



DRIVE
TO LOVE

MONICA WALTERS

HARD TO LOVE

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[From the Author...](#)

[Other Titles by Monica Walters](#)

INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, violence, moments of grief/depression, and other topics that may be sensitive to some readers. It also contains urban elements, which is why it is listed as a genre category for this book.

This is book fourteen and the final book of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids and their friends.

This book is about Rondo, Shavozz's (married to DJ) brother. You first became acquainted with him in book seven, *Don't Fight the Feeling*. It's highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it typically picks up right where the last one left off and updates ongoing issues that I don't go into great detail about.

Love On Replay
Deeper Than Love
Something You Won't Forget
I'm The Remedy
Love Me Senseless
I Want You Here
Don't Fight The Feeling
When You Dance

I'm All In
Give Me Permission
Force of Nature
Say You Love Me
Where You Should Be

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

Rondo and Dinalee's story is a beautiful one, despite the adversities at the end of book thirteen. Again, issues from previous stories are resolved, and new issues have surfaced and been resolved as well. So I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

P.S.- There may be a couple of words typical of dialect from people in southwestern Louisiana. Sha means baby.

Berotte Family and Friends Family Chart

Sheldon (1st wife Marie) and Anissa (1st husband Dexter) Berotte (Patriarch and Matriarch)

Isaiah (Jovy)

Tatum, Tyler, and Talon
(The triplets)

Chad (Lexi)

Foster
Ambrose

Shyron (Brittany)

Kinsley and Kaylee
(Twin girls)

Dylan (Skyler)

Mariana
Mason

Alexz (Axton Vaughn)

Ariana

Dexter Dent Jr. (Shavozz)

Trayveon and Dalen
(Shavozz's sons w/ Elvis)
Bradford

Jamel Dent (Sandrene)

Pregnant

Arrow Vaughn (Ax's brother) &

Lynn

Seneca Roberts (Jovy's brother) &

Kaysyn Anderson (Axton's sister)
Ellington and Jericka
(Kay's kids w/ Luckey)

Ali Joseph (Shy's friend) &

Riley

Aina
(Riley's daughter w/ Gabriel)
Annalise
Pregnant

Jericho Marcellus (Ali's friend) &

Whitney

Rome

Milton 'Jungle' Patterson

(Watchful Eyes) & Chelsea

(Jericho's sister)

Jericka (Chelsea's daughter)
Zamir

Rondo Simpson (Shavozz's brother) &

Dinalee

Micah and Sophie
(Dinalee's kids with Ramón)
Pregnant

FOREWORD

Thank you, Rondo and Dinalee, for allowing me to use your images and names to craft and promote this story! Your excitement about it means the world to me, and I will never forget it.

PROLOGUE

RONDO

“**Y**ou a evil ass muthafucka.”

I was standing on the patio at Jungle’s house in Houston. When I saw her at Jamel and Sandrene’s wedding with him, I almost lost my shit right there during the ceremony. I was normally a laidback nigga. I went to work, took care of my daughter, fished and hunted, smoked and drank occasionally, and minded my fucking business. But this shit...

This shit had me ready to commit murder. This bitch had the audacity to stare at me like she was the one that had been taken advantage of. My heart was hurt. We were supposed to be working shit out. My downfall was loving a muthafucka that didn’t give a shit about me. I trusted her. She was frequenting Houston for some fucking class, supposedly, about starting her own call center.

“I’m not evil. Jungle is. He had my cousin tortured and killed. He needs to pay for that shit.”

“Maybe I need to call him back out here so you can take that fucking attitude with him, ’cause it looks like you got yo’ ass handed to you. Apparently, they didn’t take too kindly to your reasoning. He said that he wasn’t even the one calling the shots. Yo’ fucked up cousin raped his sister. So who the one that’s evil? This shit wasn’t about revenge. What was your point in trying to work shit out with me? Things could have stayed the way they were.”

“Whether you believe me or not, I love you.”

I slid my hand down my face and turned my head as DJ stared at me. I was glad he was out here with me, because every demon swirling around inside of me right now was telling me to finish fucking her up. Abusing

women wasn't something that was in my DNA. I always did my best to love, respect, and uplift women, especially black women. I had a mother and sisters that I wanted niggas to treat like queens. There was no way I would treat someone else's mother, daughter, or sister in a way I didn't want my own family treated.

Kennedy had changed all that shit. That thought process was shot to hell in this moment, and had my brother-in-law not pulled me out of her face, I would have crossed the line without a problem. "Why the fuck you after Jungle?"

She looked away from me and refused to respond. I stepped closer to her and grabbed her face, forcing her to look at me. I knew that shit hurt because I could feel her jaw shift beneath my fingertips. She released a groan, and I only squeezed a little harder. "You don't tell me the shit I wanna know, you'll never see Sunni again. I plan to take my daughter, but if you don't come clean, visitations will be out of the fucking question. Real shit."

She tried to jerk away from me, but I didn't release her until I got good and ready. She was trembling from the pain, and that gave me joy. That was how my heart felt. Knowing that she was this evil had caught me by surprise. She wasn't perfect, and neither was I, but I thought we were doing well. We hadn't argued in nearly the entire year we'd been working to get our good thang back. To know that all that shit was fake was tearing me apart inside.

"Money. Darlena said that she had millions from Slice's death. She wanted Jungle gone because of what happened to him. Period."

"You a lying bitch. I don't like Darlena's ratchet ass, but *she* ain't even capable of this shit. When I find out what's going on, I'm turning you loose to the fucking wolves. I won't give a fuck, and by then, it'll be too late to come clean. Remember that shit."

I walked away from her to go back inside the house. When I did and Jungle told me to get on the road and he would make sure Kennedy got to the airport, I slapped his hand and headed out. When we got to my truck, DJ stared at me. "This shit is fucked up. I know that I've been around her a couple of times, but this shit is shocking," he said.

"Who you telling? This is the woman I've loved for years... the mother of my daughter. How am I gonna tell my daughter that her mother is a fucking devil? Kennedy and I have so much history, but I ain't never seen this side of her. She cheated on me in the past and lied, but I did the same shit. For her to be that hungry for money that she would set a nigga up to die

is some shit I would have never accused her of.”

DJ slowly shook his head as his phone rang. I was sure it was probably my sister. Shavozz acted like the nigga couldn't breathe without her. He answered. “Hey, baby. We on our way back.”

I rolled my eyes as he took that damn remote from his pocket. I swore they told me too much of their fucking business. That remote was to the vibrator in her underwear. I tuned their conversation out and did my best to focus on my baby girl Sunni and how I would break this news to her. I'd always wanted her to live with me, but I'd refused to contest paternity. I thought she needed her mother more.

Well, today, it was clear that she needed to be with me. There was no telling what fuck shit she was learning from Kennedy. “You gon' call her cousin?”

“Yep, because I know Kennedy lying. That shit wasn't Darlena's idea. Why would she wait all this time to get revenge? Slice been dead for over ten years. She wouldn't have waited this long. Darlena just inherited that money when her mother died. Kennedy ain't fooling me for one minute with that fucking explanation.”

“I hate this shit for you, bruh.”

“I hate it for Sunni.”

“DADDY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

“Hey, baby girl. I'm here to pick you up. You wanna come chill with me?”

“Yeah! Let me get my clothes.”

I glanced at Kennedy's mother to see the frown on her face. I didn't give a fuck about her frown. It was a little after ten, but oh fucking well. I had to get to my baby before Kennedy got here. Her flight was only an hour and a half, and she would probably be arriving in the next hour or so.

When Sunni disappeared to the back, Kennedy's mother asked, “Why do I feel like something shady is going on? Kennedy didn't say you were coming to get Sunni.”

“You right. Something shady *is* going on, but it's your daughter who's being shady, trifling, and downright evil. You can take that up with her lying

ass when she gets here.”

I wasn't trying to be disrespectful, but Kennedy had run me hot. My patience was thin, and I didn't want to be in her presence when she got here. DJ wouldn't be here to keep me off her ass. Ms. Sherry frowned harder as Sunni reappeared. “I'm ready, Daddy.”

I grabbed her hand without a word and left Ms. Sherry standing there stunned as Sunni yelled, “Bye, Momo!”

Once we got to the car and got in, Sunni looked over at me. “Daddy, you okay?”

I took a deep breath as I started the engine. “It's a lot of mess going on between your mother and me. When I think of a way to tell you without dragging her, I'll tell you.”

“Just tell me the truth, Daddy. It doesn't matter how it comes out.”

I closed my eyes for a moment then backed out of the driveway, heading to the interstate. “Your mother is cheating on me. She was seeing someone in Houston, and we ended up at the same wedding. The guy she was seeing is a friend of some of my friends. We've hung out together in Beaumont and Houston on several occasions. He just didn't know of my involvement with your mother, because he'd never met her, nor had I ever talked about her in his presence.”

Sunni lowered her head and fiddled with her nails. “So, am I going to live with you now?”

I wanted to say, *hell yeah, because yo' mama a stank ass ho*, but I was able to refrain from revealing that to her. “Yeah, baby. You cool with that?”

She shrugged and asked, “Do I have a choice?”

I took a deep breath. “Your mom is also involved in some shit that could put you in danger. This situation is deeper than what I even want to talk about right now, baby. I'm not just being petty or malicious. I want what's best for you. I know you love your mom, and she loves you, but her actions are reckless right now. Her love for you isn't at the forefront of her mind right now.”

“Okay. I love you too, Daddy. I just wish things would have worked out to where we could be a family.”

“I know, baby girl. Me too. But we have to keep moving. We can't dwell on what we wished would have happened, or we would be miserable. We just have to accept it for what it is without letting it destroy us in the process. You understand?”

“Yes, sir. It’s just hard.”

“I know, baby. Moving on won’t be easy, and it won’t happen overnight. We just have to be sure that we can be the best version of ourselves, and we will get over this heartbreak. Okay?”

“Okay.”

When I saw the tears fall down her cheeks, that only made me angrier. Kennedy didn’t give a fuck about us, and she proved it today. She knew I was going to a wedding in Houston. I had a feeling she knew that I would be there, although she was acting like it was coincidental. Today, I learned that she was an amazing actress. Instead of destroying hearts and lives, she should have been in Hollywood, capitalizing off that shit.

I had a long drive ahead to think about shit and how I wanted to proceed. It would take almost four hours to get back to Lafayette from Mobile. Sunni would be sound asleep by then. Glancing over at her, I could see that she was already dozing. “Don’t fight it. Go ahead and go to sleep, baby.”

She gave me a slight smile and reclined her seat a bit. Seeing her grow up and become a young lady was overwhelming. However, she was still very impressionable, especially by her mother. She was learning how to be a woman by watching her. Kennedy’s ass wasn’t a woman. She was a bitch, and I’d be damned if my daughter was gonna follow in her footsteps.

CHAPTER 1

RONDO

THREE WEEKS LATER...

“**Y**ou’ve had my daughter almost three fucking weeks. I’ve been trying to let you get over the shock of what’s going on, but I need to see my baby, Rondo.”

“You making this shit sound minor. You committed a major infraction, girl. What the fuck you on? We’re in Beaumont anyway.”

“You took my baby to Texas?”

“Hell yeah.”

“I told you that she couldn’t go to Texas.”

“Why not? Yo’ ho ass be in Texas.”

“Rondo, you don’t have a clue. Yo’ country ass would never understand.”

“Oh... my country ass, huh? What I need to understand a devil for? You got way too many secrets. I’m glad I’m done wit’ yo’ ass.”

“As long as Sunni is here, you’ll never be completely done with me. Remember that, bitch.”

I frowned hard and pulled the phone from my ear. Clearly, she had lost her fucking mind. “Yo, who the fuck you talking to?”

“The nigga that wanna be father of the fucking year but don’t have a damn clue.”

I frowned as I tried to piece together what the fuck she was saying. “Aye, nigga! You gon’ join yo’ bruhs or not?”

I glanced up to see Shavozz and everyone else staring at me. I didn’t even hear “Atomic Dog” come on. My bruhs were about to get cranked up. “I’m about to have a fucking clue though. Get comfortable with that shit, because that’s yo’ ass when I get home.”

I ended the call and went and turned up with my bruhs. Sunni got to hang out with her cousin for the first time in a long time. She was a year or so older than Dalen, but they barely knew each other. That shit was gonna change. My baby wasn’t going back to her ass. Period.

As we did our stroll, Mariena joined us as usual. She couldn’t pull Riley to the yard with us though, because they’d taken an impromptu trip to fucking Disney World and shit, knowing us regular niggas couldn’t just up and leave like that.

DJ told me that they were planning a trip for all of this summer, and I couldn't wait for more details. My baby girl deserved a break. After transferring her to another school and having to adjust, I could tell she was mentally drained. Kennedy tried to give me trouble about that, and I had to remind her that she was the one who fucked up.

She didn't realize that all I had to do was say the fucking word and Jungle would take her lying ass right out of here. She'd told me that shit was her idea, but she was blaming all that shit on Darlena. I wasn't sure if Jungle knew that shit or not, but we'd been playing phone tag for the past two weeks. I wanted to believe that he knew and that was why he needed to talk to me. I would try calling him back later today after we got home.

Just as we were about to end our stroll, my baby joined us and began mimicking everything we did. That shit made me smile and forget all about that wack ass conversation I'd just had with her mother. When Sunni stuck out her tongue, I was done. I could no longer keep my composure. I stopped stepping to gas my baby up. The bruhs were barking, and Mariena copied everything Sunni did.

Dylan damn near power walked over to us and snatched Mariena from the grass. We all laughed so hard. Chad started barking loudly then waited for Mariena to bark. When her puppy-like bark came through, he yelled, "That's my baby!"

I put my arm around my baby and kissed her cheek. "Daddy, y'all do this all the time? That was fun!"

"Yep. They do it every Sunday. I would only come when you were with your mom because she wouldn't allow me to take you to Texas with me."

She frowned slightly. "Why?"

"I still don't know, baby, but I'm sure I will eventually find out."

"Will I get to see Mama again?"

"Yeah, baby. Probably next weekend."

"Okay."

She smiled slightly, and before she could say another word, Alexz came outside with dessert. When Sunni saw that cake, that was all she wrote. As I headed in that direction, Alexz yelled out, "Chad and Rondo, y'all last! Y'all greedy asses will eat way more than y'all share. Luckily for y'all, everybody ain't here, but it's still a lot of y'all niggas."

Isaiah smirked as he walked past Chad and me. "You gon' let Alexz punk you like that?" I asked Chad.

“Hell naw.”

I chuckled as he made his way to her and threw her over his shoulder. That left the desserts wide open. Alexz screamed loudly as I laughed and fixed myself a couple of slices of cheesecake. Isaiah and Mr. Sheldon couldn't help but chuckle. “You played that nicely, Rondo,” Mr. Sheldon said.

I chuckled then ate a strawberry. “Chad fell for it, too.”

Everybody laughed as Alexz walked back to where we were, looking like her chest was heaving. She gave me the eye like she knew I had something to do with it. When she got close, Sunni stared up at her. “You better be glad your baby here,” she said as she slid her hand to Sunni's shoulder. “I have a special treat for the kids, baby. You can follow me inside.”

Alexz stuck her tongue out at me, and Sunni chuckled as she followed Alexz. Had Sunni not been here, she would have given me a good cussing. Once my baby got comfortable around them, I was certain that she wouldn't hold back whatever she had to say. As I enjoyed my cheesecake and “Trap Queen” blasted through the outdoor speakers, I already knew Shy, Dylan, and my nephew Trayveon were about to turn up.

One thing I loved about the Berottes was that they were never short on a good time. Plus, the love was always on overflow, even in all the bullshit. Shavozz had blessed me when she married DJ. It created a brotherhood for me to be a part of. Although I wasn't around as often, whenever I was, it was like I hadn't been missing in action. The love was always felt, no matter how long it had been since I'd come around.

By the time I finished watching the Kappas turn up and finished off my cheesecake and a slice of lemon cake, Sunni had come back outside holding a bag of candy. I checked the time, knowing that we needed to get on the road so she could get ready for school tomorrow. Spring break for her wasn't until the week after Easter. So, unlike the other kids here, she had somewhere to be in the morning.

“You ready, baby girl? We gotta get on the road.”

It was already almost five. We had to get gone if she wanted time to relax and play on her phone before bedtime. “Okay. I like it here.”

“I knew you would. Next time we come, there will be even more people here. They went on vacation.”

“That's what Aunt Alexz said.”

I smiled slightly at her calling Alexz aunt. As I stood from my seat and

threw away my paper plate, Shavozz approached us. “Y’all about to head home?”

“Yeah, sha,” I responded, mimicking my mother’s Louisiana dialect.

Sha was a term of endearment. Shavozz was noticeably pregnant, and I could remember that she’d said Dalen would be her last. “When do you find out what you’re having?”

“Next week. I’m excited.”

“I’m sure you are. You want a girl or boy?”

“It doesn’t matter, but DJ wants a boy.”

I nodded as DJ joined us and slapped my hand. “See you later, bruh.”

I nodded as he walked back over to Chad and Jamel, then gave my attention back to Shavozz. She looped her arm through mine and walked us to the truck. Once Sunni got in and I remote started it, she asked, “How’s she been adjusting?”

“It was a little rough for her. New home, new school... it was just a lot. She likes getting to see Mama more and being with me, but she misses her trifling ass mama.”

“Is that who you were on the phone with?”

“Yeah. She was demanding to see Sunni. She knows I won’t take her to Mobile on a Sunday when she has school tomorrow. She irritates the fuck out of me.”

“I still can’t believe she was fucking Jungle. How much closer to home can she get?”

“Right,” I said, doing my best to not tell her all the details.

All Shavozz knew was that she was cheating on me. Shit, everybody knew that shit when she showed up at the wedding with Jungle. It was like she wanted to embarrass me, but she was playing like a weak bitch in front of Jungle, like she was nervous. That ho wasn’t nervous, and I saw that shit as soon as he wasn’t paying close attention to her. Apparently, she thought I wasn’t looking either when she smirked.

My sister didn’t need to know all those details. If something happened, I would prefer her not to know shit. “Well, Rondo, be careful going home. I’m glad you have your baby and that you stopped letting that ho control you. That was all she was doing anyway. When do you see a lawyer?”

“I’ve already talked to one, but I see him again next week. We’ll be careful. I gotta stop and get gas, then we’ll be on the road.”

I kissed her cheek then got inside with Sunni. “I hate that I forgot my

phone in Mobile. All my friends' phone numbers are in there, and Mama may try to call me."

"I know, baby. We'll get it next weekend, hopefully."

I was glad she forgot that fucking phone. That way, Kennedy couldn't call her, filling her head with fucking lies. I backed out of the driveway and headed to the gas station around the corner. The minute I parked and got out of the truck, I saw this Hispanic looking lady staring at me. She was barking up the wrong fucking tree. I was sick of toxic fucking women. I needed a damn break. Even with as beautiful as she was... thick in all the right fucking places, gorgeous, light brown skin, and flowing brown hair, I still needed to pass on that. She wore fatigues, so she was probably crazy anyway.

As I pulled the nozzle and put it in the gas tank, I heard her speaking. "Hello. I umm... I'm sorry for approaching you. I just wanted to inquire about where you got your cowboy boots from. They're fly as hell."

She sounded like a black chick with a slight accent. She wanted to approach me for a reason other than to ask where I got my boots from. She looked like she creamed at the sight of my mean mug. I stayed with a fresh pair of cowboy boots. Everybody knew I was a country nigga at heart. "I'm from Lafayette, so I didn't get them from here. I don't really remember exactly where I got them from. I just know it wasn't here."

Her eyes stayed on my lips the entire time I spoke. When she lifted her brown eyes to mine, she said, "Okay." She licked her thick lips as she stared at me. "Well, umm, thank you for your time."

As she walked away, something in me had me call out to her. *Probably that ass on her back.* I could see that shit through her military pants. "Ma'am."

She turned around with a slight smile on her face. "Yes?"

"What's your name?"

"Dinalee. Yours?"

"Rondo. Listen... I ain't in no position to be tryna holla at anybody right now, but I was wondering if I could have your number for when I am."

She frowned slightly. "What if I'm no longer available?"

"Well, at least you'll be happy. You're a beautiful woman, but I know my shit is all fucked up right now."

I didn't bother to filter my language. She was in the military. I was sure she'd heard much worse. After giving me a soft smile, she said, "I admire your honesty, Rondo. Before I give you my number, I have to let you know

that I have two children. I'm a single mother. Divorced about two years ago. If you cool with that, then I'll give it to you."

"I'm a single father, never been married. My daughter is in the truck. I don't have a problem with that."

She smiled and held her hand out for my phone. I slid it in her palm as the nozzle clicked, indicating my tank was full. After squeezing more gas in to get to an even dollar amount, I took the nozzle out and closed my tank. Once I hung it up, I turned back to her. She extended my phone to me. "I hope to hear from you, Rondo."

I licked my lips and nodded as she walked away. I couldn't move for a moment. She was fine as shit. I wanted to ask if she was black or Hispanic, but I knew that wouldn't go over too well right now. I would save that for our first conversation... whenever that would be.

CHAPTER 2

DINALEE

“M ommy, who was that man?”

“I don’t know, chica. I liked his boots, so I went to ask him where he got them from.”

“Why? You don’t wear boots.”

I rolled my eyes. This lil girl was always all up in my business. “Sophie, find you some business besides mine to get into.”

I swore she was five going on forty-five. My son stayed in his lane. He was eight years old and stayed *out* of my business. He was content playing games on his tablet or watching his favorite shows. Not her ass. Whatever I was doing, she thought she had to be a part of it. She was currently sitting in her booster seat with a frown on her face, like the little girl in the movie *Enough* with Jennifer Lopez.

“Girl, fix your face!”

I wanted to roll my eyes. My dad used to say that shit to me all the time. Truth was, Sophie was just like me. My dad said that I was hell on wheels as a little girl. That shit was believable though because I was hell on wheels now. Sophie had heard that statement so much until she no longer had to ask what it meant. She gave me a fake smile that I wanted to laugh at as I checked my rearview mirror to see Rondo still sitting there.

I wondered if he was wondering about me like I was wondering about him. Just as I was about to pull off, he got his fine ass out of that truck. When he got out of his truck earlier, I thought I had sailed to Atlantis and met some kind of god. I didn’t know if it was his low eyes, his dark lips, or that sexy ass mean mug on his milk chocolate skin tone that set me ablaze, or if it was his semi muscular build and height of what had to be about six feet that did it.

I just knew he was sexy as fuck, and I had to make his acquaintance.

I'd never been shy about going for what I wanted. My ex-husband was my biggest mistake though. I should have left his ass where I'd found him... in the back of a club in Ohio, drunk as fuck. My two kids were the only positives that came out of that shit. His jealous, possessive ass had drained me over the five years we were married, and I knew if I didn't divorce his ass, I was gonna kill him.

I quickly checked my tank top to make sure my girls were sitting up just right as I noticed Rondo approaching my window. He had a straw hanging from his mouth, and I swore even that shit was sexy. I lowered my window to see him screwing my gas cap on. *Dinalee, really?* I was so busy strutting back to my car, giving him a show, I forgot to screw the fucking cap back on.

He approached and said, "I don't think you wanna lose that."

"Thank you for looking out."

"Mm hmm," he said as his eyebrows lifted, and he licked his lips.

Shit! That had to be bud-smoking lips. Just his demeanor said he enjoyed a good spliff or cigar from time to time. My face was heating up, so I knew I was blushing and shit. He reached out and tapped my nose with his finger. Shit, just that small contact had my eyes ready to roll to the back of my head. He gave me a slight smile then walked away, and I watched him until he got to his truck and pulled off. "You like him, huh?"

"Oh my God! Sophie, put your headphones on like Micah."

I finally drove away, and I couldn't help but smile. That man looked like he wanted to devour me. That 'mm hmm' had said all the shit he wasn't saying, not to mention the way his eyes caressed me. I could help him through whatever the fuck he was going through... just so long as his ass wasn't crazy. I was crazy enough by myself. I didn't need a man making me crazier.

That was probably why my parents divorced years ago. My mama was a crazy ass Puerto Rican, and my black father was crazy as hell too. The arguments they had were insane, and I always said that I wouldn't be with someone I couldn't get along with. My dumb ass ended up with exactly that. We clearly got along twice, but all the other times were hell after we got married. Clearly, he'd duped my ass while we were dating. Ramón deserved a simple bitch who would put up with his demanding ways and foolishness. I wasn't her, although I hung around for five fucking years of my life.

When I transferred to Beaumont a year ago, I was determined to start

over, leaving his punk ass in my past. He was pissed that he wouldn't be able to see the kids every other weekend... or at least he pretended to be pissed. He hadn't called to check on them in two weeks. While that was fine by me, because that meant I didn't have to talk to him, the kids were missing him, especially Micah. I believed he longed for that fatherly influence.

That was probably one of the reasons he stayed to himself. I didn't want my babies to ever feel like they were missing something because of Ramón's absence, but it seemed they were. That was probably another reason why Sophie was all in my business. She was searching for something to fill that void her father's absence left. They wanted to spend time with him for spring break, but he said he had to work, and his parents were out of town.

So instead of being with their dad next week, they would be at day care. I knew they hated that, especially Micah. He felt like he was too old to be going to day care, but he wasn't old enough to stay home alone. If it weren't for Sophie's meddling ways, I'd let them come to work with me. She just wouldn't sit still. I'd tried taking them with me once before, and that little girl was all over the place, peeking into everyone's offices. I promised her that day that she would never come back to work with me again. Unfortunately for Micah, the good had to suffer for the bad.

When we got home, and I'd gotten the groceries from the trunk to the kitchen, Sophie began helping me unbag them and put them away. She always handled the things that went in the freezer, since it was low enough for her to reach. As I put away the bread, cereal, and other items that belonged in the pantry, I heard my phone ringing. I was hoping that it wasn't Ramón calling, but I knew it would do the kids some good to hear his voice.

By the time I got to the phone, it had stopped ringing. It was a number that wasn't saved into my phone, so I wasn't in a hurry to try to call it back to see who it was. Once Sophie was done, she skipped off to her bedroom, and I finished putting things away. After pouring myself a glass of wine, I went to the couch and turned on the TV.

Every Sunday evening, I had a glass of wine, watched my favorite TV shows, and just relaxed. The kids always retreated to their rooms and played. Although they didn't have school tomorrow, they would still have to get up early, because I had to work. We'd been busy at the Army Reserves office, and I wasn't feeling that shit one bit.

When my voicemail light came on, I remembered that I'd had a missed call. Quickly grabbing my phone, I put it on speaker to listen while I cued up

The Resident. When the voice came through, I forgot about everything, including the wine glass I was holding. I nearly dropped it to the floor.

“What’s up, Dinalee? This Rondo. I know I said I wouldn’t call, but shit, you too beautiful for me to let you just pass me by. Somebody sure to snatch you up.”

Shiiiiid, I wished. It had been two years since my divorce, but my mama said Ramón’s ass had ruined me. I was pickier and way too cautious. That was why I was still single. I didn’t think I was. I just didn’t want to end up with the same type of bullshit that I’d left. However, when he’d said ‘snatch me up’, all I could visualize was him literally snatching me up and pinning me against the wall, doing as he pleased with my body.

Breaking myself from my crazy ass imagination, I continued listening. *“If you ain’t busy, you can hit me back. I’m heading home, so I’ll be on the road for another hour.”*

When the call ended, I took a deep breath. Damn, his slightly rough baritone voice did some things to me. I had goosebumps covering my arms, and my ears were hot as hell. I couldn’t ignore an attraction like that, although I wasn’t too fond of long-distance relationships. It had only been about thirty minutes since we’d left the gas station, so an hour and thirty minutes away wasn’t too far.

Subduing my nerves by taking another deep breath, I placed the call. When he answered, he asked, “So you screening your calls?”

I frowned slightly until he chuckled. “I’m just fuckin’ wit’chu.”

“For your information, I was putting away groceries. But I’m glad you called, and I love your reasoning behind your change of plans.”

“Straight shooter. I like that. So are you originally from Beaumont?”

“No. I was born in Puerto Rico. I moved down here from Ohio for a fresh start after my divorce.”

“Mm. So enjoying the souf?”

I chuckled at how he said south. “Yes. I think I love the different accents more than anything else. I can clearly tell by the way you talk, though, that you aren’t from around here.”

“Naw. I have a bit of southwest Louisiana and Alabama influencing the way I talk. I’m from Lafayette, but I lived in Mobile for about eight years or so. I hear your accent too though. You said you were born in Puerto Rico, but are you Puerto Rican?”

“I’m black and Puerto Rican. Basically, just black with an accent.”

I giggled after my statement. I always told people that I was black with an accent. While I embraced both cultures, my demeanor was one-sided most times. “That’s what’s up,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

“I wonder what that looks like,” I said aloud, although I only meant to think it.

“What?”

“Your smile. You gave me that mean mug. I’m a fan of that too though.”

“You are, huh? You like bad boys?”

“Not real bad boys... well... kind of. As long as he isn’t a whole ninja with me. Around me, sometimes I may need him to be sensitive or soft. I like a man that’s flexible and well-rounded. You feel me?”

“Mm hmm. Perfectly. Ninja though?”

“I try not to use the word nigga. Because I look more Hispanic than anything else, I don’t need anybody coming for me, and then I have to put them on their back.” I paused as he chuckled. “So how will you handle talking to me and dealing with whatever issues you have?”

“Well... talking ain’t never hurt nobody, right? We can at least get to know one another. When I got all my shit straight, we’ll already be past that phase.”

“That makes sense. So are you a cowboy, or you just like looking the part?”

He chuckled, and that shit was so sexy. When my phone chimed with a text message and I saw it was from him, I opened it. He was smiling. And what a gorgeous smile it was. I literally licked my lips at the sight of it. The man was sexy as hell, from the wild hair atop his head to the boots on his feet. *Jesus.*

“Mm. I like it just as much as the mean mug.”

“I’m happy you do. I wouldn’t exactly call myself a cowboy though. I’m a country nigga for sure. I like outdoors... hunting, fishing, shit like that. I have a cowboy hat, and I go to rodeos and trail rides occasionally, but I can adapt in any environment.”

“Hmm. I like that. So what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a physical therapist at Louisiana Orthopedic Specialists.”

Oh shit. He was a professional ninja. That shit turned me on even more. There was no way he could be my physical therapist. I’d have him working out the muscles of my pussy instead of the real reason I would be there. “Oh, wow. Not what I expected at all. I bet you get women flirting with you all the

time, huh?”

“What did you expect? And no. I work mostly with kids. Every now and then, one of their mothers may flirt.”

“I don’t know what I expected. I bet you have a firm but soothing touch.”

“Mm hmm.”

Blinking rapidly, I cleared my throat, trying to get myself out of the haze I was becoming a victim of. “You said your daughter was in the truck with you earlier. How old is she?”

“Yeah. She’s in here knocked out now. She’s twelve. And before you ask, I’m thirty-three.”

I smiled slightly. “I’ll be thirty in a couple of months. My kids are eight and five.”

“Boys, girls, or boy and girl?”

“I have a boy and a girl. Micah is the oldest, and the youngest is Sophie.”

“That’s cool. So tell me something about you. Like about your personality.”

I sat with my thoughts for a second, then said, “I love hard, but I hate just as hard. I don’t like being fucked over, and if you end up on my shit list, that’s where you’ll stay. Most times, I give a couple of chances before putting someone on that list, but it also depends on the offense.”

“Damn. I love hard too, but it takes a lot to make me hate someone. I mean, I may stop fucking with them, but I won’t hate them.”

“That’s admirable. I’m not there yet.” I remained quiet for a moment, but I knew I needed to ask. My curiosity wouldn’t let me rest. “So what type of drama are you dealing with?”

He was quiet, just like I had been, then he said, “My daughter’s mother. We’ve had an on again, off again relationship for the past fourteen years. We were on again recently, after a three-year break, and she fucked up about three weeks ago... Well, she had been fucking up. I just found out about it three weeks ago. I’m still dealing with that shit. That’s why I need time.”

“I totally understand. After my ex and I split, seeing another man was the last thing on my mind. I umm... I think you’re cool. I won’t call a lot, because I know your stance, but you’re free to call me whenever you wanna talk. How often do you come to Beaumont?”

“I appreciate that. At least once a month. Sometimes twice. My sister lives there.”

Good. “That’s cool. Well, I won’t keep you. I’m about to catch up on one

of my shows. I'll probably text often, but I'll let you make the call on if you wanna talk or not."

"A'ight. I can't wait until this shit is done. You seem really cool, Dinalee. I can't wait to get to know more."

My face heated up so damn much. "I can't wait to get to know you more also, Rondo. Be careful heading home."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon."

I ended the call and sat there with the phone pressed into my chest. Damn, that call was fucking perfect. I could only hope that whatever the situation with his baby mama was, it wouldn't affect where we went from here. Hopefully, it would be over soon. For me to be feeling this man like this, I *had* to know more.

CHAPTER 3

RONDO

“**W**hat’s up, nigga?”

“Curtis, what’chu doing here?”

“Shit, I was coming by to holla. I didn’t realize you weren’t here. Everything good?”

“Yeah. We good,” I said as I got our bags from the back.

Sunni and I had just gotten home from Beaumont, and my homeboy Curtis was in my driveway. Whenever I didn’t go to Beaumont, we’d kick it, whether we were playing basketball, fishing, or just smoking a good blunt. We’d been friends since we crossed over fifteen years ago. He pledged Alpha Phi Alpha though.

I used to tease him and say that I’d never seen a fat Alpha. His response would be that his belly was a backstop to keep a bitch from throwing his dick up. I would say that shit repeatedly just to hear him say that so I could laugh at his retarded ass. He and I always got into some shit. Kennedy was part of the shenanigans, but I slowed down completely when she informed me she was pregnant.

We headed to the door, and I unlocked it for Sunni. “Daddy, I’m going take a shower. I feel sticky.”

“Okay, baby.”

I set our bags on the floor and slapped Curtis’s hand. “What’chu been up to, nigga?”

“Shit. Not ready to go in to this muthafucka tomorrow.”

I rolled my eyes. Curtis had his own private practice as a family doctor. He acted like he couldn’t make his own hours and appointments. Whenever he wanted to be off, he was off. The nigga was well-respected and wasn’t

accepting new patients because he had so many. “Nigga, whatever.”

He pulled out a blunt as he chuckled, ready to spark up until a car pulled into my driveway. He slid it back into his pocket. When Kennedy hopped her ass out of that car, my face twitched in anger. She looked pissed and like she was finna be on some bullshit. “Aww shit,” Curtis said.

He already knew how shit could get explosive between Kennedy and me. He knew about everything that was going on. Stuff I hadn’t told Shavozz or my mother, he knew about. Before she could even get close to me, she yelled, “Where is my fucking daughter!”

“My daughter is taking a shower. We just got home. You need to rethink how you coming at me.”

I saw Curtis stand from my peripheral. I was glad he was here to keep me in pocket. Nobody could push me to the edge like Kennedy, and he’d pulled me away from her a time or two over the years. I wasn’t going to do anything to her back then, but he wanted to be sure. This time, I wasn’t sure how I would react to her ass. She had so much shit going on that I didn’t know about. “What’chu gon’ do, Rondo? You ain’t gon’ do shit,” she said as she got in my face.

I bit my bottom lip and took a step back. I didn’t need to lose my cool, my job, or my daughter fooling with her ass. She was trying to get a rise out of me. “Kennedy, you pushing your luck. You tryna get Sunni back. You underhanded, shady, and manipulative. I’m not threatened by you, nor am I intimidated. So your best bet is to get the fuck out of my face.”

She rolled her eyes, but the minute Sunni ran out of the door, she pushed me out of the way. “Mama!”

I bit my bottom lip to keep from saying anything until she said, “Get your things. You’re going home with me.”

I frowned hard and walked up on her. “What the fuck you think you doing?”

“I’m taking my daughter. You didn’t have a right to take her from me anyway.”

“That birth certificate says I do.”

“Well, I’m working to get that fixed.”

I frowned hard as shit. My head tilted to the side as I stared at her. “What the fuck did you just say to me?”

“Rondo, you a smart man, but you act like you slow sometimes. Sunni doesn’t look like me or you. You running around here like you’re the perfect

father and shit. She's not your daughter, nigga."

At that moment, all I saw was red. As I lunged toward her, Curtis damn near picked me up to keep me away from her. The tears fell down my cheeks. She couldn't be telling the truth. She was just saying that shit to hurt me. Sunni was stunned into silence. The tears were falling down her cheeks as well. I didn't give a fuck what she said at this point. That was my baby, and I wasn't rescinding my rights as her father.

Sunni ran inside the house as Kennedy yelled at her to come back. "Get the fuck off my property!" I yelled.

She rolled her eyes and huffed, but she walked toward her car. "I'll be back with the cops to get my baby."

I jerked away from Curtis and went inside to check on Sunni. When I saw her lying on the floor, crying her eyes out, it pierced my heart. I got on the floor with her and pulled her into my arms. "Don't worry, baby. I don't give a fuck what she says. You will always be my sunshine."

"Daddy, I can't go with her after this. Why is she being like this to you?"

"Because I found out about the real her and not the Kennedy she's been pretending to be. I'm so sorry you had to witness that shit. You don't deserve that."

