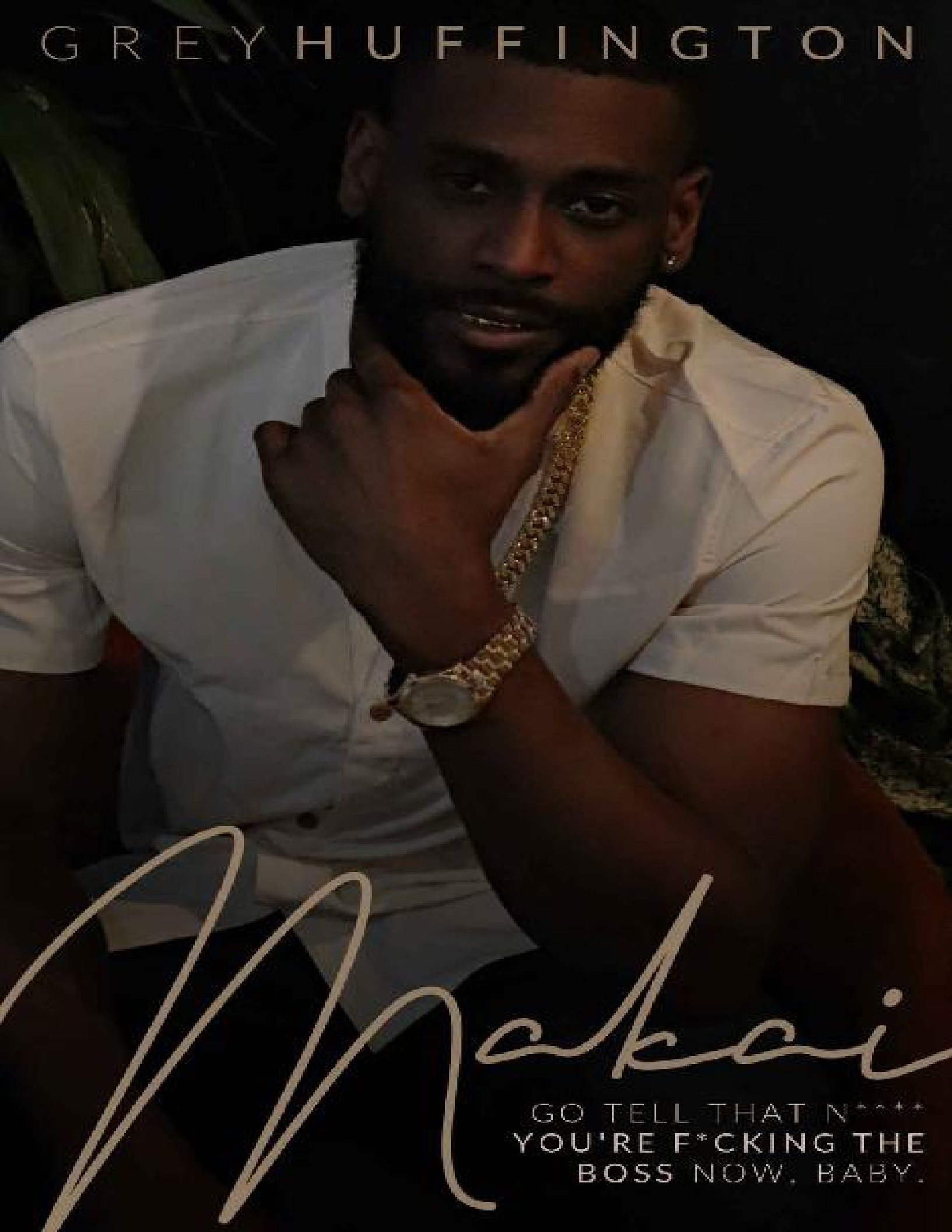


GREY HUFFINGTON



Makai

GO TELL THAT N****
YOU'RE F*CKING THE
BOSS NOW, BABY.

BERKELEY BRED

Makai

GREYHUFFINGTON

TRIGGER WARNING

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Seeing this note means the book that you are about to read could contain triggering situations or actions. This book is subject to one or more of the triggers listed below.

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This is simply my way of recognizing the reality and life experiences of my tribe and making sure that I properly prepare you for what is to unfold within the pages of this book.

violence
sexual assault
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miscarriage/child loss
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emotional abuse

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THE EMANCIPATION OF EMOREE

SLEIGH

SLEIGH SQUARED

THE GIFTED
MEMO
GIVE HER LOVE. GIVE HER FLOWERS.

UNBREAK ME
UNCOVER ME

AS WE LEARN
AS WE LOVE

JUST WANNA MEAN THE MOST TO YOU
SENSITIVITY
10,000 HOURS
DARKE HEARTS
MUSE.

SOFTLY
PEACE + QUIET
PRESS REWIND
JAGGED EDGES
MY PERSON
**THE REALM OF
RIOT THIMBLE**
WHOSE LOVE STORY IS IT ANYWAY?

THE EISENBERG EFFECT

LUCA
LYRIC
EVER
LAIKE
BAISLEIGH
LIAM

THE DOMINO EFFECT

LEDGE
HALO
LAWE

BERKELEY BRED
MALACHI
ANNA
MILO

UNHAND ME

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HOME*
BLUES*
31ST*
WHAT ARE WE DOING?*NOW THAT WE'RE HERE.*

THEN LET'S FUCK ABOUT IT*
GIVING THANKS

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This book is dedicated to me.
Since writing *My Person*, last year, I have put
my best foot forward and opened the door to an
entirely new world. I'm going to stop and I'm
going to smell the roses for a bit.

See you soon.

g.

BERKELEY BRED

Makai

GREYHUFFINGTON

PROLOGUE

“AT THE END of the fucking day, Glacier, you won’t find a nigga like me. You’re a fucking square. You don’t know nobody. You don’t got nobody. Niggas not fucking with you. All the niggas you had before me lame and all the niggas after me gon’ be lame. Broke-ass niggas. Before me, you ain’t have but five hundred dollars to your name.

“Everything you are today is because of me! Remember that shit when you tooting that raggedy-ass Honda around the city with the gas light on and a trunk full of clothes because you can’t pay the rent in that fucking apartment I put you in. That whip I gave you, I’m reposing that bitch. Talking about leaving me. Bitch, I made you. I did. Me.

“The clothes on your back, I bought them. Them shoes on your feet, that’s me. Stop playing fucking games. Don’t act like you don’t know what it is. Leaving me means leaving with nothing, so make sure you choose wisely!”

“Is that all, Nelson?” Sighing, I blinked back the tears that stung my glossy orbs.

My head descended, peering down at the fluffy slippers that felt more comforting than the cold heels that sat by the front door waiting for me. To his credit, Nelson had purchased the black shoes with the red soles that I’d grown to love. However, the intensity of his hurtful words forced me to second-guess the decision to walk across that lengthy stage we’d practiced on with them clinging to my feet.

Willing myself not to cry, I thought of opposing times, fonder times, when his words didn’t slice me like steak knives and his anger didn’t rest in the pit of his stomach. During those times, he’d never spit such fire in my

direction. During those times, I was paramount to his happiness and he was the source of mine.

But within twelve hours, it had all changed. The bitterness in my mouth at the sound of his name made my insides churn. Two small, yet significant pieces of information led us down an inevitable path that could end nowhere other than our destruction.

“Fuck you mean, is that all?” Angrily, he barked.

“I’m hanging up now.”

The warning was rooted in my deep desire to treat how I preferred treatment. Even in my despair, I was unable to inflict any amount of pain on Nelson or match his energy. I simply didn’t have it to give. The love that I harbored for him hadn’t disappeared overnight as our relationship status had, giving me more than enough fuel to remain cordial and respectful while facing scrutiny from his side of the line.

“Don’t hang up this fucking phone, Glacier.”

“What is it that you propose I do, Nelson? I won’t argue with you. I don’t have the energy or the time. In two and a half hours, I’m set to walk across the stage. I’ve worked extremely hard to obtain a degree so I refuse to let the news that my boyfriend is sleeping with my best friend and sometimes finds himself in situations that contradict his character disrupt the celebration. No matter how devastating it is. I can deal with my feelings another day. There won’t be another day for me to graduate nursing school.”

At the top of his lungs, he screamed, “I put you through nursing school!”

“Scholarships, hard work, late nights, and persistence put me through nursing school, Nelson. You simply provided a life that made all of those things easier for me. Nursing school was happening whether you were in my world or not. Did you make it easier? Yes. But I put myself through school.

“As stated a bit ago, I’m ending this call. Unless you’re calling to congratulate me, then please don’t use my number again. I’ve made it very clear that our time has ended. Nothing has changed. Nothing will change. I wish you the best in life. I simply won’t be there to witness it and I’m okay with that. I need you to find a way to be okay with that as well. Goodbye, Nelson.”

As promised, I disconnected the call. A swipe underneath my eyes cleared my face of the tears without smearing my makeup. Gazing at my reflection in the full-length mirror, I inhaled deeply. What was supposed to be the happiest of my days quickly turned sour. Nelson and Valencia’s

betrayal stung like a fresh bee sting, yet I still felt victorious.

I did it, I thought with widening nostrils and an aching heart. *I finished.*

It was still surreal. The feeling. The realization. The reality. *My reality.*

“Three deep breaths. Ten steps backward. Now I’m switching lanes. Tire marks. On my heart. It doesn’t beat the same.”

The words of Jhene Aiko’s track gaped my mouth and stretched my lips as I stood to my feet, pulling comfort right from under my bottom. There was so much more waiting for my presence than what had transpired in my absence. Showing up was the most prominent part of my future and punctuality was an addiction I wasn’t quite ready to kick this afternoon.

The tingling of my fingers was caused by the vibration of my phone. I lowered my gaze from the mirror to the screen, finding Nelson’s name on the screen, as expected. Quickly and quietly, I silenced the call. There was absolutely nothing else to discuss.

“Cause baby I was born tired. Getting more tired.”

Tipping my head at an oblique angle, I traced the puffiness underneath my eyes. The concealer was applied lightly but obscured the blotchy, swollenness of my skin with precision. Because I had a twenty-five-minute drive, registration, and a position in line to take, time was of the essence. Though seemingly simple, the tasks would require at least two hours of my morning, leaving me with little to no downtime.

My journey to the closet in my studio apartment was swift. Upon entry, the light illuminated the large space. The boxes that piled up on the top shelf grabbed my attention. I reached forward and guided the sliding ladder in my direction. One by one, I climbed the bars until my chest was flush with the wood of the shelf. The Mossimo box I’d stored among the others that held designer bags and shoes slid from underneath the stack with ease.

I secured it under my armpit and descended the ladder carefully. The black dress that left me with little room to breathe restricted my movements, making the trip up and down a bit more dramatic than it was. Nevertheless, I rejoiced inwardly as my feet met the ground again.

Upon removing the top, I found the sleek, basic black pumps that I’d snagged six years ago. The walk down the aisle in the beauties was a painful one, one that I hadn’t anticipated until I was in my late sixties, possibly seventies. It was one that changed the trajectory of my life. One that left me broken and battered beyond recognition for two full years without giving me grace a single hour of a single day.

Closing my eyes, I remained still as visions of my parents resting peacefully in their caskets consumed me entirely. A fatal crash ended their lives simultaneously, breaking my heart a hundred times over. Some days, I found it difficult to lift my head from the pillow, due to the pain of their untimely demise, but the sound of their voices that still played in my mind was all the reassurance I needed to plant my feet on the ground in an effort to leave my mark on the world. They'd both done the same.

With a heart so heavy that it anchored my feet and slowed my pace, I treaded toward the bed, where I allowed the box to fall from my hands. It contacted the bed with a thud as one of the two shoes flew upward before landing right beside it. I lowered my body until it was flush against the comforter that was beckoning for my touch, attention, and tears.

One by one, I slid the shoes onto my freshly polished toes. Up on my feet, I smoothed my dress down, turning sixty degrees to meet the mirror's surface for one final glance. Satisfied with my appearance, I tiptoed out of the makeshift bedroom that provided a sense of privacy. Though doorless, the wall that separated it from the living area served its purpose.

My appetite didn't exist. The butterflies swarming in my stomach left little room for food, but the sight of the bananas on my counter reminded me that it was a better idea to make room than to leave without having even a bite. Choosing wisely, I snatched the fruit from the counter and began flipping the lights of my apartment off.

The peel slid down easily. Careful not to smear my nude gloss, I broke off a piece and popped it into my mouth as I approached the door. My hand grazed the fob of the Bimmer that was parked out front, sending pain through my heart. With skyward brows that crinkled from the aching of my chest, I quickly pushed past the set of keys and grabbed the ring that held a large black fob with a silver button in the top right corner.

Angled downward, and to the right, my chin brushed against my shoulder. Hesitantly, I released a shaky breath while blinking back the prickling of my eyes. A shake of my head centered me again, helping me move forward without reservation.

Today is about you, I reminded myself. Not a car. Not a man. Not his affairs. Not a friend. Not heartbreak. It's about you, Glacier.

Under the pressure of my thumb, a long, strategically cut key popped out of the large black block of matter. I swung my front door open, welcoming the sun inside. Its promises of vitamins and light left me waiting for

rejuvenation.

Before slipping out of the door completely, I grabbed my handbag and the gown I'd steamed three times due to restlessness through the night. I stuffed the rest of the banana in my mouth to free my left hand for the cap I'd designed over the last week.

The loud, obnoxious sound of heavy machinery echoed in the distance, obliterating the silence that I welcomed each morning I emerged from my dwelling. Down the flight of stairs that led straight to my unit was the source. In front of the silver Bimmer that was gifted by Nelson a little over a year ago was a large hook as it climbed the bed of the fire-red truck with Dan's Towing scribbled all over it.

Pausing momentarily, I observed the manner of precision with which the conductor operated. From the comfort in his posture, I sensed he'd been in the business a number of years. Weariness didn't dictate his posture and neither did discomfort. He was well-composed, forcing me to correct the slant in my posture.

Slumped shoulders lifted, squared, and aligned with my chest, in which I hiked in the air, along with my chin. Head held high, I continued toward the Honda that was parked in the shade just behind my assigned carport where the Bimmer once rested. The dust that covered the paint made me promise to cleanse it thoroughly over the weekend.

A deep bucket, water, soap, and a rag felt like the closest I'd get to therapy with the near-negative balance in my bank account. In Nelson's pursuit to punish me for ending our four-year relationship, he'd cleaned our joint account, transferring every dollar he'd given me access to. For years, I'd had access to his funds, freely spending without question or concern on his end. Unrestricted access made focusing on school and finishing my degree much easier than trying to keep up with the full-time hours that employment required.

The twelve hundred dollars in my emergency fund would swiftly dwindle now that the account was scraped clean and a car wash wasn't one of the expenses I was willing to begin its decline with.

But there's more. The miniature voice in the back of my head spoke.

But there's not. I silenced it, refusing to consider the funds it was referring to, funds that I'd reserved for the care of my Nanny, funds that were granted to me after the death of my parents. Without them, my grandmother would require around-the-clock care that I couldn't supply. The cost of her

care home was a necessary expense I wasn't willing to toggle with.

"God, please work," I begged, tapping the left button repeatedly.

The sound of the locks lifting after a few tries brought a smile to my lips.

Thank you. With a hand covering my face, I peered toward the sunny sky.

Before climbing into the front seat, I freed my hands by placing everything inside of them on the backseat. Once I settled into the driver's seat, my chest swelled with pride. A 2008 Honda Accord was the first car I'd purchased with my hard-earned money. I'd imagined passing it on to someone in need, but no one needed it more than me at the moment. My hands gripped the steering wheel tightly as I released a shaky breath.

It's fine. Everything is fine. My mother's voice sounded in my head. *Everything is fine, Glacier.* I closed my eyes as uncertainty toyed with my ability to believe everything was, indeed, fine. My circumstances said one thing while my mother said another.

Trusting her, I stuffed the key in the ignition and turned it. The engine stalled, forcing me to turn the key backward. In desperation, I twisted it forward again, receiving the same result. My stomach knotted as I pulled for oxygen that had seemingly been sucked from the air suddenly.

"Please," I groaned.

A third attempt and the engine fired up with little hesitation. Relief reddened my cheeks and soothed my aching heart, momentarily. Refusing to allow my scuffler to quit before I began my journey, I switched gears and began the journey to the stadium where my graduation was being held.

The bright orange gas light that appeared on the dash as I reached the first red light warned me that pushing forward wasn't the best decision. My lips smacked at the thought of another setback. Nevertheless, I angled the wheels of my tires toward the service station with their gas prices glowing on the large screen, sprouting from the lawn right out front.

At the very first available pump, my wheels halted. I stepped out of my vehicle with my wallet in my hand afraid that if I dead the engine it wouldn't restart. To eliminate the possibility, I kept it running as I inserted the card associated with the account that Nelson once funded. If the system allowed it, I had every intention of over-drafting to secure a full tank as a farewell present for being blindsided by the drama that unfolded throughout the evening and well into the night.

Gasoline smothered the perfume I'd nearly slathered my skin with to make sure it lasted throughout the day. Peeking at the meter that measured

the gallons and fund's availability, I silently urged them both to continue beyond the twenty-dollar mark, which was a reflection of the account's balance. As the dial turned and one replaced the zero that followed the two, I exhaled loudly.

"Everything is fine." I repeated my mother's words.

With a full tank and confidence brewing in my bones, I continued down Asher until I made a right onto Canton where I'd spend the next ten minutes before taking another turn.

"You be on all of that nonsense. How I'm still surprised when it's always a process?"

The words belted from me as H.E.R. repeated herself on the track that had started a full minute ago.

"It's so exhausting. I'm so exhausted."

The silkiness of her voice was comforting, just as most of her songs were for me. Even when I couldn't relate to what she was speaking about, I was comforted. Her love songs left me feeling just as exhausted, betrayed, and misunderstood as she did, though it was hardly the case.

Nelson had been the ideal partner until he wasn't. As if a switch had been flipped, he transformed. The man who continued to call my phone repeatedly was not the man I'd fallen in love with, but he was making it so easy to release every ounce of that love I harbored for him.

As if he'd heard my thoughts, another call from a private number interrupted the music. Quickly, I pushed the volume button to clear the notification and resume the sounds coming through my speakers. Unwilling to allow thoughts of him to dampen the joy I'd quickly discovered, I scrubbed him from them. Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, I tuned into the song that had just erupted in my car.

"Kiss me dangerous. Been so lost without you all around me. Getting anxious—"

POP.

The loud sound startled me, stopping me mid-song. My brows hiked on my forehead, in a rush to meet my hairline. Confusion plagued me. However, the wobble in my once-smooth ride shed light on the predicament.

Not right now. Please, not right now, I begged, pulling closer to the lane reserved for emergencies and starting the flashers. Rushing out and around the car, I surveyed the damage. Sure enough, the right, front tire was blown to shreds.

“Oh, God.”

Cringing, I leaned forward, touching the rim that once surrounded my rubber. The restricted call that came through seemed to have perfect timing. My finger hovered over the screen as I contemplated answering the call, knowing that without a doubt, Nelson would come to my rescue. There'd never been a time he hadn't. I was certain this instance wouldn't be much different from the others.

However, my heart and head were aligned, not allowing me to make the foolish mistake. That chapter of my life ended when I closed my eyes last night. I refused to reopen it. I ignored the call as I circled the car and slid back into the driver's side. When the screen was clear, I unlocked it and tapped the MAPS application.

Tire shops, I typed into the search bar. Immediately, results were revealed. Discovering there was a shop just a mile and a half away from me, I simmered down a bit. My shattered nerves began to repair themselves. The others were more than eight miles away, which posed a problem. The issue with living in the suburbs was that it was hard to find things like corner stores, tire shops, dollar stores, and any small shops.

My neighborhood was designed for those who had little worries and large pockets. Up until now, I'd blended well. From the car I drove to the shoes I wore, I fit the mold. But in the blink of an eye, that had all been snatched away from me and reality hit me with a mean right hook.

Ringling ensued. And by the time it reached the fourth, a thick, heavy southern drawl obliterated my thoughts and drew my attention back to the matter at hand.

“Domino Exotic Wheels. Who dis?”

With contorted features, I looked around me to make sure I was still in my neighborhood. In fact, I was. *Who dis?* The question wasn't the issue. The way it was presented was.

“Who is this, you ask?” I rephrased.

“Same difference, Mommas. You called my line. I didn't call yours.”

He was absolutely correct. Knowing that I didn't have much time to waste, I stated my name.

“Glacier.”

“Glacier?”

“Yes, I am hav—” I continued, but was interrupted.

“Your people named you Glacier? Like the shit that shifts due to its own

weight and ends up in large bodies of water? The perennial accumulation of crystalline ice, snow, rock, sedimen—”

His disbelief didn't come as a surprise. However, the fact that he was so well-versed in the subject was surprising to me. Not so much that he knew what a glacier was. We all did. He knew the definition in its entirety as if he had a dictionary in front of him.

“Please. I'm aware of Google's definition of glacier. However, I'm having car trouble and really need help. My tire is destroyed and—”

“Rim or regular tire?”

“Regular tire.”

“Glacier, since you're so damn good at Google, you would've read that we ain't that type of tire shop.”

Pausing, I counted down from five, determined to remain collected on the call that was demanding energy from me that I absolutely hated to release.

“I—”

Click. The line went silent, immediately.

Did he—wow. Groaning, I swallowed the lump in my throat. *Did I say something wrong?*

I replayed the conversation in my head. *Google*, I recalled. Dialing the number back, I replayed my apology in my head. My options were slim and my presence at the graduation was riding on the assistance from the nearest shop and it happened to be the one I was dialing back. As the phone continued ringing in my ear, emotions boiled in my stomach, rising to my chest as my eyes began to prickle with fresh tears.

Everything is not okay, Mom, I admitted inwardly. *It's not.*

Hadn't it been for bad luck, I wouldn't have any today. Since I'd opened the text, my world had begun on a downward slope without promises of peaking any time soon.

“Domino Exotic Whee—”

“I apologize. I apologize for being so harsh on the last call. I'm sorry, but I really, really need assistance and you're the closest shop to me,” tearfully, I rushed out.

The lack of sound forced me to take a peek at my phone. Sighing, I wiped away my tears when I realized the call was still in progress.

“Hello?”

“Yeah. I'm here.”

“My tire is in shreds. I'm on the side of the road.”

“I don’t sell tir—regular tires. I don’t have regular tires here, Mommas. I’m not bullshitting when I say that.”

The edginess of his tone remained, but it had softened tremendously.

“Is there any way you can help me find a tire? I know that’s a lot to ask of a stranger, but at this point, I’m des—”

“Where you at?”

“Can—”

“Stay put.”

But you don’t know where I am, I thought as the line died again. My first instinct was to call back, but I didn’t want to become a nuisance. Instead, my body slid down the seat of my car, slightly, ending as the breath I’d exhaled did. I could feel my lips protrude from my face as I tried settling my nerves.

“What is life right now?” Frantically, I shook my head from one side to the other. “Dad, you can jump in at any point now.”

Over the last six years, I was certain they had their hands in the elevation of my world. Now that the blanket had been snatched from me, my world felt as cold as it did four years ago and my main task was to figure it out all over again. After years of everything unfolding perfectly, the change was like a fresh band-aid being ripped from my hairy arm.

“At any point.”

I closed my eyes, not from exhaustion but from overwhelm. Attempting to reduce the stress that was building and grab ahold of the situation at hand I began envisioning the life I was planning for instead of the suffering I would endure beforehand. Scrubs covered my body, gray, as I hovered over a large binder, marking my patient’s stats.

The vision progressed as time did. And it wasn’t until the bass of a stereo forced my eyes apart that they disappeared. Tiny hands and toes vanished in an instant. I searched for the origins of the thunderous sounds.

Left. Right. Front.

Behind me, I concluded.

The sound was coming from the black truck behind me that had pulled over into the emergency lane as well. Panic-stricken, I glanced at the lock on my door, confirming the smidgen of security that I had access to. For an extra layer, or possibly to appease the nerve endings that were splitting by the second, I pressed the button on the door to make sure all the doors were locked.

Through the rearview, my eyes danced, hoping to get a glimpse of the

man who would probably be the death of me. My eyes bounced from my cell to the mirror. The numbers were typed by the time he evaded my line of vision and strolled toward my car.

You watch way too many murder documentaries, I chastised. Considering the amount of peace they brought me after a long night of studying, lectures, and labs, the thought was incredibly active. *As a part of your relaxation routine, nonetheless.*

I pushed my thoughts aside and stared straight ahead, afraid to look my defendant in the eyes. He wouldn't get that satisfaction out of me and he wouldn't be able to confess with those memories at the forefront of his investigation.

Where are you? I questioned, dropping my head and erasing the three numbers I'd pressed. With trembling fingers, I accessed my call log to locate the number I'd dialed twice before.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

"Oh shoot," I squealed, my left hand landing near my heart. The sudden motion nearly forced it out of my chest. Simultaneously, my finger tapped the number on the screen, initiating a call.

This is it. This is the end for me. Mom, Dad, I'm com—

The sound of the ringing phone almost didn't compare to the sound of my heart. It nearly silenced everything else around me. I placed the phone up to my ear. That thick, southern drawl, intertwined with undeniable haughtiness soiled the line.

"You want a nigga to help you or what, Mommas?"

I peered out of the window, the phone still against my ear, realizing the man that stood next to me wasn't the man that would end my life. It was the man that I'd called for help.

*He is not exclud—*my conscious spoke.

Quiet. I silenced it.

Blinking, I tried reasoning with God, wondering how he'd possibly managed such a masterpiece in the midst of his workload. How he'd made time to carefully carve such an artful being with his tasks piling by the second was baffling.

Long, perfectly curled lashes and thick brows sandwiched dark eyes that were cold and calculated. They moved about my vehicle, taking note of anything and everything around me. He was observing, gauging my level of trouble while deciding whether he would move forward with the assistance.

I'd read him completely. His eyes and posture were like glass at the moment. I could sense his hesitation and lack of enthusiasm. It was quite obvious that he was stepping out on a limb and doing something he usually didn't. Before he changed his mind, I spoke into the phone.

"Yes. Of course," I rushed out, breath as shaky as my fingers and loud as my heartbeat.

"Then open the door."

For the third time, he hung up on me. Slightly offended, I unlocked my door, pushed it open, and stepped out of my car with a few words on my heart that needed to be released. However, his silence and wondering eyes, combing over me like bait, re-birthed the thoughts that I'd pushed away moments prior.

He is not excluded.

"You got something to get off ya chest?" He sniggered, revealing perfect teeth that were lined with gold.

I haven't told a joke. I hadn't, so his comic relief was baffling to me. However, it wasn't lost upon me that the inside joke he found comical offered a glimpse of another profile, exposing a single, dimpled cheek and lips that curled upward. It was a far cry from the downward brows, widened nostrils, and inquisitive eyes that were slimmed to slits.

"No," I lied.

"A liar. They teach you that shit in school?"

Of course. He'd noticed the cap and gown in the backseat of my car, quickly concluding my status as a student.

"No."

"Then what's up?" he asked, folding his arms over his chest, occupying more space than his lean frame required. The lack of distance between us eliminated my chances of getting past him. Though I had little reason to at the moment, the observation was still made.

"Do you make it a habit of being rude?" I wondered aloud.

"Do you make it a habit of calling motherfuckers you'n even know, back to back like that?"

Taken aback by his bluntness and the unsettling delivery, I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat while simultaneously swallowing the air that had been coated with his cologne. Immediately, I was under the influence.

"I'm sure your mother wouldn't approve of you talking to a young woman that's having a crappy day, who has done absolutely nothing to you,

in that tone.”

“She dead. She don’t give a fuck, Mommas. Respectfully.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. You live and you die.”

His view on life was accurate, but it didn’t hurt any less. My mother, too, was deceased, but for some reason, I was reluctant to release that bit of information. Enough pity was shed on me with his presence. I didn’t want to add to the stirring pot.

The sadness that flashed across his dark eyes sat right on top of my chest. I knew that pain. I’d felt it over the last six years, but it doubled with both of my parents’ deaths. It was a deep, hallowing, and unexplainable pain that only people like him and I could feel.

“Respectfully?” My brows attempted to center as my neck stretched as I changed the subject.

“Since you need your blows lightened, yeah. Respectfully.”

Unable to respond, I simply nodded. I wasn’t offended by his cognizance of my gentleness or the need to have blows softened when aimed in my direction. Life itself was beating me without relief. I didn’t need a total stranger doing the same.

“I ain’t got your kind of tires,” he said, diverting our attention. “So get all ya shit out of here and I’m going to have it towed to my shop. We can figure it out from there.”

The vibrating of my phone startled me. My words were clipped in my throat as I nodded. With a squint in my eyes and worry lines across my forehead, I pushed forward. Slowly, he stepped backward, allowing me to exit the space he’d cornered me in.

The calculations started immediately. But instead of voicing my concerns, I obliged. One by one, I collected the items I’d just put into the backseat of my car. With them in my hand, I headed for the black truck that was still running. I placed my things neatly on the backseat and then settled into the front.

The scent of cannabis lingered. The car fresheners that dangled from the rearview mirror and lined the vents worked overtime to conceal the aroma, but it was unrelenting with its presence. The mixture of peach and marijuana was one that I didn’t expect to consider pleasant, but I did.

My phone buzzed in my hand for what felt like the hundredth time in the last few minutes. I cut my eyes to make sure that Nelson wasn’t in the

vicinity. His persistence since the black truck appeared left me wondering if he was somewhere close, watching every move of mine.

Can't be. I shook the thought with a release of heavy, hot air. The circumstances would have been much different and not in my favor had he been. My attention was quickly diverted as the movement continued ahead of me.

I watched as the man who'd interrupted his day and came to my rescue, checked my trunk for a spare tire that I didn't have, secured my vehicle, and made his way back to the truck where I waited. Bowed legs and an incredibly long frame were only a few of the reasons that I was unable to tear my eyes from him until he entered the truck. His dark, licorice skin was another.

Please, Nelson, I begged, watching my phone ring again. Because I understood that ignoring the call would only add fuel to the flame burning inside of him, I slid a finger across the screen.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Why you not picking up the phone, Glacier? The fuck is wrong with you? All of a sudden, you ignoring calls and shit. When did you start this shit?"

"The moment I discovered my man was sleeping with my best friend among other things. That's when, Nelson. Any more questions before I hang up?" I sighed, refusing to raise my voice even a notch or get my panties in a bunch.

"It wasn't like that. I told you that shit. And stop listening to motherfuckers who mean you no good and are miserable as fuck, wanting you to be miserable with they bitch ass."

"I'm hanging up now," I warned.

"Wait! Wait."

With a roll of my eyes, I waited to hear what foolishness was about to come from his lips now.

"What about the baby, Glacier?"

His words stiffened my body. Unable to move, I breathed heavily into the phone, evidence that my heart rate, head, heart, and nerves were all abnormal.

"We're supposed to be a family, Glacier."

It was untrue. Continuing my pregnancy was never our plan. With it being the year of my graduation, the plan was for us to terminate the pregnancy and plan for a child in the future. I wanted to plant my feet and get accustomed to life as a NICU nurse before I committed to a life that I birthed

and would be responsible no matter the circumstances.

The pregnancy was a result of failed birth control. It wasn't planned. And with everything happening the way that it was, it only confirmed that I had made the right decision by following my heart.

My body grew warm as my face tingled with disappointment. Nelson using the pregnancy as an avenue back into my world was as low as he could've scooped. However, my decision was firm and there was no changing it. More than ever, I wanted the termination.

"There's nothing more to discuss. I hope that you'll keep your word and provide the money for the termination of the pregnancy as we talked about before."

"I'm not paying for you to kill my fucking child."

His antics annoyed me, however, ending the call wasn't the smartest decision. Without a doubt, I still needed the funds. Shelling out five hundred dollars that I didn't have to give would deepen my debt and elevate my stress levels.

"Don't do this, Nelson. We discussed this."

"You discussed this with yourself. I was never with this shit from the start."

Hot tears stained my face, smearing my perfectly applied makeup. Though light, it was so pretty. Nelson's unbelievable claims had no business ruining it.

"I'm more than sure Valencia is willing to have your child. Me, on the other hand, I can't give you that much access to me, anymore. Neither can I. It doesn't even matter. I need the money and you said that you'd co—"

A gush of wind brushed against my cheek just as my phone was removed from my possession. With unsteady brows and lips that crinkled, I turned toward the man in the driver's seat, witnessing him end the call.

"I don't think your mother would approve of you begging a nigga for a couple hunnid dollars when there are a hunnid ways to get that money."

"She's dead!" I belted, pulling open the glove compartment to find something to clean my face.

A black handgun fell from the glove compartment onto the floor in front of me. With both hands in the air, I pressed my back against the seat, closing my eyes and waiting to hear the loud bang before my lights went out. A titter pulled me back into reality as I peeked through one eyelid. Realizing I was still alive, I opened my eyes completely, patting my chest and abdomen.

“You good, Mommas. Here, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“Thanks.” I accepted the tissue as he dropped my phone in my lap.

“And stay out my shit.”

“Maybe you should lock it,” I suggested, dabbing the tears from my face.

“So that I can struggle when it’s time to use it? Nah. I’m good.”

Locking eyes with the identical weapon resting on his lap with his hand clutching the handle, I wondered if I was the only one in the truck who’d noticed it.

“That’s backup.”

Finding humor in his revelation, my eyes widened.

“Oh.”

“Now, use one of the napkins in here to grab it and put it back where you found it.”

Stunned by his instructions, I shook my head in protest. “I can’t do that.”

“Figured.” He chuckled, slamming the armrest down.

Gazing into the distance, I began to recognize the route we were taking, but still didn’t know where we were headed. The MAPs application revealed his shop was only a mile away, but we’d been traveling for some time now.

“Where are we headed?”

“To the one place they hold graduations for folk your age.”

“My age?”

“Yeah. You got somewhere else you need to be or something?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Good, then sit back and be quiet.”

“Thank you,” I responded instead of getting all in my chest about his remark. I’d learned very quickly that he meant little harm and was simply one who didn’t hold his tongue.

“Umm hmm.” He shrugged.

“I don’t have any money to have my car towed,” I blurted.

“Good thing I ain’t ask if you did, then, huh?” he scoffed, hiking up the music on his stereo to silence me.

Melting against the seat, I pushed the hundreds of words I wanted to share down my throat. The vomiting of my vocabulary felt much more productive than the silence he’d confined me to, but I settled, regardless. It was my nerves that wanted to lower the levees and allow my mouth to flood, nothing more or less. Somehow, he understood that.

Okay. I’ll shut up, I thought, folding the napkin in my hand far too many

times.

Because, when a man that fine is willing to help a stranger tells you to, you just do, I reasoned, admitting that his perfectly sculpted face was partially the reason I swallowed my words and chose to retire my vocal cords momentarily.

His side profile was striking. The hole in his nose that allowed the jewelry to hook through his nose and rest in his right nostril was the final blow. With curiosity soaring through my veins, I tried reasoning with God's intention when creating such a hunk of perfection.

The sliding of the gun beneath me quickly rescued me from the daze I'd fallen victim to. Slowly, I pulled my feet up onto the seat, slanting them so that I wouldn't ruin my dress. His sudden movements demanded my attention.

Briefly, our eyes connected. The lingering gaze piqued my anxiety. I gnawed on my bottom lip and slouched in the seat, unsure if the truck was near crashing or if I needed a crash cart because my heart was failing me.

"It can't shoot itself. It needs five pounds of pressure. Four in some cases."

"Hmm?" My chest swelled as I asked.

"You're not dying before you make it to your graduation," he said to me. Though he wasn't yelling, I could still hear him over the loud music.

Or, maybe I hadn't. Maybe it was my addiction to his dark lips and white teeth that helped me understand every word that fell from them. Their wetness was damning. And watching him continue to lick them over and over was incredibly satisfying.

Nervously, I giggled with a nod, eyes dropping and following the piece that moved with each turn, stop, or acceleration. When they made it back to his face, he'd already turned away. Lightly, I sighed, closing my eyes briefly to catch my breath.

My morning was full of unexpected, catastrophic events that I was ready to put behind me. Within a matter of hours, my world had been flipped upside down. The blissful life I was living just yesterday was now a personal hell. Regardless, I was determined to show up for myself again. I'd worked too hard and made too many sacrifices over the last four years to sit at home, moping about another human's decision.

I found myself lost in the darkness. It's where I felt safe for the moment. After a tumultuous night and discovering how its aftermath would affect the

rest of my life, I needed a second to process everything. And for the life of me, I didn't understand why I felt so deserving of it in the presence of a stranger. However, having him at my side felt like a sign from the Man upstairs that He'd always come for me, no matter the situation or circumstances.

When I managed to pull my lids apart, the wheels were coming to a halt in front of the large sign that revealed our location. We'd made it, safely and in one whole piece. Gathering myself, I managed to make it out of the truck. As quickly as I made it to the back, so had he. His aroma forced my nostrils apart as they widened with pleasure.

The sleeves that were missing from his top left little to the imagination. Veins sprouted from his arms, sending my mind into a realm that I didn't visit often for strangers. However, this one made it quite difficult. In fact, it was impossible.

"Here."

Handing me my things, he stepped off to the side as if he was suddenly in a rush.

"Thank you so much."

Finally, I spoke again. Remembering I had a voice was easier than I'd imagined after the long ride in silence.

"How long this shit lasts?" he asked, leaning down in the passenger's seat to place the gun that had fallen back into the glove compartment.

Peering toward the stadium's entry, I shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe three hours or something close to it."

"So, too fucking long, huh?"

Nodding, I responded, "Basically. But again, thank you."

"No problem. I don't have to remind you to call the shop about ya ride, because I'm certain you will."

"I will."

"Bet. And congratulations."

"Thanks."

With a smile that reached my eyes, I strutted toward the entry where I took the steps one at a time. Yet and still, I felt my body lunging forward. In an effort to maintain my balance, I grabbed the rail beside me.

Woah. Please don't bust your face, Glacier.

My ankle buckled and I swore I'd torn something inside of it. I was able to get myself upright swiftly, but the damage had been done. Refusing to let

him see me sweat any more than he already had, I bit down on my bottom lip, drawing blood, yet concealing the shooting pain in my foot.

So much for seduction and not busting my face in front of this man.

My entire body warmed. My cheeks reddened. I didn't need a mirror to notice the change in my color. The embarrassment was evidence enough.

"Get yaself some bigger shoes, Mommas." He chuckled, yelling across the parking lot.

Oh, God. He's unhinged.

Without looking back, I listened as his door closed and he sped through the parking lot with his music blasting. I released the breath I'd been holding as I stepped inside the stadium. Quickly, I placed a hand against the wall and lifted my left foot, making sure I hadn't done any damage. I didn't need a sprained ankle affecting my ability to walk across the stage.

He's right, I summed. Maybe my feet have outgrown these shoes after all.

I immediately pictured the red-soled shoes I'd traded for these. Surprisingly, I felt little to nothing as I lowered my foot and continued toward the meeting spot for the graduates. I didn't mind wearing my old shoes if it meant forging a new, brighter path that didn't remind me of the man who had forced me to embark on this journey so soon and without warning.

Makai + Glacier

WITH ROSEBERRY as my last name, it felt as if centuries had passed before my name was close to being called. With my hands tapping against my thighs, I waited at the edge of my seat as my classmates and their accolades were displayed on the large screens for the entire stadium could see. Roars followed each government name, family and friends celebrating their loved ones and the hard work they'd done over the last few years.

Maybe I should've at least called Brittney. Thoughts rang out as I smoothed my gown for the hundredth time to clear my palms of perspiration.

The two-and-a-half hour drive that my mother's cousin's daughter would've had to make felt like far too much to request of someone I'd only seen at family reunions and my parents' funeral. However, the dreadful silence that would linger until the name after mine was called had me

regretting not making the call.

It was so last minute, I reasoned. I'd been thrown a curveball that I never expected in the wee hours. The two people I wanted shouting to the top of their lungs as I accepted my degree, the two people that I'd give the entire world to had both betrayed me. So, silence, I'd have to accept.

Straightening my back and lifting my chest, I chose to unalive the negative thoughts that began surfacing. There was no time for pity. There was no time for pain. In the comfort of my home, when the day was done and reality hit, I'd allow my feelings to bloom. But for the moment, I tucked them away.

"Glacier Roseberry. Bachel—"

My cheeks reddened as my face flushed with heat. Standing on my feet, I trekked toward the stage.

Don't fall. Don't fall. Don't fa—

A loud bullhorn sounded. The fact that they were prohibited left me wondering how one had made it inside and who it had been meant for. I continued my journey toward the stage, stopping momentarily to peer into the large crowd in search of the source. My vision failed me, prompting me to keep pushing. I obliged, knowing that it would be impossible to pinpoint anyone in the sea of people.

Nelson. My heart grew weary as I silently prayed that his presence was no longer a concern by the end of the event. With his lack of patience, it was almost impossible for him to sit through a full graduation and that brought me comfort.

Whistling followed, penetrating the silence while stirring other attendees of the function. Soon enough, hands joined in unison to celebrate a stranger. Nervously, I approached the center of the stage.

Hand in hand, I posed for the professional photographer as I accepted my degree from the Mayor of the city. Right beside him was the dean and a few other people who made my years in nursing school a bit more bearable. The whistling and applauses continued until the next name was called. Thankful that silence hadn't depreciated the valuable moment, I descended the steps with a smile on my face and trembling fingers.

You did it, baby, my mother's voice sounded in the distance.

My girl, the sky is the limit, my father's voice trailed.

With fresh, hot tears gliding down my cheeks, I strutted toward my seat. It wasn't until my gown pressed against the plastic that I felt a burden larger

than I'd realized lift from my shoulders.

I did it, I told myself. I did it.

With quivering limbs, I unlocked my cell and lifted it high while tapping the camera icon. When my face was in clear view, I snapped several pictures, showcasing my new credential. My proudest moment wouldn't go undocumented. It didn't matter that there were cameras snapping around us. I wanted—*needed*—my own proof of pure elation during the storm I was facing.

Again and again, a classmate's name was called. My cheeks peaked each time they accepted their degree and continued across the stage. In a room full of strangers, I was inspired and motivated to keep pushing regardless of the circumstances. Momentarily, I regretted not making friends with the women and men who shared the same classrooms with me. The three women I'd gotten close to had all decided that the work required to finish nursing school was far too much to pair with the hardships of life and cut their losses early.

Tassels pierced the air before falling to the opposite side. In unity, we declared ourselves graduates. Chants erupted as everyone stood and made their way toward their loved ones. The pain in my chest as I witnessed the urgency in everyone's stride, was a reminder that no one was waiting for me.

No one was anxious to wrap their arms around me and tell me how proud they were of me. No one standing on the tips of their toes trying to spot me out of the crowd. No one was perched at the promised meeting spot, anticipating the moment I turned the corner. There was no one. Not even Nelson.

I searched the sea of people that had crowded in the lobby, ready to march in the opposite direction. However, there was no use in preparation because he was nowhere to be found. Closing my eyes, I quietly thanked whoever had felt the pain of losing my parents and support system. Their cheering meant so much more than the naked eye was able to capture.

It wasn't until the wind swiped across my face, freeing a new set of tears that I realized there wasn't a car in the parking lot that belonged to me. The weight of my world rested on my shoulders as I lowered my eyes to the cheap black pumps with promises of bruising and swelling by the time I made it to the end of the parking lot.

I swiped the tears from my face before unlocking my screen. In the MAPS application, I searched for the nearest bus or train stop. The closest would suffice. With the negative balance in my account, I was counting on

the few dollar bills in my purse to get me where I needed to be. A Carriage wasn't even an option for me at the moment, though it was the quickest and ideal source of transportation at the moment.

Just as my eyes began to water again, I exited the MAPS application. Discovering the train stop was a mile and a half in the opposite direction and a bus stop was the same distance in the opposite direction was gutting. Desperation crept through me. The incredibly handsome, overly rude tire shop guy crossed my mind and stayed put. In no rush to leave, the thoughts had me toying with the idea of calling him.

Maybe my car is ready now, I reasoned.

It's been hours. Sighing, I twisted my body from left to right, trying to find comfort through the discomfort.

Maybe he can bring it... or take me to it.

With those two solutions in mind, neither sounding better than walking over a mile in heels, I placed the call from my call log. Silently, I cringed at the fact that I'd called so many times on the same day. Nevertheless, I waited on the phone as the line began to ring, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

Once.

Twice.

Three times, it rang before I tucked in my bottom lip, tasting the strawberry gloss that was left.

Four.

Five times it rang and then rolled over to voicemail.

Defeated, I ended the call and pushed my phone into the side pocket of my purse for easy access. I refused the blisters that would accompany me if I walked in the heels I wore. Instead, I rummaged through my purse for the extra pair of socks that I was certain were inside. I'd been meaning to remove them since Nelson and I had gone bowling. However, I was extremely happy I hadn't gone through with it.

Instead of starting my journey immediately, I spared myself the shame by waiting until the parking lot was partially cleared and the sun began to settle before taking off toward the end of the parking lot with my heels dangling on my index and middle fingers. I placed my phone up to my ear and pretended to be knee deep in a conversation as I strolled, hoping no one felt pity, and stopped to talk to me. At the moment, I had no words.

The vibration against my face as I reached the edge of the parking lot

startled me. I lowered the phone as I changed direction, taking a right to continue my journey. The unknown, yet very familiar, number that appeared sent chills down my spine. My heart began to hurt as my eyes started to burn with tears.

Not again, I begged them.

Being strong while your world was crashing down all around you was easier said than done. I couldn't manage to keep it together for more than a few hours at a time. Though I didn't want to answer the phone in the state I was in, the pain in my chest wouldn't allow me to let it ring out.

"Hello?"

"You flodgin' on that phone for what?" His voice was smooth and somehow reassuring.

Swiping my face with the back of my hand I shrugged. "So no one will—wait."

It dawned on me. If he knew I was pretending on my cell, it meant he was near.

"Where are you?"

"Behind you. Turn around and dry your fucking face, Mommas."

Doing as I was told, I turned to find the truck that had rescued me hours prior, rescuing me again.

"Did you drive all the way back up here to pick me up?" I asked, needing to know the truth, needing to feel like someone cared enough. Even if it was a stranger.

"I never left," he admitted. "Come get in the truck. Rest your bones."

The line went dead. Though I'd been given instructions, somehow, my brain wasn't aligning with the rest of my body. I couldn't move. I was stuck in place, wondering where this man had come from and why he was as thoughtful as he was.

Maybe his mother would be proud of him, I concluded, realizing she'd raised a decent man.

"You gon' get in this motherfucker or what?"

This time, he didn't feel so far. I could smell the mixture of cologne on his skin and the mintiness on his tongue. Fine hairs on the nape of my neck and the center of my back stood. The shoes that dangled from my fingers slid off with ease. Then, there were his footsteps, putting distance between us, again, increasing my heart rate at the same time.

Standing beside the door with it wide open, he welcomed me into his

personal space once more. Still, I couldn't move. I knew that I would and I desperately wanted to but the weight of my world wouldn't allow it. For what felt like the hundredth time, I swiped the tears from my eyes.

"Come 'er," he commanded, yet contradicted himself by coming closer to me.

I was paralyzed. Immobile. Unable to move.

His arms spread wide, spanning for miles it seemed, before his chest brushed against my cheek. They surrounded me quickly after, those long, never-ending arms of his. I unraveled inside the perimeter he'd created, clinging to his shirt as if it were my only chance of survival in the midst of a tsunami.

Body to body, we stood at the edge of the parking lot, neither in a hurry to part. Because I understood my burdens weren't his to carry or hold for even a little while, I released myself from his grasp. It was possibly the hardest thing I'd done all day. I could feel my heart shattering in my chest as I did so. Though he was a stranger, I knew he had the ability to take the pain away—*momentarily*.

"Where ya people at, Mommas?" he asked as I stepped back, drying my eyes.

"I lost my parents in a car crash. My grandmother suffers from dementia. None of the family lived here other than us. Everyone else lives in Clarke and Roosevelt. A few in Channing."

As the words left my mouth, I made my way to the truck. The door that he'd opened, I climbed through and sat in the passenger seat, resting my head against the softness behind me. I wasn't sure how long it would last, but somehow, relief soothed the pain of it all for the first time today.

"You ate today?" he inquired, leaning into the vehicle.

His body stretched across mine, leaving me buried beneath him while he grabbed the seatbelt and pulled it downward. Once it locked in place, he stood off to the side with the frame of the door supporting his arm.

"No. Not really, but my eyes are swollen and my head is aching. Maybe something simple will suffice. I'm craving my bed more than anything right now."

Solitude was the solution to every issue I'd faced since the death of my parents.

"Bet. I'll feed you and then get you home."

He closed the door behind me and made his way around to the driver's

side. The smell of freshly burned marijuana stuffed my nose, but it didn't quite conceal the softer smell of live greenery. In search of the source, I turned to find the backseat filled with bouquets of red roses.

Upon recognizing the gesture and coming to the realization that it wasn't in my favor, I faced the windshield with promises to mind my own business. *Lucky girl*. The thought rushed through my head while a sigh was released from my mouth. The relief I felt seconds prior was ripped from me as sadness set in.

"They're yours," he informed me.

"What's your name?" I asked, feeling as if I needed to know a bit more about the man who had been in charge of damage control for the last four and a half hours of my life.

"Makai."

"Thank you, Makai. They're beautiful."

"Don't sweat it."

"Where'd you get them? There are so many."

"The nigga selling them in the lobby. I bought everything he had off 'em."

"Everything?"

"Every one of them bouquets, plus the ones his partna had on him."

"Filling the entire backseat?"

"Ain't that the shit y'all read about and want to happen to you one day?"

Chuckling, I nodded. "It is. From a spouse."

"Spouse, stranger, same fucking difference." He shrugged.

Brushing invisible strands of hair out of my face, I nodded.

"Maybe you have a point there."

"You ain't have to tell me that. Now, let my strange ass get you some food. I hear ya stomach growling and sh—"

I leaned forward and hiked the volume on the stereo, drowning out the last of his statement. Embarrassment left me with flushed cheeks and crinkled brows. This man was seeing me at my absolute worst.

There was no way I'd ever recover if I got the chance to see him again. That was why I was hoping I didn't. At least until I was back on my feet and could offer him something other than a bucket of tears and the shameful smile plastered on my face.

With a shake of his head, he matched my energy. Chuckling, exposing those beautiful teeth with gold enhancements across a few. His complexion

was breathtaking. He was infused with more melanin than the average person. Black like licorice, he made the gold jewelry that rested against his skin glisten without effort.

My God, he's beautiful, I concluded, unable to take my eyes off him for more than a few seconds at a time. He paid me no mind, busy rapping to the lyrics of the song playing on the stereo. Dramatically, he moved his arms and hands, patting his chest and the steering wheel every once in a while.

Noticing my constant glaring, he turned toward me, the dimple in his right cheek on full display. The theatrics increased slightly as his eyes danced between me and the road. Finally, the song ended and the volume of the stereo decreased.

“You got a fucking eye problem, Mommas?”

He didn't bite his tongue. That had been established throughout our time together. Adjusting to the pressure I was now under, I maneuvered in my seat. Upon realizing I had no response to the question he'd posed, he jacked the volume on the stereo up and continued his solo performance.

It wasn't long before we were pulling into the driveway of a home that didn't quite fit the description of those in the same neighborhood, not even of those next to it. The renovations were apparent. The home was now the size of two or three homes on the same street and resembled a result of gentrification after a Black neighborhood was discovered by white investors and developers.

The dark men that stood near the porch, all resembling the one I was sitting beside, dismantled that reality. The home was indeed owned by people with skin that was the most beautiful under the sun's glow.

Without as much as an explanation, my knight in shining gold teeth was out of the truck before the wheels could come to a complete stop. Slowly, he crept up the driveway that was littered with luxury. One after the other, he slapped hands with every man standing around, finally shoving the slimmer one toward the grass.

Worry lines creased my forehead as I watched them both adjust their bottoms and lift their fists. In an attempt to mind my business and avoid second-hand embarrassment, I reclined the seat until the pain in my back subsided. Like a newborn, unaware that they were out of the womb, I curled into a ball. With my knees pressed against my breast and my arms wrapped around my legs, I rested my eyes and head.

A yawn ripped through my lip, widening my mouth and confirming the

exhaustion I'd been evading over the last few hours. Hadn't my comfort been snatched from underneath me, forcing me to feign for myself throughout the day, then I'd blame the exhaustion I felt on the nugget in my belly that I refused to acknowledge. But truthfully, I knew the pregnancy wasn't to blame. I'd been gutted, mentally, physically, and emotionally.

"Ahhhhhhhhh." I yawned a second time.

Makai + Glacier

SHUFFLING in the distance stirred me from my slumber. Warm, wetness slid down the back of my numb hand, down my wrist. Confusion toyed with my alertness. Pulling myself together felt impossible as the light from the ceiling shined down on my face, blinding me temporarily.

What is happening? Where am I?

Familiarity was foreign at the moment. Disoriented, I closed my eyes to begin collecting my thoughts. The loud, obnoxious roaring of my stomach quickly reminded me that I was promised food and had yet to receive any. As my vision began to clear with the reopening of my eyes, I noticed the silver foil on the seat next to me.

"Makai?" Slowly, I turned toward the back where the noise was coming from.

"What's up with yo' slobbin' ass?"

"Are you always this... in-insufferable?"

