



B. LOVE
A FATHER'S
OBJECTION

RECLAIMING A BLACK MAFIA ENFORCER
BLACK MAYHEM MAFIA SAGA BOOK FIVE

A FATHER'S OBJECTION

RECLAIMING A BLACK MAFIA ENFORCER

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THE FAMILY CHART

Samuel Black & Earl Mayhem –

First Generation Creators of the Black Mayhem Mafia

Colton Black –

Second Generation Black Mayhem Boss

April – Mother of Savant and Dijon

Kirby – Mother of Assad and Hassan

John Mayhem –

Second Generation Black Mayhem Boss (Deceased)

Royal – Mother of Remi, Rameek, and Rakim

Assad Black –

Current Boss

With – Scarlett Graham

Hassan Black –

The Money Man

With – Vanna White

Savant Black –

The OG

Dijon Black –

The Princess

With – Naeem Cassidy

The Enforcer

Rakim Mayhem –

Head of Security

Remi Mayhem –

Second OG

Rameek Mayhem –

Prosecutor. Assad's best friend and Successor if ever needed.

Vixen Mayhem –

The Punisher

PROLOGUE

Dijon would have sworn she was dreaming, but for once in her life, her reality felt better than her dreams. On the white balcony table, there was a large Greek breakfast spread. Sitting across from her was the most-beautiful, selfless, protector of a man she'd ever been with. When Naeem told her to pick anywhere in the world that she wanted to go to make their relationship official... only one place came to mind—Santorini, Greece. It was where she wanted to get married, so it made sense that it be the place they officially started their relationship.

Naeem stood and went back into their cave suite, and although he was a beautiful vision, Dijon smiled at the sight of the deep blue sea and volcano that were like a painting from God Himself. A soft sigh escaped her as she sat back in her seat. So far, this had been the best three days of her life, and Dijon didn't think it could get any better... until Naeem returned holding a long black box. Instead of sitting back down, he made his way over to her.

Kneeling, Naeem's fingers softly caressed her ankle. It was crazy how a man could be so delicate yet dangerous at the same damn time.

"I want you to wear something for me," his deep, smooth voice demanded.

Naeem's under-turned, chocolate-colored eyes lowered to the box in his hand. Opening it, he pulled out the gold ankle bracelet that had his name spelled out in diamonds. She'd seen

countless women wear their man's name or initials on a necklace... but never an anklet.

Wrapping the bracelet around her ankle, Naeem confirmed, "You're mine, right?"

Nibbling her bottom lip softly, Dijon nodded. "Yes," she almost whispered.

"Forever?" The left side of her mouth tilted as she nodded again. "I want you to wear this for a few reasons." He kissed her ankle. "I want this to always be a physical statement to any nigga that eyes you that you're taken. I want to see it while I'm digging in your pussy every night. And I want this to ground you and remind you that I'm not just your soul mate, but I'm your s-o-l-e mate. Your life partner, meant to walk every day of life with you... for the rest of your life. You'll never feel alone or rejected or unwanted again."

When he kissed her ankle this time, Dijon moaned quietly as her eyes fluttered. Pulling him up by his bulging bicep, she connected his lips with hers and wrapped her arms around his neck. Naeem lifted her from her seat and carried her back into their suite. She took a handful of his dreads into her hand and tugged, getting a low growl out of him. As much as Dijon wanted to tell Naeem that she loved him, she couldn't.

Not right now.

Not because the timing wasn't right—it was.

But there was a part of her that feared things would change between them when Naeem learned the truth. When Savant got the results from Destiny's bloodwork and DNA test, there was no telling what Naeem would do. Who he would want. If they would be together or not.

Dijon would never doubt his feelings for her, and he'd been proving long before now with his actions that he was committed to her. However, if there was a chance for him to reconnect with his ex-wife, was she really supposed to believe he wouldn't take it?

Just the thought had her heartbeat racing as he placed her in the center of the bed.

It had been eating her up alive not telling him the truth, but it was for his own good, and that was the only way she'd been maintaining her peace. The last thing she wanted to do was tell Naeem there was a woman claiming to be Destiny and it not be real. No way in hell would they inflict that kind of painful hope on him. All Dijon could think about was if he died and she had the chance to have him again... she'd do everything in her power to have him back. And there was no doubt that Destiny would be on the same wave too.

With that in mind, Dijon decided to make the most of every day, every second that they had together. If things were going to change when Naeem found out, she'd make as many memories with him as she could so they could last for the rest of her life.

“Baby,” she called, sitting up. Naeem looked down at her as she untied the belt on his thick white robe. “You’ve made me the happiest woman in the world.” His smile was small as he ran his hand down her cheek. Dijon placed a kiss to his sculpted six-pack. “Everything I asked God for in a life partner, I’ve found in you. You treat me like I’m one of the most-important people in your life. Like I matter. I feel so loved and safe with you. I’m honored to wear your name and spend the rest of my life with you.”

When she tried to take his thick, heavy shaft into her hand, Naeem gently pushed her back down on the bed and dropped to his knees.

“Give me six months and you’ll have my last name too.”

Dijon’s grin spread as did her legs. Naeem gripped her thighs and saturated them with tender kisses... each one higher up than the next. By the time he made his way to her pussy, Dijon’s breathing had grown ragged. Moaning deep within his throat, Naeem licked his lips and spread her bottom set. Her eyes closed at the feel of his lips pressing a kiss to her clit. Slowly, his tongue circled before he sucked her clit into his mouth.

As always, Naeem tongue kissed her pussy with the perfect precision. Holding her in place by her waist, he

pleasured her until his chin and shiny, short beard were coated with her nectar... then he feasted on her pussy some more.

“Please, Naeem,” she begged through trembling lips, pinching her hardened nipples through her robe. “Can I cum?”

“Mhm,” he granted, latching on to her clit and applying pressure as he tugged.

Her legs locked around him, and her back arched as she came. Pulling his dreads, Dijon’s mouth dropped open, and she muttered his name as her eyes squeezed shut. Once her body laxed, Naeem stood and pushed her deeper into the center of the bed. She watched him crawl between her legs... like a hunter preparing to devour its prey. Naeem opened her robe and kissed down her neck, breasts, and stomach before putting her ankles on his shoulders and slowly pressing his way into her.

Leaning forward, he connected their lips and began to make love to her.

Slow movements sped up with time. And desire. And passion. Long, soft strokes became hard and deep. Her eyes were fixed on that anklet... dangling each time he entered her. When it started to become too much, Dijon’s arms lifted, and she gripped the sheets above her head. Her eyes closed, and she willed herself not to cry. Now was not the time to be thinking about losing him. All she could do was trust that he’d keep his word and not leave her, no matter what—not even the return of his supposed to be dead first love.

Dijon

IT WAS hard for Dijon to ignore Dewayne's anxious movements. He'd become one of her favorite corner boys over the years. Every time she had to help Hassan with a count, Dijon would thoroughly enjoy conversing with Dewayne. At first, she thought it was Naeem's brooding presence that had him anxious, but when the constant vibrating of his phone kept cutting through the silence, her intuition told her it was more than that.

Scratching her jaw, Dijon released a heavy sigh and looked his frame over.

"You're not going to answer that?" she checked, pulling stacks of cash from the black garbage bag he'd set on the table.

"Nah." His head shook as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "It can wait."

When it began to vibrate again, Dijon smiled. "It doesn't sound like they want to. Why don't you answer it? Better yet, why don't you give it to me?"

Dewayne's eyes ballooned and head shook. Naeem made his way over to the table.

"Everything good over here?"

“I hope I’m just being paranoid.” Dijon lifted her hand toward Dewayne. “Let me see that shit.”

Dewayne chuckled as he took a step back. “The fuck for?”

“You acting real anxious and jittery, and somebody blowing you up. Don’t let me find out you’re trying to set us up.”

He scoffed, taking another casual step back. “You like my sister, D. You know I wouldn’t do no shit like that.”

“Then answer your phone, Dewayne.”

Licking his lips, Dewayne looked from Dijon to Naeem as his expression turned to stone. “I’mma answer it when I leave. Can you count this shit so I can go?”

There were no windows in the warehouse, but there were security cameras.

“Check the cameras,” she ordered, standing to her feet. Freddy headed out as she put the money on the table back in the bag. Dewayne began to rock on his heels, clenching his jaw and shaking his head every few seconds. “If you talk to me, I can help you,” Dijon assured calmly.

“I—” Dewayne looked back at Naeem before running his hand down his face. “It wasn’t my fault, D. They got my daughter and didn’t leave me with much of a choice.”

“Who?”

“Wocko’s crew. He took my baby mama and daughter this afternoon when he saw me leaving the house on Bailmont with my stash. I’m supposed to call him when you’re done with the count so he and his crew can come in and clean up.”

Dijon chuckled. “Are they really that damn stupid to think they can get away with this?” Before he could answer, she added, “Why in the fuck would you keep this shit to yourself? Have we not been like family to you?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Are you not supposed to be more loyal to us than yourself?”

“D... I swear to God—”

“Give me your fucking phone,” she interrupted, irritation brewing.

It was never a surprise to find a snake in their organization, but for that snake to be Dewayne... that shit hurt on a deeper level. When Freddy yelled that there were three blacked-out cars pulling up, Dijon grumbled under her breath and walked around the desk.

“Get everyone in position and move the money out the back,” she ordered, grabbing her purse and phone off the table. “When they call back,” she started, standing directly in front of Dewayne, “I want you to answer and tell them I’m leaving out the back door and they can come in.”

Dewayne nodded, eyes lowering to his phone as it began to vibrate. She answered the call and put it on speaker. As soon as Dewayne relayed the message, Dijon sent the number that called to her phone, then wiped it of her prints on her shirt and handed it back to him. No sooner than it touched his fingers, Naeem was slitting his throat.

Her eyes closed as his blood spewed. A little while ago, seeing Naeem take a life would have turned her stomach and made her want to cry. Now, she was used to it, and it barely fazed her. If anything, she was upset that his blood had gotten on her favorite white shirt.

“Let’s go.” Naeem took her hand and quickly led her toward the back exit. Just before they made it, the front doors were opening, and shots were ringing.

A confident smile covered her face, sure her team would come out alive and victorious because they had the upper hand. Quickly hopping into her Maserati, Naeem held her hand and swerved out of the parking lot.

“I’m proud of you,” he mentioned, looking over at her briefly. “If you wouldn’t have caught that, I wouldn’t have been able to get you out of there before they came in.”

“Even if you hadn’t, I know I would have made it out alive with you.”

Biting down on his bottom lip, Naeem stared at her for a few seconds with hunger in his eyes. After merging onto the interstate, he pulled her over to him for a quick, sloppy kiss. When he released her, he told her to call Assad and set up a meeting so she could let him know about what had just happened and use their resources to make sure Dewayne's daughter and her mother would be okay. A few minutes passed before Freddy was calling and confirming none of their men had been hurt.

Dijon directed him to remove all security cameras and leftover money before the police were dispatched to the scene. They wouldn't have time to wipe everything down, so she told him to torch the place. It was better to lose one of their locations than risk any of their fingerprints linking them to those bodies.

As she stared out of the window, Dijon's head shook in disbelief. No matter how good she got at this, no part of her would ever be fully prepared to lose someone she liked, respected, and loved. Everything she did now took her back to Naeem and Destiny. Dewayne's betrayal, though sad, was nowhere near as sad as she was sure she'd feel when Naeem found out the news.

Looking over at him, Dijon kissed his hand as her eyes watered. Savant was honing her mind, Assad was building her strength, Hassan was teaching her the game, Rakim was training her for battle... but Naeem? Naeem was her protector. Her guide. Her safety. She could do this without him for as long as Hassan needed her to if it came down to it... but Lord knows she'd feel like a fish out of water without Naeem by her side. In the business... and in love.

N^{aeem}

WHEN CRYSTAL, Naeem's mother, told him to come over for dinner, his intuition told him she was up to something. They usually saw each other two or three times a month because of their schedules. Crystal worked an overnight shift for a private healthcare company. If she was spending her evening cooking and cleaning instead of resting... something was definitely up. Not wanting to question his mother, Naeem headed over, believing he would soon learn the reason for his visit.

As he sat in the driveway of his mother's two-story home, he took a moment to pray and send some love to his father before he went in. Back in the day, Naeem was naïve to just how cutthroat his father was. Nathan was a beast, but he didn't have power over his life or control of his strength. He made sure that wouldn't be the case for his son though. Every time he trained Naeem physically, he strengthened his mind and spirit too. All that Naeem was, was because of his parents—and he'd always be grateful for that.

Sure, he had a brief lapse in sanity and was hardened because of it, but what man in his situation wouldn't? It was the grace of the Most High that pulled him through. On his own strength, after losing his entire family, Naeem would have been in a mental hospital or dead. Now, things were better and brighter than they'd been in a while. Not only did he have peace, but he had happiness and love too. Purpose. A beautiful

life partner by his side and extended family that welcomed him in with warm, open arms.

Getting out of the car, Naeem looked around the quiet neighborhood before heading to the front door. He rang the doorbell, then entered.

“I’m in the kitchen, Naeem,” his mother informed, and Naeem’s nose led him in that direction before his feet even could.

As he made his way down the entry hallway, his eyes scanned the pictures of his family that hung on the walls. His heart longed for simpler times. When the four of them were in a smaller house with old-school tunes playing in the background. He’d be at the grill with his father while Naima would be dancing in the grass with his mother. Those were the days, and Naeem couldn’t think of a time where something so small made him so happy. All he could do was hope that one day in the near future, he’d be at his own grill... with his own son... watching Dijon and his daughter dance in the grass.

“Wassup, Queen?” Naeem greeted, getting an instant smile from his mother.

Her arms opened, and he made his way inside, pulling her into his embrace.

“My beautiful son. How are you, baby?”

“I’m well. How are you?”

As he released his mother, he walked over to the small table in the corner and grabbed a green apple from the rooster decorated bowl. Her entire kitchen was decorated with a country, rooster theme. To this day, Naeem had no idea what prompted his mother to become obsessed with the décor, but if she liked it, that was all that mattered.

“I’m great now that both of my children are here.”

Stopping mid-bite, he frowned as his head tilted.

Naeem set the apple down and grinned at the sight of his twin sister. Looking at her often felt like looking in a mirror. Though there were a few differences in their features, there

were more similarities. From her height and tone, bushy brows, chocolate-colored eyes, and round, plump lips... Naima had all the makings of a Cassidy clan family member.

“Man, say. Get your ass over here and give your big brother a hug.”

Naima’s cheeks lifted as she giggled and rolled her eyes playfully. “Three whole minutes older than me and you never let me live it down.”

“Damn right.”

Naima’s grip around his neck was strong, but Naeem didn’t mind. Since birth, he’d been her protector. Three-minute age difference or not... Naima was his baby. His pride and joy. There wasn’t shit he wouldn’t do for his sister.

“I missed you *so much*, Naeem.”

At the sound of her shaky voice, Naeem loosened his grip and tried to look in her eyes, but Naima buried her face in his neck. Looking at his mother, Crystal shrugged as her mouth twisted to the side. Naima hadn’t ever really been emotional. Not to the point of tears.

“What’s going on, Ny?”

Sniffling, Naima pulled herself from his embrace and turned away from both of them. She wiped her face quickly, forcing a smile when she finally turned.

“I can’t just be happy to be home?”

“Always, but we both know it’s more than that.”

Naima’s eyes shifted to their mother, who remained silent.

“It’s nothing, bro. PMS I guess.” She chuckled softly before leaving the kitchen, muttering, “I need to make a call real quick. Let me know when dinner’s ready,” under her breath.

Crystal sighed and waited until Naima was gone to walk over to Naeem. They sat next to each other at the table.

“Maybe she’ll tell you what’s going on because she won’t tell me.”

“How long has she been here?” Naeem checked. “Has she hinted at anything?”

Crystal’s head shook. “Nothing at all. Well, she didn’t act like everything was okay with me like she just did with you. She just didn’t want to tell me what it was.”

Naeem’s head bobbed. That could only mean one of two things; either she was having trouble with a man or with business. Either one would require him to step in. If she didn’t want him to handle it, she’d keep it to herself until she returned home.

“How long is she going to be here?”

“For three days or so. You know she acts like the world she’s building there will crumble if she stays away for too long.”

Naeem remained silent. Their mother didn’t know about the illegal things Naima had gotten herself into. As a youngin, both Naeem and his father kept Naima away from their violent lifestyle. Hell, she didn’t even want anything to do with it. And when she left the city for college, Naeem was sure that was the best way to keep her safe. He’d just gotten married to Destiny and didn’t know how deep he’d get in the game because of it. The less he had to worry about his family, the better.

Somehow, Naima had gone to California and become obsessed with smuggling.

What started out as her helping a street nigga that she was too damn good for turned into her heading his entire organization when he got arrested. Now, she was working for herself, traveling from Tijuana and Baja to San Diego. He probably wouldn’t have worried so much if she didn’t run her scam through known hot spots that had heavy border control... but Naima was a risk taker. The bigger the risk, the more her clients were willing to pay.

“I won’t press her about it now,” Naeem decided. “We’ll just have dinner and catch up, but I’ll find out what’s up before she leaves.”

Crystal's head tilted as she sighed. "Good luck with that."

Dijon

“AH!” Dijon squealed, trying to hold the large black Russian terrier. He’d been trying to climb out of the steel tub ever since she’d placed him inside. Though he was a sweet, older dog, he was very timid and apparently not a fan of water.

All day, she’d been excited to groom him. This was her first time working with the breed, and Dijon was anxious to add him to her resume. His owners warned her that he’d be antsy, so Naeem offered to bathe him and leave the grooming to her, but this was an opportunity she couldn’t pass on. As the fearful dog almost choked himself trying to get out of the tub, Dijon began to wish she’d taken Naeem up on his offer.

“Naeem!” she yelled, pushing the dog back down.

This time, when he plopped back up, he stepped on the hose nozzle and sprayed her with warm water.

“Benji!” she yelled, gripping the edge of the tub to avoid slipping on the puddle of water that had accumulated.

As Benji whined, Dijon didn’t know if she wanted to chuckle or cry. She’d worked with dogs that were difficult to wash time and time again, but Benji’s size put him in a whole other level of difficult.

“I’m surprised your clumsy ass ain’t fell yet,” Naeem teased, gripping the leash that was holding Benji. As soon as

Naeem hovered over him, his fidgeting stopped. Benji plopped down on his bottom and followed the direction of Naeem's hand. "Stay," he commanded, giving Dijon time to compose herself. After a few seconds passed and Benji hadn't budged, Naeem gave him a treat and picked the hose back up. "I'll hold him while you wash."

"Thank you, bae."

Dijon's head tilted, and her lips puckered. Naeem gave her a quick kiss before chuckling again.

"What time is your lunch with the girls?"

"In thirty minutes, but I'm going to be late obviously. I'm just glad I keep clothes in my office, or I would be even later."

"I can take care of him if you want, Dijon."

Her head shook as she lathered the soap atop Benji's coat. "I'm feeling some type of way because he's sitting so still for you."

"Yeah, because I exerted dominance over him. Your ass was in here flopping around like a fish."

Even though she didn't want to, Dijon laughed. The second a dog believed they could control you, they would... no matter how big or small.

"I had it under control until he started trying to get out and splashed water everywhere. Then I started slipping."

"How? You got on nonslip shoes."

"They don't work!"

"Nah." He chuckled again as he pushed hair out of Benji's face. "You just clumsy as fuck."

"Whatever, Naeem. Leave me alone."

Her eyes rolled as a small smile settled on her face. As she continued to wash Benji, Naeem held him, then dried him, and led him over to her grooming station. There, she was able to restrain him better so she could groom him alone. Like expected, it ended up taking her almost an hour to complete the groom, which meant she missed lunch with Scarlett and

Vanna. Since neither of them were in a rush to part ways, they didn't mind waiting at the restaurant for Dijon to arrive.

By the time she'd made it to Las Margaritas, her sisters in love had already eaten. Their heads bobbed as they busied themselves in their phones, enjoying the music and the ambience.

"Hey, ladies. Sorry I'm so late," was Dijon's greeting, to which they both stood to hug her.

"It's cool," Vanna assured. "I'm in no rush to go home anyway."

Dijon smiled as she took her seat, thankful they'd put her order in for her when she was a few minutes away. "He still getting on your nerves?"

With a sigh, Vanna's head shook. "It's not that."

"What is it then?"

Vanna looked at Scarlett, who shook her head and looked away. "Don't look at me. I already told you how I feel about that shit."

"About what?" Dijon looked from one to the other. "Tell me."

Vanna huffed and looked down at her belly. "That's your brother. I don't feel comfortable telling you this."

Dijon's eyes rolled as she chuckled. "Girl, please. You're my sister. We can talk about everything, but if you're not comfortable, you don't have to tell me anything."

Licking the corning of her mouth, Vanna looked up at Dijon. This hesitancy was unfamiliar. Vanna had always been the straight shooter. If she didn't want to speak up, it had to be something bad. Fearing the worst, Dijon prayed she wasn't about to say there was a chance the baby in her stomach wasn't Hassan's. He'd been doing everything in his power to not only regain Vanna's trust, but make things as perfect as possible before their daughter arrived.

"Okay," Vanna agreed quietly before swallowing hard. "I feel stupid even feeling like this, but I can't shake it." She

paused. “I don’t think I’m as over Hassan cheating as I thought I was.” Dijon’s heart skipped a beat. Partly in relief, mostly because she didn’t know what Vanna’s confession would mean. “I think I was so quick to forgive him because I almost lost him. If he wouldn’t have gotten shot, there’s no way in hell I would have forgiven him as quickly as I did. Now... things are just... stuck replaying in my mind. And he’s doing everything he can to make sure I feel safe with him, but all I can think about is him cheating on me.”

Vanna brushed a tear away quickly before continuing. “It’s like... I find myself getting upset with him over little shit that doesn’t even matter, and I guess it’s because I didn’t really release all my hurt and anger from him cheating. I don’t trust him as much or respect him as much, because he did that. And without that trust, the passion and love aren’t as genuine as they used to be.”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

Vanna’s head shook. “No. I don’t want to make him feel bad. He’s trying so hard to make things right, and I don’t want him to feel like it’s for nothing. He’s getting us a house, and I know by his search history that he’s looking up some crazy ass shit to get me for push presents. I’m trying to just... get it out of my system, but it’s not as easy as I thought.”

“That’s why I told you that you need to talk to him,” Scarlett said. “You’re entitled to how you feel, but you can’t expect it to magically go away.”

“I agree,” Dijon added. “You’ll probably never trust and love him the same if you don’t fully heal and forgive. Is that what you want to do? Something you think you can do? Forgive him?”

With a shrug, Vanna’s head shook. “I don’t know. I thought I had, but I feel so fucking resentful. Sometimes I just look at him and want to beat the fuck out of him for cheating on me.” She chuckled, causing Dijon to give her a sad smile. “I told him how that would damage us, and he did it anyway. And don’t get me wrong; sex wasn’t a big deal for either of us, so I understand. Neither of us knew the magnitude that action

would have. He's the first man I've loved and cared for like this, and I know that's why it hurts. Why I've tried to just push this shit down and get back to us, but it keeps coming up."

Dijon thanked the waitress quickly as she placed her chimichanga in front of her.

"I wish Addison was here. She'd have a pretty way of asking you questions and offering you advice. All I can tell you is... if you don't release this, it's going to continue to bubble up. You're going to punish Hassan in your present for what he did in the past. And if you do it too much, you won't have a future."

"I agree," Scarlett added. "He's trying really hard, but he can't fix what he doesn't know is broken. You need to talk to him, boo."

Vanna's head hung.

"I know my brother, V," Dijon reminded. "If you continue to give him hell and not tell him the reason... eventually, he's going to shut down and walk away. Whether you work on this or not, you need to tell him what's up. At least he'll know what's going on. Right now, he's giving you grace because he thinks the baby is what has you so moody and mean. After you give birth, he's going to expect that to change. Tell him that you haven't gotten over that situation the way you thought you had. If you need space to heal, take that space, but please be honest with him. If Hassan shuts down and leaves, there won't be no coming back."

"So what do you want, sis?" Scarlett asked. "Do you want to make it work, or do you want to end things?"

Vanna looked away as she thought it over. Seconds agonizingly passed. Dijon held her breath as she waited for what she would say.

"Of course I want to be with him." Her voice came out shaky as she rubbed her protruding belly. "I just... think I need some time and space to heal. But the baby will be here soon."

"Don't worry about that," Dijon ordered while both she and Scarlett reached for Vanna's hands. "He's going to be

there for the baby regardless. We need you happy and healthy on all sides while you're carrying my niece and when you bring her into this world. If you need space, take it now."

