

Cole Hart

SIGNATURE NOVELS

PROPERTY

OF A HOOD

Millionaire

AN URBAN NOVEL

TIECE

PROPERTY OF A HOOD
MILLIONAIRE

An  Novel

TIECE

Cole Hart
SIGNATURE NOVELS

Property Of A Hood Millionaire

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Once again, we truly appreciate all the support over the years.

Much Love,
CHS

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“I can’t believe this pussy ass nigga! All the shit I gave him, all the shit I did for him, and he got the nerve to play me like I’m some lame ass bitch out here in these streets. Who the fuck does he think I am?!”

I pulled up onto the private fifteen acres of land filled with hatred, envy, and revenge ravaging my soul. My heart had been broken for the first time in my life and I wasn’t taking it well. After having dated Loyal for the past two years, I thought things between us were good until watching his graduation party on Facebook Live, hosted by his parents at an expensive lake house in Oconee, GA. For one, I wasn’t invited, nor did I know anything about it. For two, he’d been giving me the cold shoulder for over a month and now, it was starting to add up.

As I watched the live, already settled in my unresolved feelings, Loyal’s mom had the nerve to congratulate him in front of their family and guests, but it wasn’t as harmless as it may have seemed at first. As he stood up to give his going-away speech, announcing that he was now a foreign exchange student that would be traveling the world and being thankful for new beginnings, he out of nowhere introduced his new bald-headed ass girlfriend, which his mom then added would also be his travel companion during their time away.

I was feeling betrayed and frustrated to the 100th power, as I wiped the angry tears from my eyes. I drove towards the

large, seven-bedroom estate ready to do some damage to whatever property I could get to.

“Fuck him, his rude ass parents, his ugly, fat ass sisters, and their money! I gave this nigga the best two years of his life and this is how he repays me?!” My voice roared with pain. Loyal had hurt me beyond anything I’d ever experienced, and I was going to show him that I really could be just as hood and ghetto as his parents had already made me out to be.

The first thing I laid my eyes on was his brand-new convertible Camaro that he’d gotten for a graduation gift a few months earlier. The car was like nothing I’d ever seen with all the bells and whistles, including a supercharged turbo engine. From what he’d told me, the car ended up costing his parents nearly seventy thousand dollars, and I was about to really show them its worth once I was done. As I opened up my trunk and grabbed the iron baseball bat, my cell phone began to ring. Noticing that it was Kinsley, I answered.

“Yomi, where you at?”

“I’m at Loyal’s house.”

“I told you don’t go out there. What are you thinking? You could go to jail for trespassing and then Auntie gon’ kill you for being so stupid.”

“You think I care about that?!” I sobbed. “That nigga gon’ pay for hurting me. Him and his uppity ass parents.”

“Yomi, don’t do it. That lady has called you every lowdown, hood-rat name in the book. Are you really doing this because of Loyal’s bullshit or to prove his mama right?”

“BOTH!”

“Listen, whatever your lil’ brain is cooking up, just forget about it and leave.”

“Not until I’m done!” I exclaimed, now walking over to Loyal’s car and standing in front of it. “I got something for his ass!”

“Please, Yomi, just get in your car. These people ain’t worth it, especially his no-class ass having mammy. I thought

we had that understanding earlier before I left the house.”

“No, you had that understanding. The only thing I understood was fucking his shit up!” I acknowledged, ending the call. I proceeded to do just what I had planned since seeing the live video a couple of hours earlier.

Standing with a swing-ready position, as if I was about to knock the fucking ball out of the park, I hit Loyal’s headlights, breaking the shit into pieces. Instantly, the car alarm started blaring loudly. It didn’t matter; I was way out in the country of Conyers, GA. It would take the police at least fifteen minutes or more to get here and, by then, I’d be gone. I knew how much he loved this car, so smashing in the hood next eased some of my pain because he’d be hurt as fuck that I took it this far.

I walked to the driver side and smashed out the window. Glass flew everywhere, even hitting me, but I didn’t care. Rage had taken over, and the only thing I felt was numb now. I walked around the car, striking the trunk a few times and breaking the back lights out, and ended up on the passenger side, smashing that window out too. The whole time I vandalized his shit, tears of disgust and humiliation continued to fall.

Once I was done with his car, I looked over to see that his mom’s Range Rover was parked near the garage. It was a clear sign that the bougie bitch needed a taste of this savage ass medicine too. I made my way to the car, almost with an evil smile planted on my face, and not only bust out the windows but pulled a blade out of my pocket and flattened all four tires. When that was over, I looked up at the security camera that had captured it all and held up both my middle fingers while screaming, “Fuck y’all!” with an added, “Bitches!” to emphasize my pain.

As I drove away from the scene, I passed the police making their way out to my ex’s estate. That was the only thing that made me genuinely smile. I’d gotten away with vandalizing their property and, even though they had money and would simply replace that shit, it still felt good.

“I bet they put up a gated fence now.” I smirked.



I walked in the house feeling sick as fuck and somewhat out of it. I felt like I'd just had an out-of-body experience and it was all just hitting me. My stomach turned. Couldn't believe how weak I was to allow myself to come out of character over a no-good ass nigga. I made my way to the kitchen and was met by Kinsley. Immediately, I fell in her arms and cried like a baby.

“Yomi, wow. You ok? What did you do?”

“I fucked up the love of his life, that fuckin' car, and his stankin' ass mammy shit, too!” I seethed.

“Omg! I can't believe you did that. You sound real stupid right now. Sit down, let me clean you up,” she fussed as I sat with my head hanging low, now feeling bad that I'd gone there. She walked over to the sink, wet a napkin, and grabbed the first-aid kit out of the cabinet. “You are fucking better than this. How dare you let a dog-ass nigga that don't know your worth treat you like shit! What the fuck is wrong with you? Look at you. You look a hot fucking mess. I'm almost embarrassed that you're my cousin.”

“Kinsley, I'm having a fucking moment here. How dare you say some shit like that?”

“It's the fucking truth. You out of all people should know that this ain't it. If I didn't teach you shit, Auntie sure as hell did. Between us being in your ear, you should be the smartest, baddest bitch walking this earth,” she fussed, wiping my tears while patching me up. “You are too beautiful to be going through something like this and, until you realize how worthy you really are, it'll continue to happen.”

“It won't happen again. I mean that shit. I'm over love and I'm over niggas my age. They play too many games for me.”

“Hell, all offum play games. You just gotta know which one is worth your fucking time. Can't be rolling the dice out here in these streets or you'll get your heart broken every time.

Stand your fucking ground. The minute Loyal's mom started saying all that shit about you being beneath him, that was your cue to leave."

"Yea, but he wasn't following her up. He told me what she said."

"Think about it. A nigga ain't gon' voluntarily tell you some shit to hurt you unless he sees some truth in it too or in his own way, he stands behind it. That's like slapping a bitch just to see if she'll stay, and you stayed. So, from that moment on, he knew where you stood. That gave him the opportunity to do just what he did. Break your fucking heart and make you look like a fool in the process," she added.

I couldn't even say nothing. She was absolutely right. I allowed that nigga to walk all over me because I thought I was in love. Maybe that came from giving him gifts that I'd never given another. Yea, my virginity was the biggest reward he'd gotten, and he took that shit for granted. I should've listened to my momma and Kinsley, but my nose was wide open and I was beyond fast in the ass. Nobody could tell me nothing. Plus, he was the man with a plan. At least I thought the plan was for us to be together forever. Raise a family and I'd be the house mom that took care of him and the kids while he brought in the money and paid all the expenses. Shit, it wasn't supposed to happen like this. As I sat in silence, hoping that Kinsley's lecture was over, my cell phone began to ring. I pulled it out my pocket to see that it was Loyal calling.

"Don't answer that shit. Auntie will be home from work soon enough and you need to save your energy for her."

I frowned. "What you mean by that?"

"You need to be thinking of ways to tell her what happened and then praying to God that she doesn't let you sit in jail too long because bitch, you going to jail."

"Hush," I responded with a slick roll of the eyes and doing the very thing she asked me not to do. "What the fuck you want, nigga?"

Kinsley instantly smacked her lips with a disappointed shake of the head.

“I hope you know our cameras caught you on video vandalizing our shit,” he said with a bit of anger in his tone.

“Well, I’m sure you saw what I did before I left. But, just in case the sound didn’t work on your video, fuck y’all, bitches!” I emphasized with a roll of the neck like he could see me.

“Is that her?” Loyal’s mama asked in the background. “I told you that lil’ bitch was nothing but trouble from the moment I laid eyes on her. Tell her she’s going to jail.”

“Tell your mammy to kiss my ass! I hope she likes what I did to her Range.” I laughed to cover the hurt. I was never brought up to disrespect my elders, but this lady had been asking for it ever since I met her.

“That shit ain’t funny. You going to jail, Ki.”

“Shut the fuck up, Disloyal! That should’ve been your name because ain’t shit loyal about your ass! All you had to do was tell me that you were moving on, but naaah—I had to see the shit on Facebook Live.”

“You should’ve been known. I hadn’t been messing around with you like that for months.”

“You telling a damn lie. You just ate my pussy the other day!”

“That’s a lie!” he defended himself, but I believe he only said that because I was on speaker phone and his lil’ bitch was listening.

“I’m sure your new bitch could taste my sweet juices when she kissed you!”

“Girl, stop lying!”

“Nigga, you the liar and the cheater! I ain’t got time for this dumb shit. Do what y’all gotta do! I’ve gotten my payback!”

“And that made you feel good, you lil’ hood rat?” his mama asked. Apparently, she was still there on standby, waiting to dish a lil’ more of her unwanted two cents.

“Sure did, I enjoyed every bit of it!”

“Well, I hope you enjoy that jail cell your lil’ ass is going to be sitting in.”

“I just might,” I sassed, just as my mama, Nicole, walked in. Guess that was the end of the call, because I had no choice but to hang up in their face.

Mama walked in and spoke to me and Kinsley but didn’t even look my way. I could tell she’d had a long day and hearing about my bullshit was only going to make it longer.

“Auntie,” Kinsley said. “Look at your daughter.”

I smacked my lips, looking over at Kinsley. Damn, why she just couldn’t let her see it for herself?

“What happened to you?” my mama asked, with concern written all over her face.

“I, um—”

She frowned. “What did you do, chile?”

“I, um—well, I saw Loyal on Facebook Live with some female that he introduced as his new girlfriend.”

“Ok, and—you didn’t try to fight him, did you? Did he put his fuckin’ hands on you?” she asked, now taking a deeper look at my covered scrapes and cuts.

“No, they’re out of town.”

“Tell her what you did, Yomi.”

DAMN KINSLEY, HUSH! “I went out to their house and I ___”

“You WHAT?!” she asked, with that look in her eyes that made a bitch scared to say something next.

“I vandalized Loyal’s car and his momma’s car too.”

“YOU DID WHAT, KIYOMI?! I KNOW YOU FUCKIN’ LYIN’!!”

“No, she ain’t, Auntie. She is telling the truth.”

I looked over at Kinsley and rolled my eyes. I wished she would get the hell out of here.

“You mean to tell me that you took your ass on them people’s property and vandalized their shit?!”

“Yes ma’am.”

“What the fuck were you thinking about?! How many times have I told you to just leave that boy alone? You never fit in that family anyway!”

“I know.”

“Apparently, ya ass don’t know! You are heading to college in a couple of months. You don’t need nothing like this on your record following you. That’s not a good look, Kiyomi.”

“I know.”

“It shouldn’t have been nothing strange or nothing that you shouldn’t have already known when he came out with a new girlfriend. You were just a means to an end for him. He took your virginity, used you, allowed his family to disrespect you, and you still stuck with him. You should’ve known to leave him after I banned his ass from over here! If his ugly ass mama didn’t want you to her house, then her half-breed ass son wasn’t welcome to mine! But, noooo, you act like he was your air to breathe.”

“I know, Mama, and I’m sorry.”

“You oughta be sorry! You knew fucking better than that! Now, you’ve turned out to be just what that bitch had been calling you.”

“I’m not, though. I was just mad.”

“Being mad doesn’t excuse your behavior. You don’t think I’ve wanted to run my car through a nigga’s house or burn the bitch down with him in it? But, I’ve always maintained my dignity and kept it pushing. Losing my sister to drugs taught me a lot. Life is short and it’s all up to you in how you live it and how you handle situations that come your way. You never

should've stooped to that level. Kinsley, how do you feel about this?"

"I already told her how I feel about it. She knows I don't like it one bit. Yomi's too beautiful of a girl to let anybody drag her down to this level."

"And that's my point exactly! It's more than one way to skin a cat, young lady. That wasn't it."

"I knooooow," I let out. I already felt defeated. I didn't need this unwanted lecture.

"So, now what? Does anybody know you went on their property? I'm sure they have cameras surrounding the place."

"Yes, they know. Loyal told me when he called."

"And when was that?"

"Right before you walked in," I answered.

"Ok, now what?" she asked, just as a light knock sounded off at the front door.

"That's what," Kinsley said with a worried expression.

"Don't tell me that might be the police," my mama said.

I shrugged. "Might be," I said, getting up to walk to the door. Mama and Kinsley followed me, but ama pushed me back, so she could be the first to open it. Just as I thought, the minute she opened the door, two policemen stood waiting.

"Hello, ma'am. Is Kiyomi Simmons here?"

"Yes, she is. I'm her mom. What can I do for you?"

"Your daughter is shown on video footage vandalizing property at the Miles' home while they're away on vacation. I'm sorry to do this, but she's under arrest and we'll have to take her in."

At that moment, my heart began to panic, but I held my composure. I had made my bed hard, now I had to lie in it. As the cops walked me out of the house, my mama was right there beside me.

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll be following you and I’ll get you out right away.”

I simply nodded my head, trying to hold in the tears. Already, I regretted what I’d done and, somehow, I was going to bounce back from this. Right then and there, I promised myself that not a nan nother man was going to ever make a fool of me again, and I meant that.

I sat impatiently in the empty lobby area waiting for this psychologist to call me in the back. Needing to see a therapist was the last thing I ever wanted, but the court orders that I was given said otherwise. I glanced down at my Michael Kors watch while thinking that I'd gotten here about thirty minutes early and, as time continued to tick by, I just wanted to get up and sprint out of here. As I contemplated the quick exit, my cell phone began to buzz from an incoming text message. Pulling the Samsung Galaxy out of my purse, I noticed that it was Kinsley.

How are you feeling about your appointment? Auntie woke me up and said that she dropped you off early just to make sure you didn't miss it. KINSLEY

Mama always with the shits. I didn't have to be here this early. (eyeroll emoji) Hell, I don't wanna be here at all. I don't need to see a shrink. I'm fine. There is absolutely nothing wrong with me. YOMI

Well, it was the judge's orders, so you gotta have at least five sessions. That's a big part of your probation, so you have to play by the rules. KINSLEY

Fuck rules. I hate rules. (angry face emoji) YOMI

That's your problem. You gotta humble yourself Yomi. Ever since Loyal broke your heart, you haven't been yourself. Don't let that nigga change you. KINSLEY

If I can recall, you've never had a broken heart, so you can't tell me how to act in a situation that you know nothing about. YOMI

I've had my heart broken at an early age. It may not have been by a nigga, but it taught me a valuable lesson. Anyway, I've always tried to tell you that these nigga's ain't shit. All offum come with some kind of baggage. You can't fall and then expect them to catch you. I keep my heart tucked away in a lock box. Nan nigga ain't getting the key to unlock it. KINSLEY

You say that now. (eyeroll emoji) YOMI

I'm gonna always say that. My mama taught me better and that alone should've taught you better. YOMI

Yea, but that was a totally different situation and on a level that is still kind of hard to comprehend. You're pretty cold because of that. So, people on the outside always see you as this nonchalant person. I mean, you're way too chill about shit. At some point, you gotta let your guard down. YOMI

And look where that got you. KINSLEY

Yea, but it won't happen again. My heart is now locked, and I threw away the fucking key. So, good luck to any nigga thinking he'll ever play me like that again. YOMI

Well, I been tried getting you to see it that way. I promise you; it saves a lot of heartache down the road. KINSLEY

Anyway, what we doing when I get back? YOMI

I don't know what you're doing but I've been invited to a day party by this guy I recently linked with at the club. It's actually his homeboy's birthday party. You gotta be 21 years old to get in, but they ain't checking IDs. KINSLEY

Well, count me in Sus. I'm hanging with you, so don't leave before I get back. YOMI

I won't. I got a bad ass outfit you can wear too. KINSLEY

Sounds like a plan to me. KIYOMI

“Kiyomi Simmons!” a lady called out, as I glanced up from my phone.

I gotta go. We’ll talk about this later. YOMI

Ok. KINSLEY



“How are you?” the lady asked.

“I’m good,” I answered.

“Great. I’m Dr. Elise Harris. It’s nice to meet you,” she said with a pleasant smile on her face, as I shook her hand with a friendly smile back. “Have a seat, so we can get started. Your first session won’t be long at all, not that you have that many, I see.”

“Yea, the court ordered at least five sessions, but I don’t think I need to be here.”

“I can understand that, but it must be a good reason for you to be appointed to see me,” Dr. Harris acknowledged.

“I don’t see the reason why, but it’s whatever,” I dryly responded. This was really just a waste of my time, but I’d rather be sitting here than sitting my ass in jail.

“Let’s start with you getting comfortable, then I can be the judge of that,” she said, as if she could tell I was knee-deep in my feelings.

I sat down on a nice turquoise couch right across from the psychologist, as I scoped out the layout of the office. It was nicely decorated in white, turquoise, and soft yellow colors. It gave me a serene sense of peace and, for the first time being here, I didn’t feel so guarded. “So, I see you got into a bit of an altercation about a month and a half ago?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it an altercation. I just reacted out of anger and did some things that I now regret.”

“Well, at least you have some form of regret about it. Do you mind telling me what happened?”

“Long story short, my then boyfriend, whose name should’ve been DISLOYAL instead of Loyal, announced his new girlfriend on Facebook Live and I knew nothing about us breaking up. On top of that, he was celebrating with his family and friends at a gathering that I also knew nothing about.”

“Mm-hm.”

“So, since he wanted to play me like I was a sucker, I went to his house and vandalized his car and his mama’s car.”

“You vandalized his mother’s car too?” she asked with a concerned raise of an eyebrow.

“Yep, because I’m sure she’s the reason why he did what he did. She never cared for me anyway. So, I guess she finally got what she wanted, and that was for him to leave me for somebody that was more on their level. Like I cared, because she’s bald-headed and ugly anyway, but to embarrass me in the process put the icing on the cake,” I sassed.

“A part of you does care, though. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have taken it as far as vandalizing their property. Am I right?”

“Not really,” I answered but, this time, in a softer tone than the aggressive way I’d been responding. “I did that out of anger. I know better now. His mama wanted to push me to that point, and I did just that. Needless to say, not only was it all caught on camera, but they confirmed who it was, and I went to jail.”

“How did that feel, going to jail?”

“I hated it. I felt restricted of my rights and sitting in that lil’ holding cell for nearly two hours almost gave me a freaking panic attack.”

“So, from that experience, you never want to go back, right?”

“NEVER,” I emphasized.

“So, in order to never experience that situation again, you must learn how to control your temper.”

“True.”

“I see that you have a birthday coming up. What are your plans?”

“I don’t know. I start college soon, so no telling. I really wanna hold off and just be a bottle service girl like my cousin.”

“A bottle service girl?”

“Yes, you know, the girls at the club that bring out the bottles of liquor to the party people.”

“Oh, like a waitress?”

“Yea, but the tips are better, and she gets to meet and mingle with a lot of people firsthand, including celebrities.” I smiled, as I gave Dr. Harris another glimpse of my personality.

“I see.”

“So, if I did that first, then it’ll give me some time to figure out why I’m even going to college in the first place. I already hated school, but I passed with flying colors. Just because I hated it didn’t mean I was dumb. I just never had a feeling of what I really wanted to do with my life.”

“I can understand that. A lot of people don’t have a clear direction as to where they see themselves in life. Sometimes, people are in their thirties or older before it comes to them. So, don’t pressure yourself. However, it’s gotta be something that you thoroughly enjoy doing.”

I shrugged. “All I know is that I don’t wanna be a cashier at Walmart or The Dollar Store. Other than that, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Dr. Harris softly grinned. “I’m sure it matters. Do you see yourself raising a family with a husband by your side?”

“Yea, I can see that but, right now, I don’t care to think about it. After that mess with Loyal, men aren’t on my list of priorities.”

“Well, in your case and at your age, they shouldn’t be. You should be your priority and everything else will fall in place.”

“Sounds good.”

“It can be good. You just have to trust the process. So, is your cousin older than you?”

“Yes, she’s twenty-three and she really has her stuff together, even though she’s dealt with a lot more than most people probably could handle.”

“So, you look at her like a role model?”

“Absolutely. She’s pretty, smart, has all the connections, dresses flyer than anybody I know and, more importantly, she’s my best friend. She also lives with me and my mama. She’s been living with us since she was twelve.”

“Mm-hm.”

“I’d rather not go into that situation right now, but just know we couldn’t be closer than blood sisters, even though she’s my first cousin.”

“Thanks for sharing,” Dr. Harris said as she sat back in her seat and studied my demeanor. I didn’t know what she was thinking but, hopefully, it was good. I knew my outer expression seemed hard with a cold vibe, but I sensed that she could see through it. Truth was, I was still broken from the break-up with Loyal, and even though I acted like I was over it, I wasn’t. “So, how long had you and your ex been dating?”

“We started talking on my sixteenth birthday, so it was close to three years.”

“Is he older than you?”

“He’s older than me by a year. So, he’s already nineteen going on twenty. I’ll be nineteen in three months.”

“I saw that on your paperwork.”

“I can’t lie, I loved him. Well, at least I thought I did, because my mama said that I don’t really know what love is, and she’s probably right. All I know is that he was my first boyfriend, my first everything.”

“I figured as much.”

“I honestly don’t even want to have sex with nobody else, being that I felt like he took something precious all the while knowing that he wasn’t the one.”

“That happens more often than you think.”

“So, how do I move past this?”

“Well, first, you got to focus on yourself and your goals. Do things that make you smile, hang around people that bring out the best in you, and take time for yourself. Treat yourself when you can, whether that’s a professional massage or getting your toes and nails done. Switch it up sometimes with a new hairstyle or hair color. Whether it makes sense or not, know that things happen for a reason. Nothing is worse than wasted time, so make the most of it. Live, laugh, forgive yourself and others, and you won’t have to look for love, for love will find you,” she said, reading from a beautiful picture hanging on her wall. “I tell all my clients this daily because it is an important aspect of life.”

“I needed to hear that.”

“Time has gone by so fast,” she stated, looking over at the large wall clock. “You’re not due to come back for another four weeks. Meantime, I want you to write down things that you love doing. Write down where you see yourself a year from now, then where you see yourself five years from now. We need to work on your goals, so you can figure out your purpose and what programs are out there that college can offer you. Sounds good? Can you do that?”

“Yes, I can do that. Sounds good.” I smiled.

“Wonderful,” Dr. Harris said, as she stood up to walk me to the door. “I look forward to our next session.”

“I do too,” I responded. Once back out in the lobby, I pulled out my cell phone and clicked on my Uber app to get a ride back home. As I sat waiting for my ride, I called my mother. On the first ring, she answered. “Hey, Ma. My first session is over.”

“Ok good, how did it go?”

“It actually went better than I thought it would.”

“Well, that’s a plus, because you’ve been acting really stubborn lately.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that. I just wanna completely get over that situation with Loyal.”

“I know you do, and it takes time, baby. You’ll move on to bigger things and he’ll be in the rearview before you know it.”

“I can’t wait,” I responded. “Well, tell Kinsley I’ll be there shortly. Make sure she don’t leave me.”

“Where y’all going?”

“I don’t know. She’s taking me to a birthday party that she was invited to.”

“A birthday party in the daytime, huh?”

“Yea, it’s a day party for somebody’s birthday.”

“This better not be no club type event with nothing but a bunch of grown people drinking and smoking. I know that.”

“Maaaaa, I’m grown, but it’s not that kind of party, ok.”

“Grown? Girl, you ain’t nothing but eighteen.”

“Turning nineteen in three months, that’s sooner than later, lil’ baby.”

“Don’t lil’ baby me,” my mama fussed. “I’m going to have a talk with Kin right now. I don’t need you getting caught up in nothing else.”

“Dang, I didn’t even have to tell you.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. I’ll see you when you get home.”

“Alright,” I said and ended the call. Once off the phone, I quickly sent Kinsley a text message.

Mama is about to question you about this party we’re going to. Just tell her it’s innocent, and you know what I mean by that. YOMI

Why your big mouth had to say something? I should leave your ass. KINSLEY

Don't play, girl. I'll find your ass and still come. YOMI

LOL! I got you Sus. You done yet? KINSLEY

Yup, my Uber just pulled up. I'll be there shortly. YOMI

“**M**y therapist is cool as fuck. She’s also really pretty and dresses fly as hell. She had on that same Gucci one piece that you just showed me the other day.”

“Noooo, I want that damn outfit,” I said while backing out of the driveway and heading to the day party.

“Well, she got it, boo. Maybe you can borrow hers since the bitch cost so much,” Kiyomi joked. “Anyway, I actually enjoyed my session. I think you should make you an appointment.”

“Bitch, I don’t need a shrink.”

“No, but you need somebody that you can talk to. Somebody that doesn’t know your situation or what you’ve been through. Somebody that’s not judgmental and can help you cope with things.”

“I cope just fine and have been coping since I was a youngster.”

“I know, Sus, I’m just saying.”

“And I’m just saying that this party is going to be lit,” I said, just wanting to change the subject. “I can’t wait till you meet Meech. He’s cool, handsome, and fine as fuck. Oh, did I mention he got that bag?”

“I already figured that. You don’t fuck around with niggas that don’t.”

“Thanks to my job.” I grinned. Working as a bottle girl definitely had its perks. At any given time, no telling who would show up at Club Truth. I’d met A through D list celebrities. Hell, even some E-listers. I’d mingled with Instagram models, reality TV stars, and those in-between, above, or right beneath. Just know that if I was bringing out a bottle, it was to a crowd that had money, and I ain’t talking about a little bit of money.

“That’s why I wanna work with you before I go to college.”

“Girl, first of all, you gotta be twenty-one years old.”

“And, they don’t know that. Look at me,” she said, speaking about her thick thighs, full breasts, and small waist. She definitely had a body like a goddess and a face that was beautiful. She could easily pull off being twenty-one. For that matter, she could pull off being even older, but it took more than looks to get a job where I worked. She’d have to have a legit ID, and that was something she didn’t have.

“Girl, they make fake IDs all the damn time.”

“Ok, but Auntie will kill your ass right after she kills me, so it’s a no. You not doing that.”

“She ain’t gotta know where I’m working at. I could tell her that I got a job at a hotel or something.”

“Yea, but you also said that you want to hold off on college, and I do believe she’ll know if you’re in school or not.”

“Look, you got me thinking too hard and I ain’t trying to do that. I’ll figure something out.”

“Yea, do that, and then tell me once you’ve realized that it’s no way you’ll be able to pull that off.”

“Whatever,” Kiyomi teased with a slick roll of the eyes. “Shit, I might just find my future husband at this party.”

“I thought you were writing men off?”

“I didn’t say for how long though.”

I grinned. “You ain’t ready for that just yet.”

“You’re right, but it doesn’t stop me from window shopping. I highly doubt it’ll be a nigga that can turn my head like Loyal did. One thing about it, that nigga was like a vanilla milkshake, handsome as hell with silky hair. We would’ve made beautiful babies.”

