



I WANT YOU

Here

MONICA WALTERS

I Want You Here

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Titles by Monica Walters](#)

Introduction

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, moments of grief/depression, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers. It also contains urban elements, similar to Shyrón's book in the series (*I'm The Remedy*).

This is book six of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in later books. It is highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it picks up right where the last one left off.

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Love Me Senseless

Also, please remember that your reality isn't everyone's reality. What may seem unrealistic or unrelatable to you could be very real and relatable to someone else. But also keep in mind that despite the previous statement, this is a fictional story.

Chad and Lexi's story is heavy, emotionally, and contains a lot of back and forth that can be quite irritating at times. Issues from previous stories are resolved and/or updated, and new issues have surfaced. So I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

Prologue

L

CHAD

I WATCHED her throw that ass in a circle, just like the song implied, and my dick couldn't help but take notice. She was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever met. Shit, the most beautiful I'd ever seen. Her glowing medium-brown skin, thick shoulder-length hair, DSLs, and curves had me mesmerized at first sight. It took effort to resist her young ass. However, I could tell she wasn't as mature as I liked them. That was one reason I usually stayed away from women still in their twenties. It was less likely that I would run into that with women in their thirties. If I could get a woman older than me, I would be cool with that.

Alexis Fontenot was fine as fuck though. Her appearance was never the issue. The initial problem was that I was thinking of someone else whenever I looked at her. I fell in love with a woman named Jana Woods when I was at Alcorn State. Lexi looked so much like her until I couldn't help but think of Jana. The more I stared into Lexi's big, beautiful brown eyes, the less of Jana I saw. I began seeing her for who she was and not who I originally thought she was. That was months later though.

Personality wise, she was nothing like Jana. First and foremost, Jana would have never been in front of people throwing her ass like that. She was shy and reserved, until the sheets peeled back. That was when she broke my heart. It seemed it didn't matter whether the sheets were mine or the next man's, she was ready to perform. She flew well under the radar to where her reputation didn't proceed her. I didn't know

how she did that shit, but it served her well. I thought she wanted the same things I did, but I was wrong as hell. That was why the shit caught me so off guard.

Pushing thoughts of Jana from my mind, I stared at Lexi as she danced. Her moves were sexy as hell and were luring me into a trance. All I could think about was spreading her legs and fucking her raw. I knew the alcohol had those effects on me. It always did. I loved sex, but it was worse when I drank. If she let me, I'd have her fat ass bouncing on all this dick.

She wasn't really fucking with me like that, because I'd rejected her. Lexi still had some growing up to do. She was beyond petty and still into the party scene. While her words said she was ready to settle down, to me, her actions didn't say the same thing. I licked my lips as I watched her drop it to the floor and twerk that shit like her knees were clones of Megan's. My dick hopped in my pants, and I knew that I had to have her.

She didn't even realize I was here. We were on speaking terms, but that was about it. I downed my drink then made my way to the dance floor. By the time I got to her, she was standing up straight and laughing as she danced with the women near her. I wasn't sure if she came here with them or not, but I didn't care. I was about to completely invade her space.

I stepped behind her and slid my hands around her waist, pulling her ass right against me and began swaying to the beat with her. She didn't turn to look at me right away, but the woman in front of her had lifted her eyebrows and had a slight smirk on her lips. They were probably communicating silently.

When my hands slid to her stomach and down to her pelvis, I saw the goosebumps appear on her shoulders. This dress she wore only covered the essentials—her breasts, ass, and pussy. Her long legs were on display, and her back and stomach were exposed as well. I placed a kiss on her shoulder, then went to her neck. That was when she looked up at me.

Her eyes widened when they met mine, and she seemed to be frozen for a minute. I licked my lips and said, "I need all

that action you was throwing out there a minute ago. Let me see you work that ass on me, girl.”

She turned to face me, and now that I was close to her, I could tell she had been drinking as well. Her eyes were lazier than normal. She slid her hands down my chest, then grabbed ahold to my waistband and squatted to the floor. I was two seconds from giving her what she was insinuating she wanted in front of all these people. Once she stood, she spun around and bent completely over as I jutted out my hips.

When she came back up, she began working me over. My hands slid inside of her dress, through the openings at her waist, as I kissed her neck. She was going to get fucked on this dance floor if she kept working my dick like this. Her ass was bouncing on my shit like we were fucking, and I was at the point of blasting off in my fucking underwear.

My hand made its way to the jackpot, and I slid a finger inside of her. She leaned back against me and slid her hand to the back of my neck. Her nipples were hard as fuck, and I couldn't help but bring my other hand to one of them. I pinched it and felt her walls tighten around my finger. I inserted another finger, then said in her ear, “I need to get at this pussy, girl. Fuck.”

Just as her pussy contracted and I slid my other hand inside of the top portion of her dress to feel her nipples, someone tapped my shoulder. I didn't even wanna stop to see who it was. However, when he said, “Y'all need a room, not a dance floor, my nigga,” I realized it was a bouncer.

I gave him a head nod, then withdrew my fingers from Lexi. I brought them straight to my mouth, and when she turned to me, I could see she was drunk with desire. She stared at my fingers until I withdrew them from my mouth, flashing her my long, thick tongue in the process. I grabbed her hand and led her out of the club, straight to my SUV. No words were spoken between us. We both knew exactly what we wanted. We'd been doing this dance for the past seven or eight months, and it was past time we took this shit forward.

When we got to my SUV, I unlocked the doors and opened the door to the back seat. Lexi bit her bottom lip and climbed in with me right behind her and all that ass. The minute I sat and closed the door, she straddled me. I scooted to the middle of the seat as I unzipped my pants and pulled my dick from my boxers. Lexi licked her lips and immediately lifted her hips and slid down my dick. Her eyes closed and her head dropped back as a moan escaped her lips.

I exhaled as her warmth covered me and let my dick marinate for a minute. It had been a while since I'd been in some good shit like this. I slid my hands up her thighs and gripped her bare ass as she leaned over and kissed my lips. The way she stared at me made me feel all sensitive and shit. That wasn't supposed to happen. This was supposed to be a quick fuck.

I slid my arms around her waist, pulling her back to me. I kissed her lips tenderly, sucking them as I began slowly winding my dick inside of her. Feeling her juices travel to my balls let me know that I'd entered some premium shit I wouldn't be able to easily let go of. Just the fact that she wasn't wearing underwear let me know she was planning to drop this shit on somebody. If not, why not wear underwear?

When I pulled my mouth away from hers, she moaned again as I went deeper. When I felt the soft tissue at the end of her pussy, I got excited. My dick was ready to fire off already. I had to get this sensitive shit off me. Once she sat up, I knew that was the perfect time. I stared into her eyes and asked, "You gon' bounce on this shit or not? Show me that shit you was doing on the dance floor."

She gave me a look like she was about to give me just what I asked for. After gripping my shoulders to reposition herself, she started a slow bounce as I palmed her ass cheeks. I allowed my head to drop back to the seat and let a low moan escape me. "Mm. Yeah. That's it."

She stared into my eyes the entire time she was bouncing on my dick, claiming my soul as hers. A deep frown graced my face as her pace increased. I couldn't help but pop her ass and groan. She was working my shit out. "Oh, Chad, fuck!"

Those were the first words she said all night, and they were perfect. She sounded just the way I'd imagined she would. I brought a hand to her neck and squeezed lightly as she gripped my fraternity band on my left arm. I began assisting her bounce by meeting her every stroke with one of my own. She came all over me without warning as she whispered harshly, "Fuuuuck! Fuck me, Chad!"

She didn't have to worry about that. I was one step ahead of her on that. I was balls-deep in that pussy, and I had no intention of leaving it until she milked me for everything I was worth. She slid this hot shit on me without a condom like she wanted to start some shit, so I was gon' show her that I was the shit starter. I was fucking the breath out of her ass. Her mouth was open, but no sound was coming from it, like her ass was in shock. She asked to be fucked. I was obliging her.

Watching her titties bounce gave me just the motivation I needed, and I power drove her pussy while my phone rang. That almost threw me off because I'd been expecting a call from a nigga at work. He said he had some shit to tell me. Putting that out of my mind, I concentrated on the task at hand, which was painting Lexi's walls. I was so fucking backed up I probably had enough paint for three coats.

I growled and released my seed within her depths. Her eyes opened, and it was like her conscience wanted to kick in all of a sudden. I could see the slight panic in her eyes. "You shouldn't have slid down my raw dick."

"Apparently, you okay with however this shit turns out then, which means you're telling me that you're ready to stop bullshitting."

Before I could respond to her, my phone rang again. I was completely ready to give in to her demands. I was ready to make her mine, because I was tired of daydreaming about her beautiful ass. Instead of answering her, I left her hanging to answer my phone. She huffed and slid off my dick as I grabbed it from the floor.

"This Berotte. What's up?"

“That nigga that you called Knowledge Rucker, your sister’s ex?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

“His real name is Earl Riggs. That’s the muthafucka whose ass you busted our first day on the job. They found a list he had. He was after you, and he’s connected with a terrorist organization. Don’t tell them I told you, because they are going to brief you in their time. I gotta go, nigga. Watch your back, for real, fam.”

He ended the call before I could even respond. I was shocked into silence. He couldn’t have said what the fuck I thought he said. *My sister almost got killed because a nigga was after me.* “Chad, for real? You not gon’ answer my question, are you?”

I bit my bottom lip then turned to Lexi. There was no way I could put this beautiful woman in danger because of this bullshit. I swallowed my emotions and said, “This was what it was. I’m not ready for a relationship, man. I thought we were just fucking.”

I could see the hurt in her face as she quickly nodded, then opened the door of my SUV and hopped out. “Constant bullshit. I’m done pining after you. There are plenty men that would love to give me the world, and I’m tired of turning people down for a man that doesn’t know what the fuck he wants. I’m done, Chad. Fucking done.”

She slammed the door, and I watched her walk back to the club. I refused to put her in danger. My entire family had a target on their backs because I fucked up, and after hearing that, I could barely live with myself.

One

2

CHAD

Six months later...

“KEEP IT MOVING, INMATE!” I yelled at a prisoner.

He was giving me a look that said he had an issue with me, and I was two seconds from being in his fucking face, making him kiss that damn cement. The frown he adorned told me everything I wanted to know: He was somebody I needed to keep my eye on. I didn't even know his ass, so for him to be scoping me out meant he was probably connected to Knowledge Rucker AKA Earl Riggs.

Although Shy had said that all was clear, I knew I still needed to be on guard for bullshit. The family may have been in the clear, but that didn't necessarily include me. I was the most at risk because of where I worked. I worked at the medium security campus mostly, but because I was head of security, I could be anywhere in the complex.

Once all the inmates were indoors, I headed to my office to get ready to head out for the day. I had to go talk to Zay. Today would only be our second counseling session, but I was already sick of the shit. I loved my big brother, but he was always trying to analyze a nigga. Growing up, I wasn't really the talkative type, and I quickly learned how to divert. I became a clown.

Being the one to make people laugh kept them out of my personal business. Most times, they didn't notice anything was going on with me because of my ability to hide it through

jokes and being a fool. Somehow, though, Zay could always tell, and he was always trying to get me to talk. If anybody could get me to talk, it was him and maybe my dad. I always equated a man spilling his feelings everywhere as being weak or soft. It was why Shy gave Zay such a hard time. He heard *me* giving Zay a hard time about it.

Zay was far from weak, that was for sure. He was the one who looked out for me when Dad couldn't be there. Although he was only two years older than me, mentally, it seemed he was a whole decade older. He was always so mature for his age, which was why when he told me about that shit with Joyy in college, I was shocked as hell. That wasn't in his character, which was why the guilt of it ate him alive for years.

When I got to my office, I grabbed my satchel, but not before the office phone rang. I rolled my eyes and went to it, hoping it was something simple that was needed, and I could end my day. I snatched the receiver up.

“Berotte.”

“Mr. Berotte, before you go, I need you in my office, sir.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was the warden. Jimmy Summerall was a thorn in my flesh. *Ol' Jimmy Swaggert looking muthafucka*. If it wasn't for Rondell Charles, he wouldn't know what the fuck he was doing. Charles was the chief of operations.

I grabbed my cell phone from my desk and made my way to his office. I didn't know what he could want with me so late in the day anyway. He was normally gone by now.

When I got to him, I knocked on the doorframe, and he beckoned me in with a wave of his hand. Rondell Charles was also in the office, and that shit made me nervous. Once I closed the door and sat in the chair in front of him, he smiled slightly. That put me more at ease.

“Berotte, you've been offered another position,” he said, getting straight to the point. “They want you as a warden.”

I frowned. I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about, but he had my nerves bad already. “Where?” I asked.

“Pollock. Before you say no, there are so many benefits to consider.”

“Hell no. Fuck the benefits too.”

I stood from my seat and left his office without waiting for any further explanation. I would probably be written up for talking to his ass like that, but I refused to go to Pollock. That was where Earl Riggs was. The reason he ended up there was because of a crime he committed in Louisiana that trumped the attempted murder here. Once he served his time there, he would be transferred back to serve out his sentence here.

He wouldn't see the light of day any time soon. He had to serve twenty years in Louisiana for murder, and he would have to come back here and serve fifteen for attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder. So why in the fuck would I want to go where he was? I wasn't afraid of him. I was afraid that I would throw my entire life away if I got too close to that muthafucka. I was afraid of what he could possibly do to my family.

I was still disappointed in myself for not recognizing him when Alexz introduced him to us at that restaurant. It had been ten years since I'd seen him and while he looked slightly familiar, I didn't realize who he was. I got that feeling often, because I came in contact with so many people. Plus, after that murder he committed, I didn't see him as often. It didn't help that it was my first day on the job as a correctional officer. Over time, he'd gained weight, grew his hair and beard out. He looked totally different from what I could remember. So, if I saw him, I would take all my frustrations with myself out on his ass as well.

The warden knew that shit, and he wanted to play games with me. Before I could make it out of the building, my name was being yelled out. When I turned around, Charles was running toward me. Once he got close, he patted my back and said, “He's an idiot.”

“Obviously.”

“It won't be long before he's out of here. He's a step away from being investigated. Keep that under wraps. If they find

out what he's up to, I'll be moving up to his position, and you'll be moving up to mine, if you want it."

I shook his hand as I said, "Preciate that."

I walked away from him and headed to my car, feeling like I needed to just punch something. If I ever walked off this job, the warden would be the reason. Politics were always involved in shit it shouldn't be. The best candidate for running this prison was who should be running it, not because he was favored by whomever. That was why this country was so fucked up. Unqualified people in positions of power were who were destroying this planet, piece by piece.

Once I got to my vehicle, I turned my cell phone on and saw my text messages and notifications go crazy. That didn't alarm me because it was like that every day. I couldn't have my cell phone on when I was within the confines of the prison walls. I didn't know why when half the prisoners had phones anyway.

I checked to see who I had messages from. Usually, there was a message from Dad, checking to see how my day went. Ever since Isaiah reconnected with his first love, and I'd been the only single Berotte, he'd been calling me twice a day. I appreciated that more than he knew.

Sure enough, there were messages from him, Zay, and DJ. I opened the one from DJ first, because he was usually talking shit. When I opened it and saw the picture he'd sent, time stood still. It was a picture of Lexi in a sexy ass sundress wrapped in another nigga's arms. I closed my eyes and bit my bottom lip, then read the rest of his message. *This what you want? She ain't waiting for you to get yo' shit together. That showdown you had with Seneca was for nothing my nigga if you still ain't established nothing.*

I dropped the phone to the seat and cranked my engine. Everybody knew what the deal was with why I wasn't pursuing her. Why the fuck would they keep throwing shit in my face? I was fucking sick of that shit. After Lexi and I fucked six months ago, she'd given me radio silence. When she came to Sunday dinner after Alexz's bridal shower, that

was her first time coming over in months. Whenever anyone would ask where she was, Skyler would say that she was busy or had plans.

Lexi was a speech therapist. She was never busy on the weekends unless she wanted to be. I wanted her so bad, but if I wanted her to stay safe, I had to keep my distance. That shit was killing me. Whenever I saw her, it was like somebody was stabbing me in my chest. Isaiah had suggested that I tell her what was going on, but I couldn't do that. She would force her way into my life anyway. This was the only way I could make sure she was good, even though it was killing me.

Sex with her only proved that our chemistry was just as strong as I thought it was. Her body was fire, and I couldn't get it out of my dreams. I was too old to be waking up humping the damn sheets like a horny teenager having a wet dream. My dreams were so vivid though. At first, they were me reliving what happened in the back seat of my Escalade. Somehow, they progressed to me having her in other places. Shit, one time I was dreaming that I was fucking her on the counter at McDonalds. I was obsessed.

It was good that I didn't see her as often anymore. She thought I was bullshitting her, but it was so much more than that. I cared for her a lot, and I'd gotten to know a lot about her over the past year. In my mind, she was mine. Whenever she was with someone in my presence, I was uncomfortable as hell. That shit with Seneca was her being petty, but I knew that was a part of who she was. She was petty as hell.

Glancing at my phone, I huffed and picked it up. I responded to DJ. *I don't give a fuck who she with or who she fucking.*

I went to Zay's message to see he was only checking to see if I was still coming over. I assured him that I was and let him know that I was on my way, then called my dad as I left the parking lot.

“Hey, son.”

“What's up, old man? How was your day?”

“It was good. I was in the backyard planting flowers with Anissa. You just getting off?”

“Yes, sir. ’Bout to head to Big Zay house. I hope that nigga cooked, because I’m starving.”

My dad chuckled. “Nigga, you always starving. It’s like you a fucking bottomless pit or something. Damn black hole.”

I barked loudly in the phone, imagining that he was wincing from it, then chuckled. “Since y’all know that, y’all should always be prepared. A nigga that stay ready ain’t gotta get ready. You feel me?”

I could imagine that he was shaking his head right about now. “Chad, every day, I question where I went wrong with you, then I remember that it was you that introduced me to this beautiful woman I married. You can fuck up everything else, and you’ll always get a pass from me because of that.”

“Well, shiiiiid, that’s good to know.”

“Don’t get no ideas. I would hate to be tested based on what I just said.”

I chuckled as I exited MLK to avoid the traffic on 69. “Let Mama know that she don’t have to cook no tripe this Sunday. Believe it or not, I’m getting tired of it.”

He was quiet for a minute, so I asked, “You heard me?”

“Shit, I had to make sure it was really you talking. You good?”

“Yeah. I’m just getting tired of it. I have it almost every Sunday... and for the past year and a half. I don’t wanna start hating it.”

“I’ll relay the message. I know she’s gonna be in shock too.”

I chuckled. “I’ll be sure to kiss the cook Sunday. Let me holla at DJ before I get to Big Zay.”

“A’ight, son. Talk to you later.”

I ended the call with Dad and called DJ because he’d sent another message that read, *My bad. I just think you’re making*

a mistake. I don't want you to miss out on your one over some bullshit that may not happen.

“Hello?”

“I'd rather make a mistake by pushing her away and live alone than to make a mistake and be with her and her be killed. I'm good with my decision, bruh. I'd appreciate it if we could drop it though. I don't care to hear about Lexi anymore.”

“I apologize. I won't mention her again. So what's up for the weekend?”

“Ain't shit. You free?”

“Yep.”

“What's up with you and your honey dip?”

“She went on a trip with her people and won't be back until next week.”

“A'ight. I'll holla back when I leave Zay's house.”

I ended the call and got ready to deal with Zay and his sensitive ass. I chuckled to myself, but I knew that if anyone could help me get back to myself, he could. After turning in the driveway and making my way to the door, Joyy answered it with a smile. She was glowing. I was happy that Zay was finally happy with the woman he loved. She was about three months pregnant, but she was big as hell. She could pass for six months.

I wouldn't dare say a word to her about that. The last thing I wanted to do was offend my future sister-in-law. Had it been Alexz, I would have said something, just to get her all riled up. She was due in a couple of months or so too. All these damn babies were gon' be spoiled as hell. Mariena was already proof of that. Whenever she saw me, she barked. That shit had Dylan hot as hell.

“Hey, Chad! Come on in.”

“What's up, Joyy? You good?”

“Yes,” she said as she rubbed her stomach.

“The baby kicking your ass already?”

She smiled slightly as Zay entered the room and kissed her head. “Chad, we found out yesterday that I’m carrying multiples.”

I frowned. Normal people just said twins. “Twins?”

“Triplets, bruh,” Zay said, beaming with pride.

“I know you fucking lying. What the fuck, y’all? Shit! That’s a lot of babies.”

“Who you telling?” Joyy asked with a chuckle. “We found out yesterday. I was in shock all day.”

“I mean, obviously, I’m the best Berotte. Triton status. What’chu expect?”

I rolled my eyes at Zay and brushed past him. “Y’all gon’ have to pick up an offering every Sunday at dinner to feed all them damn babies. Y’all know what the sex is for all of ’em yet?”

“Not until next month,” Zay said as I picked up the lid from the pot on the stove.

Spaghetti. That would do just fine. I got a plate from the cabinet as they silently watched me. I frowned slightly. “What? The babies ain’t here yet. It’s still enough for me.”

Joyy giggled, then said, “I’m going to lay down. See you later, Chad.”

“A’ight.”

When I turned to Zay, he stood there flexing and shit. “You see what being a Sigma man get you?”

“Hell yeah, nigga. Broke.”

Two

∞

MY PHONE HAD BEEN RINGING

nonstop, and I just wanted to chunk that shit out the window. It was my fault though. My life had been spiraling a bit because I wanted to be like Jazmine Sullivan and have a damn roster. I couldn't keep up. Every day, somebody was blowing me up. That was what I got for being wild. However, I wasn't trying to catch feelings for anybody. Niggas weren't shit. Chad had taught me that.

Assuming shit typically got me in a world of trouble, and that night in the club, I assumed Chad wanted to start a relationship with me. He knew how I felt about him. That wasn't a secret to anyone. At the time, I'd been living in Beaumont for a little over six months, and he was the only man I wanted to entertain. No matter how I tried, I couldn't get him out of my system. When he practically fucked me on the dance floor, I just knew that was where we were headed. He was going to claim me as his.

He fucked me so passionately, then left me in my feelings. It was all bullshit with him. We would talk on the phone, go out, and have a good time together, but it never went further than that until that night. What was I supposed to think? It wasn't like he was forthcoming with his feelings. He always left me assuming and guessing. I was sick of that shit. As sick of it as I was, whenever my phone rang, I was hoping it was him.

My heart was still in the back of his Escalade, and it had made itself at home, not wanting to come back to me. I was

trying to fuck him out of my system, thinking ho shit would make me forget about him. It only made me long for him more. I thought that shit with Seneca would force him to want me. I was so wrong. That nigga pretty much said that he wanted to literally fuck me up. Chad was so fucking confusing. I didn't even want Seneca. While his attention was nice, I knew he was a whole fuckboy. He wreaked from the vibes it gave off.

When he started flirting before he could even greet me, it threw up all kinds of red flags. After I went back inside, after sitting in my car to cool off, he was on my ass like white on rice. Chad was acting like I was a fucking stranger the whole day, and it was irritating the fuck out of me. I was petty, but I had never been *that* petty. I felt pushed into a corner, and there was only one way to come out: swinging.

So when Seneca sat next to me at the dinner table, talking in my ear, and laying sweet kisses on my shoulder and cheek, I allowed it. At least he noticed me. I was uncomfortable as hell though. I didn't go to Sunday dinner to get at Chad. His family was the only family I had in Beaumont. They'd accepted me as their sister since my sister was married to Dylan. Was I supposed to denounce the only family I had because Chad was an asshole?

Seneca had gotten even bolder and had licked my neck. I flinched and jerked away from him, giving him the eye. Like, *nigga, you going too far*. But since I smiled and continued sitting there, it looked like I liked it. I wanted to get a fucking rise out of Chad since he wanted to ignore me. Nigga was walking right past me like I was invisible. He hadn't even spoken to me. My petty was on overload, so I welcomed the attention Seneca was giving me, not giving thought to me being at Chad's father's house. That was the last thing on my mind, and I hate that I let Chad ignite my crazy.

Chad didn't want me to be his, but he didn't want me to be anybody else's either. If that wasn't toxic, I didn't know what the fuck it was. So for the past two months, I'd really been staying away from the Berottes, unless they were at my sister's house. The guys rarely congregated there, so I never ran into

Chad. Sunday dinner was totally out of the question. The last time I left, I said that I would never go back, and I hadn't.

As my phone rang again, I huffed loudly. Grabbing it from the passenger seat, I silenced it. Although it was my sister, I didn't feel like talking. I was in a funk. My day had been shot to shit. The little boy I was working with had thrown an entire temper tantrum and nearly hit me with a chair. I was so angry, I wanted to snatch his big ass up and show him that I wasn't one to be played with. My boss quickly intervened when she heard the commotion. He'd thrown a fit because he was struggling with a word. I wouldn't move to the next one until I'd exhausted every technique to try to get him to pronounce it correctly.

At this point, I was so ready to just move back to Dallas. When my phone rang again, showing Skyler's number, I answered. She never called back-to-back unless it was important. "Hello?"

"Da-da-da-da-da-da-da!"

I chuckled. Mariena was almost eight months old already. "Hey, nanny's baby!"

She got completely quiet, probably trying to figure out how I got in the phone. I could see her little chocolate face in my mind and the perplexed look it probably adorned. After giggling again, she started screaming her gibberish and apparently hitting the phone. I had to turn the volume down on my Bluetooth speaker. She was wearing that phone out!

"Marie! What are you doing, girl?"

Dylan was amused at his baby girl. Hearing him call her Marie always made me smile. I knew it made him feel closer to the mother he never knew. "Oh shit! Sky! Mariena called somebody on your phone!"

I chuckled even more. My sister's family was so cute. I was waiting for her to pop up pregnant again. She and Dylan were so in love, and the way he openly showed his love was beautiful. I could only hope for something like the two of them had.

“Hello?” Skyler said, breaking me away from my thoughts.

“Hey. Maybe you should keep your phone close to you so I won’t be eavesdropping on your private time. One day you’re going to be talking about me, and I’ll hear it.”

She laughed. “Girl, please. I won’t be saying anything that I wouldn’t say to your face. Mariena called you, or did you call me back?”

“Mariena called me. I thought you were calling back, and you never do that.”

“Oh, so you’re admitting that you saw when I called,” she teased.

“Yeah, but it’s been a rough day. I’m going to my apartment and have a drink then take a relaxing bath. I just need some alone time right now.”

“I understand that. Well, if you feel like getting out tomorrow, let me know. I’m going to go shopping with my baby. I love buying clothes for her.”

“Obviously. She has two closets full of clothes.”

“Well, her aunts and uncles don’t help with that. One closet is full of things y’all bought.”

I chuckled. That little chocolate doll was so hard for any of us to resist. She was so beautiful. Her hair could already be put into a curly afro puff. She was all Berotte too, the spitting image of her father. She was growing up so fast. “Well, no one told y’all to create such melanated perfection.”

She laughed loudly. “I know that’s right. She’s so perfect,” she said slowly.

I could hear Mariena giggle, and that made me smile. “I’ll call you tomorrow, sis.”

“Okay. Love you, Lexi.”

“Love you too.”

I ended the call and continued to the store. I needed more deodorant. This morning, I had to dig the damn solid out with

a fingernail file. That shit was ridiculous. I couldn't believe I forgot to get deodorant the last time I was at the store. Had I decided to go to someone's house, I would have been embarrassed at the mess under my arms.

When I got to the store, I decided to just buy a salad. I didn't even feel like cooking today, not even the slightest prep of putting something in the oven, air fryer, or microwave. I was drained. As I trudged through the store to get my deodorant, I heard someone say, "Damn, lil mama. Yo' day was that rough?"

I turned to see Seneca following me. Coming to a stop, I closed my eyes briefly and bit my bottom lip. "It was rougher."

He stood close behind me and rubbed my shoulders, sending chills throughout my body. That shit felt so good, I nearly dropped my salad on the floor. A slight moan escaped me as he leaned over to my ear and said, "Let me rub this beautiful body down. I know you don't want my dick, since you say it's for the streets, but I give a mean body massage, along with happy endings if you want that."

As good as that shit sounded, I was able to gather the restraint from some-damn-where to turn him down. "Naw, Sen. I'm good. I'm going home and soak in a hot bath with a glass of wine."

I turned to him in time to see him bite his bottom lip and flash his grill. He was so damn fine but such a waste of skin. "A'ight. You know I don't want no trouble with yo' man like last time, so I betta push on," he said with a smirk.

He knew got damn well that Chad wasn't my man, and I refused to verbalize that shit for him to scrutinize. I rolled my eyes and walked away as I said, "Bye, Seneca."

I continued to the deodorant aisle and grabbed my preference then headed to the register. While Seneca had always said he would leave me alone because of what happened a couple of months ago, he liked to still tease me, reminding me of how his touch felt. The thought of him doing that to lots of other women always turned me off and helped

me keep my composure. The minute I was ever weak and crumbled under his advances, he would fuck me—family be damned.

I got in my car, and as I was leaving the parking lot, he gave me a head nod. I waved and continued home. This life I was living wasn't where it was at. At twenty-seven years old, I should have been enjoying life to the fullest. The occasional outings to party and have a good time were getting old. Fucking niggas was getting tiring. I wasn't built for this life. I was built for love and romance. Libras were in love with love, and I didn't deviate from the character trait at all. I wanted what my sister had.

By the time I got home, I noticed I had a text from my mama. She was out and about with Mrs. Anissa, enjoying the single life. I supposed if I had someone I could spend free time with, it would make this single life a lot easier, but all my friends were in Dallas, and I hadn't tried to make any new ones. Skyler was always busy, and after what happened at Mr. Berotte's house, Alexz wasn't fucking with me like that. She was pregnant and moody anyway. Since Brittany was close to Alexz, I never really tried to become close to her either.

I sat in my car and texted my mama back, letting her know that I was good, although my day was stressful. We often checked on one another and occasionally spent time together, but lately, I'd been too busy trying to replace Chad, as if I ever had him. In my mind, I thought I would. The way he stared at me as I slid down his dick had grabbed ahold of my heart and wouldn't let me go. His tongue had performed the wonders I knew it would, since he always had that shit stuck out. Just the feel of it against mine was enough to have me cumming the Nile.

How was he able to go home with my affection for him all over him and not feel a thing? That shit hurt more than anything because my hopes were up. I was thinking that he'd finally given in to what I knew he wanted. He made me feel like he wanted me. Instead, I was just a conquest for him. No one had an explanation as to why he would do that to me... string me along like a puppy. I was a stupid bitch when it came

to him. Although I said I was done, if he would have called, I would have went running.

Swiping the tears that somehow escaped my eyes, I grabbed my purse and my bag from the store and headed inside to my nothingness. After I made it inside, I headed straight to the kitchen to eat my salad. If I had gone to my bedroom first, I wouldn't have felt like going back in there. Once again, my phone rang. Glancing at it to see who it was, I noticed it was my boo, Jericho. He didn't call often, but when he did, it was always worth my while, sexually, mentally, and emotionally.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sexy Lexi. What's up, baby?”

“Hey.”

“Damn. Seem like you need me as bad as I need you. Go ahead and get in the tub, and by the time you finish, I should be at the door in time to massage you. Make sure you come to the door naked.”

“Gladly. Let me finish eating. I'll send a text when I get in the tub.”

“Naw. Go start running that water now. I'ma fill you up when I get there. You gon' do what I'm telling you to do?”

“Mm... yes, daddy.”

“That's my girl. See you in about forty-five minutes.”

He ended the call, and suddenly, my body picked up the energy needed to do as he requested. Not only did he dick me down right, but he soothed my emotions. At least for the night, I would feel like I belonged to someone, like I was cherished. He was the only man that had been to my place, because I trusted him. Jericho would treat my body right and give me everything I desired from a man, all in one night.

Although it wasn't a permanent feeling, I settled for the temporary for now. I needed it more than anyone could ever understand, and I didn't know how to explain it other than my severed relationship with my father. It made me crave for love

from a man even more than I already did. His betrayal took a toll on me that I couldn't explain. It was like I took what he did to our family even harder than my mom did.

Knowing that he could take his love and give it to other women was hard for me to accept. The man I'd gone my entire life knowing as the loving father and husband was a fraud. He'd dived off the pedestal I had him on, straight into the flames of hell, and that shit ate me alive. The love of my dad had been lost, and at this point, I didn't want the shit back. I knew, for my sanity, I would have to eventually forgive him. I just wasn't to that point yet.

I brought my ass to that bathroom and ran my bath water like Jericho told me to do and prepared to feel the best I'd felt since he last tightened me up a month ago. My body would be loose, and my weekend could be a little more relaxed. Maybe I would go on that shopping trip with Skyler after all.

Three

ℒ

CHAD

“IF YOU COULD FOCUS MORE on positive things, it would help you let go of the negative.”

I stared at my feet as Zay talked. Seeing Lexi in that picture had fucked me up a lil bit. If I were honest with myself, I knew that I needed her. There was no way she would take me seriously now though. I'd made promises to her and failed miserably at executing the things I said I would work on. Just when I thought I was ready to be for real with her, I learned of that bullshit with Earl.

Instead of deleting the picture, I kept pulling it back up to stare at it and analyze her facial expression. She wasn't happy. She didn't want that nigga. She wanted me, and I let her down. For a year, she waited for me to get my shit together. Just when I thought I had, life threw a fucking curveball.

As we sat on the patio, DJ sat next to me and said, “I don't like this version of you. Last night wasn't even as hype as it normally is. You didn't even want the DJ to play ‘Atomic Dog’ for us to stroll to. If anybody a got damn Q, you are one to the core of you. I need you to handle this shit, bruh. For real.”

Sunday dinner had turned into a fucking intervention. We were all on the patio. Isaiah and Joyy had shared their good news, and the women were looking for dresses for Shy and Brittany's wedding next month. Alexz was growing rapidly and so was Joyy. They might as well just pay somebody to make those damn dresses.

I glanced over at DJ and nodded. They were all right. If I could just keep my mind from wondering about what Earl could be up to, then I would make progress. I knew that I needed to contact Lexi as soon as I could get a handle on things. Although she said she was done, I had to try.

“That shit with Knowledge is done, bruh. That nigga gon’ be gone a long-ass time. Definitely keep your eyes open at work, but as far as anything going down on the outside, that shit is a done deal. Live your life, bruh. That nigga ain’t as connected as you think he is. Them people ain’t worried about us. That’s his own personal vendetta. He just gon’ have to chalk that shit up as a loss and move on,” Shyrón added.

“I hear y’all. I’m tired of it though. Crank up some music or something.”

Dad gave me a one-cheeked smile and grabbed his phone to start the music. When “Atomic Dog” started playing, I chuckled. Axton and DJ hopped up from their seats, and there was no way I could let them stroll alone. I cupped my hands around my mouth and started barking loudly while everybody laughed. When I started hopping, I felt better. It was like the stroll was taking my stress.