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip as her chin trembled. "But I don't want to be away from him." Vanna chuckled. "I sound crazy as hell, huh?"

Scarlett smiled with watery eyes. "You sound like a woman in love. A woman *hurt* by love. And that's totally okay. Talk to him, V."

"Please," Dijon begged.

Releasing a loaded sigh, Vanna nodded. "Okay. I will."

Sitting back in her seat, Dijon stared at her food... suddenly wanting it less and less. Though she wouldn't take their problems on as her own, it did squeeze her heart to learn of Vanna's pain. Worse, she didn't know how it would affect Hassan when he found out. Either way, he'd have to man up and deal with it. His night with Maliya couldn't have been worth the hell it caused. Dijon could only pray it didn't cost him Vanna in the long run.

What she'd said was true—Hassan wasn't the forgiving type. He held grudges when done wrong. It took him too damn long to heal from that hurt. Hell, he'd just now started working on his relationship with his mother. If Vanna didn't come clean about how she was feeling, more damage would be done. Damage that time alone would not be able to fix.

N^{aeem}

“A’IGHT, NA,” Naeem warned. “He getting a little too close.” Dijon chuckled as she ignored him and rolled the window down a little lower. “That’s enough, Dijon! You gon’ let him stick his whole fucking neck in here!”

“Naeem!” she yelled before giggling and turning to look over at him. “As many animals as you have... I cannot *believe* you’re scared of ostriches.”

“I ain’t scared of *shit*.” His chin tilted and brows wrinkled. “I just don’t like them hoes.”

When the ostrich leaned forward to grab the small bowl of feed that was in her hand, Naeem gripped the arm of his seat. “Aye, just throw that shit out there. Give ’em all of it so he can go!”

Dijon was laughing so hard tears were streaming down her cheeks. “What about the rest of the animals?”

“*Fuck* the rest of the animals!”

Naeem shoved the bowl of feed and the ostrich out of the window before quickly pulling off. The longer Dijon laughed, the more irritated he got. It was her bright idea that they come to the drive-thru zoo, and he was cool, until they got to the ostriches. Since he was a kid, he couldn’t stand them. One day

at the zoo, an ostrich grabbed one of his dreads and tried to eat it. Ever since, he avoided them at all costs.

“Naeem... bae!” Dijon laughed as she wiped her face. “What was that?”

“Shut up, D. His ass lucky I didn’t shoot him.”

As she continued to laugh, his anger began to disperse. Eventually, Naeem released a low, calming chuckle. He rolled the windows up and cut the air back on. At this point, any animals that tried to come to the car would be disappointed because Naeem had gotten rid of all the food.

“So...” Dijon snickered. “This is pretty much done, huh?”

“Unless you want to go back and get another bucket of food.”

She laughed again as she grabbed his hand. “It’s cool. This was fun, but I’m hungry and tired. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Was there a reason?”

He looked over at her briefly as he continued down the path to exit.

“I was thinking about what Vanna told me at our late lunch. I tried not to hold on to it, but it was really bothering me.”

“She good?”

“Yeah, she is. Just in a tight spot. She’s going to be okay though. I’m sure of it.”

Naeem nodded. He didn’t get much sleep himself. It was the first night in weeks that Dijon had slept at her cottage instead of with him, and he definitely noticed the difference. While Naeem was fully aware of the fact that he had to continue to maintain his peace and joy apart from her, he also couldn’t deny how good it felt to be with a woman who increased both. These days, not having her at home made it feel like less of a home.

“You coming home with me tonight?”

“I can, if you want.”

“I always want you there with me. That won’t ever change.”

Dijon reached across the center console of his Audi and took his hand into hers. “Then I’ll be there. I wanted to be last night, but I wanted to give you some space.”

His eyebrows raised and head tilted. “Why?”

“We’re still kind of new to this.” She paused. “I don’t know if things are so great because we’re still in the honeymoon phase or if this is how it will always be. Either way, I don’t want you to get tired of me and switch up.”

Naeem considered her hesitance. Up until now, that was something he hadn’t been worried about, mainly because his actions and attraction had been pure. So was his commitment. As far as he was concerned, there would be no switching up. However, he understood it would take more than his word for her to trust that. It was a good foundational start though. When they made it to the exit, instead of pulling out, Naeem pulled over and parked.

Pushing his seat back, Naeem turned to the left slightly to look at her. Following his lead, Dijon unbuckled her seat belt and pulled her leg up to sit on it. For a while, Naeem just looked at her. She was the prettiest woman he’d ever had the pleasure of calling his. Beautiful, yeah. Sexy, damn right. But Dijon was pretty as fuck. Soft and delicate, too. And he loved that shit. Her softness softened him. Reminded him not just that he was a man, but how good it felt to have a woman at his side.

Ten years was a long fucking time to be without that.

And even before that, he was working so much that he wasn’t at home with his family nearly as much as he should have been. But Destiny always showed him grace. She never complained, instead, just making the most of the time they were together.

Guilt played a large part in Naeem’s meltdown too.

For years, all he could think about was how different things would have been if he'd been at home that night.

Stuffing those thoughts back into the deepest, darkest part of his soul, Naeem took Dijon's hand into his.

"I'll never switch up on you," Naeem assured. "If I ever feel like I'm unable to treat you how I do now, I will leave you. You never have to worry about me doing anything to intentionally hurt you, beautiful."

"I know that in my heart, I really do. But in my mind... I have moments where I tell myself to fall back. To take this slow."

"Slow?" Naeem chuckled softly before licking his lips. "Ain't shit about what we have slow except the speed at which I make love to you." Dijon blushed and looked away for a second before returning her eyes to his. "You know your heart is truly safe with me, right? I meant it when I said I wanted this forever. If I need space from you, I'll go out or send you out on my dime, but you don't *ever* have to force yourself to be away from me, beautiful. Okay?"

Dijon tugged him over and kissed him deeply. His hands slipped up her arms, bringing her closer. When she quivered from the tenderness of his kiss, Naeem forced himself to end it.

Groaning deep within his throat, Naeem pulled away as he bit down on his bottom lip. "You keep kissing me like that and I'm going to pull you over here and sit you on my dick."

Dijon giggled as she shifted in her seat. Her smooth cocoa skin had his mouth watering.

"These windows tinted, so what you wanna do?"

Naeem chuckled as he pulled her onto his lap. Now felt like as good of a time as any for him to ask, "You're on birth control, right?" She scratched the side of her eye with a soft nod. "I want to have a family with you, but I want us to do this shit right. We been fucking raw a lot though, so I had to ask."

"I am. You really wanna have babies with me?"

The soft, sweet tone her already low voice took warmed his heart.

“I haven’t made that clear yet?”

Her forehead rested on his as she smiled. “Well, I just didn’t know for sure. With... you know. What happened in the past.” Dijon sat up and cupped his cheek before placing a tender peck to his lips.

“It’s hard thinking about my sons; I can’t lie. I’ll never be able to replace them, but I can’t allow fear of that happening again to keep me from having more. For a while, I didn’t want any more children or a wife for that matter, but you’ve changed that.”

The sweet giggle she released made his dick throb.

“I would love to have your children, Naeem.”

“Good.” His hands slid up her thighs and squeezed her ass. “Would you be comfortable with us going to the doctor together? I wanna make sure we’re both healthy, you know? I’ve already added you as a beneficiary on my life insurance policy with my mama and sister. When we get married, you’ll be the main one. How do you feel about the farmhouse? Is that where you want us to start our family, or do you want to start looking for something else?”

Her mouth fell open before she released a soft, giddy chuckle.

“You really think about this kind of stuff?”

“Hell yeah. I’m not taking you from your family not to do right by you. It’s a lot of shit I have to get aligned before I propose, but I told you that’s coming soon.”

“Every time you say that...” Her head shook as she slowly rocked against him. “We haven’t even told each other we love each other yet, but every day, you show me, Naeem. Some days, I really can’t believe this is my life. That you’re mine.”

“I am yours, and I ain’t going no-fucking-where, D. You can trust that.”

Her chin jutted forward, and she huffed before muttering under her breath. Eventually, she surrendered to whatever battle she was having mentally and agreed with a nod...

Dijon

AS DIJON STARED at the back of Naeem's head, she wanted to smack it. It was the audacity of him summoning her just to ignore her while he played his game for the rest of the damn night. True enough, she wanted to be in his presence, but not like this.

Scrolling on Twitter, Dijon paused when she stumbled across a porn video that someone she was following retweeted from a mood page. Normally, she stayed away from the darker side of Twitter, but because she was feeling bored and neglected, she clicked the page and watched a few more videos. It didn't take long for her boredom to turn into arousal, causing her to undress and walk over to Naeem.

"Babe," she called, to which he gently pushed her to the right and away from his view. "Naeem!"

"What?"

"Look at me."

His eyes quickly scanned her frame before returning to his game. "I'm 'bout to land."

Her eyes rolled as she stepped in front of him and spread her legs, then touched her toes. When he began to scream and yell over whatever the hell was happening in his game, Dijon started to twerk.

“Bae, move,” he pleaded, standing quickly to wrap his arm around her and sit her on his lap. That was progress, but it still wasn’t what she wanted.

Kissing the side of his face, she whispered, “I want some dick,” as she grabbed it. It didn’t take his shaft long to harden, but he was still barely paying her any attention.

Naeem pushed his left headphone back and asked, “The hell has gotten into you?”

“I’ve been here all day, and you’ve been ignoring me.” She pouted. “And now I want some dick.”

He chuckled. “I got you when I get done.”

“You said that three hours ago! I’m about to go home.”

“Your ass ain’t going nowhere.”

Falling to her knees, Dijon pulled his dick out of his boxers. “Unhand me, woman!” he yelled. “A man is at battle! If you make me lose, I’m a beat ya ass.”

Dijon was laughing so hard she could barely focus on putting his dick in her mouth. Instead, she stood and slid down on it. She was so fucking horny, it wasn’t going to take long at all for her to nut. A quiet moan slipped from her mouth as he filled her.

“Dijon,” he gritted, grabbing her waist. “You don’t see me playing this game?”

“Fuck that game,” she moaned, bouncing up and down slowly.

“Aah shit,” he moaned, controller slipping from his hand. “You made me lose.”

His hand tightened around the front of her neck, pulling her back into his chest. Fingering her clit, he asked, “You are so fucking spoiled, Dijon. You know that?”

“Yes,” she moaned, toes curling as she felt her orgasm rise.

“You always gotta have your way?”

“Why you make me come if you were going to play the game all day?”

“I offered to teach you.”

“Yeah, but you yelled at me when I couldn’t play it right!”

He laughed, making her chuckle, but it turned into a moan. Relaxing in his seat, Naeem spread his legs more and allowed her to have her way with him.

“Ride that dick and take your nut,” he taunted, smacking her ass. “Use me until you cum.” She moaned, spreading her cheeks so she could feel more friction. “You better wet my dick up too.” Dijon whimpered, body swaying as her walls began to tighten. “Fucking perfect,” he whispered as her cum began to drip down his dick. “You be so loud and wet when I’m inside you,” he moaned, arching her back more for a better view. “You love having this dick in your pussy, huh? Tell me you love this dick.”

“I love it, I love it, I love it,” she repeated in a light voice before she trembled against him as she came.

“I didn’t say you could cum yet.”

“I’m sorry, baby. It feels too good.”

Naeem growled and lifted her legs before spreading them and fucking her as she came, drawing her orgasm out and making the tremors reverberate through her harder. She shifted, trying to get away when the pleasure became overwhelming, but he wouldn’t let her move. Dijon was locked within his control, and the more he stroked her and whispered freaky shit in her ear, the less she wanted to. As he bit down on her neck, his dick released and throbbed inside of her.

His grip around her began to loosen, bringing them both back to reality. The sound of yelling and gunfire from his headphones gained her attention. She looked down at his controller and smiled as he quickly picked it up, still holding on to her.

“My fault, y’all. Don’t try to buy me back. I need to handle something real quick.” At the sound of that, Dijon tried to

tiptoe away from him. “Nah, bring your ass back here.”

Crossing her arms over her naked chest, Dijon turned to face him. “Yes, sir?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t try that sweet shit with me right now.”

“What’d I do?” she asked just as sweetly, hands extended in confusion.

“Wassup with you?”

“Nothing, I’m good now.”

“So I can play the game in peace?”

“Yeah. I’m about to head out now, actually. You play that game for hours when you start up, so I’m just about to go.”

“Stay,” Naeem requested as he stood and covered himself. “I know you don’t really watch TV, but I made you a playlist that I can share with you. And I bought some new books from Amazon. They’re in my room on the table. Entertain yourself while I play, but I don’t want you to leave.”

That had been a running theme for the past couple of weeks. Whether they were at her place or his, neither was in a rush for the other to leave. Dijon had been trying her hardest not to let her hesitation show. Her hesitance wasn’t because she didn’t want to be with Naeem; her hesitance was because of what would happen when he found out about Destiny... if she was really Destiny. No matter how much she trusted Naeem, Dijon couldn’t fully surrender herself to him the way either of them wanted, and it was driving her crazy not being able to tell him why.

No matter how much she tried to put distance between them, he kept pulling her back in... and that only made her love and crave him more.

“Okay. We can watch a movie when you get done.”

He smiled softly, eyes scanning her naked frame. “Cool.” As he sat back down, his phone began to ring. “This your brother,” he announced as she headed down the hall.

Pain swelled inside her, threatening to swallow her whole.

“Which one?”

“Savant,” he answered, putting the phone to his ear. “Nah, D was asking who was calling. Wassup?” A few seconds passed before he said, “Yeah, we’re at my house. Come through.”

A quick whimper forced its way out of her. She needed to run, to scream, but her body became petrified stone.

Dijon briskly made her way down the hall to Naeem’s room. She took a quick shower and jumped at the sight of him heading into the bathroom.

“Jesus.” She clutched her chest as she laughed quietly. “You scared me.”

“Something on your mind?”

Naeem cut the shower on as her head shook. “Yeah, but it’s fine. Did Savant say what he wanted?”

“Nah. Just that he needed to talk to the both of us, so he was glad you were already here.” With a nod, she twiddled her thumbs before directing her feet over to where their towels hung. “Why don’t we make that permanent?”

“Huh?” The subtle rise of her eyebrow caused him to chuckle. “What did you say?”

“I want you to move in. I’ll move your cottage here if I have to. That way, you’ll still have something that’s just yours when you want your space. But this sleeping apart shit is for the birds, beautiful. I can’t sleep when you’re not here.”

Her lips parted and expression softened. She wanted to move closer to him, but the fear of what would happen after Savant relayed his news kept her from fully embracing her happiness and adoration of him.

“I would love to move in.” Keeping herself from adding *but* to that statement, Dijon allowed herself to bask in this moment a little longer. The moment before everything changed. She would savor it for as long as she could before Destiny returned to take her place.

Walking over to him, Dijon hugged him as her heart hammered wildly against her chest. She wanted to whisper that she loved him. The words ached to be released from her heart. Dijon wouldn't let them come out, though. That would make saying goodbye too hard when the time came.

Cupping her cheek, Naeem tilted her head and looked into her eyes.

“What’s going on with you, bae? And don’t tell me it’s nothing.”

Shoulders slouched, Dijon kissed his wrist and sighed. “We can talk after my brother leaves, okay? I promise.”

Removing herself from his grasp, she showered and headed out of the bathroom. Sitting on the edge of his bed, Dijon was in absolutely no rush to get dressed. This was the moment she'd been dreading for what felt like forever now. Every time she thought she was at peace, he'd love on her in an unexpected way that made her fiercely possessive of him. And it didn't matter how much she tried to have sex to store it up for what she was sure would be a long drought, he handled her body in ways that made her consistently want more.

She'd never grow tired of him.

And from the looks of things... Naeem didn't think he'd grow tired of her either.

But for some reason, her heart wouldn't allow her to accept the possibility that he'd choose her.

No, not *some* reason... there was a very specific reason.

Her father—and the men she gravitated toward because of him.

The men she'd loved in the past all left her prematurely. All put other things or people before her. Why was she supposed to believe this with Naeem would be any different?

Dijon was so deep in her thoughts, she had no handle on the amount of time that passed. Before she knew it, Naeem was out of the shower, walking in front of her with his boxers on. Clearing her throat, Dijon stood and walked to her small

section of clothes that hung in the closet. Every time she stayed over, she'd keep her clothes there so she eventually wouldn't have to pack a bag for her visits. Her eyes watered as images replayed of the last night she spent in his bed. In his arms.

Snatching the yellow peplum shirt off its hanger, Dijon grabbed a pair of jeans, then headed to the drawer that held her underwear. After dressing, she pulled her hair back into a low ponytail and looked herself over in the mirror. Naeem came behind, and the sight of his frame against hers made her smile. Lifting her hand, Dijon rubbed his chin through his beard.

“Hey,” she called softly, smiling with one side of her mouth as her tears threatened to fall. “Can I tell you something?” Turning, Dijon wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Anything.”

It was now or never. “I...”

The sound of his doorbell ringing had her eyes sealing shut as she released a long breath. Telling Naeem she loved him... apparently that would happen never.

“It can wait. What did you want to say, D?”

“Let's go. I'm sure what he has to say is important.”

Before Naeem could protest, she stepped around him and dressed quickly while he left the bathroom. As she headed down the hall, her heart beat so loudly it drowned out the sound of their small talk. Upon her entrance, Savant's mouth snapped shut and his head hung. That was all Dijon needed to know what he was about to say. He stood and gave her a hug, holding her seconds longer than he usually did. When he released her, Dijon went and sat next to Naeem. She took his hand into hers and gave him a warm smile as her eyes fluttered.

“There's no easy way to say this,” Savant started, gaining both their attention. A fine sheen of sweat pricked her upper lip. Slouching, Dijon briefly hung her head. “A little over a month ago, a woman reached out to me. She's... currently

living in France, and she has been for some years now, but she's originally from here." His eyes focused on Naeem. "She called in need of guidance, protection, or both. Basically, her father moved her there to keep her safe, and she wanted us to find out why or help her come here safely so she could find out herself."

"So what? You need me to guard her or kill whoever she's hiding from?"

Savant's head hung as it shook. "It was Destiny, Naeem." Dijon looked at the side of Naeem's face, but his expression remained blank. "She told me her father sent her there after she and her sons were shot and that her leaving the United States was the only way to keep her and her husband safe. She didn't know you thought she was dead, Naeem. But she's not. We got bloodwork and a DNA test to confirm who she was. I got the results today."

Sitting back on the couch, Naeem stared blankly. "You're saying my wife..." He looked over at Dijon. "My ex-wife... she's alive?" Savant nodded. "And my boys?" Savant's head shook, causing Naeem to chuckle. "So God spared her but not them?" He stood.

"What do you need?" Dijon asked as he walked away. "Do you want me to go or stay?"

"Stay," he answered just above a whisper. "But give me space."

She nodded, though he couldn't see it. At the sound of a door slamming, she jumped. They both remained silent as the sound of tables turning, frames flying, and things ripping permeated down the hall. His grunts and growls were drowned out by the sound of him punching the wall repeatedly. Eventually, the room grew silent, and all they heard was his sobs.

Gripping the edge of the couch, Dijon's head hung as her own tears threatened to fall. She stood, but Savant stopped her.

"Give him space, Elise. He needs to process this."

Releasing a shaky breath, she looked toward the ceiling. “What the fuck am I supposed to do, Savant? Wait for him to leave me now?”

“Why do you think that’s what’s going to happen?”

Lips pressed together tight, Dijon found it difficult to speak.

With a scoff and curt shake of her head, Dijon crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t?”

“Not at all.” Savant smiled as he stepped in front of her. “That man loves you, baby sis.”

“But that’s his *wife*,” Dijon stressed, gripping her throat. Just saying the words made it feel like it was about to close.

“*Ex-wife*.” Savant’s clarification didn’t make Destiny’s reappearance any easier to stomach. “I’ve talked to ya man several times to see where his head and heart at. Trust me, he wants to be with you.”

Dijon wanted to believe that... with all her heart... but she was unsure if she actually could accept that in her mind. No matter how much Naeem wanted her, there was no guarantee he’d feel the same way when he reconnected with Destiny. Ten years... It took him ten years practically to remove her from his heart and want love. Now that he’d finally done so, this shit happened.

This was his wife. His first love. The woman who gave him his sons.

How was he going to ignore all of that?

“Aye,” Savant called, regaining her attention. “I need to go and talk to Black about this Wocko shit. He’s not a real threat, but he’s trying to become one. You wanna ride with me?”

Looking back and down the hall, Dijon sighed and squeezed the back of her neck.

“Yes, but I should probably stay here. I have a feeling he’s about to start retreating, and I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“A’ight. I’ll come through and check on y’all in the morning.”

Nodding, Dijon hugged him weakly before watching him walk away. Plopping down on the couch, she released a hard breath before chuckling. No matter how much she tried to prepare for this moment, she wasn’t, and Dijon had no idea how it would end.

N^{aeem}

THREE. That's how many days Naeem had kept himself hidden in his room. He didn't answer any phone calls or text messages. Dijon had been there the whole time, but she'd kept her distance as he asked her to.

At the sound of light knocks on the door, Naeem shifted slightly to look at it. He was sitting on the floor with his back to the edge of his bed. Quite frankly, he couldn't sleep in his bed for missing Dijon with thoughts of Destiny in his mind. Even after clearing his throat, he couldn't grant the person behind the door permission to come in. His mouth only opened to question or curse God, which made him keep it shut.

This was a moment, a chance, that Naeem prayed and dreamed for years ago. Now... it felt like a nightmare.

"Naeem?" At the sound of Addison's voice, Naeem closed his eyes. "Can I come in?"

He hadn't called her. It must have been Dijon. Since he didn't answer, Addison poked her head inside. "Are you decent?" When he saw that her eyes were closed, he smiled—for the first time in three days.

"Are you going to be annoying your whole life?" he asked quietly, finding the sound of his voice unfamiliar after what felt like forever.

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

Addison opened her eyes and stepped inside, remaining at the open doorframe. Her eyes looked at the pile of uneaten food by the door. Every day, Dijon fixed him breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She'd set it at the door, pray for him, then leave. Not one plate had been touched, and it felt like not one prayer had gone through.

Or maybe it had. Shit, the fact that he hadn't gone on a rampage was proof enough that God had been hearing her prayers.

“You've been in here the whole time?”

Naeem nodded. “Figured this was safest.”

“I agree. But... you haven't been eating?” Her eyes slowly scanned his frame. “Have you been taking care of yourself in other ways?” His head shook as he sighed. “You're entitled to feel everything you're feeling. I just, I don't want it to consume you. You've worked really hard to pull yourself out of your darkness, Naeem. I don't want you to go back.”

When he remained silent, Addison added, “You're like a brother to me, and I love you. I'm here for you, okay?”

When his eyes watered, Naeem looked away. “I'm trying to process this shit, but I can't.”

Addison closed the door and leaned against it. “Can I help?” Naeem didn't deny, causing Addison to add, “What are your dominant negative and positive thoughts right now?”

“I'm going to kill Faulkner,” were the first words that slipped from his lips. Those were words he didn't even have to think about.

“How do you think Destiny will handle that?”

“I don't give a fuck how she's going to handle it,” he replied quickly through gritted teeth. Naeem sighed and looked down at his hands. “He buried a woman that wasn't his daughter. My wife. I grieved for a woman that wasn't even dead while I was locked up. Held so much guilt in my heart and hate toward myself for not being there. And she isn't even

dead.” Naeem chuckled and stood, walking over to the balcony in his room, but he didn’t go outside. “My sons really are, though. And I’m trying to find my strength in Yah, but I’m also having a difficult time understanding why she’s here and they aren’t.” His head hung as his eyes watered. “They were my babies, Addy. They had *so* much fucking life to live.” Releasing a huff, he pinched his eyes to keep his tears from falling. “A part of me wants to be grateful that Destiny is alive, but I also feel resentment toward her for *being* alive.” He chuckled. “How fucked up is that?”

“You’re entitled to feel however you feel,” Addison reminded. “Are you... going to reach out to her? From what I understand, she wants to come back here to see you and confront her father.”

“I guess. I feel like I owe her that.”

“What about Dijon?”

Licking his lips, Naeem turned to face Addison. “Did she know?”

“That’s something you should tal—”

“Did she know, Addison?”

Addison’s head hung briefly as she sighed. “Yes, but she didn’t tell you, because they wanted to make sure she was who she said she was so you wouldn’t go through...” her eyes looked around his room, “*this*... for no reason.”

That made a lot of things make sense. Why she’d been kind of off lately. Conflicted. Even with this looming over her, Dijon remained by his side.

“I thought she was my future,” Naeem confessed before scratching his nose. “But if Destiny’s coming back into my present... I don’t know.”

“That’s fair.”