“Yea, I know. Lil’ snow bunnies. That’s why Auntie always called him a half-breed,” I laughed. “He took more after his white heritage than he did the black—”

“Shut the hell up,” Kiyomi cut in with a serious expression, then bust out laughing. “I don’t even like light-skin niggas. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking fucking with his ass.”

“You weren’t thinking about no damn skin color. Loyal had that bag and kept your ass with money and bling. I gotta give it to him. He always gave the best gifts.”

“Exactly,” Kiyomi agreed as she rubbed on the Cuban-link chain that was glistening around her neck. “And if push ever comes to shove, I’ll have my ass at the first pawn shop around this bitch tryna see what I can get.”

I laughed out loud. “Girl, you stupid.”

“I’m so ready for this party. I feel like I’ve been cooped up in the house, partially because I was on punishment, but mainly because Loyal and I aren’t together no more. You know he kept my ass in the streets.”

“No, he kept your ass at the Westin Hotel,” I joked but was very serious.

“That too.” Kiyomi grinned. “I don’t even wanna think about him no more, so we need to scratch that name out of our vocabulary. If either of us says it, we have to put a whole hundred-dollar bill inside of the loser jar.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I’d been waiting to add his ass in the loser jar. “Bout fucking time. Now, I know you’re over him,” I said, still laughing. The loser jar was like a swear jar that was supposed to help us stay clear of a nigga’s name that was no longer wanted or needed. If his name went inside that

jar, we were not to say it, talk about him, think about him, or crave him without the other knowing or we'd have to toss in the said dollar amount. "But, damn bitch, a whole hundred?"

"Damn right."

"You want him outta your system bad."

"Real bad. It's time to put the past in the past."

"I feel you." I nodded as I turned into the newly built subdivision that had houses five thousand square feet and bigger. In no time, I was pulling up to the large estate where the day party was being held. Yomi looked over at me with a big smile on her face.

"Wow, bitch, you didn't tell me they were doing it like this. This house is as big as Loyal's parents' house."

"You owe the loser jar one-hundred bucks, bitch."

"Damn, I wasn't even thinking about that. But, I mean," she chuckled while gazing at the house and some of the guests that were making their way up to the door. "This shit is lit!"

"Oh, it's definitely lit!" I grinned.

"So, is this a celebrity or something, Sus?" she asked while checking her make-up in the visor mirror.

"Just some niggas with money, but I wouldn't be surprised if a celebrity or three is in there."

"Shit, I wouldn't be surprised either."

After we made sure that we were on point, we both stepped out of the car. Kiyomi walked over, as I scoped her from head to toe. "Sus, you mad thick in that tiger stripe jumpsuit," I told her.

"Right, eighteen where 'bout?" she clowned, now checking herself from head to toe. "We both some bad bitches, because you're definitely rocking that tie-dye, sheer maxi dress."

"Can you see my bra and thong?"

"Clear as day."

“Good.” I grinned, with a seductive lick of my tongue.

“Blue looks good on you.”

“Thanks, girl. I’ve been told that a time or two,” I said, as we walked up to the huge front door like we were the baddest bitches there. I pointed at the sign and had to laugh once reading it. “Yomi, you see that shit?”

Kiyomi began to read it out loud. “Do NOT enter if your ass is under 21. Just gon’ get back in yo’ car, hun. Do NOT enter if your titties hang past your navel. Do NOT enter if your stomach hangs below your thighs. Do NOT enter if your teeth are crooked and your breath smells like shit; hint, hint... get a peppermint.” We couldn’t help but laugh, as Kiyomi continued reading. “Do NOT enter if you’re here for drama. Do NOT enter if your arm pits aren’t laced with deodorant. Do NOT enter if yo’ pussy ain’t fresh—”

“Sus, I can’t.” I laughed out loud, cutting her off. “These niggas are crazy as hell,” I said, just as Meech opened the door.

His handsome smile welcomed us in. “I knew that was your fine ass.”

“Oh, you saw us walking up?” I asked, cheesing back.

“Yea,” he replied, grabbing me by the hand and turning me in a circle. “Damn, you look good and wearing the hell outta that see-through dress.”

“Thanks, boo.” I eagerly smiled as he pulled me closer, pressing his face against the nape of my neck.

“Damn, got a nigga dick ready to bust one.”

“Eww,” Kiyomi teased in a mumbled tone.

“Oh, ‘scuse me, this must be your cousin?” he asked, breaking away from his trance and observing Kiyomi.

“Yep,” I replied, still caught up in the moment and blushing like crazy. “Yomi, this is Meech.”

“Wassup?” he said, with that handsome smile that made my panties moist at just the sight of it.

“Hey, Meech. I’ve heard some things about you.”

“I hope they were good.”

“So far, so good,” Kiyomi responded.

“Your name is Yomi?”

“Kee-Yo-mee,” she sounded out, as I snickered a bit. She always irked me anytime she did that shit but, each time, it was always funny.

“I got you.” He grinned. “Y’all follow me.” He led the way, as Yomi and I followed behind him.

“Sus, he is fionnne!” Kiyomi admitted in a soft whisper. I already knew she would see the same thing as me. We definitely had similar taste for the most part.

“I told you.” I grinned, feeling good to have his ass on my arms.

The birthday party was lit. Niggas and women were everywhere. Some in their own lil’ cliques, others standing around scoping out the crowd, strippers dancing on the poles in the big open floor, and everybody else getting toasted, talking shit, laughing, and enjoying themselves. The vibes were everything, and I loved it.

“Girl, it’s a bunch of niggas in here. All I see is money from one corner to the next.”

“I knooooow, that’s the same thing I was thinking,” I commented. We ended up by an island bar, which was directly in the middle of the large open floor. It was surrounded by bar stools with liquor galore on the shelf behind it. There were four half-naked women serving drinks, and I couldn’t wait to quench my thirst with a few shots of 818 Tequila.

“Order y’all drinks. Everything is on the house,” Meech informed us.

“What you want?” I asked Kiyomi.

“I’ll get some Henny mixed with a peach Red Bull,” she said to one of the bartenders.

“And I’ll have three shots of 818 Tequila.”

In a split second, we had our drinks in front of us. I wasted no time downing one of my shots. 818 had to be the smoothest tequila on the market.

Meech grabbed me by my hand and said, “Let’s take a lil’ stroll around the party.”

“Come on, Yomi,” I insisted, grabbing her by the hand.

“No, go with your boo. I’m good right here.”

“You sure?” I questioned with a frown.

“I’m positive. I’m just gonna sit right here and drink my Henny.”

“Okaaay,” I playfully dragged, as Meech and I walked off. I glanced back over my shoulder to check on her right quick, but she was just bobbing her head to the music and sipping her drink. “Where the hell we going?” I asked as we walked through the hype crowd, heading for the stairs.

“Yo, Dodge, I’m heading up!” he called out, giving his homey dap while passing by.

Dodge simply nodded with an approving smile on his face. He was busy being entertained by some woman sitting on his lap and a few strippers giving them both lap dances at the same damn time.

“Your boy is having a grand ol’ time.”

“Damn right, it’s his birthday. He should be.”

“I can’t blame him,” I responded, turning up my second shot. “I would have butt-naked bitches dancing on me too.”

“My kinda girl.” Meech grinned, just as some random pulled him by his Versace t-shirt.

“Hey, baby, you got time for me now?” she asked in a drunken tone.

“Aye, chill the fuck out. Don’t you see me with my lady?” he snapped, aggressively pushing her back.

“It’s like that, Meech?” she asked with a jerk of the neck, as if she deserved a better response than that.

“Don’t play with me, bitch.” He mugged, gripping my hand a lil’ tighter. “Aye, don’t pay that hoe no mind,” he insisted, as we made our way up the stairs. I didn’t know who the thirst trap was but, if I was her, I’d be hella embarrassed, with her dumb ass.

“Meech, where are we going?” I pondered again, just as he opened the door up to a bedroom that was fully furnished and nicely decorated.

“I feel the need to test the waters,” he said in a seductive deep tone, as he bit the corner of his lip and gazed deeply in my soul.

“You wanna test the waters here? Right now?”

“Why not? Unless you’re against it,” he said, the whole time kissing on my neck. I wanted to resist the urge because I hadn’t given up the goods yet, but I didn’t see what harm it would do. I planned on fucking him anyway, sometime or another. Guess the sooner, the better.

“But here?” I asked, playing hard to get. “Whose room is this? Somebody might wanna come in.”

“This is my room. Nobody coming in here,” he told me, as I pushed him back a little so I could really take a look around the spot.

“Dang, what you do for a living?” I asked, being that not only was the room big and nice but, if this was his bedroom, who did the house belong to?

“I got my hands in a little bit of this and that,” he responded. Honestly, I didn’t care what he had his hands in, but the sooner he put ‘em on me, the better I’d feel. His ass was fine as hell facing me with a gold and white Gucci t-shirt, Gucci jeans, and a pair of gold and white Christian Louboutin high-top sneakers. The Cuban-link chain around his neck had a lion medallion hanging from it, and the diamonds in it glistened like it was wet. He glanced down at the gold Gucci timepiece flexed around his wrist. “You gonna give me some or I gotta wait?”

“Shit, I’m waiting on you.”

He grinned. “Oh, you waiting on me?” In no time, he had pushed me back on the bed, pulling my thong to the side and feasting on my goods. His tongue felt like a vibrator, giving me all the feels. Even though this was going down much quicker than expected, his gentle touch made me feel safe and comfortable. I could hear the loud music blaring from below, which gave me the courage to moan even louder from his mouth exploring the slippery slide of my playground.

“Oh, my gosh!” I let out, grabbing the back of his head. My eyes damn near rolled out the sockets, the shit felt so good. As my sprinklers began to shower him with raindrops, my toes tensed up and the sensation I felt building in my soul exploded like an erupted volcano. My body jerked a little while attempting to regain my composure. I couldn’t help but laugh seeing Meech’s content expression, as he lifted his head up, beard and face dripping my juices. Smiling from ear to ear, he stood to his feet and gazed in my eyes. He stroked his thick manhood, nodding his head.

“You know you mine, right?”

“Oh, am I?” I pondered, with a seductive smirk.

“Damn right, with yo’ sweet-tasting pussy,” he replied. At that moment, I just knew he was about to fuck my brains out but, instead, he pulled me up by my hands. “Come, let’s clean up right quick and head back down to the party.”

I followed him to the master bathroom suite but was somewhat taken back. “You sure you wanna do that?” Hell, my body still craved more.

“Yea, I don’t wanna miss it when they bring out the cake. From what I’ve heard, that’s gon’ be the littest part of the bash. But, no worries, babe. You gon’ get this dick soon enough,” he acknowledged, grabbing my hand and rubbing it across his python.

“Okurrrr.” I grinned with a modest smile. Most men would’ve definitely taken it as far as they could’ve, but he didn’t. I knew from the print in his pants that he was hung, so I knew it wasn’t that. Guess he just wanted to stake his claim, because he certainly did that. The only downside was that I

was stubborn and stuck in my ways. I didn't really know how to love or even allow a man to love me. So, if he was serious about me, this was going to be a challenge. I just hoped that I would be open to receiving the good in my life instead of pushing it away.

I sat at the bar sipping on my second drink, about to ask for my third. I found myself continually looking up the stairs, since that was the last place I saw Kinsley heading. No telling what she was doing, but I had an idea. I couldn't really blame her. That nigga Meech was fine as hell. He was just a little too much on the light-skin side, and I ain't want nan nother nigga that put me in the mind of Loyal. I took in a deep breath with thoughts of wanting to head up the stairs and check on Kin, but decided to order another drink instead. That nigga knew not to try nothing foul, at least I hoped he did, or his ass wasn't going to like the repercussions. I might've been sitting pretty but, I promise, I was with the shits.

The people partying around me were really turned up. Hell, I wasn't doing much but sitting here getting my drink on and bobbing to the beats, yet I was having the most fun I'd had in a long time. Ironically, these people couldn't have been from my side of town because I didn't know anybody. I glanced around at the layout of the house. It was beautiful and exactly the kind of place I wanted to live in. The house was built with a modern concept and had floor-to-ceiling windows all around. Walls really weren't a thing with its open layout. I couldn't tell if this was actually somebody's house or if they were renting; either way, I knew they had paid a grip just to be here.

Just as I had gotten my hands on my third drink, I locked eyes with this cutey sitting over in the corner with a bunch of women surrounding him. Nigga looked like he was having his

own lil' private party within the party. Half-naked bitches were twerking with dollars being thrown their way from those appreciating the show. However, the nigga had yet to take his eyes off me. Hell, to be honest, I was pretty stuck watching him too.

"Yomi!" a familiar voice called out. I glanced over my shoulder to see Apple heading my way. Apple was a very close friend of the family. She and Kinsley had been super tight growing up and they also worked at Club Truth together. She was the crazy one with all the jokes and was down for whatever.

"What's up, Apple?" I asked, as she made her way over.

"Sus, K didn't tell me that you were gonna be here."

"You already know she can't tell me about a showdown like this and I not tag along."

"You got that right. This party is lit as fuck!" she exclaimed, turning up the shot she had in her hand. From the gloss in her eyes, I could tell she was taking full advantage of the term drink till you sink. "Sus, you rocking the hell outta that jumpsuit."

"Thanks, but where your clothes at?" I asked, looking at her half-naked ass. She may as well had been one of the strippers here swinging on the pole.

"I don't believe in clothes, especially in the summertime," she laughed. "I peeped you watching *him*."

"Oh yea? Who is *him*?" I inquisitively asked. "That nigga looks like a tasty cup of caramel frappe." I groaned, biting the corner of my lip.

"*Him* name is Dodge Gamble." She smirked.

"Tell me more. You know him?" I asked, turning in my stool to face her.

"I know a lil' something about him, but he's more private than the rest of his homeys. His right-hand man is Meech. The nigga I'm sure Kinsley is off having a slutty moment with since I don't see either of them anywhere."

I laughed. “You definitely know her.”

“Probably better than she knows herself,” Apple agreed with laughter. “Anyways, this is his birthday party.”

“Who, his?” I asked, glancing back over my shoulder in Dodge’s direction.

“Yep, can’t you tell? These women won’t give him a break. They all over that nigga.”

“I see,” I responded, turning up my drink. “So, what’s the tea? How old is this nigga?”

“I believe he turned twenty-five or twenty-six. He might be a lil’ too old for you.”

“Girl, bye. That’s right up my alley. I ain’t fucking with nan nother nigga that’s around my age. I need a nigga that’s experienced and has his own shit. That way, I ain’t gotta worry about his mammy interfering in our relationship.”

“Well, you do realize that these older niggas come with a whole new world of trouble, especially these niggas.”

“Meaning?”

“Groupies, drugs, illegal money—”

I leaned in closer to whisper in her ear. “They sell dope or something?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that, but I’m sure they dabble and dabble in it.” She leaned in closer to whisper in my ear. “They be on some fraud shit, too. A whole lotta money, fraud shit.”

“Oh yea?” I pondered, wanting to hear more.

“Well, I don’t think Dodge is in it deep like the rest of his crew, but let’s just say that I heard his come-up was unexpected. In other words, he just kinda took over the reins. For the most part, the main thing I gather from seeing him around and at the club is that he only fucks with his crew. He doesn’t smile often; he’s a pretty low-key kind of nigga that’s not to be fucked with. Oh, and I believe his main girl is some hood bitch name Keisha.”

“So, where’d you get that tea?”

“My homegirl, Donk, from the club be telling me shit. She went to school with him. That girl Keisha also went to school with them. Supposedly, him and her were talking way back then too.”

“Damn, you know a lot more than I thought you did.”

“You know how it is. All it takes is one person to know somebody and then we all know ‘em.”

“You right.” I nodded, ordering my fourth drink. I wasn’t even fully finished with my third one but, when I needed the fourth one, it would be already on deck.

“Wassup, beautiful?” some clown ass, yet cute nigga asked as he walked up behind me. The minute I turned to face him, the smell of alcohol stung my nose as he blew his strong breath in my direction.

With a look of disdain, I replied, “Not interested.”

“How you not gon’ be interested and you ain’t talk to me yet?”

“Your breath says enough, now move!” I spat, trying to push him back out of my space.

Dude wasn’t giving up and grabbed me by the arm. “Yo, I’m just tryna talk to yo’ stuck-up ass. It’s always the bad and boujie bitches that think they better than a nigga!” he barked while laughing like he couldn’t believe I was turning him down.

“I don’t think I’m better; I know, nigga!” I challenged.

“Is that on yo’ mama, bitch?!” he seethed.

“Biiitch?! I know this nigga—”

Apple cut in, “Yeah, that’s on her mama, so move around with yo’ drunk ass,” she spat. “Nigga must be ain’t read the rules before he walked in, because he needs a peppermint some kind of bad.”

I snickered at her comment, but the dude didn’t think it was too funny.

“Y’all don’t know me. This my people’s party. I’ll throw y’all asses out.”

Now mean mugging his ass, I quickly replied, “Then try it, nigga!”

“Ayeeeee, Rosco, what the fuck you thinking ‘bout? You know we don’t play like this. I said no fucking drama, so why you over here with the shits?”

Without hesitation, dude straightened up quick. “My bad, cuz. I wasn’t tryna start no shit.”

“I would hope not, because you already know what time it is. Cut that shit out and go sober the fuck up some.”

His raspy, firm voice turned me the fuck on, as my kitty dripped just from his sexy ass coming over to rescue me.

“Wassup, Dodge? That’s your people?” Apple asked.

“Yea, that’s my first cousin.”

“Well, cuz was trippin’ trippin’,” she commented.

“Just overlook him. He’s dealing with a lot,” he told her, then directed his attention right back on me.

“Don’t believe I’ve seen you before. What’s yo’ name?”

“Kiyomi.”

“Kee-yo-mee?” he sounded out, causing my mean ass to smile. Only I pronounced my name like that.

“Yep, that’s it. What’s your name?” I asked, like I didn’t already know.

“Dodge,” he answered. The look on his face was serious, but I could see something in him that was charming as hell. Maybe it was the way he swept in and saved me from his aggressive ass cousin. Or just the mere fact that the nigga was handsome as hell and dressed in a black and white Moschino t-shirt, a pair of black cotton Moschino shorts, a black and white ATL fitted cap, and a simple pair of white Air Force Ones with the black Nike sign and the clear bubble gum bottoms. For a nigga to supposedly be sitting on some major stacks, he was dressed like a laid-back city boy from the streets of Atlanta.

He wasn't giving too much or too little, and I was feeling that shit.

"Well, I'm gonna go find my girl. I'll check on you later," Apple intervened.

"When you find her, tell her she needs to be making her way back over here," I teased.

"Will do," Apple laughed with a playful wink as she smiled at Dodge and walked off.

"So, who is her girl?" He frowned like he was trying to think of who could've invited me.

"My cousin, Kinsley."

"Kinsley?" he repeated, as if he was thinking about the name. "Ohhh, yo' cousin is fucking with my homey, Meech."

"Yea, I met him when we first arrived."

"Ok, so she's good people. Does that mean you good people too?"

"It all depends on my mood."

"Oh yea?"

"Yep," I responded, not wanting to overplay my part. I could tell he was sizing me up or, rather, checking me out up close and personal. I wasn't worried about nothing because I was a baddie, and I knew it. Not to toot my own horn, but *toot toot* muthafuckas. What could I say? I got it from my mama. I stood up from the bar seat, just so he could get a whole eye full of this hourglass, Cola bottle. I was dressed in a tiger stripe, one-piece jumpsuit with a plunging deep V-neck, showcasing my perky girls that sat up perfectly without a bra. I rocked a pair of clear heels with a black bottom that completed my attire. I was sure he had peeped my toenails matching the white, glitter nail polish on my fingertips. I glanced over at him with a nonchalant smile, like maybe I liked him or maybe I didn't.

"So, all that's real?" he asked, staring at my fat ass.

“Real as it’ll ever get,” I answered. “The only thing fake about me is this 24-inch sew-in. But don’t let it fool ya. I ain’t like these bald-headed bitches by a long shot. I have hair,” I joked, as we shared a moment of laughter. “So, I hear you’re the birthday boy.”

“More like birthday man but, yea, that’s me.”

“Cool. How old are you? That’s if you don’t mind me asking.”

“I’m 26.”

I nodded my head with a smile, as if to approve of his age. “Well, happy birthday.”

“Preciate dat,” he responded, drinking the last of his glass of Cognac.

“How old are you? That’s if you don’t mind me asking,” he mocked.

“Uh—18,” I replied with confidence.

“Say what now? You’re just a baby.”

I frowned with a scrunch in my nose. “Baby? I’m a grown ass woman. I’ve graduated high school and I do my own thing. So, don’t do me.”

“Do you? I wish,” he acknowledged, eyeing my curvaceous body. “Nah, but I can’t be fucking around like that. Girls yo’ age is crazy as hell.”

I laughed. “So, you think I’m crazy?”

“You got a police record?” he questioned like he’d heard something about me.

“Hell nawl,” I replied, thanking God that what I did out at Loyal’s house wasn’t going to go on my record as long as I completed my probation assignments.

“Well, you do have a baby face, if nothing else.”

I arrogantly smirked. “Means I’ll stay looking young forever.”

“You might be right,” he responded. “Aye, come to think about it, you know you don’t supposed to be in here. Did you even read the rules before entering?”

“I did and I didn’t care. Those rules are lame as hell,” I teased but was dead serious.

“Those rules are golden.”

“Talk about crazy. Who wrote that funny shit?” I laughed.

“I did,” he answered with a serious expression but then, out of nowhere, he shot me that winning smile I’d been waiting for. I smiled back, this time letting him know that I liked him.

“So, do you want me to leave?”

“Nah, but if I could go with you, then yea.”

“You’re cute.” I grinned, like I was his elder talking cash shit that I’d been taught by my cousin.

“Oh shit, where is the birthday king?!” the DJ yelled in the mic. “I heard the cake is coming out and, boy, what a treat it is!”

I looked at Dodge. “I believe that’s for you,” I said, just as a big ass cake was being pushed out the kitchen area. I didn’t even know how they got that thing in the house. It was huge.

“Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you,” the crowd happily sang. “Happy Birthday to Doooodge!” they cheered, just as Kinsley and Meech reappeared. “Happy Birthday to you!!” The crowd went wild while shouting, “Blow out the candles!” I had never seen candles that big, but he managed to blow every one of them out and, just like that, a bitch jumped out of the cake.

“What the fuck?!” I flinched, almost spilling my yak. The shit startled me. Everybody went crazy, as the damn cake opened up on the side and the woman inside the cake strutted out wearing a nude, fitted onesie with sparkly pastries covering her tatas and her coochie. If I didn’t have a close view, I would’ve thought she was naked, but the outfit simply matched her complexion.

“Happy Birthday, baby!” she screamed, making her way to Dodge and planting a long kiss on his lips. I definitely peeped it was no tongue action involved, so that spoke volumes. My tongue would’ve been down that nigga’s throat. Next thing I saw was her leaning in to whisper in his ear, “I know you thought I wasn’t gonna come, but I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

By Dodge standing directly in front of me, I heard everything she’d said.

“Yomi, you good?” Kinsley asked.

“Nah, bitch, are you good?” I asked back, giving her the side-eye.

“Never better.” She smiled from ear to ear.

I scrunched up my nose. “I wanna know all the deets.”

“Girrrrrrl, soon as we leave here,” she replied, sticking out the *Meg tongue* as I laughed out loud.

“I heard they’re about to serve the food.”

“Good, because I’m hungry as hell,” I told her. “Oh, Apple is looking for you.”

“I just spotted her half-naked ass.”

“Birds of a feather—”

“Hush, bitch,” she laughed. “I’ll be back.”

“Go ‘head, girl, I’m having a good time.”

As Kinsley headed in Apple’s direction, Meech began to chop it up with Dodge. It seemed like everybody had swarmed him, I guess trying to get in their Happy Birthdays personally. I just watched while thinking that the woman in the cake must’ve been the Keisha chick that Apple was telling me about. A bold move like that would only be made by his main bitch. A part of me was a lil’ salty, even though I’d just met the nigga. I looked her over, thinking that she didn’t have nothing on me but age. I always gave props when it was due, and she definitely wasn’t an ugly female. Matter of fact, I’d give her a seven or maybe even an eight on her best day, but

that's about all she was getting from me. It was just something about their interaction, or shall I say, his interaction with her that wasn't as loving as she was with him.

An hour had passed, and the music was hittin' even louder. The crowd seemed to have gotten thicker, and people were now jumping in and out of the pool in the backyard. I was still in lala land sitting at the bar alone. I had no problems being by myself. My bestie was Kinsley and a girl had to be lucky to have such a rider as her. Females and I never really bonded. I had associates and that was about it. Even they could be counted on one hand. As I gobbled down the cannabis hot wings and meatballs, I danced on the bar stool, definitely feeling the sensational high. I was sure everybody that was eating this good ass food was soaring higher than a rocket on the moon. Even the weed cake was delicious. I licked my fingers while humming the lyrics to "Wockesha" by Moneybagg Yo. Next thing I hear—

"Taste like candy, sweet like fruit. Wet like water, can I love on you?"

I smiled, catching butterflies, as Dodge rapped in my ear. "Where you come from?" I asked in my pretty girl tone.

"Across the room," he answered. "That shit must be finger lickin' good."

I laughed. "You see what I'm doing, right?"

"I wish I could lick on yo' fingers like that."

"Oh yea?" I said, turning in my seat to face him. "I thought you didn't fuck with babies."

"I don't, but I can't help but fuck with you."

"What would your woman think about that? I mean, she is in here somewhere," I teased, just as this hoe walked up behind us.

"Um, is there a reason why you over here entertaining this bitch?" Keisha asked, giving off stank face vibes.

I glanced back over my shoulder with an unbothered smirk on my face. However, this bitch ain't have but one more time

to disrespect me like it was all good.

“Who I entertain ain’t ya business, Keisha. Just because you popped outta that cake don’t change the fact that it’s over.”

“I was ya business last night when ya dick was all in my guts.”

“That was last night; it’s a whole new day. I suggest you fall the fuck back before I make yo’ ass shame.”

“I think not. I didn’t come here to jump out of a fucking cake for nothing. We’re not over,” Keisha sassed but couldn’t help shooting me a menacing stare.

“You got a problem?” I warned.

“Who is this lil’ girl? Get yo’ bitch before I turn this muthafuckin’ party out, Dodge!”

I eased off the stool, almost staggering a bit. Felt like I was standing on cloud nine, literally. “Um, I didn’t come here for this but—”

With hands moving faster than the eye could see, I had snatched Keisha by her hair and damn near drug her down to the floor. Dodge quickly intervened, trying to untangle Keisha’s hair out of my hand to turn her loose. Meech rushed over to see what was going on, as Kinsley noticed the commotion and kicked her heels off. She wasted no time getting in a free lick.

“Man, get ya girl!” Dodge let out. “Y’all need to relax. I got this.”

“Chill, babe,” Meech demanded, grabbing Kinsley.

“Turn me loose!” Kinsley yelled. “She apparently asked for this shit!”

“And did!” I assured her, just as Dodge was able to free Keisha from my grips.

“Oh, bitch, this ain’t over!” Keisha hollered. Honestly, I wasn’t doing nothing but holding the bitch down by her hair. Kinsley was the one that had snuck in a lick. I just wanted to

see if she had enough strength to get up without being helped. Just as I figured, she was an ole weak bitch.

“Keisha, you need to leave!” Dodge demanded. “This ain’t the time or the place for your bullshit!” Keisha was definitely in her feelings, and the only way she left was by Dodge aggressively grabbing her by the arm and escorting her ass out the door.

“Y’all good?” Meech asked.

“Yea,” Kinsley answered.

“I’m ‘bout to check on Dodge. I gotta make sure she don’t make him rough her ass up. And don’t y’all get in no more shit,” Meech griped.

