

Holding



Alexandria House

HOLDING

ST. LOUIS SIRE: BOOK 2

ALEXANDRIA HOUSE



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PROLOGUE ONE

FORD

TWENTY YEARS AGO...

I crossed the road, leaving behind my own white frame house and making the short journey to my best friend's almost identical home, rolling my eyes when I noticed his sister sitting on her bike by their front porch.

"What you want?" she sassed.

"None of your bawk-bawk chicken-chicken bawk-bawk chicken leg business, ole ugly girl!" I shot back at her.

"You the one who's ugly, with your big head self!" she snapped.

"Big head means big brain."

"Why you don't use it, then?"

"Why you don't use them skinny legs and ride that bike somewhere and find you some business?" I suggested, climbing the three steps.

"Your dog is ugly, too," she pointed out.

I stopped, turning to see the stray that hung around my house standing at the bottom of the steps, tail wagging. "It ain't my dog and you know it."

She didn't speak again until I'd knocked on the front door, at which time she yelled, "Blake! big head Terrence Ford is at the door for you!"

I twisted around to snarl at her. She, in turn, gave me a smirk.

The door swung open to reveal Mrs. Tyler, their mom. "Krystle, stop all that yelling! Hey, Terrence. Blake'll be out to play with you as soon as he finishes vacuuming his room."

I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

After she closed the door, I hopped down the steps, taking a seat on the bottom one while trying to act like Krystle had disappeared. She quickly killed that strategy.

“What y’all finna do? Play some dumb game on your dumb PlayStation?” she questioned me.

“Like I said, none of your chicken leg business,” I replied.

“For your information, I got model legs, stupid!”

“Model what? Model ugly chicken?” She wasn’t ugly, not by a mile. If she wasn’t her obnoxious self, I might’ve thought Krystle was pretty. But she *was* her obnoxious self, and I couldn’t stand her.

“One day, when I’m a famous model and you’re somewhere still wearing hockey jerseys in the summertime, you’ll wish you were nice to me.”

“No, I won’t, and any jersey I wear when I’m grown is gonna have my name on it!”

“No, it won’t. You don’t even know how to play!”

“Ford!”

We both turned to see Blake stepping out of the house. I grinned, standing as my best friend approached us. Before he’d placed his foot on the top step, their mom yelled, “Blake, you know what time to be home!” through an open living room window.

“Yes, ma’am!” Blake called back.

“And take your sister with you!” Mrs. Tyler added.

“What?!” my friend and his sister shouted in unison, Blake continuing with, “Ma, *please!* Don’t make me take her!”

“I don’t wanna go with them!” Krystle protested.

“As long as the two of you are together, I know you’ll stay out of trouble. Now go on before I make you come back in the house. Once you’re in, you gon’ stay in!” their mom said.

Blake and I stared at each other before turning our attention to Krystle.

“Man, come on, y’all,” Blake mumbled.

“Where y’all going?” Krystle asked, walking her bike behind us as we trudged down the short driveway to the empty rural road.

“To play ball,” I informed her.

She groaned before dropping her bike in the yard. “Hold up. I gotta get something!”

“Hurry up!” Blake yelled.

She zipped in and out of the house before joining us as we headed down the road to our destination, the stray dog following us.

KRYSTLE

Watts, Texas, was a town with a population of less than ten thousand predominately Black citizens. Just a thirty-minute drive from Austin, it was also my hometown where me and my twin brother, Blake, were raised across the street from one Terrence Mathias Ford. During summer break, a lot of the kids our age would meet up at the high school and play basketball on the outside court. I never went since it wasn't my thing and my friends were away for the summer, but on this particular day, I'd been assigned the role of babysitter for my stupid brother and his stupid friend. We all knew it was because of a fight they got into with some boys a few days earlier that my mom got wind of due to a huge bruise on Blake's cheek. Ford managed not to get injured. Then again, Blake was always the one dragging Ford into mess, so it was good he didn't get hurt. I mean, Ford was stupid, but he wasn't as stupid as my brother even though he had a huge target on his back for bullies with his red afro. Plus, he was always saying crazy stuff. He definitely had a unique look, but he wasn't ugly. His head was huge, though. Like, *gigantic*.

I sat on a bench outside the fence that surrounded the court, the same fence I'd watched my brother and his friend climb moments earlier, joining a few other guys from our school. They were all idiots if you asked me. Every one of them.

I really didn't want to be there.

At. All.

Not even a little.

Anyway, Terrence Ford's ugly dog sat at my feet, as if guarding me. It was cute. I ended up spending the whole time we were there drawing in my sketch pad. I was good at it, too. I was pretty sure if the modeling thing didn't work out, I could be an artist.

“Chicken leg! What you drawing?”

I rolled my eyes as I lifted them to see a sweaty Ford at the fence, his fingers gripping the links as he stared at me with his mouth hanging open. The dog was on his feet, tail wagging so hard that it hurt when it hit my leg.

“You wouldn’t be sweating like that if you weren’t wearing a hockey jersey, Big Head,” was how I chose to respond.

“It’s my lucky jersey.”

“Good luck not sweating to death.”

“Ole ugly girl,” he mumbled as he turned and rejoined the game.

I rolled my eyes again, letting them drop to my sketch pad and the image I’d just drawn—a portrait of Terrence Ford, hockey Jersey and all.

PROLOGUE TWO

FORD

THEN...

“**M**aybe what?” I asked, moving to sit up in the bed and resting my back against the wall.

She sat up, too, staring at me with uncertainty in her eyes, her exposed nakedness inducing a brand-new erection. I reached down and stroked myself, watching as her eyes fell below my waist. “You want it? Come get it,” I told her.

Licking her lips, she moved toward me, climbing in my lap and straddling me. We were face to face, chest to chest as she lifted to guide me inside her.

“Damn!” I grunted. “You feel so good!”

She gripped my shoulders, sliding up and down on me, a strained expression on her face. She’d never ridden me before.

“You a’ight?” I asked, reaching around to grip her ass cheeks.

She nodded.

“Good, now what were you saying? We could do what?”

Throwing her head back, she wailed, “Ohhhhhh, fuck!”

I smiled. She looked so beautiful like this.

“I love the fuck out of you. You know that?” I asked as I leaned in to nip at her neck.

She lifted her head, fixing her drowsy eyes on my face. “I love you, too. I promise I do. I love you so much!” she whimpered before kissing me, her ride now a slow, torturously good grind.

I returned the kiss, my hands on her back, my nut threatening to rip through me at any moment. “Baby, I’m about to bust and I don’t think I can hold it!”

“Don’t hold it. Give it to me. I want every fucking drop,” she leaned in and said into my ear.

ONE

FORD

Now...

“Hello?” My eyes were focused on the building before me as I answered my phone.

“You got me on speaker?” Rapp, my teammate and fellow lineman, asked.

“Yeah, my phone is connected to my car. Why?”

“You alone?”

“It’s a good thing I am because you asking all the wrong questions.”

“My bad. Look, Yamille’s cousin wants you to call her.”

I frowned. “Who the fuck is Yamille?”

“Yamille! My girl!”

“Yamille... Yamille,” I mumbled. “The chick with the big ass and little thighs?”

“Fuck you, Ford,” he grunted.

“I’m being serious! You ain’t noticed her ass-to-thigh ratio is off? Like, waaaaay off?”

“Fuck you *again*.”

“Fuck me?!”

“*Again*.”

I laughed. “Yo, didn’t you just start seeing her like last week and she’s already your girl? Man, you are a serial monogamist. One good date and you all in! I thought you were saving yourself for Bianca Bambina.”

“Look, man...you want her number or not?”

“It depends. Do the cousin’s ass and thighs match?”

Click.

He hung up, and I howled laughing. Then I sent him a text message: *Yeah, I want the number. I’m between women right now. I swear you and Jones are sensitive as hell.*

I omitted the fact that I understood Jones’ sensitivity. Dude had a baddie for a wife.

You had one, too, I thought as Rapp’s response came through in the form of a middle finger emoji, followed by the phone number.

I shook that thought off as I opened the door to my Silverado and climbed out onto the parking lot. Sighing, I dragged a hand down my face, preparing myself for the feelings that assaulted me every time I came here to visit my son. Feelings, thoughts, regrets. I didn’t want the divorce. Yeah, I *said* I wanted it, but I didn’t mean that shit and Krystle, my ex-wife, knew it. Yet, she filed the papers anyway, and I didn’t fight it. I mean, I tried to reason with her, tried to get her to reconsider, but when she made it clear that she was absolutely done with our marriage, with *me*, I said fuck it and gave in, didn’t fight her on anything. Hell, I didn’t even get a lawyer. I just signed the damn papers and that was it. The love of my life was gone. The best thing that’d ever happened to me was over, and it was my own damn fault.

Mostly.

I think.

Shit.

It was early on a Saturday afternoon, my regular weekly visitation day with LaDarius. She had primary custody of him during the season since I worked so much. I kept him most of the off-season. She was good about being available so I could visit him, and I appreciated her for that. Then again, Krystle was never one to be unreasonable...until she was.

I crossed the parking lot, passing her little white BMW as I approached the front doors of the building, entering and heading straight for the elevator. Krystle lived in a condo on

the fourth floor. I still lived in the apartment we moved into when I was first traded from the Predators to the Sires. Damn, we had some good times in that apartment.

Real good.

“Were you going to knock?”

I lifted my eyes from the carpeted floor outside her home to her face. I didn’t even remember exiting the elevator and walking to her door.

“I didn’t knock?” I asked absently.

“No, you didn’t. Uh...are you okay, Ford?” she asked, her initial annoyance seeming to melt away, leaving concern in its wake.

The real answer? No. Coming here, seeing her and her beauty, fucked with my head, made me wish for something I needed but would never have again. I felt hopeless and more than a little lost when I was forced to confront this part of my life.

Instead of sharing any of that, I said, “I’m good.”

She gave me a look that told me she knew I was lying before inviting me inside her place. Everything was just as neat as it always was. She had these huge-ass plants. She’d always loved plants...

My eyes fell to her tiny bare feet before shooting back up to her pretty face. “You been a’ight? I mean, you feeling okay?” I queried.

“I’m fine,” she replied, and then silence.

Agonizing silence.

“Uh...LaDarius in his room?” I inquired, needing to put some space between the two of us.

She nodded, shoving her hands into the hip pockets of her tight jeans, the chocolate skin of her tiny waist exposed in the short sweatshirt she wore. “Yep. He’s in there waiting for you.”

Swallowing, I replied, “Cool, I’ma head on back there then.”

“Okay,” she said to my back as I walked toward his bedroom.

Once inside, I smiled. “Hey, man! Daddy is so glad to see you!”

My boy turned his head and started doing this nodding thing he did when he was excited as I opened the door to his crib, placing my hand on the bottom of the entrance. Instantly, he climbed off a branch and slowly made his way up my arm to my shoulder.

“You missed me, huh?” I asked as I reached up and rubbed his back. “I missed you, too. I got you something.”

Me and my guy made it over to the easy chair that sat in his room before I pulled the grapes from my pocket and laid them on the floor. Dude jetted down my body to get his snack. Fruit was like candy to iguanas, and he didn’t get to eat it often. Krystle was strict about that, so I knew this was a special treat for him.

I watched him eat and laughed when he climbed up my leg, stopping on my thigh so that I could pet him. So, I did.

LaDarius was a gift for Krystle, who was an animal lover like me. That was one of the things that made us compatible. Anyway, I got him for her like a month or so before we separated. He was a tiny something back then. Now, he was damn near two feet long counting his tail.

I looked up at the huge glass enclosure Krystle had recently bought him, the heat lamps, the vegetation. My boy was living in style!

Me and him kicked it for thirty minutes before those feelings started to overwhelm me, feelings of wanting to stay, of wanting us to be a family again. Then I stood, put my son back in his little condo, and took a deep breath before leaving him, hoping Krystle would be in her bedroom so I could yell goodbye and sprint up out of there without seeing her again.

No such luck.

She was sitting in the living room, eyes glued to her cell phone.

“A’ight. I’m out. Thanks for letting me see him. He looks good,” I said.

Her eyes popped up to meet mine—almond-shaped, dark, thick lashes lifting and dropping as she blinked. “He does! I don’t give him fruit, so he stays pretty healthy.” She ended that statement with a smirk, adding, “What was it this time? Grapes or strawberries?”

“I ain’t gave him no fruit,” I lied.

“Mmhmm,” she hummed skeptically.

I laughed. “Anyway, I’ll see y’all later.”

“Okay. Oh! How are your parents doing?”

I’d reached for the doorknob, my hand lingering there as I replied, “Good. Still arguing and stuff. You know,” without turning around.

“I do. Well, tell them I said hi.”

“I will. Uh...your mom?”

“She’s great, still loving her new place.”

“That’s good. Tell her I said what’s up.”

“Will do.”

“A’ight, uh...later.”

“Later, Ford.”

KRYSTLE

After my ex-husband left, I did what I always did on those occasions. I stood in the middle of my living room fighting thoughts of how cute he looked in his usual daily uniform—a hockey jersey and shorts—and mentally reminded myself that the divorce was the best thing for us, that I'd made the right decision by ending our marriage. I told myself it was reasonable that I still had feelings for him, that I still cared about him. After all, I'd known him since we were kids. He was a big part of my life for a long time. You can't just erase a connection like that, but none of that meant the divorce was wrong. It was right. I was sure of it.

As usual, I was eventually able to unglue myself from my living room floor and double check the locks on my door. Next, I turned the living room lights off, moving to the kitchen to do the same. After peeking in on LaDarius, I headed to my bedroom, lying across my bed to check the *Nubian Love* app, smiling when I saw a few guys had left me messages.

BlkKang069: Grand rising, my Kemeti source of salvation. You are a very beautiful Black queen goddess Mother Earth light. I hope you can over, inner, and outstand this greeting. I believe we—

That was as far as I got with that one because HELL no.

I moved on to the second one.

BigTrigga2000: Yo you find as hail for a dark skin female woman. Is that yo hair? I can tell from yo pic that you getting that bag but I hope you don't let that bag get you. Hit me back so I can hit it from the back. I got a long-ass tung.

And HELL no again.

HighValueSonOfKS: Hey, I am the host of the Alpha Males with Passport Cards Podcast. I just wanna say that you cute and everything but you need to know off top that if you don't submit to me, you ain't my type. Yeah, I work third shift

at Wendy's but that don't mean I take back talk from females. If you want a real man, call me at 555-555-9008 after nine when my mama is sleep because I ain't finna take you disrespecting my mama.

Hell FUCKING no.

KanyeFan2222: First of all, what do you bring to the table?

Fuck it.

Sighing, I fought not to throw my phone across the room and asked myself why I let my friend, Destiny, talk me into making a profile on this app. This shit was beyond sad.

Groaning, I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling until I found the energy to lift from the bed. I needed to shower and go to sleep. I had work in the morning.

Two

FORD

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO...

I was the youngest of six kids and what people in my hometown called a “change” baby, meaning my mom got pregnant with me when she was going through menopause. My parents, Son and Inez Ford, were both fifty-two when I was born, which meant now that I was twelve, they were both sixty-four, the age of most of my classmates’ grandparents. My older siblings were in their thirties and forties, so life for me was...different. It was also good, since I was everybody in my family’s baby and my siblings were always buying me stuff.

“Bean, come help me shell these peas!” my mom shouted through the open screen door. She was sitting in an old wooden kitchen chair she kept on the front porch.

I wanted to protest because it was a Saturday and I would’ve rather played games in my room, but instead, I said, “Yes, ma’am,” and shuffled out the front door.

“Here,” she said, handing me a bowl full of black-eyed pea pods. Sighing inaudibly—since I didn’t want to have to pick a switch—I took the bowl and descended the front steps, dropping onto the floor of the porch. I sat the bowl next to me and started shelling the peas in the hot, early September, Texas sun, my eyes fixed on my boy, Blake’s, house across the road from mine, soon shifting to our latest stray dog lying in the front yard with his head resting on his front paws. He was a mutt we’d actually given a name—Pooch. I figured it would only be a matter of time before Pooch moved on. They always did but usually hung around for months because my mom would feed them. My pops hated when she did that.

As me and my mom worked, the only sound providing us company was loud TV noises streaming through the closed screen door. My pops was watching a western, as usual.

When my mama yelled, “Hey, there! Come here, sugar!” I almost jumped from my seat. Pooch was startled, too, standing and letting out a tiny bark.

Looking up, I saw who she was talking to and rolled my eyes. It was Krystle, me and Blake’s third wheel. His mom made her hang with us all the time! She was so dang annoying!

In her yellow shorts and a *Teen Titans* t-shirt, she crossed the road, her white flip-flops slapping against the bottoms of her feet. Stopping at the foot of our front steps, she said, “Yes, ma’am?” while actively ignoring me.

Whatever.

“Tell your mama that we taking the RV to the blues fest next weekend. She welcome to ride with us if your daddy gon’ still be on the rig. I know she ain’t gon’ want to go if he’s home,” my mom said.

“Okay,” Krystle replied, sounding all sweet and polite.

Fake self.

“And let her know she can bring you and your brother. It’s plenty of room, and Bean’ll be with us,” my mom continued.

I groaned when I saw Krystle glance at me before saying, “Yes, ma’am...I’ll be sure to tell her.”

“Inez! Your phone in here ringing!” my pops bellowed from inside the house.

“All right!” Mama yelled back, lifting from her seat with a grunt. “Here I come!” Lowering her voice, she directed her next words to me. “Keep working, Bean. Be right back.”

Then it was me and my nemesis.

“You *do* look like a bean,” she sassed as if it was her first time hearing my mama call me that.

“And you look like a chicken,” I rebutted.

“Why are you so stupid?”

“Why you so ugly?”

She gave me her middle finger, the right one.

“Where’s Blake?” I asked, dropping my eyes back to the bowl of peas.

Plopping down on the porch on the other side of the bowl, she grabbed a pod, opening it and allowing its contents to drop into the container. “He’s on punishment...*again*.”

I frowned, lifting my gaze in time to see her shake her head. “Dang, what he do?” I asked. *And why’d he do it without me?* I wondered silently.

“He snuck out the house last night to smoke, and Mama caught him. Daddy gon’ tear him up when he gets home. When y’all start smoking?”

“I don’t smoke!” I protested. “I mean...I tried. Didn’t like it. I ain’t know he was still doing it.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Ain’t nobody gotta lie to your ugly self!”

“Ford, you gotta come up with something better. We both know I ain’t ugly.”

This was true, but I wasn’t going to admit it. So, I said, “You right. You ain’t ugly. You *real* ugly.”

She grabbed another pod and threw it at me, hitting me in the face. Then I stared at her, and she stared at me. When she hopped up and started running, I chased her, stopping when she crossed the street because I didn’t have permission to leave my yard.

“I’mma get my lick back, Chicken!” I yelled, before directing, “Hey, come back here, Pooch!” to the dog, who wanted in on the chase and was standing in the middle of the road.

Again, Krystle gave me her middle finger, the left one this time, before bouncing inside her house.

Now...

King of Rock was blaring in the arena, the crowd was roaring, and my heart was pounding as I slapped hands and bumped chests with Rapp and Jones, my fellow linemen. The fans had named us *Southern Comfort*, and these two dudes were like family to me. I wouldn't have wanted to go to war on the ice with anyone else.

“Let's go get this dub-yuh, Sires!” Rapp yelled. He was our center and our team's captain as well as being a big influence on our entire roster's energy. So, to see him fired up lit a flame under all our asses. Once out on the ice, our fans added to the motivation we needed to pull out a win.

My eyes were glued to the official's hand, all the noise of the arena fading into the background as I impatiently awaited the puck drop, adrenaline flooding my veins. Expectation and excitement burned in my chest. There was nothing on the planet that compared to this, to the onset of another battle. It was us against the Coyotes, Rapp facing off against their center for possession of the puck. All eyes were on the center circle as the ten players out on the ice collectively held their breaths. The centers prematurely moved their sticks in anticipation, eliciting a scolding from the official, and then... finally! The puck left his hand and Rapp managed to slap it toward our left wing, Jones. The puck was ours, and by the end of the game, so was the win.

KRYSTLE

“Hey, girl! You ready for this?”

I looked up from my phone to see my favorite co-worker approaching me. Grinning, I replied, “You know it! Your girl *stays* ready.”

My coworker, Destiny Warrick, gave me a high five. “I know that’s right! I can’t beat your ass for nothing, but I swear, I’m coming for that Top Agent crown you got in a chokehold.”

“Come get it, then!” I trilled, pressing the button on my key fob to lock my car doors.

As we fell in step together, heading into the building, Destiny asked, “What was so interesting on your phone? You stalking a new potential client?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not stalking. It’s called being proactive.”

“Following every St. Louis professional athlete and contacting the ones who merely appear to be looking for housing isn’t stalking? Okay.”

“Look, this is my area of expertise. I once lived the transient life that goes with being an NHL wife and it’s the same across all professional sports—MLB, NBA, NFL...hell, even the semi-pros. You never know when you’ll have to move, but being forced to relocate doesn’t have to mean sacrificing comfort and luxury.”

“I hear you, and I can’t be mad at you for putting your life experiences to use in your career. As you know, I’ve had a few professional athletes as clients. They’re definitely worth the effort.”

“Yeah, but I was looking at...scores, not potential clients.”

We were now inside the newly built, one-story structure that housed Posh Properties, a Black woman-owned company. After waving at Ling, the receptionist, Destiny whispered, “Hockey scores? Still no luck on the dating app?”

“Girl, that app is a cesspool of Pookies and RayRays. They’re on there just flinging dust all over the place,” I informed her.

“I know, right?” she agreed, stopping at her closed office door.

My eyes ballooned. “You know? You know and you still advised me to download that app? What kind of friend are you?” I hissed.

She shrugged, twisting her plum-painted lips. “I don’t know. Thought maybe it would be a good distraction for you, keep you from checking Sires scores.”

“I didn’t say I was checking Sires scores. Hockey is not the only sport in the world, and the Sires isn’t the only team in St. Louis.”

She silently smirked at me.

“Whatever. I’ll see you at the team meeting later,” I said, heading to my own office.

“They win or lose?” she said to my back.

“They won, of course,” I informed her.

THREE

FORD

“So, like...I saw you at the game the other night, and wow! You are crazy talented, like a Black Patrick Kane.”

I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at it. How the hell did she know who that was? She being Rapp’s new woman’s cousin, Brandi. I’d seen a picture of her on Instagram and noted that her ass and thighs did indeed match, so I decided to give her a call. It seemed this was possibly going to turn out to be a good decision.

“Wait, so you a *real* hockey fan?” I asked.

“Yes! Been one since I was a kid!” she gushed.

I was floored. The only woman I’d ever been with who really understood hockey was Krystle.

Krystle.

Shit.

Why’d I have to think of her?

“Uh...that’s cool,” I managed to say. “So...what’s your favorite team?”

“I’m a St. Louis girl! The Sires is my team, and even if I wasn’t from here, I’d still be a fan. I’m rooting for everybody Black!”

I laughed. “Shiddd, me too. So, what do you do for a living?”

“Nothing as exciting as being a professional hockey player. Just your everyday, ordinary secretary.”

“I bet it’s hard work, though.”

“It can be, but I like it for the most part. Would love to work in the front office of a sports team one day. I got plenty of time, though. I’m only twenty-one.”

Twenty-one? Damn, she was young. Maybe too young for me, but it wasn't like I was in search of anything serious anyway.

"I see," I replied.

I could hear her sigh into the phone. "You think I'm too young for you, don't you?"

I didn't see the point in lying, so I said, "Actually, I do."

"Well, I'm not. You're divorced, right?"

"Yeah," I said slowly. "How'd you know that?"

"I read it somewhere. Anyway, I'm divorced, too."

"Huh? How? What were you, seventeen when you got married?"

"Eighteen. Got divorced at twenty. My ex is in his forties."

"Damn. For real?"

"Yes! So, you see, I've lived some life, Terrence Ford. I ain't too young for shit."

Lifting both my eyebrows, I muttered, "I do see."

"I watched y'all play the Bruins last week. You pissed that one boy off, didn't you? Must've been out on that ice talking shit," my brother, Daniel, said.

I smiled, scratching the back of my head as I reclined on my sofa, activating the speakerphone and placing my cell on my chest. "That was Abney's sensitive ass. I played with him back in college, but you know me. I *gotta* talk shit."

"What you say to him?"

"I asked him if his mama knew he was out after dark and if his dick had grown long enough for him to stand up and pee or if he was still sitting down pissing all over the toilet seat."

My big brother howled into the phone. "You are a fool, Bean! Gon' get your ass kicked one day."

“Nah, my team got my back, and anyway, everybody knows chirping is part of the game. I just happen to be exceptional at it.”

“I hear you.”

“Yeah...so, how you been feeling? How'd it go at the doctor's the other day?”

“I'm good. Everything is fine.”

He always said that shit, but it was never true. At sixty-something years old, Daniel was the oldest of the Ford kids and the one in the poorest health—high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease—you name it and Daniel had it. Hell, our mom and pops were in their eighties now and they were healthier than Daniel. Of course, I still worried about them. I worried about everyone in my family. I'd just hit thirty and was a teenager compared to them.

“You sure? You need anything?” I questioned him.

“Yes, I'm sure, and no, I don't need anything. Me and my family are fine. Me and the wife both got good jobs and we take care of each other. You know that,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. Just...take it easy, okay?”

“I always do. When the last time you called home?” he asked.

I wanted to groan but fought it. “Why? Mama called you?”

“She called me, Pammy, Junior, Maryann, Brutus...all of us siblings! She's worried about you.”

“Nah, she just wants to talk about Krystle. I can't take that right now.”

“Why? Because she be telling you right about how you ain't never gonna be happy until you get her back?”

“Dan—”

“I'ma leave it alone, but call Mama. She's too old to be worrying like this.”

Through a sigh, I said, “A'ight.”

KRYSTLE

“...as you can see, this is a beautiful townhome, fully furnished and equipped with all the luxurious amenities one could desire,” I stated as we finished the property tour. It really was a great place with a hefty lease and a beautiful commission for me if this potential client decided to bite.

“It’s great. But uh...I do have one question for you,” Chandler Osborne said. He was a recent trade from the Titans to the Cyclones whom I’d reached out to via Instagram. He was also huge—tall and fine.

Very fine.

“Okay, shoot. No pun intended,” I replied with a smile.

He chuckled, tilting his head to the right. “Are you free for dinner, Ms. Ford?” he asked, his eyes locked on mine.

“Oh! Um...” Yes, he was cute but was I really ready to date? I mean, I wasn’t serious about the dating app. Hell, was I even over Ford?

Well, he’s over you. He’s had how many girlfriends since you split? I bit my bottom lip and fought not to wince at that thought.

“Wait, are you single? I should’ve asked you that first instead of assuming—”

“I’m single. Uh, when did you have in mind?”

He smiled, making himself look even cuter. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

Returning his smile with one of my own, I affirmed, “I am.”

FOUR

KRYSTLE

THEN...

Terrence Ford's family had money. Like, *a lot* of money. Their house was similar to mine, but they had rooms added to the back. Ford had all kinds of stuff in his room—games, game systems, a million and one hockey jerseys. He even had his own cell phone, a Motorola Razr! My mom said his brothers and sisters—they were all super grown—actually bought him most of that stuff whenever Blake complained about not having as much crap as Ford did. I mean, I wanted a cell phone, but I didn't complain about it. The Fords also had two nice cars, and the RV? It was huge and really fancy. I loved it!

The day of the blues fest, Mr. Son, Ford's dad, drove the RV to the location of the event—an empty field that was once the county fairground—while my mom and Mrs. Ford talked. Ford's parents were old, like the same age as my Big Mama and Pawpaw old! I thought maybe that was why they had so much money. Mama said it was because Mr. Son was retired from working for the railroad. I didn't know anything about that. I did know that like my mom, Ford's mom didn't have to work.

Shifting my eyes from our moms, I fixed my attention on my brother and Ford. Well, I was really just looking at Ford. I saw my brother all the time. Why would I be looking at him? Anyway, Ford was changing, growing up. All three of us were since we were twelve years old at that point, but there was something very different about Terrence Ford, and it wasn't only that he seemed to have grown several inches in height overnight. It also wasn't that his voice was changing, now deeper than before. Same weird red hair and light skin. As I stared at him, I just couldn't figure out what it was.

“Why you looking at me, Chicken?” he accused, making me blink and frown.

“Ain’t nobody looking at you, ole ugly boy!” I volleyed back at him.

“Don’t y’all start that mess up!” our mothers fussed almost in unison.

FORD

Chicken Leg Krystle Tyler was so annoying and weird and... pretty. I swear she was prettier every time I saw her, and I basically saw her every day. I hated thinking she was pretty because her attitude was ugly, nasty. Plus, she was always staring at me like I was some bug she'd never seen before. Yeah, I was funny looking, the only person in my family with red hair other than my great-grandfather on my dad's side according to him, but dang, I wasn't *that* ugly, was I? I mean, a lot of the girls at school thought I was cute. I had a whole girlfriend—Natisha Johnston—who swore I was finer than all the dudes in *B2K*, and girls were always losing their minds over those guys. So, what was her problem with me? I mean, yeah...we fought all the time, but this was different. It was strange.

Freaking bizarre.

I shook my head a little, hoping I'd stop thinking about my best friend's dumb sister as I dragged two lawn chairs from the RV. The adults were setting up the area right outside the RV where they were going to sit and watch the show. Blake was right behind me with the ice chest and Stupid Krystle was behind him carrying Wal-Mart bags full of chips and stuff for us. My mama and Mrs. Tyler were in the RV getting the other food—ribs, potato salad, sandwiches—ready to bring outside. My pops had left to go speak to some old guy he knew.

“Man, what we supposed to do all day? Ain't no other kids here? Why we parked so far back? I hate blues music,” Blake grumbled.

“You don't say you hate it when Daddy plays it at home,” Krystle said.

“Wasn't nobody talking to you, Krystle!” he hissed. “Always in somebody's business!”

“You gotta have some business for somebody to be in it,” she replied, setting the bags on the card table my pops had set up and putting a hand on her bony hip. Okay, maybe it wasn’t actually all that bony, but she still had those skinny legs.

I shrugged as I unfolded the chairs and set them on either side of the table. “I don’t know. I like the music.”

“That’s ‘cause it’s all your parents play at your house, Ford. We really gotta stay over here, though? We can’t walk around and stuff?” Blake asked, moving closer to me and whispering, “I need a cigarette.”

Yep, this fool was still sneaking cigarettes.

“I can’t help you with that. My daddy said I can’t leave this spot, and I ain’t leaving,” I informed him. Wasn’t nobody trying to get their stuff taken from them. Nobody being me in this case. I had a lot to lose!

Blake rolled his eyes and groaned.

Our moms were outside now, laughing and talking as they placed covered containers of food on the table. I followed Blake back inside the RV and offered, “My folks usually really get into the show and don’t pay much attention to what I’m doing. Maybe you can sneak off later.”

“Okay, thanks for the info, man,” he said, sounding relieved.

“Anything to help you lose the attitude.”

We’d been at the Blues Fest for three hours. Blake and I were sitting in lawn chairs close to the RV and behind the adults taking turns playing *Dragon Ball Z* on my GameBoy. Krystle sat on the RV steps reading a book. She was always reading or drawing. I was just glad she wasn’t staring at me.

Willie P was onstage in a bright yellow suit and matching fedora singing *Caller ID*, one of my pops’ favorite songs. I kind of liked it, too, and was really getting into it when Blake tapped my shoulder and held up a cigarette, his eyes darting from me to the adults and back. I didn’t do or say anything. I

just watched him sneak away and shook my head. When I realized he'd taken my GameBoy with him, I wanted to groan.

