



SOLACE

a hood love tale

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MISS CANDICE

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PRONUNCIATION OF NAMES

HARAM : Huh-Rom

CAVALLI : Kuh-Vol-Lee

SYN : Sin

RECAP

As promised, Ave was finished with the car by eight. When he knocked on the hotel room's door, she was so relieved. Finally, after sitting in a quiet room with only the TV playing, she would be leaving. They didn't talk much after he ordered the food. After noticing how uncomfortable she was, Haram didn't want to bother her anymore, so he sparked up and watched reruns of *The Game*.

After Ave came up to let the know he was done, Haram paid him and walked Tokyo out. She thanked him and got into the car, preparing to leave. But she couldn't drive off. The car had been fixed fifteen minutes ago and she had yet to pull out of the parking lot. She was afraid of getting into another accident. She was afraid that this time, the accident wouldn't be minor. The sun had begun to set. It was getting darker out. Darkness and a wandering, grieving mind didn't mix too well. But she had to pull off. She had been away from Space for too long. She told her she'd be right back. She didn't want Tokyo to think that she was abandoning her again. Especially since her phone was dead. Legacy probably thought she'd run off too.

She took a deep breath trying to calm her racing heart and shifted the car in reverse. Before she could pull off, there was a knock on the hood of the car that took her attention away from the rearview mirror.

It was him.

Tokyo shifted the car in park and lowered the window.
“Yeah?”

“Move over,” Haram directed, nodding over to the passenger side.

“Huh?”

He opened the door and reached over to unbuckle her seatbelt. “I’ll take you home.”

“I don’t need you to take me—”

“I want to take you,” Haram interrupted. “Please... move over.”

He had been watching her from the door since he saw her off. He saw how she’d shift the car in reverse, move back a little, and then shift it in drive to go back in her spot. He saw her gripping the steering wheel. Haram was about twenty or so feet away but he could literally see the stress she was under. It wasn’t his responsibility to do anything for her, but he wanted to. He couldn’t let her drive away. The possibility of something horrible happen was too likely. He couldn’t let anything happen to her.

“Okay,” Tokyo mumbled as she climbed over the middle console of the car. She leaned her head over on the window, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, relieved. She was stubborn. She couldn’t help it. It was who she had always been.

“Thank you,” Tokyo mumbled again, feeling Haram get into the car.

He looked over at her, his eyes washing over her beautiful sulking face and said, “You straight.”

Tokyo could feel his eyes on her as he backed out of the parking spot. Her heart thumped heavy against her chest,

fighting against the urge to look back at him. As scary... and as intimidating as he was, Tokyo felt a sense of calmness she hadn't felt in weeks with him. He made her feel... safe. And because she felt safe, she relaxed. She hadn't relaxed since Mae passed away. Laying on the couch all day everyday wasn't relaxing—it was draining. It was depression that weighed her down. She didn't lay on that couch for days because she wanted to, she laid there because she couldn't do anything but it. But now? She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep because finally... she felt comfortable enough to.

Because she was asleep, Haram kept the radio off. The quiet bothered him though. He needed the music to drown his thoughts. The quiet reminded him of the problems he was having with his family. He'd broken his phone because of them. Not that the phone mattered—it just signified just how tired he was. He thought that maybe it was time to officially move out of the house. The only thing keeping him there in the first place was the love he had for his mother. But she was starting to suffocate him. Any time she got like this... any time they got like this, Haram wanted to be further away from them. The business he had with Syn and Cavalli didn't matter. The fact that he knew he worried his mother, not coming home at night, didn't matter. When Haram was in one of his moods, he didn't give a fuck about anything.

They couldn't possibly begin to understand what he went through. He didn't need them harboring over him, watching him, checking in with him. He was a grown ass man. Nineteen, but still grown as fuck. Why they cared to make his problem's there's got on his nerves. Especially when it came to Cavalli. He didn't need him to take care of him. He didn't

need Cavalli to be a father to him. Haram had gone most of his life without a father. He was doing pretty damn good without one. In a sense, Haram understood Cavalli's frustration though. He was a walking time bomb that often detonated without warning. There hadn't been any fall out behind him killing Jive's boy, but that was only because Jive underestimated just how gangsta the Knights were. To him, they were just some knucklehead young niggas trying to make a way in the game. He didn't know Haram was as treacherous as he was. The pretty boy shit threw niggas off every time. What Jive thought was beside the point. Cavalli knew. Syn knew. Krystal knew. And because they knew, they'd always worry.

About twenty minutes later, Haram was turning on the block. At the sight of red and blue lights flashing in front of Legacy's house, he shook Tokyo awake.

"Ay," He said, as he shook her.

Tokyo peeled her eyes open and wiped slob from her mouth with the back of her hand. "Huh?"

She was knocked out. The sleep she'd been in was so good that when she woke up it took her a while to realize where she was. She'd most certainly forgot about him. The minute she realized she was sitting next to him, she sat up straight and smoothed her hair over, hoping she didn't have dried up slob on her face.

"Yo sister be at Legacy's crib right?"

Tokyo's eyes widened as soon as they pulled up at Legacy's house. She quickly snatched her seatbelt off and got out of the car before Haram could even put the car in park.

The thought of something horrible happening to Space made her heart race with fear.

She ran up the stairs and snatched the door open.

“What—what happened? Why are the police here...?”

Her voice trailed off when she noticed the same social workers who’d been banging on her door for the past month, helping Space put her shoes on. Standing guard were two police officers.

“What the fuck?” Tokyo mumbled before scratching her head and running over to Space. Before she could get too close to her, one of the cops grabbed her, stopping her.

“Whoa... whoa... wait a minute,” the cop said. “I need you to relax.”

“Space.... Spacey... You can’t take her. She’s... I can take care of her! She’s my sister! Don’t take my sister!” Tokyo cried, having a full on tantrum, trying to get to Space, while the cops struggled with her, eventually falling to the ground.

Tokyo’s eyes stayed on Space the whole time. Her sweet baby Space. She cried too. She tried to run away from them like Tokyo told her to do if she ever saw the lady in the fancy suit again, but she didn’t have anywhere to run to. When they showed up at Legacy’s house, Juanita opened the door and let them in. Space ran until she was met with the backdoor, with nowhere else to run to.

“Please don’t take my sister from me!” Tokyo yelled at the top of her lungs. “I need her! She needs me! We need each other! Please!!!”

Her pleading fell on deaf ears because a second later, Space was being escorted out of the home. Tokyo thought her heart was broken after Mae died... today... it shattered into tiny pieces.

CHAPTER ONE

...

“Please... Don’t take my sister! Wait!” Tokyo yelled, as she scrambled to her feet, clawing to get to her little sister, while the cops continued to restrain her. “Get—get off of me!” She screamed.

“Tokyo, sweetie, relax—”

“Fuck you!” Tokyo screamed at Ms. Juanita. “Please... Please don’t take her. Please.. let me up! Let me at least get a hug from her! Please!”

The officers exchanged looks between one another but didn’t move a muscle. All Tokyo wanted was to wrap her arms around her baby sister and to tell her that everything would be okay soon. Tokyo wanted to promise her that when the time was right, she’d find her and they would be a family again. What she really wanted to do was to wrap her arms around her and run off, but Tokyo was smart enough to know that she wouldn’t get far.

“Let her up. She’s okay. Let her up.”

Tokyo looked up and immediately recognized the slightly heavysset man walking into the house as Detective Greene. He was on the scene when Mae was murdered. Since then, he’d dropped by the house several times. They never spoke because Tokyo never answered the door. She hated to see him coming, but today, when all hope was completely lost, she was happy to see him.

“Detective Green, are you sure? She’s—”

“She’s a teenager. A young girl that doesn’t weigh more than about one hundred and thirty pounds, if that. The force the both of you are using is completely unnecessary. Get off of her. Let her up,” Detective Greene said, giving direct eye contact to both cops.

They nodded and finally stood up, away from Tokyo. The minute they did, Detective Greene extended his hand to help her to her feet.

“I asked them to wait,” He told her. “You do understand that this has to happen, right?”

Tokyo, with a face full of tears, nodded, as her heart raced, feeling as though with each thump, layers of it shredded away. Detective Greene nodded and escorted Tokyo out of the house. It looked like the entire block was out surrounding Ms. Juanita’s house, watching everything go down. Tokyo paid none of them any attention. She had tunnel vision. As she descended the rocky stairs, she quickly wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hands. Space had seen her weak enough. Tokyo needed to muster up some strength if she wanted Space not to worry. With a huge lump in her throat, Tokyo forced a smile, as she and Space made eye contact. Oh, her sweet baby sister... She was terrified.

As soon as Tokyo made it to the sidewalk, she ran up to Space and wrapped her arms around her. The cops stood by, on high alert, but they were on high alert for no reason. Tokyo was going to follow the rules. She wasn’t going to run off with Space. What good would that do either of them? She just wanted to feel Space’s little body against hers for what she

hoped wouldn't be the last time. It couldn't be. Tokyo was going to do everything in her power to make sure it wasn't.

Space buried her head into the crook of Tokyo's neck as she cried. "Toky... I'm sorry. I ran and—"

"Shhh," Tokyo interrupted, as she ran her hand down the back of Space's head. "It's okay, baby. I will come and get you, okay? We won't be a part for too long. I promise."

In the pit of Tokyo's stomach was fear. Would she be able to keep her promise? Would she be able to get her little sister before it was too late? Before she could be tainted by the ugliness of the foster care system? Would she make it to her before, by God's grace, Space was adopted by a great family? Tokyo didn't know and the unknown was terrifying.

"Okay, Toky," Space cried.

Tokyo pulled away from the hug to wipe Space's face clear of tears. "Don't cry Spacey. It's going to be okay. I'm going to call and visit you as much as I can, okay? It'll just be like... like a vacation. It'll be—"

"Detective Greene, we should really get going," The social worker, Karen, interrupted, with her eyes narrowed to slits as she looked between Tokyo and Detective Greene.

She had enough of Tokyo over the past few weeks. She was sick and tired of the girl. Karen wanted to do her job and that was that, but for weeks, Tokyo had made that nearly impossible. When she got a call from the office about picking Space up from a secure location, she was overjoyed. Finally, someone in the neighborhood had decided to do the best thing. And that someone was Ms. Juanita.

Walking into her house to find Space, yet again, sitting in front of her TV wearing the same clothes for the past three days was enough for Ms. Juanita. For weeks she tried to mind her own business and to support the girls as best as she could. But she'd done enough and decided, the best support for the both of them would be to contact Child Protective Services. Tokyo was too young to take care of a child. Ms. Juanita figured, there was no telling what would become of Space had she continued to turn a blind eye.

“A couple more minutes, Karen,” Detective Greene said.

He had sympathy for the girls. They'd just lost their grandmother and now they were losing one another to the system. That couldn't be an easy pill to swallow. He could tell they were extremely close. He hated the situation they were in.

Tokyo cut her eyes at Karen and took a deep breath, before putting her attention back where it needed to be—on Space.

She ran her hand over Space's cheek and forced a smile. “Okay? It'll be just like a little vacation. I'm... Spacey... I'm going to fix this okay?”

Space, with a trembling bottom lip, nodded and wrapped her arms around Tokyo's neck, hugging her tighter than before. “Okay Toky. Okay.”

She was terrified. She didn't want to be without her big sister. She loved and looked up to Tokyo so much. Little did Tokyo know, Space didn't really look at Mae as a mother figure—she looked at Tokyo that way. Mae was always just Granny. But Tokyo? Tokyo was everything to Space. She

wanted to be just like her big sister. Strong. Pretty. Smart. Space wanted to be it all. Tokyo truly was her role model... and the only piece of family she had left. There were so many questions going through Space's young mind. She didn't know where her mother was. She didn't know if she even had a father. She didn't know what happened to her granny. She didn't know why she couldn't stay with Tokyo. She was just so sad and confused.

Tokyo kissed Space on the cheek, hugging her with the same amount of intensity. "I love you, Spacey. Okay? I love you so..."

"Detective... We need to get going—"

"Okay Karen," Detective Greene interrupted before reluctantly approaching Tokyo, rubbing the top of his head. It was tough for him to ask Tokyo to let Space go. But it was even tougher for everyone in the neighborhood to witness it happen.

Although Tokyo and Space weren't really as close knit with the hood as everyone else, they were still considered family. Especially to Ms. Della, who stood in the doorway, with tears pouring from her sad eyes, watching it all transpire. She wanted to do more for the girls and she had tried. Child Protective Services weren't just snooping around Tokyo's house, they were snooping around Ms. Della's as well as Ms. Juanita's too. She wanted to adopt Space and had even tried to but because her health was seriously declining she wasn't a good fit. She knew it—her son had tried to stop her from even trying because of it—but that didn't stop Ms. Della from at least trying. Once she found out she couldn't, she was

devastated, despite knowing her chances were slim to none. Now, standing there, watching as the inevitable unfolded, devastation had turned into sheer heartbreak. She felt as though she had let her best friend down.

Ms. Della wasn't the only one hurting though—Ms. Juanita was too. She didn't want to call them to her house. She felt like she had to. Tokyo was eighteen—Space, just a few weeks from six—those girls needed more than what Tokyo could provide by her own. Ms. Juanita just knew in her heart that decision she made was the right one, despite how mad her daughter would be when she found out... despite how much it hurt her to witness the two girls being torn apart by the very cops that Detective Greene ordered to stand-down.

“Let me go! Get the fuck off of me!” Tokyo yelled. “Don't fucking touch her!” She screamed, once the other cop tried to pull Space away from her.

“This is so sad,” Someone whispered in the crowd.

It was indeed. All the girls wanted was a little more time together. Actually, they wanted more than just a little more but for the moment, a little was all they could get. Tokyo told Detective Greene that she understood that Space had to go, but that didn't mean she wanted to let her. She didn't want to lose Space. Hadn't she lost enough already?

“Ay!” Haram yelled, pushing up from the hood of the car.

