

THE CYCLONE
MINI
CYCLONE

Alexandra House



TECHNICAL

ST. LOUIS CYCLONES: BOOK 2

ALEXANDRIA HOUSE

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DEDICATION

For my big brother—gone way too soon. Thank you for
always loving and protecting me.

You are profoundly missed.

-Love, Baby Sis

ONE

DRAYVEON

I closed my eyes and let my body sink into the mattress as she went to work, her warm, wet mouth eagerly devouring me as our moans collided in my ears.

“Shit,” I murmured. If this woman wasn’t good at anything else, she was a fucking master at sucking dick. She took her time with it, swallowing me inch by inch. No gagging, no coming up for air, just my dick sliding down her elegant throat as she hummed with pleasure. The pussy was good, too, but I’d damn near give her my nonexistent firstborn for a blowjob.

“Shhhhit,” I repeated as the bottom of my feet began to heat up, my heart started to race, and my body tensed. When the nut hit me full force, the hand that had been resting on the back of her head fell away as my limbs grew numb. I grunted so harshly that I was hoarse afterwards. Her mouth left my dick, and I felt her breath on my face but still couldn’t open my eyes. I was on cloud-fucking-nine.

When she kissed me, I kissed her back, clutching the back of her head, her hair tangled in my fingers. The other thing about this woman that I liked besides her superior head game was that she didn’t care about being fucked. She got off on giving pleasure. That was good because I was too damn weak to give her the dick. She’d drained my whole life force from me.

I lay there with her for about twenty minutes out of courtesy before I said, “I gotta go.”

She sighed. “I know you do. When will I see you again?”

Sliding her off my chest, I sat up on the side of the bed and shrugged. “Don’t know. Soon.”

“Always soon, huh?” she purred.

As I grabbed my t-shirt from the floor and dropped it over my head, I said, “And I always come back, don’t I?”

“You do, just not often enough.”

I stood from the bed and pulled on my underwear and sweatpants. “I’ll call you, Rae,” I offered without acknowledging her statement. Turning to face her, I took her in. Rae Reynolds was gorgeous and thick with mocha skin, Michelle Obama arms, and surgically lifted breasts—a wealthy fifty-year-old goddess. “Come give me a kiss.”

Grinning, she left the bed and approached me, melting in my arms.

When I left her lavish bedroom, I took my usual route through the house to the living room where my security—Shem and Luigi—sat watching TV.

“You ready, Skip?” Shem boomed, lifting his bulky frame from the couch.

I nodded. “Yep. Let’s roll.”

Shem led the way with Luigi rolling out behind me. We were barely out the door when Rae’s husband pulled up. I was in the backseat of my G-Class when Mr. Reynolds approached me, smiling as he said, “I trust you put her in a good mood?”

With a lazy grin, I replied, “She damn sure put me in one.”

With a chuckle, the older gentleman turned and headed toward his house as

Shem, the day’s driver, started the engine.

“Man, this shit is still crazy to me,” Luigi said in his shrill voice. Dude was huge but talked like he was a member of the famous singing Jackson family.

I shrugged. “They got an open marriage. Ain’t like he ain’t getting it in too.”

“He rich. You *know* he getting it in,” Shem offered.

They kept the conversation going as I reclined in my seat, closed my eyes, and smiled. Life was good as hell.

AFTER MY SESSION WITH RAE, I headed home, hit my private gym for a workout, and kicked back in my game room

to whoop Shem's ass on 2K while Luigi provided commentary.

"I can't believe your ass is playing as yourself," Luigi said, his voice followed by the sound of him sucking up the dregs of his soda and moving the straw around.

"Who else I'ma be? I'm the best, nigga," I replied.

"Yeah, well your little avatar ain't gon' be good enough today, 'cause I'm about to molly-wop you, young sir," Shem jibed.

"Shiiiiid, watch!" I shot back.

"I'm starving. What we got in the kitchen?" Luigi said, already making his way to the refrigerator.

"Didn't you just get through eating?" Shem asked.

"A Big Mac? Nigga, that was a snack," Luigi said.

"My OG brought some stuff over yesterday," I offered, eyes still on the game.

"I don't see nothing but healthy shit! This all she brought?" Luigi's big ass whined.

"Damn, bruh, why we gotta have the same discussion all the time? It ain't never nothing but healthy shit in this house," Shem said. "Skip gotta stay in shape."

"Yeah, so I can work and feed y'all's big asses," I quipped.

"Fuck this. I'ma order something from *QuickEats*," Luigi informed us.

"Kang of Wangs? Order me some of them lemon pepper wings. All flats," Shem said.

Luigi plopped back down on the other end of the sectional from me and pulled out his phone. "A'ight."

Thirty minutes later, Shem was claiming the ass kicking he'd taken on 2K was a result of me cheating, and I was shaking my head.

"That's called skill, my G. Don't hate," I said, standing and stretching just as a notification popped up on my phone

with a *ding*.

“Front gate?” Shem asked.

“Yeah,” I said, observing the live camera feed from my gate on the screen of my phone. Noting the *QuickEats* sticker on the car’s windshield, I tapped on the icon for my home security app and entered the code to open the gate.

“Shit! I hope it’s the food! I’m ‘bout to pass the fuck out!” Shem yelled.

“Shiiiiid, with all that food you carrying around in that gut?” I said, heading out of the living room.

“Fuck you!” That was Shem, of course.

“See, it *is* the food and I’m heading to the door to get it since I need to go piss anyway,” I said.

“Preciate it, cuz. Hey, make sure you tip ‘em!” Shem said to my back.

“Damn, I thought *I* was the boss,” I muttered, making my way to the door.

The doorbell rang as I swung the door open. When I saw the person standing on the other side, I froze. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but it definitely wasn’t this—her. It was the eyes, icy blue against pretty brown skin. Were they contacts? They had to be. There was no way eyes like those could be real.

I was so damn confused and intrigued that it took a minute to notice her stomach, big and round and very obvious in the tight black dress she wore with black combat boots. Her hair was in dreadlocks, the tips dyed a bright orange. One of her hands held the bottom of her stomach while the other held a big paper sack out toward me.

“Delivery for, um, Louie G.?” she said, voice husky but strained as she gave me Luigi’s government name through a frown.

“Oh, yeah...yeah. Um...” I took the bag from her and stared as she stood there frowning. “You a’ight?” I asked.

Just as her full lips parted to answer me, liquid gushed from between her legs, hitting the bricked surface outside my door and splashing onto her boots and my bare feet.

“The fuck?!” I damn near shrieked.

“Oh no,” she wailed, her eyes on the mess pooled at her feet. “Oh, shiiiiit!”

I dropped the sack of food. “What the fuck? Is that...what is that?!”

She hunched over, moaning as she gripped her stomach with both hands. “Ohhhhhhhh,” she groaned.

My heart started jogging in my chest as I shouted, “Aye! One of y’all call nine-one-one!”

“Fuccccck!” she moaned, dropping to her knees.

I could hear heavy footsteps approaching as I gawked at her while thinking she shouldn’t be on her knees on that hard-ass brick. “Hey, can you stand up?” I asked and then felt dumb for asking. If she could stand up, she wouldn’t have been on her knees.

“Why—oh shit!” one of the guys said. Then they were shouting more stuff that I couldn’t make out because I was laser focused on this woman kneeling and howling at my doorstep.

On automatic, I bent down and picked her up. She let go of her stomach and put her arms around my neck. When I turned to take her into the house, I was blocked by a wall of Luigi and Shem who stood there looking confused as shit.

“Move!” I shouted.

They both jumped out of my way, and I headed to the only bedroom that was located downstairs. “One of y’all call nine-one-one and one of y’all come with me.”

Making it to my destination, I carefully placed her on the guest bed and kind of just stood there because I had no idea what to do next.

“She got somebody we can call besides nine-one-one?”

My head snapped up from her to Luigi, who'd followed me into the room, then fell back to her.

Her eyes were squeezed shut as she shook her head. "Uh... I—oh my godddddd," she shrieked, and then she scrambled to take her panties off—which, *what the fuck*—and opened her legs. Next thing I knew, she'd started grunting and straining. Pushing.

She was *pushing*.

Oh, hell naw!

"Shem! Tell them folks to hurry!" Luigi yelled in mezzosoprano, echoing my thoughts...because shit!

"Aye, what's your name?" I asked when she let up on that grunting and pushing for a minute.

"St-Stevie," she bit out.

"Okay, Stevie...can you stop pushing until the ambulance gets here because I don't know what the fuck to do to help you."

"I *can't* stop. I have to puuuush! Shit!!

"Is that the head?!" Luigi squeaked.

"Got damn," was all I could manage to say because there really was a little hairy head poking out of this chick. My stomach flipped and my knees buckled, forcing me to back up until I felt the wall behind me, my eyes bouncing from the baby's head to ole girl's face. Then a little sense kicked in and I started remembering shit I'd seen in movies.

Approaching the bed, I grabbed her hand and said, "You got this, Stevie. You got this! Just keep pushing."

Luigi's big ass disappeared, quickly returning with some towels, and handing me a small one. When I gave him a look that read *what the hell am I supposed to do with this*, he said, "She sweating, man."

Nodding, I wiped her forehead and kept trying to encourage her as I watched her progress. This shit was...I don't know. It was weird but in a beautiful way. I'd never seen

anything like it and had never planned to. I didn't want kids. I didn't want a wife, none of that shit. I was pretty sure I'd be bad at it, the whole husband and father thing. I was positive that fucking that stuff up was in my DNA. It had to be.

She started squeezing my hand so hard I almost yelped. She was kind of a thick chick, but damn, she still shouldn't have been so strong. Nevertheless, I didn't complain about it; I just looked into her strange eyes and said, "You got it, Stevie. You got this!"

"Uh, don't somebody need to like help pull the baby out?" Luigi asked.

I glanced up at him. "What? How you know that?"

"Remember when I was messing around with Shanté Broughton? She used to watch births on YouTube all the time, and I remember the doctor always like, tugs on the baby to help get it out."

"I ain't no damn doctor! I might break it or something! Where the fuck is the ambulance? Shem!"

"Can y'all please shut the fuck up?!" Stevie wailed, and then she started squeezing my hand again, *harder*. Shutting her eyes, she roared as she pushed *again*, and the next thing I knew, a little baby was lying on the bed between her legs squalling loudly. It was bloody and so small. I couldn't take my eyes off it—her—him? A closer look told me it was a him.

Wow. Like for real, wow!

"Shit," Luigi muttered.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"B-boy or girl?" Stevie asked.

"Boy," Luigi and I said in unison.

She strained her neck, peering between her legs. "I wanna hold him."

I looked up at Luigi who raised his hands and shook his head.

I rolled my eyes at his punk ass, tried to move to get the baby, but Stevie still had a death grip on my hand. “Uh...can you let my hand go?”

“Sorry,” she said.

Grabbing one of the larger towels, I slowly reached for the baby.

“Make sure you support his head and watch the umbilical cord. It’s still attached, you know,” Luigi informed me.

I glared at him as I tried to figure out how to do what I needed to do, letting my eyes drift over to Stevie. “I don’t wanna hurt him or fuck up the cord thing.”

She nodded, moving to sit up in the bed. I watched as she reached between her legs and picked the wet little baby up with tears in her eyes. The cord was still attached to him *and* her...I think. Didn’t somebody need to cut it? Judging from the look on Luigi’s face, the somebody was going to end up being me.

Mother. Fuck.

“Look at you,” she cooed softly. Cradling him against her chest, tears rolled down her cheeks. “Baby boy, I love you already.”

“Aye, the ambulance just pulled up—” Shem said as he stepped into the bedroom. One look at Stevie, the baby, and the condition of the bed, and his titanic ass hit the floor.

TWO

DRAYVEON

I jerked upright in my bed, heart beating so fast I could almost hear it echoing in my bedroom. The dream was the same as it had been since I was seven damn years old—the argument, the tears stinging my eyes, the musty smell of the dark closet, my big brother’s reassuring voice, the fear that had me in a chokehold. Nearly twenty years of dreaming the same dream, and it felt real every time. It felt real and I felt helpless, leaning on my older brother for safety when he was a kid himself, but that was how trauma worked. It never really left you, just hung out in the dark corners and shadows of your psyche and soul, giving you enough leeway to live life but not truly enjoy it. I’d accomplished a lot since I was seven, had family and friends who loved and cared for me, but still, I was fucked all the way up in the head more days than I could count.

Rubbing my eyes, I stood and stretched before heading out of my room and down the stairs. My steps faltered at the guest bedroom door. The light was off in there, leaving the space just as dark as the rest of the house, but I knew the bed was stripped because I’d done it myself. I wondered how they were now, Stevie and her baby. It’d only been a few hours since the ambulance took them away. I hoped everything was okay.

Blinking and shaking my head, I headed toward the sunroom which led out to the pool area. Rounding the pool, I made my way to my sanctuary—my gym complex. Once inside, I grabbed a basketball from a rack full of them close to the door and started doing what I always did when I couldn’t sleep—shooting baskets.

STEVIE

“He still ain’t answering?” Bria asked, stepping inside my hospital room with two cups in her hands.

Dropping my cell onto my lap, I shook my head. “I don’t know why I even tried to call him. It’s not like he’s ever been interested in the baby.”

As soon as those words left my mouth, my eyes inched over to my little boy, fast asleep in the clear hospital bassinet. He was beautiful and more than I believed I deserved because he was healthy, despite having arrived a little early.

“I get it, though. I mean he *is* the baby’s father,” Bria mused, handing me a cup of soda which I set on the metal nightstand.

“If you want to call him that.” I rolled my eyes, trying to keep from crying even though my former boyfriend’s actions weren’t surprising in the least. He’d made clear his stance on my pregnancy—he wasn’t ready and wouldn’t be involved.

At all.

“Anyway, I’ve got to think of a name for him,” I said, changing the subject.

“I can’t believe you still haven’t thought of one. I mean, I know you thought you had a few more weeks before he’d be here, but you don’t have any names in mind?”

“Not really. Been too busy trying to keep from being homeless to think about it.”

“I feel you on that. Well, we know Bilal Jr. is out of the question.”

“Oh, that one was never in contention.”

“How about the guy who delivered him? I still can’t get over all that. You’re delivering food to a mansion and go into labor and have your baby in the owner’s bed? Wow! You’ve got a story to tell little man!”

“I really do. Damn, what was his name?”

“You seriously forgot?”

“Girl, I didn’t try to remember! I was in pain! Let me check the *QuickEats* app out. It’s logged in on there.” After finishing my investigation, I said, “Louie G. That’s it!”

Bria wrinkled her nose. “Louie G? Sounds like a member of the mob or something. I thought you said he was black and fine.”

“He was.” *The damn finest*, I thought. *Tall and handsome*. Whew! As much pain as I was in, I *still* noticed that. “And kind. He was extremely kind,” I added. “But I ain’t naming my boy Louie.”

Bria, my best friend, stared at me, and then we both laughed until a knock at the door interrupted us, and in walked the man who helped me bring my baby boy into the world.

THREE

STEVIE

Skyscraper tall, covered from head to toe in black—jogging pants, t-shirt, shoes—a gold rope-style chain around his neck, diamond studs in both his ears, and in his hands, blue balloons, a bouquet of blue roses and a huge teddy bear. He was shirtless last night, so I knew there were tattoos on his caramel-colored, muscular chest and stomach. God, he was handsome, like excruciatingly so. I couldn't stop staring at him, those thick eyebrows and nice lips, expressive brown eyes that at that moment read uncertainty...

“OMG!! Drayveon Walker?!” Bria shrieked, her eyes wide. I had no idea who Drayveon Walker was, but I guessed Louie favored him.

“Uh...hi,” he said to Bria, a lopsided grin making him look boyish. I imagined he'd worn that same grin many times as a kid. I also wondered how old he was—twenty-five? Twenty-six? Either way, he was probably too young for me. Not that he'd want my unfortunate ass. Nevertheless, he was cute, grin and all.

Too cute.

Damn, did I have a crush on this man? If I did, I needed to get myself together because not only did he more than likely not want me, but he'd seen me and my vagina in the most compromising of positions. The very thought made me groan inwardly.

“Um...Mr. G?” I squeaked.

His brow furrowed, and just as he opened his mouth to respond, Bria virtually yelled, “This is Louie G?! Ohhhhh, I get it. He used an alias because he's famous. Wow, Stevie! You coulda told me it was Drayveon Walker! Who was I gonna tell?”

I frowned. “What? Who is Drayveon Walker?”

Bria's incredulous, “*He is!*” and the guy's surprised, “I am,” were said simultaneously.

“Oh,” was my response because who the hell was Drayveon Walker? Was I supposed to know him?

Rolling her eyes, Bria explained, “Please forgive her. She’s not into basketball, so she has no idea how iconic you are. But I’m well aware, and I am a huge fan! I can’t believe I’m in the same room with *the* Drayveon Walker!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted movement in the bassinet, and said, “Well, the baby knows you’re in the same room with him. You just woke him up.”

“My bad! I need to call my daddy and tell him!” she gushed. “I’m Bria, by the way. Hey, are you gonna be here for a minute, Drayveon? I’ve got a Cyclones jacket in my car. Would you sign it? And could you take a picture with me?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. I’ll be here for a minute if that’s okay with Stevie,” he said, my name sounding good as it floated on that voice of his. Damn, was he sexy!

“Okay!” Bria said, rushing out of the room as I strained to get up so I could quiet my now fussy baby. Once I had him in my arms, I sat back down on the bed and noticed Drayveon still standing by the door. “Wanna sit down?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Uh, yeah. Where can I sit all this stuff? It’s for you and the little guy.”

I smiled and nodded toward the over-bed table. “On there is fine, and thanks. That was kind of you.”

“No problem,” he returned as he dropped into the chair Bria had just vacated, resting against the back of it and stretching his long legs out before him.

“And thank you for your help yesterday, too. You were clutch,” I added.

“Nah, that was all you. You were...incredible.” His eyes were small, intense, and fixed on me.

I felt my cheeks heating up. “I had a great aunt who was a doula. I used to spend summers with her when I was growing up, so I knew what to do for the most part.”

“Your aunt was a who-la?” he asked, his brows in a deep “v”

I chuckled. “A doula. They assist in birthing babies, provide support for the mother.”

“Oh,” he said, not at all sounding like he got it.

I looked down at my baby, relieved he was drifting back off to sleep, but looked up when Drayveon said, “What’s his name?”

Twisting my mouth to the side, I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

He sat up in the chair and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “Really? You ain’t have one picked out before now?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“You can always make him a junior, after his daddy.”

“No, I definitely won’t be doing that.”

“Oh, it’s like that?”

“It’s like that and then some.”

“So you and him...”

“There is no me and him,” I admitted. “But it’s all good.”

Drayveon regarded me thoughtfully for a moment before asking, “Can I see him? I mean, not hold him, but like, move closer to y’all?”

“Sure!” I chirped. “Of course.”

He stood, moving the few steps to my bedside, the aroma of Irish Springs soap crowding my nostrils as he leaned in to inspect the baby.

“He looks good cleaned up,” he observed.

I laughed. “Yeah, he does.”

“He straight? Healthy and stuff?”

“Yep. We’re both fine.”

“Good. He came into the world screaming. He’s a warrior, and warriors need strong names. Malcolm would be good. Or maybe David if you wanna go biblical. Victor is another good one. Or Leo.”

I smiled up at him. “I’ll add those to the list.”

He nodded and reclaimed his seat. “He’s beautiful.”

“Thanks. I think so too. Um, how’d you find me—us?”

“I remembered your name being Stevie and I overheard the ambulance dudes saying which hospital they were bringing you to. When I got here, I asked for Stevie October’s room. I heard you give your last name to the ambulance dudes, too.”

“Oh.”

“Aye, your car’s still at my crib. If you give me the keys, I can have one of my guys bring it up here for you.”

“Wow, I haven’t even thought about my car. Um, no. I don’t want you to have to do all that. If it’s not in the way, I’ll just have Bria bring me to get it once they discharge us. Shouldn’t be more than a day or two from now.”

“Nah, it ain’t in the way, and I’m good with however you wanna handle it. Let me see your phone.”

“Huh?” I asked with a frown.

“Let me see your phone so I can give you a number to contact me at. That way someone will be around when you’re ready to come get your car.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, handing him my phone.

A few minutes later, we’d settled into a comfortable silence when he broke it with, “Uh...you need anything?”

“Oh, no. We’re good.”

At that moment, Bria popped back in the room with some other chick wearing a hairnet. Then I remembered she had a cousin who worked in the hospital’s cafeteria, and I knew things were about to get out of hand because ole girl looked like she was about to pass out at the sight of Drayveon. They’d both gotten stuff signed and had basically done a selfie photo

shoot with this very gracious man when a big guy I recognized from his house peeked his head in the door and directed his words to Drayveon. “Skip, you’re gonna be late for your appointment,” he said in a high-pitched voice.

Drayveon nodded. “Uh, I gotta head out. Good seeing you, Stevie. Nice meeting you, Bria and...”

“Mya!” Bria’s cousin squealed.

“Nice meeting you, Mya,” he offered. and then he left.

DRAYVEON

After Luigi reminded me of my “appointment” with Pam Price, another of my regular cougars, we left the hospital and headed to her luxury condo over on Laclede Avenue where I damn near fucked both of us into a coma on the chinchilla rug covering most of her living room floor after she sucked seventy-five percent of my soul from my body. Then I headed home where the first thing I noticed was Stevie’s car, an old white Ford Focus. Sliding out of my Bentayga, I walked over to where it was parked on the left side of my driveway close to the front of my house. It was dirty on the outside and cluttered on the inside, so damn small I wondered if there was enough room in it for the baby’s car seat.

“Wonder if she got a car seat?” Luigi asked, making me jump. I didn’t realize he was standing behind me. Nigga had read my mind.

“Shit, she need a car to go with the car seat,” I quipped. “This is a piece of shit.”

“I mean, shorty is delivering food for a living. Seems about the right speed for her if you ask me, unless her dude got money.”

I shook my head. “Apparently, she and her dude ain’t together. If they were, I’d have to wonder why he’d have her out here like this—delivering food and shit and in *this* car.”

“Yeah—oh, shit.”

Turning to look at Luigi, I lifted a brow. “*Oh, shit* what?”

“I just remembered Nef texted me saying your OG is here. She been waiting on you.”

Fuck.

“When did she text you?” I asked.

“While you were with Ms. Price.”

Double fuck.

Without a word, I climbed the steps and entered my house, the aroma of something good meeting me at the door and leading me to my grandmother whom I affectionally referred to as my OG. She was every bit of a gangster too.

Her back was to me as I stepped into the kitchen, her attention on a boiling pot of something on the stove as Anita Baker blasted from the countertop speakers. Sneaking up behind her, I said, “Whatcha cooking, lady?”

She flinched before turning narrowed eyes on me.

“I didn’t know you were here, else I’d be here before now,” I explained, sounding six instead of twenty-six.

Through pursed lips, she said, “Mmhmm, whatever. I ain’t messed up about that. What I need to know is why I had to hear from your cousin that somebody had a whole baby in your guest bedroom.”

I was gonna kill Shem...or Nef. They were both my cousins—brother and sister.

I shrugged. “Wasn’t really nothing to tell. Luigi ordered some food and the girl who delivered it went into labor and ended up having the baby here. That’s it.”

My OG was tall and thin like me but still stood several feet shorter than my six foot, four inches. Nevertheless, she wasn’t nothing to play with, and when she placed a hand on her hip, I knew shit was about to get real.

“Have you contacted your lawyer, Skipper?” she asked.

I frowned. “No. Why would I?”

“Because you’re a damn millionaire gold-digger magnet with no medical training. What if something is wrong with the baby and that woman decides to sue you?”

“He looked fine to me.”

“And I suppose you know what a ‘fine’ baby looks like?”

“I know what she told me today. The baby’s fine and so is she.” *In more ways than one*, I added mentally, because she even looked good in a hospital gown. Beautiful. So beautiful

that she didn't need those blue contacts. She didn't need them at all.

My OG's eyes widened. "Today? You talked to her today? You gave the girl your phone number?!"

"You gotta calm down. You runnin' your blood pressure up over nothing."

She moved closer to me, got all the way in my face. "You are my baby. The one damn thing I got right. If I'ma let my blood pressure run up over anyone, it's gon' be you! Now answer me!"

"No. I went to see her at the hospital. She seems like good people."

She sighed, turning back to the stove, taking my attention to the steaming pot.

"Your stew?" I inquired.

She nodded. "Yes. I put some grilled chicken and brown rice in the refrigerator for you, too."

I leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Thanks, Granny."

"Mmhmm. Have a cleaning service come in and disinfect that guest bedroom."

"Okay."

"And call your lawyer, boy."

I sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

FOUR

STEVIE

Embarrassed.

I was so damn embarrassed, and I just felt...inadequate. I was already proving to be a shitty mother.

The used car seat I'd bought weeks earlier was recalled according to the maternity ward's social worker, so she was calling around to different charitable organizations to try and find me another one. All of the discharge paperwork was signed earlier that morning, but I couldn't leave without a car seat, so there I sat on the side of the bed with my baby swaddled in my arms, waiting.

"I could call my cousin Deedee. Her baby's a couple months old and her car seat is new. I bet she'd let us borrow it so you can at least get out of here and go to Drayveon's house to get your car," Bria offered.

I was sitting there swimming in incompetence and shame, and all this heifer was thinking about was getting to Drayveon Walker's house as if he'd give either of us a second glance.

Peering down at my son, I felt tears fill my eyes. Everything was fucked up except him. At least I'd done this one thing right.

Bria was on the phone now, probably with Deedee, and while I appreciated her help and the help of the social worker, I still found myself fighting tears. So when a knock came at the door of my tiny hospital room and it opened, I kept my eyes on my boy.

When I heard Bria's overly enthusiastic "hey!" I looked up to see Drayveon entering my room carrying what looked like a brand-new infant car seat.

DRAYVEON

She started crying.

The second she looked up and saw me stepping into the room, she burst into tears, her shoulders shaking as she held the baby in her arms, and my ass didn't know what to do, so I just stood there. Her friend had spoken to me, but I couldn't speak back because all I could think about was fixing whatever was broken inside of Stevie at that moment.

I could feel the creases in my forehead as I watched her struggle to pull herself together. It only took her about a minute or two before the tears had stopped and she was wiping her face with the back of her hand.

Her, "what are you doing here?" was shaky. She didn't sound angry. There was something else in her voice. Shame, maybe?

Assuming she was talking to me, I replied, "It's been like three hours since you called and told Shem you were on your way to pick up your car. I got...worried."

"Oh, um..." she began, but her friend whose name I couldn't remember interrupted her.

"We been stuck here 'cause the car seat she got for the baby was recalled or something. We was tryna find another one but it looks like we don't need to now," her friend said.

I was about to respond when the door bumped into me. Moving, I saw an older black woman in pants and a blouse slide into the increasingly congested room.

Her eyes swept over to me from Stevie, and she smiled. "Oh, good! I see Dad made it and with a new car seat. Top of the line, too! Let me get someone to wheel you downstairs, Miss October, so you can get out of here. I know you're more than ready!" Then she was gone.

"Stevie, I'ma pull my car around. I'll call and let you know when I'm at the front of the hospital," her friend said. Turning

to me, she asked, “Want me to take the car seat with me or you could follow me to my car now?”

“Oh, naw. I got it. I’ll come down with Stevie and the baby,” I replied, still observing Stevie.

“Okay, well...I’m a go on down then.”

Stevie nodded and watched her friend leave before finally looking me in the eye. “I don’t know why the social worker assumed you were his dad. I told her he wasn’t involved but...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes left me.

I set the car seat in the only chair in the room and folded my arms over my chest. “It’s all good. You all right, though?”

“I...thank you for the car seat. I thought I had it covered. I didn’t know about the recall, plus the social worker said it had expired, too. I didn’t even know those things had expiration dates.”

“No problem.” I noticed the baby moving in her arms and asked, “He up? Got his eyes open?”

“Yes! You wanna see if he has my eyes? That’s all anyone asks.”

I didn’t respond, just moved closer. Either I was tripping, or little man looked right at me and smiled. And his eyes *were* blue. My gaze shot up to Stevie’s face. “Those are your eyes? Not contacts?”

She nodded. “Yep, no contacts. Weird, I know. You don’t expect blue eyes with skin as dark as mine. I actually hate them.”

“Why? You’re beautiful.” Shit, I hadn’t meant to say that, but it was the truth.

“Th-thank you. I guess I don’t like the attention, and I get tired of people asking me to prove I’m not wearing contacts.”

I nodded. “I can see that. What name did you give him?”

“Still tryna figure that out.”

“He ain’t gotta have a name before you leave here?”

“Nope. I looked it up. I have up to a year to name him.”

“Damn, that’s wild.”

Her phone began to chime. I watched as she answered it, frowned, said “okay,” and then looked like she was going to cry again.

“What’s wrong? Who was that?” I inquired.

She sighed and bit her bottom lip. “That was Bria. Her car is gone. It’s not on the lot.”

“Someone stole it?”

“No, not really. Her boyfriend has a key, and if he knows where she is, he’ll just help himself to it sometimes.”

“It’s a million cars out there on them lots. How the hell he find it?”

“It’s hard to miss. It’s a loud ass metallic blue color and it’s got ‘RIP Scooby’ painted on the back window. Scooby was her boyfriend’s brother.”

“Oh. I think I’ve seen that car around.”

“I’m sure you have. Look, I’m just...shit! This is a damn disaster!”

“No it isn’t. I got you.”

STEVIE

I was sitting in the backseat of Drayveon Walker's vehicle, a super fancy SUV, my body wedged between Bria and the infant car seat. Drayveon sat in the front seat next to his bodyguard, who was driving. I knew my whole situation was fucked up, but the events of this day had shone a spotlight on it, making me feel like a major ghetto charity case around this man with the big house and this car that smelled like him—damn good.

Bria's eyes were wide and all over the place as she took in the red vehicle's interior—creamy black leather seats, screens embedded in the backs of the front seat headrests, a stereo system so fire that I almost thought whoever was singing the song that was playing was in the truck with us.

“Damn, this is nice!” Bria shrieked for about the tenth time. “Ain't never been in a car this nice, and it rides real smooth too! Shit!”

Drayveon looked up from his phone and glanced back at us, letting his eyes linger on me, I think. Or maybe I imagined it. “Thanks,” he murmured before returning his eyes to his phone.

I bit my bottom lip, moving my eyes from the back of his head to my son with a sigh. I couldn't wait to get in my car and drive home. I just needed some normalcy. Nothing had seemed anywhere near normal since the night my water broke on Drayveon Walker's doorstep.

I was so deep in thought that I didn't notice us entering the gate to Drayveon's property, but Bria's “Got dayum! This your house, Drayveon?” yanked me out of my head.

“Uh, yeah. This is it,” he said. Bria had to be working his nerves because she was definitely working the hell out of mine.

The SUV stopped in front of the familiar house, and before Bria could open the back passenger door, the driver—Shem—

did. At the same time, Drayveon opened the door next to the car seat. “You get him and I’ll get the base to his seat and secure it in your car if you give me your keys,” he said.

I nodded. “Okay.” Relief was easing its way into my bloodstream. I’d be on my way home in a few minutes.

Or so I thought.

My little bubble of hope was burst when, with my baby secure in the backseat and Bria in the passenger seat, I turned the key in the ignition and my car didn’t start. It just made a weird clicking sound, which made my stomach drop to the soles of my feet.

“Fuuuuuck,” I moaned. This could *not* be happening to me.

“It’s been sitting here for a couple of days. Battery’s probably dead. Maybe Drayveon can give you a boost,” Bria suggested.

Drayveon.

The same Drayveon who must’ve believed I was the most hapless woman in existence. No baby daddy, delivering food for a living, no child car seat, raggedy car. I was a fucking Mary J. Blige song in the flesh!

Moving from where he’d been leaning against his vehicle, Drayveon approached the driver’s side of mine. “Won’t start?” he asked through the window.

I simply shook my head in reply.

FIVE

DRAYVEON

“You remember Meena? Miss Burt’s granddaughter?”

I shook my head as I sat across my dining room table from my OG, inhaling the turkey necks and rice she’d brought me for dinner. “Nah, I don’t remember her. She Laura’s daughter?”

“Yes! She’s the baby girl.”

I nodded. “What’s going on with her?”

OG sighed and pursed her lips. “She done got strung out on that mess. Burt wants to put her in rehab, but the family can’t afford it. They started a GoFundMe. I was hoping you’d donate.”

I nodded. “You know I will.”

“That’s my baby boy!”

“I’ll just put the money in your account, and you can take care of it. Hey, did you put that money on Cap’s books?” I looked up from my plate in time to see an irritated look cross her face.