When Alexz burst through the door, I stopped and ran to her as her eyebrows hiked up. I scooped her up and ran around the yard with her as she screamed. When I set her on her feet, she slapped my arm then threw her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. “I love you, Chad. Welcome back, knucklehead nigga.”

I chuckled then slapped Zay’s hand. He hugged me and said, “I know you’re forcing this, but keep doing that. Eventually, it won’t be forced anymore.”

I nodded as I watched Alexz rub her stomach. She was like twenty-eight weeks or so, and I probably shouldn’t have run around with her, but I could tell that it made her happy. When I made my way back to the table, I noticed all the women had migrated outdoors to see what was going on. I scooped Mariena from Skyler’s arms and spun around with her as she screamed out her delight. The moment I stopped, she started

slapping my shoulders for me to do it again. As she stared at me with a big smile, showing her two bottom teeth, I chuckled.

She was such a beautiful baby. Just as her smile started to fade, I began spinning around again. Her squeals of delight made me happy. “A’ight na, listen, baby girl. Unc is over thirty. I can’t keep doing this. I’m gon’ make myself sick.”

“Ain’t nobody told you to get my baby all hyped up when you knew you couldn’t fulfill the requirements,” Dylan smarted off.

Everyone laughed as Mariena stared at me, waiting for the next spin around. Just as I began, I heard Skyler yell my name. When I stopped, Mariena puked all over me. I frowned up as Skyler ran to us. “That’s what I was trying to tell you. She only ate thirty minutes ago.”

“You did me dirty, sister-in-law. I expected better from you.”

She laughed as she took Mariena from me and handed me a towel. As everyone laughed at me, I couldn’t help but laugh at myself. This forcing it was definitely work, but I would take Zay’s advice on this one.

* * *

“So, I got a question. This serious, so don’t be playing and shit.”

I lifted my hands in surrender as DJ smiled and rolled his eyes. We’d decided to go get a drink and just chill out. We ended up at Pour 09, our normal spot for libations. Since his woman wasn’t back yet, he knew a nigga again, although he said she wasn’t his woman just yet. They’d been “talking” for what seemed to be months now. Maybe it hadn’t been as long as I thought it had been.

“What you think about dating?”

I frowned slightly. “What’chu mean?”

“I mean... like, if you dating someone, shouldn't that mean you're exclusive?”

“Naw. Not unless that was something y'all agreed to beforehand. Why?”

He exhaled loudly. “She said just because we were dating didn't mean she belonged to me. If I wanted that then I needed to make that clear. Man, what the fuck I been doing for the past three months?”

“Man, you gotta make shit clear. We living in a society where women ain't assuming shit about our asses no more, because they done been played with too much. That's how hearts get broken. How old is she?”

“Thirty-three like us.”

“See, she done been through some shit already. She ain't finna play wit'cho ass. She got any kids?”

“Yeah. She have two from her ex-husband.”

“Point proven. If you want her to be yours, ask her to be yours and quit assuming shit.”

My mind immediately went to Lexi. The minute it did, my dick stood at attention. I turned toward the bar to hide that shit since my brilliant ass decided to wear khaki shorts instead of jeans. DJ looked over at me and spun around on his barstool as well. I ordered another drink while her sex faces stayed at the forefront of my mine.

“I can't believe you ain't clowning me. I think I like this new Chad.”

“Clowning you about what? Being sensitive like a bitch?”

He rolled his eyes and ordered another drink too. I chuckled as I said, “I been talking to Zay about my issues for the past three weeks. After that first session, shit got a little easier to handle and talk about.”

DJ's eyebrows had risen, and a smirk appeared on his lips. “So you telling me *you* been sensitive like a bitch?”

I chuckled. “That's why I wasn't gon' clown you.”

As he chuckled, the song “Throw That Ass in a Circle” came on. The women began dancing, so I turned around to watch and see what I could see. None of them were working shit like Lexi did that night at the hip hop club downtown. The way she had her ass bouncing inches away from the floor... *shit!* I’d give my right lung to see that shit again. When she danced, it was like everything was okay.

“What’chu thinking about, because ain’t shit appealing that way.”

I chuckled and lowered my head for a moment. “Nothing. It’s about time to wrap this shit up. I ain’t gon’ feel like doing shit in the morning. When Shavozz coming back?”

“Saturday.”

“Well, you got two more days to sulk. When she get here, tell her how you feel. Meanwhile, I need to find somebody to fuck before I start settling.”

He laughed and shook his head as we settled our tabs. “I would say something, but I’ma keep that shit to myself.”

“Yep. Keep that shit to yourself, ’cause I ain’t tryna hear it.”

I already knew he was about to say something about Lexi. The only reason I could give him the advice I did was because of the shit I did to her. She was out there living her best life, dating and shit, because I played with her heart. She was sick of my shit, and because of the shit I did to her, she refused to give another man the opportunity to play with her again. I knew she was fucking with me with that bullshit with Seneca. She didn’t want that nigga. She wasn’t as loose as she was with me. That let me know that she was uncomfortable but trying to hide it. Only someone who paid attention to her mannerisms would have noticed that.

Once I paid my tab, we headed out. My mind was on Lexi heavy, and I didn’t know if I should reach out or not. Surely, she wasn’t still waiting for me to get my shit together. My shit still wasn’t all the way together, but it was like a switch flipped on the other day, and I chose to stop moping around. I

was still somewhat paranoid, checking shit that I normally didn't, but I didn't see that changing any time soon.

After slapping hands with DJ, we went our separate ways, and I headed home. Since it was a big Wednesday night, I knew I needed to get home before it got too late. It was already ten. I was tired anyway. After showering, I decided I would reach out to Lexi, but instead of calling, I would text and just pray she didn't have me blocked.

Hey, Lexi. I know I'm the last person you wanted to hear from, but can I talk to you in person this weekend? Maybe Saturday I can take you to dinner or something? Let me know.

I plugged my phone up, then got in bed, expecting to lay there and stare at the ceiling until I fell asleep. That was what I usually did. When my phone chimed, I nearly gave myself whiplash when I turned to it. It was a text from Lexi. I quickly picked up my phone and without opening the message, I saw her response. *Hell no.*

I didn't expect this to be easy. The point was that she didn't ignore or block me. After taking a deep breath, I opened the message to respond. *A'ight. Have a good night.*

There was no point in trying to engage with her at 11 p.m. Although I probably wouldn't sleep now, there was no sense in getting into a full-fledged conversation with her. I set my phone back on the nightstand and rolled to my back and stared at the ceiling until my eyelids got heavy.

Four

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I WASN'T sure who in the fuck he took me for, but I would be stupid to give him another opportunity to finesse me out of my panties. I didn't have a problem talking to Chad, but it wouldn't be in no date-like setting. He could kiss my ass on that. I was too done with his ass on that front. It took me forever to fall asleep after that shit the other night. Here it was, Friday, and I was still thinking about that shit from Wednesday.

I had to admit, it shocked the hell out of me when I saw a text message from him. My heart started racing, and I literally started sweating. For weeks, I'd been wishing he would text me, but when he finally did, it made me angry. I had to get up and take a shower. I was so worked up I barely slept at all that night. I wasn't worth shit yesterday.

Today, I'd taken a personal day. I had two doctors' appointments this morning, one with my gynecologist and another with my primary care physician. After that, I went to the spa and got a massage, a manicure and pedicure, and a facial. I tried to have days like this once a month or at least every other month. Whatever month I had vacation days scheduled, I didn't take a personal day. So month after next, I had a week vacation. My destination was still a mystery to me, but I knew I was getting the hell out of Beaumont.

As I sat here in McAlister's Deli waiting on my order, I admired my nails. They were beautiful, if I had to say so myself. I'd gotten white polish, but she put floral designs on my ring fingers. I almost wished I'd gotten her to do that to all

my nails. That was just how pretty it was. I was so engrossed in my admiration I didn't see anyone approaching me until they were pulling out a chair at my table.

When I looked up and saw Chad, I nearly died in my seat. My heart was beating fast as hell. While I wanted to frown, I couldn't. Seeing Chad up close and personal after two months had rendered me speechless. He was such a gorgeous man. Everything about his physical appearance turned me on. I liked men with meat on their bones, and this fine ass Q-Dawg had just that. He was tall and thick as hell. When I first came to town, I thought I was smitten when I saw DJ and Isaiah, but his ass was the one. However, I quickly realized that he was probably the most toxic.

“Hey, Lexi. I feel like it was fate that landed us in the same spot for a late lunch.”

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my tea. I was playing hard, but I was more than sure he noticed that he'd taken my breath away for a whole-ass minute. My curly puff atop my head felt like it was losing its exuberance, and my body felt heavy with sorrow but hot with passion at the same time. *How could I let this man affect me this way?* It was like I had zero control over my body whenever he was near.

“What do you want, Chad?”

Before he could speak, a guy from Houston I'd slept with a couple of times said, “What's up, Lexi? How you doin', baby?”

“Hey, Jungle. I'm good. What about you?”

“I'm good. Holla at me later.”

I didn't even know his real name. It obviously wasn't Jungle. I nodded, then turned my attention back to Chad. Surprisingly, he didn't look pissed. Jungle wasn't the one he wanted to start shit with anyway. That nigga was running the streets in Houston. He was in his forties, but he kept his physique looking good. Chad was staring at his hands then looked up at me. I saw something in his eyes that I'd never seen... remorse.

“I wanted to apologize to you and let you know that I care about you more than you would ever know. Some situations arose that caused me to back away from you to protect you. When my phone was ringing that night, I got some news that my life was in danger. There was no way I could be with you and keep you safe.”

He took a deep breath and averted his gaze. Chad was never open with me about anything, so this moment was throwing me for a loop. I frowned slightly. “Keep me safe? Chad—”

I slowly shook my head as he held a hand up, halting me. “I’m sorry. I should have told you back then, but I couldn’t tell anybody, not even my family. I wasn’t involved in anything illegal. It was because of my job. The threat isn’t nearly as great as it was six months ago, but there’s still a slight risk while I’m at work. The threat on my family is pretty much nonexistent at this point.”

“Do they know now?”

I had plenty of attitude, because I didn’t believe him. “Yeah, they know. Skyler too.”

I rolled my eyes. He could just be trying to get in my good graces again, to play in my face. If I allowed him to reenter my world, it would be on my terms and because I was playing in his face too. “Is that all?”

He shook his head, and I could see that he was struggling with what he wanted to say. I didn’t know if he thought I would be all sympathetic and shit, but he had the wrong one for that. My heart was hardening by the second as I thought about all the wolf tickets he’d sold me.

You might be the woman for me, girl.

I haven’t felt this way for anyone in a long time.

You so fucking fine. Once I dip into that pussy, you gon’ be stuck with me.

You tryna be mine forever, girl?

I can't wait to ruin you just for my consumption. Once I have you, no one else ever will.

All fucking lies. He swallowed hard then looked up at me. "I was hoping that you would give me a chance to make things right between us."

I twisted my lips to the side and folded my arms. "And how do you plan to do that?"

He licked his lips as he stared at me, causing my body to heat up even more than it already was. All I could think about was how his tongue felt against mine and how his kiss had pulled the orgasm right out of me. I hated that I felt so strongly for him.

"I plan to start by being honest, thoughtful, considerate, and more open with you. My communication skills are lacking, and that's what gets me in difficult situations most times."

I turned away from him for a moment and caught Jungle staring at me. He winked then turned away. If I gave Chad a chance, I would have a lot of cleaning up to do, meaning I was gonna have to get rid of my roster. When I looked back at Chad, he was still staring at me. I leaned forward, dropping my elbows to the table as I stared back at him. His eyes were pulling me in, and I couldn't stop it.

I wanted to straddle him, take that baseball cap off, and run my nails over his bald head and through his beard. After taking a deep breath, I asked, "Since you want to be honest, did you really want to grab me like you did Seneca at your father's house?"

"Yeah, but I would never act out on that. I was angry because I knew you were fucking with me. I was angry because of the situation I was in that caused my progression with you to come to a screeching halt. That was when I told my family what was going on."

I sat back in my seat and again folded my arms as the worker brought out my food. I nodded my thanks to her, then said to Chad, "What makes you think I was fucking with you?"

Seneca came on to me, not the other way around. I was appreciative that I was getting attention from someone, since I didn't seem to have yours. I didn't have your attention until someone else decided to show me attention. You'd known of my attraction to you for a year at that point or longer."

"So since I'm being honest, I need you to be too."

"There was some pettiness involved. I'll admit that. However, what I just said was also the truth. I've never lied to you. It was you that lied to me and withheld shit from me. You can't make demands of me when I would have given you all of me. Get the fuck on, Chad. For real."

He had the audacity to tell me to be honest. Just because I felt something for him didn't give him the right to make demands when it was because of him why we weren't together as a couple. He was about to get up, but then he stared at me and said, "You right. I can't make demands. It wasn't a demand, Lexi. I was making a request. I know you still have feelings for me. You wouldn't be allowing me in your space if you didn't. I just want to start fresh, baby. That's it. I want to prove to you how much you mean to me."

I rolled my eyes and took a bite of my grilled chicken sandwich. After swallowing, I glanced up at him to find his eyes taking me in. His eyes graced everything from my hair puff to my white toenails. Goosebumps graced my skin under his observation. After squirming in my seat a bit, I said, "Whenever I want to talk to you, I will. You can't be pushy, or this ends."

I was nervous as hell. My decision was quick, and I hoped I wouldn't regret letting him back in. He smiled slightly, then reached across the table for my hand. I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath then slid my hand to his. The heat that encompassed me was unbelievable. Shit, I felt like Dudley from the *Preacher's Wife* was sitting across from me or something, possessing me with his aura.

Chad didn't say a word. He only caressed the top of my hand with his thumb as he stared at my hand. I wanted to pull it away, but at the same time, I didn't. His touch had

penetrated my hard exterior, and I felt it with my soul. I was quickly reminded of how his palms felt on my ass that night. He lifted my hand and kissed it then released it from his grasp. “Thank you, Lexi. I’m going to do my best to be what you need. Maybe we can one day be everything you desired from the beginning.”

I swallowed hard then took another bite of my sandwich as the lady from before set his order on the table. It was a baked potato with all types of meat on it. “What is it?”

“It’s a black angus roast beef spud. You wanna try it?”

I shook my head, although I really wanted to. It looked delicious and smelled even better. Instead, I took a sip of my tea and was about to go back to my sandwich, until he held out a forkful of it to my mouth. “I can see your drool, Lexi. Taste it.”

I gave him the side-eye, but I still leaned forward, opened wide, and pulled it from his fork seductively. I moaned softly as I chewed. It was as delicious as it looked. Chad had lowered his head and stared at me. After wiping the corners of my mouth, I said, “That’s delicious.”

“Mm hmm,” he said, then began eating.

We were silent for minutes before he asked, “What are you getting into this weekend?”

More like what was getting into me. I was more than sure that Jungle wanted a piece of my love, but Jericho was heavily on my mind after our tryst last weekend. He said he would call this weekend. Instead of saying all that, I shrugged. “I don’t know. What about you?”

“Nothing besides Sunday dinner.”

He lifted his gaze from his food to me. I refused to go to his dad’s house. Not this soon anyway. Alexz looked like she wanted to get at me, and I didn’t have a problem getting back at her. Why did I need to respect a nigga that didn’t give a fuck about my feelings? Chad broke my heart that night. He’d never been that aggressive with me. I could blame it on the

alcohol, but I'd been around him while he was drinking before.

I remained quiet as I finished off my sandwich. I frowned slightly as I thought about the time of day it was. "Why aren't you at work?" I asked.

He waved me off and said, "I'm off. Why aren't you at work?"

"I'm off," I said, offering him no further explanation.

So much for being open and honest. I huffed and grabbed my trash to bring it to the receptacle. As I stood, he asked, "Can we chill a lil bit today?"

"I don't think so."

"You have plans with ol' dude behind us?"

"No. If I did, that would be none of your damn business."

"No, it wouldn't be. Not yet anyway."

I rolled my eyes and walked away. When I got back to the table, I grabbed my purse and was about to leave him sitting there without a word. I didn't have time to play games with him, and he was already making me regret my decision. He ignited my crazy. Before I could walk away, he grabbed my hand. "I fucked up already, huh? Change is hard, Lexi, but I'm trying. Please, just don't shut me out."

I slid my hand away from his and walked away. His plea was playing repeatedly in my head as I walked to my car. Chad had me spinning, and I didn't have the slightest clue what to do about it. When I got in, I set my purse in the passenger seat, then rested my head on the steering wheel. My nerves were frazzled. However, when my car door opened, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Chad grabbed my hand as he stooped to my level. He kissed it then pulled me from my seat to his arms. I tried to push away from him, but he wouldn't allow me to. The tears magically appeared, and I wrapped my arms around his waist as I rested my forehead on his chest near his shoulder. "Take a ride with me, baby."

I quickly pulled away and shook my head. “You already have my emotions going crazy. I feel like I’m losing it. No. I can’t.”

I got back in my car as he stood outside of my door just staring at me. Somehow, I mustered up the strength to crank the engine, but my heart wouldn’t let me drive away with him standing there watching me. He approached the car, and I lowered my window to hear what he had to say. “Follow me. Please. I just wanna spend some time with you. That’s it. No conditions or ulterior motives. If you don’t, then that’s okay too. I’ll just call you later.”

Chad had never begged for anything from me. He always took what he wanted. Seeing him this way pulled at my heartstrings, and I could only pray that he was telling me the truth about what was going on with him and wasn’t playing games again. If he was playing with me this time, I wouldn’t be any earthly good afterward. I would completely hate myself for falling for his ass again. I nodded, and he walked off.

I literally wanted to purge and cry my eyes out, but I couldn’t allow myself to do that until I was in the confines of my place. When I saw him back out, I followed behind him without a clue as to where we were headed. I just prayed that I was making the right decision.

Five

∞

CHAD

“NIGGA, *what the fuck you staring at? You been doing that shit every time I see you! You got some shit to get off yo’ chest or what?”*

“Earl let yo’ ass off easy. I would’ve shot yo’ big ass in the head and just did the time. Problem solved.”

“What’chu say to me?”

“You heard what the fu—”

Before he could say another word, I jacked him up against the wall by his neck. “What’chu say, inmate? I don’t hear you now. What? You choking? You can’t breathe?”

I slung him to the floor and yelled, “Get yo’ bitch ass up! You wouldn’t have done shit but run yo’ fucking mouth like you doing now. ’Cause guess what? If you were as loyal to his ass as you pretending to be, you would have handled it for him. Get the fuck up and do something ’bout it!”

Just as I was about to kick him, one of my coworkers restrained me. “Don’t let this bitch cause you to lose everything you worked hard for, man. Fuck him and Earl’s punk ass.”

I jerked away from my coworker and walked off. When I got to my office, I realized my coworker had followed me. “Thank you, Jamison. I appreciate you.”

“You my bruh. I gotta look out for you.”

With that, he left, but not long after, Charles was walking through my door. "How many times have I told you that the Earl Riggs situation was under control? Too many times to count! Go home, Berotte. Come back fresh Monday."

"How do you even know what happened?"

"I met Jamison in the hallway. Inmates were just saying you snapped, but I know you. You have to be severely provoked. Now get out of here."

I couldn't stop looking in my rearview mirror. I needed to see if Lexi was still tailing me. It was definitely fate that had me end up at McAlister's today. Being off wasn't in the plans, but when I got to work, things took a turn. That muthafucka had mean mugged me for the last time. By the time I was sent home, it was only 10 a.m. I took a shower and lay in the bed, staring at the ceiling, talking to myself about today's events as if Zay was sitting there listening.

I got up and went and got my beard trimmed then ended up at McAlister's. When I saw Lexi sitting there, I knew everything had happened for a reason today. The fact that I didn't really like McAlister's all that much only solidified that reason. I could see the shock register on her face when I sat with her, but I also saw the hurt. I broke her heart six months ago, and I could see it back then. It only got worse with the situation at Pop's house.

I originally wanted to lead her to my house, but I thought better of it. I didn't want her to think I was trying to get in her guts. Today wasn't about that. That would come if I did what I was supposed to as a man that cared about her. Instead, I drove downtown to the river. It was only one of the few places I knew where we could have some privacy in a public place that was shaded and had a breeze.

When I parked, I watched her park a couple of spots away from me. I quickly got out and made my way to her to open her door. I could tell she'd still been crying, and that made my heart sink. I grabbed her hand to help her out, and she gave me a soft smile. As I walked toward the park, I continued to hold her hand. Surprisingly, she didn't try to withdraw it. I was just

grateful that she'd actually followed me here. I didn't know what all I would tell her, but I knew I had to tell her more than what I did.

She didn't trust me, and I had no one but myself to blame for that. If I would have been more open with her, she would have possibly understood my hesitancy at first. Jana had done a fucking number on me and had me scared of committing, especially to someone younger than me. It was a hang-up that I wasn't proud of, but I knew if I would have explained it to her, she would've understood me a little better.

After getting to a picnic table, she sat, and I sat across from her. I reached for her hands, and she extended them to me. I could feel my hands trembling. She looked down at them, then back up at me. She withdrew her hands from mine and stood from her seat. I wasn't sure what she was doing at first. Surely, she wouldn't have followed me here and got out of her car to come to the park just to turn around and leave.

However, she sat next to me, looped her arm around mine, and laid her head on my shoulder. She wasn't the same Lexi from thirty minutes ago. She was showing me her sensitive side, and I needed every bit of it. "Just relax and tell me what you need to tell me, Chad."

I swallowed hard then took a deep breath and started with why I was hesitant about pursuing anything with her. "Jana Woods was my first love. We met at Alcorn. I was a senior on the football team. She was a freshman and smart as hell. She seemed to be a good girl, quiet and stayed with her nose in a book. I was three years older than her, but I didn't care about that. She was beautiful and looked a lot like you."

When I said that, Lexi lifted her head and stared at me. "Was that why you stared at me that way when we first met?"

"Yeah. The resemblance is insane."

She laid back on my shoulder as I continued. "As I got to know you though, I realized that your personalities are totally different... at least your public personalities. To make a long story short, I caught Jana fucking one of my teammates in my dorm. I was supposed to be at a meeting, but it got canceled at

the last minute. I was happy as shit, thinking I was gonna go back to the dorm and surprise her. Yeah. I surprised her alright. I fucking surprised myself too. That was when I found out she was an undercover ho and that she never considered me to be her boyfriend, just a fuck buddy.”

She lifted her head once again and stared into my eyes. When she lifted her hand to my face, I closed my eyes. “I’m not looking for sympathy, Lexi. I just want you to understand me.”

I reopened my eyes in time to see her nod. “Six months ago, I was ready to make you mine. That phone call halted everything. A guy I testified against when I first started working at the prison, started dating my sister to get back at me. I don’t know why he dated her for so long before doing what he intended, but I was grateful for whatever the reason was. He tried to kill her, and I didn’t even know who he was until he got arrested. They fingerprinted him, and his real name popped up.”

She was staring at me wide-eyed. “Knowledge?”

I knew she used to hang with Alexz quite a bit, so I wasn’t surprised that she knew his fake ass name. “Yeah, but his real name is Earl Riggs. I felt like it was my fault that my only sister almost got killed. My entire family was in danger, because they’d found out that he was connected to a terrorist group. The only names that weren’t on his list were Dylan’s and Isaiah’s. So, I had to get you away from me. If he went after my sister, he surely would have gotten someone to go after you.”

She remained quiet as she stared at me. It looked as if she was barely breathing. I wanted to wait for her response but when one didn’t come, I explained further. “The FBI and counterterrorist unit confirmed that no one was after our family and that I was the only one that needed to be concerned whenever I was at work. He could have one of his homeboys get at me. Today, I got sent home because I nearly fucked up an inmate who threatened me, saying if he was Earl, he would have killed me already.”

I was done talking. I felt like I'd said way too much, and I wanted to get up and leave her sitting right there. For some reason, I felt embarrassed, sensitive, and vulnerable. I didn't like the feeling of either of those emotions. I pulled away from her, and as I was about to stand, she looked up at me, tears falling uncontrollably from her eyes. "Why are you crying, Lexi?"

"Because you care for me more than you ever let on. I feel like a fool for not realizing it."

I scooted closer to her and pulled her in my arms. "Naw. That's all on me. I didn't want you to realize it, because I didn't want you to try to be with me anyway. You wouldn't have let go when you did if you knew something was going on. I broke your heart that night. I saw it in your demeanor and your eyes. You were crushed, and I did that to you. I just wanted you to understand. I know I still have some shit to prove to you. This was hard as hell. I've never been open like this, but Zay has been helping me with that for the past few weeks."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me tightly then kissed my cheek. "Thank you for finally telling me, Chad. This talk wasn't what I thought it would be."

"What did you think it would be?"

"You tryna persuade me to give you a chance... more promises of you being everything I wanted. I just knew you were going to lead me to your house."

Whew, shit. Glad I didn't go there. She would have kept driving. "I'm sorry. It seemed like I sold you a bunch of falsehoods. I wanted all of what I said I did. I needed you to know what was going on. I'm not as toxic as I seem. I have a reason for everything I do. Sharing those reasons just doesn't come naturally for me."

She leaned toward me and softly kissed my lips. When she pulled away, her eyes remained closed, and she took a deep breath and allowed a slight smile to grace her lips. When it suddenly dropped from her lips, I knew she was about to say

something that I wouldn't like. As I braced for it, she grabbed my hand and caressed it between hers.

“I uhhh... I need to umm...”

I put my finger to her lips. “I know you been living your best life. I'm not asking you to cut that shit off, but as we talk and get reacquainted, if you don't naturally feel obligated to shut that other shit down, then I'm not who you need to be with. Do that in your time. There's no rush. I still have work to do. Lots of conversations left to have with Isaiah,” I said, rolling my eyes.

She smiled again. “I'm proud of you, Chad. Just the fact that you're trying to be better is a start.”

I stood from my seat and helped her up as well, then we took a walk by the water, hand-in-hand. This felt right. I knew she'd been dating quite a bit. I knew I shouldn't assume that she'd been sleeping with all of them, but I could tell that she'd definitely slept with that nigga in McAlister's. The boldness he exerted and the way his eyes caressed her body told me that he'd been between her walls. While that had my blood simmering, I didn't have a right to be upset.

My rejection was like throwing her in the wild for the wolves to devour. So I knew she had loose ends to tie up, relationships to sever. I didn't expect that to happen overnight. While I wanted her, I knew that I needed to wait on that. Sex was gon' be there. However, when I dived into that shit again, I wouldn't be sharing with no-damn-body. She would be mine at that point.

I needed to be mature about this and give her time. I'd had plenty of time, so much time until she'd given up on ever having a relationship with me. I'd given up on myself, accepting the thought that I would be single for the rest of my life, because I didn't want anybody but her. If I couldn't safely be with her, I didn't want anyone. After being around her for a couple of months, I knew that she would be the woman to change me, especially after getting over how much she resembled Jana.

As we walked, I slid my arm around her waist and rested my hand on her hip. She seemed comfortable with that. Her phone had been ringing, but she'd been ignoring it. I wanted to reach in her bra and grab it. She kept it there when she wasn't carrying a purse and didn't have pockets. Just the thought of that had me wanting to rub on those pretty triple D's. Seizing my thoughts, I began heading to our cars. "I don't wanna take up too much of your time. Seems like someone is trying to contact you."

"Sorry. I didn't have plans, so whoever it is can wait until I'm available."

I smiled slightly at her but continued to our cars anyway. It felt good to have everything out in the open. Although I felt weird as shit earlier, I felt better about it now. Hopefully, it wouldn't be as difficult to talk to her in the future about anything that may arise. She was extremely understanding, and I was grateful that she'd had time alone to prepare herself for our conversation.

When we got to her car, she turned to me and leaned back against it. I licked my lips, a natural reaction whenever I looked at her, then put my hands to the car and leaned into her. I could see her nipples harden through her top. I was already beating myself up in my head. She was turned on, and that was turning me on even more. I didn't want to have emotional sex with her. I'd just convinced myself that I needed to wait until she had her shit in order.

However, here I was, thinking about fucking her against this car in the broad daylight. My dick was hard as hell, and when her gaze dropped, I knew she'd seen it. I closed my eyes and removed my hands from her car as I stood up straight. That shit was hard to do, because everything in me wanted to press my body against hers and take her mouth hostage.

"I'll call you later," I said in a low voice. "Be careful."

She just stared at me, silently begging me to be all in her space. When I backed away, I glanced at her nipples and, again, licked my lips. She took a step toward me then stopped. "O-okay," she said as she turned away.

I went to her door to open it for her, and before I knew it, I had grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling her head backward, and sliding my tongue to hers. She pressed her body against mine as she held my face, tongue fucking me like only she could. I slid my arm around her waist and pulled her close, rubbing her against my dick. Just like six months ago, I was ready to fire off in my pants.

Slowly, I pulled away from her and released her from my grasp then opened her door. "I'll be waiting for your call," she said softly.

Once she got in her car, I closed her door and quickly made my way to my SUV before I didn't. Her pheromones were strong as hell, because whenever I came in contact with her, I wanted to fuck her on sight. It was like she was in heat, and I was just the dawg to put her out of her misery. I'd only scratched the surface six months ago. The next time I got ahold of her, I was gonna fuck her world up.

Six

S

CHAD'S EXPLANATION of what had been going on with him made perfect sense. I accepted everything he'd said as truth because he didn't have to explain. He never did. So for him to explain now told me everything I needed to know. He cared enough to make an effort, and I was glad that I followed him to the river. It was like every part of me was all in, all over again. When he pressed his erection against me, I stopped breathing. I just knew I would be in his bed or hanging from his ceiling fan. I would have oscillated all fucking night with him.

The restraint he practiced was admirable. He wanted to take things slow, but I didn't know how long that shit would last. I didn't have a problem canceling every damn body for him. However, I didn't want to cancel everyone and then he pull away from me again. Maybe that was why he wanted to take things slow. *Ugh!*

I was ready, beyond ready, to be his. I'd been wanting this for over a year. Moving slow wouldn't be easy since I'd already had a taste. He called me, like he said he would, Friday evening. We talked on the phone for an hour, and I could hear the fun Chad make his way back toward the end of the conversation. Once the call ended, I was lost and restless. I wanted to go to his house and demand he take me.

Jungle had called me Friday night, and I literally turned him down. As bad as I wanted to fuck, Chad was the only man's dick I wanted to ride. Jungle put two and two together during our conversation and wished me well. He'd seen the

whole scene play out at McAlister's. I didn't have to explain shit to him. He was a smart man and very attentive, so I didn't know why he was trying to act clueless as to what went down.

Jericho hadn't called, but that wasn't unusual. He was never really consistent. We would just hook up whenever he had time and would enjoy a night together. He always made me feel what I was missing. Now that Chad was back in my life, I didn't see a point of even keeping Jericho around. I wondered if Chad was doubting his ability to even be in a relationship with me. I'd only received text messages from him Saturday and then a good morning text today.

I just wanted to be on him like a backpack whenever I wasn't at work... When he moved, I moved, just like that. I supposed my roster didn't even matter anymore. *Fuck them niggas*. None of them compared to Chad. His rude ass had me sprung. Anything could fall out of Chad's mouth. Friday, I was thoroughly impressed that he was able to keep it together for the most part. I could tell that he wanted to dig in my ass about Jungle. Our reconnection would have gone south real quick.

I rolled over in bed and stared at the wall, dreading that it was Sunday and I would have to go back to work tomorrow. I wasn't built to work. I was supposed to be a rich bitch, my feet kicked up in the lap of luxury, summoning people to do shit for me. I giggled at my crazy ass thoughts, then finally got up and started the shower.

After getting my clothes out, I texted Chad. *Enjoy your day. Hopefully, we can talk later.*

Sundays were really lonely for me since I refused to go to Mr. Berotte's house anymore. I could admit what I did was slightly immature. Had it been anywhere else besides Chad's dad's house, I wouldn't even give a shit. That was disrespectful to his people. Technically, I didn't do anything. However, I *did* allow Seneca to do disrespectful things to me in front of everyone, knowing of my past with Chad. I should have put him in his place.

But shit, what past? Chad didn't tell his business, and neither did I for the most part. Everything everyone thought

they knew was all assumptions. When I consoled him at the wedding, they thought all was right in our world. I just felt for him in that moment. Chad and I were never a couple. We had never really even entered a talking phase. We hung out together from time to time, although he was well-aware of how I felt about him. So his family assumed that I was his, which couldn't be further from the truth.

Going to Mr. Berotte and Mama Nissa's house on Sundays was how I spent time with everyone. Despite the situation between me and Chad, I looked at Mama Nissa like a second mother, and Chad's brothers were my brothers. Alexz was my sister. Not anymore. I was the outcast now. That gave me more time to fuck around unnecessarily. Chad deserved that reality check, but I definitely regretted where I did it.

Clearly, Chad had a problem with what he saw. However, I wanted him to see that I wouldn't always be here waiting for his ass. I didn't belong to him. Before Friday, I felt like he was stringing me along for his selfish desires. He was fucking around with other women like I didn't matter. If I were honest with myself, I knew I'd fallen for him. After only a month of back and forth, I loved him.

However, everyone already thought that because I was dating, I was fucking around with all those men anyway, especially since Chad used to send me pics of me with other people like I belonged to him. So selling that shit with Seneca was easy. I didn't start fucking around until after I fucked him. I chose the wrong way to try to heal myself. Fucking and entertaining different men was only a distraction from the real issue. It was in no way healing me.

That was why I could no longer be in Chad's presence. I still loved him, and I was still hurt. Talking to him Friday made me see that. I'd been reacting to him in ways that a hurt person would react... without thinking. Although I felt extremely guilty about those actions, I knew I wasn't the only one at fault. He was just as responsible as I was. Now if only I could make my heart feel that.

Before I could head to the shower, he responded to my text. *I wish you would come with me.*

He already knew that was a no-go. He would definitely have to smooth things over with everybody before I stepped foot back in that house. No one knew how much I wanted to be with him or all the lies and shit I took from him over the past few months, not even Skyler. I was too embarrassed to tell her what I was putting up with from her brother-in-law. So my foolishness looked unwarranted and like Chad was totally innocent in the situation.

I supposed none of that shit mattered anymore if I was going to accept him back into my life. I quickly texted him back. *You know I can't do that. Call me later this evening when you leave.*

I took a deep breath, accepting responsibility that, because of my actions, I couldn't be with him at his people's house, people who not so long ago were my people too. Going to the shower, I started to let my negative thoughts take over, thinking that I wasn't good enough for his family anyway. I noticed since the foolishness six months ago, I'd been a lot harder on myself, not as forgiving of my own actions.

I let the hot water cascade over me and wondered if I even deserved Chad. Knowing the reasons why he kept pulling away from me made me feel guilty as hell, especially the latest one. One minute I was justifying my reasons, and the next, I was beating myself up. I took a deep breath and said aloud, "Lexi, quit trippin'!"

I slowly shook my head, then let my hair get wet. It wasn't like I had shit else to do today. I could wash and detangle my hair, moisturize it, and twist it. It would make for a pretty decent twist out tomorrow.