Up until the cops tried to pry Tokyo's arms from around Space, he had been sitting on the hood of the car, watching. It fucked him up, seeing Tokyo so broken. He didn't know what to do, nor what to say... so instead of putting

himself in the middle of a problem that didn't involve him, he sat there watching like everyone else on the block did. It wasn't until the cops, who he'd been eyeing like a hawk, tried to physically pry Tokyo's arms from around Space that he couldn't just sit back and watch.

"I got it," Detective Greene, said with his hand up, in an effort to stop Haram from approaching.

"It's not looking that way to me, nigga. Handle that shit before I have to," Haram gritted before spitting on the sidewalk.

Detective Greene with raised brows looked down at the pavement, where Haram's spit sat just about a step away from him before looking back up at him with a menacing scowl on his face. "You—"

"Aight," Haram interrupted before whisking past Detective Greene, snatching away from his grip when he tried to grab hold of him. Before Haram could get too far, Syn was grabbing him by the back of his shirt.

Syn snatched Haram up, pulled him against his chest and said in his ear, "Be easy, for you end up on a shirt, bruh. Let these muthafuckas do they job."

Syn and Legacy pulled up in a nick of time. A second later, Haram probably would have ended up the next black man killed by the police. Haram was unhinged. Any other day, he would have known better. Any other day, his thinking cap would have been screwed on extra tight. Because of what him and his brothers got into, they were careful to tread lightly when it came to the law. Treading lightly flew clear out of the window when he saw the cop wrap his big hand around

Tokyo's petite arm though. For her, getting put on a shirt was a risk he was willing to take. Today, it was at least. While he was recklessly unhinged, with zero fucks to give.

Haram snatched away from Syn, adjusted his shirt, and glared at him without uttering a word. Behind Haram's eyes, Syn saw nothing. Nothing but coldness that sent a chill down his spine. Syn pinched the bridge of his nose and draped his arm over Haram's shoulder, in an effort to keep his wild ass planted.

"Mom's told me you hung up on her earlier," Syn stated, as the both of them looked on as Detective Greene diffused the situation, as promised.

Haram clenched his jaw muscle. "I didn't hang up on her."

"Whatever you did, nigga.... she called us crying."

Haram briefly looked at Syn, before looking back over at Tokyo who had redirected her anger at Legacy.

"I never asked you to do anything for me!" Tokyo yelled. "If keeping Space was too much for you, you could've just said that!"

"Tok... Syn took me to look at a few cars. I had just left not too long ago! My momma—"

"Fuck yo' momma, bitch and fuck you!" Tokyo screamed, as she watched the big puff of Space's ponytail through the back window of the car, as it drove away. Her bottom lip trembled, as she looked on full of uncertainty.

When Syn turned the corner on the block and Legacy saw what was happening, she was immediately moved to tears.

It didn't take her long to figure out what was happening. Her mother had done the unimaginable, knowing what that would do to Legacy and Tokyo's friendship. Tokyo trusted her to keep Space while she tried to better their situation, and yet she fucked up. If only she would have stayed home, Space would've been safe. She knew that in her heart. Because her mother had been expressing a little bit of annoyance with Space and Tokyo's situation, Legacy planned on keeping busy and away from the house by taking Space to the park until Tokyo was finished. But, when Syn called about getting her a car, she thought it would be okay to let Space watch cartoons and play with her sisters while they went to the dealership. She thought it was innocent and that she had enough time before her mother made it home because typically, Juanita would go to the bar after. Today, of all days, she switched her routine and came home early.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Tok," Legacy cried, while trying to reach out to touch Tokyo.

Tokyo yanked away before turning to swing on her.

Legacy, with wide eyes was completely stunned. She couldn't believe Tokyo was trying to fight her.

"Don't fucking touch me, bitch!" Tokyo yelled at the top of her lungs, feeling as though she was truly losing her mind. "And what the fuck are y'all looking at?!"

Tokyo was going ballistic. Her feelings and emotions were all over the place. On one hand, she wanted to beat the shit out of both Legacy and Juanita, while on the other, she wanted to curl up into a ball in the middle of the pavement and just cry. She felt a lot of things. Embarrassment. Emptiness.

Loneliness. And above anything... she felt betrayed. How could Legacy let this happen?

Syn stood next to Haram, steady talking about how Krystal called them crying, and about how things needed to be handled, but he wasn't listening. And Syn knew that when he walked away without a single word. Haram wasn't listening because in that moment, he didn't care. What he cared about was Tokyo having a complete meltdown in front of the whole neighborhood. In his heart, he knew she didn't want to be in the position she was in. Vulnerable. Crying... and in front of so many people who's always viewed her in a certain light. This version of her was the complete opposite of what anyone over there had witnessed. She was always smiling. She was always so well put together, without a strand of hair on her head out of place. She was a shining star amongst the darkness that was E. Seven Mile and Conant. Not today though. Not for a while.

Haram stood in front of Tokyo, who was steady trying to get at Legacy despite the fact that she had walked away. There was nothing Legacy could say nor do to fix what had happened and she refused to stand in the middle of the street arguing with a girl she considered a sister, more than she did a best friend. She for sure wasn't going to fight her. Not because she called her mother a bitch, and not because she tried to swing on her. Because Legacy knew the truth. That... the girl in the middle of the street with wild, disheveled hair, and tears running down her face, wasn't who her best friend truly was. Tokyo was in pain. She was grieving. And Legacy refused to add fuel to the fire by giving negative attention to any of it. She refused to give everyone, with their phones out, the tools

to go viral on social media by posting a video of them fighting. So, she walked away. Some might have looked at it as cowardly, but Legacy didn't. She simply loved Tokyo too much to take it there with her.

Wrapping his arms around Tokyo, in an attempt to hold her back, and give her comfort at once, Haram whispered in her ear. "Chill... Chill... Come on, shorty. Please... You good. I got you... I got you."

Haram took a few steps towards the other side of the street, walking Tokyo backwards towards her house. She appreciated him. In his arms, she didn't have to see the looks of pity on everyone's face. She didn't have to hear them whisper and talk about how 'it was so sad' because the sound of Haram's heavily beating heart drowned all of it out. She didn't have to worry about feeling embarrassed, or having to see Ms. Juanita standing on the porch, looking down at her with the same look of pity, as if none of this was her fault. Haram was a shield. A shield that kept her safe from those looks... A shield that kept her safe from those whispers. So, she didn't resist. She didn't question why he had his arms wrapped around her. Because she knew... he cared. He truly cared.

When they got across the street, Tokyo turned around to walk up the stairs, and Haram draped his arm over her shoulder, as a way to let her know that although his arms were no longer wrapped around her, he was there. He wanted her to feel that, because he knew she felt alone. How could he not? She'd lost her grandmother and her sister in a span of a few weeks—of course she *felt* alone. She had Legacy, and she had

Tempest, but Haram wanted her to know that she had him too. If only she would truly open up her eyes and see.

After walking into the house, Tokyo stood at the entryway, gazing over into the living room, feeling as though she was about to faint. She couldn't believe her life had come to this. Sadness. Darkness. Emptiness. And in such a short period of time. There was nothing she wouldn't give to hear Fred Hammond playing from Mae's old boombox on Saturday morning. She would give anything in the world to scrub walls again. She'd give anything in the world to smell Mae's famous fried Chicken early Sunday afternoon, as she prepared for dinner later. She wanted her family back. Sahara had taken so much from her. How could one person have such a huge impact on her entire existence? Sahara was truly a poison. The kind there was no treatment for. The kind that acted quickly, destroying any and everything that came in contact with it. Tokyo hated her with everything inside of her.

After Haram locked the door, Tokyo fell to floor. She curled up into that ball she wanted to curl up into outside and cried like never before. Haram, without a second thought, got down there with her. He picked her up and leaned against the wall, with his arms wrapped around her, as she cried harder than she ever had before. Tokyo felt as if her soul was being ripped from her body. She couldn't believe it. As she laid with her back against Haram's heaving chest, she wondered why. Why was it that she was faced with so much adversity in her young eighteen years of life? She was only eighteen. Life for her had yet to truly begin but God she was tired. Tokyo didn't want to be sad. She didn't want to be spending what was supposed to be the best summer of her teenaged life, sad,

grieving, pegged with depression. She was supposed to go to Miami with Legacy and Tempest next month. They were supposed to be living their best, free life, without the worries of school next semester hanging over their heads. This summer was supposed to be all about happiness and exploring. But yet... all Tokyo had been for weeks was sad.

Affection wasn't Haram's strongest trait. In fact, affection wasn't a trait of his at all. But when it came to Tokyo, he moved into uncharted territory. He knew what it felt like to be alone. He didn't like to talk about it, or to even feel it, but he knew. He knew it all too well. Sure, he had a mother... and he had two brothers.. and even a father too. But there were layers of Haram that had yet to be unveiled. And for good reason. Who he was... his anger... his issues... they came from deep-rooted trauma he had a hard time facing. Tokyo's situation and his were completely different—night and day even—but he understood the pain. He understood the loneliness. He understood what it was like to one day wake up without that 'spark'. That 'light'. He was stripped of his 'light' at an early age. Tokyo was too... but she found it... just to lose it again. Haram hadn't been given the pleasure of finding it again. There was an unwanted, needed, darkness hovering over him that he felt would stay there forever. Staring down at Tokyo, he hoped her story wouldn't go as his had been. He prayed it wouldn't. If he could help at all, he would make sure she got it back. He refused to watch who she truly was wilt away.

The question of rather Haram truly knew who she was could come about, but he knew. He spent years watching her. She was everything. The type of girl that walked to the beat of

her own drum, whether than the beat of others. She was a leader, and without realizing it, she had followers. Girls in the neighborhood looked up to her. Young girls watched her in admiration, wanting to duplicate her style and her sometimes funky hairstyles, too. They mimicked the sweet smile Tokyo would give whenever someone spoke to her. She'd even had a few of them reading books, when it was more of a thing to recreate TikTok videos, or party on IG live.

Haram wasn't her only admirer. He was just the only one of them that she avoided. The only one of them she judged. The other guys in the neighborhood were ignorant with unappealing reputations too, but she didn't avoid them. She didn't turn her nose up at them. Haram knew this because he was always watching. He could have easily lost his interest in her because of the way she treated him, but he didn't. The way he felt about her never wavered, and it never would. He liked Tokyo. Period. Without conditions. So what she didn't like him? Over the years, he could have done something to sway the way she felt, but he didn't. He didn't like her because he wanted to gain anything from it. Even in this instance, he didn't console her, or care for her because he wanted to gain anything from it neither. He did it because he cared.

Tokyo pressed the side of her face against his chest, listening to the sound of his heart race, as her breathing started to mellow out. She stared at the reflection of them in the floor mirror that sat against the wall a few feet away from where they sat against the peeling paint of the doorframe into the living room, while tears pooled into her brown eyes. What was it about this man that made her feel so safe? The biggest 'bully' in the neighborhood gave her something no one else

could—comfort. With his arms wrapped around her, Tokyo felt such a sense of security that devastation began to slowly subside.

Feeling her calm down a bit, Haram wrapped his arms tighter around her and Tokyo took a deep breath, closing her eyes. Within seconds, the full on meltdown she was having before, ended. Hysterical, uncontrollable crying had switched to soft sobs, and Tokyo couldn't fully comprehend why. What she knew for certain was that in Haram's arms, she felt the most peace she had ever felt in her entire life. His touch... the sound of his beating heart in her ear... was something she wished she'd had long ago.

A few hours later, Haram was jarred awake by the sound of knocking on the front door. He'd gone from leaning against the wall, to laying on the floor, with Tokyo on top of him, softly snoring on his dampened chest. He gazed down at her, taking in just how peaceful she looked and didn't want to move. Whoever it was at the door would just have to come back another time because Haram *couldn't* move. He wouldn't. He couldn't bring himself to disrupt the sleep she was in.

“Ayoooo,” Syn called out, from the front porch, as he paced, with his hands stuffed into his pockets.

The way Haram was moving was different for him. Just as it was for Cavalli when he first witnessed the way Haram was with Tokyo. It was slightly alarming, because if you knew Haram then you knew this romantic, caring side of him was one that really didn't exist. Not until the block party, at least.

Haram's feelings towards answering the door didn't change just because it was Syn. He sat there, unmoving, staring down at Tokyo who was slightly coming to. When her eyelids fluttered open her eyes found his. The house was dark, but the moon shone bright, giving just enough illumination to see his piercing dark brown irises. Instead of jumping up, and looking away, Tokyo kept her eyes on his. The exchange was an intense one. Between their eye contact, there were so many unspoken words.

Tokyo was full of feelings she'd never really felt for Haram before. She wanted to be around him all of the time. She didn't want to avoid him. She wanted to stay nestled in his strong, tattooed arms. In his arms, she slept. Free of sadness. Free of grief. With him, it was as if she was in complete bliss. In seclusion, in a world where only they existed. If possible, she'd lay there forever. This softer side of him was very, very appealing. Tokyo was catching feelings for sure.

Just as much as Tokyo didn't want him to leave, he didn't want to neither. He knew that the minute she left his arms and he opened that door for Syn, things would change. For a second there, that thick cloud of darkness went away but he knew it'd return once he stepped foot on the front porch. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. As much as he didn't want to leave, he knew he would have to eventually. He couldn't avoid Syn and his family any further. Not only did they have business to conduct, but he'd dropped Tokyo off in her car so he didn't have his own so he needed a ride back to the hotel.

"Do you need to go?" Tokyo asked, breaking the silence.

“Nah. I don’t *need* to go,” Haram responded, finding himself running his fingers over her goosebump covered arms, sending chills through Tokyo’s being. At his touch, she shivered and she sat up, caught off guard by the foreign feeling. “Not right now.”

She ran her hand through her disheveled hair before shifting her eyes up to the big clock on the wall. It was going on midnight.

“Ram!” Syn yelled, peering through the opened blinds, by cupping his hands over the sides of his face.

Tokyo nodded towards the window. “Yes you do.”

Haram didn’t want to leave her. He was afraid of what would happen if he did. Tokyo didn’t strike him as suicidal, but she also didn’t strike him as the type to have a full on meltdown in the middle of the neighborhood, so there was no telling. She was unpredictable. And if he left and something horrible happened, he’d never be able to forgive himself.