“Yes, just like I do every month,” she snapped.

I held up both my hands, including the one holding the fork. “I’m just asking because he said you didn’t do it last month.”

“Well, he’s a damn liar and you know that!”

“Cap is a lot of things, but he don’t lie and *you* know *that*,” I said, bracing myself as I resumed feeding my face.

“So *I’m* a liar? Is that what you’re trying to say, Drayveon?”

I shook my head. “No. What I’m saying is you always got a lot going on with church and your outreach work, not to mention cooking for me. I can see where you might’ve forgotten.”

“So you saying I’m senile then, huh?”

I set my fork down and locked eyes with my grandmother who could be just as argumentative as she was benevolent, albeit with *my* money. “You know that’s not what I’m saying. I forget stuff all the time and I ain’t senile.”

“Yeah, you do be forgetting stuff, don’t you? You forgot to call your lawyer.”

“Nah, I ain’t forget. I’m not planning on calling him.”

“Why? You trying to get sued? You like people taking advantage of you? I bet she *tried* to go into labor and have that baby here in your house!”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, OG, you gotta chill with that. You’re reaching now.”

“Humph,” she said. “You’re gonna learn to listen to me.” Her phone buzzed, and after she checked it, she said, “Lord, help.”

“Jamilla?” I asked, recognizing the tone of voice she reserved for her oldest child.

“Yeah, but I’m not going to bother you with this.” Standing from the table, she bent over and kissed my forehead. “I’m a head on home. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

“STAY HERE. DON’T MOVE, OKAY?” In the back of the shallow closet, my brother’s words met my ears in a harsh whisper.

“But-but where you going? What you gonna do? I don’t wanna be in here by myself,” I whimpered, tears crowding my eyes. I could still hear the sounds of screamed obscenities, objects being thrown, and glass breaking. The sounds weren’t unfamiliar to me, but they were more intense than usual, swelling to what I realized at my young age would be an explosive conclusion.

“I’ma try to go get some help. Just stay here, Dray. Okay?”

I sniffled and nodded.

“Be real quiet and don’t come out until I come get you.”

More sniffing and nodding from me. Then my big brother left, closing the door and leaving me alone in the darkness.

I shot up in the bed, my heart pounding, my breathing loud in my ears. Almost automatically, I swung my legs around and stood from the bed, heading to the bathroom to empty my bladder. Then I left my master suite, ending up downstairs. Instead of making my way to my basketball court, I disabled the alarm and stepped out the front door in my bare feet, my eyes quickly finding the Ford Focus that had become a driveway ornament on my property. As I stood there, my mind replayed the events from the day before when we ended up having to take her and the baby home. Home for Stevie October was an efficiency apartment in a building that was once a church. She lived in an okay part of town on the fringes of but not quite in the hood. I don’t know what the inside of the place looked like because she damn near begged me not to follow her inside, but that alone spoke volumes about the condition of the place. I wondered how she and her unnamed son were doing. I wondered how much her rent was and how she was going to pay it since she obviously wasn’t working right now. She couldn’t work with a new baby or a broken-down car.

I stood out there for a few more minutes before I stepped back inside and through the house to my gym.

SIX

STEVIE

“Hello?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, more than a little disappointed to hear the feminine voice on the other end of the phone, so my, “Hey, Mom,” was forced to say the least.

“Stevie?”

Really? Who else could it be? “Yes, ma’am. How are you?”

“I’m good. I trust you are too.”

“I am. Um, is my dad home?”

“No, he’s not. Can I take a message for him?”

I’d called him every day of my baby’s five-day lifespan, and it was the same every time—small talk with “mom” and no dad. It seemed he was never home, but I knew that wasn’t true. I was being blocked.

Or ignored.

As usual.

I hated that shit because it took all the strength in me to make the phone call in the first place. It wasn’t that I *wanted* to talk to him. I *needed* to.

This instance, I decided to actually leave a message. “Yes, can you tell him I had my baby. It’s a boy.”

“Oh...okay. I’ll let him know.”

“Thanks.”

After the call ended, I went back to the task at hand, organizing the baby clothes that one of Bria’s brother’s baby mama’s gave me. It was mostly baby girl stuff, but at least my little man wouldn’t be naked. Besides, a lot of the onesies and tiny socks were white, and since it wasn’t like we’d be leaving the house much, those would work fine.

Sighing, I stopped sorting and picked my phone up from my lap, tapping on the mobile banking app as if maybe more money would magically appear in my checking account. I had enough to pay another month of rent and utilities and to buy a few groceries, but I needed to get back to work soon. Actually, I needed to find a better job.

And a babysitter.

And—shit.

What I needed was for my child's father to step up. I was going to have to make a child support appointment and soon.

When my phone began to buzz in my hand, I jumped, and then I frowned at the unfamiliar number before answering the call. "Hello?"

"Hey, uh...Stevie?"

I snatched the phone from my ear and stared at the number before putting it back to my ear. There was no way this was who I thought it was. "Yes. Who is this?"

"Drayveon Walker."

It *was* him. My mouth fell open and hung there for a moment before I managed to say, "Oh...hi?"

"Hi. Look, I got your number from Shem. I hope that's okay."

"Shem?"

"One of my security guys. His was the number I gave you to use to get in touch with me. I don't like giving my personal number out."

"Oh, okay. So what number are you calling on right now?"

"My personal number."

"It showed up on my phone. You forgot to block it?"

"No."

"Oh."

"I'm outside your crib. Can I come in?"

My heart leaped in my chest as my eyes darted around my tiny apartment. It looked a hot damn mess, even more so than usual with the piles of baby clothes on the coffee table and sofa and dirty diapers strewn on the floor beside me.

As if reading my mind, he said, “I ain’t always lived like I do now, and I ain’t gonna look down on you because of where or how you live.”

After a beat or two of silence, I said, “All right. Come on up.”

DRAYVEON’S PRESENCE was so huge that he made my apartment feel even smaller than it actually was. Not just his height but his aura, his energy. He wasn’t a loud man. He wasn’t necessarily all that boisterous, either. He was just...*him*—observant and intuitive, and well, fine and handsome as hell. And no matter what he wore from sweats to jeans to the shorts he wore today, he always looked good and smelled even better.

He sat on my sofa only inches away from me. The sofa was too short for him, and he looked uncomfortable, but there was no other seating in my place. Most of the people I knew weren’t as tall as he was, and at five-seven, the couch worked fine for me.

I glued my eyes to the bassinet sitting right in front of the couch, shifting my gaze to the stacks of neatly folded baby clothes on the coffee table. I was a second from counting the smudges on my dormant TV screen when Drayveon broke the silence.

“Still no name?” he asked.

“Um...no. Not yet. That bothers you, huh? The fact that I haven’t named him yet?” I replied.

“Nah, I mean, I just ain’t never known a baby to go home from the hospital without a name. It’s-it’s different.”

“Yeah...well, *I’m* different.”

He stared at me and nodded. “I can see that. Anyone else in your family got those eyes?”

“My mom had them. She passed away years ago, though.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Me too. She would’ve been a great grandmother.”

“You got any family here?”

“No. Not blood family. I’m not from here. Moved here after college because this was where my dad was staying at the time. He’s since moved out of the state.”

“But you stayed.”

“Yeah. I like it here for the most part. Just...things are hard right now. Oh! I’m gonna have my car towed to a shop as soon as I can. I know you’re sick of looking at it.”

“That’s actually why I’m here. Uh—”

His phone began to ring, cutting him off. He checked the screen, a frown appearing on his face as he mumbled, “Shit. I gotta take this. I’ll be right back.”

I nodded, was going to reply verbally, but he was up and out of my apartment before I could. I figured it was probably his girlfriend calling. Bria had told me he was known for dating rich older women, so I pictured the caller as some glamorous lady sipping wine while wearing a silky robe. That thought was snatched from my head when my baby began to stir and softly whimper, prompting me to pick him up and check his Pamper which was soaking wet. I’d just changed *and* fed him when a knock came at my door. Figuring it was Drayveon finally returning, I called, “Come in!”

It wasn’t Drayveon, though; it was a woman with blond weave and an attitude that spilled from her before she uttered a word. Before I could ask who she was, she said, “I’m Nef, part of Skip—I mean, Dray’s security team. He had an emergency and asked me to give you this.” She held out a keychain with two key fobs dangling from it.

“What are those?” I asked, my confusion mingling with a deep sense of disappointment that he’d left. He didn’t even say goodbye.

“Keys to your new car,” she informed me.

DRAYVEON

“Thank you for coming so quick. I know you’re busy with everything you have going on. I can’t tell you how much I hated to call you with this. I really tried to handle it myself,” my OG babbled, as she always did in these situations.

In response, I kneeled beside Jamilla, directing soft words to her. “What’s going on?”

“Nayshun, that you?” Jamilla asked, her eyes unfocused on me.

“No, it’s Dray. Your other son.”

She gasped and reached up from where she lay on the floor of her house, rubbing my cheek with her cold hand. The AC must’ve been on arctic. “Dray?! Oh! Dray! What you doing here, baby? I hate for you to see me like this.”

“I know, I know. Hey, you been taking your medicine?” I asked.

She dropped her eyes and I sighed. That was answer enough for me. Besides, I knew the drill. The only time she got like this was when she decided she no longer needed to take her meds.

“Didn’t we talk about this, Ma? You promised me you’d take your meds.”

“I know. I’m sorry, baby. I’ll take it now.”

I nodded, standing and helping her to her feet. She’d lost weight, appearing even thinner than she always had. My heart broke seeing her like this again and again and again.

I hung around for a while, handing her the pills that kept her somewhat sane and watching her swallow them. By the time I left, my OG had helped her shower and fixed her something to eat. When I made it to my crib, I was beyond exhausted despite the fact that I missed my daily workout. I’d have to double up tomorrow.

IT WASN'T a dream that ripped me from my sleep this time but the ringing of my phone. I groaned and wondered if I was going to have to start putting it on do not disturb at bedtime like I used to. The dreams were disruptive enough. I couldn't handle family drama messing up my sleep, too. Rolling over in the bed and grabbing my phone, my eyes ballooned when I saw the name on the screen.

Rubbing my eyes, I answered it with, "Stevie?"

"Yes, hey," she said softly.

Shifting to lie on my back, I stared into the darkness. "Hey."

"Um...you gave me a car?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Why?"

"Because you needed one. You gotta take the baby for appointments and stuff, right?"

"Yes, but I already had a car. I just needed to get it fixed."

"And now you have a car that doesn't need to be fixed."

Silence from Stevie.

Scratching my forehead, a thought occurred to me. "You don't like it? Or you don't like SUVs? I thought you and Little Dude would need more space. Oh, and I had my guys put everything that was in your car in the cargo space of the SUV."

"No, I like it. I *love* it...it's really nice."

"Toyota Highlanders are supposed to be real safe, too. At least that's what my car guy told me."

"Oh, that's good. What about my old car? What did you do with it?"

"It's still here. Where do you want it to be? What you wanna do with it?"

"I guess I could try to sell it. I don't know..."

“I’ll tell you what, you can sign the title over to me. I’ll handle selling it and give the money to you.”

“Okay, but...this new car is really mine? Like, you’re giving it to me, or you’re just letting me borrow it?”

“The title is in my name right now, but I’m going to sign it over to you.”

“Insurance? I mean, the insurance has got to be expensive on a vehicle like that.”

“It’s handled. You ain’t gotta worry about it. Just text me a pic of your driver’s license.”

“All right. I...thank you. You didn’t have to do that. As soon as I find a better job, I’m going to start paying you back little by little.”

“You ain’t gotta do that, Stevie. It’s a gift. All you gotta do is accept it.”

Silence from her again, so I said, “Stevie?”

Her “yes” was a breathy question, and I felt that one word deep in my chest.

“You’re welcome,” I said. Then I ended the call, and for the first evening in a very long time, no nightmares visited me in my sleep.

SEVEN

STEVIE

Me and my little guy had been home for a week, and I was beginning to get the flow of this new normal. One of the biggest keys I'd learned was to sleep whenever he did. That way, at least I got a bit of rest. Breastfeeding was super convenient although Bria said everyone she knew who did it swore it ruined their breasts. I didn't care about that really. Like, who was I trying to impress anyway?

Drayveon, a voice in my head said, making me laugh out loud. He was just being nice, probably wrote the SUV he gave me off on his taxes as charity.

The SUV.

I still hadn't driven it. I hadn't told Bria about it, either. I honestly didn't know how to feel about it. Sure, I was grateful, but also uncomfortable. I wasn't used to people giving me things, at least not things that weren't eventually taken from me.

Anyway, I was sprawled out on my futon bed one afternoon, fast asleep with a hand resting on the side of the bassinet when the sound of my phone buzzing on the coffee table woke me up.

When I checked it, there was a text message from Drayveon: *I like your apartment. It's eclectic.*

That was it. No hi or hello. Still, it made me smile. One could consider my space cluttered or disorganized, but I liked it from the velvety royal blue futon to the secondhand sideboard I'd painted a bright orange which held the TV. The rug was second-hand too and was Persian style with shades of red, yellow, and orange. The artwork was all colorful and vivid, pieces I'd bought from local artists.

Sitting up to peer at my still-sleeping baby, I replied: *Thank you.*

Him: *You play guitar?*

I frowned.

Me: *No. Why?*

Him: *I saw a guitar case in the corner.*

Looking up, I spotted what he was referring to and smiled.

Me: *That's a violin, not a guitar.*

Him: *Oh. You play violin?*

Me: *I do. I played professionally for a while.*

Him: *Damn, that's dope. You gone play for me sometimes?*

Something about that request felt so intimate to me that my eyes began to mist.

Me: *Yes.*

Him: *Good. Can't wait.*

“WHAT YOU MEAN, you don't need a ride? How you gonna take the baby to his doctor's appointment? You got your car fixed? How? And ain't you gon' let me come inside? Why you actin' all weird?”

I dropped my head and cleared the doorway for Bria as she strutted inside, her braids hanging lower than the red booty shorts she was wearing.

“You just asked me like a million questions. Which one do you want me to answer?” I inquired, watching as she pulled the baby out of his car seat and cradled him in her arms while her keys hung from one of her fingers.

“All of 'em.”

I sighed, closing the door and leaning against it. “I don't need a ride because I have another car. A...um, a better car.” Yeah, better was a good word.

She looked up from the baby to give me a wide-eyed expression. “Bilal got you another car?!” she squealed. “About time he stepped up to the plate.”

“Hell no! I still can’t get in touch with him.”

“Then how did you—your dad?”

I just stared at her.

“Well, shit. I’m out of guesses.”

“Um, Drayveon Walker gave me a new SUV,” I said.

I expected her to start shrieking, but instead, she lowered herself onto my sofa and shook her head, my baby still in her arms awake and alert. “Damn, okay.”

“I know. I feel some kind of way about it too. I should give it back, huh?”

“Hell no!” She *did* shriek this time, causing my baby to flinch. “My bad, Little Man,” she cooed at him. Then she looked up at me. “I meant damn, I was hoping I imagined him looking at you the way he was looking at you because I was tryna bag him.”

“Huh? I thought you said he likes older women.”

“We *are* older than him!”

“What? Like two years older. That doesn’t count...does it?”

“If the nigga ‘round here buying you cars and shit, it evidently does! Dang, Stevie, you won the jackpot...again,” she groaned. “I’m mad jealous right now.”

“Jealous of what? I’m a broke single mother. My son’s father deserted me during my pregnancy. My fucking father is robbing me blind. I’m trying to figure out how to be a mother by watching damn YouTube videos because *my* mother is dead and I miss her every day. I need a better job but the only thing I’m trained to do is play a freakin’ stringed instrument, and that vehicle Drayveon Walker gave me? Well, me and baby boy will probably be sleeping in it in a few weeks when I deplete the money that’s in my savings account.”

“You know I ain’t gonna let y’all be homeless.”

“I appreciate that, Bria, but you live with your boyfriend who sells drugs. You know I can’t live with y’all. I ain’t tryna

get my baby taken from me!”

She rolled her eyes. “He don’t sell drugs *in* the apartment.”

“Wow.”

“Anyway, we’ll figure things out. Shoot, at this rate, you gon’ end up in that big house with fine ass Drayveon Walker. It’s them damn eyes, I bet.”

“He’s just nice and I’m pitiful.” I checked my phone for the time. “Shit, we’re gonna be late. You wanna ride with us?”

Placing the baby back in his seat, she said, “Hell yeah!”

DRAYVEON

Up at eight in the morning, eat breakfast—never anything heavy, mainly just granola and some fruit, hit my gym to work out alone or with my trainer doing core work, lifting weights, and some cardio if I'm not going to play any five on five that day after stretching and warming up, of course. Then I head to my court, which is adjacent to my gym, and work on my skills—jumpers, hooks, drills. Once I'm finished, it's usually lunchtime, so I head in the house and pop one of my pre-made meals into the microwave. My OG keeps my meals on lock. It's usually something like grilled salmon, rice, and vegetables. After that, there are usually meetings with my lawyer, manager, agent, accountant, or my OG. Or I have a photo shoot or an event to attend. This is my off-season schedule. I won't get into what life is like for me during the season. So I have to make time for pleasure. Hence, the appointments. Today was Alaina's day, Alaina the motivational speaker with the nice house and even nicer pussy. I liked Alaina just as I liked all the others who kept me satisfied, but on this particular day, I wasn't feeling Alaina. Hell, I wasn't really in that room with her at all.

I was across town in a tiny studio apartment bursting with color and an energy I didn't understand but felt drawn to.

Stevie.

Stevie with the expressive blue eyes and smooth cocoa skin. Her lips? Nice and full, the bottom one being bigger than the top one. There Alaina was bobbing up and down, working hard to get me off, and all I could think about was how Stevie's lips would feel against mine. Soft. Probably soft. Was she a confident kisser or would she be shy, hesitant? Would she wrap her arms around me or would she hold my face in her hands? Would she—

Alaina stopped and crawled up my body to kiss me. Damn, I was almost there. I kissed her back, tangling my fingers in her soft hair. I wondered how Stevie's hair felt. Alaina backed

away, straddling me and I snapped out of my thoughts long enough to grab a condom from the nightstand in her bedroom and cover myself. I never fucked anybody in my home. I was trying to keep a good balance of peace in there, and besides, if I did that, it would make these women believe we could be more than fuck buddies, and well, fuck that.

She eased down on me, riding me while filling the room with moans. She was so damn fine, forty and fine, but as she rode me, all I saw was Stevie, and when I finally busted, it was Stevie's name that I wanted to scream.

ME: *Johnathan.*

Her: *Too formal.*

Me: *Okay. LaQuan.*

Her: *Nah. I dated a LaQuan once. Didn't work out. At all. Not even a little*

I chuckled. Me: *Word?*

Her: *Word, my guy.*

Damn, I couldn't stop smiling. Her: *You really are committed to naming my kid, huh?*

Me: *Yeah. I watched him come into the world. Me and the little guy got a bond now.*

Her: *I guess y'all do.*

Sitting on the side of the tub butt ass naked and wet from my shower, I tapped my foot as I typed my next response: *Hey, do you think I could come over and see him?*

I bit my bottom lip as I waited for her to text me back.

Her: *Of course you can. When?*

Me: *How about now?*

STEVIE

I opened the door for him with the baby in my arms, giving him a small smile that he returned, opening up his face and making him appear even handsomer than he already did.

“Hey,” I said as our eyes met.

Licking his lips, he returned my greeting. “Hey.”

I backed out of the doorway, allowing him inside my home and nodding toward the sofa. He took the invitation, sitting down, the height of his knees reminding me that my futon was too low for him, but what could I do about it?

I’d moved to sit next to him when a thought hit me. Looking down at my wide-awake son, I offered, “You wanna hold him?”

Drayveon’s eyes widened as he looked from my face to the baby and back. “I don’t know. I mean, I ain’t never held a baby before. I’ont wanna hurt him.”

Giving him my best reassuring smile, I said, “You won’t. I’ll show you how to do it.”

His right knee bounced up and down a few times before he slid his big hands over the thighs of his sweatpants and nodded. “A’ight.”

I handed the little guy to him, making sure he supported his head, and then took a seat beside them. Drayveon’s eyes were glued to the baby as we sat there in comfortable silence.

A few moments had passed before he finally spoke. “He’s so little. He ain’t heavy, either.”

“No, not as heavy as he was in my body.”

“How much did he weigh when he was born? I forgot to ask you that.” His eyes were still glued to the baby as he spoke.

“Six pounds even. We went to the doctor the other day for his two-week-old checkup, and he’s gained like two ounces.”

He finally looked up at me. “Two ounces. Is that good?”

“It is! Usually, babies lose weight right after they’re born and are expected to be back at their birth weight by the time they reach two weeks old. This little guy passed that.”

Drayveon nodded, his attention back on the baby. “That’s cool. I told you, he’s a warrior.”

“Yeah, I’d have to agree.”

“He a good baby? Like, does he sleep at night?”

“He’s a sweet boy except for when he’s hungry. He only wakes up to eat at night like every three hours.”

“Damn. You getting any sleep?” he asked, his concerned eyes on me again.

I shrugged. “As much as I can. I try to sleep when he does. But at least I don’t have to get up and make bottles since I’m breast feeding.”

“That’s good. I heard that’s best for babies.”

“It is!” I said, impressed with his knowledge.

“So, how you gonna work and take care of him and feed him and stuff? You got a babysitter?”

I shook my head and folded my lips. “I...don’t know. I haven’t worked all that out yet. I really don’t wanna work for *QuickEats* anymore. I never felt safe doing that job, but I gotta do something. I’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah,” he said.

He held the baby for a few more minutes until he started getting fussy. I took him and checked his diaper.

“Did you do a poopie on Mr. Drayveon?” I cooed as I laid him across my lap and unsnapped his onesie.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Drayveon checking his clothes. I had to fight not to laugh. “Little dude done shitted? I ain’t even smell nothing. How you gon’ do me like that, man?”

I had to giggle, so I did. “Uh, you gonna be okay with me changing him in front of you, or you wanna step outside?”

“I’m good...I think.”

Laughing, I went about the business of cleaning and changing my baby. When I was done, I asked, “You wanna hold him some more?”

Drayveon sighed. “I do, but I got a meeting to get to. Thanks for letting me come by.”

“Um, you gave me a whole vehicle. Of course I let you come by. You can come see him whenever you want to.”

“Can I see you, too?” he asked, his eyes fixed on my face.

I had to fight not to drop my gaze as I replied, “Yes, if you want to.”

“I do want to. You gotta play the violin for me, remember?”

Smiling, I nodded. “I do remember.”

He left, and I found myself sitting on my sofa wearing a smile so wide it actually hurt my cheeks.

IT WAS after nine that evening when a knock came at my door. I was half-asleep, lying on the futon with my sleeping baby next to me, my bare nipple beside his mouth. We’d both fallen asleep in the middle of a feeding. I didn’t move, hoping whoever it was would go away, but no such luck. More knocking sounded at the door, so I eased off the sofa because whoever this was, was going to wake my little guy up. Stuffing my titty into my shirt on the way, I opened the door without checking the peephole. There stood the same chick, Nef, who’d brought me my car keys, wearing a frown and holding like five big shopping bags.

“Dray sent me to deliver these,” she said, obviously irritated about being assigned this task.

“Oh,” I mumbled. “Uh, I’ll take them.”

She nodded, handed the sacks to me, and left before I could thank her.

I took them inside, looked through them, and wanted to cry. They were full of little baby boy clothes and shoes, all crazy name brands, expensive stuff in various infant sizes. There were at least six pairs of Nikes!

I glanced over at my sleeping son and then grabbed my phone, nearly yelling when it started to buzz.

Drayveon.

My voice quivered a bit as I said, "Hello?"

"Hey, you get the clothes and stuff?"

"Y-yes, but why? He already had clothes."

"He had on girls' clothes today. He ain't no girl."

I glanced at my boy again and at the pink onesie he wore. "He's a baby. He doesn't know what he's wearing."

"Yeah, but I know. Talk to you later."

Then *he* hung up before I could thank *him*.

EIGHT

STEVIE

I was grateful, really grateful. *Really, really grateful.* I was grateful for the vehicle and the clothes—uncomfortable, but grateful. However, two days after he visited me and my little dude, a whole damn army of people showed up with a crib and a stroller and about a million packages of diapers and wipes. There was also a five-hundred-dollar coupon to *Motherhood*, an exclusive shop for new mothers that sold everything from nursing bras to breast cream and breast pumps. Again, I was *grateful*, but there was no room in my matchbox of a home for all this stuff! Add to that the fact that Bria was present when all this shit arrived, and I was extremely close to having my very first nervous breakdown, which to be honest, was long overdue.

“Daaaaamn!” she yelled, scaring the shit out of my baby who was in my arms nursing. Poor baby flinched and started crying. I glared at my friend.

“Sorry, but seriously, damn!” she uttered in a harsh whisper. “This nigga in love with you, ain’t he?”

I shook my head. “No, but I think he’s pretty fond of my kid. I don’t know what to do, Bria.”

“What you mean you don’t know what to do? Looks to me like you need to be preparing to give up some pussy, ‘cause he damn sho’ done earned it! Shit!”

I sighed. “Bria, please be serious.”

“I am! Girl, fuck Bilal Urquhart! You done hit the jackpot for real!”

“Briaaaa!” I groaned. “I don’t know this man, and every time I turn around, he’s giving me and my son stuff. Don’t you think this is weird? I’m a stranger to him, too! This is odd, if nothing else.”

She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling as she remained standing by my door. She hadn’t taken a seat since arriving a few minutes earlier. “Well, *technically*, he does know you.

He's seen your coochie. I ain't even seen that, not that I want to..."

I rolled *my* eyes. "*Technically*, he could be some weirdo with a thing for poor unsuspecting single mothers. For all I know, he's giving me all this stuff so I'll be his sex slave or something!"

"And?"

"Oh my goddddd. Why am I your friendddd?" I whined.

"Because I saved your life when you first started working at Ronell's. You were getting eaten alive by those customers."

"Yeah, you were the only person who was nice to me. But right now, you're being a horrible friend. Bria, I'm scared."

Her facial expression softened as she eased down on the sofa beside me, reaching over to gently tug at one of the baby's toes. "Scared of what, Stevie?"

The baby let go of my nipple and I put him on my chest to burp him. "I don't know...everything. But mostly Drayveon. What if he does all this stuff to help me and I get used to it and him and start depending on him and he just up and disappears like every other man I've ever cared about?"

"So you care about him?"

"How the hell could I not? He's been a damn real-life knight in shining armor. And he seems nice and I'm beginning to think he really does like me."

"Beginning to think? Girl, if I stop hating for a minute, I'll admit that I knew he liked you the first time he showed up at the hospital."

"I wish that made me feel better, but I just don't know."

"Girl, listen...just go with the flow. If at any second he starts getting weird on you, cut his ass off, but seriously, I've never heard anything bad about him, and famous folks are rarely ever able to keep secrets. I just always heard he liked older women. I also heard he was real charitable. We see that's true."

I nodded. “Yeah, and I am thankful he wants to help me.”
“Shit, I would be too.”

DRAYVEON

“You have a call from—‘Aye, it’s Cap’—an inmate at a correctional facility...”

I listened to the rest of the automated announcement, accepted the call, and said, “Hey, man.”

“Hey, baby bro! What’s going on witchu?”

I rested my head against the backseat of my Bentayga. “Same shit. Work and more work. I need to come see you.”

“No you don’t. You need to keep being great. Aye, you talk to OG about my funds? Shit gettin’ tight in here.”

I sat up, my eyes on Luigi as he stepped out of the convenience store. “Yeah. She still ain’t put nothing on your books?”

“Nah, man. She do this from time to time, like she be forgetting about me, but this is two months in a row. I hate bothering you with this though...”

“Nah, you right for letting me know. I’ll take care of it. Hey, keep your head up in there, man.”

“Always, Skip. Always.”

We ended the call, and I watched Luigi fill the tank up with my mind in a whirlwind. Damn, I was just tired, fucking tired.

ONE...TWO...THREE...FOUR...FIVE...SIX...SEVEN...

Shoot, rebound, shoot, rebound, shoot, rebound...

Sweat dripped from my face as I worked. I was home on my personal court, it was after midnight, and instead of a dream yanking me awake, I hadn’t been able to fall asleep at all. It felt like I was regressing all the way back to my childhood when sleep wasn’t even an option.

There were some nights when I could make it to five hundred shots before I wore myself out enough to stop. After that, I'd either go back to bed or sleep on the court. One day, I was going to fuck my back up doing that shit.

I stopped at two hundred this time and decided to use the shower attached to the court. Hopped out the shower in time to hear my phone chime with a text message.

From Stevie.

I frowned as I opened the message. The hell was she doing up so late? It was close to 2:00 AM.

Her: *Thank you.*

Me: *Why you up so late?*

Her: *The baby's up. Why are you up? Did my message wake you?*

Me: *Nah. I was already awake.*

Her: *Oh. I thought you wouldn't see my message until you woke up in the morning. Sorry.*

Me: *No apology needed. Like I said, I was up. So you got the stuff? You're welcome. Anything for Little Drayveon.*

Her: *LMAO! Little who?*

I smiled. Me: *Lil' Dray-Dray.*

Her: *Woooooow! Lol!!*

Before I knew what I was doing, I'd replied with: *Can I come over?*

Her: *Now?*

I closed my eyes and asked myself what the fuck I was doing before I sent: *Yeah. If that's okay.*

Damn near a whole minute passed before she responded with: *Yes. You can come over.*

After I got dressed, I peeked in on Shem fast asleep in one of the upstairs guest rooms, opting not to wake him and basically snuck out of my own damn house. I never went anywhere without security. When I visited Stevie and the baby,

they usually posted up outside her door, but this time, I didn't want the extra company. This time, I wanted to feel like a regular dude going to see the woman he hoped would one day be his.

STEVIE

“Hey,” I said, one hand on the doorknob, the other supporting the baby lying on my chest.

Drayveon gave me half a smile, stubble shadowing his handsome face. His small, dark eyes read uncertainty as he uttered, “Hey.”

“Come in,” I offered, and he did, towering over me as he eased past me into my cramped quarters. The scent of Irish Springs soap crowded my nose and his mere presence actually made me feel a little woozy. So yeah, I had to admit that I liked him and not simply because he kept giving me shit. It was just *him*. I was sure I would’ve liked him even if he hadn’t been rescuing me and my son.

“Damn,” he said, taking in the result of his benevolence. One could barely move around in my home now. Turning to face me, he said, “I guess I forgot how small this place is.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. I needed it all. Thank you again.”

He nodded, dropping onto my sofa. I could almost see the gears shifting in his head as he kept looking around the lone room, save for the bathroom, that comprised my home.

“Do not buy me a house,” I said.

“I ain’t said nothing about buying you a house,” he countered.

“But you were thinking about it. I can tell.”

“Maybe I was. Would that be so bad?”

Sighing, I unconsciously patted my baby on his little back as he lay sleeping on me. “Look, I truly appreciate all you’ve done, but...I don’t know how to feel about it. Like, is this something you do often? Buy stuff for strangers? Or is it just me, and if it’s just me, why?”

He dropped his gaze from my face and was quiet for so long that I started feeling bad. Had I hurt his feelings? But

then he finally spoke, “Do you want me to stop?”

“If I did, would you?” I replied.

“Probably not.”

“Why?”

“Because I like doing stuff for y’all. It...it feels good.”

“But you help other people too, right?”

He looked up at me. “Yeah, but this is different.”

Frowning, I asked, “How is it different?”

Sitting up straight, he shrugged, his eyes darting all over the room. “I don’t know. I guess because I like you. A lot. You and the baby. I like helping y’all a lot.”

He sounded so awkward and uncomfortable that it made me smile. “Why’re you acting all shy?” I queried.

His head swiveled toward me, and he gave me a lopsided grin. “Are you teasing me?”

“No, I think it’s cute, you being shy.”

He rolled his eyes. “You ain’t gon’ say it back?”

“What? That I like you?”

“Yeah, I mean...if you do.”

“I do,” I admitted. “A lot, but I’m not exactly in a position to pursue anything with anyone right now. My life is in shambles and...I don’t want you to feel like you have to do stuff for me. I’d like you without all that.”

He stared at me. “I do it because I want to, not because I think I have to. I’m not trying to buy you and I never assumed you could be bought. Damn.”

I raised a hand in surrender. “Okay, fine, but no house. *Please.*”

“An apartment?”

“No.”

“The only thing left is my place. Y’all could have the whole first floor.”

“Drayveon,” I groaned.

“Just let me help you, Stevie. That’s all I’m tryna do. No strings attached.”