By the time I finished washing and conditioning my hair, I knew I had to have been in the shower for at least an hour. After towel drying my hair and wrapping a towel around my torso, the doorbell rang. I immediately went to my phone to see if anyone had texted or called while I was in the shower, because no one popped up, not even my mama. I had received a message from Skyler.

I checked it quickly to see that she was coming over to pick up a scarf. I didn't know what the hell she needed a scarf for. It was May, and it was already hotter than Satan's ball sack. I tightened the towel around my torso, only to open the door and find Chad standing there instead of Skyler. I nearly dropped my towel. As I desperately grasped at it, he invited himself inside and closed the door behind him. "What are you doing here, Chad?"

"Skyler didn't text you? I told her to let you know that I would be coming to get the scarf. I needed to see you anyway."

"Well... close your eyes so I can fix my towel. Plus, I didn't see that text."

"Close my eyes? For real? I done seen all of that fine ass body already. You gon' deny me the pleasure, Lex?"

"Chad..."

"A'ight, a'ight."

He closed his eyes, and I quickly straightened my towel. When I looked up, I said, "Okay. You can open them. If yo' ass even closed them."

He chuckled as he rubbed his hand over his mouth. When my eyes widened, he said, "I closed my eyes. I'm just fucking with you."

I slightly rolled my eyes as I turned to go to my bedroom to get the scarf. When I turned to enter, I realized Chad was right behind me. I stopped abruptly, and he bumped right into me. I swore this felt like shit that happened in the movies. Of course, my towel fell, and Chad got a full view of everything I wanted his ass to have. He scooped me up without thinking twice and took me to my bed.

After dropping me to it, he went to his knees, and his face landed right in my pussy. The tongue that I'd been fantasizing about since I first saw him do that sexy ass neck roll with his tongue out while they did their stroll one Sunday, was already stroking the hell out of me. That shit was just as powerful as it

looked. It was long and thick. Who in the fuck fantasized about a strong tongue? *Hand in the air... me.*

I grabbed a hold of his bald head as my eyes rolled to the back of my head. “Ooooh shit!”

What he was doing to me felt so good, and I’d been fiending for it for the past six months, but I knew this wasn’t good. He said he wanted to move slowly. This wasn’t slowly. I opened my eyes and took a deep breath then regretfully pulled away from him. My pussy was trying to detach itself from me to get back to him.

He looked up at me as my juices glistened in his beard. The slight frown on his face had me about to cum without him touching me. He looked like he was about to be in beast mode, and there wouldn’t be no coming back from it if he got that far. I brought my hands to my breasts and covered them as I closed my legs. “Chad, we can’t do this. You said you wanted to go slow, remember? I think this is the opposite of that.”

He gripped my ankles and yanked me to him. “I know what I said, but don’t ever interrupt a dawg’s meal again. You gon’ get bit next time.”

The way his lip twitched, that nigga had me questioning whether he had somehow become a real ass dog. He once again lowered his head and lifted my hips slightly so he could watch me while he ate my pussy. I couldn’t handle that shit. My legs were already trembling as he sucked my clit and massaged my ass at the same time. However, when he lifted his head slightly and stuck out that long thick tongue to flick back and forth over my clit, I was done.

I closed my eyes and gripped my nipples as my body convulsed. That shit had my spine and feet tingling like I’d been given a pain shot. Before I could even come down from the high, Chad had pushed inside of me, causing my eyes to pop open. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. It was just like last time. When he wanted me, he took me. Albeit, I went willingly, he took the first step in that direction and never waited for my approval. It was like my body belonged to him.

“Chad—”

“Shhhh... fuck! I missed this shit.”

He brought his head to my chest and pulled one of my nipples into his mouth as he fucked me all the way up. His dick had to be the eighth wonder of the world. His girth was everything. I'd had a big dick before, but none quite as thick. His shit could perform a demolition all by itself. This just didn't feel right though. It felt rushed and just weird. I was being pleased, but my soul didn't feel right about this.

Maybe I was thinking too much. I began throwing my hips back at him as he brought his hand to my neck and hooked my leg with his other arm. “Lexi, fuck! Let this pussy nut for me. Spray this dick, girl.”

My orgasm was right at the verge of exploding, but it seemed it didn't want to show itself. It was like having to sneeze and not being able to get that shit to come out. I opened my eyes to see Chad staring at me. It was like there was no emotional connection at all... not like I normally felt whenever I stared into his eyes. The thought of this being a mistake reentered my mind, and I couldn't stop the tears from falling to my cheeks. He closed his eyes and fucked me slower.

My emotions didn't affect the wetness of my pussy. She wanted every thrust he had to give her, and eventually, her tears matched mine. She cried out her undying passion and love for him. While the pleasure was overwhelming, so were my emotions.

“Oh fuck! Yeah, Lexi,” Chad said as he began plummeting my shit without a care in the world.

My soul was crying, and I didn't know why. When Chad stilled inside of me, I knew he'd nudded. The only sounds were my slight moans and his grunts. It wasn't until he pulled out of me that I realized there was no condom in sight. I quickly hopped up from the bed and ran to the bathroom. I wasn't on the pill. I hated taking medication. He knew that. I started the shower and after relieving myself and taking a few deep breaths, I washed my hands and exited to find him putting his shorts back on.

I went straight to my closet and got the scarf to hand to him. He stared at me for a moment as he took the scarf from me but didn't offer any words of consolation. Before I could walk away, he grabbed my arm and pulled my naked body to him. He laid his lips on mine and kissed me like it would be the last time. *There was the passion.* What I needed to feel while he was fucking me down was present in his kiss.

He pulled away and ran his hand over my wet hair and then down to my cheek, but he still said nothing. He turned away from me and walked out of the room as I stood there frozen and feeling violated. When I heard the door close, it was like someone had fired a gun at my chest and the bullet hit me right in the heart. *This was a goodbye fuck.* He was renegeing on all his words... yet again.

The tears fell from my eyes, and I didn't know where to go from here. I was assuming, but he left me no choice. He left here without a word of explanation. He seemed playful when he got here, but it was like while he practically assaulted me, something changed, and my soul picked up on it right away. My soul was tied to his, but it was like now, it was extremely sensitive to him too. I trudged my way back to the shower, feeling depressed and confused. Once again, he was going to leave me in the dark after taking advantage of my love, and I was getting beyond sick of being hurt by him.

It seemed that he was the only Berotte that didn't know what the fuck he wanted, and I was tired of being the one to suffer from his indecisiveness and demons. I loved him so much, and that was my fucking downfall. I kept letting him in only for him to fuck me in return, literally and figuratively.

Seven

S

CHAD

“HERE’S THE SCARF,” I said as I handed it to Skyler and walked past them to the kitchen.

I’d fucked up big time. When Lexi showed up at the door in that towel, I couldn’t control myself. While fucking her, my mind decided to take me on a scenic tour of all the men I’d seen her with and how they’d probably been in the very position I was in. I jumped the gun. Then I nutted inside of her. Unless something had changed, I knew she wasn’t on birth control. Shit, she should be on birth control with all the dick she was running through.

She tried to stop me. This was on me. I knew I wasn’t ready, but her body was something to behold. She was fine as fuck, and my restraint was practically nonexistent around her. She had my nose wide open. It was like whenever I wanted to open up with her and be free, something always prevented that from happening. Then I left her place without a word. That shit made me feel worse.

As I leaned over the sink, I heard DJ ask, “What’s up with you, dawg?”

I stood up straight and dragged my hand over my face. “I fucked up, but ain’t shit I can do about it now.”

“Man, what happened? Come outside.”

I took a deep breath, not really wanting to talk about it, but maybe he could give me advice on how to go about getting in Lexi’s good graces again. I didn’t know why I was so bothered about who she’d been with. She was only reacting to my

rejection. That was some shit Isaiah had said. That nigga understood every damn body and offered the most thought-provoking statements I'd ever heard. He helped me to accept all the wrong between me and Lexi. She wanted me from day one, and I played in her face time and time again.

However, what I saw in her eyes before I walked away today nearly crippled me. I'd hurt her again, and in a short amount of time. Just Friday evening, I'd convinced her that I was ready to be open and honest with her, and I was ready to be serious about her. It hadn't even been two whole days and I'd fucked up, making her think that, once again, I'd lied and played in her face.

When we got outside, I told DJ what happened between me and Lexi a few minutes ago. He stared at me, seemingly not surprised by anything I was saying. Once I stopped, he said, "That's my bad. I caused this by sending those pictures to you. I was just trying to make you see what you were missing out on. Just like you had to tell me that dating didn't equate to commitment, I have to tell you that dating doesn't equate to fucking. Just because she was out with them doesn't mean they were fucking."

"Yeah, but I met a guy she was fucking in McAlister's Friday."

"But you ain't been celibate either, though. You forgot you left the club with that chick a month ago? Come on, man. You can't be this fucked up to think what's good for the goose ain't good for the gander."

I frowned at him for spitting out that old ass shit that my dad used to say when we were kids. He was right though. If only I could think about shit like that before I reacted. I sat on the patio furniture, and he did the same. I could see him staring at me in my peripheral. DJ had been my friend a long time, and I knew that he knew I was thinking about what he said. I internalized a lot, especially matters of the heart.

There were only a few women that I'd loved in my lifetime. My mother, the first woman to ever have my heart, was taken away from me. I was angry at God for a long time.

It wasn't fair. With all the horrible parents out there, why did He have to take one of the good ones? It was then that I began internalizing a lot. No one seemed to understand my anger. Marie Berotte was still in my heart and always would be. She was the woman I could go to whenever I was having a problem. Although I was only eight when she died, I knew that I could be an open book with her.

My sister, Alexz with a Z, was almost taken from me as well, because of my involvement in a situation at work. Jana, my first love, left me and broke my heart. All the women that I'd opened up to and was free with suffered something from the aftermath of that. My head wanted to believe that if I fully opened up to Lexi, it wouldn't last. God forbid she ended up dying.

"Chad, you gon' have to get a handle on things, man. You probably did jump the gun. You weren't mentally ready for that. I know you have needs, but you gon' have to fulfill that shit elsewhere until you're as ready as she is. I'm sure she's been playing the field, but she *wants* you. She's only doing that shit to pass time. You love her. I can see it plain as day. Until you can operate in that love though, you gon' need to stop playing with her heart."

"Zay the counselor or you?"

DJ rolled his eyes and chuckled. He always offered good advice. Although I was the one who'd lost a mother, he had basically lost his father. The man was addicted to drugs for most of his life. He had to grow up fast, and he learned a lot during the process. One thing he knew was women. He was never really a playboy like his brother, Jamel. With respect to love, he was a lot like Zay. I'd never met Shavozz, but I knew that if things worked out between them, she would be getting a good man.

I wished my body could process loss better than it did. Sometimes, I thought I still wasn't over losing my mother and that I was looking for love to replace hers. No one could replace her. She was the only woman that knew and loved all of me, and unless I got a handle on all of this, she would remain the only one.

“You like to deflect,” he said.

“I hear you, man.”

“So they having fucking triplets? How the fuck they gon’ handle that shit?”

I chuckled. “That’s a good ass question. Zay is superman though. That nigga can handle whatever life throws at him.”

“And so can you. You just have to tap into your superpowers.”

I nodded. He was right. If only I knew how, I wouldn’t be in this situation. It seemed I was just a fucked-up nigga that fucked up every woman he touched. “A’ight. Let’s go back inside.”

When I walked through the door, the women were still rubbing on Joyy and Alexz’s bellies. They had been planning how they would decorate for Shy and Brittany’s wedding. I wanted to believe that Lexi was supposed to be in it to walk with me. However, since she hadn’t been here, I didn’t think that was the case anymore. I knew for sure that Alexz was Brittany’s matron of honor. She’d gotten extremely close to Skyler too. So I wasn’t sure if Joyy was in the wedding or not.

I would most likely be walking with Alexz for yet another wedding, because I was Shy’s best man. This would be the fourth damned wedding in less than a year. Well, Dylan really didn’t have a wedding, but the point was, everyone was all in love and shit and doing well, except me.

When I sat on the couch, Mama Nissa sat next to me. She grabbed my hand and just held it for a moment. I wasn’t sure what she was doing, but I knew something was coming. She rubbed my hand between hers as my dad glanced over at us while talking to Shy. I knew they were all discreetly watching, because Berottes were nosy by nature. It was in all our DNAs. Shy had a lil bit more than most of us.

Finally, she said softly, “It’s been two weeks. I haven’t cooked tripe in two weeks, and I don’t know how I feel about that, baby.”

While I considered her a second mother, I was never really personal with her. She only knew what I allowed her to see about me. None of the women in my life were close to me, not even Alexz. That was why I argued with her so much. I loved the hell out of her, and I almost got her killed. I didn't think I would ever live that shit down.

I squeezed Mama Nissa's hand. "I just don't wanna get tired of it. It's nothing personal. I promise."

She kissed my cheek then stood from her seat and went back over to the ladies. I honestly wished one of them would go check on Lexi and make sure she was okay. Ms. Patricia was always here on Sundays. Lexi had nobody, and I knew that was because she was a lot like me. She didn't really tell her business too much. That was why that shit with Seneca caught me off guard. Although he initiated everything, just the fact that she allowed the shit was surprising.

I grabbed my phone from my pocket and sent her a text message. She probably hated me now. I couldn't seem to get this shit right with her. *I'm sorry. I didn't stick to my word, and I made things awkward between us.*

I sent that message and waited for a response from her. I wanted to say more, but if she didn't respond, then there was probably no need in doing so. Maybe I could make up for today. Hopefully, she went and got a Plan B, or we would be talking sooner than later. It seemed all of us Berottes were in heat. I was just waiting for Skyler to pop up pregnant again and for Brittany to announce something too.

It had been five minutes, and Lexi still hadn't responded. I exhaled a bit and just accepted that she probably wouldn't respond. Skyler turned to me with a smile and said, "Lexi was probably happy to see you, huh?"

Everybody turned their attention to me. I simply nodded and said, "Yep."

DJ glanced at me then came to my rescue. "Well, I think the time is coming for y'all to meet Shavozz. We've been talking for about three months, and it seems that we may be finally moving to the next level of dating."

I chuckled when he said that last line. “Nigga, what’chu mean the next level of dating?” Shy asked.

DJ stood from his seat and said, “I learned that there are levels to this when dealing with an experienced woman. Shavozz has been married before and has two kids. I assumed that when we were talking, shit was exclusive. She let me know that I had to say that shit and quit assuming that I was her only option. So, I asked her to date me exclusively last week, and she said yeah. Now I can introduce her to my family. She said she wasn’t meeting family of a nigga that didn’t voice his intentions.”

“I like her already,” Mama Nissa said as Dad chuckled.

“Oh, she ain’t finna play wit’cho ass,” Shy added.

“Well, I understood where she was coming from. Too many people done tried to play in her face. She had to make sure a nigga wasn’t playing. I get that.”

“That’s good, DJ. I’ve always admired how you respect women,” Alexz added. “She must be a really good woman. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Yeah, I think you’ll like her.”

I was glad he took the focus off me, but it didn’t get by Zay. He was staring at me like he was analyzing me or some shit. Thankfully, he didn’t say a word, but I knew we would be talking about all this tomorrow. I looked back at my cell phone to see that my message wasn’t delivered, but it didn’t give me the option to retry. She’d blocked me. *Damn.*

I needed to be alone right now. It felt like everybody was analyzing me although they’d gone on to the next conversation. I needed to put this shit out of my mind, and the moment Alexz gripped her belly, I knew that was probably the best distraction that money couldn’t buy.

“Hey, you okay, Alexz?” I asked, causing everyone’s attention to turn to her.

“I think it was just a contraction. It’s not time yet.”

“You’re thirty-six weeks, right?” Mama Nissa asked.

“No. I’m only thirty-two weeks,” Alexz grunted out.

“I think they may have gotten your due date wrong. You look full-term, sweetheart. If you’re at least thirty-six weeks, that baby could come at any time. Let’s time these contractions. I’ll time how long they last, and Brittany, you can time between them.”

The ladies were on their shit, so I stood from the couch and went and got pillows to make her more comfortable. Ax was right by her side, holding her hand. When she stood from the chair she was sitting in, she said, “Oh shit.”

Everybody froze, waiting for her to say what was up. “No need in timing anything. My water just broke.”

The women started screaming in excitement, and she laughed until another contraction hit her ass. I went to her and scooped her up to take her to their car. I was nervous, but she seemed to be just fine. All I could think about was Mama and hoping that my sister would have a safe delivery. She laid her head on my chest as we walked, and I kissed her forehead. Ax opened the door and said, “Thanks, bruh.”

He turned to Joyy as I put Alexz in their front seat, to tell her to call his family, and she was already on it. “Everything will be fine, baby. We’re all right behind y’all.”

She looked at me seriously and said, “Lexi is embarrassed by what happened, but after thinking about what happened, I realized she was on some get back shit. Take care of her heart, Chad. You can do that. You love hard, but you don’t give it easily. Let her see it before it’s too late. Don’t let your issues get in the way. I love you, and I wanna see you happy like all of us are.”

“A’ight. Worry about that baby before you be having her in the car. I’ll be fine.”

I kissed her head again as I swallowed the lump in my throat and closed the door, praying that all went well.

Eight

8

I WAS TIRED AS FUCK. I'd had to take a sick day today because I felt like shit. After Chad left yesterday, I took another shower then brushed my hair into a ponytail. The energy I needed to twist it had all been exerted on his ass. It felt like I cried for hours about how stupid I had been. When I told him no, I should have stuck by that. I blocked his number and vowed that I would be better to myself.

Later that night, I called and cursed Skyler the fuck out for sending him without telling me. She was stunned, but I didn't even care. She'd answered the phone sounding all happy because Alexz was in labor. Knowing that only pissed me off further. I was supposed to be there, rejoicing and excited like everyone else.

It didn't help that I was thinking about the shit Chad had told me about his ex, Jana, and how much we looked alike. That shit had my nerves bad. My dad had been cheating on my mother for practically their entire marriage, so I was more than sure that he was a ho before they got married. What if this Jana woman was his child? It was possible that I could have brothers and sisters all over the fucking country since he traveled a lot as an attorney.

When I woke up this morning, I was congested and had a headache like I had a hangover. I did have a hangover... a love hangover. I was back to dealing with that constant bullshit Summer Walker had sung about, except there was no relationship involved. He didn't have to be loyal to me, but he needed to at least be honest. Friday evening, I thought I made

the right decision. He proved me wrong yesterday. I was angrier with myself than I was with him.

I'd been in bed all day, lying in the fetal position in the dark. I hated taking medication, so I knew resting as much as possible would be my best bet. I would take some Tylenol later if I didn't feel any better. My job was going to get tired of me and push me out of the door if I didn't get it together. This time, I would get it together like I should have before. I refused to project any negative energy on anyone else.

Since I'd cut things off with Jungle and a couple of others, Jericho was the only man that I would allow to enter my sanctuary. Although he wasn't mine, he still made me feel loved, and I knew I could use that from time to time.

As I lay in bed, someone knocked at the door. Right after, my phone rang. Checking it, I saw my mama's phone number. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby. It's me at the door."

"Okay."

I'd messaged her to let her know that I wasn't going to work, but she hadn't responded until now. I pulled myself from the bed and went to unlock the door. When I opened it, I noticed Skyler was with her. I trudged back to my room while they followed me. The minute I got close to my bed, I fell in it.

"Are you hungover?" my mama asked.

"No. I'm congested, and I have a headache." After pausing for a minute, I said, "And heartbroken."

I burst into tears all over again as I gripped my pillow, holding it to me like it was a person. I felt them getting in bed with me, but I couldn't move. "Lexi, what's wrong?" Skyler asked, her voice cracking like she was about to cry too.

"The man I love doesn't love me, and it hurts. He lies to me time and time again, then makes excuses for his broken promises. I allow him back in my life only for him to fuck up again. I'm sick of it, and that's probably why I feel horrible. I'm tired of being taken advantage of. I'm done with Chad

Berotte. I can't deal anymore. He needs to work on himself before fucking with me."

It was completely quiet, and I knew it was because they were in shock that I actually said what was wrong. I usually brushed them off and pretended that whatever was going on with me wasn't that serious. Not this time. It was serious, and I planned to let whatever came out of my mouth to just spill like tea. I didn't give a fuck anymore, and it was time I started thinking about me. Everybody thought I was the bad guy anyway.

"He came here yesterday, and because you didn't say it was him that was coming, I went to the door in my damn towel, thinking it was you. Although I offered a weak protest, reminding him of what he said about taking things slow, he forced the issue, and I didn't stop him... again. After he got what he wanted, he left me here, naked, without a word. The whole thing just felt weird as hell. Sorry, Mama, but he got his fucking nut, then he left me here like a two-dollar ho!"

I cried so much I had to run to the bathroom to throw up. Once I cleaned up, I went back to my room and got some clothes to put on. When I turned back to them, they were silent. "This was the second time he's done that to me. That was why I allowed Seneca to do what he wanted. I'm sick of pining after a man that doesn't know what he wants. I've never felt so disrespected in my life. He used me then disposed me. I'm done with that shit."

My mama stood from my bed and hugged me tightly. "I'm so sorry, baby. I had no idea that things were this serious between the two of you."

"Apparently, they weren't," I said as I pulled away from her.

Skyler was still sitting in my bed, tears falling from her eyes. The attorney was stuck and didn't know what to say. That was rare. When I got in bed, I turned to her. "I'm sorry, Sky. This isn't your fault. I'm just angry and hurt like hell."

She lay in bed with me and pulled me to her, like she used to do when we were little and I'd gotten in trouble. I was the

one always doing something I had no business doing when we were young. I was naturally inquisitive and an explorer. I didn't ask questions. I found out shit for myself. That got me in trouble all the time. My mama said that started from the time I became mobile.

"I'm so sorry, Lexi. I thought I was surprising you because he said that y'all were talking again, and he wanted to go see you anyway. I had no idea things would take a turn like that."

"Neither did I. He seemed to be in a good mood when he got here, but things headed south suddenly."

My mama handed me some tissue, so I sat up and blew my nose. "I'm gonna fix you something to eat. You need to eat if you wanna start feeling better," she said.

I nodded as I cleaned my nose then got up to throw the tissue away. "I have to get back to work, but I was worried about you. You ain't never cursed me out like that. Shit, I was in shock. It bothered me all night."

"How's Alexz?" I asked, changing the subject.

"She's great," she said with a smile. "The baby is seven pounds and two ounces, nineteen inches long. She's a little butterball. So far, she looks like Alexz. They clearly had her due date wrong. I don't know how in the hell they were a whole six weeks off with all the technology available these days."

"What did they name her?"

"Ariana Marie."

I smiled slightly. "That's beautiful. Do you have any pictures?"

She smiled again. "I'll text them to you. I have to get lunch and get back to work. I have a client coming in for a consult."

"Okay. Talk to you later."

I grabbed my phone as I waited for her text messages to come through. After closing my eyes and taking in a few deep breaths through my mouth, I headed to the kitchen with my mama. I was going to have to force myself to feel better, and I

knew that wouldn't happen if I stayed in bed all day. It felt like my feet had two-ton weights tied to them, and it seemed to take forever to get to the kitchen.

When I got there, I saw my mama standing at the microwave, dropping tears. I didn't know what those tears were about, but I was surely about to find out. I made my way to her, and when she saw me, she quickly dried her face. "This soup ought to make you feel a little better."

"Mama, what's wrong?"

She quickly shook her head. "It's nothing, baby. Go have a seat, so I can bring your soup to the table."

"Mama, please, just tell me," I said as I sat at the table.

She exhaled hard, then said, "I just don't want to see you be me. Don't ever let a man lower your standards. I've watched you become someone you're not because of Chad's rejection. I can tell when things don't go like you think they should. You alienate yourself from us, you get sick, or you just have a really horrible attitude. I let your dad use me and demean me. Don't do that. I need you to recognize your worth and hold everybody to a damn standard."

I lowered my head and hated that I even asked her to tell me. I didn't want to talk about Chad anymore. It was hard enough saying all that to them a little while ago. She set the bowl in front of me with a bottle of water, then sat in the chair next to me. She remained silent for a couple of minutes. I finally looked up at her and said, "Mama, I love him. He keeps hurting me over and over again, simply by not talking to me and shutting me out."

"Baby, a big part of any relationship is communication. Besides love, it's the most important. However, at this point, I need you to think about you. Don't lower your standards to make him notice you. Upgrade on his ass. That mess with Seneca wasn't you. I know I told you that already, but I had to reiterate it. If he doesn't know your worth, that's his bad. He can kick rocks. One day, a man is going to come along that will take your breath away. You won't have to tell him how to treat you. He'll already know."

I lowered my head, once again, as I stirred my soup. “I thought Chad was that man. He stole my breath away when I first laid eyes on him. Why can’t he just let me in? I can feel how much he cares for me whenever he stares at me too long. But then something happens that causes him to retreat... tuck tail and run. I can’t continue on this rollercoaster. It’s too hard on my mental. Not having him is hard on my mental too.”

She slid her arm around me as tears fell from my eyes. “I know, baby. Your dad always promised to do right by me. Although Chad and your dad are two totally different men, his promises to me always ended up broken. He broke my heart, over and over again, for a long time. I feel like I taught you to endure. Endurance is okay, but not when you have to sacrifice your peace to do so. You are in turmoil, baby. I’m not saying Chad won’t ever get himself together, but you can’t stop living until the day that he does. Make yourself a priority.”

I nodded and began eating my soup. She stood from the table, and after a minute or two, she came back with a sandwich. After my first spoon of soup, I realized just how hungry I was. I practically scarfed it all down. My mama chuckled as she watched me, and I had to join her. “Thank you, Mama.”

“You don’t have to thank me. You and Chad are a lot alike. Don’t hold in things like that. I’m not saying you have to tell me, but you need to get it out to someone. It will only destroy you from the inside out.”

“Yes, ma’am. Who better to talk to than you though?”

She gave me a soft smile then kissed my cheek. I closed my eyes for a moment, knowing that this process would hurt, but I had to push Chad out of my heart. Hanging on to him, hoping he would realize how much he needed me, was dragging me through the mud. She was so right about that, and I was thankful that she was able to talk some sense into me. She stood from the table and started loading my dishwasher as my phone rang.

I knew it wasn’t Chad, because I’d blocked him. I looked at the caller ID to see that it was Jericho. He rarely called

during the week, but I was assuming he wanted to apologize for not reaching out this past weekend. I couldn't answer his call with the way I was feeling right now. If I did, I would end up sliding down his dick. I was too vulnerable to even entertain a phone call, especially because of the temporary relief I knew he could make me feel. I was tired of temporary relief. I needed something permanent. The love my body craved... I would have to give to myself.

If I couldn't fully love myself, then how could I expect someone else to? A new day had to begin for Alexis Danielle Fontenot, and that day was going to begin today.

Nine

S

CHAD

“I TOLD YO’ ass to leave her alone until you got a handle on the bullshit you were having issues with. Now you done fucked up your progress. You selfish and hardheaded. It’s been a whole month, and you haven’t gotten any better! This is a fucking waste of time if you gon’ do what the fuck you wanna do. You’ve retreated into your own fucked up way of thinking. I have a pregnant fiancée to see about and a wedding to get ready for next weekend. I got plenty of other shit I could be doing.”

Zay was chewing my ass out, and I knew I deserved every bit of it. I’d been going through the motions and not doing the work. Even now, I was half listening. I’d fucked up for real. I’d even considered going to Lexi’s place, but I knew that I’d hurt her enough. I was putting her through enough. Everything I promised her I would do, I’d failed miserably. My intentions were always pure, but when it came to executing shit, I had real issues.

“You’re not even listening now! I try not to give up on people, but it’s hard when they’ve already given up on themselves. Chad, I love you, man. But I can’t make you do shit you don’t wanna do. You going down a road of self-destruction. I’m here to help you, but I can’t do the work for you. Let’s go ahead and end this session. Call me when you’re ready to resume them.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, knowing that if Zay was fed up with me, then I was really fucked up. When I stood, I was about to walk off, but Zay grabbed my arm and pulled me into

a hug. I got flashes of when I was a kid and how he always took care of me. He always had my back, and I'd let him down. I rested my forehead on his shoulder for a moment, then pulled away from him. The way his gaze bore into me only made me feel worse. I was starting to wish Knowledge would have just taken me out so I wouldn't be feeling this tortured.

It seemed that thoughts of my mother had gotten more frequent these days, and I knew it was because of the way I'd done Lexi. I turned a loving and caring woman into a cold individual who no longer gave a fuck, and I beat myself up about it daily. I grabbed my keys from his desk and headed out to the back door. Joyy was standing in the kitchen, staring into the open refrigerator while rubbing her belly.

“You're leaving already?” she questioned.

“Yeah. See y'all later.”

I walked out, before she could ask anything else, and got into my vehicle. I thought I would head home, but instead, I found myself sitting in Alexz and Ax's driveway. After taking a deep breath, I got out and went to the door. When Ax opened it, he started barking. He knew that shit got on Alexz's nerves. I chuckled and slapped his hand as Alexz yelled, “Nigga, shut that shit up!”

I couldn't leave Ax hanging, so I started barking too. “Aww, fuck no!”

I laughed as she made her way to us, looking even more beautiful than she already was. Motherhood had done great things for her, and I was so proud of how far she'd come. Having Ax in her life had put a permanent glow on her face, but the glow she had now was of no comparison. When she got to me, she punched me in the arm.

“Well, damn. How you feeling, big head?” I asked.

“I was fine until somebody took the muzzles off y'all asses.”

I picked her up and started running with her only for her to start kicking and screaming. She'd had the baby a month ago, and Ariana slept like a log. We could strike up the band right

next to her crib, and she wouldn't even flinch. She was the total opposite of Alexz... so laid back and unbothered. Once I set Alexz on her feet, I hugged her.

“I came to see my niece. Apparently, she's asleep.”

Alexz tilted her head slightly. “Yeah, she's asleep, as usual, but you can go in there and hold her if you want to.”

I nodded then made my way to her nursery. Even after all the shenanigans with Alexz, my heart felt like it was bleeding. The past month had been tough. Things had gotten even more hectic at work, and I was at my breaking point. The warden had mentioned me going to Pollock again, and I almost came unglued on his ass. I'd gotten suspended without pay. That muthafucka was fucking with me, and I hated that nobody seemed to notice that shit. They were trying to make me out to be crazy and suffering from the intel that I knew about Knowledge.

I was just ready to be done with that place altogether, and since the last incident, Charles seemed to be playing for the other team. He didn't seem to have my back like he made me believe. It felt like it was me against the damn world, and I didn't know what to do about it other than to start looking for another job.

When I walked inside the nursery, Ariana was on her back, and her little mouth was open. I chuckled softly as sanitized my hands and put her blanket over the front of me, then picked her up. Her eyes opened, and a frown made its way to her chunky face. It was like she wanted to curse me the hell out for breaking her sleep. “Don't worry, lil bit. You can go back to sleep in a minute.”

I made my way to the rocking chair as she tried to eat her hand. Just that fast, she'd moved past her irritation with me and was in a better place, trying to soothe herself to reach the state of euphoria she was feeling before I arrived. That was a lesson in itself. I came here to allow her to soothe me, only for me to learn a lesson from a baby. When I sat, I began rocking slowly as I laid her on my chest.

“You know, lil bit, you look just like your mama did when she was a baby. She had all this pretty hair that you have, and she was chunky like you too. She wasn’t nearly as chill as you, though. She cried a lot. We were all crying a lot though, so maybe she was picking up on our energy. We’d lost your grandmother, and none of us knew how to move on. I think I kind of got used to faking my turmoil. I started acting out a bit to distract me from the hurt I was feeling. Your uncle Zay got me back on track though.”

She moaned a bit as I gently rubbed circles on her back. “The way you found peace, even in disruption, was something I never thought about until seeing you do it today. Maybe this was why I was led to come here. I can’t seem to get my life back on track, and I know it’s because I refuse to be totally truthful with Zay during counseling.”

I closed my eyes as I rocked, and when I felt the tears stream down my cheeks, I knew that I had possibly reached a breakthrough. Tears didn’t grace my cheeks often, but this past year had been rough. From the situation with Alexz, her wedding, Mariena’s birth, and now this precious angel being here, I couldn’t catch a break. However, I realized most of them had one thing in common: *Marie Berotte*.

At Alexz’s wedding, Dad played that video of Mama, and it nearly took me out. Mariena’s birth was emotional because of her name. This little angel’s name had also reflected the memory of our mother. However, the most detrimental piece of the puzzle was almost losing Alexz. It seemed like the problem was not properly dealing with the loss of my mother.

I kissed Ariana’s head, then heard, “I had issues too. I was craving a woman I never knew until I decided to accept that I would never have her. I embraced Mama Nissa, and things changed for me.”

I opened my eyes to see Alexz standing in the doorway. I quickly wiped my tears, hating that she’d seen me this vulnerable. “I’m good.”

“No, you aren’t, and it’s okay to admit that you aren’t, Chad.”

I quickly stood and laid Ariana back in her crib. She frowned again as if she was saying, *This nigga here*. I gave her the pacifier in her bed then quickly made my way by Alexz. I didn't need her eavesdropping on me like that. While I was sure it wasn't intentional, she was one of the last people I wanted to talk about my issues to.

As I made my way to the door, she caught up with me and jumped on my back. I took a deep breath as I continued with her attached to me. She used to do that all the time when she wanted me to talk to her or take her somewhere. I couldn't get away from her lil ass back then, and I could see that I wouldn't be able to get away from her lil ass now.

Ax slowly shook his head at her as I slapped his hand and made my way out of the door. When I got to my SUV, I asked, "You gon' get down now? I know you ain't coming to my house. Ain't shit to eat in that bitch."

"If you learned how to cook, there would be. You and Dylan can't boil water."

She slid from my back and continued. "I hope you're talking to somebody. You need to talk to someone other than Ariana and Mariena. They can't really talk back."

"Sometimes, those are the best discussions."

She nodded repeatedly and allowed a small smile to grace her lips. "I get it. I love you, Chad."

"I love you too."

I got in my SUV and headed to my intended destination from last time. When I got to my place, Zay was sitting in my driveway. I smiled slightly. He just couldn't let it go that way, and that was why he was the big brother. While I didn't expect him to be here, I wasn't at all surprised. If he was going to keep showing up for me, it was time I showed up for myself.

* * *

"I think Alexz was tryna choke me when she tied my tie. Feel like I can't fucking breathe. Ain't nobody asked her lil high

yella ass to come in here,” Shyrón complained.

I was tired of that nigga’s mouth already. His wedding was today, and the nigga had been on one. I just wanted the shit to be over, honestly. He had Brittany a nervous wreck. I could hear it in her voice over the phone. He’d already called her three times, and we’d only been at the venue an hour.

They were having an intimate ceremony, and it was decorated beautifully. Flowers were all over the got damn place, and I was sneezing left and right. It just felt like this was about to be a disaster. I never had a problem with my allergies, but I had never been around this many real flowers at once in such a small space. Alexz had a lot of flowers too, but the venue was nearly triple the size of this one. The women couldn’t have thought this completely through. Hopefully, I would be the only one sneezing and shit, interrupting the ceremony.

