



THE

*Perfections*

A DRINKY BOSS ROMANCE

SITEL SANDERS

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

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This story was originally conceived as part of the On the Clock series, but as I was writing, it quickly became its own entity. However, there are some references to Billingsley-Davis Inc. The characters also live in Summerville, so it's still in the same universe. You do not need to have read OTC to enjoy this book.

Please be advised that this story contains profanity and very explicit sex.

Love, Shae

## SAVANNAH

---

CHEATING.

It's *such* a cliché.

And yet, it was happening to me. Probably had been for a while now. And I found out in the most mundane, unceremonious way there was.

I caught my husband while I was paying bills.

There I was in our online bank account looking at the latest transactions. Whole Foods, Amex, Wells Fargo Mortgage, Starbucks, boring, boring, same-old. But then I saw something odd—a pending transaction from Verizon for \$128.

Our cellphone service provider was AT&T.

So naturally, I called Verizon to straighten things out and was informed by a very sweet customer service rep named Sheila that someone attempted to use our card to pay a cellphone bill. She was quiet for a moment, clacking away at her keyboard, before saying, “Oh! I see here that the

transaction was reversed. The pending transaction should disappear within twenty-four hours.”

That didn't satisfy me. Clearly, someone had gotten ahold of one of our debit cards. Mine was in my wallet, so I assumed it was my husband's card that had been compromised.

Then again...why would a dirty thief have the transaction *reversed*?

Sheila wouldn't give me the name on the cell account, but she was able to tell me that the billing address that was given at the time of payment was *our* address. The address to our beautiful, palatial Summerville home. The home I'd made with my husband. The same husband whose name was on that card.

Maurice Dayne.

At first, I was in denial, mentally cycling through various possible explanations, none of which made any sense at all.

It had to be Maurice, I finally decided.

But even then, the worst scenario I could conjure up was that he had a secret cell phone. Which, if you think about it, is still pretty bad. But another woman? It never crossed my mind.

I went into the home office and stewed for a bit before perusing the hard copies of his expense reports from work. Sure enough, intermingled with his work statements were three bank statements from an account I didn't recognize. Same bank, similar account number, but it didn't have my



name on it. And there it was. The same charge for Verizon for around the same amount, paid each month around the same time.

That's when I knew.

Stunned, and dazed, I kept reading, quickly noticing a few other odd charges as well.

Kay Jewelers.

*Whoever she is, the bitch is cheap and tacky.*

Applebee's.

*And her palate is trash.*

Coach outlet.

*LOL*

Serenity Spa.

Okay.

That one hurt.

The BillCo spa was for employees only, and Mo didn't get massages ever. Whoever the bitch was, she was a *coworker*.

I didn't confront him, though. There was no point. Maurice—or Mo, as his friends and family called him—didn't *admit* to things. He was above that, let him tell it. If he wronged you, you either stewed about it until it didn't bother you anymore or you held a grudge and suffered in silence.

And I'd been doing that for thirteen years. I was doing it right now, in fact, three days after my discovery, as I sat at a

table full of my husband's coworkers and their wives. Andre Coleman was retiring from Billingsley-Davis, and it was a big deal, so I was here next to my husband, being the dutiful wife, the queen bee of the corporate wives club. And the whole time, I couldn't stop thinking about her. *Her*.

Was she here? Was she watching us? Did everyone know but me?

Whoever she was, she knew about me. It would have been impossible for her not to. My husband was an executive here at BillCo, and I was the woman behind and next to the man. This was no innocent, duped woman. The bitch knew. She probably *enjoyed* the knowing.

Humiliated, I smiled as Andre's wife, Kendra, joked about begging him to buy a boat so she wouldn't have to look at him every day. But behind the smile I'd carefully painted on, I was thinking, and it dawned on me that it didn't really matter who *she* was. She didn't take vows with me. My husband did. My handsome, accomplished, lying, cheating husband.

So what was I going to do about it?

We rode home from the party in silence. That was our norm, so I'm sure he didn't suspect that his house of cards had just collapsed. As soon as we entered the house, he announced that he was going to go shower. I took the opportunity to call my mother and update her.

"Did you dump him yet?" was her greeting.

“Not yet. I need to figure out what I’m gonna do. I can’t just leave.”

“You have your mad money, right?”

“Yes, but that’s for emergencies. I’m not there, yet.”

“Leaving a cheating husband qualifies as an emergency, Savannah. Unless...” she was quiet for a moment. “You’re not thinking of staying, are you?”

My shoulders sagged. That question had taken the last bit of wind out of my sails. “I don’t know. I haven’t made any decisions yet.”

Her exasperated sigh was loud and infuriating. Because I knew what she was thinking. She hadn’t said it yet, but I knew.

She was holding in an *I told you so*.

“See, this is the part I always dreaded,” she said instead.

“Please don’t start.”

“No. I’m gonna start. I told you when y’all first got married to keep a job, because if he ever cheat you or beat you, you’d be less likely to leave. And here we are.”

And there it was.

It didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would.

Maybe I was finally used to it.

“I’m leaving. I am. I just need to get my ducks in a row first.”

“Yeah, well, duck number one needs to be getting your butt down to a doctor and getting an STD test.”

“I know.” I listened closely. The shower was still running. “I think I need to get a job, too.”

My mother snickered. “That should be interesting.”

I couldn’t have rolled my eyes any harder. The woman lived all the way in California and still managed to make me feel like she was standing two feet away, judging me.

“Why can’t you be supportive? I know I don’t sound like it, but I’m in a lot of pain over this.”

“Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry. I support you, you know that. I just hate that you let yourself be put in this position.”

“He’s getting out of the shower,” I lied. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. I love you. Very much.”

“Love you, too.”

I hung up and sat right where I was, staring at the wall. I knew what my immediate needs were; shower, wash the makeup off my face, moisturize, brush and floss, et cetera. But I was completely stuck. There was so much to think about, and so much to do, I couldn’t do *anything*. Mentally, physically, emotionally...I was exhausted.

My entire world had just been rocked.

What the hell was I going to do?

I’d be okay for a little while, but what about long-term?

And that's when the tears started to fall.

When I heard Mo's heavy footsteps, I hastily wiped my face and ran to the closet to undress. And hide. And it was there, when I was putting on my nightgown, surrounded by all the beautiful things I'd accumulated over the years, that I realized I didn't want to give it all up. I loved the life I'd built.

I needed a plan.

Mo exited the bathroom with a towel around his waist, still moist and glistening from the shower. His forty-year-old body was nice; a little soft in the middle, but still fit. That body used to turn me on, especially fresh out of the shower. But now?

I felt nothing.

"I think I want to start working."

Mo stopped rifling through his stack of t-shirts and looked at me like I had three heads.

"Excuse me?"

"My stuff with the Angels is winding down, and the holiday gala is still months away. I need something to do."

Mo frowned at that. "I thought you were gonna oversee the pool getting put in."

"I can still do that. Or we can put that on hold for now."

"Why? I thought you really wanted it."

"I did. I do," I said, knowing good and well I wouldn't be here to enjoy it. It had taken me three years to convince him to have one put in, and now, it was all for naught. "I'd rather be

doing something productive during the week. Maybe they can come work in the evenings and on weekends.”

Mo shrugged as he sifted through his shirts again. Looking for his favorite one, I knew. The Jackson State one. Our alma mater. “Whatever you want,” he said.

His favorite saying. It used to be mine, too. Now, I saw it for what it was.

A pacifier.

“But I need a favor.”

He grunted.

“I want you to get me an interview at BillCo. Or somewhere.”

That got his attention.

“Why the hell would you wanna work at BillCo?”

“It’s not so much me *wanting* to as it is me not having a choice. Mo, I haven’t worked in fifteen years. Nobody is hiring me without your interference.”

His handsome face bore the tortured expression of someone who was trying to figure a way out of the mess they’d created. “Yeah, but BillCo, though? I don’t know about that.”

“What’s wrong? Don’t want your wife haunting the halls of your workplace?” I half-joked.

“Nah, it’s not that. I just...people know you there. It has the potential to be messy.”

“Well, do you know anyone else who could hire me?”

He found the shirt he was looking for. He slipped it over his head and sat on the black tufted armchair he insisted I buy for his side of the closet.

“I’ll poke around and see who’s hiring.”

“Thank you.” I made a big show of yawning. “I’m getting in the shower. You’ll probably be asleep when I get out, so... good night.”

“Good night.”

Phase one of the plan was officially on.

**SAVANNAH**

---

THREE DAYS LATER, I walked into the modest but sleek offices of Jackson Distributors, all dolled up in my best St. John suit and my most comfortable Louboutins. I had a resume, most of which was embellishments, but I was confident that Mo had enough pull to get me a job. Even if I had to answer phones, I was willing. My exit strategy was imperative.

Because my dumb ass signed a prenup.

The pretty receptionist greeted me with a smile. Unlike the sixth floor of BillCo, where I, the boss's wife, was a superstar, nobody knew me here. No one called my name or waved frantically from the other side of the building to get my attention. It was kind of refreshing.

“Hi, I'm here for the interview. I'm supposed to see someone named Brenda Gellar.”

The receptionist nodded, her smile quickly falling from her face.



“Yes. Um...Savannah, right?”

“Yes.” I looked at her nameplate. “Nice to meet you, Pam.”

“Okay, here’s the thing. Brenda is...she’s no longer here. Mr. Jackson is handling the interviews for this position himself. He’s the CEO.” She tried to hide an eye roll but I didn’t miss it. “This all happened quickly. I haven’t had a chance to check your references or anything. It’s a mess right now. Anyway, please have a seat, and I’ll check and see if he’s ready.”

“Okay, thank you,” I said, before walking over to the waiting area to take my seat. The space was lovely, all neutral toned furniture and shiny wood tables covered in issues of *Forbes*, *Black Enterprise*, and *GQ*.

I was shockingly calm given what I’d just learned—that I’d be interviewing with the CEO. Of the *entire company*. With my flimsy resume, I should have been petrified. And I would have been if I was trying to start a career, or if I was taking this job searching business seriously.

“Mrs. Dayne? Mr. Jackson will see you now.”

I stood and followed the young woman down a short hallway. Mr. Jackson’s office was the last door at the end of the hall, smack in the middle, taking up enough space for three small offices. I was impressed by the size and appearance of the room as I entered it, but I was more impressed by the man sitting behind the large oak roll-top desk.

His chiseled jaw, bald head, and designer suit made him appear as if he'd just stepped off the pages of one of those issues of *GQ* in the waiting room. Handsome didn't quite capture the essence of him. Distinguished, maybe. Commanding. Magnetic.

His eyebrows rose when he finally noticed me, although I got the feeling he'd been making me stand there and wait on purpose.

“And *you* are?”

I took a few steps forward. “Savannah Dayne.”

His eyes raked over me, quick and conspicuous. “Why are you standing in the middle of the room?”

“Well, you didn't invite me in.”

He rolled his eyes. “Come in, Ms. Dayne.”

“You can call me Savannah,” I said as I took a seat across from him.

“Ms. Dayne, why are you here?”

“For the interview,” I said, trying not to sound sarcastic. “I had a two o'clock scheduled with Brenda Gellar, but—”

“No, you misunderstood. *Why* are you *here*?” He held up my resume. “I don't see anything here that would demonstrate any ability to perform the duties of an executive assistant.”

“Oh. Um...did someone speak with you?”

His thick brows knitted together. “About what?”

I decided not to play the Mo card just yet.

“Never mind. Anyway, yes, it’s true that I have a gap in my work history.”

“Fifteen years isn’t a gap. That’s a chasm.”

“Well—”

“Your volunteer work is impressive.”

A compliment? I was shocked. I’d only known this man two minutes, but I could already tell he wasn’t the type to give praise.

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat. “In the time since I received my bachelor’s degree, I have overseen the creation and development of several outreach programs in the Summerville community, including the Summerville Angels. My work in that capacity translates directly to the duties of an executive assistant. I’m organized, efficient, resourceful, and I can take the lead *or* follow the leader. I have no ego, only ambition and determination. And frankly, I have *very* extensive knowledge related to understanding and serving D and C-level executives at Billingsley-Davis, and I doubt any other applicant is going to come into this office with that.”

He smirked. “I was waiting for you to bring up your husband.”

“Oh. I—”

“Don’t worry about it.” He scanned the front of my pathetic resume. “Here’s the thing. I have desires that are related to this job that aren’t in the official job description.”

For reasons I didn't understand, a chill moved through me at the word *desires*.

"First of all," he continued, "I require complete and total discretion. Second, loyalty. Third, submission. And finally, thick skin. It may not make sense to you now, but it will eventually. Does that sound like something you can handle?"

A million thoughts churned in my mind as I tried to process what he'd just said. *Submission*? What the hell did that mean in the context of an assistant job?

"May I ask what you mean by—"

"No, you may not."

My mouth dropped open.

He nodded. "See, this is where the thick skin comes in. I don't bullshit or sugarcoat. I also cuss like a sailor and I'm demanding to the point of obnoxious. Is that something you can handle? If not, you can see yourself out."

It would have been so easy to say no and get the hell out of here. In fact, that's what I *should* have done. But I was frozen in that chair, still processing his words, trying not to stare at his handsome, golden-brown face. Which was as scary as it was good looking. Did he even know how to smile? It didn't seem so. But despite the obnoxiousness, which was already on full display, something about him was...intriguing.

"I can handle that," I said quietly.

A staring match ensued, and I lost pretty quickly. His eyes were cold steel. They made me uncomfortable.

With my eyes on the back side of the picture frame in front of me, I said, “Mr. Jackson, let me just say one more thing. I can understand why you would find my resume less than impressive. My paid work experience is...lacking.”

“Yes.”

“But I promise you I have the experience relevant to this position.” I leaned forward and raised my eyes to meet his. “I know how to give a man like you exactly what he needs.”

The corners of his mouth twitched as if he was fighting an invisible force that was trying to get him to smile. “Well,” he finally said, “I suppose we can give this a try.”

“So...I’m hired?”

His eyes went cold again as silence permeated the air. I couldn’t get a read on him. Was he mad? Preoccupied? Or just plain old rude?

“You didn’t even ask about salary. That doesn’t bode well for your business sense. Or *common* sense.”

My eyes narrowed. “You didn’t check my references or do a background check. What does that say about *you*?”

His jaw clenched. It looked to me like he was fighting a smile again.

“I’m gonna let you have that one. Besides, you come highly recommended. I’m not sure *why*, other than your husband’s connections, but I guess we’ll see.”

I let that pass.

“How much are you offering?”

“Well, seeing as how you’re reporting to the owner of this company, the starting salary ranges from \$75,000 to \$90,000. Given your level of experience, or lack thereof, I would be within my rights to bring you in at the base level.”

I went to speak, but he cut me off.

“*However*, I’m willing to bring you in at eighty-two, five. Square in the middle. And the reason I’m willing to do this is because you will have duties that fall outside of the purview of this office.”

“I will?”

“Yes. And I will discuss those as the need arises.”

“O...kay. Eighty-two, five is fine.”

“Great.” He said it without an ounce of excitement. “Go see Ms. Brooks and she’ll get you set up.”

“Okay. Thank you for this opportunity. And for giving me a chance.”

“Good, good. You read the situation clearly. It absolutely is a *chance*. Consider it a quasi-probationary period.”

“Fine.”

“Be here tomorrow at six am.”

“Is that my regular reporting time?”

“No. Sometimes you’ll be here at five-thirty. It depends on what I need you for. Anyway, tomorrow at six, coffee in hand. I take it black with two sugars.”

“Starbucks?”

You would have thought I’d hauled off and slapped him across the face.

“Uh, no,” he said. “There’s a Breville in the kitchen that you need to familiarize yourself with.”

“Got it.”

“Good.” He stood and held out his hand. “See Ms. Brooks on your way out.”

Smarting from the abrupt dismissal, I shook his hand. His grip was firm. His hand was big and meaty. I don’t know why that registered to me, but it did.

I made my way back to the receptionist.

“Pam?”

She looked up and gave me a tight, fake smile. “Need your parking validated?”

“No, Mr. Jackson said to see you and get set up.”

She stared at me in silence.

“He hired me, so I guess I need to fill out some paperwork.”

“H-he hired you?”

“Yes...why?”

She shook her head quickly. “Sorry, I’m just...um, well anyway, welcome aboard!” She reached into a drawer and removed a thick stack of papers, handing them to me over the top of her desk. “Fill those out and return them to me. I’ll get

your parking pass and building key activated while you do that.”

I took the heavy stack back to my seat in the waiting area and quickly found myself out of my depth. I’d been handling our personal finances since the beginning of our marriage, but that was after the money had already come in. I hadn’t dealt with W-4s and I-9s and health insurance and such in *years*.

But I soldiered on nonetheless, using my phone and Google when I needed to. Finally, I submitted my packet and Pam handed over a small nylon bag with the Jackson logo on the front.

“Everything you need is in there,” she explained. “Key card, lanyard, parking pass, employee handbook...” she droned on, but I was only half-listening. I had a more important question to ask.

“Thanks, Pam. Quick question. Where does everybody else work? The lower floors?”

“Yes. One through five.”

“How many employees do we have here?”

She looked puzzled as she answered, “Almost two-thousand in this building. There are more at the warehouse.”

“I see. Which department has the most men?”

Her eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

I laughed to play it off. “I have a single girlfriend who wants to meet a corporate guy. I’m just wondering where most



of them are.”

“Oh. Okay. There are a few in Acquisitions. A lot in Finance and Accounting. Oh, and Operations.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I’ll be on the lookout. For my friend.”

Pam smiled at that. “Good luck to her. Most of them are hoes.”

I burst out laughing and put the nylon bag on my shoulder. “Any advice you can give me? Something that’s not in the employee handbook?”

Pam glanced nervously in the direction of Mr. Jackson’s office.

“Yes,” she said, almost in a whisper. “Do what he says and don’t piss him off.”

**TAURUS**

---

AS SOON AS SAVANNAH Dayne left my office, I was on my phone dialing angrily, hoping my brother picked up.

“Victor Jackson.” First ring. He must not have known it was me.

“Vic. Mannnnnnn, I got a bone to pick with you.”

My brother laughed loudly, right in my fucking ear. “Hello to you too, bitch.”

“Why the *fuck* did you send your friend’s wife over here for a job?”

He was silent for a minute, which was very unlike him. “Oh! You talking about Savannah?”

“Dayne, yeah.”

“Mo’s wife. Yeah, he said she needed a job and didn’t have a lot of experience. He asked me to ask around as a favor to him. We go way back.”

“Man, this woman ain’t had a job in...” I stared down at her resume. “She’s never really had a job before. At all.”

“So don’t hire her.” He sounded distracted. Like me, he was running his own business. Consulting. But I was much more successful at this whole entrepreneur thing, not that I ever threw that in his face.

Anymore.

“I already hired her.”

“Then why the fuck are you on my phone complaining?”

“Because...I don’t know. I’m irritated by the audacity, I guess.”

That...wasn’t entirely true. Reading Ms. Dayne’s anemic resume had caused me a lot of irritation. I was so frustrated by the waste of time, I told Pam to cancel the interview. But when she reminded me that my brother sent her over, I relented. Trying to be nice and shit, since everybody looked at me like I was an insensitive monster.

It was already biting me in the ass.

“Well, you must have liked it if you hired her,” Vic said.

I swiveled my chair around to stare out of my window at the traffic below, hating the fact that I couldn’t dispute what he said. Except the “it” *he* was referring to was the audacity. The “it” that was swirling in *my* mind was something completely different.

“She’s done a lot of organizing though,” I explained, trying to justify it. “Which is administrative. Her husband is high up at BillCo, so she has to have some understanding of what my needs would be. So...”

“Yo, I ain’t seen her in a minute. She still pretty? And thick?”

I thought about her body in that suit. Stacked up like a plate of pancakes. And her face...round and soft.. Pouty lips. Almond-shaped brown eyes. Thick black hair. Full breasts. They looked heavy, too. Just the way I like.

“She’s very pretty,” I finally admitted. “A few pounds past thick.”

“Aw, shit.”

“What?”

“That’s how you like ‘em.”

I chuckled at that. Once again, I couldn’t dispute the facts.

“That ain’t why I hired her, Vic.”

“Did I say it was? See? Defensive for no damn reason.”

“Whatever, nigga. You owe me.”

“Owe deez nuts.”

After hanging up in his face, I got back to work. Tried to, anyway. But one question kept popping into my head.

Why *did* I hire her?

That shit was bugging me.

After a fruitless half hour, I ultimately concluded that it was her last statement that had convinced me. When she told me she knew how to give me what I needed. I knew what she *meant* but...that shit was loaded as fuck. She had to know that. Shit, maybe she didn't. Either way, it did what it was supposed to do, and I caved.

*I never cave.*

The clock on my computer read 3:14. Only three or four more hours left in the workday. Only four-thousand hours until my birthday. Give or take.

Not that I'd ever been into my birthday like that. This was bigger than that.

With only six months left until my fortieth birthday, I was behind. I was supposed to be a millionaire by now. And I would have been if not for my fucking divorce.

Six months left to meet my goal. Might as well have been six minutes for all the shit I still needed to get done.

I started Jackson Distributors five years ago and managed to grow it from zero to twenty-five million in annual billings. That's phenomenal for a startup, but only a small percentage of that went into my bank account.

I was doing okay. Between my home, investments, and cash, I was sitting on around seven-hundred fifty thousand. But that last two-fifty was elusive. It was my Everest. And six months might not be enough time to get it done.

It would be a crushing blow. I'd sacrificed a lot to get here. Time. Energy. Money. Love.

That last one? A big one.

So I was gonna put my head down and work my ass off to make this happen. By any means necessary.

I pressed a button. "Ms. Brooks! Get in here please."

She was filling in. Brenda Mayhew, my last assistant, started out okay, but over the course of three months, she started fucking up. Coming in late, leaving early, on social media when she was supposed to be working. It was hard getting somebody in here who was worth a damn. Older, more mature candidates didn't want to be somebody's assistant, and the younger ones who were willing were too distracted. I don't know if it was a generational thing or just bad luck, but I was at the end of my fucking rope.

Enter Savannah Dayne.

I stared at her resume again. It was trash, honestly. She'd tried her best to play up her strengths, and she had those, but there's only so much embellishing you can do with a gap like that. But that thing she said...

It wasn't all about that, though. She seemed mature, and she didn't strike me as the type to be on social media all day. Most importantly, she was married to an exec. She knew the drill.

Okay, it didn't hurt that she was fine as fuck. But that had nothing to do with anything, because she was married. And I knew that. And I had every intention of respecting that.

Was it gonna be nice to walk in and see her every morning?  
Yeah. But that's just eye candy. I wasn't trying to make any  
moves on a married woman. I don't get down like that.

I took her resume and set it to the side in a stack of other  
papers I'd already skimmed, and then I got back to work.

Six months.

**SAVANNAH**

---

THE LAW OFFICE OF Tanika Bernard was sleek and modern, a complete contrast with the woman herself. She wore a flowered dress and Crocs. and her hair was pulled back into a smart, sensible bun. Her pretty face was completely free of makeup, giving her a plain, unassuming look.

But she was sharp.

“So you got a job? How recent was this hire?” she asked, her brows furrowed in concern.

“Yesterday. I start tomorrow.”

Tan—she told me to call her that—sat back in her chair and sighed. “I really wish I’d met with you sooner. I would have advised against that.”

“Why?”

“Well, there’s the question of alimony. The judge will make the decision on the amount, and you having a brand new source of income will complicate matters.”



“I guess I just didn’t wanna take any chances. I told you, there’s a prenup.”

She waved a hand. “Even if there’s an alimony clause, which I doubt, judges have been known to overturn those. But again, you getting a job muddies those waters.”

“I understand.”

She tented her fingers under her chin. “What’s the job?”

“Executive assistant. Eighty thousand.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “That’s a lot of mud, Savannah.”

“So should I quit?”

“Quitting would be in your best financial interest, yes. But I’m getting the feeling that there’s something else at play here.”

Like I said. Sharp.

“I’ve never really worked as an adult. It’s just something I need to do for me.”

“Very well, then.” She picked up a pen. “Let’s get started.”

By the time I left, two hours later, I had a firm date in place. Maurice Anthony Dayne would be served with divorce papers in four days. I don’t know why we chose that arbitrary date, or why I wanted to surprise him with it rather than discuss it in advance, but that was the conclusion we came to.

I drove home without the radio on, sitting with my thoughts, of which there were many. I would go back to my big, pretty Summerville home and make lunch, then I’d pour a glass of

wine and reach out to some contacts in my charity circle. Then I'd plan dinner, which was always an affair. But I loved it. I enjoyed it. It was what I felt like I was supposed to be doing.

I didn't dream of this life, though. When I was a little black girl full of imagination, my dream was to become a dentist. No rhyme or reason to it, just something that sounded important. But by the time I got to college, dentistry had morphed into hospitality, and my new goal was to become the Black Martha Stewart. I had all kinds of lofty plans to one day run a successful high-end catering business, then get into party planning. I wanted to be a boss, but in a helping field. That was my passion.

But then I met Maurice.

I was in undergrad; he was working on his MBA. Cute. *So* cute. Ambitious. Driven. And he knew what he wanted.

Me.

So, on the third date, I let him have me, and by the time he graduated, he'd already bought the ring and had his sights set on a house for us.

Now *that* was a dream come true, because I never saw myself getting married at all. None of the women in my family were married, some by choice, some by circumstance. There were a couple of divorces, most notably my Grandma Berta, who got divorced at a time when that was unheard of. So independence and estrogen were all I knew.

My mother worked, and she raised me to work. Be independent. Have your own. Can't rely on a man for shit. Those were her mantras. And I believed her.

So for this handsome black knight to ride in on his horse and scoop me up with a ring in his hand and big promises on his lips was a moment. I said yes. Of *course* I said yes. And then I graduated, said, "I do," and the promises came to fruition.

Just as he predicted, Mo got the big job. He got us the big house. He bought me the beautiful white Jaguar I was driving around town in. And he told me I could do whatever I wanted. Work, don't work, have kids or don't. It was all up to me. The world was mine.

But I quickly realized I had to share that world with a lot of other people. The job market in my field was ridiculous, so my job searching and interviewing grew less and less frequent, giving way to my desire to decorate the house and learn to cook Mo's favorite meals. After a while, that became my normal. I stopped looking for work and started being Mo's wife.

A housewife.

I never knew any little black girls who had *that* dream.

I pulled into the garage and turned the car off. I didn't get out. For some reason, the peg board holding Mo's tools and things caught my eye. I wasn't sure what would happen with the house. I couldn't even say for certain that I wanted to stay

here. But we had a life here. We were settled. And now, I was getting ready to upend that life.

Oh well.

I wasn't the one who threw it all away.



The next morning, I strolled into Jackson Distributors with my head held high. I felt good. Rested. I'd gone to bed early to avoid Mo, not that I needed to. He still wasn't home by the time I drifted off. Probably off somewhere with *her*. But strangely, I was at peace with it. I might have been in the house *physically*, but emotionally, I'd already moved out.

And on.

It was my first day of work and I was nervous. Optimistic, but nervous. Mr. Jackson was a scary man, and Pam's warning to me hadn't exactly put me at ease.

Relieved that he wasn't in the office yet. I got his coffee started before Pam led me to my desk, just ten feet from Mr. Jackson's door. She got me all set up with electronics, logins, passwords, and instructions for each. Just before she went back to her station, she gave me this piece of sage advice:

"Please don't tell Mr. Jackson I told you this, but...your biggest job here is to not take things personally. He's gonna be rude. He's gonna cuss and be moody. He's ornery, but it's not your fault. Oh, and don't ever cry in front of him. He's hates that."

I nodded slowly, even though everything she'd just said had terrified me.

“Anyway, you're all set up here. I'll be out at my desk if you need me. Which you will.”

And then she was gone.

I checked the time on my computer. 6:32 am.

The other floors probably didn't start filling up until around nine or so, although it probably made more sense to wait until lunch. That's when I would go down to the café and start my research there.

The plan was to find a new husband.

But for now, the plan was not to run afoul of my mean boss.

With nothing to do, I put away my personal phone and the work phone I'd just received before rearranging things, making mental notes about what to bring tomorrow to decorate my desk. I was so engrossed, I never even saw him come in.

“Ahem.”

I looked up with my hand over my heart. “You scared me!”

His left eyebrow went up slowly. “Where's my coffee?”

It was like he hadn't even heard me. That, or he didn't care that he'd scared me.

“I didn't pour it yet because you weren't here,” I explained.

“I texted you as I was pulling in.”

“I didn't get it. I put my phone away.”

“I don’t need your excuses. I need you on the ball. I’ll text every morning when I pull in so you know to have my coffee on my desk waiting for me. And you need to be standing next to it with your tablet. Did Pam give you your iPad?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Let’s go. There’s a lot to do today.”

He tore past me and into his office. I watched after him, taking note of the fact that the man could hang a suit. Then I picked up my iPad and scrambled to follow him.

“I don’t have a lot of time to explain everything, so you’ll have to learn as you go.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Jackson.”

“Yes, Mr. Jackson. Um, will you be giving me any leeway during the learning period?”

“No.” He looked at his desk and back at me. “Coffee?”

“Sorry.”

Once that was handled, he took his seat. Following his lead, I did the same. I expected him to dive right in and assign me tasks, but instead, he simply stared out of his window for a moment before taking one sip of his coffee.

I waited.

“What exactly did you do at BillCo?” he asked, surprising me.

“I...never worked there. My husband—”

“I know that. But during the interview, you said you had experience serving executives.”

“Oh. Yes. In my capacity as...” I paused, because saying it out loud to him made me a little embarrassed. “I was the head of the BillCo wives group.”

He chuckled. “Sounds kinda sexist to me. Surely there were female executives there. Were their husbands allowed to join?”

“They were welcome, but none ever joined.”

“Yeah, imagine that. Husbands not joining a group with ‘wives’ in the title.”

“Actually it had ‘spouses’ in the official title, but we called it wives because it ended up being all women.” I cleared my throat. “What exactly do you want to know?”

“What did you do in your capacity as head of the BillCo wives,” he said in a mocking tone.

Ignoring that, I answered, “I organized several charity events, planned trips and retreats, headed up the book drives, et cetera.”

“And why did you do all this? To feel important?”

I frowned. “Are you trying to insult me?”

For a split second, the cockiness left his face. “No, I wasn’t. Just...” he shook his head. “Anyway, what I wanna know is if you ever conducted business on behalf of the company.”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So I can expect not to have to explain basic terminology and business etiquette.”

“Um, yes.”

He nodded and stared out the window again. “I worked there for a minute.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Why *would* you know?”

“I—”

“Alright, there are a little over a hundred emails in my inbox. I need you to clear those. My last assistant put them in folders. You’ll see those when you log in. Just sift through and put them where they’re supposed to go. I also need you to arrange travel for me for the second week of July...”

He talked for a good twenty minutes. I mean nonstop, rapid-fire, only stopping for air and a quick swallow of hot coffee. But I kept up and managed not to ask any questions until he mentioned my thirty-minute lunch break.

“And what should I get *you* for lunch?”

He shook his head. “I don’t eat lunch.”

That explained his thinness.

He wasn’t skinny, exactly. More like lithe, and his face had the angular structure of someone who wasn’t working with much extra fat. And at our ages—I assumed he was in his thirties like I was—extra fat helps keep the face looking young.



But the chiseled look *did* work for him.

“I don’t mind going out to get you something,” I insisted.

“It isn’t about you minding. I don’t have time to eat, and even if I did, I don’t generally have an appetite during the day. Anyway, get that done and come back. I’ll have more for you to do by then.”

“Got it.”

Okay.

So.

Whoever his last assistant was had clearly earned his or her firing. The folder system they’d designed was ridiculously counterintuitive. I stared at the mess of an inbox Mr. Jackson had been dealing with and thought it was no wonder he was irritable. The poor man probably didn’t know which way was up.

I cracked my knuckles and settled in for what was sure to be a long, tedious process of organizing his inbox.

Sure enough, it took me almost two hours, but I got it done.

“What the hell is this?” I heard him say to himself just before he bellowed, “MS. DAYNE!”

I hurried from behind my desk and jogged the few feet to his office to peek my head in the door.

“Yes?”

“You wanna tell me what the hell is going on with my emails?” he said, looming large behind that gorgeous oak

desk.

“I was going to tell you as soon as I finished.”

“Finished what?”

I took a few steps forward. “No offense to your former assistant, but it was a mess in there. I reorganized some things and added a few folders to...” I trailed off at the angry, impatient look on his face. He was clearly a man who didn’t like change.

I approached his desk gingerly. “Do you mind if I show you?”

He gestured for me to go ahead.

I eased in next to him and leaned down to see his screen.

“Okay, I created four folders. Immediate attention, within one week, requires response, and non-pertinent.”

He was quiet for a while. A long while. The long silence made me nervous. I shifted my weight from one hip to the other.

“We’ll try it your way, I suppose. Probationary. If it works, we’ll stick with it.”

I nodded and waited for a ‘thank you’ that never came. “Did you need anything else?”

“Nope.”

By the time I finished sorting his emails, fetching him more coffee, smiling when I felt like cussing him out, figuring out the filing system, and learning that he absolutely *had* to talk to

his mother anytime she called, I was dog tired and ready to go home. But Mr. Jackson had to release me to leave, according to Pam, and he hadn't yet. So I waited. And waited. And waited.

By seven o'clock, I only had one thought: what the hell had I gotten myself into?

**TAURUS**

---

WHY DO WOMEN SMELL so good?

Well, not *all* women, but the one who came into my office and stood two inches away from me did. Distractingly, so, which is a big deal for someone like me. My ability to focus is unparalleled.

Or, it *was*.

The whole time Ms. Dayne was explaining the new email system to me, I was trying to figure out what the scent was. Too mild to be perfume, but stronger than lotion. Maybe some kind of body spray? And the smell was sweet, but spicy. Vanilla, for sure. Cloves? Cinnamon? It was impossible to tell. Whatever it was, it was nice. Sexy, to be quite honest. Which wasn't good, because I'd been trying to ignore how attractive she was.

I could have advised her not to wear fragrances in my presence. Blamed it on allergies, maybe. But that wouldn't have solved the larger problem. The problem of her being fine

as hell. Perfume or not, she'd still be that, and I'd still be spending my days trying not to notice.

So I said nothing.

She was staring down at me.

I hadn't even noticed that she was done talking.

And I hadn't heard a word she'd said about my emails.

"We'll try it your way, I suppose."

She was wearing a beige dress today. It hugged her frame, and I'm proud to say I did *not* watch her walk out of my office. Damn if I wasn't tempted, though.

I'm a man. It's what we do. So I wasn't trying to be hard on myself for having the instinct. It was the fact that she was *married* that gave me pause, and her being my employee added another layer of hell no. The potential for mess was just too great, and I had shit to do.

I pressed a button and she answered.

"Can you get my mother on the line? Also, always put her through when she calls."

"Yes, Mr. Jackson."

A few moments later, my mother's sweet but raspy voice rang out through the phone.

"What you want, boy?"

Smiling, I took her off speaker and put the receiver to my ear. "I wanted to check on you, old lady."

“Boy—”

“You feeling better?”

“I’m fine. It was just a little cold.”

“Vic said you had a fever.”

She sighed loudly and dramatically. “Yes. Because of my cold.”

“At your age—”

“I’m fine, Taurus. I don’t know why y’all fuss over me. Do you understand that all the fuss makes me feel worse? Like I’m close to death. It was a *cold*.”

“Sorry. You’re the only mama I got.”

It’s been said that I’m a mama’s boy.

I can neither confirm nor deny that, but what I *can* say is that Ms. Tabitha Renee Jackson was the woman I loved most in the world. Well, second to my daughter, but she wasn’t a woman yet. So it still stands.

I can also say that I was her favorite son.

And we all knew it.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she grouched. “Leave me alone.”

I chuckled. “Yes, ma’am. Did you get my flowers?”

“Yeah, I got ‘em. Another thing that made me think of death.”

“Really, Mama? You’re being dramatic.”

“Uh huh.”

I heard the familiar sound of the *Young and the Restless* theme song. My mama loved her some Victor Newman.

“Who’s that who called me just now?” she asked.

It took me a minute to remember Ms. Dayne. “Oh, that’s my new assistant.”

“Hmmp. She sounds pretty.”

