



Behind
the
Scenes

Christina C. Jones

BEHIND THE SCENES

CHRISTINA C. JONES

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Perfect.

Privileged.

Strong.

Spoiled.

Uptight.

Useless.

If there's any one thing Pierre and Logan have in common, it's their ability to invite snap judgements based on shallow views of who they are.

Logan is the privileged only daughter of a respected family whose legacy runs long and deep.

Pierre is the moody, orphaned son of big screen royalty who couldn't possibly live up to the prestige of his pedigree.

Or maybe not.

Perhaps they're just two people trying to navigate the pressures of a world hellbent on telling them what they should be, and eschewing the limits of other people's expectations.

Maybe what they need most is somebody who can see beyond the shallow first impressions – just one person they can allow to see behind the scenes of who they are.

Maybe they have more in common than it seems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All I ever want is to give my best.

I want to breathe life into these characters, their story, to offer something more, something better, than whatever I had to give in the moments before. Sometimes I do that better than others, but that's always the goal.

For these past sixty projects, and the next sixty more, even though that sounds ridiculous.

It'll always be the goal.

Thank you to my family for giving me room to do what I needed. My friends for tolerating my lamentations and encouraging me. My betas, D, R, C, C, J, J, L, A, for your feedback and your time.

And always, always, my readers for your consistent support.

Thank you.

Enjoy!

LOGAN

P*itiful.*

There was no other way to frame the utter weakness of my barely suppressed urge to respond to the pleasant chime echoing through my car.

He was calling.

Again.

For at least the tenth time since I hurriedly dressed and grabbed my stuff, leaving the warm, false comfort of his bed in the middle of the night.

I didn't understand how he could sleep like that, after a fight.

How the *fuck* had he found the peace to be stretched out, mouth hanging open, sweet-dreams-drooling while I laid restless beside him, my heart an open wound on the verge of bleeding out?

Or – the better question – *why was I okay with it?*

Was I okay with it?

With *any* of this?

... *no.*

And all the attention I was – *pitifully* – begging his ass for before... of course he was ready to give it now.

He never saw me more clearly than when I was walking away.

That was when all his care and concern, all the things I *needed*, came pouring out.

The fact that I even knew such a thing – that I'd accepted it enough, that I'd gone back enough times to see this pattern?

Pitiful.

I cranked my music louder, as if it would drown out the sound of his back-to-back calls – ridiculous when the phone was connected to the car.

But whatever.

I turned the dial until it wouldn't go higher, scream-singing along with some break-up anthem as I navigated the dark streets of Vegas to get myself home.

No tears, though.

I refused those.

Well... I *tried*.

The more Les called, the more agitated I got, the more upset I got, the less I found myself in control – physically or emotionally, until I couldn't take it anymore.

I snatched my phone from where it was tucked into my purse on the passenger seat so I could reject the current call. Swiping past the countless texts, I navigated to where he was stored in my phone, so I could block him.

The reminder that I was driving and had no business on my phone came *very* suddenly, in the form of a sleek, matte black G-Wagon in my left peripheral as I coasted past a stop sign. The phone dropped; forgotten into my lap as I grabbed my steering wheel to pull to the right – not fast enough, though. The distinct screech of metal-on-metal rang in my ears as I made glancing contact with the other vehicle – which wouldn't have been *that* big of a deal.

But I was so frazzled, from it all happening so fast, that I couldn't get control fast enough *not* to drive right into – *onto* – a curb, with a hard stop that made my head hurt.

And Les was *still* calling.

Shit, shit, shit!

I blew a hard sigh through my lips as I turned my car off, knowing I was going to have to get out and talk to the other driver, who'd stopped too, but hadn't left their vehicle.

Of all the things to hit, it had to be a luxury car?

Instead of dawdling, I reached into my glove box for my insurance information, and opened my door into the empty street, glad that it was one of the few in this area with working streetlights offering ample visibility.

When I climbed out, so did the other driver, in a ribbed tank and basketball shorts that made me feel less self-conscious about my pajama shorts and tee shirt.

"You tipsy or something, shorty?" he called, stopping a good length away from me – too far for me to really make out his face, especially with the hat pulled low over his eyes.

"No," I answered, trying to keep my tone light and friendly, since I was clearly at fault. "Just... distracted, my bad. I've got my insurance information right here."

"*Distracted, your bad?*" he scoffed. "You busted up my shit, and that's all you've got?"

I peered toward his vehicle, which... yes, there was some damage to his rear fender and the casing on the taillight was broken, but... "It's not *that* bad?"

"Wow," he droned, moving closer now. "Let's see how you feel about it when you get the bill."

I shrugged. "Whatever. Are you getting the details or not? Nobody is hurt, so let's get this done. I wanna go home."

"That's how it works? I just take the info, we go about our business?"

He was close enough now that while most of his face was still in the shadows from the brim of his hat, I could see the distinctive glint of a grill when he spoke, and caught the distinctive *whiff* of certain... herbal remedies... coming off him.

“Ideally? Yes,” I answered. “There’s no point in getting the police involved if nobody is hurt, especially since you’ve been...”

The streetlight reflected off his grin. “Since *I’ve* been...?”

“Smoking. I smell it on you,” I told him. “And you know LVPD is gonna have something to say about it, and there’s no point in turning this into all that. Really we don’t even have to do this insurance stuff – you can send the bill to my office.”

“*Ohh*. You just got G-Wagon repair money on your own, huh?”

“The bill will get paid,” I countered, not wanting to give more information than necessary. “So, again... can we exchange info and be on our way?”

He pushed his hands into the pockets of his shorts, looking away from me to where my car – a birthday gift from my father, which was why it would be great to handle this without insurance – was still parked.

“We *could*, but...” he walked away from where I was standing, going around to the front end. “I don’t think *you’re* going anywhere.”

My eyebrow went up. “What?”

“Your shit is pretty busted,” he explained, gesturing toward my front passenger side. I came around to where he was standing, and at first glance it looked like I’d just punctured my tire on an errant grate when I hit the curb. Looking a little closer though, the whole tire assembly just looked... out of place.

I didn’t know much about cars, but I *did* know it didn’t look in much shape to be driven.

And Les was still calling.

I could hear the phone, still on the floor of my car where it had landed, buzzing incessantly with back to back calls that had to qualify as some sort of harassment at this point.

And I had *no* idea what to do.

It was three in the morning, on a damn Tuesday, and I'd wrecked my car trying to block my boyfriend while I was driving away from what I guessed now was our breakup.

Who the *fuck* was I supposed to call and explain that to?

"Ay... this isn't exactly a part of town where you wanna be hanging out," the stranger spoke up, bringing me back to the reality of my current predicament. "You got somebody you can call?"

Can?

Yes.

Want to?

Hell no.

"I'll just get an *Uber* or something," I stammered, shaking my head as I went toward the car to retrieve my phone.

"At this time of night? Over here? You're funny."

Frustrated, I turned to face him with my hands up. "Well, I don't know what the fuck else to do, so..."

He blew out a sigh, pulling a hand from his pocket to grab the brim of his hat, tugging at it. "Where do you live?"

"What?"

"*Where do you live?*" he repeated back to me, spacing the words, sounding them out like I was a kindergartener. "Pull your car off the curb to actually park it. I'll give you a ride home, and you can have somebody come get it when shit opens up."

I sucked my teeth. "A ride?! Boy I don't know you!"

"I don't know *you*," he countered. "And you hit my shit, but I'm still trying to keep your ass from being a story on the news. We doing this or not?"

"*Not*," was my immediate response. "This is an episode of *Criminal Minds* just waiting to happen."

"Cool," he shrugged. "Lemme get your business card or whatever so I can send this bill to your office, like you said."

“So you’re cool with doing it like that, instead of going through the insurance?”

“I thought you said you had it?”

“I *do*,” I snapped back. “I’m just making sure you’re cool with it.”

“I’m cool with whatever gets me off this street before somebody comes along and jacks me for my shit, shorty,” he said, with another heavy sigh as he crossed his arms. Making sure I felt his impatience.

And really... I couldn’t blame him.

He’d been minding his business - *I* had caused this.

And, he was right about this area, which I knew better than to cruise through. It was just a shortcut, through a largely abandoned neighborhood, I was in a bad habit of taking.

As I reached in the car to grab a business card instead of my insurance, that little fact kept rolling in my mind.

Sitting in a useless luxury car, alone in the dark, waiting for a stranger to come and pick me up... didn’t exactly scream *safety*.

With one of my cards in hand, I straightened up, turning to him to study his face.

“What?” he asked, when he realized I was staring at him.

“Trying to decide if you look like a serial killer.”

He chuckled at that, shaking his head. “I don’t think it quite works like that.”

“It doesn’t,” I admitted. “But I need to justify accepting your offer of a ride somehow, so... let’s say it does.”

“Oh. So... now I *am* giving you a ride?”

“If the option is still available?”

For a moment, he just looked at me, then he nodded. “Yeah. Fine. Let’s get it over with.”

Damn.

Okay.

As he'd suggested, with a lot of maneuvering, I managed to back my car down from the curb I'd crashed into, and actually park it. But even that little bit of driving confirmed there was no way I could get it all the way home in that state. I took all my important stuff out, loading it into my purse before I locked the car, even though that really didn't matter much if somebody decided they wanted it.

I *still* didn't know this guy's name, but I snapped a picture of his license plate to send to my homegirl – I knew she wouldn't see the text before I could explain the purpose. He was waiting though – graciously, honestly – so I didn't linger too much before opening his passenger side door to climb inside.

It smelled like... him.

Like weed – good weed – yes, but more too. Woodsy, and clean, and... comforting. The butter-soft leather seats were plush against my skin, the steady blast of the air conditioning a welcome respite from the dry summer heat. It was all so pleasing to my senses after all that tension that I – reflexively – closed my eyes, taking a moment to just... *be*.

“Yo, you never said where you lived.”

My eyes popped open, and I turned in his direction for the – admittedly uncomfortable – discovery that... *damn he's fine*.

“Um... not *too* far,” I hedged, before telling him where my *definitely* out of the way building was – at least, compared to where we were now.

He didn't seem to have a problem with it though, just gave me a nod, cranked his music back up, and started driving and paying me no mind.

I was paying *him* plenty mind though.

Les' phone calls were still vibrating in my lap as I studied him – light brown skin, thick brows, nice little beard situation... diamonds in his ears. We pulled up to a red light, and I looked away, picking up my cell to finally do what had caused the accident anyway.

I blocked Les' number.

“That’s smart. You shouldn’t be fucking with a nigga you couldn’t call to come pick you up.”

My eyes went wide as I looked up, but his eyes – which had obviously been in my business – were already back on the road as the light changed.

“What’s your name?” I asked him, staring until he finally gave me the courtesy of a glance in my direction, giving me a good glimpse of deep brown eyes as we passed through a well-lit intersection.

“Pierre. Why?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Why? Um... I’m in your car at three in the morning, getting a ride home. Your *name* is the least of things I should know about you.”

“You’re acting like *I* initiated any of this,” he countered. “If anything, *my ass* should be the one worried about a setup.”

“I don’t set people up.”

“So you say.”

I would’ve been annoyed if he hadn’t shot me another glittery smile – curiosity took over instead. The luxury car, the diamond drip... that face.

Who the hell is this man?

I was uniquely positioned in this city to know a lot of people who didn’t know me – it came with the territory. But *this* one... I’d never seen.

“What’s your name?”

“Logan,” I answered, leaving out my surname, like he had. I wasn’t expecting his response to just my first though.

He... *laughed*.

“Uh... what’s funny?” I asked, frowning. “Something wrong with my name?”

“Nah, shorty. You just... *look* like a Logan. It’s hella fitting, and it was funny to me.”

That only made me frown harder. “What does a Logan *look like?*”

“Spoiled. Bougie,” he answered, so matter-of-factly that it cemented my annoyance.

“Says a man named *Pierre* with diamonds in his *mouth* on a fucking Tuesday,” I countered, crossing my arms.

He laughed harder. “You’re right... that’s a fair observation, and I can own my shit. Can you?”

“What exactly am I owning?”

“Being spoiled.”

“You don’t know me.”

“But I can tell,” he countered. “Let me guess – your daddy bought that BMW you were driving, and that’s why you didn’t want to get insurance involved. If it’s still there in the morning, you can pay out of your pocket to have it towed and fixed before he even notices.”

I let out a huff. “Honestly... yes. But I *could’ve* bought it myself. And he doesn’t pay for the insurance either, it’s just... our agent is a family friend.”

“She’s family friends with an insurance agent, *wow*,” he chuckled.

“It’s not even like that!”

“You ain’t gotta defend shit to me, Logan – I’m just fucking around. Not trying to be in the car all silent and awkward and shit, you know?”

“Yeah. I... I’m sorry,” I told him, shaking my head. “If I’m being bitchy. It’s just been a long night, and my mood is fucked, so... my bad.”

“What’s got your mood fucked? Ol’ boy you blocked?”

“Besides being in a car accident? Yes,” I answered, tracing my fingers along the edges of my phone as I stared out the window at my surroundings, noting the familiar landmarks that confirmed I was on the way home. “We broke up tonight.”

“That’s why he’s blowing you up? Y’all got into it or something?”

I smirked at the window. “Or nothing. I just got sick of it and left. So... yeah, that’s why I had to block him. He wouldn’t stop calling.”

Pierre chuckled. “I’d be calling back to back like a bitch trying to see where your fine ass was too.” My eyebrows went up, and I turned to look at him – he met my gaze without backing down and shrugged. “Come on, Logan. You know you look good.”

Blushing, I dropped my eyes to my lap.

I mean... yeah, I *did* know I looked good, but I wasn’t really expecting him to *say* that.

“What did he do?”

“Who?”

“Stop playing,” he laughed. “Your nigga. Must’ve been bad to have you out here in the middle of the night. I know he gotta be *sick*.”

I pushed out a sigh. “More like... what he didn’t do.”

“Which was...?”

“Give a damn. Try. Make me feel wanted,” I explained, then shook my head. “I know it probably sounds dramatic, and you think I’m doing the most, but...”

“Nah. That’s basic shit, and if that’s not happening... what’s the point?”

It would’ve been easy – *very* easy – to simply agree, but the thing was... there were other points, other considerations where Les and I were concerned.

To put it simply... he and I were bred for this. Our relationship and eventual marriage, house, babies, all that... were basically pre-ordained.

It wasn’t quite as simple as just breaking up with him.

At least, that’s what everyone would say.

This wasn't my first journey down this road.

It was, however, the first time I felt so... *done*.

And weirdly enough, that feeling was being cemented somehow, by what Pierre had said.

You shouldn't be fucking with a nigga you couldn't call to come pick you up.

Even with emotions high, the man I supposedly loved, who supposedly loved me... he should've been an option in my mind, right? But aside from just not wanting to see him, and not wanting to explain... I really couldn't say for sure that he would've shown up.

I mean, this time, when he was trying to win me back, yeah.

He would've shown up in glittering armor.

But any other time... any regular day... I couldn't say for sure that there was any real level of concern for me.

Not for my position, or status, and what I represented for his future.

For...*me*.

Against my better judgement, I navigated to my texts, looking at what Les had sent before I blocked him. It was full of *why are you doing this, what's your problem, why are you making me worry, this is bullshit, you're so emotional, why is everything a big deal with you, why can't you just chill, we'll never move forward if you're always doing shit like this, what do you think real relationships are like, I won't tolerate this shit when you're my wife, what the fuck is wrong with you, why are you so dramatic, just come back we can forget this shit happened, what am I supposed to tell people. Nobody else would be bothered with you.*

Yeah...

I was done.

That revelation came as Pierre was pulling up to my building, making me freeze. I was fully aware that we'd

arrived, that the vehicle had stopped and was waiting for me to get out, but I couldn't make myself move.

“This is you, right? This is the building you said?” he prompted, and I turned to look at him.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I just. Um... do you wanna come upstairs?”

I... had no idea where the hell that came from, and it must've caught him off guard too, cause his head reared back. He stared at me for a long moment, then shook his head, swiping a hand over his beard before he met my gaze again.

“If I do... I'm still sending the bill for you busting up my shit,” he said, smirking.

“I'm not trying to pay for the damage to your car in pussy,” I snapped, tossing my phone into my purse. “Nevermind.”

“Nah, hold up.” He reached across me, grabbing the door handle to keep me from pushing it open. “You say you're not pussy bartering... fine. What *are* you doing then?”

With him leaning across me, his scent was even more potent – even more arousing than before – something completely different from what Les made me feel.

“I don't know,” I admitted, and... I guess that was the right answer, because he smirked.

“You know... that's relatable as fuck.”

He released his hold on my door handle and put the vehicle back in gear, whipping it into a parking spot instead of idling in front of the building. Without waiting for me, he climbed out, stopping in front of the car to raise his arms.

“This is your spot, shorty, you've gotta lead the way. You coming or not?”

Yeah.

I... guess I was.

I was climbing out of a stranger's car, to show him up to my apartment... for sex?

What am I doing?

I really didn't know.

But I *did* climb out of the car, suddenly a lot more self-conscious about my sleepwear than I was before, and glad for the fresh pedicure I was sporting with my ridiculous furry slip on sandals.

I was glad it was this time of night – Vegas aside, my building was nice and quiet, which meant no prying eyes or nosy neighbors wondering who my company was. I avoided his gaze the entire way up to my condo, let us inside, dropped my purse on the table just inside the door, and then...

“You are scared outta your mind, aren't you?” Pierre asked, chuckling as he helped himself to a seat at my kitchen counter. He was so cool, so comfortable, that it actually pissed me off a little.

How could he feel more secure in *my* space than I did?

“No,” I lied, walking up to where he was seated. With a smirk on his face, he opened his legs, for me to step between them, so I did. A million questions ran through my mind, *does he have a girlfriend? Is he a criminal? Why was he out anyway? Who the hell is he?* And I pushed them all aside, because... at this point, what did any of it matter?

Before I could work up the nerve to say or do anything, his hands were at the backs of my thighs pulling me even closer. With him seated, it put our faces in what would have been perfect alignment for kissing, but there was no way he was about to—

Oh.

Yes, he was.

Those nice, full lips I'd admired before?

Now, I knew they were just as soft as they looked.

His mouth on my mouth caught me by surprise, but I recovered quickly, kissing him back... until he brought his hands higher, gripping my ass as his tongue pushed between my lips, making this all very... real.

Too real.

I hadn't touched another man like this since before Les, six years ago.

And... really, we were only *barely* broken up.

Maybe not really broken up at all?

Like... was I *completely* sure about this?

"What's wrong?" Pierre asked, pulling back. He was looking at me like he already knew the answer, which was fine, since I couldn't verbalize it anyway.

Instead, I shook my head, taking a step away, out of his hold. "Nothing."

"*Nothing*," he mocked, but not in a cruel way. Maybe just pointing out how ridiculous it sounded. "You're thinking about ol' boy, huh?" He stood up to approach me, backing me toward the counter until I couldn't retreat further. "Worried about how he might feel?"

I bit my lip, nodding as he leaned into me, his lips grazing my ear. "Yeah."

"But you told me he didn't try with you. He didn't give a damn. He didn't make you feel wanted... right?"

A rush of air pushed from my lungs as his fingers tangled in my hair, tugging until I tipped my head back, meeting his gaze. "Right."

"Okay. So... instead of worrying about his feelings... how about..." he smirked, then leaned in to finish that sentence right against my lips. "Don't."

"Just like that, huh? You think it's easy?"

"I can make it easy as fuck," he countered, pressing into me so I could feel his hardness against my stomach.

Maybe he was right, because *that* definitely blanked my mind to anything else, and he took advantage of my speechlessness to kiss me again – longer, deeper than before. This time, when his hands dropped to my ass to grip and squeeze, there was no moment of panic, no stiffening.

I just went with it.

Instead of worrying about this, or that, or *anything* else, I gave myself fully to his lips on mine, his tongue in my mouth, his hands at the waistband of my shorts, sliding them down for more intimate access to me. Even when he showed me the condom he'd pulled from his wallet, I didn't rattle – I nodded.

I – inexplicably – wanted this.

Wanted someone who wasn't Les – who wasn't anything *like* Les – inside of me.

Pierre delivered.

Impressively.

Right there on my kitchen counter, he stripped me down to nothing and stroked me to the point of tears with my legs locked around his waist, fingernails digging into his shoulders, eyes squeezed tight. I came in a flood of sensation that left me feeling lighter than I could remember in... a long time. Legs numb, arms loose, toes tingling, all those sensations that I'd damn near determined out of my reach.

Pierre had done it so... *easily*.

He did it a few more times too, actually – up against the wall in the hallway leading to my bedroom, and *then* my actual bed, making a complete mess of my bedding and sheets.

And then, when I finally peeled myself out of bed at damn near five in the morning to take a shower... he disappeared. When I got up for the bathroom, he was snoozing away, but by the time I came back, he was gone, leaving nothing but his lingering scent on my sheets.

Which... maybe should've made me feel bad, but it didn't.

I felt the exact opposite.

And I didn't give a fuck, at all, about Les.

I changed my sheets, and made arrangements for my car, since it was morning now. With that settled, I adjusted the settings on my window covering to block the sun out, set an

alarm, and settled in the comfort of my *own* bed to catch a few hours of sleep.

Once I was rested, I'd figure out just how badly I'd blown up my life.

PIERRE

“P -Three!”

That unexpected disturbance snatched me from the welcoming jaws of sleep. I groaned in complaint, tossed a bit, but still didn't open my eyes. But then, there it was again – the melodic sound of my big cousin's voice singing up the stairs, putting an end to any hopes I could keep chasing slumber.

Once she decided something, so be it.

Truly, she was the only person who could get away with this shit from me – her, and maybe Elodie, depending how much trouble my little sister had recently gotten herself into.

Anybody else would be told to kiss my ass and asked why the fuck they were in my house – not necessarily in that order. But, *Auntie Nubz*, as El commonly referred to her, had more than earned certain privileges around here – including the right to not be ignored when she showed up uninvited in my bedroom doorway.

“Seriously, P? It's almost noon.”

Instead of responding, I turned over, sinking deeper into the comfort of my sheets, pulling them over my head as I went. My covered ears muffled the sound of Nubia's groan, and a moment later I was back out in the open again, after she'd snatched them off me.

“I don't have the energy for us to have a thing,” she urged, bending next to my head. “And you just got here. So can we not?”

I huffed, pulling my sheets from her hold as I turned over, tucking my hands behind my head. “You tell me – you’re the one invading *my* space.”

“Because you’re not answering your phone – I was worried about you. And El is too.”

“Man...” I sucked my teeth. “El is too wrapped up in that rapper nigga she’s messing with to be worried about *anybody*.”

Nubia shrugged. “Fine. So just me then. I saw the back end of your precious car out in the driveway. What happened?”

Shit.

What *hadn't* happened, was the better question.

In the time it took to blink, the events of the last twelve or so hours came rushing back to me – not being able to sleep, going for a drive, the accident... *Logan*.

“So...?”

“What?” I asked, Nubia’s question reminding me that she was even in the room.

She lifted an eyebrow at me. “P... you’re not...”

“*Nah*,” I answered immediately, already knowing where her head was going. Even with my denial, her eyes narrowed in suspicion to the point that I repeated myself. “*No*, damn. I was out riding, and some chick clipped me. Can we *not* start with the bullshit?”

“It’s not bullshit,” she snapped. “But... if you’re telling me you’re good... okay. I believe you.”

“I didn’t say all that, but the accident wasn’t on me.”

Nubia blinked, her brow furrowed as she considered my words. “So you’re telling me you’re not good? What’s going on?”

Why did I say that shit?

“Nothing. Just... the usual shit.”

All the annoyance in her face softened, to the sympathetic shit I hated, but had learned to accept – from her, at least. “Do

you need me to call somebody for you? We can get you an appointment with—”

“I’m good now,” I interrupted, before she went too far.

And it was true – I *was* good.

I had a hellish, circular problem of migraines making it hard to sleep, but lack of sleep only worsened the migraine.

It was why I’d been out last night in the first place.

The whole reason I’d met Logan – who apparently held the cure to what ailed me between her legs – at all.

“Are you *sure*?” Nubia asked, clear concern written in her eyes as she put a hand to my forehead like I was still the same little boy her mother had stepped in for, all those years ago.

“I’m *sure* I want your ass to chill,” I chuckled, pushing her away from me. “And yeah, I also feel fine.”

“Good!” she chirped, straightening to a stand. “Get your ass up then and get dressed. We’ve got a lunch meeting.”

I squinted at her. “We do?”

“Yes, we *do*.” She pushed out a sigh, crossing her arms as she pinned me with a suddenly thoughtful expression. “Do you... *want* to do this, P? This show?”

“What? Yeah, I wanna do it.”

“Okay then... I need you to act like it. I agreed to this and decided to give you space on the network because I believe in you. But you’ve still gotta prove yourself with this. So... *seriously*. Do you want this?”

I blew out a huff of air, trying to get my head together as Nubia waited. One impossibly neat eyebrow was creeping up her face, a visual cue of her anger ramping up – justifiably.

I was on some bullshit, and I knew it.

Sitting up, I swiped a hand over my face, trying to carefully choose my words. Before I could though, she sat down at the edge of the bed, pinning me with the no-nonsense

glare she always took on when she was done being cool with me, and ready to get to it.

“What’s up with the attitude, huh? Why are you playing with – and just fucking *playing* – me?” she asked, not breaking my gaze as she waited for an answer.

An answer I didn’t *really* have.

“My bad,” I said, reaching to grab her hand and squeeze. “I swear to you though... I wanna do this. It’s important to me. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, but...”

A little sympathy crept back onto her face and she nodded. “I know. And I know it’s probably rough for you, coming into a role like this, that’s so reminiscent of—”

“Chill,” I interrupted her, really not caring to go where she was about to take it. “It’s not even about all that. It’s just... a change of pace. And it’s new to me.”

She smirked. “Yeah, joining the workforce after years spent being a recluse is definitely a shift. Which is why... I hired you someone who can help.”

Frowning, I moved to leave the bed, glad I’d passed out in at least my boxers after showering when I got home. “Hired somebody?”

“Yes,” she said, getting up and immediately moving to make the bed now that I was out of it – probably to discourage me from getting back in it. “She’ll assist you with getting into a schedule, household management, all that, while you transition into this showrunner role. She’s got experience with some of the execs at the station, so she’s capable of helping hire writers, crew, actors, she can crunch numbers. She even knows how the film equipment works, so she can help in that capacity in a pinch. She’ll serve as your executive assistant at the station as well. She’ll be at your side for whatever you need.”

I stopped in the bathroom doorway, turning to frown. “*She?*”

“Yes, *she*,” Nubia confirmed, running a hand over my comforter to smooth it out. “Her official role is executive

conciierge, and she's one of the best in this city."

I snorted. "Sounds like some glorified babysitter shit to me. *Executive conciierge*. That's how you bougie niggas over in *Blackwood* get down? That's the new hot thing?"

"Real funny," Nubia said, rolling her eyes as she straightened the pillows on the bed. "Considering that I'm surrounded by designer shit you ordered with a bottomless bank account. You're *just* as bougie, and the role is *not* new. It's what Mari has *been* doing for me for years. She's only stopping now because she's stepping into a new role at the network too."

Mari was Nubia's little sister – ten years her junior, which made she and I roughly the same age. That age difference – especially the one from Nubia to Elodie, almost twenty years – was why she'd always felt more like an aunt than our cousin exactly.

It didn't hurt that she'd semi-raised us.

I shrugged. "Sounds to me like *you* need this chick more than I do."

"And if she lived in Blackwood, trust me, she'd already be on my team. Luckily though, she's based right here in Vegas, which is perfect since *you* are most certainly in need."

"I don't need—"

"It's really not up for debate, P," Nubia interrupted, standing back to admire her work. "If you want the show, you take the assistant. I don't understand why you're against utilizing this resource – I would expect that someone serious about stepping into such an important role would see the value in something like this and be smart enough to not throw it away. If it were me, I would be exploiting all the advantages I could to prove myself."

I smirked. "I'm already utilizing an advantage – nepotism, *Auntie Nubs*."

"That will only get you so far though – thank your cousin Jeff for that," she said, throwing up her hands. "The Drakes can appreciate familial mess as well as the next, but Jeff

fucked with their homeboy,” Nubia explained. “I pulled *all* my strings to keep his ass on as news director already. Mari has proven herself already and *earned* her position. I had just enough leeway here in Vegas to get you this show. You have to do the work yourself to actually bring it to fruition.”

Shit.

I’d forgotten about Jeff almost getting his block knocked off because he wanted to play *TMZ* type games with a local politician – one who happened to be tight with the Drakes.

Dumbass.

It worked in my favor though, because I didn’t need a cop out, not really. Depending on familial goodwill wasn’t how I wanted to build my legacy – wasn’t how I wanted to honor the foundation I’d been blessed with.

So...

“Fine,” I said. “Let me get myself together, take a piss, and... we can talk about it.”

Nubia smiled. “There’s nothing for *us* to talk about. We have lunch reservations at *Beauchamp’s*,” she told me, heading for the door. “One o’clock. Don’t be late.”

I wasn't late.

In fact, I was *early*, just to make a point to Nubia, who wasn't there yet when I arrived.

"Would you like to wait at the bar?" the hostess asked, with a little hair flip and sultry eyes.

"I would prefer not to. That's the only option?" I asked, taking care not to give her back any of the flirty energy she was giving me.

She leaned onto the podium, the action pushing her breasts together under the black button-up she and all the other employees wore. "You can hang out up here with me..."

I smiled, glancing around to where there was a waiting area off to the side. "I actually need to get my mind right for this meeting, so... is it cool if I wait over there?"

"Suit yourself. You'll be seated when the rest of your party arrives."

I gave her a nod, then moved away from the hostess stand so she could tend to the next people in line. In the waiting area, I pushed out a breath, trying to shake the nerves that had been building since Nubia left my house.

I had no idea what the fuck was about to happen.

When I pitched my show to Nubia, and showed her the script for the pilot, she was officially the first person who knew it even existed. I'd done things here and there in film and television production, but never anything steady, or too... official.

And writing?

Me?

That wasn't... a thing.

Until it was.

Because we were blood, Nubia would support me through whatever – that was just her nature. That support wouldn't keep her from being brutally honest with me though, and telling me if my shit was wack, or off-base.

She was excited about it though, from just the idea. And then, even more when I showed her the script. Other than her, I'd only discussed this with two other people – my baby sister, and a very specific homeboy, none of those other niggas.

Now, I was expanding that carefully curated fold to include a stranger.

A helpful stranger, but still a stranger.

It was fucking nerve-wracking.

An ailment that could easily be cured at the bar.

I closed my eyes, blowing out a sigh as I envisioned a couple fingers of top shelf *Kimble* bourbon in a cold glass, so vivid I could practically taste it. This was a business meeting, sure, but if I was about to talk shop with some stuffy *executive concierge* for the next hour or however long, the dulling of my senses could be worthwhile.

Squash that shit, P.

I opened my eyes, shaking my head in an attempt to clear the visual from my mind.

Don't try to rationalize bullshit.

“Hi. I have a lunch reservation.”

“Okay. What's the name?”

Vague familiarity made me turn around, and I froze when my gaze landed on the woman standing at the hostess counter, wearing the fuck out of slim-fitting navy slacks and a crisp white top. There was an air of confidence about her as she tucked one side of a sleek, shoulder-length bob behind her ear, showcasing an impressive diamond stud as she waited for the hostess' response.

“Your full party hasn't arrived yet, but I believe there's someone in the waiting area, if you'd like to join him there

until we can seat you.”

“Thank you.”

I was still standing on the other side of the glass, staring like a dummy when she turned around, confirming what I’d already realized.

Logan.

Pretty pecan skin, full lips coated in a subtle gloss, cute little rounded tip on her nose. Thick lashes made her eyes pop – the only hint of “glam” on her otherwise lowkey makeup.

A marked difference from when I’d first encountered her, just hours ago.

“Pierre,” she breathed, then cleared her throat and straightened her posture. “Um... hi.”

I smirked. “Hi?”

She pulled her lip into her mouth, just enough to chew at it a bit without messing up her lipstick. “I’m not sure what else to say.”

That was valid.

What *were* you supposed to say to the stranger you were in a car accident with in the wee hours of the morning, then fucked, never really expecting to see them again?

“I never did get your insurance information,” was what I came up with, and counted as the right thing, since it made her smile – *beautiful* fucking smile, damn – and shake her head.

“I guess we did get a bit distracted, huh?”

“Yeah... I guess so.”

Hell... I was plenty distracted now, thinking about the velvety ass skin covering the lush, curvy body currently hiding underneath her perfectly professional clothes. She was polished now, sophisticated – a far cry from the flustered woman I’d met in pajamas and fuzzy slippers last night.

“I could give it to you now,” she said, suddenly shaking her head, like her mind had gone someplace else too. “I have

my card on me.”

“I don’t give a fuck about that car shit,” I told her, stepping toward her to stop her from diving into her designer bag in search of a business card. “I was just... saying something.”

“Oh. So what I’m hearing is... my pussy was enough to cover the damage?” she asked, quietly, with a sexy smirk that had me ready to say *fuck this meeting*, and whatever she was here for too.

“Your words shorty, not mine.”

“So you disagree?”

“I didn’t say that,” I laughed, then gave her a slow once over that had her doing that same little hair-tuck thing. “You clean up nice.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “I could say the same. I see you left the diamond fronts at home – do those only come out when you’re trolling bad neighborhoods for pretty girls who are terrible drivers?”

I chuckled. “Something like that.”

“Oh good! You two have met!”

The sound of Nubia’s voice cut into some of whatever little magic was happening between Logan and me, forcing me to break contact with her expressive brown eyes to acknowledge my cousin, who—

“Wait, what?” I asked, as Nubia’s words really struck my brain.

Her mass of curls bounced over her shoulders as Nubia looked back and forth between us, her mouth spreading into a grin. “*Oh*. You two aren’t *meeting*, you’re flirting, aren’t you?”

Logan let out a nervous giggle as she turned to Nubia. “Mrs. Perry-Foster, I—”

“I told you – it’s *Nubia* to you, sweetheart,” she interrupted. “And there’s nothing to explain, you’re attractive kids. Logan Byers, meet Pierre Perry the third. You’ll always

hear me call him P, or P-Three, depending. We can discuss this at the table though – let’s go sit down.”

Without waiting for a response from either of us, Nubia breezed off to approach the hostess desk, presumably to ask about our table. As soon as she was gone, Logan turned to me, eyes wide.

“What exactly is happening right now?”

Before I could answer, Nubia waved us over, so... I guess we were about to find out.

I motioned for Logan to lead the way, my motives not purely based on good manners. Really, I just wanted to watch her move, and I wasn’t disappointed. Her feet were clad in simple, sexy heeled sandals that she practically glided on as she followed the hostess and Nubia to our private table, her hips moving in a hypnotic sway I couldn’t look away from.

Logan Byers.

If I’d just gotten her information like I was supposed to – *all* I was supposed to do – I would’ve already known that.

LOGAN

“I’m sorry to have been so cagey with you, Logan,” Nubia started, once we were seated and the hostess had stepped away. “But I didn’t want to give you any real details until I was sure Pierre wasn’t going to go all *moody artist* on me.”

My gaze skipped to Pierre, whose expression was guarded as he studied me, then back to Nubia as finally, real understanding dawned. “*Oh*. So... you’re saying that Pierre is...”

“*Yes*,” Nubia agreed. “You’re going to be working with my baby cousin.”

Shit.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

When I got the call from *the* Nubia Perry, that she had a project she wanted me to work on, I’d been excited beyond belief. I’d worked with other execs at the network before, at varying levels, and had even done some liaison work directly for Nashira Drake.

That was probably how I’d landed on Nubia’s radar in the first place.

I’d signed the non-disclosure and contract without the full details, without blinking.

In my line of work, that wasn’t uncommon, and all protections in the contract went both ways – I required it. In my *executive concierge* capacity, I wasn’t required to do

anything that contradicted my morals or beliefs, and I wasn't yet in a place to be super exclusive with my clientele.

I'd work for pretty much whoever could pay my premium fees.

At our meeting, just yesterday, Nubia had explained what she needed from me – a right hand person for a freshman showrunner. At no point had she alluded to being related to the showrunner in question, but when I thought about it, I also hadn't gotten very many details about the show itself – just that I needed to be prepared to help in whatever capacity was necessary.

The mystery of it all was intriguing, and this was Nubia freaking Perry, and... working on a TV show just seemed cool. All of that in combination with her offering a bonus equivalent to a third of my fee?

It was a no-brainer.

I just hadn't realized, when I was digging my fingers into his shoulders nine hours ago, that *Pierre* was going to basically be... my boss.

Wonderful.

"I see the look on your face," Nubia gushed, reaching across the table to grab my hand. "And I know, you're probably thinking, *what have I gotten into, I'm about to be working for some spoiled brat whose auntie-cousin got him a job.*"

I let out a dry laugh. "I... promise you, I wasn't thinking that at all."

"Okay, but it's true – I *am* getting him this job, and he is a bit spoiled – sorry P – but he's *actually* talented, and I know he's going to do the work," Nubia swore, beaming in Pierre's direction.

He'd finally stopped looking at me, staring at something in the distance as he cringed his way through Nubia's embarrassing words, but when he felt us looking at him, he reconnected to the conversation.

“P, tell her about the show.”

Instead of speaking immediately, he ran a hand over his waves, doing unnecessary smoothing, since his cut was impeccable. The action made me flash back to last night – *this morning* – when I’d almost hoped that hat was hiding a fucked-up hairline. *Something* on this man to count as a physical flaw.

That didn’t exist with him, apparently.

“Uh... so, the series title would be *One Day Sober*, which ___”

“It’s a play on words,” Nubia gushed, too excited to avoid butting in. “It’s a running count, and a goal, and a *lament*, and ___”

“So you’re gonna explain it then?” Pierre asked her, smirking across the table.

“*My bad.*” Nubia was grinning as she tossed her hands up. “I’m just really excited for you. Go ahead.”

“Thank you,” he teased. “Yeah tho... everything she said, about the title,” he told me. “The main character is navigating a struggle with alcohol abuse, a difficult relationship with his father, overwhelming pressure to join the family business, and the rigors of his upcoming last year of college. This first season would take place over the course of the summer before senior year.”

“Wow. That sounds great, actually. I would watch that. There’s a love story too, right?” I asked. “There’s always a love story.”

Pierre’s eyebrows shot up, like my question had caught him off guard. “Uh... yeah, I guess. I haven’t really written that far yet.”

It was my turn then for lifted eyebrows. “Oh, you’re writing it yourself? So you’re a writer then?”

“I... yeah. Yeah, I guess I am,” he said, as if it were a revelation. Or maybe he was just uncomfortable.

He'd likely never expected to see me again, and yet... here I was.

"You do a lot of guessing – I can help you develop that into certainty," I explained, earning widened eyes from both Perrys at the table.

"*Well,*" Nubia grinned, gathering her bag. "With that said, I'm actually going to leave you kids to it – you don't need me for any of this, so I'm going to get some rest before I have to be ready to start hair and makeup for my signing tonight. You'll be there, P?"

Pierre nodded, giving his "auntie-cousin" a warm smile. "Fa' sho."

"Alright. Thank you again, Logan," Nubia said, rising from the table. She offered me a wave, but Pierre got a stain-free kiss on the cheek that had me wondering exactly what kind of lipstick she was wearing.

It wasn't the time for that, though.

Very recent history aside... this was a business meeting.

I could be professional.

"Let's get out of here," Pierre suggested, giving me a look from across the table that made it clear he wasn't even a *little* interested in the same. "My place is closer than yours."

"I'm going to have to decline," I told him, keeping my tone as perfectly polite as I could. "It's important for us to use this time to establish a baseline. From there, we can parse exactly how my services can be best utilized on a continuing basis."

He bit down on his lip, studying me for a moment before he shook his head. "I don't need an assistant, Logan."

"I disagree. If this is your first time creating a TV show, or even being part of its development, there are going to be things you don't know, and things you can't do alone. I can ease that transition. Besides that, I can help with managing your life outside of the show – keeping your personal affairs in

order, so you don't have the added stress of those things, in addition to work."

"What if I don't have any stress?"

"Then I would say you're probably ignoring or neglecting a large amount of the responsibilities that come along with being a productive adult," I answered, honestly. From the way his expression shifted though, I got the clear impression he didn't like my answer very much.

"I don't need a fucking babysitter, Logan," he told me in a low, aggressive tone I'd never heard from him before. "I don't know – or care, frankly – what Nubia told you, but this ain't me – aight? I'm not interested in this shit."

Instead of feeding into his sudden swing in energy, I smiled, trying to remain upbeat. "You don't have to be *interested* in my services for them to be valuable to you," I explained. "Often, when I'm referred to people, they don't really understand what it is I do – until they see it in action. Give me a week to work with you, to help you set the foundation for your series. If you still don't see the benefit, we can discuss a dissolution of contract with Nubia. Fair?"

Usually, that little speech – the personalized variations of it – was enough to get a reticent client off the fence. And they *always* saw the value after the week.

Typically, it didn't even take a full day.

Pierre though... seemed confusingly unmoved, just giving me a blank ass look until again, he leaned across the table.

"Listen to me, shorty... the only thing I want from you, is for you to let me strip you out of your little preppy professional clothes, and stroke all of this bullshit off either of our minds. If you can agree to that... we're golden."

I blinked several times, lips pressed together to keep myself from speaking until I was sure I could do so without cursing him out.

Well... certainty would have taken too long.

I had to settle for *maybe* not telling him to kiss my ass.

“I’ll meet you at the studio tomorrow,” I told him, gathering my bag, glad that this had all happened so quickly our server had never made it back to take our order. “Every showrunner at *WAWG* gets at least a temporary office space, so I’ll consult with Nubia about yours. Enjoy your lunch,” I told him, standing to walk away from the table, and ignoring the sound of my name coming off his lips as I blinked back sudden, frustrated tears.

My feelings weren’t hurt.

Not at all.

More than anything, I was baffled that the same lowkey dude who’d given me a ride home – and on his dick – had swung so drastically into... whatever the fuck *that* was.

It was inconsequential though.

The *facts* were that I’d signed a contract and had every intention of fulfilling it. If he wanted to be an asshole – for no good reason – he wouldn’t be the first or the last, and he *wouldn’t* be a failure on my resume.

When it came to this career I was carving out?

I’d *never* lost.

And I wasn’t about to start with Pierre Perry the Third.

Knocking at my door woke me up.

I wasn't really supposed to be asleep anyway, but the events of the night before, a day spent researching and a second glass of red wine had all worked in concert to have me knocked out by eight pm.

I sat up from where I'd passed out on the couch, retrieving my laptop from where it had slipped to the floor. The screen was filled with the tabs I'd been using to look certain things up, and my favorite notepad was open to a vast to-do list I'd been drawing up for *One Day Sober*. I marked my page and closed it, then closed my laptop to answer the door, since now whoever was there was ringing the bell, making it echo through the whole apartment.

I'm coming, I'm coming, I muttered to myself, but didn't yell out loud, in case I didn't actually care to see whoever was on the other side.

When I looked through the peephole, I quickly determined that really was the case, but... I still opened the door.

"What can I do for you, Les?" I asked, unmoved by the sight of my *ex*-boyfriend at my door, still obviously dressed for work. I couldn't front on Les – the man made a suit look good, and this beautifully tailored olive-green thing he had happening was no exception.

Attractiveness couldn't overcome the fact that as a partner... he left much to be desired.

"You can talk to me, for starters," he said, slipping past me uninvited, into my space. "I called you last night when I realized you were gone. *Several* times."

"*Several* is a pretty severe understatement." I pushed the door closed, but didn't lock it, because as far as I was concerned, he'd be leaving soon. "Not to mention those bullshit texts."

Les sighed, his pretty hazel eyes offering *something* masquerading as remorse. Or hell... maybe it was genuine, but it damn sure wasn't about what it *should* be about.

I didn't believe he was actually capable of that.

"I can own up to getting upset, and texting some things that were regrettable," he said, walking up to take my hand. "But you didn't have to leave like that. In the middle of the night, then not answering your phone? That was fucked up Logan, and your ass knows it."

Pulling my hand away, I tucked them against my body, arms crossed. "I was just giving you back the same energy you'd given me. You don't give a shit about hurting or upsetting me – why should I give a shit about you?"

Les sighed, running a hand over his smooth-shaved chin. "Is this about Nikki?"

My eyebrows shot up, because... no, it wasn't. But... "Should it be about Nikki?" I asked, referring to one of his coworkers or "peer" or whatever the fuck they called it at his family's company. I wasn't particularly pressed about her, but had always gotten the impression she had an issue with *me*.

Maybe I was right.

"What?" Les blinked. "I don't... *no*," he insisted, shaking his head. "It shouldn't be about anything, because I don't see a problem. Just you inventing reasons to be upset, like always."

I smiled. "Oh. Of course. That's definitely it," I agreed, dropping my arms to head over to the door. "Let me exacerbate it – goodbye." I opened my front door, motioning for him to step out, but... obviously that would be too easy.

Instead of exiting, he moved deeper into the apartment, his eyes landing on where I'd been working from my couch. Specifically, on my empty glass. "Is this why you missed lunch with my mother and I today? To play on your laptop and drink wine?"

Annoyed, I pushed the door closed again. "I missed lunch because I wasn't fucking speaking to you, Les. I'm not sure you've quite gotten that message. And besides *that*, I *told* you

I had a meeting with a new client come up, and asked you to reschedule, but accommodating me... that would just be too much for you, right?"

"I'm sorry that my *mother*, the woman that gave me life, holds a higher priority to me than your little... assistant thing."

I laughed. "*Little assistant thing*. Wow."

"You have a fucking law degree, Logan. Your whole family does. Your cousin is *Desiree Byers*. Don't act like I'm wrong for not understanding what the hell you're doing, when your own father doesn't either. This "business" you're insisting on sacrificing your future for is... beneath you. You *have* to know that, right?" he asked, with such conviction that I knew this wasn't just cruelty, even though it felt like it.

He *really* believed that shit.

"We discussed the engagement today," he spoke again, while I was still considering exactly how to curse him out. "She's not happy about it, especially after you stood us up today, but... she's going to give me the heirloom ring."

Once upon a time... those words would've taken my breath away. To say that very sentence would've made me *happy* was a gross understatement.

I would've been over the fucking moon.

The *heirloom ring* in question was the seven-carat solitaire that his father proposed to his mother with – the same one his grandfather, and great-grandfather, had given their brides. Before my disillusionment, I'd actually fantasized about wearing it, finding the whole thing so wonderfully romantic.

Hell, even now, I felt a little pang, thinking about the fact that gorgeous ring would never be mine.

I was *not* prepared to tolerate being married to the man it came with.

"Les... I'm sure some woman is going to proudly accept that ring from you, but... it won't be me."

With those words, all his bravado – the infuriating arrogance he'd walked in here with – crumbled. His brow

dipped in a confused frown.

“Logan... come on. What are you talking about, babe?”

I smirked. “Oh. I’m babe again now?”

“You’ve always *been* that,” he insisted, approaching me again. He didn’t bother with my hands this time – he wrapped his arms around my stiff body. “Seriously... I don’t know what’s going on with us, but whatever I’ve done to upset you... I’m sorry.”

“You don’t get it.” I slipped away from him, shaking my head as I strode to my kitchen for the wine bottle I’d been drinking from.

“You’re damn right I don’t get it,” he spoke up, following me. “Just... explain it to me, Logan. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“*Everything*,” I told him, snatching the already-removed cork from the bottle without the aid of an opener. I took a swig, then shook my head. “You talk down to me about my career, you take my presence for granted, you don’t *listen*, you’re condescending... do I really need to go on?”

Shaking his head, Les propped his hands on his hips, staring at me with that same confused expression, as if nothing I was saying made sense.

“None of this is making any sense to me,” he confirmed, and... I just took another drink to keep from either laughing in his face or throwing the damn bottle at his head. “I thought we were good?”

I let out a dry laugh. “We *were* good, Les. Until we weren’t. And I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I don’t want to get over it anymore. I don’t want to *try* anymore. I’m just... done.”

He pushed out a deep sigh, just standing there looking stupid for a long moment until he nodded. “I hear you. I *hear you*, okay babe?”

“The fact that you just called me babe...”

“I think maybe we just need a little space,” he said, like I hadn’t said a word. He approached me, trying for a kiss that I

easily dodged. A *few* times, actually, before he gave up. “I’m gonna call you in a few days, once you’ve had a chance to cool off. *Then* we can talk.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, you do that,” I encouraged, knowing his number was, and would be for the foreseeable future, blocked.

He took it as a positive sign though, shooting me a grin before he headed off.

Idiot.

We hadn’t even really argued, but I still felt hot and flustered as if we’d had some knock-down drag out thing.

As such, I finished off that bottle of wine, took a long ass bath, then settled into bed... still pissed.

It wouldn’t have been so bad, if I’d at least had a successful lunch meeting to think back on – instead I could only muse about how utterly wrong I’d been about Pierre.

There I was, thinking I’d hit the one-night-stand-with-a-stranger jackpot – good sex with a decent guy I could fantasize about, since my real life was so... not the same.

But no.

No such luck.

And the worst part of it all, was that I could ignore Les.

Pierre though?

I still had to work with his ass anyway.

PIERRE

Wow! *Eight in the morning, the day after she's hired, in your studio office? She really means business, huh? – Nubz*

A humorless smile graced my lips as I thought back to Nubia's response to this too-early, too-soon ass meeting. She'd been too busy at the book signing to ask about it, but that hadn't kept her out of my text messages, seeking a follow up. Apparently, Logan had reached out to her directly for some studio information, so she knew there were pieces being moved into place.

Despite my efforts to the contrary.

I had to assume Logan hadn't shared anything about the way our meeting ended – there was no way Nubia wouldn't be on my ass about it if she had.

But since Nubia was still on the good, excited energy, Logan must've opted for the kind of goal-focused tunnel-vision that often agitated me in other people.

Something I knew said more about *me* than it did about *them*.

Productivity worked for some people.

Avoidance was more my speed.

But, because it was clear that wouldn't get me where I was trying to go, I showed up to the damn meeting, a little before the time Logan had indicated on my calendar – something I wasn't even sure how she had access to, but she did.

In fact, I was *very* early, almost thirty minutes, and was burning time in the *WAWG* executive parking lot trying to remember what Logan's car looked like.

I knew it was a BMW, but that was the only real detail I could remember – it was light color too, but exactly which, I couldn't call to mind. Maybe because it was dark, and late, and I was a bit distracted by her ass and thighs and face.

The lot at this place was full of fucking BMWs.

None of them appeared to have the same front-end damage Logan had done to hers, but from the tiny bit I knew about her, I wasn't sure that mattered.

She was a Byers – of the *you don't want to see their law firm on the letterhead unless you hired them* Byerses. I wasn't sure exactly how yet, but I was certain she was related to Desiree Byers, who'd notably blended the fine art of public relations, image consulting, and cutthroat lawyer into a unique position for herself in the fabric of this city.

If Logan was anything like that, her car was probably fixed before most people's alarm went off for the day.

Instead of dwelling too long on where Logan's car may or may not be, I pulled myself out of my own vehicle, which I had yet to bother with getting fixed. It was an eyesore, sure, but once I was *in* it, I wasn't thinking about that shit, and had better uses of my time than worrying with a cosmetic flaw.

Things like... working on my script.

Now that things were starting to move, thanks to Nubia's insistence, I had to have an actual product. While I would've rather vegged in front of one of my gaming consoles and big-ass TV, I found the focus and inspiration instead to write three more episodes before I passed out on my couch, only waking up when I did because I needed to be ready for this meeting.

With my laptop tucked under my arm, I headed into the executive building at *WAWG* for the first time. I had to go through a whole security screening, which I wasn't expecting, have an access badge printed, and then finally I was given

directions to my office – which was apparently on the fourth floor.

The studio execs were up on six, the moneymaker shows on five.

At least, that was how “Freddy” at the security desk had explained it before jotting down my office number, with *two* lines under *fourth floor*.

I couldn’t say exactly why, but that shit had me feeling salty as I headed off to the elevator, and then even *more* annoyed when I had to press that damn *four*.

My phone chimed as I was exiting the elevator, and it was no surprise to see the name that flashed on the screen, accompanied by a text containing just two words.

Good shit. – Nick Davison

That message could easily be confused as not saying much, but *truly*... it was saying a whole lot.

Nick was the only person outside my family who’d seen a single line of script for *One Day Sober*, and he was the only person at this point whose feedback I implicitly trusted. As an indie filmmaker, he’d already accomplished much of what I was just now trying to chase, and was on his way to the kind of lofty acclaim I could only hope for at this point.

If this was *his* show, his office would be on the fifth floor.

Which was why “*good shit*” was a compliment of the highest order, on the two scripts I’d sent him just this morning. The first one, he’d completely dismantled, right in front of me. I was back in LA – back home – watching a game with this dude, when I told him about the script’s existence. He told me to send it to him, so I did, thinking he would check it out later.

Nah.

He got up and printed it right in his home office, then took a red pen to it.

Asked questions.

Challenged my premise, the conflicts, every piece of what would become the pilot episode, and then told me not to say shit else to him until I fixed it.

So... I fuckin' fixed it.

And I learned from what he said and adjusted.

From there, honestly, I'd gotten a little stuck, not sure how to bring in what felt like a missing layer to the plot... until Logan's comment at that disastrous lunch.

There's always a love story.

And... shit, I guess she was right, because with that in mind, I'd knocked out two more episodes.

Two more "good shit" episodes.

I'd known Nick a long time – our fathers were good friends – long enough to trust that he would be real with me, especially about something like this. If it was fucked up... he would say so.

With the good energy of that brief commentary on my mind, I strolled down the busy hall to find my assigned office, which was tucked at the end. I had my eyes peeled for the numbers on the side, knowing that would be my only way of identifying which one was mine, with it being my first day here.

In front of my door though... I wasn't sure I knew much at all.

Pierre Perry III – One Day Sober

The words were embossed on a plaque, just underneath the office number. Looking around, I saw that the other office doors bore similar signage, but I definitely hadn't been expecting *this*. The offices were all glass across the front, with some sort of privacy feature that not everyone employed – I could see straight into some offices, not so much with the others.

Mine was one I couldn't see into... which may have been a good thing, because if I'd known Logan was already on the

other side *before* I opened the door... I probably would've turned around and kept walking.

She was throwing me, *still*.

“Good morning,” she chirped from her position at my desk, where she was busy setting up what appeared to be a brand-new computer. “I’d hoped to have this all set up before you arrived.”

I just stood there, looking at her, more concerned with how damn good she looked than what she was talking about – I think she took it as an impetus to keep talking.

“I thought you might appreciate getting straight to work, so I’ve taken the liberty of compiling some pre-production checklists for you, that should take you through every step of the process for taking your show from page to screen,” she explained, abandoning the computer setup to point out several packets on the desk. “I’ve also put together some lists of Black videographers, writers, and actors that might be suitable – they’re categorized by their styles, with other projects they’ve worked on annotated for quick reference.” She stopped, and straightened, tucking hair behind her ear before folding her hands in front of her body – a move that emphasized her perfect posture.

“All of this is also available via cloud documents for easy access, and I’ll get your computer set up with software for managing the staff, cast, and budget for this project. You’ll also find a money order that should more than cover the damage to your vehicle from our incident the other night – I consulted with the person who did the body work on my car, and he assures me the amount is correct,” she finished with a smile, then finally stopped speaking to wait on me to say... anything.

Shaking my head, I finally stepped fully into the office, closing the door behind me. “Logan... I don’t give a shit about a check.”

“Whether or not you give a shit isn’t relevant to me doing the right thing,” she said, moving away from the desk to do more... executive concierging, I guess. “For now, the fridge is

stocked with various snacks, juices, and plenty of bottled water – you can let me know what you do and don't like, and I'll adjust it as necessary," she explained, gesturing to a little seating area that had been built out – probably by her – into a decent lounging spot. "The TV will be brought up later, and I have an espresso machine on hold, if you want daily coffee. Let me know anything else you'd like brought in to make the space more comfortable."

"Please stop talking," I told her, shaking my head. My words earned me a raised eyebrow, but... *shit*. "You're overwhelming me."

"*Ah*," she said, offering a slight nod of understanding. "Far from the first time I've been accused of that. So... let's scale back. Have a seat," she offered, as if this wasn't *my* office, but... I took the damn seat, there on the couch, and put my laptop down. She joined me, opting for a spot as far away from me as she could get, which wasn't easy, since I'd plopped down right in the middle. "Tell me about your vision for the show," she prompted, her gaze still bright and interested even though I'd forced her off her careful agenda.

The problem was, she was still taxing me.

"When you say vision...?"

"Literally, what does it look like? Feel like? Sound like?"

I pushed my shoulders up. "Uh... moody, I guess. Melancholic, but still warm. Like... the shit that's happening isn't bright and happy all the time, so I want that to come across in the cinematography. I want the viewer to feel it, you know? Like... *everything*. No moments where it's just the words telling you... everything is conveying what's happening."

Logan nodded. "I understand. So the cinematography is a top priority, and presumably the music as well... are you thinking original music, or a blend, or are we licensing everything?"

I sat back, scrubbing hands over my head.

I hadn't thought about that, yet.

“Can we come back to that?”

“Of course. So... warm and melancholy. That’s quite a juxtaposition.”

“A necessary one,” I told her. “And... fitting.”

She smiled. “Okay. If that’s the case, it’ll be important to bring in staff and crew that understand that – I’m assuming you’ll act as writer, producer, director, all within your scope as showrunner, but have you considered bringing in others? To get some other voices, other flavors in the room?”

