

A woman with long braided hair is shown in a dark, intimate setting. She is looking down with a soft expression. The background is filled with out-of-focus circular lights in shades of yellow, orange, and blue, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is romantic and sensual.

Last First Kiss

B. LOVE
PUBLICATIONS
PRESENTS

MONICA WALTERS

LAST FIRST KISS

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B. LOVE PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, Readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This story is a spin-off of *Marry Me Twice*. While it's not necessary to understand what's going on in this story without reading it, it would be beneficial if you did.

This book contains EXPLICIT LANGUAGE, quite a few LEWD SEX SCENES (They are nasty, nasty. LOL), and MOMENTS OF DEPRESSION. If any of the previously mentioned offend you or serve as triggers for unpleasant times, please do not read.

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

If you are okay with the previously mentioned warnings, I hope that you enjoy the story of Jarius and Daraja.

Monica

PROLOGUE

Jarius

“SHIIT. Is that Pretty Black’s sister?”

Haji’s spoiled, territorial ass gave me the side-eye, like he really wanted to get at me for calling his new wife by his nickname for her. “Man, what I told you?”

I rolled my eyes, then laughed. “Fuck you. What’s her name?”

“Daraja.”

“She fine as shit,” I said as I watched her walk around the house with Chinara.

When her eyes met mine, she stared for a second, then looked away, pretending to still be interested in the tour Chinara was taking her on. I knew better, though. She liked what she saw. “You tryna holla or what?”

“Nigga, hell yeah. You see her?”

“I don’t see shit but that pretty black doll.”

“Whatever. I’m finna go talk to her.”

“Well, damn. You ain’t wasting no time.”

I couldn’t even respond to him. All that chocolate walking around here unclaimed was mine for the taking. She and Chinara didn’t look a whole lot alike, being that one looked

like their mother and the other looked like their father, but they were about the same height and one could tell they were sisters. Her legs were out, and they were already begging me to spread them. Her expressive eyes captured mine when she looked at me. She didn't think I saw the bat of those lashes, but I'd be damned if I was gonna let her think I didn't. I could tell that she was the type to act on what she was feeling, just like me.

As I approached, Chinara smiled and lifted her arms to give me a hug. "Hey, Jarius! This is my sister and best friend, Daraja."

I licked my lips and grabbed her hand. "Damn, that's a pretty-ass name. How you doin', Daraja?"

"Well, the name had to match the person. I'm good, Jarius."

"Hell yeah."

I kissed her hand and she blushed slightly as Chinara quietly dipped on us. Stepping closer to Daraja, I said, "You beautiful, girl."

"Thank you, handsome. So, what's up? Are you trying to welcome me to America?"

That thick, Nigerian accent was turning me the fuck on. It had me from hello. "I'm tryna do whatever you want a nigga to do, beautiful."

"Is that right? What do you mean by whatever?"

"Shit," I said, then bit my bottom lip, scanning her body unashamedly. "Whatever means just what it says, baby. What-e-ver," I enunciated.

"Mmm. That's good to know."

She stepped a little closer to me and said, "I'm not shy about what I want, and I usually *get* what I want, when I want it. Is that a problem for you?"

"Hell naw, wit'cho spoiled ass. Let me spoil and ruin you tonight, then."

She pulled her bottom lip with her teeth and my shit bricked up. Letting my eyes slide down to her cleavage, I could imagine sucking the nipples on those melons. She was thick in all the right places and I wanted to show her just how much I appreciated that. She discreetly grabbed my shirt, pulling me even closer, and said, “Jarius, why we gotta wait until tonight?”

My eyebrows went up in surprise and she laughed. “Man, quit playing with me. I’ll take you outta here right fucking na.”

Letting me go, she turned around and said aloud, “Mama... Papa... Jarius is taking me to see the sights. Do you wanna join us?”

I almost frowned. *What the fuck?* “Oh, no. I’m wiped out, child. Enjoy yourself,” her mother said.

Her father voiced that he would stay with her mother. She turned to me and winked and said, “Let’s go.”

This had to be a damn dream. I ain’t never got pussy this fast. I mean... I wasn’t calling her easy, but yeah. Shawty was easy. But for some reason, I felt like a relationship with her was anything but. She went for what she wanted, no hesitation, but she didn’t seem to be the type to really want a commitment. I guess that didn’t matter, though, because shit, I didn’t, either. When we got outside, I led her to my Infiniti in silence. As I opened the door, she ran her fingers across my back, sending chills through my body. She almost got snatched up in this driveway.

I stared at her as she stretched those sexy legs open to get in the car. The shorts she wore gave me the perfect view of those smooth, chocolate stilts and I couldn’t wait to have my tongue all over them. Closing the door, I walked around to my side and got in the car. As dark as my tint was, I wanted to take her right here. After cranking up and pulling out of the driveway, I slid my hand to her leg and gently eased it to her inner thigh. She slid off her sandals and lifted her foot to my dash, then looked at me as she grabbed my hand, moving it to her center.

Damn, she was a fucking freak. I was in heaven and could barely keep my eyes off her, threatening to kill us both. Driving became a second priority after that shit. Still, no words had left either of us. As I gripped her pussy, she let out a moan and allowed her head to fall back to the headrest. That shit was so sexy. Pulling her leg over the console, I realized just how flexible she was. She was practically in a split as I licked, then kissed her calf. Sliding my fingertips back to her inner thigh, I slid them inside her shorts, feeling the heat greet me upon entry. *Shit.* “Five minutes and we’ll be at my place. Can you wait?”

She pulled her leg back to her side of the car and unbuckled her seatbelt. When she lifted her hips and pulled off her shorts and underwear, I could have lost my fucking mind. *I guess she couldn’t wait.* But then, lil mama pulled a fucking dildo from her purse. “Naw. Fuck that shit,” I said, snatching it from her and throwing it to the backseat. “The only dick gracing that pussy today gon’ be mine. You feel me?”

“Mmm... I hope I do.”

Pulling my waist band of my shorts and briefs down, I allowed my dick to spring out in the open. “I don’t think you gon’ have a problem with that. I’m a tear that pussy up and have you stalking my ass without a car.”

She blushed, then moaned and put her hand between her legs, slapping her pussy. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head as she continued to do that shit, then pushed her fingers inside of it. I quickly pulled her hand to me and sucked her fingers, damn near closing my eyes as I savored her flavor. “Fuck, girl.”

I whipped into my driveway and into my garage so fast, I should’ve given her ass whiplash. Hopping out as the garage door went down, I made my way to her door, opened it, and yanked her half-naked ass out of there. I gripped her ass, then slapped it. The way that shit jiggled, I knew this was about to be on. She pulled her shirt over her head and let that shit drop to the ground, then unfastened her bra, allowing it to drop as well. I picked her up and sat her on the hood of my BMW,

since the engine was still hot on the Infiniti, and spread her legs.

Her pussy was wet as shit, and everything in me wanted to eat the fuck out of it, but I restrained myself. I left her there and went to the glovebox of the Infiniti and got a condom. Pulling my shit off in record time, I strapped up and walked back over to her. I grabbed her legs and pulled her across the hood, closer to me. Sliding my dick over her slit, that shit excreted its flavor. *Fuck*. I couldn't take my time. This shit was too unreal. Finding her opening, I shoved my dick inside of her as she screamed, "Fuck!"

I didn't respond verbally, just began giving her the shit she wanted... what she came here with me for... the same shit I wanted. She lifted her hips and began popping her pussy on me. A nigga was gone, and my dick was happy as hell. "Ahh," I growled, giving her all I had.

Picking her up from the hood, I spun us around, putting her back to the wall and dug for gold in her shit. "Fuck, girl. Yo' pussy the shit. Mmm."

"I fell in love with your dick at first sight. Fuck me, Jarius. Fuck me hard. I need this... shit!"

I did just what she asked and tore that kitty to shreds until we were both cumming and voicing our satisfaction. I went to the car and picked up our clothes. "My backyard is fenced in. We'll be okay walking in like this," I said to her as she covered her breasts.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to me. Closing my eyes, I brought my lips to hers and we stood there, silently breathing in one another's air. There wasn't a kiss... our lips were just resting against one another's. Whether she wanted it to be or not... we would be more than just a fuck. I felt that shit in my soul. Before I could pull away from her, she whispered against my lips, "Jarius?"

"Yeah?"

"What's your last name?"

Pulling away from her, I chuckled slightly as she stared at me, then let her eyes travel to my dick, still adorning the condom laced with the excretions from our pleasure and excitement with one another. “Hutcherson.”

Closing in the space I created between us, she kissed my lips and I gently sucked her bottom one into my mouth. That muthafucka was juicy as hell and I couldn’t wait to have it wrapped around my dick. When she pulled away, she said, “Jarius Hutcherson, I hope you plan to fuck me again.”

“Mmm-hmm. All over the fucking house.”

CHAPTER 1

*D*araja
1 year later...

AS I LEFT CAMPUS, I was happy to have my second semester done. University of Houston had been good to me for my first year, and I was thinking about registering for a couple of classes during the summer. Dedicating everything to my studies had paid off. I had a 4.0 GPA. Anatomy and physiology tried to give me a run for my money, but I wasn't having it. Being a twenty-six-year-old freshman had proven to be a lot at first, but I quickly fell into the swing of things.

Being free to do what I wanted to do was like a breath of fresh air. Taking care of my parents, especially Mama, was extremely hard. Working with limited funds made it harder. It wasn't that there weren't great doctors in Lagos. There were amazing medical professionals there. We just couldn't afford them. Being in America was not because being there was a horrible experience in Lagos. But I wanted to experience something new, and I wanted to be with my sister. I knew if it weren't for me, my parents would not have come here.

They wanted to stay in Lagos, and I understood that. Had Mama been in good health, I was almost sure that Chinara wouldn't have had a problem with that. But being that she was building her life in America, something my parents had encouraged, she wanted us here with her. So, here we were. As I headed to my car that Chinara and Haji had purchased for

me, my phone chimed with a text message. Looking at the message, I saw it was from Jarius. My insides quivered, ready to feel him deep inside of me. I'd denied him last weekend because I had some serious studying to do for finals. *Can I dig in them guts tonight?*

I rolled my eyes as I smiled. He was so predictable, but I liked that. We'd been fucking around since my first day in America, and until we moved to Houston, my guts were getting dug out almost daily. A few months ago, he'd asked me to be his girl, but I couldn't make that kind of commitment to him. I was shocked he'd even asked. Practically everything about us was a secret. I'd just told Chinara a little while ago that we were fucking.

He wasn't making things easy for me, either. He was in Houston almost every weekend and would leave on Mondays to go back home. We'd agreed that we were just having fun... fucking around with someone who felt the same way the other felt. But somewhere along the way, things changed for him. While we hadn't discussed anything, I knew that we were exclusive while I was in Beaumont. I wasn't so sure about things once I moved to Houston. Although we saw one another often, we weren't fucking as much. I had dreams to chase... a career.

After getting in my car, I responded to his text. *Yeah. I need to work out on that dick. Today was my last day of class for the semester.*

Once I cranked up and was about to drive away, there was a knock on my window, scaring the hell out of me. Frowning, I put my window down when I saw it was Jarius. "What are you doing here? You scared me half to death."

"I miss you, girl. Come on."

He'd met me at school before, so he knew where I parked most days, and he knew my schedule better than I did. Smiling slightly, I grabbed my purse and got out of the car. The moment I closed the door, he pulled me into his arms. "Why you so hard, girl? You know you missed my ass."

I giggled. "Not your ass, Jarius. Your dick."

He rolled his eyes and said, “Man, it’s a figure of speech. You been here long enough to know that shit. But the way you grab that shit when I’m dicking you down, I would say you miss my ass, too.”

Before I could respond again, he kissed my lips as his hands dipped to my ass, making me moan in anticipation. He was six years older than me and he seemed to know just what he wanted out of life. I wasn’t there yet. While he was the only man I’d been entertaining, I only knew that I needed to focus on school. Everything else came second. Pressing my body against my car, he leaned over me and said, “Tell me you missed me, Daraja.”

Sliding his hand to my neck, I tilted my head back and bit my bottom lip as he licked his. “I missed you, Jarius.”

I really did miss him, but it had become habit to deny myself. I denied myself the pleasure of actually feeling anything for him, especially after his admission. He wanted me to be his... not just secretly. Kissing me tenderly on the head, he grabbed my hand and led me to his BMW. Releasing his hand, I smoothed the back of my mini-skirt down and followed behind him. “You can’t be showing all that leg and expect me to behave.”

“Who said I wanted you to behave?”

He opened my door and I dropped my purse in the front seat, then went to the back. It had been almost three weeks since I’d felt his dick inside of me. That dildo was barely hanging on, trying to keep up with his performance. I was worn out whenever I got through fucking myself. Trying to achieve the same level of orgasms I experienced with Jarius was impossible. When I got in the back seat, he said, “Yo’ ass so fucking nasty, but you know this shit gon’ be next to impossible in this car.”

“Then why did you drive it?” I asked as I lifted my legs, setting my feet flat on the seat.

“Fuck,” he said, then slid inside with me.

He remote-started the car, then unbuckled his belt and unfastened his pants. Once he pulled his dick out, he said, “Come slide down this shit.”

I scooted over, so he could get in the middle of the seat, then straddled him. Moving my panties to the side, I slid down his dick as I let out a moan of satisfaction. Jarius gripped my hips as I leaned over him, my head hitting the top repeatedly. I was gonna have a horrible headache when we were done, but I needed him now *and* later. “Fuck, Jarius!”

“Uh huh. Tell me you love this dick.”

“Ooohh... shit. I love this dick.”

He gently pushed me back and I gripped the headrests of the front seats as he wrapped his arms around my thighs and fucked the shit out of me. “Ooohhh! Bẹni oluwa mi!”

I knew he didn’t know what I was saying in Yoruba, but it didn’t matter. He knew I was calling on God every time he pushed his anaconda inside of me. “God can’t save you right now, Raja. Not until I get my... nut!”

As he thrustured into me, I released all over his dick, already wishing for more. It was like I could never get enough of him. “Jarius! Shit!”

He growled as his grip tightened around my legs. “Fuuuuck!”

He nudded inside of me, something we’d agreed to since I was now on birth control. I trusted him to be safe and he trusted me as well. Letting my head drop back, I continued grinding on his dick until he slapped my ass. “Get’cho horny ass off me fo’ campus police arrest our asses.”

I giggled as I lifted my hips, allowing his dick to slide out of me. “Jarius, why don’t you get us a room? I’m so happy to be done with this semester, I could fuck all day.”

“Man, I swear you have the mind of a nigga, for real. You don’t want to go get dinner, celebrate with your family for a job well-done?”

I watched him tuck his dick in his pants as I licked my lips. “Of course I want to celebrate with my family, but I don’t need them in my business about what me and you have going on. That’s between us.”

“Why, though? We grown as fuck.”

I turned my head. That shit was none of his business, either. “Look. Don’t worry about it. I’m gonna go back to my car and I’ll see you at the house.”

“You still on that bullshit.”

“And you’re still fucking me.”

“Hell yeah. You got good pussy, but maybe I need to move on since we don’t want the same shit no more. I can find good pussy somewhere else.”

That hurt. Jarius was always reckless with what he let fall out of his mouth, but he’d never intentionally hurt me. I shrugged my shoulders and grabbed my bag. “Go find it elsewhere then. I’m in Texas. I’m sure there are plenty of big dicks that can give me the orgasms I need without catching feelings.”

I slid over him as he tried to hold me back. “Shit. Daraja, I didn’t mean that shit. I’m sorry. I just wanna be wit’chu, man. It’s been a damn year. What’s so wrong about being with me? I’m the only one you fucking with anyway.”

“But it’s on my time. You knew the deal from the beginning. If you didn’t feel you could handle that, then you should have left me alone.” I swung the door open and got out of the car. “It was good while it lasted.”

Walking back to my car, I brought my hand to my chest. My feelings were hurt. But fuck him. I was chasing my career. School was my main priority. Everyone was established in their careers and I felt like a failure. I barely graduated from high school because I let a man get in the way of my education. He was twenty-three, and I was seventeen. My senior year... I was so busy trying to be with him and be whatever he needed me to be, I was skipping school to do so.

When my counselor told me that if I didn't buckle down and get my best grades, I wouldn't graduate, I woke up and snapped out of the trance he had me in. Thankfully, she didn't call my parents. I did what I had to do but Gambo wanted me to choose between him and school. I couldn't let my family down, so he left me. My heart was broken. We'd been dating for almost the entire school year and I was in love with him and his abusive ways. I refused to suffer the same heartbreak again. And I refused to let a man deter me from accomplishing my dreams... attaining my goals.

After slamming my door, I started the car and burnt off. Before I even realized it, a tear slid down my face. Quickly wiping it away, I said aloud, "Fuck him. He don't get to make me feel like shit... like my feelings don't matter."

As I drove, I cranked up my music, listening to "Girls In The Hood" by Megan Thee Stallion. "I'm sick of muthafuckas tryna tell me how to live, too, Megan."

Glancing in my rearview mirror, I could see that he was behind me. Luckily, Haji's compound was big enough for me to hide in. I didn't want to talk to anybody right now. I was going to go in my room and register for both summer sessions. I didn't have time to waste or breaks to take. I'd only been in school a year. I'd been on break for seven years, although it didn't feel like one.

When I turned onto the cobblestone driveway, I checked my face, being sure that the tear that fell hadn't stained my cheek, then I grabbed my things as Jarius approached me. Rolling my eyes, he said, "Listen. I don't know what else to do. I don't know what the deal is with you. If you think I would try to hinder you from becoming a nurse or accomplishing whatever it is that you wanna accomplish, you got me all wrong. I just wanna know that you feel for me like I do for you. Yeah, a nigga caught feelings. But you telling me that you been fucking me for a year and you don't feel shit?"

I looked away from him, closing the door to my car, then fidgeted slightly. I hated that I kept fucking him. After we moved to Houston, I should've broken that shit off with him. Jarius was an amazing guy, but I wasn't ready. Just because I

was a woman, it was like they thought I should want a relationship. If the shoe was on the other foot, they would be saying, *At least he was honest with you. He's not ready.* “All I feel is pleasure when we’re having sex. My intimate feelings aren’t attached to my pussy. I’m sorry, Jarius.”

I walked away from him, leaving him standing there in shock. All the time that we’d spent getting to know one another, I’d never told him what my deal was with trying to have a relationship while I was in school. But oh well. I’d made a promise to myself, and no one would make me lose focus of that. Glancing back at him, he was still standing in the same spot, watching me walk away. I avoided the main doors we frequented and went to the back, entering the house from the courtyard. When I got to my room, I quickly disrobed for a shower. It was so hot outside, I just wanted to soak up some of this air and rest.

My phone chimed, causing me to refocus my attention. When I went to it, I saw on the lock screen that it was from Jarius. I almost didn’t want to open it, because I wasn’t so sure what he had to say. However, curiosity got the best of me. When I opened it, the text message read, *I wish you the best, Daraja. While I wanna wait for you, I know that isn’t ideal for me. So, I guess I’ll see you around.*

He was done with me, but I expected that. I didn’t justify him with a response. Instead, I deleted his number out of my phone and deleted our text thread. *Gone without a trace.* While in Lagos, I couldn’t seem to connect with anyone, either, but I felt like it was because I was dedicated to taking care of my mother when her health declined. Putting my life on hold was the logical thing to do. Now it had become normal practice.

Once I was showered and had thrown on a t-shirt and some shorts, there was a knock at my door. Falling to the bed, I said, “Come in.”

“School is finally done! What are you doing to celebrate?” Chinara asked excitedly.

“First, I’m taking a nap, then I’m registering for summer school.”

She frowned slightly and walked inside, closing the door behind her. “I thought maybe we could go out and celebrate, at least by going to dinner. Jarius is here, Mama is feeling great, and we’re all proud of you.”

“Maybe later, Nara. I’m tired. I just need a nap.”

“You sure? Is something else wrong?”

“No, woman. Now let me sleep,” I said, then threw a pillow at her.

She giggled, then said, “Fine. Get some rest.”

When she left out, I turned to my back and stared at the ceiling. I liked Jarius, but I just wasn’t ready. I wasn’t ready to relinquish full control of where my life was headed. I didn’t know how Chinara was able to just dive head-first into a relationship with Haji. But I guess she didn’t have the same experiences I did. It wasn’t that I was making Jarius suffer for other men’s mistakes, I just didn’t want to have to focus on a relationship right now. My wants hadn’t changed, but for some reason, I felt like I was the one who had wronged him.

CHAPTER 2

Jarius

I WANTED to grab Daraja by her shoulders and shake the shit out of her. Why couldn't she see that I wanted only her? I felt like she only wanted me, too. Otherwise she would have been fucking other people. She was so sexual. I thought when we weren't fucking, she was possibly fucking somebody else, but I could tell she wasn't. Every groove in that juicy-ass pussy of hers was committed to my memory. So, if she was fucking somebody else, my dick would feel the difference. Nothing between us would change. All she had to do was admit that she was mine and only mine. That was it.

After walking in the house, Haji immediately dapped me up. "You here early. What's up?"

"I had an early day."

He glanced behind him and asked, "You was tryna hook up with Daraja? She ain't here yet."

"Oh, she's here. I met her ass at U of H."

"Damn. What's wrong wit' chu?"

"I'm tired of just fucking. I want more with her."

"So, what's the problem?"

“She don’t want more. She said she’s just fine with what we’re doing.”

“Damn.”

“Right. So, I told her that this was it, then. I’ll see her ass around.”

I flopped on his couch and rested my head against the cushions. Daraja told me she didn’t want a relationship... she said that shit from the beginning. Why was I trying to force her into more? It was like I was the fucking female in this situation. But seeing how happy Chinara and Haji were... got me excited. I thought all women wanted to settle down, get married, and have a couple of babies. A nigga was straight-up confused. I’d met the female player and she put some boss shit on me and threw my ass to the side.

She was so damn beautiful, and besides the fact that she didn’t want me as a permanent fixture in her life, her personality was like honey and I was a fucking bumble bee. She was sweet as hell and had the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. And her walk... she had that model strut and I swore music started playing whenever she moved. I wanted to spit poetry like Omari Hardwick whenever... “Nigga! You listening to me?”

I looked over at Haji, then rolled my eyes. “Naw.”

“Obviously. I said that you know like hell you ain’t gon’ be able to leave her alone. Yo’ ass sprung on whatever it is that she puttin’ on your ass.”

It was like we’d suddenly switched roles. He wanted to be the comedian and shit now. I couldn’t even respond to his ass, though, because he was right. Daraja could get whatever she wanted from me and she knew it. I’d told her before that she was gon’ make me stop fucking with her and she’d laughed in my face. “Fuck you, nigga.”

He chuckled as Chinara joined us. “Hey, Jarius! You’re here early.”

I slightly rolled my eyes at the smirk on Haji’s face as I stood and hugged her. When Chinara released me, she turned

to Haji. “Baby, you think we can go out to dinner as a family and celebrate Daraja finishing her first year of school?”

I slid my hand down my face. “Yeah, we can do that,” he responded as we heard Jendayi, their three-month-old, crying through the intercom.

“Okay. I’ll let Mama and Papa know,” Chinara said as she rushed off.

When she was out of view, he asked, “You gon’ come with us?”

“Hell yeah. I ain’t missing a free meal. But I’m going home afterwards.”

“Who said anything about it being free?”

“Inherited all that money and you still a tight-ass African. Just pitiful.”

Haji laughed, then said, “But you said you was gon’ line me up tomorrow, bruh. You can’t leave.”

“A’ight. I’ma leave right after, though.”

“She got’cho ass all in your fucking feelings.”

“Whatever. Make yourself useful and get me a drank.”

As I sat there, wishing I could get fucked up, Daraja came downstairs and spoke to Haji as she went to the kitchen to get some water. When she came back, she said, “Hey, Jarius.”

“What’s up?” I said as I eyed her.

She didn’t know Haji knew about us, but I was almost sure that Chinara knew, too. I told my boy not long after day one, when I first got a taste of that kryptonite between her legs and she got her first taste of American dick. “Not too much. You coming to dinner with us?”

“I guess. I ain’t got shit else to do.”

She was tripping. But what took the cake was that she had the nerve to come sit next to me, smiling and shit. Her ass had to be bipolar. She glanced over at Haji, then asked, “You gon’ really stop talking to me?”

“Yep.”

She leaned over and licked my damn ear and said, “That’s too bad.”

“Man, gon’ with that shit, Daraja.”

“Why?”

“Because now you getting to the point where you just fucking with me. I’m not feeling that shit. Now move.”

She stood from the sofa as Haji returned, walking away with a smirk on her lips. I didn’t have time to play games with her no more. As hard as that shit was gonna be, I needed to move on with my life. I fucked around enough in my twenties to last a lifetime. I was trying to find the woman that I could spend the rest of my life with. I thought it would be her. The way she teased me turned me on, and she knew that. *Fuck!* I didn’t know why I was trying to fool myself. Standing from the sofa, I said, “Daraja.”

She turned to stare at me as I licked my lips. I could hear Haji chuckle, but I did my best to ignore his ass. Walking to her, I pulled her close to me as she glanced around me at Haji. “What are you do—”

I kissed the fuck out of her, giving her my tongue and all the frustrations that came along with it. Her hands rushed to my face, pulling me closer for a moment, then she pulled away and pushed me. The frown on her face told me that she wanted me, but I knew she was hesitant about being open in front of Haji. “He knows, Raja.”

She glanced at Haji again, then grabbed my hand, pulling me with her. When we got to her room, I gripped her hips and followed her inside. As soon as she closed the door, I slammed her into it, feeling way more aggressive than I usually did. Her eyes widened slightly, but she looked like she creamed on herself. “You knew you couldn’t resist this, Jarius.”

“Man, just shut up,” I said, spinning her around.

I slid my hand in her shorts and grabbed her fat mound. She had indeed juiced on herself. Pulling her shirt over her head, she moaned slightly. Bringing my other hand to her

neck, I pulled her against me as my other hand loosened its grip on her pussy. I slid my fingers between her folds as she arched her back against me. Leaning over to her ear, I said, “Regardless of what the fuck you say, you’re mine. I’m not playing wit’chu, either. You give my shit away to another nigga and he gon’ get fucked up. You want that on your conscience? This fat, wet muthafucka belongs to me.”

She tried to pull away from me, but I held her tightly as my fingers penetrated her. I rubbed her clit feverishly with my thumb. “Quit fighting and just say, *Yes, daddy.*”

“Make me,” she said, baiting me.

Removing my hand from her shorts, I spun her around, once again pushing her against the door, then pulled off my shirt and shorts. “That shit will be my pleasure.”



AS WE SAT at Goode Company Seafood, eating, I couldn’t keep my eyes off Daraja. That fucking woman had me as crazy as her ass. Everybody had been giving us weird looks and I knew it was because they heard that massacre earlier in her bedroom. It was the angriest sex I’d ever had. Daraja had slapped the fuck out of me, and in return, I’d beat that pussy up and damn near choked the shit out of her. I didn’t care who heard what at that point. She didn’t seem to care, either... until we emerged.

She seemed embarrassed by the looks we were getting from her parents, but that shit was her fault. She’d clearly forgotten where we were, and now, she was regretting her choices. But fuck that. I meant exactly what I’d said. She was mine, and I would fuck up some shit if I had to. She hadn’t said a word to me since we’d left the house. Refusing to ride in the car with me was childish as hell. I was done with being her fuck buddy. Maybe she was too young to be as mature about us as I needed her to be, but she was gon’ grow up real quick.

As I ate my etouffee, I could feel her father's eyes on me. When I looked up at him, he maintained his gaze, and so did I. I wasn't a coward by any means... I didn't care who it was. I continued to hold his gaze. Haji cleared his throat and tried to break the tension by talking about the school year, but that didn't help. I finally asked, "Would you like to talk?"

"I don't appreciate you treating my daughter like a piece of meat."

"No disrespect, but you got that backwards. I want her to be mine, but she's denying *me* that opportunity. She's the one treating me like a piece of meat, like I ain't good enough for her. Today was my last day accepting that position in her life. Either I'm gonna be more or nothing. So, have that conversation with Daraja."

I stood from the table before I became disrespectful. It didn't take much to get me there. My mama and sister had always fussed about how when I got angry, anything could fly out of my mouth. So, I was mindful of that and left. Haji came running behind me and grabbed my arm. "Yo, don't leave. That's his daughter, man."

"I get that. But he need to check his damn daughter. I'm out."

"Shit, Jarius. Just chill out. Finish eating and relish in the pleasure of her being in the hot seat. She was the one that didn't want nobody to know. Come watch her fidget and shit."