“Well, if you like me and I like you, we already got hella strings, don’t you think?”

“An apartment. Two bedrooms. Nothing over the top. I’ll cover the rent and utilities until you get another job.”

Shaking my head, I softly said, “All right.”

His response was to give me a big, beautiful smile that I couldn’t help but to return.

NINE

DRAYVEON

Stevie's eyes were wide as we followed the leasing agent through the apartment—three bedrooms, each with an en-suite bathroom, over fifteen-hundred square feet located on the eighth floor of a high-rise. It boasted huge windows and a spacious living room with a city view. No balcony, but I could live with that. Once the little guy started crawling, I would've worried about him getting out onto a balcony anyway.

I held the baby to my chest with both hands as we moved through the apartment. He was so tiny, or maybe my hands were big. Either way, he seemed fragile to have such a set of lungs on him. When this dude cried, he could wake up entire neighborhoods, but when he was asleep, I could swear he was an actual little brown angel. He was too damn cute, although besides the eyes, he didn't bear much of a resemblance to his mom. He was his father's twin, or so it looked. Hell, maybe he resembled Stevie's dad or some other relative. Genetics was wild like that.

I was sneaking a kiss on the top of his head covered in silky black hair when the tour ended, and Stevie looked at me.

"Well, there you have it. It's a lovely apartment with plenty of space for the little one as he grows," the leasing agent—Destiny, I think—said.

"Uh, how much did you say the rent is?" Stevie asked.

"Three-thousand-fifty a month with the utility and internet package included in that price," Destiny supplied.

"Oh, right," Stevie muttered.

"You know that ain't nothing for you to be concerned about," I interjected.

Stevie looked up at me, those eyes of hers appearing almost white in the sun-drenched living room. "Drayveon... I..."

Turning to Destiny, I said, "Can you give us a moment?"

She nodded. "I'll be right outside in the hallway. I need to make a phone call anyway."

She left, and Stevie started right in on me. "The rent is too high. This is a beautiful place, but I can't ask you to pay that much rent!"

"You ain't asking. I'm volunteering, and according to my accountant, the rent ain't exactly gonna break me."

"Stop smirking at me," she hissed.

"I ain't smirking. I'm kinda grinning."

"You said nothing extravagant."

"This ain't extravagant. It's empty."

"You know what I mean, and I don't have enough furniture to fill this place. Plus, the furniture I do have is secondhand."

I kissed the little guy's head again, directing my next words to him. "Man, I guess your mama thinks I ain't gonna buy no furniture. She trippin'. And anyway, I like her secondhand furniture."

Stevie shook her head. "I can't. I just can't let you do this. The car was bad enough, but this place? You don't even really know me!"

"Technically, I know you better than most. Isn't that what you said?"

Folding her arms across her chest, she said, "No, what I said was you've seen more of me than most."

"And what I saw was beautiful."

Her mouth dropped open.

"I just wanna help you. Remember? You agreed to this."

"I agreed to an apartment, not a sky mansion!"

I grinned. "So, you don't think you're worthy of a sky mansion?"

"No," she said softly.

Moving closer to her, I said, "Well, you are."

She dropped her head, and I kissed the top of it. “You’re more than worthy, Stevie. Let me do this. If you don’t, you’re gonna hurt my feelings.”

She chuckled softly.

I smiled, liking being this close to her. I almost told her that but was preempted by the return of Destiny.

Strutting back into the apartment, her heels clicking against the hardwood flooring, she asked, “Have we come to a decision?”

Both Stevie and I looked up as I said, “Yeah, we’ll take it.”

STEVIE

I was sitting amid unopened boxes and plastic-covered furniture trying not to feel overwhelmed when my doorbell—yes, my apartment had a freaking doorbell—rang. The baby was fast asleep on our new sofa and didn't move, thankfully, but I didn't want to chance another doorbell ring, so I hopped up to answer the door.

On the other side stood a young lady holding a huge blue teddy bear and a bouquet of blue and white balloons. "Delivery for, um...Dray-Dray Jr.?"

I smiled and said, "Yes, thank you."

Taking the gifts and a card, I thanked her again and closed the door. Still standing in the entryway, I read the card:

This is for my guy, but I know his nosy-ass mama is reading it so tell him I said happy birthday. Yeah, I remembered. And kiss his head for me.

-Dray-Dray Sr.

Giggling, I shook my head. It was August first, exactly one month after the day my boy was born. The baby was a month old today, and I hadn't even realized it.

But Drayveon had.

TEN

DRAYVEON

I'd been fake smiling and fake laughing for almost an hour. I was more than ready to be done with this photo shoot, but it was a paying gig, a Calvin Klein underwear ad, and I was *always* about making money. Shit, I had too many folks depending on me financially not to be business minded. But what I would've rather been doing was hanging with Stevie and the baby. Man, if she didn't name him soon, I was gon' do it. Anyway, I'd been spending a lot of time hanging at their place, helping unpack and arrange stuff along with Shem and Luigi, and things were coming along well. As hesitant as she was to accept the apartment, I could tell she loved it.

I was finally out of the studio and on my way to them when a message popped up on my phone from Stevie—a YouTube link. I was just about to click on it when a call came through.

Grinning, I answered it with, “What’s up, old man?”

“Nigga, I ain’t that much older than you, ole supermodel ass. You done posing in your draws?” my teammate, Leland McClain, quipped.

“You hating?”

“Hell naw! I told you they approached me, but Kim wasn’t having it.”

“Yeah, she don’t play about your ugly ass.”

“Now who’s hating? They don’t call me Pretty Leland for nothing.”

I laughed. “Don’t nobody call your black ass that shit!”

“Kim does. Anyway, what’s been up with you? Ain’t heard from you in a minute. You ain’t been over here eating up my food, neither. You good?”

Turning to face the scenery of my city through the window of my Bentayga, I nodded. “I’m good. Better than I’ve been in a while.”

“Sleeping better?”

“Nah, but I’m good.”

“Awwwww, shit! You finally took your ladies off rotation and stuck to one?”

I just smiled.

“Hell no! Which one? The CEO?”

Now I was frowning. “Who?”

“The one with the poodle.”

“Marie? Nah, I stopped seeing her months ago after she got engaged to her executive assistant.”

“Who, then?”

“No one you know of, and it ain’t exactly an official relationship yet.”

“But you gon’ make it official, huh?”

“That’s the plan.” Glancing at Luigi in the driver’s seat, I added, “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah. Shoot.”

“You think I’d be a good father?”

“I think you’d be a *great* father. You’re a good dude, man.”

“Thanks, McClain.”

“Hey, I’m just speaking the truth.”

STEVIE

He'd been coming over nearly every night, helping me put the apartment together, taking care of the baby to give me a break—per his own words—and just chilling watching TV on the ridiculous sixty-five-inch-screen one he'd bought for the apartment. This was the first night he fell asleep while here, though, and I wasn't quite sure what to think of it. One thing was for certain; seeing him with his head back and mouth open with the baby curled up on his chest had to be the cutest sight I'd ever seen—hands down. So, I was wearing a big smile when I eased the little guy off his chest and put him in his crib in his own room. When I returned to the living room, Drayveon was still knocked out, so I covered him, or as much of his big, tall body as I could, with a throw blanket, and then I went to bed.

I AWOKE from a very nasty dream starring me and Drayveon with my heart racing. I'd heard that some women experience increased sexual desire after giving birth but thought I wasn't one of them, and maybe I wasn't. Maybe it was his proximity, the fact that he was in my home late at night, all tall and sexy and fine and kind. His kindness was definitely the most attractive part of him. His kindness and the care he showed my son were enough to make my coochie liquify.

Sighing, I flipped over on my back and stared into the darkness. Then I realized I'd slept longer than usual. Turning to look at the video monitor on my nightstand—another gift from my benefactor—I noticed that the crib was empty. So after making a trip to the bathroom, I headed to the only place the baby could be, my steps faltering before I reached the living room as a familiar sound flowed into my ears. It was soft, but of course I recognized it—Dvorak's *Allegretto Grandioso*.

Leaning against the hallway wall just outside the living room, I listened to the old me, my own talent bringing tears to my eyes. For the millionth time, I lamented how far off track I'd veered. I loved my son. That fact was indisputable, but music and my violin were my first loves and I missed both terribly.

As the short piece ended, I wiped my eyes and stepped into the living room. The only light in the massive space was the TV's screensaver. Drayveon was lying on the sofa now, long legs bent. The baby lay on his chest asleep. Almost instantly, Drayveon looked up at me and smiled. "Little dude woke up crying, so I changed him, decided to check out the video you sent me earlier today. He watched it with me. Dude is rude so he fell asleep to it. I, on the other hand, can't stop watching it. You're incredible, Stevie. When was this?"

"A year or so ago. A performance I did for a charity thing," I replied.

"This is so good. *You're* so good."

"Thank you."

He sat up, one big hand holding onto the baby in the process. "Sit down," he offered.

I did, my eyes glued to him as I tried not to cry again. "Did he do number one or number two?" I asked.

"Number one. You know I woulda woke your ass up if it was number two."

I chuckled. "I can't believe you're scared of some baby poop."

"Believe it because it's real. Hey, I love this video, but it don't take the place of you playing for me."

"It wasn't meant to take the place of that. It was meant to tide you over until I feel ready to play for you."

"Fair enough. How'd you learn to play so good?"

"Well, initially, my mother taught me. Then I trained under a master violinist, and later, I attended The Walden School, a performing arts high school in NYC. I also have a Bachelor's

Degree in Music with an emphasis in Instrumental Performance from Romey U.”

“Oh, so you’re an HBCU grad. Okay, I see you.”

I smiled. “After literally being one of three black kids at Walden, I figured I needed a change of scenery.”

“I feel you on that. Hey, I was thinking...you know how you be tripping about me helping y’all?”

“I don’t be tripping,” I countered while rolling my eyes.

“Yes, you do. Anyway, I thought of a way for you to pay me back.”

My eyes widened, and I guess he realized how that sounded, so he said, “Not that. Damn, really? That’s what you think of me?”

I shrugged. “I honestly don’t know what to think of you, Drayveon Walker.”

“Well, I ain’t one to buy pussy. Know that.”

“Okay. What then?”

“Name this little man within the next week. He’s getting older, actually be tryna talk back to you when you talk to him now.”

I smiled. “Yeah, he does.”

“Right, so he needs to hear us say his name. I read somewhere that that’s important. You don’t need to wait no year to name him, and it ain’t got to be Drayveon: I just been playing about that, but he needs a name.”

“Hmm, well...maybe I already named him and just haven’t told you. Maybe I’m waiting for the right time to tell you, so it’ll be special.”

He nodded. “Okay, so you already named him. Good. What I gotta do to make the time right for you to share it with me?”

“There’s nothing you have to do. The time just has to feel right to me.”

“A’ight, I’ll wait, but I ain’t gonna wait long.”

In response, I rolled my eyes...*again*.

DRAYVEON

“Dray...Dray...”

My eyes popped open, and at first, I was disoriented, my surroundings temporarily unfamiliar. Then she came into view—pale blue eyes, warm brown skin, a deep “v” between her eyebrows.

“Stevie?” I said, my voice coarse with interrupted sleep. Glancing around, I finally recognized the living room which held the beginnings of what I knew to be her signature style. The furniture I damn near had to force her to pick out was bright—turquoise accent chairs, a brand-new orange sofa, a yellow chaise lounge, and a rug that somehow pulled all those colors together. I liked it.

“Yes, it’s me. This will be the third night you’ve slept on this couch. I know it’s comfortable, but damn. You can always just sleep in the guest bedroom. You *are* paying the rent, after all.”

Rubbing my eyes, I shook my head as I sat up. “I don’t be meaning to sleep here, it’s just...I sleep better when I’m here. I guess I...”

She dropped onto the couch beside me and softly said, “You have trouble sleeping? Why?”

I shrugged, giving my answer through a yawn. “Old shit coming back to fuck with me in my dreams, but it don’t happen when I’m here. I’mma head out, though. This is your place. It ain’t right for me to sleep here without your permission.”

Her soft hand met my arm and she gently squeezed it. “No... stay. I sleep better when you’re here, too. I just want you to know there’s nothing wrong with you sleeping in a bed.”

I smiled, and then I stared at her for a moment. “You are so damn beautiful. Not just the eyes, but everything. Like, your teeth are the bomb.”

She grinned. “I do have dope teeth, huh? I like yours, too. They’re big, but then again, everything on you is...big.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Damn sho’ is.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m going back to bed. Please do the same *in the guest room*.”

As I watched her walk away, I said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“DAMN, BRIA! REALLY?” Stevie sighed. “Okay. Okay, I’ll figure something out.”

I looked up from where I was dressing the baby to Stevie, who was holding her phone and muttering, “This is what my ass gets for having one damn friend.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. We were in the little guy’s bedroom. I was hunched over the changing table fighting to put his shorts on him. Dude wouldn’t stop kicking and smiling for shit. Stevie was sitting in a rocking chair, visibly fuming. She had on this loose, bright blue jumpsuit thing and a green sweater. Her locs were pulled away from her face and she was wearing lipstick. She was a fucking goddess.

“Bria can’t come to the doctor with me because of some shit with her boyfriend. So now I have to reschedule my appointment with my gynecologist, and she’s always booked up. It’ll be forever before I can get in, and I want to get this postpartum checkup and be done.”

“Why you need Bria to go?”

“To watch the baby. I don’t trust her to keep him at her place or here. I ain’t tryna have the police coming up in here. I love her, but she’s a fool for her man. She’d have him *and* all his boys with her here.”

“I can keep him.”

“No you can’t. Don’t you have to work out and stuff? I’m surprised you’re still here. You usually leave before the sun is up to start your day.”

I shrugged. “Taking a break today.”

She frowned. “Can you do that?”

“I’m doing it, ain’t I? I work out five days a week. Don’t matter which five days.”

“Oh. Well...what if he poops? You gonna change him.”

“Damn, I didn’t think about that. Shit...ummmm, I’ll just come with you, and you can handle that if it happens.”

“Dray, you’re going to come with me to my lady doctor?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Because the waiting room will be full of young women who’ll probably know who you are. I would say you should stay in the car, but I could be in there for hours depending on the day.”

“Hours? Damn! Nah, I’m coming in. I’ll have Nef meet us there. She’s my shadow today.”

“Why don’t you use your security when you’re here? I’ve been meaning to ask you that. You always had them wait outside at my old place.”

“Because this building has its own security. Don’t need them here. Now, let me get his socks and shoes on him and we can go.”

STEVIE

All eyes were on us, but no one approached Dray because Nef looked mean as hell. She was tall and gorgeous but very no nonsense, or at least that had been how I'd experienced her. Today, as she provided security for Dray while I awaited my turn to see the doctor for my six-week postpartum checkup, she was downright menacing. Wearing long box braids and bejeweled stiletto nails with her jeans and t-shirt, she blended in well, but the expression on her face? All I can say is if looks could kill, everyone in the room would be dead. Nef looked like she'd cut a bitch with little to no provocation. We sat in a row of seats situated against a wall in the waiting area with her and I flanking Dray, and her energy was overtly threatening. I was leery of her, and she'd merely been indifferent toward me, carrying out assigned tasks and nothing more.

Dray was holding the baby, showing him something on his phone since he swore my boy could focus his eyes. Thankfully, I only had to wait thirty minutes before being called to the back. I'd lost all my baby weight, so that was great. Breastfeeding was fucking magical!

The exam went well, ending with my doctor saying, "Everything looks good. How've you been emotionally? I know you told me the father wasn't being supportive. Do you have anyone helping you? A friend?"

I nodded. "I do have someone helping me, so I'm good. No depression."

"Great! Now, while you were in the hospital, you declined birth control. You said you didn't need it, but you're young. Are you sure you don't want any birth control?"

"Uh, actually...can we go over the options?"

"Sure!"

ELEVEN

DRAYVEON

“Finally! I’ve been coming by here for a week and you ain’t never here! What’s going on with you?” my OG interrogated me.

We were at my house, sitting in the dining room for our weekly meeting. It was an obligation I’d agreed to long ago, but I would’ve rather been in Stevie’s sky mansion at that moment.

“I’m here now. What you got?” I responded.

She stared at me for a moment, her almond eyes narrowed, before she turned her attention to her notebook. Adjusting her glasses, she began, “Miss Freddie—you know, the one who bakes those really good pound cakes for the church—well, she fell and broke her hip. They’re ready to send her home from rehab, but she needs some equipment. Medicaid will pay for it, but it’ll be cheap, so I was thinking you could pay for some top-quality things for her. Also...”

I nodded and listened and okayed everything, and then she lowered the boom.

“Now, back to you. This girl who had the baby? You been spending all your time with her, huh? Done bought her a car, paying her rent...”

I groaned.

“Yeah, I know. Folks are concerned about you. What is going on? Is that your baby, Skipper?”

“No,” I said.

“Then what the hell is going on?!”

“The same thing that’s going on with that list of people in your notebook. I’m helping someone who needs it.”

“A young woman with a working pussy shouldn’t need help! Where’s the baby’s daddy?”

“Obviously, not in the picture.”

“With the money you’ve spent on her, you could’ve helped a hundred people!”

“And I can still help them, but I’ma help her too, and it ain’t nobody’s business but mine. Full stop. I love you, but this ain’t got nothing to do with you, OG.”

She glared at me, and I stared right back at her with my eyebrows lifted.

Turning away from me, she shook her head. “This girl got your nose wide open.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she does. Now, let’s talk about how I had to put money on my brother’s books myself when you said you would handle it.”

Her head snatched up and her lips curled. “You getting onto me about Cap’s sorry ass?”

“He ain’t sorry. He’s your grandson just like I am. You raised him just like you raised me. You know what he’s been through. You know why he does the stuff he does, and you know he needs us. He don’t want me to visit him but I’ma make sure he gets what he needs. You should feel the same way.”

She stood from the table, slamming her hands on the top of it. “What I know is you’re operating out of guilt when it comes to Nayshun. You feel like you owe him, but you don’t! Yes, I raised you both, and look how you turned out! You ain’t been fucking up!”

“Because of him!” I said, vacating my own seat. “And you know that!”

She flinched and I felt bad for raising my voice, but then again, I was simply matching her energy. I loved my grandmother, but sometimes, she seemed to forget I was a grown-ass man.

We had another stare-down until I shook my head and left the room, heading into the adjacent kitchen. I was grabbing one of the meals she’d prepared for me when I heard her shoes thump against the kitchen floor. I sighed as I turned to face her.

“I did quinoa with fresh green beans instead of brown rice with the salmon,” she informed me.

I nodded, stepping close to her to plant a kiss on her forehead. “Preciate it, OG.”

As I grabbed my keys from the island, she asked, “You leaving with the food? Where you going?”

“To see that girl who’s got my nose wide open,” I replied.

I’D PARKED outside Stevie’s building when my phone rang—Shem. I shut my eyes a second before answering. My OG was known to call herself tattling on me to folks. But I was Shem’s boss, not just his little cousin. That wasn’t going to work. It hadn’t worked in a long time. I guess she forgot.

My “hello” was deadpan. I didn’t feel like dealing with this shit.

“Aye, man...Stevie’s friend called me. She wants to know if you talked to her today. She said her phone’s off.”

I frowned. “Bria? How she call you if her phone is off?”

“Not Bria’s phone. Stevie’s.”

I looked up at the building through my windshield. “Stevie’s phone is off? Can’t be. Let me hit you back in a minute.”

“A’ight.”

I called Stevie’s phone and it *was* off. What the fuck? I was feeling all panicky and shit and I didn’t know why. I just...I had a soft spot like a motherfucker when it came to this woman.

I flew through the lobby, waving at the security guard, and was on the elevator and at her door in a damn flash. She opened it, giving me a smile that my lovesick ass quickly returned.

“Hey. Where’s your food?” she asked, noticing that I was only holding my keys.

“Shit, I left it in my truck. I was in a hurry. Why is your phone off?”

“Uh...come in,” she offered.

I followed her inside and stood next to the sofa while she sat in one of the accent chairs.

“Aren’t you going to sit down?” she inquired.

“No, I gotta go back out there and get my food. Why is your phone off?”

Lowering her eyes to her lap, she picked at the shorts she wore. “I ran out of the money in my savings account after my doctor’s appointment. I don’t have insurance, so I had to pay cash. That’s why I didn’t have the money to pay my phone bill.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that, Stevie? Ain’t no way you coulda thought I wouldn’t help.”

“Because I’m not your responsibility and neither is the baby, Dray! You do enough. I didn’t want to bother you with this. I’ve been enough of a burden to you. I just...I need a job.”

Dropping my keys on the coffee table, I stepped closer to her, squatting beside her chair. “Look at me, Stevie.”

She did, tears shimmering in her pretty eyes.

“You can get a job. I get you wanting to be independent, but until that happens, let me help you. Please stop trippin’ about me helping you. Y’all ain’t a burden. I told you I *want* to help. Okay?”

She nodded as one tear rolled down her cheek. Reaching up, I wiped it away and tipped her chin up as I stood to my feet. Then, as if it was something I did all the time, I bent down and softly pressed my lips to hers. Her hands gripped my thighs before sliding up to my back, and something rushed through me, like a surge of the most potent adrenaline. My heart hammered in my chest as I began to open my mouth and

—
“Waaaaaaah!”

The sound of the baby crying shattered the magic that seemed to surround us and snatched us apart.

She stared up at me for a moment before saying, “I...I’d better go check on him.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’mma go get my food.”

STEVIE

I replayed that kiss over and over again that night. I was far from a virgin, of course, so I'd kissed my share of guys. I mean, I was thirty, not some kid. The kiss wasn't steamy in a tongue-sparring kind of way. It was a closed-mouth kiss, but it still held a plenitude of passion. It was sweet and oh so necessary, a sort of natural progression for what had been building between us—something that appeared to be totally unintentional but incredibly serendipitous at the same time. My heart felt like it would burst, my yoni felt like it wanted to detach itself from my body and slide inside his pants, and my mouth never wanted the feel of his against it to stop. I experienced something so deep for Drayveon that as I lay in my bed, the desire to be wrapped in his arms grew into a compulsion, but I didn't move, opting not to venture into the guest room where I knew he was sleeping.

By the time I awoke the next morning, he'd already left to start his day, as per usual. On the kitchen counter was a platinum American Express card issued to one Drayveon D. Walker with a note that read:

Pay your phone bill and anything else you need to pay. I'll order a card with your name on it for you to keep. Kiss the baby for me.

-Dray

TWELVE

STEVIE

I stood in the doorway and dropped my head to one side at the sight of my BFF.

She gave me a smirk. “So you still mad at me about the doctor’s visit thing?”

“Yep,” I said, placing a hand on my hip. “Drayveon ended up going with me, and it was just weird having all those women staring at us.”

“Shiiiiiiid, wasn’t nobody thinking about your ass. They were looking at *him*, fine as he is. I bet they were asking for autographs and selfies and shit, huh?”

“No, because Nef was with us with her mean-looking ass. I was scared pics of us would end up on social media even though he was wearing shades, but I’m sure folks were afraid to pull their phones out in her presence.”

“Nef? That’s the chick bodyguard, right? Girl, I’m scared of her too; she looks meaner than Shem and ‘nem. I mean, she’s cute, but she looks like she will fuck you up with them nails.”

“True,” I agreed.

“You gonna let me come in to see my unnamed godbaby or what?”

Giving her the side eye, I let her in. Minutes later, she was seated on my sofa cooing at the baby while I put up some groceries Dray’d had delivered.

“Your phone back on?” she asked as I put away bag after bag of fruit.

“Yeah, it’s back on.”

“Good. I can’t believe Drayveon let it get cut off.”

With my head in the refrigerator as I stuffed vegetables into a bin, I replied, “It isn’t his responsibility to pay my phone bill.”

“But he paid it, didn’t he?”

Nothing from me.

“He likes you. You like him?”

All done with the cold food, I moved to the pantry. “How you know he likes me?”

“I know because I have half a brain. Anybody can see he likes your silly ass. You don’t see it?”

With a bag of rice in my hand, I turned to look at my friend. “He kissed me. On the mouth.”

“What?! When?!” she trilled, making my baby jerk and then grin. That boy could be so goofy sometimes.

“I *said*, he kissed me on the mouth and I damn near climbed him. So I guess that means I like him.”

“Hell, you better!”

DRAYVEON

I was dog-ass tired when I made it to Stevie's place, a bag full of the meals my OG had made for me in one hand, a duffel bag full of my clothes in the other. I wasn't moving into the apartment, per se; I was just stocking the place up for when I was here, which was a lot. It seemed this place held some magic that kept my nightmares at bay. Plus, I liked being here.

"It's me!" I called, once I unlocked the door and entered the apartment, seeing that no one was in the living room or kitchen.

I opened the fridge and smiled at how full it was. I'd had some groceries delivered so I'd have the option of fixing myself something on the days I didn't feel like eating my pre-made meals. I'd unpacked all my food and managed to make it fit in the refrigerator before I realized I hadn't heard a word from Stevie. I'd let myself in because she told me it was silly for me to keep knocking, but I couldn't help thinking maybe I should've called or something. Her truck was out on the lot but maybe her friend had picked her and the baby up or maybe...maybe a dude had. The baby's daddy?

That thought made my stomach knot up.

Then I heard a faint sound, an instrument. Maybe a violin?

Setting my duffel bag on the kitchen counter, I followed the sound past the guest bedroom and the baby's room to the open doorway of Stevie's room. It was just as colorful as the rest of the apartment with the focal point being the turquoise comforter on the four-poster, mahogany bed. She sat on the side of it, her feet propped up on the frame as she played her violin with her eyes closed. Rather than moving deeper into the room, I leaned against the door facing and watched her, so beautiful and making music that sounded like it was pouring straight from her soul. It took a minute, but I eventually recognized what she was playing. She was making her white violin sing Floetry's *Say Yes*.

As she played, her body swayed, her chin resting on the instrument, her eyes still closed. I wanted to see them so damn badly, to see what shade they would be against the loose green dress she was wearing. Would they be icy blue or that deep blue they were when she wore darker colors?

She finally opened her eyes, and upon seeing me, I thought she'd stop, but instead, she smiled and continued playing. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Shit, I didn't *want* to take my eyes off her.

She played the last notes and moved the violin from her shoulder as she asked, "Well, what do you think?"

I swallowed and cleared my throat. "I...uh, I think that was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard in my life. It... can I kiss you? I didn't ask before—"

"Yes. You can kiss me. I'd like for you to kiss me."

I nodded, moving deeper into the room until I stood before her, then between her legs. She stared up at me with those eyes, and I could feel myself falling apart. Placing my hands on her cinnamon brown cheeks, I bent over and kissed her, and kissed her, and kissed her, taking the invitation she extended by opening her mouth. My tongue quickly found hers, and I took note of her flavor—sweet, fresh, fulfilling.

Her hands met my arms and moved to cover my hands as we licked and smacked and moaned. Then, she abruptly pulled away.

"Wait, I need to show you something," she softly said.

I wanted to groan, "Now?" but instead, I licked my lips and nodded. "A'ight."

"I'll be right back."

She left and went...somewhere, and I sat on the side of the bed, my heart about to explode. I won't even mention what my dick was doing. Damn, I wanted this woman.

She returned pretty quickly, handing me a thick piece of paper. A birth certificate. As I read it, my eyes expanded, and I looked up at her to see that she was biting her bottom lip. Her

eyes were just as wide as mine, but with anticipation instead of shock.

My eyes fell to the paper again and rolled over the words: *Child's Name: Drayveon Dwain October.*

“Are you serious? Is this real? How you know my middle name is Dwain?” Shit, I was babbling.

“Yes, I’m serious, and yes, it’s real. I found your middle name on Wikipedia and some other sites. Look at the date it was filed.”

I did. “July sixth? That was a few days after he was born, almost two months ago.”

“Yeah, well, the social worker called me after we got home from the hospital and informed me that my research was incorrect and that I had five days to file his birth certificate. Your name was the only one I wanted to give him, but I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to think I was crazy. Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you think I’m crazy for giving my baby your name when I barely knew you?”

“Only if you think it’s crazy that I’m honored like a motherfucker that you gave him my name when you barely knew me.”

She smiled, moving in between my open legs and initiating another kiss while wrapping her arms around my neck. Damn, she tasted good and smelled good and...shit! I was experiencing the best sensory overload as I unconsciously dropped the birth certificate and pulled her into me, holding her tightly. She felt so right against me that I swear I was getting light-headed. I was the one to pull away this time, ending the kiss against my own wishes.

She stared at me, brow wrinkled as our labored breaths collided in the air between us.

“Can I...can I kiss you everywhere?” I asked.

Her eyes flickered. Through swollen lips she said, “Yes,” her voice thin and soft.

I nodded, standing from the bed, which made her back away from me. Grasping the fabric of her oversized dress or kaftan—that’s what my OG called them—I pulled it over her head, leaving behind a thick bra and no panties.

Shit.

Damn.

She was a fucking masterpiece.

“If I take the bra and nursing pads off, I’ll leak milk all over the place. Little Man is sleeping past his nursing time right now.”

My eyes shot up to her face. “You need to go feed him?”

She shook her head. “He’s fine. He’s been over-feeding lately, to be honest. That’s why he’s so chunky.”

My eyes dropped back to her body. “Okay, then I don’t give a fuck about milk leaking...to be honest.”

She smiled, moving to undo her bra. I watched with rapt attention as she unveiled the juiciest breasts. This woman was perfection from the hollow of her neck to the stretch marks that adorned her stomach and hips.

Dropping to my knees, I kissed her stomach, moving down to her bushy mound. I could hear her breathing, feel her body sway.

“I...I need to lie down. You’re making my knees weak,” she informed me.

I smiled. “A’ight.”

Standing, I picked her up and placed her on the bed. As I hovered over her, my eyes glued to her lips, she said, “Can you take your clothes off? I want to see you.”

Planting a quick kiss on her lips, I climbed out of the bed and undressed as she propped up on her elbows and watched. I didn’t have much to take off—a Cyclones t-shirt and gray sweats. No underwear for me, either.

She licked her lips as her eyes swept over my body. “You’re beautiful.”

“So are you,” I murmured.

Then I was back in the bed with her, tasting her lips, her neck, her chest, her breasts. Her nipples were peaked dark chocolate surrounded by brown cinnamon, I took one into my mouth, sucking and licking. Her milk was sweet. Shit, it was addictive, like nothing I’d ever tasted before. As I went from titty to titty, I had to make myself stop. I didn’t want to deplete the baby’s supply, if that was possible. So I moved lower, kissing her soft stomach, dipping my tongue in her navel, dragging it across the dark stretch marks that covered the lower portion of her torso.

Once I reached paradise, I pushed my nose against the wiry hair covering her mound and inhaled deeply. She opened her legs wider for me as I moved lower, coming face to face with her pussy. Damn, women were miracles. This space had looked different weeks ago when I watched Little Drayveon enter the world. Now, there was no sign of that trauma. It was lovely down there.

Fucking lovely.

I had to take a deep breath and settle my damn nerves before I went in, licking her clit, sucking her clit, kissing her clit, licking, sucking, kissing, licking-sucking-kissing, her hands on my head, her thighs trembling, her moans filling my ears until...boom!

“Dray-Dray-Dray!” she cried out, her body jerking as she clutched my head.

Shit, I couldn’t decide which part of her was sweeter and I couldn’t stop tasting her pussy, would’ve kept at it for hours if I hadn’t felt her pushing against my shoulders or heard her whimper, “Please.”

So I stood from the bed, mouth and chin wet, and I wasn’t wiping a damn drop off. Staring down at her, I asked, “Can I fuck you?”

Her eyes met mine as she nodded.

I grabbed my sweats from the floor, fishing my wallet from the hip pocket, and pulled out a condom, covering myself with it. Then I rejoined her in the bed, settling between her legs and kissing her, sharing her flavor with her. She returned the kiss hungrily but took her mouth from mine when I began to ease inside her slowly, inch by inch by inch.

“Ohhhh,” she whined softly. “Ohhhh shit!”

I closed my eyes, trying to contain myself because her pussy was tight and hot like she was a damn virgin or something, and I knew for a fact she wasn't. Burying my face in the side of her neck, I eased in and out of her over and over again, taking my time and being as gentle as I could.

“You feel so good, Stevie. So good...” I groaned into her ear.

She didn't give me a verbal response, but she did tighten her arms around me and kiss my shoulder. When I lifted my head to look at her, tears were flooding her cheeks.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked, a feeling of panic rising in me.

She shook her head and sniffled. “No, it's just that...you feel good, too. I love this. I love...you.”

My mouth dropped open, and I stopped moving. “You... what?”