“Without question,” I agreed. “I’m going to write it myself, but that’s all – I want all the talent we can bring to the table.” I hesitated a moment, then told her, “I already have Nick looking at the scripts for me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Nick? As in... Nick Davison?” she correctly guessed, so I nodded.

“Yeah, that’s my boy.”

“Really? Wow,” she said, sounding a little too surprised for me to let it ride.

“Why *wow*? Is that a shock?”

Immediately, she shook her head. “A *shock*? No. I just... I’m just a little surprised that you two would be friends – I just never would’ve guessed that. Not that I really even *know* Nick, but he seems like such a good guy.”

“And I... don’t?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you implied it.”

“Did I?” Logan asked, pushing herself to a stand. “If so – I apologize. It wasn’t my intention to offend, and I’ll be more careful with my words moving forward.”

I’d barely blinked and she was already back at the desk, paying me no mind in favor of going back to whatever she was doing with the computer when I came in.

“Ay... we don’t *have* to do this awkward shit, you know?” I asked, following her over, and getting in her space so she couldn’t pretend not to hear me. “If you insist on being here, it can’t be weird.”

She straightened up, turning to face me, permeating my senses with the same subtle, dessert-reminiscent scent I’d noticed on her before. “I’m not making it weird, Pierre. I’m doing my job. It’s the only reason I’m here – *not* for you to *strip me out of my preppy clothes and stroke this shit out of my head* – or whatever the fuck you said to me.”

I sighed, taking a seat on the edge of the desk. “I... shouldn’t have said that to you. I know.”

“Yeah, so why *did* you?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“Because it was the truth,” I admitted, with a shrug. “You look good as fuck, and you *feel* good as fuck, so... that’s what I was trying to focus on. Something that didn’t make me feel like my damn head was turning inside out.”

As soon as those words left my mouth, I regretted them.

She wasn’t even asking for, didn’t need or want, all of that. Yet here I was, spilling shit I sure as fuck wasn’t trying to discuss, unnecessarily.

“Look... I’m sorry,” I told her, before she could press me about my previous statement. “Whether or not it was true isn’t relevant – I was out of line, when you were trying to be professional. It wasn’t cool, and I’m sorry.”

She stared at me for what felt like a long time, then finally offered a nod of acknowledgement. “Apology accepted. And now that *that’s* over... you can finish talking to me about your vision.”

LOGAN

Pierre was... a hard man to read.

Which was kinda baffling, considering that in my experience, “hard to read” and “man” weren’t things that really... went together.

Maybe *confusing* was a better way to phrase it.

Yeah.

That was more like it.

Good thing it wasn’t up to me to figure his ass out.

I just had to help him bring this show to fruition.

“If I show this to you... it’s just between us, right?” he asked, finally lifting the top on the custom-painted laptop he’d kept in arms reach since walking into this office.

We’d spent the last couple hours working through some of the checklists I’d created – mostly him naming the people he wanted in certain key roles on the production team, thinking through potential settings that *WAWG* may not already have a set built out for, and coming up with a ballpark for the budget. All of that was really supposed to come *after* the script was done though, for the series at large.

I smiled at him, trying to ease the very clear anxiety he had about the whole thing, which I still didn’t understand – not when he had the blessing of an incredible talent like Nick Davison already. “Yes. Legally, as a matter of fact,” I assured him. “My contract includes certain non-disclosures, so you’ll never have to worry about my divulging any of your personal

or professional information to press, or competitors, or anyone else. And even if it wasn't in the contract, I have a personal policy against telling other people's business. Barring the omission of some violent crime, anything you divulge is safe with me."

"That's a lot of words to say *yes*."

He was seated at the desk now – the desk, chair, and computer I'd chosen yesterday and had delivered hella early, before he arrived – and looked... laughably out of place, honestly. If I had to guess, his preferred workspace would end up being the lounge area – I'd curated that space, too.

When we met, he'd been completely dressed down, and looked good. For the lunch disaster, he'd been in a designer suit, probably to please the fashionable Mrs. Perry-Foster... and he looked good. Now, he was casual – nice tee shirt, nice jeans, fresh sneakers... and he looked *good*.

Just not like he should be behind a desk.

Which was probably the source of some of the angst and attitude he was giving me.

From my place on the other side of the desk, I crossed my legs, giving him a shrug. "I like to cover all bases, so yes – I can be wordy sometimes. I'll be more concise once we've settled into a rhythm with each other."

He reclined back in his chair, head propped against his hand, bottom lip pulled between his teeth, staring.

So I stared right back.

And then, once that got old, I shook my head, sitting forward to tell him, "As much as I'm enjoying the staring contest, I think there are better ways to utilize our time. You implied you were about to show me something..."

"Me? I did? I said that?" he asked, pressing a hand to his chest as I laughed.

"Yeah, *you*. You did," I confirmed, pointing at the laptop. "Stop playing and come on with it. The more you tell me, the more I can help."

Pierre sighed, and closed his eyes, giving me an opportunity for even more inappropriate studying. He was inked, beautifully, just on one side, from his wrist to the side of his neck. The sleeve was a mixture of film reels and clapperboards, palm trees and spotlights. Notably, a rendering of the Hollywood hills and the infamous sign, and – probably most intriguing – two marquee signs, inscribed with names.

His father, and grandfather.

I could see the edges of another one, but that one was hidden by his sleeve.

The night we met, I'd been too otherwise occupied to give any attention to the details of Pierre – or maybe I just hadn't cared to.

It hadn't mattered.

“So,” he spoke suddenly, his eyes popping open. The corners of his full lips curved at the realization that I'd been staring. “Between navigating the stresses of a demanding, alcoholic father, the unrealized dreams of his late mother, and his own undiscovered ambitions, Jason Parks has to decide what kind of man he wants to be. Without losing himself in the illusory glamour of Vegas nightlife. *One Day Sober* is... an exploration of one man's toxic relationship with the looming expectations of his family's legacy.”

I waited to be sure he was done speaking before I nodded, letting my lips spread into a grin. “If I read that in a press release, I'd be *dying* to binge watch, and tweet about every frame,” I told him. “But I made it clear already in the restaurant that I thought it sounded great.”

Pierre shrugged. “Anybody can come up with a logline that gets people to hit play. *Sounding* good and it actually *being* good... those are different things.”

“Well yeah, but... you have me on your side, right? And I don't miss,” I declared, making him chuckle. “We will get whoever needs to be on board with this project, and it will be completely successful, and it will launch you into the fucking

stratosphere... right up there with the legends like your father, and your grandfather.”

From the way the smile on his face dropped... maybe I'd said the wrong thing?

I mean... he *had* to know I would look him up – had to know what I'd find when I did. And really, I hadn't found much about Pierre himself since he had a reputation for reclusive behavior – probably why Nubia had made that *moody artist* comment about him. His little sister, Elodie, was much more visible, much more comfortable with the *Hollywood royalty* spotlight. Their father had been responsible for some major Black hit films, and before that, their grandfather.

Him stepping into a role as showrunner was practically preordained – he had a whole ass legacy.

But... maybe *that* was exactly the problem.

“So is the description all I get or are you going to let me read it?” I asked, trying to pivot the conversation back to the vibe we'd had a moment ago, where he felt comfortable giving me... anything.

To answer, he pushed the laptop in my direction, which made me hike a brow.

“You... want me to read it right now? Like in front of you?”

His eyes went wide, like he hadn't realized what he was implying by pushing the computer at me. “I'd rather eat that sofa over there than sit here and *watch you* read my shit,” he laughed. “I... I'll send it to you. What I have so far, that is.”

“So far? Meaning... unfinished?”

He nodded.

“Okay, that's not the biggest deal I guess. How many episodes are you thinking? Would this be an ongoing series, with a bunch of seasons, or are you aiming for something more along the lines of a limited series?”

His eyes closed again, both hands on his head this time, and he didn't bother opening them to answer. "I like completion. And certainty. So... limited series. Ten episodes. That gives me seven more to land the plane," he rationalized, opening his eyes now to meet my gaze. "I really fuck with the idea of... just telling a tight story, fleshing it all out, and being done. Getting it right and not fucking it up after trying to draw it out."

"Very wise of you," I told him, nodding my agreement. "And I appreciate the decisiveness as well. But... it sounds to me like you've got some writing to do, so we can call it a day here, if you'd like. I know I've thrown a lot at you at once, so I understand if you need some time to process."

"Oh... I kinda thought you'd be around all day," he spoke up, standing at the same time I did.

I shrugged. "I *could* be, if you needed me here for something. Or we could break now and come back together later in the afternoon to iron some things out – I have a to-do list based on some of the things we've done already. I can tackle some of those and give you an update. And," I added, "Hopefully this isn't adding too much to think about, but don't forget, my services aren't limited to just the necessary work for the show. As I understand it, your home here in Vegas isn't – or wasn't – full time. So if you need help getting that in order, hiring staff, figuring out your favorite grocery store in the area... all that. It's in my purview."

"So... if you're spending all your time getting my shit together for me, when do you have time for your own?" he asked, catching me off guard.

"Um... I have hours," I explained. "Usually in a twelve-hour shift – five in the morning to five in the afternoon. But, if there's some sort of urgent request, or last-minute thing, I do encourage my clients to feel comfortable reaching out, with the understanding that I may or may not be available. Like anyone else though, I arrange my personal life around my career."

He stared for a moment, then finally nodded. “I see. Well... I think I’m going to go with that first option you laid out – let’s call it done for today, so I can process all this.”

Returning his nod, I moved to the cabinet to grab my bag. “Of course. We can meet at the same time tomo—”

“Later. *Please*,” he said, making me laugh.

“Okay. Later. Mid-morning?”

He frowned. “What is that?”

“Ten.”

“Let’s say lunch. At my house... if that’s okay?”

“We can work wherever you’re most comfortable,” I assured, backing toward the door. “I’ll get the details from you.”

Like you don’t already have the address.

“Okay. That sounds good.”

“And... you’ll send me the scripts, right?”

He blew out a sigh, pushing his hands in his pockets. “I... yes. I guess I have to, huh?”

“Yes, you do,” I agreed, with my hand on the doorknob. “I’ll see you tomorrow, at noon sharp.”

He tipped his head in acknowledgement, and I started to head out, only pausing when he spoke again.

“Ay, Logan!”

“Yes?” I asked, peeking my head back in the door.

“I see the value, shorty.”

Unbidden, a huge grin spread over my face, and I nodded.

“Told you.”

PIERRE

INT, OFFICE, CASINO - DAYTIME

JASON IS WAITING – IMPECCABLY DRESSED, EYES ON HIS WATCH, PACING. HE CAN HEAR EVERYTHING – HIS HEARTBEAT, HIS BLINKS, THE NOISE FROM THE CASINO FLOOR, EVEN THROUGH THE HEAVILY INSULATED WALLS. HE’S NERVOUS, BUT FOCUSED. RESIGNED TO WHAT HE NEEDS TO DO. GLANCING AT HIS WATCH AGAIN, HE SUDDENLY STOPS PACING, SQUARES HIS SHOULDERS, AND TURNS FOR THE DOOR.

JAMESON ENTERS, FUMING. TAKES A MOMENT TO COLLECT HIS WORDS.

JAMESON

WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT? HUH? YOU WANT ME TO TRUST YOU WITH—

JASON INTERRUPTS, LOSING ALL THE COOL HE’S BEEN BUILDING UP IN THE TIME SINCE THEY PARTED.

JASON

I DIDN’T ASK YOU TO TRUST ME WITH SHIT.

JAMESON

WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING TO LIKE THAT, BOY?

JAMESON GETS RIGHT IN JASON’S FACE – CHEST TO CHEST. JASON DOESN’T BACK DOWN. HE LOOKS HIS FATHER RIGHT IN THE EYES, REFUSING TO SHOW ANY FEAR. JAMESON IS DISGUSTED.

JAMESON

I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS SHIT. I'VE GOTTA SPEND MONEY TRYING TO FIX *YOUR* MISTAKE. GET YOUR ASS OUTTA MY CASINO.

JASON

GLADLY.

JASON WASTES NO TIME LEAVING THE OFFICE.

POV CAMERA DOWN THE HALL, TO THE PRIVATE ELEVATOR.

DOORS OPEN TO WIDE SHOT FROM BEHIND JASON AS HE CROSSES THE CASINO FLOOR TO LEAVE. TRACY ENTERS FROM RIGHT, WORKING THROUGH THE CROWD TO GET TO JASON. ONCE SHE REACHES HIM, SHE SMILES, INSTANTLY SHIFTING HIS ENERGY.

TRACY

YOU WANNA TELL ME WHY YOU LOOK LIKE YOU JUST LEFT THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE?

“**H**ey nigga, whatcha doin?”
Goddamnit.

Elodie's sudden snatching of my headphones from my ears pulled me right out of the moment I was in. I was in a groove, blazing through the actual writing of *ODS* episodes I could already see in my head – a task made urgent by Logan's efficiency.

“Writing,” I answered my little sister, turning to retrieve my property from where it dangled precariously on the edge of her fingers.

She sucked her teeth, then came around to flop beside me on the couch. “*Duh*. That's obvious. I mean like... *what are you doing?*”

“I'm working on the show.”

Her eyebrows – currently tinted deep purple, to match the three feet of bone straight hair she was sporting today – shot up. “*The show? Like your show? You're really doing that?!*”

I hit the save button on my document, then closed the laptop, knowing the chances of getting any work done with her

here were slim. “We talked about this, El. Nubz gave me the green light.”

“Boy *please*, we both know that don’t mean shit when your default state is *idle*.”

From anybody else, those words may have offended me a little, but I knew my little sister too well for that. Elodie was twenty-two years old – a fucking *toddler*, with the attention span to match it. Her ass was too easily bored for me to take her opinions on my life with anything except a grain of salt.

She wasn’t lying on me, but still.

“Everybody can’t keep both feet on the gas pedal like you,” I countered. “You wanna grab some dinner?”

Her lashes – also purple, and annoyingly long – fluttered as she blinked at me like I was crazy. “P... it’s late as fuck, you know that right? When did you last eat?”

Confused, I turned my wrist up to check my watch, surprised to find that it was two in the morning, already. And I definitely hadn’t eaten shit since I’d left the *WAWG* offices around lunch.

“Damn. I... guess I lost track of time.”

“Ya think?” Elodie laughed, grabbing her neon yellow bag to rifle through it. “I’ve got you though.” From the depths of her purse, she pulled out a beat-up brown paper sack. “Ta-da!”

I frowned. “*Ta-da*? El, what the fuck is that?”

Her grin dropped. “It’s a sandwich, nigga.”

“From your *purse*? How long you been carrying that shit around?”

She sucked her teeth. “Just a couple hours, damn! I can’t get a *thank you* for thinking about your weird ass cause I was over by your favorite spot?!”

My brow wrinkled as I leaned in. “This is from Sammy’s?”

“Duh.”

“You should’ve led with that,” I told her, taking the bag from her hands as I stood to head to the kitchen. “Just so you know, a couple hours is a long ass time. I mean, I’mma eat it still, but...”

“Okay give it back.”

“Nah, stop playing,” I laughed, waving her off as she followed me from my makeshift office space to the kitchen, where I put the sandwich on a plate to pop in the microwave. “Thank you, baby girl,” I teased, knowing she hated that shit. When she rolled her eyes, I hooked an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in for a hug that was cut short by a whiff of something that wasn’t the cheesesteak in the microwave.

I pulled back, *really* looking at her beyond all the colorful adornments she was rocking. Immediately, I noticed the telltale gloss over her eyes. “You been drinking?” I asked, even though the answer was already clear to me.

“Oh *God*,” she groaned. “We gotta do this, P?”

“I just asked a question.”

She huffed, rolling her eyes again. “Yeah. I was with my friends, I had a few drinks, like normal twenty-somethings do, probably got something spilled me. And after, I got dropped off here safely at your house. What’s the problem?”

I shrugged. “If you don’t see one, I guess there’s not one.”

“You say that shit *after* fucking judging me!”

“Ain’t nobody judging you, El, I just...” I pushed out a sigh as the microwave went off, distracting me for a second before I could finish responding. “I just wish you *wouldn’t*.”

“I’m not the one with the problem!” she snapped.

Wow.

That... hit me right in the fucking chest.

But whatever.

I guess I deserved that reminder.

“You’re right,” I nodded, turning to the microwave to take the plate out before it got back to that annoying chime again.

“P... I’m sorry, I—”

“You’re good,” I interrupted her, shaking my head as I grabbed a glass and moved to the water dispenser on the fridge. “I should be minding my business.”

“I *am* your business though,” El insisted, stepping in front of me to grab my face in her hands. “I’m glad that you even pay attention – I swear, it keeps me from going way further left than I could sometimes.”

I gave her as much of a smile as I could manage. “I’m glad to hear that. But... no offense... you smell like vodka, and I...”

“Right,” she said, throwing her hands up, and taking a step back. “No offense taken. I get it.”

There was an awkward ass moment of quiet between us, then I gathered my shit.

“I’m gonna head to my room – you good?” I asked her, and she nodded.

“Last time I was here, I left the guest room stocked with stuff, so I’ll work it out.”

Her words brought another question to mind – one I knew better than to ask, but I did anyway. “Not that it’s a problem, but... why’d you come over here anyway? I would think you had a hotel room...”

She sighed. “Uh... yeah. I did. It was with Hellion though, and he was bugging, so I didn’t feel like dealing with him. I’m done with him, period, actually.”

I smirked. “Oh wow. A nigga that calls himself *Hellion* was on some bullshit. I’m surprised.”

“Just go eat your damn sandwich,” she laughed, shaking her head. “I’m not talking about this with you.”

“Fine,” I agreed. “As long as ol’ boy didn’t come at you wrong, cause—”

“*Simmer down,*” Elodie insisted. “It was just... typical shit. Nothing you need to get at him about, I promise.”

“But you’d tell me if it was?”

She squinted. “Maybe?”

“*El...*”

“Go to bed nigga, *damn,*” she whined, turning away from me to head for the guest room, in the opposite direction.

Only because I believed her about *this* time, I didn’t press the issue. And... now that I wasn’t head down in my script, I was really feeling the late hour and lack of sustenance.

In my room, I opened the terrace doors wide and cranked up some music in my headphones before I got settled in. Necessary food and water, something in my ears to zone out to, and... maybe hypocritically... a little herbal remedy to smooth out the edges.

And then, hopefully, sleep would come next.

AT EXACTLY NOON, THE DOORBELL RANG.

It jolted me from sporadic sleep just long enough for me to glance at the clock, decide I didn’t give a fuck who it was, and take my ass right back to sleep.

Unfortunately for me, Elodie was still in my house.

Which was how Logan Byers ended up in my bedroom doorway.

“*Good afternoon,*” she declared, entirely too perky for me when I’d just woken up. My erratic slumber had been more draining than restful, which already didn’t bode well for my mood.

I really didn’t need Logan and her enthusiastic ass energy right now.

I opted not to respond.

“I would ask if you’re not a morning person, but it’s not morning anymore, so...”

“You’re really just not gonna take the fucking hint?” I asked, finally turning over to actually look at her, and... *damn*.

She wasn’t trying to obscure that body of hers at all today, in a matching mustard pencil skirt and top combo that popped nicely against her deep brown skin. Her hair was different today too – the same asymmetrical cut, but instead of being straightened, she had soft curls framing her face.

It was hard to give her hostile energy when she looked that damn good.

“I don’t respond to hints, Pierre. If you’d like me to leave, just say so. If not... I’ve got lunch waiting downstairs. Let’s get to work.”

Her crimson painted lips turned up into a smile, and then she turned and left – I guess she was just that confident I wasn’t about to put her out.

Fuck.

She wasn’t wrong.

I dragged myself out of bed and into the bathroom for the typical morning stuff – even though it was well past that. Toilet, sink, shower, all that, and then my stomach led me down to the kitchen to see what kind of lunch she’d brought.

I found Logan at my kitchen counter, with a pristine white laptop in front of her, her fingers flying over the keys. When I walked in, she glanced at me, then back to her screen, then *back* to me, lips parted as she took in the fact that after my shower I hadn’t put on anything more than my towel.

She blinked, then looked away, pulling herself from her barstool to open my fridge.

“We haven’t discussed your food preferences yet,” she said. “So, I kept it simple and got you a rice bowl like mine, except with all the ingredients on the side. I can construct it for you, based on your preferences, or you can do it yourself.”

From the fridge, she produced a bag and started pulling things out, lining them up on the counter. “You can just let me know.”

“Yours looks good,” I told her, glancing at where her lunch was situated beside her laptop. “I’ll let you get back to it, while I fix mine.”

Logan nodded. “Okay. Sounds good.”

She started to move back to her seat, but quickly realized I’d moved into a position where I was in her way, and it wasn’t as simple as getting around me.

“Pierre... can we not?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Can we not... what?”

“Do... *this*,” she said, wiggling her fingers at my bare chest and body. “The sexual tension.”

“I can’t help it if you want me, shorty.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Fair enough,” she agreed. “But you can help the fact that you’re putting it right in my face. I’m trying to be professional here. You don’t have to...” she glanced down, right at my dick, before bringing her gaze back to mine with a sigh. “make it harder on me.”

“*Me?*” I smirked. “You’re in here with all this ass, that pretty face, all that, but *I’m* making it hard? Nah, that’s all you,” I countered. “Don’t look so good if I’m not supposed to react to it.”

“I can’t help how I look!”

“Neither can I!” I argued, barely keeping a straight face about it.

Logan pressed a finger right to the middle of my chest. “Go put some damn clothes on.”

I wrapped my hand around hers, pulling her into me as she smiled. “Make me.”

“I thought you said you were his *assistant?*”

Shit.

Elodie's voice had Logan snatching away, quickly putting distance between us.

"I am, basically," she told El, who didn't look very convinced as she turned to me.

"Whatever. I'm heading out. Back to LA."

She was way more dressed down than usual – wearing her natural hair, no false lashes, just shorts and a tee shirt. Without her colorful accessories, she was back to the Elodie I'd grown up with – and looking more like a teenager than a grown woman.

"You got everything you need?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer – she wouldn't have full trust-fund access until she was twenty-five, but still had more than enough... everything.

"*Yes, big brother,*" she groaned, then started fake-gagging when I pulled her into a hug. "Put some clothes on, ew. Your nipple touched me."

"I can't cover up all this hotness, it's impossible," I teased, squeezing her tighter for a moment before I finally let her go so she wouldn't *really* throw up. "Text me when you get home."

"Duh."

We went opposite directions – her out the front door, where her ride was waiting, me up the stairs to throw on some clothes. When I came back, my lunch had already been assembled, and Logan was back on her laptop, fingers flying again.

"Based on your script, I pared down some of the production team lists," she said, once I was seated too. "Of course, you can add whoever you want, I just thought it might make things easier to narrow it to people whose style matches the vibe you're going for."

Mouth full, I looked up, swallowing too much at once to ask, "So you read what I sent already?"

"Of course. That was the plan, right?"

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.” I ate a few more bites before I looked up, wondering why she hadn’t kept talking.

She was already looking at me. “So... you wanna know what I thought or nah?”

“You’d tell me if you wanted me to know.”

“So *yes* then?”

“Obviously.”

Logan pushed her laptop away to prop her elbow on the counter, resting her chin in her hand. “I... thought it was...”

“Stop playing with me.”

She laughed, because she *was* fucking around, and she knew it. “Okay. My honest opinion is that... it’s amazing. No cap.”

“Would you tell me if you thought it wasn’t?”

“Very tactfully, yes,” she giggled. “I most certainly would, and I would have recommendations to make it not suck. But this doesn’t suck, Pierre. It’s exactly like you described it – it’s moody, yes, but still approachable, and relatable, and... kinda tragic. I hope Jason isn’t going to break Tracy’s heart with all his mess.”

I sucked my teeth. “*What?* If *anybody* winds up heartbroken it’ll be Jason. Tracy has too much light for that nigga, she’s not gonna let him drain her, and it’s gonna fuck him up.”

“*Or...* maybe they get to be happy?”

“Nobody wants to see that. They don’t want hope, or to see what *could* be. They want what they can relate to – which is misery. That’s the only thing people think is realistic these days.”

Logan let out a sigh. “Yeah... I can’t disagree with that. But I’m also really tired of seeing it, reading it, hearing it, all that. The world is fucked up enough – I wanna see somebody win for once. I mean, not that I’m trying to tell you how to tell the story, because you’re doing a great job of it on your own,

but... I don't know. I just think you should tell the story however it comes. There are people that are going to hate it either way, so it may as well make *you* feel good about what you created, you know?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I think you're right. We'll see what happens. I'm on episode six now."

"Wow! You wrote two more last night?"

"Probably would've gotten through another if Elodie hadn't come in and interrupted. She made me realize it was late as fuck, so I had to crash."

Logan's eyes widened in understanding. "And that's why you were still in bed when I arrived. You were up late writing."

"Something like that."

Truthfully, it was a combination of shit, none of which I felt like talking to her about. She'd already made it clear she wasn't down for what I *really* wanted to do with her, so I let the conversation drop so I could eat, and then we got to work.

Me, writing the show.

Logan, reaching out to the directors and writers that would help me turn what I'd written into something better.

Idling time was over.

LOGAN

He couldn't get through that last episode.

It was killing him, which was killing me, but there wasn't anything I could do about it.

He didn't have any objections to outside input on the show – in fact, he welcomed the feedback.

Or would, once it was done.

Whatever tweaks or adjustments needed to be made, to make *ODS* wonderful, there wasn't a single question in my mind that he wouldn't be able to receive it, to accept the spirit of collaboration.

But before it ever got to that point, Pierre had that one requirement that was kicking his ass now. Even if it was a mess, even if it was going to be ripped down to the studs to be refurbished into greatness... *he* had to be the one to lay down that foundation.

There was no rush.

He could take his sweet time.

I just... wished he wouldn't be so devastatingly fine while it was happening.

He wasn't *always* this appealing – attractive, sure. Pierre was, undoubtedly, *that*.

There was, however, something about the brooding, tortured artist mode he'd slipped into that was really making it hard for me to remain professional.

I... kinda wanted to offer to ride all his problems away.

Thank God you know better though, right?

Yes.

Of course.

I prided myself on professionalism – in a role like the one I'd carved out, my reputation was my bread and butter. I didn't want to be known for providing *those* kinds of services to my clients.

I just... really wanted to lay his head on my titties and rub his back and tell him everything was going to be alright.

“Would you like me to make you a cup of tea or something?” I offered instead, keeping my completely inappropriate thoughts to myself as Pierre looked up from where he'd been staring at a blank screen for the last few hours.

I'd been busy working out contracts, putting together casting calls and other things like that, preparing for when things could move forward. Once he was done, we'd be able to hit the ground running with rewrites and storyboarding, scouting locations, casting talent. I couldn't – and wouldn't – just sit around all day watching him write, when I could work out the other details, things that hadn't yet even crossed his mind.

It was the cornerstone of my job.

“What?” he asked, pulling off the headphones that had become a constant fixture, either over his ears around his neck, ready for duty at a moment's notice.

“I asked if you wanted me to make you a cup of tea or something – before I leave,” I added, calling his attention to the time. “It's after five.”

His eyes went wide, dropping to his watch to confirm my words before scratching his head. “Damn. The day got away from me.”

“Happens to all of us sometimes,” I smiled. “I can go chamomile if you wanna relax, maybe a matcha if you want a

boost of energy...”

He shook his head. “Nah, no tea. Thank you though,” he said, lounging back on the couch to stare up at me.

“Actually... I’m hungry, I think.”

“You barely touched lunch, so that makes sense. I can order something for you, have it meet you at home. Or have it delivered here.”

Sitting up again, he weighed those options, then stood. “Actually, I’m thinking I should go somewhere to sit down and eat. Maybe a change of scenery will help me.”

I nodded. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Cool. Where you wanna go?” he asked, flipping his laptop closed, and pulling his headphones completely off as I stood there with my brow furrowed, confused.

“I’m coming too? You’re wanting to talk through the story with me or something?”

“*Hell nah,*” he chuckled, looking at me like I’d lost my mind. “That’s the last thing I wanna do. I don’t want to think about this shit at all, as a matter of fact.”

“Then... what do you need me there for?”

He smirked. “I need something pretty to look at while I force-feed myself and wallow in self-loathing. Is that not obvious?”

“Oh, well, when you put it like *that.*”

THAT WAS HOW WE ENDED UP AT *SUCRE NOIR*, A SWANKY little French-African fusion restaurant off the strip that I adored. I wanted to do something a bit exclusive, but still low-key that would make the meal as breezy as possible for Pierre, who was still pretty recognizable even though he kept a low profile.

And honestly... for me too.

It also didn’t hurt that Les had hated this place, and would always bitch about it when we went, even if it was my turn to

choose where we ate.

Bastard.

I'd been lucky enough that he either called himself still letting me stew, or he still hadn't realized I blocked him. Whatever it was, I hadn't had to talk to him, and hadn't yet had to experience the inevitable blowback of deciding our relationship was over.

For now, I just felt free.

"I hope you don't mind if this becomes my spot now," Pierre commented to me from across the table, taking another bite from his dish. "This is bomb."

That made me grin - such a different reaction than I'd gotten the first time I brought Les. For him and his family to be so supposedly high class, the man's palate was limited as hell.

Boring as hell.

"No, I don't mind at all. This is one of my favorite places," I told him. "You've never been here before?"

Stopping to take a sip from his water, Pierre shot down my assumption. "Nah, I'm actually not very familiar with Vegas at all, past the strip."

"How did you end up here then?" I asked. "The house you're in, you own that right?"

"Yeah, but I bought it when I was a kid. To come out here and party with my friends instead of getting hotel rooms all the time. Trying to be slick, avoiding the cameras and all of that. That house has seen some wild fucking times."

"*Wow*," I laughed. "You bought a whole home in Vegas to... what? Gamble, drink, fuck?"

"All of the above," Pierre chuckled. "To my credit though, I've outgrown most of that. Now I only do one out of the three."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he shrugged. "Is that so surprising?"

“For a young, good-looking man with money? *Hell yes,*” I replied. “If not for the drinking, fucking, and gambling, why on earth would you choose Las Vegas over beautiful ass LA?”

Shaking his head, Pierre speared another piece of chicken onto his fork. “LA is small. *Too small.* So many people know my name, my face. All the shit I used to be into.”

My eyebrow shot up. “Must’ve been some pretty bad shit if you felt like you needed to run from it.”

“I wasn’t running from it,” Pierre denied. “I’m just not interested in letting that shit swallow me up again.”

Now, we were getting somewhere.

I’d been wondering why *ODS* seemed so intensely personal to him, and now, learning that he didn’t drink... my mind was spinning, trying to put together the pieces of that particular puzzle.

Did he have personal experience with that?

“Let’s add that to the list of shit I’m not trying to talk about,” Pierre spoke up, while I was still contemplating what he’d already said. “Your Pops get in your ass about wrecking your car or nah?”

“*Or nah,*” I laughed. “He doesn’t even know it happened. My friend I sent a picture to does, but only about the accident. Not... anything else.”

He smirked, leaning in to say, “Anything else? That’s what you’re calling it in your head?”

“Would you prefer something else?”

“Yeah, maybe... nigga drove me home after I busted his shit for that wet ass—”

“*Oh my God shut up,*” I shrieked, too loud, then burst into laughter. “Can you... not?”

“Tell the truth?”

My forehead wrinkled. “You’re telling me *that’s* the truth? That you planned on us having sex when you offered me a ride?”

“Nah. You were way too buttoned up for all that.”

Unbidden, my head drew back in surprise, and I frowned at his words. “I was in pajama shorts.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You said I was *too buttoned up*, but I was literally the opposite of that.”

“Logan...” he chuckled a bit, shaking his head. “What I’m saying doesn’t have shit to do with what you were wearing, and everything to do with... who you are.”

“What’s wrong with who I am?”

“Nothing, to my eyes. All I’m saying is, I was shocked that you were even down with something so risky. Let alone being the one to suggest it.”

I reached for my water, suddenly *very* thirsty. “Maybe I just... needed to do something out of character. Switch things up, since I’m so easy to read, apparently,” I replied, forcing brightness into my tone. “And I don’t recall you having too much objection to the offer – if I remember correctly, the fact that I didn’t know what the hell I was doing was pretty much the deciding factor for you.”

“Yeah.” He settled back into his chair, not even a *little* shaken by my attitude. “Uncertainty and self-doubt is basically my slogan, shorty. In that moment, I could relate, and shit... I felt bad for you.”

My eyes bugged wide. “Wow. *Wow*. So it was pity sex, is what I’m hearing?”

“Only because you’re looking for a reason to be bothered, because that’s not what *I* said.”

“That sure is what it sounds like.”

“*Ay*.” Pierre sat up, reaching across the table to grab my wrist, tugging me out of the crossed-arm posture I’d assumed. “Cut the bullshit.” His probing gaze locked with mine. “If I’ve gotta spell this out for you, fine – I know what the anxiety and insecurity feel like, and its not... *good*. I didn’t want you to feel like that, so if you needed some company to get you

through it, why the fuck not? You could've asked me to play cards or something, and I would've been good. It didn't *have* to be about sex. *You* made it about that. Which I was good with too, because I mean... *look at you.*"

I pulled my hand from his.

Partially because I was so flustered by the unfamiliar sensation his words had sparked in my chest, partially because I didn't want us drawing any undue attention. I dropped my hands to my lap, out of his reach, peeking around to assess just how much privacy we had in the open restaurant before I ventured a smile in his direction.

"Fine. Not pity sex. Just... sex."

"*Decent* sex," he corrected, tucking back into his plate. "I didn't know you like that to do everything I wanted."

My eyes narrowed. "Um... you got to put your dick in me, I'm not sure what else...?"

"You're kidding, right?" He stopped, his fork hanging from his hand in mid-air for a moment before he put it back down. "I didn't get to taste your pussy, I haven't had your nipples in my mouth, haven't had my dick in *your* mouth, haven't felt you with nothing between us, haven't—"

"I get it!" I held up a hand, stopping him from continuing to list things – counting them off with his fingers for extra effect.

No, we hadn't done any of *those* things, and of course I understood the value they added to the sexual experience, I just... hadn't been thinking about any of those things.

Especially not that night, when I didn't even really know who he was.

Now though... it was definitely on my mind.

Yes, I'd thought about having sex with him again before now, but my little fantasies were centered on what I'd already experienced – protected sex, just me and his dick. Special guest, his lips.

Maybe that was a little unimaginative but considering the fact that I *wasn't supposed to be thinking about him like that anyway...* it was more than enough.

Had been more than enough.

His words had taken me somewhere else now though.

Just the regular, very normal action of him licking his lips after putting another forkful in his mouth had me thinking about him licking *my* lips, while eating something else, and I couldn't keep it out of my head.

Which was why coming to dinner with him had probably been a bad idea.

“You're not a prude are you?” he asked once he'd swallowed, his eyes glittering with amusement.

“No,” I denied. “It's just... not very appropriate, because of our professional relationship.”

He nodded. “Got it. So if you weren't my *executive concierge*, there wouldn't be a problem with me asking you to come back to my spot after dinner, so we can do some of those things we didn't get to the first time around?”

I ran a hand through the soft hairs at my nape, smoothing them down. “Honestly... no. Probably not.”

“Cool. You're fired.”

I giggled at that, shaking my head. “I walked right into that, didn't I?”

“*Right* into it.”

“Well. I guess it's a good thing *you* didn't hire me, huh?”

He had no reply for that – just a smirk before he went back to his plate, and I went back to mine, but I... kinda felt bad. By no means did Pierre give me long-term boyfriend or possible husband vibes for *anybody*, let alone for myself.

But under different circumstances?

He *definitely* could've been a nice break from my norm – the consuming, passionate, likely toxic sort of affair I'd never

experienced.

Not that what I *had* experienced – the constant search for monogamy among men with the right pedigree, the disappointments in bed and otherwise, the heartbreaks, the pressure from family... none of it was particularly desirable.

At least being around Pierre felt good.

With him, the only pretending I had to do was convincing myself it wasn't a good idea to sleep with him again.

It was refreshing.

So refreshing that when he asked if I wanted to split dessert, I agreed, even though I was stuffed. Just to get a few more moments.

When we were done, we paid – well, *he* insisted on paying, and I didn't care enough to argue – and headed out. I was feeling good about it, ready to get home, shower, grab a glass of wine and reflect on my day.

Then I heard my name, in the most annoying possible way.

“*Luuuh-giinn!*” Nikki called out, pulling my attention in her direction almost as soon as we stepped out of the restaurant. It was in a plaza-type area with a few other restaurants, boutiques, and salons, so there was really no telling where the hell she'd come from.

I just wished she'd take her ass back.

“Nikki, hello,” I greeted politely, since I had no real reason to give her a different energy. My presumptions of how she felt about me were pure conjecture – nothing concrete behind it.

She *definitely* wanted Les though.

I wasn't imagining that.

The thing about that now though was... she could have him.

“Who is *thiis?*” she asked, with a little shimmy and a grin in Pierre's direction. And *damn him* for immediately turning

on the charm, gifting her with his beautiful smile as he extended a hand in her direction.

“Pierre Perry,” he answered her question as she eagerly accepted the gesture. “Logan is doing some of her unparalleled concierge work for me. Saving my life, probably,” he added, with a fake ass laugh that Nikki and her breasts, currently spilling out of her top, ate up.

“Oh so this is a *work* thing,” Nikki mused, nodding. “What is it that you do?”

“I work in TV, over at *WAWG*.” He was smooth with it, replying without really telling her anything. “How do you and Logan know each other – and why didn’t she tell me she had a friend this beautiful?”

This bitch isn’t my friend.

I tried to tell him that with my eyes, but one look told me he’d already picked up on that.

“Well, I work closely with her fiancé, Leslie Moore, over at Moore Insurance and Wealth Management.”

Pierre’s eyes went wide. “*Fiancé? Leslie? From Moore is Better?*”

“Oh! You’ve seen the billboards!” Nikki gushed, clapping her hands together. “I was the one who designed those.”

Of course she did.

“I helped Leslie with his business cards too – *Les is Moore*. Get it?”

“He’s *not* my fiancé,” I interjected into Nikki’s self-congratulatory announcement, before she subjected us to any more of her world-class wordplay.

“Oh!” she put a hand to her mouth. “I hope I haven’t said too much. Les told me you two were going through a bit of a rough patch, but then he showed me the ring, and I just thought...”

“You thought wrong,” I corrected her. “Anyway, it was...”
Ugh. I stopped myself from telling the lie that it was good to

run into her, instead going with, “You have a good night, Nikki. I really need to get home.”

“Oh... well... okay then,” she called after us as I grabbed Pierre’s arm, urging him to come along. At first he didn’t move, despite my tugging, making sure I understood when he *did* budge that it was only because he wanted to.

“What was that about?” he asked, laughing at my frustration as we reached where we were parked next to each other.

Shaking my head, I unlocked my car so I wouldn’t set off the security, then leaned against my window. “*That* was my ex’s annoying ‘coworker’,” I said, offsetting the word with air quotes.

“You think they were fucking?”

“I think it’s a possibility, where I didn’t before. Until he asked me if she was the problem between us without me bringing her up.”

Pierre cringed. “Yeah... that doesn’t look good.”

“At all.”

“You didn’t tell me I was breaking up a marriage though. You and *Leslie*,” he added, in the corniest possible accent, barely keeping a straight face.

“He was *not* my fiancé,” I insisted. “We were never engaged. It was just... inevitable. I broke it off before he could ask.”

He nodded. “Would you have said yes?”

“What?”

“Would you have accepted the proposal,” he repeated himself, even though I’d heard him just fine. “If he’d asked... a week before you broke it off. Or two weeks? A month?”

“Maybe six months ago,” I answered, shrugging. “I probably would’ve then. Maybe four, but I wouldn’t have felt good about it. Two... I would’ve said yes in public to spare his feelings, then privately broke it off.”

“Damn. Sounds like you’ve given this some thought.”

I ran a hand through my hair and nodded. “Yeah. I have. I’ve thought a *lot* about what a disaster it would’ve been. Thanked my lucky stars I finally had the sense to get out.”

“What was holding you back?”

“Expectations. Resignation. Family honor.”

Pierre let out a dry chuckle, shaking his head as he pulled out his keys, using the fob to unlock his own vehicle. “On that note, I think I should head out.”

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked, confused.

“Nope.” He pulled his door open. “It’s just... the last time I started relating to you a bit too tough, I ended up in your bed, inside you. And since you’ve made yourself clear already in that regard...”

“Got it,” I laughed, moving around to the driver’s side of my car. “See you tomorrow?”

He nodded.

“Yeah. Goodnight.”

PIERRE

“**I** just think you should tell the story however it comes. There are people that are going to hate it either way, so it may as well make you feel good about what you created, you know?”

I wondered if Logan knew just how tightly I'd been clinging to those words to get me through the finishing of my script. The rest of the episodes had been hard enough, but when it came to *really, for real* finishing this...

The process was hellish.

Truly, I couldn't please everybody, but that knowledge didn't keep me from wanting to. What if this was the only show I ever wrote? The only thing I ever finished.

It wouldn't do for it to be half-assed, or – the internet's favorite word these days – *trash*.

It had to be right.

But who determines that?

With that question on my mind, and with very little fanfare, I made the last keystrokes for the final episode of *One Day Sober*. There were no fireworks, no popped bottles, none of that, just... a quiet sort of relief that settled over me, sinking until I felt it in my bones.

Done.

I was really done.

And it was only *one* in the morning this time.

I grabbed my phone, shooting texts to Nubia, Nick, Elodie, and after a bit of consideration... Logan. I knew I wouldn't get a response until the next day from Nubia – I'd heard more than enough over the years about the importance of her "*beauty sleep*" to know she wouldn't see it until she'd gone through her whole routine.

And Nick – his girlfriend was back home, after a business trip with the magazine she worked for, so he was likely pretty occupied.

El hit me back right away, full of insults and congratulations in her signature blend.

Logan... I wasn't sure what I expected, but it definitely wasn't her nearly instantaneous response.

Really?! Congratulationssss! Can't wait to read it! – L.Byers

She punctuated the text response with *three* little heart emojis on the end that made my eyes go wide as I *definitely* read too much into them.

Instead of saying anything about it, I pretended the shit seemed regular, and replied with,

Yeah. Thank you. What are you doing up so late?

The night we met aside; Logan struck me as the type to have a very specific bedtime she adhered to without much room for wavering. Especially since I knew she got up early as fuck for work.

Can't sleep. – L.Byers

Ah, damn.

That was too bad... even though it worked in my favor. Before I could give myself a chance to second-think it, it was the fuel I used to get up from where I was seated, clean myself up, and grab my keys, wallet, and laptop.

Twenty minutes later, I was walking up to her building, where some kind soul must've mistaken me for a neighbor, because they held the door open when they saw me coming. If

it wasn't working in my favor I would've been annoyed – the building had keycard access for a reason.

I couldn't think about that, though.

Instead, I thanked him and headed for the elevator, glad I had a good enough memory to recall exactly where Logan had led me before, almost three weeks ago.

I didn't get nervous about showing up uninvited until it was time to knock on the door.

But... then I thought about those little hearts at the end of that text and knocked anyway.

If I got cussed out or whatever... it wouldn't be the first time acting on impulse had gotten me there.

I was getting ready to knock again – not too loud, in case she'd managed to fall asleep – when the door opened, and Logan peeked out. Through the crack in the door, I could tell she was in a robe, no makeup, with a silk scarf secured on her head.

And her eyes were glossy and red.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

I shook my head, still half-distracted by the clear evidence that she'd been crying. “I'm good. I just...” I held up the laptop, showing it to her, hoping it conveyed why I'd driven here without me having to actually say it.

Her eyebrows hiked up at the sight of it, then she gave me a questioning – but not *confused* – look. Then, she stepped back, opening the door wider.

“Come in.”

I followed her directive, stepping in so she could close the door behind me. Now that I'd seen her face though, I wasn't that interested in what brought me over here. I was *much* more concerned with, “Hey... are *you* okay?”

She'd – purposely, maybe – had her back to me, but when I asked that she turned in my direction. Without the door half-

blocking her face, I could see now that the answer to that question was *definitely not*. She didn't say that though.

She didn't say *anything*, just stood there with her emotions playing on her face, trying – and failing – to keep her composure. I'd *just* seen her, at the office, the usual picture of excellence and poise – no signs of whatever this was. And there was no doubt in my mind that if I wasn't seeing her now, if our next encounter had just been at the office, all she would be showing the world was perfectly-put-together-Logan.

“You want to talk about it?” I asked, no longer needing an actual answer to the question, especially since her struggle with it was so obvious.

Unsurprisingly, she shook her head.

I couldn't just do *nothing* though, so I tossed my laptop onto her couch, and opened my arms, extending them in her direction.

At first, she just stared at me.

But then, she accepted the gesture, stepping between my arms for me to wrap around her, and for a moment I thought that was gonna be it. She would submit to this moment of vulnerability – of just needing a damn hug – and then make me vow to never mention it again, and then that would be it.

That's... not how it went though.

She sank into me as soon as I closed my arms around her, like a warm embrace was something she'd been desperately in need of. But then... it was like the reins on her emotions broke, and whatever she'd been trying to hold back came spilling out. I didn't know what else to do, so I just kept holding her, letting her sob into my chest until she finally pulled away, scrubbing her hands over her wet face in an effort to clear away her tears.

“This is so fucking embarrassing,” she laughed at herself as she turned away. “*So* unprofessional.”

“You're not on the clock,” I said, hooking a hand under her elbow, keeping her from shifting in the other direction as I

moved to get back in front of her. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

Instead of agreeing, she shook her head, pushing out a deep breath as she scrubbed her face one more time. “No. You came here to show me your script, right?”

“Not in any type of official capacity. And whatever is going on with you seems a lot more important.”

She let out another wry laugh. “I promise you, it’s not. Not at all.” With another cleansing breath, she raised her shoulders, head held high, giving me her customary “office” energy. “So, go ahead and open it up. Show it to me,” she insisted. “And we can talk about it.”

“Nah.” I frowned, moving with her to the couch as she headed for where I’d left the laptop. “That’s not even close to important right now.”

“Pierre, *please*,” she countered, her voice cracking a bit before she cleared her throat, re-composing herself. “I... could use something else to think about. So... can we just...”

Fine.

I sat down on her couch and she joined me, sitting as far away as she could, clutching her robe around her.

The prominence of her nipples through the thin, navy blue silk was distracting as fuck, but this was definitely not the time for that. I focused instead on opening the laptop, getting the script pulled up, and handing it to her to read.

And then... I found something else to look at.

While she read, I found myself drawn to a wall of pictures in her place – Logan throughout the years. There were other people in most of the pictures, sure, but I kept finding my eyes drawn to her presence in them. Holiday pictures, graduations, family portraits, sorority stuff.

Pictures of her with her not-fiancé.

In all of them, she looked happy. Like life had been nothing but good to her.

Her tears tonight said something else though.

Maybe she got into with her boyfriend.

A week had gone by since that run-in with his coworker outside the restaurant, and she hadn't mentioned him to me since. Not that she *ever* gave me unsolicited peeks into her personal life now that we were working together, but I wasn't really getting much of "heartbroken" vibe from her.

Because she's so easy to read.

She'd given a bit of insight about that the first night... a little more when I talked her into having dinner. But with Logan... I wouldn't know anything she didn't want me to know, until exactly when she wanted me to know it.

I wanted to know if her and ol' boy were back together though.

That wouldn't be so surprising, right? Couples swore they were done, then ended up right back in each other's faces all the time. Maybe she'd given him another chance, since there was a ring involved.

Maybe he still wouldn't act right.

I turned around, expecting to find her still reading. I wanted to take the opportunity for some blatant staring at her fine ass. What I found though, was that her gaze was already on me – or maybe she was staring past me, at the pictures I'd been occupying myself with.

"I just finished."

She said it with a sad sort of smile that brought me back to the other side of the room, where she was.

"Okay, so...?"

Instead of looking at me, her eyes went back to the screen, where she stared a moment before smiling again – none of the sadness this time. "It's perfect."

My eyebrows went up. "Perfect?"

"The way you've presented it, is perfect. What happens is... heartbreaking. But it feels natural. Like it was always the

way it was supposed to be. There were other ways you could've taken it... the heavy clichés, or the subversions of what's expected, yes. But I appreciate what you've done instead – just letting it unfold very quietly, and naturally. It fits. And it feels right. And Tracy and Jason get to be happy, so I'm a happy reader. Soon to be happy viewer, I guess."

I spent a few seconds, taking in her words, then dropped to the couch beside her. "Ay... you're serious right now? It's good as is?"

"I'm not an expert, by any means – just a bit of an enthusiast," she said. "But *to me*... I think it's beautiful. And sad."

I nodded. "Sad how? I mean, beyond the obvious."

"I just hate that, after standing up for himself, securing employment based on the degree he's going to get, all that... Jason is still drawn back to the family business that he never wanted to be in. I mean, yes, he's proven that he's good at it, and we know he's willing to do what needs to be done. But he was free. He had his future ahead of him, and he has Tracy, and then... Jameson's death pulls him right back. The family is successful, and respected, and wealthy, and all these things... but they're also a curse he can't get away from," she finished, quietly. "That legacy, the expectation. He can't escape."

Something about the look in her eyes, paired with the crumbs she'd dropped in the short time we'd known each other... "Why do I get the feeling you know a bit about that?"

She smirked, shaking her head. "Is it that obvious?"

"Just a little bit," I laughed.

Logan closed the laptop, handing it back to me, and I immediately put it on my other side, out of the way. As I watched, she clasped her hands in front of her, pressing them to her mouth like she was thinking hard about her next step.

"My parents are lawyers, I think I told you that before, right?"

I nodded. "I think so."

“Well... so are my grandparents – both sides. Like literally everybody. It’s not as deep in the next generation up, but enough that it’s very clearly part of the Byers’ legacy. It was never impressed upon me to marry one, but it was evident from *very* young that I was expected to be a lawyer. Like my parents. Like my grandparents. Like my great-grandfather. Bonus points if I married a lawyer too though.”

Sitting back, I smirked. “I dunno... I kinda fuck with the vision here. I get it.”

“So do I,” Logan admitted, smiling. “It’s the sort of ‘Black excellence’ corniness people go hard for. And growing up, adhering to that was all I ever wanted to do. I got the grades, and I went to BSU, got my undergrad degree, got my law degree, passed the bar, all that. And then... I realized it wasn’t actually what *I* wanted. Once I had it all, and still wasn’t happy, it was clear to me that what I was really seeking was my parents’ approval. I just wanted them to be proud. And they were! Les and I met, and our families encouraged it, even though *he* wasn’t a lawyer – I would carry the torch. Until I wouldn’t. I wanted to do something else, wanting to *be* something else.”

I blew out a sigh. “I can’t imagine they were trying to hear that.”

“No. No, not at all,” Logan mused, blinking back fresh tears. “But being a lawyer wasn’t all they taught me – not even close. They raised me to be fearless, and focused, and ambitious, stuff like that. And once I had my mind made up, that I didn’t want to be a lawyer – that I wanted to help people organize their lives, or work through a huge start-up pitch, or integrate into a new job, or... *whatever*... that was it. I wasn’t scared to leave the firm and start something of my own. I was determined to be successful at it, wouldn’t accept anything less. I talked with Desiree about branding, and establishing myself, all that. And here I am. I make twice as much as I did at the law firm, and I *love* what I do, but my parents... they just still don’t really understand it. *Why would you throw away your education and experience to be a goddamn secretary?*”

“That’s what they think?”

She nodded. “Yep. They aren’t really trying to hear otherwise, either. Not that there’s something wrong with that job, it’s just not really representative of what I do.”

“Right. After seeing how you’ve stepped in for me, even *assistant* wouldn’t even feel right. With all the shit you do, hell... you’re a partner or something. I don’t know.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re thinking of me as something more than your babysitter.”

I frowned. “I already told you, shorty; I see the value.”

Her shoulders sank as another audible sigh pushed through her nose. “At least someone does. My parents still don’t. And if that wasn’t enough, I’ve just about reached the end of my ability to avoid them any longer. I’m gonna have to tell them about the breakup with me and Les, which is just going to... secure their disappointment. And I’m mad at myself for caring so much, because I’m a grown ass woman, but... they’re my parents. I want them to accept me, and be proud of me, you know?”

“Honestly... yes and no,” I admitted, relaxing back into the comfort of her couch. “I was a kid when I lost my mother, and my Pops... after she was gone, he...” I stopped and shook my head, trying to figure out how to frame this. “El was small, so she mostly just didn’t understand. But losing her... I don’t even know how to describe it. I just felt lost, and I think my Pops did too. Cause I remember how they loved each other, and man they *loved* each other. So not having her, kinda broke him. Me and my sister – me and Elodie – we ended up living mostly with my mother’s sister – Nubia’s mother. She took care of us, because he couldn’t. Or wouldn’t. Either way, that’s where we were, so we didn’t see him a lot. And then he started drinking, so we saw him even less. He was still working though – still making everybody’s favorite movies and shit. People *loved* him. My Pops was cool as fuck man, everybody wanted him. Professionally and otherwise. Wanted to work with him, wanted his money, wanted to fuck him, all that. And to my mind... man, that shit was the life. My grandfather was Pierre and made movies. My Pops was Pierre the second and

made movies. So shit... I was gonna do that too, cause I was motherfucking Pierre Perry the Third.”

Logan laughed, shaking her head. “I can just imagine you as a teenager, telling all the girls your daddy made movies, so you were gonna do it too.”

“Damn right,” I chuckled. “Stunting like my daddy, all that. So when I was about sixteen, I moved back in with him. To learn the craft, you know? And for a little bit, that’s really what it was – he taught me screenwriting, how to use the camera, all that. He was proud that I wanted to follow in his footsteps, and he would tell that shit to anybody who would listen. I would be on set with him, absorbing it all, and I loved it. Meeting celebrities, learning how to do what my father did, what made him the man, all that. But then I started seeing more... getting exposed to more... experiencing more. Shit I really shouldn’t have at that age. I just wanted to do the shit I saw my father doing, so I did. Until it became a problem.”

Logan nodded. “You mean like... addiction?”

“Yeah.” I blew out a sigh, propping my head back to stare up at the ceiling. I hadn’t talked about this shit at length with... anybody, really. Nubia, Nick, and Elodie already knew it all, and I didn’t hang with anybody else tough enough anymore that I would share any of this with them. I wasn’t really sure why I was, now. But now that I’d started, it was pointless to not tell the rest. “He overdosed backstage, at an award show. Right after he won,” I admitted, shaking my head. “The people he was with, they were too fucked up to notice something was wrong, so by the time he got medical attention, it was too late. I was in the audience. Fucked up too. I had no idea what was going on.”

Sitting up, Logan reached forward, putting a hand on my leg. “Pierre... I had no idea *that* was how your father...”

“That’s by design,” I explained. “Luckily, social media wasn’t *as* big yet, so his PR and all that were able to keep the details out of the news.”

“At least that’s a small blessing.”

“*Real* small,” I scoffed. “Cause they didn’t bother to stay off *my* ass. I was still with the wrong people, doing shit I shouldn’t. I couldn’t say shit, couldn’t do shit, without the press on my ass, talking about how I was messing up the legacy, would never live up to my father, blah blah. And it was just like... if you motherfuckers really *knew* – he was the one who introduced me to this shit! But Nubia put her homegirl Chloe on it for me.”

Logan’s eyes went wide. “Chloe McKenna?”

I nodded. “Yeah. She got them off me, got pictures cleaned off blogs, got my name and shit scrubbed. And she gave me some advice about the company I kept, among other things. And I didn’t listen. But luckily there were real celebrities to care about, so I didn’t have to worry about that anymore. It still took me a while to get my shit together. I got off easy though – probably easier than most. Only *two* stints in rehab, and just for the drinking. I was too pussy to mess with anything much worse than that – there’s the blessing,” I laughed, and Logan joined, shaking her head.

“Man... Pierre, I really wouldn’t have known any of this. I mean, I’d kinda guessed there was a thing for you with alcohol, but I didn’t... I didn’t know where it came from. Where *you* came from. Chloe scrubbed the *fuck* outta this,” she laughed.

“Yeah, between her and my father’s people – we’ve never talked about it, but I’m sure Nubia has something to do with it too. Protecting the family and all that.”

“Very likely,” Logan agreed. “You’re lucky to have her in your corner.”

“More than lucky – she saved my life, really,” I admitted. “When her and Steph got together, and she was pregnant... while she was going through chemo... it really made me take a hard look at my own shit and decide that I was going to do better. I told her that, and she and Steph made the arrangements for rehab. My second time. I’ll be five years sober in March.”

“That’s amazing, P. Congratulations,” Logan said, patting me on the leg again. “You decided on something and stuck with it, which is more than a lot of people can say about *anything*, let alone something so intense. And now you’ve done it again with the show, which is honestly a freaking masterpiece. I’m *really* happy for you.”

“I appreciate that,” I told her, grabbing her hand before she could pull it away. “I swear, I wasn’t trying to... out-traumatize you or anything like that. I just didn’t want you to think you’re alone in how you feel, or... hell, like being grown means that we’ve got this shit figured out now. We’re all still living under the weight of our parents, for good or bad. We just have to figure out how to approach it.”

Logan smiled, but said nothing, which... kinda blew me a little. I couldn’t say what I was expecting, but her sudden silence had me wondering if I’d fucked up by not keeping my mouth shut.

My “story” was a lot.

As much as I could relate to different characters in my script, for different reasons... I’d really stopped short of writing in much of the real-life horrors. I’d seen and done way too much, before I was even legally an adult, and a lot of that shit didn’t just... go away.

Even once you were past it, the shit left scars of the worst kind.