"Neither do you, Daddy. I wanna keep staying with you. I missed her, but I don't like what she's saying. If you aren't my daddy, then who is?"

"Listen to me. I'm gon' always be your daddy. Okay?"

She nodded her head as Curtis entered the house with a bag. I didn't even realize he'd left. When he handed me the bag from Walgreens, I already knew what it was. I lived in a neighborhood right behind the store, and he'd gone and got a paternity test. I took it from the bag, and he got on the floor with us to help us with it.

After he collected our samples, he placed a phone call. "Meet me at the lab." Once he ended the call, he said to me, "I'll have the results in an hour."

I nodded. "Thanks, Curtis."

I helped Sunni from the floor, and we made our way to the couch. I pulled her in my arms and held her tightly. Kennedy was gon' fuck around and find out just how rough I could be. She'd never seen me really go there, but this shit was beyond ridiculous, and I was tired of it. I just wanted to live my life with my family in peace. My sister had found that peace with DJ, and our other siblings on our father's side had found happiness as well. I was the only one still dealing with bullshit.

There was a loud knock at the door, so I stood and went to it to see Kennedy standing there with the police. I closed my eyes for a moment, willing myself to keep it together. My hands were itching to grab Kennedy around her neck and choke the shit out of her. When I opened the door, the officer with her said, "Hello, Mr. Simpson. We're here to pick up Sunni Simpson to return her to her custodial parent."

Sunni started screaming. I never even realized she was standing next to me. "No! I'm not going anywhere with her!"

The cop's eyebrows rose as Kennedy said, "Sunni! You have to come home, baby. Why don't you want to come home?"

"You were really cruel to Daddy. He didn't deserve that. He's a good dad, and I'm staying here with him!"

I turned to her as the tears streamed down her cheeks and gently wiped them with my thumb. "Listen, baby. It's gon' be okay. We go to court next week. You can tell the judge whatever you need to tell him. He will value what you have to say. Okay? You'll be back with me before you know it. Just go with her for now."

Sunni wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly as the cop stared on sympathetically. Kennedy had the court papers in her hand, and until we went to court, Sunni had to go with her mother. This shit was wearing me thin. When I released my baby, she went and got her purse but didn't pack any clothes. "You can make me go with you, but you can't make me pack. I'm not packing twice. I won't be at your house long."

She threw her arms around me again. "I love you so much, Sunni."

"I love you too, Daddy."

With that, she walked out of the door right past Kennedy to the car. I could only pray that Kennedy didn't try to hurt my baby. The law was so fucking black and white. Going to my kitchen, I went and got a bottle of Fireball and guzzled that shit until there wasn't a drop left in the bottle, then rolled a fat one. I needed something to numb the pain I was feeling. I couldn't believe the lengths Kennedy had gone for some fucking money.

She'd destroyed our relationship as well as Sunni's relationship with her. It was like she didn't give a fuck about anything or anyone anymore. As I lit my blunt, my phone chimed. I grabbed it from the coffee table to see the message was from Curtis. *I have the results. You want them in person, or do you want me to tell you here through text?*

Text.

Shortly after, a picture came through of the testing they put the DNA samples through, then the message came through right after. *Y'all aren't a match. Biologically, she's not yours, man. I'm so sorry.*

I broke. This couldn't be my life. Sunni was my baby... my sunshine. I was the one that named her Sunni. The day she was born was the happiest day of my life. My fucking soul was distraught. I wiped my eyes then grabbed my phone and made a phone call. After it rang two or three times, Jungle answered.

“What’s up, Rondo? We need to talk. I know some shit that you may not know about Kennedy and Darlena. Vegas found out that Kennedy is the one that got shit—”

“Oh, I know everything. I don’t give a fuck about her ass no more. Kill that bitch.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Fuck her! I’m sick of dealing with her bullshit! Do whatever you want with her ass. She’s not somebody I need or even want in my life anymore.”

“Man, what happened?”

“We’ll talk later. I know y’all out of town. Hit me when y’all get back next week.”

“A’ight, man.”

I ended the call and wondered if I’d made the right decision. It didn’t matter to me right now, but once the anger wore off, I could have a change of heart. By then, it might be too late. I couldn’t dwell on that right now though. Kennedy had brought this on herself when she fucked with the wrong people. She didn’t realize that her life was in my hands. Maybe she did and just assumed that I would never give the okay. She’d gone too far this time.

I went back to the kitchen and grabbed another bottle of Fireball, then called my job’s answering service to take a personal day tomorrow. I only had two people on the schedule tomorrow anyway. Going back to the couch, I relit my blunt and took a long ass pull from it. I closed my eyes as I exhaled then lay against the couch cushions.

Depression had fallen on me like a two-ton weight from the sky, and I didn’t know what to do with it. I wasn’t gon’ make it without my baby. Life wasn’t shit without Sunni. That judge was gonna have to give my baby back to me. Regardless of paternity, I signed the birth certificate and acknowledged paternity of the seven-pound, eight-ounce princess the Lord

blessed me with at the hospital twelve years ago.

Why would the Lord take a blessing back? As I pondered the question, it was like He answered in an audible voice. *Abraham proved his trust in Me when I told him to sacrifice the son I had blessed him with. Trust me.*

It was either the Lord or I was high as shit. Either way... it made sense to me. I had no other choice but to trust that He knew what He was doing. I just hoped I didn't derail the plans with that phone call.

CHAPTER 4

DINALEE

Last night, my sleep was limited. *Nothing but Sophie had to sleep with me.* She said she'd had a bad dream, but I truly believed she just wanted to be in the bed with me. The problem with that was she slept so bad. The girl's feet were in my face when I woke up this morning. It seemed like I woke up every damn hour to move some part of her out of my face or just off me, period.

Another reason why I couldn't sleep was because I was thinking about Rondo's sexy ass. I wished I would have just skipped my shows and talked to him longer. The fact that he'd called was surprising in itself. I was happy as hell that he did. All night, his face had stayed on my mind. So much so until I found myself staring at the picture he'd sent me. When I wasn't looking at his smile, I was imagining his mean mug.

There was something tender about him. I could tell that his words were true when he said he loved hard just as I did. Despite how intimidating his frown could look, I knew it was only a front to hide his pain. I knew what pain looked like, and I'd done the same thing. I masked my pain with my attitude and anger. I needed to be a pillar of strength for my babies, but whenever I was in the privacy of my home, alone in my room, I would cry out the pain I felt inside.

After taking the kids to day care and getting to work, I decided to send a good morning text to Rondo. He was on my mind when I fell asleep and on my mind when I woke up. After thanking God for another day, he was the only person I wanted to talk to. As I sat drinking a cup of hot tea, I sent him a message. *Good morning, Rondo. I hope you slept well and that you're having a great day.*

I took a deep breath and sat back in my chair, waiting for his response. Before I could swallow my sip of tea, he didn't disappoint. I opened his message to see him with a fishing pole in his hand and a slight smile on his face. However, I could see in his eyes that he wasn't feeling at peace. It was like I could see the turmoil in them. Another message came through as I stared at his picture. *Good morning, beautiful.*

Trying to coax words from him, I sent, *Must be nice to be able to shoot hooky from work.*

After a couple of minutes and he didn't respond, I started my day, filling out paperwork and making copies of shit. I hated sitting in this dreary ass place all day. I couldn't wait until my two weeks off. It would have been nice if it had started while the kids were on vacation. We could have done all sorts of things and had all kinds of fun.

The art museum had activities planned this week, along with the planetarium and one of the rec centers. We could have gone to the movies, bowling, skating... just so many things we could have enjoyed together. I didn't make a ton of money, but I surely would have dipped into their child support account to make sure we had an amazing week. Hell, we could have even gone out of town for the week.

As I finished off my bottle of water, my phone chimed. I checked it to see a message from Rondo. I smiled big as I opened it. *My bad. These fish started biting for a minute. They weren't letting my line rest. I took a personal day. I needed a mental break and reset.*

I could only imagine what he was going through. Breakups were hard as hell, especially when you felt betrayed by someone you loved. I quickly responded. *Sometimes that's needed. I know what that's like.*

What time do you go to lunch?

In an hour.

Okay. Call me. It's easier to talk than to text.

I smiled slightly. I could imagine if he was fishing, holding the phone would be a task. *Okay. Can't wait to hear your voice.*

I could have called him now, but I didn't like to make a habit of doing that while at work. I didn't need anybody breathing down my neck, saying that I wasn't doing my job. I only had a year left, and I was seriously debating leaving. I wanted to move to Puerto Rico. That was where my mama had gone back to, and most of my family was there. Although I'd just gotten to Texas, it was lonely as hell.

As I looked over more paperwork and emails, my phone rang. When I saw Ramón's number, I rolled my eyes. I almost didn't answer. "Hello?"

"Hey, Dinalee."

"Hello."

"How are the kids?"

"They're fine, other than wishing they had an involved father."

"Man, don't start that shit."

"Did you not expect it? You haven't called in two weeks. It must be nice to disconnect and pretend they don't exist. I don't have that luxury."

"Are they with you?"

"No. They're at day care."

"Can you call me when you get them?"

"I suppose I can," I said while rolling my eyes. "Just make sure you answer the damn phone. If I have to see their disappointment, we will never call you again. So you may wanna rethink that shit. Maybe you should just call them so their hopes aren't up."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?"

"Because you're a jackass. Don't act clueless. That shit ain't cute. You know I have no fucks to give when it comes to your ass. Call later if you want to. I refuse to set my babies up for disappointment. Bye."

I ended the call without waiting for his response. His ass ran me hot, and he knew it. I actually thought that he got a kick out of it. When we were married, he used to piss me off on purpose, just to see my attitude. I swore he made me crazier than I already was. I never had a filter, and I didn't have a problem expressing myself either. It was like he tried to put me in situations where he could laugh when I had to go off.

That shit only made me hate him more. He had me acting a whole ass fool sometimes, unnecessarily. Shit wouldn't even be that serious, but he played it up just so I could make a fool out of myself in front of people. If I could have gotten away with it, I would have punched him in his god damn throat when he had me at the school going off on those people about discriminating against my son.

He told me the teacher would never pick Micah to answer questions. He was the darkest complexioned person in the class. There were a couple of black kids in class with him, but he was darker than they were. I messaged the lady and she responded politely, saying she would make changes, but nothing was done about it. Then he told me to allow him to handle it.

He fed me all kinds of bullshit, and I went to that school and threatened to whup that ho's ass. Nobody wanted to hear me out until I walked into that principal's office, threatening them with bad publicity and everything. They were about to call the police on my ass. By the time I got home, and that muthafucka laughed about it, I swore I saw red. I wanted to stab him in his god damn throat. That had to be the beginning of the end.

When things started escalating to where we were arguing nonstop and I found out he was cheating on me, that was it. I refused to be subjected to his bullshit any longer. However, I realized that as long as my kids were minors, I would still have to endure his bullshit. Thankfully, not as much since he was able to decide when he wanted to be a father.

After finishing up my responses to emails, I grabbed my purse to head to Jason's Deli to get a sandwich. As soon as I got in my car, I called Rondo. Ramón had my mood fucked, but just thinking about Rondo had put a smile back on my face. "What's up, Dinalee?"

My smile dwindled a bit because I could hear the pain in his voice. "Hey. So am I getting invited for fried fish this weekend?"

He chuckled. "You would be cool with bringing your kids around me so soon?"

"Well, it's not like you don't have a kid. I think it'll be okay."

He was quiet for a moment, and I could tell I'd struck a nerve. I got a little nervous for some reason. "I'm sorry, Rondo. Did I say something wrong?"

"Naw. I umm... I need to go. I'll call you later."

"O-okay," I stammered. "Are you sure I didn't say anything to offend you?"

"I'm cool. I'll holla back."

He ended the call, and I was confused as hell. Something had clearly happened, and I felt that it had to do with his daughter. I pulled out of the parking lot, wishing there was something I could have said or done to comfort him. I couldn't even figure out why though. I was drawn to him, and I knew it was for reasons more than how he looked like he was dragging more dick than a little bit. Just as I was about to text him, a text came through from him.

I'm sorry for how I ended our call. I just couldn't verbalize what was going on. My daughter's mother came with the police yesterday evening after we got home and took my baby from me. We go to court Wednesday. That's

why I took a personal day. My mental is fucked up.

My heart broke for him. Since the police supported her, she was probably the custodial parent. I didn't know their situation, but I could clearly tell just how much he loved his daughter at that moment. My appetite was long gone. I wiped the tear that escaped me and slowly shook my head. This man was going to be mine. There was no way I could feel this strongly for him if he weren't meant for me.

I texted back. I'm so sorry, Rondo. I couldn't imagine what I would do in your shoes. I really wish I could hug you right now. My heart is broken for you.

Twenty-four hours ago, I didn't know this man existed, and now I was imagining us in a whole relationship. This shit was unreal. I didn't even know his last name yet. I left the parking lot and went to Jason's Deli anyway. Just because I didn't have an appetite now, didn't mean that shit wouldn't come back with a vengeance later and have me acting like a bitch toward everyone in the building.

After going inside and ordering a club royale, I left and headed right back to work. I had nearly thirty minutes left, so I would probably take a cat nap. When my phone rang, I was hoping it was Rondo. I really wanted to talk to him about what was going on. He had no reason to trust me though. He didn't know me, but I wondered if he felt what I did... the intense connection.

When I saw the day-care's phone number, I rolled my eyes. I quickly answered despite the bullshit this would probably be. "Hello?"

"Hello, Ms. Cadien. This is Regina calling from the day care. Micah and another little boy got into a fight. I honestly don't know who started it, because they are both claiming the other did. I looked up from writing some plans, and they were on the floor tussling."

"Oh my God. Okay. Give me time to let my supervisor know what's going on, and I'll be there."

"Okay."

I ended the call and screamed into my hand. Micah was never a troublemaker. I just knew that call was going to be about Sophie. She was always into some shit she shouldn't have been involved in. That had me worried about my baby. What was going on that he felt the need to fight? I parked in the lot and made my way inside, letting the lieutenant know what was going on and why I needed to leave. I knew it wouldn't be a big deal, but I just didn't like taking off unless it was absolutely necessary. Today, it was

unavoidable.

I quickly made my way back to the car and peeled out of the parking lot, only to get hit by an SUV. How in the hell did I not see him? My car spun a bit, but I felt like I was okay. The SUV caught the back of my car. Thankfully he didn't hit me hard after he slammed on brakes. I dropped my head on the steering wheel and screamed. "Fuck!"

I got out of the car, although the door was slightly jammed. When I saw the heavily tatted man with a frown on his face, heading my way, I wanted to cry. He was finna tear into my ass, and I deserved it for not paying close enough attention. "I'm sooo sorry. I was in a hurry trying to get to my kids, and oh shit. Sir, I'm so sorry."

His frown eased a bit, and his head tilted slightly. That only made me more nervous. "Está bien," he said, easing my nerves.

He'd said 'it's okay' in Spanish. *He's Latino?* I thought he was just a light-complexioned black man. He had cornrows and swag for days. His style was everything. He gave me a head nod and said, "Let's get these cars out of the street."

I glanced at his SUV, and there was barely any damage to it, other than a busted headlight and a small dent with scratches around it. I cursed myself out as I got in my car and turned back into the parking lot. My tail end was fucked up. I did *not* need this shit on my insurance. I got back out to see him getting out of his SUV and talking to someone on the phone. He was probably calling the police.

I glanced at the time and decided to call the day care, letting them know I had been in a fender bender and would be there as soon as I could. When the man approached, he said, "Listen, don't worry about this shit. I can see you stressed. I'm Ali Joseph. And you are?"

"Dinalee Cadien. You didn't call the police?"

"Naw. You look like you got enough going on."

"I do. I'm going to get your vehicle fixed. I promise. Just give me time to get the money together."

"How did your car drive?"

"It was shaking a bit."

"I umm... I can take you to get your kids if need be. I'm not as threatening as I look. I own Watchful Eyes P.I. Firm. You can look me up."

I glanced back at my car and frowned. I didn't know this man from Adam, but he seemed nice enough. It wasn't like I had anybody here for me.

I could ask someone inside, but then I would be taking someone else away from work. “O-okay. You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

He smiled and damn. His smile was gorgeous. He opened the passenger door for me when we got to his vehicle, and I said, “Gracias.”

“De nada.”

I watched him walk around his vehicle as he placed a phone call. When he got in, he said, “You feeling okay, baby?”

Of course he has a woman. This man looked like a combination of swag, bad boy, and runway model. “Okay. I’ll be home to rub your feet in the next hour or so. I hit a lady, so I’m helping her get her kids... I love you too, Riley.”

He ended the call and said, “My bad. Where are we going?”

I smiled. He seemed like he was a sweetheart, and I could only imagine that Rondo was the same way in a relationship. “Red Apple Daycare. It’s over off Calder Avenue.”

“Yeah. I know where it is. Close to West Brook, right?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’ve only lived here a year. I only go where I need to go, so I don’t know where a lot of places are.”

“You gotta get familiar with where you live,” he said as his phone rang.

I noticed he had a couple of phones in his console... actually three. I supposed if he was a private investigator, that was necessary. “What’s up, ni ___”

He glanced over at me, and I tried to hold in my smile. He went back to his call as I stared out of the window as he drove, trying to tune him out. I still picked up that somebody was about to get fucked up. Just as he was ending his call, my phone rang. When I saw it was Rondo, I got way too excited. I answered immediately. “Hey, Rondo. How are you?”

I noticed Ali turned his head toward me fast as hell. “What’s up, Dinalee? I’m sorry about earlier. I needed time to myself. Am I interrupting you?”

“No. I got in a fender bender, but the man was nice enough to take me to get my kids.”

“You just got in the car with a strange man?”

“He seemed nice. He said he owned a P.I. firm. His name is uhhhh, Ali Joseph.”

“I know you fucking lying. Put me on speaker phone.”

I glanced over at Ali and saw the smirk on his lips. It was like he’d heard everything Rondo had said. “You’re on speaker.”

“Nigga, she’s precious cargo and you hit her? I’m gon’ fuck you up when I get back to Beaumont.”

Ali laughed. “Yo’ country ass ain’t gon’ do shit. What’s up, man? It’s a small world. I just got off the phone with Jungle.”

“Ain’t shit. That’s what’s up. I can’t wait until it’s over.”

“When you coming back to town?”

“Not this weekend but next... hopefully.”

“A’ight. Well talk to yo’ lady. I’ll holla at’chu later.”

I took the phone off speaker, and Rondo said, “Man, that’s one of the safest niggas you could be with. That’s my boy. We aren’t like best friends, but he’s best friends with a nigga I consider a brother.”

“I guess it’s indeed a small world.”

“Are you feeling okay though?”

“Yeah. I never saw him. My son got into a fight at day care, so they called me to go get him. I don’t know what’s going on with him today. He’s my laidback child.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of it. I’m about to clean and fillet these fish. Can I call you tonight?”

“Yeah. We have a lot to get to know about each other.”

“That we do. I’ll call around eight, if that isn’t too late.”

“That’s perfect. Talk to you then.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and saw Ali glancing at me. “We met yesterday at a gas station. I still don’t know his last name.”

“Simpson.”

“It’s crazy, because we discussed ages, kids, what we do for a living and never brought up last names,” I said as I rolled my eyes.

“I can tell you like him though.”

“I do. We’re kind of just chilling, though, until whatever he has going on with his baby mama is done. He said he didn’t want to hop into anything else so soon.”

Ali nodded, but he didn’t say another word until we got to the day care. When he got out and opened my door, I smiled. “Thank you.”

He nodded then waited for me like he was a chauffeur. When I walked in, I saw Micah sitting up front with his things. He looked at me then dropped his head. After requesting to get Sophie, too, I sat next to my son. “We’ll talk when we get home, okay?”

“Okay.”

I could see the regret in his eyes, and whatever his pain or frustration was, I wanted to take it and bear it for him. I put my arm around him and kissed his head. “Mama’s got’chu, baby.”

CHAPTER 5

RONDO

I slid my hand over my shirt and tie as my mama and I made our way inside the courtroom. Shavozz was going to be pissed that I didn't tell her about it, but there was no way I wanted her to be on the road to Mobile, Alabama, by herself at five months pregnant. DJ had to work, and I refused to have him take off work for this bullshit. As long as Mama was here, that was more than enough support.

Before I could sit with my attorney, my mama grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "Everything is going to be okay, son."

I nodded my head. I never told her that Sunni wasn't biologically mine. No one knew that but Curtis, Sunni, and me... and Kennedy's ass. I just couldn't bring myself to even say it to anybody. I was more than sure it would come up today, though, and when it did, I would have to submit DNA for another test.

When Kennedy and my baby walked in, Sunni ran right to me. I hugged her tightly. It had only been three days since I'd seen her, but I hadn't talked to her either. She looked beautiful, but I didn't expect anything less. One thing her mama did was make sure that she looked nice at all times. I kissed her head a few times as Kennedy's lawyer waited for her.

Once she released me, he escorted her to her seat behind Kennedy. I sat next to my lawyer, and he didn't look as confident as I wanted him to look. When the courtroom doors opened, I turned to see who was coming in. When I laid eyes on DJ, Jamel, Shavozz, Sandrene, Ali, Chad, Isaiah, Dylan, Shy, and Mr. Sheldon, I wanted to cry.

Jungle and Jericho were still in Florida. Ali and Riley had come back Monday morning because Riley had a doctor's appointment yesterday. Had

the others been back, I was more than sure they would have been here as well. They never ceased to amaze me. I gave them a tight smile then turned back to the front as the judge entered the courtroom. We all stood to our feet as he walked to his bench, then sat when prompted to.

I was nervous as fuck. For some reason, I didn't feel as confident as I had been feeling. With all Kennedy had done, she knew I wouldn't bring it up in court. If I did, it would implicate Jungle in a bunch of bullshit. I couldn't do that to him.

The proceedings were pretty standard. Kennedy got up there and talked about all the things she did for Sunni and painted herself out to be the mother of the century. Surprisingly, she didn't admit that I wasn't Sunni's father. She didn't have anything bad to say about me. When it concerned Sunni, there wasn't shit she could say.

Once she stepped down, my attorney called me to the stand. Since I was the one contesting custody, I thought they would have called me first, but whatever. After taking the oath to tell the truth, I was seated. My attorney went right in, asking me why I had filed for custody. I glanced at my baby and smiled slightly.

"I want her to have the best upbringing. I love my daughter. Her mother has been exhibiting qualities that I don't want her to be influenced by. The only way I feel that I can prevent that is to seek custody."

"What qualities are those, Mr. Simpson?"

"We were trying to make our relationship work, and I found out she was cheating on me and had been for a while. My daughter was spending more time with her grandmother than she was spending with Kennedy. I just want what's best for her, and I feel like I can provide that."

Before I could step down, the other attorney had one question for me. "Do you have proof of these allegations, Mr. Simpson?"

"No, I don't."

I had pictures in my phone, but again, I didn't want to implicate Jungle in anything. Kennedy smirked at me. I wanted to go over to her and knock that shit off her face. I was dismissed from the stand. When I got to my seat, I saw the judge take a deep breath. "Sunni Simpson is twelve years old. She's old enough to say where she wants to live and why. So I would like to call her to the stand."

I watched my baby make her way to the stand. I could tell she was beyond nervous by the way she was twiddling her thumbs as she walked.

When she got to the stand and took the oath, she turned to the judge as she sat. “Hi, sweetheart. I wish I didn’t have to do this. It feels like I’m putting you in the middle and making you choose between your parents. I’m sure you love both of them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I need to know if you prefer to live with one over the other. Right now, you’re living with your mother. How has that arrangement been?”

“It was good until this past weekend. I saw a side of my mother that I didn’t like.”

Oh shit. She was about to say everything Kennedy had said that day. The judge’s eyebrows lifted. “What happened this past weekend?”

“She yelled at my dad and said that I wasn’t his biological daughter anyway.”

The judge frowned and glanced at Kennedy. “Why would she say that?”

“She was angry at my dad for taking me to Beaumont to see my aunt Shavozz and uncle DJ. I had so much fun out there. She told my dad that he was trying to be father of the year for a child that wasn’t his.”

When the tears fell down my baby’s face, I lowered my head. I couldn’t watch her cry. “Baby, how did your mother know that information? Did she do a DNA test?”

“What’s that? My daddy’s friend gave us something to test after she said that. We were both upset about what she said. I didn’t want to leave with her after that, so she called the police to force me to go with her.”

The judge looked over at me and asked, “Mr. Simpson, have you gotten the results from that test?”

I stood from my seat. “Yes, Your Honor. My friend is a doctor, so he went to the lab and analyzed our samples himself. Biologically, we aren’t related.”

“Do you pay child support?”

“Yes, sir. I signed her birth certificate and acknowledged paternity. That’s my baby. Blood doesn’t matter at this point.”

“With all due respect, your honor, blood does matter. We are petitioning that Mr. Simpson’s rights be terminated.”

“Man, I know you lying,” I said aloud.

My heart had sunk to my feet. “Mr. Simpson, have a seat, sir,” the judge said, then turned back to Kennedy’s attorney. “That petition is denied. In fact, how did Ms. Jefferson know about the false paternity if she hadn’t had a

DNA test done?”

I glanced over at her, and she looked like she was trying to sink under that damn table. “It was just something she said to make Mr. Simpson angry.”

“I’m not buying that, counselor. I’m tempted to charge her with paternity fraud.” He turned back to Sunni, and asked, “Sweetheart, has your mother had any other men around you?”

“Not recently. Before she and my dad got back together, there was a man in Texas. He was sort of mean. I was only around him once or twice.”

The judge looked to be taking notes, then he asked, “Do you remember his name?”

“Umm... only his first name. Leon.”

The judge looked up at Kennedy. Her ass was red as hell. “I need his information, Ms. Jefferson. I will also be ordering for him to take a paternity test. Until this is conducted, I’m temporarily placing Sunni with Mr. Simpson.”

I closed my eyes briefly, then reopened them to see my daughter running to me. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly. I couldn’t stop the tears that fell from my eyes as I held her. I saw Kennedy’s attorney handing the judge information. That judge wasn’t playing with her ass. If whoever that nigga was that Sunni mentioned was her biological father, I was positive the judge would charge Kennedy with paternity fraud.

“We will come back here two weeks after Leon Moore submits a DNA sample. We’re adjourned.”

When I turned to my family, they all looked stunned. My mama joined Sunni and me and put her arms around both of us at once. “Let’s go home, baby,” I said to Sunni.

She smiled at me and grabbed my hand as we headed out of the courtroom. When we got to the foyer, I shook hands with my boys, then hugged Shavozz. “The next time you keep shit away from me, I’m gon’ cut yo’ ass.”

“Gone, trout-mouth girl. You didn’t need to be on that road by yourself. DJ had to work.”

She pushed me on the head. She hated when I called her trout mouth, and I loved watching her reaction to it. “And you aren’t important enough for him to take off for?”

I just gave her a look, with my head tilted one way and my lips twisted

the other, silently saying, *a'ight, a'ight*. She pulled me in her arms and hugged me again. "That had to be devastating, Rondo. I'm so sorry."

"It was, but we gon' keep it moving as we always have. This my baby right here," I said, pulling Sunni close.

"Let's go get something to eat, my treat," Chad said.

We followed him out, and before we could even get to my truck, my mind went straight to Dinalee. I hadn't spoken to her since Monday night. We'd talked for at least an hour, learning more about one another. She was cool as hell. Now that things were looking up for a while, maybe I could give her more of me. My mind was completely occupied with this foolishness. However, I was definitely rethinking what I said when I called Jungle.

Although I was still angry, I wasn't in a fit of rage anymore. If something happened to Kennedy, it would kill Sunni. Even after all that she'd done, I still loved her evil ass. That wasn't something I could just turn off. On top of that, since we'd gone to court, I would be the first person they'd question. I was going to have to stop what I'd given the okay for. While I knew Jungle had every right to take her out, I couldn't have that on my conscience. If he chose to do it anyway, there would be nothing I could do to stop him.

Once inside, I looked over at my baby, and she smiled. "I'm glad I'm back with you, Daddy. Mama was barely around for the past few days. I was with Momo."

"I'm glad you're back too."

"So is my last name gonna stay Simpson?"

"Hell yeah. Ain't nothing changing that. You my baby. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

She lowered her head as she wiped her eyes. This shit was hard. After swallowing the lump in my throat, I placed my fingers under her chin, turning her face to me. "We gon' get through this, baby. You my heart... You're my whole purpose for doing everything I do. I became the man that I am because of you. Just because our DNA doesn't match, doesn't mean that our relationship will change. Not unless you want it to. I know like hell I don't. I'm not gonna treat you any differently. You feel me?"

"Yes, sir."

"A'ight. Now let's go eat and turn up with the people who came to support us."

"I can't believe they drove all the way here."

I chuckled as I thought about how the Berottes rolled for those they

loved. That six-hour drive wasn't going to stand in the way. "That's family, baby. I'm glad you'll get to know them as your family too."

I followed behind DJ and Shavozz as we headed to get something to eat. I didn't have a clue of where we were going, but at this point, I didn't care. My phone chimed with a text message, so as soon as we stopped at the traffic light, I grabbed it to see a message from Dinalee. *Just thinking about you. I hope all is well.*

I'd sent her a good morning text yesterday, but I had yet to communicate today. My mind was on ten. I quickly responded. *Good afternoon. All is well for now. I just left court. Got my baby back for the time being. I'll call you later. I miss talking to you.*

I smiled slightly at the phone, then took off from the light. "Is it the lady you met in Beaumont at the gas station?"

I glanced over at my attentive daughter. She'd seen Dinalee and me interacting Sunday evening, although she didn't say a word to acknowledge that she knew what was up. "Yeah. She seems nice."

"I hope so. You deserve somebody nice."

I slid my hand over my face. I was starting to think that I was hard to love. Every relationship I'd tried to embark on had ended in disaster. Although it didn't get that far with Yolanda's ass, it could have. She was just stringing me along to make Jamel jealous. That nigga wasn't the least bit worried about her ass. I was glad I peeped game on that shit before it got too far. I should have known some shit was up with her ass. She was too gung-ho about being seen with me.

We fucked the first time I took her to dinner. She was throwing the pussy at me, and I refused to turn it down. After that was when I decided to go back to Kennedy's ho ass. I swore I knew how to pick them. Kennedy wasn't my first love, but she was my first and only adult love. I'd fallen for a girl in high school that fucked around on me too. *Yep*. I had to have something within me that was attracting these hoes.

While I was feeling Dinalee, I would definitely have to take starting a relationship with her slow. We could fuck if that was what she wanted, but as far as taking her places and spending my ends and shit, that was going to move at a snail's pace. I had to protect my heart. I fell in love too easily. All she had to do was show me too much attention and that she cared, then I would be hooked. I slowly shook my head at the thought as I turned into the parking lot at Dauphin's.

I didn't know why we were going to this fancy ass restaurant, but whatever floated their boat since I wasn't having to pay for it. Chad had blessed me with some ends a while back, but I was doing my best to hold on tight to that shit. After parking, I walked around the vehicle to open Sunni's door. I supposed since we were all dressed nice, it wouldn't be too bad. When we joined everyone else, Ali put his arm around me. "Honey is nice, maybe a little too trusting but nice. Either that or her intuition is on point."

I gave him a slight smile as he chuckled and patted my back. Dinalee didn't give him bad vibes. That was a good sign. "Yeah. She seems nice. I gotta call her once I get home. My mind been all fucked up this week. Maybe it can rest for a little bit now."

"I feel you."

"Y'all heard from Seneca?"

I hadn't seen that nigga since Jamel's wedding. I knew that he'd fucked up royally and that Jericho was ready to kill his ass, but I hadn't heard anything else.

"Yeah. He's okay. He's had an appointment with a psychiatrist, trying to get his issues handled. He told me that they were talking about prescribing him something for anxiety or some shit. That nigga is extremely possessive, and when he feels like something or someone is being taken away from him, he flips. He gon' have to get a handle on that, especially when it concerns us. None of us would have fucked him over."

I nodded as we headed inside, hoping that he could get it together. He was a fool sometimes, but he and I had quite a bit in common. We'd kicked it on several occasions. The only difference was that I'd never sold drugs. However, I always felt like my mama and sister's protector, although Shavozz was older than me, just like Joyy was older than him. I wasn't as close to Jericho, but just from being around him, I trusted that he was good people.

The Berottes didn't associate with fraud niggas. I knew that much. If you hung around them, you had to be on the up and up or at least striving to be. If you weren't, there was no way you would feel comfortable around them. Seneca had seemed to be on the up and up. Something more had to be going on with him other than anxiety for him to snap like that. I had his number, so I would probably call and check on him.

Once we were seated, DJ sat next to me, and Jamel sat on the other side of me. Sunni had sat near Shavozz, Sandrene, and my mama. My brothers-in-

law were the truth and were closer to me than my own brother. We didn't have the same mother, so it wasn't like we grew up in the same household, but we did grow up together. I only spoke to him once every now and then.

"I'm glad everything turned out the way it did," Jamel said.

"Hell yeah... other than Sunni not being biologically mine."

"That's fucked up, bruh. Real shit," DJ said. "So, what'chu gon' do about it? I mean... we all know what happened in Houston and why she wasn't handled."

"I called him and told him to take her ass out, but I'm having second thoughts about that shit now that the courts are all in our shit. She turn up missing, I'm gon' be who they suspect first."

"Yeah, so you may wanna call Jungle now," Jamel said. "They'll be heading back tomorrow morning."

I nodded, then made the phone call as Jamel suggested. After three rings, he picked up. "What's up, Rondo?"

"What's up? I think we need to meet. Put everything on pause."

"Okay. Umm... come to Beaumont Sunday if you can, that way we can all talk about it together. We'll all be there."

"A'ight. I'll make the trip."

I ended the call and found Ali and Shy staring at me. They nodded, then Ali smiled. I slowly shook my head. That nigga was always smiling. I was willing to bet that was how he caught people off guard with just how deadly he could be. "They gon' ask yo' ass to be a part of their crew. I can see that shit coming," DJ said.

He and Chad were close, so they probably had already had a conversation about me. They knew I was a hunter and that I was a hood nigga. Maybe they needed my expertise with something. I had no idea why they would think that I would be a good fit for Watchful Eyes though. Whatever they saw in me was something I had yet to see about myself.

The waitress got our drink orders and after she did, I received a message from Dinalee. *I'm so happy for you. I'll be looking forward to your call. I miss talking to you too.*

I smiled slightly then said to DJ, "I don't know what they would want me for. I ain't no ruthless nigga like them."

"And you think Chad is? They don't just fuck people up, man. They find out info about people that basically goes unseen by normal niggas like me." He chuckled. "There may be some quality you possess that they think would

benefit the company. The real question is, do you think it would be something you would want to do? Would you change careers?"

"I don't know. It depends on what they want me to do. I guess I'll find out Sunday."

"Mm hmm," Jamel said.

I chuckled as the waitress reappeared to take our orders. Today was a new day, and I was gonna celebrate it and feel good about it, because there was no telling what would pop off next. This shit with Kennedy was far from being over, but this small win made me feel like I could endure until the end.

CHAPTER 6

DINALEE

My nerves were so on edge, I couldn't even really focus to talk to Rondo Wednesday night. Micah had gotten into another fight at day care Wednesday afternoon, and I just didn't know what to do about it. He said the boy had been picking with him about me, but he wouldn't tell me what the little boy was saying. I could imagine that he thought it would hurt my feelings, but I tried my best to assure him that I needed to know so I could help him through it.

This was where his dad being around would come into play. He may have felt more comfortable telling him. That muthafucka had never called the kids, and I felt like his absence was truly affecting Micah. I didn't want to keep pressuring him to talk, because it seemed the more I insisted, the *less* he talked. Instead of sending him to day care, I took him to work with me Thursday and Friday.

My car was in the shop, and I was driving a rental. This lil Corolla was making my fucking nerves bad. It was so small, but hopefully, I wouldn't have to drive it long. Today, I was doing my best not to go anywhere. I just wanted to take a mental break and show myself some attention. My hair needed washing, and my skin was just feeling dry, although I moisturized it every day and drank plenty of water.

I supposed the stress of the week was getting to me. It was Sunday, and it was almost time to do this shit all over again. Yesterday, I had to clean my house. I'd been neglecting it, and it was in desperate need. Shuffling Sophie from one room to the next was a chore too. Just when she would get comfortable in one room, I would have to move her to the next. My house wasn't terribly big, but cleaning it drained me. Add washing clothes to the

mix, and it felt like I'd worked two jobs.

Rondo had taken a back burner, and it felt like I'd taken a back burner in his life as well. We didn't talk Friday or Saturday. Our talk Thursday was extremely brief. I was still trying to get Micah to talk to me. So today, I just needed to spend time with myself for the first half of it, then tend to my kids afterward and make sure they were ready to go back to school tomorrow.

After doing a facial and drinking a cup of hot tea, I ran a hot bath to soak in Epsom salt. I would do this again tonight after the kids went to bed and rub my body down with lavender. My muscles were tight as hell, and I just needed to relax.