“Ok,” Kinsley said, then directed her attention over to me. “You alright, Yomi?”

“Yea, I’m good and, before you start about me doing the most, I was only holding the bitch down. You were the embarrassing one.”

“I know,” Kinsley laughed.

“Hell, at least you hit the bitch,” I laughed. “Let’s find your damn shoes.”

Kinsley chuckled. “They’re right here,” she said, putting them back on. “I’m so embarrassed. I never meant for Meech to see that side of me. Why you had to snatch that girl like that? Them damn anger management classes ain’t helping. I need to report this shit to your psychologist.”

I chuckled, “She started it.”

“I figured that much.”

“Anyway, don’t be shame. Ain’t nothing wrong with letting your nigga know that you don’t play about yours, including him.”

“I’m sure he gets the picture now.” She grinned, looking around to see if anybody was watching us. That lil’ fight must’ve been like old news because people had quickly

resumed their festive activities like the shit hadn't even happened. "I need to go freshen up. You coming?"

"Nah, I didn't even break a nail." I smirked. "I'll be here when you get back."

As Kinsley walked off, Meech and Dodge returned to join the party. Dodge glanced over my way but didn't come back, leaving me a bit confused. Even though I'd said I wasn't ready to fuck with another nigga, it was definitely a lot about him that I liked. I had to wonder if he was turned off because I snatched his bitch up. I didn't know, but I highly doubted that was it. So, was this some of that reverse psychology? That had to be the only explanation for his 180 attitude. I mean, it wasn't long ago when he wanted to lick the cannabis sauce off my fingers. Now, he was mingling like I wasn't even here. I grabbed another drink and shrugged it off. I was there to have a good time, and that catty bullshit wasn't going to ruin my day. As long as Kinsley was linked to Meech, it was easy access for me to get to Dodge, and I was going to take full advantage of every opportunity that came my way.

Lying on my stomach across the bed with tears in my eyes, I re-watched a video of Loyal and his new boo over in Paris, seemingly having a lovely time. It had been at least two months since I had found out that he had moved on and, for some reason, it still bothered me. Getting over him was proving to be a little more difficult than I thought. On top of that, Dodge had been dodging my ass like I had the cooties or something, and that shit was only hardening my heart even more. He was the only other nigga that I had interest in, and if he would just act right, I would definitely get over Loyal.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand as I shut down my Samsung Galaxy Tablet. I had already watched the video at least five times back-to-back. I didn't understand how he could move on so easily and not think about me. There was a time when he'd say I was Bonnie to his Clyde. We were so close, even though it felt like the world was against us. We talked about marriage and raising a family. We were supposed to be living the dream, together. Yet, now, I was non-existent to him. He hadn't even attempted to reach out through social media. To be honest, I'd been waiting for some type of closure, because there was none. At least then I'd know why he did what he did. I mean, I got no explanation, no face-to-face break-up. Hell, he could've even sent my ass a text message. But, what I got was the humiliation of a break-up on Facebook, and that shit hurt worse than anybody around me knew.

As I sat up in the bed, back pressed against the headboard, I thought about college. It was Friday night, and I was starting next Monday. I only had a week left to get myself together. Luckily, I would be going to Georgia State University. It was only a thirty-five-minute ride, which meant that I would still be staying home. Honestly, it made it a lil' easier for me to process this new journey in my life. I didn't think I could go off too far from home and still maintain without the support of my mama and Kinsley.

As I watched *Wild 'N Out* hosted by Nick Cannon in hopes of laughing a little bit, I began to doze off. Just when sleep had gotten a tad bit deep, my cell phone rang, startling me. I glanced down to see that it was Kinsley calling me on Duo.

"Hello," I answered in a dry tone.

"Hello? Bitch, wake up!"

"Girl, I just dozed off. Aren't you supposed to be working? Why you bugging me, and on video chat at that?"

"Get the crust out your eyes and look." She flipped the camera around as I batted my eyes, trying to shake off the sleep. I squinted. "What am I supposed to be looking at? All I see is a lot of people walking around with all that loud ass music playing in the background."

"Girl, look," she urged, zooming in the camera. "You see him?"

My heart dropped the minute I spotted Dodge. I hadn't seen or heard from that nigga in two weeks.

"You see him, bitch?" she asked, flipping the camera back to her face.

"Yes, bitch, I see him. Why you calling me for that? He ain't stun me and I ain't stun him."

"Well, you might change your mind about that, because he just asked about you."

My eyes lit up, but I played it off. "He ain't been asking about me."

“Girl, stop! You know you happy to hear that he’s asking now,” she joked with laughter.

“I ain’t laughing, heffa,” I sassed, with a serious face. “He need not think I’m gonna be running behind his ass. I know that. He has had a whole two weeks since his birthday to hit me up. I know I didn’t exactly give him my number but, if he really wanted it, he could’ve gotten it. Hell, you still talk to Meech every day.”

“Duh, that’s my man now.”

“Duh, why you think I said that? Dumb ass.”

Kinsley rolled her eyes. “Hush, smart ass. So, you don’t wanna come out?”

I frowned. “What you mean?”

“He said he wanted you to come out tonight. And well, Auntie is on third shift this week, so you can definitely come if you want to.”

“Come where?”

“To the club, crazy girl.”

“You know security tight in that bitch. You even said it. They be checking IDs heavy in that joint.”

“Girl, don’t worry about that. If that nigga wants you to come here, trust me, he can get you in.”

I sat debating if I wanted to entertain this nigga or if I wanted to roll over and take my ass back to sleep.

“What you gone do? I got a bad outfit I just bought laying across my bed. You can wear it. All you have to do is call an Uber and *bring dat ass here*,” she teased in her DC Young Fly tone.

I grinned with a shake of the head. I really wanted to see Dodge more than he knew, but—

“Biiiiitch, come on. I gotta get back to work. This bag is calling me!”

“Let me see him one more time.”

“Girl, shit!” she groaned, flipping the camera back around.

I smiled, as I watched his sexy ass mingling with the fellas and sipping on his drink. He had on a black, red, and white limited edition, retro fit Michael Vick jersey and some black jean, cut-up shorts. When I tell you, I visioned it like I was standing right there by that nigga, I mean! His gold Cuban-link chain with the matching bracelet looked like expensive pieces that gleamed in the dance lights against his deep-brown, caramel skin. I could see his pretty white teeth, as he laughed at something the guys were saying. He looked like he was in a happy place, a place I needed to be in.

“Ok, time’s up! What you gone do?” Kinsley questioned, flipping the camera back on herself.

“I’m taking my ass back to sleep,” I told her.

Kinsley frowned. “You for real?”

“Hell yea. I’m not about to be nan nother nigga’s doormat. He ain’t about to be treating me like shit when he wants to, then turn around and think I’m gonna come just because he wants me to. I ain’t that bitch.”

“Whew, chile. A lot of girls could learn a thing or two from you. I’m having a proud moment here. I don’t blame you. Go on back to sleep, Sus. I’m gonna get a kick outta telling this nigga you turned his ass down. I bet he be all over dat ass then.”

“And if he don’t, I don’t care,” I sassed. “Have a good night. Love you,” I said and, before she could respond, I ended the call. Once off the phone, I crawled under the covers with a smile on my face. I couldn’t believe how well I had resisted temptation. Lord knows I wanted to see his sexy ass some kind of bad, but standing my ground felt better. How dare him not acknowledge me for two weeks? It was bad enough that I left his party without even getting a *goodbye* or a *nice to meet you*. But now, he wanted to see me? Boy, bye! I don’t know what planet these niggas had come from, but they could take their asses right on back. I surely wasn’t the one or the muthafuckin’ two, and he was gon’ learn today! I tossed and

turned for about twenty minutes and then, I peacefully fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up to Kinsley blowing her orange juice breath up my nostril. I cracked my eyes and looked right in her face. “Bitch, what you doing?”

She laughed, sipping from her glass of orange juice. “Get up, bitch! Auntie cooked breakfast.”

“She must be in a joyful mood,” I groggily said while wiping the crust out the corner of my eyes. “Damn, that sleep was good as hell.”

“I can tell. I been blowing in your face for the last three minutes.”

“I can tell, because a bitch started dreaming that I was peeling a Halo and was just about to eat it.”

Kinsley bust out laughing. “I’m sick of you.”

“Yea right.” I grinned. “How was your night?” I asked while climbing out of bed.

“It was fun. I made over three thousand in tips. It was definitely a poppin’ night!”

“Damn, that was good.”

“I ended up in the VIP section serving Meech and his crew. You know Meech was going to make sure they tipped me good. But, check this, Apple serviced G Herbo and his crew while Donk serviced Lil’ Baby and his crew. Girl, I know their tips were more than mine because everybody seemed to be turnt the fuck up.”

“Wow, I should’ve come out last night.”

“I’m glad you didn’t, though, because no man should think you’re somebody they can walk over. Plus, I told him that you said you wasn’t coming, and he first made a joke like, *the baby can’t get out the house?*”

I busted out laughing. “I know that nigga didn’t!”

“Yes, he did, Sus. I told his ass you’re free to come and go as you please, but you chose to stay in.”

“Good for his ass. What did he say to that?”

“He said, *dat’s wassup*. The nigga started back partying like it didn’t faze him one bit. Plus, the Keisha chick showed up.”

“He back with her? Because what I heard at his party was that they had broken up, and he told her ass that.”

“I remember you telling me that. But, hey, I don’t believe they’re back together because she sat in a booth across from theirs. They watched each other all night, but she seemed more interested in what he was doing than him being concerned about her ass. Him watching her was more of being aggravated because she was really doing the most.”

“Meaning?”

“From what I could tell, she was all up in different niggas’ faces tryna make him jealous.”

I rolled my eyes. “She definitely seems like the type.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you didn’t come because that would’ve been added, unnecessary trouble, and Lord knows I love my job.”

“Right. That hoe is weak anyway. I don’t even wanna waste any more time on her ass.” We laughed. “Damn, you made three thousand in one night?”

“Girl, the money is good. That’s why I work faithfully. It ain’t like that every night I go, but it all adds up by the end of the week. No complaints here.”

“See, that’s why I need a job there. I gotta get a car. I ain’t going to be doing this Uber thing back and forth to school forever. Fuck that. I don’t like other people’s driving anyway.”

“I feel you.”

“Yomi and Kinsley! Come eat before this food gets cold!” my mama called out.

“I forgot you said Ma cooked. Tell her I’m gonna wash up right quick and I’m coming.”

“Will do,” Kinsley replied. She headed down the hall towards the kitchen, and I headed in the bathroom across from my bedroom. As I washed my face and brushed my teeth, thoughts of Dodge crossed my mind. In a way, I hated not going to see him, but I was glad I didn’t. I didn’t know where things would go from here but, if he really wanted to see me, his efforts had better be more than going through my cousin. He needed to get at me himself. Otherwise, it wasn’t going to happen.

We sat at the table eating the eggs, grits, pancakes, and bacon that was cooked by Ma. It was delicious. She’d been working so much these past few months that we hardly got time to see her, let alone to sit down to eat a good home-cooked meal that she prepared.

“Ma, thanks for breakfast. It feels good to have us sitting here together. It almost feels like none of us are home at the same time. If we are, we’re usually ducked off in our own space—”

“Doing our own thangs,” Kinsley cut in.

“I agree,” my mama said with a nod of the head as she sipped her hot coffee. “I’m glad to have my girls at one table too. I’ve missed y’all.”

“We missed you too,” I commented, chewing my food.

“Speaking of missing each other, I saw Glenda yesterday on my way to work.”

I looked over at Kinsley, as she continued eating her food like she didn’t hear a word Mama had said. “You heard Mama?”

“Yea.”

“Well, don’t you wanna know how Auntie is doing?” I asked.

“Do your auntie wanna know how I am doing? After all, I am her only child.”

“Well—” I started, but Mama cut me off.

“She looks good,” she informed us.

“Oh really? I wonder for how long?” Kinsley commented, with a slick roll of the eyes. “Can we not discuss her during a bonding moment that I’m having with you and Yomi, please?”

“Ok, we won’t discuss her.” Mama nodded. It was times like this that I felt she should push the issue more, but Mama always tried her best to shield Kinsley from anything that could potentially hurt her feelings. That definitely included talking about Aunt Glenda.

“So, since we’re changing the subject. I’m gonna start putting in some applications. I know since I’ll be in school during the day, that whatever I get will be at night. I’m not going to say all night, but at least part time,” I said while softly kicking Kinsley under the table. “I need a car because I’m tired of using Uber. It’s annoying having to wait around for them to come and I don’t trust everybody’s driving.”

“I agree. Come, let me show you something.” Mama stood up from the table. “Come on, Kin,” she said as she headed for the front door. Kinsley and I followed behind her. Once she opened the door, she let out an excited shriek. “Surprise!”

“Omg! Is this for me?” I asked, staring at the car with a red ribbon on the hood.

“Yes, it’s for you, baby. I’m proud of you for going to college, and I definitely don’t want you waiting around for a ride to and from there.”

“Awww, shucks!” I let out with tears in my eyes.

“That’s why I’ve been working so hard. I got you a cash car, so neither of us have to make payments. I got you on my insurance, so you won’t have to worry about that either.”

“Wow, Auntie, you got me about to cry and it’s not even my car.”

Mama smiled, as I ran over to the car. “Go ahead. The key is inside. It’s a 2012 Honda Accord. It’s in great condition. It only had one owner, an older woman with all the service papers in the glove compartment. It has brand-new tires, no accidents and, ironically, she put in a new motor and transmission because she knew she was about to put it on the

market. Her son is actually a mechanic that owns a shop locally. So, he, of course, made sure the car was in tip-top, almost new condition.”

“So, do you know the lady, Auntie?”

“Yes, I worked with her, but she retired about two weeks ago.”

“Awww, well, that was nice of her to sell the car to you.”

“I know, but I needed to take on another job so that I could pay cash for it,” she responded. “I’m glad I did because the smile on Yomi’s face makes it all worth it.”

“So, are you still going to work your night-shift job?”

“Yea, but not too much longer. I just love the money,” Mama replied.

After checking out my new ride, I jumped out to hug my mama. She was the best and always looked out for me. If it wasn’t for her, I didn’t know where I’d be.

“Thank you so much, Maaa!!” I yelled while kissing on her. “You’re the best mama I ever had.”

“I’m the only mama you ever had.” She grinned, hugging me back. “Anything for you, baby.”

“Girl, you gotta take me for a spin in this whip,” Kinsley excitedly said.

“You ready?” I asked.

“Yep, you already know it. Auntie, we’ll be right back.”

“Ok, Yomi, drive safe.”

“Will do, Ma,” I said, as we jumped in the car to drive around the neighborhood.

It took a lil’ longer to get back to the house being that we stopped by the store so Kinsley could get a cigar. Even though she couldn’t smoke in my car, I was sure we’d jump in hers later and fire up the good shit. I was in a fantastic mood. My mama had really made my day. I honestly didn’t think the day could no better until my cell phone alerted me of a text

message. I glanced down at the display screen at a number I didn't recognize. Once opening the message, I smiled.

*Been thinking about you a lot since my birthday party.
Would like to see you soon. DODGE*

DODGE GAMBLE

I picked up my iPhone and scrolled through my messages. I went back to read the message that I'd sent Kiyomi about two hours earlier. For shawty to be only eighteen, she was definitely playing on a level of being a much older lady.

Been thinking about you a lot since my birthday party. Would like to see you soon. DODGE

Oh yea? I think we can make that happen... Not sure exactly when but soon. YOMI

Shawty hit me with a response that left a nigga not knowing what to say back. What the hell she meant by that? I thought she would've been excited to see a nigga ASAP. I wasn't used to pursuing. I was always the one being pursued. Plus, it was something about this thing that had me not knowing if I should go there or not with her. I mean, it wasn't no lie about younger women acting a lil' cray cray or, shall I say, quick to fall in love. The last thing I needed was more drama in my life. Hell, Keisha was more than enough of that by her damn self. But it was something about her. She was mysterious and quite luring. She had a vibe like no female I'd been around, and I'd been around limitless females. It was something about the way she carried herself, sitting off to herself at the bar and in her own world like she didn't need nobody, not even friends. On top of that, she was bad as fuck, sexy as hell, and them tiger stripes looked like they were

painted on her fat ass. I still couldn't believe she was just a baby. Shit had me feeling like I was violating.

“What you over there thinking about?”

I glanced over to my right and shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Oh, it's something or somebody. You ain't gotta lie to kick it, *Craig*,” she joked, but I knew she was dead serious.

“Keisha, do you ever get tired of hearing yo'self talk?”

“Nope,” she sassed back. “I've known you since I was in middle school and been fucking you since. I know when you're thinking about some bitch.”

“Apparently, you don't know me because I ain't thinking about a bitch.”

Keisha leaned up on her elbow, staring me in the face. “If you're gonna keep fucking me, you definitely have to put a ring on it soon,” she said, dangling that lil' po' ass finger in my face.

“I didn't even wanna fuck you. You keep coming around me, trying to make yourself seen or known. I know you. My homeys know you. You ain't gotta be doing all that to get my attention.”

“Doing all what? Having a conversation with another nigga?”

“You do the most. You weren't just talking to the nigga. You were sitting in his lap, whispering bullshit in his ear. Laughing over the music—like I said, doing the damn most.”

“You jelly?”

“Not the least bit.”

“I couldn't tell by the way you snatched me out of his car.”

I frowned with a shake of the head. It was true; I did snatch her ass out of his car. “That's because you were drunk as fuck and didn't even know that nigga. Yo' dumb ass homegirls just gon' let you ride the fuck off in the heat of the night and not say a word. Y'all ain't got no rules?”

“Rules?”

“Yea, like *we* supposed to watch out for each other. *We* won’t let our homegirl jump in the car with a fucking stranger. *We* won’t get drunk at the club because apparently, none of us know how to have each other’s back. Like, those kinda rules. You hang with the sloppiest bitches walking this earth. If it wasn’t for me, yo’ ass would probably be somewhere with your legs cocked wide open, spit dripping from yo’ mouth, and waking up to realize that you’ve been date raped or something worse.”

“That nigga wasn’t the type.”

“Are you listening to yo’self? You sound like a real dummy. You didn’t know that nigga. Hell, I didn’t even know him, and I’d like to think I know just about everybody.”

“You don’t,” she uttered with a slick roll of the eyes.

“That’s besides the fucking point, Keisha!” I said, sitting up on the side of the bed. I grabbed my shorts and started putting my clothes on.

“So, now you just gon’ leave?”

“I had no intentions of staying anyway.”

“You should’ve been a fucking track star because all you do is run when you don’t wanna face the music!”

“What music? Talking about this lame ass *Titanic* soundtrack with the violins playing in the background? Fuck that music,” I griped, grabbing my keys off the nightstand. “If you wanna make a mockery of yourself, be my guest. I won’t stop yo’ delusional ass no more.”

“You only stopped me from going because I looked damn good, and you wanted to fuck!”

“First of all, I can fuck any woman I wanna fuck at any given time. Don’t flatter yo’self. By the way, if I hadn’t stopped you, were you gonna fuck that nigga?”

“That nigga was just taking me home. That’s all. I was only doing that to make you jealous. I had no desire to fuck him. Buuuut, you stepped in and saved me, so that tells me a

lot. You still care and you still love me. You just don't wanna put a ring on it. I can respect that, but you gotta come to terms with this shit. Ain't nobody gon' love you like I do. Ain't nobody gon' suck the nut out yo' dick and then swallow it like I do."

"It's plenty bitches do that—"

"Hush the fuck up. I'm talkin' 'bout me, nigga. Ain't but one of me."

"Thank God," I irritably mumbled. "He knew exactly what he was doing when he made one of you."

"Stop yo' bullshit, Dodge. Just put yo' pride aside and give me my ring. I've been around long enough! I deserve the title!"

"Do you think this is just about a ring? You are 'bout as slow as they come! Did you forget that just a month ago, you lied to me for six months like you were pregnant, trying to get me to marry you? And at the fucking baby shower is when yo' cousin bust yo' dumb ass out because she was hard up to ride this dick, which I might add the ride was much better than yours," I confessed to really get under her skin.

"So, now, you admit to fucking her?"

"She fucked me. I just laid there."

"So, you did fuck her?!" she yelled, jumping up in my face.

"Yea, I been fucking her for the past three months. I been knowing you weren't pregnant. I just went along for the ride. Why you think I ain't pay for shit when you had that fake ass baby shower? It was me that told yo' cousin to bust yo' ass out in front of all dem people. You needed to learn a lesson because I'm starting to believe you're a pathological liar. Did you really have a miscarriage two years ago or even the year before that? Anytime I'm over yo' ass, you come up with some lame ass shit to make it seem like we belong together. It's at this point I've realized that we don't. At first, I was thinking that maybe you just loved me that much and you'd do anything to prove it. Like, fighting bitches and showing yo'

ass whether we're alone or in public. But now, I'm starting to think you're a lil' crazy, and I'm talking about coo-coo crazy."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"How the fuck else am I supposed to talk to you? You're a liar that do the fucking most to get what you want and I'm over it!"

"I'll never give up on us."

"You might as well. This shit is over with. I mean it this time," I told her as I headed for the door. I didn't even look back. I just wanted to get the hell out of there and the sooner, the better.

Once in the car, I sat for a few minutes trying to get my mind right. I began rolling a blunt to smoke on the way over to the mansion. Thoughts of the past twelve years with Keisha started to flood my memories. I knew twelve years sounded like a long ass time, but the math wasn't quite that simple. It was definitely twelve years off and on. The runs during our ons weren't all bad, but the bad when we were off stood out more than a hot-red outfit at an all-white party. Keisha's life wasn't the best growing up, and neither was mine. I'd lived in poor, income-based Housing Authority apartments. I nicknamed the place Project Ville. My family and I had been there about four years prior to Keisha and her family moving in right upstairs above our apartment.

Long story short, we met, became fast friends, and began fucking in less than a week of knowing each other. She was just closing out her middle school year and going into the 9th grade, whereas I'd just graduated the 9th grade and was headed to the 10th. Needless to say, we had a lot in common and that's what kept us grounded. However, we also had a lot of differences, which kept us apart.

Keisha had demons that seemed to follow her and, honestly, it was the same demons in my life that I was trying to get away from. A part of me felt bad for the struggles that she'd gone through. Losing her mom in a drive-by shooting left her father in a fucked-up headspace. He wasn't the least bit prepared to take care of two daughters by himself. That was

only part of what landed them in Project Ville. It seemed like they had moved from one shitty ass neighborhood to another. The move may not have been any better, but at least they'd gotten away from the place that took her mom's life.

I, on the other hand, knew very little about my dad. From what I gathered, he was a pimp with a lot of hoes that worked for him. My mom being his main bitch, so the streets say. I was a middle child with a baby sister six years younger than me and a big brother that was two years older. Our grandmother raised us from birth, each one of us, because my mom was too busy running around doing whatever made her happy. She was a wild one with a bubbly personality and stayed living life like it was golden. One day she popped in with gifts, visited for a couple of hours, then up and left. Unfortunately, that was the last time we laid eyes on her because she never came back. For all I knew, she could've been dead somewhere. But, Granny never gave up hope. She just couldn't. I was sure that was the main reason why she took us in and loved us like we were her own. She did what she could to try and find her daughter, even with the police involved, but there were never any solid leads that anybody could provide us. Eventually, we just learned to live without her, at least I did anyway.

Due to hardship and wanting more out of life, I shadowed my brother and learned to hustle. By the time I was in the 11th grade, I was the go-to guy at school for all needs weed. I even had teachers underhandedly buying from me. Everybody wanted to get high. I learned the streets pretty well and kept the same circle, with Meech being my right-hand. We ran the streets and grinded like no other. I stayed in the lane that paid me, as my brother graduated to cocaine and pills. For years, we were sitting on top of the world and lived a good life, until almost two years ago when I got that unsettling text message that changed everything around me. Before pulling off, I scrolled through my saved messages just to read those two texts again. I did this at least once a day, having embedded the shit in my head.

I need you to come to this location ASAP! Get the duffle bag off the floor in the back seat and leave ASAP! Make

sure you're alone, keep your eye on your surroundings, and stay outta sight, outta mind. Big D.

I flashed back to later that night as I sat worried, not knowing what to do after the scene I'd pulled up on. Doing as my brother had told me, I quickly grabbed the bag and left. A couple of hours passed before he messaged again.

I've gotten myself in a real jam lil' bro. To be honest, I don't know what the fuck is going on. If I make it out of this situation alive, I'll have a story to tell you. Pray for me. Please, keep yo' head up and continue to live life like it's golden. You can relax and not hustle as hard. However, DO NOT touch what's in the bag for at least a year. Be careful and only fuck with Meech the long way. Everybody else don't need to fully know your moves or what you have going on, but always make sure your crew stays loyal no matter what. Make sure Rosco knows I love him, and he'll forever be my right hand. He still has work, which I'm sure he'll continue to move, but once that runs out make sure he's paid well, so that he can do what needs to be done. Put him in position, and you know what I mean.

Listen, make smart moves so you're not in the streets much longer. That ain't a place for you. Take care of Granny and Sha. Get them outta that place. Remind them often that I love 'em & you betta always know that I love you too. Until we see each other again. Big D.

Reminiscing about my brother and his whereabouts had consumed me. I couldn't think straight for a long time. Missing him left a void in my heart that would probably never heal. I was still torn till this day, but I managed and did as he had asked. I only unzipped the bag once to see what was in it and then hid it in a safe location. A little over a year later, I decided it was time for me to put my hands on it again. I'd had a whole year to think about what I'd do with all of its contents. I called Meech to my lil' honeycomb hide-out since he was privy to knowing what had happened a year prior.

We sat in the living room of the small two-bedroom house, and, for a second time, I opened the large ass duffle bag to reveal what was inside of it. We counted out one-hundred and

ninety-five thousand dollars, along with sixteen bricks. I knew it was a lot in there, but I didn't know it was that much. My brother had hit a sweet lick, and even though I had my thoughts as to how it all went down, only he really knew. I didn't know what happened to him, but I did know he wouldn't have just left like that and never came back. So, that left us all to believe what we dreaded. None of us had been the same since, even though I think it took a much bigger toll on Granny. It was definitely memories that she relived from the pain of losing our mother in a similar way. Till this day, she had yet to allow us to have a vigil or anything for closure. In her heart, as long as we never took those grieving steps of planning a memorial, someday, they'd come back. She held strong to that faith, and because of her, I did too.

I knew from the day Dameon went missing that I had to fully step up and take care of Granny and Sha. So, the first thing me and Meech did was slow grind the sixteen bricks. We didn't want to raise any eyebrows or make niggas think we had it like that. Even our circle knew that we were making money, but it wasn't like we weren't making money before. We included them in our grind because we wanted to make sure that they could eat too. Plus, what good was having a crew if there was no loyalty set in stone? We made sure they'd forever be loyal to us, if nothing else. Now, what they did outside of what was given was on them. From there, I knew I had to get out the streets once I'd gone through the sixteen bricks. So, I invested a lot of money into crypto currency, and it had been paying off ever since. I still lived low-key, more like I got it but, then again, I don't for those that I didn't need in my business. Only Meech knew what my bank account really looked like. But Meech was on a different path with a relentless grind, and I must say that even though it's an undeniably smooth come-up, that fraud shit I ain't into.



I walked up to the mansion doors, passing the clean-up crew that was hired to make sure the modest home stayed immaculate. They were on their way out, as I made my way in.

“Yooooo!” I called out once inside the house.

“We in here!” Meech called out. I headed in the direction of his voice, entering the huge entertainment room of the open-floor design of the house.