“No it’s not,” he seethed. “I promised that I wouldn’t hurt her. She doesn’t deserve to not have my surety. Especially because of something beyond both of our control.”

“Naeem.” Addison chuckled. “You just found out your ex-wife is alive. Anyone would have a hard time processing that. Dijon will understand, and I know she’s going to support you no matter what you decide.”

His head shook. “I just need more time.”

Nodding, Addison pulled a folded piece of paper from her jeans pocket. “This is Destiny’s number. Use it or don’t. It’s up to you.” She set it on the dresser he’d flipped over. “I’m here for you, okay? Call me if you need anything.”

Naeem grumbled a quick thanks, eyes frozen on the number. Once the door closed behind Addison, he slowly walked over to it. Picking it up, he stared at the number so long he almost had it memorized. Just the thought of calling Destiny had him feeling like he was cheating on Dijon. Or was Dijon the one he was cheating with because Destiny had him first? His head shook as he tried to absolve himself of the twisted thought. He dialed the number five times and hung up before finally letting it go through. When it did, he held his breath as he waited for Destiny to answer.

“Hello?” she answered, and the sound of her voice immediately pulled tears from his eyes. Sitting on the dresser, Naeem palmed his forehead. “Hello?” At the sound of his shaky breath, she gasped. “Naeem? Is, is this you?” He nodded as he wiped his face, unable to speak. “I’ve missed you so much, baby. I can’t imagine how difficult this is for you, but I promise you I didn’t know what my father was up to. I didn’t know you thought I was dead. But I’m not.” She chuckled softly. “Obviously. Um... can I... I need to see you, Naeem. Can you come and get me? Please?”

“I need some time, Destiny,” he spoke finally.

“It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Yours too,” he admitted. “How are you?”

“I’m golden now.”

“What have you been up to?”

“I’ve been living a fairly normal life. I have a few friends here, but I wasn’t able to keep up with any from back home.

Now I know why. I have a job, a routine.”

“And you never dated? Got remarried?”

“Of course not. I mean...”

“It’s been over ten years, Destiny. You really expect me to believe you haven’t had any male companionship?”

She sighed. “I have, but it hasn’t been anything serious. What about you?”

“I’m seeing someone.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Well, that’s to be expected I suppose. You thought I was dead.” He didn’t speak. “We can hash those things out at a later date... I just want to see you. When can I see you, Naeem?”

Naeem checked the date on his phone. “Give me until the weekend. I’ll fly you here, and we’ll figure this shit out together.”

“Okay. And Naeem?”

“Yeah?”

“I know what my dad did was wrong, but...”

“It’s best if we don’t speak on him right now, a’ight?”

The sound of her sniffles had him hanging his head as his eyes closed. “Okay,” she agreed. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Naeem admitted and squeezed his chest immediately after. His heart burned and clenched. This wasn’t how he thought he would feel the next time he said those words to a woman. Of course... he thought that woman would be Dijon.

Dijon.

Standing, Naeem added, “I gotta go. I’ll send you the details about your flights after I book them.”

“O—”

Hurriedly disconnecting the call, Naeem looked around his room. The mess he’d made. The plates of food that had been

sitting up. His heart simmered down as he rubbed it, mind filled with thoughts of Dijon.

Dijon.

No matter what happened once he and Destiny gained their closure, he'd have to fix things with Dijon and make sure she understood he only wanted her...

Dijon

WHILE HER FAMILY went above and beyond to show her a good time, Dijon's heart was heavy. In the morning, Destiny would arrive. No matter how much Savant and Addison assured Dijon that things would work out, her heart was saying otherwise. Since they'd met, she and Naeem had never gone days without seeing or speaking to each other, let alone a full week, but that was now the case. An entire seven days had passed, and not once had they had a full conversation with one another.

For the first three, she prayed for him at his door. The next four, he met her there and prayed with her before closing himself back up in his room. Though that was progress, it wasn't enough for Dijon to feel confident about things returning to normal for them.

"Look." Dijon's eyes shifted up at the sound of Vixen's voice. They'd all gathered at Assad's estate for what was supposed to be a party to get her out of her funk. Instead, Dijon found space to herself to sulk in, in hopes of not ruining anyone else's mood. "Get your ass up and have some fucking fun, Dijon Elise. I took off tonight to turn up with you, and you sitting back here looking like a sad puppy."

"I am sad," Dijon whined, accepting the red plastic cup Vixen handed her. "He's going to get his wife in the morning,

Vix. Fuck am I supposed to do with that?"

Vixen's head tilted, then she sat next to Dijon on the side of Assad's kennel. Looking straight ahead, Dijon's eyes focused on the black water fountain.

"You were fine before him, and if he leaves, you'll be fine without him."

"That's just it, Vix. I don't want to be just fine." She turned to face her. "All my life I searched for a love that was just my own. I finally found that in Naeem, and I don't want to give it up."

"Then don't! Be real. Has Naeem given you a reason to believe he's going to get back with Casper?"

Dijon cackled as she lightly slapped Vixen's thigh. "Vixen!"

"What! That's what that bitch is. She's a fucking ghost! But if she tries to get too friendly with Naeem, I'ma make him grieve her ass all over again."

A small smile settled across Dijon's lips. "I needed that laugh."

"I'm for real, though. Has he?"

Dijon's head shook as she sighed. "Honestly, no."

"Then why are you moping around like your relationship is over?"

"I guess... it's not him; it's me. I'm so used to men leaving. This is my way of preparing for him to leave too."

Vixen took Dijon's hand into hers, and Dijon rested her head on Vixen's shoulder. "I'm not the one to give you advice on love and relationships at all, but I can tell you something about men. Solid men. They say what they mean and mean what they say. Until Naeem outright tells you he wants to break up, he doesn't. Don't think about that shit so much that you expect it and make it your reality. For now, just let shit ride. Don't press him, but don't give him up either. That's your man, and I'll be mad as hell at you if you give him away."

Especially if he hasn't expressed interest in getting back with her."

Dijon nodded and took a sip of the drink Vixen had brought her. "Eew." Her face twisted as the strong dark liquor burned her throat. "Why you bring me this? This ain't no tequila."

Vixen chuckled as she stood. "Come back inside. Then you can fix your own drink."

Her exhale was soft as she stood. Bobbing her head once, Dijon followed Vixen back inside. With Assad's dark walls and décor, his home was still dark, even with bright lights illuminating the front room. An old-school Memphis rap playlist played in the background while a spades game ensued. Vanna and Scarlett were in their own little world talking while Jade, the Mayhem brothers, and Vixen's cousin stood outside in the front smoking with them. Squeezing her arm, Dijon walked over to Hassan, whose head was buried in his phone.

"Do you need to be standing on that crutch like that?"

Hassan's eyes rolled as he stuffed his phone in his pocket. "Don't come over here with that shit."

Dijon chuckled and looked back at Vanna. She wanted to ask him if they were okay but decided against it. "I'm just making sure you're okay, big brother."

"I'm good. I swear. I've been taking it easy all day, but I'm determined to be walking by the time Hanna gets here."

Dijon nodded. "I admire your dedication," she decided on. "Have y'all found a house yet?"

Sighing, Hassan adjusted the crutch under his arm. "Nah, but we're going to look at her top two choices next week." His expression softened. "She tell you about how she been feeling lately?"

Not wanting to give too much information away, Dijon asked, "What do you mean?"

Hassan's eyes lifted and focused on Vanna. "That bullshit about her not really forgiving me and needing space."

“Yeah.” Dijon’s smile was warm and nervous more than anything. “How you feeling about that?”

He shrugged, returning his eyes to hers. “I don’t feel no kind of way, honestly. I’m glad she finally told me the truth so we can work on it. She said she needed space, so she has her own room. Her ass can’t break up with me though. So that’s that.”

Hassan shrugged, and Dijon’s smile widened. “Sanny!”

“Fuck all’at. She gets her own room, but dassit.” His smug expression had Dijon shaking her head. “We’re going to couples’ therapy too so we can talk without arguing and shit, you know?”

“But you’re gonna be okay?”

“Aw yeah. That’s my wife. Now that I know what’s up, I ain’t going nowhere.”

Dijon gave him a soft hug. “I’m so proud of you, big brother. Fix this shit like I know you can.”

Hassan mumbled, “I appreciate that, sis,” before kissing her temple.

“Oh, so you can kiss her, but when I kiss you, it’s a problem?” Assad teased, dropping his eyes back to his cards as Savant slammed his down on the table.

“This my sister, nigga. I can kiss her. I’on be wanting your crusty ass lips on me.”

“My baby’s lips are *not* crusty,” Scarlett defended, making Assad grin as they all laughed.

Dijon thought she was seeing things out of the corner of her eye. She closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath, refusing to believe Naeem was actually here. Sure, she’d texted him and told him where she’d be, but she wasn’t expecting him to actually show up. He hadn’t left his house, their home, in a week.

Their home.

Was it still their home?

Just seconds after she'd agreed to move in with him, Savant delivered that devastating news.

Dijon chuckled and shook her head as her eyes slowly opened. Destiny being alive shouldn't have been devastating news. It was a miracle. No woman deserved to be tortured, raped, and left for dead. No woman deserved to lose her sons, her husband and family, her home...

"Hi," she whispered as soon as Naeem stepped in front of her, holding a mix of red, yellow, and orange roses.

"Hey."

Her eyes fluttered at the sound of his voice. With a soft smile, Dijon buried her head in his chest. Naeem's arms wrapped around her, pulling her even closer.

"I've missed you," he confessed.

"I've missed you too."

At the sound of awwws and cooing, Dijon removed herself from his embrace.

"Let's go to my room so we can have some privacy."

"We wanna hear," Hassan admitted.

"Don't worry. She will tell us later anyway," Vanna assured, and when Scarlett agreed, Dijon chuckled.

Once they made it to the guest room she occupied when she slept over, Dijon locked the door behind them and looked around awkwardly. Like it was her first time being there. She didn't know if she should sit on the bed or not, but she was so nervous she felt too weak to stand. Leaning against the dresser, she gently caressed the rose petals.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, looking over at Naeem's handsome face briefly.

His distressed locs were pulled up into a bun, giving her a clear view.

"I wanted to have this conversation with you before you got drunk and wouldn't remember." Naeem took her hand into his and gently tugged her over to the bed. Sitting next to him

on top of the black comforter, Dijon forced herself to look into his eyes instead of avoiding them. “Nothing’s changing between us, beautiful. You’re still the woman I want to be with, and me going to pick Destiny up tomorrow isn’t going to change that.”

“Thank you for the assurance. I needed it.”

He cupped her cheek and caressed it with his thumb. “I promised you that I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you.”

“That was before we knew your wife was still alive.”

Naeem’s eyes closed briefly. “Ex-wife, Dijon. And that’s true, but that doesn’t change anything.”

Her head shook and she gently pulled his hand from her face. “You expect me to believe you don’t want to take full advantage of being with her again? You know how many beg God for the chance you have, Naeem?”

Though his smile was soft, it didn’t steady her palpitating heart. “Why would I beg God for a second chance with her when what I have with you now is so much better?”

Her mouth opened and closed as she stared at him, causing Naeem to chuckle.

“Naeem...”

“I’m not going to downplay what I had with Destiny,” he started, and Dijon clung to every word that seeped from his plump lips. “She was my first love and the mother of my angels. But I wasn’t ready for marriage then, and it showed. I didn’t get it all right until it was too late. When I finally started treating her the way she needed to be treated, she was taken from me. Yeah, a part of me wished I had the chance to correct that situation, but I’m at peace.” He kissed each of her hands. “Like I’ve said before, Destiny taught me how to love, and I’ll forever be grateful to her. But it’s taken me ten years to heal from losing her. Ten years to learn to live with the love I have for her in my heart and it not suffocate me. Ten years to release the self-hate and guilt for not being there like I should have been. Ten years to become emotionally stable. I’m not

risking that—ever again. My heart is safe with you. Not because I don't feel as deeply for you or no shit like that... but because I trust myself with you. You've accepted me as I am and not required that I change a thing. What we have is unconditional, healthy, and pure. I'm not giving that up for anyone." Naeem paused and inhaled a deep breath. "I'm allowing Destiny to come home for closure. She needs to learn what her father did and why, and I have to make him pay for it. But I give you my word... I'm not going to try and get back with her."

Dijon's tongue ran across her teeth as she nodded. "Okay. I hear you."

"Do you really?" he confirmed quietly.

"Yes... but... I need you to promise me something." Naeem nodded. "If you see her and reconnecting with her changes your mind, promise you'll tell me."

"Dijon..."

"I don't want you to suffer because you want to keep promises you've made to me. If your heart changes your mind, promise that you'll tell me."

Because the truth of the matter was, it was easy for Naeem to say this... but would he feel this way tomorrow? When she was in face? In his arms? Would all of that love come rushing back to his heart along with memories of the life they once shared?

"I promise."

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds, until it became too much for Dijon to bear. Covering her mouth, she stood to leave, willing her tears not to fall. Her heart had been broken so many times by so many men... her love had been rejected so many times by so many men... As much as she wanted to, it felt nearly impossible to trust Naeem in this moment. Before she could get the door unlocked, Naeem was pressing her into it.

"I'm fine, Naeem," she stressed, not even believing her own self. Turning her around, Naeem lowered himself and

placed a kiss to her stomach. “Bae,” she whispered, trying to push him away. Because her defenses were so low, she’d allow him to do just about anything to her at this point. Her eyes closed as she gripped his shoulders.

“Look at me,” Naeem demanded before kissing her stomach again. Slowly, Dijon opened her eyes and looked down at him. “You can trust me, Dijon. I love you.”

Those three words.

She’d heard them countless times before, but... those three words.

Coming from his mouth, his voice... his heart... they sounded like nothing she’d ever heard before.

“What did you say?”

He smiled, still on one knee. “You heard me.”

“I want to hear you say it again.”

Naeem lowered slightly, kissing her womb. “I love you.”

He wasn’t just saying those words for her ears. Or even her heart. Each time he kissed her gut... the seat of her intuition, or her womb... where she stored her emotional experiences with others... he was implanting the truth of his words there. The declaration of his love there. No matter how much she’d tried to get them out of her mind, they’d stay there. Naeem was such a strategic, precise lover. Always so methodical and thoughtful. Even the way he first expressed his love left her in awe.

There was nothing about this man she didn’t love and crave. And this was only making her love him more.

“Come here,” she ordered softly, chuckling quietly. When he was on his feet, she wrapped her arms around him and gave him a tender kiss. “I love you, Naeem Cassidy. God, I love you.”

His hands wrapped around her neck, and he held her in place as he kissed her deeply. All the worries and fears she was about to run out of that room with dissolved. In one

minute, Naeem had given her weary heart the strength to carry on.

N^{aeem}

NO MATTER how much Naeem tried to prepare for this moment, he hadn't been able to. He'd tried to pray, but he couldn't. God knew his heart... and the resentment that was inside. The conflicted torture of wanting to be happy that Destiny was alive yet angry for how long they'd been apart because of Faulkner. Hurt because the happiness he wanted to feel over her life was overshadowed by the pain of his sons' deaths.

Fuck.

It felt like he was grieving them all over again.

Dijon texted him this morning and let him know she'd be there if he needed anything. He needed her. She hadn't come home last night.

Home.

Was she still considering it her home?

Seconds after she agreed to move in, Naeem's whole world was turned upside down.

He was trying not to take her absence personally though. Dijon was drunk and ended up spending the night at Assad's place. While he wished she would have allowed him to come back and get her, he couldn't deny that this was probably harder for her than she was letting on. If she needed space...

he'd give her that. But if he at any point felt that space had her overthinking what was going on between him and Destiny, it would be over.

Checking the time on his phone, Naeem drew in a long breath. The more he tried to remain calm, the more his nerves unraveled.

Even with a decade passing between them, there was no doubt in Naeem's mind that he would recognize her. He was waiting at her gate, hoping he wouldn't lose his shit at the sight of her.

How was one supposed to prepare to see the wife they'd spent years thinking was dead?

When passengers began to enter the airport, Naeem stood. A weight seemed to press on his chest, making it impossible for him to breathe.

The second his eyes landed on her, Naeem's heart stopped. Literally stopped. His mouth opened, trying to pull in air for his lungs. They seemed to have caved, too. His knees weakened. Naeem dropped, unable to hold himself up any longer.

Destiny covered her mouth and clutched her stomach... staring at him for a few seconds before jogging over to him. He grabbed her hips and looked up at her as tears fell from his eyes.

Yeah.

There was no way in hell he would have ever been able to prepare for this.

Destiny's fingers trembled as they tilted his chin.

"Naeem," she choked out before her sob grew. Her hands gripped his arms and tugged him up, and Naeem wasted no time lifting her into the air and spinning her around.

Before he could register what was happening, her lips were covering his. For a moment, he succumbed. Allowed himself to experience his first love. But as soon as her tongue slipped

between his lips, Naeem pulled away and placed her back on her feet.

He should have wiped the kiss off... but he couldn't.

Not yet.

Not until it dried and he fully savored it.

"I'm with someone," he reminded, covering his rapidly beating heart. "I told you that."

Not bothering to process his words, Destiny pressed herself into his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. His eyes closed and body weakened against her. Arms encircled around her waist, Naeem picked her up again... needing her as close as possible.

"I missed you so much," she confessed, placing a kiss to his neck before burying her face there. "I'm so happy right now." Her body shook against his as she tried to stop crying. "This is the closest I've felt to our sons since that night. *God*, I needed this."

At the mention of their sons, Naeem placed her back on her feet. Turning to the side, he wiped his face. His breath was hard and shaky as he composed himself. Once he was sure he wouldn't cry another tear, Naeem turned to face her.

"Sorry doesn't feel good enough to express how I feel about not being there that day. If I would have just... let someone else handle that situation..."

Destiny's head shook as she gripped his hands. "Don't tell me you've spent all this time feeling guilty over what happened to us?" When he remained silent, she smiled softly and kissed him quickly. "He would have tried me any chance he could get, Naeem. He was obsessed with me. I-I should have told you that he flirted with me often, but I didn't say anything, because it felt good to be admired still. That was a weird phase for me. Between trying to be supermom and wife so young and find myself, I lost myself. So when he would stare at me and make little comments when you weren't around, it made me feel good."

“Whether you liked his flirting or not, that was no reason for him to think he could have sex with you. You didn’t do anything to deserve being raped, Destiny. And you for damn sure didn’t do anything that would justify him shooting you and killing our sons.”

When her tears poured, Naeem wiped them but eventually pulled her into his chest so she could release them freely. Not caring about who was around, he allowed her to shed all the pain she’d been harboring alone for years. He’d been telling himself that he needed this moment to get to her father, but the truth of the matter was, they needed time to grieve their sons too. Naeem just prayed she didn’t mistake his brief moment of weakness for a chance to get together again.

One or two small kisses or not, Naeem’s heart belonged to Dijon. No matter how broken and dark it was... it was hers... and he wasn’t going to let anyone, not even Destiny, have access to it.

NAEEM COULDN’T DENY that Destiny was just as beautiful, if not more, as she was on their wedding day. Once they’d pulled into his garage, a moment passed where he just stared at her. He told himself his eyes were making up for lost time, and that was it. She seemed to have the best features of her mother and father rolled into one.

She had her mother’s round face, pouty lips, and long hair along with her father’s dark eyes, medium-brown skin tone, and short frame. She’d gotten a few tattoos over the years that she didn’t have before and put on a few pounds, but everything else was the same.

“It looks like you’ve done really well for yourself,” she noticed, staring at his farmhouse.

“Yeah,” was all Naeem offered.

He hadn’t made his money in the most-positive ways, but he’d made some wise investments, including his home. After letting the garage up, Naeem was caught off guard by the sight

of Dijon's car. Since she didn't come back last night, he wasn't prepared to see her today. Still, this was for the best. She needed to know that Destiny was here and would be staying temporarily, and that was a conversation she deserved to have in person.

After parking between her Maserati and his Lexus, he got out and grabbed Destiny's two bags before letting her out. As they headed into the front room, Dijon was hurriedly coming down the hall with her iPad. She stopped at the sight of them—eyes shifting from one to the other.

"I'm not staying," she rushed out quickly. "I just needed to get my iPad for work."

"I'm glad you're here, beautiful," Naeem made clear, taking a small step in her direction. He looked back at Destiny. "Destiny, this is Dijon." His eyes returned to Dijon. "This is Destiny."

"His wife," Destiny added, head tilting and chest poking out as she smiled.

"Ex-wife," Naeem corrected. "When your father faked your death, he ended our marriage. I'm not going to tell you that I'm with someone else again."

"And it's her?" Destiny confirmed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Yeah," Dijon answered, hip poking out. "You got a problem with that?"

Naeem squeezed the back of his neck and sighed as he walked over to Dijon. Pointing toward the sitting area, he told Destiny, "You're here for two reasons, neither of those are to get back with me. While you're here, I will not allow you to disrespect my life partner. Go sit your ass down and wait for me."

Destiny's grin turned into a pout as she all but stomped over to the blue couch. Naeem took Dijon's hand into his and led her back to their—his—room. After closing the door behind them, he grumbled, "I'm sorry about that. She's always been a little possessive, but you have nothing to worry about."

Dijon nodded as she avoided his eyes. “It’s cool. I’m not insecure.”

“I know that. I just wanted to make that clear.”

She nodded again... still avoiding his eyes. “I’m gonna stay at my cottage until this is done. If she tries me again, the compassion I have for her will leave, and I’m going to beat her ass.”

Chuckling, Naeem closed the space between them and wrapped his arms around her. Finally, she looked into his eyes.

“You trust me?” Her eyes lowered briefly. “I’m asking because her family and friends can’t know she’s here. I paid her guard off, so he’s going to check in with Faulkner like everything is normal. If he knows she’s here, he’s going to bring in security, and I really need to get at him.”

Dijon released a hard breath. “I understand, baby. Handle your business.”

He kissed her forehead, then wrapped her arms around him. “You know you can stay here. I *want* you here. But if being here while she’s here is going to disrupt your peace, I understand why you have to leave. However, I’m not asking you to by any means.”

Dijon kissed his chin. “You can come to me whenever you want, but I know me. I’m extremely sensitive right now—and not in a weak way. If she says the wrong thing or touches you in a way that pisses me off, I’m a beat her ass. Period. So it’s best if I stay away from her. I know you both need time to process all of this, and I want you to have that, but I can’t lie and act like it’s not fucking with me that another woman is staying here with my man.”

Naeem was about to address her concern, but before he could Dijon was covering his mouth with her finger.

“It’s not you, bae. It’s me. I trust you, but I also have a long past of men leaving and rejecting me. Do I believe that’s what you’re going to do? No. But my mind is replaying every time that’s happened in the past as the outcome of what’s going to happen with you.”

Completely understanding, he nodded and kissed the center of her forehead. “Will you talk to Addison?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He paused, wanting to take as much time as he could, because he knew she’d leave when he let her go. “I love you, Dijon Elise.”

Her smile was genuine before she concealed it by nibbling her bottom lip.

Her hands slid down his chest before she carefully removed his arms from around her. The shaky breath told him tears were forming in her eyes before he could see them. Head lowered, she brushed her nose quickly as she walked away.

“I love you, Naeem. Take care of this as quickly as you can.”

“I will...” he promised... just as she closed the door.

IT APPEARED neither of them cared about the silence between them as they ate. They both would stare at each other until the other would look away. This time, Naeem did, and she laughed softly. They were in the dining room having a candlelit dinner... which was all Destiny’s doing. She asked to cook for him since he’d helped her so much already, and since he had no idea what he would eat for dinner, Naeem agreed.

Plus, they had a lot to talk about—if only the words would flow.

“Sooo...” he forced, eyes lowering to her lips as she wiped her mouth. “How does it feel to be home?”

Setting her fork next to the broccolini she’d sauteed, Destiny smiled. Her fried porkchop was half eaten, along with the spaghetti she’d whipped up. Destiny may have spent a decade in Paris, but she for damn sure hadn’t forgotten her roots.

“It feels good to be with *you*. I can’t say it feels good to be home. Not yet at least.”

Naeem nodded. “That’s understandable.”

Her eyes lowered to the pillar candles in the center of the table as he took a sip of his wine.

“This thing with you and her...”

“I’m not going to discuss my relationship with you.”

Destiny smirked and gave him a dismissive nod.

“Why? Because you know it’s not going to last now that I’m here?”

“Hell no. Because I don’t want to hurt your fucking feelings. Dijon ain’t going *nowhere*.”

Destiny’s eyes rolled. “Yeah, okay.”

His amusement at her disbelief dissolved quickly as he thought over the next thing he wanted to say.

“Will you want to go to the boys’ graves?”

She shifted and released a soft pant.