Then Krystle moved to claim Blake's seat, and I *did* softly groan. "Why you over here?"

"Where'd my brother go?" was her response.

"I don't know. Ask him when he comes back."

"You really like this music?"

"Yeah...so?"

"I guess it's all right," she said.

Huh?

"Why you being nice?" I queried.

Rolling her eyes, she smacked her lips, said, "Ain't nobody being nice to your big head self. I just think the song is okay," and went back to her seat on the RV steps and her book.

So freakin' weird!

FIVE

FORD

Now...

“**W**hoa! Slow down, Stick! Damn! We got a game in a couple days,” I said, watching as my teammate threw back another shot.

“I need this. I’m stressed. You know...Luda!” my teammate, Leo “Robin Stick” Bouchard responded. He was the team’s one and only Caucasian player, a stellar goalie. He was also...unique, *very* unique.

No, I *didn’t* know, but instead of saying that, I said, “Trouble with Coco? Y’all had a fight?”

His head shot up, his attention on me as he vigorously nodded. “Yes! I apologized, but she still won’t talk to me. I don’t think what I did was that bad.”

“Well,” I replied, taking a swig of my soda which felt weird since we were sitting at the bar in this little hole-in-the-wall restaurant, “what happened?”

He sighed. “She basically lives with me now, and I love it ___”

“Shidddd, I know you do! Coco almost as thick as Nuri. Coco tall with it, though. *Damn.*”

“I thought Jones told you to keep his wife’s name out your mouth.”

“He did, but I ain’t scared of Maleek Jones. Plus, he ain’t here. You planning on telling him?” Moving closer, I added, “You a rat, Stick?”

“No! Hand to Tupac!” he screeched.

I nodded slowly. “Good. Anyway, what you do? Pull on her hair while hitting it from the back?”

“How’d you know?”

“Damn, I was joking.”

“She started yelling about how much it cost to get it installed—the wig—and said I ruined the lace? I don’t know. I just know I need her to stop being mad.”

“That’s easy to fix...buy her a new wig, her favorite food, and offer to eat her pussy, but when you eat it, you gotta *really* eat it. Like, gobble gobble that muhfucka.”

“That’s all I have to do? Seriously?” He looked so... hopeful.

“Yeah, man. You wanna add a little razzle dazzle? Eat her ass, too.”

“Oh, she likes when I do that.”

Damn, Stick was out here eating ass?

My guy!

“Here’s a pro tip I don’t share with everybody...while you in that thang and you on top, grab her foot and suck her toes. That shit’ll drive her crazy,” I told him.

“Wow...okay! I’m going to step out and try to call her. Be right back,” Stick said as he stood from his stool. “Thanks for the advice, Ford! Twenty-one-twenty-one!”

I gave him a salute and turned my attention to the people filling the place. *So So Good* was one of those places I was sure had failed every health inspection and had a fluctuating menu full of the best food I’d ever tasted in my life. Their hours of operation were mad unpredictable, the customer service sucked, and the drinks were too damn strong. The sweet tea was damn near syrupy. The joint definitely had its flaws, just like the poorly maintained building that housed it, but the cuisine was unmatched, and a bonus was that you were bound to run into someone you knew there. Someone like... your ex-wife.

My ex-wife.

Sitting at a table in the middle of the room with another nigga.

As in, a nigga who wasn't me!

What in the absolute shit?!

Okay, yeah...we were legally divorced and lived apart and shit. I got all that, but still...

What.

The.

Fuck?!

When did she start dating? Had she been seeing other guys the entirety of our separation? I hadn't heard about her dating before now, although she was free to as a single woman. Wait, did I really just think that? That she was free to date?

I was losing my mind. Sitting there at the bar, I'd lost my sanity for few seconds, but that was what she did to me, what she'd *always* done to me—mess with my brain, confuse me.

Nah, bruh. This is on you. You agreed to the divorce. She followed through. She's not yours anymore.

Those thoughts, those *truths*, made my heart drop to the floor with a thud. She wasn't my woman, hadn't been for three whole years. A lifetime of loving her had been erased with our signatures on a piece of paper.

I couldn't take my eyes off her as she smiled and talked to whoever this clown was, and it was beginning to feel stalkerish. So, without waiting for Stick to return, I paid our tab and left.

It was the middle of the night, like 1:00 AM. I'd left *So So Good* hours earlier, but the image of Krystle sitting at the table with some goofy was playing in my head constantly. Thoughts of her sharing bread pudding—our favorite dessert—with him plagued me. So, there I sat in my truck with a pair of shorts on,

some Adidas slides, and no shirt. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stay in my apartment. So I took a drive.

A knock on the driver's side window made me flinch. When I turned my head to see Jones staring at me, I sighed with relief and hit the button to lower the window.

"Shit, man...you scared me!" I whisper-yelled.

"Ford, the fuck is wrong with you?" he asked. Dude sounded tired.

"What you mean?"

"I mean, why in the hell are you sitting in your truck in my driveway in the middle of the night with your engine running?"

"Did I wake you up?"

"Nah, the baby did. I was up with her, looked out the window and saw you."

"Aw, damn. I woke Little Bit up? My bad."

"No, she just ain't sleeping through the night yet. Ford, why are you here?" Now he sounded *beyond* tired.

"I...I saw Krystle earlier. She was on a date. Did you know she started dating?" I sounded pitiful. I *was* pitiful.

He frowned, lowering his head and his voice. "Are you... are you following her around? Stalking her?"

"No! Come on, *me* a stalker?"

He stood straight. "I mean, you *are* out in the middle of the night with no shirt on. You coulda called me and I would've told you that, no...since the only woman I keep up with is mine, I didn't know she was dating, but it isn't exactly shocking. She's single."

I felt my jaw tighten.

"You're jealous? All the women you done messed with since the divorce and you're jealous?!" he said, incredulity saturating his voice.

"Maleek? What are you doing?"

We both turned to see his wife walking toward us in a long robe and slippers.

He grasped her hand, lifting it to kiss it. Fucking show off. “Evidently, Ford decided to have a nervous breakdown in our driveway. Where’s Zora?”

“With your mom. Hey, Ford. Wanna come in? It’s chilly out here,” Nuri Jones offered.

“No, he can’t come in. He ain’t even got a shirt on!” Jones protested.

She rolled her eyes and whispered something in his ear. He groaned, then growled, “Man, bring your ass on in the house. I’ma get you a shirt, and you can sleep on the couch. We can talk later this morning.”

I smiled. “Thanks, man, and thank you, Mrs—”

“Don’t do it,” he warned.

“Fine, witcho petty ass. Will you thank her for me?”

“Ford says thank you, baby,” Jones relayed.

Nuri sighed. “Y’all just come on.”

So, I followed them into the house.

I was always a vivid dreamer with detailed images playing in my sleep, a veritable late show that never failed to move me. In addition, I always remembered my dreams, intense recollections that would make me smile or make my heart ache. I dreamt of things I had and things I wanted. Things of the past or things of the present. That night on Maleek Jones’ overstuffed, super comfortable sofa, my dream was a mixture of agony and ecstasy—hyper detailed visions of Krystle’s body, our lovemaking, her moans, followed by images of her smiling at another man. I awoke feeling drained, almost as if I hadn’t slept at all. Then again, I’d drifted off around two that morning and found myself waking to the sounds of a busy household only five hours later—kids chattering, a baby

cooing, plates clanking, Bill Withers' *Lovely Day* pouring from speakers. Jones' house was a damn paradise, Heaven compared to my empty crib. I'm not sure how long I lay there awake with my eyes closed listening while inhaling the aromas of bacon and eggs before I felt something soft land on my chest.

"Get your ass up and get dressed. You can use the guest bathroom upstairs. It's extra toothbrushes and stuff in there. My mama fixed breakfast, so don't take forever."

I opened an eye and smiled up at my teammate. "Damn, good morning to you, too, Jones."

"Whatever, nigga," he mumbled, turning to leave the living room.

"I see somebody's not a morning person," I said to his back.

He threw his middle finger at me over his shoulder, and I laughed.

"Maleek, can I have five dollars? I'm saving money for my 401K," Jones's little brother asked. I almost choked on my cheesy grits when I heard him say that.

"Yep. Here you go, Junior," Jones replied. "You need anything, Jules?" he asked his little sister.

She smiled, nearly whispered, "No," and skipped out of the kitchen.

Jones's son, his oldest kid, was in his dad's lap staring at me as his wife stood from the table with their baby girl. Before she could step away, Jones grabbed her arm. Without a word, she leaned in and kissed him.

This nigga *stayed* showing off.

"I was about to say...you know better," Jones said, staring at her ass as she walked away. Good thing I kept my eyes on him, because he snatched his head around and glared at me.

Lifting my hands, I said, “I was looking at you the whole time, boss!”

“I’m heading out to take the kids to school!” Jones’s mom yelled from somewhere. “I’m gonna go by the bookstore before I come back home!”

“Okay, Ma! Be safe!” Jones called back.

The house grew quiet as Little Maleek chewed on a piece of bacon, his eyes still on me.

“Aye, Jones...why Lil’ Man mean-mugging me?” I asked.

Jones shrugged. “He probably heard you objectifying his mother in utero.”

I sighed. “How many times I gotta apologize for complimenting your wife, man?”

He stared at me.

“Fine! I’m sorry *again*, Michael Corleone.”

“Appreciate it.” He pressed some buttons on his phone, quieting the morning music. “So...you don’t know the meaning of the word ‘divorce’?”

“Huh? Yeah, I know what it means. I mean...look, it...I...seeing her with another dude...I don’t know. Imagine if it was your wife. Imagine y’all split and you saw her out with another dude.”

Jones’s boy climbed out of his lap and toddled toward the kitchen doorway, yelling, “Mama!”

“Let me take him to Nuri. Be right back,” Jones said, scooping his son up. A moment later, he returned to the kitchen, dropping back into his chair, his eyes on me. “To answer your question, I would do everything in my power to keep us from splitting up, and if it still happened, I’d spend the rest of my life, until my dying breath, begging her to take my sorry ass back. That’s how much I love that woman.”

“I tried...” I said, losing my words.

“You tried what? I was there. Didn’t look to me like you tried to do shit.”

I blew out a breath and shook my head. “Look, I get that it’s been three years. I get it! I just...”

“You thought she’d never move on?”

“No, I think I *hoped* she wouldn’t.”

“That’s selfish as hell, man.”

“I know it is. Never said I was perfect or even a good person, but I love her, Jones. I’ve only ever loved her. Shit, I don’t know how to stop.”

“You *wanna* stop loving her?” he asked, making me stare at him.

I slowly shook my head. “No. Never.”

“So, you love her, and you still want to be with her?”

“Yeah...I do.”

“Then how you gonna fix this?”

“I *can’t* fix it. She’s moved on. She’s over me.”

“You sure about that?”

Images of Krystle sitting at that table grinning at another man flashed before me. “Yeah, I’m sure. Nothing for me to do but move on, too.”

“Ain’t that what you been doing? Summer, Shanice, Jetta?”

“Yeah, but I mean...never mind. We going to practice or what?”

“We are, and you’re driving since you interrupted my night.”

“No problem. Hey, what’d Nur—I mean, your wife say to you to get you to let me in the house?”

“She made me an offer she knows I’ll never refuse.”

SIX

KRYSTLE

THEN...

My dad was home from the rig which meant if we weren't at school, Blake and I had to find something else to do outside the house. Our dad was old school, believing that kids were supposed to play outdoors unless it was mealtime or bedtime. I hated it, but my mother made it clear that when he was home, our house was his dominion. So, I sat out on our front steps that April evening, thirteen years old, full of hormones, and miserable with no earthly idea where Blake was as I watched Terrence Ford climb out of his big brother's Lexus. He was in the middle of a growth spurt, tall and thin wearing shorts and a hockey jersey, those weird looking ice skates in one hand, a backpack slung over his shoulder. It was still light out, so I saw his face as he turned to look in my direction. Then he waved at his brother, watched him back out of the driveway, and started walking toward me, his family's new pet, a stray cat, on his heels. Butterflies instantly materialized in my stomach as I watched him, his head low, his orangey-red hair glinting in the waning sunlight.

"Chicken! You was waiting for me to get back home?" he asked. He had a big, goofy grin on his face, his *handsome* face. The smile extended to his eyes which made me beam.

"Why would I be waiting for you? I see your big head all the time, and no, Blake isn't home. Also, no...I don't know where he is," I responded.

He dropped the smile and shrugged. "I figured that. Came to see you. I know it's always rough when..." He lowered his voice. "...your pops is home."

"Like my mama says, he pays the bills; so if he wants me outside, I gotta stay outside."

“Yeah...my mom made that cracklin’ bread you like. Wanna come eat some?”

Without hesitation, I said, “Yep,” and followed him and the cat to his house.

Now...

Ford almost ruined my first date with Chandler Osborne. Well, his presence almost ruined it. Sitting in *So So Good* listening to the extremely attractive pro baller explain how his family was filthy rich, I sensed the man I once called my husband, my *person*. Hell, there was a time I couldn't be convinced he wasn't created specifically to love me. We were still so connected that I didn't need to look up to know he was there, and when I did venture a peek, all I saw was his retreating back as he left the restaurant. That sight alone made my heart flutter wildly. I wondered if he'd seen me, seen *us*, and then I told myself I didn't care if he had. We were divorced, over. Weren't we? Of course we were!

On this second date, we had dinner at a Thai restaurant. Ford hated Thai food, so I figured I was safe.

"...have you always wanted to work in real estate?" Chandler's tenor pulled me from thoughts of a Ford-less night to him.

"Um...no. I wanted to be a lot of things, but a realtor was never one of them," I replied. "When I was a kid, I just knew I'd be a famous artist."

"Really? Like, painting?"

"I paint, draw..."

"Wow! So, you never pursued that dream? Why?"

"Oh, I did. I...it just didn't work out. Wasn't meant to be." I wasn't going there. I'd worked too hard to move past it.

"Oh, okay. Sore subject?"

"Excruciating."

He nodded, his eyes surveying my face appreciatively. "Well, I'm glad you landed on your current career path and I'm more than glad to get to spend time with you tonight."

I gave him a smile. “Same.”

I was half asleep when I heard the knock at my door and initially thought it was a part of some dream I’d already forgotten. Another knock, and I lifted from my sofa, checking my phone for the time—8:00 AM. Who would be at my door this early on a Saturday?

“Who is it?!” I called, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms.

“Ford!”

I stared at the closed door, confused and more than a little disoriented. I never slept on the sofa. That was always *his* thing. Him—my ex-husband who was now at my door for some unknown reason.

“Krystle?” he said, sounding concerned.

“Yeah, give me a minute,” I replied, trying to pull myself together. When I finally opened the door for him, he rushed inside, his eyes surveying me.

“You okay?” he asked, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “You feeling all right?”

“Yeah, yeah...uh, what are you doing here so early?”

“I’m here to see LaDarius. I texted you last night about coming early because we got an away game tonight. Can’t make my regular time.”

I frowned. “You did?” Glancing around me, I found my cell lying on the floor next to the sofa and picked it up. “Oh, it’s dead.”

“I figured. Tried to call after you didn’t text me back. Went straight to voicemail. I came anyway because I was...I was worried.”

“I’m fine. Tired, but fine.”

“I bet you are.”

“Huh?” I said, genuinely confused by that statement.

“Nothing. I’ma go see our boy so I can get out of your hair.”

The next thing I knew, I was staring at his back as he strolled down the hall. Twenty minutes later, I’d fixed myself a cup of tea and was sitting on the sofa checking emails on my partially charged phone when he reappeared, standing before me, his hands shoved into the pockets of his loose jeans.

“Aye, you sure you good?” he queried.

I looked up to meet his gaze. “I’m fine, Ford. Seriously.”

He nodded. “Good. So...I saw you at *So So Good* the other night.”

Ahhh, that’s what that little quip was about, I thought. “I saw you, too.”

A look of surprise crossed his face before he quickly schooled his expression. “Yeah, I was there with Stick.”

“That’s...nice,” I replied.

“Uh-huh. You’re dating now?”

“Now? You’re assuming I haven’t dated before now?”

He looked stricken as he replied, “Nah...I mean, I’m just saying.”

“You’re just saying what, Ford?”

Squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin a bit, he asked, “Where was LaDarius?”

With a wrinkled brow, I returned, “Where was he when?”

“When you were on your...date?”

“Here. Where else would he be?”

“Alone? Just running around and shit?”

“No! In that expensive-ass cage with all the amenities any iguana could want!”

“How often you be leaving him alone like that? Do we need to discuss joint custody, because if you can’t care for him properly...”

“Are you for real right now?”

“*Insanely* for real. This dude been around my son? Does he smoke? You know LaDarius had that respiratory infection that time.”

Now I was up in his face, shorter than him in my bare feet. This whole scene reminded me of us as kids, always arguing over dumb shit. “All this because you saw me out on a date? What? You thought no one else would want me? Surprised someone does?”

He blinked, his eyes softening, his voice quiet as he said, “No, I never thought that. I thought and *think* the opposite. I think any man would want you, Chicken—I mean, Krystle. I just...I hoped...I...I gotta go.” He stood there staring into my eyes, at my lips, and I stared right back. How was it that something so right could end up going so wrong?

“Yeah, I should go. Uh...later,” he repeated, and then he left.

As per usual, I stood stuck to the floor for several minutes before I managed to move on with my day.

SEVEN

FORD

THEN...

“**T**hank you so much, Miss Inez. I’m hoping I can come back and get her in the morning. I don’t know what’s going on with David. He never gets sick!” Krystle’s mom said. She was trying to whisper, but I could hear her from where I stood in my bedroom doorway. She looked upset, *really* upset, and her eyes were puffy like she’d been crying. David was the twins’ dad’s name. I wondered what was going on with him.

“I don’t even know where Blake is right now. He keeps sneaking out...” Mrs. Tyler continued. Now, she *was* crying. Krystle stood beside her, a sad look on her face as she pinned her eyes to the floor. They were in our living room, my mom in her robe rubbing Mrs. Tyler’s shoulder.

“Mama, why can’t I go with you?” Krystle whined, lifting her head to peer at her mom.

“Hush, girl! You know you can’t come with me, and no, you are not staying at home alone at night. Don’t matter that you’re thirteen.”

Krystle dropped her head and shoulders.

Seconds later, her mom was gone and mine was making Krystle a bed on our family room sofa. I was still standing in my doorway when my mom finally noticed me.

“Go back to bed, Bean,” she instructed.

I had a million questions in my mind but didn’t ask any of them, knowing how my parents were about kids being in grown folks’ business. Climbing back into bed, I lay in the darkness staring at nothing until the house grew silent, indicating that my mom had gone to bed. I was careful to be

quiet as I eased out of my bed again and tipped into the family room.

“Krystle? You awake?” I whispered.

I could see her shift on the sofa. Her “Yeah,” was weak, shaky.

Moving closer to her, I asked, “You crying?”

After a couple snuffles, she whispered, “No.”

“What happened? Your pops sick? You worried about him?” I was on the floor now, sitting in front of the sofa, my eyes on the bundle of covers she was buried in.

“He’s really sick. My mama says if something happens to him, we won’t have nobody to take care of us. We might lose our house. I don’t wanna be homeless!” she sobbed.

Blinking hard, I said, “You won’t be homeless. I know my folks will let you stay here. You can even have my room. I don’t mind.”

She cried for a few more minutes before saying, “Thank you.”

That night, her father died. I’d later learn he had a heart attack.

Now...

I was fucking losing it.

I couldn't believe I said all that shit to Krystle about her new nigga and LaDarius. I meant it, but I wasn't supposed to *say* it. I just...fuck it! I loved her. I'd loved her for as long as I could remember, and the mere thought of her with someone else made my brain itch. It made my hands sweat and my ears pound. It also kept my dick from working, so being on this double date with Brandi, Rapp, and Yamille was futile, but it beat sitting up in my place thinking about something I'd never have again.

We were at a club—*Plush*—and the vibe was nice. The DJ was top tier, and Brandi was gorgeous with her glowing dark skin against a gold dress that looked to be made of chains. Her hair was in two thick cornrows, and her lips shimmered in the low light. I was wearing a Sires t-shirt and jeans while nursing a beer as she talked about...shit, I had no clue what she was saying, but she seemed excited about whatever it was, so I smiled and nodded.

About an hour into the date, the ladies excused themselves to the restroom, and as soon as they were out of sight, Rapp started in on me.

“The fuck is your problem, man? You still tripping over your ex-wife dating?” he asked.

I snapped my head from staring at nothing to face him, my eyes narrowed. “You knew she was dating?”

“Jones told me.”

I lowered my eyes. “Oh.”

“Yeah, so that *is* what's going on. It's written all over you.”

“Nah, I'm good. I mean, she's single. I ain't messed up about it. Plus, Brandi is a baddie.”

“Come on, man. Be real with me. You’re upset. You still love her, don’t you? You *did* say you shoulda stayed with Krystle.”

“I was drunk when I said that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? When *aren’t* you drunk?”

“I been doing better about drinking during the season, though. Plus, I really didn’t start drinking until...” Damn, I almost copped to some crazy shit.

“Until the divorce?” Rapp finished for me, but I couldn’t reply to, affirm, or deny his statement because I had shifted my gaze to the dance floor, my eyes colliding with a silhouette I was very familiar with—my wife’s. Krystle was there dancing with that motherfucker from the restaurant.

EIGHT

FORD

“Ford...Ford, where you going?” Rapp’s voice sounded distant as I found myself standing next to my chair, my eyes glued to that nigga’s hand on Krystle’s bare back.

“Huh?” I mumbled.

“Nigga, *where are you going?* Your ass hopped up in the middle of our conversation.”

Frowning, I said, “I did?”

“Yeah! And the ladies are on their way back to the table. You headed to the bar or something?”

“No, Krystle is here with that motherfucker.”

“What motherfucker?”

“The one she’s dating,” I hissed.

Rapp turned in his seat. “So?”

“So?!”

“Yeah, so! You on a date, too!”

“A date! I ain’t fucking nobody, though.”

“Ford, the fuck you gon’ do? She ain’t your wife no more. Sit your ass down!”

I thought about it for a second and fell back into my seat, mumbling, “This some bullshit.”

“The way you’re acting? *That’s* some bullshit.”

Before I could respond, the ladies were back. I managed to rise and pull Brandi’s chair out for her, losing sight of Krystle. The rest of the night was a blur for me, and when I made it back home, I found it impossible to fall asleep.

KRYSTLE

“So, you and Chandler are a thing now, huh? It’s been what, a month since you started seeing him?” Destiny asked.

I nodded as I moved the components of our catered lunch around on my plate. “Yeah, he’s...nice, a great conversationalist. Serious, mature.”

Silence from my friend, so I looked up to see her staring at me and said, “What?”

“Nothing, you just sound like you’re describing a job applicant, not a potential boyfriend,” she pointed out.

“Oh, I mean, he’s great,” I tried.

She sighed.

“What?!” I shrieked, forgetting I was in the break room at work.

“You’re still not over Mr. Ford, that’s what. That’s why you’re still here. You don’t love this job or me enough to stay in St. Louis. You came here with him and you’re staying here because of him.”

I laid my fork on my plate and shook my head. “It doesn’t matter if I’m over him or not. I need to move on. Chandler is a good option. He’s a grown-up, unlike Ford. Ford is...I don’t know, silly.”

“Translation: he made you laugh, kept a smile on your face?”

“That, too. Look, he started dating before the ink on our divorce papers dried. Hell, I saw him at *Plush* with some big booty heffa the other night. He’s not the only one who can move on.”

Spearing a chunk of sesame chicken with her fork, she said, “Whatever you you say, Krystle. Whatever you say.”

NINE

KRYSTLE

THEN...

As expected, life changed after my father died. My mom was able to pay our house off and even buy a new car with the life insurance money, but she did have to get a job for the first time in my life. She started working in the elementary school cafeteria and she loved it. I can't say I missed my dad. We weren't that close because he was so old school to have been a relatively young man. He believed women should do the child rearing. He wasn't very affectionate, and I spent so much time outside when he was home, I can honestly say I barely knew him. I was sad for my mom, though. She really loved him.

Blake didn't cope with his death well at all, although I'm not sure why. I mean, yes, he'd taken Blake fishing and hunting a few times, but other than that, he was no more a father to him than he was to me. Then again, Blake was always into so much mess that maybe he just needed an excuse to escalate. Or maybe he didn't. At any rate, a month after we turned sixteen, he was arrested for breaking into and vandalizing our school. Mama would usually rush to bail him out of stuff, but this time, she didn't. He was forced to stay in juvie for six months. By then, his friendship with Terrence Ford had basically dissolved. Shoot, I was closer to Ford at that point than Blake was, although we no longer went to the same school. During the week, he stayed with his sister in Austin and attended a school there that had a hockey team, returning home to Watts on the weekends. Saturday mornings, he always showed up on our doorstep to check on us...on *me*. At least it seemed he was checking on me. It also seemed he missed me. He was a sweet guy. Spoiled, but sweet. He came from good people, though. His mom was always offering me

and my mom food from her garden or her stove although I couldn't eat much of it. My stomach hadn't been right since the night my father died. Stress and worry about my mother and brother kept it in knots. I appreciated her kindness, though.

It became kind of a ritual for me to sit on my porch on Friday evenings and watch Ford's sister, Maryann, drop him off. That old stray cat of his would wait with me. Tonight, I chose to sit in the dark, no porch light because I didn't want him to see me and feel obligated to come speak to me. I just wanted to observe him from afar, admire him secretly, take in his tall frame, that relaxed walk of his, that big orangey-red afro. I even liked seeing those hockey jerseys he was always wearing. He must've had one for every professional team!

Well, my plan didn't work. No sooner than he'd hopped out of his sister's SUV and waved goodbye to her, the doggone cat hopped up and ran to him. The thing literally led him across the road to my house, a huge backpack slung over his left shoulder.

Standing at the foot of my front steps with a grin on his face, he said, "You *are* out here. I couldn't tell with the light off. Why you out here in the dark, Chicken?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't know. I just am...Big Head."

He chuckled, dropping onto the top step and turning to look at me as the traitorous cat sat at his feet. "I remember when you used to try to fight me every time I called you Chicken."

"Me too, you're too big for me to fight now," I replied.

"I ain't all that big. Tall, but not big."

"Same thing."

"I guess. Your mom doing all right?"

"She's okay. The same."

"Working a lot? Staying to herself?"

"Yep."

“Y’all still haven’t been able to visit Blake?”

“Nope. He keeps getting in fights. No visitation privileges,” I said with a shrug.

“Dang. How about you? Your stomach?”

“I’m...my stomach is better,” I lied.

“You don’t even sound like you’re telling the truth.”

I sighed.

“Didn’t you say you were going to the doctor? They can’t give you no medicine?” he probed.

“They did. It’s helping a little. What about you? Hockey? School?”

“I’m good. School is cool. Hockey is great. Chicken?”

“Hmm?” My belly was acting up, but not with pain. With butterflies. That happened a lot when I was around him.

“I—”

“Bean! You out here?!” his mom yelled. Looking up, I could see her tall, thin frame standing on their front porch.

“Yes, ma’am! Be right there!” he called back. “Uh...see you tomorrow?”

“Okay,” I replied, figuring he’d pop up to check on me again.

“You ready?” he asked. So, he did come back, but not just to check on me. He brought a...horse.

I frowned. “I don’t know. Where’d you say this horse came from?”

He grinned. “My brother Junior came to visit. See, that’s his horse trailer parked in our driveway.”

I followed his finger to see there was, indeed, a horse trailer in his driveway hitched to the back of a pickup truck.

“Right. So...you want me to ride it with you?”

“I wanna teach you how to ride it. You scared or something?”

“Yep.”

“Don’t you like animals, though?”

“Yes...”

He laughed. “Come on. I got you. I ain’t gon’ let nothing happen to you.”

I sighed. “O...kay.”

He used this wooden stair thing he brought with him to climb onto the horse and extended his hand to me. Hesitantly, I mimicked what I’d seen him do, climbing onto the stairs and mounting the horse, sitting in front of him. He leaned forward, pressing his body against mine and making every one of my teenage hormones jump to attention. Into my ear, he repeated, “You ready?”

“I think so,” I said.

“A’ight. These are the reins. You use these to direct the horse.”

“Okay. What’s his name?”

“*Her* name is Lisa Stansfield.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, some singer my brother likes. Okay, so... put your hands on top of mine so you can feel what I’m doing with the reins.”

I did as I was told. His hands were so much bigger than mine.

“Relax,” he continued.

“I’m trying to,” I murmured.

“Remember, I got you. Okay?”

I nodded.

“Squeeze your lower legs against the sides of her. Be gentle but not too gentle, though,” he instructed.

“Huh?” I squeaked.

“Just do it, Chicken.”

Blowing out a breath, I squeezed my legs and yelped when Lisa Stansfield started moving.

“That’s how you tell her to walk,” he informed me, chuckling.

“I see! Wow!” I gushed.

“Want her to go faster?”

“Not yet. Where are we going anyway?”

“Wherever you wanna go.”

FORD

“Thank you for the lesson and the lunch. I can’t believe we rode her all the way into town,” Krystle prattled. “That was so fun!”

“Yeah, when I get rich and famous, I’ma have me a ranch with horses and all kinds of other animals.”

“I bet you will. Hey, I’m kinda glad we’re friends now. You might have a big head, but you can be cool.”

“I feel the same about you and those chicken legs. They seem a little less...chickeny.”

She swatted at me, but I ducked. “Dang, I thought we were friends, buddies, BFFs! Why you try to hit me?!” I screeched.

“BFFs? Really?”

“Yeah!”

Rolling her eyes, she said, “I gotta go take a shower. See you later, Ford.”

“See you later, BFF.”

It was quiet, peaceful out on the lake that lived beyond the trees behind our house—*our* lake. It was a part of the acres and acres of land my family owned. I loved it, just like I loved everything else about my home. I loved living in Austin, too.

“What’s on your mind, Bean?” came my pops’ gravelly voice, the only outward indication of his age. At sixty-eight, my dad could pass for a much younger man. He was big and tall, appearing intimidating to most people, but anyone who really knew Son Ford could attest to his calm, laid-back nature which was one of many things he’d passed on to me.

“Nothing,” I said absently.

“Bean, look at me, boy,” he rumbled.

Turning, I fixed my attention on my father sitting at the opposite end of the simple boat. “Sir?”

“What’s on your mind? The only time you bring up fishing is when you need to talk to me. So, talk.”

I shifted my gaze to the water, adjusting the cane fishing pole in my hand. “Uh...so...um...”

“Boy, if you tell me you done got some girl in trouble up in Austin—”

“Naw, Pops. Nothing like that. I don’t even have a girlfriend. Too busy with school and hockey.”

“You been playing your ass off, too. I’m proud of you.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Pops.”

“It’s the truth, son. You been saying you were gonna be one of the best to ever do it, and you’re doing it. As your sister, Pammy, would say, you manifesting that thang.”

I laughed. Pammy was the spiritual sibling. I loved being around her. “Yeah.”

“What is it, son? What’s going on with you?” Pops asked, reaching down to grab his tall can of beer.

“Uh, I don’t wanna go to school in Austin no more.”

He stared at me. “So...you don’t wanna play hockey no more?”

“I do! I just...”

“You’re worried about that little girl ‘cross the road, ain’t you? So, you *do* have a girlfriend.”

I turned to see a big grin on his bronze face.

“Huh?” I asked, frowning. “Naw...”

“Boy, I’m old, not dumb or blind. Me and your mama can see you like that girl. She likes you, too.”

My frown deepened. “She does?”

Now, he was laughing.

“I don’t see what’s funny, Pops,” I grumbled.