“Wassup, guys?” I said, looking around the room to see Cobra, Mike, Boss Hog, and Jeff. They spoke but were busy feeding their faces.

“Just in time,” Rosco said, handing me a plate of pancakes, sausage, and bacon. He was definitely the jack of all trades in our circle. He made sure we were always fed and looked after, whatever that consisted of.

I grabbed the plate, feeling hungry as hell. “Preciate this, cuz.”

“You know I got ya fa life.” Rosco nodded.

“I know,” I uttered.

Granny had two daughters, Dawn and Deana. Rosco was Deana’s oldest son. Originally, Rosco was Dameon’s right-hand man. They had an unbreakable bond, especially being that they were born on the same day. But when Dameon went missing, I put Rosco in position to handle business like he did for Dameon. That also included helping me watch over the crew and making sure they were straight as well. It gave him a greater purpose in our circle, one that made him feel needed. He smoked and drank a lot of his sorrows away, but I think we all did something to help ease the pain of losing Dameon in such an untimely way.

“Aye, bruh, just relax. We ‘bout to get this thing started,” Meech said.

“What thing? Y’all having a meeting?” I pondered while getting my grub on.

“Yea, we moving in another direction with these funds. We ran up a check off these PPP loans.”

Jeff nodded with a bit of laughter. “Covid couldn’t have come at a better time. Shit, we racked up on unemployment deposits too.”

“Hell yea,” Boss Hog uttered, in between bites.

“And now, they’re cracking down on the shit. Luckily, we don’t have any ties back to us. We just knew the man behind the plan, provided him with names and information—”

“And he did the rest,” Jeff cut in. “It be dem white-collar muthafuckas that do that type of shit all the time anyway. We just got in at the right time and came out with a nice chunk of money.”

“Definitely did that,” Meech agreed. “And now on to better shit.”

The doorbell rang, as I stopped chewing to look up. “You expecting company?”

“Yea, we’re expecting company,” Meech replied, looking around at the guys. Rosco wasted no time going to the door. In walked Donk, Apple, and Kinsley.

“Hey y’all,” Kinsley spoke as she gave Meech a kiss on the lips.

“Bring dat fat ass over here,” Boss Hog instructed with a smile. Donk wasted no time heading in his direction and placing her arms around his neck.

Apple looked around the room. “Wassup y’all? Now, let’s talk about this get-rich scheme that y’all got in mind.”

“Y’all?” I pondered, not wanting nothing to do with this shit.

“Chill, bruh.” Meech grinned. “Here’s the deal. I’ve been going to Club Truth for a long time and it’s a lot of niggas coming in and out, niggas with a lot of money. Y’all three are in the right positions to get shit done and make a nice cut of the profits.”

“Okaaaaay,” Kinsley uttered with a bit of hesitation in her tone.

“And where are you going with this?” Apple pondered.

“When these money-making niggas hit y’all VIP booths, all I need y’all to do is get a picture of their bank cards and

send ‘em to me. We’ll do the rest.”

“So, it’s credit card fraud? That’s what this is about? Credit card fraud—”

“Yea, and it will never be traced back to y’all. Never,” Meech assured them.

“You make that sound so easy,” Apple said.

“It is,” Donk cut in. “We do have access to their shit.”

“Yea, but—”

“Look, if you don’t want no parts of this, just say it now and you can leave. No hard feelings whatsoever,” Meech cut in, looking at all three of them.

“I’m in,” Donk quickly chimed in.

“Well, I don’t want no smoke or nothing, but me too.” Apple nodded. “I like expensive shit, so this will work out perfect for me.”

Kinsley looked at Meech and, with a smile, she said, “I’m in. Let’s do this.”

Meech smiled from ear to ear. “Yea, let’s do this.”

I stood to my feet. “I’m gonna head on up to the room. I’m sleepy as fuck.”

“Nigga, it’s two o’clock in the afternoon. You ain’t rested up?”

“Hell nawl,” I responded.

“Keisha put that pussy on him,” Rosco joked, causing everybody to laugh. I looked over at Kinsley; I was glad she wasn’t even looking my way.

“Nah, it wasn’t like that.” I grinned.

“A’ight, we believe you,” Meech joked. “Nah, but seriously, get ya rest. We’ll holla when you come back down.”

I simply nodded and walked out. I left them to tend to their business. As I got halfway up the stairs, my cell phone alerted me of an incoming text message. I pulled it out my pocket and glanced down at it. With a smile on my face, I read the text.

How soon can we link? YOMI

Not soon enough. DODGE

Can you pick me up in an hour or so? YOMI

Send me the address. DODGE

Once the address came through, I jetted up the stairs and headed for the shower. It felt good to be exploring something new, something different. I didn't know where this was going, but I sure as hell hoped it would be farther than the stars and the moon.

“**W**here you think you’re going?”

“Out for a little bit. Is that ok with you? I thought I was off punishment by now, right?” I asked, as I looked back at Mama standing in my doorway as I got dressed.

“I can’t hold you in the house forever. I wish I could, but life don’t exactly work like that.”

“Thank God,” I uttered.

“Just be careful while you’re out and don’t be speeding, because that insurance is still in my name.”

“I’m not driving. I’m riding with someone,” I told her.

“Oh, are you? Who, may I ask?”

“It’s a boy,” I said with a smile.

“Oh, my goodness. How long have you known him?”

“For a while,” I sort of lied. “He’s been wanting to take me out to eat, so I decided to take him up on that offer.”

“A boy from school?”

“Not really, not from my school anyway.”

“Where’d you meet him?”

“Sheesh, Mama.”

“I wanna know these things, especially being that I’m a bit overprotective and that you just recently lost your mind over a

boy.”

“I didn’t lose my mind,” I responded with a slick roll of the eyes. “And I met him at school, the day we were there looking around.”

“So, he will be going to the same college as you?”

“No, he was there with his sister,” I lied. If I were honest about where I’d met him, she would be pitching a fit. So, I decided to keep that to myself.

“Is he older than this sister or younger?”

“He’s older, Mamaaaa.”

“Ok, as long as he’s not that much older. You know how I feel about you dating outside of your league or age range. Older men don’t want nothing but one thing.”

“Seems like the young ones are in that same league,” I shot back.

“Touché,” she agreed with soft laughter. “It’s good to see you smiling again.”

“It’s good to be smiling again,” I said, putting on my neon orange, tie-dye maxi dress from Fashion Nova. I slipped on my clear slides with the orange bottom that matched my dress.

“You’re looking cute.”

“Thanks, Ma,” I responded. “Where is Kinsley, still napping?” I asked.

“No, she headed out while you were in the shower. Said she had some business to tend to.”

“She always got business to tend to,” I commented while pulling my real hair up in a ponytail. “I told her she should see my therapist. I think that’ll help her with some of her aggression. She pretends like nothing is wrong and, for the most part, she’s definitely able to cover it up. But Kin is dealing with a lot of personal things.”

“I agree. I’ve always said that, but Kinsley is a bit bullheaded. Y’all definitely have that in common. Hers comes from not having a mother in her life and a sometimey father

that only shows up when he wants something. Yours comes from not having your bald-head ass daddy around.”

I grinned a little. “I don’t need his bald-head tail around me. I got you.”

“Girl, you crazy.”

“I get it from you.”

“Don’t put that lie on me,” she laughed.

“So, how did Auntie look when you saw her? I mean, be honest.”

“She looked ok. She asked about Kin and told me to tell her that she loved and missed her, but you know that’s a touchy subject. That’s why I didn’t mention that part.”

“Do she look clean?”

“She looks like she’s trying, I guess. I know her, so I know she’s still using but she’s a functioning user.”

“I love her, but I hate how she’s done Kinsley. Luckily, you took her in or no telling where she’d be. The last thing she wanted was for Grandma and Grandpa to take her in.”

Nicole grinned. “That wouldn’t have worked anyway. They’re so damn strict. I hate to say it, but that’s part of the reason why Glenda turned to drugs and alcohol in the first place.”

“They say it be the preacher’s kids that act out the most. What kinda acting out did you do?” I asked, giving her a playful side-eye.

“Girl, finish getting yourself together and stay outta grown folks business,” she laughed and walked out. I knew how to get rid of her talking ass.

As I stood in the mirror applying a lil’ light touch of make-up on my face, thoughts of Dodge flooded my mind. I didn’t know what it was, but his sexy ass had my attention. A part of me wanted to hold out longer with my response when he had initially hit me up, but my fingers had a mind of their own. That had to be my heart typing that shit because my head

knew better. Once I'd applied my make-up, I grabbed my Coach purse and headed up front to wait for him to pull up. Going down the hall, I spotted my mama lying across her bed flipping through the channels on the TV. *Good*, I thought. Hopefully, she'd still be in there by the time Dodge came, that way she wouldn't be trying to come outside so I could introduce her. Trust, she was nosey like that. Her parental skills definitely resembled some of her parents' tactics in keeping a close eye on me.

I sat on the sofa with Kinsley on my mind. I loved my cousin wholeheartedly. Even though she was four years older than me, we were always tight. Growing up, she was like the big sister I never had. It was just me and her. I could remember the nights she'd stay with us, being that Aunt Glenda was out on one of her drug sprees. She'd cry herself to sleep with me lying next to her wishing I could take the pain away. All she ever wanted was her mama to be there for her like mine was for me. I guess that part of life just wasn't in the cards for her. So, Mama stepped up and finally got custody of her so that Glenda could do as she pleased without it costing any more of Kinsley's time or feelings.

Where you at? YOMI

Chilling with Meech. What you doing? KINSLEY

Nothing at the moment. YOMI

I saw yo' boy earlier. KINSLEY

Where at? YOMI

Over here at the mansion where they threw the birthday party at. KINSLEY

Oh, ok. Is that his crib? YOMI

Nah, I think it's just a crib that they're renting for the moment so they can all be under the same roof. KINSLEY

That's weird, but ok. I guess if you got it like that. YOMI

Yea well, they definitely got it like that. KINSLEY

I can tell. So, do you know where he got my number from? YOMI

He asked Meech to get it from me. KINSLEY

So, why were you acting all surprised when I told you he text me? YOMI

Because I wasn't supposed to tell you. KINSLEY

So it's like that? YOMI

Bitch, stop it. You know I was gonna tell you. You were so excited anyway. You didn't care where he got it from. KINSLEY

You right! Lol Well, he's coming to pick me up in a little while. I'm so nervous. YOMI

Oh, ok. I see y'all wasted no time. KINSLEY

No time like the present. YOMI

I know that's right! Well, have fun and keep Auntie out ya business. You know how she is. KINSLEY

I know. I'll keep you posted. Anyway, I still wanna get a job working with you. I know it's some kind of strings that can be pulled for me. YOMI

Giiiiirrrrl. KINSLEY

Don't girl me. You just said that Dodge could get me in even though security was tight, so I know it's something that can be done. YOMI

We not talking about this right now. Meech is eating my pussy anyway. KINSLEY

Can't be too good if you texting me. Lol. YOMI

That's why I'm 'bout to go. Nigga got this phone slapping me all in the face. LOL. KINSLEY

Ewww, bye slut! YOMI

Byeeee! Lol. KINSLEY

I stood up, laughing to myself because Kinsley was so wrong for telling me that she was getting her hot box slurped on while texting me. If nothing else, she was definitely a hoe at best. I walked in the kitchen to fix some water. For some reason, I was nervous as hell. It had been a couple of weeks

since I'd laid eyes on Dodge. What if he didn't look the same? What if it was the liquor that made me think he was much finer than he actually might be? What the fuck if?! The butterflies started churning in my stomach the minute my cell alerted me of an incoming text message. I looked down at my phone to see that it was from Dodge. "Oh boy," I uttered, holding my stomach.

Outside. DODGE

I peeled back the kitchen curtain a little to see what he was driving. It looked like a 2007 Monte Carlo. I only knew those cars because Mama had a white one when I was in middle school. His was jet black, tinted out, and clean as hell. I headed back in the living room, peeking down the hall.

"I'll be back, Mama." Before she could answer, get up, or try to be nosey, I grabbed my purse and headed for the front door. I walked outside, not really wanting to look at the car because I couldn't see inside it, plus a fine sister like me had to walk with my head held high. I could hear the car doors unlock just as I touched the latch to get in. Once in the car, I looked over at him and couldn't help but smile. "Hey."

"Wassup," he said with a slight smile back. The nigga was still everything, even through sober eyes!

"Nothing much. Took you long enough to reach out."

"So, you were waiting on me?"

"Yea," I responded, looking in his luring brown eyes.

"Oh, I didn't know that," he teased. "You smell good."

"Thanks."

"You look good too."

I blushed. "Thanks."

"Who is that standing in the doorway?"

"That's my mama. Let's go before she brings her nosey tail outside," I acknowledged, as he chuckled a little.

"Where to?"

“Hell, I don’t know. Just drive.” Dodge backed out of the driveway, as I waved at Ma with a smile on my face. She waved back, but I knew she was feeling some type of way that I didn’t introduce my ride. Oh well, she’d be alright. “Is this your car?”

“Yea.”

“It’s nice as hell and smells new.”

“These are new seats I had installed. Even though it’s an old car, it’s restored like new, even under the hood.”

“That must’ve cost a lot. Why not get a new car?”

“Because I like being low-key. I don’t have to ride around in a new car to be riding in something nice. I’m sure you might think otherwise, but I don’t like a lot of attention on me.”

“Them women at your party are the ones that think otherwise, because they were all over your ass.”

“It was my birthday, that’s why.”

“Yea, yea, blame it on your birthday,” I joked.

“Why you weren’t all over me?” he asked in that sexy ass tone that drove me crazy.

I gushed a little. “Well, because um—you had that covered already. It was no need for me to join an already lit party.”

“I would’ve liked you on me more, though.”

“Stop it.” I grinned. “Don’t you have a woman, anyway? Nobody shouldn’t have been on you but her. That’s why she was acting so crazy.”

“She’s not my woman. She used to be, but those days are over. She’s the one that likes the attention and since she wasn’t getting any—”

“I think I owe you an apology too. I never meant to put my hands on her. I just don’t like people sizing me up and talking shit.”

“I don’t care about that. She asked for it, so she got it. I’m sure she was just as shocked as I was when you did that, but she was more embarrassed than anything. She’s used to running women off, not the other way around.”

“So, y’all not together no more?”

“Nawl, that’s over with. She just don’t wanna let go.”

“Damn, what you did to her?” I teased.

“Nothing.”

I looked over at his handsome self. “Yea right.”

“You’re funny, you know that?”

“Am I? I’m serious too though.”

“I bet you are.” He grinned.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“Well, have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

“Good, we’re going to my granny’s crib. She cooked oxtails, rice, collards, pork chops, and cornbread and insisted that I come over to eat. May as well take you with me.”

“To your grandmother’s house?” I asked with stretched eyes.

“Don’t look like that. She won’t mind me bringing a guest. Trust me, I’m sure she cooked for a family of seven anyway. Even though it’s just her and my sister there,” he added.

“Well, ok, but I’m a lil’ nervous about meeting your grandma. I mean, we’re just linking up ourselves and this isn’t an actual date.”

“It’s not? What you call it then since you were the one that asked me to come get you?”

“Um—I don’t know. I just wanted to spend time with you.”

“So, you don’t want to go to my granny’s house? I can call her and tell her I’ll come later if you’d rather that.”

“Nooooo, don’t do that. We can go. I just don’t wanna move too fast, ya know. I’m just getting out of a relationship, so I’m skeptical when it comes to dating again.”

“I feel you. I don’t wanna jump in another relationship either. I’ve had my fair share of drama from Keisha’s ass. I need a break myself, but we can be cool, right?”

“Cool friends?”

“Yea, cool friends that’s getting to know each other. Nothing more or less,” he stated.

“I like that.” I smiled. I really was just trying my best not to fall too soon or too hard. This nigga had a suave demeanor that I felt was going to make it hard not to. So, I had to stand my ground early to make sure that didn’t happen.

I glanced over at him. Something about his style I absolutely loved. It wasn’t too much or too flashy. I could clearly tell that he liked being the low-key one out the group. At the party, his homies were wearing Versace this, Versace that. Even his drunk ass cousin had on Balenciaga gear.

“Why you looking at me like that? You don’t like what you see?” he asked, glancing over at me.

I grinned with a playful roll of the eyes. “I was just looking, dang,” I teased, but I definitely liked what I saw. He was wearing a white Lacoste t-shirt with the green gator on the front, a pair of light faded blue jean shorts, Lacoste socks, and white Air Force Ones with the green Nike check and a green bubble gum bottom. He had on a green fitted cap with the white A on the front representing Atlanta. It was a simple look, but he made it cool and super sexy. “So, you don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but I’m a lil’ nousey. Is that mansion yours?”

“Nah, it ain’t mine. Meech rented that crib a couple of months ago. That’s just something he like doing with his money. It’s usually just one big party all the time. Either we watching the game, playing the game, getting fucked up, smoking and shit, enjoying the pool, or whatever. I actually have my own place, even though I don’t mind being at the

mansion since I do have my own room there too. But, when I want a lil' peace and quiet, I'll go to my house for that."

"Ooooh, ok. So, when y'all tired of being at that crib, y'all just get another one?"

"I don't waste my money like that but, yea, they will. It don't always be Meech. The other guys will chip in and rent too. Nobody really has a solid relationship, so living together like that is no biggie. They started that shit about a year and a half ago. It didn't start off as big, but the houses have grown over time. In that time, we've been in four different houses. That one being the biggest, but Meech did that for our birthdays. My cousin has a birthday coming up too. We'll throw another party then."

"What cousin? The drunk one?"

He grinned. "Yea, that one."

"When is his party?"

"In a couple of weeks. You coming?"

"I don't know. I might. You want me to come?"

"Yea, but more so if you wanna come."

"Ok, I'll see," I commented while thinking that they really had to have money to be blowing it like that, moving from one crib to another.

"You smoke?" he asked, pulling a blunt out of nowhere.

"Yea, from time to time with Kinsley."

"Wanna hit this? No pressure if you don't. You too pretty to be smoking anyway, but hey, you say you ain't a baby."

"Stop tryna be funny." I grinned.

"I'm just saying."

"Pass it here," I told him, as he handed it over.

"Light it up."

I wasted no time firing it up. Once lit, I inhaled the good shit and exhaled the bullshit. The taste of the weed was sweet and relaxing. After three puffs, I could feel my eyes get heavy.

“Be careful now. That’s that good shit.”

“I know,” I responded, quickly passing it back to him. “I’m done. I feel high already.”

Dodge laughed, “I told you.”

“I don’t wanna meet your grandma all high and shit.”

“Look at me,” he said, as I looked over at him. “You’re fine. Your eyes are a lil’ red, but they small like dem Japs anyway. So, she won’t be able to tell you’re high.”

“Like them Japs? You mean Japanese people?” I laughed.

“Yea, dem.” He nodded.

I couldn’t stop laughing for some reason. It wasn’t like I didn’t know I had slanted, almond-shaped eyes. Hell, that was a strong gene that ran in us Simmons girls. It was just the way he said it.

“You high for real with all that laughing.”

“I know, I can’t help it.” I grinned but then, the laughter calmed as I realized we were pulling up in the hood. “Where we going? Who live over here?”

I was confused as shit. One minute he was saying we were going to his grandma's house, and the next, we pulling up in the projects. I knew damn well this nigga wasn't taking me to bust a lick. I just knew better. I asked again because he still hadn't answered me, "Who lives over here? Please tell me you ain't about to make a drug transaction while I'm with you. That's so not cute."

Dodge looked over at me with a frown on his face. "What? I don't sell drugs. Those days are behind me. My granny and my lil' sister live over here," he responded.

"They live over HERE?" I asked to be sure. I mean, we weren't rich, so I didn't think I was better than nobody else. We just lived modest and more in the middle-class circle than the poorer class circle.

"Yea, something wrong with that?"

"Well, I just wouldn't have pictured them to live here. You got money, don't you? Or, is that a front or something?"

"A front? My biggest flex is that I don't front. I'm genuine across the board. I just don't splurge like the average nigga would if they had my money."

"Why your granny and your sister live over here then? That wouldn't exactly be called splurging if you got them out of the hood."

"Because Granny is stubborn and won't move. She thinks I'm making dope money and she wants no parts of it. I can't

lie; there was a time when I was making dope money, but I quit the game and moved on to bigger and better. She's stuck on believing that I still am. So, she feels if I move her, she won't be safe. As if it's super safe over here," he expressed with a shake of the head. "She thinks that the law will come kick in her door and put them out because the house is bought with drug money. That shit ain't gon' happen, but I can't tell her that. She's stuck in her ways and so paranoid over nothing. Trust me, though, I have a plan to get them outta here. She ain't gonna have a choice but to move. It's definitely past time. My sister is twenty years old; she can very well move if she wanted to, but she's not leaving Granny's side. I ain't mad at that, so I make sure they're good at all times."

"Oh ok, makes sense," I responded with an approving nod while looking out the window. The neighborhood looked like the slums. Hell, I didn't know if I even wanted to get out the car. Kids running around barefoot, music thumping loud, and niggas standing about chopping it up with each other. Girls walking around with coochie cutters on, looking for attention. It was definitely the projects.

"You good?" he asked. "You're with me. Don't worry. I won't let nothing happen to you."

"Ok, I trust you," I said, as he found a parking space and pulled in it. He hit the blunt a few more times. "We're gonna smell like weed."

He pulled out his Dior Sauvage. "I'm spraying before I go in."

"This weed loud, that ain't gonna cover it up. I don't care how good it smells."

"You might be right." He grinned, still spraying about two shots and then putting it back in his glove box.

"Well, that do smell good," I laughed.

"You high," he teased.

"Higher than a giraffe's pussy."

We laughed, as he looked over at me. "I'm glad you text me back."

“I’m glad I did too,” I responded. “Ain’t no random shoot-outs or nothing?”

“Nah, it’s been a while since I’ve heard about one of those over here. It looks worse than what it is. Believe me. Now, can we get out? I’m hungry as hell.”

“Say less,” I said, as we got out of the car. The busy neighborhood had me walking super close to him, as I peeped everything I could without missing a beat.

“Aye, Dodge!” a heavy voice called out.

“Yo,” Dodge responded, looking in the man’s direction.

“I need to holla at you, my boy!”

“I got you,” Dodge responded. It seemed like the hood definitely knew him and, from everybody speaking as we walked past, they respected him as well. As we walked up to the building I was assuming his grandmother lived in, a lady walking down the stairs from the second floor called his name.

“Dodge, who is that with you?”

He frowned like he was annoyed. “My friend, why?”

“Does my sister know you’re over here with your friend?” she asked.

“Her sister?” I mumbled.

“It’s none of your sister’s business who I’m with,” he told her like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Think I’ll call her over here, so you can say that shit to her face,” the lady said.

“Kay, take yo’ ass back upstairs! You supposed to be visiting me, not harassing Dodge,” a man said as he walked up to us. He gave Dodge a fist bump. “Wassup, Dodge?”

“Nothing much, Mr. Henry. How you doing?”

“I’m making it,” he answered and then, turned his attention to the lady. “Why you out here anyway? I didn’t need yo’ help getting the mail out the box.”

“Glad I did come to check on you. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have caught Dodge sneaking this girl over to his grandma’s.”

Dodge frowned. “Sneaking? You got the sneakiest sister in the world. So, don’t worry about me, Kay. Mind yo’ business.”

“Don’t get snappy with me! You were just leaving our house this morning.”

My eyes widened a little, but I maintained my composure, just listening.

“Kay, if I gotta tell you one mo’ time to get back up dem stairs, we gon’ have a problem,” Mr. Henry fussed.

“You lucky,” she said, rolling her eyes at me and, then, at Dodge. I didn’t say a word. For once, I was trying to change my quick-tempered attitude.

“Don’t worry about her. That’s Keisha’s sister. She don’t even live over here. She’s just visiting their dad but out here in my business.”

“Ooooh, makes sense. So, they lived here too?”

“Yea, but they moved out years ago. That’s their dad,” he said, pointing his head in the man’s direction as he made his way up the stairs behind his daughter. “He still lives here.”

“I see why she’s out here checking you. You were just over there this morning, right?”

“Yea, but it ain’t what it sounded like,” he responded and pulled out his key. He unlocked the apartment door and walked in. I wanted to dig a lil’ deeper about that early morning visit with the bitch he claimed he was done with, but it could wait.

“Granny!” he called out.

“In here,” she said from the kitchen.

“Hey, big head,” a cute girl said as she walked from down the hall.

“Wassup, Sha?” Dodge spoke back, giving her a hug. “What you been up to?”

“My usual, doing nails.”

“I heard you’ve been booming over here.”

“Yesszz! Just started doing lace-front wigs too,” she added. “Who is this?” she asked with a friendly smile on her face.

“This my friend, Kiyomi.”

“Hey, Kiyomi. You’re pretty.”

“Thanks, you’re pretty too,” I responded, smiling back.

“Pretty girl gang, gang!” she joked with soft laughter.

“Sit yo’ ugly ass down somewhere. Don’t go making her head any bigger,” he clowned, as I laughed out loud.

“You are pretty, very pretty,” I added, playfully rolling my eyes at Dodge.

“You brought company with you?” his grandma asked as she rounded the corner. I looked over at her and could see where they got their looks from. She was a beautiful woman with long gray hair that hung damn near to her butt.

“Hey, Granny,” he said while giving her a warm hug, followed by a kiss on the jaw. “Yes, I brought company. Granny, this is Kiyomi. Kiyomi, this is Granny.”

“Hey, baby. You so pretty,” she said, reaching out to hug me.

“Thanks, it’s nice to meet you. I see where they get their good looks from,” I told her, as she blushed like she didn’t know she had it going on in that department.

“I always tell them if it wasn’t for me—”

“Grannyyyy, stop it,” Sha laughed. “Don’t get her started.”

I loved the vibes they had. It was nothing like the congested energy outside of those doors. They seemed like a tight-knit bunch and instantly accepted me for who I was, unlike Loyal’s family. Taking a quick glance around, I could tell they were very clean people, and I was sure other apartments didn’t look like this on the inside. There had been

some remodeling and upkeep going on. I was sure that was Dodge's doing.

"I'm glad to see you, baby," Granny told Dodge, hugging him again. "I need to see you at least three times a week."

"Granny, come on. You know I come by here all the time."

"Depends on your definition of all the time," Granny told him. "Because I only see you once a week or maybe even once every two weeks."

"Yea, as of lately. But, that's because I've had some things going on."

"Well, those things aren't more important than seeing your granny."

"I know," he responded.

"Have a seat, baby," she instructed me. I guess she called everybody baby, so you had to be looking at her to see who she was talking to. Well, at least I did, because Dodge and his sister probably knew which baby belonged to who. "I'm so glad to see somebody new on his arm."

"Granny, she's just a friend."

"Friend? Yea, whatever. The only person you ever brought over here is that crazy ass—"

"Granny," Dodge cut in with a shake of the head.

"You know, the one that lied about being pregnant—"

"Granny, stop it," Sha intervened, as Dodge cut his eyes at his grandma.

"Well, I'm just saying. I never liked that one. I've been waiting for years to see a new face, and I'm glad it's yours, baby."

I smiled, not knowing what to say.

"That other one is a pretty girl too, but her attitude—Baby, she called herself telling me off one day—"

"Granny, ok, that's enough. I think I smell something burning," Dodge said.

“Oh shit! That might be my cornbread,” she huffed, hurriedly leaving the room.

“Dang, Granny talk too much,” Sha teased.

Dodge simply shook his head. He was at a loss for words when it came to the shit his grandma was speaking on. I couldn't blame him. I felt kind of bad that she was just tossing his business out there like it was nothing but, clearly, she wasn't thinking anything about it. She was just likely doing what she did best—running her mouth.