As I was getting undressed, my phone rang. Slightly rolling my eyes, I saw it was a call from Ramón. I ignored that shit and got prepared to pamper myself. Every time I looked at his name in my contacts, I rolled my eyes or chuckled, depending on how I was feeling. I'd saved his contact name as, *Sperm Donor and Thorn in My Flesh*.

I turned on my music, jamming ELHAE's latest release. He wasn't as popular, but I loved his vibe. It was similar to Ye Ali and Eric Bellinger. I could get with it. As I slid down in the water, I exhaled and closed my eyes, thanking God I had the opportunity to relax. I'd gotten up early and made breakfast for the kids, so that should hold them for a few hours. Sophie had fallen back to sleep. I kept her lil ass up late last night, just so she would be tired today and *want* to sleep. I knew I couldn't let her sleep too long, though, or she wouldn't want to sleep tonight.

Within five minutes, my phone was ringing again. I swore, it was like it wasn't meant for me to just chill out and relax. I snatched the phone from the side of the tub, but when I saw it was Rondo, I got kind of excited. "Good morning," I answered.

"Good morning, beautiful. How are you?"

"I'm okay. What about you?"

"I'm good. I'm sorry I haven't reached out as much. I know you've been under a lot of pressure and stress as well."

"Yeah. It's okay. This has been the most stressful week I've had in a while. From my ex to a wreck with your friend, then to Micah fighting at day care, I just need to reset."

"I'm sorry it's been rough. You wanna call me back?"

"Yeah. I'm relaxing in a bath. I'll call you when I get out."

"Mm. Okay. I'm in Beaumont. So if you're up to seeing me, let me

know.”

“I thought you weren’t coming this weekend?”

“I wasn’t, but something came up, so I came out. I plan to be here until about six.”

“Okay. I do want to see you. Give me a couple of hours.”

“Okay. Text me. I may be in a meeting. If I can talk, I’ll call you back.”

“This is a pleasant surprise, Rondo. I’m sorry if my voice doesn’t reflect that.”

“I get it. I was the same way earlier this week. I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Same here.”

“A’ight. Relax.”

“Talk to you soon.”

I ended the call, wishing I was in a better mood. It seemed I was drained mentally, and I supposed because Rondo had issues going on as well, it stifled our connection. It was like I was excited to hear from him, but not as excited as I was Monday. I closed my eyes, hoping that I could rejuvenate mentally, spiritually, and physically, because I was tapped out.

“MOMMY, DO WE HAVE TO GO TO SCHOOL TOMORROW?”

“Absolutely.”

“But why?”

The last thing I felt like doing was answering Sophie’s questions. As if I was given a reprieve, their sperm donor called before I could even answer her. “Hello?”

“Hi, Dinalee. Are the kids available to talk?”

“Yeah.”

I handed the phone to Sophie and continued cooking. Normally, I sat and listened to their conversations to make sure he wasn’t selling them false hope about seeing them, but today, I just didn’t have the energy. I’d cooked fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans for the kids, because I just didn’t have an appetite.

As I plated their food, I heard Micah say, “Why can’t we see you?”

I glanced over at him and saw that Sophie was totally engaged in the

conversation between Micah and Ramón. He continued, “It’s not fair, Dad. Why can’t you make time for us? Mommy is tired.”

I bit my bottom lip, and the tears fell down my cheeks. Not having help was hard, but God, this past week had tested my limits. After quickly wiping my face, I took their food to the table then went back for their drinks.

Once I set them on the table, they joined me. Micah extended the phone to me. After I took it from him, he and Sophie sat to eat their food as I went back to the kitchen to clean up. I noticed the timer was still going, so Ramón’s ass was still on the phone. Bringing it to my ear, I said, “Yes?”

“The first week of summer, I’ll be there to get them to spend the summer with me and my family.”

“Okay.”

He remained quiet. “That’s all you have to say?”

“Ramón, I’m not in the mood to go back and forth with you today. I’m exhausted, and frankly, I don’t believe you. So whatever.”

“Dina, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“I just said I’m tired. Is there anything else you want to talk about concerning the kids? If not, then this conversation is over.”

“No. I’ll call and check on you to—”

I ended the call on his ass. He didn’t need to check on me. If anything, he made my nerves worse. After I put the food away and started the dishwasher, I sent Rondo a text. *Hey. Sorry I’m messaging so late. If you aren’t busy, call me.*

I set the phone on the countertop as I got the broom. It was already two o’clock. I’d taken care of myself this morning, but it seemed I was even more exhausted than what I was. After I swept the floor and had spot cleaned it with the wet jet, my phone rang. When I answered, there was a lot of background noise. “Hello?” I answered hesitantly.

“Hey. I’ve been waiting for your text.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I had to cook and make sure the kids ate.”

“You sound exhausted, baby girl. Can I come see you?”

“Umm... I uhh...”

“You wanna meet somewhere? I can understand you not wanting me in your place just yet.”

“It’s not that, Rondo. I just don’t know if I will be able to entertain you.”

“Dinalee, you don’t have to entertain me. I just wanna be in your presence. You don’t have to say a word if you don’t want to.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “Okay. I’ll text you the address.”

“Okay. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and sent my address to Rondo. My nerves were all over the fucking place, and I didn’t know how to calm them down. I only had one more week of work, then I would be off for two weeks. I knew I would be able to fully relax while the kids were at school. I just hoped Rondo wasn’t expecting too much out of our time together today. We’d never spent time together, and while I wanted our first time doing so to be interesting and exciting, it wouldn’t be.

My phone vibrated from a text message. Rondo had responded. *You’re only five minutes from where I am. See you in a minute.*

I went to the bathroom and pulled my curly hair up into a bun. It was still damp from when I’d washed it. I changed my slightly damp shirt and put on a tank top to go along with my shorts, then slid on some flip flops. When I came out, Sophie was walking to the kitchen with her plate.

“My friend, Rondo, is coming over for a little while... the guy I met at the gas station last weekend. If you don’t want to meet him, you don’t have to. I understand the mood you may be in after talking to your father.”

“I wanna meet him, Mommy,” Sophie said.

I rolled my eyes. I knew she would want to since she liked being in my business. I brought my attention to Micah, and he smiled slightly. “I’ll meet him too.”

My eyebrows lifted slightly. He was craving a fatherly figure, so I shouldn’t have been surprised. After I wiped the table and rinsed their dishes, the doorbell rang. Taking a deep breath, I walked to the door and checked the peephole to see Rondo standing there looking fine as hell. He looked like he’d gotten a fresh lineup, and his hair atop his head was a sexy ass disheveled mess. *God, bless it.* He wore a T-shirt, jeans, and the boots I saw him wearing last Sunday, along with that mean mug.

I opened the door, and a smile made its way to his tinted lips. “Hey, gorgeous.”

He bit his bottom lip, causing my lips to part as I stepped aside to allow him inside. “Hey, Rondo,” I said softly.

Dear God, he looked even better than the first time I saw him. Once I closed the door and I turned back to him, he was shaking Micah’s hand. “I’m Rondo. Nice to meet you.”

He shook Sophie's hand as she blushed. "Are you Puerto Rican?"
Rondo chuckled. "Naw, lil mama, far from it. I'm a black American."
"My papa is black."

"That's cool."

I grabbed Rondo's hand as Micah asked, "Do you have any kids?"

"I have a twelve-year-old daughter. She's with her cousins right now."

I led him to the couch as he stared at me. Once we sat, he licked his lips and put his arm around me. After giving me a soft smile, I did the same. Apparently, Micah could sense the connection between us. "Sophie, let's go play."

"Yay!"

I chuckled. Micah rarely wanted to play with her because she always tried to boss playtime. Once they left the room, Rondo put his fingertips under my chin, lifting my head to where he could stare into my eyes. I swore I stopped breathing. His gaze felt like it was penetrating my soul, and right now, she was skipping through a field of flowers... happy as shit.

He leaned in and kissed my forehead, and my damn eyes rolled to the back of my head at how soft his lips were. However, when he pulled me in his arms, the goosebumps covered my skin. I lay against him and took a deep breath, inhaling his cologne. There was something sweet smelling on him too. "What did you eat? Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Smells like the same thing y'all ate. Fried chicken. I ate with my sister and her in-laws. They are my family too though."

"Did you have something sweet?"

"Always. I had some banana pudding and a slice of cake. You smell it?"

"Yeah. It smells good... along with your cologne."

"You smell good too... like candy."

"It's the conditioner I use when I wash my hair."

"Mm. Well relax, baby. I'm good with holding you like this. Rest your mind for a while."

I lifted my head and stared into his eyes for a moment, then softly kissed his lips. The way he stared at me made my insides quiver. Sparks definitely flew when my lips touched his, and evidently, he felt it too. His grip on me tightened a bit. *God this feels good.* I closed my eyes and lay back against him. I took a deep breath and just hoped that whatever this was between us could develop into more.

CHAPTER 7

RONDO

“So you don’t want us to kill her ass?” Jericho asked.

“I don’t want to draw attention to us. Because of the custody hearing, if something happens to her, they gon’ be in my shit, which means they gon’ be in y’all shit too. None of us need that kind of heat.”

Jungle nodded repeatedly. “You right. Besides that, how do *you* feel about her?”

I slid my hand down my face. “I still love her, but at the same time, I don’t give a fuck either. I don’t want to see her get killed on account of me saying so, but that other shit, she brought on herself. Basically, I guess I’m saying, do what you have to do after all this shit die down.”

Jungle and Ali glanced at one another. Shy was nodding his head repeatedly. “I know DJ told you that we wanted you to be a part of Watchful Eyes, but he didn’t know exactly why,” Chad said.

I nodded with a slight frown on my face. Just as Ali was about to continue, the door opened. We all turned to it. When Seneca walked in, everyone stood. He lifted his eyebrows in a sorrowful sort of way. It was like he was posing a question without verbally saying anything. Jericho walked toward him and extended his hand. They shook, then Jericho put his arm around Seneca as we all crowded him.

“I asked him to come, because he called me and filled me in on his diagnosis. I told him he needed to share that with the crew. I also wanted him to know that despite what happened, we all still fuck with him. Maybe not to the extent we once did, simply because it hasn’t been long enough, but we care about what happens to him, and none of us have turned our backs on him. He’s our lil brother,” Jericho said, surprising me.

Seneca looked nervous as hell, especially when he glanced at Jungle. “I know I fucked up,” Seneca added. “If y’all don’t want me here, I’ll leave.”

No one said anything. I walked over to him and extended my hand, and Chad and Shy were right behind me. However, Ali said, “It depends on your diagnosis. You my boy, but lots of shit discussed in here is confidential. If this diagnosis can threaten that, then I’ll have to ask you to leave. It has nothing to do with whether we’re cool or not. It’s just business.”

“I understand, man.” Seneca sat in a chair next to Jericho. “I was diagnosed with intermittent explosive disorder. Just from the talks I’ve had with the psychiatrist, that coupled along with anxiety makes it worse. Whenever I’m feeling anxious, I can have an episode.”

Jungle frowned slightly. “What is it?”

“I can have a sudden episode of impulsive, aggressive, or violent behavior, including angry outbursts, that people have come to see as me being mean or cynical. It makes me take things too far. I’ve never felt the level of anxiety that I felt with Chelsea. It’s crazy, because I trust y’all. Jericho, you’ve never given me a reason to doubt your word. Psychotherapy sessions will help me better control and understand it.”

He stared at Ali with hopeful eyes. I could tell he wanted to be back in the brotherhood. While they hadn’t totally kicked him out, not being involved in Watchful Eyes business was taking a toll on him. Ali nodded. “We’ll go case by case, Seneca, but welcome back.”

He shook his hand, and Seneca went straight to Jungle and extended his hand. “You know the police are investigating my businesses, right? All because of that bullshit you told that lawyer.”

That was what the look was for. *Damn*. Seneca dropped his hand and nodded. “I apologize, Jungle.”

Jungle’s face hardened as everyone stared at him. Clearly, no one knew that tidbit of information, not even Jericho. “Jungle, are you worried that they may find something?” Shy asked. “I can go through your shit and fix it to where they won’t find a thing.”

“I’m not worried about them finding anything, but it’s just the point that they are down there and could possibly scare somebody into talking about shit they have no business talking about. Had that lawyer not said I was a suspected drug dealer in court, I wouldn’t be having to deal with this bullshit. Disorder or not, it don’t change what you did. I’m having to suffer the consequences of what you said. I didn’t deserve that, and neither did

Chelsea.”

He walked past Seneca and said, “Rondo, let me holla at’chu right quick.”

I followed Jungle outside, and he turned to me and said, “I don’t trust that nigga with any information about the Patterson organization... period. I just want you to know that whatever happens to Kennedy will only be because of what she’s done. Your love for her is why she’s been here this long. We gon’ be watching her ass though.”

“You may need to know about a nigga named Leon Moore. I don’t know what he has to do with anything, but his name came up in court. My daughter said she met him, and he seemed mean. They are investigating him and going after him for a paternity test.”

“Paternity test for what?”

I forgot he didn’t know. “Sunni isn’t my biological daughter. I found that out last Sunday.”

“That’s fucked up. You signed the birth certificate though, right?”

“Yeah. That’s the only reason I have her. Kennedy never wanted me to take Sunni to Beaumont, and I feel like it has something to do with whoever that nigga is.”

“Okay. Does Ali know?”

“He knows about the paternity test, but I haven’t filled him in on my suspicions about Leon. I was going to tell him in this meeting. I’m sorry about the severed relationship between you and Seneca.”

“Yeah, me too. We may be able to get it back. If I end up getting locked up for anything, though, and it causes Chelsea to lose Jericka, that nigga better count his muthafucking days. Family or not, he gon’ pay with his fucked-up life. I gotta get out of here though. I’ll be at the Berottes’ later.”

“A’ight, man.”

I went back inside, and everyone stared at me for a moment. I frowned, and they all started laughing. Confusion had to be written all over my face. “What’s up?”

“So, we have a job coming up. The client lives in a rural area, and she needs someone to watch her husband. We know that you’re extremely familiar with rural areas, and we could use the extra help. If you’re interested, I’ll pay for you to relocate and everything. I know you probably can’t do that right now, because of the situation with your daughter, but I wanted you to think about it.”

Hmm. This was indeed interesting. I’d have to talk to Ali about this

privately. I needed to know of the risks and the pay. I liked what I did for a living, but I couldn't say that I loved it. While I loved kids, I couldn't say I loved the job. Maybe if I had my own practice, I would. Besides, Shy was an attorney. Maybe I could do both if I was able to relocate.

"Okay. Let me think about it."

He nodded, and I turned to Seneca. "You good, man?"

"Yeah, I'm cool."

As I stared at him, I saw the spaces where he was missing teeth on the side. At least it wasn't his front teeth. I'd heard that Jericho had fucked him up something serious. I could tell that he was still wearing a wrap around his ribs. He would probably have to wear that shit for another month or so. "You know I'm available if you ever wanna hang sometimes or just need a getaway."

He glanced at me and nodded. "Thanks, man. I might actually take you up on that."

I nodded then turned my attention back to Ali as he talked about upcoming jobs. Once he was done and we were walking out to head to the Berottes', Seneca asked, "What you got going next week?"

"I have to work tomorrow, but I might be off Wednesday. You coming through?"

"Most likely. Other than Isaiah, Joyy, and my mama, I feel like I'm out here by myself. I mean, Riley is my sister, too, but she got enough going on with her pregnancy. Plus, I know Ali don't trust me as much."

"Yeah, you can fall through."

I shook his hand and watched him walk to his car. When I felt a hand on my shoulder, I turned to see Chad. "That nigga gon' need you. Real shit. I'm glad you reached out. Are you gonna really think about the career change?"

"Yeah. I really am."

"Good. We're expanding, and Ali could really use an extra body. I'm sure you're a good shot too."

"Nigga, I'm a country nigga. If I don't know how to do shit else, I know how to hunt. I hit my target every time."

Chad chuckled and slapped my hand. "That's what I know! I think you'll like it. We don't get involved in illegal shit all the time. We have quite a few legit cases. Most of the illegal shit is because it involves one of us."

"Got'chu."

When Ali and Shy walked over to us, I said, "I forgot to say, but you

might need to look into a nigga named Leon Moore. He has some affiliation with Kennedy, and I believe he's the reason she didn't want Sunni coming to Beaumont with me."

"A'ight."

"Be careful, though, because the courts are going to be contacting him too. I'm sure y'all remember all that from the hearing though."

"Yeah. I'm already looking into his ass. I'm not finding anything just yet, but I'm sure I will," Ali said.

I nodded and headed to the car, anxious to see what Mrs. Anissa cooked for us. My sister's mother-in-law was the truth. My stomach was growling like I hadn't eaten in days. Hopefully, Dinalee would call by the time I was done eating. She didn't sound that great when I talked to her earlier, and that just pulled at my heartstrings. I wanted to hold her and let her know that I wanted to be there for her.

It seemed we'd fallen off because of all the drama we both had, but I knew that as soon as I saw her, every moment of our encounter would come back like a flood. Every word we spoke to one another by phone played in my head like it was a song on repeat. Her voice was rich, and her slight accent drove me insane. My mind was beginning to make up some of her qualities, so it was past time that I got to know her real qualities and not the ones I imagined.

I WAS BEYOND EXCITED WHEN DINALEE CALLED, BUT THE MOMENT I GOT TO her, I could see just how drained she actually was. Although she looked amazing, I could see the weariness in her eyes. It seemed her son saw it too. Just the fact that he was only eight years old and knew, let me know he was his mom's biggest ally. He was her protector. I liked that. I was the same way with my mother.

I noticed that a lot of single mothers who had boys tended to have their loyalty and protection as well. However, he saw something about me that he trusted. When he took his sister to a back room to give us privacy, I noticed the shocked expression on Dinalee's face. That let me know that he didn't play with his sister often.

However, all I could think about was the kiss she'd just placed on my lips

and how good her soft body felt against mine. *Damn*. Everything about this felt so right. I kissed her head then gently rubbed my hand up and down her back. However, when she brought her hand to my cheek, I couldn't help but tilt her head back and kiss her lips again. I allowed it to linger a bit.

When I pulled away from her and she stared into my eyes, I knew there was no way I would let this woman go. Even with all the pending bullshit, I needed her in my life. I would accept Ali's job offer today if it meant she would always be mine. Shit, she wasn't mine, but I had every intention of making her mine.

"Dinalee, why you staring at me like that, baby?"

"I could ask the same question. I swear that mean mug speaks to me."

"Oh yeah? What that shit saying?" I asked in a low voice close to her ear.

"That you would fuck the shit out of me if my kids weren't here."

"Mm. I'd do whatever you wanted me to do to this beautiful body. Real shit. But just so it's clear, I want more than that. I want to fuck your mind and your heart eventually."

She sat up on the couch and angled her body toward mine. I licked my lips as I noticed her hard nipples through the tank she wore. My dick felt like it wanted to burst through my jeans and get at her just from the sight. "Rondo, we don't know each other as well as I would like. I want to say that I want every part of you, too, but I just don't know yet."

"That's okay. You gon' know soon enough. I'm gon' make sure of that shit. As soon as this shit is over between me and my daughter's mother, I'm moving here."

She looked uncomfortable for a moment, then she stared into my eyes. "Really?"

"Yep. I was offered a job today that I'm sure I'll end up taking. So you won't have to worry about a long-distance relationship. I mean, I probably won't live in the city, but more on the outskirts, in the rural area. I know of several areas within a fifteen-mile radius."

She smiled slightly then grabbed her phone and started some music. I swore I wanted to snatch her ass up when "Simple Things" started to play. That was one of my favorite songs. When she turned back to me, I grabbed her hand and closed my eyes and just felt the vibe she was creating.

I could feel her scoot closer to me. "Baby girl, just you putting on that song is confirming everything I just said to you. That's one of my favorite songs."

“It’s my favorite song too, Rondo. I’ve never been impressed by money or lavish things a man could buy. Just shit like this impressed me more than anything. The way you’re sitting here holding me and letting your intentions be made known is sexy as hell. The simple things are what are most important in a relationship to me.”

I opened my eyes to find her staring at me. I gently swept the stray strand of hair that fell from her bun out of her face and slid my fingertips down her cheek. This woman was so beautiful. Those expressive brown eyes had me wanting to slide between her walls as soon as possible. “Same. I hate that I don’t live closer. I would see your pretty ass every day.”

When her cheeks reddened, I leaned over and kissed her again. I would never get enough of her lips. When her tongue slid to mine, I slid my hand around to her thick ass and squeezed. She pulled away slowly, and her entire face was red. It seemed staring at one another did things for both of us, because it seemed we did that shit more than we talked.

“Rondo?”

“What’s up?”

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Showing me that intensity through your eyes. It makes my insides quiver.”

“Mm. That right?”

“Yeah. It feels like your spirit is trying to get familiar with mine.”

“Maybe it is. I wanna get familiar with every part of you. I promise, I won’t be distant anymore, no matter what I’m going through. I truly believe that, this time, I’ve found the woman I need in my life. I feel like I am the man you need too. We are both going through bullshit with people we once loved, letting it tear us down. We can’t keep doing that.”

“You’re right.”

“I wish I could introduce you to my people. While I’m away, at least you’ll have help. Ali and his girlfriend are in my circle. That’s actually who offered me a job. I’d forgotten that quickly that you met him. They have a six-year-old that I believe your daughter would get along with. She’s Spanish speaking as well.”

“So why can’t you introduce me?”

“For real? You up to it?”

She chuckled. “I’m for real, but maybe next time you come to town.”

You'll have time to run down who everyone is before I meet them."

"Shiiiiid. It's a lot of 'em. You only gon' get to know them by being around them."

She smiled slightly. "Okay. Well, at least tell me about your sister."

"Her name is Shavozz. She's pregnant and will be having a baby shower soon. She's married to DJ. She also has two boys from her previous marriage."

She nodded and said, "If I weren't so drained, I would go today. I don't want anyone to think I'm being standoffish because I have nothing left to give."

"That's okay. I wish I could be here to help you, but I promise to call every day. Although this is only our first time spending time together, this feels so natural. I feel so comfortable around you, and I only first saw you a week ago. How is that possible?"

"Maybe you're right. We're supposed to be together."

I smiled at her and pulled her closer to me. She took a deep breath and said, "I think my son is searching for a father figure. I feel like he thinks that if I'm interested in you, you could possibly be the one. I'm telling you this so you won't think his behavior is awkward. I didn't want you to be blindsided either if one of them chose to say something. They haven't seen their dad in a while, and he doesn't call often. I think that's why he's having behavioral problems."

"I can understand his dilemma. I hate that their dad isn't giving them the attention they need. Does he live in Ohio?"

"Yes. I'm happy that they never blamed me for moving away as to why they can't see their father. He says he's going to get them for the summer, but I'll believe that shit when it happens. I'm just tired of hearing their disappointment. He called them today, and seeing them so upset when they got off the phone finished draining everything I had left. I'm not a crier, but today, I couldn't help it."

"Man. I really need to be closer."

She didn't say another word, and I continued to hold her close, caressing her back until it was time for me to go. I had actually overstayed. I didn't leave her place until six thirty, and I still had to go back to the Berottes to pick up Sunni. Besides leaving my daughter, it had never been so hard to leave someone. I knew that I was going through these storms in my life to make me a better person, and I was certain that the same went for her, but I

just wished the time would move just a little bit faster.

Being around Dinalee felt right. I thought it would be weird since we hadn't talked much, but I was wrong. She seemed so open and transparent with me, and I loved that. It let me know that I could trust her and be the same with her. I was never shy about expressing myself. However, I now knew that my previous thoughts of moving slow with her were for nothing.

She had me in her possession already. If nothing changed between us and we continued progressing in our journey to get to know one another, I'd want to marry her before the summer rolled around.

CHAPTER 8

DINALEE

Being in Rondo's arms was everything to me. It was like we had known one another for much longer than a week. It surely didn't feel like the first time we'd had any physical interaction. Had my children not been in the house, I would have given him my wettest dreams right there on the couch. My nipples were so hard, they were visible through my bra and my shirt. I saw him glance at them a couple of times.

I still couldn't get over his gaze. At the thought of it, I flooded my panties. The way he came into my life and grabbed ahold of me was unreal. I had been waiting to feel again, and Rondo brought out every amazing feeling known to man, plus a couple of others I'd never experienced. Intense desire nearly had me taking him inside the bathroom while my children were in the next room.

I'd never felt a desire so strong, especially not that soon. *Jesus Christ!* I literally wanted to hold him hostage in my place. I was missing him before he left and already longing for next weekend so I could spend more time with him. We agreed that I would meet Sunni, and the kids would meet each other. I could see that this would move quickly, and I was okay with that. I was happy that he wasn't sticking to his previous plans. Our connection was way too intense to just let it fester.

My workday was creeping by, and it already seemed like I'd been here an entire day. It was just about to be lunch time. As I walked out of the building to my rental, I saw a familiar SUV parked next to me. When Ali got out of his vehicle with a bag, I smiled. I wasn't sure what he was doing here, but I couldn't help but smile. His smile did that to me, and I had to imagine that it did that to everyone he came in contact with.

“What’s up, Dinalee? Rondo texted me and asked if I could bring lunch to you. He said you liked authentic tacos, so I got you some from this food truck I frequent.”

“Wow. Thank you so much.”

He handed me the bag, but instead of leaving, he was just standing there, staring at me. It made me a little uneasy. Finally, he said, “You have familiar features. I know you’re Hispanic but from where?”

“Puerto Rico. My mom is Puerto Rican.”

“Mm. So was my mother.”

He nodded repeatedly. “Cadien is your married name?”

I frowned slightly. “No. It’s my maiden name.”

He was researching me, but I didn’t understand why. Maybe he thought I was related to someone he knew... or related to him. “What’s your mother’s last name?”

“Sanchez.”

He nodded repeatedly. “A’ight. I’m more than sure we’re probably related. I didn’t know any of my mother’s family... not even her parents, and honestly, I never even researched her to find out who they were. Your features just reminded me of her though.”

“What was her name?” I asked.

“Camila.”

My eyebrows lifted as my eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. She was my mama’s older sister. I’d heard her name so many times, but no one knew where she’d disappeared to. “Well, our grandparents are deceased. Is your mother here in Beaumont?”

He slid his hand over his face, and I saw his face twitch. Clearly, he didn’t have the greatest relationship with her. “She was. She died about six months ago. So your mom is my mother’s sister.”

“Yes. My mother, Carmen, always told me about her. She didn’t know what had happened to her though. I think she was four or five years older than my mom. She said Camila disappeared one day.”

He only nodded. I could tell that there was so much more to that story that he probably wouldn’t be forthcoming about. “You know a lot more about what happened, don’t you?”

He stared at me for a second, then said, “I gotta go. Enjoy your lunch.”

I watched him walk to the driver’s side of his vehicle and take off out of the parking lot. That was a touchy subject for him. He was my first cousin.

Wow. I couldn't wait to call my mom and let her know that I knew where Camila ended up. I would also have to inform her of her death. That would probably destroy her. However, just from this brief interaction with Ali, I knew that my mom probably knew more than what she let on.

I got in my car and immediately texted Rondo. *Thank you so much for lunch. How sweet.*

He responded right away. *Call me if you can, baby.*

I was giddy like a damn schoolgirl as I clicked on the icon to call him. I wiggled in my seat as I took a taco out of the bag. As soon as he answered, he said, "Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey, Rondo. How's your day going?"

"Good now. I've been wanting to hear your voice."

"Well, we can change that. I'll text you my desk number. You can call me whenever you want."

"Mm. I like that. You sound so much better today."

"Well, I mean, I had an amazing evening, and you found the way to my heart."

He chuckled. "Tacos, or food in general?"

"You sent me food. That's love. I'll fold every time."

He laughed. "Man, you crazy."

I giggled. "I promise they had that saying wrong. The way to a man's heart is his stomach. It should be a woman."

"I beg to differ. It may need to be both, because a brother like to eat too. Don't let this physique fool you, girl. I just work it off."

"So are you on your lunch break too?"

"Yep. I needed to hear your voice. Go ahead and eat your food before it gets cold. I'll call you when I get off."

"Okay. Thanks again, Rondo."

"You're welcome."

When I ended the call, I tore into those tacos like somebody was about to take them from me. I was starving. I didn't eat lunch or dinner yesterday. Even after Rondo left, I wasn't trying to eat that late. I did my best not to eat after six if I didn't plan to do anything afterward. If I was out and about, then it was fine. I couldn't go lay down with all that heavy food in my stomach.

Once I finished my food, my mind went back to Ali. I still had his business card he'd given me last week. I wanted to know more before I confronted my mother. While she and I had a great relationship, we didn't

talk often because of the fees. I usually contacted her once a month. She refused to get on social media. I told her we could talk through there without all the fees, but she wouldn't hear of it.

To say she was only forty-six, she acted like she was eighty. Like... who didn't have at least one social media account? I told her she didn't even have to accept any friends if she didn't want to. I just wanted to make it easier to talk to her more than once a month. She didn't care though. She said she refused to have people in her business. I could only roll my eyes when she said that.

There was no sense in arguing that people would only know what she put on there. There was no convincing her. Once she had something in her mind, it was damn near impossible to convince her otherwise. She reminded me of the grandmother from *Encanto*... just hardheaded as hell and thought she was always right. I truly believed she was covering something up by always portraying her strength.

Even when she divorced my dad, I didn't ever remember seeing her cry. They argued a bit, but she was never extremely passionate. Whenever my dad would start to yell, she would shut down. I wanted to believe that I inherited a lot of that. I yelled and acted a whole ass fool at times, but I had to be strong for my babies. Maybe that was what she was doing for me.

I closed my eyes as I thought about it, knowing that our conversation wouldn't go as smoothly if I didn't have insight into the situation with Camila. I just hoped Ali would talk to me about it. He seemed to be an extremely private person. I was surprised he even questioned me about my heritage and revealed his.

As I grabbed my things to head back to work, I received a text message from Rondo. I smiled slightly as I read, *Can you send me a picture?*

I tilted my head to the side, showing off my Greek letters on my camo baseball cap. I'd pledged Kappa Epsilon Psi while in the military. It wasn't a part of the Divine 9, but I loved it all the same. I puckered my lips slightly and took the pic to send to him. Shortly after it went through, he sent back the emojis with the heart eyes. After sending him a kissy face, I texted, *Where's mine?*

I got out of the car, making my way inside to get the rest of this day over with when his text came through. I waited until I got to my desk to check it. When I did, my pussy literally throbbed. *You sent this shit to get a reaction out of me. It worked. Damn. You so sexy.*

It was a picture of him mean mugging. He knew that shit turned me on. I continued staring at his picture as he sent a text with a bunch of laughing emojis. There was no telling how I would make it through the rest of the day now, but I somehow had to try. I put my phone face down on my desk and resumed what I was working on before lunch.

“CAN WE TALK?”

“How did you get this number?”

“Dinalee...”

“Right. You’re a P.I. I’m actually surprised that you called.”

“Curiosity is kicking my ass. Can we talk in person?”

“Umm... yeah. I was going to leave in a few minutes anyway.”

“Okay. Can you meet me at Watchful Eyes? I’ll send the address.”

“Sure.”

He ended the call, and I was staring at my phone waiting for the message to come through. I didn’t expect a message from him so soon. Ali didn’t strike me as the type to be forthcoming, and I could clearly see that there was a dark side to him, especially when his face twitched at the mention of his mother. I didn’t know if I was even ready for this conversation, but ready or not, I was going to hear it.

I walked out to my car to see him sitting in the parking lot. I wondered why he told me to meet him at Watchful Eyes if he was just going to show up here? That was weird. Instead of going to my vehicle, I went to his. He quickly hopped out and opened the door for me. I gave him a big smile, trying to get him to show me his, but he only gave me a tight-lipped smile.

“Thank you, Ali.”

He nodded and closed the door, then walked around to his side to join me. Once he was in, he turned to me and said, “They sold her to my father.”

I frowned hard, trying to figure out what he was saying to me. “Like... literally sold her to a man?”

“Yes. She was a teenager, and they had her turning tricks. When my dad came along, they realized he had plenty of money and just sold her to him. He didn’t know she was underaged at first... or so he said. I think his nasty ass lied about that. She got pregnant, and here I am. We were in Florida first.

We moved to New Orleans, then a couple of years later, we left him and ended up here. Camila was evil and toxic. She was never faithful to Troy and remained a ho until the day she died. Even with me being a grown man taking care of her ass, she chose to continue fucking for hire.”

I was stunned into silence. My mother had painted Abuela and Abuelo out to be the perfect parents. I was only nine or so when they died in a house fire. Ali had remained quiet as well. Finally finding my voice, I asked, “How did she die?”

“She was killed at a nasty ass motel.”

I swallowed hard. His animosity toward her was clear. “I’m assuming she wasn’t a great mother.”

“Not even close. The only family I’ve had are the Berottes, the family Rondo and I are both connected to. I went to school with one, and he’s always been like a brother to me. To actually meet somebody that’s my own flesh and blood is crazy. I’d convinced myself that I didn’t want to be connected with anyone that could sell their child. Despite that, when I met you, I knew you were related to me, because you resemble Camila.”

“She looked like me?”

“Yeah, enough for me to know that you had to be kin. I told myself that I wouldn’t say anything, but after knowing you were kicking it with Rondo, I knew that I would be seeing you a lot more. I wouldn’t be able to keep seeing you without confirming what I knew and telling you. You would have been freaked out if I was always staring at you.”

“I would have been, but I would have made sure my sidekick was with me at all times.”

I smiled at him and grabbed his tatted hand, then watched him bite his bottom lip and close his eyes. He squeezed my hand tightly for a moment. When he reopened his eyes, he brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. “I didn’t know I needed this. While I consider the Berottes my brothers, I literally had no one who shared my blood. Besides Camila, I was all alone out here, and basically, even when she was here, I was alone. I’m happy Rondo connected with you.”

I leaned over the seat and kissed his cheek. Seeing him turn red made me smile. “I’m happy to have met you too. I’ve felt alone out here for the past year also. Just me and my babies. To know I have family here is overwhelming. I feel a bond with you already.”

“When I get home, I’ll talk to my girlfriend about having you and the kids

over for dinner. Aina will love to get to know Sophie. They are close to the same age.”

“Ali, I’m so glad I pulled out in front of you.”

He chuckled. “Speaking of... get to your rental so we can go get your car.”

I frowned slightly. “How do you know my car is ready? They haven’t called me.”

“I’m Ali Joseph. Nice to meet you, cousin. I know everything. That’s why I met you here instead of having you go across town to Watchful Eyes.”

I slowly shook my head and laughed. I got to my car and thanked God for family. I would have never suspected that I had family here. Thoughts of moving were totally out of the question now. Between Rondo and now Ali, I felt like I had the world.

As I followed him to Classic, I sent a voice text to Rondo. “Hey, Rondo. I’m off work. Call me when you get off.”

When we got to Classic, what had to be my car was sitting under the awning, and that shit looked better than it did before Ali hit me. It was the only car under there, and if my car was ready, this had to be it. I grabbed my things and quickly got out of the car, rushing over to it. It had rims, a smooth ass paint job, tinted windows, and LED lights. I turned to Ali, and he had a big smile on his face.

I practically dropped all my shit on the ground and ran to it. When I opened it and saw all new interior, I ran back to him, jumping into his arms. My interior was fucked all the way up, thanks to the kids. “Ali! Thank you! Why did you do this?”

He lowered me as I fought back tears. “When I found out we were kin, I knew I had to look out for you. You out here by yourself with two kids. Rondo chipped in too. That man is serious about you already.”

“Wow. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I got everything. Go get your babies. I’ll call you when I get a date from Riley.”

I hugged him again, nearly choking the hell out of him. No one ever looked out for me this way, and I didn’t know how to even begin to understand why they cared so much. When I got in my Impala, I sat there for a minute, staring at the lights, new radio, and gear shift. He’d practically tricked my car out. The kids weren’t going to recognize me. And Rondo... he would get thanked thoroughly.

CHAPTER 9

RONDO

“Do you mind if I come by?”

I glanced at the caller ID, making sure it was really Seneca. I'd told him Monday that I would be back in Beaumont this coming weekend, and we could kick it then. There was no sense in him driving out here. I had to see my baby. We seemed to be getting closer by the day, but I was suffering not being able to see her and hold her like I did Sunday. It was only Wednesday, and Seneca had driven here.

“Naw, I don't mind. I'll text my address.”

I ended the call and sat on my couch to think. While I understood Seneca somewhat, I was caught off guard by him coming out here anyway since I'd told him I would be out there this weekend. I'd gotten off a couple of hours ago, and Sunni and I had eaten dinner already. My day off didn't happen, because a couple of patients called Monday to schedule appointments. I thought I would sit here and watch the basketball game and drink a beer, then call Dinalee and talk to her until I got sleepy. Not the case.

Sunni was taking a shower, preparing to go to bed so she could be ready for her day tomorrow. I didn't expect Seneca to take me up on what I offered so soon though. I supposed he needed the brotherhood more than I thought he did. I believed he was more embarrassed to be around the family. However, I knew Isaiah could probably give him great advice.

After about twenty minutes, the doorbell rang. I kissed Sunni when she came to tell me good night then went to the door to open it. He smiled slightly as I stepped aside, letting him inside. “What's up, man? What'chu doing out this way?”