“Yeah,” she whispered so low he wouldn’t have known she said it if he weren’t watching her mouth. “You weren’t at the funeral?”

His head shook as he sat up in his seat. “Nah. I was arrested a few days after everything went down.”

“And that was because you went after him?”

Naeem smiled with one side of his mouth. “Him and everyone attached to him.”

“Thank you.” Her chin trembled and eyes watered, but she closed them until they were dry. “So you weren’t able to really say goodbye to them?”

“Nah.” His head shook and mouth twisted to the side. “Not until I got out. That’s also why your father was able to bury someone else in your place. If I would have been out, I would have seen you. He had a closed casket for the funeral and there was no viewing of the bodies.”

Destiny chewed on her cheek, brows wrinkled as she processed his words.

“I can’t believe my mother let him do this. I’m so ashamed of his actions. People thought I was dead for years and I...” Covering her face with her palms, Destiny rested her elbows on the table. Naeem wanted to console her, but since she was already having a hard enough time trying to accept that they were over, he didn’t want to do anything to make it worse.

“I have to kill him,” Naeem announced. Her hands dropped and she looked at him. “You know that, right?”

Her mouth fell open. Neck jerked. “But he’s my father...”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“Naeem—”

“There’s nothing you can say to change my mind. He gon’ pay for what he did, Destiny.”

She released a bark of laughter, head shaking as her eyes watered.

“Look...” Her hands lifted in surrender. “What he did was wrong, but I’m sure it was for what he considered a good reason. He wanted to keep me safe...”

“That wasn’t his job,” Naeem gritted as calmly as he could. “When he gave you to me, you became my responsibility. It was my job to keep you safe.”

She scoffed and jumped from her seat. “Yeah, and you did a good job at that, didn’t you?” she yelled, immediately covering her mouth as if that would somehow make the words go back inside. “Naeem, I’m sorry. I-I didn’t mean...”

Sucking his teeth, he stood with a smile. “That’s exactly what you meant. And it’s the truth. I didn’t protect you that night, and I’ll regret that every day of my life. Ain’t shit you can say to make me feel worse than I already fucking do.”

“Naeem...”

“Our sons are gone because of me.” His fist slammed the table so hard his wineglass toppled over and she jumped. “I

live with this shit every fucking day, Destiny. And now I gotta look in your eyes and tell you that.” His hand waved in dismissal before he turned and headed out of the living room.

A failure—that’s what he’d felt like—and finally having this conversation with her drove that feeling even deeper.

She hurried behind, tugging his arm. “Baby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“Destiny,” he almost hummed, pushing her hand from his arm.

She jumped in front of him and hugged him tightly. “You’re all I got left,” she whined. His shoulders dropped as he stared at the ceiling. “Please, Naeem.”

Looking up at him with wet eyes, Destiny kissed his neck.

“If you can’t respect my relationship...”

“Are you really not going to let me have this dick?” Her hand slid up and down his shaft. Though he may not have wanted to have sex with her, his body reacted to her naturally. “I know this dick has only gotten better with time.”

Her posture strengthened, and the gleam in her eyes was confident as she grinned playfully.

“You’ll never find out.” He pushed her hand away and put space between them. “This is the last time I’m going to tell you this; I’m with Dijon.” Massaging his chin, he added, “Maybe I need to say it like this...” Naeem stood directly in front of her. “I love her. I’m in love with her.”

Her eyes rolled, and she tried to walk away, but he grabbed her arm.

“I don’t want to hear this bullshit.”

“You need to.” He pulled her back into his chest. “And accept it too. Yeah, a nigga feeling weak and conflicted as fuck right now. My heart is sore, and my mind is all over the place. No matter what, though, I’m not cheating on Dijon.”

“You mean more than you already have? Did you forget you kissed me earlier at the airport?”

“And I’ll atone for that. But that’s as far as this goes. Do you understand me?”

This time, her pout didn’t sway him. True enough, Naeem’s weakness was a soft woman. A woman in tune with her femininity. A woman in need of him. A woman that complemented his manhood. Before Dijon, he would have fallen back in line with Destiny like it was nothing.

Damn the hurt and pain and regret. The guilt. The time passed. How being around her took him back to a time that he wished he could forget.

“I am not going to repeat myself,” Naeem warned.

Her head shook as she licked her lips. Swallowing hard, Destiny pleaded with him with her eyes.

“How do you expect me to just... turn my love for you off? You’ve had ten years to move on from me. I’ve held on to you, to us, for all this time.”

“I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but I don’t want you to think you have a chance. Even if I did slip up and have sex with you, my heart is with Dijon.”

Her head hung briefly as she sighed.

“Do you still love me?”

Naeem chuckled. “I will always love you.”

“Then why can’t we be together? Is it really just because of her?”

Squeezing the back of his neck, Naeem put some space between them. Now that she was thinking rationally, he felt safe to do so.

“Dijon makes it easy, yes, but I couldn’t be with you regardless. I would have had sex with you; I ain’t gon’ lie, but no, we couldn’t be together.”

“Why not?”

He licked the corner of his mouth and considered how deep he wanted to go with his honesty.

“I wouldn’t be able to maintain my peace and happiness with you. You remind me of a very dark time in my life, and that’s no fault of yours. You didn’t ask for any of this, but I can’t go back to that place of darkness, Destiny. And I wouldn’t be able to live in peace seeing my sons in you every damn day.”

“So...” Her head shook briefly before she nodded. “You want me to go back to France when this is over?”

“Not at all. You’ve been gone for far too long, and everyone will be happy to have you back.” He took her hands into his. “*I’m* happy to have you back.”

“Just not romantically?”

“Yes.”

Releasing her hands, Naeem went back to the table to blow the candles out.

“Can we at least come to an agreement about my father?”

His heart thudded dully in his chest, rising to his throat.

“I’ll sit down and talk to him. Hear where he’s coming from. Then I’ll decide.”

“That’s good enough for now.”

Naeem only nodded. He knew there was nothing Faulkner would be able to say to convince Naeem to allow him to keep his life. At this point, that conversation was just to get him in the door. When he was, he had three bullets with Faulkner’s name on them.

Dijon

IT DIDN'T MATTER how many times Dijon told herself it was a bad idea to be there, that didn't stop her from ringing Rakim's doorbell. As she waited for him to answer, she took a long sip of her tequila. Leaning against the doorframe, she wiped her mouth and sighed. Not checking in on Naeem had been driving her crazy. She told him to reach out to her if he needed her; otherwise, she'd check on him in the morning. But every passing second that she thought about him being with Destiny had her losing her damn mind.

When Rakim opened the door and saw her, he smiled. "The fuck your drunk ass doing here?" he asked, looking around her. "You didn't drive, did you?"

Shaking her head, Dijon pushed past him and sidestepped into his home. "This is your fault, Rakim. All this shit is on you," she slurred, tightening her grip on the bottle.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, locking the door behind her.

Wiping her eyes, Dijon released a soft whimper. "I wouldn't have fallen for Naeem if you would have done right by me."

Sighing heavily, Rakim pulled her into his arms and rested his chin on top of her head.

“I did do what was best for you. I let you go.”

“That wasn’t what was best for me,” she whined, clinging to his white T-shirt.

“It was. You got somebody who can love you out loud. You know I never would have been able to do that.”

Burying her face in the top of his chest, Dijon closed her eyes. “That’s over now.” She lifted her head and stared at his lips.

“Don’t even think about it, baby girl.”

“I really can’t take you rejecting me tonight, Rock.”

“Then don’t try and take it there, because it ain’t gon’ happen.”

Walking away from her, he headed toward his room, and she followed behind with a crooked smile.

“I need it.”

“Nah, you really don’t.” His head shook as he looked back at her. “You might want it because you in your feelings, but you don’t need it. And as soon as you sober up in the morning and realize what you did, you’re going to regret it. Then you’ll hate me, and all the progress we’ve made over the past couple months to be real friends will be for nothing.”

With a huff, Dijon took another swig of the tequila before saying, “I’m not drunk.”

He chuckled, heading over to his bed. “Yeah right.”

“I’m serious! I am a little tipsy though.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Rakim took her by the hand and pulled her between his legs. Looking up at her, he asked, “What are you doing here, Dijon?” He took the bottle from her hand and placed it by his leg.

“He kissed her.” Clenching her jaw, she closed her eyes.

“He told you that?”

Her head shook. “No, but I saw her makeup on his shirt and the stain of her lipstick on his lips.”

“Damn.” Rakim sat her on his lap. “I’m sorry, pretty girl.”

Licking her lips as they trembled, she bit down on the bottom one. “I don’t want to think the worst, but I’m going *crazy*, Rakim. All I can think about is him having sex with her and telling me it’s over. Or keeping this from me and acting like it never happened.”

“Nah.” His head shook adamantly as he used her chin to pull her eyes to his. “Naeem ain’t that kind of man. He honors honesty, and he has integrity. I believe he’s going to tell you about the kiss in his own time, but I really don’t think he’s going to cheat on you. And if he doesn’t and you fuck me, you gon’ feel bad as hell.”

Her hand slid down her face as she groaned. “I didn’t come over here for you to talk some sense into me. You giving me the dick or not?”

He laughed. “Not. I’ll hold you until you fall asleep though. Will that do?”

Sliding her hand down his cheek, Dijon nodded. “Yes,” she agreed softly.

Rakim removed her joggers and thin sweatshirt, and she was glad she had a sports bra and shorts on underneath. It was late August, not too hot, but not cold yet either. Climbing into his bed, Dijon felt solace the moment his arms wrapped around her, and she settled in the middle of his warm chest.

“I’m not going to try and justify him kissing her...”

“Good,” Dijon interrupted, and she felt his body shudder as he laughed quietly.

“But be real. If you thought he was dead and you saw him... how would you react? How would you expect *him* to react?”

“Honestly, I know she kissed him, but I’m sure he kissed her back.”

“Give ’im a pass. Just as long as nothing else happens. He got a kiss, and you get to cuddle. I think that’s fair.”

As much as she didn't want to, Dijon smiled. "You miss me?"

She waited, silently, as seconds passed.

"I do, but I'm at peace because I know he loves you."

Sniffling, Dijon closed her eyes. "I love him too. And I... Rakim, you know I will always love you. I miss you too. I know if you open yourself up for love it will find you just like it found me."

His head shook. "I ain't got no need for that shit. Not right now at least." After placing a kiss to the top of her head, he added, "Get some sleep so you can sober up and take your conflicted ass home."

She giggled and held him tighter. "Thank you, Rakim."

"Always."

N^{aeem}

THAT FOLLOWING MONDAY, Naeem's first stop when he arrived at Dapper with Dijon was her office. This was the first time they'd spent an entire weekend apart. Aside from the daily texts they sent in the morning and evening to check on each other, that was it. As much as he wanted to talk to her, Naeem couldn't imagine how this situation was making her feel. If she needed space, he'd give that.

All he could do was pray she wasn't overthinking the situation and that her trust in him would make sure she maintained her peace. He may not have been speaking to her, but he was keeping up with her through Savant and Addison. As she said she would, she was talking to Addison, so Naeem found comfort in that.

"Is everything okay, Priest?" she asked, not even bothering to look up from her iPad.

"Everything's great now that I'm with you."

She jumped at the sound of his voice and smiled widely. Locking the door behind him, Naeem walked over to her glass desk with breakfast in hand. As always, the blue and yellow color scheme of her office calmed yet energized him at the same time. Setting the to-go containers of her favorite items from Cracker Barrel on her desk, Naeem walked over to her and lifted her from her seat.

“Hey, bae,” she greeted softly, wrapping her arms around him.

Her hesitance to kiss him didn't go unnoticed.

“Wassup with you?”

Naeem sat in her chair and positioned her so that she was straddling him.

“What do you mean?”

“You barely kissed me.” Her shoulders caved, and she released a soft sigh. “Are you worried about what happened over the weekend?” Naeem's hands ran down her jet-black, middle-parted hair as he looked into her slanted eyes. Those long, wispy eyelashes always made him weak.

“Should I have been?”

“Not at all.” Naeem allowed only a brief moment to pass before saying, “I do need to tell you about what happened at the airport.”

“Okay,” Dijon agreed quietly.

“When we first saw each other... it was intense.” He licked his lips, keeping his voice low so she'd be calm. “She kissed me, and for a few seconds I kissed her back. When she tried to use her tongue, I pulled away. It's taken a few conversations, but I've finally gotten her to understand there's nothing between us. I promise you nothing else happened.”

Her smile was soft as she cupped his cheeks and placed a tender kiss to his forehead. “I know, but I'm glad you told me.”

“How'd you know?”

“A woman always knows. Sometimes she's just too blinded by love to accept what she sees.”

Naeem nodded with a small smile. “Do you trust that I'm telling you the truth? That's all that happened.”

The seconds that passed of her silence were brutal. Her hand slid down the back of his neck, thumb caressing it softly.

“Yes. It was hard at first. I was paranoid as fuck that first night, but Rakim...”

“Rakim?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “There’s something I have to tell you too.”

“If it’s about you fucking him to get back at me, I don’t need to know.”

“I didn’t have sex with him.” His body went still as relief settled over him. “I went to see him and tried to use him to feel better, but he wouldn’t allow me. He did hold me until I went to sleep and sobered up, then he fed me and took me home.” The more she shared, the lighter he felt. “He also reminded me that you’re worthy of my trust and my love. So you should actually buy him a cigar or bottle of Hen.”

Naeem chuckled, nodding in acceptance. He was glad she hadn’t had sex with him, because that would have made shit worse. As much as he enjoyed the new family he’d gained with the mafia, he would have killed Rakim and gone to war behind it.

“I’ll do that.” At the sight of her licking her soft lips, he closed his eyes and inhaled her sugary scent. “Can I have a real kiss now?” he asked, opening his eyes.

Dijon smirked. “Yes... You can have a real kiss now.”

It was crazy. She was sitting on his lap in a sports bra and loose-fitting sweats, and she was just as sexy as she was in her dresses and heels. He wanted her just as much now... if not more.

This time when their lips connected, Dijon kissed him like she loved him. She moaned quietly, pulling him closer with her arms wrapped around his neck. Squeezing her thighs, Naeem tried to control his growing dick, but it became useless to even try. At the feel of it underneath her, Dijon rocked her hips against him. He nibbled her bottom lip before pulling away.

“What time is your first groom?”

She looked back and checked the time on her iPad. “In ten minutes.”

“I’ll be done in eight.”

“Ah!” Dijon giggled as he lifted her and sat her on her desk. “Bae... what if Priest hears us?”

“She won’t if you’re quiet.”

“How do you expect me to be quiet as good as your dick is?”

He blushed, not even bothering to hide it. “I’ll go slow.”

For her to be the one protesting, she was also the one unbuttoning his jeans. As Naeem tugged her sweats down, he pulled her toward the edge of her desk.

“That’s going to make it even worse. I’ll feel you all over me.”

“And you like that shit, don’t you?” he taunted, putting himself at her slick opening. “You like feeling this dick deep inside your pussy?”

Her body shuddered as he pressed his way inside.

“Yes, Naeem,” she moaned.

“Say it,” he commanded, gripping her waist and using it to guide her up and down his shaft. “Tell me you love this dick.”

“I love your dick,” she whimpered, head flinging back.

“Deep in your pussy...”

Her legs quivered as she clawed at the papers on her desk.

“Deep... mm...” She tried to wrap her legs around his neck, but he stopped her with a swift stroke.

“Keep them legs open and in the air.”

“Yes, baby.”

“Now tell me where you love this dick.”

She inhaled a sizzling breath before locking eyes with him. “Deep in my pussy.”

The low groan he released before biting down on his bottom lip made her smile. “Don’t tell me you’re about to cum already,” she teased, squeezing her walls against him even tighter.

“So what if I am? I’m allowed to have quick moments.”

Her laugh made him laugh, but they both moaned when he placed her on the desk and entered her deeply. Instead of pushing and pulling himself out of her fully, he circled his hips and stayed deep... hitting her G-spot and clit with each stroke. Dijon wrapped her arms and legs around him as she struggled to breathe. Each whimper that released from her mouth was like music to his ears. Her cum dripped and coated him, and he didn’t give a fuck about her releasing without his permission. The shit felt so good he was cumming himself.

As her walls pulsed, his dick throbbed, shooting seeds deep inside of her.

“Shit, beautiful,” he moaned against her ear. As her nails raked down his back, he shivered. “A nigga will never get tired of this.” He kissed her cheek “Or you.” Then her lips. “Or telling you I love you.”

“Good, because I’ll never get tired of those things either. I love you too.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she connected his lips with hers. As they kissed slowly, drudgingly, Naeem had to remind himself that he had other priorities and responsibilities. Because at this point... all he wanted to do was take her back to his place and make love to her over and over again.

AS NAEEM PROMISED HE WOULD, he bought Rakim a box of cigars that Savant recommended. He’d met up with him and the rest of the Mayhem brothers, along with Nash and Pressure at Remi’s club. Though he was close to street niggas growing up, he longed for a brotherhood that blood hadn’t given him. It felt like he was getting that from the mafia, and Naeem was

glad Rakim hadn't had a moment of weakness that would have fucked that up.

"She good?" Rakim asked, lighting one of the cigars as his head bobbed to the Lil Baby that was playing in the background.

They'd been there all of five minutes, and Dijon was the first thing on Rakim's mind. Had Naeem been a lesser man, he probably would have felt some type of way about it. But he was actually grateful his woman had so many people around who cared about her. Though he was as careful as he possibly could be, Naeem wasn't invincible. If something was to ever happen to him, he'd be at peace knowing she'd be well taken care of in all ways.

"Yeah, for now. I don't know how long her good mood will last as long as Destiny is in town."

Rakim chuckled with a slight bob of his head. With the cigar tucked between his lips, he swiftly declined a call before shoving his phone back in his pocket.

"She just needs your patience and assurance. Baby girl has gone through a lot. All her life. Her daddy started a cycle that I believe you're going to break. Just be patient with her."

"Ain't shit else I can do. That's my wife. I'm firm on that shit. She know I ain't going nowhere."

Remi walked over to them, handing Rakim his phone. "Will you stop ignoring your baby mama so she can stop blowing up my line?"

"Just don't answer," Rakim demanded, hitting the end button without bothering to take the call. "Her ass don't want shit."

"You sure? I wasn't trying to ignore her calls in case something was wrong with my nephew."

Rakim sucked his teeth and rolled his eyes. "O is cool. He ain't even with her jealous ass." Swatting Naeem's arm softly, Rakim sat up in his seat. "She mad 'cause she saw Dijon on the cameras, and I ain't told her what the visit was about yet."

“Didn’t she come through like three nights ago?” Naeem confirmed.

“Hell yeah, and Tatiana been on that bullshit ever since. She swear I’m with Dijon now.”

“Keep playing with her ass, and she gon’ turn into that bitch on *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*,” Remi warned before returning to the bar.

“Mane, fuck all’at,” Rakim dismissed.

Pressure set a bag of weed on the table, and Naeem wasted no time splitting a cigarillo to fill it. As the conversation shifted from one man’s pride and problems to the next, Naeem found himself relaxing more and more. Admittedly, he was a little wound up at the start of the night thinking about going back home to Destiny. Her father was at a conference for the week and wouldn’t be back until Sunday. That was a long fucking time to be avoiding her ass.

Even though she’d accepted that he didn’t want to be in a relationship with her anymore, she’d still been trying to have sex with him. Out of respect for their history, he was trying not to talk crazy to her or put her up in a hotel, but he was nearing his wits’ end. Her attempt to get him to wrong the woman he loved made him respect her less, and that was something he never thought would happen.

A part of Naeem expected Destiny to have grown and matured as much as he had over the years, but that hadn’t been the case. A lot about her seemed like the twenty-two-year-old he’d lost all those years ago. While that would have been nice if he only wanted to have fun... Naeem was glad what he had with Dijon held more substance. Just the thought of her had a smile spreading his lips.

She was who he wished he could go home to.

Shit... He might just pull up to her cottage on his way in regardless.

She’d already given him some at work but vowed it would be the last time until his situation was taken care of.

Naeem would try to respect her wishes and keep his distance except while they were at work, but if he couldn't get to sleep again tonight... he was going to show up at her doorstep.

Dijon

EVERYONE WAS AT THE HOSPITAL. Hanna was finally about to make her arrival. September third, Dijon was about to gain her second niece, and she couldn't be happier about it. Honestly, none of them expected Hassan to have made it to thirty without any children, but he'd surprised them all. Not only had he managed to wait, but he waited for the woman Dijon was sure he was going to spend the rest of his life with.

All of her brothers were becoming the men, husbands, and fathers she knew they could be. Assad was about to get married, Hassan was about to be a father, and Savant had finally allowed himself to be loved. It felt silly now... thinking Destiny had the power to ruin what she had with Naeem. He was the key to her future, and she had to trust that nothing would change that.

A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth at the thought of him. Since she was in the waiting room with the rest of her family and friends, she decided to call and give him the news. Vanna had been at the hospital since the night before, but she was finally dilated enough for pushing. Naeem's phone rang three times before he answered with...

"Hey, beautiful."

"Hey." Her smile widened. "Are you busy?"

“I’m doing a little research for an upcoming project.” Dijon nodded, knowing that project was a hit that he couldn’t discuss in public or on the phone. “Wassup?”

“I was just calling to let you know Hanna’s coming any minute now.”

“Word?” She could hear the smile in his voice. “What hospital? I’ll pull up.”

After sharing the information with him, Dijon disconnected the call and looked around the large, bright waiting room. Her eyes shifted from face to face, landing finally on Rakim. He was already looking at her, as usual. His smirk was small as he slumped further in his seat and looked away.

Scratching her scalp through her low ponytail, Dijon stood and slowly walked over to him. The loose-fitting blush-colored lounge set she had on was the perfect outfit for spending hours in the hospital. Sitting next to him, Dijon brushed his knee with hers gently. The black sweatsuit he had on and low-sitting black snapback still looked like a million dollars on him. That was a major part of Rakim’s appeal though. His suave, sexy charm didn’t come from what he wore, though his outfits often accentuated it; it came from who he was.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked, looking straight ahead instead of at him.

“O has been hounding me about a little brother or sister.” His head shook, and he sat up in his seat, resting his forearms on his thighs. “Tatiana is eating the shit up too.”

“Y’all getting back together?”

The sight of his twisted frown made her laugh softly. “*Hell nah.*” Between his serious expression and tone, Dijon couldn’t stop the cackle that left her mouth. “She’s just trying to use that to get back in my good graces. Talking about if I decide to have another child, I should have it with her so I won’t have multiple baby mamas.”

She snickered. “I mean... that’s not a bad idea.”

He grimaced as his eyes narrowed.

“Fuck you mean?”

“I’m just saying.” Dijon’s hands briefly lifted in the air in surrender as she grinned. “You know I can’t stand her ass, but Orion is a great kid. *Y’all* made a great kid. Why not have another one... especially since you don’t plan on getting serious with anyone any time soon?”

Rakim stared at her silently for a few seconds. “I can’t tell if you’re serious or not.”

“I am,” she assured, squeezing his arm. “Do you want another baby?”

Rakim’s head shook. “I am not about to have this conversation with you of all people.”

She laughed and crossed her arms over her chest, feigning offense. “Why not? We’re friends, right?”

He sighed, locking eyes with her. “Yeah, we are.”

“So...” Her voice softened. “You can talk to me about this.”

“A’ight,” he agreed, sitting back and looking straight ahead as he massaged his jaw. “I hadn’t been thinking about it until he mentioned it, but I can’t be sure if that’s what he really wants or if she’s feeding that shit to him. Either way, I can’t lie and say it wouldn’t be nice to have another baby but definitely not with Tatiana. My son is my whole world, and I wouldn’t change shit about him, but I don’t want to go through this with her again. I don’t see myself getting into a serious relationship either, so I don’t know.” Rakim shrugged, giving her his eyes again. “What about you? Is that in the near future for you and Naeem?”

Just the sound of his name had her smiling from ear to ear, causing Rakim to tease her about being sprung all damn ready. She didn’t deny it at all.

“Not the near future, but we’re also not against it. I think we both want to get married first and spend more time with one another. For me, at least, I’m savoring being loved by a

man and it not come with pain. I don't want the focus to be taken away from that just yet."

"I feel you." His hand covered hers briefly and squeezed. "You deserve that shit. And love... being loved properly... looks good as hell on you, baby girl." Her head lowered briefly as she blushed. "I'm serious. You're glowing. I love that for you."

"And I want that for you," Dijon stressed. "Is there anything I can say or do to convince you to open your heart to love?"

His mouth twisted to the side as his head shook. "Nah." Pulling his vibrating phone out of his pocket, Rakim frowned. "Let me handle this shit outside. If she gets here before I come back..."

"I'll come get you."