As we sat watching Shy pace back and forth, Zay said, “With the way you getting on everybody’s nerves, nigga, I would say you were right in that assumption. I wanna choke the hell out of you myself.”

I chuckled as did Dylan. It turned out, Joyy was in the wedding after all. I still wasn’t sure if Lexi had withdrawn or gotten kicked out, but whatever. I was hoping that she would show up today. This past month without even catching a glimpse of her had been hard. However, I could only assume I hadn’t seen her because she didn’t want to be seen. We normally frequented the same grocery store, but I hadn’t seen her once in the past month.

The fact that she was totally done with me this time was my fault. I had no one to blame but myself. Since she was making those efforts not to see me, she probably wouldn’t see me today either. Since she’d alienated herself from the family, I was pretty sure she wouldn’t show up today.

The coordinator knocked on the doorframe to let us know that we’d be getting started within the next ten minutes then walked away as Dad appeared in the doorway. He smiled as he looked at his four sons, a look of pride on his face. As his eyes

went from one to the next, I turned my head so I didn't have to stare into his eyes. Because I was so disappointed with how my life was going, I knew that he would be able to see it in my eyes. It seemed like everyone could see it these days.

“Man, I created some handsome men.”

Isaiah chuckled as Dad whistled. He went to Shy and shook his hand then hugged him. “Honestly, son, I thought you and Dylan would be the last to get married. I always thought Zay would be first. I knew Alexz would get married early. But your ass... all that shit you and Ali were into, I could only pray that your ass didn't end up in jail. The fact that you're an attorney is crazy to me.”

Shy shook his head as he chuckled. “Dang, Pop. You ain't have no faith in me.”

“You know I did. I just didn't expect you to actually go through with wanting to be an attorney. I'm sure you and Ali got into way more shit than I know about. I just thank God I never had to bail you out of jail. I'm proud of you. This was a rough journey for you and Brittany, getting to this moment, but y'all did it. I watched you change the way you did things for the woman you loved, and I'm beyond happy that you found love to begin with.”

I leaned over, resting my elbows on my knees and allowed my mind to drift to other things. After the wedding, the reception would be here as well. Hopefully, none of it would last long. I just wanted to go home and catch up on my shows and possibly go to bed early. We'd had a bachelor party for Shy last night, and I was struggling. We didn't get back to his house until six this morning, then we had to be here by noon.

I wasn't one of those niggas that could go to sleep at the drop of a hat. It took me at least fifteen minutes to wind down enough to go to sleep. Most times it took longer than that. So after my shower and actually falling asleep, I was more than sure it was at least seven. It was daylight outside when I closed my eyes. Then I had to get up by eleven to be here on time.

Before Dad could leave the room, he gripped my shoulder. “You good, son?”

I smiled at him and said, “I’m cool, Pop.”

He smiled slightly, then left the room. Isaiah and I had talked about our mother, and I told him of my parallels with losing her and the women in my life. When I did, I could tell that the revelation of it shocked him. He had no idea that I was still struggling with the loss of Marie Berotte. However, he’d expressed how proud he was of me for finally facing what my issues were and being able to be open enough to allow him to help me.

We’d done some exercises that helped me to focus more on the memories she left and positive impressions she made on me versus the day she was taken away. It seemed that I could only focus on what I was missing versus all the things I’d gained in such a short amount of time with her. Just talking about all the great qualities I could remember she possessed helped me sleep better that night, and I was grateful to Zay for pushing me to be better.

I just knew that I couldn’t continue the way I was going. It was affecting every aspect of my life. My job was on the line, my love life was shit, my family felt my depression, and most of all, I didn’t like who I was becoming. Hurting people wasn’t my M.O. It wasn’t something I was proud of by any means. I stood from my seat and stretched, ready to get this show on the road. When Ali appeared at the door, he called Shy out of the room. That shit put all of us on high alert. Although he didn’t think any shit would be going down, the threat on *my* life was still an issue. However, they’d thought the place I was at the greatest risk was at work.

Isaiah came and stood next to me as we waited for Shy to come back inside the room. He nudged me and said, “Cool out. We got your back if anything is up. It could be something else.”

I nodded, although I knew he was only saying that to calm me down. Ali wouldn’t interrupt right now unless there was an immediate threat. I held my hands together in front of my face, trying to calm my nerves, regardless of what I knew. When Shy walked back in, all eyes were on him. His eyebrows lifted, then he ran his hand over his face. “That bitch Fatima is here

somewhere. Keep y'all eyes open. I knew she was dirty. There's no reason she would be at my wedding other than to wreck shit."

"Fuck!" I yelled.

My brothers surrounded me, and Isaiah was trying to calm me down while Shy was getting me ready for war. "That bitch don't know who she fucking with! She make one wrong move and she gon' die right here today. I knew something wasn't right about her ass. Ali called in reinforcement, and they should be here in five minutes to surround the perimeter, and Seneca is with the ladies," Shy said as he rolled his eyes.

That nigga had better not get distracted. He couldn't be trusted around women... single or not. However, I didn't think he would be stupid enough to try to mess with Brittany, Skyler, or Alexz. He'd die here today too. "Shy is right. We have to be ready for whatever comes, but we have to be calm too. We can't be on one, making everybody else nervous. Cool out," Zay added.

I swore, he was as perfect as Dad. I was glad to call him my brother. His mind was brilliant, and he always knew how to approach different situations. This shit was Shyrón's element, but here Zay was, proving why he was the wisest in the room. We all nodded in agreement as he stretched out his arms. We huddled together, like we were in a game of football. We hadn't done this in a long time, but this moment definitely called for it.

We began reciting our motto in unison, something we'd come up with when Dylan started college. It helped us to always focus on the bigger picture, and that picture was our love for each other and our family. It was a promise we made to each other and an unspoken promise to our sister and dad.

"I am my brother's keeper. He go down, I go down trying to protect or avenge. Whatever the situation, nobody breaks this bond. If a fight is what they want, a fight is what they gon' get. Us four have all directions covered. Berottes stay ready so we won't have to get ready. We gon' protect our family to the death of us."

When we were done, we fist bumped then hugged one another. I took a deep breath as the coordinator summoned us from the room with a wave of her hand. We all kept our heads on a swivel, being sure to pay attention to our surroundings. Ali was standing at the end of one hallway, and he had another guy at the end of another. I wasn't sure how things would end today, but I was ready for whatever happened.

The music was playing as Shy and I walked in with the officiant, and the wedding began without a hitch. Everything was going beautifully. I couldn't be as diligent watching anything, because like Zay had said, I didn't want to alert anyone. I knew Shy wouldn't be able to pay close attention either. This was his wedding day. All his attention should be on his bride.

I hated that this shit was about to go down at his wedding. This should be the happiest day of his life, and it was being riddled with drama and danger. My eyes scanned the small crowd, and no one looked suspicious. I barely remembered what Fatima looked like, but I knew if I saw her, I would recognize her.

When Brittany and both her dads came down the aisle, everyone was in awe of how beautiful she looked. Her dress was sleeveless with sparkly shit all over it. Shy turned completely red as he stared at her. I patted his back, trying to calm him down. He was in awe as he looked at her. Hell, I was in awe of her beauty too. We'd picked some beautiful women to be with.

That thought caused thoughts of Lexi to infiltrate my mind. I took my eyes off Brittany and began scanning the crowd, once again, to see if she'd come. Her mother was escorted in as an honored guest, so she could have been sitting anywhere. *She's not here, Chad. Why would she be?* I took a deep breath and brought my attention back to the wedding, hoping everything went as planned without any shit from Fatima ruining everything.

Ten

Q

LEXI

AS I SAT at my desk at work, eating my lunch, I looked over the appointment schedule for the rest of the day. I was beyond excited when I realized I only had one client left. Life had been looking up, although I still had some issues to overcome. It had been two months since that dreadful day Chad had shown up at my place. I'd missed the wedding a month ago, and I felt like shit that entire day.

I wanted to be there with everyone, but I knew it was best that I stayed in my corner of Beaumont. My mental still wasn't strong enough to be around Chad for an extended amount of time. I would be on vacation next week, and I couldn't wait. I'd decided to go to South Padre Island and enjoy time alone. I'd already scheduled a horseback riding tour on the beach and had plans to watch the fireworks at Louie's Backyard, a seafood buffet place that also served as a sports bar.

I was thinking about going dolphin watching as well. However, I knew a great deal of my time would be spent laying out on the beach, soaking up the sun, and swimming in the beautiful blue water. I smiled as I thought about how I couldn't wait to get out of here to start packing. My flight was leaving out tomorrow, and I hadn't even begun. While I knew my suitcase would be filled with mostly swimwear and shorts, I still needed to organize myself.

As I finished eating, I rubbed my belly, feeling it settle. Nausea had been taking a toll on me. I couldn't wait until that season was over. I'd often stand in the mirror and stare at the slight pudge in my abdomen, knowing that I would be raising

a child in love while becoming the best version of myself I could be.

When I found out I was pregnant, I cried for hours, blaming myself for not remembering to go to the store to get a Plan B. My soul was hurt that day. I was longing for Chad and had felt sick. Him nutting inside of me had completely slipped my mind. When I started throwing up three weeks ago, it sprang in my mind like a rabbit on a trampoline. I nearly crumbled at the thought. After confirming it through a home test, I made an appointment to discover I was eight weeks. I was now ten weeks and feeling much better about what was happening.

My mama was the only person that knew, and she had been begging me to tell Chad. I couldn't right now, but my plan was to finally contact him after I came back from vacation. She said that he'd looked depressed as hell at the wedding and that he seemed to be looking for someone. She said that he probably thought I would show up. I knew I couldn't do that to myself.

After throwing my trash away, my phone began ringing. When I saw Jericho's number, I knew that I finally had to talk to him as well. He hadn't been blowing me up or anything, but I hadn't talked to him since the last time I saw him three months ago. "Hello?"

"Damn, baby. I thought something had happened to you. How you been?"

"I'm okay. What about you?"

"I'm a'ight. Just been missing you. Can I spend time with you this weekend?"

"As tempting as that sounds, I'm going to be out of town. I won't be back until next weekend. Plus, there have been some new developments in my life that I really don't want to share with anyone."

He remained quiet for a moment, then said, "Damn. Okay. I thought we were better than that though, Lexi. We can usually talk about anything."

“Usually, we can, Jericho, but there is someone else I have to talk to about it before I can talk to anyone else. I’m trying to be a better person and put myself first these days. My mental was shot to shit, and now that I’m finally getting to be in a better place, I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.”

“I understand. We don’t have to meet up. I just wanna be sure you’re okay. Despite our dynamic, I *do* care for you and want what’s best for you. I wouldn’t be able to provide you with the tenderness I do if I didn’t at least care. While we seem to be friends with benefits, I can drop the benefits whenever you want to, but I would still like to remain your friend until you decide to settle down. For real.”

My heart was softened. I knew Jericho was good people, but because of our sexual relationship, I’d been avoiding him like the plague. “I’ll let you know about next weekend. We can definitely be friends for now. I care for you too, Jericho. You’ve always kept it a buck with me.”

Although I’d considered him inconsistent, he was actually the most consistent as far as the nature of our relationship that I’d been with. I always knew what the deal was with him, even when he didn’t reach out. He was always busy at work. He was smart as hell and was an IT manager for some big corporation I couldn’t remember the name of. So, he worked a lot.

The most intriguing part about him was that he was six-foot-two-inches of pure Haitian chocolate. He was so damn fine. Being wrapped in his arms was the closest thing I could get to feeling Chad. Sometimes, I’d wished that I didn’t love Chad the way I did so I could fully enjoy everything Jericho made me feel. I wondered at times if he ever wanted a serious relationship.

“I don’t know any other way to keep it, baby,” he said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Well, can I call you later? I have a client coming in within the next fifteen minutes.”

“Of course. Listen, Lexi. You can call me whenever you want. I know I don’t call a lot, but I’m just not much of a

phone person. However, whenever you wanna talk, mwen disponib. I'm available."

I loved when he spoke Creole to me. Although I didn't understand a word of it, it always turned me on. It was no different today. I could feel my clit pulse as a slight moan escaped my lips. "Okay," I said softly.

"I'll be waiting for your call, baby."

He ended the call, leaving my panties flooded. I had to quickly go to the bathroom to clean up a bit. I was so close to masturbating while I was in there, but I could wait until I got home. That way I wouldn't have to hold back. I just needed to focus on the task at hand so I could get my ass out of here.

* * *

The wind blew through my coils, adding to my peaceful horseback ride on the beach. My cowboy hat shielded my face from the sun, but my exposed skin from my bikini begged for its attention. I'd been on the island for three days, and I couldn't believe the amount of peace that I felt. The first day, I'd laid in my hotel room the entire day. Yesterday and today had been spent on the beach though. I planned to do some shopping later.

Tomorrow, I had a massage scheduled and had planned to try out a couple of restaurants. I briefly thought about parasailing, but I reminded myself just how scary I could be at times. There was no sense in putting unnecessary stress on myself. I'd talked to my mama every day and assured her, this morning, I would talk to Chad as soon as I got home. I told her she was stressing me out, so she promised to stop bothering me about it... for now.

I was more than sure that if I didn't make him aware when I got back, she would be right back on my ass about it. He had a right to know that he'd created a life. That didn't mean we would be a couple, and that was what I had to convince myself of before I called him. I was becoming content being alone,

and I refused to allow him to disrupt my peace simply because I was pregnant.

Once my ride was done, I pulled the towel from my bag and laid it on the sand underneath an umbrella and lay there to read a book. Before I could even get started, my phone was ringing. I rolled my eyes and ignored the anonymous call and started reading my self-help book. I planned to read for at least an hour while I enjoyed the sound of the water and the breeze, then I would go take a shower and nap before going out to dance.

I hadn't shaken my ass in a while, so I knew I was well overdue. I loved dancing, but ever since that night at the club with Chad, I had been limiting my time there. However, I was in a new environment, and I couldn't wait to let loose a little. Once again, my phone started ringing from a blocked number. I rolled my eyes and answered the call, prepared for bullshit. "Hello?"

"Hey, Lexi."

I sat straight up on my towel at the sound of his voice. I hadn't spoken to him in months, and just the sound of his voice had my blood boiling. "What do you want?"

"I just miss you, baby girl. I know I messed up big time, but I need you."

My father had been on the outside looking in when it concerned my life ever since we found out he was cheating on my mother. While Skyler had forgiven and saw him every now and then, I hadn't. I didn't want to be bothered with the man, his bitch, or his child. I knew the baby had nothing to do with how trifling his parents were, but as long as he was dependent on them, I wouldn't know him either.

"You didn't think, and you still aren't, Julius. You messed up for a long time, and now you're wanting me to get over it in a short time. I'm over what you did, but I do not care to have a relationship with you anymore. Period. The hurt you caused me and my mama is irreversible. That's Skyler if she wants to entertain your ass. I can't do it."

“You’re my daughter, Lexi. I’m going to always love you and want a relationship with you.”

“Speaking of, do you only have three kids? I need you to be honest with me, because if I find out anything else, there will be no way in hell we could ever mend this relationship... ever.”

“Lexi, as far as I know, I only have three kids. I can’t say for sure. No one has made me aware of any other children. That’s the truth.”

I ended the call and took a deep breath. My relaxation was ruined. Everything in me told me not to answer the damn phone, but I did anyway. That was what I got for not following my first mind. However, my curiosity was killing me about this Jana chick Chad had spoken of that looked like me, so I was glad I was able to inquire about that. I lay back and closed my eyes, trying to bring myself back to a state of calm. Easing my hand over my belly, I rubbed it. “I’m sorry for getting upset, baby. I’m doing my best to get myself together so I can be a great mother to you. I love you already.”

I was more than sure he would be calling back. He wasn’t going to give up so easily. He’d been calling me at least once a month, leaving messages. I rarely answered his calls. There was nothing more I needed to say to him. I’d said everything I needed to say, but sometimes, I supposed he needed to reevaluate the situation to see if my feelings had changed.

I picked up my book and took a few deep breaths, then went back to reading. However, I still found my thoughts keeping me from truly focusing on what I was reading. I was somewhat nervous about how Chad would respond to my news. He couldn’t be angry since it was his choice to shove his raw dick inside of me and nut all over my cervix. He had to be aware of the risk he was taking. I just wanted him to be involved in his child’s life.

Chad being raised by a strong man always made me believe he was a strong man too, that he would have the same values. That wasn’t necessarily true. While I believed he was a strong individual, he was proving to me that he wasn’t like his

dad or brothers. Something heavy was going on with him that wouldn't allow him to be in a relationship, other than this Jana woman. If that woman belonged to my dad, I was going to shit a brick. I would be pregnant from my sister's ex-boyfriend.

But again, something deeper than this Jana woman and the threat on his life was going on with Chad. I could only hope that Isaiah was getting to the bottom of it with him so he could be better. I'd given up on having a relationship with him, but I did want him to have a relationship with his child.

Standing from the sand, I decided to go back to my hotel room. I could lay there and think, and if I fell asleep, I wouldn't have to worry about my skin being burnt when I awakened. After stuffing my belongings in my bag, I made my way through the sand to walk back to my room. Thankfully, my hotel was only down the street.

I'd been getting plenty attention in my bikinis, not that I was looking for it. I had more than enough attention, hence the reason I was pregnant. By the time I got to my room, I was hot as hell and just wanted to rest. I took a cool shower then lay in bed. As badly as I wanted to be naked, I didn't do that in a hotel room when I was alone. Never knew what could happen. With the A/C set on sixty-eight degrees, I was more than sure I would need clothes on anyway.

As if picking up where it left off, my mind went to all the possibilities of Chad's responses to me being pregnant and how I would break the news. While I wanted to do something like that in person, I didn't know if I could bear seeing his face when I told him. If I was going to do it by phone, then there was no need in waiting until I got back to do so. Maybe after my nap, my head would be clear enough to decide.

Eleven

8

CHAD

I WALKED on the rooftop at Pour 09, barking loudly as “Atomic Dog” played. My bruhs, Ax, Arrow, and DJ, barked right back. I did my neckroll and stuck my tongue out, then began our stroll. When they joined me, I saw Isaiah slowly shake his head. Shy and Dylan were just biding their time for when one of their songs came on.

It had been a month since the wedding, and things had been quiet. Fatima never showed back up. It was like they spotted her and then she disappeared. I was uncomfortable for at least a week after that, so Shy made sure I had two guys on me at all times. After a week or so, I was able to relax a bit more.

My talks with Zay had gotten a lot easier since I admitted how much I missed Mama. I cried in front of him like I’d never cried before. We even talked about Lexi, and I was able to reveal to him where I went wrong in our relationship and how I made it hard to love me. Had I been able to be open with her, we would be together. When we first started getting to know one another, I could tell how much she cared for me and wanted to be with me. I played with her heart.

He was shocked to hear how my fears had me failing to show Lexi just how much I cared about her too. We had been talking things through for the past three weeks, and I truly felt like I was ready to see her. The way I left her last time haunted my soul. The way she stared at me with her expressive eyes, was all I could picture when I thought about her. I missed her.

However, she was forcing me to move on and forget about her, and I was doing my best to do that, although my system seemed to be rejecting my efforts.

She was in my dreams.

When I woke up, she was on my mind.

When I went to the hip hop club downtown, I thought about her.

When I went to bed, thoughts of her kept me awake.

There wasn't a moment of the day when she wasn't on my mind. Somehow, I had to make this right, but I didn't want to further piss her off or hurt her. I'd asked Dylan how she was doing since that was his sister-in-law, and he admitted that he rarely saw her. He said Skyler would go and visit her. It was like after that last incident, she felt uncomfortable around my family. That was my fault for not letting them in on the shit I did to her. While I was protecting her, I should have been open about why.

After the song went off, I slapped hands with DJ, Arrow, and Ax and took a seat next to Shy. "What's up, bruh?"

"Shit. What's up wit' chu?"

"Same. Trying to figure out what I'm gon' do about my job. I've been putting in for other jobs, but I'm coming up empty trying to match salaries," I admitted.

"Damn. I thought everything was cool with your job."

"Not since the warden has been trying to convince me to apply for a job at Pollock. He knows that's where Knowledge is. It's like he's trying to make me quit."

"Let me check into him, bruh. What's that muthafucka name again?"

"Jimmy Summerall. Look into Rondell Charles too. He kind of switched up on me too."

"First thing Monday, I'm on their asses."

"Thanks, bruh."

When the waitress brought out drinks, we all frowned, trying to figure out who ordered them. Jamel was the first one to stand and say, “Thank you to whoever bought these drinks.”

We all chuckled as he downed his Crown. I was happy to see him and Arrow. They usually came down every other weekend, but lately, they’d been no-shows. Arrow’s job had him busy and in high demand. Everyone needed him for surgeries and whatnot since they were shorthanded. He and Jamel were like a two-for-one deal. If Arrow couldn’t come, Jamel didn’t either. Mama Nissa and DJ would usually go and see him.

Nobody else tried to figure out who bought the round of drinks. Since they didn’t make themselves known, maybe it was just a kind gesture. One woman had bought us drinks because she’d overheard our conversation about protecting our black women. That conversation had moved her so much she’d bought drinks for all of us. She’d revealed herself though. Maybe the waitress could point out who purchased the drinks.

Before she could walk away, I asked, “Do you know who purchased the drinks?”

She turned to look toward the bar then frowned. “It was a lady, but I’m not sure where she went.”

I nodded my acceptance and downed my lemon drop shot. We continued turning up, and as soon as “Wipe Me Down” came on, Shy and Dylan showed their asses. I knew they would. The DJ loved that damned song. Since we were regulars, he always played “Atomic Dog” when we were here, but he played this shit when he didn’t even notice we were here.

We hung around for a couple more hours then decided to call it a night. I was tired as hell. As I walked to my SUV, I felt like somebody was watching me. I turned to see everyone heading in different directions, but I noticed Seneca was here. There was no bad blood between us about what happened, but we didn’t really talk to each other either. Shy had gotten to

him, and they were talking when, suddenly, a shot rang out, and heat went through my arm.

I fell to the ground as I heard another shot ring out. I slid on my back on the cement to get to the other side of my SUV, then looked at my arm to see it was a flesh wound. People were screaming and running. I was more than sure the police had been called. I took my shirt off to apply pressure to the wound. I got up from the cement to get my gun out of the console just in case somebody tried to run up on me.

There were no more gunshots, but I couldn't be so sure. I was the only one in the area I was in, so it was no mistaking that the bullet was meant for me. However, I was more than sure that it was meant to kill me. Whoever fired the gun was a bad shot. "Chad! Chad!"

I had my gun in my hand, waiting to see who would come around the vehicle. It was Shy and Seneca. "Fuck. Let me get you to a hospital," Seneca said, surprising me.

"I'll alert the authorities to your whereabouts," Shy added.

I nodded then handed my keys to Seneca. I walked to the other side of the vehicle to see my brothers all standing around, looking at the body on the ground. One after the other, they made their way to me. I knew that they knew I was okay. I was just surprised that Seneca was the one taking me to the hospital.

When I got in my Escalade, he closed the door then hurriedly made his way to the driver seat. He took off out of the parking lot, heading to Victory, right down the street. I finally looked over at him and asked, "Who was it?"

"Fatima. That was why I was there. I saw her ass, and she caught on to me following her. I knew she was in the vicinity of where I knew y'all were. Stupid bitch. Now she dead, because I don't shoot to injure."

"You shot her?"

"Yeah, but Shy said he would handle it since he's well known in the community. The police would have way more questions for me than they would for him. Being that we were

standing right next to each other, looking the same direction, they may not be able to tell who shot her.”

This nigga had possibly saved my life. Fatima could have shot me again and not missed the second time. His fast thinking and action didn't give her time to fire a second shot. “Thank you.”

“No thanks needed, man.” He glanced at me as he turned in the parking lot, then asked the dreaded question. “Why you and Lexi ain't together? All that smoke you blew my way only for you not to make it right don't make sense to me.”

I remained quiet for a few seconds, then said, “I was trying to protect her from this shit right here.”

“But if you would have died tonight, you would have died not knowing what it felt like to be loved by her. I could tell she cares for you. The whole time I was trying to fuck with her, she kept glancing at you. Street niggas live for today. If we waited until shit was totally safe, we would never have a woman that we cared for. Real shit.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. Nigga was a playa. “And who exactly do you care for, my nigga?” I asked.

He just stared at me for a moment then got out of the SUV to open the door for me. When I hopped out, he said, “We ain't talking about me. We talking about you. Make that shit happen. Just like we got your back, we can have hers. I ain't tryna fuck with her out of respect for you, so this ain't me running game. I could feel how tense she was anyway. She was uncomfortable but trying to pretend that she wasn't.”

I nodded as we walked into the ER. I wasn't about to have this conversation with him. Not long after someone came to assist me, the police arrived with my brothers in tow. As soon as they approached me, I said, “Y'all go home to your women, especially you, Zay. I know Joyy been having a rough time lately.”

He put his arm around me and said, “I'm here wit'chu. She's not alone.”

“Neither am I.”

“I been looking out for your ass for a long time. I ain’t about to stop now.”

“So, is she dead? Seneca said he killed her.”

“Honestly, she looked like she was, but I’m not sure. He shot her in the chest. An ambulance carried her off. She was aiming to shoot at you again. God must have curved that bullet, because I swore she looked like she knew what she was doing. That shit looked like it was finna hit you in the back.”

“Whatever happened, I’m grateful that I’m still here.”

“Me too, man. Me too.”

He kissed my head. This shit had scared him. Zay hadn’t kissed me since I was little. Dylan came over, clearly bothered. “I thought you were gone, bruh. Shit.”

“Relax, man. I’m good.”

The police made their way to me, so my brothers walked away, but they didn’t go far. DJ, Jamel, Arrow, and Ax were waiting to talk to me. The night had gone so well until this shit happened. I just hoped that it was over now. She’d better be glad I didn’t have my gun on me. I would have shot her in the head.

A nurse led me to a room, and they followed me, along with Shy. I didn’t know what they needed to talk to me for. I didn’t see anything. I didn’t see her or who shot her. Once I was situated, they came in and just let me know that they had to take my statement about what happened, even if I didn’t see anything, since I was the victim. All they were doing was holding up them fixing my arm so I could go the fuck home.

The minute they walked out, the doctor came in to look at my wound. It was still bleeding, and the avulsion was deeper than they thought it was. Once they started cleaning it, I wanted to fuck everyone up in the room. That shit hurt so bad. The doctor decided that instead of stitching it up immediately, they would pack it and bandage it. Because of that, they would be admitting me to give me intravenous antibiotics. *Great.*

“How long will you be keeping him?” Shy asked.

“At least two days. The last thing we want is for this to get infected. We will see how he does with the antibiotics. Then I will be able to give a more certain date for discharge. We’re going to get an IV set up, then we’ll get him into a private room.”

We both nodded. Once the doctor exited, Shy said, “Fatima is that nigga’s ex-wife, but clearly, she was pissed that he was locked up. The police have her phone, so we will work on getting a subpoena to get the info from it. I didn’t take her being at Alexz’s wedding as a threat after Alexz told me she’d invited her. That’s my bad, because when we met with her that day, it was something about her that didn’t sit well with me. Now I know why.”

“I thought I was gon’ get to go home. I ain’t never had to be in the hospital for shit. Can you get my phone out of my pocket?”

“Yeah.”

When he got my phone out of my pocket, I called Charles to let him know what had happened. I would, of course, have to be off work since I would still be here Monday. I wasn’t sure how much longer past that I would be off, but at least they would have a heads up. I was sure to put the phone on speaker, just so I would have a witness if he said anything out of pocket.

“Charles.”

“Charles, this is Berotte. I’m going to have to be off for a while. I was shot tonight by Earl Riggs’ ex-wife.”

“His ex-wife? Intel never showed that he’d been married before. You really need to get help, man. Just... let me just make this easier for you. We’re just gonna let you go.”

Shy snatched the phone from my hand. “Naw, y’all won’t. The way I see it... oh and this is Berotte, Attorney Shyrón Berotte. The way I see it, y’all didn’t do your fucking job to make sure he was protected when you knew about the threat on his life. Law enforcement didn’t conduct proper investigation. The way I see it, Berotte has a very lucrative

case. So if you are going to fire him unjustly, we'll just tack that on to our lawsuit."

Charles started stuttering for a minute, causing me to smirk. As much pain as I was in, I wanted to laugh at how Shy had just checked his ass. "Berotte, we'll talk whenever you're able to get back to work."

Shy ended the call and said, "I'm gon' start digging today. You wanna be done with them? Fine. But they gon' pay you to be done with their asses."

I lay back in the bed and relaxed until they came to insert the IV and finish cleaning and packing my wound. I was glad I had a nigga like Shy on my team. Had it not been for my brother being proactive and protecting our family, I would be dead. The Feds nor the state had provided me any protection, knowing that Earl Riggs could possibly retaliate. They left me out here naked.

I glanced over at my brother as he typed away on his phone and said, "Thanks, bruh. For real."

"I'm my brother's keeper. I only did what I was supposed to do. Plus... I mean, I love you."

That shit sounded weird as hell coming out of his mouth. I'd taught him to be hard. Expressing his feelings like this was different. I lowered my head as I thought about it, then looked up at him to see the emotion in his eyes. "I love you too, man."

Twelve

ℒ

“CHAD IS IN THE HOSPITAL. He got shot.”

I frowned as I packed. It was Saturday, and my flight was leaving in three hours. My flight time was only an hour and a half, so I knew I could be back in no time. “He got shot? How? Where?”

I thought about what he’d told me about Alexz’s ex-boyfriend and knew that had to be what had happened. My heart was racing, and I was starting to panic. I stood up straight and began rubbing my belly and taking deep breaths. Skyler had me stressing like crazy by giving me partial details.

“Don’t worry, Lexi. He’s okay. They were leaving Pour 09 last night, and a woman affiliated with Alexz’s ex shot him in the arm. It’s a flesh wound though. They are keeping him to pump him with antibiotics to be sure it doesn’t get infected. Plus, he has that good government insurance, so I know they’re milking it for everything it’s worth.”

I slowly exhaled the breath I was holding. “Okay. I’m about to head to the airport in the next hour. I should land in Houston at three. My flight leaves out at one-thirty.”

“Okay. I’ll see you when you get to town. Shy and I are handling his case against the Feds and the state. If you go to see him, I’m sure he’ll enlighten you.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you won’t know.”

“Oh, yo’ ass gon’ tell me what I wanna know.”

She laughed as I put the phone down to put on my t-shirt. I refused to look pregnant until I was ready for everyone to know. I normally wore fitted shirts, even if it was a t-shirt. Not anymore. I had shirts that I wore around the house that were looser fitting, so I just put them in the rotation to wear outdoors as well. I picked the phone up as I went to the bathroom to make sure I had all my toiletries.

“Skyler, I’ll call you back when I land. My Uber will be here in thirty minutes.”

“Okay. Have a safe flight.”

“Absolutely. I always pray that if the plane won’t land safely, then Lord, don’t let it take off.”

“I like that. I’m gonna start praying that before flights.”

“Okay. I love you, and kiss my baby.”

“I love you too. Will do.”

I ended the call and stood still for a moment, thinking about Chad. He would most likely be surprised to see me at the hospital this evening. I planned to see him anyway, but I thought I would be seeing him at his home or mine. Hopefully, we could have a private moment for me to tell him that he was going to be a father. It seemed like they were all becoming parents at once. First Dylan, then Alexz, now Zay and Chad. Shy was the only one still kid-free.

As I looked at myself in the mirror, I again rubbed my belly. I couldn’t keep my hands off it. This could have happened nearly nine months ago in the back seat of his Escalade, but thankfully, it didn’t. Chad wasn’t ready... nowhere near it. Unfortunately, I doubted if he was ready now. *Ready or not.*

I went back to my luggage and zipped everything up and checked the room once again to make sure I had everything. The one thing I didn’t want to forget was the extra dose of peace I’d gained while here. My soul felt light, and I needed it to remain that way, no matter what Chad’s response to what I had to say would be. I still loved him, but I would have to love him from a distance if he couldn’t love me back.

Everything in me wanted to be hopeful that he'd seen the light and was ready to be with me, but at the same time, I wanted to be prepared for his rejection. I was also prepared to be a single mother, doing it all on my own. If I didn't expect anything or help from him, then I wouldn't be disappointed if I didn't get it.

* * *

When I got to Chad's room, my heart took off for the races. I was so damn nervous. Once again, I hadn't seen him in over two months, and I knew my emotions would jump stupid at the sight of him. Before I could change my mind and run out of the hospital, I knocked.

"Come in!"

I took a deep breath again and opened the door. Isaiah was the first person I saw. He smiled and stood from his seat. "Must be Joyy for you to be cheesing like that."

When I came around the wall and Chad saw me, he stopped eating his dinner. The way he stared at me didn't do a thing for my nerves. Trying to lighten the mood, I said, "So somebody other than me wanted to take you out of here, huh?"

Isaiah's eyebrows went up as Chad frowned until I gave him a small smile. He smiled back as I walked closer to his bed. "Hey. How are you feeling?" I inquired.

He glanced over at Zay, and I did as well, to see him exiting the room. Once he was gone, Chad said, "Come to the other side of the bed."

I did as he requested, and when I got close, he reached out to grab my hand. His touch sent chills throughout my body. As hard as I tried to calm down, I couldn't. I could feel the tears building, and there was a huge lump in my throat. He finally said, "I'm okay. I'm better now."

"I can imagine. I'm sure last night was scary."

"Naw. I'm better because you're here. I've been wanting you here. I miss you, Lexi. I've been so fucking stupid. You

are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I fucked it up. Last night, someone made me realize that I could have died without feeling your love. But more importantly, I could have died without you ever having a chance to feel mine.”

I turned away from him and cleared my throat. He was choking me up. Him being in this hospital bed had me sensitive as hell, but there was no way I could fall for his shit this time. I’d been a fool for far too long. I turned back to him and nodded, then slid my hand from his and sat on the little couch.

“Your skin is glowing.”

“I was in South Padre Island this past week. It was so peaceful. I laid out on the beach almost every day.”

“You went alone?”

“Yeah.”

He turned away from me, and I wanted to roll my eyes. He always thought I was fucking somebody. I hated his petty, insecure moments. Most of the time, they were hateful and downright offensive. “I’m glad you’re okay, Chad.”

“Me too.”

“I actually came here for another reason. I planned to try to meet up with you when I got back from South Padre Island before I knew you were here.”

His eyebrows lifted as he stared at me, and it made what I had to say even harder. “Okay. What’s up?”

I looked down at my hands as I fidgeted, playing with my nails. “Chad, I’ve loved you a long time.” I looked up at him and could see that he wanted to say something too, but I lifted my hand, halting him. “But it feels one-sided. I need to be my best self, and being with you or pining after you won’t keep me at my best. So, I’m okay with us not ever being together. I have to come to terms with that, so I can live peacefully. When you finally get yourself together, I hope you find the love that you need because mine clearly wasn’t enough.”

