



IT'S ALWAYS

When You

Tay MO'NAE

It's Always Been You:

Written by: Tay Mo'Nae



“Home sweet home,” I said to the two recent additions to my home. “Make yourselves at home.”

I shut the door of my three-bedroom, two and a half bath modern farmhouse home. I just left the group home where my new foster kids were once placed.

Kaiden and Kaydence stood close to the door, holding onto each other. I wasn't new to the foster system, so I knew it would take some time for them to open up to me. My heart swelled in my chest seeing the look of hesitant and nervousness in their eyes. From what I was told, they've been bounced around from group homes to different foster homes for the past year. They were taken away from their drug-addicted mother and her abusive boyfriend and couldn't seem to find a stable home.

Clearing my throat, I walked in front of them and smiled. “Would you two like to see your room?” My eyes bounced between them under my glasses.

Neither Kaydence nor Kaiden said anything. Kaiden's jewel-like, deep brown eyes were narrow and his brows pinched tightly together as he stared at me with a hard glare. I noticed right away how Kaydence clung to her brother's side. Her eyes mirrored her brothers, but the nervousness in them couldn't be missed. She kept blinking rapidly, avoiding my eyes.

My heart clenched, staring at them. I could tell they didn't trust me, which I understood. Being in foster care was rough, especially if you didn't get placed in a loving and caring place right away.

I looked them both over. They dressed both in gray sweats and a white shirt. By their feet were two black garbage bags, I knew held the few clothes they had and in Kaydence's hand was a bear she got from the home.

Kaiden was eight and Kaydence was four. Sadly the two of them had been through enough trauma to last them

a life time. My only hope was to heal those issues and show them good people did exist.

Seeing that neither of them were going to answer me, I kept the smile on my face and nodded. "Okay follow me."

I turned and headed deeper into my living room. Turning left where my second and third bedrooms were, I started to get excited. I had been prepping for the kid's arrival for the past couple weeks and couldn't wait to see what they thought of their new space.

I was freshly divorced a little over a month ago and in order to keep my mind of it, I jumped headfirst into becoming a new mother.

"You'll be sharing a bathroom which is right here." I pointed to the door in front of us. "Your room is over there Kaiden and Kaydence your room is directly across from his." I turned and looked at both of them, trying to see if I got a reaction but their faces gave me nothing.

Not getting discouraged I headed for Kaiden's room first. I opened the door and felt my heart flutter. I had decorated his room in Marvel superheroes while Kaydence was in LOL Doll.

"Kaiden do you like your room?" I questioned.

His eyes barely scanned over the room before he looked at me with a blank stare. His shoulders rose. "I guess."

"If there's anything you don't like, let me know. We can change it." I wanted the kids to be as comfortable as possible. Since I had been through this as a kid, I knew how it felt not to have a voice and be bounced around from house to house. I didn't want that for these two. If anything, I hoped they soon considered this home.

"I'll let you get settled while I show your sister her room."

I reached my hand out for her to take but she shielded closer to her brother with wide eyes.

"No." She quickly shook her head, gripping his hand tighter. Seeing how frightened she was made me both sad and angry. I had gotten some background about these two and I hated how scarred she was.

"It's okay Kaydence, we're just going across the hall." "No!"

"She's not going to go without me." Kaiden finally spoke up.

I looked over at him and nodded my head. “Okay. Come with us then.” I made sure to give them a comforting smile.

Kaiden sat his black bag down and wrapped his arm around his little sister. Right away, I could tell he took the role of her protector seriously and honestly I thought it was the cutest thing. Kaydence hadn’t stopped clinging to him since I picked them up and I loved seeing how close they were. I also knew it was going to be tough for them to trust and open up to me. Life had hardened and wounded them both.

We walked out Kaiden’s room and across the hall to his sisters. The moment I opened the door and we stepped inside, I saw Kaydence’s eyes light up.

“This mine?” Her voice was small and shaky. I noticed her vocabulary didn’t seem to be where it should be at four, but I would worry about that later.

“Yes, it’s yours. Everything in here is for yours.”

Kaydence looked up at her brother, who still had a blank look on his face. When his sister looked at him it soften some. He nodded

his head and that seemed to give his sister the confidence she needed to explore.

She sat her bag down and clung to the bear in her arms as she looked around her new domain.

Before getting the kids I made sure to get each kid a full-size bed, a plethora of toys, and a closet full of clothes. I decided I would add on to the rooms once the kids were settled but for now, the basics would do.

“So you like it?”

Kaydence tuned and looked at me. Instead of replying verbally, she gave me a subtle nod which gave me the reassurance I was looking for.

“Good, now let me show the two of you the rest of the house.” It took me about twenty minutes to give the kids a full tour of their new home. One thing I loved about my house was the open floor plan in the living room. The stone fireplace with a TV mounted above it was one of my favorite areas. It was closed in by two bookshelves on each side. The two large bay windows brought in plenty of sunlight as well.

The living room led into the dining room and the kitchen was separated by an island. My bedroom was on the other side of the house, along with the laundry room, mud room, the half bath, and stairs to the basement. The house was also equipped with a two-car garage, a full rear large stone porch, a fenced in backyard where I had a playset installed, and an outdoor grill area.

It was the perfect family home that I hoped to share with my ex-husband, but now I was happy with sharing it with Kaydence and Kaiden.

“Are you two hungry?” I looked between the two once we were back in the living room.

Silence filled us.

“Well, why don’t you guys go back to your rooms and get settled while I make us something to eat.”

The didn’t protest.

I released a heavy breath once I was alone. When I first decided to take on two kids, I was still married and knew I would have the help of my ex-husband, but now that it was just me I was nervous. Since I knew how it felt to be

in their shoes, I knew I was going to have to be patient with them. Still, I hoped I would gain their trust soon.

My phone vibrated in my pocket as I headed for my kitchen. A smile formed on my face seeing it was my best friend O'Shae. I knew he was checking in to see how things were going. He wanted to come with me to pick the kids up, but I thought it would be better if I got them alone.

Best friend: *How's it going?*

Me: *Okay I guess. They haven't said much.*

Best friend: *Don't get discouraged. If anyone could get them to open up it's your ass. I'll be by soon as I get finished at the shop.*

Me: *I hope so. I really want them to like me.* Sighing, I placed my phone on my gray laminated

countertops and took a moment to look around. I had come a long way from the girl in foster care, hoping for a family of my own. I was living in my dream home and now I was a mother. The challenges that were to come I knew wouldn't be easy, but I knew I could overcome them.



I locked my phone and slid it into my pocket after reading Jerzey's last text. My eyes went to the car I was currently working on. Using the back of my hand I wiped the sweat that had formed on my brows. This was the third car of the day I had worked on and I still had one more.

I worked at a custom car shop, *T Customs Body Shop*. Since I was a kid, I loved working on cars. I gained my love from my grandfather who showed me how to not only repair them but customize them as well.

Right now, I was currently adding lights under a car, changing the color of the headlights.

“You good O?” My boss and friend, Terrance asked.

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Jerzey had been on my mind all day. I wanted to take of and go pick the kids up with her, but she turned down my offer. As much as I wanted to protest I respected her wishes.

I knew it would be a hard transition for my best friend considering everything she’d been through the past couple months. I knew she wouldn’t complain or dwell on her misfortunes because that was the type of person Jerzey was. She would always look on the bright side of things. It was one thing I loved and hated about her.

The moment I was about to start back on the car I was working on, my phone went of in my pocket.

Pulling it I noticed it was my girlfriend Payton.

Payton: *Are we still on for dinner tonight?*

I sighed. It slipped my mind that I was supposed to meet her. Payton had been my frst girlfriend for the past two years. I knew if I canceled, I would have to hear her mouth and that was something I wanted to avoid. The two of us hadn't spent much time together due to the change in her work schedule.

Payton was a third-grade teacher and she had been going to work earlier than normal to help tutor some of her students who were already falling behind.

Me: *Yeah, just let me know where you wanna meet.* Sticking

my phone back in my pocket, I gave the car

back my attention. The only thing that ever truly brought me joy in my life was football and working on cars. Since my football dream was cut short, I dove headfrst into my love for cars.

I had been working at *T Custom Body Shop* for five years now. Since Terrance first opened it up.

“Aye, did that wrap for Garret’s car ever come in?” I asked him suddenly.

Garret was a frequent customer at the shop. He was always coming in and getting something altered and fixed on his old school.

Terrance’s eyes stayed locked on the car he was working on as he responded. “Yeah, he’s coming in next week to get it put on.” I nodded and grabbed the cover for the headlight to put it back on.

“Boss, someone’s asking for you in the lobby.” Another worker came into the garage and let Terrance know.

He lifted his head. “Is it important?”

James, the worker, shrugged. “I don’t know. He just asked for the owner.”

Terrance blew a frustrated breath out and stepped out the car he was working on. There were four bays in the garage and three were currently occupied.

- chuckled.

- never understood how Terrance kept the shop up and running for as long as he had. He hated actually dealing with customers, and all his workers knew it. He would rather stay in the garage all day. Normally, his son or the receptionist would handle them, but every once in a while, he was needed.

“Shut yo ass up.” Terrance gritted at me, heading towards the door that led to the lobby.

- wiped my hands on my sweats.

All I had to do was install the second headlight and this car would be finished. Jobs like this were simple but bored me. I loved cars that got full customizations.

Digging into my pocket again, I grabbed my wireless headphones and stuck them in my ears. I only had a few more hours at the shop.

“Hey.” Jerzey opened her front door, smiling. “Wassup.” I stepped inside, kissing her forehead like I

always did when I seen her. “How have things been going?” My eyes wandered around her open living room. She didn’t have a light on, but because of the setting sun still bringing light in, it was enough to light the area.

“Well, you know.” One of her shoulders lifted while trying to keep a smile on her face. “I knew it wouldn’t be simple right away, but I’m sure after a few days they’ll open up.” She turned and headed for her light gray couch and took a seat with me right behind her.

“Where are they now?” I noticed how quiet the house was. It didn’t sound like two kids had just moved in.

“Where they’ve been all day... in their rooms. I made them something to eat earlier and soon as they ate they went to their rooms and haven’t been out since.”

It was going on six in the evening. Jerzey had got the kids around ten this morning, and I knew she was hoping to have made some kind of progress by now.

“You just got to give it some time.”

Her shoulders fell forward. "I know. I've been through this before, remember? I understand the closed-of behavior and how hard it was to trust people. When the first people who were supposed to trust you let you down, it's hard to let anyone in after that. And don't get me started on the bouncing from house to house. The moment you have some sense of normality or comfortability, you're forced to another house and forced to go through the process again." She brushed her hands through her chocolate brown, asymmetric curly hair and lowered her light brown eyes to her hands.

I reached over and grabbed her knee. Since I first met her at the age of twelve, I learned about her desire to have a real family. The two of us just so happened to become friends because we were neighbors once I moved in with my grandparents.

I knew after two failed attempts Jerzey was excited to become of mother, so I didn't want to see her down on her luck or discouraged.

"It's the first day, once they get to know you, I know they'll love you."

“What if it wasn’t meant for me to have a family, O’Shae? I mean, I was thrown into the system at six, following that my husband and me divorce, after losing a kid. What if I’m cursed?” Her voice broke.

She removed the white, round-framed glasses that complimented her cinnamon skin of her face and wiped her eyes.

My jaw tightened at the thought of Mario, her ex-husband. If you ask me he was a coward to walk away from Jerzey when she was at her lowest. I always felt like Jerzey was too good for Mario, but my best friend seemed happy so I kept my opinion to myself.

“Look at me, Jerzey.” I spoke in a low, gruf tone. I narrowed my eyes. “You are *not* cursed. Fuck your mother and father for not being there for you. Fuck Mario for not being there for you. Those kids have been scarred but once

they realize they can trust you they’ll open up to you. Those kids are lucky to be in your care and they’ll soon realize that.” I gave her knee a reassuring squeeze.

“Now go get the kids so I can meet them,” I grinned at her.

One side of Jerzey’s plush lips lifted. I knew she knew I was right. Life had been kicking her ass lately, but I knew she was strong enough to overcome it.

Her tongue swiped across her cupid shape lips. “Okay.”

Jerzey was about to get off the couch but halted when the siblings came into view. Instantly, I noticed the resemblance between them and how the sister clung to her brother.

“I was just about to come get you guys.” Jerzey waved them over. “C’mere.”

I wasn’t sure how old the boy was but I noticed he had some height on him. He had a stoic look on his caramel face. His eyes bounced from me to Jerzey, growing tighter. “Who is that?” He stepped back taking his sister with him.

“Oh, no. There’s no reason to be nervous.” Jerzey assured them hopping up quickly.

She approached them slowly, but they were both giving her a distrustful look, taking another step back.

“This is my best friend, O’Shae. He wanted to meet you guys.”

The boy looked at Jerzey with a fixed look on his face. Instead of waiting for them to come to me, I stood and made my way over to them.

“Wassup y’all?” I smiled at both of them.

“O’Shae, this is Kaiden and Kaydence. Guys my best friend, O’Shae.” Jerzey was smiling looking back at me.

“I’m glad to meet y’all.” I held my hand out.

Both of them stared down at it without bothering to take it.

“We’re hungry.” Kaiden spoke, ignoring my outstretched hand.

“Okay, what do you two want to eat?” Jerzey’s attention went back to the siblings.

“Can I have tacos?” Kaydence finally spoke, quietly. “Tacos? I can do tacos.” Jerzey nodded. “Is that okay

with you, Kaiden?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, tacos it is. Do you guys want to hang out in here and watch TV while I cook them? I can turn something on for you guys.”

“We’re going to go back to our rooms,” Kaiden told her. The smile that was on her oval face lowered.

The siblings turned and headed in the directions of their bedrooms.

“Or you can go to your rooms.” She spoke lowly with a heavy sigh.

Wrapping my arms around her shoulder, I pulled her into my side. Jerzey was only 5’5 so I towered over her at 6’4.

“Don’t worry. It’ll take some time but they’ll warm up to you. I can tell already Kaiden is protective of his sister.”

Jerzey turned her head upwards and gave me a small smile. “Yeah, it’s cute actually. She clings to him all the time and he doesn’t

seem to mind. Since she's been here I've only heard her say like ten words." She ran her tongue over her lips.

"You know who that reminds me of?" I smirked, lifting one of my eyebrows.

"Who?"

"You." I kissed the top of her head again.

She pulled away from me and stared at me curiously.

"Me? How?" Her nose bunched up.

"When you first came to live with the Mathews you were reserved. You hardly spoke. Remember that?"

Jerzey giggled. "Oh yeah, I guess you're right. I was scared as hell of being with a new family again. The last home I was in before them was overcrowded and no one ever paid me any attention. I was so used to playing the background, it was weird to have a family that actually paid attention to me, so it was a real culture shock to me."

"So you're the perfect person to help her open up. What helped you?"

Jerzey brought her thumb to her mouth and nibbled on the tip of it. “I guess receiving real love and attention. The Mathews made sure I was clothed with clothes that fit, they made sure I was fed, and when something was bothering me, they made sure to find out why. I never had anyone before them care about me like that.”

“There you have it. From what you told me before getting those kids never had a real mother and I’m sure that’s what they’re longing for.” Slowly Jerzey bobbed her head.

“I don’t know. It might work with Kaydence since she’s younger, but Kaiden is so cut off and cold. He’s older and seems hardened already. I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

“He’ll come around. He’s protective of his sister and on guard. Once he sees you’re no threat, I’m sure he’ll open up.”

I stayed around with Jerzey for a while longer talking with her until Payton started blowing my phone up. Again, I had forgotten we had dinner plans.

“I got to go shower and meet up with Payton.” I let Jerzey know pulling her into a hug. She was just finishing up the food.

“Oh, you have to leave?” A small pout appeared on her face.

“If I don’t I’ll never hear the end of it.”

She snickered. “You’re right about that,” she gave me a squeeze. “Thank you for coming over and for all the encouraging words.

Kissing her forehead, I gave her a slight squeeze. “Everything I said was true. Just stay positive and don’t give up.”

I let her go. “I’ll stop by again tomorrow to see how things are going. I got a shorter day at the shop than I did today.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

I turned and headed for the front door.

My phone was going off again.

Taking it out my pocket, I answered. “I’m on the way to the house now.”

“Where are you, O’Shae? I knew you were going to do this!”

My brows pinched together while Jerzey snickered. I knew she could hear Payton’s whiny tone through the phone.

“I had to stop by Jerzey’s house but I’m leaving now.”

She smacked her lips. “Just hurry up please, I’m hungry!” She hung up.

Shaking my head I slid my phone back into my pocket. “That girl is going to be the death of me.”

“You love that divaness.”

I shook my head again but didn’t reply.

Giving Jerzey one last goodbye I headed out the house and to my car.



“Doggy!” Kaydence spoke eagerly and squeaky. Lifting my head from the file I was currently looking over, I noticed her pointing to the animal currently walking through the hallway of my job.

“Yes, doggy!” I grinned at her.

She turned her head to look at me, she still had a smile on her face but I noticed it dimmed some. Setting the pen down, I walked over to her. She moved closer to her brother who was at her side.

Kneeling down so I was eye level with her I held my hand out. "Want to go pet the doggy?"

Her eyes went to my outreached hand then up at her brother who was giving me a stoic look. "It's okay your brothers not going anywhere. Let's go pet the dog."

Slowly her small hand moved to mine and once it was enclosed I stood up and we headed out the room and into the hallway where Mrs. Donald now was with her Golden Retriever.

"Mrs. Donald, how is Peaches doing?" I asked staring down at the dog. She paused mid-writing and glanced at me.

"Dr. Mathews, we missed you today!" Grinning I used my free hand to pet the top of Peaches' head causing her tail to wag wildly.

“I’ll be back in the office in two weeks. I’ve had some things to handle.” My eyes shifted to Kaydence who was standing close to my side with a nervous expression on her face. I noticed Kaiden had come over by us too. He was next to Kaydence with his arms crossed like he was security.

“Oh, who is this pretty girl?” When Mrs. Donald smiled at Kaydence she moved closer to me and squeezed my hand; my chest tightened.

It had been a few days since the two of them had been with me and both were still pretty closed off. I could get more from Kaydence than I did with Kaiden, however.

She looked to her brother most of the time for guidance and assurance. I was hoping both of them would learn to trust me enough to have faith that I had their best interest at heart.

“This is my new foster daughter, Kaydence. Kaydence can you say hi?” Kaydence's eyes stayed locked on Peaches who now was close to her sniffing. “Sorry, she’s shy. She actually wanted to come over and meet Peaches.”

“Now, you know she’s a big baby who loves attention. You can pet her.” She nodded her head to Kaydence who looked at me then over at her brother.

“Go ahead Kaydence, Peaches is a sweetheart.” I scratched between her ears.

Once Kaydence saw Peaches was friendly and happy, she stuck her hand out. Peaches immediately gave her attention and started licking her fingers causing Kaydence to giggle.

A smile found its way onto my face. This was the first time I heard her laugh, it was soft and innocent. Her face lit up as she played and continued to pet and allow Peaches to lick her.

“Do you want to pet her too, handsome?” Mrs. Donald glanced over at Kaiden who was eyeing Peaches.

Slowly he nodded his head but stayed silent.

“Go ahead Kaiden, it’s okay.”

Stepping forward, he ran his hand over Peaches’ head. I noticed a small twitch form on his mouth as if he was going to smile.

“Both of them are your foster kids?” My attention went back to Mrs. Donald.

I nodded. “That’s Kaiden and this is Kaydence.” “They’re beautiful kids and Peaches seems to like them too.” She was right Peaches was eating up the attention from the kids. Her tail was wagging wildly and her tongue hanging out.

I snickered. “Everything looks good with her? Did she get her allergy shot today?”

Mrs. Donald nodded. “Yep, everything’s good. Ain’t that right, girl?” Mrs. Donald patted the side of her dog.

“Good to hear.”

I had been a Vet at *Ridge Veterinarian* for three years now and I love my job. Since a young age, I’ve always loved

animals and knew by the time I was ten I wanted to take care of them when I got older. One thing, I prided myself on was knowing my patients, especially my regulars. I’ve been seeing Peaches for

two years now since her old vet retired and she was transferred to my services.

I allowed the kids to pet the dog for a few more seconds. "Okay you two, say thank you to Mrs. Donald and bye to Peaches." Neither kid looked happy about leaving the dog.

"Bye Peaches." They muttered.

"And say thank you."

They looked at Mrs. Donald who had a small smile on her face. She was always nice and enjoyable when she came in. She was in her mid 50s.

"Thank you." The two of them stepped back and Kaydence grabbed her brother's hand.

"Thank you, Mrs. Donald. I'll see you guys at Peaches' next checkup." She bobbed her head.

"It's always a pleasure. And it was nice meeting you two!" She gushed at the kids.

“C’mon guys, I just need to finish up a few more papers and we can leave.” I turned and headed back to the papers, I was looking at and grabbed them.

“Dr. Mathews, I’m glad you’re here. Mr. Wilson has been calling for you all week and-.” I held my hand up for Abby, one of the nurses here to pause.

“Tell him, I’m on vacation and he can wait or speak to Dr. Allen.” Mr. Wilson was one of my pain in the ass patients. He had an old German Shepard who he rescued years ago and called for every little thing. He was a worrisome old man who worked my nerves.

Abby snickered and nodded. “Will do.”

“C’mon guys, let’s go to my office.” I looked down at the kids.

“Aw, are these the kids you took in?” Abby went to bend down to greet the kids, but both shielded away from her.

“They’re still getting adjusted and shy right now.” I let her know seeing the smile on her young face lower.

“Oh, of course.” She stood up and her smile returned. “I think it’s a great thing you’re going, Dr. Mathews. So many kids need loving homes and I couldn’t think of anyone better to give them one.”

“Thank you, Abby. I appreciate that.” Her words warmed my heart.

Abby was freshly 20 and had been working here for a year now. She was always smiling and full of good energy. She started as a volunteer when she was 16.

After being stopped a few more times, I finally made my way to the back and to my office.

“Just take a seat on the couch over there and give me a few minutes to finish these papers.” Although I was on vacation right now, I needed to come in and sign a few forms.

Neither kid gave me any lip and did what I asked. While I handled the papers, I would glance over at the kids every so often.

They hardly made a sound as if they were used to being quiet. It was something I noticed at home as well.

“I was thinking we could go to the park and then maybe get some ice cream or something once we eat,” I mentioned pausing my pen.

Just like I expected Kaydence looked at her brother while he stared at me with a blank expression.

“I want the park,” Kaydence spoke up. Her speech was still broken up, but I could normally make out what she was saying.

“And what about you, Kaiden? Does that sound fun?” His head moved up and down.

“Okay. I’m just about done then we can leave. Think about what you two want to eat for lunch too.”

I knew they weren’t going to respond so instead, I finished up the forms I needed to complete. Since my time on vacation was dwindling down, I was hoping by the time I was due back to work the two of them would have warmed up to me.

“Stop looking so serious!” My head snapped up and a smile found its way onto my face when I noticed O’Shae making his way over to me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m on lunch and the park is just a small walk over so I came to see how things are.”

My eyes went to the playground where the two were currently playing on the jungle gym. I offered to play with them, but both declined and ran off.

“It’s going.” I shrugged while my shoulders sunk forward.

O’Shae took a seat next to me. I noticed today he was wearing a navy blue jumpsuit that had his shop's name on the top corner.

I snickered.

“You actually look like a mechanic today.”

O'Shae turned his head and flashed a crooked grin. "I know, all my work clothes were still in the washer and this was all I had that was clean." He glanced down at the jumpsuit that sported a few grease stains on it.

"I like seeing you in that. It looks nice on you." "You think?" He rose a brow.

I scanned him over before answering.

The jumpsuit hugged his slightly wide chest and fit his athletic frame perfectly. The years of playing football gave O'Shae a solid frame. Even though he had the height of a

basketball player he always said he enjoyed playing a physical sport.

"I do. You look like one of them hunky grease monkeys," I sniggered.

"Get the fuck outta here." He laughed, slightly nudging my shoulder.

He shifted his eyes to the park. “They adjusting well?” My eyes followed his. “I guess. I mean you can still tell they don’t trust me.

They still cling to each other. Kaydence is really dependent on Kaiden which I understand. I know the two of them went through some traumatic things and he was her protector when he could be.”

The social worker in charge of the kids showed me their files and gave me some insight on the kids so I could help understand them better. The things they’ve both been through in their short lives was truly heartbreaking.

O’Shae’s large gingerbread-colored hand ran down his short beard. “It’s still the first week. I’m sure by next week they’ll be more open to you.”

His words sounded good but I wasn’t sure how much credit they held. I had been these kids, even though I wasn’t

as scarred as them I knew how it felt to get bounced around and learning not to trust anyone.

“Yeah maybe.” I tugged on my bottom lip with my

teeth.

I watched the kids make their way over to the swings. Kaiden was trying to help Kaydence get on one when I stood up.

“I’ll help her,” I called out.

Hurriedly I made my way to the swings.

Kaiden’s face was bunched up when he noticed me approaching but he stepped back to allow me to help his sister.

“You want to swing too? I can push her?” I asked him. His dark orbs shifted to his sisters. “C’mon man, I bet I can swing higher than you.” I noticed O’Shae had followed me over. Silently I thanked him.

Kaiden’s eyes darted to O’Shae. “No, you can’t.”

A smirk formed on O’Shae’s mouth. He walked to the swing on the end, leaving the one between him and Kaydence open. “Let’s see.”

Kaiden's brows bunched together and he made his way to the open swing, climbing on it.

Things seemed to be going well, I noticed Kaiden had a competitive side to him. Each time he noticed O'Shae was going higher than him he attempted to pump his little legs faster.

Honestly, I was shocked to see O'Shae swinging. He never failed to amaze me.

"Don't go too high, Kaiden!" I called out.

Kaydence was mimicking the two and pumping her legs. "Faster!" She begged, kicking her feet.

Smiling I did as she requested and pushed a letting harder.

O'Shae stayed at the park with us for about ten minutes before he had to head back to work. Thankfully the kids seemed to loosen up a little.

"Thank you, O. I really appreciate you coming up here." He pulled me into his side and kissed my forehead. "You know I got you."

Releasing me he looked down at the kids. "I'll see y'all later."

"You're leaving?" Kaiden asked frowning.

It shocked me that he even seemed to care. “Yeah man, I got to head back to work.”

Kaiden didn’t reply. His attention traveled around the park.

“Bye, O’Shae. Love you.”

He smiled at me with that bright smile of his. “Love you too.”

“To infinity?”

He licked his lips. “And Beyond.”



“My sister invited us to her boyfriend’s party this weekend,” Payton said behind me as I sat on our bed.

Reaching over I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and scanned over my notifications. “Nah. You know I don’t fuck with that nigga.” I let her know.

Payton smacked her lips. “Seriously, O’Shae? We haven’t gone out and did anything in a while.”

“That nigga always be on some stupid shit. Him and his friends. You know everywhere they go shit go down. I’m cool on that.”

I clicked on the InstaFlik notification. I had done a custom wrap along with some lights on a Challenger earlier in the week and finally posted it. My likes were going crazy.

“That’s not even true. Plus it’s going to be something small with only a few close friends.” Payton’s voice sounded closer.

When I glanced up, I noticed she was now standing in front of me with her arms crossed over her small chest. My eyes ran down her honey-colored body, tracing her small curves, landing on the foral display on her meaty thighs.

Payton's full lips were poked up as she batted her long lashes. "Please, we don't even have to stay long."

"You can go to that shit, but I'm cool. Plus yo sister ghetto as hell and ion feel like being bothered with that shit either."

Again, Payton smacked her lips. "Don't call my sister ghetto!"

"That's what the hell she is! What you mean?" My face balled up.

"She's just a little outspoken and not afraid to be her true self."

Chuckling, I shook my head. "A'right Payton, if you say so. Like I said, you can go ahead and go. I'll probably chill or go hang out with Jerzey."

“Of course, you would rather go hang out with her.” Rolling her eyes, she popped her hip out. Her face grew tight.

My tongue dragged over my top teeth.

“Don’t start that shit.” Leaning up, I grabbed her by the waist, pulling her into me.

“I can’t help it; I always feel you prefer to be around her over me.”

Leaning in, I pecked the small pudge in her stomach a couple times. “You know that’s not true. Jerzey’s got some shit going on right now and needs support that’s it.”

“And *you* have to be that support?”

My head tilted upwards. “You know she don’t got anyone else. Jerzey’s my best friend and she needs me. It’s nothing more than me being there to support her.”

Payton still didn’t look convinced, but I wasn’t going to go more into the subject. Since we’ve been together, I’ve made Jerzey’s position in my life known. Never did I hide the fact that I was close to her or that I held a special bond with her.

Jerzey didn't have anyone in her corner. She hardly spoke to her foster family and didn't know her biological family. She didn't have any friends outside of me either. Her ex-husband was a fuck boy that put her through a lot of bullshit. If it wasn't for me, she would be alone.

Even with the kind of childhood she had, Jerzey never let it harden her. She was a kind spirit, big-hearted, slightly naïve, and caring. Often times, people tried to take advantage of her being so kindhearted and that's when I felt like I had to step in. Too many times, I saw her burned and I vowed to not let that happen again if I could help it.

Payton didn't understand that. She felt threatened over my relationship with Jerzey and I did what I could to make her feel more secure, but Jerzey wasn't going anywhere.

"Fine. I guess, I'll just go to the gathering by myself and you can go hang out with your best friend." She attempted to pull away from me, but I kept my grip on her.

"What the hell is yo problem? Why you getting upset?"

“Because you always seem to make time for Jerzey! No matter what you have going on, if she needs you for something you’ll find a way to be there and help her, yet you can’t even come with me to a simple party! It’s annoying feeling like I come second to another bitch!”

My brows dipped, eyes narrowed and top lip curled. This time I willingly let her go. “Don’t disrespect her by calling her out her name. She ain’t no bitch!”

Girlfriend or not I would never allow Payton to disrespect Jerzey.

“Seriously?! That’s what I mean!”

Instead of responding back to her, I stood up and unwrapped the towel around my waist, going to my dresser to grab some briefs. I could feel Payton’s eyes burning into me as I moved around our room getting dressed.

She knew I didn’t have the patience to argue with her. When she didn’t get the response she wanted that was always her go-to.

Pulling my joggers up, I made my way to my dresser to grab my chain, watch, and diamond stud to put in my ear.

My phone went off on the bed gaining my attention just as I put the back on my earring.

“Oh, shocking its Jerzey.” Payton picked my phone up and spat.

Glaring at her, I made my way over and snatched my phone out her hand. Turning around to go back to my dresser, I answered.

“Wassup Jerzey?” I grabbed my wallet and slid it in my pocket.

“Hey. Are you busy?” Looking around I made sure I wasn't forgetting anything before heading for my door. “Nah, just got dressed.”

“My car is acting stupid again. Do you mind coming over and looking at it?”

Walking down the steps, I headed to the front door where my shoes were.

“I got you. I'll be there in a minute.” “Thank you, O'Shae! I'll see you in a few.”

Hanging up, I slid my phone into my pocket and then my feet into my *Nike* slides.

“So you’re going to Jerzey’s?” Payton questioned behind me.

Sighing, I closed my eyes and pushed a breath out. “You just heard me say that, right?”

“Just like I said, anytime she calls you go running!” Not bothering to entertain that I grabbed my keys of the hook near the door.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. If you not still on some bullshit we can grab something to eat or do something together. If not that’s cool too.” I unlocked the door and stepped outside.

Payton wasn’t the frst girl to complain about my relationship with Jerzey, but just like I made it known to Payton I made it known to the previous ones too, she wasn’t going anywhere and I would always be there for her.

Making my way to my blood-red Challenger, I hit the button to unlock it.

This car was one of my greatest possessions. I had put a lot of time, money, and elbow grease into customizing it to my liking.

Hitting the button to start it, I watched the dashboard light up before shutting my door.

Payton stood at the door glaring at me with a pout on her face and arms crossed. Shaking my head, I hit a few buttons on my touch screen and turned the radio up once the song started playing.

“It looks like you need a new starter.” I let Jerzey know, lifting my head from under her hood.

Her eyes rolled to the top of her head and hands folded in front of her “Great. Does that cost a lot?” Her lips pouted out.

“Nah, you not looking at more than about 500.” Sighing, she bobbed her head. “I guess I have no

choice, but to get it taken care of.”

Wiping my hands over my joggers, I lowered her hood. “Quit looking like that.” I chuckled and leaned on the hood. “You know I got you. Have it towed to the shop and I’ll take care of it.”

Jerzey shook her head. “I can’t ask you to do that. I know you guys are busy.”

I waved her off. “Jerzey, I ain’t about to leave you out here stranded with no car. I’ll let you know how much the part is and I’ll handle everything else.”

Her mouth twisted to the side. “You have to let me pay you for the labor though, O’Shae.” Smirking and cocked my head to the side. “I don’t have to do shit.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not letting you do this for free! I can afford to pay you.”

“I know you can, but that doesn’t mean Ima accept it.” Not that I counted her pockets, but I knew Jerzey was comfortable. Not only did her career bring in a nice amount, but Jerzey was frugal as hell.

She didn't spend money unnecessarily and made sure to keep a savings.

"You know I hate when you do that, right? You don't have to give me special treatment. You should treat me like everyone else."

Chuckling, I pushed myself off the car and walked towards her until I stood towering above her. Jerzey craned her neck upwards, staring up at me with her round eyes through her glasses. For a second I searched her face, her cupid bow lips pressed into a straight line, there wasn't a

blemish on her cinnamon brown skin. I zeroed in on the birthmark right above her right eyebrow, lifting my hand and brushing over it.

"You're not everyone else, Jerzey. How many times I gotta tell you that?" She pulled her plump bottom lip in between her teeth and squinted her eyes causing her brows to dip.

"O'Shae." The warning in her voice caused me to chuckle.

Jerzey always complained about the ‘special attention’ I gave her. She didn’t like I always went out my way to make sure she was good, I’m sure it was because people made a fuss about it. It’s been that way since we were younger. What she didn’t understand was I didn’t give a fuck about how anyone felt. Jerzey always felt like she had to handle things on her own because of her constant movement when she was in foster care, but that wasn’t the case with me. If I could make it happen or help her I was doing that shit. With or without her approval.

“You cook? A nigga hungry,” I walked around her and headed for her house.

“O’Shae, don’t ignore me!”

“I’m not ignoring you Jerzey, but I’m not entertaining you either.” Stepping inside her house, I kicked my slides off and headed for the kitchen. “Where the kids at?” I walked to the sink to wash my hands.

Looking around, I took in how quiet it was.

“Where they always are, in their bedrooms. They hardly come out unless they're hungry.” Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed the sad look on Jerzey’s face.

She walked around me and went into the fridge. “I made barbeque baked chicken, baked mac n cheese, green beans, and cornbread yesterday.”

My mouth turned upside down. “Damn and you couldn’t call me for a plate!”

Snickering, Jerzey started unloading the dishes. “You know how that goes, O’Shae.” I watched her grab a plate and set it on the counter.

“Man, if you don’t get of that shit.” I leaned on her island.

“Your girlfriend doesn’t like me O’Shae, and I refuse to be the reason y’all have issues. Been there done that.” She

lifted her hand and flicked her wrist.

Biting the inside of my jaw, I inwardly groaned. This is what I meant when it came to Jerzey. She was too kindhearted. Most

people wouldn't give a damn about her feelings, but she always considered theirs.

“You're good, Jerzey. Payton is Payton. She knows the deal with us, ain't no reason to walk on eggshells.”

Jerzey walked over to her microwave and placed my plate in before spinning around to face me.

“I'm not walking on eggshells O'Shae, I'm being respectful. Our significant others aren't comfortable with how close we are. It was a constant argument between me and Mario, and Payton plus your previous girlfriends have had issues. She's just not as vocal as the other ones.”

Again, I bit the inside of my jaw.

Bringing my hands together, I clasped my fingers, resting my pointer ones on my nose, and rested my chin on my thumbs. For a moment, I didn't speak. I didn't want to come off too brash with what I was about to say, but Jerzey was starting to piss me off. She knew that shit that's why a small smile formed on her oval face.

“Jerzey first of, fuck Mario. That nigga never deserved you and we both know that shit. Since y'all got together back in high school

he always showed he was insecure as fuck. Ain't no one thinking about him or his feelings.”

“He *was* my husband up until a few months ago. Taking his feelings into consideration was necessary.”

“That nigga been trying to come between our friendship since high school. You even let him at one point.” My eyes narrowed at her. Her eyes shifted. “He’s a clown, always been one. As for the girls I dealt with. None of them were permeant, they were passing time so what they had to say wasn’t relevant.”

The microwave beeped showing the food was done, but neither of us budged.

“So Payton is just passing time? Y’all been together for a while.”

Lifting so I was standing straight up, I swiped my lips with my tongue and brushed my thumb across my nose. “I don’t know what the future holds for me and Pay. There're days I be ready to kick her ass to the curb at times. Then there’s time I enjoy having her around. Payton’s a good girl,

she just likes to argue about shit I don't care about." My mind went to the fight we had right before I left. "She doesn't know how to let shit go. That's irritating as fuck."

"Also Granny Mae doesn't like her either." She mentioned referring to my grandma. Chuckling I rubbed the back of my neck.

"That woman doesn't like anyone."

Jerzey cheered. "She likes me!"

Snorting I nodded. "Yeah well, you're different. There isn't too much not to like."

My eyes traveled down her slender frame then back up to her face where she had a look on her face I couldn't read.

"We all have things we dislike." She spoke lowly.

The air in the room suddenly felt full and the walls close. For a moment, a memory of Jerzey I was supposed to forget flashed through my mind.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from Jerzey's stare. The innocence that rung of her was suffocating. Jerzey was right. We all

do have things we disliked, but she didn't have a lot of them. She was a people pleaser and wanted to

always see the good in people. It's what caused her to be a good person.

I was someone most people didn't care for because I was brash, reserved, and too honest for most, Jerzey never cared about any of that, however. She always tried to shine her light over my darkness.

We were the complete opposite, yet she was the closest person to me.

"I'm thirsty." A small voice sounded causing the tension to break suddenly. "Can I have juice?"

Jerzey jumped and whipped her head to the side where Kaydence was standing holding on to some plush toy tightly.

Her eyes shifted between me and Jerzey. You could tell she was uncomfortable.

Jerzey smiled at her. "Of course, you can. Where's your brother? He might be thirsty too."

Just as the words left her mouth Kaiden came rushing into the kitchen. "Kaydence!" He panicked rushing towards her.

His dark eyes bounced between me and Jerzey before focusing back on his sister. "I came from the bathroom and you weren't in my room anymore."

"I'm thirsty." Kaydence let him know.

My brow rose.

Kaiden was extra protective of his little sister. Her not being in his presence caused panic for him. The two had been through a lot causing him to be worried about her and always on guard.

"Kaiden I told you, you guys don't have to worry or feel afraid."

With cold eyes, he stared at Jerzey.

I almost laughed; he reminded me of myself at that age. I didn't trust too many people either. There was always a frown on my face and I was always defensive.

“And don’t you see O’Shae? You should greet him.” While both of them turned to face me Kaydence was the only one who acknowledged me and gave me a small wave.

Jerzey sighed seeing she wasn’t going to get through to him. “Do you want something to drink?”

His head bobbed but he didn’t verbally reply.

“Okay, I’ll get you guys something to drink and bring it to you, okay?”

Neither of them replied. Kaiden grabbed his sister and turned to head back for his room.

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. He’s so hardened and protective of Kaydence. He hardly leaves her side which I understand given their past but I want them to both trust me. He’s so young and has so much on his plate. Kaydence doesn’t speak much mainly because her brother does for her, but she’s such a sweetheart.”

Jerzey removed my plate from the microwave and grabbed me some silverware before bringing it over to where I was.

“Let me hang out with him,” I told her after blessing my food and digging in.

“What?”

“The kid. Let me hang out with him. Just us two.”

Her nose scrunched up. “You don’t even like kids, do you?”

“I mean, I ain’t really been around them to like or dislike them.” My shoulders lifted then fell. “But they’re

important to you so I got you.”

Jerzey pulled out some cups and went to the fridge. “I don’t know, O. For one, I doubt he’ll leave his sister’s side and he’s not that welcoming.”

“Which is why I want him to come kick it with me. You remember how I was when I was with my grandparents. I was a lot like the kid. Life had sucked before getting with gramps and granny until my grandad finally got tired of my shit. Let me hang out with him and see if I can break that wall. That way you could hang with Kaydence without him interfering.”

When Jerzey looked at me, I could see the indifference on her face. The kids had been with her for two weeks now and it didn't seem like she was getting anywhere.

“What would you do with him?”

I shrugged. “Don't know yet, but I got some free time this weekend. Saturday morning I'll be at the shop, but I'm free that afternoon. I'll come swoop him up and we'll go find some trouble to get in.” I stuffed some macaroni in my mouth.

Her tongue poked the corner of her mouth and her nose twitched.

“Okay.” She spoke slowly. “At this point, I'm willing to try anything.”

Part of me shocked myself volunteering to take on this kid, the other part felt like I could be good for him. Being a protector of someone you love wasn't always easy, often you forget you too, need to be looked after and protected.



“Hey, Kaiden.” I smiled stepping into his room. He was laying on his bed, watching TV but quickly sat up and stared at me. His face tighten and shoulders squared.

Ignoring the hardened look, I walked to his bed and sat down on the corner of it. “I wanted to talk to you about something.” I let him know slowly.

His eyes still defensive. He didn't reply, only gave me a blank stare.

"I talked to your social worker." Mentioning that, I noticed he seemed to tense more. "She went more into details explaining you and your sister's past to me to help me clear somethings up." Still nothing.

I rubbed my hand over my thighs. "I was in foster care too when I was younger." For a moment a shocked

expression formed on his face, but it didn't last. That emotionless expression soon reappeared, but that didn't stop me from continuing. "Up until I was 12, I was in two group homes and three foster homes. I finally got a forever family when I was 12, but it took me a while to warm up to them. I was used to being traded in or ignored and mistreated. Unfortunately, not all people get foster kids for the right reasons, and I know that firsthand. There were times I was neglected or only there because of the money.

Still, I kept faith that I would eventually find a family that really wanted me. My parents, the Mathews adopted me after having me for a year and a half and it was then I knew I was there to stay.”

Tucking my lips in my mouth, I tilted my head and removed my glasses. “I’m telling you this to tell you, I get it. I understand having your guard up and being scared. You want to protect your sister and make sure she isn’t hurt again. As her big brother, you feel like it’s your duty to keep her safe and I get that. I brought you two here because I’ve always wanted kids, but it didn’t work out for me. I knew I had a lot of love inside me to share and give out. Bringing you and your sister here wasn’t to hurt you two nor do I have any ill intentions.

I hope both of you can see that and learn to trust me. You guys are in a safe space, I promised you that. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

With those final words, I gave him a reassuring smile and stood up. “I’ll be in the back if you need me.” I let him know with a reassuring smile.

Leaving him to think about what I just told him; I left out the room and walked across the hall where Kaydence was. When I peeked my head inside, my eyes fell on her bed. The TV was playing in the background.

Stepping further in the room, I noticed she was tucked under her covers sleeping. Her mouth slightly parted and her leg sticking from under the cover.

Smiling, I turned down the TV and repositioned her, so she was fully covered. She gripped the stuffed unicorn I had got her tightly near her chest and brought her thumb to her mouth.

My hand ran over her unruly hair.

Kaydence had a nice grade of sandy brown, curls that I put in a ponytail earlier, but I knew I would eventually have to tame it.

Knowing the rough past she and her brother went through caused my smile to slightly dim. She was innocent and yet life had been so cruel to her.

Bending down I kissed the top of her head before slowly backtracking out the room.

As I was closing the bedroom door, the ringing of my doorbell caused me to freeze. I wasn't expecting any company so I wasn't sure who would be at my door right now.

Leaving the kids room's, I headed for my front door.

Whoever it was so persistent to gain my attention.

"Who is it?" I called out, looking behind me.

"Mario. Open the door, Jerzey." My mouth turned upside down and blood ran cold hearing my ex-husband's voice.

"What do you want, Mario?"

"Open the door!" He rang the doorbell again.

Rolling my eyes, I unlocked my door and pulled it open. My screen door separated us.

"Why are you here?" I asked the moment I laid eyes on him.

He still looked the same. Caramel skin, broad shoulders, medium-sized arms. His hair was cut into a low fade, full groomed beard, and coffee jeweled eyes.

Not much has changed with my ex over the month we been fully free of each other.

“That’s how you greet me after all we been through?” My eyes narrowed.

Both me and Mario knew the pain and suffering I went through towards the end of our marriage. It wasn’t a pretty break up.

“Because of what we’ve been through we’re where we are now. Why are you here?” Having hate in my heart wasn’t something typical for me. Not even for the parents that abandoned me and left me in the system alone without a care in the world. Not for the foster parents that should’ve taken care of me but just saw me as an extra source of income. Not even the social workers that overlooked things they shouldn’t. I had no hate inside me for them. Mario, however? Hate grew for him over the last six months of us being married. The things he did and the things I learned weren’t easy to ignore or get past, but they made leaving my marriage a lot easier.

Mario gazed over me when he got to my face, his mouth slightly lifted. "I left some papers here; I realized when I was going through my things. I just need to grab them, and I'll be out your hair." My eyes narrowed at him.

Part of me wanted to tell him to fuck off, simply because once we were divorced and my locks were changed, he didn't have access to anything that had to do with me, but still...

"You got three minutes. Hurry up." I unlocked the screen door and moved to the side to let him in.

He smirked and nodded before walking past me to the bedroom we once shared. I followed behind him, not liking how my stomach flipped at the sight of him. There was a time when nothing, but butterflies filled my stomach when he was around.