Groaning, I rubbed the back of my hand on my dress. My cheeks flushed red from shame. I used my right hand to let the seat up, bringing myself back to life almost immediately. Darkness surrounded us completely, leaving me to wonder how long we'd be in the same spot.

"How long have we been here?"

"Long enough for you to get a nap in. You looked tired as shit and I didn't want to fuck with you, so I hung out until these niggas were ready to cut out."

"Did someone cook dinner?"

The contents under the foil smelled divine.

"Yeah. My pops. We have dinner at his crib every final Friday of the month."

“I’m sorry. Did I make you miss dinner?” Regretfully, I grabbed the back of my neck and pulled forward.

Finally done fiddling through the darkness, his eyes found mine. Pausing, he gathered his words before responding. Thankful that he was easing whatever blow he was about to land I waited, patiently.

“You ain’t make me miss shit. I’m good. I’ll sit down with them next month.”

Unable to muster a response, I let the silence settle the moment. Thoughts ran wild in my head, stemming from the start of my day to the call I’d made to the man who rounded the truck and sat in the driver’s seat.

Makai.

It was suiting. Unique, just like his coal-colored skin and single dimpled cheek. Unique, just like his aura. Since the moment he entered my space, I’d been blanketed with comfort. Though a stranger, he felt safe.

“Here,” he said, handing me the plate he’d picked up from the seat before sitting.

Saliva pooled in my mouth as I accepted it.

“Address?”

“1298 Asher Unit 2104.”

Soundlessly, he hiked the volume on the stereo. The selection of sounds had changed. SZA’s voice poured through the speakers, soothing my head and heart, simultaneously. Though my seat was upright, I still managed to find comfort, closing my eyes while enjoying the sultriness of the tune.

My face softened as the tension drained from every feature my Heavenly Father had blessed me with. Deep, cleansing breaths inflated and deflated my chest one after the other. With my palm pressed against the side of my thigh, I leaned into the contentment that discovered me. It didn’t matter if it was only for a little while. I had every intention of embracing it, enjoying it while it was around.

H.E.R. followed SZA’s voice.

Then there was Cleo Sol.

Then there was Summer.

Then there was Tink.

Then there was more SZA.

My chest caved for the hundredth time by the end of our journey. As the truck came to a complete stop, I noticed the only light shining in the vehicle was from the dash. He hadn’t typed a single digit or letter in the navigation

system of his ride or on his phone. His sense of direction was impeccable. I wasn't sure where we were twenty minutes ago and if I was asked to find my way back, I wouldn't be able to.

As the gear shifted and the truck came to a complete stop, I winced. Our time had ended. The day was done. It was time to face the music, time to face the mirror. Enthusiasm was absent in my movements as I lifted from my seat and reached for the handle of the door. As quickly as I leaned forward, so did he. His large, authoritative hand apprehended mine, stopping me in my tracks.

Settling in my seat, again, I gave him my undivided attention. He shoved the same hand in his pocket and retrieved a large knot of money. Watchful, I waited as he counted off a few hundred and pushed them toward me. Unsure of their purpose, I began to question the reasoning behind his generous offer. Before the words surfaced, he was sharing a few of his own.

“Handle that little situation,” he demanded, tilting his chin toward my stomach. “Buy you something nice with the rest.”

“You really did—”

“Save that shit, Mommas. Handle your business and don't fix your lips to beg a fuck nigga again.”

“I-I... Thank you.”

“I'll have your whip back to you within a week. It's a bunch of shit that needs to be fixed on that motherfucker.”

“I haven't driven it in two years. I had another car, but once we broke up, my e—”

“I don't give a fuck what that nigga did when y'all broke up, Mommas.”

“Understood,” I whispered. “Thank you, again.”

“Don't forget to get yourself something.”

“I can't think of anything better than paid rent,” I explained, finding humor in my crisis.

The weight of the small wad I was holding confirmed it was enough to pay a month or two of rent. That would be enough to secure the rest of my lease with the checks I'd be receiving from the job I'd claimed at the hospital already. I was simply waiting for an official notice.

My exit was interrupted again as he handed over the rest of the wad he'd pulled from his pocket. Puzzled, I paused. His generosity caused a tightness in my chest that subsided the second I witnessed the dimple appear on his right cheek as a shrug rolled off his shoulders.

“When I said buy yourself something nice, I meant that. Don’t disobey me, Mommas. I hate that shit. If you need your rent paid, use that one.”

He pointed to the stack he’d just given me.

“Wh—”

“And don’t question me. I hate that shit, too.”

“Makai... I can’t take this.”

“You don’t have another choice.”

“Is this all you have?”

“Mommas, don’t insult me.” He chuckled, squeezing every ounce of juice from my box.

“I-I mean... right now?”

“In cash? Yeah.” He nodded.

I peeled off two of the hundreds from the second stack and placed them on his lap.

“I can’t leave you with nothing,” I explained.

“Respect.”

He watched as I exited the truck, waiting for him to stop me again. This time, I wouldn’t bother unlocking my door and dragging my feet into my own misery. I’d gladly ride out in the night with him, no matter where we were headed. Unfortunately, his back rested on the seat as he watched me until I was out of the truck completely.

With heavy feet, I walked the short distance to my apartment, wishing my evening wasn’t ending. I wasn’t sure how, but I conjured the strength to stuff my key in the door instead of turning around and inviting the stranger I’d grown fond of inside my home.

Just keep going, I encouraged. You have a long road of healing ahead of you, Glacier. It starts now. Maturity led me inside where I shut the door behind me, pushing my back up against it so that I wasn’t tempted to open it and summon the man downstairs up to continue suffocating the pain that felt so real suddenly.

That’s unfair, I noted. Let him go.

Drawing my limbs as close to my body as possible, I soothed the achiness as best I could. The void that quickly formed could easily be filled with a single invitation. However, my heart wouldn’t allow me to cut corners or involve a completely innocent heart in my turmoil.

He’d seen enough of the broken me. He’d done enough for the damaged me. The best thing I could do for us both was allow him to leave and go on

with his life while I began picking up the pieces of mine.

My cell buzzed in my hand. My initial thought was to silence it, knowing that Nelson was still trying to contact me, but the possibility of it being the man who hadn't gotten very far prompted me to answer without even checking the screen.

“Hello?”

“Enjoy your freedom, Mommas. You won't be free for long.”

The line disconnected after the second sentence, leaving me with unresolved emotions. Furrowed brows led to a satisfied smile. Placing the phone against my chest, I laid my head against my door.

Mommas.

NOTE.

Between the covers of this book is **my** art piece —beautifully paired words structured for **my** creative satisfaction and later consumed by others for enjoyment.

This is just a book to most. **It's art for me.**
My art. I've had *my* time. Have **yours.**

happy reading

BERKELEY BRED

Makai

GREYHUFFINGTON

ONE

Three months later

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

PULLING from the blunt in my hand a final time, I passed it to Trent. Relieving my lungs, I pushed out the heavy cloud of smoke I'd inhaled, careful not to choke.

"The realtor needs to talk some sense into them motherfuckers."

"Or, I could," I offered.

"I'm not trying to strong-arm them out of their building, homie. Chill."

"Nigga, you want the spot or not?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then stop acting like a hoe. It doesn't matter how they get out of that bitch as long as they come out of it. It's time to expand. Fuck the bullshit."

"True. True. I guess we could stop by if they ain't hearing the latest offer."

“Pull down on ’em and they won’t have shit but what we offer them at that moment. With a Glock in their face, they’ll give you a hell of a discount.”

“Makai, you pushing it, nigga.”

“Nah, I’m ready for you to stop bitching and handle your business.”

“Trying to do shit the legit way.”

“Where is that getting you, homie?”

“I’m with you when you’re right.”

As he put the blunt to his mouth again, a phone began to ring. Because it was right beside me, I assumed it was mine. However, the red hearts gathered on the screen deterred my plans to answer. Trent picked up the phone between us, instead. The smile that tugged at his lips caused my top lip to rise slightly.

“This nigga in love like a motherfucker,” I hissed. “Showing all ya fucking teeth. Put them big shits up.”

“You ain’t never been a hating ass nigga. What’s up with you?” he asked, answering the call.

Saving my comments, I lowered the volume on the stereo so that he could hear his lady.

“What’s good, baby?”

His entire demeanor switched up. I watched as his hardened exterior softened.

Pussy ass, I joked inwardly.

Accepting the blunt he offered, I kept busy as the short conversation continued. Within a minute, it was ending and the music was up again.

“Take me to my whip. I’m calling it a night. Got to stop by the store and get Ava a few of her favorites.”

Nodding, I pressed the gas, disagreeing with the red light that demanded I stay put. Burning the rubber of my tires, I made the illegal U-turn and pulled up to the gas station.

“This nigga here,” Trent sighed. “If I don’t make it home to my girl, she’s going to be pissed. Stop all that dumb-ass driving.”

Disregarding his offensive comments toward my driving, I hopped out of the car the second the wheels stopped rolling and it was parked. Deading the engine didn’t cross my mind because I dared a motherfucker to even step too close to my shit and I was airing their shit out.

Without haste, I strolled down every aisle, loading my arm with whatever

snacks my current appetite found appealing. I puffed on the blunt that I'd brought inside with me, blowing the smoke into the air, imagining how I was about to smash everything in my hand.

"Sir, no sm—"

"Ahmad, don't act like you ain't see me come in this bitch."

"Makai, my guy. What's up?"

"I'm not ya guy, my nigga. I told you, get you some fucking drip with all this money you making in this bitch and then I'll consider it. Get rid of them bifocals and get you some 20/20 vision. Stop wearing them boring ass khakis—matter of fact, forget it. Ain't no hope for ya, dog."

"Man, you know I got swag. Stop trying to play me."

"Nah, in fact, you don't. Niggas with it ain't got to announce it. That's rule number one. Rule number two, stop getting ya fucking shoes so big before you trip over 'em."

"You know what they say about big fee—"

"Don't ever say that shit to another man. Make that rule number three." Scoffing with a shake of my head, I started for the door.

"Aye, man. You going to pay for that?"

"Rule number four, stop checking my pockets. Consider this payment for the game I just gave you."

By the time Trent made his way back to the whip, I was working on opening the Jolly Rancher wrappers. When he slid in, I scooted my stockpile over to give him room.

"Really, nigga?"

Shrugging, I reversed out of the parking lot, bobbing my head to the beat that 21 Savage was spitting on. I gripped the wheel, popping a piece of candy into my mouth. With my brain buzzing with thoughts, I zoned out and increased my speed to get Trent to his destination.

"Aye," Trent interrupted after a few minutes.

"What, nigga?"

"You good? You quiet as shit over there."

"Yeah. I'm good. Just high as fuck right now."

"Is that why you went on a shopping spree in the store back there?" He laughed.

"That and this long ass flight."

"Flight? You headed out?"

"Yeah."

“Since when, nigga?”

“Since about fifteen minutes ago.”

“With ya people?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? Is that all you can say?”

Tossing my head back in laughter, I shrugged. “I told you I’m high. Fuck you want to hold hands and have a conversation for right now?”

“I don’t. Just trying to see what’s going on in that big ass head of yours. You be shutting down suddenly and shit. I’m trying to make sure you’re good.”

I appreciated Trent. The nigga kept my head above water many days. However, this wasn’t one of those days.

“I’m good. I promise, dog.”

“All right. You better be.”

“You check on me, then threaten me? Trent, I’ll shoot the shit out of you, then drop your ass off at the hospital.”

“Damn, you not gon’ stay?”

“Nah. I hate seeing niggas in them little gowns with they ass out. Shit trifling.”

“Nigga, is that all you think about when niggas in there hurting?”

“Yeah. That’s why you won’t catch me visiting niggas in the hospital.”

“They should’ve never let you leave the building as a baby. You have some missing screws.”

“Get out of my shit,” I instructed as I pulled up beside his car.

“Let me know when you touch down.”

“Bet.”

As I peeled out of the parking lot of Trent’s shop, I placed a call to Malachi. He answered on the second ring.

“Yeah?” he barked into the phone. Besides Mercer, he was the grumpiest nigga God had ever created.

“I’m coming.”

“I don’t understand. What are you saying?” He fought to hear me. There was chatter in the background that quieted after he asked the question.

“I’m coming to the island. I’m joining you niggas on the trip.”

“Oh yeah? Good. Wheels up at eleven. Be ready. Meet us on the tarmac, nigga.”

The call ended, leaving me alone with my thoughts again. A million

thoughts scattered in my brain, a few leading the ship and sending shockwaves straight to my chest where my lifeless heart rested. Moments like so, I was reminded that I had one. It laid dormant for so many years at a time that it wasn't the easiest organ to awaken.

I rubbed the left side, warming it slightly while continuing toward my crib. Using the text-to-speech feature, I left instructions with Pops to shut the shop down at six every day until I returned. While away, he and Mercer would make sure that shit ran smoothly. Though neither of them was part of the day-to-day operations, they understood the ins and outs.

As the city's lights cascaded down on me, I fired up another blunt. The fire on the end of the blunt was the pathway to my contentment. *Feelings*. Them motherfuckers belonged in the trash and not in my chest. I peaked the sound on my stereo, hoping to drown them out. My efforts were in vain.

Thirty-five minutes later, the gates of my home welcomed me with openness. Engulfed in comfort, I entered and rode the length of my driveway while settling my rampant thoughts. A checklist of things that needed to happen within the next hour replaced most of them. Malachi and his promptness would spare not even a minute. If I wasn't on the tarmac at eleven, the wheels would be up without me and I'd be forced to find the nearest missile to shoot the fucking plane out of the air.

The fence that bordered the left side of my house rattled, loudly and nonstop. Two large, well-fed Cane Corsos sent obvious warnings before their thunderous barking began. Proud of my boys, I stepped out of my whip and whistled, demanding they settled while simultaneously confirming it was me who'd arrived. Immediately, they opted for silence.

With a few taps of the keypad, I gained access to my home. Darkness surrounded me. From the black decor to the scarcity of light, I was most comfortable. My home, being an utter reflection of who I am, resembled me in more ways than one understood. From the most shallow parts of me to the deepest, there was darkness. It coated me on a daily. It was my safe space. My haven.

My first stop was the kitchen that led to the kennels where my dogs rested daily. Midnight and Ghost were barely a year old and had outgrown their first kennels, forcing me to build ones that would last them throughout the remainder of their lives. I grabbed the two bowls of food I'd prepared before leaving earlier, carrying them toward the kennels where my boys were waiting.

I sat each bowl down before stepping back, watching for either of them to break their stances. Like the good boys they were, neither budged until they heard the command.

“Eat.”

I headed back inside, leaving their door unlocked so they had the freedom to roam inside or out. Because they were trained like soldiers preparing for war, I wasn't worried about them damaging furniture or making a mess of my home. Behavior wasn't an issue of theirs.

I tossed another piece of candy in my mouth as I took the stairs. My socks pressed against the hard floor with each step I took. When I finally made it to my bedroom, I fought the urge to climb inside my custom king and get the rest my body was begging for. Hunger pains echoed in the quietness, warning me that the snacks I'd been smashing weren't satisfying enough.

As if they were built on top of an AC unit, the marble floors of my bathroom cooled the bottom of my feet. I could feel the breeze through my socks. Mentally, I noted the desire for a heating system installation underneath the flooring to combat the coolness during the winter and fall months.

My reflection reserved my attention momentarily upon passing the enormous mirror that sat right above the Jack-and-Jill-styled sinks. Stopping in my tracks, I brushed my palm against the sea of waves that sat atop my head. My barber wasn't bullshitting this week.

I removed the gold necklaces that rested against my chest, followed by the two bracelets and watch on the opposite wrist. Free of my jewelry, I shed my clothes next. Ass naked, I stepped into the shower where the water began automatically. Heated drops warmed my skin, forcing the memory of icy floors to evade my thoughts.

I planted both hands against the shower wall as I leaned forward. Water beads fell, massaging my back before rolling off and onto the shower floor. Weighted shoulders sagged as my father's face appeared behind my lowered eyelids. It didn't matter how many years passed, the pain was still present, still prominent.

The taste of blood on my tongue quickly rescued me from the deep end I was headed toward. With expanded nostrils and a shake of the head, I reminded myself that time was of the essence and I didn't have much to loan to repetitive thoughts and lingering pain. I grabbed a fresh towel from the dispenser at the very end of the shower, poured soap in the middle, and

scrubbed my hands together until suds spilled over the sides.

“Alexa, play some shit I like.”

Desperate to drown my father’s voice and dissolve his image, I immersed myself in the beat long before Rick Ross began to spit on the track. I scrubbed the day’s grime from my skin once and then again for anything I’d left behind. When I finally stepped out of the shower, I felt lighter—physically and mentally. Still pressing for time, I headed straight to the first level where I removed a combination of books from three of my library shelves and waited for the center of the floor to part.

As it did, I descended the spiraling case that led to my most prized possessions, including the safe that held my life’s savings. Everything I’d worked my ass off for that hadn’t been washed clean through the rim shop was behind the sleek, shiny steel.

Water cascaded down my back as I stood in front of the silver door with a towel around my waist and another dangling from my shoulder. I pressed my palm against the scanner, notifying it of my presence. From head to toe, a complete scan commenced.

“Welcome, Mr. Domino,” the system sounded off.

The locks turned, allowing me to pull the door back and expose my air-tight vault to open air. Bills surrounded me, stacked neatly from the floor to the ceiling. Moving swiftly, I grabbed a drawstring bag from the custom stash and filled the soft cotton to the brim before pulling the strings on both sides.

Within a few minutes, I was back upstairs with the fabric of my briefs brushing against my dick. I spat the remainder of the toothpaste into the sink and cleared my mouth of its residue. The minty mouthwash made my tastebuds burn as I swooshed it from one inflated cheek to the other, finally releasing it after a few seconds. Thirty felt too much like torture.

I layered my body with lotion and cologne. Black jeans and a black Balmain shirt followed. I lowered my jewelry onto my skin one piece at a time while in the full-sized mirror inside my closet. Last, I snapped my newest, diamond-encrusted gold plate onto my bottom teeth.

“Let’s get it, my nigga.” Gazing in the mirror, I demanded of myself.

The alarm blaring in the distance captured my attention. I made my way to the bed where my phone was lit and too fucking loud for my liking. Snatching it up, I was plagued with confusion, trying to figure out when I’d set an alarm and the reason.

To my surprise, my mother’s name appeared on the screen with *Born Day*

just beside it. The wind was knocked from my chest, forcing me onto the bed where I rested my frame. My head fell into my hands as a groan fell from my lips. In less than two hours, it would be my mother's birthday, and frankly, one of the worst days of the year.

There was a time that I waited up at night with my brothers just to crowd her with kisses and hugs when the clock struck twelve. But since her death, since her mental break, I hadn't found the strength to celebrate her, celebrate them. Acknowledging her day at all was a fucking struggle.

Deep in my feelings, I jolted from the bed and headed downstairs with my necessities in hand. My feet didn't stop moving until I was in the whip, waiting for the gates to close behind me. The volume of my stereo was nearly maxed out, forcing me to stay afloat and not get carried away by the wave of emotions that were threatening my well-being.

The miles required to enter the highway were full of dread. But the second I climbed the ramp and hit the newly paved lines, I stretched my shit out. I pressured my pedal until it was flush with the floor, not giving a fuck about the speed restrictions posted every few miles.

Young nigga move dat dope.

Young nigga—

Young nigga move dat dope.

Though the words didn't come through my lips, I rapped along to the song internally, bobbing my head as I cleared the route to the airstrip where I was meeting my people. Knocking a few minutes off the trip, I managed to arrive just before eleven—the scheduled takeoff.

My wheels stopped rolling when I reached the staircase. I hopped out and removed the LV duffel from the backseat. When I made it up the stairs and into the aircraft where my family was waiting, it was then that I realized the mistake I'd made.

Malachi sat beside Aeir, who was as beautiful as the day I'd met her. The love I had for her came so easily, watching her love my brother with every piece of her while simultaneously loving herself more and more each day. Her spirit was the most angelic I'd ever encountered. Her ability to calm a room, and calm a heart with little to no effort, was commendable.

Milo sat beside Forrest, who was busy with her phone. Though she was head down, handling business, the smile on her face revealed so much. She was relieved to spend time away with the man of her dreams. A break from the children and birthing babies was exactly what she needed.

Ledge sat beside Halo, who was wrapped in a blanket with her head buried in his chest. Without a doubt, I knew that it was a struggle for her to make the trip happen, but her presence was appreciated. Just like Aeir, she had an angelic nature. It was soothing. Although she was battling her thoughts nearly every second of her day, they didn't dim her subtle, yet notable glow.

Lawe sat beside Kleu, neither of them paying anyone around them any attention as he examined her nose for boogers. With upturned lips, I cleared my throat, demanding they cut that shit out. If that nigga could live in her skin, he would, and vice versa. They were pathetic, but they were solid. That shit was hard to come by.

“You wish you were one of them boogers, huh?”

“Fuck you!” Lawe spat, paying me little attention as he continued messing with Kleu's nose. “Hmm. Do this.” He instructed her to blow slightly.

“Why are you still standing, Makai?” Malachi asked.

“Because I'm not about to sit down yet. I forgot something. I just wanted to come tell y'all niggas face to face not to leave. I'll be right back.”

“You're here. What do you mean, you'll be back?” Ledge inquired.

“I got some shit to do. It'll be quick.”

“Wheels up at eleven. Either you're on or you're not, nigga,” Lawe scoffed, finally giving Kleu a break.

“Nigga, do it look like I give a fuck what you talking about?”

“Here he go with this shit,” Milo sighed.

“Leave me alone and tell Precipitation to put her phone down. We're on vacation.”

In the blink of an eye, Milo was up, down the aisle, and in my face. Ledge was the first between us.

“Let's not do this. Aight?”

“Nah. Let Milo at least pinch this bitch. He always on that bullshit.”

I turned toward Lawe, refusing to believe he was choosing sides.

“Nigga, you and—”

“Who?” Kleu stood to her feet. “Him and who? Don't play with me, Makai. Because he and I will jump you.”

“Sure the fuck will,” Lawe confirmed.

“Ya feet big like a nigga. I'm not going to even make you stand on that. You look like you can fight. Speaking of which, Kleu, how tall yo' momma?”

That shit ridiculous.”

“Fuck you, Makai,” she hissed, sitting back down in her seat.

“Who invited this nigga anyway?” Lawe looked around, trying to find out. “It’s a couple’s trip. This nigga ain’t got nobody, never had nobody, and ain’t gon’ ever have nobody.”

“I thought the same thing about you, player. Was starting to wonder if you were taking the pip—”

“Chill with that shit,” Milo warned.

“Taking what, my nigga?” Lawe encouraged me to continue.

Instead, I burst into laughter.

“I really can’t stand this nigga,” Milo groaned, turning around and heading back to his seat.

“He invited himself,” Malachi spoke, finally. “Unfortunately, he’s about to get left behind.”

“No the fuck I’m not.”

“If you’re going to be causing turmoil, then you are, Makai,” he reiterated.

“I promise I’m going to be on my best behavior,” I exaggerated.

The entire plane protested. Some with groans and others with sniggers.

“Okay, that was a lie, but still. Don’t leave me. I got to run do something really quick.”

“I’m leaving you,” Malachi stated as a matter of fact.

“Bet. Call and tell y’all kids y’all love them then ’cause ain’t nobody surviving the crash after I shoot this bitch down from the sky.”

I’d made my point and there was no need to stick around to make sure it got across. If they had the sense that God gave them, then I knew the plane would still be on the ground when I returned. I left my bag at the top of the steps to assure them all I’d be back.

I slid back into my ride and floored the gas, burning rubber off the lot. It wasn’t until I was on Canton, ready to turn on Asher that I began obeying the speed limits the city officials had agreed upon. I pulled into the first available spot, closest to my destination, and hopped out. My chains bounced with each step I made, crashing into each other. With my right hand, I squeezed the butt of my Glock, unsure of what I was walking into, but not giving a fuck, either.

METTLESOME

Adjective

For a person or animal to be full of spirit, bravery, and courage.

Synonyms include: gallant, intrepid, brave, valorous, tenacious

MY LEFT KNUCKLES beat against the door. After a long stint of knocking, I stepped back and pressed my back against the brick beside the door I had stood in front of. I watched my surroundings, making sure nothing was out of the ordinary or even the slightest bit suspicious. The sound of the locks turning grasped my undivided attention and held it until the door opened.

Like a moth to a flame, I was drawn to her beauty, again. Once, twice, and a third time, my heart skipped a beat. After months of her on my dome, she was in my space.

Mommas, my inner monologue called out.

Soft lips, baby hairs, a bun, and the prettiest face greeted me with sleepy eyes.

“Makai?” she questioned as if she didn’t see me standing right in front of her fine ass.

My dick hardened just thinking of the things I planned to do to her over the next week. The shorts that hugged her thighs and exposed her pussy’s print made my mouth pool with saliva. Dismissing the bullshit, I got straight to the point.

“You done crying ’bout that nigga?”

TWO

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glacier". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large loop at the beginning of the word.

I CLEARED the sleep from my eyes to make sure I wasn't still dreaming about the man who was standing at my door—right in front of me.

“What? What time is it?”

“You worried about the wrong thing, Mommas. Answer the question.”

“Makai, it must be past midnight.”

“It's not. Now, answer the fucking question.”

His passive aggression made my nipples swell in my tank.

“You done crying 'bout that nigga?”

With confidence, I nodded. “Yes. I am.”

“Good. You handle that situation?”

His eyes lowered to my belly.

“Yes.”

“Good. Pack a bag with clothes fit for the season and pack it within the next five minutes. I'm taking you on a date.”

“Makai, what date requires me to pack clothing, and is happening at midnight?” Yawning, I probed.

When my eyes reopened after closing momentarily, I was no longer staring at the face of the handsome man that I could barely see in the dead of

the night. It was his back that faced me now as he turned to leave.

“Wait,” I called out, stopping him in his tracks.

Barefoot, I tiptoed in his direction until I noticed him rushing in mine. In an instant, his hands were on my waist as he pushed me backward, step by step until we were inside my apartment with the door shut behind us.

My breath was lodged in my chest, unable to escape. With big, bulging eyes, I waited for him to speak, to move, to do anything but look at me the way he was looking at me with those dark, aggrieved eyes. Many nights, I’d imagined his hands right where they were planted just before his lips crashed into mine and our journey began.

“You trying to make me catch a body tonight, Mommas?” Tilting his head, he asked me.

“Hmm?”

“Don’t step foot outside of your door dressed like this. I ain’t never been to jail on no serious shit, but I wouldn’t mind going for the right reason.”

“You were about to leave,” I explained, finally able to release my breath.

“Because I’m not in the business of convincing you. Either you rolling with a nigga or you not. It’s simple.”

There it was again. The way he spoke without reservation of his words, yet voiced them with a gentleness that soothed the ache they had the potential to cause, left me dazed.

“Five minutes?” I was swimming in his cologne. There wasn’t a night out on the town that I could remember leaving me as intoxicated as the liquid he’d spritzed his skin with.

“Five minutes,” he repeated.

“Five minutes.” Nodding, I followed with the same statement.

My chin lowered near my chest while I tried to gain control of myself. I weighed the pros and cons of agreeing to follow Makai into the darkness. The pros were winning by a landslide. Because I was beyond my ninety-day probation period at Berkeley Presbyterian, I was free to take some time off. With my schedule including two days off schedule, adding a few more, if need be, didn’t sound so bad.

“I’m not fucking with it if you ain’t sure ’bout it, sure ’bout me. You got the number, Mommas. Just hit me when you’re ready for a nigga.”

He released me from his grasp and twisted the knob of my door, opening it in preparation to leave. I shut it, protesting his stance. My hand rested atop his, pulling it until it fell from the handle.

“Five minutes. I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“I’ll be here.”

He opened the door, sinking my heart into my stomach. The panic was apparent, altering my features and stopping him in his tracks.

“Right outside,” he clarified with a chuckle, exposing his single dimple.

“Okay. Five minutes.”

“Five minutes.”

Nodding, he left me alone to run through the house without a clue as to what I was doing, where I was going, and why I’d agreed to a date that included more than one night’s stay. Somehow, someway, I cared less about anything other than being in his space, again. Though it had only been for a little while on that day three months ago, finding my way back was something I’d considered on several occasions.

I slung my suitcase on top of the bed and emptied its contents. It felt like an eternity since I’d stepped foot outside of Berkeley. From the moment I began nursing school, life almost completely stopped for me. My head was in my books. Hardly anything else mattered. The excitement that began stirring in the pit of my stomach was evidence that I needed this break from reality as much as Makai wanted me to have it.

Hygiene supplies, makeup, swimsuits, panties, bras, shirts, bottoms, dresses, they were all tossed inside my bag or over my arm at random. Every few seconds, I checked the time on my phone, making sure I wasn’t running behind. When I learned the five minutes had elapsed, I slipped on the Coach slides near the door and headed out. It wasn’t until the mugginess of the night hit my thighs that I realized I’d rushed out in the same attire that Makai had forbade.

Because I was already halfway to his truck, I continued. The driver’s door opened and his head appeared between the gap. His dark eyes penetrated me, lodging an arrow in the center of my chest. His frustration with my disobedience was written all over his face, bringing a smile to mine. I could feel the exposure of nearly all thirty-two of my teeth as the midnight air kissed them one by one.

Makai’s long, lean body rounded his truck in a matter of seconds. The distance between us had been obliterated, swiping the smile off my lips. He was far too close, smelling, and looking far too good. Blinking away the enchantment, I tried focusing on something—*anything*—other than his beauty.

My suitcase was ripped from my hands in the most precious manner. He leaned forward after tossing it inside. When he stood upright again, he wasn't empty-handed.

"Here." He grimaced, handing me a pair of black leggings.

The smile I'd tucked away reappeared as he slammed the back door and opened the one I was reaching for. When I turned to slip into the truck, I noticed he hadn't moved an inch.

"What's the matter, Makai?" The words fell from my lips before I could stop them.

"Don't get fucked up, Mommas."

The snickering of mine that followed left him with flared nostrils and a tilted head. Slamming the passenger door, he warned, "Aight, keep that shit up."

Unsure of what he was referring to exactly, I disregarded the warning as soon as he settled next to me. The clothes that rested on my arm began to tip over as I struggled with the leggings in my free hand. Deciding it was best to get them settled in my suitcase before slipping them on, I began sorting through the pieces.

One after the other, I folded them on my lap in preparation for transfer. Though I couldn't quite confirm, I could feel the heat radiating from Makai's vision as he stared holes into the side of my leg. The pressure of his glare became overbearing, beckoning for every ounce of strength I had in my body.

Angling my torso in his direction, I waited for his pensive nature to absorb his ability to remain silent. The wait wasn't lengthy at all. He spilled his thoughts and let me know exactly what was on his mind.

"Put it in the suitcase with the rest of that shit and leave it in the backseat when we reach the plane."

Slightly offended by his disapproval, I cut my eyes toward the clothes on my lap. It was then that I came to the conclusion that I hadn't been wise with my selection. There were better clothes in my closet, but the time restriction influenced the impulsiveness of my selections.

"Being that I only had a few minut—"

"That's my fuck up, so I'ma fix it."

Agreeing with his logic, I watched him toss the clothes in the back seat, one handful at a time. When my hands and legs were free, I remembered the additional task on my agenda. Black, stretchy fabric awaited a stretch. My hands clutched the waistband of the lounge shorts clinging to my body. I

pulled them downward, exposing the seamless, beige thong that covered my hairless vagina.

Because the fabric matched my skin tone, the illusion of nudity complicated the moment. Sweat beads drew close to the surface of my skin, making me tingle all over as heat rushed throughout my body. My head collided with the window with a thud.

“Shit,” Makai grunted, regretful of the mistake he’d made.

Tunnel vision disclosed the issue. We’d veered into a lane that wasn’t ours to have at the moment.

“Eyes on the road, Makai,” I begged.

A silent nod was the only satisfaction offered. In a matter of seconds, our eyes met. Tossing both hands in the air, he released the sweetest sound from his lips. The sound of laughter. As if the angels had come down and tickled my heart themselves, I felt fuzziness all over. Involuntarily, my cheeks peaked and my lips stretched across my face.

“Eyes on the road, sir.”

“Aight. Aight.”

Giddiness covered me, making the young girl trapped inside of me blush with happiness. I stepped out of the shorts and replaced them with the leggings before lowering my butt onto the seat again. When I finally settled, my eyes roamed until they landed on the target. His dark orbs rested on me.

Shaking his head, he gripped the steering wheel tighter and redirected his line of vision. He’d been caught. The smirk on his face brought on unfamiliar feelings, holding residency in my heart as if it had the right. As if he had the right. I cut my eyes toward the road, waiting for the pieces of me that he was chipping away at and claiming as his own to be returned.

Too soon, Glacier, I warned. Falling hard and falling fast was my downfall. It always had been. But this man, he was giving me a few more reasons with each passing second. Slamming my eyelids shut, I chastised my heart’s vulnerability. *Tighten up, babes.*

Music was the perfect distraction. I didn’t recognize the song that blasted through the speakers after Makai toyed with a few buttons. However, I welcomed it, nonetheless. Lyrics were rapidly smeared across instruments, blending perfectly.

It wasn’t until we were entering a private portal for private aircrafts that I noticed we were never headed in the airport’s direction. Makai switched gears once we were within a few feet of the steps that would lead us inside.

Anxiety crept up my spine, clouding my judgment and immobilizing me, simultaneously.

My hesitancy registered with Makai almost immediately. His long legs circled the vehicle with haste, stopping just shy of the passenger door so that he was able to open it without plowing into his body.

“Fix your face, pretty.”

Forging a smile, I turned my lips upward.

“You want to hit this blunt to calm your nerves?” he asked, offering me the drugs he’d pulled from behind his ear. Where it had come from, I wasn’t sure but I hadn’t seen it until now.

“I don’t smoke,” I shared.

“It’s liquor on the plane if you prefer it.”

“I’m okay. Just a lit—just my nerves.”

“You with me, Mommas. There’s no safer, better place to be. I’ll stand on that, any time, any place.”

Believing every word he said and clinging to them like paint on a brush prepared to create an artful masterpiece, I took the hand he was extending. With me trailing behind him, we climbed the stairs and made our way onboard. To my surprise, we weren’t alone. There were people onboard already, everyone dressed in pricey threads shattering the confidence I’d conjured on the way up the steps.

Wow. Black excellence stared back at me. I wasn’t sure what anyone staring back at me did for a living, but whatever it was paid well. Very well. Even the air was different in the space they occupied. Elegance. Class. Haughtiness. Wealth. Beauty. Arrogance. They were only a few words that came to mind at the sight before me.

“About fucking time!” the slim one yelled out.

“Well, that was worth the fucking wait,” said a man that closely resembled Makai, but not as much as he did the man seated behind him. They shared the same features, same face. *Twins?*

“I know you fucking lying.” The woman beside him cackled. “Girl, may God have mercy on you.”

“Tell him we’re ready for departure,” the gentleman with a clear glass and the same aggrieved eyes as Makai said to the attendant standing near him.

“You’re not going to introduce us to your friend, Makai?”

“She has a mouth. She can introduce herself. If it was left to me, none of

you niggas would get an introduction.”

“Can we have her name, at least?” the calmer one finally spoke.

With a straight face, Makai turned to me with curiosity resting on his face.

“What’s ya name, Mommas?”

Mortified, I contemplated running toward the door that was being sealed behind us.

“Seriously?” I questioned. “You know my name, Makai.”

“Oh, shit. That’s your government, for real?” His eyes blossomed in pure astonishment, assuring me that he truly didn’t know my name, and neither did he believe it was Glacier.

“You watched me walk across the stage. My name was called. How’d you not notic—nothing.”

Shaking my head, I began to regret the impulsive decision to join him.

Pulling me closer, he leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Cheer up, Mommas. I wasn’t listening for your name to be called. I was waiting until that pretty face of yours flashed across the screen.”

“I’m Aeir.” A gentle, soothing voice pulled me from the slum I was headed into.

“Glacier,” I replied, extending a hand.

Ignoring it completely, she opted for a hug instead. Like magnets, our bodies connected, arms wrapping around one another.

“That’s Halo,” she said, pointing to the coziest girl on the plane.

Slowly, she popped her hand from underneath the blanket that shielded her. “Hi.”

“That’s Nature.”

“Hi!” Nature tossed a hand in the air.

“And that’s—”

“Kleu. Nice to meet you, girl. You look like you have some sense. So, how’d you end up here, with this senseless ass ni—”

“Call off ya dog,” Makai joked, pulling me toward the back where there was available seating.

“I’m beating his ass before the trip ends. I see that shit now.”

“That’s Lawe, he the biggest hater of the bunch. Don’t mind him!” Makai yelled toward the front where Lawe was seated.

Still apprehensive about the fact that Makai didn’t know my name, I put necessary space between us after we both were seated. To my dismay, he

moved forward, closing the gap. A second attempt to part us proved unsuccessful when I felt Makai's arm around my waist, sliding me so close that I could feel his heart beating against my back.

"I don't mind giving your pretty ass something to pout about," he whispered, lips grazing my ear as he did so.

The stirring in my panties was as sinister as the smirk that I was certain I'd find plastered on his face. I relaxed against his frame, understanding that any battle I was fighting with him, I'd easily lose. Makai was war-ready. He was equipped. He was fearless. Losing, for him, wasn't an option.

"I fucked up, but I'ma fix it."

It was his second time reciting the line, and again, I believed every word. The lights of the cabin dimmed and everyone began to find comfort. The spaciousness gave us all enough options to keep our limbs from numbing and our necks from growing tired.

What I'd assumed was the back of the plane, where Makai and I were, happened to be the center. There was a full sleeping quarter behind us. Halo and Ledge were the first to retire, sharing one of the two queen-sized beds that were next to each other.

Though I wasn't sure how long the flight would last or where we were headed, something deep within me told me that I wouldn't touch the ground for at least another five hours. The thought alone brought about tiredness. Closing my eyes, I prepared to join the other women, who were all on their way to a more peaceful place.

Makai + Glacier

"AYE. AYE. YOU SLOBBIN'."

Makai's voice, as startling as it was, woke me from my sleep. Feeling as if I was falling, I grabbed the closest thing to me. My fingers curled around his shirt, bringing him closer to me than he already was. The wetness that slid down the side of my face confirmed his revelation. I was indeed slobbering. Flushed with embarrassment, I used the paper towel he was handing me to clean my mouth.

"Oh God. Sorry. Usually, I don—I guess I'm just really tired."

It was the second time Makai had witnessed saliva slide down the side of

my face. Trying to convince him that they were the only two times I'd experienced it as well would take far too much energy, so I let it be.

My body shut down completely in his presence. Safety, survival, and security weren't on my priority list in his presence. Not even my brain functioned properly with him near. However, that was a compliment I wasn't quite prepared to share.

"It's time to wake up, Mommas. We've arrived."

"Hmmm? Already?"

"We were in the sky for eight hours."

"I slept for eight whole hours?"

My mouth slacked in disbelief.

"You and every other woman on this flight."

"Wow."

"Let me ask you something."

As if it was even possible, he moved closer to me. Our eyes stalked one another, chests rising and falling with each breath. Impatiently, I trailed the movement of his lips, ready for his next words.

"Yeah?"

"Is womanhood that fucking exhausting?"

He didn't blink or bat an eye while waiting for my response. Sighing, I released the deep breath I'd taken. Nodding, I answered the question that had been posed, honestly.

"Yes."

His head rocked back and forward, slowly. Lost in deep thought, he raked his hand through the hairs that combined to form a full beard.

"I'ma fix that," he finalized, scooping me up into his arms and carrying me down the aisle.

Still trying to catch the breath that he'd stolen, I rested my head against his chest. My body bounced with each step he took, and it wasn't until we'd touched ground that I was lowered. I expected to land on my feet but was launched into the air again without warning.

"I'm not putting you down, Mommas. I'm picking up my bag," he explained.

"You don't have to carry me, Makai. I can walk if I—"

"You have two feet and good health. I know you can. But that ain't the fucking point here. Lay ya pretty ass down."

Because I knew I wouldn't win the fight, I obliged. When he decided to

free me, I was in the comfort of a Jeep and the doors had been taken off. There wasn't a top nor was there a back window.

Makai stretched the seatbelt across me, ending the gesture with a clicking noise that assured us I was buckled and ready to go. He tossed his duffle bag in the backseat and made his way around to the other side. Almost immediately after his bottom hit the seat, he put the car in gear and accelerated. My back pressed against the softness of the cushion and instinctively, my hands fished through the air for something that offered stability.

My right hand fisted the handle provided on the truck's frame. My left hand collapsed around Makai's long leg. Regret wouldn't allow it to stay for long. The moment our glances connected, I snatched it away, pulling it back into familiar territory.

God, he's magnetic. I sobbed internally.

As if he was offended by my retraction, Makai reached over and grabbed me by the wrist. Slowly, carefully, he placed my hand back on his leg, closest to his thigh. The apprehension and regret I felt after dissolved as he rested his large hand on top of mine, using the other to guide us to our destination.

Catch your breath, Glacier.

The sun peered behind the greenery that stretched for miles and miles. Freedom felt nearest. In fact, for the moment, there were no restrictions. The wind brushed my hair backward, causing it to flee from my face so that I could feel its gentleness against my skin.

The tires on the truck had slowed tremendously. Without him voicing the need for change in speed, I was certain it was due to my response to our departure. Nevertheless, I preferred slower moments because life was almost always moving too fast. Closing my eyes, I allowed everything that had happened in the last nine hours to sink in.

My palm began to sweat on Makai's leg. Flipping my hand over, underneath his, I tried retrieving it. His objection was clear when his fingers slipped through mine and our palms pressed against one another. I opened my eyes, ready to examine the connection that felt so incredibly fictional, only to find his already on me.

A half smile stretched my lips backward. Freeing my body of shame, I left little room for Makai to wonder if I was smitten. My eyes carefully examined his flawless skin and every inch of beauty that God had blessed him with.

“You got a fucking eye problem.” He chuckled, squeezing my hand to lighten the load.

It was becoming more and more apparent to me that Makai was full of words and hardly meant any harm by them, no matter how they flowed. With a shake of the head, I tilted my chin downward and gazed in the other direction—out into the openness of the fresh sunrise. I hardly felt his hand leave mine. It wasn't until I felt it on my chin that I noticed.

“Stand on your shit, Mommas.” His baritone was like jazz after a long shift, soothing to the soul.

“I don't know what that means,” I admitted, blushing red with embarrassment.

“No fear. It means no fear. If you want to stalk a nigga with those pretty ass eyes and that pretty ass face, then stand on that shit. Ain't no need to be shy because when it's my turn to stalk you, ain't shit gon' stop me.”

Nodding with upward-turned lips, I digested his explanation. This time, when my eyes landed on him, they didn't leave him. I watched as he re-established the connection he'd broken, pouring oxygen into my lungs again.

I took note of the skillful art that covered his body. Because his skin was so dark, from afar, it was hardly noticeable. But up close, I realized just how much he'd been marked. The intricacies of the artwork were mesmerizing. There were swirls and letters and signs decorating his skin like paint on a canvas.

When I'd finally had my fill of Makai, I rested my head against the seat, once again closing my eyes to soak up the pleasantries. Their separation didn't come until we'd arrived at a jaw-dropping villa that rendered me speechless. Immobile, I watched as everyone climbed out of their trucks and piled into their respective dwellings. The small community of vacation homes was perfect.

THREE



“GLACIER.”

I heard his voice and felt his presence surrounding me, still, but I couldn't quite gather myself or disengage from the moment I was having alone. By the third time he called out to me, he'd reached me, parted my legs, and stepped between them.

“Glacier?”

“Huh?” I snapped out of the trance at once. My name falling from his lips was like water on a day in the desert. I wasn't sure how long I'd been parched, but his voice replenished me, hydrating me to the point of capacity.

“You gon' stay out here or you coming inside?”

Makai stood so close, his legs touching mine as he lowered his head to meet my eyes. I stared up at him with the assistance of his fingertip under my chin.

His lips.

His skin.

His nose.

His cheeks.

His forehead.

They all looked so... *kissable*. So enjoyable. So **good**.

My tongue slid across my lips, rehydrating them with the life he'd poured into me. I squeezed my vaginal muscles to suppress the growing desire between my legs. Defeat clothed me as my eyes grew heavier. Drunk with lust, I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat.

He'll be the commencement of my undoing, I confessed, knowing it to be true.

"Why are you staring at me that way, Makai?" I asked, short of breath.

He required all of my energy.

"'Cause I'm waiting on you to put your big girl panties on."

"I don't understand what you're referring to."

"How you feeling, Mommas?"

"Famished." The word sprouted from my mouth without hesitation. As soon as it left, I wanted it back.

"Adjective. Extremely hungry. Ravenous. Undernourished. Malnourished. Unfed. Ensuring."

Recalling the day he'd given me the entire definition of my name on a whim, I was left with the conclusion that this man wasn't just beauty and mystic. He was brains as well.

"I—ye—"

"How would you like to be fed, Glacier? I can think of a few ways, but I'd rather submit to the thing that's on your mind this minute."

Gasping while clutching the nothingness the air offered, I digested his words and the meaning behind them. There were so many.

"Makai."

"So, back to the original topic, Kiwi."

"Kiwi?"

"Yes, because you're green as fuck."

He insulted me.

"And I like that shit. Stay that way."

"Your lips," I deflected, needing the sting to go away.

Green? The word stuck. The adjective stuck. It all stuck to me like glue, every word out of his mouth.

"What about them?"

"I ju... I-I just..." I stammered, unable to process my thoughts. The diversion hadn't worked in my favor because admitting to Makai that I wanted them against mine felt far too overwhelming.

And so were they.

My world began to spin as his lips crashed into mine. Soft and buttery, big and flavorful, they made mine feel like small pieces of sandpaper. Just as quickly as he'd laid them against mine, he removed them. I struggled to breathe, struggled to think. Struggled to see. But I could hear the words that he released less than an inch from the lips he'd just kissed.

"One thang you can't be around me is scared, Kiwi. I'm going to test every limit, push every button, and get that shit up out of you every time."

He stepped back, nearly taking my soul with him. I watched with lustful eyes as he readjusted himself in his pants.

"Come on. We've got shit to get into, Mommas." He patted my leg, urging me to follow him. Without hesitation, I did. Like a puppy, I wagged my tail, trailing behind his long legs.

"How many names will I have by the end of this trip?"

"As many as I need you to." He turned back and said to me, never breaking his stride.

"Is there a problem with you calling me Glacier?"

"Nah. I just prefer calling you what the fuck I want. Is that a problem, Glacier?"

He stood at the door of the villa that belonged to us for a few days. The smirk on his face left me no choice but to smile.

"Such harsh words," I groaned.

"I'd apologize, but I'm far from sorry. My choice of words and how they're taken don't always reflect my intentions or my temperament."

"I knooooow." Sighing with a drag, I nodded.

"I mean no harm."

"I know that, too."

"But?" he pressed, still standing next to the door.

"Well... I... Nothing."

"But what, Mommas?"

"Just taking some getting used to."

"If ever it's too much, holla at a nigga. Let me know what's up, aight?"

With a nod, I responded, "Okay."

Alterations. Though it was clear that he'd rather not, Makai wasn't opposed to altering his lingo to improve the communication between us so that my comfort didn't take a blow. Simultaneously, I wasn't opposed to adapting so that his comfort remained intact.

Pausing momentarily to gauge the level of truth in my reply, Makai studied me. Satisfied with his findings, he pressed a few buttons on the pad in front of him, waited for the sound of sliding locks, and then twisted the knob to gain access. I was right behind him, stepping up slightly so that I wouldn't fall flat on my face.

The space I walked into was nothing short of a dream. Neutral colors and natural fixtures covered every corner, giving a tranquil feel upon entry. It reminded me of the coastal rendition of my home decor. Everything on display was gorgeous. From the arched doorframes and walkways to the wooden consoles and vinyl player, I was head over heels.

"Where are we?"

"One of three of my brother's islands. This one is The Catherine. Named after our mother."

He sucked the skin of his teeth with a shake of his head. The pain in his dark eyes mirrored the same in mine. I knew that feeling. I knew that hurt. Mine was still so fresh that I was still recovering from the nonstop crying that damaged my vocals and kept my face swollen for months.

"How did she die?" I asked, stepping closer to Makai.

His space was so inviting. It felt as if I belonged, so I entered. My hand caressed his arm, my palm cupping his elbow as my fingers smoothed his skin.

"Suicide, but not before taking my pops with her," he told me, still finding himself in disbelief.

As if a knife had been shoved into his gut, he winced in pain. Not verbally, but physically. That hurt didn't just reside inside of you. It was part of your physical being, too. Even I was gutted, my stomach knotting and my chest burning upon realizing both of us were without our parents. Orphans, as some would deem the parentless youth.

"I'm so sorry, Makai. I understand."

"Do you?" he replied, looking down at me as if I was mistaken.

"My parents died in a car crash six years ago. I understand," I confirmed.

Suddenly, his body whipped around, arms surrounding mine as he pulled me into a hug. The connecting pieces that meshed us together tingled. My arms. Chest. Chin. And fingers.

He said nothing, but his embrace was everything we both needed at the moment. With each passing second, his grasp was tightened as his heart rate slowed. Calm washed over him until finally, he freed me.

Come back, my inner voice screamed but I remained silent.

“You good? You straight? Did you see the people you needed to see? Go to therapy or some shit?”

His line of questioning was baffling. Not only was this Black man standing in my face, questioning my mental stability after my parents’ death, but he was also suggesting therapy was the right place to begin healing the trauma it caused. I loved and appreciated every word out of his perfectly carved mouth. I sat with my thoughts momentarily, realizing no one had ever asked, no one cared to ask if I was all right. If I was *good*.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, lowering my eyes as my nerve endings splintered.

I shifted my weight, a nervous habit that helped lessen the pain. When I looked back up at him, I noticed his eyes hadn’t left me.

“What about you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied with a shrug, taking off in the other direction.

I despised the distance he placed between us and needed it to disappear at once. I began to hack away at it as he continued.

“Find someone you can trust and I’ll foot the bill, Mommas. Shit ain’t sweet. Talk to someone.”

I finally made it to his side, again, in the bedroom that we’d share over the next few nights. Though excited and anxious, there was a more pressing issue at hand. Stopping Makai in his tracks, I collapsed my fingers around the inner corner of his arm, turning him in my direction.

“Who’s talking to you?” I needed to know.

“Ah,” he groaned. “Don’t worry about me.”

The smile that parted the path for his perfect white teeth was convincing, but not enough. Placing a hand on his chest, I stopped him from taking off again. It was becoming clear to me that he avoided his emotions. For a girl that wore hers on her sleeve, I died a thousand deaths inside. But that smile... it brought me back a thousand times.

“Makai.”

“I’m good, G.”

He was disconnecting. Though it was still a rendition of my name, it was short, and straight to the point. He was growing cold.

“But are you?” I pushed, unwilling to let him lend a helping hand and I not do the same.

There wasn't much that I knew about Makai but the two times we'd encountered, he was nothing short of a Godsend. I'd be doing myself a disservice not to reciprocate his energy.

He planted his feet, folding his arm one over the other and giving me his undivided attention.

"It doesn't matter if you're good in my world. I don't get that uh..." He squinted his right eye trying to think of the accurate word. "That degree of leniency on this side of the tracks. The first sign of weakness and you're a dead man. And if you're not physically erased off the face of the earth, you might as well be because the motherfuckers who sense that weakness gon' hit you for everything you got. Before I go down like a sucker, Mommas, I'll pretend I'm good til the day they put me in my box and throw the dirt on me."

"You don't have to pretend right now, or ever... with me."

"With you?" He chuckled.

"Yes."

"Who the fuck is you?"

"I'm Glacier."

Shaking his head, he flattened his hand on his nicely cut hair before running it down his face.

"I know your name, Kiwi. I'm just saying, what makes you think I'm trying to be all up in my chest and shit because I'm around you?"

"Because you're all up in your chest, Makai," I explained. As if a light bulb had gone off in his head, his brows centered on his face.

"It's nothing you have to force. It just... happens. If today isn't the day you're ready or willing to talk, it's okay. I'm here for a while, as it seems. And even after, I don't think I'll be too far away."

I wouldn't be. Even if nothing became of this spontaneous vacation, I would never forget what Makai had done for me three months ago. I still hadn't paid a dime in rent. Next month would be the first time. A phone call or a few miles away, that's all I ever wanted to be if he ever needed me like I needed him that day.

After my point was made, sticking around wasn't necessary. There was an entire villa to explore. Though I had absolutely nothing to contribute to the bedroom, kitchen, or drawers, I still wanted to see every inch of the space before the exploring and activities began.

With my nose high, piercing the air, I turned on my heels. I left Makai

where he stood, sifting through thoughts that he'd made it clear that I wasn't privy to. Before I was able to take my third step, I felt his large hands stretch across the back of my neck.

My body flung backward, simultaneously swirling to meet his face. To meet his lips. A fire was ignited within me. My chest and stomach burned with desire, satisfaction, and pure adoration. My body lifted, attempting to swallow him whole. Though it was impossible, I didn't mind trying.

Standing on the tips of my toes, I familiarized myself with every corner of Makai's mouth. Deliciously and skillfully, he tongued me down, sealing the moment with soft, slow pecks on the lips, chin, and upper neck. My entire life, I'd never experienced extreme levels of jealousy, especially for someone I'd never met, but I found myself struggling to not hate whoever had the chance to enjoy those lips before me.