“I love you,” she repeated, her eyes searching mine.

I smiled as I began to rock in and out of her again, my damn legs tingling and shit. “I love you too, Stevie.”

Those words had barely left my mouth when all sound ceased, my feet heated up, and I filled the condom with a long grunt.

THIRTEEN

STEVIE

We lay in my bed facing each other, the lamp light illuminating the room. I couldn't take my eyes off his face, the hard edges and sharp angles that worked together to complete his beauty along with his small, upturned eyes, his wide nose, and his gorgeous lips.

He smiled at me as I traced his lips with my fingertip. When I began to draw my hand back, he captured it with his and kissed each finger before pulling me to him and kissing me deeply. I was pretty sure we were headed straight into round two when the baby started wailing.

“I better go feed him. He sounds pissed.”

He grabbed my arm as I moved to leave the bed. “Feed him in here.”

I frowned. “You sure you wanna see that?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded and left to get the baby without bothering to cover my body. I could feel his eyes on my ass, and I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

Minutes later, I was sitting cross-legged in the bed with my back against the headboard and my boy in my lap. I'd barely sat down before he'd latched on and was feeding hungrily. Dray's eyes were glued to him, a look of wonder in them as he leaned up on his elbow, the sheet covering the lower half of his body.

I couldn't look away from Dray, my eyes taking in the smooth, mocha-colored skin of his chest decorated with tattoos. Every part of his lean frame was covered in defined muscle. Drayveon was a complete work of art, hand-carved in heaven.

He took the hand I had resting on the baby's back and intertwined my fingers with his, his eyes meeting mine. “Did you mean what you said? Do you really love me?” he asked.

I nodded. “I do. I wasn’t sure when I first started feeling it. It...it seemed too early and I thought maybe I was confusing love with gratitude, but I’ve come to realize that both feelings can exist at the same time. I love you, Drayveon, and I’d be devastated if you stopped being a part of my life.”

He released my hand and used the back of his to caress my cheek. “I think I’ve loved you since that day your water broke on my doorstep. Watching you give birth? Your strength? Seeing you be a mother to Little Dray-Dray? All of that moved me, made me feel things I didn’t know I could feel. I...y’all are as much my family as my blood relatives, maybe even more so. I love you from deep in my damn soul, Stevie, and I don’t ever wanna stop being a part of your life. Yeah, *technically* we haven’t known each other for that long, but I think our hearts are old lovers.”

Damn, that was beautiful. I was going to tell him so when he moved up the bed until his face was even with mine and kissed me while Little Dray nursed himself to sleep.

“WHY DOES EVERYONE CALL YOU SKIP?” I asked Drayveon, my eyelids heavy as I stared at him.

“It’s short for Skipper, a nickname my late grandfather gave me. He called me Skipper and my brother Captain,” he explained.

“Awww, that’s cute. Sorry for the loss of your grandfather.”

“Yeah, he was a good dude, stayed whooping me and Cap’s bad asses though. He passed when I was in middle school. We probably worried him to death.”

I smiled. “*Stop*. So...your brother’s in prison, right?”

“Yep. Hey, what’s your middle name?” he quizzed as he kissed my forehead.

Grinning as I snuggled into him, I answered, “Nix. Like Stevie Nicks, but it’s spelled n-i-x instead of n-i-c-k-s. My

mom was a big fan of hers.”

“Of who?” This question was punctuated with a kiss to the top of my nose.

“Stevie Nicks! You know, Fleetwood Mac Stevie Nicks? *Rhiannon? Dreams?*”

He kissed both my cheeks. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

“I’m serious as finding out who brought the potato salad to the cookout.”

I laughed.

“Why the violin?” he inquired, moving his head to kiss my neck.

“My mom was a violinist and a cellist. She was also one of a few black women to conduct a major symphony orchestra.”

“Word? What’s her name?” he queried, his lips on my chest.

“Athena October, she passed away when I was in high school.”

He lifted his head and looked me in the eye. “I’m sorry to hear that, baby.”

“Thank you.”

“What about your dad?”

“Oh, Jermaine October is alive and well. Ironically, he’s an accountant.”

He rolled me from my side to my back and lay between my legs which I quickly opened for him. For two days, we’d spent every minute he wasn’t working out or in some meeting and I wasn’t taking care of Little Dray in my bed making love so sweet and hot that it felt like a dream.

“Why is that ironic?” he asked, holding his body up over mine.

“Dray, your hard dick is inches from being inside of me. I ain’t tryna talk about my father right now.”

He nodded. “Facts.”

He cut my giggle off with a kiss and erased all thoughts of my father by gliding inside me, making me sigh into his mouth. He felt...were there even words in existence to describe it? If I had to choose a few, I'd say he felt like that thing you have a craving for that's totally and completely irreplaceable. Nothing is as good, nothing is comparable, and on top of that, it's undeniably addictive. If I was an addict, Dray would be my latest and most potent drug of choice, a very necessary substance.

Closing my eyes, I surrendered to the high he induced, feeling him slide in and out of me at a leisurely pace. Dray was big...like *big*, big, and he knew it, so he didn't plow into me, and I appreciated that. He was obviously very practiced at having sex and used his considerable girth and length for both our pleasures. He was verbal, too, something I hadn't encountered in a man before. He talked to me, let me know just how good I felt with damn near every stroke, told me he loved me, and when it got really good to him, he would place his mouth right against my ear and just moan.

He was moaning now, one hand on the mattress beside my head, the other gripping my sticky breast as I held onto his back, feeling his muscles as they rippled from his work. His dick, lubricated by my eager pussy, eased in and out of me, making me feel more intoxicated than any alcoholic beverage I'd ever consumed. He was rubbing my spot, hitting just the right angle repeatedly, causing pressure to pool in my core. As it grew, I opened my eyes while he kept moaning into my ear, his strokes growing faster and faster. The pressure increased until I began to feel unhinged. I couldn't think. I couldn't speak. Shit, I couldn't *see*. All I could do was feel. I felt him deep inside me. I felt the pool of pleasure inside me begin to overflow, and eventually, I felt myself floating, floating, floating, and when I came back down to earth, Dray was repeating three beautiful words, his face now buried in my neck. “I love you...I love you...I love you.”

Rubbing his back, I reciprocated through heaving breaths, “I love you, too, Dray.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I sat in the dining room of my apartment sipping juice and watching Dray eat his fruit and granola while holding Little Dray in his lap, bouncing him on his knee. My mini me kept his little head turned so that he was looking up in Big Dray's face, watching him eat.

It was adorable seeing them together, and I couldn't help thinking about how sad I was for most of my pregnancy because of Bilal's declaration of disinterest regarding it or the baby. He was driven and his career was his priority, similar to how I once was, but the baby shifted my focus. I'd felt so alone, but now? Well, life was something else.

I was perusing social media when I wasn't observing my two guys. I hadn't posted in forever as most of my followers and friends were old coworkers or classmates from high school or college, and I hadn't felt compelled to share any of my life with them, but that would change today. Smiling, I typed: *Life is funny. Just when you want to give up, a miracle can happen. I'm looking at two miracles right now and I love them both.*

DRAYVEON

I couldn't get enough of kissing her, touching her. Hell, I couldn't even bring myself to sit in the front seat with Shem as he drove us to the pediatrician's office. It was time for Little Dray's two-month-old checkup and shots, and I'd rearranged my schedule so I could go with them. I needed to make sure those folks didn't play around with those shots. So there I sat in the backseat of Stevie's truck, the car seat to her right, my hand on her left thigh, and my mouth on her neck as she giggled softly. I hoped this never wore off, this euphoria, this strong need to have her skin against some part of mine, this love I felt for her that was almost painful. So this was what I'd been missing out on never having been in love before?

Damn, this shit was lit as hell!

Once we made it to the doctor's office, I hopped out and opened her door, carrying the car seat in while holding her hand. Little Dray was fast asleep, and I hated he would wake up to a damn needle being stuck in him. My ass was about to pass out at the mere thought of it.

I sat watching him while Stevie signed in with the receptionist. We had to wait for about twenty minutes. Shem was our shadow, but he wasn't as diligent about shit as Nef was. He was so damn busy looking at some of the mothers' asses that *my* ass could've been kidnapped and he wouldn't have noticed. I was going to have to talk to him about that. Cousin or not, I was paying him too much money for him to be slacking.

When a nurse peeked her head out of a door and called, "Drayveon October," I thought my chest would burst with pride. Leaning toward Shem on my right, I said, "I'ma go back with them. Hold it down out here."

He nodded, and I grabbed the car seat, following Stevie deeper into the office.

I undressed my little guy and watched as they weighed him. His little chunky ass was steady gaining weight! His hands looked like baseball mitts. The doctor, an older white guy, check him out with his stethoscope and stuff and said he was doing great. Then the nurse came back in to give him his shots. Man, my heart started racing, but I held him down and talked to him. He gave me this goofy grin he always gave me when I talked to him, but when that needle hit his thigh, dude's face screwed up and he screamed the house down. Another shot in the other thigh and he started sounding like a damn siren, lips quivering and shit.

“Aye, man. You good. It's okay. It's okay, man,” I said to him, and he actually stopped yelling and looked at me, tears in his little Stevie October eyes. Then he gave me that goofy grin again.

“Good job, Daddy!” the nurse chimed.

“Yeah, good job, Daddy,” Stevie agreed.

I smiled as I picked my guy up and kissed his cheek. “Thanks.”

AS THIS SEASON'S training camp approached, I started doing sessions with a personal trainer to fine tune some things. I was dog-ass-tired, leaving one of those sessions when my OG called. I was laid out in the backseat of my truck while Luigi drove me to Stevie's place.

“Hey,” I answered. “I ain't forgot about our weekly meeting.” She was forever reminding me of something we'd been doing every week basically since I was drafted into the league.

“I'm not calling about that! I'm calling about this secret great-grandchild I'm just now finding out about!” she shouted in my ear.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Drayveon October? You didn't even give him your last name?!”

That motherfucking broken-refrigerator-leaky-bucket-ass Shem.

“OG—”

“So all this time you been buying cars and renting apartments for this girl and shacking up with her instead of sleeping in your own house, not letting your bodyguards protect you in that damn apartment building, and it’s because you knocked her up?! Ain’t she young for your taste? All these years you been sniffing in behind these old-ass women but—”

“I wonder why I been doing that?” I interrupted her, but she didn’t miss a beat.

“—at least with them I didn’t have to worry about no babies popping up, but now? You done fucked up! So the whole her being a stranger who went into labor story was a lie?”

“OG! You gotta calm down! Shit!” I sat up, rubbing the back of my head. “Ain’t nobody lied about nothing. Why would I need to lie anyway? I’m a grown man!”

“Well, why the baby got your name?”

“Because his mother gave it to him. Damn, why’s it an issue?”

“The issue is she’s playing you. Can’t you see that?”

“Why?”

“Why?” She dragged the word out.

“Yeah, why she gotta be playing me? What about me makes me a guy women would want to use?”

“You’re rich, boy! That’s what!”

“Okay, so that’s all? You raised me, and you don’t think there’s anything about me she could want besides my money? What does that say about you?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to like that?”

“You! Now, look...I love you, OG, but you gonna have to back up when it comes to Stevie. Understand?”

She hung up and I shook my head, lifting my eyes to see Luigi looking at me through the rear-view mirror.

“You got something you need to say?” I snapped.

“Nah, you know I go with the flow, but Shem and Nef been talking. They don’t like how fast you and Stevie are moving. You know how protective they are about you. You’re their family.”

“I’m your family, too. You feel the same way?”

“We family ‘cause me and Cap are day ones, not blood. I’m here ‘cause I’m tight with your brother. It’s different, and didn’t I just say I’m good with whatever?”

“But you think I need to pump the brakes with Stevie, too. I can tell.”

“Actually, I think she’s a good look for you. Glad you stopped all that fucking around. That shit wasn’t making you happy. This thing with Stevie is. I’m happy for you. Do I think you need to be careful? Of course, but I also can tell she ain’t no gold digger.”

“No, she isn’t, and I’m being careful. I just...” I shook my head. This wasn’t something I wanted to discuss with or explain to an employee, no matter that I’d known him since we were kids. If I was going to discuss it with anyone, it was going to be my brother. Cap knew me better than anybody, understood me more than most. After all, he was the only somebody who’d lived what I lived from the fucked-up life we had with Jamilla to the transition we made to our OG’s and Pawpaw’s home.

Damn, I missed Cap and my Pawpaw.

As Luigi pulled into a space in the parking lot outside Stevie’s building, I told myself to shake this shit off. I didn’t need to take this bad energy in there with me.

“You can head out,” I said as I slid out the backseat. “I’m good.”

“A’ight,” Luigi answered.

I shut the door and headed inside the building to my peace.

FOURTEEN

STEVIE

When he walked through the door, I made myself stay seated on the sofa although I wanted to hop up and run to him. I was trying not to appear as clingy as I felt, and I didn't want us to spend *all* our time fucking. Well, I *did* want us to spend all our time fucking, but I didn't want that to be all there was to us.

“Hey,” he said, his voice subdued.

I frowned, taking a moment to observe him. He looked tired, but then again, he'd told me the workouts with his trainer were extremely intense. That wasn't all I saw, though. He looked...stressed.

I lifted from the sofa and walked over to him, placing my hands on his handsome-bordering-on-pretty face. “Hey, you okay?”

He looked me in the eye as if weighing his answer. “Nah, not really. My family is trippin'”

“About me?”

His eyes widened as he nodded. “How you know?”

“Because this has all happened really fast between us and in the wrong order.”

“The wrong order according to who?” he posed.

“Society. Everyone. This probably shouldn't work. It does because of the man you are, but even I feel some kind of way about being so dependent on you. I can imagine how it looks to others.”

“But I—”

“I know. I know you want to help me, that you like it. And I'm so damn thankful that I can stay home and take care of my baby. I'm glad I didn't have to go back to delivering food with my head on a swivel. I'm glad Little Dray has you, that you stepped in when his biological father wouldn't. Honestly, I only wish I'd met you sooner because between my father's

indifference toward me and me being too weird to have more than one real friend, life has been lonely for me for a long time, but not everyone can or will understand that. People, even your family, won't see that I love who you are as a man and not just what you've done for me."

He stared at me for a minute or so before dipping his head to kiss me long and deep. When he ended the kiss, he asked, "Where's the baby?"

"He nursed a few minutes ago. He's in his crib knocked out right now."

In lieu of a verbal response, he grasped my hand and led me to what had become *our* bedroom rather than just mine.

He made quick work of freeing me from the shorts and tank top I wore before relieving me of my panties and bra. He stared at my nakedness for a moment, his gaze intense. I loved that about him, how he adored my body. I no longer lamented its changes with the way he worshipped it.

He reached up, removing the silk scarf from my head, and I wanted to protest. I needed to twist the roots of my locs. Motherhood and the frenzy of fucking Dray and I had fallen into since becoming an *us* had delayed that task.

Holding the scarf in his hand, he softly asked, "Do you trust me?"

I nodded. "Of course I do."

His eyes shifted from my face to the headphones lying on the nightstand, a pair of Bose noise canceling ones he'd gifted me a week or so earlier so that I could crank my music up without disturbing the baby. I just kept my eye on the video baby monitor when I used them.

"Okay, I want to try something," he said.

I wrinkled my brow. "Try something like what?" I said slowly.

He gave me a soft smile. "Something that will give you a lot of pleasure. Nothing weird."

"Okay."

Moments later, I found myself lying in the bed, blindfolded with my scarf.

“I’m going to put these headphones on you, too. I’ll listen for the baby,” he advised.

I nodded. “What should I do?”

“Just lie there and let me please you.”

I nodded again.

Then I felt him slip headphones over my ears. He’d connected them to his phone and only a second passed before Tank’s *This is How I Feel* began to fill my ears. Lying there essentially devoid of two senses made me feel vulnerable, but the anticipation, the curiosity about where he was in the room and exactly how he was going to please me overrode that feeling of defenselessness. The truth was that I wanted Dray’s body against mine. I wanted his mouth on me. I wanted his dick inside me, and well, I would take all that however he wanted to give it to me.

The song continued to play, but no Dray. What was he doing? Was he staring at me, watching my chest rise and fall as I lay on my back fingering the fitted sheet beneath me? Was he touching himself while licking those nice lips? I gasped when I felt his hands grip my thighs, pulling me toward the foot of the bed. I couldn’t even hear myself breathe but I could feel my heart pounding as a finger breached me while another stroked my clit. My back left the bed as my mouth dropped open, my eyes futilely searching for him behind the blindfold. I wanted to see him, but at the same time, this felt so good it really didn’t matter that I couldn’t see him.

He played between my legs for long moments, pushing me to the edge and pulling back several times, wrenching moans from me that were silent to my ears. The song had switched to Beyoncé’s *Be with You* and I swear my heartbeat had taken on the tune’s rhythm.

His hands left me, quickly replaced by his tongue which he used to spank my clit repeatedly, again bringing me to the brink of release before pulling back. How he knew just when

to withdraw the pleasure was uncanny and torturous. Several seconds passed before I felt him climb on the bed, then nothing, until his mouth closed over my right nipple while he slowly entered me.

“Ohhhhh, shit,” I murmured, my words still unheard by me.

I felt so full, full of him, full of pressure, full of pleasure.

Damn.

I had never experienced anything like this. It was so intense, so achingly exquisite that my tears began to wet the blindfold, and soon, I was sobbing in earnest, begging him not to stop as he rocked in and out of me, a hand on my face, a thumb in my mouth, his tongue replacing the thumb as Alina Baraz whispered *More Than Enough* into my ears. My heart raced as I groped for him, squeezing the flesh of his back, scratching my nails down his muscular arms as I threw my head back trying to ride out an orgasm so severe that I actually felt confused, unsure of what was really happening. Static filled my brain, and when the fog began to clear, I became aware of the fact that the earphones were gone and Dray was in my ear, his voice bearing agony as he repeated, “Got damn, Stevie. Got damn...”

“WHO THE FUCK KEEPS TEXTING YOU?” Dray asked, his voice groggy.

It was early the next morning and Little Dray was lying in the bed between us nursing.

With my eyes closed, I said, “Probably Bria’s silly ass complaining about her man.”

“No offense, but how the hell did you meet her? Y’all are like polar opposites.”

I yawned. “We worked at a bar together a few years back. She was nice to me, really helped me get the hang of being a waitress, and we just clicked. Like our opposites attract, I guess. She’s a sweet person, just dick dizzy.”

He laughed softly. “Dick dizzy, huh?”

“*Very*. Shit, I’m on the way there, too.”

More laughter. “So...what? You were a waitress before you started playing violin professionally?”

“No, I did it at the same time. Being a professional violinist doesn’t pay much until it does, and it’s piece work. Like, one month I might book a bunch of gigs, and others, not so much.”

“You ever play with an orchestra?”

“Of course, but I didn’t get paid for it. They were local or public orchestras. My dream is to get booked for big events like opening for concert acts. I was working on perfecting some R&B songs with backing tracks when I got pregnant with Little Dray. He put a stop to all that from day one. Morning, noon, and night sickness kicked my ass for a couple months. I depleted my savings and had to scramble to get a job while still feeling like shit. Delivering for *QuickEats* was a fast option, although I hated smelling all that food.”

“So ole boy didn’t help you at all?”

“You mean my sperm donor?” I rolled my eyes. “He bounced as soon as I showed him the positive pregnancy test.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“Completely.”

“Hey, you sure that ain’t your other nigga texting you?”

I shook my head. “He knows not to text me until after you leave to go work out.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I ain’t always been a nice dude. Don’t get some nigga stomped.”

I raised both my eyebrows. “Damn, that aggression is sexy. Just how bad were you?”

“Believe me, you don’t wanna know, but I’ll tell you one day when I know I got your ass good and hooked on me,” he said, winking at me as he lifted from the bed.

“Shiiiiid, how I’ma be any more hooked than I already am?”

Chuckling, he headed into the bathroom as I stared at his extremely nice ass.

DRAYVEON

Shem picked me up that morning and drove me to the gym. He was trying to act like nothing was up, but I wasn't about to let this gossiping shit slide. So he'd barely pulled out of the lot at Stevie's building when I said, "You know I'm your employer, right?" I kept my eyes glued to the scenery outside the windshield as I waited for his answer.

I could feel him glance at me as he said, "Huh? Yeah, I know that."

Seated in the front passenger seat, I turned to face him. "Then explain to me why the *fuck* you keep telling our grandmother my got damn business."

"I ain't—"

"Motherfucker, don't lie. I *know* you be telling her shit, you *and* Nef.

"More Nef than me."

"Well, both of y'all asses need to understand that I'm grown and I don't answer to her or anybody else." I was almost yelling, but damn, I was over this shit.

He shook his head. "Look, man...you know you the youngest grandchild and you gon' always be her baby. She be checking up on you and I can't lie to her."

"You ain't gotta lie to her. You can tell her that if she wants to know something about me or my life, she needs to ask me."

"But you know you ain't gon' tell her shit."

My eyes almost popped out of my head. "Because I don't have to!"

He took his hands off the steering wheel and slammed them back down on it. "Damn, Skip! This about Stevie? You letting her get in the middle of family business?"

"It ain't family business! It's me and Stevie's business!"

“And Little Drayveon’s business?”

I stared at my cousin, a big, brown-skinned dude I’d grown up with. His mother, Faye, was my mom’s younger sister. We’d always been close, but was this nigga for real? “What the fuck does a two-month-old baby have to do with this?”

“I’m just saying, that ain’t your baby. You know that, right?”

“What the fuck?!”

“You got that big ass house but you stay up in that apartment with her and the kid. You doing more for her than you do for your own folks. You ain’t got Aunt Jamilla in a place as nice as that apartment.”

“Stop the car,” I said between my teeth.

“See, you all in your feelings and shit. What you gon’ do? Walk the rest of the way to the gym while I trail your ass?”

“Nah, bruh. This is *my* vehicle. I’mma drive myself there. I don’t give a shit what you do.”

“I’m your security!”

“For now. Now get your ass out.”

We stared at each other until I guess he got the message that I wasn’t playing.

“We in the middle of the street,” he said.

“Then pull the fuck over,” I shot back.

He did, hesitating before exiting the truck. I did the same, climbing in behind the wheel and driving myself to the gym.

“THE FUCK GOING ON, MAN?” My brother’s voice was deep and rough on the other end of the phone.

Sitting behind the wheel of my truck after my session with my trainer, I frowned. “Why you think something’s going on?”

“You know Mr. Polk works here, right. I tell you that?”

“Yeah, you did.”

Mr. Polk was Aunt Faye's guy friend, had been for years.

"Yeah, so he's at work this morning. Said he talked to Aunt Faye while he was on break and she said Shem said you done lost it over some young, blue-eyed pussy with a kid. You messing with a white girl?"

"She's black. It's a whole tribe of black folks with blue eyes in Africa." Admittedly, I didn't know that until Stevie told me about it one day, but it was true.

"For real? He said she got a kid and you been buying her all kinda shit, got her a crib."

"Yeah, so what the fuck is this? Tell on Dray week? I am a grown damn man! I take care of everybody in this family and our old hood and half the folks at OG's church. The second I find someone I *want* to take care of, someone I'm not made to feel obligated to help, all hell breaks loose. Shem works for me! I feed this nigga and he talked to me like I was his kid or something! I don't need that kind of protection! Not anymore."

I was waiting for Cap to reply and he did. He started laughing.

"The fuck is funny?!"

"You! You finally woke the hell up and realized how everyone is eating off your ass and leaving you hungry for some shit they can't give you. What's she like? Gotta be a hell of a woman to open your damn eyes to some shit you should've *been* figured out."

"She is. She's more than I imagined a woman could be, and I don't have nightmares when I'm with her."

"That's real, man. I'm happy for you."

"Yeah, but why you ain't say nothing about me needing to wake up?"

"Because you the golden boy. Everybody treats you good. They treat you like a baby but I'm okay with that. I just don't want them treating you bad. I mean, what they're doing is

fucked up, but they ain't putting you in no danger, so I'm good."

"Because you always look out for me, huh?" I almost whispered.

"Come on, Skip. Don't do that."

It was my time to be silent.

"I'm good with this, man. My time is winding down," he said.

I swallowed, my eyes focused on a spot on the windshield. "Cap, I..."

"Look, I'm proud of you. Can't wait to meet your lady."

Biting my lip, I said, "Yeah."

As we ended the call, I got a text from Stevie that read: *This is what Bria kept calling and texting me about.*

With it was a screen shot of a post on the Tea Steepers' IG page, a picture of me and Stevie sitting in the waiting room at Little Dray's doctor's office. In it, I was leaning in kissing her neck while she smiled. The caption read: *Looks like sexy baller Drayveon Walker has a new lady love and a secret baby!*

I started my truck and headed to her place.

FIFTEEN

STEVIE

I was sitting on the side of the bed holding my phone when he made it back. I could hear his footsteps, the same ones I'd committed to memory. Dray had this swagger, a self-assuredness that was both attractive as hell and intimidating. I'd taken the time to research him shortly after Little Dray was born because I wanted and needed to know more about this angel of a basketball player. So I knew the swagger was appropriate. By all accounts, "St. Louis native" Drayveon Walker was one of the most talented players in the history of the league.

Hands down.

Hell, I didn't understand much about the sport, but even *I* could tell from the YouTube videos I'd watched of him in action that he wasn't shit to sneeze at.

Anyway, his footsteps carried that swagger, too, so I had to smile at hearing them. When they stopped advancing toward me, I knew he was peeking in on the baby, which made me smile harder, and then he was standing in my doorway, a serious expression on his face that eased once he locked his eyes on me.

"You're smiling," he said.

"I am. Because you're here," I replied.

A small grin slipped onto his face as he moved deeper into the room, stopping just in front of me before stepping between my open legs and planting a kiss on my lips.

"I'm glad to see you too, baby," he murmured.

I grabbed his hand as he sat down beside me. "You got my message? I didn't hear back from you."

"Yeah, I came straight here when I saw it. You good?"

"I'm...a little creeped out. Like, there's also a picture where someone zoomed in on the baby while he was in his carrier."

He frowned. "I ain't see no picture of the baby."

"You didn't swipe? There were like three pictures on that post, including the one of the baby."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, and a moment or so later, shook his head. "The fuck?"

"I know."

"Shit. Look, I'm sorry, Stevie. I guess I thought since this didn't happen when I went to the other appointment with you, the one with the pussy doctor...I..."

"It's not your fault. I mean, I just see you as a regular guy because that's how you are with me, but I also realize you're famous. This is what happens to famous people."

"But it's happening to you, too, and I hate it."

"It's all right."

"No, it's not, but it is what it is. It's out there now. People know about us, and they're going to speculate and dissect everything about you and the baby. It'll be a lot. You think you can handle that?"

"And if I can't, what are you going to do? Leave me?"

The frown was back. "Not unless you want me to."

"I never want you to leave me. *Ever*. I can handle this. I'll have to."

He lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of mine. "Okay, but we'll have to make some changes."

"Like what?" I asked warily.

"Nothing bad. I'm just going to hire security to shadow you when you leave here. I'm not worried about your safety while you're in this building because it's secure, but you can't leave here without some armor."

I nodded. "Okay."

"All right, then we're good?"

"Better than good."

“Bet.”

We both fell silent until I asked, “Did you say pussy doctor?” I was trying not to laugh.

“Yeah, what? You thought I was referring to myself?” Now he was grinning.

“You do be performing exploratory surgery on my pussy, but no,” I said through a chuckle.

“Uh-huh. So how long my guy been sleep?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

I smiled. “Why? You tryna do some surgery right now?”

“Hell yeah. Tryna inspect them walls.”

“Well, shit. Come on then, Dr. Dray.”

DRAYVEON “CAUGHT” me mopping the kitchen and promptly hired a cleaning service after apologizing and telling me he forgot to hire one when I moved in. I virtually begged him not to make another bill because of me, but he insisted, so I found myself sitting in the living room holding Little Dray while a team of three women cleaned my home. I wondered if I’d ever get used to this, to him and his generosity.

Probably not.

No sooner than the ladies packed up their cleaning equipment and left, there was a knock at the door—Nef. Nef, who not only wore her usual frown but oozed hostility this time. She was holding a huge brown box with a red bow on it.

“Hey, Nef. Dray sent you?” I said, offering her my best smile.

“Yeah. Why else would I be here?” she sniped.

Well, damn.

“Uh-huh. Well, thank you,” I offered, reaching for the box.

She stared at me for a second before asking, “Can I come in?”

She never asked to come in, but I saw no reason to refuse her. So I nodded and cleared the doorway, watching as she stepped inside, her eyes scanning the living room and kitchen. She focused on Little Dray, who was on a blanket on the floor having tummy time and making gurgling sounds, before leveling a far from friendly look at me.

I gawked right back at her ass because she was beginning to work my nerves, and she still hadn't handed me my damn box.

Finally, she set the box on the floor beside her and clasped her hands together in front of her tall, lean body. Her makeup was flawless, as usual, perfectly peach painted lips curled in a snarl. "So, you and Dray are a thing now?"

I tilted my head to the side. "Obviously, we are."

She nodded. "So you got what you wanted. Got his nose open so wide that he doesn't know if his ass is coming or going."

"Do I want Dray? Hell yes. Does he want me? Hell yes, again, but whatever you think I'm doing to him, if you think I'm using him in some way, you're wrong. I love him."

"Love him?! Oh bitch please."

I straightened my shoulders, reminding her that I was almost as tall as she was. "First of all, I ain't nobody's bitch. Second, me and Dray and what we got ain't none of your damn business anyway. I was tryna be nice since y'all are family, but you don't know me to be coming at me like this."

She glared at me. "You hurt Skip and I'm coming for you."

"*You* hurt him and I'm coming for *you*."

She nodded. "I appreciate that. I like that energy. Just hope you ain't faking it."

"Okay, you can leave. Bye, Nephilim."

Her eyes ballooned.

I merely smiled as I moved to open the door for her. "Have a great day."

As she left, she muttered, “I can’t believe he told you my real name. He knows I hate that name.”

She was barely out the door before I shut and locked it. Then I opened my damn box to find five different designer handbags—Gucci, Louis Vuitton, YSL, Chanel, Balenciaga—and a small blue gift box which held a heavy, platinum American Express card with my name on it.

SIXTEEN

DRAYVEON

Me: *Change your IG profile to private.*

Stevie: *Why?*

Me: *They trolling you.*

Stevie: *Who's trolling me?*

She'd told me she didn't really fool around with social media much, and her ass wasn't playing.

Me: *Niggas.*

Stevie: *Male niggas?*

Me: *Male and female niggas.*

Stevie: *Oh. What're they saying?*

What they were saying was shit like her eyes were fake and she wasn't all that pretty, and she dressed weird and on and on, but I wasn't about to repeat that mess to her, so I sent: *A whole lotta bullshit. Just make your profile private. Okay?*

Stevie: *Okay. Where are you? I thought you had a meeting.*

Me: *I do. I'm in the meeting right now.*

Stevie: *And you're checking IG and texting me?*

Me: *Yeah.*

Stevie: *Wooooow. Pay attention to the meeting, dude!*

Me: *I don't want to.*

Stevie: *But you have to.*

Me: *(Rolling eyes emoji) Fine. Be naked when I get home. I'll be on my way as soon as I get done with this.*

Stevie: *Naked as in sticky titties out and all?*

Me: *Yepppppp.*

Stevie: *Should I be in the bed?*

Me: *Hell yeah!*

Stevie: *On my back with my legs open or on my knees with my ass in the air?*

Shit. Now my dick was hard, as hard as a got damn block of ice.

Me: *You got my dick hard.*

Stevie: *Good.*

I grinned and was about to send my response when, “Are you listening, Skipper?” ripped into my consciousness.

Looking up from my phone, I nodded at my grandmother. “Heard every word. Ms. Gladys from the church needs her air conditioner fixed. The pastor’s anniversary is coming up and you’d like to give him a nice check. Cousin Bill needs his truck looked at. See, heard every word. I can do two things at once, OG.”

“Humph. You always could do that.”

“Yeah, but when are you going to get to what’s really on your mind because I know *Shem the Super Spy* told you we got into it.”

“He did. He also told me you haven’t called him since. He’s worried you’re going to fire him.”

Shrugging, I laid my phone face down and said, “I might.”

“You might?! That’s your cousin, boy!”

“I know, but I’ve been thinking that hiring family might’ve been a bad idea. Nearly everyone who works for me is related to me. My security, my realtor—”

“Yes, and I’ve been meaning to point out how you cut your uncle out of the deal when you got that girl an apartment.”

“You ain’t gotta point it out. I did that on purpose.”