I stood near my bedroom door as he went straight to the walk-in closet. Crossing my arms and leaning against it, I waited for him to finish up, counting down the moment until he was out my presence.

“Got it.” Mario stepped out the closet, turning the light off behind him. He lifted a few tan folders. “Some important patient files.” He waved them.

My tongue poked the side of my mouth, but I didn’t respond. “Now that you got what you need you can leave.”

He rose an eyebrow. “You can’t even hold a conversation with me, huh?”

“No, I can’t.” Turning around, I started out my bedroom, not wanting to be around him any longer.

When I got into the living room, I noticed Kaiden was standing near the entrance of the kitchen looking around. “Kaiden what’s wrong honey?” I asked him.

He turned to look at me, but his face hardened when he looked next to me. Turning my head I noticed Mario. “Who’s the kid?”

My eyes narrowed. “Don’t worry about it. Leave.”

When I looked back at Kaiden, I noticed his eyes were cold again. “Nevermind.” He muttered and turned to walk out the room, back to where his bedroom was.

“A month gone and you got some random kid staying with you?”

“Mario what I have going on isn’t your concern anymore! You didn’t want kids, remember? So don’t worry about seeing one in *my house*. Now you can leave.” I stormed to my front door and snatched the door back open.

This time when Mario stared at me, his jaw clenched. “You know your desperation for kids is what ruined us.”

I licked my lips. “No, you being a narcissistic prick is what ruined us.”

Mario chuckled and walked past me. His signature cologne hit my nose.

Soon as he was out the door, I slammed it shut, ignoring him looking like he was about to say more.

Seeing my ex-husband again left me feeling unsettled and I didn’t like that.

I brushed my hands through my curly bob and pushed a heavy breath out. Mario had put me in a dark place

towards the end of our marriage. Learning I was approved for getting foster kids and would be housing two helped bring me out of that space.

After locking the door, I headed for the bedrooms so I could see what Kaiden wanted. I was sure seeing a stranger here didn't sit well with him.

"Hey, what did you need?" When his eyes left the screen and landed on me they were blank.

"Nothing." He let me know.

I tugged on my bottom lip and gripped the doorknob tightly. "Okay." I nodded and closed the door.

Patience.

I knew it was what I had to have, but it wasn't easy. Hopefully, O'Shae's plan to hang out with Kaiden will be successful. It was nerve-racking dealing with such a closed off kid.



“She’ll be okay Kaiden go enjoy yourself with O’Shae and we’ll meet up with you two later.” Jerzey let Kaiden know.

She told me when she told him he would be hanging with me today, he shut it down. Not only did he not want to leave Kaydence but he also wasn’t feeling going with someone he didn’t know. Although he had been around me a few times his guard was still up.

“I’m not leaving my sister.” He let her know. He stayed close to her, eyes planted on Jerzey with an apathetic look.

Jerzey brought the corner of her bottom lip into her mouth while glancing over at me for help. I had been here for about ten minutes waiting for Kaiden.

My attention darted to Kaiden. His chest expanded then deflated as I kneeled down, so I was eye level with Kaiden.

“Look man, I get it. You’re scared something might happen to your sister without you around, but I swear she’s in good hands. Jerzey’s soft ass couldn’t hurt a fly if there’s anyone in the world you can trust it’s her. You won’t be away from your sister too long. Let them go do their girly shit and we can go be boys.”

“O’Shae!” Jerzey groaned at my profanity around the kids.

I flashed her a sheepish grin already knowing what she was about to say.

“She’ll be good. I promise.”

Kaiden's eyes locked on me. They were tight and his face hard.

Kaydence was standing next to him, silently watching her older brother. Her unicorn was in her hand and her thumb in her mouth.

"Kaydence," Jerzey called out causing her eyes to find hers. "Don't you want to go get your hair and nails done?"

She smiled at the kid.

Shyly she grinned and bobbed her head.

"See Kaiden your sister wants to go get pampered. She'll be okay."

Kaiden snatched his attention from me and turned to look at his sister. I could tell he wasn't feeling the fact that he was going to be away from her. My chest tighten seeing how he was with her. He was so young but took on the role of protector early because no one else would. I knew what it felt like to have that kind of pressure on your back.

“Kaydence are you going to be okay with her?” Jerzey told me he hadn’t said her name yet, usually just called her Miss.

Kaydence looked up at Jerzey who gave her an assuring grin. She smiled back at her and bobbed her head.

Kaiden’s small shoulders fell and he darted his eyes to me. “Okay.” He spoke lowly. The worry he felt didn’t leave his eyes.

“I’ll make sure to call O’Shae so you can see she’s okay. A’right?” Jerzey let him know.

Slowly his head bobbed.

“Now that we got that settled. Let’s roll, kid. We gon’ stop by the barbershop today too.”

Kaiden like his sister had thick curls on his head, the only difference was his was jet black.

“I don’t want to cut my hair.” He frowned.

“That’s cool, you still need a line up. Ladies dig that shit.”

“O’Shae!”

Again a sheepish grin appeared on my face and tossed his hands up. "I ain't lying."

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. "We'll see you guys later. We have a girl's date, right Kay?" Jerzey ran her hand over Kaydence's ponytail.

Kaydence nodded and moved closer to Jerzey

Kaiden looked at his sister again, I knew he was feeling anxious about his sister not being by his side. I only hoped that after today he would see he had nothing to worry about.

When we finally got out to my car, Kaiden's eyes widened and lit up. "This is your car?" He rushed towards it but didn't touch it.

Smirking, I stood behind him as he admired my ride. Most people did when they first saw it. Since I had been customizing it since I first got it, it's like a whole different car.

"Yeah, it is."

"Can I touch it?"

Chuckling I nodded. "Go ahead."

Standing back I watched him run his hands lightly over the body of the car. He was touching it as if it would break.

“A’right, let’s go.” I told him after a while.

“What you know about basketball?” I asked Kaiden.

I had brought him by the courts and we watched a couple games for a bit. He eventually wanted to shoot around and we found a loose ball. The kid actually wasn’t bad. His dribbling could use a little tuning up, but he had a nice shot on him.

“Nothing.” He grumbled and shot the ball at the hoop.

Kaiden was tall for eight. He was a lanky kid too.

“You don’t got a bad shot on you. You used to play?” I questioned grabbing the rebound and shooting the ball myself.

Kaiden didn’t respond out loud but I noticed him move his head side to side.

“Ima have to talk to Jerzey about that, you actually aren’t bad.” After grabbing the ball again, I tossed it to him. “Let’s play.”

Football was my sport growing up, but I played pickup games here and there. “First one to 11 wins.”

His eyes narrowed at me and he nodded.

I dropped down in a defensive stance.

The game went on and the more we played the more the less tense Kaiden seemed to get.

“You sure you never played before? I barely beat you.” I swiped the back of my hand over my forehead.

Kaiden swallowed hard. “One kid at the group home taught me how to play.” He muttered lowly. His eyes traveled around the park.

Kaiden was a lot like me. Conversations weren’t a strong suit for us. Hell even right now I had no idea what to

say to him, but I knew I had to do something.

“Basketball your favorite sport?”

He shrugged. “I like all them.” He went back to bouncing the ball then paused.

“Can we check on my sister?”

Not wanting him to freak out I bobbed my head and walked over to the edge of the court where I sat my shirt and phone down.

“A’right, you got to tell me the deal. Wassup with the kid?” Zach asked me as he lined me up.

While he was fully booked for the day, another one of his barbers Holden had an opening at the same time as my appointment.

Typically I stayed to myself with my life and what was going on, but I fucked with Zach. He was the owner of *Legacy Cutz* and I had been coming to him since he first opened.

“He’s Jerzey’s foster kid. She was having some trouble getting him to open up so I offered for him to roll with me for the day.”

“So you and Jerzey finally stopped playing games and got together?” He asked pulling up and brushing my shoulders.

Zach had graduated with me and Jerzey. He knew how close we were and how I was about her.

My mouth turned upside down. “What? Nah? Jerzey just my best friend.”

Zach chuckled. “Y’all still going on with that best friend shit, huh?”

My eyes shifted over to where Kaiden was. Surprisingly he seemed to be doing fine. He didn’t look as guarded as he normally did. A hard expression was still on his face, but his shoulders didn’t look as tense.

“What best friend shit? Jerzey is my best friend. Ain’t nothing like that going on with us. Plus, I’m still with my girl.”

The mention of Payton made me think of this morning before I left. I woke up to my dick down her throat before she climbed on top of me and rode me like a jockey. She still had an attitude about me not wanting to go to her sister’s boyfriend’s shit, but I paid it no mind. Payton grew up

spoiled and when she didn't get her way, she threw a tantrum. If I let it ride out eventually it would fade.

“Jerzey ain't scare her of yet?”

My eyes narrowed and forehead creased. “Zach, what the fuck you talking about?”

“Nothing except, c'mon man. You know. Yo relationships never lasted because all them broads were upset with you and Jerzey. She's left Mario's punk ass right?”

“Yeah, that's done.” I licked my lips and balled my hands into a fist.

I never cared for Jerzey's ex-husband but out of respect, I let a lot of shit go with him. He was a fuck nigga that didn't deserve her. Jerzey overlooked a lot of shit in her marriage. Mario played on her kindness over and over. Jerzey never told me what was the final straw with him, but I knew whatever it was, it had to be serious for her to finally walk away.

“And as for them other girls. Shit just wasn't serious. They were cool, but I wasn't looking for shit serious then.”

“And now you are?”

My eyes traveled to the gold band on his left hand. “I don’t know. It’s not something I really think about.”

My childhood was fucked up until I moved with my grandparents. It caused a lot of scars to be embedded in me, anger too. My grandparents put me in therapy and anger management to help me channel how I was feeling. It also gave me a fucked up view on family and love. Up until I was with my grandparents, I never saw a healthy relationship.

“Look all I’m saying is that it’s no secret to anyone that knows y’all, that y’all close. You and Jerzey got some crazy bond that everyone seems to see but y’all.”

I waved him off as he removed the cape from around my neck.

“You reaching for something that ain’t there. We’re just friends, like siblings.”

“Yeah okay, man.” He chuckled. His eyes went across to where Kaiden was. “It’s a nice thing what you doing. I never saw yo rude ass hanging out with a kid because you want to.”

Lifting up, I went into my pocket and grabbed my wallet. “Trust me this shit is shocking to me too, but I see a lot of myself in the kid.” Handing Zach a few bills I stood up.

“Good look.” I slapped hands with him and then walked over to where Kaiden was. “You just about done?”

“Yeah, I’m done.” He cut a few more pieces of hair with the scissors.

Kaiden wanted to keep the curls on his head but wanted them cut lower.

“Thanks for fitting him in.” I handed Holden the money for the cut. “What you think Kaiden? Can you fuck with it?”

Kaiden was looking at himself through the hand mirror Holden had handed him. Along with cutting his curls shorter, he got lined up.

“I can.” He nodded.

“Well, tell Holden thanks and let’s go show you of.” Lowly he thanked Holden and hopped out the chair. Kaiden didn’t speak much. Even at the park, he said a

few things but mainly seemed to be lost in his head.

When we got to my Challenger, I waited for him to get inside before climbing inside myself.

“You hungry?” I glanced in my mirror and asked. Kaiden made eye contact with me and bobbed his

head.

Truthfully I didn’t know much about kids. I never been around them so I wasn’t sure what the fuck to do with Kaiden. I tried to think of shit I liked to do as a kid, but that wasn’t much. Sports and cars were my go-to. Hopefully, after today though he would loosen up some and stop giving Jerzey such a hard time.

“You sure you ain’t play this shit before?” I turned and mugged him.

After grabbing something to eat I ended up bringing him to my house and hopping on the game, pulling up 2K. Jerzey was still at the hair salon with his sister and wasn't ready for him so I did something to keep him entertained.

"No, you just suck." He smirked at me causing my brows to shoot up.

The frown that was just on my face turned upside as I busted out in a loud laugh. Once Kaiden loosened up he wasn't a bad kid. He was actually quite cocky and competitive as hell. It was funny.

He had requested to call his sister a few times to make sure she was okay but outside of that, he's been chill.

"Yeah, a'right. I call bullshit." I rolled my neck between my shoulders and got comfortable so we could start our second game.

Just as the game started my front door opened. Out the corner of my eye, I noticed Payton and her sister Pansy walking through the door with shopping bags in their hands.

“Hey, bae. I didn’t know you were going to be home.” “Yeah, I had some time to kill.” I told her. “Gotta do better than that.” I bragged after stealing the ball.

“Man.” Kaiden smacked his lips.

“O’Shae?” Payton called out.

Quickly I took my eyes off the screen and looked at her. Confusion was written all over her face. “Wassup?”

I looked back at the screen. “Who’s the kid?”

I glanced over at Kaiden and noticed he had tensed up. “This Kaiden, Jerzey’s foster kid.”

A snicker left Pansy’s mouth. “Shut up.” Payton gritted. “O’Shae, can I talk to you for a moment?” Her voice strained.

“Hol’ up.”

“No, O’Shae I need to tell you *now*.” Pausing the game I turned to face her frowning. “What Payton? You see I’m busy.”

She smacked her lips. “You’re playing the damn game. You can take two seconds to talk to me.” She turned and stormed out the living room towards the back of the house.

“I’ll be right back, Kaiden.” Biting down on my back teeth, I stood up, tugged on my jeans, and stalked behind her.

The moment it was just us, I mugged her. “What Payton?”

“Why do you have that kid?” She tossed her hands up, voice heighten.

“What the hell you mean? He’s hanging out with me today.”

“Why? If that’s Jerzey’s foster kid, then why do you have him?” Her face turned bright red.

My brows dipped together and my nose expanded. “Aye stop fucking yelling!” My eyes tighten as I glanced in the direction of the living room. “I’m helping Jerzey out.”

Payton’s lips pinched together and propped her hand on her poked out hip. “So you can babysit some kid but you can’t hang out with me? Oh, wait I forgot when your precious Jerzey needs something you never turn her down.” The venom dripping of her words caused my stomach to tighten.

Biting down on the inside of my jaw, I pushed a heavy breath through my mouth. "I'm not having this conversation again. You need to get over that insecure shit when it comes to Jerzey." I let her know before turning around and heading back for the living room.

Payton was calling my name behind me, but I paid her no mind.

"C'mon Kaiden we about to head out." I tossed my head towards the door.

He stared at me then looked back where Payton had now come into view, she was pouting, arms crossed, her mouth turned upside down, tapping her feet rapidly.

Slowly he stood up and made his way towards me.

"So you just gon' leave?" Payton called out behind me. Still, I chose not to engage with her. She was trippin' for no reason and could entertain herself. I know the reason she was tryna cause a scene was because her sister was there. She knew I hated when she did that shit.

When we got in the car, I gripped my steering wheel and inhaled a deep breath. My temper wasn't the best and Payton knew that shit. It was one reason I tried to avoid arguments, but her ass always like to push me.

"Was that your girlfriend?" Kaiden asked breaking me out my head.

Out my mirror, I looked at him. "Yeah, that is." "I don't like her." His eyes shifted. I chuckled lowly.

Putting on my seat belt and starting my car, I pulled out my driveway. I wasn't about to let Payton ruin today because she wanted to be dramatic.



“You like your hair, Kaydence?” I asked her as I held her hand while we made our way a couple shops down to Nail’d.

“Yes!” She squealed shaking her head. The beads at the end of the braids click together causing her to laugh.

The braider in the shop washed and blow-dried her full tresses before doing single braids and adding large beads at the end. She had a lot of hair to only be four. It was thick and curly as hell. I wasn’t the best when it came to hair so instead of stressing myself out I scheduled an appointment at Crown Studios for her to get some braids.

My phone vibrated just as we were about to enter the nail shop, I snickered seeing it was O'Shae.

Sliding the green arrow I lowered the phone so Kaiden could see his sister, already knowing who was on the other side. "Tell your brother you're okay, Kay." I snickered.

"I okay, bwother."

"See kid, I told you she's good." This was the third time Kaiden had, had O'Shae facetime me, but I wasn't upset. He was worried and I was still a stranger for the most part.

"Kaydence, I won't be too much longer okay? Are you okay?"

Kaydence nodded. "Look beads." She shook her head again making me laugh.

"They look good." There was small chatter in the background.

"Okay, Kaydence I just wanted to check on you."

Kaydence hardly acknowledge him before I pulled the phone back. Thankfully Kaydence seemed to slowly be warming up to me. I

could get small smiles out her; she had grown more comfortable with asking me for things without her brother, I even went in her room and played with her.

She still was skittish and I noticed when she got nervous she had a slight stutter, but it was a start.

“Are you having a good time, Kaiden?” I asked when I came eye to eye with him.

His face went blank, but he bobbed his head. O’Shae had let me know they had gone by the park after leaving my house. It was typically packed Saturday mornings being that a lot of guys met up to run games on the basketball court. After they went to the barbershop.

“Good. After we leave the nail salon we’ll meet back up with you two, okay?”

His brows met in the middle before he nodded his head.

O’Shae ended up with the phone a couple seconds later. He stared at me through hooded eyes, with a slight red tint to them.

“You were smoking?” I asked him with tight eyes.

He licked his lips and lifted one corner of his mouth. “I hit the blunt a few times.”

“O’Shae!”

“Don’t worry, he didn’t see me. Chill Jerz, I got this! Go finish your girl’s day. We’re good.”

Rolling my eyes I tried not to be bothered. I just didn’t want to do anything that would affect the kids.

“Okay, but no more smoking while he’s with you,” I warned.

He snorted. “Yes ma’am.”

Swallowing hard, I couldn’t help but notice heat rushed to the back of my neck the more I stared into his mocha eyes. O’Shae always looked good after getting a fresh haircut.

“To Infinity?” I spoke breathlessly.

“And beyond.”

“Did you two have fun?” I asked Kaiden once we met up with them.

Once we left the nail salon we decided to meet at Chase's to grab something to eat.

"Yeah, it was cool. Kaydence did you have fun?" His eyes locked on his sisters.

She bobbed her head causing her beads to clank together. "Look!" She pointed to her fingers which were now coated with pink glitter polish.

"Those look good. I like your hair too." He smiled.

"I like your haircut. You look so handsome." When he looked at me the smile that was on his face slowly faded.

"Thanks."

My stomach sank.

"You four can follow me." The hostess let us know. Kaiden grabbed his sister's hand and led her behind the hostess with me and O'Shae behind us.

"Don't worry, he's coming around." O'Shae tossed his arm around my shoulders pulling me into him.

My shoulders fell forward and eyes stayed trained on the kids.

“I just wish he would let me in. How did it go with you?”

I glanced up at him. “Good fo’real. At frst, he was standofsh but after a while, he loosened up. You might want to look into getting him into basketball, he’s got talent.”

I smiled at the thought. I always wanted to be a sports mom.

“Really?” O’Shae nodded.

We got to the table and glanced back at the kids with a smile on our faces. Kaiden was helping his sister into her chair while O’Shae pulled back mine so I could sit.

“Kaiden, O’Shae said you’re good at basketball. Is that true?” I asked him once we were seated.

His small shoulders lifted. “Nah, don’t try to be all shy and shit now. You were cocky as hell on the court.”

“O’Shae!” I hit his arm. “Language.”

Both Kaydence and Kaiden snickered at my actions. “Anyway.” I rolled my eyes. “Do you want to play basketball? We can look into some programs if you want.”

His eyes brighten. “Really?”

“Yeah, of course. You know Gage the basketball ball player?”

His head bobbed eagerly. “He does a program here for the kids. I’ll look into it for you?”

“Okay.” That seemed to make him happy.

The waitress came to our table introduced himself and got our drink orders.

I picked up the menu and turned so I could see the kid’s menu. “What do you guys like to eat?”

“Chicken tenders and macawoni!” Kaydence blurted out.

“I think we can do that. Kaiden?” His eyes were trained on me.

“I can get whatever I want?” His eyes squinted.

“Yeah. Have you ever been here before?” He shook his

head.

“They got the best barbeque and soul food around. You like ribs?” O’Shae interject.

This time his head moved up and down. “And macaroni.”

“Okay, we can do that.”

While we waited for the server to come back Kaiden started talking to his sister and I turned to O’Shae. “I really appreciate you for taking him today. Me and Kaydence actually made some progress with just the two of us.”

It took Kaydence a little time in each place to open up and talk, but once she got comfortable and realized I wasn’t leaving her she was all smiles. It was cute seeing her personality finally start to make an appearance.

“He’s a good kid, honestly. You can tell he doesn’t trust easily; they must have been through some shit.”

Sadly I nodded my head. “Too much.”

I looked back at the siblings. “I wasn’t sure how things would go with you two. I’m glad they went well.” I smiled at my best friend.

O'Shae although could be overbearing at times was honestly God sent. He had come through for me so many times. He was the only person I knew a hundred percent was in my corner always.

The server brought out our drinks and we gave our food orders.

Dinner thankfully went by smoothly. The kids pretty much interacted with themselves. I noticed when Kaiden was around Kaydence had no problem playing the background.

When the bill came out, I went to pay it, but O'Shae beat me to it. "O'Shae, you should've let me pay." He gave me a stern look.

"You know better than that shit."

I rolled my eyes. "You get on my nerves. You know that?"

He flashed me a crooked grin. "You love me though." For a moment I stared at him, feeling a warm

sensation shoot through the bottom of my stomach.

"Only sometimes." He chuckled.

We gathered our things and headed for the front of the restaurant. “Are you coming with us, O’Shae?” Kaiden asked once we were at my car.

He glanced at me and I lifted my shoulders.

I didn’t mind O’Shae hanging out with us, especially if it made Kaiden happy. O’Shae glanced at his watch.

“I could spare a couple more hours.”

“Where’s Payton? Y’all don’t have anything planned?”

O’Shae’s face went blank. “Nah. She went to a party with her people.”

My eyes squinted and I studied him for a moment. “I take it you two are into it?”

O’Shae waved me off. “Same shit diferent day. You know how she is.”

I licked my lips but chose not to comment back. Payton was a spoiled bitch in my opinion, but I tried to stay out of O’Shae’s relationship. It was best that way.

“A’right, get in the car and I’ll follow y’all home.”

“Can I ride with you?” Kaiden asked O’Shae shocking me.
“Kaydence, O’Shae has a really nice car! Wanna see?”

Kaydence eagerly bobbed her head.

I was happy to see that Kaiden seemed to be warming up to O’Shae. He wasn’t the easiest person to get close to. I only hope he would feel the same way about me soon.

“Did you have fun today?” I asked Kaydence as I helped her get dressed.

She bobbed her head together and held her unicorn tightly. Bath time was always a struggle for me when it came to her. She always fought me. I wasn’t sure what happened to get her so anxious when baths were concerned

but due to her past and what I did know, I could only imagine. Today, however, she only gave me a little fuss and even played with the toys I gave her.

“Okay, let’s put your scarf on to protect your pretty hair.” I smiled at her once her sleeping gown was on.

I felt like today was a good one for us.

I was able to see Kaydence without her brother and even got her to interact with me.

“Do you need anything else before I leave out?” I asked Kaydence once she was in bed.

She yawned and shook her head. Before giving her bath she said her goodnights to her brother and O’Shae. Most of the time it was hard to separate the two at night, but Kaiden had been so occupied with O’Shae that I hardly got a fuss.

“Okay, I’ll be right in the living room if you need me.” I ran my hand across her scarf.

She yawned again and pulled her unicorn closer. “Nightlight.” She mumbled with heavy eyes.

I smiled softly. “I’ll make sure it’s on.”

After a few more minutes I walked out the room, leaving the bedroom door cracked.

“Kaiden your sister’s settled in bed. It’s time for you to shower and get ready too.” I called out once I was in the living room.

O'Shae was saying something to him and he was eating up whatever it was. Kaiden glanced over his shoulder at me, to no surprise to me his face blank.

"I'm not sleepy."

Running my hand over my head, I inwardly groaned. "Kaiden, please not tonight."

We stood there in a stare down. "Is Kaydence okay?" He asked ignoring me.

"She's fine and sleep." His eyes traveled behind me. "Listen to Jerzey and go get ready for bed, Kaiden." "You're leaving?"

Kaiden whipped his head in O'Shae's direction.

O'Shae was comfortable on my couch. Shoes kicked off, legs gapped, and leaned back.

"Nah, not yet. Ima chill here a little longer."

Kaiden seemed to be indifferent. "Fine." He grumbled standing up.

Kaiden barely glanced at me as he passed and headed for the bedrooms. "I'll be in to tuck you in when you finish."

He ignored me.

Sighing, I walked over to the couch and plopped down next to O'Shae. "He hates me." I pouted laying my head on his shoulder.

O'Shae tossed his arms behind me and placed his hand on my arm squeezing it. "He doesn't hate you. You just got to find a way to connect with him."

"How can I connect with him if he barely acknowledges me?" Today was the first time I saw Kaiden even smile or say more than five words at once. "How'd you do it?" I glanced up at him.

"Shit, you know I don't know anything about kids. I honestly just did what I remember my grandad doing when I moved with them. Although I was a kid, he didn't treat me like one. He found something that interest me and threw me into it."

Biting the corner of my bottom lip, I lowered my eyes.

"Maybe."

I knew being a parent was tough, especially being a foster parent but still, I thought I would have a little more luck than what I had.

“You’re not much diferent from them Jerzey. You’re thinking too much, just handle them how you felt at the time.”

I thought about his words.

He was right, being in a new place so many times eventually caused you to grow numb. Not all those places were nice and it was hard to pick out the people who actually gave a damn about you.

“I do got one question though.” O’Shae’s fngers moved up and down my skin causing goosebumps to coat it.

“What?”

“The big scene about bedtime. What was that about?” Lifting my shoulders, I let them fall while pushing a heavy breath out.

Kaydence always threw a fuss when it came to going to bed. It wasn’t like a normal kid’s tantrum either it was more like she was scared. Today wasn’t as bad as the other

days, thankfully. Kaiden normally was able to get her to calm down. Since I was trying to get her not to be so dependent on him, I had told him to let me handle it.

“Their social worker told me they suspect sexual abuse happened in her last foster home.”

“The fuck!” O’Shae gritted causing me to lift up. His mouth was turned upside down and his brows pinched together.

“I know, it’s sad.” My voice dropped. “The foster parents they got, had five kids altogether. The two of them and three of their own. The mom used to hit them, and the dad was some brute who was always home because he couldn’t work because of an injury. I didn’t get all the details, but I learned the mom had unorthodox discipline methods. The only reason the social worker found out was that one of their kids finally spoke up. They noticed bruising around Kaydence’s thighs, but when they questioned her about it, she clamped up.

I believe it. The first few nights were rough. She literally would scream bloody murder when I first tried to bathe her down there. I had to allow Kaiden to stay in the bathroom with us. I'm assuming this all happened at night when everyone was sleep."

Just the thought of her being hurt in that way caused my chest to tighten and stomach to turn. I noticed a few healing bruises on Kaiden as well. When I asked him about them, he brushed me off but his body tensed. I didn't bring them up again.

"Muthafuckas that hurt kids deserve the worst punishment. Deaths too good for them." O'Shae's eyes went black and his voice turned cold. He was staring out into space with his jaw clenched.

I knew he was having flashbacks of his childhood. Before he went to live with his grandparents he was in an abusive household.

Moving my hand over his, I placed mine on top. "I know. I hate that any kid has to go through that."

O'Shae turned his attention to me. His eyes still isolated and distant. I gave his hand a slight squeeze. "Thankfully, there are people are with big hearts out there like you who take in the damaged."

My mouth twisted and nose scrunched. "You're not damaged, O'Shae. You got handed a fucked up hand, that's all. Look at me if anyone is damaged it's me."

His face somewhat soften. "Nah, you ain't damaged. You're damn near perfect." His words caused my stomach to flutter.

Snorting, I shook my head and playfully rolled my eyes. "We both know I'm not perfect." I brushed a piece of hair out my face.

"You're close enough." O'Shae's eyes grew intense, a faint light twinkle flashed through them. His brows flickered a little. "If my grandparents didn't take me in, I would have hoped I ended up with someone as caring and soft-hearted as you."

His gaze softened, sending a warm tingling sensation in the pit of my stomach. O'Shae was always throwing statements like that at me. He knew that always made me jittery, but he didn't care.

Heat rushed up my stomach filling my chest.

The way he was staring at me caused a sensuous light to pass through us.

O'Shae's phone went off before I could answer.

Going into his pocket without breaking eye contact he answered and placed it to his ear.

"Yeah?" He answered causing me to roll my eyes.

I hated when he answered the phone like that.

His back straighten, brows grew together, and his face scrunched up. His top lip slightly switched as creases formed on his forehead.

"Yeah, a'right. I'm on my way."

Hanging up he rolled his neck between his shoulders and ran his hand down his face. "Everything okay?"

When his dark orbs landed back on me his face was still tensed. “Nah, Payton’s ass done got too drunk and is showing her ass.” His jaw clenched. “I gotta go pick her up.” Tugging on my bottom lip with my teeth, I placed my hands into my lap and lowered my eyes.

“Oh, okay.”

Honestly, I wasn’t ready for O’Shae to leave. It’s been easier with him around and unlike me, he seemed to be a natural dealing with the kids.

Standing up O’Shae headed for the door with me behind him. I studied him from his broad shoulders down to his bowlegs.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He turned to face me.

I was so into my head that I didn’t notice he stopped. Hitting his solid chest was like running into a wall. He grabbed me steadying me with a slight smirk.

“If you wanted a hug Jerzey all you had to do is ask.” He pulled me into him.

Without speaking, I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly. O'Shae reminded me of a teddy bear. He was always so cut of on the outside, but when you got to know him he was a softy foreal. If he cared about you then you never had to worry when he was around.

"I don't think Kaiden was ready for you to leave," I spoke lowly into his chest.

"I know. If Payton wasn't on some dumb shit, I would have told them to send her home in a damn Lyft." When I looked up at him his jaw was tight again.

Lifting the corners of my mouth, I roamed his face over. "Good luck with that." I snickered, pulling away.

O'Shae muttered something I couldn't hear. "I love you, O'Shae. Thank you for everything today. It seriously meant a lot."

"You know I always gotchu." He dipped his head and kissed the top of my head. "Love you too."

I ignored the way my stomach flipped and smiled. "To infinity, right?" My head slightly cocked.

His mouth hiked upwards. "And Beyond."

By the look on his face when he let me go, I could tell he wasn't trying to leave.

Once O'Shae was gone I turned and looked around my open living space. By now I hoped that me and Mario would have filled the space up with kids of our own. Since that didn't work out and having a baby seemed like a struggle for me, I knew fostering was the next best thing. Still, there was an emptiness inside of me. Something didn't feel fulfilled deep in me.

Kaiden soon came back into the living room. A confused expression formed on his face and he looked around.

"Where's O'Shae?" He questioned giving me a hard glare.

I cleared my throat. "He had to leave."

His face dropped. "Oh." His small eyes darted around the living room.

“How about I tuck you in though?”

His mouth turned upside down. “I’m not a baby.” He didn’t give me a chance to respond to him before turning and heading back towards his room.

Bringing my pointer fingers to my head I massaged my temples.

O’Shae’s words played in my head.

I guess I had to try not to baby him as much.



“I knew you would get my shit together.” Elijah bragged circling his old school. “You know I don’t let anyone touch my baby, but I knew you wouldn’t disappoint.”

Elijah’s old school was a gift from his dad, the last thing he received right before he got injured a few years back. It was his and then his grandfathers before him.

Elijah wanted a fresh coat of paint and the rims updated. He also wanted a touch screen added to the dash to make it a little more modern.

“You got a beauty here. I told you, you need to let me buy it of you.”

Elijah ran his hand over the candy green hood then looked up at me. “My dad would probably learn to rewalk and beat my ass if I did some shit like that.” He chuckled.

Every couple months, he brought the car to me to tune up and keep up and going. Elijah always said I was the only one he trusted.

Walking up to me with his hand out, I slapped mine against it. "You know your shit, O'Shae. I know I never gotta worry when you're under my hood."

"Nigga gon' with that mushy shit." I pushed him away with a laugh.

He tossed his hands up. "I'm being foreal." He went over to the car and started it.

The moment it turned on and he rubbed the engine, I felt a light fill me. Working on and customizing cars was my passion and each time I saw my handy work a sense of accomplishment shot through me.

Elijah was my last car for the day.

"You better not put a scratch in my handy work either," I called out to him.

"I wouldn't dare!" He pulled of.

I stood there until he was out the parking lot and down the street. It was later in the day and the sun was starting to set. All the other mechanics had left for the day including Terrance.

My phone went off in my sweats. When I looked and saw it was Payton, I cleared the call and slid it back into my sweats.

I wasn't feeling her right now and she knew it. She was showing her ass, being belligerent, and acting a fool when I picked her up Saturday night. Payton couldn't hold her liquor and she always went overboard when she was with her sister. It was like she was trying to be someone she wasn't whenever she got around her.

Although the two were sisters they were raised in two different houses. Payton with her mom and their dad and her sister with just her mom. The moment you were around them you could see the difference but Payton always tried to be like her older sister.

It took ten minutes to get her out the club and into the car, then she wanted to argue and whine the whole way home. Part of

me was tempted to leave her ass in the car when I pulled into our driveway.

By the time I got her in the house, she barely was over the threshold when she threw up, coating me, the floor, and herself. That was five days ago and since then I've been keeping it short with her.

Payton's actions lately had me rethinking my relationship with her.

Heading back into the shop, I was ready to call it a day. The last thing I wanted to do was head home and deal with Payton so I was going to take my time cleaning up.

"There goes my favorite girl." I leaned down and kissed my grandma's cheek.

She was sitting on her porch with a glass of sweet tea in her hand and a book on her lap.

After leaving the shop, I made a detour and stopped by to see my grandma. I loved this woman more than anyone. She took me in when I was ready to give it all up. She and my granddad saved me

from not only my parents but myself as well. I would give her the world if I could.

“Hey handsome,” She smiled at me, closing the door in her lap. “You look well.” She gave me a once over as I

took a seat next to her.

My grandma’s street was always quiet. She’s lived here since I was a kid and said she would die here. It was a dead-end street and her house was at the end.

“I feel good.” I let her know, flexing my arm. “How are you beautiful?”

“I’m fine.”

After my grandad passed, my grandma became more cautious of me. I tried to show my face to her at least once a week. My grandma didn’t like to make a fuss as she put it so she tried to downplay everything, but I kept a close eye on her.

My grandad passed from getting pneumonia. It had been three years since he’s been gone, and it hasn’t gotten any easier. He became the father I never had growing up.

“You sure you don’t need nothing? Money?”

“Boy, I said I’m fine.” She waved me off. “I told you to stop always worrying about me.”

“That’s impossible, beautiful.”

Granny Mae shook her head. “You remind me so much of your grandfather. Always making such a fuss over little ole me.”

“Someone needs to look over you.” Granny Mae was in her mid-sixties and I knew she could take care of herself. Still, my grandad would come back from the grave and beat my ass if I didn’t make sure she was good.

Granny Mae waved me off. “Catch me up. What’s been going on?”

“Same ole.” My shoulders lifted. “Works been getting busy, taking up most of my time.”

“Your grandfather would be so proud. Working on cars was always you twos thing.”

My attention went of to the street. A small breeze passed through us. “He taught me everything I know.”

I didn’t even know I enjoyed working with cars until one day my grandad forced me outside with him and showed me how to change the oil in his car. After that, he always brought me out when he did diferent types of maintenance on it. Each time I worked with him, my love for working for cars grew.

When I wasn’t on the feld I was under the hood.

“You still with that girl?” Granny Mae didn’t try to hide the distaste in her voice.

“You know her name,” I smirked, watching her out the corner of my eye.

“Humph.” She grunted. “That girl is bad news, O’Shae. You need to leave her alone.”

“Payton is harmless, Mama. She’s just a little spoiled.”

“Humph.” Her lack of response caused me to laugh.

“Anyways, I didn’t come over to talk about her. I

needed to come make sure you were good since you wouldn't tell me if you weren't."

"Damn right."

Shaking my head, I leaned back and kicked my feet out in front of me. "You're so stubborn."

"Who you think you got it from?"

Chuckling, I watched the street again.

Being at my grandparents' house always brought me a sense of peace. My grandad might be gone but I always felt closer to him when I was here."

"How's my Jerzey girl? I haven't seen her in a while."

"Jerzey's got a lot on her plate right now."

"Is she okay?"

When I looked over at my grandma, I noticed a concerned look on her face. Since Jerzey moved next door to her as a kid, she treated her as if she was her own grandchild. It was one reason why we had gotten so close. She was always around.

“She’s good. She’s a foster mom now and that’s taking up a lot of her time.”

A small grin formed on my grandma’s face. “Ah yes. I remember her telling me she was getting ready for a placement. I’m glad she finally left that sorry ass husband of hers.” For a moment Granny Mae’s mouth twisted. “She was too good for him.”

Instead of verbally commenting, I nodded. That was something we actually agreed on.

“It must be hard being a new parent and alone.” The way my grandma’s tone changed caused a brow to lift. “I hope you’re helping her out.”

“I try when I can. The kids been through a lot and lowkey giving Jerzey a hard time especially, the oldest. It’s

funny I see a lot of myself in him. He was like me when I first came to stay with you and grandad.”

“Oh if he’s anything like you she’s really gonna need help. You were hell the first couple months,” I couldn’t help but laugh

because it was true. “You just needed some love though. I hate that my daughter and that father of yours put you through so much. I wish we would’ve noticed and stepped in sooner.” A look of regret fell on Granny Mae’s face.

“Y’all got me when it counted, Mama. Don’t look like that.” Granny Mae’s eyes glossed over for a moment and I knew it was because her emotions were starting to run high. She always struggled with the fact that for the first 12 years of my life I was abused and mistreated without her knowledge. I never held it against her or my grandad. At a young age, I learned to hide it well.

My phone went off in my sweats and when I looked and saw Jerzey Facetiming me, I smiled. “Speaking of the devil.”

I slid the circle over to answer. “Hey! Are you still at work?” She questioned.

“Nah, I’m chilling with Mama.” I turned the phone to face her.

“Granny Mae! Hi beautiful!”

“Don’t *hi beautiful* me! How come I haven’t seen you or those babies you’re taken care of now?” A frown formed on my grandma’s face.

“I’m sorry! It’s been a lot and I’ve been trying to get them comfortable with me. You know I love you!” Jerzey whined making my grandma’s face soften. She was always soft with Jerzey.

“All I hear is excuses. I expect you and those babies to come see me sometime soon. Don’t make me have to come to you, Jerzey girl.”

“I promise, I’ll be by soon!”

“I’ll be waiting. I love you, baby.” “I love you too, Granny Mae.”

Turning the camera back on me, I grinned into it. “It’s not funny. You know I don’t like upsetting Granny.” She pouted making my grandma snicker.

Jerzey loved my grandma just as much as she loved her. While her foster parents worked my grandma would

keep an eye on her. Jerzey always said my grandma had a calming spirit.

“I need your help.” She finally told me getting to why she called.

“What’s up?”

“So I know nothing about sports and raising boys. Apparently, I’m supposed to get Kaiden certain shoes for basketball camp. I have no idea what kind I’m supposed to get. Can you help me, please?” Her bottom lip poked out and she batted her naturally long, curled lashes.

Chuckling, I swiped my tongue over my lips. “I got you. When does he start?”

“Next weekend.”

“I’ll come get him and get him together.”

The tension in her face lessened. “Really? It won’t be too much of a hassle? I know I keep replying on you and this is my problem. It’s just I’m hoping this will make him actually like me.”

“Jerzey, if I said I got you. I got you. Don’t worry about it.”

She sighed and then smiled. “Thank you, O. I really don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Good thing you’ll never have to find out.”

Jerzey wasn’t wearing her glasses giving me a clear view of her bright eyes. Her face bare of any makeup; not that she wore it frequently. She glowed as if she just did her nightly routine.

“I should let you go then. I need to clean up some before turning it in.”

“Jerzey,” Granny Mae called out.

I turned the camera. “You bring those babies over here for me to meet soon.”

“I will. I promise.”

Jerzey and I said our goodbyes before hanging up. “She’s a special girl. Sweet too.” My grandma commented.

“Yeah, she is.” I bobbed my head, clearing a text from Payton.

“Jerzey is the kind of girl you need in your life, O’Shae. She’s light hearted and so loving.”

My forehead creased. “You know I don’t look at her like that.”

Amusement filled her face. Something flashed through her eyes I couldn’t read. “If you say so.”

Knowing my grandma wanted me with Jerzey, I ignored her comment. For whatever reason people couldn’t just accept that me and Jerzey were just friends.



“Okay, okay Kaydence. You don’t have to stay, calm down.” I begged as Kaydence had a full meltdown at the daycare I was planning on leaving her at. Since Kaiden would be starting school it wasn’t necessary for him, but she would have to go while I was working.

“All kids get nervous the first few days, but they adapt after their parent is gone. It's scary being away from mom the first time.” The daycare teacher told me.

It was hard to hear her over Kaydence’s screams. She was currently gripping my leg tightly, screaming with tears running down her face. Her cheeks were rosy red and her eyes squeezed shut.

My head began to pound.

I looked over at Kaiden who was standing there glaring at me. I told him to let me handle Kaydence and now he was giving me a taunting look.

“No, it’s fine. We’ll try again another day.” I let the teacher know.

I should have known it would be too soon. She was just getting used to me. Being forced to stay with a bunch of strangers for a long period of time had to be overwhelming.

Kneeling down, I picked Kaydence up. She was a tiny thing and barely felt like anything in my arms.

“It’s okay, baby. Sssh.” I tried to soothe her, rubbing her back.

Kaydence slowly lifted her head as her bottom lip trembled. Slowly her arms lifted and wrapped around my neck, nearly choking me.

“I’m sorry,” I told the teacher who was giving me a sympathetic look. “We’re leaving, Kaydence. Stop crying.” I spoke lowly and softly.

Her small body jerked in my arms, but she slowly calmed down.

I pushed a heavy breath out and closed my eyes, mentally thanking her.

“C’mon Kaiden let’s go,” I called out over my shoulder as we headed for the doors. Sunny Bee daycare had come highly recommended to me when I researched the ones in the area. I hated that Kaydence didn’t feel comfortable enough to stay here.

We walked to the car in silence. Kaydence clinging to me and Kaiden at my side.

Once I secured her in the car and Kaiden got in behind her I made my way to the driver's side. I was due to go back to work this week and I wasn’t sure how I would manage that if I couldn’t get Kaydence to stay at daycare.

Tomorrow I’m taking Kaiden to get enrolled in school. It was still the frst couple of days so he had plenty of time to adjust. I just hoped he would handle it better than his sister. He didn’t really show any emotions about things. It was like he was numb to everything.

Gripping the steering wheel tightly I watched the siblings in the mirror. Kaiden was holding Kaydence's hand now. Outside of the rosy cheeks, you wouldn't even know

she was crying. This was the first time she had a meltdown like that in public and I wasn't prepared.

Starting the car, I hurried out the parking lot of the daycare. Hopefully next time things would go better.

"Oh my goodness, look at these beautiful babies!" Granny Mae gushed the moment she laid eyes on Kaydence and Kaiden.

She was clinging to her brother's side while he stood straight up, eyes locked on Granny Mae.

"This is Kaydence and Kaiden. Guys this is Granny Mae, say hi."

Neither one of them spoke.

"Shy ones, huh?"

I sighed and nodded. "You can say that."

“Don’t worry we’ll fix that. Are you guys hungry? I just finished cooking breakfast.” She let us know.

“I am,” Kaydence spoke lowly. I wasn’t shocked, she was like a food disposal. She would eat me out of house and home if I let her.

“Well let’s get you fed. Granny’s gonna take care of you.” A faint smile tugged on Kaydence’s face.

“Come on brother.” She looked up at Kaiden who glanced down at her then bobbed his head.

“Go ahead and sit down and take a seat at the table over there. We’ll make your plates.”

Granny Mae looked at me and winked. I started towards her and she wrapped her arms around me. “Don’t look like that. They’re precious.” She told me.

We turned and headed to the kitchen.

I leaned into her. “This is hard, Granny.” “It’ll get easier. Don’t give up.”

“It’s hard. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re loving and taking care of them. That’s what they need right now. Everything will fall into place. You remember how closed of you were with me the first few times I watched you.” I grinned at her.

She was right.

When my foster parents first left me with Granny Mae I was shy and quiet. Only speaking when spoken to and tried to stay out the way. It didn’t help that O’Shae was there

scaring the shit out of me. He always looked mean and mad at the world.

Granny Mae didn’t let that bother her though. She was always sweet and welcoming to me. Eventually, I got more comfortable being around her and soon she became like a grandmother to me. I enjoyed being at her house over my own.

My foster parents were nice people, but they didn’t really have time to spend with me. They worked a lot so I spent most of my time at Granny Mae’s.”

“You’re right, it’s been a month since they’ve been with me and Kaydence is slowly starting to open up to me, but Kaiden.” I paused and shook my head.

I glanced over to where the kids were sitting at the table.

“O’Shae told me about that one. Says he isn’t the most welcoming kid.” I snorted.

“That’s an understatement. O’Shae seems to be getting through to him though. I don’t think I could ever repay him for being there like he has.” We loaded the plates

with food. Granny Mae had made French toast, eggs with cheese, sausage, and grits.

“You know O’Shae would do anything for you.” The way Granny Mae was looking at me caused heat to rush to my cheeks.

“I know he’s the best, best friend a girl could ask for.” My eyes shifted, and I grabbed the powdered sugar to add on top of the French toast.

“You know O’Shae wouldn’t just help anyone like he does you, right?”

I pulled on the corner of my bottom lip, refusing to answer. I knew where Granny Mae was going with this. Since we were teenagers she’s been proclaiming that me and O’Shae were destined to be together.

Taking the plates to the table where the kids were, I sat each one in front of them. “I’ll grab you some orange juice.”

