



In His

POSSESSION



BOUGHT BY A BLACK MAFIA PRINCE

B. LOVE

IN HIS POSSESSION

B LOVE

#BtheBeast

Copyright © 2021 by B Love

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

PREFACE

Please note: This is a DARK romance. The first 20,000 words describe rape, abuse, and self-harm while the main female character is being held prisoner. The darkness is replaced with love and care when she is freed, but that doesn't happen until chapter nine. Though these topics are mentioned very briefly (a few sentences to a paragraph) they are here. If any of these things will trigger you, please skip this read, OR avoid the following chapters/paragraphs:

Scene 1, Chapter 1 – rape

Scene 4, Chapter 3 – self harm

Scene 1, Chapter 5 – sexual abuse

The book can still be followed/enjoyed without reading these three scenes.

One

Scarlett

Every time his fingers slid down her arm, her teeth gritted harder. He may have thought her goosebumps were from pleasure, but the chills were physical proof of her disgust. There were a lot of parts to being Malcolm's possession that Scarlett Graham didn't like—entertaining his potential partners and competitors was one. Still, Scarlett would gladly choose to work for Malcolm and be his sex slave if it meant she never had to go back to her ex-husband. It was that thought and that thought alone that had Scarlett closing her eyes and forcing a smile.

“Mmm,” he moaned behind her, stepping close enough for her to feel his bulge against her. “You smell so good.” Breath heavy, Brick whispered into her ear, “I'm so glad Malcolm decided to share you tonight.”

Casually, Scarlett turned in his direction. Taking a step back, she swayed softly from the impact of her calf muscles hitting the bed. She was unsure if following him upstairs to his suite after dinner was a good idea, but Malcolm had given her clear instruction—*do not come back home without Brick's agreement to their deal.*

“It was my pleasure,” she lied, smiling softly. “Thank you for getting me out of the house for the evening.” Scarlett paused, inhaling a sharp breath as he closed the space between them. “Was I able to say anything to convince you to partner with us?”

Brick's head shook softly as he chuckled. His trip to Malcolm's underground brothel, bar, and casino was unexpected. Had Malcolm been aware of Brick's identity, he wouldn't have allowed him entrance. There were far too many illegal activities going on, on a daily basis, for *anyone* working within law enforcement to slip inside. Usually, Malcolm had a better handle on who entered his compound, and he was convinced someone on the inside had set this up.

Whether that was the case or not, Malcolm knew bringing Brick into the fold would be his best option. He may not have wanted to cut Brick in on his profit, but if that was the only way to keep the detective from trying to shut him down... so be it. The conversation between the men didn't go as smoothly as Malcolm desired, which was why he asked Scarlett to join Brick for dinner. It wouldn't be the first time he tried to use her feminine influence to his advantage, and Scarlett was sure it wouldn't be the last.

"Not quite. I don't think there's anything you can say to get me to agree to accept ten percent of Malcolm's profit in exchange for my silence." His eyes lifted to the ceiling as he paused briefly. "There is, however, something you can do."

With darkened eyes, Brick smiled as he lowered his lips to hers. Turning to the side, Scarlett gave him her cheek.

He was going to rape her—Scarlett knew it.

"Um, I—"

"Shh..." Brick ordered, pushing her down onto the bed roughly.

Gripping the burgundy comforter, Scarlett squeezed her legs shut, clashing her knees together so hard the clapping sound bounced against the cream-colored walls.

"Bri—"

"I said shut up," he demanded, voice louder this time as he covered her mouth.

With his free hand clutching both ankles, Brick lifted them over her head. It didn't matter how much she wiggled, his grip on her tightened. By the time his hand slipped under her dress

and tugged at her black panties, Scarlett's eyes had begun to water.

"Please don't," she whispered, trying to lift herself on the bed, but the palm of his hand against her cheek sent her back down.

"I don't want to mess up your beautiful face, so don't fight me. Do you want me to agree to his bullshit terms or not?"

Biting down on her bottom lip so hard she was sure she'd draw blood, Scarlett willed her tears not to fall. It was bad enough that he was dominating her physically. She refused to let him damage her emotionally too. By the time he'd gotten his thick dick out of his slacks, Scarlett had removed her ankles from his hold. The kick she landed in his gut merely discombobulated him before he was gripping her waist-length hair and jerking it so hard, she was sure she felt strands being ripped from her scalp.

With one hand cutting off her air supply by tightly squeezing her throat, the other pressed her left leg back into the bed. The moment she felt the tip of his dick at her opening, Scarlett surrendered to her fate. Brick pushed inside of her quickly, moan mixed with the sound of her cry. Eyes trained on the small white pebbles lining the ceiling, Scarlett lay perfectly still as he pumped in and out of her.

His grunts against her ear were eventually drowned out by the beating of her heart. She counted them, making note of how her breaths would quicken and slow down. Because anything was better than the thought of him unwelcomingly being inside of her. Scarlett was unsure of how much time had passed before he was rolling off of her. Panting, he tucked his soft dick back into his slacks.

Patting her thigh, Brick chuckled with a shake of his head.

"I knew that pussy would be good the moment I saw you." Turning over to her side, Scarlett released a shaky breath as he added, "Tell Malcolm he has a deal."

□□□

Sniffing softly, Scarlett lowered herself to turn the hot water handle. She wiped her tears quickly, watching as the water filled the round tub. This wasn't the first time her beauty and companionship made a man think he was entitled to her pussy, but it was the first time she was unable to push him off. Worse, there was no doubt in Scarlett's mind that Malcolm would swear it was her fault.

Malcolm was a lot of things, but a sharer of her sex he was not. He had to be the most possessive man she'd ever known. There was no love when it came to her, only obsession. Obsession, and the need to use her to provide himself with protection. As long as they were together, they both were safe from Robert. It didn't matter how much she told herself that made all of this worth it, nights like tonight made Scarlett want to run away and risk being found by her ex to suffer the consequences.

The sound of Malcolm's dress shoes caused Scarlett's heart to skip a beat. Clutching her chest, she sat on the edge of his jacuzzi tub and kept her eyes from lifting to meet his. If he saw her face, he'd have proof that she'd not only been crying but abused too.

"Did he agree?" were the first words out of Malcolm's mouth.

"Yes," she whispered quietly.

"To ten percent?" Scarlett nodded, clutching the edge of the tub with both hands. "Good girl. For your reward, you get to work the compound for the rest of the month so you can get out the house a little more."

He stepped in front of her, lifting her head with the tips of his fingers. Eyes closed, Scarlett inhaled a deep breath and willed her tears not to fall.

"The fuck happened to your face?" Malcolm's grip on her chin tightened, and he used it to lift her to her feet.

"He forced himself on me," she confessed, opening her eyes to meet his.

Malcolm removed his shades quickly, exposing his dark, beady eyes. It didn't matter how many times they had sex, Scarlett could never force herself to be sexually attracted to him. With his mocha complexion, bald head, and nappy beard... he looked to be in his late forties or early fifties... and she felt sick every time things turned physical. Not only was he fifteen years older than her, he wasn't the most appealing thing to look at either. His money and style of dress made him a little easier on the eyes, though.

“You gave another man what belongs to me?”

“Not by choice, Malcolm. I swear. I fought him off, but he overpowered me.”

“What part of you only do what I allow you to with men did you not understand?”

Shoulders caving, Scarlett's head tilted. If she grew distressed and raised her tone, he would tune her out. Trying to convince him of her innocence wouldn't do her any good. Malcolm wouldn't care that she'd been violated if he was upset—his only concern was that another man had experienced her without his permission.

“I told him no, but he said he wouldn't agree to your terms unless I had sex with him. I tried to fight him off, but he was too strong.”

Jaw clenched, Malcolm stared at her, allowing her words to register in his brain.

“He raped you?”

Relief filled her as she nodded. “*Yes.*”

Taking a step back, Malcolm looked away as he loosened his tie. “I'm sorry. I thought I could trust him with you, but obviously, I was wrong. Don't worry, Scar. I'll take care of this.”

With a soft nod, she watched as he left just as quickly as he arrived. There was no doubt that Malcolm would take care of it. If there was one good thing about belonging to him, it was the protection.

After cutting the water off, Scarlett removed her dress and bra and got inside. Brick had kept her panties, and the thought made her shiver as she relaxed into the water. Sure her body would be sore in the morning, she made the mental note to ask Malcolm to book her a massage. Scarlett repeatedly told herself that this was a part of being his possession, and that she shouldn't let it weigh her down. But the longer she remained in the water, scrubbing her skin until it was red and still feeling dirty, Scarlett knew it wouldn't be as easy as repeating a mantra to release what Brick had done to her.



Scarlett's leg shook as she sat next to Malcolm. As she requested, he'd booked her a massage plus a facial and body wrap that afternoon. After taking her to her favorite five-star restaurant for an early dinner, he told her they had to make one more stop before heading back home. Never one to share details until he deemed it was necessary, Malcolm had kept Scarlett in the dark about why they were meeting at the park.

Even with it being early May and humid, Malcolm was dressed in his usual uniform – a form-fitting, tailor-made suit. This one was sky blue, accented by a white pocket square and a button-down shirt with black loafers. To match him, he requested that she wear white, so she chose a loose-fitting button-down shirt that she'd tied and made a crop top, with sky blue shorts and clear heels.

As soon as she saw Brick walking in their direction, her foot stopped tapping. She didn't realize she was digging her nails into the wooden bench until Malcolm covered her hand and told her, "You know I will not let anything happen to you. You're safe with me."

She nodded. Maybe she was safe with him from others, but she for damn sure wasn't safe from him. Malcolm stood and helped her do the same.

"Let's go for a walk," he told Brick, buttoning the middle button on his suit jacket.

Brick's eyes scanned the four bodies that were surrounding them before nodding in agreement – as if he had any other

choice. If he didn't willingly agree, Malcolm's security would have forced him to. With Scarlett's hand in his, Malcolm pulled her close to his side. Under normal circumstances, she would have hated to hold his hand, but with Brick being around, the gesture provided security and comfort.

"Is it payday already?" Brick asked with a half-grin.

Malcolm smiled fully as he removed his shades and handed them to Scarlett.

"When I allowed Scarlett to accompany you last night, it was with the understanding that I would treat you both to dinner so you could talk. I believe women are influential and can always convince a man to move quicker than I ever could. At any point during our conversation did I tell you that you could have sex with her?"

Brick stopped walking, and they did the same. Malcolm turned to the side to face him, but Scarlett looked away.

"I thought you were offering her to me."

"Did she say no?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then why in the *fuck* would you think I was offering her to you?" Malcolm gritted. Brick's eyes went to Scarlett. Even without looking at him, she felt them on the side of her face. "Don't look at her."

Brick cleared his throat. "My apologies. I thought that was a part of the deal." He paused before adding, "Her pussy was so wet I thought she enjoyed it and was just playing hard to get. But if I overstepped... I do apologize."

Malcolm looked down at Scarlett and squeezed her hand gently to get her to look up at him.

"Do you accept his apology?"

Her mouth opened and closed. She refused to believe he was going to let Brick get away with this so easily. Maybe his partnership meant more to Malcolm than her wellbeing. Blinking rapidly, her head shook.

“No, but if you still want to work with him, I have no choice but to accept that.”

With a nod, Malcolm lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Let’s go.”

They turned, and Scarlett was unsure of why Malcolm had even brought her there, but she wouldn’t question him. By the time they’d made it back to his Escalade, he was calling one of his guards and telling him, “Don’t let that motherfucker get in his car. Take him to the dungeon. *Now.*”



If Scarlett had learned anything about Malcolm during her two years with him, it was that he was a dog in the sense that he smelled fear and was insanely loyal. Though she wished he had a dog’s unwavering, unconditional love... two out of three was cool. As fearful as she was of what she was about to see in his dungeon, Scarlett kept a brave face and fought her body to keep its trembling at a minimum. This may have been her first time stepping foot inside the dungeon, but she wasn’t naïve. Anytime Malcolm had a problem with a person, they were sent here, and that problem or person was never spoken of again.

The sound of her heels clacking against the tile was the only sound heard as they walked, surrounded by his men. Gray cement walls matched the gray tile, giving a bleak aesthetic to match the vibe of every hopeless person whose life was ended here.

Scarlett was sure Brick would be handled, but her heart wouldn’t allow her to want him dead. It didn’t matter the wrong he had done to her; there weren’t too many things that would cause her to want a person’s life force to be taken. Her father always said her empathy and kind heart would get her into trouble, and with time, she’d proven him right. Had it not been for her feeling sorry for Robert and seeking his fatherly love, she never would have entertained or even married the abusive, narcissistic bastard. Without him, there would have been no need for her to be in Malcolm’s possession. And without Malcolm, there would have been no violation from Brick.

Every time Scarlett put together the sum of the pieces of her life that led to this point, it always took her back to her father and how fucked up her life had been since he was murdered.

“Status?” Malcolm requested when they made it to the silver steel door.

“He’s alive, barely,” the tall, buff man guarding the door replied.

Taking Scarlett’s hand into his, Malcolm led her into the small room.

As soon as the scent of urine and coppery blood filled her nostrils, she covered her nose and mouth. Eyes wide at the sight of Brick’s battered body, they watered as she quickly turned away.

“Look at him,” Malcolm ordered, using her hand to jerk her body back in Brick’s direction.

Head shaking, Scarlett inhaled a deep breath. With fluttering eyes, she looked down at Brick again. His legs were twisted underneath him, clearly broken. Face swollen and discolored, he was almost beyond recognition. His breathing was vocal, slow, and fainting.

“Give me the nine.” At Malcolm’s request, he was handed a 9-millimeter, and Scarlett’s heart clenched. That was the first gun he taught her how to use. Her head was shaking before he could even hand it to her. “Why are you shaking your head no? Do you believe you have a choice?”

“I’m not killing him.”

“He violated you.” Malcolm placed the gun in her hand, holding both so she wouldn’t remove it. “In the worst way possible.” He used her hand to place her body directly in front of his. Lifting her arm and pointing the gun at Brick, he told her to, “Pay him back.”

“Malcolm, no, please. I don’t...”

Pow!

Her body froze, eyes closed. She heard the last grunt and gasp Brick released before his spirit released.

“Clean this shit up,” Malcolm muttered, dropping her hands.

Scarlett’s hand trembled as one of his men took the gun from it. It didn’t matter how much she told herself to look away, she was paralyzed. Brick’s eyes were open, staring at her. His mouth was parted slightly, and Scarlett was sure she’d have that image implanted in her memory forever.

“Scarlett,” Malcolm called before snapping his fingers. Her head slowly turned in his direction. “Let’s go.”

This time when he grabbed her hand, Scarlett was too detached to even get her fingers to wrap around his. She followed him out, unable to register any of the words coming out of his mouth. A part of her thought she was going to be okay... until they got to the car and she noticed the blood on her shoes and legs. At that point, the vomit and tears that she’d been holding in erupted.



“You’re not going to try to run away, are you?” Scarlett’s head shook. “Good.” Malcolm smiled, placing his hand on her thigh. “Robert would take you and kill me if you did. Is that what you want?” Her head shook again. “Good. Just to be sure, I’m putting your nine in my safe. Every body you catch on it is my insurance. If you ever try to leave me, it’s going to the police, and you’ll be charged with every murder attached to these bullets.” Leaning in her direction, Malcolm placed a kiss on her cheek. When she didn’t turn to give him her lips, he gently tugged her face to the left by her chin. The soft kiss he placed on her lips made Scarlett squeeze her eyes shut and swallow the bile that rose within her throat. “Enjoy your time. Jake will stay with you, but a few feet back. Let him know when you’re ready to go.” Scarlett nodded as she opened the door to his Escalade...

Snapping out of her trance, Scarlett looked down at the bags in her hands. She was standing in the middle of the walkway, fighting thoughts of the conversation she had with

Malcolm three hours ago. Scarlett was ready to go home, but she wasn't ready to be in his presence again, so she decided to go to the food court, even though she had no appetite. Shooting Brick was still heavy on her mind. A part of her wished she had the ability to become heartless since it seemed she was going to be in Malcolm's care for the rest of her life... or, at least, Robert's.

There were times she considered running, but Malcolm had a way of reminding her of what was at stake every time. Not only would she have to stay under the radar to avoid her ex-husband, but she'd also have to deal with whatever consequence came from leaving Malcolm. Besides, it was toxic as fuck, but she was comfortable with how things were with Malcolm. She was attached and afraid of abandonment... and if there was one thing she was sure of... it was that Malcolm would *never* abandon her.

"Would you like me to hold your bags while you get your food?" Jake offered.

"Please. Thanks."

After handing him her bags, Scarlett looked around the circular court, unsure of what she wanted to get. Clutching her stomach, she settled on getting cookies for later. As she walked over, she saw him walking in her direction out the corner of her eye. Cursing under her breath, Scarlett prayed the stranger wouldn't try to talk to her. It wouldn't surprise her if he did. Her beauty was something no man could deny.

Looking over her shoulder casually, she clenched her jaw when she saw Jake staring at the man already. By the time she made it to the counter of Great American Cookies, the stranger was standing at her side.

"Hey, beautiful," he greeted.

"Hi," she replied quickly, giving him a friendly smile.

"I know this is forward but..."

"I'm not interested. Sorry."

He nodded and took a step back. "Oh. Cool."

It took everything inside of Scarlett to not watch him walk away. The truth of the matter was, he was fine as fuck. But it was best for him if she cut him off as quickly as possible. All it took was for Jake to call Malcolm and suggest she was showing another man interest and he would have the same fate as Brick. As much as Scarlett liked to think it was his toxic way of showing his love and desire for her, Scarlett was no fool—Malcolm *was* obsessed with her... but it was mostly because she was his lifeline. If she were to ever leave him, the truce he and Robert had come to would be over. Kidnapping Scarlett was the only thing keeping them both alive... and Malcolm would be damned if he let *anyone* get in the way of that.



Scarlett hoped Jake hadn't told Malcolm about the man from the mall, but she was sure he did. If he didn't and Malcolm found out some other way, that would look bad on his part, and no one would risk getting on Malcolm's bad side for her sake.

Today had been a day. This week had been a week. Her life had been a life.

As much as she wanted to question why she was dealt this hand, Scarlett clutched the cross necklace her father had given her before he left. It was the only thing she had to remember him by. When he gave it to her, he told her that it was her physical reminder that God was always with her. And that He had chosen him to be her earthly father. No matter what it took, she could always have faith that he would be there for her.

Up until he was murdered, her father had kept that promise with no hesitation. Ever since, she'd been looking for him in other men. No one had been able to provide the security, safety, provision, protection, and peace that her father had. No one had come close. After sending up a quick prayer to the God she was sure had turned His back on her, Scarlett entered the bedroom she shared with Malcolm.

His eyes quickly scanned her body as he sat on the edge of the bed in his boxers, wife beater, and long, white socks.

“Where are your bags?”

“Jake is bringing them in.”

“Lock the door.”

Releasing a long breath, Scarlett nodded and did as she was told. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Your timing is perfect. I need to bust a nut before I head to the compound.”

Her body tensed, but she relaxed it quickly. Saying having sex with him felt like having sex with an old man didn't really express the feeling correctly. Aside from not being physically or sexually attracted to Malcolm, she also had to deal with the fact that his dick was small. Meaty but small. Worse, his sexual appetite was ferocious. Seemed to be just her luck... stuck fucking a small dick for the rest of her life.

Forcing a smile, she walked to the right instead of the center of the room. “Do I have time to shower first?”

“Yeah, that's cool. Put on that cake scented shit I like.”

She nodded as she closed and locked the bathroom door behind her. Leaning against it, she inhaled a shaky breath as she felt her entire being crumble. Even though she'd accepted her fate, a part of her still held a small piece of hope that there had to be better. Somewhere. Someway. But even if there was... did she have the courage to go after it?

If ever there was a man out there for her, he would have to be a bold, fearless, powerful beast to go against Malcolm and Robert for her. Her shoulders caved as she lifted herself off the door. Was she even worth that? Years ago, she would have said yes with no hesitation. But with Malcolm, her value had been reduced. And unfortunately... her confidence and hope had too.

Two

Assad

More than anything, Assad was frustrated because he was disappointed with himself. He should have known today would be no different, dealing with his mother. When he arrived at her home, the potent smell of bleach and other cleaning products immediately invaded his nostrils. Letting himself in, it took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the bright lights she'd had customized and placed in every room of her home.

It had always been embarrassing for Assad and his brother, Hassan, when they had company over and had to explain that their house was so bright because their mother swore it was the only way to see all the germs and bacteria that needed to be cleaned. Kirby hadn't always been that way, though. As far back as Assad could remember, his mother was normal. Well, as normal as a crack baby could be. Like her own parents, Kirby suffered from drug use, but she got clean when she had him.

For whatever reason, she thought her love and pussy would be reason enough to keep his father, Colton, satisfied. It hadn't worked for the woman before her, and it didn't work for the woman after her either. Colton had six children total, four of which lived in Memphis, Tennessee. Every woman that bore his seeds had been traumatized enough by his version of love to never be the same again. For Kirby, the price she paid was her inability to trust herself and her mind. To overthink. To become obsessive, compulsive, and addicted to all things... not just drugs.

Sure, Assad knew that that obsessive disorder had been innate before Kirby encountered Colton, but he definitely brought it to the surface.

With a sigh, Assad's head tilted as he watched his mother scrub the already clean floor. The shit was so clean he could see his reflection in it. But that didn't matter to Kirby. He checked the time on his all-black custom Rolex before standing and walking over to his mother.

Squatting next to her, Assad pushed her semi-matted hair out of her face. She muttered under her breath, not even acknowledging his presence.

"Ma," he called gently. When she didn't answer, he grabbed her shoulder. "Ma," he called a little louder, shaking her softly in the process.

Kirby looked up at him briefly and smiled before returning her attention to the invisible spot. "Hey, baby. I didn't hear you come in."

"Happy birthday, beautiful."

Kirby chuckled softly as her head shook. "Ain't nothing beautiful about me. Not anymore."

Swallowing back his tears, Assad inhaled a deep breath to compose himself. Every time his mother said some shit like that, he wanted to hunt his father down in Cuba and put a bullet between his eyes.

"You know you'll always be beautiful to me. Why don't you let me take you to get your hair and shit done?"

Kirby's head shook as she dipped her cloth in the bucket of steaming water that was next to her.

"I—I can't, baby. Not until I'm done cleaning."

"It's your birthday; you shouldn't be cleaning anyway." When she didn't reply, Assad added, "Can you at least stop long enough to have a piece of cake with me before I leave? I brought your favorite."

"Strawberry?" she confirmed with a smile as her hair fell back over her face.

“Yeah.” Assad covered her frantically moving hand with his. “So can you stop? Just for a little while?”

Kirby paused for a few seconds before shaking her head adamantly and continuing to scrub the floor.

“If I don’t get this stain out, it’ll set. I need to work on this now, Assad. But we can eat the cake later, okay?”

She started muttering under her breath again, and Assad knew he’d lost her. After placing a kiss to her temple, he told his mother he loved her before standing and walking back over to the table. He sighed as he looked from the cake and ice cream to the bouquet of flowers he’d gotten for her too. There was no point in waiting for her to stop cleaning. That would take hours and last for just a few seconds. If her eyes landed on anything that looked unclean or out of place based on her standards, she’d be right back to it.

Picking up his phone and keys, Assad glanced back at his mother before heading out. Times like this, he hated and loved his mother more at the same damn time...

□□□

“I’ on know why you wasted your time going over there anyway.” Hassan grumbled as they sat at their usual table in the back of Assad’s bar, aptly named Kirby’s.

The table was always left empty, no matter how packed the bar was. It didn’t matter where Assad was or how comfortable he was in that space, he never allowed anyone to sit or stand behind him. That was a lesson their uncle had to learn the hard way when an enemy caught him slipping from behind and killed him.

“If she ain’t cleaning some shit that don’t need to be cleaned, she organizing or planning or doing whatever the fuck she can to not focus on what’s happening in real-time,” Hassan continued.

Between the two brothers, Hassan was definitely the one most bitter over their situation with their mother, which made no sense to Assad since *he* was the one who dealt with the brunt of her abuse, neglect, and drug use when they were kids.

If anything, Assad did everything he could to shield Hassan from it, and maybe that's why Hassan hated her as much as he did. Not because of what she did to him, but because of what she did to his brother.

Still, Assad loved his mother... unconditionally... no matter how toxic and unhealthy trying to have a relationship with her was.

"She's allowed that," Assad countered.

"The fuck for? 'Cause Colt broke her heart thirty years ago?"

Assad's head shook as he remained patient, not swayed by his brother's passion. The same passion that kept Hassan from being ready to take over the business should anything happen to Assad. He was *too* fucking *emotional*, always acting or reacting first instead of thinking things through logically. It was that way of moving that made them an easy target for their enemies, which was why Hassan was hardly ever allowed to speak during meetings. Money was his main priority... something that forced him to remain in his head... not in his heart.

"I'm not about to go there with you," Assad dismissed, standing as their waitress arrived at their table.

Every time he stood in the presence of a woman, she smiled. Waitress or not, Assad had been groomed to be a gentleman, and he would always give women that respect. Honestly, he liked being soft with them because it calmed the beast he had to be in the streets.

"Hello, Mr. Black," she greeted with a grin. Her eyes lowered to Hassan who was still seated as she added, "Mr. Black."

"Good evening, beautiful," Assad replied as Hassan all but fucked her with his eyes.

"When you gon' give a real nigga a chance?" Hassan asked, taking her hand and pulling her between his legs.

"What I tell you about fucking with her while she's on the clock? Try to get your dick wet on your own time," Assad

commanded, pulling his vibrating phone out of his pocket to silence the call.

“Mane, fuck you. If I wait until she off the clock, her ass gon’ run outta here so fast I won’t even have the chance to talk to her.”

“Well... maybe that should be your confirmation that she don’t want shit to do with your ass.”

Maliya giggled softly, covering her mouth as she composed herself. “Do you gentlemen want your usual?”

Assad eyed his brother before deciding for them. Instead of going for their usual French Connection with Hennessy Black, he requested, “Give us a bottle of D’USSÉ XO.”

“Yes, sir.”

Assad slumped down further in his seat after she walked away, needing the alcohol quickly so he could begin to relax.

“I know you don’t understand why I choose to try and celebrate her birthday with her every year, but I appreciate you keeping this tradition with me.”

Hassan’s head shook. “Long as you know I do it for you—not her. I’on mind taking shots with you to celebrate her life, because without her, I wouldn’t have you. I’ll always be grateful to her for that. For *you*.”

Smiling with one side of his mouth, Assad gripped the back of his brother’s neck and pulled him closer to kiss his temple. Hassan hated it every time he did it, but Assad would never stop showing his brother love. Their father made him promise to look after Hassan when he left the country, and that was a responsibility he would never take lightly... no matter how old they got.

“Fuck I tell you about kissin’ all on me and shit, bruh?” The frown that covered Hassan’s face made Assad chuckle.

“If you were in tune with your masculinity, it wouldn’t bother you so much. I’m your brother, nigga. I’ma always show you love.”

Hassan's eyes rolled as Maliya set her tray on the table. He licked his lips, eyes lowered to her breasts, and Assad couldn't help but chuckle and shake his head. Maliya wasn't the slightest bit interested in Hassan or any man into illegal activities for that matter. She was working the night shift while in college, mainly because Assad's bar was exclusive and his patrons tipped well. But she was a lady about her shit, and she was smart as fuck, so she put up with Hassan's flirting and advances just like she did everyone else's, because she knew her pocket would be fatter by the end of the night.

"If you need anything else, just let me know," Maliya directed after placing their shot glasses in front of them.

Doing the honors, Assad poured them both a shot before they toasted to their mother's birth, her life, and their existence. She may not have been the most present parent, but everything she and Colton did shaped the man Assad was today, and as he looked around his bar... he was filled with a sense of pride that would forever leave him grateful.

□□□

Usually, Assad's expression was stone. He didn't allow anyone to try and read his thoughts by unlocking his eyes or expression. As he headed to the back of the restaurant for his meeting, there was no way for him to hide his smile. And, to be honest, he didn't want to.

It had been seven *long* fucking years, but his oldest brother, Savant, was finally about to be free! They may have had different mothers, but they were brothers through and through. Unlike his relationship with Hassan, the bond Assad had with Savant could be toxic at times. Most often, Savant acted more like a father than a brother, and Assad's alpha makeup wouldn't allow him to submit to *any* man's rule—brother or not.

As long as they weren't bumping heads, it was all good, and Assad couldn't wait for his brother to touch down.

The large, wide man guarding the swinging kitchen doors stepped to the side at the sight of Assad, allowing him entrance.

“Boss Man,” he greeted, to which Assad nodded.

No matter how much money he made running the Black Mayhem Mafia, Assad would always make his presence known at his legal establishments. Not just to use them to clean his dirty money, but to make sure his employees remembered who the boss was.

Cutting a sharp left, Assad greeted those in his path with a nod before making it near the freezers. Instead of going to the one on the left, he entered the one on the right. Three men were already seated around the table, awaiting his arrival. The temperature was set at a comfortable seventy degrees, giving him relief from the ninety-one-degree weather outside. This was probably Assad’s favorite place to have meetings. Not just because it was secure and cool, but because he would be able to get some of his aunt’s soul food when it was over.

When he opened the restaurant, he didn’t care what it would take to convince her to leave her corporate job to come and cook for him... he had to have her. And she’d made his restaurant one of the best restaurants to visit in their city.

“Y’all been here for a while?” he checked, pulling the only empty seat back so he could sit down.

Rakim, Remi’s brother, was the first to speak. “Nah. You good?”

Remi was arrested and tried at the same time as Savant. They both were looking at life sentences, but thanks to the mafia’s legal team, they were set for early release.

“Yeah. Give me a quick rundown of everything before we discuss why we’re here.”

Rakim, their head of security, went first. Then Pressure, their narcotics supplier. Last was Hassan, who was over their accounting. Their board members came to their meetings once a month, but since they would mainly be discussing how they would transition Savant and Remi back into the fold, their attendance or Assad’s small team of advisors wasn’t necessary. He may have run the business handed over to him by his father, but he didn’t make every decision alone.

Assad was wise enough to understand one man having such a large amount of power and responsibility could drive him crazy and fuck shit up for everyone, and he never wanted to be responsible for that. The mafia had been in his family's bloodline for generations. His grandfather started it with Rakim's grandfather, and they became blood brothers in a different sense.

“What has been put in place to make sure that what happened with Savant and Remi don't happen to anyone else?” Assad asked, eyes locked directly with Rakim.

As head of security, it was his responsibility to make sure all of their issues were handled, but he couldn't control the actions and reactions of grown men. He told Savant and Remi how important it was that they allowed him to handle all threats, but they took it upon themselves to handle it on their own. In the process, they were set up. To them, it was worth it to catch those bodies, but the rest of the family had been sick over it.

“I've broken my team down into three categories. We have our guards who will be trailing us and them when we're handling business at all times. The headhunters are on standby for any and every war. We also have our body doubles on payroll now. Just as long as no one commits a crime that they are arrested for immediately, we have several men and women willing to take that charge for the team when necessary. Just be mindful of submitting all physical changes to Tierney so she can update them, especially tattoos and hair colors for the women in the family. And that also means no fingerprints and DNA.”

“Good,” Assad complimented with a nod. “What about that meeting with the four families? Are they aware of Savant and Remi's release?”

“Yeah. My assistant has handled that. She's scheduled a meeting with Judge Faulkner too. I can't say it's going to be easy getting him to welcome us in, but if he does, that'll provide an extra barrier for us.”

“I agree. If we can get him and his colleagues on our payroll, that’ll be a damn solid barrier just in case we do get caught slipping again, but I don’t want that to ever happen.”

“You need to make sure you tell that to your hot-headed ass brothers then,” Rakim countered, eyes trailing over to Hassan. “Especially this one.”

Hassan’s leg began to shake as he sucked his teeth. Assad watched his brother, hoping he wouldn’t fold. He was only here because he promised he could maintain his composure. If he couldn’t do it at their meetings, he for damn sure wouldn’t be allowed to attend meetings with their partners and enemies. When Hassan held his tongue, Assad smiled in pride. There was no doubt in his mind that remaining silent was eating his brother alive.

“Hassan is good, but don’t ever try to use me to bait him again. You know how he is. If you poke the bear, I will let him attack.”

“That’s the fucking problem.” Rakim spoke quickly as he stood. “Y’all been babying his ass his whole fucking life. My brother caught a life charge over this nigga. And all you got to say is that’s just how he is? Fuck that. He needs to grow the fuck up and know his place. If Savant wants to play save a hoe and shoot a nigga over his ass again...”

Before Assad could stop him, Hassan was out of his seat, gun off safety and aimed at Rakim’s head. Just as quick and lethal, Rakim had his pointed under Hassan’s chin.

“If I wanted to be around some pussy, I would’ve gone to my bitch spot. Lower your fucking guns. Now.” It took a few seconds, but they eventually lowered their guns, and Hassan returned to his seat. “I told y’all, if y’all need to jack this shit out so y’all can release your beef, do that, but if I ever see y’all pointing guns at each other again, y’all gon’ have to deal with me. And we all know that’s not what you want, right?”

Seconds passed before either of them broke eye contact.

“Hassan,” Assad called.

“Right,” he answered quickly, finally looking at his brother.

It was fucked up, mostly because Hassan and Rakim used to be best friends. Just like Remi and Savant. Just like Assad and their other brother Rameek. But that all changed when Hassan slept with the plug’s daughter. As cliché as it sounded, her father was ready to go to war to protect his daughter’s honor. When Hassan declined his invitation to ask for her hand in marriage, he put a price on his head.

Savant protecting Hassan turned into them all catching bodies in broad daylight, but Savant and Remi had never been the type to let things go easily. It was their decision to kill the plug and cut the problem off at its source that got them arrested. To Savant, it was worth it because the threat to his brother had been handled... but it was clear that Rakim didn’t feel the same way.

“Get the fuck outta here,” Assad ordered, disgusted by their actions. He couldn’t even bear to look at either of them. They knew how important loyalty and family was to him... to their organization. If they were enemies amongst themselves, how would they be able to handle their enemies in the streets? Assad’s head shook as he left the freezer, even more in need of a good meal, a smooth shot, and some warm pussy to put him in a better fucking mood.

□□□

The sight of his mother’s name surprised Assad. Her birthday was three days ago, and this was the first time he’d heard from her. Honestly, he was surprised to be hearing from her at all. Standing, he headed outside, thankful he was having lunch at The Lookout. He stepped out onto the glass flooring and looked out into the sky.

“Ma,” he answered.

“Hey, baby. I was just calling to thank you for my cake and ice cream. The flowers are beautiful.”

“You’re just now eating the cake?”

“Yes. It’s been a long week. But it was amazing.”

Assad could only shake his head. The cake had fresh strawberries and whipped cream, so there was no way it tasted as good as it would have if she had eaten it the first day.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” was all he could say.

“I did. Have you talked to your brother today?”

“Which one?”

“The one *I* gave birth to.”

He chuckled, eyes set on the setting sun. “Yeah, I talked to him earlier. He would answer your calls too, if you took your medicine.”

“I’m not taking that stuff. I told you I don’t like the way it makes me feel. Plus, it makes me sleepy.”

“That’s why the doctor told you to take it at night, Ma. It’s just one pill a day, and it will help with your compulsive...”

“I just wanted to call and thank you for my birthday gifts, Assad. That’s it.”

Defeated, Assad licked his lips as his head hung. “Fine, Ma.”

“If you really want to help me, you could bring me some more weed and CBD. That’s all I need to settle my mind.”

He didn’t want to, but if he didn’t, there was a chance she’d try to get it herself, which could lead to something stronger. And the last thing he wanted was for his mother to go back to crack and heroin. It fucked with him every time the possibility crossed his mind.

“Alright. If I can’t bring it, I’ll get one of my guys to.”

“Okay, baby.”

“I—”

Before he could even finish, Kirby had disconnected the call. A part of him wanted to feel used. Wanted to feel as if the drugs were the only reason she’d called. But the other part of him, that young boy still in need of his mother’s love, refused

to see her as anything beyond a mother who had finally taken the time to call her son.

Making his way back into the restaurant, Assad sat down and chugged the rest of his drink, ignoring the burn of the brown liquor cascading down his throat. He stared at his medium-well steak, no longer having an appetite. After telling Pressure to send one of his runners over with the usual package for his mother, he cut his phones off for the night. If he was going to regain his peace, he didn't want to run the risk of anything or anyone calling and setting him off.

□□□

All the pussy in the world meant nothing if Assad had to choose between it and his daughter. He was having a good time with his niggas, but as soon as he got that request on Facebook, he left the strip club and went out to his black Tesla for some privacy. It never failed. If his daughter, Maria, couldn't sleep at night... she called him via Facebook Messenger so they could watch SpongeBob together.

Assad lived for those moments.

He lived for *her*.

His heart may have been with the mafia, but it would beat and bleed only for Maria Black.

At one point, her mother had a large piece of his heart too.

Who in the fuck was he kidding? She still did.

"Hey, pretty girl," Assad greeted as soon as the call connected.

"Hey, Daddy! Watch SpongeBob with me."

"No," her mother, Jessica, said from the background. "That's not how we practiced."

Maria huffed, brows wrinkling in a way that made Assad turn to mush.

"Hey, Daddy! How are you?"

Assad chuckled. "I'm good, pretty girl. How are you?"

“I’m good. Are you busy?”

“I’m never too busy for you. What’s up?”

“Will you watch SpongeBob with me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course. Have you already taken a bath and put on your nightclothes?”

Maria nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Okay. Go get in the bed.”

“Yay!”

Assad smiled, but it turned into a laugh as she ran to her room, ignoring Jessica telling her to slow down. All he saw was carpet and her little pink painted toes as she hopped up the stairs. Once she was settled, Assad leaned his seat back and made himself comfortable. Sometimes she would fall asleep on the first episode, and sometimes it would take five or six. It didn’t matter. There was no place Assad would rather be in that moment than with his daughter.

While they watched SpongeBob, he got a text from Jessica on his other phone.

Maria’s Mother: Sorry. I’m trying to wean her off the nightly calls but it’s the only way she sleeps through the night.

It’s cool. You know I don’t mind. This shit makes my day.

Even though Assad knew she wouldn’t say anything else, he kept looking down at his phone just to be safe. It didn’t matter that they hadn’t been together in years; his heart still yearned for Jessica. She was the only woman, outside of his mother, sister, and other family members, that he had ever had love for. She was also the first woman to break his heart and make him feel like he wasn’t enough.

No part of Assad wanted Jessica to take his daughter to another state after she was born, but he understood her decision. She said the distance was the only way she wouldn’t take him back after he’d cheated on her. It was crazy... he was the one that had fucked up then, and he was the one still suffering because of it now. Assad was sure Jessica would

forgive him for cheating with her cousin, but she didn't. She hadn't. And she probably never would.

Had it not been for their daughter, he was certain she wouldn't even speak to him anymore. Maria had brought him that grace, but no amount of love for their daughter would make Jessica take him back again. As hard as that was for Assad to accept, he did, but a small part of him prayed one day... she would change her mind.

□□□

Instead of going back inside of the strip club, Assad made his way to Kourtney's apartment. If he was going to get any sleep tonight, he had to get Jessica out of his mind, and Kourtney's pussy always provided that escape.

She opened her door, robe open, looking good as fuck. Kourtney smiled as he stepped into her space.