“You and that girl are! Liking each other and ain’t got a clue what to do about it. Me and your mama was the same way. I knew I loved Inez when we was little kids playing in the church yard. You worried about that girl? She sickly, right?” he said.

I nodded, deciding lying would be a waste of energy. “Yes, sir.”

“Me, too. Ain’t no man in that house. No protection. I been watching out for them.”

“You have?”

“Course I have! Your mama has, too.”

“Oh.”

“I tell you what, Bean. You keep doing what you doing in Austin, and I’ll keep looking out for your girlfriend. I’ll even give you reports on how she’s doing.”

I smiled. “Okay, deal!”

“Mmhmm,” he said, taking a swig of his beer. “Now, when you gon’ tell her she’s your girlfriend?”

I felt a tug on my line, and thankful for the distraction, I yelled, “I got a bite!”

TEN

FORD

Now...

“Rapp? Jones? The fuck y’all doing here? What time is it?” I mumbled. The sun was barely up, and I felt like a zombie, still half-asleep. “Did we have early practice today or something? I missed it?”

“Nah, we just need to talk to you,” Rapp said.

“Oh,” I replied. “About what? Because I ended up in the box twice during our last game? Now, y’all know that was some bullshit—”

“Nah, not that,” Rapp said. “We know the sin bin is your second home.”

“You gon’ let us in, man?” Jones asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Y’all come in,” I offered.

They followed me into my living room as I fell onto my black leather sofa.

“You got a cleaner or something?” Jones asked as he settled into my recliner.

“Yeah, it’s spotless in this bitch,” Rapp observed, taking a seat on the other end of the sofa.

“Nah...Krystle’s a neat freak. I guess she trained my ass to keep stuff in order and it stuck,” I replied with a shrug. “So... what’s up? What y’all need to talk about? We having an impromptu *Southern Comfort* meeting?”

Shaking his head, Rapp handed me his cell phone while saying, “This.”

I stared at the screen, my eyes narrowing, my pulse thumping in my ears. On the screen of his cell was a post on

the Tea Steepers' Instagram page, a photo of Krystle with her ugly-ass new dude. What did she see in this nigga? The caption read: *Baller Chandler Osborne finds a new lady love after trade to the Cyclones.*

I bit my bottom lip as I handed Rapp's phone back to him. "Why y'all show me this shit? I don't care. She's single—"

"Stop the cap. I already told Rapp about the driveway incident. You care, my guy," Jones cut in.

"Nah, I'm good now. I'm over it. I got Brandi. I know you haven't met her yet, Jones, but Brandi got a Tony! Toni! Toné *Whatever You Want* ass, a Prince *Adore* ass, a got damn Lenny Williams *Cause I Love You* ass! Rapp'll tell you. Her ass'll make you do a little soft shoe," I countered.

"I mean...she do have a nice ass," Rapp agreed.

"So does Krystle," Jones said.

I stared at him before saying, "Jooooones, I will—"

"See how that feels? You said my wife had a donkey ass!" Jones yelled.

"Damn, I said I was sorry! Shit!" I reminded him.

"Aye! We ain't here about that! Focus!" Rapp bellowed.

"My bad," Jones muttered.

"What *are* y'all here about? Y'all wanted to see me act up about Krystle and her ugly-ass nigga? Well, fuck y'all and fuck that!" I declared.

In response, they both stared at me.

"What?!" I growled.

"Fool, do you not see that this dude looks just like you? Y'all could be brothers!" Jones said.

"I don't look like him! His hair is...I don't know, *too* orange, and he got locs. Plus, he...let me see that pic again," I rambled.

With Rapp's phone back in my possession, I stared at the image. With non-salty eyes, I could see it. This nigga *did* look

like me. “Fuck,” I muttered.

“Yeah, so you know what this means, right?” Rapp asked.

“Yeah, she’s like a female Chris Breezy. She got a type,” I replied.

Jones sighed. “This nigga...”

“What does it mean then? Help me out ‘cause I’m at a loss!” I said.

“Ford, it means she still loves you, too. She waited all this time just to get with a dude who looks like you? And you can tell she ain’t feeling him. She’s smiling, but she looks stiff,” Jones provided.

I threw up my hands. “So?”

“So, you damn idiot, if you pull your head outta your ass, you could get her back!” Jones explained.

I sat there for a moment before dragging out an, “Oh.”

KRYSTLE

“...and our highest earner for the quarter, once again, is Krystle Ford! Congratulations, Krystle! Everyone, let’s give our reigning Top Agent a round of applause!” Posh Properties’ CEO, Iyla Bradley announced.

I smiled as my colleagues celebrated my accomplishment. “Thanks, everyone!” I gushed. I was proud of myself. Real estate might not have been my first career choice, but I was damn good at it. Honestly, I excelled at whatever I chose to focus on...except my marriage.

Iyla gave me a smile, the older woman’s perfect teeth gleaming against her ebony skin. “Well, that’s all I have for you today, and remember...be passionate, be persistent, be posh!”

With that, the agents’ meeting was dismissed.

“Krystle!”

I was entering my office when Destiny’s voice stopped me in my tracks. Turning, I watched her trot toward me in her red heels.

“Girl, you flew out of that conference room! I need to talk to you, if you have a few minutes,” she said.

I nodded. “Of course. I’m in the office all day today,” I informed her as I slid into the chair behind my desk.

Claiming the chair opposite my desk, she lifted a neat eyebrow. “Oh? No lunch with the Cyclone?”

I rolled my eyes. “No...not today.”

“Hmm, well, I just wanted you to know I saw that pic of you and him on IG. Cute.”

“He is...isn’t he?”

“I meant both of you together, but yes...he is. Uh...you have a type, huh?”

Frowning, I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the desk. “What do you mean? You referring to the fact that he’s an athlete? Basketball and hockey are nothing alike.”

“That, and...he looks like your ex—red hair, ruddy skin...”

“Huh? They look nothing alike!” I protested.

Destiny held up her hands. “Damn, I didn’t mean it as an insult. Mr. Ford is a handsome man...no disrespect intended.”

“You can’t disrespect me about someone else’s man because he sure ain’t mine,” I muttered. Silence from Destiny, so I added, “Not that I care.”

“Hmmm, okay. Well, let me get back to work,” she said. Then she left.

“...and it’s so beautiful here, Krystle. When are you coming to visit?” my mom chattered.

I glanced down at my phone resting on the kitchen counter as I sat on a stool shoving spicy California rolls in my mouth. Swallowing, I replied, “Ma, I’ve been to Dubai before. I took you on your first trip there.” That trip was my divorce gift to myself—seven days at the Ritz Carlton Dubai, great shopping, good food. I spent the entire trip in misery.

“Yes, but I live here now!”

“And you’re a newlywed. I’ll come visit after your honeymoon phase is over.”

“Girl, I hope that phase is never over. Oh! Gotta go! Dennis is home.”

“Okay...love you.”

“Love you, too, and Krystle, think about what we discussed the other week. There are lots of opportunities here for ambitious young women. Especially in real estate. There’s nothing holding you in St. Louis or the states, for that matter.”

“I know. Talk to you later.”

After our call ended, my appetite was gone, and I could feel the unmistakable twinge of an impending headache. Grabbing my phone, I rushed to the bathroom, located my medicine, filled one of the tiny paper bathroom cups with water, and downed a pill. Then I stepped into my bedroom, sat on the side of the bed, and opened the Instagram app. I stared at that photo of Chandler and me on the Tea Steepers’ page for minutes before collapsing onto my back with a groan. Why did Terrence Ford have to be so stupid?

ELEVEN

FORD

I wonder what time Chicken Seven closes. I could tear up some wings and fries right about now. Or maybe I want some Chinese. St. Louis Chinese food is unmatched. Do we got early practice in the morning? I stay forgetting shit. I still can't believe I ended up in the penalty box again last night. Fuckin' bullshit call. It's about time for me to go to the dentist. I can't be missing no cleanings.

Brandi took her mouth from mine and smiled at me, breaking into my internal monologue and bringing me back to her apartment where we sat on her pink sofa. She had a super nice crib. Real elegant.

"I love kissing you," she whispered, licking her pouty lips.

"Yeah...me, too. I mean, I love kissing you, too."

She giggled. "Why're you acting all nervous? We've been seeing each other for a full month now."

"We have? Wow," I uttered, sitting up from where I'd been slumped in my seat. "That's crazy. Time flies."

"It really does! So...I was thinking. I really do like kissing you and just chilling with you. Our energy matches. We're like...twin flames."

"Uh-huh..." I said absently, my eyes on her beautiful face, my mind returning to the thought of devouring some Korean fried chicken. Brandi had cooked some salmon and asparagus, and it was good, but unlike most of my teammates, I wasn't chained to eating healthy shit.

"And I appreciate how respectful you've been with me..."

"That's how my ma and pops raised me," I said with a shrug.

"That's wonderful! It really is, but...I'm ready, Terrence."

“Ford. I told you to call me Ford. Everybody calls me Ford.”

“But I like Terrence, and it’ll sound crazy calling you Ford while we’re having sex.”

It didn’t sound crazy when Krystle did it, I thought. Then a realization hit me. “Sex?” I croaked.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you...I’m ready to have sex...with you.”

“Uh...I’m...” Okay, so the thing was, my dick wouldn’t work for women other than Krystle, no matter how hard I tried to make it work.

“What?” she squeaked. “You don’t want to have sex with me?”

A real man would’ve told the truth by giving her an emphatic *no*. My childish ass said, “I do! I just...I’d rather move slow. Take our time. We’ll get to that.”

“It’s your divorce? That’s why you wanna wait?”

This time, I did tell the truth when I said, “Yes.”

“Boy, call your mama. She’s been watching your games wondering how you can get out there and get beat up but you can’t call her or answer her calls. You ain’t too grown for me to whoop your ass for worrying my wife! Call her.”

I had to laugh at that voicemail from my pops. Not that I didn’t think he would and could still beat my ass. Shit, I was going to let him if it came to it. Wasn’t no disrespecting him or my mom. That was why I wasn’t trying to talk to her or hear what she had to say. I couldn’t handle it. Not right now. Not when every time I turned around there was another picture of my got damn wife with that cornball-ass basketball player popping up on all my social media feeds. My algorithms were royally fucked up. Like, she was really still dating that generic version of me when the real thing was right here with a heart full of love for her. Real love, not whatever he was giving her. Even if it *was* love, it didn’t have nothing on mine. Who could

compete with a motherfucker who'd loved her for so many years I'd lost count? No one, that's who.

I stared out my windshield at the arena. We had a game in a couple hours.

Shit, I missed my wife.

Ex-wife, a voice in my head reminded me.

"Yeah, that," I muttered.

THEN...

My brother, Brutus, always kept a good job. Always kept a nice car and crib, too. My favorite of his cars was this sleek, black 2008 Dodge Challenger he bought brand new. I loved that car, and he knew it. He lived in New Mexico, but whenever he came home to visit, he let me drive it after I got my license. When I turned seventeen, he gifted it to me. It was only two years old and like new. I got a lot of great gifts from my family that year, just like I did every year, but that car was everything!

I was still going to school in Austin, and no, Krystle Tyler was not my girlfriend. I liked her...a lot, but by the time I got over my fear of her reverting to her meaner form and rejecting me, I came home for summer break last year and found out she had a boyfriend, some dude named Donté or Dontrae or whatever. He was a year older than us and had an old, restored pickup that always seemed to be parked in front of her house. I can't lie; the whole her having a boyfriend thing kind of broke my heart, but I recovered. It was senior year, and I was being recruited by a couple colleges to play on their hockey teams. Plus, I had my best friend back. When Blake got out of juvie that last time, he found some act right. He'd been squeaky clean ever since. So, we hung out on weekends, usually driving to Austin to kick it. He loved my car, too. I might've lost one Tyler twin, but I regained the other one. I had friends in Austin, and I was pretty popular there, but I'd missed my OG best friend.

This time, we decided to hang at the Watts High School basketball court like we did so many times as kids, rather than head to Austin. It was late afternoon on a hot spring day. As we sat on the bench outside the fenced-in basketball court, I kind of just stared into space while Blake puffed on a cigarette. I hated that he still smoked, but at least it wasn't weed. I wasn't trying to go home smelling like that. My pops would kick my ass!

“You still killing it up in Austin, huh? Krystle said you was in one of the papers. Said they was talking about all these white schools that’s tryna recruit you,” Blake shared.

With a frown, I looked over at my friend. He and Krystle looked a lot alike. He was basically a masculine version of her. “How she know that?”

He tossed his cigarette on the concrete beneath our feet and ground it out with his sneakered foot before giving me a smirk. “Really, Ford? You a smart dude. Stop acting dumb.”

“What? How am I acting dumb?”

“My sister is crazy about you. Always checking game scores and shit. The way she talks, you’d think you were the greatest to ever play hockey.”

“I mean, I *will* be. Best believe that, but...you for real?”

“Yes! You can’t see it?”

Not anymore, I thought. Back when she would wait on her porch for me to get home from Austin, I did think she liked me. I felt it, too. It was the way she’d look at me. But... “She has a boyfriend.”

He rolled his eyes as he pulled another cigarette from a pack along with a lighter he had in his pant pocket. “She don’t want dude. He’s nice to her, buys her stuff. She’s only with him because you never made a move.”

“By the time I was going to, she was with him,” I replied absently. What he’d told me had my mind racing.

“I tried to tell her you liked her. She won’t believe it.”

Frowning, I watched as he lit another cigarette. “Wait, how you know I like her?”

“I know because I got eyes. All that fighting y’all used to do? I figured it out back then.”

“Oh. Well, too late now. We both got somebody.”

“That cheerleader? How long y’all been kicking it?”

I shrugged. “Couple of months.”

He stared at me before doubling over laughing.

“Why is that funny?” I asked once he piped down with all that.

“Cause you don’t want her no more than my sister wants Delontrae,” he replied.

“That’s his name?” I said with a snarl.

“Yeah. What’s your girl’s name again?”

“Melissa.”

“You taking her to prom?”

“Yeah, who else I’ma take?”

He shook his head. “You and my sister are stupid.”

“So...you’d be cool with us getting together?”

“Yeah! Listen, I’m a fuck-up, Ford. It’s only a matter of time before I do some shit that gets me locked up for a stretch. You the only person I trust with my sister. Real talk.”

“You been staying out of trouble, though. You’re good!”

He smiled at me, dropping a hand on my shoulder. “What I am is fucked up. I’ve accepted it. You’re the good one. I can’t wait ‘til I’m watching you play your game on TV from my cell.”

I shook my head. “I hate when you talk like that, man. You gotta stop.”

“A’ight. How’s this? I can’t wait to watch you play your game from my throne in the palace whilst I’m king.” He said it in what I guess was supposed to be a British accent. It sounded more Australian to me.

Punching him in the shoulder, I said, “Shut your stupid ass up,” and then we both laughed.

KRYSTLE

I sat in the living room, my gaze out the window as I watched Terrence Ford stand beside his stupid nice car in an ugly light blue tuxedo, a boxed corsage in his hand as his father took pictures of him. It was his school's senior prom night, and I was sure he was heading out to pick up the ugly girlfriend my brother said he had.

“Damn, why don't you just go on out there and stare?” Blake said, stepping from the kitchen into the living room.

“Stop cussing, boy!” our mom yelled from her room.

“My bad, Ma,” Blake offered.

I gave my brother my middle finger and he laughed before shouting, “Krystle in here cussing, too, Mama. With her finger!”

“If I didn't see it, it didn't happen, and stop yelling in this house, boy!” she called back.

He rolled his eyes.

I returned my attention to the scenery outside to see that Terrence Ford was gone.

TWELVE

FORD

THEN...

“**W**here your cat at?” Blake asked.

“Ran away,” I replied absently.

“Dang, that’s messed up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You know what? You and my sister got to be the stupidest two people in the world,” Blake asserted, snatching my attention from the scene across the street to him. We were in my car with the windows down. Thank God he wasn’t smoking.

“What?” I muttered, shifting my gaze back to Krystle in a pink dress, her hair in tiny, long braids. The dress didn’t have straps or anything and her titties were...damn! She looked beautiful. Then again, she always looked beautiful.

She is beautiful, I thought.

“You two ‘bout to die wanting to be together and neither of you will do anything about it,” he pointed out.

“Man, don’t start with that. I’m cool. They look good together...happy,” I lied. Dude looked dusty and his suit looked dumb.

“You know they’re engaged, right?”

I jerked my head around and yelled, “What?!”

“Ohhh, so your lying ass *does* care,” he sang.

I just stared at him.

“I was playing. She ain’t engaged, but you better speak up. Dude is really into her.”

KRYSTLE

I slowly climbed the front steps to my home, dropping onto the top one and fixing my eyes on my pretty shoes. Prom was...nice. I mean, I got to hang out with my friends, and everyone looked so good. I looked fire and so did my boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend.

Sigh.

“Dang, you back already?”

I jumped, my heart going from normal to an Olympic sprint in milliseconds. “Ford? What in the world?! Where’d you come from?” I softly shrieked. It was late and I didn’t want to wake my people up. He was standing a few feet from the front of my house.

He moved closer, his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. As was his signature, he wore an official NHL hockey jersey, one from a collection of many. The full moon and porch light gave me a good view of his handsome face, his mustache, his lips.

Sigh again.

“I was sitting on my porch waiting for you to get back. You a’ight?” he asked, lowering onto the bottom step and stretching his long legs out before him. He didn’t turn to look at me, but the back of him was nice, too.

“I’m...I’m fine. Why were you waiting for me?” I uttered.

He scooted up to the middle step, causing me to adjust my feet to make room for him. When he dropped his head back, letting it rest on my lap, I gasped. He looked up at me, his pretty dark eyes glued to mine.

“Because I like you,” he admitted.

I wasn't sure what to say. Plus, my stomach suddenly felt unreliable.

“And you like me...right, Chicken?” he probed.

I let my eyes drag over his handsome face before I nodded. “Yes. I do.”

He smiled, and I truly thought I'd pass out. Why now? Why tonight?

“Before you ask, no...I don't have a girlfriend anymore,” he advised me.

“Oh. What happened?” I queried.

“She wasn't you.”

My eyes instantly filled with tears. “I don't have a boyfriend anymore, either.”

“For real? Why?”

I placed a hand on his cheek. “B-because, he wasn't you,” I stammered, the tears threatening to show themselves.

Taking my hand and kissing it, he asked, “Will you be my girlfriend, Chicken Tyler?”

I let the tears fall, lifting my eyes to the starry sky and sniffing. “Ford, I just gave my virginity to my boy—*ex*-boyfriend.”

THIRTEEN

FORD

Now...

I was in the damn penalty box *again*, this time for a bullshit hooking call, and watching the action out on the ice while biding my two minutes when Osoff, a member of the Carolina Hurricanes—our opponents—decided to yell some mess at me from the neighboring penalty box.

“Hey, Ford...they need to start calling you a box wing. Why don’t you get a blanket and a pillow while you’re in there?” was his lame attempt at chirping.

“Hey, Osoff, how you talking shit from inside the box, and didn’t you get put in there for biting? The fuck are you? A got damn chipmunk? Out there biting muhfuckers. They don’t feed y’all? Or do you only eat dick?” I yelled back at him, making my box’s attendant shake his head.

“Suck my ass, Ford!” Osoff rebutted.

“If I could get your wife’s mouth off *my* ass, maybe I would.”

“I’m going to kick your ass when we get back on the ice!”

“Osoff, you couldn’t kick my ass even if I stood still and painted a target on it, but your mom knows how to find my dick. Can’t get her off it.”

Once we were back out on the ice, I kept my eye on him and dodged him when he tried to charge into me. Laughing, I said, “See, I told you. You can’t kick my ass. Tell your mom to be naked when I get home tonight.”

He tried to hit me with his stick and ended up in the box again, giving us a Power Play. By the end of the game, we’d defeated them in their home arena.

“So...my mom throws this big party every year. It’s a charity thing. Wanna be my date?”

I looked up from my phone at Brandi’s pretty face, her eyes wide with hope. “Charity? I ain’t know your folks had money.”

She shrugged. “I mean...it’s not like she’s a billionaire or anything like that, but she isn’t broke, either.”

I nodded. “Gotcha. What charity?”

“It’s a single mother’s thing. My mom raised me on her own.”

I glanced down at the black screen of my phone. “Yeah, I’ll go depending on when it is. You know how my schedule is.”

“Oh, I’ve already checked. It’s in a week, and you don’t have a game that night.”

“A’ight. Cool.”

“Yes!” she peeped. “You’ll finally get to meet my mom. I know you want to take things slow, but I can see a great future for us. Can’t you?”

Placing my phone on her coffee table, I sighed. “Brandi, can I be one-hundred with you right now?”

The smile in her eyes dimmed. “Of course you can.”

“Okay...the thing is, I’m...uh, I’m still in love with my ex-wife. I’ve loved her since we were really young. I grew up with her. I’m not sure if we’ll ever get back together, but I wanted to be honest with you.”

She stared at me without responding, so I continued, “I haven’t been trying to lead you on or anything like that. I just...I’ve been trying to date since we split, and it hasn’t been working out because my heart is still with her. Maybe with time, that will change.”

Her lashes fluttered before she dropped her eyes and asked, “Do you want it to change?”

I hesitated before admitting, “I don’t know. I just know that right now, I feel what I feel.”

“So...you wanna stop seeing me?”

“I like you, Brandi. I’d like to remain being your friend.”

She bit her bottom lip. “I’d like that, too.”

KRYSTLE

Chandler had been traveling for back-to-back away games, so I hadn't seen him in a couple weeks, and I was kind of glad about it. He was sweet, handsome, rich, attentive when we were together, and not Terrence "big-head-ass" Ford, so I should've been sad about his absence. I wasn't sad and that was also because he wasn't Terrence "big-head-ass" Ford.

Ugh!

Why the fuck did I still love his stupid ass?

Why, why, whyyyyyy?!?!

Sitting in LaDarius's room as he sat on my lap staring at me, I asked, "Why do I still like your old ugly father, huh? Why can't I just wipe him out of my heart and move on with Chandler?"

I swear this iguana shook his head, which made me roll my eyes.

"He's the one who asked for a divorce, LaDarius. Not me. I merely granted his wish."

In response, LaDarius crawled down my leg and crept out the room.

"Wow, you just gonna leave because I'm embellishing the truth a little?" I called after him.

Okay, so I was lying. I'd been the one to ask for a divorce with my silly ass.

My phone buzzed, and I dug it out of my pocket to see Ford's mom's name on the screen.

With a racing heart, I accepted the call and put it on speakerphone. "Hello?"

"Krystle?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am, Mama-in-law. How are you?" I replied.

“I’m fine, baby.”

“Daddy Son?”

“He’s doing good, baby. How’ve you been?”

“I’m well. Been working...” *and missing your idiotic son*, I added mentally. “You sure everything is okay?” I was always worried about them because of their advanced ages but especially when she called me. She rarely called me.

“Yes and no. Everything’s fine with me and Son. It’s Bean I’m worried about.”

My stomach dropped even lower than it already had. Something was wrong with Ford? “Wha-what’s wrong with him? The last time I saw him, he seemed fine.”

“Well, he ain’t. He won’t talk to me, and I know it’s because of you.”

“Me?! How is it because of me?”

“Now, listen...I’m not accusing you of anything. I know my boy and I know you. What I mean is the divorce is why he won’t talk to me. He’s afraid I’m going to bring you up, ask about you.”

“Oh...” Damn, did he hate me so much he’d avoid his mother to keep from hearing my name?

“He still loves you and it hurts him to talk about you,” she continued, shutting down my line of thinking.

“Mama—”

“And you love him, too. I know I shouldn’t be in y’all’s business, but you two need to sit down and talk and stop walking around in misery.”

I held the phone.

“That’s all I wanted. You don’t have to respond. I’ll check on you later, baby,” she said, and then she ended the call.

I lifted my head in response to a soft knock on the facing of my office door to see my boss standing there with a tentative smile on her lips.

“Are you busy?” she asked. She was such a gorgeous lady! The thing I loved most about the older woman was her style—her short, straightened gray hair looked sleek, and the black jumpsuit she wore paired with silver jewelry screamed elegance.

Returning her smile, I shook my head. “No busier than usual, just looking over my schedule. What’s up?”

“Well...” She eased into my office and helped herself to a seat in front of my desk. “I wanted to ask you for a favor.”

Straightening my posture, I gave her my full attention. “Of course. What do you need from me?”

“So...you’re my star here at Posh Properties. You actually remind me of a younger version of myself. Ambitious, smart, stunning...”

I grinned. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Yes, and as our consistent top earner, I couldn’t think of anyone who’d be better for this task. Plus, your professionalism is unmatched.”

“Again, thank you for the compliments, but should I be worried? Are you buttering me up for something horrible?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “No, no...I—oh, here she is! Sweetie, come on in!”

I turned my attention to the open door, watching as a young lady in a red dress inched inside.

“Krystle Ford, this is my beautiful daughter. She’s been licensed to sell real estate for months, and I finally convinced her to join our team and put her skills to use. I’d love for her to train under you,” Iyla explained.

“Train?” I muttered, my eyes glued to her daughter.

“Yes, you know...show her the ropes, share some tips and tricks. I want her to have a good foundation.”

“Oh, I see. I can do that, uh...I didn't catch your name,” I said to the familiar young lady.

With a bright smile, my ex-husband's big booty girlfriend replied, “Brandi.”

FOURTEEN

FORD

THEN...

The night of her prom, after she dropped that bomb on me, I sat there, paralyzed, my head still resting in her lap, my eyes glued to her teary ones.

After a few moments of thick silence, I uttered the only word in my mind. “Why?”

She shook her head as the first tear fell, lifted her eyes to the sky and blew out a breath. “Because I thought it was what I wanted. I thought...I thought I was ready, and I still think I was ready to do it, just not with him. I...it felt wrong, totally wrong. So wrong that I broke up with him afterwards. I don’t know. I guess I’d just given up. I suppose that’s why I did it.”

I sat up, turning my body to face hers. “Given up on what?”

“On you ever noticing me, liking me.”

With a frown, I asked, “Don’t you know I’ve always noticed you and liked you? As far back as I can remember, I’ve liked you, always thought you were beautiful.”

“You said I was ugly.”

“And you knew that was a lie.”

“You said I had chicken legs.”

“Shoot, you still do.”

She sniffled and softly laughed. “I wish I’d waited. If I’d realized you...I’m sorry.”

I swallowed, wishing I could say I didn’t care or that it didn’t matter, but it did. She wasn’t a virgin anymore, but I was.

I'd waited.

She hadn't.

Another heavy silence settled between us save for the springtime Texas night sounds of bugs communicating and a slight breeze dancing with the leaves of the tall trees.

"Do you...do you still like me?" she timidly questioned.

I nodded. "Yes."

"But you don't want me to be your girlfriend anymore?"

Before I could answer, a light popped on inside her house, followed by her mother's voice. "Who's that out there?! I got a gun!" she shouted through the closed front door.

"It's me, Ma!" Krystle answered. Wiping her moist eyes, she said to me, "I better go on inside. Talk to you later."

"Okay," I agreed.

For the rest of that weekend, Krystle refused to come outside to talk to me. The following Monday, I headed back to my sister's place in Austin for school. While my sister gave me a phone a couple years earlier, Krystle didn't have one, so I couldn't call or text her. Blake had one some girl gave him, but it was disconnected most of the time because he stayed pissing the girl off. I wished I could've remained home in Watts to assure Krystle that I still wanted her to be my girl. Her revelation hurt but not enough to erase what had been building between us virtually since we were kids. I cared about Krystle, deeply. It was more than just "like," for sure. What I felt for her was something that was a part of me, something I carried with me to Austin, a feeling that played in the back of my mind and settled in my subconscious no matter where I was at any given moment or what I was doing. No other girl had truly piqued my interest, not on a real and serious level, anyway. When I thought of my future, she was in it. When I considered all my hopes and dreams, there she stood in the middle of it all. Loving Krystle Tyler was in my cells.

So, it hurt when she refused to talk to me the next weekend, too. I hung with Blake, who mentioned she'd been acting weird and being uncharacteristically quiet. He said he didn't know what was up with her or why she wouldn't talk to me but also shared that she'd withdrawn from him and their mom, too. Of course, I wasn't going to tell him what was up or what I thought was up. He might've been my best friend as well as her twin, but that was Krystle's business to tell, not mine.

In the meantime, graduation—mine and hers —was racing towards us. Blake had to make up some credits and was scheduled to graduate in the fall. He seemed cool with it, and I was glad. I was happy as all hell he was keeping himself out of trouble. I was offered and had accepted a full ride to play hockey for one of the best teams at one of the top colleges in the country—University of Michigan—and was scheduled to graduate in the top ten percent of my high school class. Life was good, I was good, but I missed Krystle.

KRYSTLE

I was embarrassed.

It was that simple.

I was embarrassed, ashamed, and I felt entirely stupid for choosing *that* night to do what I did. I was also angry at myself and Terrence Ford for being too silly to express our feelings to each other, feelings I still felt so deeply for him that I actually felt ill. There I was, mere days from graduating from high school with an acceptance letter from and a scholarship to attend Philander Smith College in Arkansas. I had friends, not many, but a few, and I'd done well in school because school was never hard for me. It wasn't hard for Blake, either. He just didn't care enough to put forth any effort. Anyway, my future was set. I was getting out of Watts and away from the sadness I often felt at home. I'd no longer have to sit on my porch and watch Ford live life. I would build one of my own. So why was I so down? Why did I feel so bad about not waiting for him? Why, why, why?!

I knew his graduation was tonight. His mother offered to drive me to the ceremony along with Blake, but I couldn't face him. Did I think he still liked me? Yes, I did, but I'd also seen the look in his eyes when I told him about me losing my virginity. I'd heard the change in his voice. He was bothered, but so was I. So was I because I could tell I'd broken his heart. That was the main reason I couldn't face him.

I sat in one of the chairs situated on the floor of my high school's gym, my eyes on my hands resting in my lap on top of my burgundy graduation gown. I wasn't in the top ten percent of my class like Ford was, but I was graduating with a B-plus average, a feat considering my brother was a fool for

much of my schooling, not to mention my father's death and the transitions that followed. My mother never really was the same after Daddy's passing, and I unconsciously shouldered all the related stress and pain to the point that it induced all kinds of stomach issues. I'd had to modify my diet and was drinking Pepcid like it was a milkshake.

Even *I* knew I was too young to be that stressed, but I couldn't help it.

Lifting my head, I let my eyes continue to peruse the sea of faces seated in the bleachers in support of the members of my modest graduating class, hoping to catch a glimpse of my mom and brother to no avail. Shifting my focus to the stage, I gave my attention to Asia Saunders as she delivered her valedictory speech. I was nervous but happy to be getting my diploma. I just hoped I didn't trip and fall while climbing the stairs to the platform.

As I stood in line awaiting my turn to cross the stage, I spotted them, all of them—my mom, Blake, Mr. And Mrs. Ford, and...Terrence Ford. The smile I wore evaporated as I met his intense stare. He was so weirdly attractive, and I had to admit I'd missed his face. When he smiled, his eyes glued to me, I quickly returned it. I was so engrossed in our interaction that I missed hearing my name and was nudged by the person behind me. As I ascended the steps and glided toward the superintendent, I could hear cheers, people screaming my name. Ford's voice rang out loud and clear, making tears spring into my eyes.

“Yeahhh! That's right! We love you, Krystle!” he screamed.

We love you.

He loves me.

My heart soared as I descended the steps on the opposite side of the platform and made my way back to my seat, a burgundy padded diploma cover in hand.