I looked at him and thought about what he'd just said. Nothing would please me more than watching Daraja have to explain herself. I turned around and headed back to our table as Daraja glared at me. She could glare all she wanted to. Just how women bragged about having to train a man, I was gon' have fun training her ass. They could call me sprung or whatever. Fuck them. I knew what I felt from her. She was fighting that shit and I chose not to. If I thought she meant everything she said, I'd let her ass go, no problem.

I resumed eating my etouffee like ain't shit happen, until Chinara cleared her throat. Looking up, I noticed all eyes were on me. "I apologize, Jarius. I didn't make my parents aware of

what was going on between us,” Daraja said, practically under her breath.

“We can’t hear you, child,” her mother said.

Slightly rolling her eyes, she repeated herself. Staring at her parents, I offered, “I apologize for being disrespectful. Daraja makes me lose my cool because she’s so stubborn. My intentions are good. I want a relationship with her, but she doesn’t seem to want that. I was probably wrong for trying to force her into that, but I know what I feel. Despite what she saying, I know what she feel, too.”

Daraja was staring at me. Although I refused to acknowledge it, I could feel that shit like it was a laser beaming into my skin. Her dad nodded and said, “Thank you for explaining.”

His gaze went to Daraja and she fidgeted slightly. For some reason, I didn’t take as much joy in it as I thought I would. I just wanted to hold her in my arms and let her know that everything was going to be fine, and that I would be whoever she needed me to be in her life. Sometimes, when we made love, I swore I could feel her soul attaching itself to mine. Her eyes told me she loved me in that moment. I just wished she would let more than just my dick in.

Reaching to her under the table, I grabbed her hand, wishing we could start today all over. This shit was a damn disaster, but at least I didn’t have the headache of keeping a secret from everybody. I knew she had more to endure from her dad. She pulled her hand away from me and glanced at me from the corners of her eyes. She was pissed. Oh well. I finished my etouffee in silence while Haji and Chinara tried to make conversation. The moment was already awkward, and there was no conversation that would change that.

CHAPTER 3

Daraja

“Do you want to be classified as a whore? I don’t understand! How long has this been going on, Daraja?”

My dad was firing off question after question while my mama sat there with a frown on her face. Last time I checked, I thought I was twenty-six years old, more than capable of running my own life. But as usual, I was being treated like a kid. I sat in a chair while my dad paced back and forth. Since he wanted to have this conversation, then we would have it, and I didn’t care how uncomfortable he got. “I have needs. Jarius and I have been having sex for the past year, since we first got here. I didn’t want anything more from him because my focus has been on school. I don’t want another Gambo situation. When I fall in love, it’s like I can’t focus on anything else.”

I crossed my legs as my dad stared at me. He didn’t like me talking about sex, but he was gonna hear it. “Jarius makes me do things I never thought I would have. He satisfies me in ways I can’t describe and I’m doing my best to only focus on the sexual part of him. I want to be a nurse. You guys came here for me. I get that. That’s why I can’t let you down. But who I have sex with shouldn’t be of concern to you. I’m a grown woman who loves sex, and—”

“That’s enough, Daraja. I don’t want to hear details,” my dad said.

“Oh, but you must. You wanted me to explain, right?”

“Watch your mouth, young lady,” my mama said.

Exhaling loudly, I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m only saying that I know what I’m doing. Jarius is the only man I’ve been with since we’ve been here. I do have feelings for him, but I’m not telling him that because I can’t afford to commit to him right now. He has the potential to make me lose myself,” I said honestly.

I’d never wanted to admit that, but I was falling for him. My body craved him like he was the last man on earth. Maybe he was right. Maybe we should be done. He’d fucked me so good earlier, I couldn’t contain my screams. That was how everyone was able to hear what was going on. He was quiet as hell as he killed me over and over again. I enjoyed every moment of it. The way my body naturally spit for him was something I’d never experienced. It was like he was the only man meant to experience everything I had to offer.

My mama sat next to me and said, “Baby, we’ve been around Jarius for a year now. He seems like a good man. I don’t think he would get in the way of your studies. Why not give him a chance to prove that to you?”

I fidgeted slightly, staring at my hands in my lap. She lifted my head by my chin. “You can’t be happy denying yourself of what you really want. He wants to build a life with you. Let him. He’s not the men from the past. He’s Jarius Hutcherson. If he proves that he isn’t what or who you thought he was, let him go.”

“I’m scared. I can’t lose myself.”

“Then don’t lose yourself. You have your sister here with you now. You can spend time with her and your little niece. He lives in Beaumont, so he won’t be here every day. Just give the man a chance.”

I lowered my face to my hands, and she pulled me into her arms. I was terrified of failing. Before I knew it, I was crying

audibly. My dad sat on the other side of me and wrapped his arms around the both of us. Lifting my head, I said, “I know you left Nigeria for me. You left home and everything you know, so that I can be happy and prosperous. I can’t fail. I can’t let you down. That would kill me, knowing how much you two sacrificed for me.”

“Baby, you won’t fail. We are already proud of you. But I hate seeing you so broken. Please don’t let the past hinder your future. Live life, baby girl. Go for what you want and be fearless.”

My daddy saying those words really put me in my feelings. My parents always gave great advice. Maybe they treated me like a kid because I was acting like one... a spoiled one. Sitting up, I wiped my face. “I’m gonna go talk to him. Hopefully, it’s not too late.”

I stood from my seat and made my way downstairs to find Jarius and Haji outside, smoking cigars. Suddenly, fear overtook me. Just as I was about to turn around and go to my room, he turned and looked right at me. His gaze had me feeling frozen in place, and it felt like I was barely breathing. Once he stood from his chair, I closed my eyes and tried to take deep breaths. *I can’t do this. I can’t commit to him. Run.* The moment I was about to leave, I opened my eyes and he was standing in front of me, playing with the hair on my shoulder. Swallowing hard, I tried to leave, but he grabbed my arm. “What’s up, Daraja?”

Haji walked in, so he pulled me outside with him. Staring out at the pool, I took deep breaths again. “You making me nervous, girl. What’chu gotta tell me?”

“I’m sorry. I hope you can forgive me for being childish... immature about our situation. Truth is, I’m afraid. Not of being hurt, but of failing.”

“Maaan... come here.”

He pulled me in his strong arms and held me against him, his beard tickling my nose. It felt like that was where I belonged. I was so comfortable there. When he pulled away, he went to a chair and sat, pulling me down to his lap. “Daraja,

I'm sorry about tonight. I'm just frustrated. I know what you said from the beginning, and it's my fault for letting my feelings get involved. I just see more with you than a deep stroke... wet-ass pussy."

I chuckled because he always said that. My pussy only got that wet for him. The first time we had sex, I was surprised at just how wet I was. I mean... it got sloppy wet for him. That made it apparent to me just how attracted I was to him. And it was more than sex. Everything about him turned me on. His swag... that thug-like persona, his business side, but this side was one of my favorites. His sensitivity made me melt like butter in a skillet. While I did my best to hide my emotions, except during sex, I knew eventually, I had to face them. "Tonight is my fault. I pushed you."

He played in my hair as I laid against his shoulder, wishing that I wasn't wired the way I was. I wanted to relinquish myself to him and have him to myself, but I didn't know how to do that without being clingy and suffocating him. I supposed being spoiled was the worst. Lifting my head and staring into his eyes, I asked, "So, what now?"

"I rent a hotel room and fuck my girl all night long."

I nearly came on his lap and I believed he could feel it through my tights. After licking his thick lips, he said, "You see how that shit heat up for me? Why wouldn't you wanna let a nigga that do that to you be all yours? Huh?"

I shrugged my shoulders, then hugged him tightly. So, I had a boyfriend for the first time since high school, and it felt damn good.



"I HATE THAT YOU'RE LEAVING."

"Come to Beaumont with me then. You ain't got shit going on until you go back to school anyway, right?"

I'd convinced Jarius to stay in Houston until Monday, and he did. I didn't have to try hard to convince him. I just asked

him to, and he did. We'd fucked so much until I was literally walking funny. "What will I do while you're working, though?"

"Whatever the hell you wanna do. You can shop for cute shit to wear for me when I get home, or you can sit'cho fine ass at the shop with me."

"You wouldn't mind me sitting there with you all day?"

"Nope. I like to show off, and having you is a prize worth flaunting, baby."

He pulled me close to him and kissed my lips. Why hadn't I given in to him sooner? Jarius had me feeling like royalty all weekend, at least until we got to the bedroom. In the bedroom, I felt like his nasty bitch. We'd gone to brunch yesterday and shopping Saturday. The Galleria Mall didn't owe us a thing. I was sure to thank him thoroughly for the bands he spent. I had no limits to the damage I was allowed to do, although I would show some restraint from now on. I'd never asked Jarius for a thing, or anyone else for that matter. I'd planned to get a job when we got to Houston, but Haji told me if I did, he was gonna break my neck. My brother-in-law was the truth.

So, I'd only been concentrating on school, giving those books hell both semesters. I'd even done a mid-winter session. I wanted to graduate as quickly as possible. I'd registered for both summer sessions when I thought Jarius was leaving me. While I could still drop the classes for the second summer session, I didn't know if I would. If I finished the four classes this summer, along with the one I took over the mid-winter break, that would put me a whole semester ahead. "Are you gonna bring me back this weekend? I start summer school Monday."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I bring you back? I won't be able to come back until Saturday evening, though. I gotta work this weekend. You broke a nigga."

I giggled as he continued to hold me in his arms, relishing in the moment. I'd never really allowed him to hold me this way for this length of time unless we were lying in bed. "So,

what's up? You coming with me or not?" he asked softly as he slid his fingertips over my cheek.

"Yeah. Give me a few minutes to pack and let everyone know that I'm leaving for the week. You sure you want me around you like that? I don't want you to get tired of me."

He rolled his eyes and exhaled loudly. "I been wanting you to be mine for some months now. I'ma be happy as shit wit'chu around, smothering my ass."

I giggled as I pulled away from him. He slapped my ass as I ran upstairs to pack. On my way to my room, I nearly ran into my mother. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I'm leaving with Jarius. He's gonna bring me back Sunday."

"I'm glad it worked out for you two."

"Yeah, well, that has yet to be seen. We have a long way to go. This week will definitely prove whether we are compatible or not... I mean, other than sexually."

"You didn't have to add that last part, Daraja. I got your point without it. But I think the two of you are a lot alike, both somewhat mysterious. Hopefully, that will help you to understand one another better. So, I *hope* it works out."

"Thank you, Mama."

She smiled at me and walked towards the stairs. However, I could see the slight limp she was trying to hide. "Mama, you okay?"

"I'm fine, child. Just a little stiff. I sat in that chair for too long."

"Okay."

I went into my room and thought about how much I would enjoy being in Darius's company for the entire week. This would be the true test if he could handle my ass or not. I knew I could worry the hell out of people at times. My sister was a witness. Before she left for America, I was her shadow. I

wanted to go everywhere she went, although I was younger than her. She hated it. I almost believed that she really wanted to go to America to have freedom from me. That was how bad I could be, and Mama and Papa didn't allow her much time to herself.

That was my problem with Gambo. It was like I attached myself to people I loved and felt strongly for. I knew that the more time that I spent around Jarius would cause me to be the same way with him. If he could make it through this week, then I would know that he was for me. As I packed clothes, I smiled slightly, because deep down, I knew Jarius would love me being in his space. "Where are you going?"

I turned to see Chinara standing in the doorway, holding my niece, Jendayi. Making my way to them, I gently took her from her arms and sat on the bed. I kissed the top of her head, then cooed. She smiled at me and I realized she had Haji's smile. I smiled back as I tickled her feet, sending her into a frenzy. She was the cutest, chocolate princess I'd ever seen. After kissing her again, Chinara huffed loudly. "Nara, you know where I'm going. So, if you need to hear me say it, I'm going with Jarius and I'll be back Saturday night or Sunday."

She hopped up and down while she clapped with a huge smile on her face. I rolled my eyes as I continued to play with the little doll in my lap. "Raja! I'm so happy that you're finally letting your guard down."

She sat next to me and bumped me with her shoulder as I gave her a one-cheeked smile. "I'm finally trying to open up and get used to the fact that Jarius is my boyfriend. Pray that I don't mess this up. I haven't had a boyfriend in eight years."

I watched the frown appear on Chinara's face. She knew about Gambo, but she was already in America when I graduated from high school. We had a whole depressive crying fit over the phone because she couldn't afford to come home to witness that milestone. A milestone I'd reached by the skin of my teeth. Her eyebrows furrowed together, showing her sorrow. "Raja, since high school?"

"Yep."

She didn't know the details about my relationship with Gambo, only that he was older than me. She'd warned me to watch out for him... everyone did, but I wouldn't listen. What would a twenty-three-year-old want with a girl still in high school? That was their question to me. I took offense to that question and accused them of attacking me. I could have avoided all the shit I went through with him. Things no one knew but me, him, and God... and whoever else it involved. When I finally broke free of the hold he had on me, I promised myself that I wouldn't be a fool again.

But when it came to Jarius, I had been a fool... a fool for not realizing that the man who could be my future was right before my eyes. I was trying to correct my mistakes. "Why haven't you had a boyfriend since high school?"

"Well, I was taking care of Mama and I just didn't have time. I didn't easily trust a lot of people after Gambo and I still don't."

Standing from the bed, I gave her Jendayi and continued to pack, choosing to leave the subject alone. Jarius was the only man I wanted to think about, and I refused to give anyone else the thoughts that belonged to him. There was a lot Chinara didn't know about me, and she wouldn't learn anything new right now, either. "So what changed?"

"What did you cook today?" I asked her, signaling that I was done with that conversation.

She caught the hint and said, "Haji wanted me to try my hand at oxtails. I think I did well. You and Jarius ought to have a plate with rice and gravy before you leave. I cooked cabbage as well."

"That sounds like a traditional Black American meal. Definitely Haji's doing," I said, then laughed.

"At least you know. But I love soul food. Besides, Mama made Efo Riro last week. Haji had a lot of seasonings shipped here. Ms. Afiong does her best to get what we need. So, if my man wanted a soul food meal, that was exactly what he got."

Efo Riro was a spinach stew that Mama topped with locust bean and ground crayfish. It was one of my favorite dishes that she cooked from home. For Haji to get the ingredients shipped here by way of his mother was monumental for me. I'd hugged him tightly while he laughed. I loved to eat and that hadn't gone unnoticed around here. "I hear you, sis. Jarius likes to eat as much as I do, so he's probably already eating while waiting for me."

"Okay. Well, I'm gonna go fix you a plate. I'm so excited for you, Raja. You deserve a man that will love you beyond what you have to offer... a man that will love your spirit."

I smiled as I took a deep breath, hoping that I'd found just that in Jarius.

CHAPTER 4

Jarius

“So, you can chill out here. I have an office in the back with a couch. You can watch TV, take a nap, whatever you wanna do. You could hang out here if you want, since the station next to mine is empty. Or you can take my ride and find some shit to get into. It ain’t much in Beaumont, but you can find the mall or some shit like that.”

We’d just gotten to the shop and I was informing Daraja of her options. I was so happy to have her here with me. When the guys got here, they weren’t gonna be able to keep their eyes off her. Then I could be all possessive and shit, like Haji is with Pretty Black. To have a woman that was for only me was something I’d been wanting for a while now. So now that I had it, I was excited as hell. When we got to my house yesterday evening, I stayed between her legs, whether we were fucking or just talking. “Well, I think I’m gonna sit in here with you for a while. Is that okay?”

“That’s more than okay. But I wanna fuck with my boys for a minute, so just go along with what I say.”

She rolled her eyes and took a bite of the kolache I’d gotten her from the donut shop. After she flopped down in the chair next to me, I walked over to her and kissed her head. The tank top and shorts she’d worn was calling me. All that milk chocolate skin on display was making me thirsty as hell. My

sexual appetite was on ten whenever I was near her, and my dick craved her guts something serious. Getting ready for my day, I unlocked the front door as Henny walked in through the back. His name was Henry, but that nigga stayed with a fresh bottle of Hennessy, so everybody called him Henny.

He went to his station as he said, "What up?"

"Not too much, nigga."

Oh, but when he turned around to say something else and he saw Daraja, that nigga's tongue froze. He licked his lips, then looked at me. "Yo, we got a new barber?"

I didn't confirm or deny. I just said, "Henny, this is Daraja. Daraja, this is Henny."

She stood from her chair and shook his hand. "How are you, Henny?"

"Shiiiiid, I'm good," he said as he looked over her body.

Before I could say anything, two others came in and they were on Daraja like white on fucking rice. She liked that kind of attention. I wasn't crazy, though. I was gonna shut this shit down in a minute. She kept glancing at me, waiting to see when I was gonna explain who she was. I walked over to her as they fawned over her, asking questions. She stared at me as I grabbed her ass and kissed her lips. "Aww shit, nigga. That's fucked up," a barber that we called Grimy said.

I laughed, and so did Daraja. Them niggas was circling her like fresh meat, asking where she was from because of her accent and how long she'd been here. They were firing the questions off so fast, she never had a chance to answer any of them. When they all got back to their stations, I said, "This my girl, Daraja. She gon' be kicking it with us this week. She live in H-town. She's from Nigeria, though."

"Damn. I need to relocate if they making 'em like that in Africa. Shit!"

"A'ight. I let y'all have fun and get all that shit out'cho system. Remember, this my lady. She deserves your respect, and I do, too. I'll buss a head wide open for her. Got me?"

“Yeah, yeah,” they mumbled as the last barber strolled through.

He barely held conversation with anybody, but when he saw Daraja, he stopped and introduced himself. She introduced herself as my girlfriend, though, so he glanced at me and gave me a head nod. I was gon’ keep my eye on his ass. He was a hell of a barber, but I’d throw his ass out of here quick if I felt some shady shit coming from him. “Baby, you need anything? You good?”

“I’m fine, Jarius,” she said as she slid her AirPods in her ear.

That smile she threw at me, though, made me wanna snatch her fine ass up. Luckily, my first client walked through the door. The entire time I was cutting him, she was watching. Every move my hand made with those clippers, her eyes followed like she was trying to learn something. Seeing that she took interest in what I did only fueled the already raging fire. It was gon’ be a long-ass day until I got to slide up in her.

Our relationship was built on sex, so I hoped the transition into more would be seamless. Although I could tell that Daraja came with some issues, I was willing to work through them with her. Despite the fact that we fucked all the time, I still got to know her as a person... some of the things that made her tick. Her trust in people was nonexistent, and she was a hard worker. Just the way she went hard in school told me that she would get whatever she wanted. The things that were important to her, she went hard for. I just hoped I was just as important.



“SHIT! RAJA, YOU GOTTA BE QUIET.”

She was riding my dick like she was getting paid to do it. It was only my lunchtime break and we couldn’t make it to the house. She’d been sitting there watching me cut heads and helping me by sweeping up the hair and getting towels for facials and shit. She even did a facial for me after watching me

do a couple. I didn't know how I made it 'til lunchtime. She'd been moaning loud as hell. She'd wanted this as bad as I did. Her juices were coating my balls.

Pulling her off my dick and laying her on the couch, I slid back inside of her as I bit my bottom lip. Sex was never a problem for us. But I only had ten minutes until my next appointment. As I dug her shit out, I lifted both her legs, bringing them to her head and fucked her pussy up. Quickly covering her mouth when I felt her legs quivering, she came the fucking Nile River. *Damn!* I loved this shit. Before I could count to ten, I was cumming right along with her. "Fuck!" I whispered harshly.

Removing my hand from her lips, she grabbed it and sucked my fingers. Man, she was a nasty-ass freak. She had a nigga straight sprung... almost to the point of insanity. Pulling my fingers from her mouth, I stood and took off the condom. Before I could think about putting clothes on, she'd pulled my shit in her mouth. "Baby, as much as I would love for you to suck my shit, I got a client coming in five minutes. I need to get back out there. Lock the door if you wanna stay in here and play. Watch a porn and keep that pussy ready for daddy."

After releasing me slowly, she said, "I can't watch a porn. I stay ready... you know that. If I watch that, I'll be out there fucking you in front of everyone. You want that?"

"As tempting as that shit sound, hell naw. I can't have them niggas seeing *nothing* that belong to me. They already prolly heard yo' ass."

She smirked, then went to the restroom connected to my office to get cleaned up. I never cleaned my shit immediately after. I liked to smell her on me. That wet-ass pussy was my latest addiction. I put my clothes back on, then washed my hands and made my way out to my chair. Niggas was pissed, shaking their heads and shit. I had to chuckle. But I'd have to make sure we never fucked in here again. If I had to, I'd bring her to the car next time.

I got right to my waiting customer, and about ten minutes later, Daraja came out. She was giving me the eye. We were

never good with quickies because both of our asses were greedy as hell. We always wanted more. Thankfully, today wouldn't be a long day like I usually had. We would be leaving by three, hopefully. I watched her put in her AirPods and zone out. When I finished my client, she again swept up the hair. Her mind was on fucking, and the faster I could get done, the better. She was quiet as hell.

As I waited for my last client who was running a few minutes late, a female came in that I'd cut before, literally and figuratively. I was hoping she didn't come my way. Since Daraja was in her own world, it didn't look like she was with me. As sure as God made Adam, Ingrid was heading my way. "What's up, playboy?"

"What's up, Ingrid? Who cutting you?"

"I was hoping you would be able to," she said, then licked her lips.

Shit. Glancing back at Daraja, I noticed she was looking right at us. *Fuck!* "Naw. I got a client coming in. He's actually a little late."

"What about an afterhours cut? It's been a while."

Daraja stood from her seat and Ingrid looked over at her. "When did you get a female barber?"

Before I could respond, Daraja said, "Friday, last week. I provide those afterhours cuts you spoke about."

She sat in my lap and Ingrid turned red as hell. "I apologize. I didn't know you'd settled down."

I didn't respond to her, but I was hoping Daraja didn't trip. I hadn't fucked Ingrid in a while, not since a couple of months after I'd met her. But I knew she was gonna think it was recent since she was so comfortable about approaching me. I was the dude people looked at as the forever bachelor. That was probably why Haji and I got along so well. We were a lot alike in that area of our lives. I was a little more aggressive and rawer than he was, but we were both fucking like it was a hobby. When Ingrid walked away, she asked in a low voice, "When's the last time?"

“Before you.”

“Over a year ago? And she still approached you like that? Bullshit.”

“For real. I ain’t fucking nobody but yo’ fine ass. You know that. As much as I was coming to Houston to get it.” I pulled her close to me. “I always wanted to be in that wet shit.”

I gently bit her ear, feeling her melt into me. “I hope you aren’t lying to me, Jarius. I trust you.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. Now sit ‘cho beautiful ass over there so we can get the fuck outta here.”

I didn’t know why I lied. That shit was pointless since we weren’t a couple back then. She hesitantly stood from my lap as my customer finally showed up. Took that nigga forever. He was twenty minutes late. I could tell that Daraja was still doubting me as she stared at me. Then I noticed that her eyes traveled to Ingrid. Ingrid looked to be avoiding her gaze but Daraja wasn’t letting up. “Babe, can you get me some water from the fridge?”

Turning her head to me, she said, “Uh huh.”

Henny had this silly-ass smirk on his face as she walked away, her ass swinging and enticing every nigga in the place. “You might want to put a sign up on your station. *Pussy whipped by Daraja’s fine ass.*”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said, then chuckled as she came back with my water.

I was pussy whipped for sure. She handed it to me, then flopped in the chair, her gaze going back to Ingrid. *Shit.* I wished she would chill out. After trying to ignore her for a few minutes, Ingrid asked, “Is there something you wanna say to me? I’m tired of you eyeballing me.”

Daraja stood from her seat and began walking toward her. She was eerily calm, and that shit scared the hell out of me. Leaving my client, I stepped in front of her. “Naw. Chill out, man.”

She frowned at me and said, “I just wanna ask her a question that I don’t want the entire barbershop to hear. But since you’re trying to hinder that, I’ll ask her from here.”

She tiptoed to see around me. “Ingrid, when was the last time you fucked Jarius?”

I almost swallowed my fucking tongue. My mouth parted from shock. I couldn’t believe she said that shit aloud. Ingrid rolled her eyes and she said, “I don’t know. About six or seven months ago.”

Fuck! Daraja glared at me and asked Ingrid, “You sure it wasn’t a year ago?”

“Positive. We fucked for my birthday, which was in October. Any other questions?”

“Yeah. Did you enjoy that shit?”

“Yeah. Why? What kind of question is that?”

Turning to me Daraja said, “I guess more than one woman got that wet-ass pussy you like, huh, Jarius?”

I was so fucking embarrassed. Daraja stormed out of the shop. I’d lied to her. I was trying to give myself more leverage when I was trying to convince her of my feelings for her. That shit was stupid, but I would have never thought this moment would have happened. I knew I still needed to get to know some things about Daraja, and clearly, this shit was one of the things I needed to know... she didn’t give a fuck.

Daraja was bold as a muthafucka. After taking the hot towel from my client’s face, he paid me, and I sent him on his way. Putting all my shit up, I high-tailed it out of the shop. Daraja was nowhere to be found. I huffed loudly, then called her phone. Of course, she didn’t answer. After getting in the car, Haji called my phone. Great. “Hello?”

“Man, what the fuck you do?”

“Be a man. Shit. Try to fix something by lying and it blew up in my face.”

“She on the phone with Chinara, trying to get her to come get her.”

“Shit. Where the fuck she at? She walked out the barbershop and I don’t have the slightest clue of where she went.”

“She walked to the front door and went back in after you left out the back. Y’all got more issues than a lil bit. If my wife gotta get on the road, I’m gonna come with her. You know shit ain’t gon’ be good if I gotta come out there, Jarius.”

“Man, ain’t nobody scared of yo’ black ass. I’ll call you back.”

I ended the call and walked back in the barbershop through the back door and saw her sitting next to Henny... kee kee’ing and shit. See, she played too many games. I walked over there and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her from the chair and leading her outside. “What the fuck is all that?”

“All what? Me talking to other men? The same thing as you talking to other women. Lying jackass.”

I slid my hand down my face, trying to keep myself from going off, knowing I was the reason we were in this situation in the first place. “Man, get in the damn car, so we can talk,” I said as I opened the door.

She rolled her eyes and got in the car as I walked around and joined her. “I hope you bringing me the fuck home.”

I noticed she sounded more American when she cursed, which was crazy to me. Usually, foreigners were the other way around. That accent was heavy but not as heavy as when she first got to the States. “Naw. When we get to my house, I’m gon’ fuck some understanding into your ass. I know I fucked up. I shouldn’t have lied. But I was tryna convince you of how much I needed you to be mine. That shit happened a long time ago. You heard that for yourself. I’m feeling you, Raja.”

“Fuck you. I don’t deal with liars, especially people that lie over stupid shit. That didn’t even matter! We weren’t a couple! There was no need to lie about that! I would have still given you a chance! It was already hard to give you a chance to begin with, and you gon’ lie to me? What are you gonna do about something that really matters? Probably lie!”

I chose to remain quiet until I got to my house. There was no way I was going to win an argument with her. If she wanted to go home, that was cool. I'd bring her ass, but not before I dug her shit out. When we got to the house, she hopped out the car like she was on a mission. I rolled my eyes at her dramatic ass. Just to fuck with her, I took my time getting to the door to unlock it. Let that sun beam down on her for a few minutes.

When I finally walked out the garage, she was already starting to sweat. I could only laugh on the inside because her crazy ass might try to swing on me. Her glare was about to bore a damn hole into me as I did my best not to laugh or even smile. She was big mad, for real. Once I unlocked the door, she was trying to storm by me, but I grabbed her arm, roughly pulling her back to me, and I'd be damn if she didn't slap the piss out of me. My fucking face twitched. I backed her into the refrigerator by grabbing her neck as her eyes widened. "You gon' chill the fuck out or what?"

She frowned hard but didn't answer me. Maintaining my grip, I spun her around to the island and stepped between her legs. As I slid my hand down her chest to her stomach, I could feel her body tremble. She was angry, but she still wanted the dick. Sliding my hand to her pussy, I asked, "You too mad to get fucked?"

Her shit was hot and wet, as always. She wanted to get fucked, but she looked like she was wrestling with whether she wanted to give it to me or not. "I'm angry enough to give you the best fuck of your life and leave."

"Come do that shit then."

CHAPTER 5

*D*araja

HE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND how something as simple as that lie could break me. I wasn't whole yet. I was trying to be, but I'd put too much trust in him. I'd always known that men couldn't be trusted to tell the truth, but damn. I never expected him to lie about something as simple as that... something that wouldn't have mattered one way or the other. My mind was going ninety miles a second as I rode his dick like it would be my last time... 'cause it just might. *Daraja, you're a damn lie.*

I didn't know why I was tripping... which was a word he used all the time. Jarius knew I couldn't resist his dick. From day one, I knew he would be the one to have me doing all sorts of things to get him inside of me. As I held my breasts, I gyrated my pussy while I bounced on him, watching him bite his bottom lip. "Quit biting your lip and voice what I'm doing to you," I said as I panted.