“What’s yo’ number? I’m going to—shit,” Haram placed his hand on the side of his head as realization hit him. He didn’t have a phone and by the look of how dark it was outside, he wouldn’t have a new one until tomorrow morning. “I can come back.”

Tokyo shook her head and looked down at the floor. “It’s okay. I appreciate you for having my back like this....”

She really did appreciate it. But she didn’t want to be babysat. She knew what Haram did for a living and she knew he didn’t have time to be laying up with her sad ass. He had shit to do, and she wanted him to go out and do it. There were

some things she needed to sort out alone anyway. She needed to find strength in all of the pain she'd been in and she wouldn't be able to do that if she got used to 'this'. Haram felt too good. Being in his arms gave her too much comfort. So much so that she knew if she started to get used to it, she'd rely on it and she'd never grow or heal from what's been going on in her life.

Haram sat up and they locked eyes again. They were so close to one another that if either of them had the guts to, they could kiss. Haram had it, but he had a respect for Tokyo that he didn't have for any other woman. So, he wouldn't cross that line unless he was *absolutely* sure it was a line she wanted him to cross. He wasn't used to dealing with women like Tokyo. The women he usually spent time with knew what time it was and was throwing themselves at him before he could even make a move.

“You sure?” He asked.

“Ram—”

“Aight nigga, shut the fuck up!” Haram yelled, cutting Syn off, the sudden usual bass in his voice causing Tokyo to flinch a little.

For a second there, she'd forgotten about *this* Haram. With her, he had been so soft spoken, that she forgot that he was very, very rough around the edges. Hell, he was rough all over. But with her, he wasn't. So it was easy for Tokyo to forget.

She lightly giggled and shook her head. “Yeah... I'm sure. You can come by tomorrow... I mean... if you have time or whatever.”

Haram pulled his lips into his mouth and nodded. "I'll have time."

And if he didn't have time, he'd make time. He didn't make time for women. They came second to the money. But Tokyo? Tokyo came first to everything. She was just that damn special to him. For her, he'd make time.

"Okay," Tokyo sweetly said. "See you tomorrow."

Haram wanted to wrap his arms around her again, but he didn't know if the timing was right. He didn't know if she'd only accepted his hug earlier because she was distraught or if she really wanted his arms around her. When Tokyo threw her arms around his neck, hugging him first, he got his answer. He held onto her so tight, that pulling away from it was the hardest thing for the both of them to do.

"Make sure you eat somethin' too," Haram told her before standing up and extending his hand out for her to grab hold of.

Tokyo, with zero hesitation, grabbed hold of it and he pulled her up. Their hands didn't leave one another's until Haram had to unlock the doors to leave.

"I will," Tokyo lied.

She wasn't going to eat. She was going to lay on the couch and cry herself to sleep. Yeah, yeah, yeah... she needed to find strength, but she'd find it tomorrow. Yeah... Tomorrow would be the perfect start to getting her shit together to get her sister back.

"Aight," Haram said, as he stood in the doorway, looking down at her.

“Damn nigga. About time,” Syn said. “Come on, fool we got some shit to talk about.”

Haram ignored him. Leaving Tokyo was proving to be harder than he thought it would be.

“See you tomorrow, Haram,” Tokyo said, giving him a sweet smile

Not that sweet smile he’d been longing for, for years neither. It wasn’t the sweet smile he was used to seeing. This sweet smile was heavily laced with sadness. There was no twinkle in her eye. It was lazy and lifeless. Haram longed for the days where he’d see that twinkle return. He made a mental note to put helping her get it back at the top of his unofficial to-do list.

Finally, after a couple of minutes, Haram was jogging down the creaky steps with Syn to the right of him.

“That’s you?” Syn asked, nodding towards Tokyo who was standing in the doorway watching.

“Nah. What do you want, nigga?” Haram asked, quickly dismissing conversation about Tokyo, that softness he had for her a sudden thing of the past.

Syn huffed with a light chuckle. “What I want? Nigga, you been on some shit.”

“Because you niggas don’t know what boundaries are,” Haram stated, before locking eyes with Legacy, and then Tempest.

They were sitting on Legacy’s porch, watching, talking about Tokyo. The both of them wanted to go over and check on her but they didn’t know if it was best.

“He was in there for a long ass time,” Tempest said with her nose turned up. “I thought she didn’t even like his ass.”

“She don’t,” Legacy said. “She ran into his car earlier and he dropped her off.”

“So why was he in the house—”

“I don’t know Tempest, damn,” Legacy snapped. “You worried about the wrong shit.”

The whole time they sat on the porch talking, Tempest talked about Haram being in the house. She couldn’t get over it. She wondered what they were doing all of that time in a dark house, when she should have been worried about how Tokyo felt.

Tempest took a deep breath, grabbed the railing and pulled up from the stairs. “Let’s go over there.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I think it’s best if we just let her cool off and go see about her tomorrow,” Legacy said with a sigh before averting her eyes to Syn who was climbing into his car.

She wanted to get away with him. She did not want to be at home at all. Living under the same roof of the very person that was responsible for what her best friend was presently going through was rough. Plus, Juanita had truly betrayed Legacy’s trust. She couldn’t believe her mother had the audacity to do something like that when she herself had a few run ins with Child Protective Services. Legacy couldn’t wrap her mind around how her mother could do that to

someone when she knew personally how scary it was to have a case building on them.

Things for Legacy and her sisters hadn't always been good. Juanita as a single mother, neglected her daughters a few times herself. She was constantly working doubles at Taco Bell when Legacy was younger, leaving her to take care of her younger siblings. Juanita's own sister called on her. If it wasn't for Juanita getting a handle on things, Legacy and her sisters would've been in the system. It wasn't just that Juanita was working a lot, but because their mother was rarely ever home, the girls missed a lot of school. Juanita was given a chance to right her wrongs. She was such a mess back then, worried about losing her daughters. For her to put someone else in the same predicament was crazy to Legacy.

Tempest sighed and rolled her eyes. "Okay well, let's go around the corner to Mo-Mo's house. You know her momma went out of town. I'm trying to get into some thangs."

Tempest was sad about Tokyo's situation but when it came to what Ms. Juanita did, she wasn't too mad about it. To her, Space being taken away was the best thing that could happen to Tokyo. She felt like her friend should be taken advantage of not having to raise a little girl, when she was still pretty much a little girl herself. To her, Juanita did what everyone in the neighborhood thought about doing but didn't have the balls to. Good for her.

Legacy didn't want to sit around a bunch of drunk, high muthafuckas. She wanted to be up under her man but she wasn't going to tell Tempest's hating ass that.

“Nah. I’m tired. I think I’m about to go to bed. I gotta get up early to go pick me car up from the dealership anyway,” Legacy said before tossing her head back with a sigh.

Tempest rolled her eyes. “Ugh. You bitches really blowing me. You ho’s wasting the whole summer.” She scrunched her face up. “We still going to Miami right?”

Legacy shrugged her right shoulder. “I hope so. My momma been talking shit about being afraid of letting me go out there by myself.”

“You’re grown,” Tempest said, with her head dramatically extended. “You don’t need consent.”

Legacy locked eyes with her. “Maybe you don’t; but I do. She still my momma.”

“Let me call Esha and see if she trying to go because it ain’t even sounding like you’re going,” Tempest said before pulling her phone from her back pocket. “And I already know she ain’t gone go,” She concluded, before nodding across the street toward Tokyo’s house.

Tempest was the one with the most freedom. Her mother didn’t particularly give too much of a damn about what she did, and its always been that way.

Legacy, drained of all energy to argue with Tempest just nodded and stood up, with her eyes on the taillights of Syn’s car. “Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow, bitch.”

She had half a mind to text Syn, asking if they could get a room. But she wouldn’t. She didn’t know much about what was going on with the Knight’s but she knew something was up and it involved Haram. Now that they were together,

she knew Syn had business to take care of so she'd let him be, despite how badly she wanted to be anywhere but Juanita's house.

CHAPTER TWO

...

“Are we going to address the elephant in the room?”

Haram adjusted the crotch area of his shorts before sitting on the couch. “What elephant?” He asked, as he locked eyes with Cavalli. “I’m here. I’m good. You wanted to talk, let’s talk. As long as it’s not about shit that doesn’t concern you niggas... we smooth.”

Cavalli ran his hand down the back of his neck, clearly stressed. “What you fail to realize, lil’ nigga is that, that shit does concern me.” He motioned towards Syn. “It concerns the both of us. As long as we’re in business together it’ll always concern us.”

Syn pulled from his blunt with a head nod. “Facts. Outside of this business shit though, nigga, we’re family.”

Haram clenched down on his jaw muscle, immediately regretting the decision to answer the door for Syn. If it wasn’t for him needing a ride back to the hotel, he would have jumped up and walked out. Aside from needing a ride, though, there was a conversation that needed to be had. Haram had been MIA. He understood and took full responsibility for how unprofessional he had been. He hadn’t been pulling his weight at all. But when it came time for money to be disbursed, he’d be sitting back with his hand out, waiting for bread he didn’t even earn.

Haram sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Leave the personal shit outside of business,” he stated,

gesturing his hands in a way to show emphasis on how to separate the two. “What I do personally doesn’t affect—”

“Please don’t sit in my muthafuckin’ face and lie, bruh,” Cavalli interrupted. “You don’t know how to keep personal shit out of business. If you did, you wouldn’t have gotten drunk as fuck and offed a nigga because he laughed at a fuckin’ joke. If you listened, instead of fighting everything we’ve been trying to help you with, personal wouldn’t blend in with business, ‘Ram!”

Haram condescendingly chuckled before flicking the tip of his nose with his thumb. Looking over at Syn he gestured towards Cavalli. “You see how this nigga gettin’ theatrical. How am I not supposed to smack the piss out ‘eem, brodie? Huh?”

On their short ride around the corner, Syn did a lot of talking about how Haram needed to be easy. He told him that business had been booming and since business had been booming, Cavalli was under a lot of pressure, busy as hell. He made sure to mention how since Haram was hiding under a rock, Cavalli had been pulling his weight for him too. Because Syn and Haram had an unexplainable bond, he listened. He was the only one he’d listen too, which was crazy considering Cavalli was the head of what they had going on.

Cavalli’s delivery was always fucked up. Instead of speaking to Haram with respect, he liked to bark out orders and Haram had never been good with following those. If he dialed back on the bullshit, maybe him and Haram would get along just fine.

Cavalli stood up and stood in front of Haram with his fingers interlocked in front of him. “Smack the piss out of who, nigga?” He pointed in Haram’s face. “You need to get yo’ shit together, *boy*.”

Haram stood up and immediately shoved Cavalli. “Fuck out my face, nigga. The fuck wrong with you?!”

Syn took a deep breath and pulled from his blunt, deciding that tonight he wouldn’t jump in between the two of them. If they wanted to scrap it out, he was letting them. He figured, maybe that would burn off the tension they clearly had for one another. If he stopped them again, all they would end up doing was getting into it again, the next time they met up. Cavalli wanted to get his shit off. He was still very pissed off about how Haram snuck him ‘like a bitch’.

Because Cavalli was anticipating that type of reaction from Haram, he wasn’t caught off guard and didn’t move an inch when he was pushed. Instead of getting out of Haram’s face like he told him to, Cavalli punched him in it. Afterall, he owed him that much. Haram reacted immediately and both grown ass men got to tussling like they were the young teenagers they used to be. The differences between now and then was very obvious. The both of them were over six feet and over two hundred pounds, with lethal right and left hooks. They weren’t wrestling like they used to neither; they were downright scrapping, drawing blood and all.

Meanwhile, Syn sat back, watching as they fought around the house, breaking shit, without a care in the world. He refused to get in between their big asses. The fight was

inevitable. Cavalli had let Haram get away with too much over the past couple of months.

“You done, pussy?” Haram gritted, before throwing a punch at Cavalli.

Cavalli dodged it and charged at him, wrapping his arms around Haram’s waist. Cavalli backed him up against the couch, and they both fell on it. He quickly flipped the both of them over and put Haram in a chokehold.

“Nah, nigga! You done?! Tap out, bitch!” Cavalli yelled, out of breath, his chest heavily heaving.

He needed to stop. He could barely breathe. Although Cavalli had a nice ass body, he was terribly out of shape. Haram too, but at least he did a push up every now and then. Besides, it had been a long time since the two of them had gotten into a fist fight. Usually, he let Haram rock how he rocked but lately, Cavalli had been drowning in bullshit brought on by him.

Haram, refusing to tap out, continued to fight. Cavalli should’ve known better; Haram had never been one to give up. Before he tapped out, Cavalli would certainly be forced to let go. It happened every time. This time he didn’t though. He choked Haram until he passed out and the minute Krystal walked into the house she panicked.

Tossing her Brahmin bag on the other couch, she hurriedly ran over to where Cavalli was laid back, against the couch, breathing heavy with a ‘sleeping’ Haram on top of him. Before he could lift his head up, Krystal was smacking him upside it.

“What the hell did you do to my baby, Cavalli!?” She shrieked, as she grabbed Haram’s arm, trying to pull him away. “And you!” She turned to Syn. “You just sitting there, smoking, like ain’t a damn thing going on. I heard all of the tussling as soon as I pulled up in front of the house!” She lightly smacked Haram on the cheek. “Haram!? Baby!? Wake up!” Haram!?”

Cavalli moved Haram away from him before standing. He grabbed Haram’s legs and picked them up, laying them on the couch. “He’ll be up in a minute. Chill out,” He said, before staggering into the kitchen, exhausted.

Syn sucked his teeth. “I wasn’t about to stand in between these two dumb niggas,” He shrugged. “We all would’ve been in this ‘mug’ scrappin’ ‘cause the first nigga that hit me by mistake would’ve caught one of these lethal boys.” He flexed his hand open and closed before pulling from his blunt and putting it out. “That nigga straight.”

“What do you mean he’s straight?!” Krystal cried. “Look at his face!”

Krystal was being dramatic; Haram had only suffered a busted lip. Cavalli too. They were going head up, but not like two niggas that hated each other. Neither of them gave the other everything they had. Had they, there would’ve been blood *all over* the living room.