FORD

I stood with our little Krystle Tyler fan group outside the gym in the balmy night air waiting for Watts High School's most beautiful graduate to grace us with her presence. I was nervous but happy she'd smiled at me. In the weeks since I'd last been in her personal space, my affection for her had grown. So much so that not seeing her at my graduation ceremony really messed me up. Now, I was determined to see her, talk to her, finally kiss her. I had to make her understand that what happened on her prom night wasn't bad enough to make me not want her. I didn't think anything could do that. I wanted her to be my girl—chicken legs and all.

When she finally emerged from the gym, I stood back as her mom rushed to hug her and Blake gave her dap. He'd spent most of the ceremony talking about how he couldn't wait for his fall graduation to arrive. I think it really bothered him that he wasn't finishing school with his twin, but he knew he only had himself to blame for it.

My parents were next to congratulate her, and then it was my turn. With our families surrounding us, I inched forward, smiling down at her as she looked up at me with uncharacteristically timid eyes.

“Congrats, Chicken,” I said for her ears only.

“Thank you, Big Head,” she replied.

“We having a little get together. Everyone is invited!” her mom announced.

As everybody around us chattered in response, I kept my focus on the girl I so desperately wanted to be mine and asked, “You riding with me?”

With a tiny smile, she nodded. “Yes.”

FIFTEEN

FORD

THEN...

“I got a phone now. My mom gave it to me right before graduation,” she said as I pulled into my home’s driveway. The ride from the high school to our street had been soundless. Not strained but a comfortable quietude.

“Word? A graduation present?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“You gon’ give me your number?”

“You want my number?”

“Absolutely.”

She gave me another little smile.

“Give me your phone, I’ll call mine and I’ll have your number,” I said.

In lieu of a reply, she handed her phone to me. I was dialing my number when I heard her say, “I’m sorry for missing your graduation. I...I was...”

Making the call to my phone and quickly ending it, I gazed up at her, admitting, “I looked for you.”

Giving me her full attention, she let her beautiful, dark, downturned eyes peruse my face. “You did?”

“Of course, I did.”

Shaking her head, she withdrew her gaze. “I really am sorry. I was...I was so ashamed. I still am. I shouldn’t have done what I did. We used protection, though. I made sure.”

“Do you think what you did changes how I feel about you?”

She shrugged in response.

“Well, it doesn’t. I still like you, Chicken. You ignoring me hurt more than you having sex with that dude. It happened. It’s over. I don’t care.”

Her eyes were on me again, making me feel weak. “Ford?” she nearly whispered.

“Yeah?” I replied.

“Have you...been with anyone. You know...”

“No. Never. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Oh, god,” she groaned. “I’m s—”

“Can I kiss you?” I requested, cutting her off.

Her head snapped around, her brow creased as she squeaked, “Huh?”

“*Can I kiss you?*”

In response, *she* leaned in and kissed *me*, her mouth slamming into mine so fast that I was kind of taken aback, but I quickly recovered, reaching up to cradle her soft face in my hands. Almost simultaneously, our lips parted and our tongues fumbled around until they created a rhythm that had us both moaning. I’d waited so long for this moment, and judging by her eagerness, so had she.

Bang, bang!

We jerked apart, both of us staring at the driver’s side window with wide, startled eyes. It was Blake who’d banged on it, a big, ridiculous grin on his face.

I lowered the window. “Man, you need to stop playing! You scared us!”

“That’s because y’all out here being nasty. Krystle, Mama said you need to come on in the house. You got guests,” he said.

Krystle sighed, and I said, “Come on. We’ll talk more later.”

She kissed my cheek. “Okay.”

“Damn, will y’all stop?!” Blake griped.

Krystle tossed him her middle finger as she climbed out of my car, making him laugh.

Hand-in-hand, we followed Blake across the road to her house. I was just about to follow her inside when he stopped me.

“Hey, I’m happy y’all finally got it together. Now, don’t make me have to hurt you over my sister,” he warned.

I smirked. “Come on, now. You know better.”

Smacking me on the shoulder, he said, “I do. Aye, I’ll be right back. My moms is sending me to the store for more pop. She’s even letting me drive her car.” He pulled the car keys from his pant pocket and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Oh, damn! She trusting you with the whip? Want me to ride with you?” I asked.

“Nah, go on in there with my sister. If I take you away from her right now, she’ll kill me.”

I laughed. “True. Don’t get stopped for driving crazy and get your privileges revoked.”

“I got this, my nigga!”

KRYSTLE

Ford and I sat around and tried to act interested in my party—which I truly appreciated—when we really wanted to be alone. I, for one, wanted another kiss. I could've kissed him for hours and I still didn't think it would be enough. His lips, his hands, his scent, the heat of his body being so close to mine? All of that had to be the exact recipe for Heaven on Earth. When our mouths connected, I feared my heart would explode, shatter into pieces, or at the very least, stop beating if only for a second. It was a long-held fantasy realized, a moment I knew I'd never forget, and a memory I hoped would lead to more like it. It was hard for me to take my eyes off him, and when I did give in and look at him, I'd find his gaze on me. Did I love him?

Absolutely.

Did I truly understand what love was, what it meant? No. I just knew I loved him, kind of like I knew I loved my mom and my brother and making art. It was something I was certain of even if I didn't understand it. At eighteen, I already knew I'd always love him.

After thirty minutes, a text message popped up on my phone.

Ford: *Meet me at the back door.*

Smiling, I replied: *When?*

Him: *Now.*

I looked up to see the seat he'd occupied was empty. So, I abandoned mine, smiling widely when I saw him standing in front of the back door, which was located in the kitchen. In what felt like less than a second, we were standing in my backyard right under my bedroom window, our bodies pressed together, our mouths jammed together, our tongues at play with one another. It felt awkward and exhilarating and oh so beautiful.

Breathtaking.

In that moment, I didn't care about time or space or the past or the future. There was just this, him, *us*.

I loved him so much; the feelings burst out of me when the kiss finally ended. "I love you," I breathed. "Please say you love me, too."

He stared at me, his eyes big and honest as he returned, "I do. I love you, Krystle. I think I've loved you since we were kids."

Smiling, I grabbed him, wrapping my arms around him as I crushed his mouth with mine. He laughed and so did I, but we never pulled our mouths apart.

Moments later, we sat side by side on the ground beneath my window, hands entwined, eyes glued to each other in the moonlight.

"I wish you'd been my first," I divulged.

"I will be. Dude don't count. You didn't love him," he replied.

Grinning, I kissed his cheek, and he grasped my chin, bringing my lips to his. I'd reached up to caress his stubbled jaw when my back door flew open, yanking us apart.

"Krystle! Krystle!" my mom wailed. "Where you at, girl?!"

I hopped to my feet, rushing to where she stood on the back porch with Mrs. Ford trying to say something to her.

"What? What is it?" I asked, my heart throttling my rib cage.

"Blake...Blake..." she mumbled before crumbling into Mrs. Ford's arms.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, turned to see Ford standing next to me.

"Ma, what's going on?" he asked his mother.

“There was an accident,” she said. “Blake was...he’s passed away.”

SIXTEEN

KRYSTLE

Now...

Brandi was...nice, bubbly. I honestly couldn't find anything bad to say about her except that she was a strange match for Ford. That was just my opinion, of course. I was going by how mismatched he and I were, but it worked.

Until it didn't.

And whose fault was that, mine or his?

Yours, bitch, my mind told me.

I frowned as I speared a piece of pasta a little too aggressively because no my thoughts weren't trying to put the blame on me!

I mean, you can't say he isn't a patient man, especially when it comes to you, sis.

Wowwww, I was under attack by my own psyche. This was some bullshit of the highest order.

"Are you okay?"

I jerked my head up to see a concerned look on Destiny's face. "Yeah. Why?"

She gave me half of a shrug. "Uh, you've been sitting there scowling at your food and stabbing that penne for a good little while. Is it..." Destiny leaned across the table in the break room, lowering her voice. "Is it your new protégé? Gotta be hard working with the boss's kid. She seems spoiled." She ended her statement by scrunching up her nose.

Through a sigh, I informed her, "No, she's great. Very smart and attentive. She's like a little real estate sponge. So...

upbeat.”

With a frown, Destiny asked, “Okay, I know you’re not the bubbliest person in the world, but why are you making all that sound so...disgusting?”

Grabbing my cell, I typed out a text and sent it to my tablemate. “Check your phone.”

“Girl, are you losing it? Why would you text me—”

“Negress, just check your damn phone!” I hissed, my teeth clenched.

She did, her eyes expanding as she looked up at me. “She’s fucking who!? How do you know? Wait, she told you? She knows you were married to him?”

“Destiny, we are at work. There is a reason why I texted your silly ass.”

“Then text me the answers!”

I blew out a breath as I grabbed my phone but stopped mid-text when I heard, “Hi, ladies! Krystle, are we still on for the showing at two?”

Brandi.

I damn near had to windmill myself to keep from rolling my eyes at her sparkly, big booty ass, and I had no reason to feel this way other than the fact she was fucking the love of my life who was probably enthusiastically eating her pussy at any and all given opportunities.

Son of a fucking bitch!

With a saccharine smile plastered on my face, I responded, “We are!”

“Oh, good! I can’t wait to see you in action again! You could sell water to the ocean!” she gushed. “Well, I’ll let you two get back to your lunch.”

As she bounced out of the break room, Destiny mumbled, “Okay, I see why you described her in that tone of voice. Over the top much?” as I finished typing out my text: *I saw her with him. She’s the big booty heffa I told you about.*

My skin crawled as Brandi drove us to the showing in her very clean Benz while prattling on and on about how excited she was to be embarking on this new career and some other shit about her future goals. I felt like doo-doo for disliking this girl when she really hadn't done anything to me. Destiny had postulated that perhaps they only went on one date and reminded me that Ford was, in fact, a single man, so I really needed to get myself together, but I couldn't.

I simply COULD NOT.

Because I still loved the motherfucker.

Fick, fack, fuck!

When I heard her say the word, "boyfriend," I tuned back into our one-sided conversation.

"I'm sorry, my mind is all over the place. What'd you say?" I asked, glancing over at the pretty bitch.

"I was saying that I think you might be related to my boyfriend. His last name is Ford, too!"

I felt like I was in a movie. You know, that moment when the camera zooms in on a character real fast and dramatic music ensues. All the air left my lungs and I felt faint but managed to strangle out, "Oh, really? What's his first name?"

"Terrence," she chirped.

By then, she'd parked in front of the million-dollar, neoclassical home, and as I opened the passenger door, I mumbled, "Never heard of him."

FORD

“Happy birthday, Mama Iesha!” I sang as I followed Jones into his living room where his mom sat on an actual throne. There was a crown resting on her salt and pepper mini fro and a huge smile on her smooth, brown face. She had on a pretty white dress. She really did look regal.

Opening her arms, she gushed, “Come give me a hug, second son!”

Grinning, I crossed the room and bent over to hug her. “How old are you now? Eighteen?” I asked.

“Almost,” she joked.

When the Sires’ head coach entered the room holding two wine glasses, I looked up to see that Nuri had her husband’s ear. I knew Jones wasn’t happy about the thing Coach and Mama Iesha had going on, but he’d become more chill about it. Still, I couldn’t believe he’d invited him to his mom’s party.

I’d turned around and was about to go tease Jones when Rapp stepped in front of me.

“You’re late,” he said.

“Damn, nigga...did we have a date?” I quipped.

“Shut up. We need to talk. Come on.” He sounded all cryptic and shit. The hell was going on?

I was about to ask him what his deal was when he grabbed my damn arm and steered me from the living room all the way out the front door.

Once outside, I asked, “Rapp! What the fuck?!”

He shook his head and those locs of his, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks as he began pacing back and forth in Jones’ cramped driveway. “It’s Yamille, man.”

“Okay...what about her?”

“She...she thinks she might be pregnant.”

I frowned. “I thought you wanted kids one day.”

“I do, but I also want to love the mother. I don’t love Yamille. I mean, I like her...”

“And you obviously like her pussy.”

“Yeah. Man, what I’m a do?” he groaned.

I widened my eyes. “Shit, I don’t know. You said she *thinks* she is, right? It’s not definite?”

“No, she texted me this shit like five minutes ago, says she’s gonna buy a test to be sure. Fuck!”

“You ain’t been using protection, nigga?”

“Of course I have. Ain’t nothing foolproof, though.”

“Yeah...”

“And be careful. Being fertile might run in her family.”

“Oh, I’m safe. I ain’t done nothing with Brandi, and we’re just friends now.”

He stopped pacing and stared at me, so I said, “What?!”

“What alternate universe am I in for you to suddenly have more sense than me?”

“Hey, Rapp?”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck you.”

“The hell y’all out here for? Party’s inside.” That was Jones making his way down his front steps to us.

I nodded toward Rapp. “Our center is having a dilemma.”

Rapp laid the news on Jones who shook his head and said, “Wow, kids ain’t something you wanna have with just anybody. It’s a lifelong commitment. Love her or not, you gon’ be connected to Yamille for at least the next eighteen years.”

“I know, man. Shit,” Rapp muttered.

“What you gon’ do?” Jones asked.

“Whatever she wants to do. If she’s pregnant, I’ma step up.”

“You sure it’s yours?” I questioned.

“No, but I ain’t gonna lead with that shit. I chose to have sex with her and she’s good people. I ain’t gonna act like she’s a ho’ now,” Rapp said.

I nodded.

“I gotta get back inside before Nuri thinks I’m dodging Coach’s touchy-feely ass,” Jones practically whined. “Always tryna hold my mama’s hand and shit...”

“I can’t believe you let him through the door,” I said.

“Yeah, I was like, ‘Jones invited Coach?’” Rapp interjected.

“I didn’t invite him. Nuri did. She also threatened me into going along with the shit,” Jones supplied.

I grinned. “She must’ve said she was gon’ withhold the pussy, huh?”

“Nun-ya,” he shot at me as he led us up his front steps.

In response, I threw my head back and laughed. Poor Rapp just shook his head. I’d never been happier to not be getting any pussy.

“...so, you’re going to pick me up for the benefit, right? I can’t wait for you to see my dress. What did you decide on wearing?” Brandi’s voice streamed from my phone’s speakers as I mindlessly perused my IG feed.

“Uh, I don’t know. Did you say it was formal or dressy?” I muttered.

“Formal! I think a black tux would complement my dress. Maybe with a gold bow tie? Is that doable for you? Wait, I

know you have a gold bow tie. You wore one the day of the Sabres game. Do you own a black tux?”

At that point, I was only half listening to my “friend” Brandi because I’d run across a photo of Krystle with LaDarius sitting on her shoulder. She looked so beautiful and was wearing a huge smile. I’d unfollowed her long ago; it hurt too much to see her face all the time. This image was posted by some blog I wasn’t following, either, but I guess it was an algorithm thing.

“Uh...black tux? Yeah, I got one. I’ll be ready.”

“Great! I really appreciate you for agreeing to be my date even though we’re not a couple anymore.”

“No problem. Hey, let me hit you back later.”

“Sure!”

After the call ended, I dropped the phone onto the sofa next to me and blew out a breath. Squeezing my eyes shut, I whispered to myself, “Shit.”

SEVENTEEN

KRYSTLE

THEN...

It felt like the ground beneath my feet collapsed and I was in a free fall to nowhere. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I swear my vision went black.

Blake was dead.

If I were to be honest with myself, I'd have to admit this was something I'd worried about when he was at his worst, but he'd changed, calmed down, and now...this?

Since my hearing was somehow intact, I was cognizant of the sounds around me—my mother sobbing, Mrs. Ford attempting to sooth her, Ford whispering something in my ear.

“What?” I said absently, turning to look at him—ruddy-colored skin, concerned eyes.

“I said you're swaying. Let's go inside and sit down, Krystle,” he rumbled, his warm breath brushing my ear.

“No.”

“No?”

Shaking my head, I repeated, “No.”

“You don't wanna go inside?”

Now I was shaking my head vigorously as I lifted my trembling hands to grab his shoulders and screamed, “Nooooo! Noooooo! Noooooo!” Then I collapsed against him, a wail finding it's way from the depths of my soul and breaking the barrier of my lips. I screamed loud and long and hard. Tears drenched Ford's shirt as he held me. When I made my way partially back to sanity, we were sitting on the ground, his arms around me as he rocked us back and forth. His breathing

was ragged, accentuated by sniffles. That's when I remembered he loved Blake, too. He'd lost his best friend.

I tried to move to look at him, but he tightened his grip on me, softly saying, "No," into my hair. It was freshly straightened for the graduation ceremony. I was sure it was a mess after I'd spent so much time out in the humid night air.

"Where's my mom?" I asked.

"With mine at my house."

"Oh."

"He knew."

I frowned. "What?"

"Blake...I think he knew he was going to...that he wasn't going to be with us much longer."

"W-why do you say that?"

Somehow, he pulled me closer to him, releasing a long sigh. "I don't know. It was the way he talked, the things he said. He really wanted me and you to get together, for me to look out for you."

"He knew I loved you."

"He knew I loved you, too."

How could the best night of my life so swiftly become the worst night of my life?

Terrence Ford loved me, *he really loved me*, but it wasn't enough.

It just wasn't enough.

FORD

This shit hurt and it changed me. Then again, how could it not? I'd lost someone I'd loved as a brother. I'd known him forever, still considered him a friend when he was wilding the hell out. This loss was huge and deep and devastating, but as jacked up as I was about it, Krystle's grief was virtually palpable. They'd been together since conception and shared a bond so strong that when he started fucking up, it affected her, caused a change in her demeanor, erasing the sassy little girl I once loved to hate and leaving behind someone so introspective that it was hard to reach her more often than not. She was taking his death harder than even their mother was, but initially, she didn't shut me out, and I was grateful for that. I was sick about Blake's death. I wouldn't have dealt well with her pulling away from me again so soon after we halfway got our shit together.

And now we sat side by side at the gravesite after having endured the rigors of the funeral service, a pearly white casket sitting before us balanced over a freshly dug hole in the ground. Krystle was tightly clutching my hand as tears flooded her face, and all I could do was wonder why. Why the service in a church Blake probably had only stepped foot in twice in his entire short life? Why did I and the other pallbearers have to carry him from the church to the graveyard? Why all the rituals? Why all this...torture? This shit was brutal, and to be honest, I wasn't really there, not mentally anyway. I wanted all of this to be finished. I didn't want to partake of the repast. I just wanted to crawl in my bed and sleep until this blew over. Until it stopped hurting.

Why couldn't it be that simple?

The preacher read something from the Bible before casting flower petals onto the top of the box that held my friend. Then, they began to lower it with some mechanism. How morbid did

a motherfucker have to be to invent something that lowered caskets into graves?

As I sat there staring and blinking, I heard a loud wail, saw quick movement, and was forced to abandon Krystle to help the other men present, including my father, restrain Mrs. Tyler from jumping on top of the casket as it continued its machine-driven descent. Looking over my shoulder, I could see Krystle shaking her head. These two women had lost the two men in their family. How were they even upright at that point?

After her mom was sufficiently calmed and led back to the church, I reclaimed my seat next to Krystle and sat there with her until there was no one left but us. The sun had begun to set.

Finally, she softly said, "Let's go home."

So, we did. I drove us back to our street where we spent the night sleeping in my car.

KRYSTLE

This time, Ford did the pulling away. We were okay at first, but as days continued to pass during the weeks after my brother's death, Ford grew more and more distant. We were both hurting, but I was working hard not to fall into a pit. I'd somehow gotten my stress-related stomach issues under control. I couldn't afford for them to flare up again. I also didn't want to develop some other disorder. Most of all, I'd decided to let this new relationship with Ford be my focus and the thing that gave me hope because heaven knows I needed some hope. Ford, who I'd rarely seen get angry or sullen, was changing into someone else, someone different, and that scared me for selfish reasons. What if the new Terrence Ford didn't like or want me anymore? That would be catastrophic. At that point, he was my *everything*.

A couple weeks into the summer, Ford traveled to Canada for one-on-one training with some famous hockey expert in preparation for college. He was gone for an entire month. Back in Texas, I got a job as a server at the same mom and pop restaurant my mother was employed at every summer. Tips were good because the place was right off the highway, but I missed Ford, even the new version of him although we'd spent most of our time in mutual silence, holding hands and kissing but not much else. I was itching to go further, but he hadn't made a move. I wondered if me no longer being a virgin still bothered him.

Initially, he'd text me every day if for nothing else but to wish me good morning or send me a selfie. Eventually, the texts decreased to weekly. He never called or answered me when I attempted to call him.

He was only home for a couple days before he left to go a vacation with his oldest brothers' family. A week later, he was on my doorstep explaining to me how he thought we shouldn't

be a couple right now, that we should wait until the time was right.

“What?” I replied weakly. I was still wearing my work uniform—black jeans and a red t-shirt with the restaurant’s logo on it. “W-why?”

He scratched his bearded cheek. Yes, Ford had a full beard, and it made him look so good! “I don’t know. I think we just need time apart,” he explained.

“But all we’ve ever had is time apart. You in Austin, Canada...”

“I know. Krystle, I love you. I just...my head is all messed up. The only thing I can see clearly to focus on is hockey, my future.”

“But not me?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I just...”

Now, I was crying. “You just what? You just don’t want me anymore? You got a girlfriend in Canada now?”

He frowned, shaking his head. “No...no! You’re the only girl for me. I’m sure of that. I just need some time, a little time to figure myself out, to stop being so angry about Blake.”

“Because that was my fault. He was going to the store for *my* party, got on the highway and that truck hit him and—”

FORD

“No! I don’t blame you! I’d never blame you, Krystle! What happened wasn’t anyone’s fault,” I said.

Her head swung back and forth as she eased away from me, the flawless mahogany skin of her face streaked with tears. “No, you’ve been thinking it. *I’ve* been thinking it. My mom probably has, too. If it weren’t for me, my brother would still be here. So...so I get it. Why would you want me knowing I’m the reason you lost your best friend?” she blurted.

“You are my best friend, too! I would never think something like that about you. You don’t know how much I love you by now?” I reached for her, but she snatched away from me.

“You love me so much you need a break? You love me so much, but the time isn’t right? You love me so much, but you can’t waste your concentration on me? Do me a favor, Terrence Ford...don’t ever call or text or speak to me again! This isn’t love! This is a fucking curse! Us together? It’s bad luck. You’re right. Blake’s death isn’t my fault. It’s *ours!*”

She stormed into her house, slamming the front door shut. Instantly, I heard her mother fussing about “all the yelling” she was doing and how she had better stop slamming doors. I stood there on her porch for longer than was appropriate, tears in my own eyes, before I trekked across the street to my home, my heart like lead. I didn’t blame her for anything. I sincerely didn’t. Truth was, she was a constant reminder of her twin brother, and I just couldn’t deal with it anymore. Did I love her? Yes, so much that I didn’t know what to do with it. Did it overshadow the grief I was poorly dealing with? No, it didn’t. So, I made the break from her, and after she spent the remainder of the summer ignoring me, blocking my number when I had enough sense to try and apologize, and literally cursed me out when I popped up at her job to talk, I realized

I'd made a huge mistake, culminating in me leaving for college without a goodbye from the girl who owned my heart.

EIGHTEEN

FORD

Now...

I never did well with being separated from Krystle. I didn't know how to let the feelings go. Like I said before, I didn't know how to stop loving her. So, there I sat in the locker room after practice, still wearing my gear, my eyes focused on my phone, on my IG feed, on pics of my fucking wife with Chuck or Bradley or Assworth Bentley or whatever his shrimp-dick-energy name was. The thing they had going on seemed to be progressing. It appeared they were in a real relationship. If this lame proposed and she actually accepted? I was going to lose every molecule of my shit!

“You gotta stop.”

I jolted my head up to find Jones standing over me in sweats and a Sires t-shirt. “Stop what? Looking at my own phone that I pay the bill for?”

“No, stop stalking your ex-wife,” he clarified.

“I can't stalk what's mine.”

“You actually can, and at any rate, she ain't yours no more.”

I stared at him.

“She's not! Staring at me ain't gon' change that, man.”

“He stalking her IG again?” Rapp asked as he approached us wearing the same thing as Jones.

“The fuck y'all supposed to be? Twinsies?” I quipped. “Y'all coordinating for a date or something? And why you in my business, Rapp? Ain't you got a baby on the way?”

“First of all, fuck you. Second, Rapp didn’t give you the news?” Jones asked.

My eyes shifted to Rapp. “Nah, what news?”

“False alarm. No baby,” Rapp said flatly.

“Damn, as panicked as you were, I’d think you’d sound happier than this,” I observed.

Rapp shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I just feel some kind of way for being in that position in the first place. Jones ain’t making shit no better.”

Jones lifted his hands, backing away a little. “Daaaamn, what I do?!”

“You married and happy and shit. Got kids...” I said.

“Yes, that’s it,” Rapp confirmed. “But you had that, Ford.”

“I know. Shit, I know,” I confessed, my words dripping with defeat.

“And like we tried to tell you, you can have it again. She obviously still has a thing for you,” Jones pointed out.

“Yep,” Rapp said with a nod. “You just gotta make that shit happen.”

Looking up at my teammates, I said, “Yeah.”

KRYSTLE

“...and I know you guys were looking for a place with room to expand your family, so I was thinking this would be a good fit with the extra loft space and the huge back yard. The house is sitting on three acres, room to build other structures, if need be. You have the two-car garage, and this house is off the beaten path. I think it’s a perfect fit!” Brandi concluded her pitch as I followed her and the prospective buyers, a young Black couple moving to St. Louis from Atlanta. The husband was a new assistant coach for the Sires. I was glad she was taking the lead on this one, and she was doing a great job. Sure, she was a bit more aggressive than necessary, but that was just part of her style. It was probably how she got Ford’s attention.

Damn, why’d I have to think of him?

“Um, my wife and I are going to step outside and talk it over for a moment,” the guy, Chad Bozant, said.

“Sure! Take your time!” Brandi chirped.

As soon as they were out of earshot, she was in my face, her eyes wide. Her “How’d I do?” was louder than I was sure she’d intended it to be.

“Excellent. I honestly think you’re beyond needing a chaperone now. You found the clients, made contact, assessed their needs, and it appears this first showing might have done the trick. They’re in love with this place,” I told her.

She clapped her hands together. “Yes! But I couldn’t have done it without your mentorship. You’re a boss!”

I smiled. “Thanks, Brandi.” She wasn’t that bad, even if she *was* screwing my husband.

Ex-husband. And you have a boyfriend, I told myself.

Then I replied to myself with, *whatever.*

“Hey, we’ve made a decision,” Chad informed us, his voice echoing in the empty house as he and his wife stepped back inside the kitchen. “We want to make an offer.”

“Wonderful! I think you’re going to love your new forever home!” Brandi chirped.

“We already do. Um, Ms. Ford, can I ask you a question?” Chad directed to me.

From where I’d perched on one of the built-in kitchen island stools, I replied, “Shoot.”

“Are you Terrence Ford’s ex-wife? If so, he was telling me you were in real estate, and I was meaning to contact you before we heard from Brandi.”

I could feel Brandi’s eyes on me as everyone in the room awaited my answer. Since I knew he worked with Ford, I decided not to lie. “Yes,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Cool! I’ll tell him I met you!”

“Chad was telling me that Terrence said you were beautiful. I see he didn’t lie!” Mrs. Bozant chimed in.

“Well, Ford is not one to lie, and thank you,” was my response.

I drove this go-round, and as I took us back to the office, I could feel Brandi’s eyes on me while Janelle Monaé poured from my vehicle’s radio. When she finally asked the question, I was relieved.

“Um, didn’t you tell me you didn’t know Terrence Ford?” She sounded downright accusatory.

Nodding, I confirmed, “Yes, I did.”

“Why would you lie about knowing him? You were married to him!”

“Because he’s my ex. I don’t care to talk about my ex. That’s why I lied.”

“Damn, you hate him that much?”

“No, but what’s past is past. He’s not a part of my life anymore. He’s a part of yours.”

“True. Well, I hope this doesn’t ruin our business relationship.”

“Of course not! We’re cool.”

“Oh, good! I love learning from you!”

“You’re a great student.”

“So...we’re good. You’re sure?”

“Positive. Hell, you want some tips on his likes and dislikes?” I glanced at her, noticing when her eyes lit up.

“Would you?” she trilled.

“Sure!” I sang.

We were having dinner at *Prime 55*, this being our first date in a week or so due to Chandler’s busy schedule and my resistance to going out. I got tired of the pictures of us that kept popping up on social media. I was married to a whole hockey star and didn’t go through this much scrutiny. Goodness!

“I like the ambience here, and these lamb chops are perfect. Thanks for suggesting this place,” Chandler said.

I looked up to see him taking a sip of his wine.

“Oh, no problem. I came here for a work gathering recently. Really liked it,” I informed him.

“Nice. How’s the shrimp and grits?”

“Divine,” I replied with a smile.

“Krystle, I’d like to discuss something with you.”

I stared at him, at his face that reminded me of another man, and hoped he wasn’t going to ask for some pussy. “Uh...okay?”

Wiping his mouth with his napkin, he straightened his posture and cleared his throat. “I know we haven’t been seeing each other long...”

Oh, fuuuuck! Was he about to propose? He hadn’t even met LaDarius yet!

“But I like you,” he continued. “You’re the total package—brains, ambition, beauty, a gorgeous body. That hair? Your hair is everything!”

I smiled and said, “Thanks, Chandler,” while thinking about how Ford loved my hair. Then I told myself to focus because if this man proposed, I needed to be ready to sprint up out of there.

“You’re welcome, beautiful. Krystle, I see a future for us. Marriage, kids, love and happiness...”

Aw, damn...

“So, will you move in with me?” he finally asked.

I blinked, grabbed my water, threw it back, and blinked again. “Um...uh, Chan—”

“I realize I’m moving fast and that you’re a divorced woman doing her own thing, but...” He dug a key from the chest pocket of his dress shirt, handing it across the table to me. “Just think about it. You don’t have to give me an answer. Just take this and get back to me on it.”

I’m not sure why I took the key. Maybe it was shock, or maybe I subconsciously wanted to move on from Ford. Like, *seriously* move on. In any case, I accepted the key but lost every syllable of my vocabulary. So, I just nodded and weakly returned the wide, satisfied grin he gave me.

NINETEEN

FORD

Now...

“**B**oy, what in Sam Hill are you doing here?!” he boomed, yanking me into a hug whilst slamming his big hands against my back. “Inez, come see who’s here!” my pops added.

Releasing me, he did something he hadn’t done since the day I left for college. He grabbed my face and stared at me before kissing my forehead. Pops was taller than me and was now a much thinner man. He’d been bald my entire life. I’d seen pictures of him with hair, but they looked weird to me. He was definitely aging, but he looked damn good for a man in his eighties.

“Hey, Pops. Wanted to see y’all,” I finally said.

“Naw, you ain’t here for me. You here to see your mama. It’s about time you stopped dodging her.”

“Bean?!” my mother shrieked as she stepped into the living room from the kitchen.

My eyes started watering the second they fell on her in a worn house dress, a towel draped over her shoulder. From the aroma of yeast rolls that greeted me the moment Pops answered the door, I knew she was in that kitchen throwing down!

Leaving my father, I stepped closer to my mom, pulling her into my arms as she wailed, “My baby is home!”

The first thing my mom did was sit me down in the kitchen and place some rolls, butter, and coffee in front of me. She did the same for my pops who sat across from me. Then she joined

us with a glass of water for herself. My folks had been together for sixty some odd years. How the fuck did they do it?

“You must ain’t got no game tonight,” my father garbled.

“No, sir. I don’t,” I affirmed.

“So, you spending the night with us, Bean?” my mom asked hopefully.

“No, ma’am. Gotta fly back tonight. Game tomorrow. Practice in the morning.”