“What's up, Rondo? I made a trip to The Best Stop in Scott to get some

boudin to take to Kaysyn. Kay Baby loves their boudin.” He bit his bottom lip. “I won’t be long.”

“Have a seat, man.”

We sat on the couch. He slumped in it somewhat at first, then he sat up and rested his elbows on his knees. “You know about everything that happened?”

“Yeah. DJ is my brother-in-law. He and Chad talk about damn near everything. I was with them when they talked about what happened in court and how Kaysyn took it.”

He nodded. “I’m trying so hard to work my way back in with her. I love that woman so much.”

“Have you talked to her since your diagnosis?”

“No. I talked to her before they left for Disney. She listened, but I feel like she only did so because Chelsea was kind enough to still allow her to be in Jericka’s life. I miss my baby girl. I miss all three of them. Jungle had said that they would let me see her, but I’m not so sure now. I can’t believe I fucked up so bad. Besides, I probably wouldn’t go see her anyway. I want Kaysyn’s approval.”

“So you bought her some boudin to get her to talk to you again?”

“Naw. Just to show her that she’s all I think about. Her and the kids. I love her so much. I wish I had known about this mental illness beforehand. Kay Baby trusted me way too much. She struggled with trust at first, and after she finally let go and let me lead, I fucked up like this.”

“I think she will understand if you explain it to her the way you explained it to us. Just be sincere and honest. She seems nice.”

“Not when it concerns those kids, she isn’t. I can’t blame her. I feel the same way when it comes to them. That episode I’d had was intense, but I think it was more than that. I was legit scared. Kaysyn was too. While we don’t know Chelsea, I know Jericho. Kaysyn doesn’t know him as well as I do. I should have trusted that he would have my back with being sure Chelsea abided by the contract. I mean, what else can I do to prove to Kaysyn how much I love her and how regretful I am?”

“I think you’re making a good start. Just don’t be too pushy. You might push her away.”

“I also needed someone other than Isaiah to talk to. While Ali is allowing me to come around, it doesn’t feel the same. At least not yet anyway. I know I’ll have to earn their trust again, but in the meantime, I needed somebody to

just listen. Isaiah is Chelsea's counselor. I didn't want to put the stress of dealing with me on his plate while he helped her through what she was feeling."

He was feeling desperate. He was too quick to accept my listening ear. Just from what Jungle said was going on since they went to court was more than enough reason for him to stay out of his face right now. However, Chad had told me how great of a shot he was. I knew that Watchful Eyes would still need him and utilize him where they saw fit. The situation with Kennedy was just touchy because it involved Jungle.

"She trusted me so much, especially because she was vulnerable. I deceived her. I hurt Jericho. My life is fucked up right now."

"I know this is easier said than done, man, but you gon' have to get past it. Stop focusing on what you did and focus on healing from it. Focus on redemption among the people you love. They still fuck wit'chu. For Jericho to bring you to the meeting says a lot. I believe once the police leave Jungle alone, he'll be cool too."

"Yeah. I gotta rectify that shit. If he wanted to, he could have me taken out with a phone call or even did it himself. Maybe if I can go to the police station and prove my condition, they'll leave him alone. I don't even fuck with the police like that. I should have known something was up with me. Hearing and seeing Kaysyn's fear of losing Jericka made me desperate. Holding her while she cried her eyes out was hard as hell."

I could only imagine how he felt. Holding Dinalee Sunday had me sensitive and soft as cotton. It was crazy how deeply I felt for her already, and I could tell she felt the same way. This distance was keeping us apart though.

"You gon' get through this, and the brotherhood will still be there when you do."

"So, you gon' work for Watchful Eyes, huh?"

"Yeah. I believe I'm gonna do it once this custody battle with Kennedy is done. I met a woman that I feel is everything I've been missing. So a nigga anxious as hell to get out that way."

He chuckled. "I know the feeling."

After sliding his hand down his face, he looked toward the hallway, causing me to look that way also. Sunni was approaching me with her phone and tears in her eyes. I stood from my seat with a deep frown on my face. "What's up, baby girl?"

“It’s Mama.”

I practically snatched the phone from her. “What do you want, Kennedy?”

“Rondo... I’m so sorry. I needed to tell you that. Despite what you think or believe, I love you. I know I haven’t shown you that, so I don’t blame you for believing otherwise. You mean a lot to me, and I truly wish that Sunni was your daughter. I fucked up, and I’m accepting that fact. I just wanted you to know that I deeply regret everything I did to you.”

My heart softened as I listened to her. I could hear the cries that were dying to escape her. It was like the woman I once knew was shining through in this moment. It helped me know that she’d shown me the real Kennedy. This evil fuck up that had shown up wasn’t the real her.

“What happened? What’s making you tell me all this?”

“He’s gonna kill me. I needed to tell my baby bye. I didn’t tell her why I was calling, but I’m telling you.”

“Who? Jungle?”

“No. Not Jungle. I just got off the phone with him, apologizing him up a wall. He ended the call on me, but he heard my heart. I was so fucking greedy! When he told me to do it, I didn’t even think twice about that shit.”

“Who, Kennedy? You keep saying he. Who is he?”

“Bye, Rondo. I love you.”

Just as the call was ending, I heard a gunshot. I dropped the phone to the floor, trying to figure out if someone had actually killed her or if she’d killed herself. My baby was staring at me, tears streaming down her face. Fear seemed to be gripping her the way it was gripping me.

“Where does she live?”

I turned to see Seneca standing next to me. I’d practically forgotten just that quickly he was still here. “Mobile.”

“A’ight. Get that boudin to Kaysyn for me. I’ll go check things out. Send me the address.”

He walked away as I pulled my daughter to me. “Daddy, what happened?”

“I don’t know, baby. I heard a gunshot before she hung up though.”

While I didn’t want to tell my daughter that, I didn’t want her to be left in the dark either. She knew something was wrong simply by my responses to Kennedy. She was in some shit that was deeper than we knew... or at least than what I knew. I pulled away from my baby and picked the phone up from

the floor then led her to the couch. I tried calling Kennedy back, only for her not to answer.

Seneca walked in with the boudin and set it on my countertop then nodded. I grabbed my phone and sent him Kennedy's address and thanked him. Once he left, Sunni asked, "Is she dead?"

"I don't know, baby. Seneca is going to go check for me."

"Who is he?"

"He's a friend of the family in Beaumont. He hasn't been there for the past few weeks. He'll get to the bottom of things... he and Ali."

"Okay."

When my phone rang and I saw Jungle's number, I quickly answered. "Hello?"

"What she up to, man? Did she call you?"

"Yeah. There was a gunshot before she ended the call. Seneca was here. He left for Alabama a few minutes ago."

"What was he doing there already?"

"He needed to talk. He said he didn't want to put more on Isaiah, because he knows Chelsea is talking to him. I'm assuming he doesn't want Isaiah to seem like he's in the middle, but he already is, whether he talks to him or not. Plus, he's seeing a psychotherapist anyway. I think he just needs the brotherhood, honestly."

"Mm. A'ight. You okay though?"

"I'm trying to be. I'm holding my daughter right now. We don't know what's going on, and the sooner we know, the sooner we can deal with the aftermath."

"Yeah. I'm gonna call Ali and let him know what's going on. We all may head your way in a lil bit. Okay?"

"I appreciate that, man."

I ended the call. We could truly use the support. As soon as I knew what was going on, I would call Shavozz, but in the meantime, I called my mama to come over. That way, she could be with Sunni, when they all got here and we tried to figure this shit out.

AS I STARED AT HER, I WASN'T SURE WHY SHE WAS HERE. I HADN'T CALLED

her, because she didn't need to be mixed up in this shit. Plus, it would look like I'd moved on too soon to the police or prosecution, and they could possibly use that shit against me. Dinalee looked nervous as hell as she stood next to Ali all chummy and shit like they were best friends.

Ali didn't usually open up to people like that. However, the longer I stared at them, the more I could see a slight resemblance. Instead of trying to figure the shit out in my head, I finally walked over to her. "Hi, Rondo. I just wanted to be here for you."

"Hey. I umm... I don't know if this is cool."

She lowered her head as Ali said, "It'll be fine. She's my cousin. She 'works' for Watchful Eyes if her presence is questioned."

He'd used air quotes when he said works, but none when he said cousin. "Y'all kin for real?"

Dinalee smiled slightly. "Yeah. He told me Monday evening. I wanted to surprise you this weekend when I asked you and Sunni to go to his house with me and the kids for dinner Saturday evening. He knew I would want to be here for you. I promise I won't be in the way. I just needed to see you, Rondo, and show you that I can be what you need me to be, just like you were for me."

I understood her reasoning, but I wasn't sure how I felt about her being here to see me being vulnerable concerning Kennedy. I honestly didn't want her to see me vulnerable at all, no matter who it was concerning. After nodding, she came to my arms, and I hugged her. When I released her, I ushered her over to Sunni.

My baby gave her a slight smile. "I remember you from the gas station."

"Hi, Sunni. I'm Dinalee. It's nice to officially meet you."

She smiled and glanced at me. "It's nice to meet you too."

"Is it okay if I hang with you while your dad handles business?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sunni said as she glanced at me.

She seemed uncomfortable, but I knew that was because she didn't know her. Dinalee was extremely outgoing and outspoken, but my baby could be reserved and shy at times. I glanced over at Ali, and he gave me a head nod, gesturing for us to go outside and speak in private. When we got out there, he said, "I know what you're thinking, and I apologize. I didn't think about that aspect of it. She works in intelligence with the military. We could use her expertise to find out who the fuck took Kennedy out of here."

I slid my hand down my face. Kennedy was dead, and I hadn't told Sunni

yet. Whoever killed her made it look like a suicide, and that was exactly what the police were going with for now. When Seneca had gotten there, the police were everywhere. Somehow, he'd gotten info that they would most likely rule it a suicide if no other evidence was found. The gun was in her hand, and they'd dusted it for other fingerprints. No one had placed anyone else at the scene. They'd just heard the gunshot.

I was more than sure I would be getting a phone call sooner rather than later. The only reason we knew she was deceased was because of Seneca going there. I didn't know Dinalee would be as needed as Ali made it seem, but whatever. I was trying to hold it together for my daughter. I couldn't focus on that shit right now. "Okay. Whatever. I need to break the news to my baby."

He nodded, and we went back inside. I noticed Sunni sitting with Dinalee, laughing and talking. I remained still, watching them interact. She'd made Sunni comfortable with her quickly. That was special, because Sunni didn't usually open up to adults that fast. I'd only witnessed her doing that with two women: Alexz with a Z and now Dinalee. When Dinalee noticed I was watching them, she smiled and winked at me. She was melting my resistance as the minutes ticked by. Before I could get caught up in her, I knew I needed to talk to my baby.

"Sunni, let me talk to you, baby."

She looked up at me and noticed my seriousness. She slowly shook her head as the smile fell from her lips. When she looked back up at me, tears were falling down her cheeks. "She's dead, isn't she?"

I nodded. She stood from her seat and fell into me. I embraced her and closed my eyes, trying to focus on consoling my baby. Her audible cries were taking me low. I picked her up and took her to her bedroom then let the tears fall from my eyes. When I heard someone entering the room, I turned to see my mama. She came in and hugged the both of us.

Lifting her head, Sunni asked, "Can I go to Momo's house?"

"Of course, baby. We'll go in the morning. It's kind of late now."

It was damn near two in the morning. Watchful Eyes had gotten here an hour ago. I was sure everyone else, especially Shavozz and Curtis, would be here in the morning. Mama had made a jambalaya, and those niggas had killed the shit. When I heard the knock at the door, I pulled away from my daughter, knowing that it was probably Seneca just getting back.

Mobile was a four-hour drive, so he'd made an eight-hour trip to check

things out for me. When I glanced down the hallway, I saw him, Ali, and Jericho talking, probably about everything he saw, then Ali called Dinalee over to them.

Going back to my baby, I sat on her bed and held her close. This would be rough for her. Until recently, she'd lived with her mother, and I knew she loved her. She was just angry that Kennedy had done what she did to me. "Daddy, what about the courts?"

"What about it, baby?"

"Am I gonna get to stay with you?"

"I'm more than sure you will."

"But what if whoever is my biological father wants me? I don't want to live with anyone else," she said, slightly panicking.

"Listen to me," I said, placing my hands on her shoulders. "Nobody is taking you from me. Okay? You gon' be with me until you either go off to college or move out on your own. You feel me?"

"Yes, sir."

She hugged me tightly and continued crying for her mother. Sunni was the only person that mattered right now. Regardless of how full the house was, they would have to figure shit out without me, because I refused to leave her in here alone right now. She needed me. Despite how I felt about Kennedy, the news had torn me up inside too, so I definitely needed Sunni.

CHAPTER 10

DINALEE

“**W**hat knowledge do you have of her past dealings, Ali?”

“Well, it’s this Leon Moore dude that I don’t trust. He’s too clean. However, I do know that he was served Monday. The courts wanted his DNA to see if he is Sunni’s biological father.”

This shit was so deep. I didn’t realize that Rondo’s ex was on some evil shit like this. However, I could tell that there was more to this story. Rondo wouldn’t be with a woman like this for years. There was no way she could hide this personality from him for years. I was going to have to search the database at work to see what I could find out about her and this Leon Moore guy.

“He’s probably the one behind everything she’s done.”

Ali nodded. The guy introduced to me as Seneca said, “She called, apologizing Rondo up a wall about all the things she’d done, telling him she loved him, although her actions didn’t show it. He heard the gunshot right before the call ended. Had she shot herself, she wouldn’t have been able to end the call.”

He was making a lot of sense. Now that I knew details of the call, though, I understood why Rondo was uncomfortable with me being here. While Ramón worked my last nerve, I would be torn apart if someone killed him. I shouldn’t have come. I just wanted to be here for him without thinking how he would feel to have me here with him at this moment.

At first, I was crushed, but damn, we’d only been talking for a little over a week. It was just that I wanted him so badly, I couldn’t see past my own selfish desires. I would steer clear of him unless he wanted me in his space. Ali brought me along to help with the situation, and I was going to do my

best to do that. He'd filled me in on her dealings with Jungle and how everything went down at a wedding.

I supposed because of my military training, my memory was impeccable. I could remember names like they were my own, and now that I had faces to match them with, they would be embedded in my mind. The details involving Kennedy would be fresh on my mind until I could get to my computer at work.

Rondo's mother offered us something to eat, and I knew there was no way I could eat anything this late. Instead, I grabbed a bottle of water and got comfortable on the couch. Shy sat next to me and said, "Welcome to the family. Whether it works out with Rondo or not, you being Ali's cousin makes you my cousin. That man has been my brother since we were eleven or so."

"Thank you, Shy, but Rondo and I will make it. I have no doubt about that."

He smiled and nodded repeatedly. "That's what I like to hear."

I smiled back as Rondo entered the room. I didn't say anything to him as he went to the kitchen and got a bottle of water from the fridge. I could hear him talking, but I remained quiet. Shy stood from his seat and joined them. Although I was supposed to be a part of the team now, I didn't approach them. The last thing I wanted to do was make Rondo uncomfortable.

As they talked quietly, I thought about my babies. Ali had assured me that they would be okay with Riley. Aina had made Sophie feel right at home, and Micah was happy to see Ali again. I could tell he was happy to know that Ali was his cousin. Aina immediately took them in as her cousins, too, although I knew she wasn't biologically Ali's daughter. We'd talked so much on the way here, and I really enjoyed getting to know him more. He and I had both been longing for family, and we found that in each other.

As I sat, playing a game on my phone, Rondo sat next to me. I gave him a soft smile and held my hand to his cheek. "I'm so sorry for just taking it upon myself to come here. I made you uncomfortable, and that wasn't my intent. If I had driven myself, I would leave. Since I didn't, I promise to stay out of your way."

He frowned at me, and that shit made my insides tremble in fear. It wasn't his usual mean mug. I could tell that this was really a frown. I stopped talking and sat back on the couch, pulling my hand away from his cheek.

"Dinalee, why would you need to stay out of my way?"

“Because I probably shouldn’t have come. You need this time with your baby. I was being selfish and disguising it as wanting to check on you. I mean... I wanted to check on you, but I wanted to see you more.”

He slowly shook his head as he reached out to grab my hand. “Quit tripping. I’m glad you’re here. I didn’t know how to feel about it at first, because I didn’t want you to see me grieve for my ex or feeling emotional and vulnerable. I also didn’t know how the authorities would take me having a woman when I just broke things off with Kennedy not long ago. But I realized that you being here makes everything better. Na, come here.”

I scooted closer to him, and he kissed my forehead. The perception the authorities would get about him had never crossed my mind. Being that he was in a recent custody battle and finding out that he and Sunni weren’t biologically related, would give him motive, and they could consider him a suspect if, upon further investigation, they ruled it a homicide. Him having another woman so quickly wouldn’t look good.

I slid my arms around him and hugged him tightly, then kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry about Kennedy. Had it been my ex, I would be upset about it, too, regardless of how much he gets on my nerves. So I sympathize with you. You don’t have to hide your feelings because I’m here. If I’m gonna be yours, it’s my job to learn to understand you.”

He licked his lips as he stared at me. We hadn’t really solidified our status, although we’d talked about being together. As far as I was concerned, he was my man. I had no other options, nor did I want any. He was the man I wanted.

“Thank you, baby. It’s my job to understand you too, and I do. You weren’t being selfish. I can understand that you wanted to make sure I was good, and that you wanted to see me. I always wanna see you too. That’s the beast we will soon overcome when I move closer.”

He leaned over and kissed my lips for the first time since I’d been here, and I nearly melted in his arms. Knowing that he understood me in such a short amount of time, had me ready to give him all of me. When he pulled away, I couldn’t take my eyes away from his, despite the yawn that was trying to escape me. My adrenaline had been keeping me going, but there was no way I would last much longer.

“Get some rest, baby. You can sleep in my bedroom.”

I gave him a slight smile as he stood and led me to his bedroom. When we entered, he said, “Excuse the laundry. I hadn’t gotten to it yet.”

“It’s cool. Thank you.”

I turned to him to find him staring at my ass. As I went to his arms, he roughly pulled me to him, and I swore I came on myself. His lips met mine once again, and his hands found my ass and squeezed. The way he cupped my ass cheek, I just knew he was tryna juice it. His fingertips had slid near the jackpot, and I almost guided him there. I was pretty sure he didn’t need guidance though. He’d intentionally missed the mark to tease me so I could beg for more.

Normally, that wasn’t something I did. I didn’t beg for shit. I took what I wanted. But with as fine as Rondo was, I’d get down on my fucking knees, begging him please. As he pulled away from me, I followed him for at least six inches. He licked his lips and said, “You acting like you want a nigga, girl.”

I stared at him as I blinked slowly. “Surely you can see how hard I’m trying to get you to drop these jeans.”

“Mm. I’m gon’ drop this shit soon enough. In the meantime, I need to smoke. If I don’t, everybody in there gon’ get the best porno they’ve ever seen. Yo’ walls ain’t gon’ be safe around a muthafucka like me,” he said as he slid his hand between my legs and grabbed my pussy.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as my body shivered from his words. I was doing my best to gather my composure, but seeing my struggle, Rondo couldn’t let me be. He leaned in closer and kissed my ear. “Mm. This fat shit gon’ get a workout as soon as I get to her. She gon’ be sweating out all them calories right here on this weight bench.”

“Rondooo...”

“Shit, don’t be saying my name like that. You want yo’ nosy ass cousin investigating a murder?”

“Please, kill my shit. Fuck!”

I pulled my shirt over my head as he stared at me. The buildup was about to take me the fuck out. As I reached to take off my bra, he stopped me. “Not right now, baby. I promise I’m gon’ get to it though. I’m glad to see you ain’t scared to throw that pussy at me though. I promise I’m gonna catch the assist and dunk the fuck out of it. Just wait until gametime, baby girl. Can you do that for me?”

I wanted to throw a fit... have a whole ass tantrum. Instead, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. After I nodded, he kissed my lips. “Get some rest. You gon’ need that shit.”

When he walked out of the room, I stomped the floor, tempted to finger fuck myself at this point. I knew he wouldn't fuck me with all these people in the house, especially his mama, but shit. His ass didn't have to tease me the way he did. The way he grabbed me, he might as well had snatched my damn soul through my pussy. I couldn't even focus on anything else now.

Just as I was about to lie down, there was a scream. I quickly opened the door to see Rondo run into his daughter's room. I couldn't imagine how she was feeling. I still had my mother. Although I didn't see her often, she was still very much alive. I could call her whenever I wanted to hear her voice. Sunni no longer had that luxury, and my heart hurt for her.

When I got to her doorway, Rondo was holding her as she cried against his chest. I walked away and went to the front room with the guys. They stopped talking when they saw me. I glanced around to see Rondo's mother still in the kitchen, so I turned to go to her instead. She seemed to be cleaning up, so I wanted to be sure she didn't need any help.

As I walked in, she looked up at me and gave me a slight smile. "Ms. Cheryl, do you need help with anything?"

"If you don't mind, could you hold the pot while I get the food into this container?"

"Sure."

I went to her and grabbed the pot, tilting it so she could scrape the rice into the Tupperware. "So, how did you and Rondo meet?"

"At a gas station in Beaumont. I noticed his boots and wanted to know where he'd gotten them. I just wanted to talk to him."

She chuckled as I smiled at her. She was a beautiful woman, but Rondo didn't look a thing like her. He must've looked like his father. "Do you have any kids?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have two... an eight-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter. She'll be thirty-five on her next birthday."

She laughed and said, "Shavozz was the same way. I swore that girl was born an adult. Have you met her yet?"

"No, ma'am, I haven't. Is she going to be here tomorrow... rather today?"

"Yes. She said she and her mother-in-law were going to head this way in a few hours."

I nodded as she scraped the last of the rice out of the pot. I took it to the sink to wash it as she said, "I'm surprised Rondo is cool with you being here. He's usually private until he's been around someone for a while. He must

really like you, Dinalee.”

I smiled slightly. “I kind of invaded his space. He didn’t know I was coming. He was uncomfortable with me being here at first. I didn’t think about how he would react to me being here. I just wanted to see him and make sure he was okay. So I’m glad he understood the place I was coming from with just popping up on him.”

She nodded repeatedly. “Well, I’m gonna go to bed. I’m worn out. I want to make sure I’m rested enough to cook breakfast for everyone in the morning.”

“I’ll be able to help you. What time are you getting up?”

She glanced at her cell phone, and said, “Probably in the next four hours. Whew.”

I chuckled slightly. I knew exactly how she felt. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Once I finished drying the pot, I headed back to the front with the guys and said, “I have to get some sleep, even if it’s for a couple of hours.”

“Okay. Good night,” Ali said.

The other guys just kind of nodded. I assumed they wouldn’t be sleeping, until I saw Seneca stand from the couch and lay on the floor. Jungle stared at him for a moment, then looked away and began talking to Ali, Jericho, Chad, and Shy. Some shit was up between them. Whatever it was, it must have been heavy.

“Good night.”

I made my way down the hall to Rondo’s bedroom and glanced into his daughter’s bedroom as I walked by. He was in bed with her, holding her in his arms, sound asleep. I was just happy that they were both resting. Hopefully, when I got to Rondo’s bed, I would be able to do the same.

CHAPTER 11

RONDO

“Come on in, Rondo,” Ms. Sherry said after opening the door for Sunni and me.

When I walked inside, I saw papers and pictures all over the coffee table. She must’ve been trying to get things together for her obituary. “Ms. Sherry, I’m sorry about Kennedy. That literally knocked the wind out of me. Although we weren’t getting along, I would never want anything like this to happen to her,” I said, briefly thinking about how I had given Jungle my permission to take her out.

That was anger and hurt speaking. There was only one thing I was happy about, and that was that no one I knew was responsible for her death. Sometimes, karma made a quick visit, and I truly believed that Kennedy was suffering because of her actions against Jungle and me. Neither of us had done a thing to warrant her hate.

However, knowing that she wasn’t acting alone had softened me for a while. The more I thought about it, I became hard again. Even if another nigga was calling the shots, I didn’t understand what that had to do with me. Her rage and anger toward me were uncalled for. There was no reason for it. I was good to her, especially the second time around. The first time I cheated on her when I found out she was cheating on me.

I had to get revenge. When I broke up with her, I told her that I’d fucked somebody else too. *If she could do it, I could do that shit better.* That was what I’d told her before I broke up with her. Not only did I sleep with someone else, but it was someone she knew. They weren’t best friends or anything like that. They didn’t even really hang, but I knew that they knew each other. They’d had a couple of classes together. I was petty as fuck back

then and still had a little bit of that in me.

“I know, baby. Have a seat.”

I frowned slightly. I was just planning to drop Sunni off so I could get back to Dinalee, but something in my heart propelled me to do as she said. After hugging Sunni and getting her situated in her room so she could get more rest, she came back out and sat next to me.

“Before she died, she called me.”

I nodded. I supposed she was trying to come clean with everyone and make peace before her demise. “She called me too,” I responded.

“Did she tell you anything about Sunni’s biological father?”

My eyebrows lifted, and Ms. Sherry cowered some. “Naw. She didn’t. What did she tell you?”

“She didn’t give me a name. She just said that not long after she got pregnant, he got locked up. Her baby deserved a father that would love her unconditionally. Although y’all weren’t together, she knew you would be that man that would love her more than anything. She said she hated that she didn’t tell you sooner and that it came out in a fit of rage. Her rage had nothing to do with you but the situation she found herself in. She took that out on you.”

I took a deep breath and slowly shook my head. I wondered if this nigga Leon was actually the baby’s father. I truly believed he was the one that had killed her. The police needed to check into that shit. I was more than sure he was back in Texas by now. “I hate things ended the way they did. I truly believe that had I not seen her at that wedding, I still wouldn’t know. I trusted her.”

Truth was, had I not been at that wedding, she would still be trying to fuck around with Jungle and probably would have ended up dead anyway. I was positive her mother didn’t know the details of that.

“I know you did. You were good for her. She said she hated that she let things get out of hand. I don’t know what she was referring to. I just hope that you will let Sunni keep coming over to spend time with me. I know it’s a four-hour drive, so sometimes, maybe I can come to y’all.”

“I would never keep her from you. You’re her grandmother, and she loves you. If you need anything, let me know.”

“I’m just trying to get this over with. It’s too soon to have her services this weekend, so I’ll probably wait until next weekend.”

“Okay. I’ll let Sunni stay until afterward. I know you can probably use

the company. I'll be calling to check on y'all every day until then."

I kissed Ms. Sherry's cheek. She was always nice to me. Kennedy was her only child, so I knew this was tearing her apart. She wrapped her arms around my waist and took a deep breath, clearly trying to reel her emotions back in. When she pulled away, I gave her a slight smile. "Call me if you need anything, Ms. Sherry."

"Okay, baby. Be careful."

I nodded and headed out to get back to Dinalee. When I left, she was still asleep. I woke up about three thirty this morning to get Sunni here so I could get back earlier. I knew I would need a nap though. I was tired as fuck. I'd basically only taken a cat nap when I got in bed with Sunni. Probably only slept an hour or so.

After getting to the interstate, I called Dinalee. She answered, sounding groggy as hell. "Good morning."

"Good morning, baby girl. I'm heading back from Mobile. I should be there by noon."

"Okay. Your mom and I are cooking breakfast for everyone. Shavozz called and said she and Mrs. Anissa were on their way."

"Okay. I can't wait to see you."

"I can't wait to see you either. Be careful."

"A'ight. Call me when you get done cooking."

"Okay."

She ended the call, and I cranked up my music. As tired as I was, I couldn't listen to the R&B music I loved. I found my workout playlist, and when Moneybagg Yo blasted through the speakers, talking about how he had time today, I knew I would make it back to Lafayette in one piece. That shit always got me hype. Sleep was crawling all over me, so I cranked the music up even louder and rapped along with him until my adrenaline carried me home.

AFTER GREETING EVERYONE, I WENT STRAIGHT TO MY BEDROOM TO GET THE blunt I rolled yesterday. I needed that shit more than ever. I didn't get a chance to smoke last night, because my baby needed me. Dinalee was in my bed, knocked the hell out, so I let her sleep.

When I got to the backyard, Jungle was sitting out there talking on the phone. He gave me a head nod then stood from his seat and slapped my hand. Going back to the call, he said, "I'll call you back, baby. I love you."

I smiled slightly. He and Jericho's sister had really hit it off. Love looked good on him. He didn't frown half as much. He looked over at me as I lit my shit and said, "Hell yeah."

He pulled one from his pocket and fired up too. I chuckled. "You wasn't gon' smoke if I didn't?"

"I didn't know if you hit the trees, man. I knew you smoked though."

"Hell yeah. I need this shit right now."

"Yep. You gon' need it even more in a minute."

I frowned at him as Shy, Chad, Ali, Seneca, and Jericho made their way outside. They'd found some shit out. Before Ali could say a word, Dinalee joined us. She came right to me and slowly sat on my lap then took the blunt from me and took a pull. *Fuck*. She had my dick about to show the fuck out in front of everybody.

"So, Leon was the one had her doing all this bullshit. He worked for Sunni's biological father."

Chad rubbed his hand down his face as Ali talked. I glanced around at everyone else, trying to catch a clue. Everyone looked stressed and already irritated about what Ali had to say. "Nigga, what else?"

"You remember the shit we were defending Chad about?" Shy asked.

"Yeah. DJ kept me in the loop."

"Sunni is Knowledge's biological daughter. Leon was supposed to be looking out for Kennedy while he was locked up. Instead, he was blackmailing her into doing his dirty work. Leon is from Houston and knows about the Patterson family. His father and Jungle's father had beef back in the day, and Ice had him killed. This had nothing to do with Slice, although he was indeed her cousin. It was definitely about retribution, and the money involved made it easier to convince Kennedy to do that shit."

I stared at Shy, completely confused as Chad said, "Even in death, this muthafucka just keep coming up. I'm just glad we don't have his ass to worry about. We just have to find Leon before he tries to come for any of us, especially Jungle. It doesn't seem like he was following Knowledge's agenda against me. He was trying to execute his own."

I slowly shook my head. "So is Sunni in danger?"

"I don't believe so," Ali said. "But we gon' keep eyes on y'all to be safe"

until we can get to that nigga. It shouldn't be too hard since he lives in Beaumont. I don't think he gives a damn about anything involving Knowledge except Kennedy. He was threatening to reveal to you that Sunni wasn't your biological daughter, and that was how he kept her doing what he wanted her to do. Once she took away his bargaining chip, he couldn't fuck with her about it no more, and she refused to do anything else."

"And since Knowledge is dead, he no longer needed Kennedy. The court subpoenaing his DNA only made shit worse. He has a second identity just like Knowledge did. That shit would have been uncovered had he sent in that DNA," Shy added.

"How did y'all find all this shit out?"

They all looked over at Dinalee as she took another pull from my blunt. When she exhaled, she said, "I can't tell you how I found it, but just know his days are numbered. If y'all don't get to him first, someone else will. It's just a matter of time. He owes money to quite a few people under his alias, Battle Wicks."

I wrapped my arms around her. However she was able to get that information, I could now understand why Ali needed her. She was able to get intel inaccessible to them. "So in the meantime, what y'all need me to do?" I asked.

"Nothing. Concentrate on your daughter. We gon' handle this," Ali said.

I nodded as I took a pull from my blunt then stared up at Dinalee. "You look tired. Let me finish this, and we can take a nap. When are y'all leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. I need to get back to my babies."

I nodded. I knew she missed them. I'd just gotten back from taking Sunni to Mobile, and I missed her already. "Okay. Well, I need to spend some time with you today."

When I looked up, I noticed the guys had walked further away from us, but Jungle was still seated. He was refusing to be close to Seneca right now, and I knew that was probably best. Once we finished our blunt, Dinalee stood from my lap, and I grabbed her hand, escorting her inside. Shavozz was standing there about to exit.

"What's up, sis? You've met Dinalee?"

"Hey. I have. How are you?"

"I'm okay, considering. I just need a nap."

"Okay. We'll talk later."

She kissed my cheek then smiled at Dinalee. Once we entered my room, I

closed and locked the door. I didn't want to be disturbed. Dinalee grabbed her phone and started "Simple Things" by Miguel. I could see it now. That would be our song. I pulled her to me and kissed her lips as she slid her hands under my shirt. When she pulled away from me, she pulled it over my head and stared at my tatted chest.

She traced the wings on each side with her fingertips as I lowered my hands to her ass. Lifting her head to stare up at me, she bit her lip. She knew that look was gon' set me off. Sliding her hand up my chest and neck until she reached my beard, she grabbed ahold of it and roughly pulled me to her. I popped her ass and gripped it then lowered my head to her neck.

Apparently, Dinalee didn't give a fuck about who was in this house. If she didn't give a fuck, then neither did I. I slid my hands inside her leggings and gripped her ass as she released a soft moan. It was like we were picking up from where we left off last night. It had to be an act of God that kept me from penetrating all three holes. She didn't know it yet, but she was gon' get some shit she didn't even realize she was asking for.

"Dinalee? We supposed to be taking a nap."

"Mm hmm. You can rock me right to sleep," she said as she grabbed my dick through my shorts.

I bit my bottom lip for a moment and whispered, "Fuck."

I started pulling her shit off, not bothering to act like I didn't want to be buried in her shit immediately. There would be no slow lovemaking right now. I wasn't in the mood to tease her and engage in foreplay. I needed to feel her walls wrapped around me. With as juicy as her ass was, I knew she had some slick shit between her thighs.

By the time I'd gotten her leggings off, she'd unfastened her bra. I slid my hand over one of her breasts and brought my mouth to her nipple. I swore she had some pretty ass titties. I sucked one then circled it with my tongue as I gently pinched the other one between my fingertips. I began walking, causing her to backpedal to the bed. When she fell to it, I pulled my shorts and drawers off simultaneously then got a condom from the nightstand.

While I strapped up, she pulled her panties off and spread her legs for me to see the priceless treasure I was about to fuck up. I didn't feel like I was capable of being tender at this moment, and I knew she knew that too. I was too tired to be taking my time, but I wasn't too tired to give her what she wanted... what we both needed.

I slid in bed with her and right into her paradise. She sucked in air and her

eyes fluttered closed as I stared at her. “Fuck,” I whispered as I began stroking her slowly.

She was tight as hell. As my pace quickened, she placed her hand on my ass, pulling me deeper and giving me permission to take it however I wanted to. I slid my hand to her throat as I began hitting her with more force. Whimpers were escaping her as I continued to stare into her soul, knowing that she would be everything I needed.

Releasing her neck, I grabbed her leg and pushed it to her shoulder and commenced to digging her shit out like I was trying to clear a blockage. “Ahh fuck,” she said as she lifted her other leg and wrapped it around my waist.

“Hell yeah. This that good shit, girl.”

“Yes, Rondo. Fuck me, baby. I’ve been dying... for this.”

I lowered my face to her neck and softly bit the flesh beneath her earlobe. It had been a little over a month since I’d had sex, but it felt like it had been years. The way Dinalee’s pussy was squeezing my shit, I knew I wouldn’t last long. That was just fine with me, because I was gonna pass out right after. I was almost sure she would too.

Pulling out of her, I flipped her over and reentered her, watching her cream coat my dick. I yanked her hips upward and began winding my dick into her, trying to savor the feeling. As I thrust harder, she buried her face in the pillow. I popped her ass a couple of times as she hissed, then I had no choice but to accept my plight. “I’m about to nut. Fuck,” I whispered.

I was doing my best to hold out and wait for her, and thankfully, she said, “Me too... shit.”

When her walls started spasming around my shit, that did it. I fired off, and that shit had my toes cramping. As I hovered over her, I said, “Now that we’ve fired off that aggression, I can take my time later tonight and give you everything you deserve. You gon’ have to stop pressuring me, though, or you ain’t gon’ be able to walk when it’s time for you to leave.”

I rolled off her as she turned her head to smile at me. “That was everything I needed to take the edge off. I’m gonna give you the treatment you deserve too. Now get some sleep.”

I kissed her lips then pulled off the condom, dropping it in the wastebasket next to the bed, then pulled her in my arms and fell asleep before my head could hit the pillow.

CHAPTER 12

DINALEE

“So this is where you fish?”

“Yep. Right here. It’s peaceful, and it gives me time to myself to think and put things into perspective.”

I nodded as we rode on his side-by-side ATV. When we woke up, we were sticky as hell. However, we decided to just wash up. We could shower later. Since we would be outside for a while, I knew we would have to shower again anyway. We’d been riding for the past hour, just talking and learning more about one another.

I kept zoning out though, because all I could think about was how his dick had touched every part of me earlier. I slept like a fucking rock and didn’t want to wake up. Although it only lasted for about fifteen to twenty minutes, I was good with that. We were both physically and mentally drained. So, if his sex at that moment was explosive, I could only imagine what it would be like later and after everyone left.

Most of them would be heading back later. It was only five, and Beaumont was only an hour and a half away. Chad and Shy said they would be leaving by seven. Jungle had a little further to drive, so he left around the same time we did. Plus, I could tell being around Seneca without fucking him up was taking every ounce of restraint in his body.