Nodding, Rakim stood and walked out of the waiting room. Getting a bit more comfortable in her seat, Dijon pulled her AirPods out of her fanny pack to listen to some music while they waited. Everyone was pretty much in their own world, and she didn't feel the need or desire to try and converse with anyone else. She did, however, want to go and snatch AJ out of his mother's arms but decided against it since he was asleep. Next weekend, Maria would be in town, and she'd already been promised a day to have both.

Losing herself in the latest Aaliyah album that had been made available on iTunes, Dijon didn't realize how much time had passed until she saw Naeem walking into the waiting room. The huge bear, flowers, and balloons he had made her smile, but it fell when she saw Destiny standing behind him. It hadn't crossed her mind that Destiny would have been with him when she called, and seeing her reminded Dijon just how possessive of him she was.

As Naeem greeted everyone, he didn't mention who Destiny was, but everyone already knew what was up. Scarlett quickly handed Assad AJ and made her way next to Dijon, and Vixen and Jade were close behind.

“Damn, can I hug and kiss my wife?” Naeem asked with a smile, unable to get to her because of the women that crowded her.

His wife.

That declaration had her nipples hardening and arms covering with chills.

“Y’all, it’s cool.” Dijon stood and squeezed her way through them, chuckling in the process. “Hey, handsome.”

“These are for you.” Dijon accepted the bouquet of yellow lilies Naeem had purchased her.

“Aww, baby, thank you. You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I wouldn’t go and buy Vanna something and not get you anything. You know that.”

His arm wrapped around her, and she lifted her head, allowing him to place a slow, tender kiss to her lips. One that had her moaning quietly as her hand slid down his chest. After pulling away, she remained in his embrace. His eyes looked a little dark underneath, evidence of how little sleep he’d been getting.

“Naeem, have you been sleeping?”

He shrugged. “A lit—”

“Nope,” Destiny answered. “He be on that damn game all night, fucking up *my* sleep.”

Dijon chuckled, but it turned into a full laugh when Vixen added, “We can always put you up in a hotel or give you a more permanent rest.”

“Yooo,” Dijon stretched. “I need y’all to chill for real. She’s cool.”

“Are you sure?” Scarlett confirmed.

“We already at the hospital, so it’s whatever,” Jade added, and Dijon regretted telling them about the not-so-pleasant meeting she had with Destiny.

“Yes, y’all. It’s cool. Go sit back down.”

Destiny scoffed. Her eyes rolled as she stepped closer to Naeem’s back.

“I was in a tournament,” Naeem informed.

“And it’s not because I haven’t been there?”

“Nah.” His head shook as he finally released her from his hold. “I miss you still, but it’s the tournament. Once we start playing, we don’t stop until we’re kicked out of that round, so I’ve had a lot of late nights.”

“Well, is it over?”

“It’s two more nights. We’re in second place so far.”

“That’s great, babe. I hope you win. If you do, I’ll have a special prize for you.”

“The new headphones I want?”

Her eyes rolled as she chuckled.

“Yes, Naeem. The new headphones you want.”

“Bet.” He placed another quick, sloppy kiss to her lips before asking, “What’s the word? Is she any closer to coming?” as they all sat down.

Dijon was grateful for the seat that Destiny kept between her and Naeem, but she still couldn’t wait for their situation to be over.

“It’s hard to say. Hassan hasn’t come back with any updates yet.”

Naeem nodded. “You ready for this?” he asked with a lazy smile.

His arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her into his side.

“Are you?”

He shrugged. “I want you to myself for at least another year.”

Dijon gripped his thigh and nibbled her bottom lip, losing herself in his eyes. “I feel the same way. But I can’t wait to have a baby with you.”

“C’mere,” he ordered, voice low and husky as his eyes lowered to her lips.

She watched as he licked his, cupping her cheek in the process.

“Naeem?” Destiny called. “Can you Uber me home?”

Ignoring the desire to tell Destiny that it wasn’t her home, Dijon tugged one of his locs gently.

“I don’t trust you to be there by yourself,” he replied, turning to face her.

Destiny smirked. “And all this time, I thought you kept me at your side because you couldn’t get enough of me.”

“What I tell you about that shit, Destiny?” Not waiting for her reply, Naeem told Dijon, “I caught her ass trying to Uber to her parents’ house to see her mama. I had to take her damn phone and keep eyes on her at all times.” His head shook in frustration as his nostrils flared. “She wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“It’s cool. I’m just going to ignore her to keep the peace.”

“I appreciate that. When this is over, I’m going to show you just how much you sticking with me through this means to me.”

“Naeem!” Destiny called, louder this time. “I’m ready to go.”

Unable to resist, Dijon leaned forward in her seat to face Destiny. “Look, lil’ mama.” She chuckled and pulled in a calming breath. “You trying my patience. Don’t mistake my kindness for weakness, a’ight? He ain’t leaving until our niece gets here, so you might as well get comfortable. And if you say some more slick shit in my presence, I’m knocking your teeth out your mouth. Do you hear me?”

“If she don’t, she gon’ feel you,” Vixen added. “For real.”

Naeem's head shook. "Maybe we should go. I'm not trying to bring no drama to what should be a joyous occasion."

"There wouldn't be no drama if she stayed in her place and you weren't disrespecting me," Destiny added as she stood. "How dare you call her your wife like I wasn't standing right there? And now you talking about having a baby with this bitch? Like I didn't give you two sons that were murdered! What about my fucking babies!"

Each sentence that came out of her mouth was louder than the other. It was clear she was hurting and still needed to heal, but lashing out in anger was shredding what little patience Dijon had left.

"Destiny," Dijon called calmly. "To be honest with you, I forgot you were even here. I lose myself in him sometimes. Still, I apologize if us talking about that felt insensitive."

"You damn right the shit was insensitive. You think I wanna hear you talking about that with my husband? I barely wanna even see y'all together."

Destiny spat on the floor, just inches away from Dijon's foot.

As much as she didn't want to, she said, "Yeah, y'all need to leave." She chuckled as her leg shook. "'Cause I know that bitch didn't just spit near me." Tugging her bottom lip between her teeth, Dijon cracked her neck—a sign that she was one second away from swinging.

Used to her actions, Assad and Rakim quickly walked over to her with Jade and Vixen following close behind.

"Stand down," Assad ordered, pushing Vixen and Jade back.

"We got 'er," Rakim added, holding Dijon down by her arms as she stared up at him. Her jaw was clenched and eyes watery. Not from sadness—but from anger.

"Mane, fuck that," Vixen roared, gripping Destiny's neck and shoving her back down in her seat before Naeem could stop her. "She been real disrespectful since she got here, and I'on like that."

As Destiny clawed at Vixen's wrist, Naeem stood and covered her arms with one of his.

"I'ma handle it," he promised calmly. "Let her go."

Gritting her teeth, Vixen looked from him to Dijon, whose leg was still shaking.

"Dijon," she called. "What you want me to do?"

Even though her words registered in Dijon's ears, her brain didn't process them. Her eyes remained locked on Rakim's, and that was the only thing keeping her calm.

"I'ma handle it," Naeem repeated.

Vixen released Destiny's throat, and as soon as she did, she was flying out of her seat.

"Whoa." Naeem wrapped his arms around her and quickly pulled her away. "You can fight, but I promise you don't want those problems. Calm your little ass down before she kills you."

Destiny's yelling grew quieter and quieter as he carried her out of the waiting room. When she was gone completely, Rakim's middle finger caressed the space between Dijon's eyes until they closed. Eyes closed, she inhaled deep breaths until her shoulders relaxed. At that point, he released her arms and sat next to her. With his right hand on her thigh, he stopped her leg from shaking. Dijon palmed her face with a shake of her head.

"I'm trying *so* hard." Her voice cracked as she fought back her tears. "I'm really trying not to whoop that bitch's ass, but she got zero more times to try me. This was *it*."

"It's on sight next time I see her," Vixen said. "You ain't gotta do shit. I'ma take care of that."

Savant took her by the hand and led her away from everyone else. She dropped into his embrace, resting her head on his chest. Gripping the back of her head, Savant kissed it before tightening his grip around her.

"You gon' be alright, Elise." Her eyes squeezed tighter. She needed to believe that. "Just three more days, and

Faulkner will be back. Then this shit will be over.”

“I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Maybe you need to just not see him until it’s over if she’s going to be around. I know you wanna beat her ass, and she earned it with that shit, but that’s only going to make this situation worse.”

Looking up at him as she sniffled, Dijon asked, “You think he’ll resent me?”

Savant shrugged as he wiped her face. “I don’t know. It’s obvious he still cares about her, but I also know he wants to protect you. He’ll feel like shit if you fought her because of him.”

Her head shook as she removed herself from his embrace.

“I know Naeem isn’t to blame for this, but I’m so angry I just...” Palming her face, she inhaled a deep breath. “I think you’re right. It’s best if I don’t see them. See him. Until after she leaves.”

She chuckled as her anger began to settle. “I’ll end up killing that girl and forcing him to grieve all over again, and even though he doesn’t want to be with her, I don’t know if he would be able to forgive me for that.”

“I agree.” Savant’s head bobbed once as he looked down at her. “This is a very delicate situation. He might not love her romantically, but Naeem still feels responsible for her right now. His heart is with you, but he’s committed to this shit with her for the moment. I can’t say he would try and get revenge if you hurt her or worse, but that’s not something I’m willing to risk. The hoe definitely tried it calling you out your name and spitting at your feet. If my son wasn’t here, I probably would have slapped her my-damn-self.”

Dijon chuckled. “She better be glad Hassan wasn’t out here.”

“His crazy ass’ll knock anybody out and not think twice about it over his family.”

They shared a soft laugh. At the sight of Hassan, her heart dropped. They all rushed over to him as he clutched his chest.

“She’s here.” He grinned, eyes red from his tears. “My baby is here.”

As the women yelled and cheered, Assad asked, “Are they okay?”

“Both are good. I can take y’all to see Hanna now as a group, but Vanna will have to rest and shit before she can have visitors.”

“Let’s go!” Dijon grabbed her hand as if she could lead the way. This was the distraction she needed to get her mind off of Naeem and Destiny. So much so that when Naeem called, she ignored his call, focusing only on watching her beautiful niece sleep through the glass window. When she got home, she’d deal with Destiny’s bullshit. For now, Dijon was going to bask in the arrival of the newest addition to their family.

N^{aeem}

HE STOOD BACK, allowing Destiny to have her moment. It was her first time visiting their sons' graves, and she was allowed the sobs she released. When her body shuddered harder, Naeem broke down and walked over to her, taking her into his arms. She clung to him tightly, as if her life depended on it, while crying harder.

Naeem held her until her cries turned into whimpers. The entire time she released, his eyes were trained on their tombstones. Unlike his ex-wife, Naeem was all cried out. At this point, he was full of anger. But unlike back in the day, he was able to contain it. There was only one person that was going to feel his wrath—and that was Faulkner.

"I'm sorry," Destiny muttered, pulling herself away from him. "I haven't been behaving the best, have I?" Not wanting to make her feel worse than she already did, Naeem remained silent as she lowered and kissed both tombstones. "I didn't plan to come here and fuck up your relationship or make you miserable, Naeem."

"Then what did you come here for?"

"I..." Her mouth snapped shut. "I came for you and to talk to my father."

"But I told you..."

“I know, I know.” She looked away. “You told me you were in a relationship, but I honestly didn’t think it was serious enough for you to not give us a chance. I’m your wife, Naeem.”

He didn’t reply right away. Honestly, he was tired of having this conversation. One day, she had accepted they wouldn’t be together. The next, she was trying him again. And he still hadn’t forgiven her for that stunt she pulled at the hospital. Not only did she upset Dijon, but she embarrassed him. He’d already made her promise to be on her best behavior when they arrived, and she did the complete opposite.

Dijon wasn’t just his woman. The mafia was an organization that consistently used his services. On a professional level, the last thing he wanted was for it to look like he couldn’t handle his ex. How was he to be trusted handling enemies? Thankfully, his reputation as Unhinged spoke for itself.

“You are not my wife, and you’re lucky they didn’t kill your ass, Destiny, for real.” Her eyes rolled as she pouted. “I’m serious. That spoiled girl shit don’t work with real killers. Faulkner let you get away with that because of his power, but they hold more power than he does. You don’t disrespect a family of that caliber and get away with it. Had Dijon not called her down, Vixen would have been off with your head that same night.”

“And you would have loved that, wouldn’t you?” She closed the space between them. “You wouldn’t have to deal with me anymore if I was dead for real. I’d be away and unable to fuck up the little happy life you’ve built without your family.” Her quick laugh turned into a frown as she placed her hands on her hips. “You out here planning to have new babies with this bitch while I’ve spent the last ten years grieving our sons and longing to have my husband back!”

“Will you stop with this shit already?” he yelled, losing his composure and causing her to take a step back. “Damn, Destiny. You act like a nigga ain’t kill a whole slew of motherfuckers for you. I’m the one that spent nine years in

prison behind that shit. I'm the one that grieved our sons *and* you. Alone in a fucking cell. I'm the one that lost my fucking mind over you. Dijon is the first woman I've ever given a chance since you, and this shit is still new as fuck because I was still hurting over you." She was so caught off guard by his honesty her mouth hung open as she took a step back.

"For the past year and a half almost, I've gone to therapy and life coaching sessions every week trying to rebuild what losing my family did to me." His voice shook and lowered as he tried to calm back down. "Don't stand there and downplay how this shit has affected me just because I'm with someone else. You will never know what I've been through because of your father. I loved you so much I lost my fucking mind, Destiny. Do you hear me?"

He grabbed the front of her shirt and pulled her back into his chest as she nodded rapidly. "I loved you so much I hated you. There's nothing you can fucking say to make me feel bad about choosing a healthier life for myself, and that life doesn't include you. Is that fair? No. Thank your father for that when we go over there. But it's the truth, and that's how it's going to be. This is the last time we're going to talk about this, or I'm going to show you what your death turned me into."

Releasing her shirt, he took her by the hand and led her to his Audi. Unsure how much longer he could stand looking at her and allowing her to make him feel like shit over the progress he'd made, Naeem knew they needed to go see her father—right the fuck now.

THE GOOD THING about a man like Faulkner was that he was so arrogant it sometimes worked against him. As deep as he was in the underworld as a drug dealer, he didn't have guards at his home because that would draw too much unwanted attention. As a judge, he didn't have enough high-profile cases to feel as if his life was in jeopardy like other judges did. So instead of employing guards for his home, he used them only when he was handling business in the streets.

He did, however, live in a gated community. It was Naeem's first thought to use Destiny's birthday as the code to get in, and it worked. They sat in the car, silently waiting for two hours before Faulkner arrived. The whole time, Naeem wanted to reach out to Dijon, but he didn't. For the past three days, she'd been dry as hell, and he deserved that. He should have had a better handle on Destiny and not given her so much grace while she disrespected Dijon, but there was nothing he could do about it at this point.

In that moment, he knew Dijon could more than take care of herself. All he cared about was getting Destiny out of there alive. It fucked with him to see Rakim keeping her calm, but he had to take that L with grace. However, once this shit was handled, no other man would be in a position to see about his woman except him.

"Do you promise not to kill him?" Destiny confirmed.

Not answering right away, Naeem called Rakim and gave him the code for the gate. After hearing the cleanup crew was three minutes away, he disconnected the call.

"No," Naeem replied honestly. "But I do want to hear him out."

"What if he says something that warrants what he's done?"

Naeem's tone was sharp as his nostrils flared.

"The man kept you from me, your life, your family... for damn near eleven years, and you're still defending him? What could he possibly say to justify that, Destiny?" When her head hung, he sighed. "Look... I know that's your father, and I'm sorry about this. I know this is hurting you in a different way because his betrayal took so much away from you too. But he has to pay for what he did."

"I'm not going to let you kill him, Naeem."

He held back his smile. Like she had any other choice. Getting out of the blacked-out car he used for hits, Naeem casually went to her side of the car. He kept his head low, sure the neighbors had cameras. It wouldn't matter, though. Once the cleanup crew took his body out through the garage, there

would be no trace of his body nor proof that he was dead—only missing. If they were seen on camera and questioned because they were the last people to see him, no one would suspect his own daughter and ex-son-in-law to be the cause of his disappearance... even if he was the reason for hers. From her denial of his guilt, Naeem was confident Destiny wouldn't tell anyone her father was the one who faked her death. And without that, there would be no motive to point to either of them.

At the front door, Naeem waited until he saw the black Sprinter at the front gate about a half a mile up. He motioned toward the door with his head, signaling Destiny to knock. She huffed but did as he ordered before calling his name. His finger went to his lips, silencing her.

“Who is it?” Faulkner called.

“Find out and see.”

“Destiny?” he called lower, swinging the door open.

As soon as she stepped inside, Naeem followed behind, and the sight of Faulkner's eyes popping open made him smirk. He closed and locked the door behind him, wiping it of his prints in the process.

“Who all is here?” Naeem checked. “This conversation needs to be had privately.”

Faulkner stammered, unable to keep his eyes off Destiny.

“Faulkner,” Naeem called, and the bass in his voice caused Destiny to jump.

“No one's here. I, uh... sent the housekeepers home for the evening.”

Not wanting to just take his word for it, Naeem searched the house himself as the two embraced. He didn't care if Faulkner tried to get away. He'd be stopped outside. As he searched, Faulkner answered Destiny's questions about her mother's whereabouts. The fact that she was at an evening dinner with her club members worked more in their favor.

Naeem was going to try his hardest not to murder Faulkner in his home, but he also knew that was going to be damn near impossible.

Making his way back to the living room, Naeem's head shook as he watched Faulkner hold Destiny. He swore nothing made him happier than having his daughter in his arms, but Naeem had to force himself not to remind Faulkner that it was his fault that she'd been gone for so long to begin with.

They'd need to ease into that.

Otherwise, he'd wind up splattering his brain on the floor next to the fucking couch.

Sitting across from them on the smaller multicolored couch, Naeem sighed and spread his legs—sitting as loose as he possibly could.

“Daddy,” Destiny called, taking his hand into hers. “Naeem and I would like to know why you lied and faked my death.”

The simplicity in which she asked the question almost made Naeem laugh. It blew his mind that she had more anger toward him than the man whose actions had separated them for all these years. Faulkner was her father, yes, but that position in no way excused what he'd done.

“I didn't want you to marry him,” Faulkner admitted, pulling his hand from hers. “I wanted to object at the wedding, but I knew Naeem would no longer work for me if I did.”

“Why didn't you want us to get married? I don't understand. You're the one who said he had to marry me.”

“I thought that would make him leave you alone,” he admitted. “If I thought he would actually propose, I would have just forbode the relationship or sent him away for work.”

“A'ight,” Naeem said, not needing that much damn backstory. “You didn't want me with her. Why not?”

“It wasn't you.” Slowly, Faulkner turned in his seat. “Destiny was used to living a life that I didn't think you'd be

able to provide. I didn't want your marriage to ruin our working relationship. But it did anyway."

"Nah." Naeem chuckled. "You fucked up our working relationship when you tried to be the man of my household. That's why I left you and started working for the Delgados."

The lines in Faulkner's forehead creased as he cupped his hands between his legs. "No matter the reason, that was what I wanted to avoid. I didn't want the two of you together, because I knew the marriage wouldn't work and I didn't want to lose my most-valuable hitman. No one gave me any trouble because of how much they feared you. I didn't want Destiny to ruin that."

With a frown, she scooted back, putting a little space between them. She looked at him like she was seeing her father for the first time, and Naeem was glad about that. Faulkner needed to be ripped from the pedestal she had him on.

"Why did you fake her death?" Naeem asked.

Faulkner looked at Destiny hesitantly. "It was to protect her. The both of you. Like I told her."

"See, Naeem?"

"Protect her from what? You said it yourself; I was the best you had. What would make you think I couldn't protect my wife?"

"From jail?"

"Had I known she was alive, I would have handled that situation differently. I would have had men handle them on my sons' behalf to ensure Destiny wouldn't be left alone."

Faulkner's head shook. He looked at Destiny again, and that's when Naeem noticed the fear that covered her face.

"I wanted to protect her... from you, Naeem."

She shifted in her seat, as she often did when the conversation became uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?"

Destiny ran a hand through her wavy hair, releasing a nervous chuckle. “Daddy...”

“I have to get this out,” Faulkner interrupted. “He’s going to kill me if I don’t.”

Naeem had no choice. He was going to die either way. When and where depended on what he said.

“Please... don’t tell him,” Destiny pleaded, gaining Naeem’s attention.

Naeem’s eyes went from one to the other as the right one twitched.

“Tell me what? Speak. Now.”

“I can’t protect you anymore, Destiny. Not with my life being on the line.” Faulkner’s head shook. “Destiny was sleeping with him.”

A desperate gasp clipped her silence. She dropped eye contact as the color drained from her light face.

“Sleeping with who?” Naeem asked quietly.

“Jhon.” Naeem’s neck jerked as he looked over at Destiny. “Delgado.”

For a few seconds, the room was silent as Naeem stared at her while she chewed the inside of her cheek. He pinched the bridge of his nose, like that would help him breathe a little easier.

“He’s lying, Naeem,” Destiny denied with tears streaming down her cheeks. “I would never...”

“Shut the fuck up,” he gritted. “Continue,” he ordered, eyes returning to Faulkner.

“She told my wife about the affair, and her mother told me. I advised Destiny to call it off, and she did. When he went over there to make that delivery, he knew you weren’t there. He was trying to talk her into changing her mind about cutting him off.”

Naeem thought back to the security cameras. How he’d never wondered what they were saying before the attack and

rape.

“So he raped you because you cut him off?” Destiny’s head hung. “My sons were killed because you cheated on me?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, wiping her face. “I-I didn’t think he’d do something like that. We had only had sex a few times. I didn’t know he was that crazy.”

Naeem massaged his temples, leaning forward in his seat.

“I knew that you would find out,” Faulkner continued. “When I went to see her in the hospital, I found out that the baby survived too.”

“Baby?” Naeem repeated. “She was pregnant?”

Faulkner nodded. “Yes, and she didn’t know who the father was. I sent her to Paris to keep her safe. You were killing left and right, and honestly, I thought you’d get off and have to stay at a mental hospital for a few years. If you came home and saw her with a child that looked like Jhon... I didn’t know what you would do.”

“Where’s the kid now?”

“I miscarried.” Destiny sniffled. “I was... so stressed and sad over the boys. Over you. I wasn’t taking care of myself at all. I lost the baby, Naeem.”

He was listening, but Naeem was having a hard time hearing her. It made sense why Faulkner helped him get as short of a sentence as possible. He thought it was because of their past, but it was because of his guilt. In his own twisted way of atoning what his daughter had done.

“So what did you plan to do, Faulkner? Keep her in Paris forever?”

“Time got away from me.” He chuckled. “I felt bad about what she’d done to you. How it broke you. A part of me felt like she needed to stay away as her punishment. Then I felt bad for her because of how hard she took losing her sons. She healed there, and I didn’t want her coming back to this. The years started adding up, and before I knew it, nine years had

passed. When you got out, I thought you'd leave town and never be bombarded by the memories of what happened again, but that wasn't the case. Then she started asking questions... I just... didn't know how to fix it.”

Naeem swallowed hard, thankful he was seated when his feet and legs began to feel numb. His mouth opened, but no words came out. It felt like everything had stopped around him. The only thing that moved were his racing thoughts.

He came here thinking there was nothing Faulkner could say to make him hate him less. He wasn't expecting his words to make him hate Destiny in the process. As he stared at her, Faulkner's words settled into his mind.

Not only had she cheated, but she'd gotten pregnant. Her affair, though fucked up, wasn't a good enough reason for Jhon to have done with he did. Still, had she not cheated, he wouldn't have had the ammunition to take what didn't belong to him.

Had she not cheated, they would have still been married.

Had she not cheated, their sons would still be alive.

Had she not cheated, he wouldn't have spent nine years in prison.

Naeem's eyes closed, and he prayed. Prayed that he'd be able to make it out of here without slashing both of their throats. Prayed that he'd release the hurt and anger brewing inside of him before it was taken out on the wrong people—including himself. The last thing he needed was to harbor these ill feelings and go back into a deep depression. Or worse, a killing spree.

He stood and walked over to their side of the room.

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” he muttered, voice calm and low.

“You're wel—”

Before Faulkner could finish, Naeem was pulling his Glock from its holster and sending a bullet through the center of his head.

Destiny screamed, covering her mouth as his blood splattered against her.

Naeem looked over at Destiny and asked her calmly, “Do you want to die today?” Her head shook as tears fell. “Then you will not scream again or try to run when I open this door.” She nodded, body trembling.