“How does somebody sound pretty?”

“I don’t know. She just does.”

I ignored the questioning tone in her voice. “I called to make sure you got the invitation.”

“Mm hm, I got it.”

“Okay, good. I’m not the one planning it, so…”

“Yeah, I understand. She would have had to be out her mind not to invite me. She’s crazy, but she ain’t stupid.”

“Mama. She’s not crazy.”

She sucked her teeth. “Why do you defend her? Any woman who leaves a man like you is a few shrimp short of a gumbo pot. Can’t nobody change my mind on that.”

“A few…what?”

“You know what I mean.”

That, I did. The hostility between my mama and my ex-wife was both legendary and mutual. I wasted a lot of energy trying to get those two to get along. It was all good now that we were

divorced, but my daughter's birthday party would be their first time seeing each other since the papers were signed.

My hopes weren't high.

"Anyway, do you want me to come get you?" I said.

"No, I can Uber."

"Mama."

"Taurus?"

"I asked you not to do that. It's not safe."

"It's fine. It don't make sense for you to drive all the way out here. I'll Uber. Or Isaac can pick me up on his way."

"I don't know if he's coming."

"Ugh. I'm so sick of y'all. If it's not you and Vic at each other's throats, it's you and Isaac. I'm tired. And if I didn't love you so much, I might say the common denominator is you."

"You kinda did just say it, though."

"Well..." she trailed off. "You need to learn how to get along with people, that's all. People besides me."

I would never say it to her but...I resented that. I'd heard it a million times from various people throughout my life. Cold. Standoffish. Mean. Harsh. It never made any sense to me. I'm cordial, and I don't start shit with people, but if something pisses me off, I'm gonna speak on it. I don't know any other way to shoot except straight.



I wasn't even sure how me and my youngest brother Isaac had gotten to the place we were at now. I loved him, but I didn't *like* him, and I'm sure he felt the same about me.

"Look, somebody will make sure you get there," I said. "No Uber. Alright?"

"Whatever. I love you."

"Mama. No Uber."

"No Uber."

"Good. And I love you too."

After our conversation ended, I fired off a text to Isaac to let him know I expected to see him there. Doing my part to get along and whatnot. Then I thought about my daughter, and the fact that I had to buy her presents without the benefit of having the first clue about what she might want.

Naya was turning seven. Not a milestone age like sixteen, where you can throw a formal event and put a big red bow on a car and know you nailed it. Seven was just...seven. I'm thirty-nine and, well, I have nothing in common with a seven-year-old.

I know that sounds strange. Probably fucked up, too. But once she was out of the toddler stage, and old enough to start becoming a real little person, I found this whole fatherhood thing a bit more challenging than I expected.

That really does sound fucked up. Even in my head.

I loved that little girl with every fiber of my being. I just didn't...*get* her. Amber, my ex-wife, seemed to enjoy that, and the fact that she was closer to Naya. She never *said* it, but she didn't have to. When I brought Naya back after our weekends, and Amber asked how it went, the fucking joy on her face when Naya tried and failed to hide how relieved she was to be home was infuriating.

So the pressure was on.

I had to show out for seven.

**SAVANNAH**

---

TWO DAYS UNTIL DIVORCE day.

I was nervous as hell, and I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like I was the one who had done something wrong. Mo had thrown it all away. And for what? The thrill of something new? Everything new eventually becomes old, and then you're right back where you started.

He'd find out about that soon enough.

I decided to stop and get a drink on the way home. Something strong to soothe my frayed nerves and help take my mind off of my impending divorce. I'd called and asked Fawn, my good friend, to meet me at Fiveoclock, the bar on BillCo's campus. She agreed, and five minutes after I got us a table outside on the patio, where it was quieter, she breezed in. All smiles, as usual.

After our hugs and our kisses, she took her seat and looked me over.

"Well, you're all in one piece," she announced.

“What does that mean?”

She shrugged and laid her napkin across her lap. “Nobody’s seen or heard from you in days. Is everything okay?”

“Not really.”

The waiter came just then and took our drink orders. After he left, I looked at Fawn solemnly. “I’m divorcing Mo.”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head slowly. “Why would you do that?”

“He cheated.”

She blinked several times. “Is it, like, a one-time thing, or was it a full-blown affair?”

Ah, yes. In my circle of friends, that question was often the difference between staying a wife or becoming a divorcee. Because a lot of us look the other way on a one-time thing. Anyone can slip, we think. Is it really worth it to throw it all away over one little indiscretion? The consensus seemed to be no, of course not. Wealthy black husbands weren’t exactly growing on trees around here.

Grin and bear it.

What Fawn was saying, without saying it, was that I needed to think long and hard about this. Because where would I find another Mo?

And she wasn’t wrong. But I had given it a lot of thought and figured I *could* find another Mo. That’s why I’d positioned myself where I had.

I knew what I was doing.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” I answered. “Do you understand that I had to make an appointment with my gynecologist? I’m gonna get myself checked for *STDs*, Fawn. If he loved me...if he wanted to stay married to me, he wouldn’t put me through this. It’s done.”

Before she could respond, our waiter returned with our mojitos. I took a long sip and felt myself relax. Fawn left her drink right where it had been delivered. She was staring at me curiously.

Finally, in a hushed voice, she asked, “How’d you find out?”

“Long story, but basically, I found something in our bank statement.”

“Damn,” she whispered. She looked like *she’d* been betrayed. “I’m so sorry.”

And then I realized that yes, she was upset for me, but she was also upset for *her*. Because now, she was thinking. Worrying. I knew her husband well; Norris was a good guy. She probably had nothing to worry about. But she would, because this hit close to home. If it could happen to me, it could happen to her.

“It is what it is,” I said. “I’m fine. I mean, it’s upsetting, obviously, but I’ll be okay. I got a job.”

At that, Fawn looked horrified, like I’d just told her I got a pet alligator.

“A *job*? Why?”

“Safety net.”

“You’ll get alimony.”

I swallowed a gulp of mojito. “I can’t rely on that. Besides, it’s part of my plan. I know what I’m doing.”

“Well I know that part is true,” she said with a gleam in her eye. “Nobody can execute a plan like Savannah Dayne.”



I was smack in the middle of cooking dinner—blackened salmon, dirty rice, and asparagus with sesame seed butter—when Mo called me. With a spoon in one hand and a wine glass in the other, I used my knuckle to press the button on the phone, then again to activate the speaker. “Hey,” I said flatly. At this point, I was done pretending.

“Yeah, hey. I’m not gonna make it home for dinner. I have to entertain a client. It just came up, or I would have told you.”

I chuckled to myself. Clearly, *he* was done pretending as well. “Fine. Have fun.”

“You, too.”

*Click.*

I hit the button and drank some more, eyeing the pan with a sigh. I’d cooked enough for two people for two nights. And that was fine, because I still enjoyed this part, even if Mo didn’t deserve it.

I liked taking care of people.

Which is odd, because taking care of my mother when I was younger felt like a burden, although perhaps it felt that way because I *had* to. I took care of my husband because I wanted to.

I finished up dinner, ate in front of the television, then cleaned the kitchen. As I was putting the food away, I went ahead and packed my lunch. This was all very normal. Routine. But what I did after that was decidedly not.

For some odd reason, I packed a second lunch and put it in the fridge before heading off to shower.

When I arrived at the office the next morning, two things weighed heavily on my mind. One, that I was only one day away from serving my husband divorce papers. And two, I'd brought two lunches, one of which was for a very scary man who claimed not to ever eat it.

It was anyone's guess as to how he would react. But who gets mad about food? Nobody, but lots of people get mad when you make assumptions, and that's kinda what I was doing now.

Oh, well.

I *meant* well.

I got the Breville started and put my work phone on the loudest setting so I wouldn't miss Oscar the Grouch when he pulled in and texted me to trumpet his glorious arrival.

Pam arrived shortly after I did. I was telling her good morning when my phone beeped loudly.

It was him.

I hurried to the Breville and got his mug of coffee ready, grabbing my iPad on the way back to his desk. When he walked in, looking very nice in a grey suit, he actually looked pleased to see that coffee and assistant were in place. Well, maybe pleased is too strong a word. He didn't look *mad*. Which was a nice change. And good enough.

“Good morning Mr. Jackson.”

“Yep.” He passed me and dropped his bag next to his chair. He sat, powered up his computer, and took his first sip of coffee while I waited patiently.

“Alright, first things first,” he said. “Get me a reservation for five people at Smoke.”

“The cigar bar?”

“Tonight at seven. Also, my daughter's birthday is coming up and I need you to get her some gifts.”

“Daughter?”

“Yes.”

“I had no idea. Is she your only child? Are you married?”

“Yes. No. And please don't ask me personal questions. Anyway, she's turning seven.”

*Ugh.*

“Okay. What does she like?”



He stared out the window for a few moments before turning back to me.

“To tell you the truth, I have no idea. I mean, I know she’s into dolls, but she does most of that toy shit—*stuff* with her mother. When she’s with me, we have experiences.”

I nodded. “I don’t have any kids, so I don’t have the first clue what to buy a seven-year-old girl.”

“That’s what search engines are for.”

*Why is he like this?*

“Uh, okay but can you just give me a little something about her? What’s she into? What does she wanna be when she grows up? What shows does she watch? Anything.”

He sighed and shot me a look like he’d rather be anywhere else talking about anything else. For a brief moment, I wondered if I was asking too many questions, but then I remembered I was the normal one here. I *had* to ask questions. I didn’t know this little girl from Adam.

“She wants to be a hairdresser, but that’s not happening if I have anything to do with it. And she watches Doc McStuffins. Disney Channel shows, too, I think. I don’t know. She doesn’t watch tv with me.”

“Okay. That’s enough to start. I’ll figure it out.”

“Yes, you will.” He unlocked his desk drawer and reached all the way to the back. When his hand reemerged, he was holding a gold Amex.

“Take this, buy the gifts, get them wrapped, and have them sent here.”

I nodded as I took the card from him. “Is there a budget or a limit I shouldn’t go over?”

“For my daughter? Of course not.”

That was sweet. Or it *would* have been sweet if he wasn’t such an asshole.

“Anything else?”

“For now, no.”

I turned to retreat but stopped short when I remembered. “By the way,” I said, as I turned back around to face him. “I know you said you don’t eat lunch, but I had some extra food after I packed my lunch so...there’s a container in the fridge.”

He quirked an eyebrow.

“Well, not that you’d be heating your own lunch,” I said. “I guess...what I’m trying to say is if you find yourself wanting something to eat, let me know and I’ll heat it up for you.”

He stared at me, his expression unreadable, and I began to fidget, shifting my weight from one leg to the other.

“Ms. Dayne, I told you I don’t eat lunch. Another thing about me that you might find relevant is that I’m not in the habit of repeating myself. Nice gesture, but unnecessary. Please get to work.”

I nodded. “Yes, Mr. Jackson. Sorry.”

Well, that was that. No more being nice. The man was set in his ways, and there was no reasoning with a person like that. I was desperately trying not to think of him as an unrepentant prick, but he was making it very difficult.

Who turns down food?

Nevertheless, I got to work. Smoke was booked solid, so I had to finesse my ass off to get the reservation Mr. Jackson wanted. And by finessing my ass off, I mean dropping Mo's name. His godmother's husband was the owner.

That connection, and all others, would be severed tomorrow.

But strangely, that fact wasn't what was needling at me once I ended the call. I was wondering about this little outing at Smoke. Was it a date? With five people, probably not. It was likely business. That made more sense. Yet I still wondered about it, because I'd been to Smoke several times with Mo and friends. It was a very sexy place.

Then again, it was Taurus Jackson. Who the hell would go on a date with *that* robot? He didn't even seem capable of having fun. Or enjoying himself. Or showing someone else a good time. He was probably a robot in the bedroom, too.

*Why am I thinking about that man in the bedroom?*

I shook my head to clear those thoughts and finished my tasks, mentally scheduling some time to go downstairs and scope out the male population. This was an important part of my exit strategy, and I was slacking.

I made a mental vow to get my head in the game.

I had no time to waste.

**TAURUS**

---

“MACALLAN, PLEASE,” I TOLD the waitress. Melanie was her name. “And this is all on my check.”

Melanie nodded and moved on to Trenton, a man I was currently wooing. In fact, I was wooing every man at this table. They just didn’t know it yet.

Trenton owned a trucking company. Hendrix, a warehouse. Aaron had friends in high places in Langston, a neighboring town, and Markell was on the City Council.

They all had something I wanted.

And I always get what I want.

Trenton chuckled quietly as Melanie retreated. “You still drinking that bullshit, huh?”

I shrugged. “I like a good Scotch.”

“Nigga, get you some Hennessy. Put some hair on your chest.”

They all laughed, so I did, too. I wouldn't say they were my friends, necessarily, but we'd hung out before. To be quite honest, I'm not sure I could call *anyone* in my life a friend. That fact didn't bother me, but it did make me wonder if I was missing something.

"So what's good, man?" Hendrix said.

"Well, I called this meeting of misfits because I think we can help each other." I looked down, in search of my bag with the printouts I needed, and quickly realized it wasn't fucking there. Wracking my brain, I remembered leaving it on the edge of my desk.

Fuck.

"Hold on, I need to make a quick call," I said. "Get some cigars, fellas. On me."

Once they were safely out of earshot, I dialed my new assistant, rolling my eyes as one ring turned to two, then three, then four before she finally picked up.

"Mr. Jackson," she said, greeting me appropriately.

"Four rings, Ms. Dayne."

"Well...I'm off the clock."

"You're *never* off the clock, remember?"

A few silent seconds ticked by before she said, "What can I do for you?" in a clipped tone. I ignored that.

"I left my bag on my desk. You need to retrieve it and bring it to me at Smoke. I'm on the roof."

“Right now?”

“Of course.”

She was quiet for a moment. “That’s kind of far from my place.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Right. Okay, I’m—”

“Are you still at the office?”

“I’m down the street.”

“Good. Step lively.”

A table full of attractive women smiled at me as I made my way back to my party. I flashed one back, but I didn’t stray from my path. I was about business tonight, not hooking up.

Even though it had been four months since I’d gotten some.

Plus, my mind was racing. More specifically, I was pissed at myself. Not about the missing papers. I knew my business inside and out; I could spout of every word of that four-page report without even breaking a sweat.

No, I was pissed because right before I left, I grabbed that container of lunch Ms. Dayne brought and snuck into my bag. Earlier, while she was at lunch, I’d gone to the kitchen to get some water and saw it sitting there, looking all lonely and delicious. I popped the top, and the smell of it wafted into my face; salmon, rice, and asparagus with sesame seeds on top. That shit hit so hard, my stomach started rumbling, and that *never* happens to me before eight pm.

But after what I'd said to her, I couldn't renege and lose ground. So I plotted on it, and just before I left for the day, I snuck back into the kitchen, grabbed it, and packed it. Then my brother, Isaac, called me talking all kinds of bullshit, and I got sidetracked and forgot to grab the bag on the way out.

So now, the question was whether or not she would see it. And if she did, would she say something.

I fucking *hated* the thought of her knowing about it.

Back at the table, my party was engaged in a game of some sort, rating women who were sitting at tables nearby. I didn't judge outwardly, but my mind was working overtime judging the fuck out of them for those juvenile antics. I was almost forty years old; the fuck did I look like shouting out numbers like a freshman in high school?

"Oh...who is that?" Aaron asked. "Y'all know her?"

I followed his eyes and there she was, strutting toward us with a little smile on her face. It was interesting...Ms. Dayne walked different outside of work. Those hips swayed a lot more. Her legs seemed longer. Her large breasts bounced with every down step.

Ms. Dayne was a fine woman.

No denying that.

No denying that ring on her finger, either, though.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she purred, her voice as sweet and smooth as honey. She *sounded* different, too.



I sat up and cleared my throat. “This is my assistant, Ms. Dayne. Ms. Dayne, these are business associates of mine.”

Ms. Dayne shared a smile with them before turning her attention toward me. “May I speak with you for a moment, Mr. Jackson?”

“Of course.”

I stood and followed her inside. That sexy walk led me all the way to the hostess station before we stopped.

The hostess reached below her and pulled out my bag, passing it over the counter to Ms. Dayne.

She held it out to me. “I didn’t wanna give it to you out there because I didn’t want them to know you forgot it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I mean, I was pleased, but I was also surprised. That’s the way *my* mind works. I concern myself with my image because it affects my business, but the fact that she did the same, without even being told, was refreshing.

And kinda sexy.

*Get the thought out your head.*

I put my bag on my shoulder and nodded toward the patio. “Did you wanna sit for a minute? Maybe have a drink?”

*Where the hell did that come from?*

She glanced toward the door and started to speak before stopping suddenly, her eyes going wide.

“You okay?” I asked, studying her face. She looked like she’d seen a ghost.

She blinked rapidly and took a deep breath. “Yeah...you didn’t see that?”

“What?”

“That lightning?”

I shook my head. “No. So, drink?”

She was trembling now.

“Ms. Dayne?”

“I...” she trailed off and pulled out her phone. Her hands shook as she frantically pressed buttons and swiped from one screen to the next. I was confused as fuck, and starting to lose patience.

“Ms. Dayne, are you having a medical emergency? What’s happening here?”

“No, sorry. I...I have weather anxiety.”

“What the hell is weather anxiety?”

“I get nervous when it storms.” She shook her head. “It’s stupid.”

I was inclined to agree with that assessment, but I didn’t tell her that. “Well, I need to get back to my guests. Are you okay to drive home?”

“Yeah. I checked the weather app. It’s headed this way, but I can probably beat it.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

She nodded and scurried off, that sexy walk long gone. She was practically running, now, and I stood there and watched until she was out of my line of sight, wondering what it must have felt like to be afraid of the weather. *Kids* are scared of thunder, and that made sense to me. Naya would climb into our bed on stormy nights and burrow under the covers, shutting out the world around her until the danger had passed. But Naya was four or five at the time. Ms. Dayne was thirty-something.

Like all things I couldn't make sense of, I put that out of my mind and made my way back to my table. The guys had already lit up, so I grabbed the Cuban one of them ordered for me and lit up, too.

After a few puffs, I was getting ready to make my pitch when Markell opened his big ass mouth.

“Aight, so we not gonna talk about the thick, sexy elephant in the room?”

They all laughed.

Shrugging that off, I answered, “Nothing to talk about. She works for me. And she's married.”

“Married? Damn.”

I nodded and reached into my bag for the printouts I needed. I had a goal to accomplish, and talking about my assistant, however fine she might be, wasn't gonna get me there.

I had no choice but to *think* about her, though, because right there on top of my printouts was a pink post-it note, written in her handwriting.

*I don't know what you're doing, but I have no doubt that you'll get it done.*



I was tired as hell when I got home. Talking business tends to drain me. But it was a good kind of tired, because the meeting had been productive. I'd talked Markell into backing my expansion in a few years, which was my biggest hurdle going into tonight, and I'd gotten commitments from the other three to supplement my needs. All in all, not a bad evening.

As I was pulling into my driveway, and the rain stopped battering my windshield, Ms. Dayne crossed my mind. I wondered if she got home okay and if she was feeling any better now that the thunder and lightning had stopped.

I also wondered about that little note she left me.

It was...sweet. Unexpected. Encouraging. And if I'm being honest, it made me feel good.

And now she was on my mind. Again.

I thought about texting to see if she made it home, but ultimately decided not to. It had been two years since my divorce, but the memory of what it felt like to be a husband

was still fresh in my mind. I wouldn't have wanted some other man checking up on my wife and her well-being, employer or otherwise.

She was probably fine.

Walking into my house still felt strange sometimes. My decorator got me right, blending modern and transitional elements to create a sleek, masculine effect. The most common observation first-time visitors made was, "It looks expensive." Hell, it *was* expensive, and that's what was strange. This place was a far cry from the shit holes we lived in when I was growing up.

I went straight to the state of the art kitchen I never used and washed my hands before checking my fridge. Ron, my chef, packed my meals and refrigerated or froze them with detailed reheating instructions. Tonight's dinner could either be chicken with spaghetti carbonara or stuffed chicken breast with zucchini.

I looked at them, then at my bag, ultimately pulling out Ms. Dayne's Tupperware dish and setting it on the counter. I went back and forth in my mind. It was *so* fucking petty but... something in me felt like this was a power struggle. If I ate it, she would win. If I didn't, it would go to waste and I would lose. Either way, she'd know I took the container when she looked in the fridge tomorrow morning. I could lie but...for what?

When I opened the lid, the delicious aroma wafted into my face again and my stomach decided for me. Traitorous innards.

I put it in the microwave.

Once hot, I delivered it all to a plate. At the first bite, my eyes closed involuntarily as the flavors washed over my tongue. It had been so long since I had a home-cooked meal. I mean, Ron's food counted, I guess, but I paid for that. And since my mother didn't drive anymore, and I was too busy to get to her Sunday dinners with any regularity, Mama's plates were no longer part of my life.

So this was it.

And it definitely filled the void.

Every bite was perfect. So perfect, I ate the entire meal standing up at my counter because I didn't want to waste valuable chewing time walking it over to the table.

I don't know if it was my full stomach or the beer I had with my meal, but I was feeling...something. Grateful, for sure. Sentimental, which was weird. Also...cared for, I guess. After two years on my own, I'd forgotten what it felt like for somebody to give a fuck about me. A woman, anyway. A woman who wasn't my mother.

It was nice.

But she was married. Married to the luckiest motherfucker on earth. Homeboy was getting good food, a pretty face, and what I would bet a million dollars was good sex. *Really* good sex.

Because how could it not be good? She was thick and curvy and soft and eager to please. I noticed that about her

immediately; she wanted me to like her. To think she was smart and capable. And I did. But more than that, she wanted to *please* me. She didn't want to disappoint me, and I found that alluring.

But it didn't matter. She was off limits, and I wasn't the side-nigga type. Too messy, and I ain't never been grimy like that. I never cheated on my wife, and I'd never been the man anybody cheated with. So I needed to find a good place to store all these thoughts I was having about Ms. Dayne.

And I needed to figure out how to get her to cook for me every day.

**SAVANNAH**

---

I MADE IT HOME right before the sky opened up, my hands shaking the entire way. I could only imagine what Mr. Jackson thought of me. If he thought about me at all. Probably laughed at me once I left. I mean, what grown adult woman is afraid of thunder and lightning?

I was embarrassed by the way I acted at Smoke, all skittish and scary. I practically ran out of there. I don't even think I politely declined his invitation to stay and have a drink.

I shook my head.

There was nothing I could do about it now.

I'd driven home like a bat out of hell, with my radio blasting to drown out the thunder and my anxious thoughts. And now that I'd made it, I should have been relieved.

But I wasn't. Because Mo's car was sitting in the garage when I pulled in. Now that I was mentally checked out of this marriage, that shiny black BMW was like a harbinger of



doom. An omen. If my life was a movie, someone would be yelling, “Don’t go in the house, girl!” at the screen.

It’s not that I was afraid. Not of *him*. I just didn’t want to deal with playing the wife anymore. Knowing what I knew, walking into my home and saying hello, asking about his day...it all felt like a lie. And I’m not a liar.

Reluctantly, I exited my car and walked into my house to greet my husband—for the last time. The weight of that hit me all at once, and a flood of unwanted tears filled my eyes.

As soon as my hand hit the doorknob, it was opening, and there was my husband, standing in front of me with a glass of wine.

“What’s this?” I asked, averting my teary gaze.

He took my purse off my shoulder. “I heard thunder a minute ago. I figured you’d be a wreck driving home.”

Ugh.

Sometimes he could be so thoughtful. Why did he have to be that *now*? It only made me feel worse.

I accepted the glass, taking a big gulp as Mo set my bag on the hall table. That first swallow only took a few seconds to calm me down a little, and I was grateful for that.

He stood there, staring at me expectantly.

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t get a thank you kiss?”

The nerve. Just the thought of my lips touching his made me queasy. But I obliged anyway, anxious to get it over with.

The last kiss.

Mo was hot on my heels as I made my way to the kitchen. It would be lamb chops tonight, and I needed to get started.

“What’s wrong with you?” he demanded. “Bad day at work?”

“No. Work is fine.” I pulled a Ziploc bag full of spice-rubbed lamb out of the fridge and set it, an onion, a few cloves of garlic, and the butter dish on the counter next to the stove.

“You’ve been acting weird lately.”

“I’m fine, Mo. Just tired.”

He was suspicious. For good reason, I guess, although he had no idea he was the cause of my behavior. But I paid no attention to him as he sat on a counter stool, alternating between staring at his phone and watching me cook. I was on a mission; this was going to be the best dinner he’d ever had, because it was the last meal he’d ever get from me. Marital death row. Dead husband walking.

But there was another reason for my focus. One I wasn’t quite ready to acknowledge yet, because it was...well, pretty terrible. A small part of me—I can’t believe I’m admitting this—deep down, deep *deep* down, was already planning lunch tomorrow. More specifically, I was planning to pack a lunch for Mr. Jackson, so I wanted it to taste perfect.

See?

Terrible.



I stumbled into the office almost twenty minutes late the next morning.

Also terrible.

Mo left before me this morning, and that was a huge relief. But I was so preoccupied by the fact that he was getting served today, my stomach was twisting and turning into what felt like baseball-sized knots, and my hands were shaking so bad I had to ball them into fists. When I was putting on my makeup, I messed up my mascara and eyeliner and had to wash my face and start all over. Then I left the house without my work phone, which meant I had to drive back to retrieve it. I was damn near in tears by the time I got on the expressway, and I was just getting off the exit when Mr. Jackson texted that he was pulling in.

So I was gonna piss off *two* men today.

As soon as I walked through the double doors, Pam looked at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. Slamming sounds thudded from Mr. Jackson's office, so I hurried straight to the kitchen to start the Breville. I didn't even make it to my desk before I heard him yell my name.

"Ms. Dayne! In my office!"

I trudged in and began apologizing immediately. After the fourth, "I am *so* sorry," his face didn't get any softer.

“You do remember that you’re in your probationary period, right?”

I stared down at the floor. “Yes.”

“Okay, so then you must also realize that failing to arrive on time is a very bad look for you.”

“I do.” I looked up at him. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

He didn’t acknowledge that.

“I’m going to set my stuff down and get your coffee. I’ll be right back.”

“Fine.”

Near tears again—how was this man able to make me feel like a kid who’d gotten in trouble with daddy?—I managed to fill his mug and grab my iPad without falling, breaking, or spilling. Back in his office, I took a deferential posture as I approached his desk.

The cold look in his eyes made me want to disappear .

“Alright, here we go.” He took a sip of coffee. “Emails first. Then I need you to set up meetings with my warehouse managers. I also need a meeting with my head of sales. Their names are in the directory. And I need the status report from Acquisitions. It’s due today and I don’t want any bullshit. Feel free to tell them I said that.”

I nodded along as I recorded every last word he said. Good thing, too, because I wouldn’t have remembered otherwise.

When I got to my desk and went to put my phone away, I had a text and six missed calls.

The text was from Tan.

*The eagle has landed.*

The six calls?

My soon-to-be ex-husband.

My heart pounded as I tried to figure out what to do. My first instinct was to block him, at least until I was off work, but then I realized that might make him come here, and that was the *last* thing I wanted. So I grabbed my phone, snuck off to the ladies room, and called him back.

Big mistake.

“What the fuck is this?” he bellowed. “You served me divorce papers at my fucking job? What the fuck, Savannah!”

“Mo—”

“You’re divorcing me? What the fuck for?”

“Because I know.”

“Know what?”

“That you cheated. You fucked another woman, Mo. You thought I wouldn’t find out?”

“Whoa. Hold up. Who told you that?”

“Nobody had to tell me.”

He was quiet for a moment. “How long you been planning this?”

“What difference does it make?”

“You sat up in that house with me knowing the whole time that you were leaving.” He chuckled. “That’s fucked up.”

“So you’re not even gonna deny it, huh? Thank you for making this whole thing easier for me.”

“It’s not the time to get into it. I’m a see you at home. We’ll deal with all this shit later.”

*Shit, shit, shit.*

That was the last thing I wanted. Mo was a seasoned pro at gaslighting.

I was absolutely firm in my decision, for sure, but he had a way of making me feel like the world was upside-down, the sky green and the grass blue. I was no match for him there, and the idea of having to deal with that made me cry.

I didn’t need anyone to yell at me not to go home. I came to that conclusion all by myself.

**TAURUS**

---

“MS. BROOKS! GET IN here!”

Pam didn't wear heels, and her footsteps were light, so her appearance at my door was always a surprise, even when I'd called her in here.

“Yes?” she said quietly.

“I need you to get with HR. Have them post the assistant job.”

“Wait...so you're letting Savannah go?”

“Uh, yeah. She knew she was probationary, and she failed to demonstrate that she can handle this job. I don't have time to deal with her fuckups.”

Pam crossed the threshold, closed the door, and approached me gingerly. I sat up a little, wondering what she could possibly have to say.

“Please don't tell her I told you this,” she said in a hushed voice. “She's not having a good day today. Because...she filed

for divorce from her husband. He got the papers, and he's been hounding her all morning."

I sat back in my chair as that washed over me. "Fuck," was all I could muster.

"I understand what you're saying about not really having the time to deal with her personal life. And I'll get the job posted for you if you want. I'm just saying maybe don't hold *today* against her. She's trying really hard to keep it together."

"I hear you but I...really don't have time for this shit."

That's what came out of my mouth. What was in my *head* was the thought that I hoped she'd be okay. I remembered getting my divorce papers and how that shit felt. Being the one who filed, she was on the other side of that particular trauma, but I'm sure it still wasn't easy. I debated sending her home for the day, but in the end, I couldn't. There was too much to do.

"Thanks for the heads-up," I finally said. "I'll keep it in mind for today."

Pam nodded and stood there in front of my desk, her hands pressed together like she was about to pray or something.

"Anything else?" I asked, eyebrows raised.

"Um...do I still call HR?"

Sighing, I rubbed my fingers across my forehead. "I'll give her a day."

Pam smiled. "That's very nice of you."



“Is it?”

She gave me one nod and took her leave, while I sat there having a fucking lightbulb moment.

I was attracted to Ms. Dayne.

Actually, that wasn't news to me. I'd always found her attractive.

No, what I'd just discovered was that I *wanted* her. As in, I wanted to *be with her*. And I knew this because as soon as the word 'divorce' spilled out of Pam's mouth, I had a visceral reaction. One that shocked the hell out of me. One that made me feel ashamed.

I was *relieved*.

And if that wasn't enough of a seismic shift, I'd also apparently done something nice for her. Something I'd never done for an employee before.

I'm not nice.

I also don't bend, something all of Ms. Dayne's predecessors had found out the hard way. But just now, I folded like a pretzel. Gave her a another chance. Another chance to fuck up again.

I shook my head.

I was at work. Supposed to be about business, not crushes.

No more chances for Ms. Dayne, no matter how fine she was.

“Mr. Jackson?”

“Yeah.”

Ms. Dayne walked in and closed the door behind her. “I would never do this in a million years but...I need to leave early.”

I let out a heavy sigh and shook my head.

That next chance had come a lot faster than I expected it to.

“Ms. Dayne, I—”

“I know, I’m *so* sorry. Please know I would never do this to you if it wasn’t an emergency.”

I stared into her tear-filled eyes and felt my resolve crumbling. Those pretty brown eyes and that quivering lower lip were *killing* me.

Fuck.

“Alright, listen. I’m gonna take you at your word that this is important. Close out whatever you were working on, give Ms. Brooks a list of what you didn’t get done, and then you can go.”

I could see the relief wash over her. “Thank you so much, Mr. Jackson. I’m so sorry. Won’t happen again.”

I just nodded. It was all I could do.

The rest of the day went pretty badly. Pam did her best, but her reception duties had her stretched thin already. With my extra shit added to it, she was scrambling.

I was returning from my meeting when Ms. Dayne called me. I was concerned, because up to this point, our phone

interactions had only gone one way. For her to call *me*, something had to be very wrong.

“Ms. Dayne, what’s going on?”

“I need you to verify my employment,” she rushed out. “I’m trying to lease an apartment, and since I don’t have a pay stub yet, they need to talk to you. I’m sorry.”

I thought about that for a moment. Something wasn’t adding up.

“Is everything alright? Why do you have to get an apartment *today*?”

“I...I can’t go to my house.”

“Um, okay.” I unbuttoned my suit jacket and took a seat behind my desk. “Are you safe?”

“Oh! Yes. It’s not what you—I’m safe. I just...I need to secure housing as soon as possible. I know you’re busy, just... never mind.”

“No, it’s fine. I just left a meeting, so I have a few minutes. Have them call me in my office.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Yep.”

I set my phone facedown on my desk. An internal debate was raging in my mind. Should she stay, or should she go? So much promise, only to end up disappointing me.

I went to wake up my computer and noticed another pink post-it on my monitor.

*Mercy is enthroned in the hearts of kings. -  
Shakespeare (I think )*

I stared at it for a full minute, not entirely sure how to receive it.

Was she calling me a king?

Thanking me for my mercy?

While calling me a *king*?

I bit back a smile.

The call came in just then. Maria from Roundtree Apartments needed to know the details of Ms. Dayne's employment. I said what I needed to say and ended the call, and Ms. Dayne rang me back not even two minutes later.

"I just called to thank you," she said. "I appreciate you doing that for me, especially knowing how busy you are."

"Did everything work out?"

"Kind of. They can't give me the keys until tomorrow, so I'm gonna go to a hotel tonight."

"A hotel?" I stared out of my window. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"It's a long story. You don't have time for it, believe me. But I'm fine. I'll be there bright and early tomorrow."

"Yes, you will. Good night."



I'll admit, I didn't expect her to be standing beside my desk when I arrived the next morning. Looking normal. Looking *so good* in that black dress she was wearing. But she was all of those things, and I was immediately distracted.

My heart thumped in my chest.

"You're here," I announced.

"I said I would be."

"Go close the door and have a seat."

She froze, then did as I asked. Before I could speak, and before she even made it back to my desk, she said, "You're firing me, right? I knew it."

"Do you drink coffee?"

"No. I'm nervous enough as it is."

I nodded as I walked over to my cabinet. I pulled out two glasses and poured a finger of Bourbon into each one.

"Here," I said, holding one out to her.

"What is this?"

"Take a sip. You'll feel better."

We both drank at the same time. After she finished coughing and sputtering, she shook her head. "It burns but...I do feel a little better."

I nodded. "I'm not firing you. But I *am* concerned."

She took another sip. It went down fine this time. “I served my husband with divorce papers yesterday. It was...a lot. I guess I underestimated how much it would affect me. And when he called me, he wanted to talk about it, and I guess, since my mind is made up, I didn’t wanna deal with him or anything he had to say. Just the thought of it gave me a panic attack.”

“You serious?”

“Yes. So anyway, that’s why I didn’t go home. I didn’t feel unsafe. Not physically, at least. Just anxious.”

I watched her take another sip, trying to conjure up something appropriate to say. I finally settled on, “Well. I’m... sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks.”

“I...um...I have experience in that area, so I understand.”

“You’re divorced?”

“What did I just say?”

She chuckled at that.

“I was on the other side, though,” I said. “My ex filed on me. It was...painful,” I admitted, surprising myself with my openness. The only other person who had heard those words come out of my mouth was my mother.

Her eyes narrowed briefly. “My ex—well, *soon-to-be* ex—cheated.”

“I see. That wasn’t our issue. We just grew apart.”

She nodded. “Either way...you’re right. It’s very painful. I didn’t expect that at all.”

“It makes sense. It’s a loss no matter which side you’re on.”

“Yeah.” She finished off that last drop of bourbon and set her glass on my desk. “Anyway, I’m truly sorry my personal issues intruded on your day yesterday. I feel horrible for being so unprofessional.”

“Life happens. And I understand that. Despite what you might have heard, I’m not a robot. Or a sociopath.”

She smiled. “Good to know.”

I realized just then that I hadn’t seen her smile much. Probably because there weren’t many reasons to smile up here on the sixth floor.

“Listen,” I said. “Like they say...this too shall pass.”

She nodded. “I know it will.”

“Did you get everything worked out with your apartment?”

“Yeah, about that.” She sighed loudly. “I’m gonna be in the hotel for a few more days. The place I wanted won’t be ready until Friday. They had an apartment available, but it wasn’t up to my standards of...well, *anything*. So I turned it down. I probably should have just taken it, but—”

“Are you okay financially? Not to get in your business. I know there’s another week before payday.”