Syn took a deep breath and pushed up from the couch to get a look at Haram. He looked at his mother with his mouth twisted up as to say ‘you trippin’. “That nigga is straight. He needed a nap, low key. Wil’ boi.”

Syn could act like Haram's busted lip was nothing all he wanted to, Krystal saw things another way. To her, it appeared that Cavalli had bullied Haram. Her pride and joy was knocked out, with a bloodied lip, while her oldest child stood in the kitchen drinking water from a gallon jug as if he'd done absolutely nothing wrong. Krystal knew Haram could've been the problem. In fact, she was sure he was. But still... that didn't give Cavalli the right to put his hands on him. Especially since he knew firsthand that Haram had issues that were out of his control.

Krystal with tears running down her face, lifted Haram's head from the couch so she could sit and cradle it. "You didn't have to fight him, Cavalli. You know better."

Cavalli grunted as he twisted the cap back onto his water. "He knows better too. Except, he won't do better."

"He's trying," Krystal said, as she looked down at her baby boy, running her hand atop his curly, wild mane.

"He's trying?" Cavalli asked with a grunt as he walked into the living room. "Trying what? To end up back—"

"Cavalli Knight!" Krystal yelled, cutting him off midsentence. "Why didn't either of you tell me he came back? Why is it that I had to come here to see that my son was here? If it wasn't for Monica calling, telling me she saw him over at Ms. Mae's house with that lil' girl, I wouldn't have never known he was here! My son was right across the street from me... underneath my nose and I didn't have a clue! But apparently y'all knew! I thought we had an understanding... What happened to communication?" Krystal paused and shook her head, looking down at Haram's face. He looked so

peaceful. Like he hadn't been wreaking havoc on the whole family for weeks now.

She looked back up, looking back and forth between Syn and Cavalli. "You boys stay with the secrets. What's going on is probably tied to what y'all are out here doing in these streets."

His baby brothers mental state could have very well been his fault. But Cavalli knew it wasn't. All three of them were under a lot of stress, regarding their position in the drug game. He had put Haram in a stressful situation. Not once, but twice... technically. The first time by meeting with Jive, knowing how Haram felt about dealing with unprofessional business partners. The second time, he didn't necessarily put Haram in it, but he made him feel as though he needed to correct what went wrong with Jive. Regardless, Cavalli knew Haram's mental state was his own fault.

"What's going on is tied to his inability to give a fuck, ma." Cavalli paused and pointed at Haram. "You like to blame everybody but that lil nigga."

"Her *baby boy* don't do no wrong, slime. You already know," Syn said with a chuckle, before pushing up from the couch. He extended his hand to Cavalli and they slapped hands. "I'll get with you a lil' later, bro. It's too sad in this boy for me."

Syn walked out of the house and sparked fire to his blunt. He looked over his shoulder at the house and shook his head. He loved his mother but she got on his damn nerves, babying Haram and shunning him as if they weren't one in the same, in some ways. Sure, Haram's issues were more so out of

his control, but so what? The shit Haram did was always excused, meanwhile, Krystal stayed on Syn's head for smaller shit. He couldn't stand it.

Fishing his phone from his pocket, he went to his contact list and called the number under the name *Little Caesars*. He was 'hungry' but it most certainly wasn't for pizza. And if he was in the mood for pizza, it for damn sure wouldn't be for any damn Little Caesars, he hated that shit.

"Hello?" Answered his side bitch, Diara.

"Where you at?" Syn asked, before walking down the stairs.

"Why? That lil' girl you been fuckin' with must be on punish—"

"Bitch, where you at?!" Syn snapped. He hated when Diara referred to Legacy as a little girl, as if she was twelve, instead of eighteen.

She sucked her teeth. "You got me—"

"Aight, fuck it—"

"I'm at home!" She yelled before hanging up on him.

Syn loved Legacy but settling down with one woman was the last thing on his mind. He was a young twenty, of course it was. He had bad habits—really bad habits. But at least he cared enough about her to keep that shit away from her. In all of the years that they've been together, the cheating Syn did never made it back to her. But that was only because the women he fucked with weren't from the hood. At least the majority of them weren't. Diara was, but she kept her mouth

shut because she knew if she didn't the little bread Syn threw her every now and then would stop and he'd probably kill her.

...

Haram woke up a little disoriented, but once he did and took in where he was at, he was on go mode. Except, when he tried to sit up, Krystal pulled him back down, by wrapping her arms around his chest.

“Cavalli is asleep, Haram,” she told him. “Calm down, baby.”

Haram, with a rapidly heaving chest and a scowl on his face didn't want to calm down, he wanted to finish what was started before Cavalli took the pussy way out by choking him out. He tried to get up again, but Krystal held on to him tighter.

“I have to piss,” Haram told her before yanking away from her grip.

Krystal swallowed her emotions and stood up to follow behind him when he walked off. Looking over his shoulder, he told her, “I don't need an escort to the bathroom ma. If I really wanted at that nigga, you wouldn't be able to stop me no way.”

Cavalli was in bed and because Haram was far from a sucka, he wouldn't get at him that way. He'd wait until they could shoot a fair one. He literally had to use the bathroom. He didn't need Krystal hovering over him.

“Okay, ‘Ram,” Krystal said, throwing her hands up. “I just... I don't know what to do with you when you're like this.”

“You really don't,” Haram mumbled before walking into the bathroom.

None of them knew what to do. All Haram wanted was space and the opportunity to live his life without having to worry about appeasing other people. They were suffocating him. After years of dealing with Haram's issues, he'd think they would pick up on how suffocating him did nothing but make things worse. They hadn't though. They thought giving him space was dangerous, but it really wasn't. Haram had never been a danger to himself. He was only a danger to the people around him.

Standing at the toilet, Haram pissed and shook before flushing. He stood at the sink, turned the faucet on and looked at his reflection in the mirror. They wanted him to do better. They wanted him to talk to them. They wanted him to get a better handle on his issues but what they failed to realize was that as long as they told him what to do, he wouldn't. That was how Haram operated. He didn't do anything because he was told to do it. He had always done things on his own accord. The longest they tried to lecture him, the longest it would take for him to get a handle on things.

Taking a deep breath, Haram finally lathered his hands with soap and ran them under the scolding hot water. He wasn't surprised when he walked out to find his mother standing by the bathroom. He sighed and shook his head.

"It's late. Why are you even around here?" Haram asked. "You need to go home, ma."

Krystal knew she shouldn't have been at Syn and Cavalli's house. She was in a hot spot and really did need to go home but she wouldn't be without Haram. She missed having her baby boy there. She'd been laying up, wide awake

every night, waiting to hear him climbing through her window. But he hadn't and that worried her more than anything. She was, however, thankful that she hadn't gotten a visit from the police about him. Still, she worried about him every single day. It wasn't just that she worried. The house was too quiet without him. She missed sitting in the kitchen with him, laughing and talking while he ate cereal from one of her big mixing bowls instead of the smaller ones. She missed her son and wished there was more she could do to help him.

“I know. Come on,” Krystal said. “I feel like cooking. You want a big breakfast sandwich in the morning? I went grocery shopping and—”

“I need you to take me to my room,” Haram interrupted, as he rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the pain of Cavalli choking him out there. “I'm not coming home right now. I still need a little space.”

Krystal took a deep breath. “Haram—”

“I don't have a phone... if I had a phone, I would get an Uber or some shit. I just need you to take me to my spot. That's it ma.” He paused and clasped his hands together. “Please.”

Krystal nodded and walked away to grab her purse from the table. “Okay... Okay Haram... I'll take you wherever you need me to take you.”

Haram nodded and walked out of the house, pushing the screen door open so hard that it crashed against the house, rattling the window to Cavalli's bedroom. He prayed it'd wake the nigga up so he could beat his ass.

About twenty minutes later, Haram was closing the door to his hotel room. Glancing up at the clock on the wall, he saw that it was close to five in the morning. He slid out of his shoes, tossed his keys on the coffee table and came out of his shirt. Before walking into the bathroom, he stopped at the wall mirror in the hallway. He tilted his head back a little, looking at the bruises Cavalli left and gritted his teeth. He couldn't believe he'd taken the pussy way out by choking him instead of scrapping straight up. Haram already knew what it was; Cavalli couldn't see him. He might've been big bro, but when Haram was on one, he wouldn't stop until a nigga was leaking or missing a couple of teeth. Cavalli had restraint that Haram didn't.

Massaging the back of his neck, he walked into the bathroom and immediately went to the shower to start it. While the water heat up, he stood at the sink, staring into the mirror again. Getting yet another glimpse of his neck sent a surge of anger through his entire being. He was tempted to punch the mirror but instead, he gripped the sides of the sink, shaking with fury. Closing his eyes, Haram took a deep breath. He thought that, maybe he should listen. Maybe it was time for him to get a handle on his life again. Lately, the bad days had outweighed the good ones. With everything piling up on him, his daily mantras no longer worked. His mind was cluttered and clouded. He psyched himself out, thinking that just because he put a bit of distance between himself and his family that he was doing better. He was. Briefly. Peace didn't exist.

Closing his eyes again, images of Tokyo flashed across his mind and he realized that the only time he truly did have

peace was laying with her on the floor a couple of hours ago. It had been a while since he slept like that. Time didn't exist. The only thing existed in that moment was the two of them. Sleep, for Haram, didn't come easily. Not unless he was heavily medicated or in a drunk slumber. Even then, he didn't sleep peacefully. With her, he did though. Instead of reading too deep into it, Haram chalked it up to exhaustion.

Once steam started to coat the mirror, he continued to disrobe and got into the shower.

...

Meanwhile, across town, Cavalli was lying awake, with his eyes to the ceiling thinking of his baby brother. He'd heard Haram leave. He heard the screen door crash against his bedroom window but he did nothing to respond to it. He knew exactly what Haram was on. Cavalli was tired of his ass. He wanted to help Haram and fuck him up all at once. Sad thing about both was that he couldn't do neither. He couldn't help Haram because Haram didn't want to be helped and he couldn't truly fuck him up because he loved him. He knew Haram had issues. Issues he'd helped him work through when they were younger. Issues that seemed to get bigger than all of them as Haram started to grow. He knew that it would be best to let Haram be but letting him be scared Cavalli. Letting Haram be, could be catastrophic for a lot of people. Before it would get better, it would get worst. But hadn't it already reached its peak? The boy committed a coldblooded murder. No mask, in front of a witness. Usually, by now, Haram would have figured it was time to get his shit together. The last time he had a black out, he corrected it. Now... he was just a loose cannon.

Reaching over to the nightstand, Cavalli picked his phone up and shot Krystal a text message.

Cavalli: Where you take him?

Krystal: Marriott downtown... He stayed. And I'm sitting in the parking lot, a crying mess.

Cavalli closed his eyes and clenched down on his jaw.

Cavalli: Leave ma. Give him time. You know he'll be back right in a couple...

Krystal felt as if she'd given him enough time. She was ready for her baby to come back home. But she knew that eventually he'd come back. He always did.

Krystal: Okay.

Cavalli: Love you.

Krystal: Love you too, son.

Cavalli plugged his phone up to the charger and turned over to finally try to get some sleep.

...

“Ayoooo!” Syn called out from the hallway, banging on Cavalli’s bedroom door. “Get up, nigga!”

Cavalli groaned and leaned over to grab his phone. It was after twelve and in a couple of hours, he had a meeting to attend. Sitting the phone back down, he sat on side of the bed and placed his hands on the sides of his head. His thoughts immediately went to Haram. His brother was the only thing he could think about for real. If he wasn’t busy handling business, his mind was on Haram.

Syn knocked again and Cavalli shouted, “Aight bitch! I’m up. Damn!”

Right after, Syn walked in, with a blunt dangling from his lips. He was the only one of the brothers who was always up bright and early in the morning, getting to it. Since they were kids, he was always a morning person and wanted to make everyone else one too. Growing up, how he’d walk around waking the entire house up just because he was awake got on their nerves. The brothers fought a lot because of it too. It didn’t matter that Syn didn’t get home from fucking with Diara until four in the morning, he still woke up at ten, had a blunt for breakfast and jumped right in the shower.

“Where that nigga ‘Ram at? At the crib?” Syn asked, before passing Cavalli his breakfast.

Cavalli looked up, took the blunt from him and pulled from it before responding. “Nah. Moms said he at the Marriott.”

Syn stood at the window with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeaned shorts and shook his head. “That nigga will be back home in a couple days. Probably today. He about drained at this point.”

Cavalli took another pull of the blunt and nodded. “Hell yeah. I told momma the same shit, basically. Just gotta let that nigga be.”

Syn glanced over his shoulder and lightly chuckled. “You know that nigga probably woke up wanting to kill yo ass.”

Cavalli laughed and passed the blunt back to him. “Fuck that nigga.” He shook his head and stood up to stretch.

Syn sucked his teeth. “You talm’bout fuck that nigga but I bet you didn’t close yo eyes ‘til he was already up out this bitch.”

Cavalli laughed again and tossed his head back a little. “Man, hell nah. I didn’t close my eyes ‘til mom’s told me she dropped his crazy ass off.”

The brothers shared a hearty laugh, standing at Cavalli’s bedroom window at the hustle and bustle of the block.

“Smart man,” Syn said, as their laughter started to subside.

They joked about Haram’s impulsiveness but in all actuality, how he was, was pretty scary. Exchanging glances, Cavalli switched the subject to the meeting he had today. It was an important one. One he wanted to talk to Haram about, but sadly, couldn’t. He was taking them another level closer to

where he wanted them to be—the top. Standing, talking about it with Syn only was bittersweet and had been for the past couple of weeks. He couldn't wait for their dynamic to be back to what it was.

CHAPTER THREE

Haram woke up to the aggravating humming of a vacuum. Peeling his lids open, he squinted at the bright sunrays, shining into his room. He'd forgotten to close the blinds. Groaning, he ran his hands down his face and finally sat up to check the time on his phone. It wasn't until he stood up out of bed, frantically searching the bed for it that he remembered he didn't have a phone. Cursing again, he looked up at the clock and couldn't believe it was almost two in the afternoon. He'd slept entirely too long. It wasn't one of those good sleeps neither. He had nightmares and tossed and turned most of the night.