He frowned hard, trying to resist. Two could play that game. I slowed my assault and let my pussy sit right on the tip of his dick. My juices were on pour and my orgasm was right around the corner, but I needed to prove to him that little shit like what he pulled earlier mattered. I also needed to prove who held the power right now. I fucked the head of his dick until he slapped my ass and growled, "Quit fucking doing that shit! I can't take that shit! You happy?"

He grabbed my hips and slammed me down on every last inch of him. Staring into his eyes, I said, “A lie is a lie. No matter how miniscule you consider it to be, Jarius. I don’t fuck with liars.”

Before I could stand, he wrapped his arms around my hips. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. Now let me eat this pussy to show you just how sorry I am.”

“Not until I cum,” I said as I slid up and down his erection.

God, his dick touched every part of me, and no matter how this new stage in our relationship would go, I’d never let go of that. I’d be a lunatic, stalking it for my pleasure. He would never be able to move on. He pulled my nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it before sucking it. As I worked my hips, Jarius gripped my ass and slid his finger in my asshole, causing me to release all over him. “Fuuuuuckk, J!”

I came hard, leaking all over him. When the wave had subsided, he lifted me from his dick and said, “I’m gonna eat this shit like I’m sitting with the disciples for the last supper.”

He flipped me over on the plush couch cushions and immediately went to it. “You sure you wanna do this here?”

He lifted his head and I saw the smirk on his lips as well as the cream he was indulging in. Slowly licking them to tease me as I stared at him, he said, “You done already fucked this couch up. Ain’t no point in moving now.” He lowered his head and mumbled, “Wet-ass pussy.”

I closed my eyes and laid my head back, not bothering to respond to his words. I was more focused on responding to what he was doing to my body. It was his turn to have the power and the strength of it made me forget that I was even angry with him. The way he sucked my pussy could nearly make me forget my name. “Jarius... oh, God,” I said as I gripped his bald head, pulling him deeper into my fruit.

I needed him. It was plain as day to me. But he was gonna have to adjust himself accordingly. He needed to be able to know exactly what I needed. We needed to talk, and I needed to fill him in on my past. Maybe he would understand me

more if I did. I was just naturally a private person, so it was hard for me to tell anyone details of my life. No one knew everything that happened between me and Gambo. Chinara only knew a little. My parents knew a little more, but not how abusive he'd gotten and the bullshit he had me doing. That was another reason why my decision to graduate from high school was easy to make.

Jarius sat up on his haunches and wiped his hand down his beard as he stared at me. He tilted his head slightly and asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You got extremely quiet, like your mind was somewhere else."

I closed my legs and stood from the sofa, heading to the bathroom as he followed. After turning on the shower, I looked at him and rubbed my hand over his cheek. "Can you take a shower with me? We'll talk afterwards."

"A'ight."

After getting towels, he got in the shower with me and slid his arms around my waist, lowering his head to gently kiss my neck. "I really am sorry, Raja."

"I don't doubt that, J. I forgive you."

He turned me to him and stared in my eyes. I guess I was more sensitive than he thought I would be. Pulling me close, he held me against him for a minute, then said, "Let me wash you so we can get out of here."

I nodded and allowed him to take care of me like only he could.



"HE WAS SO abusive toward the end. It didn't take much to set him off. He called me a bitch all the time. I was only seventeen when I met him, and I was so naïve. I mean... he was a grown man. What did he want with me? I thought I was

so grown up for attracting a man. I couldn't see that he'd taken advantage of me. And of course, he blatantly lied to me all the time. I was in love, so I ignored it... the signs that told me he wasn't right for me."

We were lying in bed. After our shower, we'd cleaned the couch and ordered some food for dinner. Cooking wasn't my strong suit and Jarius didn't feel like cooking at all, so he did a DoorDash order for Subway. We'd done most of that in silence and his eyes evaluated me constantly. I knew he was trying to gauge how I was feeling and trying to figure out what I would have to say.

When he realized it wasn't about him, he'd relaxed somewhat... until now. "Let me make sure I understand what you're telling me, baby. At the start of your senior year in high school, you started dating a grown-ass man. You thought you were the shit because you attracted him and fell in love with a nigga who basically didn't give a fuck about you. Just used you as his sex toy."

"Basically."

"So, what do you mean by abusive? Physically?"

"In every way imaginable." I closed my eyes and took slow, steady breaths, preparing myself to reveal to him what no one knew. "He was a drug dealer and he allowed some of his crew to have sex with me."

"What the fuck?" Jarius yelled as he hopped out of the bed. "I'm sorry. That shit caught me off-guard, though. I wasn't expecting that, Daraja."

"I know. The hardest part was that I got pregnant and I didn't have a clue who the baby was for. When I miscarried, I was so thankful. I went to the hospital and they checked me for every possible STD and asked me if I wanted to press charges for rape. I told them no. I didn't fight. I just did whatever he told me to do, despite how I felt about it. He had some sort of weird control and power over me. But that moment at the hospital was the last straw. They referred me to a gynecologist that I got him to pay for and she checked me thoroughly. Once she cleared me, I chose myself. I needed to

finish school. He broke up with me, and thankfully, I never went crawling back to him like he said I would.”

“Damn... shit... fuck. I can’t believe you went through all of that, baby. Who else knows about this?”

“Nobody. Just you. I needed you to understand me. If we are going to be a real couple, I needed to give it a fair shot. It wasn’t fair for you not to know why I’m the woman that I am.”

He got back in bed with me and pulled me to him. “That’s why everything is on your time. You don’t want to feel controlled. School is important to you. Lying is a huge hell no. I got it, baby. I don’t want to control you. You’re beautiful, intelligent, and sexy as hell. That mouth is a huge turn-on. I won’t interfere with you getting your education, and I promise, lying won’t become a habit.”

Before I could respond, my phone rang. I knew it was probably Chinara, because I’d called her to come pick me up, but she told me to calm down, and if I still wanted to leave, she would come get me tomorrow. Answering the call, I said, “Peḷe o?”

“So, what are you doing, sis? Am I still coming to get you?”

“No. A n ṣiṣe nipase re,” I said as I glanced at Jarius.

I’d only said that we were working through it, but his eyes narrowed, causing me to giggle. “Everything is okay, Nara.”

“I’m glad. Okay. Well, I’m about to put Jendayi down for the night.”

“Okay. Talk to you tomorrow.”

When I ended the call, Jarius pulled me to him and asked, “When you gon’ teach me Yoruba? That way you can’t talk shit right in front of me.”

I giggled again. “Yoruba isn’t that easy to learn, baby. I only said that we were working through it. I promise.”

He side-eyed me, so I straddled him. Gripping my hips, he lifted his hips slightly, letting me know he was ready for

action. “Jarius, does your dick ever get tired?”

“Hell naw. I gotta keep up with yo’ shit. Wet-wet always ready.”

I shook my head, then laid on his chest. Sex wasn’t on my mind... just all the shit I had unveiled about my last relationship. He wrapped his arms around my waist as I inhaled deeply. “I’m glad you understand me, Jarius,” I said softly.

“We’ve all been through things that explain why we do the things we do. I assume that’s why you’re so sexual also.”

“No, it’s not,” I said as I lifted my head. “After that, I didn’t have sex for like three years or longer. Sex was the last thing on my mind. It’s just that... I don’t know. It’s like that’s the only connection that I’ll allow myself to feel. I shied away from people after that, especially men. My mother’s health had started failing, so it was easy to focus on her. I knew I needed some type of interaction, though. I was extremely cranky and moody. So, sex was easier. I didn’t have to commit to anyone or even get to know them if I didn’t want to. And I left the experience a little more satisfied and relaxed. So, for the past five years, I’ve used sex as my therapy.”

“So, was that what it was between us?” he asked softly.

I could tell that he was really trying to understand me, and that made it easier to talk to him. Staring into his eyes, I brought my hands to his face. “Something about you pulled me in immediately. It almost felt like a magnetic pull that I couldn’t deny. When I got back to Haji’s that night, I couldn’t believe I’d had sex with you that easily. It usually took me a few days. But you...”

I looked away from him and rolled off him to the bed, my back facing him. He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me into his embrace, then kissed my neck. “Daraja, look at me.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t look at him right now. Emotions had filled me beyond capacity and the tears had grazed my cheeks easily. This between us was more than I

wanted to admit. *I loved him.* Those words hadn't left my mouth in eight years... at least in reference to a man. Jarius and I had just moved to the next level. *Because of my stubbornness.* But I couldn't confess that to him already. *Could I?* It was how I felt. Instead of saying it, I would just show him. He rubbed my hair and kissed my shoulder. "You love me, don't you?"

I swore I stopped breathing. *How did he know?* Still refusing to look at him, I said, "No."

I knew he didn't believe me, but I couldn't admit that yet. I could feel his damn amusement as he said, "Yeah, okay. That's why you can't look at me. But I'ma let you make it because I love you."

I for sure stopped breathing when he said it. He could just be lying to get me to say it. *He couldn't lie again so soon, knowing I was barely over the one he was caught in today.* Slowly, I turned to him, the tears on overflow. "What did you say?"

He smiled as he wiped away my tears. After biting his bottom lip, he held my face in his hands. "Even with your flaws and all, you still the one. I love you, Daraja."

I crumbled against him. *Jarius loved me.* The tears were flowing and wouldn't stop, causing my shoulders to quake. He pulled me tighter to him and kissed my head repeatedly. "Shh. Don't cry, baby. I've known for a little while, but I knew tonight, after baring so much, you needed to hear it."

I looked up at him and he pulled my head against him again. "Don't say it back. I know you love me, but I also know you ain't ready to express it. Just let me feel it and I'm good with that for now. I'm here to help make you whole, baby. You feel me?"

"Yes," I whispered. "But why me? What's so special about me?"

I couldn't believe that he could love a woman like me... so broken, closed off, and stubborn. While a lot of women judged women like me, a lot of them were just like me, too. Not

willing to admit their flaws and imperfections. I didn't have a problem expressing what I wanted... except when it came to love. Loving the wrong man hurt me. While I knew it wasn't fair to make Jarius suffer for that, I just needed to be cautious. That was for my sanity. Just the fact that he could understand that, meant the world to me. "Girl... you know you the shit. I'm not gon' lie, it was sexual at first. But your drive and determination to go to school and do well, is a turn-on like no other."

He kissed my lips, then continued, "You have a good heart, Daraja. The way you love your family is admirable. The way you love me is crippling. Just because you won't tell me don't mean I can't feel it. I can tell the difference when we make love. It's way more passionate than the first time. More than your pussy is involved, and I can see it in your eyes. Now that I know your background, I'm cool with working for your trust, because I know where your heart is. I appreciate that you even told me. That says a lot for how you feel about me."

To have a man open up like this to me made me feel soft and sensitive... vulnerable. Knowing that he could sense all of that had me nervous, though. I hadn't been doing a great job of hiding my feelings, like I thought I was. But I didn't want to be taken advantage of. He didn't seem like the type to do that, but neither did Gambo in the beginning. *You've been around him for a whole damn year, Daraja. Quit tripping.* I inhaled an unsteady breath as Jarius rubbed my back. "Relax your mind, baby. If you need help, you know I don't mind helping you get your mind off things."

I smiled as I rubbed my fingertips down his neck to his chest, then circled them around his nipples. "Well, please be my magic eraser."

He slid his body atop mine and said, "Mmm-hmm. I'm 'bout to work magic right damn now."

I closed my eyes and waited to experience his David Copperfield skills... all over and through my pussy.

CHAPTER 6

Jarius

“CAN you shut up for a minute? You want yo’ edge jacked up?” I asked Haji.

I’d come back to Houston to bring Daraja back. She was starting school tomorrow. We’d gotten back Saturday evening and I wore that pussy out right there in her room. Haji had been talking noise all day about the shit. “Quit fucking in my house.”

“Man, you act like you jealous or something. But that’s cool. I’ll get a room from now on. Now be still.”

I knew he was fucking with me, because Daraja and I were extremely quiet last night. Plus, Haji’s room was a damn mile away. He wouldn’t have heard if she would have screamed. He just knew that neither of us could be that close to each other without fucking. That was my fault for sharing our business with his ass. When I pulled away from him to check his line, he said, “I ain’t got shit to be jealous of. I got Hercules in my drawers.”

I rolled my eyes. Normally, I was the one fucking with him, but Daraja had me all sensitive and shit. Everything she went through had me feeling soft towards her. All week, she’d been under me, but I was gonna have to leave her here tonight. Just that fast, I had gotten even more attached to her ass. After

brushing the dead hair off Haji, he stood from his chair. “What’s on your mind, J?”

“Leaving her here.”

“I can imagine.”

“Yeah. You’ve had Chinara next to you since before y’all committed to each other.”

“Don’t hate on my luck. Pretty Black was destined to meet greatness. She was ready, receptive, and in the right position. Daraja, on the other hand, was NOT ready, receptive, or in the right position.”

He chuckled as I rolled my eyes. “In the beginning, we were on the same wave. You know that.”

“I know.”

Daraja wouldn’t think about moving until she was done with school. I wouldn’t dare ask her to move. But every moment I could get, I planned to get her time. Right now, that would just be on weekends if she didn’t have a lot of homework to do. I knew that this was what she was afraid of. She couldn’t put me before school, and I didn’t expect her to. It was just something I would have to deal with for the next three fucking years.

My mama had been wearing me out about meeting Daraja because she didn’t see me the entire week. She knew that if a woman had my nose wide open like that, then she had to be the one. I’d rolled my eyes when she said it, but it was true as hell. I’d do anything for that woman. I still couldn’t believe that I told her I loved her. I hadn’t said it since that night, but she knew. I didn’t want her to feel awkward for not saying it back. Whoever that Gambo, Gumbo, whatever the fuck his name was... whoever he was, he did a number on her. I couldn’t stand a muthafucka that thought he was God’s gift to women. Especially ones that abused them and expected them to take it. I didn’t even know that nigga and I was ready to go halfway across the world to fuck him up.

After getting my clippers and cape packed, I left Haji standing there to go look for Daraja. She was sitting at the

kitchen table, holding Jendayi. The older that little girl got, the more she was starting to look like her mama. Thank God. Daraja looked up at me and smiled. Handing the baby to her mother, she walked over to me. “Are you about to leave?”

“In an hour.”

She grabbed my hand and led me upstairs as I watched her ass sway in the summer dress she wore. I licked my lips because I knew she was about to break me off. This would be all I would get until next weekend. I planned to cripple that pussy to where this break would be much needed.



GOING over the documents that came in the mail from the IRS had my nerves on edge. I had a whole fucking accountant, but these documents said I was over twenty grand in the hole with the IRS. Sweat graced my brows as I read. *What the fuck?* I only had twelve grand in savings. How in the hell was I gonna pay this shit? The accountant had somehow underpaid the shit last year and this year. What I didn't understand was why I was just getting a notification about it. I should have known about this last year when the shit was short.

I immediately dialed the number, trying to see what I could do. There were ten people ahead of me in the queue. Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long. I hadn't even called Daraja yet to see how her day was. It was her third day of class and she'd text me between classes, but I couldn't answer the phone when she called earlier. It had been hella busy at the shop and I just wanted to get home, take a shower, and fall asleep on the phone with her. My mama had kept me on the phone on my way home.

When I saw this shit, I forgot about everything else. The part that had me panicking was the shit saying I had thirty days to pay the balance in full. My accountant was gonna be fired. Had I seen that shit while I was at the shop, I probably would have taken the rest of the day off to get it handled. I was praying they worked with me on a payment plan. This shit was

gon' make me tight as hell. I was gonna have to deplete my savings and the lil money I had leftover to play with weekly would be going to their asses.

After switching the phone over to speaker, I sent Daraja a message so she wouldn't think I was ignoring her. *I'm on the phone with the IRS. I will call you as soon as I can, baby.*

She answered immediately like she had her phone in her hand. *I was just about to call you again. Normally you would have called by now.*

I know. A nigga stressed out. I promise as soon as I get off the phone with them, I'm gon call you.

After sending the text, the automated system let me know I was number eight in queue. This shit was gon' take all day. To make the time pass more quickly, I started warming something to eat. My mind was going insane, trying to figure out how I would handle this if they didn't work with me. While I ate, I sent my accountant a text. *I'll be calling you tonight.*

I didn't want to fire him through text message unless I had to. My anger was rising, though, and I was doing my best not to be that dude... the one that would roll up to his house and fuck him up. Niggas didn't understand how I got down because I didn't have to show it often. Just because I wasn't in the streets didn't mean I didn't know what they were about. Letting a muthafucka get away with wronging me wasn't in my blood. My mama didn't play that shit and she brought me and my sister up to not play that shit, either. I swore she was a gangsta back in the day.

When I'd told her what was going on, she'd said, *Call the IRS and see what the fuck going on. Handle what'chu need to and let me know if you need help. Then, call that muthafucka working for you and take it out on his ass... in that order.*

After she said that shit, she hung up on me. My mama was living proof that a woman could raise a strong, heterosexual, Black man. She was tough as shit and taught me to be the same way. She had a softer side, but I didn't see it often. I was sure my sister got that side of her more than I did. She was old school and didn't take excuses. She told me when I was young

that I was gonna be strong, successful, intelligent, and a man of good moral character. I didn't have a choice.

She said either that or I would get my ass beat every day until I complied. She scared the fuck out of me when I was in elementary school. My dad bounced when I was six, and I hadn't seen him since. Her exact words were, *Fuck that nigga. Y'all gon' be good without his ass. Ride wit' yo' mama, babies. I got y'all... forever.*

I loved her to death for that shit. That was why I took care of her with everything in me... my sister, Denae, did, too. Mama had been stacking her chips for at least ten years, thanks to us. She ain't have to pay shit, so I was sure she had some stacks. But I didn't want her to have to help me. As I was getting impatient, the automated voice said I was next in queue. Thank God. My nerves were getting the best of me. I was hoping that I could make a down payment then make monthly payments. While thinking about my mama's words and mulling over my options, the agent finally came to the phone. After introducing herself and taking my information, she said, "Okay. I see you're behind \$24, 679.32. It is due in twenty-eight days."

I took a deep breath and asked, "Is there a way that I could put a down payment of half the amount and make payments for the rest?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but that window has passed. Because you didn't respond to the other correspondence we sent, including a certified letter, we won't be able to do monthly payments."

"This is the first letter I've received." I began pacing even more. "Oh, my God," I mumbled.

"Let me double check with my supervisor and let him know that you stated you haven't received any correspondence until now."

"Okay."

Fuck! I couldn't do this to my mama. Although I knew she wouldn't have it any other way, I liked to do shit on my own as a man. It bothered me to still need my mama's help at this

age. I should've paid closer attention to that accountant. Now my ass was in a bind. When she came back on the line, she said, "I'm sorry for the wait, Mr. Hutcherson. Our hands are tied. We won't be able to accept monthly payments. The total amount will be due on..."

Before she could finish, I ended the call. I knew when it was fucking due. I had the paper right in front of me. This was bullshit. I called my accountant before I could cool off and handed him his ass. I briefly thought about blasting him on Facebook for bad business, but I didn't want people in my business... namely Haji. He would pay the shit without batting an eye. That was chump change for his ass. I threw my phone to the couch and continued to pace, trying to come up with something.

As I looked around my house, I thought about listing some things for sale... shit that I could do without for a while. I was almost willing to do anything to keep from getting thirteen G's from my mama. Just as I was grabbing my phone to call Daraja, my mama called back. "Hey, Ma."

"Don't 'hey, Ma' me. What they said?"

I took a deep breath. "I gotta pay it all at once in twenty-eight days."

"See, that's that bullshit, J. But Mama gon' handle the shit because that's what I do. Handle shit. You should've had yo' eyes on that fucking accountant. I taught you better than that. You don't trust no-fucking-body, especially when it comes to your money. But that's a'ight. He gon' get his. Chalk this up as a lesson learned... a twenty-four-thousand-dollar lesson. That's an expensive-ass lesson, son. I hope you don't ever have to pay for this type of schooling again."

"I got'chu, Ma."

"How much you need?"

"I'ma figure something out."

"That ain't what I asked you. How much you need, J? Don't make me come down there."

"I'm short half of it."

“Because you and Denae take such good care of me, I got that. I’ll put it in your account tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Ma. I promise I’m gon’ pay you back every penny.”

“You damn right, and with interest. And you can start by introducing me to this lil girl that got yo’ nose wide-open.”

“Aww, shit. She in school. She probably ain’t gon’ be able to take a trip out here. She was just here last week.”

“And you didn’t fucking bring her by here. Oh, I see. You think I’m gon’ scare her off or give you the real about her ass. Let me call Denae and tell her this shit.”

I didn’t know why I had to remind her ass that Daraja was here. “What’s her damn name, and where she from?”

“Daraja Nwachuku. She’s from Nigeria and just got here a year ago.”

“She better not be using you to become a citizen. I hope you ain’t that dumb, boy. I definitely need to meet her.”

“She’s Haji’s sister-in-law. I’ll bring her by whenever she comes back. That may not be until Thanksgiving, though.”

“Muthafucka, that’s over three months away. I’ll carry my ass to Houston with you. How about that shit?”

“Ma—”

“Shut up, Jarius. I don’t wanna hear shit. Tell Haji to have my room ready.”

She ended the call. Her ass never said bye. She was so damned stubborn, too. The thought about leaving her ass behind crossed my mind, but there was no way I would get away with it. Dee Ann Hutcherson didn’t play that shit. I truly believed she would swing on me if I left her. It was like I was still her lil boy in her eyes, no matter how grown I got. I was praying that she would stay in her place when she met Daraja. It was like nobody was good enough for me. While she wanted me to settle down, the couple of women she met wasn’t worth two dead flies, smashed. Her words, not mine.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling relief, I called Daraja. She answered, “Hey, baby.”

“What’s up? How was class?”

“It was good. I miss you, though.”

“I miss you, too, girl.”

“You okay?”

“I’m cool.”

“What was the call with the IRS about? Wait... don’t answer that. I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“It’s cool. My accountant fucked me up. I’m almost twenty-five grand in the hole. That’s gon’ wipe me clean.”

“Damn. I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to ease your troubles?”

“You know what you can do, but I can’t see you right now. When I come out there this weekend, though... shit.”

“What?”

“My mama wanna meet you. I told her I didn’t know when you were coming back to Beaumont and she told me she was coming with me this weekend.”

“Oh, wow. I would love to meet her.”

“You saying that shit now, but she gangsta. My mama don’t play. She loud, obnoxious, and most times, she’s a know-it-all. Don’t take it offensively if this first meeting doesn’t go well.”

“You’re making me nervous. What if we don’t get along?”

“What that got to do with me? If y’all don’t get along, then I’ll deal with that accordingly. But I’m almost sure she’ll like you. Just don’t be intimidated by her. She don’t like weakness. She a strong woman. That’s why I’m with you. You a strong woman.”

“I guess. So, when will we have time for one another if she’s making the trip?”

“You actually think I’m gon’ let my mama monopolize the only time I get with you for the week? I’ll be damned.”

She got quiet and I could imagine that she was blushing. What I wouldn’t give to have them legs in the air at the moment. While my mama had temporarily bailed me out, being inside Daraja was my real stress reliever. Just being around her changed my entire mood, especially since I declared my love for her. If I was a bum nigga, I’d live off of Haji just to see her every day. Moving to Houston and starting over had definitely crossed my mind before this issue came up with the IRS. I couldn’t afford my way out of a paper bag right now.

I didn’t like owing nobody shit, so I knew my extra-curricular activities were gonna have to slow way down. Hopefully, Daraja wouldn’t have a problem with that. If she did, then she definitely wasn’t the one for me. Thankfully, I didn’t think I would have that problem. She knew what it was like to struggle. I wasn’t destitute or no shit like that, but the fancy dinners and shopping trips would have to come to a halt for a while.

CHAPTER 7

Daraja

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Hutcherson.”

I extended my hand and she shook it firmly. Jarius was right. She wanted to see if I would be intimidated, but I was nowhere near that. She didn’t crack a smile, just nodded her head. When Haji pulled her away to show her around the house and introduce her to Chinara, she was all smiles. That was okay. I didn’t have bitch in my blood. Jarius pulled me in his arms and held me tightly. I’d been waiting all week for this... amongst other things. His hugs were everything. As I laid my head against his chest and enjoyed the moment, he said, “You really missed a nigga, huh?”

I smiled and lifted my head to look into his eyes. “Yes. You didn’t miss me?”

“Hell yeah. I was missing you the minute I left.”

I put my hand to his cheek as I continued to stare into his eyes. Jarius was one of the handsomest men I’d ever seen. His dark chocolate skin, expressive eyes, bald head, and majestic beard pulled me in, not to mention his height and muscular build. He was sweet and funny, but when he got angry, I could tell he played no games. Now, I was able to see where he got that from. He leaned in and kissed my lips, making me wish we were alone at that minute. Sex with Jarius had to be like meeting God. I’d been with a lot of men, but Jarius... we had a

connection like no other. His hands slid to my ass and he squeezed until we heard someone clear their throat.

When I looked up, all three of our parents were standing there. We couldn't help ourselves. It wasn't like they didn't know we were having sex. His mama was glaring at us until I grabbed his hand and shrugged my shoulders. I thought I saw a smirk on her face. We were both consenting adults. They'd better be glad we hadn't gone to my room and fucked. I was so horny, I would have screamed until the paint left the walls. When we sat, Jarius smiled at me. "You and the gangsta gon' get along just fine."

I chuckled and asked, "Why you say that?"

"She winked at me as you led me over here. Dee Ann love that hood love... that shit that don't care what nobody else think."

"I care slightly. Otherwise, I'd straddle you right here."

He laughed and kissed my head. I crossed my legs and was prepared to ask him what we would do today until Haji came and interrupted us. They talked for a moment while I glanced back at our parents. They seemed to be getting along well. I decided to go sit with them and try to get to know Dee Ann Hutcherson. *Gangsta Dee*. A smile formed on my lips at the thought. When I sat next to my mama, Ms. Hutcherson said, "Let's go talk, lil woman. D to Dee."

I nodded and stood to my feet, leading her to the courtyard. She was quiet until we sat. I stared out at the fountain, waiting for what she would say. "I guess you know that Jarius is my baby. I had to come check you out for myself. Ain't nobody gon' fuck over my son's heart. He's a good man and deserves a good woman."

"Well, I haven't sold Jarius any falsehoods. He knows how we started and where we're trying to advance to. I know that he's a good man, but I'm a good woman. I deserve everything he has to offer plus some. I'm not some desperate chick who needs a man to feel validated. I'm with Jarius because of the way he makes me feel. He's a gorgeous man that knows how

to touch my heart. Whoever doesn't like that... oh well. He's mine and I'm his."

The way she glared at me, I knew she was gonna tell Jarius that she was ready to leave. But then her facial expression eased some and she said, "You seem genuine, but I'm gon' be watching you. Are you a citizen?"

"Not yet. I haven't been here long enough to apply for citizenship, but I have a Visa. I can see where this question is going. I came here for school. I have no problem going back home because America isn't all it's cracked up to be anyway."

"Shit, you right about that," she said, then chuckled. "All right. I'm cool. Just don't hurt my son."

"It's never my intent to hurt Jarius, just like it isn't his intent to hurt me."

I wanted to tell her to get out of his business and let him be a man, but I managed to keep those thoughts to myself. She stood from her seat and I did as well. When I turned to the glass, I saw Jarius watching us. The question was all over his face. I slightly rolled my eyes and he slid his hand down his face. I couldn't believe she had the nerve to accuse me of using Jarius for citizenship. *Fuck her*. I already knew that we probably wouldn't get along. My personality was just as strong as hers, which was probably why Jarius wanted me in the first place.

I watched her go sit with my parents and continue talking like she hadn't just lowkey threatened me. Making my way to the kitchen to find me some comfort food until dinner was ready, I saw Chinara heading my way with Jendayi in her arms. I found a bag of Doritos, then practically slammed the pantry door. Dee Ann Hutcherson was not going to steal my joy. As I stuffed a couple of chips in my mouth, Chinara said, "The suya is almost done. The jollof rice is done, along with the pounded yam and dodo."

"I can't wait for no damn beef meat."

She walked closer to me and whispered, "Is she that bad?"

"He's a fucking mama's boy. I had no idea."

“That could be a good thing that you didn’t know. Maybe he was keeping you away from her because he knows she’s crazy.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t know. I hope she...”

I let my voice trail off as Jarius entered the kitchen. Chinara turned to see who I was looking at, then gave me a smile and left. I watched her kiss Jendayi and turn the corner before I looked at Jarius. He glanced down at my bag of Doritos, then helped himself to a couple of chips. “I take it things didn’t go well.”