"I missed you," she confessed.

Made sense.

Assad never made a habit out of fucking the same woman more than once a week. If he did, she'd get too attached, and he wasn't trying to have that.

"I missed you too," he confessed, and that was partly true. He missed her pussy.

"How much?" Kourtney asked, allowing her robe to slip down her arms.

Assad's eyes followed its trail. Her perky breasts, hard nipples, flat stomach, and belly ring... it all made his dick hard. It didn't hurt that she had smooth chocolate skin and a pretty face, too.

"Don't worry. I'm about to show you."

Kourtney squealed and giggled, as he lifted her bridal style and carried her to her bedroom. He'd been here enough times to effortlessly find his way to her white and silver themed room. After placing her on the edge of the bed, Assad slipped his black Medusa embroidered Versace shirt over his head. Kourtney busied herself with removing his black jeans,

wasting no time putting his lengthy, curved dick inside her mouth.

It took just a few seconds for it to fill with saliva. She sucked him off slow and sloppy, just the way he liked. If he'd come here for foreplay, he would have let her suck until he came and returned the favor, but tonight was about his release.

“Get on your knees,” he ordered, retrieving a condom from his wallet.

Kourtney did so with a smile, arching her back perfectly. Assad's hand slid over her fat, round ass. Unable to resist, he smacked it and smiled as it jiggled.

“Babe,” she moaned, pressing into him.

“Beg for it.”

“Please give me your dick,” she requested... with no hesitation.

Her pussy was already soaking. Puddled up cream was just waiting for him at her entrance. Gripping her waist with one hand, Assad positioned the tip of his dick at her opening with the other.

“What will you do with it?”

“Cum all *over* it.”

He groaned and slid into her. The sound of her moan as she gripped the sheets was like music to his ears. Assad held her down, filling her with hard, slow strokes. It wasn't long before her clear juices turned into creamy cum. She did exactly what she said she would—over and over again.

By the time she'd cum a third time, Assad was ready to release his first load. Pulling out of her, he came in the condom then discarded it by flushing it down the toilet. His dick was still hard, but he got in the shower instead. Kourtney's pussy had served its purpose. Jessica was an afterthought, and he was at peace enough to be able to sleep.

When she entered the shower, she asked, “Are you staying over?”

Normally, he would have said no, but tonight, having a woman in his arms would be to his benefit. Besides, he didn't want Kourtney to feel as if sex was the only thing he'd come for... even if it was. Seeing his mother unravel over the way his father and other men had treated her had caused Assad to be more mindful of how he handled women.

“I can, if that's what you want.”

She smiled as she stepped in front of him, allowing the water from the showerhead to rain down on her.

“Yes. You can leave when I fall asleep if you want, but I would like it if you could stay all night.”

Releasing a relaxed breath, Assad agreed with, “Then I'll stay all night.”

Three

Scarlett

“You mean to tell me he only sent one guard with you, and you didn’t try to get away?” Vanna asked in disbelief.

Of all the girls working at the compound, Scarlett was closest to Vanna. They maneuvered into Malcolm’s orb around the same time. Vanna had come in to work his brothel, but her pussy was so good, Malcolm wanted her to himself—until he got Scarlett. Now, Vanna worked as a trainer for the girls he brought in by day and the bar and casino by night.

“It’s not that easy, Vanna.”

“How is it not? You could have easily slipped out through a bathroom window or even told security that Jake was being a creep and following you.”

“And then what? Malcolm would have found me. Or worse, Robert. If you leave, he’ll let you go with less of a fight. But if I leave?” Scarlett’s head shook as she sat back in her seat. “He will turn this city upside down until he finds me.”

Vanna shrugged before she smiled. “Maybe. Or we could make sure Robert found him first.”

“Oh, you must have a death wish.”

Vanna laughed. “No, I have a life wish.” She covered Scarlett’s hand. “For the both of us.” Scarlett smiled bitterly before twisting her mouth to the side. “You’re right. Malcolm

would let me go without much of a fight. He might look for me for a day, if that. But you, he will not stop looking for you until one of you is dead. And if we have to work with his enemy to make that happen, we gotta be willing to risk it, because I'm not leaving here without you."

Brushing a tear away quickly, Scarlett inhaled a calming breath before she smiled.

"I love you for that, but if you get a chance to leave, you better take it. And live for the both of us."

"Scar—"

"Promise me, Vanna," she interrupted quickly.

Vanna's dark brown eyes lowered as she shook her head. "I don't want to." Her pout made Scarlett chuckle.

"I'm not giving you a choice. Promise me."

"Fine, I promise. But I also promise to try to figure out a way for the both of us to be free."

Scarlett smiled, not sure if that last part was a promise that Vanna or anyone else could keep. It did give her hope to know that there was someone out there that loved her enough to try, though. Unfortunately, Scarlett had been used to dealing with toxic situations and men who were users and abusers ever since her mother's drug use led to her father's death. If she had a chance of making it out of her current situation alive, maybe it would have to be from the help of Vanna, because she for damn sure had lost all of her faith in men.

□□□

Scarlett wouldn't say she was a functioning alcoholic, but she couldn't deny how many days and nights she'd used alcohol to numb whatever she was going through in that moment. Addictive spirits were one of her family's strongholds, so she tried to be careful with how much she consumed. Sometimes, though, being careful was the least of her thoughts. Getting fucked up, feeling happy, even if for that brief moment was her highest priority. Tonight was no different.

Her shift at the compound was almost over, and she'd had more than the allotted amount of alcohol they were supposed to have during their shifts. Glossy, lazy eyes looked Vanna's frame over as she smiled. Pushing her hair back off her shoulders, Scarlett leaned against the bar.

"What are you getting into tonight after your shift?" she asked Vanna, not that it really mattered.

It was Friday night, and Malcolm would expect her to come straight home.

"Depends on who is trying to get into me." Vanna shot Scarlett a wink. "You?"

"The usual. Heading back to the house to wait for Malcolm."

Vanna's eyes rolled as she poured herself a shot of Tito's Vodka. "His old cornball ass. You are too young to be spending your weekends laid up with him."

"I'm old too," Scarlett countered, holding back her laugh.

"Girl, please. Twenty-nine is *not* old. You need to be tryna snatch one of these young rich niggas and let them show you a good time."

Scarlett scoffed. "Why? So Malcolm can kill them and beat my ass?"

As soon as the door to the front room opened, Scarlett's arms covered with chills. She looked in its direction, dazed as the group of men filed in. All manner of men had come and gone, none of them eliciting this kind of response from her. As curious as she was about who the men were, she forced her eyes to refocus on Vanna.

"You know who they are?"

"Who?"

Scarlett looked back in their direction, eyes zeroing in on the one in the middle. Calling him handsome severely downplayed how attractive he was. Even from a distance, she could tell he was tall. And wide. The all-black he wore

complemented his walnut brown skin. Fanning herself slightly, Scarlett couldn't keep her nipples from protruding.

This.

This was what she prayed she'd feel when she looked at Malcolm.

“Them.”

Following the direction of her head, Vanna looked to the left corner of the main room.

“Ooh. That's the Black Mayhem crew.”

“Black Mayhem?” Scarlett repeated, looking at Vanna.

“Yeah. The men that run the shit, their last names are Black and Mayhem. They're on some black mafia shit. Not just drugs, either. They run the city. I'm talking guns and knives, protection, loans, businesses... all that shit. They even have members in politics. They are some powerful ass niggas.”

“Protection?”

Vanna nodded. “Yeah. Come to think of it... maybe they could help you with your situation.”

Scarlett thought it over for a few seconds before shaking her head. “If they are here, they must be cool with Malcolm. They wouldn't go against him for me.”

Vanna smirked. “Scar, you are severely underestimating the power of your pussy.” Vanna leaned against the bar so that her face was just mere inches away from Scarlett's. “Malcolm uses you to influence men because he knows how fucking good you are at it. He sees your value, even if you've lost sight of your worth. That pussy plus your looks and influence will make any man do whatever the fuck you want. Never mind the fact that you're authentic and genuine at heart. They will eat this shit up.” Vanna's head nodded in the men's direction. “If anyone can help you get up outta here... I promise you... it's them.”

Scarlett considered Vanna's words as her eyes returned to the men. To him. He was posted up on the wall, taking in his

surroundings. Before his eyes could land on her, Scarlett turned her back as her phone began to vibrate in her pocket. Pulling it out, her body weakened at the sight of Malcolm's name.

"Hey," she greeted, forcing herself to sound happier than she was.

"Have you left the compound yet?"

"No. I hadn't even checked the time."

"It's midnight. I want you home when I get there."

"Okay," she agreed sadly before disconnecting the call. With a sigh, she put her phone back in her pocket as she told Vanna, "I gotta go. I'll talk to you later."

Vanna pouted. "Alright, baby."

Scarlett walked around the bar and grabbed her purse from underneath before giving Vanna a hug. Like clockwork, Jake made his way over to the bar to escort her out. Giving the group of men in all black one last glance, she couldn't help but smile at the sight of his. He was listening intently to what another waitress, Asia, was saying as she stood in front of him. His head bobbed slowly as he smiled. As if he felt a pair of eyes on him, his eyes began to roam, but by the time they landed on Scarlett, she was heading out of the door.

□□□

Scarlett could honestly say this was the first time she'd enjoyed the feeling of Malcolm inside of her, mainly because her eyes were closed, the lights were off, and her mind was filled with images of the man from the compound. She hadn't heard his voice or even gotten a good look at him, but what she'd experienced was enough to have her imagination running wild and her pussy dripping wet.

Spreading her ass cheeks as she bounced atop Malcolm's dick, she allowed her pussy to drench his shaft as he moaned and dug his fingers into her waist. Throwing her head back, she began to convulse against him as they both came. She lowered herself to him, breath coming out hard as she fought to steady it.

After rolling over, she sat on the edge of the bed and composed herself, wanting to make sure her legs wouldn't give out on her when she stood. When Scarlett was sure it was safe to do so, she stood and made her way to the bathroom. The sight of the smile on her face made her smile wider. Pulling her hair up into a messy bun, she chuckled over the glow the soft sheen of sweat had given her. She hadn't been this satisfied from sex with Malcolm... well... ever.

His dick was too small to provide pleasure unless it was from the back or she was on top, and he was so used to being in control that he never wanted her to be.

As she cut the water on in the shower, Malcolm made his way into the shower. The frown that he wore caught her off guard. His hand wrapped around her neck, and he pressed her body forcefully into the shower door. Biting back her groan, she closed her eyes as he asked, "What the fuck was that, Scar?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You ain't never fucked me like that. Your pussy ain't never been that wet. Were you thinking about someone else?"

A nervous chuckle escaped her, but she silenced it quickly to avoid upsetting him more. She wasn't even safe inside her own mind with him.

"Are you serious right now, Malcolm? I give you the good pussy you swear I have, and this is how you react?"

Malcolm's brows wrinkled. She could see the war he was having mentally as it flashed against his face. Slowly, his grip around her neck began to loosen.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, releasing her neck fully. "I just got a little paranoid." She nodded, opening the door to step into the shower. "Whatever made you fuck me like that, keep it up..."

Scarlett's head shook as she pulled herself out of her thoughts. Last night hadn't ended the way she thought it would, but she was glad she was able to keep Malcolm calm.

They hadn't gotten physical in about two months, and Scarlett was praying it remained that way.

"You almost ready?" Malcolm called from the bedroom.

She looked her face over once more, hating how the makeup did nothing to hide her sadness. A forced smile would have to do that, yet again.

"Yes," she answered, spraying her brush with hair perfume. After running it through her waist-length relaxed hair, she inhaled a deep breath and slipped into her red, silk knee-length dress. This was the part of her life that she hated most, having to stand before young women being trained for the brothel and pretend surrendering to Malcolm's rule was the best choice they'd ever make.

After slipping into her gold red bottoms, she left the bathroom and avoided Malcolm's eyes as they scanned her frame. He nodded in approval as he stood, then led her out of the home they shared.

The ride to the compound was quiet, which was good because Scarlett's thoughts were all over the place. She needed time to quiet her mind and trying to force conversation with Malcolm would have only added to the problem she was having.

Scarlett had no idea what she was capable of in that moment. The anniversary of her father's death was nearing, and she was always triggered around that time. Normally, Malcolm was able to have his way with her in any form, but with the way she was feeling, she was liable to give him a run for his money.

As they pulled up to the compound, Scarlett prayed Vanna was there already. If she was, Malcolm's attention wouldn't be on her as much. Even though she knew it was impossible, Scarlett needed to get away from him—even if it was for just a night. Being with him for the past two years was beginning to take its toll on her in ways she didn't expect. He'd already broken her and convinced her she was best with him, but now, she was starting to question that. She was starting to want to

regain her power. And that was the most dangerous mentality for her to have for them all.

The compound was broken up into several levels. The bottom level was where his girls lived. It was filled with ten small bedrooms and four bathrooms. The first level was the brothel. The second level, open to the public, was the bar. The third level was the casino. The fourth level was a penthouse that Malcolm used when he didn't want to go home. Currently, it was where Vanna was living. And the fifth level was a party room with an attached rooftop for day parties.

When Scarlett first arrived, a part of her thought she'd at least be free enough to have some fun, but Malcolm's tight leash on her kept her from doing too much of anything without him.

As soon as they walked down to the lower level and she saw the line of young women waiting for them, her stomach caved. It was clear by their stomachs and expressions that Malcolm had been starving them. That was the same tactic he'd used on her when she first arrived. To him, creating that dependence deepened their need for him and loyalty to him. Food, showering, clothing... the most basic of necessities were a reward for good behavior when they first arrived.

Unable to face them, she searched the room for Vanna and found her in the corner, rolling up a blunt. Though they had a lot of things in common, they were different in a lot of ways too. The biggest was that Vanna was willing to get what she needed out of any nigga that was using her. Scarlett was sure she was making connections left and right at the compound, waiting for a man she deemed worthy enough to take her out of this place.

"Scarlett," Malcolm called, pointing to his side. She took her place next to him, forcing another smile.

It was her job to convince them that one day they'd be able to live the luxurious life she lived. If she didn't, she'd be punished. Swallowing hard, Scarlett's eyes fluttered as Malcolm began his spiel. Her mind tuned him out, focusing on the man from last night.

What was it about him that made him so hard to erase?

Scarlett didn't know, but a part of her was getting anxious and desperate to find out... no matter the risk.

□□□

Her breath caught in her chest. Scarlett was convinced this was how her father would look now... if he was alive. Were they related? She wouldn't know. Scarlett didn't know anyone from her father's side of the family. But the longer she stared at the older man, she lost herself in the features he shared with her father.

Or maybe... she was seeing her father in everyone lately.

Who could say?

Clutching the necklace her father gave her, Scarlett released a shaky breath. She'd never know if she didn't go and talk to him, but how crazy would that sound? Plus, Malcolm would have a fit if she left his table to go and talk to another man... even if she thought it was someone in her family.

Looking over at Malcolm, she wondered if she should let him in on her thoughts. He said he cared about her, so that meant he should care about her family, too, right?

"Hey, babe," she called sweetly, resting her hand on his thigh.

"Yeah?"

Malcolm's eyes never left his cards. They were upstairs at the casino for his weekly game, which could have worked in her favor.

"That man over there looks like my uncle. Is it okay if I go check and see?"

Malcolm looked over at her with a soft smile before shaking his head and returning his eyes to his cards.

"No."

"Why not?"

“Don’t think because we’re in public that you can start questioning me.”

“I’m not trying to. It’s just... you know I don’t have much family and if that’s my uncle...”

He set his cards down on the table and turned to face her. “If that’s your uncle, what? You think he’s going to be able to save you?”

Her eyes blinked as she considered how to answer. “I don’t need saving from you, Malcolm. You’re helping me. I’m not trying to get away.”

“Then why are you interrupting my game for this bullshit?”

“If he’s related to my father, I would like to know. That’s it.”

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before he replied with, “I don’t trust you, and I don’t know him, so I don’t trust him either. Stay here, and if I find out that you tried to talk to him at any point tonight, I will gut him. Do you fucking understand me, Scar?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she slumped down in her seat. Feeling friskier than usual, she stood and walked away, ignoring his calls of her name. Not bothering to shoot the man a second glance, she headed for the elevators to go down to the bar. Vanna wasn’t working tonight; it was Eddie.

As soon as she sat down, he asked, “What can I get you, Scar?”

“The whole bottle of Jose.”

Eddie smiled, but it fell when her expression remained serious. He set the bottle in front of her along with a glass.

Her leg shook rapidly as she rocked back and forth. After taking a quick shot of the tequila, she headed for the bathroom. Locking it behind her, she slid down the door. Head shaking, she fought the urge to harm herself. To make the pain physical. To send her focus to one spot. She hadn’t done it in a while,

and she didn't want to start back now, but she was unsure if she could resist the urge.

She was so fucking close to going back and forth with Malcolm, and he didn't tolerate disrespect—from anyone. It didn't matter how much he needed her to remain alive, he'd beat her ass before he let her disrespect him. She needed control. She needed to take back her power.

With a groan, she tried to distract herself from her thoughts, but they were getting louder and louder. When she couldn't take it anymore, Scarlett opened her clutch and pulled the small razor blade out. Pushing her dress up, she exposed her thigh. She beat her head against the door softly, fighting back her tears.

She was tired of feeling powerless.

Tired of feeling sad.

Out of control.

The blade touched her inner thigh, and she inhaled a deep breath. Closing her eyes, she released, allowing the sting of the slicing of her skin to radiate through her entire being. Her body trembled as she inhaled again, filled with a calming high that nothing else had ever been able to give so quickly.

Her hand rested on the floor, palm open, as she took in deep breaths and focused on the beating of her heart. Scarlett couldn't allow herself to be upset over breaking her streak of no self-harm, because in this moment, it reminded her that the only thing she would ever have full control over was her life and herself...

□□□

Malcolm was evil... there was no way around that. He had a particular way of implementing punishment. He could tell by Scarlett's shut down demeanor that physical abuse wouldn't faze her this time around, so he had her deliver her mother's drugs instead. Even if she didn't tell him, he knew the image of her mother would be planted into her brain for quite some time, reminding her to watch what she said and how she said it from that point forward.

“He’s calling again,” Jake informed. He was seated next to her in Malcolm’s Bentley. “I’m trying to show you grace, but he won’t show me mercy. Please go and handle that, Scar.”

Scarlett looked over at him, moved by the pleading of his eyes. They’d been sitting in the front of her mother’s rundown apartment building for the past forty-five minutes. With a nod, she blinked her tears back and inhaled a deep breath. Refusing to shed another tear of fear, she swallowed hard and reminded herself that her mother’s state had nothing to do with her, or her father for that matter.

Jake opened the door for her, and she pulled her shades over her eyes before getting out. Lowering her Telfar hat further down her head, she chuckled. It didn’t matter what she did to try and conceal her identity, people would know who she was the second she entered her mother’s apartment.

Ignoring the cat calls, she headed upstairs to the second floor. Her mother’s apartment was at the end, so she focused on the clacking of her heels on concrete. By the time she made it in front of the door, she’d blocked out all other sounds around her. After knocking, ringing the doorbell, and calling her mother’s name, she used her key to let herself in.

The front door immediately opened to the small living room. Dark-colored carpeting did nothing to hide the stains and dirt that had accumulated over God only knows how long. A functioning addict, her mother’s first drug of choice was taken while she was on the clock as a nurse when Scarlett was seven.

For so long, her addiction was hidden under back-to-back shifts at the hospital until she was caught shooting up. Losing her job also meant losing her free and endless supply. Needing a drug that was easier to purchase, she started using cocaine. Needless to say, things began to spiral for the whole family after that.

“Mommy,” she called, stepping over scattered clothes throughout the living room.

When she didn’t find her in the cluttered kitchen, she went down the short hall to her bedroom. The door was closed, so

she knocked instead of going right in.

“Are you decent?” she checked.

“Hmm?”

“It’s me. Scar. Is someone in there with you?”

“Wh—no. What’s going on?”

Her eyes rolled at the sound of her mother’s groggy voice. She opened the door, head shaking at the state of her mother’s room. There were old food containers, alcohol bottles, and dirty clothes everywhere. The air wasn’t on, so her mother’s stench had taken over the whole room. There was no telling how long her mother had been knocked out in this state. She made her way over to the bed, covering her mouth and nose at the sight of dried vomit.

Her mother, once just as beautiful as she was, was barely recognizable. She’d lost at least forty pounds, her eyes were dark as raccoons, and her hair was sticking up and matted all over her head. Completely naked, Selena pulled the dingy white cover up her body.

“How long have you been in this room, Mommy?”

Selena scratched her head as she looked around her room. “What day is it?”

“Saturday.”

“I don’t know. Since Tuesday maybe. Did you bring my medicine?”

“Yeah, but I’m not giving it to you until you clean yourself and this apartment.”

Ignoring her mother’s arguing, Scarlett left her bedroom as quickly as she could. She wasn’t going to breathe until it was clean air. Stepping outside, she leaned against the railing as she pulled in deep breaths. Before she could stop herself, she began to sob. But it was quick. She wiped her eyes and headed down the stairs, in need of her phone.

After dialing Malcolm’s number, she hadn’t even allowed him to answer before she was saying, “You need to stop

supplying her. She's going to die soon, and you're helping her kill herself."

Malcolm chuckled. "Look, I ain't got nothing to do with that. If she don't get it from me, she's going to get it from someone else. Is that what you want?"

Clenching her jaw, Scarlett looked toward the sky. She wanted to curse her father for leaving her to deal with this mess, but on the other hand, she was glad he was no longer here to suffer because of it. If only she was granted the same grace...

"Fine, but she needs a job—find her one. Preferably one with long hours so she won't have as much free time. She needs a better apartment out the hood. Someone to cook her healthy meals and a housekeeper until she's able to start taking care of herself again. She's not going to agree to rehab, but I need you to give her a weaker strain until I can get her to try and stop taking it."

He sighed. "I didn't send you over there to start making demands."

"This is my mother." Her teeth gritted as she released the reminder. "You can do whatever you want to me, but I'm not going to let you use her against me." Fighting back her tears, her voice broke when she added, "She's all I have left."

"Fine, fine. Anything else?"

Scarlett's head shook as her eyes dried. "Not for now. I'll let you know if I think of anything else."

After disconnecting the call, Scarlett went back into her mother's apartment to find her lazily picking things up around her room. Scarlett pulled her sheets from the bed, praying this was the last time she saw her mother in such a horrible state.

Four

Assad
“Ah! Daddy!”

The excitement that covered Maria’s face warmed Assad’s whole heart. When he decided to go to Dallas for the weekend to surprise her, it was for two reasons: He was missing his favorite girl, and he honestly didn’t know how things were going to go after Savant’s release. One of the major reasons he didn’t fight with Jessica when she decided to move was because he knew living in a different state would keep his daughter safe. Even though he missed her like crazy, Assad put his feelings to the side to do what was best for them.

Jessica said she’d return to Memphis once she was fully over Assad and sure they could co-parent without their feelings and failed relationship getting in the way, but that hadn’t happened since. His ego wanted him to believe it was because she was still in love with him and he still had a chance to make things right, but his mind told him she’d found a better life apart from him and where she’d originally planted her roots.

“Hey, pretty girl,” he greeted, squatting and opening his arms so she could jump inside. Lifting her to her feet, Assad chuckled as she showered the side of his face with kisses.

“I missed you so much!” Maria punched his shoulder with her tiny fist. “What took you so long to come and see me?”

“My bad, killa. I’m here now, though. What do you want to do first?”

Her mouth twisted to the side, and her finger dug into her dimple as she thought over his question. “Hmm... can we go to the zoo and the aquarium?”

Assad looked toward the ceiling and released an irritated breath. He didn't know why he even asked because she said the same damn thing every time he came.

“You don't want to do something new, Maria?”

Her head shook as she smiled widely. “No! I wanna go look at the animals!”

“Fine.” He gave in. “Is your room clean?”

Her smile wavered slightly. “A little.”

“Okay. Go clean it all the way, then we can go.”

“Yes, sir!”

She placed one last kiss on his cheek before jumping out of his arms and rushing upstairs to her room, leaving him in the living room alone with Jessica. Sitting in the recliner he'd purchased for his visits, he pulled his phone out and ignored her eyes.

“How's everything in Memphis?” Jessica asked, breaking the silence.

“Good.”

Jessica chuckled. “Is this how it's going to be every time we're in the same space?”

Finally, he looked at her. “I'm giving you what you asked for.”

Her eyes rolled. “I said I didn't want you applying pressure for us to get back together, not for you to ignore me.”

“I can't talk to you and not express my apologies and love for you. You know that; that's why you left. So what you want me to do, Jessica?”

Her eyes softened. “I want you to talk to me like I'm a normal person, Assad.”

Tilting his head to the side, he sighed. “Fine. How has your day been going?”

Jessica sat up in her seat slightly with a smile. “Good, you?”

“Good. You know I’m always good when I see or have my daughter.”

“I know.” Her smile widened. “I...” Jessica’s head shook. “I knew you would be an amazing father. You’ve actively tried to be everything you needed from your parents, and I really appreciate you for that. Maria is crazy about you, and I’m grateful that even though we’re not in the same state, you make sure she never feels like she’s lacking anything from you.”

Assad’s eyes scanned her milk-chocolate colored face. With her hair in medium-sized lemonade braids, it was out of the way and giving him a full view of all of her beauty. Her under-turned eyes were accentuated by long, false eyelashes, and he wanted to kiss the dimples on her cheeks. Eyes lowering to her full lips, Assad licked his.

“Thank you for giving me her. She settled me down and made me feel like I had a purpose beyond this mafia shit.”

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before she looked away.

“Um... so what’s new?”

Assad released a breath as he slumped down further in his seat. “Vant is getting out soon.”

Jessica smiled. “Really? My teddy bear is about to be free? I have to come back home and turn up with him.”

“Hell yeah. That’s part of the reason I wanted to come and see my daughter. I don’t know what him and Remi about to be on, so I wanted to get some time in before we got too busy.”

“I appreciate that. I’m sure she does too.” Assad nodded, unable to pull his eyes away from her. Jessica blushed and looked away. “When are you going to stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like...” She shrugged and looked at him briefly, licking her lips. “You still want me or something.”

Assad smiled with one side of his mouth. “Shit... I do.”

Her smile dropped and she stood. “How could you let me go, Assad? You let me go like you didn’t give a fuck about me. About us.”

“What did you expect me to do? I fought for you, and you told me you needed space. I gave you what you asked for.”

“But it wasn’t what I needed!” she yelled. “I needed *you!*” Jessica chuckled. “I needed you to not sleep with my fucking cousin!”

Maria ran down the stairs, slowing down when Assad told her to. Just that quickly, Jessica had shut back down on him. She told Maria to be a good girl and not take advantage of her father being in town before heading to her room. Everything in Assad wanted to go after her, but quite frankly, he was confused as fuck.

When he went against what she said, she said he was applying too much pressure. Now, after all these years, she was making it seem like that’s what she wanted. Confused as fuck, he decided to just focus on spending time with his daughter. Everything else, even his heart’s desire, could wait.

□□□

Hours later, after she’d run him ragged and got full off food and candy Jessica would have killed him for letting her have, Maria had fallen asleep on the ride to their next destination. He took her home, laughing at the sight of her remaining sleep the whole time Jessica washed her up and got her in her pajamas. After tucking her in, Assad headed out, stopping when Jessica said...

“You can stay here if you want.”

His head shook as he headed for the door. “Nah. I got a hotel room.”

Jessica sighed as he opened the front door. “I want us to get past this, Assad. It’s been five years.”

“Obviously this isn’t some shit we can just get over. If you want to get over it, let me put our family back together.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

She didn’t answer right away, looking at everything *but* him. “It’s just not.”

He chuckled quietly and shook his head. “I’m convinced you don’t know what the fuck you want, Jessica.”

Slamming the door behind him, Assad wasn’t surprised when she came rushing out.

“I do know what the fuck I want!”

Trying to remain calm, he closed the door of his royal blue BMW SUV.

“Then what do you want?” he seethed, slowly turning to face her.

“I wanted you to fight for us, but I needed you to let me go.” Her shoulders caved. “Now I want you to stop acting like I’m the bad guy for not taking you back after you hurt me. I need you to take responsibility for breaking us up and stop trying to be the bigger person, always giving in to my demands. Be an asshole or uncaring so I can stop fucking loving you!” She huffed and took a step back. “We should be over this by now. I *am* over this by now. But I revert every time I’m around you.”

“So what? You want me to stop coming around? Just blow when I pull up and have you send my daughter out? Is that going to make this easier for you?”

With a shoulder shrug, Jessica’s head hung. “Maybe. It’s just too hard being in this space with you. I thought we would be together forever, and it’s weird. It hurts. I thought leaving Memphis would fix that, but it can’t because it can’t fix *you*.” Her eyes lifted and found his. “Or how much I love you. So maybe... maybe you were right to not talk to me when you

come around. I thought it was what I wanted, but it just... frustrates me because I can't have all of you."

He took a step in her direction but stopped when she held her hands up. "But you can," he countered softly. "You can have *every* fucking *part* of me, Jessie." Risking it all, he took another step and closed the space between them. "Take it all."

Chin trembling, Jessica buried her head in his chest. Before he could even wrap his arms around her, she was pulling away and jogging back into her home. Assad stood there for a while, unsure of what the hell he was supposed to do. It would have been selfish to go after her, especially with her high level of vulnerability. There was no doubt in his mind that they would end up making love. Then morning would come, and she'd feel worse about the situation and swear she was foolish for giving in to him. He'd suffer before he made her feel bad about loving him. So as much as he wanted to go after her, he got into his SUV and drove off instead.

□□□

"Are you and Mommy getting back together?" Maria's question caught Assad off guard. He'd taken her out for breakfast before hitting the road. Midway into their meal, she blurted the question that made his heart skip a beat.

"We are not. Why do you ask?"

Maria shrugged as she pushed her hash browns around with her fork. "She told me I was going to be a big sister."

Assad stared at her, through her, paralyzed by her confession.

"You're going to be a *what*?"

Maria grabbed her orange juice and took a small sip before repeating, "Big sister." She licked her lips and put her cup down. "There's a baby in Mommy's tummy. Did you put it there like you did me?"

His eyes blinked, mouth opened partially. Slowly, Assad's head shook. Eyebrows raised, he opened his mouth wider to answer her question, but nothing came out at first.

“Uh... no. I didn't, pretty girl.”

Maria's head tilted in confusion. “So how am I going to be a big sister then?”

He smiled, trying to remain present. “You and your mom's new baby are going to have the same mommy, just not the same daddy.”

“Oh.” She giggled softly. “It must be Mr. Mike then. He's always taking her out on dates. And when they have sleepovers, I get to go to Aunt Tammy and Uncle Kevin's house.”

Assad forced a tight smile and nodded. He watched as Maria's lips continued to move, but he couldn't focus on anything that was coming out. All he could think about was the love of his life having a baby with another man...

□□□

It was taking everything in Assad to not yoke Jessica up as soon as he saw her. Clenching his jaw, he waited until Maria had headed upstairs to her room before saying, “I need to speak with you. Outside.”

Jessica's brows wrinkled in confusion before she nodded and followed him outside to her patio. Standing near the railing, Assad lit the blunt he'd kept behind his ear. He took four puffs before scratching his scalp and shaking his head.

“You're pregnant?”

He saw her body weaken as she stood next to him. Assad couldn't bear to look at her. Not while they talked about this.

“Yes. Ass—”

Putting the blunt out with a sigh, he was no longer able to deny it.

“When were you going to tell me? Is that why you were acting so crazy yesterday?”

She nodded, wiping a tear quickly. “Yes,” she whispered. “I've been saying we can't get back together, but there was a small piece of my heart that felt like we would. When I found

out I was pregnant, that pretty much sealed our fate to just... co-parent for the rest of our lives.”

“Why, though? If you can forgive me, I can overlook you having a baby with someone else.”

Jessica chuckled softly and shook her head. “You know how I feel about that, Assad. I told you that a lot of things were fixable and forgivable but cheating and abuse were not. It doesn’t matter how much I love you; I can never be with you again. And... Mike proposed.” Assad’s head dropped as he grabbed the railing with his free hand. “So that’s pretty much it. I was just... in my feelings. Thinking about what could have been. I apologize for that. I should have just told you yesterday instead of spewing all of my conflicting thoughts and feelings onto you, especially before you left to spend time with our daughter.”

Scratching his scalp again, Assad stood upright. The king in him wouldn’t allow him to show his weakness about love or anything else for that matter. He’d cheated and made his bed, now he had to lie in it—without Jessica.

“Congratulations,” he muttered, turning in her direction. Assad used his thumb to wipe the tears that slid down her cheeks, then used his hand on the back of her neck to pull her into his chest. She gripped the sides of his shirt and looked up at him with sad eyes. “You deserve love that doesn’t include intentional pain. If he can give you that, you’ll have my blessing. But I need to meet him first.”

She chuckled. “I know.”

“So call him,” he demanded as he released her.

“Now? He’s at work.”

“I can wait.”

“You... are you serious?”

“Dead. Go fix me something to eat while I wait.”

Jessica’s eyes rolled, and she mumbled under her breath as she headed back into her condo, and all Assad could do was chuckle.

□□□

Jessica was so worried about Assad being on his best behavior when her fiancé arrived, and he felt like he'd been nice. He made it clear to Mike that if he violated or hurt his daughter or her mother, that he would make him pay. First, by destroying everything he loved. Then, by disabling everyone he loved. And finally, by taking his life. Once Assad was sure Mike understood that, he left.

Now, he was on his way back to Memphis... all in his fucking feelings. Truth of the matter was, he wasn't ready for such a serious relationship when he started dealing with Jessica. When he found out she was pregnant, he felt like the best thing to do was get serious so he could provide his child with the upbringing he wished he would have had.

Between his father being heavily invested in the streets and eventually leaving the country because he was on the run, the only consistent male figures he had came from the mafia. His mother's drug abuse and obsessive disorder had turned their home into a warzone. There were times he could remember having to stay up all night helping her clean and being beaten if he fell asleep. Having his food withheld because he didn't organize something well enough. As sick as his mother was mentally, Assad was always able to love her unconditionally, but he knew the way she'd raised him and his brother wasn't right.

Instead of taking the time to make sure he was ready for that commitment as a man and husband, he hurt Jessica in the process of trying to be a good father. He was glad she hadn't waited for him to get his shit together to a certain extent because it forced him to focus on himself and doing the necessary work to start to heal. Still, like her, there was a part of him that felt like they would get back together—now that was done.

Needing someone to help him get his mind together, he called his sister, Dijon. Even though she was younger than him, he often went to her when he needed help figuring out a woman. A part of him wished he could have called his mother and receive her wisdom, but there was no guarantee that she

would answer the phone, and if she did, she didn't believe in or even understand the wisdom and intuition she had as a woman. His father had fucked her mental up that bad, and as much as Assad wanted to place full blame on Colton for choosing a woman who was clearly mentally unstable to have children with, he also held his mother responsible for choosing not to get the help she needed.

"Hey, big brother," Dijon greeted, and just the sound of the smile in her voice did his heart good.

"What you doing?"

"Not too much. Getting ready to go to a paint and sip event. You back home yet?"

"Nah, I had to stay a little late and take care of some business."

Assad released a bit of his frustration in a sigh. He wanted his first stop to be Kourtney's place for some head without headache, but he'd fucked her a few days ago... so it was too soon for him to dip back in her pussy—no matter how good it was and how much he needed it.

"What's wrong, Black?"

"...Jessica is pregnant."

"Oh." She paused. "Wow. O-okay. We knew this would happen soon enough. You both agreed to move on."

"Yeah, but you know I always felt like we would end up getting back together."

Dijon's voice softened when she said, "I know. So what now?"

"Shit, I don't even fucking know, D. That was pretty much the nail in the coffin for us, you feel me? I guess I really have to accept that I fucked it up and will never have my family back."

She sighed before almost singing, "Black, bro..." Dijon paused. "You can create a family with another woman. You will always have Maria, and that's what matters most. Just focus on having a healthy co-parenting relationship with

Jessie. Everything else will work itself out. Maybe now your eyes will be open fully for the next woman in your life.”

Maybe that was true. He really hadn't taken any woman seriously over the past three years. Even when he would wine and dine them before sex, that's all it really was. Kourtney was the only one he would have considered a true companion, but she knew what was up too.

“You right,” he agreed. “I guess I just... gotta let her go.”

“Please.” Dijon chuckled, making him smile. “I love Jessie, but honestly, I didn't feel like she was right for you. Not in that moment. She wanted a lot of what you weren't ready to give. I feel like you tried to please her, but she shouldn't have tried to change you. You were definitely foul as fuck for having sex with her shiesty ass cousin, but I think that was really your way of getting out of a situation that you knew you shouldn't have been in anyway.”

“Look at you, being all wise and shit.”

Dijon laughed. “Only when it comes to other people's relationships. You know I'm a mess when it comes to mine.”

Assad laughed. “What's up with you and Rock anyway?”

Dijon groaned. She hated talking about her weird ass relationship with Rakim, and Assad loved asking her about it.

“Call me when you get home. We can link up.”

“Aight, sis. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

After disconnecting the call, Assad cut the volume up on his Young Dolph and began to blast it. If there was one thing he was grateful for from his father, it was the siblings he got from other women. And the mafia, of course. Family was everything to Assad... Maybe that's why it had been so hard for him to let Jessica go...

Five

Scarlett

Scarlett hoped if she pretended to be asleep that Malcolm wouldn't bother her before her shift at the compound, but that hope was proven to be a lost cause when he used her ankle to spread her legs.

"Scar," he called, voice slightly slurred.

The sound of a soft giggle further irritated Scarlett as she opened her eyes. "Yes?"

"You sleep?"

"I was. Yes."

"Since you're up, I need you to show Bianca what I like."

Scarlett's eyes zeroed in on the young girl standing next to him. She couldn't have been more than twenty or twenty-one. Keeping herself from rolling her eyes, Scarlett inhaled a long breath. The last thing she wanted to do was train Bianca through a threesome. The only time she found herself being attracted to women was after the toxic relationship she was in before Robert.

Her ex had done her so wrong she was sure she'd never deal with men again, but after her first night with a woman, she realized quickly she was all about dick. She did, however, enjoy the softness of being with another woman and thought it would be a one-time thing... until Malcolm used her to teach those that came after her.

"I'm spotting," she lied, trying to turn onto her side.

“So? You can still suck my dick.”

This time, she was unable to keep from rolling her eyes as she sat up. She knew if she declined that too, he would come up with some form of punishment for her. Hell, he would if he found out she wasn't really spotting, but that was the only excuse she could quickly come up with.

Rolling her neck, she kept the covers over her lap as she sat on the edge of the bed. Malcolm and Bianca made their way over to her. He told Bianca to sit next to him while he unbuttoned and unzipped his slacks. Drinking a few sips of water from the cup on the nightstand, Scarlett grabbed her black scrunchie and used it to pull her hair up.

His small, meaty dick was at its fullest attention, so she grabbed it and began to lick his balls the way he liked. Malcolm's hand immediately went to the back of her head, and when she took his entire length into her mouth, he groaned. Scarlett alternated between sucking fast and hard and focusing on his head. She learned the hard way using her full hand to stroke his short shaft bruised his ego, so she circled her thumb, pointer, and middle finger around it, stroking up and down as she sucked. When he started to back away, she knew he was on the verge of cumming.