"Don't walk away from me like that, Glacier. I didn't like that."

Breathlessly, I lowered my body, flattening my feet on the floor. Hadn't I been trying to stop my world from spinning, Makai would have had a response. However, I couldn't conjure one if I tried.

"You hear me?" he asked, tilting his head.

Finally, I managed to recite the truth.

"You gave me no reason to stay."

I watched his nostrils spread as he pondered.

"Two things you need to know."

"Two things?"

"Yes."

I nodded, insisting he continue.

"I don't have limits. Hell is my limit and that's because I ain't visited that motherfucker yet. When I do, I'm almost certain I can find a way to go lower."

Raised brows revealed my thoughts, but I said nothing.

"That's why I'm good."

"And the second?"

"That is the second thing, Mommas."

Confused, I waited for him to explain further. He had no plans to.

"I feel like there is a better number two. Or at least a third one."

"My mother was mental. We watched her health spiral. Though she was in her prime, physically, her mind was decaying by the day. Pops put her in a facility because he wanted her to get better. However, he couldn't stomach

the way she was living.

“He brought her home. As soon as she came down off the meds that he thought weren’t helping her progress, mentally, she killed him and then herself. We woke up to their dead bodies... in bed... beside each other. While my brothers stayed home and began their grief process, I was at school, trying to patch my wounds and forget that shit as fast as I could.

“I knew life after that would never be the same. I wasn’t wrong. I found solace in the dictionary, the one thing my mother and I enjoyed together. By the time I was sixteen, my peace came from the streets.”

“Makai.”

“No sympathy for a soldier, Mommas. When I tell you I’m good, I’m good. Shit, at least as good as I’m gon’ get. Respect that. If shit changes, then it does. For now, though, I’m good.”

“Okay.”

I rested my case, not wanting to dwell.

“And you want a better number two?”

“Huh?”

“The two things you need to know about me,” he reminded me.

“Yes. You only gave me one.”

“I’m revoking ya freedom.”

“Huh?”

“And you wonder why I chose Kiwi?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Makai,” I told him honestly.

I watched, in awe, as he walked into the front and removed my phone from the console table. Slowly, he opened the door and made his way toward the blue water. I followed, unsure of what was happening until I watched him toss the device. Turning back around, he headed toward the villa, no explanation given.

“Makai,” I called out as we approached.

It wasn’t until we were back inside and my back was against the door that he began.

“I’ll buy you a hundred more of ’em if it makes you happy, Glacier. However, any motherfucker that had access to you then, can’t now. Since you need shit spelled out for you. You’ll have a new jack in a few days. It’ll be there when you make it back. Is there anyone you love that’ll be calling, looking for you?”

His question was like a Mack truck to the chest. I couldn’t stop the rush

of words that flowed from my mouth.

“There’s no one who loves m—no one is going to cal—”

With eyes narrowed to slits, Makai questioned, “What’d you say, Glacier?”

I pushed the lump of air down my throat, looking over at him as he waited for me to repeat myself.

“Nothing.”

“Nah, what did you say?”

“No one is going to call.”

“Before that.”

“Makai.”

“Before that, Mommas. What did you say?”

“It’s nothing.” I waved it off, pushing forward because I was desperate to escape the moment. The pain in my chest felt anything but delightful. If I stayed any longer, it would spill down my eyes and onto my cheeks.

“Don’t walk away from me. Don’t do that, G.”

Turning in his direction as the prickling of my eyes began, I asked, “Is that your way of detaching?”

“Detaching?”

“Calling me that or anything else for the matter?”

“You call this detaching?” he asked, stepping closer to me. “Hmm? You call this shit detaching? I’m a nigga with textbook memory, had it since a jit. I recall definitions like most people recall numbers and shapes and shit. Me, it’s words, always have been words. The last time I checked my shit, what’s happening here is the exact opposite of whatever you’re making up in your head, baby girl.

“It’s a way for me to establish a connection when I’m feeling disconnected. I guess that’s the third thing you should know about me. I disconnect easily. So easily that there’s rarely a connection, to begin with. But with you, shit was a little different. Shit was a little spooky and a nigga ain’t never been scared of shit.

“It’s the same connection that I felt when I answered your call that has me on vacation, all in my chest, trying to figure out why the fuck you ain’t got nobody loving on you—and I’m not talking about a nigga unless he’s ’bout ready to lose his life because that’s his only option at this point.”

“My grandmother,” I admitted.

“Ya granny.”

“Yes. She has dementia. She don’t always remember me but she remembers she loves me, no matter the time or the day. For me, that’s enough.”

Nodding, he accepted my answer. He stared down at me, his height giving him the advantage. He laid a hand on my cheek, tilting his head to the left.

“I’m not detaching. I’m simply trying to establish a solid connection while making sense of the one that’s already in place.”

This time, my head bobbed up and down in understanding. I rubbed away the aching of my chest, listening as Makai spoke again.

“We’re here to have a good time, Mommas. Get out of here,” he demanded, pointing to my head. “And here.” He pointed to my chest. “And I’ma do the same.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

He leaned in and pecked me on the lips. I watched as he slid his hand into the side of his bag and removed a small gold hardshell case. He opened it to reveal neatly rolled enhancements I was sure included marijuana.

“One thing you should know about me,” confidently, I belted.

“Yeah?”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t share. Under *any* circumstances.”

“Good. Something we can agree on.”

He gave little to no thought to my declaration. His comfort made me smile within. He didn’t dwell and neither did he try to convince me of anything. Both were responses that garnered respect from me and led me to believe it wouldn’t be an issue between us. Nothing was established, yet so much was established.

Banging on the door startled me. I slid from one end of the room to the other, causing Makai to muffle his laughter to spare me the embarrassment.

“What?”

“Any further and I’d need a boat to fish ya shaky ass out the fucking water out there.”

“It was pretty random. Won’t you admit that, at least? I wasn’t expecting anyone to pound the door.”

“I got it,” he assured me, reaching over and twisting the handle.

I wasn’t sure who stood behind the door, but it didn’t take long to find out.

“What the fuck you want?”

“Move ya special ass out of the way. We’re not here for you. And the proper way to greet a guest is, hello.”

“Not one that’s uninvited. Everybody else can come in. You, though, you stay out here. Tell ya nigga to come see me if he got something to say ’bout it.”

“Boy, move.”

Pushing Makai aside, Kleu made her way in.

“It’s not time for dick, yet, boo. We’ve got shit to take care of.”

“Kiss the man goodbye and come with us,” Nature instructed.

“Please,” Aeir begged.

I looked over at a silent Halo, knowing not to expect many words. However, her eyes said all she wasn’t willing to.

“Makai, I—”

“Here, Kiwi,” he said, interrupting my speech to hand me a large knot. “The currency is interchangeable. Every US dollar is one Case.”

“Case?”

“Yes. Same as a dollar in the US, Mommas. Let’s use the brain in that big head, aight?”

Nodding, I chuckled, not taking offense.

“All pretty bit—women have big heads, boo. Don’t sweat it,” Kleu sassed with a smack of her lips. She guided me toward the door as everyone followed.

“I’ve heard.”

Before we crossed the threshold, I couldn’t neglect the deep, expansive urge to see his face once more. To feel his presence in my world. To be undone again. To linger in the agony that his dark eyes held. To soothe the achiness that accompanied visions of him—in reality and in my head.

On cue, and as if he needed the same, our eyes met. Unmoving, he stood so many feet away, watching as I separated us. Suffocation must’ve been a breeze in comparison to the misery I faced, gasping for air as if someone had knocked every bit of it from my lungs.

My brows raced to meet my hairline, unsuccessfully, while I pushed out the tainted oxygen and inhaled the fresh air of the island. Despite the mess Makai was making of me, everything was beautiful. Everything was incredibly beautiful.

Makai + Glacier

IT HAD BEEN months since my smile stuck to my face. My jaws hurt from laughter. My belly burned from doubling over as I cackled loudly and genuinely. Pretty, perfect smiles lined the table on both sides.

“You all right over there, Halo?” Kleu yelled.

“I’m fine, just wondering what I’m going to name our third child. The bottom of that one definitely had a newborn.”

Smiling at the realization that I wasn’t the only one loosening up, I clapped my hands.

“I’m not mad at you. Please invite me to the shower.”

“She won’t have one,” Kleu joked.

“But I do accept gifts.”

“Good, because I’ll send them.”

“I’ll return the favor.” She laughed.

“Noooo. I’m just getting my feet wet in my field. The last thing I need right now is a baby.”

“Ma’am. Have you met the man you’re with and the men with the same last name as him? Aside from Lawe, they don’t care all that much,” Nature explained.

“Technically, we’re Eisenbergs now. Lawe, Ledge, and I. Kleu, though, she doesn’t claim us.”

“Sho don’t. One day, maybe. That day isn’t today.”

“It’ll happen soon,” Nature added.

“It will,” Aeir agreed.

“Whatever.”

“Back to you.” Nature tilted her head in my direction. “How’d you and Makai meet? When did you meet?”

“Three months ago. He fixed my flat.”

“Makai? Fixed your flat?” Kleu scoffed.

“Yes. I wasn’t far from his tire shop.”

“Makai doesn’t sell tires, love,” she explained.

Shrugging, I continued. “According to him, he doesn’t. But my car has been riding smoothly since he returned it. I got new tires and a new engine it feels like.”

“You’ve been dating for three months?” Aeir asked.

“No. We haven’t. But it—”

“Feels like it,” she interrupted.

“Yeeeeessss. And I’m freaking out.”

“Why?”

“Ever felt something deep? Extremely deep and extremely scary at once? Yet, you can’t help yourself? You can’t stop yourself. And with each passing second, you’re silently praying that it’s not all for nothing and reciprocation is in your favor?”

“In fact, I have.”

“That’s how I feel about him.”

“That’s how I felt about my Malachi.”

“How’d you keep yourself from crashing?”

“I didn’t. I loved him from the moment I saw his face. And my love happens to be unconditional. I’m not afraid of crashing for the right reason. He’s the right reason. I’ll crash a hundred times if he’s my end result.”

Nodding, I accepted her response. I felt my body temperature soar. I took a sip of the drink in front of me. It was my second in addition to the two shots we’d taken. As someone who didn’t drink, I was hoping I would make it back to the villa without busting my knee or my face on the concrete.

“Makai is the right reason,” she assured me.

“Don’t be afraid to take a risk. He won’t let you crash. His brothers won’t allow you to, either,” Nature said.

“Neither will we,” Aeir insisted.

“I wasted so many unhappy years, afraid to take that risk. I’ll never forgive myself, honestly. But since I stepped out on faith, it’s been rewarding. Milo wasn’t perfect in the beginning but no one is. Once we established that, we were able to progress. Now, we’re married with two beautiful children. Sometimes I don’t think happy is the word to encompass my feelings. I’m in total bliss.”

“Has he ever been in love?” I found myself asking, unsure of where it was coming from.

Everyone turned toward Aeir as if she had the answer we all needed. She’d made it clear that she and Malachi hadn’t reached five years of marriage, so I was slightly confused as to how she’d have the answer I needed.

“No. Never.”

“I didn’t think he was capable. I’ve known him since we were young,” Nature added.

“A whore, yes. In love, nah.” Kleu shook her head.

“He’s never had a girlfriend.” Aeir sipped the water she’d been refilling throughout our time at the bar to balance her intake.

“Seriously?” I gasped.

“It’s why we’re all surprised you’re here. Those three months must have been enjoyable for him,” Nature pressed.

“Or the pussy.” Kleu shrugged. “Just saying.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to explain. We haven’t dated for three months. Last night was only my second time seeing him. We haven’t been intimate. Our first kiss was less than two hours ago. He showed up at my house last night and told me to pack a bag. A bag that he hated and didn’t allow me to bring. He said he’s buying everything I need while we’re here.

“Three months ago, he rescued me off the side of the road, took me to my graduation, stayed the entire time, bought me flowers after, fed me, took me home, paid my rent for three months, and paid for an abortion for a child I conceived with my ex. He left that day and I didn’t hear from him again until last night.”

Though I’d shared a lot, I didn’t feel like I’d overshared. In the last hour and a half, I’d heard so much about the women at the table that I knew I was in good hands. This was a judgment-free zone, a place I loved and would cherish as long as I was allowed in the space.

“Aw shit. Girl, welcome to the family. That shit calls for another shot. Where the waitress? Makai done fell with his funny looking ass.”

Laughter erupted as I let Kleu’s words sink in.

Has he? The question rolled around in my head as I watched her flag down the server for our table. *Because maybe I have.*

Forty-five minutes, another round of shots, and one more drink later, I wobbled into the villa while removing the shoes that were suddenly hurting my feet. Two dresses, a new swimsuit, and a two-piece short set dangled across my arm. The ladies had given me an article or two from their bag, filling me with way too many emotions. Kleu provided the hygiene as she swore her clothes would swallow me whole. I doubted it.

“Makai?” I sang.

Barefoot, I searched through the house. My first stop was the bedroom where I found an array of new clothes, tags still attached, sprawled across the

bed. Different hues and styles of dresses, including bottoms and tops, coordinated well. Purses. Shoes. Hats. Swimwear. Designer bags. A new suitcase. It all crowded the large space, making it look so much smaller.

Unable to stand another second without setting my eyes on him, I marched through the rest of the villa in search of Makai. My final stop was the bathroom where I found him stepping out of the shower. It wasn't until the door was ajar and I witnessed the water dripping from his body that I heard the water running. He shut it off with the press of a button. When he turned around to face me, again, the lazy piece of meat in front of him was slowly growing.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't know yo—"

My eyes never left his growing tool as I tried pushing out words that were merely enough to make full sentences. Makai remained silent, allowing me to witness the birth of his erection. At its full potential, his manhood made my mouth water. I closed my eyes, giving myself a second to adjust.

Dear God, help me.

"You gon' stand there letting your mouth water or you gon' come suck this motherfucker?"

"Makai, I—"

"Number four. You can be a lot of shit when you're around me, but scared ain't one of 'em."

"I'm not. I just—"

Makai made me swallow my words as he began to move toward me.

"Then make me a fucking believer and get on your knees."

His command was deafening, dropping me to my knees instantly. The heat from his body warmed my face. The sight of his massiveness cured my curiosity. It was as prodigious as his presence. It was the perfect analogy for his demeanor.

His... *everything*. Everything was justified. The rudeness. The haughtiness. The dominance. The arrogance. The generosity. The... *everything*. Everything made sense now.

My fingers caressed Makai's warmth. Manicured nails glistened around his meat, attempting to meet each other but failing miserably. At that moment, I regretted my profession. With a beautiful tool like his, lengthy, perfectly sculpted acrylic nails would've enhanced the visual.

Throbbing lips and a wet mouth parted, accepting the tip of him. Once, twice, I circled my tongue around his head, garnering a low grunt. A third

and then fourth time led to his fingers in my hair, pulling it backward until my face was upward, staring into his lustful eyes.

“Don’t play with it, Mommas. You either gon’ stuff this motherfucker down your throat or get up.”

Blinking away the gloom that clouded my vision, I waited for Makai to continue. He’d yet to release me, letting me know he wasn’t finished.

“Aight?” he asked, peering down at me.

Nodding, I replied, “Yes.”

He never freed me from his grasp. Instead, he used it to guide himself inside my mouth, stopping only when his head hit the very back of my throat. Because my gag reflex was nonexistent, the reaction he was expecting wasn’t one that he received. He removed himself, creating a trail of saliva that was never-ending. The smirk of satisfaction on his face revealed that he was now privy to my little secret.

While occupied with his discovery, thoughts lingering, I used the opportunity to gain control. I pressed my hands against his thighs, offering stability, and sucked him back into my mouth.

“Shiiiiit.”

Up and down, I bobbed, nearly releasing him each time I drew backward. Every time I pushed forward, I made sure he touched the back of my throat. Saliva pooled in my mouth, spilling out of the sides and sliding down the sides of my face.

When the timing felt right, I employed my hands, wrapping them both around his shaft. I twisted them in opposite directions while pulling upward, never releasing his tip from my mouth.

“Goddamn, girl.”

His body began to stiffen. He held onto the counter behind him for support. I refused to show any mercy. My hunger for his semen increased by the second. His climax was my mission, and I’d stop at nothing to watch him unravel under my influence. My hands, his thighs, my mouth, and my chest were both soaked. I lowered toward his balls, replacing my tongue and lips with my hands by extending their reach.

“Shit, Mommas.”

Sucking one into my mouth, I continued adapting to the taste of his skin. It was heavenly, forcing a moan from my throat.

“Ummmm.”

The heartbeat between my legs fueled me. I needed Makai’s semen like I

needed my next breath. Without it, I felt as if I'd perish.

"Damn."

His voice was thick, low, and laced with sex. His refusal to quiet himself made the hair on the back of my neck stand. It was the encouragement I didn't know I needed.

Please say more.

With both balls in my mouth, I continued working his tool with my hands until I felt his bulge moving closer to the tip. Switching positions, I used one hand to continue massaging his sack and wrapped my lips around his missile, anxiously awaiting its firing.

"Dat dick 'bout to cum. Shit."

His vow was music to my ears. Removing him from my mouth completely, I drained the pond that had formed underneath my tongue.

"SPUH." I spat right on the head.

"Fuck!"

His stomach caved as his back arched forward. Before he was able to recover, he was at the back of my throat again. I continued bobbing until his entire frame grew stiff and his fingers were gripping at my scalp. He began assisting me, sliding in and out of my mouth, controlling my movements with the fistful of hair in his hand.

"Where you want this shit at?" he breathed.

Looking up at him, I watched as his face tightened. His brows dipped toward his nose and the veins in his neck sprouted suddenly. My message was clear. Verbiage wasn't necessary. I used my hands to extract the cum from Makai. I stared into his dark, beastly eyes as it squirted on my cheeks, lips, chin, and chest.

His long fingers rounded my neck, applying light pressure as his tired eyes stared daggers into mine. Unsure of what he was preparing to say, I waited with baited, slightly restricted breaths.

"Put ya lips anywhere they ain't supposed to be and I'm catching two cases, Kiwi."

My face softened, instantly, as my lips curved into a smile. The liquor in my system soaked up every word that fell from his mouth. Just as quickly as he'd grabbed me, he'd released me. The running water and warm towel felt good across my face as I remained where I was, smile still plastered.

"Goofy ass girl," I heard Makai hiss, lifting me until I was on my feet again. Still, the drunken smile persisted.

FOUR

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

BEIGE WAS HER COLOR. The linen rested against her skin, giving us all around the dinner table a glimpse of perfection. The pop of red on her lips made my dick harden, recalling how they were wrapped around it two hours prior.

Her eyes found me for the hundredth time since we sat down. I wasn't sure what she'd put on her face but I knew that it was light and enhanced her beauty. She was perfect without it, but I wasn't opposed to the additives.

With my back pressed against the chair, I waited for her to say what was on her mind. Hesitantly, she tilted her head, allowing her nervous energy to lead her thoughts and actions. It had been the case all night. In an attempt to put her mind and heart at ease, I leaned over until my lips touched the side of her face.

Then, in her ear, I whispered, "We're grown, Mommas. It's okay to suck dick on the first date."

I pulled back, watching the blood drain from her face. She lightened instantly, looking like she needed the nearest tanning bed. Chuckling, I placed a hand on her thigh.

The wine in the glass in front of her hardly had a chance. She emptied it in one gulp.

“Makai,” she hissed.

“Aight. I’m going out here to burn one. I’ll be back.”

“Can I—”

“Nobody knows you sucked dick today but you, Glacier. You ain’t got a sign on your fucking forehead.” I chuckled. “Finish talking to the girls, everybody except that one.”

I pointed at Kleu.

“I like her. Her confidence is... I like it, Makai.”

“Stay away from her unless you want your wig split.”

“My wig? This is my natural ha—”

“Never mind, Kiwi.”

I stood, leaving her sitting with her thoughts. Hadn’t I taken her to her graduation and watched her graduate with a bachelor’s degree in nursing, I’d think she was a dumb-ass basket case. However, I knew that wasn’t her deal. She was book smart, but she lacked common sense from what I’d gathered.

Nodding toward the deck of Malachi’s villa, I summoned the men to the table. I was the first outside, kissing the humidity as I pulled the blunt from the case that kept it safe in my back pocket. Lawe hadn’t touched the pavement before his was dangling from his lips. Milo was next. Ledge made an appearance shortly after. Malachi was the last to join us.

Though he and Ledge weren’t frequent smokers, they indulged on occasion. Milo didn’t smoke at all. We’d never let him, knowing that he was destined for a different future than the rest of us. However, he’d always sat around, hoping for a contact.

As everyone got comfortable around the wooden fire, my eyes wandered into the house. I observed Glacier in complete awe. Her head fell back in laughter as she shook her head from one side to the other. A smile crossed my face as my heart pounded against my shirt.

Without doing anything, she was doing a whole fucking lot to a nigga. Effortlessly, she’d staked her claim and had me anxiously deleting every contact in my phone. It had taken me three months to revisit her, but there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that I would. Since the day she hit my line, she’d lived in my head. This trip was the perfect opportunity to get to know her better and I refused to miss it. Watching as she built bonds with people that I knew would have her back in any situation and at any time was therapy for

my soul. Knowing what I now knew about her lack of community, I was eager to share mine with her.

“Here, nigga.” I passed Malachi the blunt in my hand.

“Oh, you giving this nigga the blunt because he’s yo’ brother? What about my brother?” Lawe asked, turning in my direction.

“Nigga, you got a chip on your shoulder or some shit? He’s closest to me. That’s why I’m handing him the fucking blunt. Damn. You so worried about your brother hitting the blunt, then give him yours.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m good on that. I like pussy. Sorry.”

“We see. I was worried for a minute.”

“You ain’t never worried if I like pussy. I done had my fair share, nigga. My shit exhausted.”

“Is that why you brought that nice woman on this trip with you?” Ledge spoke up, clearing his throat.

I nodded, confirming his suspicions.

“What’s her story?” Milo asked.

“Same as ours,” I revealed.

Silence coated the space we shared. Malachi was the first to speak.

“Trauma bonding or are you—”

“Nah. I didn’t know that until today. But maybe it explains my instant connection to her. Only motherfuckers like us know how that feels. Maybe I did know before I truly knew. I don’t know and neither do I give a fuck, for real. I like her. That’s really all that matters to me.”

“You like somebody? Nigga, hell must be freezing over.” Lawe sniggered.

“Must be,” I agreed, accepting my blunt from Malachi. “I’m just trying to figure out what the hell I’m doing. I don’t want to string either of us along. I stayed away as long as I could. In my line of work—shit, y’all already know. No weaknesses. Niggas prey on those.”

“She doesn’t have to be a weakness, Makai,” Malachi explained. “Aeir, she’s strength. My strength.”

“And then there’s that, man. I stay away from anything serious, man. Dodging that shit. I’m fearful of the reality you once fa—”

“What happened to Anna will not happen to her,” Malachi assured me. “Anna was an angel, Makai. We all knew it. God needed her up there more than I needed her down here. He wanted her back. That’s all there is to that

situation. Keep Glacier far, far away from your world and you'll be aight."

"Agreed," Ledge added.

I gazed in her direction. As if she felt me, she turned toward me. The same silly smile that was plastered on her face earlier was back. I felt my cheeks fluff as I shook my head.

"Look at this nigga. This nigga pussy whipped!" Lawe belted.

Whipping my head around, I corrected him. "I ain't slid in that shit yet but I can tell by the way she walk, it's thunder."

If it's anything like the top she gave me, it's lethal.

"I hate it for any nigga that crosses her path after I do. Get my bail money ready."

"Can someone find the screws this nigga missing?" Milo laughed.

"Nah, 'cause I'm with this nigga when he's right," Lawe cackled.

Malachi tilted his head, agreeing.

"My shit already in a separate account. Halo is precious to me. Anybody, nigga or female, try her, I'm not letting up off 'em. I'm cool on a lot of shit, but my wife isn't one of 'em," Ledge told us.

"I'll burn this city to a crisp 'bout Kleu. Berkeley knows that, too."

"Don't act like you ain't gon' be ready to hand in your license if a nigga play with you 'bout Nocturnal."

In unison, we all released a gut-churning laugh. For once, Milo didn't try to jump down my neck about fucking with his wife. He was aware that it was all fun and games, but his sensitive ass got all in his feelings most times.

"Fuck you, bitch ass nigga."

Shrugging, I watched as Glacier attempted to stand. She stumbled slightly, placing a hand on her chest upon realizing the very thing I had. She was highly intoxicated.

"I think I'm about to dip out. This fucking girl drunk as shit. She can't hang with y'all people. They some fucking alcoholics, trying to turn her out."

"I ain't got shit to say about that," Lawe confessed. "Kleu will definitely make sure everyone has a good time."

Shrugging, Milo shook his head. "Nature ain't a saint, either."

"Halo, it's either way with baby girl."

Malachi chose not to speak. He simply shrugged. Aeir was one of a kind. We all knew it. But she didn't mind a good time, either, whether it involved alcohol or none at all. She didn't knock anyone, but indulging wasn't always her speed. Halo was more of the same.

“Aight, niggas. Let me get her to the crib. See you niggas in the morning. Breakfast at ten, right?”

“Yes,” Ledge confirmed.

“Bet.”

I slid the door back, stepping inside to find Mommas back in her seat. Her giggles were heartening. She was feeling the drinks she was putting back and I wasn't mad at her pretty ass about it, either.

“Makaiiiiiiii,” she sang, arms held out in front of her as she invited me closer.

“You ready to go sleep that shit off, Mommas?”

“I can't stand up. I can't walk. I tried.” Those lips she'd painted red stuck out like sore thumbs. Pouting, Glacier lowered her face into her palm. Amused, I moved in, leaning down to brush the hair that had fallen in her face.

“I know.”

“How will I get back?”

Her concerns left a smile on her face. Baby girl was truly clueless. A blonde wig would suit her well. I was convinced that there was air in that head of hers, aside from the knowledge she needed to succeed in her career.

“My legs, Kiwi. Come on. Let's go before you ask another crazy-ass question.”

I assisted her out of her seat and to her feet.

“I need to clean my mess.”

Green beans, pan-seared chicken, and garlic potatoes littered her half-eaten plate. The food was pretty damn good, but our servings were enough to feed two women. Every one of their plates still had leftovers.

“I got it.”

“No, we will take care of it,” Aeir insisted.

“I think I'm leaving now,” she announced to the women.

“We see, girl,” Kleu snickered.

“See you tomorrow.”

“We'll see you in the morning.”

“See you, Glacier.”

Everyone said their goodbyes as I lifted her body into my arms and grabbed the small purse she'd paired with the fit she wore. I had done well. Though I'd solicited the help of the niggas with me when I hit the shops earlier, I'd made all the final decisions alone.

Glacier was making that shit work. However, I'd imagined her when making choices was nothing in comparison to how she actually looked tonight. She was a breath of fresh air. She was divine.

"Aight, y'all. We sliding."

Glacier's head rested against my chest. Her eyes were closed, but I was certain she was still awake. We exited the dining area and cut through the back where the men were. It was the quickest way to our villa, which was next to the last one on the property.

"Am I seeing correctly?" Lawe yelled after me.

"Fuck you, nigga!" I hollered over my shoulder.

I was certain I was being clowned, but I could give two fucks. Mommas was laced and needed to get back to our spot. Her two feet wouldn't get her there, but mine would.

"You hear that, Makai?"

"Hear what, Mommas?"

"Shhhh. Listen."

I quieted, listening for whatever she was insisting. Waves crashed against the shore as the night crawlers howled in the distance.

"I don't hear shit. Water and—"

"Peace. Calm. Tranquility," she explained. "And water."

Remaining silent, I continued toward the villa, clinging to her words. Instantly, I heard it, too. Leaning down, I kissed the top of her forehead, silently appreciating her ability to transform moments and spaces she was a part of. Survival was the only mode I'd ever operated in, but since we'd landed, I'd entered foreign territory. Physically. Mentally. All that shit. It was a nice break from the hustle. She was a nice break from the hustle.

Upon entering our spot, I headed straight for the bedroom where I laid Glacier onto the bed. She leaned over until her head hit the pillow. With a smile on my face, I took her in fully. She was as pretty as she was drunk.

"My head is spinning."

"It's okay, Mommas. I got you. Let me get you undressed and I'll get you some water, aight?"

"Okay," she whined. "I drank way too much. I'm not much of a drinker."

"I see that."

Her shoes were the first to come off.

"I feel awful."

"You'll be aight. Now that I know you're a lightweight, I got you."

“Thank you, Makai. I’m enjoying myself.”

I pulled the straps of her dress down.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

One piece at a time, I removed the jewelry from her body.

“Only if you won’t regret it later.”

“I won’t if you don’t make me.”

“I won’t, G.”

I wasn’t sure what was on her mind, but it didn’t matter much. I wouldn’t make her regret that shit. Whatever the fuck it was.

“Promise?”

“I promise. Lift up.”

I pulled her dress from under her ass when she lifted.

“I feel like a little girl when you’re around. My brain stops working. I shut down completely. The only thing that works is my nervous system and it’s always a wreck. As exhilarating as the feel is, it’s a bit overwhelming.”

“Why?”

“Because the last time I liked a man, he—”

“I don’t give a fuck about that nigga, whoever he may be. Fuck him. He fucked up so I could come through.”

She lay in silence for a few seconds before she began again.

“We’re not supposed to tell you guys things like this. My God. Why am I even saying these things to you?”

“Because you can. I ain’t tripping, Mommas. I like your slow ass, too.”

“Slow?”

“As they come. But it takes nothing away from you, Glacier. Not a fucking thing,” I told her, needing her to get that through her head.

“I’ve contemplated dialing your number so many times since you left that night.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t you dial mine?”

“Letting you get your shit together.”

“Thank you,” she groaned, curling up in bed.

“I’m about to grab your water. Hang tight and don’t fall asleep.”

“Okay.”

I trekked toward the kitchen, full speed ahead. Glacier wasn’t looking too good. She needed hydration, and the only source around us was water. It was

a start that I was willing to work with.

I grabbed a bottle from the fridge and a glass from the cabinet. After uncapping the bottle, I poured it until it nearly tipped over the rim of the glass. When I made it back to the bedroom, Glacier was nowhere to be found.

“Ugggh.”

The sound of her body trying to expel the things she’d consumed led me directly to her. Hunched over the toilet, with her hands hugging the bowl, she called out to me.

“Makai?”

The shakiness of her voice reintroduced me to a feeling I rarely experienced. Sadness sheeted me like a blanket. If she’d gotten to this point, I knew just how uncomfortable she felt and how much she wished for it all to be over.

“What’s up, Mommas?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

I lowered my body to meet hers. The glass I’d brought into the bathroom with me, I set on the counter behind us, freeing my hands in order to hold her hair back.

“I shouldn’t have had anything to drink at dinner. I’d already had enough. I’m so into—”

“Aye, whenever you’re with me, have your fun. You’ll always be safe. You ain’t got shit to worry about. I’ll be your eyes, ears, legs, or whatever the fuck you need me to be for the sake of a good time. You’ll look back and laugh at this shit in a couple of months. You good.”

“I feel so awful.” Her whimpers were followed by sniffles.

Though I couldn’t see her face, I was almost certain she was crying. I grabbed a towel from the cubby underneath the sink and drenched it in warm water before pulling Glacier down onto my chest. I wiped her mouth and cleaned her face, sure not to leave any residue behind.

“I need you to drink at least half of this cup. You’ll feel a little better, I promise.”

“Okay.”

She obliged, not putting up a fight. I retrieved the glass and placed it at her lips. Inch by inch, I tilted it, allowing her to drink the water at a steady pace. She continued until she was at capacity. Taking a look at the little she’d left, I nodded in approval.

“You almost killed the entire glass. That’s good.”

“I’m exhausted, Makai.”

I didn’t protest as she curled up against me, stuffing my shirt with her arms. The cold bathroom floor was no place for a naked woman, but her condition called for an exception. I finished off the water and sat the glass beside us so that my hands were free to wrap around Glacier’s ice-cold body.

Had anyone told me four months ago that I’d be in The Catherine, clinging to a drunken guest on the bathroom floor as she tried to find comfort despite her situation, I would’ve sworn they were lying. But as of three months ago, I knew that shit was a possibility.

My interest was piqued that day Glacier waltzed into my world, hailing a busted tire and a graduation gown. I didn’t want to leave her pretty ass then but I knew she had some shit to handle. Pushing up on her while vulnerable wasn’t something I was willing to do, no matter how much I wanted her ass. And truth be told, I wanted her bad.

There was something about her innocence. There was something about her eyes. There was something about her that was tantalizing and impossible to forget. It took nearly everything in me not to spin the block and park my whip for the night when I dropped her off at the crib. But I wasn’t ready and neither was she. Now that we’d both had over three months to get our shit together, the odds were in our favor.

She was fast asleep, wasting little time counting Zs. Her light snores did weird shit to my heart. It was a damn shame that a woman so beautiful slept so fucking ugly. Her mouth hung open slightly, explaining the reason she was always slobbering.

“This fucking girl, man.”

I leaned my head against the vanity behind us.

What the fuck am I doing? I wondered, knowing that the life I lived didn’t accommodate a woman, a partner.

Not only were there niggas waiting to find a weakness of yours but there were a plethora of other reasons that made me think more than twice about what I wanted with Glacier. I wasn’t exactly sure what it was that I craved at the moment, but I knew it was more than I had with any woman on my contact list.

Her softness was a sacred place I could land on a daily after the bullshit I faced while in the mix of things. The days were long and felt never-ending. My cold, lonely bed wasn’t feeling too comfortable as of lately. Though I’d

never cared to have a woman to come home to each night, Glacier didn't make the shit feel like a bad idea. And even if it wasn't every day of the week, a few would suffice.

Mommas was adorable. The button nose, enlarged eyes, thick lips, high cheeks, and natural hair that flowed like silk were the perfect combination. Her lips were still painted red, smudging very little during her episode on the toilet. I lowered mine until they touched hers, kissing them.

Once.

Twice.

Three times and I still hadn't had enough.

I capped myself at the fourth when she began stirring in her sleep. Shamefully, I could feel my addiction to this woman, this perfect stranger growing and there wasn't much I could do to help myself. Over the last three months, I'd suppressed every thought and refused to bring any of the scenarios I'd pictured of her to fruition. But that shit ended the second my knuckles hit her door last night.

And though she was a stranger, she felt more familiar than any woman I'd ever stuck my dick in. It was possible that we shared the same reality that pushed her past the boundaries I set for the rest of them. Or, maybe it was the fact that she was oblivious to who I was, what I did, and what I could offer her. Women wanted to sink their claws in me to gain status and recognition but still got fucked on the low.

Clout chasers didn't even get a call back after our link-ups. But Glacier, she was as green as they came. While the entire city of Berkeley knew and cherished any Domino they came in contact with, she had no fucking idea and I appreciated that. I could remove the hats I wore every day and come as is. That shit was underrated but didn't go unnoticed.

"Let me get ya drunk ass in the bed." I sighed, lifting us both from the floor.

Slowly, and careful not to wake her, I headed toward the bedroom. When close enough, I pulled the sheets back and lowered her into the space I'd created for her to rest. I tucked the comforter underneath her chin and stepped back to observe my handiwork. Mommas was sound asleep, mouth wide open.

With a shake of the head, I backed out of the room. She was too damn pretty to sleep like the animal she wasn't. That shit wouldn't ever not be funny to me.

I slid the door that led to the water back. The sound of the crashing waves reminded me of Glacier's request. She forced me to quiet and listen to the sound of peace. At that very moment, it wasn't only heard. It was felt, too. I pulled out my phone and dialed the latest number I'd received for the oldest of our crew.

He was hardly around and I missed his ass every day, but whenever I called, he was on the line waiting for me. Life had pulled him in a different direction and it was painful to even consider how long he'd been in the wind. But I'd rather have pieces of him than to see him in a cage for the rest of his life.

The phone rang twice before I heard his voice on the other line.

"Makai," he answered.

"Ayo, Chem. I think I've found her, big bro. I just need a little advice so I won't fuck this shit up. I need to get it right the first time. She'd been through enough."

I waited for him to respond, taking a seat on the deck and sparking my blunt as he took his precious time. He wasn't in a hurry, and neither was I.

"Come down to the water. I want you to tell me all about her."

The call ended as I attempted to digest the news he'd just shared. I wanted to be surprised, but I wasn't. Chem was like a thief in the night, always there when you least expected it. No one was expecting him. Had he divulged that bit of information, Mercer would've hopped his ass on the plane, too. We never missed an opportunity to catch up with him because we never knew when we'd get another.

I shoved the phone in my pocket and made my way toward the water, still unsure of where he was requesting my presence, exactly. But the inhaling I heard from behind made it clear that I was in the right spot.

"Long time no see, Menace."

"My name is Makai, nigga."

"Could've fooled me," he scoffed, pulling me closer to embrace.

Makai + Glacier

MOMMAS WANTED TO SLEEP FOREVER. It was after ten and she hadn't budged. The liquor was still on her ass. Her mouth had finally closed

and she finally resembled the sleeping beauty she was.

I managed to shit, shower, and shave as she slept the morning away. With any luck, I'd have her up by twelve so that we could enjoy the rest of the day's activities that were on the itinerary. Jet skiing and the yacht were two things I had no intention of skipping.

Wake up, big head ass girl.

As if she heard my thoughts, the fluttering of her eyes began. Slowly, she came to, confusion covering her beautiful face. I witnessed the moment it all came back to her. Her facial muscles relaxed at once as a groan left her mouth.

“Arrrrrgh.”

I wasted little time kissing the remainder of the red lipstick right off those lips of hers. They were irresistible, beckoning for me every fucking chance they got.

“We're late for breakfast,” I informed her.

“I'm not hungry,” she whined. “I'm hungover.”

“That's crazy because I'm starving.”

“I'm so sorry, Makai. Maybe you can go without me or find something to eat here. Is there anything to eat here?” she asked, worry lines creasing her forehead. “I can even prepare something if you give me a few minutes to—”

“Yeah, G. There is something here to eat and it's been cooking all fucking night. It's hot,” I expressed, sliding underneath the cover. “And it's ready.”

I slid the panties from her pussy. Because her legs were together, it made the task of removing them fairly easy. Glacier assisted me, lifting slightly so I could get them over her ass.

I'd heard the fondest stories of the innocent ones coming unglued in the bedroom. Mommas was proving the rumors to be true. When her legs spread, giving me access to her box, her shyness faded. Her brain cells were activated. She thought clearly.

COGNIZANCE.

Noun.

Knowledge, notice, or awareness.

Synonyms include: consciousness, recognition, perception, and realization.

GLACIER KNEW what the fuck she was doing when she exposed me to the prettiest pink pussy on the planet. My mouth watered instantly. Her freshness made my dick hard but it wasn't his turn. Not yet, anyway. I had other plans for him that didn't include this moment.

"Goddamn," I whispered.

My fingers formed minds of their own. Underneath the influence of my thumb, her pearl hardened and her body jerked. Automatically, her legs lifted in protest.

"Ahhhh," she moaned, releasing the most precious lullaby.

My lids sealed, digesting the sweet sound of her voice while simultaneously familiarizing myself with the feeling of her flesh against my skin. I milked her pussy for the white creaminess that made it easy to glide two fingers inside of her. As I breached her border, she sighed with pleasure.

I opened my eyes to observe the satisfaction on her face as I stroked her pussy nice and slowly. Those lips of hers invited me closer. Instead of resting mine against them, I sucked the top one into my mouth and then the bottom. I let them loose shortly after, trading them for her tongue. Mine roamed her mouth as hers explored mine. Her morning breath was bearable, increasing my desire for more of her.

"Makai."

Her body caved. Her legs gathered, restricting my movements.

"Open up, Mommas. Let me caress that pussy."

They fell sideways, reopening her treasure box. I regained access, curling my index and middle finger upward to find that little bulb that would send her where she needed to be.

"Ummmmmmmm."

I snaked down her body until my lips hovered over her exposed nipple. The bra was no competition for her position or the process she was undergoing. Pebbled, sandy brown bullets slid into my mouth with ease. My obsession grew by the second. Easily, I marked them as my favorite part of her body.

"Ooooooh, Makai."

Under my administration, Glacier was swiftly overwhelmed with the amount of pleasure she was experiencing. Her eyes slammed shut as her back warmed the fitted sheet beneath her due to the constant squirming. Putting

her out of her misery wasn't in my plans, not yet, at least.

“Ummmm. Ma—oh my God. Ummm.”

After toying with the right nipple, I slid my tongue across her chest, not stopping until the left one was pressed against it. I slurped it right into my mouth, circling my tongue around it while brushing my fingers against her G-spot.

“Mmmmm. Yeeeeeees.”

Having my fix of her breasts, I left a trail of wetness down the center of her stomach, leading straight to her pussy. I ejected my fingers and used both hands to push the back of her thighs upward. Her well wouldn't run dry any time soon. The creaminess spilled from her canal into the folds of her, spotting the bed.

My tongue swept across my lips in anticipation of the task ahead. I pressed my stomach against the bed and came face to face with her fat ass pussy lips and pink ass pearl. Wasting no time, I covered them both and sucked them into my mouth. Swiping my tongue in the process, I sent her into overdrive. Glacier pushed forward, lifting her body from the bed as she ground her pussy in my face.

“Makaaaiiiii. Oh my God. Yesssss.”

I focused on her clit, knowing that it was the way to any girl's heart. In rapid motions that applied ample pressure, I tongued her swollen nub.

“Uhhhhh.”

She was unable to keep still as her pleasure mounted. Finally ready to end her gratifying misery, I pulled back and spat on her center.

“SPUH.”

“Makai, whaaaaa—”

Using my thumb, I retained a bit of the fluid I'd just unleashed and used it as lubricant to break the seal of her second hole.

“Ma—please,” she begged, relaxing as I engaged her pearl again. Back and forth, I licked it with my partially flattened tongue to maximize her level of satisfaction.

“Please don't stop.”

She thrust her hips, rocking against my face while riding my thumb, pushing it further up her asshole. My dick was hard as a missile but this shit wasn't about me. It was all about her and the nut she needed to get off. When her body stiffened underneath me, I knew it had arrived.

“Uhhhhhhhhhh! Uhhhh. Uhhhhhhhh.”

She convulsed, tightening her grip on my shoulders as she tried pushing me backward. I refused to give her the freedom she craved. Instead, I continued lapping up her juices, knowing that there were higher heights for her to reach.

I wanted her levees to break. I *needed* them to break so that I could feel her waters flow onto my beard and chin and neck and shoulders and chest. I *needed* her to drench me. Though she wasn't aware that it was possible and assumed this was the end for her, it wasn't. It was only right that I introduced her to a different word. It was only right that I showed her ass what that pussy could really do.

"Please. Please. Please," she whimpered, running up the bed.

I pinned her down as best I could with my free hand still locked on her clit as I massaged her asshole. Once she finally gave in and allowed the feeling to take control, she began to question me.

"Wha-what is ha-happening? Wha-whaaaa—"

My mouth was full of pussy, there was no way I could answer her.

"Ummmm. Ummmm. Stop. Please. Please. Oh my God. What's happ—"

And there it was. The tsunami crashed against my face like the waves crashed against the shore outside of our window. It wasn't until then that I freed her, removing my finger from her backend and pushing my index and middle fingers inside of her. Curving them upward, I worked her pussy, draining it of everything it had. My hand and wrist were soaked. So was the bed. I didn't give a fuck. All that mattered was the bliss on her face as her waters slowed to a creep.

"That little pussy packing some heat," I whistled.

She was in no condition to respond. Glacier was busy catching her breath and moaning unrecognizable words.

DISCOMBOBULATED

Adjective

Baffled, confused, and disconcerted.

Synonyms include: befuddled, flustered, confound.

I LEFT her on the bed, struggling to regain control of herself, but not without

final words.

“I’m starting your shower. Breakfast will be on the table by the time you emerge. I’ll throw something together. The day is long, we’ll need the energy.”

FIVE



I GAZED at my reflection in the mirror, pressing my palms against my dress and moving them downward to iron the invisible wrinkles. My reflection highlighted the fresh bruises on my arm. I winced in pain at the thought of falling off the jet ski and colliding with the water. Hadn't my arm hit the side, then there would be no evidence of my fall. However, that would've been too much like right in my world.

Bruising aside, I admired the red dress on my frame. The silk fabric clung to me, the richness of its color flexing with each movement of mine. Hadn't the dress been chosen for me, I'd never consider it. But it was stunning. *I* was stunning. The man waiting for me was to be credited.

There was one thing that was made abundantly clear with each piece I'd worn since settling on the island. Makai was no stranger to quality. I'd also noted that either he had an eye for fashion or he knew exactly what looked splendid on his partner. The complaints were nonexistent. The appreciation was thick like bread that had yet to be sliced.

Because I didn't want to keep him waiting much longer, I gathered my bearings and headed into the openness of the villa. The silk caressed my skin, swaying as I walked. I was careful not to step on the bottom while strutting in

the new pumps that complimented the extravagant, yet simple piece.

Upon turning the corner, I hardly recognized the man before me. Dressed in tailored slacks and a shirt that matched the color I wore, he was tantalizing. On his feet were crushed velvet sneakers that revealed a red bottom when he walked. Upon noticing my entry, his feet halted.

Turning slowly, his bland expression transformed into a mouth-splitting, heart-shuddering smile that left me dazed. The epitome of perfection, he was unreal standing near the patio door. As if he'd just stepped out of a magazine, there wasn't a piece of fabric or a hair strand out of place. Suddenly, I wondered if my stint in the mirror was long enough to check every box and match Makai's appearance.

"Whaaaaat?"

The giddiness I felt was questionable. I wasn't sure where it had come from or how it was derived, but it swelled my cheeks and stopped my heart, simultaneously. Makai's glare was most likely to blame, as it was penetrating and deliberately after my entire nervous system.

"You look good, Mommas," he complimented, raking his fingers through his beard as he nodded.

"Thank you."

"You 'bout ready to eat?"

"Yes. I'm starving."

Makai waved me over, extending a hand and waiting for me to join him by his side. Electric currents made the fine hairs on my arm stand when our fingers touched. The top layer of skin tingled as tiny, noticeable bumps rose painfully.

We stepped onto the deck where a table set for two and a young woman greeted us. Glass dinnerware and wine were among a few things that caught my eye. The gold domes that hovered over plates drew suspicion. I wanted to know what was underneath them. I'd only had two dishes from the island since we'd landed, and both were flavorful. With that knowledge, watching the domes made my stomach grumble.

"I'm Ayana, your private chef for the night. I've prepared three dishes for you to enjoy and paired them with a very bitter, sweet wine that I think you'll appreciate. The appetizers are waiting. After twenty minutes, I will replace the food with dinner proportions. And then, finally, dessert, thirty minutes after."

"Thank you." I smiled, ready to dig into whatever was waiting for us.

“My pleasure. If you need me, I’ll be over there.”

She pointed to a small trailer that wasn’t present hours prior. The steam emitting from the vents let me know that more food was being prepared inside. I had new reasons to thank her. Though I wouldn’t have minded utilizing the kitchen in the villa for dinner, it was a bonus that she had her own space.

“Bet,” Makai responded.

He rounded the table, our fingers still interlocked, and slid the chair in front of us backward. Our disconnection was inevitable but I still found myself unprepared. My hand fell by my side, in its rightful place, though it was a place that no longer appeased me. I lowered my body into the chair, ready to fill my stomach to the brim.

The level of comfort I experienced with Makai near left me baffled. The simple thought of digging into my food and not stopping until my plate was clean or my helping was gone didn’t make my cheeks burn with embarrassment or manifest any shame. When he was finally seated and the lids were removed, the fried crab bites with a creamy sauce drizzled on top captured my undivided attention.

I stretched my hand across the table, eager to meet his again. He accepted the invitation to praise the Lord with a bow of his head. I closed my eyes, softly sealing my lids.

“Dear God, thank You. The food before us, bless it. Bless us. Bless the hands that prepared it. Bless the hands as they continue to prepare the remainder of it. Bless this trip. Bless the couples who have joined us on this trip. Bless their union. Bless their children. Bless their families. Amen.”

“Amen.”

Makai was the first to pull away, leaving my fingers deserted in the center of the table. He lodged the corkscrew in the center of the cork and began twisting until it popped out. My mouth watered, but it was quite difficult to determine whether it was overproducing saliva due to my desire for the liquid he was pouring into my cup, him, or the food in front of me.

“You and that fucking eye problem.” He tittered.

“Sorry. I’m just having a hard time concealing my admiration for the man before me. I’ll try to control myself.”

With reddened cheeks and rolling eyes, I smiled.

“It’s cool because when it’s my turn to stare, I won’t give a fuck and I won’t stop until I’m good and ready.”

I grabbed the glass of wine he'd poured, watching in silence as he poured from the clear bottle that held brown liquor.

"No wine?"

"I ain't never been into that shit. I prefer to drink less and feel more. Straight, not a small percentage."

Nodding, I placed the glass on my lips and tilted it upward. The coolness tickled my tongue. The sweetness rested against it. The slight bitterness awakened it.

"Ummm," I praised the perfect combination.

"Good?" Makai sipped from his glass.

"It's perfect."

After choosing the accurate utensil, I stabbed the crab cake, scooping up a nice portion and discarding it in my mouth.

"Wow," I gasped, overwhelmed by the combustion happening inside my mouth.

"Yeah, this shit heat," Makai agreed, chewing a helping of his own.

We meddled with the silence, both stuffing our faces and embracing the new, yet astounding flavors of the island dish. Though the silence stretched far beyond the three-minute mark, somehow my comfort wasn't altered. It wasn't until I was bombarded with words that I began to unleash them.

"Had someone told me that I would be here, on an island with the man that saved my graduation day from disaster, I would've assumed they were lying two days ago."

"Now that you're here," Makai started, "are you happy you came?"

Pausing to share his penetrating gaze, I nodded. "I am. I've enjoyed my time here so far."

"Even the time spent in the water after falling off that jet?" He laughed.

"Even then," I admitted.

He'd jumped off his to rescue me the second he noticed I wasn't on mine anymore. His long arms pulled me from the water, hoisting me into the air so that I was back on my bike safely. But not before the moment we spent vest to vest, nose to nose, mouth to mouth, as we both found humor in my despair.

"You can't swim, can you, Kiwi?" he asked, pecking my lips in between words.

"No."

"Then let's tighten this fucking life vest. I'd act a damn fool if I lose you before I've even had the chance to fully enjoy you."

“Makai.” My jaws ached from smiling. “Fully enjoy me?”

“Yeah. If you die on me and I ain’t even hit that shit yet, I’mma need a refund or some shit.” Makai tightened the first strap so that my vest was snug against my body.

“Are you serious right now?”

“Dead serious, baby, so don’t tip over again. You’ll want to kill yourself all over if you go out before sampling this dick.”

“You’re truly insane.”

“What’s wrong with that?” he asked, tightening the final strap.

Honesty ruled in my world.

“Nothing,” I responded truthfully.

The edge it gave Makai, I adored.

“Exactly. Now get ya slow ass on here and don’t fall again.”

“I won’t,” I promised, balancing my weight on the jet ski.

“When we get back to the city, I’m tossing your ass in my pool. You can either sink or you can swim.”

“Is that an invitation to your home?”

“That’s an invitation to my heart,” he replied without hesitation.

The entire world stopped as the ringing of my ears began. I felt as if I’d been pushed into the deep end without a life jacket or a float. There was only me and then there was Makai.

I couldn’t find the words to say, so I remained soundless, examining every feature on his face while searching for signs of dishonesty. There were none.

“What’s the matter, Mommas?”

Lowering my eyes, I conjured words that weren’t as easy as others to emit.

“Where’d you come from?”

As the question surfaced, so did newfound emotions. I was desperate to know who this man was, where he’d come from, why he was treating me like precious gold when it would stop, and if I’d be able to recover. It had taken me two months to completely rip the remnants of my four-year relationship away from my heart. Somehow, Makai seemed impossible and it had barely been two days.

His spirit was alluring. His personality was captivating. His smile was charming. His wittiness was seductive. His spontaneity was enticing. And his oral sex, it was magic. He intrigued me in every way possible.

There had hardly been a dull moment with us. Though we'd been spending almost every minute together since we'd landed. I'd yet to grow tired of this man. I'd yet to crave my own space, which was preferred by every man I'd ever spent any amount of time with.

"The hood," he admitted.

Shaking my head, I placed my fork on the table. My helping was gone and so was Makai's. I retrieved my glass again, ready to fill the gaps of silence with words, with questions.

"When will it stop?"

"When will what stop?"

"The treatment. This treatment. The glorification. The effortless conversation. The intertwined fingers and care taken. When will it stop? And how far into your heart are you actually inviting me? I don't want to be left at the surface."

"When will it stop?" He sniggered, taking a sip from his cup. "I don't know, Glacier. Probably when you're begging me to get the fuck out of your face because you're PMSing and need a punching bag or some shit. Probably when you're pissed I didn't make it to ya crib on time because I got tied up.

"Probably when you're stressed and need time alone. Probably when you're ovulating, horny, and need dick inside of you every hour of the day but a nigga is busy. Shit, I don't know. That's up to you. I won't ever stop giving it, but there will be times when you're up in your feelings and won't be willing to receive it."

"Is this your way of asking me to be your girlfriend, Makai? Because I'd need to hear the words from your mouth."

"You won't hear them, Mommas, because I ain't asking you shit. I'm telling you what it is. You can either fall in line or fall in line. Because I'm reasonable, I gave you two options."