“They went okay besides her thinking that I was with you to gain citizenship,” I said, then rolled my eyes. “Why you didn’t tell me you were a mama’s boy?”

He frowned, then said, “I ain’t no fucking mama’s boy. Just because I can’t control her doesn’t mean I’m a mama’s boy. I do what the fuck I want.”

“Oh, yeah? Prove it,” I said as I ate another chip.

He yanked me to him by my waist and put his tongue into my Dorito-flavored mouth, causing me to drop the bag on the floor. Picking me up, he sat me on the island and said, “Let’s leave. I need to feel your insides. We can make it back in time for dinner.”

“Fuck leaving. There’s plenty of places to hide out around here. Follow me.”

I hopped off the island and he pulled me close again, grabbing my ass. “Daraja, ain’t nobody can change my perception of you but you. So, Dee Ann ain’t got no so say when it comes to you and me.”

“So say or say so?”

“Whatever. But you feel me?”

“Not yet, but come on.”

He bit his bottom lip as I led him to the stairway off the kitchen. Bringing him to the third floor, there was a small room that Haji had talked about using as a storage room, but Chinara talked him out of it. So, it was still empty. I locked the

door and Jarius pushed me against it as he pulled my clothes off. I giggled as he slapped my ass and spread my legs. “J, you act like you missed me.”

“You know I did... and this wet-ass pussy.”

Hearing his pants unzip, I knew he was about to fuck me up. I turned to face him, and he immediately grabbed me by the neck, holding me against the door. “So, you the type to need a nigga to prove shit to you, right?”

“Uh huh. So what’chu gon do, mama’s boy?”

He frowned as he squeezed me tighter around my neck, then lifted my leg. “I told you I ain’t no fucking mama’s boy. And you gon’ quit saying that shit before I leave this sopping wet pussy fiending for the dick and walk up out this bitch.”

My eyes widened slightly. For some reason, I didn’t think he was playing. Calling him that must have struck a nerve... a nerve that I didn’t want to fuck with. He slid into me, causing me to moan at just how good he felt. It seemed like it had been months since I’d last felt him. Lifting my other leg, I wrapped it around his waist, and he stood up straight, fucking me right up against the door. “Listen. Nothing irritates me more than being called that shit, so pipe down on that shit. You feeling me now?”

“Uh huh,” I panted as he gripped my ass, slamming into me. “But how’s that pull-out game, now? Can you walk away from this pussy now, Jarius?”

“Fuck naw. Not until we nut.”

Lifting my legs in the crooks of his arms, he fucked me just how I liked him to. Not being able to contain my screams as my legs trembled, Jarius put his hand over my mouth. “You must want them to find out where we are. I know this dick good to you, baby, but I don’t want nobody interrupting this shit. Now cum on this dick.”

He lowered his head and pulled my nipple into his mouth as I gripped his bald head. I was doing my best to honor his wishes, but when my orgasm tore through my body, I couldn’t contain myself. “Oluwa mi o! Fokii... mo nife re!”

What in the fuck! I was grateful that Jarius didn't understand Yoruba. I couldn't believe I said that. I always said, *Oh my God*. He was probably used to hearing me say that. Even the word fuck. But me saying that I loved him had come from nowhere. The tears were stinging at my eyes, threatening to cascade down my cheeks as Jarius bit my ear, then my neck. His grunts were passionate, and I could feel every ounce of love he had for me with every stroke. As I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him close to me, he looked up at me, staring in my eyes, he said, "I love you, girl."

He came within my depths as we panted. Resting my forehead against his, I held his face in my hands, knowing that there was no other man for me. He kissed my lips, then allowed my legs to slide from his arms. "What was that last thing you said?"

I couldn't look at him because I couldn't lie if I did. As I picked up my clothes, I said, "Go deeper, please."

"Girl, I was so deep, you should've been tasting my shit."

Just what I needed... his comedic relief. I giggled, then bit my bottom lip as I looked at him. "Now that I'm not as tense, maybe I can handle your mom's comments."

"She better not say that stupid shit in front of me or I'm gon' hand her ass to her. Why you think she pulled you aside to say that shit?"

"Because she feels like she knows better than you and that you wouldn't agree."

"Well... that shit, too, but she didn't want to hear my mouth. She knows I would never stand for that shit. She doesn't know shit about you."

I slid my shirt back on as I said, "It seems like to me... my opinion," I said, using air quotes. "That she doesn't want to let you be a man."

"I don't think it's that. She's just been adamant about me not turning out to be like my dad or being on the opposite end of the spectrum and let a woman use me, either. She felt like I

would be too soft with women because I was raised by a woman,” he explained, then put on his shirt.

“Well, that makes sense. But whatever. I just want you to myself this weekend. Let’s go eat, so we can go another round.”

“I have something to tell you right quick.”

He lightly grabbed my hand as he rubbed his other hand over his goatee. “What is it?”

“I umm... I can’t even afford a hotel right now. After paying the IRS, I’m scraping the bottom of barrel. Give me a month or two to get shit back on track.”

“Jarius, you know I will fuck you anywhere. I’m not tripping.”

He let out a breath, like he was holding it. I knew what it felt like to be broke. I just didn’t understand why he couldn’t ask Haji for help. Haji was a multi-millionaire. However, I knew from watching the movie, *Soul Food*, not to tell Haji, trying to help him. Jarius would never forgive me. Even though in the movie, Bird had gone to her ex, I still didn’t think Jarius would be happy about me telling Haji. If he wanted him to know, that was his friend and he would tell him. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed my lips. “I promise I’m gon’ make it up to you as soon as I can.”

“I’m not complaining. Now come on, I’m starving.”

He chuckled and followed me down. When we got to the kitchen, Chinara and his mama were fixing plates. She cut her eyes at us as Chinara giggled. “I’m gonna fix your plate. Go sit.”

“I’ve already fixed my son’s plate.”

I glanced at Jarius and he said, “Dee... chill out. I’m with my woman. Keep that plate for you. She knows how to tend to my needs... all of ’em.”

If she could’ve gotten away with throwing that food on him, she would have. I bit my bottom lip as I remained still,

waiting to see what she would say. “You better be glad we in front of folks I don’t know. I’m gon’ fuck you up in the car.”

She walked off and I couldn’t hide the smile on my face as Jarius winked at me. Gangsta Dee was gon’ hate me and I didn’t give a damn. As I fixed Jarius’s plate, Chinara nudged me as Jarius watched us. He was staring at me like he never had before, and it had me heating up even more than I already was. When I brought his plate to him, he said, “Can you put more on there, baby?”

His mom snickered, like she was trying to say I wasn’t enough for him... like she could have done better. Well, she probably could have since she’d known him his entire life. The point was me getting to know my man to where I knew him better than she did. “Umm, yeah.”

Sensing my inadequacy, Jarius added, “The extra is for you. I wanna feed you, baby.”

Had I been light complexioned, I would have been fire engine red. Haji rolled his eyes and my mama beamed with delight. I couldn’t contain the smile that spread across my face as I put more food on the plate. When I returned to him, I glanced over at his mama just in time to see her roll her eyes. That gave me joy. Jarius licked his lips as he looked at me, then pulled me to his lap. After blessing his food, he fed me a fried plantain and said, “I heard you made the dolo. They’re really good, baby.”

I chuckled, then said, “It’s dodo, baby. Fried plantains are dodo.”

“My bad.”

“It’s okay,” I said before he spooned me some jollof rice and pounded yam.

“Mmm,” I moaned.

The food was delicious, but him catering to me this way, and in front of everyone, felt amazing. Keeping him a secret all this time was a bad idea. We could have been so much more involved by now. I was letting my hurt and fear control me, and at this moment, I refused to do that anymore. As I

swallowed my food, I took the fork from him and began feeding him. Staring into his eyes, I got lost. No one else was in the room, until he asked, “What does *mo nife re* mean?”

He said it perfectly. It was like the pronunciation was seared onto his mental. I looked away from him and he grabbed my chin, turning my head back to him, forcing me to face my fears. “For real, Daraja. I have this gut feeling that it doesn’t mean what you said it did.”

Chinara was staring at me wide-eyed, then quickly looked away. She’d heard his question since she and Haji were sitting close to us. He’d glanced at us, too, with a smirk on his face. He knew Yoruba and knew the exact meaning as well. I realized my body was trembling and I could feel the moisture in my brows. Butterflies had invaded my stomach, and I knew there was no getting out of it this time. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and said, “I love you.”

CHAPTER 8

Jarius

AS I CHEWED MY FOOD, I stared at the beautiful woman seated on my lap. Sliding my arms around her waist, I kissed her shoulder. “Say it again, beautiful, but open your eyes this time.”

Her eyes fluttered open slowly and she swallowed hard as she tried to fight the tears. Pulling her even closer, I kissed her lips, trying to make her as comfortable as possible. She glanced around, so I prompted her to stand by patting her legs. Standing from my seat, I grabbed her hand and led her outside. I needed this private moment with her. Hearing her open up had come a lot sooner than I thought it would, but now that I’d heard her say it, I needed her to be confident in what she was saying to me.

When she’d said those words in her native language, I had no clue what they meant, but her body language spoke volumes. She’d tensed up some when she’d said it, like she didn’t mean to let it slip, but had relaxed just as quickly since she knew that I didn’t understand what she’d said. When I asked her the first time, I knew she was lying. Daraja never had a problem staring into my eyes and saying exactly what she wanted to say unless it involved her feelings. That was how I knew it had to be deep.

As I sat in the chair outside, I pulled her down on my lap and held her around her waist. “Look at me, baby.”

When she did, she brought her hands to my face and a few tears left her eyes. “I love you, Jarius. I’m sorry for making you suffer because of my past. Whatever you need from me, you have it.”

She lowered her head, similar to the way I’d seen Chinara do with Haji. I lifted her head by her chin, and said, “If what I was doing was suffering, I’ll take that any day of the week. I love you, too, girl. You my beautiful, delicate flower. You doing everything I want already. Real shit.”

She smiled at me, then hugged me tightly. “Let’s go finish eating and maybe we can take a ride... just chill out, me and you,” I said, then kissed her lips.

“I’d love that.”

We headed back inside and resumed our previous seating positions and fed one another until the plate was clean. No one was in the room but her, as far as I was concerned, and I couldn’t wait until it was that way all the time. We had a long road of living apart, but I’d wait for her forever now that we were in love. When she stood from my lap and brought our plate to the kitchen, my mama sat next to me. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“You know, I’m like thirty-two years old. If I don’t know, it’s about fine time I figure the shit out. Don’t you think?”

She slapped me across the back of my bald head and said, “Watch yo’ damn mouth, boy. You better be glad I like her parents. Hopefully, I’ll like her, too, but so far, it seems like we too much alike.”

“She said the same thing... that y’all are alike. I’m grown, Ma. The woman I choose is my business. If I make a mistake or choose the wrong one, let me handle that. I don’t need you looking out for me in the name of love. Daraja is the woman I choose, and I want you to be cool with that.”

“And what happens if I’m not cool with that, Jarius?” she asked, putting her hand on her hip.

“Then you gon’ stay angry. I’m not gon’ be without Daraja simply because you can’t get along with her.”

She folded her arms across her chest and a smirk appeared on her lips. “I guess it’s a good thing that I ain’t bothered. If you fall on your face, then so be it.”

She walked off and went entertained the Nwachukus. Haji sat next to me and shook his head. “Yo’ mama gon’ fuck you up when y’all get back to Beaumont.”

“She probably will, but oh well. Daraja worth all that.”

“That’s what’s up. So, how does it feel to not be chasing ass no more?”

I chuckled. “I still chase ass... just Daraja’s. But it feel good as hell.”

He held his hand out to me and I shook it, then he handed me a cigar and said, “I need to holla at ‘chu.”

He stood from his seat and motioned for me to follow him. I didn’t feel like talking about no heavy shit. My mind was on feeling Daraja’s insides again. I hated that I couldn’t get a room to properly handle her. When we got outside, he asked, “How the fuck you my boy and you struggling?”

I frowned hard as hell. “What the fuck you talkin’ ’bout?”

“Nigga, you know damn well what I’m talking about. Dee Ann told me you in trouble with the IRS.”

“The fuck?”

I couldn’t believe she came here and ran her damn mouth about my business like that. If I wanted Haji to know, I would have told him myself. “You know twenty-five G’s ain’t shit to me. Why you trippin’? We boys, right?”

I rubbed my hand down my face and said, “Yeah.”

“I’m offended that you wouldn’t come to me about some shit like that. I mean, I clown you about my change after a haircut all the time, but you know I just be fucking wit’chu. Come on, man. Give me more credit than that.”

“I’m pissed that she told you. All my life, I’ve had to prove that I was man enough to handle myself. All the bullshit about being a mama’s boy. I can handle this on my own, bruh.”

“Nigga, if you don’t shut the fuck up, I’m gon’ bust you in yo’ shit. You gon’ give that gangsta her money back and I want you to keep a little cushion for yourself. There’s only one condition.”

I twisted my lips to the side, ready for the bullshit. “What?”

“From now on, you call me Master Haji.”

“Nigga... I’ll starve first.”

He laughed, then squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t ever do that shit again. I know you a hustler and you work hard for every penny you got. It don’t hurt to accept help. I got more money than I know what to do with. I would really like for you to move out here, but I ain’t gon’ push shit. That’s yo’ business you have to run. But whenever you ready to expand... I got’chu.”

My eyes widened slightly. I never expected Haji to say no shit like that. Of course, I knew we were boys, but I didn’t think he wanted to invest in me like that. I’d always wanted to be a boss and expand my expertise. I wanted to travel and cut hair for exclusive niggas. Instead of expressing that to Haji, I remained quiet. I would get to that point eventually. “Thanks, man. I appreciate you.”

I shook his hand, then he lit our cigars. “Now let’s celebrate you being a boss... a debt-free boss. Cancel what I said earlier. I believe you ready and we about to get some shit poppin’. Don’t take no appointments after next week. We need to get some shit squared away. Get your portfolio together and we gon’ hit the ground running in two weeks.”

“Where the hell you get time?”

“I quit my chemical engineering job. Running my dad’s business and trying to work was taking up too much of my time. My last day was yesterday.”

“Damn. I never thought you would quit. But listen...”

“Naw. I know you one of those proud niggas. Daraja needs you close and I’m selfish. I need my friend here running shit with me. Let’s take over Houston. I’m in talks with a couple of guys about starting a few businesses. You with me or not?”

I was so happy I could cry. Although I should probably let Dee Ann make it, I refused. She wasn’t ’bout to get off making me look like a needy-ass muthafucka. “I’m wit’chu, man.”

“That’s what I’m talking ’bout.”

I puffed my cigar, then looked back toward the house to see my baby watching me. I winked at her, but I knew she was ready for way more than that shit. Forget love... she was gon’ get fucked. That was how happy I was. There would be nothing I would be able to do to restrain the shit.



“THAT GIRL AIN’T good for you. I can see it now, she gon’ have you running ragged tryna please her ass. She act like the sun rise and set on her ass. Plus—”

I shut her ass down by lifting my hand. We’d just driven out of Haji’s driveway. I hadn’t told anyone of what Haji and I talked about, and neither had he. I wanted to surprise Daraja when I came back next weekend. My mama couldn’t even let us get on the road good before she went in. Her problem was that Daraja wasn’t about to kiss her ass. After their talk, Daraja didn’t bother saying another word to her and I couldn’t blame her. She was cordial by speaking, but there was no need in being fake.

But what I wouldn’t do was let my mama sit here and act like Daraja was the problem. “What’chu not gon’ do is sit here and act like Daraja was the one that was being disrespectful or full of herself. Not only did you disrespect her, but you disrespected me, too. To insinuate that she was only with me to gain citizenship was some bullshit.”

“Boy, I don’t know who the hell you think you are, talking to me that way. You done let the pussy cloud your judgement. And you wanna talk about disrespectful? The way y’all carried on like horny teenagers in front of me and her parents was what was disrespectful.”

“We are both grown as fuck, Dee. I don’t care if you see me as being disrespectful. This is my life. You not finna dictate how this shit gon’ go. It’s *my* life.”

She was sitting there with her mouth partially open and her hand on her chest. When we got to the traffic light, I reached in my duffle bag and dropped a stack and a half on her lap... fifteen grand. That was her repayment plus some. “Since you seem to think my business is everybody else’s business, here’s your money. That was some cold shit to go behind my back and tell Haji about my troubles with the IRS. Had I wanted him to know, I would have told him.”

“Haji got more money—”

“I don’t care how much money he got! It’s *his* money. He don’t owe me shit!”

She crossed her arms across her chest and rolled her eyes. “Since you seem to think you can do so well without me, don’t ask for shit else. All I do is try to help you and do what’s best for you. You know that boy wouldn’t mind helping your ass, and frankly, he was proly offended that you didn’t tell him.”

“Mama, sometimes you go overboard, though. Again, I’m a grown man. If I need help, I’ll ask. But I for damn sure don’t need help in my love life. I been playing the field for a long time. Or did you forget how just a few short months ago, you were begging me to settle down? I been fucking with Daraja for over a year. You don’t think I know what and who I’m dealing with? She’s a strong Black woman that knows how to handle me. I love that shit. I’ll go to war for her, even if that’s against you.”

She mumbled something that I didn’t understand and looked out the window. She was pissed, but oh well. She’d better scratch her ass and get glad. As I frowned while driving, my heart started to soften. We’d gotten near Hankamer, almost

an hour from Haji's house, when I finally decided to break the silence. "Mama, I love you. You know I do. I appreciate everything you do for me. I just need you to back up a lil bit and let me handle this ship."

She gave me the side-eye, but finally said, "You know I just want what's best for you, son. Yo' punk-ass daddy didn't bother to stick around to make sure you grew up to become a respectable man that knew how to function in a society that was meant to tear you down. I did the best I could, and I just want to make sure you're good. That's it. I didn't mean what I said. You can always come to me when you need something, Jarius. I was just salty."

"Oh, I know you. Don't worry about Calvin, you did the damn thing and raised two successful children without his ass. Ain't nobody can take that shit from you. As a woman, you taught me how to be a man and that shit is remarkable. Just let them reins go for me, though. You did yo' job. It's time for me to be holding reins for my own."

Her eyebrows went up in surprise. I'd never mentioned wanting kids before now. But with Daraja, I could see the whole family vibe and welcomed starting a family with her. She nodded slowly, then said, "I love you, too, son."

She continued to stare out the window and I said a silent prayer, hoping that she could do what I asked her to do. I'd never had to tell her to back the hell up... never had a reason to. But now that that time had come, I was hoping that she would be able to honor that request without animosity or drama. As I jammed to Dave East's new mixtape, I kept glancing at her, waiting for what else she would say. I knew this shit wasn't over, because Dee Ann was always on bullshit. Not to disappoint me, she said, "I respect your wishes, but I'm gon' still have my good eye on that lil girl. I don't trust her just yet."

"A'ight, Ma. Just chill out and relax in my love for that woman and her love for me. You gon' see. That's the woman I'm gon' marry and that's gon' give you yo' grandkids."

“Shiiiiid. That has yet to be seen, but I ain’t saying shit else. I just hope you don’t fall face-first on that concrete.”

I shook my head slowly, knowing that nobody would ever be good enough for me in her book. After getting into Winnie, my phone chimed. Seeing Daraja’s name had me smiling big. Mama rolled her eyes and looked out the window. When I opened it to see video footage of her rubbing her fat pussy, I was glad Mama had turned her attention elsewhere. Closing out the video, I sent her a text. *You tryna kill a nigga while he driving?*

She sent the laughing emojis back. I already knew I would be jacking off to that shit tonight. Haji had given me the world and I couldn’t wait to move to Houston to make all that shit shake. Glancing back at my mama, I didn’t know when I would tell her that I was moving or how she would take it, but whatever the cost, I had to live my life. To be able to do that with Daraja would be more than a dream come true.

CHAPTER 9

*D*araja

“REMEMBER, there’s a quiz tomorrow on chapters six and seven. You’re dismissed.”

As I gathered my things, the professor said, “Ms. Nwachuku, could I see you before you leave, please?”

I nodded, then headed to the front of the room. I wasn’t sure what he could want with me... that had to do with school anyway. I’d noticed him watching my body on several occasions. He was my professor, though. Although he was young-looking, any type of relationship outside of student-teacher had to be against his ethics contract. When I got close to him, he smiled and that made me extremely nervous. “Yes, sir?”

“I wanted to tell you that I’ve never seen a student so eager to learn. You’re doing so well, I wanted to see if you would be interested in tutoring others. They are in desperate need of tutors for A&P, biology, and statistics. I’ve seen your transcript and I know you can handle all three subjects. Although the pay is minimal, I thought you might be interested.”

His eyes slid over my curves as I said, “I really don’t have time for that sort of thing. Thank you for considering me, though.”

He smiled again, so I returned his smile as he grabbed his satchel. “I appreciate you considering it. If you ever change your mind, the door is always open.”

He led the way out of the auditorium, holding the door open for me. As we walked side by side, he asked, “How long have you been here from Nigeria?”

“A little over a year.”

“Oh, okay. You’re still new. How are you adjusting?”

“There wasn’t really a huge adjustment since my family is here as well. I suppose I do miss my other family members, but that’s about it.”

“Well, I’m glad you aren’t here alone. Umm... listen.”

I stopped walking and turned to look at him. My instincts were never wrong when it came to a man being interested in me. I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he was about to proposition me. Regardless of that fact, I remained silent, waiting for what he would say. “I know this is unethical, Daraja, but I have to say that you are so beautiful. When you walked in my class, I was smitten. I could tell by the way you carried yourself that you weren’t a fresh-out-of-high-school college student. We actually aren’t that far apart in age... only a couple of years.”

I frowned slightly. He’d been searching my records to know that we were only a couple of years apart. He was giving me stalker vibes, but I would give him the benefit of the doubt, considering the situation. He didn’t want to approach a young girl. “Thank you, Mr. Joseph. I’m flattered.”

He smiled, displaying the whitest teeth I’d ever seen. Mr. Joseph could easily pass for a student if it weren’t for the way he dressed. His intellect greeted you well before his charm did. That was sexy. Had Jarius and I not been a couple now, I probably would have entertained him. “This isn’t like me and I’ve never done anything like this, but I would love to spend time with you... get to know you.”

“Again, I’m flattered, but I have a boyfriend, Mr. Joseph. We are very involved and in love.”

“I know.”

I frowned deeply. How did he know about Jarius? I shifted my weight to one leg, and before I could ask questions, he continued, “I witnessed the two of you in the back seat of his car a couple of weeks ago. I didn’t see what you were doing, but I know. I saw him join you in the back seat.”

Shit! “So, you’d seen me before I started your class?”

“Yep.”

“If you know that, then why are you approaching me?”

“Well, I didn’t know he was your boyfriend until now. I didn’t want to assume he was, otherwise, I wouldn’t have approached you at all. Again, you’re a beautiful woman, and if things don’t work out with him, the offer still stands.”

I was at a loss for words, which was rare. He grabbed my hand and gently squeezed it, then walked away, leaving me standing there with my mouth partially open. I was in disbelief. Class was gonna be extremely awkward now. I still had three weeks left. Taking a deep breath, I continued to my car, hoping to get Mr. Joseph off my mind. His chocolate skin tone was smooth and inviting. He was a much lighter complexion than Jarius, but he was still a milk chocolate. Wiping my brow, I opened the door, then looked around and saw him watching me... all six-foot-five-inches of him, that he’d brought up on the first day of class when he was questioned about his height.

Quickly getting inside, I closed the door and sat there, trying to catch my breath. *What in the hell was happening?* It was like the sexual being within me was attracted to his flirtation. I noticed guys watching me all the time, but they never approached me because I often made myself unapproachable. This was different. I had to see him every day. I grabbed my phone and called Jarius. “Hello?”

“Hey, baby.”

“Hey, Daraja. How was class?”

“It was good. Am I going to see you this weekend?”

“Of course. I’ll be out there tomorrow evening. I have a full day tomorrow.”

I pouted somewhat, hoping he would be here this evening. After this situation with Mr. Joseph, I needed to see him now. “Can I come to Beaumont today?”

He was quiet for a moment, then asked, “What’s up? You a’ight? I’m gonna be there tomorrow, baby. You must be horny, huh?”

I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t about sex. After my encounter with Mr. Joseph, I just needed to be closer to him... immediately. “No. I’m not horny. I just miss you.”

“I miss you, too, baby. Just chill out and wait for me tomorrow. I promise you won’t regret it.”

After hearing the humming of his clippers, I responded, “Okay. Well, I’ll call you later. I can hear you’re busy.”

“I love you, Raja.”

“I love you, too.”

I ended the call and rested my head on the steering wheel for a moment. *Why am I so shook?* Taking a deep breath, I pulled myself together and headed home. After the normally fifteen-minute drive turned into thirty, I parked in my designated spot and headed inside. Houston was crazy when it came to traffic and ignorant people who didn’t know how to drive. I was one of them. I couldn’t drive worth a damn, but somehow, I was able to obtain a driver’s license. Not wanting to be bothered at the moment, I headed to the back entrance so I could go to my room.

When I got to the patio, I got an eyeful. Haji had my sister against the wall, working the shit out of her. For some reason, I watched for a moment. Seeing the passion on her face made me think of Jarius. I could imagine that my face looked the same way when he was inside of me. Haji was gripping her neck and his hips were moving at a steady pace as she tightened her legs around him and screamed out her satisfaction. When he lowered his head to suck her nipples, I finally looked away and headed back to the front.

What were they thinking, fucking in front of a glass door? It was like they wanted to be seen, with their nasty asses. This wasn't the first time I'd gotten an eyeful. As big as this house was, one would think I would hardly ever see them fucking. Not so. It was like they wanted me to see them. Huffing loudly, I headed back to my car, deciding to go get lunch.

When I arrived at the Common Bond Bistro & Bakery, I grabbed my bag so I could possibly study a bit while I ate. My stomach growled and I knew I would be ordering quite a bit of food. I enjoyed food and I was grateful for a high metabolism. However, I knew the older I got, I was gonna have to tame my eating. Walking to the counter, I ordered a beef bourguignon, which was a slow braised beef, potatoes, carrots, and pearly onions served with a baguette. Once I was seated, I looked over the dessert menu. The sticky buns caught my attention, but I knew that I would be indulging in a turtle brownie.

Taking my book from my bag, I began reading over chapter six for my statistics class. I knew this like the back of my hand, but I always over studied. My biggest fear was failing. Nursing was something I was passionate about and I would never forgive myself if I didn't give it my best effort. When they brought my food to the table, I closed my eyes and blessed it as I inhaled the aroma. After ordering my brownie and macchiato, I indulged in my entrée. It was sooo delicious, I could barely concentrate on my studies. Closing the book altogether, I finished it off just as they brought my dessert.

My mood had gotten so much lighter and I was grateful for the decadent distractions. Food consumed my feel-good space. It always provided me comfort since I was a loner mostly. I didn't like talking about my issues and I internalized a lot of things. Trust wasn't easily afforded, so food always served as comfort for me.

As I finished, I rubbed my stomach and took out the credit card Haji had provided for me. I didn't use it frequently. Most of my purchases were food, lotions, and candles... aside from tuition and books. Walking to my car proved to be a task and once I sat, I released the air through a belch. That was ridiculous. Shaking my head at myself, I cranked up. As I

prepared to leave the parking lot, my phone rang. Shifting my car back to park, I saw Chinara's number. Slightly rolling my eyes, I answered, "Hey."

"Raja, we just called an ambulance for Mama. She passed out."

"I'm on my way. If I don't get there in time, what hospital will they be taking her to?"

"Methodist in the medical center. She's still unconscious. I'm so scared," she said, then began sobbing.

Jendayi was crying in the background, so she must have been holding her. "Chinara, don't worry. Mama's gonna be fine, okay?"

"Okay. Hurry."

"I'm only ten minutes away."

I ended the call and put the pedal to the metal, peeling out of the parking lot. My mama was my entire reason for pursuing a nursing career. Taking care of her had been hard, but the load would have been a little lighter had I known more medically. As I sped and weaved through traffic on 45 North, amidst blaring horns, I nearly passed up the exit. I didn't know what had happened to my mama. She'd been doing so well. I was baffled, trying to figure out what could have caused her to pass out. It wasn't that she hadn't passed out before, but with her sugars and blood pressure finally being under control, I didn't understand what had caused it this time. What was apparent was my refusal to accept that she was tired. She'd been dealing with illness a long time... long before we even knew.

When I got to the house, the ambulance had also arrived. They were wheeling her out on a gurney and giving her oxygen. They were moving rather quickly, which made me even more nervous than what I already was. Running to the ambulance, I asked, "What happened?"

"They think she had a heart attack. Get in with Chinara and Haji, baby girl," my daddy said as he got in the back of the ambulance with mama.