Standing at the window, Haram peered down and was happy to see that Ave was already out working on his car. By the look of things, he would be done soon. Haram was anxious. He needed to get on the road quick. He needed to grab a new phone and to figure out where he'd go from where he was. He knew one thing for certain, he couldn't spend another day in the uncomfortable hotel bed. He missed his own. Questions of whether he should go home just yet, or not pegged him.

As annoying as his family was last night, there were some things that Cavalli was right about. Haram's personal issues had spilled over into business. And he was the only one to blame for that. Not Cavalli. Not Syn. Him. Accountability had never been a quality Haram possessed. He responded with anger every single time. He hadn't been thinking right. Somewhere along the line, he had indeed lost sight of what was important. As he walked away from the window, he

realized that the way he'd been carrying on wasn't doing anything but making things worst.

Before walking into the bathroom, Haram stopped at his Nike Duffle bag and rummaged around it until he found what he was looking for. Staring down at the small white bottle, he clenched down on his jaw with hesitation. For once in his life, he wanted to be able to carry on without this 'necessity' attached to him. Haram hated that for him to live a somewhat normal life he needed help. There was nothing else about his life that he'd change, but it. After twisting the cap off, he tossed a pill back and rinsed it down with a swig of melted ice from an old carry-out cup from a few days ago.

Hours later, Haram was checked out of the hotel, back riding, with a brand new iPhone. With Mozzy on full blast, he sped down I-75 on his way to the hood. As he bobbed his head to 'Bladadah' he couldn't help but think of how hard it was going to be for him to sit down with his family. He thought about just popping up like everything was everything but last night was proof of how that shit wouldn't fly. The way he'd been carrying on couldn't be brushed under the rug. His actions over the past few weeks triumphed every fucked up thing he'd done in the past. Murking ol' boy was one thing but hurting his mother to tears was another. That body he caught, he didn't give a fuck about. His mother's tears were what was killing him. He'd never disrespected her the way he did this time around. Thinking about the way she silently cried last night on their way to the hotel killed him. Running his hand over the top of his head, Haram knew he couldn't pretend nothing happened. He'd have to, once again, put his humble hat on and apologize.

It didn't take him long to get to the hood. Instead of pulling up on Cavalli and Syn, he went straight home. The minute Krystal heard his keys jingling at the door, she got off the phone with her boyfriend and jumped off the couch. When she and Cavalli talked last night about Haram coming around eventually, she didn't think he'd be coming around this soon. She was grateful. So grateful that she was nearly moved to tears.

As soon as the door opened, Krystal wrapped her arms around Haram, who was a bit hesitant but hugged her anyway. He loved his mother. Dealing with her could just be a bit much. He was thankful to have such a loving, forgiving mother though. She'd put up with his issues for most of his life and she handled it gracefully.

“Hey ‘Ram,” Krystal said with a smile, as she cupped his face with a bright smile. “You hungry?”

He was actually, but he didn't want to eat. Not yet.

“Yeah, but first, I owe you an apology. I'm not going to walk up in here and act like the way I've been handling sh—things have been cool because it hasn't.”

“It's okay—”

“It's not though,” Haram interrupted before closing the door and sitting his duffle bag on the floor.

Krystal gave Haram pass after pass. Passes she wouldn't give Syn or Cavalli. And while it made Haram's life a bit easier, he didn't like to be treated special. He wanted to be treated as an equal. He wanted his mother to get as mad at him as she would if it was Syn who'd been disrespectful.

Haram didn't like how she treated him like a baby. As if his actions weren't recklessly thought out. He knew what he was doing. He made the decision to fall back on his meds because he wanted to. Not because of his issues. He was simply tired of that crutch. He was tired of having to stay up on medication. He wanted to, for a change, to be a regular nigga. And he wanted his mother to treat him as such. As fucked up as it might've been, he was happy Cavalli squared up with him last night. He felt like something other than an outcast. He felt like an equal. He had fought to be treated as such most of his life. In fact, he'd fought with it all of his life. For as long as he could remember, at least.

Haram was always seen as *different*.

Out of his brothers, he had lighter skin. He had lighter eyes. He had curly hair. He was the one with a white father. He was the mixed breed. Growing up, how much of a mixed breed he was, was constantly thrown in his face. And as if he didn't have enough issues, he was diagnosed with Bipolar I disorder at the age of thirteen, although he'd shown symptoms of it well-before. It wasn't until he was stuck in bed for days, going through a depressive episode, that Krystal realized something was wrong. The minute the words 'mental illness' was brought up, the way he was treated was flipped. Krystal let him get away with more. His brothers wouldn't fight him as often. They treated him in ways that Haram never wanted to be treated in.

"If Syn or 'Val came at you the way I came at you, you would've flipped. You wouldn't be offering them food," Haram stated, locking eyes with her. "The way I handle things

aren't to be brushed up under the rug. I was wrong. I stopped taking my meds. I flipped. I disrespected you... Act like it."

Krystal swallowed a lump in her throat and walked away from him. He had grown up so much.

"What do you want me to do, Haram? Mistreat you because of things you can't control!?"

Haram took a deep breath and ran his tongue over his bottom lip, staring across the room at his mother sitting on the couch. There was so much he wanted to say but couldn't bring himself to verbalize it. What he wanted was his mother to hold him accountable for the shit he'd done. He wanted her to stop acting like his mental disorder crippled him because it didn't. Everything he did, he was well aware of it. He wasn't autistic—*he had Bipolar*. That was it. All he needed to do was to take his medication and he'd be good. He wouldn't have manic episodes. Or extended periods of high irritability. He wouldn't have black outs. There was a chance he would've, had he been medicating but the chances were very, very slim. Going weeks, on top of weeks without treatment he refused to take was his own doing. There was no telling how bad things would've gotten had he decided to go another day without dosing.

"What Haram?" Krystal asked, looking up at him with dipped brows. "What do you want me to do?"

Haram turned the corner of his mouth up and shook his head. "Nothin'. Look... I just came to apologize. You've been patient with me. I did what I needed to do. For a second, I lost sight of what was important." He glanced to the floor before looking back at her. "I've gotten back on track."

Krystal's eyes widened and she smiled. "It's okay—"

"Ma!" Haram yelled, causing Krystal to shudder. "Stop telling me it's okay! Got damn!"

He was trying. He was trying so hard to keep a cool head. Haram wasn't mad—he was irritated. Most of the time, that was his issue. Irritability, that eventually led to anger due to his families inability to understand him. It didn't matter that he'd taken his meds. They didn't work the way they did on TV. There was no miraculous switch just because he took a pill. It was a slow and delicate process. Knowing this, he should've waited at least another day to have this talk with Krystal. He knew there was a chance that he'd be triggered.

Krystal got up from the couch and drew back. "Alright, Haram! You're doing too got damn much now. Cursing at me like you've lost yo damn—" Krystal took a deep breath and paused. "Look... I said it's okay because I understand."

Haram shook his head, pacing back and forth, wishing he could calm his racing heart. She didn't understand. None of them did. He hated when she'd say that. He hated when she'd speak about understanding his mood swings and even his depressive episodes. He most definitely hated when she'd say she understood why he wasn't very good at taking his medication. She didn't understand a damn thing.

Glancing up from the floor, out of the window, he saw Legacy and Tempest on Tokyo's porch, knocking on the door. He had half a mind to go over to check on her, but what good would he be to her in his present mental space? Haram wanted to escape though. He needed to get out of the house. He

needed to get away from Krystal. For the moment... At least until his medication did its job.

“What am I supposed to do, Haram? You... I don’t know how to handle you like this.”

He glanced from the window, back at Krystal and lightly chuckled. Condescendingly.

“You keep talking about not being able to handle me, when I don’t need to be *handled*,” Haram told her. “I want to be respected as a grown man.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

Haram shook his head. “No. You’re not. You’re... you’re doing what you’ve always done.”

Krystal approached him with her hands stuffed into the pockets of her shorts. “What have I always done? I’m just... I don’t know.”

“Stop telling me it’s okay. Because it’s not,” Haram said, taking a step back away from her. “And please... Stop coddlin’ me.”

Krystal nodded, with tears sitting at the brim of her lids. She’d never admit it, but when Haram was like this he was scary. He wasn’t her baby boy. He was a grown ass man with an ill temper. A grown ass man with a mental illness that she was still trying to understand. Before Haram was diagnosed, she punished him for what she assumed was him acting out. And on the days that he couldn’t pull himself out of bed for school, she called him lazy and told him he was getting the ‘fuck up out of her house’. It wasn’t until one morning,

Haram laid in bed, crying that she realized he wasn't faking. Something was wrong.

She was still trying to make up for not noticing the signs before. She was trying to right her wrongs. There were still times that Krystal cried about the way she treated him, growing up. Whooping him. Yelling at him. Punishing him. When all he was, was a kid with a mental illness.

“Okay,” Krystal said, forcing a smile before quickly turning away to swipe a fallen tear before he could see it.

She needed to relax. She had to tread lightly. Haram hadn't yet come down from his episode. How excited she was to have him back needed to be parked on the back burner for a while.

Krystal sat back on the couch and pulled her legs underneath her bottom. “You wanted to talk?”

Haram looked away from the window, nodded, and put his attention back on Krystal. “As I was saying... there is no excuse for my behavior these past couple of weeks. You've been patient with me, and I appreciate that.” He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, glancing to the floor again before taking a deep breath. He was showing a weakness. There wasn't weakness in apologizing, but there was weakness in his actions. Failing to make eye contact. Failure to stand all six foot three inches of his height... those were the weaknesses.

Taking a deep breath, he approached the couch and instead of towering over his mother, he sat next to her. With his eyes locked on hers, Haram said, “I don't need reminders. I can take care of myself. Your reminders don't help.”

“So, what if you miss—”

“That’s my problem,” Haram interrupted. “I’m not fourteen... sixteen... whatever. I’m almost twenty. I can take care of myself.”

Haram wanted his mother to understand that *he* was in control of *his* life. Krystal was very well aware of that, but was it against the law to worry? Was it against the law to give him a little shove when she felt like he needed it? There were still so many things Krystal didn’t understand about Haram. But after all of the years that they’ve been in each other’s lives, she should’ve understood his rebellion. He didn’t want to be told what to do. Telling him what to do was the easiest way to get him to do the exact opposite.

Just as Krystal didn’t understand, Haram didn’t particularly understand her neither. He thought she was babying him. He thought she was overprotective and pushy because she wanted to control his life. Haram was wrong. She didn’t want to pressure him into doing anything. Krystal was having a hard time letting go and accepting that Haram was a grown man. And a fine grown man at that, with his head screwed on pretty okay. He was so mature, strong, and courageous. How strong, mature, and courageous he was, scared her. Because he wasn’t just those things. Tucked away from the rest of the world was his mental illness. He kept it hidden so well that she was afraid that one day, he’d be hurt because of it.

Krystal wasn’t sure if Haram would be able to lead a simple life with it. How would he react after his first heartbreak? Would he stop taking his medicine completely?

Would he fall into a deep depression he wouldn't be able to dig himself out of it? And what about when he finally moved away? What would happen then? How would she know he was okay, all of the time? And... his anger... what if he had a run in with the police while he was in one of his moods? Black men have a certain stigma attached to them. What would be viewed as a simple mental illness on a white man, would be labeled as ignorance, ghetto, and volatile on a black man. Would he be killed because of his mental illness? Krystal worried... she worried a lot.

...

“I come in peace,” Haram said, with his hands up as he jogged up the creaky porch, wearing a light grin.

Syn jumped up from the crate he was sitting on and approached Haram with an opened palm. They slapped hands and pulled into each other for a brotherly hug. The greeting Syn gave him wasn't one Haram was expecting from Cavalli. They had been through too much shit over the past few months. He was cool, because he was on the same type of time, despite being there to apologize.

“Good shit!” Syn exclaimed with a grin. “I might've had to fuck both you niggas up.”

Haram snorted and ran his hand over the top of his head as he approached Cavalli. “Valli... What's good pussy ass nigga? I'm up now. You tryin' to shoot a fair one?”

Syn laughed and shook his head. “I thought you said you came in peace, bitch.”

Haram chuckled, looking down at Cavalli with a sneer. “Yeah, I did. I was just fucking with this uptight ass nigga. What's good, blood? You straight? We good?”

Cavalli pulled from his Black N' Mild and looked up at Haram with a snarl. “I'm not uptight, pussy. You don't have room to be comin' 'round this bitch joking about shootin no fair ones.”

Haram took a deep breath and extended his hand. “Stop trippin'. It's love. I haven't had my head screwed on

right for a few weeks... I came in peace... with apologies and shit like that.”

Cavalli pinched the Black between his lips and slapped hands with Haram before standing up.

With their hands still clasped together, Cavalli leaned in, took the Black out of his mouth, and said, “I’m glad to see yo’ head screwed on straight brodie.” He pulled back and locked eyes with Haram. “I hope it stays strapped on right. You feel me?”

Haram nodded and told him it would. Cavalli sat back down and Haram sat on the railing across from them. He looked around the neighborhood before taking his fitted cap off to wipe sweat from the top of his head. It was a scorching ninety-five degrees. And if the sweat pouring from niggas heads wasn’t proof enough, the activities on the block was. The block was popping, as it usually was when it was hot out. There was a big water fight going on, and not too long ago, Syn had popped the fire hydrant open for the kids. Unlike usual, there wasn’t a basketball game going in the street. It was too hot for that. But there was a group of niggas on the sidewalk, shirtless, shooting dice. Cavalli had just gotten up twelve hundred, taking niggas for their money a minute ago.

“Perfect timing too, nigga,” Cavalli said, as he sat up and ashed his Black. He looked up at Haram with a grin. “I just got up with that nigga Bo a couple hours ago.”

He was happy as hell Haram had gotten his shit together. He hated being at odds with his brother. He hated being at odds with either of them. They were close knit. And because they moved as one unit, there was an imbalance

whenever one was missing. Aside from that, Cavalli was tired of worrying about Haram. Haram would never know it but Cavalli lost almost as much sleep worrying about him as Krystal did.