"Reasonable?"

"Yes."

He was serious. His straight face and rising brows proved his case.

"Have you ever been in love?"

Though the girls had made it clear that Makai had never been in love, I needed to hear it from him. With him being a secret romantic, it left me curious about his past.

"Yes."

His answer was disheartening. I felt my limbs lock as he confirmed he'd

fallen for partners in the past.

“Have you ever had your heart broken?”

I moved on, trying to recover from the first blow. Unfortunately, I was hit with another.

“Yes. Four times.”

Stunned, I swallowed my pride, fishing for more information.

“Really?”

“Once when I woke up to find my mother and pops in bed without pulses. Again when my sister-in-law was murdered. Again watching my brother suffer with no one to kill, no one to harm. And then, again, discovering Malachi had handled the deed without me.”

“Malach—”

“His wife, Anna, was murdered in their home, in front of my niece. She was only six months old.”

“My God.”

“Anna, my mother, and my aunt are the only two women I’ve loved without limits. I wouldn’t say that I was *in* love with them, but dammit, their deaths were enough to make me feel the pain of losing a spouse—especially Anna. That hit me right here.” He pointed to his chest. “Made my shit explode.”

“I’m so sorry that happened.”

“Me, too. Sorry for my brother, especially. Aeir has been his saving grace but it doesn’t negate the fact that he lost a love. No matter how much time passes, I still see the pain that resides in his eyes.”

“Seeing how he and Aeir are, I would’ve never known.”

“He’s head over heels for Aeir. He loves that woman down to his core. One wouldn’t know anything unless they knew Anna. She, too, was his heart.”

“Do you want children?”

“I’ve never considered it. I’ve never considered a significant other.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“What changed? What made you change your mind? When did you change your mind?”

The last thing I wanted was to be so wrapped up in someone’s world that I didn’t recognize their lack of desire for partnership, no matter how much it seemed as though they were onboard. Communication was the simplest

solution, but it wasn't always utilized.

Slightly fearful of his answer, I watched his shoulders shrug as he leaned back in his chair. His dark orbs remained on me. Under his watchful eye, I was apprehensive, clinging to each second as if it were our last together. I'd learned the hard way, to appreciate moments for exactly what they were because they could end without as much as a decent goodbye.

Makai's index finger shot daggers in my heart. A wink from his right eye left me breathless. The indication was one thing, but hearing confirmation made my knees weak and my chest ache.

"You."

"Me?" I gulped the air that lumped in my throat.

"Yes. You hard of hearing now?"

"I'm not. Just... I wasn't expecting... Never mind."

"What's with that face?"

Tilting his head, he waited patiently for a response.

"Just a bit... a bit baffled is all."

"At what point did I confuse you so that we can revisit that very moment? I honestly don't recall saying anything baffling."

"You haven't been in love. You haven't had your heart broken by a lover. You've never considered a partner. You've never considered children. Makai, have you spent all this time alone?"

"What's the point of settling when you know there's someone out there that checks every one of your boxes?"

"You have boxes?"

"Not until I bumped into you. Suddenly, I realized why my interest was never piqued while dealing with other women. I never even gave a relationship with any of them a thought. I was all right spending my life as a bachelor. But when you hit my line... that shit went out the window."

"Immediately?"

"Almost."

"I find that funny and somewhat hard to believe."

"I'm not trying to convince you to believe me, Glacier. You asked a question and received an answer. Whether you believe it or not is not my problem."

"Fair enough." I relaxed in my chair.

The chef made her way back to our table. Within seconds, our appetizers had been replaced with dinner. A piece of grilled fish topped a bed of rice

with a red tomato sauce coating them both. Stuffed peppers served as our side, paired with a fluffy bread that smelled as sweet as it looked.

“If there’s anything else I can get you, please let me know.”

“Thank you.” Smiling, I nodded as she backed away from the table.

“Fair warning, I plan to clean as much of my plate as possible. This looks and smells delicious.”

“Do your thang, Mommas. If you big ya back, we just gon’ unbig that motherfucker with plenty water and cardio.”

“Water and cardio?” I cackled, not believing the things that came from his mouth.

“Fucking. I tried to keep it PG, but you pushed me.”

“I pushed you? I don’t recall.”

My body was on fire. I couldn’t control the laughter that continued pouring from me. He shrugged, caring little about the words he’d used.

By the time our plates were removed and the rum cake was settling in our systems, my cheeks burned and my lips ached. I’d lost count of how many times Makai had made me double over in laughter or smile until I felt the sides of my lips crack.

Makai + Glacier

THE MOON CAST a pastel blue finish over the water’s edge. I stared out into the endlessness of the night with a light heart and complacency residing in my bones. Even if only for a moment, perfection existed.

Dinner plates and dishes had been cleared. The table they sat atop was no longer reserving space on the deck. There was only us and the night’s breeze. It felt almost as good as Makai’s fingers as they glided across the side of my face. I leaned into his palm, pressing my cheek against it to feel the pressure. Security was the feeling I was searching for and the feeling I found easily in his embrace.

“A penny for your thoughts.”

Still peering out toward the sand I weighed my options. There were things on my mind that made my center throb and my tongue tingle. Telling Makai could bring them to fruition but I wasn’t sure that I was ready for the unraveling feelings that were sure to follow.

“I don’t want to go inside,” I admitted, sighing.

“Then we don’t have to.”

“I don’t think you understand.”

“Then help me.”

He turned my body until we were face to face. Those lips that I was continuing to fight my addiction for pressed against my forehead, the tip of my nose, and then my lips.

“Help me understand, Mommas.”

“I don’t want to sleep inside tonight. I want to be out there. Closest to the water. Don’t you hear it?”

“Glacier, it’s wha—”

“Shhhh.”

Placing a finger to his lips, I silenced Makai, forcing him to join me in the tranquility of the night. Nodding his head, he listened along. And it wasn’t until my hand fell by my side that he spoke again.

“Gather the linen.”

He took off toward the house, pulling me along with him. I watched in utter shock as he removed the mattress from the bed after tossing me the cover on top of it.

“Lead the way,” he instructed, bringing the bed into the living room and then out on to the deck.

Happiness churned in my belly. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to bounce up and down or run out into the ocean in my pretty red dress. Both would, undoubtedly, release the tension in my body that was caused by unleashed excitement.

I marched toward the ocean’s edge, unable to contain myself and unable to believe such a blissful experience was in queue. My comprehension of the pending event was nonexistent. It wasn’t until Makai lowered the mattress onto the sand slowly, preventing a small sand storm, that it all smacked me in the chest, slamming into me like concrete pavers.

“Fuck you smiling so hard for?” Makai sniggered, plopping down on the bed.

Standing near him with the linen in my hand, I shook my head from side to side.

“Come ’er.”

He maneuvered my body until I was in front of him, between his thighs. He then lifted my dress slightly and demanded I rest my bones.

“Give me this shit and come ’er. You’re too far away.”

I wasn’t. I was right there, right where he wanted me. But still, I felt so far. We shared sentiments. I descended until my butt rested against his center. The rigidity beneath me pressed against my moistness.

“Better now?”

With lust-filled, low eyes, he nodded. Allowing my arousal to control my movements, I wrapped my arms around Makai’s neck, slowly swirling my hips to induce friction between us two.

“You think you slick, G,” he stated, lowly.

His words dripped with sex. Choosing not to respond because I halfway knew what he meant or was referring to, I continued grinding. To my surprise, his words were accompanied by warm, roaming extremities that located my precious bulb without removing my panties.

“Makaiiiii.”

“Better now?” He repeated the words I’d spoken moments before.

My head rose and fell, matching my rhythm.

“Yeeeeeees.”

My nipples hardened, nearly tearing tiny holes in the silk that covered them. I leaned forward until Makai’s chin was between them. Sensing my urgency, he peeled back the fabric with his mouth and circled my right nipple.

The straps fell from my shoulders as my body contracted, shriveling under Makai’s influence. The wine I’d consumed wasn’t nearly as intoxicating as him. There was no comparison.

“Ummmm.”

The quivering of my frame was a result of my pending explosion. I continued grinding my body into his but with more pressure and more intensity as he moved on to the left breast. My head fell backward, harmony riding me harder than I was riding Makai.

His teeth’s attempt to penetrate my skin caused a surging, pleasurable pain that was quickly pacified with his tongue. The two fought for residency along my neckline and collarbones as I chased the mountain’s peaks that Makai was lifting me to.

“Oh, God,” I whimpered as the first wave clashed against my lower half.

“That’s it, Mommas,” Makai encouraged. “That’s it.”

“Ohhhhhhh, God.”

A second wave forced me to close my eyes and brace for what lay ahead.

The walls of my vagina released a thick, creaminess that seeped into the seat of my panties. The muscles of my vagina began contracting, desperate for the semen of the man in my presence. It was a natural response in a woman's sexual gratification process, but somehow, it felt as if the tightening of my muscles was an act created specifically for Makai.

"Ahhhhhh. Ahh. Ma—kaiiii."

I slammed my chest against his, burying my face in the crook of his neck. Labored breathing and stiffened limbs left me paralyzed as the tingling of my lady parts intensified.

"Let that shit go, Mommas."

His voice was groggy, deep, and full of desire. The hunger lay in the undertones. The thirst was within his range. He craved me. He craved us. He craved our unison.

He...

"Makaiiiii—"

My panties were torn and pushed to the side. Restricted access agitated him.

"Shut up, Glacier," he commanded, eyes glued to my bald center as he repositioned me. "I need you to sit on this dick, Mommas. Your shit leaking."

The raspiness gripped me by the heart, tugging it out of my chest and handing it to Makai on a silver platter. He buried my breast in his mouth, again, lowering my body until I felt the tip of his rigidity approach my snugness. Slowly, I buried his bone inside of me, whimpering as I adjusted to his girth.

With both stilled. At once, everything in my world made perfect sense. Makai made perfect sense. My attraction and attachment to him made sense. Our introduction made sense. Our timing made sense. *We* made sense.

Feeling whole and complete, I recognized the missing piece to my puzzle upon its entry. It solidified so much for me, leaving hardly anything up for question. Leaving hardly anything up for assumption.

Our lips joined as our bodies began to move in sync. Naturally. Perfectly. In sync. And for the first time, I felt as if I was truly making love.

Taking his precious time, Makai never missed a stroke of his tongue or a stroke of his tool. Together, they satisfied me in ways that I had never thought possible. They healed parts of me that I couldn't heal alone. They awakened parts of me that had been suppressed or deadened for far too long. They resurrected my heart, stitching it each time he tapped against my cervix

door.

This...

This was the definition of making love. This was the definition of taking one's time. This was the definition of romance. This was the definition of falling—*hard*.

“Makai...” I whispered in his mouth.

“Shhhh.” He silenced me. “Just listen to us. Just feel us. Just stay here with me, in this moment. No words.”

Obliging, I refrained from speaking again. To make sure that I remained in the moment, void of words, Makai took my tongue into his mouth again.

I opened my ears. I opened my heart. I opened my walls. I opened my world. I opened for him.

Tears stained my cheeks, kissing the air and reminding me that this wasn't a dream. I was at the water's edge, in the middle of the night, filled to capacity, feeling everything and nothing at once. I had every reason, every right, to cry. And so I did. Soundlessly, allowing my feelings to flow freely from my eyes without shame or reservation.

He felt that good. We felt that good. It all felt so good.

Makai leaned over until my body met the mattress. Positions altered, leaving me beneath him. My dress pooled around my stomach, leaving the rest of me exposed. Makai fisted my breast, still stroking me gently and with precision.

Subtle moans escaped me. The sound of my well releasing constant lubrication blended seamlessly with the sounds of the ocean. Together, they made the most beautiful instrumentals.

Makai's hands moved down my frame, both collecting my fingers along the way. Palm to palm, he lifted them over my head as he stared through the darkness. I could feel his gaze, carving holes in my chest to steal a heart that would be his, anyhow, when it was all said and done. As we held hands, he dug into me with slightly more speed.

“Shit,” he grunted. “Fuck.”

Makai's peaking was as beautiful as his dark eyes and flawless skin. He removed himself, creating a mess of my dress. His semen's warmth barely grazed the skin of my stomach, but I felt every droplet that had managed to escape the rest.

“Fuck!”

Closing my eyes, I etched his vocals in my head. I never wanted to be

without them. *Soulful. Calming. Captivating.* It was a chosen drug. Though new, I was fully invested in it already.

I lifted my butt and allowed Makai to pull my dress from my body. He cleaned my stomach with the driest parts before tossing it off to the side.

“I don’t know if I made it out in time, Kiwi,” he whispered, kissing my lips. I could hear the worry in his tone.

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “Let’s think about it tomorrow.”

Tonight, there was no use. I didn’t want to worry about anything. I wanted to saunter in ecstasy, silence luring us both into a peaceful slumber.

“Tomorrow.” He yawned.

His body flattened next to me. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he pulled me into his arms. My lids sealed, again, welcoming the most peaceful slumber I’d experienced since the night before my parent’s fatal car crash.

SIX

Glacier

MY HOME HAD ALWAYS BEEN my safe place, but it was beginning to feel like my private hell as Makai cleared the distance between me and my front door. A full week in a foreign country with limitless time to spend with him left me spoiled and aggravated with the thought of returning to reality.

The dream he'd created for me, I was ready to revisit already. A week wasn't enough. I needed a lifetime.

"Fix your face, Mommas. You look like you just lost your best friend."

Makai rubbed my cheek with the back of his hand. He took his eyes off the road momentarily to establish a connection and assure me everything was fine. Somewhere within me, I felt indifferent.

Is everything okay? I wondered.

"It feels like it." Sadly, I sighed.

I leaned into his hand, needing to feel the pressure that offered security in my world.

"Cheer up. What's with the long ass face?"

"I have work in less than two hours. I haven't adjusted yet. I've been flying for the last seven days and it feels like I'm being tossed out of the plane with a swift kick to the spine."

Chuckling at the description of my feelings, Makai shook his head. Simultaneously, the wheels on his truck stopped rolling in the middle of a busy street. He placed his flashers on and switched gears. Now in park, he turned to face me.

“What are you doing, Makai? We’re in the middle of the road.”

“I have two eyes, Kiwi. I know exactly where we are. It doesn’t matter. Wherever we are and Mommas is feeling blue, that’s where the fuck we’ll be until she’s warm again.”

His explanation left me with a sagging posture and galloping heart. Desperate for his touch, I reached out to him, needing his comfort. He pulled me closer, not stopping until my body was pressed against his.

On his lap, I sat, arms wrapped around his neck and chest against his face. Gently, he gnawed on my nipple through the shirt he’d let me borrow. Underneath, I was bare-chested, free of a bra.

“Ouch.” The pain didn’t exist. There was only pleasure.

“Tell me what’s the matter, Mommas. The real thing, and not some made-up shit in your head. And give me a kiss before you let that shit fly.”

I kissed Makai’s lips as I’d been told. When my neck was upright again, the sadness continued.

“I’ll sit here all fucking day, Glacier. I don’t give a fuck.”

“I miss you.”

Shaking his head from one side to the other, he ran his hand through his beard.

“I haven’t gone anywhere yet.”

“I know, but I can feel your absence already. I can feel the effect of the separation already. Now that we’re both home, I don’t want to have to fight for your attention or for you to go back to thinking the way you were prior to any of this. I’m just feeling so... I don’t know. I’m not feeling very secure. As much as I hate to sound so needy, I am. The truth is, I need you to validate the feelings we both share and promise me they won’t change now that we’re back to reality.”

Honking horns passed us by, but I’d lost every caring bone in my body that didn’t directly relate to the feelings I shared with Makai. He placed a hand on both sides of my face and focused on my glossy orbs. My emotions rested in my eyes, threatening to spill.

The days I’d spent with Makai felt like months. The progress we made in such a short time left me breathless and in excruciating pain at the thought of

it all being for nothing.

“What if you decide that you don’t actually want a partnership again? What if—”

“Shhhhhh. You’re getting yourself upset for nothing, G. Shit is solid. I’m locked in. We’re locked in. Ain’t shit changing between us. I’ll admit that I have a shitload of work waiting on me. I have a bunch of business to take care of, so I might go missing for a day or two, but by the third day, I’m right back in your face, right back in your world. Three shifts at best and I’m back, Mommas. I promise.”

“Yeah?” I asked, needing confirmation.

“Yeah. And don’t ever hesitate to tell me how you really feel, aight?”

“Okay.”

“Communication is what will make this shit work. You’re not a fool for feeling how you feel or needing to make sure you’re not alone with those feelings. We all seek validation in some area of our lives. Most motherfuckers just won’t admit it. You telling me the shit you have going on in your head is validating me, letting me know that this shit is as real as I think it is... as real as I want to it be... as real as I need it to be.”

“Okay.”

“How can I make it better, Mommas? How can I make this feel better?” he asked, touching my chest.

“Can you stay with me? Until it’s time for me to leave for work? I’m not ready for you to go.”

“I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m just doing what I’m supposed to do for my big, big baby.”

“I’m not a baby.” I tittered, sliding back into my seat. “Can we go now? I’m sure someone has called the police.”

“Fuck them and the police.”

Bowing out of a fight that I knew I wouldn’t win was the best option for me. I sealed my lips and fixed my gaze out of the window as the music began to play and the vehicle began to move. Movement was good. We’d been sitting still for far too long.

I felt Makai’s hand on my thigh, searching for a part of me that had gotten accustomed to his touch. When he discovered my hand, which was childlike in comparison to his, he filled the spaces I created with his fingers.

Hand in hand, we continued toward my place where my intentions were to give him a few reasons to think of me while he was away handling business.

Minutes later, Makai was dragging my suitcases into my place. He'd gone shopping for me on our first day in The Catherine, but we'd gone shopping as a group twice more. I'd left with almost nothing and returned with enough to fill one side of my closet. Shoes and bags he'd purchased were being shipped. There wasn't room for them on the plane or in the two new suitcases.

After dropping my bags off in the kitchen, Makai disappeared into the bathroom I'd shown him. While waiting for him to emerge, I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. The amount of alcohol I'd consumed during our trip was alarming. I wanted to flush my system and remove its waste as quickly as possible.

In the midst of retrieving water, I noticed the rotting food I'd left in the fridge that was supposed to be trashed days ago. The impromptu vacation had thrown everything out of whack, but I wasn't complaining. I began removing the outdated food from the fridge and dumping it in the trash.

WHAP.

The slap on my right cheek startled me. I banged my head on the top of the fridge trying to escape. There was no exit route. Not even when Makai slid my leggings down my legs and entered me from behind.

"Baaaaaaaaby," I moaned, gripping the edge of the fridge with one hand and the door with the other.

"Don't baby me, Glacier."

The sternness represented by his tone raised a hundred red flags. While blessing me with even, deep strokes, he rescued my head from the fridge and transferred me to the counter. Arched back and curled toes, I accepted his massiveness with pride.

He fisted my ponytail, pulling my head backward until his lips touched my cheek. The kiss I was waiting for never happened. Instead, I felt his teeth sinking into my skin.

"Ahhhh. Baby. Ummmm."

His strokes quickened. The love we'd made in The Catherine was a far cry from the screwing we were into now. I felt conflicted, not sure if I wanted more of this or more of the slow strokes that I'd become addicted to.

"I'm not staying," Makai grunted, confirming my suspicions.

He wasn't feeling his best. Something had happened between the time he'd set my bags aside and his return from the bathroom.

“Wh-whyyyy?”

“Because I’m not laying up in a crib another nigga done marked as his territory. You got me fucked up, G.”

I stiffened from both the pending orgasm that slammed against my uterus and the aftershock of Makai’s declaration. Immediately, I recalled the face trimmer on the counter that was once Nelson’s but I’d claimed as my own. When feeling lazy and I didn’t want to spend my day recovering from waxing, I opted for a trim that held me over for another week—sometimes two.

His collection of boxers had become my favorite loungewear. Not because they were Nelson’s, but because they were more comfortable than my panties most nights. A fresh pair hung behind the door each day and I discarded a pair in the dirty clothes. I’d collected them over the four-year span we were together. Tossing them had never crossed my mind, though I’d gotten rid of all the rest of his things.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, taking full responsibility for the heat that was coming from his body. I could feel the steam seeping through his skin.

As sick and confusing as it was, his anger heightened my sensitivity. The orgasm that was knocking at my center began to erupt. Before it reached me, Makai ejected himself from my canal, leaving me deserted and barely able to catch my breath.

“Baby,” I called out to him, watching as he stuffed his pole inside his pants.

Agitation was apparent in every move he made. He reached into his pocket and removed the knot that was inside. When he slammed it onto the counter, I could feel his frustration deep in my core.

“Makai. Can we talk about this?”

He ignored me, continuing with whatever plans he’d set in motion.

“Makai?”

I moved closer. He stepped backward, gutting me in the process.

“Ya phone should be in your mailbox. Wherever that motherfucker is. Is that enough to hold you over for the week?”

“Week?” I gasped, pulling my leggings up to my waist.

“I asked you if you were done crying ’bout that nigga and you told me yes. Ya crib ain’t agreeing with the lie you told. Don’t fucking call me until that nigga out ya life completely. I mean that shit, G. Don’t fucking call me.”

“Makai. Wait. Let’s ta—”

There was no use. He'd already reached the door and was out of it.

WHAM!

I jumped. Hearing the door slam against the frame left me with so many mixed emotions. I struggled to know if I wanted to cry, run after him, or respect his feelings as he had mine.

Glacier, what have you done? I groaned inwardly.

Paralyzed with grief, I remained in the same spot until my legs began to burn. I gathered my bearings and headed for the shower. In less than two hours, I'd be clocking in. A forty-five-minute nap was high on my priority list before and it had to happen before I walked out of the door.

Makai + Glacier

TRUE TO HIS WORD, I hadn't seen or heard from Makai in a week. His absence left me sick to the stomach. Every morning, I got home from work, I crawled in my bed where I stayed until it was time to leave for work again. Depression was settling in and the cure was nowhere to be found.

"Look, you can get your ass up or we can come get yo' ass up. Either is fine with me," Kleu threatened. "We're all having brunch at one and I'll be damned if you miss it because you miss that aggravating ass nigga. I don't know what you see in that asshole, anyway."

"It's more so what she feels," Nature said, coming to my defense. "And it's the same thing you feel for your man. He's on the same spectrum as Makai."

"Nobody asked you anything!" Kleu chuckled. "Leave my man out of this."

"He's an a-hole to the rest of the world, but he is the sweetest thing to me," I sighed. "This whole time I've been thinking he'd be the one to start this thing off on the wrong foot but it's me."

"If you don't mind me asking, why are you still holding onto your ex's things?" Aeir questioned.

"They're gone now. And they'd become my things. The briefs I wore because they're so comfortable. Not because they're his. The trimmer I use when I'm too lazy to go to my wax appointment."

"I understand but you have to see Makai's point of view. Just imagine if

you'd walked into his bathroom to find his ex's robe that he wears because it's comfortable or her entire face care kit because he hasn't bothered buying his own since they split?" Aeir reasoned.

"I knooooow. I feel where he's coming from, one hundred percent. I just wish he didn't put me in the doghouse to make his point."

"Better than cut you off completely," Nature spoke.

"That's true. The good thing about it is, I had my period this week. I guess the punishment had benefits."

"Exactly, so when the nigga comes back around, you can knock him off his feet without interruptions!" Kleu yelled, dancing in the camera.

"It's almost twelve," Aeir reminded us all."

"I knooooow. Send me the location again. I'll be there."

"Good, because I don't mind a good tussle."

"Kleu, she said she's coming," Nature belted. "Leave the girl alone. Her feelings are hurt."

"Ummm hmmm. I know. That's why I want her out of that house."

The call ended with us all saying our goodbyes, promising to see each other in less than two hours. The nap I'd taken immediately after work made the timing perfect. A good soak in some scolding hot water and a bit of pampering would do the trick and whip me right into shape.

Enthusiasm had been hiding for a full week, but peeped its head out at the realization I'd confirmed plans with the girls. Since the trip, I'd slowly gravitated to their circle and was welcomed with open arms. The betrayal I felt discovering Valencia and Nelson were hooking up in their spare time was replaced with love from the new girl gang that I'd stumbled upon.

During the time that Makai had been avoiding me, they'd been my saving grace. I received daily calls from someone in the circle and managed to get a few laughs from the text thread they'd added me to. Hadn't they been present, I wasn't sure how the week would've gone.

As I stood and stretched my limbs, a text came through. I rushed down to the bed, again, hopeful that it was the man I'd been waiting for. Unfortunately, it was Kleu.

The address. I recalled asking for it. However, when I opened the message to find a number that I didn't have stored, I was overjoyed. Multiple heart emoji followed the message that she'd sent.

I just got this from Lawe's phone. It's Makai's personal number. Call your man, sweet cheeks.

Without hesitation, I tapped the number and waited for the line to connect. Ten seconds later, I was still holding the phone to my ear. Another six seconds and the voicemail greeted me. I weighed my options, wondering if I should hang up or leave a message. Choosing the latter, I waited for the beep.

“Hey, Makai. It’s me... Glacier. At your earliest convenience, please give me a call or text at the very least. I miss you immensely.”

I ended the call, refusing to replay the message because I was certain I’d erase it.

If he calls, he calls. If he doesn’t, I won’t sweat it, I coached as I made my way to the bathroom to begin grooming. *I won’t sweat it.*

A warm bath was first on the list. I soaked for an hour. My fingers and toes were wrinkled and I’d refilled the tub twice by the time I rose with bubbles popping all over me. I warmed the tiniest amount of wax in the small warmer that I used to snatch the hair from the root that grew above my lip.

Because it grew back so often, I never waited for appointments to have it taken care of. If I waited that long, my mustache would be as full as Makai. Though it was an exaggeration, I felt like a cavewoman when the smallest bit of hair began to peep through my skin.

I polished my face with blush, highlighter, mascara, and clear gloss. When I finally opened my door, dressed in a pleated skirt and corset with matching heels, I was feeling so much better. I understood how foolish I sounded declining the invitation earlier on. Because a day out with women of such a high caliber would be the self-care I needed after such a long week.

A box waited for me outside my door. Because I wasn’t expecting a package, it came as a surprise to me. Makai Domino was listed as the recipient, further confusing me. Nevertheless, I brought the box inside. I checked the time on my phone, calculating the time I had to spare. Leaving my home without checking the contents of it wasn’t an option.

Five minutes.

I used the box opener to cut through the tape on the package. The enormous Chanel box left me speechless. I untied the bow and removed the top of the box, finding a classic flap in black. It matched perfectly with my attire. In haste, I removed the contents of my bag and stuffed the medium-sized shoulder bag.

I rushed out of the door less than three minutes later, mentally promising to clean the mess I’d made when I returned. I had the next few nights off, so

there was plenty of time to clean. Sliding into my car had me feeling an imbalance. The bag on my arm cost more than two of the cars I was driving.

Makai's generosity before parting ways paid my bills for the remainder of the three months I had left on my lease. My earnings went straight into my savings. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I checked the banking app to see exactly how much unused money was sitting and determine if I wanted to use a portion of it on a down payment for something more up-to-date.

Because the meeting point wasn't too far from my home, I arrived within fifteen minutes. Finding a spot to park was difficult, but I managed to catch a couple exiting. Thankful for their departure, I carefully replaced their car with mine.

Perfect timing.

Aeir held the door for Nature to go before her.

"Wait up!" I yelled, grabbing both of their attention.

"Well, aren't you the cutest?" Aeir extended her arms, welcoming me in for a hug.

"Thank you. You look stunning yourself."

"Kleu is already waiting. I hope you don't mind my friend joining us. She's in town for a few days. She, too, is a nurse, but she travels."

"Oh, nice. I'd like to hear all about that."

We reached the table shortly after entering the establishment. Introductions began, everyone embracing each other with the kindest, warmest hugs before we all sat down to stare at the endless menu.

"What are we drinking?" Kleu asked.

"I'm not. Not today, anyway. Sorry."

"Understood," she replied. "As for me, though... Baby, I need an entire pitcher to tell y'all how I thought Lawe's vasectomy failed us. I didn't see my period until today. Keep in mind, it's been missing for three weeks."

"Oh, wo-wow," I stuttered.

The heaviness that surrounded me felt unreal and sudden.

I shifted in my chair, searching for the only presence that made it possible to feel like I was submerged underwater without oxygen to breathe.

Makai.

Our eyes locked. I watched him obliterate the space between us, not stopping until he was beside me.

Makai.

I tried comprehending the depth of the moment, the depths of him. In

shallow territory, I searched for understanding but was met with resistance. Money was placed on the table, but his eyes never left mine.

“Hope you ladies having a good fucking day. G, let me holler at you right quick.”

He nodded toward the back of the restaurant where the restroom signs were posted. My body was out of my seat, trailing behind him, helplessly, before I could protest. When we finally reached the secluded space, closest to the emergency exit, the questions began.

“How’d you know where I was?”

“Your phone is under my plan. Our locations are both shared. The information for the account is in the Notes app.”

Feeling cheated of a full week, I huffed and pushed my back against the wall. Had I known where Makai was this entire time, I would’ve shown up, just like he had today.

“I called you today.”

“So?”

“So? What do you mean, so?”

His response was a swift kick to the abdomen.

“I don’t give a fuck ’bout no call, G. I’m right here, right now. You can tell me what you want.”

“That’s rude, Makai, and mean.”

“So is—”

I couldn’t bear the thought of him condemning me.

“Okay. Okay. I get it. You’re upset.”

“What you wanted when you called, G?”

“To see you. And can you stop calling me G? My name is Glacier or Mommas or Kiwi or baby.”

“It was, G. I ain’t feeling none of that shit right now.”

“Are you really hitting this low, Makai?”

“I told you the first week, hell is my limit, and the only reason that is is because I ain’t been there yet to find out what’s lower than that.”

“Then why are you here, Makai? To disturb my day? Hmm? Because it could’ve gone perfectly fine without you.”

The darkness in his eyes was replaced with regret. Pain, maybe. I wasn’t sure. The mention of not wanting him to interrupt my day had struck a nerve. He softened, but only for a second.

“If you don’t want to talk to me or communicate with me, then do what

you want. But not halfway. Don't pop up on me. Don't pull me to the side to talk about nothing. Don't bait me in just to leave me hanging. Stand on your s-stand on your principles, Makai. I'm respecting your space. Don't come bothering me until you're ready to come back to me."

I stormed in the other direction, ready to pack my things and head home. My apology to the girls would have to come later. I'd made it a few inches away from Makai when his fingers wrapped around my arm, pulling me back.

My body slammed against the wall as I waited for words to fall from his lips. He shot fire at me through his eyes. In no mood to return the energy he was exuding, I stepped forward in an attempt to leave again. Gently, he pushed my back against the wall again.

"I don't fight, Makai. I never will. I don't have a toxic bone in my body. I only fill my life with healthy relationships, no matter if it's friendships or partnerships. I don't argue. I don't fuss. That's not me. If that's what you're trying to get from me or expecting at all, then I'm not her. I'm not the woman for you.

"Communication is my only weapon. It's all I'll ever use to progress in situations. You're upset, but you're not communicating with me. I can't win here. You can't win here. So, what's the point?"

The question was painful to even ask. Tears welled in my eyes as they finally left my lips. His silence was nauseating. I was sick to my stomach as I gathered myself, pressing forward without intentions of returning.

"I don't like the way I'm feeling."

His words stopped me in my tracks. I faced him, again, prepared to hear him out.

"I'm a grown-ass man, G, and I've never felt any emotion for a woman that wasn't my mother, aunt, or my brothers' wives. Family. That's all I've ever given a fuck about. And then, you saunter your fine ass in my line of vision, leaving me feeling so many fucking things at once.

"I'm overwhelmed. I'm overstimulated. I'm all over the fucking place. And that shit I saw in your bathroom made my chest hurt. I felt like somebody was reaching in my shit, trying to pull my heart out that bitch.

"To even think that you still hung up on another nigga got me heated. But it's you, G. Standing on business ain't that easy. So, yes, I popped up to make sure you straight, make sure you don't need shit, and to hear your voice. I've had a long fucking week without you but have I gotten over that shit? Nah.

You can't sit here with a straight face and say you'd be over it either."

"I wouldn't be."

"So cut a nigga some slack."

"I'm trying, Makai, but what else do you want me to do with you here, standing in my face? Act as if my week hasn't been long without you? I can't do that because it would be misleading."

He lowered his head, tilting it as he stared up at me.

"I don't like having feelings and shit. I don't understand how niggas do it."

"Thank you, Makai, for sharing these things with me. For communicating with me. Your fear isn't in vain and neither does it make you any less of a man. It's love, Makai. Though we haven't reached that point, we will. And I need you to know that it's a gamble. It always will be."

Standing tall, he straightened his posture. He inhaled deeply and then released the air he'd pulled in.

"I see." He paused, deep in thought. "I'ma get out of your hair. I'll see you around, G."

Though the words were lodged in my throat, I didn't fight to release them.

What does that even mean for us, Makai? With the question lingering, I watched him turn and walk away.

SEVEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

“HEY, Makai. It’s me... Glacier. At your earliest convenience, please give me a call or text at the very least. I miss you immensely.”

Her message was looped like a soundtrack in the department stores. Since I’d heard it, I hadn’t stopped playing it. That was well over twenty-four hours ago. I pulled from the blunt in my hand, pressing replay one more time.

“Hey, Makai. It’s me... Glacier. At your earliest convenience, please give me a call or text at the very least. I miss you immensely.”

She’d surprised me a bit, going out of her way to reach out to me. That shit made me feel good, really good. Everything about Mommas made a nigga feel good, honestly. Everything except that bullshit in her bathroom.

“Fuck is you over there smiling about?” Trent scoffed.

“Shit. I’m ’bout to get on up out of here. My bed is calling my name,” I announced, stretching my limbs as I stood.

“The bed or some pussy? You cutting out mighty early and the only thing make a nigga do that is some—”

“You all down my pants, nigga.”

“I’m just saying... You went on a fucking couple’s vacation and shit with

no fucking girlfriend and now you ready to turn in early. I'm missing something here. You the nigga that doesn't sleep."

"And that's the problem. I'm tired than a bitch right now. I'm trying to lay it down."

"Hmph. And what else? Spill that shit."

"And I'm trying to lay up in some shit. Not no bust down, though. Something exclusively mine."

"Has hell frozen?"

"Nah, nigga. Just trying something new and seeing where it leads."

"She must be a hell of a woman to get you to sit your ass down."

"She is."

"Just as crazy as you, too, I bet."

"Weird as this shit sounds, she ain't. She's like a fucking lava lamp or some shit. A nigga look at her pretty ass and all the stress, frustration, whatever... it all disappears. It's been a hell of a week for me. I need her to tame the storm brewing inside me. Real shit, she ain't even got to use that thunder between her thighs to do it. I just need her around right now."

"Not this motherfucker growing mushy on me. I never thought I'd see the fucking day."

Trent was no stranger. He'd been my partner since we were kids. That same pain I felt all those years ago, he did too. He walked in to find his entire family slumped. They died of carbon monoxide poisoning. None of them even saw it coming. Hadn't he been at a friend's house, he would've been a casualty, too.

"Well, you seeing that bitch today. Don't act like you ain't a simp when it comes to Ava, nigga."

"I'm whatever I need to be to keep her happy. That's my whole chest right there. Fuck a heart."

"See, I never aspired to be like you niggas, all in love and shit. Mommas got me thinking differently, though. Why the fuck I be up, late night, playing different scenarios in my head and shit, all involving her healthy relationship, no profanity using, sleepy, clingy, addictive ass? Like I'm a fucking mental patient or something." I chuckled, not believing who I was becoming.

"Because you are a mental patient."

"Fuck you, dog. Real shit."

"Nah. I'm happy for you, bro. And she's a good girl? Them my favorite kind. They take their asses to work and come straight to the house. They

might watch a few shows, read hella books, and sleep as often as they can.”

“Always tired as fuck.”

“Exactly. I love a sleepyhead.”

“She be knocked the fuck out. I just be up, bored as fuck, waiting on her to open her eyes.”

“Making unnecessary noise and shit, hoping it wakes her ass up!” Trent cackled.

I slapped the hand he held in the air. “Exactly, nigga. Like, wake yo’ ass up, girl. I’m losing my shit, sitting here, waiting.”

“Yeah, man, them the ones. I hate to say it but prepare to be bat shit about her. They’re worth it.”

“Already, Trent. Already. A week with her felt like a year. I’ve been having withdrawals all week. Keeping her ass in the doghouse been hitting me hard as hell.”

“Doghouse? For what?”

“She broke up with some nigga a few months ago, when I bumped into her. I gave her three months to get that nigga out of her system. When I pulled up on her, I asked her if she was done crying over the nigga. She told me she was. We spend damn near a week in paradise, and as soon as we get back, I take a piss in her bathroom and the nigga shit still laying around.”

“You think she dipping back?”

“Nah. I don’t. I know she ain’t. But it’s the principle. Imagine me inviting her to my crib and my ex shit just laying around casually.”

“She gon’ trip.”

“Exactly and she ain’t even the type to trip. But that shit would make her trip with a nigga.”

“Block you on everything for a week or two.”

“I’m already knowing how it goes. Wouldn’t answer calls or open the door. The difference is, I’m knocking that bitch down. I’m not knocking on it, giving her a chance to not answer for me.”

“So, you sliding through, although she’s in trouble right now.”

“Yeah. Fuck it. I can’t take that shit no more. I’m going to get her and bring her ass with me. I need some sleep.”

“Say less. Go handle your business. You got me ready to cut out, too.”

His shop was across the street from mine. Because mine was nothing more than a front and a place to wash some of the money that touched my hands, I found myself across the street more often than not. I couldn’t

remember the last time I'd sold a tire, but according to my records, I sold a few sets of rims daily.

"Sounds like the plan to me."

We slapped hands, snapping as we extended our pointer fingers.

"One."

"One."

I tossed the blunt on the ground when I stepped outside. The crisp air was evidence that fall in Berkeley was on the horizon. There were no places I'd rather be than at the docks to collect my goods or laid up next to Glacier on the nights she wasn't on the clock.

With any luck, I'd convince her to switch shifts by the time fall started so that our nights were spent together. Because I worked through the day, too, that shift was ideal in my eyes. I made a mental note to mention it in the near future. We had nearly a month before the season began. There was still time.

I wasted no time applying pressure to the gas pedal as I started down Canton. Her crib was a straight shot from the shop. One turn and I was pulling into the lot of her apartments. I hopped out as quickly as I'd pulled up.

"Ayo, G!" I yelled out, knocking on the door simultaneously. "Open the door, Mommas."

Because I hadn't warned her of my visit, I wanted to assure her that it was me banging. I stepped back after a few knocks that rattled the door and prepared for her to open. It wasn't long before the locks began to turn.

Anxiously, I waited to see her face. I could already feel her body inside my arms, pressed against mine. It was maddening, the way she had me seeing shit, hearing shit, and feeling shit that hadn't even happened but was strongly desired. Glacier was forcing me to discover parts of me that I never knew existed.

Though I should've been running for the hills, I was running toward her. I wanted to clash and burn if that's what falling deeper for her would result in. At this point, I didn't give a fuck because it would be worth it in the very end.

The door opened slightly before closing, immediately. I didn't miss the frustration written on my baby's face before she slammed it in my face. I found myself chuckling, though there wasn't shit funny. Instead of knocking again, I sent a warning before destruction.

"G, I'll knock this bitch off the hinges, Mommas. If you don't want the neighbors to ransack your shit while you're gone tonight, then open the

door.”

She snatched it open in an instant, stepping aside for me to enter.

“I’m not coming in that fucking house, Glacier.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To tell you to pack a bag. I’m ready to lay down. I’m sleepy. I’ll be waiting in the tru—”

“Makai, it’s not that simple,” she protested.

“It is tonight. You can yell at me tomorrow. Tonight, though, I’m ready for bed and I won’t be able to rest if you’re not in that motherfucker with me. Mad and all.”

“I’m not mad.”

“Then, whatever you are, Kiwi.”

“I don’t like how dismissive you’re being right now.”

“Baby, damn, I’m not being dismissive. I’m just asking you to put off whatever you on until tomorrow. I haven’t had more than three hours of sleep all week. I ain’t gon’ get none until I begin making things right with you. This is only a gesture. It’s not me saying fuck you or your feelings. I’m saying fuck that shit tonight. So, you coming or what?”

She stood with her arms folded at her chest. Her lips protruded. Her nostrils flared. Her eyes glossed. She was deep in them fucking feelings of hers.

“I’m missing you,” I admitted.

She dropped her hands at her side as she lowered her head and shook it from one side to the other.

“Come home with me.”

“You’re not being fair.”

“Life ain’t fair, Mommas.”

“I don’t feel like packing anything,” she confessed.

“Then, don’t. You ain’t got to bring shit but your body. You don’t need a fucking thing when you’re with me, Glacier. Just lock up and come ’er.”

“One second.”

I watched her disappear inside her spot and then reappear seconds later with keys in one hand and the bag I sent her in another. After locking up, she turned to face me. I reached out, wrapping my fingers around her neck and bringing her closer. I tried my hardest to shove my tongue down her throat. I missed her so fucking much.

Voicing it was hardly enough. I needed to show her. She had to have

gotten the point by the time I released her. Simultaneously, we released stifled breaths, wiping our mouths with smiles on our faces.

“I like that bag in ya hand.”

“My man bought it for me.” She giggled. “Isn’t she pretty?”

“Yeah, Kiwi. She pretty.”

She looped her arm through mine and we both made our way to the truck.

Makai + Glacier

PULLING up to my crib with Glacier clinging to me from the passenger seat was one of those scenarios that kept replaying in my head. As we waited for the gate to part and grant us access, I took the time to address the fact that it was no longer a scenario in my head. It was happening and it felt even been in fruition.

“Thi-this is beautiful, Makai.”

I glanced in her direction to find her eyes bright and her chin high as she whipped her head in every direction to get a full view of the property. The night experience and day experience were two completely different things.

At night, yard lights made it glow slightly, assisting her vision. In the day, when the sun was up, you could see every detail, from the pond out back that Pops loved to fish in to the pool that the deck encased.

“Appreciate it, Mommas.”

“And you live here all alone?”

“Shit, not for long, hopefully. Within the next year, I’m trying to have a permanent guest.”

Her smile reached her glistening eyes.

“Then you wouldn’t be able to sneak off for a week at a time. You sure that’s what you want?”

“I’m not sneaking off no more. That shit ’bout killed me.”

She remained silent, the sound of dogs startling her. Her neck twisted in my direction. Frantically, she waited for an explanation or instructions, at the very least. I parked the whip and matched her gaze.

“You’re afraid of dogs, huh?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in close proximity with one.”

“Never.”

“Never.”

“Not even in passing on the sidewalk?”

“I can’t remember the last time I walked anywhere to do anything, honestly. And the small time I do spend from my car to wherever I’m headed, no. I’ve never encountered a dog of any kind.”

“Not even as a kid?”

“My neighbors had dogs. Several of them did, but they were always inside or in the backyard.”

“I have two dogs, Glacier, and they aren’t the cute little shits you see in the windows of cars you ride past. They’re large and they don’t trust easily. They roam the house freely, ready to serve and protect me. It’s what they’re trained to do.”

“Makai, my God. They don’t know me. They’ll have me for dinner.”

“That’s not entirely true,” I informed her. “I’ve been introducing them to your scent for the last week.”

“I don’t understand.”

I hoped what I was about to share with her would ease the worry on her face. She was visibly shaken and we hadn’t gotten out of the truck yet.

“The shirts and shit of mine you wore on vacation, I didn’t wash. I used it to introduce my boys to you. Though they haven’t formally met you, you’re no stranger. They’re very smart boys and great listeners. They’ll behave themselves. If it makes you more comfortable, after I’ve let them meet you, I can lock their door so they aren’t able to come inside until you leave or are more comfortable.”

“No. No. I don’t want their routines altered on my account. If you say they’re going to behave, then I can get over myself.”

“Bet. You ready?”

“No, Makai,” she stated honestly. “But this is as ready as I’ll be, so yes.”

“It’s all good, Kiwi. Come on.”

Their barks rang out into the night air. Glacier’s grip on my hand was tighter than it had ever been. When we entered the house and the barking halted, suddenly, she grew worried.

“What happened? Where are they?”

“On their way inside. They’ve recognized it’s me and have quieted themselves before entering.”

The tension in her body was written all over her beautiful face.

“Relax. Everything will be fine. You’ll know off top if they’re fucking

with you or not. They will inspect. Just don't pani—"

"Oh my God. They're here!" she shrieked. "What do I do?"

"Nothing. You do nothing, Mommas."

Midnight and Ghost entered the foyer where we stood, hovering as they did whenever they were suspicious. Ghost led the duo, circling Glacier and me, using his nose to familiarize himself with the new visitor. Midnight was right behind him, conducting his own inspection. Once they'd circled us a few times, Glacier began to relax.

Ghost posted up a few feet away, confirming he'd completed his thorough analysis or whatever the fuck dogs referred to as an investigation. Midnight was the last one to rest on his ass. Both of them stared back at Glacier, who hadn't taken her eyes off them, afraid of what she thought they might do. Truth was, my boys weren't going to harm her. I knew that. Deep down, I knew she did as well.

"Can I pet them?"

"They ain't with all that shit, but you can try. They'll just walk off if they're not interested."

"And they won't try to bite me?"

"If they wanted to bite you, baby, you'd be bitten by now. Unrecognizable. On the way to the morgue, not the hospital. You good. They fucking with you. You can chill now."

I left the trio alone and headed for the kitchen. The shrimp noodles in my cabinet had been calling my name since I hit the first of four blunts Trent and I had faced together.

"Behave," I warned Ghost and Midnight.

Instead of following me to the threshold of the kitchen, because they weren't allowed inside, they remained fixated on Glacier. That was confirmation they were expecting her undivided attention. She was afraid of them seconds ago.

Now that they were genuinely curious about her, she'd be fighting to get them to leave her ass alone. They'd follow her around like hawks, ready for demands and ready to kill anything that threatened her well-being.

I broke the pack of noodles twice and placed them in a bowl of warm water, careful not to touch them. I popped it into the microwave and set the timer. As the bowl began to spin, I washed my hands and began preparing the things I'd need to enhance the hood classic. Butter, pepper, all-purpose seasoning, and hot sauce.

By the time the microwave beeped, Glacier was still nowhere in sight. I hooked my noodles up, waiting for her to peep her head around the corner. When she didn't, I went in search of her, not finding her ass until I was on the last forkful of noodles.

She was upstairs, in the room furthest from the rest of them. It was the smallest and one that I didn't frequent. There was too much pain within its walls. It held my first heartbreak.

"She was beautiful."

"And the smartest woman one would ever meet. Deemed a genius, but I'm still trying to figure out how the one thing that was most brilliant about her was the same fucking thing that betrayed her. Brought her to the edge, ultimately suggesting that the world was a better place without her. As deep as her love for my father ran, she couldn't fathom going out alone. He had to join her. She made sure that he would."

She placed the picture of my mother back on the shelf where she'd got it. When she began to drift in my direction, Midnight and Ghost were at her side. Just like me, my boys had fallen and it didn't take long at all.

"I'm so sorry."

"Same, Mommas. Living in a cold ass world without the two people you need most is wicked. I keep wanting this shit to be a nightmare that I can wake up from. But I've been awake a long fucking time, long enough to know this is real. This is reality."

"As much as it sucks, it is. It's reality. I miss my mom and dad every single day. Now more than ever because I need them to see that I've become exactly who I promised them I would."

"They see you, Mommas. I know they do."

She wrapped her arms around me, resting her head against my chest.

"I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

"Me, too."

Unable to resist temptation, I slapped her cheek, cupping her ass in my palm and making that motherfucker jiggle. The low growls of Midnight and Ghost were alarming and comical at once. I halted to address their foolishness. Both of them niggas had crossed the fucking line.

"Thing one and two, take y'all ass downstairs somewhere. This mine. I don't know what y'all motherfuckers thought it was. Better chill the fuck out and watch who you growling at."

"Baby." Glacier chuckled. "Seriously? They're just dogs."

“I told you. My limit is hell. Motherfuckers go low and I go the lowest. Did you hear them niggas trying to growl at me all low and shit?”

With a shake of the head, she led me out of the room.

“I’m not sure where I’m going, but please lead the way. I am in dire need of sleep.”

“Me, too. I need to take this bowl to the kitchen first.”

“Show me where the bedroom is and you can go downstairs after.”

“There’s a kitchen up here before we get to the bedroom.”

“Hmmm. Fancy.”

“Nah. Necessary when them late-night munchies kick in on my ass.”

I dropped the bowl off and directed Glacier toward the bedroom where she wasted little time climbing in. As much as I wanted to join her, I had to wash away the day before I touched my sheets.

I wandered toward the shower, determined to make it a quick one so I could make it back to her sooner rather than later. My cravings for skin-to-skin contact and a good night’s rest pumped me with urgency. The excitement to climb my ass in bed beside Glacier was possibly immature, but that shit felt too good to consider it anything but authentic.

Ten minutes elapsed before I was back in the bedroom, briefs covering my ass and a towel dangling from my neck. I dried parts of me that were still slightly damp. The cold air made them more apparent as I crossed the threshold of the bedroom.

“Glacier, tomorrow, we—”

Upon realizing she was sound asleep, I let the rest of my statement fall by the wayside. When completely dry, I pulled back the covers on the side she’d left empty. It wasn’t mine, but I didn’t give a fuck tonight. I’d take whatever as long as she was beside me. I gripped her waist and brought her as close to me as possible.

Once I buried my face in her neck, it was lights out for me. I’d never known peace until Glacier. Now that I’d discovered it, I never wanted to live without it.

EIGHT



A NIGHT at Makai's had quickly turned into weeks at his home. *Two*. I'd slept in his bed fourteen days straight, most times without him present. Ghost and Midnight had become my companions, replacing Makai during the day when he was off to work.

This morning, however, he hadn't let go of the bed and I was able to snuggle up next to him as soon as I made it in after work. It was the greatest feeling after a long shift. Makai comforted me in ways that made me believe anyone prior to him simply wasn't doing enough, sexing enough, saying enough, communicating enough, or feeling enough for me or to me.

Perfection didn't exist, but the thing we were building was the closest to it. Not because disagreements didn't arise, but because we handled them head—on instead of letting things fester and create larger problems.

My shift was the latest topic of discussion. And as much as I wanted to fold and switch it as Makai suggested, mornings like the one we'd embarked on this time wouldn't be possible. I lived for them and looked forward to them.

"Makaiiiii."

Arching my back as I'd been advised, I shuddered as he entered me from

behind. My wetness made my melting pot easy to access, again. The intense strokes he'd administered as I laid on my back translated well as our position changed.

"Baby, please."

I felt the tip of his thumb circling my second hole, the one that made me dripping wet when toyed with. Makai understood this. He'd learned it over the last few weeks and weaponized my vulnerability to spark flames within me that neither of us could smolder.

"Cum on this dick, Glacier."

My milkiness dripped onto the bed, making a mess beneath us. Our skin stuck together with each stroke. I was leaking like a faucet, thick, creaminess that sounded like stirred spaghetti.

I wasn't sure if I could, again, but Makai had made me a believer enough times to know that anything was possible with him in control of our escapades.

"Arch that back and move ya fucking hand," he grunted, slapping my hand away. "Take this dick. You got it, Mommas."

His words.

His stroke.

His baritone.

His commands.

His encouragement.

His passive aggression.

They were a lethal combination, making my toes curl and my faucet leak. I gripped the pillows in front of me, trying my hardest to obey his rules. The pleasurable pain his long strokes caused had me dazed, dizzy, and unable to speak. Announcing my second orgasm was impossible because my head was stuffed so far in the pillow and all that occupied it at the moment was air.

"That's it," Makai moaned. "Shit, I'm 'bout to cum."

Still reeling as sweat beads popped up on my chest, I managed to get a glimpse of Makai as he pulled out of me and let his soldiers march across my butt. I fell forward with ringing ears and an ultra-sensitive center. I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and catch the Zs that appeared above my head. Makai wasn't interested in sleep, though. He was ready for our day to officially begin.

"Get up," he demanded, slapping my right cheek. "I'm starting the shower."

I was immobile. My brain wasn't sending the correct signals to my body, leaving me in a vegetative state. Not even words would form so I remained silent. It wasn't until the warmth of a rag brushed across my skin did I feel alive again. Delicately, Makai removed his residue from my backside.

"Baby?"

"Hmm?"

"The water is running."

"I can't move."

Soundlessly, he lifted me into his arms and tossed me over his shoulder. As if I was a feather, he never broke a sweat. His breathing remained even.

"There."

He lowered my feet to the floor of the shower and closed the glass door behind us.

"Are you okay to stand?"

"Yes." I nodded, unsure how long my response would reflect the truth.

The water was therapeutic. It rained down on my skin, rejuvenating my body with each passing second. I held out my palms, allowing the drops to fall freely into my hands. There was something so special and soothing about the element that I'd learned so much about throughout school and even in college.

"Turn around, Mommas. Let me get you cleaned up."

Obliging, I fell into the habit that Makai and I had created.

He started at my chin, working the towel around my neck and then down my chest. My shoulders were next. My breasts followed. Gently, he took his time, making sure every inch was covered in suds.

He cleansed my body with the same passion he stroked my insides. My mouth slacked as my head fell backward, feeling each passing of his hand on the other end of the towel. He was making love to me, again, which made my orgasm inevitable, especially when his bare hand brushed against my vagina.