I nodded, then ran to them as Haji strapped Jendayi in her car seat in his Range Rover. Hopping in the backseat, I said, “Haji, I’ll secure her. Just get in.”

He quickly left me to it and got in the driver’s seat to follow the ambulance. Thankfully, Haji’s house wasn’t too far from the medical center, so we were there in no time. I hopped out and ran toward the ambulance as they got Mama out of the back of it. Daddy got out, then the paramedics. Making sure to stand to the side, so I wouldn’t be in their way, they hurriedly got her out and ran inside. Chinara was at my side, completely falling apart. I held her close and said, “Come on, Nara. Don’t fall apart on me.”

While I was the younger sibling, I was able to keep it together because I’d seen her like this before. Chinara didn’t know the extent to which Mama’s illness went. She’d had a couple of moments like this back in Lagos. Both of them were because of light heart attacks. This one had me scared, though. She was still unconscious. As we stood around the waiting area, Haji walked in with Jendayi and headed to Chinara. Going to my daddy, I said, “She has to make it through this.”

He closed his eyes and held my hand tightly. If he lost her, he wouldn’t be far behind her. I could feel that in my soul. He let my hand go and sat in the waiting area a nurse had led us to. We were just waiting for a doctor or nurse or anybody to let us know what was going on. Daddy had retreated within himself and Haji was consoling Chinara, so I stood and left the room. I needed more room to pace. Just as I turned around, I ran into someone. After seeing the scrubs top, I looked up right into the eyes of Mr. Joseph.

Quickly backing away from his arms, I stuttered, “I’m... I’m so sorry. I should’ve been paying attention.” Before I could get all the words out, the tears I’d been holding fell down my cheeks. “Shit,” I said, trying to walk off.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me back to him. “Are you okay, Daraja?”

I shook my head, then said, “My mama is in the back and we don’t know what’s going on.”

“What’s her name? I can check for you.”

“Bukola Nwachuku.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back. Okay?”

I nodded as he took off down the hallway. What were the odds? Not only was he a professor, but he worked at the damn hospital. I just couldn’t get away from him. As I stood there, waiting, I wished Jarius was here, but before I could get my phone from the room to call him, Mr. Joseph returned. He grabbed my hands and said, “They are trying to get her stabilized. She had a massive heart attack. Hopefully, they are able to intervene. I don’t know what all has happened, but they should be in to talk to you in a little while. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Thank you. You’ve done more than enough.”

He pulled me in his arms and hugged me tightly. I accepted it because I needed it and I didn’t have the strength to fight against it. All the wind had been sucked out of my sail, and it felt like I had a slow leak in my heart that was causing me to sink. As he released me, he kissed my hand, and said, “I’ll be checking on you. Okay?”

I nodded, then looked up to see Chinara staring at us. Putting some distance between us, he said, “I should get to work. I wish you all the best.”

I nodded once again and when he walked away, Chinara asked, “Who was that?”

“My statistics professor.”

“Bullshit.”

“Really. He flirted with me earlier today, then I literally ran into him in the hallway.”

“Be careful with him. Jarius was able to rearrange his schedule. He’s on his way. You weren’t answering your phone, so he called Haji.”

“Okay.”

“Come back in here with us.”

I followed her in the room, but Mr. Joseph's embrace was still on my mind. It was warm. Shaking my head to rid myself of the thoughts, I walked inside the room. *The devil was once an angel. Everyone that wishes you well, don't actually mean it.* He didn't seem to be an opportunist, but I was vulnerable. My best bet was to stay as far away from him as I could.

CHAPTER 10

Jarius

AFTER GETTING ALL my appointments rescheduled with other barbers and paying for their cuts as a courtesy for inconveniencing them, I took off for Houston. Mrs. Nwachuku had a heart attack and things didn't look good, according to Haji. I could only imagine how Daraja was feeling. She would get her wish now. She was gonna see me today instead of tomorrow. My trunk was loaded with shit, and so was my backseat. I was gonna have to make a trip back to Beaumont, though. There was no way I could get all my shit here in one trip. I was so grateful for Haji's generosity.

As I dug around my office for important papers that I needed to keep with me, I found every letter the IRS had sent. I was beyond heated because I knew I didn't put them there. When I questioned everybody, none of them knew what I was talking about. But then something in my gut told me to question Dalin, the barber that rarely said anything. When he came in that day, I questioned him about it and he admitted to putting the letters there, saying he thought I would see them. I cussed his ass out, then fired him. Henny and Grimy had to literally hold me back to keep me from stomping a hole in his ass.

As I traveled, I thought about my living arrangements. I was going to live in Haji's pool house until I could find a more

permanent dwelling. He'd insisted that I could stay there, but that was a no go. With as much as Daraja and I liked to fuck, I needed freedom to fuck her wherever I wanted to. But today, I would be seeing her in a totally different frame of mind and that had me nervous. Most times, when we were together, she was happy and wanted to fuck. Except that night when she finally gave in to me.

This would let me know what our relationship was made of. I knew I could be everything that she needed, but I was worried about if she would let me. She'd told me that she could be clingy in relationships and I was waiting for the moment. I lived for her being up under me, literally and figuratively.

After parking, I made my way to the waiting area they were in. Haji said that the doctor had come in and told them that it was up to her whether she made it or not and that they'd done all they could do. Years of horrible health conditions had played a significant role in where she was today. Although she'd been doing better for the last year, it wasn't enough. The damage to her body had already been done. I just prayed she pulled through. I couldn't imagine what it would feel like to lose my mama. Even though she worked my last damn nerve sometimes, I didn't want to know what it would feel like to no longer have her here.

When I got to the waiting area, Haji was sitting there patting Jendayi's back as she slept. He gave me a head nod, then a pound as I sat next to him. "What's up, man? How is she?"

"She seems really strong. A lot stronger than Chinara. I haven't seen her cry. She did leave out of this room for a moment, so if she cried, she did so then."

"Okay."

I sat there and waited, hoping that she would be receptive to my way of comforting her. Once I saw her, I wouldn't want her out of my sight for the next few days. As I sat, waiting for her to appear, I listened to Haji hum. He was practically putting me to sleep, so I stood and paced a bit to keep myself

awake. I stretched for a moment, then sat back next to him. “I think she’s tired. Her body has taken all it can take. I just hope I can prepare Chinara to cope with losing her mother.”

“Yeah. Same here for Daraja.”

I knew that her parents meant everything to her. She practically put her life on hold to take care of her mother as best she could on limited funds and education. I didn’t know how she did it, but her efforts were probably what kept her mother alive this long. As we sat in silence, the door opened and Mr. Nwachuku walked in, followed by Chinara and Daraja. I stood to my feet and Daraja crashed into me. I held her tightly in my arms, rubbing her back. She looked up at me and said, “She didn’t make it. She’s gone.”

“I’m so sorry, baby,” I said as I wiped the lone tear that fell from her eye.

I kissed her forehead and watched Haji try to comfort Chinara. She’d begun to sob loudly. Daraja pulled away from me to go to console her sister as I looked on, feeling the weight of their sorrow. I didn’t really know what to say. Stepping toward Mr. Nwachuku, I shook his hand and offered my condolences. He maintained his hard expression as he fell to his seat. Again, I didn’t know what to do. Daraja and Chinara both went to their dad and they hugged him tightly. Daraja was trying to be strong for her father, and I got that, but at some point, she was going to have to let it go.

By the time the funeral home left, Daraja looked spent. They all did. Haji and I had stood outside her room while they’d said their final goodbyes and then escorted them to our vehicles. When I helped Daraja in the car and had gotten in, I grabbed her hand. “Tell me what I can do to soothe your soul, baby.”

“Just be here.”

I nodded, then cranked up and headed to Haji’s house. The ride over was quiet, as I expected it would be. After helping her out, I saw her look in the back seat through the window. She frowned slightly, but she didn’t say anything. Putting my arm around her shoulders, I ushered her in the house. When I

sat on the couch, she sat on my lap and I held her in my arms like a newborn baby. She played with the buttons on my shirt in silence. I repeatedly kissed her forehead, letting her know I was here for her.

Haji went to the kitchen and started to cook as he talked to his mama on the phone. I wondered what they were going to do as far as arrangements went. All their family was in Nigeria. It would be expensive to get them all here, and it would be expensive to transport her body there unless they cremated her. But I didn't know how they felt about that. I knew a lot of people didn't believe in cremation right here in the U.S.

I glanced over at Chinara as she laid against her dad. The three of them looked lost... a quiet mess of emotions overtaking them. When I shifted in my seat, Daraja stood and pulled me up with her, leading me to her room. I wasn't sure what was up, but I followed her quietly. Whatever she needed from me, she would get, no questions asked. After I closed the door, she began taking off her clothes. My body froze, not knowing what to do in that moment. I watched her take off all her clothes, then walk to the bathroom and start the shower.

She walked back out to me and gently tugged at my shirt. Assisting her, I took it off while she unbuttoned my khaki-colored pants. I stared at her, waiting to see what her next move would be. She stared at my dick for what seemed like forever, then went to her knees and deep-throated my shit like she was trying to swallow it. I moaned in satisfaction as she pulled away from it, then spit on it. If she wasn't grieving, I would have yanked her up and fucked the shit out of her. But I was letting her lead because I didn't want to take it too far.

She stroked me slowly as she looked up at me, then again deep throated my dick. Resting my hand against her cheek, I watched her handle business, taking me far away from here. Closing my eyes, I imagined having her in my life permanently, hoping she wanted the same. "Daraja, I'm 'bout to bust, baby," I said in a low voice.

She sucked faster, and with more suction, taking my soul and doing with it as she pleased. Just as I nudded, she released

it, allowing it to shoot all over her face. I didn't know what had gotten into her, but I dared not say a word. I went to her bathroom and got a towel to wipe her face, then laid her on the bed. I brought my face between her legs and grabbed her clit with my lips. She squirmed away from me, so I stood, waiting for what was next. She stood and pushed me to the bed, then quickly straddled me.

When she slid down my dick, the warmth of her pussy nearly paralyzed me. That shit wasn't warm. It was hot as fuck. "Mmm... shit," I groaned.

Watching her ride my dick like it would be the last time took me to new heights. She had me mesmerized with how her body moved and contorted when she came all over my dick. She continued bouncing on it as I watched her. She seemed empty. Like she wasn't here. Her emotions were somewhere else, and she was using me to distract her from them. That was okay. I'd be whatever she needed.

I grabbed her hips and slammed her on my inches repeatedly until she could no longer hold in her moans and whimpers of satisfaction. She came on my dick again, this time squirting all over my abdomen. When that happened, I busted within her depths as I held her tightly against me. Once we both caught our breath, she slid from the bed to the floor and walked to the shower, not uttering a word. Following behind her, I got in and held her around her waist until she crumbled against me. The sobs had taken over her and the only thing I knew to do was to continue holding her and allowing her this moment.

When she pulled away from me, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Daraja, there's no need to apologize, baby. I'm here for you... whatever you need for as long as you need it."

She stared up at me and asked, "Is that why you have all that stuff in your car?"

"Yeah, baby. I'm here to stay. Haji and I are working on some business ventures and I can't stand spending all this time away from you. But now... I know that I need to be here. That

was why I wasn't gonna come today, though. I was moving tomorrow. So... get used to me being around. Okay?"

She nodded, then began washing her body. I took the loofah from her and finished the beautiful task before me... worshipping her body in every flick of my wrist. Caring for her this way was new to us both, but it felt good. My soul felt right. "Jarius?"

"Yeah, baby."

"Can you cut my hair?"

I frowned slightly. She always wore those lace front wigs, so I guess it didn't matter. I'd only seen her go a couple of times without it. "Cut it like how, baby?"

I wasn't a pro at women's hair... not styling and shit. "Shave the sides and back like a mohawk."

Hmm. That would be fly as fuck on her. "I got'chu. When you wanna do it?"

"Today."

Her eyes met mine, so I kissed her lips and said, "After we eat, I'll shape you up."

She rested her head on my chest, then whispered, "Thank you."

She was desperately trying to push her grief away instead of getting it all out and allowing herself to feel. Trying to be strong for whatever reason was only going to cause her to crash later. Lifting her head, she kissed my lips and exited the shower as I washed up. I'd never been in a position to try to offer consolation. So, instead of trying to figure it out, I would let her dictate what she needed from me.



"WHAT YOU THINK?" I asked, holding the mirror in front of Daraja.

“It looks great! Oh, my goodness! Those wigs are gonna get a break now!”

I chuckled as she played in her natural curls, turning her head from side to side. She hopped out of the chair and hugged me tightly, causing hair to go everywhere. She didn't have short hair, so it was quite a bit that I had to cut off. I was just glad that she liked it. Her arms were wrapped around my neck as she stared into my eyes. I licked my lips as I stared back, knowing that this woman had me in the palm of her hands and could mold me in any way she saw fit. I wasn't a soft-ass nigga, but I sure felt like one when it came to her.

She leaned in and softly kissed my lips. When she pulled away, she slowly exhaled, turning away from me but not leaving my arms. Looking back at me, she leaned in again and I kissed her slowly, sliding my tongue over her bottom lip, then pulling it into my mouth. I knew she needed me to be soft and tender with her right now, and I didn't have a problem showing her that I could be. She released me from her arms, so I did the same, then took the cape from around her. “I'm gonna go sit with Dad for a little bit.”

“Okay,” I responded, then gave her a soft smile.

Grabbing the broom from the wall, I began sweeping up hair as Haji came outside. “While you got the clippers out, you'll tighten me up?”

“Yeah. Come on.”

He sat in the chair and I flapped the cape, then put it around him. “Raja hair looks good. I didn't know you had it in you.”

I chuckled. “Shiiid, I didn't know I had it in me either with all that hair she had on her head. But I worked it out.”

He chuckled as I got started. “How's Chinara holding up?”

“She's having a tough time. All she can seem to think about is the ten years she missed out on. I'm trying to get her to concentrate on the past year and a half that she had. Just from the talks we'd had, I knew I had to get her parents here. I

didn't believe her mom had much longer, not with all the health issues she had."

"Damn, man. I hope she can find comfort in that."

"Yeah, me too. How's Raja?"

"I know she's hurting, but it's like she's trying to find distractions, so she doesn't have to deal with it."

"This was the first time I really saw her cry. She tries her best to be strong for everybody. I learned that just from the time they've been here. She's a lot like her dad. Chinara is more like their mother was."

"Have they decided what they are going to do as far as funeral arrangements?"

"I know they want to have the funeral in Nigeria, but they won't express that. It can be costly, but I'll do whatever they want to do. It will be cheaper to have her body transported back than to pay for all the members of their family to come here. From what I understand, their mom had eleven siblings. That's not counting their children or Mr. Nwachuku's family."

"How much would you be looking at?"

"I don't know. It depends on the distance and weight. It could get as expensive as fifteen grand, but that ain't shit for a nigga like me. I'm gonna talk to them about it when you finish."

"Y'all don't believe in cremation, right?"

"Naw, not at all. I see the cost efficiency in it, but no."

"Okay. I wish I could do more. This damn IRS bullshit wiped me out."

"Man, quit tripping. I got it. I got'chu, too. Due to the situation, we prolly won't be able to hit the scene for a while. Are you gonna come to Nigeria? You got a passport?"

"Yeah. I got a passport, and yeah, I'm coming."

"A'ight. So, I'm gonna buy tickets and reserve hotels once I talk to the funeral home."

“Thanks, man.”

I continued to line him up and all talking ceased until I finished. After sweeping up the rest of the hair and dumping it in the trash, I cleaned my clippers and put them away. When I walked inside, they were all seated at the dining room table, so I eased my way upstairs to put my stuff away. The plans and paying for it was none of my business, so I didn't think I needed to be seated at the table with them.

Instead, I pulled out lotions and oils to give Daraja a rub down. I wanted to help her relax as much as possible. She'd probably want to shower again, so she could wash her hair. After getting everything setup, I turned on the TV and waited for my baby to come to the room.

CHAPTER 11

Daraja

“So, we’re having her transported back to Nigeria? How long is that gonna take?”

“Well, if we get the proceedings handled today before the funeral home closes, they can make arrangements by Monday morning. “

“But that’s a lot of money, son. We didn’t have life insurance,” Daddy said to Haji.

“You know that doesn’t matter to me. I have millions and I’m steadily adding to it. It’s not going to hurt my pockets to take care of Mama Nwachuku’s final arrangements. It’s an honor to be able to do so.”

Daddy gave Haji a tight-lipped smile, then nodded. Chinara and I lowered our heads in Haji’s presence while he rolled his eyes. I stood from my seat and threw my arms around him. It was because of him that Mama made it as long as she did. He stood from his seat and hugged me back. “Thank you, Haji. We are forever indebted to you.”

“No, you aren’t. We’re family. End of discussion.”

I kissed his cheek, then headed upstairs to my room to mentally prepare to head to Nigeria next week. I was almost sure that drama would find my address. Everyone loved my mama. I didn’t need to run into Gambo or anyone else from

my past, especially not with Jarius with me. Not that they would approach me, but I didn't need to feel a way around them. When I opened the door to my bedroom, Jarius was sitting on the bed, shirtless. He smiled softly at me, then stood and grabbed my hand, leading me to the bathroom.

He started the shower, then said, "I figured you would want to wash your hair."

"Yeah. We're going to transport her to Nigeria. So, we will be traveling soon."

"Okay."

Jarius began undressing me, giving me his undivided attention. His tenderness during this time meant the world to me. I'd never seen him this way and it was refreshing to know that I'd chosen to be with a man that would carry my heart in his. I wrapped my arms around him and rested my forehead against his shoulder as he rested his hands on my hips. "Thank you, Jarius."

"You don't have to thank me. I've always wanted to be here for you... be everything you needed. I love you, girl, and I always considered you to be more than just a fuck. Real shit."

Lifting my head, I smiled up at him, wanting to give him my all. "I love you, too."

I walked away from him and got into the shower and cried my eyes out. My mind was so boggled down with decisions I needed to make. My entire decision for going to school for nursing was to help my mama. Now, I wasn't so sure I even wanted to finish. This wouldn't be a failure. It would be a conscious change of course. But I didn't know what I would change my course to. I didn't want to live on Haji and Chinara forever, nor did I want to live on Jarius. I needed my mama. I must have been in the shower for a while because Jarius knocked on the door, then opened it and asked, "You okay, baby?"

"I'm okay. I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay."

I washed up, then washed my hair and made my way out. Jarius was standing there with a plush towel to wrap me in. I thought he'd left out of the bathroom. He enveloped me and proceeded to dry my body. The care he was giving me was overwhelming to my senses and the tears streamed down my cheeks. When he stood, he gently wiped my cheeks with his thumbs, then led me into the room where he'd lit candles. Helping me lay on the bed, he began rubbing my body, soothing more than my muscles. He was soothing my mental. When I felt him detangling my near shoulder-length hair he'd left on top, it took me over.

The cries overtook me. He slid in bed with me and held me tightly in his embrace, repeatedly kissing my head. "I got'chu forever, Raja."



WHEN THAT HEAT HIT ME, I knew I was home. Summer took on a whole different meaning in Nigeria due to the high levels of humidity. I'd gone to class on Monday to let my professors know that I was withdrawing from school. Being in Nigeria could cause me to miss a week or longer, along with the entire grief process I was going through, so I needed the summer to think through what I really wanted to do. If I went back, I wouldn't go until the fall semester.

When I'd seen Mr. Joseph on Monday, he'd hugged me and offered his condolences. He said he didn't want to do that at the hospital since my boyfriend had made it there. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to see him for the rest of the summer. Besides, having Jarius in town for good was the last thing I was expecting. He was extremely proud and didn't like accepting help. So, I was completely surprised that he'd let Haji talk him into moving.

He'd found a place before we left for Nigeria and had secured it by putting down a deposit. He couldn't move in until the beginning of the month. It was in my plans to move with him. The way in which he'd been taking care of me over the past few days had left me speechless and allowed me time

to grieve my mother properly. We'd gotten out of the house Sunday and went to the park, taking Jendayi and Papa with us to give Chinara and Haji time alone. We'd stayed in my room the entire day Saturday, watching movies, so the outing was desperately needed.

I knew my grieving process wasn't done, but Jarius made it easier for me to only concentrate on my self-care. He'd brought me to a spa for a massage before we left for them to take care of all the things I normally did for myself, like my facial, waxing, and my hair. I'd also gotten a body wrap and a massage. Not once did he initiate sex. With the way our relationship began, sex was always a major component. It was what we were familiar with about one another first. So, for him to be able to go without willingly, spoke volumes to me. It proved his love and devotion to me. Me being a sexual being... somewhat of an addict, I'd gone without it as well. Lying in his arms and receiving his soft kisses had been good enough for me.

When we got to our hotel room and Jarius had sat our luggage down, I asked, "So, what do you think?"

"Of what? The hotel?"

"No. Nigeria."

"Well, I only have one thought about it at the moment. It's hotter than Satan's ball sack out here. Shit!"

My eyebrows went up and the laughter consumed me. "Satan's ball sack, Jarius? Really?"

"Hell yeah. You know that's some hot shit."

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close, then slid his nose against my neck. Gently biting my earlobe, he whispered, "But you know what I love about it?"

"What's that?" I moaned as my eyes fell closed.

"It bred perfection... a body like a goddess, a mind like Einstein, and classic femininity like Dorothy Dandridge."

He'd made me scorching hot with desire, but I knew that we would be leaving to meet up with my mother's siblings in a

little while. A soft moan left my lips as I brought my hands to his bald head, dragging my nails down the back of it. His hands went to my ass and he squeezed. “Damn, girl. Do we have time?”

“If you can handle a quickie. We both know that’s practically impossible for the both of us unless we’re in a car.”

I giggled softly as he kissed my neck and bit my earlobe once again. “Can I try, though? I miss you. Shit, you soft as hell.”

“Yeah, let’s try. But you can’t be walking around Lagos with a hard dick, Jarius, if you don’t nut.”

“Well, it’s been a few days. I might get it off. You know I be trying to be in that wet shit as long as possible.”

“Mmm-hmm,” I moaned as I pulled my shirt over my head and began shimmying out of my tights.

I watched Jarius unveil his masterpiece as I licked my lips. His dick was hard as an iron pipe and I was ready to bounce all over it. He was right. It had been a few days... five, to be exact. I could normally go five days, but with him being around me constantly, it was surprising we’d made it this long... grieving or not. By the time I’d gotten my tights off, he was pushing me to the bed. I crawled in it, then tooted my ass up, laying my head on the bed. “Look at that wet-ass pussy,” he said as he joined me in bed.

Lowering his head, he sucked up my wetness from the back, making me excrete even more for him to digest. “Oh, fuck,” I moaned.

He went to his knees and slid his big-ass dick inside of me as I reached between my legs to play with my clit. “Yeah... shit, Raja. Pop that pussy for me.”

As I began working him, I realized that most likely this wouldn’t be a quickie. He knew that in order for this to work, he would have to drill me... have me screaming to the high heavens. “Jarius?”

“Yeah, baby,” he moaned.

“Fuck me. Pleeeeeeaaase, fuck me.”

With that, he grabbed my ass and began dicking me down how I liked him to. Grabbing a pillow, I brought it in front of me to keep me from sliding as he had his way with me. He slapped my ass a few times in quick succession, stinging me and causing me to hiss as I came on his dick. “Jarius! Shit!”

“Yeah... wet my shit up.”

He grabbed my hair as he leaned over me, causing me to lay flat on the bed. My moans were uncontrollable, and I still couldn't help but feel his love through the thorough fucking he was giving me. “Jarius... tell me you love me. Tell me all the freaky things you like me to do,” I said, trying to get him to cum.

“Mmm... I love you, girl. I love when you deep throat this dick, especially after I done been in this wet shit. I love when you taste yourself. That shit make my dick rock hard.”

I wiggled away from him and turned to suck his dick. “Like this?” I asked, then wrapped what he called my DSL's around him.

Grabbing my hair, he began fucking my mouth and I could feel his dick swelling in my mouth. I began humming, then gagging slightly, and that did the trick. “Fuck!” he growled as he spilled his seed on my tongue.

After swallowing, I went to the bathroom to wash my face. He had my nose running with as deep as he was down my throat. He appeared behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “I love you, baby.”

He kissed my shoulder as I responded, “I love you, too.”

There was a knock on the door, and I was almost sure it was Chinara. It was probably time to go. I went out to the room and quickly got dressed, as did Jarius. Grabbing my purse, I put on some lip gloss and went to the door with him, while fingering my hair. When we opened the door, she gave us a knowing smirk and said, “Let's go.”

I smiled at Jarius, then followed Chinara. He grabbed my hand as we walked down to our rental. My nerves were

starting to get the best of me, though. My reputation wasn't the best, and I didn't want anyone approaching me or giving me dirty looks. While I was with Gambo, I was quickly addressed as a bitch or hoe. I was so stupid and naïve back then. Although that was eight years ago, those decisions followed me. It wasn't like I was doing anything to rectify them. After I left him, three years later, I was back in the saddle, fucking whomever I desired. The three-year hiatus was for naught, since I went right back to doing what I was doing anyway.

I deserved the title they gave me. My hoe activities had spread like wildfire amongst my peers and I was grateful that it never got back to my papa. My heart was gold, but at the time, thanks to Gambo, my heart was shut off. The valve had been turned off and hidden behind bullshit. But now that I had something meaningful, I was embarrassed. Even though Jarius and I started off the same way, I didn't think he had any idea just how bad my reputation was.

When we got in the car, I could see just how bothered Chinara was. I pulled her to me and said, "Come on, take a selfie with me."

She leaned over and smiled, then pushed her hair over her shoulder. Once I'd taken the picture, she fell back into the seat and said, "It just doesn't feel right being here. Not without Mama."

I lowered my head. I'd been doing my best to only think about Mama's pending funeral when necessary. I was trying to prevent myself from being angry or falling into a depression. That wouldn't be fair to the people around me because I knew they would get the brunt of my frustrations. Did I think it was unfair for God to take my mama now? Hell yeah. Was I angry about it? Absolutely. But dwelling on those feelings would only make things harder for me and everyone around me.

Deciding not to respond to Chinara, I leaned over to Jarius and snapped a selfie of the two of us. He wrapped his arm around my waist and said, "Lagos is nice."

"It is," I responded.

He continued taking in the sights as my anxiety kicked up a notch. Normally, I didn't care what people thought about me, but Jarius... his thoughts of me weighed heavily on my mind and heart. I didn't want him thinking of me any differently than he had been. Even my cousins my age didn't really fuck with me. When we stopped in front of Aunt Aurelia's house, I slowly exhaled. She had the biggest house of my mama's siblings and she was quite bourgeois. It was almost as if everyone in the family was beneath her. She kept her distance and we only really saw her for special occasions.

My Aunt Bisa was the more down to earth aunt who would spend more time with her nieces and nephews. She was the cool one, along with Uncle Kwame. Thankfully, they were both here. I'd recognized their cars. As much as Mama struggled financially and with her health, Aunt Aurelia never seemed to care. She rarely called and even though she knew we needed help, she never offered it. I grabbed Jarius's hand as we walked to her door. I had to admit, we didn't look like we did when we left. We'd obviously gotten ahold of some money and I knew she would be able to tell the moment she looked at us.

Glancing over at Haji, I noticed he held his head high, like he was royalty and I loved it! It was perfect for this moment. Aunt Aurelia opened the door and said, "Come! Come in!"

Stepping aside, she allowed us inside her home as she studied each one of us. "You all look great! How is America? Good, yes?"

We all nodded and Chinara introduced her husband and daughter. Aunt Aurelia doted on Jendayi for a moment, then she looked over at me. "And Daraja... who do you have with you?"

"This is my boyfriend, Jarius. Babe, this is Aunt Aurelia."

He shook her hand with a smile as she nodded in approval. "Well, come on to the back where everyone has gathered."

We followed her as I glanced around at some of my cousins. They were all speaking to Chinara as we passed them, but I got the look. Unfortunately, I believed everyone noticed.

I was already ready for this to be over so we could head back to America. But the moment we got to the back courtyard, my eyes landed on a pair I hadn't seen in a couple of years, causing my palms to sweat and my body to tremble. Gambo.

CHAPTER 12

Jarius

THIS HEAT WAS COOKING a nigga and I'd be damned if they thought I was gonna sit in that hot-ass sun all day. I had gladly grabbed my chair and brought it to the shade. Haji had followed suit. They could sit their black asses out there if they wanted to. They'd be doing that shit without me. Daraja had stayed glued to me... like stuck... like fucking Siamese twins. As hot as it was, I wanted to tell her to move. She was sitting on my lap while Chinara mingled and talked to her relatives. I noticed the looks she'd gotten when we first arrived. Besides her aunts and uncles, only a couple of people spoke to her.