“Y'all come eat. The food ready!” she called out. We made our way to the kitchen, as Granny fixed everybody a plate. I guess that's something she was accustomed to doing. “Fixing four plates makes me think that Dameon is home. I miss him dearly, every day.”

“We all do, Granny,” Sha agreed.

“Who is Dameon?” I nosily pondered. One thing about me, I was going to ask some questions if I wanted to know something. My mama always said less was more, but I didn't care. That was one of those bold traits about me.

“Dameon is our brother,” Sha answered.

“My oldest grandson by two hours,” Granny added.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“We don't know. He left here one day and didn't make it back. It's been two years now and Lord knows I miss him. It's the same thing that happened to their mama over sixteen years ago. She disappeared off the face of this earth and we ain't seen her since,” she sadly expressed. “At times, I don't know what to do with myself. If it wasn't for my other daughter, Deana, my five grands by her, and these two sitting here now, I would be lost.”

I looked over at Dodge, who was quiet as a mouse. I cleared my throat because I could tell that I'd opened a can of worms and it had made him uneasy. At that point, I realized what my mama meant by saying less was more.

“Granny, come on. This should be a happy gathering over good food. Don’t make it a sad visit for me,” he eased in.

“You’re right, baby. I won’t. So, how long have y’all known each other?” she pondered.

“Um, we met a few weeks ago at a party,” I said, since Dodge had a mouth full of food and was taking forever to answer her.

“It was Dodge’s birthday party, Granny. The one I was telling you that he didn’t invite us to. Talking about I wasn’t twenty-one and you were over the age limit.”

I laughed under my breath.

Dodge looked over at Sha. “Really? You ain’t twenty-one and Granny ain’t coming to no party like that.”

“I would’ve come through. I know how to electric slide.”

We laughed. “Granny, they don’t do that no more. Everybody’s hip to these Tik Tok dance challenges now,” Sha teased her.

“I’m sure I can Tik Tok too.”

“If you don’t sit down somewhere woman,” Dodge let out.

“Ask Royce,” she said. “She be over here teaching her granny all the moves.”

“Royce is seventeen, Granny. She got Meg Thee Stallion knees. You’re sixty-five, you got arthritis in yours. Let it go, old woman.”

We all laughed. “Sha got a point, Granny,” Dodge playfully teased. It felt good to see him relaxed and back in his element. We sat laughing and talking for nearly an hour. It was the best conversation I’d had in a long time. Maybe it was just the pure genuineness in the way they felt about me. For as long as me and Loyal had been together, I had never sat down with him and his family and ate a dinner like this together. It definitely meant more to me than Dodge would ever know. Ironically, we were just friends, though, and I had to keep my mind intact, and my heart tucked away.

After eating dinner and getting to know everyone, Dodge decided it was time for us to go. We gave our warm hugs and see you later and then, we were out the door. As we walked back to the car, Dodge grabbed my hand to gently hold it, as if he knew *outside* made me a bit nervous. Just as we made it to his car, this bitch popped out of nowhere.

“Damn, so it’s like that, Dodge? You were just in my bed last night, but you’re out here holding her hand like y’all are an item.”

“Get in the car,” Dodge told me as he hit the unlock button.

“Nah, lil’ girl, you ain’t going nowhere. I owe you one or, shall I say, you owe me my one,” Keisha said and, before I could say anything or make another move towards the car, her sister swung on me from behind and, the next thing I knew, I was fighting both of these bitches. Their tag team game was much stronger than her weak ass one on one, but I did my best to hold my own. If Dodge was holding one back, the other was still on attack, until he shoved the hell out of her sister, which landed her right in the arms of their father.

“I know damn well y’all ain’t out here jumping this girl!” he fussed, holding the sister back.

Dodge was able to scoop Keisha up, since she was sitting on top of me still swinging. Once free and off the ground, I punched that bitch so hard in her face, I think I broke a finger plus a few fingernails.

“Get y’all dumb asses in the house before somebody call the police, and I ain’t bailing neither one of y’all out.”

Somehow, between all the chaos, Dodge was able to get me in the car, as he jumped in on the driver side. Without prolonging the stay, he backed out of the parking spot and left the scene.

“You a’ight?” he asked, looking over at me and grabbing my face to see if any damage had been done.

“Yea, them stupid bitches gon’ get what’s coming to them,” I huffed in between breaths because I was damn near

out of it.

“Just calm down. I’m so sorry that happened. I never would’ve taken you there had I known Keisha would show up and act a fool.”

“She ain’t acting a fucking fool for nothing! You just fucked that bitch, then gon’ pick me up like you done moved on from her!” I spat.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Like what?! Did you fuck her or NAH?”

“Aye, just calm down, damn.”

“Nah, did you fuck the bitch last night or this morning or whenever the fuck you were over there?”

“Yea,” he answered. “But, it really wasn’t like that.”

“How else the fuck is it then?! You stuck your dick in her dumb ass and she thinks it’s more than what it is! Dumb bitches like her ain’t gon’ just fuck a nigga and not think that strings aren’t attached! You the adult one here; YOU SHOULD KNOW BETTER!” I was angry as fuck by this point, especially when I pulled down the visor mirror to see that I had scratches on my face and on my neck. Oh, I was LIVID! “Why the fuck you keep fucking with that dumb ass hoe?! What’s yo’ fucking problem? I don’t care what it is, just leave me the fuck out of it!”

“I’m sorry. I promise that won’t ever happen again.”

“You damn right it won’t happen again! I’m not fucking with you like that no more! This friendship is DONE!” I angrily expressed.

At that moment, Dodge didn’t say another word. Even though I was pissed, glancing over at him led me to believe that he was hotter than Louisiana hot sauce and wanted all the smoke. I didn’t say another word the whole ride back to my house. When he pulled in my driveway, I couldn’t jump out fast enough. I didn’t say nothing and neither did he. Before I could even get in the house, he was speeding off like a NASCAR driver. I simply glanced back over my shoulder,

feeling somewhat bad for the way I had behaved afterwards, but FUCK THAT! He needed to take some accountability for this shit too. All I knew was that, for now, I was going to focus on my damn self for real this time, and fuck a nigga! Because I meant that, fuck a nigga!

“Can I see your face?” I asked Kay, as she stood in the bathroom mirror checking herself out. “Chile, she ain’t did much damage.”

“I don’t know what you looking at, but that bitch gave me a black-eye. You know this shit ain’t over.”

“Chile, that eye ain’t black, it’s just puffy,” I said to calm her nerves. “Shit, if you got a puffy eye, then I’m sure she should have two black-eyes because we went to work on her ass.”

“And did!” Kay agreed, giving me high-five. “Don’t nobody fuck with my sister or her feelings and get away with it. If I had been to that birthday party, she would’ve gotten it then. Putting her damn hands on you.”

“She was lucky then but not so lucky tonight!” I smiled, like I had gotten a championship belt behind that shit.

As we walked out the bathroom and headed in the living room, our dad was sitting on the couch with his arms crossed and shaking his head. “I can’t believe y’all grown asses are in there bragging about jumping on that poor girl.”

“Poor girl?” I frowned. “You don’t know her, Daddy. She is a shit starter and already tried to fight me once.”

“You must’ve done something to her if that’s the case.”

“How you figure?”

“Because you’re a bully, Keisha. You and your damn sister,” he fussed. “It’s always something with y’all. Haven’t y’all gotten enough of this foolishness? Your mother gotta be turning over in her grave.”

“I can’t believe you’d say that about your own flesh and blood,” Kay stepped in.

“I can’t believe that y’all are twenty-five and twenty-three, yet still act like y’all are seven and five. Kay, you have allowed Keisha to rub off on you. Even when your mother died, you were still the sweetest ever, but hanging out with Keisha has turned you, and not for the best.”

“Daaaaaddyy!!” Kay yelled out.

“Don’t Daddy me. You were supposed to be over here visiting and helping me pack up this shit because my back has started giving me hell, again. But, instead, you’re outside asking Dodge questions.”

“And?” I cut in. “If she ain’t got my back, who do? Because it sure as hell don’t seem like you do!”

“It ain’t about having your back, Keisha, but you and Kay take things too far. That’s not the first time I’ve seen y’all jump a girl about Dodge. Or, even jump a girl period. Y’all have made a name in this neighborhood ever since y’all were younger. Keisha, it started with you fighting just to fight. It’s like you have a point to prove—”

“I DO!”

“No, you don’t. It’s not that serious! I get that you’re pissed off about a lot of things—”

“Damn right I’m pissed off!” I lashed out.

“And it started when your mama died. I get it, Keisha. Trust me, I get it. I, too, was very mad when she died. Yes, she was y’all’s mama, but I knew her before y’all were born. She was the woman I laid beside every night, and to lose her like that broke me. When I tell you I’ve been broken since, and I will never bounce back. To know that we had just gotten approved for an apartment in a better area and that we were moving within two weeks, but we never got that chance. I was

only getting a disability check, the new apartment was based off both of our incomes. I couldn't afford it by myself, so we ended up here. I do feel like I failed y'all. Had we been able to still move in that new apartment, I believe that y'all wouldn't have been so overprotective of each other. Plus, this environment is not exactly the best. It's not the worst either, but it's not an ideal place I wanted y'all to grow up in."

"Daddy, I don't wanna talk about this," I eased in. Anytime we spoke about Mama, I shut down. Losing her left me lonely and bitter. Yes, I had my daddy and my sister, but it was nothing like a mother's love, my mama's love. She was the absolute best and always made sure we were good, no matter where we lived. So, to lose her in such a way could never be erased from my mind. "You always bring up Mama to turn the conversation, but you need to stop doing that! You overlook the shit we're going through because you hadn't been able to get your shit together for years!"

"That's a lie, Keisha!"

"No, it's not. Where is the lie, Kay?"

"I see none," Kay bluntly answered. "You shut down for years and left us to fend for ourselves, Daddy. But you wanna talk about when I was sweet. I'm surprised you remembered. If you weren't dazed out and locked up in your room from popping Oxys, you would've been here to help us grieve properly. We had to get it how we lived. You made sure we were fed, but we had to fend for ourselves out there in the real world. Even when we got caught stealing school clothes, you privately talked to the judge and was able to get the charges dropped, so we didn't spend a day in juvi. You even sat down and talked to us, and it almost seemed like you were about to get yourself together, but you fell right back into that dark space. By the time you crawled out, we were grown and basically on our own."

"EXACTLY! And now you got the nerves to try and tell us that what we did was wrong! How you know? You don't even know the whole story! Were you there last night when Dodge was laid up in my bed and acting like he cared about me? Was you there, Daddy?"

“No, I wasn’t there, Keisha.”

“Ok then, so don’t be coming at me for being defensive over a cheating ass nigga that’s hurt me more times than I can count.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. You’ve played your part too. I may not have always been present or in the moment, but I know things too! You and Dodge have been on the outs for a very long time! You just can’t seem to get that part through your head. You always play the victim. You’ve played on that boy’s intelligence for years! What about the baby, or shall I say babies?!”

“Don’t you go there!” I yelled.

“Daddy, don’t do that!” Kay jumped in to my defense. “Keisha has not had it easy!”

“Oh, and you would know, huh? You’ve enabled this behavior for years, which is why I’ve said she really turned you into a lil’ mini her!”

“I’m my own person!” Kay argued to disagree.

“Yea, you’re Keisha’s person!” he fussed back.

“Daddy, you’re such a fucking sell out!” I intervened. “Talking to your daughters like this! I can’t believe you! Kay came over to help you pack up, since you’re moving next week. Yet, you in here giving her hell. Without our help, you’d be a lost soul. You should appreciate us even coming back to these slums to see you.”

“That is one thing I can say about Kay. She will check on her old man, but I never see you. Matter of fact, this is the first time I’ve laid eyes on you in months.”

I looked around at the run-down apartment. “And you wonder why?”

“That’s why I’m moving. This is not a place for me anymore. I’ve gotten my shit together—”

“Finally,” I uttered.

“And I want better for myself. Y’all should want better for yourselves as well.”

“Like we don’t,” I spat. “I got my cosmetologist license two years ago, and I do very well doing hair. I’m even working on getting a shop in a new location. Kay is my sidekick, so she helps me a lot. We’re like a tag team partnership. She braids and I do everything else. If you were a part of our lives, you would know that.”

“I do know that. Kay fills me in, unlike you. For the record, I wasn’t talking about your finances, though; I’m talking about your mental, your happy place. You need to sit down and talk with a therapist. Since y’all such tag team partners, I think it’s wise if y’all go together.”

“A THERAPIST?!” we both let out.

“I’m not crazy, Daddy,” Kay said.

“I’m not saying that but, because y’all have dealt with a lot, I think it’s a wise thing for y’all to do.”

“I’m not seeing no damn therapist. You go see one!” I angrily spat. “You need to see one more than we do! I’ve dealt with my issues on my own; I don’t need no outside help with that.”

“I beg to differ! Y’all literally just jumped on a girl outside and didn’t give a damn about it. Then, y’all come in here bragging about it. But you don’t see nothing wrong with y’all’s actions?”

“Nothing at all.” I smacked my lips with a slick roll of the eyes. “You got some muthafuckin’ nerves.”

“Look at the way you talk to me. I am your father.”

“Never said you weren’t, but I’ve definitely imagined what it would’ve been like if I had a different father. Or, if it would’ve been you that got shot instead of Mama.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you just said that. The disrespect is so rude and hurtful.”

I looked at my daddy with menacing eyes. “The pot can’t call the kettle black—”

“Okaaaay,” Kay cut in. “It’s time for you to go, Keisha. Everybody needs to cool down,” she said, grabbing me by the arm.

“So, you’re walking me out?”

“Yep, it’s time for you to go. This ain’t getting any of us nowhere, and as much as I want to leave Daddy here by himself, I’m not. I said I was going to help him pack and I am. But you don’t need to be here because y’all’s relationship isn’t on the best of terms as is.”

“I agree,” I huffed, looking over at Daddy and rolling my eyes again. “Talkin’ ‘bout go see a therapist. Nigga, you go see one!”

“Keisha, time to go,” Kay demanded, pulling me out of there.

“He needs to work on his back problems, then maybe he can get a new woman so he can finally get over Mama,” I egged on.

“Don’t do that. You’re taking it too far,” Kay said as she closed the door shut behind us because I was still talking shit. “Go home. Just go home and take a relaxing bath. You need to clear your head. I’ll be there sometime later tonight.”

“Ok, but I don’t know why you wanna stay here with him.”

“Because he’s my daddy and, regardless of what issues we might have, I love him.”

“Whatever, girl,” I responded, fanning my hand in the air like I could give two fucks. “Fuck him.”

“Bye, Keisha. Drive safely,” Kay said, ignoring my comments.

I walked off thinking that Kay always had my back, but she sometimes straddled the fence when it came to our daddy. She should’ve been on my side at ALL times. I was the one that took care of her, not his ass.

I got in my car, still in my feelings. I was hurt about the way Dodge had been treating me, yet my daddy over here

taking sides and telling me I needed to see a therapist. He was the fucking disrespectful one. Instead of acknowledging my pain and being here for me, he'd rather take up for a bitch he didn't even know. He could talk as much shit as he wanted to, but every time I saw that bitch, she was gonna catch these hands. I meant that. As I backed out of the parking lot, I got a text message.

Was that you fighting out in the parking lot? VEE

Yea, I had to show my ass again, girl. KEISHA

Chile, when are you gon' learn that you can't keep tryna prove yo' love to a nigga that don't wanna be loved? VEE

I rolled my eyes. Vee always had the nerve to try and check me, but I wasn't the one. Just because we grew up together didn't mean shit. Little did she know, she'd moved off my best friend list a long time ago. I was surprised she still hadn't figured it out yet.

How you know it was about him? KEISHA

Chile, Dodge is the only nigga you've ever showed yo' ass over. Even though you've slept with many others. So, don't play me, I've known you since middle school. I know you, bitch. VEE

"Bitch, you don't know me," I spat. "Who the fuck do she think she is?"

Vee, I'm not in the mood for your shit. Ok! If you noticed, I haven't hit you up in forever. Hell, I didn't know you still stayed out there. So, I would appreciate it if you mind yo' own business. Me fighting has nothing to do with you! You weren't out there helping me, was you? Ok then! Don't piss me off or it'll be me and you the next time. KEISHA

Wow, if I can recall, I was the one that fell back because you're a self-centered, always in denial, don't see nothing ever wrong with your actions, stupid lil' bitch that thinks fighting is the answer. But, if you wanna feel like you're the one that kicked me to the curb, FINE! I don't give a damn. I was just checking on your stupid ass but, as always, being

stupid is just in your nature! FYI! I been moved out of that place. My aunt called and told me about the brawl you and Kay had, so I was just asking to make sure you were good. Oh, and Keisha, don't ever threaten me. You ain't the only one from the trenches, bitch. We can take it there! VEE

I damn near ran off the road reading her response. That bitch had me fucked up. One call to Kay and we'd have that bitch laid up in the hospital somewhere. The fuck!

Girl, you don't wanna take it there. You already know what I'm capable of. So pump yo' brakes and while you're at it, lose my number. KEISHA

Like you said something. Blocked and deleted, hoe! VEE

Vee was that one friend that I'd fall out with at least three times a year. I couldn't stand her mouth and always thinking she was the one with all the sense. She was right; she grew up in the trenches just like me, so she couldn't give me no advice. I was my own woman and moved how I wanted to move. Fuck her!

I pulled up in my driveway thinking about Dodge. He hadn't called or messaged. He was actually pretty quiet being that I had just fucked up his lil' date or whatever the fuck that was. I mean, why would he bring her to the hood? He should've known some hood shit would pop off. To even think about her meeting his talking ass grandma had me fuming inside. So, was shit really that serious?

So, that's how you wanna play? KEISHA

OK! When you see me with a new nigga, don't say a fucking word! KEISHA

Once in the house, I found myself pacing back and forth. Dodge had yet to reply to me.

Oh, and just so you know, that bitch getting beat every time I see her. So, if you think that's gon' be your next bitch, you can cancel Christmas, my nigga! I'm gon' always be around! Did you forget? I'm still tatted with your name right above my heart. That shit ain't going nowhere. I'll ALWAYS be your property. KEISHA

You too pussy to respond? Keep that same energy from here on out. I want nothing else to do with you! KEISHA

I glanced over at the front door, noticing that Kay had made it home. I couldn't wait to tell her about Vee's ass. But, just as I was getting ready to vent, Dodge walked in instead. My eyes stretched wide open just seeing the anger written all over his face. Before I could get a word out, this nigga was on my ass like a vicious dog protecting its owner. His hands gripped around my neck as I tried screaming, but I couldn't get nothing out. He was literally choking the shit out of me.

“Bitch, if you ever try me like that again, you'll be meeting yo' mama in the afterlife!” he barked, as my feet dangled in the air.

“DODGE—”

“I'm sick of yo' stupid ass!” he roared, slinging my body to the floor. I grabbed at my neck, trying to catch my breath. “This relationship or whatever the fuck we had is OVER! I don't want no more of yo' pussy, yo' headaches, or yo' fucking time! It's DONE! Don't ever call me again!” He headed for the door but stopped in his tracks to look back at me. “Oh, and bitch, I dare you to put yo' hands on her again. Promise that'll be the last time you ever touch anybody else!” With that being said, he threw the house key, hitting me on the side of my head, and then slammed the door shut behind him.

I bawled up on the floor and cried like a baby. I believe I'd lost the only man I ever loved. Dodge was no stranger to putting me in my place, but to tell me that I'd meet my mama was an all-time low, even for him. I had to pull myself together, because if Dodge thought he was going to be the one with the last laugh, he was wrong. I had something for his ass and in due time, he was going to find out what it was.

I pulled my freshly done sew-in into a high ponytail, then undid a few buttons of my shirt. I wanted to find something fun to get into, and I couldn't do that looking like the preppy type. The white button-up paired with a navy-blue vest and tan khaki pants was my look for the day, but the day was over, at least the school day anyway. Attending Georgia State University had its perks. It was some fine ass niggas here, and I loved it! It reminded me a lot of high school. The athletes still did what they did, and the girls were still envious of those they thought were better than them. College drama was definitely similar to high school drama, no matter how you flipped the coin.

I'd been in school for three weeks and had yet to find anyone I felt worthy to hang out with. It was starting to look like a loner freshman type of year. Going through my bag, I grabbed my lip gloss and applied a fresh coat. Smacking my lips together, I smiled and grabbed my Michael Kors backpack and stood up to walk out the class. Walking towards the exit, I messaged Kinsley to see where she was at. A minute later, my phone was ringing.

"Girl, why are you calling me if I messaged you?"

"I'm getting dressed, I don't have time to text."

"Wait, where you going?"

"Rosco's birthday party."

"Damn, that's today?"

“Yes ma’am. I know you’ve been preoccupied with school and trying to forget about Dodge and the shit you dealt with that night, but I did tell you about this. You wanna join me?”

“Hell no, I don’t want nothing to do with Dodge. I’d rather keep my distance,” I responded but, deep down, I was lying. I missed his sexy ass. I hadn’t heard from him since that following morning when he messaged and asked if I was ok and to apologize once again for putting me in harm’s way. I read the message but didn’t respond. Hell, I guess he took that for what it was and hadn’t reached out since.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t ask. It’s going to be lit, I can already tell you that. You can come for drinks and the food. You know you love to eat. Plus, they be having that edible, weed-infused good shit.”

I laughed. “Nah, I’ll sit this one out, but have fun for me too.”

“You know I will.”

“And don’t be sneaking off tryna fuck either. Hot ass heffa!”

Kinsley laughed. “Girrrrrl, I’m gonna behave myself. I already told Meech that we ain’t getting down like that, so don’t even try it.”

“Good.”

“So, what are you gonna do today?”

“I don’t know yet, but I definitely wanna have a lil’ fun. So, roll a blunt for me and hide it in your top drawer. If I don’t do nothing, at least I can get high and chill out.”

“I got you,” Kinsley said. “I gotta go, but call me later just in case you change your mind.”

“I doubt that, but I’ll call you anyway just to check on you.”

“Ok cool, talk to you soon.”

“Ok,” I said and ended the call.

Smiling, I did a cute little two-step hype, feeling excited about unwinding with a blunt when I got home. Mama was on third shift too. It was on.

“Let me see you do that again,” a smooth voice whispered in my ear. His hands brushed my waist, spinning me around to face him.

“You would wanna see that again, huh, Hendrix?” I smirked.

“I would love to see anything that gotta do with you, if we’re being honest.”

“Boy, stop!” I giggled, bracing my hand against his chest.

“I’m keepin’ it a buck. I’ve been tryin’ to get at you for a minute.”

“Mhm, hard to tell.”

“So, you ain’t been noticing me watching you?”

“Um, no.”

“Stop playing.”

“I’m serious,” I said, but I’d definitely noticed him watching me. I was just playing hard to get.

I stepped back and took in all that was Hendrix. He was the Georgia State University star player of the basketball team and probably the cutest boy in the whole school. His dimples made the girls’ hearts melt, but it was his chocolate complexion and pearly white teeth for me. After Loyal’s half-white ass, I had started falling hard for the darker skinned men, especially if they had pretty white teeth. It was my weakness, but I couldn’t take Hendrix too seriously, either. He was in college just like me. There was nothing worldly he could teach or show me. Older men were more of my speed for two reasons: money and maturity. However, Dodge had left a bad taste in my mouth with his baggage of bullshit, and my patience had run super thin. I needed a man that was gonna take care of my body, as well as my mind, and line my pockets. He also needed to be a protector. I had a thing for hood niggas too, but they came with too much drama and

I wasn't built for that, so I think I'd have to keep that shit to a minimum.

“Stop playin' with me, let me take you out.”

“What money you got? I'm not a cheap date.”

“You wild,” Hendrix laughed, but pulled out a few bills. “Professional ballin' is gon' bring in the big bucks later, but I've been working for right now.”

“Where you work at?”

“I work with my dad at his hardware store.”

“Is that right?” I smirked. “Your dad has a hardware store?”

“Yea, it's been in business for almost seventeen years now.”

Closing the gap between us, I licked my glossy, full lips and leaned forward, pressing my chest against his. My lips swept against his ear as I said, “Set something up then. For right now, though, this money is mine,” I teased, gently snatching the money out of his hand.

“So, you gon' do me like that?”

“Promise all of this is worth your time and your dime.”

“Say less.” He cheesed back. Not tripping about me taking his money let me know that somewhere along the line, he had more than that.

“Kiyomi!! Hold up!” a girl from class yelled out.

I looked in her direction but still planted a kiss on Hendrix's cheek, leaving a perfect silhouette of my lips.

He smiled, almost bashfully. “I can't wait for this date.”

“Me either,” I told him, as he turned to walk away but then glanced back.

“Don't stand me up either.”

“Oh, I won't,” I assured him. He walked off, as the chick walked over. “Hey girl, wassup?”

“Hey, girl. You don’t know me, but we take a couple of classes together. I’ve noticed that you pretty much stick to yourself and I do too, but it’s something about you that I like.”

I frowned. “That you like?” I hope this bitch wasn’t gay, because I wasn’t into eating pussy or nobody’s ass.

“Noo, not in that way,” she giggled. “I don’t have friends like that either, so I was wondering if you’d like to hang sometimes.”

“Well, I don’t fuck with females too funny because they be on some bullshit a lot of the times but, chile, I love your nails! They look good!”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “I got the hook-up if you ever wanna get yours done too.”

“I’ve never had a female approach me like this. So, I think we can swing hanging out. Sorry, I’m bad with names, but what’s yours?” I asked, being that I never paid attention to shit in class, definitely not names. I only did enough to make sure I satisfied my mama with my grades.

“I’m Rosalyn,” she answered. She was a pretty, soft brown-skin chick with a friendly personality. Off top, I could tell she was cool as hell. “I see you talking to ole fine ass Hendrix. All the females want him, being the star basketball player and shit. The nigga is hella cuuuute!”

“He is a cutey,” I agreed, almost blushing just thinking about him.

“That nigga wants you, though. You should definitely give him some play.”

“I just might.” I smirked. “But anyway, what year are you in?”

“I’m a sophomore now. I’ve gone through all the freshman shenanigans.”

“What are those?”

“Oh, nothing, I was just saying. The higher-class people just look at you like you’re a baby. But you definitely don’t carry yourself as such, and girl, you got body-ody-ody-ody-

ody-ody-ody-ody-ody,” she sang, making me laugh. “I only knew you were a freshman because I saw your name on the roster.”

“Oh, ok, because I really don’t give a fuck how people look at me.”

Rosalyn grinned. “I can tell. So, what you getting into? I was about to hit up this kickback.”

“What kind of kickback?”

“It’s a family event. You wanna come?”

I thought about it all of five seconds. “Shit, I don’t have nothing else to do. I might as well.”

She smiled. “Well, you can wear that if you want to.”

“Girl, no!” I quickly let out. “I need to go home and change into something more relaxing and chill.”

“Ok, where do you live?”

“About thirty minutes away from here, in Conyers.”

“I usually catch an Uber because I can’t drive yet. So—”

“Girl, you can’t drive?” I shook my head with a slight grin.

“No, girl. This Atlanta traffic gives me anxiety, but I’ll learn one day.”

I laughed. “And how old are you?”

“I’m twenty going on twenty-one in two weeks.”

“Oh, yea, when is your birthday?”

“September 5th,” she responded.

“Wow, mine is the 7th. Virgos in the muthafuckin’ house!”

“I know that’s right!” she shrieked with excitement. “I knew it was something about you I liked.”

“Well, now you know.” I grinned. “You can ride with me if you want, since I’m going to the party with you.”

“Ok, cool.”

“Let’s roll.”

We got in the car and headed to my house. It actually felt good to have finally met someone that I felt like I'd get along with. She already had the type of energy I vibed with, and that alone made me feel good about this new friendship.