I couldn't stop the tears from falling down my cheeks. This shit was so damn painful, but I knew it was something I had to do. I had to tell him exactly how I felt. "When you left me in my apartment that day you came to get the scarf, I felt disrespected, cheap, and insignificant. Those are things that I have never felt with anyone. You hurt me so much. But that day showed me that I needed to put my peace and sanity at the forefront."

I wiped my tears away and looked up at him to see he'd turned his face away from me. My heart was aching, and the light feeling my soul had earlier was filled with grief and sadness. I stood from my seat and walked over to his bed. I didn't know how to segue my way into what I had to say, so I just blurted it. "You're going to be a father, Chad. I'm eleven weeks pregnant. I hope that you will want to raise this child and be a part of his or her life, but I won't beg you to be."

He sat up in the bed and turned to me. He was silent, so I looked away and said, "I will unblock you if you need to talk to me about anything concerning our baby. Again, I love you, and I hope you can find happiness within yourself so you can be free to love the next woman."

I walked away, and as I was about to pass the foot of his bed, he blurted, "What if I wanna be free to love you? What if I wanna raise our baby together? I've been thinking about you for the past two and half months, wishing that I could fix this shit, yet again. Lexi, please don't leave. Please. I tried calling you the same day it happened, but you'd already blocked me. Please don't leave. Baby, I'm gonna be a dad? Damn."

He was overwhelmed, and it seemed the tears were going to drop at any minute. When he got out of bed and made his way to me, pulling his IV, I wanted to escape. I couldn't give in to him again. I began shaking my head rapidly as I backed away from him. "Chad, I can't. Again, I hope we can communicate about my progress throughout the pregnancy, but I can't embark on a relationship with you. I don't trust you with my heart."

I quickly made my way out of his room with tears streaming down my face, nearly running into Isaiah. He

sidestepped as I practically ran down the hallway. “Lexi!”

Chad’s voice yelling my name in a hospital nearly halted me. I could hear the pain in it, but I couldn’t do this with him. I should have given the news to him by phone because this proved to be too much for me. When I got on the elevator, I saw him and Isaiah standing there outside of his room, watching me leave.

I made my way to a corner, slid to the floor, and cried my eyes out before the door could even close. I couldn’t hold it any longer. This pregnancy was going to take me through it emotionally. I quickly stood and tried to pull myself together as the elevator got to the first floor. I practically ran to my car. Once inside, I started my engine and peeled out of the parking lot, heading to my place.

Before I could get there, my phone was ringing. When I saw Skyler calling me, I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, then answered. “Hello?”

“Hey. Umm... Isaiah just called me and said he was worried about you. He said you were at the hospital to see Chad and you ran out of his room in tears. Can me and Mariena come over?”

I remained quiet for a moment. The last thing I felt like doing at this point was talking. Sensing my hesitancy, she said, “We don’t have to discuss it if you don’t want to. Let us come over and help take your mind off whatever happened between the two of you.”

There wasn’t a distraction in the world that would keep my mind off Chad and our unborn child. My jeans were snug, and I just wanted to go home and get in my sweats. My cookies and cream ice cream would keep me company while I lay on the couch in my feelings. How was I supposed to know if Chad was sincere? I refused to end up looking like a fool again. I’d been a fool over him for a year and a half. When would enough be enough? Finally answering Skyler’s question, I said, “Okay.”

“Okay. We’ll be there in about thirty minutes.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call as I turned into my apartment complex. I didn't live far from Victory, but the drive seemed like it took hours. My soul felt like it had been dragged through the mud. By the time I got out of the car and got inside my place, my phone was ringing yet again. It was Chad. I knew he would be calling soon. I declined the call, then texted him. *I can't talk right now. Maybe later tonight.*

He quickly responded. *Okay. Just know I heard everything you said. I wanna be at your next appointment.*

I didn't respond to him because I needed to relax for a moment. I'd promised my baby that I would do my best not to get too worked up over shit, and I'd already let him or her down. I unbuttoned my jeans as I made my way to my room and exhaled. I was already going to have to get maternity pants. Most of my pants were tight and fitted. As soon as I got to my room, I took off my jeans and slid into some sweats.

I wanted to be held by strong arms and assured that everything would be okay, but I knew I would have to be that for myself. It seemed love was running from me, and I didn't know how to feel about that. At least when my baby was born, I would be able to cuddle with my little Berotte and feel unconditional love.

I was happy that Chad was accepting of our baby. I wanted to believe that he would be happy about the pregnancy, but I couldn't tell these days with him, so I had to be prepared for whatever. I rubbed my tummy and said, “I'm sorry, baby, about my emotional breakdown earlier. I'm happy that you will get to know your father though. I think he's going to be a wonderful dad to you. I just wish that we could have gotten it together so we could raise you together under one roof.”

I took a deep breath, then slid on my fluffy socks and made my way to the kitchen to get my ice cream. As soon as I sat on the couch, my cell chimed. I swore I wanted to just put the shit on do not disturb. I checked it to see a text from Jericho. I smiled slightly and unlocked the screen to see his message.

Hey, baby. I got called in to work today. Can I see you tomorrow?

I wasn't sure why he was checking in, but I messaged him back. *Maybe so. You wanna do lunch?*

Everybody else would be either at the Berottes' or the hospital. I couldn't be at either place. After I ate the first spoon of my ice cream, he responded. *That sounds good. Figure out where you wanna go and let me know.*

Will do.

As I was responding, Skyler messaged to say they were here, so I went to unlock the door. Her hands would probably be full trying to hold Mariena and her bag along with her purse. I opened the door to see her making her way across the parking lot. She smiled big, and Mariena did the same when she saw me.

As soon as she got to me, I grabbed her from her arms and walked inside. "Hey, nanny's baby! How are you?"

Mariena smiled big as slobber fell from her bottom lip. I turned to Skyler and said, "Oh, hey, sis."

Her eyebrows lifted as she shook her head. "I'm so forgotten, but I will gladly take the number two spot to my chocolate drop."

I sat back on the couch and resumed eating my ice cream while Mariena slobbered more, wanting a taste. She was reaching for it and everything. I glanced at Skyler, then lifted the spoon to her mouth. She was eleven months now, so she should be able to handle a little bit of it. I would put it away in a minute so she wouldn't be so tempted. I was sure the coolness of it felt good on her gums too.

I looked over at Skyler and saw that she was just staring at me. I knew she wanted to know what was going on between me and Chad, so I decided to put her out of her misery. "I pretty much told Chad that I wouldn't continue being his fool. I told him how I felt the last time I saw him and how I never wanted to feel that way again. When I told him I didn't trust

him with my heart, I could see the hurt in his eyes. Then I told him that I was pregnant.”

Her eyes bucked. “Are you serious? When did you find out?” she practically screamed.

I chuckled a bit as she took Mariena from me. Baby girl was pissed too. I stood to put the ice cream away, and Skyler followed me. “I found out about three weeks ago. I’m eleven weeks now. I told him that I hoped he would want to be involved with raising his child, but I couldn’t be in a relationship with him.”

“Congratulations, Lexi. I’m so happy for you. I hate that things are the way they are with you and Chad. Do you think he’ll ever be able to repair this?”

“Maybe, but it will take time. I let one conversation loop me into his foolishness again last time. Both times destroyed me mentally. I can’t take any more of that. I need to be at my best not only for myself but for my baby.”

After I put the ice cream in the freezer, she walked over to me and gave me a one-armed hug. “You’ve been through a lot of back and forth with Chad. I’m just happy that you finally chose you. Chad has some issues he has to work on, and he’s been doing so with Isaiah. They’ve been inseparable for the past couple of months. I can see the change in him and him reverting back to the Chad we all love. I just hope this incident with Knowledge’s ex doesn’t knock him backward.”

“What else is going on with him? He didn’t tell me because I didn’t stay long enough to find out.”

She rolled her eyes. “We’re suing the Feds for their negligence and piss poor job of handling this issue with Knowledge. They should have provided Chad with protection, and they should have also researched Knowledge, AKA Earl, and his connections. They would have known about Fatima. We’ve subpoenaed her phone records. I haven’t heard anything yet, but Shy said she’s been planning to get at Chad since Earl got locked up.”

“Damn. Well, I hope all goes well with that.”

“Yeah. So, if you have a little girl, I can pass all of Mariena’s clothes down to you. Some of her clothes still have tags on them. When we got around to them, she’d already outgrown them.”

I slowly shook my head. “You spoiled, lil mama,” I said as I tapped Mariena’s nose.

I sat on the couch and tucked my feet under me and turned on the TV. I could tell that Skyler wanted to ask more questions about me and Chad, but she left well enough alone. I was happy, too, because I was done talking about it. I needed to get myself together for this conversation I would have with him tonight.

Thirteen

ℒ

CHAD

I WAS GOING to be a father. My heart was feeling overwhelmed. I was happy and tormented at the same time. Seeing the way my actions affected Lexi and hearing the way she felt that day made me feel like shit. I couldn't stand myself right now. When she slid to the floor of the elevator and burst into tears, I wanted to run to her before the doors closed, but I didn't want to make things even harder for her.

When Zay and I walked back into the room, he had to talk to me for all of fifteen minutes to get me to tell him what was going on. After revealing that Lexi was pregnant, he didn't know how to feel. I could tell he wanted to congratulate me, but at the same time, he wanted to apologize. I'd been wanting to see her for the past two months, but I would have never guessed I would have been seeing her this way.

After calling her and then receiving her text, I'd been antsy, waiting to hear from her. Since I was doing well with the antibiotics, they were sending me home. I was beyond happy to leave this shit. The food was horrible. When I'd come back in after Lexi left, I'd thrown that shit on the floor. I'd been in my thoughts ever since I'd talked to Isaiah, not giving anyone else much attention. I didn't know if I wanted to blast out that she was pregnant just yet, but I supposed it didn't matter.

Once Dad found out I was going home, he said he would see me tomorrow. He and Mama Nissa had come by earlier before Lexi came, and he was supposed to come back by this evening. It was just me and DJ now. He had been waiting to be

alone with me so we could talk about whatever was going on with me. As soon as Dylan left, he went in.

“You’ve been quiet since I’ve been here. What’s up, man? Don’t tell me you gon’ let this shit tear you back down. You were doing great.”

“Naw. It ain’t that. Lexi came by earlier. She was telling me how I hurt her and how she didn’t think we would ever be together but wishing me well with the next woman. I didn’t know why she came to the hospital to tell me all that until she said she was pregnant. She was letting me know, basically, that just because she was pregnant, that didn’t mean that she would just want to be with me.”

“Damn. Umm... congratulations?”

“I know. It’s bittersweet. I’m happy that I’m gonna be a father, but I want to share every moment of that with her. She’s done with me. When she said she didn’t trust me with her heart, that shit was like a gunshot to the chest. I deserved it though. I done put her through a lot of unnecessary bullshit. While I was worried about her level of maturity, I was the one being immature. Grown ass people know how to communicate.”

“Not all of them, man. When you’ve grown up suppressing shit, you have to learn to communicate. Until Lexi, you never really had a reason to have to divulge your deepest feelings and desires. That shit is definitely a learned behavior. Being raised primarily by my mama taught me that shit. Mr. Berotte is an amazing man, but he held in what he was feeling too. That’s why it took him so long to move on.”

I silently agreed by nodding. He continued. “You need to talk to him about it. If anybody knows what you’re going through, it would be him.”

“You right. I’ll talk to him when I get home.”

Shortly after, the nurse came in with my discharge papers. I signed that shit fast as hell and got the hell out of there. DJ had to catch up with my ass. I wanted to get home to get situated and be ready for if Lexi called. She said she would

call me tonight, and I wanted to believe that she would. It was already seven. The minute the elevator doors closed, DJ asked, “You got a fire to put out, nigga?”

“Hell yeah.”

My heart was in flames. I needed to cool that shit off by talking to Lexi. She was hurting. Even if we only talked about the pregnancy, that would be enough for now. I didn’t know how she was feeling, and I couldn’t remember how far along she said she was. I wanted to know who her doctor was, what things she couldn’t eat, what type of vitamins she was taking, how long she was on her feet throughout the day... I wanted to know it all.

DJ only shook his head. The nurse was waiting for us with a wheelchair at the bottom. “Mr. Berotte, I was supposed to wheel you down here since you’re on pain medication.”

“Man, that candy y’all giving me ain’t doing shit but irritating me.”

“Mr. Berotte, you should have said something. We could have given you something stronger.”

I waved her off as I walked past her. “I’m six feet three, two hundred seventy pounds. Y’all actually thought Tylenol 3’s were going to work for me? It don’t matter though. I’m going home now. I’ll deal with it.”

I walked out that door as DJ laughed. “Nigga, you wild. The bigger issue though is what you gon’ do about your brand that she fucked up?”

“Huh?”

“That flesh wound fucked up your brand.”

“Nigga, as soon as this shit heal, I’m gon’ be checking to see how bad it is. I gotta go to the doctor’s office Wednesday to get it stitched. Alexz gon’ be able to tell me, because she gon’ be coming to clean and pack it every day until then. If it’s fucked up, I’ll eventually get it redone somewhere else. I ain’t tripping on that.”

I opened the passenger door to my Escalade after he unlocked it, and we headed to my house. Hopefully, his car was already there so he could get gone. I was going to need privacy when I talked to Lexi. I needed to tell her how I'd been working on myself and the conclusions I'd come to. My plan to be better was just as strong as hers was, if not stronger. It was important to me to be better than I ever was.

Before this shit with Earl Riggs, I was a fool, covering up years of hurt. Being crazy was sort of my defense mechanism. It was how I took the focus off my real issues. However, late at night, I often thought about my struggles with love. Davion Farris had said it best in his song "Best Advice". *Don't love a woman if you cannot love her fully. You'll break her heart...*

He wasn't lying. I'd done good with that until meeting Lexi. She said that she loved me, and I knew I didn't deserve it. I loved her too, but I had a fucked-up way of showing it. Love was definitely an action word, and my actions were saying I didn't give a fuck. I couldn't love her fully, because I was fighting the demons of my past. I couldn't provide the love she craved because I didn't love myself.

When we got to my house, DJ helped me get situated and offered to get me something to eat. I didn't know why he thought I had something in the house to eat when I couldn't cook worth shit. Before he could leave, there was a knock on the door. I went to it and looked out the peephole to see it was his woman. I recognized her from the pictures he'd shown me. I opened the door, and she smiled.

"Hey, Chad. I'm Shavozz. I'm here to pick up DJ."

"Hey. Come in. He was about to go get me something to eat."

"Oh."

DJ came back around the corner and smiled when he saw Shavozz. He approached her and kissed her as she put her arms around his neck. I rolled my eyes and walked off. Seeing love just made my fucking stomach turn. I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of strawberry lemonade. As I did, DJ asked, "What'chu wanna eat, big dawg?"

“Subway is fine. A foot long meatball on white with Swiss cheese. Thanks, man.”

“A’ight. You want any vegetables?”

“Naw.”

“Okay. We’ll be back in a few.”

He and Shavozz left out, and I went to take a shower. I knew that by the time I got out, he would be back, and hopefully, Lexi would be calling me too.

* * *

I almost broke my neck trying to get to the phone. I’d fallen asleep, and as soon as the phone rang, I rolled over and nearly fell out of the bed. “Hello?”

“Hey, Chad. I’m sorry I’m calling so late. I just... I figured... I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

I looked at the clock to see it was almost eleven. I’d fallen asleep thinking that she wouldn’t call. If she didn’t, I was going to call first thing tomorrow morning. “It’s okay. How are you feeling? You having any morning sickness?”

“I feel okay. A little morning sickness, but not as much as Alexz was having.”

“How far along did you say you are again?”

“Just eleven weeks. I don’t have another appointment until the end of next month. They should be able to tell what I’m having by then.”

“Please let me know the exact date when you have time. I need to make sure I take off that day.”

“Why would you need to take the whole day?”

“Because I know you probably will. I need to make sure the mother of my child is good. Lexi, I know you may think this situation is fucked up, but I feel like it’s a blessing. I’ve been working hard on me these past two months. I’m not going to make you any promises, because I know I’ve let you

down repeatedly. I'm just going to show you. I was prepared to say all this before you told me you were pregnant."

She remained quiet. I knew she didn't want to say what she was thinking, but I still heard it loud and clear. She didn't want to even talk about that shit. Normally, she would have just said it. "I know you don't wanna hear that shit, so I won't say anything else about it. How was your vacation? Besides laying on the beach, what all did you do?"

She proceeded to tell me everything she'd done. Most of her activities were relaxing, and I could get with that. "Can I see you tomorrow? I didn't really get a chance to see your stomach. Am I free to tell people?"

"You can tell whomever you want. I don't know about seeing you right now, Chad."

"Please. I just wanna be a part of the journey. Do you already have plans? I'm sorry I didn't ask that first."

"I have plans for lunch. You'll probably be at your dad's house at that time."

I knew it was with a man. I didn't have to ask. Lexi didn't have female friends or acquaintances, not even at work. I could accept that like a man without asking too many questions. I didn't think she would have sex with someone else while she was carrying my baby, at least I hoped she wouldn't. I muted the phone so I could exhale loudly, then unmuted it afterward. "What about after your lunch plans? Can I see you?"

A nigga was desperate. I wanted us to raise our child as a couple, and I refused to give up on that. Since she still loved me, I just hoped I would be able to convince her to give me yet another chance at her heart. I wanted her to eventually be able to trust me with it, because my plan was to show her that I could be trusted. I'd never claimed her as my woman, and that was my bad, but eventually, I planned to. I'd never begged a woman for shit, but Lexi had me sounding like Keith Sweat's pathetic ass.

"That's possible, Chad. I just hate being so emotional."

“I saw you in the elevator, Lexi. I’m going to do my best to make you comfortable in my presence. I know this is difficult for you. It’s hard for me too. I wanna be involved in every minute of this journey, and knowing that it’s my fault why I can’t be is fucking with me big time. I haven’t loved a woman in a long time, but I love you, Lexi. I’m in love with you.”

She burst into tears and the call ended. I just wanted to hold her in my arms, and I knew I wouldn’t sleep tonight if I didn’t at least try to see her. Fuck this arm. I got up and slid on a t-shirt and some basketball shorts, then made my way to her place. My mind was trying to take me to negative places, but I refused to allow that. It wanted me to ask her for a paternity test, since she’d been sleeping with other people. But in my heart, I knew she was carrying my baby.

When I got to her door, I knocked softly, hoping that she would let me in. I needed to hold her in my arms. I could see her peek through the blinds, before she said through the door, “Chad, what are you doing here?”

“Please open the door, Lexi. You can’t expect me to see and hear you break down twice in one day and not want to be there for you.”

She didn’t respond. I laid my palm on the door. It was like I could feel her standing there, allowing her tears to stain her cheeks. Her pain was seeping through the door, and I needed to be able to carry and absorb it for her. She was dying inside, and I wanted to give her life, showing her that I could be the man she wanted and needed.

When I heard the locks disengage, I took a deep breath, trying to prepare myself for what I would see. As the door opened, I got a peek at all her natural coils and curls. She didn’t have on a bonnet, so they were all over the place. As the door opened more, I walked inside then turned back to her as she closed it. She had on a housecoat and fuzzy socks, and the tears were still falling from her eyes.

I went to my knees and pulled her to me by her waist. When I began untying her housecoat, her breathing pattern

changed significantly. I wasn't going to do anything she didn't want me to do, but I wanted to get a peek at her growing belly. As her robe fell open, I saw she only had on a sports bra and some tight shorts, but her pudge was very visible.

I gently rubbed my hand over it then kissed it. "Hey, Baby Berotte. Daddy's here. You probably can't hear me yet," I said then looked up at Lexi.

She shook her head as more tears fell from her eyes. I gave her a slight smile then wrapped my arms around her and laid my head on her stomach. I could feel the lump building in my throat, so I stood to my feet and wiped the tears from her cheeks. After swallowing it down, I simply adored her. "You are so beautiful, Lexi. Pregnancy looks amazing on you."

She smiled softly as I pulled her in my arms and hugged her. My arm was starting to throb a bit with all the movement, but I didn't care. I had to show Lexi how much I cared and provide her the consolation she needed. If I didn't, eventually she would find someone who would. I couldn't have that. Seeing her with another man would kill me. That was why I made a vow to myself, at that moment, I would be everything I promised her in the past.

When she wrapped her arms around me and laid her head on my chest, I was able to relax a bit more. For a minute, I didn't think she would accept the love I was trying to give her. When I felt her body quake, I pulled away from her and went to her couch so we could sit. As she tried to sit next to me, I pulled her in my lap and held her like a baby. The cries that left her hurt my heart. The torment my actions put her through should damn near be unforgivable, but here she was, choosing to carry my baby and allowing me to console her.

I didn't take a moment of this for granted. I knew with as petty as she could be at times, she could have easily aborted my baby or kept the pregnancy a complete secret from me. She wanted me to know and have a relationship with my child, and I truly believed that she still wanted me to have a relationship with her as well. I couldn't fuck up again. I couldn't afford to lose her again.

Fourteen

ℒ

LEXI

“**THANK** you for meeting me for lunch. I know you like to relax on Sundays.”

I smiled at Jericho, then looked at the menu. Something seemed different though. He was always tender with me, but today, it felt like more, like he wanted more. He kept staring at me, and it was making me slightly uneasy. I wasn't uneasy in a bad way, but I felt like I was about to have to either put him in his place or break his heart. He was number one on my roster, but I hadn't let him know that I was retiring the roster altogether.

He was my star player, but I was shutting down shop. The team would no longer be in existence, and he was losing his job. I glanced up at him to see him staring at me again. “Everything okay? You're staring at me a lot... more than usual.”

“You're just beautiful. You're glowing. Maybe it was your vacation. Your skin is gorgeous.”

I set my menu on the table and decided that I would put him out of his misery. He needed to know about the changes in my life and why I couldn't fuck him anymore. “Jericho...”

He smiled. *Damn, he's so gorgeous.* “What's up, baby?”

I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. It felt like I was about to start sweating. I reopened them, and I could see the look of concern on his face. He reached across the table and grabbed my hand. Before I could say anything, I heard, “What's up, Lexi?”

I looked up and saw Seneca and Jungle. *What the fuck?* How in the hell did they know each other? “Hey.”

I had no plans of saying more. But then Jungle asked Seneca, “How you know lil mama?”

“Her sister is married to my sister’s soon-to-be brother-in-law. We’re connected to the Berottes, the nigga we were doing the work for. She used to date the nigga we were looking out for.”

“Damn. It’s a small world, huh? So Shyrón is her sister’s brother-in-law, and so is the nigga we were protecting.”

Jungle nodded repeatedly as Jericho’s grip on my hand tightened. I looked over at him and noticed the slight frown on his face. Apparently, Seneca noticed too. “Cool out, dude. We just stopped to speak. You wasting your time anyway. She in love with somebody else.”

I could have crawled under the damn table. “Seneca, can you get your ass on?”

Jungle chuckled and said, “Yeah. She was with him at McAlister’s a couple of months ago. I could tell by the way she looked at him that she loved him. That’s the dude we’ve been protecting, Chad.”

“Yep,” Seneca cosigned.

Jericho stood from his seat, and I was hoping they didn’t make a scene in this restaurant. Seneca and Jungle were both so fucking rude. “I’m gonna give y’all privacy. I’ll be back in a minute,” Jericho said, then mean mugged Seneca and Jungle.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Instead of getting angry, Jungle chuckled. Seneca nudged him and said, “Come on, Milton. We done got her in trouble.”

Milton? That was an older sounding name. I would have never guessed that was his government. “Yo, I never asked you how you knew Lexi,” Seneca said to Jungle.

“We messed around for a lil bit until she kicked a nigga to the curb for Chad. But I see that was a lie.”

“It wasn’t a lie. Jericho and I are friends, who I, unfortunately, have to let down easy today. That’s the whole purpose of this lunch. I was about to do that until y’all rudely interrupted, Milton. Why the hell they call you Jungle?”

“Because I’m way too wild to be civilized. You got firsthand experience of that, lil mama. I guess we’ll leave you to your business then. I’ll be seeing you around.”

I rolled my eyes. How much smaller could the damn world get? These two niggas were watching Chad’s back. How convenient. They walked away just as Jericho was making his way back to our table. I was so damned embarrassed. When he sat, I said, “I’m sorry. Some people just don’t have good sense or manners.”

He gave me a head nod, clearly irritated. “So is that what you were going to tell me? That you’re in love with someone?”

I took a deep breath and exhaled hard. “Yeah... along with the fact that I’m pregnant. I assume that’s why my skin is glowing.”

“Are you sure it’s his?”

My eyes widened slightly. *Was he calling me a ho?* His eyes widened slightly as he lifted his hands. “I’m asking because I slept with you a little over three months ago. Condoms aren’t one hundred percent. I just want to make sure that you’re sure.”

I calmed down a bit. “Oh. Yes, I’m sure. He’s the only man I’ve been with since you. I’m only eleven weeks pregnant, and I just made eleven weeks Friday.”

“I think I would feel better if we did a paternity test. What if they’re wrong about how far along you are? I don’t want any surprises later, Lexi. I’m not trying to start shit, so don’t look at it that way. Does the guy you’re in love with know?”

“Yes. Chad knows.”

My heart had to be beating fast as hell. I didn’t understand why since Chad and I weren’t a couple. Although we had an emotional moment last night, things were still the same as they

were. I hadn't reneged on my word. It was nice lying in his arms though. He left my place about two o'clock this morning to go home. The entire time he held me, he had a hand on my stomach, gently swiping it back and forth. He gave me consolation and intimacy at the same time.

I was glad he left though. I didn't want to fall off the wagon. His dick pressed against me was begging me to lose focus and ride him to the pearly gates. Had that happened and then he shut down on me again, I would have lost it. I was almost at the point of moving back to Dallas. I didn't want to be here anymore, but since I was pregnant, I didn't want to be away from Chad, especially if he wanted to be involved.

Breaking me away from my thoughts, Jericho grabbed my hand again. "Don't be upset. I just want to be sure."

I nodded and was about to pull my hand away until he continued. "I wanted to tell you something today too. I guess I waited too long though. We've been messing around for eight months or longer, but I've been feeling this way since the last time I saw you. It's taken me a bit to accept it. I wanted to make you mine, Alexis. I'm feeling everything about you. I honestly don't even care about you being pregnant for someone else. That's how much I care about you."

I felt like I wanted to cry. Jericho was a good man. He never hesitated to give me what I needed. But for some strange reason, God allowed me to be head over heels with a man that played with my heart.

"You're the only woman I've been sleeping with. I went out on a couple of dates, but they weren't you. Your beauty can't be matched, inside or out. Your need to be loved and feel loved pulled at my heart in ways I didn't think were possible. While sex is amazing with you, it was the moments that I held you in my arms that stick with me the most. The way it feels to care for you is something that I've always wanted."

I lowered my head. I was breaking his heart, and I didn't like the way that felt. Even though he knew what it was between us, I felt responsible. I lifted my head and stared into his eyes. "I'm sorry, Jericho. I'm in love with Chad. We aren't

a couple right now, but it still wouldn't be fair to you to try to enter a relationship with you while I'm in love with him. Had I not been in love with him, I would be with you without hesitation. You're an amazing man."

He released my hand as the waitress finally appeared to take our orders. Once she left, he said, "Well, I wish you the best. I wish I would have met you sooner. If it's okay, I'm gonna schedule the paternity test in Houston. I can pick you up one day and we can go. It will have to be during the week though."

"Okay. Just make sure you schedule it enough in advance to where I can take off work. I'm doing this for your sanity, but I'm one hundred percent sure that this is Chad's baby, especially since he didn't use a condom."

I rolled my eyes after my statement. While I would love my baby with everything in me, I should have made him stop since he didn't wrap up. He couldn't have been that way with everyone he was with, because he would have kids all over the creation. Both times we'd fucked had been void of condoms, and both times he'd nudded inside of me like I couldn't get pregnant. I lucked up the first time.

"Well, you bear some responsibility too, right?"

"I do. I allowed it." I took a sip of my water. "Why are you so perfect?"

"I'm not. I'm far from perfect. That's why I had to leave when your lil wannabe gangsta ass friends were here. They were making an extremely dangerous side of me come out of hibernation."

I swallowed hard as he stared at me. "There's nothing for you to be nervous about, Lexi. If you were going to be mine, I would have made you aware of my past before we made anything official. I still may tell you, but not here where anyone can hear me. It would have to be in private."

I nodded then gulped my water, bypassing the straw altogether as he chuckled. He had me so nervous, I couldn't even laugh. "Girl, you tripping. I'm still the same Jericho. Just

know that I'll fuck somebody up over you. Since we don't really live outside of our bubble together, you've only been privy to the side of me I showed you. I'm not tender all the time. How else would I be able to protect what was mine?"

I gave him a slight smile. "I suppose you're right. I'll just pretend you didn't say a word about your past."

"That's probably best. So you know I'm not going to move on right away. If things don't work out with Chad, I'll be around. So go where your heart is leading you, baby. Just know that if he doesn't appreciate you for the priceless treasure you are, I'll be in the wings waiting to give you the world, you and that lil baby you carrying. Ou se yon bèl flè."

I blushed. I could feel how my cheeks had heated up. He knew what him speaking Creole did to me. "What did you say?"

"You are a beautiful flower."

Sometimes I wondered if he was telling me the truth about what he was saying, but then I figured that he didn't have a reason to lie. What purpose would that serve? It wasn't like there was someone else around that would understand him. "Thank you, Jericho. You've always been good to me, and I honestly hate that I'll have to let go."

He leaned forward in his seat. "Then don't."

My heart sank a little bit. "That wouldn't be fair to Chad if I chose to give him a chance, nor would it be fair to you to start dating you, only to stop dating you to be with him."

He sat back in his seat and stared at me like he was undressing me with his eyes. I was so turned on, I could barely stand myself, and I wanted to believe that he knew it. *Jesus Christ of latter-day saints*. Being around him would be dangerous. I would probably need to drive myself to Houston, because this shit with him was strong, and my body didn't want to resist him, despite my feelings for Chad.

* * *

“I know without a doubt that the baby is yours, but he wants to be sure.”

“Is that who you went to lunch with today?”

“Yes. I had to tell him about the pregnancy. I refuse to be with anyone while I’m pregnant. I’m petty but not that petty. I feel like that would be wrong on so many levels, unless you wanted nothing to do with the baby.”

Chad remained quiet. We were having a phone conversation about my day so far. He was still at his dad’s house, and I had just gotten home from my lunch date with Jericho. I didn’t want to keep this from him and then he doubted that the baby was his. I could hear him moving around, then I heard a door close. “If you don’t mind me asking, when was the last time you had sex with him?”

“About three months ago, not long before we reunited. Maybe a week before.”

“That’s probably best then. I can respect him for wanting to be sure. I was going to tell my family, but maybe I should wait.”

“The timing doesn’t add up, but okay. If it was his baby, I would be further along. But okay. Whatever.” I was getting a little irritated, but I checked myself. “I suppose it’s probably best so there won’t be any doubt.”

“I think I should go with y’all.”

“Why?”

“You won’t need my DNA?”

“There are only two possibilities. If the baby isn’t his, which I don’t believe he or she is, then the baby is yours.”

That was a simple ass concept, unless he was insinuating that I’d probably slept with someone else. I hoped like hell he wasn’t about to start no shit with me. I couldn’t handle that after the emotional lunch I had with Jericho. I would end up giving his proposition a green light. I refused to be belittled or demeaned by Chad any longer.

Yes, I fucked around, but he was the only muthafucka that I'd fucked raw in over two years. I'd slept with Jungle, but that was five or six months ago. I swore I just wanted to disappear and raise my baby alone at this point.

“Okay. Well, I'll call you once I leave here.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and began undressing, wishing that things were simpler. Had I not been pregnant, I would be with Jericho right now, without a doubt. Love had fucked me over when it came to Chad. I truly believed he had more to say but he was filtering himself. Old habits die hard, so I knew where his mind had gone without him even saying so, and I was mentally preparing for his absence once again.

I lay across my bed and rubbed my belly. “I wish it was just you and me away from everyone. I just hope everything works out for the best. I want you to know your father's family, so I guess I should be grateful that Jericho and Chad want to be sure.”

I grabbed my phone and texted Chad. *Whenever he lets me know about the appointment, I'll let you know so you can get a paternity test too.*

He could have his test. I just wanted to be alone now. I was stressed out of my mind. Time couldn't pass fast enough. I messaged Jericho to let him know that Chad wanted to accompany me to Houston and that he wanted to leave a DNA sample also. All he sent in return was the okay emoji.

I set the phone back on my nightstand and hummed “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” until I fell asleep.

Fifteen

Q

CHAD

“SO WHEN DO you have to go to Houston?” Isaiah asked.

“Tomorrow.”

It had been two weeks and one day since the dreadful conversation I had with Lexi about another nigga wanting a paternity test. I wanted to believe that she was carrying my baby, but when that came up, my mind took off for the races, wondering who else could have been dropping their seed in her. All the plans I had of trying to wine and dine her had gone out the window pending the results of this test. If the baby wasn't mine, I knew she wouldn't be either.

I wouldn't be able to handle raising another man's child... not with her. If she had a child when we met, that would be different. I was hating that I had even dipped in her raw now. How else could it be a possibility that the baby was for someone else unless he'd been in it raw? I looked over at Isaiah to see him writing on his notepad. We were having our counseling session, and things had been going well until two weeks ago.

“So if this is someone else's baby, you're done?”

“Yep.”

“I'm willing to bet that this other man doesn't feel that way. If you really love her, you would still want her. The only reason she was even with another man was because you fucked up. You threw her away and told her you didn't want a relationship with her. Otherwise, there would have only been

you. Why are you really going to Houston? If the baby isn't his, then it's yours, right?"

"Because my mind started filtering through all the niggas I saw her with over the past few months. What if the baby is for neither of us?"

"Are you serious right now? Did she say someone else could possibly be the father?"

"No. She's quite sure that I'm the father. She said this guy wanted to take a test to be certain. She's doing it to appease him."

"Chad, tell me this. Did you sleep with someone else before trying to rekindle things with Lexi three months ago?"

I already knew where this was going, and I didn't want to hear it. "Yes, I did."

He only nodded repeatedly. I supposed he knew that he didn't have to drive his point home. I'd already gotten it. "If you don't trust her then why do you want her back? Is it simply because you can't stand to see anyone else with her? If so, then that's a fucked-up reason to want her."

"Man, I do love her. I just can't always help the way my mind works."

"Your mind is like anything else. You have to train it to think the way you want it to think. When it brings contrary thoughts to your mind, you need to denounce the shit immediately instead of entertaining it. I need you to realize what you're saying and think about how crazy it sounds. She wasn't committed to you, although she wanted to be. She didn't owe you her loyalty, but now you want to hold it against her for not giving you something you didn't deserve."