There was one nigga, though, that seemed to have a problem with us. His eyes kept making his way to Daraja and the shit was starting to bother me. I didn't want to bring it up now, though. I was doing my best to wait until we left. But I didn't know how long we were staying. We'd already been here an hour. I wasn't rushing, but I was Dee Ann's son and bullshit was something I didn't tolerate too well. "You want something to eat, babe?"

"Yeah, please?"

"Okay. Come with me."

This must have been that clingy shit she was talking about. Haji chuckled as she stood and tried to pull me up. "Jarius,"

she whined. “Come on.”

Taking a deep breath, I left my seat and followed her inside to the spread. It was almost as hot inside as it was outside due to the warmers under the food and the door being open more than it was closed. She fixed me some goat and yams with something called akara. I turned my nose up slightly when she told me it was fried bean cakes. Not because I thought it wouldn't taste good, but the last thing I needed to do was to tear up these people's toilet. She piled my plate the fuck up, but I realized that she was gonna share with me.

When we got back to my seat, I expected her to get her chair. Naw. She sat back on my lap with the plate and was feeding a nigga. I loved the hell out of Daraja, but I felt like I was about to melt or explode from all this damn heat. She had to have seen the sweat on my head. Grabbing a napkin, I wiped my face and head as I did my best to contain myself. The food was good, so I tried to concentrate on that. Something was up, and I was gon' figure out what the hell was going on before we left.

When we finished eating, she stood and walked to the trash can to throw our plate away. As she did, I saw the guy that had been watching her approach her. She glanced at me and she looked nervous as hell. I stood from my seat and made my way to her. Whatever the issue was, I figured it had a lot to do with this nigga's presence. When I stood next to her, he smiled. We were about the same height. I may have had an inch on him. I was a little bigger than him, too. Surprisingly, I was darker complexioned than him. The way this sun hit, I didn't know how anybody was light complexioned out here.

He stretched out his hand as Daraja looped her arm around mine. I shook his hand as he said, “Nice to meet a friend of Raja's. I'm Gambo.”

Ain't that some shit. I remembered who the fuck he was, and I now knew why my baby was so uncomfortable. “Nice to meet one of her enemies, so I can keep an eye on you. And I'm her man... much more than a friend.”

He chuckled as Daraja tightened her grip on my arm. I was trying to figure out why the fuck he was here to begin with. “You’re pretty bold for an outsider, especially to claim this whore as your woman.”

My patience went to being non-existent and my restraint was completely gone as well. Daraja got in between us as I said, “You ain’t got but one time to disrespect her.”

Moving her to the side, I swung, connecting with his jaw. He went down, and before I could kick him, Haji was pulling me back as onlookers surrounded us, trying to reestablish the peace. Once he stood, he spat blood out of his mouth and said, “You *will* regret your actions.”

He jerked away from the people holding him back, then snatched up the chick he was with and left. “What the hell happened?” Haji asked as I walked back to my chair.

“He called Daraja a whore.”

“Well, he didn’t lie. I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” her aunt said as if Daraja wasn’t standing right here.

She lowered her head and she looked like she wanted to cry... the total opposite of how I expected her to respond. They had no respect. Her mother had just died. I walked over to her as Chinara and her dad approached us. Chinara’s face was riddled with confusion, like she didn’t have a clue of what was going on, but her dad seemed to know something. “Come on, Jarius. I’m sorry.”

I followed her to the same door we came in through. At first, I thought we were the only ones leaving, but when I saw Chinara and her dad behind us, I was grateful that they took her side. “Daraja? What’s going on? Who was that guy?” Chinara asked.

“We’ll talk when we get back to the hotel,” she said softly as I opened her door.

Once inside, I forgot about how hot it was and I pulled her close to me as she pulled my hand to her for inspection. My knuckles were a little swollen, but nothing too serious. She kissed it, then brought it to her face. When the tears left her

eyes, I knew this was serious. Everyone remained quiet as we traveled, but once we arrived at the hotel, we all went to Haji and Chinara's room. Chinara immediately started asking questions, reiterating the ones she'd asked earlier. "Daraja, what's going on? Who was that guy?"

She lifted her hand, trying to calm Chinara down. "His name is Gambo. I dated him in high school. Because of the things he had me doing, I developed a reputation as a whore. Even after I graduated high school and broke up with him, I continued to sleep around, earning me that title. I'm sorry if that disappoints y'all."

I pulled her close to me as her eyes widened. Glancing at her pops, he nodded, I suppose giving me approval for whatever I was about to say. I didn't know how he knew, but I was glad he understood. "Raja, fuck what all those people think. I know what's in here," I said, laying my hand on her chest. "Ain't none of those muthafuckas God. He the only one that can judge you. Hold your head up. I'm pretty sure they all got some bullshit in the closet that they aren't too proud of, either. Don't let them talk to and about you like that. I don't give a damn who they are. You gotta show respect to get it, and your aunt... she almost got just what she was putting out there."

She hugged my neck as Chinara said, "Wait a damn minute. That's the Gambo you were dating while you were in high school? He looks every bit of forty!"

"He's not forty. But he's in his thirties. He was too old to be dating me, either way. I almost don't wanna talk about it now. I just wanna sulk and throw a damn pity party. This shit shouldn't be overshadowing Mama's death or her funeral celebration. How do you say it in America? She's probably turning over in her grave!"

She stood from her seat and was trying to storm off until I yanked her back. "Naw! What did I just tell you? None of that shit defines you. Fuck them. To hell with all the shit that nigga did to try to bring you down. Look where you're at now. Look at that shit as your motivation... your testimony."

She looked up at me, then at Chinara, who looked like she was ready for war, the way she was huffing. “Gambo abused me... sexually, mentally, emotionally... in every way possible. He had me sleeping with his friends. I was in love... naïve... stupid as hell. I did whatever he told me to do until I realized I wasn’t going to graduate from high school. I got my act together and left him alone. Jarius, you punched a known drug dealer in the jaw. He has a lot of people that work for him. I’m so sorry.”

“The outcome would have been the same, though. I don’t give a fuck if he was Nelson Mandela. His disrespect towards you woulda got the same outcome. I ain’t scared of that muthafucka. I’m sorry for my language, Mr. Nwachuku. I’m just upset.”

He’d been pretty quiet through all of this. I was wondering what he was thinking. It couldn’t have been good thoughts. “Daraja, why didn’t you come to us?” he finally asked.

When he did, I could see the hurt all over him. The type of hurt only a father could feel for his youngest daughter... his baby girl. “Because I loved him. I would have done whatever Gambo told me to do. There was nothing you or Mama could have done. I’ve disgraced the both of you.”

Her dad stood from his seat and left the room. I was at a loss for words. I thought he would have embraced her, but he seemed to be embarrassed as well. Daraja ran after him, begging for his forgiveness as Chinara ran after her. Haji and I stood there silently until Jendayi started jabbering. “Did you know about that nigga?” Haji asked.

“Yeah. She just told me about him when she decided to give me a chance. I mean, I understand wanting to keep some shit like that to yourself, but I didn’t know the shit was like *this*... that everybody knew about her conquests. It’s hard to believe that she was wildin’ like that. What I mean is... she seems discreet about her shit. Y’all didn’t know about us until I told you.”

“That’s where you wrong, nigga. I peeped game that first day y’all left together. I just didn’t say nothing. I knew y’all

was fucking. Had the rest of them been paying attention, they would have known, too, because y'all wasn't discreet about shit."

I chuckled, remembering how she put that wet-ass pussy on me and blew my fucking mind. She had me from then, but she'd made it perfectly clear that she didn't want a nigga in her life but to fuck. As a smile made its way to my lips, Haji pushed me. "Don't be reminiscing and shit. That nigga took advantage of her and I feel sorry for her. I don't know how that got past her parents."

Before I could respond, Chinara walked back in the room. "Daraja went back to your room."

She walked past us and closed the door to the bathroom. I shook Haji's hand and left to go check on my baby. This bullshit couldn't have happened at a worse time. When I opened the door, I saw Daraja lying on the bed, face down. I laid beside her and asked, "Baby, you okay?"

She lifted her head and the tears on her face made me weak. She only shook her head. I pulled her in my arms and consoled her. From her dad's demeanor at first, I thought he was angry at the way they ostracized her, but apparently, he was angry at her. He couldn't have thought I would be condemning Daraja to hell. Maybe that was why he nodded at me, thinking I would verbally destroy her even more. "Listen. What I said earlier applies to your dad, too. Whomever got a problem with the decisions you made, fuck them. That shit ain't have nothing to do with them. I got'chu. It can be me and you against the fucking world."

She cried audibly and that hurt my heart. Suddenly, she got up from the bed and went to the bathroom and slammed the door. I tried not to take that personally, because I knew it wasn't directed at me. This shit had to be a lot on her... all while trying to bury her mother. I wondered if Chinara was angry with her, too. It was too late to be angry. Baby girl had changed her life and was on the right track. How they gon' be mad about shit that happened years ago? If anything, her father needed to be angry with himself for not doing something about

his teenage daughter being taken advantage of by a grown-ass man.

I went to the bathroom and leaned against the door. “Baby, I’m here for you. Whenever you wanna come out.”

I refused to leave the door. I needed her to feel me... my sincerity... my love. I needed her to know that when it felt like the whole world was against her, I would still be here for her. Turning my back to the door, I leaned on the doorframe and decided to send her a text message. *Baby, I love you. Regardless of your past. Please come out to me and let me console you.*

I could hear movement, then I received the text, *I’ll be out in a sec.*

I still remained at the door, waiting for her to come out, and within a couple of minutes, she did. She looked in my eyes and I could see the hurt... the sadness. “He said that no daughter of his would behave the way I did. That he didn’t want to see me until the funeral.”

I closed my eyes briefly and pulled her in my arms. “Damn, baby. I’m so sorry.”

“I let him down, but I can’t go back there. I’m over that shit. I’ve been over it for a long time now. My mama’s funeral begins in two days, and all anybody can think about is all the people I fucked! Why in the fuck is that anybody’s business? Why does it even matter right now?”

She began fighting me and I knew it was just her getting out her frustrations. As she pounded my chest, she screamed, “Fuck them!”

“What did Chinara say?”

“She was angry. But fuck her, too. While she was in America, I was left to tend to my parents... to my mama. I was the one there, suffering with them... going without to make sure they had what they needed... putting my entire life on hold! And for what? To be called a whore? This is bullshit!”

I wrapped my arms around her as she fought me, causing us both to fall to the floor. I didn’t know what to say, and

lately, I'd been finding myself in that position more often than not. Daraja let out a gut-wrenching cry that nearly killed my spirit. When she finally stopped fighting, she laid against me. "If anyone should be affected by anything in my past, it should be you. You've never seen my clean bill of health... never asked for a blood test, but yet, you have my back. I loved my mama, but this is the last place I wanna be right now."

"Just chill out here with me. We don't have to go anywhere, and you don't have to talk to anybody. Just stay here and heal from this, baby. I told you that I got'chu. Nothing is gonna change that. I hate that your pops and Chinara are being insensitive right now, but they'll come around. One thing I know is that they both love you. When they come to realize how they made the situation worse, they will come to you and beg your forgiveness. I guarantee it. But right now, I want to get you in the shower so you can get cleaned up and then I'll give you a massage. What do you think?"

She took a deep breath as we prepared to get up from the floor. "Sounds good. I love you, Jarius. Thank you for loving me."

Once we stood, I kissed her head. "You don't have to thank me. Just overdose on this love with me."

CHAPTER 13

Daraja

AS WE WALKED behind the casket to the burial site, I couldn't stop the tears from falling. It had been a long five days of celebrating Mama's life. I just wanted this to all be over and finally, it almost was... day six. My parents were Muslim, and the Yoruba people engaged in celebration for a full week. Since my mother didn't die tragically and she was older, it wasn't considered a sad occasion. There had been dancing and tribal drums, along with musical performances. But I didn't feel like celebrating. I wanted this to be over. Haji had spent so much money already, at least thirty grand.

As I held Jarius's hand, I felt like I was barely there. We'd stayed in our room until the first day of the celebration. I still hadn't spoken to my dad, and he seemed to be avoiding me, so he didn't feel obligated to speak. I would have never thought he would turn his back on me... ever. It wasn't like I was still out there sleeping around with whomever. I was in a committed relationship. For over the year, Jarius was the only man I'd been with. When we came to America, I'd been on a three-month drought. This magnitude of anger was unwarranted. It was the past and I'd changed.

Chinara had tried to talk to me the first day of celebration, but I didn't want to talk to her. Although I'd lied to her time and time again about my personal life over the years, she was the one I expected to understand. Most of my friends had

turned their backs on me when I was out there being reckless, but my sister... in my mind, I'd always have her if no one else. When she told me that people were justified in calling me a whore, I wanted to crawl under a rock. That level of judgment from her hurt my heart. Was my behavior horrendous? Of course it was, but I already knew that. Everyone did things they regretted. Chinara wasn't perfect, either. No one was perfect, so how dare they throw me to the flames?

I was the outcast and I was just fine with that. As long as I had Jarius, I had everything I needed. I was just grateful that Gambo's words to him had only been a threat. Fear had paralyzed me, knowing that he could possibly hurt Jarius or worse. If he would have, there was no way I would have been able to forgive myself. When everyone turned their backs on me, he was there, offering me love and comfort. I'd found solace in his arms for the past few days. The once nonchalant, comical, and sexually starved man had become attentive, compassionate, caring, and loving. He'd been everything I needed him to be and shown me things I wouldn't have believed he was capable of feeling or doing.

When we reached the burial site, I refused to give anyone but Jarius my attention. I didn't stand with the family. It was bad enough we had to ride in the same car. The loss of my mother was killing me inside. She was my ally and my confidant. She knew about some of my exploits. While she offered sound advice, she didn't judge or shun me. She'd told me that I was searching for something that I needed to find within myself. I was broken beyond repair after Gambo. I was angry that I allowed myself to stoop to such depths. It took me a while to recover.

As the preacher or whoever he was spoke, I leaned into Jarius. Releasing my hand, he wrapped his arm around me as my body shook from the cries escaping me. He kissed my head as I buried my face in his chest. Sliding my arms around his waist, I stayed that way until he said, "Baby?"

When I lifted my head, I saw Chinara standing next to us, tears staining her cheeks. I only stared at her for a moment, then laid my head against Jarius. "Daraja, I'm so sorry. I have

no idea what it was like to be here, carrying the brunt of the weight, taking care of Mama. Nor do I know all the things you went through with Gambo... being taken advantage of. My natural reaction was to be outraged, but it should have been one of compassion and love, especially knowing that it was in the past and that you've come so far in your journey of self-love. I love you so much and I'm so, so sorry."

Lifting my head once again, I allowed her sincerity to penetrate the armor I'd built around my heart. As I took a step closer to her, she pulled me in her arms, and we cried together. She was my sister, and while her actions hurt me, I needed her love, despite me thinking I could do without it. When I pulled away from her, we were standing there alone, besides Jarius and Haji. Everyone had left us to head to my aunt's house. I refused to subject myself to their cruelty yet again. "Can you guys bring us to the hotel before you go to Aunt Aurelia's?"

"If you aren't going, I'm not going either," Chinara said, then smiled softly at me.

I smiled back, then looked at Mama's grave. Bowing my head, I whispered, "I'm gonna miss you so much, Mama. I love you."

Jarius kissed the side of my head, then grabbed my hand, intertwining his fingers with mine. Looking up at him, I said, "So, I was thinking, when we get back and you start moving, I want to move with you. What do you think?"

"Shit, I think you finally thinking like me. Let's do this."

I kissed his lips, grateful that I'd given in to love and let this amazing man appreciate me the way I deserved. Gently sliding his fingertips down the side of my face, he said, "I can't believe we're finally here... out in the open, refusing to hide our innermost feelings. It feels good as hell. A lot better than I originally thought it would."

"Yeah. I thought I would feel too vulnerable and I was afraid of being taken advantage of."

Jarius smiled, then we walked away to get back to the rental. We'd walked probably a mile to the burial site. I knew

he was dying in this heat. “Honestly, I was afraid of expressing myself because I didn’t think you felt the same. You’d made it perfectly clear that we were just fucking.”

I chuckled and so did he. “I’m glad I came to my senses. I can’t live without you. Giving you all of me was scary, but I’m so glad I did, because now, I can reap the rewards of love.”

He smiled down at me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. His soft lips met my forehead, then we continued behind Haji and Chinara until we got to the car.



“CAN I GO WITH YOU?”

“Baby, I don’t know how long me and Haji gon’ be there, but if you don’t mind chillin’ by yourself, you’re more than welcomed to come.”

I huffed loudly. We’d been back for a week and I’d gotten completely attached to Jarius... like not wanting him out of my sight attached. He’d spoiled me. But now it was time for him to handle business and I was tripping. Yesterday, he and Haji had been busy the entire day and I was in this apartment alone for most of the day. The day after we got back, we’d moved into the apartment and the next two days, we’d spent time getting everything unpacked and the apartment furnished. It was hard work, but it was worth it. The peace I felt inside was overwhelming.

Tonight, he and Haji were going to some club that a lot of Houston rappers frequented so Jarius could network. Haji had already purchased him a spot and next week, the renovations would start. Jarius, though, would be a barber to the stars. A barber that catered to high profile clients, flying wherever they needed him to be. I wasn’t really feeling that, but who was I to knock his hustle? “Fine. I’ll stay home. The last thing I need is for you to get jealous when I start getting attention from other niggas,” I said, throwing up air quotes.

I rarely used the word nigga, but Jarius used it frequently. So, to emulate him, I said it this one time. He huffed, then

rolled his eyes. He knew it was true. If I went with them and I was left alone, the vultures would sniff me out. I couldn't control that. Wherever I went, I got attention. I assumed it was not only because of my beauty, but my self-confidence. My sexuality seemed to show on the outside as well. It was like they could smell me like a dog in heat. It was the weirdest thing. I rarely approached anybody in my past. They mostly came to me.

As he got dressed, he said, "Listen, baby. I'm working, although it may not seem like it. I can't help it that my work includes fun. Why don't you go chill with Chinara? She's gonna be home."

"I don't feel like talking about what happened back home. I don't feel like seeing a man that still won't speak to me. I told you I could be clingy, and you accepted that. It's okay, though. I'm gonna register for school. That way I won't have time to sulk about missing you."

I stood from my seat and left the room. Needing something to do to keep me occupied was a part of my everyday life. I couldn't just sit in the house all day like Chinara had been doing. She had her daughter to keep her company, though. I sent Haji a text, asking if it was okay for me to use the card to register for school. He quickly responded in the affirmative. I thought I would need the entire summer to bounce back from the devastating loss, but if anything, I needed to keep busy. Jarius walked into the room and said, "Get dressed, so we can go."

"I'm not going. I'm about to register for classes that start next week."

We were in Africa for almost two weeks and the last week of the first summer session ended today. Getting on my laptop, I quickly went to the website and enrolled in the two classes I'd dropped in the first summer session, realizing I'd once again be in Mr. Joseph's class. He was the only one teaching the statistics class this summer. That was probably playing with fire, but oh well. I had to have the class. So, before school started, I needed to be on one accord with my man. As he continued to get dressed, I walked up behind him and wrapped

my arms around him, sliding them down to his crotch. His dick immediately started to harden. "Raja, really? Haji gon' be here in fifteen minutes. I don't feel like hearing that nigga mouth."

I ignored him and began taking off my clothes. Stepping around him to face him, I slid my hands up his chest and pulled his head to me. I kissed him slowly, although he tried his best to resist me. Pressing my body against his, he slapped my ass, then pulled away from me and took his clothes off. "Come on, man."

I smiled, then bit my bottom lip and leaned over the desk and spread my legs. My eyes closed as I anticipated the feeling of dick between my walls. "Naw. Sit down."

When I turned around, he roughly sat me on the desk, then pushed my legs apart and pushed inside of me. I slumped, causing my head to rest against the wall and I knew by the time we were done, I would have a headache. "Fuck! You always tryna control me, girl. You know I can't resist this wet shit."

I smirked at him as he began pounding my pussy, stretching me out to fit his monstrous size, but I loved every minute of it. The desk began hitting the wall and my head sliding up and down it. It seemed he was trying to kill me in every stroke as his fingers dug into my hips. He growled loudly, which caught me off guard... but shit, I liked it. Yanking me from the desk, he picked me up and slammed my back against the wall. "I can be clingy, too. But just hearing you say another man might try to get at what's mine, intensifies my need for you. This my shit, right?"

"Hell yes!" I screamed out as I came all over him.

He pushed my legs up until my knees were to my sides and slow-whined his dick inside of me, watching my juices coat him. That shit felt so amazing, I was on the verge of cumming again. "Jarius... oh my God. Fuck! Fuck!"

I began squirting on him as I slid my fingers to my clit and gently tapped it, causing more to excrete from me. Jarius was biting his bottom lip but his eyes never left my pussy and that

only made what I was feeling more intense. I brought my fingers to his lips and he sucked them clean as he began plowing into me, fucking my breath away. “You so fucking sexy. I’m about to nut all in this pussy.”

He grabbed my nipple with his teeth, and I yelped in excitement as I held his head close to me. His bald head was like an aphrodisiac and I just wanted to rub my pussy all over it. “Give it to me, daddy. Yes! Oluwa mi o!”

He growled as he released into me, panting against my chest. Releasing my legs, I slid down the wall and to the floor. I wasn’t worth shit. He chuckled as he scooped me up and brought me to the bedroom. “I can guarantee I won’t be long, now. Smelling you on me all night, gon’ have me wanting to get back here lickity split.”

“Lickity split?” I laughed. “I assume that means really quickly.”

“Uh-huh. Fast as hell.”

“Okay. Well, I’m gonna take a nap now to get ready for you later.”

“Be ready for some shower action,” he said, then kissed my head and hurriedly put his clothes back on.

The knocking on the door let me know that Haji had arrived. “Shit. See, you got me late.”

I giggled as he left the room to open the door. Once he had, I heard Haji say, “See... quit fucking around with Daraja, so you can handle business. You already pussy whipped.”

“Fuck you. You know yo’ ass pussy whipped, too.”

They both laughed, then I heard a slap. I was assuming they’d slapped hands. “Just hurry up.”

Jarius appeared in the doorway again. “I love you. See you later.”

“Okay. I love you, too. Good luck!”

The crankiness that was trying to invade me earlier was gone. Maybe I just needed to be fucked. Well, mission

accomplished, because Jarius had fucked the mobility out of me. All I wanted to do now was sleep. I hoped everything went well for him tonight and that he would be able to establish connections that would put him on the path of accomplishing his dreams. I snuggled up to my body pillow and went straight to sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Jarius

“SO, ARE YOU SINGLE?”

“Naw. My baby at home, waiting for me. It was nice talking to you, though.”

I walked away from this chick that was tryna get me caught up. She was one of these ballers’ groupies, I assumed. I’d networked and handed out my card to quite a few people. I’d even pulled up my website for a couple of them to show them what I did. Hopefully, somebody would take the bait. Tomorrow, I knew I would have to go check things out in Beaumont and go check on Dee Ann before she had a damn heart attack. Before we left for Africa, she swore that the United States was gonna make me prove my citizenship before I could come back.

So, I hadn’t seen her in almost a month and had only talked to her a few times. She was about to lose it and threatened to pop up at my apartment to make sure everything was good. She swore I was hiding some shit from her. I plopped down in one of the plush seats next to Haji. He was sipping on some Henn and I needed a drink as well. When the waitress came over, I ordered one, then cased the scene. There were women everywhere. I hadn’t indulged in the club scene in a hot minute. The way women were out here just throwing

themselves on men in VIP was ridiculous. But whatever. *Was Daraja like this in her past?*

I didn't know where that thought came from, but I quickly rid myself of it. She liked sex, but that didn't mean she was throwing herself on people. That didn't even sound like her M.O. She was confident and niggas were attracted to her. She was right. I would have fucked somebody up for trying to holla at her. Daraja was gon' have my ass crazy as hell. I was possessive and jealous as hell when it came to her. We'd only been here thirty minutes and I was ready to go dig all up in her shit.

As the waitress brought my drink, one of the rappers we had talked to joined us. "So, listen. I'm having a lil somethin' somethin' at my crib in two weeks. I think it might benefit y'all to be there. I got a couple of cousins that's gon' come through and you can prove your skills on their heads."

"A'ight. Sounds like a plan. Shoot me the address and I'm there. What time?"

"Around eight-ish."

"A'ight. Thanks for looking out."

"I think that will help you get your foot in the door if niggas can see you in action."

"That's what's up. 'Preciate it."

He shook my hand, then I downed my Henny. I looked over at Haji and said, "Nigga whenever you ready, we can bounce."

"Let's chill out for a minute. It's been a while since I been out, and I didn't realize how much I needed this shit."

I chuckled slightly. He may have needed it, but I didn't. I was ready to get to my baby, ASAP. I could imagine it could be a little overwhelming with a baby in the house. At least he was able to get out. I wondered what type of breaks Chinara got. Daraja and I would have to keep the baby to give them some alone time. "Jendayi running you ragged, bruh?"

"Naw. I just... I just needed some time to myself."

I frowned slightly. What wasn't he saying? "What's up?"

He rubbed his hand down his face and kind of tugged on his beard. He sat back on the couch and said, "Chinara rarely wants sex. I may get it once a week. I know she's tired from taking care of Jendayi all day, not to mention she just lost her mother. I'm just trying to get my body to stop trying to control my mind. My mind should have power over my body. But I hate feeling neglected. It makes me feel flattered when other women show me attention. I don't like feeling like that. Pretty Black should be the only woman that makes me feel that way."

I frowned and said, "Flattered? Nigga, you tripping."

"I'm serious, though. She turns me down most times. When she doesn't, I have to settle for a quickie. I know she needs time and I'm trying to be patient. My dick just wants more than my hand wrapped around it."

"Well, have you talked to her?"

"Naw. I don't wanna seem insensitive. I'm gonna send her to a spa day and let her get pampered. Show her that I'm trying to relieve her of her responsibilities for a while. Take her on a date. I need my wife, though. Did Daraja withdraw when Mrs. Nwachuku died?"

"Naw. We fucked the same day. She withdrew after all that shit in Nigeria until after her mama was buried. But everything was back to normal after that. I think Chinara is carrying a lot of guilt. She may need counseling, man."

He nodded, then got another drink. My phone vibrated in my pocket and I noticed it was D-Eazy's address. I nodded at him across the room. That could be my break and I was gon' make the most of it. Those edges were gon' be razor-sharp. I would definitely have to take Daraja with me there. Since the crowd would be more intimate, I'd be able to keep my eye on her and keep her close. She was clingy as hell, but she'd warned me. Her mom was gone. She'd told me that her mom was her only confidant. Baby girl was gon' have to get some friends, though, so I could work and make moves for us.

As I thought about her, I received another text. I assumed I'd thought her up because it was from Daraja. Realizing it was a picture message, I bit my bottom lip as I opened it. *Fuck!* Her legs were wide open, and her message read, *I'm waiting for you, baby.*

As I stared at the picture of her fat, wet pussy that nearly swallowed the fabric of her underwear, I could feel my dick hardening. Naw, this couldn't go down like this at the club. I held my phone up and sent her a selfie... still biting my lower lip. She would know what that meant. I was gon' fuck her up when I got home. "Yo, what'chu doin'?' You over there looking like a female, taking selfies and shit."

"Says the man that's feeling flattered. Shut the fuck up, nigga."

Haji rolled his eyes, then downed the rest of his drink. I did the same as he said, "Come on, so I can get yo' ass to your woman."

"Shit! Thank you."

He shook his head as he stood. The moment he did, a woman approached him. "How you doing, baby? You leaving already?"

He licked his lips and said, "Yeah. I gotta get home to my wife and baby girl."

She pouted and said, "Well, damn. I guess I'll let you go, then." After looking him up and down, she said, "I don't mind offering temporary relief, though."

I stood from my seat and said, "Man, get yo' disrespectful, home-wrecking ass on."

She frowned as she stared at me. She lifted her hand and snaked her neck, but just as she was about to try to let me have it, Haji interrupted her. "Gon' move around, shawty. He right and you know it."

She rolled her eyes and walked off as Haji slapped my hand. "Thanks, man."

I nodded as we headed out. He was too close to entertaining that broad. I wasn't about to let my boy go down like that. That bitch wasn't worth losing the woman that meant the world to him. Once we got outside, I said, "Please talk to Chinara. Communication is everything, bruh. She not a mind reader and neither are you. Y'all work this out before it gets worse."

"I'll talk to her tonight because, for a split second, I entertained her ass. I already feel like I cheated just now."

I patted his shoulder and said, "Y'all gon' get through this. A lot of married couples have rough patches... so I've heard in the barbershop. But your love should help you overcome."