My grandmother was tall and slim just like her daughters, and the years had been kind to her. Sitting across the table from me in my house, she could’ve passed for a woman in her forties rather than her early seventies. But as her mouth dropped open and just hung there, she looked cartoonish.

“It wasn’t his business to know. Actually, none of what I do is anyone’s business but mine, especially when it comes to Stevie,” I pointed out.

“Stevie,” she scoffed, “What is that? A stage name? That girl is going to use you until she uses you up! Why can’t you see that? And why haven’t I met her yet if she means so much to you?”

“Because you’ve done nothing but put her down from the second she came into my life. I ain’t gonna let you berate her to her face.”

“Well, from what Nef said, she can handle it.”

I straightened my posture and frowned. “She can handle what? What did Nef say to her?”

“Why? You gon’ fire Nef, too?”

“Probably.”

“Then I ain’t gonna tell you a damn thing. I need to go. See you before you start camp for our next meeting,” she said.

I was so pissed about whatever Nef had done or said, I didn’t reply. Instead, I grabbed my phone and left too, realizing just how bad of a decision I’d made in hiring family to hold so many official positions in my life.

I WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, mad as hell because Nef was ignoring my calls, which meant I didn’t know exactly what she’d said to Stevie or how to deal with it. It was early evening, and the sun was still shining, but all the blinds were closed. The apartment was dark and quiet.

“Stevie!” I called.

No response.

Was she sleep? Probably. Being a mother to a small baby was hard-ass work. Little Dray was demanding as fuck. Cute, but hugely demanding. I hated I was always so busy and

couldn't help her like I wished I could. I was thinking about hiring a nanny just so Stevie could have some time to herself.

I was quiet as I walked through the apartment, making my way to my little dude's room first. He was usually knocked out when I first made it home in the evenings, and this was no exception. I smiled down at his tiny sleeping body. Damn, I loved this kid.

Creeping out of his room, I headed to our bedroom and almost fell at the sight before me. Any thought of Nef or anyone on the entire planet besides Stevie was gone.

Stevie.

"I heard you when you came in. Took you long enough to make it back here," she said. She was completely nude, and her body screamed sex. Shit, it always did from her heavy breasts all the way down to her little toes with the chipped polish on the toenails. Miles of legs covered in the richest shade of brown, her locs hanging free, her stomach bearing the evidence of motherhood, her lips so perfectly shaped, and her eyes, eyes that might frighten you at first glance, so clear and icy blue—this woman, *my woman*, was a rarity, almost *too* beautiful to be real.

And I wanted to devour her right then and there.

With my dick so hard that it was difficult to concentrate on speaking, I managed to say, "Yeah, I was... I checked on the baby and—can you turn around and let me see your ass?"

She rotated her body slowly, giving me an eyeful of that inspiring ass of hers, and once she was facing me again, I asked, "Can I eat your pussy? I really wanna eat your pussy, and after that, I wanna fuck you real slow."

She assessed me for a moment before shaking her head. "No."

"No? Why?" I pretty much whined.

"Because I want to please you."

"Eating your pussy and fucking you *does* please me."

She smiled, inching over to me and pulling my head down so that our mouths met. Just as the kiss was heating up, she pulled away from me and dropped into a squat. Before I could take another breath, my dick was exposed and sliding down her throat, *her actual throat*, and I heard myself yell, “Shit!”

I kept my eyes on her as she worked, hers closed, head bobbing, hands on her knees. She sucked with determination and practiced skill, like this was something she’d worked on and perfected. I didn’t have the strength to get in my head about who she’d practiced on because I was got-damn losing it. My mind was unraveling. What the hell did she want from me? A better car? A house? If she kept sucking my dick like this, I was going to fuck around and buy her a damn amusement park, knock all them rides down, and build her a whole-ass castle. Her mouth on me felt so good that I was ready to propose. Hell, I was ready to retire from the NBA and spend the rest of my life in bed with her. I—

I couldn’t feel my legs or my feet, my head was swimming and the nut? It tore through me so brutally that I thought I heard a woman scream Stevie’s name before I realized it was actually *my* six-four ass singing soprano. Then I swear I blacked out, and when I returned from the darkness, my fingers were tangled in her hair, my ass cheeks were gripped tight, and she was *still* sucking, her hands now on my thighs.

Gottttt. Damn!

“How-how-how you do that like you just did it?” I stammered. “You wasn’t even gagging. You ain’t broke a sweat or nothing.” But my ass did.

Popping me out of her mouth and smiling up at me, she said, “Throat numbing spray and patience.”

“I’m a buy a case of that shit. The spray, I mean.”

She laughed, but I was deadass serious.

STEVIE

“I’ma hire a nanny to come in and help you with the baby part-time,” Dray said as I lay facing him in the bed with the baby lying between us nursing, a frequent position for us now.

I frowned, lifting my eyes from the baby to meet Drayveon’s. “What? Why? I don’t need one.”

“Training camp starts in a couple of weeks, and I wanna get you out this house for more than a doctor’s appointment before then.”

“And take me where? I have everything I need here.”

“To dinner, to shop. I want us to go on a date. We haven’t done that yet.”

“Oh.”

“And you need to be able to have some time for yourself. You deserve some...me time.”

I wanted to argue with him about it but I couldn’t. As much as I loved Little Dray, I did need a breather every now and then. Motherhood was not for the weak.

“I can have someone set up interviews for as soon as tomorrow. You can choose the best person,” he continued.

“What about Bria?” I proposed.

“What about Bria’s nigga? The dope boy?”

“She finally left him. She’s staying with one of her cousins now.”

“Where does her cousin live? She ain’t keeping the baby in some trap house.” He was acting like *he’d* given birth to Little Dray instead of me.

“I was thinking she could watch him here. You said part-time, so you don’t mean the nanny would live here with us, right?”

“Hell, no! I like it just being us three.”

“Okay, me too. I just wanted to clarify that. So anyway, she could watch him here, right?”

“Yeah. Find out how much she wants to be paid and work out a schedule with her. I’ll handle paying her, and I ain’t tryna argue about it.”

Through a sigh, I said, “Okay.”

“Good. Nef bring you your gifts?”

I smiled and nodded. “She did. Thank you, Dray. I loved them.”

“Welcome, baby. So...I heard she said something fucked up to you?”

“You heard? From who?”

“My OG.”

“Why do you call her that?”

“OG? Because she got a rep. My granny was a gangster back in the day, according to everybody from my hood.”

“Damn. What’s her real name?”

“Bethel Walker.”

“Bethel. I like that.”

“Yeah, now stop deflecting. What’d she say?”

I shrugged. “Basically, she’s convinced I’m using you just like everyone else in the world is.”

“You been on IG?”

“Yep, and Facebook.”

“Damn. Baby—”

“I don’t care what anyone but you thinks. You know the truth, and that’s all that matters.”

He moved in to kiss my lips and then the top of Little Dray’s head. “Yeah.”

SEVENTEEN

STEVIE

Nearly two and a half months after we first met in the most unconventional way, and after countless lovemaking sessions, Dray and I went on our first date with Bria serving as our newly minted nanny-babysitter person. Shem, who Dray was apparently two seconds from firing, was there with them providing security. which really meant he was there to make sure Bria's ex-man didn't pop up. Maybe having her be the nanny wasn't a good idea, after all, but she knew my baby and I didn't want some stranger keeping him.

We were going to a pre-preseason party being held at Leland McClain's house. Dray said the teammates took turns hosting this annual party before training camp began, and this year it was Leland's turn. I knew who Leland was only because he was Big South's little brother. I mean, *everyone* knew who Big South was!

The house was humongous, located in a community of veritable mansions, a couple of which I'd delivered food to before. It felt weird to be in this same neighborhood as a party guest, weird but nice.

A very quiet Nef drove us there. She'd also be the one picking us up instead of staying there with us since Dray said Leland McClain would be providing security. I didn't really start feeling nervous until Nef pulled to a stop on the curved driveway, waiting for other cars to move so we would be closer to the front steps. With wide eyes, I watched people exit vehicles and walk toward the house—women in expensive-looking dresses, men in suits.

I glanced down at what I wore—a fitted, bright yellow jumpsuit with oversized, blousy sleeves and a keyhole opening in the front paired with a pair of red heels—and winced. I was going to look woefully out of place. Turning to face Dray, I found his eyes resting intently on me.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Um, I was until I saw what everyone is wearing. Why’d you let me wear this?”

“Because you look fucking edible in it,” he said, licking his lips, his eyes narrowed to slits.

“Stop looking at me like that. We can’t fuck right now.”

“Oh, we can’t? ‘Cause I bet we can.”

“Draaaaaaay! I’m being serious. I’m gonna stick out like a sore thumb in there!”

He fingered one of my locs before leaning in and kissing me deeply, making me brace myself with a palm on his hard thigh.

Once he ended the kiss, I murmured, “Good thing my lipstick is smear proof.”

“Stevie, you really think I give a fuck what anyone thinks about how you’re dressed? The fact that you don’t look like those other women is what attracted me to you in the first place.”

I gave him a faint smile. “Really? I thought it was my eyes.”

“Those too, and you about to outshine everyone in that room. Including me.”

Dray’s Bentley SUV began to move forward again, and once it stopped, he hopped out to open my door. I could feel Nef’s eyes on me but refused to acknowledge her, opting instead to smile as my door opened to reveal Dray in his black slacks and white dress shirt open to reveal the top of his chest. That was when I realized he wasn’t dressed like the other men. That *really* made me smile.

Kissing my cheek, he took my hand and led me up the front steps inside the house. The foyer was massive, probably twice as large as my old apartment, with shiny dark wood flooring and a gorgeous chandelier as the focal point. Still holding tightly to my hand, Dray led me into what must’ve been the formal living room where there was a huge sectional sofa and two overstuffed chairs. In one corner, was a bar

manned by two bartenders. People, some sitting and others standing, cluttered the room, extremely tall men with mostly petite women on their arms. Everyone was beautiful, and even though I realized Dray and I stood out, I knew it wasn't in a bad way. We were beautiful, too. So I knew the eyes I felt on us were admiring rather than scrutinizing.

“You pumping and dumping? Want a drink?” Dray asked into my ear as the room swelled in a cacophony of murmured voices and smooth jazz.

“No. I guess I have a weird palate. I hate alcohol,” I admitted.

“Me too. Ginger ale?”

“Sure.”

While he took care of getting our drinks, I glanced around the room, observing the people until my eyes bumped into the glare of an older woman. I frowned as I looked away in time to take my drink from Dray.

“We gotta find Leland. I want you to meet him and his wife,” he said into my ear again.

I smiled. “Okay.”

“You good?”

I reached up and kissed him. “I'm with you. Better than good.”

Before either of us could say another word, the attractive older lady who I'd noticed mean mugging me appeared out of no-damn-where and was standing right in front of us crooning, “Dray, I was hoping I'd see you here.”

He gave her a warm smile. “Rae, you're looking good, as usual.”

“So are you. Mmmm, as always.”

He chuckled, and I raised an eyebrow. These two had an odd familiarity between them, what seemed to be a chemistry. As they basically had a full conversation about I-don't-even-know-what while acting like I wasn't there, I realized he was

fucking this woman or had fucked her. Either way, I didn't like their banter at all.

“Oh! Rae, this is Stevie October,” Dray finally said as if he'd just, at that moment, remembered I existed. “Stevie, this is Rae Reynolds, wife of Cobb Reynolds, the Cyclones' General Manager.”

Rae looked me up and down before addressing me. “Well, you're gorgeous. You're the girlfriend I've been reading about online? The one with the secret baby?” she asked then turned to Dray. “I can't believe you've kept her a secret from me all this time. I would've loved to play with her, too. Look at that body, those eyes...”

What. The. Fuck?

“It ain't that kind of party when it comes to her,” Dray said tightly.

“Touché. Well, it's nice to meet you, Stevie October. Very nice to meet you.”

“Excuse us, Rae,” Dray said rather abruptly. “Stevie, I see Leland. Come on.”

With his big hand on my back guiding me, we made for... somewhere. As we walked, I leaned in and asked, “Uh, Dray? Who the fuck was that?”

“Someone I used to mess around with before you.”

“And she's married to one of your co-workers?”

“He's a little more than a co-worker, and he's the one who hooked us up. They have an open marriage.”

“I see. Are you still fucking her?”

“No, I just said I *used* to.”

I still felt some kind of way, especially since this biddy was trying to fuck *me*, too.

LELAND MCCLAIN WAS what I would term a pretty man rather than a handsome one, kind of like Dray. His wife, Kim,

was beautiful with luminous dark skin, curves for days, and box braids that hung past her waist. She was dressed in a white romper and white strappy sandals. In an instant, I felt more relaxed. Hell, my style was closer to hers than anyone else's, including Kendra Logan's. She was married to Paul Logan who I knew on social media as "Polo" or "Big Polo." In a room of scattered giants, he outsized them all in height and bulk. He was handsome, though, standing there dwarfing his wife by kilometers. Kendra was tiny in her black dress to say the least, and she'd given birth to *two* kids!

"Walker! I heard you've been inducted into the stepdaddy club. Welcome!" Polo boomed at Dray.

Dray grinned as Polo shook his shoulder. "Thank you, thank you."

"I'm tryna figure out how this peanut head-ass nigga managed to convince Stevie to deal with him," Leland McClain quipped.

In response, Dray said, "Eat shit, McClain."

While our three men carried on with their "conversation", Kendra and Kim gushed about my post-pregnancy snap-back as both of them and anyone with a social media account knew I had a baby.

I grinned and shrugged. "It's the breastfeeding, I suppose, although I'm still a little chunky. This jumpsuit fit looser the first time I wore it."

"Well, you're wearing the hell out of it tonight. I need one. I love it!" Kim said.

"If I had the body and legs for it, I'd get me one, too," Kendra interjected. "Y'all are like the perfect height. Not too tall or too short."

I smiled. Kim appeared to be a little taller than me, but we both towered over Kendra.

"Dray seems happy with you. He even seems younger. I'm glad he found you," Kim said.

“I’m glad he found me, too,” I replied. “He is the sweetest, most considerate man I’ve ever known, and he’s so good with my son. He’s basically his father at this point.”

“Yeah, I know a lot about that. Polo’s a great stepdad to my oldest. He treats both our boys equally,” Kendra shared.

“I think we all got us some good men,” Kim declared. “Hey, Stevie...Kendra and I wanna make sure you get our numbers before you leave tonight.”

“Yes,” Kendra chimed in, “training camp is in like a week, and then there’s pre-season. After that, the madness of the regular season begins. It’ll help if you have friends who know the ropes.”

“Yep. Are you going to follow the team to away games? If so, you can hang with me and Kendra. We always book the same hotels and stuff.”

“I’m not sure if I’m ready to fly with the baby, but I’d love your friendship. I have a feeling I’m definitely going to need it.”

I jumped a little, then giggled when Dray stepped up behind me, circling my waist with his long arms. “Dance with me,” he breathed into my ear.

I turned in his arms, throwing an “I’ll be back, ladies!” over my shoulder as he moved us to the dance floor. A song I didn’t recognize was playing, something obviously made popular before my time. It was smooth and hypnotically sexy, and as we moved to the rhythm, Dray sang along with the lyrics, his mouth against my ear as his body crowded mine perfectly.

“What song is this?” I asked.

“The Deele—*Crazy Bout’cha*.”

“Hmm,” I hummed, moving my hips in time with the beat as Dray’s hands slid down to grip my ass, his mouth now on my neck. We danced and danced, public lovemaking at its best.

DRAYVEON

Rae Reynolds must've lost her damn mind.

It wasn't her propositioning a threesome with Stevie that bothered me because I shut that down. It was the constant texting she did after that. Every time I felt my phone buzz in my pocket and checked it, there was a different message from her:

Rae: *We need to talk.*

Rae: *I miss you.*

Rae: *I was waiting patiently for a visit from you. You should've contacted me and let me know you wanted to end things.*

Rae: *I'm bored without you.*

Rae: *Meet me tomorrow?*

If that wasn't irritating enough, her husband found me on the way out of the bathroom and fucking confronted me.

"Rae's been really unhappy. We'll talk later," he said, patting me on the shoulder.

"Nah, there's nothing to talk about. I'm in a relationship now. I won't be seeing Rae anymore," I replied and left him standing there.

IN THE CAR, after we made our exit, Stevie gushed about how nice Kim and Kendra were and how beautiful the McClain house was. It seemed she was past the Rae thing.

Seemed.

As soon as we made it home, Shem left, and I went straight to where Bria was sitting on the sofa with Little Dray, taking him from her, kissing his cheeks, and making him laugh.

"How'd he do?" Stevie asked her.

“Great until the first time I fed him. He don’t be wanting to mess with that bottle, but he finally went on and took it. He’s a good baby, though. But you know that. Y’all have a good time?”

They went on talking as Stevie walked her to the door, and when she returned, she stood over me and the baby, calmly asking, “What’s a general manager?”

Shit.

“Uh...they run things regarding the team, basically. They handle player contracts and negotiations, hire and fire coaches. They’re like second in command to the owners.”

“So, he’s your boss.” It was a statement rather than a question. “He has the power to fire you?”

“Nah, he’s not my boss and NBA players don’t really get fired; we get traded or benched. I’m not in danger of either of those things happening, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“How do you know that for sure?”

“Stevie, sit down.”

“I don’t want to. I have to stand when something’s bothering me.”

I sighed, my eyes on Little Dray as he drifted off to sleep in my arms. “I know because I’m a very valuable player. Plus, the owners love me. The ultimate power lies with them. Anyway, me fucking his wife was his idea. I got proof of that, texts and shit.”

“Maybe, but he could make life hard for you, couldn’t he?”

“He could but he won’t. He wants me on the team. If he fucks with me, I’ll negotiate to move to another team. With people like him, business comes before everything else. He ain’t about to mess his money or job up over this shit. Believe me.”

She finally sat down beside me. “When was the last time you...had sex with her?”

“Earlier on the day I first met you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Stevie, I was far from a virgin before I touched you. My body count is high, but I’m yours now and forever if you’ll have me. Ain’t no other woman for me.”

Reaching over to rub the baby’s back, she leaned in and kissed me. “I’ll definitely have you, Drayveon Dwain Walker. I just...”

“Just *nothing*. I only want you and my job is not in jeopardy. That’s facts.”

Through a sigh, she said, “Okay.”

“THERE YOU GO, man. Gotta get you clean. Can’t be ‘round here funky and shit,” I said as Little Dray smiled up at me. I was giving him a bath in his tiny tub that fit in the kitchen sink. My shirt was wet, hands soapy, and I couldn’t think of anything I would’ve rather been doing at that moment. Stevie and Little Dray were my whole damn world, a world I hadn’t realized I needed or wanted. “You ready for your favorite part? I’m ‘bout to wash this fade.”

“Stop teasing him about his hair!” Stevie said as she entered the kitchen and hopped up on the counter, her long legs bare.

“It *is* a fade, albeit a jacked up one. It’ll grow back, though. I read somewhere that a lot of babies lose their hair on the back and sides of their head.”

“I know.” Holding up my phone, she added, “You left your phone in the bedroom. Looks like you got a text from Leland McClain.”

“Open the phone and read it to me.”

She put the phone in front of my face to unlock it, and then read, “Hey, man. Been meaning to tell you that I like Stevie. She’s a good look for you.”

I nodded. “Text him back: *I know, nigga.*”

She giggled as she typed out the text and jumped when the phone began to buzz. “Your OG is calling.”

“Answer it,” I said as I picked our big boy up and wrapped him in a towel. Dude was outgrowing his tub.

“Hello? Hi, ma’am, this is Stevie...yes...well, he asked me to...o-okay.” Stevie thrust the phone toward me. “I’ll take him so you can talk.” She wore a frown as she took Little Dray and left the kitchen.

“Hello,” I said into the phone as I leaned against the kitchen counter.

“Why is that girl answering your phone?” OG hissed.

“Because I told her to,” I replied, my voice even.

“And why the hell would you do that?”

“Because she’s my woman and it’s *my* phone.”

“Boyyyy! You—”

“What you need, OG?”

“What do I need? We have a meeting! I’m at your house right now.”

“Oh, that’s right. Who’s driving you around today? Shem?”

“Yes,” she said, getting more pissed by the second.

“A’ight. Have him bring you over here to Stevie’s place. He knows the address.”

“I bet he does since you live there now. Done abandoned this big, pretty house...”

“Yeah. See you in a little bit.”

I ended the call and made my way to the baby’s room where Stevie was sitting in the rocking chair nursing him. He had on a blue onesie and some matching socks as he ate, making little sounds.

“He be enjoying that titty milk, don’t he?” I asked, giving her a grin.

She smirked. “So do you.”

“And that’s a fact. Hey, you good? OG say something fucked up to you?”

“No. She was just kind of rude, but I think that was because me answering the phone shocked her.”

“Hmm, well, she’s on her way over here for our meeting.”

“What?!” Stevie shrieked, making the baby jump and whimper. “Shit,” she said before cooing, “I’m sorry, man.” Looking up at me, she added. “Why?”

“Because this is where I live now, and she needs to understand that you aren’t temporary. You’re a part of my life, a *permanent* part.”

“How can you know that for sure? How can you know we’ll work out in the long term?”

“Because I know what temporary feels like. This ain’t it. You don’t feel it?”

Dropping her eyes, she nodded. “I do...I just—there’s so much we don’t know about each other.”

“We got all the time in the world to learn. I love you. I want you. Hell, I *need* you. Know that, first and foremost.”

Lifting her eyes, she softly said, “I feel the same way. All of that is the same for me.”

I HAD to damn near beg Stevie not to hide in the bedroom when my OG arrived. I got it. The old lady was mean and intimidating as hell, but she was going to have to get used to Stevie. It had occurred to me that by meeting her at the house, it appeared that I was hiding my woman from her. Like I was ashamed of her or something, and I didn’t want to give off those vibes. I’d never been prouder of anything than the fact that this woman had accepted me and let me share her life, and I wanted the world to know it. Stevie was smart, a talented

artist, sweet, loving, and drop dead beautiful from head to toe. I was fortunate to have her on my arm.

When I opened the door, OG stormed inside. Shem wasn't behind her, so I figured he'd opted to skip the impending show and wait in the car, one of *my* cars.

She didn't speak as she stepped inside, her eyes sweeping the space that loudly proclaimed itself to belong to one Stevie October with bold colors and an eclectic mix of furniture that I'd gladly paid for.

Stevie stood from the sofa with Little Dray on her hip, heading toward us in the small entryway. Proffering a hand, she said, "Hi, Mrs. Walker, I'm Stevie."

OG didn't take her hand, but she did say, "hello" in a less than convivial manner.

Dropping her hand, Stevie said, "And this is my little guy."

"Drayveon?" OG asked with less of an edge to her voice.

Stevie must've noticed the shift, too. "Yes, we call him Little Dray."

OG placed a hand on his leg. "He's a fine baby. Breastfed?"

Stevie nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Hmmm, reminds me of Skipper when he was this age. He was a fine one, too."

Stevie smiled, glancing at me before offering, "Would you like to hold him? He's a friendly baby."

OG's eyes lit up. "I would!"

The meeting ended up consisting of her running down who needed help in this weird little voice, since everything she said was directed toward the baby instead of me as she sat on the sofa holding him and kissing his fluffy cheeks.

EIGHTEEN

STEVIE

Dray was in the worst damn mood, had been since his feet hit the floor that morning, and I had no idea why. Like, he was actually being an asshole, not answering me when I spoke to him, refusing to eat the breakfast I made him and that was a damn special occasion because I hated cooking and he knew it. He really got pissed when he lost whatever game he was playing on his PlayStation 1000 or whatever the hell that thing was called. I'd never seen him like this, and I didn't like it at all. So, to keep from showing him *my* ugly side, I steered clear of his ass, opting to leave any room he entered and taking my baby with me.

I ended up spending most of the day in Little Dray's room and was sitting in the rocking chair reading a post on some blog's page about how my eyes weren't naturally blue and that I'd had dye injected into them at some clinic in Mexico when he appeared in the doorway, all tall and handsome, a look of regret on his face.

"He's asleep?" he asked, nodding toward the crib.

"Yep. It's naptime," I replied.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what? Being a dick to me all day?"

"Damn. Yeah, I'm sorry about that."

"Okay." I dropped my eyes back to my phone, so I didn't see him cross the room to me. However, I did watch him lower himself to the floor in front of me. When he laid his head in my lap, I instinctually rubbed my hand over his closely trimmed hair.

"What's going on, Dray?" I questioned.

"Training camp starts in a few days. I don't wanna leave y'all," he said.

I closed my eyes and tried to dial back a feeling that threatened to overtake me. It was something between relief,

elation, and empathy, but I needed to check my emotions in order to really hear him. So I said, “I don’t want to be apart from you, either, but this is your job and I understand you have to do it.”

He looked up at me, eyes wide, or as wide as eyes like his could get. “I love you so much. I’m at peace here with you and Little Dray.”

I frowned. “You weren’t at peace before us?”

“No. I was...I was fighting shit. My past, demons that don’t fuck with me when I’m here. I’m...I think they’ll come back when I leave. I don’t want them to. I...before I started staying here, I barely slept at night. I got so used to it, I almost thought it was normal.”

“You mentioned that before, your sleeping problems. How long has that been going on?”

“Since I was a kid and...I don’t wanna talk about it. I don’t wanna talk about nothing. I just want us to get in the bed and fuck every second we can until I have to leave.”

“Oh, that reminds me. I got a copy of my results for your viewing pleasure. I’m STD free.”

“You already got mine, so...no more rubbers?”

“My IUD is in place, so yeah. No more rubbers.”

“Oh, I know it’s there. I can feel it when I’m inside you, or at least the part you call the string.”

“Damn, you really do have a big dick, don’t you?”

With a goofy grin, he gazed up at me and quipped, “The fucking biggest.”

NINETEEN

DRAYVEON

“I saw on TV where they making y’all stay in a hotel for training camp again this year. How’s it going?”

I shook my head as if my brother could see me through the prison phone he was on. “It ain’t. Missing my damn family.”

“Who? OG? You ain’t missing her; you missing her cooking. I bet even that healthy shit tastes good coming from her kitchen.”

“I ain’t talking about OG, man.”

“You talking about Jamilla? How you missing her? She ain’t even all the way there in the head. Ain’t been since—”

“I’m talking about Stevie and Little Dray.”

“Stevie? Oh, ole girl with the blue eyes! It’s like that, baby brother? Your ass is all in for this chick?”

“All in and then some. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do here, but I’m ready to go the-fuck home to my woman. For real.”

Silence from Cap.

“You still there?” I asked.

“Yeah, just jealous. You gon’ make my ass settle down when I get out of here.”

“You should. Time is winding down, man. You’ll be out before you know it.”

“Yep, and the first thing I’m a do is get me a lobster meal and some ass.”

I chuckled. So much for him settling down. “Hey, gotta go. I need to try to go to sleep at a decent time so they can kick my ass on that court some more tomorrow. Call me in a couple days.”

“Will do, Skip!”

After we'd ended the call, I opened a text from Stevie that'd come through while I was talking to Cap. It read: *My mother*. Under those words, was a link to an online newspaper article. The caption read: *Little Rock native and violin virtuoso succumbs to injuries from fatal car wreck*. Above the article's title, was a color photo of a strikingly beautiful woman wearing a huge Afro, her bright blue eyes seeming to stare right at the camera as she played her instrument. Stevie looked a lot like her, although this woman's eyes were a deeper blue, and her skin was a shade lighter.

The article paid tribute to her talent and groundbreaking work as a conductor, along with her heart for service and championing women musicians. It ended with:

Athena Olivia Van-Vellen October leaves to cherish her memory her husband, Jermaine October, and a teenaged daughter, Stevie, who is also an exceptional violinist.

I stared at the picture for a moment before googling "Athena October," finding tons of articles, a fan website dedicated to her, and a YouTube channel that bore her name. Clicking on one video led to me watching several, some of her performing, others of her conducting. I didn't know much about classical music or orchestras, but I knew I felt it in my chest when she played, just like I did when Stevie played, and I saw nothing but authority when she conducted.

Finally, I ran across a video of her being interviewed. She was poised and very articulate with a voice that reminded me of her daughter's. She was pregnant at the time, which made me smile. Before I drifted off into a troubled sleep that night, I replied to Stevie's text with one of my own.

STEVIE

Drayveon: *My mom.*

Just as I'd done, he supplied a link with his text. I was asleep when he sent it the night before, but it was the first thing I saw when I woke up this morning ecstatic that Little Dray had slept through the night.

After checking on my boy, I hit the link which led to a page of search results for a Jamilla Kay Walker. Most were articles from St. Louis news outlets with titles like:

Local Woman Arrested for Assault.

Local Woman Acquitted of Murder Charges.

Local Woman Found Wandering and Confused in Downtown Area has been Identified.

Local Woman Identified as Jamilla Walker Missing. Has History of Mental Illness.

Jamilla Walker Found and Hospitalized.

Without bothering to read any of the articles, I sent a reply to Drayveon.

Me: *What mental illness does she have?*

His response came through in seconds: *Schizophrenia*

My heart dropped and ached for him. Some of these articles were fifteen and twenty years old. He'd dealt with this as a child.

Me: *This is why your grandmother raised you and your brother?*

Him: *Yes.*

Me: *I'm so sorry, Dray.*

Him: *Don't be. Hey, I was on a break. Gotta get back to it.*

Me: *Okay. Love you.*

Him: *Love you too.*

“GIRL, they done found your YouTube videos. Shit, even *I* forgot you had that channel. You ain’t put nothing on it since right before you got pregnant, have you?” Bria asked.

Shaking my head, I picked up a little suit and smiled. “I was too sick to even think about playing my violin back then, let alone record myself. Look at this. Isn’t it cute?”

“It really is! You gonna get it?”

I shrugged. “Why do you keep asking me that?”

“Because we’ve been shopping, going from store to store for like an hour, and you ain’t bought nothing.”

I glanced at Luigi, who stood a few feet behind us. “Because this feels weird. A bodyguard? Spending someone else’s money?”

“Spending *your man’s* money. And didn’t he tell you to go shopping?”

“Yes, because Little Dray is outgrowing everything. He’s like huge for his age.”

“It’s that titty milk.”

“True.”

“If you don’t buy something, I’m telling Big Dray.”

“You just love that you have his number now, huh? Don’t be tryna push up on my man, Bria. I don’t wanna have to beat your ass.”

“Damn, I ain’t like that and you know it! Did I used to have a thing for Drayveon? Of course. What heterosexual woman wouldn’t? But on the real, I’m big happy for you. Shit, I’m good with living through you at this point and it don’t hurt that he’s paying me more for nannying a baby I’d gladly keep for free than I’ve ever made on any job in my life! This is keeping me from even considering taking that fool I was with back.”

“Thank god. Okay, I’m going to get this little suit. Help me pick some more stuff out.”

“Now you’re speaking my language!”

TWENTY

DRAYVEON

I was back in the closet, the darkness closing in on me as the sounds of chaos on the other side of the door were muffled. The smell of the closet, the harshness of my breathing, the pounding of my heart, the fear, it all crowded my little body, stifling and thick and impenetrable. I was shaking, holding a hand over my own mouth to keep from crying out. One thought replayed in my mind like a broken reel—he was going to kill her this time and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I was too small, smaller than most kids my age which didn't add up in a family of giants. Cap was tall but just as skinny as I was. Would he really be able to help her? He'd been gone so long. Would he come back for me?

Yelling, a thud, more yelling.

It sounded so far away from my hiding place, but it wasn't. It couldn't be, as small as our apartment was. I needed to pee—bad. I told myself to hold it.

Hold it.

Hold it.

Hold it.

I shot up in the bed, heart galloping, hands shaking.

Fuck!

The dreams were back in vivid, terrifying detail and I hated it.

Throwing the covers off me, I sat up on the side of the bed and rubbed my forehead in preparation for the headache I knew would come next. Then I glanced at my phone on the nightstand and thought about calling Stevie but knew it was too late. Just as that thought left my mind, my phone lit up with a text message...from Stevie.

Hey, Bria reminded me of something today, so I did this. Tell me what you think.

Clicking the accompanying link took me to a YouTube page I was very familiar with—hers. After she sent me that one video of her performing, I watched everything on her channel—other performances, videos of her practicing different songs, even a couple of her talking about her love of music. This new one was filmed in our apartment, and I could tell she'd used her phone to record it. There she sat on the side of our bed in one of my t-shirts and a pair of shorts, her locs pulled back in a ponytail. Before she began playing, she looked into the camera and smiled, saying, "For Dray."