Using his balls to hold him in place, she continued the fast and hard suction that he liked, breathing deeply as he jerked and began to shoot his seeds down her throat.

“Damn, baby,” he moaned, laying Scarlett down on the bed.

“Malcolm, I told you I'm spotting.”

“I'm a grown ass man. A little blood don't bother me.”

Covering her face, she inhaled a deep breath at the feel of Bianca's hand sliding up her stomach. As soon as Malcolm had her silk pajamas and panties down, his movements stopped.

“Did you lie to me?”

Lowering her hands, she met his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Ain’t no blood in these panties, Scarlett.”

She shrugged. “It must have stopped.”

His eyes lowered and jaw clenched as his head tilted. With a soft smile, he asked, “You want to bleed?”

“Malcolm...”

“I’ll make you bleed.”

Before she could scoot up on the bed, he was pulling her back down to the edge of it. Malcolm quickly wrapped his arms around her legs and lifted them up.

“Malcolm, don’t!” she yelled, pushing at his head, but it did her no good.

He began to forcefully punch her opening, ignoring her cries as she squirmed against him. Able to get a leg free, she turned and tried to run away, but he grabbed her again, yelling for Bianca to hold her down. She hesitated for only a second, quickly holding Scarlett’s arms down while he grabbed her legs and lifted them up again. Instead of punching her opening, he pressed his fist inside of her, pounding it until she blacked out from the pain.

□□□

Scarlett’s hand shook as she tried to apply her eyeliner. Chucking the small pen down, she cursed under her breath as pain ripped through her. Even wearing period panties, she could feel the blood the moment it leaked from her opening. Scarlett didn’t know how long she’d been out of it, but when she woke up, it was to Vanna applying a cold towel to her face while Bianca stood in the corner, shaking with tears streaming down her eyes. More than anything, she was worried about the pain Scarlett had sustained, not so much Malcolm’s character and being the cause of it.

When she peeked into the bathroom, Scarlett looked at her through the mirror before picking her eyeliner back up. Her nerves were still so bad her hand continued to shake. Releasing a low growl, she surrendered to the fact that she was in no condition to continue on. Bianca walked in slowly, taking the liner out of her hand.

“Close your eyes,” she said softly.

Scarlett stared at her for a few seconds before doing so. She was about five inches taller than Bianca, so she leaned against the sink. Carefully, Bianca applied the liner and Scarlett’s blush and nude gloss, then sprayed her face with her setting spray.

When she was done, Scarlett muttered, “Thank you,” before turning to look herself over in the mirror.

“Is he always like that?” Bianca asked quietly.

“No. If you do what he says, you won’t have any problems. He only gets violent when you disrespect him.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have.”

“Stop,” Scarlett demanded quickly. “Malcolm sees compassion and kindness as a weakness if he’s not controlling it. It will be in your best interest to not show that you care for anything or anyone unless he tells you to.”

Bianca nodded quickly. “How long did it take him to move you to the big house? I thought being here would be best, but after that, I’m not so sure.”

Scarlett chuckled. “Being his main bitch is no prize at all. Trust me. Yeah, you don’t have to stay at the compound, but you lose a lot of freedom in the process. All that I have is tied to him. I don’t have my own money. I can’t talk to anyone outside of the compound.” She chuckled. “I don’t even have a fully loaded cellphone. He has my iPhone locked to where all I can do is speak to him and his guards. Don’t make getting my position your goal.” She stepped closer to Bianca. “I don’t know what you’re running from that would make you think being his sex worker is better, but I promise you, you do *not* want to be here.”

Bianca’s eyes remained locked with hers as they watered. She nodded and looked away before asking if Scarlett needed anything else. Scarlett told her no and hoped that she would take heed to her warning as she left the bathroom. If Malcolm found out about what she’d done, there would be

consequences, but if she could get at least one woman out of his control... it would be worth it.

□□□

Two and a half years earlier...

SCARLETT WAS in no rush to get back to her husband, but she knew if she didn't arrive soon, he would worry. Even when he wasn't treating her the best, Scarlett always had his best interest at heart. She could admit that she was infatuated with Robert because he was an older man. Daddy issues perhaps, but Robert was nothing like her father.

A year into their marriage, Scarlett was convinced signing that license was one of the worst decisions of her life. Robert wasn't abusive all the time, but when he was, it was brutal—not just physically but mentally and emotionally, too. In the beginning, she told herself it was because he didn't know a healthy way to love her. But eventually, even that wasn't a good enough excuse to accept his abuse.

The moment she loved herself enough to put herself first, she began to consider life apart from him. But knowing she needed to leave was just the first part. She would have to actually leave Robert and pray that he didn't drag her right back like he'd done times before. Having been married now for three years, Scarlett had tried to leave Robert five times. Each time he treated her worse when he found her before, spoiling her to make up for it.

The past six months had been pretty good. They both had been on their best behavior. Scarlett wasn't sure if Robert had truly turned over a new leaf or what, because he hadn't raised a hand to her or cheated with another woman. His illegal dealings in the streets still came first, but he made sure she was well taken care of when he couldn't be home with her.

Scarlett wasn't naïve enough to think he had magically become the man of her dreams, but she was smart enough to enjoy their good space for as long as she could. As she pulled up to the light to leave the shopping center, confusion filled

her when her music cut off. Looking down, she saw that a new song was playing. It didn't make any sense because her phone was supposed to be connected to her Bluetooth.

Not thinking too much into it, she changed the song back to what she was originally listening to. By the time the light turned green again, the song had changed, again.

After turning into traffic, she went to her home screen and quickly went to her settings. For a few seconds, she alternated between looking at traffic and the phone her Bluetooth had connected to. Seeing as she was the only person in her car, Scarlett didn't understand why her Bluetooth was paired to an iPhone named "That Bitch". She looked around at the cars that were in traffic with her, zeroing in on the car in front of her.

With an irritated chuckle, she shook her head at the sight of the license plate tag—THTBTCH.

"Why in the fuck is your phone connecting to my car, bitch?" she mumbled, pulling up closer to the car. "The shit isn't just magically connecting. You would have had to actually be in my car to set it up."

Releasing a shaky breath, Scarlett changed the song again, waiting to see what the woman in the car in front of her would do. She waited until they got to a red light and changed the song again. Scratching her chin, Scarlett weighed her options. It was clear this woman had been in her car, comfortably so. She could either follow her and find out why, or trust her gut and the fact that she had had an affair with her husband.

Not wanting to jump to any conclusions, she followed the woman to her next destination while trying to get Robert to answer his phone. When he didn't answer, she figured that was probably for the best. Seven minutes later, that bitch pulled into the parking lot of Verizon Wireless. Scarlett watched the woman intently, taking pictures of her in the process. After sending the pictures to Robert, she got out and followed her into the store.

As she stood behind her in the line, Scarlett tried to maintain her calm. For all she knew, the woman had no idea

that that was her car. That Robert was her husband. And it wouldn't be fair for her to take her frustration out on another woman when her husband was the one who had betrayed her.

“Hey,” she spoke softly with a smile to get the woman's attention.

She turned, and as soon as she locked eyes with Scarlett, she laughed. “Hey.”

“Do you know who I am?”

Her eyes scanned Scarlett's frame. “Yep. I do. I know your husband too.”

Her voice wasn't loud, but it was loud enough to gain the attention of the man in line in front of them. He looked back at them briefly before stepping up.

“You fucking him?”

She smiled again as her head tilted. She was confident, not even bothering to face Scarlett as if she knew that no matter what she said, she was safe.

“If I am?”

“You're that bitch, right? If you're sleeping with my husband, just tell me.”

She waited a few seconds before chuckling again and finally turning to face Scarlett.

“I am. Now wha—”

Before she could finish taunting Scarlett, Scarlett had taken a handful of her hair, using it to hold her in place while she repeatedly connected her fist to her face...

□□□

Present Day

THEY WERE BACK. *He* was back. The one who had been inhabiting her dreams. As hard as it was, Scarlett fought to keep her eyes off of him. Every time she failed, she went to the bar and got a shot from Vanna. The last time she did,

Vanna asked, “Will you go over there and talk to them already?”

Scarlett’s head shook as she pushed her glass back in Vanna’s direction.

“No, because if Malcolm does anything else to me any time soon, I’m liable to die trying to kill his ass.”

Vanna’s expression softened as she refilled Scarlett’s shot glass. Now she was on shot five, which was enough to keep her in a good mood, but not enough to have her drunk.

“You wanna talk about what happened earlier?”

Scarlett’s head shook. “I just want to forget it.”

Vanna smiled bitterly. “I understand.” She covered Scarlett’s hand with hers. “If you change your mind, I’m here.”

Scarlett leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek before downing her shot, closing her eyes at the sound of Malcolm’s voice.

“Where was this energy earlier?” he asked while smacking her ass. Pressing his chest into her back and head, he placed a kiss on her neck. “I’m sorry about that too. My feelings were hurt because you lied to me, and I lashed out.”

Not bothering to respond, she pointed at her glass for Vanna to refill it.

“You sure? You know it hits you quicker when you drink them back to back.”

“I’m positive. Pass me those honey roasted cashews.”

Vanna slid the small bowl her way then poured the shot, eyes going from Scarlett to Malcolm.

“You don’t hear me talking to you?” Malcolm asked.

“Yeah.”

“So accept my apology.”

“I don’t.”

Vanna’s eyes widened.

“What did you just say?”

Scarlett turned in her seat to face him. “I said I do not accept your apology.” Her head tilted as she asked, “Are you going to beat me now?”

Because at this point, that was the only way he would be able to force her to accept. As long as her pussy was swollen and bleeding, Scarlett was a ticking time bomb that he needed to steer clear of unless he wanted her to explode.

Licking his lips, Malcolm chuckled. “You’ve been drinking, so I’m going to let you have that tonight. Are you sober enough to take the VIP table in the far left? That’s big money over there, and I need my best girl working that table to make sure they come back.”

Scarlett’s eyes went in the direction Malcolm was pointing in, and she had to keep from smiling. It was their table. *His* table.

“Yes, I’m sober. I can handle it.”

“Come. I will introduce you.”

As much as she didn’t want to, she placed her hand in Malcolm’s when he offered it and helped her stand. Though her pussy and pelvis were still on fire, she’d taken enough pain medicine to not feel it as much. She hadn’t told Vanna what happened or about the pills because then she wouldn’t have wanted to serve her, and alcohol was the only way she was making it through the night.

The closer she got to the table, the faster her heart beat. She’d never been nervous about meeting a man in all her life, but there was something about *this* man that rattled her in the most tantalizing way. As soon as they made it to the table, all eyes were on her. Used to it, she smiled softly, looking every man in attendance in the eyes... except him. And it was hard to ignore him when he stood in her presence.

“This is Scar. She will be your server tonight.” His grip heightened from her hand to her arm. “But hear me clearly—she belongs to me. She is my possession.” Releasing his hold, Malcolm smiled and placed a kiss on her cheek. She tried not

to react, but she couldn't keep her body from stiffening as she closed her eyes.

Her eyes opened, and Malcolm was gone. She smiled, happy to be out of his presence.

“What can I get you all to drink? Y'all want bottles to start?”

“Champagne,” he said, forcing her to look into his dark chocolate eyes.

“Champagne? Are you celebrating something tonight?”

He shrugged before shooting her a soft smile. “I guess you could say I'm celebrating meeting you.”

This wasn't the first time a man had flirted with her, but it was the first time a man had flirted with her knowing she belonged to Malcolm. Honestly, she didn't know how to respond. If it was anyone else, she'd reject him to keep him safe, but he had to know who Malcolm was. He had to be aware of the danger flirting with her would place himself in.

“I'm honored to make your acquaintance as well,” Scarlett confessed.

He extended his arm, large hand open and waiting to accept hers. Resisting the urge to look back, Scarlett placed her hand inside of his, chills covering her arm though his hand was warm. And soft. And veiny. As his thumb caressed hers, he stared into her eyes.

“Scar, is it?”

She nodded. “Scarlett Graham, but everyone calls me Scar.”

“Scarlett,” he muttered, licking his lips as if he liked the way her name tasted. Pulling her closer, he added, “Beautiful name for an even more beautiful woman.”

“Thank you...”

“Black.” He paused, head tilting as he looked her curvy frame over. “Assad Black.”

“I’m um...” she pulled her hand from his, “...going to get you all a few bottles of champagne.”

She didn’t have to look back to know that he was watching her walk away. She felt his eyes on her the whole time. As soon as she made it behind the bar next to Vanna, she practically fell against it.

“Girrrrrl,” she stretched, squeezing Vanna’s hand. “Did you see that shit?”

“I diiiid. That nigga wants you!”

“It seems like it, and Malcolm made it clear that I belong to him!”

Vanna’s head shook as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I told you... if anyone can get you out of here... it’s them. What do they want?” Scarlett didn’t reply. She was too busy allowing her brain to process Assad’s boldness. “Scar?”

“Huh?”

“I said what do they want?”

“Oh. Um. It’s...” She turned and counted everyone seated at their long, rectangular table. “It’s eight of them, so give me four bottles of Moët to start.”

“Is it someone’s birthday or something? We need to send our girls over with you if it is. Get the fireworks and shit going in this bitch.”

Scarlett chuckled. “No. I asked if they were celebrating, and he said he was celebrating meeting me.”

Vanna grinned. “This is *it*, Scar. This is it. I feel it in my spirit. It’s something about them.”

Something about *him*.

“I can’t think about that right now. I just have to make it through the night without Malcolm starting to suspect anything. He’s bold and dangerous, but I’m the one that will have to pay for it. So I can’t even play with him like that.”

Vanna’s head shook as she pulled two trays from under the bar. One held the champagne while the other had glasses and

everything else they would need. The women slowly made their way back over, and the whole time she walked, Assad's eyes were on her... as if he just didn't give the slightest fuck about what Malcolm had said. Scarlett's nipples hardened, and she knew he'd noticed it when he smiled.

"You got a man, beautiful?" the man who looked like a younger version of Assad asked.

"I do," Vanna replied with a smile and wink. "I got a few."

"Can they fight?"

They laughed. "They can. They can shoot too."

"Shid, me too, so wassup?"

Assad's head shook while the man who was seated on the opposite side of him said, "This nigga. I see he ain't learned his lesson yet."

"Mane, fuck you."

"Y'all chill with all that," Assad ordered, silencing both men immediately.

When the younger man followed Vanna back to the bar, he left his seat next to Assad open, but she wasn't expecting him to ask her to sit down.

"Oh, no. I couldn't," she declined gracefully.

"I insist."

Assad stood, giving her the chance to take in his full height. She was five-five, and by the difference, he had to be at least six-two or three.

She liked that shit.

Clearing her throat, Scarlett looked around casually in search of Malcolm as she made her way around the table. He did instruct her to make sure they returned, so she had to play nice.

"Is anyone ready to order?" she asked as Assad pushed her seat up to the table.

"Nah." Assad declined.

“Shit, I am. Their wings are good as hell,” the man seated next to him countered.

Scarlett chuckled. “I agree.”

Looking around, her eyes landed on Kendall. After beckoning her to their table, she asked her to help her serve them by taking their orders and letting her know when they were ready for pickup. Kendall agreed, heading around the table to see what everyone wanted. Scarlett looked around again, and this time, her eyes found Malcolm. He nodded and gave her a soft smile of approval, which allowed her to relax a little more into her seat.

“Be honest with me,” Assad spoke, gaining her attention as he placed one of the champagne flutes in front of her.

“I shouldn’t. I’ve been drinking tequila all night.”

He smiled as he filled the flute halfway up. “Don’t worry. You’re safe here. I’m not going to let anyone take advantage of you.” She didn’t know why, but there was something about his eyes and tone that made her believe him, which was a miracle within itself. “How did you get caught up with a nigga like Malcolm? What does he have on you?”

Scarlett chuckled nervously. “Why can’t we be in love?”

Assad’s head shook as he poured himself a glass of champagne. “He didn’t introduce you as the woman he loves and treasures; he introduced you like you were his prized possession.”

Licking her lips, she swallowed hard. “I can’t say.”

Assad nodded. “But I’m right?”

Her eyes shifted in Malcolm’s direction, and surprisingly, his attention was on Bianca.

“Yes.”

Assad nodded before taking a sip of his champagne, and her eyes focused on his perfectly manicured hands. She was supposed to believe this man was in the black mafia? While she couldn’t deny he had the aura of a man who wasn’t to be fucked with, he looked more like a model. From his tall, wide,

walnut-colored frame and dark chocolate eyes to his square head, curly tapered mini fro with shaved sides, and his high cheek bones.

Assad was beyond handsome.

Even his beard looked soft, curly, and well moisturized as it drew attention to his brown and pomegranate-colored lips. They looked so fucking *soft*. Every time she looked at them, she had to lick hers.

“Are you safe with him?” Before she could look in Malcolm’s direction again, Assad’s hand was going to her thigh. “Focus on me,” he commanded softly.

Looking toward the ceiling to dry her eyes, Scarlett inhaled a deep breath.

“Are you safe with him, Scarlett?”

He squeezed her thigh gently, holding the space for her while she fought to stay in the present moment. Unable to answer him vocally, she shook her head as her eyes slowly lowered to his.

“Okay.” He removed his hand and sat back in his seat just as Kendall was making it over to their side of the table.

By the time she was done, Scarlett stood and took the notebook from her.

“I’ll take it.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She didn’t feel like she would be able to breathe until she was away from him. After entering their orders and ignoring Vanna’s millions of questions, she rushed to the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Sliding down it, Scarlett inhaled a deep, shaky breath. Her eyes closed and her head shook. This was the first time she’d ever expressed the danger she was in, and now, all she could think about was Assad telling Malcolm.

Even though her heart didn’t want her to believe he’d be capable of doing such a thing, the truth was, she didn’t know

this man at all. All she could think about was this being some type of twisted test that Malcolm had set up and she had failed. Scarlett was so deep in her thoughts that she hadn't realized she was scratching her inner thighs through her jeans until the sting became unbearable.

"Shit," she whispered, standing and quickly unbuckling her jeans.

She'd scratched the scabs off the cuts that were newly healing. After wiping them, she pulled her jeans back up and washed her hands before heading out. Scarlett wanted to avoid their table, but if she did, Malcolm would sense that something was up. Thankfully, Assad didn't pay her any special attention for the rest of the night... until they were getting ready to head out. After he paid their bill, he reached into the small duffel bag the man that had been sitting next to him opened.

Assad pulled out a large stack of bills and handed it to Scarlett. When she saw the band around it that said ten thousand dollars, she rejected it.

"I can't take that, Assad."

"You can and you will," he countered. "I want you." His confession caught her so off guard, all she could do was stare at him.

"What?" she asked gently, making him smile.

"I said I want you."

"Assad..."

"But I'm not going to pursue you. Not yet. Only for your protection. You will be seeing me again, though. Soon."

Unable to resist, she watched as they left, seemingly surrounding Assad like a safety net.

Was he their boss?

The Black that was over everyone else?

If that was the case, maybe he *could* help her.

No.

She couldn't get her hopes up.

No man had been able to save her in two years, and she'd be devastated if she saw Assad as her hood knight in shining armor just for him to disappear like the rest.

□□□

Two years earlier...

THIS WAS Scarlett's only chance to get out, and she had to take it. Six months ago, she didn't know Robert was expecting his first child. With another woman—that bitch—whose real name was Candice. Candice lost the baby during their fight, and Robert had been holding Scarlett responsible ever since. When he found out, he beat her to the point of death. And it wasn't until he was done did he realize what he'd done.

For the past six months, he'd been keeping her chained, naked, in their bedroom... because it was the only way he knew he could keep her from running away. It didn't matter how much he apologized and told her he loved her; Robert could tell by the look in Scarlett's eyes that he'd sent her to her breaking point.

That was proven this evening.

When he left for a meeting, she sliced and fractured her hand, pulling it out of the handcuff Robert had it in. Grabbing only clothing for the night, she rushed out of their home and never looked back. She'd run about two miles straight before she was falling to her knees. Bright lights blinded her, and she could only pray it wasn't Robert coming back home early as she rolled over onto her back... but she was too tired to sit up and see.

The door opened and closed, and Scarlett closed her eyes as her chest heaved. Looking up into the setting sun, she was convinced death would be better than going back with him.

"Scar?" The sound of Malcolm's voice brought tears to her eyes. He was Robert's enemy and competition, but

anything was better than Robert himself. “The hell are you doing out here?”

“I can’t go back. I can’t go back to Rob. I can-can’t go back,” she repeated over and over again, prompting Malcolm to pick her up.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’ll take you with me. You’re going to be okay now. I promise...”

Six

Assad “Ayo, Black. Ain’t that lil’ shorty from the compound?” Hassan asked, gaining Assad’s attention. They didn’t go to too many different places outside of those owned by the members of the mafia, but they’d been frequenting the compound often enough to recognize the chocolate cutie being hassled by one of the drunk niggas that Assad had already had his eye on for most of the night. He didn’t tolerate disrespect toward women, and this was the second time he’d noticed the man trying to gain the attention of a woman that clearly wasn’t interested.

Assad sighed as he set his glass of Hennessy Black down. The last thing he wanted to do was have an altercation at his bar, especially since it was known for its laidback, upscale vibe, but as he watched the man pull her arm and tug her closer, he could already tell what kind of night they were about to have.

“Yeah, that’s her. You think that’s one of her men?”

“Regardless, he don’t need to be manhandling her like that ’round me.”

Assad watched for a couple seconds more before giving Hassan permission to “Get ’em.”

With no hesitation, he was up from his seat, swiftly making his way through the crowd. Even with the tension still brewing between him and Rakim, without even knowing the issue, he was right behind him with three other men.

Assad grabbed his drink, sipping slowly as he watched Hassan effortlessly pull her from the man's grasp. He asked her only one question, and when she answered no, he handed her off to Rakim to bring her to their table. Everyone who knew the Black brothers knew Hassan was the one with the most screws loose. If he tried to grant you grace or patience, you took them both without a second thought, because he was liable to flip the next second.

Now was no different. After asking the man to leave once and not getting the response he wanted, Hassan knocked him out with one punch and had security drag him out. Assad chuckled with a shake of his head.

"Can't take his hot-headed ass *no-fucking-where* without him knocking a nigga out," he grumbled under his breath.

"Hey," she spoke, smile wide as she stood next to Assad.

Standing, he replied. "Hey... what was your name again?"

She chuckled. "Don't worry. I never told you. It's Vanna."

"Nice to meet you, Vanna. You work at the compound with Scarlett, right?"

"I do."

"Have a seat," he offered, using a swift motion with two fingers that had a waitress bringing an extra chair to the table. "What was that shit about?"

She sighed as she declined the bottle of Hennessy that he offered. "I only drink clear, and just a drunk nigga that couldn't take no for an answer." Vanna smiled as Hassan made his way toward her. "I'ma have to give your brother some pussy now since he walking around acting like captain save a hoe in this bitch."

They both laughed as Hassan sat next to her. "Shid, what you wanna do? We can leave this bitch *now*."

Vanna laughed, leaning more into his side as he wrapped his arm around her.

"I need some information before y'all dip out," Assad requested, adding, "Tell me about Scarlett," before she had

time to vocally agree.

Vanna's smile fell instantly. She reached for the bottle of Hennessy and took a shot to the head. He expected her face to twist up like most women did, but she took it like a G, getting a smile out of both him and Hassan.

"I can't tell you about her situation. That's hers to tell," Vanna said, and Assad respected her loyalty. "But I can tell you she needs to get the fuck up outta the compound before Malcolm kills her, or his men do because she killed him."

Assad sighed as he sat up in his seat. "How long has she been there?"

"Two years. She's his main bitch, so she's in the house with him. I live in the penthouse in the compound, which is why I have the freedom to be out and about."

"So what? He holding y'all hostage or some shit?" Hassan asked.

"Kind of but not really. Like, the women who work the brothel can leave, but he gets them so dependent on him that they feel like they don't have any other choice but to stay. I can leave, and he might look for me for a day or so because I bring him good money, but that would be it. Scarlett's situation is different though. She's life or death valuable to him. He's not going to willingly let her go... to anyone."

The men around them chuckled lightly, already knowing what was up. Vanna looked around, confusion covering her face.

"What's so funny?"

Vanna had no idea, and Malcolm didn't either. Assad was going to get Scarlett—there was no question about that. He'd already had his men look into her past, but they didn't find much. She didn't have a work or credit history and had pretty much fallen off the face of the earth as far as records were concerned two years ago. It all made sense now. If she was being held captive by Malcolm, that would explain why she hadn't been working, going to school, filing taxes, or anything else public for that matter.

It was clear that Vanna wasn't going to go into much detail about why Scarlett was so valuable to Malcolm, and she didn't have to. The more Assad learned, the more intrigued he became, and his appetite for knowledge wouldn't be satisfied until he knew all there was to know about Scarlett Graham. There were some things only she would be able to tell him, and to do that, she'd have to be removed from Malcolm's territory.

Assad hadn't gotten the mafia as far as he had by taking enemies and threats lightly, but he was also confident enough to know he could have anything he wanted—including Scarlett.

Sitting back in his seat, Assad ran his hand over his beard before making clear, "Malcolm might scare these lil niggas in the streets, but I can promise you... he don' met his match with me..."

□□□

If Assad had neighbors, they would have hated him right now. Luckily, he lived on six acres of land that didn't have any other houses for miles. Between having flashbacks of his childhood with his mother and his thoughts being invaded by the state of Scarlett's welfare, he hadn't been able to get to sleep. Kevin Gates was blasting at his Bluetooth speaker's highest capacity, and Assad found himself in the middle of his kitchen floor, scrubbing nonexistent stains... just like his fucking mother.

Having a butler, housekeeper, and personal chef didn't mean shit when your mother trained you to clean as if your life depended on it. When you were a child getting woken up out of your sleep with lashes from belts because of crumbs you missed... it kind of felt like it did.

He'd FaceTimed his daughter, but Jessica didn't answer, so that offered him no relief. It only added to his mental discomfort. Three hours passed before she was finally calling him back, which alarmed Assad because she either texted him or let Maria FaceTime him. After cutting his music off, he answered with, "Y'all good?"

“Yeah. I’m alone now.” Jessica paused and sighed. “Look, we need to talk.”

Standing, Assad tossed the rag he’d been using to scrub into the bucket of lukewarm water and headed to the island in the center of his all-black kitchen.

“About what?”

“Mike isn’t really comfortable with you calling so late at night. I told him it’s just a habit and how we get Maria to sleep peacefully, but he’s not really feeling that.”

Assad smiled softly before it dropped. “I don’t give a fuck *what* he feeling... I’m going to talk to my daughter whenever we see fit. And if you ignore my calls again because you aren’t comfortable answering in front of his bitch ass, he gon’ have to see me. Is that what you want?”

Jessica sighed. “No, Black.”

“Then check your man... before I do.”

After disconnecting the call, Assad slammed his phone down on the counter. This was what he was afraid of—a man coming into Jessica’s life and fucking up the routine they had built. A part of him would have been able to better understand Mike’s plight had he been a man about it and come to him with the shit. Principle was everything to Assad. Quite frankly, he’d killed niggas for less. Mike trying to cut off his communication with his daughter would definitely be addressed if Jessica didn’t handle it immediately.

Seven

Scarlett

Scarlett didn't realize how lonely she'd felt until she got to the compound and saw Vanna there. It was one of the rare weekends that she had off, so Scarlett wasn't expecting to see her. Instead of heading straight to the bar for a drink, she made her way to Vanna's table.

"I am so glad to see you," Vanna said as Scarlett sat across from her.

"What's up?"

"I didn't want to come to the house to tell you about this." Vanna leaned forward, looking around the bar area. "Where is Malcolm?"

"Checking on the girls downstairs. What's going on, Vanna?"

Vanna sighed as she cupped her hands on top of the table. "I went to Kirby's last night for drinks. Guess who owns the bar?"

Vanna's smile made Scarlett chuckle. "I don't know. Who?"

"Black."

Two seconds passed before Scarlett grinned. "Assad?" Vanna nodded. "So you saw him?"

"I did, and he asked about you."

"He did?"

“Yep.”

“What did he say? And what did you say? Then what did he say? Tell me everything and start from the beginning.”

Vanna chuckled before doing as Scarlett asked. She listened intently as Vanna told her about the man who couldn't take a hint getting knocked out, which led to her being seated with the Black Mafia. Normally, a man expressing interest in Scarlett would have alarmed her, but there was something about Assad that made her believe he could handle himself.

“So what's up with you and Hassan? Did you leave with him?”

“Nah. I was just talking shit. From how he talks, he has enough women to keep him company. I did give him my number though.”

“Well, that's nice.”

Vanna chuckled. “Girl, please. You know you hate the thought of me talking to Hassan if you can't talk to Assad.”

“That's not my vibe. Regardless of my situation, I will be happy for you always.”

“And that's exactly why you deserve the best. Period.”

Scarlett smiled softly as she shrugged. “Maybe one day.” She released a sigh that did little to release her growing frustration with her situation.

Even without turning around, Scarlett knew Malcolm was approaching their table because she smelled his cologne. His firm, hard hand gripped her shoulder.

“What y'all over here talking about?” he questioned, eyes boring into the side of Scarlett's face.

“I was just telling Scar that I want her to come out with me tonight. I think it would do her some good.” Malcolm's head shook as he sat next to Scarlett, but Vanna continued. “She hasn't gone out by herself in what? A year?”

“Yeah, because when I allowed her to, she tried to run away.”

“But she learned her lesson. Didn’t you, Scar?”

Avoiding Malcolm’s eyes, she nodded. “Yes, I did. I know it’s safest for me here.” She turned to face him, placing her hand on his cheek. “With you. I promise you, I will never try to run away again.” When he leaned into her slightly, she continued with, “You can trust me, babe. You’re the only man I know I am truly safe with. But I think it’ll be good if we had a little space.” She smiled, using her free hand to cup his shaft. “I want you to fuck me like you miss me sometimes.”

Licking his lips, Malcolm released a heavy breath. “Don’t try to play me, Scar.”

“I’m not,” she assured quickly. “I give you my word—I won’t try to get away. I promise.”

He thought it over for a few seconds before agreeing with, “Fine, but I have rules.” Scarlett squealed and danced in her seat. “You have to go somewhere I am known and respected, you cannot talk to any other men, and you have to be home before I get there.”

“What time will that be?”

“Whatever time I feel like it.”

Avoiding the urge to grit her teeth and roll her eyes, Scarlett nodded. She couldn’t do anything to mess this up. This would be the first time she’d been able to do anything with Vanna without Malcolm being around, and she honestly needed the time away. Malcolm swore Vanna was a bad influence, but he knew he couldn’t keep them apart. And if he tried, it would only make Scarlett rebel against him more.

“Okay. I’ll just be back by one then. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine.” Malcolm stood and placed a kiss on the top of her head. “You will have guards, and you know I have eyes everywhere. If you do anything to dishonor or disrespect me, you know you will be punished.”

Scarlett was too excited to care about his threat as he walked away. What she’d said was true—she wasn’t going to try and run away. She felt like she didn’t have to at this point.

There was something in the pit of her that told her Assad would be coming for her soon...

□□□

They were beautiful, so it was no surprise how many men tried to approach them. Every time a man tried to talk to Scarlett, she turned them down with grace. Only once did Malcolm's guards have to step in, and when they did, he ordered that Scarlett and Vanna be taken somewhere else. His choice?

Kirby's.

Apparently, Malcolm was trying to convince Assad to have a party at the compound because he knew one night of celebration for the Black Mayhem Mafia would bring in close to a million dollars. Not only would they buy out the bar, but they would request every woman in the brothel and spends hundreds of thousands or more at the casino. It was then that Scarlett realized why Malcolm had been treating Assad and his crew like royalty the two times they'd visited. In his eyes, they were.

Though Scarlett would have loved to see Assad, she was praying he wouldn't be there. Even though she knew Malcolm wouldn't have an issue with her talking to him, his guards would be watching her, and too many smiles or the wrong hand placement could mess everything up.

Scarlett thought she was in the clear after the first hour had passed and he hadn't arrived. She spent the evening feeling like a normal woman for the first time in what felt like forever. Between drinking, dancing, and laughing with Vanna, Scarlett momentarily forgot the prison that would be waiting for her when she went home.

Then... the atmosphere changed. Just as all eyes were on them when they arrived, practically everyone's attention went back to the door, and she didn't have to look to know why. Still, her curiosity had her taking a peek, and as soon as she saw Assad dressed in all black, she bit back a smile. The gold Barocco embroidery around his Versace polo shirt was accented with a gold chain, watch, and rings.

She liked how he dressed, classic and simple, but she could also tell by the way he carried himself that he had money.

Her heart beat faster and faster the closer he got, and it was harder and harder for her to hide her smile. Eventually, she turned to Vanna to play it off as she asked, “How did they know we were here?”

Vanna shrugged, mirroring her smile. “I was texting Hassan and he asked me where I was.”

“You know you ain’t right. I’m not trying to get into any trouble tonight.”

“Come on, Scar. Assad is worth *all* the smoke.”

Scarlett’s head shook. Before she could disagree, Assad was standing directly in front of both of them. She inhaled a deep whiff of his scent—it was everything, somehow—warm and floral, citrusy, and fresh all at once. Scarlett had never smelled anything like it before, and it made sense because she’d never met a man like *him* before.

He lifted Vanna from her seat effortlessly and pulled her into his arms. The entire time he hugged her, his eyes were trained on Scarlett. She closed hers, envisioning herself wrapped up in his arms. It was ridiculous... the jealousy she felt when Vanna sat back down.

“Y’all should be in VIP, right, Black?” Hassan confirmed, to which Assad nodded.

“Right. Follow me.”

Taking Vanna’s hand into hers, Scarlett followed behind Assad with Malcolm’s guards at both of her sides. They went upstairs where there were two rooms with large glass windows. One had low blue lighting and the other red. Smoke filled the room with blue lighting, and she couldn’t deny how impressed she was by the sight.

“So these rooms are based on your vibe?” she gathered.

“Exactly,” Assad confirmed. “The blue room is for those who are more chill and laidback. Hookah and weed smokers.”

Old school DJ in there. The red room is for the lovers who want to drink and have a little privacy while still being in the company of others.” Scarlett looked from one to the other, noticing how most of the people in the red room were hugged up, dancing, or deep in conversation with someone of the opposite sex. “Which one would you like to join?”

She laughed nervously. “Blue.”

Vanna’s eyes rolled as she grabbed Hassan’s hand and led him into the red room. Scarlett could only shake her head. She acted like she didn’t have a slew of crazy ass men blowing up her line on a regular basis. Now, it seemed like she was trying to add another one.

As they headed into the blue room, one snap of Assad’s fingers had men from his crew blocking Malcolm’s guards.

“Oh... um... they have to stay with me.”

Assad’s head shook. “Nah. They can wait outside.”

This was the first time she’d ever seen Malcolm’s men stand down. With a nod, Jake crossed his arms over his chest and told her, “We’re right here.”

Even though they didn’t come inside, they were standing at the largest window watching her. Still, it offered her some relief, which caused her to say, “Thank you,” quietly, as they sat down.

“He has them with you at all times?”

She nodded. “Yes. Even when I don’t have my guards because I’m with him, he still has his, so I’m never really alone.”

Assad took her hand into his, and as soon as he did, her breathing hitched. Scarlett wanted to look over at the three guards that had come with them, but she knew if she did, they would act.

The sincerity in Assad’s tone when he asked, “How are you, Scarlett?” washed away all of her worries.

Her body relaxed some, causing her to lean forward more in his direction.

“I’m okay.”

“Are you really?”

Scarlett chuckled softly. “I am. Really. I’ve gotten used to things with Malcolm with time, so I can’t say I’m experiencing anything new.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on with that situation?”

She looked to her left, and Jake was on his phone as he stared at her. There was no doubt in her mind that he was talking to Malcolm. If she was going to be punished, she would at least make sure it would be worth it.

“I can’t really go into a lot of detail right now. His guards are trained to read lips.”

Assad’s eyes widened before he scoffed. “Are you fucking serious, Scarlett? It’s that deep?” She only nodded, eyes saddening. “Okay. I need you to tell me what you want me to do.” He paused and leaned forward, shielding her from Jake’s eyesight on the blue velvet couch. “I told you that I want you, but that was selfish as fuck of me. A nigga trying to wife you is the last thing you need right now. Tell me what you need and what you want me to do.”

Her head shook as she chuckled and released his hand. “Why? Why do you even care about me? You don’t know anything about me, yet you’re risking your life to save mine? Why? You want me to be your possession too? Are you at war with Robert too?”

Assad’s expression remained stoic. He sighed and readjusted his watch on his wrist.

“You can ask me anything you want but do so with respect. Don’t raise your voice at me, especially when I’m coming at you with love.”

“But that’s what I don’t understand,” she stressed, sitting up in her seat. “*Why*, Assad?”

Assad ran his hand down the back of his head. He didn’t reply right away, and Scarlett liked that.

Assad's gruff, authoritative voice softened when he said, "Several reasons."

"Like?"

He smiled again, and every time he did, she swore he was taking another piece of her heart. She waited anxiously to hear his slow southern yet proper drawl. Her eyes kept dropping to his brown and pomegranate lips. They looked impeccably soft.

"Something about you I feel drawn to. I know that sounds cliché, but I feel like a magnet is pulling me to you every time I'm in the same space as you. Beyond that, I can't be who I am and not help you. I stand behind the morals of my mafia ten toes down, and a major part of that is protection. If you're being held against your will, I gotta handle that. Ain't no other way around it."

He paused, and her lips parted at the sight of his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. "In the beginning, it was strictly physical attraction, but the more I learn about you and see you, the more I want to help you just because it's the right thing to do." Her head lowered briefly as her breathing slowed down. "I'm going to ask you again." His fingers lifted her head by her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to save you? Tell me what you need."

Her eyes watered as she stared into his. "I—I need... to use the bathroom."

Scarlett stood abruptly and rushed to the left, following the neon blue bathroom sign. She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn't realize Assad was following her until he closed and locked the door behind them. Panic set in immediately, and she tried to open the door, but he blocked the knob.

"You can't be in here, Assad," she stressed quietly, heel tapping the floor as she looked up at him. Even with her six-inch heels, he was still a couple of inches taller than her. Not a lot, but enough. "They are going to tell him."

"So what if they do? What is he going to do to you?" Brows wrinkling and chin trembling, she shook her head as it

lowered. "Leave with me, Scarlett."

"I can't," she whined. "It's not that simple."

"I'm only going to ask you one last time," Assad made clear as she leaned against the sink. "What do you need?"

Scarlett's heel tapped the floor as she gripped the edges of the sink. Inhaling a deep breath, she held it as Assad slowly stepped in front of her. Looking up at him, Scarlett allowed herself to get lost in his beautiful chocolate eyes. She smiled softly, feeling a filling of peace that she hadn't felt in over a decade. Sniffing, her hand slid down his solid chest, and the gesture caused him to close the space between them.

As she looked up at him, he looked down at her. All it would take was a slight dip of his head for their lips to connect, and God, Scarlett wanted that dip more than anything in the *world*.

"You," she whispered, not wanting her own heart to hear it.

His forehead lowered to hers as he stared into her eyes. Gently, his nose brushed against hers before he nudged it back, tilting her head in the process. Eyes lowered, and lips parted slightly, Scarlett gripped the sink tighter as her pussy ached for him under her pink silk dress. She loved the way the fabric felt against her skin, and Assad's hand sliding down it only intensified that feeling.