The only one of them that could sleep like a baby whenever Haram was on a trip was Syn. He never worried because he trusted his brother. He let Haram rock how he wanted to rock and waited patiently for him to get his shit straight. He was the only one in the family that understood Haram when he was having an episode. He was the only one of them that gave Haram his space too. Some might look at Syn not caring enough but he cared just as much as his brother and his mother did. He just cared in a different type of way. He loved him a lot more than he let on. If something horrible happened to Haram, Syn would lose his shit.

With raised brows, Haram said, “Straight? What’s on the flo’?”

“Pape nigga. Chicken,” Syn responded with a big smile before extending his hand for Haram to slap. “We up, up. Bro finally came through.”

Cavalli laughed and said, “Shut up bitch, I was always gone come through.” He put his black out and ran both his hands over the top of his head. “Shit just took a lil’ longer than anticipated.”

Haram nodded. “Better late than never, G.” Him and Cavalli slapped hands and just like that, they were back to where they fit best—on one accord.

CHAPTER FOUR

...

“Tokyo... Let me in,” Legacy yelled, as she banged on the front door for the fiftieth time.

Tokyo, as she had done for the past few days, laid there on the couch ignoring her. She didn't want to talk to Legacy. She didn't want to speak to anyone. The people she really did want to speak to were no longer with her. Mae... and now Space. Tokyo was alone, drowning in sorrow, and to her, Legacy was the one responsible. She trusted Legacy to keep Space. She trusted her to keep Space safe. If Legacy felt for any second that watching Space would be too much, she shouldn't have offered to keep her. Since Mae passed away, Tokyo had been adamant about not asking people for help or seeking a single hand out. She never forced Legacy to do anything. She never forced Ms. Juanita to neither. If they really didn't want to help, all they had to do was leave the two girls the fuck alone.

Now look.

Tokyo literally had no one. She had no family. She had no friends. She was done with Legacy and she was done with Tempest too. All Tokyo wanted was to be left alone, but that seemed pretty impossible since Legacy made it her business to come by several times a day to check on her. She didn't need to be checked on, she needed space. Literally and figuratively.

“We might as well just go,” Tempest said with a frown on her face, looking down at her phone. “We've been coming

over here every single day for like a week and she still ain't opened up for us. Shit, fuck it. We're supposed to be having fun this summer, but yet we've been babysitting her ass. If Tokyo wants to lay cooped up in the house crying all day, then oh well. It's not up to us to take care of her, Legacy. I'm off this shit. At least we know she's not dead. It would be a smell by—”

“Really bitch!? What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Legacy yelled, on the verge of smacking Tempest in the face. She couldn't believe she had the audacity to be so insensitive to their best friend.

“What? Did I say anything wrong? Shit, Legacy,” Tempest said with a sigh. “We're all sad. It's a fucked up situation, but let's face the facts here... Space is better off wherever she ends up at. I'm not mad at what your momma did. Hell... what eighteen year old can really take care of a six year old? Tokyo ain't cut out for that. She should be thanking Ms. Juanita for doing something she couldn't. You can't tell me what mom's did was fucked up.”

Legacy hated to agree, but she did. She didn't, however, agree that her mother had the right to call CPS on Tokyo, but she did agree that Tokyo didn't need to become a full-time parent to Space. She'd just turned eighteen and was still a child herself at the end of the day. Tokyo should've been out enjoying life, not worrying about taking care of a whole child. Legacy just wished things could've gone differently with that.

“You out here talking really crazy like I'm deaf because I'm sad,” Tokyo said, startling both Legacy and

Tempest who were on their way down the stairs. “Nobody asked either of you to come over here, so why keep coming? I’m good. Go away. Especially if you’re going to be saying shady shit behind my back. Fuck the both of you.”

“Fuck both of us?” Legacy asked, with raised brows. “What the fuck did I do to you, Tokyo? Please tell me... What did I do... directly... for it to be fuck both of us?”

Legacy’s feelings were hurt like never before. She’d been trying for days to enjoy her summer but she couldn’t. She couldn’t even cruise the city in her fresh ass Nissan Altima because her best, best friend wasn’t to the right of her. How was she supposed to have fun in her brand new car while her bestie was at home a mess? She couldn’t. Shit just wasn’t right without Tokyo and by the sound of things, shit wouldn’t be right for a long time. Tokyo was spewing straight up hate, and as much as Legacy wanted to fix things, she was tempted to just wash her hands of their friendship.

Tokyo shifted her weight from one leg to the other, as she looked down at her toes, speechless. Legacy technically hadn’t done anything to her. She was just guilty by association but was that fair? In that moment, Tokyo felt like it was. All she had to do was keep Space. All she had to do was protect her when Tokyo couldn’t.

Looking up at Legacy, Tokyo just slammed the door shut.

“See? Fuck her,” Tempest said, throwing her hands up as they turned to continue down the stairs. “How she actin’ don’t have nothin to do with Granny and Space. ‘Cause how do being sad about somebody dying make you be mean to—”

Before Tempest could say another thing, she was being yanked backwards by her hair. Tokyo, from behind the door heard Tempest steady talking shit and had, had enough. Before they could even realize she had come outside, Tokyo had yanked Tempest up the porch, where she pounded on her like she was a stranger on the block, rather than a girl she considered her best friend. Was Tokyo over reacting? Possibly. But her actions didn't just come from a place of anger. It came from a place of depression, grief, and betrayal too. How could her best friend talk about her like that? How could her best friend discredit everything she was going through? Tempest hadn't been supportive of what Tokyo was going through from the jump. When Tokyo talked about Sahara and how she was worried about her turning to drugs, she wasn't supportive. She added fuel to the fire and did nothing to ease Tokyo's worrying mind about her. When they talked about Haram looking out for her at the Block Party, it was Tempest who poisoned Tokyo's thoughts about why he was doing it. Sure, she said it out of her mouth, but Tempest was always giving her unsolicited confirmation.

“Oh my God! Tok, stop! Get off of her!” Legacy screamed, as she tried to pull Tokyo off of Tempest who was wildly flailing her arms, trying to get a hit off. Every punch she threw, Tokyo bobbed and weaved, dodging them. After a while, she got tired of bobbing and weaving, and sat on Tempest's arms, while she beat her bloody. She was taking things far. Too far. But because all she saw was red, she kept going. Up until she felt a pair of strong arms pull her off of Tempest in one swift move.

Before she could react, she was behind the closed door of her house, panting heavily, looking up at a frowning Haram.

“Move! Get out of my way!” She yelled, trying to get past him.

“For what? Man, chill out,” Haram said, standing against the door with his arms crossed over his chest.

He was pulling into the driveway of his house, when he heard the commotion coming from down the block. When he peeped what was going on, he ran down the block to break it up since no one else was, and Legacy was having a hard time.

“It’s nice to see you alive though,” Haram continued, locking eyes with Tokyo who had been avoiding him.

He hadn’t seen nor heard from her since the night Space was taken, four days ago. She crossed her arms over her chest, in an effort to hide the stains on the same shirt she had one four days ago. Stains Haram noticed before she’d crossed her arms. He tried not to, but his eyes traveled from hers, to the rest of her, taking it all in. Tokyo hadn’t touched a lick of water. She hadn’t bathed. And by the pile of trash on the porch, she hadn’t touched the food he’d dropped off neither. Tokyo was bad off.

“Tokyo,” Haram called out.

She shifted her gaze from the floor, up at him. “Huh? I’m... I’ve been good. I’ve just been trying to clear my head.”

Haram took a step closer to her and took a deep breath. “You should come out from behind these walls. Gettin’ a lil bit of fresh air is the perfect remedy for clearing your head. You

can't do that stuck here." He paused and locked eyes with her. "Sometimes, when I really need to clear my mind, I go to the riverfront. There's something about the sound of waves crashing together that gives a nigga peace. I bet it'll do the same for you. So... get dressed; let's go."

He knew what it meant to want to be left alone, so he wouldn't push but he would try to ease her out of the house at least. She needed to get out. She needed to feel the sun and a cool breeze against her skin. Staying inside was bad for her mental health. Haram knew all about it.

"I can't go—"

"Why can't you? What's stopping you? Go jump fly like I know you know how," Haram interrupted.

Tokyo pulled her lips into her mouth before turning to look away from him. She was embarrassed. She knew she looked a mess. She knew she smelled horrible too. Which was why any time Haram would take a step closer to her, she'd take one back. She was for sure ripe. As much as she'd rather just crawl up on the couch sulking as she had for the last few days, she knew she couldn't keep doing that. Tokyo needed to get into the shower. She needed to go outside. She needed some good ol' fashion Vitamin C. Besides, what would laying around sad all day do to help her situation? She needed, once again, to find strength in her sorrow.

"Okay," She whispered before walking away.

Haram nodded and walked away himself, going back onto the porch to pick up the torn up carryout bags and trash. At least his money hadn't gone to waste completely. At least somebody... or something ate it.

Tokyo looked over her shoulder at him through the screen door, cleaning the porch up and felt such a sense of fulfillment. She appreciated Haram so much. She would have had that same compassion for her friends, if she felt like they were actually being friends. Tokyo didn't want to deal with them. Legacy played a role in her sadness. And Tempest? Tempest was just an ignorant, rude bitch that had never shown an ounce of sincere compassion for her situation. Haram though? Haram had been one hundred percent all around and she appreciated that so much. Especially coming from him. Someone she didn't think gave a fuck about anybody but themselves.

Standing in the bathroom, at the mirror, Tokyo stared at her reflection. She hadn't seen herself in days. Now, standing there, she saw everything she felt. Sadness. Dirtiness. And the lack of life in her eyes too. She wondered if she'd ever smile again. A real one. A genuine one. The type of smile she had the day of her graduation. The type of smile she had before her world was turned upside down. She wanted to be happy. She wanted to be happy so bad, but she couldn't escape that thick cloud of grief and depression hanging over her head.

Taking a deep breath, Tokyo said out loud to herself, "I guess taking a shower and getting out of this house will be me taking a step toward getting from up under it."

The entire time Tokyo showered, she cried. She cried for Mae. She cried for Space. She cried for change. She stood underneath that shower head, crying, begging God for strength. She had to overcome this. She had to put on her 'big girl panties' and do what needed to be done. Get Space back. She wanted her baby sister so bad, but she hadn't done a single

thing to put her closer to getting her. She couldn't stay stagnant. She couldn't drown in her problems, and she wouldn't. She hadn't before. When she was a little girl, she persevered... she could persevere through this too... right?

About two hours later, Tokyo was dressed in a cute, long, spaghetti strapped mustard colored sundress and a pair of white and mustard colored Van's, sitting on the passenger side of Haram's car. She would've worn sandals if it wasn't for being in dire need of a pedicure. She blow dried her wet hair and pulled it up into a big bun on top of her head before giving her edges a soft, natural baby hair look. She wasn't really up to it, but she put on a bit of concealer, lashes, and eyeliner just to brighten up her face a bit. She hadn't done much to take care of her skin lately and it showed. But the makeup gave her just the right amount of glow that her natural skin would've had she been taking care of herself.

The car was fairly quiet, with the exception of Nipsey Hussle's Victory Lap playing at a low volume. Haram didn't know what to say. This was a different lane for him. Riding along with a chick... a beautiful chick at that. Someone he'd had his eyes on since he was a youngin'. He hated to even come to the conclusion, but he was nervous. And he was never nervous with women. Tokyo did that to him though. And by how tensed she was, with her hands tucked underneath her thighs, he could tell she was nervous too. He wanted to tell her she had nothing to be nervous about. He had her. If she needed him... she'd always have him. Haram wanted to help her. He wanted to be close to her. It was what he'd wanted for years. To be in her vicinity. To be her friend. To be seen by her. Tokyo hadn't a clue, but Haram was completely smitten by her

and seeing her like this... saddened... broken... a shell of the young woman she used to be... fucked him up.

Although he was a bit timid, he asked what she wanted to eat. Not if she was hungry. Not if she wanted to go grab something... but what she was in the mood for. He knew her well enough to know that if he'd asked her something like that, she would have said no. But he could tell by the old dishes in her sink, and the rummaged through Door Dash orders on the front porch that she hadn't eaten.

Tokyo shrugged her right shoulder. "I don't really have a taste for anything."

Haram lightly snorted, before glancing at her. "You been to Joe Muer? Moms love that shit. She make us take her there every birthday and Mother's Day. It's at the Renaissance Center, so we can go there first and walk right over to the riverfront after."

"No... I've never been there. That's cool, I guess," Tokyo said, before looking down at her buzzing phone.

She sighed at the sight of Legacy's name. Picking her purse up from the floor, she tucked her phone into the little pocket on the side. She didn't want to talk to Legacy. She didn't even bother reading the text message. She knew all Legacy probably was doing was talking shit about her beating Tempest's ass, as if she didn't deserve that shit.

Haram glanced over at her again and said, "Aight. Joe Muer it is then..."

Tokyo nodded and looked away, out of the window. "I don't have any cash but—"

“What is it with you and trying to give me money? I told you before... I don’t want your money,” Haram interrupted, with a furrow in his brow. “Stop offering me that shit.”

He felt disrespected, otherwise he wouldn’t have cursed at her. He didn’t like it. He didn’t know what Tokyo was trying to prove. Whatever it was, she could stop. He wasn’t interested in her money.

“I was just sayin... I—”

“You smooth,” Haram interrupted again, before running his hand over the top of his head, with a deep breath. “My bad. No disrespect. I just... I offered to take you out. I don’t want your money, Tokyo. Aight? Please stop offering it to me.”

“Okay,” Tokyo said in a low tone.

Haram gripped the steering wheel, lightly twisting it, hoping he hadn’t upset her. He wanted her to have a good day. He wanted to ease her suffering a little. He didn’t want to aid to it by making her feel uncomfortable.

He glanced at her, tugged on his beard, and then looked back to the road. He didn’t know how to approach her. The way she made him feel like a giddy little boy drove him crazy. Haram couldn’t be the Haram he is with everyone else with her. Tokyo was to be treated with a certain type of delicacy. He couldn’t come at her raw the way he did with Khadijah.... and for a number of reasons. One being he wanted to be gentle with her. He wanted to handle her with care. He liked her. He didn’t particularly like Khadijah who was dealt with out of convenience. For Tokyo, he’d go the extra mile.