"I never in my life thought I would be accepting marital advice... shit, any advice from your ass."

"That's a'ight, though. Because the last time you took my advice, you ended up with your queen. And because of that, I got mine, too, with her freaky ass. Come on, hurry up."

He chuckled and got in his ride to bring me home. Glancing down at my phone, Daraja had sent another picture of her licking her own nipple. I shifted in my seat and looked at Haji. "Nigga, drive faster."

"Man, shut the fuck up. You gon' get there when we get there. When is the party at D-Eazy's?"

"In two weeks. You and Chinara ought to come. Y'all have a sitter?"

"Naw. Ms. Nwachuku was our sitter. I don't know if her dad would feel comfortable watching Jendayi by himself."

"Well, ask him. If not, then maybe we can set up something for the ladies to do together with Jendayi."

"Maybe. We'll see. I'll bring it up tonight to see what she thinks. You still going to Beaumont tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I gotta check on my shop... let niggas know that I'm still the boss man and I gotta see Dee Ann before she have a fucking heart attack. You know what Daraja called my mama?"

“What?”

“Gangsta Dee.”

He fell out laughing. I couldn't help but laugh, too. “Well, she *is* gangsta. You know that shit. She remind me of Lil Scrappy mama, without all the bullshit of trying to be in the entertainment industry.”

“Aww, shit. You say some shit like that around her, she gon' fuck you up. She can't stand Momma D.”

We laughed and talked all the way to my place. Before I got out, Haji shook my hand. “You did your thing tonight. You 'bout to blow up and you deserve that shit.”

“Thanks, man. It's because of you. See you later.”

“A'ight. Be careful tomorrow.”

I nodded, then headed inside to see if Daraja still had it bust wide open for a nigga. I was ready to slide in her shit immediately, even with the smoke on me from the club. We could make our way to the shower after round one. When I walked through the door, baby girl was sitting in a chair from our dinner table, spread eagle. She'd placed the chair a few feet from the door. A slow smile made its way to my lips. “Three hours was too long. Come make it up to me.”

“Shit, with pleasure.”

I stripped right where I stood while she slid her hand down her body and started playing with her pussy. That shit was a turn-on like no other. I joined in with the self-pleasure and began stroking my dick as I watched her. Torturing myself wasn't a part of my plans but Daraja ran this show and she knew it. When she pulled her fingers out and brought them to her mouth, that was it. I snatched her sexy ass up from that chair and pushed her all the way to the couch, bending her over it. Quickly pushing my dick inside of her caused me to close my eyes. “Shiiiiit!”

She looked back at me and started twerking her ass. I popped her ass as I dug that shit out. “Jarius! Oh, fuck... me!”

She was already cumming on my shit. Once she'd ridden the wave, I turned her around and sat her on the back of the sofa and reentered her with haste. As I held her close to me, her nails dug into my back and her screams in her native tongue was fueling my fire. Grabbing her titty, I toyed with her nipple while my dick explored that wet pussy. I didn't know how her shit stayed so wet. It was ready at any given moment, even when I caught her off-guard. The shit was insane. "Raja, fuck! I swear this the best pussy I ever had. And yo' man done been in a lot of shit."

She smirked, but my next thrust knocked that shit right off her face. "We were made for each other, that's why. By far the best dick and I've had more than my fair share of pipe."

She was right. We were destined. Picking her up from the couch, I brought her back to the kitchen and sat her on the countertop. "Listen... don't take what I say the wrong way."

She frowned slightly, but said, "Okay."

"This is me rationalizing shit in my head. Niggas approached you a lot, huh? You wasn't one of those women that went to a nigga, right?"

"Put your dick in me, Jarius. We'll talk about this after you make me cum."

And with that, I plunged back in her goodness as I noticed her wetness on the counter. I pulled right out of her and licked that shit up. "Can't waste none of this shit."

My face went to her pussy and I feasted on that full course meal. She held my head in place and bucked against my mouth until she'd satisfied herself, cumming all over my beard.

CHAPTER 15

Daraja

“CAN I RIDE YOUR HEAD?”

He frowned and tilted his head to the side. “What?”

I smiled slightly. “It’s just a fantasy for me to see my juices on your bald head. Can I?”

“Whatever floats your boat, baby.”

I was too excited. I had him lay face down and I straddled his head, allowing my clit to lightly graze it. My eyes closed as they rolled to the back of my head. After rolling my head, stretching my neck, I looked down at his chocolate head between my legs and nudded all over him. “Oh my God! Jarius!”

I couldn’t believe that shit happened so fast. Sliding off his head, I bent over and began licking it. His grunts told me he enjoyed this shit as much as I did. I’d been waiting for him to get back home, so I could have my way with him and vice versa. He had me so sprung, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I’d been watching porn until he got here, wishing I was getting drilled with dick. We’d been in the front room, the kitchen, the shower and now we were in the bed, going for round four. I loved that he was just as horny as me. We just fit.

As I continued to lick his head, he reached up, sliding his hand between my legs, and began fingering me, giving my g-

spot the attention it definitely needed. I'd had four orgasms already and I was starting to wear down. When I went straight up on my knees, he sat up in the bed and replaced his fingers with his dick. Staring into my eyes, he sucked his fingers, then grabbed my ankles and said, "This the last round, baby. We gotta get some rest. And a nigga tired as fuck. This pussy gon' kill my ass."

He growled as he brought my feet to the headboard. He plunged in my pussy and said, "I wish you could see this shit."

Right after he said it, he grabbed his phone from the nightstand and began recording. For some reason, that excited me. I could feel myself get gushier as Jarius slowed his strokes to be sure to get good footage. "These fucking pornos ain't got shit on this. Who wanna watch dry-ass looking pussy? This shit... this shit'll make a muthafucka crazy as hell."

He began thrusting harder as I moaned loudly, then creamed on him. "Nut for me, Jarius. Show the camera what this pussy does to you."

He growled loudly and quickened his pace, watching the action as he recorded. Before long, he pulled out and shot his seed all over the outside of my pussy. "Fuck!"

Ending the recording, he collapsed next to me and said, "After I clean you up, we gon' carry our asses to sleep."

"Okay. I never approached anybody."

"Huh?"

"I wasn't one of those thirsty females that begged for a man's attention. They always approached me."

He nodded, then stood to go to the bathroom. Before he could return with the towel, I was out.



"DO I HAVE TO GO IN?"

"Naw, but I would love it if you did."

I rolled my eyes. I wasn't in the mood to deal with Gangsta Dee's shenanigans. He smiled at me as I said, "Okay."

He walked around the car to help me out. I swore, if she was on bullshit, I was gon' be on bullshit, too. Jarius was just gon' have to take a backseat to our asses. I'd be damned if I was gon' let her run me. His past lil women may have been intimidated by her, but I was in no way, shape, form, or fashion afraid of her. I felt like her bark was probably more vicious than her bite, anyway. While he knocked on the door, I looked around her yard. The landscaping was beautiful, and I especially loved the pink flowers mingled throughout the shrubbery.

When she opened the door, she smiled big and pulled Jarius into her arms. Before she could pull away, she slapped the back of his bald head and said, "It's about time you brought your ass to see me! Yo' sister in there, too."

Looking around him, directly at me, she said, "Hey, Daraja. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you, Ga-Ms. Hutcherson?"

I almost called her Gangsta Dee. Jarius glanced at me and smiled. "I'm good, now. Y'all come on in. I cooked."

I was surprised as hell. There were no looks of animosity, daggers, or glares. Maybe she'd come to grips with me being the woman in Jarius's life and that I wasn't going nowhere. Maybe he'd set her straight about our last meeting. Whatever the case, I walked in and another woman sashayed in the room and put her hand on her hip. "Yo' ass forgot you had a sister?"

Jarius picked her up and swung her around as she screamed with laughter. It brought a smile to my face. When he set her on her feet, she slapped his arm as she tried to maintain her balance. "Raja, this is my big sister, Denae."

Before I could greet her, she smiled big and said, "I always wanted a lil sister! No offense, big head."

She pushed Jarius in the head and came straight to me with open arms. That was so different. It caught me by surprise. I

giggled and hugged her. When she pulled away, she grabbed me by the hand and asked, “Your name is Raja?”

“Had you let me finish the introduction, I would have told you that her name is Daraja,” Jarius said. He then mumbled, “Ol’ buzzard.”

“I’m sorry, Daraja. Hol’on.”

She turned around and started beating on Jarius. I was gonna love her. I stood there and laughed at their interaction. When she let up, Jarius yelled, “It’s like that already, Raja? You ain’t even cut for yo’ nigga. Just let me get fucked up, huh?”

I lifted my hands in surrender and asked, “Who am I to interfere in family affairs?”

Denae laughed and put her arm around my shoulder like we’d been best friends forever. I chuckled as Jarius shook his head and pushed his sister out of the way. When we got to the kitchen, the smell of good food hit my nose. I inhaled deeply, then said, “Oh my. What did you cook, Ms. Hutcherson?”

“Aww, I didn’t too much. Just some black-eyed peas with smoked ham hocks in it, potato salad, green beans, cornbread, and smothered pork chops. I hope you eat all that.”

“It sounds amazing. I’ve never had black-eyed peas, but I’m willing to try it all. We eat ham hocks for sure.”

Gangsta Dee smiled and I almost passed out from shock. “Well, have a seat while I prepare your plates.”

I did just the opposite. I went to the kitchen with her and said, “I don’t mind helping.”

“See, you fit in with us! You my sissy and big head can just stay home from now on,” Denae said, causing me to giggle.

“Denae, you gon’ get off my son.”

“Tell her, Ma,” Jarius chimed in from the other room.

Listening to their banter made me miss how our family used to be before Chinara left. We had so much fun together.

We didn't have a lot of money, so we spent a lot of time together at home. Our bond was just as tight as theirs. But now, my mama was gone, and my daddy still wasn't speaking to me. I was avoiding Chinara, because I didn't want to talk about what had gone down in Lagos. I watched how Mrs. Hutcherson fixed her plate, so I prepared Jarius's the same way and served him. When I sat the plate in front of him, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me down on him. "Damn, nigga. Let her breathe. You see her every day. Let me talk to my sissy."

Jarius rolled his eyes and said, "Don't hate on what we do. Where yo' nigga at?"

His mama rolled her eyes as Denae lowered her head. "That muthafucka got locked up for possession with intent to distribute. He gon' be there a minute. Hopefully, he still a man when he come out. He was always kind of weak to me."

"Mama! Really? I'm sitting right here."

Gangsta Dee rolled her eyes as Jarius's eyes widened. They continued to talk about her now ex-boyfriend while I helped myself to those black-eyed peas. They were so good. I had to stand from Jarius's lap and go fix my own plate. When I came back, they all looked at me and laughed. They could go to hell. I was hungry. I finally joined them, grateful that I felt a sense of family with Jarius's family and thankful that I'd probably gained a new best friend in Denae.

As I ate, I received a text from Chinara. Not wanting to be rude by texting at the dinner table, I said, "Please excuse me for a moment."

I stood from my seat and opened her message to read, *Please call me when you have time. We need to talk.*

I rolled my eyes. I didn't want to talk about what she wanted to talk about. Instead of overthinking, I called her. "Hello?"

"Hey. What's up?"

"I miss you. I feel like you've been avoiding me, and I don't like it. I understand that it's most likely my fault, but

when y'all come back, can we go shopping tomorrow and just hang out?"

"Umm, yeah."

"Don't worry. We won't talk about anything you don't want to talk about. I just miss my best friend."

My heart softened and I almost shed a tear. Holding it back, I said, "Okay. I miss you, too. I'll talk to you later. We're at Jarius's mother's house."

"Okay. Talk to you later."

We weren't staying in Beaumont overnight, so I would call her when we got back and set up something more official for tomorrow. I smiled to myself as I headed back to the dining area. My sister meant the world to me and I was grateful that we would be able to work through things eventually. As I sat, Jarius asked, "Everything okay, baby?"

"Yeah. It was my sister. I just didn't wanna be rude and answer my phone at the table," I said as I noticed Ms. Hutcherson on her phone.

"Like that gangsta over there?" Jarius asked playfully.

I giggled as he said, "Gangsta Dee, if that ain't Jesus, hang that shit up."

She stood from her seat and smacked the shit out of him as Denae and I died in laughter. She ended her call, though, and went back to her seat like ain't shit happened.



"Ms. NWACHUKU! Hello! I'm glad to have you back in class."

I smiled politely. It was my first day of class. I still wasn't one hundred percent sure that I wanted to be here, but it gave me something to do to keep me occupied. I couldn't be on Haji's dime forever. "Thank you."

"How are you?"

"I'm okay. Taking it one day at a time."

“Good,” he said as he unashamedly looked me over.

Surprisingly, it made me somewhat uncomfortable. I looked away, then said, “Well, I have to go. I have another class.”

I didn’t wait for his response. This time I had his class first. Quickly making my way out of the auditorium, I caught him watching me. Ugh. I couldn’t deal with this the entire semester. As I walked to my next class, I adjusted my Balenciaga tee that Chinara had bought me yesterday and tried to forget about Mr. Joseph. Chinara and I had a good day yesterday. I could tell that something was bothering her, but we’d agreed to not talk about heavy subjects. We just wanted to enjoy time together like we used to.

Jendayi had stayed with Haji, so we had the freedom to go where we wanted without stopping to tend to her needs. We’d stayed out at least three hours, but Chinara didn’t seem like herself. She wasn’t as light. It looked like something was weighing her down and I planned to go talk to her when I left class. Haji didn’t seem as warm either when we’d left. I wondered if they were having marital issues. They were so great for one another, so I definitely needed to talk to her.

When I got to my next class, I was thankful for a female professor. She’d introduced herself and had begun lecturing when I got a message from Denae. We’d exchanged numbers before Jarius and I had left Saturday. *Call me when you can, sissy.*

I smiled at her calling me sissy. It was like she’d been longing for our type of relationship. I messaged her back. *Okay. As soon as I get out of class.*

While I had my phone in my hand, I messaged Jarius. *I love you.*

Love you, too.

He’d responded immediately which was unusual. He probably had his phone in his hand at the time. I brought my attention back to the professor and tried to learn something.

When I walked to my car, I saw a bouquet of flowers sitting on the hood. I smiled brightly as Jarius exited his car a little further down from mine. Sniffing the lilies, I smiled again. When he got to me, he grabbed my hand and led me to his car. “Why you wore a skirt, Raja?”

“Because I like skirts and dresses.”

“But this skirt is short as fuck. I hope ain’t nobody seen my shit.”

I smirked as we got to his car. He opened the back door as he licked his lips. I smiled even more as he took the flowers from me. He knew I was always down for this type of foolishness. Before I got in, I scanned the parking lot and caught the gaze of Mr. Joseph. *Shit*. “Umm... you sure you wanna do this, babe?”

Jarius grabbed his dick, letting me see the imprint. I could tell he was hard as a rock. Mr. Joseph was just gonna have to see, because I wasn’t about to turn my man down. I got in and he joined me. After pulling his dick out of his shorts, I moved my panties to the side and slid down his erection and rode the fuck out of him, letting Mr. Joseph know that I had who I wanted just in case he was watching. “Damn, girl! What the fuck you on? Shit!”

“I missed you, baby, and all these inches.”

“You gon’ get us caught. Got my car rocking like the shit got hydraulics.”

He gripped my ass as I continued fast and furiously. After I came, seconds later, he did, too. Resting my head against his for a moment as I panted, I brought my hands to his face, running my fingers through his beard. Allowing him to slide out of me, I went to the floor and pulled him into my mouth. He quickly lifted his hips, then pulled himself out of my mouth. “Girl, we gotta bring this shit home. This shit ain’t gon’ cut it. Come on.”

“I’m going to see Nara, then I’ll be there.”

He stared at me for a moment as the car turned off. The remote start only lasted for fifteen minutes. Turning it back on,

he grabbed his dick, then my hair and said, “Fuck me up then,
'cause I can't wait.”

CHAPTER 16

Jarius

“WHEN WE LEAVE HERE, I’m gon’ eat the fuck out of that pussy. You look fine as hell tonight. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you was tryna bring another nigga home,” I said in Daraja’s ear.

She giggled. She wore this lil white romper thing. It was long-sleeved and showed major cleavage. Plus, it was short as hell. If she bent over just right, you could see the bottom of her ass cheeks. She was fine as fuck and looking at those chocolate thighs was making me wanna turn on some Eric Benét and let her wrap them shits around me. “Thank you, baby. And I’m gonna let you eat it, too. Nobody has access to this shit, but you. Mo ni ife re, bebi.”

I stared at her and could see the love in her eyes. “What does that mean?”

“I love you, baby.”

“Mo ni ife re, bebi.”

Her eyes widened. “Well, look at you! Let me find out you been studying Yoruba!”

“I just repeated what you said. I have a loose tongue. You should know that shit. I can pronounce different words in different languages easily.”

“Shit, I see.”

I gave her a one-cheeked smile as I rang the doorbell. We were at D-Eazy’s house for the gathering and I was somewhat nervous, hoping he didn’t renege on me. I had my bag with my clippers and shit to show them how I got down. As Haji and Chinara approached us, someone opened the door and asked for the passcode to get in. Pulling up the message on my phone, I recited the code to him. He stepped aside and we walked through. It was so many niggas smoking, the shit looked cloudy as hell.

As we looked around, Daraja said, “I hope my eyes don’t start burning. You know my eyes are sensitive.”

“I know. If need be, I’ll give you the keys and you can pick me up later.”

No sooner than I said that, there was a tap on my shoulder. When I turned, D-Eazy was standing there with his hand out. I slapped it as he said, “What’s up? You ready to put in this work?”

“Hell yeah. This my lady, Daraja and you remember my boy, Haji. That’s his wife, Chinara.”

He shook all their hands, then led me to the room I would be cutting in. I sat my bag on the table as Daraja and Chinara sat on the couch. It wasn’t as smokey in here, thank goodness. Haji and Chinara seemed to have made up because they were kissing on each other and they looked genuinely happy. When four guys walked in, they all shook my hand and one sat in the chair. I took a deep breath, relaxing my nerves as he told me he just wanted a simple fade and to leave a lil bit on top.

I cut his hair in twenty minutes. My speed was what got me a lot of business, too. Not only was I good, but I didn’t take forever either. Before I knew it, I was done with all four of them. Just as I was about to wrap up, D-Eazy walked in with about three other rappers and a couple of ballplayers. They all took my card as D-Eazy sat in my chair. I was happy as shit. Turning my head, I winked at Daraja as she smiled at me. Everything had fallen in place and I couldn’t help but thank God for sending D-Eazy my way.

After I finished up and was packing my shit, I caught a glimpse of Daraja playing on her phone. She had a shocked expression on her face. “What’s up, babe?”

She looked up at me and so did Chinara. “We’ll talk when we leave.”

I should have known shit couldn’t be perfect for too long. That was the story of my fucking life. Just when I thought I’d gotten in a sweet spot, some crazy shit would pop off. I didn’t know what was up with Daraja but judging by her body language and her facial expression, it wasn’t good. “A’ight. Well, y’all ready?”

They all stood as I reached my hand out for Daraja to grab ahold of. D-Eazy came back into the room with a schedule. He handed it to me and said, “The dates I circled are when I’ll probably need a barber on hand. Of course, I’ll pay for your flight and other expenses. You’ll just need to make sure your schedule is cleared for me. You a beast with some clippers and a straight edge, man. I appreciate you coming through tonight. My manager will be getting with you to discuss the particulars and set everything in stone.”

“I appreciate this so much.”

Before we could leave, I’d given out several more cards. Tonight had gone extremely well. While Daraja and Chinara had garnered attention, nobody disrespected us by tryna holla at them. That was a good thing because I wasn’t up for fucking up nobody’s house. When we got to the car, Raja looked extremely tipsy. “Girl, you was drinking? I only saw you have one drink.”

“I had way more than one. I had about six.”

I shook my head slowly. “So, what was up earlier? You looked all nervous and shit.”

She started to fidget a bit and that wasn’t like Daraja. She was a straight shooter. As I stared at her waiting for her to tell me, I started the car, then tapped the steering wheel with my finger. “My professor is flirting with me.”

My eyebrows lifted slightly. What that had to do with what happened earlier? I was lost. “Okaaaay. That’s what was bothering you earlier?”

“Somehow, he got my phone number and he messaged me.”

I could feel my blood simmering as I said, “Let me see it.”

She unlocked her phone and pulled up the text message, then passed it to me. After allowing my eyes to adjust to the brightness of her screen, I read, *Hi, Daraja. This is Mr. Joseph... Brent. I'm sorry but I got your number from your school records. I couldn't help myself. It felt like you were taunting me that day when you looked right at me, then got in the car with that guy. I walked closer so I could see better through his windshield. When I saw the way your body moved, I was mesmerized. Can I please get to know you on a personal level? You're so beautiful and your intelligence wows me. But your sex appeal is off the Richter scale. I'm looking forward to your response. Either way, I admire you.*

I looked over at her. This nigga was bold, like they’d had a conversation before. He seemed too comfortable. I didn’t think Daraja was up to anything shady because she wouldn’t have shown me the text if she had been. Plus, she was a horrible liar. I knew her mannerisms like I knew my own. Although I was pissed that he had the nerve to go to those lengths to text her, I remained calm when I asked, “Have y’all talked before?”

“He’s my professor. Of course, we’ve talked.”

“Daraja, you know that ain’t what the fuck I’m talking about. Has he approached you *this* way before?”

She glanced over at me, then said, “Yeah. In person. That was when I told him I had a boyfriend. That was before Mama died. He told me he figured that I had a man because he’d seen us when we both got in the back seat of your car the last day of the spring semester, but he wasn’t completely sure if we were a couple or not until he asked.”

“So, apparently, he don’t give a fuck about your man. That’s what the fuck I’m picking up. What about you?”

“Yeah. But he’s my professor. I can’t afford for him to have any animosity towards me and flunk me out of his class.”

“Fuck that shit.”

I looked at her phone and began typing a response when Daraja snatched the phone out of my hand. My eyes widened slightly. “So, you wanna keep getting messages from the nigga? Is that what’chu telling me?”

“No. I’m going to report it to the university. That way they have record of my complaint in case he tries to take action against me.”

The whole time she spoke, she looked straight ahead. That was usually a sign that she was lying. “Look at me and say it again.”

She turned to me and stared at me with those big, sexy, expressive eyes. “I’m going to report him.”

I rubbed my bald head, then said, “A’ight. You can’t help it that he wants you, but I’m trusting you to handle it.”

“Everybody wants me, Jarius. It’s always been that way. I’m not being an ass. I’m just telling the truth. Men can’t seem to resist me. So, if you can’t handle that someone will approach me regardless of my relationship status, maybe we shouldn’t be together.”

“Whoa, whoa. Where the fuck did that come from? I shouldn’t let people’s disrespect of my relationship get to me simply because everybody wants you? You gotta be fucking kidding me. You ain’t the only muthafucka that’s wanted. Keep that shit fresh on your mind. Ain’t nobody approached you tonight. Although I saw them looking. Your professor took it too far. After that first talk, he should’ve left it alone.”

“I *was* approached tonight... several times. You just didn’t see it. You were cutting hair. After I told them I was with you, they left me alone. Look... I’m sorry. The shit is just stressing me out because of who it is. You can’t get at everybody that’s

disrespecting our relationship. That's all I'm saying. You'll be getting at people all day every day."

I rolled my eyes at her and took off towards the apartment. She was on that bullshit and I wasn't for it... at all. I could feel her gaze and see it in my peripheral, but I refused to look back at her. I was pissed. While I was pissed about the text, her initial response to it really pissed me off. She'd never made me doubt her until now. Even with our relationship being the way it was... fuck buddies, I'd never caught her in a lie until the I love you statement. And that one I didn't hold against her.

When we got home, I got out, then walked around the car to open her door. I didn't bother to help her out. I walked the fuck off. When she caught up with me, she pushed me. "What the fuck wrong wit'chu?" she asked.

Hearing the slang fall from her lips let me know she was pissed now, but I didn't give a fuck. We would just be two pissed off muthafuckas. When I turned to her, I could see she was fuming. "Yo, keep your hands to yourself."

When we got closer to our apartment, she pushed me again. "You ain't gon' disregard me, Jarius. What are you pissed about?"

I spun around and grabbed her by her neck and walked her to the wall by our door. "Didn't I tell you to keep your hands to yourself? You gettin' way too comfortable with doing that shit."

Her eyes were wide, then she frowned and slapped me. I tightened my grip on her neck, then ripped her romper and began sucking on the nipple that fell from it. "Stop, Jarius."

I bit her nipple, then looked up in her eyes. She had that sex haze clouding her vision, so I knew she didn't want me to stop. I further ripped her romper, then looked around to make sure we didn't have an audience. After I ripped the crotch, I quickly unbuttoned my pants and pulled my dick out. Stooping, I pushed her legs apart, then slid my dick inside of her. "You still want me to stop?"

“Ahh... shit.”

I finally released her neck, then picked her up, giving her all my dick as I turned to the door. “I asked you a question, Daraja. You still want me to stop?”

“No... pleeeeeease don’t stop.”

As I unlocked the door, I roughly put her against the door and began fucking her. “Don’t ever put your hands on me like that again. I done let you get away with that shit a couple of times too many. You gon’ fucking give me the respect I deserve.”

“What are you gonna do if I don’t? Because right now, you’re giving me incentive to do it again.”

I lifted her legs in the crook of my arms and fucked her with all my might, still outside the door. When I looked up at her, tears were streaming down her cheeks. Her nails had dug into my skin and she was crying out into the night air for mercy. Finally opening the door, I walked inside and turned to kick it closed, but not before noticing a couple of people watching with their mouths hanging open. “Now, you wanna rethink how you gon’ come at me? I’m a grown-ass man, Daraja. I’m not about to play with you. Either you want me in your life, or you don’t. Let me be the man in this shit.”

“Jarius, you aren’t gonna control me!”

I pulled her off my dick and threw her to the sofa and walked off. I knew that shit would get her attention. Going to the bedroom, I took off my clothes, then started the shower. She pushed me and now she was gonna regret it. I got in the shower as I heard her enter the room. A few moments later, she pulled the curtain back. “What are you doing?”

“Letting you fucking control shit. Now close the curtain.”

She got in with me instead, but I refused to look at her. It was like she couldn’t see that she fucked up. I refuse to let any-fucking-body put hands on me that way. I could see if I was the one that had fucked up. She slid her hands around me and grabbed my dick. She whispered, “I’m sorry, daddy.”

“Move, girl. You done pissed me off. I ain’t fucking wit’chu right now.”

I could feel her body stiffen somewhat, but when I turned around to wash the soap off my back, she went to her knees and pulled my dick in her mouth. Sex was the cure-all for everything. That was what I believe she thought. It wasn’t the remedy, but I’d be damn if I was gon’ miss out on this head she was giving me. Her mouth was wet as hell and feeling her throat close around my dick felt good as hell. I grabbed her by the hair and began fucking her mouth.

Once I nudded, I got out the shower, but not before noticing the stunned look on her face. She was gonna have to talk to me. After putting on a t-shirt and some basketball shorts, I laid in the bed, reflecting on tonight and how things went wrong. We were both hot-headed and that wasn’t a good thing, so one of us was going to have to show some humility. As I laid on my back staring at the ceiling, I heard, “You’re right. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have put my hands on you, and I should have handled the situation with Mr. Joseph better. I took my frustrations with the situation out on you.”

I sat up in the bed, looking at her demeanor. She lowered her head as I stood before her. Lifting it by her chin, I said, “We good, baby. We just have to realize that we have boundaries and that we have to show each other the type of respect that we want to receive. Come here,” I said as I pulled her into my arms. “But just promise me that you gon’ handle up with that professor. I don’t want him to think you cool with him messaging you.”

“First thing Monday morning. I love you, Jarius. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. We good. I’m sorry, too, for how I spoke to you.”

“I’m not tripping on that, Jarius. I know that’s how you talk, and it wasn’t about disrespect.”

I held her tightly and fell into the bed with her, causing her to laugh. “I love you, too, Raja... more than you even realize.”

CHAPTER 17

Daraja

“HEY! Since when do you ring a doorbell? Come in!”

I smiled at Chinara as I walked through the door. “Since I no longer live here.”

I chuckled as she led me to the kitchen, where she was cooking dinner. We’d never really talked about what was bothering her. Jendayi was extremely cranky the day I came to talk, and we could never really get a good conversation going. I did notice that she seemed to be doing better. She and Haji were affectionate last night, and it didn’t seem to be forced. “Where’s my niecey pooh?”

“Haji took her out to the park. He has to go out of town tomorrow, so he wanted to spend as much time with her as he could before he left. He’s gonna be gone for almost a week.”

“Where’s he going?”

“He has to meet with some people in Atlanta, then he goes to DC. Something to do with the business and contracts.”