Once at my house, we walked in. Kinsley had already left, so we were there alone. I headed straight in Kinsley's bedroom and grabbed the blunt that she had stashed for me. I headed back in my bedroom and let the window up while turning on the ceiling fan. "You can come in here!" I called out, firing up a strawberry and cream candle.

"What you doing in here? I like your room."

"Thanks, my mama still decorates for me." I grinned.

"It's pretty. You must be spoiled and an only child."

"I am an only child, but I don't think I'm spoiled. I guess I've just never lacked for nothing."

"My mama is the same way too. She definitely makes sure we're good. My father is the bread winner, so he's the one that spoils us the most."

"So, your mom and dad are still together?"

"Yep."

"How does that feel? You know, to have a two-parent home?"

"I don't know. I guess it feels fine." She shrugged. "My mom is the strict one. My dad is a laid-back character and don't really bother us like that."

"That's wassup. You smoke?"

"Do I? What kind of question is that? You got some weed?"

"Shit, I got a blunt right here."

"I'm ready! Let's go outside."

"Nah, we good. We can smoke in here. My mama is gone all night. She won't be back from work until eight in the

morning. I light my candles through the night and spray real good. She won't smell it."

"Girl, you brave. We smoke but we don't do it in the house." She grinned. "I'm going over by the window, so I can blow the smoke out that way."

"Cool," I said while searching for something cute to wear. "You can put it out when you're finished. We'll smoke the rest on the way to the party."

"Cool, because I'm nervous as hell smoking in here."

"I can tell," I laughed. I found a cute lil' Tommy Hilfiger t-shirt dress that stopped right above my knees and rocked a pair of Tommy Hilfiger sandals, fixed my ponytail, and was ready to head out. Once in the car, I lit the blunt again and headed to our destination.

"So, what kind of kickback is this again?" I asked as I stopped at a red light, passing her the blunt.

"This some good weed," she expressed, coughing a little. "Um, it's really a birthday party for my brother," she said, passing the blunt back my way.

I frowned a little. "Your brother?"

"Yea, I don't think it's really going to be nobody but family there. I mean, he has his crew and a few friends, but it's supposed to be a little more intimate. At least, that's what he asked for."

Intimate, I thought. "Who is your brother?"

"Girl, I'm sure you don't know him. Don't worry. You'll be fine."

"No, I'm just asking. I might know somebody that knows him."

"His name is Rosco."

I damn near choked from coughing so hard. At that moment, I glanced down at her nails again. "Who did your nails?"

“My cousin, Sha,” she answered, damn near causing me to pull the fuck over. “Whaaat?! You’re scaring me.”

“I know your people,” I admitted.

“Please don’t tell me you’re fucking my brother,” she shrieked. “Damn, it’s a small world.”

“No, girl!” I quickly cut in. “But I do know your cousin, Dodge.”

“Ooooh, Dodge ole cool ass. That’s my nigga.” She smiled.

“I also know your grandma and Sha. We’ve only met once, but I met them through Dodge.”

“Hold up, you’re not the girl that Keisha and her sister jumped on, are you?”

I slick rolled my eyes. It was a small world. “Yes. That was definitely me.”

“Wow, I can’t stand them bitches for real now. I’m glad my cousin kicked her ass to the curb.”

“Oh, did he? Because the reason why she was all in my face is because he’d just stayed the night with her.”

“Girl, let me tell you something, and please don’t mention this to my cousin, but that bitch is crazy as fuck. She does things to make my cousin fuck with her. He knows the shit is toxic, but she has her ways.”

“And because of that, he and I can never—”

“No, I mean, she’ll lie like she’s pregnant or something and, because he loves kids, he’ll start dealing with her again. I mean, check this out. This bitch had a whole baby shower and all, talking about she was six months pregnant and was lying the whole time.”

“So, that’s what y’all grandma was talking about. That bitch is crazy.”

“Her own cousin bust her ass out at the baby shower. Funny though, because Dodge didn’t even seem surprised about it. He just shook his head, apologized to us for her lying,

and then walked out. I ain't gon' lie, I felt bad for him. Now, why he was over there that night before y'all fought, I have no clue, but I'm sure he had his reasons."

"I feel bad for him in a way, but that's too much. For one, that hoe thinks it's over, but I can't let them get away with jumping on me like that."

"Wait a minute, you're the girl my brother said you checked her ass at Dodge's birthday party?"

"Yea, and I guess that was another reason why she jumped me."

Rosalyn started laughing. "My brother said you was holding her ass down with one hand and didn't bust a sweat the entire time."

I grinned. "That hoe is weak."

"Turn right here," she said in between laughs. "Wow, the more we talk, the more I see us becoming besties."

"I can see that too," I chuckled, smoking the last of the blunt. I was definitely high as hell.

"So, do you like my cousin?"

"I can't lie, I do, but I just got out of a relationship, and the last thing I wanna do is jump right back in another one."

"Trust me, I feel you."

"So, are you in a relationship?"

"Not exactly. I'm in a situationship, just creeping right now. My brother is overprotective of his sisters. Don't get me wrong; I don't care if he knows I'm dating, but this guy is in his crew, and I don't want that smoke."

"You're fucking a nigga in his crew?"

"Yep."

"Oh shit, who?"

"Girl, why? You be making me nervous, shit!"

"Is it Meech?"

Rosalyn frowned. “Hell no. Meech is like an uncle to me. He fine as hell, but he is off limits. Dodge would be pissed about that more than my brother would. Well, I take that back. They’d both be mad as fuck.”

I grinned. “Ok, just asking because my cousin is dating Meech.”

“The pretty girl that Rosco said Meech is crazy about?”

“Rosco tells you everything.”

“Well, he is my best friend,” she said with a smile. “He’s just been through a lot since our cousin went missing.”

“Dameon?”

“Yea, so Dodge told you?”

“Kinda,” I said. “Actually, it was your grandma, though.”

“Go figure. She loves to talk and, if she likes you, she’ll tell all of our business. Today is also his birthday. He was born two hours before Rosco. So, some of my family might show a lil’ sadness, even though Granny doesn’t want us making a big deal out of him not being here. I guess it’s her way of coping, and we all have to roll with that because she is the glue to this family. We don’t need nothing happening to her,” she expressed, while pointing. “It’s right here.”

I wasn’t even paying attention to where we were going until I pulled up. “We at Club Truth.”

“I know. His party is here.”

“And you called it a kickback. This is a whole club.”

“Yea, but it’s a day party event. They rented the place for the day.”

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Yep.”

“Oh wow, this will be my first time walking in this place, even though my cousin is a bottle girl here.”

“She got the job I want,” she shrieked.

“Hell, I want it too.”

We laughed. “Well, don’t worry, because hanging with me, you’ll be coming here more often.”

“Girl, they be checking strong for IDs and I’m only turning nineteen on my birthday. At least on yours, you’ll be legal.”

“It doesn’t matter, my brother has always gotten me in anytime I wanted to come. I would have to sit with them, though, so he could keep an eye on me but shit, I didn’t care. I just enjoyed being in there.”

“I feel you,” I said, taking in a deep breath while thinking about Dodge being in the same vicinity as me. It was now or never.

“You ready to get out?”

“Yea,” I answered, but was I prepared to see Dodge? I’d just told Kinsley that I didn’t want to go with her because of him. Now, fate had brought me here anyway. I didn’t know what this was about or how it would turn out, but there was only one way to know. “Ok, let’s go.”

I sat off to myself in the corner sipping on some Remy and bobbing my head to Bruno Mars’ “Leave The Door Open.” Every once in a while, he came out with a hit that I liked. I glanced around at my family enjoying themselves. More importantly, Rosco was in his element. He was surrounded by those that loved him most and he knew it. He was a special addition to our family, and we wholeheartedly appreciated his presence, everybody did. I looked over to see him pulling Granny and her sister, Aunt Clara, out on the dance floor. It was moments like this that I lived for. They danced and laughed with each other. My aunt Deana joined them, and then Royce and Sha made their way to the floor, just as the electric slide came on.

“Oh shit,” I let out with a shake of the head.

“That’s my jam!” Granny shrieked, as we all laughed. Her loud mouth could be heard even over the blaring speakers.

“Get it, Granny!” I shouted from my seat. She was the glue that held our family together. Without her, I didn’t know where we would be or what we’d be doing. She was indeed a super woman that I loved and would do anything for.

This party was nothing like mine. Rosco didn’t care to have the strippers and the bad bitches flaunting their assets around. He wanted family to celebrate his birthday with. It was a lot of close friends and, of course, those close friends brought their closest friends, but the party wasn’t nearly as wild as mine. I sighed, as thoughts of Dameon crossed my

mind. Anytime this day approached my mood would be thrown the fuck off. For two years, all I could do was wonder what happened to him. It was a sick ass feeling. I knew that. So, while everybody was enjoying themselves, I was just trying to maintain and keep it together.

Thoughts of Keisha crossed my mind, only because her sister had the nerve to ask Sha if they could attend Rosco's birthday party. I knew that was all Keisha, but she knew not to play with me. I hadn't talked to her ass since I yoked her out. She definitely knew how to bring out the beast in me, that was for sure. A woman like that, I couldn't deal with no more. When I said I wanted more out of life, I meant that for the lady I'd have on my arm also. That brought me to Kiyomi. I felt so bad for the way Keisha and her sister jumped on her. She fought a good fight, I ain't gon' lie, but I wished like hell that never happened. I was hurt when she didn't respond back the next morning. On top of that, it had been a couple of weeks and she still hadn't said nothing to me. I even asked Kinsley if she'd be coming to the party but was told that she wasn't coming.

“Damn, shawty really don't want nothing to do with me.”

“You over here talking to yourself?” Serena asked, as she stood by me ordering herself a drink from the bartender.

I glanced over at her. “Nah, just thinking out loud.”

“I've been watching you from across the room and I noticed that Keisha wasn't with you. Is it true that y'all have finally called it quits?”

I simply nodded my head, while turning up the glass of Remy.

“So, you're a free man? I'm glad you finally left that bitch.”

“Me too,” I uttered.

“Does that mean we can start kicking it again?”

I looked her over just to see if I was missing something. I couldn't lie; Serena was a bad bitch with a fat ass and a cute face, but it was nothing I yearned for. Any other time, I'd fuck

just to fuck, but I wasn't in that head space, and especially not today. "No disrespect, but nah. I'd rather not."

"Ok, your loss," she stated, as I grinned to myself. I honestly didn't feel like I was losing out on nothing when it came to her. She might've been an RN with her shit together, money on deck, and single as fuck, but she wasn't my type, no matter how fine she was. She walked off, and I couldn't be happier. I didn't want to tell her ass no again. Some women were just persistent like that. As I continued drinking my sorrows away, a soft touch of a hand graced the back of my neck, damn near sending chills down my spine.

"Is this seat taken?"

I looked over my shoulder and almost had to do a double take. My eyes lit up the minute I saw who it was. "Nah, it's empty."

"Good." Kiyomi smiled as she sat down beside me. "Hey, can I get an Incredible Hulk with a double shot of Henny?" she called out to the bartender.

"Yes, I'll bring it over," the bartender responded.

She looked at me through those sexy almond-shaped eyes, as if she could sense my weakness. "You ok?"

"Yea." I nodded. "You ok?"

"Yes, I hope you don't mind me just popping up here."

"Oh, nah, I'm glad you came. It feels good seeing you."

"Ironically, I feel the same way," she said with a sincere smile. "I owe you an apology for not responding to your message."

"No apology needed. I understood why you were mad. Hell, I was mad too. I straightened that shit, though. You ain't ever gotta worry about her even looking your way if ever y'all are in the same room."

"Damn, what did you do or say to her?"

"Just know that it's some shit I don't play about, and she crossed the line."

“From what I’ve heard, that ain’t nothing new.”

“Yea, but putting her hands on you exceeded all the other bullshit she’s done.”

She smiled with an approving nod, like I’d said something that made her day. “So, is it really over between y’all?”

“Yea, I haven’t talked to that girl in a while. Matter of fact, since that night. I don’t believe we’ve ever gone a full week without some kind of communication.”

“Oh, so that’s a good thing?”

“I would think so.” I shrugged. “I’m not trying to prove to nobody that I’m really done with her ass. But I definitely believe that the people who know me, know that it’s over.”

“So, you’re over here by yourself while it looks like your family is out on the floor enjoying themselves. You sure you’re ok? I heard it was also your brother’s birthday.”

I nodded. “Yea, it is, and, no, I’m not really ok, but it’s not like I can do anything about it. My mood is usually all over the place, and if a fuck nigga knows better, he’ll stay out of my way. I have a lot of anger built up and I’m always ready to unleash it on a muthafucka.”

“Damn, you act like you just go around knocking niggas out.”

“Let’s just say that niggas know not to test me.”

“I feel you.” She smirked, sipping on her drink. What she didn’t know was that I wanted to rock Mr. Henry’s ass that night his daughters jumped on her, just because I couldn’t hit them. I mean, it definitely would’ve made me feel better at the time. However, I would’ve regretted it the next day. Mr. Henry and that bad ass back probably wouldn’t have survived a blow like that. It was true, I was definitely hot tempered, and that was attributed to losing my mom and even more so, my brother. People closest to me always joked about me looking so hardcore and mean, but that’s because I never felt like I had a lot to smile about. Getting money was cool, it got me out the hood, but it was so much more than money I was missing. Folks not walking in my shoes could never understand that.

“Well, I’m glad to see that y’all have made up.” Kinsley walked over with a tipsy chuckle. “I thought you said your ass wasn’t coming?”

“I wasn’t,” she replied, glancing over at me. “But I ended up with his cousin, and well—here I am.”

“My cousin?”

“Yea, Rosalyn,” she said while pointing out on the dance floor, as Rosalyn had joined Granny and the others having a good time.

“How you know her?”

“We go to the same school.”

“Oh, you go to GSU?”

“Yep,” she answered, sipping from her drink. “Hey, Meech.”

“Wassup, Kinsley’s lil’ cousin.” He grinned, with a big smile on his face while wrapping his arms around Kinsley’s waist from the back. “I’m glad you showed up.”

“I’m glad too,” Kiyomi responded as she smiled at me. “Love in the Club” by Usher came on and everybody went crazy. That old song still won over a drunk crowd of people, at least my people anyway.

“Let’s go dance,” Kinsley told Meech. “We’ll be back.”

“Take ya time.” Kiyomi nodded. “Your people are loving this song.”

“Same thing I was thinking.” I grinned.

“Rosco is really enjoying himself.”

“He deserves it.”

“I’m sorry I misjudged him the first time we met. He just came off as disrespectful.”

“He was, but I’ll blame it on the liquor. He don’t usually act like that. He’s just dealt with a lot since losing my brother. They were tight as hell. You would’ve thought they came from the same womb, at the same time.”

“I bet. Hell, they were born on the same day.”

I sat sipping on my drink and admiring her look. She was so pretty to me. Her tone when she spoke was soothing, and the way she carried herself was even more attractive. I still couldn't believe she was only eighteen.

“So, you and Rosalyn know each other? Small world.”

“We actually just met today, even though she's in a couple of my classes. She walked over, introduced herself, and we started talking. She invited me to this kickback, is what she called it.” She grinned. “I didn't even know it was for Rosco or that he was her brother until we were halfway here. By then, it was too late to turn back.”

I grinned. “You would've turned back had you known earlier?”

She playfully shrugged. “I don't know. A part of me was missing you. Plus, I just looked at it as fate.”

“Fate, huh? Dat's wassup,” I commented, finding myself smiling more around her than I ever did on a daily basis.

“It's really nice in here. I told Kinsley to help me get on as a bottle girl.”

I scowled. “Bottle girl? Nah, that ain't for you.”

“Why not? She makes good money. It's not like she's selling her body or anything.”

“I know dat.”

“And they dress tastefully.”

“I know dat.”

“So, what's the problem with me being a bottle girl? I need to make money.”

“You don't need that type of money. You're in school, right? Well, focus on that and let me help you out if you need money.”

She bashfully frowned. “You helping me out? Why would you do that? It's not like we're a couple or anything like that.”

We're just friends, remember?"

"Oh, I remember. But friends help friends out, right?"

"I guess." She smiled. "No strings attached?"

"Not one, unless you attach 'em."

She gazed in my eyes. I wanted so bad to kiss her, but then

—

"Hey, baby, you came. How are you?" Granny asked as she hugged Kiyomi.

"Hey, Granny, I'm good. How are you?"

"Awww, she called me Granny." She gleefully smiled, looking back at me.

"Yea, I heard her." That within itself told me shawty was into me more than she put on.

"I heard about what happened that night, and I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

"Granny, now is not the time for this," I intervened. Damn, things were going pretty decent for us. I didn't need her spoiling that by bringing up the fight.

"It's ok. I'm ok, and it's all good. It happened, and I'm moving forward," she said, but I could tell that was just something she told Granny. I already had peeped her character since day one, and she definitely wasn't going to let that slide.

"Well, good for you," she responded, leaning in and kissing Kiyomi on the jaw. Even I was shocked to see that. Granny was only affectionate with us. I had never seen her being this friendly with an outsider, no matter if we were fucking them or not. They talked for a while, as Rosalyn made her way over, giving me a hug. We all clowned a bit; then, out of nowhere, Kiyomi stood up and pulled me by my hand.

"Let's dance."

I wasn't the dancing type. I was way too cool and smooth for this shit but once on the dance floor, I forgot all about that. Anthony Hamilton had us in our zone, as "Best of Me" blared through the speakers. Something about this girl was amazing

and, at that moment, I really wanted to give her the best of me. Her smile lit up the room, while she gracefully circled me in a sensual, sexy rhythm. I was merely moving back and forth, but shawty had me feeling like I was really doing something.

“What the hell?!” Rosco teased, joining in on the fun. He leaned close to whisper in Kiyomi’s ear. Knowing him, I was sure he was apologizing for his prior behavior and not telling what else. I had to smile about it because everybody in my family took a liking to her. It wasn’t just me.

“You must’ve put something in his drink?” Meech clowned, causing everybody around us to laugh. “This nigga don’t dance!”

“Never seen him bust a move in my life,” Rosco joked.

“Get off my baby,” Granny cut in with laughter.

We literally partied like it was 1999. Once the evening wound down, we sang happy birthday to Rosco, adding in Dameon’s name since he had his own birthday cake lit up as well. It was the second year we’d done this, celebrating him still. I was the appointed person that blew his candles out, and the wish I made didn’t change. I just wanted my brother back, wherever he was.

Everybody started clearing out around eight. We’d been partying since around two. As Kiyomi and Kinsley chopped it up, Meech walked over.

“The afterparty is at the mansion.”

“I already figured that,” I responded.

“You know we had to keep this party PG-13 with Granny and the kids being here, but it’s on and poppin’ with strippers and all at the house.”

“I’m heading over,” I told him, as I grabbed Kiyomi by the hand. “You ready?”

“Yea,” she responded, and then, asked Kinsley, “What you ‘bout to do?”

“I’m going to the mansion,” she answered. “You coming?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll call and let you know either way. I gotta run home first and change clothes, that’s for sure,” she said, after Rosalyn messed around dancing and spilled her strawberry daiquiri all over her outfit.

“Ok, well call me,” Kinsley told her.

Kiyomi and I walked off, heading outside and to her car. As we stood up by the driver door, she punched me softly in the stomach.

“What’s that for?” I grinned.

“You tryna get to the mansion to see them po’ ass strippers,” she teased.

I laughed. “Nah, it ain’t like that. Trust me, I’ve seen enough naked ass to last me a lifetime.”

“Really? How many women have you slept with, Dodge?”

“I’m not putting a number on it. Just know it’s been more than my fair share.”

“Wow, you nasty,” she joked.

“Right now, I wanna be nasty with you.”

She blushed, something I loved seeing her do. “Stop it.” She smirked.

“I’m serious, but I’ll wait for it. Granny always told me that anything worth having is also worth waiting for.”

“Good, because I hope you don’t think I’m like these lil’ strippers you done took down through there and back.”

I grinned. “If you think that’s all I’ve been with, you got a lot to learn about me. It’s nothing wrong with strippers and I’ve had some of them too, but I be on some other shit.”

“So, you’re fucking women that are doctors, lawyers, accountants—”

“Why not? You think I only fuck with hood bitches or po’ bitches?” I mocked her. “Do I look like that kinda nigga?”

“Nah, but then again—I’m sure you’ve hit some white-collar bitches, stay-at-home bitches, cougars—”

“And now I’m fucking with a baby.”

She laughed. “You trippin’. Guess I am the baby of the bunch, huh?”

“You’re definitely the baby,” I clowned. “But there is no bunch. I’m mostly just coolin’ right now,” I expressed while opening her car door, being that the parking lot had started emptying out.

“So, are you fucking anybody or nah?”

I stared at her, not wanting to lie. “Maybe.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“It’s a maybe. Now, go home and change your clothes. You should come back out tonight, so we can finish this conversation.”

“I’ll think about it,” she teased.

“Don’t think too long or you’ll think wrong.”

She grinned. “Yea, yea.”

Once she’d gotten in her car and drove away, I headed to my ride. I glanced over at a parked black Escalade, not thinking much about it at first. After getting in my car, the Escalade headed out of the parking lot as the driver side black tinted window eased down.

My heart dropped a little. “Dontae Torres,” I mumbled under my breath. He nodded his head with a cocky smug and pointed his trigger finger at me. He cruised into the street with a black Benz following him, as they drove away. I immediately grabbed my cell phone and called Meech.

“Wassup, you headed to the mansion or you following behind shawty tryna fuck?” he teased.

“Dontae Torres is here.”

“Who?” he asked like he’d heard me but wanted to make sure.

“Dontae—”

“Here where?”

“At the club.”

“What the fuck?! You sho’ it’s him?”

“He made sho’ I knew it was him, and it was another car following him. They just pulled out of the parking lot.”

“Why the fuck would he show up now? We hadn’t heard nothing from them since Dameon and Polo went missing. That shit’s been—”

“Over two fucking years ago, so why are they back?”

“You think—”

“Nah, we can’t talk about this now. I’ll be there shortly,” I said, not wanting to say nothing else over the phone. Instead of partying, we had a new agenda, and that was to figure out why these niggas were in town.

I entered the mansion with Kinsley on my arm. It was already lit. The party must've started while we were still at the club. All the guys were here drinking and mingling, except for Dodge. I looked over to see Rosco encircled by strippers twerking all around him. The big smile on his face said that he was definitely having the time of his life.

I couldn't even focus on my surroundings from thinking about Dontae and his crew being in town. The last time they were here was when his brother, Polo, had gone missing. Polo was the middleman that had been serving Dameon for years. Ironically, years turned into them becoming homeys. But in a strange twist of events, he and Dameon went missing on the same night, and that was the night that Dodge was called to a bloody scene where he was given specific instructions to retrieve a large duffle bag and sit on it for a year before touching it again.

When Dontae showed up looking for his brother, they knew just as much as we did, and that was basically nothing. Even though Dodge had the work and the money, they didn't know it. On top of that, it looked like a robbery gone horribly wrong and no bodies left to tell the story. Dontae came to town at least three times doing his own investigation but always left more clueless than the time before; at least that's the way it seemed.

Dodge did as he was told and didn't start grinding until a full year after Dameon and Polo's disappearance. We also slow grinded the product for almost fourteen months. We didn't need anyone thinking we had work to that extent. Being that we were already in the streets, and I was doing a lil' bit of everything, it was a good cover. Plus, the guys also did their part without knowing exactly what was going on and, even if they did, they would never talk. If nothing else, we were big on loyalty and stayed true to the game.

As Kinsley and I made our way over to the island bar to get a drink, I spotted my ex, Thomasina. I hadn't seen her since she caught me getting my dick sucked by another bitch named Jessica. Jessica was my go-to for those late-night creeps. She was nothing more than a good lay and she knew it. We had porn star, wild as fuck sex and we both loved it.

"Got you a new squeeze, I see."

I looked over at her, leaning on the bar gazing at me. "Don't start that drunk shit."

"I'm just getting my first drink. I'm not drunk."

"Good, keep it that way," I told her. Once alcohol consumed her system, she became annoying as fuck and unpredictable, one of the things I disliked about her. Don't let the alcohol do you, control yo' shit. "What you doing here anyway? I haven't seen you in months."

"I wonder why?" she asked with a roll of the eyes. "Anyway, I won't go there tonight. It's over and done with. But, to answer your question, Mindy was invited by Rosco and I came as her plus one. I was at the club too, but you was too boo'd up to see me."

"Excuse me, do we have a problem?" Kinsley cut in.

Thomasina grinned, as I quickly intervened. "Ain't no problem, no problem at all, babe."

"Girl, ain't no problem. I'm just fucking with my ex. See," she said, turning her shoulder to Kinsley. "I still got his name tatted right here."

I hadn't seen her in so long, I thought she would've gotten my name covered up by now, especially how mad she was when she walked out on me.

"Oh, so you got tatted with his name on you?" Kinsley frowned. "I would never."

I was surprised she even said that, but before I could speak up, here comes big-mouth Thomasina. "Well, you'll never be his main bitch. Ask around, any woman that these niggas take serious get tatted as a way of proving our love. For three years, I was once known as his property—"

"Thomasina, chill out," I insisted.

"No, I wanna hear this," Kinsley told me, basically pushing me to the side to get up in Thomasina's face. "Just because you got tatted don't make you his property. I'm nobody's property."

"Oh, you say that now. Trust me, being his property comes with lots of benefits. But you're apparently not smart enough to know that." She smugly grinned. "You're running in a league that's not for you, baby."

"That's enough," I intervened, getting in the middle of them. I didn't want Kinsley swinging on her. I'd seen her in action, and this shit could get physical real quick.

"No, hold up," she directed her attention to me. "So, I'm curious. Everybody that you've been in a serious relationship with has a tattoo with your name on it?"

"Oh, it ain't like it's many of us. It's only three. Am I right?" Thomasina asked, only to be funny. "I believe the others got theirs covered up, but I'm still wearing mine because I'll always be his property. This nigga will always hold a special place in my heart, even though he was the one that broke it."

"Girl, you sound stupid." Kinsley stepped up but, at that moment, I grabbed Kinsley by the arm.

"Aye, don't do this at Rosco's party. Get the drinks and let's move around this shit." My tone had gotten serious because this was that unnecessary drama I didn't need to be

dealing with right now and I wasn't with it. Kinsley quickly caught on and hushed the hell up, doing as I said. "I think you should leave," I told Thomasina.

"This ain't your party," she shot back. I wanted to cuss her ass out, but I walked off instead. I really wished me and Kinsley could resume from where we left off at the club, but Thomasina fucked up the vibes and Dontae showing up had me feeling some kind of way. This night seemed like it was going straight to hell.

"We need to talk," Kinsley urged.

"You serious? Right now?" I asked, looking around at everybody having a good time.

"Yea, right now."

"A'ight, we can go up to my bedroom, unless you wanna talk right here."

"We can go upstairs," she responded. I knew then this was about to be serious.

Once entering the bedroom, she gulped down her drink. "Take it easy," I told her. She was already feeling pretty nice from the drinks at the club.

"I'm really confused about this shit. Homegirl has the nerve to show me her freaking tattoo with your name on it and then say it's other females also walking around with your name on them."

"Look, the other females have gotten their tattoos covered up. I paid for the cover-ups myself."

"So, why does that bald-head heffa downstairs still have hers? Y'all not together, right?"

"You know we're not together. She even said it."

"Ok then, she don't need to be flaunting that shit in my face. Talking about she's your property. She sounds like a fool. Where she get that from, you? Is it true that your homeys have their women tatted as some sort of property stunt or whatever?"