“Hmm, so this is how you decided to stop ignoring me? By just showing up here all the way from Missouri?” she questioned.

With my eyes fixed on my plate, I said, “I...I needed to talk to you. The phone seemed too impersonal.”

“Oh,” she hummed. “So you wanna talk about something personal?”

“Like your wife?” Pops chimed in.

I nodded before looking up at both of them. “She has a boyfriend. See?” I pulled my phone out, tapped until the screen showcased a photo on IG.

My parents handed the phone back and forth before my mother returned it to me.

“Humph,” Pops mumbled.

“So that’s the opp, huh?” Ma said.

My eyes ballooned. “Ma! How you know what an opp is?”

She flapped her hand at me. “Child, one of the great-grands taught me. I know what ‘mid’ means, too. Anyway, is he the opp?”

I had to laugh but still managed to say, “Yes, ma’am. He definitely is.”

“Was that a key he was handing her? They shacking up?” Ma asked.

Shrugging, I blew out a breath. “I guess. I don’t know. I just know I don’t like it.”

“Because you still love her?”

I smiled at hearing my mom’s drawl. When she said her, it came out as huh.

“I do,” I admitted. “And...and it hurts to keep seeing them together. They’re all over social media because he’s in the NBA.”

“Handsome, too,” my mom observed.

“Ma!” I protested, eyes wide.

“Boy, the negro look just like you. What you upset about?” my father said.

“I’m upset because it’s *not* me! It’s *him*! I want my woman back!”

“Then go get her back!” Mama advised.

“I tried to,” I whined. Yes, I literally whined because this shit was upsetting, and this was my mama. It was okay to whine to my mama.

“Boy, stop that whining,” my mom fussed.

So, maybe it *wasn’t* okay.

“I’m just saying...” I mumbled.

“Well, try harder!”

“Maaaa!”

“What’s keeping you from reconciling with her, son? Don’t you realize she wants what you want? She’s dating your twin, and she’s still in St. Louis when she doesn’t have a reason to be. She doesn’t have any kinfolk there, no real ties other than you. And don’t say that lizard is keeping her there because she ain’t got to let you see it,” Pops said.

“Iguana,” I corrected. “It’s an iguana.”

“Well, I don’t know why you bought the girl a damn crocodile. That’s probably why she left you. Why you didn’t get her a puppy or a kitten or a goldfish like a regular negro?”

“Pops, it’s not a crocodile. Plus, she loves it,” I tried.

“Crocodile, alligator, Tijuana, they all the same,” he grumbled.

I sighed.

“Bean, look at me,” my mom ordered.

I did, giving her my full attention.

“When I talk to that girl, I can hear it in her voice. She still loves you. She misses you. She wants to be with you. Shoot, she’s still wearing your last name! Now, you’ve got to be a man and fix this or you’re going to spend the rest of your days in regret and misery. You hear?”

I bit my bottom lip before saying, “Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t play around with this. Her mama told me she’s tryna get her to move to Dubai,” my mom added.

“What?!” I shrieked. Shit just got *mad* crucial.

“I bet that lit a fire under your ass, and look here, get her some flowers and maybe a parakeet or something,” my pops advised. “No more got damn boa constrictors!”

“Mmhmm,” Ma said, “And Bean, don’t be basic.”

All I could say was, “Wow.”

TWENTY

FORD

THEN...

I wasn't sure why I was doing what I was doing other than this first semester of college was kicking my ass. Between coursework, practice, and all the bullshit that went with being Black at a top PWI, I was stressed the fuck out and needed something familiar, something good and familiar.

Someone good and familiar.

So I used some of the money my siblings kept depositing in my account and bought a plane ticket. After a taxi ride, there I was...waiting and waiting and waiting because I hadn't planned this out well. Hell, I hadn't planned it out at all. I just did it, hoping I wouldn't be rejected because I needed this—*her*. I needed her so badly that it hurt. It literally hurt.

Finally, as I stood outside her dorm, I saw her approaching. She saw me too, her steps faltering before she left the chick she was walking with, dropped her backpack on the ground, and started running to me. I cut the distance by rushing to her, and then she was in my arms, her legs around my waist, her face in the crook of my neck. Closing my eyes, I held her tight, breathing in her scent. Her hair was big, covering my face. She'd always had a lot of hair but kept it braided when we were growing up. Now it was a wild afro.

Beautiful.

I heard her snuffle and rubbed her back. I knew what she was feeling. I felt it, too. We needed each other. We belonged to and with each other. One thing I knew for sure? My heart belonged to her. Full stop.

“Damn, Krystle! Who is this? You ain't gon' introduce me to him?” her friend said.

Lifting her head, Krystle's eyes were locked on my face as she replied, "Amiyah Anderson, this is Terrence Ford. Ford, this is my friend and roommate, Amiyah."

"Nice to meet you, Amiyah," I said, my eyes on Krystle's pretty lips.

"Same," Krystle's friend chimed.

"I wanna kiss you," I told Krystle.

In response, she pressed her lips to mine, making me squeeze her to me.

"Uh, y'all got somewhere to go? You can use my car," Amiyah offered.

"Yeah, we gon' need that," I said after reluctantly reclaiming possession of my mouth.

In total silence, I drove us to a hotel, got us a room, and once inside, Krystle threw my ass against the closed door, kissing me as if she'd spent the past few months needing me like I'd needed her. Our hands were everywhere, our tongues clumsy but urgent as we kissed. When she broke the connection, I actually groaned.

"Ford, you still a virgin?" she panted.

I stared at her for a moment before truthfully saying, "No."

"Good," she declared before kissing me again.

We kissed and licked our way to the bed with me ending up on my back as she straddled me. That was when a thought hit me.

"Chicken...you been...you got a man?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"No," she quickly retorted.

"Have you been...fucking somebody?"

She grinned. "That was sexy. Say it again."

I frowned. "Say what again?"

“Fucking.”

I almost repeated it since I probably would've done anything to get inside her at that point, but I remembered the matter at hand. “Answer me and I will.”

“I've been with a couple dudes since I've been here, but I've only wanted you.”

I gazed up at her, wanting to know why she'd push me away and be with other dudes, why she blocked me, but then I realized it was the other way around. I'd ended us and she'd just acted accordingly, so I said, “I don't want you *fucking* anyone but me, Chicken. I'm sorry for breaking up with you or whatever I did. I've only wanted you, too.”

I'd barely finished my statement when she took my mouth in another hungry kiss, the weight of her slim body on mine, the heat of her pussy through her sweats, the taste of her tongue all sending me into a place so blissful, I knew I'd never want to come back to reality. Without ending this kiss, we frenetically undressed until we were skin to skin, her body pressed to mine, my hands gripping her ass. She lifted from my body long enough for me to cover myself with a condom, one of two I kept in my wallet. Why hadn't I brought more? Probably because I'd come here to talk, to beg if I had to. This was unexpected, a pleasant-ass surprise.

Condom in place, I watched her stare at me, at my dick, for a long moment before saying, “I'm not sure but...I think you should probably be on top.”

“Okay,” I instantly agreed. I was about to have sex with the reason my heart was beating. She could've requested we do it hanging upside down from a flagpole on the White House lawn and I would've been down.

Seconds later, I was between her legs, my bricked-up dick resting on her immaculate pussy, my arms trembling as they bore my weight, my mouth on her mouth, her neck, her breasts. Then I was inside her.

I was inside her.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as she gasped.

“Ohhhhh, shit!” she hissed. “Shit-shit-shit-shit! Forrrrrrd!”

Damn, I hadn't even moved yet, but real talk, *I* felt like screaming. Screaming, crying, praising God, Allah, *and* Buddha, anybody, because this pussy was hot as hell! Tight, too. And so damn wet!

I eased back, slid forward...eased back, slid forward...eased back, slid—she reached up and grabbed my face, pulling it down to hers. No kiss, just our labored breaths mingling between our mouths.

Our eyes met, and through her teeth she gritted, “Fuck me hard.”

Whatttttt??????

With those three words, she snatched the last bit of sanity the feel of her pussy had allowed me to retain. I went full-on beast mode, slamming into her and hoping I would last longer than a nanosecond because I *never* wanted this to end.

Never *ever* ever!

I sucked her tongue, bit her neck, squeezed her titty, and slammed into her juicy pussy while moaning and groaning and saying shit like, “Got damn! You feel so motherfucking good!” and “Lord hammercyy, this some good pussy!” and “Fuck, baby!”

I was dripping with sweat by the time she threw her head back and cried, “Big Headdddddddd!”

With her pussy squeezing my dick, I didn't stand a chance. At that point, all I could do was throw my own head back and fill the condom, putting a big-ass exclamation point at the end of one hell of a sentence.

KRYSTLE

I wished I could've at least attempted to play it cool when I saw him standing outside my dorm, but I'd wanted to see him for so long; it was automatic for me to break weak. And now? Now my body was tangled with his in a hotel bed in the middle of the night. I was ignoring assignments that were due and I didn't care. Big Head and his Big Dick had made all my big dreams come true. This handsome, weird-looking, red-headed dummy was my paradise and I wanted to stay here forever.

"You still love me?" he asked into the darkness of the room.

I nodded against his chest. "Yes. More than before. You still love me?"

"More than anything in this dumb world."

Picking up on the changed tone in his voice, I queried, "School getting to you?" Ford was spoiled and his life had been easy. I was sure he, like some of the friends I'd made at Philander, was having a hard time adjusting.

"Yes and no. I got the coursework down. I mean, it's a lot, but...it's the team. Some of my teammates...never mind."

I sat up, switching a lamp on. "No, tell me, Ford."

Sighing, he turned his head to look at me. He still had that beard.

He was so sexy to me!

"I'm the only Black player on the team just like in Austin, but in Austin, I had friends on the team. In Austin, I didn't have to deal with being called a nigger—hard 'r'—by racist ass, talentless white boys who made the team because their daddies donated money to the school. Abney, our team captain? He's a supreme asshole. I...I hate it there, man. I

wish I could've gone to an HBCU, too, but..." His voice trailed off.

"No hockey, and you gotta have hockey," I finished for him.

"Yeah. So here I am, all the way in Arkansas bugging you with this shit."

"You're not bugging me. I get it. I don't have the race issues, but I got stress. College is different, intense...and I've been missing you bad, Ford. Real bad."

He rolled onto his side and reached for me, pulling me down to him. "Turn over. Put your back to me," he said.

I did, whimpering when I felt his hardness against my ass.

"Can I have some more of you, Chicken?" he whispered in my ear.

"You can have all of me, Ford. Every damn morsel."

He lifted my leg and glided inside me, making me bite my lip as my eyes fluttered closed.

"Krystle?" he murmured on a breath as he deftly rocked in and out of me.

"Yes?" I moaned.

"Can you unblock me?"

"Yesssssss!"

TWENTY-ONE

FORD

Now...

“O hhhh, damn! Missed it *again*, huh? Sucks for you, Collier!” I taunted one of our opponents from my seat on the bench. “When was the last time you actually made a goal, my guy?”

“Bring your ass out on the ice and say that shit to my face!” the Canadians’ center shot at me.

“I’ll be out there when it’s my shift again. You can suck my ass all you want then!” I yelled at his back.

Whether I was on the ice, on the bench, or in the box, I never missed an opportunity to chirp. It was my ministry. I was gifted at getting under the opp’s skin. It led to a lot of fights but fuck it. It wasn’t like they could kick my ass on or off the ice. Believe that.

Before long, I was back in the action, handling the puck Rapp had just sent my way. One thing about the Canadians, their goalie was top-damn-notch, so scoring wouldn’t be an easy task. Luckily, *Southern Comfort* specialized in the hard shit.

There was an opposing player pacing me, but I kept moving and retained possession of the puck, advancing toward the goal. I could’ve made it. I was sure of that, but to be safe, I sent the puck back to Rapp and...boom! Our first goal of the game, and the only one needed to win!

Yeah, *Southern Comfort* was truly the standard.

I was shooting the shit with Robin Stick in the locker room post game when I received a text from Brandi: *Good game, Ford!*

I frowned. Ford? For some reason, that felt off coming from her.

Still, I replied with: *Thanks.*

Her: *Can't wait to see you in that tux, friend.*

Me: *Yeah.*

“Ford, you’re up!” Rapp announced as he entered the room.

Still perplexed about the “Ford” thing, I stood and headed to the media room for press.

KRYSTLE

For LaDarius

I sighed as I stared at the screen of my phone. This note accompanied a CashApp from Ford, one he sent monthly and termed “child support.” No matter how many times I told him it was unnecessary, he ignored me. It was sweet, though, and cute. That was Ford—sweet and cute and funny. So funny.

Another sigh and then a gasp as a knock sounded at my door, although I was expecting the company. It was time for Ford’s visitation. So, I stood from my sofa and padded barefoot to the door, checking the peephole before opening it. He entered smelling all woodsy and shit. He was wearing my favorite cologne and I instantly took it as a personal affront.

Activate attitude.

“You’re late,” I said, reclaiming my seat and leaving him to close the door.

His eyebrows flew up. “Uh...you consider on-time late?”

“According to my phone, you’re late.”

“Not according to mine.” His eyes dropped to my feet, and I smiled, lifting my left leg to rest on my right thigh and massaging my foot.

His ass was hypnotized. For a second, I thought he was going to drool before he snapped out of it and muttered, “Uh...I’ma go see LaDarius,” and left the living room. Twenty minutes later, he rushed past me to the front door, wishing me an almost unintelligible goodbye as he made his exit.

THEN...

Things had been good between me and Ford, consistent for the first time ever. We kept in touch via phone, calling and texting each other on the daily, spent nearly every second of Thanksgiving break together back home, and although it was only a week until Christmas break, I needed to see him. I missed him so much. I loved him so much.

I loved him so, so much.

So, there I was in the midst of a role reversal as I finally made my way to his dorm on the huge campus. The University of Michigan was sprawling, immensely dwarfing the tiny private HBCU I attended. We're talking more than three thousand acres versus less than one acre. So yeah, it was a chore finding Ford's spot. Once there, I stood outside, garnering weird looks as I texted him: *Hey, where are you?*

Ford: *In the library.*

"Shit!" I softly hissed. It'd taken me forever to find the damn dorm. Now I had to find the library?

Me: *Where is that?*

Him: *Why? You here or something? Lol.*

Me: *Actually, yes. I'm outside your dorm.*

No reply from Ford.

Was he mad at me for popping up? Did he have a girlfriend here? Glancing around at the girls in my immediate vicinity, I shook that thought off.

Me: *Ford?*

Nothing.

Fuck!

Now my heart was racing. Had I fucked up by coming here?

Dropping my head, I tried to figure out what to do next, the sound of rapid footfalls pulling my gaze from the ground to see a tall figure trotting toward me.

Ford.

He was wearing a big grin, a backpack bouncing on his shoulder as he quickly approached me. I yelped when he grabbed me, lifting me from the ground and kissing me so hastily that I felt faint.

“That your girl, Ford?” I heard a voice say.

Pulling his lips from mine, Ford looked to his right and replied, “Fuck off, Hunter.”

“Fuck, man! It was just a question,” the owner of the voice, a well-built, scarlet-faced white guy, rebutted.

“Yeah, and you can shove that question up your ass,” Ford spat.

The guy walked off, mumbling something else, and I turned to Ford. “Damn!” I said.

He shrugged. “This team is basically a pipeline to the NHL. I’m not tryna transfer, so I had to learn how to survive.”

“By being a dick?”

“It’s the only language most of these assholes understand. What are you doing here, Chicken?” He ended his statement with a peck to my lips.

“I missed you. Really bad.”

Lowering me to the ground, he cradled my face in his hands. “Missed you, too, but...how’d you get here? You used your refund money? I didn’t think you had that much.”

“Nope. Got a credit card, bought a ticket, caught a cab, and here I am, Big Head. You glad to see me?”

He smiled, pulling me into a hug. “Hell, yeah.”

He got us a room at a hotel near the campus, and this time, he was the initiator once we were safely inside our suite. He

pounced on me, undressing me, kissing me, touching me, and for the first time, tasting me. He spread me on the bed, lowering his head to my eager pussy and lavishing it with his tongue. I'd never felt anything like it. No one had done this to me before, and as I slowly began to unravel, I knew I wanted this to be an *us* thing—a me and him thing. I never wanted another man to make me feel like this, so raw, threadbare, and uninhibited. Free. In that moment, I felt so, so free. Shit, I felt new, like he'd unlocked a whole different version of Krystle Tyler. An upgrade.

My thighs trembled as pressure swelled deep inside of me, in a place I couldn't touch but could feel so acutely I feared I was losing my mind. He licked and slurped and sucked on my bud, one hand squeezing my breast, the other gripping my thigh. He hummed, the vibration of his voice echoing against and through my body. Then it happened. I imploded so fiercely that a strangled cry flew from my mouth as I squirmed beneath him, trying to escape the pleasure while hoping it never ended. Tears wet my face as his appeared above me, his eyes intense, his lips and beard wet. He kissed me, sliding his tongue in my mouth. I could taste myself, an odd but satisfying flavor. When he entered me, I moaned long and loud. I'd missed this feeling, had dreamt about it so many times since the last time. I honestly wished we could get paid to lie around and fuck. I couldn't think of a better occupation.

"I love you," he leaned in and whispered in my ear as he stroked me. He filled me past capacity, making me ache and tremble and cry. He felt so good inside me.

So good.

Gazing up at him, my mind in a haze of decadence, I returned, "I love you, too."

When he hit his peak and his dick began to pulse inside me, I held him close to me, relishing in the sounds of his grunts and groans. Together, we were perfection, bliss.

FORD

“Where’d you learn how to do that?” she asked as we lay in our hotel room.

“What? Eat pussy?” I questioned.

“Yeah. What girl taught you that?”

“No girl. Been watching porn.”

“What?!” she shrieked into my chest.

“What else I’m supposed to do without my girl here with me?”

“Oh.”

“Did you like it?”

“Hell yeah!”

I laughed. “Chicken, can I try something else?”

“Is it something weird?”

“I don’t think it’s weird.”

“Okay...”

“Uh, I wanna suck your toes.”

“Huh?”

“Baby, please don’t make me ask again. I know you heard me.”

“I did, I...why you wanna do that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always liked your toes, all the way back when we were kids and you’d where flip-flops. I’ve always thought you had the prettiest feet.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, so...can I?”

“I mean, we just took a shower. They’re clean. Go for it.”

I did, first caressing her beautiful face, letting my hand drop to squeeze her right nipple as I kissed her full lips. Soon, I was face to face with her tiny feet where I slowly licked and sucked those pretty toes of hers, moaning the entire time. I loved every second of it, and judging from the sounds Krystle made, so did she. When my dick was so hard that I thought for sure it would break, I slid back in that tight pussy of hers and rode her to paradise.

A week after Krystle showed up in Michigan with nothing but a credit card, her ID, and a backpack full of clothes and toiletries, we both traveled home for Christmas break, finding creative places—my car, the woods behind my house, hotels in Austin, her bedroom while her mom was at work—to fuck. She and her mom spent Christmas at my house. She got me some sweaters she knew I wanted. I got her a promise ring. We were both happy with our gifts. We had a great time, even rang in the new year under the stars. I didn't think things could get any better between us, but shortly after we both returned to school, she stopped communicating with me. No calls, no texts, and my attempts to reach her were fruitless. I was in a damn panic, calling my folks and even her mom, who hadn't heard from her either, while trying not to flunk out of school or get kicked off my team. Two weeks passed before her worried mother got in touch with me to inform me that Krystle had dropped out of school and was now in New York City.

TWENTY-TWO

FORD

Now...

What the fuck was going on with this woman? She was acting so damn strange, different. First, she kept calling me Ford. Second, she was aggressively chewing some cinnamon gum. I hated cinnamon gum. No, she didn't know that, but it hadn't been an issue before. I had to let my window down a little as I drove us to this benefit to keep from inhaling that shit.

“Can I change the station?” Brandi asked, spraying that cinnamon stank all over the place.

“Mmhm,” I said, keeping my mouth and nose closed. I was going to pass the fuck out before we got to the venue.

She changed the station to some conservative news shit. When I glanced at her, she was grinning at me, still chomping on that stankin' ass gum. Fuck! I mean, was it too late to back out of this?

“Is this station good or would you rather hear some Taylor Swift?”

Taylor Swift? I was a grown-damn-man. The fuck I look like listening to Taylor Swift?

“Uh, this is cool if it's what you wanna hear.” *I'ma just tune this shit out anyway*, I added mentally.

“Great! So...are you excited about tonight? I am! I can't wait to hit the dancefloor with you, Ford!”

“Uh-huh. Can you not call me that? I prefer Terrence.”

“Oh...okay,” she said, her energy shifting as she turned to gaze out the passenger window. What was up with this chick? I mean, yeah, I initially told her to call me Ford, but the shit

just didn't sound right coming from her. Man, I couldn't wait for this night to be over! I was going to be done with Brandi.

Done.

We finally made it to the venue, managed to find parking, and after I opened her door for her, I helped her down from my truck. She grabbed my arm as we headed into the building, a bright smile on her face. I supposed she liked stuff like this. I did, too, when I had Krystle on my arm. I was going to have to stop thinking about her. It was bad for my mental health.

The place was nice, a modern art museum with exhibit pieces up for auction. I wasn't really into art like that. Krystle was the artist, so she had a better sense of this stuff. Still, I liked the vibe of the event. Champagne was flowing and we were damn near being accosted by servers with various hors d'oeuvres. The little cucumber salmon things were hitting, though. A string quartet played classical music in a far corner of the massive room with oddly placed walls, and the joint was packed with well-dressed Black folks. It was cool.

"Who'd you say was throwing this event?" I leaned in and asked Brandi who'd been glued to my side from the second we arrived.

"My mom-slash-boss," she replied.

"You work for your mom? You never told me that."

"It's a recent development."

"Oh, so your mom is rich, huh?"

She rolled her eyes. "You could say that. She's a big name in real estate. Has her own firm with several realtors on staff. I guess she's a true boss."

Real estate?

Clearing my throat, I began, "Hey, what's the name of her comp—"

"Oh, there she is now. Come! Let me introduce you two," Brandi cut me off and basically dragged me across the room to a group of people. Some I'd met before. Others I hadn't, but one in particular, I knew well.

Standing there in a tiny dress with a face card that never
ever declined, was my fucking wife.

TWENTY-THREE

KRYSTLE

Now...

There he was, looking all stupid in a black tux, goatee neatly trimmed, hairline so sharp it could cut glass. Tall and handsome and supposed to be mine forever.

Terrence-motherfucking-Ford.

I should've known!

I should've expected her to bring him, but I was actually shocked and thrown way off balance. So, there I stood on Chandler's arm lacking the much-needed ability to take my eyes off a man whose body I'd long ago committed to memory. A man whose scent still lived in my nose.

"Mom, this is Terrence Ford, the man I've been telling you about. Ford—I mean, Terrence, this is my mom, Iyla Bradley," Brandi chirped.

Bitch.

Okay, that wasn't fair, but whatever.

"Terrence," my boss sang. "You look familiar."

"Uh, yeah...I think we've met before," Ford said, his eyes on the older lady. I knew he had to feel the heat of my regard on him, but he was doing a good job of playing it off.

"Hmm, maybe..." Iyla said, adding, "Well, you are all my Brandi talks about. You're a professional athlete, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. I play hockey with the Sires," Ford verified.

"Hockey..." Iyla turned, searching the people crowded around her until her gaze collided with mine.

Shit.

“Krystle, didn’t you’re husband—oh,” she said, cutting her words off as recognition registered on her face. “Well, I’m... good to meet you, Mr. Ford. Brandi, a word, please.”

“Didn’t know your ex would be here, did you?” Chandler whispered in my ear. I’d almost forgotten I was there with this man.

“No, why would I?” I said in a terser tone than intended.

“Whoa, it was just a question. Damn,” he said, backing away from me a bit.

“Sorry. I...excuse me.” I made for the restroom because fuck all this.

“Why the fuck are you here with that nigga? Got your fucking toes out in those shoes, too!”

I swung my body around to see that Ford had followed me into the corridor leading to the restrooms, and instead of being sensible and ignoring him or telling him to mind his damn business, my silly ass countered with, “Why you here with fucking Sunshine and Rainbows? You like nice bitches now?”

“I ain’t with her!”

I moved closer to him, right into his personal space. “Boy, yes-you-are! She’s been hanging off you all fucking night!”

Glaring down at me, he hissed, “I’m her date for tonight, not her man. We’re friends. I ain’t fucking her unlike you and got damn Carlton Banks’ super cornball ass!”

“You done fucked half the women in St. Louis since we divorced. Shit, probably *before* we divorced, and you have the bombastic audacity to have an issue with who *I’m* fucking?”

He stumbled backward, looking like I’d just slapped him. “Chicken! Are you really fucking that nigga?!”

“Why? I’m not your wife anymore since you very eagerly signed the divorce papers so you could finally be rid of me and my issues!” I was literally screaming.

At an event thrown by my boss.

I was going to get my ass fired, and I didn't care. My heart was so damn broken.

“What the fuck else was I supposed to do?!” he roared.

“You could've fought for us! For *me!*” I proposed.

“I was trying to give you what you wanted!”

“I didn't want a fucking divorce! I would *never* want a divorce and you know that! I never even signed the damn papers!” I shrieked.

TWENTY-FOUR

FORD

THEN...

I was hurt. I was also angry that Krystle, my girl, my *heart*, would make these big decisions without telling me. No, she didn't need my permission to do anything, but she'd accepted my promise ring, said she loved me, and I truly believed she did. Why wouldn't she discuss something like dropping out of school and moving to New York with me? Why would she cease all communication? Yes, I would've tried to talk her out of it because I knew she didn't know anyone in New York, and moving there would be dangerous. Throwing away a scholarship wasn't exactly a sound decision, either, but damn! Was I not worth being notified, at the very least?

Her mom said she'd called her all excited, fast-talking about how she was staying in what sounded to me like a boarding house full of artists. She'd explained to her mom that artists don't become better artists in schools, that life and experiences were their teachers. Maybe she was right. I didn't know shit about art or artistry. I just knew it fucking hurt that a woman I'd loved for as long as I could remember excluded me from this new life of hers.

She didn't return home for holidays. She didn't call me, and I eventually stopped calling her. A full year passed before I just let it go, let *her* go. I had to if I was going to be able to achieve my own goals and realize my own dreams. No, I never stopped loving her, but I couldn't afford to lose my focus, so I went on with my life. Since she stopped contacting her mom after that initial New York call, I didn't know how she was doing, if she was okay, if she was even alive. She hadn't updated her social media since high school. So, that was that. I moved on and with a vengeance. I fucked so many women

during my sophomore year that I lost count. It was fun. Meaningless, heartless, but fun, and it kept my mind off Krystle sometimes. Other times, she was who I saw when I was inside those other girls. She'd truly fucked my head up.

And I still wanted her.

Shit, I *needed* her.

Although my heart was both splintered and hardened, there was some good news. I secured an agent, and my gamble that playing for U of Michigan would pay off, did. That June, at the end of my sophomore year, I was drafted by the New York Rangers.

KRYSTLE

THEN...

There were parts of my life after I left college that I couldn't even remember, kind of like online shopping in the middle of the night when you're half asleep and being surprised when your packages arrive. It wasn't that I was completely absent during those times. I just felt...impaired. Almost intoxicated, high. For more than two years, I made impulsive decision after impulsive decision. Some good, some bad, and all without Terrence Ford. I didn't know why I'd pushed him and my mom away. I also didn't know why I'd cut contact with my few friends after high school or the people I grew close to during my brief stint in college. It was just something I did, something that had to be connected to Blake's death because even *I* knew I wasn't the same after that.

Nothing was the same after that, especially my ability to maintain connections, even those I desperately wanted and needed.

I'm not making excuses, as there are no good excuses for me shutting the people I cared about and who cared about me out of my life. It was just that when I felt like this, this agonizing impulsivity, this weird, wired sensation, I had to isolate myself. So, I did. I moved to New York City with plans of becoming a famous artist and an understanding that it would take work and struggle. I'd heard the greatest artists lived the hardest, and sometimes, most tragic lives. I had the tragic part on lock with the loss of my twin. I guess my father's passing would fall in that category, too. Hard? Things had been hard from time to time, but by and large, I'd always had the things I needed and some of the things I wanted. So, this experiment—moving to a new place with one suitcase and a credit card—would surely be the hardest task of my life, and

it was. It was lonely and frightening. It was full of uncertainty and scarcity, no security at all. I was rail thin by the time I got a job, and it wasn't even a good job. I worked nights as part of a crew that cleaned office buildings. Executives are fucking disgusting, by the way. The restrooms? Oh my god! I spent the free time I wasn't sleeping working on my art in my eighty square-foot apartment. I had little furniture, a makeshift kitchen of a mini fridge, hot plate, and microwave, and the bathroom was communal, but my art? My art was beautiful and beyond anything I ever believed I could create—paintings, drawings, collages. Most days, I worked in a frenzy, driven by a desire to be seen, known, appreciated. Imagine my elation when, among the dozens of galleries I visited and owners I met with, one finally agreed to show my work!

TWENTY-FIVE

FORD

THEN...

I never blocked her on anything—not on social media or my phone—so maybe I shouldn't have been surprised to see her pop up on my Facebook timeline. Well, not her, but a post she made. A flyer that read: *The Sanaa Gallery presents Evolution of Love by Krystle Tyler*. There was a listing of exhibition dates and times along with a photo of a much thinner version of the girl who still owned my heart. I stared at that post for so long I swear it became burned into my memory. Fucking tears filled my eyes because at that moment, the hole she'd left in my heart became too apparent, too real. Then the anger surfaced, raw and cold and heavy. How was it possible to love and hate one person this much? And which feeling would I choose to sit in? Quickly, I chose hate. Hate was much safer than love when it came to Krystle Tyler.

Fuck her and her damn exhibition.

Why the fuck am I here?

That thought, part of a chorus that played nonstop in my mind, was my companion as I stepped into the Sanaa Gallery after practice during one of their day showings. The place was relatively empty save for three or four bodies roaming the sleek, colorful Chelsea gallery sandwiched between a vegan yogurt shop and a pet groomer.

“Hi! Welcome to Sanaa! I'm assuming you're here for the Krystle Tyler exhibition?” an attractive, older Black woman greeted me, ending her statement with a wink.

At that moment, I realized I was still standing at the entrance, probably looking as lost and apprehensive as I felt.

“Uh...yes,” I replied, shoving my hands into the pockets of my slacks.

“Wonderful! You’re *definitely* going to love it! Per the artist, you need to begin here, then move through the rooms in a clockwise manner. You should end up right at our gift shop entrance with the final piece.”

“Um, okay. Thanks.”

She left, and either I was tripping, or a couple of the other people perusing the place kept looking at me. I mean, I was tired, but was I *that* tired?

Shrugging, I moved to look at the first piece, frowning as I focused on it. It was titled, “The Beginning,” and it was a drawing of me as a kid playing basketball on the high school court. I quickly moved on to the second piece, another drawing of me, this one of me smiling as I stood in my front yard back home. I had to be like eleven or twelve. As I progressed through the showing, I saw image after image of me, gradually ascending in age. The work improved with my age in the pieces, advancing from images obviously created by a child, although even they were damn good, to those created by a master at the craft. Young me at a blues fest sitting in a lawn chair, me standing in Krystle’s front yard, me playing hockey in high school—when had she seen me play hockey back then? Me in my cap and gown when I was eighteen, me gazing at the stars at night, me standing naked in that hotel room in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They were all...me. Drawings, paintings, even an image of me somehow created with scraps of paper. By the time I found myself staring at the final piece in the collection, I was done fighting tears, letting them flow freely as I stared at a painting of myself in my Rangers uniform, a replica of a picture I’d seen on Twitter. For Black hockey fans, I was a big deal. All of us Black players were. The photo had been tweeted by a Black girl hockey fan group.