Closing her eyes, she slid the bow over the strings, creating a beautiful version of what I recognized to be *I Love You* by Faith Evans. I closed my eyes too, laying back on the bed with the phone near my ear. By the end of the song, there were actual tears in my damn eyes, so I played it again and then again. I could feel myself growing calmer every time I listened to it until I finally replied to her text with: *That was almost as beautiful as you. I love you too, baby.*

Thinking about how much I missed her, I got back under the covers and fell into a dreamless sleep.

"YOU LOOK GOOD OUT THERE, Walker. The whole team looks good—already! We might just grab another championship this season!" Cobb Reynolds declared as he dropped his suited form onto the bench next to me.

Dragging a towel over my sweaty head, I nodded. "Preciate you, Mr. Reynolds."

He glanced around before lowering his voice. "Um, have you reconsidered continuing our arrangement? Your young lady is striking and I'm sure she's enjoyable, but we both know Rae has talents that can't be surpassed. She misses you, and well, you know what they say if the wife ain't happy, no one's happy."

"I think it goes, if Mama ain't happy, no one's happy. You and Rae don't have children by choice, right?"

“Same sentiment. In short, my Rae has been a bitch lately.”

“Sorry to hear that, but I won’t be reconsidering shit. I had fun, Rae had fun, but she knew this wasn’t going to be permanent. I’ve moved on. Maybe she could pick one of the rookies to play with. I’m no longer an option.”

He smiled. “Oh, come on. We could all have fun. All four of us—you, Rae, me, and that gorgeous young lady of yours.” He ended the statement with a wink.

Through clinched teeth, I countered, “I ain’t like you. I don’t fucking share. You come near mine, and I will fuck you completely up. I mean it. I will kill your ass.”

“Walker—”

“Do not play with me about my woman.”

He opened his mouth to speak again, but I cut him off. “And don’t even think about threatening me or my career over this shit. If you do, I’mma sue the whole damn team for you trying to force me to fuck your wife and trying to fuck my woman. How’s that gonna look for you?”

The older gentleman’s light skin reddened as he cleared his throat, stood from the bench, and adjusted his tie.

“Oh, and tell your wife to stop contacting me.”

He nodded, leaving without uttering another word.

STEVIE

One week.

Dray had been at training camp for one week, and I missed him so much I didn't know what to do with myself. This was weird because I'd only known him for three months. I didn't even know he existed before then and now I was sitting around feeling lost. It wasn't like I didn't talk to him every day. We even FaceTimed every couple days so he could see the baby. Plus, there were countless videos online showing him and his team practicing. I had access to him in many forms, but I didn't have *him*, and I hated it.

Of course I didn't share any of these feelings with him. He sounded down enough during our phone calls. He'd shared that he wasn't getting much sleep and wished he was with me and Little Dray, but this was his job. He understood that and so did I. It didn't make me miss him any less, though.

I filled my time with Little Dray and making videos of myself playing my violin or hanging with Bria to keep from totally losing it, but I missed him. I really and truly missed him.

"DAMN, they sharing the hell outta your YouTube videos now!" Bria shrieked from her seat on my living room sofa.

"You on your phone while you supposed to be nannying? I'ma tell Dray to cut your pay," I replied from the kitchen. The apartment had an open floor plan except for the bedrooms and bathrooms, so I could easily see her and the baby. He was lying on his stomach on the floor, a play mat under him. He was fascinated with a yellow plastic ring attached to the mat.

"I can multitask. Anyway, all the blogs been posting that video you dedicated to Drayveon and the comments are going wild. Folks are making requests for what they wanna hear you play next."

With my attention on the cookbook I'd been perusing, I asked, "What songs are they requesting?"

"*Best Part* by H.E.R. and Daniel Caesar, *Essence* by Wizkid, and *Human Nature* by Michael Jackson. It's a ton more."

"Hmm, those are good. Hey, I guess all that posting they're doing is what got me all those new subscribers. I went from two hundred to ten thousand in a couple days."

"Damn! Bilal doesn't even have that many, does he?"

"Hell if I know."

"He still ain't called you?"

"Nope. He said he didn't want anything to do with the baby and he meant it, but we're good without him. More than good."

"You sure are! What is your no-cooking ass reading a cookbook for?"

I shrugged. "I've been trying to think of ways I can contribute since Dray pays for everything. I wanted to try cooking his special food for him. Not sure if I'll actually do it, though."

"Girl, that man don't expect nothing from you other than what you already give him, and that's a family."

I stared at her for a moment because there were these times when Bria would surprisingly make sense, and this was one of them. When I could close my mouth, I said, "I think you're right."

"Shit, I *know* I am. You love him and I think that's enough for him."

"Yeah, it's the same for me."

TWENTY-ONE

STEVIE

I was dreaming about me and Dray, about his hands exploring my body and the way he'd sometimes rub the side of his face against mine before kissing me. In the dream, I could feel his warm breath on my ear as he told me how much he loved me. Dream Drayveon was kissing me passionately when I woke up and realized that Real Life Drayveon's lips were actually touching mine. Opening my eyes, I saw him lying next to me, his big hand caressing my cheek as he moved his lips from my mouth to my neck.

"D-Dray? What are you doing here? You're here? You're not supposed to be here for five more days," I said groggily.

He lifted his head and looked into my eyes. "You counting the days, too?"

I nodded. "I miss you. So much."

"I miss you, too; that's why I snuck out the hotel."

"You're gonna get in trouble."

"Probably."

"You don't care?"

"No. I'll pay the fine or whatever. I just need one good night of sleep and I'll only get it here, with you."

"So you're just going to sleep?"

"If we do what we both wanna do, and I wanna do it bad as fuck, I ain't gonna be able to move in the morning, let alone actually practice. Your pussy is set up to drain a nigga. Energy be on zero."

"Wow, really?"

"Really and truly."

"Well, I'm glad you're here anyway."

"I'm glad to be here. I peeped in on the little guy. How the fuck he grow like that in a week?"

“I wish I knew. Your OG asked the same thing.”

“She been here?” he asked, voice shrill.

“Yeah. She’s been here to see the baby a couple times since you’ve been gone.”

“She being nice to you?”

“Extremely.”

“Good.”

“Yeah. Hey,” I said softly, turning on my side to completely face him in the darkness. “I love you so much.”

He pulled me to him, so close that I was inundated with a scent I’d missed so much I’d begun bathing with it myself—Irish Springs soap. Directly into my ear he said, “And I love you so much more, baby.”

DRAYVEON

“Good work, youngin’! Man, you are a beast on the court! Like a damn machine. I could barely tell you been missing your girl,” Leland McClain said, clapping me on the back as we both left the hotel...*finally*. “And speaking of girls, there goes mine. Heyyyy, Little Kim! Tyrone missed youuuuuu!”

Who the hell was Tyrone?

I chuckled as he trotted to where his wife was standing next to their vehicle and picked her up as she giggled. I frowned when I saw Shem standing outside mine. “Where’s Luigi? Stevie in the truck?” I barked. I didn’t want him or Nef anywhere near her and I’d made that shit crystal damn clear. I was trying not to fire their asses, but I wasn’t having nobody fucking with my woman, not even talking about her behind her or my back.

“She’s not in there. Luigi ain’t feeling well so he called me to come get you. He said Stevie called him saying she wasn’t riding with him to pick you up,” Shem explained.

“His ass shoulda called *me* and I woulda caught a ride with McClain and his wife and security.”

“Damn, Skip! Come on, man. We family. I’m sorry for telling Granny shit about you and talking about your girl. I get it. Things are different with her.”

“What’s different is I love her, I love her son, and ain’t nobody taking that away from me.”

He raised his hands. “I’m not trying to! I get it now. For real. My bad for disrespecting her.”

I moved past him, snatching the back passenger door open and tossing my bag inside. Then I climbed in the front seat while he slid in behind the wheel.

“To Stevie’s spot?” he asked.

“That’s where I live,” I muttered.

He didn't reply, and as he navigated the streets of St. Louis, I texted Stevie. I was more upset that I had to wait the time it took to get home to see her than anything else. Upset and worried.

Me: *Why you ain't in the car with me right now? You all right? The baby okay?*

Stevie: *I'm so sorry about that. We're fine. I stayed home because my father and his wife are here visiting.*

Her father?

TWENTY-TWO

STEVIE

Twenty-four hours earlier...

I was multitasking—breastfeeding while editing my *Human Nature* video. Yes, I was taking the requests because it was actually fun. This part of my newfound fame was surprisingly enjoyable. I was happy that people liked my music. I didn't care how they felt about me personally.

So I was in a good place. I still missed Dray, but I was managing to cope a little better. His surprise visit had a lot to do with that.

When my phone rang, my initial thought was to ignore it since it wasn't the special tone I'd assigned to Dray, but something made me look at the screen. When I saw "Dad," my breathing stopped for a second. He was finally calling me back after three months?

I let the call go to voicemail and had finally released my breath when he called again. It was on the third round of calling that I managed to answer.

"Hello?" I nearly whispered.

"Stevie! Hey! Your mom and I are in town! I'm trying to see my grandbaby."

I hated when he referred to his wife as my mom. I literally despised it. Pushing through that feeling and the less-than-fond memories triggered by the sound of his voice, I asked, "You're in St. Louis?"

"Ain't that where you live? Look, we went by your place and someone else is living there. Where you staying now?"

"Uh..." Hesitantly, I gave him my address, though I'm not sure why. I'd only contacted him for help I no longer needed. I didn't want to see him, but I suppose a part of me did want him to see Little Dray.

When we ended the call, I hopped up, nearly scaring my son to death from the sudden movement, and began cleaning my already spotless apartment. I changed the baby into a short set instead of the onesie he had on and exchanged Dray's Cyclones tee for one of my caftans. I loaded the Keurig and ordered dinner to be delivered. Then I sat on the sofa holding my son and trying not to cry.

DRAYVEON

Now...

Something was off with Stevie.

She wouldn't sit down, stood beside the sofa like she was waiting to do something. Or rather, waiting to be *told* to do something. As I sat there half-listening to her father tell me what a fan he was of mine, I kept glancing at her. Her eyes were vacant, her forehead creased.

"I couldn't believe my Stevie was dating Drayveon Walker! I don't know why she didn't tell me. I found out through my wife!" he was saying.

"And *I* found out while I was watching the gossip segment on the *Loretha Halter Show*. There were pictures of the two of you leaving this building!" his wife, Ada, gushed.

I frowned. "There were?"

"Yes! You two were dressed up, or at least Stevie was as dressed up as she gets. She was wearing yellow," Ada said, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

Stevie was still silent, eyes downcast as she stood beside the sofa and me. Reaching for her hand, I pulled her into my lap and kissed her cheek. "I love everything she wears, especially that yellow fit."

Stevie laughed nervously, her eyes unfocused on my face as she said, "Um, you need anything?"

"I got what I need right here in my lap," I said for Stevie's ears only. "Hey, you good?"

Her eyes finally met mine and she nodded.

Whatever the fuck was going on with her, I didn't like it, and I was sure it had something to do with her dad and stepmom. Shit, they were making *me* uncomfortable. It wasn't

just the subtle digs at Stevie, it was their energy. Something was off with this whole situation.

“Oh, I heard you were a kind man. I see it’s true!” Ada chirped.

I shrugged. “I don’t know how kind I am. I just know I love Stevie. She can do no wrong in my eyes.”

“Well, I’m just glad she’s got you. She ain’t never had much of nothing else,” her father, Jermaine, muttered.

Stevie’s head snapped up, her eyes on her father. I could tell she wanted to speak but didn’t.

So I did: “You ain’t heard her play? Seen what a good mother she is? Nah, she’s got a lot. More than I deserve, honestly.”

Her father chuckled tensely, and Ada declared, “Such a good man!”

Little Dray could be heard crying from his crib and Stevie almost looked relieved as she hopped up and said, “Let me go check on him,” leaving me with her folks.

“Drayveon,” Jermaine said, “what do you think? Will the Cyclones grab the championship again? You’ve already got two rings, right? With you being a St. Louis native, I know you’re proud of the team...”

He went on and on and on, with his wife chiming in here and there. They were overly nice to me but dismissive of Stevie. Even when she finally re-emerged with Little Dray in tow, they paid little attention to him.

“There’s my dude!” I damn near yelled upon seeing the baby on her hip. “Come here, boy!”

Grinning, Stevie handed him to me and said, “He missed you, too.”

“He better had.” I kissed his cheek, making him giggle.

“I just can’t believe Drayveon Walker is my grandson’s father!” Jermaine chortled. “This is great!”

This was the consensus on the gossip-sphere, that Little Dray was my son. It was also something I didn't plan on disputing because he *was* mine as far as I was concerned. Even if Stevie and I didn't work out—something I would fight to the death to keep from happening—he'd still be mine.

“Yeah, I'm loving fatherhood. It's the greatest gift. Don't you agree?” I asked as I stood Little Dray up in my lap.

“Well, I wasn't blessed to be the father of a son, so I wouldn't know,” Jermaine said, shaking his head.

What the fuck?

My “what?” came out rough as hell.

“Uh, would anyone like something to drink? Water? Juice?” Stevie asked.

“Water will be fine,” Jermaine said, his voice flat. “Ada, you want something?”

“Do you have bottled water, Stevie? You know I don't drink out of just anyone's glasses,” Ada replied.

Stevie nodded and was about to do their bidding when I grasped her arm and stopped her. “Hold up, baby. What the hell is going on?”

Stevie's eyes blew up as they darted from me to her father and back. “N-nothing.”

“Nah, something is going on. You been running around here like a slave, refusing to sit down. You ain't acting like yourself.”

“Oh, she's always been a little odd. That's just Stevie,” Ada advised.

“Not *my* Stevie. She's happy with me. She smiles with me. She knows she ain't gotta wait on me,” I shot back.

Nothing from Ada, but Jermaine did pipe up. “Well, of course she's different with her parents. That's normal. I ran a tight ship when she was growing up. Her birth mother traveled a lot, so it was mostly just me and Stevie at home from the time she was five or six. *I* had to train her up. I taught her a

woman's place. She cooked, cleaned, everything. Then Athena sent her off to New York to that fancy-ass high school. Seems she forgot her training if she's neglecting you."

I turned my whole body to face this man sitting beside me. "Man, what the fuck are you talking about? She's a person, not a servant. If I want to be served, I'll pay someone to serve me. This is your daughter. Why you talking like she's a puppy or something?"

He shook his head. "You're a new father and you have a son, not a daughter. You wouldn't understand. Do you know I had to pay for her to get an abortion when she was seventeen?! That was right after her mother passed. So no, you don't know fatherhood like I do."

"Wooooow, really?!" Stevie screamed. Her whole body was shaking. "The only reason you had to pay for it is because you wouldn't give me my money! You know, the money my *real* mother left me when she died?!"

"Everything was left to *me*. I don't know what you think Athena told you, but she left it to *me*!" he countered. "That's why I didn't return the calls you made right after you had his baby. I knew you were going to ask for money. You have a rich boyfriend and you were going to ask *me* for money! See what I mean, Drayveon? Girls!"

"Man, get your ass out of my house," I said. I didn't yell but wasn't nothing hospitable about the tone of my voice either.

"What?" Jermaine bellowed.

"You hard of hearing? I said, get out! Leave! You ain't took a second glance at the baby so you're obviously here on some bullshit. One thing about it, I ain't letting no one make Stevie uncomfortable on my watch, especially in her own home!"

"Jermaine, let's just go and come back tomorrow," Ada said, gripping her husband's arm.

"Nah, ain't no coming back tomorrow or the next day or the next day. You can come back when you learn how to treat

Stevie like a human and with respect. Now, *go!*”

They left, mumbling some unintelligible bullshit with every step.

Once the door was locked behind them, Stevie looked at me and said, “What if they go to some blog or tabloid and tell them you kicked them out?”

“Then I won’t give a fuck. They can say whatever they want. They can’t make or break me. They can’t make or break you either. You gotta stop letting them.”

She lifted her shoulders. “That’s easier said than done when you’ve been *trained* a certain way.”

I could feel my own damn nostrils flaring. “He train you on some other shit, too?”

Her blue eyes shimmered as she vigorously shook her head. “No, nothing like that. He just treated me like a workhorse. If my mom was away, I had to cook, make his plate, clean the whole house. That’s why I hate cooking now, although I wouldn’t mind cooking for you. I hate cleaning, too, but I also hate dirt, so I was going to keep this place clean. Still, I appreciate the housekeepers. Anyway, when my mom sent me to New York, that all changed, and I finally got to be a kid. Then I got pregnant...”

“You ain’t gotta talk about that if you don’t want to.”

“I do. I want to tell *you*.”

We were still standing by the door with me holding Little Dray who was sucking on his right fist. So I said, “Let’s sit down first. Matter of fact, let’s go get in the bed. I’m tired as shit.”

“It can wait, Dray. I can tell you later. I’m so sorry they were here when you made it home. I’m sorry I didn’t meet you at the hotel.”

“It’s a’ight. Come on. I wanna hear whatever you wanna tell me.” I took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

WE LAY in bed facing each other. Still clothed with our little guy on his stomach between us lifting up on his chubby hands and blowing spit bubbles.

“I was a senior in high school. So was my boyfriend at the time,” Stevie said, her eyes glued to me. “He’d been my boyfriend for a few months the first time we had sex. He didn’t pressure me. It was something I wanted to finally experience.”

“He took your virginity?” I asked, reaching over to rub her cheek.

She nodded. “Yes. It was...I don’t know how to describe it. It wasn’t good or bad. It just happened, like something I could mark off a list of tasks. We did it a couple more times, and we always used a condom. The last time we did it, the condom broke. I didn’t understand how or why it broke, but it did. When I realized I was pregnant, I knew I wasn’t ready to be a mother. I was barely a woman. I also knew I didn’t want to be connected to the father for the rest of my life. I didn’t love him. It wasn’t a decision I made lightly, though. It was just the right one at that time. He agreed it was the best decision but could only give me less than half the money I needed. So, as much as I hated it, I had to get the rest from my dad. My mother had died a year earlier, so I couldn’t go to her.”

“And he gave it to you. I bet he had an attitude about it, too.”

“He always had an attitude with me. Looking back, I think he resented my mother’s success, resented having to be with me while she traveled for work, and I believe he took it out on me. That, and he obviously wanted a son rather than a daughter. I’m sorry you had to see me like that, so weak around him. He-he triggers some bad stuff that I don’t know what to do with. Being around him makes me crawl inside myself. It makes me hide, always has.”

“Yeah, I saw that. You ever try counseling? I have, and it helped some. I mean, I still got issues. It ain’t magic, but it’s worth a try.”

“I did in college. It was free there. I might try it again once I get a job and some benefits.”

“Stevie, look at me.”

She did, her eyes so full of vulnerability that I wanted to kick her father’s ass all over St. Louis. “I’m your man. I want to take care of every one of your needs. No matter what. As far as I’m concerned, you are my responsibility along with our son. I love you, Stevie, with my entire damn heart. You ain’t gotta wonder, and you ain’t gotta feel bad about anything I do for you. Now, I understand you wanting your independence and your own money, I promise I do, but don’t think I won’t hold you down until that happens. Okay? You want counseling, find a therapist and pay them with the card I gave you.”

A single tear escaped her right eye as she whispered, “Okay.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what made you decide to have Little Dray?”

“I felt ready. I felt like I could actually be a good mom to him.”

“You are an excellent mom.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you...uh, love his dad?”

“I cared for him. He’s a violinist, too, and I was in awe of his talent. I think maybe I wanted to love him, but I didn’t.”

“But you’re sure you love me?”

“Without a doubt.”

TWENTY-THREE

STEVIE

I was excited and nervous and just in amazement. I'd never seen so many people in one place before. I'd performed in front of nice-sized crowds and been to a few concerts given by big name acts, but this? The crowd, the energy, the fact that I was about to see Dray in action live for the first time? All of that made this experience especially electrifying.

“Daaaaamn, these some good-ass seats! Shit, we almost on the court. I'm prolly gone have fine-ass Polo Logan's sweat on me before it's over with. Girl, that's Big South over there!” Bria rambled.

I was only half paying attention to her until she mentioned Big South. “Where?” I asked.

“Two rows down in front of us. He's like right behind the Cyclones' bench! Damn, his back is fine.”

I looked and it *was* him! I almost started hyperventilating but tried to play it cool. “Well, his brother's on the team. Makes sense for him to be here, right?”

“Uh-huh. I wonder where his wife is? I'll be his side chick any day!”

“Oh, you can give that up, sis. I might not know much about basketball or any other sport, but I know music, specifically *his* music and him. He is madly in love with his wife. There's never been a single rumor about him cheating on her.”

“Probably because any woman who had the chance to be with *that* has enough sense to keep it on the hush.”

I rolled my eyes. “And please don't call anymore of the married players fine too loudly. The wives all sit near this area.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

I glanced past her at Luigi who was serving as bodyguard to me and the baby during the game, per Dray's insistence. It

still felt weird to have a bodyguard, but I didn't argue about it since this had been my reality for a few weeks now. It just felt foreign like everything attached to this new world I was living in, a world where I was happily cocooned in a beautiful man's love, day in and day out.

"Here they come!" Bria shrieked.

My eyes shot to the court as I continued bouncing Little Dray on my knee. He was so mesmerized with all the sights and sounds around him that her yelling didn't seem to faze him, or maybe he was just used to her loudness at that point.

When I saw Big Dray trot onto the court, my heart stuttered and fluttered in my chest as I took in his tall, lean frame covered in a Cyclones track suit, his eyes searching the crowd as he neared the Cyclones' bench. When he found me, he grinned, and I grinned right back at him as I held the baby's hand up in a little wave. Other team members could be seen visually searching for their loved ones, too, which made a thought pop into my head.

Leaning forward, I asked Luigi, "Are any of Dray's family members here? His mom, grandmother?"

Luigi shook his head. "Nah. Shem and Nef come when they're on duty, but other than that, I don't think his family comes to his games. His brother used to be at every one of them, though."

I nodded, frowning slightly. They seemed so protective of him. It was odd to me that they wouldn't be supporting him at his games.

"I'ma go to the concession stand. Y'all want anything?" Bria asked.

Luigi declined her offer. I sent for popcorn and a bottled water. After Bria had sashayed her round ass away, Luigi scooted closer to me.

"Hey, your friend single?" he asked.

With raised eyebrows, I replied, "Bria? I believe she is."

He nodded before scooting back to his seat.

Intrigued, I observed him from the corner of my eye. Of course I'd seen him many times before but was usually so laser focused on Dray that I'd never really paid much attention to him as anything other than a big mass of a person, but this time, I really looked at him—tall, probably six-seven, wide but not in a sloppy way, dark skin, hair cut low. Luigi wasn't bad looking. The only turnoff could be his light voice, but all in all, he wasn't a bad catch. Bria could and had done much worse in the past.

DRAYVEON WALKER WAS PHENOMENAL!

I didn't understand half of what was going on, but I did know that when he got his hands on the ball and released it, it was going in the basket no matter his distance from it or how heavily he was being guarded. Free throw, jump shot, whatever...Dray didn't miss. Seeing him in action made me appreciate him even more. Yes, basketball was just a sport. Dray wasn't a surgeon or scientist, but he had talent. What he did on that court was rare, something that was embedded in his DNA and would possibly be passed on to his children. He wasn't just a good basketball player; he was a damn magician with the ball!

The Cyclones lost, but I could confidently say it wasn't because of Dray, and now I could see he was right. They'd be fools to ever fire him for any reason.

"Damn, that was a good game!" Bria declared, taking the baby from me so I could gather my purse and the diaper bag. It was time for us to go to the designated area and wait for the players with the other girlfriends, wives, and family members. We were leaving our seats when a man approached us, making Luigi move to block me and the baby from him.

"Hey, you can't just walk up on them like that," he said in that soft voice of his, but while it might've been on the soprano side, his size was enough to intimidate a prize fighter.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Reverend Wiley, Bethel Walker's pastor. You don't remember me, son?"

Bria nudged me, giving me a quizzical look as Little Dray grabbed at the collar of her Cyclones t-shirt. In response, I shrugged.

“Yeah, I know who you are, but you still can’t be walking up on her like that. Drayveon’s orders,” Luigi informed the man.

“Son, I merely wanted to speak to her. I don’t think Drayveon would mind.”

I reached up and tapped Luigi on his meaty shoulder. When he craned his neck to glance at me, I said, “It’s okay. I’ll speak to him.”

Luigi hesitated before moving to the side, his body still shielding half of mine. The man came into view. Standing a row above us, he was tall and trim in jeans and a Cyclones sweatshirt, his tiny salt and pepper Afro cut neatly, his light brown skin bearing the proof of his advancing age. He wore a friendly smile as he proffered a hand to me. “Hello, I’m Harvard Wiley. Mrs. Walker’s pastor. I was Dray’s pastor when he was a boy, too.”

Taking his hand, I returned his smile. “I’m Stevie.”

“Stevie. Interesting name for a beautiful young lady. And this is your son?” he asked, shifting his attention to Little Dray. “I believe his name is Drayveon, as well?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “This is Little Dray, and this is my friend Bria.”

“Nice to meet you, Bria. Well, I won’t keep you, Stevie. Just wanted to meet you. Oh, and I’ve been meaning to thank Drayveon for the generous donation he gave to the church the other month. That ten thousand dollars more than took care of the repairs to our plumbing system.”

“I’ll pass the message on to him. It was nice meeting you, Reverend Wiley.”

“Likewise, Sister Stevie.”

DRAYVEON

We lost the game, but I was good. Shit, I'd done my job like I always did. Plus, I couldn't be in a fucked-up mood when I knew I had Stevie there for me at the end of the night. Seeing her and Little Dray standing there waiting for me when it was finally time to leave the arena felt good, better than the two times we won the championship. The only thing better was getting home and climbing into bed with her.

In the darkness, as we lay facing each other, she asked, "You're not upset about the game? You lose your shit over a lost game of 2K."

"Niggas be cheating at 2K."

She rolled her eyes. "*Anyway*, Polo looked like he was about to go off on someone tonight."

"He's always like that when we lose. Unlike him, I have some emotional regulation when it comes to real ball. I did what I was supposed to do—my best. As long as I know that to be true, I don't let a loss get me down. Plus, it was a pre-season game. We play over eighty games a season, *plus* the eight pre-season games. We got a good team and time to make this up."

"More than eighty?! In one season?"

"Yep."

"Shit! How many per week?"

"Three, sometimes four."

"That's crazy! How do you play like that so often? All that running and moving and dribbling and shooting? No wonder you work out all the time."

"I'm used to it. Hey, I don't expect you to come to all my games, especially with little Dray being so young. That'd be asking a lot, but I would like for you to come to some of the home games."

“Of course I will. Oh! I met your OG’s pastor after the game. He wanted me to thank you for the ten thousand dollars you donated for the church’s plumbing repairs.”

I was silent for so long that Stevie called my name. So I finally replied. “I heard you, baby. The pastor’s a cool dude. I was glad to donate.”

“Yeah, he seemed nice. Hey, can I ask you something?”

“You know you can.”

“Why don’t any of your family members come to your games?”

“How you know they don’t? Maybe they just missed tonight’s game.”

“Well, I asked Luigi about it. Was he mistaken?”

“Nah, he was correct. Um, back when I would give my folks tickets, I eventually found out they were selling them to people. Like, to *anybody*. I felt...I guess I felt like they were using me, so I stopped giving them tickets.”

“Well, that’s fucked up. Your OG would sell hers?”

“Nah, she’d give them to some cousin of mine and they’d sell them. I suppose she was burnt out from coming to my junior high, senior high, and college games.”

“I’m sorry, Dray.”

“It’s all right. Let’s go to sleep, baby. I’m tired as hell,” I said, pulling her body to mine.

“Okay.”

I WOKE up the next morning with a headache. My sleep had been troubled, not from nightmares this time but with thoughts that followed me into unconsciousness. Thoughts, questions, and decisions that needed to be made. When I opened my eyes, I found the other side of the bed empty. I could hear voices drifting from the front of the apartment, Stevie’s and a man’s. Frowning, I sat up, searching the room for the basketball shorts I’d discarded the previous night. Pulling

them on, I rubbed a hand over my bare chest as I stretched and yawned, making my way to check on the baby before going to see who she was talking to. Little Dray's crib was empty, but I soon found him in the living room in his little bouncer.

"Hey, man," I said, bending down to unbuckle him and pick him up. He gave me a smile as I held him against my chest. "Let's go see who your mama is talking to."

Turning to the front door, I saw Stevie hiding behind it in one of my shirts and nothing else, her long brown legs and thick thighs exposed. At the sight of her looking like she was looking, my dick started acting up. Stepping up behind her, I fixed my eyes on the man she was talking to while directing my words toward her. "Morning, baby. What's going on?"

She glanced up at me and smiled. "Hey, I was just about to come get you. This is Kenneth from maintenance. He says they got a request to come check the smoke alarms? I didn't put in one. Did you?"

"Nah, baby. Must have the wrong apartment."

"Um, no. It says this request came from apartment eighty-two, uh...Walker," the guy said. He was clean cut, kind of short, and I'd never seen him in the building before, so I asked, "You got some ID on you, man?"

"Um, yes. Just a moment."

He reached into his back pant pocket, but instead of pulling out ID, he pulled out a cell phone, holding it up.

I grabbed Stevie's arm, pulling her back. Still holding Little Dray, I snatched dude's phone from him just as he snapped a picture, throwing it down the hallway behind him. Then I got in his face and yelled, "Get the fuck away from here before I call the police *after* I kick your ass!"

I guess I scared the baby because he started crying. I could hear Stevie saying something behind me, but I kept my eyes on dude as he scrambled down the hall toward the elevator, picking up the pieces of his phone which had hit a wall before crashing to the concrete floor.

When I closed the door and turned to Stevie, she took the baby, soothing him with questions and fear in her eyes.

“That was a damn reporter or wannabe reporter or blogger or something.”

“What?! How’d he get past the front desk security?”

“That’s what I wanna know.”

TWENTY-FOUR

STEVIE

“Why you looking like that?” he asked, standing over me in this foreign territory.

I swallowed hard before speaking. “I don’t want to stay here. You work so much. You’ll barely be here, and this place is too big. I don’t want to be here alone. Someone could hide out anywhere and I wouldn’t know it.”

“This house is secure, Stevie. There’s a gate; the entire property is surrounded by an electrical fence. If even a bird lands on it, it’ll get fucked up. No one is gonna get in this house unless we let them in.”

“The apartment is secure.”

“It was until it wasn’t. Management can’t explain to me how that motherfucker made it to our door, and I can’t let that slide. Not when it comes to you and the baby.”

“Dray, they fired the guard that let him slip by.”

“Yeah, I know, but I also know for sure that nothing like that is going to happen here because this is *my* property. I got full control of what happens here.”

Tears began to fill my eyes. I was being unreasonable and I knew it, but I loved our apartment. Yes, it was big, but it was cozy. This house, *his* house, was beautiful, and it was where I met Big Dray and gave birth to Little Dray, so it held a special place in my heart. However, it was lavish and huge, so huge that I was sure Dray’s work-related absences would be even harder for me to deal with. Add all that to the many changes I’d experienced in just a few months and who could blame me for feeling overwhelmed? I couldn’t find the words to make Drayveon understand what I was feeling, and because of that, I was coming off as ungrateful about his attempt to protect me and the baby.

In the midst of my silence, he lowered himself beside me on the royal blue sectional sofa in whatever room this was and reached for the baby, pulling him from my lap to his. “Look, I

know this is a big change, baby, but this is how it's got to be. If you absolutely hate this house, I'll get us another one, but until then, y'all gotta stay here. Otherwise, my head's gonna be fucked up anytime we're apart. Yeah, dude was just tryna take some pictures of us, but the next dude might actually be dangerous."

Sighing, I nodded. "I know you're doing this because you're worried about our safety, so of course I'm going to stay here. I just...um, thank you. I need you to know I do appreciate you."

"I know you do, and I appreciate you for giving me something real to hold on to. I'll do anything to protect you and Little Dray and what we have together. *Anything.*"

Reaching over to place a hand on his stubbled cheek, I softly said, "I know. I know."

DRAYVEON

My eyes popped open to darkness, slurping sounds, and heat spreading from my feet up my legs. Then I became aware of the mouth on me, Stevie's mouth.

Fuck!

“St-St-Stevie? Wait—ohhhh, damn!”

It felt too good. Way too good, like the best thing in the world wrapped up in the worst thing in the world. She kept taking me deeper down her throat while jerking me off with her hand. Slurping, sucking...hell, she was *inhaling* my dick and chipping off pieces of my soul at the same time.

“Stevie! Shit, what's going on?!” I whined. I wanted her to both stop and keep going.

Her mouth left me and she murmured, “Do I really need to explain it to you?”