And if I was reading Logan right... I may have pulled the mask back on mine a little too much.

LOGAN

W *ho even is this man?*

As I listened to Pierre talk about his life – talk about his wounds – I couldn’t help wondering. Every time I thought I had him pegged, he threw me more information for my “*hard to read*” file.

Maybe a DUI or something, sure. A stint in rehab wasn’t even that surprising for spoiled rich kids – of which I was including myself in the number. I’d been too scared to do anything more than drinking or smoking a little weed and drinking risky convenience store energy boosters to get through a rigorous schedule of classes and partying in college. But my friends, and peers?

Oh, I’d seen it all.

What Pierre was describing though, wasn’t the kind of shit that came from boredom.

He was a lonely, hurting, grieving young man, in search of attention and acceptance from his father. It wasn’t overtly mentioned, but it almost seemed as though at some point... maybe the self-medicating had even been part of their bond.

And then he lost *him* too.

It didn’t feel fair.

He was quick to make sure I understood he wasn’t trying to compare our situations at all, just to relate. And I believed him, too.

But it did put some things in perspective.

Before he showed up at my door, I'd stressed myself into a mild panic attack, with the realization I was going to *have* to tell my parents about my breakup with Les. It was *why* I couldn't sleep and had been able to return his text at all. I was in the midst of calming myself when it popped up on my screen – that momentary excitement for him had given me something else to focus on.

But then came the hot tears of disappointment in myself, for being so damn weak and whiny in the first place.

I was a grown ass woman.

I paid my own bills.

Had my own job.

Why the fuck was I so scared to tell my parents I wouldn't stay with – and especially wasn't going to marry – a man that didn't make me happy anymore?

It was the complete opposite of the Byers energy they'd taught me.

I was *supposed* to stand up for myself, *supposed* to refuse to settle.

And yet, I was panicking about even the *thought* of admitting I was doing both of those things.

Pathetic.

Except... when I left the firm... things had changed. They accepted my decision, but they weren't happy about it. I got fewer calls about grabbing dinner, hitting the tennis court, coming shopping, all the things I'd always done with my parents that made them feel like *friends* too. I understood not talking shop about the firm anymore, but all the other stuff?

It hurt.

No, they hadn't cut me off or anything that drastic, but they weren't happy with me.

And they'd let me feel it.

I *still* felt it, even though we'd been slowly approaching normal again, as they saw – even though they pretended not

too – that I was running a successful, legit business.

And now I was going to disappoint them again, and maybe drop a bomb on a forty-year friendship between our families by not marrying the man they'd practically handpicked.

So... yeah.

“Did I say too much?”

The sound of Pierre's voice pulled me from my musings. He'd just said something about living under the weight of our parents – the “expectations” part was silent – and maybe I'd been musing on it too long, if he'd gotten that impression from my silence.

“No, not at all,” I assured him, instinctively leaning in. “I'm honored, honestly, that you trusted me enough to share any of this. Obviously, everything stays between me and you.”

“I know,” he told me, with a confident smile that landed right between my panty-less legs, making me regret the decision to choose either those, or the robe, when he knocked on my door.

In my defense, I wasn't expecting visitors at all, and *certainly* wasn't expecting to end up this close to him, for this long.

Nor was I expecting him to look as good as he did.

Which was dumb.

Of course he did.

“So... um... I guess things are going to really start moving with the show now, huh?” I asked, trying to shift to something more neutral.

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

He squeezed my hand to emphasize his words, which was how I even noticed he was still holding it, from several minutes ago. It felt so natural that I'd barely registered it.

“I was actually talking to Nick about how good you are with this – you sure this is the first show you'll have worked on?”

I nodded. “In this capacity, yes, but I’ve seen a lot in my experience working with some of the execs at the network, and I’m... kind of obsessed with the process,” I admitted. “I’ve always been into seeing how things work, building things from scratch, all that. So while I love what I do, generally speaking... what I’m doing with you now would be my ideal role all the time. Like if I could bridge the executive concierge thing specifically into working behind the scenes in TV and entertainment. So I’m actually having a lot of fun.”

“Really? That’s *dope*,” Pierre mused, offering me another grin. “You’ve never thought about any of the other parts? Maybe being in front of the camera?”

I rolled my eyes. “Ohhh, here you go...”

“You look good, shorty, I can’t help it,” he insisted, *still* holding my hand. “I’m saying – if you were on my TV screen, I’d be tuned the fuck in, on time. No matter what hour.”

“Stop.”

“For what?” he asked, using his extended grip to pull me closer to him. “Why I gotta stop?”

I bit my lip, relinquishing my fight not to meet his gaze. “Because... like I’ve said countless times, you’re making it very hard for me to maintain my professional distance.”

“Why you tryna do that anyway? I already told you, you’re not on the clock.” That sexy smirk came back to his face, as his gaze drifted up to my head. “You got your hair tied up, your robe on, talking about professional distance. Ain’t nobody trying to hear that,” he teased, tugging at the edge of my robe, but not actually pulling it up. “What you got on under there?”

I sucked my teeth. “A nightgown.”

“I’on believe you. Show me.”

I knew that shit was a setup, but unbelted my robe anyway, pulling it open to show him the soft, hella-comfortable but still hella-pretty Scantilily nightie I had on. His heated gaze drifted over me, from my thighs to my breasts to my face, then back to my thighs.

“What’s underneath *that*?” he asked, sitting up to get even closer. His fingers skimmed the contrast lace on the hem of the negligee, and I quickly closed my robe, backing up.

“None of your business.”

“So... nothing?”

Shit.

The lust in his eyes, the way his energy changed when my reaction – or lack of one – told him he’d guessed correctly...
shit.

Neither of us said anything... I was just looking at him, and he was just looking at me, and then... *fuck it.*

I climbed in his lap.

If he was surprised by my sudden willingness, he didn’t say so – he just accepted it with open arms, taking over as soon as my mouth dropped to his. One hand came to the back of my neck, gripping me there to keep me in place as his tongue pressed between my welcoming lips. He wasted no time in slipping the other beneath my robe.

I admired his restraint.

At first, it was just about the kiss, just about the meeting and tangling of our tongues, the tasting of each other. That hand that was under my robe, he kept respectfully planted on my upper thigh, or at the small of my back to pull me in. Nowhere in between.

At least, not until I sank a little lower against him, purposely grinding against the prominent bulge in his sweats.

Then, he went for skin.

Both hands, gripping my ass and squeezing, pulling me against him. And then, as he grew even harder, went to work stripping the robe and nightgown off me, leaving me completely exposed in front of him, tummy and love handles and all.

Not that he gave a shit.

He was very indiscriminate with those big, skilled hands, caressing and touching and cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples until he finally stopped kissing my mouth to focus on other places. My neck, my collar, a steady journey southward until he reached my nipples.

His teeth, tongue, and lips stayed busy there until I was squirming in his lap, held still by one firm hand against my hip. The other, he slipped between my legs, playing with my clit as he brought his mouth back up to mine, kissing my breath away as his fingers worked between my legs. His tongue sank deep into my mouth, and his fingers sank deep into my pussy, the two sensations working in tandem. I groaned against his lips, getting wetter and wetter as he played with me, even as in the back of my mind... I knew this was a mistake.

But then his fingers moved to my clit, pinching and holding at the same time as his teeth sank into my bottom lip, gripping as I squirmed against him.

And I... forgot everything.

Everything except *this*.

He pulled my lip into his mouth, sucking away the sting of that bite as an orgasm pulsed through me, making my ears ring. I was only half-lucid, still high off that feeling when I reached between us, maneuvering to pull him free from his boxers so I could sink onto his dick, closing my eyes as my body reacted to the sudden imposition.

“*Fuucck*,” he whispered against my lips, his fingers sinking into the soft flesh of my ass as leverage to pull me closer, to bury himself deeper, making me whimper in dual pleasure and pain.

I didn't move.

I just... relished it.

Both the feeling of him inside me, and the look in his eyes – as he stared into mine, and then between us, at where we were connected. Our gaze met again, and there was this

moment of unspoken agreement where, without me leaving my position, we stripped *his* clothes off.

So then it was just... us.

Nothing in the way, anywhere.

Then I started moving, riding him in purposefully slow circles, so I could feel him against every inch, and could feel every inch of him. His hands drifted up my thighs, up my hips, over my stomach, to my breasts to cup and squeeze again as he watched me, and then finally, his mouth came back to mine.

Urgently.

In what seemed like no time, I reached that point where slow wasn't working – I needed the friction, needed faster, deeper, so that's what I did. With my hands anchored on his shoulders, I rode him harder, until I'd lost any semblance of pace or control, and was working purely in pursuit of bliss.

It came quickly.

And hard.

No warning.

I was just... somewhere else, still connected to him, but also connected to a depth of pleasure I'd had yet to experience with anybody.

Even myself.

It rocked through me, arresting my movement, but... that wasn't the end. Pierre pulled me off him, placing me in the seat where he'd been before he dropped to the floor in front of me. I didn't have time to think much of it before his face was between my legs, his arms hooked around my thighs as he ate my pussy like he'd bought tickets and *this* was the main attraction.

And then... I was right back where I was before, on some kind of sex-induced mental trip that had me feeling like I was floating.

But no, I was very much still grounded, still rooted in the blissful reality of Pierre's tongue on my clit, lapping me up

like he was starving for me, holding me steady while I fucking... vibrated.

That was the only way I could describe it.

He finally came up for air, not even bothering to wipe me from his face and beard before he pulled me to the edge of the couch. Once I was in the right positioning, he buried his dick in me again. I locked my legs around his hips as I gripped the edge of the cushions, trying to keep some semblance of composure, but it wasn't easy.

Not with one hand at my neck, holding me in place as he kissed me, his other hand between my legs, playing with my clit as he stroked me.

So I stopped trying.

I just... let go.

I let *everything* go, all the concerns about professionalism and worries I would be too loud, or what my face might look like, and I fucked him back, rocking my hips into his to meet his strokes.

He seemed to like that – it made him press even harder, grip me tighter, bury himself deeper, push his tongue further into my mouth, stroke faster, until he reached his own nut, about two seconds after I came completely, utterly, unglued.

I had no sense of my legs, couldn't breathe, couldn't see, I could just... *feel*.

And it was so fucking good.

Afterwards... I kinda expected a repeat of last time – he'd sneak out while I was in the shower.

Instead, I'd only been underneath the hot spray for a few moments before I felt the shift in energy that told me he'd come into the bathroom. I went still, listening to him pee, flush the toilet, wash his hands... and then he stepped into the shower with me.

At first, just to get clean.

But then, he pressed my back against the tile and kissed me.

And I let him.

I let him make me cum again, and then I let him eat too many of my granola bars, and then... I let him into my bed.

Maybe it was stupid.

Maybe *I* was stupid.

But it sure as hell felt good.

PIERRE

Even in slumber, Logan was the most put-together person I'd ever experienced.

I'd been awake for about twenty minutes, but didn't want – this time – to leave without saying anything. I didn't want to wake her prematurely either, with what I knew about how fragmented her sleep had been last night. So instead of doing either of those things, I was observing, as the sun made its debut through the window shades.

She was facing the window, so the first rays of sun appeared in bands of light across her face. Logan was already beautiful – the light made her ethereal. The perfect, velvet-soft surface of her lips parted, taking in an extra breath as she rolled onto her back, eyes still closed, even through a brief moment of tension where her hand came to her head, checking for the presence of her scarf, which was still securely tied.

Her hand dropped, and she drifted fully into sleep again.

A few moments later, a faint buzzing sounded, and she stirred again. This time, her eyes did peel open, just enough to see the watch on her wrist as she lifted it in front of her face. She held it there as she tapped the screen, flipping through notifications that had been filtered there from her phone.

It took her a bit to realize I was there, sitting up in the bed beside her.

When she did, it startled her so bad that at first she rolled away from me – so fast and recklessly that I had to catch her arm to keep her from falling out.

“*Holy shit,*” she hissed, putting her free hand to her chest to calm herself as I laughed at her unanticipated reaction. “I was *not* expecting... anybody. I’m not used to having someone in my bed.”

I sucked my teeth. “You had a whole not-fiancé, but used to waking up alone?”

Her gaze dropped, embarrassed. “I would... usually go to his place. He always said mine was too *frou-frou-girly.*”

Looking around, a frown slipped onto my face. Yes, the soft gray décor with peachy accents was feminine, but it wasn’t like some overwhelming explosion of pink. It was elegant, and tasteful, and... fit Logan perfectly.

Of course that nigga had a problem with it.

“*What a bitch,*” I muttered, getting distracted halfway through the statement by Logan’s exit from the bed. She’d put that little nightie thing back on, but it had ridden up around her hips, giving me a brief peek of ass before she pulled it down, covering herself.

“You know I heard that, right?”

“So?” I shrugged. “Fuck him.”

I climbed out of the bed too and she blushed, averting her gaze – I hadn’t put a damn thing on, but I wasn’t sure why she was so embarrassed about it.

“I know you’re not getting prude now, like you weren’t all over my dick just a few hours ago, shorty,” I teased, padding across the soft carpet to where she’d stopped at her dresser, pulling out matching bra and panties.

She rolled her eyes. “Why do you keep using that word for me. *Prude.*”

“Because you keep acting all uncomfortable about sex. Does it offend you?”

“I’m not offended, it just doesn’t fit me.” To make her point, she grabbed my dick with both hands, squeezing in a way that made a groan push from my lips. That seemed to be the reaction she was looking for – a reaction she rewarded by

unexpectedly sinking to her knees in front of me. “If I were so uncomfortable... would I do this?”

The “this” she was referring to was taking me between her lips, in a sudden rush of warmth and wetness. She kept one hand on me, the other braced against my thigh as she pumped, matching the sweet suction of her mouth.

“*Oh damn,*” I muttered, my eyes involuntarily shutting as she took me deeper, down her throat.

Then *deeper.*

It didn’t take her long to build a rhythm that had me moaning like the bitch I’d called her ex, but man... I’d be that, as long as she kept sucking and slurping, making a wet, perfect mess as she looked up, meeting my gaze. She pulled back, grinning at me as her hand reached underneath, cupping and squeezing my balls before she went back for more, taking me so deep that it made her gag.

She didn’t stop though.

She kept it up, moaning against my dick as she swallowed me over and over, ignoring my warning that I was about to bust so she could... swallow me more.

Swallow it *all.*

And then she left me there, spent and braced against her dresser, trying to recover. The smirk she shot me before she disappeared into the bathroom... I wasn’t sure what it meant, but I took it as a challenge, stalking in there after her.

I found her at the sink, a wet towel in her hands as she washed her face. No words were necessary – I bent her over the sink, sliding into her from behind as she braced her hands against the counter.

With a hand at the back of her neck, I pulled her up some as I bent to press my chest against her back. My mouth dropped to her ear to deliver a simple demand.

“Open your eyes.”

When she did, I angled her head so that she was watching me – watching *us* – as I drove into her. I grabbed her hand,

pushing it between her legs.

“Play. I wanna see you.”

At first, I kept my hand over hers, fingers aligned. I wasn't guiding – she was. I was just making sure she kept at it, not stopping when it became too much.

“Open your eyes,” I told her again, “See how fucking sexy you look?”

As soon as her eyes opened, I pulled one side of her nightie from her shoulder, then the other. With her fingers between her legs, breasts exposed and bouncing with each stroke, her soft lips parted in pleasure, she was...

Shit.

“Keep going,” I whispered in her ear, nipping her lobe with my teeth as I followed the same directive. After her little impromptu head session, I barely had anything left, but I'd gladly deplete everything I had in reserves to watch her cum in this mirror.

My fingers circled her nipples, pinching and squeezing the hard peaks until I had Logan writhing against me, trying to keep up. She put her other hand back on the counter, trying to brace herself as I stroked her harder, faster. Her eyes closed again, and I nipped her shoulder, pinching her nipples harder.

“Pierre, *please*,” she whined, her moans turning to high-pitched keens of pleasure. I released one of her nipples to pull her up again, and prop one of her knees up on the counter. In this position, she was opened even wider, so I could bury myself even farther.

“It's up to you, shorty. Just cum for me. Come on,” I encouraged against her ear, reaching below to pinch her clit between my fingers. “Open your eyes. *Watch.*”

She did, her face contorted in wonder as her body tensed and tightened before the rush of pleasure – it was fucking glorious.

“*Good fucking girl,*” I praised her, which seemed to make her cum even harder. Her pussy contracted wildly around me

as I stroked her through it, milking another nut from me that I hadn't even realized I'd be capable of so soon.

More new shit she was bringing out of me.

Afterwards, I let her get back to her morning routine while I got myself cleaned up to go home. As with most other things, she was super-efficient and damn near too helpful – *“here’s a fresh toothbrush and wash cloth, and unisex body wash for you. You can keep it, it’s yours. The coffee pot will brew a cup at exactly this minute, you can have that one and I’ll fix another. This healthy breakfast spot I like is exactly this many miles away – their drive thru takes six minutes from getting in line to receiving your order at the window”* – and almost stressful to watch, so I committed to keeping *that* to a minimum, so we could both have room to breathe.

Things between us were quiet now – not necessarily awkward, but... yeah.

Quiet.

“I’m gonna head out,” I told her, peeking into her closet, where she was standing in the bra and panties she’d pulled out earlier, choosing clothes. “I’ll see you at the office?”

She looked up, biting her lip for a second before she brushed her hair from her face. “Yeah. But um... before you go, we should probably talk about—”

“I know I’m not your man now,” I interrupted, already knowing where she was about to go with it. Well... it was an assumption she confirmed with a relieved sigh that didn’t offend me – we’d only known each other a short time, but I knew enough to expect... this. As a matter of fact... “None of this would’ve happened if I thought you were on some *let’s go together* kinda shit. You’re fresh off a serious relationship, and I’m just... not in a place for anything like that. It’s cool.”

The relief coming off her was palpable as she approached me, wearing a sweet smile. “Good. I wouldn’t want you thinking... I don’t know what you might be thinking. But you should know, I think you’re really dope. So it’s nothing to do with you, everything to do with me.”

“Ditto,” I told her, anchoring my hands against her waist to pull her against me because I couldn’t help it. “I know you’re just using me for my body, shorty.”

“I think you like that,” she countered, running her hand up my arm as she pressed into me, head tipped back like she wanted me to kiss her, so... that’s what I did.

It could’ve been – maybe *should’ve been* – awkward to do so outside the direct context of sex, but it was the most natural fucking thing in the world. Logan moaned into my mouth as I dropped hands to grip her ass, groaning myself as I started getting hard again like my dick wasn’t already tender from having already seen a little too much action over the last hours.

I’m about to end up with a whole new addiction.

That was the thought that forced me to pull back from her... eventually.

Back at my place, I didn’t have much to do, since Logan’s ultra-preparedness had already assured my morning hygiene. I really did grab breakfast from the spot she recommended, then made my way to *WAWG* in fresh clothes, ready to really start tackling the show now that the initial writing was finished.

I... wasn’t prepared for what I walked into as soon as I stepped in the building.

Laughter.

Soft, feminine laughter that drew my attention to the security desk that was already my primary destination. There, the security guard – *Freddy* – was giving full-blown fucking heart emoji eyes to the woman standing at the desk, her hands moving as she told some animated story.

Logan.

Damn she looks good.

Her ass was sitting *just right* today, in another pair of those slim-fitting pants she seemed to prefer – in a delicate sea foam green. Her lightweight blazer was the same color, stopping at

her hips in a way that accentuated those lush curves, and the tone was a stark contrast against her deep brown skin.

Not even two hours ago, I'd been buried inside her, but just the sight of her now had me ready to find somewhere private all over again.

But... no.

She'd already made herself clear.

Logan Byers doesn't fuck her clients.

And we were back there now. Back to working together, nothing else.

Supposedly.

I was irritated by how hard *Freddy* was grinning in her face, so I tapped into that instead of my attraction to her as I made my way up to the desk. My approach made her turn a little, obviously wondering who was coming up behind her. I half expected the smile to slip from her face, but if anything, it went a little wider.

“Mr. Perry – good morning. I came back down to wait for you.”

My eyebrow hiked over her announcement, but I said nothing as she gestured toward the security sensors I had to go through before accessing the rest of the building. She stood off to the side to wait with the other security guard, giggling and shit with him while I cleared the checkpoint.

As soon as she stepped to my side though, she was the picture of professionalism all over again.

Until we were on the elevator.

There, she looked up at me with a teasing smirk. “Pierre... you're not *jealous* are you?”

I sucked my teeth. “Why would you ask that?”

She crossed her arms, making her breasts even more prominent beneath the white lace cami she'd paired with her outfit. “Your face. It's doing a thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied, but none of the utter amusement left her face.

“*Mmmhmm.*”

Shit.

As I followed her off the elevator, I scolded myself, because she was right – that was really the only logical reason for me to be so irritated by that harmless interaction. She’d been giving him much more – public – flirty energy than she was putting in my direction, and I, ridiculously, felt slighted about it.

As if I hadn’t spent the night in her damn bed.

I had to get my head right.

I had no justification to feel any type of ownership towards her, *especially* when we’d just had this fucking conversation.

I was tripping.

It was just *really* hard not to, with her.

I found myself studying her again as we headed down the hall – close enough that I found myself wondering where her bag and laptop and all that were, if she’d waited for me at the security desk. Or had she’d said she came *back* to wait for me? I was about to ask when she opened the office door, ushering me inside.

To a tiny gift box and a tastefully masculine floral arrangement on my desk.

“What is this?” I asked, turning to her with a frown, only to be met by barely suppressed excitement coming from her.

“So before you trip about it... I always get my clients a nice gift for accomplishing a major goal while I’m working with them. You *have* to accept it.”

My frown deepened. “What did I...?”

“You finished the script,” she explained. “Obviously I knew you would, so I made the arrangements for this gift ahead of time. It’s just time to give it to you now. Open it,” she

insisted, practically bouncing in her heels as I reached across the desk for the box.

“I’m not gonna lie... I’m a lil nervous.”

“*Don’t be,*” she laughed. “You want me to turn the other way? Cover my eyes?”

I smirked. “Yeah, cover your eyes.”

I was just playing with her, but she did it, making me chuckle as I pulled the lid off the tiny box.

“Oh, *shit,*” I muttered, frowning – in a good way – at the platinum grill resting atop the black velvet inner tray. The style was like the ones I was wearing when we met – just meant for the bottom teeth, but these were an open-faced style, with diamond fangs.

And *ODS* engraved in a pattern across the top bar.

This was...

“Do you hate it?” Logan asked, and I looked up to find her blatantly peeking through her fingers. “You hate it, don’t you?”

“What? *Nah,*” I assured, shaking my head. “This is dope as fuck.”

“Oh!” That brought the smile back to her face. “Well, in *that* case... congratulations on finishing your script, Mr. Perry. I’m very much looking forward to working with you to turn it into an amazing show.”

“Thank you, Logan,” I said, wrapping my free arm around her neck to pull her into a hug, which she returned. I intended to keep it friendly too, no flirting or nothing... but the door swung open while we were mid-embrace, and from the look on Nubia’s face, I was sure it didn’t *look* like nothing.

“Oooh, what am I looking at here?” Nubia asked, as Logan hurriedly put some distance between us, reminding me of when Elodie had walked up on us, too.

“I was just thanking Logan for her gift – she got this for me since I finished the script,” I said, effectively shifting focus

as I held out the box for Nubia to look.

“Awww, that’s sweet,” Nubia gushed. “The flowers too?”

When I confirmed, Nubia turned to Logan with a smile. “I’d heard you were good, but damn girl – I’m gonna have to hire you for myself.”

“That can certainly be arranged after my contract for Pierre wraps up,” Logan quipped as the door opened again, and a blurry mass of hair in a Black Panther tee shirt came racing at me.

Better known as my nephew – or cousin, whatever – with his father not far behind him, shaking his head at the antics. “Whassup, Steph,” I greeted, taking a second to bump fists with him before I bent to peel a giggling Trey off my legs. He was really named after his father, but he and I had the notable honor of both being “*the thirds*”.

He didn’t know though, that I gave him a lot of credit for my continued sobriety. Nubia had been very clear that my changed behavior was a prerequisite for having any type of presence in his life. I’d lost enough family at that point and wasn’t trying to miss out on anything else – especially not when I already owed Nubia for the presence she’d held in my life after the loss of my mother.

I couldn’t fuck this up.

Sobriety had been a hellishly tough first step, but it hadn’t been a magic bullet. Even once I stopped drinking, I wasn’t suddenly “okay” – that had taken longer – hell, I was still in the process, I felt, with this show being another important, cathartic piece of the puzzle. Steph and Nubia had been present and accounted for at every point over these last few years and Trey’s little ass was energy and joy personified.

“I can’t believe you’re letting him wear this, Nubz. I remember you vowed to keep him in designer,” I laughed, referring to his t-shirt.

Nubia rolled her eyes. “*Only* because him and his father ganged up on me about it. Supposedly he’s old enough to choose his own clothes now.”

“He *definitely* is,” Steph spoke up, then turned to Logan, extending his hand. “Stephen Foster.”

“Of course, I know who you are,” Logan practically gushed. “Huge fan of your wife. I still remember that episode of her makeover show – the one with the breast cancer survivor. You came along to help with some things for her son, and y’all’s chemistry was just so...” She let out this dreamy sigh, which made Nubia and Steph both laugh. “I’ll just say I was really excited when the beans got spilled that y’all were really a couple. And then y’all’s maternity cover for *Sugar&Spice*. And those *wedding pictures* with baby Trey, oh my God!” she had that same wistful stare on her face that the security guard had been giving her, but then she shook her head, snapping out of it. “I’m so sorry. I’m fangirling right now, I just... I’m a fan.”

“It’s fine,” Steph chuckled. “I didn’t catch your name...”

“Oh, *sorry!* Logan Byers. I’m Pierre’s executive concierge.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Damn, that sounds official – babe, do we need one of those?”

“I’m trying to get *her*,” Nubia told him. “She’s expensive.”

“Hi Logan!” Trey chimed, pulling the attention back to him as he waved at her.

“Oh my goodness, *hi!*” she spoke, returning his wave before she pressed her hands to her chest. “You’re such a handsome little sweetheart!”

He blushed at the compliment, tucking his head against my neck. “Thank you,” he told her, knowing his mama would be on his ass about his manners, before – loudly – whispering to me, “she’s pretty Uncle P.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “She is, huh?”

It was Logan’s turn to blush at that, cause the whole room heard it, and Nubia and Steph exchanged a look.

“Well,” Logan said, straightening her blazer. “This feels like a family moment, so I’m going to step out and find a quiet

spot to work while y'all catch up."

"Absolutely not!" Nubia spoke up. "You don't have to uproot on our account. We got here early this morning and popped by to see if P wanted to grab breakfast with us – and I wanted to see your new office, which looks great by the way."

I grinned. "Yeah, that was all Logan – she had it all set up before I ever stepped foot in here," I explained, looking past Trey's curls to see that Logan was very interested in everything except my direction. "With that said," I continued anyway, "If y'all are gonna be here a few days, I'm gonna pass on breakfast so we can get some work done on the show. It took me some time to get the script wrapped up while Logan was blazing through all the preliminaries and other stuff, so I think I should get caught up."

"Solid choice man," Steph nodded, and I wouldn't front like his approval – and the pride in Nubia's eyes as she extricated Trey from my arms – was light to me.

It mattered, a lot.

"Let's say dinner then?" Nubia asked. "Or a late lunch, if you wrap up early for the day?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "Let's do that."

"You're welcome to join us, Logan," Nubia quipped, after I'd said my goodbyes to Steph and Trey, and they were already headed out the door. "From what I hear, you're practically family, too."

She closed the door without waiting on Logan's response, leaving *me* to deal with the wide-eyed horror of the reaction to those words.

"Pierre, *what* is she talking about?! You didn't tell her we ___"

"*Nah*. We're close, but not... *that* close." I could talk about anything with Nubia, truly, but the happenings of my bedroom weren't exactly prime conversation between us. "She's probably fishing. Probably picked up on our energy or something."

“You think people can tell?”

I shrugged. “I don’t care if they can or not,” I admitted, picking up the grill she’d given me so I could put the top back on the box. “But I know *you* do, so I’ll keep it cool. And I can tell Nubia to chill.”

“Not necessary,” she said, shaking her head. She reached into the cabinet where she always kept her things, pulling her laptop out. “It would probably just make it more obvious that we...”

I raised an eyebrow. “That we... what?”

“I don’t know.”

That felt like a lie.

And felt *very* opposite to the definitive line in the sand that had already been drawn.

Whatever it was though, in typical Logan fashion, she shook it off, raising the lid to her laptop with a smile.

“Let’s get some work done, so you can make it to that late lunch with your family.”

LOGAN

“**H**ave I really left you speechless?”

Across from me, Trei – *my* Trei – Norwood, not to be confused with Pierre’s adorable little cousin – cringed, then made a big show of knocking back the rest of his drink. It had been weeks since we’d kicked it, before I even signed the contract for my latest client, so I was filling him in on everything that had gone down.

Everything that had gone down.

Trei was a little older than me, but still, we’d practically grown up together, and were good friends now. I’d been his sounding board, trying to offer a woman’s perspective back when he was in heavy pursuit of his now-girlfriend a few years back. My advice – among others, in addition to his good looks and charm – had won her over, and they’d been happily together since then.

And Zoraya Whitfield of *the* Whitfields was no easy catch.

This nigga *owed* me some good advice.

“*Trei*,” I prompted, when he still hadn’t said anything, but was still looking off in the distance like he was deep in thought.

“My bad, Lo,” he said, sitting up straight to meet my gaze. “I just... shit, I don’t know what to tell you. You know you fucked up though, right?”

I threw my hands up, so frustrated I couldn’t do anything but laugh. “Yeah, *duh*. I shouldn’t have fucked him – I knew it

beforehand, and I *especially* know it now, but I can't go back in time. So... what do I do?"

"You remember those memory zapper things from *Men in Black*?"

"Trei!"

"I'm *sorry*," his ass laughed, shaking his head. "I said I don't know what to tell you. I mean... you don't have a problem working with him, right?"

I shook my head. "Come on, you know me. I can always, even to my detriment, keep it cute and professional."

"Okay then. If you think he can do the same, what's really the problem?"

Blowing out a sigh, I reached for my wine glass, disappointed to find it empty. Especially since I couldn't have another if I planned to drive myself home. "The problem is... I don't think it was really *just sex*, even though we're both pretending it was."

"So you've got feelings for him?"

"*Feelings* is a stretch," I insisted. "But I can admit that I... I kinda like him. He's intriguing."

"Like is a feeling, Logan."

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Yes," I laughed, wrinkling my nose at him. "I'm saying that I don't have *feelings* yet, but I'm afraid they're gonna develop, and that's just... not ideal."

"Right. Especially since your parents are expecting you to marry Les Moore. Which – I *do* have some advice about that."

I perked up. "Please. I'm listening."

"You're grown. What are they gonna do, send you to your room because you didn't marry who they wanted?"

I rolled my eyes, disappointed that he was simplifying it so much when he *knew* better. His father, my father, and Les'

father had all gone to BSU together back in the day and were all good friends.

Les had followed his family's plan and would take over the business.

Trei had followed his family's plan and was *already* moving into position as head of operations for *Norwood's Wine and Fine Liquors*.

I couldn't help thinking I wouldn't have this problem if instead of pushing me toward Les, my parents had seen my perfect match in Trei. He was fine as hell, a great businessman, and was actually *interesting*.

I'd even had a pretty sizable crush on him back in the day.

But because of the bigger age difference between us – I was a high school sophomore when Trei was heading off to college – it came down to me and Les, who was only a year older.

Somehow, I doubted he and I would be going on six years of doldrums, and only just now, once I was already over it, talking about a ring.

“You remember what they did when I left the firm, right? Or did I just imagine crying on your shoulder about it?” I asked.

He let out a huff. “Yeah, I remember that bullshit – your father still doesn't even want to look me in the eyes cause I got in his ass about it. But you should've pushed back about that shit, Lo. Yes, our parents worked hard to provide a life of *good* options for us. But we didn't ask to come here – we don't *owe* them anything except our love and respect. We don't have to choose the option they want us to take.”

“You did. Les did.”

“Les is... an interesting character,” he said, trying to be kind since he had no real issue with him. “So I can't speak for him. But I actually like the spirits business and enjoy what I do. I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything. You, on the other hand... practicing law was draining all the energy out of

you. It wasn't until you started your business that you blossomed again."

I nodded. "Yeah. I know, but they weren't trying to hear that."

"So *make them* hear it," Trei insisted, still talking about it like it was this easy thing. "If they act stupid again, so be it, you know what? Make them feel *that* too. Shit, *you* stop speaking to them if they want to act crazy," he laughed. "How your parents gonna give *you* the silent treatment? Nope. You do that shit first and see how fast they come around."

"That shit doesn't work," I claimed. I knew that from experience with Les. When I tried to give him the silent treatment, he seemed to prefer it.

"Nah, me and Zora do it to each other all the time," Trei admitted, shaking his head. "We can't stand for the other to not be speaking to us, so it moves us to have the conversation – even if it's ugly – and get over the shit with less wasted time. Cause you know that's what it is, right? Being at odds with somebody you love is a *waste of time*. It's one thing to need a few hours to cool off – even a day, you know? But if you're comfortable withholding attention and affection for longer than that, over something that could be solved by a conversation – or even better, by you not being a fucking bully? There's something wrong there. And if you're on the receiving end of that, you shouldn't be letting it ride. Whether it's friends, family, romantic, whatever. They've gotta put *their* shit to the side when it comes to *your* life. And I'll tell them that shit again if you want me to."

I smiled, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. "That's not necessary, Trei. But thank you for offering. And for the advice. I mean... you're probably right. I believe they want me to be happy, I just think they believe they know how to get there better than I do, which doesn't really work for me."

"But you've been trying to force that. You've been trying to make that work, on several levels – with your job, your

relationship, hell, that flashy ass BMW that I *know* your ass hates,” Trei laughed.

I pushed out a deep sigh, thinking about the long argument I’d had with my father about my cute little electric car, which he’d *hated* purely off the strength of it not being German engineering.

The next month, the *flashy ass BMW* was parked in front of my building, sporting a huge pink ribbon. Because my car hadn’t fit his standards, he’d decided it wasn’t good enough, so he’d done something about it. And because I didn’t want to be ungrateful, I’d just gone along with it.

Just one of many times I’d let them trample over my autonomy.

It couldn’t always be this way.

Whether or not it *would* though... that would be up to me.

I left lunch with Trei with that idea heavy on my mind, and then, hours later, reached out to my parents to confirm that I’d join them for dinner the next night. Instead of a restaurant though, I pushed for the privacy of their house.

The last thing I needed when I broke this news to them was an accusation of making a scene.

I checked my face and hair in the mirror one last time before I exited my car – I didn't want to offer any ammo for my mother to pick apart.

Not that she was overtly mean or anything, she was just... very in tune with her appearance and expected the same from me. If there was something wrong, she would have suggestions to give out.

Which I just... didn't need.

It had been a long ass day.

There hadn't even been any time for awkwardness *or* flirting between me and Pierre – we were busy.

Now that the script was locked in, the budget was decided, and all legal considerations on track, it was time to start hiring people, officially. Nick Davison had flown to town for the day, and between the three of us – but of course mostly Nick and Pierre – there had been a lot of discussion and narrowing in terms of additional directors, cinematographers, editors, composers, just... everything.

And then we needed official offers drawn up for all those people.

It was grueling.

But it was done.

Or at least, it would be, over the next couple of days. We at least had all the names, and a soft verbal *yes* from damn near all of them, but the actual contracts would take time.

I was already exhausted, and these were still the very early stages.

“Logan, you look *beautiful*, sweetheart,” my mother greeted, opening the door to welcome me inside. “What a lovely dress – you went to that boutique I recommended, didn't you?” she gushed, pulling me into a hug.

“I did,” I answered, returning her hug and greeting with compliments of my own because Kimberly Byers *always* looked flawless, and there was no exception today.

The fact that she hadn’t found anything wrong with me was a relief.

“Come along,” she said, hooking her arm through mine. “Your father’s already set the table.”

I let her guide me to the dining room, feeling a little less anxious, but... still on edge. It was a further relief when my father had a warm greeting for me similar to my mother’s, and before long, we were all seated around the table.

“I’m surprised you’re alone – I assumed you were bringing Les when you let me know you were coming today,” my mother mentioned, looking up from her plate. “We haven’t seen him at all lately – he’s not letting the insurance company overwork him, is he?”

Right to it then.

Okay.

“I... haven’t spoken to Les in a few weeks,” I told her, punctuating my sentence with a mouth full of salad so I wouldn’t give the conversation more detail than necessary.

Maybe not *enough* detail, because my father laughed. “Ah, trouble in paradise. It happens, sweetie.”

“No, actually,” I corrected immediately, pulling in a deep breath. “I broke up with him, and we’re not getting back together. Because I don’t like him.”

There was a long silence, and then, finally my father put his fork down. “What do you mean you don’t *like* him? You’ve been dating him for the last six years.”

“Only because it’s what you and mom wanted. If it was up to me – if I’d *felt like* it was up to me? We probably wouldn’t have made it past two. But you guys adore him, and already had our life together practically planned out, so I thought it was for the best.”

“Because it was – because it *is*,” my mother said, frowning at me across the table like she was confused. “Les is a lovely young man – he’s tall, he’s handsome, he’s successful, he’s tall —”

He makes me wanna drink bleach.

“... and the Moores are very good friends of ours. I think you should reconsider this, sweetheart.”

“The fact that you had to list *tall* twice says everything, mama,” I said, shaking my head. “Yes, the things you said about him are true, but none of that means he’s right for *me*. He’s constantly talking down to me, insulting my business, trying to make me feel like he’s the only man who’d ever want me. Or *put up with* me. Does that sound like someone I should be with to you?”

“It sounds like you two are having some issues communicating – maybe you should see a counselor before you two take this next step,” my father suggested. “I can set it up for you.”

“Or not, because I’m not going to counseling with a man I’m not dating anymore, let alone considering marrying. It’s over, guys,” I told them, forcing a firmness I didn’t actually feel into my voice. “I know it’s disappointing, but it’s not your decision – it’s *mine*. And I won’t be swayed.”

That set off another round of silence at the table – they were stunned, I could tell, that I would speak to them that way.

Hell, I was too.

But the whole situation felt very *now or never*, and since I’d decided it was gonna be *now*, I couldn’t back away from it.

“Does this have anything to do with you working with that Perry kid?” my father spoke up, his voice tinged with familiar frustration and anger.

It was the same tone he’d taken when I put in my resignation from the firm.

“We know you’ve had him spending the night at your place, been with him all odd hours of the day,” he added,

information that made my mouth drop open in shock. I looked to my mother, but it was clearly not new to her – she was giving me the same expectant look, like she was waiting on an explanation.

“Are you... *spying* on me?” I asked, my brow furrowed in confusion as I tried to think of any other possible way they could know these things.

“If you thought we’d allow you to be galivanting all over Vegas with God knows who, for this little servant thing you’ve got going without any kind of oversight, sweetie you were sadly mistaken,” my mother spoke up, and I...

Finally, I understood what people meant when they claimed to see red.

“*Are you fucking kidding me?!*” I asked, pushing back from the table. “You *have* to be, right?”

“Don’t you *dare* disrespect us, young lady!” my father bellowed, standing up, clearly hoping that the bass in his voice would make me shrink like usual.

I was too tired though.

Physically, mentally, emotionally, I just didn’t have it in me to fall back as expected.

“*Respect?!*” I shot back, instead. “I’ve done nothing *but* respect you two, and your wishes, to my own detriment! I suffered at that law firm for years until I finally got the courage to step out on my own, and you both saw it and said nothing! You never asked if I was okay, never told me it was okay for me to do something else, even though it was killing me. But as long as I didn’t curse at you, that was fine, right? You’d have me miserable for the rest of my life with a man who I couldn’t even *beg* to show me some consideration and care, but as long as I don’t yell, that’s fine, right?!”

“Sweetheart, no one is saying that—”

“It’s *exactly* what you’re saying!” I screamed, cutting off my mother’s weak ass attempt at an explanation. “It’s what you’re saying now, what you’ve been saying, what you would’ve said forever, as long as I pretended to be perfect

little obedient Logan. You would've smiled and shown me off to your friends as a fucking success story while I was emotionally dying right in front of your eyes. As long as it was your way."

"I am your *father*," he bellowed at me, jabbing a finger in my direction. "You will *not* make me feel bad for trying to lead you into what was right or making sure you were protected!"

"I was in the way of more harm dealing with the firm's pervert ass old men clients than I've *ever* been while pursuing my passion!" I snapped. "Do you know how many times I've been groped, or had disgusting things said to me, or been outright solicited, but didn't dare say anything because I didn't want to lose any of your precious *billable hours*? I couldn't even tell you," I admitted, scrubbing the hot tears from my face. "*That's* how many times. It's part of why I hated that place, why I don't want to deal with those *people*. You wanna send people to follow me, wanna check up on me, but guess how many times I've ever had to deal with one of my clients making me uncomfortable? Just *once*," I answered, before either of them could hazard a guess. "And where was the fucking protection then, huh? Nowhere to be found. I handled *myself*. I've *been* handling myself, and I'll continue to, because you know what? For better or worse, I'm a Byers, and you didn't raise me to lose. You just weren't counting on your expectations being my opponent, were you? So... whatever, okay? *Good luck with that.*"

Ignoring them calling after me, I stormed out, making it all the way into my car before they caught up. I locked the doors though, turned the car on and pulled off, only stopping to put my head out of the car, look my angry father right in the eyes, and tell him –

"You can send somebody to pick this car up from my building tomorrow. Otherwise, I'm reporting it and having it towed."

And *then* I drove off.

Scared as hell, but... somehow... relieved.

I had no clue what was going to happen now, wasn't sure what my next step in my relationship with my parents would be. But I didn't feel like I was suffocating under the weight of their opinions anymore, at least.

And that was a start.

The first thing I did when I got home was make arrangements for a new vehicle – the cute little non-German smart car of my dreams. Then, I went through the trouble of talking with my building about revoking the keycard admittance for Les.

He no longer needed that access to me.

Then, in a move I would probably regret, but couldn't help giving him this courtesy – I unblocked him, to shoot him a text to let him know I'd told my parents about the breakup.

Because they would probably tell his parents, which meant no longer pretending he was just giving me a little space.

I could already see the dots moving to indicate he was typing a response when I blocked him again.

There would be no back and forth.

Not with him, or anybody.

Moving forward, since it didn't seem to be a top priority for any of the people it *should* be important to... I would put *myself* in charge of looking out for me.

PIERRE

FROM: BYERS, LOGAN
TO: PERRY, PIERRE III

I apologize for any inconvenience it may cause, but I need to take a personal day. For any urgent/immediate services, please contact me at the previously provided number. Any necessary provisions to keep your schedule on track have already been made, and I will make up any essential work tomorrow. All correspondence that has been funneled through me will be responded to and/or forwarded in a timely fashion.

Thank you for your understanding, and I'll see you tomorrow.

I frowned at that email as soon as it hit my inbox – not because I couldn't manage without Logan for the day, but because it felt... *off*.

Logan Byers taking a personal day?

That shit didn't even sound right.

As much as I wanted to hit her up, I had to respect the boundary we were trying to put in place – and respect the fact that she obviously had something going on. Only because of our blurred lines did I have any hints as to the things that had been bothering her lately, from her ex to her parents.

I was going to have to pretend I didn't know about any of that, though.

So instead of hitting her up, I went to the office, intent on following through with the efficiently detailed schedule she'd already put in place for me. I spent the early part of the morning fielding emails from prospective production team members who had questions – questions I could easily answer from the fact-sheet Logan compiled.

Even when she wasn't here physically, her impact was everywhere.

My next step was a script breakdown meeting with Nick, who immediately looked around like he was confused when I walked into the small conference room alone.

“Where's Logan?” he asked, going back to his task of putting the script up on the big screen projector, so it was easier for us to work together on it.

I shrugged. “She hit me up this morning saying she needed a personal day.”

“Something wrong with her?”

My eyes went wide, glad he saw the same thing I did. “There *has* to be, right? She's been a machine since the day she started, but now she needs a personal day? It's been bugging the fuck outta me.”

“Did you call or anything? Check in?”

Dropping to a seat, I shook my head. “Nah... trying not to overstep.”

Nick stopped what he was doing to pin me with a knowing smirk. “Ay... remember when I asked your ass if there was anything going on with you and her, and you blew me off like that was bullshit?”

“Just like what's about to happen right now?”

“Nah, player,” Nick laughed. “You not getting off easy this time. Especially not now that I've been around y'all together.”

I sucked my teeth. “What, you're about to tell me we've been giving each other long, pining looks behind the other's back or something?”

“The exact opposite – y’all give a *little* too much to pretending not to be hella aware of each other. It’s subtle, but... I see that shit.”

“Your ass is always *seeing some shit*,” I chuckled. “Just like you *saw* Noah in that airport.”

“You damn right – I saw the love of my life and took my chance. As far as I see it, ain’t no shame in that. My lady will be ready and waiting for me when I get back to LA,” he bragged. “Meanwhile... you’re *afraid to overstep*. Get outta here, man.”

“We work together – what am I supposed to do?” I asked, tossing my hands up. “We’re attracted to each other, sure, but what we’re doing here, with this show... that has to be the focus, dude. That has to be *my* focus. I need to do this, and she’s too important to *that* process for me to inevitably fuck it up because we were trying to do something else.”

Nick just looked at me for a bit, then shook his head. “Aight man... I’ll let you talk about that whole idea that you’d *inevitably fuck it up* with your therapist or something. I’m not touching that. What I *will* say though, is that you shouldn’t let trying to avoid the romantic shit have you out here looking like you don’t give a fuck. That’s not even like you.”

I pushed out a sigh as I reclined back in my chair, swaying back and forth. There wasn’t much I could say because... he was right.

It *wasn’t* like me.

My natural inclination hadn’t even started with a text or a phone call – I preferred to just pull the fuck up, so I could see what was happening with my own eyes. But after that little conversation at her place, then her reaction to Nubia’s “*family*” comment, and how “professional” we’d kept things since... the line in the sand had been pretty clearly drawn.

I didn’t give a shit about the line though.

I only bothered because *she* cared, but if it was up to me, we could leave the boundaries blurry. I didn’t want to be

disrespectful of her wishes, but I also... wanted to make sure she was good.

Needed to make sure she was good.

Which was how, after Nick and I had mapped out locations, wardrobe, and set design for the episode we were scheduled for... I ended up in front of her building.

Again.

By some sort of divine providence, she was already standing outside when I pulled up, talking to a guy wearing a *Turner Motors* shirt. I went ahead and exited, walking up just as she shook the man's hand and he walked away – giving me no cover at all against the curious frown Logan levied in my direction.

“What are you doing here?”

Fuck.

Instead of walking through this in my head, I'd spent the ride over here rapping along with my radio about illegal shit, and now that I was in front of her...

Hell, what *was* I doing here?

“Uh... Nick asked about you,” I momentarily deflected, then shook my head, meeting her gaze to tell the whole truth. “And... I was worried about you.”

Her eyebrow shot up, and she laughed. “*Wow*. I take one personal day and you feel like you have to pull up and check on me?”

“When you put it like that it sounds like I'm bugging, but... yeah, actually,” I admitted. “I just felt like something was off.”

She tried to shrug it off, but her sudden inability to meet my eyes felt like confirmation of what I suspected. Outwardly, even in a ponytail and athleisure instead of the attire I was used to seeing her in, she was as put-together as usual.

“Logan—”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” she cut in, before I could even get my words out. “I appreciate you coming to check on me, really, but... I’m just trying to be okay, and rehashing it...” she stopped to take a deep breath, putting her hands up to her face – that’s when I noticed the key fob hooked over her finger.

“Something happen to your ride?” I asked, shifting the subject to something neutral in hopes she wasn’t about to shut down on me.

With a heavy sigh, she dropped her hands. “Um... you could say that. I gave my father his car back, and got my own,” she said, pointing to a gleaming teal-colored hybrid in one of the resident parking spots up front. “Just got delivered.”

“It looks good. You happy with it?”

“Very much so,” she nodded. “Feels a lot more... me.”

Something about the way she said that made it feel loaded, but she’d already been clear about not wanting to unpack whatever was going on – at least not with me. So, instead of digging in, and before shit got awkward, I decided it was time for me to head on about my business.

“You can tell me more about it tomorrow,” I spoke up, taking a few steps backwards. “I see you’re good, and probably busy, so I won’t hold you.”

At first she just gave me a smile, but as I turned to fully walk away, she called after me. “Hey, I don’t know if you’ve eaten yet, but I have a ton of Chinese buffet food upstairs...”

I stopped, turning to look at her. “From where?”

“The really good one, at the Drake.”

I scoffed. “Nah, you can’t leave their buffet with food.”

“You can if you know exactly who to talk to,” she smirked. Because *of course* she knew who to talk to. “You coming, or not?”

Of course I was.

She grinned as I jogged back to where she was standing to accompany her into the building. Before we got on the elevator though, she looked up to meet my gaze, and asked, “Hey... just as... *friends*, right?”

“You’re asking me not to fuck you?”

“Basically, yes.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

She laughed at that as we climbed on the elevator together, but I was very serious about *trying*. This little yoga-pants situation she had going on was making it hard not to wonder if there were any panties underneath, and then the thought of her *not* having any on...

“Damn, that was a long *ten minutes to go get my new keys*.”

The fuck?

My musings about the number of layers between myself and Logan’s pussy were cut short by the sound of an unfamiliar voice as soon as she opened her apartment door. I froze where I was, trapped by the sudden stare of two women I’d never seen or met before, but who were apparently very familiar with Logan.

“Oh, that’s why it took you so long – you brought back a stray fuckboy,” the one who’d been speaking before laughed, pushing a handful of waist-length braids over her shoulder.

“*Laurel!*” the other one gave her friend a deeply censoring look – Laurel shrugged it off – and then started in my direction, hand outstretched. “Hi. Rowan Bishop,” she said, and I accepted the offered handshake. “You are...?”

“Pierre Perry...”

“*The third?!?*” Laurel blurted, over a mouthful of noodles.

At first, I thought maybe she was familiar with my father and grandfather – or perhaps me directly, because of the old shit with my reputation. But then there was a whispered “*ohhhh*,” from Rowan, with a meaningful look in Logan’s direction.

And the sheer embarrassment on *her* face said it all.

They knew who I was from what *she* had told them.

“Yes, this is Pierre Perry the Third, the *client* I told you about,” she said, rushing up to me to usher me in the direction of the kitchen. When I met her gaze, she gave me a subtle headshake that I took to indicate whatever they knew, it wasn’t *everything*.

“Pierre, this is my neighbor, Laurel, and she is how Rowan and I met. They were already besties, and then they kinda welcomed me into their fold,” Logan explained. “Laurel is a brilliant freelance techie, and Rowan runs the Cartwright Center – local community center and charity. They already know you’re a writer and producer,” she said, turning to me.

“Yeah, and maybe we can find out *what* you’re writing and producing since you’re here in person. Logan’s ass is always all tight-lipped with the tea like she took a blood oath or something,” Laurel said, following us into the kitchen. “Your description was great though – this man is fine as fuck.”

“*Seriously?!*” Logan hissed, but I personally couldn’t do shit but laugh – I would never have expected straight-laced Logan to be friends with someone who just said things so... plainly.

I liked Laurel.

“My sexiness is no secret, shorty,” I told Logan with a wink before giving my attention to Laurel – and Rowan, who’d walked up beside her. “Logan is using her massive skills to help me with the production and development of an original series. We’re keeping the details on the low for now, but... I think it’s gonna be pretty good.”

Logan snorted. “Pretty good? It’s gonna be *amazing*.”

“I know you wouldn’t settle for anything less than that,” I smiled, setting off totally different reactions from her friends.

“*Awww!*” from Rowan, and a muttered, “*We’re really supposed to believe they’re not fucking?*” from Laurel.

Which reminded me of what Nick had said about us being too obvious.

“I’m about to put you outta here,” Logan told Laurel, who took on this faux-innocent look that had me chuckling again.

“What’d I do?” she asked, snagging an eggroll from the takeout containers on the counter before Rowan snatched her arm to walk her back toward the living room where she’d been.

Still grinning, I turned to Logan, who looked like she was regretting her decision to bring me up here.

“This is what you needed a personal day for?” I asked. “To kick it with your girls in the middle of the day and eat buffet food at home?”

Her eyes went wide, mouth open, but I spoke again before she could.

“Seems like a dope ass break to me. I might have to take some notes.”

Logan’s shoulders sank, I guess relieved that I wasn’t judging her for needing an unexpected day off. “This wasn’t my plan, actually. Laurel’s sister is kinda... seeing... Lincoln Drake, so she has certain perks – buffet access being one of them. She texted me to tell me to come by when I got home because she had a plate for me, and I responded that I was already home, and then... her and Rowan showed up with all this,” she explained, waving her hand at about eight takeout containers worth of food. “She showed me a picture – this isn’t even half of what she took. She says she’s stocking her freezer,” Logan laughed. “I love the buffet at the Drake though, so it was a needed mood booster.”

“What were your plans before they showed up?”

She sighed. “Depressing music played at obnoxiously loud levels and a bottle of wine.” As soon as the word *wine* left her lips, she kinda froze. “Sorry.”

I shook my head. “Just the mention of liquor isn’t gonna make me relapse, shorty,” I chuckled. “I appreciate the concern though. It did have to be a pretty hard line at first, but

I like to think I'm pretty good at keeping myself together now."

"What are y'all whispering about over there?!" Laurel yelled. "Logan tell that man to fix a plate and come on over here so he can tell me if he's got some single fine friends!"

"*Oh God,*" Logan groaned. "This was supposed to feel like a hot seat for *you*, not me."

I shook my head, giving her a smirk as I grabbed one of the plates that was already on the counter. "There are *very* few situations that feel like the hot seat to me," I told her. "You've gotta have some shame to be easily embarrassed."

She gave me a skeptical look, but I wasn't bullshitting – and... I actually liked her friends. Once I was sitting down with them, I found out that Rowan was married to a local politician I actually *had* heard of, who'd lost a city council election just to bounce back and end up in a different office anyway, with a *real* focus on charity. And calling Laurel "brilliant" wasn't just some hyperbolic thing - she'd actually created, from scratch, the project-management software used by everybody at *WAWG*.

With Logan's help on the non-technical aspects, apparently.

"Look, I was deadass about the fine, single homeboys," Laurel spoke up after a while, waving off that whole line of conversation. "With your tats, and that haircut, your lil sneakers and all, you're fully immersed in the fuck-nigga uniform – where the rest of y'all at?"

Shaking my head, I chuckled as I reclined back in the couch. "I wish I could help, but... anybody I know that I would wish on a woman already *has* a woman."

"Mhm, mmhm," Laurel nodded. "Okay, the nice guys, right. Now what about the ones you *wouldn't* wish on anybody, cause that's exactly my type."

Beside her, Rowan gave her a playful nudge. "Will you *stop*? I told you, Reid has friends that would be great for you!"

“And I’ve told *you*, I don’t want any of those stuffy ass political dudes,” Laurel huffed. “Tell Reid to holler at me when he has a friend I have to sign a non-disclosure agreement to fuck with like you did.”

My eyes went wide. “Wait, a non-disclosure?”

“Not at liberty to discuss that,” Rowan sputtered, nudging Laurel in a non-playful way this time.

“*Sorry*,” she giggled, then looked back to me. “Seriously though... where they at?”

“Listen... a couple years back, I would’ve had somebody for you. Everybody I fuck with now is too well-behaved.”

“*Ugh*. You’re reformed, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah... unfortunately.”

“No, no, good for you,” Laurel groaned, as Logan and Rowan laughed. “You’re from LA you said? You must’ve been in some pretty wild shit, huh?”

I shrugged. “I mean... it was Hollywood, so...”

“Oh you were a *hoe* hoe? Like big time, huh?”

“I guess you could put it like that,” I laughed.

“But you’re not anymore now? You’re for real reformed?”

“I am *for real* reformed,” I agreed. “I was celibate until fairly recently, actually.”

Logan had been drinking from a glass of water, and choked on it with that revelation, eyes wide. “*Really?*”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Not like... in a big deal kinda way though, just something I’d been in practice with around my sobriety. Not engaging in behaviors that triggered my desire to drink, and... casual sex was one of those.”

“*Wow*,” Rowan spoke up, leaning forward. “So you’ve struggled with alcoholism?”

“I have. But I’ve got a few years of sobriety under my belt now. Lived in Blackwood for a while, had a sponsor there, who I keep in touch with.”

“So the celibacy was like one of your steps or something?” Laurel asked. “You had to do it for a certain length of time, and then you were done, and you just let loose on somebody who didn’t realize it was your first pussy in years?”

I threw my head back to laugh at her characterization before I shook my head. “Nah, not quite like that,” I chuckled. “It wasn’t really anything official, just after talking to Will – my sponsor – about the challenges I was having, he thought it might be good for me, so I gave it a shot. And then eventually... it wasn’t even difficult – it’s discipline. Not fucking was a helluva lot easier than not drinking,” I admitted, then looked to Logan, who was still sitting there speechless. “And when I did have that first experience afterward, it wasn’t really this big deal in my head. It’s a bigger deal to y’all than to me,” I laughed. “But I knew I wasn’t using sex as a substitute for anything else, wasn’t feeling any kind of unhealthy urges, none of that. I just... felt like it was supposed to happen. Like it was something she needed, and I was just the means for that, and... who was I to stray from the path?” I stopped talking, realizing they were all staring at me. “Damn, that makes me sound like I’m on some *higher spiritual plane* shit, doesn’t it?”