All this time, she’d been creating images of me while shutting me out of her life?

“Why?” I said aloud. I didn’t understand. I couldn’t process this. I was too damn befuddled to feel the anger that

kept the heartache in check. I was just fucking floored.

“Because I love you, and I’ve missed you every second we’ve been apart.”

Believing I’d imagined her familiar voice coming from somewhere behind me, I didn’t acknowledge those words. I didn’t turn around to see if she was really there. I didn’t do anything.

“Sula, the gallery’s owner, called and told me you were here. She recognized you from the exhibition pieces. When I first showed her my work, I explained that this was an evolution of love, *my* love. You.”

I shook my head at the imaginary Krystle’s words. “Nah, you don’t love me. All this...I don’t know what it’s supposed to mean, but I know you don’t love me. You don’t abandon, cut off, hurt the people you love. You enjoy hurting me.” My voice was wavering but fuck it. I was hurt. When it came to Krystle, all I seemed to do was hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

That’s when I spun around, smacked dead in the chest by her beauty. How was it possible for her to be even more beautiful than I remembered? She seemed taken aback, too. Hell, I *knew* I looked good.

“You’re sorry? You kick me out of your life for no reason, put on a damn display, an exhibition of my face, more than two years later, and all you got to say is you’re fucking sorry?” I growled. “Fuck you, Krystle! Fuck you and your got damn sorry!” I kept my voice low, but the character of it told her just how angry I was.

She blinked hard, licking her pretty-ass lips. “It’s all I can offer. I don’t have an excuse. I just...I felt like running, so I ran, but I never stopped loving you.”

I nodded, chuckled, and brushed past her, rushing to the gallery’s exit. Once out on the sidewalk with the sounds of the city buffering my pain, I could breathe again. The feeling only lasted for a moment before Krystle exploded through the gallery’s front doors, crashing into me. I flinched, backing

away from her with my hands in the air. Pain filled her eyes and I didn't care. At least I wasn't the only one hurting.

"Ford—" she began, but I cut her off.

"Do you have any idea how much I loved you? How I would've done anything, *anything*—good or bad—just to make you happy? I fucking breathed for you, and you threw me away like I didn't matter!"

Now she was crying, tears flooding her face as she clutched the material of her blouse over her chest. Passersby didn't even glance at us. Such is New York.

"I know! I know!" she shrieked. "I know you hate me now, and I know I deserve it. I didn't do this work because I thought it would make you forgive me. I don't ever expect you to do that. I don't deserve it. I created this art because it was what was in me. Every inch of me, every cell in my body, loves you, *only* you. I haven't looked at another man. I haven't thought about another man. I love you. I want you. I don't deserve you. That's my cross to bear. I love you enough to want you to be happy. I realize that can't happen with me, but I'm still going to love you until I die and I'm fine with it. I...I understand."

I stared at her, my nostrils flaring, my breathing uneven, my chest tight. Her head was lowered, a mass of black, kinky hair obscuring most of her face, but I could hear her sobs.

"Look at me," I ordered.

She slowly lifted her head, and I did the only thing I truly wanted to do. I kissed her, rough initially, then sloppy, urgent, needful. I kissed her right outside that gallery, and she kissed me back, wrapping her arms around me and pressing her tiny body into mine. Thankfully, she ended the kiss because I was willing to asphyxiate myself to freeze the moment. Releasing my body, she grabbed my hand.

"Come on," she said, and I followed her back inside the gallery without a word. We quickly passed the collection of my face until she stopped at a door near the back of the place, opening it and ushering me inside. Frames, shelves, boxes—a

storage room. When she closed and locked the door, we were plunged into darkness. Before I could think through what was happening, I heard Krystle move, felt her hands on me, fumbling with the closure on my pants. In lightning succession, my pants were down, underwear was down, dick was free, and she was swallowing me, her hot mouth making me whimper and grab for something, *anything*, to steady myself. I eventually grasped onto a metal shelf and threw my head back, moaning softly. My other hand sank into her hair as she sucked me with her mouth and massaged me with her hand. My brain was screaming at me to stop her, to get my ass out of that room and away from this woman. My heart was conflicted. My body was clear that its rightful owner was pleasing it. I was a fucking system of confusion, a network of contradictions, pissed at myself but powerless to stop her.

Because I still loved her.

So. Fucking. Much.

“Krystle...” I whimpered, my body swaying. “Fuck!”

Letting me slip out of her mouth, she softly said, “Shhh!”

I nodded, swallowed, my “Okay...okay,” hushed and strained.

Then I told myself this would be the last time, the last time I’d see her. The last time I’d even let myself think about her. The last time I’d smell her, taste her, feel her, the tail end of those thoughts flying through my mind as I erupted in her mouth.

She stood, pressing her lips to mine. Caught in a haze, I grabbed the back of her head, kissing her so brutally that it hurt *me*. Once we parted, I murmured, “Come home with me.”

“Okay,” she replied, her breath grazing my lips.

KRYSTLE

Terrence Ford lived in a small studio apartment that was a mansion compared to mine. He had an actual kitchen *and* a bathroom. Paradise! No sofa, just a comfy looking chair and a bed. I shut out any thoughts of the other women he'd brought here. It wasn't my business. What mattered was now. We were together *now*, and I needed to be in this moment, to enjoy it while it lasted.

We'd taken a cab there, the ride made in silence. The walk up to the fourth floor made in silence. His unlocking the door and letting me inside...in silence. I was visually inspecting the apartment—not spotless but not dirty, either—when I felt him press his body against the back of mine, his erection poking me in the ass, his arms encircling my waist as his lips met my neck. My head dropped backwards, my eyes fluttering closed as I covered his hands with mine. He felt so good, so right and familiar. I wanted to tell him how much I'd missed him, but I didn't want to break whatever spell he had to be under to want me after the way I'd treated him, even if he only wanted me for this moment.

I whimpered when he slid his hands up to my breasts, squeezing them through my shirt as he nibbled my neck.

“Ford...” I breathed as he lifted my skirt to my waist and slid a hand down to my pussy, gripping it through my panties. I gasped when he began to pull and tug on my underwear until it ripped, dropping to the floor.

“Bend over the bed,” he rumbled in my ear. At that point, I was so wet and ready and had missed him so much; he could've told me to stand on my head and I would've at least tried to. So, I eagerly rested my elbows on the unmade bed, trembling with anticipation as I closed my eyes and waited... and waited...and waited. I was about to turn and see what he was doing when he gripped both sides of my waist and drove into me. The thrust felt punitive, as if he'd been awaiting an

opportunity to reprimand me, and it felt like Heaven. I didn't realize I was crying until I saw a tear fall to the black fitted sheet. He slammed into me harder and faster, his grunts joining the sound of our mating flesh and my sniffles to provide an oddly erotic soundtrack for our sex. I felt his body crowd mine, felt his breath on my ear as he asked, "You still love me? How much?"

"M-more than I can say. More than anything or anyone else in the world!" I whined.

"Who you been fucking since you left me?"

"N-no one!" I cried.

"You're lying." This was a statement, not a question, both words punctuated with a deep, agonizing thrust.

"Ohhhh, shit! I wouldn't lie about that! You know I wouldn't!"

No response except for him lifting his body from mine and tightly gripping the back of my neck, pounding into me until I found myself screaming through an orgasm.

Only seconds passed before I felt him empty inside me while grunting, "Shit!"

TWENTY-SIX

FORD

THEN...

I was a sucker for her. I can admit that. I couldn't think or reason when Krystle Tyler was near me. They say love is blind, right? Well, for me, love gave me twenty-twenty vision. I clearly saw her flaws. I clearly felt the pain, and I clearly knew I still loved her. I also knew she loved me, and the love we shared was hard as fuck to kill.

Five days into this reconciliation, as we lay in my bed, her head resting on my chest, she asked, "Have you been with a lot of women since I deserted you?"

I winced at her wording, however appropriate it was. "Yes."

"I figured."

"That bothers you?"

"Of course it does, but it's my fault. Have you...fallen in love with anyone else?"

I chuckled bitterly. "That's an impossibility, Chicken. I love you. Always have. Always will."

"You don't sound happy about it."

I stared at the ceiling, observing the pattern of sunlight seeping through the slots of the closed window blinds. "Loving you has never been easy. It's been...painful."

"I know. I know..." She sounded defeated and I didn't have the words to make her feel better. The truth of the matter was I was taking a huge chance with my heart with her. She needed to know that.

"So, how long?" I asked, hearing the strain in my voice.

“How long what?”

“How long before you disappear this time? A week? A month? A year? How long before I have to deal with losing you *again*.”

“You won’t ever have to contend with that again. I...I want to be with you forever.”

Silence from me. What was I supposed to say? I didn’t believe her. Shit, it would’ve been hard to convince me that *she* believed what she was saying.

“I know you’re skeptical, but I mean it. Being without you was torture for me. I just didn’t know how to fix things. I didn’t think you *could* or *would* forgive me...ever,” she said.

“So, you made all that artwork, posted that flyer, and hoped I’d visit the gallery?” I returned.

“No. I made the art because you are all I think of. Your face is all I see when I close my eyes. I dream about you. You’ve basically consumed me since I was a kid. Any art I’ve ever created was of you. The flyer? Yes, I hoped you’d see it. I hoped you’d come to the gallery, even asked Sula to call me if you showed up there.”

“I was easy to recognize since my face was all over the place,” I mused aloud.

“I know. I...”

“I love you, Krystle. I do. I just...how am I supposed to trust you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe...”

“Maybe what?” I asked, moving to sit up in the bed and resting my back against the wall. I didn’t have a headboard.

She sat up, too, staring at me with uncertainty in her eyes, her exposed nakedness inducing a brand-new erection. I reached down and stroked myself, watching as her eyes fell below my waist.

“You want it? Come get it,” I told her.

Licking her lips, she moved toward me, climbing in my lap and straddling me. We were face to face, chest to chest, as she lifted to guide me inside her.

“Damn!” I grunted. “You feel so good!”

She gripped my shoulders, sliding up and down me, a strained expression on her face. She’d never ridden me before.

“You a’ight?” I asked, reaching around to grip her ass cheeks.

She nodded, letting out a weak, “Yes!”

“Good...now, what were you saying? We could do what?”

Throwing her head back, she wailed, “Ohhhhhh, fuck!”

I smiled. She looked so beautiful like this.

“Chicken, I love the fuck out of you. You know that?” I asked as I leaned in to nip at her neck.

She lifted her head, fixing her drowsy eyes on my face. “I love you, too. I promise I do. I love you so much!” she whimpered before kissing me, her ride now a slow, torturously good grind.

I returned the kiss, my hands on her back, my nut threatening to rip through me at any moment.

“Baby, I’m about to bust and I don’t think I can hold it,” I informed her.

“Don’t hold it. Give it to me. I want every fucking drop,” she leaned in and said into my ear.

That’s just what I did, my ass sinking deeper into the mattress as I fell apart underneath her perfect body, my dick drowning in her impeccable pussy. Moments later, I was still inside her, our foreheads touching as we both fought to regulate our breathing. This felt so damn right, almost supernatural in its goodness.

“We could get married,” she said, lifting her head to look into my eyes. “I’ll sign a prenup, agree to whatever you want me to agree to, but I need you to understand that I’m serious. I love you. Forever.”

I stared at her for so long that she eventually lowered her eyes and moved to leave my lap, but I stopped her, wrapping my arms around her and saying, “Okay.”

Smiling, she moved from my lap, taking her immaculate pussy with her. She lay back on the bed between my legs, placing her feet on my chest. “You still like feet?”

With a grin, I replied, “*Your* feet? Yes.”

I shifted my body so that I rested between her legs, my hard dick lying on her pussy as her feet remained planted against my chest. I eased inside her while grasping her left foot, kissing each toe before licking them and watching her eyes flutter closed as I glided in and out of her slippery pussy.

TWENTY-SEVEN

FORD

Now...

“**W**hat?” I asked, trying to make sense of what she’d just told me. “You didn’t sign *what* papers?”

“You know what? Forget it. It doesn’t matter,” she said, turning her back to me.

“You gonna run away again, huh?”

She snatched around to glare at me. “No, I stopped running a long time ago and you know it. I’m still in this city. I’m still...fuck it! I didn’t sign the motherfucking papers because I love your stupid ass!”

I blinked and frowned. “So...we’re not divorced?”

“Nope. We’re not. I never signed. Nothing was ever finalized. I still have the papers with *your* signature on them in my dresser drawer. Now you know, and I’ve probably lost my damn job in here yelling at you and you couldn’t care less about how I feel. So, I guess this is my karma for all the times I hurt you.”

“No, I...”

“Uh, Krystle? Everything okay?”

I shut my eyes and fought not to turn around and fuck Geoffrey the Butler up. Instead, I said, “Obviously not.”

“I was talking to *her*, not *you*, Terrence,” this nigga of hers said.

Oh, okay. So he *wanted* his ass kicked? Bet! “And I’m talking to *you*. She’s my wife. You need to back off.”

“*Ex-wife*,” the Fresh Prince of Nowhere countered.

“Nigga, don’t make me fuck you up!”

“Wait, wait! Chandler, can you just...I’m ready to leave,” Krystle cut in.

“Krys—” I began, but she preempted me.

“He’s going to take me home. That’s it. We can talk later if you want. I just need to get out of here,” she said.

“I’ll take you,” I tried.

“You have a date, Ford,” she pointed out.

Shit, I’d forgotten all about Brandi. Then again, her mom was here. She could catch a ride with her. “Nah, I’m taking you home. I’ll come back for her.”

She moved closer to me, nearly whispering, “Ford, I need to talk to him.”

I shook my head.

“*Please,*” she murmured.

Reluctantly, I said, “A’ight.”

I’d decided to find Brandi so we could leave, too, when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

Brandi: *I’m taking an Uber home.*

That was it, the whole text. I guessed maybe she was embarrassed since I’d had a whole argument with Krystle, but whatever.

Me: *Be safe.*

Then I left.

KRYSTLE

Sitting in Chandler's car outside my building, I turned my head, focusing on the little red car parked next to his. It was a Corvette. Cute.

After clearing his throat, Chandler spoke, breaking the silence that had settled between us the moment we left the benefit. "Um, you wanna explain what just happened, Krystle?"

I tightly shut my eyes and sighed. "Not particularly because it's embarrassing, but I owe you the truth."

"Okay..."

"What happened, what you witnessed, was two damn fools who should've never gotten married."

"Looked to me like I witnessed two people who are obviously still in love and should've never separated. The fool part is debatable in your case."

I chuckled, turning to face him. "I'm so sorry, Chandler. I honestly thought I was ready to move on. I...I thought I could will myself not to care about him, but the truth is, I loved him before I realized what love was. It's like we're stuck together."

"But you don't want to be with him?"

"Oh, I do. It would just be better for him if I didn't."

He frowned, searching my face before asking, "Why would you say that? You're wonderful. Smart, beautiful, driven, level-headed. You're a dream, Krystle. Terrence Ford is a lucky man to have captured your heart."

I scoffed, "Not really. Anyway, let me give you your key, and I really am sorry, Chandler. I hope you find your match."

Giving me a weak smile, he said, "Yeah, me too."

He offered to walk me inside and to my door, but I declined. I needed to be alone with my thoughts, my truths. I needed to attempt to process what had happened. I was so deep in thought that I was only inches from my door when I noticed him. Him being Ford leaning against the wall beside my door, a duffel bag at his feet.

I jumped, clutching my keys tightly in my hand. “Ford! What the fuck?! You scared the shit out of me!”

Pushing off the wall, he bent over to pick up the bag. “My bad. Didn’t mean to.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m moving in,” he replied matter-of-factly.

TWENTY-EIGHT

KRYSTLE

This nigga must have lost his got damn mind!

TWENTY-NINE

FORD

“Moving in where?” she asked, a deep frown somehow making her look even prettier in a menacing way. Now my dick was hard, but I knew it was too soon for that.

“Into this apartment,” I answered. “So, unlock the door. I’m tired as shit. Got practice in the morning.”

“Ford, why in the hell would I let you move in here? We’re div—” She cut herself off.

I smiled. “That’s right. We’re married, and it doesn’t make sense for me to be living separate from my *wife* and my son. I figured you weren’t going to come to my place, so I came here.”

“You can’t stay here.”

“Why? It’s my place, too, ain’t it? What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine, baby. Unlock the door. We probably disturbing the neighbors.”

She huffed, unlocking the door and trying to close it on me after she’d entered the apartment.

“Ouch, baby. You hit my foot with the door. You know I like it rough, though,” I quipped.

“Fuck you,” she hissed.

“Already? I thought we’d need some time to work through our issues first, but you know I’m always down for some of you. You done painted your toenails red, too? I’mma suck them motherfuckers down to the gristle.”

“Do not touch me, and you can’t sleep in my bed,” she fussed.

“I’m good with the couch. Looks real comfy.”

She stared down at her very nice, spotless sofa and groaned.

“What?” I asked, dropping my bag beside the door.

“Nothing.” Without another word, she left the living room, and I followed her to her destination—LaDarius’s room. As she entered his closet, I thought about taking him out of his crib but decided against it. I really was tired as shit. She eventually emerged from the closet with her arms full of blankets and comforters. Before she could take a step, I took them from her.

“These for me? It ain’t even cold in here,” I said.

“They’re to protect my sofa,” she snapped.

“Damn, what you think I’ma do? Shit on it?”

“You wouldn’t!” she gasped.

“Chicken, when have you ever known me to shit in the bed?”

She left the room and I followed her, saying, “Damn, you think I’m some kind of degenerate? That’s why you let me think we were divorced all this time? Three fucking years?”

Snatching a comforter from the pile I was holding, she said, “I’m not discussing this tonight, Ford. I’m tired. You’re tired. I let you in. Be happy with that for now.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I just shut my mouth and watched her pile all those covers on the sofa before leaving me in the living room after she cut the damn lights off on me.

“Good night, Chicken!” I sang as I sat down to take my shoes off.

I laughed when a text from her came through: *I hope your ass has nightmares.*

KRYSTLE

I didn't sleep, which could either be a sign of impending disaster for me or just a side effect of being in the same residence as my...husband.

Shit.

Fuck.

Damn.

Hell.

It wasn't that I didn't want him. Obviously, I did. I wanted him here. I wanted him in my bed, to be completely honest, but this wasn't good. Him being here just wasn't good.

Not for him, at least.

“Knock, knock.”

I flipped over to see Ford standing in my bedroom doorway in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs.

Fine.

This man was so freakin' fine!

Ugh!

“Uh, yes?” I replied, pulling the covers up to my chin as I licked my lips.

“Um, I got early practice, so I ordered some breakfast. Didn't see much in the kitchen,” he said.

“Yeah, I haven't gotten around to grocery shopping.”

“Too busy getting that bag and shit, huh?”

“Yeah, so...what's for breakfast?”

“A whole bunch of country food. Biscuits and gravy for you.”

“Oh, okay.”

He stood there staring at me and I stared back. I really had missed him.

“Chicken, I’m sorry,” he finally uttered, his voice low, unsteady.

“For what?” I asked weakly.

“For not fighting harder for us, for *you*. You know I love you, right?”

I nodded as I blinked back tears. “I love you, too, and... I’m sorry.”

With a frown, he questioned, “What are you sorry for?”

Through a heavy sigh, I supplied, “Everything.”

THIRTY

KRYSTLE

THEN...

I dug my hands in his thick hair as my legs trembled, my chest heaving. Three years. We'd been married for three years at that point, and his ability to unravel me with his mouth was still absolutely astounding. He hummed and licked and sucked on my clit, making my entire body vibrate as pressure expanded in my core in tiny, excruciating increments until I exploded, crying my love's name with every wave of pleasure that overtook me. Then he was kissing me, sliding inside me, his eyes closed as he bit his bottom lip and sighed. So beautiful. He was always so beautiful when he made love to me, and that very second, I told myself, like I often did, that I was the luckiest woman in the world to be loved by this man.

"I love you," I whimpered. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

His eyes popped open and locked on mine. "How much you love me, baby?" he asked, his voice strained.

"More than I could ever show you."

He kissed me again as he slid in and out of my wetness, stroking me into delirium until we both hit our peaks, filling our condo with tortured, satiated moans.

"So, you like the team, making friends?" I asked, watching him dedicate all his concentration to the task at hand.

He looked up at me and frowned. "I been with the Predators for months now. Why you acting like I just got traded?"

“Because we’re supposed to be sitting here watching TV but you’re rubbing my feet. You only rub my feet when you’re stressed. I’ve been on my best behavior, so it’s not me. Gotta be the team.”

He exhaled, resting against the back of the sofa while continuing to rub my feet. “It’s the same shit it was in New York and back in college. I’m the only Black person on the team.”

“Bullies? Racists?”

“I mean, yeah. I’m always have to deal with that shit from opponents and a few teammates that disguise it as jokes, but some of these fans. Got damn! I’m playing for ‘their’ team, and they got a huge problem with it. Others seem to love me. Shit’s just stupid. I’ll be all right, though. I always am. Plus, I got my shit-talking down to an art. Half the dudes on the ice try not to get near me because I be frazzling them and shit.”

“Frazzling?” I laughed.

“Yup, and you know what? I’m prolly get traded again eventually anyway, so fuck it.”

I stared at him, knowing he’d never quit because he was living his dream but wishing things could be different for him. “I’m sorry,” I offered.

“No need to be. You’re my good thing. You keep me sane in all this. Anyway, what about you? Missing New York? Liking Nashville so far? I know you had all the art community connects back there. Making any progress here?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I’m going to keep trying, though.”

He lifted my left foot, kissing the top of it. “Maybe you need to choose another subject for your art. Not everybody is into Black gingers.”

“I would if I could. You’re my muse. Can’t change that.”

“I can totally relate. Plus, you got paid bank for that one painting. The one of me naked.” He rolled his eyes.

“You gotta stop. It was a painting of you in bed. There was a sheet covering the important parts.”

“What about the other one?”

“Oh, that one. Well...the buyer just gets to see how blessed I am.”

“*You’re* blessed or *I’m* blessed?”

“Shiiiiid, we both are.”

We laughed, and I moved my legs, scooting to his end of the sofa and climbing into his lap. “Things will get better with work. I’m manifest an all-Black hockey team for you to play on,” I told him.

He smiled, kissing the tip of my nose. “Thank you, baby.”

FORD

THEN...

We were at this club over on Hampton Street in Nashville. The place was small, but the atmosphere was electric with brown bodies crowding the dancefloor and a fire DJ who just didn't miss! As I did my regular two-step, my wife showed out, looking too damn fine in a tight little red dress, her hair all over the place. She grinned, sang with the music, and teased the shit out of me. I don't think I stopped smiling the entire night.

We made it home early the next morning, fried chicken wings in a greasy sack in hand, both of us half drunk and somehow exhausted and wired at the same time.

"Shower?" Krystle asked, her eyelids low, her lips devoid of the bright red lipstick she'd applied at the beginning of the night.

Licking my lips, I nodded. "Yeah. Shower."

Once inside the spacious, glass enclosure, I watched as she lathered her body with soap, letting my eyes trail down her shapely legs to her beautiful little feet. A second later, I was on my knees, water dripping onto my body from hers as I kissed each toe on each foot, letting my lips drag up her legs to her knees, her thighs, her clean-shaven pussy, her stomach.

"I'ma put a baby in here soon," I murmured as she clutched the back of my head.

"I can't wait," she breathed.

Standing, I kissed her breasts, her neck, her mouth, as she wrapped her legs and arms around me. "You can't?"

She locked eyes with me. “I really can’t. Probably gonna need a cesarean, though, if the baby inherits your big-ass head.”

I slid inside her, making her suck in a breath. “I got a big head, huh?”

“Ohhh, damn! You...got...the...biggest...head!” she cried, throwing *her* head back.

“Shit,” I grunted, bracing one hand against the shower wall while gripping her ass with the other as I glided in and out of her tightness. “You been telling me that since we were kids.”

“And-and-and I’ve been telling the truth!” she whimpered.

I bit into her neck, making her jerk and moan. “And-you-still-got-chicken-legs!” I said, pairing each word with a thrust.

“F-f-fuck youuuuuu!” she wailed as her pussy squeezed my dick, pulling my nut right out of me.

Still braced on the wall with her legs around me, I hummed, “Mmhmm.”

I was used to her mood swings and attributed them to the life she’d lived. I realized I was fortunate. I’d lived a life of privilege. My family still doted on me. My sisters sent me money every month even though I was gainfully employed. The closest thing to a relative I’d ever lost was her twin, my best friend. I hadn’t known adversity other than the shit I dealt with out on the ice, but my occupation was chosen. I could quit and never have to deal with it again. Krystle hadn’t been so lucky. She’d lost her father, her brother, and didn’t have any family left other than her mom and some other relatives she didn’t really know. Evidently, her mom was estranged from her family, had been since Krystle was little. So essentially, all she had was me.

I understood it when she woke up some mornings feeling down, and I was always happy when she pulled out of it. I gave her room to feel what she needed to feel because she always, without fail, came back. She always returned to the

woman I married. Sometimes, she'd be her serious, loving self, taking care of me like only she could. Other times, she'd be so damn energetic. Those times, she'd fuck and suck me until I damn near couldn't see straight, want to dance all night, and cook extravagant meals for me, but honestly, I loved all sides of her.

The one constant in all this was rain or shine, up or down, she never missed a home game. Not in New York and not in Nashville. She attended some away games but all home games. She always sat at the glass so I could easily spot her, and I looked for her every game. It was like a ritual for us. So, I knew this particular bout with the blues was different when I skated out on the ice and didn't see her sitting in her regular seat. I had to fight not to be distracted, had to push my worry aside and get my job done. I was preoccupied through press and damn near wrecked my car trying to get home.

Our condo was dark, quiet, but it didn't feel peaceful like it usually did. The air was heavy and thick with something I couldn't make out. Whatever it was had my heart pounding so hard; it scared me.

"Krystle!" I called.

Nothing.

"Chicken?"

Still, nothing.

I instinctively knew she was in our bedroom, so that's where I went, finding the door locked. My first reaction was panic. Why would she have the door locked? We never locked doors, other than the entry ones.

"Krystle! The fuck you got the door locked for?!" I shouted, jiggling the knob.

"What are you doing here?" she said through the door.

"What you mean? I live here! Unlock the door!"

"Go away! I don't want you to see me like this!" She didn't sound like herself. She sounded...afraid. Afraid of what? Me?

“See you like what? Open the door, baby! What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just need to do something, and then everything will be okay.”

“Krystle, I swear I’m about to kick this door off the hinges!”

Silence from her.

“Chicken! Open this fucking door!”

Met with quiet again, I made good on my threat, damn near kicking that door out the frame to find my wife tossing a handful of pills in her mouth.

THIRTY-ONE

FORD

THEN...

“**B**ipolar One disorder is a form of neurodivergence marked by episodes of extreme highs and lows—mania and depression...”

I was listening to the doctor, a psychiatrist the hospital had assigned to Krystle. I mean, I was hearing her, but I don't think I was really digesting her words. *My Krystle had a mental illness? My Krystle was in the psych ward? My wife?*

My heart?

How the fuck could this be reality?

“...we've started her on an antidepressant for now, and it seems to be helping. You say you haven't noticed any prolonged mania recently, correct?”

I pulled my eyes from the floor of the office and fixed them on the young, Black doctor. She seemed smart. Surely, she knew what she was talking about, but how could this be real?

“What-what do you mean?” I asked.

“When we spoke before, you said there were instances of her being impulsive, reckless.”

“Yeah... that was when we were younger. She promised to stop doing that. So, she stopped. She gets excited sometimes, real hyper. She comes up with these crazy ideas, but she always runs them by me first and we talk it out.”

“She must really trust you.”

I frowned. “Why wouldn't she? I'm her husband. I love her.”

The doctor raised both her hands. “I meant no offense. Based on what she’s told me, I believe your love and support and her dedication to you have helped to keep her pretty close to balanced, but it isn’t enough. She’ll need to be on medication for the rest of her life.”

“The rest of her life! How? I mean, where did this... neurodivergence come from? Is it because her brother died?”

She shook her head. “No. The trauma related to her twin’s death certainly affected her, but bipolar disorder can be hereditary. Krystle asked that I speak to her mother—”

“Like she asked you to speak to me?” I cut in.

She nodded. “Yes, but she wanted me to talk to her mother about her family history. Apparently, her mother’s father suffered from bipolar disorder, as well.”

Suffered?

That did it. My ass broke down and sobbed in this woman’s office because Krystle really had been suffering and I didn’t realize it. “What can I do to help her if my love isn’t enough?” I cried. “She wants to hurt herself. How am I supposed to stop it?”

She tried to hand me a tissue, but I swatted it away, using my hand to dry my face.

“Do what you’ve been doing. Love her. Support her. Encourage her. The meds will keep her stable, but she’s got to take them as prescribed. For you, I’m sure she’ll be willing to do that. In time, I’m hoping she’ll want to do it for herself. She’ll also need therapy,” the doctor advised.

I nodded and blew out a breath. “Okay. How long she gotta be here? Seventy-two hours, right?”

“Krystle has agreed to stay until she’s stable.”

I nodded again.

I needed my damn mama.

When I entered the visitation room, she burst into tears. Initially, she refused to see me, but I'd finally received a call from one of the nurses informing me that she was ready, so I skipped practice and made my way to the hospital. They could fire me for all I cared.

She scrambled to her feet to hug me, and that's when my tears began to flow. I was so damn happy I'd stopped her before she could swallow those pills. I literally dug them out of her mouth and threw them across the room before calling nine-one-one. Then I held her in my arms as she wailed. I hadn't held her since that day. She felt so good.

I kissed the top of her head, her hair in cornrows instead of her signature afro. I halted my tears, deciding that I needed to be strong for her.

Rubbing her back, I whispered, "It's good to see you, baby."

She pulled away from me, placing her hands on the sides of my face. "I missed you. I just...I wasn't ready. I was...ashamed."

As we took seats across from each other at the table, I asked, "Ashamed of what?"

"Of what I did or attempted to do. I just...I couldn't help it. I was so depressed. I couldn't see any other way out of it."

"But that's not your fault. The way I understand it, the disorder causes you to feel that way. It's out of your control."

She nodded, tears still rimming her eyes. "At least now we know why I did all that dumb shit. Pushing you away, moving to New York. Fucking those random fools in college..."

I flinched. That was one thing I still fought to get over, and yes, it was hypocritical, but still...

"At least I understand why I'm the way I am. My mom used to worry about Blake having a mental illness. Whole

time, it was me.” She shook her head.

“Yeah, but you’ve got a plan. Meds. Therapy. This is manageable.”

She stared at something behind me. “Terrence, I don’t expect you to stick around for this. You should be able to live a normal life.”

“First of all, Terrence? When you start calling me that?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“Second of all, look at me.”

A single tear fell from her eye, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“Chicken, look at me...*please*.”

Finally, she locked eyes with me.

“Baby, any life I have with you is normal for me. I love you. A diagnosis and a hospital stay can’t change that. I’m happy we understand the ‘why’ now. I’m ready to love you through this shit. You just gotta let me,” I said.

“But this will never end. I have to deal with it for the rest of my life. We were just talking about me stopping my birth control so we can try for a baby. I can’t, in good conscious, bring a baby into this! What if I pass this on to him or her, Ford?”

“Okay, then no babies.”

“You don’t mean that. You come from a big family.”

“Which means I got a gang of nieces, nephews, great-nieces and nephews, cousins, you name it. I’m good on kids. I just want *you*. That’s it. Whatever you’re thinking will be best for me is wrong if it doesn’t include you. Don’t use this as an excuse to end us.”