Seneca seemed to be begging him for forgiveness just from his gaze. According to Ali, Jungle had known Seneca the longest out of everyone there, so his betrayal hit him hard. I had no idea that Jungle was a kingpin. Well... a recently retired kingpin. So it was in his nature to eliminate problems permanently, no matter who it was. I didn’t know why he was practicing restraint with Seneca, but I supposed it wasn’t for me to know.

This morning, while Rondo was gone, I called the office and had my superior work some magic for me, since I knew it was pertinent we got the information as quickly as possible. When it came to our families, we made exceptions. After explaining to him about what was going on, but disguising it as Ali's problem, he gave me what I needed. I loved him for that, because he knew that shit wasn't black and white all the time. We looked out for each other and would step slightly over the line to help one another.

"So, since you're leaving tomorrow, I think I'm going to go to Beaumont too. I just have to talk to my baby and make sure she's good. I wanna look at possible places to live while I'm out there."

I turned to him and smiled. I couldn't wait until he and Sunni could move. I supposed he wouldn't have to wait too much longer since Kennedy had been killed. He was trying to wait on the custody hearing to be wrapped up. I was positive he would be hearing from his attorney soon about what the next steps would be.

He grabbed my hand and caressed it as he drove, then asked, "Are you any good at braiding?"

"Yeah, I do okay."

"Do you think you can braid mine in two braids?"

"Yeah. Absolutely."

He smiled at me as I glanced at his head. He only had hair on top. The sides and back were faded. I didn't want to braid it though, because I wanted to grab that shit later, but I knew I had time for that. I couldn't wait to have him sitting between my legs. We were probably a mile away from his house, when he stopped the ATV and turned to me. He knew what his gaze did to me, but here he was, in these woods, acting like I wouldn't spread my legs right here on this side-by-side.

"You're more than I originally thought you would be. I know I said that I wouldn't move fast, but damn. It's barely been two weeks, and I want to claim you as mine. You dropped everything to come see about me and my daughter. You have babies of your own to see after, but you made me a priority. I promise to make you a priority too."

He bit his bottom lip as he pushed my hair from my shoulder. "All this long hair, thick ass body, beautiful brown eyes, man... you got me. All of me. I ain't never been so ready for something in my life. The crazy part is, this is the one thing I was sure I wasn't ready for. You showed me differently, and I don't even know how you did that shit."

He continued playing in my hair, and a smile graced my lips. The way he said hair was sexy to me. Shit, the way he talked period. That country dialect was about to make me lose myself in these woods. Besides his eyes and the way he stared at me, his voice was another aphrodisiac. He had me readier than a fresh Duracell battery.

I leaned into him, and he laid his lips on mine, the smell of marijuana ever present. I hadn't smoked in a while, but damn if I didn't want to be a part of everything he did. My tongue invaded his space, and before I knew it, he'd pulled me astride his lap. "We have a chemistry that can't be denied. I don't know if I could begin to even exist without you now. Shit, this was fast," he mumbled as he gripped my ass.

I knew exactly what he was feeling, because it felt like I'd been swept up in a whirlwind from day one. He was so expressive, and I loved that. "It was fast, but it feels so right, Rondo."

"Yep. Now come on before we inspire the woods to start talking. We don't need an audience out here."

I giggled as I slid off his lap. When I did, my phone started to ring. When I saw my mom's number, I started sweating under my boobs. I quickly answered. "Hey, Mami."

"Hola! ¿Qué pasa?"

"I'm in Louisiana, visiting my boyfriend," I said as I glanced at Rondo to see the smirk on his lips.

"Boyfriend? When did you get a boyfriend?"

"Not too long ago, but listen. I need to talk to you about something very important. Just to give you an idea, I met my first cousin the other day."

"What? Cousin? Who?"

"His name is Ali Joseph, and he's Camila's son."

She was quiet as hell. I had to check my phone to see if she was still on the line. "You there?"

"Yes. This is amazing. Camila has a son. Is she there?"

"No. She died about six months ago."

"Oh no. I wish we could've reconnected. I haven't seen her since I was eleven."

"I know. I'll call you back when we get to the house. There are some things I need to ask you. Stay by the phone, okay?"

"I will."

She ended the call quick as hell. That made me believe that she knew

more than what she'd told me. "You okay?" Rondo asked.

I turned to him and smiled. "Yeah, I'm okay. My talk with her shouldn't last long, but it's definitely something that needs to be had. Are you familiar with everything Ali went through with his mom?"

"Vaguely."

"Yeah. He told me some things about her, but I know that was probably only the tip of the iceberg. I feel like my mom knows more about her than she's letting on. I want to be able to tell Ali about things he doesn't know, to maybe give him more closure."

Rondo nodded. "I'm sure he'll be glad for it. While you talk, I'll hang out with everyone else until they leave," he said as he approached his backyard.

"Okay. I'll just stay out here."

He leaned in and kissed my lips then turned the engine off. Once he got off and went inside, I sat still for a moment, in the quietness of nature. Despite the reason I was here, spending time with Rondo had been everything I imagined it to be, plus some. I was too happy that he would be heading to Beaumont this weekend as well. That would give us even more time together.

Taking a deep breath, I called my mama back. I was starting to regret even telling her that I wanted to talk about this to her. I almost didn't want to know now, because I was on such a high from being with Rondo. As her phone rang, I was hoping that she didn't listen and had stepped away, but I wasn't so lucky. "Hello?"

"Hey. I didn't get to ask last time. How are you?"

"I'm okay. So you met Camila's son. What is he like?"

"He's nice. He owns his own private investigation firm. He's doing well for himself it seems. I've only known him a few days. We've talked quite a bit though."

"I have a feeling that he told you some things about Camila."

"Yes. He said that she was a whore, basically. But what shocked me was that he said Abuelo and Abuela sold her to his father. Is that true?"

She remained quiet for a while, like she'd done earlier. That let me know that it most likely was. How could a parent sell their child? They didn't sell her to a loving family who would take care of her. They sold her to a man! A man that was a drug dealer. Who did that? In my opinion, it took a level of evilness to accomplish something like that. I couldn't imagine selling Sophie to some man. He could have killed her.

"It's true. They were like her pimps. She wasn't bringing them enough

money in Puerto Rico. They were about to do the same to me, but Camila stopped them. It was her idea to go to Florida so they could get more money. Once they sold her, we came back to Puerto Rico. She did that to save me. I will never forget how she sacrificed herself for me.”

It was my turn to be quiet. While I wasn’t trying to paint Camila in a bad light, I still thought it was fucked up how she treated her son, even after he was an adult. She needed healing and never sought it. I knew she had to be traumatized by the actions of her parents and having to sleep with various men for money to support the family, but at some point, she had to have felt like she could do better than what she was doing.

Hearing Ali say that she continued to do that, even when she didn’t have to, was mind-blowing. After all the neglect and abuse, he was still there for her, trying to take care of a woman that never took care of him. Maybe she was at a point in her life that she was beyond help. She probably felt like she didn’t know any other way to be. I couldn’t judge her, although I really wanted to.

“I’m glad you have good memories of her, Mama. Why did you paint out my grandparents to be something they weren’t though?”

“By the time I got older, they weren’t who they once were. They’d changed.”

“As long as they never went back for Camila, in my opinion, they didn’t change. Ali said they lived in Florida until he was eight years old. Why didn’t they go back for her?”

“Because the man they sold her to married her. He wouldn’t have just let her leave. She was his.”

I slowly shook my head. They ruined her. She probably felt unwanted and unloved by her family. I could imagine that she felt all alone in this world, a lot like Ali felt when I met him. I was sure Camila was worse, because Ali said she didn’t have friends either. He at least had the Berottes. “Ali suffered a lot, Mami.”

“I can imagine he did if she didn’t change what she was doing.”

“He took care of himself nearly all his life. I honestly don’t know how he made it. He should’ve either been dead or in jail somewhere. He’s defied the odds.”

“Well, that’s good. I have to go, bebé.”

“Okay. Talk to you soon. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She ended the call. I felt like this conversation had triggered her. I wished she would have just told me the truth to begin with. I supposed she thought I would never find out any differently. She didn't seem to be surprised that Camila had a son. It was like she'd already known. She didn't ask to meet him or anything. There was still some shit she wasn't saying, but again, I wasn't sure if I even wanted to know now.

As I headed to the back door, Rondo was walking out with a plate of food. When I saw those red beans, rice, and fried chicken, I was ready to fall on my face in worship. "That looks and smells amazing."

"Mrs. Anissa and my mama cooked."

"I have to eat inside so I can talk to the ladies for a little while."

I walked inside to see Mrs. Anissa smile. I'd met her earlier this morning. She was really sweet. I could tell Ms. Cheryl was analyzing me a bit. Rondo was vulnerable right now, and I knew she was just trying to look out for him. She wasn't rude or anything, but I could see her watching me when she thought I wasn't paying attention to her.

When I sat at the table, Mrs. Anissa and Shavozz joined me. I smiled at them, then blessed the food. When I opened my eyes, Rondo kissed my head, then went and sat with the fellas. "Dinalee, Rondo seems so happy. He's smiling more than I've ever seen. He normally wears a scowl on his face unless he's laughing at one of my crazy children," Mrs. Anissa said.

I smiled as I felt my cheeks heat up. "I hope I'm the reason for that. I can't wait to meet the family. We're supposed to be having dinner at Ali's Saturday evening, so I should be at Sunday dinner, along with my children."

"How many kids do you have?" Shavozz asked.

"Two, a boy and a girl."

She nodded and asked, "How old?"

"My son is eight, and my daughter is five."

"Oh, okay. I have a son who's a little older than your son, that was why I asked. He's almost twelve. Sunni is a little older than him."

"Oh, he's probably too old to play with Micah. He's a big boy," I said then chuckled.

She did the same. As I ate my food, I couldn't help but close my eyes. "Mrs. Anissa, this is delicious."

"Thank you, baby. I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"Shavozz, when are you due?"

"Girl, in three and a half months. It can't come fast enough. It's getting

hot, and this belly isn't becoming any easier to carry.”

“Do you know what you're having?”

“Yes. I found out yesterday. I'm having another boy. So I'm out of luck for having a little girl, because this is it.”

Mrs. Anissa giggled. “So she says. She originally said she probably wouldn't have another baby since her youngest son was already ten years old when she and DJ met.”

Shavozz flinched in her seat and her face turned red. “Are you okay?”

She slowly shook her head. “I'm okay. Mama Nissa, I'm gonna hurt your son.” She turned back to me as I frowned slightly. “He has the remote,” she said.

I was still confused for a moment until I realized what she was speaking of. I chuckled as she flinched again and closed her eyes. I giggled more as I thought about Rondo having that kind of power over me. That shit wouldn't work out. I would leave wherever I was to find his ass and fuck the shit out of him.

Shavozz stood from the table and made her way to the bathroom. When I saw her make a phone call before going inside, I laughed more. “My son is so nasty,” Mrs. Anissa said. “They think I don't know that she has one of those remote vibrator things that she wears. She acts like she doesn't like it, but if she didn't, she wouldn't put it on.”

When she rolled her eyes, I couldn't help but laugh. Ms. Cheryl joined us at the table with a small bowl of food. She smiled slightly at me as I continued to enjoy my food. I needed to finish so this could settle on my stomach. I had other activities on my mind that wouldn't work out well with a full stomach.

CHAPTER 13

RONDO

“**A**re you sure about Dinalee, sha? Before you get defensive, I’m just asking. She seems like a nice young woman, but you are moving really fast.”

“I’m sure, Ma. Beyond sure. Don’t compare this to me and Kennedy. Kennedy didn’t become my girlfriend until I found out she was pregnant. So that was different. I was trying to do right by her. In my mind, I felt like if she was good enough for me to sleep with, then she was good enough to be my girl so we could raise our child together. Obviously, that was the wrong decision.”

“I understand. I just don’t want to see you hurt again, especially so soon after Kennedy.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, I feel so strongly for her until it’s made this entire situation bearable. I don’t know how I would be handling Kennedy’s death without her presence in my life.”

“If you’re sure, then that’s all that matters, baby. I really hope for the best. Are you in Beaumont?”

“Yes, ma’am. I just pulled up to Dinalee’s place.”

“Okay. Talk to you when you get back, baby.”

I ended the call and glanced over at Sunni. She needed a break from her Momo’s house. She said she felt like she was suffocating there. That was why I didn’t make it to Beaumont yesterday when Dinalee and Ali left. I had to make a trip to Mobile to pick up my baby. I told Ms. Sherry that I would bring her back Sunday evening, which was tomorrow. Sunni said it was like her mom was all over that house... in every direction she turned.

She smiled at me and asked, “Are we gonna get out?”

I smiled back as I realized just how grown up she was becoming. She was almost my height, and I was six feet even. The girl was growing like somebody had fertilized her ass. What bothered me the most though was that she was developing. I'd seen teenage boys watching her. If nothing else would have me making a trip to that jailhouse, it would be my baby, because hell naw.

After walking around the truck and opening the door for her, we made our way to the front door. "You said they're eight and five?" Sunni asked, inquiring about Dinalee's children.

"Yeah. So you'll be extremely interesting to them as a big kid."

She smiled then rang the doorbell. She always wanted siblings, but Kennedy had assured her that she wasn't having any more kids, and I had no intention of making a baby with a random woman either. As long as I was with Kennedy, she would have been an only child.

When the door swung open, Dinalee was standing there with a big smile on her face. I could see her disappointment when I couldn't leave with them yesterday, but she understood. Just the fact that she took off work to be with me had me feeling bad about disappointing her too. However, I wouldn't dare leave my baby hanging if I had a choice.

"Hey! Come on in!"

I smiled at Dinalee's excitement. She hugged Sunni, and I realized they were the same height. Sunni may have actually had an inch on her. She came to me and kissed my lips then stared at me with her big brown eyes. I gently swept her straight hair from her shoulder as I looked over the tight, distressed jeans she wore.

Her shoulders were bare, because she wore a tube top, but I wanted her whole body to be bare at this moment. Thursday night, I didn't even get a chance to have my feel of her. We both fell asleep on the couch. She was out first, and I refused to wake her up. Just when we thought we were going to be able to get some in Friday morning, Sunni called.

That lil taste from Thursday afternoon had worn off, and I was already in starvation mode, wishing I could get another sample of her goodness. *Damn!* I licked my lips as her face reddened slightly. She turned around as Sophie made her way down the hallway. "Mommy, how do I look?"

Baby girl had on her Sunday best with tennis shoes. I smiled then bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing. "Sophie, that is not what I took out for you to wear. Oh my God!"

Before she could respond to Dinalee, she noticed Sunni. Not saying a word, she walked closer to her and grabbed her hand. “Hi, I’m Sophie.”

“Hi. I’m Sunni.”

“Like the sun!”

“Yeah,” Sunni said with a chuckle.

“You wanna go to my room?”

Dinalee interrupted and said, “You are not going in there to play. We have to be to Ali’s house in an hour.”

“Mooommyyy,” Sophie whined.

“I’ll help her,” Sunni said, surprising me.

Sophie hopped up and down, suddenly feeling better with a huge smile on her face as Dinalee slowly shook her head. I chuckled as I watched her pull Sunni down the hallway to her room. Dinalee came to my arms and said, “I missed you.”

“I missed you more, baby.”

I kissed her head, loving the feel of her body against mine. One day, we would get time alone where we were both rested and could totally focus on each other. I couldn’t wait for that day to come. When she pulled away from me, she said, “Let me go help Sunni with her and make sure Micah is ready. She’ll have Sunni in there playing with dolls instead of getting dressed.”

I chuckled then smacked her ass as she walked away. Once I sat on the couch, Micah came to the front room with me. He had a darker complexion than Dinalee and Sophie. He’d clearly been passed Dinalee’s African genes over the Puerto Rican ones. However, he had her hair. I stood and shook his hand, then he sat next to me. “Hi, Mr. Rondo.”

“What’s up, man? How you been?”

“Good.”

“That’s good.”

He fidgeted slightly, and I knew he wanted to say something but was probably nervous about it. After observing him a little more, I asked, “Is there something you want to say to me? You don’t have to be scared.”

“You frown a lot.”

“I do, but I’m not mean. It’s just natural for me. I think it was more of me trying to make people think I was mean when I was younger so they wouldn’t mess with me.”

He nodded. “This boy at day care always messes with me. He called my mama the B word. We got into a fight.”

“Did you tell your mom?”

“No. I didn’t want her to know what he said.”

I nodded repeatedly. “I think it’s honorable of you to want to defend your mom’s name. Sometimes though, you gotta let people make a fool of themselves. You won’t be able to fight everybody.”

He looked down then back up at me. “I’m not going to let anyone talk about mi madre.”

I lifted my fist, gesturing for him to give me a fist bump. I didn’t want to tell him to fuck anybody up that disrespected his mother, because that would have only gotten him in more trouble. He was too young for that; plus, it would have only added more stress to Dinalee. I didn’t feel like we were at a point in our relationship where I could give her son that kind of advice.

He was young and seemed to be looking for a male role model or father figure. That let me know just how impressionable he would be. He’d probably take whatever I said as law. I had to be careful. In addition to that, his father was still in the picture, regardless of how often they saw or talked to him. We didn’t need those types of issues.

The rest of the time he sat there, we talked about things he liked to do, and he inquired about things I liked to do. He looked so interested when I talked about fishing and hunting. I was happy about the way we seemed to be bonding effortlessly.

When the ladies came back out, Dinalee had them looking like princesses. She’d even smoothed out Sunni’s edges. I wasn’t bad at doing her hair, thanks to YouTube, but Kennedy kept her hair looking nice and healthy. She always found different styles to put it in. That was one thing I never had a complaint about. She kept baby girl looking nice.

Seeing her smile and her hair looking better reminded me of that fact, and it made me sympathize even more with my baby. I was sure she missed her mama, but today, having a woman to care for her in a way similar to the way Kennedy did, had to have meant a lot to her. “We’re ready, Rondo.”

I smiled as Micah and I stood, taking them in. “All of you look beautiful.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rondo,” Sophie said as she held Sunni’s hand.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Sunni said.

Sophie looked up at her with a frown then looked back at me. “Mr. Rondo is your daddy?”

Sunni smiled down at her and said, “Yes.”

“Where’s your mommy?”

The smile fell from Sunni's face as Dinalee's lips parted. "Sophie, that's enough. Let's go."

"She died," Sunni said to her as tears fell down her cheeks.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I pulled my baby girl in my arms. Sophie looked like she wanted to cry too. She walked over to us as Dinalee tried to hold her back. "It's okay. Let her go," I said to Dinalee.

She came to us and hugged Sunni. "I'm sorry about your mommy."

Sunni gave her a slight smile. What Sophie asked Dinalee stunned me. "Is my daddy dead too?"

Dinalee shook her head rapidly. "No, baby."

"But I don't get to talk to him." She looked back over at Sunni and me and said, "Maybe you can be Sunni's mom, and Mr. Rondo can be me and Micah's dad."

Dinalee looked uncomfortable, so I said, "Whatever you want, Sophie. We can do whatever you want."

She ran to me and grabbed my hand with a smile as she stared up at me. "Come on, y'all. Let's go," I said, glancing at Dinalee.

Our kids were going through a lot. Hopefully, they would continue to have each other to lean on as Dinalee and I leaned on one another. We hadn't talked much about her ex-husband, but I was sure after Sophie's statement, we would be.

WHEN WE GOT TO ALI'S HOUSE AND HAD GONE IN, AINA AND SOPHIE screamed and hugged each other like they hadn't seen one another in years. We all laughed as they hugged. They'd only met this past Wednesday night when Dinalee accompanied Ali to Lafayette when Kennedy was killed. For some reason, the fact that she wasn't here kept entering my mind today. It was like everything that happened, I found a way to relate it to the fact that Kennedy was dead.

I didn't know why I didn't expect her death to bother me the way it was. We'd been a part of one another's lives for the past fourteen years or so. Just the thought that I had given Jungle permission to take her ass out bothered me more than a little bit. She was a woman that I once loved, and despite what she'd done to me and to our daughter, I couldn't forget that.

When the kids had calmed down and I introduced Riley and Aina to Sunni, Aina swept Sunni off to the bedroom with her and Sophie. It was like she was the big sister, and I truly believed she was eating up all the attention from the little ones. Micah glanced around, probably trying to figure out what he would get into. Unfortunately, there were no boys his age or even close to it in the family. I wanted to believe Shavozz's son, Dalen, was the closest.

After he settled on the couch with his tablet, Riley and Dinalee went to the kitchen, leaving Ali and me alone. He gestured for me to follow him. Once inside of what looked to be a man cave, he closed the door. "So, Jericho is going to stay on you and Sunni next week. If for some reason y'all aren't together, he'll stay on Sunni. When do you plan to move?"

"Probably within the next two weeks. I'd planned to look for places out in Cheek, Hillebrandt, and China. You know, close enough to make moves, but far enough to hunt and do whatever I wanna do outside."

"Okay. So Seneca has a plan that I believe will work. Jungle is the one in the most danger. Without him and Vegas knowing, I put bodies on him. Chad is watching during the daytime, and Seneca is taking the night shift. He's determined to get back in Jungle's good graces."

"I don't know. It may not be no coming back from that. Jungle seems pretty determined to avoid him. I was hoping there wouldn't be no shit in Lafayette."

"I think Seneca is even more determined. I just hope something gives to where he can make this right. What he did was fucked up, but his efforts to make things right are admirable."

"Did Kaysyn get her boudin?"

"Yeah. He brought it to her. I track his ass. I mean... I track everybody, but I pay more attention to his moves, even before that bullshit with Chelsea. Seneca has always been somewhat shady. I'm just glad we know why now."

I nodded. "How did Kaysyn respond to him?"

"He told me that she was happy for the boudin and actually hugged him. I don't know. I feel like her still being able to spend time with Jericka lightened the blow a bit. He even got to see Jericka, because she's with Kaysyn until tomorrow."

"Man, that's what's up. I know he's trying to give me space because of this shit with Kennedy, so I'll have to reach out."

"How are you doing with that?"

"I'm a'ight."

He just stared at me and nodded. I could tell he didn't believe me. "How are things with my kinfolk?"

"They're good, man. She's a good woman. I could tell that in a short amount of time. Her kids are searching for a dad though. Have you had a chance to check out her ex-husband?"

"Naw. I'm gonna download the software to your phone so you can do it for yourself. Have you given your job your notice yet?"

"I'm gonna give it to them Monday."

"That's what's up. Well, let's get out of here and see what Riley got for us."

"Okay. How is she?"

"Better. The morning sickness has passed. I uhh... I slid a ring on her finger last night."

"You did what, nigga?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. I asked her to marry me. I wanted that moment to be private. Being around her has made me a little more social than I used to be, and I feel like it's because she completes me, but for something that serious, I wanted it to be between me, her, and my princess."

I smiled as we left the room. Me being here at Ali's house was surreal. I never really felt like I totally fit in with everybody because I was so country and because Kennedy never wanted to come around. Now I knew why. I still couldn't believe Sunni was Knowledge's daughter. There was no need in telling my baby that since that nigga was dead anyway. I didn't know all the history about him, but I did know that he tried to kill Alexz and Chad at some point.

It was crazy that that same nigga was wreaking havoc in multiple families. I didn't even know how she got involved with someone like him, but I supposed I would never know now since neither of them were here to tell about it.

As I walked to the kitchen, I saw Dinalee and Riley plating food as they talked and laughed. However, the knock at the door caused me to pause. Ali went to it and welcomed Jericho and Whitney inside, along with Chad, Lexi, Shy, Brittany, and Seneca. I supposed this had turned into a Watchful Eyes dinner.

Once I spoke to all of them and we went to the front room until the food was ready, I heard the door open again. I didn't pay it too much attention since Ali didn't. That nigga was crazy attentive to everything. So was

Jericho. If neither of them seemed bothered, then everything had to be cool.

The women joined us up front, but none of them sat. They stood there huddled together for a while, but when they broke apart, Kaysyn was standing there. My eyebrows shot up, and Seneca's did as well. He bolted from his seat and practically ran to her. When he stood in front of her, she grabbed his hands.

"You probably want this to be done privately, but I was humiliated in front of everyone in that courtroom, so I want this to be done in front of them too. You wanted to explain your diagnosis and what has been going on in psychotherapy to me. I need the support, Seneca. I also asked Isaiah to come. He and Joyy should be arriving in a little bit."

Seneca licked his lips as he lowered his head. He looked back up at her and said, "Whatever it takes. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to explain, because you didn't have to."

Dinalee glanced at me, and I could see the tears in her eyes, along with the other women's. This would be a tough talk emotionally. I stood from my seat and went to her. When I got to her, she pulled my face to hers, and I kissed her lips. "Were you introduced to the ladies?"

"Yes. I'm a part of the crew, they said, but I had to tell them that I was actually a part of Watchful Eyes."

I chuckled. "I doubt you'll be in the field though, baby. So you can be a part of both."

"Don't underestimate my training, Rondo. I can fuck up shit with the best of 'em."

I slowly shook my head. "For some reason, I believe that shit."

CHAPTER 14

DINALEE

After who I assumed to be Isaiah and Joyy arrived, Joyy went right to Seneca and hugged him tightly. Riley informed me that Joyy was his sister on his and her mother's side. She was his sister on their father's side, so she and Joyy shared a brother but weren't related. She found out Seneca was her brother after coming into the family, kind of like Ali and I found out we were related.

Everyone coupled off as Seneca stood there frozen in front of Kaysyn. His eyes had never left her. I could see just how much he loved her and how desperate he was to have her again. I'd heard enough about her from the ladies and how she was a no-nonsense type of person but that she'd let her guard down with Seneca, only for him to burn her.

Once everyone quieted down, he began explaining himself. "Kay Baby, there is no one I love more than you, Jericka, and Ellington. I've always been protective and possessive, but I thought that was just my nature because of how I grew up. This thing with Chelsea wanting to establish a relationship with baby girl escalated into something beyond my control. I was diagnosed with intermittent explosive disorder."

He slid his hand down his face as Kaysyn's eyebrows lifted. It was like she was familiar with the mental illness. Seneca continued, and he was bringing tears to all our eyes. I noticed that he was literally trembling. "For me to talk about my issues like this in front of everybody should tell you how sorry I am and just how serious I am about us. I wouldn't dare be vulnerable like this in front of all these women. I'm working on me, baby. The anxiety I suffer from only makes it worse, the therapist said. I'm trying hard to get it under control."

She brought her hand to his cheek as the tears slid down her cheeks. “When I was superintendent in Atascocita, we had a couple of kids that suffered with the same illness. I understand it totally. However, there’s another person that suffered with it too. Luckey. That was why he smoked weed. It was to mellow him out. I promised him I wouldn’t say anything about it, but I felt like you needed to hear that right now.”

She wrapped her arms around him, and that man broke. He cried so hard, right here in front of all of us. I swore I was crying as much as he was. When he composed himself, she led him outside. All the women were wiping their eyes. “That was so beautiful,” Riley said as she rubbed her belly.

“I know, sis. I can’t stop the tears,” Whitney added as she rubbed her pregnant belly as well.

I was gonna have to be careful around these parts. Three women were pregnant in their circle of family. I had no intentions of joining the club anytime soon. Staring up at Rondo, I gave him a tight smile as he wiped my cheek with his thumb. “I’m gonna go check on the kids,” I said to him.

“A’ight.”

I needed a breather. Seneca had fucked up, but God, the way he hustled to get back to where he once was in life moved me. A man that could admit his faults and do something about it by seeking help was everything in my book. While I didn’t have all the details of what happened, I knew enough. That was why I really couldn’t stand Ramón’s ass. He’d called earlier today, saying that he just wanted to check in on the kids but didn’t have time to talk to them.

What Seneca did tonight reminded me of how I wanted him to do the same thing to save our marriage. He refused to humble himself and admit how he had fucked everything up. He’d made life harder for his kids and me, because he couldn’t seem to remember that we were a fucking priority.

After taking a deep breath and exhaling, I peeked into Aina’s bedroom to see them playing with dolls. Sunni was seated on the floor with them, combing a baby doll’s hair. Micah was in the corner of the room on his tablet. He looked up and saw me peeking in and smiled. I smiled back then made my way back to the room with the adults.

When I made it back to Rondo, he introduced me to Isaiah Berotte. “This man is the family counselor. He’s the oldest Berotte son and looks out for everybody in any way he can. He’s a counselor in real life, not just for the family.”

Isaiah chuckled. “Nice to meet you, Dinalee. Will you be at the family dinner tomorrow?”

I glanced over at Rondo, and he smiled, so I said, “Yes. I met your mom a couple of days ago. She’s very sweet.”

He smiled slightly and nodded. “That she is. This is my wife, Joyy.”

I shook Joyy’s hand as she smiled. I noticed she was really concerned about Seneca. When Riley called everyone to the dining area, I smiled up at Rondo. “You know, I forgot Kaysyn has a son close to Micah’s age. I think he’s nine or ten. They’ll be able to play tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’m happy about that. He won’t be bored,” I said with a slight chuckle.

“Get ready to turn up. You pledged, so you might get put on the spot.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Almost everybody pledged something. I’m a Que, and so is Chad, Shavozz’s husband, DJ, and Kaysyn’s two brothers, Axton and Arrow. We set it off every Sunday. Shy and Dylan are Kappas. You haven’t met Dylan yet, but he’ll be there tomorrow. He’s the youngest brother. Alexz, the youngest Berotte, and Dylan’s wife are AKAs, Kaysyn is a poodle, Riley is a Delta, and Joyy is a Zeta. Oh, and Isaiah is a Sigma. So, as you can see, you are in the right family, baby. We have a damn step show almost every Sunday.”

“So you telling me I have to stroll by myself?”

“Yep. Kaysyn doesn’t though.”

“What did she pledge? You said a poodle.”

“Sigma Gamma Rho.”

“Oh. Okay. I just can’t get over the fact that you’re saying I’m in the family. While I know we have so much more to get to know about each other, I’m excited to meet everyone.”

“I’m excited to introduce you to the ones you haven’t met. There are a lot of kids, too, so Sophie and Micah should be just fine. And... I’m excited to be able to say you’re in the family.”

He pulled me in his arms and stared at me like he was ready to tear me apart. “Rondo, it wouldn’t be cool if I pulled you in the bathroom. It’s my first time visiting and really meeting Riley. I didn’t talk to her but a second when I left the kids with her before Ali and I went to Lafayette. You can’t have me making a horrible first impression.”

He chuckled and nodded repeatedly. “Yeah. I better chill out because it’s

not beneath me to fuck anywhere. They'll just have to talk about me. I wouldn't even care. My dick would be satisfied though."

I bit my lip, trying to hold in my laughter. The crazy part was that I felt like he was serious as hell. I quickly stepped away from him and made my way to the kitchen as he laughed and went to chill with the guys.

HER LITTLE BARKS WERE WAY TOO CUTE, BUT I COULDN'T FOCUS ON SHIT BUT Rondo's tongue hanging out of his mouth. *Lord have mercy.* There was no way in hell he was leaving today without fucking me. I had yet to experience his tongue, and that shit had me leaking. It didn't help that he was staring at me nearly the entire time he stepped. That neck roll had my eyes rolling to the back of my head. Hell, I could barely breathe.

Once Riley joined them and did a little something, they sat back down. The Kappas made their way to the grass as Rondo sat next to me. Before I could say a word, Sophie asked, "What were y'all doing?"

"We were dancing," he said simply.

Trying to explain anything further than that would be draining. Sophie would ask question after question until she had an understanding of what he was talking about. She seemed okay with that explanation, then turned her attention to Shy and Dylan. I was able to meet the youngest Berotte brother and his beautiful family as soon as we got here.

As Rondo put his arm around me, I lost all focus when Shy and Dylan started that fucking shimmy. As I glanced around, I realized I wasn't the only woman that did. When their sister yelled at them, getting them to really cut up, I chuckled. She was loud and funny as hell. She was my kind of people. When the baby boy joined them, I laughed as Chad scooped him up.

"We ain't gon' be doing this shit every Sunday."

"As long as my daughter is barking, Foster gon' be shimmying them shoulders. Get used to it, nigga."

I laughed, as did everyone else. One thing they didn't do around here was bite their damn tongues. I was at home, for real. As if reading my thoughts, Mr. Sheldon said, "Did we forget that my precious grandbabies are outside?"

"Daddy, I don't know about precious. These kids are rotten," Alexz said.

"You know you've always been our baby, Alexz, but you are the *last*

person that can call anybody rotten.”

“Tell her again, Pop!” Chad yelled.

When Alexz ran up on him, he slung her over his shoulder. Everybody rolled their eyes and shook their heads as Alexz screamed, and Chad ran around the backyard with her. Once he put her down, all the little kids were hopping around Chad, begging for a turn. He seemed to eat that up. He took them two at a time, running all over the backyard. By the time he got to Sophie, he looked over at me, silently asking permission.

I giggled and nodded my head as Sophie hopped up and down with her arms extended in the air, begging to be picked up next. She was enjoying herself. Micah seemed to be enjoying himself as well. Kaysyn’s son was keeping him occupied.

“What’s up, everybody?” Seneca said as he walked around the gate.

Mr. Sheldon walked over to him and pulled him in his arms like he was the prodigal son. The people that didn’t see him last night also went to him and hugged him tight. I supposed he hadn’t been here in a while. When I saw the little girl run to him and jump in his arms, I smiled. She was so happy to see him. Kaysyn walked over to him, and they hugged. When he kissed her lips, I knew that they would eventually work things out.

He seemed so much happier than what he seemed when I met him in Lafayette. It was like he’d found his purpose again. However, Jungle still didn’t seem impressed. He’d actually been somewhat quiet today. I wasn’t sure what was going on with him, but everyone seemed to know it was something. Jericho had sat next to him, and they had been talking amongst themselves. Whatever the problem was, I wondered if it had to do with Leon Moore.

As I watched Alexz and Skyler do their thing, I hoped they wouldn’t put me on the spot as Rondo thought they would. Those thoughts all came to a stop when my phone rang, and I saw it was Ramón. I glanced at Rondo, then I rolled my eyes as I answered. “Hello?”

I regretted it immediately because the music was kind of loud in the background. “Dinalee? Where are y’all?”

“Why are you worried about it, Ramón?”

“Because I’m in town. I wanted to surprise you and the kids.”

“Why in the fuck would you want to surprise me? You still the same inconsiderate fuck up.”

I’d forgotten where I was just that quickly. Rondo was holding my hand

with a scowl on his face, and Ali wore the same frown. Alexz was standing in front of me with a smile on her face. “Hell yeah. I needed somebody around here that would be on the same wave as me when it came to fucking somebody up. Thank you, Rondo, with your greedy ass. I done found my new bestie.”

Had it not been for me really being pissed off, I would have entertained her. “I’m sorry,” I said to everyone and stood from my seat.

Ramón had me all the way fucked up. How dare he just pop up at my fucking place like we were a couple or some shit. When I got to the gate, I realized Rondo was right behind me. “Why are you really here, Ramón?”

“To see my kids. Why else would I be here? I thought we could sit like adults and talk about how things are between us, but I can see you’re still holding on to past bullshit.”

“You can’t be serious right now.”

“Are you going to come home or not?”

“When I get good and muthafucking ready. You should have called. I’m not about to alter our day because you decided to be a father today.”

I ended the call in his face. I was sure that he would be here more than one day. He could see the kids when we had time. “You okay?”

I turned to Rondo and nodded. He pulled me in his arms, and said, “Let me take you home so he can see the kids.”

I pulled away from him. “Fuck him. He’s on my timeline.”

“Well, I want to meet him before I have to leave to go home.”

Great. “Fine.”

I was angry. This muthafucka showed up and ruined my day. The kids probably wanted to see his ass though. I rolled my eyes as I headed back to the backyard to get the kids. When I walked over to Sophie, she already looked like she wanted to cry. “Your dad is in town.”

Her eyes brightened, and she turned to Aina, Ariana, Jericka, and Mariena, hugging them one by one like they were all her best friends already. When Rondo joined me with Micah, we headed to his truck. “I told Sunni I would be back in an hour or two.”

I nodded, wishing Rondo wouldn’t have given in to Ramón’s demands. I knew he was wanting to dive into this chapter of my life, because it was still somewhat cloudy to him, but I wasn’t ready for this shit. I wasn’t ready for him to meet my fuck up. Ramón represented the woman I used to be. I was so naïve back then.

I remained quiet for the ride as the kids chattered about finally seeing their bitch ass daddy. Rondo would only be here another couple of hours, and I had to spend it being pissed. He kept glancing at me as he drove. I hoped he didn't think I was pissed at him. I was a little irritated at him, but my anger was toward Ramón for interrupting our day.

When he turned in my driveway, I saw his ass sitting on the porch, like he knew I would come running. *Muthafucka*. I didn't wait for Rondo to open my door. I hopped right out of his truck. He would probably fuss about that, but I was hot as fuck right now. Ramón stood from his seat with a smile as Sophie ran to him screaming, "Daddy!"

I rolled my eyes as Micah ran to him too. When Rondo got to me, he said, "I know you pissed, but calm down so you don't go off in front of the kids."

I gave him the side eye. "This muthafucka gon' get whatever I got for him. If it were up to me, we wouldn't be here."

His eyebrows lifted slightly, but he didn't say anything as we approached the porch. When Ramón's eyes landed on Rondo, he set Sophie on her feet, and a slight frown made its way to his face. "Hello, Dinalee. Good to see you."