“I’m okay. I had some rainy day money stashed. My mama didn’t raise no fool.”

“Okay. Good.” I glanced down at yesterday’s post-it, which now resided on the front of my desk drawer. “You still have my card, right?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry. I do, I meant to give it back to you yesterday. The gifts are ordered and on the way. I—”

“Keep it. Put your hotel bill on there.”

Her eyes went wide. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t joke about money.”

“Why...why would you do that?”

That was a good question. One I didn’t have the answer to. So what I said was, “You’re part of the team now, and I take care of my team. I want you focused while you’re here, so if I can alleviate some of your burden, I’m happy to do it. Well, not *happy*. Willing. Able.”

“That’s so nice of you. Thank you.”

I sighed. Nice again.

“Alright. Well. Glad we talked. Why don’t you open the door so we can get started.”

“Yes, Mr. Jackson.”

“And understand that I need you to get back focused,” I reminded her. “I’m entering a critical time with this company and I need you on top of your game.”

“Understood.”

I gave her instructions for the rest of the day—to arrange meetings with potential clients, check on an HR issue, follow



up about an interview with a local magazine, and attend to my dry cleaning.

“That’ll do it for now,” I finished.

She nodded as her fingers moved gracefully across her iPad. Fingers that were tipped with light pink nails. When she was done, she stood to her feet and grabbed my empty mug in her free hand. “More coffee?”

“I’m good.”

She turned to leave. Just before she reached the door, I felt a surge of...something...and called out to her.

“Yes?”

“I never thanked you for the lunch you brought me.”

A smile played at the corners of her mouth. “You ate it?”

“Yeah. What did you think happened to it?”

“I thought you threw it out.”

“No. I ate it. It was delicious.”

The smile bloomed.

And it was beautiful.

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“I did. So...if it’s not any trouble for you...I mean, if you have leftovers or whatever, you can bring them for me and Ms. Brooks.”

“You and Ms. Brooks?”

She saw right through that shit.

“Yes. Or whoever.”

Damn. That was lame as fuck.

But she smiled again, and I felt lucky to have been on the receiving end of it for the second time this morning.



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## SAVANNAH

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I WASN'T SURE HOW to take the fact that I hadn't heard from Mo since the day he got the papers. He didn't even check in to see where I was after I didn't come home. Which only served to reinforce my decision, I suppose. But my feelings were mixed. I didn't want him anymore, that I was certain of, but I at least wanted to know that he hadn't just thrown up his hands and moved on already. Stopped loving me already. Stopped giving a shit if I was dead or alive.

But it must have been true, because there were no calls. No texts.

Nothing.

My husband of thirteen years didn't care about me at all.

Oh, well.

I had a plan.

Okay, the work part of the plan wasn't progressing much. Mr. Jackson kept me too busy. But the rest was coming along.

The rental office called to tell me my apartment was ready. That was a huge relief. I didn't want to be beholden to Mr. Jackson for any longer than I had to be—as much as I appreciated the gesture.

But before I could deal with the apartment situation, I had to get yelled at by Tan.

She was not happy.

“Why didn't you follow my instructions?” she said, her voice at an octave that couldn't have been comfortable for her throat.

“You don't understand—”

“I damn sure don't!” she yelled. She waited a beat before saying, in her regular voice, “I'm sorry, but *Savannah*. Why? I specifically told you that if you leave the home, it can be considered desertion. And what did you do? You got a whole ass apartment! Do you know what that looks like to a judge?”

“I didn't wanna go home and face him.”

She studied my face. “You told me you weren't afraid of him.”

“I wasn't. I'm not. I just don't have anything to say.”

I shook my head, certain she wouldn't understand, and tried to explain it as best I could. “Tan, he would have tried to get me to stay, or convince me that I was crazy for leaving. I just didn't have the mental or emotional energy to deal with him. I'm done. I'm ready to move on with my life.”

“I understand that,” she said, her voice softening, “but there’s a right way to go about it. You basically didn’t do *anything* right.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Then why am I here? Why did you hire me if you weren’t going to take my professional advice? You have to be one of my most hard-headed clients ever, Savannah.”

I chuckled at that. “I’m sorry. But I do need you.”

“For what?”

“To get me out of this marriage as fast as possible.”



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## TAURUS

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### *WHAT THE FUCK?*

There was so much glitter and pink, it looked like a unicorn threw up on the park.

Amber—my ex—and I had many disagreements over the years about what I considered flighty, frivolous things. I'd always wanted to bury Naya in educational toys, primary colors, erector sets, and books. Amber was all about dolls, tiaras, glitter, and makeup kits. They actually make the latter for little girls, which I still find ridiculous.

We never did reach a happy medium, and now that we were apart, I didn't have a say in what my baby did at her mother's house. I'd come to terms with that. Tolerated it. But I had to see it today. A shit load of it, all around me.

I tried not to show the disgust on my face as I walked toward the pavilion. It was Naya's birthday. It was all about her. Pink and all.



I spotted her laughing and running around with some other little girls with—what else?—a little unicorn crown on her head. Despite my aversion to that, I smiled. My daughter's laugh was one of the few things that made me truly happy.

With my arms weighted down with the packages Ms. Dayne had procured for me, the contents of which were a mystery, I looked around to find the gift table and found my ex-wife instead. Amber looked good. She always looked good. I felt a twinge of regret at the sight of her.

I'll say this: Amber was never my type. Tall, thin, modelesque. She was gorgeous, yes, but a while back, I realized I married her partly because I thought she was the kind of woman I was *supposed* to marry. As a black man, you get into professional circles and get hit with the unspoken rules pretty quick. Rules that happen to be restrictive as fuck... you should dress like this, you should talk like that, your wife should look like this...like Amber, basically.

So that's what I did.

But the thick ones were always my kryptonite. Nah, not even thick. Full-figured. Gimme Jill Scott over Halle Berry any day of the week and twice on Sunday. Not that Halle wouldn't get the dick, too. Just saying, as it relates to the shallower pursuits, Amber was cool but I would have preferred a woman like...

Well.

Like Savannah.

I meant Ms. Dayne.

Her husband obviously didn't succumb to peer pressure. Lucky ass nigga. Just the thought of all that ass and those thighs in my bed at night...or dripped out in a cocktail dress and on my arm at the office parties...and she could cook, too? And she was smart as hell?

He *was* lucky, but apparently his luck ran out.

*Mr. Dayne, hold this L.*

"Oh, no, what did you do?" Amber asked as she approached me, her long braids trailing behind her.

"What?"

She shook her head as she surveyed my packages. "There's, like, twenty presents here."

"You're exaggerating, as usual."

She rolled her eyes and relieved me of a few of my packages. "Follow me."

We deposited my presents on the gift table under the pavilion. With my arms free, I scanned the immediate area for something that had gone through fermentation. Upon discovery of a lone cooler full of sodas, I resisted the urge to ask Amber where all my party money had gone. I know I said seven wasn't a big deal, but it definitely deserved better than what Amber had put together here.

There was no point in bringing that up, though.

Amber did what the fuck she wanted. Always had.

I was content to let Naya play with her friends, but Amber called out to her before I could stop her.

“Ny! Your daddy’s here!”

And just that fast, I was glad she did it. Seeing Naya’s beautiful face light up, and watching her run to me as “Daddyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” streamed out of her mouth made my day.

It must have been the high of it being her birthday or something, because she was never *that* excited to see me.

I scooped her up in my arms and kissed that crown right off her head—I didn’t mean to—before setting her back down.

“Happy birthday, baby girl.”

“Thank you, Daddy. I dropped my—”

“I got you.” I picked up the tiara, dusted it off, and placed it back on top of her little coils. She beamed as she grabbed my hand and dragged me over to look at the cake—also a glittery unicorn. I pretended to be into it because that’s what she wanted, and then she ran back to her friends to play.

“Taurus, you remember Darnell.”

I turned around to shake hands with my ex-wife’s new boyfriend, who she introduced me to a few months back out of respect. She knew I’d need to size up any man she was bringing around my daughter. He didn’t seem like much in the finance department but he was respectful, at least.

“Yeah, good to see you,” I said. “Thanks for coming.”

“No doubt, bruh.”

He reached out a hand and we dapped. Good thing I saw my brothers just then, because I wasn't really in the mood for conversation with this dude.

“Y'all excuse me real quick,” I said as I walked away to greet my brothers. Which was a whole other animal.

Vic, I was happy to see. Isaac? Isaac could eat a dick. Nevertheless, I greeted and hugged them both, because even though I hadn't seen her yet, I knew my mother was around here somewhere. Her eagle eye always found us, and she always knew what we were up to.

“Thanks for coming, y'all,” I said as I sat on the wooden bench. “Did Ny see y'all already?”

“Yeah. You the late one,” Vic joked. “Where you coming from?”

“The office.”

My brothers shared a look. I ignored that to ask, “Where's mama?”

“In the bouncy house.”

We all laughed at that. It was a nice moment. Almost like we were three happy, loving brothers instead of what we actually were.

“Wifey looks good,” Vic said. “She's glowing.”

“I guess.” I crossed my arms and waited for it.

It was Vic who took the shot. “Homeboy must be hitting that right.”

Isaac snickered.

I nodded like it didn’t bother me at all. “Must be.”

They burst out laughing like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard. Childish asses.

“Nah, all jokes aside, bruh. I know that shit ain’t easy. I got nothin’ but respect for you right now.”

“Fuck you.”

They laughed again. I was used to them clowning me about the divorce. Frankly, I’d earned it given how I used to treat them. But I was the oldest, and as the oldest, it was my birthright to fuck with them. It wasn’t my fault they were too sensitive to handle it.

Now it was their turn.

“Seriously, man. When’s the last time you got your dick wet?”

I screwed my face up and looked at Vic in disgust. “Really, nigga? I’m at my daughter’s birthday party.”

“She can’t hear me.”

“So? I’m not trying to be thinking about all that right now. Who raised you?”

It was quiet for a beat before Isaac smiled.

“So two years?”

I shook my head. “Fuck both of y’all.”

More laughter from them. I was almost annoyed enough to go back to the pavilion to talk to Amber’s new boyfriend.

“You just...you be wound up all tight and shit,” Vic said. “You been like that since Amber left. You ain’t even got a standby letting you slide through sometimes? That ain’t healthy.”

“I’m good.”

“So you got a regular?”

“Nah, but it ain’t like I been celibate. You don’t remember Kamila? From Houston? We met up a few times.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Last year.”

Vic grinned. “You hit?”

“Of course.”

“And...that’s it? You’re done?”

I shrugged. “Y’all know me. I don’t get down with that one-night stand shit. I like to be locked down.”

“Yeah, yeah, we know.”

“Shee-it. Not me.”

We looked at Isaac and laughed, because that was a fucking understatement. Ever since he got out of jail, he’d been going nonstop. How his undisciplined ass had managed to remain childless was a mystery to me.

“You know this nigga don’t even beat his meat,” Vic said, gesturing to me.

Isaac’s eyes went wide. “You lyin’.”

Vic laughed. “He be on that no-fap shit. Nigga got a regimen and everything.”

“It’s not how it sounds,” I explained. “I do no-fap periodically for like, thirty days at a time. It keeps me focused, that’s all.”

“Damn. You a dry-dick motherfucker, Taurus. Hate to see it.”

I glared at Isaac, playtime now over. “You know what *I* hate to see? Your dusty ass coming home from jail yet again.”

“Taurus.” Vic raised his hands. “Come on, man. We were just playing.”

“Nah, fuck him,” Isaac spat. “I see what type of time he on.”

I shrugged. “You went at me, I went at you.”

“He was just joking, though,” Vic defended. “You took it too far.”

“Whatever.”

“You know what?” Isaac stood and walked toward me with his chest out. I jumped to my feet and waited, hoping I wouldn’t have to hurt this nigga at my baby’s birthday party.

But it never came to that. Just as Isaac was starting to speak, I heard Amber’s voice.

“Guys! We’re gonna do cake and presents!” she yelled at us from the pavilion. As we walked over, and Isaac pulled ahead of us, Vic stopped me to say, “That was foul.”

A grunt was my response.

“You still on that bullying shit, Taurus. It ain’t cool.”

“Leave it alone, Vic.”

“Fine.” He jogged ahead to catch up with Isaac, the brother he was closest to.

The shit didn’t bother me. Much. Because, again, I’d earned it. I was hard on them after my father passed. I thought I had to be. And I guess my behavior left a mark. But that was years ago. They should have been over that shit by now.

I gave my mama a hug before taking my place next to Naya at the big table. She tore through her gifts like a tiny tornado, leaving me and Amber covered in wrapping paper, bows, and other debris.

“That one’s from Daddy,” Amber said, pointing at the big purple box. “Most of them are, actually,” she muttered.

Naya ripped the paper off before letting out a blood-curdling scream that made my eardrum pop.

“DADDY!!!” She lifted a severed head in the air. “It’s the Amani doll!!! Look Mommy!”

Amber looked at the head, then at me, her eyes wide. “I’m shocked.”



‘What the fuck is that?’ I mouthed over Naya’s head. Amber didn’t get a chance to answer, because Naya dropped the doll on the table and launched herself at me.

“Thank you, Daddy! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“You can’t find these anywhere,” Amber said. “I looked for a month.”

“Why?”

“The hair is just like natural hair. It shrinks, you can braid it, flat iron it, all kinds of stuff.”

“I can play hairdresser,” Naya explained. “I love it, Daddy, it’s my favorite present.”

I hugged her back, delighted that she was happy, but also annoyed with Ms. Dayne. This was strike...I’d lost count. Which didn’t bode well for her.

She was gonna hear about this.



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## SAVANNAH

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“GOOD MORNING!” I CALLED to Mr. Jackson as he trudged toward me. The drawn look on his face made him appear as though he’d had a rough night and would have rather been anywhere else. My smile dropped from my face as I watched his approach.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, listen, I got a bone to pick with you.”

“Excuse me?”

He dropped his messenger bag on the floor and unbuttoned his suit jacket before settling into his chair. Glaring, he swiveled in my direction until he was facing me. “Why the fuck would you buy my daughter a doll head?”

“She didn’t like it?”

“Answer my question.”

Was this some kind of trick question? I wracked my brain for a suitable answer, or any answer that would get that angry

look off his face. “Um, because I remembered you saying she wanted to be a hairdresser.”

He blinked several times. “Okay, so if you remembered that part then you should have *also* remembered when I said she wouldn’t be if I had anything to do with it. Which should have told you that’s not the fucking path I want her on. So again, I ask, what the fuck?”

I set his coffee on the desk. “She’s seven. Her life goals are gonna change ten times before she graduates high school. A doll head isn’t gonna determine the path of her career.”

“That’s not the point. You acted against my wishes.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jackson, but you never explicitly said—”

“Do I *have* to explicitly say it? You’re my assistant. You’re supposed to hear the shit I *don’t* say. You’re supposed to anticipate my needs and execute them and you failed to do that!”

He...had a point there. It never even crossed my mind that it would be a problem. So yeah, I dropped the ball on that. That’s not to say I thought he was being reasonable, because he absolutely wasn’t, but he was right about the job. I should have acted accordingly.

“Do you want me to return it?”

He paused and looked away before bringing his eyes back to mine. He seemed...chastened. “No,” he snapped. “She loved that fucking doll. It was her favorite present.”

“Then why are you yelling at me?” I said, hiding a smile.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You didn’t respect my wishes. Don’t let that happen again, understand?”

I wanted to answer in the affirmative. That seemed the safest bet. But something in me felt the urge to speak up for myself on this.

“Actually, Mr. Jackson, I do, but I don’t. I agree that I should have done a better job taking your wishes into account. But I’m also a little frustrated because I went through a *lot* to get that doll. You can’t just march into a store and buy a doll like that.”

I paused to take breath. “You wouldn’t get this because you don’t have...hair...but the doll is black, and beautiful, and you can wash the hair. When you wash it, it stretches out like real hair and when it dries, it shrinks and becomes an afro, like real hair. Do you know how rare that is? You can’t find it anywhere.”

He seemed to ponder that. Which was good, but not unexpected. He could be rude and belligerent, but I noticed he tended to take time to listen and think about what he’d heard.

“So basically, what I’m getting is that you want me to say ‘thank you,’” he finally said.

“Not at all. It would be nice, but I know better than to expect that from you.”

A frown stretched across his face. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Do you need anything else, Mr. Jackson?” I said dismissively.

“Yeah, I do. I wanna know why you’re taking this shit personal. Ms. Dayne, don’t ever let yourself forget that you work for me.”

“Oh, there’s no danger of that.”

“So now you’re being sarcastic.”

“No. It’s just...you didn’t give me much to go on with this whole birthday present thing. I did a *lot* of research...google, YouTube, tik tok. All to figure out what little girls like. I scoured your social media to see what your daughter looks like to make sure I ordered the right doll. And I did all that to make your daughter happy and make *you* look good in the process. So yes, maybe it would be nice if showed a little gratitude for that. But like I said, I know not to expect it. After all, I work for you. That’s what the money is for, right?”

“Damn right.”

“Great. Anything else?”

“Are you *dismissing* me?” he asked, nostrils flared.

It was a rhetorical question, I knew, so I didn’t answer. Instead, I softened my face and voice as I said, “What I meant was, do you need anything else from me at this time?”

“No. Actually, yes.” He looked pained as he struggled to speak again, his face relaxing as he finally said, “Even though you went against my wishes, I...appreciate the work that you put into doing it.”

I stifled a laugh. “Wow.”

He smiled. Actually *smiled*. “That’s more than most people get.”

I had no doubt about that, but all I said was, “I’m leaving. I have lots of work to do.”

He nodded.

“By the way...there’s lunch in the kitchen. Let me know when you’re ready for it. If you want it.”

“Oh, I *want* it.”

A slight chill went through me. “Okay. I’m out there if you need me.”

My hand was on the doorknob when he called out to me again.

“Ms. Dayne.”

“Yes?”

“Send an email to Eli Bettinger in sales. Get him the name and contact info for that doll company.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

“Got it.”

As I made my way back to my desk, my cheeks ached from how hard I was smiling. I’d done something *good*, something he was pleased with.

The level of happiness I felt made me uncomfortable,  
because...why did I care so much?





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## TAURUS

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I LOOKED AROUND THE conference room at the eager but nervous faces of my staff, hoping my facial expression conveyed the disappointment I felt. Because if not, I'd have to resort to yelling like I usually did.

I guess I was trying to get better at that.

Not sure when that started, but okay.

“So he said no?” I said angrily. “That offer was solid.”

Eli shook his head. “Not no. I mean, he said no, but then he told me Whitman and a couple other companies are sniffing around. So he's open to negotiation.”

Of course he was.

“Is it money?” I asked.

“Seems like it's money and principle.”

I thought about that. Principles. Nice to have, I guess, but you never let them cost you money.

“Do you have an angle?”

Eli stared down at his notepad. “He told me some things during the conversation. He’s married. Three daughters. And he and his wife love going to Vegas. They’re churchgoing but Vegas is their escape, apparently.”

“Alright. Karim?” I said, shifting my gaze to my finance guy.

“I like it,” he said. “The potential on this is very high. The market is thirsty.”

I tapped my pen on my pad, a habit I’d developed. It helped me think.

Tap, tap, tap.

Churchgoing folks and Vegas. Didn’t seem to mix, in my mind, but okay. Let’s say that worked. If they liked Vegas, they were either drinkers or gamblers. And I was both, in moderation.

“Alright, let’s do this. Karim, put something together for him. Eli, you’re taking him and his wife to Vegas. I’ll come in for the last leg and take them to dinner.”

“Got it.”

I sighed and stared down at the collection of facts and figures in front of me. Mr. Chris Harris of Amani Dolls was playing hardball with me, and it was plucking my nerve. I’d sought *him* out, which wasn’t how these things typically went, and he didn’t seem grateful at all. But by the looks of Karim’s projections, all this hassle would be worth it in the long run.

From a value-added perspective, landing his business just might put me where I needed to be, goal-wise.

I flipped to the next page of my notepad, taking a quick glance at today's post-it.

*Good luck in your meeting, boss.*

Simple, but effective. I didn't need luck, but her thoughtfulness did what it was supposed to do.

"We're done here," I announced. "Let's make this happen."

A chorus of "Yes, Mr. Jackson"s erupted around me as I stood to my feet and gathered my stuff. Everyone else was standing, too, but they waited for me to walk out the door before they started filing out.

I had the elevator all to myself, which suited me just fine. I was headed upstairs to the gym to work out and think. I fucking *hate* working out, but I do it because it's part of my discipline regimen. I take care of my body the same way I take care of my mind. That's something my father taught me.

My daddy. Walter Grady Jackson. If you let my mother tell it, he was all talk, no substance. And she wasn't all the way wrong about that. But that talk was important. It stuck with me. Made me a better man.

A better man than *him*, in some ways.

I stepped off the elevator and swiped my keycard. Upon entry to the gym, I let out a relieved sigh when I saw that there was no one else up here. I didn't feel like talking. I also didn't feel like witnessing the quiet, slightly fearful reverence of some of my executives when they found themselves next to me on a machine.

I changed quickly and hit the treadmill for my warmup, thoughts of my father lingering in my mind. It had been almost twenty years since he left this earth, and I missed him. Shit, I had to *become* him after his passing, making sure my mama was straight, taking care of my brothers like they were my own. That's what pissed me off about Isaac. Every time he got locked up, it was like none of the shit I did or said made a bit of difference. Me and Vic had spent the last several years trying to do shit our father would have been proud of. Isaac? He was doing shit that gave him a quick thrill. No discipline. Giving no thought to the impact it would have on his future.

Fuck it.

I did all I could.

He was a grown man, now. He was on his own.



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## SAVANNAH

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“YOU’RE STILL HERE?”

I looked up from my computer screen and was greeted with the sight of Mr. Jackson standing in front of me, clad in a white t-shirt and blue sweatpants. The shock of seeing him in something other than a suit rendered me speechless.

“You okay?” he said, concern on his face.

“Yes. Just...yes, I’m still here. It started storming and...” I trailed off.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Everybody has their thing.”

I nodded, grateful that he didn’t judge me. In fact, he almost seemed to be...empathizing with me.

“Maybe,” I said. “I find it hard to believe *you* have a thing, though. I can’t imagine you being scared of anything.”

He walked closer, and I saw a gym bag slung over his arm. “I have a fear. It’s rational, I think.”

I waited, eager to hear what it was, happy to be let in a little, and greedy for a tiny nugget of tea about my new boss. But he continued walking toward his office, disappearing behind the door and leaving me in the dark.

Okay, then.

He was so...elusive. A closed book. Cold fish? Whatever name I gave it, it was frustrating. We didn't have to be best friends or anything, but the man was giving me nothing.

Although I guess the bigger, more important question was: what was I looking for from him?

And, why?

"Did you just come from the gym?" I called, silencing that uncomfortable thought.

"Yeah," he answered back. He stepped out of his office. "Worked out, ran a little, took a shower. For some reason, I have a lot more energy lately."

*Probably because you actually eat now*, I thought to myself.

"Wait, you took a shower while it was storming? You must not have a black mama."

He looked at me curiously. "I didn't know it was storming. And you don't seriously think I'm biracial, do you?"

"No, it was a joke."

"Oh."

There was no smile—big shocker—but the bemused look on his face was cute. In fact, his face itself was cute. It was



different, too. More filled out. Which was also probably because he was eating my food now.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked as he perched himself on the edge of my desk. “You’re gonna hang out here until the storm passes? You might be here all night.”

“It’s supposed to clear out around eight.”

He checked his watch. “Shit. It’s six already?” he said, more to himself than to me. “Well, you probably have enough work to last you two hours, right?”

“I do.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I nodded and returned to the spreadsheet on my computer.

Despite his declaration that he was leaving me to my work, he just...sat there. Watching me. Making me nervous. Probably trying to figure out a way to micromanage me.

“Let me ask you something,” he finally said.

“Okay...”

“What do you think caused your weather phobia? Because that night at the cigar bar, I was thinking about that. Trying to figure out what would make somebody have a fear like that.”

I sat back in my chair, surprised that he was asking a personal question. I wasn’t bothered, though. I looked up at him and into those steely eyes, realizing I usually avoided looking directly at him.

It wasn’t so bad.

“I don’t remember when it started exactly. I just remember being home alone after school in Kansas. Tornado Alley, if you didn’t know. And there would be these really violent storms and tornado warnings, and I’d take my little self into the bathroom and close my eyes and pray nothing bad happened to me.”

“Damn. Kansas?”

“Yeah. My mom worked every day, so I was a latchkey kid. It was just me in the apartment by myself for hours until she got home.”

“Did you ever actually *see* a tornado?”

I shook my head. “And honestly, I wish I had, you know? Because then all the mystery and fear and anticipation would be gone. But the unknown...I guess that’s what freaks me out. I know it’s not rational, but I can’t help it.”

He nodded. “You want a drink?”

“No. I’m okay.”

He looked out the window. He did that a lot. “Is this helping, me sitting here talking to you?”

I chuckled. “A little. Is that why you’re still here?”

He brought his eyes back to mine. “Actually, I have some shit I need to get done before I go. But I guess it worked out.”

I nodded, stopping short when he stood and stretched. When he lifted his arms, his shirt rode up a little, giving me a

glimpse of his abs. They were toned, and there was a faint trail of hair trailing down the center toward—

“I’m gonna grab my laptop,” he said. “Be right back.”

Well, this was new.

I puzzled over the situation while I waited for him to return. First, I wondered if the real reason he was still here was because he didn’t trust me to be alone in the office. But that made absolutely no sense, and he’d never done anything to lead me to believe that, so I discarded that theory. Then I thought maybe he was here to make sure I got my work done, or that I got it done right. But that made even less sense, because he’d been pleased with my work of late.

The simplest explanation was that he was being nice.

Why didn’t *that* occur to me first?

Mr. Jackson reappeared just then and plopped down on the leather couch with his laptop. I found myself staring at him, intrigued by the way his long legs gapped open and his shoulders relaxed. It was an entirely different posture than I was used to seeing him in. It was jarring.

And sexy.

“Can I ask you something, Mr. Jackson?”

“What’s up?” he said, his eyes still glued to his screen.

“Earlier, you said you had a fear, but you didn’t tell me what it was.”

“Yeah. I didn’t *want* to tell you,” he said matter-of-factly. “I was just making the point that everybody has something.”

“Got it.” I began clacking away at my keyboard, typing up the memo he’d dictated to me earlier.

“Alright,” he said.

My fingers froze in the air, hovering over the keys while I waited for him to speak.

He brought his eyes to mine. “It’s nothing major. My biggest fear is that I won’t meet the goals I set for myself.”

“Oh. That sounds normal.”

“Maybe it is, but the *extent* of it for me isn’t, I think. I’m obsessive about my goals.”

“You’re a CEO. I have to think that’s a common trait among your kind.”

He chuckled. “So what you’re saying is that I’m completely normal. I’ll take it.”

“Well, I didn’t say all *that*.” I cleared my throat and pushed my luck. “What’s the goal?”

He shook his head. “See, now you’re getting personal. I told you, I don’t like that.”

He had, but I pressed on anyway.

“I understand what you’re saying, but I work for you. In service to your goals. My job is to help you achieve them, right? That’s not personal, that’s business.”

He looked skeptical for a moment, then he chuckled as if accepting the fact that I'd bested him. "Fine. The one that's looming over my head right now is the fact that I'm about to be forty. I was supposed to be a millionaire by then."

"Says who?"

"Says *me*. I mean, my company makes millions, but me personally, I haven't hit that milestone yet. I'm close, but..." he trailed off and deflated a little, his body sinking into the couch.

"Why don't you just pay yourself more money?" I asked.

"It doesn't work like that. There's a board, and I collect a salary. It's tied to the company's bottom line."

"Okay," I said. This seemed like a problem I could help solve. "So what will it take?"

"For me to hit a million?"

"Yeah. How do we make this happen?"

He smiled. "It's not your problem."

"It is *now*."

He raised his eyebrows and grinned at that declaration, like he was impressed that I would even try to help.

Not sure why, though. It that was my job.

"Well, bringing in a new account would help a lot," he said. "I have a couple on the hook, but I just need one good one."

"How long do we have?"

“My birthday’s in December.”

I frowned at that. As if reading my mind, he said, “Yeah, I know. But I thank God every day that my parents didn’t name me Sagittarius.”

We shared a laugh, and it was a nice moment until a loud crack of thunder pierced the air. I jumped and put a hand over my heart, feeling it’s quickening beats beneath my fingertips. Mr. Jackson pretended not to notice, which I appreciated very much.

“You think you’ll get the doll guy?” I asked, playing it off.

“Maybe.” He set his laptop to the side. “Let me ask you something. What perfume are you wearing?”

“That was random,” I said, laughing.

“Not really. I’ve been wanting to ask you that for a while.”

So why didn’t he?

“It’s lotion. Black Pearl.”

He nodded. “It’s nice. Very nice.”

“Thanks.”

“A little distracting sometimes, though.”

Distracting?

What did *that* mean?

“Do you want me to stop wearing it?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed. He seemed to be thinking. Assessing. “No, you’re good,” he said. “I’m mostly used to it now.”

“Is it an allergy thing?”

“No allergies. It just smells really good on you, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

My heart was still racing, but at that point, I wasn’t sure if it was the storm or Mr. Jackson. He was so *different*, and it was throwing me, but in a good way. I couldn’t give a name to the energy, but I felt it acutely. Good energy. I felt like the cutest guy at school had paid me a compliment as he passed me in the hallway. Young, giddy, frenetic energy. Almost like...

Like a *crush*.

“So how are you doing with...everything?” he asked.

“One day at a time.”

I cleared my throat.

How much did I want to share?

“It’s so strange being on my own.”

“Why is that?”

“I was thinking about this last night and realized I went from my mother’s house to the dorm, then from the dorm to my ex-husband’s house. I’ve never been on my own before.”

His brows furrowed. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-four. Is that pathetic?”

“More like surprising.”

“Oh.”

“So besides strange, what’s it like being on your own for the first time?”

“Honestly? It’s overrated.”

He let out a loud, bellowing laugh. It was odd to me, because I didn’t think what I said was funny. But also because I was pretty sure it was the first time I’d ever heard anything resembling joy come out of him. It felt good to make him laugh like that, though. It was an accomplishment.

After he finished laughing, he fixed those steely eyes on me. “So you miss home?”

I opened my mouth, closed it, then opened it again, unsure of how to answer that.

“I miss certain things about it, yes.”

“What is it that you miss?”

“Not my ex, that’s for sure. But I miss making my house a home, if that makes sense. Making things beautiful and peaceful. Filling the house with the smells of my cooking. Decorating. Tending my garden. Hosting dinner parties. Taking care of...” I trailed off. “Nurturing my spouse. Not *him* exactly, but...I don’t know.” I hesitated. “It’s hard to explain, but I miss having someone to take care of.”

Another clap of thunder sounded, but it was further away. The storm was finally passing.

Mr. Jackson didn’t respond to what I said. Instead, he picked up his phone. “The Vegas confirmation just came through.”



“I don’t think it told you this, but I got you on the first flight out with no problem. But coming back, they didn’t have anything before twelve. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine.” He stared at me thoughtfully. “I just had an idea.”

“Okay...”

“Chris is bringing his wife along. I’ll be entertaining them. Might be nice to have someone there to buddy up to her.”

“Do you want me to book someone else to go with you?”

He rubbed his chin. “Yeah. You.”

“Me?”

“Are you busy the next two days?”

“No, but...I don’t know.”

“All expenses paid. You have experience in this area, right? Of course you do.”

“Yes, but...” I trailed off. I was getting strangely excited by the possibility of getting out of town. Away from my problems. With *him*.

I couldn’t think of a single reason to say no.

“I guess I could go.”

“Great. Bring clothes for dinner and a show.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” He shook his head to emphasize his point. “This is a business trip. You’ll be working. Hard.”

“Understood.”

He picked up his Macbook and set it on his lap. “It’ll be cool having you there. For encouragement.”

So he *had* seen my little notes. I smiled at that.

For another hour, we worked in silence, me at my desk, him on the couch. I caught him looking at me a couple of times which, if I’m being honest, gave me that same feeling. Only this time, I was sure what it was.

The him that I’d just seen, the one who talked to me during the storm and opened up and gave the appearance of a normal human being?

I *liked* that man.



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## TAURUS

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BECAUSE OF THE SHORT notice, Savannah had to book herself on a later flight. Which was fine, because I still wasn't sure what her role would be on this junket. I'd told her she'd be working, and that was true, but what I didn't tell her was that there might be some play involved as well.

No, not that.

Well, *maybe* that, if she was interested.

What I meant was, if we had time, I fully intended to ask her out alone, maybe to a lounge to get a drink and talk. That short conversation we had the night of the storm had left me wanting more.

She was...appealing.

And despite not knowing her well, I'd felt comfortable opening up to her. In fact, I always felt comfortable around her. Her whole vibe was just...*safe*.

I was looking forward to getting to know her better, and if today's post-it was any indication, she was on the same page. I

found it stuck to the first page of Eli's report, which Ms. Dayne had printed for me.

*I can't wait to see you in action.*

A person could read into that if they were so inclined, but I chose to believe it was about seeing me close a deal and getting to know me outside the office.

But right now, I was getting to know the Harrises. Chris and Vanessa. Both were around my age, maybe a little younger. Chris was artsy, a true creative. Vanessa was more traditional. Even their clothes bore this out; Chris wore a brightly colored Ankara sweater and she wore a simple black dress. She was quiet, but Chris seemed to defer to her a lot. It quickly became clear that I had to win her over as much as her husband.

So when Savannah still wasn't here by the time the waiter came to take our orders, I was concerned. She had texted me thirty minutes ago when she checked in, so she should have been here by now.

I was just getting ready to fire off an angry text when I saw her at the hostess station. And what a sight it was.

*Goddamn. She looks good as hell.*

I stood as she approached the table in a tight red dress, damn near forgetting myself and the fact that this wasn't a date.

Just as she reached the table, I pulled out the chair next to me and, unable to help myself, leaned over to whisper, “You look beautiful.”

A smile appeared on lips that were also red. “Thank you. I’m just here to make you look good.”

“Mission accomplished, Ms. Dayne.”

She took her seat.

“Chris and Vanessa Harris, this is Savannah Dayne. She works with me.”

Pleasantries were exchanged.

I’m assuming.

I saw lips moving but I didn’t hear shit. I was too busy staring at Ms. Dayne. In that fucking *dress*.

First of all, she had her titties all pushed up, looking like two ripe brown melons waiting to be squeezed. Second, her hair looked different. She had put curls in it or fluffed it up or something, and it was sexy as hell. And she was wearing that scent I liked, only it was much more potent than normal.

This was gonna be a long night.

Ms. Dayne ordered her drink and we ordered our meals. Back in my right mind, now, I got down to business.

“So, Chris. No need to beat around the bush here. We both know what this is about.”

“We do.”

“You have a product. There’s demand for that product and not enough retailers who offer it. The solution is simple.”

Chris glanced at his wife before answering, “Yeah. Your man Eli was thorough.”

“Good. And he made you an offer.”

“He did.”

“What’s your answer?”

“Damn, bruh. I don’t even get dinner first?”

We all laughed at that. Well, they laughed, I smiled.

“You get dinner, dessert, drinks, and you get to hang out with me and Ms. Dayne. But that doesn’t change the facts, Chris.” I took a sip of my martini. “I have something you need.”

“Yeah, but so does Whitman. So does Stadler.”

I nodded. “True enough. But…” I trailed off, pulling out my phone. I held it up so he could see the pictures on my screen. “That’s Mr. Whitman. That’s Mr. Stadler. And here’s me, King Jackson. Right in front of you. One of these things is damn sure not like the other.”

Chris smiled and inclined his head. “A point was made.”

“Listen. I’m your market. I understand the importance of your product. I understood that out the gate. You’re gonna have to *convince* them other two of that.”

“Eli said you gave one to your daughter,” Vanessa chimed in.

“I did. And she loved it.”

“Here’s the thing,” Chris began. “Money-wise, the offer’s competitive. But those other two are bigger companies with more resources. That’s kind of a draw for me.”