In his eyes she was *thee* prize. How bad he wanted her was pretty equivalent to that unruly child at the city fair trying to win that big bear that seemed impossible to win. That's what Tokyo was to him. Impossible to win. Impossible to get close to. Impossible to get a smile up out of. Impossible all around. Now that he'd gotten close enough to smell the scent of her perfume on her flawless skin he never wanted to be away from her. The other night, he fell asleep with the thought of her body against his on his mind. He couldn't wait to feel her cashmere soft skin on his again. He couldn't wait to wake up with her dried up drool on his tee again. He would do whatever necessary to ensure that she stayed right where she was. With him. In his grips. In his life. If that meant dialing back on his brash personality, then so be it. For her... he would.

About thirty minutes later, they were walking into the Renaissance Building, heading up to Joe Muer Seafood. They had been quiet since their awkward exchange in the car. Tokyo didn't know what to say. Just like Haram, she too felt giddy. She was with *thee* Haram Knight. At a fancy restaurant, having doors held open for her and shit. This is what Tempest wanted. Although she'd just beat her ass, Tokyo did feel a little guilty. Tempest had been crushing on Haram since they were in middle school. What would she think if they ended up becoming a thing?

Glancing at him, Tokyo decided she was probably overreacting. He was being nice. He was being a friend... right? He just wanted to make sure she was straight... right? Haram... the neighborhood bully... couldn't possibly have a crush on her. Didn't he have a thing with 'that girl' Khadijah?

Tokyo had seen them around together a few times. Not much lately, but when they were all around fifteen, sixteen, chilling on the block, she'd see Haram and Khadijah chasing each other around and walking up and down the block together all of the time. It had always been known that they were messing around. Maybe they weren't anymore? There were so many thoughts roaming through Tokyo's mind. She was searching for any reason that Haram couldn't possibly be trying to get with her. Since when?

Once they made it to the restaurant, they sat down and it was again... awkward silence. Tokyo wanted to pull her phone out so bad, but she felt like that would be rude. Haram was still trying to collect himself. He picked up the menu and looked over it, although he already knew what he wanted. He picked it up and looked at it to stop himself from staring at her. Damn she looked good. Tokyo had done a complete one eighty from what she looked like when he pulled her off of Tempest. Her skin had its usual glow and her eyes? Her bedroom, soft set, brown eyes were so beautiful. The feline-like eyeliner she'd applied earlier only gave them more appeal. Haram could stare into them all day, despite the lack of life they had in them lately.

His phone buzzed but instead of answering it, he hit the silence switch on the side of it and stuffed it back into his pocket.

“You like Mussels?” He asked, to break the silence.

“I've never had mussels,” Tokyo said with an embarrassed giggled. “I'm kind of picky.”

She picked her menu up and bit the side of her lip, looking over it, wishing she could find some chicken tenders and fries, or just some simple fried shrimp and French fries too. She didn't know what she was thinking, agreeing to come to some fancy seafood restaurant. Joe Muer was very fancy. They were drinking water from fancy wine glasses, and the waiter had a cloth tossed over his forearm. There was soft classical music playing and shit. Tokyo wasn't used to this. She didn't grow up with a silver spoon in her mouth at all. Haram neither but because him and his brothers were getting a lil' bit of money and they had a bougie mother who liked to have dinner at fancy places, he was more familiar with it all.

“Picky? Do you see anything you like?” Haram asked.

Tokyo giggled again. “Uhhhh.... They don't have chicken tenders?”

Haram laughed. “Chicken tenders? Shorty... Hell no. We ain't at Applebee's baby.” He paused and leaned forward to show him her menu, although they were looking at the same one. “Look... this right here straight. Ain't shit but some fish tacos. You like tacos, right... and fish?”

Tokyo cut her eyes at him. “Yes, I like tacos and fish, Haram.”

He laughed with a shrug. “Ay... I'm just checking. Get that. You eat steak? Shit's fire. Don't get that boy well-done though. Get it medium well. Moms put me onto that shit. Changed my life, low key. For a minute, I was eatin' cardboard hard ass steak, shakin' the table and shit when I was cutting it. Can't believe I was eatin' that dry ass shit.”

Tokyo laughed. She couldn't believe he had such a great sense of humor. She would have never guessed it. When they were kids, and she'd see him being silly, she thought he was just being ignorant but now that she somewhat knew him, she saw him in a new light and now realized that the way he talked... cursing... with a bit of aggression was just the way he talked, period.

As on the edge as he was, Haram was starting to lighten up a bit, letting his personality free. He'd never admit it but he held back a little just because he was unsure of how Tokyo really felt about him. She didn't like him. So in an effort to change that, he changed himself a little. But he couldn't. That fake, soft spoken shit wasn't him. He was naturally laid back, but when it came to intimate settings like this, he wasn't. He was free. So... he'd be free. Haram figured, fuck it. Who he was, was who he was. If she happened to not like him for who he truly was, then so be it. He grinned at the light twinkle in her eyes as she laughed and thought maybe she wouldn't think he was too bad after all.

When the waiter came back for their order, Tokyo still couldn't decide on what to order. Everything sounded so fancy, like she wouldn't enjoy any of it. So, with her permission, Haram ordered for her. Which happened to be a great thing. Because he wanted her to broaden her palate a little, he ordered her the filet mignon since she said she hadn't really eaten steak much. Since she wasn't really familiar with it, he ordered her the roasted chicken too, just to be safe. She ended up smashing the steak though and taking the chicken to go. Tokyo tried sushi, and she even had tuna tartar. She might've thought she was picky, but to him, she wasn't. She

was open to trying new things and Haram saw that as her being pretty open minded. He loved that shit. It was crazy to him, seeing different layers of Tokyo after all of the years of just wanting to speak to her in general. Although she never really showed interest in wanting to get to know him, Haram never viewed her as stuck-up, like most men would've. Despite her disinterest, he never viewed her in a bad light and tonight he was happy he wasn't a bitter nigga. Had he been, this impromptu date probably wouldn't have been possible.

After dinner, as scheduled, they walked over to the riverfront. Tokyo's mind drifted off to Space and Mae every now and then, but not as often as it would've had she been at home on that couch. Glancing over at Haram, she lightly smiled. She had him to thank for that. What she got with him, she knew she wouldn't have gotten that from opening the door for her friends. Legacy was on her shitlist. And seeing and chilling with her would only constantly remind her of what happened to Space. At least with Haram she could escape a little.

When they got closer to the riverfront, a cool breeze hit Tokyo's face and she closed her eyes. It was a scorching ninety degrees, but by the river, it was a lot cooler than that. The breeze felt so good. The feeling didn't compare. Tokyo was so caught up in the moment with her eyes closed that she didn't realize she had come close to being hit by one of the motor scooters zipping by until Haram grabbed her, pulling her back.

“Watch where the fuck you ridin’ at nigga!” He yelled, as she crashed against his chest, at the young guy speeding

past. He was so engulfed in the music blasting through his air pods that he didn't even hear Haram.

Tokyo giggled, shaking her head. "That was my fault. I had my eyes closed, like a dumb ass."

Looking down at her, Haram was convinced. She was definitely the most beautiful woman in the world. In all of the years that he'd watched her, he felt it, but now... now he was completely sure. Tokyo's beauty was uncanny. It wasn't just her brown, doe eyes or her full, heart-shaped lips. It was the air around her. It was her. Her aura. Her smile. She had such an infectious personality. Infectious in a good way though. In an addictive, 'I want to overdose on you' kind of way. Haram could stare down at her all day, every day. He could hold her in his arms for all of eternity. He couldn't imagine ever getting tired of her. She didn't just have a good vibe. She *was* the vibe. And everybody in her life knew it too. The vibe that she was, was the reason so many people in the hood gravitated towards her. She didn't have to do anything. She didn't have to wear skimpy clothes or put out to draw people in. She was just all around dope.

It amazed him how they had similarities when it came to being the center of attention, but in such distinct different ways. Haram's allure was based on fear, attraction, and mystery. While Tokyo's was built on just who she was in general. Her light. It was easy to be attracted to her. The hood had a thick sheet of darkness over it, whereas, in that darkness lived the light that was Tokyo. As dope as that was, Haram was perfectly fine with the way he was viewed. He couldn't imagine being the center of attention for the reasons Tokyo was. He couldn't imagine anybody being attracted to him

because of his light. He didn't have a light. He was, just like the majority of the hood, filled with the darkness. But his darkness was of a different hue.

“What?” Tokyo asked as she shyly turned and looked away.

Haram was staring directly into her eyes and it was very intimidating for her. Direct eye contact had always been something that made her nervous—especially from a man as alluring as Haram. She couldn't stare into his eyes for long. In fact, she couldn't stare into them at all. Everything about him made her nervous. His rough, strong hands on her especially. As nervous as he made her, his hands on her skin made her feel good so she stayed there. Despite her heavily beating heart and the goosebumps covering her entire body.

“I make you nervous,” Haram stated. “Why?”

Tokyo giggled and shook her head. God, she was like mush in his hands and she couldn't stand it.

“You don't make me nervous, boy.”

“I'm a grown ass man, sweetheart,” Haram said with a cocky smirk. “If it isn't nerves... what is it?”

Could Tokyo be feeling him as much as he was feeling her? The thought of the feelings being reciprocated didn't seem too plausible to him. How could she like him? If all she did for years was ignore him?

“It's nothing,” Tokyo said, steady avoiding eye contact.

She looked everywhere but at him. She looked over at the doting couple standing at the railings, overlooking the riverfront, smiling, hand-in-hand. She looked a few feet over

at the crowd of kids playing in the water coming from out of the ground, in their swimsuits. Averting her eyes down to the little baby sitting on the ground, splashing in the water made her heart smiled. She was so cute and chubby, reminding her of Space at that age. Haram's grip on her chin, turning her head in his direction stole her attention, forcing her to look at him. Still, she avoided his eyes. As much as she could, for as long as she could, at least. It didn't take long for her eyes to meet his, as the intensity behind his gaze was pure persuasion.

The minute her eyes met his, her heart rate seemed to steady from its intense beating. The world around her moved at a pace of molasses on the concrete on a hot summer day. The noise... the kids playing in the water... the unsatisfying combination of different music blaring from various devices... seemed to fade. All she could see.. smell... feel...hear... was Haram. And when his lips touched hers, she exhaled and melted into his touch. He wrapped his arms around her waist and she wrapped hers around his neck, as they stood in the middle of the Riverwalk kissing. Their tongues did a sensual two-step, while the beat of their hearts seemed to oddly thump at the same tempo.

Finally.

Haram could put a flavor to the pink lip-gloss she wore often. Finally... he could but a feeling to her full, pouty lips. Finally... Tokyo wasn't just someone he marveled over from a distance. She wasn't *just* someone he *wanted* to spend time with. She wasn't *just* someone he *wanted* to know. She wasn't *just* someone he *wanted* to kiss. She was all of those things, plus more.

After about two minutes, the sound of Haram's phone ringing tore them a part. It wasn't him that interrupted the kiss though—it was Tokyo. She pulled away and rubbed her lips together before softly pulling her arms from around his neck. Haram ignored his ringing phone, as he wrapped his arms tighter around her, pulling her closer to him when he felt her pull away. She felt so good, he did not want to let go of her.

“I've wanted to do that shit for a long time,” He admitted.

Tokyo giggled and she wondered, who the fuck was she with him? She loved urban romance books, but she didn't consider herself to be the mushy, giddy type, but Haram made her that way. She'd had her fair of innocent kisses too, but none of them made her feel the way that he made her feel. She was like someone else with him. She was a version of herself that she wasn't when she was with anyone else, or alone. And she liked it. As crazy as it may be, she really liked it.

“No you didn't,” Tokyo said, with a light giggle, looking away again.

She couldn't help it. Haram was so intimidating. The light hue of his hazel brown eyes... *those piercing hazel brown eyes.* in They did something to her. But she wasn't the only one though. Haram had that effect on women. His mesmerizing eye contact could woo the panties off a nun.

“Yes I did. If you paid attention to a nigga, you would've noticed a long time ago,” Haram said, as his phone rang again. With his hands on her waist he pulled her even closer. “It's cool—I got your attention now... I'm keeping it.”

He was telling the truth about that. Haram couldn't fathom going back to the way things used to be between the two of them.

Tokyo just looked at him. This time, she didn't shy away from his intense eye contact; she stayed right where she was, with her head slightly cocked to the side. Could it be? Could Haram be telling her the truth? Since they've become reacquainted, all she's gotten from him was genuine realness. He hadn't given her a reason to believe he was lying or pretending about anything. Why would he start now? Why would he, after all of these years, pick now to express kindness and the way he truly felt about her? Haram struck her as a lot of things over the years, but never had he made her think that he was the type of man to prey on fragility. When he grabbed her hand and interlocked his fingers with hers, she knew... he was telling the truth.

Once they made it to the railing, overlooking the river, Haram stood behind her. With his hands wrapped around the railing, and Tokyo in the middle, she felt so safe. Not trapped, like she would have had this gesture came from anyone else. She was completely comfortable with him, which said a lot considering their history.

"Close your eyes," Haram said, as his heart rate picked up, leaning in closer to her ear.

Tokyo took a deep breath and listened. Once she closed her eyes, the sound of the waves crashing together seemed to get louder. When Haram pressed his body closer to hers, the rest of the world seemed to vanish again. They became one. One with the sound of the river. One with the feel of each

other. It was such a therapeutic moment. Not only for Tokyo, but for Haram as well, who had too closed his eyes.

When he told her he dropped by the riverfront every now and then to clear his mind, he was telling the truth. Except, when he'd stand at the river, it wouldn't be at Hart Plaza, and it wouldn't be so early in the evening. Haram always waited for the sun to go down, and he always stopped miles and miles away from the popular areas of the riverfront. To the area that didn't have the tall barricades. He liked the freedom of it. Though he'd never jump into the river, he liked having the option too. Being without restriction.. without limits... gave him a sense of freedom that nothing else really did. He'd sit on the railing, with his eyes closed, listening to the waves and the eerie silence around him. That and of the sound of nature. Crickets and other critters lingering about. Every now and then, the sound of a boat riding by would give him comfort too. It was at the riverfront was where he reached a little bit of peace. He'd always need more, but peace and tranquility always seemed unobtainable.