I looked away from Isaiah for a moment. He always had me rethinking shit. Sometimes I wondered if I was even a Berotte. None of them had as hard a time with their relationships and finding their one. I thought it would take Shy and Dylan forever, and they were now both married, and Zay was getting married at the courthouse next month. With the way Joyy had been feeling lately, she wouldn't be able to

handle a ceremony. Even hot-headed Alexz had beaten me to the punch.

Maybe I was more like Dad than I thought. DJ was right. I needed to talk to him. “Can you see if Dad is available?”

Isaiah’s eyebrows lifted. “To sit in on this session?”

“Yeah.”

He grabbed his phone and made the call. When he got off, I asked, “You think maybe I just have too much shit going on? I mean, I got a nigga tryna kill me and all, then I got the bullshit with my job. I’ve been pushing paperwork for the past week that I been back. I’m stressed.”

“Naw. I think since all the bullshit though, it’s gotten worse. Since Mama died, you’ve programmed your mind to look for the negative shit so you can push women away. It’s just gonna take a lot of effort for you to get it together.” He paused for a moment. “Dad is on his way.”

I nodded. Expressing myself in this atmosphere, Zay’s office that was being converted into a bedroom, was comfortable for me now. I’d gotten used to being here, baring my heart. I knew it would be easier for me to talk to Dad here. If I didn’t talk to DJ or Zay, then I didn’t talk to anybody. Dad knew that, and he let me be. This time, I needed him. I was more than sure he knew the day would come where I did.

Zay turned on some soft music, and I slumped in my seat and stared at the ceiling. Quickly pulling my phone from my pocket, I shot Lexi a text. *Hey. Just checking on you. How you feeling?*

She responded immediately. *Horrible. I’ve been throwing up all day. I wanna move. I hate it here.*

I knew what she was insinuating. She was starting to hate me. I hadn’t been showing her as much affection like I did the night I popped up at her house. I talked to her every day, but I hadn’t told her I loved her in two weeks. She could tell that I’d pulled back. Lexi was an intelligent woman, and I knew she’d put some shit together on her own. Instead of leaving well enough alone, I responded.

Why do you hate it here? What happened?

I waited for a moment, and her response came through. It was more detailed than I expected. Since she'd been pregnant, she didn't seem to have a problem with saying exactly what was on her mind. Normally, when she was hurt, she would say one or two things then she would shut that shit off.

I feel like I'm sacrificing myself for a man that don't give a shit about me. Your love comes with conditions. You aren't the only one who wants me. I can be with someone else who can make me happy, pregnant and all. I love you, but this back-and-forth shit with your emotions is fucked up, Chad. When I seem to get hope that things will be okay, you burst my balloon and remind me of why we aren't a couple and never have been. I'm sick of this shit.

My mama and sister have been interacting more with y'all than they have with me. I'm lonely. At least in Dallas, I have friends. I feel like the outcast out here, like I'm the damn Jezebel. I'm single and I can do what the fuck I want, but of course they gon' ride for their brother whether he's right or wrong. I feel like I was accepted into the family and then got kicked out, because they think I hurt you. I'm tired. As soon as the baby is born, I'm moving back home.

I rubbed my hand down my face. I caused all this shit. The back and forth was wearing *me* thin, and I was the one causing it. I quickly texted back. *I'm coming over to talk when I get out of counseling. Nobody has kicked you out of the family. You alienated yourself because you were embarrassed about that shit you did with Seneca.*

Again, she responded immediately. *You don't get to manipulate me. Fuck you.*

I didn't bother responding. I shoved my phone back in my pocket. "And that's why you shouldn't be on your phone in here," Zay said matter-of-factly.

"She wants to move back to Dallas. She said she's miserable here. She feels like everybody turned their backs on her since the incident with Seneca. I'm sure she's mainly

referring to the women. She said her own mother and sister spend more time with us than they do with her.”

“What else?”

“She’s sick of my back and forth and that I’m not her only option. Even while pregnant, someone else is willing to make her happy.”

“Mm hmm. I’m willing to bet it’s the guy that wants the paternity test. I told you. Even if the baby is yours, he’s still willing to be with her and help raise *your* baby, because he wants her. That man loves her. I don’t know whether he’s told her or not, but he does. You finna lose your woman. You better get yourself together quick and be consistent. You get it together for a couple of days and then you let the smallest things throw you back to square one. Give me her number.”

I gave Zay her number without hesitation. I knew whatever he said to her wouldn’t hurt our situation. Plus, he had a way with words that could make anyone change their minds. I felt like shit in here, and I hated that. I was tired of feeling this way. Before I could really get carried away with my thoughts, Dad walked through the door. Zay and I both stood.

He shook Zay’s hand, then stared at me for a moment. I extended my hand, and he grabbed it, pulling me to him and embraced me. Before I knew it, I was crying like a big ass baby. I wasn’t trying to hide it or stop it. It felt like I’d been holding this shit in for years, and just an embrace from my dad pulled it out of me.

When I pulled away from him, I wiped my face. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, son. You needed that.”

I nodded then looked at Zay. “Don’t look at me. You asked me to call Dad. So you tell him or ask him what you need to.”

He turned to me, and the concern in his facial expression had tears falling from my eyes again. “How did you move past Mama’s death? I feel like my life is at a standstill and sometimes declining, because I can’t let go of the heartache her death caused me. Because of that, I don’t want close

relationships with women. It's why I fight with Alexz all the time. Although she's come to love that, I wanted her to hate me for always picking on her so she wouldn't want to be close."

He frowned slightly, and he seemed to be in deep thought. When he looked back up at me, the tears had filled his eyes. "It took me a long time. I didn't realize I needed to let go until Anissa came along. She made me feel things I hadn't felt in a long time. That was when I knew I needed to let go of Marie, or I would be miserable for the rest of my life. Seeing how my struggle was affecting Anissa pulled me out of it."

I lowered my head and said, "I love Lexi, but I've had a hard time showing her. It's like when I try to get close and open up to her, something happens that causes me to shut off completely. She's pregnant, Dad."

His eyebrows lifted. "So why aren't you with her?"

"Another guy wants a paternity test. Lexi is sure that the baby is mine, but she's going to have the paternity test to appease him. I haven't been able to be close to her because of that. I told her that I want a paternity test too. I wanna be sure another person isn't involved."

"You're afraid of loving a woman. I mean truly loving her. If you can't show your love, then, to that other person, it doesn't exist. The two of you weren't committed to one another. She gave you her loyalty for a long time before she moved on. Honestly, I don't think she moved on. She's been doing everything she knows to do to try to get your attention. That shit at the house wasn't all on her. That was on you, son. You are going to have to take responsibility for your actions. Her behavior is a direct reaction to the bullshit you're putting her through."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I knew he was right. Zay had pretty much said the same thing, and I'd even come to that same conclusion on my own.

"I pulled up the camera footage, because I needed to see it for myself. That girl was so damn uncomfortable. She was smiling, but she was tense from the first time he touched her.

If you go back and look at it, you'll see that. She allowed that so she could get your attention. Lexi is a beautiful woman. Just like you want her, other men want her too. She loves you, and you've broken her heart. You are going to have to let Marie Berotte rest in peace, son. She loved her babies, and I know you loved her too. But she needs to be in your memories, not directing every scene in your *Lifetime* drama."

I slid my hand down my face, doing my best to keep my emotions to myself until Zay said, "Naw. Let that shit go. It's just us. Your body is trying to release, and you're stopping it from doing so. Let it go, Chad."

He stood from his seat and walked over to me and pulled me from mine. "Come on, man. It's me. You ain't never had to hide shit from me, and you know that. Let it go."

He pulled me in his embrace, and just like with Dad, that did it. I released my emotions. It felt like my mama was leaving me all over again, and that shit hurt. She was the only woman I trusted with my deepest emotions. This time, I didn't try to pull myself together. I cried until I felt like I had nothing left. When I was done, it no longer hurt. My heart felt renewed, and my soul felt lighter.

I pulled away from Zay, and Dad pulled me in his arms again. "I can see the difference already. If Lexi is the woman you love, make it right, son. When do you go for the paternity test and what time do you leave?"

"We leave at nine tomorrow morning."

"Go get breakfast, because I know you can't cook. Surprise her with breakfast in bed. Buy a couple of roses. Make her feel like she's special to you. She may not be receptive at first, but keep doing it. Eventually, she will see that it's not an act. Just like you said in so many words that you don't trust her, she doesn't trust you either. The only difference is she has a reason not to trust you. She hasn't given you a reason not to trust her. Again, she didn't owe you her loyalty, but she gave it to you for free for six months. Don't let her gifts to you go unopened."

I pulled away from him and nodded. “You’re right, Pop. Thank you. Thank you, Zay. I’m gonna go get cleaned up, and I’m going to Lexi’s place with one of her favorite foods and flowers. It’s time I stop bullshitting before I lose her. Y’all pray my strength in the Lord, because this won’t be easy. That girl liable to throw that food in my face.”

I chuckled then wiped my face. I shook both their hands then headed out feeling like a new man. I owed DJ a thank you as well for knowing what I needed. This time, Lexi would be mine. I wouldn’t fold on my promises to her, and I refused to let negativity rule my mind. I promised myself I would do whatever it took to have her back in my life. This time, I would make her happy and grateful that she hung around.

Sixteen

S

SOMEONE WAS KNOCKING on the door, and I had a feeling it was Chad. I wasn't in the mood for his foolishness. Today had been a day from hell. My mama and sister had been spending quite a bit of time with Alexz and even Joyy, although they both knew I was pregnant too. I could use the help also, but I was left to fend for myself. I understood Joyy probably needed more help, but I was their blood. Whatever.

I felt like I was on my own, and today, I'd reached my breaking point. After we came back from Houston, I planned to take a few mental health days and go to Dallas. I would look for an apartment and maybe even talk to Julius. My heart was craving love and affection, and I couldn't seem to get it from nobody.

I made my way to the door and checked the peephole to see Chad standing there with flowers and a Buffalo Wild Wings bag. *Oh, his ass is laying it on thick!* He knew I loved wings. I asked through the door, "What do you want?"

"I want to spend time with you."

"For what? I thought you were content with just being my baby's father. There's no need to spend time with me, Chad."

I swiped an angry tear from my face. This shit was so old. For the past two weeks, I hadn't seen him. He would only text and he called once a day to see how I was feeling. That was it. He never asked if I needed anything. It wasn't that I did, or

that I couldn't get it for myself, just that he didn't care to find out.

"Alexis Danielle Fontenot, please open the door."

No he didn't call out my full name. I was hungry, and those wings were calling my name. *Ugh!* I opened the door and stepped aside to let him in. That was when I noticed he had a duffel bag. "What'chu got a duffel bag for?"

"I'm staying on your couch tonight so I can help you in the morning."

"Help me with what?" I asked with a frown on my face. "I don't need your help, Chad. I haven't had it since I've known you. I can do for myself."

He just stared at me with puppy dog eyes, but he didn't say a word in his defense. He handed me the flowers and the wings. After cutting my eyes at him, I said, "Thank you."

Going to the kitchen, I put the flowers in water, then tore into the wings. I realized there were way more than I could eat. He wanted to eat dinner with me, I supposed. Oh well. I ate my belly full in silence, then washed my hands and went to the couch while he ate. I turned on the TV and watched *Law and Order: SVU*. As I watched, I received a text from an unknown number. I rolled my eyes, because I was tired of being bothered by unnecessary shit, and it seemed like whenever I got a text, it was bullshit.

When I opened the text, the tears rolled down my cheeks without warning. It was from Isaiah. *You haven't been kicked out of the family, Alexis. We love you. You stopped coming around. You have no reason to be embarrassed by what happened. Chad and I have been talking quite a bit, and he realizes how he's responsible for everything that has happened. This message isn't to advocate for Chad though. I just wanted you to know that you're still an honorary Berotte until Chad comes to his senses and ask you to legally be one.*

The tears were falling one behind the other uncontrollably. That was probably why I didn't see Chad approaching me. When he sat next to me, no words were exchanged. He just

pulled me into his embrace. While my mind was telling me to get as far away as possible from him, my body needed the affection and refused to pull away. I buried my face in his chest and released all my frustrations.

It didn't help that Jericho wasn't happy about Chad coming along to give his DNA also. He probably thought he could make this a nice day between the two of us. I didn't want to be with Jericho. I wanted Chad to come to his senses, for real this time. I wanted him to show he cared as much as I did. I needed him to make me his and mean every word of it.

I pulled away from him and stood to go to my room, but he grabbed my arm, halting my forward progress. He stood from the couch as well. He put his hand to my cheek and stared into my eyes. "What's wrong, Lexi?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to have a talk with him, spilling my feelings all over the place for him to just disregard them. I felt like he wasn't here to support me. He was here to make sure he wouldn't be taking care of a baby that wasn't his. I knew this was his baby, but he didn't trust me. I jerked away from him and walked to my bedroom and slammed the door.

Not long after, he opened the door. I should have locked it. "You just want to invade my space, don't you?"

He lifted his hands in a surrendering motion then came closer to me. He sat next to me on my bed, remaining quiet for a minute or so. "I want to ask a question, but I don't want to offend you."

"Since when do you care about my fucking feelings, Chad? Ask your question and get out."

"You're so sure that I'm the father. Why does this nigga think it's possible that he could be the father if you're saying it's not a possibility?"

"He wants the baby to be his because he wants me to be his. We used condoms all the time, but according to him, condoms aren't one hundred percent, and he needs to be sure that he isn't leaving another man to take care of what... rather,

who belongs to him. Although, he said he would definitely take care of someone else's."

I added that last sentence to be petty then paused to really let it sink in. "Now if you're done, please get out. I would prefer you not stay here, but if you're going to anyway, do *not* ever come into my bedroom unless I invite you in."

He nodded then stood from my bed and walked out. I wasn't sure if he was just leaving my bedroom or leaving my place. I didn't give a damn one way or the other. I just wanted him out of my face. Lassoing my feelings was hard with him around. I'd allowed Chad to break my soul, and it was hard trying to repair it. I just needed to be able to focus completely on my pregnancy and block out everything and everyone else.

Grabbing my phone, I looked at the text from Isaiah again. He'd always been the kindest. I really felt like he was my big brother through his hugs whenever he greeted me. Taking a deep breath, I responded. *Thank you, Zay. I appreciate your words. I'm not as embarrassed as you may think. I am slightly though. The eyes I got from everyone, including my own sister, made me feel like I wouldn't fit in anymore. Alexz looked like she wanted to kill me. So I thought it was best if I stayed away. I love you guys too.*

I got under the covers in my bed and thought about tomorrow, hoping there wouldn't be any shit between Chad and Jericho. I wouldn't be able to take any more drama. After setting my do not disturb, I set my phone on the nightstand and pulled the covers over my head, then cried myself to sleep.

* * *

When my alarm went off, I barely wanted to peel myself from the bed. I kept my apartment cold, so getting up was even more difficult. After turning it off, there was a knock on my bedroom door. I assumed Chad slept on the sofa. I hated talking as soon as I woke up. I rolled my eyes and went to it. When I opened the door, he was standing there with a bed tray

with breakfast on it. As I stared at him, he said, “Get back in bed.”

My head tilted slightly as I tried to read him. He had a flower on the tray and everything. I shook my head. “I don’t have time. Thank you.”

I took the food from the tray that he’d gotten from McDonald’s and set it on the desk in my room then went to my ensuite bathroom and started the shower. When I came out, he was no longer standing there, so I closed the door and began undressing. I had an hour to eat this food and be ready to go.

Deciding to eat before my shower, I sat at my desk in my panties and t-shirt. I decided to scroll Facebook while I ate, but the notifications on my text messages caught my attention. There were four messages. One was from Isaiah, one was from Jericho, and the other two were from Chad. They were all sent last night after I’d shut down access to me. I read Jericho’s first since he would probably be here in a little while.

Are you still riding with me to Houston?

I rolled my eyes. He wasn’t the one who was on my nerves, but this situation was giving me hell. I quickly messaged him back. *No. I’m going to drive. I need to be alone.*

I quickly checked Isaiah’s and he was simply saying that it was best if I came around instead of staying away. He said only guilty people hid and from what he saw, I wasn’t guilty of a thing. His message made me smile, but as long as Chad and I were in this funky ass space, I wouldn’t be going. I stared at Chad’s message for the longest, trying to figure out if I wanted to read it. Instead of opening it right away, I began eating my pancakes.

It was very possible that I could read his message and lose my damn appetite. However, before I could even get to my third bite, I had to run to the bathroom. The smell of eggs always sent me running. Before pregnancy, I loved eggs. As I coughed and heaved, a hand began rubbing circles on my back. He started the water running in the sink and got my mouthwash from the cabinet.

After I flushed the toilet, he handed me a wet towel. I wiped my mouth and said softly, "Thank you."

Not even caring that he was in the bathroom, I pulled my shirt off and took off my underwear to get in the shower. Seeing him admire my body in my peripheral only turned me on. I gargled then prepared to get in the shower until Chad rested his hand on my stomach. I stared at him in the mirror and saw him swallow hard as he caressed it.

"I'm sorry for questioning you. When he wanted a paternity test, I assumed you were out there being reckless, not using protection with whomever you chose to be with. That was wrong of me. A lot of things I did and said have been wrong. I'm sorry, baby." He rested his forehead on the back of my head and took a deep breath. "I know you tired of hearing that shit, but I really am. I owe you so much. I'm not talking material things. My dad told me that you had given me gifts that I refused to open, and that shit hit me hard in the heart. I fucked up... bad."

I pulled away from him to turn around and look at him. When I saw the tears falling from his eyes, my heart fell to my feet. He'd never shown this much emotion in front of me. The tears fell from my eyes as well as he stared at the floor. I pulled him to me by placing my hands on his cheeks. There wasn't a time that I felt as emotionally connected to him than now. I pulled him even closer and slid my arms around his neck.

When he didn't hug me back, I pulled away and stared at him. My heart was in shreds, and as badly as I wanted to move on and forget he even existed at times, I couldn't walk away from him like this. Even though I knew he had some internal issues going on, it didn't stop me from feeling neglected and insignificant. None of that mattered in this moment. The love I had for him had surfaced. "I forgive you."

He looked up at me, and his eyes widened slightly. I lifted my hand to further explain. "I forgive you, but it doesn't mean that we will hop into a relationship."

He nodded as he swallowed hard, I assumed trying to swallow his emotions. I again put my hand to his cheek and wiped his tears as his beard tickled my palm. “I have to take a shower. If you don’t mind, can you throw away the eggs? This pregnancy ain’t feeling eggs one bit.”

He gave me a slight smile then leaned over and softly kissed my lips. It was so tender, it rendered me speechless. I couldn’t move from my position until he left the bathroom. After taking a deep breath, I checked Chad’s messages to see he was only letting me know that he didn’t leave and he loved me, then I got in the shower, reevaluating my entire existence. The way I loved this man was crazy, and no matter how much I wanted to let go, something inside of me wouldn’t allow me to.

Once I finished showering and was moisturizing my skin, I heard the doorbell ringing. *Shit*. That was Jericho. I heard the door close, but I didn’t hear any words being exchanged. So I quickly pulled on my leggings and oversized shirt then brushed my curls into a ponytail. I grabbed my lip balm, purse, and phone, then made my way to the front room where I found them awkwardly standing in silence.

“Hey, Jericho.”

“Sup?”

I cleared my throat and asked, “Are we ready?”

Instead of responding to me, everyone grabbed their keys. I did the same, and we all headed to the door. After I locked up, Chad said, “This shit is crazy. Why can’t we all be adults about this? We’re taking three vehicles to go to the same place.”

I nearly swallowed my tongue. Chad volunteering to be the mature adult in this situation was shocking as hell. Before I could say anything, Jericho said, “You right, man. Since I requested the test, I can drive.”

Chad nodded, and I watched them walk toward Jericho’s Range Rover. They both turned to me to see me standing in the same spot. Making their way back to me, Chad placed his

hand on one shoulder as Jericho placed his on my other shoulder. “You okay?” Chad asked.

I shook my head but allowed a slight smile to grace my face. “I’m in shock, honestly. Thank you.”

Jericho grabbed my hand, and Chad placed his hand at the small of my back as they led me to the back seat of Jericho’s Range. This shit was awkward, but I supposed it was for the best. I would much rather endure this moment than one with them arguing or wanting to fight. Chad was extremely confrontational at times, so to see him in this light only made my heart even softer. This would be an interesting drive.

Seventeen

S

CHAD

NOBODY COULD HAVE TOLD me that I would be in the same car as the nigga that wanted to stake claim to the baby growing inside of Lexi. The maturity and unconditional love Isaiah spoke of had come to the forefront. If she was sure the baby was mine, then I believed her. This was to ease Jericho's mind. If I had to be honest, I would say that he was an okay guy. He legit cared about Lexi, and I had to respect him for that.

When we got back to Beaumont, we all went our separate ways. I wanted to follow Lexi in her apartment, but she had been extremely quiet for the entire trip. I could imagine that she was uncomfortable. They told us that we should all receive the results by email in a couple of days. I was extremely happy with the expedited services. There was no way my nerves could handle waiting any longer than that.

Jericho and I talked a bit about our jobs and family and did our best to include Lexi in the conversation. She wasn't rude or anything, but I knew she wasn't feeling that shit at all. It was weird as hell to me too, but again, we had to be adults about the situation. Since he wasn't tripping, neither was I.

As I was heading to K-Asian to get Lexi some lemon pepper wings, my phone rang. When I saw my job's number, I rolled my eyes. I didn't know what the hell they wanted. I was getting tired of fooling around with their asses. I was desked because of my arm, but that shit was practically back to normal. However, the minute they knew I was trying to take

them to court for the incident and their negligence, I'd been treated like I was a fucking new hire.

I answered with a slight attitude. "Berotte."

"Berotte, this is Charles. Can you come in sometime today? I know you took a personal day, but if you can—"

"You can't tell me by phone whatever you need me to come to the office for?"

"It's not something I feel I should say by phone."

"If you finna fire me, do that shit. If I drive all the way over there for that, I'm gon' be pissed. So go 'head and do the shit so I can file wrongful termination to my list of grievances."

"Mr. Berotte, nothing would be wrongful about your termination, because we have plenty of reasons to release you from your duties, starting with your insubordination."

"That's a far cry from what you were saying to me about three months ago. I have a right to defend myself and also protect myself. So what'chu saying, Rondell? Y'all letting me go?"

"I'm afraid so, Chad. We'll have papers for you to sign."

"Fuck that. I'm not signing shit. See y'all in court."

I ended the call and nearly threw my phone to the floor. I was so sick of this shit. I was starting to believe those muthafuckas were in cahoots with Earl Riggs. I was sure he'd heard about what happened to Fatima. She'd only lasted a week or so, then she died in the hospital. Shy had called on our way back from Houston to tell me that. I needed to call him back, because I didn't want to talk in front of Jericho. He was saying they found all kinds of incriminating info on her phone and proof that Earl knew of her plans.

I wasn't as angry as I thought I would be if they actually fired me. *Fuck them people.* I called Shy. He answered, sounding extremely upbeat. He was laughing at something before he said, "What's up, bruh?"

"Bullshit."

He was quiet for a moment, then he asked, “What happened?”

“I got fired a minute ago.”

“Uh huh. I got something for their asses though. You got time to come by the office?”

“Yeah. Let me get Lexi something to eat, and I’ll be there.”

“A’ight.”

He ended the call. I was surprised his nosy ass didn’t have questions about Lexi and me, but he was probably just waiting to ask me face to face. I continued to K-Asian, not sure about how I felt. I was sick of that fucking job, but it was one thing for me to quit. It was totally different getting fired. I wasn’t stacking my ends as much as I should have been. I only had enough in savings to keep me going for a couple of months.

I knew my family wouldn’t let me suffer, but I hated asking for help. Everybody had their own shit to take care of. Hopefully, the Feds would settle out of court once Shy got all his shit together. Then they could compensate me for all my pain and suffering. I just wanted this shit to be done. With any luck, Shy had some good shit to show me so we could proceed.

Since I’d called Lexi’s order in, there was no wait. I grabbed the bag from the counter and headed to her place. When I got there and rang the doorbell, within seconds, she opened the door in her robe. Her eyes were puffy, and her hair was already a mess. “Did I wake you up, baby?”

“Yeah. Come in.”

She looked so damn tired. I just wanted to hold her in my arms and assure her that everything was gonna be okay. “My bad. I just wanted to bring you something to eat.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Go ahead back to sleep. You can warm it up later.”

“I’m awake now. What is it? It smells good.”

“Lemon pepper wings from K-Asian.”

“You gonna eat with me?”

I lifted my eyebrows slightly. “I hadn’t planned to. You want me to stay?”

“Yeah. We need to talk.”

“Okay. Let me lock my vehicle. I’ll be right back.”

I left her apartment shocked. Maybe she’d gotten the alone time she needed. I stepped out and walked far enough to set the alarm then jogged back to her apartment. When I got inside, she was seated at the table, waiting for me. I locked the door and quickly made my way to her. I was just happy that she wanted me in her space. Thanks to Dad and Zay, I’d finally realized how much of a fool I had been, and I promised myself that I would do what I had to do to make us work.

She stretched out her hand, and I put mine in hers. She said grace then stared at me. I was anxiously waiting to see what she had to say. She looked away from me and asked, “What made you do that today?”

It was my turn to lower my head. I took a minute to think about what I would say and how I would say it. I believed that was my problem most times. I didn’t think before I spoke. “It was stupid to drive three vehicles. We all knew what the situation was. I needed to be a little more accepting of it. That was my way of showing you that it was squashed.”

“But I mean, why does it matter, Chad? We aren’t a couple, and I don’t know if we ever will be.”

“It matters because you’re the mother of my child. It matters because we *aren’t* a couple. It matters because I *want* us to be a couple one day. I love you. That hasn’t changed, although I haven’t said it in a while. I love you more than I can express, baby. I truly want you to be happy, and me causing drama ain’t gon’ make you happy.”

I watched the tears fall from her eyes. Seeing her cry so much was hard. I didn’t know if she was just that hurt by my actions, if it was the pregnancy, or a combination of the two. Whatever the reason, it was damaging to my soul. I lifted my hand and swiped the tears with my thumb. She leaned into my

touch and closed her eyes. It seemed I was making things hard for her, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I love you too, Chad. I just don’t wanna get all soft toward you again, only for you to shut me out again. I can’t go through that again. I leave tomorrow to go to Dallas. I just need a break from everything to get myself together.”

“You still thinking about moving back?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded my acceptance. It would be up to me to convince her that she needed to stay. I couldn’t fathom her being that far away from me. Instead of saying anything else, I pulled our food from the bag and separated it. We ate in silence for a while, then I decided to ask the question brewing in my mind. “Lexi, if you move, how will we coparent?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t think about that right now.”

She was uncomfortable and stressed. Her shoulders had lifted somewhat, and her body looked stiff. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was a legitimate question. I just don’t have an answer for it right now.”

“Hopefully, we won’t have to figure that out. I want you to stay. I want you here with me. Those words may not mean much to you right now, but I plan to make good on my words this time.”

She only nodded. We continued eating until we were done. After washing my hands, I was about to head to Shy’s to talk, but when Lexi spoke again, that all changed. “Can you stay with me tonight?”

“I would love to stay wit’chu.”

She blushed and went and threw her container away in the trash along with mine. When she returned, she grabbed my hand and asked, “So how’s everything going outside of the shit we’re dealing with? How’s work?”

I swallowed hard. “I got fired before I got back here today.”

Her eyes widened, and she put her hand over her mouth. “It’s okay. I was supposed to go meet Shy, because he has some shit he wants me to look at. We’re building a case against the Feds and my job for their lack of protection for me and the way they handled the case as a whole. They were extremely negligent when it came to the threat on my life. Had it not been for Shy, I would have been dead.”

“Go... go handle your business.”

“I can do that tomorrow after you leave. You need me, and I want you to see that you’re my priority. You and our baby mean everything to me. I won’t put anything else before y’all again. How long will you be gone?”

“A week. Don’t change the subject. I’m okay if you need to leave, Chad. Really.”

“No. I’ll call Shy in a lil bit and let him know that I’ll be up there tomorrow. Besides, he may end up getting even more info for me. You asked me to stay, and I’m not about to pass up the opportunity to be in your space.”

She led me to the couch, and we sat. She leaned and rested against my shoulder, so I lifted my arm and pulled her close. She snuggled into me as she turned on the TV. “What do you feel like watching?” she asked.

You. I just wanna watch you. That was what I wanted to express, but I didn’t want her to think I was just running game. “Whatever you wanna watch is fine.”

I kissed her forehead, and I was surprised when she lifted her head and puckered her lips for a kiss. I wouldn’t dare leave her hanging. When I put my lips to hers, I couldn’t pull away. Those thick lips had me from day one. I pulled her bottom lip into my mouth and sucked it slowly before I pulled away from her. She stared at me for a moment then cleared her throat and turned to the TV.

I relaxed a bit as she laid against me. It felt good to be free with her. For me to express as much as I did a little while ago felt more natural than I ever thought it would. However, I

could feel her tension. She was stiff as hell as she lay against me. “Talk to me, baby. What’s up?”

“Both times that we had sex, you disappeared on me.”

“Who said anything about sex?”

“Nobody, but—”

I put my fingers over her lips. “Unless you plan on attacking me, I’m good.”

She chuckled. That was a sound I hadn’t heard in a while. Knowing that I caused that chuckle made me feel even freer than I already did. She stared up at me and said, “I just don’t want you to be in a position where you feel like you wanna attack *me*. Most likely, I would let you, but I feel like I would be setting myself up for failure.”

“Don’t worry. As bad as I want yo’ ass, I know I got some shit to prove. Not just to you but to myself too. I just had a real breakthrough yesterday. I want to be sure that I didn’t imagine that shit.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, were your issues with me totally from the situation with Knowledge and you being shot? I mean regarding my safety and whatnot.”

“No. I’ve been holding on to my mother. That was clearly unhealthy. I’ve been afraid to get close to another woman for fear of losing her. It happened with Jana, and it almost happened with my sister.”

“Yeah, you told me about that last time. I thought that maybe it was something else.”

I refused to tell her about me thinking about other niggas she’d been with. That would only hurt her, not help her. “Other than my own insecurities getting in the way, that was it. It took my dad to help me let my mama go, and I believed it was because we didn’t openly talk about her that often. I wanted to be like my dad so bad growing up. So I held everything inside. My brothers did that quite often too, but I seem to be the only one who that shit affected negatively.”

“Well, I’m glad that you are getting it under control.”

“Me too, baby. Me too.”

Eighteen

8

LEAVING Chad this morning was hard as hell, but I needed the reset. The man who I swore I wanted nothing more to do with had torn down my defenses once again. I felt stupid as hell for allowing him to make my heart soft toward him already. He held me all night and had he wanted to fuck me, I would have let him. It seemed he was determined to make us work this time, but it had only been a couple of days, so the jury was still out on that.

That was my problem the other times. I was way too quick to jump right back in with him. He felt so good lying next to me. His dick was hard as hell, and it took a lot of willpower for me not to slide down it like I had a fire to put out. I *did* have a fire to put out... mine. My insides were scorching hot, wishing that I could feel Chad's dick between my walls. Our sexual chemistry was off the charts, which only made resisting him that much harder.

I was nearly to Dallas, and Chad had already called three times to check on me. I'd literally been smiling for the entire drive. My phone started ringing, and I could see on the Bluetooth that it was Skyler. "Hello?"

"Hey! Where are you? Mama, Mariena, and I are at your place."

"On my way to Dallas."

"Dallas? Why are you going to Dallas?"

"To spend time regrouping. I needed a break away from everything and everybody."

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Lexi, really?”

“Really. I’m okay.”

I rolled my eyes slightly. I hadn’t heard from them in a week, but they were disappointed that I wasn’t home today. Where in the hell were they the other six days? “How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know. I packed for a week, but I doubt I stay that long.”

“Well, at least you sound good. I guess we’ll talk to you whenever you get back then.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call, grateful that she didn’t keep pushing like she normally did. Although they weren’t checking on me as much as I thought they should, I didn’t want to get into it with either of them. I loved them. They would probably just think I was overreacting anyway. As I exited the freeway, my phone rang again, and I knew it would be Chad this time. I was correct. “Hey.”

“Hey, baby. You made it yet?”

“I just took my exit.”

“Okay. I miss you already, girl.”

I giggled like he hadn’t put me through over a year’s worth of bullshit. “You just saw me four hours ago, Chad.”

“I know. I’m gonna have a surprise for you whenever you get back.”

Surprise? The only surprise I was going to want when I got back was for him to make love to me. It had been a while, and I was about to succumb to the withdrawals. “Okay. I can’t wait to see what it is.”

“A’ight. Call me once you get situated.”

“Okay.”

Apparently, today was call-and-check-on-Lexi day, because as soon as I ended the call with Chad, Jericho was calling. I really didn't feel like talking to him, but until the results came in, I would answer his calls. It wasn't that I thought he was the father of my baby, but I knew he thought it was a possibility, and I didn't want him to think I was brushing him off like Chad had done me.

"Hello?"

"Hey, sexy Lexi. What's up, baby?"

"Not too much. I just got to Dallas. What's up with you?"

"Dallas? What are you doing in Dallas?"

"I just needed to get away. I'm gonna do lunch with one of my friends tomorrow, but I'm going to just rest today."

"Oh. Okay. Well, I guess we'll be talking soon, once the results come in. I'll let you go so you can get situated."

That was strange. He sounded nervous as hell when I said I was in Dallas. I'd never heard Jericho sound nervous. I shrugged it off and continued to my hotel room. The moment I got checked in and settled in my room, I immediately thought of Chad. I hoped and prayed that I was making the right decision by allowing him in my space. He'd broken me twice in the last few months, and like the Jill Scott song, "Hear My Call", I was afraid for me. Mentally, I was all over the place.

However, the same man that I'd allowed to make a fool of me was the same man trying to heal me. I craved love so much until I almost didn't care who it came from. I was desperate, and I didn't like that feeling. I was a natural romantic, and not having anyone to shower with my love and affection and them reciprocate it had turned me cold. That was why I could fool around with so many and not develop feelings for any of them. I liked Jericho, but it never went beyond that, even with as much love and attention he showed me.

As I lay here, I decided that I needed retail therapy. Shopping always put me in a great mood, although I was already in a good mood after my night with Chad. I could definitely tell the difference in him from the last time he tried

to make things right with me. While I wanted to have sex with him, I was scared as hell. I was afraid that if I gave him the pussy, he would disappear. It was as if that was all he wanted.

That was what his actions said, but I knew that wasn't how he felt. The problem though, was that I didn't know exactly how he felt. The way he'd been expressing himself yesterday and today had been everything. When he said that we should all ride together to Houston for the DNA test, I was shocked into silence. Just the fact that he made an effort to get along with Jericho was impressive.

Chad was so fucking confrontational. I knew that, and that was the reason I allowed Seneca to do what he did. I knew it would eventually get Chad to see me. However, now that I knew his issues and that he was trying to work on them so he could be the best version of himself he could be, I was happy. Whether he took me as his or not, I knew our child would be raised in love. I grabbed my phone to call him and let him know that I was settled and planned to go shopping.