I rolled my eyes even harder. *Fuck him*. I didn't respond to him. Instead, I said, "This is my boyfriend, Rondo. Rondo, this is Ramón." As they shook hands, I said, "Bitch ass," under my breath.

Rondo clearly heard me, and I wanted to believe Ramón did as well. He reached out like he wanted to hug me, and I jerked away from him. "You said you were here to spend time with your children. What does that have to do with me?"

He turned to the kids and said, "When your mother unlocks the door, give us a minute to talk, then we'll go for a ride."

"Yay!" Sophie said.

I walked past them and unlocked the door. I was steaming, and I knew this would get worse, because he would say some bullshit once the kids weren't listening. Rondo went to the bar area and watched as the kids went to their rooms. Ramón glanced at him and asked, "Can we talk in private?"

"Hell no. You can say whatever you need to say in front of Rondo."

"I don't think my kids are any of his business. This is between me and you."

Rondo stood from his seat with a frown. I thought he was about to once again give Ramón what he wanted, but instead, he came close to me and

grabbed my hand. “Dinalee is my woman. That makes your kids my business. They’ll be spending more time with me than with you. No need to shoot slugs. I’m a better shot anyway.”

Ramón turned red as his nose flared. “And this is who you have my kids around?”

“She wasn’t talking to you, dude. I was. Address *me*. Although she told me, I can clearly see now that you were the problem. You wanna go ’round and ’round, I got time today. So you can either respect the fact that she’s moved on, or you can fly yo’ ass back to Ohio. You know damn well she wouldn’t endanger her children... children you haven’t seen in God knows when.”

Ramón looked scared as shit for a moment, but I was fuming. I was glad Rondo was standing up for me, but I didn’t want to even be in this fucking situation. “Ramón, if you are just here to cause drama, you can leave. You’re making me not even want to let the kids out of my sight, because I don’t trust you to bring them back home.”

He turned his attention to me. “I’m gonna get custody of my kids. You have no right to have them around another man without talking to me about it first.”

“You know what else I don’t have a right to do? I don’t have a right to be taking care of them alone, but I do that shit without complaint. You can get the fuck on with that bullshit. I’m the custodial parent, and as long as my kids aren’t in danger, I can do whatever the fuck I want. Now this is your last opportunity to spend time with them. I suggest you take it before it’s off the table.”

That man tried to step to me, and Rondo stood right in front of me. “You don’t wanna do that. I promise you don’t.”

He yelled for the kids, and Micah came out with a frown on his face. When he did, I knew he’d heard every word spoken. Sophie was right behind him looking just as sad. “I don’t want to leave Mommy,” she whined.

That shit only made him angrier. “I flew all the way from Ohio to see you two. Why don’t you want to spend time with me?”

“Because you’re being mean to Mommy!” Sophie yelled.

He took a deep breath and slid his hand down his face. “I’m sorry. Okay? I’m sorry,” he said, lifting his hands. “Can I at least take y’all for ice cream? We can come back when we’re done and play in the backyard. Please?”

“Okay,” Micah said hesitantly.

Sophie followed his lead, and they headed to the front door. “We’ll be back in an hour.”

As soon as they walked out, I stood at the door and watched them leave. I wasn’t worried about him keeping them. He didn’t want them when he was supposed to have them, let alone when he wasn’t supposed to have them. *Jackass*. Once they pulled off, I closed the door and turned to Rondo to see a frown on his face.

It wasn’t the frown I liked though. Apparently, he had some shit on his chest. I shifted my weight and put my hand on my hip. He came closer to me as I said, “Thank you for standing up for me.”

“Yeah. That’s my job, but you gon’ have to pipe that attitude down. You appeasing him gives you leverage.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Rondo, hol’on. I been dealing with that bitch for the past ten years, three years before we got married, five years on lock, and two years since we’ve been divorced. I know how to handle him. He doesn’t show up when he’s supposed to, but he wants me to be inconvenienced during my time. Fuck him. I’m not appeasing shit next time. He could have had the decency to call and say that he was coming. What if he would’ve come while I was in Lafayette? Ramón can kiss my ass, and you can, too, if you don’t understand where I’m coming from.”

“Oh, that’s where you coming from?” he asked in a low voice as he slowly made his way to me. “I’m not the enemy. Reserve that shit for him.”

I shifted my weight again, and before I could say a word, he grabbed me by the neck and pinned me against the wall near the front door. “Now say you sorry.”

I frowned and was ready to spit venom until I felt his hand sliding down my body. My breathing went on hiatus as his hand slid inside my shorts and gripped my ass. He leaned into me and lightly bit my earlobe. “I don’t hear you, Dinalee. I need an apology.”

“What will happen if you don’t get one?”

“Then I will fuck you into submission. You gon’ give it to me without a doubt.”

“Well, consider me a mute from here on out, because I want that action.”

He lifted his head and frowned harder. That shit only made me wetter. I didn’t know how I went from being angry to being turned on in a matter of seconds, but here I was... sopping wet and ready to be taken advantage of. Lowering his head, he bit my neck, causing me to hiss, then pulled away and

took my shirt off.

I grabbed his hand and led him to my bedroom, just in case Ramón came back quicker than he'd said. When we entered, he immediately took off his shirt then dropped his shorts and drawers. He went to my bathroom and started the shower since we'd been outside almost all day. While he was in there, I came out of the rest of my clothing.

When he came back, he stood still and stared at me. "See, you really trying me today, woman. First, you threw your attitude in my face, then you hopped out of my truck like you didn't have a whole kingly nigga sitting next to you, and now you being disrespectful by taking the wrapping off my meal. That's strike three on yo' ass."

He came close to me and smacked my bare ass, then lifted me in his arms. I wrapped my legs around him, and I felt his dick bobbing around my opening. When I tried to slide down the tip of it, he lifted me higher. "You ain't running shit. Just brace yourself for what'chu finna get."

My entire body was hot, and it was getting harder and harder not to say anything. "Rondo, take me."

"Oh, you can talk now? If you ain't apologizing, don't say shit else. Shut the fuck up and take this discipline how I'm handing that shit out."

I bit my bottom lip as he went to my nipple and pulled it in his mouth. When he sank his teeth into it, I yelped. "Rondooo!"

He smacked my ass again and slid me right down his dick, taking my fucking breath away. He began walking to the bathroom, and when we got into the shower, he practically slammed me against the wall and started fucking my cervix up. I screamed so loud even he flinched. I sank my nails in his back and hung on for the ride.

The pain I felt was no match to the pleasure, and I was on the verge of exploding all over his dick. He gripped my ass and repeatedly slammed me on it while staring at me with that sexy ass frown on his face. This shit was criminal. He was assaulting my body so fucking good, instead of reporting his ass, I was willing to look the other way.

He slowed his assault but maintained the powerful thrusts. I opened my eyes as I panted, staring right into his eyes. With every thrust, he took my damn breath away, pushing that shit right out of me. The goosebumps filled my body, and the water filled my eyes. This man was so fucking gorgeous. If I stared at him long enough, he could get whatever he wanted out of me.

He sped up his pace once again, causing me to slide up and down the

wall. I had no control. The way he had my legs pinned to my body, there was nothing I could do to get away. I just had to take every blow he delivered. My body began trembling, and I knew I was about to let him have it. The urge to piss was strong as hell, so I knew he was about to get everything my body had to offer.

I screamed out my release as he fucked the hell out of me. “Mm, fuck!” he yelled, finally saying something.

He’d been completely quiet while he practically destroyed my insides, rearranging the shit to make room for the pipe he was laying. Tears fell down my cheeks as my body unleashed its flavor once again. As I came hard, literally scratching the fuck out of him, I screamed, “I’m sorry, Rondo! Shit! I’m so fucking sorry, baby.”

He pulled me off his dick and set me on the floor. “Show me. Tell me how you taste. Give me your rave reviews.”

I pulled him into my mouth as my eyes rolled to the back of my head. “Damn. If your eyes rolling and shit, we need to get cleaned up so I can taste that shit for myself.”

He snatched me off it and claimed my mouth as his. His tongue slid to mine, and he moaned into my mouth. When he pulled away, he said, “Hell yeah. I’m finna gut that shit out.”

CHAPTER 15

RONDO

After carefully washing Dinalee like she was an ancient artifact, I patted her dry and led her to the bedroom. My dick was pissed when I stopped her from sucking my shit. I would have nudded right down her damn throat quick as hell. Her pussy was gonna be the death of me, but I couldn't wait to play Russian roulette with that shit.

She got in bed, and I stood over her, admiring her body. Damn, she was beautiful. I loved that she had some meat on her bones. I'd break a skinny woman in pieces. That shit I put on her in the shower nearly had me ready to bust all up in her paradise. Dipping in her raw was something I never anticipated doing, but shit. When I felt the heat coming from her pussy, my dick wanted to come in from the fucking cold.

However, I planned to stroke her pussy so good it would be spitting for me every five minutes. The flavor I tasted on her tongue was my first priority though. I made my way to the bed, my eyes laser focused on that landing strip between her legs. I was about to devour that shit. I slid between her legs as they trembled. She couldn't keep still if she tried. "Dinalee."

"Yes?"

"I like how you submitted, baby. I told you that you would. I'm finna eat the fuck out this shit."

She moaned as I slid my nose from her entry to her clit then gently rubbed it back and forth while breathing on it. I looked up at her to see her watching me. Maintaining my gaze, I gripped her thighs and began rubbing her clit in circular motions with the tip of my nose. Just as I was about to go in for the kill, the orgasm poured from her. It didn't squirt at me, but she wet the damn bed for sure.

That shit propelled me forward like a starving man to a porterhouse steak. I covered her entire pussy, ready to swallow that shit whole, then pulled away and began circling her clit with my tongue. Fuck a rose. I was about to have her clit trying to withdraw to get away from me. Her taste was addicting, and after my first sample, I was ready to risk my livelihood for this shit. I was already strung out and a fiend for her flavor.

I began sucking her clit slowly, allowing my tongue to graze it underneath. The flesh underneath and on the sides were her spots. I could tell by the way she put her hands in my hair trying to push me away from her one minute, then pull me to her the next. When she grabbed my hair, I knew she was about to let me have it again. I sucked it more forcefully, and as I thought she would, she came again.

“Rondo... please. Oh God. I’m not going to be able to function.”

I lifted my head from her pussy as her juices conditioned my beard. “Good. Then that means I backed up everything I said. Give me one more.”

I began sucking her again, but I slid my fingers inside of her this time. When I reached the soft tissue, I began massaging it, falling in sync with the rhythm I’d created on her clit. I needed to show her who the fuck she was dealing with. Her outbursts weren’t gon’ fly with me, especially if they were really directed at someone else. She took my vulnerability to mean that I was tender all the time. Wrong assumption.

She gripped my hair tighter as she tried to close her legs, squeezing her thighs on my ears. I smacked her ass, causing her to release those vice grips, but it also scared the orgasm right out of her ass. This time, that shit shot right in my face. I went up on my knees and entered her with haste, not even bothering to wipe my beard.

That shit was dripping with her goodness, and I wanted her to be a part of the excitement of that. As I hovered over her, it dripped in her face, and I leaned over licking that shit off her like the fucking dawg I was. That was how good she tasted. She grabbed my beard and pulled my mouth to hers. I was sure to give her all her flavor when I slid my tongue to hers. She pulled away and yelled, “Rondo, fuck!”

I closed my eyes for a moment as I concentrated on making love to her pussy, giving her more of my skill than just beating that shit out the frame. I wanted to show her just how much she meant to me. That shit earlier was to prove a point. This... this shit here was to show her how special she was to me already.

I slid my hand to the small of her back and lifted her hips into me. She was taking my dick like it was made for her, and that was refreshing as hell. I stared at her sex faces, and the sexiness of it was about to have my soldiers infiltrating her eggs like they were at the enemy line. “Dinalee, fuck! Yo’ shit so good, baby. I’m sorry too.”

“For... what?” she asked between her pants.

“For trying to tell you how to handle your affairs. I got’chu, baby, and I’ll always have your back. Now cum with me, because I can’t hold out any longer. Yo’ pussy my fucking kryptonite.”

When her walls tightened around my dick, I literally had to think about fishing and wild animals not to fire off in the heaven between her legs. Her body stiffened for a few seconds, then she came once again. Multiple orgasms for her was my goal, and I wouldn’t rest until I crushed that shit. As she started to wind down, I pushed her legs to her shoulders and watched my glaze-covered dick stroke her repeatedly, swelling by the second.

I quickly pulled out of her and shot cum all over the outside of her pussy. That was the most beautiful shit I’d seen in a long time. I released her legs and fell back to the bed. She rolled over and straddled my chest then took my dick in her mouth. Having a front row seat, seeing my nut all over her pussy had me ready to cum all over again.

I slid my fingers in her shit, then brought one to her asshole. She flinched a bit then immediately relaxed. When I pushed another finger inside, she tensed up again. “Relax, baby. Let me make this shit orgasm too. I’m finna make you fall in love, girl.”

I began stroking her ass slowly while using my other hand to gently rub her clit. My dick was hard as hell, though, and feeling it play ping pong with her tonsils was taking a nigga down faster than a balloon with a hole in it. I stayed the course, and before long, her body seized, just as I shot off. She was bucking all over my chest like she was having convulsions, and my dick had blasted off like a rocket. I wasn’t sure where my nut landed, because she couldn’t even keep her mouth on it.

I kept stroking her asshole until she calmed down to slight tremors. She turned to look at me, and when I saw the nut on her face, my dick bricked up all over again. I licked my lips as I stared at her. She stood from the bed and nearly busted her ass on the floor. I got up and grabbed her by her waist, helping her to the bathroom.

When we got there, I couldn’t help but bend her over the vanity and push

my dick back inside of her. There was no way I would be able to leave anytime soon. Watching her ass jiggle for me though, was assuring this session wouldn't be long. I knew I wouldn't see her until next weekend, so I had to get all I could, while I could.

I wrapped my arms around her thighs and lifted her hips to me and wore her pussy out, winding my dick inside of her expertly with every thrust. "Ahh, fuck!" I yelled as I pulled out of her, skeeting all over her back.

"Rondo, shit!"

"We gon' need another shower," I said as we heard a door close.

The kids were back. I'd let her take a shower alone, because if I didn't, I'd be tempted to disrespect the fuck out of everyone in the house, wanting them to hear how I was pleasing her body. I'd wash up, but I refused to touch my beard. I for sure wanted her punk ass ex-husband to see how that leave-in conditioner would have my shit curling up and shining.

"WHAT'S UP, RONDO? YOU GOOD?"

"What's up, man. I'm cool. How are you holding up?"

I'd finally called Seneca to check on him. We didn't get a chance to talk Sunday. After I left Dinalee's house, I went back to the Berottes' to pick up Sunni. I'd refused to leave her house until her ex did. I didn't trust his ass. Just the shit he was tryna pull with me being there had me on edge. I didn't get back to get my baby until nearly seven o'clock.

Monday morning, I'd given my job my two-week notice, and I'd taken off work Friday, Monday, and Tuesday. I needed to find somewhere to live. Dinalee had suggested that Sunni and I move in with her, but I knew that wouldn't work out well for me. I couldn't live that close to other folks. My neighbors were at least two or three acres away from me. There was no way I could deal with someone else within a few feet of where I rested my head.

We'd gotten back to Lafayette four days ago, and I'd taken Sunni to Ms. Sherry's house the next day. After the funeral, she would be with me to go check on houses in Beaumont. She was grateful that I would be letting her miss even more school on Monday and Tuesday. Neither of us were looking forward to Saturday, for obvious reasons. However, I knew I had to be strong for Sunni. If that meant masking my own emotions for the sake of my baby,

then so be it.

“I’m good. I’m actually with Ellington. We went and hooped for a little bit. I’m picking him up from school again. I see Kay Baby every day. We umm... we’re taking things slow though.”

“Good. I’m glad things are looking up. For real.”

“Yeah. I have Chelsea and Jericho to thank for that. Had Chelsea not allowed her to see Jericka, there would probably be no hope for us. I know that for a fact, and I would have had no one to blame but myself. All these years, people just accepted my behavior as it just being how I was. That I was just evil. When I hurt people I loved, I knew there was a problem.”

“The important thing is that you are working on it. I’m so happy that Kaysyn understood and is willing to try to work things out.”

“I ain’t never had to be so sensitive and vulnerable in my life, but I’ll do whatever I have to do to get Kay Baby back in my life. I love that woman with everything in me. But enough about that. You sure you good? You need anything?”

“Naw, man. Just dreading Saturday.”

“Have you spoken to Ali yet?”

“Naw. What’s up?”

“We got word that Leon Moore will be at the funeral. I have a connection in Mobile that has a connection to him. Just so you know, I may not be inside the funeral for that very reason.”

I knew exactly what he was saying. He was going to be preparing to take that nigga out as soon as possible. “So y’all were able to validate everything Kennedy had said?” I asked.

“Mm hmm. Every word. The whole money thing with Jungle was partially her shit too. Leon wanted revenge, but she wanted to get paid. However, I knew he wouldn’t turn down any money. I don’t know if that information makes things easier or harder for you.”

As I thought about what he said, I couldn’t figure out if it made things any easier or not. “Either way, she didn’t have to treat me the way she did. I had nothing to do with what she had going on. I guess it’s a good thing she’s not as heartless as I thought she was. She shouldn’t have kept Sunni’s paternity away from me. In a way, I’m glad she did though. I wouldn’t have a daughter, because there was no way I would have taken care of a baby that wasn’t mine. Can Sunni get social security since Knowledge is deceased?”

“That’s a good question. I mean, if you could prove paternity, then I don’t

see why she wouldn't be able to do that. You'd have to get with Dinalee to see if any of that information can be accessed by civilians without getting her into trouble."

"Yeah. I'll ask her when she gets here tomorrow. Are all of y'all coming tomorrow, or Saturday?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"Have things gotten any better between you and Jungle?"

"Naw. He won't talk to me, so I just stay out of his way. I know it's taking a lot of restraint for him not to take me out. I've seen niggas bodied for less."

"A'ight. I just wanted to check on you though. I'm glad everything is going okay. See y'all tomorrow evening. I'm gonna be heading that way in the morning."

"Okay. Ali will probably be calling you soon. Be careful on the road."

"A'ight. Thanks, man. Y'all too."

As Seneca said, when I ended the call with him, Ali was calling. I quickly answered, and he filled me in on everything Seneca had just told me. However, he added more to it. "I have a security team from Mobile that will be in place Saturday. Niggas don't give a shit about shooting up a funeral. I'm thinking H-Town is gonna basically end up being bait to flush him out of hiding."

I noticed Ali rarely mentioned names by phone unless it was completely innocent. When he said H-Town, I knew he was speaking of Jungle. That nigga was Houston personified. "So that's the only one he's after?"

"That's what I believe, but that's not saying he wouldn't take somebody out that interferes with that shit. I'm just glad that our boy had a connection out there. Otherwise, we would have been ill-prepared. I'll send you a picture of that nigga just in case you see him before we do. We have earpieces so we can talk to one another. I'll give you yours tomorrow when I get there."

"Okay."

"You okay though? You need anything?"

"I'm good."

"Okay. We'll see you tomorrow."

He ended the call as I turned in the driveway at my house. I wanted all this shit to be over and done with so bad. Jungle looked out for me, for real, when he spared Kennedy. I would pack my weapon, because if Leon showed up like they thought he would, he was definitely coming to get at Jungle.

Since he knew Jungle was coming, then he probably knew I was cool with him. He wouldn't hesitate to take my daughter or me right on out of here. If my baby got hurt, there wouldn't be a thing that could keep me from hunting his ass down like a wild animal.

CHAPTER 16

DINALEE

When the kids and I arrived in Lafayette, we immediately got in the truck with Rondo to head to Mobile. I'd missed his ass something fierce. The shit he put on me last weekend had me fiending for another hit. He had my ass on pause with how he told me what the fuck to do. I was Jill Scott in that moment, because shit, if he could tell me what to do, then he could tell me what to fucking do.

After he left, I sat in the middle of my bed for the longest, thinking... *Did he tell me to shut the fuck up?* I'd never been the type to let a man tell me no shit like that, but when Rondo did that, I was leaking like a damn faucet. I didn't know how he did it, but he had me losing my damn mind. I was even nice to Ramón's ass after that.

I knew for sure that he knew what had gone down while he was gone with the kids. I was way too calm when they returned. With what Rondo had put on me, I could barely focus on anything but him. He kept staring at me while the kids talked to their father, making me want to take him back to my room and ride the fuck out of him.

Our ride to Mobile was rather quiet, and I kind of expected it to be. I knew this weekend would be hard for him and Sunni. I would focus on taking care of him after the funeral. Since he and Sunni were following us back to Beaumont Sunday morning, I would worry about trying to take his mind off things then. I had yet to cook for him, and I planned to introduce him and Sunni to my Puerto Rican heritage through the dishes I cooked. I could only hope they liked them.

I already had my menu planned for Sunday evening, Monday, and Tuesday morning. I planned everything from tripleta and pina coladas to

quesitos. Tripleta was like a sandwich filled with beef, ham, chicken, and cheese, and would soak the alcohol from the pina coladas right up. Quesitos were a deep-fried pastry that I would make for breakfast. I was gonna fill it with cheese and bacon. I had other dish ideas prepared as well, and I couldn't wait to cater to the two of them.

Once we'd gotten settled in our hotel room, we left to pick up Sunni for lunch. We were supposed to be going somewhere called The Noble South. He guaranteed that the food was amazing, and it was one of his and Sunni's favorite places to dine. For dinner, he said Kennedy's mother was cooking and would be welcoming everyone to her home to eat. I didn't know how she was being so social with the grief she was feeling.

I couldn't imagine losing my daughter, period, let alone someone killing her, and being able to function enough to cater to people who were practically strangers to me. The police were still supposedly investigating, but they hadn't provided any updates about having a suspect. They were still leaning toward ruling it a suicide. That was why Ali's company was so beneficial, especially to us as black people. We had to be efficient when it concerned our own, because we surely couldn't depend on law enforcement to be.

Just knowing that man could possibly show up to the funeral to go after Jungle had me on edge, thinking about the safety of our children. However, there was no way I wouldn't show up for Rondo. Whether he expressed it or not, I knew he needed me.

When we got to Kennedy's mother's house to get Sunni, Rondo got out of the truck, and we remained inside waiting for him to come back. "Mommy?" Sophie called out.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Is Mr. Rondo mad?"

"No. He's just sad right now. Sunni's mommy died. The funeral is tomorrow. That's why we're here... to love on them with hugs and kisses."

She nodded, and I knew she would take what I said in the literal sense. She would shower Sunni with affection and love as soon as she got in the truck. They were walking our way, and Rondo had his arm around her shoulders. I could see the tears on her face. It was going to be a long two days. While I did my best to hide my emotions from my children, I knew I wouldn't be able to while watching Sunni and Rondo grieve.

When he opened the back door for her and Sophie saw her face, I could

see the tears fill my daughter's eyes. As soon as Sunni sat in the seat, she wrapped her arms around her. The tears immediately fell down my cheeks as I watched them. Sunni was so receptive to Sophie's love. It warmed my heart. Rondo got back inside and glanced at them in the back seat. He swallowed hard as I grabbed his hand, silently letting him know that I was here for him just like Sophie was there for Sunni.

He gave me a tight smile and nodded, indicating he understood my silent communication, then turned the music on. A mid tempo song came on, and I liked the vibe it was creating. When Rotimi began singing, I looked at the screen to see it was a Lecrae song. As I grooved in my seat, he glanced at me and bit his bottom lip. I couldn't help but sway and slightly shimmy my shoulders. As Lecrae rapped and I listened to the lyrics, I smiled.

The words were touching, and I felt like he played this song specifically for me. The chorus was saying she was the best thing that ever happened to him. Three weeks... it had been almost three weeks, and Rondo was one of the best things to ever happen to me too.

Once we got to the restaurant, Sunni had perked up. She was no longer crying, and she had a slight smile on her thick lips. Once we exited the truck, I pulled her in my arms. "Hey, sweetheart."

"Hey," she said softly.

I kissed her cheek then went back over to Rondo and grabbed his hand. Glancing back at the kids, I noticed Micah and Sophie were each holding one of Sunni's hands. Micah rarely showed emotion or that he even cared about what was going on, so to say I was shocked was an understatement. This had to be the real deal. The kids got along well. It helped that Sunni was so laidback.

After walking in, they led us to a table. When we sat, Rondo looked over at me and gently stroked my cheek with the backs of his fingers. The sadness in his eyes was overwhelming and pulling the emotions from my very depths. "Thank you, Dinalee, for being here."

I grabbed his hand and kissed it. "There's no other place I'd rather be."

I was seriously falling for Rondo, and I couldn't explain how it was happening so quickly. He had a severe case of BDE, but he was also tender, understanding, and loving. When he apologized to me, too, last weekend, I almost told him I loved him. A man admitting his faults and accepting responsibility for them was a turn on like no other, especially when it was something you'd never encountered. I was in awe when Seneca did it.

Ramón rarely admitted fault. When he did, somehow, he would turn it into being my fault as well. That man irritated my soul, and I thought my experiences with him had ruined me for any other man. Rondo was proving that theory to be false, because I could barely contain myself around him. I had been waiting for someone like him without even realizing it. I thought it would be hard to love another man, because I had a damn barbed-wire fence around my heart, but Rondo seemed to have wire cutters and knew how to use them.

Sophie was talking Sunni to death, and I knew she had to be tired of listening, but she was engaging with my baby and letting her ramble. As I watched them, I could see Rondo watching me from my peripheral. I slowly turned his way, and he quickly turned his attention to something else. I didn't know what that was about because he usually didn't have a problem staring into my eyes. His emotions were probably all over, so I wouldn't ask any questions.

Sometimes, we needed to just be. Everything didn't need to be addressed. However, after the funeral and we were in Beaumont, I would be more talkative and try to get him to express his thoughts if he still wasn't talking. My thoughts were getting away from me, and Rondo noticed. He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"I'm sorry I'm not talking much. My mood just..." He shook his head. "It's—"

I put my fingers to his lips, halting his words. He kissed them. "I understand, baby. I'm here when you want to talk."

He nodded and slid his arm around me. We would be fine, and I couldn't wait until the funeral was behind us so he and Sunni could begin to heal from the trauma of it all.

I DIDN'T BOTHER WEARING MAKEUP TODAY. I SIMPLY CLEANED AND moisturized my face, then slid on some lip gloss. If Rondo dropped a single tear, I wouldn't be any good for the rest of the day. I swore I was nervous about how I would feel about him grieving the loss of another woman, but I would have to be heartless not to sympathize with him. He'd known this woman for nearly half of his life.

When the crew and family got here last night, he seemed to open up more with them, and I was happy about that. Alexz wouldn't let him make it about how much food he was eating. I could only laugh at her antics. It kept a smile on Rondo's face, though, and I couldn't be more appreciative of that, although he'd sort of shut me out.

Ali had called a short meeting with us last night about the funeral today. If Leon Moore was seen, no one was to make a move inside the church unless he did. Once we left the funeral, it would be open season on his ass if it was safe to do so. Jungle had brought along his right hand, a man by the name of Vegas. He'd said that the police had stopped harassing him, but he knew they were still watching his ass. It seemed that had made him a little looser, but not totally because of the situation at hand.

I sat next to Ali and Riley while Rondo and Sunni sat with the family. I wanted to be next to him so badly. The detectives were in attendance, and they'd talked to Rondo briefly before the funeral started. Aina and Sophie were whispering in one another's ears, trying not to be too loud. They probably couldn't wait to get out of here so they could play. Thankfully, the casket was closed the entire time. I didn't know if that was her mother's choice or if it was something that was necessary.

Rondo and Sunni had left us for an hour or so after lunch to go to the funeral home with the woman I now knew as Ms. Sherry. So I was assuming they viewed her body then, which would also explain why he was even more withdrawn when they returned.

I glanced over at Ali to see his face was slightly red. When I glanced around, I spotted him. Leon Moore was standing against the wall, his eyes on the casket like he was in a trance. Everyone in the Watchful Eyes Crew had noticed him. Several of them had said, *Confirmed*, in the earpiece, indicating that they'd spotted him.

When he looked away from the casket, he walked toward the back, and I saw him notice Jungle. He'd probably been noticed him. I knew he wouldn't do anything in here, because there were too many cops here. "Stay alert," Ali said.

I turned to look toward the door but scanned the back of the church. Seneca and Jericho had remained outside. Ali said they were the best shooters. I was trembling a bit. It wasn't that I was scared of Leon, but I was afraid of not being able to protect the kids. If that fool decided to start shooting, how would I be able to keep them safe?

As if sensing my nerves, Riley nudged me. “Don’t worry. I got the kids. Whitney is helping me, and so are the other women of Watchful Eyes.”

I nodded then squeezed her hand as Sunni walked up to the podium to recite a poem for her mother. Rondo had gone with her and stood by her side as she did a beautiful job reading. However, when she was done, she took a deep breath and began talking about her mother.

“She always made sure my hair was combed when I was going somewhere. She told me that no one would take me seriously if I went anywhere unkempt. I was five. I had no clue what unkempt meant at the time. I’ve heard her say ‘sit like a lady’ since I was two. Whenever I wore a dress, she taught me to sit with my legs closed or crossed. She taught me so much... things I’ll never forget.”

She wiped the tear that fell down her cheek, then looked over at Rondo. When she turned back to the microphone, she said, “She wasn’t perfect, and I was devastated when I found that out. However, the best thing she ever did was make Rondo Simpson my dad. I know with God’s help, my daddy, and my momo, I will get through this and become everything she desired for me and more.”

Everyone stood to their feet and applauded as she made her way to her seat. When I looked at Rondo, I wasn’t any good. A couple of tears had fallen down his cheeks. My face was probably red because I could feel the heat surrounding my ears. Riley handed me a tissue to wipe my face as I sat back in my seat.

I stared at them, wishing I could have sat close to console them, and Rondo’s eyes met mine for a moment. He quickly looked away, and that hurt my heart. I wasn’t sure why he wouldn’t stare at me or even look at me for more than a couple of seconds. Even after his words of consolation yesterday, I was still wondering if there was more to it than the funeral.

After the pastor preached and told funny stories about Kennedy as a little girl, we followed the procession out to the family car and hearse. I was on guard for anything to pop off. The security team Ali had hired was also in full force. I spotted Leon across the way. His eyes were on Jungle and his friend Vegas. His face twitched as he watched him. Jungle had most likely noticed, but he pretended not to. Chelsea and Jericka were riding along with Kaysyn instead of him because of the situation.

Once everyone got into their vehicles, the kids and I got in the vehicle with Ali and Riley. Rondo rode in the family car with Sunni and Ms. Sherry.

We were heading to the cemetery, and I was antsy as hell. My nerves were all over the place. I felt like if something was going to happen, it would happen there.

When we got there and parked, I saw Jungle and Vegas getting out of their vehicle. As he was about to walk away from his vehicle to the burial site, two gunshots rang out. People were running and screaming. I *knew* something was going to happen. Within seconds, another shot rang out, and I spotted Leon as he dropped to the ground.

Ali quickly hopped out of the vehicle and demanded that I stayed inside with Riley and the kids. After we got them all on the floor, I looked up to see the passenger side window was shot out of Jungle's vehicle, but I didn't see Jungle. I frantically searched the lot. When I didn't see him, I said, "I'm getting out. Y'all stay in here with Aina and Ms. Riley. Okay?"

"Okay," Micah said.

I ran over to where I saw Rondo standing. When I got over there, I saw Jungle and Vegas on the other side of the vehicle, unharmed. What I saw next though, warmed my heart. Jungle was staring at Seneca. Before Jungle could say a word, Seneca said, "He was about to shoot again. There was no way in hell I was going to let him take out a kingpin. Houston wouldn't be the same without you."

Jungle slid his hand down his face, then extended it to Seneca. When Seneca grabbed it, Jungle pulled him in for a hug. He'd saved his life. Had Leon gotten a chance to shoot again, he wouldn't have missed. He was awfully close with the first two shots. As they hugged, Vegas leaned against the door of the vehicle. That was when we realized that he'd gotten hit.

"Shit! Vegas, where you hit at, man?" Jungle said, sounding panicked.

"Stop tripping. It's just a flesh wound in the arm. He ain't had no fucking aim. We weren't moving fast, and his ass still missed his target."

"You still need to get to a hospital," Ali said.

I looked around to find everyone coming back out to see what happened. As I glanced over at Leon, I noticed Seneca had shot him in the head. That shit was blown wide open. I grimaced and turned my head. I didn't miss seeing that shit. While I hadn't been to war, when I was on active duty, one of the soldiers had a psychotic break and started shooting up shit. Several soldiers had been killed, and one looked just like Leon looked.

When someone touched my shoulder, I jumped. "Shit!" I yelled.

Jericho had a concerned look on his face as he asked, "You okay?"

“Yeah. I’m okay. Thanks.”

He patted my back, and I made my way toward Rondo. He was standing there watching me but talking to Vegas and Jungle. Before I could get to him, Ali stopped me. “I thought I told yo’ ass to stay in the vehicle.”

“You did.”

“So you disobeyed a direct order, right?”

I frowned, but he was serious as hell. “Ali—”

“Naw. I’m a P.I. I know you went through PTSD years ago when that soldier went crazy at your office building on base. You were only nineteen, but you went through counseling and shit for years... until you had Micah. So don’t try to play me like you’re fine. Go meet Riley.”

I felt like a scolded child, and I knew he meant business. Before I could walk away, Rondo came to me and hugged me. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

As I tried to stare into his eyes, he looked away. I wanted to grab his face and make him look at me, but Ali’s glare in my direction sent me walking to his damn SUV. In a week’s time, two men had told me what the fuck to do, and I wasn’t feeling that shit one bit. Mainly because I actually listened and did what they said for me to do.

I hadn’t told a soul about the PTSD I suffered from. I thought I was over it. Staring at Leon’s body triggered me something serious, because now, I felt like I was hyperventilating. Halting my forward progress, I lifted my hands in the air, trying to catch my breath, when Seneca appeared in front of me.

“Come on. Take slow deep breaths with me, Leelee.”

I wanted to chuckle at the nickname he’d assigned me, but shit, I might have passed the hell out if I did. Following his lead, I closed my eyes and took deep breaths in, and slowly exhaled them. As I did, I could feel my heart rate calming down. The sweat rolling down the side of my face let me know just how worked up I was.

When I opened my eyes, Isaiah was standing next to Seneca. I gave him a slight smile to let him know I was okay. He patted Seneca’s shoulder and said, “You did a good job, man.”

When Isaiah walked away, Seneca stared at me for a moment, I assumed trying to make sure I was okay. “I suffer from anxiety. I know what it feels like to not be able to breathe.”

Damn. This nigga was troubled for real. As gangsta and thugged out as he seemed to be, one would assume he was damn near indestructible. His pants

sagged a bit, and he had a platinum grill. He didn't seem like Kaysyn's type at all. As I thought that, she walked over with the kids, Chelsea, and Jericho right behind her. "Is everything okay?"

I absolutely hated all this attention. "Yes. I'm okay. Thank you, everybody."

I tried to walk away, but Jericka said, "Mom, can I ride with them? Aina and Sophie are over there."

I turned to see she was talking to Chelsea. "Well, baby girl, you were supposed to ride with your mommy. Ask her if it's okay."

Jericka quickly turned to Kaysyn with hopeful eyes. "Please, Mommy?"

Kaysyn smiled. "Sure. We have time to spend together tomorrow."

"Yay! Thank you!"

She kissed Kaysyn's cheek then Chelsea's and grabbed my hand. I smiled at both of them as they watched us with a smile. Glancing back toward Ali and Rondo, I noticed they were talking to a couple of police officers. I didn't even notice that they had arrived. By the time I got back to the vehicle, Riley was sitting up, and the kids were in their seats as well.

I opened the door, and when they saw Jericka, they screamed in excitement. These little girls were something else. I helped her to the third row then got in to hear her say, "I couldn't wait to come play with y'all!"

I smiled so big. They loved each other so much. Looking up at Riley then over at my son, I asked, "Are y'all okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," Micah responded.

"Riley, what about you?"

"I'm okay. I'm cramping a little bit. I think I got too nervous."

I got out and went to the driver's seat and grabbed her hand. "Are you sure? Lift your feet up to the dash. I think you may need to go get checked out anyway."

"Yeah. I'll talk to Ali when he's done."

"Naw. Talk to me now," I heard him say.

I swore, this man was always creeping up on somebody. When I turned to him, he tapped my earpiece. That was how he heard what was going on. I'd forgotten I had that shit on. "Seneca said y'all can get in with him and Kaysyn."

"Okay. Keep me updated," I said as I helped the girls out of the back.

"I will, and I'm sorry for yelling at you. I was worried about you. You good? You need to go to the hospital with us?"

“It’s okay. I should have listened to you the first time. I’m okay. Y’all go and make sure Riley and the baby are good.”

“Okay.”