"Assad," she called, but before she could get anything else out, he was connecting his lips with hers.

"Tell me again," he commanded, pushing her panties to the side.

Scarlett bit down on her bottom lip as his middle and ring finger slid up and down her slit.

"I need you," she moaned. "But I really have to go, Assad."

He smiled. "No." His wet fingers circled her clit. "I need you to *cum*."

As Assad wrapped her right leg around him, he dipped his middle finger inside of her. Covering her lips with his, he kissed her softly. Carefully. Tenderly. Placing a second finger inside of her, Assad opened her mouth with his tongue. She let him in—freely—swirling hers around his softly.

No man had ever kissed her so passionately before. Handled her so softly and with care.

Her pussy heated with each slow entrance of his fingers. He found her spot quickly, bending his fingers and applying gentle pressure.

“You found that quickly,” she complimented with a smile.

“Doesn’t take long when you know what you’re doing.”

Assad returned his lips to hers, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Thumb circling her clit, he continued to finger fuck her, filling the bathroom with a sound that resembled quiet smacking. She was so wet she was almost embarrassed, but Assad’s fingers were providing more pleasure than any dick she’d had in quite some time.

When she felt herself on the verge of climax, she lowered her hands down his back as Assad broke their kiss.

He told her to look into his eyes, making sure she heard him as he told her, “You’re mine now,” while she came. It was the most intense thing to ever overtake her. And if she’d never experienced a soul tie before, Scarlett was sure she had one now. As she whimpered and trembled, he told her, “But I don’t want you to use and abuse you. It’s clear that’s what you’re used to. I’m going to take you, and then I’m going to set you free. *That’s* what you need.”

Assad removed her fingers, and the disconnect had her weakening as she fought her tears. He lifted his hand, sucking her nectar from his fingers. The sight had her wanting more, but she knew they’d been in the bathroom too long already. Even with the possibility of Malcolm’s wrath being upon her when she got home, this brief moment of escape with Assad was appreciated and necessary. She had no idea what would

become of them romantically, but she was even more sure now that Assad would be the key to her freedom...

□□□

Assad had paid Malcolm's guards for their silence that night, but what Malcolm said was true—he had eyes everywhere. They didn't have to tell him about her brief disappearance for him to find out. But when he did, he woke her up by throwing a bucket of water into her face. As she choked and coughed, he lifted her out of bed by her soaking hair and smacked her.

Their yelling match ended with him making her apologize and promising not to disrespect him again. Her entire security team was replaced, even Jake. After she freshened up, Malcolm told her to take a ride with him. She had no idea where he was taking her, and even when they arrived at Not Yo' Mama's Soul Food, Scarlett still was clueless. If he wanted to have an early dinner with her, she was sure he would have taken her to his normal spot.

It wasn't until they headed inside and she saw Assad seated at a table in the back did she realize what was happening.

"No," she pleaded softly, but Malcolm ignored her, tightening his grip on her hand and using it to drag her along. "Malcolm, please. I said I wouldn't talk to him anymore. What more do you want?"

He continued to ignore her as they headed in Assad's direction. His head lifted, teeth stopped chewing momentarily at the sight of them. Wiping his mouth, his head tilted and shook. Assad's expression remained calm as he lifted his glass of what looked to be iced tea and took a gulp. His men stood immediately, but he instructed them to sit down.

Unable to face him, Scarlett's head hung as Malcolm said, "I thought I made it clear that Scarlett was my property? She's not for your use unless I give you permission and access to her. Unless you are in my presence, do not attempt to have any type of alone time with her."

“Scarlett,” Assad called calmly, causing a squeezing pain within her heart. “Look at me.” Her eyes lifted to Malcolm and he nodded, so she looked at Assad. “Do you belong to him?”

Malcolm’s grip on her arm tightened. She bit down on her lip to avoid making a sound as she breathed deeply through her nostrils.

“Do you belong to me, Scarlett?” Malcolm asked with a smile.

“Yes,” she whispered, lowering her head again.

“Good.” Malcolm released her. “Now, I get that maybe I didn’t make myself clear the first time. I would like for us to continue to build our relationship, so I am willing to overlook what happened at your place of business. Are we good?”

Assad chuckled. “We’re perfect.”

“Great. Are you still interested in having your brother’s welcome home party at the compound?”

His eyes went to Scarlett’s when he said, “I stand behind my morals and how I feel. I told you I would be there, didn’t I?”

Her eyes closed and fluttered, receiving his reminder loud and clear.

“Alright. We’ll talk and finalize all the details.”

“Bet. Blessings.”

With one bob of his head, Malcolm ended their impromptu meeting, taking Scarlett’s hand and leading her out of the restaurant. She fought the urge to look back, knowing that would have led to an even worse punishment from Malcolm.

“You’re lucky you didn’t fuck this up for me.” He grumbled, practically pushing her out of the door.

As hurt as Scarlett wanted to be, she had faith in Assad. Her intuition was telling her things weren’t going to end the way Malcolm thought they would at this party. He promised her last night that he would come for her. And she would have to be ready...

Eight

Assad

Large gatherings of any kind hadn't ever been Assad's vibe. It often heightened his anxiety, and with the example he had from his mother, that's the last thing he needed. But, his motherfucking brother was out... and what Savant wanted, he was going to get. Assad took a long pull of his blunt as Savant and Remi received love from everyone in the club around them.

"Still Smell Like It" by Young Dolph was playing, and it described their return perfectly. Being down for seven years hadn't changed what needed to remain within them most. If anything, there was even more hunger and fire in their eyes.

It shouldn't have come to anyone as a surprise when Savant and Remi were granted early release. This was the point their father had tried to get the mafia to before he left the country. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to, so he had been on the run for a decade... which was why Assad was in control now. With the strides their legal team was making, Assad was confident they would be able to exonerate his father and have all charges dropped so he could return home. Until then, Colton was living his best life in Cuba.

It hadn't been that easy for Rakim and Remi's father, Colton's best friend and partner, though. He'd been sentenced to a life sentence, and before they could get him out, he was murdered. Even though their grandfathers were gone and his father was unable to run the organization, Assad was doing everything he could to keep it running successfully with the

help of his family. They were practically untouchable, and when he got Judge Faulkner and his colleagues on board, they would be unstoppable.

As happy as Assad was to have his brother free, his mind was heavily swayed by Scarlett. He couldn't wait until tomorrow night so he could see her. Free her. It would have been nothing for him to go in guns blazing and air shit out, but that wasn't how the mafia did things. They had to have permission from the other four families ruling the south to make any moves, and there was no doubt in his mind that they would say Scarlett, or any woman for that matter, wouldn't be worth the bloodshed, removal of peace and agreements, and possible war.

He needed another way to secure her without losing their blessing and protection. It took a little thought and studying Malcolm, but Assad was confident he'd found the perfect way. It was driving him crazy waiting, especially knowing Scarlett could have been being abused, but Assad kept telling himself it was best this way. Because when he got her, Assad didn't plan on letting *anyone* hurt her again.

□□□

Even though they had the Sprinter, Assad, Hassan, and Savant were behind it in Savant's gold 1971 Cutlass. After not being able to drive for so long, he wasn't trying to have anyone driving him around, and Assad understood that.

It didn't surprise Assad that Savant didn't go in and speak to his mother when they picked Dijon up, either. For some reason, Dijon felt she could convince their oldest brother to sway, though, and it was both comical and frustrating to see her try.

"Can't you just be the bigger person, Vant?" Dijon pleaded, gripping his wrist.

"That's our mama. The fuck I need to be the bigger person for?"

"Age doesn't always equate wisdom, big brother. You know why she feels the way she does. Why can't you meet her

with grace?”

Savant’s head shook as he started the car. The last thing anyone was trying to give April’s judgmental ass today was grace. April was Colton’s first baby mother. After she gave birth to Savant, he left her for Kirby. Kirby birthed Assad and Hassan. Years later, Colton went back to April and had Dijon before starting his trip around the country. Surprisingly, he only had two more children before going to Cuba. That they knew of, at least. He’d spent fifteen years hiding in the States before going to Cuba... Who knew how many children Colton really had out there.

April had never agreed with his lifestyle, but he was charming, which was how he’d knocked her up the first time. And for Dijon? Well... all he had to do was tell her he was about to turn himself in and that that would be the last time she would see him for a while. She bussed it open real quick.

“I don’t rule with grace,” Savant made clear, putting the car in drive. He looked his sister in the eyes to make clear, “Or mercy. She brought this on herself, so it’s up to her to fix it.”

Unfortunately, they knew that wouldn’t be the case. April was so stubborn and set in her ways, she wouldn’t admit to being wrong no matter how wrong she knew she was. She never liked the fact that Savant had followed in his father’s footsteps, and when he was sent to prison, she stopped talking to him altogether. Now that he was out, it was clear Savant had no intentions of trying to go back to an already toxic relationship, and Assad didn’t blame him.

People were always trying to make you stay in toxic situations with family, when most often, you got the most peace cutting that person off—family or not.

That was honestly one thing Assad could say he respected about his oldest brother, even though they had their issues too. Savant wouldn’t allow anything or anyone to rob him of his peace. I guess that’s how you learned to be when your biggest enemy growing up was your resentful mother.

“Will one of you please talk some sense into him?” Dijon requested, looking from Hassan seated next to her in the back

seat to Assad who was in the front.

Hassan chuckled. “You know damn well April don’t fuck with us like that.”

“So? That’s his mother.”

“And? The fuck that mean? He’s supposed to just tolerate the disrespect because she gave birth to him?”

Dijon groaned. “I should have known you wouldn’t be any help. Black, will you please tell your brother to turn around and go speak to his mother?”

Assad’s head shook. “Sorry, sis. I can’t get down with that.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Dijon slumped in her seat with a pout. Assad smiled, knowing she would get out of her feelings soon. Under different circumstances, all three of her brothers would have been willing to give Dijon’s spoiled ass anything she wanted, but that wasn’t the case when it came to April.

April didn’t just disrespect and ignore Savant and try to control Dijon, she treated Assad and Hassan like shit too. Even though they didn’t ask to be born, she resented them simply because they *were* born. She felt as if she could have convinced Colton to go down a straight path and leave the mafia if he stayed with her. Kirby, however, was all for his dealings in the streets—especially when it gave her more money than she could count and more crack than she could snort... but for a good long while, she damn sure tried.

The ride to the compound was silent, but as soon as they pulled up, Assad smiled. He’d already let his brothers and team know of his plans. Now... he could finally get his girl.

“You sure you don’t want me to warn you before this shit goes down?” Assad asked, looking over at Savant as he turned the car off. “You just got out, so I ain’t trying to put you in a position that might put you back in. My plan is solid, but if Malcolm tries to take her back, I can’t guarantee we won’t have to lay his ass out.”

Savant's head shook. "Just get Dijon out of here. That's all I care about. I ain't going no-fucking-where."

Assad smiled as Savant handed Dijon his key. If the plan worked, they would all be leaving in the Sprinter... Scarlett included.

□□□

When they first arrived, Malcolm was hesitant about letting Scarlett take care of them while they were in the bar area, but Assad insisted. As soon as he saw her face, he knew why. Makeup may have covered her black eye, but he could still see her swollen lips and the dark bruise on her neck. It took Savant's logic to keep him calm, promising him that she would be free of him by the end of the night. Because at that point, Assad was ready to put a bullet between Malcolm's eyes right the fuck where he stood.

Knowing that Scarlett would remain in his visual for the entire time, Assad began his plan, starting with taunting Malcolm. Even though he'd requested the compound for the night, the heads of the other four families were still allowed to stay for their poker game. For the first hour or so while they were at the bar, Assad made sure all attention was on him and his crew. He understood how important pride and respect was to Malcolm, and if he no longer felt like the big boss in charge, he would start moving emotionally and recklessly in an attempt to regain that power.

Remi instantly went down to the brothel while Savant was already upstairs at the casino. Hassan was in the penthouse with Vanna. There was no part of Malcolm's compound that wasn't taken over by someone in the Black Mayhem Mafia. Even Rakim had gone up to the rooftop.

When Malcolm's frustration became evident, Assad went into the second phase of his plan—a false sense of victory. Colton had trained all of his sons to smell weakness and insecurity on even the toughest of men. When they found your weakness, they capitalized on it. For Malcolm, it was being in control.

It didn't take much for Assad to get under Malcolm's skin. Not only were all of his women and workers tending to every beck and call of the mafia, but he'd been showing special interest in Scarlett all night. She did good maintaining her self-control, but if she was the key to life and death for him as everyone was saying, Scarlett would always be the biggest detonator for Malcolm. He had to be careful, though, because all it would take was one minute of Malcolm not being within eyesight for him to punish Scarlett for Assad's actions.

It was because of that that Assad was trying his hardest to keep Malcolm nearby.

The final part of his plan was the poker game. Close to one in the morning, they all went upstairs to the casino. With the heads of the remaining four families still being there, it was the perfect time for Assad to move. He couldn't outright ask Malcolm to play a few hands with him, because his proposition later would seem suspect. Since Savant was already at the table, he did the honors, and of course, Malcolm accepted the challenge.

He said he needed to go and get cash, which didn't make sense to Assad since this was his establishment, but he couldn't challenge him. If he made it seem as if he was trying to keep tabs on Malcolm, he would grow suspicious. So, he had one of his men follow Malcolm since Scarlett was still downstairs.

It took far longer than it should have for Malcolm to come back. When he did, he was sweaty and disheveled. Assad didn't have to wait for his men to tell him what happened, but because he didn't move off emotion, he still did. As soon as Eric told him he heard Malcolm yelling at Scarlett for showing him too much attention before they tussled and he fucked her, Assad released a sinister laugh that had Savant cursing under his breath.

"Get Dijon outta here," he ordered, eyes locked with Malcolm. "Bring Hassan and Rakim up. And keep eyes on Scar."

"Yes, sir."

Assad ran his hand over his beard before drumming his fingers on top of the table. His anger was brewing, and if he didn't contain it, Malcolm's blood was going to spill right here—right now. It didn't matter that Malcolm was heavily guarded. They were no match for the mafia. Malcolm was lucky Assad tried to do everything with honor and integrity... it was the *only* thing keeping him alive right now.

When he saw Hassan and Rakim enter out of the corner of his eye, he told Malcolm, "I know what you did." All eyes around the table were on him. Malcolm smiled but remained silent. "Out of respect for the five families, especially the members of mine that are here, I'm not going to kill you where you sit. I want to know what it's going to take to take Scarlett off your hands."

Malcolm chuckled. "I don't know what you're talking about. Regardless, anything I do with my woman is none of your fucking business, young buck."

There was no need to go back and forth in a pissing match. Assad simply asked, "What's her price?"

"Not one you can afford."

"Try me."

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before Malcolm's head shook. "She isn't for sell. And you can't sit at the table if you aren't playing."

Assad beckoned Eric again, and he opened the black duffel bag he was carrying. After placing five ten-thousand-dollar stacks on top, Eric stepped back. Remaining silent, Assad smiled at Malcolm, who roughly requested that he be dealt in for the next game.

Purposely losing the first three games, Assad waited until he only had ten thousand left in cash. He put up the keys to the Sprinter as well, with the condition that if he wins... he gets Scarlett. Assad saw the moment of uncertainty flash through Malcolm's eyes, but he hid it quickly. Malcolm may have wanted to reject his offer, but he couldn't, not while seated with the rest of the families.

All it would take was a sign of weakness and insecurity in their eyes and they would run him out of town. Fully aware of that, Malcolm agreed with one bob of his head. After telling one of his guards to go and get Scarlett, he stood and began to stare out of the window.

Assad and Savant glanced at one another briefly.

This was it.

All he could do was pray he had studied Malcolm enough to know his hand.

If he lost, he would have to resort to plan B. Whether the four families gave him permission to or not, he was taking Scarlett out of here tonight.

At the sight of Scarlett, Assad smiled. Her eyes were watery, but she smiled too. Even in the softest of fabric, prettiest of makeup, and highest of heels... her situation had her spirit weary and soul tattered. But she held on, and Assad was going to make sure she gained her reward tonight.

Malcolm sat back down at the table, and Scarlett made her way next to him. At the dealer's mercy, Assad held his breath while he waited for his hand. Putting the cards in order, he fought back his smile. Not because he had the greatest hand starting out, but because he had a good enough hand to confidently bluff until Malcolm folded. As discussed, he received more cash from his brothers until both he and Malcolm were both all in.

With a confident smile, Malcolm put down his hand—straight.

Assad met Scarlett's eyes as he set his hand down—a straight flush.

Malcolm's vocal disgust was heard all across the table. He cracked his neck, staring at the cards. Though Assad didn't expect Malcolm to buck right now, risking the loss of the blessing and protection of the four families, he also knew how valuable Scarlett was to him. Assad stood, extending his hand for Malcolm to shake.

Malcolm's top lip curled as he stood. Not bothering to shake Assad's hand, he turned to Scarlett and told her, "This is *your* doing." Scarlett took a step away from him. "*You* set me up, didn't you?"

Assad rounded the table, shaking the hands of the rest of the heads in attendance before wrapping his arm around Scarlett and pulling her behind him as he faced Malcolm.

"I'm going to ask that you no longer speak to her. She belongs to me now..."

Nine

Scarlett

As excited as Scarlett wanted to be that she was free, her nerves immediately began to rattle as they headed out of the compound. The moment she stepped inside of the black Sprinter with Assad's guidance, her heart began to palpitate.

"What are you doing?" she asked, shaking as he buckled her seat belt. "You're making a big mistake, Assad. You don't know what Malcolm's capable of. Who he is..."

He smiled softly but it fell quickly. "You obviously don't know who I am."

"He's not going to let you have me. I'm too valuable to him."

Assad's face twisted up as his head shook. "Y'all keep saying that, but y'all ain't really saying shit. Why is Malcolm so adamant about not letting you go?"

"We're being followed," Remi announced.

"Has Vixen arrived in the second Sprinter?" Assad checked.

"Yeah, she's here. Behind his men."

"Tell her to turn off. If he's about to have his men try to take her back, I don't need any unnecessary casualties."

"I trained Vixen," Hassan added. "You know she's not going to do that."

Scarlett watched as they all put on bulletproof vests and pulled guns, big and small, out of a chest in the back of the van.

“Assad,” she pleaded softly as he wrapped the vest around her body. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me. Just... just take me back.”

He smiled before placing a kiss to the center of her forehead. “It’s a little too late for that now. The van is bulletproof, so no matter what happens, I need you to stay inside.”

“But...”

“Stay inside. Do you understand me?”

Remi swerved into an alley, and Scarlett swayed from the impact. She nodded, swallowing hard and holding her cross necklace as they all headed toward the back of the Sprinter. Assad’s hand gripped her arm, pushing her down and laying her flat under the row of seats. As soon as they jumped out of the van, the sound of gunfire rang out. Each time a bullet ricocheted off the van Scarlett jumped as she squeezed her eyes together tightly.

She didn’t know how long they’d been shooting, only that she was glad it was all over when they began to hop back inside.

“Is anyone hurt?” she checked as Assad lifted her back to her feet.

“Nah. You good?”

Scarlett nodded, looking over every inch of his face.

She still couldn’t believe that he’d not only bested Malcolm but gotten her further than she’d ever been from the compound alone. Still, her heart wasn’t fully at peace. There was no part of her that told her this was over.

As they laughed and joked like this was a regular occurrence, Scarlett silently rocked in her seat. Assad didn’t force her to talk, only looking her way every so often and squeezing her thigh to remind her that he was there.

When they pulled into the abandoned parking lot, they all began to file out and go to their separate cars except Assad, Scarlett, and one other man.

“Where can I take you so that you will be safe?”

Scarlett chuckled with a shake of her head. “Nowhere. I’m never going to be safe. And now, neither will you.” Before she could stop herself, she was shoving his shoulder as she asked, “What the hell were you thinking, Assad?”

The confusion that filled his eyes didn’t go unnoticed, but he still remained his calm self.

“I was thinking you were being used and abused and needed my help. That’s what the fuck I was thinking. You said you needed me...”

“I was just talking!” she yelled, flailing her arms in the process. “I didn’t mean for you to actually try and take me! He’s not going to rest until he gets me back, and I do not want you or anyone attached to you getting hurt because of that.”

Assad took her hand into his. “I’m going to ignore you raising your voice at me because it’s clear you’re doing it because you’re worried about me.”

Her head hung briefly as she inhaled a deep breath. When she looked into his eyes, she confessed, “*Of course* I’m worried about you. You risked your life to save me. But...”

“But what?”

Scarlett’s head shook as she struggled to find a way to express her conflicting feelings. “I never thought this would be possible,” she whispered, voice shaking in the process. “If he doesn’t have me, he’s going to die, Assad. He’s going to come for me, and I would die if something happened to you because of it.”

Scarlett’s hand slid down his chest, settling at the bottom of his black shirt. She gripped it tightly, as if she could already feel his spirit leaving his body because of Malcolm.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning and explain why you’re so afraid? We will decide the next move once I know

all working variables of this situation, okay?”

Scarlett nodded as she released a calming breath.

“You good, bro?” Savant asked.

“Yeah. Y’all can head out. Eric will take the Sprinter down to the house on Main Street. I’ll get up with y’all later.”

“Aight.”

Scarlett followed Assad out, thanking him quietly when he opened the door of a black Camaro for her to get inside. She definitely wouldn’t consider this to be a car he’d choose since he was so tall, but when he slipped into the driver’s seat, she couldn’t help but enjoy the view of him behind the wheel.

“I have no destination in mind yet,” Assad told her. “Start talking whenever you’re ready,” he granted, pulling out of the parking lot.

“Are you familiar with Malcolm’s family and background?”

“I know the minimum.” Assad cut the music down. “His father came up under my grandfather, but he didn’t like the code of the mafia so he did his own thing. Had two sons that he gave his empire to.”

“Did you know Malcolm’s brother was his twin?”

Assad looked over at Scarlett briefly. “Robert is his twin? They look nothing alike.”

Scarlett smiled bitterly as she looked out into the night sky. “Yes. Not too many know they are even brothers these days because of how long they’ve been at war.” She inhaled a deep breath. “They have always been at odds, since childhood. Their mother died when they were thirteen, so their father was their everything, naturally. A lot of their issues came from their competition for their father. To be his number one son. They really couldn’t stand each other, and that got volatile once their father died and was no longer able to try and maintain peace between them.

The only person they kind of listened to was their aunt. She tried to keep the peace like her brother had done, but it

was hard. Without their mother, they hadn't really learned to love, respect, and submit to women. So anyway, time passes, and things get worse between them. Eventually, Robert decides he wants to settle down. He gets engaged, but one of their fights leads to a shooting, and his fiancée is hit. Even though one of his men did it, Robert held Malcolm responsible. He makes it clear at that point that he's going to get even. When Malcolm least expects it, he's going to make his brother suffer, and then he's going to kill him."

The shaky breath that Scarlett released caused Assad to take her hand into his.

"Is this where you come in?"

She smiled softly with a shake of her head. "Yes," she whispered before clearing her throat. "Before me, every woman Malcolm expressed interest in was a victim of Robert in some way. This became their sick and twisted game... causing each other as much pain as possible through the women they cared about and tried to love.

"Years later, I met Malcolm. I had no idea who he was or his brother, none of that. Honestly, with my daddy issues, I was just looking for love and guidance. With him being older than me, I guess I thought he could provide that. I wasn't attracted to him, like at all, but when he asked for my number, I agreed.

"We talked for about a month before he asked to meet me for a date. When I got to the restaurant, Robert was there. They looked more alike then. They were the same size and had the same haircut. Robert didn't start letting himself go until he lost me. Then, he gained weight and grew his hair out. I didn't know it was Robert because I didn't know Malcolm had a twin." Scarlett laughed. "So I go over to him and sit down at his table, and we proceed to have dinner together."

She chuckled. "And the whole time I'm thinking I'm talking to Malcolm but I'm not. So when our dinner is over, Robert asks for my number, and I'm like what? You already have it. He gives me this cute little smile and tells me I must have been waiting for his brother Malcolm. I was so

embarrassed but he told me it happens all the time. Robert tells me that he would like to date me, and in that moment, I'm unsure.

“He told me Malcolm had several other women and he wouldn't care if he didn't have me, obviously, because he hadn't shown up for our date. At that point, I was like fuck it. I wasn't expecting anything serious to happen. I just wanted to feel loved and safe. Cared for.”

Her eyes watered as she paused to breathe. Assad stroked her hand softly with his thumb.

“I agreed to date him, and Robert was perfect in the beginning. He literally gave me everything I wanted and needed. He proposed to me, and I accepted. Malcolm came to me before the wedding and told me that he was using me. That he was going to use me to make him suffer because I was the only woman he'd really expressed interest in and then he was going to kill me. He told me about the game they played, but it seemed like a lie because Malcolm hadn't brought me any harm the entire time I was dating Robert. He told me that was because he cared about me too, but I still didn't believe him. We'd only talked for a month, so I didn't think we'd built a strong enough connection for that.

“I went on with the marriage, and that's when I began to see the real Robert. The one who wanted to use me to hurt Malcolm but fucked around and fell for me in the most toxic way possible. He loved me in the best way he knew how, but it wasn't really love at all. It was control and obsession. When I began to see that, things started to get bad between us. The cheating and abuse started and I regretted marrying him, naturally. Malcolm started writing me these letters talking about how he wished he would have fought harder for me and all of this bullshit. I wrote him back over the course of six months, just because he was the only other man I was able to really have contact with.

“Robert, like Malcolm, didn't want to risk me leaving him for someone else, so he limited my contact with everyone until, eventually, I was only allowed to talk to him. I stopped fighting his rules and gave in, and things got better for a while.

Then he would cheat again, or I would do something to upset him, and that was our cycle for three years. But the last time he cheated, it was about six months before Malcolm took me.”

Scarlett paused, pushing back images of Candice. Their last fight. What it meant to her, for them.

“I found out that she was pregnant...”

Her chin trembled, and she was unable to hold back her tears. No one knew why Candice was the final trigger for her. How Robert didn’t want to share her with anyone... not even a child... so he forced her to have several abortions. And when she didn’t, he beat their baby out of her. Now, she wasn’t even sure if she could have children anymore. She’d been having unprotected sex with Malcolm and hadn’t conceived yet. And that was probably the most horrible part of it all. How her yearning for a father may have stripped her of her opportunity to be a mother.

“But it was too late. We fought and she’d lost the baby, which made Robert flip. I guess because he didn’t love her as much as he loved me, he didn’t care about sharing her, so he was happy about having a baby. So when he found out that she’d lost it, he snapped. Beat me worse than he ever had before. And that’s when I decided I couldn’t do it anymore. He had me chained in our room, and when he left for a meeting, I was able to free myself. I got a mile or two away from the house before I almost passed out.”

Scarlett chuckled quietly as she wiped away her tears. “I had to be running off of adrenaline at that point because I still don’t know how I made it that far, but... Malcolm pulled up. And he picked me up and took me with him. He told me that I was safe with him.”

“But that obviously wasn’t the case,” Assad countered.

“Not at all. He did convince Robert to give me a divorce, which I will always be grateful for. But he became obsessed with me and what I represented to him too. Malcolm and Robert created a kind of truce. As long as Malcolm had me, Robert wouldn’t come after him. He gave Robert his portion of their father’s empire, which was supposed to be an even

trade because Robert was always more into becoming his father's replacement than Malcolm was. It was okay at first, but eventually, he started making things romantic between us. The more I fought it, the more abusive he got. Fast forward two years, and he's been using me just to make sure Robert doesn't kill him. Robert was an evil son of a bitch, and everything he did, he did to control me, but in his mind... it was because he loved me. And he didn't want Malcolm to do anything to me. So he's left Malcolm alone all this time..."

"And now that he doesn't have you, Malcolm knows his brother is about to come after him."

"Yes, even worse now because Malcolm has had me for two years."

"So you really are his only way to keep his life at this point."

"Exactly."

About a minute passed before Assad decided, "Then you'll just have to stay with me."

Her head shook as she chuckled. "And exchange one prison for another?"

Assad looked over at her, nostrils flaring. "Do you really think I would treat you like either of them did after all this?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You may see having me as a power move too."

Because the truth was, after years and years and years of abuse, neglect, and being used... Scarlett still wasn't sure if it was wise to trust Assad. They all started out good... until they weren't.

"If that's how you feel, Scarlett," was all he said, and his detachment made Scarlett feel like shit. But she told herself it was better to not trust him at all and he gain it, than trust him and be disappointed by yet another man.

□□□

"Wow," Scarlett whispered, taking in Assad's huge mansion. It was the biggest home she'd ever seen. Unsure of if

it was actually as dark in color as it looked, she asked, “Is your home really black?”

He smiled as he drove behind the mansion to his just as equally large and impressive garage.

“It is. I’ll show you around tomorrow morning when the sun comes up.”

As he opened the garage, bright lights cut on and dogs began to bark loudly.

“I have a lot of dogs, so don’t try to leave the grounds without me.” She nodded, but her silence must have alarmed him because he added, “That’s not my way of trying to trap you here. My dogs are trained in German, so I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

She smiled softly as she looked over at him. “I know, Assad.”

“Do you really?”

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before she said, “I do.”

His eyes smiled as he pulled into the garage. Scarlett looked around, fascinated by all the cars she saw. If there was any doubt of Assad’s wealth, his mansion and eleven cars made it clear.

“So you’re wealthy, not rich,” she announced upon realization, making him chuckle.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“And you’re still living in Memphis?”

Assad shrugged as he led her out of the garage door. “My family is here. I’m protected and respected. What reason do I have to leave?”

Scarlett shrugged. “Just common, I suppose.”

When they made it inside, Assad told her, “You can stay in my sister’s room and use anything she has in there until I can take you shopping. The rest of the guestrooms aren’t prepared for stay.” Scarlett nodded as he led her up the dark winding

stairs. “If you need anything, page me on the intercom in your room. Mine is number one.” Assad waited until they were at the door to tell her, “You’re safe here. I promise I will not let anything happen to you, okay?”

Standing on the tips of her toes, Scarlett pulled him down to her for a hug. He laughed softly, hugging her tightly. Scarlett wasn’t sure how long she’d have her freedom, but she was happy to have it even if for a night.

“Thank you so much,” she whispered, voice thick with emotion.

Assad placed a kiss to the center of her forehead after releasing her. “Try to get some rest.”

She nodded as he closed the door behind himself, and after two years, Scarlett finally felt like she could breathe...

□□□

Assad’s home was dark, scary, yet beautiful. And calming. As she quietly made her way down the hall, she was in awe. She’d never seen a mansion this big, let alone this dark. The walls and furniture were all black with gold accents and décor.

On her quest for alcohol to calm her nerves and quiet her overthinking, Scarlett found herself just standing in the middle of his foyer, taking everything in. The sound of growling had her taking in a sharp breath before she darted for the stairs. Unsure of which direction to go in, she screamed and ran for the first open door she saw. Closing it behind her, she hoped Assad was still awake and would be on his way soon. She didn’t know how many dogs were chasing her or how to speak German. If he was asleep, she’d be stuck in the hall closet for the rest of the night.

As scared as she was, Scarlett couldn’t help but chuckle. She had a big, beautiful room and imagined sleeping on the cold tile floor for the next few hours because she couldn’t resist looking around.

The sound of Assad’s voice spewing words she didn’t recognize filled her with relief. Instantly, the sound of paws

retreating caused her to stand. Assad opened the door with amusement in his eyes.

“You didn’t tell me you let the dogs run loose,” she scolded softly, fighting back her smile.

Assad chuckled. “Yeah, I have three giant schnauzers that I let roam throughout the night. They are my trained guard dogs.” He took her hand into his and pulled her out of the closet. “I’m never worried about someone trying me here, but if they did, those three are always free at night.”

She nodded and swallowed, making the mental note to do everything she needed before he let the dogs out.

“Okay, good to know.”

“You’ll need to familiarize yourself with all of my dogs, especially them. Are you afraid of dogs?”

“Really big dogs, yes. But if they don’t seem aggressive, I’ll be okay.”

“They aren’t aggressive, but they are protective. Honestly, they will probably end up being your best friends while you’re here.”

She smiled softly. “I’m sorry about this. I wanted to go to the kitchen and see if you had something to drink. I can’t get to sleep.”

Assad sighed. “You can’t rest your body because you haven’t tried to rest your mind. I can take you to my bar, but you don’t need alcohol to do that.”

“I have tried to rest,” she lied, not convincingly either.

“You haven’t even undressed.” With a huff, Scarlett rolled her eyes, annoyed with her own self. “Come on. Let me take care of you.”

Even if she wanted to reject his offer, she wouldn’t. Couldn’t. She needed this. Needed him.

Assad took her back to his sister’s room, sitting her on the small bench in the bathroom. She watched as he created a relaxing ambiance with soft music, dimmed lights, and lit

candles. While the water ran in the garden tub, Assad left briefly, returning with a bottle of Jose Cuervo.

“Are you good?” he asked, to which she smiled and nodded. “You’re safe, Scarlett,” he repeated again. This time, she believed him more.

“Okay,” she whispered, fighting back her tears.

Scarlett waited until he left to undress and get inside the black tub. Lowering herself into the water, she inhaled a deep breath. When she released it, her tears fell as she smiled.

Ten

Assad

Assad didn't get much sleep last night. All he could think about was what Scarlett had shared with him. How fucked up it seemed like the last few years of her life had been. All he wanted to do was hold her, comfort her, and let her know that he wasn't going to let harm come to her again. But he didn't want to overwhelm her, so he kept his distance.

With the extra information she'd shared with him, Assad had his advisors look into Malcolm's brother as well. They were able to confirm everything she said. Robert and Malcolm had a longstanding rivalry that seemed to die down right before Robert's first fiancée was murdered and then again after his divorce to Scarlett had been finalized two years ago.

Finding out that Scarlett had been married to Robert for years before she'd become Malcolm's possession made his heart ache for her more. By his calculations, that meant she'd been dealing with, at minimum, five years of suffering. He had no idea how her life had been before she married Robert, but with three years of him and two years of his brother to deal with, Scarlett deserved her freedom and so much more.

Even though he had access to information about her parents, Assad didn't want to invade her privacy unless it was necessary for her safety. He preferred, instead, to give her the chance to share the things with him that she wanted him to know. And he was even more curious about her upbringing now.

Deep in his thoughts and coffee, Assad smiled at the sound of his intercom buzzing.

“Assad,” she called sweetly, voice low and naturally seductive as it always was.

He stood and made his way over to the intercom by the front door. “Good morning, beautiful.”

Scarlett giggled softly, and the sound of it made him smile. “Good morning, handsome. Can you come here, please? I don’t want to have another run-in with the wolves you call dogs.”

With a chuckle and nod, Assad headed out of his room. After knocking on the door twice, he opened it.

“I’m in the bathroom,” she announced.

He made his way toward the sound of her voice, licking his lips at the sight of her from behind. She was wearing one of Dijon’s sleeping shirts, and because of their height difference, it rested just under her fat ass cheeks. It was taking every ounce of self-control Assad had to not walk up on her and squeeze it.

“Your sister doesn’t have my foundation shade. Can you get me some? I can’t walk around like this.”

Scarlett turned in his direction, allowing him to see the light ring around her left eye. It wasn’t a fresh black eye, maybe two or three days old. It was lighter than the bruise on her neck. The swelling had gone down on her lips, too.

Even bruised up, Scarlett was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She had the prettiest toffee brown skin, but his favorite part of her was her honey-colored, almond-shaped eyes. Her high cheekbones, small nose, and pouty lips added to her feminine appeal. Not to mention her tall, slim-thick frame. But it was something about those honey-colored eyes... something that left many men mesmerized.

Her hair was wet and wavy, still hanging just as long as it did when she had it straight. Assad couldn’t resist walking over to her and running his fingers through it, surprised to not

feel any tracks, extensions, or clip-ins. She smiled as she looked up at him.

“You’re the most beautiful being I’ve ever seen in my life, Scarlett.” She hung her head and blushed, and Assad had no idea why. “I know you hear that all the time.”

Scarlett nodded in agreement, running her hand down his chest softly. Every time she did it, chills covered his arms.

“Yes, I do, but it hits different coming from you.” Her smile wavered as his thumb gently traced her bruised eye. “Definitely don’t feel beautiful with that.”

“It makes you more beautiful. Shows what you went through and survived. But you don’t have to worry about Malcolm or anyone else putting their hands on you again. I promise you that.”

When he couldn’t take the softness in her eyes anymore, Assad stepped back and put some space between them, reminding himself that this wasn’t about his pleasure. Or his feelings. This was about her freedom – that was it.

“The house dogs are back outside in the kennel,” he informed. “When Alfonzo arrives in the morning, he takes them out.”

“Alfonzo?”

“My butler. I have a housekeeper and personal chef too. They all live in a smaller house that I own a few miles up. Did you still want a tour? I can show you around while Brenda prepares breakfast. Anything special you want?”

Her shoulders heightened as she smiled and thought over his request. “Hmmm, can she make French Toast?”

“The best you’ll ever have in your life.”

“Okay, can I have that? And fruit? And bacon?”

“Done. What do you want to drink?”

“Coffee and orange juice if you have it.”

With a nod, Assad headed to the intercom and called down to the kitchen. When he was done, he told Scarlett to finish

getting ready and to let him know when she was ready. It didn't take as long as he thought it would, mostly because she'd only added a pair of tight-ass shorts and pulled her still damp hair up into a bun.

Once he showed her all of the bedrooms upstairs, he showed her the ones downstairs, totaling eight. Then, he showed her the living room, dining room, and sitting area. Saving the kitchen for last, Assad showed her the chill room he'd created and the black water fountain outside, which were probably his two favorites in the black and gray mansion he'd had custom-built from the ground up. Their last stop was his kennel outside, where he housed ten dogs, then they made their way to the kitchen.

His crew took a liking to Scarlett instantly, which said a lot about her character. He thought he was the only one who felt a pull to her, but now, he was convinced that was just a part of her aura, which would explain why neither Robert nor Malcolm wanted to lose her. Not having known her for a long period of time, Assad couldn't pinpoint what it was about Scarlett that made her so irresistible.

Yes, she was beautiful on the outside, and she had a way of looking at a man that made him weak in his knees... but it was something about her core... and he was getting more and more curious to figure out what it was.

"Hey," she called after taking a sip of her coffee. "Is there a way for you to check with Hassan and see if he's heard from Vanna? I'd like to make sure she's okay. She's my ace and the most solid person I've met throughout the whole thing." After a brief pause and smile, she added, "Besides you, of course."

"Yeah. I agree, she's solid as a motherfucking rock. Hassan isn't usually up this early, but I'll text him and tell him to call me when he gets up."

"Okay, thank you."

Assad nodded as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. They waited for Brenda to finish their breakfast in silence, but somehow, her hand had connected with his. She was facing a new danger now, one she had never experienced before. And

that was securing the love of Assad Black if she wasn't careful.

□□□

Assad didn't know what the fuck he was thinking agreeing to go shopping with Scarlett. It hadn't registered in his mind just how much she'd need since she left the compound with literally nothing. For some dumb ass reason, he thought it would take an hour max for her to grab everything she needed, but they'd been out for a good six hours before she was ready to head back home.

Home.