When I walked back to the kitchen Granny Mae already had the cups ready. “Thank you.” I smiled at her quickly then turned around.

After getting the kids situated I went to make myself a plate. I was happy I let Granny Mae know I was stopping by. She never half-stepped in the kitchen.

“When are you and my grandson going to stop playing and get together already?”

My heart stumbled in my chest. “What are you talking about, Mama? You know O’Shae’s with Payton and I’m freshly divorced. A relationship isn’t what I’m looking for right now.”

She waved her hand, shooing my words away. “All just excuses. Placeholders that’s what all those hussies have been and that’s what that so-called husband was. God was getting you both prepared for each other.”

Heat flooded my stomach as butterflies filled it. My pulse rushed in my throat and my heart pounded in my ears.

The sound of something hitting the ground gained my attention causing me to jump and whip around.

“She didn’t mean to!” Kaiden quickly blurted out. He shot up and rushed to stand in front of his sister. My eyes went to the cup and spilled orange juice on the floor.

I walked towards them. “Don’t hit her,” his small voice trembled.

Kaydence stared at me with wide, fearful eyes. A hollow hole formed in my chest.

“Hit her? I’m not going to hit her. It was an accident.” I let him know. Kneeling down I picked the cup up. “It’s okay. No one’s in trouble.”

Glancing up, I noticed Kaydence’s body shaking. “Guys relax. I promise it’s fine.”

“Here, sweetheart.” Granny Mae walked up behind me and handed me a towel.

I wiped up the spilled juice before standing up.

Kaiden was still protectively standing in front of his sister. His arms stretched out in front of her and his face twisted up.

“Now, now. Stop all that.” Granny Mae told him. “Go ahead and sit back down and finish eating. No one is getting hit in Granny’s house.” She let him know.

His eyes bounced between me and Granny Mae. “You’re not going to punish her?” My chest tightened.

I shook my head. “No, I promise.”

It took a few seconds before Kaiden finally moved from in front of his sister and went back to his seat.

“Here, baby girl. This time I got you one with a lid.” Granny Mae smiled at her.

Kaydence hesitantly grabbed the capped cup and brought the straw sticking out to her mouth.

“What do you say, Kaydence?”

“Tha, thank you.” She stuttered.

“Granny Mae got you.” Granny winked at her.

The tension in the room lessened, but I still felt an inkling feeling inside of me. I hated the look of panic and fear on the kid's faces when they did something. One thing they never had to be worried about was being physically harmed. The fact that their small minds instantly went to physical punishment caused my heart to twist in my chest.

Focusing on the kids as they ate, I hoped I would be able to heal the scars life had caused them so soon.

“Now that we’re done with the food, how about we eat some popsicles and sit outside?”

“Yay!” Kaydence cheered.

“That okay, *mom*?”

The word mom made my heart swell. It was the first time I had been addressed as such.

Both kids looked at me with hopeful eyes.

Nodding. “Yeah, sure.” I grinned.

We went outside in the backyard and sat on the back porch. The kids rushed out in the yard, entertaining themselves while me and Granny Mae took the chairs near the door.

“You looked stressed when you first got here. What happened?”

Dropping my shoulders forward while I eyed them. “Kaydence had a full meltdown when we attempted daycare today. She’s not comfortable around strangers or being around a lot of people. I go back to work this week and I won’t be able to focus knowing she’s freaking out.”

There was a lot to consider now that I knew Kaydence couldn't handle daycare. I knew if Kaiden was able to stay with her she would be fine, but he would be in school.

"I should pop you." Granny Mae spoke after a few moments.

My forehead creased. "What?"

"Why would you take that baby to daycare when I'm here perfectly fine."

My mouth parted then closed. "I didn't think of that." My eyes shifted.

Granny Mae shook her head. "I'll watch her while you work. You don't have to worry about daycare. Plus it's overpriced." She waved her hand in front of her.

"Are you sure? I don't want to be a bother."

"Jerzey." She gave me a stern look.

Sheepishly grinning I tossed my hands up. "Okay, okay."

I looked back at the kids playing. I felt more comfortable knowing Kaydence would be with Granny Mae. I trusted her and I was sure Kaydence would be comfortable here.

Kaiden was due to start basketball camp this week too.

It was a lot going on in such a short period, but I was willing to accept the challenge.



“You like those?” I asked Kaiden as I sat on the bench while he tried a pair of shoes on. Just like I promised, I picked him up to take him to grab some basketball shoes. His first day of basketball camp was this Saturday and from what Jerzey told me he was excited.

“Yeah. They’re cool.” He walked back and forth in the LeBron’s on his feet.

Lifting one corner of my mouth, amusement filled me at how nonchalant he always seemed.

“A’right, we’ll grab them and one more pair.” I stood up and looked around. When my eyes fell on the Under Armor Curry’s I walked to the wall they were on.

“What about these?” I picked them up and examined them.

Walking over, I handed Kaiden the shoes so he could look them over. “Curry’s the best so I know these shoes gotta be the best too.”

One of my brows lifted. “He good, but I wouldn’t say he’s the best.”

Kaiden’s head whipped to me with a mug on his face. “He’s the best shooter in the world and Ima be just like him!”

Chuckling, I waved over the worker that had been helping us.

“You got me there, kid.”

The worker walked of to grab the size we needed while I walked over to where some of their athletic gear was.

“You gon’ need shorts and shit too.” I sorted through the basketball shorts until I found his size.

Another ten minutes passed before we were checking out and headed out the shoe store.

Instead of going to the mall, I brought him to the shoe store D12 District between A&B Prints and the Two Scoops.

“Can we get ice cream?” Kaiden asked once he noticed the ice cream shop next door. I glanced over at it

and noticed it wasn't too crowded and nodded.

"C'mon."

We walked next door.

Two Scoops was known for its homemade ice cream. They changed their favors in and out depending on the seasons.

"Welcome to Two Scoops! Would you like to try a scoop of our homemade ice cream today?" The young guy said behind the counter.

I glanced down at Kaiden, waiting for him to answer. "What you want, kid?"

He looked at the ice cream on the counter then at me. "Cookies and Cream."

"Cone or cup?"

"Cone."

The worker looked at me as I sat the bags down and went into my pocket. "That's it?"

Kaiden bobbed his head. "A'right." I shrugged.

I walked down to where the cash register was.

“Did you play basketball?” Kaiden asked suddenly.

“Nah, I mean not foreal. I played pickup games, but football was my poison.”

“I don’t like football.” He scrunched his face up. “They’d tear yo ass up on the feld anyways.” I

chuckled.

The worker got Kaiden’s order together and then handed him the cone before taking my card and swiping it.

“Come again.” He called out after us when we started out the door.

We were nearly to the parking lot when I noticed a familiar face that caused my top lip to curl up.

“Well, if it isn’t my old friend.” Mario stopped in front of me with a smug grin on his face.

My face went blank.

Mario was in his white coat, indicating he just got of work or was heading to the hospital.

“Nigga we ain’t never been friends.”

I'd known Mario for years, but I never fucked with the nigga. He always was in some weird ass competition with me that I couldn't understand. We used to play football together until I blew my knee out senior year.

Mario chuckled and cocked his head to the side. "Always so hostile." His eyes shifted down to where Kaiden was next to me causing my shoulders to tense.

His brows dipped together and his eyes squinted. "Ain't that the kid that was at my house?"

"Your old house and don't acknowledge him." I slightly stepped in front of Kaiden after noticing the uneasy look on his face. He was gripping his cone tightly, body stiff with his eyes locked on Mario.

"I see my wife still got you wrapped around her finger. I'm guessing that's the foster kid she kept pestering me about getting."

"*Ex-wife* and don't fucking speak on her!" I stepped towards him feeling the vein in my neck bulge.

Mario smirked. "You always were quick to come to her rescue. You always had a thing for her, huh? Too bad I was the one blowing her-." Before he could answer the bags were out my hand and gripping his white coat.

I had about 20 pounds and more muscle on me compared to him. Although I had got injured, I made sure to keep myself in shape.

"The problem's always been you run your fucking mouth too much. I been waiting to fuck you up but outta respect for Jerzey, I refrained. Finish that disrespectful shit you was about to spit and give me a reason." My voice low practically a growl.

Mario's eyes bucked and he struggled to get out my grasp.

My heart pounded fiercely in my chest while my blood rushed through my veins.

Mario's always been loud and rambunctious. It was one thing I never fucked with. He was like a child that craved attention.

"Speak nigga!" I shook him.

My right eye twitched and my hand itched to knock him out.

The grip on my shirt caused me to snap out the red zone I found myself going into.

Over my shoulder, I laid eyes on Kaiden. Just that quick I remembered he was there. Fear crossed his face. His eyes wide and wondering.

I noticed he no longer had his ice cream cone.

Silently I cursed. The kid had been through a lot and I knew situations like this could trigger him. I bit down on my back teeth as my nostrils fared.

Slowly I dragged my attention back to Mario, releasing him and stepping back.

He mugged me and ran his hand over his coat. "I don't know what the fuck Jerzey saw in yo punk ass all these years." I spat bending down to grab the bags I had dropped.

"You're just mad I got her and you didn't. I finally was able to claim something you couldn't and that's what pisses you of." He taunted again, laughing

Again I bit down on my back teeth while fire erupted in my stomach.

The urge to fuck him up was strong but knowing Kaiden was next to me I fought it. "C'mon Kaiden." I turned to leave.

I would see Mario again. Butter Ridge Falls was only so big.

When we finally got inside the car it was silent. My pulse was still racing, pounding in my ears. My body was blazing.

I hated when my anger started to flare. It was hard for me to keep a handle on it. It was like a teapot on a flame. It was a trait I, unfortunately, picked up from my sperm donor.

"I don't like that guy." Kaiden spoke after a while.

My eyes shifted into the mirror so I could look at him. "You ain't gotta worry about him." "He made Jerzey upset."

My brows furrowed. Glancing at the road for a moment I looked back in the mirror.

“When?”

Kaiden’s shoulders rose then fell. “When he came over. She got mad and was yelling.” His voice was small.

My grip on the steering wheel grew tighter. “You won’t have to worry about that again.” He was quiet, turning his attention elsewhere.

I focused back on the street. My knuckles white from my grip on the wheel.

Mario always treated Jerzey like some consolation prize when he was around. Always dangling her in my face as if she was some piece of property he won. That shit

always irritated me. She deserved so much more than what he offered her over the years.

I was still pissed of by the time we got to Jerzey’s house. Kaiden hadn’t said much else since he let me know about Mario popping up.

“Aye,” I called out before we got out the car.

His eyes shifted to me. “You like being here? With Jerzey, I mean.”

I fucked with Kaiden he was a kid trying to deal with the hand he was dealt, but I didn’t like how he handled Jerzey. It caused her to be upset more times than I liked. The sense of protectiveness I felt when it came to Jerzey wouldn’t allow me to continue to let this shit marinate.

“It’s cool.” He shrugged.

My eyes narrowed.

I swiped my tongue over my lips.

“Life fucked you over. I know all about that shit, trust me. Our past might not be the same, but mine wasn’t pretty either. If it wasn’t for my grandparents I would probably be dead at the hands of my own father.” Kaiden’s eyes

widened. “They recused me and gave me a chance at a good life, just like Jerzey is doing for you. You need to lighten up on her. She’s a good person and she cares about you.” For a moment I kept my eyes on him.

He didn't react to what I said, but I could tell he heard me. I knew how hard it was to trust after you've burned so many times. His past was rougher than mine but at some point, he had to learn to try to ease up. He was still a kid and had too much ahead of him to have such a fucked up outlook on everything.

I pushed open my car door and stepped out, before lifting the seat forward so Kaiden could get out.

He had his bags in hand and we started for the house. "Did you guys have fun?" Jerzey asked when she opened the door for us.

She was smiling brightly, glasses on her face, hair in its natural state stopping right at her jawline. She shifted her attention to Kaiden then back to me.

"It was cool," Kaiden mentioned stepping into the house.

"You got your shoes?"

He nodded, lifted the bags in his small hands, staring at her with emotionless eyes. "Did you say thank you?"

Kaiden turned to look at me. "Thank you." I nodded at him.

"Are you hungry? I cooked some spaghetti." Kaiden looked back at Jerzey. "Not right now." "Okay. Put your things away."

Kaiden walked out without another word.

"O'Shae, I can't thank you enough for this. How much was everything so I can pay you back." She turned to face me.

My lips pressed in a straight line. "You know better than that. I'm not taking your money."

"But Kaiden is my responsibility."

"And I offered to take him."

"Still, it looks like you got him more than one pair of shoes. Let me pay you back."

I waved her off and folded my hands in front of me. "Why ain't you tell me that nigga Mario's been bothering you?"

Her face balled up. "What are you talking about?"

“I saw him while we were out and Kaiden mentioned he came over and made you upset. Why ain’t you tell me?”

“What was there to tell? He had forgot some papers here he needed. He came, got them and left.”

“Why were you upset then?”

“We’re freshly divorced. Seeing him so soon doesn’t make me happy.” She shifted her eyes and crossed her arms in front of her.

My eyes narrowed. “I’m beating that nigga's ass.” Jerzey shook her head. “No O’Shae. I don’t need you to come to my rescue all the time. No one is thinking about Mario.”

My heart stuttered and expanded against my ribcage as I took a step towards her so I was now towering above her. “I don’t like how that nigga speaks on you, Jerzey. I told you I was spearing him because you asked me to. If I see him again and he says some of the wall shit, I’m beating his ass.”

Her breathing seemed to change as she stared up at me. She blinked a few times and parted her mouth but didn’t speak.

“I’m not that same quiet girl from back then, O’Shae. I can handle myself.” Her brows wrinkled while her mouth thinned.

“I ain’t trying to hear shit you saying, Jerzey. You’re too nice to muthafuckas who don’t deserve it. I keep telling you that shit.”

The surrounding air suddenly felt thick. It felt like I could hear the small tics of her heart in her chest as we stood in a stare of.

My eyes traveled over her.

Jerzey’s face was delicately carved, the way her face scrunched up brought attention to her high cheekbones.

I watched as her chest rose and fell at a steady rate in the tank top she wore. Noticing how her hips tapered into long silky legs in the shorts she wore. I felt something stir in my gut, piercing my chest.

“I don’t play about people I care about. You know that. Anyone who fucks with you is fucking with me. That’s never going to change.” My voice more gravelly than normal.

Knowing she wasn't going to win this argument Jerzey finally rolled her eyes and allowed her shoulders to fall.

"Okay, O'Shae." She held her hands up. "If you say so."

A smirk formed on my face. My hand went to her waist and pulled her into me.

Out of nowhere a roaring formed in my chest. The sense of protectiveness filled me again.

"You're never gonna win when it comes to me having your back, Jerzey. I don't play about you, never have. The sooner you learn to accept that, the less fussing you'll have to do."

"O'Shae." She breathlessly spoke.

Her round eyes full of innocence and gentleness.

Dipping my head, I pressed a kiss on her forehead. Jerzey soon wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly.

I knew sometimes I could go overboard when it came to how I handled things with Jerzey. I know it annoyed her as well, but I

couldn't help it. Since the moment I laid eyes on her and saw how innocent she was I felt the need to make sure she was protected. It started with my grandparents

making me keep an eye on her, but eventually it became natural.



“Go ahead Jerzey, she’s gonna be fne.” Granny Mae let me know.

My eyes traveled to Kaydence who was currently sitting on the couch with her unicorn in her arms and thumb in her mouth.

“I know but-.”

“But nothing. Go take Kaiden to school and go to work. She’ll be fne.”

Kaydence must have enjoyed being around Granny Mae because she gave little fuss when I let her know she would be staying at her house instead of going to daycare while I worked.

“Kaydence are you going to be, okay?” I asked kneeling down, so I was eye level with her. I knew she was

in good hands with Granny Mae, but still, I didn't like to have to leave her.

"Are you coming back?" Her small head tilted to the side as her eyes filled with curiosity.

A small smile formed in my chest as it warmed. "I sure am. Right after work, I'll be back." I pulled on one of her braids.

"Kaydence, tell your mom we'll be good." My heart skipped.

Granny Mae was the only one who addressed me as the kid's mom and I wasn't sure if they saw me as such, but I loved the way it made me feel inside.

"I okay." She smiled, thumb still in her mouth. Sighing, I nodded. "Okay, I'll see you in a few hours." Standing up I looked at Granny Mae who was giving me an amused look. "Go on, Jerzey girl. We'll be okay." "I know. I'm sorry." I smiled sheepishly.

She waved her hand in front of her. "Don't be sorry. It's normal for a parent to be worried when they first leave their kid. Go."

I nodded. "You're right. I should go. Kaydence, can I have a hug?"

She looked up at me and grinned before popping up and rushing to me. I hugged her small body tightly. She had been becoming more and more comfortable with me. There were even a few times she would sit in the living room with me and we would watch movies together with Kaiden. He was still guarded but I was happy one of them was starting to trust me.

I kissed the top of her head. "Bye, baby girl." "Bye."

Releasing her, I gave Granny Mae a small smile before heading for the door. Kaiden was waiting for me in the car and I didn't want him to be late on his first day.

"Is she okay?" He asked the moment we were in the car.

He didn't like the idea of leaving his sister for hours at a time especially, with someone that was still new to them. His eyes were trained on Granny Mae's house.

“Everything’s fine, Kaiden. She’s fine, I promise.”

I pulled out the driveway and drove down the street.

“Jerzey.” I damn near crashed when a small voice came from behind me. It was the first time I had heard Kaiden say my name since he’d been with me.

“Yeah?”

His eyes were trained on the window watching the scenery. “I don’t like school.” He let me know.

I tugged on my bottom lip. “Why not?”

Slowly his attention shifted to me. “I never stay at one too long.”

A stabbing shot through my chest. I knew all too well how he felt. Unfortunately, when you didn’t have a permanent placement as a kid you not only went through a bunch of homes but schools too. You learn not to make friends because eventually faces just become blurs. It’s hard being content in one place not knowing if it’ll last.

“Sadly, I know all about that. It wasn’t until I was 12 that I was finally able placed in a forever home. Being in foster care is hard on so many levels, but the hardest is growing close to others not

knowing if they'll be there the next day." My top teeth scraped over my bottom lip. "I know you still have some reservations about me, Kaiden but I

hope this can be you and your sister's forever home. If I have my way then this will be the last school change for you."

When I looked back into the mirror Kaiden was staring at the window again only this time he had creases on his forehead, his eyes were squinted.

Kaiden put on a front on the outside. He learned he had to be tough and guarded, but on the inside, he was still a vulnerable kid that needed to be cared for.

It was my lunch break and I decided to stop by T Customs Body Shop and bring O'Shae something to eat. I wanted to do something nice for him since he's been so much help with Kaiden.

“Wassup Jerzey, something wrong with your car?” Terrence asked me when I got to the front desk. He had lifted his head from the papers in front of him when he noticed I was standing there.

I shook my head. “Nope, I’m actually here for O’Shae.” I lifted the white bag with two subs, I got from the deli down the street.

Just as he was about to speak a door slamming against the wall gained my attention.

“I’m not about to do this shit at my job, Payton!” O’Shae spoke coming out the breakroom.

“You can’t keep ignoring me, O’Shae! It’s been weeks and you’re still being short with me.”

Both of them stopped in the middle of the lobby. “Gon’ Payton. We’ll talk later.” He headed for the desk but paused when he noticed me.

“Wassup? Your car messing up again?”

I focused on Payton for a moment who was now glaring at me with her arm crossed. Dragging my attention to O’Shae, I gave him a

small smile. “No, I actually brought you something to eat.” I lifted the bag.

“Of course, you did!” Payton fussed stomping towards me. “You just don’t know your place do you?” She snapped.

“My place?” I cocked my head back.

“Payton!” O’Shae warned.

“You’re always trying to push up on O’Shae. Always calling him expecting him to say how high when you say jump. O’Shae is *my man*. You need to learn to step back and

in your place.” Her eyes cut into tight slits while her neck rolled.

“Payton!” O’Shae stormed back around the counter and snatched her up by the arm. “Let’s go!” He gritted.

“I don’t know your issue with me Payton, but O’Shae and I are friends. We were friends before and we’ll be friends after you. Your beef with me is yours alone because, at the end of the day, I’m not going anywhere.” I flashed her a fake smile.

“Tell her how it really is.” Terrance muttered with a low chuckle.

“Bitch I-ow!” She yelled.

O’Shae dragged her through the front doors of the car shop while I stood there clenching the bag in my hand. Every time I was around Payton she made the point to try and come for me. I tried to ignore her most of the time, but it wasn’t always easy.

“That fucking girl.” O’Shae muttered the moment he was back in the building.

Thankfully the lobby was empty outside of me and Terrance.

“You gotta get a handle on that, man.” Terrance let

him know.

“I know. My bad about that.” O’Shae shook his head and focused on me.

“C’mon to the back.” He turned and headed for the room he had just come out of.

I gave Terrance a small smile and wave before following behind my best friend.

He shut the door behind us and sat in one of the plush chairs against the wall.

Silently I took the seat next to him and dug in the bag to grab his sub, handing it over to him.

“I thought you went back to work today.”

I took a bite of my sub. “I did. I’m on break right now.” As I spoke, I covered my mouth.

We were quiet for a moment. For some reason, the silence between us had my stomach flipping. “What was that about?” I finally asked sick of the quiet.

“Same shit as always. I ain’t been fucking with her since I had to go pick her up when she was drunk. It seems like all we been doing is arguing too. I’m sick of it foreal.”

“Are you going to break up with her?” His hooded eyes studied me intensely for a moment.

“I’ve been considering it. I need a woman to be my peace. Payton ain’t been bringing me that lately.”

The way he was staring at me caused a heart-rendering tenderness to shoot through my chest.

Quickly I snatched my eyes from his.

Lately, I’ve been feeling funny when O’Shae looked at me too long. His gaze was always smothering and seemed to strum a fire in my belly,

Knowing how protective he was of me didn’t help either. It’s always been like that since we first became friends, but recently it’s been causing me to feel things I shouldn’t.

“If being married to Mario all those years taught me anything, it’s never to waste time with someone who doesn’t make you happy. I didn’t want to be a divorcee, but I had to eventually choose myself.” My chest ached thinking of the events that played out in my marriage. “You’re a good guy, O’Shae. If Payton doesn’t value that, then maybe leaving her is best.” I spoke the last words lowly.

My pulse throbbed in my throat.

I wiped my suddenly clammy hands over the pencil skirt I was wearing.

The room we were in suddenly felt as if someone turned the heat on.

“I should leave. I don’t want to be late back to work.” I spoke lowly, wrapping up the rest of my sub.

I stood up prompting O’Shae to do the same.

“Thanks for the sub. I needed that.” He stared down at me with that same smothering look in his eyes.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “You’ve been such great help lately. It’s the least I can do.”

“So I take it the drop-offs were good this morning.”

A small smile formed on my face. “Yeah, thankfully. I even got Kaiden to talk to me a little more than normal.”

“That’s good.” He ran his hand over my arm making me shudder. “I’ll probably stop by later to check in with him if that’s cool.”

My eyes went from his touch on my arm to his face. “You know it’s no issue.”

I swallowed hard.

O'Shae suddenly pulled me into him and hugged me securely.

"To infinity." He spoke into my hair.

Closing my eyes I inhaled his musky scent and wrapped my arms around his broad body. "And beyond."



“O’Shae, come on I told you I was sorry!” Payton whined following behind me.

Leaving out our bedroom, I headed down the hall to the room I had been staying in the last couple days.

“You can’t keep ignoring me. I made a mistake!” Whipping around, I caused Payton to stumble back as I glowered down at her.

“You came up to my job showing your fucking ass for no reason, Payton! I’m sick of this bullshit.”

“I wouldn’t have had to come up there if you would have just talked to me! I don’t like you ignoring me and being short with me. What can I do to fx this?” The whininess in her voice caused my skin to crawl and my temple to throb. Payton seemed to think batting her lashes

and giving this baby voice would fx things. At times I let shit go, but this time I wasn’t.

She poked her bottom lip out and slowly started towards me. My body remained stiff as she leaned up and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Baby, I’m sorry okay? I shouldn’t have gotten that drunk nor should have come up to your job. I just miss you, miss us.” She stretched her neck and pecked my lips. “I feel like we’re growing apart and I don’t want that so I acted out, forgive me.” Again she leaned up and kissed me, this time a little harder. Her tongue traced my lips and her chest pressed against mine.

Against my will, my dick stirred and started bricking up. “Let me make up for my behavior.” Her voice dripped with lust.

Payton dropped down to her knees taking my sweats with her.

She stared up at me with bright eyes, grabbing my semi-hard dick and stroking it.

My eyes narrowed as I watched her spit on my shit and rotate her hands around it.

“I’m sorry.” She kissed the tip a few times before sliding her tongue over it. My knees damn near buckled when she took me in her mouth.

Payton lacked gag reflexes and had no issue taking me to the back of her throat. My hand went to the back of her head and I gripped her hair as she bobbed on my pole.

Her mouth grew wetter as her slurping filled the hallway.

Her eyes found mine while she grabbed my thighs, squeezing them. My grip on her hair grew tighter as I thrust my hips further.

“I don’t know if I believe you sorry yet, Pay.” I groaned.

She mumbled something, but it came out like she was humming. Her hands went under my dick and she cuffed my balls, massaging them. Her tongue dragged over my tip.

“Fuck, you gon’ catch this shit, Pay?” I muttered. Again her eyes found mine and she bobbed her head. Pulling back, she spit on my dick again then rotated

her hands up and down while twisting them before taking me back in her mouth.

“Shit.” I growled shooting my seeds into her mouth.

She continued to suck, going harder.

The moment she pulled back, she looked up at me grinning.

Her tongue swiped over her lips and she batted her lashes.

“Am I forgiven now?”

Biting down on my bottom lip, I had to take a few breaths before I responded.

“Giving me head ain’t gon’ make me forget how you been acting lately.”

Slowly she stood up and circled her arms around my neck again. “I know, but I wanted you to see I was sorry. Ima do better, I promise.”

My eyes squinted and my lips pressed in a straight line. “You also need to cut the slick shit out with Jerzey. She ain’t did shit to you for you to always try and come for her.”

Her mouth turned upside down. “Jerzey needs to learn her place.”

“And what’s her place?”

“That I’m your girlfriend and she needs to remember she’s *just* your friend.”

Reaching behind me, I grabbed her hands and unwrapped them from around me. “You really be trippin’ over some shit that don’t even matter.” I turned away from her.

Continuing my original route to the spare bedroom, I ignored her calls for me. Payton’s ass needed to grow up before I walked away from her.

My hand gripped the glass in my hand while staring at the ice move around in the brown liquor in it. The faint smells of cigars filled my nostrils along with low chatter.

Currently, I was sitting at the bar at Rocky’s Cigars. Being that I liked to be lowkey, I typically enjoyed coming here when I needed

to clear my head. It was normally a good amount of people but people minded their business.

I tried not to indulge in liquor too much due to how I grew up, but right now a drink was needed.

Lifting the glass I tossed the brown drink back. It burnt the back of my throat but went down smooth causing a warm sensation through my chest.

This wasn't my typical place to come and clear my head, but at the moment it would do.

Shifting my neck from left to right, I felt it crack as I stretched it.

My relationship was weighing heavy on my mind. I kept replaying the last month over and it seemed things kept getting worse.

Chaos didn't sit well with me. With my upbringing it caused me to love living a peaceful laid back life. My past wasn't something I liked to think or talk about, but Payton knew the basics. I never went into full details since I was trying not to be stuck in that space. It was

dark and cold. Most of the time thinking about what I suffered as a kid put me in a fucked-up mood.

It caused me to want to go into solitude and close myself off from everyone. As a kid I spent too much time in my head, replaying the fucked-up household I escaped from. It was one of the reasons my granddad hooked me up in football, he told me I spent too much time alone and needed to get more involved. Thankfully, I was good at the sport and actually enjoyed playing it. If I wouldn't fucked my knee

up senior year I would have probably tried to pursue it further.

Grunting lowly, shook my head.

Again I stretched my neck, and this time rolled my shoulders attempting to loosen the tension building.

My stomach growled the moment I finished my drink. Knowing I wasn't much of a drinker and I was on an empty stomach I made this my only one.

Digging in my pocket, I grabbed my wallet, grabbed a couple bills, and tossed them on the bar.

Standing up, I headed for the exit.

The moment I stepped outside the low sunset hit me.

It wasn't too warm out, there was a small breeze passing by.

Closing my eyes I inhaled the fresh air and shoved my hands in my pocket, turning and heading for my car.

Pulling up to Granny Mae's, I cut my car off and smiled slightly when I noticed Jerzey's car in the driveway. I knew my grandma was watching Kaydence and Kaiden when he wasn't in school, while Jerzey worked. I figured she was here picking them up.

I climbed out my car and headed for the door.

Since I was a teenager I had found solace over here. It's hard coming from a fucked up space and trusting the next place you lay your head at would be safe for you. My grandparents always had my back though. Growing up, I always looked forward to being at their house whenever I could before moving with them.

When I stepped inside the house the first thing I laid eyes on was my grandma and Jerzey on the couch.

“Wassup ladies?” I headed over to them and kissed my grandma’s cheek before moving to Jerzey doing the same.

“Look at my handsome grandbaby. What brings you by?”
Granny Mae smiled at me as I took a seat.

“Dang Mama, I’m not allowed to come see you anymore?
Jerzey done took my place?”

My grandma gave me a knowing look. “You know better. No one can take your place.”

Jerzey snickered causing me to cut my eyes at her. She grinned at me. “Don’t be jealous, O’Shae.”

I waved her off. “I ain’t never been jealous in my life.”

Noticing how quiet it was, I furrowed my brows together.
“Where’s the kids?”

“They were asleep when I got here so I let them stay asleep.
They should be up soon.”

Taking my phone out my pocket, I noticed it was a little after six.

“You hungry, honey? I made meatloaf, corn on the cob, and mashed potatoes.”

My stomach growled just at the words. “You know you can hook me up.” I rubbed my stomach.

Granny Mae snickered. “You always were down to eat me out a house and home.”

“You think I could move on the feld with an empty stomach?”

“Yeah, whatever.” My grandma laughed and stood up heading for the kitchen.

I cleared the text notfications from Payton and locked my phone back. “O’Shae,” Jerzey called out gaining my attention.

My eyes lifted and landed on her. “Are you okay?” Her brows met in the middle.

“Yeah, why you ask that?” Her lips pressed in a straight line. Her eyes searched me over.

“I don’t know, just making sure. I haven’t spoken to you in a couple days.”

Tilting my head to the side, I gave her a small smirk. “I’m good, Jerzey. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Her face didn’t loosen. “Did you and Payton fx things?”

My jaw clenched. “I don’t even wanna talk about that shit.”

My tongue dragged over my top teeth. The thought of Payton caused my head to hurt.

“Here you go, honey.” Granny Mae came into view, handing me my plate.

“She has you so spoiled.” Jerzey snickered.

“This my baby. I can’t help it.” When I looked at my grandma she was grinning at me. “He’s all I have left.” Her smile slowly dimmed. My chest ached.

“You’ll always have me too, beautiful.” I let her know. “I know, honey. I know.” After saying a quick prayer, I dug into my plate. No one threw down like my grandma.

A few minutes later the kids made their way into the living room, just as I was finishing my plate.

“O’Shae!” Kaiden rushed to me when he noticed me on the couch.

“Wassup kid?” I held my balled-up fist out for him to dap.

He looked down at my hand and quickly dapped me up. “I heard you started school. How’s that going?”

Kaiden shrugged. “It’s cool.” I wasn’t shocked by his lack of expression. “I like my teacher.”

“That’s what’s up,” I bobbed my head and looked at Kaydence who had made her way onto Jerzey’s lap. “And what about you, pretty girl? I heard you over here tryna steal my grandma away from me.”

Kaydence looked at me and cheesed. “Uh, uh.” She shook her head with a bashful look on her face.

My eyes squinted. “I don’t believe you.” She giggled. “O’Shae, leave that baby alone. Tell him, Kay it's

enough of Granny Mae's love to go around." Granny stepped back into the living room.

I knew watching over Kaiden and Kaydence made her happy. She wouldn't say it but I was sure my grandma got lonely in this house. Having the kids here kept her occupied.

"I go to basketball camp Saturday, O'Shae. Can you come with me?" Kaiden suddenly asked.

I glanced over at him. A hopeful expression was plastered on his face.

"I'm sure O'Shae will be working, Kaiden." Jerzey cut in, but he paid her no attention.

"What time is it?"

"Nine in the morning." Licking my lips I thought about it. Saturday I had a pretty full day.

"She's right, I'll be at the shop all day." Kaiden's shoulders sagged forward.

"Oh." His voice was low.

“How about I come scoop you up Sunday and we’ll go by the park? You can show me everything you learned then?”

The sadden expression quickly left his face as he nodded.
“Really?”

“As long as it’s cool with Jerzey.”

Kaiden whipped his head to face her. “Jerzey, can I?”

I could tell by the look on her face she wasn’t expecting him to use her real name. I notice her eyes gleamed brighter and her smile grew. “Sure, if that’s what you want.”

“It is.” He bobbed his head.

“I want park!” Kaydence cut in.

“We can go to the park with them.” Jerzey tickled her stomach causing her to squeal in laughter.

My phone vibrated on my lap and when I saw it was Payton, I ignored it just like the last few times. I had left the house in a fucked up mood, but now it was starting to fade and I wasn’t going to let her ruin it.



“Things look to be going well.” Mrs. Turner the social worker over the kids said as we sat in my living room.

“They are. It was a rocky start to get them to open up to me, but slowly I think they’re starting to trust me.”

Today was the first time since I had the kids that a home visit happened. I knew periodically they would be a thing. Mrs. Turner was a sweet lady and seemed to care about her job and kids. When I was younger, I remember not every social worker was like her, so I was thankful.

Clearing my throat, I ran my hands over my legs. “What about their mom? Have you heard anything about her?” I glanced over to the hall to make sure the kids weren’t lurking around.

After Mrs. Turner looked the house over and talked to them, I sent them to their rooms to give us some privacy.

A somber look formed on her face. “Unfortunately it looks like she’s still using. There was a time we thought she would get clean, right after she was released from jail, but that monkey is hard to get rid of.”

My eyes dropped. It hurt my heart knowing the kid's mom refused to do right by them. From what I knew she had been addicted to drugs since Kaydence was born. Apparently, it was her father that got her addicted. Neither of their dads were present, however.

The kids had gotten taken when the school noticed how many days Kaiden was missing and how he came to school unkept. Social services didn't take long to determine the household wasn't fit for kids.

The kid's mom had gotten them back twice within the three years they had been taken and each time she refused to stay clean. The last time right before me happened to be the worst of them all.

"I think I want to get them into therapy." I let her know, pushing my glasses up on my nose.

Neither kid mentioned their birth mother or life with her and I didn't know if it was good or bad. With everything they had been through, I wanted them to find a healthy way to unpack it. Hopefully, therapy would get them more comfortable too. Holding onto trauma wasn't good, especially for a kid.

Mrs. Turner smiled. "I'm happy to hear that. You know those two babies have so much heaviness on their hearts that I think therapy would be perfect."

“Do you think if their mom gets clean and stays clean she could get them back?”

Mrs. Turner pressed her lips together. “Truthfully, I don’t know. The main goal is to protect the kids. Of course, we don’t want to separate families which is one reason why we stress keeping them together, however, two failed attempts in such a short time makes it unlikely. She would have to do a lot of work to show the courts she’s fit.”

I bobbed my head and scraped my top teeth over my bottom lip.

I had already formed a love for the two kids. It would pain me if I lost them. I knew fostering was technically

supposed to be temporary, but that didn’t take the emptiness that flled me at the thought of losing them.

Mrs. Turner looked around my open living space before gathering her things. “Well, I think I have everything I need. The kids seem to be doing well and are healthy. Do you need anything for me?”

I shook my head. "Can you just let me know if the mom tries to get them back? I know you said that it wouldn't be easy for her but..." My voice trailed off.

"Don't worry. If and that's a big if, it happens. You're the first call I'll make." She gave me a reassuring smile.

"Thank you." I walked Mrs. Turner to the door where we said our goodbyes.

The moment she was gone, I headed for the kid's room. I could hear them in Kaiden's room.

"Hey." I pushed open the door.

Both of them looked up at me. I knew sometimes after seeing the social worker, for me at least, I would feel kind of heavy.

"Just wanted to check in with you two. You both feel okay?" I walked to the bed and sat on the edge.

Both of them nodded. "Is Mrs. Turner gone?" Kaiden asked.

"She is. Everything went well too."

My eyes bounced between them. “She said you two are doing well and things are good.”

“So we get to stay?”

I frowned. “Of course, you do. Did you not want to?” Quickly

Kaiden shook his head. “No, I want to. I, I like it here.”

“Me too!” Kaydence quickly followed up.

This was the first time Kaiden had expressed anything of the sort to me. “Good,” I smiled at them. “I want that too.”

“Do you ever think of your parents?” I asked O’Shae.

We were currently at the park watching the kids play. O’Shae and Kaiden spent a good amount of time on the courts while me and Kaydence sat on the sidelines and watched. Kaiden was eager to show of what he learned his first day at basketball camp.

O’Shae looked over at me with a blank face. “Why would I do that?”

Shifting my eyes over to where the kids were playing, I lifted my shoulders. “When I met with the kid’s social worker the other day she told me the kid's mom was nowhere near getting clean. It made me think about my time in the system. My parents gave me up without a second thought, left me at six because they didn’t want to be parents anymore. Every day I cried that they would come back for me. None of their family took me in and it left a longing of wanting my own family.

When I think about their mom not getting clean for them and all they had to go through my heart bleeds and stomach grows queasy. She used to leave them dirty and hungry to get high from what I was told and that alone makes me happy my parents gave me up instead of subjecting me to something like that. I haven’t thought about them in a while, but after Mrs. Turner left I did. I wondered what my life would have been like had they kept me.”

Growing quiet, my stomach churned at the thought. I remembered little of my childhood with my parents, but I don’t think they mistreated me, at least not that I remembered.

O'Shae's face grew more serious. His eyes were lifeless and his mouth was in a straight line.

"With all the bullshit I went through with my parents they're the last muthafuckas I would think about."

I blinked a few times. "I don't know how you do it." My voice was low.

"Do what?" His eyes tightened.

"Just keep going like I doesn't affect you. Everything you went through with your parents you never seem to speak on. Like it doesn't bother you?"

"It was a long time ago, Jerzey. Why dwell on it?" "I know but-"

"My dad used to beat my ass without any care in the world. When he was sober he was mean as fuck and yelling all the time. My mom just used to allow the shit. Ain't shit to think about or remanence. I don't have any good memories

being in that house or of my parents. It's not a time worth remembering."

Tucking my lips into my mouth I chose not to respond. I knew how hard it was for O'Shae to get over the trauma his parents, mainly his dad caused him. Even though his mom wasn't an abuser she never put a stop to it either or left. I knew O'Shae loved her, but he resented her at the same time.

"I'm sorry," I whispered lowering my gaze. "I didn't mean to push. I just been thinking of my time as a kid and-." O'Shae grabbed me and pulled me into him, hugging me tightly. "It's cool Jerzey, I get it. Both situations are fucked up, but there isn't a reason to keep thinking about it. At the end of the day, we're both good. You're getting the family you always wanted and I'm content with how shit played out. Fuck our parents, a'right."

When I lifted my head to look at O'Shae I was confused by the heated feeling that suddenly formed on the back of my neck. My stomach tingled.

The way his orbs peered into me caused a warm sense of security to fill me. It was always like that with

O'Shae. Whenever I was feeling some type of way, I could always count on that to change when being around him.

Dropping my attention to his lips when his tongue swiped over them, my heart stumbled and my pulse raced in my throat.

I was confused by the push I felt to feel his lips. O'Shae and I've always been close but lately, I've been feeling a curious swooping pull in my innards.

We were outside surrounded by others, but it felt as if it was only us two at the moment.

The look on O'Shae's face was unreadable which wasn't shocking. Sometimes it was hard to read what he was feeling. He was good at masking his emotions when he wanted to.

His breath tickled my nose, and it was then I realized I had subconsciously moved closer to his face. My heart pounded loudly, filling my ears as if they were drums.

O'Shae's hold around me was tighter than it first was. His thumb strummed my back lightly.

It was as if I didn't have control of my body right now as I moved closer again.

"Jerzey!" Kaydence rushed over to us causing me to jump. Quickly, I pulled away from O'Shae. Heat rushed to my cheeks and my stomach fipped.

"Uh, yeah. What's wrong?"

"Bwother!" She pointed and that's when I noticed him holding onto his knee.

"Damn it!" I hopped up and rushed over to him. "What happened?"

"Nothing, I just fell and cut my knee."

Kneeling down, I grabbed his leg out his arms and examined it."

"You cut it good. I could see the white meat," I cringed. "We should head home so I can clean it, so it doesn't get infected. Does it hurt? I can carry you."

Guilt fooded me, I had gotten so caught in whatever the hell just happened between me and O'Shae that I lost track of the kids momentarily.

"Man he's a boy, that's what's supposed to happen. Don't baby him." O'Shae said behind me.

"Yeah, I'm a boy. Not a baby." He frowned pulling away from me.

Glancing over my shoulder I mugged O'Shae but felt my heart jump inside me when I faced him causing me to swiftly turn away.

"Fine. Let's go then." I stood up.

"You okay bwther?" Kaydence asked her brother.

"I'm fne, Kaydence."

"I'm going to get them home. Thanks for today though." I let O'Shae know.

"You ready to get rid of me already?" He stared down at me.

"I uh..." I cleared my throat.

Silently I cursed myself. There was no reason for me to suddenly feel nervous or tongue-tied. This was O'Shae for Christ's sake.

"I don't want to take up any more of your time. You always push us to the front of the line and I'm sure you have other things to take care of." I shifted my eyes to the kids.

"Jerzey," O'Shae grabbed my chin and forced my attention back on him.

"Don't make whatever that was weird, a'right? It was a moment that we both got caught up in."

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "Okay." I blinked a few times.

Leaning down he placed a kiss on my forehead which made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. "I love you." He let me know, lips still on me.

It was something I wasn't foreign to but hearing him say it this time caused my body to feel weird. "I love you too." I hugged him tightly.

“To infinity.” He pulled back and gave me an intense stare.

I forced a smile on my face. “And beyond.”

O’Shae brushed my chin with his thumb, staring at me a second longer before releasing me.

His attention went to the kids while I pushed out a heavy breath. I couldn’t explain how my emotions seemed to suddenly be all over in O’Shae’s presence. I hadn’t felt this way since we were teenagers and even then it came and went. I needed to get a grip on my feelings. I had a lot on my plate right now and besides O’Shae was taken.

My chest tightened.

For a moment Payton’s words played over in my head, but I quickly brushed them off. As long as I kept reminding myself that O’Shae was just my best friend and didn’t look at me like that, then everything would be fine.



Me: *You finally done avoiding me?*

I hit send, sending Jerzey a message and slid my phone into my sweats then turned back to the car I was working on.

The past few days, I barely been able to get in contact with Jerzey and that wasn't like us. I also didn't like it. The moment the two of us had at the park had been playing over in my head since it happened.

I knew I should've broken the moment when it first started, but it was like I was in some kind of trance. Jerzey's breathing had slowed down, her cheeks grew flushed. Her eyes kept flashing down to my lips.

While I should have stopped her, I couldn't help but feel a pull to her instead. Ignoring the small voice that told me not to cross that line was a battle I oddly wanted to lose. Her small, yet plump lips had parted slowly.

It was wrong. I shouldn't even be thinking of Jerzey in that light. She was my best friend, had been that way for 15 years, yet lately, I'd been seeing something different in her.

My phone vibrated.

Best friend: *I'm not avoiding you O'Shae. I've just been busy this week.*

Smirking, I replied.

Me: *Busy doing what Jerzey?*

Lifting my eyes from my phone, I looked the car over in front of me. It was almost done. I had completely redone the dashboard and added a backup camera.

Best friend: *With me going back to work and everything I've been trying to get the kids into a routine. Not to mention I'm trying to find them a therapist. Like I said I've been busy!*

I chuckled at her last sentence. Jerzey was sweet, but at times she had some sass to her. All that she was saying made sense, but it still didn't hide the fact that she was

avoiding me. The last time I did see her she barely made eye contact with me.

I wasn't feeling that.

Rolling my neck between my shoulder, I slid my tongue over my teeth while putting my phone away. I would let Jerzey have it for now. If I knew her she was overthinking the moment at the park and it caused her to get anxious.

I would allow her to use the excuse she gave me, but that didn't mean I was letting it slide forever.

“Damn, it feels good to finally be back home.” Mateo expressed leaning back on the leather chair and extending his long legs forward.

I turned to face him. “How long you gon’ be here?” “Two weeks.”

Mateo was a roofer who traveled a lot. His company was always sending him to different states to work. He had just come from Dallas.

Mateo and I played football together back in high school. While I was a running back, he was the quarterback.

He was also the only one I connected with enough on the team to stay in contact with after the season and my injury.

“How’s Chy feel about that?” I asked, referring to his fancée.

“You know Chy, she doesn’t really make a fuss unless it’s necessary. She knows I’m not out here fucking around so she doesn’t trip.” He took a swig of the liquor in his glass.

My eyes traveled around the lightly lit building. We were at Rocky's Cigars. Unlike me, Mateo actually smoked cigars and used the place for that reason.

When my phone went off, I glanced at it seeing it was Payton calling me. The two of us had been in limbo this past week. I was trying to let go of the aggravation I felt when it came to her, but as of late my patience with her had been little to nonexistent.

"You gon' get that?" Mateo's eyes went to my phone.

I hit the side button.

"It's just Payton. I'll see her when I get home." "Y'all into it?" He rose an eyebrow.