"Baaaaaby!" I shrieked, clinging to Makai for support.

"Shhh. Shhhhh," he whispered, kissing me on top of my forehead.

"Mmmm. Mmm." I hummed, feeling my muscles contract.

"Stand up, so I can finish washing you up, Mommas."

What he was asking of me wasn't tangible. I leaned into him, making his job harder. However, he still managed to get it done. After rinsing me off, he perched me on the bench that was a few feet away from the showerhead, but not too far from the heat that emitted from the hot water.

I placed my head on the wall behind me, reminiscing on the moment that led us to this point. During our first shower together, in his home, I washed his back and he returned the favor. However, the rag never left his hand. He cleansed me from head to toe. Every day, during our showers, it was more of the same. On occasion, he allowed me to cleanse his skin thoroughly, but his main focus was me. *Always*. In all ways.

After we'd both been cleansed, Makai hauled me into the bedroom wrapped in one of his plush towels. They smelled like berry fields and caressed me like a long hug.

"I never thanked you for going to dinner with me Friday, though we were supposed to have date night."

It was something we'd agreed on a week and a half ago. Though our first date night was lost in translation and we ended up at his grandfather's house eating with the family, I thoroughly enjoyed myself. Meeting everyone was another event in our relationship that was scratched off my list.

"I enjoyed everyone. Especially all the babies."

"They got plenty of them."

"Quiet. There aren't that many."

Silence provoked me to continue, but Makai beat me to the marker.

"I have a question for you, Glacier, something I want you to answer honestly."

"Okay," I responded, bracing myself for impact.

To my surprise, there was no need.

"Is there anything I'm lacking?"

The sincerity in his voice lulled my heart. Makai had made it abundantly clear that he had no idea what he was doing and if he ever began doing it wrong, then I should address him. I had absolutely no reason to. He was a natural. Though he'd never been in love before, he'd been loved and he'd been loved properly. It made all the difference.

As tough as his edges were, his core was as fragile. Makai wasn't all bad and neither was he the menace he'd been labeled as. He had a heart, a bigger one than any person I'd ever met in life. Though he didn't open it to many, he'd opened it to me and I was grateful to have such a large chunk of him.

I left the pain of my old relationship behind me so that I could be as open and as vulnerable as our bond required. I didn't label him the same as the other men I'd dated, because he wasn't. Makai was special, different in every single way. Discovering new parts of him and new pieces to our puzzle each

day kept me on my toes. He kept me on my toes.

Falling in love with him was unavoidable and I was almost certain I'd reached that point. The possibility crossed my mind as he patted my skin dry, waiting for me to respond.

"No, baby."

"You for real, or you just saying shit to make a nigga feel good?" Genuinely, he needed to know. He stopped drying my body until I opened my mouth with another answer.

"I'm not. I promise. I don't understand why it's so hard for you to credit yourself for having a heart, Makai. A good one."

"Because I've been heartless my whole fucking life, Kiwi."

"Because you felt like you had to be in most circumstances. This isn't one. When you step outside of that door, your heart shrivels again. But when you're with me, it expands and it beats and it desires and it yearns and it—"

"Loves."

"Ma-Makai," I stammered, having absolutely nothing more to say. He'd left me without oxygen.

"It does."

Nodding my head, I agreed. My eyes burned from the saltiness of my tears as they formed, the first falling too fast for me to catch.

"Mine, too," I confessed.

"Which makes me want to do this shit right, Mommas. The people I love, I don't let them down. I never have and I never will. I'd go to the ends of the earth for 'em, no questions asked. I feel the same about you, but the shit is a little different.

"My family, they don't expect much from a nigga, especially on a daily basis. I strived every fucking day to be the dude that you need that day because every day, I've realized you need something else, another version of me I probably haven't even tapped into yet. So, I'm just trying to make sure I'm not lacking."

He began rubbing my body down, again, using the towel to dry my tears as well.

"Am I?" My voice shook, hoping I'd been as accommodating to him as Makai had been to me.

"No. No. No, you aren't. You make a nigga feel real fucking good these days, G. Purposeful. Ya know? Give me something to look forward to every damn day. I be out in the streets, ready to skip and bob my head to some

fucking love song as I make my way back to you.

“I’m pressing niggas to hurry the fuck up so that I can get home to see you off to work. And the nights you’re off, a motherfucker better not even call my phone about business. All because I’m digging the way you make me feel and the way I feel about you. Maybe them ain’t the right words.” He chuckled.

“A nigga with a textbook memory and I can’t even think of enough to describe what be going on in here? You see what you do to me, woman?” He laid his palm against his chest. “But I like it. I’m scared but I’ve never been a pussy, though.”

His last few words stuck with me, prompting the next question. “What are you most fearful of?”

His eyes darkened a few shades as he stared off into the distance. He’d disconnected. I desperately needed him back in the moment.

“Baby,” I called out to him. He lowered his eyes to me, letting me know he was back with me.

“Becoming the man I saw my brother as over a two-year span and having the same reason to become that man.”

“Anna,” I whispered.

“Anna.” He nodded. “Aeir doesn’t even know how much I appreciate her, how much the fam appreciates her. She brought him back to us.”

“I’m so thankful for the new friendships you’ve helped me foster. The women are everything I could’ve imagined in a girl group.”

“They’re good people, baby. You’re in good hands. I promise.”

“I know.”

“After you get dressed, Aeir will be downstairs waiting. She’s already on her way to get you. I called in a quick favor.”

“Where are we going?”

Though excited, I wanted to know how my day would flow. Most of them were spent catching up on sleep, taking Ghost and Midnight for walks, FaceTime with Makai, and lunch dates with the girls when they were available.

“She’s taking you to look at some condos so you can get out of that bullshit ass—”

“Makai,” I warned, knowing he was ready to fly off the handle. I lured him back in, back to me.

“Anyway, you leaving all that shit in there unless I spent my money on

it.”

“Fine with me.” Shrugging, I continued. “But what you’re not going to do is get worked up over something so irrelevant. You’ve made it clear that you’re going to provide me with a new space. Let’s leave it there.”

“I was,” he stated as a matter of fact, kissing my lips to let me know that he wasn’t letting his thoughts overrule his happiness.

“Good. Now, how long do I have?”

“About twenty minutes.”

“Makai, you’ve wasted so much of my time this morning, knowing you had plans for me?” I joked, bolting through the bedroom and into the second closet in his bedroom that I’d made mine. It was fairly empty, but I was slowly building a decent-sized wardrobe with his help.

“My bad, Mommas. I was enjoying your company and contemplating telling her to cancel the plans but I finally said fuck it.”

He followed behind me like the lost puppy he was whenever it was time for me to leave him.

“Are you really going to stand there with those big, sad eyes and droopy lip?”

“Is it working?”

“No. Not really. As much as I want to hang out with you today, the sound of condo searching is enough to get me out of the house, baby. A new place? Oh my God, the feeling is unmatched.”

“And getting you out of your place will make me feel much better, too, so I ain’t tripping. Let me know how much longer on your lease or what it’ll take to break it and I got you.”

“Makai, you really don’t keep track of how much you spend on me, do you?”

“For what?” He tittered. “If you felt that little pussy between your legs, you wouldn’t keep track, either. I’m ’bout ready to empty my pockets right now, lint and all. You can have it, Kiwi.”

“Shut up and get out so I can get dressed.”

I snatched a pair of leggings and a cropped top to match. On top, I planned to wear my denim jacket and the sand-colored slides that Makai had purchased me.

“I’m not ready to leave yet. You can get dressed with me in here.”

He made his way inside, sitting on the bench in the middle of the massive closet.

“So aggravating.” My cheeks rounded as a smile lifted my brows and stretched my lips upward.

“Don’t do me like that,” he pled.

Spoiling Makai mentally and catering to his emotional desires was such a privilege that I was fully invested in. He was the biggest, bravest bear that simply needed someone to stroke the gentle parts of him that were hidden from the rest of the world.

“If you’re going to stay, can you help a little?”

“Whatever you need.”

He was on his feet immediately. Acts of service and gift-giving were undoubtedly his love languages. Being needed, feeling like he could be of assistance, and watching someone find joy in his gifts made his heart pump.

“Socks. Do you have any brown ones, specifically ones that match this?”

“Yeah. I got you. One second.”

Makai exited, leaving me with a hundred thousand and ninety-two feelings that all had a subject in common—my growing love for him. *My baby.*

Makai + Glacier

I PECKED his lips a final time and climbed into Aeir’s truck.

“Hm.” He pushed forward, kissing me once again before slamming the door.

“Pull off!” I demanded, knowing we’d be another few minutes if she gave Makai a chance to think of anything else that would keep me in his presence longer.

“Wait!” he yelled, knocking on the window.

“I told you to pull off.” I sniggered.

“Sorry, Glacier, but I can’t do my brother like that. Let him have his way. He deserves it.”

“Yes, baby?” I asked, poking my head out of the window.

“Here. Get y’all something to eat while y’all out. I know y’all like talking shit about us over sweet ass drinks and nasty ass food, pretending to hate us.”

“We don’t,” I scoffed. He had it all wrong.

“Yeah. Yeah. Here.” He handed me a few hundreds from his knot.

“I really don’t need this much, Makai.”

“But I need to give you that much, so take it. And call me if you find something you like. Don’t leave until you sign the lease.”

“Okay.”

“Here,” he said, again, this time handing me a card.

“What’s this?” I asked, staring at the thick, black card that was sleek and weighty.

“Your American Express card. It’s attached to my account so you ain’t worried about shit.”

“Baby, seriously?”

“Yeah. If you find something you like, call me. I want to make sure everything straight before you sign a lease.”

“Okay. Can I go now?” I laughed, knowing just how painful it was to release me.

My heart already longed for him as well, but I had business to tend to. Ironically, it was business he’d set in motion for me.

“Get ya big head ass on, then. Acting like I’m getting on your nerves.”

The smirk on his handsome face made me curl my fingers, stretching them to meet his collar and pulling him forward. My lips and his rejoiced, making contact again for the twentieth time since I’d awakened.

“I’ll see you soon. I promise.”

“Aight, Mommas. I’ll be somewhere in the city... waiting on your call.”

We parted ways, finally, the silence in the car leaving me with my thoughts. Makai was growing on me so heavily. Had I felt alone, I’d be concerned. I wasn’t alone. He exposed himself and the adoration we shared each day.

“I’ve never seen him like this,” Aeir averred.

Tilting my head in her direction, I rested my eyes on her immaculate brown skin.

“I’m in love, babe.” I dragged my words as I ran a hand down my face. “My God. Is it too soon? We’re going on five weeks.”

“Almost five weeks. Girl, why did it take more than five minutes? What’s wrong with you? It only took me one minute and I knew I had fallen for Lawe. To make matters worse, I was at work, where I was supposed to not even notice men for real,” Kleu blabbered, startling me. It wasn’t until then I realized why music wasn’t playing.

“I knew I loved Milo the first time I saw him on campus. From the

beginning, we were stuck to each other like bees on a honeycomb.”

“I fell in love with Malachi through dreams and visions of him that confused my head. However, they never confused my heart. And the first time I heard his voice on the phone, I was ready to toss my body in front of him and demand he love me back.”

“So, I’m a late bloomer?”

“Not at all. I saw it in your eyes while we were on vacation. That’s why I assumed you had been dating for months. I would’ve never known that was your first date if you hadn’t told me.” Nonchalantly, Aeir comforted me.

“Okay. This makes me feel better. Now, I want to turn around and kiss my baby again. Shopping for condos don’t seem so fun now.”

“Good thing you aren’t, then.”

“What do you mean? He said—”

“Because he doesn’t want you to feel as if he’s making such huge decisions for you and not considering your personal desires. Makai has already chosen your condominium. He’s just hoping you choose the same one so that he doesn’t have to rework the papers.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“It’s as if he just keeps getting better with time. I’m almost afraid to find out when it all will end.”

“It won’t,” Nature called out. “It won’t, Glacier.”

I gazed at Aeir for confirmation. She shook her head from one side to the other. “It won’t.”

“Listen to them,” Kleu added. “It doesn’t stop with them. They just find ways to get better, do better, love better, listen better... all the things. They are obsessed with progression. Not only in life but in love as well. That’s why I’m never coming up off my nigga.”

“Me either,” Nature addressed.

“I’ll go to my grave loving Malachi.”

“Just don’t beat him there or I’m going to resurrect your ass for him. I can’t see him go through that again.”

“I won’t,” Aeir laughed. “I promise.”

I remained silent, taking everything they were saying into consideration. Their testament to the Dominoes’ ability to improve the perfection they already presented was honorable.

“So, are we heading to the place he’s already chosen, or would you like to

view the others?”

“Take me to the place my man has already prepared for me. I don’t care about the others. He knows me well enough now. I’m almost certain he chose nothing short of the best for me.”

“Shiiiiid. I know that’s right. Rep your man, girl. Call me later to tell me all about how much you love your new place, Glacier. I’m about to get my day started.”

“My next appointment is in five minutes. I’ll talk to you ladies later,” Nature chimed in.

“Talk to you all later.”

The music picked up, filling every inch of the truck with soft, jazz sounds. I examined the beautiful machine that Aeir drove daily. I’d seen hundreds of G-Wagons but I’d never been inside one. I’d only had the privilege of admiring them from afar. Now that I was inside, I could attest that the interior was as dreamy as the exterior.

Within fifteen minutes, we were approaching a high-rise building. Aeir was the first out as the concierge opened her door. I was next up, falling in line and following her as she traveled toward the entry where a woman stood, waving us over with a folder in her hand.

“Hi, I’m Eloise. Nice to meet you. Who is the lucky woman? Ms. Roseberry?”

She extended a hand to shake ours.

“I’m Glacier Roseberry.”

“Aeir Domino.” With a hand on her chest, Aeir clarified.

“Good. Good. Let’s get inside and out of this Berkeley wind, shall we?”

“Lead the way, please.” Nodding, I assured her we’d follow.

“I’ll start with the most obvious; valet and concierge are one and the same. We’re equipped with twenty-four-hour service. There’s an entire staff dedicated to assisting residents. Each floor has six members on their concierge team. They’re at your service whenever you need them.

“Cars of our residents are taken upon arrival and placed inside our elevator that leads directly to our resident’s floor. On this floor, you’ll find glass cubbies for each car. Residents can have up to three of them. When you’re ready to leave, you can step right outside of your door to your cubby where you’ll use the fob inside your vehicle to get back down to the ground level.

“The process simply repeats itself as you come and go. We have several

elevators, all stopping on a maximum of three floors. Not all the elevators go to every floor. This cuts down on wait times when coming home.

“Because most residents come out of the car garage, they hardly use the elevators for anything but getting to their homes, not leaving.

“Let’s head upstairs. I can show you the amenities after we’ve toured your space. I think it’s best to start there.”

“Because I won’t be sleeping in the gym or the pool,” I agreed.

“Right. Let’s get to the more important spaces, the ones you’ll use most often.”

“Thank you.”

We entered the elevator and exited less than a minute later, on the very top floor.

“There are six condominiums on this floor. They’re all customized and look a little different. Yours, in particular, is the third largest and has the most incredible view of Berkeley. You can see the entire city from up here.”

She opened the door.

Including him.

Makai stood near the never-ending, floor-to-ceiling window with his back pressed against the glass. He looked up, noticing we’d entered and he was no longer alone. I whipped my body around, waiting for an explanation from Aeir. She shrugged with the cutest smile on her face.

“How’d he... We left befo—”

“Your place is only eight minutes from his, babes. I drove around in circles to give him time to make it here before us.”

“Sneaky little thing!”

“I hate to cut out so soon, but I have to get back to my babies. If you need me, please call me.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes. My job here is done. Before picking you up, my mission was a bit more complicated.”

“What was it, exactly?”

“Furniture. It’ll be here within the hour. All you have to do is say yes to this unit. If it doesn’t work, you can look at any unit you want on this floor, baby. I’ll put a motherfucker out if you want their shit. This building checked all the boxes and your safety won’t ever be in question,” Makai explained, shoving his phone in his pocket and making his way over to me.

“Yes.”

“But baby, you haven’t ev—”

“Yes. I’m saying yes. I want to be exactly where you want me to be, wherever you feel most comfortable with me being. I don’t need to visit every room to know I love this place. Look at the windows, Makai. The kitchen, the size of the living room, the study... It’s a yes.”

I scanned the main areas that were visible, loving everything I saw.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s settled,” Aeir boasted. “I told you she’d love it.”

“You did. Appreciate everything.”

“I’ll expedite that delivery order now. Everything should be here and situated within the next hour. In the meantime, I need to get going.”

“And I need to prepare to let her drag my Black ass around, buying shit to fill this bitch up.”

“Makai!” I blurted, tapping his arm.

“Fuck that lady. I’m sure she be cussing, too,” he whispered, leaning closer to Aeir and me.

“You have your hands full here, friend,” with a titter, Aeir warned.

“Thank you so much for all that you’ve done for me today. I don’t know what all it consisted of, but I’m certain it was a lot of work.”

“That’s the advantage of marrying a Domino. They make sure that hard work doesn’t truly exist in your world if they can help it.” She chuckled. “Pointing out everything from the Pinterest board I’d created was my only job. Not going home and coming to get you instead was the hardest part.”

“Well, nonetheless, thanks again.”

“Of course.”

We saw her out before the tour of my new condominium began. I was already filling a store cart in my head as Eloise began speaking again.

“This unit features a double dining and living room situation. It’s the perfect place for hosting if you have a large family.”

We do, I brimmed with pleasure, realizing it was now my reality.

NINE

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

WATCHING her hips sway from side to side as she made her way to the whip had me considering adding some width to them motherfuckers. Maybe a mini or two would thicken them up even more. Her body was perfect as it was, but some grown-ass woman weight wouldn't hurt. Some weight that expressed her life's purpose and an ability that the opposite sex simply didn't have—*procreating*.

Chill, nigga, I warned, sealing the blunt in my hand.

"Hey, you."

Glacier plopped down onto the seat of the coupe I'd spent two hours at the dealership copping.

"I love it, babe."

"Thank you. Here."

I stuck my wet lips out for her to kiss them.

"You ready to roll?"

"Not really, because I don't know where we're headed."

"I'm not telling you, either. You'll see whenever we get there."

I hadn't seen Glacier in two days. I had missed the shit out of her ass.

Business had called me away, but now that I was back in the city, she was my priority.

“Ugh. So annoying.”

“How you liking your new crib?” I asked, changing the subject and ignoring the lies she told.

“I love it, baby. I just wish I had someone to sleep in my big, lonely bed with me,” she exaggerated, whining.

“I’ll be there tonight.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. I promise. Ghost and Midnight walking ’round that bitch sad. I went to feed them today and they don’t know what to do with themselves.”

“I know. I’ve visited them twice, hoping they wouldn’t notice my absence.”

“Too bad, because them niggas know.”

I lit the blunt, taking a pull before punching the gas. Her body flew backward, making me double over in laughter.

“Oh God, Makai. Pay attention and stop laughing,” she fussed.

“My bad, Mommas. I should’ve warned you.”

“Or at least let me get my seatbelt on.”

“That too.”

The irritation in her voice alerted me to other issues, prompting me to put my blunt out.

“What’s up, though? What’s on your mind? You sound... frustrated.”

“I’m not, baby. Just anxious.”

“About what? How can I fix it?”

“I just need to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s the limit on the card you gave me?”

“Ain’t one. Spend whatever you need. Why?”

“Because I was thinking... I’m becoming a little frustrated with my car. And now that I live here, I want a better one. One that represents me now, not me years and years ago. Riding in Aeir’s truck a few days ago, and it made me want one like it. I have been obsessing over them for the last two days since you’ve been gone, working up the nerve to ask if—”

“Ask for what? Working up the nerve for what? Have I not proven to you that you can have whatever you want, Glacier? If I have access to it, then so do you. For every dime I have, at this point, five cents of that shit belongs to

you. You can have whatever you want, baby. You want a G-Wagon like Aeir's, then let's get you a fucking G-Wagon."

I busted a U-turn in the middle of the street, putting the rest of our plans on hold. If Glacier wanted a new whip, then that was what she'd get. I was beating my own ass for not getting her something else sooner.

"Baby, we don't have to right now. It's late. Maybe they're closed."

"They'll open that bitch up, then. You're not going to spend another day obsessing over something you can have. You're getting a truck, baby. Tonight."

"I'd much rather have date night. The truck can wait. Seriously. I don't want to spend our night looking around, test driving, or whatever else it takes. I'd rather be alone with you."

The desperation in her tone, and the feel of her hand as it grazed my thigh, soothed me. I relit my blunt and made another U-turn, heading back in the direction we were going.

"Aight. Then, I guess the gun range shit out of the question tonight?"

"Oh, God. You planned date night at the gun range?"

Baby was mortified.

"Yeah. It's important that you learn how to protect yourself, Glacier. I won't always be there. I live a life that people wish they could. If anything ever happened to you because of me, I'd lose my shit. So, yeah, I planned a date at the gun range."

"I wore heels," she admitted. "And a dress. I'm sorry, baby. I didn't know."

"It's all good. I was just trying to take you somewhere official. I can teach you how to shoot at the crib. I'd prefer it, anyway. The rounds are unlimited, and so is the choices of machinery."

"I have mase."

"For what? A bear? Kiwi, you got to blast a nigga that comes your way. You gon' fuck both y'all up with some mase."

"I have a knife, too."

She was proud of her arsenal. I was sick to my fucking stomach.

"A motherfucker shouldn't even be able to get that close for you to have to use your knife. Send his ass to hell before he is even in your personal space."

"Oh, no. I couldn't. I wouldn't be able to live with myself." She huffed, getting herself worked up for nothing.

“Yes, you would. Because you’d find comfort in knowing you tried to keep him alive until the ambulance came. Be down there giving the nigga CPR and shit.”

“You know me so well.”

“Where we headed, G? I ain’t got no more tricks up my sleeve,” I confessed, puffing on my blunt.

“Well, there is this new movie I was eyeing.”

“See what time the next one is showing. And do you really want to waste your fly ass fit at the movies?”

“I don’t mind.”

She busied herself on the phone while I made a few turns to get us closer to a theater so that she could see whatever she was trying to see. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been to see a movie. We bootlegged almost everything as kids. As an adult, it never crossed my mind.

“The next one starts in an hour,” she articulated, straightening her back so that her voice projected over the music.

“Bet. You want to wait there or what?”

“Yes, because I have something I want you to look at.”

“What is it?” I wondered.

“The one truck that I like most. It’s not in Berkeley but it has zero miles on it.”

I understood why she wasn’t interested in the dealership idea. She already had a truck in mind.

“You want it shipped?”

“Yes. It’s all a very pretty shade of white with little sprinkles meshed into the paint. Everything inside is the prettiest shade of nude. It’s loaded with so much.”

“See what they need from you to get the process started.”

“Makai—” She sniggered, leaning closer to me.

That could only mean one thing. She already had some shit in motion.

“I’ve already been approved. I just wanted to make sure I could use the card for the down payment. That’s why I asked about the limit.”

“Bet. Don’t put shit down. We don’t pay notes, baby. We pay for the whole thang. Give me the link and I’ll make sure it’s in your cubby by nightfall tomorrow.”

“Awww. You’re going to make me cry.”

“Don’t do that shit, Mommas. It’s the only time you look ugly.”

“Really, Makai?”

“Real shit. The first time I seen that shit, I was like, please stop. Please stop that shit. It’s not a good look for you.”

“I don’t even know why I try with you sometimes.”

“Because you love a nigga and his honesty,” I reminded her. “Now send me the link to that truck. I can put something in motion while we wait for the movie to start.”

Glacier was ecstatic to hand me her cell the second I was settled into a parking spot. To my surprise, she’d done her homework and chosen a sick-ass G 63. After further inspection on my end, I forwarded the link to my phone and then to my people from there.

Have this at the crib by nightfall tomorrow.

Because the location of my home was anonymous, the vehicle would be delivered to Pops' house.

“So now we wait.” Glacier reclined her seat slightly.

“Yeah. We have about forty-five minutes. What’s on your mind, Kiwi?”

From the way she peered in my direction, I knew there was something floating in that noggin of hers.

“Well, I was thinking that maybe the dogs cou—”

“No.” I laughed, shaking my head because I already knew where this was going.

“You haven’t even let me finish.”

“Because them niggas too big to be anywhere other than where they’re at. Plus, I can’t even touch you when they’re around without them tripping. That’s part of the reason I got the spot, to have you to myself, away from them niggas.”

“Seriously? You’re jealous of dogs?”

“If they don’t come up off you soon, I’m putting them niggas to sleep.”

“Wait. Hold on, Makai.”

“Any nigga that tries to come between us has to go. No exceptions.”

“They are animals!” She cackled.

“Anybody—shit, anything—can get it.”

“I don’t even know why I try with you sometimes.”

“Me either.”

Forty-five minutes passed by extremely quickly. Lost in one another and the thoughts lingering in our heads, we were approaching the start of the movie.

“Baby, it’s 9:15,” Mommas announced, gathering her belongings.

I was the first out of the whip. I made it to her side as she slid out. Taking her hand, I gently closed the door behind her, knowing that it would seal itself tightly without my assistance. Hand in hand, we journeyed toward the building and then to our seats. Glacier had secured our tickets online, so there was no need to pick any up. Before my ass could touch the seat good, I was back up, ready to hit the concession stand.

“Where are you going?” she whispered, pulling me back down.

“To get some food. I’m hungry as shit.”

“Baby, there’s a button to push on your chair. They’ll come and take your order.”

“Damn, real shit?”

“Yes. And bring it to you. I just sent you the link to the menu.”

“It’s online?”

“Yes.”

“Damn.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” She chuckled.

“I ain’t know they done upgraded like that. Shit, I would’ve been hitting the movies.”

“I think that’s a lie, baby.”

“It is, but now that I have a woman that demands date nights, then I know where to come every now and then.”

“I won’t be mad about a movie date at all. I can dress down and relax.”

“Exactly. Now, where the fucking button at, Kiwi? My stomach touching my back.”

Makai + Glacier

I HATED the nights she worked. Shit, I hated she worked at all. If it was up to me, she’d be jobless and spoiled. However, I’d settle for the spoiling. I did that shit with pride. Movie dates like the one we’d gone on last night, dinner dates, activities, outings, picnics, clothes, bags, shoes, hairstyles, facials, or whatever else Glacier wanted, she could have. The sky was hardly the limit for Mommas.

What you doing? I texted, hoping her phone was near. I was missing her

down bad and needed to hear her voice.

When the gray bubble appeared, I knew I had some action. I waited for her response to surface, but it never did. Instead, I received a call. In my eyes, that was even better.

“Mommas,” I sang into the line, drunk off whatever potion she’d been giving a nigga.

“Hey, baby.”

“What you doing?”

“Working. Preparing to take my break in the next twenty minutes. Are you near?”

“Shit, I can be.”

“Okay. Maybe we can settle for a date in the cafeteria? It’s late so they don’t have many options.”

“I’m with whatever. I’m not complaining.”

“Okay. Meet me downstairs in the cafeteria in twenty minutes.”

“Bet.”

Thrilled to be in my lady’s presence again, I caught myself doing a small celebration dance. My hands were both in the air as I rocked my body from side to side, sure not to spill the weed I’d just lined my blunt with.

Admittedly, Glacier had a fucking hold on me. I punched the gas, determined to meet her in twenty minutes. I was almost fifteen minutes away, but I had a stop to make. The engine in the coupe got me the hell out of dodge and on the highway in seconds. Rick Ross and his recollection of the moves he was making to see the money he was seeing fueled my adrenaline.

I made a pit stop just before leaving my car in the emergency room roundabout. If they needed it moved, they’d tow my shit. I wasn’t tripping, not even a little. But neither was I going to miss the twenty-minute mark. Following the signs through the hallways, I made it to the cafeteria just as Mommas was walking in.

The beige scrubs she wore hugged her frame perfectly. Loose almost everywhere else, the backside had little to no room left. Shit, I wished I was them fucking pants for the night, riding up her ass and pussy every so often.

“Pssst. Pssst. Can I holler at you for a minute?” I whispered. “What’s ya name? You walking so fast, baby.”

“Because my man is meeting me here soon. I don’t want you to end your night in one of the beds upstairs, so it’s best we not talk to one another.”

“Damn, it’s like that?”

“Yes.”

I reached her, my steps equaling nearly two of hers gave me an advantage. I wrapped my arms around her, stuffing my nose in the crook of her neck.

“Ummmm. You smell good, Mommas.”

“Thank you, baby.”

“How long is your break?”

“I have a full hour if I decide to forfeit my two fifteen-minute breaks.”

“Forfeit them motherfuckers then, baby.”

“Hmmm. Those fifteen-minute naps come in handy, Makai.”

“You can nap during the hour. I promise I won’t even bother you.”

“What’s the catch?”

I placed my lips an inch away from her ear and confessed, “I want some of that thang between your legs.”

“A nap will be needed, indeed.”

Nervously, she chuckled, pulling me deeper into the cafeteria.

“Nah. We going outside. I’m parked in the emergency entrance.”

“Oh God. I need to grab something to eat first.”

“I got all that in the car.”

“What did you get?”

“A plate from Pops. I was supposed to pick it up earlier but let time pass me by.”

“You interrupted Pops’ sleep this late, Makai? I could’ve gotten something from the cafeteria,” she fussed, walking down the hallways without looking at a single sign.

“I have a key, Glacier. You do know that, right?”

“Oh, yeah.”

We arrived to find my car in the same place I’d parked it, waiting for me to hop back in and do the right fucking thing.

“I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this,” she commented.

Her head darted from one side to the other as if someone was privy to our little secret. Her paranoia was humorous.

“You watching the door like somebody about to come out of that motherfucker looking for you.”

“They aren’t.”

“Good, then, we straight.”

I searched the parking lot for the best secluded spot, one where she would

be able to sleep peacefully after I dropped dick off inside of her. When I finally found the perfect location, I backed in, giving us a clear view of the hospital and the remainder of the parking lot.

Glacier's head was turned toward the window, thoughts in a faraway place. She hardly noticed we'd settled in. I slid my seat back and reached over to her side of the car. I snatched her little fine ass up by the shirt and sat her right on my thighs.

"What's the matter, Mommas? Talk to me."

It was so easy for me to see straight through her facade. Something was bothering her. It was written in those big, wondrous eyes.

"My grandmother. I feel like I've dropped the ball. She requires commitment and I've always made time for her. As of late, I've been putting my weekly visits off. Every week, I say that I'll go the following week. Then, I tell myself I'm too busy that week. Seeing how you and your family cherish Pops and see him so often has me slightly disgusted with myself."

"Then we'll go tomorrow."

"We?"

"Yes. You pull up to Pops' with me. Shit, why not?"

"She has dementia."

"Aight, your point?"

"It's not always pretty."

"My mother went from a completely normal woman, a fucking brilliant being, to losing her fucking mind. You think that shit was always pretty?"

"No."

"Exactly. We locked in, Kiwi. Your shit is my shit. The good, bad, and the ugly. Aight?"

"Okay."

"Now, get up and get these pants off. I got the perfect remedy for that heartache you're feeling—doctor prescribed."

"Doctor prescribed, huh?"

She perked up immediately, showing those pearly white teeth and gums that secured them.

"Umm hmm. Keep them panties on."

"Baby."

"Keep them motherfuckers on."

The innocence she harbored, I was stripping her of, slowly but surely. She could remain bashful and shy away from anything she wanted in public. With

me, unfortunately, that wasn't an option. Having Glacier open, ready, and willing for me was such a treat. When she finally shed those layers of protection, she was a fucking beast behind closed doors.

She sucked dick like it was the last piece of meat in her possession as the world came to a screeching halt and humanity as we knew it ended. She worked her pussy like she was trying to trap a nigga and have him sign papers on that motherfucker. She cooked like she was trying to light the path to my heart. She cleaned like a mental patient who was obsessed with cleanliness or a pure germaphobe.

Mommas was the total package and a nigga would have to put me in the mud before I came up off her. When I laid down to take my final rest, I wanted to sleep well knowing that I had everlasting love, endless top, and a piece of the ocean lying right beside me each day.

I slid my fingers into her mouth, lubricating them before rubbing the parts of her pussy that I loved to kiss more often than not.

“Ummm.”

Her low, pleasurable moans were always music to my ears.

I removed my dick from my sweats. The elastic band made it easy to release the dragon. I wasted very little time tapping against her entrance to prep it for my intrusion. When her lips brushed against mine and the begging commenced, I granted Mommas' wish.

“Put it innnnnnn. Ohhhh, yesssss.”

We sealed our connection with a kiss. Glacier's feet were flat against the seat on both sides of me, giving her the perfect balance. She held onto her knees, bouncing her pussy on me like she had no fucking intentions to stop jacking my shit until I was spitting up inside of her. Trying my hardest to slow her down and catch my breath, I gripped her waist and bit down on her lip.

“Uhhh.” She groaned in pain, but her speed didn't alter a bit.

“You gon' make me nut all in this shit, Kiwi. Slow tha—fuck! Slow that muuhfucker d-down.”

“Cum for me,” she requested innocently, as if she wasn't putting a whooping on my ass in the process.

That was the final straw. I unloaded, unable to gain control of myself as I exploded inside of her guts. She continued bouncing, succumbing to her own orgasm. Simultaneously. It wasn't until then that her chest touched mine and her knees hit the seat.

I watched her readjust in the passenger seat after I cleaned her up with the wipes in my glove compartment and helped her get her pants back on. She scarfed down the grilled chicken, broccoli mash, and sweet potatoes in a hurry so that she could curl up under the blanket I'd provided as well. Within seconds, she was off to sleep—fucked and full.

When it was time for her to return to work, I kissed her goodbye and watched her walk back inside. Pride swelled in my chest. Before the doors shut, I couldn't help but release my feelings, laying them out on the platter for her to have her helping.

“I love you, Mommas!”

Turning back, she laid a hand on her chest.

“I love you back, baby!”

On cloud nine, I sped through the lot and headed to my next destination. It wasn't my final one, but it was the most important one of the day. Upon arrival, I whipped into the closest spot to the door.

Fuck that director, I thought, realizing I'd parked in their spot once I was out and headed toward the door.

“Can I help you, sir?” the woman behind the desk asked as I approached.

“You can start by turning some of these lights on. Why the fu—why is it so dark in here?”

“Probably because the patients are asleep and visiting hours were over six hours ago.”

“Makes sense,” I admitted.

“So, how can I help you?”

“Hattie Roseberry.”

“Yes. Ms. Hattie. Our sweetheart.”

“I'm looking for her.”

“Well, she is asleep. She went down a few hours ago. You can come back in the morning when visiting hours start. Be here at eight.”

“Nah. That ain't gon' work for me and I'm not interested in visiting. I was hoping you could get her shit packed up and help me get her to my car. She's coming home for a few days.”

I smacked the counter with every dollar in my pocket.

“There's been a family emergency of some sort, huh?” she responded, mouth damn near touching her chest.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

Makai + Glacier

THE PACING that had gone on for the last five hours had me drifting in and out of my sleep. I was resting with one eye open, making sure Glacier's grandmother didn't get into anything that would harm her or send her into a worse episode than the one she was experiencing.

Her routine had been interrupted. She'd been uprooted from her home and brought to a strange place. As the clock ticked, I was beginning to wonder if it was a good idea to bring her out of her habitat and into unfamiliar territory. The turning of the locks at 7:43 a.m. sharp quickly pushed those thoughts aside. As much as I wanted to get up from the couch and greet Glacier at the door, I was too fucking tired.

"Baby! Makai. Where are you?" she shrieked, coming through the door. "My truck!"

I watched as she removed her shoes at the door, hardly paying attention to her surroundings. She hadn't noticed me on the couch and nothing else around her. *My Kiwi*. I peered in her direction, watching her change into a pair of slippers.

Because I was so invested in fulfilling the void missing her grandmother made, I'd completely forgotten about the task I'd completed before shooting her a text last night. Her whip had arrived in mint condition. Instead of having it delivered to Pops', I'd had it dropped off at the shop so that I could give it a full inspection before signing the paperwork.

"Baby, you go—"

She finally turned around, finding me on the couch. Her grandmother's pacing was halted as she noticed the familiar face.

"Icy? Is that you, my baby?"

"Granny?"

The two traveled the distance to erase the space between them, meeting in the middle of the living room. Loud, uncontrollable sobs emerged from the spot where they stood, fisting my heart and fucking up my head.

"Where's that daddy of yours? He said he was on his way to see me. I haven't heard from that boy since. He ain't answering my calls. Can you see if you can reach him for me? I need my candy. He told me he would bring me that candy I like."

Tearful and filled to the brim with emotions, Glacier took her grandmother by the hand. “He is away on business, Granny. He and my mother send you their love. Come here. He dropped this off with me before they left because he knew you’d be expecting it.”

She pulled open the first drawer of the island. Tears fell from her face, onto the floor. I watched her crumble as I watched her grandmother’s eyes glisten.

“Icy! All this for me?”

“No, old lady. You can’t have all of this. It’s not good for you. You’ll have your sugar way too high.”

“You’re right. Can I at least have one?”

“Yes. Of course. I’ll have one, too.”

I observed as they both grabbed a piece of the yellow butterscotch candy that Glacier kept floating around somewhere. It all made sense now. They were her granny’s favorite. Our eyes locked.

“I love you,” I mouthed.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, tilting her head to the side as more tears fell.

“You so ugly,” I whispered, bringing a smile to her face.

TEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

GLACIER'S SPOT had become home for me. Over the last four months, I'd been at her condo more than I was at my house. I was in her bed more than I was my own. Wherever Mommas was, that was where I wanted to be. On at least two of her days off, we ventured to my crib but always ended up right back at hers.

As corny as the shit sounded, it made us feel so much closer. The additional square footage of my home wasn't as impressive now that she was in my life. From my favorite spot on the couch, I could see damn near everything in her crib, including her, unless she ducked off into one of the three bedrooms or a bathroom.

I pressed the buttons that would grant me access to her unit. While I was expecting to find Glacier on the couch, chilling on the phone with one of my peoples' significant other or indulging in her new favorite downtime activity, television for an hour or two, I didn't. She was particular about the timing, claiming to feel like she was wasting the day away if she spent a minute over the two-hour mark in front of a screen.

"Mommas, where you at?"

“I’m in here!”

Dropping by her crib before one of the most important meetings of the year possibly wasn’t a good idea, but I couldn’t bear the thought of her falling asleep before I got home. I trailed her voice into the master bathroom where she stood in the mirror, polishing her face with makeup. It was then that I remembered it was the night I’d promised her date night after standing her up twice this month.

Fuck. I began trying to think of a way to explain to her that it wasn’t a good night. Tomorrow would be perfect, but I knew she was back on the clock the next day. It was impossible to take her on anything but a day date.

“What’s the matter, baby?” she asked, stuffing an earring in her ear, and looking at me through the mirror. I wasn’t sure how long I’d been paralyzed, looking like the fucking fool I felt like.

“Nothing,” I responded, shaking my head and moving forward to kiss her cheek. She’d painted her lips with some shiny shit, so I left them alone.

“Good. You’re already dressed. And here I was, thinking you’d be the one running behind.”

I couldn’t muster the strength to deny Mommas another night. She looked way too good in the one-piece she had on. She was dripping with confidence. I liked that shit on her.

The new timepiece on her arm was shining. The bracelet and necklace combo I’d gotten her was the perfect touch. Mommas looked like money. My money. The kind that couldn’t fold. Wouldn’t fold. And didn’t run out.

“How much longer do you have?”

I made the rapid decision to bring her along with me. Mixing business with pleasure wasn’t my jam, but I’d make an exception for the night. It was that or telling Mommas to strip down and call it a night.

She didn’t trip with me about shit but I was sure she’d block my ass for a month and tell her coworkers not to let me on the floor to see her in the wee hours when I was missing her ass something awful. There would only be a few niggas at the table tonight, all crossing the threshold and on their way to becoming top earners.

“I’m just finishing up, waiting on you so you can help me get these Givenchy boots on. They’re such a hassle.”

“Aight. Bet. Let me know when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.”

I followed her to the living room where she had them prepped and ready.

One by one, I worked them onto her feet, knowing that she'd need a prayer and a miracle to get them off. They were a hit, though, matching perfectly with the fit she'd chosen.

"You smell good," she complimented.

"Thank you, Mommas. You smell good, too. Look even better."

"My man, my man, my man," shyly, she sang.

"Ya man gon' eat you the fuck up when he gets home and gets you out of this shit."

"I can hardly wait."

"I bought you a new coat. It's in the trunk of my car. I should've brought it in."

"Thanks, baby. Where will we be dining tonight?"

"A secluded spot, but we won't be alone."

"Who's coming? The girls haven't mentioned dinner plans," she inquired, curiosity spilling from her tongue.

Apprehension was hunting me. I struggled with the thought of surrounding her with motherfuckers I did business with, but there was no other option. I'd dismiss them as quickly as possible so that we could enjoy as much of our night alone as possible.

"Because they aren't a part of these plans. I have some business to tend to tonight. A dinner meeting of sorts and decided to bring you along."

"Okay. Am I overdressed? Underdressed?"

"You're perfect. Let's roll. We're taking my whip."

She sauntered out of the door with me watching every fucking step she took, imagining just how much I'd have her back arched and how high her ass would be in the air as I put that work in. It didn't take her long to notice I wasn't behind her. She spun on her heels, looking like an entire fucking dinner meal, and blushed a shade of red. Her light skin and rosy cheeks would be the death of me.

"Whaaaat?"

"Nothing. I'm coming. I'm coming."

We piled into the coupe, using the fob to control the elevator for a seamless transport. Nightlights flashed across our faces as we set out on our path. Berkeley was a beast in the winter. Its beauty was unmatched. The snow stuck to everything it touched. Holiday decorations filled the gaps between gates, lit up the very tops of buildings, and illuminated the darkest parts of the city.

“Don’t say nothing, Makai.”

“Nothing,” I joked, already knowing what question would follow.

“Ugh. So annoying. I’m just going to get you something, anyway.”

“Good, ’cause I don’t want nothing but to know that my family is in good health and my girl is still by my side. Anything else is a bonus, Mommas, so do your thing.”

“Fine.”

Her smile was radiant. She rolled her eyes, playfully, as I grabbed hold of her thigh. She’d been thickening up nicely as of late. Good dick, good loving, and the finest dining were to blame for the weight gain. I admired every pound she’d packed on.

“Baby,” she whined.

“What?”

I took my eyes off the road momentarily to see her squirming in her seat.

“You’re going to ruin my panties.”

“They coming off soon, anyway, G. It’s all good.”

I patted her thigh before gripping it again. That was where my hand rested until valet opened her door. She was happy to bounce her ass out of the car, forever unsure of how far I would take things when we were alone. She had little to worry about. My head was in another place. The meeting and the fact that Glacier would experience a different side of me at the table completely consumed my thoughts at the moment.

Hand in hand, we stepped into Rouge, a speakeasy that was only available to certain players of the game. The owner, Roulette, was kind enough to let me have the spot whenever I needed it. She didn’t have much of a choice, though. She was family, and looking out for one another was exactly what family did.

Being Chem’s blood sister made her mine by default. We didn’t share parents but we shared a sibling and I’d known her her entire life. My reservation was top priority. She’d pushed every nigga on the schedule aside to accommodate me. Her generosity was appreciated.

The boardroom was our destination. Through the hidden door, never-ending hall, thick curtains, and into the soundproof meeting room, we traveled. Glacier’s grip tightened as we entered.

The tension in her body was easily recognized and noted. I was kicking myself in the ass already and realizing how much of a shitty decision it was to bring her along. Unfortunately, we were here now, and the meeting was set

to start in seconds. Her comfort, however, was not a gamble for me. I stopped in my tracks, turning and leaning down to meet her ear.

“Are you okay?” I needed to know, coming to the conclusion that I would halt the entire meeting if necessary.

Did I want to? Nah.

But I would in the blink of an eye to make sure Mommas was straight. Niggas could either wait for my return or take their asses home.

“Yes,” she said, nodding.

I paused, waiting for her eyes to meet mine. They were the mirrors of her soul. If they didn’t align with her answer, we were walking right back out of the door. To my surprise, there was something within them that I didn’t recognize.

Something *unfamiliar*. Something I’d never seen, making my decision a bit harder. Discernment wasn’t on my side this time. I couldn’t figure Kiwi out. For assistance, I asked another question.

DISCERNMENT

Verb

The ability to judge, recognize, or identify something or someone.

The ability to draw a conclusion or perceive without judgment to obtain spiritual, emotional, or physical guidance.

Synonyms include: judgment, discrimination, enlightenment, astuteness, shrewdness, erudition

“KIWI, WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEAVE?”

She paused, swallowing the lump in her throat. Her eyes darted in so many directions, I lost count before they were back on me.

“No, baby. They’re waiting for you. I’m fine.”

“Fuck them,” I insisted. “What do you want to do?”

“Find our seats,” she responded.

“They’re at the head of the table.”

“But there’s only one.”

“There will be two by the time your feet reach the head of the table.”

I switched positions, placing her in front of me as my hand rested on her

back. I led her to our seats. As I'd stated, her chair was waiting by the time she made it. Once she was seated, I followed suit. Everyone around us stood, pissing me off slightly.

"Sit down," I demanded. "I'm not interested in the warm welcome. Let's get down to business. I got shit to do."

All eyes were on me.

"We'll start with introductions," Roulette began.

She organized and directed every meeting I hosted. There was only one a year. She was in charge of everything from seating to invitations. And once everyone was finally at the table, she was in charge of the proceedings.

"Dank."

"Phil."

"Nel."

"Rudy."

"Frank."

"Greg."

"Tim."

"Eric."

"Jay."

"Squeeze."

"Thank you, fellas. In front of you, my staff is offering you appetizers according to your personal selections upon invitation receipt. As you begin to dine, you'll find screens in front of each of you with an itinerary for this meeting. We'll start with inductions.

"There are four new faces at the table who have performed well this year, becoming part of the top ten earners. That's something to be proud of. We'd like to officially introduce you to The Table."

Roulette worked the room, doing what she did best. All eyes were on her. Except for one set in particular that couldn't quite resist Glacier's frame. Taking note, I continued listening as Roulette began knocking off bullet points from the tablets that were placed in front of everyone.

"Rudy. Nel. Eric. Jay. Welcome, fellas. In the envelope in front of you is a key to your new storage. Inside, you'll find an additional supplies to expand your business. The new strand that is waiting in your unit has been customized and was specially formulated by The Chemist. No one earner has the same strand. Find comfort and confidence knowing that no one is in possession of yours but you."

“That’s what’s up.”

A few head nods and amens were heard around the table. However, I couldn’t put a finger on where they’d come from because my eyes were planted on the person who couldn’t keep theirs to their fucking self.

“Who is my mans right here?” I asked, pointing directly to the motherfucker who obviously needed an optometrist on speed dial.

I felt Glacier’s hand on my thigh, gripping it in an attempt to get my attention. I was too invested in the presence of the man across the table to submit to her request.

“Nel,” Roulette confirmed, checking the seating chart.

“Nel, you need us to send you to an optometrist, my nigga? ’Cause it’s got to be something wrong with ya vision. Pay attention to her, she’s the one talking, nigga. Not me and not her.” I tilted my head toward Glacier.

“Baby,” she whispered, beckoning for my attention.

“You got it, boss. She just resembles someone I used to know. It’s all good.”

“You don’t know her no more, then, my nigga. That’s all that matters here.”

Feeling a hundred pounds of pressure on my chest, I waited for a response. There wasn’t one. I continued to grill the nigga who had pissed me off before I could properly warm my seat.

“Welcome to the grown-up table, nigga. A far cry from the kid’s table you’ve been scraping for food at. Over here, we shut our fucking mouths and get this fucking money. It’s the only thing that matters here. Learn the rules and stick to them motherfuckers,” I suggested.

“Baby.” Glacier tugged at my pant leg.

Finally, I gave her my undivided attention. I owed her an apology for bringing her to this meeting and an even bigger one for forgetting our date night had been rescheduled twice and ultimately landed on the one night I needed to handle business.

“I’m sorry, Mommas. I—”

“That’s him,” she whispered.

“Him, who? Who the fuck is him?” Baffled, I asked one question immediately after the other.

“That’s my ex-boyfriend. His name is Nelson.”

“Oh yeah?”

The weight that pressed my chest cavity against my heart was released. It

wasn't that this nigga had a problem with his eyes, he was seeing the gem he'd lost with the nigga who was his boss. His heart was aching. There was no need for me to join his pity party. I wanted to turn that motherfucker up.

Standing, I grabbed the glass that had been placed in front of me. It was filled with champagne that I had no intention of sipping. The plan was to pass that shit to Glacier, but the plan had changed.

"Madam," I called out, beckoning for Roulette's attention.

"Yes?"

"Bring a few bottles out and add a key to this nigga's load. It's a fucking celebration."

"Is it? Should I round the ladies up as well?"

"Nah, not this time. Just a bottle for my mans on the other end. I got a lot to thank this nigga for."

I held my glass in the air, everyone following suit, though they weren't sure what we were celebrating.

"You want in on this shit, baby?" I asked Glacier.

Quickly, she shook her head.

"Bet."

The bottle was delivered to his end of the table. One was also delivered to my end.

"Nel, Nelso, whatever your name is, my nigga, I just want to give thanks to you, my nigga, for doing whatever the fuck you did and blessing me with the best fucking thing that's ever happened to me. She's one of a kind, bro.

"What you've done on the block, any motherfucker could've. But what you've done for my life, nah. Niggas at this table ain't fucking with that. Best gift ever, hands down, nigga. I appreciate that. I appreciate you. So, to Nelson."

"To Nelson," the room erupted in cheer.

A good sport, he nodded, hiking his glass in the air as well.

"She fucking the boss now, dog. When you see her in the streets, look the other way and we gon' be aight. No hard feelings. It's love, all love, 'cause you the nigga I have to thank for giving my baby up. That extra key on me." I chuckled. "And that still ain't enough 'cause I could never repay a nigga for fucking up that bad."

"Right on. Right on," Nel responded, tilting his glass again.

"Now, back to the money!"

I popped the bottle of champagne and refilled my glass. When I sat beside

Glacier, I leaned closer so that she could hear me clearly.

“Never feel threatened by a nigga in my presence. I will kill everything breathing in this bitch about you. Don’t ever get that twisted. For you, I will clear a whole town. For you, I will lay shit down. For you, I will wage war. For you, G, hell ain’t even the limit. Fix your face, that’s your past. I’m your future.”

“I love you,” she responded, reaching for my hand underneath the table.

She sought security, comfort, and validation. I met her exactly where she was, willing to give her whatever she needed. Our fingers intertwined as the meeting continued. Though I was fully present, mentally, physically, and financially, I still kept my eyes open and my ears to the ground, making sure there were no lingering feelings associated with the conversation Nelson and I had just had.

“I love you more, Mommas.”

Roulette rounded the table, ending up beside me with her hands concealing the words coming from her mouth as she whispered in my ear.

“I’d like to take Glacier into a more comfortable setting. Roaman, Range, and Royce are in the lounge having drinks. She’s welcome to join them.”

“The entire gang is here, huh?”

“Not exactly. We’re missing a few and the obvious one.”

She was referring to Chem.

“Right. Let me ask her.”

Roulette nodded, stepping away as I turned toward Glacier.

“Baby, the woman conducting this meeting is Chem’s sister,” I explained lowly so that she was the only person at the table able to hear me.

“Your Chem?”

“Yes. My brother. His sisters are in the lounge having drinks and she’s offered to take you back there if you’re more comfortable.”

“Baby, I’m comfortable wherever you are,” she clarified. “But after all of this, I could use a drink and some girl chat.”

“Aight. Bet. She’s going to lead the way. When I finish up, I’ll come get you.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll have your food delivered to you,” Roulette told Glacier as she stood.

Intently, I gazed in her direction as she followed Roulette out of the boardroom. Wedding bells and flowers and white gowns and rings clouded my head. Without a doubt, I knew one thing to be accurate in my future.

I'ma marry the shit out of that fucking girl.

The reassuring smile she gave me before exiting, letting me know that she was in good spirits, made my heart pound against my chest. I responded with a head nod, letting her know it was all good.

ELEVEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glacier". The lettering is cursive and somewhat stylized, with a large, sweeping initial 'G'.

“ALL RIGHT, Mr. Hodge. You’re going to play nice tonight?”

I stepped into the room of my most difficult patient. Though he was a sweetheart when he wanted to be, he hated hospital stays. They filled him with uncertainty and he was hardly able to get any rest. The sounds of the busy building upset him something awful most days.

“I behave myself. Don’t tell a lie like I don’t. If you had a diaper on your ass and sat in your piss at least twice a day, then you’d have an attitude every now and again, too.”

Sighing, I handed him the cup that held three of his oral medications.

“Get these down and show me your mouth after you’re done. I have some water for you right here.”

“Show me your mouth,” he mimicked, taking the cup. “And you want me to behave. Hell, stop treating me like a damn kid and I will.”

“We’re just trying to make sure you’re doing everything the correct way so that you can get out of here as soon as possible.”

“I’m sho is ready. Shit. Somebody knocking on that doe every five minutes. Might as well take the fucker off the hinges. Even if I say no, they coming in, anyway.”

Chuckling, I grabbed the empty cup from his hand. He knocked the pills down without water, a task I'd never understand the science behind.

"Here, have some water. Let's make sure everything is all the way in there."

"Goddamnit. Leave me alone, will you? I took the pills. Go bother somebody else."