He had to keep reminding himself that that wasn't her home and she would be leaving as soon as it was safe to do so. But for now, Assad was enjoying her company. Enjoying how much lighter she seemed. How she smiled more. Allowed herself to laugh without abruptly cutting it off. Allowed herself to just be without having to constantly look over her shoulder or seek a man's guidance and approval. Every time she smiled at him, she made the risks of securing her freedom worth it.

It wasn't until they'd returned, and she asked, "What do I owe you?" that Assad realized how deep her roots of being used had to have gone.

His eyes lowered to her as she ran her hand up and down his hardening shaft. Discipline or not, there was no way in hell he wouldn't react to her touch. Assad wanted Scarlett bad as fuck—there was no denying that.

"What you doing?"

Scarlett laughed softly. "If you have to ask, I must not be doing it right."

She tried to drop to her knees before him, but he grabbed her arms and kept her from doing so. "That isn't necessary."

Confusion covered her face as her head tilted. "You just spent thousands on me. That can't be for free."

“Yes, it is. I’m not expecting anything in return, especially pussy.”

The blank stare she gave him would have been amusing if it wasn’t so fucking sad.

“I don’t understand.”

“You ain’t ever had a man take care of your needs without expecting something in return?”

Her head shook. “Not since my father.”

“Scarlett…”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” she requested quickly, softly. “We’ve had a really great day and I don’t want to ruin it. Is that okay?”

He nodded. “Whatever you need. But I need you to understand, nothing I do for you will ever be conditional upon what you’ve done for me or what you can give me. My intentions are always pure.”

“So you don’t want to have sex with me?”

“I didn’t say that.” Assad chuckled quietly and she smiled. “I’m saying, you don’t have to question my motives or my kindness. I told you I wanted to help you secure your freedom, and I meant that shit. I didn’t take you to use you and mistreat you like you’ve been done in the past. If you want to thank me, a simple thank you is always enough.”

Her head shook as she confessed, “That doesn’t sound like nearly enough, but thank you, Assad. For everything.”

His arms opened as she made his way into his chest. Assad placed a kiss to the top of her head, unable to keep himself from offering her some type of affection and intimacy, and he was glad he did when she moaned softly.

“I needed that,” she whispered, holding him tighter. “Needed this. You. More than you will ever be able to comprehend.”

“Whatever you need, just let me know, aight?” He paused before admitting, “I wanted to come into that room and hold

you all night.”

“Why didn’t you?” Scarlett questioned, lifting her head to look into his eyes.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“That wouldn’t have overwhelmed me; it would have increased my peace.”

His phone began to vibrate in his pocket, and Assad was grateful for the distraction. He released Scarlett, and she wasted no time heading up the winding staircase, probably to call Vanna now that she had a new phone. That was all she’d been talking about on their way back home.

“Yeah?” Assad answered after confirming that it was Savant.

“I’ve called you three times already. The fuck took you so long to answer my calls?”

“I’ve been busy. What’s up?”

“Meet us on Main Street. We need to talk...”

□□□

The biggest problem Assad and Savant had stemmed from their personal and professional relationships conflicting. As the oldest brother, Savant had a tendency to expect everyone to bow to him. When it came to the mafia, however, Assad was the boss. He could tell by Savant’s tone that he was going to be in big brother mode when they met up, and Assad tried to mentally prepare the entire ride there, but there was only so much he could do to prepare for what he was sure would be a disagreement.

An irritated sigh left him when he entered his aunt’s restaurant and saw his brothers, Remi and Rakim, and their advisors all seated and waiting for him. He was sure his advisors had informed them of what they’d learned about Scarlett and her situation with the brothers, but he didn’t want to jump to conclusions and react first. Instead, he took his seat at the long rectangular table and told them, “Make this shit quick. I need to get back home,” as he removed his shades.

“You didn’t give us all the facts about this situation before we went in,” Savant spoke up.

“I didn’t have all the facts then.”

“Since when do you make moves without them?”

“Since when do you question my moves?”

“Okay,” Hassan said, hands lifted in mock surrender as if he was the one causing an issue.

“Let’s focus on the facts and the problems to ensure we can find a solution,” Terrance, Assad’s main advisor, spoke up.

“The problem is, we went in thinking this extraction was going to be a one-time thing,” Savant clarified. “But that isn’t the case. Robert and Malcolm’s teams are already gearing up for war, and because you took her, that puts us right in the middle of it.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Assad rejected. “The four families were there. They witnessed the exchange. I won Scarlett fairly.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Remi countered. “The moment Malcolm came after us, he lost the blessing and protection of the four families, and you know he never had it from us. Without the five families on his side, he has everything to lose.”

“Which makes him reckless as fuck and us his main target,” Savant added. “Had I known he would come for her, I wouldn’t have agreed to let you do it.”

Assad laughed as he sat up in his seat. “Agreed? You don’t *let* me do anything. *I* run this shit. You do what the fuck I say around this bitch.”

“Who the fuck you think you talkin’ to, lil nigga?” Savant asked, standing from his seat.

Assad released his sinister smile, and as soon as he did, they all began to stand and put space between the brothers.

“Ain’t shit little about me, big brother. You wanna find out?”

“Aight, that’s enough,” Hassan decided.

“We just want to be aware of the threat Scarlett has created,” Rakim added.

“She hasn’t created a threat for any of you. This is on me.”

“Bullshit,” Savant almost yelled. “And I’m not going to let you risk our lives or freedom going to war behind this bitch.”

“That’s going to be the first and only time you disrespect her. That’s on my daughter, Savant.”

Savant chuckled as Remi and Rakim pulled him out of the restaurant.

“You hear this nigga? He wanna come at me over the bitch now. Her pussy must be as magical as they say it is because she got his ass gone all-fucking-ready.”

No one was able to keep Assad from jumping onto the table and running down it, and had it not been for Remi quickly pushing Savant out of the front door, Assad would have been on him.

“What the fuck, Black!” Hassan yelled, stepping directly in Assad’s path.

“Did you not hear what he just said?” Assad roared, trying to push his brother out of the way.

“I did, but damn. He always talking shit when we don’t listen to him. That ain’t nothing new.”

“It don’t matter if it’s new or not, I’m not tolerating the shit when it comes to Scar. Period.”

“Okay, aight. I’ll check him. But let me handle it. Aight?”

Assad’s eyes were on Savant as Remi all but pushed him into his car. Today wouldn’t have been the first time things had gotten physical between the brothers, but they were always able to make up quickly. Scarlett, however, was already a sensitive topic for Assad, which meant she was a weakness. If his brother could get that kind of reaction out of him when it came to her, he could only imagine how his enemies would use her against him if they ever had the chance. And that was all the more reason why she needed to leave... quickly.

□□□

Assad was so deep in his thoughts and cleaning that he didn't hear Scarlett when she walked up behind him. Before she could touch his back fully, he was standing, wrapping his hand around her neck, and pressing her back into his island. When his eyes focused on her, he released her quickly, apologizing as she massaged her neck.

"It's fine," she assured him. "I shouldn't have snuck up on you."

"Still, I apologize. I don't ever want to put my hands on you."

Scarlett smiled with one side of her mouth as she caressed his arm. "Just don't call the wolves in here on me," she joked, lightening his mood.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, noticing the bottle of Jose Cuervo in her hand.

Her head shook as she placed it on the black island. "No. I couldn't sleep."

Assad sighed as he pulled a black bar stool back for her to sit down. "Me either, that's why I'm up cleaning."

"Cleaning what? Your home is immaculate."

Immaculate.

Why'd she have to use that word? That was the same word he used when his mother was having one of her spells. Was he starting to get more and more like her?

"Just a habit I guess. Or a vice, shit, I don't know."

He smiled though his emotions were conflicted and his mind cluttered.

"We all have them," Scarlett offered, taking the tequila to the head.

"And drinking is yours?" he confirmed, accepting the bottle as she slid it in his direction.

“Unfortunately. I’m not an alcoholic or anything like that, though. I just... drink to numb whatever I don’t want to feel.”

“That’s the only way you know how?” Her head shook as she looked away. “What’s the other way?”

“I don’t want you to judge me.”

“Trust me, I have no room to judge.” Even though she still wasn’t facing him, Assad saw her cheek lift from her smile. “How about I exchange my pain for yours? Would you be more comfortable telling me then?”

Her eyes returned to his. “Only if you promise that it won’t change the way you look at me.”

Assad considered her condition. “I don’t think there’s anything you could tell me about yourself that would change the way I look at you, Scarlett.”

She smiled, leaning more in his direction. “How do you look at me?”

“Like I look at myself, and I’m trying to figure out why.”

“Okay,” she agreed softly, running her hand up and down his thigh.

Assad was convinced her love language was physical touch and that that was why she was so fucking affectionate. If he didn’t get a handle on being affected by the smoothness of her skin and softness of her touch, he would fold under the pressure.

“You go first,” Scarlett requested, smiling at him in a way that held him hostage.

Assad released a hard exhale and scratched his scalp through his small patch of curls.

“My mother was abused as a child, so she became an abuser. I took the brunt of it so Hassan could feel safe. She’s Bipolar, and she suffers from OCD. Add to that a drug addiction, shit was bound to implode a time or two in my childhood.” He smiled softly, mostly to make himself feel better about what he was sharing. “She started on crack and when she linked with my pops, he upgraded her to cocaine.

When she would get pregnant, she'd sober up. It would last for a few years, but all it took was that one thing to trigger her and send her right back down that hole."

He paused, not realizing he'd hung his head until she scooted her chair closer and lifted it.

"Most of her spells would happen overnight. She would wake us up out of our sleep almost every night to clean or party, depending on her mood. So now, it's just hard for me to sleep throughout the night fully. As fucked up as it sounds, cleaning provides comfort now because it's what I'm used to."

Scarlett took his hand into his as she asked, "Is she still using now?"

His head shook. "No, thankfully. She doesn't like to take anything now, not even her prescribed medication. Only thing she does is smoke weed or take CBD, but that's it."

"Well, that's good." She paused. "My mother still uses."

Assad tried to keep his face from showing his surprise, but he couldn't help it.

"Crack?" Scarlett nodded, eyes watering. "Damn, Scarlett. I'm sorry."

"It's... I've gotten used to it. She started when I was seven and has been doing it ever since. It got really bad after my dad died when I was seventeen. He was honestly my place of solace and peace. My dad was the only thing that made my childhood manageable." Scarlett smiled as she looked into the distance. "I remember one Valentine's Day, she was so high, she couldn't go on the date he had planned, so he took me out to dinner instead." Her smile widened. "It became our tradition from that point forward. He would buy me flowers and take me to nice restaurants and tell me what real love was and what I should and shouldn't tolerate from men." The breath she released was shaky. "But when he died... I pretty much released everything he'd ever taught me seemed like. I think a part of it was because I was so angry with him for leaving me."

"Was he sick?"

Her head shook as she quickly brushed a tear away. “No. My mother, she had racked up a large debt with one of her dealers and he came to collect. My dad tried to protect us, and they killed him. Right in front of us.”

When her body weakened, Assad pulled her close for an embrace. “Who was the dealer? Do you know his name? Would you remember his face?”

She sniffled and shook her head. “I don’t know his name, but I would definitely remember his face. My mother basically sold him my virginity after that. Losing my father only made her get high more, and he came to collect again six months after that. She gave him me.”

When her voice cracked, Assad squeezed his eyes shut and held her tighter.

“I—I...” she inhaled a deep breath, “...I didn’t go back home after that. I pretty much bounced around different friends’ houses for about a year before I started using men for shelter and my necessities. Which is why, even though I know Robert and Malcolm were treating me bad, I accepted it, because I was used to toxicity at that point. No man has loved me and cared for me for real since my father. I lost him twelve years ago, and I’ve been suffering ever since.”

Cupping her cheeks, Assad lifted her head so he could look into her eyes. With a lick of his lips, he wiped her tears away. After placing a kiss to her nose, he told her, “You have me now.”

Scarlett smiled softly, gently removing herself from his embrace. “I didn’t mean to unload on you like that,” she said before chuckling softly.

He’d been around her enough to know shutting down and numbing herself was a defense mechanism. Assad wished she felt safe enough with him to know she didn’t have to do that, but that trust would take time.

“That’s what we agreed to, right?”

Her head nodded as she looked away. “Yes,” she agreed softly. “I um... I cut.”

“Cut?” It took him a second to realize what she was saying, but when he did, he clarified with, “Yourself?”

She nodded. “Yes. If I don’t drink, I cut.”

“May I ask why?”

Still avoiding his eyes, she looked down at her hands as she twiddled her thumbs. “Makes the pain physical instead of mental and emotional. So it’s easier to release it. Plus, it makes me feel in control. I don’t know. It makes me feel good afterwards. Not quite like an orgasm, but close. I can’t really explain it.”

“No, I get it. I’m the same way with pain. Boxing and tattoos do it for me.” His eyes lowered to her arms. They were free of any new or healed cuts. “Where?”

Her eyes lifted to his. She stared at him for seconds on end, as if something inside of his eyes would give her confirmation that it was okay to share that part of herself. Scarlett’s legs spread partially. Taking his hand into hers, she lowered it between her thighs. Their eyes remained locked as she brushed the tips of his fingers against them. His eyes dropped immediately when the scars prickled his fingers. Some felt like whips, while the others felt harder. Fresher.

Standing, Assad stepped between her legs and lifted her, sitting her on the island.

“Assad,” she whispered, gripping his shoulders as he spread her legs for a closer look.

Head tilted, he caressed her war wounds, applying slight pressure. Assad lowered himself, and the second he kissed her thigh, she inhaled a sharp breath. Each kiss caused her to release a shaky breath or whimper. By the time he’d covered every scar with a kiss, she was clutching the back of his head and whimpering.

When he stood upright, her legs locked around him. He chuckled as he pulled her to the edge of the island.

“We agreed this wasn’t about sex.”

“You said that, but I never agreed,” Scarlett countered. She licked the center of his lips, and he clenched his jaw in response. “You can’t see into me like that, give me an intimacy I’ve never experienced... and not expect me to crave more.”

The second her soft lips brushed against his, Assad gripped her hips. She placed a second kiss there that made him relax against her. The third had him closing his eyes. The fourth made him growl softly before connecting his lips with hers.

Scarlett sighed into his mouth as he opened hers with his tongue. Arms wrapped around his neck, she tilted her head and swirled her tongue around his. But it was the sound of her moan when he sucked her tongue that forced him to pull back. Her breathing had slowed down drastically, but the lust in her eyes couldn’t be avoided. Needing to regain control, Assad picked her up and placed her on her feet.

“Let’s go to bed.” He took her hand into his and led her out of the kitchen, not even bothering to put the alcohol back up or the cleaning supplies... which was a miracle within itself.

Everything had to stay in its proper place.

Always.

“Together?” Scarlett checked.

“Yeah. If you don’t mind.”

Her free arm wrapped around his as she smiled. “I don’t mind. Not at all.”

Eleven

Scarlett

Somehow, they'd made it through an entire night without waking up. That was definitely a first for Scarlett. On top of that, she was naked, and Assad hadn't tried to have his way with her. He was so fucking cute... making her wait until she was under his plush California king-sized comforter to take off her clothes. Because he wasn't sure he could contain himself if he saw her naked body. However, feeling it pressed against his had definitely made his dick hard, and it drove Scarlett crazy knowing it wouldn't be inside of her.

It took a little time, but eventually, she fell asleep, and it was the most peaceful sleep she'd had in a while.

The first time they woke up, she didn't even know it was morning. Not only were his walls and décor black, but there were blackout curtains covering his windows too. If his alarm wouldn't have gone off, she wouldn't have known it was six in the morning. Which was too damn early for anyone to be waking up, she was convinced.

But something she wasn't expecting happened. Their bodies had disconnected while they slept. Assad's hand went to her back, rubbing it gently before lowering to her ass. When he squeezed and she moaned, he allowed it to travel down further—stopping between her warm, wet thighs. Before she could even enjoy the feel of his fingers caressing her clit and opening, Assad rolled her over onto her side and pulled her

back into his chest... holding her until his alarm went off again.

She ended up staying in bed for a little while longer, not getting up until she received a call from Vanna. Instead of calling her right back, Scarlett went to the room she'd been occupying and freshened up. Before beginning her search for Assad, she returned Vanna's call.

"Damn, Scar. You get your freedom and I don't hear from you anymore," was how Vanna greeted her.

Scarlett smiled, tightening her grip on the phone. "We didn't talk for one day, Vanna. One day."

"One day too many. Are you good?"

"Yes. Surprisingly, nothing terrible has happened since I've been gone. A part of me thinks it's because I've been at Assad's place, but I feel really good about this. How are you?"

"Good. Hassan hasn't allowed me to go back because he doesn't want Malcolm trying to use me to get to you, even though I don't know where you are."

"Wait. You're *with* Hassan?"

"Girl, no. I made him put me up at the Peabody since he refused to let me go back. He has a damn guard at my door, following me around like I'm a celebrity."

Scarlett chuckled. "You're just eating this shit up, huh?"

"Absolutely. I've dealt with niggas who had money before, but these men have *power*. I'm going to milk this for as much as I can, as long as I can."

There was a quiet tap on the door, gaining Vanna's attention. After promising to see each other soon, they disconnected the call, and Scarlett headed downstairs. It shouldn't have surprised Scarlett to find Assad outside by his water fountain. His morning routine was the same, just in a different location of his home. He would always have a cup of coffee and spend time in deep thought or reading before he left for the day, and Scarlett couldn't help but admire how he had

the ability to not only control his thoughts long enough to find peace but stick to a positive habit as well.

“Hey,” she greeted, tightening the tie of her red silk robe.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

He patted his thigh, and she couldn't hold back her smile as she made her way over and sat on his lap.

“I've been thinking,” Assad started after placing a kiss to her neck that made her nipples harden.

“About?”

“Us.”

Her smile widened. “What about us?”

“We have toxic ass habits that we need to break.”

They shared a small chuckle. “I don't deny that, but I also don't know where I would even begin. Life would have to get better I suppose.”

“I agree, and it will, but until it does fully, I think the easiest thing for us to do would be to replace them with something good or creative.” Tapping her thigh for her to stand, he said, “I wanna show you something.”

“Okay,” she agreed, accepting his hand when he offered it.

“Do you have any passions or hobbies? Interests?” he asked, leading her back into his home.

She considered his question, probably longer than it should have taken as they headed down the hall.

“I used to really love pottery and embroidery, but I haven't done either in about five years.” A warmth filled her as she recalled the reason she'd gotten into them in the first place. “After my dad died, I would go to his grave and just sit. It used to be this really small, cute little old lady doing the same thing every Saturday with her husband. She would knit for hours and update him on her life. When she noticed me, she started trying to teach me to knit. We started out doing embroidery and I just stuck to that.”

“Is she still in your life?”

Her head shook. “No. She died right before I met Robert. Haven’t really done either since.”

“Do you think it would help keep your mind settled if you did?”

Instead of opening the door Assad stood in front of, he looked down at Scarlett and waited for her to answer.

“I think so. I stopped because it made me miss her so much. Now that I’m more at peace with her death, I think I could handle it.” Looking around his large frame, she asked, “Now what’s behind the door?”

Assad smiled as he opened it, and Scarlett gasped as she stepped inside.

“Wow, Assad.” He remained at the door after closing it, allowing her to take in what was surrounding her. “You did this?”

Her eyes scanned the walls and ceiling, all of which had been splattered by paint. The floors too. There were a few pads and easels resting against the wall, but they were clear.

“Yeah. I haven’t painted anything in a while, though, which is probably why my sleeping has been off even more.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this before. What other talents do you have?”

“Just this.” He smiled as he slowly walked over to her. “Painting was my hidden pleasure. Not too many know about it.”

“Thank you for sharing it with me.”

His phone vibrated as he pulled her closer, and as much as she didn’t want him to, Scarlett knew Assad would answer. He sighed, just as frustrated about the intrusion as she was.

“Yeah?” he answered, grip around her waist tightening. “Did you tell her that we only grant favors on the first of the month?” Assad pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay. Give me about an hour, and I’ll be there.” After disconnecting the

call, he asked her, “Are you going to be okay by yourself for most of the day? I would tell you that you can take one of my cars and get out, but I don’t want you alone until we know for sure how things are going to play out with Malcolm. Do you want to go out with guards or would you rather just stay here?”

Scarlett’s hand wrapped around his wrist as she asked, “Can I ride with you? I won’t get in the way. I promise. And if it’s something private, I can just sit in the car.”

He smiled with one side of his mouth. “You sure you wanna do that?” She nodded. “Aight. Go get dressed.”

With a squeal, Scarlett scurried out of the room, smiling when she turned and found him staring at her ass in the process.

□□□

Assad was quickly becoming the type of thoughtful that Scarlett was sure only existed in movies and books. After spending the day at his side while he handled business, he surprised her with a trip to her father’s grave... which she hadn’t been to in over two years. Placing new flowers down and being able to sit and talk with her father filled her with a peace that she’d been missing ever since she was at the compound.

Yes, she knew she could talk to her father anywhere and at any time, but a part of her felt silenced by her situation. She knew her father would not have approved of the choices she’d been making when it came to men, but Scarlett was confident that he would approve of whatever the hell this was that she had with Assad.

“Thank you for letting me tag along,” Scarlett almost sang sweetly as they headed back inside.

Assad’s day wasn’t over, but Scarlett was sure she’d been attached to his hip long enough.

“I was happy to have you. You’re the first woman that hasn’t been afraid of who I am or tried to use me for what I could do.”

“I’ve been used enough to never put anyone else through that. I honestly just like being in your presence. You’re the first man I’ve felt safe with, peace with, and like I could be myself with in a really long time.”

“I wanna show you something before I go.”

Filled with curiosity, Scarlett followed behind as he led her down the hall to the right. When they walked to the room next to his paint room, her curiosity was filled with confusion. Before they left, he told her that it was empty.

“Close your eyes,” he ordered softly, making her giggle.

“Close my eyes?”

Without repeating himself, Assad lifted her hands and used them to cover her eyes. The sound of the door opening made her inhale a sharp breath. Assad gently led her into the room. A few steps later, he told her, “Okay. Open them.”

Lowering her hands, Scarlett had no idea what to expect, but what she saw was better than anything she could have guessed. The room was almost filled with pottery and embroidery supplies. Her eyes watered as her head shook softly.

“I don’t know anything about this shit, but I had my personal shopper cop everything she could find.” He made his way next to her. “I don’t know how long you’ll be here, but I want you to be happy and at peace while you are.”

Turning, Scarlett stepped in front of him and took him into her arms. It didn’t matter how much she told herself this was just his job... every day that she was in Assad’s presence made it harder for Scarlett to want to say goodbye to him.

Twelve

Assad

Kirby was having a good day today. Well, what Assad would consider a good day. She was high off life, full of energy, and hard to be contained. To Assad's surprise, she called and invited him to exercise and shop with her, and even though Assad was fully aware of this being another one of her phases, he was glad it didn't involve her manically cleaning and rearranging or being unbearably angry and agitated. Though he couldn't convince her to take her medicine, he had convinced her to rest before he left.

As happy as he was for the shift in her mood, he became conflicted when he noticed the missed calls he had from Kourtney. Since they only reached out to each other when they needed sex or companionship, Assad was tempted to let her calls go unreturned. With Scarlett at his home, he had no desire for any other woman. It had been hard as fuck resisting the urge to have sex with her, but he'd been standing firm on that decision. A few slip-ups here and there had granted him the chance to kiss her lips and play with her bottom set, but they hadn't gone any further than that. Kourtney had been down for him for quite some time now. As much as Assad wanted to avoid what he was sure would be an awkward conversation, he would have felt like less of a man had he done so. So as he left his mother's home, he returned Kourtney's call.

She answered quickly with, "Hey."

"Hey. Sorry I missed your calls."

“It’s cool. I figured you were busy.” After a brief pause, she added, “Can you come over?”

Assad didn’t answer her right away, mostly trying to convince himself to go. Because going would remind him that he and Scarlett weren’t in a relationship. That securing her freedom, not her heart, was still his main priority.

Though he had no desire to, he agreed with, “Later.”

“Okay, cool. Just call when you’re on your way.”

“Aight.”

Releasing a frustrated exhale, Assad ran his hand over his face before he chuckled. This was probably the first time in his life he was dreading getting some pussy... especially Kourtney’s pussy. With a shake of his head, he mumbled, “Yeah, I definitely need to handle this so I can get away from her,” because if he wasn’t careful, things would become more permanent than either of them expected. And soon, Assad would be the man not wanting to let Scarlett go.

□□□

“You’re smiling a lot, Daddy,” Maria noticed.

“Say what?” he asked, lifting his cup of tea to his lips.

To keep Scarlett from drinking as much, he’d switched his night cap to something without alcohol. To his surprise, it granted the same calming relief a shot of Cognac would have provided.

“You’re smiling a lot,” she repeated with her own wide grin. “Are you happy?”

Assad hadn’t realized he was smiling more than usual until Maria called him out on it. Scratching his scalp, he chuckled quietly.

“Yeah, pretty girl. I guess I am happy. Is that okay with you?”

“Mhm,” Maria replied before sitting Indian style. “I always want you to be happy. I hate it when you come see me and you look so sad.”

“I’m not sad when I’m come see you. I’m always happy when I’m with you.”

Her head shook adamantly. “You’re happy when we do stuff, but you’re sad when we’re at home.”

It hadn’t registered to Assad that there was a possibility that Maria was picking up on the tension between him and Jessica when they were in the same room. Things were awkward between them now because of Mike. Though he hadn’t been trying to enforce any new rules, Jessica felt some type of way over being in the middle of them. Trying to respect her fiancé while maintaining the routine she had with her child and her father was proving to be harder than she thought... and Assad telling her to call the wedding off didn’t make it any better. She swore it was because he was jealous of her moving on, but since he’d had Scarlett, rebuilding anything with Jessica hadn’t even been the last thing on his mind.

“Well Daddy is happy, and I don’t want you to think being in your home or around your mom makes me sad, okay?” Maria nodded. “Let me talk to your mama real quick.”

“Yes, sir,” Maria agreed before dropping the phone onto her bed and climbing down it.

As always, he chuckled as she ran through the house, convinced she was going to be a track star in high school.

Jessica’s eyes rolled as she put her earbuds in, and the first words out of her mouth were, “I’m not arguing with you today, Black.”

“Kill all that shit before you irritate me. I asked for you to make peace.” Sitting up in her seat, Jessica smiled and nodded for him to continue. “I’m willing to discuss our boundaries again. I don’t want Maria picking up on us having issues. She’s getting older now and more aware of how we’re feeling, and I don’t want her to think I’m always feeling some type of way when I’m around you.”

“And you think discussing boundaries will change that when it’s really the fact that you’re still in love with me?”

“Humble yourself. This ain’t got shit to do with me wanting you back. I’m past that.”

Her mouth dropped and eyes widened. “Since when?”

“Since you let another nigga’s seed take residence in your fucking womb,” he replied louder than he wanted to. Releasing the scowl that covered his face, Assad took a sip of his tea, allowing his words time to settle within her. “You don’t have to worry about me trying to get you back or acting some type of way because you’ve moved on.” He ignored the sadness that covered her face. “Get with ya man and see when he wants to have another sit-down. I’ll behave for this one.”

Even though her eyes were watery, Jessica smiled. “Who is she?”

“Who is who?”

“The woman you’re trying to replace me with.”

Now it was his turn to be surprised. “You trying to say another woman is the only reason I could get over you?”

Jessica shrugged. “It hasn’t happened in all this time, so something has to be new.”

“The way I see you. Us. That’s it.”

Telling her about Scarlett was useless. She wasn’t going to have a permanent place in his life anyway. Besides, Assad liked the idea of Jessica wondering what the hell had caused this change within him.

“If you say so,” she agreed.

“Get with him, though, and let me know.”

“Okay. Assad?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

Her smile made him smile. Assad nodded before disconnecting the call. It had taken some time, but Assad had accepted what Dijon said as truth. He hadn’t cheated on Jessica because he was self-centered and uncaring when it

came to her feelings. Assad had finally accepted the fact that he'd cheated because he knew it was the only thing he could do to ensure Jessica wouldn't take him back. It hurt like hell to hurt her, but at that point in his life, that was easier than admitting to not being ready for the role of husband and father that she was trying to make him out to be.

Things had changed, though. Now, Assad was ready for that life. Ready for his wife. To have more children. Even if that meant training Hassan to take his place over the mafia. That in itself would take years to accomplish, so he would need to start grooming him as soon as possible. Which was all the more reason for him to try and handle this situation with Scarlett quickly. He wouldn't allow his brother to inherit his beef. So his life wouldn't be able to reach the next level until Scarlett was no longer in it...

Thirteen

Scarlett

Jazmine Sullivan played in the background as Scarlett carefully sculpted the clay. It was crazy how less than three weeks ago, she was walking around Malcolm's home without the slightest bit of peace. From the first night she'd been with Assad, the opposite had been the case. It didn't matter how much she tried to overthink the situation and speak negativity into existence, Assad's calm and confident demeanor kept her in the present moment. And in her present, she was safe—with him.

Scarlett hummed along to "Lost Ones", her wavy hair framed her face as she worked intently with a smile. There was a peace that came from not having to keep herself made up and looking her best that she was basking in more. The feeling of being a wild, raw woman. There was no makeup on her face, only a red lip stain. Her hair was in its natural wet state. And she was dressed in nothing but a silk gown. Vanilla body mist covered her frame, and she had to admit that was for Assad more than herself. It seemed to draw him to her more when she wore it.

She paused briefly and looked out of the window, smiling wider at the sight of Assad's dogs roaming the grounds around the water fountain. Though she had no plan in place for when all of this was over, she was content with the grace that had been given her through time to figure things out for herself, by herself.

So much of her innocence and life had been taken when her father was, and her mother chose drugs over her own child. There was no time for college or planning a bright future. Beyond her hobbies, Scarlett had no clue what she wanted to do with her life. Before now, she was convinced her legacy would be the horrible death she was bound to have at the hands of a man. Now, she had hope, and that was a gift she thanked God for as she squeezed the cross necklace that hung around her neck.

The tap on the door gained her attention. As she picked up the CBD joint, she said, "Come in."

At the sight of Assad, she smiled before taking a pull that instantly calmed her.

"Hey," she spoke, trying to hide her excitement to see him... but there was no use.

Assad had left before she woke up this morning, and now that the sun was setting, it felt like forever had passed since she'd seen him. He wore a smile too as he walked over to her.

"Hey. You good?"

"Yes," she confirmed, tilting her head and puckering her lips for a quick kiss.

Sex or not, they'd gotten into a comfortable, affectionate pattern, and Scarlett was grateful for it. She didn't realize how much she'd been craving affection and the safety found within a man's arms until she started getting it from Assad. For years, she'd been thirsty for it, and he never hesitated to satisfy her. After giving her a tender peck, Assad lifted her from the orange velvet chair she was sitting in and put her on his lap.

"How has your day been?" he asked, looking over her shoulder at what she was creating.

"Good. Quiet. You?"

"Productive. Pressure is working on a new strain exclusively for the mafia. If this takes off like I believe it will, we won't have to supply anything else."

A proud smile lifted the corners of her mouth before she kissed his temple. Even though his grandfather had started the mafia on the backs of harder drugs, Assad expressed that it had always been his goal to sell only weed. As of now, he refused to sell crack or heroin to black people, but his overall goal was to stop selling it altogether.

“That’s good, Assad. I’m really proud of you.”

“Thank you, honey.”

Honey.

He’d started calling her that now.

Said it was because of the color of her eyes.

“What you making?”

“A paint pallet for you.”

“Aw yeah?”

His interest piqued as he sat up further, pushing her closer to her clear desk in the process.

“Yes. I feel like I don’t have much to offer you, but at least with this, you’ll have it to remember me by always.”

“What makes you think you don’t have anything to offer me?”

Scarlett shrugged, even though she knew the answer. Hell, she’d been thinking about it a lot lately.

“I don’t. You have people working here, so it’s not like I can cook and clean for you. You have enough money to buy yourself anything you want. And we don’t have sex. I feel like you give me so much, but I don’t have any way to give you something in return except this.”

“You wanna know why this means more to me than anything you could ever buy?” She nodded. Assad took her hands into his and kissed them both. “Because it will come from your hands and your heart. You’re right, I can buy myself anything I will ever want... but nothing compares to that.” Scarlett blushed, trying to cover it by hiding her face in his

neck, but he wouldn't allow her to as he added, "And you give me something every day you're here."

"What?"

Assad's finger slid down her ear. "You listen, and I've never had a woman really do that before. You inspire me to do things I've always wanted to do but lacked motivation behind." His thumb softly caressed her eyes. "You see me, and you don't look at me differently or judge me because of it." His pointer finger slid between her lips. "You're always mindful of how you speak to me... now." She chuckled softly. "Always with love and respect." His middle and ring finger slid down her chest, across her heart. "You let me in here and make me feel like I belong there." Taking her hand into his, he kissed it again. "And you give me attention and affection. You don't ask for anything but my time. That makes me want to give you that and more."

"I give you all that," she whispered.

"Every day."

"I didn't know."

"Because it's genuine. That's why men gravitate toward you so fucking much. All a nigga really need is a woman that listens and supports him, gives him pussy on the regular, keeps herself up, and shows appreciation for what he does. You do all of that effortlessly."

Her mouth opened and closed, unsure if it wanted to allow the words from her heart to seep out. "So why isn't it enough for you?"

"What makes you think it's not?"

"The fact that you stress that nothing can happen between us almost every other day."

Assad chuckled softly. "I do that because I'm trying to convince myself of that, not because I don't want you or because you're not enough. You're perfect for me, Scarlett." He kissed her bare shoulder, and as always, her nipples hardened, and chills covered her skin. "I just don't want to stand in the way of your freedom. You deserve that."

Instead of telling him that he was what she deserved, she nodded, sighing softly. Before she could return to her clay, Assad covered her hands with his. Pushing her hair out of her face, he looked into her eyes for a few seconds before covering her lips with his. And though they kissed almost every day, this kiss felt different.

Scarlett's hand cupped the back of his neck as her body relaxed against him. Normally, Assad was the first to pull away. This time, he repositioned her body so that she was straddling him. She broke the kiss when his hands slid up her thighs, and the sight of him biting down on his bottom lip with lowered eyes was all the confirmation that she needed of what would happen next.

As much as she wanted to grind against him, she resisted since she didn't have on any panties. Gripping her hips, Assad's lips trailed down her neck. When they reached her collar bone, she began to unzip his pants. She pulled his shaft out of his boxers, licking her lips as she gripped it. It was long and curved, heavier than what she was used to. Scarlett smiled softly. It had been so damn long since she'd been with a man that could fill her. After rolling the condom down his shaft, Assad lifted her.

"Are you sure this is still what you want?" he checked, head at her opening.

"Yes," she moaned, pussy dripping just off the anticipation.

She inhaled deeply as he pushed her down his shaft, eyes locked with his. Beginning her normal medium pace, her head flung back quickly. Admittedly, cumming quick and making her partner cum even quicker was a habit she'd mastered for sleeping with men she wasn't sexually attracted to. Feeling him not just brushing against her spot but at her core because of his length had her pussy clutching him quickly.

With a firm hold on her waist, Assad slowed her movements.

"Slow down, honey," he ordered. "Make it last."

Her moans began to pour as she felt him all over. Their lips reconnected, tongues creating their own slow rhythm. The sound of her sticky nectar was heard as one sound stopped and another started, mixed with Assad's palm smacking her ass. His breathing grew ragged and he moaned, and it was the music she wanted filling her ear. With one arm wrapped around her waist and the other around her shoulders, Assad held her close, like he never wanted to let her go.

And he didn't, not even when he stood and sat her on the edge of her desk.

He paused her playlist, wanting to hear her moans above all.

Assad stroked her deeply, the hardness of each one causing her desk to knock against the wall. No dick had ever been so good she wanted to run away, but Assad was changing that. Her legs slowly began to close around him, but he didn't let up—not until she'd cum twice and her moans had been replaced with whimpers.

Placing her on her feet, Assad turned her around and entered her from behind. Holding her hands down on the desk, he filled her with methodical strokes that had her alternating between moaning and calling his name. He picked up his speed, kissing and licking her ear until she came again. This time, he pulled out quickly, stroking his dick in preparation for his cum. Scarlett dropped to her knees before him to remove the condom, sucking and swallowing every seed he had to offer.

Assad's body jerked as he gripped the back of her head, dick throbbing as he unloaded.

When he was done, she stood, giggling as he picked her up and carried her out and up the stairs to his bedroom.

□□□

He hadn't taken his eyes off her since they'd sat down. Scarlett felt her cheeks heating as she blushed. Assad had made it clear just how beautiful she looked before they left for lunch, but he was looking at her like he wanted her to *be* his

lunch. Looking over The Capital Grille's menu, she shook her head and chuckled.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, looking up and into his eyes.

"I'm thinking about you riding my dick right now."

He hadn't bothered to lower his voice or whisper, and Scarlett wasn't expecting his answer to be so vulgar. Sure, he told her seeing her in her black, form-fitting dress and heels was an equation for him to possibly have to catch a body in broad daylight, but she wasn't expecting him to still be so turned on by her appearance.

"And how much I want to pull your hair while I fuck you from behind," he added, head tilting as he looked over her face and bone straight hair.

Picking up her water, Scarlett took a long sip and fought back her smile. "You're insatiable."

"I know, and I figured it would be worst with you."

"Why?"

"Because of how we connect."

"I think you were right to hold off for as long as we did," she confessed. Truthfully, Assad had given her the best dick she'd ever had. He was precise and methodical, making her feel him over every inch of her body. And the way he demanded eye contact took things to an intimate level that set her soul on fire. Every crevice of her pussy had been filled by him last night, and it was pulsing now... in need of more. "I want that dick to belong to me now."

He smiled before licking his lips. "It does. Tell me how you want it tonight."

Squeezing her legs together, Scarlett bit down on her bottom lip as their waitress returned with her shrimp cocktail and his crab cakes. He was so fucking luxurious. The only man she'd known to have a five-course meal for lunch *and* dinner at a five-star restaurant without even blinking. But that was something he'd been instilling within her mind – going

after every-damn-thing she wanted and could have with no apology. Malcolm's riches couldn't compare to Assad's wealth by any means, but you wouldn't know that by how Assad carried himself.

He wasn't overly flashy and in need of attention. Even with his home, which was miles away from anyone else's and hidden behind rows of trees. Besides his wardrobe that was comprised of only Versace, Assad chose to spend his money on experiences more than materialistic things. His greatest pleasure, though, was a good meal, and spending close to a thousand dollars or more while they were eating out a day was nothing to him.

After making sure they were good, their waitress left, and Scarlett released the giggle she'd been holding in because of their inappropriate conversation.

"I remember when you used to make me laugh like that," came from behind Scarlett. Assad's smile fell as he looked at the woman who had spoken. She made her way to the side of the table, allowing Scarlett to take her in. "Is she why I haven't heard from you lately, Black?"

"Making a scene is beneath you." His voice was low and calm, as always.

"And ghosting me is beneath you, or I thought it was. I guess I was wrong."

"I didn't ghost you. I told you I was involved with someone else for the moment and no longer available."

She scoffed. "That's even worse. The fact that you think you can just put us on pause while you fuck around with someone else. Did you expect me to just wait for you?"

Assad chuckled. "Honestly, I didn't care if you did or didn't."

Scarlett could tell by the rolling of her neck that things were about to go to the next level, so she asked, "Do you want me to handle this for you?"