“You’re telling us you aren’t?” Laurel asked, lifting an eyebrow at me as I shook my head.

“Nah. I mean... I don’t think I am? I’m just explaining what it was like for me – which I realize now doesn’t make a lot of sense outside my head.”

“I think it does,” Rowan said. “You’re not saying you think this woman was your soulmate or something, or even that the moment had some deep meaning – or maybe it did, and maybe she is – but for you, there was some sign or whatever that made you feel like it was part of your story. It was just... next.”

My brow furrowed as I listened to her speak, and when she was done, I nodded, because...

Yeah.

That was exactly it.

I didn't know what – if anything – this dynamic I'd been building with Logan since we both stepped out of our vehicles in the dark that night, meant. I just knew that in the course of everything, from my mother's death, to living with my aunt, to going back to my father, to *his* death, those years in the wilderness, to Nubia's ultimatum, me going to live closer while I got sober... all of it.

None of it felt out of place in the grand scheme of... whatever.

“You're an interesting dude – I see why Lo-Lo was so pressed about having you as a client at first,” Laurel said, in a way that... I'm pretty sure was a compliment?

“Okay time for you to go,” Logan said, getting up – I thought she meant Laurel, but it was actually *my* arm she grabbed, tugging until I cooperated and stood with her, following her to the door. “I'm sorry about this,” she said, stepping out of the door completely with me. “I mean, I thought it would be funny for them to grill you, but I didn't know it would get so... personal.”

I shrugged. “I told you, shorty, I'm not... easily embarrassed, or none of that. I'm just... P.”

“Yeah, now I know.” She bit down on her lip, averting her gaze like she was trying to talk herself into something before she looked back to me. “Um... this probably isn't my business, or maybe it is, but... when we...that first night... was that?”

I let out a dry chuckle. “Yeah. It was.”

“Okay. Okay. Um... I thought you'd said that you were just trying to like... make me feel better or something. Not like nature was calling you into my pussy or something.”

“*Wow*,” I laughed. “Yes, I only came to your place that night because you asked me to, but when you asked... it felt like it came outta nowhere, right?”

She narrowed her eyes and nodded. “Yeah.”

“But it felt instinctive?” I asked. “Like once we were in the midst of it, it was effortless. Like that moment of connection

between us was just... intended to be. Right?"

"Right," she whispered. "But..."

"But *nothing*." I shook my head. "Don't... don't make it something it's not. I'm not confused about being drawn to you, and you don't have to be either."

"It's not *that*," she said. "I kinda... feel like I re-took your virginity or something though. You don't feel like you should've saved yourself for a special girl or something?"

I laughed at that shit, and then... I started not to give her a real response to her question, but... fuck it.

"I gave it up to a beautiful, big-hearted girl who looked at me like she needed me to help her feel something, who didn't make *me* feel like her presence was gonna drag me back into the abyss. I can't think of anything more special."

Her lips parted in surprise at that answer, but nothing came out. Instead of waiting on it, I gave her a little salute and then headed on my way.

If she had more to say... she could tell me tomorrow.

LOGAN

A *re you ready to stop acting like a child so we can talk about this? – Daddy.*

I rolled my eyes and tucked my phone away, remarkably unfazed by that text from my father.

Trei was right – it *was* better to be the one who got mad and decided not to engage, instead of being on the receiving end of the imposed distance.

I wasn't fucking budging, and really? I felt like I could hold my ground on this a long ass time.

In the couple of weeks that had passed since our blowup, I'd seen my parents exactly once – for an ill-fated public lunch I'd politely walked my ass out of. The invite had seemed innocent enough – a claim they wanted to clear the air, with the possibility of an apology implied.

I really should've known better.

It was just another opportunity to talk down to me – but in public, where maybe they thought I'd keep my cool, but nope. I was still determined not to make a scene – I wouldn't give them the satisfaction for one, and plus I never knew when I might be around a prospective client.

I made them feel the weight and depth of my anger – my commitment to being treated with respect – by simply *refusing* to be treated a way I didn't like.

Either they'd leave me alone, or they'd adapt.

In any case, I couldn't focus on that right now – I had show contracts to meet with legal about.

The network had their own lawyers onsite, and I had all the necessary licensing to represent the show on Pierre's behalf – if he wanted that, which he did. He was trusting me with his baby, so even though everybody was technically on the same side, I owed it to him to focus on the task at hand, instead of my personal shit.

When the rep from legal walked in... that suddenly got a lot easier.

“You must be Ms. Byers?” his fine ass asked, extending a hand in my direction as I stood from my seat in the conference room. Pierre was off somewhere with Nick, talking to the Drakes about using their real casino instead of the set buried somewhere on the studio lot, so I was taking this meeting alone. By the time I was done, they'd be back, and it would be time for the next thing on our packed itinerary.

“Anthony Cottrell,” he added, once I'd accepted his hand. He smiled at me, showcasing a single dimple embedded in his deep brown skin. “Good to finally put a face with the name from all the emails.”

“I agree,” I told him, returning his smile before I pulled my hand from his. “Uh... there really isn't much for us to do here, just a matter of making sure the signatures are in the right place, stuff like that. I'm... a little surprised you didn't just have an assistant, or an intern do this.”

Taking a seat, Anthony kinda... blushed? “I'll be honest with you, Ms. Byers – this isn't the first time I've seen you,” he admitted. “I've seen you often, coming and going up and down the halls, through security, all that. So when I caught this opportunity to meet you, I couldn't pass it up.”

“As opposed to... just walking up and introducing yourself?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You always seemed busy,” he shrugged. “Very busy, very focused... very beautiful,” he added, tagging on the kind of

smile that probably got him in many doors – between *many* legs.

Hell... I felt it right in the seat of my panties too.

I let out a little laugh. “*Oh*. So... you thought you should use false pretenses to end up on my schedule, so that you could have my undivided attention?”

“Why do I get the feeling you think that’s a bad thing?”

Again, I laughed, shaking my head. “Honestly, Anthony? I... appreciate the motivation, but I really am very busy. So if legal doesn’t *really* need these documents gone over in person, I have some things I need to get back to.”

He clapped a hand to his chest. “Damn. I guess this was a swing and a miss, huh? Do I get a consolation prize at least? Maybe dinner?”

Standing up from my seat, I laughed. “I’m a little irritated with the antics right now, so I’m going to say no. But again – it was smooth, so kudos to you, I guess.”

“So you’re leaving me with hope,” he chimed, following me to the door, and getting close enough that I could tell he smelled good as hell. “I’ll try again then.”

I smiled. “Save some trees and ink, and just walk up to me next time,” I advised, walking away as I pulled out my phone to check my schedule.

I wasn’t lying – I *did* have better places to be than getting flirted with by a network lawyer.

It was great boost to my ego.

But I didn’t have time for that shit right now.

Looking at the schedule, I realized I was more distracted than I thought – I’d had the time for the meeting about filming in the casino wrong. They’d actually finished with that an hour ago and were back on the studio lot for cast auditions.

Shit.

That wasn’t... *me*.

I didn't get schedules wrong.

Uh... you kinda did though.

The meeting with legal had been impromptu, and instead of taking it another day, I'd tried to squeeze it in, which probably accounted for my mix up. Nothing had happened, nothing was broken – hell, no one *else* even knew about it.

But I did.

With a deep breath, I tried to clear my head, switching gears away from my mistake so I could be as mentally present as possible. By the time I arrived on set, they were already deep in the throes of it all – Nick, Pierre, and the casting director they'd brought on, Miko. Nobody blinked about my late arrival, or even seemed to notice anything was off.

Thank God.

I settled into a seat while Nick handed me his notes, to get me caught up on everything they'd done so far. Most notably, they'd cast the Jason role – a nice-looking kid who wouldn't have been out of place on one of those colorful men's natural hair grooming commercials. He was still on set because they wanted to see his chemistry with potential actors for the other roles, including the one they were wanting to figure out next.

Tracy.

To me, one of the most important roles.

In the course of the series, she felt almost like Jason's north star, guiding him back towards himself, and keeping him upright. Conspicuously – admirably – Pierre had been careful not to paint her as Jason's healer, or as if he were something that completed her. Even though the show was *about* Jason, Tracy was fully realized, and his want for nearness with her kept him focused on his own path, instead of collapsing under his family's bullshit, or the harmful influence of old friends, all of that. As much as he was – necessarily – doing it for himself, he was doing it for her, too.

It was a meaty part.

And... some of the women auditioning were doing better than the others, but none were really giving it what it needed, not to me. Unless somebody came in and knocked it out of the park though, the team was committed to seeing everybody.

At least, until, Miko called one particular name.

I could only guess Nick and Pierre hadn't seen the lists of who showed up for the casting call – I hadn't either, since it literally wasn't available until they arrived at the audition.

As the one with the official capacity though, Miko must not have seen anything out of the ordinary, because when she called out, "Send in... what is this... *Elodie*?" her face didn't do anything.

Me, Nick, and Pierre though?

We were a different story.

"El, *come on*," Pierre groaned, as soon as she walked up, dressed in heavy boots, jeans, and a white tank, just like the casting call said. "You know this is serious, right?"

Miko leaned in. "What am I missing, here?"

"Elodie is his little sister," I answered, then looked up to give her a little wave, which she returned, then looked right at Pierre.

"I know it's serious – that's why I'm here. I want to audition," she said, earnestly, looking right at her brother.

Pierre shook his head. "I'm not about to do this with you because you're bored, or whatever. You're not an actress, El. I've never even heard you talk about this."

"Don't do that," I said, before I could stop myself. But now that the words were out, everybody was looking at me, so I had to keep going. "If she's here, and prepared, like everybody else... at least let her try. If she sucks, okay, don't hire her for the role. But don't brush her off just because *you* don't think she's serious. You don't know what dreams she's been scared to tell anybody about."

Once I'd spoken, I sat back, avoiding everybody's eyes, lest I make it even *more* obvious that the wrong chord had

been struck with me.

“I think she’s right, P,” Nick spoke up, and Miko wasn’t familiar enough with the dynamic to disagree.

“I know the lines. I know the part, and I’m ready to do it. You think you’ve got a monopoly on honoring our parents or something?”

Oh, damn.

I wasn’t looking, but I heard Pierre let out a huff, and could imagine his irritated posture. “Fine. If you think you can do it... let’s see it.”

I glanced up just in time to see the determination in her eyes before she looked away, to the “Jason” actor she’d be working with for this scene.

The cameraman moved into place, and Miko was the one to count the scene in, and then... they were off.

“What makes you think you can understand me, huh?” Jason demanded, pacing the floor in front of her as she watched him, her face pulled almost into a sneer. “You see me walking the casino floor a couple times, you know who my father is, and what? You *know me* now?”

As Tracy, Elodie bit her lip, clear derision knit into her expression as she stepped forward. “You’ve got the emotional depth of a kiddie-pool, nigga. What is there to know, huh? Oh, because I wear a skimpy little costume, work the card tables, you think you know something I don’t? Sounds like *you’re* the one doing the judging to me.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Oh but it is. *It is,*” she repeated, with a pained crack in her tone that wasn’t expressly called for in the script. “You know why I’m here? *The same fucking reason as you!* Because my family expects it – either that, or the stripper pole, right?” A nasty smile crept over her face. “That’s where the girls like me end up, you know? One or the other, around here, just going along to get along, cause we don’t have any options. Not like the rich, pretty son of the boss man.”

“Tracy—”

“*Shut up! Just... shut the fuck up!*” Tracy shook her head, turning her back to Jason before looking up to the ceiling. “Every summer, I come back to this casino. Because it’s good, easy money, and it’s not as dangerous as it is for the girls at the clubs. Not *as* dangerous. But still.” She turned on him. “My mother did it, and her mother did, and probably hers too. As long as your family has had this place, mine has come to work – cigarette girls, or passing out chips, dealing cards, getting groped either way. As much as this place is built into your legacy, it’s built into mine too.”

Jason took a deep sigh, scrubbing a hand over his head. “Why just the summers? Why not year-round, to save up, and get outta here?”

“*Duh,*” Tracy said, wearing a sly smirk. “Because *just like you...* when it’s not holidays or summers, I’m off at school. At *your* school. You walk around *there* like your shit don’t stink too.”

“You’re shitting me.”

She grinned. “Nope. The same hard ass classes, difficult professors, high ass tuition as you. Only, I have to pay it myself. And then I come home for the summer and work myself like a dog at the mercy of some rich assholes, and have to listen to my parents, my friends, and everybody else encourage me not to fucking bother, cause nobody thinks there’s anything more out there for me than working at this *goddamn* casino. So... you know what... you’re right – I *don’t* understand you.” A dry laugh pushed from her throat, and she shook her head. “And really... you suck. So why the fuck would I want to?”

“*Cut.*”

For a moment... we all just sat there, in silence.

Before Miko ended the scene, I’d been so completely immersed that I’d forgotten where I was, and the sudden imposition of her voice had been startling. When I looked to

Nick, I could tell the same thing was going on in his head, and in Miko's.

Pierre just looked stunned.

Without saying anything to any of us, he got up and approached Elodie, draping an arm over her shoulder to pull her off to the side and speak to her alone. After they'd talked for a few moments, going back and forth about something none of the rest of us could hear, El left, and Pierre came back to his seat.

Miko was the one to break the silence.

“So... she's our Tracy, right?” she asked, in a tone that implied there was no other option – and really there wasn't, since Elodie had easily blown everybody else out of the water.

He looked up, looking between us before he spoke. “Yeah... she kinda killed that, huh?”

So there it was.

We did see the other actors who'd come to try for that role, but nobody hit quite the right note like Elodie had. We were done for the day after that, with auditions continuing throughout the week for the other roles. Miko went on her way, and so did Nick, and finally, in the later part of the afternoon, it was just Pierre and I in his office.

“*A monopoly on honoring our parents,*” I said, pulling his attention from his computer as I took a seat at the edge of his desk. “What was *that* about?”

Leaning back in his chair, Pierre eyed me for a long moment before he spoke. “It's about our mother,” he told me, quietly, then pulled up the arm of his tee to show me the part of his tattooed sleeve that was normally hidden.

Eloise Perry spelled out on her own marquee, like his father and grandfather.

“She was an actress. Lots of really quiet, melancholy indie stuff,” Pierre explained, with a wistful smile. “She never really wanted fame – she avoided it, actually. She just had a passion for it, so she did it, and that was how she and my father met.

She was already a Perry – no relation – but he was like... *you already have my last name, you know you're supposed to be my wife, right?*"

"That is *incredibly* smooth. I probably would've had to pull like ten generations worth of ancestry data to make sure though," I laughed.

"*She did,*" Perry chuckled. "I really wish I had them telling this story on video or something, cause it's hilarious. And this was before like... sending off your DNA and stuff, there were digging up old family bibles and stuff with the birthdates written in the front before she would even let my father take her on a date."

I smiled. "*Wow.* So you're a Perry on both sides?"

"Yep. The whole family really got a kick out of that too. Like I said, I don't have them telling the story of how they met on film or anything, but I've got boxes of footage of us with my mother. We would write scripts and act it all out like they were real movies – we'd send them to my Pops, and he *loved* that shit. They loved us, and they loved each other. El was little when she died, but she was always obsessed with those fake movies growing up. And then when she got older, she would watch mama's stuff. Today was the first time I ever heard that she wanted to *be* like her though."

I nodded. "Yeah... I guess y'all talked about it though?"

"A little bit. I'm gonna get up with her tonight to tell her she got the role... and apologize again, for trying to blow her off."

"Good," I agreed. "She probably needs to hear it. I'm sure she'll appreciate it."

Pierre's gaze came up to mine, locking before I could look away. "I get the feeling you'd know."

"Your feeling is right," I confirmed, with a wry smile. "I've never gotten my apology for being brushed off, and then killing something people thought I couldn't accomplish. And I mean... I've come to live with it. I've accepted that it's probably not coming, but still... It would be nice, you know?"

“I appreciate you speaking up for the underdog,” Pierre said, clapping a hand on my knee – no innuendo either, just a friendly gesture. “I was being an asshole.”

I smirked. “Yeah, you kinda were. But I get it, that’s your little sister. You know her better than most. And... I’ll admit, I was rooting for at least giving her a shot, thinking maybe we can get her some acting classes, start her in an ancillary role, something like that. I was *not* expecting *that* to come outta her.”

“Yo. Listen. I...” Pierre sat back, shaking his head. “I had no idea. Like *no* clue. She hadn’t even said anything to me about coming back out to Vegas period, let alone that she was studying the role. And then she came in and murdered that shit, like... like it was nothing. And you know who she looked like – who she reminded me of?”

“Who?”

A little grin spread over his face, and he nodded. “Our mother.”

“Talented ass family,” I laughed as I stood from my perch on the desk. “Do you need me to do anything? Dinner reservations, a congratulatory gift, any of that?”

Pierre closed the top on his laptop and stood. “Nope. El likes to shop, so in addition to my apology, I’m gonna submit myself as her personal bank account and bag holder for a couple hours at the mall.”

“Top tier apologizing,” I laughed. “I really couldn’t have crafted anything better myself. Should I take that closed laptop to mean we’re done for the day?”

“As far as I’m concerned, yeah – I’ve gotta go take a nap or something so I can hang with El’s young ass,” Pierre laughed. “Ay – was everything good with the crew contracts? I know you wanted that handled before we moved on with the cast.”

I blinked, remembering Anthony and his flirting for a moment before I nodded. “Yes, everything is settled there. We’ll be ready to move forward.”

“Good. So... I’ll see you tomorrow?” he asked, prompting me to nod again, offering quick goodbyes before he left me there in the office by myself, trapped by the sudden buzzing of my phone.

We need to talk – Daddy.

I pushed out a deep sigh as I stared at the message on the screen.

“You good?”

“Oh *shit!*” I whispered, startled by the sound of Pierre’s voice. “I thought you were gone.”

“Yeah, I noticed you didn’t follow, so I was making sure I hadn’t missed something. And now you look pretty stressed out.”

“It’s nothing,” I lied, shaking my head. It wasn’t that I didn’t *want* to tell him what was going on, I was just... trying to preserve some sort of boundary between us.

Especially since his whole *I broke his celibacy* revelation.

Sure, it only happened because I was messing around when he came to check on me, but still...

That was *so* much to process.

Even if he insisted it wasn’t a big deal.

Maybe because the way he’d described it, as this very natural thing... as nervous as I’d been once it was clearly about to happen... it felt the same for me too.

Which was low-level terrifying.

I wasn’t – usually – the kind of girl who operated too largely on my “feelings”. I liked logic, and concrete things I could reach out and touch, and... neat boxes.

What he was talking about – *what I’d felt too* – was messy.

I wanted nothing to do with it.

Luckily, he didn’t seem pressed.

“Well... when you decide you wanna talk about ‘nothing’... you know my ears are open, all that,” he said,

thankfully not pressing.

I smiled. "I know. And thank you."

This time, I joined him in heading to the elevators, and he walked me to my car before we parted. He was going to deliver good news and make amends with his sister.

I... was going to pick up wine and sushi and try my best to ignore my phone for the rest of the night.

PIERRE

It just didn't seem good enough.

As much as I heard and was doing my best to accept Nick's assurances about the quality of the script after we'd spent all those intense days going over it in rewrites... there was something I couldn't get off my mind.

Even though I was just a kid, and hadn't really understood what she meant, I remembered my mother chastising my father that no matter how much critical review he got from his sycophant peers, his scripts were only as good as the care they took of the women who appeared between the pages.

Heroines and villains alike, they deserved more than flat characterizations that only existed as a complement to the men who were – typically – the “real” focus.

Again, back then, as a kid I couldn't really understand it. Now though, when I saw my mother's movies, and thought about the work my father had done since then, I could very clearly see it.

There was a difference.

Without looking up a single word from the creators on social media or watching past interviews, however the creator of a movie presented women on the screen was a clear indication of how they felt about them in real life.

And when I *did* see them in action, read their interviews, whatever... well, the assumption panned out with near 100% accuracy.

It was important to me to not become another part of my own statistic.

So I called Sienna.

Well more accurately I called Sienna, and she didn't answer, which I took as a sign from God, attempting to protect me from myself.

But then, instead of calling me back, a few hours later she shot me a text saying that she was already about to get on a plane from LA to Vegas for something else she was already working on. Instead of hashing it out over the phone or email, we would just meet and talk about it in person.

I... didn't love the idea.

But if she was already on her way anyway and would be in town... maybe it was for the best. Depending on what her schedule was like, it – maybe – wouldn't be too big an imposition to hire her for some script consultation work.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Shit.

Shooting was due to start in exactly two weeks. If nothing else, maybe she could lend her experience with the creation of one of this past summer's hottest Black shows to my first episode, at least. Whatever insight she could offer – specifically from a woman's perspective with her added expertise as a writer – would be enough for me to apply to the rest of the script.

Whatever happened, as it stood now, I did *not* feel prepared for that first table read. So between now and then, *something* was going to have to happen.

I could not blow this.

Especially after seeing how phenomenal Elodie was in the Tracy role. If she shined despite a bad script – which I was pretty confident she would – it would make my failing of our parents look even more drastic in contrast.

I really, *really* did not want that.

I downplayed it when talking about it to Logan, but what the media had taken me through in the wake of my father's death contributed to an even worse downward spiral than I was already on. Yeah, most addicts were under the mistaken impression that they had it under control, but the traumatic, *dramatic* way in which my father left me, paired with the intense scrutiny, judgment, unmerited commentary, and overexposure from what felt like the whole world at the time... honestly, I still had nightmares about it.

Sure, I felt like I was pretty well past that now.

On a day to day basis, at least.

But there was still the fact that a common refrain amongst the media had been that I was supposed to overtake my father's legacy, but I didn't actually have the tools to do so.

I was a drunk; I was supposedly a druggie.

According to "sources" I was nothing more than a big dick and a pretty face, nothing between the ears, no comparison to the legend that was my father.

I knew I shouldn't give a shit about proving them wrong, that making this show wasn't about *that*. It was about honoring a legacy, doing something I was passionate about – and maybe even *good* at.

I wanted to create something my parents would be proud of, if they were here to see it.

And I wanted to prove the naysayers wrong.

So I would do what was necessary.

When Sienna arrived for our unscheduled meeting the day after I'd called her, it was with big hair and a bigger smile. She was very touchy, very flirty, just like she'd always been.

I'd hoped to have Logan here, even though I hadn't told her about this meeting. I'd put enough on her plate and didn't want to throw her off. Still, her *keep this shit professional* energy would have been a great buffer for Sienna's *fuck work, let's play* mentality.

Instead she was off being productive, still dealing with contracts.

So many contracts.

There was a contract and hiring paperwork, waivers, and non-disclosures and all sorts of other shit for every single person that would step foot on our set.

It was a lot.

And I was glad as hell she was on it, instead of me.

“*P-Threeeeee!*” Sienna gushed, rushing to wrap me in a hug as soon as I met her downstairs at the security desk. She went from talking Freddy’s ear off to looping an arm through mine, not stopping to ask what it was I’d even called her for before she started chattering away about everything that had been happening in her life from the major to the minutiae.

I let her.

Because it really had been a while, and despite my reservations, it really *was* good to see a familiar face. For better or worse, Sienna reminded me of home, and my memories of LA were by no means all bad.

She was present for some of the bad though.

“Okay,” she said, once we were seated in the lounge area in my office, and she’d rambled for another twenty minutes. “Tell me what’s going on, what did you have me hop on a plane for?”

My eyes went wide. “Well... you hopped on a plane because you had something else going on here in Vegas I thought?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, there’s always something going on somewhere, right? What did you need me for?”

I sighed. “Well, I’m making the show.”

“Oh *right*,” she exclaimed, grabbing me for another hug. “I heard about that, but you’ve been a little stingy with the details

– nobody knows anything! I can't believe you haven't gotten a press run started yet.”

“We haven't even started filming, which is part of why I wanted to talk to you. I—”

“Nooo, you do *not* want to wait until you start filming to build a buzz! What kind of people do you have around you that don't have your marketing together? Do you need me to call someone?”

“I'm good on that front,” I told her, even though... *should I already be doing that?* I'd have to run it past Logan. But in any case – “I was calling you because I wanted to have you take a look at the script for me. *Everybody* was talking about *The Common Room*, like... I couldn't have avoided it if I wanted to. You killed it.”

Sienna beamed. “Well, *thank you* – and thank you again for the congratulatory bouquet, it was beautiful.”

“You're definitely welcome – gotta hold it down for our old crew, you know? I remember how we were all just trying to make our shit happen.”

“Right,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “Until *some* people got too good to hang around us anymore...”

Yeah.

I should've seen *that* coming.

“Don't do me like that, Sienna. You know why I left.”

“You didn't *have* to go all the way to *Blackwood* for it though. You could've just told me you didn't want me anymore – didn't have to go alllll the way over there. I'm a big girl, I could've taken the hint.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “*Really?* Cause we definitely weren't on any serious shit when I left, which was mutual, I thought?”

“Okay, you've got a point there,” she smirked, leaning in. “That was *then*. What about... now?”

“Now, I'm trying to get my show made, and I could use your expertise – like a consult or something. Paid, of course,”

I added, trying to make it as clear as possible that this would be a professional collaboration – nothing more.

She sighed. “You’re not as fun as you used to be. But... fine. Tell me about the show and explain what you think is the problem.”

I spent a few minutes giving her a basic rundown of the show, then shifted into my concerns for Tracy. To Sienna’s credit, she gave me her full attention the whole time, nodding along as I made my points. And then, when I finally stopped, she asked to see the script for the first episode – which included the audition scene Elodie had murdered.

I... wasn’t expecting her to frown *so much* though.

This was exactly why I didn’t typically hang around when people consumed my work – I preferred not to be present for the reaction. But I’d asked for this, so I forced myself to peck around on my phone until she was done, and ready to give her feedback.

“So... she’s like a Black manic pixie girl trope with a decent vocabulary or something, huh?”

Well damn.

“That... wasn’t exactly how I intended it,” I said, still cringing over that framing. “She’s definitely different from what Jason is accustomed to, but she never gave me... manic?”

Sienna waved that off. “Okay maybe not manic, but she’s giving me overly-woke vibes. I mean, what is this reference here, about people walking away... ? What does this even mean? This is the kind of highbrow shit that turns the audience off.”

“I’m aiming at a highbrow kinda show,” I explained. “It’s not a comedy, it’s not light.”

“Right, it’s a drama. But I’m telling you, if you can connect the millennial crowd with your heroine – they either wanna fuck her or be her friend or both – then you’re golden. You’ll get the show trending, everybody talking, you’ll be the main topic every week. But Tracy is too... confident. She’s too

certain, too focused, to together. And she's not pressed about Jason. She's not relatable enough – audiences want messy, insecure women they can relate to.”

I frowned. “Logan called her aspirational. Inspiring.”

“I don't know who the fuck Logan is, but they don't know what they're talking about,” Sienna assured. “Remember, *The Common Room* is my *third* hit show – I know what I'm doing. Send me the script – all the episodes. I'm gonna get this fixed for you.”

She had all the confidence in the world in her tone, but... I wasn't nearly as certain. “I'm gonna run it all past Nick, and after that, we can talk about your compensation and all that. Cool?”

“Nick Davison? Of *course* he'd connected to this – I see his lofty fingerprints all over this,” Sienna grunted, rolling her eyes. “I bet he's trampled your original script, hasn't he?”

“Nah,” I chuckled. Sienna and Nick were never exactly the best of friends – they tolerated each other when they needed to because of their shared connection to *me*. Nick was never into the drinking and partying – it wasn't really his personality for one, and his sickle cell disease made it potentially dangerous anyway.

Sienna was *always* about that life and tended to be very vocal with her opinion that people who weren't were boring.

So yeah... that wasn't exactly a match.

“Eighty-percent of this is my words,” I explained. “Maybe more than that, just guided by his advice, and he definitely has a lot of outright input too. Don't forget – Nick is an award-winning filmmaker. You can't sleep on his talent just cause you don't really fuck with him.”

“Yes I can,” she sucked her teeth. “Anyway, enough about that – this little reunion right here,” she purred, suddenly shifting energy back to the flirty shit as she practically crawled into my lap. “Where are we going to celebrate?”

She was right in my face, lip pulled between her teeth, one hand planted – too high – on my thigh. And... I couldn't and

wouldn't front; Sienna looked good as fuck, with her signature sandy-brown fro, big brown eyes, and that mouth... that I was quite familiar with. She had a body too, that she wasn't shy about showing off. Right now she was in ultra-low-cut jeans and a crop top that left her lacy, see-through bra peeking out the bottom.

It was quite an appealing picture.

I didn't have an opportunity to think further than that though because Logan came breezing through the door very suddenly, wearing a big smile about something until her gaze landed on us.

Her smile dropped *immediately*.

"Oh! Oh my goodness," she said, turning away. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you had... um... company. Moving forward, I'll knock and announce myself before coming in."

"Logan, I—"

"All the contracts are handled," she kept on, like I hadn't spoken, "Everybody is confirmed, signed, all that."

"Oh, you have an assistant? *Cute*," Sienna giggled, somehow getting even closer. "I should've known. She's sexy. If you're into that body type."

That made Logan turn around.

"You think you can make us some lunch reservations?" Sienna *kept fucking talking*, and I... didn't even know how to stop what was bound to be a misunderstanding happening right before my eyes.

Well... what could've been.

Logan smiled though. "Of course? How about *Beauchamp's*?"

Sienna looked at me. "The food any good?"

"I... yeah," I nodded.

"Okay cool," Sienna giggled. "If they've got good food and a good bar, I say let's do it. Set that up," she told Logan.

“Wonderful,” Logan agreed, with a tight smile before she shifted her gaze to me. “I’ll get that set up and forward the details to your email, and then I’m actually heading out for lunch myself, per my schedule I sent you earlier in the week. You and I can get together later today or tomorrow to go over the marketing plan I’ve been working on, but you should be aware that I managed to secure a small piece in *Sugar&Spice*, with Rashad Martin doing the photography. If we want to take that option, they’ll need an answer very soon, so they can squeeze us into the next issue. Think on it and we can discuss later. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Without giving me a chance to respond to any of that, she slipped out, which Sienna laughed over.

“What the hell kinda assistant is she, talking to you like that? You’d think she was like... part of the team, not the girl who fetches coffee,” Sienna jeered.

I got up, putting some distance between us as I informed, “She *is* part of the team. And she only brings my coffee to be kind – not because she has to.”

“Oh here you go, always wanting everybody to feel important.”

“Logan *is* important,” I corrected. “*Beauchamp’s* is impossible to get in for a same-day reservation, but she’s gonna make it happen because her name holds the weight in this city – not mine.”

Sienna smirked. “Okay. Fine. I’m just saying... if she’s the *Logan* who found all that literary feminist bullshit Terry was giving *aspirational*... now I see why.”

“Tracy.”

“What?”

“My character’s name is Tracy,” I repeated, shaking my head. “And where Logan is concerned, you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, so how about you just don’t?”

“Wow,” she laughed, holding up her hands. “Fine. You know I didn’t mean any harm, right?”

I nodded, letting the issue die for now, but... that was *exactly* the problem.

She never meant any harm.

But the harm was there, whether or not it was meant.

Sienna headed out, citing wanting to change before we met for lunch. When I sat back down at my computer, I already had an email from Logan – reservation info and the *Sugar&Spice* feature details.

Nothing more.

I grabbed my phone, wanting to shoot her a text to explain that whatever it looked like between me and Sienna when she walked in, really wasn't.

But why?

For weeks now, there had been no flirting, no innuendo – Logan wanted to keep shit professional, so we had. And it hadn't even been awkward – we'd been incredibly productive, we'd talked, we'd laughed, there was nothing weird...

Explaining to her that Sienna wasn't a potential girlfriend or whatever else might've gone through her head though... it didn't feel like the type of thing that would improve our vibe.

So I put the phone back down.

We had a good energy going, and I wasn't about to be the one to fuck it up.

LOGAN

I kept imagining myself kicking Sienna's ass.

Now I usually wasn't the type to really take it there because it just wasn't my energy, which had been her saving grace. I wasn't easily riled by pettiness from women who saw me as some sort of competition; which was obviously the case, because why else bring out the nastiness with a stranger?

She'd seen me, decided she had her place and I had mine, and wanted to make sure it stayed that way.

I wasn't the one to play those games with though. If there were any two things in the world I was *very* certain about? They were: my value to clients and the fact that with this face, body, hair, and clothes – or without them – I looked good as fuck.

She felt it and she hated it.

I could've used that to make a point, sure.

But for what?

I had nothing to prove to her, so I did my damn job instead.

That was all mature, professional, *don't wanna chance messing up her manicure* Logan though.

Outside Logan, if you will.

Inside Logan was currently putting a red-bottom on Sienna's neck.

Pierre hadn't bothered to introduce her, but it only took me a moment to pinpoint who she was and why I recognized her.

Sienna Sparks, a loud-mouthed party girl who was always in some kinda friction with someone via social media. She was a writer and producer, among some other titles she'd given herself. Her work was the kind of vapid, emotionally manipulative, reductive conversation starting, derivative bullshit ass shows that got attention in the echo chambers of social media, making them "hits" on the compelling strength of FOMO.

Like that God-awful *The Common Room*.

Fake ass *Girlfriends*, about a bunch of women in the same apartment building recycling the same men amongst themselves and getting mad at each other about it. Those trash ass dudes were the center of their silly ass worlds, when they weren't being terrible friends to each other and horrible at their jobs and just being wastes of space in general.

The plots were all over the place and over the top and the acting was terrible. Stilted, unrealistic dialogue that seemed catered to being quoted for tweets and Instagram captions, weirdly forced *lesson of the week* ass scenarios.

One of the characters spent a whole episode lamenting the possibility she'd contracted HIV from a "down low" man, in *this* day and age, and I didn't even change the channel – I just turned my whole fucking TV off and went to bed.

Maybe throwing offensive dated storylines, stereotypes, and controversies into a blender and slapping a *millennial* sticker on whatever it regurgitated was some people's cup of tea.

It was *not* mine.

I didn't hate-watch TV. My self-imposed limit forced me to spend the little time I had on stuff I actually enjoyed; so I never bothered tuning back in, and I hadn't missed it, at all. I watched her receive her accolades and all that and I was glad to see the barriers she was breaking as a Black woman, proud to see her getting the shine.

Mediocre white folks got rewarded for wack shit all the time, why shouldn't she?

The work just wasn't for me and I accepted that.

Now that I knew she was a bitch though... well, I could proudly let my internal *fuck her* flag fly.

I didn't have to wonder how she and Pierre knew each other – she had a very similar background to his, Hollywood parents on both sides – so they'd probably run in the same crowds, been friends.

I also knew Pierre had been feeling iffy about the script, so it was no big shock that he'd sought another consultant – *especially* one who had a few, albeit terrible *to me*, hit shows.

It made sense.

Even what I'd walked in on, with her practically in his lap, them staring at each other like they were about to rip the other's clothes off... my logical mind had no problem with that. My feelings about her as a person, and the quality of her work, aside... Sienna Sparks was a *bombshell*.

The woman was gorgeous, period.

Presumably she was single, and so was Pierre, so it made sense, completely, for there to be chemistry, and maybe more, between them.

In my not-so-logical mind though... I kept glancing at my phone, waiting for Pierre's name to pop up with...

What, Logan? An assurance that it wasn't what it looked like? A declaration that he only has eyes for you? What?

Shit.

I didn't know what I was expecting, or what I wanted, or *why* I wanted it, I just wanted... something. A feeling I fully recognized as ridiculous, considering the fact that I was keeping him so firmly planted in the *client* part of my brain, only allowing overlaps with the boundary of *friend*. It wasn't fair to feel so nauseous about the thought of him with someone else when really... that was the only possibility here.

This is nuts.

“Hey, you ready?”

I looked up from my phone to see my cousin Des heading toward me with a smile. As usual, she looked flawless, from her perfectly coiffed hair to her designer heels, but as I stood to greet her, she stopped in her tracks to hype *me* up.

“*Damn* we’ve got some good-looking women in this family,” she gushed as she pulled me into a hug, then air-kissed both my cheeks. “Where did you get this suit, ma’am?”

I sighed. “From this place mama sent me to.”

Des raised an eyebrow. “And you left there with something that fits like *this*?”

“Hell no, I got it tailored,” I laughed, locking arms with her as the hostess led us to our table. It had been *entirely* too long since I’d hung out with her, but I was already feeling a weight lifted off my chest.

Desiree’s experience and career – her superstar status among the *Black Royalty* in Vegas had been a large contributing factor of me branching out too. Her parents hadn’t been very happy about it either, but she’d transitioned her lucrative law career into that of a “fixer” in the vein of fictional Olivia Pope, and she was damn good at it.

The best.

I wanted that kind of notoriety, that kind of lionization attached to *my* name. Not fame, not really, just the kind of status where nobody had to recognize your face, but when they saw your *name*, they just knew – you better be sure you’re on the right side of it.

I had no interest in cleaning up messes for politicians and all that – no interest in the lane Des had carved for herself. There had been a time when I first left the firm, that she’d been very heavy with the recruitment speeches – she wanted me on her team, badly, and I was flattered.

My cousin *saw* me, and I needed that.

What I also needed though, was to create something of my own, which she always respected, and then encouraged. She was full of advice and resources, and it would've been silly of me to turn down the first clients she sent my way, so I didn't. I took them on, and I worked hard as fuck, and I wasn't perfect by a long shot back then, but I left them impressed.

In turn, they left my card and their testimonials with their friends.

And so it went.

Des was a bit older than me, which worked to my advantage. Her experience and insight made her an excellent mentor, friend, and sometimes sounding board.

Which, I could really use right now, on more topics than one.

I leaned over the table a bit, lowering my voice to ask, "Hey... keep it a buck with me. Have you ever crossed the line with a client?"

Her eyes went wide, and she held a finger up, taking a swig of water before she answered the question. "Look at me right now. Zero out of ten, do *not* recommend," she stated, then her eyes narrowed. "Your current client is Pierre Perry, right?" she asked. "That young man *is* fine, but Logan..."

"Yeah," I cringed. "Too late for that."

"Of course it is," Des sighed, shaking her head. "To answer your question... yes, in the past, I've crossed the line with the client. And it didn't work in my favor, it was a fucking mess. Now I'm not saying that it *can't* go right, because I've seen it before with other people in my field. I've just also seen it go wrong too many times."

I shook my head. "Oh *no*, that's not even the issue," I told her. "It's not... we're not... trying to make it be something serious. That isn't actually on the table."

Des sat back. "Oh good. Why not?"

"Because it probably wouldn't work out," I laughed. "How are you going to say *good* and then ask *why not*?"

“Because I want to know *why not*,” she shrugged. “I was surprised when the news came out about you breaking up with Leslie, so I’m trying to figure out where your head is. Was this just a one-time thing and you’re working some single girl stuff out, or are you in the market for something serious and this guy is just not it? Or... something else?”

“I’m not sure either of those categories is accurate actually,” I admitted. “I’m definitely not in some big rush to jump into another relationship. I mean... I spent six years with Les, and it’s not like I hated the man the whole time.”

“Yeah I know,” Des laughed. “You were obsessed with his big-eared ass once you actually gave him a chance.”

I laughed. “Yes, I was. And when it was good between us, it was *so good*. I saw the forever, so clearly. But somewhere, something shifted – maybe him, maybe me, maybe both of us, but I couldn’t see it anymore. And once it was done... once it was over, it was just *over*. And I don’t know if I’ve really mourned that.”

“Do you feel like you need to still?” Des asked. “You were checked out for so long that you may have already done that without even really realizing it. So that’s my question: not do you think it’s too soon for you to move on, but do you feel like *you’re ready* to move on?”

“Well I’m *definitely* not hung up over Les,” I assured. “Like, that’s just not the issue at all. I’m... immersing myself in helping with the show, and I’m finding joy in that. I’m thinking about what I want for my career and where I want it to go – like I could specialize in just the TV thing, with the same general services, you know? And... I enjoy working with Pierre, and I think he’s a really great guy. And the sex is... fantastic. He really values and respects me, professionally and otherwise too, I think. He makes sure I’m okay. We’ve got the chemistry and all that good stuff – all the stuff that makes it not even matter if the other boxes get checked. I just don’t know if I want to be someone’s girlfriend right now,” I mused, realizing this was as much true consideration as I’d allowed myself to give to this possibility. “But then... there’s the fact

that about an hour ago I walked in on him in his office with someone. So I'm kind of thinking he may have moved on."

Des shrugged. "And it's fine if he did, right? He's far from the only eligible bachelor in Vegas. But my advice to you, whether it's him or someone else, is that you can just... date someone. Everything doesn't have to lead to marriage or even to a relationship. It's not the end all, be all – not your prize in life. You can have fun just being out with someone – dinner, movies walking the strip, playing golf, whatever. Getting a hotel room and getting your back blown out. *Whatever*. It's okay to do that and it not be more than *that*. If it becomes more, and you're okay with that, then it does. But it doesn't have to be the goal."

I pushed out a sigh and nodded. "You're right. I guess after being in a relationship so long, it just kind of feels like the default state for me. But I get it though. You're right," I repeated. "Just because that was someone else's goal for me, what they wanted to see, doesn't mean I have to fall into it."

"I know what I'm talking about every once in a while," she teased. "If you're going to take my advice there though, let me give you something else while I've got your ear. Talk to your damn daddy before he has a stroke."

I rolled my eyes at that and Des laughed.

"I know I know they behaved badly, and they deserved the silent treatment because of it. I get it. You're a grown woman and they needed to get off your back. But if you're going to be grown, Logan? Be grown. You can have a conversation with your father and still stand on your convictions. If he's still acting out, start the clock over, that's his bad."

"But—"

"But nothing," she sang. "Is he an excellent litigator, yes. I understand that. My daddy is a lawyer too, and so is my sister, and my... well, I don't have to tell *you*, you know how we do in this family," she laughed. "Nobody wants to argue with a fucking lawyer, *I know*. But take the chance to at least hear him out, if for no other reason than... they're getting old, Lo. We don't know how much more time we'll have with them."

You shouldn't allow the disrespect, no. Absolutely not. But... please talk to that man so he can stop whining about it to *my* daddy, who won't stop whining about it to *me*."

"So this is selfish for you, is what I'm hearing."

"Duh," she laughed. "I love you and I want you to be happy of course... but also these old men are getting on my nerves."

We giggled about that and more, and enjoyed our lunch until we both needed to get back to work. I was surprised to discover she was headed to the *WAWG* building as well, for a meeting she couldn't tell me anything about, with a network exec she couldn't disclose. The only thing she *would* say was that men were disgusting. She wouldn't clarify if that was about the client or not though.

In any case, we walked into the building together, intended to part ways on the elevator. When the doors opened to let us on though... Anthony walked off. His face lit with a grin as soon as he saw me and there was no hesitation in his step as he headed straight for where Des and I were standing.

"Ms. Byers," he greeted and I tried to ignore the subtle nudge Des was giving.

"Mr. Cottrell, how are you?" I asked. "I was in your part of the building most of the morning and didn't see you."

"Trust me, I have been disappointed about that since I found out. I was honoring your wishes to not finagle another meeting, but I was certainly hoping to catch you sometime. So that I could do as you suggested, and simply... walk up and ask you out."

"She'll go," Des spoke up before I could even answer. She held out a hand to him, which he accepted. "I'm her cousin, Desiree. And she'll go. Dinner, this Friday."

"*Wow*," I sputtered, as Anthony laughed.

"Okay then, this Friday," he agreed. "Of course assuming *you* are saying yes as well?" he asked, looking to me.

For some reason, the image of Pierre and Sienna looking *extra* cozy on the couch flashed in front of my eyes. Quickly, I blinked it away and nodded.

“Sure,” I told him, earning another of his beautiful smiles. “I would like that.”

“*Excellent.*” The genuine excitement coming off him was very endearing, which made it easy not to be too mad at Des for meddling. He was charming and handsome, and... if I was really going to just date, without taking it too seriously... those were really the only two things he needed to start.

“She likes tulips,” Des yelled out of the elevator after we’d finally gotten on and I’d already given Anthony my private contact information. This time, I swatted her ass about that shit, which only made me laugh as she eased away from me. “I’m trying to help him win, that’s all,” she insisted. “That man looks *good*. Why didn’t you tell me about him?”

“Because I don’t know him! We only met because he *manipulated* me into a pointless meeting, just so he could talk to me privately.”

“Okay effort.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. It was cute. It was also annoying, because it was a waste of my time, and I told him so.”

“But being frank with him about your disappointment didn’t send him running in the other direction? He’s *still* interested? I’m... waiting to hear the problem?”

“There isn’t one,” I laughed, as the elevator stopped on my floor. “Yet. I’ll let you know after the date *you* agreed to... unless this fool chops me up or something.”

“Don’t worry, I’d hunt his ass to the ends of the earth,” Des called, as the elevator closed to take her up to whatever executive she was about to get out of trouble.

At the door to Pierre’s office, I hesitated a bit, then knocked – I didn’t think he was actually in there, but I wasn’t trying to get another surprise. When no answer came, I let myself into the empty office, taking the time to regroup and check my schedule and emails before moving on the next step.

According to the daily itinerary, Pierre was down on the studio lot, reviewing set designs; something I was supposed to be joining him for. At first, I waffled, thinking it would be easy to just... stay here in the office and work on something else. But I didn't want to be the one making things awkward.

So I made my way back down, with a brief stop at the desk so Freddy could make sure I knew he noticed I'd been in and out a lot. Once I got away from him, it was over to the space that housed the loft that had been built out for Jason, his parents' home, and his father's office, since those were the settings we'd been using most – we'd scouted and secured real locations for everything else.

Pierre did smile at me when he saw me, which made me feel a little silly for being so – internally, at least – awkward. As soon as it was just us again – no Sienna – we were right back to our normal vibe, with no friction.

Or... so I thought.

Everything was good, we were laughing and joking, making notes on what to add to and take away from the set. And then, I heard my name, and turned to find Anthony walking toward me yet again...

With a huge bouquet of tulips.

"I'm nothing if not able to take a hint," he said, moving to put the flowers in my hands. I didn't know what else to do, with several sets of eyes – including Pierre's – on me, so I just... accepted them.

"Thank you. These are beautiful," I admitted, because they honestly were. "Um... how did you know where to find me?"

Anthony grinned. "Freddy, at the security desk," he laughed. "He ribbed me quite a bit for *trying to steal his girl*, then said he couldn't hate on another brother, so he had to help. You'd told him where you were heading."

Yeah, for my safety, not... this.

"Right," I nodded.

“I’m gonna let you get back to work,” Anthony spoke up – maybe he *could* actually take a hint. “I know you’re a busy woman, and I don’t want to keep you. And... I will actually take these back with me, and leave them at the security desk for you, so you don’t have to lug them around.”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

“You are quite welcome, Ms. Byers. I’m looking forward to our date.”

I smiled. “Right. Me too.”

He went on about his way then, and I... *shit*. As much as I truly, *truly* hated displays like this while I was trying to be taken seriously at my job, after the last year or two of inattention from Les... I couldn’t front.

This was sweet.

It felt good.

“So... you’re seeing him or something?” Pierre asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I wiped the smile from my face, but didn’t nod, since that wasn’t exactly true, but if it was... “Would that be a problem?”

His eyebrows shot up, and he made this scoffing sound that let me know he’d likely taken that in a way that wasn’t how I meant it. “Nah, you’re more than free to do you, shorty. I was just... whatever. Can we get back to work now?”

O...kay.

“Of course,” I nodded, wondering what *I’d* done to cause such a reaction. Or... maybe it wasn’t me at all. Maybe it was nerves about the script, or the issues we’d discovered with the set, or maybe something else entirely.

Pierre was a grown man though.

If he had a problem with my work, I trusted that he would tell me.

And apparently... there was nothing personal between us for *that* to be the cause.

So... I did what I always defaulted back to, instead of trying to dig for deeper meaning that may not even exist.

I did my job.

PIERRE

Now that my head was clearer, I understood better why I'd needed to distance myself from Sienna.

At first, I'd been able to just chalk it up to the process of recovery.

With the exception of a very select few, I didn't hang with *any* of the people I'd been around during the parts of my life where addiction had hold of me the worst. Those people reminded me of old habits, brought them way too near the forefront for me to be able to do what I needed to do, so they had to be cut. Now that it wasn't so urgent, now that sobriety was my default rather than an occasional thing, it was blatant.

Sienna was... a lot.

Some of that was in a good way. When she was happy, she was *happy*, and could light up the whole room with her bubbly, vivacious energy. But when she was low... she sucked all the fire out, in a way that felt damn near supernatural; that's just how intense she was.

I was aware enough of myself to recognize I could only handle the constant rollercoaster with her for so long.

The thing was... she'd already been around longer than expected.

Last night, at a later hour than most would find polite, she showed up at my door, very excited about what she'd done with the last episodes of my script. Even though she was unannounced, even though I'd been just a couple hours into

the first good sleep I'd had in the last couple of weeks, of course I let her in.

It was about my script.

Ignoring the fact that she smelled like a distillery, I simply kept some distance from her as she talked everything out. And it was... It sounded different. It sounded like *her*, though I suppose I should have expected that when asking her to consult on it. But... when I wrote with Nick, the script still felt like me.

So maybe I was bugging. Maybe this was just some type of paranoia, since I was so in my head about the script anyway.

Instead of giving her any pushback in the moment, when she was very clearly not completely sober and I was tired, I offered to order her a ride back to the Drake hotel where she was staying. In the morning, I would talk to Logan about where any breaks in my schedule might be so, Sienna and I could really dig into everything in daylight hours.

“Huh?” Sienna slurred. It was subtle, but I caught it because I was just hyper-aware of it, looking for it. “I don't need a ride, I drove. What would you call me a ride for?”

Okay.

“Aiiight... so, Elodie is supposed to be coming to stay with me during shooting, but she's not here yet. The guest room is set up for her though, so you can use that. How about you just stay over, sleep... whatever this is off? And then we can look at this with fresh eyes, first thing in the morning before I even go to the office?”

Sienna grinned, approaching where I was standing to press her body into mine as she tipped her head back to look me in the face. “Or... I could just spend the night in your room... Like old times. Upstairs, last door on the left... right?” she giggled, and I shook my head, taking a step back and putting my hands between us so she couldn't get back in my face.

“I prefer the other way,” I told her. “I think we could both use a good night of sleep.”

“And I know the perfect thing to burn some energy off. We could put each other to sleep...”

“Sienna... seriously...”

Right in front of my face, Sienna’s mood visibly shifted. The flirty smirk she’d been wearing swung almost frighteningly into a wounded scowl. “Oh right. You’re too good for me now, I forgot.”

“That’s not even what I’m on,” I said shaking my head. “I don’t mean any offense, seriously. But I *can’t* fall back into the same stuff that had me out here bad just because you want to recapture old times. I’m not judging you for doing you, I just can’t be a part of it. Do you understand that?”

She just stared for a moment, then rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she huffed, grabbing her bag and laptop to head up the stairs. “I don’t need any directions,” she told me, with a glance over her shoulder. “You fucked me in the guest room before, too.”

Yeah.

This was a mistake.

There wasn’t any other way I could feel about it, no excuses to wrap my head around. This was just flat out a mistake.

Luckily, I was already almost finished making it.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE TO BANGING ON MY LOCKED bedroom door. I knew Sienna a little too well to not have taken that extra precautionary step to prevent any shenanigans with her. Once I peeled my eyes open, a glance at the clock told me it was already nearing ten in the morning.

Well past the time I would typically have been in the office.

Shit.

I flung myself out of bed to get to the door, where I found Sienna on the other side. I was only vaguely surprised to find

her in nothing but a tank top and panties; presumably what she'd had on under her clothes when she showed up last night.

Actually... the tank top was a surprise.

"You locked your door?" she teased. "Really? Did you think you'd wake up with my hands down your boxers or something if you hadn't?"

"Honestly? Yeah. What is it? I need to get myself together and get to the office."

Sienna smirked. "Oh no, the office has already brought itself to you. You have a guest waiting downstairs."

Instead of playing into whatever game of riddles Sienna was trying to get me to engage, I moved past her. Downstairs, through the kitchen, and out into the living room... where Logan was waiting.

"Good morning," she greeted, with her same reliable *let's get to work* energy as always. "Did you forget we had a meeting this morning? About press for the show, marketing plans, your photo shoot for *Sugar&Spice*, all that?"

I knew when it came to Logan that was just a question; not an accusation. I wasn't being chastised. She was just honestly curious and my answer would inform what her next steps were in terms of the information she would give me and in what volume.

Sienna did not.

I didn't even realize she'd followed me down here, but before I could reply to tell Logan that yes, I'd definitely forgotten, *she* opened her mouth.

"Have you always talked to your bosses like that? It's hella familiar. You should stop."

Logan smiled at her. "I'm my own boss, actually. And yes, as a matter of fact, I do speak to myself that way, with pointed questions and direct offerings of information. Pierre, as my client, if there's some issue you need to discuss with my methods of communication, I'm absolutely open to that

conversation. We can build it into your schedule for the day if necessary,” she said to me, effectively dismissing Sienna.

I was surprised it had taken this long, and that Logan had been this nice about it.

I’d already put a stop to any outright disrespect Sienna tried to level at Logan, but that hadn’t stopped her from doing any little needling she could get away with. I’d even apologized to Logan about it, which she took in stride, insisting that Sienna was no more of a bother to her than a mosquito who wouldn’t actually bite.

“Just buzzing around, hoping someone will notice and give it some attention.”

“Client,” Sienna repeated back, in a derisive, childish tone before she sunk off somewhere.

Hopefully to get dressed and go about her business.

She’d effectively drained all the patience I had for her in any particular twenty-four hour period. *Especially* since she wasn’t just looking at the script for me as some friendly favor.

She was getting a check for her work.

Market rate, not some friends and family discount either.

The fact that she was not just here out of the kindness of her heart made me feel less guilty for being annoyed and ready for her to take her ass on.

“I’m sorry,” Logan said putting down the notecards she was so partial to when it came to this type of meeting. As she did, I noticed a bracelet on her arm; a new, disparate addition to her typical wardrobe. She approached me slowly, like she was hesitating about whatever was about to come out of her mouth next.

That bracelet was fucking with me though.

I didn’t know what it said about me that I knew Logan only wore a watch. She might put on a few rings or something, but when it came to her hands and wrists, I had only *ever* seen a watch on Logan.

Today there was a bracelet.

A skinny band with a heart charm hanging from it. It looked exactly like the type of corny shit that wack ass lawyer from the network would have bought her.

Did I have any evidence other than my own suspicions that it had come from him?

Nope.

I just *knew* because I did, and the fact that she was in my face this morning looking as good as she did, wearing another niggas jewelry... it was pissing me off.

“I know this is none of my business, but... I’m a little worried about you. You’ve been stressed about the script, and it’s been worse since she popped up. Now you’re forgetting important meetings. So I have to ask... what’s happening, here? Are you sleeping with her?”

She’s really asking me that with this motherfucker’s bracelet on.

Wow.

“You’re right,” I told her, wearing a blank expression. “It’s *not* your business. I’m just your client.”

At first, her eyes went wide, clearly hurt by my rejection of whatever sympathy she was trying to toss my way. Her brow furrowed, mouth opened, then quickly shut again as she pressed her lips together, swallowing whatever she’d been about to say.

Then she smiled.

“Of course. I apologize for overstepping. It won’t happen again,” she declared, with an eerie sort of calm that left me feeling... unsettled. “How about I order you and Ms. Sparks some breakfast – assuming you’ve not eaten yet. A nice boost of energy should give us what we need to get this planning and prep work done. Then I’ll get out of your hair so you two can enjoy your day.”

The way she shifted her attention to her laptop then made it clear she wasn’t looking for an actual answer from me. She

was informing me as to what was about to happen. I couldn't verbalize why, but I could just *feel* the fact that maybe... I'd kinda fucked up.

But why should I explain shit when she was making assumptions about what *I* was doing, while some other motherfucker was bringing her flowers and jewelry?

So... whatever.

Instead of hanging around, I left the living room to go get myself together and *of course* Sienna had her ass in my shower, instead of just using the one in the guest room. She must've heard my footsteps leading me in that direction because as soon as I hit the door of the bathroom, she stepped out, wet and naked and... beautiful.

Honestly.

"See something you like?" she purred, not bothering with a towel before padding up to me. "I've gotta get out of here, and I know your taskmaster down there is probably waiting, but... we could make something happen in a short amount of time. You always did know *juuust* the right buttons to take me from zero to a hundred in an..." She snapped her fingers, then slid her wet hands up my bare chest. "*Instant.*"

It was tempting.

Very tempting, in the face of the unfamiliar, absurd urge I suddenly had to get under Logan's skin in the same way that bracelet had gotten under mine. Just give Sienna exactly what she wanted with the bedroom door wide open so every moan, every scream, could travel through the house. To drive home a false impression that I'd moved on too.

What the fuck was there to move on from?

That was the question I couldn't answer and it was bothering the fuck outta me. Why was I so pressed about this shit when my focus was on making this TV show happen, and figuring out what the hell I was doing with my life, and... other things that weren't remotely related to dating a woman who hadn't wanted anything serious.

From jump.

She hadn't lied, hadn't led me on, hadn't given me a single shred of false hope, and yet... *somehow*... her dealing with this Anthony dude felt like a betrayal.

The answers I needed weren't located in the depths of Sienna's pussy though.

And even if they were, that was just one Pandora's box I refused to open because of what might come with it.

"I appreciate you helping with the script, Sienna, but... that's really gonna have to be it," I told her, stepping back. "Logan is ordering some grub if you wanna hang around before you head out."

Sienna rolled her eyes. "No thanks. I've lost my appetite."