“No, it’s not like that. But, yes, we all have a thing that if we’re in deep, then we like our women branded.”

“Branded? Like, what the fuck? Is that necessary? What if they’ve never had a tattoo and didn’t want one?”

“That’s up to her. I can’t make a woman do what she don’t wanna do. But the women I’ve fucked with, did. You buggin’.”

“Nah, you trippin’, because I’m not getting a tattoo.”

“I think you’re in your feelings because my ex still got hers, on top of using the word property, but if you’re my woman, then what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I’m never going to do that. So, where does that leave us?”

I frowned because she was coming off super strong about a tattoo. I had never even mentioned that she should get one. She was just listening to my ex and somehow allowed that bullshit to get under skin. This was the first time I’d seen this side of her, and I wasn’t feeling it.

“I’m asking you a question.”

I stood there looking at her, trying not to say the wrong thing. Shawty had the wrong one, especially coming at me over something so simple. “I hear you talking to me, but you acting like you got an attitude and I don’t do well with those. Especially over something so fucking petty like getting a damn tattoo. If you don’t wanna get one, DON’T. Did I ask you to? Normally, and this is just facts, any woman I’ve ever been serious with wants to get one because that’s their way of showing me their loyalty and that they’re all mine. So, I have referred to them as my property. We all do around here. But that’s taken out of context when you say it or when you listen to how my ex is saying it. I got what she was saying though ___”

“Oh, so you siding with her?”

“Listen, like I said, I got what she was saying. I am good to any woman that I’ve considered strictly my woman. If she

got tatted then, yea, that proved her loyalty and her love to me.”

“Just because a bitch get tatted don’t mean it’s proving their loyalty or love. It’s plenty lower-back tramp stamps being read inside the mind of the next nigga that’s hittin’ it from the back.”

“Well, in their defense, they could still be fucking that nigga too. Or maybe getting a tattoo hurt so bad that they’ve not gone through the process again to get it covered up.”

“So, you saying you still fucking your ex, since she was so happy to show off that bogus ass tattoo?”

“You reaching now. Chill out,” I told her, being that I knew it had to be the liquor taking over, but she needed to know to just let it go. It wasn’t that serious, at least not to me.

“If I don’t get this tattoo, will you ever take me seriously?”

“I already do, so what’s the issue?”

“The issue is—”

“Ayyyeee!” Dodge called out from the other side of the door. He then knocked. “Yooo.”

“Yooooo!” I called back. “Come in.” He couldn’t have shown up at a better time.

Dodge walked in, speaking to Kinsley again. “I’m sorry to interrupt y’all, but um—”

I looked at Kinsley, already knowing what the deal was. “Yea, so can me and you talk about this later, or NOT, because as far as I’m concerned, this conversation is over.”

“Mm-hm, it’s like that?”

“Come on, babe. Just let it go already. I really need to talk to Dodge, so I’ll be down in a little bit.”

“Alright,” she said with a bit of an attitude and walked out of the room. I looked at Dodge with a shake of the head.

“What the hell just happened? Y’all was all lovey dovey at the club.”

“Thomasina happened.”

“Where the hell Sina at?”

“Downstairs starting shit.”

“Well damn.”

I grinned to brush off the negative energy. “Anyway, what the fuck is Dontae doing here?”

“Hell if I know, but we know he ain’t here because he wants to be here. Something is going on.”

“I agree with that.”

“I’ve been very careful in the way I’ve moved. I’ve also made sure that y’all were careful too. We didn’t move the weight fast. We did some real slow grinding and didn’t re-up. I’ve turned that money many times over in crypto currency and continuing our weed grind. For the most part, I’ve been chilling, so nothing we’ve done should have him coming back.”

“Do you think his uncle Don sent him?”

“Possibly, but why?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but we do know that Don is the one that calls all the shots,” I answered. Don was the kingpin where all the work came from. Dontae was his nephew and held shit down on their end. Polo was younger than Dontae and had the task of delivering the work abroad. Dameon took a trip out west to set up some licks and ended up meeting Polo. Needless to say, that link within itself was all he needed. In the beginning, Polo always came with two of his cousins but, eventually, he started coming by himself, at least when he came to see Dameon. They not only did business together, but they’d hit the clubs and hang out a bit too.

“He absolutely calls the shots, so I’m confused. On top of that, this nigga let his window down and pointed his trigger finger at me with a smug ass expression on his face.”

“He did that?”

“Hell yea. What was that shit about?”

“I don’t know but if he did that, then it’s definitely something and, whatever it is, we’re on the radar.”

“I agree. We gotta talk to the guys and let ‘em know what’s going on. The last thing we need to do is slip up,” I said.

“I personally need to have a sit down with Dontae and see where his head is at. I mean, they can’t want me dead because they had all the opportunity in the world to do that earlier or any other time in these past two years since Dameon and Polo been gone.”

“True.”

“So, I need to reach out and get this shit over with. Plus, I don’t know what happened to them, either. I’m lost. I know damn well he don’t think I knocked off my own brother and his just to get my hands on their work.”

“Yea, but they don’t know you got any work. Hell, we don’t even know if D and Polo are even dead, to be honest. We don’t know what the hell happened. I know we’ve talked about this a few times over, but what did you really drive up on? We gotta piece this shit together.”

“Man, that’s all I’ve been thinking about since that night. I drove up in the middle of nowhere. First off, what the fuck was they doing out there? It was like a cabin buried in the woods. Dameon never mentioned nothing like that to me. I’m assuming it was a ducked off location that had been used many times over. Probably a meeting place of some sorts. I mean, it would’ve been the perfect spot to remain low-key and off the grid. When I pulled up, I just saw this place with the lights on and I peeked in the windows. It was fully furnished, nothing seemed out of place. I remember turning the doorknob and it was unlocked, but I was freaking the fuck out and didn’t go inside. Those weren’t the instructions. So, I noticed lights coming from the back of the cabin. I eased to the back and saw that it was the car headlights still on. It was the car that D and Polo was in the last time I saw them,” he explained, taking in a deep breath. “Man, this shit is heavy. That had to be one of the scariest moments of my life. I didn’t know what the fuck I was

walking up on. Damn, my heart feel like it's about to jump out my chest.”

“Calm down. Breathe—look around the area as if you're still there.”

“I am.”

“Ok, and step by step, in slow motion, what did you immediately notice?”

“Dem bright ass headlights and that both the driver and passenger door were open.”

“Ok, and then what?”

“I move out of the lights shining on me and walk around to the driver side of the vehicle. My foot is right at the edge of a puddle of blood, but I don't immediately notice any trail. The driver seat is bloody. I can tell that whoever was sitting there was either getting in or ready to get out. The same with the passenger side. However, I didn't see as much on that side, even though it was blood there. The scene was eerie, and just the thought of it got my hands sweating right now,” he said, inhaling another deep breath. “I opened the backdoor, grabbed the heavy ass duffle bag and wasted no time getting out of there. If I didn't know any better, I'd think a bitch was watching me. That's how scary that shit was.”

“So, what do you think happened?”

“Shit, I don't know. Did Polo kill Dameon? No, I don't think so. He took a liking to him, and they were super cool. Plus, D was only spending about sixty thousand that night. That's like chump change to Polo. He was already here making his rounds—”

“So, do you think D killed Polo and then took off?”

“I thought about it because he would've been the one to gain, especially with telling me to hit up the scene and get that damn duffle bag. But, I don't see that. Nobody can make me see him killing somebody that he was that cool with. Polo put the nigga on. He still had work when that shit happened. He was just getting his stash right. Why you think Rosco was still

grinding when were like sitting ducks waiting for the year to pass?”

“You right. I’m just confused, and now this nigga back.”

“Exactly! And, why? We ain’t did nothing out of place. Plus, I know they ain’t back for that lil’ bit of shit. They make that kinda money in their sleep. Rosco even told me that dem boys run a sex trafficking ring.”

“Oh yea?”

“Shit yea. He told me this a long time ago, around the time when Dameon went missing. It really went in one ear and out the other because they want women, not niggas.”

“D would’ve volunteered for that shit though. They wouldn’t have had to kidnap him.” We laughed.

“You right,” he said as his phone beeped with an incoming text message. He glanced down at it and smiled.

“Nigga, I ain’t seen you smiling this much in a long time. Shit, ever!” I joked.

“It’s her. She’s coming over.”

I nodded my head, feeling good for my boy. It finally seemed like he had let that toxic shit with Keisha go. “That’s wassup. Enjoy the fun beginnings, because for some reason, it don’t always stay that way.”

“Speak for yourself.” Dodge grinned and walked out the room.

I followed behind him, not really in the mood to see Kinsley, especially if she was going to keep on talking about that damn tattoo. Matter of fact, arguing over something so petty had me trying to figure out what really was going on with her. Think I needed to find that out before I took this shit more seriously than I should be.

I woke up with a smile on my face, stretching my arms out to get the blood flowing, so I could get ready for the day. This had been my mood for the past two weeks. I was absolutely feeling myself being that the sexiest niggas in the city were on my ass, and I loved every bit of it.

Dodge was still playing it cool but definitely had all of my attention. I just couldn't show it because getting hurt this time around wasn't an option, and I had a feeling that maybe he was feeling the same way too. It wasn't like he was celibate or anything, but I wasn't giving it up so fast. He'd tease me about it here or there, but it was no pressure, nor was he pressed. I understood his needs and maybe one day I would fulfill them but, for my own sanity, I knew it was best to wait.

Hendrix was like the sun shining on a rainy day. He brought a smile to my face anytime I was in his presence. He walked me to class and showed me just the right amount of attention that I wanted. I hadn't given him that date yet, but that's because I wanted to be sure of it. He wasn't complaining though and never mentioned the money that I'd taken from him that day. I didn't believe he was fucking anybody but, hey, if looks told the story, I'd suspect his bed was hosting a different bad bitch every night of the week.

Rosalyn and I had gotten super close in so little time. She truly had become someone I considered a close friend. Of course, nobody took Kinsley's place, but since her disagreement with Meech, she'd been in a different space. I

didn't want to focus on that because Kinsley went through mood swings from time to time, sometimes more often than she realized. That could be blamed on her mother and her father because neither were fully in her life like they should've been, and she held some serious resentment toward them for that.

As I mentally said my affirmations, something I needed to stay consistent with but wasn't at all, I eased out of bed. Before I could make it to the bathroom to brush up, mama bust in my room door.

"Dang, you can knock first."

"I know I can, but I pay bills 'round here. Not you," she sassed.

"Okaaaay, so what you want?"

"For somebody that solely depends on me, you sure as hell got a smart-ass mouth," she teased, causing me to laugh.

"Maaaa, it's early. What ya want, girl?"

"Your aunt is here."

"Glenda?"

"That's the only aunt you got on my side of the family, ain't it?"

I grinned but then got serious right quick. "Oh wow, Aunt Glenda is here? I haven't seen her in forever. How she look?"

"She looks ok, not good, but not her worst," she answered.

"Is it just the liquor and drugs?"

"Probably, but I don't know."

My eyes stretched. "Where's Kinsley? You know she's not gonna be happy to know that Auntie is here."

"She's in the shower, but I came in here to see if you could tell her while I go see what's going on with Glenda. She hasn't been over here in years. So, to show up now definitely tells me that something is wrong."

"Chiiile, Kinsley ain't gonna like this."

“I know, but I’m not turning my sister away just because Kinsley don’t like it. She needs to deal with some things anyway. That lil’ attitude of hers lately has been working on my last nerves. I’m ‘bout to put yo’ ass and her ass out.”

“Ma, really? I ain’t even did nothing.”

“Yea, but you quick to get a lil’ funky ass attitude too, like somebody owe y’all asses something.”

I laughed. “Don’t you have somebody to talk to? You better go back in there before your purse get missing.”

“Yomiiii, don’t do my sister, lil’ girl.”

I laughed. “Just kidding,” I said, as she walked out. “Or am I?” I teased under my breath. Damn, I sure as hell didn’t want to deal with this shit right about now. Kinsley already was having mood tantrums and now, I was about to add to it. Mama would send me to do the dirty work. Shit, I could’ve talked to Auntie, and she could’ve told Kinsley herself. I sighed while walking in the bathroom to freshen up. I’d deal with that shit when I came out.

I walked out of the bathroom and headed straight into Kinsley’s bedroom.

“Dang, you can knock first. Acting just like your mama.”

I grinned. “I literally just told her the same shit earlier.”

“Can you believe that me and Meech are arguing again?”

“Damn, what the hell is wrong with y’all? Everything was good until you ran into his ex.”

“That’s the fucking problem. While we were chilling last night, this bitch called so much till he had to turn off his phone. So, I tell him that he should answer and cuss her ass out.”

“And?”

“And, he wouldn’t answer. Said she gon’ keep calling regardless.”

“He still could’ve said something to her.”

“Well, then, the bitch had the nerves to pop up.”

“Where? At the mansion?”

“Yes, and he went outside and handled her ass, because she left after that. But, it’s the principle. I feel like he’s still fucking her. Or maybe he started again after we saw her at Rosco’s birthday party.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Meech is into one woman and that’s you.”

“Girl, never let a man fool you like that. Them niggas fuck no matter what.”

“Well, Loyal definitely taught me that,” I mumbled.

“I’m trying to tell you.”

“Let’s be honest, Sus. You will sabotage a good thing in a heartbeat. I believe you run niggas off because you’re too afraid of getting attached.”

Kinsley rolled her eyes while applying Unicorn Kisses whipped body butter by The Spiritual Tea Company all over her silky skin. “Girl, I don’t wanna hear that shit. I save myself from getting in too deep, otherwise I would end up with a broken heart like you did when Loyal fucked you over.”

I slick rolled my eyes back. “Really, Kin? You might be smelling good, but your attitude is still stank.”

“Whatever.”

“You really should reevaluate yourself. Meech is a good nigga. He is really into you.”

“Ok, and?”

“And you shouldn’t be treating him like this. I mean, damn, you haven’t even given him a chance. It ain’t like y’all have been together long.”

“I don’t appreciate his ex-bitch always coming around or calling. That’s a red flag. You already know once a nigga shows me anything that don’t align with the way he originally started treating me, I cut his ass off.”

“So, you’ve cut him off completely?”

“No, but it’s pretty much heading in that direction. I’ve already removed my feelings from the situation.”

“Wow, you need to see my therapist.”

“Fuck your therapist.” She smirked.

“That shit ain’t funny,” I said in a fluctuated high-pitched tone. “You really need to talk with someone about your feelings or you’re gonna end up a lonely, grouchy old lady.”

Kinsley continued moving about, getting dressed and acting like she wasn’t stun my ass.

“Um—well, I came in here to tell you that your mama is here.”

She scowled, shooting me a menacing look. “Here where?”

“She’s here in the house talking to Mama as we speak.”

“What the fuck is she doing here?”

“Hell, your guess better than mine.”

“She ain’t been here in years. Why the fuck is she showing up now?” she huffed, slipping on a black one-piece jumper from Fashion Nova.

“Honestly, Kinsley, I don’t know, but it must be serious.”

“Nothing is serious when it comes to her. She’s been getting clean my whole life and that always fails. She’s so out of touch with reality, and I don’t have time for her bullshit.”

“I know how much you’ve suffered from her absence and her presence. She wasn’t exactly an ideal, loving mother. She and Mama are like night and day. I get it.”

“No, you really don’t get it. I went through a lot with that lady. It’s shit I was even embarrassed to tell anybody, so I suppressed it and moved past it.”

“Kin, I know this shit is deep. So, if you don’t wanna see why she’s here, I understand. I’m sure Mama will understand too. But, I’m about to go in here and see what’s going on with

her. You can stay in here and when she's gone, I'll let you know."

"Fine," Kinsley irritably responded.

I walked out of the bedroom, unsettled in my feelings. I knew my cousin had gone through a lot while living with Auntie, but to hear her say she'd gone through things she had never talked about touched me. I could somewhat understand why she was always all over the place with her feelings, but I still felt she needed help in order to get past that shit. Or at least in learning how to cope with it on a daily.

I stepped in the living room to see Auntie and Mama talking. The minute Auntie looked up, she smiled at me. "Wow, Yomi, you have grown into a beautiful young lady."

I smiled. "Thanks, Auntie. It's good to see you. It's been a long time."

"I just told her that you haven't seen her in years," my mama said.

"I know, but I want to make up for my absence. I know this can't happen overnight, but I need to get my life together. I'm forty-two years old. I can't keep living like this."

I believe we'd heard this before, but I sat down to hear her out again.

"What's so different this time, Glenda?" my mama asked. "You put all of us through getting clean and then go right back to what has kept this family broken."

"I know, and I'm sorry about that. I believe I'm strong enough to do it this time."

At that moment, Mama looked over at me. "Where is Kinsley? Did you tell her that Glenda was here?"

"Yea, I told her."

"Is she coming in here? Because I really wanna see her," Glenda pondered. "I miss her so much."

I frowned. How could someone claim to miss their only child so much but hadn't made any attempts to see her in

years? The shit was quite confusing to me. “Well—um, I don’t think—”

“Glenda, you just can’t pop up on us and expect things to go back to normal. I mean, look at you. You look like you haven’t taken a bath in days.”

“I wash,” she cut in, like hearing Mama say that pissed her off a little bit.

“Ok, I’m just saying that you don’t look so good. You really look bad.”

“You think I don’t know that, Nicole? I know I look bad. I fucking feel bad too. That’s why I’m here now! I know I need to get my shit together or I’m gonna die. This shit has taken control of me for far too long and I need help.”

“Glenda, you’ve asked for help over the years, and we’ve helped you. But it’s always your choice to go back in the streets. You’ve been on alcohol and weed since you were twelve, then you graduated to cocaine by the time you were sixteen. You were even on drugs when you was pregnant with Kinsley—”

“No, I got clean to have my baby,” she sassed with an attitude.

“In the beginning, you were on drugs, Glenda. Yes, you got clean about four months in, but you still was on drugs afterwards. Staying clean never lasts long.”

Glenda irritably shook her head. “Don’t discredit me, Nicole.”

“I’m not discrediting you. I’m just speaking facts.”

“Well, your facts ain’t adding up.”

“See, this ain’t what we’re gonna do, and especially in front of my child. You have a way of trying to brush off your actions as if they didn’t exist, and we all know they did.”

“I never said they didn’t. I’m just saying give me credit where it’s due.”

My mama crossly grinned. “Mhm-mm—I’m not doing this with you. You show up, you disappear. You come back; you leave again. This has actually been the longest you’ve been gone. How long has it been, Glenda?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s been almost five years, right? I believe you showed up to congratulate Kinsley on graduating high school. I also believe, at that time, you told us you were checking into rehab and getting clean, yet you disappeared once again.”

“I definitely don’t need to travel down memory lane.”

“I’m sure that’s not why you’re here, but we have to address the fucking elephant in the room. You don’t think so, Sis?”

“You’ve always been the arrogant one,” Glenda expressed out of nowhere. “You think you’re better than me because you’ve never had to experience the shit I’ve been through.”

“Glenda, don’t do that. I’ve never thought I was better than you. For that matter, you were the one that always got the most care. Mama and Daddy always seemed to love on you more because you were the one that seemed to need or want the most attention. I just did what needed to be done to get through living in that house with all of y’all.”

“Seems like you did well for yourself,” she said, looking around our house. She acted like we were living in an eight-bedroom mansion or something.

“I’ve worked hard for it,” my mom shot back.

“Ok, and I just want to work hard and get the things I deserve too. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all, but we’ve heard this before. Don’t get me wrong; I wanna see you work hard, get clean, and live your best life, but you gotta want it for yourself too.”

“I know, and that’s why I’m here. I wanna get clean and finally get myself together. Where is Kinsley? Because it’s something I want to tell her.”

“Well, um—Kinsley isn’t exactly coming out. She don’t really wanna see you, Auntie. Um—maybe you should get clean first and then come back afterwards to make amends,” I recommended, because if she was my mama, I’d hate to see her looking this way. She looked like the struggle was real and smelled a lil’ raunchy too. I was glad Kinsley wasn’t coming out because this shit was embarrassing.

“I appreciate your suggestion, but I need to talk with my daughter first. I can understand her not wanting to deal with me, but I’m still her mother. I can’t do this without her knowing my reasons why it’s time for me to clean my life up.”

“You can tell me, Auntie. I’ll tell her. I just think it’s important for you to get clean, stay clean for a while, and then reach out to Kinsley,” I said.

Glenda stood up. “Where is she? I’ll go to her.”

My mama stood up to stop her. “No ma’am. You’re not walking all over my house to look for Kinsley.”

“I wouldn’t have to walk all over your house if you just tell me where the hell she’s at.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? You’ve broken that girl. Kinsley deals with a lot because of you. She doesn’t want to see you right now. What part of that don’t you understand?”

“I get it, Nicole. I get it! I fucked up a long time ago, but I so badly want to make it right.”

“And why? What’s so different now, Sis? What the hell is so different?”

“I’m pregnant, Nicole. I’m fucking pregnant. That’s what’s so different.”

My eyes stretched wider than the Mississippi River. “You’re what?!” my mama let out. “You’re pregnant?”

“You’re what?!” Kinsley asked, entering the living room with a befuddled look on her face. “I know I didn’t hear that you’re pregnant.”

“Kin.” Glenda smiled, with a sigh of relief to see her daughter. “Yes, I’m pregnant, and I wanna be a good mom to this baby. I wanna be a part of your life and love on you too. Please, let me do that. I’m begging you.”

“Wow, are you serious right now? Yomi, pinch me, please. This shit has gotta be a joke.”

“I’m serious, Kinsley. Let me be your mama. I promise to get clean and do right this time.”

Kinsley stood staring at Glenda like she was a stranger, a person she never knew. I scooted back on the sofa, just in case Sus started swinging at her. I wanted no parts of that smoke. I glanced over at Mama, and she too was looking like she was preparing herself to break up a fight, but then she said something to try and calm the situation.

“Glenda, I think you should leave now. This is too much for us.”

“Please, I’m heading to rehab now. I just wanna make sure that you’re on board with me,” she said to Kinsley.

“On board with you? On board with you? Have you ever been on board with me? You have never taken out the time to invest your attention or your love in me, yet you want me to be on board with you getting clean. Oh, let me not forget because you’re a forty-two-year-old dope fiend that’s pregnant. Wow, I didn’t even know you could still have kids. I mean, damn, I’m sure you’ve aborted about five of my siblings already, right?”

“Kinsley, don’t do that,” Glenda urged with a cut expression on her face.

“Do what? Tell you how I feel right now? You got the nerves to come in here looking tired as hell but want my forgiveness? Is that why you’re really here?”

“Yes, I want you to forgive me and give me another chance. Please,” she begged. “I need this more than you know.”

“And, I’ve needed you more than you know but you weren’t there.”

“It’s never too late, baby. My boyfriend is in the car outside waiting for me to come out, so we can both check in and get clean.”

Kinsley grinned. It sort of freaked me out because I didn’t know what she was about to say. “Your boyfriend? That’s so funny to me. You actually have a dope fiend boyfriend who also wants to get clean, and this is because it’s his baby too, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Go figure. Two crack heads tryna clean up for their baby. What a fairytale love story.”

Glenda started crying. I ain’t gon’ lie, I felt kind of bad for her. “This is no joke. I’ve been sick for a long time. You have no clue what I’ve dealt with before you were born. It’s things I never spoke on.”

“And it’s things I’ve never spoke on either, Glenda!”

My mama stepped in. “Ok, y’all need to calm down. This is too much. I think it’s going to take more than just you

asking for forgiveness to be forgiven.”

“Duh,” Kinsley sassed. “She should know that. I’m leaving. I don’t have time for this.”

“Kinsley, please. Can we get past this?”

“I don’t know. Can you?” she asked and, without saying another word, she grabbed her keys off the key stand and walked out the house.

“Nicole, please talk to her for me.”

“I’ll try, Glenda. I do wanna say that I’m proud of you for taking this step again, and I hope you stick with it this time.”

“Thank you,” she said and looked over at me. “Love you, Yomi.”

“Love you too, Auntie.” I heard Kinsley skirtin’ out of the driveway, as Auntie walked out to leave. I looked over at Mama. “Dang, my birthday is in two days and they in here acting a fool,” I teased.

“Yomi, hush. Everything ain’t always funny.”

“I knooow,” I sang. “But, come on, Ma. I can’t be getting in my feelings like that. I have a big day coming up. Ya girl is about to be nineteen, baby!”

“I know, and I’m so proud of you for going to college and being a good girl. Don’t think it’s going unnoticed.”

“Good, because Sunday night, I’m staying out all night. Just so you know.”

“Girl, if you don’t get your ass out my face.”

I laughed. “Love you too,” I said, skipping back down the hall to my bedroom. The minute I laid across the bed just thinking about all the crazy shit that had transpired, my cell phone rang. I glanced down to see that it was Dodge calling.

“Hello,” I answered with a big ass smile on my face.

“Wassup, baby girl? What you doing?”

“Nothing much right now. Just cooling, laying across my bed.”

“You want some company in that bed?”

“Yea, if you can get past my mama to get in here,” I teased, as he grinned.

“Don’t tempt me. All I gotta do is make a good impression on Mama and I’m in there.”

“That ain’t gonna be so easy.”

“That’s what yo’ mouth say, but I beg to differ.”

I chuckled, “You think you’re such a lady’s man.”

“I am,” he responded with arrogance. That shit turned me on.

“I can believe it.” I smirked. “So, are you sure you can get me in the club tonight? I really wanna be able to celebrate Rosalyn’s birthday with her.”

“No worries, I got you. I’d rather you sit by me or at least in my section. I mean, the club is pretty laid back, but drunk niggas get beside themselves, and I’d hate to knock a muthafucka out.”

“Whew, you would do that for lil’ ol’ me?” I teased.

“I’ll do more than that about someone I care about.”

I blushed. “Awww, you care about me?”

“You can’t tell?”

“I mean, yea, I guess.”

“Well, I do,” he acknowledged.

I smiled so hard just hearing him say that.

“You blushing?”

“No.”

“Yes, you are. I hear it in your voice.”

I giggled. “No, you don’t.”

“A’ight,” he said, as I continued blushing.

“Anyway—”

“Yea, anyway,” he mocked. “What are you doing for your birthday Sunday?”

“I have no plans, to be honest.”

“Well, if Mama isn’t doing anything, even if she does, I still wanna spend a lil’ time with you.”

“Oh yea?”

“Yea,” he responded in the sexiest tone ever.

“I’m down.”

“Cool. I’ll see you later?”

“Of course,” I told him. “I need to get my day started anyway. I spoke with Sha yesterday and she’s going to do my nails around three.”

“I paid her already, so you ain’t gotta be kicking out no money.”

“Thank you.”

“You going over there?”

“Yea, I ain’t scared.”

He grinned. “I know you’re not, but—”

“I’m just kidding. She’s coming over here. I was going over there at first, though, but Granny doesn’t want me running into drama.”

“Granny said that?”

“Yea, she said that.”

“That’s nice of her. I don’t want you running into drama either. I would’ve met you over there if that was the case.”

“Awww, aren’t you sweet, but I’m definitely drama free nowadays, especially this weekend.”

“Good, I don’t have to worry too much. I have a lil’ business to handle, but enjoy your nail date with Sha. I’m sure you’re gonna love her work.”

“Thank you. I know I will.” I cheesed. “Talk to you later?”

“Of course,” he responded, making me smile once more and then, we ended the call.

Before I knew it, I had dozed off and was awakened by Kinsley shaking my leg.

“Bitch, get your ass up. Didn’t you say Sha was coming over to do your nails?”

“Yea,” I groggily answered, slowly cracking my eyes open and looking around. “What time is it?”

“Almost two o’clock.”

“Damn, I was knocked the hell out.”

“Slobbering and shit.” Kinsley grinned.