Grabbing her arm, he dragged her to the front door. Once it was open, the cleanup crew quickly entered. He gave Destiny to Eric, telling him to hold her at one of the safe houses until he decided what to do with her. After they cleaned the house and made sure no blood or fingerprints would be found, they were to leave out in one of Faulkner’s cars.

Going out to his, Naeem was unable to move for a while.

All he could do was sit there and think about how much he’d lost for the woman he loved.

And to hear such harsh truths about the actions that led to it...

His head shook as he started the car.

Naeem didn’t know how he was going to come out of the darkness this time, or if he would even try.

Dijon

HAD Eric not called and told Dijon what was going on, she wouldn't have known. It didn't matter how many times she called... Naeem would not answer the phone. He wasn't even talking to Addison. For seventy-two hours, Dijon let it ride. At that point, she couldn't take it anymore. It didn't matter how dangerous Naeem was... She wouldn't allow him to suffer alone. If he didn't want her around, that was cool, but she wouldn't be able to rest until she set eyes on him.

Instead of letting herself in right away with her key, Dijon texted Naeem, *I'm outside. Can I come in?*

She kept their thread open, watching his dots dance across the screen. Naeem didn't say anything. Since he didn't say no, Dijon let herself inside.

As it was the last time he had a spell, Naeem's home was immaculate, but she was sure his room would have been the opposite. Knocking on his door, she waited for him to invite her inside. When he didn't, Dijon sighed and leaned against it.

"I'm not leaving, Naeem," she informed him. "Not until I see you."

He sighed, making her smile. "Come in."

Opening the door, Dijon expected the worst. She'd dressed comfortably in fuzzy boots, black leggings, and an oversized

blue sweater just in case she had to clean. However, Naeem was up, dressed, and looking like his normal self.

He was seated in the corner of his room, feet kicked up on his blue recliner. There was a bottle of brown liquor that she was unfamiliar with missing a glass or two on the small round table beside him. Setting the paperback copy of *A Course in Miracles* that he was reading down, Naeem looked up at her and gave her his attention.

“You’re...” Her head tilted as she continued to take his calm demeanor in. With his locs pulled up into a messy ball, Naeem was shirtless. The gray sweats he had on matched his house shoes. “Okay?”

His chin was almost in his chest as he avoided her eyes.

“I’m madder than I’ve ever been in my life,” he confessed, voice eerily calm. “That’s why I’m keeping myself in here. It’s safest this way.”

She swallowed and looked around the room. “Playing the game hasn’t helped?”

“I haven’t tried. I don’t want to release my anger onto an object or person outside of the one that made me upset.”

Her breathing hitched, and she shivered at the sound of his voice.

“Does that mean you’re going to kill Destiny?”

His head shook as a series of different emotions covered his face.

“I don’t want to,” he confessed, and that unexpectedly caused Dijon to release a sigh of relief. There were only so many things you could come back from... and she wasn’t sure if Naeem killing the mother of his children and ex-wife was one. “But I also don’t know if I can live knowing she’s alive and our sons aren’t.”

His head hung briefly before he stood and walked outside to the balcony. Wanting to give him space, Dijon released a shaky breath and walked toward his bed.

“Is there anything I can do?”

His head shook. “Not this time.”

Dijon pouted, feeling more helpless than she wanted to in this situation.

“Are you eating? I see that you’re drinking...”

“No. I haven’t touched that bottle, and I haven’t been eating. I need my flesh weak so I can hear from Spirit. He’s the only way I’m not going to go back down that path, Dijon.”

Licking the corner of her mouth, Dijon took two small steps in his direction. She’d never felt so helpless before. While she wished she could take his anger and pain away, there was no way for her to do so beyond praying or handling Destiny herself. Well... she was going to pay her a visit anyway. But now that she knew Naeem didn’t want her dead, she’d let her live.

“I don’t feel equipped to say anything to make you feel better,” she confessed, finally stepping out onto the balcony. “I’ll pray for your strength and peace. Your comfort and guidance. Beyond that, I really don’t know what to do.” As much as she wanted to touch him, she didn’t, pulling her hands behind her back instead. “I’ll give you your space to process this, and I’ll be waiting when you do.” Clenching her jaw, she fought the desire to tell him she missed him. The last time she saw him, she was telling herself a break was what they needed after what happened at the hospital. Now, Naeem was all she craved. “I love you, and I’m here. Even if you just want my presence.”

She turned to leave... waiting for him to tell her that he loved her too. The longer it took, the angrier she became. Not at him, but at this situation. By now, things were supposed to be better, not worse. They were supposed to be back together enjoying their present and preparing for their future.

“D,” he called, just as she made it to his door.

Turning, she watched Naeem come from the balcony.

“Yes?”

His hands went into the pockets of his sweats. “I don’t think you should wait for me.”

Shoulders sagging, she smiled before it immediately turned into a frown as her head shook in confusion.

“Wha—Why not?”

“I won’t be any good if I...” Gritting his teeth, he looked away. “I want to be the man you need, but...”

“No,” she seethed, nostrils flaring. “I’m not going to let you let her ruin this for us!” He maintained his calm, though her anger was brewing. “I’m not her, Naeem. What she did was fucked up times a thousand, but you can trust me. I would never do some shit like this to you.”

He chuckled with a soft shake of his head. “I’m not worried about that. How am I supposed to cherish you with my first wife’s blood on my hands, Dijon? How can I give you babies knowing I wasn’t there to protect the sons I had with her? I thought I was ready, but this shit has opened wounds that I honestly don’t know if I’ll ever be able to heal.”

Her eyes blinked rapidly as she fought back her tears. “That’s okay,” she assured sweetly, slowly walking over to him. “Y-You don’t have to be healed fully from this. It takes time. I accept this version of you, Naeem, and I’m willing to walk with you through your journey.” Cupping his cheeks, she forced him to look into her eyes. “We’re sole mates, remember? We walk through every phase of life together. I got you, bae. It ain’t shit about your past that can make me love you any less in our future.”

His chin trembled and throat bobbed. She’d never seen his eyes so lifeless. Heard his voice so dead.

“I know you have to believe that in your heart, though,” Dijon added with a bitter smile. “Just like I had to believe in my heart that you were worthy of my trust.” The soft bark of a laugh that she released as she stepped back from him couldn’t be contained. “That you wouldn’t leave me.”

“Dijon,” he called softly, trying to reach for her hand.

“Please don’t.” Dijon inhaled a short, aching breath. “Don’t tell me you’re sorry or that this is what’s best for me. I’m tired of hearing that shit, quite frankly.”

Pushing past him, she headed for the door... regretting that she'd even come over.

"That's how you leaving?" he confirmed, not bothering to turn and look her way.

"How else am I supposed to? It's over, right?"

When he didn't answer, she walked out quickly with only one destination in mind. However, there were two people that she wanted to talk to. After hopping into her Ford-350, she dialed her oldest brother's number. Normally, the sound of Addison and her daughter's laughter in the background would have made Dijon smile. Right now, it only irritated her.

"Yeah?"

"I need to talk to Colt." Her request must have left him speechless because he didn't reply. "Vant!"

"Yeah, what you say?"

"I said I need to talk to Colt."

"The fuck for?"

Starting her truck, Dijon chuckled. "Personal."

"Too personal to talk to your big brother about?"

Her head shook as she licked her lips and sighed. "Yes," she whispered. "Can you just give him my number?"

"A'ight. Is this about Naeem?"

"No," she answered truthfully.

More than anything, Dijon wanted to know why he'd left. Why he'd mishandled her heart and broke it before any other man could. Why he didn't show her what she needed to look for in her romantic partners. Why he hadn't been consistent in her life. Why she kept looking for parts of him in other men.

"Are you sure? 'Cause I feel like you lying."

Dijon snickered, needing the relief. "I'm not, big brother. I swear."

Savant sucked his teeth. "A'ight, even though I really don't want you talking to that nigga."

“He’s our father, Savant.”

“That nigga ain’t no father to me.”

Rolling her eyes, Dijon put her truck in reverse. “Just have him to call me please.”

“Fine. What you about to get into?”

“I got a stop to make then I’m going to work out with Black. I wanna go see Hanna too, but depending on how late it is, I might go do that tomorrow.”

“A’ight, cool. I love you.”

Dijon didn’t realize how much she needed to hear that... until she heard that. “I love you too.”

After disconnecting the call, she texted Eric and told him to send her his location. Destiny’s location. She’d broken her man, and this time, Dijon worried he was beyond repair...

DIJON LOOKED her slender hands over before using the left one to turn the doorknob. Though Destiny was being held captive, she had a nice setup in one of their safe houses. Currently tied to the bed, she was watching TV with an empty to-go box of food next to her. When her eyes landed on Dijon at the door, the comfortable smile she had on from watching TV faded.

“Untie her,” Dijon ordered, not bothering to make eye contact with Nemo... the guard currently watching her.

“Are you sure, boss lady?”

“If I wasn’t, would I have said that?”

Standing, Nemo walked over to the full-sized bed and removed the plastic fork she was eating with from the bed, then untied Destiny.

“What do you want?” she asked, grin returning.

“Stand up,” Dijon demanded.

“For what?”

“Do you want a chance to protect yourself from this ass whooping you’re about to get?”

Destiny snorted and shook her head in amusement.

“What? You think because Naeem and I are temporarily on bad terms that you can come at me?”

“Bad terms?” Dijon scoffed. “You cheated on him, and the man you cheated with tried to kill you, he raped you, and he killed your sons. Trust me, you and Naeem are done.”

Destiny’s lips trembled, and she stuttered before snapping her mouth shut. She blinked rapidly as her shoulders slouched. Just as quickly, her head lifted high in determination as Dijon’s words left her mind.

“I don’t believe you. Naeem is my husband. He might be upset now, but he’s not going to give up on me or us.”

Dijon chuckled. “It’s funny because I came here ready to kill you, then I said I would just beat your ass. Now I feel sorry for you because you have to be delusional if you think Naeem will ever give you another chance.”

Standing, Destiny sighed, as if she was beginning to get irritated by Dijon’s presence. “Look... I understand your plight. I get why you don’t want to let him go. But he’s mine. You’ve kept my spot next to him warm enough. Mama’s home now.”

It was in that moment Dijon realized, truly for the first time, just how fucked up Destiny was. She became the mirror Naeem adamantly didn’t want to see himself in. All this time, it was hard for her to believe him when he said he didn’t want to go back to his darkness because she was too focused on love.

Love did that to people sometimes.

And for her, since she was new to a healthy love, Dijon couldn’t fathom a man not wanting to connect with the first woman to make him feel it again.

Now... the more she talked to Destiny... the more she realized that darkness wasn’t just about murder and death. It

was toxicity. Destiny wasn't healthy for Naeem; Dijon was. And *that's* why he chose her.

"You don't realize how your actions broke him... do you?" Dijon asked softly, slowly walking over to Destiny. She kept a foot of space between them, unsure if she still wanted to tag her or not. "You broke him, Destiny. And you've come back all these years later, after he's taken those broken pieces and put them back together, just to break them all over again. I don't think you really understand that."

"No." She laughed and crossed her arms over her chest. "I really do. That's how I know he loves me and will take me back when he gets over this. Otherwise, he would have killed me when he killed my father." Destiny stepped closer, head tilted as she stared at Dijon. "I made him do that." She smiled. "I couldn't kill my father myself... could I?" Her smile dropped. "He deserved to die for what he did, and when he snitched on me, that further proved it. I don't give a fuck what you say, Dijon, or how long I lend Naeem to you. He's mine—always has been and always will b—"

Dijon's fist connected with Destiny's mouth so quick even she wasn't prepared for it. When Destiny stumbled back, Dijon tackled her. Her fists repeatedly rained down on Destiny's face. Destiny put up a fight and tried to land a few undercuts that barely grazed Dijon's chin and jaw because of her ability to stick and move. Destiny, however, was no match for the Black Mayhem Mafia princess. Had Nemo not pulled her off, Dijon was sure she would have killed her.

Pressing her chest into the wall, Nemo kept a few inches of space between them as he reminded her, "Naeem wants her alive, Dijon. That's the only reason I pulled you off."

Inhaling a shaky breath, Dijon nodded rapidly. "Thank you. I... got carried away."

"Is it safe for me to let you go now?"

After pulling in a few deep breaths, Dijon nodded. "Yeah, I'm good."

Nemo released her, and she didn't even bother looking back at Destiny's still body as she walked out. Outside, Dijon looked down at her hands and shirt... both covered in Destiny's blood. She was grateful she'd driven her truck today instead of the Maserati. Hopping in, she inhaled one last deep breath. Dijon took her shirt off and wrapped it around her left hand.

At the sound of her phone vibrating, she looked down and noticed she had a missed call.

The number was unrecognizable, leading her to believe it was her father.

Dijon waited until she was driving to return Colton's call. He answered with, "You looking for me?"

Her eyes closed for a second at the sound of his voice. Gripping the steering wheel as her breathing turned choppy, Dijon clenched her jaw and fought to maintain her composure.

"Why weren't you there for me?"

Colton chuckled. "Dijon... is this really..."

"I asked, didn't I?" she yelled louder than she wanted to. At this point, her patience was running thin. *Anybody* could get it.

He exhaled a hard breath. "Girls were meant to be with their mothers. I didn't... think it mattered if I wasn't there. April... You were her responsibility."

"She might have had the responsibility of teaching me how to be a woman, but you were supposed to show me the good and bad of men. You know how fucked up my life has been because of you? Yeah, my brothers stepped up in a major way, but I still had issues because I wanted you."

"Dijon..."

"And you never even gave a fuck." She chuckled with a shake of her head. "I'm yearning for my father's love and finding pieces of you in any man that I could find, and you don't even care that you're not in my life. Because... what? I wasn't your responsibility?"

“No, you weren’t.” His confident tone only intensified her anger. “I wasn’t there for your brothers, so I don’t know why she thought I would be there for you.”

“Maybe because you told her you would be! Maybe because she loved and trusted what your ass said! And that was her fault and needing you has been mine. But you know what, Colt? I release you from any place I ever desired you fill in my life. It’s clear you’ll never be a present father to me, and this bullshit about you wanting to come to be a grandfather is played out too. I see why they don’t want you around. You’re just going to pop in and hop right back out, and I’m not letting you do that to my nieces and nephew. You will not hurt them like you did us because of your careless inconsistency.”

He chuckled. “It’s funny that y’all think my return is something you can control.”

“Whether you come back or not, you’re not going to have a place in our family. You gave that up long ago.” *And I have to stop trying to fill that spot through my romantic partners*, she thought to herself, tugging her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Come January, I’ll be back home... whether you like it or not. We can sit down, catch up...”

Her laughter silenced him.

“Why? So you can get my hopes high of us *finally* having a normal relationship just to leave me all over again?” Her head shook. “I’m good on that, and I’m good on you. Goodbye, Colt.”

Punching her steering wheel, she screamed yet refused to let her tears fall. A few seconds later, she giggled. Which turned into a full laugh. Which turned into a sob so deep she had to pull over on the expressway because she couldn’t see.

“Did I just break up with my father?” Dijon chuckled as she wiped her face. Releasing a sigh of relief, she closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath. “I think I just broke up with my father.”

Squeezing the bridge of her nose, Dijon chuckled again and shook her head. She'd never felt so free before in her life. Finally having control of her situation with Colton instead of waiting for him to make time and prove himself worthy of her provided a peace Dijon didn't know existed. And she was sure it would only get deeper... better... with time.

Not just pertaining to Colton but all men in her life.

Going forward, she'd never beg a man to love her or accept her love. She'd never beg him to stay when he made it clear that he wanted to walk away. And she would lock the door of her heart and not allow anyone to haphazardly try to come back in when he felt like it. Not even Naeem.

No matter how much she loved him, Dijon wouldn't allow him to become another reflection of her father.

He'd love her properly or not love her at all.

There would be no in between...

N^{aeem}

NAEEM WASN'T sure what kind of mood Dijon would be in when he saw her. Apparently, she'd unleashed her own form of a beast. Nemo called and told him what she'd done to Destiny just after Savant called and said she was requesting to speak with their father. He may not have known what his woman was up to, but he was damn sure going to find out.

Instead of letting himself inside of her cottage, he decided to give her the same privacy she'd given him earlier. He knocked on the door, unsure what the fuck he was even going to say. Hours ago, he was telling her not to wait for him. Now, he didn't want her to do anything but.

"What?" The attitude, he expected, but the roughness of her tone caught him off guard.

"Who you talking to?"

A beat of silence passed. Her voice was softer when she said, "Naeem?"

"Yeah. Open the door."

The huff and groan she released made him smile, but he dropped it when she opened the door just enough to poke her head out and look at him.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked sweetly, and his smile returned.

“Why would you be in trouble?”

She shrugged, opening the door just a little wider. “I don’t know.”

“Dijon...”

“I didn’t kill her!”

“You could have!”

Her eyes rolled as she opened the door all the way, allowing him to see her dressed in one of his shirts and a pair of thick socks that came just under her knees.

“Well... at least then you wouldn’t have had to worry about having her blood on your hands.”

His posture weakened and expression saddened. “About that... Can we talk?”

“If it will end with you reminding me that you don’t want to be with me... no.”

“I’ve never not wanted to be with you, beautiful.” Resisting the urge to take her into his arms, Naeem repeated, “Can we talk? Please?”

When she agreed, he went to his Lexus and grabbed the pepperoni pizza, jalapeño and bacon cheese sticks, and 1800 that he’d brought just to get back on her good side. At the sight of it, she laughed softly.

“Seriously, Naeem?”

“I figured you would be mad at me. Didn’t want you hungry on top of that too.”

Passing her to walk inside, he couldn’t resist dropping a quick kiss to her lips.

Because the truth of the matter was, it hadn’t taken long for Naeem to come to the conclusion that Dijon was in his life for a very specific reason after she left. And when Nemo called and told him all that Destiny had said, it served as confirmation of exactly what he had to do.

“I don’t realize how small my cottage is until you or my brothers are here,” she admitted as they headed to her kitchen.

The space was definitely small, and he would have preferred to have this conversation at his home—their home—but he didn’t want to push his luck. The last thing Naeem wanted to do was put Dijon on an emotional roller coaster. While she softened him, it was his job to keep her steady. While he strengthened her, it was her job to be his light. That had been their thing since they met, and he didn’t want Destiny’s return to fuck that up now.

“I’m hoping by the end of our conversation you will agree to come back home with me.”

“You said...”

“I know what I said,” he interrupted, not wanting to hear her even speak those words.

When she handed him a plate, Naeem declined. Since he’d gone so long without eating, he was starting small with fresh fruit juice and soup.

“But that’s not what you meant?”

His head shook. “In that moment, I did. I want what’s best for you, and in that moment, I didn’t think that was me.”

Leaning against the stove, Dijon asked, “What has changed?”

Naeem took her hand into his and led her to the living room. Sitting knee to knee, he was honest with her.

“I was taking what Faulkner and Destiny did personally. It’s easier to take responsibility for the actions of others than feeling like a victim for me. Telling myself that my marriage was a lie, my wife wasn’t the woman I thought she was, and the past ten years of me romanticizing how great things were... that was a hard pill to swallow. My ego was bruised, and that’s why I was so fucking angry.” He paused and inhaled a deep breath. “It would have been easier for me to just... slip back into that dark space and try to cut off the love I have for you, but the moment you walked out the door, I knew I wouldn’t be able to do that.”

Naeem cupped her cheek as he continued. “You’re my light, Dijon.” She smiled softly as her watery eyes fluttered. “You’re my guide out of the darkness that has consumed me. You’re my second chance to get marriage and family right. I’ll never heal from losing my sons, but I don’t want that hurt to be the reason I keep myself from having more with you.” Naeem kissed her hand. “The truth of the matter is... what I had with Destiny was flawed. All the guilt I felt that forced me to make her a priority, that shit is gone now. I can’t automatically cut off the love I had for her because it was real, but I hate her more. And I’m not going to allow her and Faulkner to take another person that I love away from me.”

Releasing her hand, he licked his lips... almost unsure if he deserved to let his next words slip from them. “I want to be with you for the rest of my life if you’ll have me. If you don’t, I understand, but I wanted to make sure you knew I loved you...”

Pulling him toward her, Dijon showed him with her kiss the words her heart longed to say. She sighed into his mouth—like this, like he was all that she’d needed. Naeem placed her on his lap with her back to his chest.

She smiled and spread her legs, knowing exactly where this would lead.

Naeem loved pussy... There was no denying that.

He loved pleasuring pussy and being pleased by pussy.

As much as he loved Dijon’s fat, wet, pussy... he didn’t always have to feel it wrapped around his dick.

He’d been a selfless lover before he even knew what that shit was. Hearing his woman moan, watching her squirm, smelling her unique scent... It all provided pleasure for Naeem.

Dijon wasn’t wearing any panties under his shirt, so as soon as his middle finger slid down her folds, it was coated with her wetness. Leaning against him, Dijon relaxed her eyes and spread her legs more as he caressed her clit. The simple movement of gliding his finger up and down her lips and

opening had her so wet the sound of her cream grew as loud as her quiet moans.

As he kissed and licked her neck, her nails dug into his wrist. Feeling her clit swell, Naeem knew it wouldn't be long before she came. Often, he drew her orgasm out because he wanted to provide her unending pleasure. It wasn't about that final destination with him; the journey was far more important.

“How does that feel?”

Dijon smiled. “It feels really good, baby. I'm trying so hard not to cum.” She inhaled a deep breath and bit down on her bottom lip.

“You can cum. I won't be done with you for a while.”

As her body locked, her pussy pulsed as she came instantly. Dijon released a quiet, “Aah,” in relief, wrapping her arm around his neck and tilting his head for a kiss.

His middle finger slipped inside of her, stroking her tight walls. Alternating between a slow and medium pace, Naeem fucked her with his finger while gently pressing her pussy lips and clit together. As her cum literally poured into his hand, her whimpers poured as she palmed her breasts. Pussy growing even wetter, Dijon released quiet curses under her breath as her hips rocked and circled against him.

“Shiiit,” she stretched, just above a whisper.

Feeling her walls contract, Naeem stopped the movement. “Did I say you could cum again?”

“Naeem,” she whined, bucking against him.

“It's too soon. You'll be too tired for this dick.”

“I promise I won't, baby, please,” she begged.

Continuing his movements, Naeem stared at her pleasure-twisted face. Her eyes were closed and mouth open before she bit down on her bottom lip. This time when she came, her body jerked against him.

Turning her around, Naeem relaxed further in his seat as she pulled his dick out of his pants. She was just as anxious to

have him inside as he was to be inside. The moment she slid down his shaft, they both released content sighs. As she bounced against him slowly, Naeem held her close and sucked her nipples. Head flinging back, Dijon moaned as she gripped the back of his neck.

Each time she bounced against him, moans threatened to fall from his lips. When he could no longer hold them in, the sound of his pleasure intensified hers. Gripping her neck, Naeem applied pressure and used it to control her movements. He picked up the pace, dropping her down onto him with medium speed. Back arched, Dijon whimpered as her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

Her wetness puddled up and gushed down his dick as she came. He smacked her ass and tightened his grip on her neck, growling as he fought to not cum himself. As her body quivered, Dijon moaned his name. Her eyes opened and connected with his before she did the same with their lips. When she pulled away, Naeem stood and carried her to her bed.

He placed her in the middle of it and removed the shirt. The only reason he pulled out of her was to undress himself, but he was anxious as hell to get back inside. Dijon was just as anxious too. Her arms were open and waiting the second he got back into bed. Pressing his way back in, Naeem just... lay there. He looked into her eyes as she cupped his cheeks and caressed them with her thumbs.

“You really love me, don’t you?” Naeem didn’t know why he had to ask, but he did.

She smiled and lifted herself slightly to kiss the worried expression from his forehead that his bunched brows created.

“Yes, Naeem. I love you.” She chuckled. “Are you just now realizing that?”

“Nah. I mean...” He shrugged. “I know I love you, but I don’t know. Maybe I am just now accepting your love for me too.”

Her smile was sweet as he lowered himself back down to her. Lifting her legs into the air, Naeem leaned them against his arms as he gripped her comforter. His strokes were deep, hard, and slow. Each time he pressed into her and that anklet dangled, he shook his head.

Unsure how long he'd be able to last, Naeem circled his hips, grinning when she tried to close her legs as she cried out. This time was one time he *needed* her to cum quick.

“You’re not playing fair.” Dijon wrapped her legs around his waist. “How do you expect me not to cum with you fucking me like this?”

“Cum, beautiful. I’m ready to cum too.”

With his permission, Dijon came one last time, and he followed right behind. His heart beat wildly against his chest, and it was a very physical reminder of how much love and admiration Naeem was storing for her there.

As she placed soft kisses to his collarbone, Naeem rested half of his weight on her and the other half on her bed. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she released a content sigh.