“I don’t want to end us. I don’t want to lose you. I...I need you. I just...I want the best for you. Ford, I went to a doctor while you were at practice, asked for sleeping pills, and filled the prescription. I methodically *planned* a suicide. Don’t you

see how messed up a person has to be to do something like that? You *can't* want this for yourself.”

“You don't think I love you enough to see this through?”

“I didn't say that. I just...”

“Then take the medicine, go to therapy, and let me take care of you. Please. I *got* this. You're worried about what's best for me? *That's* what's best for me.”

She closed her eyes, sighed, and nodded.

KRYSTLE

A few months after I was discharged from the hospital, Ford was chosen to join the NHL's first Black-owned team, a new franchise based in St. Louis called The Sires. Nearly the entire team was Black, the coaching staff was Black, and Ford was super excited about this move. So was I, excited and relieved. Hopefully he'd actually make some friends on this team which would buffer the racism he'd undoubtedly have to deal with from some of their opponents.

Hopefully.

He deserved that much at the very least given what he'd had to deal with, the consequences of being in love with me.

My mom stayed with us in Nashville for a couple weeks after I was discharged, and that was nice, different from when I was a kid. She shared so much of her life with me, things she'd never told me before. Stories of her family, her childhood, her father's illness, the hardships that led to her moving away with my father and never turning back. She said I was blessed to have Ford, that my father was never very attentive or affectionate. I believed "blessed" was an understatement.

I was taking my meds, attending therapy. The first thing I did when we moved into our apartment in St. Louis was find a local therapist. I was determined to stay on track. I was committed to these positive changes in my life, but even positive changes can have adverse effects.

My art.

I hated the art I was creating when I managed to create any art at all. That broke my heart. It honestly shook me to my core. I didn't feel like myself without the ability to make beautiful art of my beautiful husband. So, while the move was a good thing, I found myself in an agonizing struggle with my self-identity. I didn't know how long I'd be able to hold it

together or if my love for Ford would be enough to make me stay the course.

THIRTY-TWO

KRYSTLE

Now...

Iyla was waiting in my office for me the Monday after Friday night's gala. I'd expected as much, so I was prepared for whatever. My savings was burgeoning. I could survive off that money for a while. One thing I was not going to do was beg for this job.

Fuck that.

Standing just inside my workspace, I said, "I don't see any boxes. Do I need to get my own so I can start packing up my office?"

Giving me an unflinching stare, she replied with, "Absolutely not. You're my best agent, my top earner. Why in the world would you be packing up your office?"

"My—I caused a scene at your party."

She nodded. "You did, and a rather lowbrow one at that, but nevertheless, it was *my* party for *my* charity. I've sent out the apologies, and I doubt anyone important was sober enough to realize what was happening anyway."

"I see. Well, I apologize. Things between me and my ex can get...volatile. We really shouldn't be in the same room at the same time. If I'd known he would be there, I wouldn't have come."

"Volatile is a good word, but that wasn't an interaction between exes. It was an interaction between two people who are still attached to one another. My Brandi tells me your ex broke up with her because he still loves you. He actually told her that."

I blinked a few times, probably more than a few times, trying to process what she'd said. Finally, I managed a soft, "Oh."

"Mmhmm, apparently Brandi's had a huge crush on your fellow for a while. She's a big hockey fan. Anyway, she's on her own now. No more shadowing her. Thank you for your willingness to help her, knowing that she was dating your... *ex.*"

My eyes widened.

"Yes, she told me about that, too." Lifting from my chair and stepping around my desk, she continued with, "I'll let you get to work now. Have a profitable day, Krystle," and then she sashayed out of my office, leaving behind the remnants of her expensive perfume.

I'd barely taken my seat when Destiny appeared in my doorway.

"Bitch," she hissed, "did you fuck your ex-husband?"

Destiny: *Where is he now?*

Me: *Same place he always is since he scammed his way up in here. On the couch.*

Destiny: *Scammed? How?*

Me: *Shit, I don't know.*

Destiny: *Wow. Anyway, y'all are still married, he's living with you, and you ain't getting none? You crazy!*

I shouldn't have told this heifer shit. Me: *It's not that simple.*

Destiny: *You need to **make** it simple.*

"Hey, I'm about to pop some popcorn. Want some?"

Ford.

I looked up to see him standing in my bedroom doorway in his got damn drawers again. He was getting on my last nerve being fine and stuff. Why hadn't he gained weight in all these years?

"Nope," I lied.

He grinned. "Stop lying. You know you want some popcorn. It's that movie theater flavor."

"No, I don't, and why you making popcorn anyway?"

"Me and my son are getting ready to watch a movie."

Licking my lips, I continued my interrogation. "What movie?"

"*Candyman*. The old one."

My favorite popcorn *and* my favorite movie? He wasn't playing fair.

"You can come watch. I ain't gonna ravish you," he quipped.

The problem was, I *wanted* him to ravish me. It'd been a long three years.

"I'm good. Have fun with your popcorn and movie," I said.

He shrugged. "Will do."

FORD

I wasn't in the mood for *Candyman*, but I had to see this through. I knew it was only a matter of time before she made her way to the living room, and I was correct. She sauntered to the sofa and sat a few inches to my left. Without a word, she dug her hand in the bowl on my lap, tossing popcorn into her mouth. Looking down, I saw she was wearing socks with her huge night shirt.

Damn.

LaDarius left his spot on the floor next to me where he'd been eating strawberries and inched over to Krystle's feet.

"Changed your mind?" I asked her.

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously."

"Keep being mean to me, and I'ma go look in the bathroom mirror and say 'Candyman' five times."

Her mouth dropped open. "You better not!"

"You still think that shit is real?"

"No—I mean, I don't know. I'm not taking any chances in case it is."

"A'ight," I said, setting the bowl on the cushion beside me and standing from the sofa.

"Ford, don't do it," she warned.

I frowned. "Do what? I gotta take a piss."

"Then I'm going with you."

"To piss?"

She hopped up from the sofa. "Yes! I've seen your dick before."

"Damn, why you jump up like that? You gon' scare our son."

She stared at me.

I smiled and licked my lips. “And you’ve done more than see my dick. Much more.”

“Shut up. Do you really gotta pee or what, Ford?”

“Yep,” I said, leaving the living room.

I felt her behind me as I made the short trip to the bathroom across the hall from LaDarius’s room.

I actually needed to piss, so I did, and she stood her ass right behind me, following me to the sink as I washed my hands. After I turned the water off, I looked up at the mirror over the sink and said, “Candy—”

She jumped on my back, clamping her hand over my mouth and I started laughing. “Chicken!” I yelled into her hand.

“I told you not to say it!” she laughed.

Krystle was *laughing*. What a beautiful sound.

“Okay, okay...I’m sorry!” My words were muffled, but she must’ve understood me because she moved her hand.

Spinning around, I saw that she was grinning.

“Damn, you that scared?” I teased her.

She gave me a smirk. “Like I said...I’m not taking any chances.”

“Okay...Candyman.”

Her eyes widened as she tried to cover my mouth again, but I caught her hand before she could.

“Damn, Chicken! I ain’t even looking in the mirror!” I chuckled.

“Don’t matter. Come on. I wanna watch the movie,” she replied.

Clasping her hand, I nodded. “Let’s go watch it, then.”

She held my hand all the way to the living room, releasing it as we reclaimed our seats. Halfway through the movie, she

scooted closer to me.

Shit, a win is a win.

“Terrence Mathias Ford! I know LaDarius is not on my kitchen counter!” She’d just made it home from work and was already yelling at me. I loved it.

“He was helping me wash dishes,” I explained.

“I have a dishwasher.”

“It was just a couple cups and plates. I’m tryna save us some money on the water bill.”

“Whatever,” she mumbled.

“Bad day at work, honey?” I asked as she headed to her bedroom.

“Shut up,” she replied, making me laugh.

“I love you, too, Chicken. What you want for dinner?”

“Don’t you have a game?” she called back.

“Nope. I’m here with my family all night tonight.”

“Yayyyy,” she said, her voice devoid of any emotion.

“That’s what I said!”

THIRTY-THREE

KRYSTLE

Now...

Luckily, Ford stayed busy with work—practices, games, meetings—for the most part, so he wasn't home break-dancing on my nerves that much. It was a familiar situation, and a welcome one since I wasn't going to make him leave. Not that I truly wanted to. After all, I loved him. But the nights he *was* home? When he wasn't irritating the shit out of me, those nights were excruciatingly long, sleepless ones spent with me lying in bed trying not to cave and invite him to crawl under the covers with me. It must've been his pheromones or something because I was sure I'd trained myself not to want dick in the three years since we split. Or maybe I had lied to myself when it came to his particular dick. I missed his dick and his hands and his mouth.

Deep, regretful sigh.

Lying on my back in the darkness, I thought about pulling out my vibrator, but if he heard me in here moaning, I would legit perish from embarrassment. I groaned before grabbing my phone and dialing a number.

"Hello?" he said slowly. "Krystle?"

"Yes, it's me. Did you erase my contact or something?" I snapped.

"Daaaamn! No, it's just...why are you calling me? I'm in your living room, remember?"

"Of course I remember that. How could I forget how you bogarted your way up in here?"

"Now, Krystle...how can a man bogart his way into the marital home?"

“Shut your big-head ass up and listen. I want some dick.”

The call ended, and less than a second later, there was a knock at my door.

Rolling my eyes, I called, “Come in!”

The door swung open, and this fool said, “Big Dick Ford at your service.”

“Oh my godddd,” I groaned. “Look, this doesn’t mean anything. I just happen to be horny, and you are here with your dick, so I figured why not? Don’t get ahead of yourself. I just need you to fuck me. That’s it.”

“Okay. Just dick? You don’t want head? Toe service? No ass eating?”

“Just dick. All that other stuff will cloud my judgement.”

“So...sixty-nine is completely off the table, right?” he asked. It was dark, so I couldn’t see him well, but I could imagine those thick eyebrows of his were tented.

“Correct.”

“Condom?”

“Hell yeah! You know you been out in these streets.”

“No, I haven’t. I haven’t had sex since we split.”

“Huh? But you had girlfriends—”

“Who broke up with me because I couldn’t fuck them. I wanted to, I tried, but I couldn’t.”

“W-why?”

He scoffed, “Because I love you, Chicken.”

All I wanted was some dick, and here I was, fucking crying.

“Shit,” I sobbed.

I covered my face, flinching when I felt him sit on the bed and pull me to him. The contact was unexpected but needed. Many a night, I’d craved his arms.

“I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to make you cry,” he whispered.

Shaking my head, I said, “You didn’t. I’m making myself cry. All I do is fuck us up. I’m the damn problem, Ford. I’ve *always* been the problem.”

FORD

I reached over, turning the bedside lamp on as I continued holding her with my other arm. “Hey, look at me.”

She did, the defeated expression on her wet face making me ache inside.

“Your illness is not your fault. You know that and I know that. The divorce...that’s on me. I should’ve recognized what was going on instead of...I’m sorry. *I’m* to blame for that.”

“No—”

I placed a finger to her lips. “Baby, can we discuss this later because my dick is about to hard me to death.”

She stared at me before laughing. “What?!” she shrieked.

“You offered me pussy, my dick took it seriously, and now it’s so damn hard, you could hang clothes on it. I’m a need to fuck you asaptually.”

Still laughing, she admitted, “Well, I *am* wet, so go for it, Big Head. Give me that big dick.”

“Say less.”

Shit quickly got wild in that bed as our mouths locked and we chaotically undressed each other, not that we were wearing much—a night shirt and panties for her, briefs for me. Then I was between her velvety thighs, the head of my dick wet with precum. I was so excited that I feared I was going to reach the finale before I could get inside her.

Gazing down at her, I murmured, “I missed the fuck out of you, Chicken.”

“I missed you, too, Ford,” she said, her eyebrows knitted. “So much.”

Kissing her again, I eased inside the best pussy in the free world—wet and hot and tight as a Spirit Airlines seat.

Got damn!

How was it possible that she felt even better than I remembered?

“You haven’t been with anyone else either...” I unintentionally spoke the revelation aloud.

“No, I haven’t!” she wailed.

My entire body tingled and my head swam as I screamed, “Chicken...chicken! Fuck! This pussy! This some *Erotic City* pussy! I ain’t never leaving this pussy again! Shit!”

As I drove into her like a damn first-generation Neanderthal, she grabbed my face, pulling it down to hers, biting my lip before initiating the sloppiest, nastiest kiss I’d ever experienced. It was everything. *She* was everything. Always had been.

“Ford!” she screamed, and then I felt her walls shudder. Her pussy squeezed me, milking me against my will, and when it was all said and done, I collapsed onto the bed next to her, fighting to catch my breath. I’d closed my eyes and was finally getting back to my baseline heart rate when I felt her shift beside me. Her soft hand grasped my dick. Her tongue met the head of it, and I gasped.

“I-I-I th-thought you said just fucking,” I stammered as she took me into her mouth.

After a good two minutes of exemplary head, she said, “I changed my mind,” and resumed sucking my very life force from me, gasping and gagging as I howled like a werewolf.

THIRTY-FOUR

KRYSTLE

THEN...

He was never home. NEVER. Of course, I was accustomed to his absences during the hockey season and they never dampened things in the past, but this new team had consumed him. He liked his teammates and had fast become close friends with his fellow linemen, Maleek Jones and Orlando Rapp. Not that they were bad guys or anything. They were super cool. The thing is, I'd never seen Ford as animated as he was with them, at least not in ages. He seemed younger, sillier, and while I loved that for him, I was still struggling. My art was gone. The medication made me feel numb most days. My sex drive was in the toilet. My mom, who I might've not been super close to but loved, had married a guy and moved to Dubai. I felt like I had nothing. Absolutely nothing with him spending so much time with the team both on and off the ice.

Sure, he wanted me to come with him when he hung out with them, and sometimes, I did. Jones and Rapp both had beautiful, very normal girlfriends. No mental illness detected, but I'd never been one to easily make or keep friends. The few I'd had were born out of proximity—classmates, coworkers, artists. The only thing these ladies and I had in common was our men, and that was just weird to me. Nevertheless, I attended the occasional gathering, working hard not to be overtly awkward. It was as if I expected the bipolar to jump out of me at any moment, despite the effectiveness of the medication. At least, I *thought* it was effective.

Anyway, being in an intimate setting with someone other than my husband was so stressful that I started making excuses. I enrolled in an online real estate course just to have something to do and used it as a reason not to go hang with

Ford and his new crew. Turned out, I liked the course, so at least that ended up being a good idea even if I stumbled upon it.

Whenever he was home, it was like Heaven, and I clung to him. I was scared to death of losing him.

Scared to death.

FORD

THEN...

I was trying. I was really trying to get this right, but something somewhere got lost. I was on my dream team, finally had authentic friends who loved the game as much as I did. Yeah, things still got crazy out on the ice. I was used to that anyway, but being on a team where everyone from the top down was Black made the bullshit much easier to cope with. I thought things were fine, but one good look at my wife a year into my time with the Sires told me I'd been overlooking her true needs. I'd been enjoying this new phase of my life so much that I somehow missed her misery until the day it all came to a head in the absolute worst way.

I made it home late that night after traveling back to St. Louis from our away game in Ohio. Our apartment was dark, and I was startled when I heard Krystle sniffle.

Flipping the light on, I saw her sitting on the sofa in one of my old Rangers t-shirts. Her hair was covered with a scarf, her face was downturned, her hands in her lap, fingers laced. She looked so...defeated.

"Baby, what you doing sitting in the dark? Why you not in bed?" I asked, reaching behind me to lock the door but keeping my eyes on her.

She lifted her head, her puffy eyes meeting mine. "I couldn't sleep. Been thinking."

I sat down beside her, my brow wrinkled as I stared at her. "You...have you been keeping your therapy appointments? Taking your meds?"

She frowned at me before rolling her eyes up to the ceiling. "It's always going to be like this, isn't it? Your first

thought is always going to be that I'm out of my mind."

"Krystle—"

"I get it! I fucked up *repeatedly*. I made you miserable, broke your heart. I'm a fucking problem for you, a got damn liability!"

"I ain't said none of that, Chicken! Damn! I'm your husband. I can't check on you, on your well-being?"

"I'm not crazy, Ford. I'm upset, and I'm tired of always being alone, but I am *not* crazy!"

"I know you're not! And what you mean by always being alone? I'm here if I'm not at work, and if I go out, I always invite you. You keep refusing to go!"

"Because I don't want to be around...people. It...it's too stressful."

"Not if you get to know them. Jones and Rapp are good people. Their ladies are cool, too."

"That Tasha is a snob."

"True, but...maybe you should try to make some friends of your own. Like, go out and explore the city. You barely leave this apartment."

"You don't get it. You just don't get it. My whole world is different now. I'm on these meds that make me feel dead inside. I can't draw or paint or do anything I love to do. When we have sex, it doesn't feel the same."

"Damn. You don't like fucking me no more?"

"I...I don't know."

"Well, didn't they say you can try different meds, see if one with fewer side effects will work?"

"I don't want to take the meds anymore. I don't need them. I managed just fine for years without them."

"Chicken, you can't do that, and you didn't manage it. You tried to kill yourself."

"I won't do that again."

I dropped my head. “Baby...you can’t control what you do when you’re not on the medication. You know that.”

“I can! For three years, I did!”

“Until you didn’t.”

“I’m stopping the medicine, Ford. I don’t care what you say.”

“I can’t let you do that, baby. I just can’t.”

“You can’t stop me from doing it. You can’t stop me from doing shit!”

“You’re right. I can’t. I also can’t stand by and watch you destroy yourself.”

“Then we may as well get a divorce. We don’t really have a marriage anymore anyway.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You don’t want a divorce! I *know* you don’t. If I don’t know shit else, I know you love me.”

She shrugged. “Me loving you can’t help me, and *you* loving *me* hasn’t brought you anything but heartache. May as well cut our losses.”

Rubbing my forehead, I sighed before saying, “Look, I need sleep. We can talk about this in the morning when both our heads are clear. We’re both just saying shit right now.”

“My head is very clear, Terrence.”

“Here you go with that Terrence shit. What do you want me to do? Quit my job? Cut off my friends? And I *know* you been skipping therapy.”

She shot me a look of pure hatred. “Fuck you! This ain’t about me being fucking bipolar! It’s about me regaining control of my life! I don’t want to take the meds anymore and I want out of this fucking marriage!”

“No!” I boomed, making her flinch.

“No?! No what?”

“No, that is not what the fuck you want. We are going to get some sleep and revisit this in the morning.”

“Revisit what? My therapy?”

“That and everything else. You just need...”

“What? What do I need, Terrence Ford?”

I closed my eyes, the weight of loving this woman crashing down on me so hard that I just...buckled. I *buckled*. “What do you want from me, Krystle? Right now, tell me what you *really* want.”

“I told you what I want, and you just told me I was wrong.”

“You want a divorce? If that’s true, the other shit ain’t my business. Meds or no meds, a divorce would put me out of your life, period.”

She squared her shoulders. “Then that’s what I want.”

“You want me out of your life? That’s what you’re saying?”

“I’m saying I want you out of my life *yesterday*.”

“Okay. Fuck it then. I’ll give you what you want.”

“You will?” she squeaked.

“Hell yeah. Like I said, fuck it. We tried. I tried. Shit didn’t work out.”

She stared at me before saying, “You really mean that?”

“This ain’t something I’d play about, Krystle. Again...*fuck it*.”

There were tears in her eyes as she whispered, “Yeah, fuck it.”

A few moments later, I left our home, drove to a hotel, and fell into a troubled sleep. I just didn’t have any fight left in me where my wife was concerned.

THIRTY-FIVE

KRYSTLE

THEN...

“**T**hanks for coming. I thought it would be better for me to give you the papers rather than have you served since we do still care about each other,” I said.

He nodded, leaning against the closed front door.

“Uh...I plan on moving out. I’ll take LaDarius with me since he’s so young. I know you won’t have time to take care of him,” I explained. “You can have him during the off-season.”

He shrugged. “I bought him for you, so it’s whatever you want.” His voice was flat, and he wouldn’t look at me.

“Okay. Um...you can visit him during the season, though.”

He nodded. “Preciate it.”

“No problem. Take your time with those. I know you’ll want to let a lawyer look over them.”

He flipped through the papers and looked up at me. “Got a pen?”

I froze for a second, finally letting out a strangled, “What?”

“You got a pen? I’m ready to sign now.”

“Oh. Yes, I do. Hold on a minute.”

I left the living room, fighting tears as I grabbed a pen from the bedroom and returned, handing it to him. I watched him scrawl his name on the paper and nearly burst into tears. When he handed them back to me, I just stood there.

“That’s all you needed?” he questioned, his voice so incredibly cold.

“Uh...yeah. I’ll be out of here by the end of the week,” I responded.

“Bet,” he said, and then he left.

THIRTY-SIX

FORD

Now...

“**W**as it...did you enjoy the sex? I mean, I’m assuming you did, but I know it was an issue for you before,” I said. We were in bed, and I was still tingling and shit from being inside her for the first time in more than three years.

“It was everything I’ve been missing. I’m...the fact that I even *wanted* sex is a win for me. I’m on a different medication. Fewer side effects. Been on it for a while now,” she told me.

“Oh, okay. That’s good.”

She was already snuggled into the side of my body, but I felt her move even closer. “Ford, I am so sorry for pushing you away, for breaking us up, for even speaking the word ‘divorce.’ I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean any of it.”

“I know, baby,” I said, turning to face her in the lamp light. “I knew when you said it. At the time, I was just so hurt and...”

“Tired? Weary? I get it. I’m a lot.”

“I *was* tired, but not because you’re a lot, as you put it. I’m a big boy. I knew what I was getting into when I married you. Of course I didn’t know about the bipolar disorder, but I knew you could be impulsive, unpredictable. I still believe making you my wife was the best decision I’ve ever made, by the way. What’s a lot is this illness. It’s a lot for both of us, baby. You know, the doctor back in Nashville suggested I join a support group for loved ones of people with bipolar disorder, and I did visit the website, read all this stuff about how people with it tend to push their loved ones away. How they might

periodically decide they don't want to take their meds. I should've realized what you were doing instead of just getting in my feelings. I should've seen it wasn't you. It was the disease. Shit, I should've joined the damn support group."

"You're a human being, not Superman. There's no way you could've done any more than you did. You were the best husband. Top notch."

I chuckled. "Were? As in past tense?"

"You still are, given the circumstances. I...I thought I was doing you a favor, freeing you from my mess. I didn't account for the fact that love doesn't work like that. Neither of us could turn it off."

"Yeah. So...were you ever going to tell me we weren't really divorced?"

"Yes. I would've. I just..."

"You didn't know how to tell me?"

"No, I didn't."

"So...what was the plan? Were you going to let me be a bigamist if I decided to get married again?"

"I honestly never thought that far. I...would you have married someone else?" she said timidly.

"Never."

She sighed. "I'm so fucking sorry for all of this. I'm...I am back in therapy. I never stopped the meds. I just...I guess I didn't give myself enough time to adjust to St. Louis and the Sires. We were in our own little bubble before this move. I just...I don't know."

"I understand, and I could've handled things better. I was so damn happy to have friends."

"I get it. Destiny is wonderful. Ford?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Can you forgive me? Or...or do you want a real divorce?"

I fixed my eyes on her pretty face, saw the fear in hers. “I forgave you a long time ago, and as far as a divorce, I’ve spent the last three years wishing I could un-sign those papers. I want you. I love you. I never wanted to let you go.”

She gave me the biggest, brightest smile. “Can we...I want us to be together again. I want you in my bed every night. I wanna sit at the glass at your games. I wanna hang with you and your friends. I want to wake up with your dick in my mouth or my pussy on your face. You know...like old times.”

I gently pushed her onto her back, slid down her beautiful body, and buried my face between her thighs, inhaling deeply before opening her lower lips and stroking her clit. She flinched, moaned my name, and let her thighs drop open. Smiling, I slid one, then two fingers inside her while spanking her clit with my tongue. I licked, slurped, sucked, and savored her flavor while massaging that bundle of nerves just inside her pussy. It was a coordinated effort, a sophisticated operation with distinct goals in mind. I wanted her to bust all over my fingers. I wanted to feel her pussy contract around them. I wanted her to scream my name. I wanted to leave no doubt in her mind that she was it for me, that she was my all, and that I desired whatever she desired, that my life would never be right without her. So, I licked and sucked and stroked and tongue-fucked her until she wailed and cried for mercy.

Then I moved my body until my face hovered over hers, kissed her lips, and asked, “How’s that for an answer?”

“Uh...” she panted, “you’re saying you’ll think about it?”

Chuckling, I kissed her again as I slid inside her. “Yeah, I’ll definitely think about it.”

Later, as I was drifting off to sleep, I heard her ask, “Why do you love me so much when I’ve done nothing to deserve it? What do I give you?”

“Give me? Why do you see love as a transactional thing when it’s not? Why would anyone need to earn it?” I groggily posed.

“I don’t know...I guess it just feels like you’re getting the short end of the stick. I get you, and you are everything. In turn, you get me and all my stuff.”

“Chicken, I love you because you’re you, because you exist, because you’re my home, my heart. You being you is enough. I love you simply because you are you.”

“Ford...I love you, too...so much.”

“So, wait...you back with your wife? For real?” Rapp asked, his eyes huge.

“Yeah. Damn, why you acting so shocked?” I replied. We were in the locker room after practice.

“Hallelujah! Now I don’t have to worry about fucking you up. I actually liked you before you started disrespecting my woman,” Jones said.

I threw up my hands. “Got damn, Jones! You know you only proved everything I said was correct by holding this grudge for so long. Natural gas space heater...”

Jones nodded. “Okay, well...the way you been skipping around this bitch today, I see Krystle got some damn ghost pepper coochie, ain’t she? That mug is off the Scoville charts!”

I took a deep breath, blew it out, and said, “A’ight, I’ll stop.”

“As you should, nigga,” Jones affirmed.

“Y’all gotta chill. So, what happened? How you get her back? Y’all getting remarried?” Rapp interrogated me.

“The fuck you mean how I get her back? I’m Big Dick Ford,” I said.

Crickets from my friends.

“Fine! Turns out she never signed the papers. The divorce wasn’t finalized. She wanted your boy the whole time, just

like I wanted her,” I told them.

“She forgave you for cheating?” Jones asked.

“Jones, I told you I never cheated,” I reminded him. “I would *never* cheat on her.”

“But you said you fucked up, that that was why she divorced you,” Rapp asserted.

“I did fuck up by agreeing to some shit neither one of us wanted. Look, things are more nuanced between me and Krystle than I can share. A lot of it is her personal business, but just know that me and her been on a long, hard road together for a long-ass time, since we was kids. Shit ain’t been easy, but we got love, real love.”

“Hey, congrats, man. I’m happy for y’all. For real. You look better already,” Jones said, giving me dap. “Being without her truly fucked you up!”

Rapp smacked me on the back. “I’m happy for y’all, too. A little jealous, though. Now I’m the only single lineman.”

“Yeah, but Stick ain’t married yet. I know he’s not a lineman, but he’s our boy,” I offered.

“Shidddd, Coco got Stick on lock. Only a matter of time before he puts a ring on it,” Jones shared.

All I could say was, “Wow.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

KRYSTLE

His lips were on my ear, my neck, my cheek as I attempted to cook us dinner. I giggled, turning my head to kiss his gorgeous lips. It'd been a month since we'd been living as man and wife again instead of roommates, and we'd already fallen into a comfortable rhythm, no doubt because this was what came most natural to us—being together. We were soulmates who found each other before we understood what love and marriage were. My heart had belonged to him for so long that I honestly didn't know how to take care of it myself.

“You wanna eat or you wanna play?” I asked as he wrapped his arms around my waist. “This chicken and dumplings ain't gonna cook itself.”

“We talking eating pussy or food? ‘Cause I was planning on doing both,” my silly-ass husband disclosed.

“Ford...” I groaned.

“You can cook. I ain't stopping you,” he said, sliding his hands up to squeeze my breasts.

“You gotta stop.”

“You really want me to?” he asked, sliding a hand from my breast down into my panties.

When his finger began to thrum my clit, I leaned into him, moaning, “Ohhh, shit!”

“Does that mean no?”

“Ahhhhh!”

“You can't just be walking around here in a t-shirt and draws, baby. Not when I was without this pussy for so long. I got time to make up for.”

I dropped the knife I'd been using to cut onions, moved his hand, turned around, and kissed him, yelling into his mouth

when he backed me into the counter. His hand was in my panties again. Then his fingers were inside me. I braced myself against the countertop, widening my stance for him. I felt him grab my chin, coaxing my mouth open with his thumb.

“Look at me,” he ordered.

I lifted my head, my eyes on his as he kept that thumb in my mouth and his fingers in my eager pussy, fingerfucking me while closely watching my reaction. What could I do when something felt this good besides moan, whimper, and fight to keep my eyes open because I was gradually floating away, the pressure in my core growing into a severe swell of pleasure. When I began the climb to the pinnacle, my cries grew frantic, almost panicked. I wanted to feel the release, but I also wanted to keep ascending because this journey felt so incredibly good. But there was only one possible end for this trek—a freefall into ecstasy, and fall, I did. I jerked and hissed and held my breath until I finally collapsed in his arms.

We ended up ordering pizza for dinner.

It was date night.

I was going on a date with my ex-ex-husband, and I was so excited to be stepping out with the handsomest ginger in the world. He was wearing jeans and a Sires fan jersey. I was wearing jeans and a tight little gold cardigan with some cute little gold heels. We were headed to dinner at *Bait*, and we couldn't keep our hands off each other in his truck on the way there. His hand gripped my thigh or clutched my much smaller hand or massaged my cheek. My hand gripped his arm, his thigh, the back of his neck. I don't think either of us had ever been so in love with each other or so full of understanding. I suppose we'd matured, grown up during our time apart. We'd definitely missed each other and appreciated being connected again.

Lord, I loved this man. I loved every inch of him.

“I can’t wait to get in here and tear this food up, and when we get back home, I’ma tear *you* up. You are so damn sexy!” he said, glancing at me with a huge grin on his face.

“And I’ma *let* you tear me up,” I advised him.

He grasped my hand, pulling it to his lips. When the song on the music app in the vehicle changed to J-Wonn’s *Take You Down Thru There*, he started singing with it, winking at me. My young-old man loved all types of music, but blues was still his favorite.

I vibed to the song with him, joining him on the chorus.

“Hey, we gotta hit some blues fests after the season is over. Now that I let my apartment go and we got two incomes and one home, we can get an RV, do it up like my folks do,” he suggested.

“I can’t believe your dad still drives at all, let alone that big RV,” I said.

“Shiddd, they just got a new one.”

“Your parents are something else, definitely not your regular octogenarians.”

“Big facts.”

“Well, at least I know I’ll have you for a long, long time since longevity runs in your family.”

“You got me for eternity, baby. Once this life is over, I’ma find you in the next one.”

I smiled before leaning in to kiss his cheek. “I love you, Ford.”

“I love you, too, Chicken.”

That night, we ate and laughed and enjoyed each other’s company. When we returned home, we danced on our apartment balcony to old school music provided by Ford’s phone before he kneeled in front of me, lifted my leg, and ate my pussy until I nearly passed out.

FORD

“You all right over there?” I asked, shooting her a glance before refocusing on the road.

“Yeah...why?” she returned. I could feel her eyes on me. I imagined her full lips were poked out.

“You’re real quiet. Haven’t said a word since we left home.”

“Oh. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Do your friends know I have bipolar disorder?”

“No, I don’t tell your business, baby. You know me better than that.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did.”

I glanced at her again, “Really?”