I sat up in bed, stretching my tired arms out. “I see you’re in a better mood.”

“I just smoked, that’s why.”

“No wonder. Why you ain’t wake me up, so I could hit it too, Sus?”

“Because I smoked on the way here, nut.”

“Oh, ok. So, how do you feel about Auntie?”

“I have no feelings. I don’t care what that lady got going on. I’m just over it.”

“Dang, you’re going to have a baby sister or brother, though. Don’t you wanna be there for them?”

“Girl, I’m twenty-three years old. She waited till now to get pregnant and to suddenly wanna get clean. So, I guess I’m supposed to forgive everything that has happened and move forward in trying to build this relationship with her and this kid that probably won’t even be born.”

“Kin, you can be so harsh at times.”

“Listen, I’m just saying. She’s talking about she’s pregnant, but how many other times has she been pregnant? I’m sure it was a lot and still, it’s only me that’s living.”

“You might have a point,” I agreed.

“Besides Glenda testing me today, can you believe that when I left here, I went over to see Meech. At first, things were good, we was just chilling and talking—”

“So, you told him about Glenda?”

“Hell nawl. I ain’t telling him about a woman that’s dead to me.”

“Wow,” I uttered, but didn’t even take that any further. Kinsley could be downright mean as hell at times.

“Anyway, this nigga told me that in six months to a year, he wants me to quit my job.”

My eyes widened. “Quit your job because—”

“Talking about he’ll take care of me. First off, I’m not you ___”

“Hold up, bitch. I ain’t got nothing to do with that.”

“Yea, but you know what I mean. You want a nigga to take care of you. You wanna be a stay-at-home mom with the kids and shit. That ain’t me. I don’t even want no nappy-head ass chullen.”

I laughed out loud. “You so wrong, Kin.”

“I know,” she laughed back. “But, it’s the truth and I’m not quitting my job for him or nobody else.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“Yea.”

“What he said?”

“He said that I was being stubborn and that I needed to stop with this aggressive behavior because it was starting to turn him off.”

“Wow.”

At that moment, she sat down on the side of the bed, almost looking like she had tears in her eyes. “I’m just so sick of this. People tryna get me to live how they want me to live. Glenda coming back expecting me to forget and forgive like ain’t shit happen. Meech acting like he’s my father and wants

to take care of me, but when I don't conform, it's a problem. On top of that, I just wanna move out of here and get my own place. I'm grown and it's past time."

"Yea, but Mama ain't putting you out. She talks her shit, but she wouldn't care if we lived with her forever."

"But, that ain't it for me. I need my own space. I wanna have company come over and spend the night. We can have company, but Auntie don't play about a nigga spending the night."

"True."

"I just have a lot going on and sometimes, I get to feeling so overwhelmed."

"You just need to take a couple of shots of Remy and calm your nerves. You go through this crazy shit more often than you realize. Just breathe. It's gonna be alright."

"Yea, I hear you."

"Anyway, about tonight."

"Yea, what about tonight? Ooooh yea, Dodge is getting you in the club. Girl, it's gonna be lit. Them niggas done VIP'd the whole back section of the club for Rosalyn's birthday. That shit is like five thousand dollars."

"Damn, what the fuck?! Who all gonna be there?"

"Shit, the usual. I guess a few friends or associates, but Meech said that Rosalyn just wanted a regular club night of fun, which is why she didn't have a party like Rosco. Of course, Rosco and Dodge are such the protectors that they don't want them partying all over the club with everybody else, so they reserved that area just for her."

"I knew she wanted a regular club night just to be herself, but she did say that Rosco probably was going to be watching her like a hawk. Plus, her other two sisters are gonna be there too."

"So, how many of them are there?"

"Talking about Rosalyn's siblings?"

“Yea.”

“Um, it’s Rosco, Rosalyn, Royce, Rhoda, and Romello is the five-year-old baby boy.”

“What the fuck?! Their parents got a whole baseball team.”

I laughed. “I know right, and I’m bad with names, but I sure as hell remembered all those R’s.”

“I don’t see how the hell they keep up. That’s too damn much,” Kinsley laughed, just as the doorbell rang. “That’s probably Sha.”

“I’m excited about these nails,” I told her, heading to open the door. “Hey gir—”

“Hey,” the delivery guy said. I stared at the dozen yellow tulips, mixed in with a dozen red roses. “I have a delivery for Kiyomi Simmons.”

“Um—that’s me,” I said, as he handed the beautiful flowers over in a *Happy Birthday Yomi* embroidered vase. It was absolutely stunning. As the delivery guy walked off, I turned to face Kinsley, whose mouth was partly open like she was just as dumbfounded as me.

“Damn, what does this mean?” she asked.

In a clueless tone, I responded back, “Your guess is just as good as mine.”



I stepped in the club on an all-time high. It wasn’t even my birthday, but it was my birthday weekend, and I was going to party like nobody’s business. On top of that, I was holding the hand of the hottest nigga in the club. He was fine, fine and looked good, good. Tonight, he was giving me rich nigga vibes, sporting a Louis Vuitton fitted cap, matching shirt and belt. His Louis Vuitton sneakers were tight as hell and reminded me of a pair of Air Force One’s, his favorite sneaker.

Listen, whatever Dodge wore, it was always stylish and sexy as fuck on him. I loved it all.

We made our way through the lit crowd as I scoped out the place. Even though this was my second time in here, it was definitely different on a packed club night. The crowd was more intense. Women were walking around like they were only there to land a nigga with money. The men were either standing around checking us out or mingling and telling lies. It was certainly my kind of party.

We made it to the back section of the VIP area, and it was big as hell. I didn't even see this the first time I was here. The crew was there, laughing and joking around while getting their drink on.

“Wassup, birthday girl,” I said to Rosalyn.

“Heyyy, my best fran,” she joked with an elated smile. I could tell she was already lit and feeling good.

“Don't go too hard,” I told her, as she leaned over to whisper in my ear.

“Cobra is gonna take good care of me.”

“Ooooh, I've been waiting for you to spill the tea.”

“We still have to keep it on the low, because you know how my brother is.”

“I know.” I nodded.

“But tonight, I'm definitely going home with him afterwards. I don't care who finds out.”

“You go girl,” I shrieked in her tone.

“Sha, your brother loves my nails,” I said, holding my fingers up.

“I knew he would. He tipped me good too.” She grinned. “You need to get those done once a week.”

We laughed. “Long as it's on his dime,” I joked.

“You know I got you,” Dodge assured me. “Aye, baby girl, you good, though?”

“Girl, go tend to your boo, because I’m sure as hell about to tend to mine.” Rosalyn giggled.

“Okurrrr,” I let out. I moved on over to Dodge. He had a cup of Remy in hand already waiting for me. I wasted no time sipping the good shit.

“Don’t go too hard,” he told me.

I smiled. “If I do, you got me, right?”

“Damn right,” he responded with that handsome ass smile of his. As we cozied up to each other, the night seemed to be going great. I was enjoying this moment, watching the bottle girls doing their thing, including Kinsley. She seemed to be in a much better space, and that made me happy for her. I just hoped it lasted. We had two bottle girls serving our area because it was so big. One was Donk and the other was some girl I didn’t know, but she was pretty. Apple was servicing a VIP section next to ours that had about six mafia looking half-breeds, as my mama would say, over that way. I knew her tips were going to be good.

Within the hour, I’d drunk two cups of Remy and was working on my second cup of 818 Tequila mixed with some sweet shit that was definitely going to sneak up on my ass. Even though I was on another feel-good level and about two sheets in the wind, I noticed Dodge watching these men over in the VIP section next to ours. Meech walked over a few times as they chopped it up about whatever the hell was going on. For some reason, the fun was still hype around us, but the crew seemed to have gotten a bit more on alert.

“Where’s Kinsley?” I asked.

“She told you she was working the bar the last time she came over. Something about it being a shortage of bartenders tonight.”

“Damn, I didn’t even hear her.”

“I know.” He grinned.

“I’m ‘bout to go over there,” I said while looking in that direction, spotting her serving drinks.

“Uh, ok, just be careful,” he told me, but he seemed preoccupied anyway. I headed to the bar and was lucky to find an empty seat right in the front.

“Kin-Kin!” I called out.

She laughed, walking over. “What your drunk ass want?”

“Nothing,” I answered, sipping from my cup. “I got all the free drinks I want in VIP.”

“I’ve noticed.” She grinned. “This damn bar is busy as fuck tonight. I’d rather be running my sections, but I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I am.” I smiled.

“Chile, these people keep ordering. Be right back.”

As I sat there bobbing my head and rolling my hips in the seat listening to “By Yourself” by Ty Dolla Sign ft Bryson Tiller, a light tap was felt on my shoulder.

“Ki,” the familiar voice caressed my earlobe. It was only one person that called me Ki.

What the fuck?! I thought to myself, but casually turned in my seat to face this nigga. “Loyal, or shall I say, muthafuckin’ D-I-S-L-O-Y-A-L.”

“Wow, I’ll take that. What are you doing in here?”

“Question is, why are you back? Aren’t you supposed to be galivanting the world with your new bitch?”

He grinned but cut it short. “I only came back to see you.”

“Oh, really?” I didn’t believe shit he was saying.

“Your birthday is Sunday. I was hoping to see you.” Did you like the flowers?”

“My trash can did,” I sassed.

“I deserved that.”

“You ain’t gotta be sending me nothing that you once did. Remember, our relationship is over.”

“Yea, but I know those were your favorite.”

“Not no more.”

“Damn, Ki. I’m sorry.”

“For what? You did what you had to do,” I said, but tried to keep it cute. The last thing I needed was for him to see me sweat again.

“I shouldn’t have done you like that. I’m sorry.”

“Ok, apology accepted,” I told him, like I was so unbothered by his bullshit but, deep down inside, I was bothered like a muthafucka.

“Can we talk later?”

“I’d rather not,” I told him. “You can move around now.”

“Wow, ok, so it’s like that?”

“Hendrix!” I called out, thinking that this nigga couldn’t have been walking by at a better time.

“Kiyomi,” he countered with a smile the minute he laid eyes on me. “I didn’t know you were gonna be here.”

“That’s because you never called me back.”

“I’m sorry. I got tied up at the store with my pops.”

“I figured.” I playfully grinned, almost forgetting that Loyal was standing there. I was now giving Hendrix all of my attention. Hell, it was the convenience of it all. Plus, he was like a tall stream of cold water on a hot summer day. I could drink from his fountain any day of the week.

“Damn, you’re beautiful.” He cheesed. “Let me buy you a drink.”

“No, I’m good,” I told him, holding up my cup. The nigga was looking and smelling good as hell. At that moment, I grabbed him by the hand and started dancing with him. I didn’t know what the hell I was thinking. I just wanted to make Loyal jealous. I glanced over my shoulder to see him clearly in his feelings but, instead of indulging, he walked off. That’s when I spotted Keisha, who was unaware of my presence. This bitch was about to get it. Promise when I put these hands on her this time, it’d take an army to get me off

her. I instantly stopped dancing and reached out to touch her ass, but Dodge came out of nowhere, grabbing me from the back.

“Baby girl, no,” he calmly said in my ear. “This is ain’t the time for that.”

Keisha turned to see me and Dodge standing there, not knowing that she was about to get dragged in this bitch. She shot us an unbothered smirk with a slick roll of the eyes like she wasn’t concerned at all, but she had better be. I wanted all the smoke, and she was gonna feel it, sooner than later.

DODGE GAMBLE

This night was crazy as fuck, as I held Kiyomi back from swinging on Keisha. I knew if she ever spotted her, it was going down. But we were out celebrating Rosalyn’s birthday. It definitely wasn’t the time for that drama. On top of that, I was confused as to what Kiyomi had going on.

“You okay, Kiyomi?”

“Yea, she’s a’ight,” I cut in, eyeing this nigga down. I already knew who he was being that I was a GSU basketball admirer and often times betted on the games, but he needed to back the fuck up like he didn’t see me standing here.

“Yes, Hendrix, I’m good,” she responded.

“It’s either time to go or we can go back to our section, because I’m not standing by and watching you fight,” I told her.

She looked at the basketball star and then at me, and then back at him.

“Um—I’m going with him before I snatch this bitch’s wig off.”

Hendrix frowned. “Who’s bothering you?”

“She said she was good,” I assured him. I actually liked the nigga, at least his basketball skills, so I would hate to knock his young ass out. He needed to move around now.

“I’m ok,” she repeated. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Ok,” he said, but the look on his face was that of concern as he watched us walk off.

Kiyomi looked over at me, as if she needed to explain. “That’s Hendrix Wright, a guy I go to school with. He’s cool.”

“Mm-hm, I know of him.” I nodded, but I could tell from the way he looked at her that it was more than him just being a cool guy. She even grabbed him by the hand and started dancing but, if I was not mistaken, I would say that was to get back at another dude that was in her face. I could tell from the body language and the eye contact of whatever words they were having that she had some kind of history with him. He likely was the ex.

As I sat back down, Kiyomi headed over to talk with Sha and Rosalyn, as Meech made his way back over to me.

“What’s going on with y’all?”

“Nothing, she just saw Keisha and tried to hit her ass. I can’t blame her; she owe her a beat down, but I had to tell her that tonight ain’t it.”

“Damn.”

“I know, right. I just wanted to come out and have a lil’ fun, but it’s too much going on,” I said, glancing over my shoulder to see Keisha heading over to the section where Dontae’s lil’ do-boys were sitting at. “What the fuck is she doing?”

Meech looked over to see exactly what I was looking at. “Playing with fire.”

“Well, her ass gon’ get burned tonight, because I ain’t saving her this time. She’s on her own.”

“Why the fuck are they back, anyway? They were just here a couple of weeks ago. To come back definitely tells me they’re searching for something.”

“Or peeping game,” I added. “It can’t be about the shit in the duffle bag. I know better than that. So, whatever this is gotta be deep, but why they fucking with us? Dameon is missing right along with Polo. They saw the scene when they

showed up there. They knew something wicked had happened.”

“You right, but I’m gon’ have Apple listen closely to their conversation as she’s serving them. Maybe she’ll hear something that’ll help us connect the dots. Meanwhile, everybody’s on alert. Hopefully we won’t have to shut this bitch down.”

“You know we will if we have to.”

“That I do know.” Meech nodded, as he walked off.

I sat back just scoping the scene. I was more observant than anything. Talking wasn’t my forte. I’d rather listen first and then chat about it later. I could see that the lil’ star ball player was watching Kiyomi, probably making sure that she was alright. I knew he liked her; I mean, look at her. Who wouldn’t? However, was she just as much into him? I could tell something was there, but I wasn’t pressed, not the least bit. My main thing was for her to feel as free as need be to do whatever her heart desired. Either way, I was going to be me, and if she was with me, I was going to protect her by any means necessary.

I sipped from my cup of Remy, glancing back over my shoulder at Dontae’s henchmen. I had no clue where he was, but they wouldn’t be here unless specifically ordered by him. This shit was already crazy within itself, but I needed to find out what the deal was. At that moment, I stood up, looked over at Meech, and nodded my head towards the VIP section in which I presumed to be my sworn enemies now. Without waiting for an *ok* from my right hand, I headed over.

“Dodge,” I heard Rosco call out, but I was on a mission.

The minute I entered their VIP section, one of the guys stood up, crossing his arms at the wrist just below his waist, like that was supposed to scare me. I grinned to myself, thinking, *these niggas don’t know who they’re fucking with*. I might’ve been younger than my brother by two years, but I was definitely a thug in the streets. I just wasn’t much talk.

Growing up in the hood, we'd had shoot-outs, our fair share of run-ins with the law, turf wars, and even dumb shit in between. Just recently, about six months ago, I came out of retirement and pistol whipped two fuck boys at the same damn time, and then beat the brakes off their cousin who tried to jump in to save them. The beef started when a nigga thought he could slap my sister upside her head, like she didn't have a brother to defend her. Where they did that at? Because where I was from, we didn't play those type of games.

Over time, after making lots of money, I realized that it was time to ease out the streets like my brother wanted for me. So, I stayed as low key as possible. My crew did as they pleased, but they knew what I was about and where I stood when it came to that. However, the respect I'd made for myself wasn't going anywhere, and these muthafuckas had to know it. We weren't out west flexing our muscles. We were on our own turf in the city, and I be damn if they thought they were going to show us up.

"You need something?" the dude with the wrists crossed asked.

"He just over here tryna fuck with me. It's over, right? That's what you said. So, leave me the fuck alone, Dodge!" Keisha spat.

I looked at that hoe like she was crazy. "Bitch, shut the fuck up. I ain't stun yo' ass. You can suck this nigga dick right here, right now, and I still wouldn't give two fucks 'bout yo' stupid ass."

Keisha looked cut as hell once I finished dogging her attention-seeking ass out. I really could give zero fucks about this bitch.

"Tony, we need to talk," I insisted, looking right past anybody else standing in my way. Tony grinned at me like he was egging me on.

"Is that the way you talk to a lady?"

"This ain't a muthafuckin' lady, but if you wanna claim her as yours, have at it."

Tony looked at Keisha, winking his eye. “Give me a second, beautiful. Don’t go far.”

“Oh, I won’t,” she said to him, but was staring at me the whole time. I really wished I could put this size 11 Louis V shoe up the crack of her ass. She was lucky I knew how to control those urges.

I sat down by Tony, now noticing that my crew was definitely watching me and on guard for whatever. Meech had also made his way to the VIP section and was standing directly in front of the guy that addressed me first.

“So, you come over here with a little attitude. Wassup?” Tony asked in a suave, yet demeaning tone.

“Wassup with you and your clique? I feel like y’all are watching me, following me, whatever the fuck this is, and I wanna know why?”

“Lucky for you, that’s the reason we’re here. Dontae wants to talk.”

“And he couldn’t tell me this when I saw him a couple of weeks ago?”

“Well, you know—timing is everything.”

“Tell me when and where. I’ll be there.”

“Just be expecting a call soon.”

“Yea,” I uttered, standing up. “Y’all can stop tailing me now. This shit is getting out of hand.”

“I just wanna fuck the shit outta that lil’ fine ass bitch that you could give two fucks about.” He grinned, but I believed that was his way of getting under my skin.

I grinned back. “She’s all yours, my guy.”

I headed back to my section with Meech right by my side.

Rosco immediately started questioning me. “Everything good, Cuz? Do I need to hit the parking lot?”

“Nah, we good, no straps tonight.”

“You sho’?”

“Positive,” I answered. For the moment, I sat back trying to take all of this in. Dontae wanted to talk to me, and I had no clue what about. For all I knew, he could’ve wanted me to take Dameon’s place and carry on where my brother left off. But I was out the drug game and had no thoughts whatsoever to get back in.

As I sat pondering in my thoughts, I peeped Rosalyn and Cobra getting kind of close. I looked over to see that Rosco was preoccupied with his hands gripping some girl’s ass, so surely he wasn’t paying attention. Normally, I would ease over and see what was going on, but hell, she was now twenty-one and could very well see whomever she wanted to see. However, Rosco probably wouldn’t like it.

“Hey, we going to the dance floor,” Sha said, holding on to Kiyomi’s hand.

“That’s what you wanna do?” I asked Kiyomi.

“Yea,” she replied, already dancing as she stood there.

“Cool,” I told ‘em. “But please try to stay away from the drama.”

“Oh, I’m letting her slide tonight, but she gon’ get it. Just wait and see.”

I shook my head. Shawty had gangster tendencies with a baby face. I definitely had to keep my eyes on her. I sat in a spot where I could see all around me, more importantly keeping an eye on Sha and Kiyomi. Nothing out of the ordinary stood out to me, except seeing Tony get up to leave with Keisha hanging on to his arm like she was desperate. In reality, she really was, but I wasn’t fazed not one bit by her hopeless antics.

“That’s a dumb ass hoe right there,” I uttered with an irritable shake of the head.

As I zoned out for a mere minute or two, the crowd started erratically dispersing. Immediately, I jumped up because I already knew what was going on. Just that fast, Kiyomi was on Keisha’s ass. For somebody with a whole lot of mouth and could easily throw dem hands, Keisha had gotten her ass lit up

by Kiyomi and Sha. It reminded me of her and Kay's double team action. In Keisha's case, payback was certainly a bitch. Meech and Rosco broke up the fight, as I grabbed Kiyomi's hand for us to make a swift exit.

Once in the car, I saw the crew heading out amongst the crowd. They must've shut the whole party down. I spotted Tony leaving out the parking lot by himself. I guess he must've left Keisha to fight her own battles. That should've told her clueless ass something, but for some reason, I highly doubted it.

Meech hit me up, letting me know that everybody was good and that they were heading to the Waffle House. Kiyomi's cell phone rang, as she looked over at me.

"It's Kinsley," she said, answering on speaker.

"Yomi, you alright? Meech said you were fighting."

"Yea, I'm good. I beat that bitch's ass."

"Girl, you crazy. Why you ain't wait till I was around? I wanted some of that action."

Kiyomi laughed. "Don't worry, Sus. Me and Sha handled that."

"Glad you did. Where you heading now? You with Dodge, right?"

"Yea, I'm with him, and I'm going to the house. I think I've partied enough for the night."

"I think you have too. Well, I'm staying with Meech tonight, so I'll see you in the morning when I get there."

"Ok," she said, and then ended the call. I looked over at Kiyomi with a smile on my face. Shawty was bad, and I liked her even more after seeing that she could very well hold her own. Plus, I hated to say it, but Keisha had been asking for that kind of ass whoopin' for a long time. Girls just wouldn't fuck with her because she was a bully and known to fight. But in reality, she was actually weak, and Kiyomi peeped that the minute she held her ass down at my birthday party. "You ain't mad, are you?"

“Me? Mad? Nawl,” I expressed. “She asked for that. I just didn’t want you fighting, because we were celebrating Rosalyn’s birthday, but hey, I guess you had to do what you had to do. I ain’t mad at ya.”

“Good, because my intentions was never to end the party early. I just didn’t like that she was walking around as if she had gotten away with jumping me. I don’t even know her sister, but she’s lucky she wasn’t there or—”

“I know. She would’ve gotten some of that smoke too.”

“You know what to say.” She laughed, causing me to laugh too.

“So, you’re going home?”

“Yea, I wanna go home. This liquor got me feeling good, and I’m over crowds for the night. I just wanna chill at this point.”

“Say less,” I responded, as I headed toward her house. I glanced over, noticing that her cell phone was vibrating with an incoming text message. Then it vibrated again, and then again and again.

“Damn,” she uttered, reading the text messages. I was waiting to see if she’d respond, but she simply turned the phone off. That told me it had to be somebody she didn’t wanna be bothered with.

As we pulled up into her driveway, she looked over at me with those beautiful almond-shaped eyes, and that captivating smile. “I enjoyed tonight, even though I had to lay hands on a bitch.”

I grinned. “I enjoyed the night too.” We gazed at each other, as I leaned in to kiss her. She had the sweetest lips I’d tasted in a long time. I’m for sure we were lip locked for all of three long minutes, when suddenly—

“Wanna come in?”

“In yo’ house? Where’s yo’ mama?”

“She’s working. She don’t get off till eight in the morning.”

“I don’t trust that.”

She laughed. “It’s cool. I promise you.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You scared?” she joked. “Come on.”

I sat staring at her beauty that was enhanced by her witty personality. It was something about this girl I couldn’t resist.

“Ok, I’ll come in, but I’m not staying long. Last thing I wanna do is get caught up over here.”

“You’re in good hands,” she teased.

I got out the car, following her inside the house. “Sit down. You want something to drink?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Well, I’ll be back,” she said, heading down the hallway.

I glanced around the house thinking that it was nice and tidy on the inside. I could smell strawberries in the air, giving me this relaxed feeling, but I still felt nervous inside. All the women I fucked with had their own places, or they’d come to mine. Sitting here had me on my p’s and q’s, but suddenly, that feeling changed.

“What you got on?” I asked as she flaunted that sexy ass body in a short ass fitted t-shirt that stopped right above her butt cheeks.

“Just something I sleep in. You don’t like it?”

“Hell yea, I love it,” I answered, as she straddled me. My dick instantly rose to the occasion, causing her to back off a little.

“Whoa,” she let out, having to feel it. “What the fuck? That’s all you?”

I laughed. “I would hope so. It’s with me everywhere I go.”

“Damn,” she uttered with a bashful smile.

“You ain’t no virgin, are you?” I quickly pondered.

She laughed. “No, but I sure as hell ain’t never had nothing that big.”

I grinned.

“I honestly have only been with one guy. So, I’m cautious about doing this.”

“We don’t have to. You do know that, right?”

“But I want to,” she expressed, softly kissing my lips.

I found myself caught up in the moment, enjoying every bit of knowing that she was ready to give herself to me. I knew what I was capable of and what I stood for. Being with her would be nothing like being with Keisha. Shawty wouldn’t have to worry about a damn thing from this point on, and I meant that on Granny.

I grabbed her butt, palming her juicy cheeks, standing to my feet with her legs wrapped around my waist. I wanted nothing more than to blow her mind and make her mine, but something was holding me back. I had a feeling that she still had shit going on, and in order to be with me, she had to be sure. This wasn’t just a fuck thing; it could potentially be a forever thing. However, I wasn’t with this spontaneous shit, waking up the next morning regretting it. No doubt sex would be amazing, but I wanted more, and I’m sure if she was fully in her sober mind, she’d agree. So, against the wishes of my other head, I took it upon myself to stop—

“What are you doing?”

“We can’t do this. Not now, it’s just not right,” I said, putting her down.

She stood staring in my eyes. “You sure you wanna turn this down?”

“I’m not pressed. If it’s meant to happen, it will.”

I could tell she’d gotten sexually heated, but still shot me a sweet smile. “You sure?” she asked again, this time turning in a circle so I could get a good look at what I would be missing.

“Damn, I’m not that sure, but I said what I said.”

“Okaaaaay,” she sang.

“Matter of fact, I’m ‘bout to go. I can’t stay too much longer, or I’ll go back on my word—”

“And let me guess, you’re a man of your word.”

I smiled. “You know what to say.”

“I’ll walk you out,” she said, pulling me by the hand. I felt bad about leaving, but I knew I was doing the right thing. Once at the door, she kissed me again. “See you tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” I responded, as she opened the door and walked me out on the porch. “Go back inside.”

“Ok.” She nodded, but a black Charger pulled up in front of the house and parked on the side of the road.

“Who is that?”

“OMG, it’s Loyal.”

“Loyal?”

“My ex,” she responded.

“You need me to get rid of him?”

“No, please don’t. I can handle this,” she said, just as my cell phone rang.

“Ok.” I nodded, kissing her soft lips once again. “Put some clothes on.”

“Doing that now.”

I headed to my car, as her ex got out of his. I wanted the nigga to say something, breathe wrong, do anything out of order, and I was going to lay his ass out. However, he walked right past me, nodding his head as his way of speaking, and went straight up to Kiyomi’s front door. He didn’t go in. He waited, as I got in my car, making sure he stayed in his lane. Kiyomi stepped back on the porch. She’d put some jogging pants on, as she waved her hand at me like she was ok. I lightly blew the horn, backing out of the driveway. I didn’t know what that lil’ talk would be about, but I had a gut feeling that he was only there to beg, and she wasn’t giving in. As

long as he'd leave with his tail tucked and didn't try no funny shit, we were good.

As I drove away with intentions of definitely giving her fifteen minutes and then calling back, my phone began to ring again. I glanced down to see an unfamiliar number, thinking this must've been Dontae, as I quickly answered.

“Yo,” I said to nothing but silence on the other end. “Yoo,” I said again.

“Dodge.”

I slammed on brakes, as my heart raced damn near out of my chest. Instant tears filled my eyes, as a lump formed in my throat. “Dameon—”

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