“Understandable. But that also means there’s no reciprocity. No symbiosis. I mean, I don’t need you, *per se*, but *they* need you even less. They’re busy looking at the bottom line. I’m looking at the total package. And of course, as I said, I’m sitting right here in front of you. You’re not just an entry on a ledger to me. Jackson is a team. A community.”

Ms. Dayne’s drink came just then. A coconut martini. She took a sip and glanced over at me, then looked at our guests.

“Vanessa. Do you feel like listening to this right now?”

“Not really.”

The two laughed.

“Tell me about your daughters,” she said, before I could interject. “I understand they inspired the whole thing.”

Chris perked up at that, putting his drink down to give us the whole story. I only half-listened, because that was really all I could do with Ms. Dayne taking the baton like a pro and sitting next to me looking how she was looking. But more than that, the change of context had me completely off-balance. This wasn’t my office. She wasn’t at her desk or standing in front of me with her iPad. We weren’t in boss/employee mode, despite the purpose of this dinner. We were just two people. Two *attractive* people.



My walls were down.

I was loose.

Loose enough to admit that I was attracted to this woman. *Extremely* attracted. And I fucking *desired* her, in every possible way. I wasn't even sure when it happened, but here we were.

Fuck.

The music kicked up just then, something young with enough bass to make your drink ripple. Ms. Dayne's eyes lit up, and a wicked smile graced her face.

"Vanessa, do you dance?"

"I love to dance. Chris won't."

"Won't, or *can't*?" Ms. Dayne asked facetiously.

Chris burst out laughing. "The latter decided the former."

"Well you know what? I'm gonna dance with your wife. If that's okay with you."

"Oh, that's *more* than okay," he said with a grin, and I could imagine exactly what he was imagining because I was imagining it, too. Vanessa was a pretty woman, and full-figured like Ms. Dayne. The two of them side-by-side was a very pretty picture.

She reached over and grabbed Vanessa's hand. "We'll be back when the food comes."

Naturally, I watched them leave, focusing all of my attention on my assistant. The way she was walking, the

sexiness of the stiletto heels on her feet...this woman had everything a grown man like me could ever need. Sensing trouble, I peeled my eyes off her ass and put them back on Chris.

“So how long y’all been married?”

“Sixteen years,” he said proudly.

“Wow. Congratulations, man. Longevity seems hard to come by these days.”

“Yeah.” He looked in the direction of where the ladies had gone. “That’s my lil baby right there. Been together since college.”

“That’s what’s up. Y’all look good together.”

“Preciate it.” He knocked back an oyster.

“Make it last, man. The single life ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. Trust me.”

“I feel you.” He glanced toward the dance floor again. “But that’s you, right?”

“Ms. Dayne? Nah. She works for me.”

Chris’s brows furrowed. “My bad. Y’all seem...I don’t know. I thought y’all were together.”

At the mention of her, my eyes went straight to her location. Big mistake and here’s why: I didn’t recognize the song that was thumping through the speakers, but it had a vibe. Very sensual. And it was taking me to a mental place that I had no business being in right now. What’s worse, Ms. Dayne was

dancing to it, moving her body right in time with the beat, letting me know she had rhythm. Her hips were rolling. Her ass was bouncing a little.

A dense fog of lust settled over my brain.

“So, uh, how’d you and your wife meet?” I asked, tearing my eyes away again.

“We met at a Battle of the Bands. She danced for Jackson State. I saw her on the field, left my seat, chased her down, almost got my ass beat by security, and finally caught her and got her number.”

“Now that’s a story to tell your grandkids.”

“Right,” he said, laughing. “That’s a good woman, right there. I mean, you know, no relationship is perfect. She gets on my nerves, I damn sure get on hers. But I don’t know where or what I’d be without her. She takes care of me.”

“Nice.”

Okay, I was jealous. Just a little.

More like a lot.

Because ever since my divorce, I’d been miserable. Not necessarily because I lost Amber. I loved her, of course, but I was just now coming to terms with the fact that we weren’t right for each other. She said we grew apart and her needs weren’t being met, but the sticky, uncomfortable truth of the matter was that *neither* of us was getting what we needed. The difference was, I was willing to live with it. She wasn’t.

What I wanted, but never admitted to my wife, was to be taken care of. I didn't tell her that because you're not supposed to say shit like that in the twenty-first century, especially to a career woman like Amber. She didn't have the time or the desire to cook from scratch or iron my shirts or come to client dinners and gas me up or nurse me when I was sick. She was busy, so she hired out half of those tasks and the others, she just wasn't interested. And that was fine.

That's what I told myself every day.

Vic once told me I didn't want a wife, I wanted a replacement for my mama. But that wasn't it. I didn't want another mama, and I didn't want a maid. I didn't even care that Amber didn't have time to do those things. I just wanted her to *want* to do them for me.

I let my eyes roam over to Ms. Dayne again and felt stupid for just now realizing something important.

No.

Earth-shattering.

She'd been taking care of me.

I guess I could have chalked it up to her being good at her job. Because she was, now that she was settled in. But it was more than that. A lot more. She went above and beyond in a way that even the best employee never has for me. She'd been treating me the way I'd always wanted to be treated and I... was just now seeing that.

Shit.

That realization, and the two Bourbons I'd consumed, had me spinning.

She and Vanessa were still over there laughing and dancing together when the dj switched up and something faster came on, some lady rapper talking about getting bags and whatever else. I couldn't even call it, because I was transfixed, my eyes glued to her, watching her twerk like the motherfucking rent was due. I felt myself leaning forward a little, my mouth dry, blood rushing to my groin.

So not only did Ms. Dayne have ass, she knew how to throw it, too. That was an important data point for me. And then I wondered if she could do that on my dick. I'm not proud of that thought. In fact, I actively tried to erase that shit from my mind. But it was no use.

Resistance was futile.

“Yo, you good?”

Chris's voice snapped me out of it, and when I looked over at him, he was grinning hard. He'd clocked me.

I shook my head in defeat. “My bad.”

“Does she know?”

I sighed. “Nothing to know. She's married. Well, separated.” I took a sip to soothe my dry throat. “I find her attractive. It's not deeper than that.”

He nodded slowly, having caught the ‘it's none of your fucking business' tone in my voice. But the fact that his

eyebrows were still hovering near his hairline let me know he wasn't buying my bullshit.

Neither was I, anymore.

The waiter returned with our meals. While I directed him on the place settings, Chris waved the ladies back over.

"We're some God-fearing folks," Chris said as they took their seats. "Hope you don't mind if I say grace for the table."

"Nah, not at all."

The Harrises held their hands out. Ms. Dayne and I locked hands with them, and each other, and I was so preoccupied by the silky-softness of her hand in mine, I couldn't have told you what Chris said if I had a gun to my head.

Once we were done, I dug into my food and tried to clear my head of all thoughts about Ms. Dayne.

"He really does," she was saying, and the Harrises were laughing.

"Does, what?" I asked.

Vanessa swallowed her bite and said, "I was saying you eat like a bird."

"No, I don't."

"You do," Ms. Dayne said. "But that's not a bad thing. Portion control keeps you looking good. General, you. I eat like a bird, too. A vulture."

They laughed.

I didn't.

I did something worse.

I leaned over and said, “It looks like it’s working for you, though.”

I must have said it louder than I thought, because the whole fucking table went quiet. Ms. Dayne cleared her throat and muttered, “Thank you,” before shoveling food into her mouth.

*Fuck. I made it weird.*

“You know what?” I said, trying to clean it up, “I eat pretty well during the week. My chef does my dinners, but Ms. Dayne gets me right for lunch. She’s an excellent cook. So...I guess if the food is good, I go in. I think I’m just picky, maybe. I don’t know.”

The Harrises exchanged a look.

*Why do I keep saying weird shit?*

“Anyway, how’s everybody’s food?” I said awkwardly.

“Okay, listen,” Ms. Dayne began. “I might get in trouble with my boss for this, but I have to say it.”

I shot her a sideways glance, but she kept going.

“Chris, you have a winning product. I know this because I was a little black girl with dolls that had hair that didn’t look a damn thing like mine. I truly believe *your* dolls will make a big splash, but only if we can get them to your target market. I’ve had the experience of going to my local retailer to buy a gift and not being able to find a single black doll. This man right here can change that for you.”

Chris glanced over at a smiling Vanessa. “Y’all have given me something to think about, for sure.”

“Understood,” she said. “Just don’t think yourself out of the right decision. We do that sometimes.”

Vanessa nodded.

“It’s just...” Ms. Dayne trailed off. “This man works hard. Pardon my language, but he works his *ass* off. He has a vision, and I get inspired every day watching him execute it. He’s... amazing.”

A grin broke out on Chris’ face as he looked over at me.

Ms. Dayne cleared her throat. “I’m done. Am I in trouble?” she asked me.

The Harrises laughed.

I just shook my head.

She flashed me a pretty smile and dug into the rest of her mahi mahi, while I picked at my food and tried to figure out what the fuck my problem was.

After dinner, we took a ride over to the Bellagio so me and Chris could get at the blackjack table. In the car on the way there, Ms. Dayne and Vanessa were laughing and gossiping—I think they were both tipsy—and in the process, her dress rode up a little, giving me a nice glimpse of her upper thighs. Them things were so thick and meaty, they looked like they belonged in a KFC bucket. I licked my lips and tried not to stare. Or imagine myself between them. Caressing them. Squeezing them.



That shit didn't work, so I finally leaned over to whisper, "Your dress. It's..." and gestured to her hemline.

She glanced down and stared for a minute—*definitely* tipsy—before doing a half-ass job of pulling it down. But not even a minute later, once again—THIGHS.

I blew out a sigh and turned my head to look out the window. This night wasn't going at all like I had imagined it in my head. I was usually so good at this part, easily and confidently handling clients, turning on the charm. But not much of it had shown up tonight. I was off my game.

And I knew why.

But the interesting part, the part that had me keyed up, was that Ms. Dayne, in her tipsy state, was loosening up just enough that I could see a little something in her eyes when she looked at me. She was always charming, so it would have been easy to blame it on her nature, but there was a clear difference between the way she was handling me and the way she was handling Chris and Vanessa.

Like at the table.

Me and Chris were deep in the game. I was winning, of course. Vanessa had gone off to play slots. Ms. Dayne was with us, watching for a while before asking Chris, "Can I freshen your drink for you?"

He glanced at his glass of bourbon. He still had a few swallows left. "I think I'm okay."

"Let me know if you need anything," she responded.

Cool.

But then she walked up behind me and put her hands—her soft, dainty hands—on my shoulders. My breath caught in my chest. Pulse quickened. And when she leaned over me, and her hair brushed against the top of my head and the side of my face, chills crawled up and down my spine.

She put her lips a millimeter away from my ear and said, very softly, almost like a purr, “Do you need anything, Mr. Jackson?”

*This fucking woman...*

She had to know. How could she not know?

All the blood in my brain rushed straight to my dick and I almost, *almost* said something nasty to her. But I caught Chris looking at us, and that brought me back to my right mind.

My glass was still half full but I said, “Yeah, I’ll have another Jack and Coke,” just to get her sexy ass the hell away from me.

I ended up leaving with more money than I came with. Chris crapped out, but in the end, he still made out better than me because Vanessa was whispering in his ear the whole way back to the hotel. Had that nigga cheesing like it was picture day at school.

I knew that look.

I would have traded all my winnings for a night like he was about to have. It had been four-and-a-half months since I’d last had sex. I hadn’t had any issue with it. Work kept me busy and

distracted. But lately, and especially tonight, I'd been on *ready*.

Once we got to the lobby, we said our goodbyes to the Harrises after agreeing to meet for breakfast in the morning. They strolled off happily, Vanessa with a goofy grin on her face, Chris with a handful of her ass.

And then there were two.

"I think that went well," Ms. Dayne said.

"How would *you* know?"

She snapped her head to the right and looked at me in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"I—fuck. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just frustrated, that's all."

She didn't respond to that. Instead, she rifled through her purse, probably for her room key so she could get the hell away from me.

"Can I walk you to your room?"

"Not with that attitude. Goodnight, Mr. Jackson."

She was halfway to the elevators before I caught up with her. I'd never seen a woman move that fast in high heels. Impressive.

"Ms. Dayne, hold up."

She whirled around to face me.

"What I meant to say was that I close a lot of deals, and I can usually tell when it's leaning in my favor. Tonight, it was

not.”

Her face softened, just a little. “You think it’s going badly?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “I’m just...off tonight. I don’t know what it is.”

She eyed me cautiously. She was about to speak but the *ding!* of the elevator’s arrival cut her off.

“I’ll walk you to your room and make sure you’re safe. Alright?”

“Okay,” she said softly, stepping into the elevator.

We positioned ourselves on opposite sides. I glanced at the elevator capacity sign: 2500-pound limit. Together, we were only about three-fifty of that, but the thick tension in here had to have made up the rest. The energy was *charged*.

I stared at her.

She stared at me.

Pretty brown eyes. My resolve—what was left of it—was weakening.

I cleared my throat. “You did a good job tonight. I appreciate all your hard work. I probably don’t say that enough.”

“You don’t say it at all.”

We shared a smile at that.

“Honestly, it didn’t feel like work,” she said. “I enjoyed myself.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She looked down at the floor, all shy like. It was cute.

*Ding!*

We exited the elevator and hit a right. The hallway was long and our pace was slow. I can't speak for her, but I wasn't ready to say goodnight. I took my sweet ass time. She seemed to be doing the same.

“This is me.” She'd stopped in front of room 714. “So I'll see you in the morning. At breakfast.”

“You will.”

I stood still and waited, my eyes fixed on her pretty face. Something about this moment felt pivotal, and I didn't want it to pass. But I wasn't exactly sure what to do with it.

She held up her key. “Good *night*,” she said with heavy emphasis, like she was sending me on my way. But she should have known by now that I'm not a man who's good at taking orders.

I wasn't going that easy.



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## SAVANNAH

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HE WOULDN'T LEAVE.

And thank goodness for that.

I'm a smart woman. I knew exactly the kind of man I was dealing with. You can't ask a man like Mr. Jackson to come in for coffee. He's a hunter; he has to be the one to make the kill.

But there was also the nagging voice in the back of my head that wondered if he had picked up on my signals. Or if he was attracted to me at all. It seemed so, but nothing in life is certain.

But why else would he still be standing here?

I turned toward the door, acutely aware of his lingering presence behind me. The smell of his cologne. Even the sound of him breathing. Ignoring it all, I put the card in front of the pad and heard a click just after the green light flashed. I was turning the door handle when I heard it. Quiet, but intense.

“Savannah.”

In shock, I whirled around to face my boss. As always, his expression was inscrutable, but I didn't need his *face* to tell me anything. Everything I needed to know was in those three syllables. My name. My *first* name. The fact that he said it. The *way* he said it. It was all perfectly clear.

Exhilarated and terrified, I turned back around and opened the door. I stepped through and kept walking, hoping what I did was a clear sign to him about what *I* wanted.

I left the door open.

When it closed behind me, I wasn't sure if he'd come through it or not. I was just about to turn around to check when I heard footsteps. Slow. Deliberate.

Closer.

Closer.

He was so close, I could feel his body heat at my back. I took a deep breath and waited until I couldn't wait any more.

"What are you doing?" I asked softly.

"What do you think I'm doing?"

I smiled. "You said my first name."

"And?"

"And...I liked it."

He closed the last bit of distance between us. His voice was deep in my ear, his breath warm on my neck.

"What else do you like?"



My eyes closed as that washed over me.

There were several ways I could answer that question. I wanted to tell him I liked seeing him first thing every morning. Bringing him food. Talking to him. I liked his focus and ambition. I liked playing the part of his lady tonight. Most of all, I liked being his subordinate. Working for him. Submitting to him. I remembered him using that word during my interview and the confusion that followed.

I wasn't confused anymore.

But I didn't say any of that. I simply stood there, still as a statue, as his fingers grazed my shoulder. Goose bumps erupted on my arms as he brushed my hair to the side and pressed his lips to the back of my neck.

It had been so long since I'd been touched like this. I could feel the longing on his fingertips. Every touch felt deliberately measured, as if he was just barely restraining himself. I let out a sigh that might have been a moan; I can't say because I didn't hear it. I only heard the smack of his lips as he kissed his way from the back of my neck to the side and down to my shoulder. My body ablaze, I grabbed his hands and wrapped them around my waist. His throaty chuckle in my ear was more than I could stand. I arched my back, pressing my lower body into his, sighing at the feel of his erection against my ass. How we got from boss/assistant to this, and so quickly, I wasn't sure, but I was damn sure happy to be here.

It felt so good.

And so right.

He pulled my ear between his teeth and nibbled gently before asking, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Do I still have to call you Mr. Jackson?”

He laughed and spun me around. “Maybe.”

We locked eyes for a mere second before our lips met. I’m not sure who made the first move...probably him. All I know is my eyes closed involuntarily, my thoughts stopped, and everything went silent around me. I was gone.

Lost in the soft fullness of his lips, in the euphoric sensation of his hands on my ass, squeezing, kneading. Caught up in the taste of the whiskey on his tongue and the urgent but sensual way he used said tongue to tease mine.

I was ready.

As if he’d read my mind, he pulled away and stared down into my eyes as he slipped out of his jacket. His hands were at the top button of his shirt when I grabbed them and shook my head.

“Let me do that for you, Mr. Jackson.”

He smiled, then ran his tongue across his bottom lip, licking me off. “I like that about you.”

I undid the first button. “What?”

“You know how to treat a man.”

“Do I?” The second button gave way. Golden brown skin peeked out at me from underneath.

His hands went to my waist again. “You do. And you just *work* for me. Imagine if I was actually your man.”

Third button undone. Almost there. “*Do* you imagine it?”

He smiled. “No comment.”

“Well, I like doing it.”

He blinked slowly as his eyes searched mine. “For everybody, or just me?”

“I think it’s my personality.”

“Oh.” His disappointment was palpable.

“But I *will* say when I do things for *you*, it feels...different. It makes me feel good in a way I’ve never felt with other people.”

“Oh yeah?”

I nodded as I freed the last button. “Working for you, knowing I’m doing a good job for you, gives me *pleasure*.”

“Mmm,” he grunted, shaking his head. “For once in my life, I’m speechless.”

I pushed his shirt off his muscular shoulders, then dropped my hands to his belt. “You can tell me ‘thank you.’” I unzipped his pants. “After I finish pleasing you.”

I sank to my knees in front of him, and whatever clever retort he had for me got stuck in his throat when I sucked the head of him into my mouth. The words became a gasp, then a groan as his hands found their way to the top of my head. I teased him with my tongue. Around and around, I treated the

tip of him like my own little lollipop. When my hand gripped the base, I got confirmation that his cockiness was perfectly rational and well-earned; that thing was gargantuan. But I could handle that. I'd had plenty of practice.

“*Shhhhhhit,*” he hissed. “Don't be shy. Take all that. Straight to the back of your throat.”

I pulled off and stared up at him. “So you're *always* bossy.”

“Is that a question?”

“No, an observation.”

“Good. Because I don't have time to be explaining shit to you. You're just gonna have to learn as you go.”

My eyes narrowed, and a flood of wetness filled my panties as his words called back to my first day.

It seemed like that was just yesterday, and today, I had his dick in my mouth.

Funny how time flies.

At any rate, I got down to business. I'd always been good at this part. Mo taught me well. I almost wished I could call him up and thank him for the skill, especially upon seeing and hearing how much Mr. Jackson was enjoying it. His groans made me throb with need, creating an aching desire to have him inside me, filling me up.

When his dick began to pulse in my mouth, I intensified my assault on him to speed things along. But hearing him call my name again, sternly this time, made me stop.

“You almost got me,” he said as he extricated himself from my mouth. “Just like everything else you do, the head was on point. But I don’t wanna cum yet.”

He pulled me to my feet and grabbed the back of my neck. Breathless, I submitted, allowing his tongue to invade my mouth once again. His kisses were passionate, authoritative, persuasive. Just like him.

I made an attempt to unzip my dress, but I didn’t have the dexterity I needed to reach that exact spot on my back. With his tongue still in my mouth, Mr. Jackson reached around and pulled my zipper down. The touch of his hands on my bare back was heavenly. I moaned quietly as my clit throbbed.

When he finally pulled away, it was to relieve me of my dress. I stepped out of it, in my bra and panties now, and moaned again when he cupped my mound. I wrapped my arms around his neck and lifted my leg, encircling his waist and giving him easier access. We shared a moan when he slipped his fingers past the thin fabric and touched me where I was most sensitive. And wet.

“*Shit,*” he groaned. “You know what this feels like?”

“What?”

“It feels like you’re ready to take this dick.”

“I’ve *been* ready.”

He pulled his head back and looked into my eyes, his expression inquisitive. “So this didn’t just happen tonight?”

I shook my head and ran my hands up his abs and over his chest. His body was hard and taut, his muscles defined. His handsome face registered surprise.

“I don’t know when it happened,” I said, and that was the truth. “But I’m glad it did.”

“Me too.” He placed one last peck on my lips before he released me. We finished undressing and quickly returned to our original positions, embroiled in a deep, desperate kiss. I felt him walking me backwards, stopping only when my legs hit the edge of the bed. I sat while he grabbed his wallet and pulled out a condom. Once he’d covered that amazing dick, he pushed me backwards and climbed on top of me.

I opened my legs for him. He stared down at my pussy for just a moment before he slid inside me. Slowly. Carefully. His eyes rolled back and I arched toward him. It felt like we’d both been waiting for this moment. Him being inside me was a *relief*.

“Is it me or does this feel right?” he asked me, his voice low and strained.

“I swear I was just thinking that.” I reached for him. “Come here.”

He obliged, and when the rest of our bodies met, they fit like they were the last two pieces of a puzzle. I pulled his face to mine so I could feel his lips again.

I let out a soft whimper when he pulled out and pushed back in, his length and girth causing slight twinges of pain. But the

pain quickly gave way to pleasure. *Intense* pleasure that overwhelmed all of my senses. He served me long, deep strokes, perfect in speed and rhythm. We breathed in unison. Moaned in unison.

“Mr. Jackson,” I moaned. “What do I call you?”

He chuckled in my ear. “Call me by my name.”

“Okay.”

“Say it.”

“What?”

“Say my name.”

“Taurus.”

“Good girl. That’s what I wanna hear when you cum on my dick.”

Had it been anyone else, I might have had my doubts. I didn’t even cum every time with Mo, and he knew my body backward and forward. But Taurus? I had no doubt. He had me so wet, so turned on, so *sensitive*, I knew my release would come quickly.

“Shit,” he whispered.

“You like that?”

“Fuck, yes.”

I raked my nails up his back, lifting up slightly to kiss and suck his neck. His skin tasted divine.

“Just so you know,” he said, “I’m a talker.”

“Okay. I’m quiet.”

He smirked. “We’ll see.”

I smiled back and wrapped my arms around his neck. The reality of this moment was hitting me. Hard.

I was having sex with my boss.

But it was *good* sex, so whatever.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he ordered, and the reward for my compliance was an onslaught of direct hits to my g-spot. With every stroke, intense tingles radiated throughout my lower body, leaving me breathless, witless, stunned, and screaming, “Oh my God!”

Taurus raised up and put a hand on the headboard for leverage, smirking down at me in triumph. “Ain’t so quiet now, are you?”

“Because you’re...you’re,” I stuttered. “Oh God, that feels so good.”

“It’s supposed to.”

He brought his free hand to my face, gently stroking my cheek as he stared down at me. The juxtaposition was startling; the tenderness in his eyes and in his touch contrasted sharply with the roughness of his strokes. But somehow, it was perfection, and so was the view from where I was. His taut muscles rippled and a thin sheen of sweat covered his caramel skin. His abs tightened and contracted with every thrust, and when I rested my eyes on his handsome face, the look of pure ecstasy that covered it made my entire body clench.



I reached for him, needing to feel his body on mine. When our bodies lay flush once again, I sighed happily and held him to me, letting my hands dance lightly across the backs of his shoulders while he slowed his pace. It felt so intimate, so loving, like we'd been doing this for years. Like we meant something to each other—certainly more than boss and employee.

I captured his mouth in a torrid kiss. Our tongues intertwined, our limbs entangled, our moans in a strange harmony, we *made love*. He buried his face in my neck as his hands found their way beneath me, gripping my ass cheeks like they belonged to him.

Shit, maybe they did.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Savannah,” he muttered against my skin as he stroked me slowly. “And you feel so damn good.” He was buried so deep inside me, I thought he was trying to touch my soul. It was *scarily* intimate, too intimate for a first time.

The first time...it’s for satisfying the urge. Scratching the itch. What we were doing was so far beyond that, I wasn’t sure how we could ever go back to the way things were. We were in very dangerous territory here.

But it felt *so good*.

“You ready to cum for me?”

I sighed happily, grateful for the distraction from my thoughts. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

He lifted his head, then his body, and looked down between us. I looked, too, and marveled at the sight of him moving in and out of me, my creamy wetness coating him with every stroke.

He licked his thumb and reached down between us, pressing my clit like a button, winding firm circles as he thrust in and out of me. My eyes rolled back, but not before I heard him chuckle. It was a cocky sound, like he *knew* he was doing everything exactly right, but I couldn't blame him, because he fucking *was*. He was winding me up, charging me in preparation for my release, and he was masterful at it, applying just the right amount of pressure. He got me most of the way there and stopped, bringing his thumb to my lips, offering me a taste. I received it eagerly, sucking my essence off of him while he changed up his stroke. Now, he was giving me short, deep thrusts, angling his pelvis just right to give my clit just the right amount of friction.

Like I said.

Masterful.

He let his hand drift from my mouth to my chest, where his fingers found my nipples. He lightly pinched them, rolling them until they were stiff. I writhed and moaned at the added stimulation, almost coming complete undone when he stared down at me. The meeting of our eyes gave me a jolt, and I saw something in those steely eyes. Passion, yes. But something else. Something more. And I felt the connection. Yes, he was in me physically, but he had *gotten in*.

I gasped as the pressure built to a slow, exquisite peak. I could tell by the way he was staring at me that he was paying close attention. Not surprising, given his general attention to detail. He was treating my pleasure like a status report, checking me to make sure I was on track. And his face was a mirror, reflecting my ecstasy back to me. His groans echoed my moans, ramping up as my body geared up for release. My mouth dropped open, my vision blurred, my heart raced, my core tightened.

“There you go,” he said proudly and knowingly, just one second before the pleasure surged to an explosive, throbbing climax. As my body succumbed to him, I remembered his directive and, as I always do, I acquiesced.

“Taurus,” I moaned, but not for long. The moan turned to a scream as the orgasm intensified, so powerful I saw stars before tears seeped out of my eyes. Had I been in my right mind, I might have been embarrassed by my behavior. Crying? The first time? Yikes. But the dick was so good, and the orgasm so powerful, I forgave myself immediately. Anyone would have reacted the same under those circumstances.

About ten minutes later, I came again. Cried again. And when Taurus came soon after, I held him to me, one hand on his back, the other at the back of his head. I held him like he belonged to me now.

Maybe he did.



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## SAVANNAH

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I WOKE UP ALONE.

I wasn't the least bit surprised, or bothered, by that. If I wasn't ready to face what we'd done last night, Taurus—*Mr. Jackson* had to be feeling some serious regret. Sleeping with an employee? On a business trip?

In the cold light of day, it was kind of...sketchy.

Or...was it?

We were grown. Attracted to each other. Unattached—kind of. And we were caught up in the rush of dinner and drinks and being out of town together. Anyone would have succumbed.

The fact that the sex was amazing was even more evidence that what we'd done wasn't wrong, but was it *right*? For him? For me?

I couldn't decide.

My body didn't care about any of that, though. My body felt good and tired, the pleasant kind of tired that follows a good workout. Which could definitely describe last night.

With a sleepy smile on my face, I stretched out on the bed, laying there for several minutes, reliving as much of last night as I could. The kisses, the feel of his dick in my mouth, inside me. My body responded to my memories with butterflies in my belly and pulsing in my clit. I got wet all over again and felt a strong urge to touch myself, but I didn't, because I had a brunch to get to.

Taurus' discipline was rubbing off on me.

I was dressed and pulling my hair into a ponytail when a text came through.

*Meet me downstairs with your stuff. We're going straight to the airport.*

I frowned at that, read it again, and wondered what happened.

Thirty minutes later, I spotted Taurus in the lobby looking casually handsome in a black shirt and jeans. He stood as I approached, his face giving nothing, as always. I didn't know whether to smile or not. If he was Mr. Jackson again or if he was still Taurus. Should I acknowledge last night, or pretend it never happened?

"You made it," he said blankly.

I guess we were pretending.

“Yes. What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said with a shrug. “Their kid was sick so they left early. I’ll give him a call when I get back.”

Sick kid. That explained it. Maybe. If the kid was *actually* sick.

“You’re not worried?” I said, eyeing him for his reaction.

“Nah.” Still cool as a cucumber.

But *I* was worried. About the deal and...other things.

We didn’t talk on the ride to the airport. Taurus was on his phone the entire time, leaving me to steal occasional glances and wonder where his head was at. He was giving me nothing, but maybe that’s how it worked. I hadn’t had casual sex in ages. Perhaps this was the routine: discreet sex out of town where nobody will ever know, then back to business at home.

It was probably for the best.

We checked our bags and stood in line to board the plane. He’d managed to get me in business class with him for the trip home. I was looking forward to it. Maybe we’d talk.

Or maybe he’d continue to ignore me.

By the time we’d been seated—him in the window seat, me in the middle next to some lady—I was dying for some kind of sign of something. *Anything*.

“So...”

He looked over at me, his eyebrows up. “So?”

“How are you?”

Expressionless, he answered, “I’m good.”

“Oh. That’s good. Me, t—”

“I already know you’re good, Savannah. I made you cum three times last night, remember?”

My head immediately whipped to my right. The woman in the seat next to me looked like she was trying her hardest not to listen. I knew she heard, though.

“Can you please keep your voice down?” I asked him in a whisper.

“For what?” He pulled the window shade down halfway, cutting off the harsh glare of the afternoon sun. “You broached the subject.”

“All I said was, ‘so.’”

“Yeah. That was you broaching the subject.”

“Okay, fine,” I said with a sigh. “I guess I was just... checking in.”

“What do you wanna know, Savannah?”

“It’s not that I wanna know anything in particular. I just...I don’t know.”

“Look at you, all shy,” he smirked. “Look, I enjoyed myself. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“No. I already knew that,” I said, taking my turn to smirk. “I guess I’m just making sure we’re still comfortable with each other after...everything.”



“I’m good,” he said with a shrug. He looked down at my lap. “You aren’t buckled.”

“Oh.” I reached down to grab my belt. He got to it first.

“I got you.”

After he secured my band in the buckle, he moved his hand back to his side, lightly grazing my breasts on the way. I cut my eyes at him and he winked back, making me feel the tiniest bit of relief about the fact that we were on the same page about our tryst. It meant something to him, too, and he wasn’t going to pretend it never happened.

Taurus worked through takeoff and the first hour of the flight. I napped briefly before powering up my kindle and starting on a romance novel I’d been wanting to read. I couldn’t bring myself to start it before because of the pain I’d been in, but now? I was ready to read about two people falling in love.

The implications weren’t lost on me.

“Fuck.”

I looked over at him. “You okay?”

“I can’t concentrate.” He sighed and pointed at my kindle. “What are you reading?”

“A novel.”

“What’s it about?”

“Love.”

“Does it have sex in it?”

I laughed. "I'm sure it does. I'm only twenty pages in right now, but I'll keep you posted."

"Nah," he smirked. "Whatever's in that book can't be better than what we did last night."

I cut my eyes at him again. "Stop."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Do I?" he grinned. "Come here real quick."

"No."

"Savannah," he said, sternly this time. "Come here."

Unable to resist, I leaned in his direction. He met me halfway, pressing his lips to mine.

I thought it would just be a cursory peck, but he quickly slid his tongue between my lips. I surrendered, but only for a moment. It wasn't the time or the place.

And I wanted to leave him wanting more.

So I pulled away begrudgingly and got back to my book. Occasionally, Taurus would look over at me and shake his head, but I did my best to ignore him and focus on reading.

I was on page fifty-two when I realized I hadn't absorbed a single word.

"Quick question," he said in my ear. I shivered and leaned away from him. It was scary how much he was affecting me.

"Yes?" I said cautiously.

“That dish you brought me the other day, with the spinach. What was that called?”

“Frittata.”

“Cool. One more question.”

“Mm hm?”

“Do you always wax your pussy, or did you do that for me?”

“Shhhhhh!” I glanced over at my seat neighbor. She had her earbuds in, thankfully.

“What?” he asked. His genuine confusion tickled me. This was a man who never gave any thought to how he might be inconveniencing other people. He’d never had to.

“First of all,” I said, “I didn’t know we’d be doing anything on this trip. And second, people can hear you. And why are you even talking to me about that right now?”

“It popped into my head.”

“Yeah, I bet it did. What else popped into your dirty mind?”

Chuckling, he leaned a little closer. My pulse quickened.

“Since you asked, I’ll tell you.” He closed his laptop and slid it back into his bag. “I’ve been reliving last night. That’s why I can’t concentrate. Every time I try to focus on something, I hear you in my head. The sounds you made... moaning...whining in my ear. Calling my name.” He grimaced. “Fuck.”

I nodded. That was all I could do. Speaking seemed impossible. I was giddy that he'd been thinking about it the same way I had. And I was turned on by the lust in his voice.

"I keep replaying the moment I made you cum the first time."

"Why?"

He looked into my eyes. "That's when it got real to me. I got to see you in a different light. You were already sexy just in general, but that particular moment was just..." He stared down at my lips. "It's the most intimate you can be with somebody. It's the most erotic and sensual you can ever feel. The most pleasure you can experience. I got to see how that looked with you. And sounded. And felt."

"How did it feel?" I asked with a small voice. My seat neighbor shifted in her seat.

He closed his eyes. His brows furrowed like he was watching it in his head. "It was...indescribable. You'll just have to take my word for it, Savannah." He put a hand on my thigh and leaned over to whisper, "Your pussy is life-changing."

I swallowed hard and whispered, "Thank you."

"Thank *you*. It was so good it..." he looked out the window. "It brought a tear to my eye."

"Are you serious?"

He brought his eyes back to mine. "Don't tell nobody that shit. I'm serious."

“I won’t.” I considered that for a moment. It was truly the last thing I would have ever expected him to say. “I—”

“You know what I was just thinking?”

“What?”

He glanced down at my armrest. “All I have to do is move this out of the way and I can make you cum right now.”

“Oh my God, please don’t!”

I whipped my head to my right and found my seat neighbor staring at us with a look of sheer terror on her face.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do this anymore,” she said frantically. “I mean, it was hot at first but I do *not* wanna sit here and listen to y’all give each other hand jobs for the next three hours.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “You’re right, that was rude. Won’t happen again.”

She nodded and faced forward, closing her eyes to shut us out, probably. Next to me, Taurus was laughing. Of course.

Shaking my head, I picked up my kindle. “I’m gonna read now. And you probably have work to do.”

“Yeah. I have work to do. Making you cum.”

“Taurus.”

“Can I work, Savannah?” he said, an adorable grin on his handsome face. He was irresistible and he knew it.

“Stop it!” I warned.

“What?”

I leaned closer and lowered my voice. “That woman just said—”

“Alright, enough of this.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Excuse me, miss?” he said, leaning over me slightly.

My neighbor turned her head toward us and raised her eyebrows.

“I’m Taurus. What’s your name?”

“Lydia.”

“Nice to meet you.” He pulled several hundreds out of his wallet. “You look thirsty, Lydia. Let me buy you a drink.”

Mortified, I froze as Lydia eyed the money, then me, then Taurus. When I glanced at him, his gaze was fixed on her. He was perfectly calm and in control. Lydia didn’t know this, but I knew in that moment that he was gonna do what he wanted either way. She was lucky he was making a concession about it.

Finally, Lydia did the smart thing and took the cash. “I *am* kind of thirsty,” she said.

Taurus smiled. “Enjoy. You should crank your music up, too.”

She nodded. “Yeah. The plane is pretty loud.”

He didn’t respond to that. Instead, he reached into his messenger bag and pulled out the most luxurious looking

blanket I'd ever seen. It was slate blue, probably cashmere, and once it was resting across my legs, it was undoubtedly the softest thing I'd ever felt.