"Not at all. You will always remain a lady when you're in my presence." Returning his attention to the woman standing

by their table, he stood and said, “We can talk privately, Kourtney, at another time. Obviously, I didn’t make my desires with you clear. But I’m busy right now, and you’re being real disrespectful. I’m disappointed in you.”

“You’re disappointed in me?” she repeated, voice rising. “You fucked me like you loved me, never committed to me, then cut me off. And you’re disappointed in me?”

“Is there a problem here?” the manager asked, looking from Assad to Kourtney.

“No. She was just leaving,” Assad dismissed, taking her by the elbow and casually leading her out of the restaurant.

It didn’t take long for him to return.

His gruff voice held a tinge of irritation when he said, “I apologize for that.”

“It’s cool.”

“Do you want to know who that was? What that was about?”

Her head shook. “No. You’re not my man, so I have no real claim to you. Besides, she’s upset because you cut her off. That’s all I really need to know.”

He nodded, staring into her eyes to gauge her sincerity. Truth was, Scarlett was a little startled. She’d had sex with him for one night and could in fact confirm his sex game was top tier. Filled with the kind of passion that made you believe he loved you even if he didn’t. No matter how rough or fast or nasty he got... whether it was holding her hands, looking into her eyes, complimenting her beauty, or kissing her deeply... Assad was still gentle with her in some way.

A way that she thought was reserved for just her. Now... she wasn’t so sure.

□□□

Scarlett could definitely get used to waking up in Assad’s arms, but his alarm clock and constant calls were a different story. Holding him tighter, she wrapped her leg around his

body as he answered a call. Gruff voice thick with sleep, Assad answered with his usual, “Yeah.”

Sitting up quickly, Assad sat on the edge of the bed as he listened intently.

“That ain’t got shit to do with me,” he replied. Cupping her hands in her lap, Scarlett told herself not to listen in, but she couldn’t help herself. “I would advise you to find a different way to handle that.” Grabbing her phone, Scarlett focused on texting Vanna until Assad ended his call. “Good morning, beautiful,” he greeted as he laid back down and pulled her on top of his chest.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. That was Malcolm.”

He said it so calmly, Scarlett was sure he had to be talking about a different Malcolm. Still, she sat up quickly and looked down at him.

“Malcolm Thompson?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he want?”

“He’s meeting with Robert soon. Apparently, he’s no longer able to hold the meeting off, so he was demanding that I bring you back to ensure the meeting ends in his favor.”

Scarlett’s heart sank. Shoulders caved. “Oh. Okay.”

Before she could get out of bed, Assad was grabbing her wrist and keeping her inside. “Where you going?”

“To get ready. You’re taking me back, aren’t you?”

“Did I say I was taking you back?”

“Well, no, but...”

“So lay your ass back down. My alarm isn’t set to go off for another thirty minutes.”

Even though she couldn’t see him fully because of how dark his room was, Scarlett could make out the calmness of his silhouette. It soothed and infuriated her at the same time.

“Look, I’ve enjoyed my time away and this taste of freedom, but shit is about to get real, Assad. Are you sure you’re willing to risk so much just to save me? I would really understand if you changed your mind.”

“Ain’t shit changed. I stand behind what I say and how I feel. I know what I’m risking, and I also know that you’re worth it. Can we please go back to sleep now?”

With a quiet nod, Scarlett lowered herself to his chest. She told her tears not to fall, but they did anyway. As soon as Assad felt them cascading onto his skin, he held her tighter. Of all the tears she’d cried, this was one time Scarlett could say they were happy tears.

□□□

It was Assad’s bright idea that Scarlett get to know his sister Dijon. She’d been missing Vanna like crazy, and even though they saw each other once or twice a week, it was nothing like when they were able to see each other every day.

Even though Scarlett was happy about possibly getting a new female friend, she wondered if that friend being Assad’s sister was a good idea. Sure, it would work in her favor now, because she would be able to help her figure out the parts of Assad that he kept locked away. But what about when all of this was over and they parted ways? How would she handle seeing him in passing while she spent time with his sister?

Not wanting her paranoia and overthinking to create a problem where there wasn’t one, Scarlett focused on her breathing in an attempt to calm down. Since they were meeting for dinner and possibly drinks afterwards, depending on how it went, Assad had stayed home. But he did send a guard with Scarlett just to be safe. While she admired his confidence that Malcolm wouldn’t try anything, she also appreciated what he did to maintain her peace of mind.

Before she could even get into the restaurant good, Assad was calling, which made her smile. It was crazy how the same action from a different man created a different reaction. When Malcolm called to check on her, it irritated her and made her

feel trapped. When Assad called, it made her feel cared for and protected.

“Yes, Assad?” she answered.

“What I tell you about answering your phone like that?”

Scarlett laughed softly as she looked around the restaurant. “That it makes you want to bend me over so I can say it while you’re inside of me.”

“I’m starting to think that’s why you do it.”

“So what if it is?”

“I’ll show you when I get home tonight.”

Home.

As much as Scarlett wanted it to be home, it wasn’t. Not her permanent one at least. But instead of focusing on that, she vowed to enjoy every day that she spent there.

“I will hold you to that. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. D just called and told me she was running a couple of minutes late, so she’s not there yet, but she’s about to pull up soon. I told her what you were wearing, and you’ll know her when you see her. She’s short, chocolate, and pretty as hell.”

“Okay. And thanks again for setting this up. I miss my friend, but I know I also need to start developing relationships with other people too.”

“I agree. I think this will be good for both of you. Text me when you’re about to leave.”

“Okay.”

After disconnecting the call, Scarlett gave her attention to the hostess and was seated. She wasted time on social media until she felt a presence heading her way. At the sight of Dijon, Scarlett smiled. Assad was right – she was short and tiny with beautiful chocolate skin, long hair, and the prettiest face. They didn’t look too much alike, but they did have the same colored eyes and head shape, so Scarlett assumed that came from their father.

“Hey, Scarlett?”

“Yes,” she confirmed with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Dijon announced, extending her arms for an embrace.

“You as well. Thank you for agreeing to this. I’m sure Assad made it sound like I’ve been walking about like a sad puppy when I’m bored.”

Dijon laughed as she took the seat across from Scarlett.

“Not at all. I’ve been anxious to meet you ever since you came into his life.”

“Really? Why is that?”

Dijon’s smile was as soft as her voice when she said, “You make him come home. And for a man like Assad... that means everything.”

Fourteen

Assad

Assad had taken Scarlett to one of his favorite private upscale restaurants in Memphis, which was hard to come by. They were so far and few in between that when he found one, it wasn't long before it became popular and was always packed. Because he preferred dining in a quieter setting, he often rented restaurants out for the night when he had dates, but with Scarlett, he wanted to show her off.

After dinner, they barhopped downtown since neither of them had had any alcohol in weeks. Since Scarlett was only having one drink at each place, Assad did the same. It was important to him that she knew he stood behind her commitment to not drown herself in alcohol just as he wouldn't numb himself with obsessive cleaning.

As he swirled his Hennessy Black around in his glass, he asked, "What do you need? Want? Desire?"

Her eyes, as always, held him captivated as she smiled. "I needed my freedom, and you've given me that."

His head shook. "Not fully. We still have a little work to do."

"Yes, but still." Reaching her arm across the table, she extended her hand for his, and Assad put his inside. "You have to understand that for five years straight, I was basically held captive by a crazy set of twin brothers. Even when I was married to Robert, I was still unsure how I would escape him.

We had our good moments, but the bad always outweighed the good. So even though I still can't do things 100 percent by myself yet, being out from under their rule is freedom to me."

"I understand."

"I do, however, want to get to that point where I can roam the city freely without guards and all of that."

"It's going to happen sooner than you think," Assad assured, hoping she didn't ask any more questions. Malcolm had called and told him that he had two days to return her before his bimonthly meeting with Robert. If he didn't have Scarlett by then, he promised they both would regret it, but Assad wasn't worried about that. "Is that all you need?"

Her mouth twisted to the side as she thought it over. "I need to find my purpose. You've already helped me find my passions again. Which has helped increase my happiness and peace. I want to become more aware of myself as a woman. And, of course, I need a job or to go to college." She chuckled, eyes sparkling with each word she spoke. "I need real love. Unconditional love and devotion. But I'm in no rush for that. There's a lot that I have to do within me before I feel like I'm ready to trust another man." She paused before adding, "Unless it was someone I already knew and trusted."

"Do you... have a lot of options?"

"Not at all. Just one."

"...Who?"

Her head tilted as she smiled sweetly, looking down at the connection of their hands. "You."

"Honey..."

"I know, I know, this is just business for you. But you asked, so I had to answer truthfully."

"True." Assad took a sip of his drink before continuing their conversation with, "What do you want?"

Scarlett exhaled as she sat back in her seat, releasing her hand from his. "Now or in the future?"

“Both.”

“Now, I want to leave the city. Be out in nature or at the beach, freely. Somewhere I can just... be. No guards and phones, no responsibilities. Somewhere I can just sit, meditate, and relax.” Her eyes blinked rapidly as she stared through him. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but I’ve never gone beyond Arkansas or Mississippi.”

“Never?”

“Nope. I didn’t realize that until just now. We would travel to neighboring states to visit lakes and amusement parks but that’s it.”

Assad made the mental note to book her a trip as soon as all of this bullshit was over as she asked, “Your turn. What do you need?”

He thought it over for a few seconds before answering her with, “A break.”

“From?”

“Everything. Since having you, this is the first time since I took over for my father that I’ve come home at a decent hour. I’m usually on the go taking care of everything. The favors for the city, protection, acting as a point of peace between residents and law enforcement, dealing with suppliers, making sure the money straight, handling our enemies... I’m over it all.”

“You don’t have help?”

He nodded softly. “I do, but I’m a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to the family business. It meant everything to my grandfather and his best friend, Mayhem, when they created it. My father could have taken it to new heights, but he allowed his pride and anger to get in the way and make him reckless. Now his ass can’t even touch American soil without fear of being caught or gunned down by the FBI. I’ve turned it into what my family has always wanted to be, so I got a big weight on my shoulders to maintain it.”

Instead of replying right away, Scarlett gave him the same consideration he gave her and thought over what he’d said

fully before responding.

“I understand how you feel obligated to do everything because you want it done a certain way, but I believe your family, your men, they are a reflection of you and what you and your father taught them. They might not do everything the exact way you would, but you have to be confident in your ability to choose people that will honor the decisions you would make when you aren’t around. The mafia isn’t just about you, it isn’t just your responsibility, that’s why you have your team of advisors, right?” He nodded, left side of his mouth lifting into a smile. “Well... I think you should give your team that same consideration. Act as their advisor but let them handle what you’ve put them in control of to handle. You have an amazing life, Assad, but if you continue down this path you won’t have the time and freedom to enjoy it.”

Assad stood and walked over to her side of the table. She smiled as he cupped her cheek and tilted her head.

“Aren’t you... mm...” Her words were cut off by a moan when he kissed her. “Going to tell me what you want?”

“Right now... all I want is you.”

□□□

“Make me cum with your tongue, Assad. Please.”

Her wish would definitely be his command. Assad held her hands under her legs as he ran his tongue between her folds. Lifting her hips, Scarlett fed him her pussy as she moaned. For a while, he used his tongue to lick and tease her, lapping up every drop of her nectar that flowed from her walls. She got so wet, she soaked his beard, and as much as Assad loved pleasuring her, his dick was aching to get inside of her. Locking down on her clit, Assad applied pressure as he sucked while licking her clit. Her back arched and legs shook as she came in no time.

As much as he wanted to take his time with her, Assad didn’t have much of it. His brothers were on their way so they could ride out and take care of some business, but after the conversation they had at the bar, a part of Assad wanted to tell

them to handle it without him. He wasn't all the way there, yet, though. Besides, he needed to clear the air with Savant. They hadn't addressed what happened the last time they saw each other.

Tomorrow, they would all be getting together for Rameek's birthday set, Scarlett included, so Assad didn't want or need no drama.

Scarlett scooted up into the middle of the bed, spreading her legs wide like he liked. He wasted no time sliding into her, cursing under his breath as her warm walls tightened around him. Giving her medium-paced strokes, his eyes went from her wetness coating his shaft to her playing with her clit and nipples. He loved watching her pleasure herself and telling her so only turned her on more.

Her pussy was so fucking tight and wet, and she knew just how to fuck him back... rolling her hips and squeezing her walls at the perfect time. Assad gripped her neck and squeezed, needing more control over her body than she had of his. It was cheating because he knew it would make her cum quicker but fuck it.

Between the sound of her cum coating him and her moans and quiet calls of his name, she was making it hard as hell for him not to bust inside of her. It was bad enough that he was going in her raw, but Assad refused to get another woman pregnant that wasn't his wife. Not having his daughter full time was a kind of torture that compared to nothing he'd ever experienced in this world. Only knowing that she was away from the violence and safe made not having her okay.

When Scarlett's legs began to close around him, Assad knew she was nearing the edge. Her moans were replaced with her gasping for air as she pulled him down to her. Stroking her with the same pace, he kissed her deeply while fingering her clit, moaning as she began to cum and convulse underneath him. Never a selfish lover, he waited until she was done fully to pull out and cum himself.

Showering together turned into another quickie with her pressed against the wall, but Assad was dressed and ready to

go when Alonzo announced his brothers' arrival. Scarlett spoke to both before heading to the room he'd given to her, giving Assad a hug and kiss goodbye in the process.

“So you fucking her now?” Savant asked. “She gon’ have yo’ ass just like them damn brothers if you keep on.”

“I specifically told you not to come in here on that bullshit,” Hassan said, making them both chuckle, only because he was usually the one who was on it.

“My fault.” Savant lifted his hands in surrender. “I’m just worried about you and the family. I don’t want you fucking up everything we’ve built for some pussy.”

“I won’t,” was all Assad offered, not feeling the need to go into detail. “You just gon’ have to trust that I know what the fuck I’m doing.”

Savant sighed, running his hands down his face. “Aight, lil brother. I know sometimes the way I show my care and concern is off, but y’all know I’ll go to war behind y’all. I hate to see y’all making bad decisions or putting yourselves in positions to be hurt—physically or emotionally—but if you say you got it... I trust that you got it. And if you don’t, you know I got you.”

“That’s all I ask for.”

Savant extended his hand for Assad to shake, and he did, allowing his oldest brother to pull him in for a hug.

Fifteen

Scarlett

Scarlett had been a nervous wreck all afternoon. When Malcolm sent Assad a FaceTime request, neither she nor Assad expected to see him with her mother. His threat of making Selena overdose if Assad did not return Scarlett within hours was enough to make Scarlett want to surrender her own self. Yes, she and her mother had a toxic relationship that stemmed from her drug abuse, but that in no way meant she wanted her mother to die. The best thing that ever happened to their relationship was Scarlett moving out. Her daily prayer was for her mother's sobriety... not for drugs to be used as a weapon against her.

It didn't matter how much she fought Assad, he wouldn't take her back to Malcolm. It wasn't until she told him that she'd never forgive him if Malcolm murdered her mother that he offered, but in doing so, he also asked that she trust him to make a pitstop first. The ride to the unknown destination was quiet, mostly because Scarlett was wrapped up in her own thoughts. But when they pulled up to a place she never thought she'd return to again—her attention returned to the present moment with a vengeance.

“No,” she whimpered quietly, unable to stop a few droplets of urine from escaping her. “This was your plan? To give me back to Robert?”

“Do you trust me or not, Scarlett?”

As her tears poured, Scarlett's entire body began to shake. The sound of knocking on the window of his BMW SUV

caused her to jump and clutch his hand. A breath of relief escaped her as she clutched her chest at the sight of Hassan. She hadn't even realized he was trailing them, she was so deep in her thoughts.

"Honey," Assad called, snapping his fingers to regain her attention. "Do you trust me?"

"Y-yes," she stuttered, wiping the tears that had escaped.

"Then you know I'm not letting you go to either of them. Wait here. Do not get out of the car. Do you understand me?"

Nodding rapidly, she wiped her continuously falling tears. Hassan got into the car with her while Assad made his way to Robert's front door. Even with four men surrounding him, Assad's aura made him hover above them all. She trusted him to no end until this point. Being so near to the man that begun her years of torture had her questioning *everything*.

"Black is smart," Hassan said, voice sounding like he was a million miles away. "If he say he got this, he got this."

She nodded, not bothering to look in Hassan's direction, but she did hold his hand.

Seconds turned into minutes, and those minutes felt like an eternity.

When Assad came out of the house, Scarlett had to keep herself from hopping out and running to him.

His expression was stone, unreadable, and Scarlett didn't know if that was bad or good.

Hassan got out of the car, and the brothers spoke for a few seconds before Hassan and the rest of his men left. Assad waited until they were gone to get in the SUV and tell Scarlett, "It's handled."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your mother is about to be released—unharmful. We can go and see her in a few minutes at her apartment."

A quiet sob left her mouth before she reached across and pulled Assad into her arms, holding him tightly. She didn't

know what kind of deal he'd just made with the devil himself, and honestly, she didn't care. If it didn't require her going back to Robert... anything else would be manageable as long as her mother was safe and secure.

□□□

The housekeeper that Malcolm hired hadn't been to Selena's apartment since Scarlett had left him, so it was probably in horrible condition when she arrived. Knowing that was a possibility, she begged Assad to wait for her in the car, but he wouldn't. Even though he had a plan in place with Robert for Malcolm, he didn't trust either of them enough to let her go in alone. When he was sure the area was secured, he stepped outside and waited by the door so she could have some privacy with her mother.

Scarlett didn't know what to expect when she saw her mother, but she for damn sure wasn't expecting her to be upset. She was so caught off guard, she asked her mother to repeat herself because she thought she was hearing things.

"I said did I ask you to get me out of there?" Selena repeated, arms crossed over her chest as she looked up at her daughter.

Being taller than her mother had always been a running joke until Selena was deep in her drugs during Scarlett's teenaged years. Then, it was often used to excuse abuse because of a misconceived threat.

"He was going to kill you."

"You don't know that. My tolerance is high. I could have handled anything he would have given me."

Scarlett chuckled, taking a step back. "So let me get this straight, instead of thanking me for saving your life, you're upset because I kept you from overdosing?"

"I wouldn't have overdosed. Malcolm has been fucking up my supply all month because of you! He's been giving me half of what I usually get, telling me he will cut me off altogether if you didn't come back to him."

“Is that what you wanted? For me to be with him just so you could get high?”

Selena’s chin tilted, nose in the air. “As much as your father and I sacrificed for you, you could have done this one thing for me.”

Her head shook as she scoffed. “Do you hear yourself right now? What have you done for me in over twenty years, Mommy? You stopped giving a fuck about me after you got fired! Daddy did *everything* for me! And he gave up his *life* for you! And *now* you want me to go back to Malcolm’s abusive ass just so he can get you high?”

“You don’t understand,” Selena stressed, grabbing Scarlett’s arms and squeezing. “Malcolm’s shit was strong. And cheap. Sometimes free! I’ll never have a better deal than that.”

“And that’s all you care about, isn’t it? You don’t give a fuck about me. And I’m starting to think you never even cared about my father! All you wanted was his money so you could smoke that shit up too!”

Scarlett wasn’t expecting her mother’s palm across the face, but she’d been hit by heavier hands and wasn’t fazed by it. What she was fazed by, was the fact that the woman she was willing to do anything for had just smacked her.

“Get the fuck outta my house,” Selena gritted.

“You can’t put me out. I’m the reason you even got this apartment! Had I not convinced Malcolm to get it for you, you’d be homeless or in a fucking shelter! After everything I’ve done for you, you put your hands on me?”

Her hurt was coming out as anger the more she thought about it. The sound of her raised voice had Assad coming in to see what was going on.

“I mothered you when I needed that my-fucking-*self*,” she yelled with tears streaming as Assad pulled her behind him. “And you disrespect me like *this*?”

Selena spat at their feet, laughing when Assad tightened his grip around Scarlett to keep her from grabbing her mother.

“You’re mad now, but you’ll be sick if you put your hands on her later. She’s not in her right mind,” Assad whispered into her ear, turning her toward the door.

“You think I give a fuck about this ratty ass apartment? I didn’t want this shit no way because I knew you’d throw it in my face,” Selena yelled as Assad gently pushed her out of the door.

Storming down the stairs, Scarlett ignored Assad’s calls for her. She hadn’t been this angry in a while. Come to think of it, she hadn’t been this angry since she’d been with Assad. Every problem she had, he had a solution for. Every worry she had, he was able to soothe. Even now, his arms were wrapping around her, and he was holding her close. It didn’t matter how much she told him to let her go, Assad held her tighter—until all she was able to do was allow the sound of his heartbeat to fill her ears and calm her.

Before she knew it, she was sliding down the SUV in tears, with only the surety of Assad in her life to keep her steady.

Sixteen

Assad “Ah,” Scarlett yelled before squealing as his giant schnauzers playfully attacked her. They were so big, they were taller than her when they stood on their hind legs. Toppling over onto the ottoman in the sitting room, she pleaded, “Tell them to sit,” as they tried to lick her face.

“Nope,” Assad rejected, recording the viscously cute attack. “I told you to learn the commands in German for when I wasn’t home.”

“Okay, I will,” she conceded before laughing and trying to push them away.

Assad honestly didn’t want the moment to end because he knew the news he was about to tell her would ruin her mood. He’d been gone all day, and it didn’t feel right breaking up her happiness with such bittersweet news. Still, he sent them away and helped her up.

She wiped her face, smile still lingering. “I’m glad you came when you did. I don’t know how I was going to get back to my room without them following me,” she confessed before releasing another soft laugh.

“Malcolm is dead,” Assad blurted, and her smile fell instantly.

She breathed deeply, cupping her hands in her lap. “Okay. Robert?”

“Yeah.”

Scarlett nodded. “What does this mean?”

Assad hadn't planned to tell her about the truce he made with Robert in order to get her mother back, but now it seemed like he would have to. Standing, he went over to his bar and grabbed the Hennessy Black. After taking a large gulp, he set the bottle down and sat across from her.

“It means Robert just reneged on our truce. He guaranteed Malcolm's life in exchange for him releasing her. Since he's proven that he isn't a man of his word, I don't expect him to keep the agreement he made with me concerning you.”

“Which was?”

He didn't want to tell her, because she would feel even worse. Instead, he told her, “It doesn't matter. What matters is that I cannot trust him to not come after you. Which means I have to kill him. That's the only way to guarantee your safety.”

Scarlett's head shook. “This is what I wanted to *avoid*, Assad. I don't want you risking your life for me. And I know you're powerful, but Robert is not an easy mark.”

Assad chuckled. “I could have killed him in his own home yesterday.”

“Yeah, and his men would have killed you too. He's never alone. *Ever*. When he has a threat, he won't even leave his home until it's handled.” She stood and walked over to him, sitting on his lap. “His men will come at you nonstop until you're dead, Assad. That is not what I want.”

That was a fact that Assad was fully aware of. He made it a point to study all of his potential partners and enemies.

“Would you like for me to send you away? Until all of this is handled,” Assad offered, fingers caressing her arm.

Her head shook as she smiled softly. “No. I couldn't leave you here to deal with my mess.”

“I'm honored to handle your mess.”

Placing her forehead on his, Scarlett kissed his lips sweetly. Assad kissed her neck twice, holding her close.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

He hated her tears, even the happy ones. Before they could slide down her cheek, Assad brushed them away with his thumb. She placed a soft kiss to his lips, sighing as the sound of his phone vibrating interrupted him. Under normal circumstances, he would have ignored it, but with the shift of Robert’s actions, he couldn’t. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Assad released an irritated sigh at the sight of Savant’s name.

The last thing he wanted to do was hear his mouth release *I told you so’s*. If he didn’t answer, though, the family would worry.

“Yeah?” he answered, brushing Scarlett’s hair as she laid against his chest.

“I ain’t gon’ say I told you so,” Savant said, making Assad smile. “Is she worth the war?”

Assad looked down at Scarlett, whose eyes were closed as she found peace in his embrace.

Was she worth it?

He thought of what he’d received from her over the month and a half that she’d been with him. The affection, respect, listening ear and influence. The appreciation, the smiles, and bomb ass pussy. The relatable companion that made him face his fears and flaws to become a better version of himself. A solid as a motherfucking rock life partner that was down to accept him and ride for him no matter what. One who gave him purpose and a reason to relax.

Was she worth it?

“Hell yeah,” he replied.

“Aight. Hassan is meeting with the security team tonight. I’ll swing through and see what’s up. Whatever y’all need until this shit is over, just let me know.”

“Preciate it, big brother.”

“Always.”

Assad disconnected the call and wrapped his free arm around Scarlett. It was crazy how before her, he couldn't sleep for more than two or three hours at a time without having to get up and clean or do something to keep his mind busy. Now, with her, he could fall asleep in seconds, literally anywhere, and sleep for eight hours straight. That, alone, his peace of mind, made Scarlett worth it.

□□□

The situation with Robert caused both Assad and Scarlett to not be in the best mood on their date last night. That was unacceptable for Assad. When they made it back home, he had her pack a bag and prepare to leave first thing the next morning. He hadn't told her where they were going because he wanted her to be surprised. She looked to be sleeping so peacefully laying against his arm that he didn't want to wake her up, but he had to. What was waiting for them was better than sleep.

Kissing the side of her face, Assad chuckled when she gently pushed him away.

“Wake ya rude ass up,” he ordered before kissing her again.

“Whyyy,” she whined, placing her hand over his face.

She may have been affectionate, but Scarlett hated being woken up out of her sleep.

“Because we're here.”

Scarlett sat up quickly, rubbing her eyes. “Yay!”

Assad chuckled as he unbuckled his seat belt. Standing, he handed his flight attendant an envelope that had both her and the pilot's payment inside. Though he had his own private jet for Black Mayhem Mafia use, he often hired pilots from a privately-owned company in Memphis. One of his goals had been to learn how to fly one day, but he had so many other responsibilities that that was placed on the backburner.

“Thank you, Mr. Black.” She turned and handed him the bouquet of one hundred red roses and sunflowers for Scarlett.

With a nod, Assad accepted the large bouquet and turned to hand it to Scarlett. She gasped and covered her mouth at the sight of them.

“Baby, are those really for me?” she checked, balling up her fists to keep from reaching out for them.

“Absolutely.”

Her shoulders hiked and she grinned as she reached out for them, laughing when they covered her face completely.

“Assad, these are absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much!”

After placing them on the seat, she gave him a quick hug and kiss before picking them up again. The whole walk out of the jet, she inhaled them with a smile until it was time to go down the stairs, then she did the same thing as they headed for the car that was waiting for them.

“So where are we?” Scarlett asked once they were settled in the back seat.

“Oahu.”

“Hawaii?”

The sight of her eyes widening as she sat up in her seat made him chuckle. “Yeah. I got a vacation villa off Kailua Bay.”

“Wow.” The innocent giggle that escaped her as she looked out of the window made his heart squeeze. “My first trip out of the south is to Hawaii. Crazy.”

Instead of replying, Assad allowed her to take in the moment for everything that it was worth. If she allowed him to, he’d take her to another state, another country, every day of her life. What good was it for him to have money if he didn’t enjoy it? And the happiness that covered her face definitely made their trip worth it.

When they arrived at the villa, Assad asked, “Is this what you meant when you said you wanted to get away and relax on a beach somewhere?”

Holding his hand as she looked out onto the beach, Scarlett nodded as a single tear slid down her cheek. This time, Assad didn't try to wipe it away. She turned and wrapped her arms around him.

"Thank you," she whispered before sniffing.

He held her for a few seconds before leading her back to the front of the villa to let themselves in. After placing their bags by the front door, Assad showed her around his property. Though he was sure she'd spend the bulk of her time on the beach, he still wanted to make sure she knew what all the villa offered. It was definitely one of his best investments and the reason he wanted to get more into real estate. On average, Assad was able to rent the villa out for three to six thousand a night, depending on if it was peak season. The pool, hot tub, tennis court, and outdoor chef's kitchen and bar made it a prime location for travelers.

"What do you want to do first?" Assad asked as they made it back inside of the villa.

"This," she replied, pressing his body against the wall.

Assad's perception of her sexuality had definitely changed. In the beginning, he thought her offering herself to show her appreciation was because she was used to being used, but that wasn't the case. With other men, sex was a chore, but with him... Scarlett had made it clear that it was the most pleasurable experience she'd ever had with a man. She wasn't offering him her pussy because of its power; she was offering him the chance to become one with her because she knew *its* power. Being a lover of physical touch, the actual words *thank you* would never seem like enough. Any time he did something for her, she'd want to hug and kiss him... and if given the chance... suck the soul out of his dick too.

Now was no different. She was on her knees and unbuckling his pants before he could even take his shoes off. Pushing his pants and boxers down, she pulled them from both legs. Gripping his shaft, she swirled her tongue across his head while playing with her nipple. As soon as she took half of his

length into her mouth and licked under his shaft, Assad gripped her genie ponytail.

The wetter her mouth got, the more of him she took in. Once she had his shaft fully coated with her saliva, Scarlett began to stroke him with her fists at the same time that she sucked. Each time she twisted her wrists and sucked, it felt like she was conjuring his nut from the soles of his feet. The sound of his moans and curses made her go harder. Scarlett continued to stroke him with one hand while the other massaged his balls. When he felt his core tighten, Assad tried to push her away, but she kept the same pace. His grip on her head tightened as his body jerked, seeds shooting out of him and into her mouth.

Dick still hard, Assad helped her stand to her feet. While he loved head, especially hers, it was never enough unless he was in a rush. He pushed her into the wall, licking her neck as she pulled her sundress up. Scarlett shivered, turning slightly to stick her tongue out for him to suck. He did as he pushed her panties to the side, nibbling on her bottom lip while she moaned as he entered her.

She was always trying to fuck him back and make him cum quick, but he gripped her hips and kept her from doing so. Back arched, Scarlett moaned and grabbed his neck from behind as he filled her with long, slow strokes. It didn't take long before she was drenching his dick with her cum. Making love to his mouth with her tongue, she moaned her praises for his dick in the process. Assad fed her his moans, arousal growing with each filthy word that came out of her mouth.

His orgasm snuck up on him, forcing him to pull out quickly. "Fuck," he roared, body jerking as she stroked him with her hand.

If this was how they were going to be starting their vacations, Assad would have to take her out of town more often...

Seventeen

Scarlett

“You’re telling me Hassan hasn’t even gotten a whiff of your pussy and you got him following you around like that?” Dijon asked, and Scarlett almost spit her water out when she laughed.

Covering her mouth, she swallowed quickly before laughing. That was the first thing out of Dijon’s mouth when she sat down at their table. Vanna shrugged with a smug grin, looking over at Hassan as he listened intently to what Assad was saying.

“Nope. No sex,” Vanna confirmed.

The last time they’d all met for lunch, Dijon couldn’t believe her brother was sticking so close to Vanna without having sex with her.

“He must really like you,” Dijon decided.

“I think he likes the chase,” Vanna clarified. “When I have sex with him, he won’t be as infatuated with me. I already know.”

“That’s why you make him fall hard now, before he gets the pussy,” Scarlett shared with a wink.

“I’m trying. He’s fine as hell, and he has money and power, so I know his options are limitless. If I want him to take me seriously, I have to come different.”

“That’s smart,” Dijon agreed, “And if he’s smart, he won’t start acting stupid whenever y’all do have sex.”

Scarlett smiled as their conversation shifted easily. She'd gotten back to Memphis two days ago and felt like a new woman. Getting away was exactly what she needed to get her mind right. When she returned, her first goal was getting a journal and therapist. She also started looking up ways to get to know and become more aware of herself. One major key to advancing in life was going to be knowing who she was and what she wanted and didn't want to make sure she was able to never settle for less than she deserved in all things.

"Have you talked to your mama?" Vanna asked, shifting the conversation back to Scarlett.

Scarlett sighed as she picked up the last cheddar biscuit from the basket. Assad's aunt's restaurant was probably the only one he'd taken her to consistently that wasn't an upscale restaurant, and it had the best food she'd ever had. She wanted to make her way through everything on the menu, but she had been having the smoked turkey with white barbecue sauce more than anything.

"Nah. She called me while we were gone but I haven't called her back yet."

"You think she wanted to apologize?" Dijon considered.

Scarlett's head shook. "I doubt it. My mother isn't the apologizing type. She's old school, so to her, a parent can never be wrong."

She chuckled, though sadness filled her. Before the drugs, there was never a need for her mother to apologize to her. She was always fair and acted in Scarlett's best interests. Crack had turned her into a careless, selfish shell of herself, and Scarlett ached to have her mother back.

"Why don't you call her?" Vanna suggested. "I know you all aren't on the best of terms and her being your mother is no reason to accept when a person makes you feel like shit, but I know how much you were hurting over how things ended. If she can accept that you were angry because you were hurt, maybe she will start to understand."

“I agree,” Dijon added. “My relationship with my mother isn’t the best and she’s toxic as fuck, but that’s my mama. I can’t see myself not having some kind of relationship with her, and I think she feeds off that. So, I get it, but at the end of the day, you have to do what’s best for you.”

Scarlett nodded as she considered their words before shifting the conversation back to Dijon.

They continued their lunch for another hour or so before they all began to part ways.

It was no secret that Savant wasn’t her biggest fan, so she was surprised when he walked next to her to Assad’s Tesla and asked, “Can I speak with you for a moment, Scar?”

“Oh shit. He got on his proper voice. You better watch out, big bro, before he take your girl,” Dijon teased, shoving Assad’s shoulder with her own.

“Nah, *he* better watch the fuck out,” Assad countered.

“Y’all gone somewhere,” Savant ordered, flashing a charming smile.

“Um, sure,” Scarlett agreed.

“I just wanted to apologize if I’ve ever made you feel uncomfortable while you were around us. I don’t know you, so I don’t have anything against you personally. I just didn’t like the situation meeting you placed my brother in.”

“That’s understandable.”

“As the oldest, I’m used to acting like another parent to them, but I realize now that they can live without my guidance and protection. It’s still hard to turn it off though.”

Scarlett smiled. “He’s blessed to have you. I wish I had a big brother or sister growing up who would have my back like y’all ride for each other.”

“Well...” Savant shrugged, flashing that smile again that Scarlett was sure made a hell of a lot of women swoon. Hell, had she not been crazy about Assad, she would have too. All of his brothers were fine as fuck. Shit, his sister was sexy as

hell too. “You got a big brother in me now, and I got you on whatever you need.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate that, Savant.”

They hugged, and after teasing her about being perfect for Assad’s affectionate ass, he opened the door and helped her get inside.

“He’s like a big ol’ teddy bear,” she said to Assad as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“Yeah. And a grizzly bear when you fuck with him or anyone he loves.”

Scarlett chuckled as she pulled her phone out. Deciding to call her mother back, she considered what she would even say. She’d called about nine days ago, and knowing her mother, it was to ask if she could convince Malcolm to bring her more drugs. The second she heard that Malcolm was dead, Scarlett was sure her mother wouldn’t care to talk to her anymore.

When she didn’t answer, Scarlett figured she was high. But by the time they’d made it home and Selena hadn’t called her back, she began to worry.

“You wanna swing by there?” Assad offered.

“I’m sure she’s fine, but it’ll make me feel better just to make sure.”

“Cool.”

The entire ride to her mother’s apartment, Scarlett tried to mentally prepare herself for what she would see. Walking in on her mother drugged up and naked was such a regular occurrence that she was used to it by now. As much as she wanted Selena to go to rehab, her mother found way too much happiness and pleasure in her drug use. What person would give that up when they had so little to live for?

Her husband was dead, she couldn’t do the one thing she really loved, which was nursing, and her daughter was a constant reminder of everything she’d done wrong since the moment she sold her virginity.

Scarlett had to admit how easy it was for her to wish that her mother would stop, but when she took a moment to really consider the life her mother had lived, she understood why she wouldn't.

When they arrived at her apartment, Scarlett called her once more before letting herself inside. As soon as she entered the apartment, her nostrils were invaded by the most horrible scent she'd ever encountered. Covering her nostrils did nothing to stop the pungent smell of feces, garbage, and rotting fruit from making her sick to her stomach.

"Woah." Assad stepped in front of her quickly, pushing her back gently in the process. "Why don't you wait outside and let me make sure everything's good first?"

"Why? She's probably passed out somewhere. Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Scarlett tried to pass him, but Assad wouldn't let her. His eyes pleaded with her silently. "What's wrong with you?" she asked through her chuckle.

"Honey," he called softly.

The longer she stared into his eyes, the more she saw the sadness that filled them. Swallowing hard, Scarlett's head shook.

"No," she muttered, pushing his arms down and trying to go further into her mother's living room, but he grabbed her again.

"You don't need to see this."

"Let me go, Assad," she ordered calmly, body radiating with heat as she considered the possibility.

"Are you sure?"

Nodding, the words wouldn't come out. Assad released her, and as soon as he did, Scarlett covered her nose with her shirt and headed through the living room to her mother's kitchen. As soon as she entered, she saw Selena's body... seated against the cabinet and slumped over... crack pipe still inside of her open yet slightly bent hand.

“Mommy,” she whispered, crumbling to her knees immediately. Crawling over to her mother, Scarlett pulled her into her chest immediately. “Ma,” she called, shaking Selena. Scarlett checked for a pulse, feeling nothing. When she didn’t say anything, she shook her again, staring into her unmoving eyes. “Ma!” she yelled, voice cracking. “Answer me,” she roared, taking a fistful of Selena’s hair into her palm.

Assad paced in front of them on the phone, but his words didn’t register as Scarlett’s ears began to ring. When she finally accepted the fact that her mother was gone, she closed Selena’s eyes and weakly fell against the cabinet next to the one that was propping her up.

“Shhh,” she whispered, soothing herself more than her mother’s already released soul. Rubbing her hand across Selena’s hair, Scarlett swayed from side to side as she stared into the distance. Her eyes were just as dry as her heart was empty. It didn’t matter how much she knew her mother’s drug use would eventually take her life... nothing could have ever prepared for this moment to happen.

□□□

Three days. Three days had passed, and Scarlett hadn’t shed a single tear yet. Assad told her that it was good to shed tears over her mother because they would help her body release toxins and sadness. But she couldn’t do it. Unsure of if it was because she was more angry than sad, she agreed to going to The Smash House and spent a good forty-five minutes breaking and shattering everything inside of the room... but that didn’t help either. It did, however, allow her to yell and scream, which felt like a needed release.

Even now, as she prepared to scatter her mother’s ashes over her father’s grave, no tears came out. Assad’s arm wrapped around her, reminding her that he was there with her. Sniffing and pushing her shades up on the bridge of her nose, Scarlett opened the urn and waited for another passing wind. As much as she hated getting her mother cremated, she agreed to her wishes. While she didn’t understand what would make Selena want that, to have her ashes shattered over her father’s grave no less, Scarlett honored it.

“Maybe it’s guilt,” she blurted out.

“What?”

“Why I can’t cry.” Scarlett looked up at him through her shades. “Maybe it’s because I feel guilty.”

“Guilty about what?”

“Not answering when she called. What if that was when she died? Now I’ll never know what she’d called me to say. The last memory I have of us...” Scarlett covered her mouth and choked back her tears.

“Please don’t do this, honey. If you don’t release that, it’ll eat you alive. There’s no point in overthinking what that call was about because you will never know. If you want to hold on to anything, hold on to the good things. The good times and memories. Remember her from your childhood, not her most recent state.”