"Okay well, I'll hit you up about the script meeting later," I said, not bothering to hide *my* annoyance either because *goddamn*.

I wasn't in the mood for managing other motherfuckers' moods in addition to mine.

She let out a huff and stomped off, leaving me to do what I'd come up here to do, which was get myself together so I could actually work.

Which... meant facing Logan again.

Fuck.

That look she'd given me after I told her whatever was happening with me and Sienna wasn't her business... that shit was etched into my brain.

I'd hurt her.

And didn't even understand *why* I'd done that shit.

LOGAN

“Okay... I have to give it to you. This is *actually* amazing,” I told Anthony, once I’d swallowed my mouthful.

Across the table, he grinned at me. “See? I told you I could make the best short rib you’d ever taste, and you didn’t believe me.”

He was right. I *hadn’t* believed him when he made that claim because nothing about him said *this is a man who can cook*. There was, however, plenty that said he would do whatever it took to impress me.

I hadn’t decided yet if I thought it was bad or good.

For now, I was legitimately enjoying myself with him – including the time spent in his gorgeous kitchen, where he’d insisted I sit down and watch. I was so relieved that him inviting me over while he cooked hadn’t *actually* been some backwards ploy to see if *I* could cook that I didn’t even mind the fact that the food had taken a long ass time to cook.

He was good company, so I hadn’t found myself bored.

There *was* still time for this invitation to turn into him trying to get into my panties though.

We’d see.

In the meantime, I was just gonna enjoy it.

“Where in the world does a Las Vegas lawyer pick up a skill like this?” I asked. “Seems very specific.”

He chuckled. “Well, he makes a claim that he absolutely does not have the ability to back up, and then he frantically googles and practices and wastes a whole lot of expensive meat in the two days before he’s due to back up the shit he talked.”

My eyes went wide. “Seriously?”

“When I open my mouth, I really try to make sure it’s the truth coming out,” he chuckled, as I shook my head.

“You know what... that sounds very much like my kinda energy, so I’m not even mad,” I admitted, laughing. “Not to mention, you were honest about it, so... kudos to you.”

I wasn’t about to say this out loud, but backing up shit talk was very high on my list of non-physical qualities that made a man attractive. Really, Anthony had a whole lot going for himself, and in terms of a first time back in the saddle... I could do a lot worse.

He was incredibly easy to talk to, and look at, which was a one-two punch that had me at his house well past my intended hour. It wasn’t until he was offering me another glass of wine that I decided it really was time for me to go.

“I can’t have that last glass. I need to be nice and clear-headed for my drive,” I told him, using it as an *honest* excuse to decline. “I really have enjoyed myself with you though. I’m glad I let you convince me.”

He didn’t pressure me about staying longer once I made it clear I had every intention of not being at his house all night. I did get a hint of disappointment from him, but that was understandable, so I didn’t really mind it. Especially since it wasn’t like he was pouting about it.

He walked me out to my car, where he gently grabbed my hand, holding it up.

“Is this a gift from somebody I need to be worried about?” he asked, referring to the bracelet that was a new addition to my typical wardrobe. “I don’t mind a little healthy competition for your attention, but at least let me know to expect it.”

I grinned. “Well, Anthony... I look like *this*, so you should be expecting competition at all times,” I told him, teasing. “But this in particular is a gift from a group of teenage girls, and I am not a creep, so no. They are certainly not any type of romantic rival.”

“Okay, I follow you there but... I need some more information on that. Why would a bunch of teenagers give you something like this?”

“They saw it and thought it was elegant,” I shrugged. “And... that’s a word I guess they associate with me. Rowan Bishop, Reid Bishop’s wife? She runs this community center.”

“Yeah, The Cartwright Center. I know exactly who you’re talking about.”

“Right. Well, I volunteer there sometimes, and there was this group of girls who’ll be graduating high school really soon. When I could, I had been spending time helping them with their college applications and preparing resumes, their introduction letters, helping them study, all kinds of stuff like that. I had plenty of time because I hadn’t chosen a new client yet. But, since taking on Pierre, it’s taken away most of the time that I would have been spending with them. Which bothered the hell out of me. So to assuage my guilt over not being able to give them as much attention, I gifted them scholarships to assist with them getting their higher education. This,” – I held up my arm – “was their way of saying thank you. It was a few days ago, and I’ve just been wearing it ever since.”

“Ahhh,” Anthony groaned. “I see what you doing right now,” he said, chuckling as he took a step back.

My eyebrows went up. “I’m doing something? What am I doing?” I asked.

“Trying to make me fall in love with you on the spot,” he told me, inciting a peal of giggles before I could stop myself.

“*Wow*. That was...”

“That was pretty corny, I know,” he laughed. “But that is what you bring out of me. I can’t even be smooth anymore.”

You're beautiful, smart, successful, *and* you've got a big heart? What am I supposed to do with all of this? With all of *you*. I mean, *come on*."

"Well, you count your lucky stars that the last guy didn't play his cards right. And you hope that *you* do."

Anthony's eyebrow shot up. "The last guy?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "A six-year relationship, which ended... two or three months ago. Something along those lines. He was... like you. Handsome, gainfully employed, no kids, big dreams for the future, all that stuff that checks off the boxes. Except a couple really important ones that I did not realize were that important."

"What were those boxes?" he asked, stepping closer.

"Those boxes are down for maintenance," I said, then laughed at myself for that ridiculous imagery. "I'm not even presenting those boxes for checking right now. Which is to say that I'm not trying to jump right into another big thing so soon. Not opposed to it, but I just want us to be on the same page when it comes to what's happening here, or what could happen here. I know you and your boxes are of that age when men start to realize they want a wife. But I'm not looking to be that. And I hope that doesn't come across as harshly as I feel like it sounds."

Anthony shook his head. "No, not at all. I appreciate the transparency. And I also recognize an opportunity to just be cool and play my position when I see it, so understand that nothing you said is even in the realm of scaring me off."

"I didn't think it would be."

For whatever reason, he took that as an opportunity to take that final step closer to me, basically pinning me against my car. I knew the kiss was coming and didn't back away from it. This was only the third time we'd been out, in as many weeks, but I had accepted that this step of letting a whole new person put their lips on mine was coming soon.

With Pierre, I hadn't even thought about it, and maybe that was part of the appeal.

There was no time to anticipate it, no time to think about what might go wrong, or how I really feel about it. It had just happened.

Anthony, on the other hand, was not getting the benefit of such a clean mental slate from me.

He did fine though.

His lips held the perfect level of moisture and they were soft. He didn't try to do anything weird with his teeth, didn't try to force his tongue into my mouth, no craziness.

Just... a nice kiss.

Just nice.

How... disappointing.

It wasn't something I'd used to write him completely off, especially when we didn't know each other that well quite yet. Maybe a little more... *oomph*, a little more spark would come later.

But for now, I gifted him with a smile as we gave our final parting words and I got in my car for the drive home.

Anthony should have been on my mind.

Dissecting every moment of our date, thinking about what I'd tell my friends, wondering what might be up for us next. Instead... the route home led me along a familiar area I hadn't driven in months.

The same route where I'd ended up quite literally running into Pierre for the first time.

So he ended up dominating my thoughts.

I was still baffled by this thing with Sienna.

It was bad enough knowing that he was trusting her with his already flawless script.

Sleeping with her though?

That was something else.

I'd called myself doing the right thing – the direct thing – by simply asking point blank since even the possibility had me

worried about him. I remembered him speaking about how getting away from the people he'd hung with in LA had been this necessary thing for his sobriety. And now here his past was, right back in his face, while he was already stressed about making sure he got the show right.

It was a disaster waiting to happen.

I could admit to being a bit obsessed with winning when it came to my career.

I loved all the little corny sayings and adages.

Logan Byers doesn't lose.

Logan Byers doesn't miss.

I was self-aware enough to know that part of my concern about Sienna's presence and what it meant for the show was rooted in my desire to be a part of the *ODS* success. *Not* to have my name on it, or anything like that, because that wasn't the norm for me anyway, and wasn't a thing that mattered.

The personal satisfaction was more than enough.

But deeper than that – *more prevalent* than that – was my concern about Pierre's mental state. And honestly, his sobriety. Yeah, he'd said it was none of my business, and he'd been more than a little cold over the last few weeks. But neither of those things could make me just a flip and switch and not be worried about him.

Not when I considered him a friend.

Even though I was a bit unsure he felt the same way, which... I didn't even know what to make of that. I'd briefly wondered if it was related to Anthony, but he'd started up with Sienna before Anthony even formally asked me out, so maybe not. What the reasoning was, I wasn't sure – I just knew he'd been more distant than usual.

Just yesterday, he'd been adamant about not needing me there for the *Sugar&Spice* shoot, insisting that I could be off handling other things. Which was fine, because I *could*, but... it just felt a little strange.

Like he didn't want me around.

If I was on my usual three-month contract, this wouldn't even be a problem – I'd have already moved on to the next thing. But because a major part of what Pierre needed was help with the show, I was contracted through the end of production or six months – whichever came first.

So I was here for the long haul, in a situation that had become unfortunately awkward.

Yay for me.

In front of my building, I sat in my car an extra few minutes to check my messages and everything before I got out. As if I'd thought him up, one of the messages in my email inbox was from Rashad Martin – the *Sugar&Spice* photographer, who'd flown out from Blackwood for this thing with Pierre. Apparently, he thought since I wasn't there, even though I'd been the one to coordinate, I'd like a sneak peek at the shots.

Damn right I do.

I wasted no time tapping into the attached photos – there were just two, but each took my breath away, for different reasons. Nubia had served as his stylist, and I hadn't been privy to anything beforehand, but... *goddamn* he looked good.

One shot was him in a beautifully tailored tuxedo, but... undone. He was seated, his tie draped around his neck, shirt unbuttoned, jacket tossed nearby. His eyes were closed, the image taken in a way that dripped with mental and emotional fatigue, as if he were all dressed up to receive an award – to reap the benefits of his work – and now, it was done.

I loved it.

The other was more playful, and to me, sexier. He was dressed down, in sweats and a tee shirt, but otherwise ready to impress. Fresh haircut, neatly trimmed beard, spotless sneakers, diamonds on his wrist, in his ears, designer shades. He was hanging from the seat of his vehicle, outside somewhere so the sun was hitting just right, the dark ink of his tats making a beautiful contrast against his brown-sugar skin.

And then... there was his mouth.

With the *ODS* fronts I'd gifted him on full display.

I really tried not to make things mean more than they did, but...

Did that mean something?

I was sorely tempted to just hit him up and ask, but directness hadn't worked in my favor last time.

So... I wasn't about to lose any sleep over it tonight.

MY FIRST TABLE READ...

And maybe... not the last one?

The more I worked on *ODS*, the more my mind wandered, about shifting my career focus from this more generalized approach I'd been on to something more... specific.

Like TV-specific.

This was... *everything*.

I got a chance to take one more proud look around at my work before anyone else was due to arrive. Instead of just stuffy, uncomfortable chairs around a conference table, I'd commandeered an empty space and had lounge chairs brought in, with a big coffee table in the middle.

The table was loaded with healthy – and a *few* not-so-healthy – snacks, each seat had bottled water and a little personal side table at the ready, with a fresh notebook and working pens for anything they might need or want to write down. Right up front, when they first entered, I had everyone's scripts printed in book binding, ready and marked with their parts. I also had tablets for the main actors, so that the writers – Pierre and Nick – could send them changes on the fly.

Kettles for hot tea and coffee, a bowl of throat lozenges.

Hell, I even had blankets in case somebody got cold, and personal electric fans if they got hot.

I was ready for *anything*.

Except Sienna walking through the door with a sour ass expression, two minutes before we were due to start. Everybody else, down to the smallest part we'd brought on for today's read, had gotten themselves there *early*.

And then here her ass came, breezing in like some diva, with the definite air of someone who thought we'd been just *waiting* on her to arrive.

"What is *this*?" she sneered, looking around at what was obviously not the typical-looking table read she'd expected.

Before I could speak, Nick was beside me, hooking an arm over my shoulder. "It's dope, right? Logan took the time to make sure we're prepared for all contingencies, make sure everybody is comfortable, and fed if necessary, all that."

Sienna scoffed. "These people are actors – they aren't eating that food. Now if you'd put out a couple lines of cocaine..."

"Plans have already been made for any extra food. There's a shelter just around the corner, expecting me this afternoon. I'll be there to donate the extras to their dinner service *and* drop off a check on behalf of this production, and we've already made arrangements for donation of any future extras from table reads, as well as from craft services once filming starts. And since this show is literally called *One Day Sober*, and the creator takes pride in his *own* sobriety... I'm a little unclear on why you'd ever even make a joke like that?" I asked, digging in unnecessarily because... *really*?

"Girl, if you don't get your goodie-two-shoes ass outta my face," Sienna snarled, and I... stood my ass right where I was, because that bitch didn't run me and my ability to remain "professional" with her was running out.

Fast.

When she realized *I* wasn't going anywhere, she stomped off, flouncing over to where Pierre was seated, looking through the printed version of the script.

“Damn,” Nick chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody handle Sienna quite like that.”

I shrugged. “She doesn’t intimidate me, on any level. And if it came down to it, I’m pretty sure I could beat her ass. So, there’s no need for me to give her back the energy she gives me. I stay cool, she looks crazier.”

“That is very calculated, Ms. Byers. I like it,” Nick said, holding out his fist for me to tap with mine before we joined the rest of the cast by taking a seat.

And then we got started.

The interactions between Jason and his father ran through *beautifully*. To the point that no one else in the room could even hide it on their faces. We were right there with them, reacting to the arguments, getting angry, all that. It was awesome.

And then... it was time for Elodie to portray Tracy, and...

It was *awful*.

There was no getting around it.

It wasn’t on Elodie either – she was trying her best with what Sienna had made available. But compared to the poignant, superbly rendered scenes she hadn’t touched, it didn’t even feel like the same show.

Nobody could hide *that* on their faces either.

“What makes you think you can understand me, huh?” Jason demanded, staring across the space at Elodie as Tracy. “You see me walking the casino floor a couple times, you know who my father is, and what? You *know me* now?”

Tracy bit her lip, smirking. “You don’t know shit, nigga. I stroll up in this place like the bad bitch I am, and you think you know *me*, but you don’t.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Yes it is. Period,” she snapped. “I’ma get my family up outta here, watch. Everybody that doubted me is gon’ see it.”

“Tracy—”

“*Fuck you!*” Again, she smirked. “You and your daddy, ain’t nothing but tricks anyway. And you gone keep tricking, generation to generation. Every summer, til I get outta here. Watch. Period.”

Jason cringed. “Why just the summers? Why not year-round, save up?”

“*Duh,*” Tracy said. “Cause I’m at school, nigga. The same one as you.”

“You’re shitting me.”

She grinned. “Nope. Up there hustling they bougie asses too. I don’t even go to those lil bullshit classes, and guess what? I’ll still have the grades.”

“So what is this really about for you?”

“Securing a bag, what else? And don’t you fuckin’ judge me for it either,” Tracy snapped. “You think you and your people the only ones? Nah, fuck that, I’ma get mine – I’m sorry,” Elodie said, breaking character to drop the script into her lap. “P, really? This is what we’re doing now?”

Suddenly, it was all eyes on Pierre, who’d been very quiet since the scene started. This was the same one Elodie had auditioned with, that had been so great in the moment. The girl trying to pay her way through school to get out of the hood was by no means an original character arc, but the way Pierre wrote her, she’d had depth and heart, neither of which were betrayed by her penchant for a potty-mouth.

Under Sienna’s pen... Tracy was a caricature.

Maybe he hadn’t been able to see it before, maybe he needed to hear it out loud, but there was no possible way Pierre couldn’t see what was so obvious.

That woman’s input was *not* an improvement.

It was a fucking tragedy.

Pierre was wearing a hat, and had it pulled low over his eyes, arms crossed. Since he hadn’t spoken yet, and still seemed to be in deep thought, Sienna took it upon herself.

“I don’t really see any familiar faces, so I’m going to guess this poor attempt at a table read is many of your first,” she said, standing up. “You should feel honored to have been invited on the journey of something my hands have touched, and you should probably remember that. This is not a community project – you’ve been hired to do a job. So get it done – I’ve got places to be.”

“So go then, girl,” Elodie snapped. “Who even are you?”

I knew, for a fact, that Elodie knew exactly who Sienna was. I also knew it was a perfect question to accomplish Elodie’s goal of getting under her skin – she had no loyalty to this woman, and with her family and bank account, it wasn’t like Sienna could “do” anything to her.

It was perfect.

“I’ve written and produced three hit shows, *little girl*.”

“I bet they were some bullshit. Niggas get impressed by anything with some current slang thrown in these days.” Elodie waved her off and pulled out her phone, giving her the energy only a twenty-year-old socialite could do so very well.

I couldn’t front.

I loved this.

But I knew Pierre was probably ready to sink through the floor, so I couldn’t let it go on.

“So I think what’s happening here,” I spoke up, over the hum of voices starting, “is that everyone who signed on here, did so with the expectation that this was going to be a certain show. But now, with the changes to the script, it’s feeling like something else. Nick, Pierre, would you two be open to us going back to your script before the most recent changes, and let our actors read through *that* to see how it feels?”

“Why the *fuck* would they want that? Are you trying to say something’s wrong with what *I* wrote?” Sienna snapped at me.

“I think it’s quite clear your changes aren’t working, so I’m offering a suggestion.”

“Which *I* happen to think is a good idea,” Nick spoke up. “I didn’t think there was a problem to begin with, but these changes... if I’d seen these before today, I wouldn’t have signed off on it.”

“Because it’s not up to *you* and your wannabe highbrow eyes,” Sienna countered. “You show me something better, since you’re a critic now.”

“Respectfully... I believe Pierre already has shown us better.” I looked down just long enough to tap a few buttons on my tablet. “Our Jason and Tracy now have the scripts pulled up on their screens – their original scripts. We can go through that same scene right now, and everyone can see the difference.”

Frustrated, Sienna turned to where Pierre still hadn’t said a word. “If you do this, I am *outta* here. And I still want every dime you owe me for my time in this God-awful place.”

“I guess we should say goodbye then,” Pierre told her. “You’re welcome to stay, since I invited you here for your voice, and wanted you on this team. But this is, has always been, a collaborative effort. And if you’ve got a problem working with others, I’m not going to beg you. We’ll make sure you get your check, though.”

I *fully* expected her to storm out, furious at not having gotten her way. Instead, she crossed her arms, a self-satisfied smirk on her face as she returned to her seat. “Fine. Let’s see this in motion, so you can see – I *know* what audiences want. I know my shit. And you’ll see it. Let’s do it.”

I returned to my seat wearing a smirk of my own, because I knew what was coming next – one of my favorite scenes. The way Sienna wrote it, it completely changed Tracy’s motives and trajectory. But to me, the way she connected with Jason in the moment was a masterpiece.

I’d already seen the whole conversation about working over the summer, the family legacy, all that, in audition. It was beautifully clear in my mind.

Jason took a deep sigh, scrubbing a hand over his head. "Why just the summers? Why not year-round, to save up, and get outta here?"

"Duh," Tracy said, wearing a sly smirk. "Because just like you... when it's not holidays or summers, I'm off at school. At your school. You walk around there like your shit don't stink too."

"You're shitting me."

She grinned. "Nope. The same hard ass classes, difficult professors, high ass tuition as you. Only, I have to pay it myself. And then I come home for the summer and work myself like a dog at the mercy of some rich assholes, and have to listen to my parents, my friends, and everybody else encourage me not to fucking bother, cause nobody thinks there's anything more out there for me than working at this goddamn casino. So... you know what... you're right – I don't understand you." A dry laugh pushed from her throat, and she shook her head. "And really... you suck. So why the fuck would I want to?"

What came after that though, I'd only ever read, so I was excited to at least hear it.

"If you're not trying – don't even *want* to understand me, what is this conversation even about, Tracy? Why even bother, if you think you've already got me figured out?" Jason asked, meeting her gaze.

"Because I'm hoping it'll get you to figure *yourself* out. You and your whole family... you walk around with your noses in the air while you build your fortunes off the backs of locals. You don't care how many parents aren't there to help their kids with the homework, or who are too stressed because money is tight to have the necessary patience to show them grace, and love, and what actually being happy looks like. You've never known the life of having to get your siblings ready for school in the morning cause your parents are dead tired from an overnight shift, so they can't. But you think the shit is okay because y'all toss your spare change at a charity every once in a while. You *think* you're the ones who couldn't bear the suffering of a child to ensure your own livelihood, but

no. Y'all are not the ones that walked away. You stand there and watch and then go right back to your castle," Tracy said, disdain clogging her voice as she sat back, done.

"What does that shit even *mean!*" Sienna interrupted, before Jason's next line. "It's just word salad, trying to sound deep!"

"It's a reference to *The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas!*" I informed her, shaking my head. "You were going on about how much you know, yet you don't recognize something most people pick up in freshman level lit classes?"

Her eyes snapped over to me, filled with fire. "I'm about sick of you!"

"Honey, the feeling is mutual. Can we get back to this, please?"

"*What-the-fuck-ever,*" Sienna screeched, ripping herself up from her seat to storm out.

"I'll make sure your check gets to you!" I called after her, then brought my gaze straight to Pierre, who'd finally pulled that damn hat up. "Shall we finish this table read now?"

Without Sienna's interruptions – or her awful script – the rest of the read went beautifully. There were minimal changes needed, which meant next week's shooting date – pushed back to give some breathing room around the script and more time to perfect the sets – was secure. I could schedule the reads for the next episodes, as well as get the appropriate crew to build out shooting schedules... all kinds of things were unlocked now that this was done.

It was going to be a lot of work, but... it was work we were excited to do.

And I couldn't wait.

I did, however, wait until we were alone in his office to broach the elephant in the room with Pierre – one of them, at least.

"I'm glad you were able to see the beauty in your own work," I told him, as we were packing up to leave there, done

working for the day. “I know seeing it shot and edited and all that will be a whole other level, but in the meantime... I hope you were able to see what we see.”

He stopped what he was doing to look up, meeting my gaze. “You don’t have to be nice about it, shorty. You can say it plain. I was bugging and was about to let this turn into some bullshit because I... couldn’t just believe that I could do it.”

“Everybody has to be reminded sometimes,” I shrugged. “Sienna’s invoice isn’t cheap, so that uncertainty is gonna cost you, but... things are back on track now. So... there’s nothing to sweat anymore, right? It’s fine.”

Pierre smirked. “Why do I feel like you would’ve made sure it ended up like this?”

“Cause you know I’ll do what it takes for you to win?”

The smile slipped from his lips, but he nodded. “Yeah. That’s it exactly. And I appreciate it.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” I assured, dropping my eyes so I could flip the heart charm on my bracelet from the uncomfortable spot where it had gotten lodged.

“You must really like that bracelet, huh?” he asked, and I nodded.

“I really do. It’s not my typical style, but it means a lot, so... here I am,” I laughed. “Am I messing with it a lot? I know I am. I just don’t want to happen across any of the girls and not have it on – which I know is ridiculous, but still.”

When I looked up, his brows were pulled together, confused. “Girls?”

“Yeah, remember? Or maybe I didn’t tell you, since I haven’t had any time with them since we started. Some seniors I met down at The Cartwright Center. I put some money into a trust for them, for college, and this was their way of thanking me.”

“*Oh. Oh.* Wow.” He shook his head, letting out a dry sort of chuckle I didn’t understand. “I... thought it was from Anthony.”

“What?!” I laughed. “You know, it does look like something a man would buy for someone, but... no. I absolutely would not have accepted jewelry from him, this soon. We haven’t even... nevermind. Just... no.”

Pierre raised an eyebrow at me. “You bought *me* jewelry though.”

“That was different.”

“Nah, I think you did it cause I’m easy. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Stop it,” I laughed. “Um... speaking of... Rashad Martin sent me a couple pictures from your shoot. I saw you wore the grill.”

Pierre smiled, and nodded. “Absolutely. Had to represent, right?”

“Yeah... I guess so. You looked good.”

“Did you doubt I would?”

I giggled, shaking my head as I grabbed my bag and headed for the door, glad that for the first time in a while, it felt like we were parting on a good note. I was getting out while we were ahead.

“Nope. Never.”

PIERRE

“I can't sleep.”

I didn't bother trying to hide what I was doing from El, since she probably already smelled the smoke anyway. From my lounged position on the balcony chaise, I beckoned her with my hand, inviting her to come out and join me in the pitch black of night.

I couldn't sleep either.

“You're really about to let me do this, huh?” she asked dropping beside me and extending a hand to insist I share. Reluctantly, I did, watching her take her turn and then blow the puff of smoke out of her mouth before passing it back.

“What are you talking about, girl?”

“Your show, P. This is your baby, something you created, something you're building. I don't have any experience. I've never done anything like this. I didn't even know I *wanted* to do something like this.

I grinned at her. “And now, here you are.”

“Yeah,” she huffed. “Here I am. Here *we* are. The thing is, when I look at you I'm not doubting anything. Every time you said you were going to do something, you made it happen. Whether it was making sure I was good or getting sober so you could be around our nephew or making the show. You made it happen. What the fuck have I done besides look cute on Instagram?”

“You’re twenty, El. What is it you think you’re supposed to have done?” I asked.

She sat back with a shrug, her posture defeated. “I don’t know. *Something*. A wack rap album. A clothing line. An amateur sex tape like all the other cool kids,” she laughed.

“That’s aspirational?”

“It’s proof they did *something*.”

I shook my head then gave her a nudge, inviting her to take another turn. It sounded like she might need this more than I did.

“Your proof is coming soon, baby girl,” I told her. “I’m not going to sit in your face and front like I always thought you had something great in you that you were just hiding. Not saying you *didn’t* have something like that, but you’re young. So I wasn’t really looking for that, which is maybe my bad because... *goddamn, El*. You are really fucking good at this. And I’m not saying that just cause I’m your brother. I can’t even imagine anybody else in this Tracy role. You are truly our mother’s child, and I know... her and Pops, they’re not here to see it, you know? They’re not here to give you that encouragement, bolster your confidence all that. *I’m* here though. So I’ll say it for all of us. We’re fucking *proud*.”

“Shut up,” Elodie muttered. Her head was turned away from me, but the sudden snuffles breaking through her silence told me I’d struck a nerve. I wasn’t trying to do all that, but she was my sister.

I couldn’t have her out here feeling down.

Especially when our first day of shooting was tomorrow – in a few hours, actually. I knew that’s what these nerves were about, because it was the same thing that had driven me outside, too.

Couldn’t sleep, the only person I wanted to fuck wasn’t on me like that, and turning to the bottle wasn’t remotely an option.

So my medicinal herbs would have to do the trick.

“You’re nervous, too?” she asked into the darkness, after several moments of silence between us had passed.

“Hell yeah,” I answered, truthfully. “Like you said... I created this. Now it’s time to give birth.”

“Is Nick gonna be there tomorrow?” she asked, a bit more excited about that prospect than I liked.

“Yeah,” I told her. “He rented a place for him and Noah to be here for the length of shooting.”

She sucked her teeth. “He takes that damn girl everywhere.”

“His long-term girlfriend? Yes, he *does* take her everywhere,” I laughed. “And even if he didn’t, you know I’d beat the brakes off his ass if I even thought he was looking at you, right? He’s too old for you.”

“I know,” Elodie whined. “I’m just tired of these wack ass dudes my age. I guess they *are* cute together. And Noah gives some good ass advice online, with all her self-worth talk and all that.”

“See? *That’s* what you need to be looking up to. Maybe you won’t end up with another *Chaos* or *Hoodlum* or whatever the fuck that boy’s name was.”

“*Hellion*,” El corrected me, giggling. “And he’s old news now anyway. And speaking of old news, now that you can’t get away from me and avoid the question... um, what were you thinking, bringing Sienna freaking Sparks into your writers’ room?”

I closed my eyes, dropping my head as I pushed a harsh stream of air through my nose.

“Dude. I want to say I don’t even know what that was about, but I know exactly what. It was just stupid. I mean, personal tastes aside, Sienna makes hit shows. People talk about them.”

“Yeah, people talk about them, but half of those people are clowning them because they’re wack. You’re not really on social media like that, so you don’t see it, but I do. And if

you'd just run that idea past your little sister first, I could have saved you whatever you had to pay that harpy, plus some time and frustration. Thank God for Logan pushing to get everything back where it was supposed to be."

Thank God for Logan indeed.

With the mention of her name, her face came to my mind's eye in clear focus.

Pretty as ever, mid-orgasm.

Beautiful.

"Are you going to finally tell me the truth about what's up with you and her?" Elodie asked, leaning back to rest her head on my shoulder. "Don't lie," she insisted. "And don't say it's nothing, cause it's not nothing, cause I can see it. You like her, don't you?"

"Don't matter," I answered. "She's seeing somebody."

El shrugged. "So? Make sure she *sees* you too. You don't have to cross any lines or anything like that to make yourself a contender. Just make sure she sees what you've got that the other nigga doesn't. Let me guess, he's some type of CEO, an oil sheik or something?"

"What?"

Again, she shrugged. "What? She just seems like that type. She's elegant, beautiful, educated, thick, comes from money. She's the *I Need a Wife My Family Approves* of wet dream, P. You're going to tell me she's not?"

"I'm not saying that, but that nigga ain't no CEO or nothing like that. He's a lawyer at the network."

"A lawyer, or *the* lawyer? *WAWG* has a whole legal department, with a hierarchy of lawyers. So where is he on the food chain? I *bet* it's not low."

Shit.

She was right.

I only knew this because I'd been – insanely – driven to size him up, but he was only one step below the *top* level of

the firm that represented *WAWG* exclusively. And from what I could tell, the only reason he wasn't at that top level was because those positions had to be inherited, and unless he was in the business of taking hits out, none of the current partners seemed in much danger of dying off soon.

So he wasn't quite as wack as I'd thought; at least on a professional level.

"I'm going to take your silence to mean he's pretty high up, but I assure you it doesn't matter. You may be boring now that you're on your good behavior shit, but you've got a for real swag about you, P. You're handsome, you're tall, you're fit, you have this whole moody artist and writer thing going. And you've got money. So basically you're a vibe. If you want me to, I will help you take her from this dude. I like Logan, so really it would be my honor."

"I'm not about to *take her* from anybody," I laughed. "Though I do appreciate your enthusiasm. She knows what she wants, where she wants to be, all that. If something is supposed to happen between us, it's going to happen without me having to force it."

"Sounds fake, but okay," El quipped. "You're stupid if you like her and don't do anything about it though."

"Right now, I've got a show to focus on," I reminded her. "That's what I'm out here for, not to be boo'd up."

"You can't multitask, nigga?"

"Shouldn't you be taking your ass to bed or something?"

"Ohhh, now you ready for me to go?" she laughed.

"I *been* ready for that."

Pushing herself up, she giggled again. "Keep telling yourself that, like you don't *love* having me around."

"You're delusional."

"Yeah yeah. I'm gonna try to catch a few hours of sleep before we're due on set... you should do the same."

El disappeared back into the house, leaving me out on the balcony alone. She was right, so after a few minutes I got up too, going inside to toss myself across the bed, hoping to get a bit of slumber.

It didn't take too long for it to find me.

It was bittersweet.

That's what I finally settled on, when trying to figure out how it felt to be on a full-blown, working set for the first time since my father died.

The *bitter* was more prevalent than I wanted it to be, and certainly more than I wanted to admit. It was acrid in the back of my mouth, unswayed by water, gum, anything.

My parents should've been here.

They'd both died too young – and hell, they'd still be young now, just in their fifties. I could've gone to my mom about my script when I was worried about Tracy's portrayal, could've had my father in a director's chair beside me.

So much would've been different – so much would've been *better*.

It wouldn't have taken me nearly this long to put my first project out.

I'd already be thriving... instead, I was playing catch-up.

Shit.

I must've looked like I was on the verge of vomiting from nerves because Logan popped up out of nowhere, slipping some kind of ginger lozenge into my hand before she gave it an encouraging squeeze.

It helped.

Maybe it was the ginger, maybe it was *her*, but either way, I felt better.

I felt... capable.

With that energy in mind, and with Nick and Miko on set in their roles as first and second assistant directors, and Logan doing her typical thing of just... thinking of everything before it actually went wrong... we were ready to start.

My father didn't make television – he made films. They were different, yes, but not *that* different. I'd worried the long ass absence would mean I'd completely lost all the knowledge he'd instilled in me, but I actually fell into a groove with it all quite smoothly.

I remembered the phrases, the technical terms, knew the words to use when talking to my cinematographer and my gaffers, all that.

It was mind-blowing, in the best possible way.

That was the sweet part that cut the severity of the bitter, making it a little easier to tolerate. No, the shit hadn't been perfectly lined out for me, and my parents weren't here to see me make this happen, to see Elodie shine in that role of Tracy.

But we were here.

We were doing it.

We hadn't let the bullshit keep us on a permanent pause.

When we wrapped for the day, there was this collective feeling of just... accomplishment. Obviously this was only the first day of about seven or eight that would result in just *one* episode – we weren't anywhere close to done.

Day one was in the books though.

It was late, and the whole crew had worked hard, so pretty much everyone was ready to get home. There were a few necessary conversations had, and then people started trickling out so they could get rested up to start again first thing tomorrow.

Not Logan though.

She was bright-eyed and energetic as ever, sidling up to me after I'd just finished talking with Nick and Miko about the call sheets and schedule for tomorrow. Everything we'd done today had utilized the sound stages – we'd be on location for the next few scenes, which was a whole different animal.

“So... are you about to call it a night?” she asked, wearing this expression I couldn't quite figure out.

“I thought everybody was. We’ve gotta be back at six am.”

“Right, right,” she nodded. “I just thought maybe... you’d be... trying to obsessively look over the raw footage from today, or something like that.”

“Oh I’m definitely about to do that.”

“Oh thank God, can I come too?! I’m dying to see it, but I’ve been trying to stay out of the way.”

I frowned as I grabbed my laptop, leading her off the set so everything could be locked up for the night without anyone having to wait around for us. “Why would you think you’re in the way?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Just in case. I’ve worked with the execs before, but this is my first time getting to be on set. I’ve been reading everything I can get my hands on, but I just feel like there’s still so much I don’t know. Like... why are we leaving the set if we’re going to look at the footage?”

I chuckled. “Well, on a lot of sets, we’d have somebody taking actual drives from the cameras with all the days footage – separate copies, to be kept in different places, in case something happens to one of the sets. WAWG has a private server as well, secure password access, all that – as long as I’m connected to our private internet, I have access right on my laptop, and if I wanted, I could download and watch at home. I was just going to my office though.”

“See? I had no idea about that – I knew about the copies of the footage, but not the server thing. I’m guessing the DIT sets that up too?”

“So you *do* know what you’re talking about then,” I told her, leading her to my vehicle so we could drive back over to the main building. “Somebody who didn’t wouldn’t be able to pull a title like that out of nowhere.”

“Fine, I know a *little*,” she admitted. “There’s still a lot to learn though.”

That was true.

And she seemed so eager and interested in all of it that I didn't mind answering her questions and listening to her talk about it all the way back to my office, where we settled in that lounge area she'd made for me.

She turned to me as I got myself logged into the server, biting her lip. "*Look,*" she said, holding up a hand to show me that she was shaking.

"*Relax,* damn shorty," I chuckled, putting the laptop down on the coffee table after I'd maximized the screen so we could both see it. It was just camera tests right now, but I'd set it all in a playlist to stream one after another. "Your ass is making *me* nervous."

"I'm *sorry,*" she squealed. "It's just so... exciting, and scary. I'm good though. I'm cool."

I raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"I'm *sure.*"

"Okay cause it's about to start, but if you need a minute..."

"I'm sure. I promise," she giggled, looping an arm through mine and scooting a bit closer. "Okay now I'm ready."

Actually... I wasn't sure either of us was.

Accounting for multiple takes and different shooting angles, it was maybe six or seven minutes of actual show time. It wasn't edited, there were some outtakes, and some obvious first-day jitters.

But even with all that...

"This is... *flames,*" Logan gushed, squeezing my arm as soon as we reached the end of what was available from today.

And... yeah.

It really fucking was.

Again, I *knew* this was the very beginning, knew we still had a long road to go, but damn... all the stress over the writing, the pre-production, hell, the years it had taken me to get to the point of actually writing down a story I'd been

mulling over and developing in my head for such a long time...

It was...

I was...

“Pierre, oh my God, you’re killing me, say something!” Logan laughed, and... I did say something. I grabbed either side of her face, pulling her in for a kiss that she returned without even the slightest hesitation.

At first.

Very suddenly, she stiffened, and I pulled back, immediately realizing my mistake.

“My bad,” I told her. “I—”

“It’s fine!” she chirped, her voice way too high as she sprang up from the couch. “Emotions are high, and we’re both excited, and it’s... nothing to apologize for. You deserve to be enthusiastic about this. You’re pulling off something amazing.”

“*We’re* pulling off something amazing,” I corrected, standing to join her. “You’ve been vital to this process, shorty. There’s no way I’d be here already without you driving this bus.”

A smile took over her face as she blushed over the compliment – honestly making it hard not to kiss her again – no apology this time either. “I’m just glad to be a part. I told you before, that this might be something I want to do full time – working in TV, you know? Getting to see behind the scenes like this, seeing all that goes into it, just makes me think about it even more. And who knows when I would’ve been able to if it wasn’t for you, so... thank you for trusting me with your baby.”

“I couldn’t imagine better hands to have put it in,” I admitted. “Which is crazy, because remember at that first lunch, I told you I didn’t need a babysitter?”

“Ohhh I *do* remember that,” she laughed, shaking her head. “And look at us now!”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Look at us.”

She met my gaze for a long moment – not exactly awkward, but not really easy either. I could just *feel* it, like there was something unspoken.

Logan was the one to break away first, clearing her throat and grabbing her bag from the couch. “I’d better get on home, see if I can finagle a few hours of sleep before it’s time to report back. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I responded, reluctantly, because I really didn’t want to not see her until then. I wanted to fall asleep inside her, then wake up for more, but... obviously that wasn’t on the table. “See you tomorrow.”

LOGAN

Mentally, I had to be ready for whatever might get thrown at me.

This was the default state I tried to live from anyway, but it was especially important *today*, since I was finally going to sit down with my father.

It really shouldn't *have* to be this way.

Preparing to have lunch with someone I loved shouldn't feel like it required tactical plans, but after weeks on weeks of not offering either of my parents more than the most shallow of conversations, not giving room for anything deeper and *certainly* not being face to face with them... they were going to make me pay for that, somehow.

I just *knew* it.

For daring to really take a stand for independence, even as a thirty-something, there would be some sort of recourse.

For a second time though... I was prepared to walk away.

That was the bargain I'd made with myself when I followed Desiree's advice to reach out and have the conversation my father had been so insistent on. I had Trei's words tucked safely away as well, and even some of Pierre's.

Nothing from Laurel.

I adored her, but she had *not* been helpful.

There were definite nerves when I walked into the restaurant, but I was okay. I was solid, I was ready, I was—

“There’s my little Logan-bean!”

Not prepared for that at all.

Nothing could’ve warned me about the joy I’d feel, being called that childhood nickname by my father as he pulled me into the first embrace in months.

“Hi Daddy,” I greeted in return, squeezing him back before I planted a kiss on his cheek. He grabbed me at the shoulders, pushing me a way a bit as he looked at me with narrowed eyes like he was searching for something.

“Why, you’re not green at all. You *sure* you’re a Logan-bean?” he asked, brow furrowed, very serious as I giggled like I was seven years old all over again.

“I come from brown beans, not green ones,” I told him, giving him the child-logic answer he was looking for before he returned my kiss on the cheek, and we sat down.

“So,” he started, as soon as we were settled with drink orders and the server had walked away. “You had an accident in the car?”

Here we go...

I squared my shoulders and nodded. “I did. And I made sure the damage was repaired, paid for out of my own pocket. I’m assuming you know that because of... a service record inspection or something?”

“Yes, well, it was necessary to get the car sold, since you didn’t want it,” he droned. “An uncertified mechanic could’ve voided the warranty.”

“I guess it’s good I used the repair services of a license dealership then, huh?”

He smirked. “Indeed. The work was flawless.”

“No one who *really* knows me would’ve expected me to accept anything less.”

Right on time, the server arrived with our drinks, giving me a needed interruption. I took a slow sip of water, calming

myself, because I knew this conversation wouldn't exactly be easy.

And it was just getting started.

“That’s the root of the problem here, correct?” my father asked, once the server had left us again. “You feel like your mother and I... like we don’t really know you.”

“If you did, you would trust me to make good decisions. You wouldn’t try to force me along *your* path, because you’d know how much I thrive in my own. You’d know that I deserve better than a tolerable life someone laid out for me. If you knew me... this moment wouldn’t even be happening.”

My father chuckled and nodded. “Yes... you’re having the moment every child has, where they feel the need to break free from the anchor of their parents. It happens to all of us. But I’d like to think we taught you well enough that you *must* see the wisdom in allowing those who have already traveled before you to tell you in which direction to point your sails.”

“That assumes I have any interest in taking the same journey – I don’t,” I told him, flat out. “Being able to follow the exact directives of a map charted by someone else is a great opportunity – a great resource – for someone who wants the same things that other person wanted. But that’s not who *I* am. You raised a smart, self-sufficient, curious, ambitious woman who wants to find a way for *herself*. You can’t see the beauty in *that*?”

“I see foolishness and rebellion masquerading as some sort of misguided self-determination. You act as if you’re on a dress code, a curfew, like you’re being forced to let someone else choose how you wear your hair. You young kids these days, you have no respect for the sacrifices made before you – or what, do you think I don’t understand wanting to follow a passion?”

I frowned, offering him a shrug. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You wouldn’t, because your mother and I, we never complained. Your mother wanted to be some fashion designer.

I was going to rebuild and repair houses. In our dreams, that is. But we realized that these were flights of fancy – hobbies at best, that would never have afforded us the opportunities we were able to pass down to you. That our parents passed to us. And theirs before that. You're fortunate enough to have a legacy, sweetheart. And I will never apologize for encouraging you to carry it out, because this is what we do. We pass it down."

Once he was done speaking, I opened my mouth, but was interrupted again by the arrival of our plates – the food smelled good, but my appetite was beyond lost.

"So... what I hear is that... because you and mama gave up your passions to tow the family line... you think I should do the same?"

He looked at me. "I wouldn't put it like that, but... yes. What parents have children and don't have expectation?"

"I understand expectation. I even understand being disappointed, I *get* it. But... with all due respect... I reject this legacy," I told him, and his gaze shot up to me from his plate, alarmed. "I will *not* pass down the idea that a cool story for the family reunion is more important than their freedom to carve what they want out of life."

"Logan—"

"No," I interrupted, shaking my head. I hated the crack in my voice after I'd already been determined not to cry, but this was... so beyond disappointing. "I don't even understand how you can say this stuff to me, Daddy. All my life, you've challenged me to not accept easy answers, to think critically, to think *for myself*. What was all that, huh? Was that only for other people? I'm only supposed to think for myself when my thoughts line up with yours?"

My father dropped his fork, pushing out an exasperated sigh. "*My God*, Logan, with the dramatics! You're telling me you hated practicing law *this much*, that you're acting as if our wanting this for you is some punishment?"

“Yes,” I insisted, with a dry laugh. “Yes. Finally. Now, you’re listening. I would leave work physically *ill*. It was draining my desire to go anywhere, do anything, *be* anything. I was miserable at that firm, miserable with Les, and you’re sitting across that table speaking as if that’s an acceptable tradeoff, as long as I continue the legacy.” I stopped and scoffed. “You know... I wondered if you *knew* me, but I’m realizing, hell... do you actually *love* me?”

“Don’t you *dare* question that, young lady. Not *ever*. Your mother and I have sacrificed and worked ourselves to the bone to make sure you had *every* resource, everything you might need at your disposal, *because* we love you!”

“Then *prove it*,” I demanded, barely keeping my composure. “You’re talking to me about money and connections, private schools and tutors and yes, I appreciate *all* that. But it’s *so* disingenuous to point to *that* to prove you love me when it was just as much about ensuring your precious legacy. *Love* doesn’t ask you to suffer for it. *Love* doesn’t require your misery. *Love* desires your wholeness. *Love* doesn’t see you hurting and begging to be seen and decide that’s an acceptable state. If your love and attention require that I fall in line to live a life I barely want to wake up to... I don’t want anything to do with that.”

For a long moment, my father stared, in astonishment of what had just spilled out of my mouth. “So you are telling me you would rather be disengaged from your family than simply accept the gift we sacrificed to be able to offer?”

“Frame it in whatever way makes you feel justified,” I laughed. “But...yes. And make no mistake – I will not fold, I will not fail, I will not be back to beg. I will *continue* to kick ass on my own, and I will pull myself higher. I will start my own legacy, yes of giving my children whatever tools, resources, benefits I can. So that they have no limits to following their own dreams and figuring themselves out. And you will not be privy to a single intimate moment of watching us soar, and it will be your own doing.”

I was fully prepared to walk away from the table.

And not even because I was just so certain that he was wrong, and I was right, but I was certainly full of righteous indignation, and not prepared to let it go. They had so much to say about how they'd raised me, but instead of trusting the job they'd done, they'd rather treat me like a black sheep for not doing exactly what they said.

It was bullshit.

And I didn't have any qualms about seeing it as exactly that.

Maybe ten years ago, when I was still too young and naive to realize my parents were not infallible, I would have simply gone along with this. I would have tucked away the yearning to do something else and simply *listened*, because they were successful.

Really successful.

How could they *possibly* not know what was best?

I wasn't some silly twenty-year-old girl anymore, though. I was an adult, self-sufficient and capable of fending for myself. I didn't *want* to be okay without my parents, but if I had to... I would.

And I would never forget the lesson in that.

"It seems that you've given this a lot of consideration," my father spoke, seeming to choose his words very carefully. "You feel like you've done the due diligence of looking at it from all angles?"

I nodded. "I do. I won't pretend not to understand, or even empathize with what you guys wanted for me. I get it. What I *don't* get is the sentiment that your wants for my life should supersede my own. What I *don't* get is the alienation you subjected me to, when I dared to venture out. I don't understand why, when I stepped into my own as the enterprising young woman you raised me to be... you decided it was something to punish me for."

"That, I am sorry for," he admitted... surprisingly. There was clear contrition in his gaze when it met mine. "I know your mother has her own piece to say about all that, but neither

of us... that wasn't okay, Logan. And that, I will freely apologize for. We shouldn't have done that, and we're sorry we hurt you in that manner. Neither of us knew how to manage that depth of disappointment, so unexpectedly, and we... reacted badly."

"I... accept that apology Daddy, but honestly... if either of you had been paying any real attention, my leaving the firm wouldn't have been unexpected. If you'd genuinely asked how I was doing, how I was coping with it all, you would've known I was struggling. It wouldn't have come to this."

"Maybe if you'd spoken up—"

"Oh don't do that. Do *not* do that," I laughed. "It's taking *all this* today, when I'm years into a very successful business to get you to even – maybe – see that I'm capable of being fine without becoming a lawyer. Don't act like you wouldn't have shut me down and not listened back then, when you're barely listening now."

"You've made your point."

"Have I *really* though?" I looked at my untouched plate and shook my head. "Does any of this mean anything to you, or are we just going right back to the same thing, where I'm not invited to dinner or golf anymore because I dared to put my foot down?"

My father pushed out a sigh. "You have made yourself very plain. And, as such... we will do our best to respect it. Even if we don't understand it."

Relief allowed me to drop the tension in my shoulders and jaw, but only a little. I still wasn't completely convinced, but... if nothing else, I didn't know my father to be a liar.

If he was saying he'd try... he likely would.

"Okay," I agreed, finally picking up my fork to at least pretend I could eat. I barely had a mouthful consumed before...

"So I hear you're dating a lawyer over there at the network."

You've gotta be fucking kidding me.

“How on earth do you know that?” I asked, looking up.

“Your uncle saw you out at dinner with the young man, so he asked Desiree about it, and she confirmed. No untoward methods this time.”

I nodded. “Oh. Um... yes,” I admitted, swallowing the outrage I'd been ready to dive fully into. “Anthony Cottrell. And I wouldn't call it *dating*, we've just been out together a few times.”

“Either way, I'm just glad it's not that fellow you were working for – you don't need to be wrapped up with anyone with those kinds of problems while you're trying to build a business.”

I frowned. “First of all, Pierre is *still* my client, and he's been incredible to work with. Second, we were never dating. Third... I'm not sure what you believe you know, but he doesn't have any ‘problems’ that are any of the public's concern.”

“The public, no, but any man in such proximity to *my* daughter... I want to know what he's about, and I would think you'd want the same. A recovering addict, whose father died via overdose... wouldn't that be someone to be wary of, on a personal level? And I believe there was some mystery shrouding the mother's death as well.”

“His mother was epileptic,” I snapped. “She had a grand mal seizure, and her death was sudden, and incredibly traumatic for their *whole family*, just like his father's was. Pierre has been through unfathomable loss, and yes he made some mistakes, but he also put in the work to never go back there again. I... really can't believe you're judging him as if the firm's client list isn't full of *current* functioning addicts.”

“Goddamnit, Logan! Is everything I say going to be a problem for you now?”

“If everything you say is problematic, then... yeah,” I shrugged. “But right now I'm just trying to figure out what Pierre has done for you to feel so justified in judging him?”

“You mean *other* than walking around looking like a thug?”

“Okay, I’m done here,” I said, taking a last sip of my water before grabbing my bag. “I’m just not about to listen to this.”

“Why are you so sensitive about this young man?”

“Why are *you* so critical of him?” I countered. “Pierre is incredibly talented, he’s resilient and focused, and he’s... a good person. Which is, alone, more than I can say for even a quarter of *your* client list. So can we just... not?”

Across the table, my father pushed out a heavy sigh, then chuckled. “This isn’t going very well, is it?”

“I think that depends on what your goal was when you sat down,” I said. “I’d hoped we could come to an understanding that I love you dearly, but my life is my own, and when input was desired, it would be sought. But I can see we’re not there.”

“Nor was Rome built in a day,” my father quipped, and even though I wasn’t really trying to hear that... I understood the message.

And I was willing to give it some time.

Instead of leaving like I wanted... I stuck around, and we shifted conversation to more neutral topics. By the time I left our lunch date, I actually felt pretty good about it, even while knowing that him simply hearing me out had only been a first step.

Sunday was technically my day off now that shooting had started. Sundays were an off day for everyone on the crew, actually. Since there was nothing happening for me to observe, I was making my rounds with the other people in my life. Now that I’d finally caught up with my father, the next thing on my agenda was another semi-date with Anthony.

He’d talked me back to his house.

This time, it was truly for us to just hang out, not even over a meal. I wanted to see if I still liked him when I wasn’t

stuffing my face, and really... I was still trying to see what the lack of chemistry I was feeling was about.

He was all the things that should make him a breeze to casually date, and maybe more, but there was just... something.

Maybe the fact that he wasn't Pierre?

Which was *completely* ridiculous, because me and Pierre as a thing was like... a nonstarter.

Is it though?

Shit.

I really couldn't entertain that line of thought while I was literally in another man's house, watching him make me a root beer float. I wasn't *trying* to think about Pierre, or that kiss from the other night, or how he'd felt inside me all those weeks ago, or anything like that.

But it was hard when Anthony wasn't talking about anything worth mentally connecting to.

"So what else was on your agenda today?" he asked, after having spent the last several minutes talking to me about his grocery shopping adventure from the morning. He slid the float over to me, then took a seat beside me at the counter with his own. "What got pushed from your schedule to make time to eat ice cream with me?"

I smiled. "Uh... I typically take it pretty easy on Sundays, so just some quality time with me, myself, and I," I laughed. "I did have lunch with my father earlier, which was... interesting."

"That sounds ominous," he chuckled.

"That's about right. We weren't on great terms before today, and now... we're a little better, I think. I'm still not sure we're seeing eye to eye."

Anthony nodded. "Yeah, that parent relationship now that we're good and grown... that can be tough. What was the friction about, if you don't mind me asking?"

“Oh it’s not some big secret or anything like that. Your basic *parents wanted me to be a lawyer and marry a lawyer* trope. Which, I subverted by leaving their law firm and breaking up with the lawyer they’d handpicked for me.”

“Wow – so, your parents are lawyers too? With their *own* firm?”

I raised an eyebrow at him, surprised that this was news. We hadn’t gone into much detail about family yet, since we were still in the early parts of getting to know each other, but still... not to sound haughty, but the Byers were *known*.

Especially when he was a lawyer in this city.

“Yeah – was that not a thing you knew?” I asked, suddenly feeling a bit uncomfortable.

Confusion knit his brow, and he shook his head. “My apologies if it’s a detail that slipped by me, but... I can’t say I remember you telling me about it.”

“I don’t believe I have, but... I don’t know. Did you not know who Des was, when I introduced you? *Everybody* in this city knows Desiree Byers.”

His eyes sprang open wide – a little *too* wide, or maybe I was just being paranoid. “Man... I don’t think I ever made that connection until just now. Your family is *the* Byers family, from that big firm downtown? With the commercial? Franklin and Frederick Byers?”

“Yes... Franklin Byers is my father.”

“Damn. And you’re turning the family legacy down?” he cringed. “That’s bold. I *wish* I’d had that kind of backing when I was trying to get my footing. I’m only a few years past paying all my loans off.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really? This isn’t inherited for you?”

“Not at all. Nobody thought I’d be able to do it, actually, but then everybody had a hand out. I don’t ever want my children to experience that, so I plan to do all I can to give them what I didn’t have. And I’d hope they wouldn’t squander

it, knowing how hard I've worked to get even where I am now, as a corporate lawyer – not a revered position at a prestigious firm.”

“I'm not *squandering* anything. My education and experience absolutely inform what I do now, and I'm grateful for the opportunities my parents afforded me. I just don't feel like it's a debt I should have to repay by living my life according to *their* wants.”

Anthony nodded. “Right, right. I get that part too. I guess I just... see it from both sides.”

I bet you fucking do.

“Yeah well, I'm not looking to litigate my life choices with anyone – especially when I'm doing perfectly fine.”

“And you shouldn't have to, *really*,” Anthony agreed. “I'm an outsider here, so I don't really know all the intricacies and history, all those things that inform how you feel about this. In addition to you being a woman, and just... maybe interpreting this whole thing differently, you know? From where I'm sitting, I'd *love* to be told what to do with my career by a man like your father.”

“Maybe I should put you in touch with him then,” I laughed. “It seems like he needs a project, and since you understand the value of mentoring, unlike me, maybe I should send him *your* way.”

Anthony chuckled. “Hey, don't threaten me with a good time, Ms. Byers. People would pay good money for an opportunity like that.”

“I'm going to pass that along. Give him something to do instead of breathing down *my* neck – give the wisdom to someone who'd really appreciate it.”

Beside me, Anthony's expression changed, shifting to a bit of a cringe.

“I... get the impression I've said something wrong?”

Pushing myself off my barstool, I shook my head. “No, you've told your truth, which is perfectly fine. I just don't like

it, and I'm not having a good time anymore, so I'm going to go."

"We don't have to talk about this at all," Anthony insisted, following me to the door. "Stick around. I don't want us to part on these kinds of terms."

"I'm not mad at you," I assured him. "I just... should've gone home and stayed there after that lunch with my father. I'm really not in a company kind of headspace, so... yeah."

He sighed. "You sure I can't convince you? You didn't even finish your float. How am I gonna cement my ability to feed you as my last redeeming quality when I make you mad if you're not gonna finish, huh?"

"I'm sure there will be another chance," I laughed. "Thank you for inviting me, but... seriously. I'm just in a mood, and it's not fair to either of us, so I should probably go."

He nodded. "Okay. I appreciate that, so... I won't hold you. Will I see you around the office at all tomorrow?"

"Probably not, since we're starting a new episode. Episode two."

"Damn, y'all have been doing all that shooting and only on the second episode?"

"Yuppp," I nodded. "It's not as fast as most people think – and we've actually been very efficient. Most hour-long dramas take about ten days per episode, so we're making good time."

"Fascinating. You should stick around and tell me more about it."

"Nice try," I laughed, stepping out the door. "Let's try this another time?"

"Sure. I'll look forward to it."

I... didn't let him kiss me.

In fairness, maybe he would've had the sense not to try this time, but I wasn't taking any chances. I didn't linger, going straight to my car and starting it up, but I did check my phone before putting it into gear.

I had a text from Pierre.

Guess who has a very rough cut of episode one, just waiting to be watched? I'll be at the office in a bit to watch if you want in... - Pierre Perry III

Ah, hell.

How was I supposed to resist *that*?

I checked the time on that text to see when it was sent – just a few minutes ago, actually. So... yeah.

I pointed my car toward *WAWG*.

PIERRE

My eyes were swimming.

Staring at the weekly schedule on my screen was starting to give me a headache.

It was so much, packed in so little time that all the days were starting to swim together, which made it even more vital to make sure the schedule was followed. If not, it meant that somebody wasn't going to be where they were supposed to be at the right time, and it would trigger a butterfly effect of a bunch of shit getting messed up.

Some irrevocable mistake?

Probably not.

But we were in too good of a groove to slow down now.

I closed my eyes, reclining back in my chair as the episode I had watched with Logan last night played in my head. Even more than that very first day of shooting, when we just had those few minutes, it was clear now that we really had something special on our hands.

It would not do to fuck it up.

A knock at the door made my eyes pop open, and I yelled for whoever it was to come in. As soon as I saw Anthony Cottrell, I had to check my reflexive disdain over his presence.

Speaking of having something special on your hands that it wouldn't do to fuck up.

“Hey bruh,” he greeted, those casual words not even sounding right from him. “I was looking for Logan, but I haven’t seen her anywhere this morning?”