He lifted the armrest between us and stared at me, willing me to move closer to him. So I did, of course, and settled against him, resting my head on his chest and closing my eyes, shocked by how comfortable I felt in his arms.

He was patient. It took about twenty minutes for the flight attendant to bring Lydia her vodka with cranberry. Once she had it, I knew Taurus would be all over me.

And he was.

And I didn't mind.

It started with a kiss and quickly progressed to his hands moving beneath the blanket, under my shirt, under my bra. When his fingers grazed my nipples, I couldn't stop myself from moaning into his mouth. It felt so good, I was overstimulated. I pulled away and put my hands on his to still them.

“What's wrong?” he asked, sounding a little less patient.

“We're on an airplane surrounded by people.”

He blinked. Once again, he didn't see the problem. “Look, I can't do anything about that. If I had known I'd be doing this with you, I would have flown us private.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. But here we are. Do I need to make it rain on every motherfucker on this plane? Because I will.”

I believed him. I glanced over at Lydia, who looked like she was already three sheets to the wind.

He pecked my lips. “Look, if you’re uncomfortable, I’ll leave you alone.”

I thought about that for a moment before whispering, “I don’t want you to leave me alone.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“So you think you know me?”

“I know a little.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“You like submitting to me. Don’t be ashamed.”

“Who said I’m ashamed?”

“The fact that you whispered it.”

“Okay, I like it. I don’t know why I do, but...I do.”

“Don’t worry about why. Just enjoy it. Now close your mouth and let me work.”

“Yes, Mr. Jackson.”

With his tongue in my mouth and his hand in my panties, Taurus took me higher than any airplane ever could.

Twice.





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## TAURUS

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WE STOOD TOGETHER, SILENTLY, waiting for our bags to pass us by on the carousel. A million thoughts swirled through my head. Work. The Harrises. Hunger. But the one that superseded them all was the question I wanted to ask her: will you come home with me?

“So what’s next for you?” I said instead.

“Meaning, today?”

“Yeah. You all settled into your apartment?”

She chuckled. “Not even close. I have a bunch of boxes to unpack, and I still need to get my furniture situated.”

“You know you can hire people to do that for you.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Or *I* could. Did you even get paid yet? Do I need to talk to HR?”

“Yes, I got paid,” she said, laughing. “It’s fine. I’ll get it done eventually.” She elbowed me lightly in my side. “It’s all

your fault. You keep me so busy, I don't have the time or energy to do anything but sleep."

I pointed to the blue bag headed my way and she nodded. I lifted it and set it next to her, my wheels turning the whole time.

"I could help you with your boxes."

And other things.

Like orgasms.

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't have to. I'm offering." I spotted my bag and moved to pick it up. "I'm only gonna offer once."

"Okay. Yes. That would be nice."

I pulled out my phone and added her name as a contact. "Put your address in here."

She did as I asked and we walked together to the parking lot, parting ways after I loaded her bags into her trunk. On the drive to her place, I left the radio off. Deep in my thoughts.

I was tired. Hungry.

Horny.

I don't know what the hell I was thinking with that little stunt on the plane. I mean, of course I enjoyed making her feel good, but afterward, I was on a thousand. Damn near gave myself blue balls.

After four-and-a-half months, I'd finally had sex. I felt like a new man. I honestly hadn't even realized how much I'd

missed it. But what was more notable about last night, for me, was remembering how important it was to feel that connection.

The physical act was one thing. That part was good as fuck. But being inside her and staring into her eyes, knowing she'd been wanting me, too, and that we were both feeling the same thing at the same time...*that's* the part I enjoyed the most.

But that's not why I was headed to her place. I didn't care if we had sex tonight. I just wanted to be around her. Spending that time together outside of the office had stirred up my appetite, but for companionship. Savannah was cool as hell to be around, and I wanted to explore that. The sex was just a bonus.

*A hell* of a bonus.

Just thinking about it had me shaking my head.

A text came through as I was pulling into her building. I glanced down, saw that it was her, and pulled into the first space I saw so I could read it.

*Could you park in front of the other building?*

*Why?*

*Don't wanna give my ex any ammunition*

Frowning at that, I hit the speed dial button and waited.

“Hey,” she said breathlessly.

“What’s the problem?”

“No problem. I just need to be careful. I wouldn’t put it past him to find out about us and use it against me.”

“How would he find out?”

“I don’t *think* he would, but he could be watching me.”

I sat back in my seat and thought about that. “Yeah, I think that’s my cue.”

“For what?”

“I’m not trying to get caught up in some bullshit. And I don’t wanna make things hard for you in the long run.”

After a beat, she said, “You didn’t eat anything on the plane. Are you hungry?”

I smiled. I guess she did know a little about closing a deal.

“Alright. Let me park and I’ll be up in a second. Pop your trunk and I’ll grab your bags on my way.”

By the time I made it up the steps to her second-floor apartment, she’d already changed out of her traveling clothes. I eyed her JSU t-shirt—which just barely covered her ass—and felt my dick trying to rock up.

“You went to JSU?” was all I said.

“Mm hm,” she said absentmindedly as she closed the door behind me.

“Chris went there. He mentioned it when y’all were at the bar.”

“Hmm. Didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. That must be why he thought you looked familiar.”

“Maybe. Okay, you can put my bags in the bedroom. I’m gonna start prepping.”

I walked down the short hallway and into a small bedroom. I wasn’t sure what her old house looked like but this right here? Wasn’t it. Not saying she was too good to live in an apartment, but this apartment wasn’t good enough. Not for a woman like her.

I joined her in the small kitchen, watching her from behind as she chopped onions, enjoying the dimples in her thighs and the way the back of her t-shirt rode up a little where her ass poked out.

“What are you making me?”

“What do you have a taste for?” she answered without turning around.

*You.*

“I don’t have a preference. Everything you make is good.”

“Okay.” Her sing-songy voice was so cute.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“Oh, no, you just sit down and relax. You can work after I get some food in you. I don’t want you doing too much on an empty stomach.”

Smiling, I leaned against the counter and watched her work. It had been a long time since I did any kind of manual labor. I hired all that shit out. But tonight, I'd do anything she asked me to do. Bonus points if the work was difficult. Because I was feeling this...I don't know—*primal* urge to take care of her.

The way she took care of me.

I mean, my ex-wife never treated me this well, not even when we first got married. And that's not to say she was a bad wife, because she wasn't. I just didn't know how much I wanted to be treated like this until now. Savannah had raised the fucking bar.

And she didn't even know it.

“Do you want something to drink? I have a bottle of wine around here somewhere.”

“Nah, I'm good,” I answered quietly, my eyes glued to her body. She stirred, chopped, tasted, measured, poured, and stirred some more, and all I could think about was being buried deep inside her.

She finally turned around. “You're not gonna sit down?”

I shook my head.

“So you're gonna stand there and watch me the whole time?”

“Probably. You look good.” I took a few steps toward her. “I'm over here wondering if you taste good, too. I'm leaning heavily toward yes.”

She smiled. “You’re so different outside of work. It’s amazing.”

“Am I?” I took another step and stopped. “You can thank your pussy for that.”

Her eyes went wide. “You’re so nasty.”

“Yeah. I am.” I walked right up on her and grabbed the back of her neck. Her lips parted as she looked up at me. Staring down at them made me feel weak.

*What is she doing to me?*

I dipped my head to taste her soft, full lips. The sensation shot straight to my groin, and if I didn’t know before what it meant to yearn for someone, I damn sure knew now. I was hungry for her. Desperate, really.

Which meant I needed to clear something up before I had her again.

“I probably should have asked you this before all this started, but...what’s the deal with your ex? I know y’all are getting divorced, but are you separated? Legally?”

She brought her hands to my back and gripped my shirt. “Legally, no. I filed and moved out, though. We are one-hundred percent *not together*.”

“Well—”

“Okay, ninety-nine percent.”

I wrapped an arm around her waist. “That’s good enough for me. I just don’t want no problems. I’m not very good at



diplomacy. If a man gets in my face talking shit, I'm liable to tell that man exactly what his woman sounds like when she's screaming my name."

She brought those pretty eyes back up to meet mine. "That sounds dangerous."

"You know what's dangerous? You, standing in front of me with this little ass t-shirt on."

I brought my hands to her hips, kneading the meaty flesh my fingers found there. I lifted the hem and found more skin. Soft, supple curves and *naked* skin. A quiet groan escaped my lips as I registered that fact.

"No panties, huh? You know you're about to get this dick, right?"

"No," she whined. "I need to feed you first."

I chuckled and went to my knees in front of her. "Then open your legs, Savannah. Feed me."

With her hands clutching the edge of the counter and her right leg hooked over my shoulder, Savannah fed me good. A grown man's helping of pussy. She tasted so sweet I put my whole face in it. Licking, sucking, gently biting—I did it all, using her verbal cues to learn what she liked.

Far as I could tell, she liked it all.

So eager. So willing. So vulnerable. Goddamn, she was sexy. Wide open for me, putting herself at my mercy, trusting me to get her off. I can't even put words to how bad I wanted to please her. Every whimper, every moan, every tremble of

her thighs directed me down the path to her release. I sucked her clit into my mouth. She got louder. I slid two fingers inside her. She writhed and moaned my name. That one was dangerous, because feeling how wet and slippery she was almost made me lose it.

In the end, it was that combination of me sucking her clit and fingering her that made her cum. I held her up as she came apart, hoping it felt every bit as good as it sounded. She deserved it.

I forgot I was hungry. We retreated to her bedroom, leaving the food right where it was.

I never did get around to helping her with her furniture.



I passed her husband when I was leaving, right before I crossed the street to get to the adjacent parking lot. I didn't know dude, and had never seen him before, but I knew. It was his posture. The way he eyed me when I passed. The territorial look in his eyes. A man doesn't look like that unless he has a deep investment in a woman.

I didn't blame him.

Savannah was the kind of woman who inspired devotion.

So I got into my car and waited. A few minutes later, he got out of his car and walked toward the stairs. I sat there for a while. Not sure why. Savannah made it clear she wasn't afraid of him, and besides, it wasn't my business anyway. She was still legally married to him.

Five minutes passed and he didn't come back down.

I took that as my cue to go.

And *stay* gone. Literally and figuratively.

It was for the best.

Way too messy. What was I thinking getting myself caught up in this?



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## SAVANNAH

---

I DON'T KNOW WHY I let him in here.

I think it's because I was so caught off guard. Not even five minutes after Taurus left, Mo was knocking at my door. A chill went through me when I looked out the peephole, and then I worried. Had he seen Taurus leaving? Had he been watching me?

I ran to put some shorts on and fix my disheveled hair. I had to make myself stop smiling from the thought that another man, a *better* man, had blown my back out right before my cheating ex-husband showed up.

An annoyingly smug ex-husband. He was grinning when I flung the door open, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" he said quietly.

With a loud sigh, I stepped aside and let him in. Unlike the day I had him served, I felt okay about talking to him now. I suppose I felt a bit stronger here on my own turf. There was an

inner confidence that was radiating through me that hadn't been there before.

It felt good.

“What's up?” I asked.

He shrugged dramatically. “When a wife serves her husband divorce papers, I think it warrants a conversation. Don't you?”

“I wasn't ready to talk to you yet.”

“And now?”

I crossed my arms in front of me. “You're here. Talk.”

He pointed to my lonely little couch. “Can we sit down? Is that okay?”

Once we were seated—with me as far away from him as possible without falling off the couch—he spoke. And it wasn't anything I wanted to hear.

“So, I'm not gonna say I cheated, because I think that's the wrong way to frame what happened.”

I stared at his cheating face—still handsome, unfortunately—and rolled my eyes. If men had nothing else, they had the audacity.

Nothing was *ever* Mo's fault.

“Okay,” I said, feeling charitable. “Tell me what happened.”

He sat back and stretched his legs out, making himself large. Colonizing my space. “Work's been very stressful lately,” he said. “In a moment of weakness, I allowed myself to be ensnared—”

I burst out laughing, and the perplexed look on his face only made it worse. I laughed until I was clutching my stomach. He simply stared and waited.

“Mo. Come on,” I said when I could finally speak. “You can’t honestly expect—”

“Just hear me out. Let me finish. I was ensnared by my emotions. I got caught up emotionally. Not physically, necessarily. There’s a difference.”

So much double-speak. I can’t believe I dealt with it for so long.

“So you didn’t fuck another woman?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Again, I think that’s the wrong way to frame it.”

“How would you frame the act of sticking your married penis into some other bitch’s vagina?”

His eyes flew open. He had the nerve to look outraged.

“Don’t do that. See, this is what I’ve been saying for years. When I try to talk to you about real issues, and pour out my heart, you make it very difficult with your sarcasm and your sharp tongue. And then I close up. That’s what leaves me vulnerable.”

“So it’s *my* fault you fucked another woman?”

He stared at me impassively. “What I’m trying to say—if you would just *listen*—is that I made a mistake. I acknowledge that. And honestly, Van, it took a lot for me to come here and

admit this to you. I did it of my own volition. Don't I get some credit for that?"

"Absolutely. A-plus. Gold star for Maurice."

His eyes rolled. "Sarcasm. It's so fucking hard to talk to you."

"Bottom line this for me, Mo. What do you want?"

"I want to work things out. I don't like coming home to an empty house."

"And I don't like coming home to this tiny apartment. But here we are."

"Then come home."

I narrowed my eyes. "Just tell me one thing."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Why'd you have to pick a low-budget bitch? Coach outlet? Applebee's? She must be too young to know any better."

He shook his head. "That's so unattractive, Savannah. You used to have a lot more class."

"And you used to have a wife. Now get the fuck out of my apartment."

"Cussing me out? What's gotten into you?"

*Good dick.*

"Goodnight, Maurice. I don't wanna talk to you again after tonight. Anything you need to say, you can tell it to my attorney."



“So you really won’t even talk to me about this?”

“No. You’ve been gaslighting me our entire marriage. Never again.”

“Gaslighting.” He chuckled dismissively. “You in therapy or something?”

I stood and walked over to the door in hopes that he would finally get the message. I waited while he stood slowly to his feet and looked around my little apartment, taking in the details with a smirk. He strolled toward me, his eyes on my body now, then my face, and shook his head.

“So it’s like that?” he said smoothly.

“Yes. It’s like that.”

He brushed past me with a parting shot. “Alright. I sure hope you like this little ass apartment. You ain’t gettin’ a dime from me.”

I wanted to appear unaffected by that, but my emotions got the best of me. I slammed the door shut behind him, my cheeks heating from anger.

The absolute nerve of him. After all these years, he didn’t have enough respect, or residual love for me to make sure I was okay? And the worst part was, the divorce was his fault. Why was he treating me like I did *him* wrong?

Furious, and hurt, I picked up my buzzing cell phone to check my texts. It was Taurus.

*T-You good?*

*Yes. Did you make it home okay?*

*T-Yeah. So, we're on the same page, right?*

*About what?*

*T-What happens in Vegas...etc*

Well, that stung. I was surprised by how much it bothered me, actually. I wasn't expecting the man to propose or anything, but this? I could have left Vegas in Vegas if that's what we were on, but he'd brought his ass over to my home to fuck me. That counted for something.

Or so I thought.

*Of course. Same page. I'll see you Monday.*

I hoped he read that with all the dryness with which I typed it.

*T-Six o'clock sharp.*

I hesitated.

Thought it over.

Forced myself to look at the bigger picture.

He was still my boss, and I still had a job to do. A plan to execute. Sex with him wasn't going to help me accomplish any of that, so it was best to leave the past in the past. He was absolutely right.

Big picture.

*Yes, Mr. Jackson*



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## SAVANNAH

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“GOOD MORNING, PAM!” I called as I walked through the door.

“Morning,” was her mumbled reply. “What’s got you all chipper today? You normally roll in here like a bear who got woken up out of hibernation.”

“It’s a Monday, and I’m happy to be here,” I announced.

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded me. “Did you win or something?”

“Win what?”

“Slots. Vegas. You must have won big.”

Won, yes. I had sex with my boss, and it was amazing.

Lost? Also yes....kind of. Because after the sex, I got brushed off.

“Just got a good night’s sleep, that’s all,” I lied.

“Uh huh. You look different. Something’s different.”

Probably the extra time I'd taken on my hair and makeup, and the fact that I'd waited to put on my scented lotion until right before I got out of my car so it would be fresh, and the fact that I was wearing my slinky black V-neck sweater dress and a pushup bra.

Okay, so the bigger picture I was supposed to be looking at kinda evaporated before my eyes. Last night, I lay in my bed for hours before sleep caught me, and while I was lying there, I was ruminating, and ruminating led to the startling realization—maybe *admission* is the better term—that I... liked him. I mean, *liked* him, liked him. And since I liked him, I didn't want Vegas to stay in Vegas. I wanted to see if there was something there worth exploring.

Lord, help me. A major reason I started working here in the first place was to find a new husband. I never would have thought Mr. Jackson would be in the running. Never, ever.

The man was obnoxious. Rude sometimes. Ornery. Stubborn. Kind of an asshole.

But he was smart. Driven. Sexy.

And the dick was *bomb*.

"I'm gonna get started," I called as I sashayed into the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, I got the arrival text, and a few minutes after that, I was in position with Mr. Jackson's mug in hand and a smile on my face.

And my titties pushed up.

“Morning,” Pam muttered as he passed. He gave her a nod.

“Good morning, Mr. Jackson!” I called.

“Yeah, good—” he stopped. His mouth dropped open.

“Are you okay?”

He resumed his walk toward the desk, his eyes fixed on my face. “Uh, fine. You look...” his eyes drifted lower. “...Nice.”

“Thank you.” I set the coffee in front of him and tapped my iPad to awaken the screen. “I’m ready for you,” I cooed.

He shook his head as he lifted the mug to his lips. He looked pissed, and that pleased me. I knew what was behind that anger.

“Call a meeting with Acquisitions,” he ordered, setting his mug back in its place. “Get me out of the meeting with Fleet. I need another day to go over the numbers they sent me. Fucking lazy as hell over there. I’m putting an end to that shit, though. Also...”

On and on he went, so long my fingers got tired of typing. At long last, he shut up and took several swigs of coffee before saying, “That should be enough to get you started.”

I waited. And waited. And waited.

He gave me nothing.

“Should we follow up with Chris?” I finally said.

“We?”

“Well, *you*.”

He tilted his head. “What do you think the Acquisitions meeting is for?”

“Well, *excuse me*. Didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he snapped.

Sigh.

“I hope you don’t mind that I sent their daughter a get well card and teddy bear.”

“That’s fine.”

His blank stare annoyed me. I thought I had gotten to him, but he seemed as intractable as ever.

“What’s for lunch today?” he demanded.

“I’ll have to order in. I didn’t get a chance to cook anything.”

He chuckled, but it was a bitter, sarcastic sound. “Got busy, huh?”

“Kind of. I finally got all my boxes put a—”

“That will be all for now.”

Asshole.

I took my time walking out, making sure he got the full picture of what I was working with back there. My dress was clingy, but not obscene, chosen specifically for a moment like this.

He wanted to distance himself from me? Push me away? Fine.



But I wasn't about to make it easy.



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## TAURUS

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*WHY SHE GOTTA BE so damn fine?*

I stared down at my dick and willed him to act like he had some sense. All angry and shit. But I couldn't blame him for swelling up, because not only did Savannah look good as fuck today, her smell was stronger—the lotion *and* the pheromones—and her attitude was on a thousand.

She was toying with me.

And I *liked* that shit.

I had to force myself to pay attention in the meeting with Eli and the team. You'd think I'd have been on my toes given the stakes, but I was sitting there reminiscing about being between Savannah's legs.

“Chris ain't returning my calls.”

That got my attention.

“He said his kid is sick,” I said to Eli.

Eli looked down at his notes—for what, I didn't know. Probably stalling. "I'll keep trying him. I don't know, though."

"What don't you know?" I demanded, a staunch enemy of that phrase. "I *pay* you to know."

"Yes, I-I-I understand. What I mean is, it went well in Vegas on my end. And on yours, too, I'm sure," he rushed out. "I just think I should have heard something by now."

I shrugged. "Give him a few days."

That was the official response. In my mind, I was concerned. And pissed.

Chris Harris would never get the kind of personalized service I provided with any other distributor. That was just facts. And while I was happy to have spent some time out of town with Savannah, that trip was a fucking business expense. I wanted a return on my investment.

Ms. Dayne was sitting at her desk when I returned. Working hard, or at least pretending to be. She didn't even look up when I passed, and when I got back to my desk and took my seat, I thought about that.

She didn't greet me.

To be fair, I'd never told her she needed to, but I suppose I expected her to at this point. She didn't have to be happy to see me or anything, but it would have been nice to get a 'hello' from her. An acknowledgment that I was alive, and that she valued my presence.

Right?

*Shit. Am I tripping?*

“Ms. Dayne!”

Too late now.

Silence, then footsteps, which made me think about her walk, which made me lose focus on why I was pissed in the first place.

The greeting. That was it.

“Yes, Mr. Jackson?” she said, stepping just inside the door.

“Are you aware that I came back from my meeting?”

Her eyes darted around my office as if to say ‘of course I am, dumbass, you’re sitting in your office.’ But she wisely answered, “Yes, I saw you when you walked by.”

“Okay, good. I was wondering, because you didn’t greet me or ask if I needed anything.”

“Okay...uh, I apologize. I wasn’t aware you expected a greeting every time you returned. Noted. *Do* you need anything?”

I couldn’t tell her I needed her juicy thighs wrapped around my head. I couldn’t tell her I needed to hear her moans and feel her soft skin. I couldn’t let her know I needed to make her cum.

So I simply turned and stared out the window.

“Do you have something you wanna say to me, Mr. Jackson?”

I looked at her in surprise. Was she challenging me?  
Seemed so.

Fine with me.

I don't run from challenges.

And I always win.

"Close the door," I ordered.

I turned back to watch. Stared hard. It was a fucking production the way she moved. And it seemed even sexier today. Maybe because I'd seen her naked. Or maybe because she was turning it on for me on purpose.

Either way, I enjoyed the view.

I waited until she returned to my desk and stood directly in front of me. Then, I attacked.

"Why did you wear that?"

She looked over herself in feigned confusion. "Wear what?"

"That dress," I said, gesturing.

"What's wrong with it?"

I stared blankly. "It's inappropriate."

"How so?"

I pressed my lips together and took a few breaths before answering, "It's revealing."

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly before she caught herself. "What is it revealing?"

"Don't play games with me, Ms. Dayne."

“I’m not. What is my dress revealing, Mr. Jackson?”

“Cleavage. Which makes me think about your titties. Which makes me think about the fact that I’ve seen you naked. Do you remember that happening, or did I make that up?”

She nodded slowly, her chest rising slowly as she inhaled. “I remember.”

“As much as I’ve tried to forget, I can still hear the sounds you made when I touched you. Do you remember when I touched you? *Where* I touched you?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Do you ever think about how good it felt?”

She blinked in slow motion. “Mm hm.”

“I try not to, so I’m sure you can understand how fucking distracting it is when you come into this office looking like that.”

She went to speak, closed her mouth, then opened it again to say, “Like what? What do I look like, Mr. Jackson?”

Resisting the urge, I simply replied, “Distracting.”

“Well, I apologize for distracting you.” She cleared her throat. “Is there a list of approved articles of clothing that I should be aware of? The kind that *don’t* distract you?”

“If I’m being honest, you could wear a motherfucking Hefty bag and I’d still be distracted.”

“So the answer is no?”

“The answer is no.”

“Noted.”

A staring match ensued. She usually looked away after a few seconds, something most people do when dealing with me. The fact that she was holding my gaze now, staring me down, made me realize that something between us had categorically shifted.

I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

Her eyes still on mine, she blinked slowly before pulling the corner of her lip between her teeth. I watched helplessly, unable to control my increasing arousal, the tightness in my groin quickly becoming unbearable. But I was enjoying the feeling. I'd never felt like this in my office before. This professional space I'd created to conduct business felt different now. Erotic. Sensual.

I wasn't sure how I felt about *that*, either.

My past assistants had all been various levels of attractive. I noticed, of course, but never acted on any of it. I'd always maintained professional boundaries.

Until Savannah.

And now, I wanted nothing more than to strip both of us down and explore the possibilities. My desk...the wall...the large floor-to-ceiling picture window...anywhere and everywhere she was willing to play. However she wanted it. Whenever she wanted it.

I was used to being in control.

This wasn't good for me.



“Did you need anything else?” she asked softly.

“Just...” Frustrated, I shook my head. “I’m really trying to keep shit professional with you, Savannah.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Jackson,” she said with a smile. “We’re on the same page. Your text was very clear about the fact that what happened in Vegas needs to stay there. As far as what happened here in Summerville...that’s less clear, but I’m sure you’ll educate me as the need arises.”

My eyes narrowed. “You got a smart ass mouth.”

“And you like it,” she said with a confident, biting tone that shot straight to my dick.

I nodded slowly, too turned on to pretend otherwise. How had I ever thought I could win anything against this woman? She had me by the balls and she knew it.

“Why do I feel like you say some real nasty shit when you’re feeling yourself?”

She chuckled and pushed her hair behind her ear, staring at me in expectant amusement, daring me to make a move.

I found myself at a crossroads. I was the one who pulled back the other day, but all I wanted to do *now* was rush forward and consume her. Right down to the last drop.

“Ms. Dayne...” I trailed off after a piss-poor attempt to modulate my voice so she wouldn’t hear how effected I was. It might have worked if I’d stopped instead of letting my thoughts rush out of my mouth.

“I want you so bad. I fucking *hate* you right now.”

She didn't seem surprised or offended by my admission. She didn't react at all except to say, “I hate you, too.”

Funny how such hostile words could make me feel so good. Hiding a smile, I tapped my pen against the desk. “How do we do this?”

“You're the boss. You tell me.”

Her answer came so quick, I knew she'd been thinking about it, too. But what was *it* exactly? She was married, and I was her boss. It had disaster written all over it.

“Alright,” I said. “We just...focus. Work is work. That's what we're here for. Agree?”

“Agree.” She let out a quiet sigh. “Do you have a preference for lunch, or should I decide?”

“You decide.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“No.”

This time, when she walked away, I kept my eyes on my computer, reading words on the screen and having no fucking idea what they said.



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## SAVANNAH

---

AFTER SPENDING THE WORK day completing tasks and battling the sexual tension between me and my boss, a phone call from my mother was the last thing I needed.

But it was probably what I deserved.

“Any news about the divorce?” was her greeting.

I cradled my cell phone between my face and my shoulder as I typed up a memo Mr. Jackson needed me to send out. “I told you I had him served, remember?”

I looked over at Pam, who was packing up for the day. Lucky her. It was close to six, but I knew I’d be here for at least another hour.

“I don’t remember that at all,” my mother was saying. “You sure you told me?”

“Yes. The day it happened. I texted you.”

“Oh. *That* explains it.”

I rolled my eyes. “You still on that?”

“I’m not on anything. I just think a mother deserves better.”

I glanced at Mr. Jackson’s door, worried that he’d catch me on a personal call. His closed door wasn’t as reassuring as it should have been.

“Texting isn’t disrespectful,” I said, trying not to convey the irritation I felt. “It’s—you know what? It doesn’t matter. You called me, what’s up?”

“Just wanted the latest. And to see how you’re doing, of course.”

The thought of telling her about Taurus crossed my mind. It uncrossed pretty quickly, though, because the painful truth was that I simply did not have that kind of relationship with my mother. If I told her, she would judge me, fuss at me, and maybe even berate me if she was in the mood for it.

My mother was not a safe place to land.

“I’m okay,” I said. “How are you?”

“Same old, same old. I’m more worried about you.”

“I’m okay, I promise. Work is going fine. That’s where I am now, actually.”

“So you stuck with it, huh? Good for you.”

“You thought I wouldn’t?” I said, instantly regretting it. Of *course* she thought it.

“I wondered,” she said. And then came the insult. “You’re so used to being taken care of.”

“Why do you always say that like it’s a bad thing?”

Rhetorical question, of course. To her, it *was* a bad thing. A *horrible* thing. Because the women in our family had always worked. Never relied on a man, because you can't. So a year or so into my marriage, when I told my mother I had no plans to get a job, she actually started crying.

“But what about your degree?” she'd wailed. “All that effort, all that hard work down the drain, Savannah! What are you thinking?”

Before I could answer, she'd gasped. “Is *he* making you do this?”

I'd laughed at that, because the idea was absurd, but I understood it. For a woman as independent as Grace Stewart, it was an absolute tragedy.

“I'm not saying it's bad to be taken care of,” she said unconvincingly. “More like unrealistic.”

“Well, it was my reality for thirteen years, so...”

“And how did that work out for you?”

There it was.

“I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow. Or...whenever I have some news.”

Mr. Jackson texted me just as I was hanging up, telling me I could head out for the night. That was bittersweet; I was glad to be going home, but I'd been hoping to see him before I left.

While I was sitting in traffic, I got the idea to call and check in with some of my old BillCo friends. I was under no illusion

about the fact that I would have to hand over the reins to someone else now that I was no longer a BillCo wife. It made sense from a practical standpoint. But I'd cultivated genuine friendships with some of those women. I missed them.

Sherry didn't answer. Carmella didn't answer. Brigida didn't answer. But on the sixth ring, Marion finally picked up.

"Well, well, well," was her greeting. It made me smile.

"Hey, sweetie. I'm so glad to hear your voice."

"Yeah, you too," she said. And then, in a hush, she said, "I heard."

"Did you? Well, that saves me from having to tell you."

"How are you handling it?" she said, her voice dripping with pity. "Anything I can do?"

"No, I'm okay. I'd love to do lunch soon, though. I know I'll have to step down, but I'd love to help make the transition smooth."

"Oh. We, uh..." she trailed off. I waited with a growing sense of dread, and my fears were confirmed when she said, "We already decided on that. Lynell is the new president."

"Oh. Okay. Makes sense," I said. "That was fast, though."

"Well, there's a lot to do."

"Of course." I cleared my throat. "So, lunch? You, me, Sherry, Carm—"

"Brian's home, sweetie, I have to go. But we'll definitely plan something soon, okay?"

“Okay.”

“Call me.”

*Click.*

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

Well.

I'd been replaced already. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. Because I'd been there for eleven years. A going away lunch would have been nice. A going away Zoom call. A card, even.

Because—not to brag—there wouldn't even *be* a BillCo wives club if I hadn't created it.

I knew I would be giving up a lot when I left Mo, but this right here? This was a slap in the face.

I was an outcast. A pariah.

And it wasn't even my fault. You'd think *I* was the one running around town breaking my vows.

I understood, though. My presence would be disruptive, because I would be a constant reminder that no marriage was perfect, and that their husbands were fallible.

As if any woman needs a reminder that men disappoint.

Just before I got in the shower, I checked my email. Just one, and it was from Tan. Apparently, the judge was upholding the prenup.

It was a setback, but not unexpected. But on a shitty day, when my boss, who I'd slept with, pumped the breaks on our



affair, and my mother offered no support, and the charity group I founded unceremoniously dumped me, getting this news was enough to push me over the edge.

Clad in my nightgown, I warmed up my dinner and sat at my tiny table to eat it. It sounds terrible given how blessed I was to even have a roof over my head, but...this felt like rock bottom. Truly. And my whole exit strategy, which had seemed like such a good, actionable plan, had gone awry thanks to my inability to control myself. How trifling would it look to go husband shopping at Jackson now that I'd slept with the boss?

I'd painted myself into a corner.

After dinner, I picked up my phone to do something that was sure to pick me up. Something I enjoyed immensely—schmoozing. That's what philanthropy was all about, but it could be useful at work, too.

Just because my personal life was in shambles didn't mean I couldn't be productive at the job.

“Vanessa, hey,” I greeted her when she picked up. “Just wanted to touch bases with you and check on Amani.”

“You're so sweet. She's feeling better, and she wanted me to thank Mr. Jackson for the card and bear. That was very thoughtful.”

“Of course. We're a family over here.”

“I see that.”

Then, she went silent on me.

“So listen, I had so much fun with you and Chris in Vegas.”

“I know, me too.”

“I was telling Mr. Jackson we need to get you two down to the beach next time.”

It was quiet for a moment before Vanessa answered, “Maybe.”

“Everything okay?” I said.

“Yeah. It’s just...hang on just a second.”

I heard shuffling, the muffled sound of someone talking, and a door closing. “Okay, I’m back,” she said breathlessly.

“What’s wrong, Vanessa? You sound weird.”

“I know, I didn’t wanna talk in front of Chris. He hasn’t decided yet, that’s all. I just didn’t want to commit to something in case things don’t work out.”

“Of course. I understand. No pressure at all, hon. I just enjoyed making a new friend.”

“Me, too.”

We talked for a few more minutes before she told me she had to go. I made a mental note to follow up again in a few days, but I wasn’t hopeful. If Chris hadn’t decided by now, he was likely leaning toward a no and trying to figure out how to break it to us.

I’d keep working on Vanessa. I could be very persuasive when I wanted to be.



I heard him before I saw him.

Coffee in one hand, iPad in another, I stood at Mr. Jackson's desk and waited, listening to him yell at the staff outside his office. It was like a grouchy contagion that started as soon as he got off the elevators and made its way down the hall, into the reception area, and finally, to me.

“Good morning, Mr. Jackson.”

“Yeah, let's get started.”

I wanted to ask him how he was doing, because he was clearly more stressed than usual. I knew this whole Chris ordeal—and the prospect of him not reaching his goal—was getting to him, but there seemed to be an extra edge to his frustration.

Too bad we were staying professional at work. I would have loved to help him take the edge off.



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## TAURUS

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“YOU WANNA TALK ABOUT it?”

I shot Savannah a look as I took my first sip of coffee. “Talk about what?”

“The reason you came in here yelling at everybody like you’re the angry daddy who just came home to your bad ass kids.”

“Do I *look* like I wanna talk about it?”

She sighed. Her body was fully covered today which, if I’m being honest, was a letdown. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I had sat up in this office in this very chair and told her not to distract me. Now? I could have used a good distraction.

That million-dollar mark was getting further away.

I’d obsessed about it last night. Didn’t even fall asleep until two-something thinking about it. And the unfortunate conclusion had hit me hard: I failed.

When I started this company, it was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. Long nights, a hell of a lot of ‘no’s, savings drained, and solitude. But I’d built it into something that was profitable within a year, and that’s a big feat for entrepreneurs. By all accounts, I was a success.

But I didn’t feel like one.

“Listen.” She cleared her throat and spoke softly. “I know Chris hasn’t made a decision yet—”

“Good for you. Knowledge is power.”

Her face fell. “Look, you can be disappointed all you want, but lashing out at your employees isn’t gonna change things.”

I sat back in my chair. “But it feels good.”

That made her smile. “Of course it does, but that doesn’t make it right.”

I spread my hands. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Apologize.”

I chuckled. Not only was she challenging me, I was sitting up here listening to it. And taking heed.

“Done. I’ll apologize. Anything else?”

“Yes. Understand that apologizing doesn’t undo what you did, and it doesn’t make people forget. It’s like breaking a dish and gluing it back together. You might have fixed it and made it functional again, but the crack is still there. And then you break it again in another place. And again. And again. And then one day you wake up and realize it’s unfixable. So yes,

apologize, and then going forward, maybe work on being nicer.”

She stared at me, waiting for a reaction.

Savannah wasn't the first person to tell me to chill, and she damn sure wouldn't be the last. I'd been an unrepentant asshole to basically everyone but my mother and daughter. It had never bothered me before, because I own my bullshit, full stop. But for whatever reason, hearing *Savannah* say this was...humbling. So I simply said, “I hear you.”

She sat and took a deep breath. “I know you think you're not gonna meet your goal—”

“Ain't no *think* about it. I'm not.”

“There are other accounts, Taurus.”

I took another hot sip. “I don't have time to start all over.”

“Okay, so you wanna have a pity party. Fine. Should I fix you a drink?”

“Yeah. Fix two.”

She stood and smoothed her dress down unnecessarily. It—and *she*—still looked perfect. “I don't wanna drink with you,” she said.

“Who said it's for you?”

Her laugh warmed me. “Ice?”

I shook my head.

While she was busy playing bartender, I swiveled in my chair to look out my window. Dark clouds were gathering on

the horizon, almost as if they were getting into formation to match my state of mind. I was off-kilter today. Unsettled. Happiness, or even just basic *peace*, seemed elusive.