"There you go with that attitude, handsome. Calm down. You don't have to drink the water if you don't want to."

"Good, 'cause I wasn't planning on it any damn way."

"Fine. Is there anything I can get you before I head out of here?"

"Yeah, the hell up out of here. I'm ready to go home."

"You will, Mr. Hodge. We're just waiting for the doctor to approve your discharge. You're not completely well. Your procedure went well, but we're monitoring you for infections, complications, or any signs of regression. We're not trying to keep you here any longer than necessary but we have to make sure you're taken care of."

"Yeah. Whatever."

He fanned me off, turning his back toward me as he pulled the cover up toward his chin.

"Cut off the light on your way out. Take the bulb out if you can. I'm so sick of y'all flipping that moth—"

"Mr. Hodge!"

"Well, hell, I am."

"Goodnight, sir. I'll see you in a few hours."

"Umm hmm. Unfortunately."

He could go on this way for a while. If I didn't get out of his room, I'd be there all night, going back and forth with him to convince him he was in the right place.

"I'm taking my first fifteen," I announced as I approached the station.

A yawn ripped right through my face. My eyes became prickly before glossing over. My exhaustion was baffling but somehow justified. After dinner with Makai last night, we didn't leave the lounge area of Rouge until the wee hours. Conversation flowed freely throughout the course of the night after business had concluded. By the time we stumbled into the house, the sun was mere hours from rising.

Exploring one another's bodies began and didn't end until the largest star appeared behind the skyscrapers of Berkeley. The Peaks was a beautiful

place. The elevation from the remainder of the city was just the beginning of its beauty. There were so many other aspects. The list was ongoing. Each day, I found a new reason to fall in love with the area.

“Okay,” Shelly responded. “Which rooms are yours tonight?”

“Mr. Hodge’s clique.”

“Oh, right.”

“Same patients, different night,” I sniggered.

“Girl, tell me about it. At least you get some entertainment. Mr. Hodge makes my night every time I’m on duty and I’ve never even had the man on my rounds.”

“Filling in for me when I’m on break is enough time with Mr. Hodge to get you through an entire shift.”

“I promise. The man missed his calling. He’s a comedian.”

“He’s sweet, too, he just hates to expose that side of him to everyone.”

“Hmm. ’Cause I still haven’t seen it yet. You’d have to make me a believer.”

“I’m serious, Shelly. He has his days. He’s tired of being here, which I understand.”

“Me, too. Hell, I’m tired the second I clock in.”

“You sound like me, today,” I admitted, another yawn splitting my mouth in half.

“If you need thirty, I promise I won’t tell a soul,” Shelly whispered.

“Oh, God. As much as I’d love to, I can’t do that to you.”

“Girl, they’re asleep. I’ll be fine.”

“No. Not right now, at least. If you’re still willing to cover for me, I’ll add that extra fifteen to my lunch break. I could use some shut-eye to get me through the rest of my shift.”

“You know I got you, girl.”

“Thanks, babe. I’m heading to the break room.”

I patted my pockets to make sure I had my debit card and phone. Walking back would reserve far too much time and I needed every bit of the fifteen minutes I was taking. I began down the hallway, excited to rest my bottom and make the phone call I’d been waiting all night for.

Finding the break room empty was always a joyous time for me. I tapped my card against the vending machine and made two selections. A bag of chips and a Twix were the perfect combination. I moved along to the other machine and retrieved a bottle of cold water.

By the time I decided on a seat, the first of the two Twix bars was half-eaten. I opened my phone to find my notification center empty. The fact that Makai hadn't sent a single message gave me mixed emotions.

On one hand, I thought it was hilarious and utterly ridiculous to find an entire thread of messages when I took a break. On the other hand, I looked forward to them. Knowing that there was so much on the top of his brain that he wanted to share while I was away warmed me to the core.

I pushed my feelings aside and made a call to him. The ringing began and proceeded far longer than usual. Worry lines creased my forehead as the third ring turned into a fourth. It wasn't until the fifth that I heard his voice.

Relief drenched me. A smile lined my lips. The deep, raspiness of his baritone gave the perfect explanation for the delay and the reason my notification center was empty.

"Mommas," Makai groaned. "What's up?"

"Hey."

"Hey."

"I didn't mean to wake you. I assumed you were still awake. Get some rest, baby. I'll see you in the morning. Are you at the condo or—"

Makai had purchased the condominium for us both. His closet was as extensive as mine. He had as many pieces inside of it as I did. His toothbrush was used almost every day of the week. It was he who pushed the trash down every day. Though we hadn't addressed the situation or stated the obvious, we lived together and had been for the last four and a half months. My extended stay at his home was the beginning of our living arrangement.

"Nah. Nah. I'm good. What you doing?"

"Nothing. I'm in the break room, taking my fifteen-minute break."

"How has your shift been going?"

"Good," I tittered. "Until I realized you hadn't sent me anything. Have you not been missing me?"

"That's why I'm in your bed, under all this damn cover, on your side. Yeah, I miss you, baby. I fell asleep, hoping I'd wake up to you coming through the door."

"I miss you, too."

Silence coated the line. It admitted things that Makai wasn't. Exhaustion was weakening his resolve and it was impossible to shake it off.

"Baby," I sighed, wishing I was right next to him.

The shift change he'd suggested months ago resurfaced in my head. I was

almost ready to make the switch. My hesitancy was a result of thoughts that pertained to the ease of navigation through days that I was on schedule.

My days were still incredibly productive. Not sleeping past noon gave me plenty of time to enjoy the rest of my day or handle any business necessary because everything was still open.

Working from seven in the morning until seven in the evening meant that I'd clock in before everything opened and after everything closed, leaving my off days as the only option to handle business. I didn't like the idea. However, now that Makai was in my world, nights without him felt much more torturous than giving my entire day away three times a week.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm up, baby. I hear you."

"I haven't said anything." He was hilarious, even when he wasn't trying to be.

"Oh. What's up, though, Mommas? How has your shift been going?"

"Baby, you've asked that question already."

The quietness gripped my body, wrapping it tightly in Makai's web. My smile widened as my head switched from one side to the other.

"Goodnight, baby," I whispered, ending the call.

Makai's level of comfort in my space offered me a version of peace that left me feeling fuzzy all over. I opened the group thread, finding a slew of messages I'd missed in my absence. Because the notifications were silenced, they hadn't shown up in the center either.

I hadn't had much time to process the previous night. Discovering Nelson was a part of Makai's world was unexpected. Having them meet was never on my bingo card. And last, predicting Makai's response was impossible.

We never discussed my previous relationship. If it was left up to Makai, he'd claim to be the first man I ever dated. His delusion was the cutest, but encounters like the one we had last night were painful reminders that he wasn't.

Hi, ladies. Anyone awake?

Though there wasn't much to dwell on about the situation, there were a few lingering thoughts that I needed to get out of my head. I'd come to the perfect place. A group full of listening, nonjudgmental women that I'd grown to love and cherish over the last few months.

Hardly a few seconds passed before my phone vibrated in my hand. Kleu was calling. I opened the bag of chips as I swiped across the screen. Once it was situated between my shoulder and ear, I unscrewed the cap on the bottle

of water.

“Hello?”

“Hey, what’s up? All the old women are asleep. It’s just us. I’m cleaning so my fingers aren’t available.”

“At this time of night?”

Kleu’s insomnia was a frequent topic between us because she was always the only member of the group chat who was awake well into my shift.

“I used to be sliding down a pole at this hour. Forgive me for playing pretend in my head, watching all the money I’m no longer seeing nightly fall onto the floor beneath me.”

“I think that mentioning this to your doctor will be beneficial.”

“I’m all right. I’ve been a night owl since I was a child. My internal clock isn’t the same as the rest of the world’s and I’m okay with that.”

“Okay. You’re right. It’s not different from me choosing the overnight shift, huh?”

“Not at all. Some of us are just wired differently. Now, what’s up?”

“Welllllll,” I paused. “Makai and I ran into my ex-boyfriend last night.”

“Oh shit. Let me put this mop down. Say what now?” She chuckled. “Say when, say who, say how?”

“Makai brought me along with him for dinner. It was date night for us. I’m assuming he decided to kill two birds with one stone. I don’t know. Nelson was a guest at dinner.”

“Oh, the girls are going to be pissed they missed this spill.”

“I know, right? I don’t plan on repeating myself after this. It’s not that big of a deal. Makai and I haven’t spoken about it since last night.”

“What did he say?”

“Which one?”

“Makai, of course. I don’t give a damn what your ex said.”

“He made a toast.”

“To who?”

“My ex. Thanking him for screwing up and blessing him with me.”

“Shut the fuck up, Glacier!”

“I’m serious. I wanted to melt in my chair.”

“Why? He’s right.”

“And then, he insisted I never alter my level of comfort when in his presence, no matter who I’m in front of.”

I popped the last chips into my mouth, sure not to chew loudly enough to

be heard.

“He means it, too, babe.”

“I know. It’s just that I hadn’t seen him in so long and the one time I do, it’s at dinner with my man. It was so much to digest at once, especially not knowing how Makai would react.”

“If there’s nothing else you take from this conversation, step away knowing that you have absolutely nothing to fear when it comes to a Domino man exuding confidence and remaining in control of any situation they find themselves in. You’re not fucking on a bum, Glacier. You’re fucking on a boss. Act accordingly. Head high, chest out in every room you walk in, no matter who is in that motherfucker.”

Nodding as if she could see me, I agreed with her.

“I have to get back to work, Kleu.”

“All right. Call me later if you want to talk more about it.”

“I don’t. I just... I guess I just needed to tell someone. Thank you for always being a listening ear and offering sound advice.”

“Of course, babe. That’s what we’re all here for.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yup.” She ended the call immediately.

Her words stuck to me like glue as I gathered my trash and tossed it into the garbage can on my way out of the door. Just as I made it onto my floor, I heard Mr. Hodge’s voice on the speaker, requesting to see his nurse.

“I’ve got it,” I called out, letting Shelly know I was back and ready to deal with whatever Mr. Hodge was planning.

“I was just about to head in there to see what that man wanted.”

“It’s fine.”

I sanitized my hands and walked the short distance to his room. I entered to find him sitting up with a mug on his handsome face. There was no doubt about it, he was a fine gentleman in his time. I was certain the women were delighted to have him around.

“Yes, Mr. Hodge?”

As I moved closer to his bedside, I popped on the lights and grabbed a pair of fresh gloves from the box.

“I need to get up and go to the bathroom.”

“Now, Mr. Hodge. You know you’re a fall risk. That’s why you’re bedridden.”

“How the hell I become a fall risk here? I ain’t one at home. Hell, I’m

tired of them damn people coming in here to change a diaper I don't need in the first place."

"Well, until you've recovered from your procedure and the doctor sees fit, you can't get out of bed."

"Damn the doctor. He doesn't know more about my body than I do."

"According to his medical degree, he does."

"Damn that degree, too."

"Shhhh..." I silenced Mr. Hodge, gaining wind of the commotion going on outside in the hallway.

"What the hell is going on out there?"

"You cannot be here!" I heard Shelly yelling from afar.

"Where the fuck she at? You ain't talking 'bout shit right now."

"Daniel, call security. Sir, you cannot be here!"

The voices were muffled, but I recognized each and every one of them, including the one that left me puzzled.

Nelson? How doe—

Mid-thought, I halted, recalling him being right beside me as I filled out the application for the very position I was in. Berkeley Presby was my dream job and I'd secured it with his knowledge. My graduation solidified my spot on their employee roster, but he hadn't made it to that point in my life. His ship sailed the night before.

I rushed toward the door, pulling it open to find everyone at the nurses' station out of their seats, acting as human shields, blocking Nelson from proceeding. To their dismay, he was much larger than anyone standing in front of him. Seeing Shelly fall to her knees from his forceful blow was like a punch to the gut.

"Stop it!" I screamed, refusing to allow him to harm another member of our team.

He charged in my direction once my position was exposed. In an effort to protect myself and buy the rest of the staff time to get assistance, I stepped back into Mr. Hodge's room, pushing the door closed behind me. To my dismay, Nelson was fast and he was strong. Just before the door shut completely, he grabbed hold of it.

I stuffed my hand in my pocket, frantically searching for my phone. Makai's number was the first on my call list. I pressed the call button, but hung up immediately, remembering he was asleep. The shove against the wall racked my brain. In my twenty-eight years of life, my one-hundred-and-

fifty-pound frame had never been handled so forcefully.

“Nelson, you’re hurting my arm,” I whimpered in pain.

“So, you fucking that nigga now? On some payback shit?”

“Young man, let her go. Who are you? Get out of my room!” Mr. Hodge yelled across the room.

“Nelson, please. Let go of my arm.”

He twisted it tighter as the words came from my mouth.

Fists hammered on the door as my coworkers demanded I be freed.

“You on some payback shit?”

“I’m not that kind of person,” I explained, though he already knew it.

However, those once-alluring eyes had darkened dramatically. He was in a rage and saw nothing but what he’d tricked himself into believing. Whatever that was, wasn’t exactly my issue. It was some inner work that he needed to nurture within himself.

“Bitch, you think you’re better than me now? That nigga know I made you?”

Refusing to give Nelson the satisfaction, I focused on freeing my arm from his hold and using my free hand to dial the digits that I knew would result in an instant response. The water pitcher clashing against the wall awarded me with the freedom I’d sought. Mr. Hodge loaded his hand again, this time launching the top from his dinner plate. I pressed the three numbers, and the call button, and stuffed my phone inside the pocket of my shirt.

“Let go of her!” He yelled.

To my surprise, he’d risen from his bed and planted his feet on the floor. His attempt to get across the floor seemed to have been unsuccessful, but it didn’t stop him from trying again.

“Mr. Hodge, please don’t! You’ll fall!”

Nelson struck out, pushing Mr. Hodge to the ground. I yelped, leaping over the objects that had been tossed in our direction to pry Nelson’s hands from around Mr. Hodge’s neck. The old man refused to go down without a fight. He snatched the phone from the table beside his bed, bringing it down on Nelson’s head.

Mr. Hodge’s reflex was commendable. He had caught the receiver before it could touch the floor, slamming it against the side of Nelson’s head at once. Upon realizing he was in for a fight, Nelson redirected his anger. He gripped my neck, instead, leaving Mr. Hodge gasping for air.

“What the fuck have you told him? You told him my business, haven’t

you?”

“It’s not my—you’re cho—Nelson!”

Left without a choice but to defend my life, I lifted my leg, trying to connect it with his scrotum. Though his grip loosened, he didn’t let go. My attempt was unsuccessful, but enough to get him to lighten up.

“It’s not my business to tell, Nelson!” I screamed. “Let go of me.”

“That shit going to your grave with you,” he grunted, applying more pressure around my neck.

I could feel myself running out of oxygen. Words were impossible at this point. I tried my hardest to unwrap his fingers, but it was impossible without breaking skin. That was the last thing I wanted to do.

WHAM!

WHAM!

The blows completely blindsided Nelson. The hold on my neck ended suddenly as bodies began to move around me. It was Mr. Hodge and Dr. Thomas that I recognized immediately. Simultaneously, they’d sent mind-numbing blows to Nelson’s cranium. Mr. Hodge had used a piece of metal from the IV stand. Dr. Thomas had gone a more traditional method, using his fist.

“Are you okay?” Dr. Thomas asked, paying little attention to the fallen.

“Yes. Mr. Hodge,” I gasped. “Ma-make sure Mr. Hodge is okay.”

“Hell, I’m all right. Feels like back in the day, except I didn’t have a diaper on my ass then.”

As the words left his mouth, police stormed the room.

“Berkeley City Police Department. Make room! Make room!”

“It’s him. The one on the floor.” Tony, the only male nurse on our wing, ushered them in while pointing at an unconscious Nelson.

“You aight?” he turned to me and asked.

Because I was still struggling to breathe, I simply nodded.

Makai + Glacier

THE REMORSE that rested in his eyes made me turn away. I was unable to match his gaze. His heart was breaking into pieces before me. I couldn’t hold myself together.

His love blanketed the room. I couldn't breathe. Yet, without it, I couldn't continue life. Makai had become my direct source of oxygen. The line was tangled and I wasn't sure if I'd survive his glossy eyes and flaring nostrils.

"Ya neck, Kiwi," Makai groaned. "Ya fucking neck."

He ejected his body from the chair in the waiting room and began pacing again.

"Makai, please."

Falling to his knees, he looked up at me.

"Do you see your fucking neck?" Pain resided in his tone as the question surfaced.

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Fuck!" he yelled, standing back up.

I'd given my statement. The rest of the staff were giving theirs. Nelson was in custody, cuffed, and waiting to be taken downstairs. The entire floor was in an uproar.

But Makai, he was livid. After consoling me, and making sure I was well, the anger began brewing.

"Listen to me, Mommas," he gritted, back on his knees and in front of me. "I'm your first line of defense. I'm your emergency line. I'm the motherfucker you call to handle your shit. I'm your fucking police. Me. Call me! Don't call them. Call me! They're going to put that nigga in the cold cell; I'm going to put that bitch in the soil. I'm sparing nothing and no one behind you. Do you understand me?"

Nodding, I wiped the tears that fell onto my cheeks. They were fast and they were plentiful. Makai reached up, gently wiping my face with the arm of his hoodie.

"Call me."

"Okay."

"I'm coming, Kiwi. I'm always gon' come. Just call me. Just call me."

I brushed the side of his cheek.

"I don't like this. I don't like this shit one bit."

A violent reaction was the only reaction Makai had ever known. He'd explained his coping mechanism to me so long ago. Not having the ability to react to such a violent situation with more violence left him in shambles. However, I was relieved that the police had gotten to Nelson instead of

Makai. It brought me a bit of peace.

“I’m taking you home, Glacier. Where are your things?”

“I have to go down to the station. I’ve been advised to get a restrain—”

“Restraining order, baby? The piece of paper that has spared not one woman’s life in situations like this? Nah. I’m the restrainer and the fucking order. They don’t protect y’all from shit, but I will.”

“If I’m not going, then I’m ready.”

Nelson’s threat rang loud in my head. As much as I wanted to share it with Makai, I couldn’t. He’d seen enough. He’d heard enough.

“Where are yo—”

His body stiffened for a split second. Just as quickly as it stilled, it began moving swiftly. His hand landed on his hip where there was no doubt his gun rested. My eyes followed his, landing on Nelson, who was being escorted out of the building. Everything was moving so fast. Before I was able to stop him, Makai’s gun was out and pointed in Nelson’s direction.

Rising to the challenge, I leaped toward him, gently pressing against his arm. My lips touched his earlobe. My left hand caressed his back.

“I love you.”

Overcome with emotions, I repeated myself, just in case he hadn’t heard me the first time.

“I love you, Makai, too much to let you make such a foolish decision.”

His arm was still rigid, straightened as he continued to aim.

“When you up it, you gotta let that motherfucker rip, Kiwi.”

Completely entranced, his eyes never left Nelson as his grip around the gun tightened. Words wouldn’t suffice. With this bit of knowledge, I stepped back until my body was in front of the gun.

“I can’t let you do this to yourself,” I pled. My eyes burned from the tears they continued to cry.

“I can’t let you do this to us. I can’t let you do this to your brothers. To your niece. To you—”

Makai’s hand dropped. Visibly relieved, I expanded my arms to bring him into a hug. He rejected me. It was his hand that pulled me closer as he stared daggers into me.

“You won’t be able to save that nigga every time, Mommas.”

“It’s you I’m trying to save,” I admitted.

Still gazing at me, Makai licked the tears from the right side of my face.

“You can cry your pretty little heart out. That nigga gots to go.”

I followed Makai out of the waiting area, down the hallway, and outside to his car as if I didn't own a single cell in my brain. My soul was leading me. My brain had no jurisdiction over my body when it spoke to me. My heart, head, and limbs belonged solely to it.

"We can get your shit later. Your whip, too."

He helped me into his truck. Sharp pains shot through my arm and neck with each move I made. The assistance wasn't necessary but it was appreciated.

"You good?" Makai asked as he settled in.

"Yes."

"Fix your face, then, Mommas. You're ripping me to pieces."

"Sorry," I apologized, feeling the weight of my world collapsing around me.

"Don't apologize. None of this is your fault. Hoe niggas gon' do hoe shit."

"I'm ju... I'm worried about Shelly."

"Shelly gon' be aight."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. She'll be aight and back on nights right with you."

"Right," I whispered, still slightly unsure of her future.

She was unable to move her arm and couldn't stand on her own. Something was certainly broken. We'd need her scanned to find out what.

"Here, lay back and rest your mind. Relax."

"Okay."

I waited as Makai reached over and reclined the passenger seat. When it was time for him to return to his side of the vehicle, I wasn't ready. I grabbed hold of his hand, intertwining our fingers. With him in my possession, my body began to regulate itself. I closed my eyes and prayed for any amount of sleep. Even a few minutes would be all right with me.

TWELVE

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

LEANING against the hood of my truck, I waited for the doors of county to open. Parking across the street seemed too far for comfort, but it was the only option. In hindsight, it was the only path for prisoners to exit.

“Sometimes I wonder if it was you that inherited her—”

“Don’t wonder no more, nigga,” I advised. “It’s me.”

“Makes me feel better about some of the shit you say and do.”

“I don’t need you feeling better about my choices, bro. They’re mine.”

“Yet, they affect everyone.”

I agreed with a head nod. He was right. There was hardly a time when Mercer opened his mouth and he wasn’t. His wisdom, along with Malachi’s, had been inherited from our father.

I lit the blunt in my hands and lent my attention to my boys. Ghost and Midnight sat patiently, unsure of their environment, but not of their task.

I kneeled between them, rubbing both of their backs. Neither of them budged. Their eyes darted in different directions, familiarizing themselves with any and everything. The vibrations of their throats caused me to look up toward the road.

Nelson waited at the curb with a bag in his hand. When the cars stopped and the coast was clear, he ran across, oblivious to his surroundings and happy to have been released. He walked right into the trap I'd prepared for him.

"Watch 'im," I commanded.

Their low vibrations turned into low growls.

"Still."

It was important that Ghost and Midnight understood that they weren't to react to anything that happened unless the command was given. Their job was simple—*watch*.

As Nelson approached the only path possible for him to meet his true freedom, I noticed the shift in his demeanor. Naturally, he patted his waist for his piece. It wasn't there. Taking a different route, he stepped toward me with his hands in the air.

"Let me explain this shit, boss," he started, closing the gap between us.

I passed Mercer the blunt in my hand, unwilling to hear anything coming from Nelson's mouth. My hand grazed my waist. The difference between me and him, though, my shit was sitting, locked and loaded.

Mercer's frame shielded mine completely.

"Fuck is you doing, Mercer?"

"Picking up where you're lacking."

You, too? Mercer was the second person to spare this nigga. I didn't want to hear that shit again. Glacier had already saved his life once.

"Move, so I can do this, nigga!"

"NOT RIGHT HERE, bro. As your big bro, I can't let you do that to yourself, to us. We'll get this nigga. I'll make sure of it. On Momma. Nigga, on Daddy."

I lifted my head and then allowed it to fall as I made a note of Mercer's position. I snatched the blunt from his hand, knowing I wouldn't win the secret beef we'd quickly embarked on. Before he allowed me to make the

mistake, he'd make it for me. The idea of losing him again set me straight. I pulled on the blunt, filling my lungs.

"Say less."

I took one step toward the truck, rage making my blood burn and my body hot. Ghost and Midnight never moved, keeping watch over the being that I'd given them specific instructions to keep an eye on. I continued to the driver's door, turning back to give one final warning to the nigga that stood in the freezing cold looking like the bitch he was.

"Even playing field, nigga. Understand that I will stop at nothing to hunt you down and kill you with my bare hands. Pussy."

Mercer crossed both hands in front of him, the move I'd seen him make countless times before he rocked a nigga to sleep for hours. His strength wasn't necessary, though. I wanted to leave him with scars he'd remember for the rest of his life.

"Eat," I advised my boys.

Simultaneously, Midnight and Ghost launched forward, knocking Nelson onto the snow. I watched, silently, as they obeyed my orders. While Midnight was locked in on his lower half, Ghost was set on dislodging Nelson's vocal cord from his throat and tearing back the skin of his cheeks. And unless I stopped him, he'd fall through.

Nelson's cries for help meant nothing to me. In fact, they were as satisfying as watching my boys seek vengeance for their mother. The more he articulated, the faster my heart beat. A smile spread my lips across my face.

Good boys. Good fucking boys.

"Ghost! Midnight!" Mercer called out to them both.

Neither reacted. They continued to eat as they'd been told.

"Bro, they're going to kill this nigga," he barked, pointing at the boys.

"You said I couldn't. Why can't they?" I shrugged.

"Because you'll still go down for murder and your dogs are going with you."

The thought of Ghost and Midnight being euthanized at my expense snapped me out of the trance my anger had catapulted me in.

"Halt!" I yelled.

Instantly, Midnight and Ghost sat back on their legs and stilled, blood and pieces of flesh hanging from their mouths. Somewhat satisfied, I demanded more of them.

"In the truck."

Snapping my fingers, I pointed toward the truck door that Mercer was now holding open. Leaving Nelson on the ground leaking was an option, but it felt too much like right.

Kneeling beside him, I explained, “I’m nothing like them. I’m uncouthed. I have no fucking limit when it comes to Glacier. Fucking with her is like fucking with my money and I don’t play about my fucking money, bitch ass nigga. Consider yourself terminated. You have no traps. You have no white. You have no fucking crib. I burned that bitch to the ground. The smell is still lingering in the air this morning. Everything you’ve worked so hard to get, I’ve taken it. Everything being in business with me has helped you gain, I’ve taken it. You’re a bitch. A hoe ass nigga and that’s all you’ll ever be. I bailed you out, not because I’m ya fucking boss, but so that you’re out here with me where I won’t have any problems getting active, bitch! I’m coming and I ain’t stopping until your name on niggas’ t-shirts and your mother’s fat ass face is plastered all over the fucking news as she cries for justice for her hoe ass son. But there will be none.”

Gathering every ounce of saliva in my mouth, I spat on his open wounds, stood to my feet, and headed to the truck where my boys and Mercer were waiting.

“I will handle it, Makai,” Mercer advised before I was able to settle in the truck.

“I don’t need you to handle my shit, Mercer. I’ve got it.”

“I don’t need to see you behind that wall, so I’ve got it.”

“No. Fuck the wall. That man violated me. He has to see me in these fucking streets. Point. Blank. Fuck you and anybody else who doesn’t understand that shit.” Spit flew from my mouth as I defended my decision. “I’ll sit behind twelve walls when it comes to her, Mercer. I don’t give a fuck.

“Glacier is a good fucking girl, dog. She stay to herself. She’s out the fucking way. She doesn’t bother nobody. She work and bring her ass home to me. She’s my responsibility and I’m going to dead any and everything that brings her harm.

“*That’s on Momma, nigga. That’s on Daddy, nigga.* If I don’t kill that bitch, then my name ain’t Makai motherfucking Domino. Pops ain’t raised a single hoe, my nigga. He has to get it!”

“Say no more, then.”

“I ain’t.”

My emotions began to overwhelm me. I felt the fear thicken in my throat. Knowing that there was someone in the world out to harm Mommas wasn't sitting well with me. It was way too triggering. It reminded me of a time when everyone's world was up in flames, a time we lost someone we loved and cherished dearly because jealousy and envy were at the top of a nigga's priority list.

She's a good fucking girl, I reminded myself again. My job was to protect her and I'd go to the ends of the earth to do so.

Makai + Glacier

NIGHT HAD FALLEN hours ago and I was still riding the city in circles. Comfort felt so far out of reach. At the moment, Glacier couldn't even offer it to me. Nelson's entire operation had halted.

"Makai, are you there?"

"Yeah, Royce. I'm here."

"The funds have been transferred into the account. Anything that comes in after will automatically be rerouted to the account. He won't see a dollar. The only money he has at his disposal at the moment is any cash in his possession."

"I've had my people shake down his spots. He doesn't have much of that either unless we missed a location, which I highly doubt."

"Good, then."

Calling in favors wasn't the route I preferred, but when it came to technical shit, that was beyond me. Putting someone on the matter that I trusted wholeheartedly was my only option. There was no one in the business I trusted more with my account numbers than Royce. It was her first time getting ahold of them, but there was no doubt in my mind she'd protect them with her life.

A woman of many resources, she could handle the most complicated tasks with ease. Until now, I'd never had use for her services. However, I wanted to snatch every dollar I'd helped Nelson make right from under his nose, leaving him dead broke and out in the open where I'd snap his fucking neck the second I caught up with him.

"How is she?" Sighing, she asked the dreadful question.

“I don’t know. My head’s been in a different space. I haven’t talked to her. Respectful of her infectious and optimistic spirit, I don’t want to dump this fucked-up ass energy on her. She won’t understand. She won’t know how to handle it. She won’t recognize me.”

“But she’ll recognize your heart.”

“I don’t know about that, either. That motherfucker ice-cold right now. And her optimism, there’s no room for that right now. I don’t see one positive outcome in this situation. I just don’t. That’s too much of a burden for her fragility. I’m fucking pissed even thinking about that shit.”

“Makai,” Royce called out to me.

“Yeah?”

“As green as she is, Glacier is no fool. She knows who she fell in love with. She knows what type of man she’s given her heart to.”

Taking her words into consideration, I agreed.

“You’re right. That still doesn’t make this shit any less complicated.”

“I know.”

“Ima let you go.”

“Call me if you need me—or any of us, for that matter. We’re here.”

“I know. Appreciate it. Shave some off the top for yourself.”

“Already did that, Makai. You know me. That was first.”

“I can respect it. Holler at cha.”

I discontinued the call and set the phone in my lap. My hands came down my face as a low groan emerged. I felt the brittle, brutal parts of me resurfacing as I waited for any signs of movement in the home I waited outside of. There were none.

I utilized the moment of stillness to give in to the temptation that was knocking on my heart. My finger hovered over the call button as I contemplated placing a call to Glacier. As if our hearts were in sync, my phone began to buzz in my lap. Without thinking, I silenced the call at the realization that I wasn’t quite ready to talk. I had no words.

I settled for a text, hoping it would suffice. Speaking to Glacier would only soften my resolve. It was what I feared for the moment. I needed the sharp edges I’d acquired throughout my life, not the ones she covered with her gentleness and blanketed with her love.

What’s up, G?

The gray bubbles I waited for never appeared. Instead, another call came through. It was Glacier, again. Worried that something was wrong, I started

the engine of the scuffler that I had traded my wheels for and headed toward the hospital where she was on the clock.

“Hello?” I answered her call, refusing to let it ring out and regret it later.

“What’s up, G?” she emphasized, voice shaky and full of pain. “Baby, what’s happening right now?”

“Shit, Mommas, I thought something was going on.”

I slowed the engine, obeying the laws put in place by the city.

“In my opinion, there is something going on, Makai.”

Because I had no rebuttal, I remained silent.

“Talk to me.”

“And say what, Glacier?”

“Don’t do that to me.”

“Do what?”

“Grow cold. Don’t do that to me.”

Pausing, I chose my next words wisely. She was accurate in her observation. I was hardening. I could feel it with each passing second. There was no discrimination when my switch was flipped. There were no exceptions. There was only red. I only saw red.

“I’m not trying to, baby. I’m just between a rock and a hard place right now.”

“I understand Makai, but—”

“You don’t, Mommas. You don’t understand,” I gritted, frustrated with myself for bringing her into my world.

I could’ve saved us both the inconvenience. Because that was all that nigga was, an inconvenience. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Makai.”

“Glacier, I’m trying, aight? I’m trying to keep my head above water here but I am failing. I am becoming the man that I dread, for your sake alone and nothing else. I’m becoming the man I was before you stepped foot in my world. I’m becoming the man that was necessary to become the man that you fell in love with. And I can’t tell you if you’ll like that man—if you’ll love that man. But right now, I’m him, G.”

“I don’t care, Makai. All I care about is you. I’m here and I’m willing to meet you wherever you are, whenever you’re there. Just don’t ice up on me. Stay warm, just a little, *for me.*”

“I need to go,” I lied, unable to lie to her.

Warmth was void in my life at the moment. It served little to no purpose.

Warmth would only get me killed, or worse, Glacier. With those odds stacked against me, I couldn't welcome it, not even for her.

"Come here, Makai. Come to me. My security blanket has been snatched from around me. I'm feeling most vulnerable right now. I'm feeling exposed. Naked. A mess."

Her confession made my chest ache. It was my responsibility to offer her security. I'd failed. Hearing her confirm it left me with no choice but to restore it, restore her. I ended the call without another word spoken. My foot applied more pressure to the pedal. I zoned out with only my destination and Glacier in mind.

I made it to the hospital in record time, parking the scuffler at the very end of the parking lot. Before stepping out, I secured my piece on my waist, removing the safety on my second one. I had no intention of being safe. I wanted to send a nigga to hell twice so that I could kill his ass two more times when I got there.

Fresh off the elevator, I stalked the hallways of Glacier's unit. Oncology was her specialty at the moment, but it was only temporary. Pediatric nursing in the intensive care unit was where her heart rested but she needed a full year of experience before she could apply for that position.

I circled the entire floor, ending up near the elevator again, empty-handed. The waiting room was my next stop. There, I found a comfortable chair and grabbed the remote to the television near the door. I wouldn't relieve the seat of my body's heat until Glacier clocked out.

I'm here, Mommas, I texted, desperate to relieve her of the apprehension she felt. The text had much more depth than what it was intended for.

I'm here, Mommas.

Forever.

For life.

Always.

In all ways.

Any time.

Every time.

However.

Whenever.

Whatever.

It didn't matter. It never would.

I love you, she responded with a red heart attached to her message.

What was understood didn't have to be explained. I shut down my screen and prepared to wait out Glacier's shift along with her and the rest of her team. They, too, were safe as long as I was in the building.

Makai + Glacier

PEACEFULLY IN MY ARMS, Glacier slept. She'd taken a full hour break to get some shut-eye after the chaotic night she'd had the previous night. Sleep hadn't come easy for either of us. I didn't get a wink in, which was the reason I couldn't keep my eyes open for more than a few seconds. The sound of Glacier's alarm alerted me mid-doze.

"Huh?"

I jumped out of my brief slumber, clutching the butt of the gun tucked at my waist.

"Mommas." I yawned, noticing her phone was sounding off. "Your phone."

"Hmm?" she stirred.

"It's time for you to clock back in before ya people come looking for you."

"It's time?"

"Yes, baby."

She was disoriented and the cutest fucking thing. Her struggle to readjust was soothing to my soul. As she rose, head finally rising from my lap, she stretched her arms high in the sky. The side of her face was marked with lines that went in every direction and were red like fire.

"Mommas, I can take you home. You don't have to stay. You need some rest. Real shit, we can walk out of this motherfucker and never return. Your safety is vital, staying employed isn't. Say the word and I'll have your year's salary in your account in minutes. Just say the word, Glacier."

"Makai, everything will be okay. As much as I'd love to spend my days getting on your nerves to no end, I can't. I put off nursing school three times, wasting valuable years of my life. I don't want to waste any more of them. I love being here. I love my patients. I love the staff. I love the atmosphere. It really gives me something to look forward to each day I'm on the schedule. Nursing brings me joy. I'd grow miserable staying home."

“Is there nothing else you want to do in life?”

“Yes. There is something else. But this is where I am now, and I love it here. There’s no need to think about anything else until this no longer serves me.”

Nodding, I agreed. Glacier danced every night as she put on the form-fitting ass scrubs. Her career was the highlight of her weeks. The three days a week that she clocked in, she never complained. Watching her fall in love with her profession was beautiful, but I’d be damned if I didn’t want her to put it on hold briefly. Not just for peace of mind, but for her safety as well.

“Aight. Get back to work. I’ll be right here.”

“I know,” she told me.

I pecked her pursed lips and watched her disappear behind the waiting room door. The buzzing of my cell pulled me away. Mercer’s name crossing the screen prompted me to answer.

“Yeah?” I yawned.

“Where you at?”

“Sitting with Glacier, keeping an eye on shit. What’s up? It’s going on three. Hell you doing up?”

“Fucking around in the kitchen.”

That was his sacred place. Any dish one could think of, Mercer could create. Any dish that one’s mother made after perfecting it for years, Mercer could make it better.

“You called to hold the phone or what?” Another yawn muddled my words.

“Nah. Just making sure you straight.”

“I’m good and you don’t sound like you in no fucking kitchen, either. Lying ass nigga.”

“Then stop asking dumb-ass questions. What other reason would I be up right now, nigga?”

“Mercer, that’s mine. If you take that opportunity away from me, consider us done.”

I stood to my feet, trying my hardest to shake the exhaustion. There was no use.

“I’m a lot of things, but a hoe ass nigga ain’t one. I have no intention of fucking you over. But you won’t stop me from looking out for you. It’s your job to protect your girl, but it’s my job to protect you. Ima do that to the fullest. I don’t give a fuck how that makes you feel, either.”

The line died as I sat in the recliner. Knowing that Mercer had replaced his oven mittens with black gloves that easily squeezed a trigger made it easier for me to find comfort. I scrolled my phone for notifications I'd ignored over the last twenty-four-plus hours.

Milo had called me every name under the sun because I hadn't answered his calls. The group message was full of rants from his line. I peered at the time at the top of my screen and decided to call him back after sunrise.

Resting my head against the seat, I glued my eyes to the television across the room. I didn't hear a fucking word that came from it. Everything was muted except the thudding of my heart. Violently, it pumped in my chest for the woman who'd chosen to love me for the nigga I am. I closed my eyes with her vengeance heavy on my mind.

Unsure of when I'd fallen asleep, the tapping on my shoulder woke me immediately. I squeezed the barrel of my gun, removed it from my waist, and prepared to aim and shoot.

"It's me."

Finding Mercer standing before me, I re-tucked.

"Just like that?" he questioned. "Right in these people's hospital?"

"That's where the shit started, right?"

"Yeah." He nodded, agreeing with my logic.

"Go home and get some rest. I've got it from here. I'll make sure she gets home safely. Rest up. The hunt is useless without a sharp soldier."

"I'm good."

"I wasn't asking," he affirmed.

Though there was absolutely no room for humor, his stance left me with little choice.

"Nigga, you think 'cause your neck swollen and your chest implants are inflated, you can bully a nigga or some shit? My pistol will penetrate them dragon scales on your arm, my boy. That's make believe, you gon' feel every bullet."

"But you ain't gon' shoot it."

Because he had called my bluff, I remained silent. I stood and stretched my body, jumping to see if he would move an inch. The motherfucker didn't budge.

"That jail got you fucked up."

"I refuse to let it fuck you up. That's all that matters."

"Whatever, nigga. I'm gone."

“Go home! Malachi is holding the fort down. You can sleep tonight. After tonight, I can’t say the same.”

“I can sleep when I die, nigga.” Shrugging, I pushed the door open.

“Stop fucking with me!” Mercer yelled out to me.

Makai + Glacier

GLACIER WALKED through the door at 7:40 a.m. Still half asleep, I checked the time for clarification. A little while longer and I would be getting my day started. Instead of heading straight for the bathroom and starting the shower, Mommas began stripping out of her clothes. In only her panties and bra, she climbed into bed, pushing my arm upward and laying it across her.

Glacier’s body pressed against mine. Skin-to-skin contact was what she craved. Body heat was what she craved. Reassuring pressure was what she craved. Security was what she craved.

The sniffing that followed the realization that my arm was damp squeezed my heart, emptying it of everything it needed to function properly. Glacier’s pain was mine. Though I didn’t know what was wrong, I understood that parts of her, not visible to the human eye, were hurting. That shit made me hurt—*all over*.

“What’s the matter, Mommas?”

Silent tears transformed into low, body-rocking cries that made Glacier a blubbering mess. So much time passed before she was able to muster the strength to respond.

“Talk to me.”

I rubbed her leg, trying to calm her down.

“Shel-Shelly. She has a broken arm and a fractured hip. It... I-it takes those injuries months to heal. Six months to a-a year. She doesn’t deserve any of this.”

“Neither do you,” I assured her. “I’ll handle Shelly’s expenses while she’s recovering. Don’t sweat that, Mommas.”

“I hope he stays in jail where he belongs,” she cried.

Informing her that I’d bailed him out so that the ball was in my court was out of the question. She wouldn’t understand. But it didn’t matter if I was the one to set him free or not; he was coming home, regardless. I just needed him

out a bit sooner.

The bond money they were requesting, he had in a single stash house. Becoming a top earner of mine wasn't easy, and that nigga had done the work to make it happen. Props were due. The nigga was getting to the bag, but that wasn't surprising. Any nigga at my table had to have motion.

I leaned her body forward and freed my arm from beneath her. As my feet touched the floor, I grabbed her leg and pulled her to the edge of the bed. I removed her bra first, happy to see her pebbled nipples respond to the cold air. Next were her panties, which slid down her buttery thighs and onto the floor with ease.

Her body was like silk in my hands, soft to the touch. I tossed her over my shoulder and started toward the bathroom. Before lowering her to the ground, the shower was running and the Bluetooth speaker was active. Some slow shit I knew she'd love played in the background, settling her heart and putting a stop to her tears.

I admired her as the remorse in her eyes bloomed. Underneath the water, she allowed it to cascade down her skin. Her orbs never left me. She was searching for things that only I could provide, and every chance I got, I would. *I did.*

"You're okay, Mommas."

Rubbing her drenched hair, I affirmed. She nodded, feeling every word I spoke to her.

"We're okay, Mommas."

Finally, she was able to close her eyes. She stepped back slightly to allow the water to drench her face and hair entirely. The long, straightened hair transformed into curls that made her hair appear shorter.

She was hypnotizing. I loved every inch of her frame. Her areolas were such a precious sight. I lowered my neck so that my mouth could meet her nipple. The warmth of the water greeted me first. Then it was her tasteless skin.

Glacier was easily my addiction. Ridding the world of anything that brought her discomfort was my duty. In every area of her life, I wanted her happy, healthy, and at peace. Nothing else mattered to me when she was involved. Her love overruled every aspect of my life. Not even money could fuck with Mommas. I had enough of that shit already. I hadn't had enough of her yet.

"Uh." She gasped as her arms surrounded me.

They were the warmest in this cold, cold world.

Desperation fueled my fire. I was burning inside for her, aching for her. I let her nipple fall from my mouth as I searched through the water for her lips. I found them. The second they parted, I pushed my tongue into her mouth and made love to every inch.

I gripped her breasts in my hands, massaging them. She moaned into my mouth. I never cut her loose, even as I hoisted her into the air and slid her down on my dick. She winced as I breached her opening, clinging to my upper half for dear life.

Up and down, I handled her with care. Her pussy welcomed me with cushioned walls and a creaminess that allowed her to glide with little effort on either of our parts.

“Baby.”

Her whimpers made everything around us disappear.

“I love you so much.”

Her words healed pieces of me that had been broken for so long.

“I need you.”

Her confession melted the ice that was forming around my heart.

“I need you, G,” I admitted, afraid to fathom a life void of her existence. How I’d gone so long without her would forever be mindboggling.

“Marry me, Mommas,” I begged. “Have my babies. Please, marry me. Be mine forever.”

She nodded, wrapping her arms around my neck and moaning into my ear. “I’m already yours forever.”

She solidified our bond. There was no ring, there were no plans. There were just two hearts that wanted to pump beside each other for the rest of eternity.

“I’ll marry you a hundred times over. I love you so much.”

A nigga who’d never considered partnership was proposing marriage, empty-handed, because I was being led by my truth at a moment that I wholeheartedly felt was perfect. No one, not even my own mother, could’ve convinced me that it would be my reality.

The woman I’d fallen for agreed to be mine forever without hesitation. My elevation was inevitable. She was fucking my head up.

Because I knew that my nut was rising and I wouldn’t last too long due to the heightened emotions and her sensitivity at the moment, I focused on making sure she was satisfied first. I was approaching my climax rather

quickly. I needed her to approach hers even quicker.

“Fuck!” I removed my dick.

Unless I was ready to end it all, I had no other choice. Her shit was too moist. Her cream was too heavy, coating my skin until it was white. I lifted her higher and pressed her back against the wall before diving in.

Her leakage stained my beard. I wasted no time finding her clit through the snowy fields of gratification. My tongue circled the bulb that made her convulse in my arms.

“Makaaaiiiii.”

She was already near her point. I could feel it. Her level of sensitivity was far too high.

“Oh God, yeeesssssss.”

She was almost there. My dick had gotten her exactly where she needed to be. My tongue would only assist in the home run.

Locked in and showing no remorse, sucking her pussy into my mouth and flickering my tongue over her clit with speed. Her limbs loosened but her abdomen area tightened. Those pretty, slender fingers gripped the back of my head. Glacier fought for balance, but there was hardly any. She was on water, lost but not deserted. She had little to worry about because I would carry her back to shore right after I took her out into the deep end where the climax of the adventure awaited us both.

I lapped up her cream before drawing back completely. Before she was able to get her shit together, she slid down my dick again. Her nails clawed my back.

“Baby, waiiiit—oh my... Baby.”

“Fuck, this pussy so good,” I moaned, drilling into Glacier.

Her titties bounced as I lifted her over and over again. Obsessed and completely fixated on her areolas, I began to peak. Unlike so many times before, the urgency to dislodge didn’t occur. I stayed inside of her pussy, thrusting until I felt my ending near.

Glacier’s fingers gripped the side of my face, forcing my mouth open. Her tongue fled her mouth, seeking refuge in mine. I welcomed it with warmth and liberation. And while our tongues embraced one another, her pussy espoused my semen.

I cleansed Glacier’s body, slowly and gently, then did the same for myself. She waited patiently and accepted the towel that I wrapped around her tightly after drying her body. Bridal style, I carried her into the bedroom

where I removed the towel and grabbed the body cream that she kept in her nightstand.

It smelled like peaches, roses, and apples. There were hints of caramel, but I couldn't be too sure if it was an additive. Nevertheless, the scent was pleasant. I dipped my hand in the round jar and removed the perfect amount.

I left streaks of fluffy butter on her skin, trailing down to her toes where I started working it in, finishing at her neck because her facial skincare routine only included scentless, dye-free products that kept her face radiant.

"Hey," I whispered, kissing Glacier's lips.

She'd fallen asleep. The light massage paired with the shower and good dick had put her to bed.

"Hm?"

I lifted her body and pulled back the covers. She curled up in a ball from the coolness underneath. Her naked body began to produce fine bumps immediately. I tossed the covers on her and tucked them underneath her chin to make sure no air made its way underneath.

"I'll see you later."

It was impossible for me to tell Glacier she might not see me for a few days, possibly a few weeks, or maybe even a month. However long it took to finish the job I'd started, then that was how long I'd be away. There was truth to my statement, though there wasn't a time stamp on it.

"I love you."

"I love you," I replied.

THIRTEEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

THE SUN HAD LONG AGO SETTLED, yet sleep was nowhere in my future. I observed the crystal blue water of the pool from the lounge that held me hostage. After nearly five days, Nelson had yet to resurface. Both Mercer and Malachi suggested he was somewhere healing from his wounds. In the back of my mind, he was somewhere plotting his next move. That possibility kept me up at night, feeling like my head was under the water I was peering at.

Both Ghost and Midnight's ears perked up at once. They fled from my side and made their way to the gate at the edge of the backyard. Loud, thunderous barking followed, alerting me that the boys were unhappy with what they were seeing, hearing, and feeling.

I remained seated, sipping from the bottle of Hennessy in my hand. My cell phone was the best set of eyes I could manage at the moment. The cameras showed twenty-eight angles in and around my home. When I noticed

Lawe's whip at the gate, fondling with my keypad, I called out to Ghost and Midnight.

"Quiet."

They settled immediately. I utilized the intercom to communicate with the uninvited guest.

"Don't break my shit, nigga."

"Then open this bitch up. I'm seconds away from shooting it up."

"My neighbors gon' have your ass in jail before you can tuck that motherfucker."

"They won't hear shit. They're miles away."

He had a point.

"Open the gate. It's cold than a motherfucker out here."

"Freeze, nigga." Chuckling, I pressed the button to give him access.

His car sped through the gate, barely waiting for it to open completely.

If this nigga breaks my gate, I'm fucking him up.

Pissed that I had to get up from my seat, I sucked my teeth. The last thing I wanted was company, but with Lawe, I had no choice. He was a fucking thorn in my side, but he meant well. If I didn't let his ass in, it would be a problem. Everything was a problem with this nigga.

On the way into the house, I remembered to grab more firewood to put in the pit that was keeping me warm. Paired with the large heaters that surrounded the four seating areas, the Berkeley winter didn't stand a chance.

"What's up?"

"Shit, you tell me," he huffed, pushing past me to come inside.

"You a rude mo—"

"So are you. Now, where the fuck is your gloves and shit, nigga? You in this big, cold ass crib in gray sweats and shit. You turning pussy on me or what?"

"Don't put me and pussy in the same sentence unless you're referring to the one between Glacier's legs. You don't know a better stepper than me, nigga. Don't insult me."

"I know a few," Lawe challenged, drawing his head back and enlarging his eyes.

"And I can bet my last dollar they're all connected to me by blood."

He nodded, chuckling. "You'd keep every dollar, too."

"Exactly. Don't come in my shit playing with me. If I ain't suited up, it's for a reason, nigga."

“Then what’s the reason?”

“Almost every breaking news story that’s interrupted Kleu’s shows this week, nigga, that’s why.”

“That’s you?”

“Who the fuck else is it? I’ve combed every corner of the city and haven’t dug that nigga out of one. Either he’s in the slums or already in hell.”

“Shit, then that’s where we’re going.”

“If I had a way down there to double-check, nigga, I would be on my way.”

“Momma’s crib?”

“Nothing.”

“Granny’s crib?”

“Nothing.”

“Aunts, uncles, cousins?”

“Damn near the whole family tree done got a knock from me.”

“So, this nigga hiding for real, for real.”

“Yeah, and as much comfort as that brings most, that shit has me uneasy. I like to hit my target dead in the center of their forehead within one to two business days. Shit, one to two business hours.”

“Minutes.”

“My point! I tried to pop that bitch’s top at county. Mercer’s big, buff ass jumped in front of a nigga and shit. I put Ghost and Midnight on him.”

“And you wonder where that nigga at? Probably nursing his fucking wounds. I hate them big motherfuckers. Fuck you be feeding them? Human?”

On cue, Midnight and Ghost appeared and they were less than happy to see Lawe standing in their home. Perked ears and defense stances displayed their discomfort and willingness to attack.

“Tell them niggas to chill. I ain’t dude. I’m a lay their big asses down, right beside one another.”

“Don’t fuck with my dogs!” I warned.

“Tell them not to fuck with me, and where the fuck you going? Leaving me in here with these niggas.”

“Watch ’em,” I demanded, heading down the hallway.

“Fuck you mean, watch them?” Lawe yelled.

The sound of him loading his chamber stopped me in my tracks. I turned to find him aiming his Glock at Ghost.

“He the first one I’m hitting. He’s too fucking calm for me.”

“He’ll rip your airways from your throat. He’s the first motherfucker you should shoot.”

“Say less.”

“Chill,” I called out to the boys. Immediately, they relaxed. “That’s family. Though the nigga crazy with bad energy, that’s family.”

It wasn’t the first time they’d met Lawe. Every time, there was unspoken beef between them.

“You coming or what?”

Hesitantly, he followed me outside where I passed him the bottle of brown. Back and forth, we took swig after swig, keeping the blunts in rotation. As the night unfolded, my yearning for Glacier increased. I could taste her on the tip of my tongue. I could feel her in my arms. It had been a week since I’d laid eyes on her, seen her anywhere besides a cell phone screen.

“I’ma marry her,” I blurted mid-conversation.

“Nigga, how the fuck you jump from football to I’ma marry her?”

“Because I am.”

“Do that shit, then. After this shit, you should.”

“Why haven’t you married Kleu?” I puffed, preparing for some bullshit to come from his mouth.

“Because what will it change? Real shit. How will marriage benefit either of us more than our current arrangement? Honestly. Tell me. Think of one thing aside from ‘papers’ motherfuckers love to say they have on a person as if they’re an object or some shit?”

I paused, trying to think of something significant. I couldn’t.

“Ain’t shit gon’ come to mind, so you might as well stop straining your fried-ass brain to think. If I leave today, everything goes to Kleu. If I were to fall into a coma today, Kleu has the power of attorney. And that shit works both ways. It won’t make me love her ass any differently. Ya feel me?”

“That girl got my whole fucking chest. Fuck my heart. What are we missing? She’s got a ring on her finger. She’s in a fat crib. Endless funds. A nigga that loves and worships the ground she walks on. What more is there to give her besides some paperwork? I think motherfuckers crazy for putting papers on a relationship and using it as a means to confirm a bond.

“Then, when that bullshit ass bond is broken because it wasn’t solid in the first place, they have to go ask a motherfucker for permission to leave a motherfucker, how to leave them, what they are entitled to after they leave

them, and how long they stay in their pockets after they leave them. We good.

“If Kleu left me today, for one, I’m going to split somebody’s fucking wig, and second, she can have whatever the fuck she wants from me. I don’t need to pay for her a lawyer to tell me to be a decent human and make sure she’s straight when I asked her to quit her job. I asked her to take a chance on me... a chance on us.

“At the end of the day, it’s just papers and a high-ass ceremony most folk can’t even afford. Nigga, did you know that most of the wedding party pays to be part of the fucking wedding? What type of shit is that? I’m paying to be in your wedding that you asked me to be a part of? I’d cuss a motherfucker out.”