He answered on the first ring. "Hey, Lexi. You good?"

"Hey. Yeah. I'm settled in my room, but I'm thinking about going shopping."

"What's your Cash App?"

I frowned slightly. "Why? You tryna commit fraud like them hackers on Facebook?"

He laughed loudly. "Girl, give me yo' shit."

"SexiLexi. Sexi is spelled with an I instead of a Y."

"Shiiid, you ain't lying."

I giggled. That was why Jericho called me that at times. He'd Cash App'd me a couple of times to have dinner on him. "Why are you wanting to Cash App me, Chad?"

"Just so you can get a few things, maybe something sexy for me to see."

My body heated up that second. "Mm."

That was all I could say. He'd caught me off guard. However, I knew he'd gotten fired, and should be saving his money. When my phone chimed, I saw he'd sent me three hundred dollars. "Chad, although I appreciate your generosity, I can't accept this. You don't have a job, remember?"

"You let me worry about that. All I want is to see you in something sexy while you throw that ass in a circle like you do when you go to that hip hop club downtown."

I laughed again. I hadn't been dancing in a while since I didn't find a decent place in South Padre Island to go to, and I definitely liked to throw my ass in a circle. I was going to have to make a mental note to go when I got back to town. "Damn. I hadn't been out dancing in a long time."

"Well, whenever you go, please let me know. I know you ain't mine, but you know how I feel about another nigga giving you attention. Lexi, I want to be the only one giving you attention, but I'm willing to wait until you're ready. Whenever you're ready, I want you to be mine, baby. Even if that damned DNA test comes out in Jericho's favor, I still want you, lil mama."

I could hear him moving around as I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. He wanted me to be his, but I needed time to be sure this was real. Ignoring the last part of what he said, I responded, "Well, I'll be sure to let you know. What are you doing?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Choking my dick with visions of you dancing racing through my mind. Mm. You fine as hell, baby."

I closed my eyes, doing my best not to touch myself. Chad was making me so damn horny. I slid my hand over my breast, but as I slid it down my stomach, I thought I felt slight flutters. I was only thirteen weeks, so it couldn't have been the baby already. *Could it?* Apparently, I'd gotten quiet on Chad, because he said, "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I just... damn. I want you."

“I wasn’t uncomfortable. Something else grabbed my attention. I thought I felt flutters in my belly.”

“You’re thirteen weeks, right? Can you feel them this early?”

“That’s right. I’m almost fourteen. I don’t know how soon I can begin feeling anything. It just pulled my attention away from fingering myself.”

“Mm.”

“You wanna fuck me, Chad?”

“I wanna make love to you, Lexi. But if you wanna be fucked, I can do that too.”

I remained quiet, thinking about how he filled me and made me feel things no one else had. It was like when his dick entered me, I was catapulted into paradise. He took me to the King both times, even after the second time got weird. My feelings ran deep for this man. If we didn’t end up together, I’d probably be single for the rest of my life, because I couldn’t fathom another man having this effect on me.

“I love you, Chad. I’m scared though.”

“I love you too. I know you are. That’s why I said whenever you’re ready. I’m not rushing you. Do whatever you need to do for you. I’m just praying that whatever you do will include me. I would love for us to raise our baby together, under one roof. If that’s not possible, I’ll understand and will do my best to make sure our baby lacks nothing. I know you will too.”

Before I could stop them, the tears flowed down my cheeks. I still wasn’t used to Chad expressing himself this way. It overflowed my heart with joy when he did. It was at that moment that I knew I would definitely be giving him another chance. While I wouldn’t tell him now, he would know when I returned. As excited as I was feeling about it, I knew there was no way in hell I would be able to stay gone for an entire week.

“Thank you, Chad. I’m loving the change in you. It was what I needed. I just hope that you will continue counseling to be sure that this Chad stays at the forefront.”

“I will, and I believe I’m going to include my dad in my sessions. It helped me so much. I think I damn near idolized him. I wanted to do everything he did. When I couldn’t climb that pole in school, trying to be a lineman, it nearly killed me. That was what he did for years.” He paused for a moment, then continued. “You don’t have to worry. I’m going to continue seeing Zay once a month and on an as-needed basis.”

“I’m proud of you. Well, I’m gonna go shopping. Let me know how your meeting with Shy goes.”

“I will. I’m about to leave home now to head his way.”

“Okay.”

“Call me when you get back to your room.”

“I will. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

I ended the call feeling like I was on cloud nine. I hadn’t been happy in a long time, and I could only pray that this was only the beginning.

* * *

Surely that ain’t him. I was leaving Y.O. Ranch Steakhouse, and I could have sworn I saw my dad. I scanned the parking lot, trying to spot him again, and there he was with a little boy... my brother. I decided that I needed to see him and talk to him, possibly coming to a resolution about some things I didn’t previously even want to think about.

As I made my way toward him, I stopped dead in my tracks. He stopped to talk to a man, and that man was staring right at me. Jericho Marcellus. Why in the fuck was he talking to Julius Fontenot? I angrily stomped my way over to them. When I got to them, my dad’s eyes widened in excitement, but it dwindled when he saw the expression on my face. I was angry, but most of all, I was confused. Was this some kind of setup?

“Lexi! Hey! What are you doing here?” my dad asked.

I cut my eyes at him and the little boy who resembled me and brought my attention back to Jericho. He stared at me with somewhat of a hard expression on his face. “The real question is, why are you here?” I asked Jericho.

“The two of you know one another?” my dad asked with a frown on his face. “You told me you had no clue of who my daughter was.”

I turned to Julius and asked, “What in the fuck is going on?”

My dad slid his hand down his face, something he did when he was frustrated. “I had a case that went south. My client threatened harm to me and my family. My immediate response was to get someone to look out for you, Skyler, and your mother. Jericho came highly recommended. Before hiring him, I asked if he knew you or Skyler, and he told me he didn’t.”

“I didn’t know her at the time, but I got too close, and we ended up literally bumping into each other in the grocery store. I couldn’t help but want to get to know her,” Jericho said, answering all our questions.

It wasn’t a setup, but his ass was on the job. “So you lied to me. You lied about your job and everything! Jericho, for real? So all this shit was a joke to you?”

My dad looked back and forth between the two of us with a deep frown before he asked, “You slept with my daughter? You weren’t supposed to get close to any of them, but you have the audacity to come here to settle up now that the threat is no longer there?”

Jericho’s eyes never left mine. “I planned to tell you, Lexi, on the way to Houston, but when Chad rode with us, I couldn’t. When your dad called me Friday to tell me that the job was done, I promise I had no intent of keeping it from you. I fell in love with you. That’s no joke. Seneca and Jungle knew who I was, and they knew I was fucking up. That was why they said what they said. We’re all working for the same company under Ali Joseph, Watchful Eyes. They are watching Chad.”

I slowly shook my head. This was bullshit. I should have known Jericho's ass was too good to be true. We never argued. He never disagreed with me on anything, because this was a job. Fuck him and the bullshit he was trying to sell me right now. "So what the fuck is the DNA test for?"

"DNA test? You're pregnant?"

"Daddy, please. I'll talk to you in a minute."

He took a step back with a slight smile on his face. I hadn't called him Daddy in a long ass time. I turned my attention back to Jericho to see his facial expression had softened. "I want this to be my baby. You probably don't believe me, but I love you, girl. I know you don't feel the same way and you probably never will, but if this baby is mine, it will keep me connected to you. Ain't nothing fake or shady about the way I feel for you."

He stepped closer to me and gently laid his hand on my stomach. "I'm not gonna lie. I was hoping Chad never got his act together. Those nights I spent with you, holding you in my arms weren't fake. I was giving you all of me, Lexi."

"All of you except for the part that you were the hired help." I backed away from him. "Stay away from me."

I walked away from him, and my dad said something to him, then yelled for me to stop. As I took deep breaths, doing my best to keep my food down, I realized that it was of no use. I ran to the grass and threw up all my lunch. When I heard someone say, "Uh oh," I turned to see my dad and his son watching me.

I reached in my purse and got some napkins out of it to wipe my mouth and a small container of mouthwash. I had to stay prepared with as much as I regurgitated my insides. If I got angry or felt a way about something, it seemed to really upset my stomach.

"Lexi, you okay?"

I nodded. He grabbed my hand and led me to his car. My heart was hurt. Although I didn't love Jericho, I did care for him. To know that it all could have been a job for him hurt,

and I didn't even know why. It shouldn't have even mattered. But I supposed because I actually considered being with him if things didn't work out between me and Chad was what had me feeling deceived.

My dad opened the passenger door for me, then put my brother in the back seat in his car seat. When he closed our doors, the little munchkin said, "Hi!"

I turned and smiled slightly. "Hi."

He smiled big. I didn't even remember his name. I just knew that he was getting close to being two years old now. Once Dad got in the car, he started it, then stared at me with a slight smile on his face. "Hey, baby girl."

And the water works began. What in the fuck was wrong with me? I dropped my face to my hands, trying to figure out what I was crying about. When he touched me, I realized I was crying because I missed my daddy. I threw my arms around him and cried like someone had died. After pulling myself together before I had to throw up again, I said, "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. I'm happy to see you and happy that *you* seem happy to see me too."

I gave him a slight smile. "Surprisingly, I *am* happy to see you. I didn't realize just how much I missed your love. I was so angry. I didn't want to forgive you for hurting Mama... all of us, but I can't live that way anymore. You will always be my dad, and the way you treated me let me know that another man should always treat me like a queen."

"Although I wasn't living it myself." He slowly shook his head. "So, you're pregnant?"

"Yeah. I'm almost fourteen weeks, just entering my second trimester. Hopefully, the puking will stop soon."

"Is it Jericho's?"

"I truly believe that Chad is the father. However, Jericho wanted a paternity test because we slept together not long before Chad and I did. Ugh! Chad is the only one I didn't use protection with."

I knew Julius Fontenot knew a thing or two about that. However, that made me feel free. I knew the last person that would judge me would be him. If anything, he would understand my weaknesses, because they were similar to his. Only similar though, because he was in a whole-ass marriage. I was single. Well, technically, I was still single.

“I should have told you that I had someone watching out for you, but I didn’t want you to hate me more. My life has been hell, and I have no one to blame but myself,” he said as he turned to baby boy in the back seat and gave him a sippy cup.

He squealed in delight as my dad smiled at him. “Daddy, what’s his name again?”

He chuckled. “Julius, but we call him JJ since he’s a junior.”

“Oh. Sorry, I forgot.”

“It’s okay.”

“Are you and his mother still together?”

“Naw. That wasn’t gon’ work out. I was so damn stupid. I threw away my family for bullshit. I mean, I love my son, but Patricia and I could have adopted if I wanted another kid. I took her for granted because she overlooked my behavior time and time again. I knew I had to move on though. I’d hurt her for the last time. Not only did I hurt her, but I embarrassed her, made her look like a fool.”

I didn’t feel sorry for him at all, but I was glad that he’d put some things into perspective. “I forgive you, Daddy. I’m not going to say things will go back to how they were, because I don’t believe they will ever be the same, but I can give you respect as my father when we do talk. I love you.”

“I love you too, baby girl. What are you going to do if the baby is for Jericho?”

“Daddy, I don’t know. I feel like I’m sure that it isn’t. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. Despite his lies, he seems like a good guy, so it wouldn’t be a total disappointment. Chad and I are trying to get our lives on track though. I feel like if

this isn't Chad's baby, it will take a lot longer. He did say that if the baby wasn't his, he would still want me to be his. I don't know if that was just nice words or if he was sincere. Hopefully, I won't have to find out."

Nineteen

L

CHAD

“SO YOU TELLING me that Summerall is receiving bribes?”

“Yep. And he’s started paying Charles. That’s why he’s flipped the script on yo’ ass. They were so sloppy with that shit too. That lets me know that it probably goes above their heads. We finna hang them muthafuckas by their toenails. Now the Feds... I can almost prove racial discrimination.”

My eyebrows lifted. I’d come to Shy’s office to see what he had for me. This nigga was efficient as hell. If he proved racial discrimination against the FBI, his career was really gon’ blow up. Skyler’s career would, too, since she was helping him. Racial injustice was her bread and butter. “Damn, Shy. Nigga you gon’ be on every news outlet in the nation.”

“Hell yeah. So what’s your price? What’s your life worth to you?”

I frowned. “Nigga, my shit is priceless. What the fuck you mean?”

He rolled his eyes. “What will it take for you to turn your back on this shit and say it never happened? They are going to want to settle once we get past the preliminary shit. If you want to go to court, we can do that too, but we’ll be in more danger than we were with Knowledge ass. They’ll kill me, you, and Skyler. I don’t know about you, but I ain’t up for being a mortar for the cause. I still got shit to do. Everybody got a baby on the way or already here. I been fucking Brittany

ass upside down, tryna get that nut to stay in there and marinate for a while.”

I laughed so loud I almost scared myself. “Muthafucka, you crazy as hell! You must take after Mama side of the family, because Berottes are one or two hitter quitters. Me and Lexi only had sex twice, and you see where that got us. Dylan said the first time he nudded in Skyler, she got pregnant. Obviously, Isaiah think he king shit since Joyy pregnant with fucking triplets.”

“Nigga, fuck you. Name yo’ damn price before I drop yo’ case and let you starve to death.”

I laughed hard again. When I got my laughter contained, I asked, “What’s a good number?”

“Shoot for the stars, my nigga. They gon’ bring it down.”

“Shiiiiidd, let’s go for a billion then.”

“Hell fucking yeah.”

“We got their asses!” Skyler said as she barged into Shy’s office. “Every muthafucking case involving terrorists, if there was a witness or someone was being threatened, they were either put in witness protection or there was an agent assigned to them. All of them were white, dating back to the fucking eighteen hundreds. I also have proof that documents were falsified. Their records should be the same as ours, and they aren’t. I hope y’all ready to be on David Muir, because we about to be big time.”

I slowly shook my head. “To hell with the news. Pay me. Give me my fucking money!”

“Hell yeah!” Shy cosigned.

“I’m telling you, bruh... if they award me a billion dollars, I’m gon’ do my stroll and neckroll right there in the courtroom. I’m gon’ bark so loud, every dog in the vicinity of the courthouse gon’ be howling.”

We laughed so damn loud, if any other clients were in the building, they were probably wondering what in the hell was

going on. “Bruh! I will become frat and bark wit’cho ass if they award you that much money!”

I laughed harder. Shy couldn’t hardly stand the Q’s, so that statement was extremely funny. By the time we finished talking, going over paperwork, and clowning, it was nearly time for his office to close. We agreed to meet up at Pour 09 this weekend, and I made my way home.

I was trying to wait for Lexi to call me and not seem too needy by calling her so much, but fuck that. I missed her. After spending the night with her last night, without having sex with her to complicate shit, I didn’t want to be without her. Holding her in my arms had me sleeping more soundly than I had in months. After her phone went to voicemail, I was already starting to worry. Before I could call again, she sent a text.

I’m with my dad and little brother. Can you believe that shit? I’ll call you back. I got some shit to tell you that you ain’t gon’ believe.

I chuckled as I read it, then responded. *A’ight, baby. I miss you.*

I was fucking sprung. Now I was all sensitive like a bitch. In this case, I liked it. I liked needing somebody, and I needed the fuck out of that woman. Not having her made me crazy as hell. That was one of the reasons I was depressed and in a funk. My mind and heart were at war where Lexi was concerned. She was made for me, and I threw her away to let her be toyed with by other niggas, then got mad that she was toyed with. I was so damn messed up.

She responded almost immediately. *I miss you too. I’ll call you as soon as I get back to my room.*

Okay, baby.

She was going to be mine. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. *Sign it into law and make it official.*

* * *

“Run that shit by me again,” I said to Lexi.

She'd gotten back to her room and had gotten settled. She'd been with her dad all evening, which was a surprise in itself. She couldn't stand that nigga after what he did to her mom. This pregnancy had her sensitive as hell. Before she called, I'd had a conversation with my dad. He'd called to check on me, and we ended up talking for nearly an hour. However, this shit Lexi just told me had stunned me.

"You heard me. Jericho was working for my dad. He was supposed to be watching my back."

"Yeah, but he was watching your front, back, and sides. Ain't that some shit."

She chuckled. "Yeah, but he still seems like the same guy. It just irritates me because it makes me wonder if he was playing games with me."

"I mean, does it matter now? You're going to be mine anyway."

"Is that so, Mr. Berotte?"

"Hell yeah. I can't wait until you get back. You know what else I can't wait for?"

"What's that?"

"Confirmation that you're carrying my baby, so that can be behind us."

She remained quiet, and that put me on high alert. I wanted to panic and say some shit that I shouldn't say, but I remained calm. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just nervous. My mind is going through the what ifs. What if he fucked the condom up to get me pregnant on purpose and they have my gestation date wrong like Alexz? What if—"

"What if you getting worked up for nothing?" I asked, cutting her off.

She took a deep breath and huffed. "You're right."

"So what are you doing tomorrow, besides waiting for the test results?"

“Well, one of my friends from high school is wanting to meet up for mani-pedis and lunch. So I plan to do that and maybe visit a few more friends.”

“And the next day?”

“I don’t know.”

“How about you come back home? You gon’ make me go days without you? I got the best sleep I’ve gotten in a long ass time last night.”

“Yeah, me too. I promise not to keep you waiting too long, Chad. When I come back, I wanna see you stroll though. You know I love Omegas.”

“Shiiiiid, it better only be one Omega you love, girl.”

“Hell yeah. He about six three, two hundred something pounds, bald headed with a nice ass beard, brown skinned, with a baritone voice. His bark is sexy as hell too. But you know what I really like?”

“What’s that?”

“That thick ass tongue. He sticks it out every chance he gets. Oh, but when he gave me head, I thought I had breached the pearly gates. That shit gave me an out-of-body experience I will never forget.”

Lexi had my dick hard as hell, and I was at the point of leaking. “See how you teasing me? When you get back here, I don’t want to hear no shit. I’m coming to your place to bring you to the pearly gates again.”

She giggled. “It’s refreshing to have you back to your playful self. Although we were only talking, I would love to see you run around with Alexz like you used to.”

“You’d have to come to my dad’s house to see that, Alexis.”

“I know. Isaiah messaged me the other day. He had me crying something fierce. Well... everything has me crying these days. You were at my place when he messaged me. That man has a way with words that can pull out your deepest emotions.”

“Tell me about it,” I mumbled.

We remained quiet for a moment, and in that short amount of time, I could hear Lexi snoring. I smiled and hit record on my phone. She wasn't getting out of it this time. This morning, when I told her she was snoring last night, she called me a liar. Said she didn't snore. I couldn't wait to let her hear it. “Baby?”

“Hmm?”

“Get some rest. Call me in the morning when you wake up.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I ended the call and lay back in my recliner to watch the preseason game. I still couldn't believe what she'd told me about Jericho. However, the fact that he worked for Ali told me a lot about him. He was the real deal and most likely, he was legit. At least, he was legit now. There was no telling what he used to be involved in. I was sure he already knew who I was if that was the case, and he most likely knew Shy as well.

This DNA test had me antsy, and Lexi's what ifs didn't make it any better. However, I meant what I said. Just like Jericho had told her, I wanted her regardless of paternity. I would take care of her and the baby. It was amazing how things changed when I opened my heart to her. Something I thought I would never be able to do didn't seem so hard to do now. I refused to be without her, and I knew she felt the same way about me. It was time to stop playing in her face and be for real about what and who I wanted. Period.

Twenty

20

I WAS BITING my acrylic nails, waiting on that got damn email. It was three o'clock in the afternoon and I had just gotten back to my hotel from my day outing with my girl, Jeanine. We'd gotten our nails and toenails done, and I'd even gotten a massage. Then we went to Truluck's for lunch. I knew my seafood intake was limited, so I didn't dare get fish or crabs. I did a few grilled shrimp and vegetables.

I'd talked to Chad this morning and again briefly on our way to lunch. I texted him when I got back to the hotel to tell him I was gonna take a nap, but shit, I was wide awake, anticipating that fucking email. I began playing games on my phone, trying to help the time pass, but it was of no use. It didn't even keep my mind occupied. I was scared as hell for some reason, whereas I was completely sure before.

A text came through, and it was from Jericho. I rolled my eyes, but I opened it to see what he had to say for himself. *Hey, Sexy Lexi. I just wanted to check on you and make sure you were okay. I'm about to lose my mind waiting on this email, and I figured that maybe you were feeling the same way. Again, I'm sorry for not telling you the truth, but nothing I made you feel was fake. I really do love you. The love you feel whenever I embraced you was real, baby.*

I rolled my eyes as I thought about what my dad told me. Jericho had been watching me for months before we even ran into each other. He'd been watching me since a month after I'd moved to Beaumont. So he knew about Chad and had probably seen my heartbreak and how much Chad meant to

me. He'd seen my tears and me longing for a man I thought didn't want me. All my lonely days and nights were probably playing through his binocular lenses.

I knew I was probably over exaggerating how things really went, but I couldn't help but do so since I had no clue that he was watching me. Deciding to respond, I closed my eyes for a moment, then began typing. *Hey. I am extremely antsy, but I'm okay. Apology accepted.*

I didn't know what else to say to him. Obviously, I wasn't a great judge of character, and my third eye was nonexistent when it came to fraud ass niggas. Or maybe I was just in the wrong places and attracting niggas at the wrong times. Chad and Jericho both seemed to care about me a great deal, but the situations were all fucked up. First Chad's and now Jericho's.

I found myself thinking about how I substituted Jericho's affection for what I wanted to feel from Chad all the time. For a moment, I assumed some guilt in the situation, but I quickly dispelled it. Jericho knew what it was from the beginning with me. I never insinuated that we would be in a relationship or anything close to that. He knew we were just fucking and showing one another affection. Chad had my heart so cold it was easy for me not to get attached. That wasn't the case for Jericho.

It was just a bad idea all the way around for him to fuck with me, knowing I was in love with Chad. He set himself up for failure. Before he bumped into me, he already felt an intense attraction to me for him to go against the rules outlined for him. Losing a month of payment for the job he was doing because of his involvement with me was a huge risk to take, and he lost in every way imaginable.

He texted back. *Thank you, Lexi. It means a lot to me that you can forgive me for deceiving you. I promise you, I had no ill intentions. No matter what the results say, I want what's best for you.*

I smiled slightly. He'd always been a sweetheart. Until we ran into Seneca and Jungle that day, I hadn't seen anything indicating otherwise. As my thoughts ran wild about Jericho,

my phone chimed. It was the email! I hurriedly clicked on it. As my eyes scanned, another email came through as well. The first email said that Jericho was not a DNA match to my baby. I closed my eyes, relaxing in what I knew in my heart all along.

The next email clearly matched Chad to my unborn child. Tears of joy left my eyes as I lay back in the bed. My body quaked as I cried audibly, releasing all the tension and stress I'd been holding hostage. My phone began ringing, and I knew it was Chad. I answered immediately through my tears. "Hello?"

"Come home, baby. I need you here. Please come home."

I cried even more as I listened to him try to console me by phone. His voice was tender and full of love as he assured me that everything was just as it should be. When I finally got a grip on my emotions, I said, "I'll leave first thing in the morning. It's getting late, and I don't want to be on the road at night. We're having a baby, Chad."

"Yeah. We gon' be a family. I can't wait to love on you, baby. I've been waiting for this email. They kept a nigga on ice all day."

I chuckled. "Yes, they did."

We were quiet for a minute until Chad broke the silence. "I know I said I wouldn't rush you, baby, but this moment is so intense. I need to ask. Will you please be all mine? I need you in my life, and I know I was stupid before. While I'm happy that the baby is coming, I wanted to tell you all this that day I was in the hospital, before you told me you were pregnant. I'd made up my mind that I wanted you to be mine. I've wasted enough time, and I know that isn't your fault, but—"

"Chad," I said, cutting him off. "Let's talk about that when I get home tomorrow."

It wasn't that I wanted to ice him, like he'd said the DNA testing center had done him, but I wanted to say it to his face. I wanted to look him in his eyes and say what I've wanted to

say for nearly the past two years. It was something that not so long ago I didn't think I would ever say to him.

Chad remained quiet, and I knew he was thinking the worst. I wanted to put him out of his misery, but at the same time, I needed to be able to express to him how I felt face to face. "Chad, I just feel we need to talk about that in person versus by phone. Since I'm coming home in the morning, I wanna wait."

"I understand."

He didn't understand. He wanted to hear the words now. Chad was extremely impatient at times and wanted his way all the time. As long as I had to wait, surely, one day wouldn't kill him. "Do you really understand, Chad?"

"No, but I'll wait."

I could hear him moving around, so I asked, "What are you doing?"

"About to go find something to eat at someone's house."

"So you just going to crash someone's family dinner?"

"Yep. My family not here, so why not?"

I smiled slightly. He didn't have an ounce of playfulness in his tone. He was really salty that I wouldn't give him an answer now. "Well, I'll let you go so you can do that. Call me when you get back home."

"A'ight, baby. I love you."

"I love you too."

I ended the call, feeling strange about our entire conversation. He was so damned spoiled. I lay in bed, thanking God that the results were as I thought they would be and was about to doze off until a text came through from Jericho. I sat up to read it. *I suppose these were the results you wanted and that you told me it would be. Congratulations. I guess I have to let go now. It's been an amazing ride, sexy. I hope to see you around sometimes.*

My heart softened for him. Despite the reason we ended up meeting, Jericho was a solid dude and deserved happiness. I was grateful he didn't choose to be on no bullshit. Instead, he chose to be on his grown man shit and accept things for what they were.

Thank you, Jericho. I wish you the best.

I took a cleansing breath, then lay in bed to finally get that cat nap.

* * *

When I heard someone knocking on the door, I was startled awake. Who would be at my hotel room? My dad didn't even know the exact room I was staying in. No one knew. I remained still, waiting to see if someone may have been mistaken. But again, the knocking commenced. Easing out of the bed and quietly walking to the door, I looked out of the peephole to see Chad standing there. Apparently, I'd taken longer than a cat nap.

I flung the door open, and he rushed in like someone was after him. I glanced in the hallway and quickly closed the door to see what the problem was and why he was here. The moment I spun around, we were face to face. Well, not really. I tilted my head back to look at him. "What's going on? What are you doing here?"

"Answer my question first."

I lifted my eyebrows. Surely, this nigga was crazy. "You drove all the way here... four hours, so I can answer your question sooner?"

He stared at me, not responding to anything I said. I took a deep breath and led him to the bed then turned on a lamp. We sat on the edge, and I held his hand in mine in silence before finally breaking it. "For almost two years, I've been wanting to look into your eyes and tell you that you have all of me. You denied me that moment. But finally, the opportunity has presented itself. Chad, I've never felt anything close to what I feel for you for anyone else."

He lowered his head for a moment, then stared back into my eyes. Seeing him look so sad and broken, like I've felt for the past year was hard. I knew he thought I was about to tell him hell no. Although my mind was still wearing me out about it, I knew I had to go with what I felt in my heart. If I got burned again, I'd just have to accept it and move on.

“Chad, I love you, and there is nothing I want more in the world... well, besides our baby to be healthy, than to be yours. Take all of me and claim me as your woman. Inhabit every part of me with your aura, your love, your—”

His lips crashed on mine, taking my breath away. His tongue slid against mine sensuously, increasing my desire for him to unforeseen levels. I brought my hands to the back of his head, knocking his baseball cap off, and held him to me, not ever wanting to be away from him. This was the most tumultuous shit I had ever been through. Had I turned him away, it would have meant that I endured all that shit for nothing. I was wanting to reap the rewards for my endurance and tenacity.

This kiss from him was proving to me that I made the right decision. I'd never felt this much passion from Chad, not even in the times where I thought he was all in. I could clearly feel the difference. It felt like he was giving me his soul, and it was a feeling I never wanted to let go of. He pulled away from me slowly and placed his large hands on my face.

“You mean the world to me, Lexi. Thank you for waiting for me to get my shit together. I will never cause you to regret that decision again. I love you with my life, my heart, and all my soul. There will never be another woman who will complete me like you do. I know I took you through some changes, caused you to do things, acting out of hurt, and turned you into someone that you aren't simply because I couldn't let go of trauma. That shit is on me, but I'm here to try to right my wrongs and make my crooked paths straight. I love you so much, and I plan to prove it every day.”

I pressed my lips to his again as the tears fell down my cheeks. The way I felt at this moment was definitely worth the wait. Pulling away from him, I stood and undressed and

helped him undress as well then got in bed. He got in behind me and immediately wrapped me in his arms, resting his hands on my abdomen. After kissing my neck, he said, "I'll never let go again."

"You promise?"

"With all of me."

I relaxed in his embrace as he continued to lay sweet kisses on my neck and shoulder. "I've been wanting this so bad, baby," I whispered as the emotion ran out of me freely.

I'd learned to embrace my tears, but this time, they were tears of joy. "I'm going to make up for lost time, Lexi. I promise. Please tell me I can make love to you."

"Yeeees, please do."

His hands journeyed to my breasts, and he cupped them while his tongue licked circles around my earlobe and neck. That was my damn spot. I didn't know how he knew that, but he stayed there, proving that he did. One of his hands traveled down my body and slid inside my panties. It felt like I'd already cum on myself because that shit was drenched.

"Mm, you ready for me, Lexi?" he probed after dipping his fingers inside of me.

"I'm always ready for you, Chad, even when I'm pissed."

He took his hand from my breast and placed it around my neck as he mumbled, "That shit good to know."

His hard dick against my ass was driving me crazy. I wanted to pull it from his boxers and just slide onto it. That was what had gotten me in trouble previous times. The man was hard to resist. He was beyond sexy, but his sex appeal and aggressiveness turned me on. He basically took what he wanted, and I loved that about him. This person he had been for the past year was foreign to me, and I was grateful he took what I hoped to be a permanent vacation.

Just as I was about to turn to him, he slid his dick inside of me. He slid my panties to the side quick as hell. The moan that came out of me had been dormant for way too long. Feeling

the shiver that went through him did something to me as well. Goosebumps appeared on my flesh, and I couldn't help but pull my hardened nipples between my fingertips. "Jeeesus."

Chad moaned in response as he began stroking me. My body was about to unleash every ounce of liquid inside of me. My nerves were all over the place, and it felt like every one of them were about to orgasm at once. I screamed out the pleasure I felt as Chad once again placed tender kisses on my shoulder and neck.

"I love you, Lexi. Shit, I fucking love you, girl," he said as his pace quickened a bit.

That did it. I erupted all over him. "Chaaad! Shit!"

My body convulsed as he held onto me tightly. "Yeah, give me all that shit. Mm. My dick loves you too. Pull that nut from him, baby. Take what you want."

That shit he was talking in my ear had my orgasm lingering, my opening contracting repeatedly, doing just what he told it to do. "Mm, fuck! Here it comes, baby."

He squeezed me to him as he released inside of me. We were both huffing, practically struggling to breathe. That nut had taken all the air out of me. I supposed it had done the same for him too. He was still holding me tightly like he thought I was going to get away. He didn't have to worry about that. I was here for the long haul, and I prayed he was too.

Twenty-One

ℒ

CHAD

WHEN I WOKE UP, Lexi was in the shower. I'd driven like a bat out of hell getting here last night. I couldn't stand not knowing... the same shit I had her feeling for over a year. I didn't know how she did that shit. I couldn't take it. When I told her I was going to somebody's house for dinner, I was getting my shit to drive to her. She never asked how I found out where she was. I had a brother that could locate anybody. Wasn't shit a secret for a nigga like Shy.

I got out of bed and made my way to the bathroom. The shower was a stand-alone and full sized. That was perfect because I was a big nigga. I slid the door back and got in behind her as she stared at me. The love in her eyes was softening a nigga's heart tremendously. I'd never noticed it before now. She was staring at me like I'd hung the moon and stars in the sky.

"Good morning, baby," I said, then leaned over and kissed her lips.

"Good morning. How did you sleep?"

"Like a rock. You?"

"Same," she said, then giggled.

I stared at the soap on her body, and I immediately wanted to get shit cracking all over again. She stood under the spray, and when she turned to me, I was stroking my dick. He was on one the minute I heard the shower running. She licked her lips, and my dick jumped in my hand. I'd been dying to feel them lips sliding on my shaft. I grabbed the Dove bar from the soap

tray and reached outside of the shower for a towel from the shelf and began lathering it.

Whenever I finished washing up, I planned to slide my dick past her tonsils and fuck her esophagus up. While she recouped, I'd put my tongue to work, especially since she loved it so much. Her pussy tasted so damn good, so I couldn't wait to indulge again. As I washed my body, I glanced at her to see her staring at me. She licked her lips again as she watched me. "You don't have to keep licking your lips. I'ma give you something to taste in just a minute."

She bit her bottom lip, and damn if I didn't want to get straight to fucking. I moved to the showerhead as she moved to the back of the shower and rinsed off my body. As I did, she said, "You so fucking fine, Chad."

"Well, that means we gon' be a fire ass couple then, baby, because you the finest woman I ever seen. When we show up Sunday, we gon' have to be fashionably late so they can see what a Berotte couple supposed to look like."

She giggled then got out of the shower. Seeing her pudge in her abdomen put joy in my heart. I was about to be a father. It was almost unbelievable. I'd been wanting that for a long time, but I was finally ready for what I wanted. After I left the shower and dried off, I walked toward the bed to see Lexi lying there, spread eagle. But what threw me all the way off was that she had "Atomic Dog" playing. I frowned slightly. She laughed, then said, "I should have played the other song because apparently you like fucking me meat to meat."

She rubbed her belly as I slowly shook my head, trying to contain my smile. "Come on, Chad. You know what I need."

I grabbed my dick and gave her every minute of the stroll and neck roll that she loved, especially when I hung my tongue out and flicked it back and forth. She was tripping, rooting me on like she was at a concert. I stopped and walked to the bed. "You ain't finna have me about to take another shower."

She laughed as I sat, then grabbed her phone and turned the song off. When she turned back to me, she went to her

knees and straddled me. Seeing the happiness on her face made me smile. She rocked back and forth, teasing me. "Slide that wet pussy up here and let me kill that shit," I said as I lay back in the bed.

She bit her bottom lip again and did as I asked. When she hovered over my face, she slowly sat that shit on my lips while staring into my eyes. I had to show her why they called me hurricane tongue in college. My tongue put on magic shows, and she was about to be my subject. Although she'd felt it before, I wanted to show her that was only a preview. This time I was going to take my time and love every nerve on her clit. If it took me all day, then so be it, because neither of us had a thing to do.

She was off for the rest of the week, and I was currently unemployed. The room was paid up until Saturday, so there was no rush. I brought my hands to her ass and caressed that thick shit while I alternated between sucking her clit and flicking it back and forth. "Chad, I'm finna cum already. Shit!"

I lifted her from my tongue and shook my head. "Naw. Hold that shit in a lil longer. The minute you do, I'ma wanna feel that on my dick. I ain't ate enough yet."