“No, I mean. Shit, I don't know what I mean.”

“I'm apologizing for pouting and being bratty about having to move here.”

“Okay...can you apologize with your pussy, too? I would really like some pussy.”

I heard her softly laugh. “You want pussy instead of head? Really?”

“I want both, but if you finish the head I'ma be too weak to enjoy the pussy.”

“All right, how you want it? Want me to ride you?”

“You know I do.”

Before I could blink, she was straddling me and guiding my dick inside her slick walls. Then she leaned forward so I could have access to her titties while she rode me. Grasping her hips, I raised my head and sucked on her right nipple while thrusting up into her. Her soft moans filled my ears along with

the sound of her wetness. I could smell our sex, felt heat rising from my feet up my body again, and stopped long enough to reposition us on our sides, lifting her leg and gliding back inside her. I thrust harder and faster as I kissed and licked her ear and her shoulder. I fucked her so hard that her moans grew louder, hysterical, strained, and when I finally busted, I swear a tear rolled down my cheek.

“Your pussy is perfect, baby,” I mumbled, still moving inside her even after my dick had deflated. “Fucking perfect.”

“TRICK OR TREAT!” Stevie sang, holding both Little Dray and his pumpkin bucket. He was dressed in a scarecrow costume, Stevie was dressed as Dorothy, and I was dressed as the tin man as I rushed from room to room in my house giving my boy his treats.

Opening the downstairs bathroom door, I said, “Here you go, man!”

In response, Little Dray giggled before stuffing his fist in his mouth. He was getting so damn big, growing up way too fast.

“This is ridiculous. You know that, right? Trick-or-treating in the house?” Stevie said with a big grin adorning her face, her blue eyes wide.

“No it’s not. It’s his first Halloween. We ain’t taking him out in the neighborhood for someone to cough on him or something. This is what I call *safe* trick-or-treating.”

She shook her head. “You’re a strange one, Drayveon Dwain Walker.”

“I know, but you love me.”

“I sure do.”

“A’ight. Now give me time to get to the kitchen before y’all come in there.”

“Woooooow, okay. We’ll wait a few seconds before heading that way, won’t we, Dray-Dray?” she cooed, kissing our chunky boy’s cheek.

Both our phones sounded at the same time, alerting us that someone was at the gate. Before I could check mine, Prince, a new member of our security team whom I’d assigned to be Stevie’s shadow, appeared. He was shorter than me but buff as hell. Stevie described him as medium ugly, but dude was cool, came highly recommended, and most importantly, he wasn’t related to me. It was the same for the other new members of my security team—Sigg and Berto.

“Want me to take care of that, boss?” Prince offered.

“Nah, I got it. You recognize this dude, Stevie?” I asked.

She frowned, pulling her phone from the pocket of her Dorothy dress. Her eyes shot up from the phone to me as she said, “That’s Bilal, Little Dray’s bio dad.”

TWENTY-FIVE

STEVIE

This was...awkward, mad awkward and weird and wholly unexpected.

There I sat in a room with a man I once thought I loved, a man I loved so much it hurt, and the little boy who connected us all and owned my entire heart. We were in the game room which I'd learned was the central hub of this mansion. Me, Dray, and the baby sat together on the sectional while Bilal sat in Dray's fancy gaming chair, silence filling the room.

Bilal Urquhart looked exactly the same as I remembered him—my height, bulky, and handsome with warm brown skin and dark brown eyes. He wore dreadlocks, too, his much shorter than mine, and sitting there observing him in Drayveon's house, I could readily see the small nose and ears he'd given our son. Most impressive were his hands with long fingers that made love to a violin like no other.

Breaking the silence, Bilal said, "*Wizard of Oz?*"

I frowned. "Huh? Oh, yes! Dray's idea. I mean, Drayveon's idea."

"Yeah," Dray agreed, his voice gruff, his tiny eyes glued to Bilal.

"Uh, I guess I should introduce everyone. Bilal Urquhart, this is Drayveon Walker. Dray, this is Bilal Urquhart," I said.

"And that's Drayveon...Junior?" Bilal inquired.

"No junior. He ain't got my last name," Dray bit out, "*yet.*"

The tension in the room was so thick that I found myself nibbling on my lip while Little Dray started rooting at my chest through my dress. "Can you go get him a bottle?" I asked Dray.

He hesitated before saying, "Yeah. Be right back."

After he left, I kept my eyes on Bilal, who was laser focused on the baby.

“He’s got your eyes,” Bilal stated, “and your lips.”

I nodded. “Yeah, he does.”

“He a good baby?” he asked, as Little Dray began to fuss.

“He is.”

Bilal nodded. “I’ve been checking out your new videos. Good stuff. You’re getting crazy views, too. I’m glad people are getting to experience your genius. I’m still jealous of your skills, you know?” He ended his compliment with a smile, the same smile that used to make me melt back before he became deadbeat dad of the century.

It didn’t make me melt anymore.

Plus, I knew he was fishing for a compliment of his own. Bilal was part of a popular hip-hop quartet that traveled the world. I wasn’t jealous at all. I just didn’t care, so I said, “Thanks.”

Dray entered the room with a warmed bottle of breastmilk, and I silently prayed the baby would take it and I wouldn’t have to leave Dray and Bilal alone to go breastfeed. Dray looked like he was three seconds from chopping Bilal’s head off.

Thankfully, he took the bottle and I sighed with relief. I’d opened my mouth to speak, when Dray preempted me, directing his words to Bilal.

“How you know where we live?”

“It’s not exactly a secret. A lot of people know where you live,” Bilal replied.

Dray nodded. “Okay, why the fuck are you here after all this time?”

“Uh, Dray,” I tried, placing a hand on his thigh. I swear he was about to lunge at Bilal.

“I’m good, Stevie. I’m just tryna figure out why a motherfucker who would abandon a woman while she’s carrying his baby and ignore her calls after he completely misses the birth would then pop up only after she lands on the

gossip blogs because of who her man is. What? You tryna be a daddy now?” Dray fumed.

“I’m...I wanted to apologize to Stevie for...everything. I-I should’ve picked up the phone. I should’ve at least bought some diapers, but I just...” Bilal lifted his eyes from the floor to my face. “I wasn’t ready to be a father. My music is everything to me. You know that, Stevie.”

I nodded. “I do know that, and I never tried to stop you from pursuing it. You said you wanted no part of me having a baby and I accepted that. I called you after he was born because I needed help—money. I don’t need that now.”

“Yes, I can see that. I just...I’m sorry, Stevie. I really am,” Bilal muttered.

Dray leaned forward, his eyes narrowed at Bilal. “I love Stevie, and I love that baby. If you think—”

“No,” Bilal cut him off. “No, I’m not here to get in the way of what y’all got going on. I’m still all about my music. I’m happy for Stevie and the baby. I just want to say if I’m needed, I won’t be ignoring any more phone calls.”

I nodded, and I could see Dray visibly relax.

After Bilal left, I turned to Dray, handing him his now sleeping namesake. “Can I tell you something?” I asked.

“Look, I wasn’t gonna fight dude. It just pissed me off him showing up all out of the blue and shit,” Dray said.

“No, you definitely would’ve beat his ass, but that’s not what I wanted to address. I wanted to say that I love you, Little Dray loves you, and we are your family. In all the ways that matter, you are his father. Okay? Nothing is going to change that.”

He stared at me for a moment before saying, “Marry me.”

“Uh...what? Dray, you don’t have to do this just because ___”

“No-no, listen...this ain’t about Jaleel.”

“Bilal.”

“Whatever. This ain’t about him. Now, I ain’t prepared with a ring or nothing and it ain’t gotta be tomorrow or next week or even next month, but I want you to be my wife, and I wanna adopt Little Dray. I want him to have my last name. I wanna be with you forever. I wanna make more babies with you. I wanna travel the world with you, and when we grow old, I wanna die in your arms. Marry me, baby.”

Choking back tears while trying to understand how we’d come from my water breaking on his doorstep to this, I swallowed hard before saying, “I will. I will marry you when and wherever.”

With Little Dray lying against his chest, secured there by his big hand, he leaned in and gave me the sweetest, softest kiss, and the deal was sealed.

TWENTY-SIX

DRAYVEON

I was always at my best when I was on the court in the middle of a battle. My speed, agility, and all my senses were at a high, my concentration was infallible, my determination, unmatched. I had this talent for erasing everything from my mind when I was in that space, the space where nothing mattered beyond how I handled the ball, how many times I made it fly through the net, and the true bottom line? Whether or not we won.

And I always wanted to win.

Although what I'd told Stevie was true and I had a good handle on my emotional regulation, losing wasn't fun. That shit hurt and truly fucked with your head. We were being paid obscene amounts of money to win. People crowded arenas to see us win. Our futures depended on us winning. So a loss? No one wanted a loss. Winning just made everything better, easier. It even made talking to the press bearable, and I hated the fucking press.

So I was glad we won yet again.

As it turned out, I was right. We'd more than made up for that preseason loss and now had one of the best records in our conference. It was mid-November, still early in the season, but we had good momentum going. The only thing that could stop us from making it to the playoffs was us. As for me, I planned to do what I always did—my best.

I was more or less floating as I made my way to where Stevie, the baby, and their security were waiting for me when McClain caught up to me, nudging me.

“Damn, dude. You be jetting up out of these home games now,” he said. “What she doing to you?”

“The same thing Kim is doing to you, nigga,” I shot back.

“If that's the case, I'm surprised you ain't wifed her up yet.”

“I plan to.” After hesitating as we continued walking, I added, “I proposed. She accepted.”

“Damn, really?!”

“Yup, and I ain’t tryna hear about how I technically don’t know her or how this is happening too fast or—”

“Man, I ain’t gon’ say shit like that and you know it. Hell, I’m the king of taking it fast. I’m just surprised. I always knew your taste in women was like mine. Stevie’s young. Just curious about the change.”

“Truthfully, ain’t no change. I...nah, I ain’t telling you this. I ain’t got time for your silly ass to roast me.”

McClain stopped walking and gave me this serious look. “Nah, we boys, youngin’. I ain’t gon’ roast you ‘bout no serious shit.”

I sighed, adjusting my duffel bag strap on my shoulder. “You know my grandparents raised me and my brother, right? Well, my grandmother ran things. My gramps was a cool dude, but she was the queen and her influence over me was real. She *taught* me to want older women, said they’d be better for me because they’d know how to take care of me. Thing is, I got tired of being taken care of. I wanted to be *loved*. Stevie gives me that. She loves me, sees me as a damn superman just because I care about her. She tells me she needs me, just me. Not the money. *Me*. Stevie don’t ask me for nothing and I can’t say that about none of my family members. Most importantly, she lets me be a man. Shit, I don’t know what could be better than that.”

McClain smiled and nodded. “I feel you, man. I definitely feel you.”

A few moments later, I was pulling my two heartbeats into my arms when I felt a slap on my back. When I turned to see who it was, I damn near fainted.

It was my brother.

“I KNEW I was getting out early. Decided to surprise you, little brother!” Cap basically yelled, pulling me into another hug. He looked good, had definitely gained some weight, but still looked like I remembered him the last time I saw him nearly five years earlier.

“Man, I know I said it all the way here, but it’s good as hell to see you,” I said, grinning from ear to ear. We were at my house, Cap having hopped in the Bentayga with us and talked a million miles a minute the whole way here. He was so hyped; I hadn’t been able to formally introduce him to Stevie and Little Dray.

As soon as we made it home, Stevie headed upstairs to feed the baby. So it was just me and Cap hanging out in the kitchen.

“And you got my car in your garage? Man, I appreciate you for keeping it up.”

“I bought the motherfucker. What you thought I was gon’ do? Throw it away?”

“I don’t know. I’m just saying.”

“I’m surprised you still want it,” I mumbled.

“Don’t start that shit, Skip. Hey...so this is the house you bought? Nice, real nice. You been here a couple years now, right?”

“Yeah, OG picked it out. I had the gym and basketball court added on, but I’m a have to sell it. The layout ain’t good for a baby.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Oh, so this thing with...”

“Stevie.”

“Yeah, Stevie. This thing with her is *real* real, huh?”

“Yeah, as real as it gets. I love her and I love that little boy, too. You stayin’ here, right?”

He shrugged. “Nah, I ain’t tryna impose on you and your girl. I was gon’ bunk with Luigi until I can get my own place.

I ain't tryna stay with OG. She hates my ass, and you know Jamilla is out of the question."

"Nah, you're staying here. I would've kept Stevie's apartment if I'd known you were getting out, but this place got enough room for all of us."

"You sure?"

"Yeah!"

"A'ight, where you want me? In the bedroom I saw down here?"

"Uh, not that one. There are a couple bedrooms upstairs besides mine and the baby's. You can pick one of those." I didn't bother telling him the room downstairs was off limits because it was special to me, to my little family.

"Cool, cool. As soon as I find a job, I'll get my own spot."

I nodded. "No rush. You know I got you. Hey, I'm glad your ugly, big head-ass is out."

Cap chuckled. "Man, fuck you, Skip!"

I fell out laughing.

"Aye, uh...who was that chick with Stevie at the game? Short, thick, red braids?"

"That's Bria, Stevie's friend and the baby's nanny."

"Bria." He nodded. "She got a nice...name, a real nice name."

"From what I heard, your boy Luigi thinks so, too."

"Damn."

LATER, in the darkness of our bedroom, I held Stevie close to me, her body stiff.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

There was a stretch of silence before she said, "Nothing."

"You're lying."

“Why I gotta be lying?” she squealed.

“For one, you’re still awake. For two, you’re stiff as a damn board.”

She sighed. “I...I don’t know your brother.”

I chuckled. “That’s it? Of course you don’t know him yet, but you’ll get to know him, baby.”

“Yeah, but I’m not used to sleeping in a house with someone I don’t know.”

“You slept in the apartment with me before you knew me.”

“That’s different and you know it, Dray. Plus, my baby is in another room. I just...I know he’s your brother and you’re happy to see him. I don’t want to mess that up for you, but...”

I didn’t know what to say. I mean, I got it and would probably feel the same if I were in her shoes. So I finally thought to say, “I hear you. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” she asked my back.

I didn’t respond, leaving our room and stepping next door to Little Dray’s room where I found him fast asleep. A few seconds later, I’d brought him to our room and laid him in the bed between us.

As I got back in bed, being sure to give the little guy plenty of room, Stevie said, “Thank you,” her voice quivering.

“No problem, baby. Listen, I need you to know that I’m serious about protecting you and our boy. I wouldn’t let anyone—blood or not—stay in this house that I didn’t trust. I trust my brother with my life.”

“Okay,” she softly said.

TWENTY-SEVEN

DRAYVEON

“Good morning, beautiful,” I said as I entered the kitchen. Stevie was at the counter, her back to me. So I stepped up behind her, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her neck. She had on a long, loose dress, and I was sure there was nothing underneath it.

Turning her head a little, she gave me a soft smile. “Good morning, Dray. You ready to eat this nasty shit?”

I laughed. “You’re a hater. You know that?”

“Yeah, but I’m eating it with you, so...”

I kissed her cheek, swatted her on the ass, and moved to where Little Dray sat in his swing thing. Upon seeing me, he started kicking and grinning. “Good morning, man! Your mama got you locked in this thing again?”

“I got him in there so you can eat in peace. He already ate,” she said, approaching the table with our food—steel cut oats, fruit, and yogurt.

“I’m so damn jealous of him,” I quipped, licking my lips and eyeing her breasts.

“Good morning, y’all,” Cap greeted, stepping into the kitchen as me and Stevie settled at the table. “That really is a cute baby.”

“Thank you,” Stevie and I said in unison.

“I see he got you eating that healthy shit, Stevie,” he observed.

“She’s eating it of her own volition, nigga,” I cut in.

“Where you learn a word like volition? I didn’t think your ass stayed at that white college long enough to learn a damn thing.”

I gave him my middle finger. “From your mama.”

“We got the same mama, asshole.”

“Naw, Jamilla found your ass somewhere. She ain’t wanna tell you, though.”

“Man, fuck you, ole string bean ass.”

“All I know is, your beefy ass *needs* to be eating this, but it’s plenty of other shit in here you can fix.”

“Healthy shit!”

“That’s what your probably hypertensive ass needs! If I’d known you were gonna come back looking like fucking Rasputia from Norbit, I wouldn’t have been pressed about putting money on your books.”

“Yeah, well...my dick is still bigger than yours and I don’t need shit but some pussy. No offense, Stevie.”

“Nigga, you ain’t gon’ be able to reach the pussy with that gut in the way!”

“Shiddd, I bet my mouth can reach a pussy. I bet that!”

“Oh, I’m sure it can. That’s the one thing your ass been exercising with all that chewing you been doing.”

“Mannnn, fuck you, Drayveon!”

“Fuck yourself, Nayshun!”

I could tell Cap was about to say something else but was interrupted by Stevie who’d burst into laughter.

“Y’all are a whole mess!” she declared.

We were, and I loved that shit. I’d missed it.

STEVIE

Nayshun, or Cap, as Dray called him, was nice enough. He was actually pretty friendly, unlike Shem and Nef. Miss Bethel had been nicer since meeting Little Dray, but she'd been hostile as hell before then, albeit through Dray rather than directly with me. Plus, he was funny. He kept me and Bria laughing when he sat with us at Dray's home games. Nevertheless, it felt weird living in the same house with him at first, but I did get used to it. The good thing was that Dray never left me alone with him. He made a practice of taking Nayshun with him whenever he left the house, even on game nights, and Nayshun traveled with him to out of town games, too.

Since Dray had his brother to spend time and get caught up with, I spent time with Bria or utilized the phone numbers Kim McClain and Kendra Logan gave me. On this particular day, I was meeting them for lunch while Bria babysat for me. It was refreshing to be in a place devoid of so much testosterone. I was really outnumbered at home now with the addition of Cap.

Sitting on the patio of the exclusive Café N, I smiled at the two gorgeous women before me as I sipped water and awaited the arrival of my wedge salad. Since Kim had picked me and Kendra up, only her security was present, sitting at a table beside ours.

"Stevie, I'm so glad you've been hanging with us!" Kendra gushed.

"Me too! I love my little boy, but it's always good to get out and have some grown-up time," I said.

"You ain't never lied. I got so many kids I don't know what to do!" Kim asserted.

"Well, my two boys feel like twenty. Being a boy mom is rough! But I love them both so much," Kendra sighed.

"Yeah, I love my tribe, too. Boys are tough, but I swear my one little girl is meaner than all those boys," Kim said, shaking

her head.

“So y’all really feel my pain, huh?” I laughed.

“We do! But Stevie, I need to let you know that you really don’t have to be so beautiful. Sheesh!” That was Kendra.

“And you wear the most gorgeous clothes! That dress? Girl!” Kim chimed in.

I looked down at the red sweater dress I wore and shrugged. “I’ve had this thing for so long, I probably need to get rid of it.”

“Where’d you get the head wrap? I love how colorful it is,” Kendra inquired.

“I think I got it online. On Etsy, and thanks. Y’all are too sweet. I know my style is weird. But that’s me—weird,” I said, ending on a chuckle.

“Nah, you’re an artist. Artists see things differently, including clothing. I married into a family with a couple artists, so I get it,” Kim offered.

“I didn’t wanna bring him up because I’m sure you hear this all the time, but I am such a fan of Big South!” I confessed.

“Shidddd, so am I!” Kim divulged, making all of us laugh.

“You keep hanging with Kim and you’ll get to meet him eventually. Just know, as fine as you think he is, that doesn’t compare to how glorious he is in person,” Kendra advised.

“Daaaaaaamn,” I breathed. “I can’t wait!”

“Mmhmm. So, Stevie...I want to ask you something,” Kim said.

I nodded as the waiter returned with our salads. “Sure, what’s up?”

“I’m over Leland’s charitable organization, *Juanita’s Hope*, and I’m already working on plans for next spring’s gala event. Would you be willing to donate something for the silent auction, and by something I was thinking a private performance?”

“Really? I’d love that! Yes!”

“Yay!! Thanks, girl! I appreciate you!”

“No problem at all!”

DRAYVEON

“Dray! Dray! Wake up! Baby, wake up!”

Stevie’s voice sounded hollow, like she was calling me from the opposite end of a protracted tunnel. Her words bounced around me in the closet.

The closet.

I was there again, cowering against the back wall, my bladder full, fear clawing at my throat and threatening to choke the life out of me.

Hold it.

Hold it.

Hold it, I chanted internally.

If I left the closet to pee, I’d see what was going on, be able to put a visual to the frightening sounds on the other side of the door.

Hold it!

Hold it!

Hold—

“Dray! Dray, wake up! You’re having a nightmare!”

The terror in her voice yanked me from the closet and slammed me into my bed, in my bedroom, in my house. I shot upright, my heart banging into my rib cage, my head thumping with pain, my breathing loud and labored.

There was a lamp on, giving me a good view of Stevie’s eyes—bright blue with fear. Little Dray’s matching eyes were drowsy, as if he’d been snatched from sleep, too.

“What is it? What...what’s going on, Stevie?” I asked, rubbing a hand over my throbbing forehead.

“I don’t know. I think you were having a nightmare. You were shaking and whimpering, and you kept saying ‘hold it.’”

Before I could respond, a knock sounded at our door. Stevie's wide eyes swung from me to the door and back, then slid down to her body. She was naked as had become her customary way of sleeping, so I said, "I got it."

Leaving the bed, I walked to the door in my underwear, glancing back at Stevie and the baby burrowed under the covers before opening it. It was my brother, of course. Stepping out into the hall while closing the door behind me, I said, "Hey, man. What's up?"

Cap was a few inches shorter than me but wider, of course. Looking up at me with tired eyes, he said, "I heard your girl yelling your name. At first, I thought y'all was handling some business, but then I realized she sounded scared. Figured you might've been having one of your nightmares. I know they used to scare the shit outta me when we was kids."

I sighed, leaning against the hallway wall. "Yeah...I don't usually have them when I'm with her. I think I told you that. I don't know what's going on," I muttered.

"I'm here reminding you of the shit we went through. That's what's going on. Have you told her?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. Ain't tryna run her off."

"Man, she loves you. Stevie Wonder can see that. She ain't going nowhere. Tell her."

"I plan to. Just...just not right now."

"Okay...uh, I think I'ma crash with Luigi for a while, give your mind a rest."

"You ain't gotta do that, Cap. I want you here."

I could see him smile in the dim light shed by the wall sconces in the hallway. "You think I ain't noticed you drag my ass with you to keep me from being alone with Stevie? And shit, I get it. I ain't mad about it. She don't know me. You feel guilty about the things I've done for you. Don't. I'd do them again because I love you, man, and me loving you means I ain't gonna let myself be the one making you have nightmares. I'm triggering that shit."

“Cap—”

“It’s all good, Skip. You said you’re working on a gig for me. I got my car, and my bank account is fat, thanks to you. I can stay with Luigi until I get me a place. No sweat, man. For real.”

He held out a hand and I grabbed it, pulling him into a hug.
“All right, man.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

DRAYVEON

“A private performance? Like, for who? A man?” I asked.

Stevie rolled her eyes. “For whoever makes the highest bid, and so what if it *is* a man?”

“So I’ma be there with you holding the music or something. You ain’t going by yourself,” I replied.

“You don’t trust me, Dray?”

“Oh, I trust *you*. I just don’t trust nobody else.”

“Wooooow, so you think all men want me?”

“Have you seen yourself? Have you noticed how men look at you when you’re out and about? I have, and if looks were dicks, you’d be overfucked.”

“What?!” she shrieked, falling into laughter. We were sitting in the backseat of her SUV on our way to Thanksgiving dinner at my OG’s house.

“Your ass heard me. It don’t help that you got them breastfeeding titties, and that ass? That ass can make many a grown man cry. Shit, I done shed more than a few Stevie October ass-related tears!”

“Dray!” she squealed, shifting her eyes to where Prince sat in the driver’s seat.

“What? I’m paying him not to listen. Ain’t that right, P?”

“Sure is,” Prince responded.

Stevie smirked at me, and I gave her a grin.

“Have you thought about starting a foundation like Leland has? That way, you can help people without having to be so hands-on. Ms. Bethel says you’ve been cancelling your meetings with her, and I know it’s because the season has you busy.”

Damn, OG was telling on me to Stevie, now?

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about doing something like that.” I reached between us and grabbed Little Dray’s Nike covered foot, making him kick and smile at me. “So, you ready for today?”

“You talking to me or him?” Stevie asked.

“You. My boy *stay* ready.”

“He does, and no. I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to spend the day in a room full of Walkers. Most of them hate me, you know.”

“Nah, they’re just misguided. I put out the word that I ain’t tolerating nobody disrespecting you, so don’t worry about that.”

She nodded, but she didn’t look convinced of my words.

“I tell you what, let’s have headphone sex when we get home tonight.”

She gave me the biggest smile. “Yes, let’s!”

“THERE’S MY BABY!” OG gushed, virtually yanking Little Dray from Stevie who was grinning from ear to ear. “Jamilla! Come meet Stevie and the baby!”

My mom appeared in the foyer of OG’s house looking much healthier than when I last saw her, wearing a floral dress and some fuzzy house shoes. She came to me first, placing her slim hands on my cheeks before pulling me into a hug. As I embraced her, I wished I could see her more often, but I realized years ago that it was best for me to distance myself from her and her illness. As much as I loved her, the kid in me could only take that shit in small doses. There were too many bad memories I was trying to outrun as it was.

“Hey, Ma. You’re looking good,” I said as we ended the hug.

“Thank you, baby. Nayshun’s been coming to visit me. He looks great!” Lowering her voice, my mom added, “He said he won’t be here today. You know he and Mama don’t get along.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. Let me introduce you to my little family. This is Stevie and this guy is Little Drayveon.”

“Oh-my-goodness!” Jamilla shrieked as she stepped closer to Stevie. “Oh, she’s beautiful, Drayveon. Her eyes glow!”

Stevie smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

“Look at this fine baby, Jamilla. Don’t he remind you of Skipper when he was little?” OG said.

Turning her attention to Little Dray, Jamilla reached up and rubbed her hand over his fuzzy head, making him grin. “Oh my, oh my! He’s perfect, just perfect!”

That boy was passed from aunts to cousins to OG to Jamilla who refused to lay him down when he fell asleep in her arms, and I spent over an hour introducing Stevie to my huge family. When it was time to eat, everyone made plates and sat wherever they could find a seat. OG had reserved seats for me and Stevie at the dining room table along with her, Jamilla, Aunt Faye, Mr. Polk, and Mr. Washington, OG’s guy friend. Things were going well, and everyone seemed to love Stevie.

Nef and Shem arrived late, neither of them acknowledging me or Stevie, but whatever. I’d been getting the cold shoulder from my cousins-slash-employees, Vic and Demetrius, too. Again, whatever.

By that evening, I’d developed a bad case of the “itis” from the three plates of food I’d inhaled and was more than ready to go home and fall into bed. Stevie was in one of the bedrooms changing Little Dray’s diaper as we prepared to leave when I was called from my seat in the living room back into the dining room by my OG.

When I stepped into the room and saw the people seated around the table, I chuckled and shook my head. “What is this supposed to be, an intervention or something? I ain’t on drugs.”

“Not anymore,” Nef muttered.

“Man, Nef...don’t start,” Shem mumbled.

“Yes, hush girl!” OG hissed. Turning to me, she smiled and cooed, “Sit down, Skipper. We just want to chat with you.”

“We” was her, Shem, Nef, Uncle Ralph—my realtor, Cousin Vic—my lawyer, Cousin Demetrius—my accountant, Shan, who ran my website and was also Vic’s wife, and Jamilla, who wouldn’t look at me.

I folded my arms over my chest. “I don’t need to sit. Me and mine finna head out, so say what you gotta say.”

OG sighed, placing her hands before her at the head of the table. “Okay. We have some concerns about the way you’ve been handling business lately.”

With lifted eyebrows, I asked, “You mean since Stevie came into my life?”

“Yes,” Nef gritted, “that’s exactly what she means. You got me and Shem on the sidelines! I heard you hired like three new dudes including that motherfucker who ate like a runaway slave today and is sitting in your truck waiting for you now!”

“It’s *Stevie’s* truck, and you’ve still been getting paid, right?” I shot back.

“We have. Man, I ain’t complaining,” Shem offered.

“But you’re still here being a part of this ambush, huh, Shem? You know what? I think I *will* sit down. This is gonna be good. What you got to say, Uncle Ralph? Vic? Demetrius? I ain’t been calling y’all? Ain’t been asking for advice before I make business decisions?”

All three of them nodded and started speaking over each other.

“You got that apartment without my help. You see how that turned out, and I heard you just bought some land. I look stupid hearing about what my client is doing from other people!” Uncle Ralph spat.

“And you’re doing all kind of shit without consulting me!” Vic shouted. “You set up a trust for that baby that ain’t yours! My contact at the bank told me!”

“You stopped making deposits into the accounts I manage. Why?” Demetrius, the calmer of the three, asked.

“Because I can. It’s *my* money,” I said, opting to answer Demetrius since he wasn’t yelling and shit. “Shan? What you upset about?”

“Somebody’s been updating your website, putting up links to that girl’s YouTube channel,” she said, poking her lips out.

I nodded. “That’s true.”

“And you keep canceling our meetings,” OG said. “You *know* a lot of people from the old neighborhood depend on your help.”

“If the old neighborhood means so much to you, why’d you have me buy you and my mom houses in better neighborhoods, OG?” I posed.

She frowned. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Matter of fact, it’s strange as hell that y’all in here complaining when I ain’t cut no one’s pay off. I still been making deposits into you and Jamilla’s accounts, ain’t I? Makes me think y’all are more concerned about the control you had over my shit than actually getting a paycheck.”

Mayhem ensued with everyone at the table talking at once. Aunt Faye poked her head in the dining room but didn’t speak. I was paying her fucking bills, too.

“Skipper! What’s gotten into you?!” OG shrieked. her voice rising above the din.

“What you been doing with my money, OG? All the donations I been making to the church? The walkers I been buying for elderly church members, the cars I been fixing for single mothers, the rehab I been paying for? Where’s it been going for real?” I interrogated.

“It’s been going where I say it’s been going, boy!” she shouted.

“Nah, it hasn’t. See, I hired someone to look into all of my affairs. That someone went around the old hood talking to my supposed donation recipients, or at least the ones I could

remember. Most of them ain't seen you in forever, let alone got any money from you. The ones that did get money? They got far less than what I gave for them."

"They a got damn lie!" she countered.

"Even the pastor? 'Cause he said I gave ten thousand for the plumbing. Didn't I give twenty thousand, OG? For the roof and some other shit?"

"No—"

"Don't worry about it. I got new plans for charitable giving that don't involve you."

"What?!"

"And as for the rest of you ungrateful motherfuckers who've been stealing from me, *Demetrius*. Or overcharging me for your services, *Vic*. Or leading me to real estate that you own a stake in, *Ralph*, you're fired. Same goes for you, Shan. I was paying you way too much for subpar work. And Nef and Shem? You know why I'm firing you two."

"Firing us?!" Nef screamed.

"Yes, as in I ain't paying y'all another fucking dime!" I clarified.

Nef threw up her hands. "All this because of that blue-eyed, gold-digging bitch?! I bet she don't even know how fucked up you really are! We all been protecting you! *All* of us, and this is how you treat us?! Huh? Well, maybe if I tell your bitch you're a crackhead murdering motherfucker, she'll leave your stupid ass and things can go back to normal!"

"Fuck you! I been taking care of this whole damn family and you threaten me?! Fuck you, Nef! Fuck all y'all!" I barked.

"You know what? Maybe I should tell her. I could tell her about how Cap keeps taking the blame and doing time for your punk ass. Yeah, she needs to know that!" Nef yelled.

I stalked around the table and got in Shem's face. "You better get your sister before I kick your ass."

“My ass?” Shem screeched.

“Yeah, you know I don’t hit women,” I said.

“Skipper, stop this! Nef and nobody else is gonna tell that girl a thing!” OG said.

Jamilla was crying now.

My pulse was racing, head throbbing as I pointed a finger at Nef. “You know what? Fuck this! I’m done! I’m done with all y’all!”

“Dray!” That was Stevie, and the first thought in my head was *how much did she hear?*

When I turned to face her, I knew she’d heard every word Nef said.

TWENTY-NINE

STEVIE

When he heard me call his name, Dray dropped his shoulders before turning to face me, the expression on his face a mixture of anger and fear. Before I could formulate another thought, he was moving in my direction, determination clouding his face as he gently gripped my elbow, leading me and the baby out of the dining room.

“You got everything? Diaper bag, purse?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes, Dray—”

“Not now, baby. *Please*...let’s just go. I gotta get the fuck outta here.”