“We’ve never paid for any of the weddings we’ve been in.”

“Which is how it’s supposed to be.” He laughed. “That shit will never make sense to me. They pay for their hair, makeup, dresses, suits, shoes, everything. I’m good, man. I’ll go to my grave thinking that shit is all for nothing. People want weddings, not bonds these days. It’s always the most stressful day for brides and grooms. Ain’t shit okay about that.”

“I see where you’re coming from. Different strokes for different folks.”

“Which is why I’m at every one of them weddings, ready to get fucked up and watch the groom cry like a bitch.”

“I’m not going to cry.”

“Nigga, my napkin already ready. I love being a part of that shit because it’s beautiful, nonetheless, but in my opinion, it’s pointless.”

“You haven’t told a lie yet, so I feel ya.”

“But how long I got to get my shit together? I need to make sure I’m stacked standing by your side, wiping your tears. It’s the least I could do for you making me your best man.”

“I never said you were going to be my best man.”

“That shit understood, player. I’m the designated best man. Anybody that has a problem with that can get shot.”

“When they stop making guns, what you gon’ do?”

“Learn how to build my own. Fuck you mean?”

“You can’t shoot everything and everybody.”

“Why the fuck not?” He reared back.

Shaking my head, I decided against answering.

“When all this shit over, I’m going to ask her to marry me. Her birthday

is February 14th.”

“She looks like she was born on Valentine’s Day.”

“Fuck that supposed to mean?” I took offense. The look of disgust was written all over his face.

“‘Cause y’all niggas know how to pick ‘em. All y’all niggas got the same girl, just different faces. Aeir – definitely could’ve been born on Valentine’s Day. Nature, though she has a little heart to go with her shit, still... Valentine’s Day. Glacier, if you blow too hard, she gon’ fall the fuck over.”

I tossed my head back, completely amused. He was speaking facts tonight, but he had Mommas fucked up.

“Twice, nigga. You’d have to blow twice.”

“Yeah, aight. A good one, two, three, pweeeeeeh and her ass on the flo’, dog.”

He demonstrated, filling his jaws with air and releasing it on three.

“Exaggerating ass nigga.”

“Point the wildest, finest, curviest one out and that girl gon’ belong to me.”

“Because you need somebody as crazy as you to deal with your shit.”

“Whatever. I can be a bit toxic sometimes. I don’t mean no harm. I just need somebody that can get with my shit when I’m getting with the shit. I can’t take a motherfucker that’s gon’ run cry. Nah, come punch me in my eye. Black that motherfucker so I know not to play with you no more.”

“That’s concerning. Kleu be beating your ass? Blink once. I can set you up with R—”

“Nah.” He tittered. “Do I think she will if it came to it? Yes. But she don’t be thinking about my ass. She ignore me half the time. I like that shit, too. Kleu ain’t with no drama. But she doesn’t avoid it when confronted, either. She gets down.”

“Shit, I saw that shit firsthand at Milo’s wedding.”

“And I wish she could drag that nutty ass bitch again. She was dead wrong.”

“Yeah. She was tripping with that shit.”

“Kleu is every one of them at heart. That’s why they get along so well. She’s the sweetest, nigga. She won’t admit it, but she is a natural protector. That’s her role in their friendship. She’ll shut some shit down for the women she loves. Crazy, all of them are the same fucking type.

“Ever, Lyric, Baisleigh, Halo, Aeir, Nature, Glacier. All of ‘em. And she

can't get enough of them. Cold-blooded and soft as the rest of them at the end of the day. That's why I love her ass and ain't ever giving that motherfucker up. Never. Anybody waiting can retire that shit.

"So, February?"

"Not a wedding, a proposal."

"Bet. I'm trying to put you down that aisle quick, huh?"

"Too quick."

We both toyed with the silence before Lawe spoke again.

"I'd pay any kind of money to see ya mom's face hearing this shit. To hear your pops try to guide you and shit, tell you what a successful marriage takes. They were the happiest couple I'd ever laid eyes on until I met my pops and the rest of my people.

"Again, that shit beautiful, man, and I don't see it any differently from what I have. Being happy and in love ain't no easy shit. Especially when it's shit that's always trying to tear a motherfucker down."

"Like this bullshit."

"Exactly."

"I'd give a fucking lung to see either of them long enough to tell them about, Glacier. Shit, about Aeir and Nature and Kleu and Halo. They'd love each and every one of them."

"Call them more than Pops. You think he be trying to fuck our bi—women on the low? I got to start watching that nigga. He ain't slick."

"Shut the fuck up, crazy-ass boy. Where'd that come from?"

"Man, that nigga ain't getting no pussy. He always calling and texting our people."

"Because that nigga is lonely and most times just want to see who will come keep him company. You see how much he got them kids."

"Probably trying to make some of his own, too."

"Please, Lawe, just shut that fucking mouth of yours. And you're dead ass."

The look on his face said it all.

"I'm not fucking joking. I'll have to lay Pops' ass down for fucking behind me. I'm not playing that with Kleu. Y'all niggas might not be hipped but I see it."

"I want you out of my house, dog. Real shit."

"Nah. This weed too good, and it ain't mine, so you're stuck with me."

Again, he was stating facts. Aside from believing Pops might have ill

intentions with our women, I hadn't disagreed with him yet. The weed was potent. My eyes grew tighter with every blunt we sparked. I didn't need a mirror to see how red they were.

Makai + Glacier

THE BLARING television woke me from my sleep. I wasn't certain how or when we'd made it to the couch in the living room but it appeared we'd brought the party inside. Lawe was stretched out on the other couch with the throw Glacier added to the fall and winter decor draped over his body.

My hands were tucked inside of my joggers. I still wore the hoodie I'd had on while outside.

I need that fucking blanket, I thought, releasing a yawn.

I stood and quietly tiptoed toward Lawe. When I snatched the blanket from over him, he stirred slightly but didn't wake. I felt victorious after successfully obtaining the blanket. I draped it over my body and regretted it immediately. It smelled just like her.

1:11 a.m.

The time on my phone was big and blinding. As I adjusted to the light, I noticed the notification at the bottom of my screen. As if she had been thinking of me, too, Glacier had sent a text an hour ago. If she wasn't working, she was usually sleeping around this time.

Instead of texting her back, I tossed the cover off and stretched my body until my bones popped. I debated waking Lawe up, but the idea of Kleu popping his ass in the eye like he claimed he loved, I decided to leave him asleep.

I wanted to test her limits, see if she'd fall through for us all. It was time someone blacked that nigga's shit. Considering how spooked that nigga would be when he woke up and realized he was alone with Ghost and Midnight, I snickered on the way to the coupe, covering my mouth so that he wouldn't hear me.

Anxiously, I cruised the city, taking in everything at once. Though my situation gave me little room to breathe, making me feel suffocated, knowing that I was on my way *home to her* provided me with an unrestricted oxygen supply. I gripped the wheel of my ride with Glacier heavy on my heart.

She'd been designed for me. Perfectly, she fit. It wasn't until she walked into my life that I came to the conclusion that I'd been lonely before. Shielding my heart from women after the world had already broken it was my coping mechanism.

I didn't want to cope anymore. I wanted to live. That was what Glacier did for a nigga. She gave me life. She gave me purpose. She gave me hope, some shit I hadn't had since the day my momma killed herself and my pops.

A smile caressed my face after a week of expressionless features. Imagining her coming toward me dressed in white from head to toe... Imagining her walking around the crib with a belly so swollen, she couldn't see her feet... Imagining her carrying something we created together... Imagining us decorating trees and opening gifts on Christmas.

It didn't feel so farfetched now. In fact, it felt like it was at the tips of my fingers. The quicker I handled the situation at hand, the faster I could ice her out and give her an endless budget to plan the wedding of her dreams. How I'd break it to Lawe that Trent would be the nigga standing beside me, I wasn't sure. I just hoped Trent had enough bullets because that nigga would surely be gunning for his head.

Trent. I recalled the last conversation we'd had. He, too, was ready to sit down and put a ring on Ava's finger. Growth was a beautiful fucking thing and it was so fucking rewarding.

"Hi, Mr. Domino. In for the remainder of the night?"

Valet was at my door, ready to take my whip upstairs for me if I was ending my night.

"Yeah. I'm in for the night, my guy. Keys inside."

"Good. Thank you. See you later."

The elevator ride gave me more time to think about her, about us. A few months was all I needed to know what I wanted for the rest of my life. It had everything to do with Glacier. Yet, I couldn't shake the apprehension that revolved around my occupation. Niggas needed one reason to bring me to my knees and I had given it to them that night at dinner.

I'd be kicking myself for the next five years for that slip-up. Among my associates was not the place for Glacier to be. I'd placed a target on her back. That was why it was important that I handled Nelson. He'd be the lesson for any nigga who considered fucking with Mommas.

Curled up in a ball, Glacier laid in bed. Sleep had taken over, leaving her no choice but to rest her heart, her mind, and her body. Emotions swelled in

my chest. Seeing her was like seeing my most vital organ outside of my body. I rubbed my chest to ease the pain my love for her caused.

I undressed, stripping down to my briefs. It was me, this time, who needed to feel her skin against mine, to feel the pressure of our bodies as they collided in a nonsexual manner, to hear every breath she took, and to have something to hold on to. To have *her* to hold on to.

I pulled the cover back slightly to climb into bed behind her. My heart stopped at the sight of my belongings. The large white tee was a few sizes too big for her, but she wore it anyway to signify the intense yearning for my presence. The briefs she wore hugged her frame so wonderfully. They didn't belong to her but seemed as if every thread had been tailored for her existence.

The contorting of my face helped display my true feelings. A mess, I tucked my face near her neck and brought her closer.

"Baby," she whispered, still asleep.

"Y-yes, Mommas." I felt my voice slip.

Choking off my words led me to silence. I had nothing to say. Yet, I was feeling everything.

Makai + Glacier

"Y'ALL DEAD FUCKING WRONG," I scoffed, sucking the skin of my teeth.

The snow that fell and wind that blew relentlessly made it seem so much colder than it actually was. The hoodie I'd worn over the last week and a half simply didn't mount to much in the brutal cold of the day now. I added a thick, black Moncler piece that didn't let a single gust of wind cut through its fabric.

I stared at my parents' grave with malice in my heart. I hated them both, but not for any reason other than leaving my brothers and me far too soon. While there was only one reason to despise them, there were a hundred more reasons to love them. And I loved them deeply.

"But shit, y'all already know that. We're here to discuss something else... someone else."

Sighing, I proceeded to shake my head. It didn't matter how many years

passed or how much their absence taught me, I still found it hard to believe they weren't here with me.

"So, I met this girl, man," I said, turning toward my father's side of the headstone where his body rested. "She's special."

I turned toward my mother. "You'd love her. She reminds me of you in some ways, many ways, really. According to Lawe, we've all surrounded ourselves with women just like you. He didn't say it out of his mouth, but I knew that's what he meant.

"And honestly, I ain't mad about it. You were in possession of such a beautiful spirit. You were the purest of people who ever entered Dad's life. Things just got in the way, things that you couldn't control or you would've. I know you would've."

I paused, realizing I was making this about my parents when I simply wanted to tell them about the girl who meant the most to me.

"But this visit ain't about that. It's about Glacier. Her name is an exact contrast to who she is. She's not cold. She's not hard. She's not made of ice. Mommas is warm. A whole hug. A shelter from the cold. Soft inside and out. She's magic. And believe it or not, she's mine."

It was a privilege loving her.

"I never thought much about the day I'd tell you about a girl as a kid, ya know? But shit, I never expected to be telling you about her standing over your grave. I feel robbed. I feel shunned. I feel like I've been punched in the fucking gut."

I shoved my hands in my pocket, blowing out air. It was so cold that I could see the breaths I took.

"But what can I do, right? It's life. You're birthed and then fucked over until you die. Right, Pops?"

A gust of wind blew past me as I felt Malachi's arm on my shoulder.

"He gon' smack the shit out of you again if you don't watch your mouth when you're talking to them, nigga."

He was visiting his late wife, Anna. I decided to stop by the grave that I avoided until I was led back every few years. Not physically, but mentally and spiritually, when nothing would settle me except a visit.

"I'm mad enough to beat his ass after all these years. Nigga just gon' leave us like that. Type of time they was on?"

"When you find the answer, please tell me. You ready to head back?"

"Yeah."

He was referring to the spot we'd met and I'd hopped in the car with him.
"Bet. Milo said they'll be pulling up soon."

"Right on time."

We piled into his whip with his right-hand man at the wheel. The warmth kissed me like it missed me and I wasn't mad at that at all. Standing outside for even a few minutes had my nose feeling like it was about to fall the fuck off.

"Where you at with this situation?" Malachi asked, breathing into his hands to warm them.

"Ready to blow a gasket. Had the drop on the nigga, finally, but he disappeared inside an apartment complex and ain't come up out of that bitch since."

"Then go in after his ass."

"Went in every unit until they started calling the people. I'm at the point now where I don't give a fuck about them, either."

"I do. We've got way too much on the line for you to get jammed for murder, Makai."

"You got another solution, nigga?"

"Patience."

"Yeah. That's never suited me."

"Well, make it, nigga."

"Next subject," I encouraged, uninterested in whatever he was saying.

Had it been Aeir in the same situation, patience wouldn't have been a word he'd want to hear coming from anyone's mouth. He was only weaponizing it because it wasn't him staring at Glacier's pictures every day, wondering if the world was a safe enough place for her now and how he could make certain that it was soon.

"Mercer doesn't accept handouts. We must make sure he understands that this is not what this is."

"He has no other choice. If he tries to march them broad ass shoulders out of the door then he—"

"Nothing. Then we wait for him to see things our way. He's still getting acclimated to his new norm. Forcing him to accept something that we want for him isn't the solution. We wait."

"You can wait, Malachi. With all due respect, I'm tired of him sleeping on himself. It's time to turn that nigga into the mogul we know he is—the legit way. The quicker, the more money we can clean."

“It’s not even about that.”

“Never about that when it comes to us, but it is a bonus.”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

We made it to our destination twenty-five minutes after leaving the cemetery. Milo and Mercer were exiting Milo’s whip as we climbed out of Malachi’s.

“What’s up?” I greeted Mercer, pulling him in for a quick embrace.

“What’s up?” I asked Milo.

He tilted his head, looking at me as if I’d lost my fucking marbles, rejecting my hand with a slap on the wrist.

“Fruity-ass nigga. Tight-ass jeans. I bet Niagara be pegging you, don’t it? You can tell us.”

“Nah, but Galactic probably let you sit on her finger every now and again.”

“Awwww, he thought of a new word.”

“New? Nigga, who you think I am, you? Learned that shit by second grade.”

“I know, you was kind of slow back then. I’m surprised you made it out of elementary.”

“You got me fucked up, Makai. Mixed up with you. Did you forget I graduated t—”

“Blah, blah, nigga. Let’s handle business,” I joked, pushing him forward, knowing that it would push his buttons.

Within less than a second, he’d circled me and placed me in a headlock. Unable to defend myself, I resorted to laughing because he was breathing down my neck like he’d just run four miles nonstop.

“Out-of-shape ass nigga, in my ear sounding like your name Albert.”

He loosened his grip before deciding to let me go completely. “I really don’t like this nigga.”

Mercer and Malachi said nothing, both standing beside each other as if they didn’t recognize either of us. I took a look around me, discovering home. Mercer had always said that it was a person and never a place. In the presence of the men that I’d grown from a boy into a man, I felt at home, at peace.

It was the reason I could laugh after over a week of feeling absolutely nothing but the ice over my heart. The moments I’d shared with Glacier and Lawe were the only exception.

“Here,” Malachi urged Mercer to take the key in his hand.

“What’s this?”

Malachi nodded toward the building we were standing in front of.

“That’s yours,” I clarified.

“Mine? For what?” His brows creased as he looked from one of us to the other.

“Don’t you think it’s time to let the world taste the same food we’ve had the pleasure of having?”

Puzzled, Mercer flipped the key in his hand, staring down at it before looking back up at us.

“I can’t take this,” he said, trying to hand the key back.

Malachi shook his head.

“I’ve got paper. You niggas know that, right?”

“We have no doubt about it,” Milo assured him.

“But that’s beside the point,” I added.

“Use your money to build it out if you just have to use your shit. But we’ve all put some money in a pot to get this place off the ground.”

“You niggas can—”

“Watch you do what you love to do on a much grander scale. Whatever it takes to turn this spot into the five-star restaurant we know it can be, we’re willing to do,” I interrupted.

“Hmph,” he scoffed.

“We’re not taking that key back, so take your wide-back ass in and check it out.”

“If you weren’t my little brother, I’d be done bust you in your mouth.” He chuckled, still following orders.

We filed into the building, the three of us allowing Mercer to lead the way so that we were able to see his pure reaction. The two-story building was massive. Turning toward us with a smile on his face, he nodded in appreciation.

“I’mma need to go dig up that mil.” He laughed. “This motherfucker gon’ take every dime.”

“Or you could use the quarter that’s left in the account after purchasing this space to get started.”

“That’s your idea? Budget?”

“Yeah. If I can cut some costs, seven-fifty or eight might do it.”

“You have two-fifty. We can make sure you get to four and you match it.

That'll give you the eight you need to get it to where it needs to be," Malachi explained.

"You don't have to. I have the—"

"We don't want to hear that shit, Mercer. Just deck this bitch out. That's our only request." I hushed him.

"And agree to the name we've already decided on."

"What's that?"

"The M."

Nodding, he agreed in an instant. We wasted little time shaking on it.

"The M," he repeated. "It's a done deal."

FOURTEEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glacier". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large loop at the beginning of the word.

SEEING my grandmother made my soul bubble. I loved her deeply and I loved her wholly. Aside from a cousin living on the other side of Huffington State, and a few other distant relatives, she was the only family I knew. Neither my mother nor father had large families. It was the sole reason that I planned to be fruitful when my time finally came.

“I have to get going, Granny. Work starts in a bit and I need to make a stop. It’s my coworker’s birthday and I can’t walk in empty-handed.”

She was lucid. It wasn’t often she was, but those moments, I cherished.

“Just a minute now, baby.”

“What is it?” I tittered, trying to keep up with her. She was moving around the room with so much urgency.

She shuffled through a small trunk she’d pulled from underneath her bed. I hovered over her, trying to get a glimpse of what was inside. However, she was making it quite difficult as she swatted at me.

“Get back. This will all be yours when the time comes.”

“Okay. Okay.”

I stepped back, waiting for her to expose whatever she’d chosen. When she finally did, the smile that tore a slit between my top and bottom lips

couldn't be contained.

“This was your father's necklace. Your mother had it made for him as a wedding gift. He wore it proudly, every single day until she got him a better one. After I noticed she'd replaced the old one, I asked to have it. I was saving it just for you, Icy.”

“Grannnnny. Thank you. It's so pretty.”

“Isn't it?”

She popped the locket open and showed me separate pictures of my mother and father, each on one side of the small circles.

“Look at them, young and full of love.”

Her memory was shallow, but she remembered some good parts of her life, my father's life, and mine when her mind was in the right place.

“Reminds me of you and that one you're seeing,” she said, catching me off guard.

I was unsure if she remembered Makai, the few times he'd visited with me, or the degree of our relationship.

“Makai?”

“Who else would I be talking about, Icy?”

“I jus—nothing. Why do we remind you of Mom and Dad?”

I stared at the gold necklace, admiring my mother's beauty. She was striking. I'd inherited her entire face, almost. Parts of my father were infused, but not many.

“Even a blind man can see the adoration in that boy's eyes for you. He's such a lost soul. It's written all over his face. And what you offer him, no one else will ever be able to. You don't require him to travel the distance.

“You meet him where he is and he accommodates you for the journey. You two are selfless when it comes to each other and that's how I know you'll make it through whatever has been put in front of you. Just have faith, and most of all, have patience.”

How she knew that there was a storm pulling us in different directions was beyond me. I didn't care to dwell. I'd been feeling the weight of our circumstances a lot more lately and was hoping that our storm would pass soon.

I missed Makai dearly. I'd gone from seeing his handsome face daily and lying next to him in bed to brief calls and check-ins every few days. Though contact was inconsistent, I never once felt his love waver. When I had a moment to talk to him, I could hear it in his tone and the words he shared

with me.

“Thank you, Granny.”

“It’ll get better. Just wait and see.”

“I know.”

With a head tilt, I agreed.

“Now, get out of here and get to work. Where do you work again?”

“Berkeley Presby, Granny.”

“What you do there, baby?”

She’d snapped out of it instantly, reverting to her forgetful self that I still held so much love for.

“I’m a nurse.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and I have to get to work.”

“Yes. Of course, baby, you told me that. I’m sorry for keeping you so long.”

“It’s fine. I love you, old lady.”

“I love you, too, Icy. Bring me some of that candy I love next time. Your dad said he was on his way, but—”

“He left it in the drawer beside your bed. You had fallen asleep so he left it there for you. Remember, one! Two if you’re really craving something sweet.”

“All right. If you talk to him, tell him I’ve been trying to call him.”

“I will.”

With my heart in shambles, I left my grandmother and headed to pick up the cake from the bakery for Tony. Because he was a rather simple man, his requests were simple. Gift cards, that was all he wanted. I decided to add a cake and personal birthday card to appease myself more than him. Either way, I knew he’d love and accept them both.

My new accessory rolled around my skin as I trekked through Martain’s, the private supermarket in the heart of Berkeley. Though it wasn’t near my home or the hospital, it was a few miles away from my grandmother’s nursing home and on my route.

The bakery to grab the cake was my first stop. I arrived to find a small line forming. Because there was only one employee fulfilling orders and checking customers out, the service was substantially slower than usual. I checked the time on my phone screen.

I should be fine, I thought, preparing for the wait. The line moved up a

notch as soon as I got in. The person standing at the counter had received their order and was headed in my direction, pushing a cart and carrying a belly in front of her that made my brows hike on my face, rushing toward my hairline. Completely caught off guard, I found myself gawking at the round belly of Valencia.

The cart she pushed stopped mere feet away from me. I moved forward in line, hoping the message was clear. Since the night everything was exposed, I had yet to speak with Valencia. Seeing as though she was standing in front of me, very pregnant, with a stomach that would've matched mine had I continued my pregnancy, left me flabbergasted.

"Glacier," she called out to me.

She hadn't gotten the point. She hadn't realized talking to her was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Can we talk?"

"I'm not sure what we're supposed to talk about, Valencia."

"Everything."

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm well, you're well... what more is there to discuss?"

"I'm sorry, okay?"

I stood silently, unable to respond.

"I am."

"Congratulations on the baby, Valencia. I pray that you're having a safe, healthy pregnancy and that your child lives a happy, healthy life. As for me, pretend I don't exist because that's what I've done for the last six months with you. There are absolutely no hard feelings. I simply feel nothing."

"The first time it happened, we were both drunk. He was taking me home because I'd had a little too much to drink and couldn't drive home. He was at the same club. He helped me inside and it kind of just—it just happened.

"And after the first time, though I felt so guilty, I just couldn't stop. We couldn't stop. One thing led to another, and the next thing I know, we were repeating the crazy shit to each other. Things that we shouldn't have been to express feelings we shouldn't have had for one another. I'm so sorry, Glacier."

"You're not sorry for what you did, Valencia. You're sorry it was me that got caught in the crossfire. However, you wouldn't change it if you could. You wouldn't go back to that night and change a single thing. You had sex with your best friend's boyfriend and you loved it.

“You loved it so much that you couldn’t stop yourself from doing it again and again and again until eventually, feelings got involved and a child was conceived. You’re in love, Valencia. I can see it in your eyes even now. How I didn’t see it the last eight months of my relationship with Nelson, I don’t know. But I can honestly tell you that I’m happy for you. Just stay safe. Not all that glitters is gold, Valencia.”

Stepping closer, she responded with a whisper, “I know.”

“If you’d excuse me, I have a schedule to stay on.”

I moved up in line again, leaving her behind me.

“Congratulations!” she yelled.

I didn’t budge as the words tore through my core. They were the words I’d wanted to hear from her that day back in May when I walked across the stage. The energy I promised not to give Valencia began brewing in my chest, not allowing me to remain silent. I marched toward her, not stopping until her belly brushed against my flat tummy and my face was inches away from hers.

“Congratulations? Congratulations?”

Foreign emotions brought along foreign words that were absent from my vocabulary but felt justified at the moment. Valencia didn’t deserve me in my purest form. She deserved the lesser version of me, the one she’d quickly birthed with her presence and ignorance.

“You stupid, malicious, backstabbing bitch. You don’t get to congratulate me now. Hadn’t you been sucking my man’s dick and fucking him like he was the last on earth, then you could’ve been right there, waiting for me when I got off the stage to congratulate me.

“You would’ve been at the dinner that I wanted with just the three of us because you two were all I had. But you weren’t. I left my ceremony with uncertainty and in a pair of socks with no transportation and no clue how I’d get back home. I left my graduation in so much pain that it hurt to even speak. It hurt to think. It hurt to exist. So, no, you don’t get to congratulate me, Valencia.

“I was nothing but good to you. I’ve only ever been in your corner. I loved you like you were my sister. You had no business shitting on me the way you did. You had no business breaking my heart the way you did. You had no right to do that to me. Nelson is a man. I’ve grown to expect things from those creatures. I could’ve dealt with him cheating the same way I am now—by moving on with my life.

“Breakups happen. But you, Valencia. To know that it was you he was cheating with is just... It’s foul! Again, breakups happen, but friendship breakups—that is pain on an entirely different level. I mourned us more than I mourned Nelson and me. I cried for us. I wept for us. You broke my heart way worse than that man ever could.”

I left her with those words, marching toward the line. I was pissed that I’d let her take me there and even more upset I’d lost my spot in line while tapping into the energy she evoked.

Bitch! I huffed, feeling the pain of it all resurface.

“Next!”

Finally, a second set of hands had come to the bakery to help. I retrieved the cake I’d come for and headed to U-Scan where Valencia was checking out. The blaring of her phone silenced after a few seconds. I halted at the sound of Nelson’s voice after she answered the FaceTime call.

“Where you at, baby?”

“I’m on my way. I’m leaving the grocery store. I just picked up the cake.”

“Aight. I’m headed that way, too. I could’ve stopped by the store. Shit, it’s on the way.”

“No. No stops, remember?”

The mention of Makai, though his name wasn’t stated, elevated my heart rate.

“Fuck that nigga.”

“I just sa—”

I cleared my throat, grabbing her attention. Shaking my head, I forbid her from mentioning my name because I knew it was coming. Their conversation was evidence that she was aware of everything going on. I, on the other hand, was blind.

“What you say? You cut out.”

“I was saying that I’ll just see you at the venue.” She redirected the conversation as I completed my transaction.

It wasn’t until I was on my way out of the door that I noticed she was wearing a shirt with her child’s name on it.

Naomi Reign is coming, the shirt read.

A girl, I concluded as I searched for my truck. Before starting the engine, I rested my head against the seat. My life lately felt so overwhelming, so unreal. I was ready to resume the peace I’d had before I walked into Rouge.

When the drumming of my heart subsided, I started the engine and began

the journey to Berkeley Presby. It was an easy fix. Falling into my routine helped me sort my thoughts and keep my mind occupied. It was so easy to forget the world outside when I walked through those doors.

As I entered the expressway, Makai stuck to me like glue. I used the controls to log into my contacts and send a call. The few seconds of waiting were agonizing, but relief was available once his voice replaced the third ring.

“Mommas, what’s up?”

“Nothing. What are you doing?”

It felt like months since I’d felt Makai against my skin. My craving increased as he spoke again.

“I’m tied up right now.”

“Come home, Makai.”

“After tonight, G.”

From the way he’d said my name, I felt the disconnection. I remained silent, not wanting to express how much I’d rather him call me something else and how much I wanted him in the bed we shared when I got home. I didn’t want to wonder if I’d find him there. He needed to be there.

“Get out ya head, aight? This shit almost over. I’m coming home, Mommas. I promise.”

“Where are you?”

“Putting an end to this shit.”

I swerved, avoiding the truck that was driving wildly beside me.

“My God, where’d these drivers get their license?”

“Where you at?” Makai questioned, suddenly sounding concerned.

“I don’t know the name of this—oh my God. They’re going to kill someone.”

“Where you at, Glacier?” he screamed in my ear.

“Makai, why are you yelling, baby?”

“Glacier!” He didn’t reduce the volume. In fact, he yelled louder. “Where you at?”

The swerving vehicle managed to get beside me again. Panic-stricken, I tried focusing on staying in my lane without falling victim to their carelessness. However, my efforts were in vain. My eyes darted from my lane to theirs, trying my hardest to keep a watchful eye. The window of the vehicle lowered, revealing the driver of the Toyota 4-Runner. My heart stopped.

“MAKAI.”

Suddenly, it was me yelling.

“Makai!”

“Get off, Glacier. Get off!”

“Where are you?”

“I’m positive I’m just behind you. Get off the fucking expressway, baby.”

“It’s hi—”

The force of impact slid my car across the expressway. My head collided with the steering wheel and everything around me blackened as gunshots rang out.

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“GLACIER!” The sound of Makai’s voice stirred me.

I opened my eyes, still disoriented and still losing consciousness.

“Ma—”

Words were beyond me. I went into total darkness, again.

|

“I GOT YOU, baby. I’m getting you out.”

I opened my eyes again. Hearing Makai’s voice so close but so far away made my heart hurt. I didn’t know much, but I knew he was too far away. I needed him near.

“Fuck. I’m working on it, baby.”

My body was upside down. I could feel my neck pressed against the ceiling and my blood rushing to my head as I blacked out, again.

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“STAY WITH ME, Mommas. Stay with me. I got you.”

This time, he was with me. My body bounced up and down as sirens blared around me.

I'm in his arms. I'm safe, I thought, slipping into darkness again.

I'm in his arms.

Makai + Glacier

BEEP.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Cold air surrounded me, yet there was still a familiar warmth that lured me to consciousness. I opened my eyes, slowly adjusting to the brightness of the room. The soft, yet slightly calloused hand that caressed mine caused havoc in my chest.

“Makai?”

The movement of my lips caused pain throughout my body. My head pounded, reminding me that I'd indeed been involved in an accident.

“Mommas?”

His long legs stretched until he was standing. He moved closer to my bedside and peered at me. We both found incredible discomfort in the lingering silence.

It wasn't until I felt wetness on my neck and my lip began to quiver that my emotional wreckage was identified. I cried, silently, staring back into Makai's orbs. I ached for his touch, to feel his skin against mine. Even so close, he was too far away. I searched for words but there were none.

I watched a single tear fall from his eyes. It fell to the floor as he leaned forward in an attempt to conceal his pain. I didn't have the privilege. Mine rested on my face, neck, and the gown they'd dressed me in.

He cleared his throat to speak. “How are you feeling?”

I shook my head, admitting I wasn't well. Everything hurt.

“Fuck,” he grunted, spinning a full circle.

His fingers pulled at his beard. He was in deep thought, regret evident in

his posture.

“I love you.” From some place deep within, I mustered the strength. From some place unknown, I mustered the strength.

“And that’s the fucking problem, Kiwi. You love a nigga that was never meant for you to love, baby. Girls like you not supposed to fall in love with niggas like me. And niggas like me not supposed to fall for girls like you. You deserve lawyers and doctors and pilots and shit like that. Motherfuckers with professions that won’t jeopardize your life.

“Falling in love with me put a red dot on your back. Falling in love with me made you the easiest target for a nigga who’s feeling any type of way about me. And up until I met that nigga, wasn’t too many fucking problems a motherfucker had with me.”

“Makai, this is-isn’t your fault.”

“Had it been anyone else in the world that you laid down and busted that shit open for, you wouldn’t be here. You wouldn’t be in this position. You’d be at work right now, not laid up in the very beds you stand beside every night. So, yes, Glacier. This is my fault. And because it is, this is what’s about to happen.”

He took the seat beside the bed and scooted it as close as he could. He grabbed my hand carefully, placing it between his.

“Baby.” I wept, unsure of what he was about to say but dreading the words that were about to fall from his lips.

“Listen, Mommas... There’s an account that I’ve set up for you. Inside is \$1.8 million. It’s all yours. You won’t ever have to work another day in your life if you don’t want to. Start a business. Take a year off. Invest it in stock. Whatever you want to do.”

“Makai, stop.”

“Shhh. Shhhh,” he hushed me. “Your car is paid off. Your insurance will fully fund another vehicle. The process is already in motion. Your condo is also paid but you can’t live there, Kiwi. You can rent it out if you want a steady income. They’ll pay top dollar for that space, especially if it’s already furnished. Or, you can sell it.”

This entire time, I was under the impression it was leased. This was news to me.

“The choice is yours, but staying there or anywhere in Berkeley is completely out of the question. You must go. As soon as you leave this place, you have to go. As long as you’re here, you’re a sitting duck. I’ve seen what

happened to women like you because of men like me and I could never live with myself if God did that to me, if He took you away from me. I can't chance it. I can't live through that type of pain. I won't make it. So, save us both, Glacier, and get out of here."

Though painful, I still managed to shake my head from one side to the other. "I'm not leaving you."

"You don't have to. I'm going to do that for both of us."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I didn't aim high enough. I had a choice to make on that expressway. Make sure that you weren't in your truck when it burst into flames or chase that nigga down and dead him. I chose you and I'll choose you again and again and again.

"Because I chose you, I have unfinished business. A bullet in the back and a bullet in the head are two very different things. A bullet in the back got that nigga a patch and a first-class ticket to county where I need to be."

"Makai, please."

"Nah. I'm not willing to play hide and seek with this nigga no more."

Makai stood and kissed my cracked lips. I closed my eyes as the pain shot through my face.

"What about us?"

"As of this moment, G, there is no us. Go live your life, Mommas. Let a square put a smile on your face. You deserve that. It's the least I can do, let you go. I refuse to find you on the floor with some hot shit in ya chest. That ain't the life I'm trying to live. That ain't a life I'm trying to live. I'd rather go my way and let you go yours. Your life, for me, matters more than the love I have for you."

"You don't know—you don't know what you're saying. You don—you can't mean that."

"Before I cost you your life, I'll be a selfish motherfucker," he emphasized.

"You don't want to do this."

"What I don't—" he choked. "What I don't want is to feel what I felt when I walked in and found my brother's wife on that floor beside him as he clung to the bit of his heart she'd managed to leave him. What I don't want is to look my children in their faces and tell them how much of an amazing woman their mother was.

"What I don't want is to try to rebuild a life with bits and pieces, knowing

that it's likely impossible. What I don't want is to lose my fucking mind—just like my mother. So, when I tell you you must go... Just go, G."

"But I love you, Makai. I love us."

"I love us, too, but not as much as I love you. You as a person. You as a nurse. You as a granddaughter. You as a woman. Before you're mine, you're all of those things and I love that shit. I love it enough to know when to let it go."

"You have no right. Wh-what even was the point? Why'd you come back? Why'd you show up at my door that night? What was the point?" I hyperventilated.

"Stupidity! That was the point. Thinking I could fall my stupid ass in love when that ain't in my cards. That's not how my life works. That's not a luxury I have."

"But it's staring back at you."

"At what cost, Glacier?"

I had no rebuttal.

"I love you, Mommas," he wept, leaning down to kiss my forehead. "Take care of yourself."

The words I needed were lost. The pain overpowered everything, all things, inside of me. Makai, the man I'd fallen for the very day I laid eyes on him, was telling me that in this world, we no longer existed.

That we could no longer be.

That I didn't belong with him.

That he didn't belong with me.

As if he didn't remember us, remember our love. As if he'd forgotten so swiftly. As if I hadn't felt something. As if he hadn't felt it, too.

I closed my eyes, desperate to locate a new source of oxygen because he'd taken all I had left inside of me. I couldn't fathom seeing him walk out of the door.

Walk away from me.

Walk away from us.

Walk away from the future he'd promised me.

I couldn't bear the weight of any more pain. A thousand tons sat on my chest, already restricting my airways and suffocating me. Death, the one that he spoke of, had to be easier than this.

FIFTEEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

WALKING AWAY from Glacier made every bone in my body hurt. Doubled over in pain, I exited through the emergency room doors. I leaned over the first patch of grass in sight, releasing every piece of food I'd consumed in the last twenty-four hours. Leaving my whole life behind, the act of it all was repulsive.

"Urgh!"

My body began to purge, trying to rid itself of the things love had given to me before life took it away tragically.

"Fuck."

I wiped the remains with the back of my sleeve.

"Fuck, Mommas."

Drunkenly, I stumbled in the opposite direction, toward the car that I was using to conceal my identity during my hunt. Beside it, I lowered my body to the concrete slab because I could go no further. Head in my hands, I tucked my emotions deep down, as far as they'd go, because where I was headed, they couldn't come.

Get ya shit together, nigga.

Walking away from Glacier was the most complicated task I'd ever have to complete. But it was the most necessary. If I wanted Mommas to live a good, fulfilling life, then there was no other way. She deserved peace. I didn't know peace. She was the only bit of it I'd truly experienced. For that, I owed her the world. With a stacked account and a new stream of income, I hoped I'd given it to her.

I hopped in the whip and took a brief second to get myself together. The ignition stalled before starting on the second attempt. Without haste, I rolled a blunt using as much of the weed inside of my tin as would fit. The first puff after lighting it was followed by so many more. And finally, when my head was on straight, I exited the lot.

I ignored every traffic law Berkeley had ever put into effect, headed straight toward The Valley where the police presence was heavy and jail was inevitable. I floored the engine as I entered the expressway and didn't let up on the gas until I reached my exit.

Blue lights flashed behind me almost instantly. Deciding to take them on a wild ride, I continued deeper into The Valley where the street lights hardly came on and addicts crawled the streets at odd hours.

"Pull over, now!"

The loudspeakers drowned out the maxed volume of the stereo.

"This is the Berkeley City Police Department. You are being pulled over. Decelerate now."

I obeyed the orders I'd been given, but not until I was ready and when my blunt had ended. On a well-lit gas station lot with a full audience, for my safety, I exited the car with my hands in the air.

"Get out now!"

"On the ground! Now."

I lowered my body to the ground and placed both hands behind my back so the officers wouldn't have to. The less time we wasted out here, the more time I'd have to master my plan of action.

"Hands behind your back, now!"

I remained silent. Jail was my destination and that was exactly where I wanted to be. The FN on the front seat and the extra magazines in the back would secure my spot. Anxiously, I awaited my transport. There were no words to be spoken. I needed the policeman to do their jobs and pay their debt to society.

"Any weapons?" one of the officers asked, before patting me down.

Silence.

“Any fucking weapons?”

Silence.

“I’m going to ask you once more!”

“You can ask me a hundred times, my nigga. I ain’t telling you shit. Do your job and do that shit quick. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Anything that was said after I’d demanded a speedy transport was a blur.

The blinding blue lights turned into white ones that lit the ballroom that was covered from the ceiling to the floor with flowers that had cost me over ten thousand dollars.

It didn’t matter, though. It didn’t matter one bit. Because the smile on Glacier’s face as she cried tears of joy, obliterating the distance between us, was well worth it. Friends and family had gathered to celebrate our love. And just as Lawe had predicted, tears slipped from my eyes.

“Here, bro,” Trent said, attempting to hand me a napkin.

“Here,” Lawe interfered, snatching the tissue from Trent and stuffing it in his pocket so that his was my only option.

Trent had been appointed as the official best man, yet Lawe still hadn’t gotten the memo. Trent’s position was beside me. Somehow, Lawe had made his way between us. He was sandwiched, nearly shoulder to shoulder, but didn’t give a fuck.

“Lawe.”

“Take the napkin before I give you something else to cry ’bout.”

With a shake of the head, I accepted the tissue he was giving me.

“Now, turn around and pay attention. We can talk about this later.”

“Talk about wha—”

“Later,” he hissed.

I focused on Glacier, putting my thoughts of Lawe and his delusion aside. Come ’er, Mommas. I’m here.

Makai + Glacier

“FACE THE WALL.”

Stripped down without as much as a pair of briefs to cover my ass, I granted every request of the intake officer.

“Squat for me.”

VIOLATED

Verb

The failure to comply with rules, regularities, or agreements.

Synonyms include: disregard, infract, transgress, defy, contravene

EVERY CODE of ethics was broken in the intake room. Nevertheless, I wasn't opposed to the process with the knowledge of its outcome.

“Alright. Put these back on and stand out there for me.”

Still complying without resistance, I followed every instruction thrown my way, until finally, I was shoved in a cell with twelve other niggas. They parted like the Red Sea, making room for me to travel freely. Berkeley was home. It didn't matter which of its crevices I fell into, my last name rang bells. Loyalty, hustle, and heart had put our name on the map and kept that motherfucker there.

I combed through the faces of each one of them in search of one in particular, hoping my opportunity had come much earlier than anticipated. To my dismay, Nelson wasn't among any of the men sharing a sweaty ass cell with me.

I pushed my back up against the right corner at the very back of the unit and began to mentally prepare for whatever was to come. The uncertainty made me anxious, but details surrounding the circumstances supplied me with the patience of a teacher in a toddler's room at the daycare center.

Whether it took four months or four years to finish the mission, I wouldn't drop a sweat. I had never stepped foot inside a jail. If I had any other options, I would die with that still having been the case. However, Nelson had a blown tire and a bullet in his shoulder. He didn't get very far before he was apprehended and taken into custody after attempting vehicular homicide.

After patching him up, they sent his ass straight to jail. The likelihood of him being released was slim. He was out on bond for the last incident and his record was far from clean. They weren't letting his ignorant ass go and I wasn't paying a fucking soul to handle my shit for me. I had to get my hands

dirty. This shit was very personal.

He'd crossed the line two too many times. There wouldn't be another opportunity for him to do so. It was now my life's mission to make sure of it.

"Domino!" an officer called as he neared the cell.

"Counsel."

I'd been in police custody for three hours. I was almost certain my brothers had gotten a whiff of my pending charges before my body was off the ground of the gas station. Hearing that a lawyer was requesting my presence was not surprising, neither was it relieving.

Bodies scattered, leading me toward the exit path. When I made it to the bars, cuffs were waiting for me. I stuck my hands through and observed the officer confine my hands.

"Step back."

Seconds later, the cell's door opened slightly. I maneuvered, turning my body sideways in order to squeeze through the small opening. Freed from the corner of the common cell, I felt no better. Shit, I felt nothing. I was numbing a bit more with every passing minute.

The hallway we proceeded down after a few corners stretched for an eternity. Cold, concrete floors that were a medium shade of gray carved the path for us. Everything I'd ever imagined prison resembled; in actuality, it was worse.

Luckily, this place wasn't my final destination. It was only temporary. Where I was headed next was still in question, but I knew that county was only a holding facility. Within seventy-two hours, if you weren't bailed out, you were headed elsewhere.

"In here," the officer instructed, pointing inside of the room we were approaching.

I stepped inside to find a man I'd only seen a time or two but never interacted with personally. Money was exchanged for services years and years ago while Mercer was fighting his legal battle. Communication wasn't my goal in the meetups. I was simply paying the retainer to keep his ass in court for my brother.

"Uncuff him," he demanded immediately.

I lifted my wrists and waited for his orders to be followed. The correctional officer jingled the large metal circle of keys until he found the one he was searching for. My wrists were freed shortly after he inserted the key.

“Privacy,” was his next request.

Obliging, the officer stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

The small council room that was furnished with only a table and two chairs was the most basic shit I’d ever seen. It was cold and bare, resembling the interrogation rooms in crime documentaries.

“Hi. Mr. Domino, I am Reginald Valdez, your lawyer. I will be representing you from this moment on.”

“Tell my brothers I’m good.”

The average-height, pot-belly attorney reddened as his head tilted in confusion. There was crust in his eyes, pairing with the wrinkles of his suit to confirm he was tucked away in bed when he’d gotten the call. As his mouth began to move, I counted the sleep lines on his face. There were six of them that hadn’t dissolved yet.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t need representation.”

“Do you understand you’re facing federal charges, Mr. Domino?”

“I’m well aware of that.”

“You need counsel. Your brothers are waiting to make bail once it’s posted. I’m only here because they insisted I let you know that it won’t be much longer before you see sunlight,” he explained with a smile on his face.

I swiped it rather swiftly with my next few words.

“Tell Malachi, because I know that’s who sent you, that I’m right where I want to be. Tell him that I’m good and not to waste his chips. If he bails me out, then I’m coming right back in this bitch. Tell him I’m sitting down for a while and to hold shit down.”

“Mr. Domin—”

“Don’t waste any more of your time here, partna. Go home and get yo’ ass back in bed. Tell them niggas I’m straight. I’ll call them when I’m ready. I’ll let them know when to come get me.”

“I don’t think you understand. You’re facin—”

“I don’t think you understand, my nigga. But I’m not in the business of convincing nobody of shit. Tell my people what I said. Tell ’em I’m good. Tell ’em I’ll call ’em when I’m ready. Any more of your time spent here is a waste and on you. As for me, I’m going to lay my Black ass down.”

“Is there anything you need?”

“Yeah,” I responded, reaching for his tie and pulling him closer so that only his ears could hear me. Though we were alone, I knew that the

likelihood of total privacy was slim. His bald head released beads of sweat. Panic was written all over his posture as he nodded in compliance before any words even came from my mouth.

“To be put in a cell with Nelson Smith.”

I released him, allowing his feet to touch the ground without elevation again.

“I can’t... I can’t do that, Mr. Domino.”

“Then, goodbye, Mr. Valdez.”

I headed toward the door. As my fist hit the center, Mr. Valdez called out to me.

“Mr. Domino.”

“Yeah?” I never budged, still waiting to be cuffed so I could return to my cell.

“Be careful. Prison is a wild place.”

“I’m a wild nigga. Maybe this is where I’ve belonged all along, huh?”

The cuffs were slapped on my wrist as soon as the correctional officer realized I was waiting. The guy who had ushered me into the room was not the same one who escorted me back to the cell. In fact, our route was even different.

“This not the way to th—”

“I know,” he quickly responded. “That’s not where we’re headed.”

“Then where the fuck are we headed?”

“To a different wing. Consider this the upgrade.”

“I’m not trying to be upgraded, my nigga. Put me back in the holding cell.”

The more inmates I encountered, the better my chances of bumping into Nelson were. Wherever the fuck we were headed, I wasn’t interested.

“I’ve been given orders. I’m following them,” he explained with a shrug.

We ended up in a much shorter hallway that was lined with smaller, cleaner cells that were nearly filled to the brim. It wasn’t until we reached the end that I discovered the cell I’d be occupying.

“This you right here.” He pointed inside.

I stepped through and placed my hands through the horizontal space so that he could remove the cuffs. I massaged my wrists as I analyzed my new surroundings. Every nigga, other than me, had another individual inside the cell with them.

Fucking Malachi, I concluded with a shake of my head.

“Thirty seconds,” the officer whispered, sliding a black flip phone into the bar and walking away immediately after.

The phone began vibrating the second it touched my palm. I opened it, curious to find out who was on the other end. Chem’s voice registered as soon as he spoke. The oxygen in the room faded as the disappointment in his voice translated.

“What are you doing, brother?”

“Finishing business.”

“Why must you do it this way, Makai?”

“What other way would you have me do it? Hmm? If it were you, where would you be standing right now?”

“In a cell.”

“Exactly. Don’t lecture me, Chem.”

“I’m not. Just trying to see where your head is.”

“The same place yours would be.”

Had the roles been reversed, it would be me on the phone as he explained the same.

“Understood.”

Chem was no fool and neither was he a hoe. We might’ve had different fathers but our principles were aligned. Our father’s principles were aligned. Unfinished business was unacceptable and the catalyst for so many avoidable issues. I couldn’t continue life until this situation was handled.

Looking over my shoulder or sending another party to handle light work was not an option. This nigga wasn’t invincible, he was simply good at hiding. But now that we were on the same block, it was only a matter of time. And until that time came, I’d be around.

“I’ve got this.”

“I know,” he sighed.

“Don’t worry about me. Tell them niggas not to worry about me, either.”

“How can I help?”

The strain in his voice was evidence that he was frustrated with the situation as much as I’d imagine Malachi, Milo, and Mercer were. But they had nothing to worry about. I’d be home as soon as my deed was done. As soon as I knew that the world was free of threats to Glacier’s livelihood.

“Put that nigga in the cell with me.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Bet.”

“Handle your business and come home, nigga.”

“That’s the plan.”

I ended the call and placed the phone on the horizontal opening that housed a small ledge. Calmly, I sat on the bottom mattress of the bunk and pressed my back against the neatly tucked sheet.

I placed my hands behind my head and closed my eyes. I could rest now, knowing that a few walls were the only thing separating me from Nelson. With time, not even those would come between us.

I’m here, Mommas.

Glacier was the last thought on my mind before exhaustion set in.

SIXTEEN



MY WORLD HAD BEEN RIPPED right from underneath me. After a four-day hospital stay, I was finally being released. Though I was better, physically, I was a mess inside. Emotionally, I was wrecked.

Nothing was the same. Nothing felt the same. And without Makai, nothing would ever be the same. A prisoner in my own body was the best way to embody my sentiments. After being freed by his love, time, patience, and care, I felt like I'd been taken hostage by his absence. It was all-consuming.

“Ready?” Aeir asked, switching gears.

I shook my head from one side to the other, displaying my true feelings. I was far from ready to face reality. Laying in the hospital bed without Makai was hard enough. Walking into a space that we shared, knowing he wasn't coming home to me, would be too overwhelming.

Aeir's hand gently caressed my leg. She squeezed, trying her best to reassure me. However, there was only one person in the world I wanted assurance from, validation from, at the moment. And I was far from ashamed to say it.

“I just need him to come home to me,” I admitted.

There were no more tears left to cry. I'd exalted them all. My body was drained, tear ducts were dry.

"How is it that one day your life is the closest thing to perfect, and the next day, it's barely a breathable place? I feel like I'm suffocating, Aeir. He left and took his love with him. I don't understand. I'm confused. My heart is confused. My heart... It's hurting... so bad."

"I understand, babes. When you love someone so much, so hard, and with everything you have, losing them feels like the end of the world. I can't say anything that'll make you feel better. All I can do is comfort you at this time.

"My words, Glacier, they can't soothe your pain. It's fresh and it's valid. Your relationship has ended. Not due to death, cheating, or differences that you couldn't resolve. It's ended because life happened and ripped the man you love away from you. That's a hard pill to swallow. You won't get it down today, tomorrow, or even next month. Take it slowly. But remember that life does, in fact, go on.

"And this may not be the end. Maybe it's just a comma. Just a pause. Just an obstacle. I don't believe, not even a little, that this is the end of your story with Makai. I just don't believe it, Glacier. Nothing in my heart will allow me to."

"I miss him so much. I just—I don't know."

"You don't have to know right now. Take your time. There will be order after the chaos. But first, give yourself time to feel, time to hurt, and then time to heal. You're a beautiful girl with a bright future. Don't let this situation dim your light. Keep your head up, and when you're ready, keep pushing forward. You know what they say about things you love... let it go. If it's meant, it'll come back around."

"I don't know, Aeir."

"Things with Malachi and I weren't always this way, Glacier. I left him, pregnant with our son and all. I chose to put myself first and push forward, no matter how much it hurt. I knew, deep within, that he was the man for me. I knew that he was my final destination.

"Me knowing wasn't enough, though, babe. Malachi had to know that for himself. And not by me convincing him. He had to figure it out on his own. I stepped away to give him the time he needed to do so. When he returned three months later, he had a different view of us, of our life. We haven't been more certain of our love than we are now.

"Each day, that certainty grows and it all started with me pushing past the

pain to let love work its magic. This feels so much of the same. Makai is the most fearless man I've met, other than his brothers. But there's one thing he's afraid of. It's not life. It's not death—not his death, at least. It's the death of the people he loves.

“He's afraid for them to leave him. Like his mother and father. He is still healing. Malachi expressed on several occasions that Makai took Anna's death the hardest out of his entire family. It was triggering. It changed something inside of him, too.

“Falling in love, for Makai, finding someone he wants to spend forever with, it's all triggering for Makai. He hasn't lost his mind, Glacier. He lost his heart. It's with you. And he's simply trying to protect it at all costs. He's just being Makai. He's just being proactive.

“He's making sure that it's not him standing over your grave on Sundays. He's making sure you have the chance to live life, whether he's a part of it or not. His freedom is a small price to pay for that. At least it's the way he sees it. Give him grace. He's a man in love and there's not much that can deter a man in that precious place.”

Aeir had shed so much light on the situation, forcing me to think of everything from Makai's perspective after only thinking of myself. Makai wasn't being the selfish man I'd accused him of being. He was, indeed, the selfless man I'd fallen in love with.

“My God, he's stubborn.”

“Now that... I agree with wholeheartedly.”

We'd arrived fairly quickly. I wasn't quite ready to face the silence, but the choice wasn't mine to make. Makai had decided for both of us. I'd been advised to walk away from something that grounded me on my worst days. It would be hard. It would be the hardest thing to ever do.

Mourning my parents' death wouldn't compare because their lives ended. They didn't just leave me, they left this earth. Mourning my relationship with Valencia and Nelson wouldn't compare, either. They'd both wronged me, making the transition much easier than the one I was facing.

Makai was still among the living. Makai hadn't done anything to hurt me. So, this felt like nothing I'd ever felt before. Mourning something that still lived within you, mourning someone that was still among the living and still made your heart beat.

Aeir and I used the elevator to reach my floor. The empty cubby was such a dreadful sight. My new truck was somewhere in a salvage yard, waiting to

be crushed and tossed into a wasteland somewhere.