I don’t know why the fuck you asking me...

“She’s offsite this morning, man,” I told him, taking pity on the fact that she must not be answering texts or phone calls either if he didn’t already know that. “You must have fucked up.”

Why did I say that shit?

He took that as an invitation to start chuckling, pushing through the door like we were suddenly homeboys or something. Now that half of his body wasn’t tucked out of sight, I could see that he was holding a vase of flowers.

Tulips again, but a different color than the ones he’d given her a couple weeks ago at that set design review meeting.

“I think I may have a little bit,” he admitted. “She has some stuff going on with her father, and she was telling me about it, but I think I may have taken the wrong side in that situation.”

I shook my head. “I’m no expert man, but I don’t think y’all been kicking it long enough for you to take anybody’s side except hers if she’s confiding in you about something. Especially if that’s not something she typically does with you,” I told him, wondering why he was now venturing *even further* into my office, all the way up to the desk. He put the flowers down on the desk, which I guess was fine because Logan would be back to get them.

But then he took it upon himself to take a seat.

“I was just being honest with her you know? I didn’t want to be hyping her up to be pissed at her father, and then later on they’re fine, but she and I get into it, and she tells her old man ‘*yeah daddy, he don’t even like you, he was talking shit*’, you know?”

“Are you dating him, or are you dating her?” I asked, and then internally scolded myself for asking this dude follow up

questions as if this was a conversation I even really wanted to have.

I had other shit to do.

Like for real.

“I get your point but man, you know who her father is right? Franklin Byers, from all the commercials about their family law firm. One of the top firms in the city; somewhere I could actually see some upward mobility. I can’t chance fucking that up.”

My jaw went tight. “So... you’re only with her because of her connection to some job you want? Like she’s a stepping stone or something?”

“No. Not... *only*,” Anthony quickly corrected. “I mean there’s plenty – and I do mean *plenty* – to like about Logan on her own. I mean, you see her everyday right? I know there’s a professional line and all that, but... you ain’t blind,” he chuckled, while I gave him the blankest of stares.

He must have caught on that I wasn’t about to commiserate with him about this shit because he cleared his throat, quickly wiping the goofy ass grin off his face.

“I’m just saying that, when this thing with me and her goes somewhere, I want to make sure I’m in a position to really enjoy every available perk.”

How much trouble would I get in if I was to break this dude’s jaw?

While I didn’t get the impression he was using Logan outright, like that had been the goal... it was clear as fuck that he was *willing* to.

And I didn’t like that shit at all.

“I’ll make sure she knows you dropped by,” I told him, sparking another big ass grin as he stood, extending his hand.

“Good looking out, man, I appreciate it.”

I would have stared right in that nigga’s face all day, not touching his offered hand, not even acknowledging it honestly.

But then Logan came breezing through the door.

If Anthony thought there was anything strange about me not immediately returning his gestures, he didn't say anything about it. He just gave me this look like we were in on something together before he turned to a surprised Logan.

Damn she looks good today.

With our shooting days starting so early and ending so late, she'd taken to not straightening her hair. Now, she wore it in various natural styles, a new one everyday, something I'd come to look forward to.

Today, it was parted in the middle in a way that made her natural curls frame her rich, pretty brown face. With all our back and forth, and long hours of standing, she'd traded her signature heels for lower profile shoes. Somehow, like today, she would pair them with a dress and still look good.

Today's dress was patterned with big ass flowers and ties on the sides that cinched the soft fabric to her waist before it flared out to accommodate her hips and ass.

I'm probably looking at her a little too hard right now.

"Logan, just the woman I wanted to see," Anthony said, stepping toward her with his arms out.

"What are you doing here?" she asked submitting to a very quick, very stiff hug before she put some space between them. "I thought we talked about stuff like this at work?"

"I'm not trying to hold you," Anthony insisted. "I just wanted to drop off these flowers to hopefully brighten up your day. And apologize for that little friction between us yesterday. But like I said I won't hold you. I know you're busy woman."

Logan's gaze went past him, to me, then to the flowers, then *back* to me before she finally looked at Anthony again. "Thank you so much for the flowers, but we'll have to talk later. It really is a very busy morning."

She wasn't lying to him.

The only reason he'd even gotten ahold of me was because Nick was directing this episode, so I wasn't absolutely *needed*

on set.

I was making my way over there soon, but him being in control gave me some license to step away and get some other things done.

Things that did *not* include hearing about the relationship woes between this little wack dude and the woman I wanted.

Since I was fully admitting it to myself now.

“Yeah, I’ll see you later,” he agreed, finally taking the hint enough to go ahead and make his way out the door.

As soon as he was gone, Logan turned to me with clear embarrassment on her face. “I am so sorry about that,” she said. “He wasn’t bothering you too much, was he?”

I shook my head, chuckling. “Nah, not at all. You were a little cold to buddy though. Something going on?”

Logan pushed out a sigh. “Not exactly. I’m just not that sure about him.”

“Really? Why?”

“There’s just something off,” she told me, shaking her head. “Like I just get this feeling he hasn’t been completely honest about some stuff to do with my family. Not even like he’s lied, just not saying everything he probably should, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“And then... okay, so yesterday I finally sat down and had a conversation with my father, right? So we have it out, get everything out on the table and we agree to just at least try to understand each other a little better. Afterwards, I go and talk to Anthony about it. You and I have talked about this before, so you know what I’ve been going through with my parents, but this is my first time talking to *him* about this.”

She stopped, sighing again like she was trying to figure out her words. “Instead of I don’t know just *listening*, or empathizing, he starts telling me about how if he’d done this and that for *his* kids, he would hope they wouldn’t squander it. And he wished *he’d* had the opportunity to work at a

prestigious law firm like *I* did, and just some stuff like that. Which... okay fine, I get it, I've had opportunities people would give everything for. But... that really doesn't have anything to do with *me*. Because what my parents want would be a dream for somebody else, I should just shut up and take it? It's just really frustrating, because it feels like I'm being called selfish or ungrateful, and there's this weird manipulation almost. Like when your parents say, *well don't you know there's kids going hungry?* to get you to eat your food. Yes, I do know there's kids going hungry, and I feel really bad about that. Can we give this to them? Because *I* don't want to eat it!" she laughed. "You get what I'm saying? Like I should take whatever is handed to me because of what some hypothetical person doesn't have."

I chuckled, nodding. "Actually yes, I know exactly what you mean about those conflicting feelings," I told her. "Like when my mom died, and I was sad about it, there would be people who would say, *well there's some people that don't have either of their parents so you should consider yourself lucky. It could be worse.* And then, after my dad it was, *yeah you lost both your parents, but you've got money.* Like these constantly moving goalposts of what you get to feel, based on somebody *else's* feeling about your situation. Yes, we have a certain level of privilege, that a lot of people would do anything for. And it's not like it's something we *earned*. It's inherited, because of what our parents did before we came along, and then went through once we were here, whatever. So... *yes*, it's something to be grateful for, and we should be. We should be able to see that," I admitted, then sat back.

"But on the same token... people always have an opinion on what *they* would do if *they* were you," I said. "And it's all based on *their* traumas, their experience, whatever options *they* didn't have. It's got nothing to do with you, but they'll make it about you. Which is ironic because, they'll be quick to say *you're* selfish, or not grateful enough, but they're not thinking about you – they're thinking about *them*. All that *if it was me* or *I wish I had*... all of that is just projection. It's a manifestation of their own unmet desires, that they want to turn into yours."

Honestly, I'd heard it all.

If *I* had a famous mom and dad like that, *I'd* be over here doing this, that, and the third. If *my* bank account was like *his*, I'd be doing this, this, and that, he don't even deserve it. You've got *this*, so why aren't you doing this over here, why aren't you doing what *I* want you to do.

Usually from people who'd never done anything that wasn't for themselves. Who wouldn't do or sacrifice even a *fraction* of what they were expecting from you.

It was fucked up.

It was also understandable though.

Everybody had things they wanted that were outside of their reach. Nobody, no matter what kind of front they wanted to put up, had it all. So they thought, they dreamed, and they wished they had things that weren't theirs, because the people that had them weren't using them the way *they* would.

It was selfish, and it was unfair, but it was human as fuck.

"I guess that's a way to think about it," Logan agreed. "It just frustrated me so bad in the moment because it's like... why should I be miserable you know? Why does it make me ungrateful to not want what's being offered when I'm *not complaining* about it? I've *never* complained about going to get what I wanted on my own. I could see it if I acted like what my parents were willing to give me wasn't good enough or something. But it's never been that. I've never asked for *more*. So to treat me like I'm being some brat when all I want is respect for building something on my own... It's wack. But I didn't know if I was just in a bad mood after the talk with my father, and I didn't want to take it out on him. So I cut our little date short, but he could tell he'd pissed me off. I guess that's what the flowers are for."

I nodded. "So you said this was just yesterday? So when you came to watch the rough cut with me yesterday evening, that's where you were coming from?"

"Yeah."

“So you were in too bad of a mood to kick it with *him*, but it was no problem for you to come kick with me?” I asked, teasingly tossing my hands up in triumph, which brought that gorgeous smile to her face.

She shrugged. “What can I say? I *really* wanted to see that episode, and it was completely worth it. Turned my whole mood around.”

Her phone buzzing in her hand pulled her attention away to check the screen. Whatever she saw pulled a big, deep frown to her face. I was getting ready to ask her about it, and make sure nothing was wrong, when my own cell started buzzing from where I’d tossed it on the desk earlier.

I reached for it, but Logan was faster, practically sprinting across the office to snatch it up before I could.

“What the hell is that about,” I asked, confused, pushing up from my seat so I could approach her and get my phone.

Logan shook head. “You don’t need to see this,” she warned, plastering on a smile. “Let’s just put all these notifications on *do not disturb* like they should’ve been in the first place and go down to the set and immerse ourselves back in the show.”

“Logan...what’s going on?” I asked, eyebrow raised as I pulled my phone from her reluctant grip.

Only because of the forthcoming show had I made any type of return to social media.

I hadn’t been posting anything yet, because that was going to be handled by someone hired specifically for that purpose. They were on my phone so that I had access and could check on things when I wanted, and *maybe* post if I felt inclined.

I had no interest in it on a personal level though.

Elodie had been tagging me in things left and right, and there were a couple tags from Nick, and Nubia, but that was mostly all. I wasn’t in the spotlight like that, so I didn’t even have a bunch of followers.

I could only assume, based on what I was seeing now on my screen, that was about to shift.

Fresh Outta Rehab: Hollywood Brat Using Decimated Inheritance to Make a Comeback.

That was the headline chosen by the gossip blog who was running what was essentially a hit piece they'd decided to actually tag me in. There wasn't a ton of text, which explained why Logan had so quickly known to try to get this out of my reach, but what was there... *Damn.*

The loss of my mother, my father's death, the downward spiral of drugs and alcohol.

According to a "source", I'd run through most of the money my parents had left and was using the remnants as a last-ditch effort to make a cash grab. Supposedly, I was putting together a fantasy version of my own life that omitted too many of the real details, cleaned everything up too nicely to be anything more than a snore fest that took itself too seriously.

Which... maybe I could swallow that.

What made the pill a lot larger and more jagged though, was the pictures.

Just three of them.

My father strapped to a gurney while paramedics tried in vain to save his life right after the overdose.

Me, out in the club with a full bottle in my hand, turned up for me to pour it straight down my throat.

And probably the worst, because of the implications, was a picture of me, Sienna, and some others at the very same house I was living in now. Everybody was on the couch, drugs clearly visible on the table, with me slumped over, passed out.

It was bad.

Now, I wasn't necessarily ashamed of the shit I'd done, the shit I'd tried. It wasn't *good* by any means, but I was doing the same shit as everybody else around me. Alcohol, weed, mollies, oxy, shit like that. I was lucky enough – if you wanted to phrase it like that – that the "least" harmful shit had been

what did the most for me when I was trying to self-medicate my way through my pain.

But I never lied, not even to myself, about what I did and didn't do.

The shit on that table in the picture?

Was some shit I didn't do, because of what I'd seen it do to others... including my father.

The picture of him... there was no telling where they'd gotten that one. But I knew those other two pictures – and probably what little information they had about the show that wasn't locked inside iron-clad non-disclosures – had come straight from one “source”.

Sienna Sparks.

“Hey. *Hey*,” Logan said, grabbing either side of my face to physically pull my gaze away from the screen. “This means nothing, okay? You are whole, and sober, and making a dope ass show – old pictures and hater commentary don't change that.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, but... *fuck*,” I muttered, pulling away to retake my place in my chair. “I'm trying to understand why she would... why do this? What does this shit accomplish?”

“Chaos,” Logan easily replied, coming around to my side of the desk, and taking a seat on the edge. “She's still in her struggle, and you aren't, so she has to create chaos to level the field. I've got something for that ass though,” she mumbled, holding up her phone. Her fingers traveled over the screen at lightning speed, typing something out before she looked up at me with a smile. “She's from LA, so maybe she doesn't know like I do – you don't wanna be on the wrong side of Desiree Byers. And we'll get in touch with Chloe McKenna too, for good measure – a PR dream team that will get this shit squashed before it gets any leverage.”

I sighed.

Of course she was thinking about this practically – and that was important. The damage would be mitigated, the story

turned into something else to shift attention, all that. Most likely, this wouldn't affect the show.

If only that was the sole consideration.

“Hey,” she spoke up, reaching her foot out to nudge my leg. “You kinda zoned out on me just now... I hope you're not really taking this shit to heart.”

“How can I not?” I shrugged. “This has been my worst fear, since I pushed forward to actually do this. I'm already getting the fucking label, just the burnout kid of a Hollywood legend trying to be something I'm not.”

“That's a lie, though,” Logan countered, frowning. “Like, flat out. I'll say it again, Pierre – you are *whole*. With some fleshing out to do still, yeah, but you are so much more than this bullshit ‘article’ or misleading pictures. And I believe you know that. Maybe you didn't before you started this, but with all we've done – all *you* have done... you gonna sit in my face and tell me the lie that you believe *this* over what you see in the mirror?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I mean... I know what I've accomplished. I know what I've done. I'm still working out the *who I am* part, but... I know it's not what they're saying. But knowing the truth doesn't make the lie less irritating, or significant. I don't want those labels – I don't want people thinking that shit about me.”

“*Fuck what they think.*” Logan slid more in my direction, her brows pulled together in a scowl as she repeated. “*Fuck what they think. Fuck them, fuck Sienna, and fuck anybody else* who sees that bullshit and think it still defines you. It doesn't! And look, I know it's easy for me to sit here and say *oh don't worry about* when the headline isn't about me. I know it's different for you, it's deeper. But you're not who they say you are – you are who you *are*. There's always going to be someone who wants you to be still, and not be more or different than what they expected. You can't affect that. What you *can* do, is keep thriving. Keep working, stay sober, maintain your focus. Do *not* give these words the power to shake you up.”

She... was right.

Logically, I understood that – that not letting this shit sway me was absolutely paramount, bigger than anything.

But it was *hard*.

“Look,” Logan said, pulling my attention again to show me something on her phone. “I was coming to tell you this anyway, but then Anthony was here, and... whatever. Your piece in *Sugar&Spice* goes live at the end of the week in digital, and it’ll be in the print version next month. You look at this, and tell me what is more representative – you looking good as fuck in a respected magazine that honors your legacy and highlights you as someone to look out for or some bullshit tabloid that has to use pictures of somebody who isn’t who you are anymore?”

I took the phone from her to scroll through the pictures and look at the article. And man... those pictures really were hard as fuck. The article wasn’t a full-blown profile or anything, just a quick piece, but still effective. It did touch on my alcoholism, but my current sobriety was presented as the triumph it was, not some tenuous thing I was barely holding on to.

A completely different tone.

“For everybody working against you, with nothing but negative things to say... there are just as many, if not loads more, who are on your side. We believe in you, Pierre. And I know *you* believe in you. Everything else? That’s just noise.”

I thought about that for a bit, then nodded, mentally committing to seeing this shit her way – or at least, trying.

Trying my damndest.

“Aiiight, Ms. Motivation,” I teased, standing up. “How we go from me trying to get *you* to brush shit off, to you having to tell me?”

Still seated on my desk, Logan coyly arched her back. “I *am* quite good at that, aren’t I? I like to think it’s a specialty of mine.”

“You are full of those, aren’t you?”

“I really do try.” She planted her hands on either side of herself on the desk as I moved to stand in front of her. Tipping her head back, she stared up to meet my eyes. “What?”

“You know you’re too good for that nigga right?” I asked her, gesturing toward the forgotten flowers on the desk.

She let off a dry laugh. “It’s not... serious. Not yet.”

“Not ever,” I countered, and she raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe not. But you said that like you know something I don’t.”

“Because I do,” I said, reaching to play with the little ties on the side of her dress.

She glanced at my hands, then back up to match my gaze. “What’s that?”

That I’m about to do what I threatened months ago.

I didn’t say it out loud though – I kissed her, and hoped she’d get the message. Unlike last time, I didn’t pull back from it either.

And I wouldn’t be saying I was sorry.

Because I wasn’t.

Especially since she wasn’t hesitating to kiss me back, and she tasted so damn good. My hands slipped under the hem of her dress as she welcomed my tongue into her mouth, draping her arms around my neck to pull me closer.

Inviting me to do more.

Still, she sucked in a breath when my fingers grazed the waistband of her panties.

“We’re supposed to be meeting Nick on set, not... doing this,” she whispered, unconvincing.

“He’ll be just fine until we get there. Is that your only objection?”

She ran her tongue over her lips. “No. I... don’t have office sex,” she said. “This isn’t me.”

I moved my hand, skimming over her clit through her panties before I pressed harder, drawing a whimper. “But it *could* be,” I murmured against her lips. “I think you want it to be,” I told her, making her whimper again as I pushed the fabric aside to touch her directly. “You want me to make you cum, don’t you?” Instead of answering, Logan closed her eyes, dropping her head back as I pushed my fingers into her, but I stopped there, leaning in to demand. “Say it, shorty.”

“I want you to make me cum,” she breathed, sounding a bit desperate as she moved her hips to create the friction I wasn’t giving.

“Right here on the desk?”

“Yes.”

“Right next to Anthony’s flowers?”

“Yes.”

Say less.

I dropped back into my seat, rolling it right up to her. She lifted up, letting me remove her panties and push that dress up around her hips before I spread her legs open. The sun streaming in through the window behind us gave me a perfect view of the perfect, pretty pussy I hadn’t seen in far too long.

And that was exactly how I treated it, like a friend I hadn’t seen in far too long who needed all my care and attention. She tasted just as good as I remembered, and sounded the same, even through gritted teeth and clamped lips, trying not to alert the whole fourth floor of what I was doing.

It was fine.

She could get loud later, back at my house.

For now, my primary concern was fulfilling her request – I ate her until she came all over my face, right there on my desk, right beside Anthony’s flowers. As soon as I stood to bring my face back to hers, she dropped a hand to untie the straps holding her dress closed, then pulled it open. One side, and then the other, revealing the simple, seductive bra underneath that matched the panties currently under my desk.

I wasted no time stripping down to a state where I could join her, skin to skin, one hand teasing her breast, the other squeezing her ass as I buried myself as deep as I could get.

So fucking good.

I didn't rest on that though.

I brought myself right back to what I'd decided as my primary objective, making her cum again. With her legs locked around my hips, I drove into her again and again, watching the reactions on her face to tailor my every move to her pleasure, knowing that my own would come along with it.

If I had her breaking all her rules, it would damn sure be worth it.

If I had to judge, based on her teeth in my shoulder muffling her cries of pleasure and her fingernails digging into my ass cheeks, I would have to say I was doing a good job. My full confirmation came when she tensed and buried her face against my chest, trying her damndest not to scream as her pussy contracted wildly around me. She was so tight, so wet, so fucking *perfect* around my dick, I couldn't have stopped that nut if I wanted to.

Not that I wanted to.

It was incredibly satisfying, emptying myself into Logan as she melted around me and then collapsed against me, contented and spent. After a few minutes to catch our collective breath, we went to the connected bathroom to clean up and make ourselves presentable.

Logan, in her normal fashion, looked nothing like what I'd just done to her. At least, she wouldn't to anyone else.

I could see that she was a little flustered, knew exactly what had put that quiet smile she kept trying to hide on her face.

And it didn't have *shit* to do with those flowers on the desk.

"So," she spoke up, pushing out a breath as she looked at me. Involuntarily, she shuddered, then shifted a bit, fighting

back that smile again. “We should probably make our way over to the set.”

LOGAN

I'd never thought about what it might be like to wake up in Pierre's bed.

Seriously.

I mean, I knew what sex with him was like, so there was nothing unexpected – in the best possible way – there. I'd spent the whole rest of our shooting day anticipating it, just knowing I'd have orgasms pulled out of me until I was weak and couldn't keep my eyes open.

He'd delivered on that.

Just like he had before.

This... was a bit different though.

Waking up with his face tucked against the back of my head, his arms around my waist keeping me close, his dick hard and pressing into my skin just waiting for one of us to acknowledge it this morning.

It was dreamy sigh inducing.

I hadn't had the imagination to conjure up how perfect and completely natural such a thing would feel.

How *good*.

I was still marveling over that when he stirred, and we were suddenly just... skin on skin.

Another thing that was completely outside of my norm.

Sleeping naked was just *not* my preference, but I don't know.... Maybe it just wasn't my preference *alone*, or with Les.

I *did* know that when I tried to leave his bed in the early hours of the morning to slip on the pajamas from my overnight bag, he'd grabbed me by the wrist, pulling me right back into him. "*Nah, shorty. Your pajamas aren't welcome in here.*"

Why had that made me so wet?

And he was doing it again now, arousing me with very minimal effort. My eyes were still closed, but I smiled at the feeling of him pressing a kiss to the back of my neck, then another and another, and then that hand around my waist was slipping lower. Between my legs, to play.

And just like that, we were at it again.

He pulled just my hips backward, putting me at the right angle to lift my leg and slide inside of me. I was already sore and overworked down there, but the pleasure of it all quickly overrode the discomfort as he took me with slow, deep strokes, peppering soft kisses over my shoulders and neck.

Why didn't we do this sooner?

Pierre had this remarkable flair for making me feel like the easiest lay ever. What had been so difficult for others – and hell sometimes *myself* if I wasn't in the right frame of mind – he made happen like it was nothing.

"*What is your fine ass trying to do to me?*" whispered in his extra-deep early morning rasp, right in my ear while he was balls deep inside me seemed to be today's particular trigger.

The very next thing I knew, my thighs were shaking, body tensing as I came hard, barely registering his final stroke and release a few moments later.

*What was **he** trying to do to **me**?*

Once I'd caught my breath, I turned over onto my back so I could see his face.

Handsome as ever.

“Good morning,” he murmured, reaching out to caress my face with a smirk that incited the most powerful urge to climb on top and ride him. But with what he’d just done... I was pretty sure we were both fully out of commission for a bit.

“Good morning to you, too,” I answered back. “I see you have no plans to let up on my IUD,” I laughed. “Which I do have, by the way, in case birth control has crossed your mind *any* of the times we haven’t bothered with a condom.”

I don’t know what I was expecting as his response, but a full, belly laugh would never have been it, if someone had asked me to guess.

“Logan, come on. Yes, I should have asked, but... we both know I didn’t *have* to.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I know your ass wasn’t taking any chances with an unexpected baby,” he chuckled. “I’m guessing you’ve got at *least* two period apps on your phone, plus some kind of tracking in your regular calendar. Not to mention, I’m sure you keep it in your head too. You’ve probably got a gynecologist a phone call away for any possible emergencies or questions. All that *on top* of your birth control. Am I wrong?”

I sucked my teeth. “It’s only *one* app to track my period,” I corrected him. “And... a color-coded dot in my regular calendar. So?”

“I’m not ragging on you about it shorty,” he laughed. “I’m just saying... a long time ago, I remembered hearing something from Nubia’s mom. She wasn’t talking to *me*, but I heard it. *Anytime you spread those little skinny legs, you need to decide whether you trying to get pregnant or trying not to get pregnant. Ain’t no in between, ain’t no caught up in the moment. You either trying to or trying not,*” he said, hilariously shifting his voice into a bad caricature of an older woman. “Now,” he said in his regular voice, “I’m not saying *I* feel like it just a woman’s responsibility to take care of something like that. It’s on everybody involved. But with that said... from the very first time I laid eyes on you, it was quite obvious to me that *you* are a *trying not to get pregnant* kind of woman.”

I kinda wanted to be mad at that, but I also kinda... couldn't.

My mother had a similar conversation with me, when I was heading off to college, which was presumably where Nubia was headed when she and her mother had that conversation Pierre had overheard.

We'd obviously already had all the basic sex conversations, but I wasn't doing much in high school to have any sort of practical experience. Knowing how that might change once I was off at college, she taught me about what to look for in terms of the normal discharge that meant I was ovulating, making absolutely sure to avoid those days since they represented the worst risk of unplanned pregnancy, and then still being protected the other times.

It wasn't until I got very serious with Les that I had shifted to needing all-the-time birth control, not just condoms, which neither of us wanted to use anyway. Back then, we were going at it like rabbits, and we needed certainty that we weren't making a baby.

It was much less necessary by the time I came to the realization that the relationship was over.

In any case, Pierre wasn't wrong, but a lack of conversation about this was still irresponsible. Unplanned babies weren't the only concern if we were gonna keep having unprotected sex. He and Les were the only people I'd had sex with in the last seven years, so the chances of *me* giving *him* anything requiring an antibiotic were low.

Him on the other hand...

"Were you sleeping with Sienna?" I asked, which instantly sucked any humor out of our conversation.

He looked at me, eyebrow raised, then nodded. "A long time ago, yes. Recently? No. Not since I moved to Blackwood."

Meaning not since before rehab.

"So... that day I found her over here prancing around in her panties like she owned the place... you just let me believe

you were fucking her?” I asked. “For what?”

“Man, you came in my spot wearing ol’ boy’s bracelet... well what I *thought* was ol’ boy’s bracelet... and I don’t know. I lost my head a little.”

“*What is it* about that damn bracelet?” I laughed. “*You* asked about it, *he* asked about it. I put it on and y’all just go straight to caveman mode?”

“I didn’t say I was proud of it,” Pierre admitted. “I wanted you, it seemed like he had you, and I didn’t know what to do with that feeling. But... since we’re just being upfront and asking, did you and him...?”

I cringed. “No, never.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “That means I can continue to have zero qualms about doing this.”

This being spreading my legs open to put his face between them.

And there I was thinking I didn’t have it in me to cum again.

“OKAY, SO I’VE REVIEWED SIENNA’S CONTRACT AND HER NDA,” Des said, putting a copy of both documents on the conference room table.

Nubia had flown in this morning, and Chloe had just sent along suggestions, since it was such short notice that she couldn’t make it.

Between the four of us, we were going to get this figured out.

“So it doesn’t appear that she overtly violated her NDA, since it’s pretty specific to the show. No discussion of script content, the actors, none of that. The pictures were from six or

seven years ago, so they're outside of the scope of the legal documents too. So from that standpoint, we really can't do anything about it. Even if she decides to keep talking or releasing pictures."

I let out a huff of air, frustrated as much of my *we can do it* energy melted away.

"That's just from a *legal* standpoint though," Des quickly assured, and Nubia and I both sat up a little taller. "It just means we can't sue her for it. For now, we'll see if this was just a one-off moment of craziness for Miss Sparks. She can have that one. If she says *anything* more, we become a source of our own."

Ah.

I should've known Des would come with it.

"I draw the line at revenge porn," she continued, "So I would never release any of the *several* sex tapes and nude pictures between her and a frankly frightening number of married high-profile men. I'm currently not above letting the world know that that these affairs happened and are happening, and letting the public do what it will with that information – especially since she's been so vocal about the last few celebrity cheating scandals," she said. "It's all very hypocritical." She put a folder down on the table, then pulled out another. "There's also lawsuits and affidavits against Miss Sparks for copyright infringement, plagiarism, workplace safety violations – not a very good boss, it seems. And, it seems she has a bit of a nose candy habit, and a couple stints in rehab herself. But I'm going to presume that we're calling those things off limits as well correct?"

Damn.

I knew Des was formidable, but I didn't know she'd be able to get her hands on all *this*.

"Yeah," I nodded. "Pierre would never want to use that against someone in his defense. But the fact that she's a skank and a liar, and doesn't treat her employees well, all of that is fair game."

Des smiled. “Very good.”

“So we’re covered on offense, if it comes to that point,” Nubia spoke up. “On defense – which I hate to even call it, but here we are – Chloe thinks we’re going to have to pull P out of his comfort zone, and let people get to know him. It’s going to be a bit of a hard sell, but... I think she’s right.”

“I think as long as he’s able to mostly maintain his privacy, he’ll be acceptant of it,” I said. “On the surface, yes, of course, he wants the show to be a success. But I believe he also wants to change the narrative his past has created, and be known for his own talents and passions, not just someone with famous family members. It’s more important to him than I think he even realizes.”

“Then yeah, he’s definitely going to have to show himself,” Des said. “Nothing stops a negative narrative in its tracks quite as well.”

“I know that from unfortunate experience,” Nubia laughed. “Chloe has some practical steps that can be put in place, starting with him actually posting on social media. It can still be show-focused – a sneak peek at a page of script, a quick picture of the lighting rigs, stuff like that, that’s of interest to him. And then other stuff – his shoes for the day, his lunch, what he’s listening to in the car, stuff like that. And, occasionally, that gorgeous Perry family face,” Nubia teased. “It makes him real, and relatable. And seeing him healthy, and working, and oblivious to the bullshit... like Desiree said – perfect way to stop a false narrative.”

“I’ll convince him,” I nodded, looking between the two of them. “If nothing else, I’ll get his phone and take the damn pictures myself.”

Nubia’s eyes went wide. “You think he’ll let you do that?”

“Oh definitely,” Des answered, before I could, obviously not thinking about how intimate it might make Pierre and I sound.

Not that it was inaccurate, but Nubia didn’t need to know that.

“Oh,” she said, catching it immediately. “I feel like the two of you know something I don’t – that sounds very *sure*.”

“She just means that Pierre trusts me pretty well with these things related to... all this,” I tried to cover. “You know he has a *Sugar&Spice* feature coming very soon, that he let me arrange for him.”

Nubia’s eyebrow went up. “Yeah... I was at the photoshoot, I remember.”

“Right. Of course,” I nodded. “Well... like I said, I’ll talk to him about these things, and we’ll hope for the best. That there’s no drastic measures we need to take.”

Trying to help rescue me, Des stood, gathering her materials. “If that’s all, I do have another meeting – y’all keep me posted, and I’ll have my eye on Miss Sparks. I’m ready to turn the fire up on that one at any moment.”

With that, we all started packing up, for a meeting that should’ve been over. I was sure Nubia had other things to do, and I was supposed to be heading to set.

I should’ve known that was too easy.

“*Not* so fast, young Ms. Byers,” Nubia called after me, as I tried to escape the room. I froze, taking a deep breath before I turned to face her. “So... I see I was right about welcoming you into the family, huh?”

My eyes bugged open.

Just like the *first* time she’d said that to me.

“Mrs.-”

“Nope. Nubia.”

I let out a breath. “*Nubia*. I... umm...”

“Girl, relax,” she chuckled, letting the frown she’d been wearing slip into a smile. “Pierre is a grown man and you are a grown woman. Why are you acting like you’ve been called to the principal’s office?”

“Well, I... I just... it’s not what you hired me for,” I finally managed to say.

“No, definitely not,” she laughed. “But... to let you in on a little secret... after seeing the way y’all work together – seeing how much Pierre has thrived with you at his side professionally... I may or may not have hoped something like this might happen.” She shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a romantic.”

My shoulders sank in relief at hearing that, but still... “It’s not really ideal, though.”

“I can imagine not... since you’re coming out of a pretty serious, long term relationship, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. And I’m not... I don’t... me and Pierre... I don’t know what it is, quite yet.”

“I’m sure you know you don’t have to, right?” Nubia asked, hooking her bag over her shoulder as she approached the door. “That it’s okay to start without knowing the end?”

I smiled. “That sounds like very experience-based wisdom.”

“Because it is,” Nubia confirmed. “I never, *never*, would’ve thought Stephen Foster would be my... anything beyond a great fuck,” she laughed. “Now? He’s everything to me. I’m not saying that’s definitely what’s going to happen with you and Pierre, because I have no idea. The man I thought *would* be my forever ended up being very temporary, so it’s hard to know. But it’s a good thing that, like I said... you don’t have to. Just enjoy it for what it is.”

With Nubia *and* Des having shared that same sentiment with me, it was hard to not take it to heart. In fact, it stayed on my mind long after I’d stopped by Pierre’s office to regroup and then headed back downstairs to make my way to the set... then turned right back around to get back on the elevator to head to the legal department.

There was something I needed to handle.

I felt a bit bad for popping up on him at work, but since Anthony never seemed to have similar reservations... whatever. His overly eager intern showed me straight to his

office, where he looked up from whatever he was working on to greet me with a smile when I stepped into his doorway.

“*Logan*. This is quite a pleasant surprise,” he said, pushing up from his chair.

I closed the door behind me, staying near it instead of stepping into his arms for the hug he was offering. “I’m... afraid it may not stay that way very long.”

His eyebrows went up as he dropped his arms. “Oh?”

“Anthony... you’ve been nothing but generous, and affectionate, and kind to me, so I won’t insult you by beating around the bush – this isn’t going to work. My heart isn’t in it, and I don’t want to waste your time by having you think we’re working towards some mutual goal when we aren’t. But I really do wish you the very best.”

He scrubbed a hand over his head. “Um... *wow*,” he huffed. “That might be the most polished kiss-off I’ve ever gotten.”

“I’m sorry if this feels impersonal, I’ve just... thought about it a lot. And I don’t have any interest in offending you or having this become some ugly thing where we have to avoid each other in the halls. I was hoping that since we’d only seen each other a few times, there was no reason for this to be anything other than amicable.”

Anthony shook his head. “No, I’ve got no issue with that, at all. I’m a bit surprised to hear you say that, actually. I was thinking I may have said too much to your boss yesterday in his office.”

I resisted the urge to correct the notion that Pierre was my boss, to instead focus on, “What? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It was before you walked in,” he explained. “I was talking too much and I thought he might’ve repeated some of it back to you.”

“You said something bad about me to him?” I asked, incredulous, but he shook his head again.

“No, not bad. Just... not great. I guess it doesn't matter anymore, so I can just tell you,” he chuckled. “I really was interested in you for *you*, but... I was also interested in the fact that you were a Byers.”

So I wasn't imagining that shit.

“Wow. No, he... didn't say a word to me about that,” I told Anthony. But it *did* shed some light on how Pierre had spoken about him after.

That whole *right next to the flowers* thing.

“So... what, you were using me to... be connected with the firm? With my father?” I asked, still trying to figure out what the end goal for him was. “Because you could've just asked me.”

Hearing that seemed to really hurt, if the disappointment in his eyes before his head dropped was any indication. “Right. I guess I'm just not used to things working in my favor when I use a direct approach.”

“Maybe in other cases, that was true,” I agreed. “But personally... I love candor. I know the reputation for attorneys is sneakiness and manipulation, but I promise, you do *not* have to lean into that.”

Anthony gave me a nod, and a bit of a smile, though I could tell I'd probably ruined his day. “Thank you, Ms. Byers. I will definitely take that under advisement.”

I had no problems taking a hint.

The clear energy shift told me I was dismissed, and I couldn't blame him. I turned to leave, but before I was gone, I couldn't resist poking my head back in the door.

“Hey.”

He looked up with heavy eyes. “Yes?”

“I'll talk to my father for you, okay? He'll be in touch.”

“*What?!*” he asked, practically springing off the desk. “You're serious? You'd do that for me?”

I shrugged. “You need a mentor, he needs a mentee, and it’s surely not going to be *me*, so... it may as well be someone who really wants it.”

“I... *shit*...,” he said, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t even know... *thank you*,” he said, stepping through the door to hug me, which I accepted this time.

“Like I said,” I told him as I slipped away, then moved to leave. “You *really* could’ve just asked.”

I felt a lot better – a lot less guilty – about breaking things off as I headed *back* downstairs to finally make my way to the *ODS* set. Knowing he had some ulterior motives helped, and the promise to put him in touch with my father did the rest of the heavy lifting where that was concerned, to the point that I felt free as a bird by the time I walked up to Pierre and Nick mid-scene.

I didn’t interrupt, waiting until their natural break before I offered any greetings. There was the usual handshake between me and Nick, and Pierre and I usually didn’t touch each other.

Today, he grabbed my hand, pulling me much too close for the intimacy to not be obvious to anyone watching – it didn’t seem like he cared about that though.

“How was the meeting?” he asked, referring to the one between me, Des, and Nubia.

“It was fine,” I told him, taking a step back. “We can talk more in detail about it later. Alone.”

He nodded. “Okay. Why’re you running from me though?” he asked, with a confused smile.

“This is an incredibly public place,” I responded, returning his smile as I slipped my hand from his. “And unless we want to create a new scandal, or make some kind of announcement, we should probably keep it cool. Not so obvious that something is happening between us...”

“Shit, you’re right,” he admitted, taking another step back himself. “My bad. The sight of your face just got a nigga a lil hype, that’s all.”

“Oh my *God*,” I blushed, shaking my head. I glanced around to see if there was anyone within earshot before I admitted, “My heart may have started racing a bit when I saw you too, but... we gotta chill. We’ve already been outed to Nubia. And Elodie knows, since she’s staying at your place and saw me.”

Pierre squinted. “Yeah... Nick knows too.”

“See!” I couldn’t do anything now except laugh at it, but still. “I just... I would like us to be able to just enjoy it for what it is before it becomes something we have to explain, or defend, or whatever else.”

He nodded. “I can work with you on that.”

I bit back a smile as one of the crewmembers walked past us, but couldn’t help the almost overwhelming happiness behind the smile.

“Good.”

PIERRE

“**U**ncle P, Uncle P! Look! You gotta watch!”

I peeled my gaze away from my laptop – which I wasn’t supposed to have out anyway, honestly – to watch my nephew as he did a cannonball into my pool.

Impressive.

I hadn’t even been using it. It was actually Logan’s call to have it serviced for the first time in quite a while, once she found out that Nubia and her family were going to be staying in Vegas for the week. Not that there wasn’t a pool available at their luxury hotel, but Logan had suggested that I needed the family time on our day off from shooting. Instead of spending it like I normally would, still obsessing and making ultra-last-minute changes to the script ahead of the table read for the episode.

She was right – I probably *did* need this.

Everybody was chilling – Steph on the grill with steaks for lunch, Nubia, Elodie, and Mari chatting and playing with the kids. Trey, and Mari’s baby girl Eloise – affectionately called Weezy – who was named for my mother, were both having a blast in the pool.

I was – between peeks at my laptop – just taking it all in.

A little earlier, Steph’s people had called, and as usual I was pleasantly surprised when they asked to speak to me. It felt good though, and of course I took my ass over to the phone to show my grinning face on the video call, all the way from Argentina where they lived. I knew my mother would

have been on my ass like a kid who wouldn't give Grandma a hug if I hadn't. Not to imply that speaking with them was some undesirable thing, because it definitely wasn't. Steph's parents were always full of warmth and wisdom for me; his sister and her husband – plus their adorable kids – always had jokes and laughs.

It was all good vibes, good energy that I needed to keep me from going crazy.

I put my laptop aside, knowing at this point, I was just picking at the script for the sake of doing it, without actually making anything better. There wasn't much I hated worse than an overworked script, and I didn't need the stress of *that* possibility as an additional weight on my mind.

So instead, I subjected myself to the possibility of becoming the new subject of conversation for the three women as I walked past, intending to make a safe journey from where I'd been tucked to myself to where Steph was. But I should have known they weren't just going to say *nothing* when I passed.

"*P-Three*," Nubia sang. "*Why* wasn't Logan invited? I thought I'd see my girl here today!"

I shrugged. "It's her day off too. She wanted to get some face time in with *her* people."

"Sure," Mari grinned, lifting a fussing Weezy from her unicorn floatie in the water. "I think you just didn't want us asking her any questions."

"Yeah, that too," I chuckled, reaching for the baby. Her chubby cheeks lifted in a toothless grin as she accepted being transferred from her mother to me, and I didn't hang around.

I kept on with my previous destination of moving on to where Steph was. He'd sat down now and was lounging with a bottle as he played audience to Trey's current water exploit; a kid-sized ball and basketball hoop that had been another one of Logan's ideas.

A good one too.

“You seemed to be in pretty deep thought over there with that laptop,” he said, putting his bottle down. The label had been hidden by his hand, but now I saw that it was just a soda and that knowledge was relieving.

Why though?

It had been a *long* time since I’d been sensitive enough that just the sight of liquor had me on edge.

Pushing that from my mind, I nodded to Steph as I took a seat beside him and reached into the cooler for a bottled water of my own. “Yeah,” I answered, situating Weezy on my leg as she immediately grabbed at the bottle to chew on it. “Down there messing up my script trying to make it perfect.”

Steph chuckled. “Sounds about right. But from everything I’ve heard so far it seems like filming and all of that is going well. Is that true?”

“Yeah,” I assured. “Everything has been a breeze, really. A few hiccups here and there, but nothing outside of the normal shit that any show goes through. Nothing Logan hasn’t been able to swoop in and fix.”

“*Damn*,” Steph said, snapping his fingers.

I raised my eyebrows. “Huh?”

He shook his head and chuckled. “Me and Nubia had a bet going for how long you could carry on a conversation without bringing Logan up. She thought less than five minutes. I was giving you at least ten. You just won my wife a foot rub.”

Half embarrassed, half amused, I let my head drop back as I laughed. “*Damn* man, y’all had bets on me? That’s cold.”

“Nah, it’s all love,” Steph grinned. “We were both pretty worried about you coming back out here by yourself. It was part of why Nubia was so insistent on hiring somebody for you in the first place. So at the very least, you’d know you had somebody on your side who was right here in the city with you. I see now that we didn’t have to be *too* worried about you, man. You’re out here really getting it done, and we see you.”

“Thanks, man,” I nodded. “It’s definitely been a little journey, figuring shit out, trying to get it right, but... I don’t know. I hope I’m not jumping the gun, but I’m feeling good about it.” I stopped, watching Weezy play happily with the cold, unopened water bottle for a moment before I continued. “I was... lost, you know? Before rehab *and* after. The only difference was the sobriety. That was why I came out here in the first place. Not that life wasn’t good up there in Blackwood with y’all, but I just didn’t feel like it was where I was supposed to be. And since the show was set in Vegas anyway... I figured why not?”

I still remembered the conversation I’d had with Nubia about it. How grateful I was, because she hadn’t tried to talk me out of it. As soon as I mentioned going to Vegas to write, she was right there with me, offering not just her support, but dangling the carrot in front of me that if I wrote it, she would put everything in place for me to actually *make* this show.

I was thankful for my family, beyond words.

“So you’re here now,” Steph spoke up. “Is it everything you thought you wanted?”

My eyebrows went up as I thought about it, not wanting to give just a knee jerk answer.

“Honestly? It’s more.”

Steph reached his bottle out for me to bump with mine, which was still in baby girl’s hands, and made her laugh.

“That’s exactly the kind of shit I want to hear.”

It was a good way to spend a Sunday morning, into the afternoon.

We talked, we laughed, we ate, I subjected myself to Elodie sticking a camera in my face for social media, and took a picture with Weezy that was so cute Mari insisted I put it up online.

Ugh.

Logan and Nubia had both been in my ear about their whole *changing the narrative* plan. On its face, it made sense, and I wasn’t even completely opposed.

I just hated it.

After the way celebrity news media had treated me in the wake of my father's death, I hated the idea of offering up my happiness to them.

"It's not for them though," Logan had assured me. And she was naked at the time, which made me a lot more willing to listen. *"Are they going to see it, and use it? Yeah, probably. Sure. But it's **for** your fans. It's for the people who want to see you win. And... it's for you. How is anybody going to know who you really are, the things that really make you happy, the people you really care about, if you don't show them?"*

Fine.

But I still hated that shit though.

We ended up kicking it at my house all day, until it was time for dinner. Then everybody got packed up and dressed to go out together for a meal before they left in the morning. They'd be getting on a plane at the same time me and Elodie were due on set.

I'd been out alone in Vegas several times since I'd been back without anybody bothering me. Even while I was with Elodie, I'd been able to enjoy a certain level of solitude because I wasn't *personally* that recognizable. If they knew who she was, they likely wrote me off as her boyfriend or something. When women stared, it was because I looked good, not because they knew who I was.

Tonight, with the combined star power of El, Nubia, and Steph – plus that little bullshit "scandal" because of Sienna – I felt like everywhere I looked, somebody was pointing a camera in my face.

Okay.

Maybe it was just one or two people.

But *still*, it felt like one or two too many, and the shit was irritating when I was just trying to go out and enjoy a meal with my family. I knew it would be fine once we got inside the actual restaurant, but in the meantime we had to walk through the crowded boulevard with folks staring, and I was annoyed.

Which didn't make the next thing my gaze fell on any easier to process.

We'd gotten through the doors of the building where the restaurant was housed – this communal type spot with several eateries in one place. The doors we walked through were just the main ones for the building and we could see the front entrances of the others. Steph was giving our name to the hostess waiting out front of the one we'd chosen when I looked up and saw Logan.

Wearing the kind of dress that made me want to peel her out of it.

Which... wasn't saying *much* because I wanted to peel Logan out of all her clothes all the time. But it was the accessory on her arm while she was in *that* dress that really had me going.

Not the bracelet, no.

*Who the fuck is **this** nigga?*

With my hands in my pockets, I broke away from my family to approach where Logan was walking arm in arm with some dude who looked like he was fresh off a *Sugar&Spice* cover. She'd been too busy giggling at whatever the fuck he was talking about to notice me when I noticed her, but as I approached, I must have caught her gaze because her head turned in my direction and her mouth spread into an easy, happy smile.

“Pierre, hey!” she greeted, breaking away from her date to offer me a quick hug. “What are you doing out here?” she asked.

I gestured behind me to where the rest of my family had already gone inside the restaurant, but Steph was hanging near the front door obviously waiting on me. “Just having dinner with the fam before they head out in the morning,” I told her. “I see you're out here looking good for a date. How you doing, man?” I said, addressing dude that had been just patiently standing there.

“*Oh God,*” Logan muttered under her breath as he accepted the hand I’d offered for him to shake.

“Can’t complain, bruh.”

Yeah, I bet you can’t.

“Pierre, this is my *friend* Trei Norwood,” Logan said, giving me the evil eye like I was doing something wrong. “His family owns a local spirit company. Trei, this is Pierre Perry. My... well... you’ve heard a lot about him from me.”

Trei chuckled. “Indeed. Good to finally meet the man behind the mystery,” he added, and... I didn’t know what that shit was supposed to mean, so I didn’t like it. So I was about to ask about it when another woman walked up and Trei slipped an arm around her.

Immediately, I caught that their vibe was much more intimate than anything that had been going on with him and Logan when I spotted them.

“Pierre, this is Zoraya Whitfield, Trei’s girlfriend. It’s been a while since I’ve been able to catch up with both of them, and since this was my night off from work, they asked if I wanted to get dressed up and join them for dinner.”

Oh.

Oh.

“*Yeah,*” Logan murmured under her breath, and I found my manners to properly greet a very amused-looking Zoraya as well.

“It was lovely seeing you guys tonight,” Logan told them, as they prepared to part ways. “Pierre will see me to my car. Won’t you?” she asked me, with a very pointed glare.

“Yeah. Not a problem.”

She came with me to say hello to Steph, so that I could send him on to be with the rest of the family while I got chewed out.

I mean, while I saw Logan safely to her car.

“You want to tell me what that was about?” Logan asked, thankfully grinning, which let me know she wasn’t *too* pissed about it.

“My bad. It looked like you on a date,” I explained, opting to just tell the damn truth. “You’re out in public with *this* dude, out in public with Anthony’s corny ass, with no problem. But me and you gotta damn near pretend we don’t even know each other.”

“That is an exaggeration and you know it,” Logan laughed. “Before shooting started, you and I grabbed dinner together plenty of times. I’ve never said anything about having a problem being seen with you!”

“Yeah, on a professional level. I’m talking about romantically. You can be out looking like this for date night with other niggas, but not me?”

Logan huffed. “Have you *asked*?”

“If I did, what would the answer be, Logan? What are we even doing?”

Stopping at her car, Logan pushed out a sigh and turned to face me. “As much as I understand why some certainty and clarity would be really important for you... I am in no way ready for a *what are we?* conversation,” she told me earnestly, holding my gaze. “What we did in your office, me staying overnight with you, your family knowing about us... all of it is already way out of my comfort zone. And even if it wasn’t, I’m just... I don’t *know* what we’re doing. It’s been like a week, barely, and I’m lost as fuck, and I’m confused too,” she admitted. “But at the same time, I’m also very... certain. Whatever it is that we’re doing, this dynamic we’ve created... It feels good. And I’m hoping that it’s okay with you for us to just kind of take our time with this, and let it be what it is, until it’s something else. And then we can let that be what it is until it’s something else too.”

“Absolutely,” I reassured her. “I get all that, shorty, and I’m not trying to rush you into something. It’s new for me too. I don’t know,” I chuckled. “I probably seem crazy jealous right now, huh?”

Logan laughed. “I wouldn’t say *crazy* jealous. Definitely a little bit though. But I get it. Things changed between us, without like... a full-blown conversation, we were just going with the flow. So everything looks different. But there’s only *one* person I’m interested in like that right now. And I’ve got way too much going on to be able to juggle men, so if you see me with someone else, I promise you, you have no reason to be jealous. You’re the only person who has my attention.”

“Oh *damn*,” I grinned. “It’s like *that*?”

“Yeah it’s like that, and it *better be* like that for you too.”

“Absolutely,” I guaranteed her. “Unquestionably.”

Logan bit down on her lip, trying to keep from smiling as hard as I know she wanted to. “So... I should probably let you get to your family,” she said. “I saw that *completely* adorable picture of you and Mari’s baby. Thank you for actually giving the social media thing a try – that was an excellent addition to your feed. Has getting this time with them been as restorative as I hoped it would be?”

“Yeah, it really has. Good call.”

She nodded, then stepped away from her car door, giggling when I opened it for her before she could do it for herself.

“I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Yeah, you will.”

She surprised me a bit by glancing around to see if anybody was looking in our direction before she leaned in to give me a quick kiss. She didn’t even say anything else after that, just climbed in her car and pulled off, leaving me to make my way back to the restaurant feeling good as fuck about the clarity just that quick conversation had given me.

It must have been all over my face when I got back to my people, because as soon as they saw me, they laughed.

“Steph says I’m wrong for not telling you who it was when you saw Logan with Trei,” Nubia said, as I took the seat she’d saved for me beside her. “The look on your face was just so crazy I couldn’t pull myself together to tell you before we had

to go ahead and go in. And you were already walking off like you were on a mission, and I was trying to see what was gonna happen, and –

“It’s cool, Nubia,” I laughed. “I got my little feelings hurt for a second, but that’s the price I paid for jumping to conclusions. We’re good though.”

“Me and you, or you and her?” she asked.

I grinned. “Both.”

LOGAN

“**S**haw is a nice-looking kid. It can’t be *that* bad, right?”

In the dressing room mirror, Elodie gave me a look that very clearly implied it was, indeed, that bad. There was only one – incredibly tasteful, non-gratuitous – sex scene in the whole show, and it was only there because Pierre, Nick, and Miko had all agreed that it was necessary. Not just tossed in for shock factor like it seemed with so many other shows. They were really hoping to create a show that didn’t use tricks to pull the audience in; nothing was here just for the novelty of it.

Of course, all that put added pressure on the people who were actually going to *be* in the scene.

Elodie and Shaw.

Tracy and Jason.

“It’s not about how he looks,” Elodie revealed, shaking her head. “It’s about... how *I* look.”

I frowned. “El, you could be a freaking model. You’ve *been* a freaking model.”

“You have to say that, you’re my brother’s girlfriend.”

“I’m not his *girlfriend*,” I corrected her, “And I don’t have to say *anything*. It’s the truth. You look amazing El, and you’re not about to walk out there and get treated like a piece of meat on *this* set anyway,” I reminded her. “Neither Nick nor Pierre

is even here, so that takes away *that* awkwardness. Miko is directing this episode, remember?”

She'd asked me to be here as her backup – God knows why – but I was ready to do whatever was asked of me. And we were going to make it happen.

“Hey,” I said propping my hip against the vanity table as something else occurred to me. “Nobody’s... making you uncomfortable or anything, right? Is Shaw being a creep or something, and you’re not comfortable doing this with him?”

El immediately shook her head. “*No*, not at all,” she said, giving me a look like I’d lost my mind for even thinking something like that.

And hell maybe it *was* off target, but after my own experiences, I had to make sure.

“Shaw has been... really great to work with,” El said, her face slipping into this serene expression that clued me in to something I hadn’t picked up on before. “He sent me those,” she revealed, pointing to an oversized bouquet that was taking up a large amount of the vanity table. “They were waiting for me when I got here this morning”

“Oh *really now?*” I exclaimed, plucking the card from where it was still hanging from the little holder.

“Ellie don’t worry. I’ve got you today, and we’re going to kill this.”

Understandably, there was no name on it, since they were obviously keeping what seemed like a bit of a budding romance under wraps.

“*Ellie?*” I asked with a grin as I looked up, and she snatched the card from me, embarrassed.

“Do *not* say a word to Pierre, okay?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Only if I thought you were in danger or something would I *ever*,” I assured her. “But it’s quite clear to me you are in good hands... *Ellie*,” I teased, making her shake her head.

“I keep telling him not to call me that.”

“But you don’t *actually* want him to stop calling you that, right? Cause that shit is adorable.”

“*Right?*” She gushed. “We haven’t... Like nothing has actually *happened*, you know? We’ve gone over lines together on the phone and ended up talking until we fell asleep, stuff like that, but nothing else. Which... I guess is what’s making this whole thing weirder. Like he looks good, and he always smells good too, so it’s very easy to be his love interest on screen. But... him kissing me, holding me on camera for certain scenes is one thing. Him seeing me naked, us acting out *this* scene... is something else.”

I didn’t patronize her by reminding her that the *world* had seen her in an itty bitty, may as well not even be there type of bikini on more than one occasion. A shot like that was much different than the up-close familiarity of being one on one with a person, TV set or not.

“I really think you’re going to just have to tune all of that out, El,” I told her. “I know you know how to lose yourself in your character so you’re going to have to just... sink into this, and get it done. You’re not Elodie. You’re Tracy. He’s Jason, not Shaw. We’ve only got essential staff on set that for this one, and the intimacy coach to make sure you guys are as comfortable as possible. And we’re going to make this thing happen, right?”

She pushed out a sigh at first, but then she nodded, looking up at me with a smile. “Yeah,” she nodded. “I’m going to make it happen. Thanks, Logan. I knew your never frazzled ass would be the one to talk to about this.”

“Never frazzled?” I laughed. “Oh baby that is a front. This whole thing, the show, all this work to make it happen? It’s driving me *nuts*. My cycle is all out of whack, I’ve been messing stuff up. Never in my life has this stuff happened to me,” I told her, shaking my head. “It is absolutely stressful for me too, I think it just comes out in different ways for all of us.”

El nodded. “Yeah, different manifestations and all of that, I get, but your cycle is messed up? Girl you’re about to have

another Pierre,” she cackled, making my eyes go wide.

“Cute joke, but absolutely not,” I declared.

Just like Pierre had assumed about me, weeks ago, I *literally* had an app for that.

And the intra-uterine equipment to back it up.

“Whatever you say,” Elodie sang, checking her makeup in the mirror again.

“You just focus on not making a mess in that bed with Shaw, *Ellie*,” I teased, making her blush again.

“That’s cold, Logan. You ain’t right for that.”

I laughed as I left her in the dressing room to finish up and get ready to move on to the set. It really was much quieter today, at least for now, while we filmed this love scene.

I had read too many horror stories from other actors about extra crew members and whoever else crowding around set just to get a glimpse of the actress naked. Or worse, a bunch of faces around the room while she had to mimic great sex.

It was gross.

Luckily Nick and Miko both had the experience and integrity to not create environments like that for their actors, and Pierre had certainly needed no convincing.

He and Nick were taking this time while Miko was in charge on set to go over the next few episodes now that we were right in the middle. With the way it ended up working out, the network wanted to debut the show alongside some other, already proven premieres.

This was a good thing.

The shows that would be coming on before and after *One Day Sober* already had buy-in from established viewers. So in addition to the people who would have heard the buzz about the show and wanted to watch it just because of that, we would pick up viewers from people who simply left their TV on and thought this new show looked interesting and kept watching. Or, from people who tuned in early for the show that was

coming on after and committed to catching *ODS* next time it was on.

What that meant though, was we'd be premiering that first episode – and probably the next two if we wanted to keep up with the schedule – *before* we'd be done filming.

It was something other well-known shows did all the time.

It wasn't *anything* new, not particularly innovative, but it was a daunting prospect.

Because for every episode that premiered and was already out, anything included there became canon. There were no reshoots, no editing to take a certain scene out.

It was final... before everything *else* was final.

And we'd said yes to it.

So, Nick and Pierre were poring over the script, making sure that everything was completely tight. I didn't say anything to either of them about the fact that they'd already done that several times because I knew it wasn't helpful. They had to make sure for themselves and with my own wannabe perfectionist nature, far be it from me to get in the way of that.

It was just going to have to work itself out.