This was a bad day.

“Drinks are ready,” she announced behind me, her soft, sing-songy voice cutting through the fog of my negative thoughts. Without turning around, I held out my hand for her to deposit my glass. When my hand was still empty after several moments, I got irritated.

“What’s the fucking problem?” I demanded.

“I’m not giving you your drink, or anything else, until you go out there and apologize.”

I quirked an eyebrow as I spun around, as amused as I was insulted. She was giving me orders.

That was rich.

“Savannah. You work for me. Bring me my fucking drink.”

She squared her shoulders. “You need to apologize. After you do, the drinks are yours.”

I stared at her in both disbelief and awe. The last time someone talked to me like that was...I couldn’t even remember. People knew better, and that’s not my ego talking. Everyone I dealt with on a day-to-day basis either worked for me or needed me in some capacity, and nobody was trying to bite the hand that fed them. Well, except Isaac, but fuck him.



But here was Ms. Dayne, standing right in front of me, telling me to do something that went against everything I stood for.

And my sprung ass was gonna do it.

I stood and buttoned my suit jacket. “We’re gonna have to talk about your behavior, Ms. Dayne. I think you need a refresher course on who’s the boss and who’s the employee.”

She gave a little shrug.

I took a deep breath as I moved toward my door, low-key buoyed by the knowledge that Savannah was behind me. It was odd; apologizing had always been a sign of weakness to me, but today, it made me feel strong.

I made the rounds, starting with Pam, because she was closest. I kept shit short and sweet. “Sorry, Pam,” I said. “For yelling. I was doing too much.”

Her blank stare and open mouth told me exactly how monumental this was, but I kept it moving. Dwight was next, and his reaction was similar to Pam’s. Jordan, Emily, Everett, and Nasheed’s reactions were all comparable, as well.

After, I marched back into my sanctuary, closing the door behind me. I went to lock it, thought the better of it, and kept walking until I reached Savannah. I unbuttoned my jacket, grabbed one of the glasses, and turned it up.

The liquor burned its way through my chest as I took my seat, calming me instantly. Savannah just watched me, finally taking a sip out of the other glass.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Tasting it.”

“Who said I want your mouth all over my glass?”

She smirked. “I know exactly where you want my mouth.”

My dick twitched in my pants as she finished off my good Scotch.

She coughed once, then set the glass down. “I’m proud of you. Apologizing isn’t easy, I know, but I respect it. My ex never apologized for anything, and it made me lose respect for him.”

That was interesting. And a little disturbing. Because what if I’d refused when she asked—or, *told* me to apologize? I felt like I dodged a bullet there. I still had her respect. And she was proud of me.

What a relief.

But enough of all that. There was a much more pressing matter to attend to at this moment.

“Where do I want your mouth, Savannah? Since you know so fucking much.”

She reached down and pressed her hand against my growing erection.

“Right there,” she breathed.

Okay.

I guess we were doing this.

I grabbed her hand.

“You’ve gotten way too comfortable around here, Ms. Dayne.”

“How so?”

“You telling me what to do. It doesn’t work like that.”

“How does it work?”

“I don’t do what you say. You do what *I* say,” I said as I stared at her hips, which were directly in my line of sight. I was talking big shit, but truthfully, and respectfully, her fine ass had me in a fucking chokehold.

“Now, go over there and lock the door.”

“Why?”

“See what I’m saying? Don’t question me.”

She dipped her head and peered at me with those pretty brown eyes. “Yes, Mr. Jackson.”

I watched her walk away like I had so many times, completely undone by the switch in her hips and the soft jiggle of her ass. Was I really about to fuck my assistant in my office in the middle of a work day with some of my employees only a few feet away?

Yes.

Yes, I was.

She made her way back to me and stood in place, her eyes full of lust. “I locked the door. Did you need anything else, Mr. Jackson?”

“I need your mouth on my dick. I thought you knew that already.”

Without another word, she went to her knees in front of me, making a big show of undoing my pants. Once she had my dick in her hands, she looked up at me and tilted her head. “I hate seeing you stressed like this.”

“You do?”

I didn’t mean to sound so surprised. It was just...she had a way of making it sound like she gave a fuck about me. I mean, anybody within a ten-mile radius of me knew I was stressed, and I’m sure they probably wished I wasn’t, given my penchant for taking it out on them. But for her to say she hated to see me stressed...like she cared about my state of mind... like she cared about *me*...

I needed that in my life.

“I do,” she answered. “It’s not good for you.”

I sank a little lower in my chair and let my head fall back to rest against it. “So de-stress me, Savannah.”

Her eyes still trained on mine, she kissed the head of my dick, making me groan softly.

“I’m going to,” she purred. “Just relax.” Another kiss. “And let me please you.” She licked it this time, slow and nasty. My toes curled. “Can you do that for me?”

“Fuck, yes.”

A smile, a wink, and then my entire dick disappeared inside her mouth. How she managed to do that, I had no idea. What I did know was that my knuckles were white from gripping the arms of my chair, and the sound of her gagging had me dangerously close to nutting down her throat. I mean, that was the plan anyway, but I didn't intend for it to happen so fast. So I focused on controlling my breathing. Not looking at her. Not thinking about her.

It was no use.

I glanced down. So beautiful with her eyes closed, her face covered with a veil of ecstasy, as though she was enjoying it as much as I was.

Impossible.

She bobbed up and down, her spit making my dick shine like a new penny. And then she moaned and—*fuck*. I was close.

“Slow down,” I breathed. “Yeah, just like that. *Shhhhit*.”

But it didn't help. Seeing her head bobbing up and down slowly was even sexier, and going slow seemed to give her more options. Her tongue was working more, the suction got stronger, and the slurping got louder.

I gave up.

Just before my eyes rolled back and the strongest nut I'd ever felt overtook me, I saw a bolt of lightning race across the sky. Could have been a symbol. Maybe a metaphor. For what, I couldn't have said in a million years, because I was cumming

in her mouth, spurting off like a busted pipe. The sound of her swallowing all that nut had me damn near ready to pass out.

I sat there panting as she pulled off with a pop. My eyes followed her as she stood. She didn't move, just waited for my next directive.

No problem.

“Take your clothes off.”

She immediately began to undress. I stood and went over to the wall next to the door, dimming the lights until I could only see her silhouette.

She was naked by the time I made it back to her. Without warning, I grabbed the back of her head and smashed my lips onto hers with a sense of urgency. It was imperative that I got back hard again as soon as possible. I needed to be inside her like a starving man needs a meal.

“I love the way you kiss me,” she told me as she pulled away. “You're so forceful with it. Like you have to have me.”

“I *do*,” I admitted. “Is that a problem?”

She shook her head.

“Good.” I undressed, then grabbed her hand and led her over to the window. One more kiss before I pushed her against the glass. She flinched when her back hit it; it was cold, I suppose. So I wrapped my arms around her, rubbing her back, kissing her deep before kneeling in front of her. I ate her pussy until she came, which didn't take long. Her quiet whimpers

gave me the second wind I needed, and just as the rain began to pound against the window, I slid inside her.

*I'm home.*

I let out an animalistic growl as her pussy sucked me in. It was hard to fathom how something could feel *so damn good*, but somehow, some way, it did. Her pussy was incomparable. Nobody in all my almost forty years was seeing her in that department.

But our connection was also amazing. I was with her. She was with me. She wanted to be here, sharing this moment, going half on the pleasure, relishing it just like I was. We were truly one, and that felt almost as good as the physical act.

She wrapped those pretty legs tightly around my waist. With one hand under her ass to hold her up and the other flat against the glass, I stroked her. Slow, because what was the rush? Deep, but not too deep, because I didn't want to overwhelm her or make her scream. Okay, I *absolutely* wanted to make her scream, but I couldn't do that here. So I settled for the whimpers and the quiet mewls.

Not a bad consolation prize.

“Yessss,” she whined.

“Yes, what? Tell me how good it feels.”

Her nails dug into my back. “It feels...so...so good. Your dick...”

“Speak your mind, baby,” I said, thrusting deeper.

“Taurusssss...you fuck me so good.”

“*Shit.*”

I was too close for comfort. There was no condom between us this time to inhibit the sensation of her pussy hugging my dick, so I really should have seen this coming. No pun intended. Nevertheless, the relentless acceleration of that second nut still left me speechless.

I was preparing to pause when she said, “Fuck! I’m about to —”

“Me too,” I admitted. “*Goddamn*, it’s so fucking wet. And tight.”

“Ohhhhhh,” she moaned as her walls pulsed around my dick. I didn’t wanna cum yet, especially when I wasn’t in a position to pull out, so I held that nut with everything in me.

It was one of the hardest things I’d ever done.

I had to bite my lip, concentrate, and ignore the way her pussy was talking to me. It felt like it was fucking me independently of her, kissing me, squeezing me, sucking me, massaging me, drooling on me, begging and pleading with me to *cum inside me, Taurus. It will feel so good. You know you want to...*

Fuck, yes, I wanted to.

*So bad.*

But, I didn’t.



I may have been fucking in my office in the middle of the day, but I still had enough discipline not to make the shit worse.

Just as she was winding down, a roll of thunder escalated from a rumble to a loud boom, causing her to jump, her eyes darting wildly.

“It’s okay,” I reassured.

“I know. But...I...I don’t like being this close to the window.”

She was trembling now, so small and helpless in my arms. Once again, a primal feeling swelled in me.

“Savannah, look at me.”

She brought her eyes to mine. Lightning flashed again, illuminating her beautiful face.

“I would never let anything happen to you. Alright? I got you.”

“Okay.”

“You trust me?”

She tightened her grip on my neck. “Yeah. I do.”

I stilled my body and waited, still enjoying the sporadic spasms quaking deep inside her pussy. But I was more concerned with making her feel safe with me. She needed to know, truly and instinctively, that I would protect her.

“You okay?” I asked cautiously.

“I wanna see it.”

“See what?”

“The storm.”

I pecked her lips as I bent down to let her feet touch the floor. After I spun her around, I stole a quick glance at her naked body before I pressed myself against her, bringing us skin-to-skin again.

“Put your hands on the glass,” I instructed, and she obliged. Of course.

With one arm around her waist to anchor her to me, and one on the glass to steady myself, I carefully made my way back into the wet warmth of her pussy. As the rain pounded the window and the lightning illuminated everything in its path, I made love to Savannah with a renewed sense of purpose. It was more than just a nut to me. Or giving her another one. I was *communicating* something to her, although the exact sentiment wasn't entirely clear in the moment. There were words I couldn't say, yet, and thoughts swirling in my subconscious that were just out of my reach. But my *body* understood, so I used it to tell her how I felt.

I needed her, and it scared the hell out of me.

But for now, there was only bliss.

Despite the beautiful distraction that was her pussy, I was still lucid enough to realize something. I stopped moving to whisper in her ear.

“Quit sucking your stomach in.”

She tensed a little. “I'm not.”

“Yes you are.” I kissed her neck. “Savannah, every inch of you sexy. Let that shit go.”

Several moments passed before she finally relaxed. I mean, *completely* relaxed. Feeling her go limp in my arms, her muscles flaccid, and hearing the little sigh she emitted, told me she was fully comfortable with me. Which turned me on. So I grabbed her hip and went off.

Her hushed moans were music to me. Seeing the way her ass rippled when she threw it back on me was exhilarating. Seeing her head drop, knowing it felt that good to her, was satisfying. All I wanted to do was please her. My Savannah. So sexy. So beautiful. So sweet.

“Fuck me harder, Taurus. I want you to fuck me so hard I taste your nut in the back of my throat.”

Wait...

*I knew she was nasty!* said the giddy voice in the back of my head.

Game over. She could have this whole fucking company if she wanted it.

“It’s like that?” I asked breathlessly.

“Did I stutter?”

When I tell you I went HAM on her...beneath the sounds of the pouring rain and the rolling thunder were the sounds of our skin slapping, her strangled screams—fuck my employees, I guess—my groans, and me talking in her ear. Giving orders like I always do.

“Come on, girl. Take this dick since you with the shits.”

Pussy got wetter.

“Yeah, you like that. You love it when I tell you what to do.”

“Yessss!”

“Yeah. Take all this fucking dick. I know it’s big, but if you nasty, show me. Nasty girls don’t run. They take every inch.”

And she did. I wished I could have gone all night, but that’s just me being greedy. I pulled out just in time and nudded all over her back. The way she moaned let me know she liked that shit.

I let my forehead come to rest on her shoulder. I caught my breath pretty quickly, but the weak feeling in my knees wouldn’t let up.

“Why did we do this?” she finally said.

“Because we wanted it. Because it feels good.” I kissed her shoulder. “Are those reasons not good enough?”

“Are you gonna push me away again? This isn’t Vegas, after all.”

I stood up straight and grabbed my undershirt, gently cleaning my nut off her back before leading her over to her clothes.

“Are you asking me where this is going?”

“No.” She pulled her dress down over her head. “I just don’t like the hot and cold.”

“I hear you.” I pulled my pants on and took a seat behind my desk. I was exhausted. “It’s not fair to you.”

“Or *you*.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“I don’t have a suggestion. I’m not asking for a relationship. I’m not asking for *anything*, really, except for us not to pretend this isn’t happening.”

I thought about that for a moment before saying, “That’s fair.”

She fastened her watch. “We’ll keep things professional here, of course.”

“Of course.”

“So that works for you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I watched her step into her shoes. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s all for now.” Dressed now, she leaned down to place a brief kiss on my lips. “I have work to do. I’m right out there if you need me.”

“Wait.”

She stopped moving.

“Do you still have my card?”

“Yes.”

“Take it and get your nails done. When you were putting on your watch, I noticed your polish was chipped.”

“Oh.” She put her hands behind her back, and I felt bad for embarrassing her. “I haven’t had time.”

I nodded. “Well, if you can make time, feel free to use my card. Actually, just...keep it, and when you need something, it’s on me. Whatever you need.”

“I’m okay. I got paid last week,” she said, smiling.

“I know. I want to. Hair, nails, whatever you need. Not that you need your hair done. You look beautiful. I’m saying—”

“I get it,” she laughed. “Thank you. That’s very sweet.”

I opened my mouth to speak again, but she was already at the door. And it was probably for the best, because I wasn’t in my right mind. I was still high off the sex and was about to tell her...well, it’s not important. The important thing was to regain my focus. And now that I’d had my release, I could do that again.

That was the plan, at least.



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## SAVANNAH

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WE GOT THE BAD news two days later.

Chris Harris decided not to use our company to distribute his product.

It was over.

To his credit, Taurus wasn't as grouchy as I thought he'd be. When I brought him his lunch, he was on the phone ranting to somebody. Then he called Eli up and yelled at him. But by the time he left for the day—early, at four o'clock—he was strangely subdued. Which was...scarier, in a way.

Worried, I made the unilateral decision to reach out to Vanessa. Mr. Jackson would probably be pissed, but *Taurus* would understand.

I hoped.

“Hey! It's Savannah.”

“Hey, girl. How are you?”

“Well, I'm a little disappointed.”



She sighed. “I know.”

“What happened?”

“It’s...I don’t...I really don’t wanna be in the middle of this.”

“Middle of what?”

I heard rustling, then footsteps, followed by a door being closed. “Okay. The thing is...Chris knows your... husband.”

It took me a few moments to make sense of that. “My *ex*-husband? Maurice?”

“He said y’all aren’t divorced.”

“It’s almost final. But what does that have to do with—”

“Chris doesn’t wanna deal with it,” she rushed out. “He said it’s too messy.”

She gave me the details, pausing every few moments to take a deep breath as she explained. It was bothering her as much as it was bothering me, it seemed.

Shit.

The world is way too small.

But worse than that, this felt like yet *another* instance of me being penalized for what Mo had done wrong.

“I’m really surprised by this, Vanessa. And for the record, Maurice cheated on me. We are not together and never will be again. Because of something *he* did.”

She was quiet for a moment. I thought maybe what I said had made a difference, but, “Be that as it may, Chris said he can’t do business with Taurus. Not like this. And it’s too bad, because he really wanted to work with a black-owned company.”

“Okay, let me just...let me think about this for a second.”

I sat there stewing, my stomach tying itself into knots. I wasn’t sure what Taurus and I were to each other at this point, but the thought of him coming up short because of *me* was unbearable.

“Alright, what if I took myself out of the equation?” I offered. “If there’s no me, there’s no more messiness. Right?”

“I...you’d really quit your job over this?”

“I’m just an assistant.”

Vanessa chuckled. “You seemed like a lot more than that.”

In spite of the situation, that made me smile.

“I’ll quit. Tell Chris I’m no longer part of the company. Can you do that for me?”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

Vanessa let out a heavy sigh. “Okay.”

That night, I lost sleep again. Between Maurice, the divorce, the prenup, and being unceremoniously replaced in the wives group, it was all getting to be too much.

And then there was Taurus and the goal he'd been working toward. I knew it wasn't *directly* my fault, but I still felt somewhat responsible. If I couldn't make this work for him... if he didn't make his goal because of me...I didn't want to think about it.

I also didn't want to quit tomorrow.



"I need to talk to you about something," I said, closing Mr. Jackson's door behind me. I'd finally worked up the nerve to have this conversation, which was tough, because he'd been making eyes at me all morning.

"Make it fast," he said, his eyes still on his screen. "I'm swamped right now."

I forced my legs to move until I was right in front of his desk. I placed my trembling hands behind my back and took a deep breath.

"I'm giving you my notice."

His eyes shot up from his screen. "Notice of what?"

"I'm leaving. Quitting. I'm happy to train my replacement whenever you find someone."

He stared at me. "Are you serious?"

Without waiting for me to answer, he was on his feet and rounding the desk to get to me. He stopped about two inches away and gazed down into my eyes.

"What's this about, Savannah? And don't bullshit me."

“Fine.” I averted my eyes. “I talked to Vanessa last night.”

“And?”

“And she told me why Chris turned you down.”

He took a step back and leaned against the edge of his desk.  
“Let me guess...he got an offer for more money.”

“I *wish* that was it.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

I took a deep breath and let the words rush out on an exhale.  
“It’s because of my ex-husband. He knows him from school. They’re frat brothers, and Chris doesn’t wanna get caught up in any messiness.”

Taurus crossed his arms in front of him and stared blankly. Despite all the time we’d spent together, and all the sex we’d had, I didn’t know him well enough to decipher his silences. I waited for the blow-up, bracing myself for the worst.

“That’s understandable,” he said quietly.

“It is?”

“Yeah. You’d be surprised how personal business deals can get.” His eyes narrowed. “So you thought quitting would solve this problem?”

“It *would* solve it. Vanessa told me it would.”

He shrugged. “Well, the answer is no.”

“Answer to what?”

“To you quitting.”

I stared at him, confused. “But...I didn’t ask for your permission.”

“I know,” he said, nodding. “That was your first mistake.”

“I’m confused. I’m doing this to help you. I work for you, remember? I’m supposed to act in your best interest. This is in your best interest, Mr. Jackson.”

He shook his head as he walked back behind his desk and took a seat.

“I guess I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but—”

“You guess?”

“Don’t interrupt me. I appreciate it, but *I* decide what’s in my best interest.”

“Getting this account would put you where you need to be to meet your goal.”

“Probably,” he said, shrugging a shoulder.

I was confused by his cavalier attitude, not to mention his lack of emotion.

This wasn’t the Mr. Jackson I knew.

“Is your goal not important to you anymore?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, before answering, “It’s...not *as* important.”

“What changed?”

His eyes left mine for the first time since our conversation began. The silence enveloped us as he stared out of his

window. I was dying to know what was in his head. His face was unreadable.

“I’ll have Eli give him another call,” he finally said. “If that doesn’t work, we’ll move on. Happens all the time.”

“I hear you, but...this is easily fixable. I can find another job. And I’ll be getting alimony soon. Probably not a lot, but enough to be okay for a while. I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I could hear the desperation in my voice as I said the words:

“Taurus, this problem is on me. Let me solve it. I don’t mind, I promise. All I need to do is—”

“Stop!” he yelled. “What part of no do you not fucking understand? You’re staying your ass right here with me! I need you!” He paused, and then, more softly, he said, “I mean, I need your...you know your way around this office and you know what I need and...it’s, um, not a good time to be searching for other candidates.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “You’re the boss.”

For once, I saw contrition on his face. “Right. Back to work.”

“Yes, Mr. Jackson.”

I heard him call my name—my *first* name—as I walked away. I pretended not to hear him.



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## TAURUS

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I KNEW SHE HEARD me.

But I guess I kinda deserved her ignoring me. I'd acted like an asshole yet again, and even though she'd gotten used to my bullshit, she still had her limits. I'd just stomped all over them, and now, I would have to deal with it.

I waited a few hours, which, for a man like me, who prided himself on being fearless, was pretty damn weak. But I couldn't help it. The way she made me feel...it was confusing. Unprecedented.

I didn't know who I was when it came to her.

"Ms. Dayne!"

She sauntered in. Stayed right by the door.

"Yes?" she said flatly.

I...couldn't do it. Something in me wouldn't let me apologize.



So I cleared my throat and moved on to the second bit of business I had for her.

“I have my daughter this weekend. I want to take her somewhere. Some kind of outing. A fun outing.”

“Okay...”

“You may or may not have noticed that I’m not the most chipper person in the world.” I paused, choosing my words carefully. “I don’t think my daughter enjoys her time with me. I don’t think I’m...fun. At least not fun enough for a seven-year-old.”

I’d never shared that with anyone. I was honestly stunned I’d just opened up to her like that about something so personal. And painful.

Her face softened, just a little.

“Anyway, I need you to plan something for us to do.”

She took a few steps forward. “Any preferences?”

“No. I trust you.”

A smile appeared on that pretty face. First time all day. “I’ll have something for you before I leave.”

I spent the latter part of the day down in Purchasing, then stopped by Operations to talk to my COO. By the time I got back to my office, I was starving.

Savannah was at her desk staring at her computer screen. As soon as she saw me, she stood. “Welcome back.”

“You don’t have to stand.”

She nodded and smirked, and I realized she was being sarcastic.

Ignoring that, I said, “Listen, I’ve been running around. I didn’t get to eat lunch.”

“No problem. I’ll go warm it up.”

“What is it today?”

“Chicken marsala. And I brought dessert, too. Peach cobbler.”

“Damn. Sounds good.”

She nodded again and took her leave.

Five minutes later, she set my plate on my desk in front of me. It smelled like heaven.

“Are you ready to hear the plan for this weekend?”

I gestured for her to take a seat.

“Okay, you’ll take Naya for breakfast at Ms. Lila’s Tea Room. It’s a little girly, but I think you’ll survive.”

I smiled and took a bite of the chicken. “Shit,” I said with a grimace. “This is delicious.”

“Thank you. After breakfast, you’ll go to Candy Land and let her tour the factory and pick out some treats to take home. She’ll still be full from breakfast, so you don’t have to worry about her overdoing it.”

“Smart.”

“After Candyland, you’ll head over to AdventureTime. That’s in Langston. Depending on what she wears to breakfast, you may need to pack her a change of clothes just in case she wants to zip line or rock climb. You can grab lunch while you’re there or an earlier dinner somewhere close to home. By the time you get back to your place and get her in the bathtub, she’ll be ready for bed.”

“You thought of everything.”

“No, not everything. You can fill in the gaps. Anyway, all tickets have been purchased and sent to your email. Just show the barcodes at the door.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She stood. “Anything else?”

“Actually, yes.” I swallowed a bite and washed it down with water. “Are you busy this weekend?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not sure.”

“I had a thought.”

She sat and stared at me with genuine curiosity.

“You should come with us.”

“With you and your daughter? Why?”

I set my fork on my plate, giving her my full attention. “I wanted to talk to you about something, and I think it’s a conversation best had outside the office.”

“You could call me on the phone,” she suggested.

“I wanna do it face-to-face.”

“In front of your daughter?”

I waved that away. “I’m sure she’ll be off playing at some point.”

I watched as she crossed her legs. She had on pants today, unfortunately for me. “I don’t know...” she said.

“With everything you’ve been dealing with, it might be nice to have some fun.”

“So it’s about *me*, now?”

Chuckling, I said, “Okay. I’m waving the white flag. I just wanna see you. And I’m sorry about earlier. That’s what I wanted to talk about, I just don’t wanna talk about it today.”

She took a deep breath, sighed, then rolled her eyes. “I’ll meet you at AdventureTime. Just text me when you’re on your way there.”

“Perfect.”



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## SAVANNAH

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I WAS A NERVOUS wreck.

No matter how many times I told myself it was no big deal, I couldn't ignore the fact that I was about to meet Taurus' daughter.

It meant nothing. How could it? It's not like we were dating. It was just sex. Which, in the grand scheme of things, meant nothing.

Except...

It sure *felt* like it meant something.

The other day in his office. Good lord. That man put it on me. Wore me *out*. And it felt like a whole lot more than just mindless pleasure. He *made love* to me.

But then...back to work. Like everything was normal.

I didn't get him at all. It was messy, sure, but he knew that the first time he fell into my bed.

Then he came back for more.

Twice.

Messy obviously wasn't a deterrent for him.

But if I was being completely honest with myself, I'd have to acknowledge that I wasn't even sure what I wanted from Taurus. I'd come here looking for a new husband and found... him. But he wasn't what I had in mind. I was hoping to meet a nice corporate guy, go on some dates, enjoy some wining and dining, and then be presented with a clear declaration of intent on his part.

What I'd gotten instead was mean, grouchy Taurus, who was my boss, and who, rather than wining and dining me, had given me the best sex I'd ever had and then...continued to be mean and grouchy. No dates. No declarations of any kind.

What was I supposed to do with that?

And why in the hell did I want to keep doing it?

I wore my best blue jeans, a simple white cotton shirt, and some nude-colored flats. A gold S hung around my neck, and my favorite watch encircled my wrist. Simple and casual. Plus, makeup and the lotion Taurus liked.

It meant nothing.

When I walked into AdventureTime, I saw him first, standing in line for zip lining. Beside and two feet below him was the most adorable little girl.

He locked eyes with me and smiled as he waved me over.

"Hi. Have you been here long?" I said.

“About ten minutes. She came straight over here,” he said, laughing. “Naya, this is my assistant, Ms. Savannah.”

Two giant brown eyes looked up at me, and a high-pitched voice said, “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” I studied her intricately woven hair. “Your braids are beautiful.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I did them all by myself.”

“Are you serious?” I looked at Taurus, who nodded. “You’re seven!”

She giggled at that. “I know.”

“I’m in my thirties and I still can’t cornrow. Naya, you are talented. Like...”

“She’s been doing it since she was five,” Taurus said. “She even braids hair for some of her friends.”

“I’m so impressed. Wow. I see why you want to be—”

I stopped short as I remembered Taurus’ feelings on that subject. Pivoting, I said, “Why are you standing in line? The tickets I got you were express passes.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t? I’m sorry.”

Shrugging, he said, “Don’t worry about it. You can’t be perfect at everything.”

We exchanged a smile.



Once Naya was strapped into her harness and waiting in the queue, Taurus and I found a bench a few feet away. We sat in silence for a moment before he finally spoke.

“Alright. I asked you here because I wanted to tell you why I blew up at you yesterday.”

“I’m listening.” I angled my body sideways to look at him directly.

“It’s really fucking my head up—”

“Shhh! This is a children’s play land.”

He looked around. “They can’t hear me.”

I shook my head.

“Anyway, it’s fucking my head up to have to grapple with my feelings the way I have been.”

“Mr. Jackson has feelings. Who knew?”

“You got jokes?”

“Sorry.”

“Look, I’m just shoot straight with you. Ever since we started fuc—having sex, I’ve been...dazed and confused. I take my work seriously, so I try to keep that boundary intact at the office, but with you...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “It’s been hard to maintain.”

“I understand.”

“Yeah. And it’s also been hard to admit to myself that I like you. Which I do. So when you came to me yesterday talking

about leaving, it was like you were *breaking up* with me. I know that sounds crazy—”

“It doesn’t.”

He studied my face. “You quitting was never gonna work for me, because the bottom line is...accounts are replaceable. You aren’t.”

I struggled to keep my face neutral, but my smile broke through anyway.

“I know you were trying to look out for me,” he said. “I appreciate it.”

“Good.”

“I also know you like me, too.”

“Oh, really?”

“Come on, Savannah,” he smirked. “You ain’t cooking up chicken marsala and giving top tier pussy and head because you wanna be the world’s best assistant.”

I pressed my thighs together. “Stop being nasty.”

He chuckled. “Admit it and I will.”

“Okay. White flag. I like you, too. But what does it matter? You were clear about wanting to leave all that in Vegas.”

“And how many times have we fucked since then?”

“Taurus!”

“Mmm,” he said, closing his eyes. “Yell my name like that again.”

“You just said you were gonna stop being nasty.”

“Okay, okay. My bad.” He glanced over at the zip line queue to check on Naya. “I pulled back when we got back from Vegas. I did. But I had a good reason.”

“Which was?”

“Your husband.”

“*Ex.*”

“Yeah. Him. He showed up at your place that day.”

Recognition washed over me like a wave. I had no idea Taurus knew about that.

“He did,” I said cautiously. “He only came to bother me with his same old routine, that’s all. Nothing happened, if that’s what you think.”

“I didn’t think that. I know I’m a hard act to follow.”

I rolled my eyes at that.

Even though it was accurate.

“Nah, I just kinda woke up to the fact that for now, until y’all are officially divorced, he’s still part of your life. And I don’t wanna be mixed up in that.”

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that *before* you fucked me down.”

He smiled. “I should have, but...” he looked me up and down. “Resisting you was impossible.”

My cheeks heated. “The feeling is mutual.”

Our eyes locked. We seemed to breathe together as the heat and tension rose between us.

“So...” I tried to come up with something benign. “Naya’s having fun.”

“Savannah...”

The sound of his voice. The way he said my name, like he’d said it in Vegas...I was about to melt into a puddle right here in front of all these bad-ass kids.

“What?” I asked, breathless.

He glanced around him, then leaned in so close, his face was almost touching my neck. “I’m gonna say this and then we’ll move on.” He took a deep breath, inhaling me. “I don’t want anybody else near you.”

“I...what do you—”

“Not your husband. Not your exes. Definitely not no new niggas. Your pussy is mine. Do you understand?”

Well.

It was a declaration.

Just not the kind I’d hoped for.

And yet...

I nodded my agreement. Vigorously.

And then I pressed my thighs together to quell the throbbing, because even though I knew what he meant, and there was no chance of it ever happening anyway, Taurus’

pronouncement that I couldn't even fuck my *own husband* had me on tilt.

Yeah. My pussy was his, alright.

He tapped my leg, sealing the deal, then sat up straight. "Cool. Anyway, yeah, Ny's having a good time. Thank you for planning this. She loved the tea room. Of course she loved Candy Land. I balled out, for real. Bout to put some dentist's kid through college, I see it already."

Still partially in a daze, I laughed at his joke about five seconds too late. He studied me quizzically.

"You good?"

"Yeah." I shook my head to clear it. It amazed me how he could just shift from one conversation or mood or idea to the next while my brain struggled to catch up.

"Can I ask you something personal?" I said, finally in my right mind.

"Go ahead."

"Why do you think you've been...not fun with her?" I said, gesturing toward Naya.

He inhaled slowly and deeply before answering, "I know I'm a good father. I take care of her. When I die, she'll be a rich little girl. I handled all the practical shit just fine. But the other stuff...it just isn't my forte."

"What other stuff?"

“The fun stuff, I guess. Playing with dolls or running around with her. Indulging her little imagination. All I ever do is push STEM on her and teach her about money. That’s not fun. At all.”

I looked over at Naya. She was having the time of her life in the ball pit.

“You know what? Everything you just said? I wish I’d had that. Lots of adults look back on their childhoods and wish they had that,” I said. “And honestly, some parents are better at the fun stuff. It just wasn’t your strength, and that’s okay.”

“Maybe.”

We watched a family walk by. Mom, dad, two tween girls and a toddler boy.

“But maybe you could try coming out of your comfort zone. Like you did today. Keep doing that. Keep thinking about what makes her happy and do that.”

“I hear you.”

“What was your dad like?” I asked.

“He was cool. He threw the ball around in the backyard sometimes, but other than that, he was about business. Which is funny, because when it came to *real* business, he was a fucking mess.”

“How so?”

“Couldn’t keep a job. We moved almost every year. At one point we were living in one of those extended stay motels.”

“I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “You know what the most fucked up part was? He won the lottery. Not a lot. Something like a hundred thousand dollars. He could have paid off all their debts, bought us a little house, and made sure we were comfortable. But he decided it made more sense to gamble it away.”

“Damn.”

“They didn’t tell us the specifics, but I was the oldest. I heard things. I knew that money was gone.” He shook his head. “And when he died, he just left my mama with more debt. Wasn’t no Gofundme back then, just credit cards and payday loans.”

“Well it seems like you broke that curse. Or pattern, or however you wanna look at it. You’re doing very well for yourself. And your family.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Another family passed us. The little boy was whining about ice cream.

“Where did a million come from?” I asked softly.

“That’s always been in my head for some reason. *Make a million. Make a million.* Once you do that, then you can rest. Once you do that, you’re...” he trailed off. “I don’t know. Not like...*him.*”

“But something changed.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Yeah. Something changed.”

I was about to ask him what it was when Naya emerged from the ball pit with her hand over her eye.

“What’s wrong, Ny?” he asked immediately.

“Somebody threw a ball and it hit me in the eye.”

“Aww, let me see,” I said instinctively.

She moved her hand and presented a slightly pink eye.

“It’s a little pink but I don’t see any damage. It might sting for a bit, but you’re okay.”

“Okay,” she mumbled.

“Who threw the ball, though?”

I looked over at Taurus and smiled. Papa bear was getting wound up.

“I didn’t see who it was.”

He glared over at the ball pit. “You want me to go find out?”

“No. I’m not going back in there. I wanna do rock-climbing next!” she said, her injured eye already forgotten.

“Alright, go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Okay!” Her little voice trailed off as she ran over to the rock.

“I have a personal question for *you*,” he said. “Did you and your ex not want kids?”

“No, we did. We tried. Went to a specialist. Everything checked out fine with me.”

“So he was shooting blanks?”



I shook my head at the crassness of that remark. And then I laughed a little. “I don’t know. After my results came back, he said he didn’t wanna continue with the testing. And that was that.”

“Damn. That’s selfish as fuck.”

“You think?”

He shot me a look. “You *don’t*?”

“I guess I never thought about it after that. Just kind of... shut off my feelings.”

His eyes raked over my face. “So you *did* have feelings.”

“Of course.”

“You still want kids?”

“If I get married again, yes. Absolutely.”

I looked away, because he was staring at me like he was ready to give me some kids right now.

“I always saw myself being a stay-at-home mom,” I said. “Breastfeeding, baby-wearing, baby food making, homeschooling, all that crunchy stuff.”

He laughed. “I bet you’d be good at it.”

“I think so, too. More of us need to do that. Need to be *able* to do that.”

“Us, meaning...?”

“Black women.”

“Oh. Yeah, I agree.”

“Anyway,” I sighed. “Why STEM? For Naya.”

“She’s smart. Inquisitive. Advanced. And there will always be STEM jobs.”

“That’s it?”

His eyebrows went up. “That ain’t enough?”

“Hairdressers will always have jobs, too.”

“Alright, you’re getting too personal, Savannah.”

“Okay, just hear me out,” I pushed. “My mother had her own feelings—*strong* feeling about my future, and when I didn’t do what she wanted me to do, it caused a rift in our relationship. We’re still not healed from that to this day.”

He didn’t respond to that. Instead, he took his cellphone out of his pocket and snapped some pictures of Naya on the rock wall. She was having a ball, and that seemed to put him at ease.

I was happy to see that.

Later, after Naya had gotten her fill of fun, I walked them to the car.

“You wanna come back to the house with us?” he said as he opened the back passenger door of his SUV.

I looked at little Naya, then back at Taurus. “I don’t know. It’s your weekend together.”

Naya didn’t get in the car. Instead, she stood there and looked up at me, waiting for an answer. I softened at the questioning look on her face.

“I really wish I could, but I have a lot to do. I appreciate the offer, though, and I absolutely will take you up on it soon.”

“Alright. Naya, say goodbye to Ms. Savannah.”

“Bye, Ms. Savannah. It was nice meeting you.”