“Yeah, I think...I think I should stop treating it like a dirty secret. It’s just an illness. If it were diabetes or something like that, I would tell people in case of an emergency. I think it should be the same way with this. Maybe if people know, I won’t worry so much about doing something to embarrass you.”

“What? Chicken, you could never embarrass me. You could strip naked in front of Rapp and Jones and all I’m doing is kick their asses.”

“Wait, why would you kick *their* asses if *I* stripped in front of them?”

“I don’t know, makes sense to me, though.”

“You’re so stupid,” she laughed.

“That’s why you love me.”

“True. Well, I’m excited about seeing your boys again, and Nuri, too.”

“That’s right! You’ve met her.”

“Yep, but at the time, she was Maleek’s nanny. That changed quickly.”

“Sure did.”

“She’s cute. Sweet. Nothing like his ex.”

“And that’s the damn truth!”

I loved seeing her like this, smiling, animated in her conversation. She and Nuri and Coco really clicked, but I wasn’t surprised. Although Krystle had made a habit of isolating herself basically since childhood, she was smart, witty, and intriguing. Her mind had always amazed me, and her talent? Ridiculous! Hell, she made me look like a superstar no matter the medium she chose.

“Ford! You got your lady back! Nuthin’ but a G thang!” Robin Stick shouted, holding his fist out to me.

I laughed and shook my head before pounding his fist with mine. “Fo’ sho’, Stick. I see you and yours still going strong.”

He dropped onto Jones’s sofa beside me, nodding. “Yeah, things have been good since I took that advice you gave me. I’m thinking about putting a ring on it.”

I turned to look at him. “Whaaaat? Damn! I’m happy for you, my guy! Uh...where you find a durag to match your shirt?”

Stick rubbed his hand over his silky red durag and nodded across the room toward his lady. “A gift from my Coco. She likes when I wear durags.”

“Okay, so...you tryna get waves or—”

“Ford! Why you sitting over here staring at your woman? Still stalking her?” That was Jones approaching us to hand me a beer.

“I’m talking to Stick. I ain’t even looking over there right now,” I said, taking the bottle from him.

“First time you took your eyes off her tonight,” Jones observed.

“Whatever, nigga. Where’s Rapp? He ain’t made it yet?” I asked.

“Ain’t coming. Texted me talking about he didn’t want to be the only dateless person here,” Jones shared.

I frowned. “Damn. I used to be the only dateless person in our group sometimes. Never bothered me. At least not that much.”

“That’s because you’re stupid,” Jones said. “Plus, Rapp is mad ready to have a family. That pregnancy scare shook him for more than one reason. He definitely didn’t want a kid with ole girl, but he wants kids.”

“Probably got something to do with how he grew up,” I mused.

“Yeah,” Jones agreed.

“Leooooo, can you come here for a minute?” Coco crooned.

“On my way, my Bonita Applebum!” Stick sang before hopping up from the sofa.

Jones and I both laughed as he took the seat Stick vacated.

“So...what about you?” Jones said.

“What about me?” I replied.

“You got your wife back. Y’all gonna try for a kid?”

I hesitated before giving him an answer. “Nah, it’s not in the cards for us, but I’m cool with it.”

“Oh, damn. Y’all got fertility issues? Man, I’m sorry for even bringing it up.”

“No...you remember I said I didn’t want to be telling Krystle’s business?”

He nodded.

“Well, she gave me permission to share that she has bipolar disorder. Been dealing with it for a minute now, and since it tends to run in families, she don’t wanna risk passing it down to our kids.”

Jones gave me this sympathetic look and had opened his mouth to speak before I interrupted him with, “I’m good with it. I just want her. That’s all I’ve ever wanted, and I understand where she’s coming from. That disease ain’t easy to deal with. Plus, we got LaDarius.”

“Hey, I wish y’all the best, and I totally understand. You know my mom deals with mental illness, right? Nuri’s dealt with it, too. So, I get it. I really do. You ever want a kid fix besides LaDarius, I got a house full of them for you to choose from,” Jones offered.

I chuckled. “I appreciate you, man. I might take you up on that kid fix offer, except for that mean-ass son of yours. He looks like he be plotting on me.”

“And the crazy thing is, he’s nice to everyone else,” Jones told me.

“You probably programmed him to hate me. I apologized fifty times. Tell Little Man to cut me some slack.”

Jones stared at me before saying, “Nope.”

KRYSTLE

“I swear, I have never seen your husband look so content. You are definitely good for him!” Nuri gushed.

“I could say the same for yours. He seems so happy!” I returned.

“That’s my hero. I love me some him.”

I followed her eyes to the sofa across the room from where we sat in some accent chairs to see our husbands sitting side by side. “I can relate.”

“I bet! So, you and him have known each other since you were kids?” Nuri asked.

I nodded. “Yep, grew up across the street from each other. We were mortal enemies at first, but he grew on me, red hair and all.”

Nuri giggled. “He’s so funny, though. I bet he keeps you laughing.”

“He’s always been funny but he’s quiet sometimes, introspective. He’s sweet to me. Always has been despite— Nuri, I want to share something with you because I’m hoping we can be friends.”

“I’m hoping the same thing.”

“Okay...I have a mental illness, bipolar disorder. I’m on medication and in therapy, and I’ve never really been a danger to anyone but myself, but I wanted you to know.”

She gave me a sincere smile. “Thanks for sharing that with me. I’ve dealt with my own mental issues. No judgement here, and it doesn’t change how I see you. From the first time I met you to now, I’ve always thought you were smart and beautiful. A powerhouse.”

I wanted to cry, but instead, I said, “Thank you.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

FORD

I smiled as my lady kissed all over my face, her legs and arms wrapped around me as I gripped her ass. Chuckling, I said, “You know it’s just a home game, right?”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed as she kissed my nose.

“And you’ll be there...”

“Mmhmmmm.”

“Then why you acting like I’m going off to war?”

“Cause you are!” she said before pecking me on the mouth. “Plus, I always used to do this before we split. You know that.”

“Yeah, you used to say you were giving me luck.”

“Yep.”

“Wish I had time for you to give me some of that lucky pussy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Boy, I gave you some of that like an hour ago.”

“Exactly. An hour is like a week in pussy years.”

“What?!” she laughed. “What does that even mean?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Gotta go, baby. See you at the glass?”

After giving me a slow, sweet kiss full of tongue caressing and moans, she affirmed, “You sure will. Hey, I got something for you.”

With lifted eyebrows, I asked, “Head?”

“No, nigga. Put me down.”

Reluctantly, I did as she requested, watched her ass jiggle in some booty shorts as she left the room, and smiled when she returned with a piece of paper in her hand.

“I made this for you,” she said shyly.

Taking the paper, I gazed down at it and had to take a deep breath and hold it to keep from crying. It was a drawing of me in my Sires uniform holding my hockey stick in the air. I was smiling triumphantly.

“You...you’ve been making art again?” I softly inquired.

She nodded, biting her bottom lip. “Yes, the new medication allows me to, but I hadn’t done much before now. Got my muse back.”

Pulling her to me, I kissed her forehead. “I love it, Chicken.”

“I’m glad you do, Big Head.”

We were battling the Hurricanes again, and they were playing like they had a point to prove. I suppose they did have a point to prove since they took that “L” at home the last time we matched up. I was having a ball fucking with Oscoff who was glued to my ass every time I had possession of the puck. Dude was relentless *and* sensitive as fuck. I can admit that me referring to his grandmother as a GILF—granny I’d like to fuck—was pretty grimy, but whatever.

Our line was moving fast. Rapp had the puck, but I was keeping my eye on him, so I was ready when he passed it to me to get some of the defense heat off him.

Of course, the second my stick touched the puck, Oscoff’s ass popped up like a fucking pimple, poking his stick in my space. We ended up against the wall scrambling for the puck before I managed to send it to Jones, and Oscoff got in my face shouting some bullshit about my mama.

“Yeah, yeah...yours, too. Look, I cannot let you suck my dick right now. My wife is here watching,” I quipped, turning to get back in the action. In the time I spent dealing with Oscoff, my side had lost the puck. I was back in the game, racing toward our goal when something...or rather, *someone* plowed into the side of my body so hard that I honestly didn’t

know what the fuck was happening. My helmet flew off, my knee twisted in this weird way, causing pain to shoot through it, and as I crashed onto the ice, someone screamed loud enough for me to hear it above the crowd. Then...everything went black.

THIRTY-NINE

KRYSTLE

Hockey had always been a brutal game. I knew that, and although I'd grown desensitized to it over the years to an extent, I never liked seeing the results of that brutality on Ford's body. His skin tone made the bumps and bruises seem even worse than they really were. But as much as I hated it, I tried not to voice it because I knew he'd loved the game longer than he'd loved me. His desire to play hockey was in his blood. His talent, natural. Still, I might've been spoiled by the fact that he'd never sustained a major injury. Never before had I seen his unprotected head hit the ice. Never before had I seen the look of agony he wore before he dropped. Never before had I seen him lie still outside of a bed. He was knocked out cold.

My first response as I sat with Nuri and her family was to scream his name so loudly that I startled Maleek's little sister *and* his son. Somehow, the baby slept through it. My next move was to try and get out on the ice. I didn't know how I would do it, but I was determined to do it. I couldn't focus on anything else, not even the melee out on the ice as several Sires players piled on top of the guy who plowed into Ford and beat his whole ass. Not Nuri's voice saying something to me. Not the booming voices of angry fans. Nothing mattered but getting to Ford.

Nothing.

Finally, I said fuck it and decided to climb over the glass. I was about to get to work when I was approached by a man.

I was poised to punch his ass if he tried to stop me, but I heard him say, "...coaching staff. Come with me."

I stared at him, at the Sires polo shirt he wore, turned to see Ford was being rolled off the ice on a stretcher, and started crying. "Will you take me to him?" I sobbed.

"Yes, ma'am. That's what I'm here to do."

Some Sires employee drove me to the hospital, to the emergency room, and waited with me. My phone was in my purse buzzing nonstop. I knew one of the callers was Mama Ford, but I didn't have anything to report to her that she didn't already know since I knew she watched all his games on TV. I was a wreck, my heart aching and sprinting at once. My mind veered toward a thought pattern that was dangerous at a time like this, inklings about the years I'd wasted with that dumb-ass fake divorce crowding my brain. What if this was really serious? What if he didn't recover? I sure hoped his teammates fucked that dude all the way up.

I wished I could be alone, but I understood that the team wanted a representative there. After all, my husband was a precious commodity for them, but not nearly as precious as he was to me. He was my everything. I honestly couldn't recall what it felt like *not* to love him.

"Mrs. Ford? Uh, Krystle Ford?" a voice called.

My head snapped up to see a petite, dark-haired woman in scrubs and I almost tripped over my own feet jumping up out of that chair and stepping toward her.

"I'm Krystle Ford," I said, my words in a tumbled rush.

She smiled. "I'm Dr. Fuentes. Your husband is awake and alert, and he's asking for you."

My face crumpled as I squeaked, "He is?!"

She nodded. "He is. I'll take you to him."

I followed her to and through the massive ER doors as she led me to my heartbeat, my forever love. Once in that trauma room, I rushed to his side, letting the tears flow. He looked relieved to see me, reaching out a hand and pulling my face to his.

"You okay? I was worried about you," he whispered.

I looked into his eyes. “Worried about *me*?! You’re the one who’s hurt! I’m fine.”

“Didn’t...” he hesitated, winced, and continued. “Didn’t want you to worry.”

“Mr. Ford, do you want me to explain what’s going on to your wife?” the doctor asked. I didn’t even realize she was still there.

He shook his head. “Nah, I can tell her.”

FORD

The doctor nodded and left, and I was glad. They'd run so many tests, shone lights in my eyes, and talked my ears off. All of them. The neurologist, the orthopedic dude, the nurses. The whole time, I was asking to see my fucking wife and they were acting like they couldn't hear me. Pissed me off!

"Hey, sit down in that chair so I can talk to you," I said to Krystle.

She grabbed the wooden chair with the pale-blue, vinyl cushion and pulled it close to the bed before sitting in it.

I blew out a breath, thinking I shouldn't have refused the pain medicine because my head was booming. "They ran a trillion damn tests. That's why it took so long to get you back here, but I was asking for you. I ain't want you thinking the worst."

She reached for my hand, grasped it in her soft one. "I was okay. I knew they were taking care of you."

I averted my eyes from her face. "Yeah...so, they said I got a concussion."

"What?!" she shrieked. "Oh my god! Oh my god!"

"Baby, baby, calm down. Please, calm down. I'm good. I just gotta rest, take it easy for a while. No hockey for a minute."

"Okay. Okay, so...you didn't fracture your skull or anything?"

"Nah."

She gave me a teary smirk. "That big head is hard too, huh."

I chuckled and instantly regretted it, grabbing my head in response to the pain.

“What’s wrong?! You hurting?”

“Yeah,” I groaned, “my head is killing me. My knee, too.”

“They didn’t give you anything for pain?” She sounded like she was about to turn that emergency room completely out.

“No, I mean, they offered me some god damn ibuprofen, but you know I don’t like taking pills.”

“Ford, I don’t give a shit what you don’t like! Your red ass is going to take some pain medicine. Let me go get a nurse.”

“Wait, damn! Can I finish telling you what I need to tell you?”

“Be quick.”

“Yes, ma’am. Uh, I got a torn MCL, too. I’m out for the rest of the season at the very least.” My voice broke on those last words and then the tears came, worsening my headache. I felt her near me, heard her quiet words of reassurance, felt her kiss my tears, but I was still fucked up about all of it, about *everything*.

I was totally fucked up.

FORTY

FORD

I *ce, knee elevation, knee brace, crutches, pain meds, rest.*

Ice, knee elevation, knee brace, crutches, pain meds, rest.

Ice, knee elevation, knee brace, crutches, pain meds, rest.

Day after day after day after motherfucking day.

No practice, no games, no hockey. None of the sport I'd been playing my entire adult life plus years prior to that. At thirty, I was older than most of my teammates, and ten years in, my career was well beyond the average length of a professional hockey player. That was because I was damn good at what I did, and I took damn good care of myself. Now, I was wondering if I'd seen the end, if I would ever be able to return. Yes, I knew it took time to heal, but two weeks later I was still having fucking headaches and experiencing dizziness. The damn knee didn't even feel that bad. It was my head. A concussion is considered a "minor" traumatic brain injury but there was nothing minor about how I felt. I wasn't myself, and I was sure Krystle had to be tired of the whole situation. She'd taken off work to be home with me, waiting on me hand and foot, and I didn't like putting her through this shit. The upside? Oscoff was out for twenty-five games.

Fucking asshole.

I hoped his team never won another damn game.

Nah, I hoped his wife really was fucking up on him like I said she was at the beginning of that last game. That sumbitch put me on my ass for real.

I shook my head, grabbing a grape from the bowl Krystle had handed me and popping it in my mouth as I flipped through the channels on the TV with the remote.

"How long did I sleep?" came Krystle's frantic voice as she appeared in the living room, her hair covered in a silk

scarf, nothing but panties covering her body. Lawd, I wanted some pussy, but the doctor had advised against it, and I didn't think I could handle all that moving and shit, anyway.

“Uh, not long,” I replied, wondering if she'd noticed my hard dick in my sweats.

“Oh. You okay?”

I nodded.

She eyed me before grinning. “Your dick is hard? That's a good sign.”

“My dick *been* getting hard. You just ain't noticed. Shidddd, I'm hurt, not dead.”

“Want me to do something about it...with my mouth? I'll be gentle.”

“Hell yeah, I do, but I been dizzy as fuck today. I don't think I can handle that mouth right now. The nut would probably send me into a seizure.”

“Oh, I was just gonna do a couple licks. No happy ending.”

“So you're into torture now? In my time of sorrow? That's fucked up.”

“Sorry,” she sang. “Just tryna help. Anyway, let me go put some clothes on. I need to run to the store. Anything in particular you want me to get?”

“Liquor. Lots and lots of liquor.”

“No. Jones already told me to watch out for you drinking. I told him that was never a problem before.”

I shrugged. “I never had my wife leave me before.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Ford, I'm—”

“Nope, I'm only accepting vaginal apologies. Keep that pussy on ice so it can purr ‘I'm sorry’ to me when I get better.”

She rolled her eyes. “Shut up. My mom called earlier, told me to tell you she's praying for you.”

“Next time you talk to her, tell her I said thanks. She and her dude still going strong?”

“Yep.”

“Good, hey, them bloggers still talking shit about you?” I asked, watching as she rolled her eyes again.

“Yeah, they’re still calling me ‘Chandler Osborne’s ex’ like I don’t have a name. I think the latest narrative is I went back to you because I’m just a gold-digging, baller dick rider and now that you’re hurt, I’ve been trying to get back with Chandler. They are so stupid.”

“They really are. I mean, look at me. Aside from the fucked-up knee and head, I’m a catch.”

“You sure are. You’re fine, got a big dick...not saying that Chandler has a small one. I really don’t know.”

I stared at her.

“What I meant to say is Chandler got a micro dick. Why would I leave you and your titanic dick for that?”

“Ex-damn-zactly.”

“You sure you all right? Headaches getting any better?” my mom asked.

Adjusting the phone on my ear, I said, “A little. How you and Pops doing?”

“Aw, we good. Still piddling around. How long they say you gon’ be down. I know you ready to get back to work.”

“It depends on how fast I heal. The league is more concerned about the concussion than the knee, of course. I’ll have to be thoroughly evaluated before I get the go-ahead. The docs think I’ll be out for the rest of the season, though.”

“Oh, Bean...how you dealing?”

“I...don’t know. I’m upset, but I got my wife back. So, I can’t be too mad.”

“I know that’s right. Your daddy wanna say something to you.”

A second later, my father boomed, “Hey! I know you miss all that skating, but sit yo’ ass down right now. You hear?”

Chuckling, I said, “Yes, sir.”

“Ford, my man! You done gained weight, ain’t you?” Jones declared as he and Rapp stepped into my living room.

“Yeah,” Rapp agreed. “Mrs. Ford must be feeding you good.”

“I’m trying,” Krystle said, adding, “I’ll be in the bedroom if y’all need anything. See if you two can talk him into going back to physical therapy.”

“Damn, bae! You snitching now?” I groaned.

“Yep,” she said before disappearing into our bedroom.

“You skipping out on PT? You planning on retiring or something?” Rapp asked from the opposite end of the sofa. Jones sat next to me.

“Man, I just got to where my damn head ain’t constantly hurting. I ain’t ready for no new pain,” I informed him. “I’mma go back soon.”

“So you ain’t been doing nothing but sitting up in here eating for damn near a month?” Jones queried.

“No, nigga...I went to PT for a minute. Just taking a break,” I replied.

Jones nodded. “Well, hurry up and get yourself together. Morehead is a good right wing, but he ain’t you.”

“I am. Hey, I heard y’all fucked Oscoff up so bad that he’s out for the rest of the season now,” I said.

“Hell yeah we did!” Rapp shouted.

“You better believe we did!” Jones agreed.

At that moment, LaDarius came creeping from the bedroom into the living room. Since we were home so much now, we'd been letting him roam free more than usual. He crawled up my good leg and settled in my lap.

"You came to see your uncles?" I asked him.

"Damn, he done got big!" Jones observed.

"I'm glad I sat over here," Rapp mumbled.

"You still scared of him, Rapp? He's harmless," I laughed.

"Nah, that dude got teeth. Ain't shit with teeth harmless. Fuck that!"

Jones and I both fell out laughing.

"You should come to some home games, man. You could sit on the bench. You're still a Sire," Jones said, with Rapp interjecting, "For life!"

"I'ma try," I said. "I'ma try."

KRYSTLE

I woke up in the middle of the night to find Ford's side of the bed empty. Before I could wonder where he was, I heard the toilet flush in the en-suite bathroom. Turning onto my side, I stared at the door expectantly. Several minutes passed and no Ford.

"Ford?!" I called. "You need help?"

Silence.

"Baby, you okay in there?!"

His, "Yeah," was low and...weak? He certainly didn't sound like himself.

So, I left the bed, placing my hands on the bathroom door. "Ford? What's wrong, baby?"

The door opened slowly to reveal him in his underwear. He'd gained a little weight, but he was still fine, perfect. My eyes crawled up his stomach and chest, finally arriving at his face. His eyes were wet.

"Can you, uh...I'm tryna get back in the bed," he muttered.

I was blocking him, so I moved, saying, "Oh, my bad. Ford, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied as he basically hopped the few steps to the bed, dropping onto the side of it and burying his face in his hands.

"Ford—"

"Baby, *please*. I just wanna go back to sleep. I don't wanna talk about this."

"Okay," I said, trying not to sound like my feelings were hurt when they were. He seemed annoyed. I guess maybe he *was* annoyed with everything at that point. So, I walked

around to my side of the bed, settling under the covers with my eyes to the ceiling.

I knew it was best to leave him alone, but I still asked, “Why didn’t you use your crutches to go to the bathroom? You could’ve fallen.”

His answer was a clipped, “I know.”

I bit my lip and shut my mouth, deciding I’d at least attempt to get some sleep.

Then he said, “You should go back to work.”

Frowning, I turned to look at his silhouette in the darkness. He was lying on his back, too. “What? Why?”

“It’s been six weeks and shit ain’t no better.”

“Yes, it is. Your headaches are better. No dizziness, and you’re back in PT. You’re improving.”

He scoffed, “My career is gone. I’ll never play again. Somebody gotta support us.”

“Ford, we have plenty of money in the bank—checking *and* savings. Plus, your agent negotiated your contract for guaranteed pay—injury or not.”

“You remember that?”

“Of course I do. What’s going on, baby? You’ve been pretty positive up until now.”

“I...I thought this would move faster. Players get concussions all the time and are back on the ice quicker than this. I’m fucking frustrated!”

“Okay, what about therapy? It could help.”

“I’m going to PT, Chicken. You just said that.”

“I’m referring to a therapist, like the kind I see.”

“Nah, I ain’t going to no therapist.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t fucking need to, Krystle. I’m good.”

“Obviously, you’re not.”

“I ain’t fucked up enough for a therapist.”

“But I am?”

“I...that’s not what I meant.”

“I think it’s *exactly* what you meant.”

FORD

“Krystle—fuck! I don’t know what to do! I’ve only wanted two things my whole life, hockey and you! Losing you messed me up worse than what I’m going through now. I stumbled around and figured out how to kind of survive without you, but the shit was so hard. Hockey was the only thing that kept me from totally losing it. Then I get you back and lose hockey. What I’m gonna do if I lose you again?” My voice sounded so weak. I hated it.

“Is that what you’ve been thinking? That I’ll leave you again?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“My knee is fucked up, I still get dizzy from time to time, and I may never play hockey again. Why the hell would you stay?”

“Now who’s acting like love is a transactional thing?”

“Chicken—”

“Ford, first of all, I’m not going any-damn-where, ever again! I promise on my brother. Second, you’re going to play again. The doctor even said that. It’ll just take time.”

“K-Krystle, I’m scared. I’m scared to play again,” I sobbed. “If-if I get more concussions, I could end up with permanent brain damage and that scares the shit out of me. It’s like...I thought I had at least another three or four years to play before I retired, but now, I’m petrified that I’m gonna end up messed up. I’ve heard of dudes whose whole personalities change. Other dudes live in constant pain—headaches, vision loss. I don’t want no fucking CTE. I don’t want that!”

The lamp on her side of the bed popped on. “Baby, look at me,” she said.

I slowly turned my head to see tears streaking her cheeks.

“You have a right to be scared. There’s no shame in it. There’s also no shame in wanting to play the game you love.

This is a lot all at once. I think therapy could help. It's not nearly as bad as you think."

"I know...I just. I love you. I don't wanna lose you, but this is hard and it's unfair for you to have to go through it."

"Are you serious right now? You were there for me when neither of us even understood why I was the way I was. I ain't going nowhere. I will never leave your side. *Ever.*"

She leaned in to kiss me, and I reached up to wipe her tears.

"I'll think about the therapist, okay?" I said.

"You promise?" she wept.

"I promise, Chicken. Hey, thank you."

"For what?"

"For loving me and letting me love you."

She grinned. "You're welcome, Big Head."

I smiled as she kissed me again.

FORTY-ONE

FORD

“O hhhh, shit! Daaaamn!” I shouted, dropping my arms to the bed and closing my eyes. “This pussy always been good!”

Her feet were planted on the bed, her hands on my stomach as she squat-fucked the complete shit out of me, bouncing up and down on my dick and moaning nonstop.

“Krystle, Krystle, baby, shit!” I yelled.

“Terrence Mathias motherfuckin’ Ford! You feel so good!” she whimpered.

“So...do...you! Shit!”

She dropped to her knees and started grinding on my dick while licking her lips.

“I-I-I’ma bust, baby. Fuck!” I groaned. “I don’t wanna bust yet.”

“You know what I want,” she panted. “Give me that nut, Ford. I want every last drop.” Then she hopped up and started sucking the head of my dick. That did it, I came so hard that I started seeing stars and shit. I almost thought I had another concussion, and as if her wet and gushy wasn’t gift enough, she lay back between my legs, lifted her foot, and stuck her toes in my mouth.

Before I commenced to sucking them, I breathed, “One day, I’ma find the words to tell you how much I love you.”

“I already know how much you love me. I’m still tryna catch up. Not sure I’ll ever be as good to you as you’ve been to me. I love you so much it scares me sometimes, but in a good way.”

I wanted to reply, but I was too busy feasting on those cute little toes of hers.

Smacking Jones on the shoulder, I asked, “You gon’ be a’ight, man? Look like you about to pass out.”

“I’m good,” he said through his teeth. “I’m cool.”

“Then why are you sounding like your jaw is wired? Coach is good people.”

His head jerked around, and he narrowed his eyes at me. “That’s my mama, man. Ain’t no people good enough for her.”

“Okay, calm down, with your violent ass. I’m just saying, why’d you agree to throw this engagement party if you just gon’ stand around looking like you’re plotting a murder?”

“Because Nuri...you know what? Fuck you. You know why.”

I laughed. “She be getting you with them coochie ultimatums, don’t she? I ain’t judging you, though. I get it.”

“Speaking of...you look good, man. Happy.”

“Shit, I am. Off the crutches, still gotta use this cane but I’ll take it. Been getting pussy, got cleared to come back next season. I’m ecstatic, my guy.”

“I see. So...one more year, huh? I can’t believe you’re going to retire after next season. Whatchu gon’ do after that?”

I shrugged. “Travel, buy a house, Coach some kid league hockey, invest in real estate with my wife, fuck...”

“Sounds like a plan. Wait, so now that Coach and my mama are engaged, you think they gon’ be fucking?”

I frowned. “Uh...no comment?”

His mouth dropped open. “They already been fucking, ain’t they?”

“Again, *no comment*. Oh, look...there’s my wife. I’ll be back.”

I quickly hobbled away from my crazy-ass friend and snuck up on my lady who was in deep conversation with Mama Iesha.

“Congratulations again, Mama Iesha. Can I steal my wife for a moment?” I asked.

Jones’ mom smiled as I kissed her cheek. “Of course!”

Turning to Krystle, I offered, “Will you dance with my crippled ass?”

“Sure. I’ll even hold you up if I need to,” she replied.

“Shiddd, you *been* doing that,” I informed her.

Before we could step to the middle of the spacious living room, the music—an Alex Isley tune—abruptly stopped, and Nuri’s voice could be heard above the sparse crowd of people. Again, Rapp was absent.

“I need everyone, especially Coach and Mama Iesha to look at the TV screen for a moment,” Nuri announced.

Everyone’s attention was on the wall-mounted TV as she mirrored her phone to it and a face popped up.

“Big South!” Coco shrieked.

“Stop and Frisk!” Stick shouted.

Mayhem ensued as the legendary rapper smiled. Once we’d all calmed down, he began to speak. “Coach, Miss Iesha, I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to celebrate with you, but I won’t be missing the wedding. I just wanted to hop on FaceTime and tell you congratulations. Wishing you a long life of love together.”

The call ended, and everyone started talking over each other. South was one of the team’s owners and I’d met him before, but I didn’t think I’d ever get used to seeing him outside of a music video or TV interview. Life was wild.

Once the room quieted down, I heard Jones very loudly ask his wife, “Wait a minute. You got Big South’s number, baby?!”

He actually sounded upset, too.

This nigga...

FORTY-TWO

FORD

“Ford, stop it!” Krystle fussed.

With wide eyes, I asked, “What I do? I ain’t even doing nothing!”

“Leave my dick alone. I can’t concentrate.”

Grinning, I slid my hand up and down it again. “Whose dick, now?”

“*Mine*, Big Head. You saying he ain’t mine?”

“Oh, he’s definitely yours, but you neglecting him right now. He’s lonely.”

She gave me a smirk. “I’m painting him...and the rest of you. Y’all gon’ have to be patient.”

“I really am your muse, huh? You gon’ sell this one?”

“You really are, and nah, this one’s for me. I’m a hang it over the bed. I think it’s done. Come see.”

I lifted from the side of the bed, making my way to where she stood with her easel. She was so fucking talented. I mean, it really looked like me sitting naked on the side of the bed.

“Damn,” I said. “You even got LaDarius in there.” I turned to where he sat on the foot of the bed doing his nodding thing.

“Yep. So...you want some pussy before you have to leave for your therapy appointment?” she questioned, her eyes roaming my body. “Or do you need to keep your mind clear so you can talk to him?”

Yes, I was seeing a damn therapist, *and* I joined a support group. The shit was actually helping, too.

“I *always* want some pussy, but...in front of our son?!” I asked.

She kissed me long and slow, and the next thing I knew, I had her up against the wall making her scream. When I saw

LaDarius creep past us, leaving the bedroom, I smiled before returning my attention to the task at hand, rocking in and out of the softest, wettest, tightest place on planet earth.

EPILOGUE

FORD

FIVE MONTHS LATER...

“...**A**nd I was thinking we could build a barn here for your horses,” Krystle was saying. “I know you said you wanted at least three...”

I was tired as hell after my game the previous night, but I had to smile as she shared her vision for a plot of land she'd found outside the city.

“So, what do you think? There's so much we can do with this land,” she added.

Stepping closer to her and wrapping my arms around her waist, I said, “It's beautiful. How many acres did you say?”

“Twenty-two. As you can see, it's undeveloped. It'll take time and money to get it where we want it to be, but I think it's a sound investment.”

“Okay, Mrs. Ford...let's do it.”

She gazed up at me with excitement in her eyes. “Really, Ford?!”

“Yeah, you convinced me. I see why Iyla didn't fire you after we showed out at the benefit. You are damn good at what you do.”

“I am, aren't I?”

“Yep. This is nice. Plenty of room for lots of animals, like your namesakes.”

She frowned. “Crystals? They're not animals.”

Grinning, I shook my head. “Nah, chickens.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Fuck you, Ford.”

I laughed, pulling her close and burying my face in the cloud of hair atop her head. “I love you, Chicken.”

“I love you, too, Big Head.”

“Hey, let’s call it the BT Ranch...for Blake.”

Backing away from me, she smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

We stood there and stared at each other, me taking in the beauty of her dark skin, full lips, and expressive eyes when she spontaneously squatted in front of me, tugging on my gym shorts.

“Krystle, what—”

I lost my words when, right there in the middle of nowhere, she pulled my dick out. The next thing I knew, I was in her mouth and my legs were threatening to give out.

In awe, I looked down at her, my chin in my chest as I closed my eyes and groaned, “Got dayum, Chicken! Shit!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A true southern girl, Audie Award-nominated author Alexandria House has an affinity for a good banana pudding, Neo Soul music, and tall Black men in suits. When this music-loving fashionista is not shopping, she's writing steamy stories about real Black love.

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