As I headed in Miko's direction, I passed a couple of assistants who were standing by waiting on filming to start. I spoke, and they spoke back, but as they returned to their conversation, I heard, "*I can't believe Pierre's fine ass isn't on set today. I didn't know they meant even **he** wasn't going to be here when they were asking people to sign up for the "limited" set.*"

It took everything in me not to turn back and get another good look at the face of the one who said that. I'd been teasing Pierre way too much about his unfounded jealousy to fall into the same thing.

Especially when this was harmless. He *was* fine, so of course there were people on set who saw it and wanted to be in his presence because of it.

At the same time though... he was mine, and there didn't need to be any other bitches looking for him.

Mine, but I corrected El when she called him my boyfriend.

What kind of sense did that make?

In any case, it wasn't the time for me to be thinking about that. Once I tracked down Miko, she went straight into reviewing directorial notes, and even put a headset on me and one of the director's tablets in my hands.

"Uhhh, I know you said you wanted me here to back you up but damn," I laughed, as she pointed out the chair next to her for me to sit down.

She grinned. "Not just backup, honey. You're official today."

She... wasn't just talking either.

She really meant it.

When things just didn't seem to be flowing right in terms of getting Tracy and Jason from the front door to her bedroom without it looking stiff, Miko turned to me asking for my advice.

The way it was all scripted was fine, but there had been changes to the set for the purposes of getting the shot that hadn't been accounted for. So, in trying to make it flow as scripted, we were ending up with clunky looking shots.

So we changed it.

Right there, on the fly, Miko and I worked together to make some shifts that kept everything that was written, but moved it at all around a bit so that it flowed. Once we figured that part out, the scene went marvelously, and honestly... It was pretty freaking hot.

Shaw and Elodie had real, blazing chemistry that I'd seen before, even when they auditioned together, but now that I knew what I did about them, it seemed to shine even brighter.

And it was all going to look even better post editing, with the color grading and the music and just... *yes*.

I'd been excited just to even be on the fringes of making this happen, but stepping right into the middle of it in this way was an unexpected pleasure.

Once the scene was fully wrapped, and the characters were off to make costume changes as more people arrived to start their shifts on set, Miko got my attention to pull me into an embrace. "You did so good, honey," she complimented. "I can't wait to tell Pierre he was right."

My eyebrows went up. "Huh?"

"Well, I was talking about bringing in another director to help me with this episode. Pierre didn't want to be out here watching his sister fake getting it on for take after take, and I think Nick sees her in a similar manner. They got lucky that there was something else to do, so neither of them had to say that, especially since this was already my episode to direct. Anyway, Pierre insisted that since you've been such an engaged part of this, that you could handle it. He didn't think we needed to bring anybody else on. And look at you, proving him right!"

With that said, she walked off, leaving me to really think about that.

Yes, I was good at my job, that went without question, but the fact that he'd trusted me with something like *this*?

Well... that was something else entirely.

"SO YOU'RE REALLY ENJOYING YOURSELF WITH THIS?" MY mother asked, peeking at me from the next mud bath over.

It was another Sunday, another day off, and when my mother had reached out, asking if I wanted to accompany her to the spa... well, I didn't have to think about that very hard.

Hell yes I did.

"I really, really am," I told her, truthfully. As stressful as it was becoming the closer we got to being done, it was still

pretty gratifying to see a project of this scope through from start to finish.

“Well good,” my mother said, closing her eyes. “I’m glad to see you flourishing, even if it’s not what we wanted you to do.”

My eyes nearly popped out of my skull at that. True, we’d been in a decent place since that conversation with my father, but it had been my impression that they were mostly just humoring me.

They understood where I was coming from, but didn’t necessarily agree, which was the most I was asking for anyway.

No aiding, no abetting, just acceptance.

This was different though.

“Well, that’s quite a shift,” I couldn’t help commenting, and my mother laughed a bit as her eyes reopened.

“Well once your father and I forced ourselves to take our own egos out of the equation, it was actually quite simple. Especially seeing how happy you are now,” she added. “I know you’ve accused us of not being aware enough of your mental state, and maybe that’s true. What I thought back then was just... drive and ambition, I see now was more along the lines of resignation and grit. To get you through something you weren’t enjoying. It’s clearer now because I see the difference in you. You seem so much lighter.”

“I *feel* so much lighter,” I agreed. “I’m glad you see it too.”

She nodded, then got this far away look on her face for a moment before her attention came back to me. “We really did think through what you said. Through *everything* you said. And at first... we really didn’t want to believe you. *I* didn’t want to believe you.”

“That I wasn’t happy working at the firm?”

“No,” my mother shook her head. “Not that. I didn’t want to believe that the same things I’d had to endure as a young

lawyer, the same things I'd fought against and thought were eradicated... were still happening right under our noses."

Oh.

The good ol' boy culture.

It was unfortunately still rampant, even when the ones who were more commonly thought of as the "*good ol' boys*" weren't actually present.

There was always some asshole willing to step into that place.

I'd been lucky enough to have the Byers surname, so as dehumanizing and frustrating as my own harassment from clients had been, I still felt somewhat empowered to shut it down. I wasn't with that shit, and all it took was a smacked hand or face, and/or a threat to mention it to one of my parents or the other partners to make it stop.

Not everybody had a soft place to land in the face of something like that, though.

It had been a deep source of guilt for me, in fact.

I hadn't been up front with my parents about it when it was happening because I hadn't wanted to be viewed as weak, or unable to handle myself. I wanted to prove that I could handle it on my own, which could never be the case if I was running to my parents to fix my problems.

Of course, *now* I could see how silly that was.

And how harmful it was to people who may not have had the protection of their mother, father, uncles, aunts, cousins, all being alongside them at work. It was this unspoken thing, because that was how all abuse thrived – the victim was always scared to speak up, to tell the wrong person about it for fear of their situation becoming worse.

I could've – *should've* – said something before it came spilling out as some sort of "gotcha" against my parents, which... I had to own.

"That really bothered me," my mother went on, pulling me from the depths of my own thoughts. "I kept trying to tell

myself that maybe you were just angry and trying to make us feel bad, that you were exaggerating the problem. But I couldn't sit with that. My brain just wouldn't let me accept that easy answer. So... I investigated. Very quietly. I signed privacy agreements with so many young associates, paralegals, interns, legal secretaries, people from all over the firm, just in the time since you told us that. I made myself accountable to them, and their stories, and your father did the same, just from a different direction, and you know what we discovered?"

The suspense was literally killing me – my chest was tight, breath lodged in my throat as I waited for her to answer.

"The problem was bigger than we thought. Bigger than *you* probably even realized," my mother admitted, wistfully shaking her head. "We have dropped a million dollars' worth of clients over the behavior reported, like you said, but it wasn't just clients who were the problem. We've excused a startling number of people from our employ, and the most disheartening thing about it? Our upcoming family picnic is likely going to be missing a few faces. And *good riddance* to them. Because how can we ever pride ourselves on this legacy if we're protecting abusers?"

"*Wow*," I whispered, shaking my head. "I... *wow*."

"Precisely," she agreed. "So there was quite the shakeup, over the last few weeks, for the better. And really... we have you to thank. Neither of us wanted to believe we'd created anything other than a demanding, productive, educational environment at the firm. It's part of why it was so hard to accept it when you wanted to do something else – we couldn't see how toxic it was, under the fabulous façade. We wanted to believe you were just rebelling, that we'd spoiled you, but... we see it now. And we're grateful you told us, so we can fix it."

Wow.

Again.

This was certainly *not* the conversation I'd expected to have with my mother, but I was more than glad we did. Through the rest of our bath, she told me about the changes

they were making, policies they were implementing, all of that, and honestly... it sounded amazing.

I was proud of them.

And really, it made me understand their position a little better, even though I was still hurt by how they'd pushed me away. Becoming an adult – or apparently, even a parent – didn't make you magically equipped to handle certain emotions and disappointments, so... sometimes it ended up coming out wrong, expressed in the worst possible of ways.

None of us were immune to it.

After the mud baths, it was on to massages, then another shower, and then time for our pedicures. That area wasn't as private as the others, since they saw more clients for that, so we had to shift conversation to something lighter.

Like my father's disappointment that it hadn't worked out with Anthony.

Especially now that they'd met.

They were a match made in heaven for each other, but I was glad I'd already put a knife in that situation romantically, because it definitely would've been hell for *me*.

“He's a nice enough young man, and potentially a great attorney, but my goodness... I don't think I've ever met someone so eager to agree with your father,” my mother giggled over her champagne.

Beside her, I was enjoying a glass of my own, from the bottle we had to ourselves. This was why I liked hanging with my mother – she didn't do anything half-assed. There was a driver waiting who'd be taking us to a private dinner after this, and I didn't have to ask to already know the meal would be gourmet.

A sudden frostiness in the air made me look up from all my giggling with my mother to see that two new patrons had entered the area.

Les' mother and my least favorite of his aunts.

Even when he and I had been on the best of terms, I'd despised this lady and her crooked, faux jheri curl wig.

His mother was fine.

Usually.

"Well. Logan. I haven't seen you in quite a while," she said. The other heifer pretended to be busy on her phone.

I opened my mouth, fully prepared to be pleasant to her – I had no reason to be anything else, especially since before Les and I came together, our parents had been friends. Still were, as far as I knew, but considering the lack of dialog between her and *my* mother... that was in question.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself. My son has been in *such* a state since you... *trampled* on his plans for your shared future."

I smiled. "Mrs. Moore, I actually *am* very pleased with my life," I told her. "I'm sorry to hear that Les is having a difficult time adjusting, but it's only been a few months – I am positive he'll be back to himself."

Honestly, it was surprising to me, hearing that he was having a hard time with the dissolution of our relationship, since we'd barely actually *had* a relationship by the time it was over. Still, I didn't hold any ill will towards him, so my words were sincere.

"I'm sure you are," she huffed, moving on to where the very uncomfortable looking hostess was trying to usher them into seats.

I looked over to my mother, who had picked up a magazine, and was flipping serenely through it while sipping her champagne.

"*Mama*," I hissed, and she looked up at me with a plastered-on smile.

"Yes?"

"You wanna tell me what's going on between you and Gina? Y'all didn't even acknowledge each other."

She huffed, turning back to her magazine. “There is not a damn thing going on between me and that woman or her sister, or that curly possum on her head.”

“*Daaaamn*, mama!” I cackled, then quickly pulled myself back together. “You used to fuss at me for talking about the woman’s hair. What in the world happened?”

“What happened is that, shortly after you told us about the termination of your relationship with Leslie, those two came to my *home*, demanding that your father and I *get you in line*. As if you were cattle to be corralled or something. And then, once I’d disabused them of *that* notion, it came out that since you’d decided not to be a lawyer anymore anyway, they didn’t think you were good enough for him. I put those bitches out of my home so fast I think she *actually* had that wig on straight for a moment.”

“If you don’t get outta here!” I laughed, not bothering to temper it this time, not immediately. I didn’t want us to get kicked out though, so I quieted down and let my mother change the subject to something in her magazine, since she obviously didn’t want to talk about those two.

Unfortunately, that only lasted so long.

My mother and I were almost done with our services when yet another Moore walked in.

This time, it was Les.

Now that I wasn’t so deeply immersed in my annoyance with him, I could admit – just in my head – that his big-eared ass *did* look good. Not that it meant anything to me anymore, just an observation.

I could see how that face and body convinced me to hang around longer than I should’ve.

“Logan... you’re looking good,” he said, with a slick smile that I returned.

“So are you.”

Across the room, his mother cleared her throat, getting his attention. “What are you doing here? Did something happen?”

He frowned. “I... thought something happened with *you*. Aunt Rita texted and said something was wrong with the card processing, and you needed cash to pay. I came through because I was already in the area. They were just letting me stick my head in to say hello, since they didn’t know anything about the problem up front.”

What a wack ass set up, I thought, exchanging a glance with my mother as Gina turned to fuss at her sister.

“I’m going to let y’all get back to it,” Les said, chuckling as he caught on to the obvious lie too. “I *will* cover the pedicures though – theirs too,” he told the worker, indicating me and my mother.

Before I could speak up to tell him our pedicures were covered in the package we’d already paid for, his mother spoke up again.

“Don’t you dare spend another dime on that girl!”

“Another?!” my mother said, not even giving me a chance to open my mouth. “*My* daughter has always had, has, and will always have her own – she doesn’t need your son to pay for a damn thing for her.”

“*Whoa*,” Les bellowed, stepping into their eyeline so they weren’t looking at each other. “Mama, that’s uncalled for. We’re not about to do that. Logan, Mrs. Byers – please, I’m sorry.”

“*You’re* fine, sweetheart,” my mother said, sitting back and swallowing the rest of her champagne.

That was how I knew we were *really* back on good terms, cause Kimberly Byers didn’t play about her baby, and I guess she felt like she needed to make that clear.

And *I* certainly wasn’t complaining.

PIERRE

I had key card privileges now.

And I didn't even care how corny it might be to be excited about that, I just *was*.

No longer did I have to call to get Logan to let me into her building or wait around to catch somebody going in or out. *Not* to be confused with keys to her place; I still had to be let into her front door.

But this was progress.

This was a *step*, even in a situation where we still hadn't really defined what this thing between us was.

Now *that*, I was trying not to be too pressed about.

There were two things helping me keep my head. One was a desire not to spook Logan by trying to push this thing too fast.

This was all still very unlike her and she was already giving me a lot.

The other thing was the knowledge that if I didn't have the huge stressor of creating the show on my back, I wouldn't be quite as hard pressed to put a label on what we were. The anxieties of the show had me a lot more drawn to certainties in my personal life, things I didn't really have to wonder about.

Which meant it was a good thing I had somebody like Logan on the other side of this, because she really wasn't the *make you wonder* type. She was either with it or she wasn't,

and when that status changed, I felt confident she would let me know.

So for now, I was good.

This was the first situation since I'd been fully-seated and comfortable in my sobriety that resembled a relationship, and I wanted to be careful with it, didn't want to mess it up.

The only thing with *that* was... I now had a whole list of things I was trying not to mess up, which wasn't exactly great for my mental health.

“Oh my God, aren't you Elodie Perry's brother?”

Fuck.

Neither was that.

It was late, and I'd just walked through the door of Logan's building with my backpack slung over one shoulder, ready to spend the night. We were both exhausted when we left set, so sleep really was the only thing on either of our agendas. When I commented about where I'd rather do my sleeping tonight, she'd given me a smile that just wouldn't let me keep my ass at home.

Maybe I should have though.

“Uh... yeah,” I answered the woman and her friend who had rushed up to me now, peering at me with wide eyes like I was some kind of superstar.

“What are you doing here?” She asked. “Oh my God do you live here? Is *she* here?!”

“What if she's your *neighbor*?!” the friend giggled, and I shook my head.

“Nah, I'm just visiting a friend.”

“Must be some *friend* at this time of night,” the first one said, and they exchanged a look, letting off some kinda twin-energy high pitched laugh.

“Says the women leaving *out* at this time instead of coming *in*,” I counted, eyebrow raised, which made them

blush first before they decided it was hilarious that I'd pulled their card too.

"I guess you got a point, we'll let you get on about your business... if you promise to introduce us to Elodie!"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "Sorry ladies. I don't think I can help with that, but maybe you'll run into her around town."

They had no qualms about the eye rolls. "*Fiiine*. Can we at least get a selfie or something?"

Fuck.

I wanted to... I don't know just offer an autograph or something instead, but I wasn't famous like that. And even if I was, from what I understood, people these days didn't want that. They wanted photographic proof for their social media accounts. If I declined this, I could already hear Logan, Nubia, and even Chloe McKenna in my head, fussing at me about not being nice to "fans", even though they weren't even *mine*.

"Fine," I grunted, trying not to sound as completely unenthusiastic about it as I felt. "Just one."

There were more excited giggles as they both took their phones out, even though I'd very clearly said just one.

Whatever though.

I stepped between them and fixed my face to try not to look completely fucking awkward as they snapped their pictures – just one apiece, so maybe that was just a misunderstanding.

Either way, they seemed happy with the photos and went on about their giggling-ass way, so I could move on to my real destination.

Logan's bed.

She answered her door in her pajamas, her hair already tied up for the night in one of her many printed silk scarves. I got a kiss in greeting that made me want to say *fuck sleep*, but Logan had already been through the wringer, handling a bunch

of media stuff and picking up a few more official duties on set for the first half of the week.

She was barely keeping her eyes open, and I didn't want to contribute to her dragging or being exhausted the next day.

So, when she slipped her hand into mine to lead me to her room, I just followed, with no expectations about sex, which was cool.

Completely.

I just wanted to be close to her.

She climbed into her bed while I headed for the shower, and by the time I made it back out, she'd already drifted off. Instead of waking her up... I just joined her.



I WAS IN TROUBLE AS SOON AS I WOKE UP.

I could just *feel* it in Logan's energy, even though I wasn't sure what I could have possibly done wrong.

She wasn't being outright cold, but I'd definitely woken up with her before to a lot more warmth than she was sending in my direction now.

I was confused.

Really fucking confused.

That was, until I picked up my phone.

Apparently, I'd been tagged in something, and when I unlocked my screen to figure out where I'd been tagged and in what, the first thing I saw was the picture I'd taken last night in Logan's lobby with those girls.

At first I thought *damn, maybe one of them put something in the caption to make it seem like something it wasn't*. But to my eyes the caption seemed innocent enough.

***Look who me and my homegirl ran into.
@El_P_NoAlbum has a fine ass brother. One step closer to***

meeting the real thing right?

They didn't even give a shit about me; only my connection to Elodie. But that made me even *more* confused as to what Logan could be upset about.

So, fuck it.

I just *asked*.

"Hey," I said, stepping into the bathroom with my toothbrush while she was still in the mirror washing her face. "What's up with you this morning? You're giving me some energy I don't understand."

She cut her eyes in my direction in the mirror and then her eyebrows pulled together. "You *really* don't understand why I would be annoyed that you took a picture in my lobby that is now *all over* social media?"

My eyes went wide. "...nah, shorty. I really don't."

"*Seriously*, Pierre? All it takes is *one* person who knows where I live to recognize the distinctive ass lobby of this building in a picture and rumors start flying."

Oh.

Damn.

I had *not* thought about that.

Logan lived in a nice ass building, and it *was* a pretty distinctive lobby. Ultra-modern, all white, with these teal neon lights and accents everywhere.

I could see her concern.

Instead of admitting that though, I focused on something else.

"Not a rumor, if it's true. It's just a story somebody happened to guess right," I said, which brought a scowl to her face.

"It's not a *guess* if we're spoon feeding them information I've been pretty clear about not wanting to get out." She shook her head, turning her eyes back to her own reflection.

“Whatever though. It’s my fault. I knew it was sloppy, us being at each other’s places, but especially you coming to mine when I don’t have any real privacy here.”

“Damn, so me and you together is *sloppy* now?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. People taking pictures of my client on his way to spend the night in my bed? Yes, Pierre it’s fucking sloppy. But again, it’s my fault for getting wrapped up in it and not thinking this through like I would with anything else. I should have known better.”

With a huff, she left the bathroom.

And I... really didn’t know what else to say, so I called after her, “Ay, you’re not calling your ass finished without toning and moisturizing, are you?”

She poked her head back in the bathroom door. “What?”

“Last time you stayed over with me, you made a whole big ass deal about your morning skincare, upset that you forgot to grab your toner and your moisturizer. You walked out of here without doing it just now.”

She stared at me for a long moment and then she did step back into the bathroom to finish her routine out.

In silence.

Which was cool, because I was brushing my teeth anyway, and it gave me time to replay the conversation in my head so I could see exactly where I went wrong.

Because I definitely *had* gone wrong.

She was right, we had discussed this. And even though I didn’t really care for the secrets and shit, I knew it mattered to her.

And not just that it mattered to her, that she had a *point*.

Her reputation was important, and of course, one that claimed she slept with clients wasn’t what she wanted.

So... when I was finished brushing my teeth, I went to find her in her closet.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She’d had her back to me, but when she turned now with today’s shoes in her hand, her eyes were glossy like she was struggling not to cry.

Shit.

I was *really* sorry now.

“Hey... my bad, aiight?” I told her, immediately approaching to wrap my arms around her. Instead of pulling away, she welcomed it, dropping her head to my chest. “I shouldn’t have been dismissive,” I admitted. “And I should have stepped outside or something for the picture. I didn’t even want to take it honestly, I just felt like if I didn’t, it would turn into something else for you to have to fix. You know I wouldn’t consciously do anything to mess things up for you, right?”

“Of course I know that,” she said, lifting her head to meet my gaze. “It never crossed my mind that this was on purpose. But I... I do get to be bothered about it,” she told me. “And not just irritated with you, but with myself too. You want to be behind the scenes with me, then this is what you get – this is what you got to see. I spent too much time in my last situation just swallowing stuff and brushing it off. And I don’t want to do that anymore, so I’m just going to feel what I’m feeling. And then we’ll move on.”

As usual, she was right.

It was actually something I’d had to talk through extensively in rehab—feeling what you were feeling instead of rushing to try to fix it or not feel it anymore. That shit wasn’t healthy and was often the catalyst for a disastrous relationship with self-medicating, which I knew a little too much about. Sometimes... you just needed to sit with shit and let it pass when it passed.

I wasn’t a pussy, so I could handle her feeling however she felt about it because I knew we’d be good on the other side.

“You want me to leave you alone?” I asked, and I was, admittedly, relieved when she shook her head no.

“I’m not *that* mad,” she said, with a soft laugh as she dropped her head against my chest again. “There’s a balance, between logic and emotion, and I may have let the pendulum swing a little too far. We have to be a lot more careful.”

I didn’t have a rebuttal to that, and I also didn’t care to explore what that was going to mean for us moving forward.

Not right now.

For now, I was going to just enjoy whatever time we had left this morning.

Handling the rest could come later.

WE ENDED UP BEING LATE.

Just a little.

I casually tossed out the suggestion of us doing a bit of “making up” to smooth over the tension and we ended up getting a little too wrapped up in it.

What saved us from being hella obvious with it was Logan’s need to go handle some things in the office, while I went straight to set. Not arriving together was a good cover.

Not good *enough*, however.

“I don’t have to ask where *you* spent the night, do I?” Elodie teased, sidling up to me at the craft services table where I was grabbing a pastry and coffee for breakfast. “You gotta be more careful with your creeping, P.”

I sucked my teeth. “You say that like I haven’t noticed how tough Shaw has been sniffing around you,” I taunted right back, turning to face her just in time to see her jaw drop open.

“Logan said something, didn’t she?!”

I frowned. “No, Logan hasn’t told me shit about you – *should* she have?”

“Oh. Nope,” El quipped, pressing her lips together like she’d said too much. But because she was nosy, she couldn’t help asking, “What makes you think there’s something with me and Shaw?”

The *easy* answer was that I’d seen *that* scene – through my damn fingers – between the two of them. They were both talented actors, but the chemistry was so strong I had a hard time believing it was completely fake.

The other, harder to verbalize answer was that I could just... tell. And it was fine. Not that she needed – or cared for – my approval, but even when they weren’t in character, I’d seen how that nigga looked at my sister, and... she needed somebody that looked at her like *that*. Not... Misogyny or whatever the fuck that other dude’s name was.

I knew El though, and... the fact that Shaw seemed like a good dude, had good head on his shoulders, was appropriate in age, and wasn’t doing a bunch of partying and shit... none of that worked exactly in his favor. Not based on her past relationships – the ones I was privy to, at least.

Working on the show did seem to be calming her down though, so maybe her attraction to wild dudes was changing.

Hopefully.

Just in case though, I wasn’t about to give her too much indication that Shaw had my approval.

“I’ve seen him sniffing around you,” I told her, with a stern expression I didn’t actually feel. “He’d better be glad it’s too late to recast him. I didn’t hire his ass for this.”

“*Ugh*, you hate everybody I like,” she fussed, crossing her arms.

Yeah.

I did.

And my displeasure had likely fueled her staying with them, which I’d learned a lesson from.

“You’ll live with it somehow, you always do,” I said, pulling out my phone so I could stop the incessant buzzing it

was doing.

Fucking social media.

“Did you run into another one of my fans or something?” El asked, peeking around me to see my screen. “Or you’re just Mr. Popular now?”

Shaking my head, I showed it to her. “Man, I don’t know what all is going on with this shit. I’m only doing this because I have to. I’ve gotta post something today.”

“Take a selfie with me,” she suggested. “It’ll definitely get a bunch of likes.”

“I don’t care about that...”

“But you *should*,” she insisted. “Creating buzz for the show, all that.”

I was so fucking sick of that word.

Buzz.

Why couldn’t I just put the shit out, and whoever wanted to watch it, did?

Obviously, I knew it didn’t exactly work like that – especially with network funds behind the project. Sure, I’d gotten the greenlight straight from the top, but the budget we’d been given wasn’t just for fun – they needed to see returns. And the way that happened was advertising dollars, licensing, merch, all that kinda stuff whose success depended on people watching.

And the best way to get people watching was... buzz.

“Here,” I told El, handing her the phone. She was the one who knew the angles and shit, so it was better to let her be the one to get it done.

She didn’t even show it to me after, just went straight to slapping a black and white filter on it, and adding it to my feed with the caption, “*The Family Business.*” I expected her to return it to me after that, but instead she started tapping around.

“Uh... can I help you?” I asked, gesturing for her to hand it over.

“Hold up, I’m trying to see how many chicks you’ve got camping out in your DMs.”

“What? *None*,” I insisted, shaking my head. “I don’t even look at that shit. It was always full of spam, so I stopped.”

“You’ve gotta set it where only people *you* follow can send you messages,” El said. “I’ll fix it for you. But um... I see a familiar face in here.”

“What? Who?”

Her nose wrinkled as she pointed out a message from Sienna, right before she deleted it without opening. “*Blocked, bitch.*” She muttered. “Oh, this is one of the production assistants here,” she said next. “She wants you to follow her back. I’mma go ahead and do it.”

“If you don’t give me my damn phone,” I said, taking the device from her just as Nick rolled up, ready for us to get started.

We really did have to get to work.

We were filming episode six now, with the show premiering earlier than what we’d gone into this thinking – in just two weeks. We’d been offered the option of a digital-first premiere, with the show being primarily pushed as the latest “binge-worthy” offering on the streaming service.

I didn’t want this binged though.

I understood the appeal, and had even been guilty of doing it myself, but really felt like “binge culture” did a lot of shows – and art in general – a huge disservice. Good shit needed time to breathe, time to sit with it and really process it, to consider not just the messages, but the art itself.

The brain needed breaks from stimulation to appreciate what it had consumed.

I wanted the time and energy, the blood, sweat, and tears we’d put into this to be appreciated beyond somebody staring

at their screen in a near vegetative state. I wanted people to *feel* this shit, like we had through every step of creating it.

So we'd taken the other option.

Nick, Nubia, Miko, Logan, they all agreed it was the better choice.

A real premiere, happening in a few weeks, and a sneak peek event in LA, happening even sooner.

All about the buzz.

I hated that fucking word.

Besides the obvious, for me it held a different connotation – right alongside *binge*. It was a cruel irony that my chosen path – my passion really – was happening in TV, where I couldn't get away from those words, and couldn't really explain to anybody else why the shit was so triggering.

It was *all* so fucking triggering.

I was good though.

I had to be.

We were too close to the finish line, too close to finally seeing this through for anything else to be an option.

LOGAN

The emptiness from the other side of the bed woke me up.

That's the only way I could describe what pulled me from my slumber, even though something had been off before that. The last few days had been more stressful than usual because we had to turn in the first episode to the network at the end of this week, ahead of the premiere and sneak preview event.

We were *all* stressed about it, in varying forms.

I was out of whack, mentally and physically, in ways I never knew before due to the sheer pressure of this.

But Pierre... he had something else going on.

So, when I woke up in his bed to find myself there alone, I didn't chalk it up to grabbing a drink or simple insomnia.

I got up to see for myself what was wrong.

For now, we'd decided that any overnight stays would need to happen at his place, since it was exponentially more private. The benefit of that was that I got to see him in his natural habitat so much that I didn't have to search very far to figure out where he was.

I just went to the balcony doors on the other side of the room.

Sure enough, as soon as I pushed the doors open, I could smell the evidence of his chosen form of self-medication - which I'd read enough on to not be concerned about. Especially since it wasn't some all the time thing.

I wasn't surprised at all to find his computer in his lap, and I didn't have to see the screen to know what he was doing – obsessively watching that first episode yet *another* time. Looking for flaws, searching for any miniscule deficit that would, to his mind, declare him unworthy.

“Come here,” he said, not even looking up to acknowledge that I'd stepped outside. “The color grading is off right here. You see it too, right?”

With a sigh, I joined him on the outdoor sofa, humoring him by looking at what he was indicating to me. “I don't see it, P,” I told him, choosing honesty over being patronizing. He didn't need that. “Just make a note, and maybe run it by Nick or Miko or both, see if they see it. If they see it too, then editing will correct it.”

He still hadn't actually looked at me, so I raised a hand, running it up the back of his neck and into his hair, which hadn't been cut in a little too long.

More evidence of something going on.

In the almost half a year we'd known each other, I couldn't recall ever seeing him without a fresh haircut until very recently.

“You really should try to get some sleep, instead of driving yourself crazy with this. There's no such thing as perfect, but if there was... this episode would definitely be it.”

That was honest too.

I wasn't just trying to get him back to bed to get some rest.

The episode was truly – at least to my eyes – flawless. It did a wonderful job of introducing the main players, their motivations, their struggles, introducing a problem at the end for viewers to care enough about to want to see it get solved.

Visually it was beautiful, between the directing and some stellar cinematography.

Even the score was lovely, thanks to songbird Dani and her musically inclined partner who I just so happened to share a

name with, Logan Lewis. I wasn't biased because of that. They were just dope.

It was clear to me, watching with as much of a neutral eye as I could, that everybody involved had really put their hearts into it.

I hated that Pierre's inner critic was so loud he couldn't see it too.

"I feel like I'm going to miss something that fucks it all up," he admitted, finally offering more than a glance in my direction. His eyes were glossy, and not just from the weed.

"That's what you have a team for," I reminded him. "This is *your* baby. All the rest of us are part of your birthing squad. We're not going to let you fall."

He nodded. "I know. I *know*," he repeated. "Like logically, on the surface, I'm fully aware of that. There's just something, way down deep, way in the back of my mind that's telling me I'm going to fuck this up. And the closer I get to having to turn this episode in, it just gets louder and fucking louder. And no matter what I do, I can't seem to drown it out."

Shit.

There was something there in his words, something in his tone, that put me on edge. I knew he was stressed. I'd seen him stressed before; but this felt so much deeper, so much more potent, that it was hard not to feel uneasy.

And there was next to nothing I could do about it.

I spent a little longer outside with him, doing my best to offer encouragement from every angle I possibly could, hoping that something would stick. But once it was clear that wasn't happening – and I was barely keeping my eyes open while Pierre had started the episode again – I finally pulled myself up.

He was so caught up in the screen that he barely acknowledged me slipping away, back into his room. In his bed, I closed my eyes, even while knowing my chances of any real, restful sleep were slim.

I was worried about him.

Worried about how this stress would manifest, how long it could keep up this attack against his mental state, and what that might mean for him.

What it might mean for his sobriety.

I knew him enough to know *that* was of equal, maybe *more* importance to him than the show was, but he was so deeply immersed that I wasn't sure he could see that the pressure was drowning him.

He was only eating when I practically forced him, like a petulant toddler, and the evidence of his exhaustion was apparent in the dark circles forming under his eyes. He had tunnel vision though, for making the show perfect. I'd already done all I could with that.

I couldn't save him.

And that's not my place.

Their desires for my career weren't the only things my parents had instilled in me. More specifically, my mother had drilled into me that it was never, *ever*, my job to restore or renovate a man. She insisted that I deserved someone already whole, someone who knew enough to not go out in the water without a life jacket.

But... Pierre had one of those.

I was just afraid he wasn't blowing the attached whistle to let somebody know he was out there, sinking.

I was afraid he didn't know he *needed* to.

And so, instead of minding my business like I probably should have, I searched the recesses of my mind for a detail he'd given me a while ago, probably without even realizing it. Once I found it, I picked up my phone from the bedside table and pulled up the search engine to get what else I needed.

I couldn't pull him from the water, and he hadn't asked me to, but... I damn sure wasn't going to sit around waiting until it was too late. I was gonna get the lifeguard's attention.

THE STRESS WAS GOING TO KILL *ME*.

Two more days had passed, and I hadn't seen a change in Pierre to indicate something different had happened.

Fine, so I hadn't seen any traction on my move until late yesterday, and we'd been crazy busy filming some on location scenes from the casino. It was noisy, and it was loud, and there was so much going on and...

Oh God he's going to be so pissed at me.

That concern was so prevalent it was making me dizzy and sick to my stomach.

I guzzled what had to be my sixth bottle of water for the morning, and then finally decided to stop being a fucking wimp and just fess up before the anxiety of it all really did drive me to vomit.

I called out to him, getting his attention just as he was walking away from a conversation with Nick.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" I asked, nervous, which was a completely foreign feeling. Since when was I nervous to talk to *him*?

"Of course, shorty," he said, giving me the kind of smile I felt like I hadn't seen from him in days as he led me off the casino floor to the office we used as the setup for Jason's father. He closed the door behind us, and immediately all the noise of the casino was shut out. "You've been avoiding me this morning," was the first thing out of his mouth. which made my eyebrows bunch together.

"I have?" I asked, even though when I thought about it... yeah, I guess I kinda had, since I was nervous about my little secret.

He chuckled. "Yeah, you have. Every time I get close to you, you head in the other direction. What's up?"

Wow.

His demeanor was so remarkably different from the energy that had caused me to take action that it suddenly felt really silly.

“Okay,” I breathed, chewing on my lip for a second. “I... need to confess something.”

Pierre crossed his arms, his expression completely blank as he stood there waiting for me to continue.

“Umm, well... you’ve seemed really stressed out. Like *really*, really stressed out. And I was worried about you, so... I called someone. Someone I hoped would be a good person and maybe not add to your stress like if I had said something to Nubia or Elodie, but then again, they’re your family. They know you better than I do, so maybe I should have said something to one of them first,” I muttered, wondering why I hadn’t considered that in the first place before running to...

“Who did you call, Logan?” Pierre’s voice broke into my thoughts, keeping me from traveling too far over that mental ledge.

“I got in touch with your sponsor,” I blurted out, instead of dragging it any further. “I remembered way back to that conversation with Laurel and Rowan, you mentioned that his name was Will. I knew you were living in Blackwood at that time, so your sponsor would be there. So as soon as I had “*Will from Blackwood*” in my mind, it was like a light bulb went off,” I explained. “I remembered reading the story years ago about Cameron Taylor, from *Sugar&Spice*. She struggled with alcoholism. Her husband... back then he acted in a sponsor capacity for her. Kind of. It was messy,” I said, getting off track again. “But anyway, I remembered that her husband’s name was Will. So I tracked down contact information for him and reached out, without giving your name or anything like that. Just to make sure it was him.”

I took a deep breath, because through all this, Pierre was just looking at me, not saying anything, and it... felt a little like my lungs were going to explode.

“It was him,” I confirmed. “So I told him what was going on. And I’m sorry, because I know that this is a *massive*

overstepping of boundaries, but I just couldn't stand to see you hurting. And I really want – *need* – you to be okay,” I said, my voice cracking with sudden, unexpected emotion that brought tears along, too. “I’m sorry, I’m not supposed to be crying right now, and I don’t even know why I’m doing that, but... yeah. I really hope that I didn’t... get you in trouble or anything, I don’t know how it works. But you know me. You know I couldn’t *not* do something.”

His expression very solemn as he nodded. “Yeah, I do know you Logan. You want to know what I know about you?”

“That I’m a self-righteous know-it-all whose always trying to fix something, even when my own shit is very much *not* together?” I asked, bobbing my head. “Yeah, I know. I know it all.”

“Nah, shorty,” he laughed, stepping toward me. “What *I* know is that you, Logan Byers...are one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.”

Wait, what?

I’d barely processed that he wasn’t actually angry – or at least, didn’t seem to be – before his hands were cupping my face, and his lips were on mine. My heart practically leapt into my throat, but I swallowed it back down, pulling away so I could look him in the face, with what was apparently a clear question in my eyes.

“Will called me *very* early this morning,” Pierre admitted. “He told me that a *very* meticulous, damn near neurotic woman named Logan was *very* concerned about me. That was you, right? You’re Logan, and you’re could *definitely* be described as neurotic, so...”

“Shut up,” I laughed, knowing I may very well have sounded like a crazy person to that man with my very organized explanation for why Pierre needed him. “So... what happened?”

“He talked some sense into me,” he admitted with a nod. “A bit of a tough love, if you can call cussing somebody out for five minutes straight that,” he laughed. “But... the gist of

the message was to get my shit together before I ended up right back where I was. Which is probably exactly where I was headed. I was spiraling and you saw that. And did something about it. And I'm... grateful."

"I'm just glad it helped," I gushed. "I'm glad you're not pissed at me."

"Definitely not that," he chuckled, pulling me back against his chest.

I submitted to that hug, and the relief it brought, but my mind was rolling back to when he called me *one of the best things that ever happened to him*.

Just... *wow*.

What in the world was I supposed to do with that?!

"I sent the episode off this morning," he told me, muttering the words into my hair.

My head popped up. "What?!"

He grinned at me. "Yep. After talking with Will and realizing how I was fixating... how unhealthy it was... I said fuck it. And I sent it off. And I feel about five tons lighter."

I didn't even bother trying to suppress my smile as I nodded. "Good."

"YOU KNOW... STARING AT ME ISN'T GOING TO MAKE THAT test *not* positive, right?"

"I haven't even taken it yet."

Across the desk, Loren, my doctor, smirked. "You said you were late."

"Just a couple weeks."

She snickered. "Logan... you've never been late before. Like... ever."

Ugh.

She was right.

In fact, the exact point she was making was what had made me stop putting it off and seek advice from a doctor. Pierre – and his sponsor – had called me neurotic, and that wasn't... *wrong*. I had a whole running chart of my daily moods, I tracked my periods down to the heaviness of flow, amongst a whole list of other things that had enabled me to predict my cycles with a very particular level of certainty.

I *knew* my body.

And I just wasn't sure an abnormal level of stress could account for all the strange things it seemed to be doing now.

Apparently, Loren agreed.

“Sweetie... I use you as my “ideal” example for keeping up with all this stuff when I’m talking to other patients,” Loren said, eyeing me across the desk. “You’ve been coming to me for how long? Since you came back from college?” she asked. “In all that time, I’ve *never* met a woman as in tune with her body as you. I think we both know what it’s going to say when you take that test.”

“But I have an IUD.”

“Women get pregnant with IUDs every single day,” Loren said, very simply, like that wasn't a gut-rending blow. “They are *not* one hundred percent effective. Which you were very aware of, because I distinctly remember you telling me you and your man would also avoid or take extra precautions around your ovulation days. I remember marveling at how well you planned to... *plan*. What happened to that?”

“Well, I started having sex that wasn't nearly as... planned.”

Or rather, not at all.

If I *was* pregnant, and far enough along to have missed a period, this had to have happened weeks ago... when we first started messing around again.

Maybe that *first* time we messed around again.

On his desk.

Right next to Anthony's flowers.

"Well good for you," Loren gushed. "I thought it all sounded kinda stuffy, but you and your boyfriend have been together so long, that's to be expected I guess. Glad y'all started spicing it up."

I swallowed, hard. "Um... actually, Les and I are not together anymore. This is... someone else."

"*Oh*. Like a fling or something?" Loren smirked. "Don't be embarrassed about that." She turned around a framed picture on her desk, showing me an adorable toddler. "My baby girl is the result of a fling – and it was a messy situation. But it all worked out, and everybody loves each other, and we're good. But if *my* mess can work out... surely yours can. Whatever you decide to do."

I blew out a sigh.

I wasn't worried about it working out, because mentally, I hadn't even gotten that far yet. But... I was going to have to catch up, quickly.

After a little more back and forth, Loren took a blood sample instead of having me pee on a stick or in a little cup. And then, way too soon, she was confirming what she'd already been sure of, but I'd stupidly hoped wasn't true.

I was pregnant.

Still very early, but no less... positive.

I left Loren's office in a daze and didn't even bother dragging myself back to *WAWG* to attempt any work. My head was all over the place, but what I kept coming back to was the fact that... this was *not* how my life was supposed to go.

I was just starting to really feel like I knew who I was, but I was still very deep into figuring that out. I'd imagined myself as a mother, sure, but... where the fuck was I supposed to fit that into my life *right now*?

And then... there was Pierre.

Brooding Pierre who felt everything *so* deeply, but still somehow managed to have a casual energy about him.

A great foil to my pragmatism and “logic”.

He, too, was just now figuring himself out, and finding confidence in his work, and just... being.

Where was he supposed to find the mental space to be a father?

I climbed straight into my bed, in my clothes.

Chaos.

I couldn't find it in me to care, though.

Loren had removed the IUD there in the office and sent me home with prenatal vitamins I couldn't even stomach the thought of. Now that I knew what I'd been all too willing to deny – what I hadn't even considered a possibility... everything seemed to be in a fog.

Pierre called several times, but I couldn't wrap my head around speaking to him yet. I'd told him I was going to the doctor, and it was only because he was distracted that I'd been able to get away without giving more details than that.

Since his talk with his sponsor, he'd been much better – not withdrawn, less stressed – but there was still a lot happening, still a lot that required his attention.

A knock at the door reminded me though, that Pierre didn't really *do* ignore calls. If he was worried about me, he was going to just show up.

Which... was honestly a great quality.

It was exactly the kind of thing that made him so endearing, what had made him so hard to resist. But the fact was... I still had no clue what we were doing, if either of us were thinking this was something long term, what either of us was even expecting, or *wanted* from this.

Sure, Nubia and Des had both encouraged me that I didn't have to define anything before I was ready, but... that was a little more difficult when the possibility of a baby was thrown into the mix.

What the fuck was I supposed to do?

I didn't want to leave him worrying at the door, so I got up and answered it.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as soon as I let him in the front door.

"You're not supposed to be over here," I reminded him, which he immediately brushed off.

"I was worried about you when you didn't answer your phone. Especially knowing you had to go to the doctor today. Are you good?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "Just not feeling very well. Cramps, nausea, and I'm... just exhausted."

He cringed. "Oh, shit. Is that... something normal, or...?"

"Yeah, it's nothing unusual."

It wasn't.

Loren had told me to expect all of this.

"Do you need anything? Need me to fix something for you, or—"

"No," I shook my head. "It's really sweet of you to offer, but I think I just need to be alone, and get some rest."

Pierre stared at me a moment, like he was searching for a clue I wasn't telling him everything. Obviously I wasn't, but I must've been doing a good job of hiding it on my face, because he nodded, then pulled me into a hug.

"I'ma sneak out," he said, planting a soft kiss against my lips. "Text or call me if you need me for anything, okay?"

I nodded. "I will."

Once he was gone, I pulled off my sheets, changing them before I climbed into the longest, hottest shower I could stand. Afterwards, I thawed and heated some of the Chinese food Laurel had stashed in my freezer when she ran out of room in her own, then climbed into my fresh linens.

To eat, cry, and think about exactly where I'd gone wrong.

LOGAN

I went to Des about it.

I knew if I couldn't count on anyone else to talk good sense into me as far as all of this went, she would. Only...after I sat down across from her in her office and explained everything that had happened, she didn't exactly give me the answer I was expecting.

Her exact words were, "Okay, so... I'm not exactly sure what you're saying is the problem?"

Those words, from her, made my eyes bug wide.

"You don't see the problem with me being unexpectedly pregnant, by a client, who I'm not actually in a relationship with?"

Des rolled her eyes. "You were so worried about that man you cried and called his sponsor, but you're not in a relationship with him. Bullshit somebody else, Logan."

"Okay not *officially* in a relationship with," I conceded. "We haven't actually had that conversation."

"So it sounds like you need to do that then. There's a baby on the way, so it seems pretty pressing now," she laughed.

"Des, this isn't funny."

"No, it actually kind of is, because I'm not sure what it is you're expecting from me or what you want me to say. I am quite sure you already have your mind made up as to what you're going to do, so why don't you tell me what it is you need from me?"

I only had to think about it for a second because I'd been thinking about it all night already.

"I need you to tell me I'm not crazy."

I truly didn't need any convincing one way or the other as far as whether or not I was keeping this baby. The issue was, the decision I'd made wasn't based even remotely on any sort of logic.

I'd thought through the pros and cons of this situation from every possible angle, and what I'd arrived at didn't make any sense.

Neither I nor Pierre needed a life changing occurrence of *baby* magnitude, when both of us were already going through such major transitions. Not only were we not individually prepared for something like a child, I didn't see how even it made sense for us as a unit.

Like I'd just explained to Des, we hadn't even had the *let's be official* conversation yet.

But here we were with a decision to make.

A decision I had already made, for better or worse.

"Well that's easy," Des said. "You're not crazy. Lo... honey, you're in this transitional period of your life, where you've come to this place of rejecting everything you thought it was gonna be. You were gonna marry Les, and have a kid two years after the wedding, and then another two years after that. And then maybe, if you don't have a girl and a boy, one more for one last shot. And definitely a dog. But... that's canceled now. Your life isn't going to look like that, and it doesn't have to. Why *wouldn't* you embrace something like that?"

"Because it doesn't make sense. *None* of this makes sense. My feelings for Pierre, wanting to keep a child that is going to completely disrupt my career—"

"You know it doesn't *have to*?" Des asked, cutting in. "It's literally my job to see the best possible scenario from something that could be a complete disaster. Logan, think about it like this. Just a week or so ago, you were telling me

how you think you might want to make some sort of shift to your business, right? Well this could be a great time for that. Having a baby is going to force you to slow down some, and yeah there's going to be some sleepless nights and some stress and some vomiting and all that, I'm not discounting that. But you've been really hustling with your business for several years now. Maybe it would be good for you to get a break and do something else. Like having a baby. And by the time you're ready to go back to work, there's a good chance that you'll have more clarity on what you want to do. You'll have to have more clarity on what you want to do because you'll be a parent, and you're going to have to figure out the balance.

“If you're going to be spending time away from your child... I know you, Logan,” she grinned. “You are going to be as efficient about it as possible, and doing something that isn't what you really want to be doing? That's not going to compute for you. Besides that... it's not like you're a kid. You're thirty-three years old. Please, don't let my unmarried, childless ass come across like I'm rushing you, but... *it is* time for you to be thinking about this. And just from a vanity standpoint, you could do a whole lot worse in the baby daddy department than Pierre-fucking-Perry. You've always kept a good-looking man on your arm Logan, but *that* one? Goddamn. This is going to be one pretty ass child.”

Shaking my head, I couldn't do much other than laugh at that.

Every point Des was making right now was completely valid, but I kept coming back to how ridiculous it was that... it didn't even matter.

None of the points for or against this pregnancy were weighing on me more heavily than the fact that it simply... felt like it's what was supposed to be.

Just like when Pierre had described his decision to break his celibacy that first night we met.

Just the natural next step in our path.

And *this* was even more terrifying than that had been.

I COULDN'T KEEP AVOIDING BEING AROUND PIERRE.

He already knew something was up, but I so typically kept things close to the vest anyway that it was easy enough to convince him everything was fine without me having to tell an outright lie.

Everything wasn't fine though.

It wasn't fine at all, and no matter how I tried to justify it, the fact was that I wasn't being honest with him.

Which really wasn't usually how I got down.

If I didn't want to talk about something, I would say that. I knew how to use my words, well enough that I could simply make it clear that a conversation was necessary, but it needed to happen at another time.

With Pierre though, there was no way I could put that kind of pressure on him, not with everything else that was already going on. And so I convinced myself that not talking to him about the pregnancy was really for *his* good, instead of my own.

I'd have to answer for my own bullshit soon enough, but it wasn't going to be now, when we had this huge trip to LA next week. We were filming episode eight now, and then taking a break and doing the wrap up episodes when everybody got back.

This was with the understanding that based on audience reception, something might change. Or at least that's the story they were going with in order to look responsible to the network. I knew that the story was what it was and neither Nick nor Pierre was going to touch it based on the fickle fancies of the American general public.

They were the ones who'd made Sienna Sparks a star.

Before I exited my car to show my face on set, I gave myself a bit of a pep talk, mentally preparing for whatever

new stresses I might find.

Pierre had been okay since speaking with his sponsor, but that only accounted for the added stress of the premiere episode. Sure, that was off for review, but in the meantime, we still had the regular stresses of a hopefully hit show to make.

With any luck, nothing had gone wrong today.

I didn't have it in me to handle it.

The lack of urgent messages on my phone gave me some hope about that, but I knew all it really meant was that no one was trying to add anything additional to my plate. So it was with a bit of caution that I went ahead and made my way inside.

And of all the things I expected to find... it was *not* Pierre, looking very handsome, very laid-back, very cozy, *right* at home with the same assistant bitch that had been looking for him the other day in his face.

All smiles on both sides.

I'd laughed about his reaction to seeing me with Trei, but now that the shoe was on the other foot, I could admit to understanding him better.

I didn't like that shit.

Especially as I watched ol' girl lean in a little too far, wearing a top that was cut a little too low, putting her abundant breasts right in Pierre's face.

I'm not saying he seemed exactly thrilled about it, but he certainly didn't seem bothered either. Then she put her hand *way* too high up on his thigh, and I saw red as my feet immediately started propelling me a bit faster.

"I could *really* use a laugh right now too," I said, breaking up their little joke session, since neither of them had noticed me walking up. "What in the world is so funny? I feel like I need to hear it too."

Skank-sistant looked annoyed at my sudden presence, but then she shot a smirk in Pierre's direction. "Inside joke," she quipped, and then walked off after giving Pierre a little wave.

“Okay what the fuck was that about?” I asked, feeling how irrational I sounded as the words left my lips, but whatever.

Right now, in this moment, I didn’t like how watching that exchange had made me feel, so I would be that.

“What was what?” Pierre asked, his expression telling me he was genuinely confused, which was fine, because I was more than willing to explain.

“Well, let’s start with how comfortable you are with her tits in your face, continue on to how she brushed me off, and we can land on you having inside jokes with this bitch.”

Pierre’s eyes went wide, and he grabbed my hand, leading me off to a slightly quieter portion of the set. “Aight, I don’t know what’s going on with you lately, but I know *something* is. How about you just tell me what’s up instead of us talking around this?”

“Don’t try to change the subject. Why is she so comfortable in your face?”

He shrugged. “I want everybody on set to be comfortable talking to me,” he explained. “And we were laughing about some stupid meme she sent me on Instagram, that’s all.”

“Oh so she’s in your DMs now too? Is that what we’re doing? I insist on the social media to help you with your business and you want to use it to play around with other women?”

Unreasonable.

Yes.

I knew this.

But the train wreck had already started, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Hey,” Pierre shook his head. “Look, what I’m not about to do with you is have you acting like this when what I’ve heard from you is *you’re not trying to define anything, you don’t know what we are*. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not trying to press you about anything, but what I’m not going to stand here

and take is this kind of bullshit when you're not even trying to be serious with me."

"*I'm* not trying to be serious?!" I asked, outraged that had even come out of his mouth with what I'd been processing over the last few days. "You're not... *I'm* not... That is *so* unfair for you to even say," was what I settled on, but it apparently wasn't good enough.

"It seems fair as fuck to me, shorty," he countered shaking his head. "You're decisive about everything else. Any other thing that's put in front of you, you're making choices on the spot. Rolling with the punches, calling quick plays. That shit is your specialty Logan, your whole expertise. But I'm supposed to just be good with you coming in my face talking about some *other bitches* this, *other bitches* that, when you can't even be real with me about what this is. I'm not about to do that with you."

"How am I supposed to define it when I don't even know," I responded. "I don't even know who I am when I'm with you, and you think I'm supposed to know what I'm *doing*? My life has been upside down since I met you. All the ways I governed myself before, the shit isn't working anymore, and I don't know how I'm supposed to react to that. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. You want to throw in my face that I'm decisive – yeah, when it comes to taking care of everybody else. When it comes to making sure the people I care about are good, yeah, I can do that. But when it comes to me? I...I don't fucking know, okay? For whatever reason, I can't make the same rules apply. And it's terrifying. So it's not that I don't *want* to be able to give you some answer, to give you some type of certainty. I can't even give it to myself!"

"Nah," Pierre shook his head. "I'm not accepting that. I think you can. I think you know *exactly* what you want, and I think it's right in your face waiting on you to claim it. You're just scared of it."

"Is that not what the fuck I just said?" I asked, tacking a mirthless laugh onto it for... hell I didn't know what I was laughing for because there wasn't shit funny.

I was just stressed, and confused, and... really *sure* about something it felt crazy to be sure about.

And that *something* was not just the baby.

“Why are you scared?” he asked, leaning in to get in my face, but not actually touching me. “You know me, shorty. What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don’t *know* what’s going to happen, and despite everybody doing their best to assure me otherwise, *that* is exactly the problem.”

“So you’re gonna let that rule you?” he asked. “You’re about to let *that* drive you? I didn’t realize you were a punk like that, Logan.”

“I’m not a punk, fuck you,” I replied.

“Then prove it. Or what? You’re scared you’re gonna lose or something?”

“I don’t lose.”

“Then, like I said... prove it.” Pierre shrugged, giving me this disbelieving smirk that set off inexplicable rage.

Rage I released by practically diving at his face to press my mouth to his – he was right there with me too, catching me around the waist to pull me close.

“I don’t want that girl in your face,” I murmured against his lips, once I’d pulled away from a bruising sort of kiss I’d taken while basically hanging from his neck to be in the right position.

“Why should I care about that?” he asked, giving me that same smirk again. “I know you’ve got it in you... just say it.”

“Because you’re *taken*,” I practically growled, then kissed him again.

Damn shame there wasn’t anything she’d given him nearby for me to make him cum next to.

The sound of Nick’s voice calling Pierre back to set reminded me of where we were, throwing instant ice water on my completely ridiculous feelings. I’d never chalk this up to

some type of pregnancy hormone thing, but it was certainly some kind of stress induced fight or flight reaction I couldn't otherwise explain.

And I hoped I could get away with never speaking of it again.

Which... of course wasn't about to happen.

Once we were wrapped for the day, Pierre asked me to go for a ride with him, reminding me of the day we met, for a whole different reason than what had brought it to mind for me just hours ago.

He spent the first several minutes of the ride teasing the life out of me, and I took it, because I had been admittedly – as the kids probably didn't say anymore – *bugging*.

And even though I had claimed – even just to myself – that I couldn't explain it, deep down it felt like I *did* know what it was.

The stress of keeping something that would affect us both in such a major way to myself.

I... was going to have to find the right time to tell him.

"I've been wanting to talk to you about something," he said, squeezing my hand as we pulled up to a light. "The show is about to wrap within the next few weeks. Which means... your contract is going to be up."

I nodded. "Yeah. I was really expecting to go past that little deadline, but you put in the work, and you made it."

"*We* made it," he corrected, returning his gaze to the road so he could pay attention while he drove. "Been a busy ass six months, huh?" he asked. "A lot of changes, a lot going on."

You have no idea.

"Yeah. Exactly that. Are you already thinking ahead to what you're going to do next, or you thinking about taking a break?" I asked, trying to gauge what his plans were against one of the possibilities Des had laid out for me.

“I feel like I won’t *know* until I’m there. But what I’m *thinking* is that I want to go straight into the next thing. And I want you to come with me.”

My eyebrows went up. “What?”

“I’m thinking about another story. Maybe a movie this time. I’ve already got a little of it lined out. Based on true events again.”

“Another part of your life story?”

“A love story,” he said, giving me this slick smirk before looking back to the road again. “Kinda like ours. My heroine was going to hit the hero with her car and put him in a coma. They’re strangers, but she feels so bad that she comes to visit every day, reading to him, singing to him, shit like that. By the time he wakes up from this coma, he’s fallen in love with her. And we see her living her life and all of that but dreaming about them being together at night. He’s in this coma but he’s hearing her voice, and he’s got all this brain activity going on in his head, you know? They’re in love, they’re having babies, all this shit you know?”

“Are you serious?”

Pierre busted out laughing, shaking his head. “Hell nah,” he chuckled. “Not about the coma and all of that, but it *is* a love story. And you have to admit... the way we met, it’s definitely worth writing about.”

I shook my head, dropping my gaze to my lap as I smiled. “You may have a point there.”

“Ain’t no *may* have a point about it. I do,” he chuckled. “But yeah, it’s been marinating in my mind. Not *exactly* ours, like *ODS* isn’t exactly *my* story either. Just inspired. I think a lot of times men are expected to only tell certain types of stories and I don’t know... I think I might have it in me to make a lil something for the ladies to swoon over.”

I shook my head again, laughing at the silly intonation he took on to say that, but really... “I agree,” I told him. “I really think you could.”

“With a certain somebody on my team, of course,” he said, reaching over to nudge my hand. “What do you think? I understand if you don’t want this TV and movie stuff monopolizing your time. I know it’s not really in your incredibly broad job description. But I remember you mentioning been interested in it. And I remember you being excited about this project. I don’t know if you see it too, but you’ve flourished on this one. I think we make a great team. So...what do you say shorty, come on,” he teased. “After we have this one, you wanna make another baby with me?”

I nearly choked on my tongue.

Obviously, I knew he was talking about the show, but that phrasing, was really throwing me.

This whole conversation was.

Knowing that he was already thinking about his next thing, ready to dive right into it and excited about the prospect of it... I couldn’t tell him that I was *already* carrying another of his progeny.

Not right now.

“It sounds amazing,” I told him, truthfully. “But this is already so much, that I think it would be smart to get this completely wrapped up, and *then* talk about the next thing. But I’m excited about the potential, and I can pretty much assure you...we’ll be part of each other’s lives for longer than finishing the show is going to take.”