Swiping my tongue across my top teeth, I thought about his question. "Nah, not foreal."

Mateo's laughing caught me off guard. "Not foreal? What the hell that mean?"

Picking my glass up, I took a drink of the Jack and Coke. Mateo picked up the brown and gold box of the table next to us and pulled a cigar out of it. I watched as he prepared it.

“It means, I ain’t really feeling the relationship anymore.” I lifted my shoulders.

“Damn, that bad?”

Without verbally responding, I gave him a crude nod.

Gossiping and telling my feelings wasn’t my thing. Mateo knew that too. I would let you know enough to get my point across and that was it.

“What’s the reason you’re ending things *this time*?” The way he said it caused me to glance at him with squinted eyes.

“Why you say it like that?”

One side of his mouth hiked up. “You don’t keep a girl around too long. I’m surprised Payton lasted this long. I actually thought y’all might make it.” He brought the cigar to his mouth and grabbed the lighter near the box.

“Shit, just ain’t working out. She wanna argue and shit too much and you know I’m not with that.”

Growing up arguing led to a lot of negative backlash in my household. I wasn't going through that again.

"Hmph." He grunted and chuckled.

"What?"

He shook his head. "How's Jerzey doing?"

My face went neutral, my lips formed a straight line. "She's good."

"She's divorced now, right?" My eyes narrowed trying to understand his line of questioning.

"Mateo just say what the fuck is on your mind."

Again he chuckled. "She the reason why you're leaving Payton?"

"Why would Jerzey be the reason?"

"C'mon man don't play that shit with me. Me and you both know a few of your relationships didn't last because you refused to end your relationship with Jerzey. Now that she's single I can only guess that's the reason."

I didn't reply right away.

Mateo's words weren't completely wrong. When my girlfriends in the past couldn't accept my friendship with Jerzey and wanted me to choose, they were always disappointed when I chose her.

"Me and Payton just ran our course. Shit happens all the time."

"You don't seem too torn up about it."

"Why the hell I feel like I'm being interrogated?" Mateo tossed his hands up and blew smoke out his mouth. "Just saying, with you and Jerzey both single now maybe y'all can finally get together."

My face went neutral again. "You and I both know." "Y'all just friends, you don't see each other like that.

Yeah, yeah." He waved me off. "You always spitting the same shit, but the way you treat her don't add up to what you're saying."

"Meaning?" I cocked my head to the side.

"Meaning the way you handle Jerzey is like a lover, not a friend. You hold her to a different standard than you do all your

girlfriends, put her before anyone. Don't hesitate to end things with anyone who disagrees with y'all friendship."

Again one side of his mouth hiked up. "Tell the truth nigga you and Jerzey be fucking on the low?"

My eyes cut into tight slits.

"No, I ain't fucking her."

"But you want to?"

I bit the inside of my cheek. "What's your point, Mateo?"

"It's something between the two of y'all and everyone sees it, but y'all obviously."

Instead of responding to him, I finished my drink and leaned back in my chair. The thoughts I'd been having when it came to Jerzey lately had me second guessing shit with us. She had taken on the mother role beautifully, just like I knew she could. Jerzey always craved a family to call her own. I know her main goal was to have kids of her own but given circumstances, she couldn't control it hasn't happened yet. Still, that didn't stop her from loving the foster

kids she has. Seeing what I already knew about her play out made my heartbeat increase three times its normal rate.

A light that her punk ass husband had dimmed for so long was slowly starting to find its self-back to the surface.

“O’Shae?” Jerzey opened the door with a shocked expression on her face.

“You gon’ let me in?” I stared down at her.

She fidget some and shifted her eyes. “Oh yeah. Sorry.” She opened the door wider and stepped to the side.

Walking in the house I turned to face her. The moment she shut the door and turned to face me, I gave her a once over.

Since she was still avoiding me, I had to pop up on her. I knew the kids would be in bed by now giving us the freedom to talk without interruptions.

“Is everything okay?” She asked, looking at me with knitted brows slowly starting towards me.

“You tell me. Why the hell you be avoiding me, Jerzey?” Her cheeks fushed while her eyes shifted left.

“I told you I wasn’t.”

“So now we lie to each other?” My head tilted.

Jerzey’s eyes found mine again. I watched her chest rise and fall slowly. “O’Shae.” She spoke lowly.

Her light brown eyes behind her glasses lowered. “This ain’t me and you, Jerz. We handle whatever issue we have and move on. This avoiding and dancing around the problems isn’t us.” I took a step towards her.

“There is no issue.”

My jaw clenched. When I got in front of her, I grabbed her waist resting my hands on her hips.

My tongue swiped over my lips. “Talk to me, Jerz. Wassup?”

A small sigh escaped her lips causing me to focus on them momentarily. Her top teeth scrapped over the bottom one before she pulled the corner in her mouth. A nervous habit of hers.

“Am I making you nervous?” She swallowed hard. Being this close to her caused the scent of vanilla and strawberries to hit my nose. It was a sweet, yet subtle scent that made my stomach flare.

“At the park. Things with us...” she started but allowed her voice to trail off. Her chest rose and fell again, this time slower. “Something felt different.” She spoke lowly.

My thumb brushed over her side, skating across the small piece of skin showing. It was subtle but it caused her to shudder.

I knew what Jerzey was referring to. There had been a shift that day, that moment. It was like a vaguely sensuous light had passed through us.

“How did it make you feel? Whatever that was? What did you think of that?” I questioned studying her face.

A tremor touched her mouth before she tucked the corner of her bottom lip again.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you want to act on it?”

Instead of responding she nodded and shifted her eyes.

Her confession made my adrenaline rush through my veins. It fred my blood to a fever pitch and caused heat to rush through my chest.

Removing one of my hands from her side, I lifted it and brushed over the bottom of her smooth jaw. “But it's wrong. I shouldn't have wanted to kiss you, O'Shae.”

“Why not?”

Her eyes brimmed with tenderness while her brows drew together. “Because you're my best friend.”

I licked my lips.

My fnger traced her jawline and then traveled back to her lips that were now pouted out.

For a second, I wasn't sure what to say because she was right. We shouldn't be thinking about each other like that. I shouldn't want to dip my head down and claim her sweet lips as my own. I

shouldn't want to grip her neck tightly and pull her closer to me until her breast were pressed against mine.

The thought caused my eyes to drop lower.

The thin shirt she was wearing gave me a full view of her hardened nipples poking out behind them.

A jolt shot to my dick.

"Jerzey." I started not really sure what to say. Never had I felt an internal battle inside myself like that.

Her eyes fluttered when her name fell from my lips.

She inhaled a deep breath.

"I-" just as I was about to say more, a loud scream made us both jump. Her eyes shot in the direction of the kid's room before she pulled out my grasp, rushing in that direction with me behind her.



The moment I heard Kaydence's scream I took off towards her room. My heart pounded loudly and only seemed to get louder the closer I got.

Hurriedly, I pushed open the door where I saw Kaiden had already arrived and was sitting on her bed.

“What happened?” My eyes traveled around the room before landing back on the siblings.

Kaydence was clinging to her brother crying in his chest. Kaiden peered up at me with dark eyes. His mouth turned upside down.

“Her night light went out and the door was closed.” He pointed to where the light was near her bed.

My eyes followed and slowly I bobbed my head. “Damnit.” I gritted.

I remember vaguely closing the door. I must have forgotten to leave it part way open. By now O’Shae was by my side.

Releasing a small breath, I held my chest attempting to calm my racing heart while I made my way to the bed.

“Kaydence,” I spoke slowly sitting on the bed. “It’s okay now. You don’t have to cry.”

She was still clinging to her brother, but her glossy eyes traveled up to look at me. “You’re safe, I promise. I’m sorry I shut the door all the way.”

She snifed. “Aye Kaiden, why don’t you let Jerzey get Kaydence now?” O’Shae called out.

I had forgotten he was even still here.

Kaiden’s eyes shot to him and remained blank for a moment.

They came back to me. I could tell he wasn’t feeling that.

“You don’t have to worry, Kaiden. I just want to make sure she’s okay.” I made sure to keep my voice soft.

Again, he stared at me for a long minute before finally nodding. “I’m not leaving.” He told her when he started to pull away and she panicked.

Kaiden and I switched. I moved to the head of the bed and pulled Kaydence in my lap when something damp touched my leg. My brows furrowed and I glanced down. It was then I noticed the sheets were of the bed too.

I rubbed small circles on Kaydence’s back. I inhaled a sharp breath, taking in a sour smell.

My eyes squinted.

I looked at O'Shae who was looking around, he must have noticed the same thing I did.

It took a couple minutes, but Kaydence finally calmed down. When I laid my eyes back on Kaiden he was carefully watching me. Part of me was happy Kaydence had someone in her corner like him, the other part was sad he had to take this role on. It was obvious he either wasn't sleeping or a light sleeper if he made it in here so quickly. He must have been used to being on guard and being ready for anything.

"Kaydence, why don't we go into the bathroom and get you cleaned up?" I offered once her small body stopped shaking against mine and her snifles slowed.

She glanced up at me, her cheeks and eyes now red and flushed. "I didn't mean to." She blinked a few times.

"Sometimes she wets the bed, but she's getting better." Kaiden hurried and said. "Kaydence, I told you not to do that anymore." Panic filled his small voice.

My nose scrunched and eyes shifted to O'Shae, he looked just as surprised at me. This was the first time I heard Kaiden chastise his sister.

"It an- accident." Her words came out strained. Her body shook again. Her arms were around me and clung tighter.

My chest grew tight. It made my stomach turn that every time something happened they thought they would get punished.

Rubbing her back again, I lowered my head and kissed the top of her head. "It's okay, Kay. You're a big girl, I know. Sometimes accidents happen. Let's get you cleaned up, okay?"

Her eyes went to her brother before she bobbed her head.

"Kaiden, why don't you go lay back down? I'll get your sister cleaned up and back to-."

"No." He blurted out harshly. His brows pinched together. "Don't whoop her. She didn't mean to."

My top teeth scrapped over my bottom lip. “Kaiden, I’m not going to whoop her. She was scared and had an accident. It’s okay.”

I made sure to keep eye contact with him.

The smell of urine filled my nose again. It made my head ache.

I glanced at O’Shae hoping would help.

“Aye Kaiden, why don’t we give the girls some privacy? I never saw your room before.” He cut in.

He didn’t reply to him right away. “Kaydence, do you want me to stay with you?”

I continued rubbing her back. When she looked at me her eyes were wide and still pooled with tears. “I trouble?”

I shook my head and gave her a small assuring smile. “No baby, you’re not in trouble.”

I could feel her heart pounding in her chest while she hugged me. “I okay.” She looked at her brother and let him know.

Hesitancy still bounced around on his face. “Okay, I’ll be right in my room though.” Kaiden looked at me. “Don’t close the door.” His eyes narrowed.

Part of me wanted to laugh. Sometimes it was like he was the parent.

Kaiden led O’Shae into his room and I couldn’t be more grateful for him. I know I needed to stop being so timid when it came to Kaiden, but I didn’t want to scare him. He had been through so much already, the both of them have. Handling them with kid gloves I felt was best, but I knew I had to start showing I was more than capable of handling things.

Taking Kaydence into the bathroom, I kept the door cracked while I stripped her of her soiled clothes and washed her up. She had finally calmed down but was quiet. Being so traumatized as a kid had to be rough. No kid should have to be so guarded or on edge.

First thing in the morning I was finding a therapist. I had been doing some research but now it was time for action. Social services had recommended a few to me as well.

“Kaydence,” I called out to her quietly pulling the new sleeping gown over her head.

She looked at me with wide eyes but didn't speak. Her unicorn was now in her hands, cuffed right to her chest.

“I need to ask you something but you're not in trouble, okay?” My voice stayed low and soft.

Kaydence nodded.

Smiling softly, I grabbed her hands, giving them a small squeeze. “Your sheets aren't on your bed anymore.” That quick the calm look on her face shifted. “Don't worry, it's fine. I just need to know where they are so I can wash them and get you some new ones.”

Kaydence blinked a couple times and her hand suddenly clammy. She shifted her eyes around the room before landing on a certain area.

Glancing over my shoulder, I looked where her toy box was.

Giving her hands one last squeeze, I let her go and stood up to go by the toy box.

I looked around the box and noticed her sheets balled up behind it. Leaning down I picked them up and stumbled when the string aroma of pee hit my nose. My eyes slightly watered.

How long had these been here?

I tried to remember if I had noticed this stench before.

“Got them.” I turned around lifting the sheet. Kaydence glanced at them.

“Everything good now?” I looked towards the door and noticed O’Shae. Kaiden rushed in and to his sister.

Flashing a reassuring grin, I nodded. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“I’m going to go throw these in the washer and grab you some new ones, okay?” I looked at Kaydence and let her know.

Heading out the room with O’Shae behind me, I walked across the house to where my laundry room was located.

After loading the washer, I turned and dropped my head, closing my eyes for a moment. I knew being a foster parent could be challenging. I knew it took patience and a lot of love. Times like now, however, I felt like I jumped the

gun. Like maybe I craved to have kids and a family of my own so bad that I didn't think things through.

Thoughts of my marriage popped in my head. Mario always said I was so obsessed with being a parent that it caused a wedge between us. The two miscarriages I suffered flashed through my mind. I gripped the washing machine tightly.

"Jerz?" O'Shae called out.

"What if I'm in over my head, O? What if Mario was right? Some people just aren't meant to be a mother." My bottom lip trembled and tears clouded my vision.

Suddenly arms were wrapped around me from behind and O'Shae's large body was pressed against me. His chin rested on the top of my head.

“That nigga told you that?” Instead of responding, I allowed my tears to fall.

O’Shae pulled back and spun me around so I was facing him. His dark eyes peered into me. He grabbed my shoulders and held them tightly.

“Listen to me,” he spoke, I could tell he was tryna keep his composure. “Fuck that nigga. That bullshit you just

said to me, got me wanting to fnd him and give him the ass whooping I *been* owing him.” My heart stuttered in my chest. “I don’t know anyone else in the world who’s more deserving of being a mother. You’re the most kind hearted, big hearted, nurturing person I know. Any kid would be lucky to have you as a parent.”

His hands moved from my shoulders to my waist. “Those kids in there, they need you. Right now, it may seem like a lot but you got this. You’re strong as fuck. Don’t allow Mario or anyone else to convince you otherwise. You hear me?”

It seemed like the walls around us were closing in. I sucked in a sharp breath as his words caused heat to rush through my chest.

My stomach fluttered like crazy.

The more I stared at him the more I found myself falling down a rabbit hole I couldn't climb out of. I couldn't explain the feelings that were currently rushing through me, but I couldn't escape them.

Blood rushed through my veins, my heart a beat away from exploding. The same pull I had at the park suddenly

overflowed me. Passion rushed from my stomach to my chest.

My eyes fell on his lips.

A tug of desire fluttered through my belly.

Unable to keep my emotions under control, I leaned up, grabbed him and crashed my mouth into his. O'Shae's hands sunk into my hips.

My mouth opened accepting his tongue. A wild swirl filled the pit of my stomach. Desire rushed up my spine, covering my body like a warm blanket.

Urgency to get closer to him filled me. When I went to step closer to him, O'Shae stopped me and pulled his mouth from mine.

I was breathing heavily, my eyes lowered.

"Jerzey," he gritted huskily.

My heart pounded in my ears.

"Please." I begged.

Right now logic seemed to go out the window. So many different feelings were rushing through me. I needed some sense of security to keep me grounded. O'Shae did that for me. He's *always* been that for me.

His orbs studied me, mouth pressed in a straight line, and his top lip ticked.

"Right now, you're vulnerable. This..." he pushed a heavy breath out. "This isn't you. Isn't us."

His words were like a dagger being sent through my heart. "I don't. I'm not-."

My words were staggered. I tried to gather my thoughts, but they seem to be all over.

“Listen to me, Jerzey.” His words were softer now, face more laxed. “I love you; you know that. I would do anything for you. The last thing, I want to do is take advantage of you especially, in an emotional state. I would *never* do that. I’m here for you, you know that. Just not like that.”

I blinked a couple times slowly bobbing my head, processing his words.

My stomach fipped. “You’re right. I, I, I’m sorry.” Heat rushed to my cheeks. I couldn’t believe I just tried to throw myself at O’Shae. I didn’t know what the hell was wrong with me. Lately, the feelings I’ve been having for him were anything but as a best friend.

One side of his mouth hiked up. “Don’t be sorry, Jerzey.” His hand lifted and brushed over the bottom of my cheek. “I’m not complaining. I just don’t want you doing anything you regret. I never want to be your regret.”

I could taste my pulse in my throat now.

O’Shae pulled me into him and hugged me tightly. Closing my eyes, I gripped his strong back tightly and

dug my face into his broad chest.

Times like this I was grateful for O'Shae being in my life. No matter what he always looked out for me and had my back. There was never a time I worried when I was with him.



“O’Shae!” Terrance’s voice called out to me gaining my attention.

I snapped out my head and glanced at him.

My mind had been occupied since leaving Jerzey’s house last night. The rushed and heated emotions that were blanketed all over her face stayed embedded in my mind. I couldn’t get the touch of her sweet lips against mine out my mind. The nagging push I had to deepen the kiss and claim her body was almost overwhelming, but I had to think logically.

Jerzey was an emotional wreck last night. She was fighting a lot of feelings, feelings I felt she never dealt with when it came to her divorce. The last thing I would ever do

was take advantage of that. Plus, our whole life she’s *just* been my best friend. I never wanted to fuck that up.

No matter how old we got, I could never handle her crying.

Once she got control of herself, she grabbed some clean sheets and went back to Kaydence’s room to change her sheets and

cleaned the bed. When she noticed she didn't have a bulb for the light, she didn't hesitate to allow Kaydence to sleep with her. Jerzey could doubt she wasn't meant for this, but she was wrong. Those kids needed her and truthfully she needed them as well.

“Wassup?” I asked Terrance after a few seconds of silence.

“Your girl's here to see you.” I was in the breakroom right now, trying to gather my thoughts.

“Jerzey?” I questioned with furrowed brows.

“Jerzey?” His face scrunched. “No, Payton.”

Payton.

That's right, by the time I got home last night she was sleep. I was still staying in the guest room and was able to

shower and lay down in peace. When I got up this morning she was gone already.

“Oh right. Send her in here.” I let him know sitting up straight in the plush chair I was in.

He gave me a curious look before nodding.

I watched as he turned to leave, my hands folded between my legs while my legs gapped further.

Last night Payton was nowhere in mind. The only thing that stopped me from going any further was Jerzey's mental state at the time. For a moment, my hands balled up and the thought of Mario spewing the bullshit he did to her caused the veins in my neck to throb.

"Hey." Payton's soft voice filled the break room.

Lifting my eyes, they landed on her taking her in. She was dressed in a sun dress that stopped just above her ankles. It was a halter top, giving a glimpse of the top of her breast.

"Wassup Pay," I nodded. "Why aren't you at work?" Her hands folded in front of her. "No school today. Us teachers had meetings this morning and that was it."

Silence filled the room. "I was wondering if you wanted to grab something to eat. I know you normally take a break around this time?" I rose a brow.

Payton never came to eat with me, even when she was of. I looked at the clock on the wall. I had about a half hour left.

“Yeah, we can.”

She gave me a small, toothless grin. “Okay.”

“I gotta head back, Pay.” I let her know, gathering up my stuff.

We went to the same deli up the street where Jerzey had brought me food from a while back. It didn't take long to get our orders. The lunch was silent. I could feel Payton look at me every so often but she didn't speak.

“Already?” She questioned, poking her bottom lip out. I glanced at my phone and nodded. “Yeah.”

Her mouth twisted to the side. “Are we okay, O'Shae?” Her eyes lowered and her face dropped.

I pushed a sigh out. “What you mean?”

“I mean,” she paused and swallowed hard. “These past couple months have been so rocky. We hardly talk anymore. I feel like I hardly even see you anymore.”

“Payton.”

“I want to fx whatever this is. I don’t like fighting with you. I know a lot of it is my fault, but I’m going to fx things. Honestly, I don’t know what’s been up with me lately, but I plan on doing better.”

Sincerity flashed through her eyes.

I grabbed the back of my neck and squeezed it. “Can we just call it truce, please? I miss my man. I miss you sleeping next to me. I miss *fucking* my man.”

My dick twitched.

It had been a minute since I felt her. Outside of her giving me head, my dick hadn’t seen any action.

“I gotta head back to work, we’ll talk about this later, a’right?”

Her face fell. “Okay.”

I didn’t miss the disappointment in her tone. Hurting Payton wasn’t something I wanted to do, but I wasn’t sure if

I could give her what she wanted. I knew by avoiding her I was putting off the intervenable.

We stood up and made our way out the deli. The walk back to the shop was quiet. My mind heavy with thoughts.

“I guess I’ll see you at home.”

I licked my lips and nodded. She hesitated for a moment before walking into me and hugging me. My arms went around her.

What used to feel natural, now felt foreign to me.

“I love you, O’Shae.” She let me know.

My throat tightened. “You too, Pay.” Her head lifted, eyes bounced between mine. Eventually, she stretched her neck with her lips puckered out.

Not wanting to hurt her anymore, I met her halfway kissing her. I waited for something, anything to spark within me.

Pulling back, I released her. “Go ahead to your car so I can watch you.”

Her shoulders fell. Thankfully she didn’t fight me. Today Payton seemed like a completely different person than who’d she been these past couple months.

Once Payton was in her car, I turned and headed back into the shop. Tony, Terrance's son was behind the front desk.

I tossed him a head nod then headed for the garage. I had two more cars for the day then I could head out.

Working on cars was my safe haven. Whenever there was a lot on my mind, I never hesitated to get lost in them.

"I'm glad you agreed to come with us." Jerzey flashed a grin at me. She wanted to do something with the kids that was fun and thought a movie would be good. The kids seemed to have a good time and enjoyed themselves.

It had been three days since I laid eyes on hers and three days since the kiss. I was for sure she would try to avoid me again after overthinking things, but thankfully I was wrong. From what she told me, the following night had been okay. She replaced the night light and told me she didn't leave the room until Kaydence was sleeping.

"Did you guys enjoy yourself?" She looked down at the kids as we headed for my car.

Both of them nodded which caused her smile to grow. I was happy to see her in better spirits. She hadn't mentioned the small breakdown she had the other day and neither did I.

"Can we get ice cream?" Kaiden asked once we were in the car.

Jerzey looked over at me and I shrugged. It was her call.

"Do you have anything to do?"

I shook my head. "Nah." Payton was somewhere with her sister. The two of us still needed to talk, but now it seemed both of us were avoiding it.

"Okay, then I guess ice cream it is." She grabbed her seat belt and put it on.

Hitting the button to start my car, a low hum traveled through my stomach when the engine roared.

"Your teachers told me you're doing great in school so far, Kaiden." Jerzey spoke while we sat at one of the outside tables.

“School’s easy.” He lifted his shoulders keeping his eyes on his ice cream.

“It’s more than that. Your teacher said she could already tell you’re advanced for your age. I’m proud of you.” Jerzey looked like a proud mother at the moment as she praised Kaiden. You could tell he was eating it up, but tried to not show it.

“Aye, that’s dope. What about basketball? How’s that going?”

“Odin, the guy that runs his age group said he’s a natural. He said he can be a pointing guard.”

“Point guard.” Kaiden groaned causing me to chuckle. “My bad.” She tossed her hands up. “A point guard.”

I bobbed my head. “That’s what’s up. I figured when I saw you on the court that day.” His mouth twitched into a smile. I shifted my eyes to Kaydence who seemed to be in her own world as she ate her chocolate sundae.

“And you. My grandma is quite fond of you. I think you might replace me as her favorite.” Kaydence glanced at me with a shy grin on her face but didn’t reply.

“She loves being over Granny Mae’s. I think she has her spoiled already.”

“We made cookies!” Kaydence cut in.

“You like cookies?” Kaydence nodded, licking her spoon.
“What’s your favorite cookie?”

“Peanut butter!” She shouted happily.

It was nice seeing the kids actually be able to be kids for once. The two of them seemed a lot happier than when they first arrived.

“Oh yeah, I fuck with peanut butter.”

“Language.” Jerzey’s cut her eyes at me.

Both Kaydence and Kaiden laughed. “Cursings a habit, my bad.” I smirked eating the last of my ice cream.

Once we finished eating, Jerzey decided it was time to get the kids home and ready for bed.

I parked in the parking lot across the street. While we waited for the cars to clear a voice sounded next to us.

“Isn’t that your wife?”

Looking over I noticed Mario along with a few others in a group a couple ways down. My body tensed and I stepped

closer to Jerzey. Kaydence was standing in front of me, I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her into me.

Mario looked over; his eyes bounced around the scene in front of him.

My eyes cut to slits when he said something and then headed over to us.

“Well, well, well. Look at the happy looking family.” A mocking grin was on Mario’s face. He looked from the kids to me to Jerzey.

“Go away, Mario.” She gritted.

My jaw clenched. Memories of what Jerzey confessed to me played over in my head.

“Take the kids to the car and wait for me,” I told her releasing Kaydence.

Out the corner of my eye, I noticed Kaiden mugging Mario. “You know it’s funny, the whole time we were together I knew you wanted my wife. I’m not shocked though, you were upset she was the one thing I had before you. Couldn’t stomach that I had your precious best friend in ways you would never.”

“Mario, will you go away?!” She shrieked.

The kids jumped. “Go to my car!” I repeated this time a little more stern.

“O’Shae.”

“Jerzey go!”

“I see you finally got the little family you were desperate to have. Of course, *you* were right there to help her in this role, huh? You were always hiding in the shadows waiting for a nigga to fuck up.” He chortled. “Y’all probably didn’t even wait for the ink on the divorce papers to dry before y’all hooked up.”

I took a step closer to him, hands clenched at my side. The veins in my neck throbbed. Teeth clamped together so hard it caused my jaw to ache.

“It’s cool though.” His shoulders lifted. “You can have her now. I had her and she served her purpose. She was the one thing I was finally able to conquer that you couldn’t. There was no need to stay with her anymore.” He was speaking to me, but his eyes were locked on Jerzey.

Without thinking I launched at him, sending my balled up fist into his face. He fell back, but that didn’t stop me. Quickly hovering over Mario, I saw red as I sent my fist into

his face over and over. The feeling of his bones cracking under my hand caused my adrenaline to rush even more.

I could hear cries, yelling, and pleas around me but I was too far gone to stop. This had been building up. I had been longing to get my hand on this nigga.

“O’Shae, please!” Jerzey’s voice suddenly knocked me out the trance I was in.

I blinked a few times, my fist in the air preparing for another hit. When I looked around, I noticed the people Mario was with were now surrounding us. Jerzey was next to us along with the kids, a frightened look on their faces.

“Fuck!” I gritted.

Staring down at Mario, I had done a number on him. His eyes were swollen, already blackening. Blood gushing out his nose and pouring from his mouth.

Reaching down, I grabbed the collar of his shirt. “Stay the fuck away from her,” I shook him. “She tells me you bothered her again and Ima fuck you up worse than this.”

Mario groaned in response. My tongue swiped over my top teeth.

My stomach flipped. “Oh and by the way,” I grunted. “You didn’t have Jerzey before me. Stupid ass nigga.” I shoved him down and released him.

Standing straight up, I rolled my neck between my shoulders and flexed my hands.

“Let’s go.” I turned for the street.

Jerzey and the kids were silent while they followed behind me.

I knew I had overdone it. My anger was something I learned to manage, but there were times it overtook me. Those times I felt like my father and that was the last thing I wanted.

My chest ached as I clenched my jaw again.

By the look in Jerzey’s eyes, I knew she was disappointed by my actions. She had only seen me get like this one other time. I always wanted to shield this side of myself from her.

“Jerzey.” I started when we reached my car.

“Not right now, O’Shae.” She let me know as she aided the kids inside the car.

My jaw tightened.

I knew this was something I had to make right, but I wasn’t going to apologize for defending her.



“You sure Granny Mae or grandad won’t be home anytime soon?” I breathlessly moaned as ffteen-year-old O’Shae kissed my neck.

He pulled back and stared at me with dark, lustful eyes. “Jerz, she’s at the hospital and grandads at the shop. We’re good. Neither will be home until later tonight.”

I knew his words were true Granny Mae was the head nurse at the hospital and grandad worked as a mechanic.

I blinked a few times and took a deep breath to calm my raging heart. "Okay. You're right sorry."

O'Shae flashed me a crooked grin. "We don't have to do this, Jerzey. I don't want you uncomfortable." His hand went through my hair causing goosebumps to fill my arms.

"No, I'm fine." A slight grin formed on my face. "C'mon." I grabbed the bottom of his shirt, pulling him closer to me.

O'Shae licked his mahogany-toned lips and moved in, pressing them against mine. My stomach fluttered and blood rushed through my veins like a raging river.

O'Shae's hand went to my forming breast and he caressed them roughly.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as he gently pushed me back and hovered over me. My body slightly shook, but not because I was scared of O'Shae. This moment between us was

something we would never get back, but it also meant something to me.

“Jerzey, promise me before we fully go through with this, nothing is going to change with us. You’ll still be my best friend and we’ll continue like nothing happened.” O’Shae was now above me with both of us stripped out our clothes.

I took a second to give him a once over. His body sculpted perfectly from the hours he spent working out for

football. His eight pack on full display, the deep V cut on his pelvis that caused my center to throb.

Lowering my eyes, I felt my breath stagger landing on his condom covered dick. For a teen O’Shae was already a nice size, at least I assumed. He was the only guy I had seen.

“I know, O’Shae. I know don’t worry.” I assured him, raising a hand and running down the front of his body. Another crooked grin formed on his face.

“A’right, I don’t know a lot about this, but if we’re doing this, we’re doing it right.” Before I could ask him what he was talking about O’Shae had lowered himself between my legs and propped them up on his shoulders.

I jumped the moment his tongue came in contact with my center.

O’Shae and I made a pack to take each other’s virginity. Well, more so I asked him to be my frst because I wanted it to be with someone that meant something to me and I know would value it as much as I did. O’Shae was hesitant about it at frst but eventually, he agreed. Being

that he was too a virgin, I knew this was something special we could share.

My chest rose and my hand went to his hand when he sucked on my clit. “Do that again!” I begged him.

He glanced up at me as he did what I begged. “I like that,” I cried. His large fnger went inside me causing me to finch as it stretched my untouched walls.

For it being his first time, O'Shae caused my body to feel like it was floating as he continued to explore my lower lips with his mouth. He had managed to get two fingers inside of me the wetter I got. It hurt, but I knew it would be nothing compared to his shaft.

O'Shae was now face to face with me, his dick poking at my center.

His dark orbs bored into mine. "I'm about to put it in." He let me know in a strained voice.

Swallowing hard, I bobbed my head. My arms went around him and gripped his muscular back.

Wincing the moment he pushed inside of me, I felt my body tense without my permission.

"You want me to pull out?" He froze.

I shook my head squeezing my eyes shut. "Keep going." His mouth dropped and he pecked my face as he pushed inside me. My nails sunk into his back

"Don't tense up, Jerz. Try to relax."

I wanted to do what he said, but it was hard. I wasn't expecting it to hurt this bad.

"Just put it all in," I begged. "That's gonna hurt even more."

"I don't care! I just want it over with."

My eyes were still closed and my nails still in his back. I was ready for this to be over.

"Okay, okay."

I gasped the moment all of him was inside me, my nails sunk deeper inside his back. Tears fell from my eyes.

Jerzey, look at me." He demanded in a low tone, his voice sort of strained.

Fluttering my eyes open I stared at my best friend. The only person I trusted wholeheartedly in the world.

His eyes brimmed with a gentle passion and tenderness.

"I love you Jerzey and I'm honored you wanted to share this with me. This is something the two of us will never forget."

My heartbeat skyrocketed in my chest as my stomach filled with a warmth I never felt before.

"I love you too, O'Shae." I cried.

I was snapped out my memories when O'Shae called my name. I looked and noticed we were now outside my house. I was so lost in my head that I didn't even realize we were here.

"Thanks for going out with us," I told O'Shae and opened my door.

I heard him mumbling something I couldn't make out and then his door opened and closed.

"They both fell asleep and it's no point in waking them. I'll grab him and you grab her." He told me.

I wanted to fight him, but when I looked back at the kids, I thought against it. "Fine."

His glare on me became hard and his jaw clenched but gave me a crude nod. I know the way I was acting was pissing him of.

Honestly, I wasn't mad at the fact O'Shae had beat Mario's ass. It was way past due. There were multiple times he threaten it but I always begged him not to. I just hated that he chose to finally do it in front of the kids. They were already dealing with enough and the last thing I needed them to do was to be triggered by violence.

O'Shae followed behind me with Kaiden in his arms. We walked in the house and instantly in the direction of the kid's bedroom.

"Go ahead and lay him down. I'll change Kaydence then come do him." I walked into Kaydence's room without waiting for him to reply.

She gave me a little fight but didn't wake up as I changed her into her sleeping clothes and put her bonnet on.

I smiled down at her and leaned down kissing the top of her head. "I love you," I whispered.

After finishing her, I headed into Kaiden's room and noticed O'Shae wasn't in it anymore. Repeating the same cycle I did with his

sister, I changed his clothes but as I was changing him he jumped up.

“It’s just me, Kaiden. You’re fine. Go back to sleep.” I let him know while he looked around with wild eyes.

His eyes fluttered as they landed on me. They sagged with sleepiness.

Nodding his small head he allowed me to finish changing him and tuck him in.

“I love you,” I spoke into the top of his head.

“Love you.” He muttered back at me causing me to freeze.

My heart stumbled in my chest. Eyes grew wide. I stared at him with my mouth parted thinking I misheard him. This was the first time I’d heard those words from either kids. I didn’t even know if he meant them but I would still take it.

I ran my hand over the top of his head, through his curls. It was about time for him to go to the barbershop again.

After leaving out Kaiden's room I started for my room so I could shower and change.

"Shit, O'Shae!" I jumped grabbing my chest when I saw him on my couch. "I thought you left."

He stood up and stalked towards me. His eyes dark and sharp. His brows pulled together in an affronted frown. "Nah, not until we talk. I'm not gon' apologize for beating that niggas ass he-"

"I don't want you to apologize. I know he deserved it." "Then where the fuck did the attitude come from?" A muscle flickered in his jaw.

"I was pissed because you did it in front of the kids. They've dealt with enough violence in the past, I don't want that with them now."

His face soften and he glanced in the direction of the kid's room. He grabbed the back of his neck. "Shit, you right. I shouldn't have done that shit around them." His eyes fell back on me. "That nigga just pushed me too damn far talking about you like that. You

know I would never allow anyone to disrespect you.” His voice suddenly dropped an octave.

O’Shae’s mouth thinned and eyes narrowed. “He had that shit coming to him. He’s just lucky y’all were there because I would have...” Instead of finishing his sentence, he allowed his words to trail off.

My stomach clenched.

Noticing his eyes had a faraway look in them, I stepped forward placing my hand on his arm. His attention snapped back to me.

“O’Shae,” I kept my voice low and light. “I don’t want you to go to that place because it’s not you. Although I’m honored you fought to defend me, I can’t lie and say that it wasn’t scary either. You seemed to flip into a completely different person.”

O’Shae looked possessed when he was fighting Mario.

“I’m not him.” He spoke roughly.

I gripped his wrist. “I know you’re not, O’Shae. You’re so much better than him. I would never compare you to him.”

Being so close to O'Shae after what happened in my laundry room was tough. The moment I thought about how I threw myself at him I wanted to coward away. The only thing that stopped me was the fact that O'Shae wasn't the guy to make you feel awkward or throw anything in your face. He was always considerate of my feelings.

Even back to our first time, he never treated me any differently. He helped me clean myself up, ordered us something to eat, and we spent the rest of the evening watching movies until I headed home.

Still, me throwing myself at him was embarrassing. The past couple weeks, my views on O'Shae had been different. Seeing how he helped me with kids when he didn't have to was a turn-on. O'Shae had learned to mask his feelings a long time ago. He didn't speak out much and he was typically calm, laid back, and kept people at arm's length. When he interacted with the kids, especially Kaiden he was the complete opposite of that. I loved that, I loved seeing that side of him. It didn't come out often but when it did, it caused a swirl of giddy emotions to fash through my stomach.

“You basically told him you were my frst.” My head tilted to the side.

His tongue slowly dragged over his lips and his eyes dropped. “Yeah, my bad about that. I wasn’t saying it on some bragging shit, I just hated how he talked about you like you were a trophy that he was trying to beat me to get.

Mario and his weird-ass obsession with being better than me was cool, but I wasn’t going to let him act like all you were a consolation prize.”

Pulling my hands away from his wrist and I folded them across my chest and bounced back and forth on the balls of my feet. I didn’t miss that either. The way Mario bragged on me was like a slap in the face. He basically said he only perused me so he could have an advantage over O’Shae. That was a blow to the gut.

“I was so stupid. All these years being with him, even marrying him. I knew it was a mistake before we even got married, but I wanted it to work so bad. I wanted stability and a family so bad,

I convinced myself that maybe once we were married Mario would be the guy I needed him to be or at least help me get what I wanted most in the world.” I swallowed hard. “To hear how he spoke about me as if all the years we had together meant nothing was a hard pill to swallow, but I guess I asked for it.”

My eyes shifted.

O’Shae cufed my chin. “Nah, we ain’t even gon’ do that. Your only downfall was being too trusting.” I turned my

attention back to him. “You came from a past where you didn’t have anyone so wanting to create a family of your own is normal, Jerzey. There’s nothing wrong with that. It didn’t work out with him but shit from where I standing it’s a blessing. Did you really want to be tied to that nigga for the rest of your life?”

Just the thought of that caused a distaste to form in my mouth. “No, absolutely not.”

“The night we took each other virginitities, I didn’t regret it. I felt safe and knew you would make the experience enjoyable regardless of if we didn’t know what we were doing. When it came to Mario and

our marriage, I never had that sense of safety with him. I didn't feel like I could just be myself and know everything would be okay. Yet, I stayed and tried to make it work."

"I still remember that day," he bit a smirk back. "I remember every face you made, every sound you made." My breath faltered as the hair on the back of my neck rose.

"You were so vulnerable that night, so trusting and shined of innocence." He lifted his hand and raked it through my hair. "You were perfect."

My heart danced in my chest.

A knot rose in my throat.

"Mario never deserved you. Hell neither did I. You were so pure and both me and Mario only tainted you."

"You didn't!" I quickly blurted out. "You didn't." This time my voice was softer.

Something flashed through his eyes I could make out. "My point is Mario's the type of nigga who couldn't handle someone shining brighter than him so he does whatever he can to dim that

light. He tried that with you, but you didn't let him then so don't let him now. Fuck that nigga, he doesn't deserve to have that power over you, Jerz. That family you want you're going to have it, hell you have it now. You didn't need him for shit and still don't. Don't let him cause you to doubt yourself because you're the shit, Jerz."

My blood surged from my fingertips to my toes as his words played over in my head. I attempted to swallow my heart back down in my chest as it threaten to escape. My fingers ached to touch him, lips craved to taste his again.

"Don't forget you also have me. I'm always on your side, never forget that."

Heaving in a long sigh, I loved the way his words warmed my chest.

"How did I get so lucky to have someone like you come into my life?" My question didn't really need an answer, but it's something I often thought about.

"Nah Jerzey. You got it wrong, *baby*. *I'm* the lucky

one.”

After O’Shae’s heartwarming words to me, he left out. I hoped he would stay longer, but instead of voicing that I allowed him to go. It was becoming harder and harder to keep my feelings for O’Shae buried. It seemed the more he was around the more I found myself wanting to leave the platonic field we were in into something deeper.

With a towel wrapped around me, I went inside the bottom drawer of my dresser and pulled the book out, turning and going to my bed. My fingers brushed over the cover and my heart staggered. My chest constricted as I opened the front page.

The moment my eyes landed on the black and white photos inside, the flood started to build in my eyes. I picked the two sonograms and held them in, tossing the old book to the side.

I wasn’t sure if I kept these to bring me comfort or to torture myself.

I had gotten pregnant twice during my marriage to Mario, both times the baby only lasted about three months before they were gone.

During my first pregnancy, I learned I suffered from Adenomyosis which caused my uterus to grow three times the normal size. It was something I wasn't prepared for and couldn't understand. All I wanted to do was have a baby and learning that seem to snatch the rug from under me.

My eyes focused on the second sonogram. It had been eight months since this pregnancy. Me and Mario stopped trying for kids once we found out my condition, finding out I was pregnant again was shocking, but I was happy. Unfortunately, I was the only one who was happy.

It didn't take long for Mario to express how he had given up wanting to be a father and thought it wasn't the best to keep the fetus.

I wiped my tears and ran my hand over the image.

My second pregnancy broke something in me. Mario wasn't supportive nor was he there for me emotionally. With him working at

the hospital he worked long hours sometimes I wouldn't even see him. He never attempted to check in on me and see how I was doing. It felt as if I was a single parent when I was actually married. The moment I lost my baby, I knew my marriage was over and didn't hesitate to file the papers.

Sighing, my shoulders fell forward.

Even though I might not have the opportunity to become a mother biologically I was still having my chance now. The only issue was with fostering there was no guarantee how long I would have the kids. I was forming a bond with them, I had grown to love them and wanted to see them have a better life. *I* wanted to give them a better life.

O'Shae was right, I couldn't allow Mario to dim my light or cause me to feel bad about anything. I was finally getting something I never had... *a family*.



I sat on my bed with my head dropped forward in my hands feeling like a weight was on weighing me down.

Mentally I was preparing myself for the next few minutes. I knew they were about to turn upside down and cause a headache I desperately wanted to avoid. All morning at the shop I had been playing my next move over in my head and finally came to the

conclusion that today it had to happen. Too much had happened to elude it any longer.

“Hey, baby!” Payton bounced in our room. Lifting my eyes I watched her glide around the room with a smile on her face. Seeing her in a happy mood made what I was about to do more fucked up.

“So I was thinking we should-.” Her words faded out when she turned and noticed the bags near me. Her brows dipped together and her mouth turned upside down.

“Are you going out of town and didn’t tell me?” She bounced her eyes from me to the bags.

Pushing a heavy sigh out, I stood up.

“Payton, we need to talk.” Her irises grew tight.

“Okay...” hesitancy dripped from her mouth.

She slowly made her way to me. “What’s wrong, baby?”

We never really spoke about the issue we were having after the day she popped up to go to lunch with me. We kind of let things linger and came to some silent agreement to move on. That wasn’t

sitting well with me. My mind nor my heart was in this relationship anymore and I couldn't keep faking like it was.

Reaching behind me, I grabbed the back of my neck and squeezed it. My eyes roamed Payton over. We had a good run but at the end of the day, she wasn't the one for me. I always knew that but maybe the thought of having to start over with someone else stopped me from ending

things. I had grown comfortable in our relationship and although the spark hadn't been there for a while, I stayed.

"This ain't working for me anymore." Not one to beat around the bush, I ripped the band-aid off.

Her face dropped and a blank expression formed soon after. "What?"

I cleared my throat. "We had a good run, but this." I pointed between us. "Isn't working anymore. I know that-."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" She bellowed, face instantly turned bright red. "Are you dumping me?"

My lips pressed in a straight line as creases filled my forehead. “Cut all that damn yelling out. I’m tryna have an adult conversation.”

“Fuck your adult conversation! You’re dumping me!” She pointed at her chest. “After two years, you’re leaving me!”

The vein in my neck throbbed. The theatrics was what I hoped to circumvent during this.

“Look, I’ll let you keep the house. I’ll call the landlord and get my name off the lease. I’ll pay the next couple of months of rent too since I’m leaving suddenly but I *am* leaving.”

“I don’t get it O’Shae, we were happy! Up until a few months ago, everything was fine. Now suddenly it’s like we’re always at each other’s throats and you announce you’re leaving. What changed?” Her voice was full of hostility as she spoke. Her leg bounced causing her body to shake.

“My feelings.” I lifted my shoulders. Never the one to mix words I was going to give it to her straight. “I don’t feel the same way about you as I did before, Payton. Don’t ask me why because I can’t tell you. We just grew apart I guess.”

“You guess? *You guess!* That’s bullshit O’Shae and you know it! It’s Jerzey isn’t it?!”

“Jerzey? She ain’t got shit to go this with.” My brows pinched together.

“Bullshit! She gets divorced then suddenly you’re like a whole ‘nother person. Now you’re leaving me and moving out! What you plan on moving in with her and raising those

bastards she took in?!” Fire raged in her eyes and her nostrils fared.

“Don’t fucking talk about them like that! This why I’m leaving Payton, you’re fucking attitude. I’ve had enough of it!” I wanted to keep things civilized but I should’ve known that was too much to ask.

I wasn't expecting her hand to go across my face. "Fuck you!" Her voice echoed in my ears. "Fuck you!" She started throwing hits at me.

I lifted my hands protecting my face.

I could feel my blood starting to rush through my veins and grow hot. "Keep your fucking hands off me!" I shouted pushing her back causing her to stumble.

Breathing heavily, I glowered down at her with my chest rising and falling quickly. One thing I didn't play about was domestic violence. I had seen that shit enough growing up. Payton knew how my temper was set up and she wanted to provoke me. It was something she often did when she didn't get her way, but this was the first time she put her hands on me. I would never put my hands on a woman, no

matter how much my hand was itching too. I knew I had made the right call.

"I packed a good amount of my stuff, I'll be back later to get the rest."

Her face was twisted up, hands still balled at her sides. She was breathing heavily. “Don’t bother! You can keep this stupid ass house. I don’t want shit that has to do with you!”

I watched as Payton turned and stalked to our walk-in closet. She grabbed one of her suitcases and started throwing shit inside.

Dragging my tongue over my top teeth, I tasted blood. The first hit she did, I couldn’t lie did get me good in the mouth. My jaw clenched.