“It feels like my life is falling apart.”

“Or falling together,” Aeir suggested, coming into my condo.

She hung her purse on the hook behind the door and removed her coat. Her shoes were next. I undressed, slowly, making sure I didn’t agitate my fragile frame any more than it already was. Thankfully, there were no broken bones, but the bruises and concussion were enough to slow me down for a couple of weeks. My ribs hurt every time I spoke or moved. They were barely intact, suffering bruises as well.

“I don’t know, Aeir. It feels a lot like—”

“Shhhh. Let’s think positive thoughts. And let’s get you back in bed. Nature is on the way to help me in the kitchen. We’ll make enough food to get you through the next few days and be right here by your side until you’re ready for us to leave, okay?”

“You don’t have to, really. You have a family.”

“And you’re part of it, so what do you mean? What are you saying right now, babe?”

“That a few hours is fine, but I won’t let either of you stay too long.”

“Fine. Whatever works for you. Now, come on. To the bed.”

Sighing, I made my way to the bedroom where the smell of Makai lingered, making me sick to my stomach. I paused, mid-way, turned toward Aeir, and shook my head. There was absolutely no way I could rest there.

“I can’t. Not in here.”

He’d been home less over the last week or so, but his scent had penetrated the walls, the sheets, the pillowcases, and everything else he’d ever touched.

“I can’t.”

“It’s okay. A guest room?”

Nodding, I approved the newest idea. That was more suitable. Missing Makai was enough. To have his absence rubbed across my nose every second of my day was too much.

In the first guest room, I lowered my body onto the bed. I struggled to get my legs up. The pain was mind-numbing, but with help, I managed to get it done.

The shower I’d taken prior to leaving the hospital was the best idea I’d had in days because I was in no shape to do so without support. My shower had none. The walls were bare, aside from a rack for soaps, body washes, razors, and other shower supplies. With any luck, when it was time to shower

again, tomorrow, I would feel a bit better and my pain wouldn't be as disabling.

"How is that?"

"This is good."

"Okay, I'll be in the kitchen if you need me. Don't yell. That'll only cause unnecessary pain. Just shoot me a text."

Aeir sauntered out of the room after flipping the light switch. And the moment she did, my loneliness depleted me. I laid my head against the back of my hand as it sat on the pillow underneath me. Makai's dark skin and perfect teeth haunted my lids the second I sealed them.

A tear fell from the corner of my eyes. Proof that my tear ducts still had life and I hadn't damaged them with the emotional depths I'd reached over the last few days stained my pillow.

Don't cry, Mommas. His voice played in my head, making it more difficult to contain myself.

"Come back to me," I whispered, burying my face in the pillow.

The pain cut so deep that I felt it splitting me in half. My back rose and fell as silent tears soaked the linen that wrapped the rectangular fluff.

"Come back, baby."

"Glacier," Nature's voice appeared.

"Yes?" I cracked.

"Awww, baby," she sighed, rushing into the room.

She climbed into bed beside me. Her cold hands and feet slid underneath the covers for warmth. Her arms wrapped around me as she carefully pulled me into her arms. I could hear her heart drumming against her chest.

"Would you like to talk about it?" she asked, giving me space to do as I pleased.

"No," I admitted.

"Okay. Okay. Then we won't talk."

She rubbed my back, up and down, bringing me as much comfort as I had the capacity for. Her touch was soothing. It nursed the storm happening inside of me. And eventually, it led me to a peaceful place where sleep was possible.

Makai + Glacier

OPENING my eyes each morning was becoming an impossible task to complete. My desperation to discover this was all a bad dream was the only reason I mustered the strength to do so. Each time, I prayed that Makai was beside me and our worlds were still intertwined.

It never happened. He never appeared. The nightmare never-ending. It was as if I was in one, continuously long cycle of the same day, happening again and again.

Five days out of the hospital and I was feeling much better than when I was discharged. I could move around on my own and get through the day with fewer pain pills in my system. Yet and still, everything still hurt, especially my heart.

It'll work. I settled on the oversized hoodie, joggers, and UGGs that nearly swallowed me whole. I was melting away. The healthy, happy weight I'd gained over the last six months was falling off me rapidly.

Anything else in my closet was impossible to wiggle on in my condition. I'd be in too much pain and too exhausted to make it out of the door. Staying home another day wasn't in my plans. Sunshine and Makai were the two reasons my mission was set in motion and the reasons I'd see it through.

I walked into the cubby to find the most faithful set of wheels waiting. When I climbed inside of my car, nostalgia slapped me across the face. The blow was forceful, taking my breath away and requiring a few seconds to recuperate and get myself together. Flashbacks of the very first time Makai's voice crossed my line.

"...Who dis?"

"Who is this, you ask?" I rephrased.

"Same difference, Mommas. You called my line. I didn't call yours."

"Glacier."

"Glacier?"

"Yes, I am hav—" I continued, but was interrupted.

"Your people named you Glacier? Like the shit that shifts due to its own weight and end up in large bodies of water? The perennial accumulation of crystalline ice, snow, rock, sedimen—"

"Please. I'm aware of Google's definition of glacier. However, I'm having car trouble and really need help. My tire is destroyed and—"

"Rim or regular tire?"

"Regular tire."

"Glacier, since you're so damn good at Google, you would've read that"

we ain't that type of tire shop."

"I—"

Click.

Chuckling, I found the silver lining. Makai had been unpredictable since day one. Why I'd expected anything else from him was beyond me. Expecting me to accept his decision without considering mine was beyond me, too, which was why I punched in the address for the men's correctional facility as I waited for the cubby to reach the ground and release my car.

Led by nothing more than an inkling that Makai was mistaken and didn't mean the things he'd said, I set out on the forty-eight-minute drive. Google had been useful in my quest to stop the foreclosure of our relationship. I discovered his current status, charges that were pending, and the facility he was housed in as he awaited his second court date. The first one had been the morning after his arrest.

Seeing his face on my screen, so cold and so disconnected, shattered me to pieces. It had taken the entire night to pick myself up. Makai was facing serious charges, ones that would revoke his freedom for years. I couldn't fathom life on the outside, knowing that he was locked away in a cage like an animal.

I drowned my thoughts with music that soothed my aching heart. Cleo Sol preached about inner peace, loving yourself, dwelling in spaces that appreciate your presence, and living a full life in no hurry. As she read me for filth, I unpacked the pain of my situation.

Makai and I were more alike than I'd ever understood. The fear of losing someone you love and reopening the wounds that death had given you was real. It was paralyzing. It was devouring. The same fear that led Makai to make the decisions he made was the same fear that led me through the parking lot of the correctional facility forty-five minutes later.

Losing Makai had ripped the band-aids from my flesh. I needed to feel healed, again, to feel whole again. To feel him, again. Even if only briefly, I needed to remind him that we were above any forces that tried to tear us apart.

On shaky legs, I exited the car, unsure of what to expect beyond my point of comfort. Every few seconds, I was being buzzed through another gate until finally, I reached a large space with others anxiously awaiting a chance to see their loved ones as well.

"May I help you?" a guard asked with little enthusiasm and exhaustion

intertwined.

“Yes. I’m here to visit Ma—”

“Right this way. Take all that off and step through here.” She pointed, not being very specific.

“All oooof?” I responded and waited for clearer instructions.

“All that. The hoodie. The shoes. The hat. Take that off.” She livened up, but not because she was excited. She was irritated with the question I’d asked.

“Thanks.”

I removed everything she’d mentioned before stepping through the metal detector. Its approval awarded me everything I’d taken off. As I redressed, I began a new question but was quickly cut off.

“Where do—”

“Over there. Go talk to them over there. You see the big visitation check-in sign over there, right? You look like you can read.”

Taken aback at the harshness of her tone, I proceeded toward the desk she’d pointed to. I arrived to find another guard sitting behind the desk, marking letters and numbers on a notepad.

“Hey, I’m here to visit someone.”

“Grab a clipboard and fill out the paperwork. Once you’ve finished, bring your identification back up with you.”

“Okay.”

“Have you ever visited before?”

“No. I haven’t. But I did manage to get the validation check completed last night and was approved for visitation today.”

“Good. Makes my job easier. Give me that clipboard and just hand me your identification. Write your inmate's name and his number on the line beside it.”

Word for word, I obliged, hoping that my obedience sped the process up slightly.

“Here it is.”

“The next visitation is in fifteen minutes. I’ll try to get you in the system and back there by then. It’s only a thirty-minute visit. If they can get him down here in fifteen minutes, then you’re good. If not, then you’ll have to wait for the next visitation and I’ll let you back then.”

“Thank you.”

I had a seat a few feet away so that I didn’t miss my name being called or

any important instructions. Within three minutes, she was calling me up.

“Ms. Roseberry?”

“Yes.”

Moving swiftly was possibly the worst decision I’d made all day. The pain in my back and sides simply wasn’t worth it.

“They’re going to get him down for the next visit. Here’s your identification. Remember, this is not a physical contact opportunity. You will be taken to a room where you’ll choose a seat. When ready, the inmates will come in and find their loved ones. Once the visit is over, you’ll return to this area and make your way out of the door. Understood?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Good. Now, have a seat and wait for them to call your group.”

“What group is that?”

“The next one,” she responded, cutting the conversation short.

I imagined there was a letter or number that followed the word group, but apparently, that didn’t matter. I was next up and, for now, that information was enough for me to go on. Instead of sitting, causing more pain, I found the closest corner and pressed my back against the wall. The coolness offered little comfort but it was enough for the moment.

I busied myself by counting the tiles on the floor. The sound of crying babies, frustrated mothers, spiteful staff, and family members awaiting their chance to see their loved ones overstimulated me. I bounced my right foot on the floor, still remaining focused and determined to finish the count I’d started. At the brink of my stimulation, I gnawed the inside of my lip until I drew blood.

“Group sixteen.”

Sixteen, I thought. I'm in group sixteen.

The officer hadn’t given me a number or letter to follow, group sixteen was next. I joined the line that was forming and waited to be escorted down the hallway. It didn’t take long. Everything was moving swiftly. Before I knew it, I was sitting down, staring at the number twelve.

Am I too far down? Will he see me? Maybe I should’ve worn makeup to cover the bruises. A million thoughts ran through my mind.

Anxiety continued to manifest in my belly as I wiped the phone with a disinfectant wipe that I’d removed from my purse before coming inside. The germs were one of the things I’d read many warnings about on the social forum for visitation.

Taking extra precaution, I wiped the small surface my elbows rested on. As I began, a shadow darkened everything in front of me. I looked up to find Makai and those dark, mysterious eyes staring back at me. I picked up the phone, again, placing it up to my ear this time. Makai did the same.

“Hey,” hesitantly, I greeted him.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I waited for his response. When I was met with silence, defeat entered our space, weaving in and out of the threads that covered my body.

“Maka—say something, baby,” I begged. “Say somet—”

“Go home, Mommas,” he advised, staring daggers into my chest.

He didn’t sit. He didn’t bat an eye. His facial muscles never relaxed. His posture never changed. That smile that I’d dreamed of, it never showed.

WHAM.

The sound of the phone slamming onto the hook that was connected to the wall nearly made me jump through my skin. Furrowed brows and a continuously breaking heart were evidence of my confusion.

Makai?

I held the phone, unsure of what to say or what to do. As quick as Makai had come, he’d gone. Bushy hair and a beard that had grown nearly twice its normal length over the last eight days deemed me speechless. Underneath the thick, black hair, I could still see him beneath. Makai was still there, somewhere.

Why are you doing this to me? my heart screamed, but nothing surfaced.

The loud ringing sound startled me. Thirty minutes had passed. I’d sat in silence, completely disoriented for twenty-six of them.

“Time to go, ma’am,” the guard at the front of the long hallway shouted. “Visitation is over.”

Over? That word, in particular, stuck to me like glue.

“Sorry. I, uh...”

“It’s time to go. We have another group coming in.”

It was then I noticed the booths were empty. I was the only person who remained.

“I’m so sorry. I’m leaving.”

In a trance, I cleared the building and rushed to my car. The physical pain I felt was nothing in comparison to the hole Makai had left in my heart. Bleeding profusely, my head fell into my hands as I released what was left of me.

Makai + Glacier

PATTING against the wooden floors woke me from my sleep. I wasn't sure how long I'd been down or how many times I'd been in and out over the last twenty-something hours. All I knew was my heart hurt no less than it did when I left the prison the previous day.

The rest of my house hadn't seen me. I climbed into bed. My appetite didn't exist and the heaviness of my burdens had bolted me to the bed. The days were long. The nights were even longer. Misery had been knocking so long that I grew tired and let it in.

Losing my mind and all the good sense that God had given me was a possibility, and it's what I thought had happened to me when I heard the low grumbles of Ghost and Midnight. I ventured out of my bedroom, knowing that there was only one person who could be responsible for their presence.

Feeling as if all bets weren't off the table and all hope wasn't lost, I rushed into the living room. Seeing Makai free and in the home we shared would heal every spirit of brokenness that had been released on my account.

"Mak—"

With Midnight and Ghost at his side, Mercer stood in my living room. As if he would appear at any moment, I remained silent, waiting for Makai to peep his head around the corner or jump out and scare me. I waited for him to wrap his arms around my waist. I waited for him to whisper in my ear, telling me things that would soothe every ache in my body.

I've missed you.

I love you.

I need you.

I'm sorry.

I never meant to hurt you.

I meant none of it.

"Glacier," Mercer called out, taking a seat on the couch. "Makai sent me."

"No," I whispered, feeling my nostrils flare. "He doesn't get to send anyone. He doesn't get to—"

"Sit down," Mercer told me, patting the spot beside him.

"He has no right, Mercer."

“I agree.”

“Why isn’t he—why isn’t it him? Why isn’t he here? Wh-why is he doing this to me? I’ve done nothing but love him with every fiber in my body. Doesn’t he know that I love him? Doesn’t he know that he’s my world? Doesn’t he know that I-I can’t breathe without him? Doesn’t he know that my body aches for him? Doesn’t he know, Mercer?”

Nodding, Mercer assured me that he, in fact, knew it.

“I am a mess without him. I am not whole.”

“Glacier.”

“He has no right to do this to me. He can’t do this to me.”

“Sit down.”

Feeling faint, I finally took Mercer’s advice. Overcome with grief, I was dizzy. The spell knocked me down, onto the couch beside Mercer. Right where he needed me.

“Don’t go back there, you hear me?”

“Mer—”

“Don’t. Makai is my brother, but hear me clearly. When a man shows you who he is, believe him. Makai is a man who will go to the furthest extent to protect the people he loves. He’s lost enough of us. He ain’t losing another.

“Trust me when I tell you that, that isn’t always pretty. Sometimes, it’s ugly. Very fucking ugly. I gave up years of my life to protect the people I love.

“We’re all the same, Glacier. But Makai is a different kind of beast. His thoughts consume him. The need for results fuels him. His tunnel vision is sometimes his worst enemy. He’s trying not to make an even worse enemy out of himself by letting something happen to you on his clock.

“Letting you go for him isn’t easy, but he feels it’s necessary. There’s nothing you or any of us can say to convince him otherwise. Trust me, we’ve tried. He’s adamant. That’s why I’m here.”

“It should be him.”

“But it’s me. Don’t go back there, Glacier.”

I nodded, choosing not to respond.

“By the end of this week, you need to have all your things packed and ready to go.”

“Go where? Where do I have to go?”

“If you need help with that, we got you. But Makai has forbidden it. He doesn’t want either of us to know where you’re headed.”

“Why not?”

“So he’s never tempted to—precaution,” he rephrased. “The dogs, they’re yours. He wants you to have them.”

“Why is he the only one getting his way in this situation? What about me?”

“It’s all about you, Glacier. Have you not heard a word I’ve said? This is all about you.”

“I’m not ready to leave Berkeley. I’m not ready to leave *him*.”

“You have no other choice. The city knows who you belong to. Relocation will keep you safer. Relocation will give Makai peace of mind.”

“He deserves no peace, Mercer, not while I’m in turmoil.”

“Well, scratch that part. Your safety is reason enough.”

“It’s not his fault. Why is he blaming himself? Nelson is my ex. He’s not some random guy.”

“To Makai, he is.”

Frustrated, I decided to remain silent. Nothing made sense anymore.

“I know my brother, Glacier.”

“It seems as if I don’t know him enough.”

“Time... patience. That’s all he ever needs. He’ll come to his senses. Just don’t let him forget that you haven’t forgotten. He said don’t come back. That nigga never said not to reach out. Put the pen to the paper. Give him something to think about. Give him something to look forward to whenever the day comes that he exits those gates. Hold your place in his head and his heart.”

“Thank you. Thank you.”

That thought had yet to cross my mind. Now that it had been presented, I wanted to use the first piece of paper I laid eyes on to tell Makai how much of me he’d destroyed recently, how much of me he’d taken with him.

A knock on the door pulled me from my thoughts.

“The crew has arrived. They’re here to help you get a head start on packing. At the end of the week, a truck will be waiting downstairs to take you wherever it is you want to go.

“Inside of the folder on the table by the door is everything you need to access the account and money Makai has left for you. Thursday, your new truck will be delivered. If you need anything, my number is also in the folder. Take care, Glacier. And Merry Christmas.”

In seven days, children everywhere would be rushing toward the

Christmas tree to see what Santa had gotten them. I'd be settling into a home I didn't want in a city that I didn't want to be in. No Christmas tree. No gifts. No Makai.

"Merry Christmas."

Mercer's body was replaced with Kleu's. Nature and Aeir sat on the other couch. Completely numb, I listened as they made plans to collect my things without my assistance to make this transition as easy as possible for me.

The truth was, there was no way to ease into this situation or anything close to it. You had to face it head-on, even though it hurt. And as if a switch was flipped in my head, I accepted that. I accepted the results of Makai and I's union. I accepted the time we'd had together. I accepted the fact that this was our end. I accepted it all.

Rubbing both Midnight and Ghost, I quieted the room with a few choice words.

"Anyone interested in helping me find a house?"

"And she's alive!" Kleu joked.

"What do you have in mind?" Aeir inquired.

"I was thinking Clarke."

"Clarke," Nature agreed. "Far enough but not too far away."

"A cute three-hour drive," Kleu cheered.

"Yes. Clarke sounds like a good idea," Aeir advocated.

"God, I'm going to miss each one of you."

"We're going to miss you, too, but we promise to come visit."

"Then men are forbidden."

"Girl, fuck Makai. Lawe can go where he damn well pleases."

"But he won't, and we all know that," Nature told Kleu.

We all agreed.

"Well, I'll come alone or with one of y'all. But now that we've got you talking again... I need you to tell me something. What tricks you be doing with your pussy that got a nigga trying to run you off the road and another one following his ass in jail to end his life?"

Shaking my head, I began to explain. "That's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"Nelson is holding on to a secret that I discovered the night I left him. He's afraid that I've told Makai and that his business will be circulating among the men he's in business with."

"What kind of secret? Isn't that nigga over thirty? What secrets could he

have?” She continued to probe.

I grabbed my phone from beside me and unlocked the screen. I searched my Instagram account for the name of the person who had initially messaged me and then followed up in my email where the actual information had been sent and stored. The six-minute voice note began as soon as I tapped the triangle on the left of my screen.

“Good evening, Glacier. I’m quite sure you don’t know who I am but I recently discovered your existence through Nelson. He’s a dear friend of mine. My intentions aren’t to stir up any commotion. I come in peace, advocating for the health of people who are oblivious to what’s going on around them.

“I met Nelson five and a half years ago when I first started going to Dr. Lacey. We’d both recently discovered our status and were starting the new prescription drug that treats HIV and eventually eliminates the possibility of transmission to others. The goal for people like us is always to be undetected since a cure isn’t available to us. Nelson was unsure how he’d been infected and so was I.

“We bonded over the things we had in common and eventually exchanged numbers. There was no foul play. I was aware that he was a heterosexual man as well as he was aware that I wasn’t. On those awful nights when his thoughts started to get the best of him, he started reaching out and vice versa.

“Eventually, our friendship evolved and Nelson became curious. I let him explore his sexuality, passing no judgment. He and I went on for a few months, exploring that portion of his life before he decided to get back to the basis of our friendship and eliminate the rest. However, every so often, he found his way back to my home, indulging in a guilty pleasure that he hated to love. But again, no judgment.

“Eventually, it stopped, again, but our friendship continued to blossom. Still, he confides in me about things that he won’t dare mention to another soul. One of these things in particular is the fact that he’s in love with two women, one of which is pregnant, and the other woman is her best friend, who might also be expecting his child.”

I hadn’t noticed the last line until now. He’d warned me that Valencia was expecting. Still, I had no clue because I’d skated by that part.

“This brought me to the question of whether the women involved knew his status. Nelson blew up when the question was posed, confirming what I

already knew. You are oblivious and so is the woman that is supposed to be your best friend. This message is nothing more than a message of caution. I want you and your child healthy.

“I’ve lived with this disease long enough to know that it’s not pleasant. It’s not the end of the world, by far, and I live a good life. But if I can prevent a child, without a choice, from being brought into this world with a positive status, that’s exactly what I will do. I’ll end this message by saying that I’m sorry for any hurt it may have caused. But I’d rather it be now than later that I tracked you down and told you what you deserved to know the day that Nelson decided he wanted to put his penis inside of you. I’m no fool and I’m sure that my life is in jeopardy by sharing this, but to save a life, I’m willing to risk mine.

“I wish you nothing but the best and I pray that your pregnancy is as beautiful as you are, my love. Don’t walk, run to the nearest clinic and get tested. Knowing your status is important. Nelson has been undetectable for almost five years, but confirmation is key.”

I could hear a needle drop in the room if I had one. Blank stares coated everyone’s faces around me.

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” I sighed. “This is where his anger stems from. The following week, this man was found dead in his home. I picked myself up off the floor, mourning the loss of my best friend and man, to pay my respects.

“I’d taken tests and had blood work done throughout nursing school and nothing had ever come back positive, so I wasn’t too worried. My annuals were appointments I didn’t skip. I made sure to get the full panel yearly.

“Nothing had ever come back abnormal. That didn’t stop me from running to the doctor’s office to be tested again. As I’d suspected, I was not infected over the course of our four-year relationship.”

“You can’t tell me there isn’t a God,” Aeir mumbled.

“Amen,” Kleu finished, waving a hand in the air.

“This doesn’t leave this room, ladies. It’s not your secret to tell, either. Nelson is fighting his own demons, believing his status is the end of the world and his preference in sexual partners is a crime. I left Nelson because he lied and because he cheated. I wouldn’t have cared who it was with. Cheating, for me, is a deal breaker. The details don’t matter.”

“The details don’t matter,” Kleu agreed.

“Now, can someone please get me a drink? If I’m going to pack this

entire condo, I'm not going to do it sober.”

“Now, you're talking my language.” Kleu chuckled, hopping up from the couch and heading toward the kitchen.

This was my reality now. There was no running.

SEVENTEEN

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

22 MONTHS LATER...

The Way of a Superior Man's pages glided across my finger every minute or two as I finished another. I'd read the book three times over the course of my stay, and each time, I got a new understanding, a better understanding than I had the reading prior. It was one of the few nonfiction books that held my attention and helped me pass the time each day.

The one that had the most wear and tear didn't tell a story or have a narrative at all. It was full of definitions, synonyms, and parts of speech. My dictionary had seen better days. I'd read it from cover to cover six times and was trying to pace myself before completing it a seventh time.

While niggas preferred recreational time, I spent my time with my head in the books, reconnecting with my roots and doing the dreadful mental work I'd been avoiding since a teenager. My days weren't spent in the day room, watching television for hours on end. They were spent identifying my greatest flaws and fears while figuring out how to navigate life without them being hindrances.

The loud chatter came to a screeching halt when the sirens sounded

throughout the unit. Footsteps scattered as everyone migrated to their cells. As the doors began to close, I rolled from the bottom bunk. I stuck my head out of the door as it continued to close the gap it shared with the wall.

“What’s going on, OG?”

Freddy was one of the oldest men in our unit. He’d been down for thirty-two years and wouldn’t be released in society without embalming fluid and missing organs. He retaliated, avenging his son’s death by killing the sons of the officer who’d shot his boy. There were three of them, from the ages of seventeen to twenty-four. His son was seven when he was gunned down during a water gunfight with his friends.

“Something in the next unit, but they’re shutting us all down. Most likely, somebody died from their injuries.”

“Nah, but almost. A nigga found out one of them niggas fucking his little piece and damn near got his top popped trying to confront the nigga,” Mookie explained.

“In here?” OG asked.

“Yeah. They jumped his stupid ass together,” Mookie tittered. “Let me slide my Black ass in before they start tripping on a nigga.”

Freddy let him slide by, still inquiring about what had gone down. I, on the other hand, had no interest. What niggas did in their spare time and when no one was looking behind the walls was none of my business. I laid back on my bunk and resumed reading until my eyes grew tired and my heart grew weary.

Turning my head slightly, I peered at the only image that hung from the wall beside me. Glacier’s smiling face had gotten me through the darkest of days. Her spirit lingered. Her love clung to me like skin. Her face, I saw it each time I closed my eyes.

Mommas.

Turning my head in the opposite direction, I landed on the small box of letters that gained a new tenant each month. Like clockwork, Glacier sent a new letter. I’d yet to read one. I wasn’t in the right head space to do so.

She weakened me. She was a drug. My drug. And once I got a hit of her, I knew how much I’d desire more. She’d easily become the focal point of my world. She was for an entire six months. But the night I was fully processed into the system was the night I eliminated that distraction.

I wasn’t sure if it had made shit any better or worsened me altogether, but I wasn’t willing to find out by reading anything she’d written me. I couldn’t

afford to get wrapped up in her web. Not now, not ever again. It was better this way. We were better this way.

Without a doubt in my mind, I knew that she was living a full life, succeeding in every area. The thought turned my lips upward.

One won't hurt.

I closed my eyes, hoping to get rid of the small voice in my head that reappeared every time my orbs landed on that fucking box.

Just one.

I lifted the book from my chest and dug in again. That box haunted me every fucking night but I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it. Neither could I bring myself to read any of them. I wished she'd stop wasting her precious time and keep pushing forward. But at the same time, if she ever stopped writing me, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. Her consistency was symbolic of so many things in my world at the moment.

One, Makai.

Sighing, I found myself staring at the box again. This time, the distance wasn't separating us. I'd pulled it toward the bed where it sat, waiting for tampering. I folded the page of the book I was reading and placed it on my bunk, face down.

I can't. I pushed the box away, battling my thoughts.

In the same breath, I pulled it back toward me.

Just one, I bargained, removing the very first letter I'd received from Glacier. There were twenty-one of them. The last one, I'd received during mail hour this morning.

The white envelope was burning a hole in my hand. Neatly opening it wasn't an option. I tore into it with urgency, careful not to rip the letter inside. As it unfolded, I began to breathe again. Not any air, air that contained bits and pieces of her. It was the finest, purest, and most rewarding oxygen one could ever inhale.

MAKAI,

I'VE STARTED *this letter twelve times, wondering what I could possibly say to convince you that you've made a mistake. That our love is worth another*

try. That we deserve one another. That my life is nothing without you.

But I won't write any of that. I won't try to convince you of what's right for you, your head, and your heart. That would be so unfair. In life, I've prided myself on fairness and I'll remain this way—even with matters of my heart.

Doing what's best for you will always have my vote. It's important that we advocate for ourselves, our love, and our futures. A future with me isn't one for you. I get that now. It's taken me a full month to see it, but I'm here now.

I'm out of my element. I'm without you. And it sucks. It feels like so much of me is missing. So many times I touch my chest just to make sure my heart is still there, to make sure it's still beating because it feels so broken. So battered. So bruised.

Today, I thought about vacation, the first time I understood the power of parallel souls. Your three things. Since you've been gone, so much has changed in my world. Things are different. I am different. So, here are three things I think you should know about me now:

My heart will never not want you.

You've gutted me.

My door is always open for you. It's the blue one; the only teal one on the entire street. I made it that way so you'll never lose your way on your quest to find your way back to me.

BONUS: If I've loved you once, I'll love you forever.

I'M SETTLING in a new city, at a new job, and in a new home. It's as scary as it is lonely. I miss your body next to mine. I miss the sound of your voice first thing in the morning. I miss the smell of your breath in the early hours. I miss the way you laugh. I miss the way you love. I miss your hugs. I've washed my own body for too many weeks.

I don't know, Makai. Most days, I think I'm okay, but I'm feeling so blue. The family you've given me has been such a blessing during this transition. None of this would've gone as smoothly as it did had they not rolled up their sleeves and helped me at every turn. I'm forever in debt to them, each and

every one of them.

My grandmother is still in Berkeley. My visits will be few and far apart, but I will make the trips every now and again. Leaving her behind was so difficult, but uprooting her in the condition she was in was not the best idea. I weighed the pros and cons. Ultimately, I couldn't.

Midnight and Ghost are loving the new yard. It's barely a matchbox in comparison to what they're accustomed to, but they're happy. Knowing that I still have parts of you, although I can't have all of you, makes me happy too.

I ran out of words four paragraphs ago but admittedly, it's so hard to stop this pen from publishing what's on my mind so that I don't have to explain what's on my heart. I'm a mess, Makai.

TAKE CARE,
Mommas.

I FOLDED the letter neatly and placed it back into the envelope it had come out of. The heat radiating from my body warmed the floor beneath me. When I stood to put the box back in its rightful place, the hot spot left on the floor was the perfect analogy for the fire that had been birthed inside of me.

Inhaling, I allowed my bottled emotions to escape momentarily. With every fiber in my being, I missed Glacier. Walking away from her left me ill for weeks—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Reading the very first letter she'd written confirmed what I'd already known. I wasn't alone.

I miss you... Like every day... That one Beyoncé song had replayed in my head for six months straight. Every day, all day. It repeated itself in my head.

Wanna be with you, but you're away... Glacier and I could both relate to the words. Glacier and I were both experiencing the same pain.

I didn't let the pain rot my insides and corrupt my thoughts for long. I laid down on the bottom bunk and reopened my book, hoping that one day, the emptiness associated with Glacier's absence didn't hurt so bad. Hoping that my wounds would heal themselves because I didn't have the ability. I didn't have the strength.

The fact that I was the person who ended us was all paradoxical. Shit, love was paradoxical. I understood very little, but felt so fucking much. It

was bewildering. It was inexplicable. It was baffling.

PARADOXICAL

Adjective

Appearing absurd or self-contradictory

Synonyms include: illogical, confusing, absurd, incomprehensive

THIRTY MINUTES into my read and the unit was still on lockdown. It had settled tremendously, most motherfuckers finally succumbing to their exhaustion. The silence was welcoming. It was the playground for a less than sound, less than sane mind. My thoughts roamed freely.

The sound of tightly strapped boots and tens of keys slapping against one another began, getting closer and closer with each passing second. My eyes landed on the metal that held the top bunk upright, remembering the man who had preceded us all in death. DJ was a solid, cool cat who had a massive heart attack in the dead of the night. I woke up to find him cold and stiff, eyes wide shut.

“Open eighteen!” the CO yelled.

“In here, Smith.”

Smith?

“I need you to behave yourself in here. If it was up to me, you’d be going to solitary, but what can I say? Got to follow orders. Either somebody behind the desk loves your Black ass or you’re having a stroke of good luck. Either way, this is where you’re housed from now on.”

Closing my eyes, I exhaled the breath I was holding, praying that Royce was working a bit harder than God to deliver a blessing He’d denied me of. I was enjoying isolation but the mission had yet to be completed.

Over the twenty-two-month span, I’d been in a cell with three different men, none of whom were the men I had requested the night I was processed into the system.

“Up. We have an incoming,” the CO called out, instructing me to get off the bed.

I followed orders, facing the wall and placing my hands behind my head without as much as a peep.

“You gon’ take these off me or what?”

I’d forgotten a million things in my lifetime but that voice, it was one that I’d never forget. It was the voice of the man who had caused havoc in the life of a woman who happened to have my heart in her possession. The warmer version. The ice-cold version was the one that brought a smile to my face. My lips stretched toward my ears as joy filled every inch of my being.

Royce. Fucking Royce. If there was no one else that could handle it, whatever *it* might be, Chem’s younger sister was a for sure thing.

“Close it up,” the CO instructed the operator in the control room.

My hands fell by my sides as I turned around to find Nelson standing in the middle of the room, looking like he was fresh out of the boxing ring. It became clear to me that he was the victorious party in the brawl that had us all locked down. The blood left his body as if he’d seen a ghost. I could almost bet he had, but it wasn’t mine. That motherfucker belonged to him.

Welcome to Doom’s Day.

“D-dog, let me apologize now so that we can both sleep without one eye open, looking over our backs and shit.”

“No one is sleeping tonight,” I promised him.

“That’s what you on? Nigga, it’s been two years.”

“It could’ve been twenty. I don’t make threats I don’t make good on.”

“That shit dead, man. I’m not on that type of time. Real shit.”

“Tell me, my guy, why is it that you’ll be dying tonight instead of getting to the fucking bag?”

Though I didn’t care to talk, the question had been circling my head since the day it all started.

“Because she couldn’t keep her fucking mouth closed. My preference and medical stats were nobody’s fucking business. You feel me?”

“She never divulged a single piece of information about you. Never. Where you stick your dick isn’t anyone’s business but now all of Berkeley will know because you can’t keep it in your pants. The difference between out there and in here... ain’t no bitches, my nigga.”

“She ne—she didn—”

“All for nothing, which makes this shit even sweeter.”

Giving him little time to get himself together, with his belongings still in his hand I sent a nose-crushing uppercut straight to the chin. He was unable to recover before another blow struck his temple. The blood that spewed from his nose deterred me from hitting him in that area again.

Though Glacier hadn't, he'd revealed his positive status with a few choice words. I exercised caution and put his big ass down with the second blow. His things were scattered all over the room. I pushed them aside with his body, dragging him to the toilet. I positioned his neck on the rim of the bowl before heading to the other side of the cell to retrieve the boots that sat in the corner. I slipped into the right one.

Contentment led my movements. Though fluid, they were made without haste. I savored every second of this moment. I wanted to relieve it four thousand times over. The exhilaration was addictive. It was liberating. It was gratifying.

WHAM.

One swift, strategic kick to the back of the neck ended his world. The forceful blow, in combination with the metal surface, crushed parts of his spine that were required to sustain life, sending him straight to the pits of hell where he belonged for fucking with one of God's angels.

RETRIBUTION

Noun

Punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrongful, usually criminal, act

Synonyms include: penalty, fate, reckoning, recompense, vengeance, restitution

I SLID my hand into the sliced mattress pad that had caused twenty-two months of back pain and retrieved the burner inside of it. I then fished the plastic bag from the sink to retrieve the battery pack and SIM card that had both only been used once for activation before being brought inside.

The number that was stitched in my brain, backward and forward, made it easy for my fingers to glide across the buttons without mistakes. After pressing the green button, I held the very top of the flip against my ear.

"Yeah?" Malachi answered the line.

After twenty-two months, it felt so fucking good to hear his voice.

"Now, you can come get me, nigga."

"Say less."

EPILOGUE

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Makai". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 'i'.

IT HAD TAKEN three additional months to kiss the fresh air on the other side of the fence, but that shit was still sweeter. Because there wasn't shit the system could offer me but an expunged record, eventually, I left nearly empty-handed.

Everything I owned, except my image and the box of letters, I'd given to the men that made my stay more pleasant. Where I was headed, there was no need for anything I'd acquired during my incarceration.

A black Escalade awaited my arrival. Beside it stood Mercer, leaning against the grill that was massive in stature. It was a good fucking day to see either of the men who had come from the same womb as me. I hadn't gone more than a week without seeing their faces, so a twenty-five-month stint was an all-time high.

Mercer had left us for a few years and Chem was hardly home, but they were the exception. Prior to their encounters with the law, I saw them more often than not. Family was everything for us all. The little we had left, we cherished.

"Ain't picked up a fucking pound. Were you even eating, nigga?"

“When you’re used to lobster and medium-well steak, it’s a fucking adjustment to have noodles on the daily.”

“Right on. Right on.”

“But nah, a nigga was getting swole than a bitch. After I hit Malachi’s line, I got my ass out of that cell and put that work in. Couldn’t come home with little ass legs and a belly the size of Santa’s.”

“Damn,” Mercer snickered, pulling me in for a hug.

“Nah, you know a nigga exaggerating. Won’t ever catch me slipping like that.”

“I love you, bro. Real shit. Happy you’re home. Never been happier to have your boney ass shoulder pressed against mine.”

“Fuck you!”

I shoved Mercer into his truck, taking a second to recover from his honest comedy.

“I love you, too, bro.”

“Come on. The quicker we get out of this lot, the better off we’ll both be.”

“Shit, you ain’t gotta tell me twice.”

I rounded the truck and hopped my ass in the passenger seat. It didn’t take long to realize Mercer and I weren’t alone. Milo and Malachi sat on opposite sides of the backseat with smiles stretching their cheeks and exposing their teeth.

I was out of the truck in a flash. Chests, hands, backs, and shoulders bumped against one another as we embraced.

“Welcome home, nigga,” Milo asserted. “It’s a good fucking day.”

“Any day I’m seeing you niggas is a good day for me.”

“Welcome home,” Malachi expressed.

His words halted everything around me.

“I finished business,” I told him, wanting nothing more than for him to understand that it had to be done.

Patting his chest, he tilted his head with a nod.

“She’s safe.”

“She’s safe,” I agreed.

“You’re a better man than me, Makai. I commend you one hundred times over.”

“I’m not. Not at all. I’m just a man that had an advantage. Had you had the same, then shit would’ve gone a lot differently.”

“But they had to happen the way they did and I’m okay with that now. I’m okay, Makai.”

There were so many unspoken words twisted and twirled in the last sentence. Letting him know that I understood far beyond his actual expression, I brought his head closer with the back of my hand.

“I know,” I acknowledged. “I know. I see it every time you look at her.”

Shaking his head up and down, Malachi confirmed my observation.

“And I love that shit for you. You deserve that and so much more, bro.”

“I’ve got everything I need right here, man. I can’t ask for another fucking thing. My cup is running over.”

“Understo—”

Screeching tires burning through the lot caught everyone’s attention.

“Who the fuck trying to get they asses locked up with that bullshit on these folks’ lot?” I asked to no one in particular.

They knew just as much as I did. Or, at least that was what I assumed until the silence began revealing otherwise. As the car in question approached us, I waited for someone to draw, but no one budged.

“You niggas turnt pussy or something?”

“Nah, that nigga just shoot back and he don’t miss.”

Lawe emerged from the Hellcat, releasing enough weed smoke to fog a bathroom mirror. The sealed windows no longer concealed the loud music thumping from the speakers. He bobbed his head and moved his body from side to side.

“What’s up, baby?”

“Fuck you doing here, nigga?” Milo questioned.

“You niggas tried to have a little reunion without me. Fuck you, you big ear, fat lip fucker. And fuck you, you suit-wearing bitch. And fuck you, you wide receiver back having, fry cooking ass nigga. Didn’t call me? Well, I still pulled up.”

“Damn, why we gotta be all that?” Milo wondered out loud.

“From this point on, don’t even say shit to me. None of you. What’s up, nigga? You out that motherfucker?”

“You see me standing here in your face, right? Stop asking dumb-ass questions.”

“I see what this is, you niggas ganging up and shit?”

“No, nigga. You just asking the obvious.”

“Hit this and calm your ass down. We’ve got almost an hour drive. I

don't want to be fighting with you. I actually miss you."

He passed the blunt in his hand. I gladly accepted.

"He's not riding with you," Milo disagreed.

"Didn't I say not to say nothing to me, Dumbo?"

"He's not," Malachi concurred.

"Nope."

"Oh." Dramatically, Lawe challenged, "Yes the fuck he is."

"Lawe," I sighed, knowing exactly how this was about to go.

"Nigga, you want your kneecaps or to ride with them niggas? The choice is yours, but make that motherfucker right now."

"You for real right now?"

"Did I or did I not say I missed yo' Black ass?"

He snatched the blunt he'd handed me from my hand.

"You really tripping right now? Right now?"

"Fuck it. You ain't got to ride with me. I came into this world alone and I'm—"

"You actually came with Ledge," I reminded him.

"Whatever the fuck. You know what I'm saying, nigga."

I took a look at my brothers, who had been expecting me to take the ride home with them. Regretfully, I eased closer to Lawe, letting it be known where I stood.

"Y'all niggas chill and shit. Meanwhile, he's over here professing his love for me. Y'all not doing enough. I have to go where I feel wanted," I cracked, backing up until I was on the passenger side of Lawe's ride.

"Come on now, that jail getting to your head, bro. You making it sound like we in some type of relationship or something."

"Aren't we?" I sassed, heightening my tone while sliding into his ride.

"Get out. Get the fuck out of my car."

"Nope."

"You going straight back to jail, nigga," Milo warned.

"Come get me if I do."

"Nah, we'll wait another twenty-five months."

"That's cool. Chem's one phone call away, nigga!" I yelled over Lawe as he closed the door.

It hadn't touched the frame before he was burning the rubber off his tires, clearing the parking lot.

Damn, it feels good to be home.

Makai + Glacier

I DIDN'T CLIMB out of the shower until my fingers wrinkled and my legs began to hurt from standing so long. The man I stared back at in the mirror no longer resembled a man who was cold, heartless, or on top of the world. This man had plummeted.

The void in my eyes matched the void in my heart, the void in my home, the void in my world. There were no dogs to feed. There was no back to wash. There was no body to press up against. There were no lips to kiss. There were no hugs to give. There was no Glacier.

Reality began settling in quickly. The silence of my home was mind-numbing. But as much as I hated to face it, the quietness meant that things had aligned perfectly. Everything had fallen into place, even if that wasn't a place of comfort.

With the towel wrapped around my waist, I stepped into my bedroom to find a familiar face staring back at me. The smirk that turned my mouth sideways was followed by a head shake.

"Welcome home," Chem greeted me.

My feet were planted on the floor, awaiting the human enclosure he'd become as he wrapped his arms around me.

"You've done well, Makai."

Accepting his approval for exactly what it was, I cradled the back of his head in the palm of my hand.

"I've missed you. I'm happy you're home."

He pulled away and took a seat on the bed again.

"Appreciate that."

There was a long, deafening pause that left us both with mixed emotions.

"Why aren't you happy to be home, Makai?" he asked.

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to. It's written all over your face. Don't lie to me."

"Just... just adjusting to the new norm."

"Why don't you just call her?"

"Don't do that. Don't do that, Chem."

"Why not?"

"Because you know what it is. You know how this goes."

“But I don’t. Have you forgotten who my wife is? Who she was? You think I give a fuck about what it’s supposed to be? When it’s a matter of the heart, not much else matters.”

He stood to his feet and removed a small piece of paper from his pocket.

“When you’re ready, you should really go check that out.”

“What is it?” I asked, picking up the paper he’d placed on the bed.

“Something that needs your attention.”

Glacier’s face was plastered on the page, her license number, home address, phone number, and birthday were all gathered on her updated driver’s license.

Mommas. My heart galloped in my chest.

I lifted my head, pulling myself out of the web she’d spun from afar.

“I can’t g—Chem?”

As quickly as he’d come, he’d gone. The paper he’d left with me was glued to my fingers. I sat on the bed, studying every detail, every bit of information on the card. Her birthday grabbed my attention. It was the 31st of January, just fourteen days shy of her thirtieth.

Idea after idea popped into my head, but I dismissed them without hesitation. Knowing that it was the best thing for me to do, I crumbled the paper and tossed it across the room in the trash where it belonged. Glacier’s life was much better without me. And my life would go on without the fear of losing her because I’d already given her up.

It’s better this way.

It’s best this way.

I convinced myself.

Makai + Glacier

I CHECKED the address for the sixth time, reading the numbers out loud and in my head. The darkness that surrounded me made it harder to read and forced me to squint my eyes a bit. After the sixth confirmation, I knew that it wasn’t the uncertainty that was keeping me seated. I stared up at the blue door, knowing, without a doubt, I was at the right place.

3. My door is always open for you. It's the blue one; the only teal one on the entire street. I made it that way so you'll never lose your way on your quest to find your way back to me.

I TUGGED AT MY BEARD, tittering at the nerves that continued to build in my belly. Question after question, scenario after scenario, kept me rooted in the driver's seat.

What if she has a nigga?

It was that one that forced me out of the car and onto the pavement outside of Glacier's home. I removed the Glock from my waist to remove the safety. If a nigga was laying in her bed, it would be the last bed he laid in before the one they reserved for him at the funeral home.

Chill.

The voice of reasoning spoke. I remembered the words she'd written and the pain that rested within them. I'd hurt her. If she found the strength to push forward, maybe I could live with that. Maybe I could live with someone repairing parts of her I'd broken.

2. You've gutted me.

AS THE THOUGHT SURFACED, it dissolved. Glacier had made it abundantly clear that she'd always love me, despite it all. She'd told me several times over. She'd shown me. She'd written it in the letter that she sent me.

1. My heart will never not want you.

AND I BELIEVED every word because my heart hadn't stopped wanting her since the day I saw her face. It didn't matter what I'd said or how I'd handled

things, my heart had a different way of dealing. And it still wanted. It still craved. It still beat... for Glacier.

The modest two-story home was a far cry from our homes in Berkeley, but it was Mommas. I could taste the fruits of her labor after spending hours in the kitchen following one of Mercer's recipes without flaw.

Those nights, the nights we spent inside, talking for hours, were the best kind of nights. Tonight, I was hoping we could run that shit back. If she'd have me. If she'd accept me. If she'd let me.

The ball was in her court. Whatever Glacier wanted, she could have, even if that was for me to get the fuck out of dodge. I'd leave for the night, but I'd have my Black ass on her porch before sunrise tomorrow.

It hadn't taken me but a week to come to terms with the fact that there was no world without her. Chem had been right. Shit, Chem was always right.

When it comes to matters of the heart, nothing else mattered.

The second my foot hit the first step, the sweet sounds coming from Ghost and Midnight made me light up inside. Knowing that they were still looking after Mommas for me was rewarding. I pushed forward, dusting my foot on the mat in front of me as I pushed the doorbell with my index finger.

Clarke was a fucking doozy in the winter. Snow covered the roadways, driveways, and lawns. There were at least eight inches pressed against the garage door. I made a mental note to shovel that shit in case Glacier needed to get out at any point the next day. Being that it was so late in the evening, I was almost certain she was staying for the rest of the night.

Locks began to turn. I brushed my hands against my pants and straightened my posture, anxiously awaiting the moment that her beauty was revealed to me. The barking grew louder as the door cracked.

"Quiet, boys," Glacier demanded.

The sound of her voice sent shock waves straight to my chest, awakening my heart. Through the cracked door, I could see her full frame.

"Sit nicely." Her body was angled toward Midnight and Ghost. She continued to give orders, warning them to play nice. Neither one of them niggas knew what that shit even meant.

Look at me, I begged. Look at me, Mommas.

Finally, she lifted her head. A gasp fell from those beautiful lips of hers. She was dressed comfortably in a champagne-colored lounge set and slippers that were so fluffy, they looked twice the size of her small feet. She was so

perfect. Still perfect. Still pretty.

“Makai,” she choked.

“I’ve missed you so, so fucking much, Mommas.”

The words that I’d bottled up for months and months spilled, but not without trouble. I swiped away the tears that crashed against my skin before the breeze turned them into icicles.

“Are you her—is this for real? Have you come back to me? Have you come to stay?”

Nodding, I assured her I wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’m ready to make good on them promises I made to you, if that’s aight with you?”

Glacier nodded, letting me know that everything she’d said in that letter twenty-five months ago was still true.

“Yes. Yes. Of course. Everything I said in my letters, I meant. Every word.”

Shame consumed me. Upon recognition, she sighed.

“You didn’t read them, did you?”

“Only one.”

I watched her heart break all over again. My stomach turned.

“I’m sorry, Mommas. I ju— I just had to keep my head on straight in there. Reading anything from you would’ve made that time much harder than it was.”

“Or made you realize you belonged here and not in there.”

“Or that,” I admitted.

“So much was in those letters, Makai.”

“And, I promise to read every one of them. They’re in the car.”

My promises didn’t soothe the ache I’d caused.

“What’s the matter, Mommas? I’m sorry.”

I swiped tears from her eyes with my thumb. Seeing her cry was unnerving.

“I know, Makai, it’s just that—”

“Talk to me, baby. Tell me what’s really on your mind. Don’t spare me.”

“I don’t wanna break your heart,” she cried, tears streaming from her big, glossy eyes.

“Then don’t,” I begged, “Not if you don’t have to.”

She widened the door, exposing Ghost and Midnight. Just as she’d asked, they sat. However, it wasn’t their presence that brought me to my knees. It

was the faces of the two deep brown children clinging to Glacier's right leg.

"Daddy?" One of the two smiled up at Mommas, seeking confirmation.

"Yes, baby." Glacier stared directly at me. "Madelyn and Makenna, Daddy. Daddy, Madeleyn, and Makenna."

It wasn't her. She wasn't the culprit. It was me. I'd broken my heart in five million pieces that could not and would not ever be repaired. Staring at the faces that resembled my own, thinking about how much I'd missed, gutted me.

The emotions that I thought I had control over gained control of me. The levees broke and I became the blubbering mess that could not speak. My hands, they had never failed me. I swooped both tiny bodies into my arms as I pushed forward into the house.

I searched the air, blindly feeling for Glacier. Her hand joined mine as I watched the girls acclimate themselves with every feature on my face using their tiny hands. Everything I never knew I wanted, everything I never knew I needed was at my fingertips.

"I'm sorry."

"You're here, now. That's all that matters."

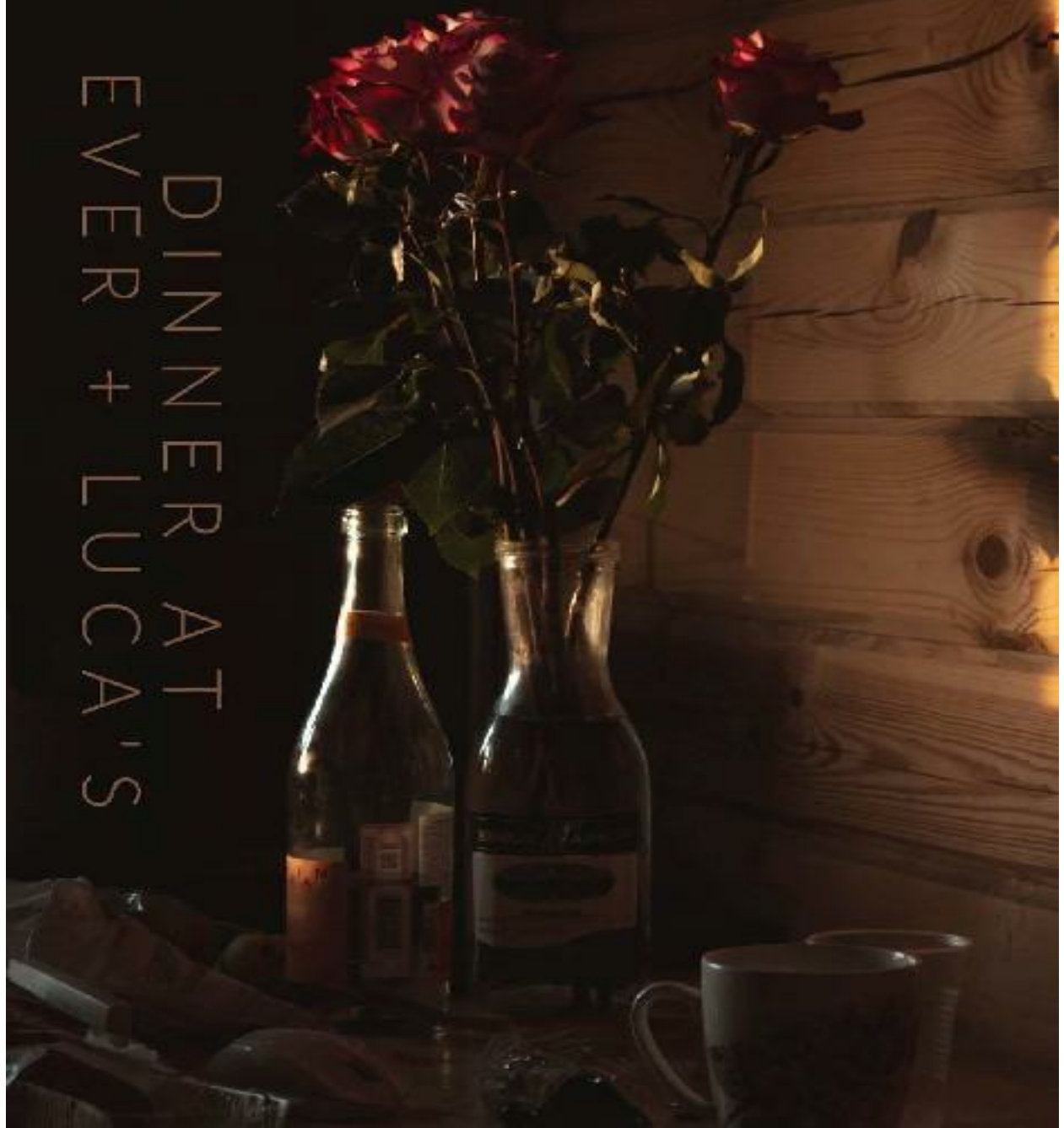
The end.

From Glacier, to Makai – to read a full letter(s) from Glacier to Makai, click [here](#).

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