Head hung, Scarlett nodded.

“Okay,” she whispered. “It’s time.”

With one bob of Assad’s head, Dijon began to sing a medley, beginning with “Don’t Move My Mountain”. Because Selena’s family had long disowned her because of her drug use, the only person there in her honor was Scarlett. Everyone else had come on the strength of the connection she’d built with Assad. Which was probably why Selena hadn’t wanted her to make a big fuss over her death. Who would be there to mourn her besides Scarlett?

Resting her head on Assad’s shoulder, Scarlett waited until Dijon had gotten to “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” to spread her ashes. When she was done, it felt like the wind literally passed through her, causing her to shudder. A part of her was sure it was the Holy Spirit of God, removing every ill feeling she’d been associating with her mother’s death.

“Thank You, God,” she whispered, cupping Assad’s hand. “For ending her suffering.” After putting her hand from her lips to her heart, she told her mother, “Rest easy, Mommy. Be at peace with Daddy.”

As Dijon began to sing “I Love the Lord,” Scarlett covered her nose, thinking she was about to sneeze. Instead, tears began to roll down her cheeks. She giggled softly as the tears began to pour. Letting her parents go so they could rest unblocked the tears she’d been holding in all this time. And by the time she was done releasing them, Scarlett felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She was sure they would cross her mind often, but now, Scarlett was sure she’d smile and know that they were finally at peace.

□□□

Scarlett wrapped Assad’s arms around her, swaying to Calvin Richardson’s “Can’t Let Go”. No one in their crew was really the clubbing type besides Hassan and Vanna, so they went to a blues lounge after the memorial instead. She’d chosen Long Island Iced Tea as her drink of the evening, knowing the mix of different liquors would get her drunk quicker than shots, and that was proving to be true as she horribly sang her heart out to Assad.

He looked at her, eyes filled with affection as he grinned, holding her tight. Assad licked his lips before kissing hers and she wrapped her arms around his neck. With their foreheads pressed together, Scarlett relished in how good it felt to be in his arms. She wanted to say it was the liquor that had her so warm and happy, but the truth was... it was being with Assad and everyone else. Outside of her childhood, this was the first time she had a crew of people whose intentions she knew were pure. A crew of people that she could trust. That weren’t out to use her for their own gain. Being with them had turned what would have otherwise been one of the saddest days of her life into something filled with purity above all else.

As the song ended, Assad called out, “Honey,” while they still swayed to a beat only they could hear.

“Yes, baby,” she answered, running her hands down his back.

“I love you.”

Pulling her forehead from his, Scarlett looked into his eyes. “Are you drunk?”

Assad laughed heartily. “No. I gotta be drunk to confess my love for you?”

Scarlett smiled so big her cheeks almost touched her eyes. “I just wanted to make sure you were in your right mind before I said it back.”

He matched her smile silently for a few seconds before saying, “I am.”

With a nod, Scarlett released a shaky breath. “I love you.”

“I *know* you’re drunk.”

She laughed as she ran her hands up his chest, loving how he always kept her locked tight in his arms—close to the heart that she was sure was hers within his chest.

“I’m tipsy as hell, but I will always be sober enough to be real about how I feel for you. I’ve been in love with you since the night we met, Assad Black.”

“Why haven’t you said anything?”

“I didn’t want to push you away. Besides, it’s been what? Two months? I guess I just wanted time to catch up to how I feel.”

He lowered his lips to hers, sucking her bottom lip the way she loved as he squeezed her ass, making her moan.

“Let’s get outta here.”

“Okay. Let me go to the ladies’ room first.”

“Hurry up,” he ordered with a smack to her ass.

The sight of him biting down on his bottom lip as he stared at her was enough to put some pep in her step as she headed back.

The whole time she released her bladder, Scarlett hummed with a smile. As she washed her hands, she looked her reflection over in the mirror. A part of her almost felt guilty for being so happy, but she refused to allow her mother’s death to make her feel bad about living. Finally. Living. Not just existing. Actually living.

“I love your dress,” the woman at the sink next to hers complimented.

Scarlett looked over at her briefly before cutting the water off and reaching for a paper towel. “Thank you.”

“Hey,” she called as Scarlett headed for the door.

Turning, Scarlett asked, “Yeah?”

“Robert wanted me to let you know you’re not as safe as you think you are.” Scarlett’s head tilted as she walked toward her. “He wanted you to know that he can get to you easily, but first, he wants to make Assad suffer for thinking he has the power to sway him.”

Scarlett chuckled, suddenly feeling herself sober up.

“Tell Robert...” Scarlett grabbed the back of her head quickly, ramming it into the wall.

The woman yelped, digging her nails into the back of Scarlett’s hands. Scarlett had fought men twice as big as her size, so she wasn’t getting up no matter how hard she tried. Had it not been for the woman losing consciousness, Scarlett would have continued to ram her head into the wall. She bent down, checking for a pulse. When she found one, she walked over to the sink and washed her hands. Inhaling a deep breath, she pushed her dress down and made sure not one piece of hair was out of place before heading back out.

She didn’t know if she should tell Assad or not. She didn’t want to ruin their night, but she also didn’t want to risk them being followed.

“We have a situation,” she alerted.

“What’s wrong?”

“Robert had some bitch follow me into the bathroom. I don’t know how many other people are in here with him but...”

“What did she say?”

“She said Robert could get to me at any time. I’m not as safe as I think I am.” Scarlett paused before adding, “He wants

to make you suffer for thinking you can sway him or some bullshit.”

Assad ran his hand over his beard before releasing a sinister smile that sent chills up her spine.

“Is that right?” Scarlett nodded. “Let me go talk to her.”

“You can’t,” she rejected, stepping in front of him when he tried to step past her.

“Why not? Did she leave?”

“No. She. Um. I kind of... she’s unconscious.”

“What I tell you about that shit?” he growled, taking her hand and leading her to the bathroom.

“You said I had to be a lady when I was with you, but I was in the bathroom. And she was talking shit!”

“You’re the female version of Hassan I swear,” he grumbled, walking so fast she had to take two steps to keep up with one of his.

When they walked in, she was still unconscious. Assad checked for a pulse before walking out silently. She didn’t hear what he’d said to his family, but the men immediately shot up from their seats. Handing Dijon his key, he told her, “Get them out of here safely. Stay at Evergreen. Call me when you get there. Fella will be there to make sure the place is secure, and I’m going to have Hassan trail y’all there.”

“Okay,” Dijon agreed.

Stepping in front of Scarlett, Assad used one gesture of his hand to signal three men from the bar to stand and spread out—men that she didn’t even know were with him.

“I’m about to shut this bitch down. If he has anyone else in here, they won’t be leaving. Dijon is going to take you to one of our safehouses. Have your phone volume loud for when I call. Do not stop anywhere or let anyone in until I get there, okay?”

“Okay.”

He placed a quick kiss to her lips before walking off with Savant. Before she could ask any questions, Dijon was taking her by the hand and leading her out as Assad's guards huddled around them.

□□□

When three a.m. had rolled around and Assad still hadn't made it, Scarlett took an edible just to get to sleep. He'd called to let her know they were okay, but she wouldn't be at peace until she saw him. She didn't know what time it was when he slipped under the covers with her, but as soon as she felt the bed indent, she was stirring in her sleep.

"Assad," she called softly, reaching out for him.

He made his way close, gripping her leg as soon as she tossed it over him.

"I'm here, honey."

"Are you okay?" Her hand slid across his face in the darkness.

"Yeah."

"And everyone else?"

"They're here. And fine."

"What time is it?"

"Close to five. Go back to sleep."

"I'm sorry about all of this."

"Stop saying that," he commanded, and she was awake enough now to hear the sleep in his voice.

A part of her wanted to slip out while it was still dark and never look back. Remove herself from his life and all the drama she came with. Scarlett was convinced her life would be filled with darkness until Robert was removed from it, and if Assad was the only chance she had of being rid of him, she'd have to offer him as a sacrifice and pray God sent a replacement like He did with Abraham.

As Assad massaged her ass, she rubbed his back, inhaling his exhales.

Before she knew it, someone had moved closer, connecting their lips. “I love you so much,” she declared, willing herself not to get emotional.

Assad pulled her onto his lap, arms wrapped around her tightly. “I love you just as much. Maybe more.” She smiled, winding her hips against his hardening dick. “Put me to sleep,” he requested, and she happily obliged, pulling his shaft out of his boxers and sliding down onto it...

Eighteen

Assad

Ever since Selena died, Assad's own mother had been heavy on his mind. He realized just how blessed he was that she'd stopped using and was even more anxious to get her on a treatment plan for her disorders. It didn't matter how much she said she was okay, she wasn't, and Assad was tired of allowing her to suffer when she didn't have to. At the moment, Robert was his biggest priority, but when that was over, getting her the help she needed would be at the top of his list.

As he always did before making any major moves, Assad went to Dallas to visit his daughter. This time, he'd brought Scarlett with him. She didn't come with him to see Maria, but he wanted to get her out of the city so she could safely and freely move around while he was with his daughter. He couldn't believe how big Maria was getting. It seemed as if she'd grown inches since the last time he'd seen her last month. Maybe it was all in his head. As he watched her run up the stairs with the teddy bear he'd brought her, Assad clutched his heart.

When Maria was no longer in sight, Assad patted the M necklace on his chest and headed back to the kitchen where Jessica was. His eyes lowered to her slightly protruding belly as she sliced a cantaloupe. Assad couldn't lie and say it didn't fuck with him a little that she was having a child and building a family with another man, but he'd also accepted the fact that she wasn't his forever partner like he thought she would be.

They'd tried to force it once, which led to him cheating and becoming a man he swore he'd never be.

All that mattered to him was that she was happy with a man who treated his daughter like she was his own, never forgetting that he was her father, though. It also helped that he was building what he was building with Scarlett. She fit him perfectly, there was no doubt about that. And now that they'd confessed their love for each other, their bond had gotten deeper. The only problem was, there was no part of Assad that wanted to keep her bound to his side because of the commitment often associated with love.

She had so much life to live... for herself. And he still didn't want to stand in the way of that. In fact, his love for her made him want to release her and allow her to embrace her liberty even more. How could he say he loved her and hold her back?

With each passing day, Assad was more and more ready to be less involved with the mafia. He wanted to get married and have another child. Knowing he wouldn't be able to do that with Scarlett kept him from investing fully into what they were building.

Was it envy that he was feeling toward Jessica?

Was he upset that he couldn't have the normality she was experiencing?

His eyes went to the engagement ring on her left hand and his nostrils flared.

Maybe it was.

Giving himself time to process what he was feeling, he pulled the paper from his back pocket that he wanted to give her out and sat down. She'd finished cutting her cantaloupe and sat next to him before he was composed enough to speak.

When he was, he said, "I still don't see how you eat that bland ass shit."

Jessica smiled as she popped a piece into her mouth. "I put salt and sugar on it, so it's good."

“Do you need to be doing all that right now?”

Her eyes rolled as she shook her head. “Not you coming in here monitoring my food too.”

“Oh, so somebody else has told you how unhealthy that shit looks? Who? Mike?”

Jessica laughed, eyes crinkling around the edges in pure joy. “Will you stop saying his name like that?”

“Like what?”

“You place so much emphasis on the I. Just say it regular.”

Assad’s head shook as he chuckled silently. “Whatever.” He slid the paper over to her, muttering, “That’s an amendment that I had my lawyer draw up.”

Her brows wrinkled in curiosity as she grabbed the folded paper and opened it. “Amendment to what?”

“My will.”

Her eyes lifted and locked with his. “Why are you giving me this?”

“Because you’re the mother of my child and it pertains to her.”

Jessica’s head shook as she set the paper down, not even bothering to look at it. “No. You’re not dying any time soon, so it doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t expect to die any time soon, but you know that I have to be organized and prepared for everything.”

“But why are you doing this, Assad? Is something going on?”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

“If your life is at risk, it does concern me because of our daughter.”

With a sigh, Assad scratched his scalp through his curly fro. “I just want to make sure she’s good just in case something happens to me. That’s it.”

Jessica crossed her arms over her chest as she sat back in her seat. "I need more than that."

"It's nothing for you to worry about." Assad stood. "You didn't want to be a part of this lifestyle, remember?"

She followed him out of the kitchen. "Assad." When he didn't stop walking, Jessica grabbed his arm. "Talk to me. Please."

His head tilted as he stared at her for a few seconds. "The woman that I've been helping for the past couple of months, shit is about to get a little more serious with that."

"The one that has you smiling more than usual?"

He smiled unintentionally just at the thought of Scarlett. "Yeah."

"So helping her is risking your life?" His head bobbed once. "How dangerous is what you're going to have to do for her?" When he didn't reply, Jessica shook her head. "No. I don't know what the hell you're up to, but I forbid it."

Assad chuckled. "Fuck makes you think you can forbid me to do anything?"

"Pushing your big head ass baby out of my pussy, nigga! The fuck!"

Her flaring nostrils and huffing turned his amusement into pride. Jessica may not have wanted to be in a relationship with him, but she still cared about him. Probably always would. Something about that made Assad feel good.

"Don't talk about my daughter's head."

Jessica scoffed. "It's shaped just like yours."

Assad smiled before wrapping his arm around her shoulders and leading her to the door so he could leave.

"Real shit, I'm good, aight? I don't plan to fold nor lose my life over this shit, but if I do, Maria won't have shit to worry about. Neither will you because she came from you. Aight?"

Jessica sighed, expression softening. “I know I can’t stop you from doing whatever you have planned, but may I please remind you that you have more to live for than this woman? Think about your daughter and your family. You swear that’s everything to you. Is she really worth you risking losing them?”

“I risk losing them every day of my fucking life just by being a black man, Jessica. Me being in the mafia doesn’t help. Every day of my life is a risk, why you think I live the way I do?”

Jessica licked her lips as her head shook. “I hear that, but it feels like you’re about to walk clear into some bullshit for her. I just want you to be clear that she’s worth that.”

“She is,” he replied, with no hesitation, unable to miss her chest deflating.

She stared into his eyes for seconds on end. “You love her... don’t you?”

For a moment, he considered lying to spare her feelings. Then, his eyes lowered to her belly.

“Yeah, I really do.”

Nibbling her bottom lip, Jessica looked away. She nodded and released a choppy breath.

“Okay. Well. Be safe, I guess.”

“You can’t look at me now,” he asked softly, and she shook her head. “You got a whole fucking baby in your stomach that don’t belong to me, Jessie,” he stressed. “I can’t move on and be happy too?”

Her head shook as she pouted. “No. You broke us; you’re not supposed to be happy with another woman. Like I wasn’t enough...”

“You were,” he assured quickly. “You were *too* much.” He cupped her cheek, forcing her to look into his eyes. “Too much too soon and I wasn’t ready.”

“But you’re ready now?”

“I am, and I tried to be ready with you, but you stood firm on your boundaries, and I respect that.”

“So you’re settling?”

Assad dropped the hold he had on her chin. “Not at all. Scarlett fits me perfectly. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman. And that doesn’t take away from what I shared with you.”

Jessica sighed, running her hand over her belly. “I get it.”

He clenched his jaw, unsure of what the fuck to say—as always.

“I’m going to come through before we head back to Memphis in the morning to take Maria to breakfast. Have her ready by seven.”

“Is she coming with you?”

“Nah. I don’t want her meeting Maria.”

He didn’t want Jessica to think it was because she wasn’t to be trusted, but since he didn’t see them having a forever, he didn’t want Maria getting attached to her.

“Okay. I’ll have her ready.”

“Bet. Blessings.”

As Assad headed out, he called Scarlett to see what she was up to, feeling free of pain and regret as he left Jessica for the first time since they’d split.

□□□

They’d shopped for hours before heading back to their hotel. Scarlett was lively at first, but when he shared with her the real reason for the trip, she began to shut down. He didn’t know if it was because of the will or because he’d come to spend time with his daughter. There was only one way for him to find out... to ask.

He watched her look herself over in the mirror of their suite—as if she could look anything other than perfect. She was wearing his favorite color, black, which always turned him on. And her body smelled of vanilla, his favorite scent to

smell on a woman. Face lightly made and glowing, Scarlett was a sight to behold as always, and as always, Assad couldn't get enough of her honey brown eyes. Scarlett shot him a wink through the mirror as she smiled, making him feel a little better about the conversation he wanted to have before they headed down to the bar.

"What's on your mind?" she asked, proving just how in tune they were.

"I should ask you the same thing. What's got you so quiet?"

She looked down briefly before turning to face him. "I've been wanting to ask you something, but I didn't want to ruin the mood with the conversation that may follow."

"Ask me now."

Scarlett passed him, going to the gray sectional in the center of their suite and looking out of the floor-to-wall length windows. "Do you want more children?"

"I do. Do you want any?"

He saw her cheek lift from her smile as he stood feet behind her. "I always have but..." Her head shook. "I don't know if I can anymore."

"Oh." Assad was glad they weren't facing each other because her confession definitely changed his expression. "I'm sorry to hear that." She nodded. "You said anymore?"

"Yes. I've been pregnant before. By Robert. Several times actually." She sniffled then chuckled. "He was always so obsessed with me that he didn't want to share me with anyone, not even a baby. So every time I got pregnant, he'd make me get an abortion. And he wouldn't let me get on birth control because he said he didn't want it to change my weight." Scarlett scoffed with a shake of her head. "The last time I got pregnant, I didn't tell him until close to the end of my first trimester, when it wasn't as easy to hide it anymore." She paused, head dropping. "He beat me and... I lost the baby."

His heart dropped, felt like it literally plummeted to the ground. Assad walked over to her, taking her into his arms.

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, nothing about that shit is okay. I wanna off his ass even more now.”

Scarlett laughed softly. “I think that was why I got so upset the last time he cheated on me. When I found out he’d gotten another woman pregnant, it was because she’d lost her baby after we fought, and he swore it was my fault. He grieved that baby and punished me, like I hadn’t lost baby after baby for him.

“Now I don’t even know if I can conceive again because Malcolm and I were never able to. I don’t know if I’m being punished for something that I don’t even know I did.” Her voice broke when she said that last part, and Assad had to close his eyes to keep from shedding his own tears.

“God knows how fucked up my relationship was with my mother and how much my father meant to me. I accepted that I would never have that healthy bond with my mother anymore, and I was looking forward to having that mother-daughter bond with my own child... and now... I just... I can’t bear the thought of that never happening.”

“Maybe God not allowing you to get pregnant by Malcolm wasn’t a punishment; maybe it was His way of sparing you and keeping you from growing his seed inside of you. Have you ever considered that?”

She sniffled. “No, I hadn’t.”

“So maybe you *can* have children. But even if you can’t, you can still have that bond with other girls—whether you give birth to them or not. I know it might not feel the same, but there are so many motherless children out there who would love to be loved by you.”

“You’re right,” Scarlett agreed, fighting back tears. “I just feel so bad every time I think about it. And I think about how I would have to be with a man who didn’t want to have any children just in case I can’t. I would hate to be with a man who

resented me for not being able to do one of the main things I was created to do—create and incubate.”

“You’re more than your womb, Scarlett. And if a nigga makes you feel like you aren’t, he doesn’t deserve you.”

Scarlett looked up at him with watery eyes, and he was sure had she not just finished her makeup, she would have allowed them to fall.

“Did you think this would make me look at you differently? Is that why you’ve been so quiet?” Assad confirmed.

She nodded, inhaling a shaky breath. He smiled and placed a kiss to the center of her forehead.

“I love you for you, Scarlett. That’s it. Your love adds enough to my life. Plus, I already have a daughter. Yeah, I want more kids, but I’m not with you just for that. If things were to get serious between us, that’s something we could work out together. Don’t let that make you feel less than. There are females out here with a dozen kids who still don’t know what it means to be a woman or a mother. Don’t ever play yourself like that.”

With a smile, Scarlett stood on the tips of her toes and gave Assad a kiss that let him know if they didn’t leave soon... they wouldn’t be leaving at all.

□□□

Assad’s heart was heavy. The meeting with him, the other four families, and Robert was set for tomorrow, and he was supposed to head back to Memphis today. Robert was dangerous, mainly because he had proven that he didn’t follow the code. He had no heart. No integrity. Though Assad feared no man, a man who acted recklessly was a man to watch and be prepared for.

Scarlett walked up on him as he sipped what was supposed to be a mimosa, but it was really champagne with a tablespoon of orange juice. Wrapping her arms around him from behind, Scarlett kissed his bare back. Assad relaxed instantly.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on your conversation, but you were talking so loud out here it was kind of hard for me not to,” she said softly.

Jessica had called him while he was on the patio and told him Maria had a stomachache and wouldn’t be able to do breakfast. She reminded him again that no pussy was worth dying over, and the conversation turned heated, mostly because Assad sensed it was jealousy more than concern that was leading her tongue.

“I’m not changing my mind.”

“I...” She huffed. “Don’t get me wrong, everything that you’ve done for me has reminded me of my value. I want to be selfish and let you do this for me, but I also have to keep in mind that you have a daughter and a whole family that relies on you. So if you want to change your mind, baby, I swear I will understand.”

Assad turned in her arms and looked down at her. “Who do you have fighting for you?” Her eyes blinked slowly. “Who’s in your corner?” She looked away briefly. “Without me, who would you turn to?”

“Assad...”

“I’m not trying to be another controller of your life, by any means. In fact, I *want* you to find happiness, peace, and security outside of me. Within your-fucking-self. But if I don’t handle this for you, you will *never* be able to. Robert will never stop coming after you, you’ve said it yourself. Yes, I have a daughter, and I have a family, but I also have you.” After setting his flute down, his hands cupped her cheeks, and he forced her to look into his eyes. “And I would kill myself if I let you go and something were to happen to you. Do you fucking understand me, Scarlett?” She nodded and gritted her teeth as her eyes watered. “Good, because I’m not having this conversation with you or anyone else again.”

“Okay,” she whispered, bottom lip poked out as she fought back her tears.

Assad released her, and she scurried back into the suite as she wiped her eyes. He finished his drink and headed back in, finding her naked in the middle of the bed. His eyes scanned her body as his dick hardened. After pushing his boxers down, Assad slowly crawled between her legs.

She inhaled a deep breath and held it, not releasing it until he was inches away from her face.

He pecked her lips twice, then a third time for good measure, before slowly spreading her lips with his tongue. Assad lowered her body down on the bed, moaning quietly as he deepened their kiss. Spreading her legs, he kissed the small scars that were healing along her thighs, proud that she didn't have any new ones. Her pussy was already soaking wet by the time he'd made it to it.

Sliding his tongue between her folds, Assad kept his eyes locked with hers. She bit down on her bottom lip, eyes fluttering as he sucked her clit into his mouth. Scarlett moaned softly, back arching as he applied pressure.

“Ooh,” she moaned, gripping the back of his head. “Yesss,” she slurred as he circled his tongue around her clit while he sucked. “I love when you do that,” she expressed, nectar dripping down his chin. “It makes me cum so quick.”

He slipped a finger inside of her, though it wasn't really necessary, just to feel her walls clench as she came. When she was done, Assad wiped his mouth and beard as he made his way up her body. Scarlett's legs wrapped around him tightly. She looked into his eyes as he slowly entered her. She moaned his name as she pushed against his chest, causing him to hold her down by her wrists. As they kissed, he stroked her slow and deep, moaning as her body trembled underneath him.

This shit felt different.

Like it was more than just a nut building up.

Something else felt like it was about to erupt.

And it was like she felt it too.

Her lips trembled as she whimpered and looked into his eyes. Back arched, her eyes rolled into the back of her head as

she came. It wasn't hard and loud like usual, but it was just as intense. Her cum flowed like waves as she whimpered. Her pussy opened, allowing him to enter her even more deeply.

“Fuck, honey.” He hummed then groaned as his dick throbbed inside of her while he came. Releasing her wrists, Assad covered her body with his, not fully placing all of his weight on top of her. She held him tightly, kissing his neck in the process. Scarlett's hand went up his neck, to his scalp. As she scratched it, he felt his body relax more. And before he knew it... he was asleep.

Nineteen

Scarlett

She was trying not to feel so alone, but what Assad said before they left was true – she didn't have anyone other than him and Vanna and those that she'd met through him. Scarlett didn't know anyone from her father's side of the family, and she hadn't seen anyone from her mother's family in twenty years. If she passed them on the streets today, she probably wouldn't recognize any of them.

After sharing what was bothering her with Assad, he told her, "You can have my family. They can be a little toxic at times, but the love is real."

Scarlett smiled as she stood and walked over to him. He was so fucking beautiful... in all ways. From his chocolate eyes and walnut brown skin to his curly tapered fro and thick, curly beard. Those heart-shaped, pomegranate lips were calling her name, but she resisted the urge to kiss them. As handsome as Assad was physically, his heart and spirit were beautiful too... and that combination made him irresistible.

She watched as he pulled the multicolored linen Versace shirt down his frame. It wasn't her intention to put an extra weight on his plate before he left for the meeting, but he wouldn't leave before she told him what was on her mind, so Scarlett had to share.

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't want you thinking about that. That's something I'll have to accept I guess."

“Not necessarily. I have connections. If you wanted me to, I could find your father’s family.”

“You could?”

“Easily.”

“What if they don’t want to get to know me?”

“It’ll be their loss, but at least you can say you tried.”

“You’re right. Thank you, Assad. It’s like God has given you an arsenal of everything I need during this time.”

He smiled as she walked over to him, but his smile wavered as she removed the necklace her father had given her. Made sense since she only took it off when she was about to go to sleep. With a deep inhale, Scarlett looked down at the necklace before looking into his eyes.

“I want you to wear this at the meeting today. Maybe it’ll give you more guidance and protection.”

Assad’s expression softened. “Are you sure, honey?”

“Yes,” she whispered, nodding.

Assad sat down, allowing her to stand over him as she placed the necklace around his neck. He stood, allowing her to take in how it hung nicely with his M. With a smile, Scarlett ran her hands over both.

“Be safe,” she commanded softly, trying her hardest not to allow her fear to seep out. “I can’t lose you too.”

“You won’t,” he assured, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her in for a kiss.

As soon as they said their goodbyes, Scarlett grabbed her phone, face twisted at the sight of another missed called from the same number. All this time, she thought it was for someone else, but they left a voicemail after this call, so she listened.

“Hi. This is Attorney Mitchell. I’m looking for Scarlett Graham. This is pertaining to my client, Malcolm Thompson, and his will. If you could, please give me a call at 901-555-0955.”

Scarlett lowered the phone from her ear as her thoughts ran a mile a minute. Mitchell sounded familiar, but what she didn't understand was why Malcolm's lawyer was reaching out to her, or how he'd even found her for that matter.

She wanted to wait for Assad, but her anxiousness had her calling the number back immediately. Scarlett was put on hold briefly before he was answering with...

"Attorney Mitchell."

"Hi. This is Scarlett Graham."

"Ah, yes. You're a hard woman to get in contact with, Ms. Graham." He chuckled softly.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you get my number?"

"Long story short, I was led to an Assad Black who gave me your number yesterday evening."

"Oh." Her brows wrinkled as she tossed the idea of Assad giving him her number around in her mind. Confusion filled her, but she brushed it off. They could talk about that later. If he felt it was safe for him to have her number, he must have already vetted him and the reason for the call, which allowed her to relax a little more. "What's this about?"

"I've been sorting out my deceased clients' affairs and assets. Malcolm didn't have a wife or children, so he left all of his homes and cars to you. His business has been left to his brother." Scarlett chuckled softly as her grip on the phone tightened. It didn't surprise her that Malcolm left the compound to Robert. As competitive as they were, he probably thought it would keep Robert away from Scarlett in his death. She was, however, surprised that he'd left her all of his homes and cars. Not wanting to be tied to him in any way, Scarlett said, "I don't want any of it. Sell it and donate the money to a list of charities I will send you later."

Her heart dropped immediately when she remembered what was in Malcolm's safe.

"Oh! But before you sell his house in Heather's Grove, I need to get inside and remove a few personal items from the

safe.”

The last thing she needed was for anyone to get a hold of the gun he'd been using as insurance against her. If it was used to catch another body, it, too, would be tied to her because of the bullets. Scarlett was too close to her freedom to lose it by going to jail...

□□□

“Well, what do you like to do? What do you feel passionate about?” Dijon asked.

Assad thought it would be good for Scarlett to get out of the house while he was at the meeting so she wouldn't worry so much.

“I'm still figuring that out,” Scarlett confessed. “The things I've returned to doing as hobbies aren't things I would want to try and make a career out of. I could see myself getting into the beauty industry some kind of way, though.”

“I can definitely see that,” Vanna agreed.

“Me too.”

“Maybe I'll start with a YouTube channel or something simple. Play around with hair and makeup and take it from there.”

“If it's anything you can do, it's provide a look,” Vanna complimented.

“You match Black's style effortlessly, and that's hard to do with his one brand ass.”

Scarlett laughed as she nodded in agreement. “I can't deny that. I had to literally buy every color I could find for when he throws on those multicolored shirts.” She laughed again as they joined in. “But you know what, I think I would find pleasure in being a stylist.”

“Ooh, yes!” Vanna confirmed.

“And you could offer hair and makeup add-ons for women as well!”

“Scarlett Styles,” Vanna added.

Scarlett beamed as she nodded in approval. “Yaassss I love that! I’ll definitely start researching that soon. Thank, y’all.”

“Always,” Dijon replied, reminding Scarlett of Savant.

She sat back in her seat, smiling and deep in her thoughts as Vanna and Dijon continued to converse. Her hand went to her neck and chest, and she rubbed absently. The absence of the necklace her father had given her would have driven her crazy under normal circumstances. Now, it grounded her with peace. Every time she touched that spot, she sent up a prayer that God not only kept Assad safe but allowed him to be victorious in the plans made with Robert.

The ladies finished their lunch before heading to the flower wall to take some selfies. Though they were heavily guarded by Hassan and his crew, they weren’t intrusive. It wasn’t nearly as bad as when she used to be with Malcolm’s men, mainly because they were there to spy on her as well. Hassan didn’t give a fuck what she was doing or who she was talking to, and Scarlett didn’t know if it was because he trusted her with his brother or because he was too focused on Vanna. Whatever the case, Scarlett was grateful because it allowed her to still keep a sense of freedom in the safety they provided.

It made her consider if this was a life she could live... forever. Or, as long as Assad was in the mafia. Would she still feel free while being under his security? He didn’t always have guards while they were together, but he did want her to have them whenever they were apart. Was that something she could convince him that she was okay with so they could work toward a future together? Was that a move she wanted to make?

What if her freedom was an excuse Assad was using not to commit to her? Was that a conversation that she wanted to have? Especially now that she’d shared with him that she was unsure if she could have children. True enough, she hadn’t gone to her OBGYN for definite results provided by tests. After two years of no conception, that was all the proof she needed.

Assad did, however, have a way of changing her perspective when it came to things. She didn't want to get her hopes up, but she also couldn't deny not having a baby by Malcolm would have been a definite act of grace by God. While Scarlett couldn't understand why she'd been dealt such a hard hand in life, she was able to find God's grace and mercy where she needed them most.

Her heart was too full of love and joy to question Him now, but for the first time in a really long time... Scarlett had hope... in all things.

□□□

Scarlett needed to feel close to Assad. She paused the episode of *Iyanla, Fix My Life* that she was watching and headed to his painting room. Iyanla's show had become a form of therapy for Scarlett when she was unable to meet with her therapist. There was always a gem or five that she was able to take from each episode she watched.

Tonight's episode showed how we couldn't see our true reflection in a broken mirror, or a broken state of self-reflection and awareness in life. It had Scarlett wondering how many women were living broken and half-lived lives because of their parents or childhood. Toxic relationships. They didn't always have a mafia knight in shining armor to come to their rescue like she did. But they could, however, have her help.

She'd been thinking about her purpose a lot—and Scarlett was starting to think her pain would have a lot to do with it. She knew she would have to heal first, but a seed had been planted in her heart to start some type of foundation for women who came from broken homes and suffered through toxic relationships. There would also be a program for girls still in broken homes. If she did nothing else, Scarlett would want to make sure she helped them break the cycle of toxicity with their relationships with their parents.

The worst thing a woman could do for herself was carry the weight of her childhood wounds and traumas into the relationships she had with men.

Holding her silk robe tight, Scarlett stepped into Assad's painting room, and a smile immediately lifted the corners of her mouth. Closing her eyes, she inhaled the scent of drying paint mixed with his cologne as it lingered in the room—warm and floral, citrusy, and fresh all at once. Allowing herself to become enveloped by the scent of him, Scarlett released a deep, calming breath before slowly opening her eyes.

Her smile fell and eyes watered as they landed on the painting he'd been working on. When she first came in, she was proud because he'd stuck to his painting, and she'd stuck to her pottery and embroidery as creative ways to break their toxic habits. Now, as she walked over to the painting, pride was filling her for a different reason.

Covering her mouth, tears slid down her cheeks as she took in the painting Assad had done of her. Her hair was longer, covering her breasts as she cradled her protruding belly. Because of her past, she'd blocked out the image or possibility of having children, but with it staring at her in the face, she was unable to do anything but consider it. This would explain why it had taken Assad so long to come to bed last night—he was painting her.

"That was supposed to be a surprise," Assad called behind her, startling her.

She jumped and clutched her chest as she turned in his direction. Relief immediately washed over her as she jogged over to him.

"I'm so happy you're home." Her voice shook as she pushed tears back.

"I will always do everything in my power to come back home to you." Assad's grip on her tightened. "Always."

When he released her, Assad looked at the painting as he told her, "This isn't meant to make you feel bad if you can't have children. I just... I wanted to show you that you could give birth to other things. It's not done, but I was going to write on your belly. Show you that you could be pregnant with purpose. That you could give birth to creativity. That you

could leave a legacy on this earth for being the mother of millions, not just one or two.”

She smiled and swallowed hard as she wiped away tears. “Seems like confirmation. I was thinking about starting some kind of foundation when I was evolved above my own brokenness enough, for young girls in toxic homes and women that have come out of those situations but are still those broken little girls searching for whatever they lacked in the men and women they come in contact with.”

“That sounds amazing, honey. I think that would be a good look for you. I’m proud of you.”

She smiled as she took his hand into hers. “I don’t want to talk about that, though. How did the meeting go? Wasn’t it over hours ago?”

Assad’s expression hardened as he cupped her cheeks and placed a kiss to her forehead.

“Let’s go sit down. We need to talk...”

Twenty

Assad
“I’m not waiting outside,” Savant rejected, eyes darkening.

“If you come in, he’s going to get paranoid.”

“I don’t give a fuck. I’m not letting you go in there alone.”

“I won’t be alone, Vant. The heads of the other four families are in there too.”

“You think I trust them with you?”

Assad’s head flung back as he released an exasperated sigh. This was the last thing he needed right now, but he knew there was no talking Savant down.

“Fine but stand by the door. And don’t say shit.”

Savant grinned as he agreed with a nod, but Assad knew his older brother would move closer and speak if he felt led, which was all the more reason for them to get through this meeting as quickly as possible.

As soon as they walked into the old barbershop that had been turned into the families’ headquarters, they were searched. Even though it was mandatory that no weapons be brought in at the meeting, someone always tried to buck that rule.

“Stay here,” Assad reminded, shaking his head as Savant took a few steps in his direction and leaned against the wall.

Standing at the black roundtable, Assad shook everyone's hands that were in attendance before taking his seat. While they waited for Robert to arrive, he texted Hassan to make sure they had gotten to the restaurant with no issue. It would be a sucka ass move for Robert to try and snatch Scarlett during the meeting, but he didn't want to keep her holed up at home, so he let her meet up with Dijon and Vanna with extra protection for the afternoon.

Looking around the blacked-out windows, Assad slumped further in his seat to get comfortable. He wasn't sure if it was the training he'd received over the years or what that had him so confident with how he ran the business, but there was no fear or anxiousness in his heart. He was, however, prepared for Robert to go against the grain and make shit more difficult than it would need to be.

Now that his brother was dead, Assad was the man standing in the way of him having what he wanted—Scarlett. During their first conversation, Robert admitted to everything Scarlett had shared with him. He admitted to pursuing her because he knew Malcolm was smitten with her. His plan was to use her to play on his brother's envy. Make her fall in love with him, then kill her, just like Malcolm had done his fiancée.

Along the way, Robert fell in love with Scarlett... for real... and all of his plans changed. At that point, he didn't want to kill her or allow anyone else to. Not even God. He became obsessed with keeping her safe and away from everyone else. But Scarlett wasn't the type to be contained... not even then. Yes, she wanted safety and to feel as if she belonged, but when things started to get too heavy within their marriage, she wanted to escape, and that's when the abuse started.

The more, in his mind, she made him abuse her, the less Robert wanted to be around her. And that's when the cheating started. But seeing her hurt made Robert want to be a better husband, which made him fight to love her more and make her happier.

Hearing how everything went down from his perspective gave Assad a fresh fire to keep her away from Robert's crazy ass. He was convinced there was nothing in this world to help

the twisted twin brothers besides bullets to reunite them with their parents, who had desperately fucked them up. There was no doubt in Assad's mind that had their mother lived longer, things would have turned out differently for them. But not having her not only made it impossible for them to learn how to treat and love women but it made them laser-focused on the one and only parent they did have.

The front door opened, and Robert stepped inside. As soon as he did, Savant pushed himself off the wall.

"This nigga," Assad grumbled under his breath before chuckling.

When Savant told the guards he would be the one searching Robert, neither of them gave him any static over it. A small smile remained on Robert's face the whole time Savant searched him, but his eyes were locked in on Assad.

"Are you sure you can handle this?" Quest, honorary leader of one of the four families, asked. Technically, his father was still in control, but he was in the hospital after an attack. "Robert is a baiter. He will say anything he can to rile you up."

Assad bobbed his head once. "Yeah, I got it. 'Preciate you looking out though."

Robert sat in the empty chair that was across from Assad. The smile he was wearing faded when his eyes landed on the necklaces around his neck. As he leaned forward, he frowned, and Assad knew it was because he recognized the necklace that Scarlett had allowed him to wear. He wasn't sure he wanted her to be without it, today of all days, but seeing how rattled it had Robert made it worth it.

"Take that off," he ordered, to which Assad chuckled and ignored him. "You didn't hear me? I said take that off. Now."

"Fuck you gon' do about it if I don't?" Assad taunted calmly. Quietly. But loud enough for Savant to hear and take a step in their direction. Assad lifted his hand, holding his oldest brother back.

Robert's head tilted as his tongue rolled across his jaw.

“Can we start the meeting?” Carl, the oldest member in attendance, asked.

“Please,” Sydney agreed.

“We are here to see if we can come to an agreement between one of our members, the Black Mayhem Mafia, and Robert. Though Robert is not officially associated with the families of the south, his father’s relationship with the founders of the Black Mayhem Mafia has afforded him our protection and blessing to run his business freely. Because of his father’s connection, we also are invested in ensuring a peaceful relationship between Robert and Assad,” Quest stated.

“What needs to happen for there to be peace between the two of you?” Carl asked.

“Peace only comes from my wife being returned to me,” Robert made clear.

“She’s no longer your wife. You have no legal claim to her,” Assad replied.

“It was our understanding that Scarlett became Assad’s possession when Malcolm lost her in a poker game,” Sydney added, and Assad had to keep his face from twisting up. He hated how stuck in the old way of ruling that they were, seeing women as possessions and bargaining tools, but in this moment, it was working in his favor... so he kept his mouth shut. But that was another reason he was ready to leave the mafia. Enemies were quick to use anything or anyone you loved against you in the heat of war—including your wife and children.