She nodded while squeezing her eyes shut. I wanted to laugh, but I managed to control myself. I went back in and sucked her pussy lips, then began licking and slurping her like she was a melting ice cream cone. I wanted to help her prolong her orgasm, but that shit didn't seem to help. Her legs were trembling uncontrollably, and she seemed to be holding her breath. "Chad! I can't hold it!"

She screamed as she bucked all over my face. The minute I felt that shit on my tongue, I picked her up and lowered her on my dick. "Buck on that shit."

She rode me like she was in the fucking Kentucky Derby with the most to lose. I swore she was gon' break my fucking dick off. Her pussy was squeezing the fuck out of my shit, and if I wasn't careful, she was gon' get the shortened version of this pleasure-filled ride. I gripped her hips, slowing her down, and she fell over on top of me. Her pants were sexy as hell. It

was like a slight moan escaped her with every breath she released.

I slowly wound my dick into her as she laid on my chest. “We ain’t in a hurry, baby. Let me take my time wit’ yo’ sexy ass. Mm, shit.”

She was so damn wet and tight. Lexi had that premium pussy, and she knew it. I didn’t know how I went six months after I had my first taste. Whoever said fear was a powerful enemy, didn’t lie. For fear to be able to keep me away from this shit, it had to be. Although I said we weren’t in a rush, it was torture going this slow. Before I even realized it, an animalistic sounding growl left me, and Lexi came all over me.

“Oh fuck!” she screamed. “That fucking growl... shit!”

She was such a damn freak. I sank my teeth in her shoulder as I increased my pace just a bit. My nut was near the surface, and if she rolled her hips just right, I was gon’ shoot the club up. Since I curved upward, the head of my dick was catching all the love she was showing me. That soft tissue firmly rubbing against it had me counting sheep to keep from nutting. All that was for naught when Lexi threw her ass in a circle on my dick. The end.

“Oh fuck!” I yelled as I buried my dick balls deep inside of her and tightened my grip around her waist.

When I loosened my grip on her, she lifted her hips and allowed my dick to slide from her then slid down my body until her mouth found its intended destination. I went up on my elbows so I could see this shit. When those lips slid down my shaft, I couldn’t help but bite my bottom lip. I was still rock hard, anticipating how she would make me feel.

Once she started a rhythm, I joined in, slowly giving her what she was down there for, poking the back of her throat. She released it, and the spit fell from her mouth. She threw her leg across me, putting her ass in my face. “I can swallow him better this way. The upward curve is deadly. Shit!”

She went back to it, and the moment my dick slid down her throat, I tensed for a minute. I had to occupy my time for sure. I slid two fingers inside of her and finger fucked her until she came, then pushed them one at a time into her asshole. The moans leaving her had my dick feeling like it was going to explode. “Spit on my shit, Lexi,” I said as I jabbed her throat. “Give me that throat-gasm.”

Her soft lips kissed the tip of my dick, then I felt something warm cover it like a damn blanket. She placed her hands on my thighs as I lifted her bottom to take a look. It was so much spit on my shit, I got excited. I slid from beneath her and pushed her on her stomach. When I straddled her, she had to know what was up.

I put the head of my dick at her asshole and slowly pushed inside. I watched her grip the sheets while doing her best not to scream too loudly. That shit felt so damn good I had started sweating. I gave her more of my dick then began slowly stroking her ass. “Chad! Oh my God! Fuck!”

I bit my bottom lip and gave her more with each stroke. That shit she spit on me was the perfect lube. As my sweat dripped on her back, I gripped her hip with one hand and grabbed her hand with the other as I rested it on the bed above her head. “Lexi, fuck! I love you.”

“I love... you... too! I’m cumming!”

When her asshole got wet as hell, there was no way I could hold back any longer. I pulled out and nudded all over her ass cheeks. I fell on the bed next to her and kissed her lips. That was the last thing I remembered before passing out.

* * *

“You good, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Everyone is going to be excited to see you.”

“Yeah. I just hate I won’t be able to have a drink.”

“Me too. We can drink soda. Since you can’t drink, I won’t either.”

I got out of my SUV and walked around to open the door for Lexi. We’d gotten home yesterday evening, and tonight, I was meeting my brothers and sister at Pour 09. We’d decided to make it coed tonight. Mariena and Ariana were at my parents’ house and would be there until Sunday. I didn’t know how they would fair out with a newborn and a nearly one-year old, but more power to them.

I didn’t know how Joyy would make it out with how bad she’d been feeling, but we would see. I opened the door and grabbed Lexi’s hand, helping her out of her seat. She wore some leggings and a tank top, showing off her pregnancy bump. She was fourteen weeks now and had an appointment in a little over two weeks. They would possibly be able to tell us what we were having.

We walked to the entrance, hand-in-hand, and when we made it upstairs, the minute Ax, Arrow, and DJ spotted us, they started barking. I joined in as everybody else groaned and Alexz rolled her eyes. I wasn’t expecting to see Arrow and Jamel, but I was glad they’d made it down. Surprisingly, Seneca and Ali were here as well. Had he and I not had that talk when I got shot, the tension would have been thick as hell.

The women all looked excited and circled Lexi, touching on her belly and shit as I greeted my brothers. When I got to Zay, he hugged me. “You look good, man. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Zay. I’ll still be there Monday.”

He released me and gave me a pound. “That’s what’s up. We won’t be able to stay long, because Joyy is so damn swollen. Her feet look like two pigs.”

I laughed because he said that shit low to where she couldn’t hear him. “They ever say what y’all are having?”

He smirked then got everyone’s attention. “The doctor’s appointment went well, and the babies are on track. Two of them are one pound, eight ounces, and the other is one pound, seven ounces. So Joyy and I are having the first Berotte

princes, two boys and one girl. The boys are already bullying her since they're the heaviest."

Everybody applauded, and the women all made their way to her to offer their congratulations. Lexi smiled at me then sat next to Skyler. When I saw her hug Alexz, I couldn't help but feel amazing about how far we'd come. When Zay walked over to Lexi, and she stood from her seat and gave him the biggest hug, I knew she would be crying by the time they separated. When he released her, she didn't disappoint.

I sat next to Shy and slapped his hand. "So, we file for a preliminary court date Monday. They gon' shit a brick."

"I'm ready, bruh. How fast you think this gon' go?"

"Depends on how quickly they want it to go away. I'm thinking after they see our evidence and findings, they gon' want this shit to go away fast. It's unprecedented for someone to sue the FBI. They can thank their negligence for that. However, quick for them could be a year."

"I'm ready. Monday, I'm gonna start looking for a job."

"No you not. I heard about Jericho. How you feel about him?"

"I ain't got nothing against him. Why?"

"Ali wanted to see if you wanted to work with them until your ship came in." He laughed after he said that shit. "He said whenever that money hits, he knows you gon' tell them to kiss yo' ass."

I chuckled. "Let me think about that. Although I have nothing against Jericho, don't mean I wanna be around him like that."

"I feel you on that. You better than me. Ain't no way I could have ridden in the same vehicle with him."

"Well, it ain't like me and Lexi was a couple. He wasn't disrespectful or anything like that, so it worked out."

Before he could say anything else, "Atomic Dog" blared from the speakers. I slowly shook my head and stood from my seat with my bruhs. The haters all rolled their eyes. They were

just salty because there were more of us. We strolled for a good while, until Shavozz walked up the stairs. DJ stopped dead in his tracks and went to her. She didn't look all that happy though. I wasn't sure what was going on, but after she said whatever she had to say, she turned and went back down the stairs with him hot on her trail.

Once the song went off, I sat next to Jamel and asked, "What's going on?"

He slowly shook his head. "Some bitch is tryna cause problems between them. I think she knows Shavozz, and she's telling her that she saw DJ with another woman. It might have been me she saw and thought it was DJ, 'cause that sound more like me than him."

I slowly shook my head. He was right about that. DJ was never a cheater. He was dedicated to Shavozz before she was even his woman. There was no way she mistook Jamel for DJ though. Jamel was lighter complexioned like Mama Nissa, and DJ was about my complexion or a little darker. DJ was also a couple of inches taller than Jamel. Sounded like Shavozz's friend was full of shit. She probably wanted him for herself and was jealous that Shavozz had him.

When he made his way back to us, I noticed that Shavozz was behind him. Maybe he was able to convince her that her friend was either lying or mistaken. She looked slightly uncomfortable though, so I stood and greeted her, then he introduced her to everybody. I looked around to see that our family had grown significantly. We'd come a long way from Dad and the five of us.

Just as I was about to take a sip of my Coke, an arm wrapped around my neck. "Congratulations, big head. How in the hell did everybody know before me?"

"The only people I told were Dad, DJ, and Zay. Shy finds out shit on his own. So blame him for not telling you."

Alexz released her playful chokehold, then sat next to me. "Are you going to bring her to Sunday dinner?"

“Yeah. She’s finally mine. I plan to clear the air Sunday too.”

“Good. I need that so I can really welcome my girl back. I figured you’d done some shit, but as your sister, I always got your back.”

I slid my arm around her and kissed her head, and she jerked away from me with a frown on her face. “Just because I’m married and I’ve had a baby don’t mean anything has changed. I still don’t want your crusty ass lips on me.”

I pushed her in the head, and she dramatically fell against the table. I slowly shook my head. “See, you always overdo shit. Ain’t nobody pushed you that hard.”

“Yes you did! Don’t make me get my man involved.”

“He ain’t gon’ take yo’ side. He know his wife is a ratchet ass gangsta sometimes.”

She laughed then threw her arms around me. “I miss fucking wit’chu.”

I turned to her and grabbed her hand. “The only reason I started fucking wit’chu like that was to make you hate me.”

She frowned hard, and I could see the tears building just that quickly. I continued to explain before she could interject. “The first woman I loved was taken away from me. The next woman I loved played me. I didn’t want another woman close to me, including you. I knew you would never take your love away like Jana did, but I didn’t want to lose you like we lost Mama. Honestly, when you went into labor, I was scared as hell. Even with me doing that, you were almost taken from us, and it was because of some shit that involved me.”

The tears fell down her cheeks, and I wiped them away with my thumb. This sensitivity shit was new, and I felt slightly uncomfortable knowing that everybody could see me. “Damn. Chad, I could never hate you. You got on my fucking nerves the most, but I could never hate you. I’m glad that shit is done now. I may get to know a side of you that I’ve never met now.”

I frowned. “Hell no you won’t. Only one woman gon’ get the new and reformed Chad. You gon’ continue catching hell, because that’s our dynamic. So don’t be tryna get all deep in your emotions with me. Reserve that shit for Ax and Zay.”

Her face turned red as she yelled, “Ugh! You make me sick!”

“Throw up then.”

She pushed me in the head and walked off as I chuckled. No matter how much I changed, I had to continue being the jackass that she knew. That shit was all my pleasure. As I sat there, waiting for my soda, Lexi sat next to me. She looped her arm through mine and said, “Remember you said you had a surprise for me?”

“I said that?”

Her head dropped, and she gave me a pointed stare, causing me to laugh. “Yes, you said that, nigga!”

“I just wanted to cater to you. I’ll take care of you tomorrow. You’ll enjoy it.”

She wiggled in her seat. “I can’t wait! Don’t be tryna renege on my shit.”

“All that cussing gon’ have to stop once the baby can hear you.”

She shot me the finger, and before she could pull it away, I put my mouth over it and sucked it before releasing it. “All fucking night, girl. I’ll fuck you all damn night. Wait until we get home.”

She blushed as the waitress set our drinks in front of us. I slid my arm around her waist and said, “If you can’t wait until we get home, I will gladly start here. Pour won’t ever be the same.”

“Chad!” She laughed loudly then took a sip of her drink. “Chill out.”

“Mm hmm. That’s what happens when you try to charge me up, woman. I’m gon’ always get the last laugh.”

Twenty-Two

ℒ

SENECA WAS A DAMN FLIRT. We'd gotten to the Berottes' house for Sunday dinner, and instead of speaking, he winked. I rolled my eyes as he laughed. He was gon' make Chad jack his ass up again. He flirted with every got damn body though. I'd seen him wink at Alexz too. She only rolled her eyes and shot him the finger.

We'd been here for an hour, and I felt somewhat weird. Mr. Berotte welcomed me back, and Zay was just as friendly, but it seemed the women were somewhat distant. They all greeted me but then went their way. After they spoke to me at Pour 09 and rubbed my tummy, they somewhat did the same thing. It wasn't as noticeable or sudden though. Maybe it was me. Maybe I was the one being weird. Whatever it was, it made me slightly uncomfortable.

My mama sat next to me after helping Mrs. Anissa get the food warmed. "Hey, baby. How was Dallas?"

"It was good. I actually spent time with Daddy and JJ and cleared the air about everything. It was time for me to let go of my anger."

"That's good. He and I finally made peace when he was here when Mariena was born. Later that day, he came back to the hospital without that woman, and we were able to talk things through. When you decide to be at peace, it's easier to let BS roll off your back. I'm at peace now, and your dad recognizes that."

"That's good, Mama. I'm at peace now too."

“How have you been feeling?”

“I’m still having morning sickness, but I’m okay otherwise. I kind of miss you and Skyler. Y’all haven’t been spending as much time with me, and I don’t know if y’all are busy or if it was something that I did to push y’all away. If I did, I’m sorry. I could really use you guys’ support.”

Her eyebrows rose and scrunched together like she was about to cry. I knew it was better if I said something about how I felt versus letting it fester. She pulled me in her arms and hugged me tightly. “Baby, there isn’t a thing you could do to ever push me away.” She released me and grabbed my hand. “You’ve always done your thing. I got used to letting you be because I thought that was what you wanted. I’m so sorry. I love you so much, and I will be at your place every day if that’s what you need from me.”

I smiled softly, realizing that she was absolutely right. I just thought that when I told them I was pregnant, they would be there more. I let a tear drop and quickly swiped it. “You don’t have to come every day, but every other day would be nice.”

She chuckled then pulled me into her embrace again. “Me and Mariena will be glad to come over. Since I watch her during the day while Skyler and Dylan are working, she’s become her GiGi’s sidekick.”

“So I’ve heard,” I said as I giggled.

As we talked and caught up, Chad came to the front room along with all the guys and stood in the middle of the floor. I frowned slightly, trying to figure out what he was doing. He gave me a wink and a smile while he stood there, I assumed letting me know that everything was okay.

“Hey, family. I uhh... I wanna thank y’all for your support while I was going through stressful times at work and with all the depression I was dealing with. I wanted to apologize to all of you for what happened months ago. I allowed it to look as if Lexi was the only one at fault, and that wasn’t the case. I’d been treating her horribly. One minute I was acting like I was all in and ready to give us a shot, then I would ghost her. I had

her swinging like a fucking pendulum. She'd dedicated herself to me without me doing the same in return. I was stringing her along, making promises I couldn't keep because of all the shit I had going on internally."

I was so embarrassed. I lowered my head, not wanting to look at him. It wasn't that I faulted him for wanting to clear the air, but it made me realize that there was indeed tension in the room. The tension that I felt wasn't imagined. They were staying away from me, because they thought less of me or that I didn't fit. I stood from my seat, and said, "Chad, you don't have to do this. It's okay."

I grabbed my purse and made my way outside to the patio and cried my eyes out. This was bullshit. Every fucking thing made me cry these days. No one followed me. I sat out there alone for at least ten minutes. That only made me feel worse. I was ready to go home. This was why I stayed away. When I heard the back door open, I quickly wiped my tears. I didn't bother to look to see who it was, because I just assumed it was Chad or my mama. When Isaiah sat next to me, I leaned against him.

He was always so kind to me. He put his arm around me and gave me a squeeze. "Chad and your mom were trying to come out too, but I told them to let me speak with you first. You know I know the real. Just give everyone time. You have to realize they had only gotten one side of the story. How did you feel when Skyler was involved with Dylan and found out another woman was saying she was pregnant with his baby?"

I sat up and looked at him. He gave me a slight smirk. I nodded repeatedly, getting his point. "I wanted her to leave him in her dust, not knowing that woman was lying on him."

"See? Give them some time to get the whole story. They'll come around."

"You're right. Thanks, Zay. You a real one, for real. I'll always respect you for that."

"Thank you, Lexi. You can always come to me to talk. I always try to see the full story, even when I don't know what it is. When that happened with Seneca, I knew there was more to

it. So did Dad. We saw right through your pettiness. You were uncomfortable as hell.”

I swore this man and his dad had vision from God. No one else had noticed. My mama and sister knew me best, and they missed that altogether. They were so pissed at me that day, and at the time, I was beyond pissed at Chad. I was on some ‘fuck him and everybody that ride with him’ shit that day. They were upset that I did it at Mr. Berotte’s house. Chad was fucking with me at Mr. Berotte’s house, so he got all the damn smoke at Mr. Berotte’s house.

“Come back inside, Lexi.”

I gave Isaiah a soft smile as he helped me from my seat. Holding my hand, he led me inside. The moment we walked in the front room, Alexz made her way to me and hugged me tightly. I wasn’t sure what else Chad had said to them, but whatever he said had enlightened them. When she let me go, she said, “I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t owe me an apology.”

I walked over to where Chad was standing and walked into his arms. I laid against him as he kissed my head. Tilting my head back, I said, “Thank you.”

“I’m gon’ always ride for you. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The tears wouldn’t go away. I just couldn’t seem to get used to this Chad. Everything he said touched me deeply. I believed it was because I’d wanted it for so long. I had practically given up on him, not believing he was even capable of giving me what I needed. At the time, before his counseling, he wasn’t capable. That was another reason to be thankful for Zay.

Chad pulled away from me and said, “Let’s go eat. I’m ready for my plate of tripe.”

I frowned up. I didn’t see how he ate that nasty shit. Apparently, he saw my face. “Girl, you better fix yo’ face. You gon’ have to learn to cook that for yo’ man.”

“Shiiiiid. My stomach is turning just from the smell. The baby don’t like that shit either.”

“Don’t be cursing my baby.”

I laughed aloud, but when I saw Jericho outside with Ali, Seneca, and Shy, I froze. *What in the fuck was he doing here?* Chad pulled me close. “It’s okay, baby. He works for Ali sometimes, and Ali works for my brother. He just started his own company a few months ago. They are trying to recruit me.”

I swallowed hard as I went to the kitchen to fix our plates. Chad quickly stopped me and said, “Get off your feet. I got it.”

I nodded. When I walked to the table, I noticed Jungle had joined them. What in the fuck was this world coming to when all the muthafuckas I’d been involved with in the past six months were at the same place? Chad didn’t know about Jungle, but he clearly knew about Chad. Hopefully, we could all be adults. I didn’t belong to any of them, but I now belonged to Chad, and I refused to let anyone fuck that up over some bullshit.

My chest was starting to tighten when I noticed them walking to the back door to come inside. Chad set my bowl of chili in front of me, and I brought my attention to that instead of the men walking through the door. When I realized that all of them walked by me without saying a word, I released the breath I was holding.

They’d gone to the kitchen and were talking to Chad. I was trying to wait for him to join me at the dinner table, but they were taking too long. The chili smelled so good. When Mrs. Anissa set the pan of cornbread on the table, I nearly came on myself. It looked so moist and buttery. As I reached for a square, I heard, “Hey, Lexi.”

I looked up to see Jericho. “What’s up?”

“Not too much. Shy invited us inside to get something to eat. I just wanted to speak.”

I smiled at him and nodded. “Take care, Jericho.”

He walked out, and Jungle was right behind him. He gave me a head nod and left without a word. *Thank God.* Jungle and Seneca made me the most nervous. They just seemed like niggas that liked to stir up shit like Terrence Howard in *The Best Man*. Although I had never slept with Seneca, I knew because of what happened between us, it was assumed.

I closed my eyes for a moment because I could feel the bile in my throat. That didn't help. The minute I stood from my seat to head to the bathroom, I felt it coming. I ran down the hall, and the moment I got to the toilet, my insides twisted up and rang everything out of my system. I didn't even have time to close the door.

Someone had joined me though, because I heard cabinets closing. When it finally stopped, I flushed the toilet and looked up to see Skyler standing there holding a towel. "Thank you."

"Of course. Mama told me how you felt. I'm sorry. I be so wrapped up in my own bubble. I promise I'm going to do better."

"It's okay. I think it's the pregnancy that has me craving more attention."

"Whatever you need, I'm here. Okay?"

I gave her a soft smile then rinsed my mouth. When I stood up straight, Chad was handing me some mouthwash. "You okay, baby?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

He smiled and walked away. I knew he had to get back to that nasty ass tripe. That shit was gonna keep our house divided.

* * *

"So, if you look right there, you can clearly see that you're carrying a little boy. I'm surprised it's so pronounced this early," the ultrasound tech said as she circled the genitalia with her mouse.

I glanced at Chad and could see the stupid ass grin on his face. The minute she walked out of the room for me to get dressed, he said, “He’s definitely a Berotte. We pass down blessings to our boys.”

I rolled my eyes. “Chad, really?”

“Hell yeah. When he get older, he gon’ be rearranging insides like his pops.”

I slowly shook my head. I would never disagree, because Chad was extremely blessed. I nearly threw up on his dick last night. That nigga was literally trying to put his dick down my throat. Like, I can suck dick, but shit, I can’t continuously swallow and regurgitate it. He mistook me for Superhead. Then he gon’ say that he got carried away. *You think, nigga?*

My gag reflexes were more sensitive since I’d been pregnant, so he was gonna have to chill the fuck out. It seemed the further along I got, the worse it got. I was seventeen, nearly eighteen weeks now. My pudge was rounded out, and I no longer looked like I was just gaining weight. I actually looked pregnant. For the people who knew me, they claimed I looked pregnant before. *The lies they tell.*

Chad helped me put my shoes on, then said, “It must be true. You quieter than a criminal in a room full of cops.”

I chuckled. He was such a nut. “You blessed, baby. I can’t deny that shit. I didn’t think twice about sliding down that raw dick. You realize we’ve never used a condom?”

“Yeah. You was tryna trap me.”

I laughed loudly, then covered my mouth and slapped his arm. “Umm, the way I recall it, the last time it happened, you were in control of that. So I believe you were trying to trap me, nigga. Get the story right.”

“I did get it right. You took advantage of me, girl. Speaking of,” he said then paused as I laughed. “I need you to dance for me tonight and take complete advantage of me. I mean like violate the fuck out of me.”

I looked up at him to see him rolling his tongue. That shit made me gush in my panties. “Only if I can ride that thick ass

tongue.”

“Hell yeah. That sound like a violation to me. Slide that shit all over my fucking face.”

“Okay, stop. I’m starting without you. Let’s get the hell outta here.”

“Way ahead of you,” he said as I noticed my purse on his shoulder.

He bit his bottom lip and smacked my ass just as he opened the door. My panties were wet as hell, and I could see that I would need to carry an extra pair at all times. After scheduling my next appointment, we made our way to the car to head home. As we exited the elevator into the parking garage, Chad said, “Let me go get the vehicle so you don’t have to walk so far.”

“It’s okay. I need to walk.”

We made our way to his Escalade, and I realized he was parked at the back of the damn parking lot. When I saw that, I knew that I would be getting this nut out before we left. Part one of the violation was about to begin. When we finally got to it, I went to the back door while he frowned. “What’chu doing?”

“Chad, just get your ass in the back seat before someone sees us.”

I climbed in, and he was right behind me. He sat behind the passenger seat, and I lifted my skirt and straddled him. “Damn. I didn’t think the violations would begin before we even got to the house. Fuck.”

I unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his jeans, then quickly unzipped them to pull his dick out. He lifted his hips to slide his pants down some so he would have more room. That zipper would have torn his dick up, and we couldn’t have that shit. When he sat, he slumped slightly, giving me enough room to put my feet on the seat so I could bounce on him.

“Damn. What the fuck you tryna do?” he asked.

“Twerk this ass on you. I thought you wanted me to dance?” I asked as I completely submerged his dick.

“Oh fuck! Do whatever the fuck you want, baby.”

And that I did. I rode him until I came twice, and he fired off in my depths. “Shit. We gotta hurry up and get home,” he said.

He always called his house our home. I thought it was sweet. He kept saying that he would be moving me in it soon so we could start getting the nursery together. “You don’t want to go to your dad’s house so we can tell them what we’re having?”

“Hell naw. Who gets full on an appetizer? Shol’ in the hell not me. I ain’t big for nothing. Yo’ man eats his belly full. They’ll find out Sunday at dinner.”

I chuckled as I climbed to the front seat. Before I could sit, he smacked my ass. “Oww, Chad!”

“What’chu expected when you put all that ass in my face?”

He got out and walked to the driver’s side. We’d fallen into our relationship like we’d been together for months, and it had only been three weeks. We were meant to be. There was no doubting that shit. The comfort we felt around each other proved that. I loved Chad, and although I had to go through the fire to get his love in return, it polished me like a fucking diamond. I could appreciate the struggle that sometimes happened in life, knowing that we went through what we did for a reason. We passed the tests, and I prayed that it only prepared us to endure through the hard times relationships could bring.

When he got in the vehicle, I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Pull that dick out so I can violate you on the way home.”

Epilogue

L

CHAD

Five months later...

“I MEAN, you can cross examine the witness, but it ain’t gon’ help your case,” Shy said as he took his seat.

I was sitting on the stand, and I wanted to laugh so bad. This nigga was a whole fool. This was a preliminary trial to see if we even had a case. The attorney said, “We have no questions, Your Honor.”

“Smart man,” Shy responded.

“Mr. Berotte, enough,” the judge said, then dismissed me from the stand.

I swore this nigga was still a gangsta in the damn courtroom. He’d told somebody earlier, *You just gon’ lie, but I’m gon’ ask the question anyway.* I literally had to lower my head and chuckle silently. Lexi had squeezed my hand, trying to keep me in line. As I left the stand, I glanced at her and our son, Foster. That wasn’t my first choice to name him, but Lexi loved it. I gave him his middle name, Zale. Our little man was nearly our big man. He was almost nine pounds when he was born, nearly a month ago.

Lexi was miserable her last month. The doctor had her on bedrest because she was threatening to go into labor early. Speaking of being miserable, so was Joyy her last couple of months. The triplets were about four months old. All of them were five pounds and a couple of ounces when they were born, and they were already giving the two of them hell. When one cried, they all cried. Joyy’s mama and J’Niya moved back to

help not long after Joyy and Isaiah tied the knot. J’Niya’s baby was about a year and a half now and doing well. That house had to be chaotic with four kids under the age of two in it.

When I got to my seat, I took my little guy from Lexi. He was the most beautiful baby I’d ever seen. He looked just like me. Lexi said that was because I got on her damn nerves while she was pregnant. That wasn’t the truth though. I kept her laughing. She was laughing so hard it sent her into labor. She was cracking up and then her water broke. The only nerves I was on were the ones on her juicy ass clit.

The judge dismissed us until Monday so she could deliberate. She said that it could be a difficult case, but she needed to go over everything Shy presented because it was a lot. We filed out of the courtroom, and when we got in the hallway, I turned to Shy. “Bruh, you gon’ get me put out the courtroom for laughing. You act like this all the time in court?”

He frowned as he stared at me. “What’chu talkin’ ’bout?”

“The shit you be saying. Like, ‘you gon’ lie, but I’ma ask anyway’.”

He chuckled. “That was mild, man.”

Skyler chuckled as she shook her head. “One time he told a witness, ‘whoever paying you to lie gon’ want their money back’. When the DA objected, this fool said, ‘I object to this foolery too’.”

I laughed so loud. “I’m surprised a judge ain’t kicked you out.”

“Oh, I’ve been threatened plenty of times. I think they are more amused than anything. That’s why they only threaten me. They probably laugh when they go to their chambers.”

“You crazy as hell.” I shook my head as I lifted my little man to my shoulder. “How are you feeling about what the judge said?”

“Oh, she gon’ give us our day, and then the negotiations will begin. They didn’t want to cross you. That says a lot, and the judge heard that shit loud and clear. I’m a beast at what I

do. That's why Summerall and Charles done already been convicted."

He was right about that. Summerall and Charles, along with the senator, were convicted of fraud and bribery. They'd lost their jobs and were each serving a year in prison. They're lucky they didn't have to serve that time in the very prison they worked for. The inmates would have fucked them all up. They'd offered me my job back, but I'd gotten too used to being free. They were going to have to do better on the pay for me to even consider it.

"How soon do you think negotiations will begin?" I inquired of Shy.

"As soon as a month from now. But it could also take years. Since they got us in court so soon, I don't think it will take that long though. They don't wanna deal with my ass in court. The FBI dropped the ball, and they know it."

Once we got to the vehicle, I strapped Foster in his car seat while Lexi got in on the other side. She refused to ride in the front with me until Foster was able to face the front. I wasn't tripping on that though. I wanted her to enjoy every minute with him. Most times, I was doing jobs with Ali and wasn't home. She was still on maternity leave but would be going back to work sometime next month.

Working with Ali was spoiling me though. I picked and chose what I wanted to work on. The stipulation for me working with him was that I couldn't be on a case with Seneca, Jericho, or Jungle. He told me Jungle didn't really work for him. He just gave them intel they could use when it benefitted him. He was a kingpin in Houston. That was more of a reason I didn't want to be in cahoots with that nigga.

Seneca and Jericho were cool, but that shit was a big conflict of interest. If I was having a bad day, being around those niggas could cost me. I'd punch somebody in their shit over them looking at me too long. The point was that I was making enough to support my family, and I couldn't ask for more.

When I got in the car, we headed to Dad's house. I was tired as hell because we'd been in court all day. I was pretty sure Lexi was worn out too. Mama Nissa and Dad had cooked for us. Shit, we always had someone cooking for us. Lexi wasn't the greatest cook, and I couldn't boil water. I knew once Foster got a little older, she would try to learn to cook different dishes. I would even try to do better. I'd tried breakfast one day, and I tore those fucking eggs up. Shit had shell pieces all in it.

As I drove, I could hear Foster making noises in the back seat. I glanced back there to see Lexi making faces at him. Seeing her interact with him warmed my heart. Now that we lived together, we really felt like a family. I was the only one that hadn't got married yet. Lexi said she wasn't in a hurry for that though. She said whenever the spirit moved me, then she was cool with it. She said she didn't want to put unnecessary pressure on me. I didn't feel pressured at all though. I just knew my baby wanted her pre-baby figure back.

She'd gained nearly fifty pounds while she was pregnant. I could tell that shit was so uncomfortable for her. She carried the weight in her breasts and feet it seemed. Her fucking feet had ballooned, and I felt sorry as hell for her. I saw what Zay was talking about when he called Joyy's feet little pigs. Every evening, I gave Lexi a foot rub.

The hardest part was not having sex. Sex was so damn explosive between us. Her last month of pregnancy, we'd been put on restriction. We still had another week before I could dip into the cookie jar. I'd been jacking off as discreetly as possible. A nigga was fiending. I almost ate her pussy while she slept the other night. I knew if I did that, we would both want more.

When I turned in the driveway at Dad's house, I noticed everybody was here. I guess they just decided to cook for everyone. "Well, damn. Is it Sunday?" Lexi asked.

I chuckled. "Shiiid, I guess so."

I got out and helped her out, then got Foster. When we walked in, Dad had one of Isaiah's boys, and Isaiah and Joyy

each had a child. He went from zero grandkids to having six, all in the matter of a year and a half. Shy was about to have a fit since he was the only Berotte without kids. Thankfully, he wasn't doing that shit in front of Brittany. I noticed he'd watch what he said and did when it concerned her. I couldn't be prouder of him.

The minute we walked in, Ms. Patricia came and got Foster from me. After greeting everybody, Lexi and I sat on the couch. I pulled her close to me and kissed her cheek. "Have I told you how beautiful you are, baby?"

"All the time. Have I told you just how sexy you are?"

"Hell yeah. Every chance you get. That's why we the best-looking Berotte couple."

I kissed her neck and she giggled. "You better stop before we fuck up that six-week waiting period."

"Word? You ain't saying nothing but a word. I'll take you in my old bedroom and kill that pussy softly."

She rolled her eyes and giggled. "I swear, you are so crazy."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Chad. Calm your horny ass down."

I nodded and sat back on the couch. We remained quiet for all of two minutes until she asked, "How discreet can you be?"

"Fuck discretion. They know what this is."

I stood from the couch and led her outside while she frowned. "Chad, where are we going?"

"Through the window. You said you wanted to be discreet."

"Nigga! I'm not climbing through no fucking window!" She laughed hard as hell. "You make me sick!"

I laughed as I pulled her in my arms. "Uh huh. Smother that fire in that fireplace for me. I'll throw some wood to it as soon as we get home."

“Ugh!”

She stomped off while I stood there and laughed. I couldn't even go back inside just yet, so I sat on the patio and reflected on just how far I'd come. A year ago, I would have never guessed that I would be here. I was better than I'd ever been, and it was because of love. The love of my dad and brother helped, but it was the love of that beautiful woman I called mine that gave me something to fight for. Now that I had her here with me, I would be sure she wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

The End

If you did not read the author's note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

Afterword

From the Author...

If they wouldn't have gotten it together, I was giving up on the rest of the series. LOL! I was *that* done with their asses. Chad had a lot of things going on internally. His internal issues affected Lexi, because she loved him so much and just didn't want to let go. As many times as she said she was done, I learned that she was only running her damn mouth. LOL!

Chad's issues with losing love were way more serious than he realized. It was probably best that the shit happened with Knowledge, or it wouldn't have been discovered. He and Lexi would have definitely had problems later. Zay was so instrumental in his healing, and I loved the way he stepped up for his brother in this book, even when he was getting on his damn nerves.

Lexi reminded me of my younger self. I didn't handle rejection from men well, and I tended to use sex to feel validated. While she said she just wanted to do what she wanted to do, she wanted to be loved. It was why she couldn't let go of Chad. She loved him and just wanted him to love her back, so she settled for everything that felt like or resembled love until she could get the real thing. Her repairing her relationship with her dad, or whether forgiving him, was big. She needed to let go of her anger with that whole situation. Did she make you love her?

That shit with Jericho threw me for a loop. When it came out that he was working for Lexi's dad and ultimately Ali, my mouth was open. I free write, so that was as much a surprise to

me as it was to you. However, it made it easier for Lexi to let him go without hesitancy. While he does love her, he knows that she belongs to Chad.

The issue with suing the FBI was farfetched and extremely fictional. LOL! While it is possible, it doesn't progress nearly this quickly. There are only certain cases that they will even hear. While Chad's case is one that would possibly be heard, again, it wouldn't happen this quickly or this easily. However, since this is fiction, it can happen however I want it to. LOL!

This situation with DJ and Shavozz will be explored in their book. After them, DJ's brother Jamel, and Arrow, Axton's brother, will wrap up 2022. Stories are indeed planned for Seneca and Jericho. I'm thinking about adding one for Ali, but we will see what happens in Seneca's story first. Other characters will most likely pop up in the remaining books to demand their own stories. Insert eyeroll. LOL!

I really hope you enjoyed Chad and Lexi. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases.

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The Hendersons: The Next Generation

Someone Like You

Other Titles by Monica Walters

The Berotte Family Series

Love On Replay

Deeper Than Love

Something You Won't Forget

I'm The Remedy

Love Me Senseless