It took five minutes for Payton to get whatever she was taking and storm out our bedroom. “I hope you and that bitch enjoy each other!”

My top lip twitched.

The moment I heard my front door slam shut, I rolled my neck between my shoulders and fell back on the bed.

My pulse was still racing.

Part of me knew Payton wasn’t going to take my news well. Her acting rational was just too much to ask for. Still, I felt good about my decision. Payton had me wanting to act out of character.

The person I fought hard not to become I could see myself being if I would have stayed with her.

I refused to go to that place.

Removing Payton from my life was what was best for me. If she couldn't accept that then that was her problem.

Pushing out a deep breath, I stood up again. Instead of sitting in here pissed of, I was about to do the very thing I always enjoyed; working on my baby.

“Hey, beautiful.” I greeted my grandma with a kiss on the cheek.

“Well if it isn't my handsome grandson. What do I owe this honor?” She smiled at me.

I looked my grandma over; she looked good for her age. Even with her salt and pepper hair, she was aging gracefully in the face.

“Can't I just come to see my favorite woman?” I took a seat on the couch. “I thought she would be gone by now.”

“Jerzey had some kind of emergency at work and asked if they could stay longer.”

I looked around. “Where’s Kaiden?”

“In your old room. That’s where he spends most of his time.” I nodded.

“Wassup Kaydence?” I looked down where Kaydence was coloring at.

She lifted her head and turned to face me. The moment her eyes landed on me her face lit it. “Hi!”

“You ladies doing okay?” I looked between them.

“We are, tell O’Shae we were just about to check on the peach cobbler we made.” Granny Mae turned for the kitchen.

“Oh, I came at the right time.” I rubbed my stomach.

Glancing down I laid eyes on Kaydence’s picture.

“What you coloring?”

“Doggy!” She lifted the coloring book, showing me the picture.

“Oh, shit we got a Picasso in the house!” Kaydence didn’t know what I was talking about but she still laughed.

“No, doggy!” She giggled.

Grinning back at her, I eyed the picture again.

“You like coloring?”

Kaydence nodded her head.

Most of the time I was hanging with Kaiden. I connected with him the moment I met him.

“What’s your favorite color?” Her head tilted and ripples formed on her forehead as if she was thinking.

She looked down at the crayons in front of her.

“This one!” She picked up purple.

“What color is that, Kaydence?” My grandma had walked back up on us.

“Purple!”

“That a girl. We’ve been working on her colors. Seriously I don’t know what the people before her did with her, but this poor baby was like a blank canvas.”

Kaydence had gone back to her coloring. “Show O’Shae your number age, Kaydence.”

Kaydence quickly flipped through the book until she was at a page where she attempted to trace some numbers.

“You did that?” I pointed.

“Yep!” She beamed.

“Good job!” I clapped.

Seeing Kaydence so comfortable with my grandma wasn't shocking to me. That's just how Granny Mae was. She had a welcoming and nurturing spirit. It actually reminded me of Jersey. Both of them were so loving and big hearted.

“Ima go see your brother and I'll be right back.” Pushing myself off the couch, I headed for the rooms until I got to my old bedroom.

The door was open and I noticed Kaiden sitting at my old desk playing with one of my old model cars.

“That was one of the first cars me and my grandad put together.”

Kaiden jumped and turned to face me. He dropped the car on the desk.

“I wasn’t going to break it.” I frowned.

“I wasn’t worried about that.” Walking deeper into the room. I ran my hand over the cars I had lined up on my desk when I was younger. My grandad used to buy me different cars and we would put them together and I would paint them.

“You did all these?” He pointed. I had more on the wall. Those were more valuable ones.

I nodded. “Sure did. Outside of football, I loved working on cars.”

Kaiden looked back at the model car and ran his hand over it.

“Can you get me one?” He turned back to me with hopeful eyes.

The corners of my mouth hiked up. “I gotchu kid.” I looked back at the cars.

This was something I always loved to bond with my grandad over. Whenever I was overwhelmed or found myself getting upset I would lock myself in my room and work on one of these cars.

“Aye, let’s go outside. I want to see what you been learning at that basketball camp.” Kaiden smiled.

“Oh, I’m the best now!” He bragged hopping up. I chuckled at his enthusiasm.

“Yeah a’right, we’ll see.”

Kaydence ended up following us outside. After Kaiden showed me what he’s learned we included her in the game, showing her a few moves. She wasn’t feeling it and ended

up ditching us to play with some chalk my grandma had got her.

Seeing how responsive the kids were now, it’s hard to believe that two months ago they would barely give anyone a second glance.



“Thank you, Dr. Fields, you’ve been a lot of help.” I thanked the therapist on the other side of the phone. She owned her own practice downtown. One of the therapists who worked under her specialized in kids’ trauma. She had an opening next week for the kids.

“It’s no problem, Jerzey. Althea is a great therapist and I’m sure the kids will love her.” Dr. Fields let me know.

I moved around my room idly as I finished up the phone call.

Once off the phone, I pushed a deep breath out. That was just one thing on my list that helped me breathe easier.

When I looked at the time, I saw it was time to get dinner started. First, I wanted to check on the kids.

Pushing Kaiden’s door open I noticed him sitting on his bed with a frown on his face. He was staring down at some papers in his lap.

“Hey,” I called out gaining his attention.

His head popped up. “Hi.” He muttered then looked back down at the papers.

“What you looking at?” Heading over to the bed, I took a seat next to him. I glanced down and noticed it was a math sheet.

“This stupid math. I can’t get this problem.” A smirk found its way to my face. Kaiden was so independent that I wasn’t shocked he didn’t come ask for help.

“Let me take a look.”

“You know math?” He looked up at me with a questioning look.

I snickered. “I know a little something.” Grabbing the sheet, I looked over the sheet noticing they were starting to learn multiplication. “How about you meet me in the dining room at the table and we’ll do the sheet together?” When I looked at him, his eyes shifted to the sheet.

“Okay. I have to read too.” His voice was small, but I heard him.

“Kaiden,” I set the papers on my lap. “If you need help you can ask me, you know? I know you’re smart, but there’s no problem with asking for help when you need it. I’m here whenever you need something, okay?”

He nodded his head. “Now grab your book bag and go wait for me. Ima go check on your sister.”

“Okay.” He gathered his things while I headed out the room.

Kaydence was at her toy box, playing with a few of her LOL Dolls. “Hey, Kay. You good?” I leaned on the doorframe and asked.

Her head turned so she could face me. “I’m hungry.” Her statement made me laugh. This little girl was always hungry.

“I was thinking we order pizza tonight? Sound good?” She bobbed her head.

For a moment I couldn’t help but admire her. I had taken her to get her hair redone over the weekend. She now

sported braids in the front of her hair, leaving the back out which were natural spiral curls.

“Okay. I’m going to order and then I’ll be in the dining room with your brother if you need anything.”

“Okay.” She turned back to her dolls.

Turning and heading for the main part of the house, I grew excited. I felt like me and Kaiden finally had a breakthrough. He was finally allowing himself to let his guard down around me and I believe he was starting to trust me.

There was a knock on my office door causing me to pop my head up.

“Come in.” I glanced back down at the paperwork I was finishing up.

I had a small gap in my schedule at the clinic and was handling some housekeeping.

“Hey, Jerzey. Do you got a minute?” Abby popped her head in.

“Hey. Yeah, come in.” I smiled. “Wassup?”

She stepped inside my office, closing the door behind her.

“I was wondering if I could pick your brain on something. If you don’t mind.”

When she took a seat, I noticed how fdgety she was. “Abby is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to ask you how you became a foster parent?”

I blinked a few times. That wasn’t what I was expecting.

“Oh um, I just had to get certifed. Take a few classes, they came and inspected my house, and did a background check. It wasn’t too hard, but it was a lengthy process. Why do you ask?”

Abby was so young. I couldn’t imagine her taking on the responsibility of another person if she didn’t have to.

“Well, my ex-boyfriend.” She cleared her throat. “He was recently incarcerated for being an idiot.” She rolled her eyes. “Anyways, his daughter, she’s fve. Her mom was never in the picture and social services got involved and right now she’s in foster care. His mom would take her, but

she’s too busy living her life and she doesn’t have anyone else. I’ve been in this little girl’s life since she was two and I hate to see her

bounced around. I was thinking of becoming a foster parent so I could get her.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip and thought about what she just told me. Abby was a bright girl, she was good at her job, kept her head low, and everyone loved her around here. I didn't see any reason why she wouldn't make a great foster parent.

“How long does he have?”

“Five years.”

“Why doesn't he just sign over temporary custody to you? I think that'll be a lot easier.”

Her shoulders fell. “Honestly, I haven't spoken to him for a few months. He was mad I chose not to stand by him during everything. He won't even take my visits. That's why I wanted to go this route so at least she'll be with someone she knows and trust.”

My mouth twisted to the side. I reached over and picked my phone up. “I can send you the information to get

started. Anything you need, just let me know. I'll try to help with whatever I can." I tapped my phone screen.

"Really? Thank you, Jerzey! I knew you were the perfect person since you're doing the whole foster parent thing now."

I nodded. "It's no problem, Abby. I hate hearing about kids getting lost in the system."

My mind shifted to my childhood for a second.

"If you don't mind me asking. What made you become a foster parent?" Once I finished sending the information to her I looked back up.

I cleared my throat. Although I was cordial with all my coworkers, I didn't let them into my personal life. They only knew what I let them.

"I've always wanted a family. I grew up in foster care believe it or not and unfortunately, I have a condition that makes it hard for me to carry a pregnancy full term. Fostering was the next best thing."

"You never thought of adoption?"

I bobbed my head. “Of course, but I don’t know fostering just felt better for me at the moment.”

Abby leaned back in her chair. “I didn’t know you were a foster kid. I think it’s amazing what you’re doing. Even with your condition you still have a big enough heart to help kids in need.”

A smile formed on my face. “I know what it’s like being in a position where all you want is someone to love you and *want* you. Every kid should have the chance at a normal life with someone who will take care of them.”

There was another knock on the door. “Hey, Jerzey. You’re 2:15 is here.” Ryan one of the aids let me know.

“Here I come.”

“Room 3.” He closed the door.

Abby stood up. “I’ll get out your hair. Thank you for the information.”

“Just keep me updated.”

She gave me a small tip of the head. “I will. Thanks.”

My fingers tapped on the desk as I waited in the lobby of the hospital for Mario to come down. I was going to let everything go, but after thinking about it I knew we needed to have a conversation. What happened between O'Shae

and Mario was something I didn't want to happen again. Mario always loved to provoke O'Shae for whatever reason. I couldn't understand his constant need to try and compete and be better than him, but it was growing old.

"Why are you here?" Mario spat when he came in view of me.

I lifted my head and held back a laugh. O'Shae had done a number on him. His eyes were black, his right one red as if a blood vessel was popped, his lip slightly swollen, and he had a few bruises scattered on his face.

"We need to talk."

"We don't got shit to talk about! And I hope your boy got bail money because I'm pressing charges." He glowered at me.

My lips pressed in a thin line, my eyes wandered around the lobby. The receptionist behind the desk was trying to show she wasn't listening but I could tell she was.

When they landed back on Mario, I noticed he was on his way back to where he had come from.

“Unless you want everyone to know the *real* reason behind our divorce I advise you to talk to me, Mario!”

I didn't want to pull that card. The painful events that led up to our divorce were things I wanted to push to the back of my mind and keep there, but Mario was pulling my hand.

He froze, even though his lab coat I noticed his body tense.

Turning around, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils slightly flared. “Fine. But I have patients so make it quick.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned and headed for the double automatic doors.

My heart thumped loudly in my chest.

Once we were outside, I stepped to the side out the way of people and ears. It was partly cloudy today. The sun barely peeked through the overcast. "What Jerzey?" Mario snapped.

Cutting my eyes into tight slits, while my top lip curled up, I could hear my knuckles cracking as I curled them into tight fist, and pushed a heavy breath through my faring nostrils.

"What the hell is your problem, Mario? I don't get it, we divorced and are free to live our lives without each other.

Why do you constantly choose to cause problems for me?" I tossed my hands up, attempting to keep my voice leveled.

"You know the whole time we were married I knew you wanted that nigga, but I kept telling myself it doesn't matter because I got her. I got something *fnally* had something *O'Shae* doesn't. I *fnally* won." His face twisted up when he mentioned O'Shae's name.

My brows burrowed. "You won? Being with me wasn't some competition, Mario! O'Shae was just my best friend! You knew that!"

“Just your best friend that you slept with, right?” My mouth snapped shut. “Yeah, you think I couldn’t read between the lines? The one thing I thought I had up on that nigga, I found out the joke was on me.”

“None of that matters! What happened with me and O’Shae was before we even got together! It was once and wasn’t even how you’re thinking. I don’t know why you’re so obsessed with competing with O’Shae but-.”

“Because that nigga always got the shine! On the feld and of. It wasn’t until he got injured my recognition on the feld was fnally noticed. I was tired of always being in that niggas shadow. Tired of not getting the shine I deserved!”

My mouth turned upside down.

Mario sounded like a child throwing a tantrum. I couldn’t believe how he was acting right now. It was never any mystery that he was jealous of O’Shae, but I never knew how deep.

“That night.” I swallowed hard. “You implied that you got with me because of O’Shae. Did you really mean that? Was it all a joke?”

A mocking grin suddenly formed on his swollen mouth. He dragged his tongue across his lips. He snorted.

“You know at frst the only reason I got with you was that I knew how much O’Shae was into you. I learned you were his weak spot, so I fgured I’d get with you, play with you for a while then dump you. It seemed like the only thing that affected him was you being affected. Prom night, our frst time I planned on leaving you and never looking your way again.”

My stomach fipped and acid filled my throat. “But then I saw how easy you were to manipulate; how naïve you

were. You hardly gave me any pushback on anything and it was easy to do shit and not get caught because you were so trusting, so desperate to have someone.”

Each word he spoke chipped away at something inside me. My knees buckled.

“So why marry me?” I whispered in a shaky voice. My eyes now focused on the ground, but slowly rose to his.

He shrugged. “Because O’Shae didn’t want me to. It was the perfect way to get at him. Having the most important person to him tied to me for life. I saw how he looked at you. I knew there was something between y’all no matter how many times y’all spit that best friend shit. What a better way to crush him than to marry the one person he loves most.”

My heart dropped into my stomach and tears filled my eyes, but I refused to allow them to fall.

“So everything was a lie. You never loved me?” I blinked a few times to keep my tears at bay.

He rolled his neck. “It was fun, you treated me like a king.” His shoulders lifted. “Maybe I did have love for you, but I was *never* in love with you. When you first got

pregnant, I was relieved when you lost the baby, because I didn’t want that kind of tie to you. Marriage was one thing, but I didn’t want

a kid. At the end of the day, you were a ploy for me and served your purpose.”

I stumbled back as if I was punched in the gut. My heart cracked in half and bled. My vision became blurry and suddenly it felt like ice was shot into my veins.

“I got patients. It was nice talking to you.” He went to walk past me while I stood there frozen. My tongue suddenly felt heavy in my throat.

“If you press charges against O’Shae I *will* go to your boss and tell him what led to my last miscarriage,” I spoke lowly in a strained voice but loud enough for him to hear me.

Lifting my attention to his, he gave me a hard glare before continuing to pass me.

Torment ate away at my insides; a suffocating sensation tighten in my throat.

Hearing Mario’s confession caused cold despair to dwell in me. I knew our marriage wasn’t perfect and there

were times I had my doubts, but the last thing I ever expected was to learn it had all been a lie.



I was sitting outside my house, working on my car with Mateo when my phone vibrated in my pocket.

“So you officially done with Payton?” Mateo questioned as I sat up and pulled my phone out.

“Hell yeah. You know I don’t play that hitting shit. That was the final straw for me.”

My brows drew together when I saw it was Granny Mae calling.

“Wassup beautiful?” I answered.

“Have you talked to Jerzey?” Her question made my stomach drop.

“Nah, not today why?” I pulled my phone away from my face, put it on speaker, and went to my text.

***Me:** Aye you good? Mama lookin’ for you.*

“She normally comes and gets the kids no later than six thirty and if she’s late she’ll let me know. I haven’t heard from her and she’s not answering.”

I glanced at the clock seeing it was a little after seven.”

“It’s no problem they’re still here. I’m just worried.” Jerzey normally texted me back quick, but when I saw

she didn't I climbed out my car.

"Ima see if I can get in contact with her. You want me to come pick the kids up?"

"No, like I said they're fine. Just make sure she's fine." "A'right, Ima call you back."

We hung up and when I looked at Mateo, he was giving me a questioning look. "Everything good?"

I went in my pocket to grab my keys so I could lock my house up. "I don't know, but Ima find out."

I checked my phone again seeing Jerzey hadn't even read my message. I tried to call her too, but she didn't answer.

Now I was worried.

When my knocking on the door went unanswered, I located the spare key and unlocked the door. Jerzey's car was in the driveway so I knew she was home.

Dread crept inside me causing a sinking feeling to fill my stomach. My heart sounded like drums pounding in my chest. A knot formed in my throat when I was greeted with silence.

“Jerzey!” I called out.

Silence.

I glanced around the living room, nothing seemed out of touch or messed up.

Making my way to her bedroom, I called out to her again. Once I was outside her door, I didn’t bother to knock. Pushing it open, I stepped inside. My eyes scanned the room and when they landed on the bed, my forehead creased seeing the hump in it.

Stepping closer to the bed, my brows drew downward in a frown.

“Jerz.” I sat on the edge of the bed when she didn’t budge.

“Jerzey.” This time my voice was a little sterner.

I grabbed the comforter and yanked it.

“O’Shae, no.” My jaw tensed hearing the sadness dripping from her tone.

I yanked the cover a little harder, snatching it out her hand. “What’s wrong? Granny Mae called and said you didn’t get the kids, now I see you’re here in bed. Wassup?”

“The kids I forgot.” She groaned.

“They’re fine.”

It took a few minutes, the air in the room was heavy, but Jerzey finally turned to face me. Tear stains tatted on her cheeks, her eyes red and swollen.

“The fuck you crying for?” Instantly I felt my blood grow hot. My eyes narrowed.

She sniffed a few times, avoiding eye contact with me.

“I’m fine.” She raised her hand to wipe her eyes.

“Don’t fucking lie to me,” my mouth pinched together.

Tears pooled her eyes making ice fill my stomach. Inhaling a deep breath, I pushed it out and attempted to calm myself down. Seeing Jerzey upset always stirred different kinds of emotions in me.

Blinking a few times, again her eyes shifted. "I..." she stopped.

She licked her lips and closed her eyes.

"C'mon baby. Talk to me." I reached over and used my finger to wipe a tear that had just fallen.

Her eyes opened and she stared at me with saddened eyes. Her breathing was shallow, cheeks flushed red.

"I went and seen Mario today." The moment his name left her mouth, my shoulders tensed. I bit on my back teeth.

"I wanted to find out why he approached us. All I want is to move on from us, peacefully. Instead, he told me that the only reason he got with me and stayed with me is that he wanted to hurt you. He even told me he was relieved when I miscarried. Our whole relationship was one big fake joke to him and I've been trying to comprehend everything and figure out if I missed the signs."

My hands balled into fists. The vein in my neck throbbed and my shoulders squared. A volcano erupted inside me, filling my stomach with lava and shooting it to my chest.

“That nigga said what?” I gritted.

“O’Shae, I just, I just don’t get it. I loved Mario. Things weren’t perfect with us, but I did love him. I tried to be a good wife to him. I tried to do everything right and why, why would he do that?” Her shoulders shook and more tears fell down her face.

I gritted my teeth, feeling my muscles quiver. “He’s a fucking dumbass!” I spat feeling my body grow hotter the more I thought about her words. My jaw ached by how hard I was clenching it.

Red.

All I could see was red.

“When I see that nigga again Jerzey, it’s over for him. I keep sparing him but telling you some fucked up shit like that. Making you cry like this.” I paused.

My pulse was racing, rushing through me, only amping me up more.

She shot up. “No, O’Shae. He’s not worth it. I talked him out of pressing charges against you this time, but I’m not sure he won’t next time. I don’t want you getting in trouble for me.”

I searched Jerzey’s face. Even though her eyes still glossed over with tears, I could see worry bouncing around in them.

“I’m tired of that nigga hurting you, Jerzey. I’m tired of you sparing him. He doesn’t deserve it!”

Her lips tucked in her mouth; eyes darted to the right. “I know that.” She spoke in a whisper. “I’m not asking you to spare him because of him, it’s because of you. I don’t want you getting in trouble or outta character because of him. You’re so much better than that, *better than him*. I don’t want you to go after him, I don’t want you to lower yourself to his level.”

My hand fexed.

I looked over her tear struck face. My heart tumbled in my chest.

“What do *you* want me to do then?” My throat constricts.

“I want you to...” pausing for an instant, she scraped her teeth over her bottom lip and pulled in the corner. “I want you to make me feel better. To stop the hurt.” Her

honeyed voice was so low I almost thought I misheard her, but her eyes showed me I hadn’t.

Suddenly they filled with a smothering fire and darkened with lust. Blood rushed to my groin and my dick stirred.

“Jerzey.”

“I don’t want to talk, O’Shae. I just want you to help me feel better. Can you do that for me, *please?*” The vulnerable tone in her voice had me ready to shut her down, but the way her eyes were searing into me had my words caught in my throat.

“You and Payton are done right?” I had mentioned to her how I broke up with Payton without going directly into details.

“That’s finished.”

“Then please.”

A nagging in my chest told me this was wrong. Jerzey was speaking out of hurt right now. But staring at her puppy eyes and pouty lips made me ignore that feeling.

Reaching over so I was hovering over her, I stopped inches away from her mouth, feeling her small breaths brush against my face.

Lust crashed into me like a battering ram to the gut. A dangerous slash of desire shot through me as I claimed her lips as mine.

My heartbeat kicked into overdrive.

Pushing forward, I forced her back so I was now on top of her. Jerzey's hands cuffed my face.

My hands stayed planted on the side as I deepened the kiss.

Jerzey widened her legs, giving me more room to settle between them. Pushing my tongue in her mouth, I caressed hers with mine, savoring the sweet taste.

One of her hands moved to my neck and she gripped it tightly. Her chest pressed against mine, hips rolling under me.

I wanted Jerzey.

I wanted everything she had to offer me at the moment. Had it been anyone else I would have taken her right now, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not in the state she was in.

When Jerzey was upset she craved comfort. It was something she's done since we were younger. Her need to feel loved was a lot stronger when someone hurt her.

Pulling her bottom lip into my mouth I sucked on it and moved one of my hands to her hair, brushing through it.

"Jerz," I mumbled against her mouth.

Lifting my head, I stared into her smothering orbs. "I'm not going to fuck you."

Her eyes squinted and brows met in the middle. "I know how you operate, Jerzey. I know how you handle hurt. I'm not gon' be

that guy. Not with you.” My dick was straining in my jeans, pushing against her pelvis.

“O’Shae I-.” I cut her words off and kissed her again. “I’m not leaving though, a’right? Ima let Granny Mae

know the kids need to stay over and Ima stay here with you.”

“But-.”

“No buts.” I pecked her lips.

Our relationship had shifted, maybe even before tonight, but it was different. While I kept trying to tell myself that Jerzey was acting out of hurt, I wasn’t so sure. Nor was I sure I was just being the supportive and caring best friend.

A rush fled through my chest

Shifting so I was on the side of her, I pulled her into me and wrapped my arms securely around her.

Jerzey didn’t fight me. She turned and snuggled into me, prompting her ass to hit my pelvis and back against my chest.

I inhaled the fresh scent of her hair and closed my eyes taking her in.

Jerzey's warm body molded against me perfectly. Her fingers ran up and down my arm.

"I love you, O'Shae. To infinity." Her words were now filled with sleep.

"And beyond."

I know she wanted me to leave the Mario thing alone and for now, I would put her at ease, but that didn't mean I would forget. He had to see me, *again*.



“The kids a natural. All he needed was some polishing up and he’s gonna be a force to be wreckin’ with.” Odin let me know as I stood next to him watching one of the older kids work with Kaiden.

The corners of my mouth lifted. “He’s enjoying his time here. I just recently got him a basketball. Soon as he finishes his homework, he’s outside dribbling.”

Things the past couple days have been getting back to normal. The day after seeing Mario I tried to shake of the words he spat at me and continue my day-to-day routine. The kids were depending on me and I felt guilty about leaving them with Granny Mae. When I went and got them later that day, she wasn’t upset just more so concerned. I

had to assure her I was fine; I just needed a moment to gather myself.

Like always O’Shae was there holding me, making me believe it would all be okay. The only difference this time when I threw myself at him, I didn’t feel foolish afterwards. O’Shae thought I was trying to find comfort in him because I was hurting which was part of the reason. The main part, however, was that I was starting to fall for my best friend.

Turning my focus back to Kaiden, I ignored the swelling in my chest. “Yay, Kaiden!” I clapped when he made a basket.”

His head whipped to me.

I waved and gave him a thumbs up.

He balled his face up and shook his head before turning back to the basket.

Odin chuckled next to me. "That kid hates distractions."

Kaiden got to the back of the line and the next kid stepped up.

"Aye, aye." I looked towards the door of the community center. Odin left from next to me.

"Gage wassup? I wasn't expecting you to be here today." They slapped hands.

"Had a light day today and decided to come show my face."

My eyes roamed over the tall, light skinned man making his way over to us. Since I wasn't into sports I didn't know much about Gage, but I do remember Kaiden bragging about meeting *thee Gage* one day when I picked him up from camp once.

“Jerzey, this is Gage the founder of the program. Gage, Jerzey, Kaiden’s mom.” Odin introduced us.

I didn’t bother to correct him when he referred to me as Kaiden’s mom. It made me feel good whenever someone referenced me as such. The more they were with me the more I forgot they were foster kids.

“Nice to meet you.” I smiled with my hand out.

“Nice to meet you. You got some talent on your hands. The kid is nice with rock.”

“So I heard.”

“Aye, hold up. Your forms all wrong.” Odin walked away and onto the court.

For a second silence passed through us. The only sounds you could hear were the basketballs hitting the ground.

“I don’t know if Odin’s spoken to you about it, but there’s a basketball league starting in the fall I believe Kaiden would be great for.” Gage let me know.

Turning my attention to him, I waited for him to go into more detail. “They have different levels, of course. Kaiden would be in the junior division with other eight and nine-year-olds. They travel to compete with different teams.”

“And you think he’s a good fit?”

Gage nodded, crossing his bulky arms over his chest. “I do. I’m doing some recommendations from the program and from what I’ve seen so far, he’ll be perfect.”

Twisting my mouth to the side, I shifted my gaze back to the court. Kaiden was passing the ball back and forth with another kid now. The two seemed to be in a deep conversation about something.

I snickered, whatever they were discussing they both were passionate about.

“Well, I guess I’ll leave so Kaiden can finish up. I’ll talk to him about this league when I pick him up.” I let Gage know turning to him.

This was the first time I lingered around. Normally I dropped Kaiden off and went about my business, but today I wanted to see what went on while he was here. I was interested in knowing the kids' interests, especially Kaiden. The ice around him was still there, but it was melting.

Kaydence was with Granny Mae, the two were going to some stores. Apparently, Granny Mae had become one of her favorite people, I knew it was because she spoiled her. I loved she was learning to lean on someone else.

“If you're interested just let Odin know and I'll give you a call with more information.” I nodded.

I know Gage was a big-shot NBA player, but he talked so humbly I wouldn't even know. He walked away from me to the court where the duo was. I stood there a little longer watching before turning to leave.

“Oh, this is cute.” I grabbed the burnt orange shirt of the rack I was looking through and examined it.

Since I had some time to waste before either kid came back with me, I decided to kill some time. I had received an email that Nova Rae's had started putting their fall collection out. I had been so occupied with the kids, that I had been neglecting myself. Even before the kids, I felt like I had lost myself. I had lost myself in my marriage a long time ago, but I was ready to find myself again.

Moving around, the brightly lit boutique, I added more to the bag in my hand, even finding some clothes for Kaydence to wear from the *Nova Rae* collection. Nova Rae had a few mommy and me outfits, I eagerly purchased.

It was amazing that someone local was doing big things. Being an entrepreneur, getting your clothing line up and running couldn't be easy. I had read about Nova in *Issa Vibe* magazine when they spotlighted her business. Reading it made me even more excited to support the young Black woman.

"Could I interest you in any jewelry today? Their buy one get one free." The sales associate behind the counter asked.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. "No, not today. Thanks."

When I saw it was O'Shae calling me, I couldn't stop the smile from forming on my face.

"Hey," I answered before grabbing my wallet out my crossbody purse.

"Where you at?" He sounded out of breath.

"In the D12 District doing some shopping. Why do you sound like that?" I handed the card over.

"Been a minute since I actually worked out. Found out I ain't the nigga that used to dominate the feld anymore." Snickering, I grabbed my card back.

"Thank you." I grabbed the bags then turned to leave. "Age is catching up with you, huh?" "Yo ass only a few months under me."

"So you're still older." I smiled heading for the door.

"Where the kids?"

"Kaiden's at camp and Kaydence is with Granny Mae." "So you're free?"

“I am. Oh sorry.” I told the person I bumped into leaving out the door.”

“You should really watch where you’re going.”

“I said sorry.” I balled my face and looked up. Instantly rolling my eyes noticing it was Payton and her sister.

“Ain’t this the girl that stole your man?” Her sister snickered looking me up and down.

“I didn’t steal anyone’s man.”

“Ain’t no one steal my man.” We answered at the same time.

Not caring to stick around I went to walk around them.

“Excuse me, Payton.”

“Payton?” O’Shae said over the phone reminding me he was on the phone.

“I know the only reason why O’Shae broke up with me was because of you. You just couldn’t let us be happy could you?”

My eyes narrowed and brows furrowed. “Payton, you’re delusional. I don’t have anything to do with why O’Shae left you.” I went to step around her again, but she stopped me... again.

“I don’t believe you. You were always the reason why he held back from me. Jerzey this and Jerzey that. Jerzey needs me, Jerzey called, Jerzey, Jerzey, Jerzey! Do you know how tired I was of hearing your name come out my man’s mouth?!”

Her nose flared and her face reddened while her voice heightened.

I shook my head. “Payton me and O’Shae are friends. We been friends since before you even got in the picture. If anyone caused an issue in your relationship, it was you.”

“Oh, hell nah.” Her sister muttered.

“Put me on speaker.” O’Shae blared in my ear.

“O’Shae, no.”

“O’Shae?” Payton scuffed. “Of course, you’re speaking to him right now.”

My eyes tightened and my mouth turned upside down. “Payton look.” I pushed some curls out my eyes. “Whatever you and O’Shae have or don’t have going on isn’t my problem. Whatever the issues the two of you have, you need to handle with him and leave me out of it. I always respected your relationship and played nice because you were O’Shae’s girlfriend.” Pausing I stepped closer to her clutching the bags in my hand tighter. “You’re not his girlfriend anymore, so I would remember that. Don’t let my kindness make you think you’re going to keep disrespecting me and get away with it. Keep playing with me and I’ll make your accusations come true. Now excuse me!” This time I pushed past her, bumping her shoulder in the process.

The last thing I was about to do was sit here and argue with Payton. For two years I played nice with her, I was over it now.

“I don’t know how you dealt with that girl for two years,” I complained, fshing out my car keys when I reached my car. “I swear I’m so tired of everyone accusing us of fucking around. At this point, we should’ve been since everyone suspects it anyways.”

O'Shae didn't reply to me right away. I stuck my bags in the back seat before checking the street and heading for the driver's side.

"O'Shae?" I pulled the phone away from my face seeing he hadn't hung up.

"Where you heading now?" He asked. My nose scrunched hearing the difference in his voice.

"Uh, home I guess. I really don't have anything else to do."

"Meet up with me."

"Okay, where?"

"Our spot." The corners of my mouth lifted.

I wasn't expecting him to say that, but I wasn't against it.

"Okay."

We said our goodbyes and hung up. It had been a while since I been to *our spot*.

My thoughts shifted back to Payton. It was bewildering to me how all O'Shae's girlfriends had an issue with our friendship.

Especially at the time, I was married. It made it hard to maintain a friendship whenever everyone had something to say.

There were even times I tried to pull away from O'Shae to bring peace but he always shut that down. I tapped my fingers over my steering wheel, watching the people walk up and down the street.

A pull in my chest started. Thinking of recent events, I wondered if everyone's accusations had some kind of justification.

I stepped on the old track that was up the street from our old neighborhood and took a look around. The last time I was here was graduation night, me and O'Shae had met up here late that night to celebrate.

I leaned against the wall that separated the track and bleachers, going through the memories of high school.

Me and O'Shae started coming here once they built the new track and this one stopped being used. It was a random night we were walking around, since then it became *our spot*.

Smiling when I saw O'Shae approaching, I pushed off the wall and met him halfway.

"Hi." I bashfully grinned.

Never before had I felt the amount of butterflies fluttering in my stomach when it came to O'Shae that I'm feeling now.

"Wassup." Immediately he pulled me into a hug.

My head rested on his chest and my arms wrapped around him. A blanket of security filled me.

"I haven't been here since high school. I'm glad you thought to come here."

We separated.

"Foreal? I come here every so often when I need to clear my head in peace." He looked around the old field.

"Yeah, since it's across town I never had a reason to come over here. Nothing's changed though."

We walked over to the bleachers and took a seat on the lowest one. For a moment neither of us spoke. A small breeze

passed through us; the sun was shining bright above us. A few birds chirping could be heard overhead.

It was a comfortable silence between us.

“Ima check Payton.” O’Shae finally let me know.

I shook my head and turned my head to look at him. “O’Shae, no.”

“She was outta line.”

“And I can handle it.” A small toothless grin formed on my face. “Look I appreciate you always ready to go to war for me, but I’m not a weak damsel in distress. I’m not worried about Payton and whatever accusations she throws

at me. If need be, I know how to defend myself. She’s irrelevant to me.”

O’Shae’s jaw clenched. His nose expanded and his eyes shifted.

“A’right you right.” He grabbed the back of his neck and squeezed it. “I can’t help it. When it comes to you, this urge to protect you always overfills me.”

Reaching over I grabbed his hand, enveloping it in mine. “And that’s one reason I love you, but O’Shae I’m good. Payton doesn’t scare me. Stop always worrying about me.” This time I showed him all thirty-two teeth.

O’Shae smirked. “I’ll never stop worrying about you, Jerzey. As long as there’s air in my body.” His words made my heart flutter and a strange sensation tightened in my throat.

“I heard you when you tell her you’ll make her accusations true.” Heat rushed to my cheeks.

“Yeah, well it must have been something she wanted if she kept speaking on them with no proof.”

I went to remove my hand from his, but he held it tightly. “We can both admit shit with us has shifted, Jerz. All

that platonic shit we both used to spit doesn’t exist anymore.” A surge of electricity shot through my veins.

O'Shae's eyes appeared dark and more intense. It seemed as if we were having a silent conversation with one another. Mentally speaking words neither of our mouths were ready to say.

I scanned him over, needing a moment to gather my words. My eyes trailed over his large, tattooed right arm. It was the only one he had. He got it when grandad died.

"You know we never got our matching tattoos?" I mentioned lifting my hand. I traced the angel wings with his grandad's name in the middle with my fingers.

"That's cause yo scary ass. You the one who don't like needles."

I rolled my eyes and hit his arm.

"Shut up. They hurt."

Scrapping my top teeth over my bottom lip, I ran my thumb over his skin.

"We should do it now?"

"What?" His brows dipped.

“I mean.” I cleared my throat, feeling my cheeks warm and center beat. “The tattoo we should do it now.”

His head tilted to the side and his eyes pressed in a straight line.

Suddenly one side of his mouth quirked upwards. “A’right, fuck it. Let’s go.



“Regretting your decision?” I taunted Jerzey as I sat in the chair next to her. Her face twisted and she lifted her hand, flipping me off.

I chuckled. “You’re almost done. You’re doing better than I thought you would.”

I lifted my arm and read the words that now canvased the inside of my forearm. The words, *And Beyond*, were printed in the middle between my wrist and the crease where my arm bent.

“All done.” Samara let her know.

“Oh, thank God.”

Since we weren’t getting anything overly complicated Samara, one of the artists at Ink’d was able to fit us in before her next appointment.

“That wasn’t so bad.” Jerzey admired her arm. She had gotten, *To Infinity* in the same place.

Once she was cleaned and wrapped up, Jerzey laid her arm out. "Put yours under mine."

Doing what she said, I nodded in approval. She had gotten hers written in red ink while I settled on black.

"Okay. I have to ask," Samara spoke while she started her clean up. "The saying. I know where it comes from my daughter loves the movie, but what's the deal with getting it on you?"

Jerzey cheesed and looked at me with gleaming eyes. "Growing up Toy Story was my favorite movie. I always loved Buzz; thought he was so bad ass. One day I told O'Shae I loved him and he repeated it. I asked him to infinity, and he finished it with and beyond." Jerzey shrugged. "After that, it became our thing."

"That's so cute! You two are cute together too!"

"Oh, we're not. I mean, it's not like that." Jerzey stuttered while I smiled in amusement.

Samara looked between the two of us. "Oh, I just assumed."
Her nose scrunched. "My bad."

Chuckling, I shook my head. “We pay you or up front?” “Up front. I’ll meet you up there.”

Before we left out, the owner who I knew to be Zavion, popped his head in the room. “Shorty, I’m about to go grab something to eat. You hungry?”

Samara’s face lit up when she stared at Zavion. “Yeah, let me check them out and. I’ll go with you.”

Zavion never took his eyes off Samara. “Okay. I’ll be in my room when you finish.”

He turned to leave.

“That’s the owner, right? I saw some of his work featured in *Issa Vibe*. He’s amazing.”

“That he is.” Samara grinned with an underlying meaning to her words. “But yep that’s him.”

After she got cleaned up, Samara met us at the front counter where I paid for both me and Jerzey’s tattoos.

“You know I could have paid.”

“You were too slow.” I shrugged when we walked back to my car.

“You’re so annoying.” She groaned.

“But you love me.” I winked at her, opening her door.

She stared at me for a moment with flushed cheeks. “Yeah, yeah.”

Jerzey climbed in the car.

“I think I wanna have a movie night with kids tonight. Are you busy? I was hoping you’d join us.” Jerzey questioned once I was in the car.

I stepped on the break and pushed the button to start it up.

“That’s cool with me.”

“Okay.” A smile was plastered on her face. It was a relief to see after the last time I saw her. Since the day I held her in her bed, we’ve talked every day, but Jerzey told me she needed to gather herself so physically I gave her space. She made sure to assure me she was fine whenever I asked, but it wasn’t until I laid eyes on her at the track that I believed her.

Mario's words fucked her up, I knew she wasn't completely over them, but she was trying to keep a brave face. Jerzey didn't like to make a fuss over things, it annoyed me how lenient she could be.

Rubbing my engine a few times, I checked my mirrors before pulling out into the street.

The sunroof was pulled back allowing fresh air to fill the car. One of my hands rested on the steering wheel the other in my lap.

"What?" I asked keeping my eyes on the road. I could feel Jerzey peeking at me.

"I'm just happy to have someone like you in my life. Even if you're overbearing sometimes."

Chortling I glanced at her briefly. "I don't plan on letting up either."

Playfully she rolled her eyes. "Trust me, I know."

I stopped at the red light and turned my attention to her. "You know you're one of the most important people in my life, right?" I asked her growing serious.

Her eyes searched mine before she nodded her head. “Yes, O’Shae I know.”

I stared at her a while longer. I felt as if me and Jerzey were in a grey area that neither of us chose to clear up.

“Wow, they didn’t even make it through two movies.” Jerzey giggled and shook her head.

Glancing down, I noticed the kids were sleeping on the blanket she had laid out for them, popcorn scattered around them.

“Guess they had a long day.”

After getting our tattoos, we separated for a while then met back at her house later on. “Speaking of long day, I spoke with Gage. He told me he wants Kaiden to join some travel league.”

“Foreal?” My brows shot up.

She bobbed her head. “Yeah, apparently both him and Odin see a lot of potential in him. I watched him for a little while and he *is* good.”

“But?”

Her eyes shifted to Kaiden, who was sleeping on his arm. “Do you think I should let him do it?”

“Outside of working on cars, football was a great release for me. It helped keep my mind occupied with everything going on. I think it’ll be good for him.”

She sighed. “They start therapy next week. Hopefully, that along with basketball will be good for him.”

I reached up and brushed some hair behind her shoulders. “It will. Don’t worry. Kaiden’s come a long way since you first got him. Both of them are.”

Slowly, her chest rose then fell. “Do you mind helping me get them in bed?”

I licked my lips. “I gotchu.”

Jerzey and I took a few minutes to collect the kids and put them in their rooms. I sat on the couch scrolling through my phone while she went through their nightly routines. I took in Jerzey’s living room. Lights from the moon and streetlights shined through her window.

Never did I see myself being a guy who had movie nights. For a long time, I never even pictured myself having a family. Outside my grandparents, a family was nonexistent to me. However being here with Jerzey, Kaiden, and Kaydence gave me a sense of that. Tonight was good, we watched movies I barely paid attention to, but it was a good time. It felt normal and natural.

“They’re all tucked in and back sleep.” Jerzey walked over to where I was and plopped down next to me.

My arm went around her and I pulled her into me. “You’re a great mom to them. They’re lucky to have you.”

My hand ran up and down her arm. Jerzey snuggled closer to me.

“I just hate it took them going through what they did to get to me.”

For a moment the only thing that could be heard was the movie playing. My fingers featherily brushed over the goosebumps that had formed on her arms.

“This reminds me of days we would be at Granny Mae’s house with nothing to do. We would sit around binge-watching movies for hours.”

“And eventually yo ass would fall asleep on me.” She giggled.

“It’s not my fault you didn’t sleep.”

I licked my lips. “It’s hard to sleep when you’re used to being scared and on guard.”

Jerzey lifted her head of my chest and stared up at me with a soft gaze. Her hand brushed over my cheek jaw.

“You could barely see the scar that used to be here.”

“Is that right?” She traced my jawline and nodded.

There used to be a war wound from one of the many beatings I got from my father as a kid on my left cheek.

We continued staring at one another. Her fingers now softly ran through my beard. “You’re letting your beard grow out more?”

My shoulders lifted. “Hadn’t decided yet.”

When she brushed her thumb over the front of my chin, it grazed my bottom lip. "I think you should."

"Do you?"

She bobbed her head. "It looks nice on you. Makes you look more mature."

I flashed a crooked grin. "Maybe I'll consider it then." Slowly she dragged her tongue over her lips, causing my eyes to drop down to them. Memories of how sweet they tasted played over in my head. My stomach stirred.

The heat intensified around us.

I went back and forth in my head if I should make a move on what my body was craving. My hand had left her

shoulder and now was planted on her hip. Her body pressed closer to me.

"Jerzey," I swallowed hard when her hand found its way on my thigh. Blood shot down to my dick.

"O'Shae, I know what you're going to say and don't. I'm not vulnerable right now. I'm not in my feelings."

My heartbeat tripled.

Her breathing slowed as her hand inched up.

“Can I tell you a secret, O’Shae?” She batted her lashes with a drunken expression on her face.

“What?”

Jerzey leaned in pressing her chest against my arm. My eyes peeked down at them.

“Ever since our first time, I thought about you. I thought about us learning each other’s bodies and how you always checked to make sure I was comfortable the whole time.”

Her hand brushed across the tent that had formed in the basketball shorts I was wearing. I gritted my teeth.

My pulse now escalated in my throat.

Taking her by the back of her neck, I gripped it tightly and lowered my face to hers. Our lips but a whisper apart.

“Fuck, I thought about you too. All the sounds you made, the faces you made, the way your nails dug into my back when I went deep inside you.” Her eyes fluttered, mouth parted.

Now was the time to turn back. If I wanted to stop whatever this was I needed to right now, only I didn't. I had been fighting these feelings for weeks, trying to convince myself that Jerzey was acting of emotions when we had our moments. Now though, there were no sad emotions to play of. Raw, lustful, emotions covered her face.

Her cheeks slightly fushed.

Her chest rose and fell at a quickening rate.

Jerzey's breath came out slow and hard.

"Kiss me." As she spoke her lips brushed over mine. Not wanting to put it of anymore, I gave in to her

request. My lips feverously crashed into hers. Hungrily claiming them as my own.

Jerzey lifted her arms and wrapped them around my neck while my grip on hers grew tighter.

My other arm wrapped around her lower back. Tilting my body, I pressed my body into hers forcing her backwards.

A moan left her mouth and fell into mine.

Jerzey rolled her hips, her center teasing my hardened dick.

A low growl formed in my throat.

Lifting, I stared at her as her tongue went over her now swollen lips.

No words needed to be said between us.

Standing up, I held her tightly bringing her up with me. As if she weighed nothing, I swooped her up and carried her in the direction of her bedroom. Our lips found each other again. My tongue explored the recesses of her mouth.

Lowering her on her bed once we were in her room, I gripped her breast with my hands, squeezing and caressing them. They had filled out nicely since we were teenagers.

She moaned and lifted her chest into my touch.

“I’m gonna have so much fun with you.” My mouth lowered to her neck and I swiped my tongue over the hollow front of it.

Her head went back.

Scrapping my teeth over her skin, I pulled her fesh in my mouth.

Jerzey lifted her legs and wrapped them around me. Her hot center pressed into me.

Moving my hands to the bottom of her shirt, I lifted it and pulled it over her head. Flashbacks of the night I frst experienced her zipped through my head.

The bra she was wearing pressed her breast up more. Using the tip of my tongue I traced the top over her cleavage down to the valley between them. As I sucked on the side of her breast, I reached behind her to unhook her bra.

“These take me back,” I smirked staring at her chest.

It rose and fell quickly.