“He did, but not without my permission. I gave her to Malcolm as a means of keeping the peace between us. It wasn’t permanent, so she was not his to give away.”

Carl sighed as he shook his head and sat up in his seat. “Unfortunately, Malcolm is dead, so there’s no way for us to confirm that. The truce you had with him was outside of the five families, and there is nothing we can do to honor that. We can, however, honor the exchange between Malcolm and

Assad. With that being said, Assad has our permission to keep Scarlett.”

His heart skipped a beat and relief filled him. Not because he knew Robert would agree with their ruling, but because if he didn't... Assad wouldn't have to worry about the families being against him handling it.

“Does anyone disagree?” Carl asked, and everyone's head shook.

“Good,” Sydney picked up. “Going against our ruling and starting a war with one of the members of the family will immediately release you from our protection and blessing,” he told Robert. “Not only will you make it hard on yourself to be able to do business in our state, but you will also take on the additional four families as your enemies. We will come at you from all sides to protect ours. Do you understand?”

Robert stood, palms planted on the table. “I do. Get ready for war.”

□□□

When Assad finished telling Scarlett about the meeting, he scratched his scalp before taking a hit of his blunt.

“So that's it? He's going to try and go to war with all of you to get me?”

Assad's head shook. “Not quite. I took some time to think it over, and I believe I have a way to avoid that happening. But a major role will fall on your shoulders. If you're not with it, war is the only other option.”

Licking her lips, Scarlett exhaled a hard breath. She accepted the blunt that Assad offered. After taking two pulls, she handed it back as she asked, “What's the plan?”

“Tomorrow morning, you have to go back to Robert.”

Her body crouched immediately as her mouth and eyes widened. “What? No!”

“Hear me out,” he requested calmly. “You said it yourself; he won't stop until he has you or he's dead, but Robert will not move as the typical enemy. He will move in very calculated

steps to maintain his life. He will attack us and the other four families until we surrender or catch him slipping. There are only two ways for us to combat that. One, we go in guns blazing and kill everyone and everything where he will be hiding, or two, you go in... and kill him yourself.” He paused to give her time to speak, and when she didn’t, Assad continued. “If you don’t want to be near him, I understand, but I think it would be poetic justice if *you* handled this. A way for you to regain your power and start the next phase of your life. But if you don’t want to, I understand. I will still have to use you as a way to weed him out, then we will attack.”

Scarlett released a shaky breath. Her hands trembled as she covered her face. As her head shook, her legs began to sway, and her body shook. He hadn’t seen her in this nervous state for quite some time, and he hated to be the one to put her back in it, but Assad was confident that his plan was the best option possible.

Lowering her hands, Scarlett asked, “What would you need me to do?”

□□□

The mood was somber as they waited for Robert to arrive. It didn’t matter how much Assad told himself that this wouldn’t take long, he didn’t want to release Scarlett at all. Still, he couldn’t express that, because she was motivated by his mood. If he showed anxiousness, worry, or dread, she would too.

Holding her hand in the back of the Sprinter, Assad kept his eyes closed as he breathed deeply. “Here” by Samoht played, and as soon as it was done, Scarlett requested that he play “I’m Not God.” He did with no hesitation, appreciating how she was using music to minister to her soul and prepare her mind. As they saw Robert’s Cadillac heading in their direction, she told him to play “Power” by Iyla. When the song completed, Scarlett released his hand and told him that she was ready.

“Tell me you love me,” she requested with a soft smile.

“I’ll tell you when you get back.”

Her smile widened. “Okay,” she whispered softly before trying to stand, but Assad grabbed her hand and pulled her onto his lap, not giving a fuck about who else was in the van watching.

His fingers slid down her cheek and she kissed his palm.

“I believe in you,” he reminded. “This ain’t nothing that you can’t handle. Take back your power, honey, and I’ll be waiting for you.”

She nodded, inhaling a deep breath as she forced her tears not to fall. “Promise?”

“I do.”

Licking the corner of her mouth, she closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “Okay, baby. I’m ready.”

But he wasn’t. Not at all.

“It’s time,” Savant declared.

“Aight,” Assad agreed, kissing her hands, then her forehead and lips. “I lo—”

Scarlett placed her finger over his lips. “Tell me when I get back.”

She stood with a smile. Assad followed behind her, getting out of the Sprinter and leading her to Robert’s car. This was going to be a long fucking few hours. He was confident that Scarlett could pull off his plan tonight, by dinner, but if she couldn’t, he was giving her exactly twenty-four hours before he came in with his team.

He’d already made it clear, if she wasn’t at their designated meetup spot by tomorrow morning, to go into his bathroom and cover for safety.

Robert got out of his car with a wide grin. As his men surrounded Assad and Scarlett, he reminded himself that this was the quickest and safest way to end this, but that didn’t make it any easier for him to release her hand so she could walk in Robert’s direction.

“I’m glad you came to your senses, young buck.”

Assad remained silent. For some reason, his competition thought him being thirty-two was too young to have wisdom and a means to effortlessly handle this mafia shit. A part of him liked that because it made them underestimate him—making plans like this one even easier to execute.

He watched Robert lead Scarlett to his car, never taking his eyes off her.

“It’s for a day only,” Savant reminded, making his way next to Assad.

“Maybe less,” Hassan added.

Assad nodded. “Is Eric in position to follow him out?”

“Yeah,” Hassan replied.

“Two to three cars back at all times. I don’t need Robert or his men noticing.”

“Of course.”

When the Cadillac reversed, Assad turned and headed back to the Sprinter. This would have to work. He’d carry guilt for the rest of his life if it didn’t.

Twenty-One

Scarlett

The whole ride to Robert's hideaway, he held her thigh. As if he expected her to try and jump out of a moving car to get away from him. He talked about how happy he was to have her back, and Scarlett listened silently, giving him a smile here and there.

When they made it to the hideaway spot, Robert made it clear that he didn't trust her 100 percent just yet. She'd been away so long that he would need time to make sure her intentions were pure. The last time they'd been in each other's presence, it didn't end well. He'd chained her to their bed to keep her prisoner before leaving to handle some business.

"Do you forgive me for that?" he asked, sliding his middle finger down her neck.

Her eyes fluttered as she inhaled a deep breath. The less anger and fear she showed, the better, and the quicker she could get the hell out of here.

"Do I forgive you for beating me half to death?" Scarlett chuckled. "No, I don't." As soon as he gripped her shoulders, her eyes closed. "But I understand that you were just upset," she added quickly. "An-and that you handcuffed me because you didn't want me to leave you."

"That's right, Scar," he agreed softly against her ear. "I love you so much. I've never wanted you to leave me."

"Like your mother did?" His body went slack behind her. Swallowing hard, Scarlett slowly turned in his direction. "I get

it now, Robert.” She smiled, hoping her lips wouldn’t tremble. “I lost my mother too. So I... I get it now.”

His head nodded as his eyes watered. “Good. I’m glad. Now we can get back to us.”

“Okay,” Scarlett agreed softly.

“I have to search you, just to make sure you aren’t concealing any weapons.”

“I know.”

Her eyes closed as Robert’s hands patted her body down, lingering in some places longer than others. Closing her eyes made it worse. Her body began to tremble. Each touch reminded her of the past. The abuse. Inhaling a deep breath, Scarlett reminded herself that facing him and ending him was the only way she could take back her power.

When he was done searching her, he allowed her to enter the hideaway house.

“I’m so happy to have you back, Scarlett. You don’t know how many times I’ve dreamed about this moment.”

“I’m happy to be away from Malcolm. Being with him was torturous.”

Robert took her by the hand, leading her down the entryway hall.

“What did he do to you?”

Scarlett waited until they were in the living room to answer him. She sat down on the black leather sofa, trying to put some space between them, but Robert sat as close as he possibly could. His grip on her hand tightened, and Scarlett had to remain mindful of her expressions. If she showed any hesitation or disgust, he would question it.

“He abused me. Forced himself on me a lot.”

Robert’s jaw clenched as his eyes tightened. “He raped you?”

Scarlett nodded. “A lot of times. Sometimes, I willingly allowed him to have his way with me. If I didn’t, he’d punish

me in some way.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” he sincerely confessed, and Scarlett had to keep herself from laughing at his hypocrisy.

“Why didn’t you come for me, Robert? How could you allow him to keep me for two years?”

“That had never been the plan, Scarlett. At all. I wanted to come for you sooner, but Malcolm threatened to hurt you if I didn’t submit to what he wanted. He basically forced me to be without you in exchange for our father’s empire while he focused on the compound. It was only supposed to be for a few months, but time just drew on. But I never stopped wanting you. Ever.”

“Did you... replace me?”

He chuckled softly, running his free hand down her cheek. “I could never replace you, my love.” Robert paused before asking, “Tell me, did Assad violate you in any way?”

“Not at all. He was nothing but good to me. I owe him my life. Had it not been for Assad, I *know* Malcolm would have killed me, or died trying because I killed him. It was that bad.”

He stood and began to pace. “I wish I could pull him from his grave and kill him all over again for what he did to you. But that’s over now, and I promise you, no one will ever hurt you again.”

Scarlett smiled softly.

Just like with Malcolm, she was sure that Robert would keep her safe from all others... except himself... and that wasn’t true safety at all.

Still, she was at peace because she knew what he’d said was true.

No one would *ever* hurt her again.

Not because of him, but because of Assad.

□□□

Scarlett's body shook as he undressed her, and Robert was alarmed. He said sex was the only proper welcome home. Even though Scarlett was mentally prepared for it, her body was betraying her.

"I don't understand," Robert muttered softly. "I thought you wanted this too?"

"I do. It's just... we've been apart for so long... I feel like I have to get to know you all over again." She smiled and took his hand into hers. Placing it over her rapidly beating heart she added, "I'm scared, Robert. We've been back together for an hour now. Can we slow this down a little? Please?"

"I'm sorry, Scar. I was so happy to have you back that I didn't even consider that. Yes, we can take our time."

"Good. Why don't we talk and catch up for a little while? Maybe watch a movie or go for a walk? Then I can fix you dinner, and we can take it from there."

Robert stared into her eyes for a few seconds before nodding his agreement.

"Okay. We can do that, but we aren't leaving the house. Not any time soon. I have to make sure it's safe for us to return home first."

"Okay. Thank you for making sure I'm safe."

Scarlett kissed his cheek, swallowing back the vomit that crept up her throat. The longer she was in his presence, remembering all that he put her through, the less nervous she was, and anger filled her. It took a certain kind of evil to prey on a woman's need for security and safety, belonging, and both Malcolm and Robert had done just that.

Five years ago, Scarlett would have cowered under Robert with no hesitation. He would have appeared to be the biggest devil and god of all. But as she looked into his eyes and took in his aged expression and frame, she found herself not fearing him at all. When she smiled this time, it was genuine, because she knew his time on this earth would soon be coming to an end.

□□□

It took what felt like forever, but dinner time had finally come. Scarlett had forced her way through conversation, a movie, and a walk around the grounds. When it was time to prepare dinner, Robert still didn't leave her side. He watched her intently, hovering, obsessing, as always. Her nerves got bad, and even though she didn't want to, she had a drink just to ease them. Stopping only at one, Scarlett wanted to make sure she remained fully sober to fulfill the plan.

The house was covered with guards, outside and inside. Robert may have tried to appear fearless and unfazed by Assad, but it was clear that he understood how big of a threat his family was. And Scarlett couldn't help but be grateful for Assad's plan, because there was no way in hell she would have been able to bring a gun or any other weapon inside for that matter.

She'd ended up cooking a big enough meal for the guards that were inside the home, but Robert didn't allow them to eat with them in the dining room because he wanted her to himself. This was her only chance, but she needed Robert distracted to execute the plan. Unsure of what time it was, Scarlett ate as slowly as she could, giving Assad time to call at six-fifteen. When one of the guards came in with Robert's phone, her entire body weakened in relief.

Robert's head shook as he declined the call. "I will call whoever it is back when I'm done eating."

Panic set in, but before it could fill her fully, the guard said, "It's Assad. He said he has to check in with you now."

With an irritated sigh, Robert accepted the phone and stood. As she expected, Robert still didn't like discussing business with her around. He stepped out of the dining room, giving her the brief time alone she needed to pull the small package of poison from the bun in her head. Quickly yet carefully, she poured it into his drink and swirled it around with her finger before rushing back to her seat.

When he came back, they finished their dinner in silence. As always, he finished his drink last, giving the poison she'd

added time to dissolve fully. Scarlett held back a smile as she watched him guzzle the drink.

“Come, let’s go to your room,” she suggested, standing and extending her hand for his.

Robert smiled as he wiped his mouth. Taking her hand into his, he led her upstairs to the bedroom.

“Let me freshen up first,” Scarlett requested.

“Okay. I tried to get all of your favorite things. Let me know if I’m missing something.”

“I will.”

Heading for the bathroom, Scarlett put an extra sway in her hips. Not bothering to close the door, she kept it open fully so she could get to him quickly when it was time. Undressing slowly, Scarlett put her clothing on top of the counter before cutting the shower on. Stepping inside the walk-in shower, she quickly pulled the empty, small bag from her bun and tossed it down the drain. She showered as slowly as she could, giving the poison time to work its way into his system.

By the time she stepped out and began to dry off, Robert was walking into the bathroom, sweating and holding his stomach and chest.

“Did I make your meal too spicy?” she asked sweetly, walking over to him.

“I don’t know, but I definitely don’t feel good.”

“Go lie down. Let me take care of you.”

Following her lead, Robert weakly plopped down on the bed. His grip on his chest tightened as he began to take in choppy breaths.

“I can’t breathe,” he stuttered.

Stepping away from the bed, Scarlett asked, “Do you want me to call for help?”

His head nodded as he clutched his arm. “Yeah, I—I think I’m having a heart attack.”

When he groaned and fell back as his eyes sealed, Scarlett rushed out of the room and down the stairs. Even though it wouldn't have mattered when help arrived, she wanted it to look as if she was surprised by what was happening to him. It would look as if he had a heart attack, and the poison that he ingested would be released through bodily fluids after he took his last breath.

“Help!” Scarlett yelled. “Somebody, help!”

His in-house guards came rushing in her direction.

“What’s wrong?” the one with his phone asked.

“Call nine-one-one! I think he’s having a heart attack!”

□□□

Scarlett remained at the hospital thirty minutes after Robert was pronounced dead. When his main guard offered to take her somewhere, she declined, opting for an Uber instead. As they planned, Scarlett had the Uber driver take her to the Walgreens one block up from the hospital. The moment her eyes landed on Assad’s Camaro parked in the back, she smiled.

Getting out of the car, Scarlett looked around to make sure none of Robert’s men had followed her. When she was sure the coast was clear, she rushed in his direction, crumbling into his arms. Assad lifted her into the air, wrapping her legs around him as he slowly swung her around.

“I can’t believe we did it.” Her breath came out shaky as she tightened her hold around his neck. “I can’t believe it’s over. I’m finally free.”

Assad’s low chuckle was like music to her ears. His lips covered hers for a tender kiss.

“It’s over, honey. You’re finally free...”

Twenty-Two

Assad

Assad was losing his patience. He'd stopped by to see his mother, but she was deep in the middle of a spell. She'd spent the past two hours going from one thing to another. He watched as she cleaned, rearranged, and reorganized everything in her home before heading to the kitchen to fix dinner. But instead of sitting down and eating with him, she decided to cook more, leaving him at the table that was covered with food alone.

He was filled with gratitude over her choosing every day not to return to cocaine after seeing what happened to Selena, but witnessing Scarlett's brokenness over their time wasted made him want his mother to take her medication even more.

"Ma," Assad called, scratching his scalp before running his hand down his face.

"Yeah?" she replied, and that was a good sign. She wasn't so deep that she wouldn't be able to focus on what he was saying.

"Will you come and sit down? I need to talk to you."

"We can talk now. What's up?"

"I need your undivided attention." Assad stood, walking over to her. Ignoring him, Kirby continued to pull things out of the refrigerator to cook. "Ma. Did you get any sleep last night?" Her head shook as she began to mutter under her breath. "When's the last time you slept?"

Assad's neck rolled as he began to lose his patience. Before he could stop himself, he was pushing all of the food off the counter. With haste, Kirby lowered and began to pick it up, until he grabbed her arm and lifted her off the tile.

"Will you fucking stop for a minute," he roared, shaking her gently. "Just stop!"

Kirby's body stilled, but her eyes kept shifting from the mess to him. Three seconds passed before she was trying to pick it up, but Assad wouldn't allow her to.

"Do you even care that I can't talk to you about anything going on in my life because there's not enough care in your heart or space in your brain for you to focus on me? I've forgiven you for the pain you caused me as a child, but I can't take this shit anymore."

He released her, and to his surprise, she remained still.

"If you don't stop being so fucking selfish and take your medicine, you're going to lose me for good, because I can't keep seeing you like this. You've already lost Hassan; do you want to lose me and your only grandchild too?"

Kirby's eyes lowered to the mess as she said, "You don't understand the discomfort I feel living like this. You think I enjoy it?"

He laughed. "You must do. Your doctor tried to put you on a treatment plan of the proper mood stabilizers to avoid antidepressants, but you won't even allow that. So yeah, I think you do enjoy it."

Kirby's head shook rapidly as she pulled at her hair. "I don't," she repeated over and over again until Assad covered her mouth with the palm of his hand. Her head continued to shake, and his eyes closed as he pulled her into his chest.

"Breathe, Mama," he begged. "Breathe in and out with me. Count every inhale like we used to do, okay?"

She tried to nod between the uncontrollable head shakes. It really was beyond her control at this point. When her anxiety and OCD flared, anything she did would turn into a form of repetition. It took them breathing and counting to ten for the

shaking to stop. When it did, Assad led her out of the kitchen so she wouldn't see the mess. As she looked into his eyes and focused on her breathing, Assad couldn't keep himself from getting teary-eyed. It was the first time she'd focused on him fully since he'd arrived hours ago.

"How do you feel?" he checked.

"Fine." Kirby rolled her neck. "I don't want to lose you, son. I haven't spent any time with my granddaughter in years. While I get why you and Jessie didn't trust me with her alone when she was smaller, Maria is old enough now to keep herself occupied if I have a spell while she's here."

"No, she isn't, Ma. You can't tell me the last time you even slept. And you expect me to let you keep my daughter? How would I be sure that you're looking after her properly if any little thing can rile you up and maintain your attention?"

"So you're saying the only way I'll be able to really spend time with her alone and not lose you is if I take the pills?"

Assad nodded. "Yes. We can start with supervised visits, and when we're confident that it's in your system and that you will be present, you can have her overnight."

Kirby began to twiddle her thumbs as she thought over his terms. "Okay. I'll uh... I'll call my doctor's office in the morning. See if I can't set an appointment to speak with him and go over the treatment plan again."

His head tilted. He wanted to trust her, but he'd learned not to get his hopes up too high.

"Can I trust you to do that, or do I need to make the appointment for you?"

"I'll make it. I give you my word." Her twiddling turned into running her hands up and down her thighs. "I should probably not go back in there."

"I agree. Let me get everything cleaned and put away. I'll make you some tea before I get started. Why don't you go and get in the bed? I know it's hard to shut your thoughts off, but can you at least try?"

“I will, but it won’t work. I’ll probably need a sleeping pill, or some weed.”

Assad nodded. At this point, he’d gladly give her a blunt if it meant she’d rest. All he could do was pray the threat of losing him and Maria would be enough for her to take her medicine, because she for damn sure wasn’t going to do it for herself.

□□□

“So what is she doing to stay on track?” Hassan asked, and Assad smiled.

This was the first time he’d expressed interest in their mother’s condition, probably because she had actually started taking her medicine.

“She’s resting more, thankfully. Her doctor has personalized her treatment to make sure it doesn’t make her feel out of herself. That was her biggest fear because she didn’t want to feel like she was high or not in control of herself. I guess she thought that would make her want to start using again.”

Hassan nodded. “I understand that. She fought hard to get off cocaine, so I guess I get why she wouldn’t want to take any type of pills or medicine consistently.”

“Exactly. We went out and I got her a lot of shit to keep her mind busy creatively since that helped me and Scar so much. She has a chef and housekeeper too. Her doctor said keeping her from falling back into her habits was for the best, but that we can’t expect her to cut everything out overnight. It’s going to take some time, but as long as she’s productive and resting, she should be feeling more like her regular self in about six weeks.”

He nodded again, absorbing everything that Assad was saying. Everyone had gotten together to kick it before Scarlett decided where she would be going Monday. She hadn’t let Assad in on her plans fully, but that was probably for the best.

“Well, if she sticks with it, I might slide through. Pay her a visit.”

Assad grinned before hugging his brother's neck.

"Proud of you," he declared before heading across the blue room to where Scarlett and Vanna were sitting.

He thought back to the first time he'd brought her up here and asked her about her needs. How he finger fucked her and had his first taste of her in the bathroom. Honestly, Assad had been hooked ever since. When she noticed him headed in her direction, Scarlett smiled.

She was looking beautiful, as always. Even more radiant. Two weeks had passed since Robert was handled, and she was almost floating around the house. The joy that came from her being able to move around the city freely... it made him appreciate so many things he'd been taking for granted. Even still, with the freedom to do whatever with whoever, Scarlett always wanted him by her side.

Sitting next to her, Assad released a content breath when she lifted her leg and crossed it over his lap. She was dressed in a blue Versace midi dress that kept her covered, not that Assad was worried about anyone trying to look up the dress anyway.

Gripping her thigh, Assad asked, "What do you need?"

Scarlett smiled, eyes resting low from the weed she'd ingested. "My man inside of me."

"You can have that." As she giggled, Assad tried to implant the sight into his memory. "Have you decided where you're going Monday?"

Her smile fell, but she nodded anyway. Assad was able to find her father's mother and sister for her, which was a damn good start. Last time he checked, she wasn't sure if she was going to try and meet them or visit a state she'd never been to before. Either way, Assad had been trying his hardest to prepare to wish her well.

He'd already opened her a bank account and deposited six figures in it. Since she loved his Camaro so much, Assad had gotten her a white one of her own. She was pretty much set for whatever she wanted to do wherever, and Assad could only

take peace in knowing she had the freedom to come back to him should she decide to.

“Think I’m gonna pay my grandma a visit first. I called her earlier today to let her know I was going to start traveling Monday, and she damn near begged me to come and see her.” Scarlett chuckled, and it warmed his heart. “She said she wants to tell me about her and my father in person, which I understand. After that, I might travel for six months or so before settling down somewhere. Maybe Memphis. I know I want to really just... live for myself before I get started with the nonprofit organization.”

“That’s more than fair. And you know if you need help with anything, I got you.”

Her head shook as she took his hand into hers. “I don’t know what I would ever be able to do to repay you for all that you’ve done for me.”

“Just live. That’s all I need. I want you to make the most of every day of your life, Scarlett. Make up for the time lost. Can you do that for me?”

Scarlett looked away. Her head shook. “What if I can’t?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“Honey...” Assad pulled her face back in his direction. “We discussed this.”

“I know, but that doesn’t make it any easier. I’m new to this. It’s not as easy for me to cut off my heart like it is you.”

“That’s what you think I’m doing?” he asked with a soft smile. “Just because I’m willing to let you go, doesn’t mean I’m going to stop loving you. I told you that I would never try and possess you like the rest of the men in your life. You deserve some time to yourself, Scarlett, and I’m not going to stand in the way of that.”

“That only makes me love you more.” She pecked his lips tenderly before pulling away. “Thank you for showing me that good men and real love still exist.”

Assad nodded as he pushed her hair out of her face. While he hoped one day she would return to him, he also knew there was a strong possibility of her finding a healthy love the more she healed herself.

“Can we get out of here? I want to spend as much alone time with you as possible,” she requested, and that was one wish that Assad would happily grant.

□□□

She'd chosen to sleep alone, and while Assad knew that was for the best, he couldn't help himself. He decided to sneak into bed with her, but he was the one in for a surprise when he opened her door and found her legs spread wide as she played with her pussy. His dick began to harden immediately as he licked his lips. Flashing him a smile, Scarlett continued to pinch her nipple as her cum coated her fingers.

“Come here, baby,” she moaned.

Assad walked over to the bed but didn't get in immediately. He stood at the edge of it, watching her pleasure herself. Scarlett's eyes closed and her head tilted as her mouth formed an O. Quiet moans poured from her between choppy breaths. She removed her finger, allowing him to watch her pussy leak and throb before slipping them back inside.

Getting into bed, Assad laid next to her, squeezing her breasts as they kissed. She moaned into his mouth, swirling her tongue around his. Alternating from one nipple to the other, Assad lowered his mouth to her neck and sucked the spot that always made her shiver. He made his way down, licking and sucking her nipples as he squeezed her neck. Moans pouring louder, Scarlett inserted a second finger as he sucked her nipples.

He never dreamed he'd receive so much pleasure from her pleasure, but in that moment, he had no desire to enter her. Just her scent and the sight of her cum alone was enough to satisfy him. Assad did, however, stick his fingers into her mouth so she could wet them before circling them around her clit. The extra stimulation had her cumming even harder the second time around.

“Why didn’t you come to me?” he asked before licking her essence off her fingers.

“I didn’t want to make us saying goodbye even harder. I wanted you so much, though.”

“That’s probably for the best. I came in here thinking you were sleep. I was going to hold you until morning and sneak out.”

Scarlett chuckled as she ran her hand down his chest. “I would have loved waking up in the middle of the night in your arms.”

“We’ll sleep together tonight, but it’ll be the last time. Agreed?”

Her head shook as she grinned and got out of bed. “Let’s just take it one night a time.”

Assad could only shake his head as she watched her go into the bathroom to freshen up. It was her bright idea for them to not sleep together, and now she was just as ready to renege as he was. But that was one of the best things about Scarlett now. She was always so willing to freely go with the flow. His breath came out hard as she got under the black comforter and stared at the ceiling. Saying goodbye to her was definitely going to be harder than he thought.

Twenty-Three

Scarlett

Even though Vanna and Dijon wanted to go out last night, Scarlett decided against it. It would have been too hard to have an official goodbye. Telling herself that it wouldn't be forever is the only way she was able to leave any of them... especially Assad. He could barely look at her this morning before she hit the road, and Scarlett couldn't blame him. Well, she could, actually, because it was his fault that they had to part.

She wanted to hate him for being so noble and choosing what was best for her, even if it wasn't what she wanted.

It hadn't even been a day yet, and she was already missing him like crazy. Even now, the excitement of meeting her grandmother couldn't compare to the sadness she felt over losing Assad. Her father's mother, Charlotte, lived three hours away in a small town in Mississippi. Finding out that her father had named her with her grandmother in mind was like the icing on the cake. She was even more anxious to meet her after their first conversation a few days ago.

Still, a pang shot through her heart as she stared at the picture of her and Assad as her wallpaper. She'd planned to call her grandmother and tell her that she was outside, but she'd been stuck staring at that picture instead. A call came through, startling her out of her paralyzed state. At the sight of her grandmother's name, Scarlett smiled and answered the call.

"Hello?"

“Scarlett?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I was just calling to see if this was you sitting in front of my house.”

Scarlett chuckled as she looked toward the window at Charlotte peeking out. “Yes, ma’am. It’s me.”

“Alright. I’m gonna unlock the door and let you in.”

“Okay. Here I come.”

After disconnecting the call and inhaling a deep breath, Scarlett looked herself over in the mirror and got out. Her grandmother seemed nice, which made her even more confused as to why she wasn’t in her life. They did say grandparents were softer with their grandchildren than they were their own kids, so it wouldn’t have surprised her if her father had experienced a different version of her.

When she made it to the front door, Charlotte opened it, and Scarlett’s eyes watered immediately. It was like she was staring at an older female version of her father. Covering her mouth with her hands, she immediately began to sob. Charlotte stepped out with tears in her own eyes and pulled Scarlett in for a hug. A few inches taller than her grandmother, Scarlett cradled her in her chest before running her hands over Charlotte’s face.

“He looked just like you,” she muttered more to herself than to her grandmother.

“I know,” Charlotte replied with a proud smile. “Get on in here. Let me get a good look at you.”

Scarlett stepped inside, immediately feeling the love and homey vibe that once enveloped her as a child. The temperature was perfect... not too hot or not too cold. The air smelled of soul food cooking in the kitchen. Family portraits and pictures of Jesus and scriptures lined the walls. Charlotte’s furniture was vintage, and every piece was a different pattern or color.

Instead of sitting in the living room, they went into the small yet long kitchen. By the windows, there was a brown wooden table. They sat down, just staring at each other before bursting into laughter.

“Well,” Charlotte started, “I’m sure you have questions.”

“I do. The main one being why is this the first time I’ve met you.”

“It isn’t,” Charlotte corrected. “You were just too young to remember me.”

Scarlett listened intently as Charlotte shared with her the reason why she or anyone else from her father’s side of the family hadn’t been in her life. Her parents met young... high school. Her father was set to do great things. Multiple colleges had sent recruiters to his games because they were sure he had a bright future ahead of him. But that had never been Cedrick’s goal.

He wanted to go to college, but not play sports. Still, since that was the main way for him to have funding, he would have played. His real passion, however, was sociology and philosophy. Somehow, Selena had convinced him that those weren’t profitable subjects to study. She told him it would have been better, as a man, if he went to a trade school. That way, he could make good money, pay their bills, and live off-campus.

That began the spiral of their relationship. Charlotte didn’t like how Cedrick seemed to bend to Selena’s demands. She used being a realist to downplay his dreams and plans. And every time Charlotte or someone in their family called her out on it, it created an even bigger rift between them.

Eventually, Cedrick cut them off altogether, but when he proposed to Selena, he reached back out. He thought that would make his family proud, but it didn’t. If anything, they came down harder on him. His mother stressed to him that there was something about Selena that she didn’t fully like, but Cedrick didn’t want to hear that. They ended up getting married, and soon after, Scarlett was born.

Cedrick worked and kept Scarlett while Selena went to school to become a nurse. Charlotte slowly made her way back into their lives for the sake of her granddaughter, but that didn't last long. Because she didn't agree with how Selena was raising Scarlett, they had the biggest fight of all, and Selena made him choose between them and the family he'd created.

“As any good man should, he chose the two of you.”

“And that was it?”

Charlotte nodded. “Yes. When your mother's drug use started, he reached out, but when I called him back, he didn't answer. I think it was shame. He'd chosen Selena so many times and things hadn't panned out the way he thought they would. I believe my son was embarrassed because we were right about her. And he wasn't even around when his father died and was buried.” Charlotte took Scarlett's hand into hers. “I don't ever want you to think we weren't in your father's life because of you. Or because of him. Your mother... was just... the kind of person who demanded all or nothing. And your father did what he thought was best for his family. I've never resented him for that, though I always missed my son. And when he died...” Her head shook and she looked away until her eyes were dry. “I regretted letting him stay away for so long, but there wasn't anything I could do at that point.”

Scarlett wished she could tell her grandmother that everything had worked out for the good, but that would have been a lie. Her life was horrible, and she was even more sure now that that wouldn't have been the case if she'd had her family in it. Still, that was in the past. All she had was the present. She wouldn't even allow herself to dwell on the future.

And in this present moment, she had a connection to her father that she never thought she'd experience before. Scarlett planned to take full advantage of that...

□□□

Scarlett nibbled on her bottom lip nervously, hoping Assad wasn't too busy to answer her FaceTime request. He told her to call him once she was settled for the night, but with his way

of moving, there was no guarantee he'd even be able to answer. That was one of the perks of living with him. It didn't matter how long he stayed away; he'd always come home to her.

When the call connected, Scarlett's shoulders hiked as she grinned. As soon as she saw his face, it turned into a pout.

"Damn, I miss you," she confessed.

Assad chuckled. "I miss you too, honey. How is it going?"

"Good. She's real chill and old school. Her guest bed has seventy-six mattresses. I'm just praying I don't fall out of bed. My fall will be a good five feet down."

He laughed harder, and Scarlett enjoyed the sight even though she was dead serious. "You crazy as hell, Scarlett. I'm glad to hear that, though. Was she able to give you a better understanding of what went down?"

"Most definitely, and she showed me a lot of pictures of my dad too. I'm really glad I came. It makes me feel connected to something outside of myself, you know?"

"That's good. Are you going to connect with anyone else in your family?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so. Now that I've met her, I am curious about the rest. I'm going to take it slow, though. What are you doing? I'm surprised you're at home."

"Vant wouldn't let me go out with them tonight. He said I was looking like a sad puppy because of you and fucking up his flow. All the women kept coming to me because I looked so sad, but I kept turning them down."

Scarlett laughed. "You damn well better. As far as I'm concerned, you belong to me."

He smiled at her for a few seconds before agreeing with, "I will gladly be your possession."

"Umhm." Her eyes rolled playfully. "Not the way you got rid of me."

Assad chuckled. “Come on now. You know that was for you. If you ever come back to me, I’ll never let you go again.”

“I might hold you to that.” Their eyes remained locked with goofy grins before she broke the silence with, “Are you in my room? That looks like clay behind you.”

“It is. I was trying to see what the appeal is with pottery, but the shit is stressing me out. It requires too much patience and attention.”

“That’s the point, silly. It helps you focus and strengthen your patience. Hand building would be good for you if you started with something small and quick.”

“I guess. I’m going to leave that for when you get back though.”

Her smile widened as she slid deeper under the covers. “You really want me to come back someday?”

“Of course. But only after...”

“I’ve healed and lived. I know, I know.”

“Smart ass.” He grumbled with a wide smile...

Twenty-Four

Assad

When Jessica admitted to having second thoughts about her marriage, that was all Assad needed to hear to try and convince her to move back to Memphis. He was confident that he could keep them safe, plus, he needed his daughter. Period. They agreed to start out with him having her for the holidays and summers since they both had settled into their lives in Dallas. Plus, Jessica was so hot and cold with her engagement to Mike. One week she was ready and the next she wasn't. Either way, Assad was just happy and looking forward to spending more time with his daughter.

The fact that he was able to discuss this with his mother only made the situation better. She'd been taking her medication faithfully and was able to tell when she was about to have a spell. While things weren't one hundred percent normal between her and Hassan, Hassan had kept his word and come to see her, and that was all the motivation Kirby needed to continue with her treatment.

All was calm within the city of Memphis. Now that both Malcolm and Robert had been eliminated, an entirely new realm of opportunity had been created. While Assad wasn't interested in capitalizing personally, he had been discussing investing in [Smoke's](#) underground casino ring now that he no longer had any competition.

The only thing that would have made Assad's life better was having Scarlett at his side. She'd been in Mississippi for a month now and didn't seem to have any plans to leave anytime

soon. Assad loved that for her. She was connecting with her father's family, and that was definitely filling a huge hole in her soul.

Every time he went onto her Instagram and saw her beautiful face, a part of him wanted to selfishly tell her to come home, because he knew she would... with no fucking hesitation. But he kept telling himself that this was for the best. Not because he couldn't have a future with Scarlett as she was, but because she needed to experience life and love and even other men before committing to a serious relationship with him or anyone else.

If and when they got back together, Assad wanted no doubts that it was because they wanted each other... not because she didn't think she could do any better. It didn't matter how great of a catch Assad knew he was, he would never take her power and control. Her choice. Her freedom...

Epilogue

Scarlett
Four Months Later

FOUR MONTHS HAD PASSED, and a lot had changed for Scarlett. On top of reconnecting with family and finding her roots, she found herself. Her purpose. Her passion. Her calling. Her working womb.

Scarlett's hand slid across her protruding belly as she stared at Assad's front door. She'd been keeping up with him through Vanna and Dijon. When they first parted, they talked every day. Then every week. Then every two weeks. Then once a month. It was hard as fuck seeing his face and not being near him.

Distance didn't numb her to her feelings for him; it only made her love him more. Still, Scarlett stayed away, especially when she realized there was a chance that she was pregnant. She thought back to the first time he didn't pull out, right after she told him she wasn't sure she could conceive, and the timing had lined up perfectly for that to be the reason she'd missed her period. Scarlett was in such disbelief that she didn't even go get a pregnancy test until another two weeks had passed and her period still hadn't come.

Now, almost five months pregnant, she felt it was safe to return home and let Assad know he would be a father again. Unsure of how he would react, Scarlett prepared for the possibility of him thinking she'd lied to trap him with a baby. Who would have thought a woman who swore she was barren would conceive so quickly with another man? Maybe not

getting pregnant by Malcolm or Brick *had* been God's grace for her. She was unable to even question why He hadn't covered her with mercy and gotten out of that situation anymore.

To be honest, she knew why. Her organization had gotten its first grant approved, and Scarlett was confident that it would be the way she helped girls and women all over who were struggling with the issues and demons she'd been working vigilantly to overcome. If she was able to help just one woman, everything she'd gone through in her past would have been worth it... especially since it seemed as if she had so much positivity to look forward to for the future.

"Get out, Scar. Go tell that man he has another baby on the way," she almost whispered, staring at the door.

She hadn't learned the sex of their baby yet, wanting to do that with Assad. Looking down at her stomach, she rubbed it again before inhaling a deep breath and getting out of her car. Rubbing her sweaty palms together, Scarlett headed toward the large iron doors. After ringing the doorbell, she took a step back. It felt like forever, but eventually, Assad opened.

His eyes widened and he smiled immediately, but when his eyes lowered to her stomach, his smile dropped.

"Hey, Daddy," she greeted nervously with a smile as he continued to stare at her stomach. "Um, surprise." Her hands opened at her sides. "I was going to tell you sooner, but I wanted to make it through the first trimester, just to be safe. But it's definitely your baby." She chuckled nervously, rocking on her heels as his eyes finally lifted to hers. "I don't know what we're having. I figured we could find that out together. And if you don't want to like, be with me, I understand. We can just co-parent and *ooph...*"

Assad's hand wrapped around her neck, and he pulled her close forcefully, stopping just in time to keep her from bumping into him with her belly. Kissing her with more passion than he ever had before, Assad lifted her into the air and wrapped her legs around his waist. Arms around his neck, Scarlett's fingers found their way to his scalp as Assad

softened the kiss. She sighed into his mouth, happy to be where she *knew* she belonged. Because the truth of the matter was, in Assad's possession... Scarlett had found her freedom...

The End

(For them, for now 😊)

This is the beginning of the Black Mayhem Mafia
STANDALONE series.

I WANTED the focus to be on Assad and Scarlett without getting too heavy into the members and functions of the mafia, but y'all, I'm going deep with this! I won't showcase all members, but I definitely have stories for about seven

up my sleeve.

If you'd like to read about other characters, stay tuned! Hassan will be up next AND you can preorder his story now! It is available [here](#).

IT WILL NOT BE available on KU, but some of the shorter novels/update novellas for couples will be. If not, I hope you enjoyed Assad and Scarlett's story. If you did, please do me a kindness and leave a review on Amazon/Goodreads and recommend it to a friend so someone else can enjoy it too! And if you rave about it online, make sure you tag me (@authorblove) I love showing my readers love! ☐

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed!

Let's connect!

For text messages on release day – text BLOVE to **(855) 718-0381**

Mailing list - text BLOVE to 42828

On all social media - @authorblove

My paperback store - <https://www.authorblove.net/b-love-books>

Exclusive eBooks - <https://www.authorblove.net/exclusive-ebooks>