“It was nice meeting you too, sweetie.”

She ran straight into me and grabbed me in a bear hug. Surprised, I hugged her right back, shooting Taurus a look over her head that I hope conveyed just how touched I was by this sweet little girl. She *liked* me.

It was scary how much that meant to me, for reasons I wasn't ready to acknowledge yet.

After we parted, Naya climbed into the backseat and buckled herself in. Taurus and I shared a look. A look of longing and need. I ached to feel his lips on mine. To consummate our conversation and the feelings we'd admitted we had for each other. But we couldn't, and his upcoming business trip ensured that we wouldn't get another chance to do so until next week.

It would be torture.



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## TAURUS

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“MAN, PLEASE TELL ME you’re not fucking Mo’s wife.”

“Hello to you, too, Vic.”

“Nah, fuck all that.”

I squinted into the sun. It was hot as balls today. “What was the question, again?”

“Ain’t no question,” my brother barked. “I need you to tell me you’re not fucking that man’s wife.”

“I...can’t tell you that. And how the hell do you even know?”

“Long story.”

I glanced over at Naya, flashing her a smile as she eased down the slide at the park near my house. She was shocked when I told her we were going. An adult would have played that off, but kids don’t give a single fuck about your feelings.

“Long story, huh? I got time.” I settled against the bench and waited to hear this.

“Alright, so you know Mo is frat. Somebody in another chapter’s group chat, I guess whoever you were in Vegas with, he posted a pic of you and her and asked if anybody knew her. He was like, ‘yo, she looks familiar and I’m trying to see something.’ Somebody in *that* chat recognized you and texted me the pic on some, ‘ain’t this your brother?’ so I’m like yeah, that’s T, what he do? And he was like ‘yo, tell him his business is in the streets.’ So, this is me telling you right now: your business is in the streets, bruh.”

I worked through that in my head. Now it all made sense. “They’re getting divorced,” I said quietly.

“So you *are* fucking her?”

I was glad he couldn’t see me smiling. I guess I was supposed to feel shame or regret but the truth was, I didn’t. I was happy as hell to be the cleanup man. It was *well* worth it.

“Yeah, I am,” I admitted. “If anybody has a problem with that, tell ‘em come see me.”

“*Fuck*, Taurus.” He sighed. “I think Mo would have a problem with that.”

“I don’t give a fuck about no damn Mo.”

“Well, maybe you should.”

“For what? Who is *he*?”

“Her husband. Legally. I mean, you’re my brother and you know I always got your back no matter what. But fucking with somebody’s wife is grounds for getting your ass whooped, and he wouldn’t be wrong to do that shit, know what I mean?”

“They’re not together, Vic. They’re getting divorced. She don’t even live there anymore. I’m supposed to wait till they sign on the dotted line before I get my dick wet?”

“Probably.”

“Look, if you don’t want some other nigga fucking your wife then you probably shouldn’t be out here cheating on her.”

“Oh, that’s what happened?”

“Yeah.”

He was quiet for a minute. “It’s still messy, though. Shit could cause problems.”

It already had, but I didn’t mention that. I wasn’t in the mood to hear I told you so.

“Thanks for the heads-up, but I’m good.”

He chuckled. “Whatever, man. You got it.”

“Sure do.”

“I hope it’s worth it.”

“Oh, it is.”

His laugh boomed in my ear. “I guess I should be celebrating that your uptight ass is finally getting some. You seem mellow, too. She must got that deluxe, special addition, death grip pussy.”

“Bye, Vic.”

“Hold up!” he said, laughing. “Yo, you talk to Isaac?”

“For what?”

“Man, one of y’all gotta be the bigger person. Y’all both done did some shit that the other one don’t like and said some shit that cut deep. Make the first move, bruh. Dead that shit. We family.”

I thought about my father. Not a great provider, but excellent at bringing us closer. He was the glue, and if he saw us now, if he was up there in the ether looking down on his sons acting a fool the way we were, he’d be shaking his head in shame.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. But I’d already made up my mind.



I should have called before I pulled up on my brother, if only for the fact that he was a habitual weed smoker and I had my daughter with me. It was also possible that loverboy could have a woman in his apartment.

He wasn’t at work, that was for sure.

“Is Uncle Isaac home, Daddy?”

I’d been staring up at his apartment building for a couple of minutes, psyching myself up.

“We’ll see in a minute.”

Naya and I climbed the stairs to get to the second floor, then walked down the short hallway to apartment 1411. I knocked and waited, and after almost a full minute, I heard his heavy footsteps padding toward the door.



He didn't look happy to see me when he flung the door open, but when he saw Naya, his whole face lit up.

"Hey Ny!" He grabbed her in a bear hug. "You came to see your favorite uncle?"

She giggled into his neck, swinging her little feet in excitement. She loved her uncles, and they loved her right back. That was something I never once worried about. Me and my brothers had our shit, but they treated my daughter like she was their own. I'll never forget when Ny got her adenoids out—routine, but her uncles insisted on sleeping at the hospital until they knew she was out of the woods.

"My bad for popping up," I said reluctantly. "You busy?"

His eyebrow went up briefly before he answered, "Nah. Y'all come in."

His place was small and neat. I'd only been over here once.

I looked around, searching for something nice to say. I finally settled on, "Place looks neat, man. Peaceful."

"Yeah. Ny, you want some cookies?"

"Of course I do!"

We laughed at that. After he got her set up with a stack of chocolate chip cookies and a glass of Kool-Aid, he led me out onto the small balcony, sliding the door closed behind us.

"So what's up? It ain't like you to just pop up on a nigga."

"I don't know." I stared down at the street below. "For some reason, I thought I'd come holler at you. See how you're

doing.”

“I’m straight. Been looking for work.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” He belted the robe he was wearing over his sweatpants. “Why you sound so surprised?”

Ignoring that trap, I pressed on. “Anything I can help with?”

He frowned. “You serious?”

“Of course.”

He rubbed a hand down his face, then stared at me with his eyes narrowed. “What’s up, T? You pop up over here acting all nice and shit. Offering to help me. What’s really good?”

“Alright. Look, I can say it. I owe you an apology.”

His frown broke into a smile. “Let me sit down for this.”

“Whatever, man. I’m serious. I should have been more... shit, I don’t know. I could have done better by you. So, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t respond, but the sudden glassy appearance of his eyes hit me right in the gut. Because that’s the moment I realized how much my support meant to him, and how much the lack of it had fucked him up.

I really thought I was doing the right thing being hard on him. Just like I thought I was doing the right thing with Naya. But fuck, maybe I’d done more harm than good.

“You need a hug?” I joked to break the tension.

He just stared. “Yo, you remember when I went in the first time?”

“Come on, man.”

“Nah. I need to know this. Do you remember when I got locked up the first time?”

I sat in the other lawn chair. “I remember.”

“Why did you tell Mama to leave me in there?”

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. I didn’t think I’d have to answer for that today.

“I thought I was doing the right thing, man.” I turned to look him in the eye. “If I had known...you know I would have never—”

“I *don't* know. That’s the fucking problem,” he said, his voice slightly raised. “That night, the night you decided I needed to learn my lesson...them niggas jumped me.”

“I know.”

“They beat my ass, Taurus!”

“I know!”

He stared at the concrete floor, shaking his head. “You didn’t even care.”

“Isaac. I *did* care.”

“And how would I know that?”

Fuck.

I didn’t have an answer for that.

“Fine. You’re right. I should have said something. Shit, I should have apologized. I’ll say it now. Isaac, look at me.”

He brought his eyes to mine.

“I’m sorry. Leaving you in there was the wrong decision. Matter of fact, a lot of shit I did and said with you was probably the wrong decision. I thought I knew best. I thought I was doing what Pop would do, but, shit. Maybe I was misguided. I’m truly sorry.”

He sat up straight and nodded, his posture changing in such a way that it seemed a weight had lifted off of him.

It was odd, but I felt the same way.

I hadn’t realized how much guilt I’d been carrying until now.

“I was joking before, but come on,” I said. “Let’s hug this shit out.”

Laughing, Isaac jumped to his feet. I was barely upright when he slammed into me, almost knocking me against the sliding glass door.

“Alright, alright,” I said, pushing him away. “Damn, nigga, you smell like weed.”

Isaac smirked and patted the pocket of his robe. “Yo, you wanna get faded?”

“With my daughter here?”

“Oh, shit. I forgot about Ny.”

“Yeah. Look, we’ll get out your way so you can blaze up. But I’ma tell you right now, we drug test, so you need to wait a few weeks.”

“You’re really gonna give me a job?”

“I’m not *giving* you shit. You gotta apply and interview like everybody else. You do that, I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

He nodded. “I appreciate it.”

“Not a problem.”

His hand was on the handle of the sliding door when he stopped. “Seriously, T. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“You *never* apologize. Or offer to help me out.”

“I’m just...trying to be better, I guess.”

“Why now?”

I shrugged and gestured for him to open the door.

A sly grin spread across his face. “It wouldn’t be because you out here creepin’, would it?”

“Y’all ain’t got shit else to do besides sit up and gossip about me?”

Isaac laughed. “Don’t blame me. Vic called me on some chatty patty shit. He’s happy for you, that’s all. So am I.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Yeah. So that’s why you’re all sensitive now?”

“Can yo ass just appreciate me being here?”

Isaac slapped me on the back, laughing. “Alright. I’ll take it.”



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## SAVANNAH

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“MS. DAYNE, I NEED you to schedule a meeting with Andre Giddings. First day back, any time before lunch.”

“Okay, but why am I Ms. Dayne again?”

“My bad, beautiful. I’m in work mode right now.”

It was a little after seven here at home. Taurus, in Atlanta, should have been on the same time, but clearly, he wasn’t watching the clock.

“How’s the trip going?” I said as I fixed my plate.

“It’s cool. Got a couple leads, shaking all kinda hands. I’m making progress on the expansion.”

“Seems like a lot of that could have been handled over the phone.”

He throaty chuckle warmed me. “You trying to say you miss me?”

“Maybe a little. I don’t miss you yelling at me, though.”

“Of course you do.”



“Seriously, I didn’t even get to see you before you left.”

Hearing myself say those words—*whine* them, actually—embarrassed me a little. I felt like I was begging, something I’d never done before with a man. Taurus had awakened something in me, and whatever it was, it had me acting like I was in love. I *wasn’t* in love, at least not to my knowledge, but these last few days without him had been just as I imagined they would be.

Torture.

Okay, I’m being dramatic.

But I really did miss him.

“You wanted to see me?” he asked, his voice a little deeper and huskier than when the conversation first started.

It turned me on.

“I always wanna see you,” I said softly.

“Mmm. Well, you could have if you’d said something.”

“How? You had Naya, and then you flew out Sunday.”

“I mean, my schedule was tight but I would have made time to see you if you wanted me to. You gotta tell me what you need, Savannah. You know what they say; closed mouths don’t get nudded in.”

“Okay, first of all, you’re nasty. And second, literally nobody says that.”

“*I* say that.”

“I can’t even deal with you right now,” I laughed.

“How was your day?”

“Fine,” I said with a sigh. “I got a lot of work done at the office.”

“Cool. But what’s that I hear in your voice?”

“What do you mean?”

“You sound kinda down.”

Hmm. He’d been paying attention.

“I wouldn’t say *down*, necessarily. Just...not at my best. I had an argument with my mother, and I tried to reach out to another one of my so-called friends from the wives club.” I took a bite of my steak. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Obviously, it does. Anything I can do?”

“Other than coming home tonight?” I said. “No.”

Ugh. So pathetic.

And honest.

“And if I *was* there...what would that do?”

I smiled. “It would make me feel a lot better.”

“Just me being there? So if I came over and sat on your couch, that would make you feel better?”

“Yes, nasty. Just being near you is enough. I don’t need dick *all* the time.”

He laughed. “Let me ask you something. What kind of webcam do you have?”

“Just the one on my computer.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Alright. I have a dinner to get to, but I’m gonna call you later. Somebody’s gonna come to your door with a package. Open it, get set up, and answer when I call. Video.”

“Yes, Mr. Jackson.”

I wouldn’t say I waited by the phone or anything but I... basically waited by the phone for his call. To be fair, I binge-watched a show on Netflix while I did, so it wasn’t *completely* pathetic.

Netflix was my futile attempt to drown out my thoughts, which were mostly about my mother. She didn’t respond well to news of my new relationship.

I don’t know why I told her. Actually, I do know. I wanted her approval. Deep down, I knew I wouldn’t get it, but I took the risk anyway.

“Are you insane?” she’d asked. “Hopping from one bed to the next before the ink—do you realize I can’t even say ‘before the ink is dry’? There isn’t any ink yet, Savannah! What is *wrong* with you?”

And then she tore into me about being dependent and unable to live without a man taking care of me, followed by a stern reminder that there’s nothing wrong with being divorced and taking care of my damn self.

By the time the call ended, I was close to tears and afraid we would never see eye-to-eye. She didn’t approve of the way

I lived my life, and she probably never would. That was all there was to it.

So that's why I was counting the minutes waiting for Taurus to call me. It felt like he was the only person in my life right now—besides Tan, who I paid— who was actually on my side.

When the phone finally rang, I waited until the third ring to answer. To prove a point that didn't need to be proven.

“You all set up over there?” was his greeting. He looked so handsome, all shirtless and sleepy.

“Yeah. You're not gonna record me and send it to the group chat, are you?” I joked.

“First of all, I'm not in no group chats. And second, do you really think I'd do that to you?”

Taken aback by his reaction, I said, “Of course not. I was kidding.”

“Okay, but just know I would never put you out there like that, Savannah. That's disrespectful as fuck. Besides, I don't share.”

I flashed him a smile. “Okay. I hear you.”

“Cool. You ready to bust that pussy open for me?”

“So you just jumped right in, huh?”

“Time is money, sweetheart,” he said with a smirk. “Let's do this.”

I leaned back against the headboard. My heart was beginning to race. “So you’re just gonna watch me?”

“Yeah, and you’ll watch me.”

“Believe it or not, I’ve never done this before.”

His eyebrows went up. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious.”

“Well I’m glad I got to pop your cherry. Where you at, in the bed?”

“Yeah. Can you see me?”

“Barely. It’s mostly darkness.”

“Okay, hang on.” I adjusted the camera, angling it until it was pointing at me straight on, then turned on my bedside lamp.

“What about now?”

“Yeah. *Damn*,” he said, his eyes going wide. “Look at you. So pretty. You took your makeup off?”

“Yeah.”

“I can tell. You don’t even need it.”

My breath hitched in my chest, and I felt warm all over because...he’d said that with such...*love*.

Or maybe it was just horniness. I know I was afflicted with it.

“Thank you,” I breathed, sinking deeper into my bed.

“Can you see me?”

“Yes. You look drunk.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I had a few.”

“Uh oh. I hope you can still perform,” I teased.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, sexy,” he said with a wink.

“Okay, so how do I start? What do you want me to do?”

It was his turn to get comfortable. He put a pillow behind him on the headboard and propped his phone. My view changed from just his face to his face and upper body.

“I want you to relax,” he said softly. “Take a deep breath. Good. Now open your legs for me.”

He drew in a sharp breath when I spread my thighs, revealing lavender panties. I wasn’t sure why he was so taken aback until he shook his head and said, “You’re wet as hell. What you been doing over there?”

I looked down and noticed a wet spot on my panties. I hadn’t realized.

“You want me to take them off?”

“Nah.” The lusty rasp of his voice was unbearably arousing. “I’m a tell you what to do,” he said. “Put your hand in your panties.”

Slowly, I inched my fingers below the waistband, but I came to a stop with my finger hovering over my clit. I wanted him to direct me. I wanted to feel the caress of his words before the caress of my own hand.

“You touching yourself?” was his needy question.

“You didn’t tell me to.”

He smiled. “Touch it, Savannah.”

I pressed my fingertip to my clit, letting out a soft moan as the tingling started.

“Yeah. Play with it for me. There you go. *Fuck.*”

He adjusted his camera, angling it downward until his lower body was visible. The outline of his magnificent dick was visible through the thin gray fabric of his boxers.

“Pull it out,” I moaned.

“You wanna see this dick?”

“Yessss.”

“Slide them panties to the side for me.”

I obliged.

“Fuck.” His hands went straight to his dick, and my greedy eyes took in the beautiful sight of him slowly rubbing the prominent bulge. My ears relished the quiet sighs and muffled groans coming from his mouth. I imagined it was my hand stroking him, and that it was his hand in my panties, playing in my wetness and strumming my clit.

He pulled it out and, well, things went pretty fast after that.

I came first, and I was so enthralled, I nearly missed *his* release. It would have been a shame, too, because I enjoyed it almost as much as I enjoyed my own.

The tightening of his abs. His hand gripping it. The groan he emitted. The sticky white eruption that flowed down his hand

as he stroked himself through it.

It had never done much for me in porn. But now? With Taurus? It was fucking *hot*.

Silence followed. I struggled to catch my breath, to keep my eyes open. I heard Taurus sigh, then movement as he left his position, presumably to clean up. I was still in the same spot when he returned, limp and drained and satisfied.

“How you feelin’ over there?” he said.

“Perfect.”

“Let me get a close-up so I can see what we did.”

“You’re so nasty,” I said with a chuckle. But of course, I picked up my phone and gave him a glimpse of me from point blank range.

“Fuuuuck.” He shook his head. “What are you doing to me?”

“Same thing you’re doing to me.” I let my head drift backwards until it rested on my pillow. “So this is what the kids are doing these days.”

“I forgot you ain’t been out here like that. Since what, college?”

“Mm hm.”

“Yeah. It’s a new frontier out here.” He paused. “You sleep? You better not be sleep.”

“No,” I laughed. “Just relaxed.”

“Me too. I’m a sleep like a fucking baby tonight.”



“Not me. I’m a little on edge. You know I sign the papers in a few days.”

“Oh, shit, that’s right. You’re worried about it?”

“A little.”

“What can I do to put you at ease?”

“That’s sweet, but there’s nothing you can do. And I know that kills you because you like solving everything,” I said to his laughter. “I just have to see it through.”

“What time is the hearing?”

“Three o’clock on Thursday.”

He nodded. “I’m confused, though. When I got divorced, I just signed the papers and sent them in. I never had to go to the courthouse.”

“Yours was uncontested, then.”

“Yeah, I gave her what she wanted so I could make sure Naya was taken care of.”

“Well, I don’t have a Naya, and he has no interest in taking care of me,” I said. “I don’t know, I just don’t get him. My attorney said he has an issue with the alimony, but I’m not even asking for what I’m actually entitled to. He’s getting off easy and he won’t even agree to *that*.”

Taurus was quiet for a moment.

“Alright, how about this?” he said. “I’ll meet you up there. After it’s over, we’ll go celebrate.”

“I don’t know...”

“I wouldn’t go in with you, obviously. I can get some shit done in the car while I wait.”

“You would do that?”

“For you? Yeah. I would.”

I smiled at that, but I still didn’t answer.

“Savannah, the man won’t be your husband anymore,” he said, reading me correctly. “It’s time to stop giving a fuck about him.”

“You’re right. Okay. Let’s do it.”



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## TAURUS

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I SHOULDN'T HAVE GONE to work today.

I probably shook fifty hands on my trip, and wouldn't you know, one of them motherfuckers got me sick. Slight fever, chills, congestion, and a sore throat greeted me when I woke up this morning. But I had to go in. There was too much to do.

“Good morn—oh,” Savannah said as soon as she saw me. “What's wrong?”

“Not feeling too hot,” I answered. “Is it obvious?”

“Yeah,” she said, poking out her lower lip. “You look terrible.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean.”

I went to grab my coffee, but she immediately put her hand over mine. “Don't drink that.”

I looked down at the mug, then up at her, my eyes narrowed. “Why, what'd you do to it?”

“Nothing,” she said, laughing. “Caffeine’s no good when you’re sick. Let me make you some tea.”

“No. I want coffee.”

“But—”

“Coffee, Ms. Dayne.”

She sighed loudly and moved her hand away. “You are so stubborn.”

I shrugged and took a sip. I could barely taste it. “Lots to do today.”

I expected her to pick up her iPad and await my instructions like she usually did. Instead, she pressed the back of her hand to my forehead and announced, “You have a fever.”

Grateful for her touch, I didn’t move or argue. “Yeah, probably,” I said. “Anyway—”

“And you’re congested. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Nothing I can do about that. Now, I need you to—”

“Drink your coffee, but I’m gonna make you some tea anyway.” She pulled her hand away from my head and placed it on my shoulder. “I’ll put honey and lemon in it. That’ll soothe your throat.”

“Who said my throat hurts?”

She tilted her head. “Does everything have to be a fight?”

“I’m not fighting. I just don’t have time to be sick. Too much to get done.”

She opened her mouth, thought the better of it, and closed it again before walking over to the door. Once that was closed, she came back to my desk and wrapped her arms around me, pulling my head in to rest on her chest. It was risky, because my first inclination—which she had to have known—was to remind her we were in work mode and warn her to get back on her job. But I didn't, because once her arms were around me, I forgot all about work and let myself melt against her. Her touch was so soothing. Loving. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

This was exactly what I needed.

The other thing I needed?

It was stuck to my monitor.

*Work begins at 6 or so, but my day never truly starts until I see your face.*

Shit.

This woman was just...*damn*.

I closed my eyes and let it marinate.

“I really do have shit to do, Savannah,” I finally said.

“I know.” Her voice went soft. Sweet. “Here’s what we’ll do. You tell me what needs to be done, decide what your most pressing matters are, and then you go home early. I’ll finish up

and then I'll come over and bring you some medicine and some soup. You can work in bed."

"So you're gonna be my nurse, huh?"

"Yep."

"Are you the kind of nurse who does whatever it takes to make her patient feel better?"

"No, nasty."

Pain exploded in my head when I laughed at that.

"Okay," I agreed. "I'm too weak to fight it. We'll do it your way." I nuzzled my head against her soft breasts and wrapped my arms around her waist. We stayed like that for quite a while until she pulled away. She leaned over and kissed the top of my head before picking up her iPad and putting her game face back on.

"Alright, boss. Tell me what to do."

*elle*

I ended up leaving work around two o'clock. That was way later than Savannah wanted, but like she said, I was stubborn like that.

When I got home, I stripped down to my boxers and got in my bed, shivering under the covers as the chills set in. I must have been more tired than I thought, because I dozed off immediately and didn't open my eyes again until my doorbell rang.

Still half-asleep, I smiled and reached over to the security panel to hit the button, buzzing Savannah in. A few moments later, my front door opened and closed. I rolled over to face my bedroom door so I could see her when she came in, smiling again as her footsteps moved down the hall. But the smile slowly faded as I realized it didn't sound like Savannah's walk. The steps were hurried and heavy, with none of the gracefulness.

I realized what was happening just a few seconds before my mother came through my door, her face twisted in concern.

"Mama? What's wrong?"

"My baby is sick, that's what's wrong!" She rushed toward me, stopping at the foot of my bed. "What do you need?"

*For you to leave,* I thought.

"I'm okay." My fever-addled brain was too foggy to make sense of her presence. "How'd you know I was sick?"

"I called your cell and you didn't answer, so I called your office. Your secretary said you went home sick."

"Okay. How'd you get here?"

She looked away sheepishly. "Uber."

"You know what? I'm too sick to argue with you about it."

"Good. I'm gonna get some soup started. Where's your thermometer?"

"I'm okay, Mama. You don't have to do all that."

"Nonsense. You never come home sick, Taurus."



“I didn’t want to. My assistant—” I stopped, cutting myself off before I gave her information she could pounce on and blow out of proportion. “You didn’t have to come all the way here, Mama.”

I *said* that, but she and I both knew that was exactly what I would expect her to do. She’d been doing it my whole life—I was her favorite, after all. But *tonight*, it just...didn’t work for me given the plans I’d made.

But how to get her out of here?

I sat up and stretched, setting off a domino effect of pain. “You know what? It’s not even that bad. Matter of fact, I feel better. I think I just needed a nap.”

She advanced on me, pressing her hand to my head.

“Boy, you’re burning up. Lay down.”

I should have known better.

So now, the challenge was getting to Savannah before she got here. I grabbed my phone and was writing the text message in my head when my doorbell rang again.

*Well, this will be interesting.*



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## SAVANNAH

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“HELLO.”

I stared at the woman and knew instantly who she was. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Hi. I’m, um, Taur—Mr. Jackson’s assistant. I...” I glanced down at the grocery bags in my hands. “I have the items he requested.”

Ms. Jackson smiled. “Come in, dear. I’m Tabitha. Taurus’ mother.”

“Oh, of course. Nice to meet you. I’m Savannah. We spoke earlier.”

“Mm hm,” she said as she closed the door behind me. “Follow me. Kitchen’s this way.”

I hadn’t realized how much I was looking forward to being with Taurus—even *sick* Taurus—until I saw her standing in the doorway. I hid my disappointment as best I could as I followed closely behind her, my attention divided between

checking out Taurus' decor and coming up with a clever scheme to get her out of here.

“He asked you to pick up groceries?” she asked as she eyed my bags skeptically. “That boy don't know what to do with all that.”

I set the bags on the marble countertop. It was *gorgeous*. “Yes, ma'am,” I said. “I think he was gonna have the chef make him something.”

Her eyebrows raised in amusement. “The chef always brings the food with him, dear.”

“Oh. I didn't know that.”

“Uh huh. Are you sure you weren't supposed to be cooking something?”

“Yes, ma'am. I...” I trailed off. “Sorry, I wasn't sure what he told you about me. I cook for him sometimes for lunch, that's all.”

She wore the same facial expression my mother did when she knew I was lying but was enjoying listening to my bullshit. Finally, she put me out of my misery.

“Go on and wash up. It'll go quicker if we work together.”

After I washed my hands, I got started mincing the garlic, while Ms. Jackson washed the chicken pieces. Occasionally, I'd hear Taurus coughing, and it took everything in me not to go back there and check on him. I mean, I knew he was okay in that he was alive, but was he *well*? Didn't sound like it. The thought made me ache a little.

“So how long have you been at Jackson?”

I thought on that. “Just over two months. Wow. It feels so much longer than that.”

“My son running you ragged?”

I stifled a laugh. “It’s not too bad.”

“Oh, please. He’s an asshole, you can say it.”

I let the laugh out this time, and Ms. Jackson did the same. Still, she seemed to be studying me.

“I wouldn’t say that. He’s...driven, and his expectations are super high,” I explained as I transferred the garlic to a bowl. “And yes, it can come off assholish sometimes. But I respect how hard he works.”

“Hand me the carrots.”

“Here you go.”

She took them from me and set them on the cutting board. “He has a big heart under there. He’s just...tough.” She ran the grater over the carrots in smooth, fluid motions. “He had to grow up fast when my husband died. Up and decided he was the man of the house and had to take care of everybody.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Hmph,” Ms. Jackson grunted. “Take care of those onions for me.”

I got to work chopping onions, then celery, then the carrots. Ms. Jackson put the chicken in a pot and poured broth over it before bringing it to a boil. I busied myself with Taurus’ tea,

squeezing generous amounts of fresh lemon juice and honey into the mug and stirring until it was blended perfectly.

“Tea is done,” I announced. “Did you wanna take it back to him?”

Ms. Jackson smirked. “I think he’d rather get it from you.”

I blushed like a teenager. It was so silly, me being all shy and self-conscious like this. I was a grown ass woman, after all, but the butterflies and the giddiness at the knowledge that I was about to see him were relentless.

“I’ll be right back,” I assured before walking down the hall toward his bedroom. With my free hand, I smoothed my hair down and ran my fingers up my eyelashes to lengthen them.

Like I said. Silly.

“Knock, knock,” I said softly as I entered the room.

He was shirtless, sitting up with his glasses on, back against the headboard, and his laptop in front of him—of course. When he saw me, his face lit up in a way I’d never seen it before.

“Hey, baby.”

His voice was weak and slightly hoarse, and congestion had rendered it nasally, but it was still one of the best things I’d ever heard.

“I have your tea.”

“Close the door and bring it over here.”

I flashed him a look. “I am *not* closing the door. Your mother is here.”

“And?”

“And she’ll think we’re doing something in here.”

“She knows I’m sick.”

“Like you wouldn’t try to get some anyway.”

He laughed, then let out a chest-rattling cough. “You got me.”

I made my way to the nightstand. “Do you have a coaster?”

“Yeah, but just put it down. I need you more than I need that tea.”

“You’re not getting *me* with your mother out there, Taurus.”

“My mama’s grown and she knows I’m grown. Shit, she used to buy me condoms in high school.”

I looked him right in the eye. “We are *not* having sex tonight, Taurus. Period.”

He stared blankly. “I understand your concerns. But you know what, I think we could work something out that would be to both our advantage.”

“Are you really trying to negotiate right now? It’s not happening.”

“I’m not at optimal health, that’s true,” he pressed, “but I’m perfectly capable of laying on my back, resting, while you—”

“You’re the worst.”

He laughed. “Okay, I’m done. I feel like shit, for real. I’m about to drink all this tea. I wish I had some morphine to pour into it.”

“That bad?”

“Body hurts. Head hurts.” He shrugged and let his head fall back against the headboard in defeat. “I’ll be alright.”

My face, my eyes, my heart...everything softened as I took in the sight of tough, strong Taurus in his weakened state, his defenses down. His physical vulnerability seemed to be a catalyst for emotional vulnerability, and I had the distinct impression I was seeing a side of him that not many people saw.

I reached down and gently pulled his glasses off his face, setting them on the nightstand next to his tea. He stared up at me in silence, waiting, his tired eyes full of emotions that I couldn’t quite get a read on. I put a hand on his cheek. It was warm.

“Your mom said you act like a big baby when you’re sick.”

He smiled. “Facts.”

“That’s okay with me. I’m here to take care of my baby.”

The words felt so natural coming out of my mouth.

“Is that what I am to you, Savannah?” he said. It almost sounded like a *plea*.

“That’s what it feels like,” I said. It was the most honest answer I could give. “Do you mind?”



“I don’t mind at all. I’m...happy to be that.” He took my hand and pressed his lips to the back of it. “And it’s mutual. Believe that.”

I smiled. “What are you working on?”

“Letter to the board.”

“Is it something they asked for?”

“Nah.”

“Then it can wait. I want you to get some rest. I’m serious.”

“Alright. I hear you. You’re the boss. *Today.*”

As the boss, I exercised my right to shut down his computer and walk it out to the table in the hallway. Then I forced him to get all the way under the covers before switching on the tv and turning to *SportsCenter*.

“Do me a favor,” he said as I was making my exit.

“Need something?”

“Yeah. Don’t let my mama come back here in the next few minutes.”

“Okay...why?”

“Because. You got my dick hard,” he said without an ounce of shame.

“I didn’t even do anything, Nasty.”

“Oh, you did something. You did a lot.”

I shook my head at him, hiding the fact that I was intrigued.  
“I’ll keep her busy while you jack off.”

“Nah. I don’t do that.”

“You don’t masturbate?”

He shrugged. “The other night on the phone was the first time in months.”

“Wow.”

“It’s a thing I do. Keeps me aggressive. I need that aggression at work.”

“Well, I applaud your discipline.”

He bit his lip. “How often do *you* do it? No, you know what? Never mind. I’m hard enough already.”

Laughing, I exited his room, closing the door behind me. Back in the kitchen, Ms. Jackson was drinking a glass of red. She smiled when I approached.

“How’s the patient?”

*Horny.*

“He’s fine. I had to make him stop working.”

She rolled her eyes and took another sip. “Want some wine?”

“No, thank you.”

I pulled out my phone to check my email, content to wait her out. With the soup simmering, there was nothing else to be done. But she seemed intent on lingering. She watched an episode of *Family Feud* before making Taurus some more tea. While she walked it back to him, I stirred the soup, then turned

on the oven to warm the sourdough bread I brought. A few moments later, she returned with Taurus' empty mug.

“I didn't like his ex-wife.”

I looked up from my phone in surprise.

“I'm sorry?”

She set the mug in the sink. “His ex-wife, Amber.”

I hesitated. As much as I wanted to hear the figurative tea, I knew it wasn't my business, and I figured Taurus might feel a way about her telling me. But she seemed content to keep talking. She was his mother, so who was I to chastise her?

“Really?” I said flatly.

“Although to be fair, she didn't like me either.” She took another sip of wine. “It wasn't any one thing. She just didn't seem as into Taurus as he was into her. And I didn't like how she treated him sometimes. Like an afterthought.”

“Yeah, that's not good.”

“I stayed out of it, though. You're not supposed to get in grown folks' married business.” She stared off to her left, and it reminded me so much of her son. “But I knew it wasn't gonna last.”

“Wow.”

She waited a few beats, and then, “So, what is this that y'all are doing?”

“Who?”

“You and my son. I know you’re not over here because you’re a good assistant. Nobody’s that damn good.”

Laughing, I shrugged to play it off. “We like each other.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s clear.”

“Is it?”

She tilted her head forward and glared playfully. “I went in that room to give that boy some more tea and he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. Asking me what I think about you, bragging about your cooking and how good you are at your job and how thoughtful you are. His nose is wide open, Ms. Lady.”

I smiled. “I don’t know about that.”

“Well *I* do.” She wiped her hands on a paper towel and surveyed the kitchen. “So tell me about yourself.”

“Oh. Well. Not much to tell, honestly. You know where I work and what I do. I’m...” I trailed off, realizing how bad it would sound to say I was in the process of getting a divorce.

“Married?” she said with a smirk.

Shit.

“Yes. My divorce will be final in a couple of days.”

She nodded. “Did you go to college?”

“Yes, ma’am. I have a degree in hospitality.”

“How did you end up as my son’s assistant?”

I looked down at the table, embarrassed. “I stopped working when I got married. I was just a housewife. This is my first job since I was a teenager.”

She poured herself another glass and sat across from me at the table.

“Why did you say *just* a housewife?”

I stared into her eyes, which also reminded me of Taurus. Cold. Steely. Penetrating.

“Because...I don’t know,” I said. “People don’t seem to hold that in high esteem. And by people, I mean my mother.”

She chuckled. “I can see that. She sent you off to college hoping you’d make something of yourself. Take care of yourself.”

“Right. She’s disappointed, I get that. She worked, my grandmothers worked. I think she thinks I’m...weak.”

Ms. Jackson nodded. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

“Being weak?”

“Mm hm.” She took a long sip. “Folks applaud us for being strong, but I think the dirty little secret is that we’re strong because we’ve always had to be.”

“But I *am* strong,” I whined. “My husband cheated on me. Friends dropped me. I’m living in a tiny apartment, and I wake up every morning at the butt crack of dawn to go and fix coffee for *your son*—no offense,” I said quickly.

She chuckled into her glass.

“I could have fallen apart, Ms. Jackson. But I...didn't. I kept it pushing. That's not good enough, though, because I don't have a career. I don't do any real work. She judges me by a different standard, and it *bugs* me. It shouldn't, but it does.”

“Well, first of all, there's nothing wrong with being a housewife. Everything we women do is work. My mother was a domestic. She got paid to cook, clean, and take care of white folks' kids, so obviously, it's work. She would have *loved* to have the luxury of taking care of her own damn kids all day, but she couldn't.” She shrugged. “I've always been of the mind that somewhere along the way, we let white women convince us that being a housewife was a bad thing. But that was *their* issue, not ours.”

Another sip. “I had to work, just like your mother. If I could have stayed home with my boys...” she trailed off before looking at me like she'd just realized something. “Has it ever occurred to you that your mother might be jealous of you?”

*I...*

*Holy, shit.*

“Not until you just said it.”

“I mean, I don't know the lady, so I could be way off, but I bet she took one look at you, with a husband who makes enough that you can decide if you're gonna work or not, and thought ‘dammit, why not me?’”

“My dad left when I was little,” I said, walking myself through it. “She worked two jobs. I got my first job in high school to help her out, and I hated having to work. She did, too. We used to talk about it. About how tired we were and how stressed out we were.”

“See? You’d be surprised how many parents want their kids to struggle because they did.” Her words were beginning to slur. “I’m glad I didn’t have daughters. I’m not sure I wouldn’t feel the same way.”

I mentally cycled through all the shade and microaggressions my mother had lobbed at me over the years and felt a weight lift. The possibility that she didn’t look down on me, that she might actually *envy me* instead, was blowing my mind.