When I glanced up, Jerzey’s eyes were drunkenly staring into me. Grabbing her breast and pushing them together, I rotated my mouth between them. Teasing her swollen nipples with my tongue, sucking on them and pulling them into my hungered mouth.

Her legs tighten around me and hips grinded faster.

“I’ve fantasized about this happening so many times.” She whined as I kissed lower.

Her legs unhooked from around me. “What did you think about, Jerz? Tell me.” I demanded breathlessly. I bit on her stomach lightly causing her to shutter.

Grabbing the rim of her shorts I pulled them down and the moment her pussy was visible I couldn’t help but widen her legs, lift up and admire the beauty of it. Soaked and swollen her lips peered at me, calling for me to taste them.

Lightly using my thumb, I brushed them over, collecting her juices before bringing them to my mouth and sucking it clean.

“Still sweet as fuck.” Dropping between her legs, I wrapped my arms around her thighs and lowered my head. Swiping my tongue over her awaiting lowered lips, the first taste released a beast that had seemed to be locked away.

Using one hand to pull her hood back, I sucked and flicked my tongue over her clit while my fingers invaded her walls. First one then two, moving in and out of her. She gasped and gripped my head.

Her pussy grinded into my face while I feasted on her. Curling my fingers forward and pulling on her clit, I felt her walls tighten around my digits.

“I’m close!” She cried.

Glancing up, I watched her head tossed back, eyes closed, and mouth gapped. Her legs quaked in my hold. Swirling my tongue around her swollen bud, I pushed my fingers deeper until her body was convulsing.

Her juices were like a raging river, covering my face and beard. Snatching my fingers out her, I covered her pussy with my mouth. Using my thicken my tongue, sticking it inside her, attempting to get every drop.

“Okay, okay.” She attempted to push me away.

Her body shaking, juices still coming.

“I didn’t expect you to drown me like this.” I kissed her lower lips.

“I, I haven’t came from head in a while.” She struggled to get out.

Pulling on my bottom lip with my teeth, I eyed her hairless mound. My dick was screaming for some release in my shorts.

“You’ve gotten a lot better at that.” She confessed.

I chuckled and sat up. Her juices running through my beard.

Stripping out my clothes, I grabbed her by the waist and turned her so she was on her stomach.

Jerzey looked over her shoulder at me. Her eyes lowered to my dick that was in my hands. Pre cum oozed out the tip as I squeezed it.

She swiped her tongue over her lips.

I felt like a lion watching its prey as I stroked myself, tracing the silhouette of her body with my eyes.

Using my knee to gap her legs, I wrapped an arm around her waist, lowered myself on her, and positioned my dick at her awaiting entrance. I rubbed my dick up and down her lips, mixing her juices with my pre cum.

While releasing my dick and grabbing the front of her neck, I pushed my way inside of her. She cried out, eyes instantly rolling to the back of her head.

My eyes squeezed closed the moment her walls locked around me. I was the first man to even invade these walls, I remember how it felt the first time I fully entered

her, popping her cherry. The way her tunnel attempted to reject me yet suck me in at the same time. It took everything in me not to bust the moment I was inside her and I felt like that right now.

“Shit,” I mumbled before pressing my lips against the side of her face. My fingers found her clit and brushed over it as I started pumping in and out of her.

“Ssh, ssh. You can’t wake the kids, Jerz.” I taunted, pushing myself deeper into her.

“O’Shae!” She whimpered.

Smiling against her skin, I pinched her clit, and bit lightly on her fesh.

Her ass lifted, giving me more access to her.

The grip I had on her neck tightened while my lips teased her skin. Her moans grew loud again, her eyes closed, and silky walls grew wetter.

“I feel you gripping me, Jerz. You’re about to cum again ain’t you?” I spoke into her ear before pulling the top into my mouth.

She struggled to speak just as her body jerked under me.

“That’s right, fuck. Give me all that shit!” I groaned. My strokes grew shorter, out quicker, rapidly tapping her spot.

My dick jerked, but I wasn’t ready to cum yet. I had gone years without feeling this pussy, I wanted to bask in every moment.

Moving my hand up, I gripped her chin, forcing her head still and lowered my lips to hers. She hungrily sucked on my tongue, whimpering in my mouth.

Slowly, my hips rolled into her while our tongues explored each other.

“I love you, O’Shae.” She moaned in my mouth. Passion rushed up my spine, heart expanded in my chest. I knew the meaning behind her words went deeper than a friendship.

“I love you too, Jerz. Fuck, I think I always have.” I sucked on her bottom lip.

My fingers continued playing with her clit, while I held her face steady. “I just want one more from you. Just one more.”

She stared me in the eyes.

Her body quivered under me and she nodded quickly. The moment she began cumming again, my dick swelled, and I shot my seeds inside of her. “Fuck,” I moved my hand back to her neck and gripped it tightly.

Lowering my face into her neck, I kissed it lightly tryna catch my breath.



My fingers tapped against my thigh as I sat in the lobby of Kaiden and Kaydence's therapist's office. It was their first session with Althea. She thought it would be good for their first session if I wasn't present. She wanted the kids to be comfortable with her and proclaimed with me in the room they might not want to open up as

much. I tried to explain to her, they weren't open to new people but she insisted.

Picking my phone up that vibrated on my lap, I felt my cheek heat up when I saw O'Shae had texted me back. I wasn't sure how things would go after we slept together, but so far they were normal. A conversation between us was needed to confirm what we were or weren't, but I was good in the space we were in.

O'Shae: *I know yo ass overthinking right now. Chill out they gon' be good. They're strong kids.*

Rolling my eyes, I tugged on my bottom lip with my teeth. He was right, the kids have been doing a lot better than when they first got with me. They were more trusting now and open to not being attached at the hip. I was even able to get more conversations out of Kaiden. As far as I know, Kaydence hadn't had any more accidents and I made sure to stay stocked on light bulbs for her nightlight.

Me: *I know you're right. It's just hard. I wish I could be there in with them : (.*

First taking note of the time, I looked up at the white closed door. There were less than 10 minutes in the session left and no one had come out crying so that was good.

I looked back at my phone.

***Me:** Also, I think we need to talk about what happened the other night...*

I pushed a deep breath out and pressed send. Being with O'Shae the other night felt right. It brought feelings out in me that I thought I had buried away a long time ago. Before me and O'Shae had sex, I had a small crush on him,

but he made sure to emphasize that nothing would change between us after we took each other's virginities. Me not wanting anything to change I convinced myself my feelings for O'Shae weren't real. He had always been in my corner and I was sure that's where my feelings had wavered from. When we slept together the other night, a lock inserted and twisted, unlocking a door I kept tucked away for a long time.

***O'Shae:** My house tonight at 7 My
heart skipped.*

Me: Okay.

I was the one who initiated we talk but I didn't expect him to suggest tonight. I wasn't sure how this conversation would go but either way, I knew me and O'Shae would be okay.

A door opening gained my attention. Looking up, I shot up when the kids came out with Althea behind them.

I studied their faces to get some kind of clue on how the session went. Kaiden had his typical none emotional look I had grown used to. Kaydence was holding on to her brother but grinned when she saw me.

She released Kaiden and rushed to me, hugging my leg.

"Hi, baby." I ran my hand over the top of her head. "You okay?"

Kaydence looked up at me and nodded.

"Ms. Mathews. Can I speak with you?" I looked at Althea.

“Yeah, sure.” My eyes went to Kaiden. “You okay, bud?” His eyes shifted to Althea and then back to me before giving me a crude nod. “Okay, how about you two go over where those toys are and play while I talk to Ms. Althea.”

Kaydence released me and rushed to Kaiden grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the toys in the room.

“Let’s go in my ofce,” she smiled at me. “Sadie will watch over them.” She nodded towards the receptionist.

I nodded, gave the kids one more look then followed behind her.

“Kaydence and Kaiden are lovely kids.” She started.

I looked around the room. It was decorated in soft pastel colors. Yellows, greens, pinks, and white. Pictures of cartoon characters and animals were scattered around the wall. In the corner was an interactive mat with a box of diferent toys. The atmosphere was perfect for a kid.

“They are.” I smiled bringing my eyes back to her.

She took a seat and opened for me to seat on the couch across from her.

“You’ve grown fond of them, haven’t you?” Her legs crossed at the knee.

My head bobbed as I took a seat. “I have. A lot has happened in my life this year, but those two helped deal with a lot of it.”

“Like what if you don’t mind me asking.”

I cleared my throat and shifted. “I’m newly divorced and before my divorced, I sufered from a miscarriage.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

I stared at her for a moment. Althea had to be in her early forties, late thirties but she seemed like a nice woman. Her voice was calming like you could listen to it on one of those podcasts that helped you fall asleep.

“It’s fine. It just wasn’t my time. Kaiden and Kaydence though, they’ve helped me get over that. I’m blessed to have them.”

She nodded and leaned over picking up a notebook. “You mentioned they’re closed of and I saw that today. Kaydence didn’t speak a lot, it was mostly Kaiden.”

“I figured.” My mouth twisted to the side, fingers tapping against my thigh.

“Is that normal for them?”

“It is. When I first got them, it took a few weeks for me to actually be able to interact with Kaydence without Kaiden interfering.”

“He’s taken the role of her protector and older brother serious?”

I smiled. “He does. Considering everything they’ve been through; I don’t blame him.”

She nodded. “I know you gave me a summary of why you want them to see me, but I would like to know more from them. The next session I want to try them together again. After that, I want to do individual sessions. I understand Kaiden wants to keep his sister safe, but her being so dependent on him isn’t healthy. I want to help

build a safe space for both of them so they learn it's okay not being around each other all the time.”

“Did you get anything out of them?”

“A little, nothing too major. I did learn they enjoy being with you.”

My smile grew. “They do?”

This time she smiled at me too. “They do. I don’t know how long it’ll take for them to be comfortable enough to open up with me, but they seem fond of you. Both asked if you could come in at some point in the session.” My chest warmed.

“It’s important that they’re in a healthy and safe environment. With their past, it’s hard for them to trust others but it seems you’ve built that with them. That’s good. I want you in on their next session. I wanna see if they’re more willing to talk with you present.”

“Of course.” I quickly let her know.

“Good.”

“Is there anything you recommend I do? I mean I’m new to dealing with kids with trauma.”

Althea shook her head. "You're doing what you're supposed to. Just keep doing that."

I spoke with her for a few more minutes before we left out the room. After collecting the kids and scheduling another appointment we headed for the elevator to take us to the main floor.

My fingers drummed on the steering wheel as I waited for the road to clear so I could pull out the parking lot.

"What did you two think of Althea?" I asked glancing back at them in the mirror.

Kaydence had her unicorn in her arms and thumb in her mouth while Kaiden was looking out the window.

"She was okay." He answered.

Seeing the street was clear of cars, I pulled into traffic. "So you guys would be okay with seeing her again?" "Why do we have to?" Kaiden's eyes cut to me. Scrapping my top teeth over my bottom lip, I pulled

on the corner of it. “Well, you two have been through a lot and having someone to talk to will help you deal with it.”

“We have you.”

A small toothless smile formed on my face. “I agree, you do and you guys will always have me. Althea is just

there to help me,” I cleared my throat. “Neither of you ever speak on your mom. Do you miss her?”

I always avoiding bringing up their previous situations especially, their mom but I knew I had to stop handling them with kid gloves if I wanted them to move on.

“No.” Kaiden shut down, his face blank.

“What about you Kaydence, do you?” “She doesn’t.”

I tapped my finger on the wheel again. “Kaiden, I’m asking Kaydence.” I glanced in the mirror. He pinched his brows together then turned to look out the mirror. “Kaydence, do you miss your mom?”

“You’re mommy.”

I swerved when those words came out her mouth.
“Shit,” I mumbled.

“Kaydence I-” my words got caught in my throat. Tears filled my eyes.

“You see me as your mom?” I gripped the steering wheel tightly.

Kaiden cut his eyes to me but stayed quiet while Kaydence giggled.

That warm feeling filled my chest again. I knew me and Kaydence had grown closer, she spent a lot more time in the living room with me now than she did her room. I also looked forward to our girl days when she got her hair done and went to the nail shop. Today we were even matching in one of the outfits I got from Nova Rae’s.

Smiling I continued to drive, I needed to run by the clinic before I did anything else. I took today off since the kids had therapy, but there was one patient I needed to check in on.

“Abby hey, what’s going on?” I handed the chart to the front desk and turned to face her.

She was smiling widely. “I’ve been doing the classes to become a foster parent. They’re doing a home study next week.”

“Abby that’s great! I’m so happy for you.” I nodded for her to walk with me. “Have you spoke to the daughter or her dad?”

Her smile slowly dimmed before she rolled her eyes. “No.” She sighed as her shoulders fell. “I did write him and

I’m waiting to see if he’ll read it and respond. “Kaylee though, no word but I’m trying to stay positive.”

Reaching over I gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “That’s all you can do. Once you get certified then you’ll be set.”

When we stepped through the door that led to the back I immediately laid eyes on Kaiden and Kaydence who were petting one of the dogs that were being handled by one of the other vets, Dr. James.

“I just hope that everything works out. I hate Kaylee’s alone, I’m scared for her. What if she’s being mistreated?”

“You can’t think like that, Abby. Stay positive, remember?”

She looked over at the kids. “How is it? Do you enjoy raising them?”

I grinned. “I do. I’ve grown to love them. I don’t want to get rid of them.”

“Since first starting here I’ve looked up to you, Jerzey. You’ve always been so passionate about your work. Most people see animals as just that, but you actually care about them and their well-being. I was surprised to learn you

didn’t have kids but seeing you with them shows you were meant for this role.”

I fought back tears when I looked at Abby again. “Thank you, Abby, that really means a lot.”

“Mommy, can we get doggy!” Kaydence rushed over to us and pointed.

I waved to Dr. James.

“Mommy?” Abby questioned.

“It’s new.” I grinned. “You want a dog, Kaydence?” She nodded, her face matching mine. “Mhm, we’ll see, okay?”

Her arm wrapped around my leg, and she hugged it tightly.

Kaiden came over my brows furrowed when I noticed him coughing.

“You, okay?” He nodded, coughing a couple more times.

I patted his back until the coughing calmed down. When I made sure he was good, I decided it was time to go. “You two ready? You hungry?”

“Yes!” They both blurted out.

“We’re going to head out, but Abby if you need to talk you have my number, okay?”

“Thank you, Jerzey.”

“No problem. I’ll see you tomorrow. C’mon kiddos.” Today was a good day.

“You need to go, Payton! I’m not doing this shit with you!” I pulled up to O’Shae’s house and saw him outside with Payton.

“After two years! Two years, O’Shae, you’re just throwing this, *us* away!”

I cut my car off and through my rolled down window I could hear them.

“Even if I was considering us still it all went out the window when you put yo hands on me. I don’t do that domestic violence shit and you know that. You got the rest of your shit, now you can leave. I’m changing the locks tomorrow.”

Payton stomped her foot and started yelling.

“Who is that?” Kaydence questioned.

I glanced back at her and Kaiden. “No one important.”

“Oh, I guess this is why you’re doing this!” When I looked back from the duo, I noticed Payton was glaring at my car.

“Stay here,” I told the kids.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped out the car.

“I should have known! You’re never too far behind, are you?!” She crossed her arms over her chest and if looks could kill, I’d be dead.

“Payton, I’m not your enemy.” I approached them. “Everything okay?” I looked over at O’Shae.

He surprised me when he wrapped his arm around my waist and kissed my temple. “Everything’s good. Payton was just getting the rest of her shit and leaving.” He glowered at her.

“I knew it! You two fucking, aren’t you?” Her eye twitched and bounced between us.

“Who I’m fucking isn’t your concern anymore. Leave Payton, now. That’s the last time Ima say that shit.” O’Shae’s voice didn’t raise, but it was stern, filled with warning. I knew he was hitting his limit with her.

Payton mugged me. “I hope being a homewrecking bitch makes you feel good about yourself. Karma’s a bitch!”

I went to step to her but O’Shae tightened his hold on my waist. “Go!” She rolled her eyes and snatched up the bags at her feet before turning and stomping away.

We watched her pause at my car and peer into it. Scofng she looked back at us then rolled her eyes and continued to her car that was on the street.

After she tossed everything inside, she got in the car and skirted of.

“She’s worrisome as fuck.” O’Shae muttered before turning to face me. “Sorry about that.”

I waved him of. “I told you, I’m not worried about her.”

One corner of his mouth rose. “Who are you worried about then?”

Digging my tooth teeth in my bottom lip, I fought back a smile.

“My best friend.”

“*Best friend.*” He smirked, dragging his tongue over his lips and raising an eyebrow.

My knees buckled.

We stood in a stare of briefly causing me to forget the kids were in the car.

“I should get the kids.”

O’Shae pecked my lips then released me. “Go ahead.”

Inhaling and exhaling a deep breath I turned and started for my car.

“Is O’Shae your boyfriend?” Kaiden asked when I got him out the car.

“What you know about that?” I glanced down at him, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach.

He lifted his shoulders. “At our last house, Jenny kissed a boy and said it was her boyfriend.”

O’Shae held the door open for us. “What about a boyfriend?”

“Kaiden asked if you were my boyfriend.”

When I looked at O’Shae a hint of mischief played over in his eyes.

“O’Shae can’t be my boyfriend Kaiden because he hasn’t asked me to be his girlfriend.” I made sure to keep

eye contact with O’Shae as I spoke. A smile tugged on his lips.

“I got something for y’all.” Ignoring my statement he looked down at the kids.

“What?” Both of them said eagerly quickly forgetting the current subject.

They followed behind O’Shae into his living room and I stood near the entrance watching. “You got me a car!” Kaiden’s face lit up.

“I told you I got you.” O’Shae handed Kaydence a coloring book and some colored pencils.

I stepped further into the room, eyeing the modeled car box. “This is a surprise.”

“Yeah well, one day at Granny Mae’s I noticed Kaydence coloring so I grab a couple books and Kaiden was interested in the model cars I had around my old room.”

“Can we do it together?” Kaiden asked looking up with hopeful eyes.

“I gotchu kid.” O’Shae ran his hand over his head.

“You color with me!” Kaydence raised the book.

“I gotchu you too.” He smiled down at her.

I was sure my heart was about to leap out my chest. “Guys, tell O’Shae thank you.”

“Thank you!”

The kids got lost in their gifts, finding a spot on the floor.

Stepping closer to O’Shae I gave him an inquisitive look. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I wanted to.” He shrugged.

“You would make a such a great dad, O.” His face went blank.

“I don’t know about all that.” He chuckled grabbing the back of his neck.

Reaching down I grabbed his hand. “I do. Seeing how attentive you are with the kids and how much they both take to you proves it.”

With lazy eyes, he peered down at me, his hands went to my waist. The change in our relationship was sudden, but I loved how giddy it made my insides.

“Also how you are with me shows me you could be a dad.”

A crooked grin formed on his face. “You guys eat?” I nodded

“Yeah, we’re good.”

Grabbing my hand, O’Shae led me to the couch.

“You wanted to talk about us?”

“Don’t you think we should?”

“I do. I don’t know what’s going on with us, but after the other night, well it’s obvious things changed.”

He nodded. “What do you want to happen with us?”

“I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize what we have.”

O’Shae chuckled. “Kind of too late for that.” I rolled my eyes. “O’Shae.”

“You told Kaiden I wasn’t your boyfriend because I hadn’t asked you to be my girlfriend.”

My stomach tightened and my pulse quickened. “Yeah...”

“So we should fx that, huh?” His hand brushed over my thigh and he stared at me with dark eyes.

“You wanna be my boyfriend? I mean you just got out a relationship and I’m newly divorced.”

“I don’t give a damn about any of that shit, Jerz. All that matters is me and you, right now. I fnally realize why all my other relationships never lasted.”

My heart pounded loudly in my ears. “And why is that?”

He grabbed my hand, caressing it. "Because they weren't you. More importantly, I never bothered to form anything like we have. You're my best friend, Jerzey. You know the good and bad when it comes to me. There's nothing I can hide from you or want to. I never felt like that with anyone else I've been with. All this aimless dating has been pointless, being that my best friend was the perfect match for me the whole time."

I inhaled a sharp breath as air inflated from my lungs. A warm blanketed feeling covered over me. My arms filled with goosebumps and tiny sparks spread through my chest as I process what O'Shae's words.

"I, I, I feel the same way." I staggered out.

The pounding in my ears grew louder.

"Then we're good. We're gonna do this?" His head slightly tilted.

Unable to process my words I bobbed my head as it swirled.

The moment was surreal to me right now, but it didn't stop the deep tingle deep and low within my stomach.

"Mommy look!" Kaydence rushed us, shoving her coloring book in my face.

O'Shae's eyes widened and I just smiled.

"It's beautiful, baby." I let her know.

Life was perfect for me. Sitting here with *my kids* and now *my man* was all I ever wanted.



“How you holding up, baby?” Granny Mae asked me, taking a seat next to me.

With my legs gapped, I leaned forward resting my elbows on my knees and folding my holds together.

“I’m good, Mama. I’m more worried about you?” I turned my head to look at her.

Crow's feet that weren't there last time I saw her surrounded her eyes. Her face was long and her eyes were droopy.

“It never gets easier.” She brought her mug to her mouth. “Every day, I wish I would have tried harder to get her out that situation.”

Unhooking my hand I reached over and grabbed my grandma's hand. “It's not your fault. You did all you could,

Mama.”

Tears filled her eyes. "I know, I know. It's just hard knowing you had to bury your child at the hands of someone else. At least I was able to get you out."

A soft, delicate smile formed on her face, but she had a faraway look in her eyes.

My jaw tightened.

Today was the anniversary of my mom's death. Every year it seemed to hit my grandma harder. Four years after my grandparents got me out that house, my dad finally took it too far.

I still remember Granny Mae waking me up crying, barely able to speak. It was my granddad that eventually told me what had happened. He beat her to death and didn't even try to run. They caught him still standing over the body after getting a call of screams from the house.

I rolled my neck between my shoulder and gritted my teeth.

Every year I waited to feel something, *anything* and every year I felt the same thing... numb. My mom didn't protect me from my dad's fists, she didn't leave for her own

good and it cost her, her life. Now every year we're reminded of that fretful night.

"I miss her so much. Before she got with your father, she was so full of life and had such a promising future." My grandma's bottom lip trembled. "When she got with your father though, she changed. It was so quick; it was like she was a completely different person overnight. The only good thing that came from their relationship is you. You're the only piece of her I have left." She squeezed my hand.

"And I'm not going anywhere."

A small silence passed through us; the old grandfather clock in the corner ticked loudly.

There was a knock on the door that gained our attention. "I'll get it," I told her and stood up.

Heading for the door, I pulled it open and was surprised to see Jerzey on the other side. She looked just as shocked to see me, but quickly recovered by throwing herself into me and arms around my neck.

"Are you holding up, okay?"

Pulling back, she grabbed my face and pecked my lips. "I'm good, Jerz." Her eyes searched mine. I could tell

she didn't believe me. She was just like my grandma always waiting for me to break down on this day.

The kids were now in the house and sitting by Granny Mae. I reached behind Jerzey and shut the door.

"I know today's hard for Granny Mae, so I wanted to come check on her. You were my next stop." Giving her a half-crooked grin, I grabbed her hand and led her to the couch.

"Hi, Mama." Jerzey smiled, releasing my hand and walking to Granny Mae kissing her cheek.

"Hi, baby."

The kids greeted her next.

"How are you?" Jerzey took a seat next to her.

"I'm fine sweetheart, just missing my baby girl." She smiled softly.

“O’Shae guess what?” I looked down and Kaiden was now next to me.

“Wassup kid?”

“I’m going to be in a basketball league!” His eyes were the brightest I’d ever seen them.

“Oh yeah? That’s what’s up. I know you gon’ be dribbling circle’s around everyone.”

He puffed his chest out. “Ima be better than Curry!” Laughing, I ruffled his curls. “We gotta get you back in the chair.” I let him know, noting his outgrown hair.

“How are you and these beautiful children?” Granny Mae looked at Kaiden who was near me and then Kaydence who was on Jerzey’s lap.

“We’re good. We just left Mama’s and I wanted to stop by here before we headed home.”

“I appreciate it, Jerzey girl. You’ve always been such a sweetheart.” I stared at Jerzey with a smile on my face. Granny Mae

was right, Jerzey's been kindhearted our whole life. She was the light to my darkness.

"Also don't think I didn't see that kiss. What's going on with you two?" Granny Mae's brows crinkled and she looked between us.

Jerzey turned to look at me and a goofy grin formed on her face.

"We're together." She admitted.

"Together? As in?"

"As in together, a couple. Jerzey's my girl."

Granny Mae's eyebrows shot up and the corners of her mouth heightened. "When did this happen? I thought you were still with that girl."

"Nah, we're done. Been done for a while honestly." "And you two?" She looked between me and Jerzey again.

"Just kind of happened." Jerzey smiled bashfully.

"Can I go outside?" Kaiden turned to look at Jerzey.

"Me too!" Kaydence hopped of Jerzey's lap.

“Sure, but don’t leave the yard.” Jerzey let them know.

“O’Shae want to shoot around?” Kaiden turned back to me.

“Give me a minute, kid. I’ll be out in a second.” He nodded and him and Kaydence rushed the door.

I walked over to the couch and sat down next to Jerzey, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her back into me.

“I always knew you two would find your way to each other, didn’t I?”

Jerzey snickered. “How did you know when we didn’t even know?”

“It was obvious when you two were around each other there was something there. Everyone seen it, but you two.”

Jerzey looked over her shoulder at me. Dipping my head, I kissed her forehead.

“And the kids are responding to this well?”

Jerzey lifted her head, turning her attention back to Granny Mae. “Yeah, they love O’Shae.”

“Hm.” Granny Mae smirked nodding her head while bringing her mug to her mouth.

“What?” I asked her through squinted eyes.

“Nothing. Just admiring you two. It reminds me of me and grandad. Ima go check on the kids.” She stood up suddenly. “I’m happy for you two.”

When it was just us two, Jerzey turned to look at me with worried eyes. “Are you honestly okay, O’Shae? Every year you say you are, but if you want to talk we can?”

Releasing Jerzey, I shifted my attention to the front window.

“What’s to talk about?”

“There’s a lot. Your mom passing, your dad’s incarceration. The fact that you lost both your parents on the same day.”

I snorted. “Jerz. I lost my parents long before that night. I’ve come to terms with everything. I know some people might dwell on

everything, but I'm not. What happened, happened and there's nothing anyone can do to change it. Do I wish my mom would have left when my grandparents got me or sooner, yeah?" I lifted my shoulders. "But she didn't. It is what it is."

Jerzey's light brown orbs bounced around my face. Her lips pressed into a straight line. "Okay, but if you want to talk..."

Smirking I grabbed her, pulling her into me. "Then you'll be the first one to know." Jerzey grabbed my face, smashing her lips into me. My hands traveled to her ass and I gripped it, pulling her closer to me.

The way I felt with Jerzey was foreign to me. I didn't know how much I enjoyed the touch to be touched until it came to her. The wall I built around me didn't exist when

she was with me. I always felt like my feeling intensified when she was around.

"Even though it's only preseason the team looks good," Mateo mentioned as we sat on my couch.

“Amir’s at his prime. I saw they said he wanted to break his record for the longest yards ran on the field this year.”

“You ever miss it?”

Out the corner of my eye, I watched Mateo drink his beer. “Football? Hell yeah. The injury that took me out, plays over in my head all the time.” My jaw clenched.

I’d never forget how one bad tackle ruined everything for me. By the time my knee was finally healed the season was over. My chances of getting any scholarships were dead.

“It’s fucked up. That could have been you instead of Amir.”

I watched as the quarterback, fake a pass and Amir took of down the field. The Cobras had never won the Superbowl, but that was because they had a horrible

coaching staff and quarterback in the past. This year that all changed. After last year they brought in a new coach and drafted a

new quarterback. They also got a new wide receiver and traded a few new players on defense.

“The change in the team was good for them. They all look hungry like they want to win.”

I nodded. “Maybe this year they’ll actually bring a ring home.”

Both The Cobras and Titans had promising seasons. The city hadn’t had a championship from either in years, but there was talk that both could change this year.

“You know what’s funny?” Mateo spoke suddenly.

“What?”

“Even with you injured Mario barely got a second look from colleges. That nigga talked so much shit about it being his time and couldn’t even perform.” He chuckled causing me to join in.

Mario was a wide receiver on the team and even though he was good at his position, he barely made any noise. Most of the time we ran the ball because I couldn’t be touched on the field.

“That nigga was living of his daddy’s legacy. That’s all that was.” I shook my head.

“Damn shame. You know he gon’ shit his pants when he finds out about you and Jerzey.”

Smirking I leaned back on the couch. “Fuck that nigga. He never deserved her anyways.”

“I’m just glad y’all finally stopped playing. Even back in high school, you use to be ready to go to war for her.”

My shoulders lifted. “Niggas knew not to fuck with her. Mario’s ass was the only one who liked to try my patience.”

For a moment I thought about the news Jerzey told me. I hadn’t forgot how I owed him another ass whoopin’.

“Remember when she cursed you out on prom night?” I chuckled.

“Nigga how do you remember that? Yo horny ass was too busy trying to get Tasha in the janitor’s closet.”

A sly grin formed on his face. “Shit she was fine as hell and willing. That don’t mean I don’t remember the scene you caused. Your ass should have claimed her that night.”

I waved him off. “I just knew Mario was on some bullshit and had to warn him.”

The night of prom flashed through my mind. Mario and some of the other football players all were bragging about taking their dates back to some hotel room each one of them had. While I tried to stay in my lane, I had to make sure to warn Mario not to be on any bullshit with Jerzey. I would have beat his ass that night if Jerzey didn’t spare him.

My phone vibrating gained my attention. When I reached over and glanced at it, I didn’t miss the way my heart danced in my chest as I read the words.

***Jerz:** I know you said you were fine. But I just wanted to check on you again. I’m here if you want to talk <3. Everyone always expected me to be like a ticking time*

bomb waiting for me to explode, but that was never the case. I processed my parent's fate a long time ago. My grandad helped me

channel the anger I had towards them as a teenager. Although it was his daughter he never made excuses for her or tried to change my feelings towards her.

Hearing the message, I locked my phone back and turned my attention back to the game. A smile tugged at my lips.

Normally I wasn't the most social able person, but that rule never applied to Jerzey.

"C'mon! Pass interference!" Mateo shouted tossing his hands up.

Whenever I watched a football game I always wondered how my life would have panned out if I would have been able to continue my career. When I frst got injured I was angry and bitter, knowing my dreams were over. It was a hard pill to swallow but at the end of the day, I knew I was where I was meant to be.



“This is the frst time we’ve been out as more than best friends.” I hugged O’Shae’s arm and grinned up at him.

He glanced down at me with his signature crooked grin. “It is, isn’t it?” His brows wagged.

I nodded. "Kind of feels different doesn't it?" "Nah, not foreal."

Rolling my eyes, I poked my bottom lip out. "Well, it does for me."

"How you fgure?"

Sighing I leaned my head on his shoulder. "Because every time I'm around you now I feel all fuzzy inside."

My insides always felt mushy and as if they were swirling now when I was with O'Shae. I still saw him as my best friend, but it was so much more than that. Being with

Mario never had me feel so light before. Being with O'Shae was easy and our relationship itself didn't change, just the dynamic.

"Wanna know something crazy?"

He asked once we got to his car. We had just went and grabbed something to eat. The kids were with Granny Mae. She was still in her feelings over O'Shae's mom and wanted something to keep her occupied. She had taken them to the lake for a while, giving me and O'Shae some time to ourselves.

“What?” I pulled away and looked at him.

“This is the first relationship I’ve been in where I feel like it’s actually real. I don’t just feel like I’m with someone to occupy my time.”

O’Shae trapped me between him and his car. His body pressed closer to mine.

Heat flooded my stomach. “I feel the same way. I think I’m starting to realize I was never in love with Mario. I think I just loved that I wasn’t alone anymore.” My words came out low, but I made sure to keep eye contact with O’Shae.

My heartbeat was a beat away from exploding in my chest and my pulse raced in my throat.

“So you telling me you in love with me, Jerz?” His voice dropped an octave, head cocked to the side, and tongue slowly dragged across his lips. For a moment I got lost in his dark orbs. My breathing slowed.

I swallowed hard, attempting to keep my heart in my chest.

“Truthfully, O’Shae. I think I’ve always been in love with you.”

My nails dug into the O'Shae's muscular back and chest lifted pressing against his wide chest.

O'Shae pumped in and out of me with deep, long strokes. Massaging my wet walls and claiming my body as his.

His lips dropped down to my breast and tongue teased my sensitive nipples.

"O'Shae!" I cried breathlessly as my body quivered. His fingers sunk into my side while his other hand gripped my breast. Moving his hand lower, he grabbed my thigh and lifted it.

My body jerked as my leg wrapped around his waist. "Do you know how good you feel to me?" He mumbled into my skin.

His lips explored the center of my chest. Tongue dragged up the valley of my breast

Clenching my pussy around his shaft, I sunk my top teeth into the fat of my bottom lip. My heart pounded loudly in my chest. Sweat poured down my body, mixing with O'Shae's.

He kissed his way up to my neck, swirling his tongue around the hollow front and nipping it with his teeth.

O'Shae's house was closer to the restaurant than mine. The moment we got inside he didn't hesitate taking me his room and having his way with me. Tonight though, his strokes were different from the last time. They were passion driven and each time he pushed himself into me, it felt like he was snatching a piece of me for himself, a piece I wouldn't get nor want back.

"Open your eyes, Jerzey." He demanded in a throaty, husky voice causing a rippling to shoot through my stomach and up my spine.

Fluttering my eyes open, I made eye contact with O'Shae.

Goosebumps covered my arms.

I felt like metal and his eyes were magnetics as I stared into them. They were compelling and filled with desire, love, and passion.

My mouth opened, but no words came out as he tapped my spot rapidly. Beating on it like a drum.

O'Shae's mouth overtook mine. His tongue caressed it. His hand hugged my hip.

He rolled his hips into me.

A large thump formed in my chest.

It wasn't hard to learn from the last time that over the years O'Shae had picked up some skills. Skills I was thankful for right now.

When he lifted his mouth from mine and stared at me again, his stare was more intense.

It didn't take long for me to cum again, only this time O'Shae was right with me. His dick jerked inside me and his grip on my body tightened.

His head dropped and lips brushed over the side of my face, making their way back to mine.

When his lips were just a whisper from mine, he spoke quietly causing them to brush against mine. "I'm falling in love with you too."

Gripping my stomach, I pushed out a heavy breath through the pain as I made my way across the house to check on the kids. My period was approaching and it always brought on unbearable cramps.

First I checked on Kaydence who was peacefully sleeping, holding her unicorn closely in her hands. Loud coughs caused me to whip around and look across the hall.

I made sure to leave the door cracked and headed for Kaiden's room.

When I stepped inside, I rushed to his bed. He was sleep but seemed to be having a coughing fit.

"Kaiden," I shoot him gently.

He groaned and attempted to pull away from me. "Wake up, honey." I shoot him again.

His eyes fluttered and mouth turned upside down.

“Are you okay?” I patted his back.

These coughing spells of his were becoming a lot more frequent and I didn’t like it. “My throat hurts.” My brows furrowed.

“I wonder if you’re getting sick.” I placed the back of my hand to his forehead. “You don’t have a fever. Does anything else hurt?”

He shook his head.

“Okay, Ima go grab you some water. I’ll be right back.”

I hadn’t gotten the kids a doctor since being here, but it looks like I would have to find one. Whatever was wrong with Kaiden I wanted to get it handled ASAP. I also didn’t want Kaydence catching whatever it is. Outside of the excessive coughing, he didn’t seem sick. Hopefully, it was just allergies.

My nose scrunched. I tried to recall if it was ever mentioned he suffered from allergies or anything. I didn’t believe so. Making a mental note to call the social worker in the morning, I made my way to the kitchen.

After grabbing the water and making my way back to Kaiden's room, I saw he had nodded back of. Sitting the water on the nightstand near his bed, I sat on the edge of it and ran my hand over his curls.

I squeezed my eyes shut as my stomach cramped again.

Kaiden seemed to be fine, but I stayed in his room for another five minutes to make sure. He was a strong kid and didn't typically let anyone know when something was wrong. I was surprised when he admitted his throat hurt.

When I was back in my room, I pushed a shaky breath out and opened the pill bottle. The next couple days were going to be hell. Because of my condition, my period was always ten times worse than normal.

I hoped the medicine my OB had given me to take the edge of would kick in quickly.

My front door opened as I lay curled up on my sectional with a blanket over me and eyes shut tight.

“Jerz,” O’Shae called out.

Opening one eye, I wanted to smile when I laid eyes on him.

“Hey,” I spoke through a strained voice. “Where’s the kids?”

I had texted O’Shae asking if he could pick up Kaiden from basketball because my stomach was in shreds. The pills I had for this situation unfortunately were doing nothing for me.

“Don’t worry, I got you.” I watched as he made his way to me with a bag in his hand. “Ima go put this in the freezer and I’ll be right back.” He handed me two pills and a water bottle.

Slowly I leaned up and took the pills.

Closing my eyes again, I took a few deep breaths and laid back down.

A few minutes later O’Shae was back, this time climbing on the couch and making his way behind me. Typically I didn’t want to be bothered when on my cycle, but this wasn’t O’Shae’s first rodeo with me. Mario was hardly any help during this time, he always

chalked it up to me PMSing and being dramatic not realizing it was way more than that.

At the moment I felt like my insides were being torn apart.

O'Shae lifted my shirt and I felt something warm hit my stomach. "You got me another heating pad?"

"I told you, I got you. You're ice creams in the freezer too." His lips pressed against the back of my head.

One of his hands went to my back and he massaged the smalls of it.

Small sighs left my mouth and I closed my eyes again. I was still in pain, but I appreciated O'Shae being here with me. The first time I went through this I was 16 and my foster parents were of course working, leaving me to deal with the severe cramps and heavy bleeding alone.

O'Shae ended up coming over for whatever reason and found me curled up in tears. In a panic he rushed to me, trying to figure out what was going on. Once I convinced him I didn't need a hospital he

carried me to my bed and held me until he knew Granny Mae was home from the hospital, that's when she took over.

“Thank you for always being here for me,” I whispered, feeling the pills he gave me taking effect. My

eyes were heavy.

O'Shae continued holding me and rubbing my lower back until sleep finally found me.



“I know she’s gonna tire herself out by the time we get home.”

Jerzey laughed watching Kaydence jump on the trampolines.

While Kaiden was at basketball camp, Jerzey wanted to get Kaydence out the house.

“Then that means I’ll have you to myself.” I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her body into mine.

Jerzey giggled and glanced over her shoulder. “We still have her brother, who you promised to help with that model car you got him.”

My tongue dragged over my top teeth. “Damn I did tell his ass that didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did! You know he’s not gonna let you slide on it either.”

Moving my face to her neck, I dug my face into it and kissed it. "O'Shae. There are kids around." She giggled, shifting in my arms.

"Fuck them kids," I tugged on her fesh.

Again, she snickered. "I never thought you would be like this?"

Without removing my lips from her neck, I spoke. "Like what?"

"So touchy and affectionate."

This time I lifted my face and stared at her. She had her eyes locked on Kaydence who was playing with a couple other kids.

"She's really broken out her shell."

I glanced over and had to agree. Kaydence looked happy.

"I'm not like this with everyone. In fact, I've never been like this before. It's just you. For some reason, I can and don't want to keep my hands of you." Moving my hands to her front, I cufed her breast.

"O'Shae!" Chuckling I released her and tossed my hands up.

“Just showing you what I mean.”

Jerzey turned and glared at me. “Hands to yourself.”

I continued to stare at Jerzey, thinking she was right. The type of guy I’ve been these past few weeks was different for me. It was something I did without even thinking about it.

Jerzey picked up her phone and stared at the screen.

Her brows furrowed.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s the community center.” She answered.

I couldn’t hear what was being said to her, but whatever it was wasn’t good.

“We gotta go!” She hung up and jumped up. “Kaydence!”

Noting the panic in her voice, I followed behind her as she rushed to the play area. “Kaydence, come go we gotta go!”

“Jerz. Hold on, what happened?” I grabbed her.

“I gotta go to the hospital. Damnit, Kaydence come on!” Her face was red and fear bounced around in her eyes.

“Chill. I’ll grab her.”

Jerzey was bouncing her leg viciously and I could practically see her hear pounding in her chest.

Not sure what was up, I hurried and got Kaydence who was upset about leaving and helped her locate her shoes.

The moment we got to Jerzey she was rushing for the door. Kaydence looked at me confused and my face matched hers. I wasn’t sure what the phone call was about, but I knew it had to do with Kaiden and whatever was said wasn’t good.

“Kaiden, are you okay?” Jerzey rushed over to the hospital where he was with an oxygen mask on his face.

Sluggishly he nodded his head with his eye barely open.

Her eyes and hand bounced around his body searching to make sure he was fine.

“The doctor should be in soon. They were able to get his breathing under control.” Odin stepped over to her.

Kaydence was in my arms, head on my shoulder, sleeping.

Apparently, Kaiden was having trouble breathing while at basketball camp to the point they had to call the ambulance.

“Did they say anything? Do they know what caused this?”

Odin shook his head. “They’ve been running tests then put him on oxygen. That’s as far as they got before you arrived.”

Jerzey’s eyes fell and shifted back to Kaiden. “Thank you for staying with him until I got here.” Her hand went over Kaiden’s curls.

“Of course. Champ gave us a good scare. I had to make sure he was good.”

I walked over to the couch on the wall in front of the window and laid Kaydence down.

“Keep us updated.” Odin nodded at me and turned to leave once I walked closer to Jerzey again.

My arm went around her waist. "I should have been more persistent with getting him a doctor. He's had this nasty cough for a while, but I just thought it was allergies." I pulled her wrist up and kissed the tattoo on her forearm.

"This isn't your fault. He's been up and active, giving no indication that he was sick."

She leaned her head back on me. "I just hope he's fine."

I looked down at Kaiden who seemed to be peacefully sleeping. His chest rose and fell at a casual rate.

His eyes fluttered open and he attempted to remove the mask.

"No, Kaiden keep that on." Jerzey rushed over and placed her hands over his.

He glanced up at her with a confused look on his face. "It's okay, Kaiden. I'm here and you're going to be okay." Jerzey pulled away from me and sat on the edge of his bed. He coughed a few times causing her to tense. "Where's the doctor?" Her eyes shot to the door while

her legs bounced.

“He’s a strong kid, don’t worry Jerz.” I grabbed her shoulder.

Her shoulders fell forward. “It’s hard not to. I don’t know what to do in situations like this.”

“First, calm down. You can’t panic or he will.” When she looked back at Kaiden his eyes were locked on her. She forced a smile on her face.

The beeping of the machines and small snores coming from Kaydence filled the room. After fifteen minutes of us not hearing anything I was about to go look for the doctor when he knocked on the door and opened it.

“Good afternoon.” An older man stepped inside. “I’m Dr. Halsted. Are you the parents?” He closed the door and stepped closer to the bed.

“Uh, yeah I am.” Jerzey shot up. “What’s wrong with him? Is he okay?”

“Does Kaiden have a history of breathing problems?” “I, uh. I’ve only had him for a few months but not that I’m aware of.” A confused look formed on the doctor’s face. “I’m his foster mother.”

He nodded. “Well, according to the test we ran Kaiden suffered from an asthma attack. Do you know if he has a history of asthma?”

Jerzey shook her head. “No, not that I was told.” Her worried eyes shifted back to Kaiden. “He’s been having these coughing spells lately. I just figured it was allergies. Is he okay now?”

Dr. Halsted walked over to the sink in the room and washed his hands before proceeding to the bed where he checked the monitors.

“We were able to get his breathing under control. He did have some wheezing going on in the chest, but that’s not uncommon. We’re going to give him something to help with the inflammation in the chest and a breathing treatment to clear his airway.”

“So he can’t play basketball anymore?”

“I wanna play!” Kaiden blurted out, pulling the mask from his face.

“Relax, kid.” I grabbed his shoulder and eyed the doctor.

The doctor gave him a reassuring smile. “Basketball is still able to be played. We just need to get a handle on this frst.”

When Kaiden got conformation, he relaxed again. Jerzey took her place back on the corner of the bed and he leaned on her. Her hands went to his back and she rubbed it gently.

“I don’t get it through. How come no one ever mentioned this to me?”

“It could be something he recently developed. You said his coughing spells just started, correct?”

“Yes.”

When Kaydence started whining behind us, I turned and walked towards her while the doctor continued talking to Jerzey and examining Kaiden.

We were at the hospital for another two hours before he was discharged to go home. Kaiden looked exhausted by the time we got him in the car.

Before Jerzey climbed in the passenger seat, I grabbed her and pulled her into me. "He's good, Jerzey. You heard the doctors. He's just got to take it easy the next few days and you make sure he takes his medicine daily and use his inhaler when needed. Stop looking so scared."

She hugged me tightly and dug her face into my hands. "I hate how helpless I felt in there. That was the scariest call, O'Shae. I don't know what I would do if I would have lost him. Lost either of them."

When Jerzey looked up at me, I noticed her eyes were glossy. My chest tightened.

Instead of responding, I hugged her tighter. It was clear to me now that Jerzey had grown a deep connection to these kids. I knew if she were ever lose them it would destroy her.



“Jerzey, girl you’re glowing.” Abby bragged, smiling at me.

Blushing, I waved her off. “Oh please.” My hands went through my hair. I straighten it last night for the first time in months.

“I’m serious. You look good, happy. Haven’t seen that look on you in a while.”

My cheeks hurt from how hard I was smiling. “I am happy.”

This past month has been pure bliss. Things with me and O’Shae were progressing better than I could imagine. It makes me wish we would have tried this sooner. The kids were doing well and progressing with Althea. They didn’t

say much about *all* they went through, but they were opening up a little more to her.