“Bet,” he said, squeezing my hand again before we merged into heavier traffic which really did require more of his focus.

I should have been happier about this.

Not only had we bridged the gap to define what we were, but he wanted me to be an extended part of his team.

Professionally, romantically, everything was falling into what should have been a perfect place.

If only if it weren’t for a very literal *bump* in the road.

When I did tell him, how was he going to react?

How would he feel?

Just because *I* felt so certain, was so sure this was right... didn't mean any of this would hit the same for him.

"I didn't scare you, did I?" Pierre asked, without looking at me. His gaze was focused through the windshield. "I mean, referring to us as a love story? I'm not saying we're there yet, but..."

I thought about it for a moment and then shook my head.

"No," I answered, reaching across the console to rest a hand on his leg. "It was actually exactly what I needed to hear."

PIERRE

It really was crazy how fast things could change.
And I meant that in the *worst* possible way.

Before I closed my eyes for sleep, I'd been on cloud nine, basking in the fact that me and Logan were officially a thing, and she was basically onboard with remaining a part of my team professionally.

I woke up to all hell having broken loose.

Remarkably, Logan wasn't awake yet, which gave me time to contact Chloe and Des Byers to get them on the case. When she *did* wake up, shit was not going to be pretty, and I needed to be able to offer some good news.

We'd been outed.

After her kissing me on set the day before, that shouldn't have been too big of a deal, at least to me. We had a crew for the show that felt something like family, and I would have thought they'd think it was cute that we got together.

And maybe they did.

The internet disagreed.

Not only were there pictures of that kiss all over the place, there had been stuff dug up about Logan and Anthony, and Logan and Les. True enough, everything had happened fast between us, and it was all condensed into a somewhat short period. But according to what social media was running with, they'd have the world believing Logan was fucking all of us at the same time.

It wasn't *just* her either. There was some stuff about me and Sienna and the picture of me and those girls in Logan's lobby had come back to bite me in the ass, being painted as something it wasn't. And I didn't know if I've been hacked or what, but the DMs between me and that production assistant were suddenly public fodder, too. The stuff they were trying to run against me was weak. There wasn't even a case to be made for simple flirting between me and ol' girl in the inbox.

I wasn't on that because she worked for me and I didn't need that type of trouble, *besides* the fact that Logan was the only woman getting that type of energy from me.

The stuff about her... looked bad though.

This was the first day of our break from set, and later this afternoon, we were due on the Drakes' private plane. Because of that, I was letting her sleep, with an assurance from Des that she would get in touch with Logan's parents to make sure they at least knew she was okay.

In the meantime, all I could do was wait.

It didn't take long.

Logan rose from her slumber with a jolt, as if she knew something was wrong.

I was on her immediately, pushing a hot cup of tea into her hands as soon as she'd sat up. She gave me a suspicious look, then glanced to the bedside table for her phone, which I'd removed to let her maintain her peace as long as possible.

Maybe not the best idea, but... *goddamnit*.

"Pierre... where's my phone?" she asked, eyebrow raised. I didn't even bother arguing, just reached into my pocket for the phone and handed it over.

"I already called Chloe and Des," I told her, which made her other eyebrow go up as she unlocked the phone. Her expression was very neutral as she tapped and scrolled through various screens and I watched her, waiting for some rage to overtake her expression.

Rage that never came.

She shook her head, tossing the phone down beside her to give her attention to the tea I'd brought. "This is perfect," she commented after she'd taken a sip. "Thank you."

"Aiight, you're scaring me, shorty," I told her, taking a seat at her feet on the bed. "Are you not seeing the same thing I woke up to this morning?"

Logan took another sip, and then a deep breath, and then put her teacup down on the bedside table. "Yes, I see it," she confirmed. "But the thing is... I already knew this was coming. It was just a matter of when." She shrugged. "Des and I have been expecting this since Sienna came for you; that she would attack people around you, when she realized her effect on you was limited. We did think it would most likely be Elodie, so actually... I *am* a little surprised that she decided to come for me instead. But I guess once we – once *I* – outed us on the set... maybe knowing you and I are together struck a nerve for her?"

"So you're saying somebody on set tipped this off?"

Logan nodded. "That's *absolutely* what I'm saying," she agreed. "How else do you think those pictures were obtained? If I had to bet, the girl I ran out of your face yesterday would be the number one suspect on my list. And not just because I don't like the way she was hanging around you. I've just got a feeling."

All I could do was push out another sigh as my brain processed even more new information. I was in no place to deny what she was saying, so there was no point in me arguing against it or giving any pushback.

I was just still... *surprised*.

"I really expected you to freak out about this," I told her as she reached for her tea again.

She shook her head. "What would I freak out for?" she asked. "I mean, don't get me wrong; I understand why you'd think so, but really what would be the point? The internet thinks I'm a slut. Maybe I slept with all of you in the span of a year, maybe I didn't. But literally... what does it matter?"

“I thought you were concerned about your professional reputation?” I asked. “That was one of the biggest reasons for us not publicly being together.”

“I was. But the more I think about it, the less I’m sure it even matters. Especially when you and I are going to be working together for another contract after this one anyway, right?”

“That’s true. By the time we’re done with another project, none of this will be on anybody’s mind.”

She nodded. “Or, who knows, things might be just completely changing for me overall,” she said, which felt... cryptic. “In any case,” she continued, “What it really boils down to is, after yesterday, I’m less inclined to be concerned with something like this. The power of it is in its ability to embarrass or tear me down, and you know what... I don’t actually feel either of those things. So I’d much rather focus on something that matters. Like the fact that we have a flight this afternoon and I’m not packed, which is a disgusting break from character for me. So, let’s push this away, get you packed, and then you can come with me and *I’ll* get packed, and we can make our way to the airstrip together.” She tipped her head to the side as if she’d just thought about something else. “Actually... this may have done us a favor. This trip should be a lot more fun without me having to pretend I don’t want to ride your face.”

She shot me a grin and then climbed out of bed to head for the bathroom, leaving me feeling a bit dumbfounded.

Logan had been all over the place lately, and at first I’d thought it was just me. Thought my own stress and struggles were causing me to see things different – that my anxiety was clouding my vision.

But...nah.

Something was different with her.

AS SOON AS WE LANDED IN LA, IT SEEMED LIKE MY PHONE was ringing like crazy.

People who I didn't even realize had my new number were hitting me up, wanting to see my face. Because of Logan's planning, we had some leisure and down time built into our schedule, so when I ended up in a group text of old friends trying to arrange a meetup for dinner, I didn't have an excuse like *I can't, too busy* readily available.

"You should go," Logan insisted, when I brought the idea to her. "These are your friends, and they want to see you. Unless... are you concerned about drinking or something?"

Not exactly.

Most of us had grown up quite a bit and changed – evolving from that toxic place where we'd been. In varying degrees, we'd had our healing processes, or however they wanted to frame it. Which was a good thing.

But still.

I just wasn't sure about being in the same place with them, and what it might do to my mental space – what old mentalities or triggers it might bring up. The sneak preview event was happening tomorrow and I didn't want to put any additional stresses on my mind before that.

Or maybe it was all just paranoia anyway.

"Are Nick and Noah going?" Logan asked, her voice a welcome intrusion into my thoughts.

Nick and Noah were local to LA but, "Nah," I answered. "Remember Noah had to come back out here from Vegas a few weeks ago, so this is her and Nick's first time being together in a bit. They ain't trying to be looking at anybody but each other."

Logan grinned. "Understandable. I asked because I thought maybe if you had... I don't know, I guess some backup? Somebody to help keep you centered?"

"Is that your way of offering to come?" I asked, which must have been way off base from the way her eyes bugged

open. She recovered quickly from her surprise though, schooling her expression into something more neutral.

“No, it was not, because I don’t know those people. Those are *your* friends.”

“You know *me*,” I countered. “You’re *my* friend. It’s not like anybody is gonna bite you or something like that.”

“Tell *yourself* these things sir,” Logan teased.

When she’d booked this trip, she’d gotten us adjoining rooms. Right now, we were in *her* bed, but later – at least according to *my* plans – we’d break in both of them.

“Are you coming or not?” I asked, which she answered with a slick smile.

“I need you to clarify that question.”

I slid my hand down her body, cupping her ass to pull her against me. “How about both?”

I HATED IT TO ADMIT IT, BUT I MISSED LA.

Vegas was cool and all but LA just had a certain energy about it, and I wasn’t talking about the Hollywood shit either. I wasn’t sure how to quite verbalize it, but there was this vibe I’d lacked without really realizing it.

So when I walked into the lively beachside restaurant with Logan on my arm – since we were outed anyway and didn’t have to front anymore – it felt like a good decision. That feeling carried through the warm greetings from faces I hadn’t seen in what felt like forever. Everybody was cool, they liked Logan, they wanted to hear about the show, they had good things to update me on as far as what had been going on with them. And they just seem genuinely happy and supportive that shit had turned around for me.

None of the negativity I’d been worried about.

Until Sienna walked in.

There was *one* of the group that ultimately showed up that I was a little more apprehensive about than the others – Jen.

And it was for exactly this reason.

I knew she'd been tight with Sienna, but she was one of the main ones pushing for this dinner to happen, so I thought I was tripping. And then, her ass had hugged me the tightest when Logan and I came in.

She *was* an actress though, so I should've known better.

Sienna walked up to the table smug as fuck, practically begging to be acknowledged.

I hadn't talked to anybody else about that bullshit story she'd planted, or the pictures she'd given the media – she was still their friend. They were all going to be cool once I left anyway, so it seemed pointless to address it – to address her.

Logan must have picked up on my position and decided to follow my lead.

She tried, at least.

Sienna made a big point of speaking to us, and we both responded as pleasantly as possible, before we went right back to the conversation we'd already been having with my homeboy Alan.

We were intent on not letting Sienna ruin the night by making it awkward.

As if that wasn't why she showed up in the first place.

“What kind of party is this?” Sienna shouted over the cacophony of noise in the restaurant, so we could all hear her. “Y'all so boring. Aye, waiter, bring us some fucking shots! The hometown hero is back, we've gotta to celebrate.”

I could feel Logan tensing beside me, so I grabbed her hand under the table, lacing my fingers through hers as some of the others in the group shut Sienna's shenanigans down. I leaned in, to whisper in her ear, “I'm not bothered by this shit. Don't let her rile you.”

But of course, Logan wasn't really the type of woman to be told what to do.

Not that she was letting Sienna upset her, because... nah, I didn't get that impression at all.

Logan was completely cool.

At the same time, she wasn't willing to let even an ounce of Sienna's bullshit ride. Every time she aimed her mouth towards our side of the table, Logan was on her ass.

"I heard the show lost a little flavor recently, what's up with that?"

"That's actually old news, and the flavor was trash. So we took it out."

"You don't really have any experienced names attached to the show, do you? I'm only asking because I'm afraid it might not have that certain professional touch that execs look for."

"Our network has already seen it and loved it. But I'm sure you do know plenty about professional touch, Sienna. Weren't there some pictures of you and that married record label exec you were supposed to be doing that social justice venture with that came out today?"

"You know audiences these days are just so fickle. And with so much going on in the world, nobody wants too much of the serious stuff anymore."

"I get why you'd think that, since everything you do is a joke. But we think a little more highly of our audience than what you're talking about. I think we'll be just fine."

"Damn Pierre," Sienna finally exclaimed, after realizing Logan was going to have appropriate smoke for everything that came out of her mouth. "Put your bitch on a leash, we're trying to have a good time."

"I've got your bitch," Logan called to her across the table. "Come on over here, I'll show it to you."

"Aye, that's enough," I spoke up, putting a hand on Logan's shoulder.

Across the table, Sienna tossed an incredibly smug look in Logan's direction, but I don't know what the fuck for, because...

"I ain't talking to her, I'm talking to *you*, Sienna," I made clear. "*You* might be trying to have a good time, but you haven't done shit for me but toss shade and sabotage at every opportunity. What the fuck is your problem?"

"*My* problem? I'm not the one that ran away while their friends were still here suffering. I'm not the one who got clean and decided I was too good for the people who weren't judging me for being supposedly 'dirty' in the first place. That was *you*. So what the fuck is *your* problem?"

I sat back in my chair a little stunned by that accusation, even though... I guess I could see where she was coming from. It was a common thing, something Will had talked with me about at length.

People who were still struggling projecting their guilt on to you, and the equal possibility that you were projecting the blame for your addiction on to them.

But the thing was, I *knew* they weren't responsible for my shit, and I never thought they were. My enemy had always been unresolved grief, insecurity... hell, my own brain.

"I never blamed *anybody else* for my bullshit," I spoke up, making sure I directed those words around the whole table. "And I apologize, *truly*, for making any of y'all feel like I thought I was better than you. I'm not. I'm no better than any of you, and I'm no different," I said, shaking my head. "Which is exactly *why* I stayed away, because I didn't think I was strong enough to maintain the victory that I scratched and clawed to get. And I can't afford to lose it. I'm not judging anybody for the shit I was doing *with* them. I just don't want to go back. And maybe that was wrong of me, thinking that being around y'all could cause that, but I promise you... that's more about *me* than it is about *you*. It's a question of *my* strength, not yours."

"We know that P," one of our homegirls, Coral, spoke up. "Why did you even invite her?" she asked Jen.

“Because *she’s* still our friend too, that’s exactly the problem,” Jen snapped at her. “All of us aren’t in the same place, as much as y’all love getting up on a high horse to act like we are.”

“Cause the idea is trying to respect everybody,” Alan said from beside me. “You can’t come in here ordering shots for a table full of people, knowing half of us are trying to stay sober. That’s fucking disrespectful. You can do what you want after, but we’re just trying to have dinner with old friends right now. You niggas can’t just eat and have a good time anymore? You always gotta be lit?”

“Whatever,” Sienna snapped, standing up. “I’m not about to listen to this shit. Fuck you,” she aimed at Coral, who flipped her off, “fuck you,” she told Alan, who just laughed, “and *especially* fuck you,” she said again, shooting that last one in mine and Logan’s direction.

Okay.

Cool.

As long as I didn’t have to deal with her bullshit anymore.

After a few seconds, Jen got up to follow behind Sienna, which I didn’t feel any way about – that was her friend, and that was fine. I just wasn’t trying to be part of any drama and shit.

And... it seemed like those of us who were left had the same thing in mind.

It felt good to be around them with a clear mind and unmuddied senses – felt good to be in a place where I could be out, enjoying myself with friends with no need to dull reality.

To just be present.

I... was glad, despite Sienna’s drama, that we’d come out.

I hadn’t known how much I needed this – needed to see that I didn’t have to be afraid of coming in contact with my past, or afraid to fully live.

I was good.

“*GOD* YOU LOOK GOOD IN THIS SUIT,” LOGAN GUSHED, COMING up to me backstage to fix my tie.

The morning and afternoon had swept by in a blur of press events, pictures, and interviews, and now we were approaching the summit of a mountain we’d been climbing all day – the actual premiere.

I didn’t have any more steam.

It must’ve shown on my face, because Logan looked up, her expression dipping into concern as she studied me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, cupping my face in her hands.

“Are you okay?”

My tongue felt heavy in my mouth as I shook my head.

“I... no,” I admitted. “Definitely not.”

“Okay. Um... let’s just sit down for a second,” she said, ushering me to a seat before she shooed away the assistants and whoever else had been swarming the area. “Hey... tell me what’s going on.”

I swallowed hard, trying to bring some moisture back to my mouth, but it wasn’t working. “I’ve just.... *Fuck*. I’ve got this thought in the back of my mind, that all of this shit is about to go wrong, and I can’t shake it. I’m supposed to go out here and give a speech, talk about the importance of this, why these people are supposed to care, and I just... *can’t*.”

“You can.”

“Nah, I’m really... like, I know you’re being supportive and encouraging, but for real. Logan... I cannot do this shit.”

She grabbed me under the chin, lifting my gaze to hers.

“You are due on that stage in literally *four* minutes. You can, and you will.”

“I can’t think about anything but the failure. That’s all I see. Every time I try to think about what I’m supposed to say, it’s just a loop of everybody fucking hating it. It’s the only

thing on my mind,” I admitted, knowing how shitty it sounded, but if I couldn’t keep it a buck with anybody else...

“Okay, so... you need something else on your mind? Something to supersede all this other stuff, right? Something *different* to overthink, to break the mental loop?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, actually. That would probably work, but *this* shit is so intense that I don’t even know what—”

“I’m pregnant.”

Logan – beautiful fucking Logan, who was especially exquisite right now in her runway worthy designer dress, perfect hair, perfect makeup, perfectly poised as always – said that shit to me, and then took a step back.

And I just... blinked.

“What?” I asked. “Are you... you’re playing, right?”

She shook her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Logan, I—”

“Don’t have time to talk about this right now, I know,” she interrupted, grabbing my arm to tug me up from my seat. “You have something much bigger than this premiere to worry about now. So, focus all your anxieties on *that* instead. What you have to do right now, go out here and introduce this show? *This* is nothing, Pierre. So go do it.”

“Logan—”

“We need to get your mic on, Mr. Perry,” one of the production assistants insisted, rushing up to lead me away.

“I’m gonna go to my seat,” Logan called, giving me a little wave. “We’ll talk later.”

What?

Nah.

We needed to talk *now*, but she was right – we didn’t have time. And... remarkably, she was right about having something much more significant to worry about making introducing the show feel like a fucking breeze.

We'd practiced and rehearsed enough that I put on that particular performance with ease, but that word, *pregnant* was electric sliding through my brain the whole time.

"*Later,*" she scolded, when I tried to address her once I'd taken my seat for the screening to start. We weren't in private, not really, just a section reserved in an auditorium full of influencers, youtubers, reviewers, journalists, and internet personalities we'd invited to watch the first episode and talk about it honestly.

Damn near everybody who'd worked on the show had their devices out, obsessively watching the reactions from the crowd, but I was obsessing about something else entirely.

Pregnant.

Was that why she'd been so *different* lately?

"*Later,*" she scolded, after the screening, when we'd soaked up all the applause. "People want to talk to you.

Yeah, but I didn't want to talk to them.

At first, it was hard to give a shit about the pats on the back, the congratulations, but when I really *saw* the smiling faces of the actors, the crew, when Nick and Miko rushed me to wrap their arms around me for an excited embrace... it really hit me.

We'd done it.

And people had *loved* it.

Yeah, there were some people who felt like it was too moody and dark, but that was more about their personal tastes than a critique on what we'd created. Overwhelmingly, there was a consensus that we had something amazing on our hands.

After all my doubts, all the worries... here it fucking was.

We could celebrate.

I let myself soak it all in, all the raves, all the people wanting to take pictures and shake my hand, the hugs, all of it.

I lost track of Logan in the shuffle of things – or rather, she lost track of me, trying to avoid a very necessary conversation.

I had business to handle though, so I focused on that until the night was over, then made my way back to the hotel alone, since she *had* at least hit me up to let me know she was exhausted and had to turn in for the night.

Yeah, I bet she did.

I took my time getting undressed and showering in my own room, as I let this shit run through my mind. Not even the semantics of it all, the fact that I hadn't even thought such a thing was a concern, just the fact that it... *was*.

A family of my own was something I hadn't considered in a long time.

A *long* time.

I'd been so consumed with just trying to figure my shit – *myself* – out, trying to create something, trying to find my footing, that bringing other people into that wasn't even a consideration.

And yet... the knowledge of Logan's pregnancy, as out of left field as it was, had me feeling strangely... *rooted*.

It was the same way I felt about her.

Like I'd been wading in the dark, treading water, and then finally reached out and touched something solid. Like after just *being* for so long... my feet were on firm ground.

It was disconcerting.

And... relieving, somehow.

Which was a premature feeling, considering that fact that I didn't even know what Logan was planning to do.

It was *so* soon – too soon – to bring a child into an equation we'd just found the answer to. My career was just starting, hers was in full blown – neither was in a place where making such a huge life change was wise.

Logan liked deciding things based on logic – not this emotional shit. It was why it had been so hard for her to even make a firm decision on being with me. I could hope all I wanted, and get settled with the idea of being a father, but... if

she – rightly – decided it wasn't a good time, and she didn't want to do this... it wasn't like I could force her hand.

Well... I guess I probably *could*, but I wouldn't do that to her, wouldn't violate her autonomy by begging, or worse, threatening.

Which was why we couldn't keep saying *later*.

We needed to have this conversation.

I was picking up my phone to call and see if she was awake when a knock sounded at the door between our rooms. I immediately got up to answer, finding Logan on the other side in her pajamas, hair tied up for bed.

“What's taking you so long to come talk to me?” she asked.

With a dry chuckle, I let her into the room. “You were the one avoiding me after you dropped that bomb, and then you ran off.”

Logan ran her tongue over her bare lips and nodded. “Yeah... I did, huh?” she gave me a wry smile. “I called myself letting you have your moment... as much as you still could, after I ruined it.”

“You didn't ruin anything, shorty,” I told her, grabbing her hand to pull her with me to a seat on the bed. “I'm not saying it was the *best* way to drop that information, but it definitely had the intended effect. I killed that opening speech.”

“You did,” she laughed. “You were amazing. And the show was amazing. And everybody loved it. And I... feel like shit, because it ended up overshadowed.”

I shook my head. “I think you're projecting, because you didn't get to present this with your usual *Logan* delivery,” I said. “I couldn't be happier with the reception the show is getting, the way it's being covered, all that. I *was* distracted as fuck during the screening, but once everybody started gassing me up after, I was having a good time,” I chuckled. “Your announcement didn't ruin anything but the forty-slide presentation with all the pros and cons you were probably planning to give me.”

“It wouldn’t have been forty slides,” she defended with a smile. “But... I’ve definitely been playing it all in my head.”

“And where have you arrived?” I asked, trying not to sound as nervous as I felt about her possible answer. “What do you think you want to do? Did the pros win or the cons?”

She pushed out a sigh before she met my gaze. “Neither. The pros didn’t matter, and the cons didn’t either. I just... I want to keep the pregnancy,” she said. “And... as much of a shock as it all is, I just hope that’s okay with you?”

“*Okay* with me?” I laughed, wrapping an arm around her to pull her into me. “It’s a lot more than okay, I’m fucking... *relieved*.”

Logan tipped her head back to look me in the eyes. “So... you’re happy about this? Not overwhelmed with the crushing fear of ruining a child?”

“Oh nah, I’m definitely that.”

“Oh thank God,” she gushed. “Me too.” I laughed at the relief on her face before she dropped her head to my shoulder. “I’m... feeling a lot of different things, actually. I’ve known for a couple of weeks and still haven’t processed them all. So I know you haven’t either.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I’m still pretty dazed, but... I’m... also kinda excited.”

“Which is crazy,” she countered. “We’re *crazy* for this.”

I shrugged. “That’s fine. We’ll be that together.”

LOGAN

I was so, so tired of throwing up.

My lack of – completely inappropriately named – morning sickness early on had given me a false sense of security. According to all my obsessive reading there were some lucky souls who managed to escape the curse of first trimester nausea and sickness.

I'd hoped to join their ranks, but apparently that was not meant to be.

I rinsed my mouth one more time with the bottle of mouthwash I'd started keeping on me at all times, just for occasions such as this. *This* being days like today, where I'd carved out a moment to attend a Cartwright Center event; a little award ceremony Rowan was putting on for all the high school graduates in attendance.

I couldn't let my girls down by missing it.

My pregnancy was not common knowledge yet, and I didn't plan on making it that way anytime soon. So, I'd snuck off to the bathroom to relieve the churning of my stomach before I sat through any more speeches.

On the way my back out, of course I bumped into Les.

As usual, the man looked good.

Now though, the cologne that used to make me want to climb all over him had my stomach lurching again.

"Hey," he greeted me with a hug while I held my breath, and he squeezed me for just a moment before letting go,

keeping the contact between us appropriate. “I thought I might run into you here.”

Yes, of course, because he probably didn’t have five million things competing for his brain’s attention. Not even once had I considered the fact that I might run into him at this event, which was silly because his presence made perfect sense.

In the same capacity that I’d stepped in for this year’s female graduates, Les had been doing his part for the guys. It was a role he’d stepped into because of my influence when we were still together.

I was glad to see that the change in our relationship status hadn’t meant a change in him doing his part for those boys.

“I’m glad to see you’re out here looking good,” I said to him, taking a step back to give myself a break from his cologne.

“I can say the same, Ms. Byers,” he said. “According to the internet, it didn’t take very long for somebody to snatch you up – for obvious reasons. Pierre Perry, huh?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “It was unexpected, but what can I say... that’s just the way things work out sometimes.”

He dipped his head. “Right, but... can I ask you something though?”

“Of course.”

“Word is that y’all started up right about the same time as things... fell apart for us. Was it because you met him?”

“No,” I answered immediately. “I was done when I left your apartment in the middle of the night that night. He and I didn’t meet until later.”

Fifteen minutes later, but still.

Les didn’t need to know that.

“Okay,” he nodded. “Not that it really matters you know, I was just curious. I never was completely clear on what went wrong between us,” he said, and I shook my head.

“Well, that’s probably because it wasn’t just this one, certain thing. I don’t know if you felt it like I did, but I don’t think either of us had really been feeling it for a while. And I finally just came to a point where I couldn’t keep living like that. We weren’t *in love* anymore Les, and I could feel it. It was permeating everything. You didn’t care anymore, which made it hard for me to care either, and eventually... one of us had to decide to end it. It just happened to be me.”

“I definitely loved you, Logan. I have since we were teenagers, before we actually got together.”

“I fully believe that, Les,” I agreed, smiling at him. “And I felt the same for you. But loving somebody, isn’t being *in love*, and it doesn’t mean that you’re supposed to be with them. And what I truly believe is that we were just so used to being together, that we didn’t know how to do anything else. But it was time.”

Les pushed out a deep sigh, but then he nodded. “I don’t like it, but I’d be full of shit if I disagreed. I never meant to make you feel like I didn’t care, but... you’re right. Things weren’t like they used to be.”

“See?” I laughed. “Now since you asked me, it’s only fair that I get to ask you too... *Nikki*,” I said, and he immediately started shaking his head and chuckling. “Just be real with me, because that last conversation that we *did* have, you asked if it was because of her. And you’ve got to understand, that shit did not look good, man!”

He stopped laughing but shook his head again. “*Never*,” he swore. “I will fully admit to knowing she liked me, and I won’t front; I always thought she was beautiful. She’s funny, she’s an attractive woman. But I never cheated on you Logan. Never even considered it.”

“Well... that’s good to know,” I told him. “I’m not sure why, since we’re not together anymore. But still.”

“I get it,” he said. “I’m glad to know the internet was *not* right about the reason you left me.”

“Are they ever?” I asked. “Hey though, I’ve got one more thing that I really just have to know. If you were feeling the same way I was about us, why on Earth – like after you really realized it was over – would you be messed up about that?”

“Messed up about it?” he asked. “Logan, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your mother, that day at the at the spa. When your auntie made up that lie about the credit card machines not working, remember?”

“Oh yeah, I do remember that. I still don’t know what they were thinking, getting me to come up there.”

“I think they thought I was going to see you and my panties were going to fall off, but you’d mush me right in the face and say *back off bitch, you already had your chance*. I mean... that’s just *my* best guess.”

Les laughed. “You know what, fooling around with those two, I wouldn’t even be surprised.”

“But you’re telling me you have *not* been sitting around pining for me and lamenting our lost love?”

“Nah,” he said. “More like, that’s what my mother has deluded herself into believing so she doesn’t have to accept the fact that I’m currently dating someone she feels is beneath me.”

“Your mother feels like everybody is beneath you,” I said. “What makes this new chick so notable?”

“Because it’s...Nikki. In her eyes, Nikki works for us so... It’s just a lot. *And* she doesn’t like that I don’t let her disrespect fly in the personal *or* professional setting, so she’s just going through... a bit of an adjustment. She’ll be fine.”

Wow.

I was glad, for his sake, that he was thinking about it like that.

And maybe a little bit for Nikki too.

The friendship between our parents had typically kept his mother on decent behavior with me, but there were definitely times when her overly high opinion of herself, her family, and her son, came bleeding through.

I hadn't been forced to choke down a full meal of that woman's bullshit, but I'd had enough of a taste to imagine what it was like.

"I'm really happy to hear all of that," I told him. "Glad you're... I don't know, standing on your own now."

He shrugged. "Once I saw you doing it, it's kind of like... what more excuse did I have?"

What more excuse indeed.

Les and I parted ways after that, as amicably as usual. I was actually glad I'd run into him. Not necessarily because I needed closure on that situation, because I'd fully moved on. But it had, just at the very fringes of my mind, bothered me a bit thinking that my selfish choice to end things between us had made life harder for Les.

Apparently, that wasn't really the case.

So, I was feeling pretty good, my nausea all but forgotten as the ceremonies finished up, and then I had to go about the rest of my day.

Today was another on-location filming day, and I didn't feel like tracking down where they'd gotten off to or figuring out if there would be a place for me to peacefully vomit my entire life up, so I went to the office instead.

Even when I was on set, I was always doing something else too. Today that something would be gathering sound bites from the critical reviews of the screening to forward to the marketing team. Was this something I could have left for them?

Of course it was.

But I wouldn't be myself if I didn't see something that needed to be done and simply do it, instead of properly delegating it to someone else.

A bad habit I was *really* going to have to break myself from.

I was nowhere near adjusted to the knowledge of my pregnancy, and yet life went on. Before I knew it, the pregnancy would be replaced by a live, crying, needy baby who would require the attention of its parents.

Delegation at *that* point would be absolutely necessary.

I didn't have a lot of time to develop the necessary art of letting go that giving tasks to someone else required, but I did have *some*.

So for now, I would enjoy the pressure of having too much on my plate as long as I could.

As soon as I hit the front doors of *WAWG*, I heard my name.

It was coming from Freddy up at the security desk, who was currently playacting that he had a broken heart. "Ms. Byers," he tried to pout, but his dimpled smile came through instead. "All this time I thought lawyer boy was my only competition and come to find out P-Three's pretty ass was courting you too. How was I ever supposed to have a chance?"

"I'm so sorry, Freddy," I laughed. "I probably should have given you a heads up, huh?"

"A text message, a carrier pigeon, a four-page letter, or something. I guess I get it though. He *would* get mad as hell when he saw me flirting with you, so I should have seen this coming."

"Really now?"

"Oh yeah," Freddy nodded, ushering me through the security checkpoint as another group of people started walking up who would require his actual professional attention.

I did remember one such incident, when we first started, but I hadn't noticed since then.

Not that it mattered.

I couldn't dare tease him about it now, unless I wanted him bringing up my own jealous nuttiness. I had to just tuck it away for now.

On my floor, I had to make a quick stop by the bathroom to relieve my stomach and do another wash out of my mouth. I did at least feel better afterwards but knew I would need to eat something, or the next wave would be much worse.

When I walked through the door of Pierre's office, I was wondering what suitable snacks he might have in his fridge.

I was *not* expecting to find that weirdo production assistant girl in his office.

He must have left the door unlocked last night.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" I asked, startling her as she rifled through empty file cabinets. Everything was digital now, so we really didn't keep anything in here. It was purely a workspace, and a break room.

"Oh... I was just looking for something I left in here," she said, daring to take a seat against his desk with a bit of a smirk I didn't understand. "We were up here last night and I just... misplaced my underwear."

Huh.

Now, I hadn't been with Pierre last night, and he *had* stayed on the *WAWG* lot late. So was it *possible* she was telling the truth?

Yes.

But if there was one thing I absolutely did *not* believe about Pierre, it was the idea that he would cheat on me, in his office, with a production assistant, a week after finding out I was pregnant. Now I wasn't so naive to think that my pussy was so solid gold it would always keep him where he was supposed to be.

No.

He was responsible for that.

But at the same time... this hoe was lying.

“Let me ask you something,” I said, moving purely on suspicion as I stepped further into the office, walking up to where she was sitting there at the desk.

She raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“How much is Sienna paying you?”

This woman – Stephanie, according to the badge pinned to her shirt for all these weeks, was fair skinned enough that I could literally see the blood drain from her face.

Bullseye.

She stammered for a moment, trying to... I guess trying to figure out what she was going to say now that she’d been figured out. But then she must’ve decided it was better to just get away, because she shot off from the desk like she was going to get past me to the door.

Before I could think better of it though, my hand was out, grabbing the tail end of her long braided ponytail as she passed.

That stopped her cold.

I quickly let her go, surprised that I’d done it in the first place – she’d been moving so fast that the sudden lack of momentum sent her tumbling toward the floor.

I stayed back.

“With all the contracts you signed to be able to work on this set, the privacy agreements, the non-disclosures... I’d think you would know it was in your best interests to just answer the question. Before I start talking to lawyers.”

Because she was stupid, instead of taking my more than generous offer, she smirked at me as she stood up. “Like Anthony Cottrell,” she asked, as if she thought that jab was going to get under my skin, but really... it just made me smile.

“Yes, like my family friend who works for this network, Anthony Cottrell. Or I can just call Des Byers and roll your entire life upside down. Think Sienna is paying you enough for that?” I asked. “Or I can call Des *and* any number of the

other lawyers over at my family's firm, and we can just turn this motherfucker all the way out."

That seemed to make her understand the gravity of this.

"So now, you're going to tell me," I insisted, getting right in here face. "How much is she paying you?"

"SO IT *WAS* HER," PIERRE MARVELED, AND I NODDED.

"Told you."

"You did," he chuckled. "But you *are* almost always right."

"Yep. Almost," I grinned, closing my eyes.

This was, in a word... *Lovely*.

After my little talk with Stephanie the production assistant, figuring out what she planned to do, and having security escort her out, I'd been too simultaneously keyed up and exhausted to get much done. I opted to take myself home, doing a little bit of work from the comfort of my couch before the nausea and exhaustion had taken over.

And then Pierre showed up.

With oyster crackers and peppermint tea, armed with some type of acupressure technique he'd heard about on the internet. Now, for the first time all day, my stomach was feeling settled, my mouth was not sour and dry, and I felt somewhat normal.

With Pierre's fingers pressed to a very specific position on my hands, the constant hum of sickness wasn't nearly as potent, and I was more than glad for the relief.

"So it's all taken care of now?" he asked.

"Pretty much. Obviously she's fired, but Des is going to get back to me on whatever else is going to happen. I don't think she's going to go too hard at Stephanie since there was no actual vendetta there. She just loses her job, along with any goodwill or clout she had at the network. She loses that

privilege now. As far as Sienna though... I think Des might be cooking up something much worse.”

I almost expected Pierre to have a rebuttal for that, some plea for mercy of some type. But no... he shrugged.

“Well, she shouldn’t have pulled you into whatever problem it was that she had with me. So... I say do what you’ve got to.”

Why did that turn me on?

Everything about him did, really, but there was just something different about this moment now. Something so intensely intimate about the both of us on my bed, me sitting cross-legged, his legs stretched out on either side of me, as he gave me this weird, nausea busting hand massage.

Lovely.

“You remember that first day of work?” I spoke up with a smile. “How I was *so* shocked to hear that you and Nick were friends? Because he seemed so nice and you seemed...”

“Like an asshole,” Pierre filled in for me, chuckling. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Why were you so mean to me that day? I mean not *that* day, but the day before, at that lunch. When we first found out I was going to be working for you. Everything was going well, and then you just... switched on me?”

Pierre shook his head. “Man, I think it was some kind of fight or flight response. You and Nubia were pushing pretty hard that day, and you’ve seen how intense this is for me. I think I was just trying to protect myself or something. So I attacked.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I get it now. And I’m really glad that we were able to stick it out, because look where we are.”

“Yeah. This was a pretty unexpected turn of events. Thank God.”

Yeah...

“How are you feeling now?” he asked, stopping the movement of his hands. “Did that actually help?”

“Yes, it helped a ton,” I told him. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me, beautiful.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m not shorty anymore, now I get to be beautiful?”

“Nah, you’re still shorty, you’re just also especially beautiful to me right now.”

“Really?”

I raised the other eyebrow too then, turning to glance at the mirror over by the vanity. I was in the most oversized t-shirt I could find among my clothes, and my hair was tied up in my most garishly colorful scarf. Even though I knew he was coming, I hadn’t been going for cute at all. Just pure comfort to accommodate the *discomfort* this pregnancy was already putting me through.

“I don’t think I stuttered, woman,” he said, moving so that he was behind me in the mirror. “I said beautiful, and I meant it.” He planted a kiss against the back of my neck, and... *God help me* that was all it took.

As sick as I had been, it hadn’t affected the way *he* affected me, and I must have been putting off some serious pheromones, because he picked right up on it.

Still in view of the mirror, his hands slipped under my shirt, the only thing I had on. I watched him move, one hand cupping my breast, his fingers pinching and pulling at my hypersensitive peaks, the other between my legs.

“You know the rules,” he muttered against my ear, and exactly as prompted, I fought the urge to close my eyes.

So I could see everything.

Every bit of pleasure played out on my face as he pulled me up to my knees, for better access, and a better view. His hands were busy, busy, busy, and so fucking skilled, sending me right towards an orgasm that took my breath away.

And he wasn't even done with me.

He pulled the shirt over my head, and then met my gaze in the mirror for just a moment before he snatched my scarf off too.

“Pierre,” I scolded, but he didn't care. He stuck his hand right in my hair, ruining my careful wrap to push my head down, taking my upper torso with it and leaving my ass up in the air.

There wasn't much for me to watch like this, not when he was behind me with his face buried between my legs. I did my best to stay up on my hands for as long as I could, but eventually I succumbed to the intensity of his mouth, and all I could do was drop my chest to the bed.

Eyes closed, mouth open, pleasure pouring from my lips, my fists clenching handfuls of my pretty grey comforter as he ate me until the proof of my arousal – of my bliss – was dripping down my legs.

At least until he could lap that up too.

I was still bent over in a trembling heap from that orgasm when he got up on his knees too, quickly undressing before he grabbed my hair again to pull me back up onto my hands and he buried himself inside me.

“You know you're supposed to be watching,” he scolded, giving me an extra deep stroke as some kind of orgasmic punishment.

He must have liked how my pussy responded, clenching tight around him to keep him there, must have liked how it played on my face, because he did that again, and again, and again and again, keeping his fist in my hair, his other arm anchored around my waist to keep me up, so I could take it.

And I sure as hell did watch.

I watched every single moment as he stroked me into yet another orgasm, finishing himself deep inside me with absolutely zero guilt since I was already carrying his child anyway.

As soon as we collapsed together on the bed, he turned me to face him, with a gentle hand to my face as he met my gaze.

“You still feel okay?” he asked and all I could find the energy for was a grin.

I felt amazing.

PIERRE

I *f anybody knows how to throw a party, it's Nashira Drake.*

That's what Logan claimed when I finally conceded to the idea of the viewing party for the first episode of *ODS* when it premiered for the public. If it was up to me, I would watch it – *again* – from my balcony, with a little herb on the side, completely ignoring any and all hot takes about it on social media.

Logan had insisted I couldn't do that; that the show, and all the cast and crew who'd worked hard to make it happen, deserved more than that.

So... I agreed, on the condition that she had to keep it small. Just upper level cast and crew.

She pushed back on that, insisting that it should be for everybody, since all the roles on set had been vital.

I didn't disagree with that, I just didn't want all those people in my damn house.

She won.

I still didn't let her hire Nashira though.

She... was using her instead for the official wrap party in another three weeks, because it was apparently outside of my power to give Logan a true "no".

She'd doubted her own ability when it came to the planning of this, which was why she wanted to hire it out to a professional. Whoever she found – *not Nashira*, which meant I

did *not* have chocolate fountains or blinged-out doves in my backyard – had done a nice job of transforming the oversized yard and pool area I’d been ignoring into a fully loaded outdoor watch party space.

It was pretty cool.

Lounge chairs, decorations, food, a huge projector screen that was undoubtedly making me a nuisance to my neighbors. I was usually pretty quiet though, so I could send them a gift basket or something to make up for today.

There was also plenty of security on site to make sure no one who wasn’t invited didn’t bring themselves anyway, and also to make sure nobody took it upon themselves to go roaming through my house.

One drawback of having this event here.

I was confident that it would be handled well though, so I wasn’t *too* worried. Not about that at least. What I *was* worried about, was the fact that people were going to be arriving soon and Logan was nowhere to be found, at least not out here.

I had to go looking for her.

I found her upstairs on my balcony, overseeing the last placements of party details.

“You okay,” I asked, startling her, and she pressed a hand to her chest as she turned around.

Beautiful.

“Yeah,” she told me, with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

I raised a brow. “You lying to me now?” I asked, stepping out onto the balcony to grab her hand and pull her inside.

“I’m not lying, I *am* fine,” she told me. “At least Loren thinks so.”

I’d had to hear about Loren and what she thought enough times in a very short period that I immediately recognized the name as Logan’s doctor.

“What do you have to talk to her about?”

Logan opened her mouth to speak, then hesitated, clamping her lips together in a slight frown. “I was going to tell you *after*, so you didn’t freak out before this event. I was up here trying to mentally get myself together.”

“Logan...”

“I was spotting,” she admitted. “Bleeding a little.”

That make my eyes go wide as fuck. “Logan, you’re *bleeding*, and you think I give a shit about this screening?! We need to get you to the doctor!”

“No,” she shook her head, raising her hands to urge me to calm down. “We really don’t. Loren says it’s really common in the first trimester, and from what I described to her it was not enough blood to freak out about. I’m supposed to monitor it, and if it doesn’t go away or gets any heavier, *then* we need to see a doctor. Right now, it’s not information to freak out about. Which is exactly what I was trying not to do when you walked up here.”

“You’re sure?” I asked, putting a hand to her stomach, down low where the baby – once it was an actual baby – would be. Her body hadn’t changed at all yet, at least not visibly. I knew she was more sensitive in certain places, but looking at her, nobody would know she was carrying a baby.

Our baby.

It was a little scary to think about, low key.

“You know you’re talking to the queen of over-preparedness, right?” She teased. “I talked to Loren for the professional opinion, and then went to the internet for the varying contradicting theories of the masses. And on this, there is a pretty decent consensus. No worries, no doctor, just watch and wait. There’s a lot going on down there. All my organs being remapped and changed. And *sir*, you weren’t exactly... gentle with me last night. Remember?”

Yeah, I remembered, and it was her damn fault.

The things that woman had done to me on her knees had unleashed some...

“It won’t be happening again,” I declared. “Not until after.”

Logan’s brows furrowed together. “After *what*? I know you’re not talking about *after* I have this baby? I’ve already got plans for you tonight. I mean... not tonight obviously, while this is going on, but I’m definitely not going to wait another... however many months.”

I sucked my teeth. “You really about to front in my face like you don’t know *exactly* how many months?” I shook my head. “As a matter of fact, exactly how many *weeks*?”

“Days,” she admitted with a groan. “But anyway, treating me like I’m fragile? That’s not going to work for me. So, tomorrow during the daytime, I’m going to go see Loren, just to make sure. Not because you threatened to withhold sex from me though, I was already going to do this. And Loren knew it too because she’s already texted me appointment details.”

“Good,” I said. “In the meantime, I want you off your feet, Ms. Byers.”

“Pierre, you can’t be serious. I have a party to host. I need to go down there and check the decorations, I need to make sure the seating chart is—”

“Logan, what did I say?”

Her lips clamped together, and she shuddered a bit before she straightened her shoulders. “You said you wanted me off my feet.”

“So next time I see you, you’re going to be where?”

“*Off. My. Feet.*”

“Thank you, shorty.”

A deep smile spread across her mouth as I lowered my lips to hers. “I love you,” she said, which stunned me for a second because... damn.

We had never said that before.

But...

“I love you, too,” I told her right back, with zero hesitation because it was true.

I couldn't pinpoint a specific moment when I knew, I just *did*. The only reason I hadn't already come at her with it was because I was trying not to freak her out. It had *been* in development though... probably well before we even decided to stop the *keeping it professional* act.

After the way she'd been at my side professionally, as a friend, and as a lover... how could I *not*?

“Are you going to carry me down the stairs, since I'm not supposed to be on my feet?” she asked, with a teasing wink.

“Oh, you must think I won't?” I reached down, quite easily scooping her into my arms as she squealed. “I've had this ass up in midair while I made you cum before. Remember that?”

“Of course I remember it, but please put me down before you go anywhere near those damn stairs,” she shrieked.

I only did because I didn't want her freaking out over whether or not I might drop her, and it turned out it was good, because as we descended the stairs, I quickly realized we already had guests.

Nubia and my cousin Jeff.

He was one of few Perrys left from my father's side, and I didn't fuck with him at all, even though he lived here in Vegas, and was the head news coordinator at *WAWG*.

Back when my father died, Jeff had been a reporter, still looking for his big break. He got it, at what I felt was the expense of the family. He didn't post any crazy pictures, he didn't exaggerate anything, he just told the truth. Which... honestly kind of felt worse.

I understood it was his job, and he felt he had a duty to not let bias keep him from reporting. But still... even though that story was now scrapped from any type of official outlet, those real, unexaggerated details almost felt more private, more hurtful than the crazy bullshit other outlets had run with.

It was years ago, but I wasn't sure I was over it.

Especially knowing he'd done some other shady things to other people over the years.

Nubia liked him though, which I didn't hold against her. When he wasn't on bullshit, he'd always been a cool, funny guy, with depth of knowledge about a lot, making him great to have a conversation with.

It was once he turned in the fucking Black *TMZ* that turned me off.

Despite all that, he was family, and since I wasn't feeling any particularly negative visceral reaction to having him in my house, I decided to be cool, offering him a greeting, but not nearly as warm as the one I gave Nubia. I introduced him to Logan, who he was looking at a little too hard until I made sure he understood she was spoken for, which he already knew apparently. He claimed he just couldn't get over how much more beautiful she was in person.

She was, but I was already just expecting Jeff to be full of bullshit.

At least until I found out why Nubia had brought him here.

"Jeff is going to do a special feature on your show," Nubia informed me. "It's a big deal. The network was really pleased with the attention generated from the private screening, and they've done some market research and all that to see how excited people are for tonight's premiere, so they want to put some real muscle behind this thing." She leaned in. "Some real *money* behind this thing," she added, with a rubbing gesture with her fingers to further drive the point home. "So we're going to get some footage from tonight which I think you already know about, right?"

Logan put a hand on my shoulder. "Yes, I've already talked to him about that."

She failed to mention I wasn't very *happy* about it, but whatever.

"Oh good," Nubia gushed. "So we'll get that, we'll get some footage on set as you're doing the last episode, and then we'll get some interviews with the other cast members, a few

crew, and then footage from the wrap party. It'll end up being an hour-long documentary type of thing. All that sound good to you?" she asked.

Good?

No.

But I'd manage.

I gave whatever permission was needed, and then Nubia and Logan walked off, leaving me to subject myself to a camera in my face and questioning from Jeff, who I still vaguely wanted to punch.

I did what I said and kept my cool though.

The questions were good questions. Really insightful, and nothing with any type of shady undertones. By the time I was done doing my part with that, the party was in full swing, and I managed to hunt Logan down for us to find our private seating for the show to start.

It was a whole new level of excitement, like we hadn't already seen it.

Logan had arranged something on the screen where we saw updates from the various show hashtags as they were happening, across social media. Having already seen this episode at least a million times, *that* was almost more entertaining than watching it again.

Just like the private screening, not *everybody* loved it.

More than once I saw "sad", "stuffy", "pretentious", and even a few "borings" thrown in there too. But what I had to believe though, was that those people were simply not my audience. Not that we'd created the perfect show, but it was certainly something I'd put my heart into, and I felt like that showed in the results. I was proud of what I'd put my name on, which was really what mattered in the end.

But it was also pretty fucking dope that a whole lot of people loved it.

A *lot* of people.

By the time the premiere was over, we were trending across all social media outlets. The actors were beaming about the love that fans had been sending their way, and the way their follower numbers were climbing.

Even Nick and Miko were on cloud nine.

We really had made something special.

And as much joy as it brought me to see everybody happy and all hyped up about the good energy generated from the screening, nothing topped the way Logan screamed when the credits were rolling at the end and she saw her name alone on the screen right after Miko's.

Third assistant director.

It wasn't technically the most accurate title, but it was more about making sure she was honored. After the way she'd gone to bat for the integrity of the script at the table read, the way she made sure everybody on set was taken care of, the little notes she'd whispered in Elodie's ear between tapings without thinking anybody noticed... all of that, plus the countless other ways she contributed had made a difference, and she deserved the recognition for it.

Official recognition, not just behind the scenes.

"*Very nice move,*" Steph congratulated me about it later, quietly. I didn't get a chance to respond before Logan and Nubia walked up, talking about the busy schedule for next week's filming.

I saw the exact moment when Logan realized she needed the restroom.

One second, she was fine, sipping what I knew was ginger ale, but might pass as a real drink to anybody who was looking on. The next, there was this look in her eyes, a subconscious hand to her stomach, and a sudden tightening of her jaw.

"Do you need—"

"Nope, mingle!" she insisted, then turned to rush off, leaving me with Steph and Nubia, just as Elodie walked up.

Before anyone else could say anything, Nubia looked me right in the face, and asked, “How far along is she?”

El and Steph’s eyes went wide, surprised by the question, but she’s asked it so matter-of-factly there was no point in me denying it – not to them.

“About ten weeks,” I admitted, quietly, after making sure nobody else was in earshot. “And... I’m scared as fuck.”

“*Aww*,” Nubia gushed, pulling me into a hug before Elodie could get to me with a punch in the arm.

“Wow, you’re keeping secrets like that, nigga?!” she asked, and I shrugged.

“It’s early as fuck to tell people, in case... something goes wrong. And besides that, Logan and I really haven’t had this discussion.”

“My bad,” Nubia cringed. “I just recognized that look on her face and had to say something. I’m sorry.”

“Congratulations, man,” Steph spoke up. “Be prepared for that woman to work the endings off your nerves.”

Nubia sucked her teeth. “Excuse you – I was a *breeze* when I was pregnant.”

“You wouldn’t speak to me for most of it.”

“Because *you* – you know what, let’s go, so I can cuss your ass out in private about it.”

“It’s about to be some *ass out*, but not like you think,” Steph countered as they waved and walked off, to go... married people shit, I guess.

After they were gone, Elodie crossed her arms, pinning me with a scowl.

“You better be glad I actually like her,” she declared. “I can’t *believe* you’re out here with a baby on the way, as much shit as you talk to me about being responsible.”

I grinned. “You’re right, El. I’m a hypocrite. Only because I want the best for my little sister.”

Shaking her head, she returned my smile with one of her own. “I’on know P... You’re having a kid with probably *the* most orderly chick on the planet, you’ve obviously been in love with her since I walked in on y’all in your kitchen that day, and you just premiered a bomb new show. And you’re still sober. I’d say you’re doing a pretty good job of leading by example.”

Thankfully, the party was still going, so I didn’t have to process the depth of a compliment like that. Shaw walked up to congratulate me on the show, and I needed to give the same love back to him, and we talked for a bit before he led Elodie off somewhere, wanting her full attention for himself.

Then it was just me.

Just me, and my thoughts, in a party full of people, but I didn’t feel overwhelmed by it, or frazzled, none of that.

Just grateful for everything that had happened, to arrive at this moment.

And looking forward to whatever was next.

INT, OFFICE, CASINO - NIGHT

JASON IS IN HIS FATHER’S OFFICE, AFTER THE FUNERAL,
SEEKING TO

QUIET THE NOISE OF EVERYTHING SURROUNDING HIS FATHER’S DEATH. HE’S QUIET, THINKING, THEN AFTER A MOMENT, SLIDES OPEN THE DESK DRAWER TO REVEAL A BOTTLE OF KIMBLE BOURBON, STILL SEALED. THE LIGHTS ARE LOW, TENSION IS HIGH – ESPECIALLY AFTER THE INTOXICATED CRASH THAT LED TO JAMESON’S DEATH, JASON NEEDS TO HONOR HIS COMMITMENT NOT TO DRINK.

HE OPENS THE BOTTLE, SMELLS IT.

JAMESON (OFF-CAMERA)

YOU’RE ALREADY FUCKING UP, I SEE.

JASON SMIRKS, UNDERSTANDS THAT THIS IS NOT A GHOST — JUST HIS FATHER’S VOICE IN HIS HEAD, AS CRITICAL AS ALWAYS. HE PUTS THE TOP BACK ON BUT LEAVES THE BOTTLE ON THE DESK.

TRACY BURSTS THROUGH THE OFFICE DOOR, SMILING. SHE’S RELIEVED TO HAVE FOUND JASON.

TRACY

THERE YOU ARE! YOUR MOTHER IS REALLY... WORRIED. SHE NOTICES THE BOTTLE ON THE DESK, BUT JASON DOESN’T EXPLAIN. HE DOESN’T NEED TO.

TRACY

YOU’RE GONNA BE READY TO HIT THIS PARTY WITH ME TOMORROW, RIGHT?

IT WAS STILL AWE-INSPIRING TO ME, HOW A FEW WORDS ON A page ended up becoming something so much more layered once the actors got ahold of it. What I’d typed was nothing compared to the depth and emotion Shaw brought to something as simple as sitting in his father’s office with a bottle of liquor.

The understanding and empathy Elodie infused into Tracy’s decision to not even make the bottle a big deal, the way she’d made her question about him attending the party this loaded thing that wasn’t even about the party, but rather asking... *are you going to be okay?*

This was what got creators obsessed with their craft, and I was no different.

This scene was really bittersweet.

It was the last “real” scene — what would show last in the episode was the “party” — a cookout with Tracy’s family, where she was going to be introducing him to everyone, making things official between them. There at the party, her sisters and cousins were teasing her about not feeling like eating, with one sister taking it more seriously than the rest.

She pulled Tracy aside, handing her a pregnancy test and ushering her into the bathroom.

The test was positive.

It would end on that scene, which had been the source of much controversy at the table read, and even now. I kept being asked about a second season, which wasn't happening, because I'd told the story I wanted to tell, and had no plans to stretch it out.

Even Jeff wondered though, in the closing interview with me for the *making of the show* special, if something like that wouldn't be too frustrating for the audience, leaving the story "incomplete".

I shook my head. "A very wise man, and incredible filmmaker – my father – once told me that it took a massive amount of arrogance to ever think you were telling a character's *complete* story. If you've done your job right, that character's story is this enduring thing, that carries on forever. Graduating college isn't *the end*, getting married isn't *the end*, even death isn't *the end*. All those things are just the beginnings of new stories, maybe happening outside my creative lens. It's not up to us to tell a *complete* story – that's not possible. Our job is to tell the story we see. Anything else has to be left to the imagination."

"I... think that's an incredible way to see it," Jeff nodded. "And a perfect place for *our* story on the making of your first project to end."

There was some scattered applause, from a small crowd of people I hadn't even realized were watching – of course Logan was in that group.

"Okay, I see you, *Mr. Artistic License to Do What He Wants*," she teased, allowing me to wrap her in a hug.

"I'm just trying to be as real with the people as possible," I told her, taking a step back to admire how fucking pretty she looked in her soft yellow dress. "You *sure* we have to—"

"Yes, I'm sure we have to meet my parents for lunch," she cut in, before I could even get the alternate plans out of my

mouth.

She'd already broken the news to them about her pregnancy – she'd thought it would go better that way. And it must have, because now it was time for us to actually meet for the first time, and I... wasn't exactly nervous, but I wasn't jumping for joy about the shit either.

But it was needed.

And it wasn't lost on me, that some of the things I'd written for Jason's life had ended up paralleling my own.

"I'm playing, shorty – I know it's important to you."

"Thank you," she smiled. "I should warn you... they are *very* excited to meet the father of their impending grandchild, but they are still a little traditional. More than a little. Um..."

I chuckled. "Logan, please. Just say what you need to say."

"Don't be surprised if they try to pressure you, okay?"

"Pressure?"

She sighed. "Yes. As in... for a wedding date. Which is ridiculous," she said, grabbing my hand to lead me off set, but I quickly shifted our trajectory for my vehicle instead of hers. "Ain't nobody getting married anytime soon."

I squeezed her hand as I opened the door to help her, giving her a wink just before I got her settled in.

"You sure about that?"

-THE END.

AFTERWORD

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review online, via Goodreads, Storygraph, or wherever you purchased this novel.

Thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

christina c jones 
love, in warm hues

Christina C. Jones is a modern romance novelist who has penned many love stories. She has earned a reputation as a storyteller who seamlessly weaves the complexities of modern life into captivating tales of black romance.



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Chasing Commitment

ETERNALLY TETHERED

Haunted

Coveted

STANDALONES

Mine Tonight

Wonder

Equivalent Exchange

Love & Other Things

A Mutually Beneficial Agreement

Relationship Goals: a novella

Anonymous Acts (Five Star Enterprises)

Audiobooks:

[Ante Up \(High Stakes, Book 1\)](#)

[Deuces Wild \(High Stakes, Book 3\)](#)

[I Think I Might Love You \(Love Sisters, Book 1\)](#)

[I Think I Might Need You \(Love Sisters, Book 2\)](#)

[Getting Schooled \(Wright Brothers, Book 1\)](#)

[Pulling Doubles \(Wright Brothers, Book 2\)](#)

[Bending the Rules \(Wright Brothers, Book 3\)](#)

[Inevitable Conclusions \(Inevitable, Book 1\)](#)

[Inevitable Seductions \(Inevitable, Book 2\)](#)

[Inevitable Addiction \(Inevitable, Book 3\)](#)

[Haunted \(Eternally Tethered, Book 1\)](#)

[Coveted \(Eternally Tethered, Book 2\)](#)

[The Culmination of Everything \(Sugar Valley, Book 1\)](#)

[Equivalent Exchange \(Night Shift\)](#)

[Wonder](#)