Ms. Jackson set her wine glass on the table and took another appraisal of the kitchen. “I think my work here is done.”

“You’re leaving?” I said, hoping she didn’t hear the disappointment in my voice.

“Mm hm. Seems like you have it handled. Soup’s done, I’m sure.”

“How are you getting home?”

“Uber.”

“Are you sure? Taurus doesn’t like you doing that.”

“He’s so protective.” She smiled warmly. “What else has he told you?”

“Not much. Just that y’all are close.”

“He didn’t tell you he’s my favorite?”

I frowned at that. “No. I didn’t know it was...okay to say that.”

She laughed. “It’s not, but I do.”

She stood on unsteady feet. I followed her into the living room to make sure she didn’t keel over.

“Listen,” she said. “You’re a grown woman. Whatever your mother likes or doesn’t like about your life...who cares? Do what you want.”

I thought about that. I was feeling her advice. She wasn’t impartial, I knew, but I needed more insight. More honesty. And frankly, I liked talking to her.

“She also thinks I’m rushing into things,” I said. “With Taurus. What do you think?”

“You really wanna know?”

“I do. Because being in it like I am makes it hard to figure out what’s normal and what’s not. My mother thinks I should wait six months to heal before I—”

“Okay, stop,” she said, holding up her hand. “I’m not gonna tell you what I think, because I want you to get in the habit of trusting your own gut. You say you wanna be strong, well, act like it. Make your own decisions.”

She shrugged her coat on and smiled. “But with that said, I like what I see.”



“Me?”

“*Y’all.*” She checked something on her phone. “I know that boy very well. He’s different now that you’re in the mix. In a good way. I don’t know *you*, yet, but you seem happy. And you’re here, doing all this, when you could be home or wherever else. It doesn’t take a genius to see that something good is happening.”

I smiled. “I’m so glad I got to talk to you tonight.”

“Me, too.” She put her purse on her shoulder and opened her arms. I walked into them, and we embraced.

“Alright,” she said, parting quickly. “My car’s here, so I’m gonna go. It was nice meeting you, sweetheart.”

“You, too.”

I closed the door behind her.

So that was two members of the family who liked me.



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## SAVANNAH

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“YOU STAYING WITH ME tonight?”

I grabbed the empty soup bowl and glass and balanced them in my arms. “I didn’t bring any of my stuff.”

“You can sleep in one of my shirts,” Taurus said. “I have an extra toothbrush in there somewhere.”

“I don’t know...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have my bonnet or any of my hair stuff. No clothes.”

“Well, I’m the boss. I give you permission to be late to work tomorrow.”

I thought back to his mother’s words. *His nose is wide open.*

“Alright,” I said. “You wore me down.”

I walked the dishes into the kitchen and washed them. When I returned to the bedroom, Taurus was sitting up again, looking like he’d caught a second wind.

“What hair stuff?” he asked.

“What?”

“You said you didn’t have your hair stuff.”

“Oh.” I toed my shoes off. “My pomade and stuff.”

“Is it something I can send out for?”

“Oh, no. You can’t get it in Summerville. I have to order it online. It usually takes a few weeks to get here. I have to time it just right so I don’t run out.”

“Why can’t you get it here?”

I frowned at the interrogation. His earnestness and concentration told me he was back in work mode. I wondered if he even knew how to shut it off.

“Most places around here don’t stock black products like that unless it’s big name stuff,” I explained.

He looked to the side. He seemed to be thinking before he turned back to me and nodded. “Help yourself to whatever’s in my closet. Except my jerseys.” He smiled. “Nobody wears my jerseys but me.”

I rolled my eyes playfully as I headed over to his closet. Just like the rest of his place, it was sleek and modern. Well-built oak shelving lined the walls. Matching wood hangers held his clothes in their places. A dark grey tufted ottoman sat sternly in the center of the room. I took a quick scan before I zeroed in on the dresser, not wanting to linger too long. There would be time to explore later.

I selected a black t-shirt before closing the dresser drawer. It felt good to shed my clothes and cover myself in something that belonged to Taurus. I suppose it could have even been a little symbolic; everything I owned was procured with Mo's money. *Our* money, but his money. And now those clothes lay at my feet like molted skin.

I picked them up and folded them before placing them on top of Taurus' dresser. I made my way back into the bedroom and climbed into bed next to my patient. His clock told me it was close to ten.

"You feeling any better?" I asked.

"Physically, no," he admitted. "But you being here with me is cool. Makes this shit bearable."

I didn't respond to that, nor did I let on how good it made me feel. Instead, I gestured for him to lie down. I lay down next to him and threw my leg over his feverish body.

With Mo, I was always pushing him away at night. I couldn't sleep any other way than alone and untouched on my side of the bed. But I didn't shy away from Taurus' touch, and I fell asleep just fine with his arms around me.

It was the first good sleep I'd had since I left my husband.



Three days later, I sat in a hot, stuffy courtroom and waited for a judge to decide my fate. Judge Albert Bittain, a portly older gentleman with what seemed like very little patience for the goings-on, was presiding over today.

Tan kept putting her hand on my arm. She thought she was calming me. I wasn't worked up, though. Not at all. I was simply out of patience. I wanted to get this over and done with, and Mo seemed content to drag it out. Judge Bittain even snapped at Howard, Mo's attorney, when he attempted to talk me down from five years of alimony to two. We settled on three, but he wasn't happy about it.

We sat silently while Judge Bittain studied his notes. Several minutes ticked by before he finally spoke, and it was only to say, "Let's recess for thirty minutes."

One knock of his gavel and he was gone.

"Don't worry," Tan said quietly. "This is somewhat normal."

"Somewhat?"

She sighed. "I'm used to contentious proceedings, although I'm a little surprised it came down to this."

"I'm not." I glanced over at my soon-to-be ex. "He's petty."

"I know. And you're way too giving, especially considering the fact that he's completely at fault."

"I just want it over with."

"I still don't understand why you didn't want to bring in the infidelity."

I thought about that. "I'm not a killer. Some people have that in them, some people don't."

Taurus was one of those people. Anything to get what he wanted. Anything to close the deal. I admired his killer instinct, but I didn't think I possessed any of my own.

"I need to make a phone call," I said to her.

Out in the hallway, I shot off a text to Taurus, who had arrived at the courthouse an hour or so ago.

*Sorry, this is taking forever*

He responded immediately.

*T-Don't apologize. What's the issue though?*

*Alimony*

*T-Call me*

"It's me," I said, when he answered.

"I know. What's the problem?"

"He's nickel and diming me. I already agreed to shave his time down to three years, but now he's trying to lower the payment to a thousand a month. A thousand! I swear, I wanna smoke a cigarette right now, I'm so anxious."

I heard him sigh, and then there was a long silence before he finally spoke again.

“Take whatever he’s offering.”

“Excuse me?”

“Let him win.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So you can be done with this shit,” he said. “Go back in there, say yes, sign the papers, and then go to dinner with me. I’m hungry.”

Despite the situation, I laughed at that. “Taurus. It’s not that simple.”

“It *is* that simple.” He paused. “I got you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Do I really need to spell that out?”

It took me a full minute to say, “Yeah, you do.”

“Savannah. The minute you sign those papers, you’re free. You won’t be his anymore. You’ll be mine. If you’ll have me.”

My heart pounded as goosebumps erupted on my arms. “You mean that?”

“Have you ever known me to be a man who doesn’t mean what he says?”

“No.” I was all smiles now. “Of course I’ll have you.”

“Good. Now you can relax. Go back in there with your head up and settle all this. Then we’ll celebrate. Okay?”

“Okay.”

And that’s exactly what I did.



Tan was horrified, of course.

“I ask this with all sincerity,” she said. “Did you get high while you were outside?”

I snickered. “It’s okay. I just wanna move on. This is what I want.”

“This isn’t what *I* want.”

“Does it feel like you’re losing?”

That seemed to get her attention. She put her head down briefly before clearing her throat.

“It’s not about me. It’s about you. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’m positive.”

She glanced over at Mo’s side of the courtroom. “I’ll get with Howard.”

I waited while she did just that, trying not to smile as the smirk gradually fell from Mo’s face. Gone was the big, smug man from earlier this morning. Now, I only saw a small man who was afraid. Not of losing me, necessarily. It was slowly dawning on him that he was losing control, and that was what he hated most in the world.

Judge Bittain reentered and took his seat behind the bench. One bang of the gavel and we were back to business.

“Your honor, we’ve reached a settlement agreement.”

Judge Bittain gave a curt nod. “Great. What did we decide on?”

“One-thousand per month,” Tan said. “I believe that’s the last item of contention.”

“Perfect.” Bittain wrote furiously on his pad. “Spousal maintenance ends at the end of a three-year period unless Ms. Dayne remarries, at which time the agreement will be rendered null. Do both parties understand?”

“Yes, your honor,” Mo and I said in unison.

Bittain finished his writing with a flourish. “Pending the signing of the documents, I hereby issue a divorce. This case is dismissed.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel. Happiness, sure, but there was some sadness, too. The finality of the moment hit me a bit harder than I expected. I stared at the table in front of me while Tan patted my back, allowing myself to feel the weight of it all. But I didn’t let it linger. With a deep breath, I turned to my attorney and gave her a hug of gratitude.

“Thank you, Tan. I know you didn’t always agree with my choices, but you fought for me regardless.”

She tightened her grip. “I’m just glad you got what you wanted. Whatever that is,” she couldn’t resist adding.

We shared a laugh. I pulled away and nodded. “I did. I got exactly what I wanted.”

The sun seemed brighter when I stepped through the doors of the courthouse. The air, fresher.

A few feet away, Taurus stepped out of a charcoal gray Porsche. You would have never known he was sick as a dog a

few days ago. I smiled as I approached him.

“It’s done.”

He pulled me into a cologne-scented hug. “You didn’t have to tell me that. I see it all over your face.”

I pressed the side of my face against his chest. “Do I look different?”

“Yeah. No more stress. That’s what I like to see.” He kissed the top of my head. “You ready to go eat?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. We’ll swing back by and get your car after dinner.”

Taurus got me settled into the passenger seat, which meant buckling me in, before rounding the car to get in on his side. He’d just closed his door when a big shadow loomed outside my window.

“What is this?”

I looked up at Mo. “What do you mean?”

“This your new boyfriend?”

“We’re not married anymore, Mo. Why do you care?”

He scratched his beard thoughtfully. “You moved fast, didn’t you?”

At that, Taurus shifted in his seat so that he was facing us, but he elected not to speak.

Yet.

“All this time you were walking around all hurt and self-righteous,” Mo said. “Now I find out you had another man in your back pocket the whole time.”

I rolled my eyes. “First off, it wasn’t the whole time. And second, did you really think I was gonna jump out of this disaster of a marriage without a parachute? Fuck you.”

Taurus snickered, and Mo shifted his gaze to him for the first time. “You hear that?” he said. “She just called you a parachute.”

Taurus stared back. “Am I supposed to be mad about that?” He looked at me and smiled. “Shit, strap in, baby. Let’s fly.”

I wanted to throw body on his and let him have his way with me. It would have been tacky, though, so I refrained. Instead, I smiled shyly and grabbed his hand.

“I sure wish I would have known about this before,” Mo said. “I mean, I saw him that day, outside your apartment. Had no idea he was with you. That you were fucking him. If I had known all this was going on, I would have brought it up. Subpoenaed his ass.”

At that, Taurus tensed up. “Motherf—”

“It doesn’t matter at this point,” I interrupted, trying to bring this to a close before things got out of hand. Mo knew exactly what he was doing, as always, with the insinuation that I was in the wrong. He wanted me to get worked up. He wanted to pull me into an argument. But I wasn’t taking the bait.

“It does matter, though,” Mo insisted. “I feel duped. You trying to act like you had the moral high ground, but the whole time you out here shackled up with him. Wearing the clothes I bought you. Driving the car I gave you.”

Taurus let my hand go. “Where’d you park?”

“Two spaces over,” I said, pointing to my car.

He took a long look. “You like that car?” he finally asked.

“It’s fine, I guess.”

He turned back to me. “Is there anything in there you need?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Where’s your key?”

I eased the fob off of my keyring and handed it over to Taurus, not entirely sure where he was going with this.

“Here you go, Maurice,” he said as he tossed the fob out of my window. “Drive it in good health, bruh.”

Mo caught it, but just barely. He brought his eyes to mine, and I stared back in a shared moment of understanding.

The torch had been passed. He couldn’t beat Taurus and we both knew it. So I didn’t pity him for standing there in silence with his mouth open, and he didn’t look to be ashamed of losing this way. The better man won, and that was all there was to it. Nothing else to say or do.

Unless he *really* wanted smoke. Taurus would gladly give it to him, I knew that full well.

“We done here?” Taurus needed. “Me and your ex-wife have plans that don’t include you.”

“I—I...yeah.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

As Taurus drove me away from Mo, and my old life, I felt a tiny twinge of empathy. But there was no time to dwell on it, because Taurus told me to look in the backseat. I turned and laid eyes on what had to be twenty dozen roses. Blue roses, which are rare and beautiful, and my favorites. I’d never told him that.

“How did you know those are my favorite?”

“I didn’t.” He chuckled. “That’s funny. I asked for the rarest ones they had. I didn’t want to get you anything basic. You’re not a basic type of woman, Savannah, and I don’t mean that in a colloquial way.” He put a hand on my thigh. “Women like you are rare. Special. Beautiful. I wanted to get you something that expressed that.”

Well.

Maurice, who?



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## SAVANNAH

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“HOW DOES IT FEEL?”

I swallowed my wine and set my glass on the table. “It feels...weird. I was married when I woke up this morning. Now, I’m not.”

Taurus nodded. “You can get married again.”

“I know.”

He took a bite of his steak and chewed thoughtfully. I watched him, having already finished my bisque. It was all I could eat. The events of the day had wrung me out.

“How much time do you think you’ll need before you’re ready?” he said.

I raised my eyebrows. “For marriage?”

“Yeah.”

“I...hadn’t thought about it.”

He straightened his tie and sat back in his seat. “I want you to think about it and get back to me on that.”



I stared at him. Dumbfounded.

“Are you saying you wanna marry me?”

He smiled.

“I’m saying...Look, before you came into my office that day, I was basically just existing. Hiring out most of the services I needed, which was fine. Made life easier. I had Naya. My brothers. My mama. Some friends. But I didn’t *feel* anything. I was numb. And then here came you. Beautiful, sexy, nurturing, caring. Listening to me, taking care of me, leaving me notes, nourishing me...I mean, my chef cooks for me, and the shit is good, but it feels so different when you do it. I can’t explain it. Everything you do, it’s like you just...give a fuck about me. Make me feel cared for. And valued.” He looked off toward the other side of the restaurant for a moment before his eyes came back to mine. “I don’t know why I need that so much, but I do. And you give me that.”

“I see.”

“But something else happened, too. I saw you cycle through a lot of different emotions, Savannah. Happiness, sadness, fear. When you were happy, I liked it. I wanted to make you happier. When you were down, I wanted to fix it. I stayed at the office when you were scared of that storm because I wanted you to feel safe. I wanted you to feel protected.”

He looked down at his plate and chuckled.

“I’m usually good at expressing myself, but you got me shook.”

“You’re doing fine,” I said softly.

He nodded. “I guess this is all a long, convoluted way of telling you I want you in my life. I feel like we...fit.”

“Wow.”

“So think about it for me.”

“I will, but I wanted to clear the air about something.” I took a deep breath. “When I first decided to get divorced, I asked Mo to help me find a job because...well, I knew I needed the money. But the main reason was that I was hoping to meet somebody.”

I looked away from him, first out the window, then down at the table.

“I’m used to being a corporate wife. That’s what I know how to do, and I’m good at it. I enjoy it. I don’t want a nine-to-five. So I figured I’d eventually meet somebody in your elevator or something.”

We laughed at that.

“But instead, I met *you*.” I brought my eyes back up to meet his. “Mean, grumpy, demanding, stubborn you. But as annoying as you were, I found myself enjoying doing things for you. Like you said, it just...fit.”

“So that parachute thing, that was true?”

“Kind of. Does that bother you?”

His eyebrows raised in amusement. “Do I strike you as the kind of man who would be insulted by that?”

I shook my head.

“If anything, I respect it. Ain’t no certainties in life, so it’s smart to set goals and make plans. To be honest, it feels good to be good enough to fill that role for you.”

At that, I let out a relieved sigh.

“Everything about this feels right,” I said.

“Doesn’t it?”

“Like the stars aligned.”

He picked up his glass. “Thank God for the stars.”

We shared a smile, then we drank to that.

“We have dinner tomorrow with the Harrises,” he said.

“Really? How’d you change Chris’s mind?”

“I didn’t. Just told him I wanted to meet.”

“That sounds promising.”

“Maybe. We’ll see. Anyway, I have Pam posting your job tomorrow, but I’ll need you to stay on until I find somebody.”

“Of course.”

“In a couple of days, I need you to make travel arrangements for my trip to Tucson.”

“Okay.”

“Later tonight, I need you to ride my dick.”

I glared playfully. “You’re the worst.”

“No, I’m the best. That’s why you’re with me.”

“*Am* I with you?”

“You tell *me*.”

He picked up his knife and fork and cut another piece of steak. Despite his ever-present air of cockiness, and his attempt to seem unbothered, I knew he was eagerly awaiting my answer.

I took a long gulp of my wine, toying with him and enjoying it.

“I don’t know,” I lied.

“Tell me you’re mine, Savannah.”

“I’m leaning toward keeping you in suspense.”

He shrugged and put a bite of steak in his mouth. “You ain’t gotta tell me. I already know.”

“But you wanna hear it anyway so, here it is. Yes. I’m with you. I’m yours. And I can’t wait to show you how much I truly do care about you, Taurus.”

That hard, cocky shell cracked for a moment and I saw him blush. This man *blushed*. It was so adorable I wanted to cry.

“You just made the best decision you’ve ever made in your life.”

And just like that, he was himself again.

But I didn’t mind at all.



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## TAURUS

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MY DAY STARTED OFF perfectly.

I woke to Savannah kissing me all over my face, and the sound of her soft voice telling me it was time to get up. I was still half-sleep when she went down on me, but the impending orgasm woke me up quick.

After, she led me to the bathroom, where she'd pre-pasted my toothbrush. In fact, it was sitting on a little silver tray next to a small glass of what looked like lemonade.

"Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes," she said. "After you brush, drink that. It's a palate cleanser to get the toothpaste taste out before you eat."

I followed her instructions, took a quick shower, then came downstairs to a five-star hotel worthy spread on my dining room table.

"Damn, girl. We expecting company or something? What's all this?"

“This is how you’re starting your day today. Sit down and I’ll make your plate.”

Again, I did as she said, watching her patter around putting food on my plate. Shit made me smile. It’s what I wanted. What I’d always wanted.

“Did you get a chance to look at the links I sent you?”

She set a glass of orange juice in front of me. “I’ll be honest. I don’t know anything about cars. Can’t you just pick one for me?”

I took my first bite of omelet and had to fight the urge to moan. “Damn, Savannah.”

She smiled in triumph.

“Alright, tell me the color and make and I’ll get you something,” I told her. “Whatever you want.”

“So if I wanted a Bentley, that would be okay with you?” she asked, her tone playful.

“I’d let you know I think Bentleys are gaudy, flashy pieces of shit, but yeah, I’d still get you one if that’s what you really wanted.”

“I don’t. Just wanted to see what you’d say.”

“Baby, ain’t no need to test me. I told you I got you. Matter of fact, when can we get out of that apartment?”

She pulled a plate out of my cabinet. She looked right at home. “As far as I’m concerned, I’m already out,” she said. “I still have stuff there, but I’m not going back there to sleep.”

“Glad to hear that.”

She joined me at the table with her plate, and we ate in silence. It was peaceful. Felt natural.

“I did something that might be something,” I said between bites of blueberry muffin.

“You couldn’t be more vague if you tried.”

Laughing, I picked up a piece of bacon and swirled it around in a puddle of maple syrup. “I don’t usually talk in detail about my deals before I make them. I can be superstitious sometimes. But since you gave me the idea, I can tell you.”

Her eyes lit up. “I’m listening.”

“I have something in the works with Honey Naturals.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “Wait, *the* Honey Naturals? The one *I* use?”

“The very same.”

“How did that happen?”

“Remember that night you slept over?”

She nodded.

“My body was sick, but my brain was still working. It was bugging me, the fact that my girlfriend can’t just walk in Target or wherever and buy her hair stuff. I had Acquisitions run some numbers for me that next day and it looks promising.”

“But...I wasn’t your girlfriend then.”



“Savannah, you’ve been my girlfriend in my head for months now. Even when I was trying to deny that shit to myself,” I said. “Anyway, I’m thinking of adding a beauty division.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. The pie is huge and I want my piece.” I swallowed a piece of honeydew. “But more than that, I want my girlfriend and my mama and my daughter to be able to walk into a store in their neighborhood and get exactly what they need. Me and Eli were talking about this yesterday when I was waiting for you. The distribution pipeline for black beauty products is fucked. For a lot of reasons. I’m gonna fix that.”

She looked at me like I hung the moon.

“I know,” I said. “I’m amazing.”

She laughed and nodded. “You really are.”

We ate in silence for a few moments before she took a deep breath.

“I might have done something, too.”

“What’s that?”

“I wanna start a non-profit.”

The sparkle in her eyes was unmistakable. And adorable.

As much as I liked and appreciated her enthusiasm for the things that were important to me, seeing her light up like this for her own ideas was even better. The pride I felt swelling in me, and the excitement, must have been what Amber used to

look for from me when she shared her work accomplishments. I'll cop to that; I didn't give her what she needed. I wasn't very supportive. There's no excuse for it. Just the truth, which I was seeing clearly now.

I was never in love with Amber.

"What brought you to that conclusion?" I asked Savannah.

"Charity is where my passion is," she said. "It's work I actually feel good about."

"Do it."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely. I got you. Whatever you need."

She leaned over to peck my lips, and I received the kiss eagerly. There would probably be more where that came from after dinner tonight. She didn't know it yet, but I had one more little trick up my sleeve.



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## SAVANNAH

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DINNER WITH THE HARRISES was going great. I was vibing with Vanessa, Taurus was vibing with Chris, and I was halfway gone off the expensive wine Taurus had ordered for the table.

Then he started talking business.

“So here’s where I’m at with it, Chris. You already know what I can do. You know I believe in your product and share your vision for expansion. That hasn’t changed. What *has* changed is the situation that affected our original deal.”

Chris glanced at me, then back to Taurus. “That’s good to hear.”

“Yes. It’s no longer a factor. And I understand why it was tricky for you.”

Chris let out a small sigh. “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“No worries.”

I knew Taurus well enough by now to know what his tight jaw and eagle eyed stare meant.

Something bad was coming.

Chris cleared his throat. “Wait, what did you mean when you said *original* deal?”

Taurus smiled. “The original offer is no longer on the table.” He pulled out a manila folder and handed it to Chris. “Everything’s the same except the number.”

Frowning, Chris opened the folder. His eyes zeroed right in on the bottom of the page. He stared at it for several moments, and when he looked up again, he didn’t look happy.

“A quarter of a point, Taurus?”

He spread his hands. “Take it or leave it.”

What the hell was he doing? I caught Vanessa’s eye and shrugged slightly. She looked as confused as I felt.

Chris sighed and closed the folder, setting it down next to his drink. “I need to think about it.”

“Understood.” Taurus looked at me. “And there’s one more thing,” he said, his eyes cold and hard.

“What’s that?”

“You owe this woman an apology.”

“Wait,” I said, “that’s not—”

“And I say that,” he said, cutting me off, “because there’s a certain way we do business at Jackson and it doesn’t involve embarrassing my employees. From what I understand, there

was a picture taken of her without her knowledge that was shared. That was a violation of her privacy. That better not *ever* fucking happen again.”

Vanessa turned to look at her husband. “What did you do?”

“Nah, it’s not like it sounds,” Chris defended. “In Vegas, when we were at the restaurant...remember I told you I thought she looked familiar? I asked my group chat if they knew her. That’s how I found out she was Mo’s wife.”

Vanessa crossed her arms. “You posted her picture in your group chat? You need to apologize.”

I wanted to tell him it was okay, but the look on Taurus’ face gave me pause. Jaw clenched, nostrils flared, lips tight. It was...gallant. And kinda sexy.

Chris looked at Taurus. “It wasn’t personal, man. I—”

“Don’t talk to me, talk to her.”

Chris turned to me. “I apologize, Savannah. I was wrong for that. And if I caused you any embarrassment, please know it was not my intention.”

“I accept. Thank you.”

Vanessa let out a sigh.

Taurus sat back in his chair. “Great,” he said. “Still thinking?”

“Yeah. I feel kind of duped, though,” Chris said. “I was leaning toward you, but now you’re changing the numbers on

me. You're more like Whitman and Stadler than you wanna believe."

I was nervous.

Taurus leaned forward. Going in for the kill.

"Never, ever forget that this is business," he said. "You kept me waiting and I amended the offer accordingly. It is what it is. And you know that."

"Yeah. I do."

"So what's it gonna be, man?"

Chris blew out a sigh and drummed his knuckles on the table, deep in thought. Taurus' poker face was masterful. I'd never seen anything like it.

I, on the other hand, was anxious, fully expecting Chris to decline. *I* would have declined after seeing the price change. Not to mention getting sonned the way he did. Sheesh.

"Alright, man. It's a deal."

Finally, Taurus cracked a smile. "Good."

The two shook hands while Vanessa and I exchanged relieved smiles.

"Champagne?" Taurus asked us.

"Definitely."

While he was signaling the waiter, I pulled out my phone to fire off a text.

*You're so sexy when you close a deal*

Taurus looked down at his buzzing phone. Poker face firmly back in place, he didn't react at all.

Challenge accepted.

He and Chris started talking about whether or not the Rockets had a good enough roster this year. I took the opportunity to send another text, one that I thought would probably turn his head.

*My pussy is so wet*

He read it, set his phone face down on the table, and shot me a quick, expressionless look.

Time to take it up a notch.

*You're a fucking boss, Taurus. And do you know  
what bosses get to do? Bosses get to pressure  
wash my tonsils tonight*

That was the one.

He shifted in his seat and brought his eyes to mine, glaring so hard I *knew* he wasn't playing with me. I also knew he would, in fact, be pressure washing my tonsils tonight. I stifled a laugh and turned my attention to Vanessa, knowing my work here was done.



But I should have known better.

“Y’all excuse me for a second,” he said. “I need to take a call.”

Taurus swaggered away from the table, leaving me to wonder if there was some kind of emergency. Not a full minute later, I got my answer.

*T-Bring your sexy ass here*

I glanced at the Harrises. They were busy talking, too busy to notice all this foreplay.

*Where is here?*

*T-Private room in the back. NOW*

I grabbed my purse. “I’m gonna go to the ladies room.”

“You want me to go with you?”

I stared at Vanessa in horror. “No!” I said, before realizing I was blowing up my own spot. “No, you relax. Order dessert if you want. It’s on us.”

That seemed to satisfy them. I walked toward the back of the restaurant with my eyes peeled, finally seeing the black velvet curtain and the RESERVED sign that topped it.

Nobody said a word to me as I slipped past the curtain, leading me to believe Taurus had already paid off whoever needed to be paid to leave us alone.

It was a lovely room. I didn't have more than a few seconds to admire it, though, because a hand grabbed my hair from behind. Taurus' voice was rough in my ear.

“So I'm a boss, huh?”

“Yeah,” I moaned breathlessly.

“And you thought you were gonna talk that nasty shit to the boss and not get fucked up?” His tongue traced a path down the side of my neck, making me shiver. “Give me your panties.”

“Taurus...we have guests.”

“I don't give a fuck.”

Suddenly, he was spinning me around. His lips smashed against mine. As his tongue slipped into my mouth, he grabbed my hand and moved it between us, placing it against his erection.

“You see what you did? That's what you do to me, Savannah.”

Wanting him to feel what he did to *me*, I took his hand and moved it under my skirt. His fingers found their own way under the thin fabric, and as they brushed my slick folds and brought me tingling pleasure, I rubbed his dick. Our movements were aggressive and frenzied, our moans hushed but fervid.

“I don’t have a condom,” he whispered against my lips.

“So?”

He chuckled. “I’ll pull out. I need to save it anyway so I can give you what you want.”

Smiling, I reached under my skirt and hooked my fingers in the waistband of my panties. I pulled them down and stepped out of them before placing them in Taurus’ outstretched hand. He stuffed them in his jacket pocket with a smirk.

He backed me up until we reached the long buffet table. As he lifted me onto it, I thought about the poor patrons who would sit down to eat in this room and hoped the restaurant staff was thorough in their cleaning.

Taurus unbuttoned his pants. “We need to make this quick.”

“That depends on you—oooh!”

He sucked in a sharp breath as he slid inside me. “Goddamn, girl. You weren’t lying about this pussy.”

Without waiting for a response, he hit me with deep, backbreaking strokes that made me want to scream. But I couldn’t, so I bit into his neck instead, squealing in his ear as his dick pounded my G spot. Over and over and over until I exploded in a dizzying, pulsing, body-wracking orgasm that made stars burst behind my eyes. My whimpers drowned out whatever smug words were coming out of his mouth, but as I was teetering on the edge of sanity, I was able to make out the very last sentence.

“I’m so fucking in love with you.”

I loosened my grip and pulled back to look at him. I struggled to focus my eyes, and when my vision was finally clear, his face was blank again.

“On your knees for the boss,” he said.

Figuring it slipped out, and contextualizing it properly—he’d said it while he was *in* me—led me to decide to let it pass. We were in a hurry, I knew, so I forced myself back to lucidity and hopped off the buffet and into his arms. He took a step back, shrugged out of his jacket, and lay in on the floor at my feet.

“Let’s go, baby.”

I grabbed his dick and sank to my knees on top of his jacket. It was still wet, but I didn’t mind, and still rock hard, which I loved very much. He groaned when I kissed the head.

“Tell me something,” I said.

“Anything.”

“Why did you press him like that?”

“Who, Chris?”

I nodded.

“This can’t wait til later?”

“I wanna know.”

He sighed. “Look, I don’t give a fuck how much money is on the table. I ain’t got no mercy for *anybody* who disrespects you. I had to get his ass in line and I did. Alright?”

Again, I nodded. There was so much I wanted to say just then, but I couldn't get the words out if I tried. I closed my eyes, embarrassed by the tears that were pooling, and I gave him the best head of my life. I mean, I put my heart and soul into that blow job.

With one hand fisting my hair and the other gripping the back of my neck, Taurus came with a deep groan and pressure washed my tonsils until I gagged.

When he was done, he lifted me to my feet and wrapped his arms around me, sliding his tongue into my mouth for a brief but passionate kiss.

"I'll go out first so you can fix your face," he said, tapping my lower lip. "You left all your lipstick on my dick."

Laughing, I pushed him away. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

By the time I made it back to the table, dessert had been served. I thought I played it off well, but the looks on Chris and Vanessa's faces said otherwise. But they kept it classy and left it alone.

Taurus and I held hands on the car ride home. I was still a bit weepy about the evening's events, but I didn't let the tears fall. Instead, I marveled at my good fortune. I had the man of my dreams. The luxury to do something I loved. I was happy for the first time in years.

"Taurus?"

"What's up?"

“I love you, too.”

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## EPILOGUE

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FOUR MONTHS LATER

“Happy birthday dear Taurus, happy birthday to you!”

He shook his head in embarrassment before leaning forward to blow out the candles on his cake—a one-foot-tall chocolate one with edible gold flakes, in the shape of a trophy. That was my idea because—drumroll, please—Taurus finally reached his goal. I couldn’t have been more proud of him.

“Make a wish, baby.”

He looked at me and winked. “Don’t need it. I have everything I want.”

“Awww!” was his mother’s reply to that. Right in my ear. I didn’t even know she was looking over my shoulder.

Ms. Jackson and I had forged a pretty close relationship over the last few months. Knowing Taurus was her favorite, I expected the worst once he told her we were officially together. Codependency, maybe even jealousy. But there was

none of that. Ms. Jackson took to me like she'd known me all my life. She was a sweet woman. Only a *little* overbearing.

My own mother was still giving me a hard time about jumping from one relationship to the next, and I was still struggling with worrying about what she thought. She hadn't even met Taurus, yet, which was upsetting. Frustrating. But she'd come around soon. I had a feeling about that.

"Daddy! Open your presents!"

Laughing, Taurus pulled Naya to him and set her on his lap.

"You're my present," he joked, to her giggles. "Baby, get my brothers over here for me."

While he and Naya cut the cake, I went out onto the patio, passing Fawn and Norris on my way. They were the only two friends from my old Mo circle who were part of my new life. But things were looking up. I was making fast friends in my new capacity as head of the Summerville Women's Center. It was set to open in just two months.

The smell of weed hit me as soon as I opened the back door. "Your brother wants you," I told them with my hand over my nose. "And y'all missed the singing."

"Oh, my bad, sis." That was Vic, who had already taken to treating me like family. Isaac was less affectionate, but Taurus assured me it wasn't personal.

"Isaac, you coming?" I asked.

"Yeah, man, let's go," Vic said, already at the door. "It's the...you know."



I shot him a look, but he didn't notice.

“Oh, shit!” Isaac said, jumping to his feet. “Here I come.”

“It's the...what?” I said, but Vic ignored me.

Whatever.

I had a party to host.

Tonight was birthday party one of three. Tomorrow, the entire C-suite was joining us for a semi-formal dinner at Il Noche in Langston. The day after that, Taurus and I had courtside seats to see the Rockets. The tickets were in a gift box on the table inside.

I'd forgotten how fun it could be to buy a man presents with his money.

When I came back inside, Taurus was on his feet in the living room, gifts and cake apparently forgotten.

“What's going on?” I asked him, a little weirded out now by the silent, smiling people around me.

Taurus grabbed my hand and went to one knee.

*Oh, my God.*

“Taurus, what—”

“Savannah. Baby. It's very simple. I love you with everything in me. I can't imagine living my life without you in it.” He grabbed my other hand. “When it came to love, I always felt like a piece was missing. A piece of *me*. But now, I'm whole. You build me up, hold me down. You make me feel like a man. Like I can do anything. And I wanna spend the

rest of my life making you happy. Taking care of you. Giving you everything so you want for nothing. And when the storms come, I'll protect you. So, with all that said, will you marry me?"

Semi-blinded by my tears, I said, "Yes, of course I will."

And *that's* when I finally saw the ring. It was big and beautiful, but I didn't care about that. I threw my arms around Taurus' neck and pressed my lips to his.

I heard Naya say, "Ew!"

Ms. Jackson was clapping.

Everyone else was awwing.

But I only heard my fiancé's voice in my ear asking me if I'd eaten yet.

"Not yet. I don't have an appetite," I whispered.

"You have to eat something, Van. You can't be starving my baby."

Nobody knew, yet. It's the way we wanted it.

The night I told him was emotional for both of us. It was a Saturday, the day we found out Amani Dolls was selected for the Favorite Things holiday issue. He had to go into the office that day to prepare for the onslaught of orders, so I brought him dinner and made him stop working to eat it. As I watched him scarf down my lasagna, I just...blurted it out. I suppose it was fitting that it came out in the exact same spot where we met.

We were ecstatic. He cried, I cried. And we made love, right there in the office. Later that night, he actually let me sleep in one of his jerseys.

That was a milestone.

“By the way,” he said, still holding me, “your mom gave me her blessing.”

I reared back at that news. “Excuse me?”

“I had a little talk with her, and she came around. She’ll call you later tonight.”

I let the tears fall then, overwhelmed but deliriously happy. Of all the deals my man had closed, this one meant the most.

“I love you so much, baby daddy.”

He chuckled in my ear. “And I love you, Mrs. Jackson. That’s your name now, I don’t care.”

I tightened my grip on him and said the words, like I had so many times before.

“Yes, Mr. Jackson.”

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## THANK YOU

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Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed this novel, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads so other readers can enjoy it, too!

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Shae Sanders grew up sneaking her sister's Jackie Collins novels when she really didn't have any business reading them. But they stoked a love of edgy and steamy romance against the backdrop of business and power. Now, she writes about black love, lust, and relationships with a side of social stuff thrown in for a little razzle dazzle. In her spare time, Shae spends time with her husband and kids, watches her favorite shows over and over again, and teaches as an adjunct professor.

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