After Kaiden’s scare at basketball camp, I made sure he took it easy for a few days, since then he hasn’t had any more fare-ups.

He was now enrolled in the basketball league that Gage recommended him for and I was excited to see him in his first game. I had been working with Kaydence to help with her speech and she seemed to be getting better. She was a little behind for her age, but I could tell she was going to be smart just like her brother.

“I got to see her,” Abby mentioned knocking me out my thoughts.

“See who?”

“Kaylee, I got to see her.”

Pausing I turned and looked at her with risen eyebrows. “That’s great Abby. How was it?”

Her chest rose then fell and shoulders. “Good for the most part. I got in contact with her social worker and was able to find out what group home she was in.”

“Still no word from her dad?”

She rolled her eyes. “No. But I don’t care anymore. As long as I can get Kaylee that’s all I care about.”

I bobbed my head.

It was drawing close to the end of the day and I was excited to get home. It had been a long time since I looked forward to leaving the clinic. I loved what I did and it never felt like work. Going home to Mario never excited me, it was just like everyday life. Now I had a purpose.

“Got any plans for the holiday?” I asked Abby after a pregnant pause.

It was Labor Day weekend.

“Just a date with some Chinese food and One Tree Hill.”

“No family?”

She shook her head. “My parents live down south and I have a brother, but he’s always out doing his own thing.”

My mouth turned upside. “My boyfriend’s throwing a barbeque Saturday. You should come.”

“Boyfriend?” Her eyes widened. “I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

Again, I blushed. “Uh yeah, it’s still kind of new, but...” I shrugged and ignored the way my heart leaped at the thought of O’Shae. It was still kind of surreal that we were together after all this time.

“Ooh, that’s why you been glowing. You go ahead, girl!” I snickered at her words. “I’ll come if you don’t think he’ll mind.”

“Of course not. I’ll send you the info.”

I stopped in front of the door that led to the next animal I was seeing. Being that it was my last one of the day I wanted to end it quickly and get home to the kids.

“Do you think our mom misses us?” Kaiden asked catching me of guard.

I glanced in my rearview mirror at him. We had just left his therapy session. Today was a solo session with just him. Kaydence was with Granny Mae.

“I’m sure she does, honey. She’s just sick right now.” I tried to explain.

“I don’t think so.” His words came out as mumbles and he stared out the window with his chin propped on his small fist.

“Kaiden.”

“She always yelled at Kaydence for crying and ignored me.” My chest clenched along with my hands on the steering wheel. “I don’t think she misses us.”

I tried to find the right words to bring him comfort but was coming up blank. This was the first time he’s brought his mom up. “Did you and Althea speak on your mom today?”

I glanced in the rearview mirror and watched him bob his head.

I swallowed hard.

“Do you miss your mom?”

This time Kaiden looked at me with sad eyes. “No. I hate her.”

I blinked.

“Kaiden, you don’t hate her. I’m sure your mom loves you and your sister. She’s just dealing with something things right now.” I stopped at a red light.

“I don’t want to go back with her.” I

swallowed hard.

“Jerzey,” This time his voice was small.

“Yes, honey?”

“I like staying with you.” My stomach fluttered with you.

“I like you staying with me too. You and your sister.”

“You’re nice.”

A small toothless grin formed on my face. “Can I, can I call you mom like Kaydence?”

His eyes quickly shifted out the window while he fiddled with his hands in his lap. My heart swelled in my chest and a warm feeling spread through my stomach.

“Of course, Kaiden. I would love that.” My voice cracked and tears pooled in my eyes.

Squeezing and unsqueezing my steering wheel, I willed myself not to get over emotional. It's already been a rough day considering what this weekend represented, but now this just sent my emotions into overdrive.

"I appreciate you inviting me, Jerzey. This was way better than sitting on my couch all lonely." Abby thanked.

I grabbed the almost empty wine bottle and filled my glass.

"It's no problem. I'm glad you came. I hope you enjoyed yourself."

Everyone was finished eating and now enjoying the nice weather. The kids were playing with the bubble guns Granny Mae had got them, she was sitting near them watching. Mateo was here, but he and his fancée had to go to some function her family was having.

It was nice having everyone together today. Granny Mae always forced O'Shae to light the grill up during the holidays, but this was the first time it wasn't just us three.

I took a large sip of the wine, enjoying the fruity favor. Today I wanted to feel numb and it was doing exactly that. While inside I felt hollow, I made sure to keep that feeling of my face.

“Come in the house, really quick. I wanna talk to you.” I glanced over my shoulder at O’Shae whose head was near my ear.

Rolling my bottom lip into my mouth, I sunk my top teeth in it. His hair was freshly cut, and his beard lined up.

I blinked a few times. “Everything okay?”

His face was blank, lips pressed together. “I don’t know yet.”

My eyes narrowed. “Abby, can you excuse me for a moment?”

She smiled. “Yeah, of course.”

I downed the rest of the wine in my glass and stood up, stumbling in the process. O’Shae grabbed me to steady me and his mouth turned upside down.

“Oops.” I giggled.

O'Shae led me into his house with a firm grip on my waist.

"What's up with you?" He walked me into his living room then released me.

His eyes peered into me intensely. "What you mean?" My spoke through hiccups.

"How much wine did you have today?"

"A glass or two."

"Four, you had four."

My eyes squinted and lips pouted out before I laughed.

"O'Shae since when are you the wine police?" I

batted my lashes and my mouth slacked into a lazy grin. His face grew sterner. "You don't drink Jersey, not that

much at least. What's going on with you?" His eyes studied me, traveling over me as if he was looking for something.

"Nothing, I just wanted to let loose today." I blinked a few times ignoring the fuzzy feeling that was filling my head. The wine was starting to hit, giving me a nice buzz.

“Something’s up with you, Jerz. I noticed it the moment you got here.” He paused, looking me over again. “Wassup, talk to me?”

His voice along with his eyes suddenly softened.

Avoiding his eyes, I folded my hands on my stomach.

“Nothing O’Shae.”

“Jerzey.” He called sternly.

Still, I avoided his eyes.

“Look at me.” Slowly I dragged my eyes back to him. “I know you, something’s bothering you.”

O’Shae stepped closer to me and grabbed my hands, pulling me closer to him. “Talk to me, Jerz.”

My tongue was suddenly heavy my mouth and throat grew dry. I attempted to swallow back the tears threatening to fall.

I didn’t want to make today about me. I tried to push it all out my mind and enjoy today, knowing what it really meant.

“My baby was supposed to be born this weekend,” I spoke lowly in a shaky voice.

I squeezed my eyes shut and inhaled a sharp breath. My heart hammered in my chest as it tightened.

“I thought you were due at the beginning of the year?” I shook my head, forcing a small smile on my face and opening my eyes.

O’Shae had been there when I mourned my first pregnancy, it was around the time I had gotten pregnant the second time.

“Not that time.”

His face balled up with confusion. “That time? There was more than one?”

Slowly I nodded my head, tucking my lips in my mouth. O’Shae’s grip on me tightens.

“I found out I was pregnant right around the time I was due the first time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I squeezed my eyes shut again. “I was scared. After the last one, I wasn’t sure what would happen so I wanted to wait until I was in the safe zone.” My voice was strained. Stomach churned.

“Jerz,” O’Shae called out softly.

“I, I-” The dam broke and tears begin to fall causing O’Shae to pull me into him. One of his hands wrapped around my waist the other cufed the back of my head. I dug my face into his chest allowing the emotions I had been trying to ignore all day to come to the surface. I wrapped my arms around him and gripped him tightly.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Jerzey. I wish you would have told me.”

“I had to deal with it alone. This time I didn’t have you.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?”

“I was embarrassed.”

“Jerzey.” My breathing picked up and my heart fell into my stomach. Memories of my last pregnancy played over in my head causing it to spin and a sharp pain to shoot

through my chest. There was so much that surrounded that single event that changed my life. So many reasons why didn't tell O'Shae.

"I didn't miscarry," I whispered.

I wasn't sure if O'Shae heard me, so I lifted my head and stared up at him. He was watching me with curious eyes. "What do you mean you didn't miscarry?"

A lump formed in my throat.

Memories of the day I woke up to a severe pain in my stomach and blood between my legs, played over in my head.

I went to drop my head, but O'Shae stopped me by grabbing my chin. His eyes narrowed, searching mine.

"Jerzey. What happened?"

I inhaled a deep breath, I slowly pushed it out as my stomach flipped.

"Mario," I whispered making him tense up.

"Mario what?" He gritted.

"He, he. He caused me to lose it." My body shook, and tears rushed out my eyes.

Saying the words out loud made it real. I tried to forget, tried to ignore the pain that my ex-husband had caused me daily.

“What the fuck you mean he caused you to lose it? What did he do?” Oshae’s deadly tone sent a shiver down my spine.

“When I found out I was pregnant again, I was going on three months. I was excited and couldn’t wait to tell Mario. After the first pregnancy, he didn’t want kids anymore, but I convinced myself that when he found out we were expecting again he would change his mind. Jokes on me he wasn’t happy, in fact, he told me he didn’t want it.” My voice shook as ice fled through my veins. “We argued about me keeping it. He kept trying to convince me it wasn’t a good time for a baby. He had just got a promotion at the hospital and was working more, so I understood, but I wanted my baby. For two weeks we walked around our house not speaking. He was hardly home and well I was still in bliss about my pregnancy. I was scared but happy.”

My pulse suddenly was in my throat and my temple throbbed.

“It was a Wednesday. I hadn’t been feeling good

and I called off work. My stomach had been in pain all night and I wanted to take it easy. I woke up bleeding and feeling like my stomach was being ripped apart. I knew. I knew I was having a miscarriage.” My voice cracked. Sympathy passed through O’Shae’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Jerzey.”

“He gave me an abortion pill. Slipped it in my drink without me knowing and caused me to lose the baby.” I blurted out. Soon as the words left my mouth I was crying again, this time harder than before.

O’Shae pulled me into his chest again. My tears filled his black shirt.

“I heard him on the phone, he didn’t know I was up but was up talking about the pills worked and I had lost the baby. I confronted him and he tried to deny it at first but eventually, he admitted the truth. He told me it wasn’t a good time for a baby. I didn’t even know

if I was gonna be able to carry that baby to term, I was already high risk, but I wanted to try. I fled for divorce the next day.”

I felt like a weight had finally been lifted off me. I had been holding that in for so long. Day in and day out despair

filled me. I was in a bad place for so long, it wasn't until I was told I was getting the kids that I finally started feeling alive again.

O'Shae was silent. I could hear his heart pounding away in his chest.

I sniffed a few times and slowly lifted my head off his chest again, staring up at his face. A chill shot through me. His eyes were dark, almost black. Eyes tight and mouth turned up.

“Why didn't you tell me?” O'Shae wasn't looking at me. His voice was emotionless and cold.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. My stomach knotted.

“I was embarrassed. My husband forced me to lose our kid and had no remorse about it. I divorced him and wanted to bury and forget it. I knew Mario wasn’t perfect but I never imagined he would do anything like that.”

The air surrounding us was heavy. It seemed like time was moving slowly as I held my breath waiting for O’Shae to say something.

O’Shae surprised me when he released me. His face was void of any emotion, but I noticed the vein on his neck pulsing.

“O’Shae.” He ignored me.

Without giving me a second look, O’Shae turned and headed for his front door.

“O’Shae!”

He snatched his keys of the key rack near the door and snatched it open, then slammed it shut.

My heart fell into my stomach and my breathing sped up.

Panic shot through me. My pulse raced.

The moment I heard O'Shae's car roar, I rushed to the door and outside.

O'Shae was pulling out his driveway. "O'Shae!" I shouted hurrying towards his car.

He kept his eyes forward, ignoring my shrills. I continued yelling for him. The look he had in his eyes, I knew it. O'Shae was in the red zone and I was afraid he would do something he couldn't take back.

My throat was raw, my head was pounding from my continuing yelling.

"Jerzey! Jerzey!" Granny Mae's voice was next to me, but it sounded like she was far away.

My chest was tight.

"What happened? Jerzey, calm down!" I couldn't speak. It was as if someone was squeezing my throat and refusing to let go.

I could hear yelling around me but was unable to respond.

My hand went to my chest as I gasped for air. The outside became fuzzy and suddenly began to spin afore silence and darkness consumed me.



Red.

Red was all I seen as I burned rubber to the hospital, not giving a fuck about the law. My knuckles were white by how hard I

was gripping my steering wheel. My jaw ached by how hard I was clenching it.

It felt like a volcano had erupted inside me sending lava rushing through my veins.

Skirting in front of the hospital, not giving a fuck if I was in the no-parking zone, I jumped out the car and stormed into the hospital.

Right now I had tunnel vision.

“Sir, sir!” The receptionist yelled as I stormed past her and through the double doors that led to the emergency

room. I didn’t know if Mario was on shift right now, but I knew if he was, he would be back here.

My eyes scanned over around the room. Adrenaline rushed through me.

Like God was on my side, Mario was at the desk in the center of the room, grinning and cheesing in some woman’s face behind the desk.

Not giving myself time to think, I rushed him. Grabbing him by the shoulder, I sent my fist flying into his face,

Screams sounded around us but I zoned all that out. Jerzey's words continued playing over in my ears causing my rage to intensify. I didn't let up on Mario, hovering over him I continued crashing my fist into his face. A satisfying feeling shot through me each time I connected with his flesh.

By the time I'd come to, I was being pulled off Mario who wasn't moving. "Get the fuck off me!" I attempted to yank away from the man holding me.

"Calm down!" He yelled.

I felt handcuffs click on my wrist.

My heart pounded in my ears. Blood boiled.

My breathing was heavy.

I watched as people rushed Mario all in a frenzy.

I was escorted back through the double doors, no longer able to see Mario, but that didn't stop my pounding heart.

Once I was in the waiting room, I noticed an ambulance rushing in. For a second, I glanced at the gurney and my body froze as my stomach dropped.

“Jerzey?” I whispered. “Jerzey!” I attempted to break away from the cop holding me. My knees buckled while a knot filled my stomach.

I was escorted outside. “O’Shae!” My head whipped around and Granny Mae was rushing towards me. “What’s going on? Where are you taking him?”

“Ma’am, back up!” The other cop demanded.

“Mama, I’m fine. I’m fine!” I assured her as I was placed in the back of the cop car.

My head was spinning and the look on my grandmother’s face broke my heart. She stood there, tears running down her face.

I clenched my jaw.

I knew what I just did was reckless, but I didn’t regret it. The only thing I *did* regret was not being there for whatever just happened to Jerzey.

“I ‘preciate you, man.” I told Mateo once I climbed in his car.

I was arrested, processed, and able to be bonded out awaiting to hear about my court date all within three hours.

“What the hell you get arrested for?” He pulled away from the police station.

I flexed my hands. My knuckles were swollen and my skin broken.

“I fucked Mario up.” I rolled my neck between my shoulders and gritted my teeth.

“Mario as in Jerzey’s ex-husband?”

“Yeah.”

The urge to beat his ass filled me again. “What the fuck for? Never mind. It gotta deal with Jerzey right?”

Instead of verbally responding I nodded my head, not bothering to give any more details.

“I need your phone.” I turned to face him. I needed to figure out why the fuck Jerzey was on that gurney.

Mateo handed me his phone, fashing me a curious look.
“Everything good?”

Ignoring him, I called Granny Mae’s cell phone.

“Hello?” She answered after a couple rings.

“Mama,” I spoke.

“O’Shae! Oh, thank God I was so worried. What the hell did you do?”

“I’m good. You still at the hospital? What happened to Jerzey?”

My chest hadn’t stopped aching since I was escorted out the hospital.

“She passed out yelling after you.” Guilt crept into my stomach.

Gripping the phone tightly, I closed my eyes and pushed out a heavy breath. “I’m on my way up there.”

“No, you’re not! You just got escorted out of here in handcufs. Take your ass home.”

“I’m not going home until I lay eyes on my girl.”

“O’Shae Michael. Take your ass home and don’t come near this hospital.” I bit down on my back teeth.

Granny Mae hung up.

“Everything good?”

My eyes seared into the phone. “Just take me to my car.” I placed his phone into his cup holder.

Again I flexed my hand and rolled my shoulders. A million things were running through my head. Granny Mae didn’t sound like I had anything to worry about, but it still made me uneasy that Jerzey was in the hospital, especially because of me.

“Is our mom okay?” Kaiden asked, staring up at me with worried eyes.

While everything was going on, Abby had stayed here and kept an eye on them. After getting my car, it took everything for me not to rush in the hospital and see what was up with Jerzey.

The moment I got home, the kids bombarded me. I let Abby know she could go and would have Jerzey call her when she got home. My heart hadn't slowed down since I

got of the phone with Granny Mae. My nerves were unsettled and I couldn't slow my racing mind down either.

Kaydence had fallen asleep and was now lying next to me on the couch.

I tilted my head to the side for a moment and stared at Kaiden. Jerzey had told me how he asked to call her mom, but this was the first time I heard it with my own ears. He had finally warmed up to Jerzey and I know she was happy about that.

"She's good. Her and Granny Mae will be back soon." I tried to keep the roughness out my voice as I spoke through clenched teeth.

Kaiden narrowed his eyes and his brows met in the middle. "What happened to your hands?"

I glanced down at my battered hands, stretching them quickly. My top teeth sunk into my bottom lip and my shoulders squared. “Nothing. Aye, how about we work on your model car?”

I wasn’t good at this.

My adrenaline was still pumping, hands still twitching to meet Mario’s face and my body felt like sparks were shooting through it.

Kaiden caught my eye, that blank stare I was used to was on his face. I thought he was going to fight me but instead, he nodded his head and turned to go grab his model car.

Sighing, I grabbed the back of my neck and squeezed it. Reaching over I grabbed my phone, seeing no notifications I clenched it tightly in my hands. My grandma had demanded I stopped calling her after the third time.

My temple throbbed and I dragged my tongue over my top teeth.

When Kaiden came back I attempted to push my ill thoughts to the back of my head.



My head was pounding, throat felt raw, and my body felt like it had been hit by a semi-truck as I sat in the hospital bed with an IV in my arm.

My eyes traveled over to where Granny Mae was sitting. “Is O’Shae okay?” I asked after clearing my throat.

“That hothead grandson of mine is fine. You need to worry about you and...” her voice trailed off and her eyes traveled to my midsection.

My stomach flipped, heart leaping in my chest, and a chill shot through my body.

Instead of acknowledging what she said I laid back and closed my eyes.

I had a panic attack, something I hadn’t experienced since high school. That along with me being dehydrated

caused me to pass out. The moment I woke, memories of O’Shae’s deranged face popped in my head, and my pulse raced as panic shot through my body.

Granny Mae tried to keep me calm and when O'Shae finally called I was able to relax some.

The curtain was pulled back and the nurse who was in charge of me stepped in with a small smile plastered on her face. "How are you feeling, Jerzey?" She stepped to the bed and looked at the monitor.

"My head still kind of hurts." She nodded and lifted the IV bag, examining it.

"That's to be expected. We can't give you much, but I'll see if the doctor will order you some Tylenol."

I nodded and tucked my lips into my mouth. Too many thoughts were running through my head right now. O'Shae had called, but I needed to lay eyes on him. Even if I appreciated him sticking up for me, I hated that he felt the need to act irrational.

Then there was the kids, I hated they had seen the whole display that went down, and now with the situation I was just presented, it only made things trickier.

“Jerzey girl, I can hear your thoughts all the way over here. Calm down, sweetheart.” Granny Mae reached over and grabbed my hand.

My eyes sagged and tears threaten to fill them. “I’m scared, Mama.” I blinked a couple times while my heart rate sped up.

A sympathetic look appeared on her face. “Everything’s going to be okay. You just have to stay positive.”

“But what if it isn’t, you know my situation.” My voice cracked.

Granny Mae gave my hand a slight squeeze. “Now, now none of that. You’re going to be fine, Jerzey and my *new* grandbaby will be too. It’s all gonna work out.”

I gnawed on the corner of my bottom lip.

Dread bounced around in my stomach and I tried to quiet my racing thoughts. When I woke up the last thing I was expecting to be told was I was pregnant, roughly five weeks.

I didn't feel pregnant nor did I have any indications I was pregnant. Knowing my history I was terrified to even go along with this pregnancy. I knew the chances of me carrying to term were slim.

I chewed harder on my lip.

I wasn't prepared for this. In a short number of months, so many things have transpired. I was finally starting to leave that dark place I was once in. If I didn't make it through this pregnancy, I didn't know what I would do.

When I stepped in O'Shae's house with Granny Mae I was bombarded by both Kaiden and Kaydence. Their eyes wide and full of fear.

"Hey, hey. I'm okay guys." I forced a smile on my face and dropped down so I was eye level with them.

"Boo-boo?" Kaydence pointed to the wrap on my arm where the IV was with her thumb in her mouth.

“I’m fine, honey.” I grabbed her free hand.

“You went to the hospital?” Kaiden was staring at me with a hard, yet scared expression on his face.

I nodded. “I did, but I’m fine. I promise.”

Wrapping my arms around both of them I pulled them into me, hugging them tightly. I closed my eyes and released a small sigh. These two had truly become the highlight of my day.

“I’m fine.” My voice was low. Their small arms wrapped around me.

I hated that I scared them like I did.

I felt him the moment he approached us. Opening my eyes, I lifted them. O’Shae was staring down at me with a pinched expression on his face.

My stomach fluttered.

I released the kids and slowly stood up. The moment I was on my feet, O’Shae snatched me into him and held me tight. His mouth hungrily covered mine and one of his hands dug into my side while the other grabbed the back of my neck.

“Fuck, you scared the hell outta me. I’m sorry.” He groaned against my lips.

My pulse raced in my throat as the hairs on the back of my neck rose and filled with heat.

“You scared me too.” I pulled back and got lost in his penetrating orbs.

For a moment it felt like it was only us in the room. “You two need to talk. How about I take the kiddos with me for the night?”

I turned and looked at Granny Mae. “I don’t know if I want to be away from them right now.” I was feeling vulnerable and extra clingy at the moment. Learning I was expecting again had me on edge. Not only did I not know how O’Shae would take the news, but there was the fear that I could wake up and it all be gone haunting me. My doctor told me it wasn’t impossible but would be hard for me to carry to term if I got pregnant again.

My eyes went to the kids.

“What’s wrong?” O’Shae questioned.

I turned back to him, my eyes dropped and my mouth turned upside down when they landed on his hands.

Reaching down, I grabbed one and ran my thumb across the wound.

“What did you do, O’Shae?” My voice was shaky.

A knot formed in my stomach. O’Shae was clenching his jaw when I lifted my focus back to him.

“How about we go get some ice cream? We’ll be back.”

I slowly bobbed my head this time. Seeing O’Shae’s hand and knowing his temper, I could only imagine what he did.

Granny Mae escorted the kids out the house while me and O’Shae stood in a stare of.

“O’Shae, why are your hands bruised and banged up? What did you do?”

“You know what I did, Jerzey. You think I was gonna let what you told me go?” He spat, balling his face up.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you! O’Shae you can’t just go around fighting!” I shouted dropping his hand and stepping away from him.

I was in my feelings being that today was the day my baby was supposed to be born. The wine I was drinking didn’t take that feeling away, but it helped numb me. Admitting what happened to O’Shae made me feel released

from it. Holding back the final straw in my marriage had been taking a toll on me mentally.

Still, the last thing I wanted was O’Shae to blow up like he did. He always feared he would turn out like his father. I never wanted to be the reason he went in that direction.

“Fuck that, Jerzey. That nigga’s *been* asking for me to beat his ass. You think I was gonna keep allowing him to disrespect you?”

“I don’t need you to save me, O’Shae!” My voice elevated.

“I don’t give a fuck!” His voice equal if not louder. “I don’t care who it is. I will *always* defend you even if you get pissed about it.

Mario played with you like you were a fucking toy and you thought I was gonna keep allowing that shit slide? You can be mad at me if you want, Jerzey. I'll take that. But me defending you, *fighting* for you will never stop." His voice leveled, eyes hard, and mouth pinched.

I inhaled a hard breath. My heart did a summersault in my chest.

Fire burned in O'Shae's eyes as his words filled my body and caused my head to spin.

I licked my lips. "I don't want you to be like him," my voice dropped and faded out. "I know that's your biggest fear."

My chest quenched and eyes fell while I tucked my lips into my mouth.

"Jerz. Baby." O'Shae stepped towards me, grabbing my wrist and tugging me gently towards him. His thumb ran over my tattoo.

"That's why I love you," he moved in and pecked my lips softly. "You don't gotta worry about that. I'm not like that nigga and

even though sometimes I may lose my temper, I've learned to control it."

I glanced at his swollen and bruised knuckles. "You got arrested." I swallowed hard. Granny Mae didn't want to tell me, but when she noticed I was more anxious not knowing about O'Shae she broke down and revealed what happened to him.

"Don't worry about that. I don't regret beating that niggas ass."

O'Shae lowered his head and rested his

forehead on mine.

Closing my eyes I inhaled the small breath releasing from his mouth. My body was warm, and my stomach tingled.

"I love you." I whispered.

O'Shae moved one of his hands to my waist.

After a few moments of silence, I broke it. "I have to tell you something."

Suddenly my blood began racing through my veins and my heart beat tripled.

“What?” He pulled up, keeping his hold on my side and stared into my eyes.

Lifting my hand, I brushed my fingers through his short beard. The tip of my thumb graced his bottom lip.

My stomach flipped and mouth grew dry.

My chest tightened.

I attempted to swallow the lump that formed in my throat.

“I’m pregnant.” I spoke softly, feeling my lungs constrict, and squeezing my eyes shut.

My heart was threatening to beat out my chest and my stomach was a ball of knots. An acid taste formed in the back of my throat.

O’Shae didn’t reply to my admission right away which only caused me to grow more uneasy.

Memories of how Mario reacted the last time I told him I was pregnant flashed through my mind. Me and O’Shae had just claimed each other as more than friends. Things with us were still fresh. I

was still learning how to be a mom to Kaiden and Kaydence. Not to mention he never mentioned in all the time I've known him that he wanted kids.

O'Shae was great with the kids, it was one reason I was able to finally acknowledge the feelings I had buried away for him, but I wasn't sure if he wanted any of his own.

"The chances of me carrying this baby to full term are slim and that scares the hell outta me. This is quick and unexpected as well. I don't even know if you want kids, but please." My voice cracked. "Please don't tell me to get rid of it."

I gasped when O'Shae's hand suddenly wrapped around my neck. My eyes popped open and fell on his hard glare.

"You know me better than that, Jerzey. I'd never tell you some sucka shit like that."

"But-." Before I was able to finish my sentence his mouth was on mine. In one fluid motion, I was lifted, my legs were around his waist, and he was carrying me in the direction of his bedroom.

A moan left my mouth at the fiery kiss he was giving me.

I could feel his dick straining through the shorts he was wearing and pressing against my center.

O'Shae's fingers sunk into my ass.

The moment we were in his room and I was on his bed he was stripping me out my clothes.

I could barely gather my thoughts as his lips brushed over my skin sending electrical currents through my veins.

My back arched upwards when his mouth covered my sensitive nipples and he sucked roughly on them. His hand dragged down my stomach, finding the top of my bald mound.

I closed my eyes and released a small sigh.

O'Shae used his knee to nudge my legs wider and the moment his fingers brushed over my wet lips, a shudder shot through me.

As much as I wanted to continue this foreplay, I was craving him inside of me.

“O’Shae,” I cried out as he pinched my clit.

“Talk to me, Jerz.” His smokey voice was filled with lust.

“I want you inside me.” Between my legs were soaked.

Giving me a hard stare, he crashed his mouth into mine and hungrily kissed me. My mouth parted and his tongue invaded it, finding mine and massaging it.

My head spun.

A heat of desire rushed through my body and warmth flooded my chest.

Ripping his mouth of mine, O’shae swiped his lips with his tongue and sat up. I watched him climb off of his

bed and strip out his clothes.

Eyeing his thick member, I felt my mouth water.

Rolling over, I climbed to the edge of the bed.

O'Shae watched me as I reached out and grabbed his throbbing shaft. My thumb ran over the thick vein running down the side.

Leaning my head in, I ficked the tip, catching the precum oozing out of it.

A grunt fell from his mouth.

Flickering my eyes up, I circled his bulging mushroom head, wrapping my hand around the base of his dick, I lowered my head, pulling it into my mouth.

O'Shae was not only blessed in length but girth as well. My mouth stretched, taking more of him.

This was the frst time I tasted O'Shae and I was gonna enjoy it. My head bobbed up and down, I attempted to take all of him

"Shit." His hand went to the back of my head.

My mouth grew wetter when his tip hit the back of my throat causing me to gag.

The part of his dick I wasn't able to take, I jerked with my hand.

O'Shae's fingers dug into my scalp, and his hips jerked.

When I glanced up at him his head was back and his eyes closed.

The more I sucked him, the wetter I became between my legs. My tongue swirled around his pole. With my free hand, I grasped his balls and caressed them.

"Fuck, Jerz." O'Shae started moving slowly fucking my mouth. In return, I released a moan.

His grunts and the sound of my sucking filled the space around us. Just when I felt like he was about to release himself in my mouth, he snatched me away from him.

Lust and fire burned in his hooded, dark eyes.

O'Shae grabbed my neck and leaned forward. My eyes fluttered.

"You're so fucking sexy." He growled greedily taking my lips.

Before I could blink, I was on my back and O'Shae was pushing himself inside me. I couldn't breathe as his hard thickness filled me.

My pussy was soaked and hugging him tightly.

"Fuck." His head dropped to my neck.

He bit on my skin causing me to hiss, but my walls to constrict around him.

O'Shae fucked me with long deep strokes. His lips moved up and kissed along the side of my neck, up to my face.

My nails dug into his muscular back, hips thrusting upwards.

My body jerked the moment he hit my spot. "Right there, Jerz?" He stared me in the eyes. His eyes low, dark, and full of passion.

I attempted to answer, but my words were caught in my throat. My eyes rolled to the back of my head when he tapped my spot again and again.

“O’Shae,” I cried out as my body jerked under him. A wave of passion shot through my stomach and my grip on his back tightened.

“Give it to me, baby. Don’t hold back.” He pressed his wet lips against my cheek. “I love you, Jerzey. You’re about to have my baby. You’re giving me something I wouldn’t want from anyone but you. I can’t wait to see you swollen with my seed, baby.” His teeth scraped over my ear lobe.

His hand moved between us. He brushed it over my stomach and down to my clit.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head and my mouth parted.

Pleasure tore through me like nothing I ever felt before.

O’Shae’s strokes slowed.

“I got you. Whatever fears you got, pour that shit into me and let me carry them. You’re never alone with me.”

When he lifted his head and stared at me, I felt my breath get caught in my throat.

“To infinity.” He spoke lowly.

My legs jerked as my stomach tightened when he pinched my clit.

Unable to finish the phrase, I cried out as my body exploded in ecstasy.

“How far are you?” We were still in his bed, O’Shae was behind me with his arm wrapped around me, a hand resting on my still fat stomach.

“Just a little shy of five weeks.” “Damn, so the first time.” He chuckled. “Yeah, crazy right?” My voice was dull.

I lowered my hand onto O’Shae’s large hand and brushed over the top of it.

O’Shae pulled me further into him. His chin rested on my shoulder.

“O’Shae,” I whispered. My eyes locked on the painting on the wall across from my bed that I had gotten from *Remember The Time*

a few months ago. It was of a Black woman with a blooming afro of flowers coming out her hair.

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up.” Just speaking the words caused a sharp pain to pass through my chest.

“Jerzey.”

“Because of my Adenomyosis, the chances of me miscarrying are high. I learned that during my first pregnancy. Even though my second pregnancy was forced

away, I still had complications leading up to that night. I convinced myself that having Kaiden and Kaydence was enough but learning I’m pregnant again is scary. Since I wasn’t sleeping with anyone, I didn’t take any precautions to prevent pregnancy, but now I am again and I...” My voice began to crack. “I don’t know how it’ll turn out but knowing you’re just as excited about it as I am gives me some hope.”

Out of nowhere, I was flipped on my back and O’Shae was hovering over me.

His eyes scanned me over. “You’re having my baby.”

“O’Shae.”

“*You’re* having *our* baby.”

“Do you even want kids?” My voice shook.

His face softened. “I never thought about kids truthfully. Never seen myself being a dad. I don’t even know if Ima be good at that shit.” He paused and clenched his jaw. “Knowing *you’re* having my baby, knowing the type of person you are, and how fucking amazing you are, seeing you with Kaydence and Kaiden, it shows me you were meant to be a mom. You *will* carry our baby to term and have a healthy pregnancy, I feel that shit in here.” He tapped his

chest. “Don’t give up yet, baby. Ima be here every step of the way.”

Tears clouded my eyes.

I reached up and wrapped my arms around O’Shae’s neck, pulling his head down to mine.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” My eyes shifted to the tattoo on his forearm.

“To infnity.” I pecked his lips.

A crooked grin formed on his face. “And Beyond.”



My hand enveloped in Jerzey's and fingers looped through hers as our baby's heartbeat filled the small room we were in. My eyes had been locked on the screen since the technician turned the monitor on.

A feeling I never felt before surged through my chest causing my heart to swell and slam against my ribcage. I had never pictured

myself being a father, with my background I never wanted to risk turning out like my parents, but here I was.

Jerzey's hand tightened around mine, shifting my eyes from the screen I looked at Jerzey. Her eyes were glossy as she stared at the screen.

"Your baby's measurements are matching up for seven weeks, the heartbeat is strong too." The technician

let us know, tapping the machine a few times.

This moment was bittersweet.

Although being a parent was never on my agenda, I couldn't deny the attachment I already felt for my child. Knowing that Jerzey, someone I trusted and loved with my life, was about to risk hers to bring my child into the world had me looking at her through a different light.

My throat grew dry and a lump formed in the center of it.

I knew the risk when it came to her pregnancy and condition. I knew there was a chance she might not carry to term, it scared the

hell outta me. I wasn't sure if Jerzey could survive another pregnancy loss. Not to mention I've already felt an attachment to our baby, losing it would crush both us.

"Dr. Harris will be back in momentarily." The tech smiled at us.

I didn't even realize she had finished up the ultrasound. Jerzey was now holding onto sonograms, staring at them in a foggy gaze.

Dr. Harris had already let us know the risk Jerzey could face with this pregnancy. Since this was neither of their first rodeo with this she wanted to take extra precautions to give us the best chance.

"Can you believe this?" Jerzey whispered.

For a moment her eyes left the images and fell on me. Her brows bunched together and eyes squinted.

"What's wrong?"

I cleared my throat and attempted to swallow the lump in my throat. "Today just makes everything real. You're really about to have my baby."

A small sadder smile formed on her face. “Hopefully.” Turning my mouth upside down, I stood up. “Aye, none of that.” I leaned down and pecked her forehead, then her nose, ending at her lips where I rested my lips. “You heard your doctor, she’s gonna do everything she can to make sure you have a healthy pregnancy.”

Dr. Harris spoke on a scheduled c-section. She didn’t think Jerzey would be able to carry the baby full term and mentioned possibly delivering at 34 weeks.

Jerzey gnawed on the corner of her bottom lip. “I really want this baby.” Her lips brushed over mine as she spoke.

“Me too.” One of my hands went to her hip and I gave it a tight squeeze. “Everything’s gonna work out, Jerz. You’re gonna have our baby and be an amazing mother.”

Jerzey lifted one of her hands and brushed it over my cheek, moving it down to my beard. “I’m happy I’m going through this with you. Thank you for not leaving me.” Her voice cracked.

I had to keep the vile words I wanted to spit pushed back. I know she was saying what she said because of Mario's punk ass.

"I would never leave you. It's always been me and you, right?"

Her head bobbed. "And that's not gonna change."

My heart was heavy. I wish I could take all the worry I saw bouncing around in Jerzey's eyes and carry it for her. I hated seeing her upset and knowing there was nothing I could do to fix it. When it came to her, it was natural for me

to step in and help her when needed. Right now, I felt powerless.

No one ever made me feel like Jerzey did. I always had the urge to protect her and block all poisons in the world from her. Since she first started coming around, my grandma stressed for me to keep an eye on her. I hated the thought at first, I had my own shit going on at the time. Taking on someone else's issue wasn't something I planned on doing. Over time, that changed and being there for Jerzey was almost as natural as breathing.

I knew there was nothing physically I could do to help her through this, but mentally, I planned on being here for her every step of the way.

“Hey, beautiful.” I kissed Granny Mae’s cheek and took a seat next to her.

“How was the appointment?” She turned to face me, worry displayed on her face.

She was sitting on her porch, there was a small breeze that passed through us as the sun began to set across from us.

A slight grin formed on my face. “Good. Her doctor wants to keep a close eye on her especially once the baby starts growing, but everything looked good.”

Granny Mae didn’t reply right away, I thought she would have been happy by this news, but she still looked troubled. “What’s on your mind, beautiful?”

Granny Mae’s eyes grew tight and she pinched her lips together. “I’m worried about you, O’Shae.”

“I’m good, Mama.”

“You were arrested after beating a man up at the hospital, that’s not good. Not good at all.”

My jaw clenched and my nostrils slightly flared. “He had it coming to him.”

Since the incident with Mario, I hadn’t really spoken to my grandma. She knew some of the events that led to me reacting how I did, but I’ve been so consumed in Jerzey and trying to ease her mind, that I neglected to check on the most important person in my life.

Granny Mae pinched her lips together again, worry lines displayed near her eyes. “I don’t like you losing your temper, O’Shae. It scares the living shit out of me. I love

how you want to protect Jerzey and you go above and beyond for her, but O’Shae, you have to have limits, you can’t allow your anger to consume to the point your blackout or do something dangerous.”

Granny Mae’s eyes filled with tears causing my chest to squeeze. “I got my anger under control.”

“Until you don’t, O’Shae! For so long me and grandad worked on getting your anger under control. When you came to live with us, you had so much rage built up inside of you. We feared one day you might let it consume you to the point where we couldn’t get you back. Slowly we were able to get it under control and found ways to help you manage it. You’ve been doing so good, but when Jerzey is involved all that progress goes out the window.”

My eyes narrowed. “It’s not Jerzey’s fault.”

Granny Mae shook her head. “Of course not. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying, you need to start thinking more when it comes to how you handle things that have to do with her. Outside of your grandad, you’re the most protective man I’ve ever seen and there’s nothing wrong with that. At the same time, you can’t act irrationally. I lost

my daughter due to uncontrollable anger. I refuse to lose you too, O’Shae. I don’t want to have to come visit you behind bars because of your anger. Jerzey also needs you, with the kids and now her being pregnant, you can’t risk being away from them.”

“I know that,” I gritted. “I don’t plan on being away from them either. I’m nothing like him and I won’t get to the point where I lose control like he did.”

I heard what my grandma was saying. Her worries were justifiable, but comparing me to my sperm donor was going too far.

“I know you’re not, honey. That’s not what I’m saying. I just want you to be careful. That’s all.”

I haven’t heard anything from the courts since being released. They told me to expect papers in the mail within the next few weeks for court. Even with that hanging over my head, I didn’t regret what I did.

Neither of us spoke. “I’m sorry I worried you. When Jerzey told me what Mario did, I just reacted. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

The corners of her mouth hike upwards into a small grin. “I know handsome.”

I bit down on my bottom lip and flexed my hand.

“I wanna marry Jerzey.” I blurted out. My grandma’s eyes widen. “I’ve been looking at rings and I want to make her mine, ofcially.”

Granny Mae’s eyes bounced around my face. “Are you ready for that, O’Shae? That’s a big step and Jerzey she’s freshly divorced. Does she want to get married again so soon?”

I grabbed the back of my neck giving it a squeeze. That question had been playing around in my mind too. Jerzey never mentioned not wanting to be married again, but she also never said she wanted to either.

“Then you have Kaydence and Kaiden. If you marry Jerzey they become permanent in your life too for as long as she has them. Are you ready take that responsibility on?”

“I’m already around them.”

“Yes you are, but not as a parent. If you marry Jerzey you’ll have to step up as a father to them. Is that something you’re ready for?”

“I know and I’m ready for that too. Since Jerzey frst got those kids, I’ve felt the need to be right there with her, helping her. Kaiden was so much like me; angry, scared, withdrawn. Soon as I met him I felt a connection to him. I’ve grown attached to Kaydence too. She’s always so eager to show me the coloring book I got her. She’s no longer timid and scared. Those kids have become an important fxture in my life. They’re important to Jerzey meaning they’re important to me.”

“You really love her don’t you?” I
nodded. “I do.”

“You wanting to marry her isn’t just because she’s pregnant?”

My face balled up. “I want to marry Jerzey because I love her. She’s a light in the darkness that fills me at times. She has a huge heart and always tries to see the good in people. The moment she took the kids in she became a mother to them and never treated them as if they weren’t hers. I love that she’s the complete opposite of me, yet the same. Both of us sufer from abandonment and lack of parents. For years, I stood on the side and let a nigga who

didn't deserve her, have her and mistreat her. I'm not doing that again, Jerzey deserves the world, she deserves someone who loves her and will promise to treat her right. Jerzey's mine, and I'm not going to let any more time pass between us."

Revealing my feelings wasn't something I did normally. Most of the time, I kept my emotions under wrap and shielded myself. Thinking about Jerzey and talking to my grandma made that hard.

Granny smiled softly again. "I've known for a long time you two were meant for each other. I can hear it in your voice, I know you're great for Jerzey and those kids. Just like I know you'll be a great father to your own. You deserve to be happy too, O'Shae. You suffered so much, but it didn't break you. I'm so proud of the man you grew to be. Do you know how you're gonna propose?"

Having Granny Mae's support in this gave me more confidence to go further with my plans. There were doubts in my head that maybe I was moving too fast or that I was in above my head, but I ignored them. I had never thought

about marriage or being a family with anyone else other than Jerzey, and I was ready to make that happen.

“Calm down,” I leaned over and kissed Jerzey’s temple. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and enveloped her body into mine.

“I’m trying. I just hope they’re as excited as we are.” Her tongue went over her bottom lip before she pulled the corner of it between her teeth.

“They will be.” I assured her, my mouth still pressed against her skin.

Kaiden and Kaydence sat on her couch in front of us waiting for one of us to speak. Jerzey wanted to tell them about her pregnancy, but she was nervous.

“Okay, I’m ready.” I pulled my face up and stared at the side of her face.

She pushed a deep breath out and stepped out my arms.

“Is everything okay?” Kaiden spoke up. His eyes bounced from me and Jerzey.

I smirked. It would be Kaiden to notice how on edge Jerzey was. He was always observant of his surroundings. Aware of those around him.

“Everything’s great.” Jerzey forced a smile on her face as I stepped next to her again. “I just, well we just wanted to talk to you guys.”

Kaiden’s face balled up but he didn’t speak.

“What?” Kaydence blurted out.

Jerzey looked over at me and I gave her a slight nod.

“We’re having a baby.”

“A baby!” Kaydence happily jumped up and went to rush us but Kaiden stopped her.

His mouth turned upside down, eyes dark and cold. “No, Kaydence.” He spat lowly.

“Kaiden,” Jerzey called to him.

“Jerzey’s having her own baby meaning she’s gonna send us back.” The moment those words left his mouth I saw Jerzey’s face

crack. This was the first time in a while he referred to her by her name.

“Kaiden, no that’s not-” Before she could finish he was jumping up and storming out the living room.

Kaydence’s face filled with confusion. “I don’t wanna leave.” She whined lowly, tears clouding her eyes.



Kaydence gripped the stuffed unicorn in her arms tightly.

“Kaydence, you’re not. I’m not.” I became tongue-tied with emotions.

Kaydence suddenly jumped up and rushed to me, hugging my legs tightly.

My hands instantly went to her back as I hugged her. Turning my head I looked at O’Shae, who looked just as surprised as me.

I cleared my throat knowing I needed to get this situation under control. My heart ached at the thought of the kids believing I could just easily give them up.

“Kaydence. Honey,” I started swallowing down the frenetic feeling that was filling my body.

Kneeling down so I was eye level with her, I felt my heart drop to my stomach as her tears fell. "I'm not giving you up, okay? You and Kaiden, you guys don't have to leave."

She blinked a few times, staring at me with big, hopeful eyes. "No leaving?" She whispered.

I shook my head. "Of course not. I love you guys. You two mean so much to me. I would never let you go just because I'm going to have my own baby.

"Baby." She spoke.

I nodded smiling slightly. "Yes, a baby. You're going to be a big sister."

Her eyes lit up. "Sister?" I snickered at the small lisp in her words. I had been looking into speech therapy for her, to fix that.

"Yes, sister. You and Kaiden aren't leaving me." My stomach was full of butterflies.

I pulled Kaydence into me and hugged her tightly. "I love you, Kaydence." My voice cracked.

Crying wasn't new to me, but it seemed like when I was pregnant it got worse. The uncontrollable emotions that filled me were foreign to me. A warm blanket filled covered over me.

"Want me to go check on Kaiden?" O'Shae asked.

Releasing Kaydence I stood up and shook my head. "No, I'll go."

I had been relying on O'Shae so much when it came to Kaiden, but now it was time for me to step up. I couldn't always lean on O'Shae to handle things when it came to the kids when I was their guardian.

Leaving Kaydence with O'Shae, I headed for Kaiden's room. My stomach flipped. Me and Kaiden had been making so much progress. He came to me when he needed help with homework. He no longer walked around with a scowl on his face all the time, he was smiling more. I didn't want my news to send us backwards.

When I pushed open his door, he was using his inhaler, tears running down his flushed cheeks.

I rushed to him, panic filled my body. "Are you okay?" He coughed and inhaled a few more pumps.

Kaiden didn't speak, instead he glared at me.