Without another word, I let him guide me through the house and out to my truck. A weighted silence filled the vehicle’s interior as we made the ride home. I wished Little Dray would at least babble or gurgle or something, but he was uncharacteristically quiet, his little eyes glued to Big Dray in the darkness.

Once we made it home, Dray followed me to our bedroom, staying near the doorway. “I’ll be back,” he muttered.

“Okay...where are you going?” I asked, sliding my shoes off.

“Out to my gym. I need...I’ll be back.”

“All right. I’m gonna bathe the baby and try to get him to sleep.”

“Cap’s staying with Luigi. He can sleep in his room now.”

“Yeah, you told me that already.”

When several hours passed and he hadn’t come to bed, I started worrying, not to mention the fact I was concerned about what I’d heard Nef say and how he’d reacted to it. He was obviously hurting, and I hurt for him.

Our boy was sleeping through the night now, and I didn’t want to disturb him, but I also didn’t want to leave him alone

upstairs while I went on a hunt for his daddy. So I gently picked him up and laid him against my chest as I searched the house before exiting through the patio doors that led from the sunroom into the backyard, both of us wrapped in a blanket in the cool early morning air. Passing the covered pool and darkened pool house, I entered the gym to find it empty, passing by exercise equipment and stepping into the adjoining brightly-lit basketball court with his initials—DDW—painted on the center of the floor. I found him lying near the northern goal with a basketball under his head like a pillow. He was still wearing the black sweatpants and red t-shirt he'd had on all day.

I stood just inside the door for a moment, trying to figure out if he was asleep while deciding if I wanted to wake him up if he was. Finally, I settled on saying his name, which made him jerk to a sitting position, his head snatching in my direction.

“Why you got him out here this late?” he snapped, making me flinch.

“Uh...I was worried about you. I couldn't sleep and I wanted to see if you were okay,” I stammered, my voice quivering. He sounded so...cold. “I'll...uh, sorry for disturbing you.”

I'd turned to literally run back to the house when he said, “Wait. Baby, come here,” in a softer voice.

I didn't move a muscle, didn't even turn to face him.

“Stevie, I'm sorry. Can you please come here?”

I shook my head. “No. You were right. He shouldn't be out here, and neither should I.” With that, I left.

DRAYVEON

I watched her leave the court and my heart fell. I was fucking this up. Stevie and Little Dray were all I had, and I was fucking us up over some shit that happened way before them.

Grabbing the ball, I threw it as hard as I could, making it bounce off the wall under the opposite goal. “Fuck!” I yelled, my voice echoing around me as I hopped to my feet and ran to my house, making it to our bedroom just as she was climbing into the bed.

Getting in beside her, I watched as she turned her back to me. In response, I scooted close to her, pulling her naked body into mine, spooning her as I whispered in her ear, “I’m sorry, Stevie. I love you.”

Nothing from her, so I rolled her onto her back and spread my body over hers. “You not gonna forgive me?” I asked, my mouth only inches from hers.

“There’s nothing to forgive. I shouldn’t have bothered you. You obviously wanted to be alone. Should’ve minded my business,” she said, her eyes wide with uncertainty.

“I’m your business and you’re mine. You were right to be concerned because I’m fucked up, Stevie.” Kissing her cheek, I added, “You deserve better than me.”

“There’s no such thing as better than you,” she whispered.

Reaching between us, I freed my dick from the shorts I was wearing, nudging her legs open. “I told you. I ain’t always been good.”

Throwing her head back as I slid inside her, she groaned, “You’ve...been...nothing...but-but-but good...to me...”

“Oh, Stevie...Stevie...Stevie. I love you, baby. I love you so much,” I said into her ear as I rocked in and out of her. Damn, she felt good.

Her moans filled my ears as tears fell from her eyes.

“You still love me, baby?” I asked. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you!” she cried, voice full of agony and ecstasy.

“Baby...” I whined.

I fucked her like it was the last time I’d get a chance to, my own tears coming before I could stop them, and after she got hers, I screamed my release, collapsing onto her before rolling to my back and pulling her on top of me.

“Tell me, Dray. Tell me what Nef was talking about. Please,” she softly said.

“I’m...I’m scared to,” I admitted, my voice weak. “I don’t want you to leave me.”

“I won’t. I promise I won’t. I just want to help you. *Please*, Dray.”

“How much did you hear back at my OG’s house?”

“Everything, I think.”

Hesitantly, I said, “Okay.”

THIRTY

DRAYVEON

Nineteen years earlier...

Hold it.

Hold it.

Hold it...

No matter how many times I told myself to hold my pee, there came a point when I couldn't. I just couldn't, so I stood on shaky legs and slowly turned the closet doorknob, easing it open to a burst of sound—loud voices, bumps, things shattering. The sounds were tangled, preventing me from making sense of any of them. I knew the players, the bodies occupying our little public housing apartment—me, Cap, Jamilla, and our dad, Johnnie. Our parents never married, and Johnnie never gave us his last name. Theirs was a volatile on-again, off-again cluster fuck of a relationship. At that moment, Johnnie and Jamilla were fighting, as usual. At nine, Cap was trying to break it up, as usual, and seven-year-old me was scared shitless...as usual.

I didn't have the strongest bladder back then, and fear only seemed to make it weaker. I'd eased the door open enough to squeeze out of the closet and make a run for the bathroom when I heard a scream that made me fall to my knees while still holding the doorknob. Then I heard Cap yelling, "Stop, Daddy! Stop! You gon' kill her!"

I wish I truly understood what was going through my young mind, but I didn't and still don't. I was scared, I loved my mother, and between my parents, she was the kindest, the one who, despite her illness, actually seemed to care about me and Cap. So, while on my knees in the closet, I moved to the back again, finding the shoe box that held my daddy's gun. It was only by luck and his irresponsibility that it was loaded because I didn't even know to check to see if it was.

It was heavy in my little hands that shook as I opened the closet door wide with my shoulder and followed the noise until I was in the living room. It looked like a war zone. The blinds were torn on the windows, the TV was on the floor, the glass coffee table was broken, and there my parents were—my mom on the floor, my dad on top of her with his fists flying as she kicked her legs. Cap was clawing at his back. Daddy threw him off just as I entered the room.

I didn't say a word. I didn't move too close. I just did what I'd seen the people do on TV and what I'd seen once outside our bedroom window. I pulled the trigger and shot my father in the back.

THIRTY-ONE

DRAYVEON

Now...

Stevie sat up, straddling me. “What happened after you shot him?”

“Uh...Cap took the gun from me and yelled at me to get back in the closet, so I did. I don’t think I really realized what I’d done. I just wanted my father to stop hurting my mother, and he did. It took a long time for me to get that he was dead, that *I’d* killed him,” I replied.

“Well, you were just seven, a baby. You’d probably played video games where people had more than one life.”

I nodded. “Yeah, me and Cap played those kinds of games all the time.” I sighed and continued, “So I ran back to the closet. I didn’t even need to pee anymore, which was good because I have no idea how long I sat in darkness crying and scared out of my mind before the door swung open, making me scream. It was a female police officer with a gentle voice, and after she begged me to, I left my hiding place. I don’t really know all the details, but I do know my OG came and picked us up, my mom went to the hospital, and at first, they thought she’d killed him. Initially, she went along with it because he’d beaten her so bad, she had no memory of that night. Then Cap came forward and said he shot him.”

“What happened to him?” she questioned.

“Well, we were poor and black, so at first, they put him in juvie. OG hired him a sorry-ass lawyer who finally got him out after a year, but Cap had changed by then.”

“How?”

“He was quieter, meaner in some ways. Not to me, but he had a low tolerance for bullshit. Still does. I didn’t care, though. He was my big brother and I’d missed him, so I would

follow him around while he and his friends—some of whom had been in juvie with him—did stupid shit like break into cars and steal change or other things. We both got in trouble so many times, we worried the shit outta OG. Maybe that’s why she’s been stealing money from me—payback.” I ended the statement with a halfhearted chuckle.

“Dray—”

“It’s all good. I figured my folks were fleecing my ass. You think it’s fucked up that I fired them?”

She shook her head. “No! I blocked my dad’s phone number.”

“Why? He was calling bothering you? Why you ain’t tell me?”

“Because it wasn’t that big of a deal. I’m telling you now so that you’ll know I understand why you fired them. I get it. I’m just sorry it came to that.”

“Yeah, well...it’s taken care of now. No sweat. Anyway, we kept getting in trouble even when I hit junior high and it was evident that I had talent. That’s when Cap stopped letting me hang with him. I was pissed at first, but I came to realize he was just trying to protect me and my future. He was in and out of jail for petty crimes but had cleaned up his act by the time I got drafted into the NBA. Then I went and fucked up, and he took the blame again to keep me out of prison.”

“H-how did you fuck up?”

I sighed. “I decided to experiment with drugs. I was a damn rookie at the time, and I was just wildin’ the-fuck out. I’d never had so much money, attention, and pussy in my life. No offense.”

“None taken. You already told me you had a high body count.”

“Yeah, so before me and McClain got tight, I hung with another Cyclones rookie, Marvin Tate. He ain’t even playing no more, was taken out by a bad knee injury. Anyway, we were at his condo, and he had a shitload of cocaine, told me to try it. I did, and I ain’t gonna lie, I liked how it made me feel. I

felt invincible on that shit. But the high was short-term, and even though I liked feeling the way it made me feel, I had enough sense to realize how addictive it was. I told myself I'd leave it alone but still accepted the vial Marvin offered me.

“I remember tossing it in the door panel pocket of my brand-new car and leaving it there for so long that I forgot about it. It was the first car I bought, a black Wraith. Awhile later, I gave it to Cap. I was never stopped in that car, but he was—stopped *and* searched.”

“And they found the cocaine,” she correctly surmised.

“Yeah, and since the car was in his name at the time, they thought it was his. He never told them any different, even though I begged him to. You know what he said?”

“What?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“He said I was too important to get locked up and lose my career over one mistake, a mistake I made when I was a young man just starting his career. So he took the weight and did the time. Luckily, it wasn't a lot of cocaine, but it was enough to get him a few years. That's what he was in for when we got together.”

“And you blame yourself? Feel like you owe him?”

“I *do* owe him, but he ain't one to apply pressure. I just... I'm fucked up, baby. I ain't got no business helping raise a kid.”

Still straddling me, she reached over, turning the lamp on. Then she placed her hands on the sides of my face. “Dray, you are a wonderful man who happens to have a past. Who doesn't? But your past doesn't have to dictate your now. You changed, and your brother obviously loves and forgives you. You just gotta forgive yourself. And understand this: there's nothing you could've done in the past to make me stop loving you. I'll never leave you. *Never*.”

Lifting my head, I closed my eyes and kissed her. “Thank you, baby. Thank you.”

We'd turned the lamp off and she was pressed to my side when she said, “You know...you promised me headphone

sex.”

I chuckled. “Shiiid, grab the headphones, then. You ain’t said nothing but a word.”

THIRTY-TWO

STEVIE

“Tell me about your grandfather,” I asked Dray one night after we’d settled into bed.

“Hmm, he was a big man, big and tall. He was a plumber by trade, he loved the blues, loved drinking Crown Royal, loved fishing, his daughters, me and Cap, but most of all, he loved my grandmother,” Dray said, ending the statement with a yawn.

“He sounds cool.”

“The coolest.”

“Do you ever visit your mom? You don’t talk about her that much.”

“No, not really. I...living with a mentally ill mother is hard, so hard that it makes it difficult for me to be around her now.”

“I know the feeling. My dad certainly has some mental issues.”

“Facts.”

“Yeah...Dray, you ever think about getting back in therapy?”

“You think I should?”

“Only if you feel the need to. I think you’ve come a long way from that scared little boy you told me about. I’m proud of him *and* you.”

He squeezed me to him and kissed the top of my head.
“Thank you, baby.”

IT WAS insane how hyped Dray was about Christmas. He hired a company to come and decorate the entire house. I

mean, there were fully decorated Christmas trees in nearly every room, including the kitchen, in addition to the gazillion-foot one that stood in the foyer. That one had a toy train circling it on a track. Little Dray loved that train.

There were Christmas towels in the bathrooms and kitchen, Christmas pillows on the living room sofa, and the entire outside of the house plus all the trees and shrubbery were adorned with lights. It was like living in an amusement park or a department store, but I liked it.

As Christmas Day grew nearer, more and more gifts appeared under the big tree, and I felt myself being inundated with anxiety. What was I supposed to give a man who could afford anything he wanted in the world, and would anything I gave him really be considered a gift when I'd be using his money? This situation was seriously stressing me out!

Well, I did have a little money of my own since my YouTube channel had blown up. Plus, Dray's car guy had finally managed to sell my raggedy car, so I had that money, too. Truthfully, I *could* get him something...but what?

DRAY HAD a game on Christmas Day, an away game at that. So we celebrated a couple days before Christmas with a catered dinner of turkey and dressing with tons of sides, and the three of us—me, him, and the baby—took pictures together in matching pajamas, Dray's idea. By pictures, I mean they were taken by a professional photographer. When it was time to open our gifts, all I could do was shake my head as Dray sat on the floor by the tree and opened the fifty-seven gifts he'd bought the baby, who'd begun crawling and was constantly trying to escape his lap. Little Dray was on a mission to get to the train. He wasn't thinking about the soft toys or clothes or shoes Santa had brought him.

Dray finally gave up, saying, "Gone and demolish the train, dude," through a laugh.

"You spent all that money and he wants the thing that's been here the whole time," I said, laughing with him.

“That little nigga been eying that train all month,” he said as Little Dray knocked the train over. “Hey, you ready for your gifts?”

I nodded. “I am, but you didn’t have to—”

“Yeah, yeah. Get to opening, woman.”

Grinning, I did just that, opening box after box. Clothes, purses, shoes, and the one that made me fall into shambles...a brand-new violin. Correction, a Yamaha Silent Series *electric* violin! It was so damn sexy!

I scramble-crawled to Dray, tackling him with hugs and kisses while screaming, “Thank you! How’d you know I wanted one of these?!”

“I asked Bria,” he replied.

“It’s gorgeous! I love it!”

“I’m glad you do, but I’m need you to actually open that Telfar.”

Frowning, I sifted through the boxes and wrapping paper until I found the bright yellow handbag. Opening it, I discovered a small blue box, a small *robin’s-egg blue* box. Inside was a ring with an obscenely huge diamond.

I looked up at him. “What is this?”

Giving me a lopsided grin, he replied, “A ring.”

“I know, but why? I don’t need a ring.”

“Yeah, you do. We’re engaged. Now everyone will know it.”

I started crying, just blubbering all over the place. I cried so hard that Little Dray stopped massacring the train and stared at me.

Big Dray pulled me to him, hugging me tightly. “Why you crying, baby?” he asked.

Through gulps of air, I said, “I don’t understand why you’re so kind to me, why you give me so much when I can’t give you anything in return. You know what I bought you? A

damn manly locket with a picture of you and Little Dray in it. That's it!"

Silently, he released me, moving to the lone gift that remained under the tree. I watched as he opened it, pulling out the silver necklace and opening the dog tag-shaped locket.

"When did you take this?" he asked.

"Early one morning when I'd gotten up to pee. I came back to our room and saw him snuggled close to you in the bed. I thought it was sweet. So I took a picture."

He nodded, biting his bottom lip. When I saw the tear roll down his cheek, I moved closer to him, pulling *him* to *me*.

Through sobs, he said, "Can't you see? You've given me everything I ever wanted. You gave me a family, baby. A *real* family. You ain't tell me to leave you the fuck alone when I kept coming around although you probably should've."

"You're my angel. I could never tell you something like that," I confessed.

I cried with him and smiled when Little Dray crawled over to us, trying to get in his daddy's lap.

Picking him up, Dray said, "I love y'all. I love y'all so much."

"We love you too, baby," I whispered.

DRAYVEON

I stood in the doorway staring at my brother and his...date. This wasn't a surprise but at the same time, it kind of was in that I didn't know it was happening.

"Didn't you say y'all were celebrating Christmas early?" Cap asked, sounding irritated.

"Yeah..." I responded.

"Then why the fuck you just standing there. Let us in, nigga!"

I did, my eyes darting from him to Bria. "What's up, Bria?"

"Hey, Dray," she said, grinning widely.

As they slid past me, Cap smacked Bria on the ass and she shrieked a giggle.

"Stevie! Look who's here!" I called.

Stevie came into the foyer, still in her matching plaid pajamas with Little Dray on her hip. Her steps slowed when she got a good look at the scene before her. "Hey, Bria, Cap. Y'all came...together?"

"Mmhmm," Bria hummed. "Oh! Y'all all three are matching! That's so cute!"

"Thanks. It was my idea," I broke in.

"Really? You always did have a hard-on for Christmas," Cap quipped.

"Man, fuck you. So...what's going on here?" I asked.

"Yeah, and how is it going on without me knowing about it when I talk to you every day and see you every other day, Bria?" Stevie queried.

"Hey, Little Dray," Bria sang, moving to take the baby from Stevie.

“Nuh-uh. Nope. No baby until you answer me,” Stevie said.

“I got it, baby. Me and Bria been seeing each other for a good minute. We just got us a crib together,” Cap proudly announced.

I smiled. Bria was a nice person, was always there for Stevie for the most part, and she was good with Little Dray, so I said, “Okay, congrats. Y’all are a good look for each other.”

“Preciate it, Skipper,” Cap said, stepping closer to me to offer me some dap.

“Well, this explains you getting off the phone so quickly lately and being so...chipper. I’m happy for you, Bria!” Stevie gushed. The two of them hugged and left me and my brother in the foyer.

“Uh...Luigi know about this?” I asked my brother.

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied. “They never hooked up. He ain’t even step to her, so he’s cool with it. Plus, he’s messing around with Shanté Broughton again.”

“So...everything’s good with you, huh?” I asked him.

“Better than good. I’m happy, like for real happy for the first time in a long time. And thanks for the job, man. I’m liking it so far. Been working on the event, calling all your rich-ass friends. They really like you for some reason.”

“Whatever, nigga. Anyway, I’m glad things are coming together with the gig. The least I could do was give you a good job. The very least.”

“Nah, man. For real, I appreciate you. I’ma make you as proud as you’ve made me.”

I had to blink back tears because...what?

I guess my thoughts were showing on my face because he smiled, saying, “You made mistakes, but at the end of the day, you made something of yourself. You built something, and you’re sharing it with me. I ain’t mad about nothing I’ve done for you, and like I said before, I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

I stared at him for a long moment before pulling my big brother into a hug.

He hugged me back, softly asking, “Hey, you good after all that Thanksgiving shit? I know you ain’t been wanting to talk about it, but...”

I nodded as we ended the hug. “Yeah. I’m good. I told you, it had to be done. The dreams ain’t been back since.”

“Good...good, and thanks for hooking Luigi up with a new gig. He says it’s a good fit for him.”

“Luigi is good people. I ain’t got nothing against him. My boy Polo was looking to hire some security, and I knew Luigi was reliable. I’d still have him on my payroll if I didn’t need to make this change. I wanted a whole new crew. Shit, I *needed* one.”

“Yeah, I feel you. Hey, Merry Christmas, baby brother.”

I smiled. “Merry Christmas, Cap.”

THIRTY-THREE

STEVIE

I was so damn nervous. Like, nauseously nervous, not only because this was a huge night for Dray, but because of the company I'd be keeping. Therefore, it took me way too long to get ready.

"Baby, you ain't ready yet?" Dray called as he stepped into our bedroom in his tux. He looked...fuckable. Very, very fuckable. So fuckable that I almost forgot I was petrified about the night ahead.

"What?" I mumbled, my eyes skating up and down his tall, lean, muscular frame. Got damn, my man was fine!

"You still ain't dressed? We gon' be late, baby. It ain't a good look, me being late to my own event," Dray said as he moved closer to me, adding, "Shit, you smell good as hell."

"I'm scared," I blurted.

"Scared? Of what?" he inquired, placing his big hands on my bare arms as he captured my gaze.

"Tonight, the people. There will be actual celebrities there tonight."

He chuckled. "Stevie, you're in the blogs more than most of the people we'll see tonight. *They* should be nervous about meeting *you*."

"You're just saying that because you love me and my pussy."

"I mean...true."

I rolled my eyes, making him laugh.

"You sure that's all? You're not worried about Little Dray being with someone other than Bria tonight?"

I sighed. "Kind of? I mean, I know we vetted the babysitter and she came highly recommended from Kendra and Polo, but she's keeping him *overnight*. I've never been apart from him for a whole night..."

“I know, but he’ll be fine. She’s got our numbers. Get dressed, Stevie Nix, so I can show you off to all those rich niggas you’re so worried about meeting.”

Through another sigh, I said, “Okay.”

Less than an hour later, I was exiting a limo and taking Dray’s hand as he led me into the St. Louis Sable Inn and Suites, a luxury hotel located downtown. I wore a Kelly-green cape jumpsuit with black stilettos and a black YSL clutch. My locs hung freely and the only jewelry I wore was my engagement ring.

“You look so good, I’m a eat the lining out your pussy when we get home tonight.”

I smiled. “You look so good, I’m a suck you into a seizure before you get a chance to eat my pussy.”

“Got damn, Stevie,” he muttered.

“Youngin’! Bout time you made it! What you tryna do, make a special entrance or something?” Leland McClain greeted us once we entered the ballroom.

As he and Dray slapped hands, Dray said, “Shut up, nigga. Hey, Kim,” while grinning from ear to ear.

“Hey, Dray, Stevie. This is so nice! What a great way to celebrate your new foundation!” Kim gushed.

“Isn’t it?” I agreed.

And it really was. Cap, the foundation’s executive director, had done a wonderful job organizing the event, and from what Dray had told me, hiring staff, as well. The ballroom was elegantly decorated in black and white with a live band playing smooth jazz on the small stage at the far end of the room. Dinner was to be served and Dray was to give a short speech. I was visually inspecting the space when my eyes collided with a standing banner near the doors we’d just entered through, and almost instantly, my eyes began to fill with tears.

On the banner was a photo of my mother, a professional shot of her playing her violin, her body leaning to the left, her

eyes closed, an expression of complete enrapture on her beautiful face. Below it in an elegant font read: *The Athena Van-Vellen October Foundation for the Arts.*

When I turned my attention to Dray, he was staring at me, a slight smile on his face. “I know I haven’t shared much about the foundation with you, but it’s going to bring the arts to inner city kids. I...uh, I know I should’ve asked your permission to name it after your mother, but I wanted it to be a surprise for you,” he said.

Reaching for his hand, I managed to blink back my tears as I stepped closer to him. “It was...it is!”

“Are you okay with it?” he asked slowly.

“Am I okay with it?” I placed a hand on his cheek. “My love, I’m *more* than okay with it. I love you for this. Thank you!”

Then I kissed him, and he kissed me right back.

DRAYVEON

The evening's festivities were coming to an end and it seemed that everyone was having a good time. People were eating and taking full advantage of the open bar. Well, my teammates weren't drinking alcohol because we had a game in a couple days, but it was a great night. Yet, as grateful as I was for all the money I was able to raise, I'd had enough peopling for one night. I was ready to go home and make Stevie scream my name.

"Youngin', my brother wants to holler at you real quick." McClain's voice snatched my attention from Stevie, who was chatting with Bria at our table, to him and Big South, but before I could reply, Bria shrieked, "It's Big South! I knew he was here but he's *right here!* How do I look, Cap?"

"The fuck you mean, how you look? Your ass about to look single," Cap snapped.

"My bad, baby, but it's Big South!"

"I know, shit."

While they continued to bicker, I stood and shook the rap legend's hand. "Thanks for coming all the way to St. Louis to support my new foundation, man. It's much appreciated. Let me introduce you to my fiancé." I looked down at Stevie, whose mouth hung open. "Stevie October, this is Everett McClain, Leland's much better-looking brother."

"Kiss my ass, nigga," Leland shot back at me.

Through a chuckle, Big South said, "No problem, Dray. Good to meet you, Stevie. You're actually one of the reasons I decided to make the trip here."

"Really? Me?" Stevie squeaked.

"Yes, I've been checking out your YouTube videos. You're phenomenal," Big South shared.

"You have? I am? I mean, thank you!" Stevie shrieked.

Shifting his attention to me, Big South asked, “You mind if I sit and talk to y’all for a minute?”

“Naw, man. Have a seat,” I offered.

He dropped into a chair next to mine, and that’s when I thought to introduce him to Cap and Bria who both stammered all over themselves in response.

When he turned his attention back to Stevie, he said, “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but I have a record label as well as a movie production company.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Stevie said, her eyes wide and bright. When her eyes were like that, they seemed electric to me.

“Well, my brother, Neil, is working on the score for a movie my studio is currently shooting, a really atmospheric love story. I’d love for us to meet and discuss you playing on some of the songs he’s composing.”

“What?! I mean, yes! I’d love that!”

“Good. Good. Hey, let me go get my wife so you can meet her,” he said.

We met Mrs. South—actually, I’d already met her before — and kicked it with them for a while before finally heading out. Stevie was so damn happy that she kept her word. We’d barely made it back in our house before she’d snatched my pants down and commenced to sucking me into a damn stupor.

THIRTY-FOUR

DRAYVEON

“Look, he’s about to do it again! Look!” I whisper-screamed.

“I’m looking right at him, Dray,” Stevie whispered back.

Man, watching babies develop was crazy! Little Dray was using furniture to pull himself to his feet and he was only six months old. When dude started walking, I was going to literally lose my shit!

Scooting closer to Stevie on the sofa in the game room, I took her hand and kissed it. “So...McClain’s benefit is coming up.”

“I know.”

Silence from me.

“Dray, if a man makes the winning bid, I’m not going to screw him. You gotta stop tripping, and you are not going to be there when I do their performance.”

“You ain’t going alone. I know that much.”

“Well, of course Prince will accompany me. He shadows me everywhere I go.”

“If by Prince you mean Prince Drayveon Walker, then you damn skippy.”

“Damn skippy? Now that was some old shit. I can’t believe you’re actually younger than me.”

“Only by four years, and never forget, my dick is older than you.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

I laughed as the gate alert popped up on my phone. I stared down at the image from the camera for so long that concern filled Stevie’s voice as she asked, “Who is it?”

Looking up at her, I said, “My OG.”

MY OG DIDN'T COME ALONE, and as we all sat in my formal living room—her, me, Stevie, Little Dray, Nef, and Jamilla—I felt...I don't know. Conflicted?

It had been months, and I'd missed seeing them, especially OG, but I hadn't missed the bullshit that came along with these three women being in my life. I didn't miss being treated like less than a man unless I was handing out money. As for Jamilla, I loved her but as I'd shared with Stevie, I had no more capacity to cope with her issues, a boundary I'd set awhile ago. But she was my mother, and I would always take care of her.

After what felt like centuries, OG finally spoke. "Dray...I wanted to apologize to you about..."

"About?" I prompted her because I wanted, *needed*, to hear her say it.

Her eyes were on me as she completed her statement. "About the money, about me lying to you regarding the money."

I nodded, staring at her for a moment. She looked good, had on a new wig and a little makeup. "I appreciate that, but I need to know why."

With her eyebrows bunched up, she said, "Why?"

"Yeah, *why*? OG, you know better than anyone what kind of money I make. Hell, you know I'm under a hundred-million-dollar, three-year contract right now!"

"You are?!" Stevie squeaked.

"Yeah, baby. I am." I replied, redirecting my attention to my OG. "Not to mention the money I make from endorsements. My bank accounts are overflowing. I'll never spend all this money, not in this lifetime. If you needed or wanted some money from me, all you had to do was ask and you know I would've given it to you. So...why?"

She sighed. "Because...because I knew this would happen," she said, pointing at Stevie.

I frowned. "This? They ain't a damn this!"

“I know, I mean...I knew you’d find a woman and settle down and start a family one day. I didn’t think it would be a ready-made family, but I knew it would happen, and when it happened, I thought you’d turn your back on me.”

“OG...wow. I...that’s what you think of me? That I can’t love and care for more than one person at a time?”

“No...I just—I was wrong. I know I was wrong. You’re a good boy—”

“Man. I’m a *man*. You and Nef seem to have trouble remembering that. And why is she here anyway?”

“I hope not to start some shit because if so, I’ma have to step in. Dray doesn’t fight women, but I do,” Stevie said, her eyes narrowed at Nef.

OG nudged Nef, who cleared her throat before muttering, “I’m sorry for saying all that shit I said. I was just...mad.” Her eyes were on the floor.

“I’m not rehiring you,” I informed her.

“I figured that. I got another gig anyway. I’m Ricki Rain’s armor.”

Ricki Rain was an up-and-coming female boxer based here in Da Lou, so I said, “Congrats.”

“Yeah, she hired me *and* Shem. Said you gave us a good reference.”

Stevie’s eyes shot over to me from where she sat in a club chair in the corner of the room. I sat in a matching chair and my folks sat on the sofa together.

Shrugging, I said, “When her people called, I just told the truth. You ain’t her cousin, so I doubt you’ll be tryna snitch on her.”

Nef gave me a smirk. “Whatever, Skip. Anyway, I’m apologizing because I owe it to you. You was good to me, to *us*...all of us. So, I’m sorry.”

“You apologizing for everybody? You the family spokesperson?” I asked.

She grinned. “Basically.”

“It’s all good. Um...OG—”

“I don’t expect things to go back to how they were. You ain’t got to tell me you’re done giving me money because I have enough sense to know that. I know you got Nayshun handling donations and stuff. Folks say he’s doing a good job,” OG interrupted me.

“He is,” I confirmed.

“Good. Look, I miss the baby!” she spouted, tears in her eyes. “You ain’t gotta give me another dime but I wanna be able to see the baby! Look how he’s grown since I last saw him!”

Now she was for real crying, and I didn’t know what the fuck to do with that. The last time I saw my OG cry was at my Pawpaw’s funeral and that was a long time ago.

But Stevie knew exactly what to do. She hopped up from her seat, and as Nef stood to her feet looking as bewildered as I felt, she sat next to OG, handing Little Dray to her. When Jamilla, who was on the other side of OG, started kissing the baby’s hand, I knew she was there for the same reason.

Moments later, Stevie was sitting in my lap as me, her, and Nef watched my mom, OG, and Little Dray in awe.

“I really like that energy, Stevie, but don’t go to thinking you can kick my ass,” Nef muttered. She was standing next to us.

“Don’t fuck around and find out that I really can,” Stevie countered, making me proud. I was going to fuck her into a stupor later on.

I squeezed Stevie to me as I whispered in her ear. She nodded and I returned my attention to my two elders.

“Uh...y’all can come visit him from time to time, if you want to,” I offered.

“We can?!” Jamilla trilled. “Thank you!”

“Yes, thank you, Skipper,” OG said. “Thank you, Stevie.”

“You’re welcome,” Stevie and I said in unison.

THIRTY-FIVE

STEVIE

Two months later...

This was the definition of a captive audience.

There I sat in the room with the highest auction bidder, a man who had paid a quarter of a million dollars just to hear me play my violin, and I had his rapt attention. His eyes never left me, but he looked so...serious, almost as if he was studying me, not just the music. Honestly, he was eye-fucking me, which made it hard to concentrate, but I was a professional. I'd played in front of huge crowds before. I could handle playing for one man, one very fine, sexy, and rich man. He wore a robe, Versace, I think, and nothing else.

Lord. Have. Mercy.

I closed my eyes and continued freestyling to his requested song—*Heaven* by Kem, as it poured from his obviously expensive stereo speakers.

“No. Open your eyes,” came his voice, rich and smooth and...panty dropping.

I popped them open to see he had lifted from the chair he was reclining in. I watched as he untied the belt on the robe, my eyes involuntarily dropping below his waist, and that's when I hit a note so wrong, it assaulted my own ears.

He smiled. “What note was that?”

“A your-dick-is-hard flat,” I replied, laying the violin on the coffee table as he crossed the room to join me on the sofa.

“I didn't tell you to stop playing,” he said, settling on the sofa and burying his face in my neck.

“No, but my pussy did. I cannot believe you really paid all that money to have your own wife perform for you.”

Kissing the wedding band he'd slid onto my finger a week earlier at the courthouse, he murmured, "Oh, you ain't performed for me yet. Bria got Little Dray all damn day and I'm about to fuck you until neither of us can walk."

"Is that right, Mr. Walker?"

"Hell yeah. I even brought your headphones down from the bedroom, got a special playlist queued up on my phone, and..." He reached in the pocket of his robe and unearthed a small bottle of throat numbing spray.

I grinned. "Oh, so you *ready* ready, huh?"

Leaning in to kiss me, he spoke with his lips touching mine. "Mrs. Walker, I *stay* ready."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A true southern girl, 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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