“That was amazing, but I need to hear you say it vocally.”

Dijon giggled. “I love you too, Naeem. And yes, I want to be with you. But if you walk away from me again...”

“I won’t. Shit. I couldn’t even let a damn night go by with us being at odds.”

“That was really cute too.”

He felt the scowl lifting the top of his lip. “Ain’t shit cute about loving a woman so much that the thought of her being mad at you creates a literal pain in your chest.”

She squeezed his cheek and smiled softly. “At least you have a woman who loves you back just the same.”

Lifting his top half, Naeem looked down at her. “I—” His phone rang, and he groaned. “That has to be someone on my favorites because I put my phone on Do Not Disturb.”

“That’s okay. You can get it. I need to shower anyway.”

His eyes locked on her ass, jiggling slightly. He couldn’t resist smacking it before licking his lips and denying the urge to bite it.

“Wait for me,” he requested... deciding to do just that. Naeem got out of bed and grabbed his phone. At the sight of his mother’s two missed calls, he sighed. She only called back-to-back when something was going on.

“Hello?” Crystal answered.

“Wassup, Ma?”

“Vivian is blowing my phone up looking for you. Something about Cordell being missing. I’m not sure what the hell she thinks that has to do with you.”

Naeem sat on the edge of the bed. He hadn’t told his mother or sister that Destiny was alive and back in Memphis, so it made sense for his mother to be confused.

“Send me her number,” was all Naeem said.

“Alright, baby.”

After disconnecting the call, Naeem went to shower with Dijon. His desire to feast on her had subsided some because thoughts of what Vivian would say took up so much space in his mind. Once their shower was over, he dried and moisturized his skin, then climbed back into her bed. Remaining naked, the warmth of her skin atop his instantly relaxed him. Naeem was going to thoroughly enjoy sleeping with Dijon in his arms... but he needed to see what Vivian wanted first.

“I need to call Destiny’s mama real quick,” he announced, opening the text thread between him and his mother.

“What do you think she knows?”

“I have no clue, but we’re about to find out.”

Putting the call on speaker, Naeem placed his phone on his chest next to Dijon’s head.

“Naeem?”

“Yeah. How can I help you?”

Vivian sniffled. “My husband is missing. He’s been missing for three days.”

“And?”

She sighed. “I know you know Destiny is alive. She called me and told me she was back home, but you didn’t want anyone to know until after you spoke with her father.” Naeem’s eyes rolled as he clenched his jaw. “It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together. My daughter comes to town, gets back with you, and now my husband is missing.”

“I don’t know what you’re insinuating, but neither of them are with me.”

“I don’t want to go to the police, Naeem,” she wailed. “He’s... You know what he does. If he’s okay and I bring this to the press, he’s going to be upset. Cordell has kept our lives private, and I want to keep it that way if I can, but I’m scared. Please. Just let me know if you have him. I don’t know what to do.”

Naeem’s eyes closed. “I don’t have him, a’ight? But I’ll call you in a couple of days. Don’t call the police or go to the news until after you’ve heard from me.”

Vivian sobbed but quickly silenced it. “And Destiny? I haven’t heard from her either. Do you think they’re together? But why wouldn’t they take me? I’m just... so confused.”

He scratched his ear, genuinely sad because of how this was worrying her. It was a shame that her husband’s objection and her daughter’s indiscretion were causing her pain. But there was nothing Naeem could do about it at this point.

“Give me a couple of days and I’ll see what I can come up with. In the meantime, do you have access to Faulkner’s email account?”

“I do.”

“Email his assistant and ask that his cases for the week be pushed back. Say he’s still in Nevada and hasn’t come home yet from the conference.”

“Okay. Thank you, Naeem. Please let me know as soon as you find out anything.”

He disconnected the call with guilt heavy on his heart. This was why Faulkner trained him not to get close to his targets. To learn as little about them personally as he possibly could. There was no reason for him to feel remorse for Faulkner, but his wife’s anxiousness was making him feel just that.

“You okay?” Dijon checked, running her hand up and down his chest.

He kissed the top of her head and wrapped both arms around her.

“Yeah. How was Destiny when you left her?”

Dijon shrugged. “I don’t know. She was unconscious.”

“Okay. I’ll have a private doctor go and check on her. As of now, I haven’t decided how I’m going to handle her yet, but she will be handled. Even if it’s just sending her and her mother away. I don’t want her here fucking up my peace.”

“I love the sound of that.” Naeem heard the smile in her voice, but it faded when she jumped up from his chest. “Shit,” she grumbled, hopping out of bed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, sitting up.

“I forgot about the pizza...”

NAEEM HAD BEEN KEEPING up with Destiny through Eric, Nemo, and Lamont. So far, they had been the only three people watching her at the house. He’d sent the private doctor over to administer pain medicine and make sure she didn’t have any internal bleeding or swelling on her brain. Four days later, he made his way over himself. The moment he pulled up and saw the empty driveway, Naeem knew something was wrong.

He called Eric first, who told him it was Lamont’s turn to be at the house.

“Did he tell you he had to leave for anything?”

“Nah.”

“And he has a car, right?”

“Yeah. The purple Charger is his.”

Nodding, Naeem got out of the car. He didn't want to think the worst. There was a chance someone was in Lamont's car and he was inside. Even though Destiny was tied up, Naeem stressed that she was resourceful. Her father had trained her for a lot of situations because of the things he heard while in court and did in the streets.

Walking inside, Naeem called out for Lamont and got no response. He quickly made his way to the back room where she was being held and cursed under his breath. Lamont was slumped over in bed, naked, with two bullets to his chest.

It probably didn't take much for Destiny to convince him to engage in sex with her, and she used it to her advantage obviously.

If she was in his car, there was no telling where she was at this point. Naeem's main two places in mind were her parents' home and his. After calling Eric and requesting a cleanup crew, he called Dijon and told her to go and check his farmhouse while he headed to the Faulkner estate—making it clear that Destiny was armed. He told her not to go after her if she saw the purple Charger outside.

For four days, he'd been wrapped around Dijon's body, only leaving when he had to for work. This was not the way Naeem wanted to get back into the swing of things, but he had no choice. Of course Destiny wasn't going to make this shit easy.

Dijon had gotten to the farmhouse before he arrived at his destination and informed him that Destiny wasn't there. That caused Naeem to speed up... sure Destiny was at her parents' home.

His thoughts were surprisingly calm as he drove. Naeem wasn't worried about Destiny or her mother for that matter. If Vivian wanted to go to the police, she would have done so by

now. And Destiny... well... Destiny was so convinced she had Naeem wrapped around her finger that she wouldn't do anything to ruin that.

When Naeem drove through the gate and noticed a purple car on the street in front of the Faulkner estate, he smiled. As much of a rush as he was in to get Destiny, he didn't immediately go inside. At this point, he was wishing he'd never learned she was alive. All the hell she'd been bringing with her hadn't been worth it—at all.

Not expecting either of them to let him in, Naeem picked the lock and let himself inside. Destiny jumped from her seat in the living room, but she clutched her chest and relaxed at the sight of him.

“Where's your mother?”

“In her room. I made her rest. What are you doing here?”

“No, what are *you* doing here? Did I not make it clear that you were staying at the safe house until I decided what I wanted to do with you?”

Her eyes rolled. “Did you really think I'd stay there knowing my father was gone and my mother was probably going crazy because of it?”

Naeem scratched his eyebrow, head shaking in slight annoyance. “You don't have a choice, Destiny.”

“Actually... I do.” She turned and grabbed her phone, pressing a few buttons as she walked back over to him in the center of the room. His eyes went around her to the couch... It showed no traces of the murder that was committed there exactly one week ago. “You see this?” Destiny lifted her phone so he could see it. It appeared to be a screenshot of scribbled names and dates. “This is the log of every murder you committed for my father. The official log is with our family attorney, but there are three copies in safety deposit boxes all over the city.”

Since there was no statute of limitations on murder in Tennessee, with that information, Naeem would be looking at a death sentence. Faulkner hadn't just listed the names of their

victims but where their bodies had been hidden as well. He'd even gone so far as to put where the murder weapons were, and when Naeem used just his hands, he listed that too.

“Because my father is dead, I have absolutely no reason not to share this.”

“What do you want, Destiny?”

She smiled and licked her lips, lowering her phone in the process. “I want you to go back to Paris with me.” Destiny tossed her phone onto the couch and took his hands into hers. “Give us a real chance again. Let's have another baby. He or she won't replace the sons we lost... but at least we can give them the love we still have left inside.” Just as soft and sweet as her first set of words were was just as sour and dark as the second set was. “Make no mistake about it, Naeem. You really don't have a choice here. Because of this log, I pretty much own you.” Her grin was replaced with her biting down on her bottom lip as she chuckled. “We can do this in love or in hate, but either way... you're mine. And you'd better believe if I can't have you... no one will.”

It was taking everything inside of Naeem to say he'd rather die than be with her. However, it was clear she only had one thing on her mind—and that was a life with him. Since that was impossible, she'd have to die. Just the thought of killing her had his eyes watering. Even after finding out she'd cheated, Naeem couldn't bear the thought of something happening to her. That affair being the reason for his sons' deaths wasn't even enough to make him want to kill her.

But now... seeing how low she was willing to go... This was the final straw.

Cupping her cheeks, Naeem kissed her forehead before clenching his jaw.

“Does anyone else know about this?”

Her head shook. “No. Not even my mother. But if I am murdered, our attorney knows you or the Black Mayhem Mafia is responsible, and he takes this to the police. So how do you want to do this?”

“You think threatening me will cause me to want you, Destiny?”

“At this point...” Her shoulders shrugged and head shook. “I don’t give a fuck. I’ve lost too much, Naeem. I’m not losing you.” Her head hung briefly. “I love you, and I want us to be together. You may hate the method behind my madness, but I know this is what’s best for us. If you just give us a real chance... you’ll remember why you fell in love with me. If I have to force that for our love to flow, so be it.”

Nodding, Naeem licked the corner of his mouth.

“Spend a few days here with your mom. Try to get her mind off things. Sunday... we’ll go back to Paris like you want. Start fresh.”

She smiled, eyes watering immediately. “Are you serious, Naeem? Don’t play with my emotions.”

“I’m serious. Think of anywhere you want to stop along the way too. I’ll use a friend’s jet, and we can go anywhere you’d like.”

She squealed and hugged him tightly. Gave him a kiss that made his stomach turn. Swallowing the vile taste of vomit that threatened to erupt, Naeem told himself this shit was almost over.

“I can’t wait, baby! I’m sorry that I had to pull this card for us to get to this point, but I promise you... you’re going to remember why you love me... and this will all be worth it.”

Taking her hand into his, Naeem kissed it. “Remember, you can’t be seen. Everyone still thinks you’re dead.”

“I won’t go anywhere. I promise.”

He nodded, taking a step back from her. “I have a lot of shit to take care of before we leave, so you might not hear from me for a day or two. But I’ll be back for you. I promise.”

Not waiting for Destiny to reply, Naeem made his way out. As soon as he was outside, he wiped his mouth as he gagged. He’d never been so disgusted in his fucking life. Never felt so

betrayed in his life. And for this to be coming from the woman he'd vowed to spend the rest of his life with?

The shit was insane.

Naeem was glad he was so quick on his feet, because the wrong look or words could have set Destiny off. If his plan to rid himself of her forever was going to work, she'd need to think there was a future between them. Naeem was going to take her back to France, but if she came back to Memphis, it would only be from her mother's request to have her buried there.

Dijon

“Wow.” Naeem was the first to speak, but they both took the time to take each other in. “You look absolutely amazing, Dijon.”

And she’d made sure she did. From the red formfitting sweater dress to her makeup and bone-straight hair.

Naeem looked good too. They’d dressed alike unintentionally. He matched her with his red and black sweater, black jeans, and loafers. His locs were newly retwisted... short beard glistening. Those chocolate-brown eyes constantly made passes over her face and frame as he licked his plump lips.

“So do you. I love you in red and black.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Naeem closed the space between them and tilted her head by her chin. He gave her a deep, slow kiss that had Dijon wanting to cancel their dinner and go straight to dessert. She wouldn’t though. It was important to Naeem that they go out before he went to France with Destiny. Though she wasn’t worried about him having sex with Destiny or no shit like that, Dijon wasn’t sure where Naeem’s head would be when he returned.

“We need to go,” she suggested, pulling away from him.

“I agree,” was what Naeem said, but he also returned his lips to hers briefly.

Once he'd gotten his fill, he took her by the hand and led her to his Lexus. Dijon didn't know where their first stop would be, though they both planned their date. They'd go to a new seafood joint she'd heard about for dinner, then The Wknd for drinks and music after ten. Between dinner and drinks, they'd go to the Rec Room to play a few games. If there was one thing that Dijon loved about her relationship with Naeem, it was how present and attentive they were to one another's needs, desires, and interests.

The more she did to make him happy, the more he matched and exceeded that energy, and she loved that shit.

Because Dijon loved communication, she was sure they would talk all throughout dinner, but that didn't stop her from asking, “How are you feeling about everything? Are you ready for what you have to do?”

Naeem lowered the volume on the Mozzy that he was playing. “I feel at peace. This isn't something that I want to do, but I know it has to be done.”

She nodded. “Does it?”

He looked over at her briefly, surprised by her counter. “What are you saying?”

Dijon twiddled her thumbs in her lap. She'd been thinking about this a lot ever since Naeem told her his plan. If that was what he thought needed to be done, she'd support him for sure. More than anything, she was worried about the aftereffects.

“She's done a lot of foul shit...”

“Foul, unforgivable shit,” Naeem clarified.

She nodded and licked her lips, keeping her tone low when she added, “But she's still your first love and mother of your children.” Dijon looked over at him, not surprised to see that his expression hadn't changed. “I guess I just want to make sure this won't haunt you for the rest of your life. Like... she needs to be punished for sure. But are you sure you can handle being the one to do it?”

“It can’t be anyone but me.” Naeem took her hand into his and kissed it, allowing their fingers to remain intertwined when he lowered them. “I appreciate your concern, bae, but I got this. You know how your family wants to handle your father if he comes back.” She nodded, though even that was something she didn’t fully agree with. Maybe it was because she’d just gotten in the mafia. Either way, Dijon knew she didn’t have a say in the matter. She would stand by her brothers no matter what. “I have to handle her.”

Naeem paused and massaged his chin. “She cheated on me, and the nigga she cheated with tried to kill her.” He looked over at her, voice lowering when he added, “He killed my sons. My innocent sons.” Naeem’s hand lifted as he pulled in a deep breath. “I’m trying not to blame Destiny for that, but she’s responsible for all the shit that transpired. If she would have been honest with me about her needs, I would have done everything I could to satisfy her. If she would have told me about the affair, I would have taken care of Jhon. But she didn’t, and a man had an upper hand on me that destroyed my family forever.

“On top of that, I’ve grieved this woman for ten years, and yet again, she put her father above me. Yeah, I understand how tempting it can be to let your parents protect you... but I was her husband.” He gritted, “She was my fucking wife.” Naeem chuckled. “There was so reason for her to allow ten damn years to pass without reaching out to me in some form or fashion. And when she did get back, she uses me to kill her father, talks crazy to you and disrespects our relationship, then threatens to go to the police. Snitching in itself was a death sentence.”

His head shook before he lost himself in silence for a while. “Trust me, you don’t have to worry about me carrying this around with me. When she’s buried, for real this time, I’m burying my past with her too.”

Dijon nodded. “I understand, baby.”

“When I come back to Memphis, it’s all about me and you. *Our* family. Okay?”

Her eyes fluttered as she nodded. It didn't matter what Naeem said in his spiel, she heard the hurt in his tone. And maybe that hurt would always be there. The shit hurt her too. Made her want to pull up on Destiny and off her before he even had the chance to.

She'd trust her man, though. Maybe this was the closure he needed. Either way, this taught her two important lessons about Naeem—family came first to him and she would always be safe with him... and he was a merciful man if he loved you, but when that love was no longer enough... that mercy definitely ran out.

THEY FOUND themselves at Paula and Raiford's Disco instead of The Wknd. Not only did Dijon know one of the bartenders there, but the vibe was better. With a mix of black and white people crowding the dance floor, they all looked the same under the red and white lighting. Really, Dijon just wanted to come because she thought it was karaoke night, but it wasn't. They both were having a good time anyway.

Their table didn't come with it, but the bartender had hookah set up that Naeem wasted no time adding weed to. By the time Dijon's friend brought her third drink, she was good and fucked up. Not too drunk or high that she was outside of herself... but she was definitely feeling good.

"I wanna get on that pole," Dijon decided, staring at the pole that was fairly empty. So far, she'd seen only two other women attempt to dance on it.

"Shid... go get on that hoe then."

Naeem was slumped down in his seat with one of his feet on the table. His naturally under-turned eyes were resting even lower—evidence of the weed in his system. Pulling her into his chest, he squeezed her ass and whispered in her ear, "How about I get you one set up at home?" When his fingers slid between her cheeks down to her pussy her lips parted slightly

as her eyes closed. “I’ma wanna fuck you when your dance is over.”

“That sounds good to me,” she agreed, resting her hand against his chest.

As his lips began to drop kisses along the side of her face, Dijon made her way into his lap, but as soon as “Cupid Shuffle” started to play, Dijon was hopping down and heading toward the dance floor. Naeem’s head shook as he watched her stand underneath the red balloons.

“Come *on*, bae!” she yelled, immediately falling into the line dance.

When he didn’t stand to meet her, Dijon rushed back over and tugged him out of the booth by his hand. Instead of standing next to her, Naeem stood behind her. Her ass was on him, and the feel of his dick against her as they danced had Dijon’s eyes closing as her smile widened. It may have been his way of keeping her close and enjoying their dance, but as she lost herself in the safety of his embrace, Dijon was content knowing Naeem would never willingly let her go...

N_{aeem}

ASSAD HANDED Naeem the card that held the pilot's information for their private jet. He'd gotten the pills he'd need to put Destiny to sleep from Vixen, and Rameek confirmed the family attorney she'd placed her confidence in was on their payroll too. It didn't take anything more than a phone call for him to hand deliver the log to Naeem and let him know where the copies were.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to do this yourself?" Assad asked, to which Savant added...

"She's done a lot of foul shit, but that's your first love at the end of the day. We don't need you getting to Paris and changing your mind about this shit."

Sitting back in his seat, Naeem massaged his chin in thought. Their concern wasn't anything different from the inner dialogue he'd been having with his damn self. And with Dijon for that matter.

They were in the blue room of Kirby's, and it provided the peaceful ambience he needed to prepare for what he'd have to do tomorrow. It wasn't just killing Destiny that was heavy on his mind; it was being in her presence in general. Naeem was a lot of things, but forgiving wasn't one. Had it been anyone else, he would have shot her where she stood and dealt with the consequences as soon as she showed her hand. Just like

she did from the beginning of their time together, Destiny had Naeem doing things he wouldn't otherwise do. That shit was about to end though.

And soon.

“That shit means nothing to me anymore,” Naeem answered. “The sooner I take care of this, the better.”

“That’s a tough spot,” Hassan admitted. “I’m crazy as fuck, but I’on know. If Vanna did some shit like this to me...” His head shook.

“That’s respect though,” Savant clarified. “If someone you love has to be put down, it’s best if it comes from you.”

“Exactly,” Assad agreed. “That’s why you gotta handle Colt if he comes back in January.”

“What’s up with that shit anyway?” Naeem asked. “Dijon told me none of you want him here. Is he that big of a threat and something I need to prepare the team for?”

Assad took a long pull from his blunt while Hassan downed his shot, leaving Savant to answer.

“Y’all definitely need to be prepared. Colt has a lot of enemies, and we don’t know what they will do to get to him. His generation doesn’t believe in going directly to the target, so there’s a really good chance they will come after his family to get to him.”

“Plus he’s wanted, so not only will MPD be after him, but the feds and DEA will be too,” Assad added. “That’s a lot of heat that will be coming our way. We’ll need to move extra careful going into the new year. None of us are doing anything sloppy enough to get caught up, so as long as no one snitches or infiltrates undercover we should be good.”

“With Hanna being here now, I’m not even trying to let it get to that point though,” Hassan made clear. “I want his fucking head as soon as he touches American soil. If anything happens to my baby girl because of his selfish ass...”

“That’s not going to happen,” Savant assured quickly.

Naeem had learned quickly their pecking order and how they operated. Assad was the boss of all bosses, but Savant's wisdom and guidance never went ignored or unappreciated. He had a way of both irritating the fuck out of them and calming them like no one else could. Just his assurance had Hassan sitting back in his seat, body relaxing, and that was a lot for the known hothead.

"I already told you I'll take his ass out if I have to," Savant continued. "He's not bringing no heat our way. That's on my fucking life."

"Are you going to be able to handle this shit, Sanny?" Assad questioned. "We joke a lot and shit about you being reckless, but we also know you feel the most. If it's going to bother you to take him out, let us know now so Vant can mentally prepare."

Hassan's head tilted as he stared at his empty shot glass. His years of wanting to be over security back in the day never could have prepared him to have to kill his own father. No matter how horrible of a father Colton was... that was still their father.

Naeem couldn't imagine being faced with the task of having to put to rest the man who had given him life.

Then again, he was less than twenty-four hours away from killing his ex-wife.

How much different could it be?

In their world, certain actions had deadly consequences... and from the sound of it... Colton had that deadly consequence coming his way.

"I'ma handle it," he assured as he sat up and poured himself another shot of the vodka and cognac mixed liquor.

Neither Assad nor Savant said anything. They looked at each other briefly, and Savant nodded before they changed the subject. By the time they'd rotated a third blunt, Naeem was ready to go home to Dijon.

Home to Dijon.

Just the thought of it had a big ass grin spreading his lips. She'd agreed to letting him hire a moving company to bring her things over to his place. Because the cottage was so old, they'd been advised not to try and uproot it. Instead, he promised to have her a cottage built in his backyard by the barn. Hell, she spent so much time outside with the animals anyway it wouldn't surprise him if she was out in the cottage a lot too. As long as they ate together and slept together... that was all Naeem cared about.

At the thought of Dijon, the thought of Destiny also crossed his mind. Not wanting her to start thinking the worst since they hadn't been seeing each other, he shot her a text that read, *Tomorrow's the day. I hope you're ready.*

Destiny: Ready for my forever with you? I've been waiting for this for ten years. I love you.

When he texted her back, *I love you too*, Naeem had to cut his phone off. The shit had his anger bubbling up to the surface, and he'd been keeping it under control too well to let a reply from her ruin that. All he could do was tell himself that this was about to be over.

That he was finally about to be rid of his past for good.

That after tomorrow, the only woman who would have access to his heart romantically was Dijon, and because she accepted him just as damaged as he was... all the bullshit Destiny had taken him through wouldn't matter. He'd heal in his own time. In his own way. With the love of a woman that he still didn't understand why he deserved but thanked God for every day of his life.

WITH HIS BACK TO DESTINY, Naeem dropped two of the pills into her glass of champagne as Vixen instructed. It would take the pills two hours to work their way into her system. She'd grow tired before falling into her deep sleep. Destiny would feel no pain, and even though Naeem felt that was more grace

than she deserved, being the mother of his sons granted her mercy.

Still.

Once the pills fully dissolved, he walked in her direction. Naeem took a small sip before handing her the flute. She didn't appear to doubt him, but he wanted to be sure she felt completely safe with him. Sitting down next to her, Naeem relaxed in his seat. The jet would be landing in twenty minutes, which meant he'd have one hour and forty minutes left with her on this earth.

"I can't believe you're really here, Naeem."

Naeem looked over at her, watching her throat bob as she took a gulp of the champagne.

"I can't either honestly. After hearing about everything you did, I didn't think I would ever give you a chance."

Destiny turned slightly. "Be honest with me: are you here just because of the log... or because you love me and want to give me another chance?"

Thinking over his answer carefully, Naeem didn't reply right away. No matter what fucked-up shit she'd done, a part of him genuinely wanted to make her last moments as perfect as possible. It was crazy how love distorted your character. On one hand, Unhinged had to keep himself from snapping her neck. On the other, Naeem wanted to pray she got the love she desperately needed to heal.

Unfortunately for her, Destiny had made it clear that the only man she was interested in getting that love from was Naeem. And since that was impossible, there was not enough room in the world, let alone Memphis, for the both of them. He'd suffered enough because of the decisions in his past... all of which came from loving Destiny. That shit was officially over.

"I'm here because of what you have against me; I can't lie." Her head hung briefly. Shoulders dropped. Naeem lifted her head by her chin. "You're determined to make us work, and I can't deny that anymore. Maybe you see something for

us that I don't. So even though I'm here because I have to be, I'm sure that will change and I'll be here because I want to be. Is that good enough?"