We had gotten his asthma under control since his attack. He was back on the court but knew if he felt any discomfort to let his coach know and always have his inhaler with him.

"Kaiden," I sighed sitting next to him on his bed. His hard eyes shifted forward. "Do you know why I got you and your sister?"

I waited for him to answer, but he stayed quiet. "I always wanted to be a mom. There's something wrong with my body that makes it hard for me to become a mommy, but I didn't want to give up on being one, so I became a foster parent. When you and your sister were placed with me, I was ecstatic. I was finally going to have kids to care for and have a family. I had given up on birthing kids and I was content with raising you and loving you two." I paused and watched his face. It was still cold and emotionless. He refused to meet my eye. "Over the past couple months me, you, and your sister have formed a bond. You two have become the kids I never thought

I would be able to have. You two helped me be a mother.” My voice shook.

“Just because I’m having a baby, doesn’t mean I would give up you or sister. You guys are mine. I love you both as if I birthed you. If anything I hoped you would see this baby as your little brother or sister and protect them like you do Kaydence.”

That statement caused Kaiden to turn and face me. “You don’t want to send us back?” Hesitancy bounced around in his voice.

I shook my head. “Of course not. We’re a family Kaiden and family just doesn’t turn their backs on each other.”

“O’Shae too?”

My heart stumbled in my chest. “Yes, O’Shae too. He loves you two, just as much as I do.”

Kaiden stared at me for a little longer before his face soften. “I’ll be a good big brother.” He spoke lowly making my heart expand.

“I know you will, kid.” Reaching over I grabbed him and pulled him into me, hugging him tightly. “I love you Kaiden, okay?”

He lifted his head and stared at me. “I love you too, mom.”

After spending a couple more minutes in his room, I left and headed back to the living room.

“Everything good?” O’Shae asked pulling me into his lap when I got to my couch.

I nodded looking at Kaydence who was watching Frozen while lying on the floor.

I stared at her for a moment.

“I want to adopt them.” I spoke more to myself, but out loud.

Slowly I turned my head to face O’Shae who was staring at me. “I don’t want to lose them. I’m their mother, O’Shae.” Tears clouded my eyes.

My heart was heavy in my chest. “So let’s do it.” My eyes narrowed. “O’Shae. You don’t.”

“I’m in this with you, baby.” He grabbed my hands. “Those two have grown on me just as much. I support whatever you chose to do.”

Choking on the feelings that filled me, I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

O’Shae was my rock, always has been.

“I’ve been approved to be a foster parent.” Abby smiled before taking a bite of the sandwich she was eating. The two of us were currently on our lunch break.

“Abby, that’s amazing! I knew you would be.”

“I can’t lie I was nervous at first, but I’m glad that everything worked out. I talked to Kaylee’s social worker, and she’s been sent to another group home. She’s been fighting and getting in a lot of trouble. Her foster family couldn’t handle it and sent her back. Kaylee isn’t even like that she’s such a sweet girl.”

Her voice trailed off and a faraway look appeared in her eyes. “Being in the system isn’t easy. She was ripped away from her

family. She's more than likely scared, angry, and confused so acting out isn't uncommon."

"You grew up in the foster system, right?" I nodded. "Is it as bad as they say?"

My lips pressed together and I tucked them in my mouth as I thought about her question. "It can be. Not all my placements were bad, but not all of them were good

either. Sadly a lot of people become foster parents for the money so they neglect the kids."

"God. I hope Kaylee hasn't gone through that. She's been in the system for five months now. Who knows what all she's been through."

"Don't think like that. I'm sure she's fine." Her eyes shifted. "I hope so."

Abby reminded me in so many ways. Her heart was big and open. She was kind and full of love.

“Have you been okay?” Abby asked changing the subject. I could see she was still worried in her eyes. I knew she was trying to change the subject to keep her mind off the negative thoughts.

“Yes, I’m good. Great actually.”

“Pregnancy treating you well then?” Her brow rose.

I couldn’t fight back my smile if I tried.

The moment I walked into the clinic; Abby was rushing me. She had been worried since I passed out in the yard. I was grateful for her, Granny Mae had told me how she offered to keep the kids with no hesitation. I didn’t want to go announcing my pregnancy because I was still at risk of

losing it, but I told Abby knowing she would keep it to herself.

“I had my first thing of morning sickness the other day. That wasn’t fun.” I snickered. “But yes so far so good.”

Her eyes lit up. “I know you’re going to be a great mom, Jersey. The kids take the news well?”

“Eventually. At first it was rough, but once I assured that I wasn’t sending them back they were excited. O’Shae took us all out to celebrate after we told them for ice cream.”

“I’ve never seen you look so happy, Jerzey. You never smiled like you do now when you were married. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you, Abby.” My chest warmed.

Abby wasn’t the only one who noticed the difference in me. I’d never been this happy in my life. Even with the risk of my condition looming over me, I was still happy. My life had taken a turn in the best way. I no longer was being held down in a loveless marriage. I no longer was desperately trying to keep someone around who didn’t really want to be there.

“Adoption is a big step, Jerzey. Are you sure you’re ready for that?” Mrs. Turner asked me.

I pushed my glasses up and bobbed my head. “I am. I love them and don’t want to lose them.”

Mrs. Turner gave me a hard stare before her face suddenly softened. “You’ve been good to those two. They’ve been bounced around a lot and this is the first time, I’ve seen them comfortable and happy with their placement. Therapy seems to be helping as well. According to Kaiden’s school, he’s doing great. Kaydence spoke with me without her brother by her side. It looks like you’re what they needed.”

I rubbed my hands together and looked over my shoulder in the direction of the kid's bedrooms.

“No, they’re what I needed.” My hand went to my stomach. “Kaiden and Kaydence aren’t mine, but I feel like they are. I know it can be a lengthy process, but I want to move forward. I don’t want to risk them ever being stripped away from me or losing them. I love both like I birthed them.”

Mrs. Turner smiled. “I’m happy to hear you say that. I’ll file the paperwork needed and do what I need to do, to get the process in motion. I wouldn’t recommend the kids with anyone else.”

Inhaling and pushing out a heavy breath, I loosen my shoulders allowing them to fall forward.

“Thank you, Mrs. Turner.”

She stayed around a little longer before gathering her things and preparing to leave.

The moment she was gone, I leaned on my door holding the door handle, gripping it tightly.

I hadn't brought up adopting the kids to them yet. First, I wanted to talk to Mrs. Turner and make sure it was possible. The last thing I wanted to do was get their hopes up. Now that it was getting put in motion, I couldn't wait to share the news with them.

“O'Shae, what's going on?” I asked as I looked around the empty track field.

O'Shae texted me asking me to meet him at our spot. I dropped the kids off at Granny Mae's and drove a few blocks over.

“We’ve spent a lot of time here together. There were times we would come here in the middle of the night and just sit around staring at the sky for no reason.” His eyes traveled around the open field.

My eyes narrowed as I watched him, trying to understand his point. When O’Shae looked back at me I gasped by the emotions pouring out his eyes.

His hands shoved in his pockets.

“I’m not a romantic nigga.” He stepped closer to me causing my breath to stagger. “I don’t show my emotions often, I don’t speak on them. I don’t give a fuck about to many people either. Just you, my grandma and now Kaiden and Kaydence.” For a second he paused and glanced down at stomach. One of his hands left his pocket and landed on it. Butterflies swarmed my insides. “And this baby. Everything I didn’t know I wanted you gave me in a few short months, Jerz. We wasted so much time trying to make it work with other people when in reality we should’ve been looking at each other.”

He suddenly dropped down to one knee. My heart hammered in my chest at a quicken rate. My mouth grew dry. Momentarily I forgot how to breath.

Pulling the other hand out his pocket, I noticed a black square box. When O'Shae opened the box and the ring inside came into view, my mouth dropped and my eyes bucked.

In the box was a diamond heart ring. On each side of the main diamond held two smaller ones. The ring was beautiful not too big and fashy, ft me to the tee.

O'Shae grabbed my left hand and licked his lips. "I know you did this shit before, but truthfully we both know that was just a trial run. You're my best friend Jerz. For the past 14 years its been you and me. You're the only person in the world I can depend on and knows everything about me outside of my grandma. I kept trying to tell myself that taking things further with you would fuck our friendship up, but that was farthest from the truth. The moment we decided to give this thing with us a try, I knew. I knew you it for me. There's no one else I can see myself spending the rest of my life with. So..." he cleared his throat. For the frst

time ever, I saw uncertainty form on O'Shae's face and it made my heart beat even faster. "Will you marry me?"

I inhaled a sharp breath. My hands suddenly became clammy.

"What about Kaydence and Kaiden?" I asked in a shaky breath. "I just put in to adopt them." My words were slow. My mind was running a mile a minute. A pulsing knot had formed in my stomach and my heart thumped wildly inside me.

"I want them too. I knew when I got the rings, you and them were a package and I'm okay with that. I'll be the daddy they never had, if that's cool with you."

Uncertainty.

Again, it showed in O'Shae this time in his eyes and voice. O'Shae was always a confident person. He didn't always say much, but he was secure in his actions and self. Right now that wall was down and he was showing how he really felt.

"And you're not just doing this because I'm pregnant?" A ball of nerves formed in my stomach.

O'Shae shook his head. "That played into it, but no. I'm doing this because I fucked up before. When I took your virginity, I felt something for you, Jerzey but I kept telling myself that us being friends was better than risking our friendship with a relationship. That allowed you to be open to a nigga who don't even deserve to breathe the same air as you. I won't let that shit happen again. Even if you say no, it's still me and you until your ready. I'm ready to give you the family you always wanted, Jerzey. I want that with you, if you'll let me."

Tears I desperately tried to keep at bay broke free and ran down my face. I never heard O'Shae sound so raw and open before.

I knew I loved him.

I loved him for a long time, but like him I feared of messing our friendship up. I was tired of living in that fear though.

Dropping down so I was now face to face with him. I pulled my left hand out his grasp, and cuffed his cheeks securely.

My eyes bounced around his face for a moment, taking in his mocha brown eyes, thick brows that were slightly pulled together, and medium toned lips.

My heart was full, leaving no spot in my chest untouched.

The love radiating in his eyes caused goosebumps to form on my skin and the hairs on the back of my neck to rise. “Yes, I’ll love to be your wife.”

Moving in, I kissed him lightly but that wasn’t enough for him. O’Shae quickly overtook the kiss. Claiming my mouth with possessive desire.

An electric shot, shot through my body down to center causing me to moan in his mouth.

I never expected to be engaged so shortly after my marriage ended, nor did I expect it to be O’Shae, but I was happy. No longer was I gonna allow fear to keep me from what my heart was yearning for.



“Go Kaiden!” Both Jerzey and Kaydence cheered while we sat on the bench watching him dribble ball down the court.

My eyes traveled down to Jerzey’s hand, my heart swelled eyeing the ring on her left hand, *my ring*.

Since me and Jerzey had never spoken about marriage, I was nervous for the first time in a long time. I didn’t know if she would

accept my proposal or how she would react. All I know is that spending the rest of my life with her sounded right.

One side of my mouth hiked up as my eyes went back to the floor. Kaiden's team was now on defense.

One of the kids shot the ball and it bounced off the rim. Kaiden's teammate caught it and located Kaiden passing him the ball.

"That's my boy! Good shit!" I jumped up shouting when Kaiden went for a layup and made it. I clapped my hands loudly feeling like a proud parent.

Feeling her eye on me, I shifted them to Jersey and noticed she was staring at me with adoration in her eyes.

Winking at her, I turned my attention back to the game.

The teams were now on the sidelines, I noticed Kaiden now had his inhaler in hands.

This was his first game and although he wasn't starting he had been doing good for the amount of time he was in.

The game continued.

Kaydence and Jerzey continued being Kaiden's personal cheerleaders and there were even times I found myself jumping up and yelling at the refs for unfair calls. This experience was all new for me. It reminded me of when I used to play football and my grandad would be on the sidelines cheering me on.

We were currently at Chase's finishing up eating when Jerzey cleared her throat and called out for the kids.

Kaiden's team won by two and you couldn't even tell it was his first time on an organized team. There were some room for improvement, but overall the kid did good. After the game, I offered to take him out to eat wherever he wanted to celebrate.

Jerzey turned to look at me and I gave her a subtle nod, reaching over and grabbing her hand, giving it a tight squeeze.

“First Kaiden, I’m so proud of you. You did so good tonight. I’m not a sports person, but I never knew how much I could enjoy being a sports mom until today.” She smiled at Kaiden who shockingly was beaming with pride as he stuck his mac n cheese into mouth.

“I play basketball too!” Kaydence blurted out cheesing just as hard as her brother.

“Of course sweetheart, if that’s what you want to do we can get you signed up soon as your old enough.”

Kaydence satisfied with her response picked up her chicken tenders and dipped it into her barbeque sauce.

“Me and O’Shae have something to tell you guys.” Jerzey let them know, bring the focus back to why she got their attention. My finger brushed over her engagement ring.

“We getting married!” I wasn’t sure if the kids really understood the term, well Kaydence at least. They both stared at us with confused looks.

“I thought he wasn’t your boyfriend,” Kaiden’s face balled up and his eyes bounced between us.

“Uh, well, he wasn’t at frst.”

“But I am now. Well technically I’m her fancé.” I lifted her left hand and kissed it. A new sense of possessiveness filled me knowing she was wearing my ring.

“So you’re going to be like our dad?” His brows furrowed together and nose scrunched.

I opened my mouth and glanced at Jerzey. I wasn’t sure how she wanted me to respond to that.

“Would that be okay with the two of you? If O’Shae and me got married and he became your dad.”

“Will things change with the baby?” Worry filled his face.

Jerzey quickly shook her head. “No, of course not. I told you, just because a baby’s in the picture doesn’t mean you two are getting pushed to the side.”

Kaiden looked at me for reassurance. “You don’t have anything to worry about, kid. If both you and your sister would allow me. I would love to be your dad.”

Kaiden’s eyes dropped. “We never had a dad before.” His voice small.

I clenched my jaw as a pain shot through my chest. “I never had a son before either... or a daughter until now.” His head lifted and he looked at his sister.

“Do you want O’Shae to our dad?” He asked her.

She barely gave him time to finish his question before she was bobbing her head.

“Me too.” Kaiden turned to face me. “Okay.”

Jerzey squeezed my hands as I released a breath I didn’t even realize I was holding. This was second time my nerves got the best of me. When she turned and smile at me, a fame lit in my chest.

“I also have one more announcement. I talked to Mrs. Turner about adopting you two and she-” Jerzey’s voice

cracked. “She said I can adopt you two, she’s going to file the papers.”

I wasn’t shocked when I saw her getting teary eyed.

I watched the kids for their reaction. “Adoption meaning we’ll be with you forever?”

Jerzey nodded her head. “Is that okay with you guys? I don’t want to even risk losing you and I told you I consider you my kids. Now we’re making it official.”

“You’re going to be our mom forever?”

“Forever?” Jerzey’s voice was shaky.

A wave of different emotions rushed over Kaiden’s face. I could tell he was trying to keep it together, but the vulnerability was flashing in his eyes.

“And we never have to leave you?” His voice broke. “No, Kaiden. I know every foster kid wants to find a permanent home, and I want to give you both that with me. I love you two.”

Out of nowhere, tears rushed down Kaiden’s face and his small body shook. It caught us all off guard because Kaiden rarely

showed his emotion, let alone cry. Jerzey hurriedly hopped out her chair and rushed to him. Soon as

she got to him, she pulled him into her and hugged him tightly.

Kaiden crying caused Kaydence to start crying making me get up to comfort her. I'm sure we looked crazy with two crying kids in the middle of the restaurant, but I didn't give a fuck. Emotions were running high right now.

"It's okay, Kaiden. It's okay." Jerzey spoke lowly.

I had Kaydence in my arms, her head was now laying on my shoulders and her arms around my neck.

"I want to stay with you," It took a few minutes, but Kaiden eventually lifted his head and spoke in a low voice. "I want you to be our mom forever."

After leaving the restaurants we got the kids some ice cream to try and bring the mood down. Emotions were high and still raw from both announcements. Once we explained everything to Kaydence so she could understand she was just as excited as we

were. Kaiden had clung to me more than normal and I wasn't complaining. By the time we were back in the car the kids had fallen sleep before we left the D12 District.

I was sitting on my couch going through my mail when I froze seeing an envelope that was from the courts.

"They're both still sleep. I know today was a lot for them but I'm happy they took it well." Jerzey spoke sliding down next to me. "What's that?" She asked me, laying her head on my shoulder.

I had opened the envelope and gripped the papers tightly.

"Court papers."

I felt Jerzey tense next to me. "O'Shae."

Scanning over the papers, I saw I was due in court in two weeks.

"Don't worry about it. It's all gonna work out." I turned so I could face her. Her eyes bounced around behind her glasses, searching my face.

I leaned in and kissed her forehead. "I'm good, baby. Don't stress it." I leaned down and ran my hand across her stomach.

"I hate this. I'm sorry."

Reaching up and grabbing her chin, I cuffed it tightly. "Don't apologize for shit happening right now. This isn't your fault. I did what I did because I choose too, and I love you. I'm not tripping over this, and I don't want you too either."

I could tell my words barely knocked the ice of the surface.

Instead of verbally trying to ease her mind, I moved in and claimed her mouth with mine. The kiss was slow and sensual.

Blood rushed down to my dick.

"I'm gonna be okay, Jerzey. I got you."

"To infinity?" She whispered her lips brushing across my lips.

My hand went to the back of her head and I palmed her curls. Her short breaths tickled my nose.

“And beyond, baby.”



I rubbed my stomach, ignoring the slight aches coming from it. I didn't want to worry too much and start overthinking. I had called my doctor and she told me as long as I wasn't cramping or bleeding I

had nothing to worry about. Still I made a point to get checked out if the dull pain didn't disappear by the morning. I hadn't told O'Shae because I didn't want to worry him and plus with him getting his court papers I didn't want to bring anymore stress to him.

I took a few deep breaths and closed my eyes saying a small prayer. I really wanted this baby and prayed everything would work out.

When I opened my eyes they landed on Mario. It was like Déjà vu seeing him stalk towards me with a scold on his face.

He didn't even bother to stop as he stormed past me towards the automatic doors.

Rolling my eyes, I followed behind him. My heart thrummed loudly in my chest.

Once we were outside, I wasted no time.

"You need to drop the charges against O'Shae," I let him know.

He whipped around and faced me with a twisted face. His face was still bruised, the black eyes barely visible but still there.

“The hell I do. Do you see what he did to my face?” He spat, practically foaming at the mouth.

“And look what you did to my life! For years you allowed me to waste time on you, on our marriage! You played me like you loved me to get back at O’Shae! Then you forced me to have a miscarriage knowing how much I wanted a baby! You ruined my fucking life!” I shrieked. Adrenaline rushed through my veins while my blood ran hot.

“Don’t say that!” He shushed me quickly looking around.

“Why not? It’s the truth! You fed me abortion pills without my permission and caused me to lose my baby! You know my condition. You know how hard it is for me to carry to term and get pregnant, yet you didn’t care! You were selfish and O’Shae beating your ass is minor. I should have called the cops and went to your boss so you could lose your medical license!” My heart pounded loudly in my ears while my stomach fipped.

“He snuck me!” Mario curled his top lip.

My nostrils flared and I pushed a heavy breath out. “Mario, I’m tired of dealing with you. I’m tired of you constantly fucking up my life. I want to be done; I want to move on. Drop the charges, or I promise I will go to the chief of surgery and tell him what you did.”

“You don’t have proof.” He smirked.

I bit the inside of my jaw and balled my fist up. “Wanna bet? I recorded the conversation I heard. After hearing what you said, I knew I wanted a divorce and planned on using the news in court if you fought me.” I was bluffing, but Mario didn’t know.

When I overheard what he did, I was frozen in shock.

Mario’s jaw ticked.

His eyes bored into mine and brows pinched together. His eyes looked my over. “You’re getting married?”

I lifted my left hand and examined my engagement ring feeling butterflies fill my stomach. “I am.”

“To O’Shae?” The frown that was on my face, turned into a smile.

“Yep!” I made sure to pop the p at the end.

His jaw clenched again. “I knew you and that nigga had something going on. Y’all probably was fucking the whole time behind my back.”

Again my nostrils flared.

Mario always acted out when it came to O’Shae. He always allowed his jealousy to display in an ugly way. “What does it matter? You didn’t really give a damn about me anyways! Drop the charges Mario or you’ll regret it! I’m not playing! End this and stay the hell outta my life!”

Not waiting for his response, I spun around and stalked away from him. Mario had done enough damage in my life. I wasn’t going to allow him to do the same to O’Shae too.

“You are gonna look hot as hell in this!” The associate at Naughty Candy spoke, handing me the red bag.

My cheeks flushed pink as I grabbed it. "Thank you." "No problem, girl. I hope you and your man enjoy."

She winked at me.

Heat filled my stomach as I headed for the door of the sex store. O'Shae has done so much for me lately. He's facing a case right now because he was defending my honor. Without being asked, he stepped up to help me with the kids. Him declaring he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me was the icing on the cake. Even though my first marriage didn't work out, it didn't turn me off to marriage. When Mario asked me to marry him, there was a nagging inside of me that told me I was making a mistake. With O'Shae I didn't feel that. In fact, I felt nothing but passion, love, and heat overflow my body every time I thought about being his wife. When I stared at the ring on my finger, my heart always went into overdrive, slamming against my ribcage fighting to stay inside my chest. He had embedded

himself in my skin and I couldn't get rid of him if I wanted to.

Tonight I wanted to show O'Shae just how much I love and appreciate him. I wanted to step out my comfort zone and do something I never did before. Tonight was all about him.

"Fuck, what I do to deserve this?" O'Shae asked when he stepped into my house and turned to face me. His eyes instantly ate me up and hunger filled them.

Butterflies swarmed my stomach.

"I thought we could have a date night," I spoke lowly.

My pulse raced in my throat.

The kids were with Granny Mae tonight. Under the black sheer robe I had on red; O'Shae's favorite color, the lingerie set I had bought earlier today.

O'Shae tugged on his bottom lip, his eyes darker than when he first arrived blazing with lust.

I had to remind myself to breathe when he took a couple steps closer to me, stopping directly in front of me and gazing down.

“You’re beautiful.” O’Shae lifted his hand and gently cupped my cheek. My stomach quaked. Slowly he dragged his hand down, never breaking eye contact with me. Goosebumps layered my skin when his hand brushed over my collarbone, and continued until it slipped inside the top of my robe, stroking the top of my breast.

My center throbbed as moisture formed between my legs.

“I, I cooked.” I stuttered out, ignoring the yearning inside me.

O’Shae flashed me a crooked smile. “I know something I wanna eat.” My knees buckled when his tongue dragged across his plump, bottom lip. My nipples pebbled under the thin lace bra covering them.

Inhaling a sharp breath, I closed my eyes. Slowly I exhaled when O’Shae’s mouth landed on mine, soft and sweet. A small whimper escaped my mouth when he sucked on my bottom lip.

“Let’s go eat.”

It took me a second to gather myself. My heart hammered loudly and viciously in my chest, I wondered if he

could hear it.

Heat filled my body and I reached and grabbed O'Shae's hand. "C'mon." I tugged lightly.

The impact he had on me was one I never felt before. Even now as he stared down at me, I saw how much love he had for me residing in those dark orbs. It was a look, no one's ever showed me before. A look I never wanted to deny again.

After eating the Chicken Parmesan I prepared, me and O'Shae headed to the living room. Dinner was filled with small talk, him telling me about some of the cars he had been working on lately. I loved the way his eyes lit up as he spoke. The aching in my stomach had subdued so I didn't feel guilty when he asked how I had been feeling lately.

"If someone would have told us that we would be here months ago, I would have laughed in their face." He told me, with his hand planted firmly on my thigh.

"Really?" My eyes fluttered.

O'Shae licked his lips, his hand moved higher. "Everyone always spoke about feelings they could tell the two of us had for each other. I denied it so long thinking they wanted to see something that wasn't there, but now maybe they were seeing something that I was trying not to see."

I swallowed hard as the nape of my neck grew warm. "I've loved you since I was 13," I blurted out. O'Shae's hand stalled. Blinking a few times I gathered my thoughts as I continued. "You were the first and only friend I had when I got with the Mathews. You always had my back and protected me. The day we lost our virginities to each other was the best day of my life." Pausing I swallowed hard again. A knot formed in my stomach. "I was losing something so special to the man I loved for so long. Even if we didn't get together it was still special to me"

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" His head slightly tilted.

I tugged on my bottom lip; I shifted eyes to my front window for a second. "You were so adamant about nothing changing with us.

I didn't want to scare you away by admitting how I really felt. I was getting a piece of you that no one had had before and that was enough for me."

A smothering fame passed through his eyes. They lowered and his breathing slowed down. My heart hammered loudly in my ears.

I was caught of guard when O'Shae pounced on me, his lips crashed into mine. The kiss was like soldering heat that joined metal. His hand slipped inside my robe and he groped my breast causing me to moan into his mouth.

My heart danced in excitement and my body tingled. Between my legs, the foodgates opened and a jolt of shot down from my stomach.

Snatching away from O'Shae, I stared at him in a drunken state.

My tongue swiped over my lips and I dropped my attention down the bulge straining in the jeans he was wearing.

Moving of the couch, I kneeled down in front of O'Shae. His heated stare stayed locked on me as I grabbed the front of his jeans and fumbled with it.

O'Shae helped me by lifting up once his jeans were unbutton.

His harden dick soon came into display instantly making my mouth water. Leaning forward, I made sure to keep eye contact as I flicked my tongue over his swollen, mushroom tip, collecting the pre cum oozing out. It was slightly salty, yet sweet.

My mouth hungered for more.

"Shit." He grunted, clenching his jaw.

O'Shae's hand lightly brushed over my cheek. Wanting to taste more of him, I dragged my tongue over the tip of his shaft again, before circling it, and pulling it into my mouth.

O'Shae's hand went to my curls as I took him deeper into my mouth. The moment his grip grew tighter, I sucked harder. My head bobbed up and down while my mouth became wetter. He thrust his hips upwards. When my eyes flickered up to meet his, I only became more turned up at the lust filled look in them.

Relaxing my throat and breathing through my nose, I took him as far as I could go without gagging. My tongue circle around his pole. Using my hands, I grabbed the base of his dick, jerking him at the same time.

Between my legs was soaked and begging for relief but I fought against it.

“You don’t know how fucking good you look sucking my dick, Jerz.” He groaned. His hold on me grew rougher.

I hummed as the sound of me sucking filled the area around us.

“Fuck I’m about to cum, baby. You gon’ catch it?” Flickering my eyes up again, I nodded again.

Hollowing out my cheeks and taking him again to the point, I gagged.

O’Shae’s dick twitched in his mouth.

Using my free hand I grabbed his balls caressing them.

“Fuck!” He grunted.

His seeds soon filled my mouth and I happily drank them.

The moment, he was finished he yanked me up and crashed his mouth against mine. Our tongue fought against the other. His hand went inside my robe again. He lowered his mouth from mine, kissing and biting down to my neck.

My head went back and I released a heated moan when his teeth sunk into my flesh. He was hard again. His dick pressed against my stomach.

I *needed* him.

Snatching away from him. I stepped back and pushed my robe down since it had already come untied. The sheer material slide of my shoulders and O'Shae stared at me as if he was about to pounce on me.

His eyes lowered, taking me in. I loved the way the red looked against my skin. The bra I had on was see through, giving a full view of my pebbled nipples. The cheek underwear, were crotchless and left little to imagine.

“Shit, you look sexy as fuck.” He moaned, stroking himself slowly.

The fame inside me grew hotter.

I never felt this turned on in my life. The urge to please O’Shae was stranger than anything I ever felt.

“C’mere.” His spoke in a throaty tone sending a chill through my belly and up my spine.

Stepping forward, his hand left his dick and he grabbed my waist. Leaning in he kissed on my stomach a

few times, sending futters through it.

“My baby’s in here.” He spoke against my skin before pressing his lips against again.

My hand went to his low cut hair.

O’Shae placed his hand between my legs where my juices were running free. I whimpered when his fngers ran up the inside of my thigh and graced over my lower lips.

O'Shae lifted his head and stroked my pussy, lifting his eyes to watch me. Grabbing his shoulders to steady myself. My knees buckled and stomach tighten.

"You so fucking wet." His finger pressed inside me. "O'Shae." I moaned closing my eyes, gripping his shoulder tightly.

His thumb went to my clit and he curled his finger forward before pushing it deeper.

Leaning in he placed one kiss on the top of my mound through the thin material. Another finger inserted into me. I rolled my hips into his touch, gripping my walls around his digits.

It didn't take long for me to release on him.

The moment I released on his hand, O'Shae snatched his hand from between my legs and brought them to his mouth, He sucked the juices of then stared at me with fire in his eyes.

He didn't slow down. Grabbing my hips, he lifted me and lowered me on his awaiting pole.

I sunk my teeth into my bottom lip. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I sunk down.

O'Shae gripped my hips and he moved me up and down. He moved in and sucked on my nipples through my bra then brought my swollen nipples between his teeth.

My head went back and hands went to the his shoulders.

Clenching my walls around him, I started bouncing faster on top of him, loving the way he filled me up.

O'Shae moved one of his hands and brought it to my breast, releasing them from the red material and devouring them with my mouth.

"I love you." I moaned as my stomach tighten.

"I love you too." He grunted sinking his hand into my hip.

"I can't wait to be your wife."

I was so close.

O'Shae suddenly stood and turned, so I was now on my back. He grabbed one of my legs and placed it on his shoulders, quickening his stroke, pushing deep inside me.

I cried out as my body jerked and breast bounced freely.

"I can't wait to have this every fucking day." He grunted through gritted teeth.

I attempted to speak but words got lodged in my throat as I came. "You're going to be the perfect wife." His mouth found mine again.

My arms circled around his neck.

That night O'Shae took my body to different heights I didn't know was possible. The amount of passion he pushed into me each time he thrust inside me was suffocating. While I wanted tonight to be for O'Shae he of course flipped the tables worshiping my body in ways it had never been handled before.

A yawn escaped my mouth as I sat across from Althea. I had forgotten the kids had a joint morning session. O'Shae and me had

been up late last night and by the time I finally fell asleep, I felt like I was being woken up.

“The kids are excited about their adoption.” My eyes widen. “They told you?”

She nodded smiling slightly. “Kaiden couldn’t wait to give me the news. Stability will be good for them. They’ve come such a long way since our first session. Although they’ve only talked about their past in bits and pieces, I see a large amount of progress.”

My eyes shifted to the door where the kids were in the lobby entertaining themselves.

“At first I was scared it was too soon, but I love them so much and I know I wouldn’t be able to handle them being taken away from me.”

“They’ve been through so much in a short period of time. You giving them a stable home and care is good for them. I brought up their mom today when Kaiden told me you were adopting them, he told me you *were* their mom.”

I swelled with pride.

“I’m getting married and having a baby. Kaiden and Kaydence being a part of all that only made sense. A family is something I always wanted and I couldn’t picture starting one without them.”

Althea smiled at me.

It took time but Kaiden and Kaydence had finally started to open up to Althea. There had been no more accidents and Kaiden didn’t seem so on edge when it came to her. I know it was still the beginning but it showed they were growing and that’s all I wanted.



I woke up, reaching over and shot up when I noticed the bed was empty.

My brows furrowed together, hearing Jerzey in the bathroom. Tossing the covers of me, I darted to the bathroom, witnessing Jerzey hugging the toilet and emptying her stomach inside it.

“Shit.” I hurried to her. My hand instantly went to her back.

“I, I didn’t meant to wake you.” She struggled to get out.

“Man, chill on that.” I frowned.

Her grip on the toilet tightened and when she looked up at me I felt my heart drop. Her cheeks rosy, eyes brimmed with tears and red. She looked miserable.

I stood up and went to the closet in the corner, grabbing a towel.

After wetting it, I placed it on her forehead.

“What do you need?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” I dapped her forehead.

Jerzey leaned on me and closed her eyes taking a few deep breaths. “I think I need to go to the hospital.” Her voice was hoarse.

My eyes widened. “What’s wrong?”

She tucked her lips in her mouth and lowered her eyes. “I’m bleeding.” When she looked back at me, her tears began to fall.

My heart pounded loudly, stomach fipped. “That means...” I couldn’t even finish.

Jerzey shrugged and snifed.

Her hand went to her stomach and she winced.

I wet my lips. “Okay. Ima call Granny Mae. Are you okay enough to get ready?” She nodded slowly.

Sighing, I dipped my head and pressed my lips against her forehead. My hand went to her stomach.

My nerves were running wild.

I hoped she wasn't losing our baby.

She had just hit nine weeks and finally stopped worrying about losing our baby.

Both of us were silent as I guided her out the bathroom. While we moved around the room, I made sure to say a silent prayer for both my babies.

"I've been thinking what are we going to do about our living situation?" Jerzey asked while lying on the hospital bed.

Granny Mae rushed over to watch the kids while we made our way to the hospital. Jerzey was still complaining of small stomach pains which had me pushing every traffic rule. I always wanted to protect her and knowing I couldn't from this had me feeling hopeless.

Currently, we were waiting for the doctor to return. They confirmed she wasn't having a miscarriage, thankfully but still were running a few tests.

"I figured I could move in with you and break my lease."

Her eyes widened. "Really? You would be okay with that?" I shrugged.

"Your house feels more like home than mine. Not to mention the kids are comfortable there."

A smile slowly formed on her face. "You're so amazing." She reached over and laid her hands on mine. Suddenly tears brimmed her eyes.

"O'Shae, if this baby doesn't make it. Will you still want to marry me?" Her voice cracked as she spoke.

"You're not losing the baby."

She wet her lips. "But if I do. Will you-."

"I'm not even putting that shit in the air. Regardless of what happens, I love you Jerzey and yes I want you to be my wife. My proposal isn't conditional, neither is my love for you." I lifted my hand and kissed it.

Using her free hand, she wiped her tears.

I hated she had this lingering over her head.

The curtain was pulled back and the doctor overseeing her entered.

“Ms. Mathews how you feeling, any more pain?”

Jerzey shook her head. “Good, good. I’m happy to say all the test and bloodwork came back fine. When you’re pregnant sometimes you bleed because your uterus is expanding, given you condition small discomfort isn’t uncommon.”

When I looked at Jerzey, I could see the weight leaving her body.

“So my baby is okay?”

The doctor nodded. “It is.”

“I told you, you both were fine.”

Jerzey turned to face me, tears were still in her eyes, but a smile was now on her face.

“If neither of you have any questions you’ll be discharged shortly.” We both ignored the doctor, growing more lost in each other’s life.

Jerzey made me feel. Normally my feelings seemed to be void, but not with her. I was scared when we got here, but I tried to keep a brave face. We still had a long way to go, but I was confident this was going to be Jerzey’s miracle baby.

“What do you think about getting a dog?” Jerzey looked up at me as we walked down the street. My face turned upside down.

“A dog? For what?” She shrugged.

“Kaydence mentioned wanting one and I’ve been considering it. There’s a lot of dogs in the shelter that need homes.”

“How about we hold of on a dog? We got a lot of shit going on right now.” I let her know. I wasn’t even an animal person, but I knew for Jerzey and Kaydence I would do it anyways. It seemed like they both could get anything outta me.

“You’re right about that. Especially now that she’s going to start speech therapy. Kaiden’s basketball, the adoption, the wedding, the new baby, and your court date hanging over us. Yeah, a dog might be overkill.” She snickered.

We had just left a speech therapy office in New Haven, they were said to be the best and that’s what Jerzey wanted. Kaydence would come here once a week to help get her speech to the level it should be.

“I hope she takes to it well. I want to eventually try her in daycare again.”

“I don’t know how Granny Mae will feel about that.” I glanced down at her.

“I’m sure she’ll be upset. She loves watching both Kaydence and Kaiden, but I want her to be around other kids. Also, she’s already behind, the daycare offers a pre-k program too. I think it’ll be good for her.”

Pausing, I grabbed her wrist halting her and pulled her into me.

“What?” She stared at me confused.

I sunk my top teeth into my bottom lip. “You’re just amazing that’s all. “ I scanned her face over.

The corners of her mouth hiked up. “You aren’t too bad yourself, Mr. Jacobs.”

Dipping my head low I pecked her lips. “Let’s grab something to eat before heading back to the city.”

Her face lit up. “I could go for some food.” Her hand rubbed her stomach causing my face to match hers.

After the scare she had, I found myself being more entuned with her and her body. It had been a few days and

she said she was feeling fine now but still, I was on edge. Kissing her lips one last time, I wrapped my arm

around her, we continued to where my car was parked.

“Well, well, well. Look at the happy couple.” I froze as I was about to unlock my front door.

Closing my eyes, my shoulders rose then slowly fell as I pushed out a heavy breath before turning around.

“Why are you here, Payton?” My arm wrapped around Jerzey and I pulled her into me. Payton’s eyes bounced between us and her mouth pinched together.

“I can’t believe you really did this to us, to me O’Shae!” She finally spat her eyes shooting daggers into Jerzey making me pull her closer to me.

My eyes narrowed. “Did what? Why the fuck are you here, Payton?”

“You acted like you loved me when you were dealing with you ‘best friend’ the whole time! I hope you’re happy with yourself!” Venom dripped of her words.

“Payton me and O’Shae weren’t messing around while he was with you. I was married for Christ’s sakes!” Jerzey

pulled away from me.

“Doesn’t seem like that mattered. Look at you two now!”
Payton threw her hands up.

“You don’t owe her an explanation, Jerzey.” I gritted with my eye cut tightly at Payton. “You don’t got shit else here of yours. We’re over and were over long before we actually broke up. Accept that shit and move on. I’m not gon’ allow you to keep disrespecting my fancée!”

“Your fancée?!”

“That’s right.” Jerzey lifted her left hand. Seeing the pride in her eyes as she showed of her ring caused my heart to swell.

“You need to move on, Payton. Find someone that’s gonna love you and deal with your shit. I wasn’t that nigga.” Payton’s face fell. “I came here to give you one last chance to fx things with us, but now I see I’m better of without you.” She turned her nose up. Her eyes bounced between us again before spinning around and storming down the stone walkway.

“I can’t believe you dealt with her for two years,” Jerzey muttered.

“Neither can I baby, neither can I.” Shaking my head, I turned and went back to unlock my door. I wasn’t about to let Payton ruin my day. That ship had come and sailed.

“It seems Mr. Mario Herb has dropped his changes against Mr. Jacobs. Is that correct?” The judge scanned over the papers in his hands and lifted his head, bouncing his attention between the two of us.

“That’s correct your honor.” His lawyer spoke up. When I turned to look at Mario he was shooting daggers my way. I smirked at him and straighten the collar of my suit.

Jerzey had told me how she went to visit him, again, to my dismay. Whatever she said to him spooked him enough to make him leave all this shit where it was.

“Mr. Jacobs,” The judge called out bringing my attention back to him.

“Yes sir.”

“You do know even if Mr. Herb is dropping the charges, the hospital has the right to file their own?”

I bit the inside of my jaw and glanced at my lawyer before bobbing my head. “Yes sir.” His eyes narrowed at me.

“If there are no other objections then the case is dismissed.” He tapped his gavel.

My lungs released as I pushed out the breath I had been holding, turning to shake my lawyer’s hand, I glanced at Jerzey who was grinning widely. I winked at her.

“It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Jacobs.” My lawyer said.

“Hopefully, I won’t need you again.”

The moment I was close enough to Jerzey she rushed into my arms. “Can we go now? I want to put this all behind us.”

“I hope you enjoy my sloppy seconds.” My body tensed as Mario spoke behind me.

“O’Shae, ignore him.” Jerzey begged, grabbing my hand.

I stared down at her pleading eyes.

“C’mon.” She pulled my hand. “He’s not worth it. Please just ignore him.”

I knew she was right, but Mario knew Jerzey was my weak spot. He always pushed that button and had me

wanting to beat his ass. As much as I wanted to turn and black his eye again, I ignored him.

“You right, baby. That nigga just mad he lost the best thing that happened to him.” I pulled her into me and kissed the top of her head.

I glanced over my shoulder at Mario who was glaring at the two of us. Smirking, I pulled her into my side.

“Let’s go get *our* kids.” This time when she looked at me she was grinning.

“Let’s go.”

For Jerzey’s sake, I would keep my cool, just like always. Mario would always be a miserable nigga who lost out on a good thing.



“You feeling okay?” O’Shae asked his brows pulled together and eyes full of worry.

Smiling softly and rubbing my small stomach, I nodded. “I’m fine, O’Shae. Don’t worry.” His mouth turned upside as he looked me over.

I was now five months pregnant with a baby boy and had been put on bed rest after some discomfort and bleeding had occurred. The baby was growing at a healthy rate, but because of the state of my uterus, it was causing some issues. I was trying to stay positive. This was the further I had gotten in a pregnancy and I was over the moon.

Even though I missed working I wanted this pregnancy to work out even more. These next four months were going to be a challenge but I knew O’Shae would be right by my side.

“How can I not worry about *my wife?*” He lifted my left hand and kissed it. My stomach fluttered and my cheeks flushed.

After his court date, we went to the courthouse to get married. Since neither of us had family, it didn’t make any sense to plan a big

wedding. Not to mention Mrs. Turner made the point to mention it would look better for the adoption if I was married. Since the case against O'Shae was dismissed there was nothing holding us back.

Social services had tried to find the kid's mom. I wanted to make sure there was no chance she could come back and try to take them. Turns out she signed her rights away and had no plans of trying to get them back. According to Mrs. Turner, she was still getting high.

"God, it feels so good to hear you say that" I grinned, leaning up and wrapping my arms around his neck.

A crooked grin formed on his face. "It feels good to say it." A tingling sensation shot through my body. It amazed me how I still felt like I was floating when it came to

O'Shae. I had known him almost my whole life, yet I always got a giddy feeling when he looked at me.

"Mommy!" The kids rushed in yelling with Granny Mae behind them. "Can Granny take us to the trampoline park?" Kaydence rushed out.

She had only been in speech for two months and we had already seen an improvement. There were still some words she had issues with, but it was going well. I also was able to get her to go to daycare, it was only for two days a week. Althea told me to start small, but it seemed to be working out.

“You finished your homework?” O’Shae narrowed his eyes at Kaiden.

“Yep! Mom checked it too. Right?” O’Shae turned to look at me and I nodded.

“All correct answers too.”

“So can we go?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“A’right, but make sure you take your inhaler.”

With the weather breaking, Kaiden’s asthma had been up and down, but we were able to maintain it. He was still

playing basketball and getting better each game. Since I was on bed rest, I hadn’t been able to go see him play as much as I wanted to which made me feel bad, but Kaiden didn’t seem to mind.

“When we get back can we paint my car?” Kaiden stared at O’Shae with wide eyes.

He had adapted O’Shae’s love of model cars. He didn’t care so much about working with real ones, but he did like building and painting them.

“Yea we can.”

“Me too!” Kaydence jumped in.

“No, it’s only for me and dad.” He mugged his sister. “Aye, what I tell you about that?” O’Shae chastised. Kaiden was still protective of Kaydence, but he was

now starting to be more of an older brother who wanted independence from his sister. Kaydence wasn’t having it, however. She wanted to do everything her brother did.

“Sorry,” Kaiden muttered causing me to giggle. “Okay, okay.

C’mon you two.” Granny Mae ushered

them. “We’ll be back later.” She smiled at us.

Granny Mae was still God sent, she had no problem stepping in and helping with the kids when we needed her. They loved

hanging out with her too, probably because she *still* spoiled the hell outta them.

“Oh and this was in the mail.” She stepped forward, handing O’Shae a large yellow envelope.

My eyes widened and heart pounded loudly.

“Wait is that what I think it is?”

O’Shae’s eyes scanned over the envelope. “I think so.”

“Well open it.” I rushed, tapping his arm.

His eyes shifted to the kids and did as I said. Ripping the envelope, he pulled the papers out and scanned them over.

“Well?”

“It’s official their ours.” He finally spoke with a wide smile on his face.

Grinning I snatched the forms out his hands and looked them over. They were the official adoption papers that certified us as Kaiden and Kaydence’s parents. We had the ruling at the beginning of the month.

My heart was full.

The moment the judge declared us the parents, I stopped breathing. Having a family of my own was all I ever wanted. Seeing the documents now caused tears to fill my eyes.

“Now we have to celebrate! I’m going to cook when we get back. This is great news.”

My eyes went to Kaydence and Kaiden, the both of them cried in court when they were declared ours. After all they had been through, I knew it was a relief knowing they were somewhere where they were wanted.

“C’mere.” I told both them.

The moment they were close enough, I tossed my arms around them and hugged them tightly. My son moved around in my stomach, wanting to be a part of the moment.

“I love you guys,” I told them kissing the top of their heads.

“I love you too.” They spoke.

I kept my arms around them a little longer. I hated how emotional this pregnancy had me. It seemed every

little thing had me crying nowadays. Releasing them I pulled away and wiped my eyes.

“Don’t cry.” Kaydence lifted her small hands and wiped my cheek causing me to laugh.

Granny Mae left out with the kids afterwhile and it was just me and O’Shae. I was laying in front of him on the couch. His arm wrapped around me while his hand palmed my stomach.

“Are you happy, Jerz?” O’Shae asked as I began to doze of.

“Of course.” I grabbed his arm and snuggled closer into him.

“You love me?” He kissed the top of my head.

“More than anything.” My finger brushed over the tattoo on his forearm.

“To infinity,” I yawned and closed my eyes.

“And Beyond.” A dazed feeling overcame me. “It’s always been you, O’Shae and it always will be.” I muttered drifting of.

It might have taken us a while to get here, but now that we were, I knew there was nowhere else I would rather be.

The End!

Coming this winter!

What is Zarinah to do when her twin sister begs her to switch places and go on a date in her place, only to find herself falling for 'said guy'?