He hurriedly got inside, and they took off as we walked toward Kaysyn. Whitney was standing next to her along with Mrs. Anissa. When I noticed everyone else gathering, we stood still to see what was going on. Mr. Sheldon grabbed his wife’s hand, and they asked everyone else to grab hands. When Mrs. Anissa and Mr. Sheldon began praying for Riley, I immediately felt the genuineness of this family. This was why Rondo loved them so much and considered them his family too. I could only pray that Riley and the baby were okay.

CHAPTER 17

RONDO

“**Y**ou spoke well, baby. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Daddy. When are we leaving for Beaumont?”

“Not until tomorrow. You cool with that?”

“Yes, sir. I’m just ready to move or at least go back to your house. Being here reminds me of Mama too much. What happened at the cemetery? Uncle Chad and Uncle Shy blocked our view when they covered us. I heard gunshots.”

I was truly hoping she didn’t ask. By the way Ms. Sherry was staring at me, I knew she probably wanted to know also. Chad and Shy had done a great job at shielding all the kids from that bullshit. Isaiah, Dylan, Axton, DJ, Arrow, Jamel, and Mr. Sheldon had helped with the crowd as well.

However, even with all that going on, I felt like I was just going through the motions. After viewing Kennedy’s body Friday afternoon, it was like I couldn’t function. I didn’t want to go, but Sunni had asked for me to go with her. There was no way I could tell my baby girl no.

When I saw Kennedy’s beautiful face, I couldn’t stop the tears from falling. Sunni was screaming, and Ms. Sherry wasn’t doing any better. I could only imagine how she looked after she’d gotten shot. He’d shot her in the chest. We made the decision then that having the casket open would be too hard on us.

Then my attorney called and said I would be awarded permanent custody of Sunni since Kennedy was no longer here. The whole point of the court subpoenaing Leon Moore was to prove Kennedy guilty of parental fraud anyway.

I was already in a funk, but after all that, it only got worse. It was like

seeing Kennedy only reminded me of the horrible luck I'd had with women. Dinalee was feeling me more and more with each passing day. I could feel it, but at the moment, I could feel the wall rising all over again. Fear of being broken again had crept in and took control. I couldn't stare into her eyes, because I didn't want her to see my doubt.

I was so sure of how I felt for Dinalee before this. It was evident with how quickly we were progressing. I felt comfortable around her and was sure that she was the woman for me. I was irritated with how I was feeling, and I knew it stemmed from my grief. It was like I felt like I was doing something wrong by having another woman at my ex's funeral. She had only been my ex for a month and a half.

While she was the reason she was my ex, I loved her like I'd never loved anyone else. Before her betrayal, I was positive that we were moving in the right direction. I was thinking about marrying her. She'd made me confident in her love for me. I didn't know how I couldn't tell she was playing with me.

"There was a man there trying to kill Jungle. He was the one your mother was cheating on me with. I believed he was the man that also killed your mother. She wouldn't have killed herself, not with a daughter like you."

"Well, I'm glad he's dead then. Why was he trying to kill Uncle Jungle?"

"I don't know, baby. I just know it had nothing to do with him, but the guy needed someone to blame."

I knew what the reason was, but I didn't feel like spilling all that bullshit in front of Ms. Sherry to my baby. Sunni seemed to handle today a lot better than what I did. Because of my grief, I couldn't even be there for Dinalee. When I saw Seneca standing with her, I wondered what was going on. It looked as if they were taking deep breaths or something. I was speaking to law enforcement about what had happened.

We didn't even tell them that Seneca was the one who shot him. One of the security guys took the wrap. What made it even more seamless was that Seneca and Jericho were both given one of their guns just in case something like this happened. The security team had a license to carry in Alabama. In Texas, you didn't have to have a license, and I didn't believe Seneca had one. I didn't know how that worked from state to state, but we'd rather be safe than sorry.

Us being out of state would have made that shit more difficult, and they probably would have arrested Seneca. I was just happy that this shit was finally over. Now I had to get my shit together before I lost Dinalee. I

believed she knew that something other than Kennedy's death was bothering me. We hadn't had a conversation longer than a few minutes since Thursday, and that was by phone.

When we arrived back at the church for the repast, I knew I needed to see about Dinalee. Something had happened, especially with the way Ali had practically yelled at her. After helping Ms. Sherry and Sunni from the car, we headed inside. She was the first person I saw, and she was seated at a table with Whitney, Chelsea, Kaysyn, and the girls.

Aina had gotten in the car with them since Ali had to take Riley to the hospital. When I got close to Shy, I asked, "Have you heard from Ali yet?"

"Yeah. They got to hear the baby's heartbeat to put their fears to rest. The baby is fine, but of course, she has to follow up with her doctor. They were able to see that she was having a little girl also."

"I'm sure Ali is smiling from here back to Texas."

Shy chuckled. "You know he is. I know you're glad this shit is over though."

"More than glad. Now Sunni and I can move on and build a new life in Texas."

He patted my back as he walked away. When I looked back over toward Dinalee, she was staring at me. Taking a deep breath, I headed in her direction. She stood from her seat and met me halfway. "Hey. You okay?" I asked her.

She nodded and gave me a tight smile. As she stared at me, I looked away briefly then stared back at her. "You sure? I can take you to the hospital if you feel something is wrong."

"I'm okay, Rondo." She glanced behind me. "That man is wanting to speak to you. We can talk later."

I turned to see one of Kennedy's cousins waiting to speak to me. I obliged him as Dinalee walked away. She definitely knew something was up with me. I couldn't keep running from her. We needed to sit and have a long talk about what we were feeling. That needed to happen sooner rather than later.

AFTER GETTING TO SHAVOZZ AND DJ'S HOUSE TO GET SETTLED FOR OUR TWO-night stay, Sunni came and sat next to me on the couch. "Why aren't we

staying with Ms. Dinalee?”

“I wanted to give her a little space. I don’t want to be too clingy.”

That was bullshit. We hardly talked at all at the repast yesterday or on the way home this morning. As soon as I was done talking to one person, it seemed I was talking to someone else. I’d talked to Curtis for the longest. When we got to my house, Dinalee had gotten in her car and left, not bothering to wait for Sunni and me to refresh our clothes. I didn’t blame her since I seemed to be ignoring her. I planned to go there once I felt she and the kids had gotten settled in. There was a huge disconnect that we needed to address.

She was driving alone from Lafayette since the kids had ridden with Kaysyn and Seneca. Micah had wanted to be with Ellington, and Sophie wanted to be with Jericka and Aina. Since Kaysyn had a huge SUV, they allowed the kids to ride with them. Even Mariena and Ariana rode with them. Those little girls were establishing a friendship and bond that I hoped never got broken. They loved each other already.

Jamel and Sandrene walked through the door, and he came over and slapped my hand. “I’m glad you’re moving closer. That way when Arrow and I come to Beaumont, we can all kick it.”

“Yep. And it won’t be as long of a drive to go out there to kick it with you, Arrow, and Jungle.”

“Yeah. That’s what’s up. When are y’all moving?”

“We going look for a house tomorrow.”

“Good.”

He walked away to go to the kitchen to talk to DJ as I stared at my feet. I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent a message to Ali first, to check on Riley. He’d said everything was fine, but I wanted to be sure that she was still okay. When he confirmed that she was fine and resting like the ER doctor suggested, I texted Dinalee. *Hey. Are y’all settled?*

Sunni flopped next to me while looking at her phone. “Who are you texting?” I asked when I saw the thread on her screen.

“Momo. She said she misses me already.”

“I can imagine that she does. When summer rolls around, y’all will be able to spend more time together.”

“Maybe she can come here, since we’re moving.”

“Yeah. I think she’ll appreciate the getaway.”

She smiled as I glanced at my phone, waiting for Dinalee’s response. She

normally responded right away when I texted her. Maybe she was still unpacking and getting settled. I'd been at DJ and Shavozz's house for an hour, but I didn't have small kids to see after either. Sunni stood from the couch and went to the game room with Dalen.

My sister's stomach was expanding rapidly. I was more than sure she was ready to have the baby. As I watched DJ wrap his arms around her from behind and kiss her neck, I knew I had to make this right with Dinalee. I let fear get in my way. I supposed fear would make me hard to love, but it was hard for me to love someone else too. My attraction to her was insane, and I wanted to eventually love her.

I allowed past experiences to get in the way. However, if she felt as strongly for me as I thought she did, I knew we would get past this hiccup. I glanced at my phone to see she still hadn't responded, so I tried calling. When she didn't answer, I started getting worried. I really didn't know what she was going through when Seneca talked to her, but if it was bad, maybe she was feeling the same way now, although she'd said she was fine.

I stood from my seat and went to the game room where Sunni and Dalen were. "I'm about to go to Dinalee's house. Are you coming?"

"Yes, sir." She turned to Dalen and said, "We'll be back later."

He nodded and continued playing his game. When she joined me, Shavozz yelled, "Dinner will be ready in an hour or two."

I nodded as she giggled. DJ was kissing her neck again. All that romance was making me long for Dinalee even more. I was wrong for shutting her out. Besides Sunni, she was of most importance to me. I hated that I behaved the way I did. I also hated that it seemed I wasn't there for her either when she needed me. Seneca had just blown a muthafucka's head off and was still able to take care of a woman who should have been my main priority.

Once we got in the truck and headed her way, I could feel my nerves kicking in, because I didn't know how she would react to me just popping up. Sunni remained quiet, and I knew it was because she could feel the vibes I was putting out there. When we turned in the driveway, my stomach was in knots. While I didn't shy away from confrontation, I still hated it. I hated when things were tense, even when I was the one who created the tension.

After helping Sunni out then going to the door and ringing the doorbell, we waited for her to answer. Within a minute or so, I heard the locks disengaging. When she opened the door, I could tell she had been crying. Her eyes were red and slightly puffy. I glanced behind her and asked, "Are the

kids here?”

She only nodded, so I turned to Sunni. “Baby, can you go inside with them while I talk to Ms. Dinalee outside?”

“Yes, sir.”

When Sunni went inside, I grabbed Dinalee’s hand and escorted her to the steps so we could sit. Once we did, she slid her hand away from mine and turned her head the other way. That hurt my heart, but I knew she was putting out just what I had been putting out for the past two days.

“First, let me say that I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t expect grief to hit me as hard as it did. Going to the funeral home Friday afternoon only made it worse. I practically ignored you and let fear take control of my actions.”

She turned to me and stared right into my eyes. My gaze didn’t waver, and that seemed to only irritate her. “I couldn’t do this for the past two days. Why? Do you not want to feel a connection to me? I understand grief. I understand you not necessarily wanting to talk. But you pushed me away. You talked to everyone but me. I need to know why, Rondo. And fear of what?”

I looked away and stared at the ground for a moment. I’d never had a problem expressing myself with her, but this had me nervous for some reason. When I lifted my head to stare back at her, she’d turned her head again. She was about to stand, but I grabbed her arm, keeping her seated.

“I’m afraid to love. I mean... I know I can be hard to love at times, but I found that seeing Kennedy dead reminded me that love hadn’t been kind to me... ever. The doubts started coming to my mind like crazy. Like... what if this time is no different? I want to love again, and I want to love you, but just like I think I can be hard to love, it’s hard for me to love too. I allowed my past experiences to take control, and I apologize for that.”

She stared at me for a moment then gave me a tight smile. “You aren’t hard to love, Rondo. You’re just the opposite. That was why your silence seemed so personal. I’ve already fallen for you, and I can’t even explain how. If you need to take a step back to evaluate things in your life, I have no choice but to understand. Actually, I think you should do that. I want you to be sure that I’m who you want before this goes any further. I also want you to be sure of exactly *what* you want.”

I frowned slightly. “I already know that you’re who I want. That’s why I’m here.”

“What do you want though? I want a relationship... a meaningful

relationship. I want a family. I want to be married again. I can't let Ramón's foolishness change me or cause me to think that everyone will be like him. We weren't compatible, and it's partially my fault for trying to force us to be. So please, take time to think about what you want, Rondo. Just like you don't want to be hurt, neither do I. I'm willing to give you all of me, but I need you to be sure that you're willing to give me the same."

I was somewhat stunned. I supposed my spirit sensed it all along. That was why I was nervous. She had put up a wall that wasn't there before. She'd never had a wall up concerning us. She always said exactly what she felt, and she didn't let shit keep her from experiencing me. I didn't need time though.

"I am willing to give you all of me. I had a moment of weakness."

"So what will keep you from pushing me away again? Rondo, there are some things I'm not willing to deal with. This weekend, I felt closer to everyone else than I did to you. I hated that feeling. No matter what you're going through, I should never feel like I don't matter. Whenever I tried to be close to you Friday evening, you found something else to do. I can't do that. I refuse to endure that. I love you."

She closed her eyes, and when I saw a tear escape and roll down her cheek, I knew I hurt her deep. She took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "I've been on the fast track since I met you, and this proved to me that I needed to slow down."

"No. Please don't. It was the situation. I told you that I want to love you too, Dinalee."

"I know what you said, but please... for my sake, for the children's sake, take time to think about it. Even if that's just for the rest of the day. I really need to be alone right now so I can work through some things."

"Things like what? What was Ali talking about yesterday?"

She looked away from me, and I could tell she didn't want to talk about it. She said she needed time alone. As much as I didn't want to honor that request, I swallowed my pride and allowed her to do what she needed to do for herself. It wasn't like I had given her the opportunity to help me through what I was going through, so I had no right to feel a way about her doing the exact same thing. At least she communicated that with me.

"I understand, Dinalee. I'll think about everything you said and give you time to yourself. Can I take the kids with me? You can't possibly get the time you need with Sophie all in your space."

She turned to me and gave me a slight smile. When she leaned in and put

her arms around me, she broke. I held her tightly as she cried audibly. It was killing me not understanding what she was going through. When she composed herself, she stared into my eyes. “Thank you. I just need a couple of hours.”

I licked my lips as I gently swiped the tears from her cheeks. When I leaned in to kiss her, she didn't back away. She said she loved me, and I planned to prove to her that falling for me wasn't a mistake.

CHAPTER 18

DINALEE

I played with the card in my hand, flipping it back and forth, debating whether I would make the call or not. Isaiah Berotte had slid it to me at the repast. It was like he could see right through me and my hard exterior. While I knew I needed to talk to someone about what happened yesterday, I didn't know if it was something I wanted to talk about now.

However, I also knew that the longer I waited, the worse it could get if I was triggered again. I needed time to just relax and chill out alone. Seeing Rondo and denying myself of everything I wanted was so damn hard, but I wanted him to be sure of what he wanted from me. I wasn't fit to be a lifetime girlfriend. *Fuck that shit.* At this stage in my life, I wanted a family. Maybe later in life, if I wasn't locked down already, I could be on my Oprah shit and have a Stedman.

I stood from my seat at the bar and went to my bathroom and ran a hot bath with lavender, then stared at myself in the mirror for a moment. I was a beautiful woman inside and out, and I refused to allow this to cripple me like it did for years in my past. That was probably why I fell for Ramón's ass. My self-esteem was somewhat low because I thought something was wrong with me.

After getting undressed, I lit some incense and sage, then stretched and took deep breaths. I started my music and got in the water, thinking about Rondo. I couldn't believe I'd told him that I loved him. That wasn't the way I intended to say it. I'd planned it out in my head that I would give him a full body massage after feeding him an amazing dinner. The kids would be with somebody else so we could have privacy.

Once his massage was done, we would make love and I would tell him

then. That was the plan, and it sounded so sensual. I was excited about it, and I hated that I didn't get a chance to express it in that manner. However, I needed him to know how invested I was in us. When I thought about my future, I saw him in it as my husband. I needed him to make sure that was something he wanted too. If it wasn't, then we were wasting time, and I'd fallen in love for nothing.

I understood that he had a weak moment, dealing with the death of Sunni's mother. However, that shouldn't have left me out in the cold. I needed him to trust that I had his best interest at heart. I wanted to be the one to console him and Sunni, but that moment was taken away from me. Seeing him cry and not being able to do anything about it... not even offer him a hug was so damn hard.

Just like he was thinking of his past experiences, I realized that his behavior caused me to think of mine too. I refused to be in another one-sided relationship. I would not be the only one giving everything I had while he took advantage of it without giving the same in return. Being depleted of energy and purpose was a muthafucka. I could deal with the lack of energy if things were progressing, but the minute I felt like I wasn't needed, I had to let go.

This was our second hiccup, but both were surrounding Kennedy's death. It also made me wonder if he clung to me because of how he felt after losing Kennedy. He seemed to not give a damn about her until she was killed. His anger had turned into sorrow. I just hoped I wasn't simply a space filler. The way he made me feel couldn't be fake. It felt way too real. I wanted to keep believing that it was real.

As I lay in the tub, I decided to go ahead and wash up so I could call Isaiah. I needed to release this negative energy and be ready to talk to Rondo when they returned. I couldn't waste time being in my feelings while he was here. I needed to spend time with him if he decided that he needed me as much as I needed him.

When I got out of the tub and had dried off and moisturized my skin, I put on some sweatpants and a T-shirt then called Isaiah. He answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Isaiah. This is Dinalee."

"Hey. How you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Well... I'm trying to be okay. Do you have time to talk?"

"Yeah, I do. Let me head to my office."

I could hear one of his kids talking then yelling. “Talon, come on, man. That’s your sister. Don’t yell like that at her. You hear me? That’s not how you talk to a woman.”

I smiled slightly at him explaining to a one-year-old how to treat a woman. That was so cute. However, that was when it started, and I couldn’t help but applaud him for that. Once I heard a door close, he said, “Okay. I’m in my office.”

“Okay. Seneca helped me through breathing yesterday. I literally thought I was going to pass out.”

“Anxiety is no joke.”

“No, it isn’t. I was diagnosed with PTSD some years back. I haven’t had any issues with it in nearly ten years. However, after seeing that man like that on the ground yesterday triggered it. When I was on active duty, a soldier went crazy and just started shooting up people in our office building on base. A guy not too far away from me head got blown off.”

I stopped talking and took deep breaths because my mind was filled with images of what I saw that day and then what I saw yesterday. “Say no more. I get it. That was what caused that attack. I’m sure you have a therapist through the military though, right?”

“I do, although I haven’t spoken to him in a while. That honestly wasn’t the only reason I called though. I just thought I would explain that so you understood what was going on with me, especially since I plan to be around the family a lot more.”

“Thank you for that courtesy. If there is ever an issue, I’ll know how to handle it.”

“Right. I actually called to talk about my relationship with Rondo. He kind of... umm...”

“Ignored you. I noticed.”

Damn, he was attentive. However, if he noticed, then it was probably pretty obvious. “I understood he was grieving, but he had no problem talking to anyone else. So today, we talked, and he apologized. He said the situation made him think about how love had never been kind to him. He’s afraid that I won’t be any different. He seemed to get a little irritated when I told him I needed time alone and that he needed to think about what he wanted with me. Was I too harsh?”

“Past relationship trauma can be a beast. Rondo’s is still fresh. He’d only found out about Kennedy’s betrayal a week or two before he met you. He’s

probably still trying to deal with some things. Who initiated conversation about this?”

“He did.”

“That’s a good thing. That means he realized his mistake and is trying to rectify it. If he didn’t want to pursue anything serious with you, there would be no need to explain himself, right?”

I remained silent, thinking about what he said. That made perfect sense. Why didn’t I think of it that way? “I guess not. I wish I would have thought about it that way.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure he wasn’t thinking of things from your perspective either. If y’all did that, there would be no need for me. Job security.”

He chuckled, and I did too. I liked him. “Right,” I agreed.

“I’m not saying to not tell him how it affected you and for him not to rectify it, but he definitely cares for you. I could see it when I first met you at Ali’s house. So, to answer your question... I don’t believe you were too harsh. There’s nothing wrong with making sure he’s sure about the way he feels. Your statements were based on his actions, no one else’s. It wasn’t like you told him you were done. There is nothing wrong with self-evaluation and making sure there is clarity.”

“Thank you so much, Isaiah. I really like you. Have you ever thought about working with the military?”

“Naw, I ain’t never thought about it,” he said, dropping his professionalism. “I mean, I won’t rule it out completely, but I would need to know more.”

“Okay. If it’s cool with you, can I maintain you as my counselor?”

“Absolutely.”

“I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me and on a Sunday.”

“That’s what family does. We’re family now.”

I smiled. Just a month ago, my kids and I were alone, and I was thinking of moving to Puerto Rico to be with my mom. Now I couldn’t even fathom doing that. “Thank you again. I’m grateful for family.”

“Talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. The talk with Isaiah made things so much clearer. He didn’t say a word about charging me for his services, and I totally forgot to ask. I grabbed my phone and sent a text message. *Please send me an invoice.*

I included my email address, and almost immediately, he responded with eye roll emojis. I laughed as his second message came through. *I just said we're family. Family don't pay for my services. I want to see my family healthy and prospering in all aspects, and mental health is a huge part of that process.*

I smiled as tears filled my eyes. *You're an angel. Thank you.*

After setting my phone on my nightstand, I went to the kitchen to cook. I was going to make the tripeleta and pina coladas. I was off for the next two weeks, and I was beyond happy about that shit. Hopefully, Rondo liked it. They would be back in an hour, and I wanted the food to be ready or close to it. He and I needed to get back on track... again.

Our issues were with communication. However, I believed that after this incident and enduring the awkward way it happened, we would be vowing to do better communicating our needs to one another and not letting it fester. Had he not come over today, I didn't know when I would have reached out. I just knew that I loved him, and I very much wanted him to eventually reciprocate that.

As I grilled the sandwiches, I heard doors closing. I smiled as I looked at the time. Two hours on the dot. That proved just how much he wanted to make this right. He was anxious to get back to me. I smiled slightly as I went to the door and opened it. The kids were excited as they came back in. They were all smiles, including Sunni. I grabbed her and pulled her into my embrace.

"I'm sorry I didn't greet you when y'all first got here."

"It's okay," she said and smiled at me.

"It's not okay. That won't happen again."

I kissed her cheek as her smile widened. Sophie came to me for a kiss too. I slightly rolled my eyes. She was so jealous when I gave love to anyone else. When I saw that they had Ellington, I smiled. He and Micah seemed to get along so well, although he was a year or two older. As they made their way to the rooms, I turned to Rondo.

He was standing there, staring at me. "You look a lot better, baby," he said in a low voice.

I made my way to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. "I feel better, Rondo. I hope the kids didn't give you a hard time."

"Not at all. You cooking?"

"Yes," I said as I pulled away from him to get the last sandwich off the

grill.

“Damn, it smells good. I thought I was going to be either taking y’all to get something to eat or ordering something to pick up later.”

After removing the sandwich, I turned to him and said, “I would really like for you and Sunni to stay here.”

He licked his lips then bit the bottom one as he came closer to me. Without saying a word, he pulled me in his arms and gripped my ass. While he was taller than me, he wasn’t terribly tall to where he had to stoop or anything. However, he stooped anyway and picked me up, setting me on the countertop, and stood between my legs.

“Say less, baby. I’m so sorry for how I treated you.”

“Show me how sorry you are later.”

He gave me a smirk then backed away some so I could get off the countertop. “You know what? Let me eat, before I forget the kids are here. What did you cook?”

I chuckled as I put some sauce in a bowl. “I made a Puerto Rican dish called a tripeleta. It’s like a sandwich with plenty of cheese, ham, chicken, and beef, along with onions and tomatoes. I wanted you and Sunni to have a taste of my Puerto Rican heritage. Don’t get it twisted though. I can cook a soul food meal too. I just wanted you to have something different.”

He chuckled, then took one of the sandwiches from the plate and dipped it in a homemade sauce that was similar to Chick-fil-A sauce in taste. I watched him intently as he bit into it. He closed his eyes as he chewed. When he reopened them, they were wide as hell. “Damn! This shit good as hell. Let me fix a plate.”

I giggled. “Do you like pina colada?”

“I like all alcohol, baby. You can’t miss me.”

I chuckled as I grabbed the frozen treat from the freezer. While everything seemed great now, I knew I needed to talk to him... not only about where we were going in our relationship, but about what had happened to me in the military years ago and what happened yesterday. I fixed myself a plate then sat with him. “Did the kids eat?”

He glanced at me. “Yeah. They wanted McDonald’s.”

I rolled my eyes. They always wanted McDonald’s. “Okay. I don’t know if Sunni will want to try one or not, but there are plenty on the stove.”

“Okay. So tell me what’s going on with you besides the bullshit I did. Something happened at the cemetery. I saw Seneca holding your hands and

y'all taking deep breaths."

He continued eating as I set mine back on the plate. "I suffer from PTSD. I hadn't had a moment like that in a long time, but seeing that dead body was triggering."

"You didn't go to war, did you?"

"No, but there was an incident on base when I was like nineteen. It left a few people dead. One of the soldiers', in my vicinity, head got blown off, similar to Leon's. It sent me into a panic attack. I was hyperventilating. He said he suffers from anxiety and knows how it feels to not be able to breathe. He helped me breathe through it. I'm just grateful that he was there. I could have passed out. I felt lightheaded and dizzy."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

"Your plate was full. We were at the cemetery."

"I know, but I should have been there for you."

"It's okay. I'm just glad it's over now. Leon is dead, and hopefully, so are all the issues."

"Yeah. I need to talk to Jungle to see if there were any other loose ends. Kennedy's cousin Darlena was somewhat involved in all that bullshit, but I'm not sure if anything different was found out about her."

He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips to kiss, and I went back to my food. I was hoping I didn't have to go into detail about what went down years ago. That was a story I didn't want to have to repeat again. It was bad enough Ali had somewhat thrown it in my face. I was stunned when he started spitting out the details of my folder.

I didn't know how he found that information, because that shit was supposed to be sealed. No one was supposed to be able to access that information. I was quickly learning that nothing seemed to be off-limits for Ali. I truly believed he could have gotten the information on Leon Moore. I believed he just wanted to test me to see how efficient I would be.

When I looked up at Rondo and saw him staring at me, I smiled. He'd eaten four triangles, the equivalent of two sandwiches. "Do you want more?"

He grabbed my chair and yanked it to him. "Mm hmm."

He slid my T-shirt off my shoulder and lightly kissed it then my neck. "I want more... as much as you can handle giving me. I promise you that I'm ready."

"I believe you. Isaiah helped me to see that. You wouldn't have felt the need to explain your behavior if you weren't ready. Thank you for being

patient with me.”

“Naw. You been patient with me, and I appreciate that. When we get done, we have to take Ellington home, then we’ll have to go to Shavozz’s house to get our clothes. After all that, we get to come back here so I can show you how sorry I am.”

“Mm. I can’t wait to see how you will grovel at my feet.”

“Your feet? Naw. I’m gon’ grovel at that pussy. That wet, fat ass pussy.”

I stared into his eyes, knowing that there was no way I would be able to look away first. “Damn, baby. She’s gonna enjoy every minute of that.”

“Hmm. I bet she will.”

CHAPTER 19

RONDO

“Oh fuck!” I whispered harshly. “Cum on this dick, Dinalee.”

I was hitting it from the back and watching all the ripples go through her ass. The kids had gone to sleep, and Sophie was way too excited to be sharing a room with Sunni. When we got back from taking Ellington home and getting our clothes, I drank another pina colada. That shit was strong as hell. By the time the kids went to bed, I was on the verge of eating Dinalee out on the kitchen table. I was so damn horny I just needed to get at her ASAP.

Her moans had gotten a little too loud, but mine weren't any better. Her pussy had my dick in a chokehold, and I was doing my best not to nut prematurely. I grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling her head back so I could grip her neck. “Rondooo, shit! Fuck me, baby! Fuck... me!”

I put my hand over her mouth as she came all over my dick. That didn't last long, because she bit my fucking fingers. I jerked it away and shoved her head to the pillow. After leaning over to her ear while still deep stroking her paradise, I said, “You gon' have to shut the fuck up before Sophie knocking on the door, thinking you about to die.”

She buried her face in the pillow, and I closed my eyes, trying hard as hell to concentrate on anything other than how good her pussy felt. I wasn't wearing a condom, and we'd practically torn our clothes off trying to get to each other. I still couldn't believe she'd told me that she loved me. I kind of figured she was falling, but for her to admit it made me that much more determined to prove to her that I could be everything she needed.

Feeling my raw dick inside of her was like indulging in the most decadent chocolate. While she was light complexioned because of her heritage, there

was nothing vanilla about this shit. The power of that melanin was shining through at this very moment, and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold it any longer.

I pulled out of her, and she swiftly turned around and sucked the shit out of me, causing my dick to express its ultimate gratitude. She'd sucked the fucking breath out of me, too, as I stared down at her with the deepest frown on my face. When my dick slid from her lips, a shiver went through my body. I collapsed on the bed next to her, and she mounted me. "I've been wanting to ride the fuck out of you."

"Mm. Well handle up then," I said as I felt my dick rising once again.

That nigga didn't even deflate completely. He wanted as much action as she planned for him. Until she passed out, I planned to be on go. She slid down my shit, and my toes curled so fucking tight they were about to start cramping. The way her pussy rubbed across the head of my dick upon entry nearly made me yell foul on the fucking play. My dick twitched like he was about to regurgitate his affections, so I closed my eyes and counted fucking sheep.

Unfortunately, that didn't last long, because she started bouncing on my shit while pulling her own hair. That was the sexiest shit I'd seen in a while, and I couldn't help but slap her ass then grab hold of it. *Got damn!* She wasn't lying when she said she wanted to ride the fuck out of my dick. That nigga was so damn hard it felt like he was about to burst through the skin.

"If you want your fun-filled ride to last longer, you need to slow your ass down."

She stared at me but didn't take heed to a fucking word I said. When she grabbed her titty and started licking and sucking her own nipple, I threw her off me and shot cum every-damn-where. Her ass probably wanted me to cum quick so she didn't have to be up there too long. But hell, if she needed to tap out, I wouldn't have had a problem with that. I would have pulled her to me and fucked that pussy up.

I looked over at her, and she had a slight smile on her face. "Dinalee... I know you ain't tryna get pregnant. Don't be getting caught up with how this dick stroke them insides and be looking at me sideways for the next nine months."

She giggled then slid her soft body on top of mine and laid her head on my chest. I kissed her forehead while thanking God that things were rectified in our relationship. As I stroked her hair, she said, "I need some more."

“I’ll give you all you need.”

She lifted her head and stared at me like she was in disbelief. “You aren’t tired?”

“I don’t ever get tired of pussy. Now that I have yours, I may as well be immortal, because even robots need charging at some point. Whenever you wanna drop this sloppy shit on me, I’ll be ready.”

I gripped her ass, lifting slightly, and slid right back into her paradise. I didn’t even bother to clean up. She was gon’ fuck around and find out how we really did things in the south. I didn’t know why she thought my dick was a weak ass nigga that wouldn’t be able to keep up with her drive. Her past dude must’ve needed testosterone injections or some shit. As long as she was on go, I would be too.

I slid her up and down my dick slowly as she moaned softly, her walls gripping me like they didn’t want me to leave. My dick was home. I felt that, and she felt it too. “I love you, Rondo. Mmmm. I love you so much.”

Her walls closed in, and she came, her body trembling as I felt her liquid offering, leaking to my balls. I kissed her head. I wanted to tell her that I loved her too, but I wasn’t quite there yet. I hated leaving her hanging like that though. Apparently, I was too quiet, so she said, “You’ll love me in time, and I’m gonna be here for the journey. I won’t ever break your heart, Rondo. I won’t make a fool of you. Just like you vowed to be everything I needed, I’m going to be the same for you.”

I lifted her head and kissed her tenderly, sliding my tongue into her mouth slowly, tasting the residue of our feelings on it. When I pulled away from her, I rolled over, landing on top of her. My dick immediately found home and engaged. As I stared at her, she stuck out her tongue and licked my lips. It still held her flavors from earlier when we’d first started. I wrapped my lips around it and kissed her passionately, giving her exactly what she wanted—all of me.

It was like the walls fell completely, and the weight lifted from me. I could have sworn we’d levitated. Our lovemaking was so damn powerful. It was like it drained and fulfilled me all at the same time. Her hands traveled down my body, and when she got to my ass, she pulled me deeper into her, and I got fucking lightheaded. She wanted more than my dick. She wanted my fucking soul. In time, she would have that shit.

“YOU BUSY?” ALI ASKED AS SOON AS I ANSWERED HIS CALL.

“We’re riding around looking at houses we searched on the internet. I plan to move as soon as possible. Everything good? How’s Riley?”

“Everything cool. Riley is good. She’s off this week. If there are no more complications, the doctor will release her to go back to work Monday.”

“Oh, okay. That’s good. What’chu need?”

“I just need to holla at’chu about something when you’re alone. I prefer to do that in person though.”

I frowned slightly. I didn’t know what he wanted to talk about, but he had my damn nerves on edge without me even having a clue. “Okay. We have two more properties to look at, then I’ll make my way to your house.”

“Okay.”

He ended the call, and I glanced at Dinalee. “I have to go meet with Ali when we get back. Hopefully, it won’t take too long.”

“I don’t guess it’s Watchful Eyes Business if he doesn’t want me there.”

“Hmm. I didn’t think about that. I wonder what it’s about,” I said as we turned into the driveway of the next house.

Sunni said, “Oooh, Daddy! I like this one.”

“I do too. Let’s get out and peek through the windows, since it’s empty.” I turned to Dinalee. “You coming, baby?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

I could tell she was trying to rack her brain to figure out why Ali didn’t ask her to come out. After opening her door, I said, “Maybe it’s about my employment or something about Kennedy. It could be anything personal that wouldn’t require Watchful Eyes to be there.”

As she agreed, she got a text message. She smiled slightly. “He called a Watchful Eyes Meeting for this evening, but the time is pending.”

“See? Maybe he needs to talk to me about something personal first.”

Her feelings would have been hurt if he said he didn’t need her anymore. Apparently, working with them meant more to her than I thought. She nodded and headed to the house with me. The listing had said that it was a five-bedroom home with three bathrooms and was nearly three thousand square feet. It was only one level, but that was fine by me. I hated climbing stairs. As Sunni peeked through the window with Sophie jumping up and down next to her, I turned to Dinalee and chuckled. “Look at Sophie.”

She rolled her eyes as I went over there and picked her up so she could see. The house was really nice from what I could tell. There was no need in

looking at the other. I needed to call and set up a walk through with the real estate agent. After we'd all looked through it, I asked Dinalee, "What do you think?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "It's a beautiful home, but what I think doesn't matter. How do you like it?"

I stared at her for the longest and watched her shiver slightly. "Why in the hell do you think I'm looking at a five-bedroom house? You don't think that's too big for just me and Sunni? You may not wanna move in with me at first, but eventually, you will. So the house I buy needs to be able to accommodate all of us. The kids need their own—"

She kissed me, cutting off my sentence as Sophie said, "Awww! Sunni, look!"

When Dinalee pulled away from me, I damn near yanked her back. However, if I did that, Sophie would have lost her mind. Dinalee rolled her eyes and said, "Hush, Sophie. He's my boyfriend. I'm allowed to kiss him."

Sunni giggled as Sophie stood there with her mouth open. Micah had rolled his eyes at her antics as well. Dinalee gave her attention back to me. "Rondo, wow. Your words were beautiful. I can't wait until we've gotten to that point in our relationship."

"Me either. But at least when you spend the night, the kids will have their own rooms."

"I love that. Call the realtor."

I chuckled and did just that, setting up a walk through for the morning. Dinalee said the kids would be in school tomorrow. She'd allowed them to stay home today to spend time with us. I believed she wanted them to see the family vibe we were creating. That felt good as hell too. It was something I'd craved as much as she did.

Once I got them back to her house, I headed to Ali's house. Curiosity about what he had to say had me flying through Beaumont, on the verge of running red lights. When I turned in the driveway, I saw him heading to the backyard. He glanced back at me, then stopped to wait for me to join him.

When I got closer, I could see that he looked bothered. He slapped my hand and shook it, then I followed him to the back. I noticed other cars were here as well, so I wasn't sure why Dinalee couldn't come. After rounding the corner, I saw Jungle, Seneca, Shy, Chad, and Jericho. The core members of Watchful Eyes were here... except Dinalee.

I walked over and greeted everyone before sitting. We talked about the

house I was going to look at and how Sunni and I were holding up. Once everything quieted down, Jungle said, “The police have cooled out completely. I’m in the clear as far as I know. Vegas handled Darlena. I hated that we had to, though, because she didn’t seem to really be involved in Kennedy, Leon, and Van’s bullshit, but she knew too much. She could become a threat later.”

“So Leon wasn’t working with nobody?” I asked.

“Nope. When those muthafuckas connected to Knowledge got killed, that eliminated his team too,” Chad said.

I nodded as Jungle continued. “Thankfully, the tension in our crew is done. Seneca and I are okay. Trust is a hard thing to regain, but we working on it.”

Seneca nodded. “I appreciate the opportunity to rectify my actions. I thought I would want to stay away from Watchful Eyes, but I couldn’t. Although I didn’t act like it, y’all my family. Besides Joyy, Big Zay, and my mama, y’all my people. Of course, the rest of the Berottes too. We’re brothers, and I nearly fucked that up. Kay Baby and I are still taking one day at a time, but we’re getting along. I even get to see Jericka whenever I want now. That’s a blessing.”

I smiled slightly as I glanced at Ali. He still looked bothered. Jericho patted his back. “Just spill it, bruh.”