“Oh okay. What time does he leave?”

“His flight leaves out at eight, so he’ll probably leave home about six-thirty.”

“Well... if you can pick up Jendayi by seven, I’ll keep her tonight, so y’all can have time alone.”

“Really? Thank you!”

I shook my head slowly. She acted like I’d never kept Jendayi before. But I guess it was different without Mama here. That woman wouldn’t let Jendayi leave her sight. Lowering my head as I thought about her, I closed my eyes briefly. When I lifted my head, Chinara was staring at me. “So, how have things been? I can tell that something has been going on with you.”

After covering the pot she was stirring, she sat at the island with me. “I’d been grieving pretty hard... thinking that had I stayed in Lagos and never come here, I could have helped more. I was gone for ten years. I missed a whole ten years of my mama’s life. Time is something you can’t get back and I feel like I made the wrong decision coming here.”

I looked around her house and at the wedding picture of her and Haji hanging on the wall... the wedding we missed. Then there was a huge picture of Jendayi near it. “You made the right decision, Chinara. Getting Mama here to receive care and to be taken care of in better living conditions is probably what added that year to her life. She was sinking fast, Nara. She’d passed out a couple of times before. We didn’t tell you everything because we didn’t want you to worry. You were out here alone. We at least had each other.”

“But had I never left, I could have possibly helped make the living conditions better with an added income. Maybe we could have gotten Mama insurance and a nurse. There’s so much I could have done to help.”

“No. Don’t do that to yourself. I’ve learned to accept things the way they are. Whether you had have stayed or not, this would have been our reality. Besides, you met the man of your dreams here and had a precious baby girl. There are no mistakes.”

She lowered her head and played with her fingers. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I *know* I’m right. I have the man of my dreams, too, because of you coming here. We’re living the life we were supposed to live. Whenever God was ready for Mama, he

would have taken her, despite whatever provisions we tried to make for her. Let go of the guilt before it eats you alive.”

She stood from her stool and pulled me from mine and hugged me tightly. “You’re so right. Thank you.”

“Maybe make an appointment with a grief counselor. They can help you get through it.”

She nodded, then sat back down. I did so as well as she said, “I’ve been taking it out on Haji. He’s been so understanding.” She shook her head as the tears fell from her eyes. “I know he feels neglected. I was just so stressed. I didn’t make time for him. He deserves my best. I can see in his eyes that he’s hurting and disappointed. He loves me so much and just wants my time.”

“Well, you’ll be able to give him plenty of time tonight.”

“Yeah,” she said as she wiped her face. “Thank you.”

“Now you can put that thang on him!”

She fell out laughing as I stood from my seat and began twerking. She slapped my ass as she laughed loudly. “You’re so damn nasty!”

“No! You’re nasty, too. You just try to be all quiet about it! I’ve seen you and Haji getting it in. A few times! I called myself trying to sneak in the house about a month ago and y’all were fucking in front of a glass door. So don’t tell me!”

Her eyes were wide, and her hand was on her mouth as I revealed what I’d seen. “Oh my God!” she screamed.

As dark-complexioned as Chinara was, I could have sworn she turned red with embarrassment. I nearly fell off my stool laughing as Haji entered with Jendayi. Standing to my feet, I went straight to them. After kissing Haji’s cheek, I took my little niece and lifted her in the air as she giggled. My laughter came to a complete halt, though, when my dad entered the room. I quickly walked away with Jendayi so I wouldn’t be in the same room with him. Going out to the courtyard, I knew that would give me an ample amount of space from him.

Being close to him brought out the sensitivity, vulnerability, and inadequacy in me. I felt unworthy of his love and I hated that feeling. While I knew he had expectations of me as my father, he had to realize that I was my own person and would figure things out for myself. And eventually, I did. I may not have taken the path he wanted me to take, but I got there. I wasn't the child that did everything she was told. I was the one that had to learn from experience. Taking the easy road wasn't in my genes. According to my mama, she was the same way. She wasn't as bold as I was, but she went against her parents quite often. They thought it was best if they got her married and almost to anyone who would accept someone that wasn't a virgin.

As I sat with Jendayi, I began talking and playing with her, trying to get my mind off the fact that I was no longer accepted by my papa. As we played, Chinara joined us, but I was shocked to see Papa right behind her. Haji came out behind him and took Jendayi from me, then went back inside. I didn't want to talk. Now that he was over himself, I was worthy of his love again, I suppose. While I wanted to stand and walk away, take Jendayi and never come back to Haji's house, something wouldn't allow me to move a muscle. "Hello, Daraja."

I didn't respond to him. Hearing his voice was bringing my emotions to the surface and I hated that. I'd been crying more in the past couple of months than I had in the last few years. It was so unlike me... or maybe it was a part of me that I had buried during my journey away from Gambo and the emotion of losing my mother had resurrected it.

My father cleared his throat and said, "I owe you an apology. When I heard everything you'd been through, I was angry. I allowed that anger to take control of me in ways I never knew. You weren't the only person I was angry with. I was with myself for allowing my baby girl to experience so much abuse. I was angry at Bukola for not being attentive enough to our baby. Then I realized how selfish I was being by shifting some of the blame to your mother. She was dealing with enough. Her health was much worse than she'd let on and

it was difficult for her to focus on things of that nature when she was in so much pain.”

He rubbed his hand down his face and continued, “As your father, I failed you. Instead of being angry and embarrassed, I should have pulled you closer to me, knowing that you somehow found your way out on your own. You were taken advantage of and abused before you had become a mature woman... before you could even experience the joys of being a woman. Without counseling... something you probably should have had, you dealt with that abuse the best way you knew how. I’m proud of you for excelling despite the absence of parental guidance.”

I remained quiet, refusing to look at him. Chinara slid her hand over mine, trying to coax the words out of me, but nothing came... nothing that would be good for me to say to my father. I was rarely at a loss for words, but the right words failed me. “Daraja, please say something. Even if you don’t forgive me for my selfish and insensitive reaction... just say something.”

Finally turning to look at him, I allowed the tear to fall down my cheek. “You hurt me, Papa. I never expected you and Chinara to turn your backs on me while I was still dealing with the most hurtful thing of all. Mama and I talked often and while she didn’t know the extent of the abuse I endured with Gambo, she knew that I was wrestling with something. She knew that I was running from myself. I didn’t stop running until I met Jarius. So, I wasn’t excelling at anything. We had just happened to move to a country where I didn’t know anyone. My reputation couldn’t follow me.”

When I took a moment to gather my composure, Papa said, “I also realized that you were just like your mother. She walked to the beat of her own drum. Trying to silence her drum, her parents married her off to me. While in our culture it isn’t socially acceptable for a woman to sleep around, it was worse back then. You have a lot of her in you. Her strength, stubbornness, and caring spirit embodied you a long time ago.”

“She told me. But when I met Jarius, I experienced my last first kiss. He’s the only man I’ve entertained here and he’s the only man I have plans of entertaining. I’d been running from love and he helped me realize that I didn’t have to run anymore. Papa, I don’t know...”

I closed my eyes, trying to make myself release forgiveness, but the truth was that I was still hurting. He and Chinara... him even more so, had hurt me beyond words. For him to keep this silence going between us for so long had hurt even more. Chinara at least tried to make things right between us before we buried Mama. I just didn’t talk to her until then. But him... it had been over three weeks. “Chinara, can you get Jendayi’s things ready for tonight?”

She nodded, then stood and went inside. As I stood, he stood, too, and pulled me in his arms. “You are my baby girl, and I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I’m sorry that I allowed other people to dictate your worth. I was so stupid.”

I crumbled against him, finally hugging him back and sobbing into his chest, similar to the way I’d done with Jarius when Mama died. The levees had been broken and I held on tightly to my father. My entire grieving process came back to the forefront because I hadn’t been able to grieve the loss of her with him. He kissed my head and continued to hold me and rub my head. “This will never happen again. Nothing will ever make me turn my back on either of my daughters. I love you so much and I hate that I failed to show you that.”

Pulling away from him, I wiped my face and said, “I forgive you, Papa. I’m sorry for letting you down.”

He put his hands to my face and forced me to look at him. “Listen. You don’t owe me an apology. I’m proud of the woman before me. I’m just happy that you accepted me back into your life. You and Chinara are my world and it wasn’t complete without you in it. I was such a fool.”

“I love you, Papa.”

He hugged me again, gently rubbing my back. When we pulled away and I turned to go inside, Haji came outside and draped Jendayi’s bag across my shoulder. “Well, damn. I take

it that you're rushing me and Jendayi out of here," I said, then chuckled.

"Hell yeah. I need my wife."

I wrapped my arm around his waist and said, "Thank you for everything. You've been amazing, Haji. You take care of all of us like we're your family."

"You are."

"You know what I mean. Thank you, brother."

"Always, sis."

As I headed inside, Chinara was putting Jendayi in her car seat. I couldn't help but laugh. These two were something serious. Papa kissed my cheek and headed to his room as Chinara smiled at me. "I'm glad that I was able to help out."

"Me too! I'm gonna even fix you and Jarius some food, so you don't have to cook."

"I appreciate that. He's gonna be in for a surprise when he sees our niece."

"No, he won't. I already called him," Haji said.

I couldn't help but laugh at the two of them. Although Papa had kept Jendayi for them to go out last night, she was still in the house. As long as she was in the house, there was no way Chinara would be able to stay away from her, especially not if she started crying. I couldn't wait to get to Jarius to see what he had planned for the three of us. He'd stayed home to get some work done. Once Chinara had finished fixing our food, Haji grabbed the to-go containers and Jendayi and Chinara looped her arm through mine as they walked us out.

Seeing how happy they looked to be able to spend time together tonight made me smile. I was just grateful that I could give them the opportunity to do so.



WHEN I WALKED into Mr. Joseph's classroom, he smiled at me. I didn't return the smile. His ass had put me and Jarius on edge the other night. He had me so nervous about school, I'd snapped on Jarius. After sitting in my normal seat, I crossed my legs, then pulled the desktop over my lap. Once I got my materials ready, I texted Jarius. *Have a great meeting today, baby. I love you.*

I love you, too. Have a good day, too, babe.

When I'd gotten home with Jendayi yesterday, I noticed that he'd bought all kinds of stuffed animals and toys for her. We'd played with her all evening, but the icing on the cake was him staring into my eyes, saying, *I can't wait to put one of these beauties in you.* He'd made me all warm on the inside. As soon as I finished school, he could impregnate me as many times as his heart saw fit. Today he had a meeting with D-Eazy's manager, and I was nervous about how much he could possibly be gone. A couple of others had called for him as well, but he couldn't get with them on his availability until after his meeting today to see what dates he would be meeting him on the road. Jarius promised that he would take me with him when he could, so I wouldn't be home alone.

I'd also talked to Denae, finally. We'd been playing phone tag for a few days. She was just wanting to talk about her ex and said it felt good to have someone to talk to. We had a day planned for next weekend and were working on a girls' trip for us, Gangsta Dee, and Chinara. I couldn't wait to get away for a vacation. My last trip wasn't so pleasant, and it only drained me more than I already was. It had depleted me.

As I took notes, I tried to avoid Mr. Joseph's gaze. His eyes landed on mine often and it was only assuring me that I had made the right decision to file a grievance against him. He couldn't seem to take a hint. I never messaged him back and today I didn't smile at him. That alone should have told him that I wasn't interested, not to mention that he knew I had a boyfriend. I wasn't naturally a rude person, especially with a sexy man, but I could be. Jarius was my all and there was no room for anyone else. Seeing how he'd evolved over the past year was enough for me to dedicate the rest of my life to

him... get baptized and share with the world all that he'd done for me.

I was constantly debating about converting to Christianity since that was the religion he mostly identified with. While I didn't consider myself a Muslim, I wasn't a Christian, either. I wasn't really anything. I believed there was a God, a higher power... but that was about it. As I sat contemplating that, Mr. Joseph ended his lecture and dismissed class. Before I could leave, he called out, "Ms. Nwachuku."

When I looked up at him, he waved me over to his desk. I slightly rolled my eyes and when I got there, he smiled and said, "I take it that you aren't interested in my proposal."

"I am not. I did look at you before getting in the car that day, but that was to show you I had everything I needed. I filed a grievance this morning. Please don't contact me again... ever in your life. That was rude and stalkerish. If I didn't give you my number, then you didn't have permission to use it."

He turned slightly red. "I wish you would have come to me before filing."

"We'd spoken already. You knew I had a boyfriend and you clearly saw that I was happy with who I have. You crossed the line. I just want to come to school, do well, and graduate. That's it. My personal life is intact. I appreciate your concern when my mama died, but I got it from here."

I walked away from him, feeling pleased with myself. Hopefully, he didn't try to retaliate against me through my grade. I didn't think he would be that dumb. He would most likely be put on some type of probation... unless this wasn't his first complaint. As I walked to my next class, I sent Jarius a text that read, *We shouldn't have any more problems.*

CHAPTER 18

Jarius

AFTER THE MEETING with D-Eazy's manager, I placed a call to Quan to offer my skills. I sent him a copy of my availability and he said he would get back with me. In the meeting, not only did we go over the schedule, we made a contract and I'd gotten a retainer of sorts for my services. We negotiated prices for the cuts and for securing me for the dates he wanted. My retainer was the price of all the cuts for the ten dates I was booked for... right at five hundred dollars. Which wasn't a bad deal for him. That was chump change. However, the more in demand I got, those prices would see an increase. All the other times he needed a cut, he would be in Houston.

Before going home, I passed by the site for my new shop. Renovations were underway and I was beyond excited. I owed my nigga, Haji, big for this. It was because of him that I could now come and go as I pleased and spend more time with my baby. When I got home, I put all Jendayi's toys away. We'd had so much fun with her last night. I knew that we'd be watching her more often. Haji and Chinara would most likely appreciate every minute of that.

When I walked into the house, I undressed and laid across the bed for a minute. I planned to take baby girl to lunch, but I could use a nap. Before I could dose off, though, my mama

called. She was getting along with Daraja, especially since Denaë loved her. “What’s up, Ma?”

“Hey. I just wanted to tell you that you finally got letters from the IRS confirming that all that shit was paid in full. They put deadlines on everybody else, but they take their damn time on their end.”

“I don’t even care. I’m just glad it’s done.”

“I know that’s right, son. Well, when are you coming back to town?”

“I don’t know. Probably before I go to Miami.”

“Miami? What the hell you going to Miami for?”

“I got a contract with D-Eazy as his personal barber. So, we sat down and went over some dates and he locked me in.”

“Congratulations, baby! That’s what you always wanted.”

“Yep. Thanks to Haji, I’m gon’ be doing what I wanted. So, thank you for running your big mouth.”

“Oooh. Hell, no. Yo’ ass gon’ thank me better than that. Whenever you come, I need a spa day and a five-star meal. You heard me?”

I chuckled. “I got’chu, woman. But let me get this nap in and I’ll call you later.”

“Okay. Send me Raja number. I need to be able to get ahold of her without having to go through you. We got shit to talk about.”

I rolled my eyes. “To say you couldn’t stand her, you shol’ kissing her ass, now.”

“Boy, shut the hell up and do what the fuck I asked you to do. Always got some slick shit to say.”

I shook my head and said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. She in class, so don’t call now.”

“I know how to text. Damn! Find you some business. Bye, nigga.”

I swear she got on my nerves. At least she said bye this time. After sending her the number, I passed out.



“SO, WHEN DO YOU LEAVE?” Daraja asked, sounding disappointed.

“Not for another whole month. You might be able to come with me. I need to see this body in a bikini on Miami Beach. All this sexy-ass chocolate, laying in the sand, gon’ have a nigga on ten. What’chu think about that?”

“If I’m done with school, then that’ll be perfect.”

“Don’t worry, baby girl. So far, I’m only gonna be gone once a month, except for December and January... so far. We gon’ make a trip to Beaumont probably in the next couple of weeks, too. Did my mama text you?”

“Yeah. She was just saying hey and how we gotta hit your pockets when we come to Beaumont. I like her so much more now. I didn’t think we were going to get along at all.”

“Me neither. But I’m glad she changed her attitude after our talk that day.”

I pulled her to me and kissed her cheek as we walked to the car from the grill we’d gone to for brunch. We’d eaten our bellies full and now she wanted to take a nap, but I had other plans for her. She’d never gone ice skating and I promised her that I would take her one day. She probably thought I’d forgotten by now because that was months ago that we’d talked about that. She was just in her first semester of school when she’d first mentioned it. Once we left there, I planned to bring her to a salon to get her nails and feet done.

As I drove past our exit, she looked at me with a slight frown on her face. “Where are we going?”

“You gon’ see in a minute. Just ride, baby.”

She smiled slightly. It was rare that I surprised her. During our relationship before we became a couple, she’d told me that

she didn't do surprises. That was understandable for a woman that didn't commit. She wasn't close enough or comfortable enough with a man for him to be surprising her. But now, since I was fo' sho' the only nigga she was fucking with, it didn't seem to be a problem. I knew her well enough to know what she liked, and she knew that I loved her. All my surprises would have good intentions and she would be the focus behind anything I did.

When we pulled up to the Galleria, she looked even more confused. Grabbing our jackets from the back, I got out to help her out. I chuckled as I walked around the car, because she was so damn confused, especially when I grabbed jackets. It was summertime in Houston. Jackets weren't needed. After opening her door and helping her out the car, she stretched, then said, "I think I might know what we're doing here."

Her lips eased into a smile and she leaned against me as I took her socks from my pocket and handed them to her. She smiled big, then hugged me tightly. "Wow. Thank you, baby."

Once we made our way inside and she saw that ice-skating rink, she started hopping up and down, not being able to contain her excitement. I couldn't stop the big, Kool-Aid smile that appeared on my face either. Seeing her filled with so much excitement made me happy, knowing I was the indirect cause of it. She leaned into me and said, "I'm so excited, I wanna take you in one of these family bathrooms and fuck you up."

"Well... shit. You know I ain't ever against digging up in that wet-ass pussy. That shit worth catching case."

She giggled, then looked back at the rink. I laughed, then said, "Come on, girl. Let's get some skates."

I'd ice-skated a few times, so I knew baby girl would need my help. That shit took some getting used to, even if you knew how to skate. Once she figured out balancing on that blade, she'd be good. As we sat to get our skates on, Daraja was beaming with excitement. She watched the other ice skaters go by and I could see it in her eyes. I'd never seen her continuously smile for such a long period of time. Once we'd

gotten our skates on, I helped her to the ice and baby girl was struggling. We stayed close to the wall while she got comfortable.

After a couple of times around the rink, she loosened up a bit, venturing away from the wall but still holding onto me. Once we got to just holding hands, she smiled at me and said, “This is fun! I think I have it!”

I smiled at her and eased my hand out of hers but stayed close. Her smile was big but then I could see she was about to lose her balance. I slid my arm around her waist and grabbed her hand. “I got’chu. I won’t go far. You’re doing good.”

She kissed my lips, then gathered herself. When she let go this time, she was good. Throughout the few hours we were there, I watched her glides go from like small steps, to long fluid motions. She was becoming a pro, but my feet were fucking hurting. She was so happy, though, so I couldn’t tell her I was ready to go and interrupt her. “I’m gonna sit down for a while, baby girl. You feel comfortable continuing by yourself?”

“Yes. I think I have it. Thank you so much, Jarius.”

“Thank me later.”

I kissed her lips then headed to a bench. I was gon’ need a fucking foot massage before the day was over with. Shit, I would probably stay at the nail salon with her and get a pedicure. As I sat and watched her skate, I couldn’t help but think about how far we’d come. After two months of dipping in her honey pot, I was ready to give her the world. I was pussy whipped and wanted more from her. She didn’t see it. She was determined to keep me at a distance. I was thankful that she would rather give me a chance than to let me go. There was no way I would have felt for another woman what I felt for her.

I wanted to be the type of man my mama didn’t have... the type of father that I didn’t have. That nigga was trash. Any man that could walk away from his kids was trash. I didn’t care what the woman did or didn’t do. Hearing a man say, *she won’t let me see my kids*, rubbed me raw. I wanted to have

babies with Daraja. I planned to love my kids beyond words, and they would feel it, no matter where me and Raja ended up. There would be nothing she could do to keep me from them. But at this moment, I felt like a fucking psychic because I saw us running shit together... forever.

We would be a power couple that people would look at and say, *relationship goals*. Yeah. That would be us. Both doing our thang to make our relationship work... arguing hard but loving and fucking harder. It was gon' take work, but I was willing to put it in. I was just grateful that she opened up to me, letting me be the man to take her heart and nurture it.

When she'd gone around the rink a few more times, she decided to skate towards me. I supposed she was done. We'd been here for three hours and I had no intention of going back to that ice. Just as she was exiting, I stood to help her. Thankfully, I got there in time because she nearly slipped and fell backward. That ice wouldn't have been nothing nice on her ass. "Oh shit!" she yelled.

I chuckled and said, "I got'chu."

She put her hand to her chest and said, "I saw my life flash before my eyes."

I rolled my eyes at her dramatics. "Man, whatever."

"Feel!"

I put my hand on her chest and it felt like her heart was about to beat out of it. I shook my head and said, "If you would have hit that ice, it would have been months before you would have wanted to come back."

She giggled. "Well, good thing I didn't."

"Right. Well, come on so we can go do something about our aching feet."

She smiled at me and said, "You are just full of surprises today."

"Yep. I have all kind of shit for you to do. My beard needs conditioning so it can keep its exuberance... you know... look all lively and shit."

She fell out laughing. “You are so crazy. But I will gladly ride the fuck out of your face.”

“See, keep on talking and we ain’t gon’ make it to this nail shop.”

She stood after getting her shoes on and said, “That’s where you’re wrong. We’re gonna go there, you’re gonna get me something else to eat, and then I will give you something to eat.”

I stood and wrapped my arms around her waist. “You so damn nasty. I love that shit.”

She giggled as we made our way to the counter to turn in our skates. When we walked outside and thawed out some, I started feeling the jitters, knowing what all I had in store for her. After getting to the car, before she could get in, I said, “I want every day with you to be like this.”

She smiled and said, “If we work hard at it, it will be.”

I nodded, then opened her door. She was damn right, and a nigga was definitely willing to put in the work.



“BABY, WAKE UP.”

Daraja rolled over, then looked at me and smiled. “How long was I asleep?”

“About two hours.”

“Damn. I’m not gonna want to sleep tonight.”

“Perfect. I don’t plan on sleeping either.”

She rolled her eyes playfully, then sniffed with a slight smile on her face. “You cooked?”

“Mmm-hmm. Smothered pork chops that’s gon’ have you calling on the Lord. Yo’ man is a jack of all trades.”

“Okay. Let me get myself together.”

I smiled at her, then went back to the kitchen. The moment we got back from the nail shop and had eaten something light and quick, she went to sleep, and I got started. I'd put roses on the table, candles around the room and bought wine. She was gonna be surprised when she came out here and heard one of her favorite singers playing through the speaker. She was in love with Tamia. I was more into rap, but that shit wasn't gon' set the mood I needed.

When she came out, she stopped dead in her tracks. A look of shock registered on her face, then she slowly smiled. "Wow, baby. This is beautiful."

I walked over to her and grabbed her hand, leading her to the table. When she sat, I immediately went to my knee. She was staring at me silently, I assumed not wanting to ruin the moment by asking questions. I'd been planning this moment for the past couple of weeks, but that didn't stop me from being nervous as hell. Even after asking her dad for her hand in marriage. I believed that was one of the things that prompted him to make things right with her. Despite her past, she was in a good spot now. That was all that mattered.

Pulling the box from my pocket, I said, "I know we ain't been a couple long, but for the past year and a few months, you've ruled my thoughts and eventually my heart. Everything about you seized me and wouldn't let go. Daraja, I love you and I see you in my future. Ain't no point in waiting. Waiting for what? The only thing that will change with time is my love for you. It'll get stronger day by day. Tell me that you gon' continue to fuck my world up by accepting my last name."

I opened the box and revealed the 6.6 carat, radiant cut, halo ring. My best friend was a diamond jeweler. I had access to some exclusive shit. When she saw the 18k, yellow gold ring, her eyes widened. I could see the emotion all over her as she brought her hands to her mouth. "I never saw myself being anyone's bride. I didn't feel that I would be a prize for anyone. But you... you've shown me what real love is all about, despite the twists and turns our lives can take. Real love doesn't take into account where you've been... only the

possibilities of where you can go. I will gladly carry your last name with honor.”

I bit my bottom lip as I slid the ring on her trembling finger. The moment I let it go, I spread her legs and said, “Now let me marry the pussy.”

“Hell yes, baby. She’s ready to say, I do.”

EPILOGUE

Daraja
Two years later...

“DARAJA BOLANLE NWACHUKU, SUMMA CUM LAUDE.”

Although Chinara, Haji, my dad, Jarius, Gangsta Dee, and Denae were the only ones up there cheering for me, I could hear them loud and clear as I crossed the stage, receiving my Bachelor of Science degree in nursing. I was ready to become an RN at someone’s hospital or doctor’s office. It had been a difficult road, but I kept my mother’s memory in my heart and achieved greatness, taking classes whenever I could, which allowed me to graduate a year early.

Jarius had been amazing for the past two years. We’d traveled to some of the most amazing places in the United States together... from Miami to Los Angeles and New York City. We’d agreed to get married at the courthouse the Monday after I graduated. We’d gotten our marriage license a couple of days ago and I couldn’t wait to change my last name. There was no need for a wedding or going to Nigeria like Chinara had done. No one would be celebrating with me. I only had a few friends from my years here at U of H and our families. Jarius was cool with it. He was ready to get married the moment he asked me.

As I sat in my chair and waved at Jendayi, who was on her dad’s shoulders, my friend said, “You have a beautiful family. Congratulations, girl.”

“Congratulations to you, too,” I said, then hugged her.

Once the ceremony was over, I ran through the crowd straight into the arms of my soon-to-be husband. Everyone around him clapped and laughed at my excitement. When he released me, he turned to Haji and grabbed a bouquet of flowers and said, “Congratulations, baby. You’ve worked so hard. To finish a four-year degree in three is beyond amazing and I’m glad to say this amazing woman before me is about to be my wife.”

I smiled and was about to kiss him when his mama pushed him out the way and said, “Quit hogging her all to yourself. We all wanna congratulate her.”

I laughed loudly, then hugged her. “Gangsta Dee is coming out! Thank you so much for coming.”

She sucked her teeth. “You know I wouldn’t have missed this for the world. You my girl and I’m glad you got that knucklehead in line. I already consider you my daughter, so ain’t nothing gon’ change Monday. I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too.”

I continued hugging everybody as I learned of our reservations at Pappadeaux’s. I loved their seafood and their drinks, so I was beyond happy with their choice. Before we could disperse, I said, “Can I have everyone’s attention?”

My family crowded around me as I slid my hand in my gown, pulling a small gift box from my cleavage and handing it to Jarius. He frowned slightly. “Babe, this is your day. What’chu getting me a gift for?”

“For all your support... putting up with my mood swings, sleepless nights, and indecisiveness about everything. I love you and I just wanted to say thank you.”

He kissed my lips and said, “Well, shit, in that case, this shit is well-deserved.”

Everybody laughed and watched as he opened his gift. When he pulled the positive pregnancy test out of it, he nearly came unglued. Jarius lifted me from my feet and spun me

around. “Man! Is this for real? I thought you were on birth control?”

I giggled and responded, “It’s very real, daddy. I stopped my birth control four months ago. It just took a little while for it to get out of my system for this to happen.”

He went to his knees and hugged me around my waist, kissing my stomach as Haji took pictures. He and Chinara knew about my pregnancy. She was standing to the side with a huge smile as she held their four-month-old son and Papa held a two-and-a-half-year-old Jendayi. She and Haji had obviously been doing well, especially after Chinara finally received the counseling she desperately needed. Little Ense was proof of that.

When Jarius stood, he kissed my lips and said, “We get to start our family sooner than I thought. Damn. I love you, girl.”

“I love you, too. Looks like I overdosed on you, too. Good thing you were my last first kiss.”

The End

AFTERWORD

From the Author...

These two were so nasty from the very beginning! LOL Despite the complexities with why Daraja was the way she was, I loved her. She wasn't afraid of being who she was. Sis said she was horny, but she didn't want a man. She got what she wanted and moved on. I could respect that! Jarius and his mama were super fun to write! Momma Dee... Ma Dukes, Lil Scrappy's mama, was the inspiration behind her character. And in that order! LOL

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 (@authormonicawalters), Instagram (@authormonicawalters) and Twitter (@monlwalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases. Please subscribe to my webpage for updates! <https://authormonicawalters.com>.

For live discussions, giveaways, and inside information on upcoming releases, join my Facebook group, Monica's Romantic Sweet Spot at <https://bit.ly/2P2106X>.



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