Her smile was soft as she took his hand into hers. "That's a good start. Like I said, I know I've been misbehaving lately and..."

"Misbehaving?" Naeem laughed.

"Okay, I've been acting a fool." She smiled too. "But I just... my life has been on hold for over ten years, Naeem. All I've had is memories and hope that when we got together things would be like they used to be. Do you know how determined that's made me? I can't let you go. I simply won't."

Naeem scratched his scalp and released a loaded sigh. "None of that matters anymore. You have me now. Just focus on that."

Destiny wrapped her arm around his and rested her head on his shoulder. He looked down at her and closed his eyes. This would all be over... soon.

OF COURSE, things didn't go as planned. That would have been too much like right. Instead of eating at home, Destiny insisted on taking Naeem to one of her favorite restaurants. It took some convincing, but eventually, he was able to convince her that he wanted to eat at her home so he could have her to himself. After about thirty minutes of waiting for their to-go orders, they headed out.

He checked the time, noticing he had about forty minutes before the pills kicked in.

While she plated their food and lit a few candles, Naeem freshened up in the bathroom.

"Get ready for a thick, hearty meal that will make you never want to go to America again," Destiny boasted from the kitchen.

“Ain’t shit better than soul food.”

She laughed, and as much as Naeem didn’t want to, he smiled. Why couldn’t she have just come back home and been on her best behavior? Her secrets wouldn’t have been exposed, the way Naeem viewed her and felt about her wouldn’t have changed, and she wouldn’t have to die.

A lot could be forgiven. A lot could be tossed away as mistakes. But threatening his freedom... That was unacceptable.

Destiny broke code and became an enemy the moment she did that. Their personal issues no longer mattered—this was business.

“Yeah right. If you love this food just as much as I know you will, you owe me.”

“Owe you what?”

“Your love. For the rest of your life.”

Heading out of her bathroom, he muttered, “More like for the rest of your life.”

Her walls were decorated with floral wallpaper that didn’t seem to fit her at all, yet it still had a vibe that suited her. The suede vintage furniture was something out of a magazine. Faulkner had her living nice. That, Naeem couldn’t deny.

“What do you do here? You said you work, right?” Naeem asked, sitting at the small dining room table.

“Yeah, but it’s nothing fancy,” Destiny stated, setting his plate in front of him. He’d never had duck a day in his life and hadn’t planned to start now, but she swore it was the best thing on the menu. Destiny covered her mouth as she yawned. “Whew. I’m getting sleepy.”

“That was a long flight. How about we take a hot bath and get in bed for a while?”

She pouted as she sat across from him. “I wanted to show you my world.”

“You can, but you need to rest, Destiny.”

“You’re right. I’ll be grumpy if I don’t get some sleep.”

Naeem didn’t have much of an appetite, but he ate a few pieces of everything on his plate. Honestly, he was too busy watching her. Her body relaxed and began to sway as she fought her sleep. Eyes low, her movements began to slow down drastically. She managed to eat all of her food, and as soon as she was done, Naeem wiped his mouth and stood.

He made his way back to her bathroom, running a warm bath for her with bath salts. Helping her stand, Naeem kissed her temple.

“You good?” he checked, licking his lips as she gripped his wrist and nodded slowly.

“Yeah. Just really tired.”

“Come on. Let me bathe you, then get you into bed.”

She nodded, holding him loosely as he lifted her off her feet. Carrying her into the bathroom bridal style, Naeem sat her on the toilet seat and turned the water on. He undressed her, then helped her get inside. Kneeling, he washed her body, eyes slowly falling from his eyes as she fought to remain awake.

Her smile was lazy as her pointer finger slid down his cheek.

“Why are you crying?”

Naeem’s head shook as he quickly wiped his face. “Nothing. Just... overwhelmed I guess.”

Destiny chuckled quietly before clearing her throat as her head bobbed.

“I need to get out. I’m about to pass out.”

“Just relax, Destiny. I got you.”

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before she was closing her eyes again. This time, they didn’t open. He waited a minute or two before going to get her phone and using her fingers to type out a text to her mother. In it, he stated that she couldn’t bear the weight of killing her own

father for faking her death and keeping her away from her husband for ten years just to betray her confidence when she finally returned home. To prove that she'd killed Faulkner, Naeem included the location of where his body could be found. He signed the suicide text with Destiny apologizing to both him and her mother.

He didn't feel no ways about pinning her father's murder on her because that's what she wanted anyway. She wanted him dead; she just couldn't pull the trigger. Now, they both were gone, and they'd have to answer to God and each other for their sins.

Naeem was finally free of them both and all the hell that came with them.

Not sending the text right away, Naeem waited until she no longer had a pulse. Then he sent the message and put the phone on airplane mode before allowing her body to lower into the water. Setting the phone next to the tub, he left the bathroom and slid against the wall. It didn't matter how long he sat there, Naeem wasn't able to come to terms with the fact that Destiny was gone.

Again.

He never thought he'd have to grieve for her twice, and honestly, he wouldn't.

The tears he'd shed today would be the only tears he'd shed for her, and they were over the situation and how he was the one who had to end her life.

After a few minutes passed, he called for help, and the emotion he conveyed about her death was genuine. Though they accepted Destiny's death as a suicide, they did ask him to stick around in case they had more questions. He wasn't worried about the police here or the ones back home for that matter.

Naeem wasn't new to this—he was true to this. His father had trained him to not just kill, but get away with murder. The only time he'd slipped up was trusting Faulkner, and now that he had that log... there would be nothing tying him to the

Faulkner family anymore... except the thoughts and memories of his sons that would be with him forever.

FIVE DAYS LATER, Naeem was back in Memphis. Destiny's body wouldn't be released for another week or so, and Naeem had already offered to pay for everything. He made Vivian's home his first stop, though he wasn't sure she would actually want to see him.

From what Destiny had told him before everything went down, Vivian didn't agree with her husband faking their daughter's death. She didn't know that Destiny wanted her father dead or about the log that documented all of Faulkner's approved hits for Naeem. He hadn't decided if he was going to come clean or allow Vivian to spend the rest of her days with good memories about her family. Sure, she knew Faulkner was in the drug game, but she had no idea how many murders had been committed because of him.

If that log would have been used against Naeem, it would have destroyed Faulkner's reputation too. Vivian, like him, was the only other innocent party in all of this that had been able to keep their lives... and Naeem wanted to keep it that way.

After knocking on her door, he took a step back and inhaled a deep breath. His grip tightened on the bag in his hand. Naeem was grateful Vivian didn't have any company. The last thing he wanted to do was force himself to wear a façade of the grieving spouse. It did seem odd to him that Vivian didn't have anyone with her during such a terrible time, though.

When Vivian opened the door, her red, puffy eyes were the first thing Naeem noticed.

"I don't want any company," she stated quickly.

"I don't plan on staying."

Nodding, Vivian stepped aside and let him enter. “How are you holding up?”

“Don’t worry about me. How are you?”

She sighed as she closed the door behind him, but Naeem didn’t bother stepping further into the home. This was going to be a short trip.

“I’m in disbelief. It hasn’t hit me that I’ve lost my husband and my daughter and that she was the cause of both.” Vivian chuckled, tears starting up already. “I wish she would have just stayed hidden. There was nothing worth all of this. Not even you.”

Shrugging, Naeem didn’t even have it in him to feel offended, because he felt the same damn way. Thinking Destiny was the perfect, loyal, loving dead wife would have been a hell of a lot better if he wouldn’t have found out she was still alive.

“I just wanted to stop by and let you know I’m here if you need anything. I’m taking care of the arrangements for both of their funerals.”

Naeem handed her the duffel bag that was filled with hundred-dollar bills. He was sure Faulkner had a hefty life insurance policy that would take care of Vivian for the rest of her life, but he had to do something. When she opened it and looked inside, Vivian gasped and clutched her chest... allowing the bag to slip from her fingers.

“Naeem... I can’t take that.”

“You can, and you will. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Nodding, Vivian brushed the tears that had fallen down her cheeks and gave him a quick hug.

“There is... one thing you could do for me,” Vivian said as he opened the front door.

“Name it.”

Vivian squeezed her fingers as she looked around the empty hallway.

“I’m going to lose my mind if one more reporter, colleague, or associate calls here. And I’m too ashamed to talk to any of our family and friends. Destiny mentioned you taking her to France in a private jet. Is there any way you can have me sent to Aruba until it’s time for their dual funeral? I... really just need to get away.”

Naeem nodded. “Yeah. How soon are you trying to leave?”

“As soon as I can get a few bags packed. How soon can you make it happen?”

He’d need to call Assad and secure the jet, but Naeem was sure that wouldn’t be a problem.

“Tomorrow? Is that too soon?”

“No.” She chuckled quietly. “Tomorrow is perfect. Thank you.”

“I’ll be here at six a.m. to take you to the strip.”

“Thank you, Naeem.”

“It’s cool. I’m going to send a guard over here too. Make sure he keeps anyone from disturbing you until you leave.”

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Naeem got into his car and made a few calls before pulling out. He figured helping Vivian maintain her peace was the least he could do. Shit, it would help him maintain his too. Naeem hadn’t planned on attending the dual funeral, and he wouldn’t, unless Vivian asked him to. Hell, she probably was going to have to be forced to go herself. There wouldn’t be a shortage of people at her side, though. That, Naeem was sure of.

A part of him did want to go... just so he could see for himself that Destiny was really gone this time. No matter what he decided, Naeem was just happy to almost be completely done with this phase of his life.

IN THE END, Naeem decided to go to Destiny’s wake the day before the dual funeral. As he looked down at her lifeless

body, so many thoughts raced across his mind.

Things would have been different had Faulkner expressed his concerns and objected to their marriage instead of trying to head it and come between them.

Things would have been different if he would have trusted Naeem's place in his daughter's life.

They would have been different if he would have been home more.

If his wife would have been faithful.

If he'd not spent almost a decade in prison, most of which was in solitary confinement, idolizing Destiny because of his guilt.

Had she not come back to Memphis with so much obsessive love and hate in her heart.

Schemes up her sleeve.

But none of that mattered now.

What was done was done, and his mind could finally rest.

His heart could finally be at peace.

And Destiny was finally with their sons—hopefully.

Naeem rested his forehead on Destiny's for a few seconds before whispering that he loved her, still, through it all. The hate in his heart toward her was released the moment her soul was. He was left only with the good.

As he made his way outside, he sent up a quick prayer to the Most High and asked that more of His strength be imparted into him. And His comfort.

Dijon was leaning against the passenger's side of her Maserati. Out of respect, she stayed outside, but there was no way she'd allow Naeem to go through this alone.

She opened the door for him, and before he got inside, he lifted his sunglasses to briefly look into her eyes before giving her a kiss.

Finally... there was no tug-of-war on his heart and mind. Naeem was hers, and Dijon was his. As she drove off, hand nestled inside of his, Naeem knew making her his wife and the mother of his children would be the only thing higher than this...

EPILOGUE

Dijon

THERE WAS something about Naeem being at her side for this family meeting that made Dijon feel stronger than she ever had before. No matter what was to be said of him, Naeem took his role as her protector and their enforcer seriously. As always, Assad stood when she made her way into the warehouse. Her black, six-inch heels stabbed the floor, providing the only sound that was heard.

Seated around the long, rectangular table were all leaders of the Black Mayhem Mafia and their advisors. After greeting her brothers and the Mayhem brothers and Vixen with hugs, Dijon nodded toward everyone else and took one of the seats that were available between Hassan and Rakim. Instead of taking the empty seat next to her, Naeem stood behind her with his hand on her shoulder.

Whether he'd been welcomed into the mafia or not, he respected the fact that until he and Dijon were married and he had his blood-in, blood-out session, he wouldn't be a permanent member yet. No matter how much love they showed Naeem, he consistently gained their respect with his integrity and devotion toward her.

Since she was the last to arrive, Assad immediately began to speak.

“Our princess has been standing in for Hassan for almost four months now.” Though she didn’t smile fully, the corners of her mouth did lift slightly. “Under the guidance of him, Rakim, and Naeem, she’s not only kept business running smoothly but found a way to increase our profit by ten percent without having to cut our workers pay or lower the quality of our product.”

Naeem squeezed her shoulder gently, and when she looked up at him, Dijon couldn’t deny the pride in his eyes.

As the men around her clapped and Vixen released an animated, “Yasssss, bitch!” Dijon chuckled.

“Things have been changing for a lot of us,” Assad continued. “With those changes come new opportunities and responsibilities.” His eyes shifted toward Hassan. “Hassan, I’ve noticed how having Vanna and Hanna has settled you tremendously. Along with the anger management classes that you’ve been taking, you’ve gained the wisdom and discipline to handle your temper and not be as volatile as you once were.”

Hassan nodded, expression remaining calm as everyone around acknowledged his growth. Growth that Dijon and his brothers were damn proud of.

“Your temper and reckless behavior were the only reasons we gave Rakim the head of security position.”

When Hassan looked around Dijon at Rakim, he bobbed his head once and smiled, already knowing where Assad was going with this.

“Where is this going?” Hassan asked, never having been one to enjoy surprises.

Assad and Savant chuckled and looked at each other briefly before Assad answered his question.

“I’ve spoken to Rakim about this already. With his permission, I’d like to give him the head of production position, where he’ll work hand in hand with Remi over in distribution. You’ll become head of security, and Dijon will keep her current position.” Assad paused and gave them both

time to process his words. Her eyes shifted to Savant, who was already smiling at her. He winked at her and shook his head when her eyes watered. Inhaling a deep breath, she nodded and looked at Assad. “You both will have time to think this over and speak with one another to make your decisions. Savant and I have decided that we will not continue to work on Colton’s behalf. When he finds out, he will return to Memphis in January. That means we will need to have these new positions in place by the end of this year so we can have full attention on him and whatever his return means. You both have one week to make your decision by our next meeting.”

“Okay,” Dijon agreed as Hassan nodded.

Conversation shifted, and they went through the rest of the meeting in about forty-five minutes. When they were done, Dijon made her way over to the small bar area for a shot. Instead of going for her usual tequila, she opted for Jack Daniels.

“What do you think?” she asked Naeem.

“I think you should think about it and talk to Hassan first before we discuss this.”

“Okay, but...” Dijon smiled and took his hand into hers. “What do you think?”

He chuckled. “I think you’re great at what you do, and I will stand by you, whether you choose to remain in the game or not.”

“And...” Her eyes shifted and she stepped a little closer to him. “What about our future? Our children. I would be the only woman in the family business outside of Vixen, and she doesn’t want kids. Do you think we could really keep them safe?”

“I’ve already lost two sons. You’d better fucking believe I’m not going to put us in the position to lose anymore because of this shit. They will be protected at all times. If ever things get too unsafe, all of you will be sent away.”

His declaration calmed her and allowed her to fully consider the proposition she’d received. After knocking her

shot back, Dijon made her way over to Hassan. He'd gotten rid of his crutches as soon as Hanna came home. Still not at his full strength, Hassan was taking things slow. But he'd started working out with Dijon and Assad along with his physical therapy, and they were confident he'd be back to himself in no time.

"Hey," she spoke softly, gaining his attention.

"Wassup, D?" he greeted, nodding as Vixen told him she'd get at him later. "How you feeling, baby girl?"

She shrugged and smiled as she sat next to him. Her heels weren't extremely uncomfortable, but she was tired of being on her feet after working a full shift at her spa.

"I'm honored they want me to stay on, but I definitely don't want to keep your position if you want it back."

Hassan's head shook as he smiled. "Don't even worry about that shit. This works out great in my and Rakim's favor. We both get the positions we wanted from jump. It's you I'm concerned about."

Dijon sighed as she scratched the side of her nose. "I can't lie; this isn't the path I saw my life going down."

"Exactly. This was never what you wanted."

"But... I love it," she confessed softly before chuckling. "It feels like I'm doing what I was born to do. Not just because I'm closer to my brothers and helping the family out, but I genuinely feel like I'm becoming the woman I was made to be. I can't really explain it, and I know I don't really have to because you get it. But I don't know. I'm different now."

"As long as you like the changes and you are okay with the risks, we can do it. It's not always going to be good and easy. This shit is dangerous. And when you and Naeem decide to start your family, it'll be best if you don't handle business together. That way, if something was to happen, it wouldn't happen to the both of you. So you'll have to get comfortable with another team and trust that they can keep you safe just as well as he can. Are you going to be okay with all of that?"

Dijon hadn't thought about that. She envisioned Naeem by her side every step of the way, but what Hassan said was true. This wasn't a decision she'd need to make quickly or lightly.

"I think I would, but I do want to think about it a little longer."

Hassan nodded. "As you should. You know I'm in this shit forever, no matter the outcome, but that doesn't have to be the case for you. No matter what you decide, you know we support you either way."

"Thanks, big brother."

At the sound of Savant calling their names, they stood and headed back over to the bar.

"Hell no." Her face scrunched up at the line of Hennessy Black shots. "I am *not* drinking that shit."

"Come on, baby sis. You gotta get some hair on your chest if you staying in the business," Savant teased, handing her and Naeem a shot.

"I don't think my man would like that," she declined, sniffing the shot and making them laugh.

Naeem squeezed her ass and pulled her in for a quick hug before they all lifted their shots to toast and take them. Dijon was confident she would maintain her position in the mafia, but she wanted to also take the time to consider her future in the process. This was one time she wished she could talk to her mother, but they hadn't been talking since April found out Dijon had temporarily taken over for Hassan. Dijon couldn't imagine how her mother would respond if she took over the role permanently.

She couldn't think about that shit, though. Especially right now. Tonight was a night of celebration... and Dijon wasn't going to let anything ruin that.

"ARE YOU NERVOUS?"

Dijon looked over at Naeem, and the lazy smile on his lips made her roll her eyes. This would be the second time she was around his mother and the first time they'd be alone. When Crystal asked to spend the evening with her, Dijon didn't think much of it. She expected it to be filled with questions so she could determine her intentions with her son, but after the sweet message Crystal left on her voicemail this morning... Dijon realized that wasn't going to be the case.

Crystal hadn't asked her to come over to grill her about Naeem's grown ass; she was genuinely trying to get to know her. That was a first. Her own fucking mother hadn't tried to get to know her. April only wanted to mold her.

"A little," Dijon confessed, looking toward the front door. "She seemed cool that first day, but I don't know. This will be my first time spending time with any man's mother alone." A thought crossed her mind. "What if she doesn't like me?"

Naeem's face twisted up. "She's going to love you because I love you."

"You think so?" she asked sweetly.

"I know so."

Nodding, Dijon unbuckled her seatbelt. "Okay. I'm ready. But if I call..."

"I'll come back down here and get you. Otherwise, I'll see you in a few hours."

Naeem got out of his Audi and went to her side to open the door for her. Pressing her into the door, he tilted her head and looked into her eyes.

"When we get home, I'm going to show you how much this means to me."

There was no point in her trying to hide her happiness. Not just over the thought of making love to him, but actually going back home to him. The past weekend was spent helping movers sort her things before they boxed everything up and took what she wanted to Naeem's place and a separate storage unit. He promised she could redecorate however she needed

to, to feel at home—but his gaming area and meditation room were off limits.

“How?”

Naeem licked his lips and smiled as his pointer finger slid down her throat. “I’m going to give you a bath and dry you off... just to make you wet again. Then I’m going to eat your pussy until you pass out. Last, I’m going to wake you up by sliding my dick inside of you and making love to you until your body can’t stand anymore. When it’s over, I’m going to clean you up, wrap you in my arms, tell you all the things I love about you, and hold you while you sleep.”

Dijon moaned quietly as her body meshed with his. “That sounds amazing, babe. I can’t wait.”

Naeem gave her a sweet kiss, but it got nastier the more he pecked her lips. By the time he pulled away, both of them were breathing raggedly.

“I love you,” she confessed as he placed a kiss to her forehead.

“I love you too.” He gently pulled her off the car. “Gone before I decide to keep you to myself.”

When he smacked her ass as she walked away, Dijon squealed and rubbed the place he touched. After taking a deep breath in, she rang the doorbell. Crystal wasted no time coming to open it. She spoke to Naeem, then shooed him away before hugging Dijon and inviting her inside.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to spend a little time with me, Dijon.”

“It’s cool. Thank you for asking.”

Crystal smiled as they headed down the hall. “What can I get you to drink? Naeem said you like tequila... How about frozen margaritas?”

“Ooh, you know how to make a girl feel welcome.” They shared a soft laugh as Dijon pulled the card out of her purse. “Speaking of which, I got you this. Naeem said you were

obsessed with roosters for your kitchen, so..." She shrugged as Crystal accepted the card.

Crystal opened it and pulled the picture out. When she realized it was a picture of the clay rooster Dijon had Scarlett make for her, she pulled her in for a tight hug. If April had taught her anything, it was the power of first impressions and that you never went to a person's home for the first time empty-handed.

"Oh, you're definitely in the family after this. Thank you so much, Dijon! I absolutely love it."

"I'm glad. My sister made it. As soon as she gives me the okay to pick it up, I'll bring it over."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! I need to ask my knucklehead ass kids why they never get me anything like this. All they do is talk about my roosters."

Dijon smiled as they made it to the kitchen. "Is there a reason why you like them so much?"

Crystal's smile settled as she busied herself grabbing the ingredients they'd need for their margaritas.

"My mother loves roosters. Since she lives so far away, this is how I feel close to her. She gave me my first set of rooster towels when I moved into my starter home, and I've been adding to my collection ever since."

"That's sweet." Dijon pouted slightly.

"Are you and your mom close?"

Her head shook. "Not at all." Dijon chuckled. "We're nothing alike, and who I am..." Her head shook again. "She'll never approve of."

Leaning against the counter, Crystal crossed her arms over her chest and gave Dijon her eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that, Dijon. If I've learned anything so far in this life, it's that everyone has a special way they love us and a special place in our lives. We're not always blessed to have healthy relationships with the people we should. No one can ever take her place in your life, and you shouldn't even try to let them.

But... with the way my son talks about you, I'm confident I'll be your mother in love soon. I'll be here for you in any way you decide to let me be. Just like I've accepted him and his sister, I will always accept you too."

Dijon cleared her throat and lowered her head briefly. "Thank you," she whispered, causing Crystal to chuckle and walk over to her for a hug.

She wasn't expecting their time together to start out like this, but Dijon definitely couldn't deny how good it felt to not only have a motherly influence without the judgment, but Crystal's character was definitely genuine and accepting. Nurturing. A lot of things Dijon had been needing all of her life. It seemed like being with Naeem offered things she hadn't expected at all—Crystal was one of them.

At the sound of the doorbell, Crystal released Dijon as she said, "I know my son ain't missing you already."

They both laughed as she headed down the hall. Sitting at the table, Dijon placed her purse on top of it.

"Naima?" she heard Crystal say.

"Hey, Ma. What you in here doing?"

The door shut as Crystal said, "Okay. What the hell is going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen you more in two months than I have the entire time you've been away from home."

Naima chuckled. "You are being so dramatic." At the sight of Dijon, her smile fell briefly, but when it returned, it was wider. "Dijon, right? I recognize you from the pictures my brother sends. You are even more beautiful in person."

Dijon stood, making her way into Naima's arms.

"I can definitely say the same for you. It's so nice to finally meet you."

"You as well. I came just in time." Naima turned to Crystal. "You about to make the homemade tortilla chips and

salsa too?” she asked, pointing at the margarita mix Crystal had gotten out.

“Naima, whatever it is, baby...”

“Ma,” Naima stretched. Her smile dropped and voice lowered. “It’s nothing. I just wanted to be with my family. That’s it.” She turned back toward Dijon when she added, “Let me go and put my bags up, and we can get to know each other, if that’s cool.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Dijon agreed, unable to ignore the worry that covered Crystal’s face.

Sighing, Crystal sat next to Dijon.

“Something is up with my daughter, and she refuses to tell me or her brother what it is.”

“She will in her own time.”

“I hope her own time is quick enough for us to help her with whatever the problem is.”

Crystal stood. “Can you call Naeem and tell him she’s here?”

“Yeah, sure.”

As she pulled her phone out of her purse, Crystal left the kitchen. Dijon was definitely curious about what had Naima making such long trips back home so frequently since it was obviously not her norm. Naeem had said it himself... Addison was like the present sister he wished Naima could have been. Something was definitely going on with Naima that she didn’t want her family to know about. Maybe if they got close enough, she’d trust Dijon enough to help her with whatever she’d gotten herself into...

THE END

(For Dijon & Naeem)

Things are about to get sticky and tricky with Colton being on the way!

Stayed tuned for that to begin to unfold in Rakim's book. You can preorder it [here](#)

And... you are cordially invited to witness the marital union of Assad & Scarlett in "In His Possession 2: Marrying a Black Mafia Prince" which can be preordered [here](#)

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