He seemed to know what Ali had to say. “As you all know, I found out that Dinalee is my first cousin. Her mother and my mother were sisters. Rondo, I tapped Dinalee’s phone. That’s why I didn’t want her here. I don’t totally trust family. My parents fucked me over every chance they got. My grandparents sold my mother to my father.”

I was stunned into silence. I knew he had issues with his parents, but this shit was deeper than I thought. “I don’t listen to all of her calls. Actually, I’ve only listened to one. I knew after she found out about our kinship, she would be calling her mother. I needed to hear that shit firsthand. When I saw the phone number, I listened.”

I slid my hand over my mouth and beard. I remembered that her mother called when she had come to Lafayette to be with me after Kennedy was killed. I didn’t recall Dinalee telling me anything about the call or what her mother said about Ali or his parents. As I quietly waited for him to continue, my phone vibrated.

It was a text from my mama. *You got a letter from the judge’s office. Your*

attorney will probably be calling you as well.

I knew to probably expect that call in the morning. It was probably something official to confirm what my attorney had already told me. I responded to her. *Okay. Thanks.*

“Her mother, Carmen, said that Camila told her parents to sell her to keep her safe. Camila was looking out for her safety. That shit kind of fucked me up, because somewhere along the line, Camila’s heart hardened because of what happened to her. She never sacrificed her well-being for me, other than her having me in the first place. She told me that she wanted to have an abortion. My dad wanted to keep me and forbade her from getting rid of me.”

He started pacing, and I knew that shit was bothering him bad. He turned to me and said, “I disabled the tap. I put her in Watchful Eyes mainly to watch her. While she seemed to not know who I was, I wanted to make sure. It takes a lot for me to trust people. I purposely told her some shit so she wouldn’t think I was digging into the family and why she was really here. Obviously, I didn’t find anything. What I had her working on with Leon, I could have found that shit out for myself. I’m the know all, be all.”

I wanted to chuckle, but I knew he was serious as hell. He looked up at the ceiling, then his eyes landed on Jericho. They had some type of silent communication as Shy put his arm around Ali. I could clearly tell that the three of them were the closest. “My parents are dead, Rondo. We took them out. Hearing that my mother once had a heart made me feel guilty, like I’d misunderstood her all this time. Jericho and Shy helped me see differently. Camila had evolved into someone else. The girl that had a heart for her little sister no longer existed. The Camila I knew was far removed from that. I tried to get her help, and she always turned it down. I couldn’t keep letting her torture my very existence.”

“Damn, bruh. I didn’t know all that.”

He nodded. “Had it not been for these two men, I would have probably been dead or in jail a long time ago. Shy gave me family. Jericho had my back at all costs. His training was extensive in shit like that, and he took care of things I had no idea of how to do inconspicuously. Dinalee is a good woman, and when she gets here, we having a welcome to the crew party for you and her, but I needed to tell you about that. In our brotherhood, we don’t keep secrets. We ten toes down for each other.”

He glanced at Seneca, causing everybody to do the same. “That includes you too. However, you betray anybody in our crew again, you won’t live to

tell about that shit. I mean that with my whole heart. We love you, nigga, but ain't no way in hell will we let our love for you destroy all of us. Can't happen and it won't happen."

Seneca nodded and stood and extended his hand to Ali. He grabbed his hand and pulled him in for a hug. I was glad I only came along at the tail end of all that shit. When they separated, Ali turned back to me. "The only secret there will be is me telling Dinalee that I know about the conversation. I understand why she didn't tell me. After what all I told her about Camila, she knew that shit wouldn't make me feel any better."

I nodded my understanding of what he was saying to me. He didn't want me to tell her either. "So, Rondo, you think you gon' get that house?" Chad asked.

"Hell yeah. We do a walk through in the morning. I can't wait to get out here with y'all."

"Well, I want you to know that I got'chu. When I felt like I had nobody else, even with all the bullshit you had going on, you took the time to talk to me and check on me. I appreciate that," Seneca said as he handed me an envelope.

I frowned as I stared at it. "What's this?"

"Just open it."

I opened the envelope and pulled out a cashier's check for two hundred fifty grand. "Naw! Nigga, naw! Why you giving me this? I'm good. Chad hooked me up when he hooked everybody else up."

Seneca slowly shook his head. "I have more money than I know what to do with, man. I invested a mil, and it turned into four. You deserve that money. That way, you ain't gotta wait on all that fucking paperwork. You can pay cash for that house. How much is it?"

I damn near wanted to cry. I still had about three hundred grand of the money Chad gave me. He'd given me five hundred thousand, and he'd just met me. "The house is listed for three thirty."

"They gon' go down on that shit if you tell them you have cash. I'll get you another cashier's check for the rest. We take care of each other, man. If all of us are millionaires, you will be too. You feel me?" Seneca said.

I slapped his hand and hugged him. When you were good to people, you were blessed. This time, I was more than blessed. "Na go get Dinalee and the kids. The women of Watchful Eyes are all bringing the food and our kids. We finna have a good time. If it was the weekend, we could get fucked up for

real, but a lot of us got shit to do tomorrow,” Chad said.

He started barking, and everybody rolled their eyes. I threw up my hands and started barking right along with him. “Aww shit. I forgot Rondo was a fucking dawg,” Shy said. “We gotta recruit more playa muthafuckas that don’t mind shimmying on a nigga.”

I chuckled as Chad pushed him in the shoulder. I could actually say that Kennedy’s fuck ups were my blessings. I gained more brothers, more family, a come up in my career, and a woman that made me feel shit I hadn’t felt in a long time. Things were looking up for me for the first time in a long time. Maybe I wasn’t all that hard to love after all.

CHAPTER 20

DINALEE

“**W**hy are you calling me, Ramón?”

“I just wanted to check on the kids. Listen. I’m sorry about the shit I pulled the other weekend. Losing you has never sat well with me, although I made it seem like it didn’t matter. I thought I was coming not only to see the kids but to begin making things right with you. I fucked up our marriage. That’s very clear.”

“So why all the fucking confusion then?”

“When I saw Rondo with you, it fucked me up. I waited too long to get my shit together.”

I rolled my eyes. Even if I wasn’t with Rondo, I wouldn’t have taken his ass back. I would have no guarantees that he wouldn’t go back to the jackass he was while we were married. *No thank you.* He continued. “I wasn’t angry with you or him. I was pissed at myself. I wasn’t the man you needed or the father my babies needed. So I needed to apologize for my behavior.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled loud enough for him to hear. “I accept your apology.”

“Thank you, Dinalee. I’m going to do better about checking on the kids as well. I can’t wait to get them this summer.”

His ass wasn’t slick. He knew Rondo would step in and take his fucking place. Sophie almost called him daddy yesterday. She heard Sunni calling him that and was trying to mimic everything she did. I had to remind her little ass that she was only five years old. Sunni was twelve, more than twice her age. She was already calling Sunni her sister.

When she and Rondo left Tuesday, we all looked depressed, even Micah. They were originally supposed to leave Tuesday morning, but he decided to

wait for the kids to get out of school so he could take us to dinner before he left.

“Okay, Ramón. I have to go.”

“Okay. Can you have the kids call me when you have time?”

“Yeah. They’ll call this evening.”

I ended the call and got in the shower. We were about to head to the Berottes’ for Sunday dinner. Rondo and Sunni would be meeting us there. They didn’t come down this past Friday because they’d been busy packing. I was okay with that since I knew they would be moving really soon.

While they were here, he’d started the process of transferring Sunni to Hardin Jefferson Junior High. She was so excited about that. The house Rondo had purchased was in Cheek, a small community right outside of Beaumont. He was so excited, because the house had a lot of land to where he could purchase farm animals if he chose to, and he was already planning to attend a trail ride next month.

When he showed the guys pictures of it Monday night, they flipped, saying that all the Watchful Eyes parties would now be there. The party was so cool. There was so much food and a huge cake welcoming Rondo and me to the crew. I was able to get more acquainted with Lexi, Brittany, Whitney, Riley, Chelsea, and even Kaysyn. While she and Seneca were no longer in a committed relationship, the women refused to let her go.

She and Seneca seemed pretty friendly with one another though, so apparently, they were doing well as they tried to work through things. She still didn’t know if they would ever get back together, but she said she still loved him. I was happy that everything was just so peaceful. From what I understood, it had been a rough couple of years with all the drama they’d had to overcome.

The way they swore us in, one would have thought we were going to be protecting the president. They kept saying brotherhood, though, and I had to keep clearing my damn throat. Finally, Chad had said that I was one of the brothers now and to get used to that shit. Rondo had adamantly disagreed. We laughed about that for a few minutes. I really enjoyed spending time with everybody, and today, we would spend time with the rest of the family.

They were having a small baby shower for Shavozz today, so Ms. Cheryl would be coming down with Rondo. I also learned that he had two other sisters on their father’s side that would be coming as well. He told me that he also had a brother. He’d never talked about them, but maybe one day, I would

get to meet his brother, since he wouldn't be here today.

By the time I was done with my shower, the doorbell was ringing. I threw on my robe and practically ran to the door. When I saw Rondo and Sunni through the peephole, I swore I was on a high that I had no intentions of coming down from. I quickly opened the door with a huge smile on my face.

Sunni's face mirrored mine as I pulled her in my embrace. I hugged her tightly, and she giggled. "You missed me?" she asked.

"Absolutely! I'm so happy you're here to stay!"

She laughed more. Rondo's house wasn't ready yet, so they would stay with us until it was, which was only another week or so. After releasing Sunni, I went to Rondo as he scanned me in my terrycloth robe. Without him saying a word, I knew where his mind had gone. I slowly shook my head. "Nope. Not now."

He frowned, then grabbed my hand to lead me to the back. "Ms. Dinalee, where's Sophie?"

"Girl, she got in trouble, so she's napping. You can wake her up though."

Sunni shook her head. "That lil girl is always in trouble."

Sophie was definitely always in some business that wasn't hers. She was meddling through my things in my bedroom and came across one of my toys. I nearly lost consciousness when I saw her playing with my rose. Had my shit on her neck and shit talking about how it tickled. I sent her to her room, because she knew better than playing in my things.

When Sunni retreated to Micah's room where he was playing his game, Rondo pulled me to my bedroom. As soon as I closed the door, he yanked my robe from my body. "Tell me no, Dinalee."

He stepped closer to me and slid his hand between my legs as he toyed with my nipple with the other one. "Tell me you don't want me in this fat pussy."

When his fingers slid inside of me, I took in a sharp breath. He pulled them out and put them right in my mouth. "You don't wanna slide down all this dick, Dinalee?"

I quickly unbuttoned his pants, pulled out his dick, and went to my knees to lube it up. As soon as my mouth covered him, he grabbed my hair and began stroking my mouth. I loved when he fucked my face, because that sexy ass mean mug stayed on his face, and his eyes stayed on mine. "Fuck. I don't know why you like playing with me. You know you wanted this shit."

He bit his bottom lip as I wrapped my hand around the base of his dick.

The head was going down my throat, putting my gag reflexes to the test. I was so close to throwing up on him, and I knew he felt it, because he pulled his dick from my mouth, covered with my saliva, then pushed me to the bed.

When he entered me, he shoved my face in the mattress and rearranged my fucking insides. His dick was lethal, and it was about to kill my pussy in the most pleasing way. “Rondo, shit,” I said against the mattress.

Within a couple of minutes, he pulled out and nudded on my ass. “Stay right there, and I’ll get a wet towel,” he said.

Just that quickie had me spent. I almost wanted to stay here for the rest of the day now. Once he returned with the towel and had wiped the nut from my ass, he entered me all over again. “Rondo, fuck.”

“Quickie or not, you know I can’t be around this pussy and not have you cum on my dick. That first round was too fast. Now come on. Give me that shit.”

“Mmm... yes, baby. Make me cum.”

Within a minute or so, I was cumming all over his dick, and shortly after, he was pulling out once again. “And now you need to get dressed so we can go.”

I turned to him and gave him the side eye as he stuffed his dick back in his pants. All I wanted to do was lay down and go to sleep now. Pulling me up from the bed and helping me stand on my wobbly legs, Rondo kissed me, giving me the gift of life all over again. I knew we would never hear the end of it if we didn’t show up today, especially after everyone agreed to be there. They said it would be the first Sunday dinner in a while where everybody was there, not to mention the baby shower.

After cleaning up, I got dressed, and we headed out. When we got to Rondo’s truck, Sophie said, “Mommy, what were you doing in your room?”

I frowned at her, confused by what she was asking me. “Getting dressed. Why?”

“I heard you cuss at Mr. Rondo. Did he make you mad? You didn’t sound mad.”

I saw the smirk appear on Rondo’s face as I rolled my eyes. “No, he didn’t, baby. We were just playing.”

She frowned then shrugged her shoulders as Sunni brought her attention to something on her tablet. I was grateful for the distraction. Within a few minutes, we were turning in the driveway at Mr. Sheldon and Mrs. Anissa’s house. It seemed they were the parents to everyone that would come over on

Sundays. Mrs. Anissa called everybody her babies and referred to them as such to Mr. Sheldon. He would smile and agree.

They were a beautiful couple. Rondo had to explain to me that she was his second wife, and they'd only been married for a few years... like five or six. Once he told me their story, or as much of it as he knew, I admired them even more. To know they'd both overcome adversity was inspiring. Rondo and I seemed to almost mimic their circumstances before meeting one another. Rondo's past significant other was deceased, and my ex-husband was a jackass.

I knew our situations were different, but our outcome was the same. We met someone on our second attempt at love, and like them, we were forming a blended family that would have close bonds as well. I looked up to them in a short amount of time, and I knew everyone in attendance did so as well. Rondo called them Pops and Mama Nissa. I thought that was beautiful.

He opened the door for me as I grabbed the gift bag for Shavozz. It was filled with goodies for her and the baby. She would be telling everyone what they planned to name him, and Riley and Whitney would be revealing the sex of their babies. I already knew Riley was having another daughter, but I wasn't sure about Whitney.

When we got to the backyard, the kids were running and screaming as Chad chased them around the yard. Without giving anyone a second look, Sophie ran straight to them. I was about to yell for her to come back, but Alexz said, "Aht aht! Let that baby go play. She can speak later. We gon' be here a while today. Kids are always amused by a jackass."

I chuckled. I swore we were sisters in another life. She gave Chad the damn blues though. I was more than sure I would be, too, once I got to know him better. He just seemed so damn fun to be around. With him being a part of Watchful Eyes, I knew I would be getting to know him and Shy a lot quicker than the other Berotte brothers. Since DJ was Rondo's brother-in-law, I knew it would take no time getting to know him as well.

It seemed to me that this family had rescued everyone here in some way or another. Being a part of Watchful Eyes and listening to Ali when he shared stuff with me had proved that. Mrs. Anissa and Mr. Sheldon had become parents to all of us... even me. I was so far away from my parents, and it caused our relationship to sort of drift. I wasn't as close to them as I used to be. However, having them as parents away from home made my heart feel light.

It seemed the only ones who had a functioning, healthy family were the Vaughns. Kaysyn, Axton, and Arrow, along with their parents, had come into the family and added to the love. Everyone else was broken in some sort of way, whether it was deceased parents or some sort of dysfunction. Whatever the case, I was happy that I was now a part of it all.

Alexz put her arm around me as we went inside. I was able to get more acquainted with Sandrene and meet Rondo's sisters, who'd already arrived. Shavozz had a ton of gifts. I originally thought it would be a co-ed baby shower, but I saw that the women would be inside, and the men would be outside. "So how are things progressing with you and Rondo?"

I turned to Alexz and said, "Good. Since we got some shit straight after the funeral, things have been on the up and up."

"Good. I hope you can cook, because that nigga will eat everything that ain't fucking nailed down," she said as she glanced toward the door.

When I looked back and saw my man standing there in all his country ass glory, I smiled. He had on his boots, jeans, and a plaid shirt, looking like a wet dream. "Alexz, you always running your mouth about something. Eat a piece of cheesecake or something. And fix me a piece while you at it."

I smiled, trying not to laugh. Alexz liked fucking with people. "Nigga, you got a woman here. I ain't fixing shit no more! Ain't nobody 'round this camp was single last time I checked. Only one man, other than my husband, still has my devotion, and that's Sheldon Berotte. You ain't him."

Rondo twisted his lips to the side and came to me. "Don't be talking to Alexz. She gon' be a bad influence on your life."

I laughed so hard. He acted like I was an impressionable Sophie. "Uuhh, I think I'm grown, Rondo."

"You need to be reminded of who the disciplinarian is in our relationship?"

"Mm hmm. ASAP."

"Nasty ass." He leaned to my ear and said, "I'm gon' beat the fuck outta that pussy when the kids go to bed."

"I look forward to that shit."

It felt like Sheba was about to detach herself from me and attack his ass. Then I had to go and stare into his eyes. He was gon' fuck me somewhere around here to take the edge off. I would risk my dignity to feel his dick in my paradise.

CHAPTER 21

RONDO

I slowly shook my head at DJ as he puffed on a cigar, happy as shit. He was finally having a kid of his own. While he loved my nephews like they were his, I knew he longed to have his own, but because of his love for Vozz, he refused to make a big deal out of it. She sacrificed her wants for him, and because he was an amazing man to her, I applauded her for that. Life was about making sacrifices for the ones you loved and the ones that reciprocated that shit.

With Kennedy, it seemed I made all the sacrifices while she fucked me over. I was doing my best to leave that shit in the past. Dinalee wasn't Kennedy. She was far from that shit, and she deserved everything good I had to offer.

We were all sitting outside, while the women were in the house, cutting up. We could hear their asses screaming and shit out here. They sounded like they were having fun. I wanted to go in there and crash that fucking party, because I wanted more potato salad. I loved how Mama Nissa made her potato salad. Instead of using mayo, mustard, and relish, she just used that Kraft Sandwich Spread. The relish was cut up fine in the spread. I hated crunching on shit in potato salad.

The food was always good over here. Today, we'd had a beef roast with a forty-weight gravy. That shit was fire. Fuck those baked beans. I'd put the gravy from that roast over some rice with potato salad and green beans on the side and tore it the hell up. As we chilled in the backyard, watching the kids play and have a good time, the gate opened.

Everyone was already here, so I wasn't sure who was popping up. Everyone's attention was focused on that direction, and Mr. Sheldon had

stood from his seat, along with Zay, Shy, and Dylan. Chad was still in the yard, playing with the kids.

It was a man that looked slightly familiar, but I couldn't place him. Axton, Arrow, and Seneca stood and made their way to him. I assumed it was someone they all knew. He looked slightly nervous. When Mr. Sheldon sat down, Isaiah said, "He looks a lot better."

I frowned slightly and asked, "Who is that?"

"Kaysyn's first husband, Luckey."

"Oh shit. I thought he looked familiar. He's smaller than I remember."

"Yeah. Drugs chewed that nigga up and spit him out," Shy said.

The patio door opened, and Kaysyn walked through it. She didn't look nervous, so maybe she was expecting him. Her brothers, Seneca, and Luckey made their way back toward us for him to talk to Kaysyn. I was happy, because I wouldn't have to strain extra hard to hear what they were saying. Ali was staring hard at him, and so were Jungle and Jericho.

"Daddy!"

I turned to see Jericka running to him. He stooped, and when she got to him, he lifted her in his arms, holding her tightly. The tears cascaded down that man's face. I felt sorry for him. To be mistakenly addicted to drugs had to be a hard thing to overcome. When he finally put her down, he turned his attention to Ellington, who was just staring at him. He nodded at him, and Ellington came closer.

He extended his hand to his son. When Ellington took it, he pulled him in for a hug. He looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then he relaxed and embraced his dad. Once Luckey stood, he stared at Kaysyn. "Thank you for allowing me to come to see them."

"You also need to thank Chelsea," she said as Chelsea came out of the house. "She's Jericka's biological mother."

Luckey nodded then expressed his gratitude to Chelsea. Apparently, he already knew what had happened. Turning back to Kaysyn, he said, "You didn't have to agree, though, so thank you. I miss them so much. I've been working on myself for the past few months. I wanted to wait to see them, because I wanted to make sure I was better. I didn't want to be in and out of their lives again."

Kaysyn nodded. I noticed Seneca was hanging back. He looked nervous as hell. I felt like he was probably feeling insecure at this moment, but I didn't think he had a thing to worry about. From what I knew about

Kaysyn... she wasn't for no bullshit. With as much as Luckey put them through, she wouldn't take him back. Seneca still had her heart, despite his fuck up.

"Do you want to eat?" she asked him.

He nodded with a slight smile. She turned to go inside and fix a plate as he turned to Seneca. He walked over to him and shook his hand. No words were spoken between them. Luckey began making his rounds, speaking to everyone including Kaysyn's father. When he sat, Jericka plopped on his lap and hugged him for the longest. It was clear that she'd missed him. Walking over to Seneca, I asked, "You good?"

He nodded, but I wasn't accepting that simple answer. "She don't want him."

He glanced over at me and asked, "How you know?"

"Drug addiction is an everyday battle. He's fighting his body's cravings, and his mental is fucked up because of that addiction. Talk to her."

"I'm not sure that she wants me either."

"Take it one day at a time, man. Anything good is worth fighting for. Fight to convince her that you learned from your errors and that you're still going to therapy because you want to do something about it. At least y'all can still be a part of Jericka's life. It worked out for all of you."

"Thanks to Chelsea. She could have held that shit against me and Kay Baby and kept Jericka away from us."

"But she didn't. Focus on the fact that she didn't. Focus on what is instead of what could have been. Get over your guilt and move on from it. If you keep holding that shit over your own head, Kaysyn will too. You can't expect her to move on if you don't."

"Damn. You work for Isaiah now?"

I chuckled and pushed his arm as I noticed Isaiah watching us with a frown on his face. He'd probably heard his name. "Seneca, whatever the fuck you said better be on the up and up, nigga."

Seneca chuckled and shot Isaiah the finger. "Is this your first time seeing him since he's been clean?" I asked.

"Yeah. The kids too. Kaysyn had talked to him a few times when he would call to check on them. I think she saw him once or twice though."

I nodded as Kaysyn came outside with a plate for Luckey. After setting it in front of him, she looked at Seneca and smiled. When she looked away and went back inside, I bumped him with my shoulder. "Talk to her. That's the

only way you gon' know."

I stood from my seat to go inside and fix another plate. I'd just have to deal with Alexz's big mouth. The food was worth it.

"YOU STILL ENJOYING YOUR NEW SCHOOL?"

"Yes, sir. There's a lot of white people there though."

"Yeah. The rural communities in this area are predominantly white. I don't plan on transferring you anymore, so I was hoping you liked it. Ain't nobody messing with you, are they?"

"No, sir. There are a couple of black teachers there that look out for the black kids. My English teacher told me to be sure to let her know if I had any problems. Everyone seems nice though."

"Good."

"Are we going to Ms. Dinalee's house?"

"She's coming to ours. She said she wanted to braid your hair, and she left all the product in your bathroom."

"Yay! I can't wait."

I smiled at her as I drove home. We'd been in our new house for two weeks, and I was beyond happy to be closer to Dinalee. Working with the Watchful Eyes crew gave me a lot of flexibility, so I ate lunch with Dinalee almost every day, whether she was at work or not. I was still working on getting her to move in with us, but I was trying to be patient at the same time.

My insecurities about us were practically nonexistent, and I just wanted to wake up next to her every day. When they stayed with us last weekend, I was beyond happy. This weekend would be the last weekend the kids would spend with us before they left for Ohio to spend time with their dad over the next month.

They would come back after the Fourth of July, and we would be going on vacation with the Berottes the last week in July. That would be a vacation out of this world, and I couldn't wait for all of us to turn up in Puerto Rico. Dinalee was beyond excited about that, and Ali seemed somewhat excited about it too. He would get to meet a lot of his family. I was happy for him. I didn't know how the pregnant women would fare out on this trip though. Shavozz was due to deliver next month, so she would probably leave the

baby with Mama, but Riley and Whitney would be damn near eight months by then.

However, they weren't the only two we had to worry about. Chelsea had announced her pregnancy at Shavozz's baby shower and so had Lexi. Everyone picked with Jungle, telling him that he didn't wait long to be fruitful and multiply. That nigga's chest was on swole the entire time after the announcement. We couldn't tell him or Chad a damn thing the rest of the day without them referring to their pregnant women. I knew that Jungle would be marrying Chelsea before long. There was no point in waiting when they were already living together anyway.

Arrow and Lynn finally set a date for their wedding as well, and she was passing out save the date cards. It was like the day was full of great things. No drama, just love. When Shavozz finally told everyone what the baby's name would be, we were in shock. Everyone assumed he would be Dexter the third, because DJ was named after his father. Since her oldest son's nickname was Tray, short for Trayveon, they decided to go with something else. Bradford Dexter Dent was what they chose to name him.

This family would have to rent a hall for Sunday dinner before long. Mr. Sheldon asked about moving it to my place during the spring and summer since I had a lot of property. I would be just fine with that. The kids would enjoy all the space to run around and have fun. We could buy bouncy houses and other things to keep them busy.

When we got home, Dinalee and the kids were already there, sitting in the driveway, waiting for us. As soon as I turned in, Sophie hopped out of the vehicle. She was always excited to see me... like I was her biological father. One time, she'd slipped up and called me dad. She was trying so hard to be like Sunni. I thought it was cute, but to Dinalee, not so much. She said she needed to act like a five-year-old.

Sunni hopped out of the truck as soon as I parked and ran to Sophie. When she picked her up and swung her around, I realized that Sunni was just as excited to have them around. She never really got to enjoy a sense of family. Kennedy and I never lived together. I believed she knew that things were progressing between Dinalee and me, and that we would eventually be a family... one that lived together.

She was definitely right about that. I planned to convince Dinalee to move in with me soon, but I knew in order to do that, I needed to tell her how I felt about her. I always did, but I needed to reassure her that she was it for

me. I went to her and kissed her lips then shook Micah's hand.

"How was your day, baby? You off early."

"It was good. I finished early. The kids were happy they didn't have to go to day care after school."

"I bet." I turned to Micah and asked, "Everything been cool at school and day care?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

Whenever Dinalee had to work too late, sometimes I'd pick the kids up so they didn't have to go to day care. Micah hated going. Sophie was fine wherever she went. She was always the center of attention. Micah, not so much.

Once we got inside, Dinalee was about to head to the bathroom to get hair stuff to do Sunni's hair. I grabbed her hand and pulled her to me. She smiled big as I wrapped my arms around her. "The past three weeks have been amazing. The first week and the weekends after have been even better."

She smiled. "Yes, they have. I'm enjoying having you close and at my disposal."

She giggled as I slapped her ass. "So, when y'all gon' move in so we can have that closeness all the time?"

"There are certain things I need before that can happen, Rondo. You know that."

"I thought I was providing everything you needed though. Run it down for me again."

She rolled her eyes as she pulled away from me and went to the couch. "Rondo, seriously? If you can't remember what I need, why would I consider moving in?"

I sat next to her and pulled her to me. "Come on, baby. Please? Tell me again."

She huffed loudly then pushed me on the head as I chuckled. She stared into my eyes as I bit my bottom lip. "I need your undivided attention."

"Done."

"I need your consistency when it comes to being there for me emotionally and physically, especially when I've just had a long or rough day."

"You got that."

"I need to be thoroughly fucked at least four times a week."

"Mm. You got that plus some."

I leaned over and kissed her neck as she giggled. “I need you to love my kids like they’re yours.”

“Already done. So what haven’t I done, baby?”

“I need you to love me.”

“Check it off the list. I love you with all my heart, baby.”

Her eyes widened, and tears fell from them. I knew she needed me to profess my love for her. It was the only thing I hadn’t done to fulfill her requirements. I didn’t blame her. Why would she move in with a man that hadn’t even told her he loved her? She had children to consider as well. However, I needed to be sure that I loved her. I didn’t want to say that during a vulnerable moment.

I slid my fingertips over her cheek then pushed her curly hair over her shoulder. “I know it’s been a long month of you telling me you love me and not hearing it in return. I’m here to make up for that,” I said as I started Ginuwine’s “Differences” on my phone.

She smiled slightly and placed her hand on my cheek. “It was hard not hearing it, but I’ve been feeling it for a long time. You’ve always shown me that I was special, Rondo. Although you wouldn’t say it, I felt loved. That made all the difference, baby.” She glanced at my phone and continued. “My whole life has changed too. You came in and made me look at you like I’d never experienced hurt by a man. Everything was brand new with you. I love you, Rondo.”

“I love you too, Dinalee. So, when you moving?”

EPILOGUE

DINALEE

ONE YEAR LATER...

“**Y**ou’re such a beautiful little girl, spitting image of your father. I hate to be the one to break the news to you, Annalise, but you gon’ catch the blues with all these boys around you.”

Riley chuckled as I talked to her eight-month-old. She and Whitney had their babies two or three weeks apart, but Whitney had a little boy, who they’d named Rome. Shavozz and DJ’s son was already eleven months old. Lexi and Chelsea also both had boys whose names were Ambrose and Zamir. Chad had said that Ambrose just sounded like a strong ass nigga and that it was the perfect name for his son. We’d all rolled our eyes at that comment, including Lexi.

Their son and Chelsea and Jungle’s son were both almost five months old. So that was five boys that would give this little girl hell. Mr. Sheldon kept up with those little girls, though, and I nearly had to fight him to hold Annalise. It was beautiful to see him and Mrs. Anissa take in all these babies as their grandchildren, just like they’d taken in their parents as their kids.

Riley and Ali had gotten married in the backyard at the Berottes’ house a few months ago. She was so happy and had practically cried the entire time. Seneca had walked her down the aisle and gave her away to Ali since her father was deceased. Riley made a gorgeous bride, and I could tell that their wedding was emotionally taxing on her. Ali loved her through every minute of it, then revealed that she was already pregnant again. Annalise was only four months old at the time.

We were at Arrow and Lynn’s wedding reception. She’d made a gorgeous bride as well. The wedding was extremely elegant, but it was crowded as hell. Lynn had really made a name for herself in the community as a deejay. While she didn’t have much family, she had a ton of friends. Arrow had enough family to make up for it though. *Geeze*. The Vaughn family was huge.

As I watched everyone dance and have a great time, I chuckled at Jungle dancing with Chelsea’s mother and Seneca cutting up with Ms. Patricia, Lexi and Skyler’s mother. They loved gassing up the matriarchs in the family. Isaiah was dancing with his mother-in-law, Ms. India, and Axton was

dancing with Mrs. Anissa. It was beautiful. Dylan had chosen Mrs. Shirlene, Kaysyn's mom, to dance with since Seneca had stolen his mother-in-law. Their wives and girlfriends were laughing the entire time.

Jungle and Chelsea had pulled a fast one on us and had gotten married on our family trip to Puerto Rico. I'd never seen Jungle as a soft man, but seeing him be vulnerable with Chelsea was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever witnessed. It didn't help that I was emotional about seeing my mother and a lot of my family. It was home for a week, and that feeling had me crying my eyes out when it was time to go home to Beaumont.

We'd just moved in with Rondo by that time, and he was nervous that I thought I was making a mistake, especially since I'd told him of my thoughts about moving to Puerto Rico when we'd first met. I spent an entire day convincing him that my emotions had nothing to do with him. The kids spent the day with my mother, and I catered to him the entire time. Our relationship had progressed tremendously since then, and I was the happiest I'd ever been.

“Okay, listen. It's my got damn turn, ho.”

I didn't even have to look up to know that was Alexz. We'd become the best of friends and would purposely get on Rondo's fucking nerves. Him enforcing his discipline on me had become a common occurrence. I loved when he forced me to apologize. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, he loved that shit too. Alexz practically snatched Annalise from me as I fake pouted. Her being the youngest girl in the family had her spoiled like crazy... just like Alexz. She was eight months old and couldn't crawl... or rather refused to crawl. She was always being held.

After she took her, I watched Arrow and Lynn chat with their other guests as they left. The reception was practically over, but the family was still here and had no intentions of leaving any time soon. Rondo came over to me and pulled me from my seat so we could swing out to “There You Go” by Johnny Gill.

That was one thing I learned at the trail rides we'd gone to. He loved to dance and was pretty good at it too. He'd taught me how to zydeco, and swinging out wasn't too much different, just slower paced. I really enjoyed dancing with him. It always led to other bullshit. It didn't take much for us to end up in a bathroom or his truck at times. All he had to do was stare into my eyes with that slight frown on his face. He knew that shit too.

However, as we danced, he wouldn't stare too long. That shit put me on high alert, because the last time that happened, he was having doubts about

us. He was allowing fear to consume him, and I wasn't for that shit one bit. Instead of making a big deal of it right now, I decided to wait until we were alone or got home so we could talk about it privately.

I glanced around the dance floor to see Seneca and Kaysyn dancing together. I smiled at the sight. They'd been doing well, and she'd started wearing her engagement ring again. She'd told me that she never thought she would put it back on. As long as Seneca continued to progress, I believed she would eventually marry him. She said she was wearing the ring, but she still wasn't totally sure about whether she could fully trust him to do what was right. That was a few months ago.

However, by the looks of it now, her mind had been changed. They were still swaying, but his lips had landed on hers, and she was kissing him back. I couldn't help but smile at them. As I looked around again, I noticed I wasn't the only one watching them. Mrs. Anissa had the biggest smile on her face as she stared at them.

I believed after everyone watched Seneca and could see his sorrow, they were rooting for him to get it together. No one wanted to just throw him away. Despite his issues, he still deserved to be loved.

When it was just family in attendance, Arrow and Lynn thanked everyone for their presence and help to make their day one to remember. Arrow called Jamel and Rondo up to the mic. When I thought he was about to thank them for something, he handed the microphone to Jamel. "With the blessing of my boy... my brother, he allowed me to take some of their attention to put it on my wife and myself. We're expecting our first baby."

Everyone applauded as Sandrene blushed. *Whew, chile.* As everyone applauded, Rondo called me to the mic with him. When I stood next to him, he thanked Arrow as well. "Well, my announcement is similar to Jamel's. Dinalee and I are expecting a baby as well."

I smiled so hard. We'd taken a test a couple of weeks ago, so I wasn't sure why Rondo wanted to wait so long to tell them. It wasn't until he got down on one knee that I realized why he was waiting. He wanted everyone to witness a moment that neither of us would ever forget.

I cried audibly as he said in the microphone, "Dinalee Cadien, you came along at a time in my life where I was ready to give up on love. In a short amount of time, you taught me how to love and how to accept love. It was hard for me at first... hard to accept that you were genuine, but I now know that it's the only way you know to be. You stepped into my life like an angel,

taking care of me and Sunni emotionally. I don't know what we would have done without you."

He took a deep breath as he pulled the ring box from his pocket and opened it. "My daughter calls you mom, because you stepped in and showed her that another woman could love her like she belonged to her. I would like to call you my wife, but only if you cool with that. You are already exhibiting the attributes of a wife, but I need you to be mine. Will you marry me, baby?"

My entire body was trembling, and the tears were falling. "Yes, Rondo. With pleasure, baby."

He slid the diamond ring on my finger and stood as "Simple Things" started playing through the speakers. Everyone applauded and his bruhs barked as I kissed his lips, not wanting to ever separate from him. He pulled away and stared at me for a moment. "The kids are going to stay with Chelsea and Jungle tonight so we can have some privacy. I need to worship you for the queen you are."

"I love you so much," I said, then laid my head against his shoulder.

"I love you too."

I never thought this moment would happen again. Ramón had convinced me that I was hard to love... that I was difficult and incapable of treating a husband with respect and love. Rondo had proved him wrong, and I couldn't wait to continue proving him wrong every day by loving the man I was meant for.

The End

If you did not read the [author's note](#) at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

FROM THE AUTHOR...

This has been an amazing journey. The Berotte Family Series is complete. Am I saying I will never return to it? No. However, as of right now and for at least the rest of this year, there won't be another Berotte story. I'm not ready to age any of the kids for any second-generation stories either, and as of right now... Vegas is not getting a book. LOL!

Rondo and Dinalee had an amazing instalove story. There was minimal drama between the two of them and when there was it was rectified quickly. Kennedy suffered her fate, and Leon was handled quickly. Sunni being Knowledge's daughter though! I didn't see that coming as I was writing. SMH. He was determined to be a part of the Berottes and now an extension of him is. *cringe*

Dinalee being Ali's cousin was a beautiful way to connect him to family since he didn't have any... other than the Berottes, Vaughns, and his brothers of Watchful Eyes. I loved the fact that they recruited Rondo *and* Dinalee in the crew.

Seneca's redemption was touching as well. He'd nearly become someone totally different to prove that he belonged. Mental illness of any kind is something to take seriously, but Jungle wasn't feeling that. I was glad Seneca eventually got the opportunity to make things right with him.

All these babies!! Whew, chile! LOL! I knew y'all would want that for everyone though. The only one that hasn't gotten pregnant that can, is Lynn. Since her bariatric surgery, she has to wait a specified amount of time before she can safely do so. As mentioned in Kaysyn and Seneca's story, Kaysyn can no longer have children, which was her reason for adopting Jericka.

Again, this has been a wonderful journey. The first book released in April

of 2022, and it is wrapping up in May of 2023... a fourteen-book series. Thank you for your support and love along the journey.

I truly hope that you enjoyed this drama filled ride that probably had your feelings all over the place. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases.

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