Until now.

With Tokyo's petite body pressed against his chest, Haram felt the same peace she felt. And when she placed her hands on top of his, he exhaled. She gave him something a prescription drug could never. She sent tingles through his body. She took him on a high that the best weed couldn't even give him. And she hadn't done much of anything. It was just... her.

Tokyo's bottom lip trembled. Not because she was on the verge of crying sad tears but because she was on the verge

of crying tears of relief. For the past few months all she's felt was sorrow and complete emptiness. But in this moment, she didn't. She could literally feel the weight of her problems falling off her shoulders. She didn't deserve to bare all of what she's bared over the past few months. Tokyo should have been enjoying her young age. She was supposed to be as free as she felt. And she was supposed to feel as free as she felt in that moment, all of the time. In losing Mae and her baby sister, she lost so much of herself. But as she stood, with her hands on top of Haram's, she felt pieces of herself coming back. For weeks, she had been so out of reach. But she believed that after today, who she was would be restored. Little by little. It was crazy, but in her pain, Tokyo wanted to find the strength she had when she was eight... nine... back when she literally had no one. Back then, she was so strong. Being rescued by Mae had made her too comfortable. She forgot what it meant to be strong. But she wouldn't forget again. Tokyo was going to put her big girl panties on and preserve, for real. Her days of sulking in misery had to come to an end. This... freedom... it felt too good to go back to how she was before.

“Thank you,” Tokyo said, as tears rolled down her face.

“For what?” Haram asked.

“Caring about me. Getting me out of the house... This... This right here.” Tokyo swallowed. “Thank you so much, Haram.”

He opened his eyes a bit, and they landed on the nape of her neck. He wanted to kiss her there so bad, but he didn't. As bad as the urge to kiss her was, he kept his composure. He

couldn't give too much too soon. He was afraid that if he gave her everything he wanted to give her, he'd push her away. He'd come off too strong. He had to control his excitement. This moment with Tokyo was one he wanted to savor. One he wanted to hold on forever. He was just that into her.

“It's cool baby. I got you,” Haram told her before pulling his bottom lip into his mouth.

Tokyo just didn't know how much he meant that. He intended on showing her though.

...

“What up?” Haram asked, standing in the doorway, shirtless. He rubbed his eyes. “You trippin’ poppin up over here too.”

Khadijah crossed her arms over her chest and eyed him up and down. “I wouldn’t have had to pop up over here if you would have answered your phone, nigga. I been calling you all day.” She scrunched her face up. “I was just worried about you, since the last time I saw you, you—”

“Yeah, I’m smooth,” Haram interrupted, looking up and down the block.

He had to stop her before she said too much. It was late but the block was active as hell. Everybody was doing their own thing, but that didn’t mean niggas couldn’t still be lurking, listening. In the hood, you never really knew.

“That’s good,” Khadijah said before chewing on her bottom lip.

She had been so worried about him. Not only had she been worried but there was so much on her mind concerning the two of them that she had lost sleep. What she hoped would happen after she showed him just how down she was, hadn’t and it had been fucking with her. It took Khadijah a lot to even get out of bed and pop up at Ms. Krystal’s house. She had to see him though. She knew that if something horrible had happened, she would have found out through word of mouth, but so? There was still this nagging feeling in her gut that something was wrong with him because he hadn’t fallen through in a minute. She was hurt to see that Haram was

perfectly fine. Her mind began to wander. She wondered if he was done with her. She wondered if the rumors about him spending a lot of time with Tokyo were true.

“What you been up to?” She asked.

Haram’s eyebrows knitted and he smirked a little. “Shit.... What up, ‘Dij?”

This small talk, checking up on one another thing, hadn’t been their M.O in years. Now, it was strictly sex. They didn’t ask about each other’s day. At least Haram didn’t ask about hers. Every now and then, Khadijah would try to make it personal, but before they could get too far into conversation, he’d be putting his shoes on to leave.

Haram never really had any interest in small talk with her. They were cool, but he didn’t consider Khadijah interesting enough to carry on conversation with. That, and usually, he was always on the go. Tonight, she had caught him on a down time. It was after midnight and he was doing something he rarely ever did—sitting on the couch watching movies. Krystal was working the midnight shift, so he had the house to himself. It had been a minute since he sat still, watching Netflix. He felt like a normal person, eating popcorn and shit. It was a vibe until Khadijah popped up on him.

Khadijah sucked her teeth and playfully rolled her eyes. “Why it gotta be something up for me to ask what you been up to?”

“I’m about to press pause... You playing!” Tokyo called out from inside of the house.

Khadijah's eyebrows lightly knitted as she stood on her tiptoes. "Oh... You have company."

Haram rubbed the back of his neck, looked over his shoulder at Tokyo and then back at Khadijah. "Hell yeah. Good look on checking up on me though, 'Dij. I appreciate it."

Khadijah pulled her lips into her mouth to hold back tears. She nodded and quickly turned to walk down the stairs. She was in her feelings heavy. The only time she was allowed in his house was if they were on fuck shit. Never to sit up and watch movies. Khadijah knew for a long time that the only thing Haram really cared about when it came to her was what she had between her legs. And for a long time, that was alright. These days, that realization just hit different. She wanted more. She needed more. But Haram would never give her more than what he was already giving her. She knew that, so he didn't feel bad when he closed and locked the door.

After they left the riverfront, Haram and Tokyo went back to his house. She didn't want to be alone, and he wasn't quite ready for their night to end. He was cool with her staying at the house with him. Plus, after the past few weeks he'd had, with his emotions being all over the place, he needed a day like today.

When he sat on the couch, Tokyo stole a few quick, questioning glances at him. She wanted to ask who was at the door but she felt like she didn't have that right. She knew who it was anyway. Still... she wanted to ask just to see his reaction. She did feel a little tinge of a 'win' since he'd sent Khadijah on her way. Whatever they were to one another couldn't be too serious since she was still there.

CHAPTER FIVE

“What up, nigga?” Cavalli greeted, before slapping hands with Haram.

“Shit. What’s the deal?” Haram asked, before taking a seat at the table with Syn and Cavalli.

They were having their weekly meeting. Lately, they had been meeting twice a week. The level up had been beautiful for them. But because they were moving more work, expanding, and dabbling into different things, their workloads had increased too. Haram went from barely moving around to moving around every day, all day sometimes. They might’ve been growing, but that didn’t mean they were comfortable letting new niggas close to their paper. Haram was making more rounds than usual, collecting money, handling business. Syn was ahead of the drop offs. Pretty soon, they would be doing out of state shipments. Today, that was the topic of the meeting.

Cavalli passed Haram the blunt him and Syn had been pulling from before standing up. He ran his hand over the top of his head and took a deep breath.

“For years, it’s primarily been just us three,” Cavalli began.

Syn shook his head. “Aw shit.”

“Let me get my shit off, nigga,” Cavalli shot back, locking eyes with him. “Like I said before I was rudely interrupted by this nigga... For years... since the start of us, it’s just been us three but as y’all know... shit’s been picking

up. These days I don't even know what the fuck sleep is, to be honest." He lightly chuckled, shaking his head. "But we have to work smarter, not harder. Just like you niggas, I'm iffy about bringing other muthafuckas in too. But with this expansion... we have to."

Haram pulled from the blunt, leaning back against the chair. He nodded, understanding, despite how uncomfortable bringing other people in made him. He saw this coming. He was surprised it took Cavalli as long as it had taken him to even make this move. They had workers around the hood but bringing niggas into their organization was a totally different thing. It was a different lane for all three of them. They all worked closely together and for good reason too. Primarily being trust. They could trust one another with their lives. Putting their trust in another muthafucka outside of the family made them all uncomfortably nervous.

Haram especially. He trusted Cavalli, but did he trust him to make the right choice when it came to bringing new niggas in? Absolutely not. Cavalli was good when it came to business and running shit, but he had poor decision making. He put them in the room with Jive just to get ahead. Because Haram was trying to be more of a team player these days, he wouldn't blame Cavalli on that body he caught... although he did feel like that was his fault. He bit his tongue for the sake of keeping shit copacetic. But with this, he couldn't bite his tongue. If he did that, Cavalli would likely get them in yet another bloody situation.

"I hear you," Haram interrupted, as Cavalli was talking about how beneficial it would be to their business. "I hear you loud and clear. But," He paused and passed Syn the blunt. "For

me to be completely comfortable with this shit, I need to be hands-on with this one. I fuck with you bro... I trust you... but.” He paused again and lightly chuckled. “To keep me cool... you can’t just bring a nigga around and—”

“Nah, nah, nah,” Cavalli interrupted, moving his hands back and forth. “Bro, we doing this shit together. I know how important this right here...” He motioned between the three of them. “... this unit. I know how important it is. Fuck no would I ever just bring a couple niggas in like here.” He paused. “Plus, doing that shit would be like throwin them niggas to the wolves... literally. Any shaky shit, I’m already hip to how you niggas would handle it. We been in this shit together. We’re equal partners. Any move I put in motion... we makin’ it together, ‘Ram.”

Haram nodded with his mouth turned down a bit. He fucked with it. Since they’ve been in business, Cavalli was always the decision maker. He was happy to know that the old way of doing things had come to an end. He respected the respect Cavalli had for them.

Because they had good history with Quay, linking with him was a given. Once they got that in order, Cavalli switched the subject to out of state shipments. He hit Syn and Haram from left field when he told them their first shipment would go out tomorrow morning. They didn’t see that coming at all. They might’ve been equal partners, but Cavalli had been doing a lot of work behind the scenes. He’d been in and out of state over the past week or so but they weren’t aware of how fast shit would be moving.

After the meeting, they had a big ass shipment of fentanyl to get ready that took them all night to put together. Haram didn't hit the block until around two in the morning. Before going to the house, he pulled up on Tokyo, as promised.

What Tokyo didn't realize was that when he finished up meant two in the morning. She was awake though. She barely slept. Not because she was crying, stressed out neither, but because she would be up for hours and hours researching custody and looking for jobs. She applied to at least ten jobs a day. She had laser focus on getting Space back. So much so, that sometimes she lost track of time.

"How was yo' day?" Haram asked her after pulling away from the hug he gave her as soon as she opened the door.

Tokyo scratched at her loose ponytail and shrugged. "It was good, I guess. I was busy most of it." She took a deep breath and asked him about his day.

Haram turned and locked the door before turning back towards her. Before she could walk away, he was wrapping his arms around her waist, pulling her into his arms. He couldn't get enough of her pretty ass. He always wanted his hands on her. It was crazy to him, the affect she had on him. It was nothing like he had ever experienced before.

The way he felt about her could easily be seen as unhealthy. In fact, although Haram had been on his best behavior, Cavalli was still a bit concerned about his relationship with Tokyo. He didn't want his baby brother to get wrapped up in Tokyo just for something to go wrong. Most

of Haram's bipolar episodes were brought on by triggers. And there was no telling what heartbreak would do to him.

Haram wasn't concerned about shit but making money and making Tokyo his woman. The other shit didn't cross his mind. He lived his life without fear. Always had, and always would. He was so into her that he couldn't even see things with the two of them going left. He was going to make sure things stayed on the right track. He wasn't fucking things up with her. Not if he could help it, he wouldn't.

"It was straight," Haram told her before pulling his bottom lip into his mouth. "It didn't get better 'til I got here though."

Tokyo blushed and self-consciously ran her hand over her disheveled hair. She looked a mess. She had put a little effort into the way she looked earlier, but after a few hours and getting comfortable, her ponytail got raggedy and she changed out of the cute romper she had on into some pajama shorts and a t-shirt. If Haram would've come earlier, he would have seen her on her A-game.

Little did Tokyo know, Haram didn't give a fuck about any of it. If anything, he appreciated her being comfortable enough with him to be in her natural state. He loved it. Shit, Tokyo could have her hair all over her head, with dry lips and crust in her eyes and he'd still think she was the prettiest. He had never been one for that extra superficial shit anyway. It was easy to judge Haram by his looks. He looked like the type of guy to go for the thick IG Model, BBL, light skin, with long weave type, but he wasn't. He liked the beauty of women period. He didn't care the size or skin complexion. Khadijah

was chocolate, and far from skinny. Whereas Tokyo was a lighter hue of brown, but she wasn't thick, nor was she skinny. Tokyo was petite with the Coca-Cola bottle shaped body. Her curves were almost identical to Nia Long's when she played Bird on Soul Food. Slim and curvaceous with a mouthful of breast. She was perfection.

“Whatever,” Tokyo said, steady blushing.

How coy she was drove Haram crazy. Her pureness was sexy as hell to him. Over the past couple of weeks, she'd gotten a lot of her light back. But it wasn't until she was in his arms that he saw that twinkle in her eye. He could stare into her eyes all damn day if possible.

“Whatever what? You don't believe me? You don't feel how happy I am to see you?” Haram asked, before pulling her closer to his body.

Tokyo gasped at the feel of his thick dick on her thigh. She jumped back a little. Not because he didn't feel good, because the feel of it caught her by surprise. When she jumped back though, Haram regretted coming off so strong. He had to remember... he had to proceed with caution when it came to Tokyo. He had to give her a little bit of his aggression at a time. He didn't want to come off too strong, or as if he was trying to rush things. They weren't even together yet. But he planned on changing that.

“My bad—”

Before he could apologize completely, Tokyo was throwing her arms back around his neck and kissing him on the lips. *Damn*, thought Haram at the taste of her sweet tongue on his. She was the aggressor this time and he loved that shit.

Wrapping his arms around her body, he backed her up against the wall behind them. Tokyo moaned into his mouth, as Haram's strong hands found the roundness of her barely covered ass cheeks. Although she had changed out of her cute romper, she purposely chose the shortest pair of pajama shorts she owned. She wanted to entice him. She wanted to get that reaction out of him. Since they had been kicking it, Haram had been the perfect gentleman. While Tokyo appreciate it, she wanted more. Tonight, feeling the hardness of his dick against her, told her that he wanted more too.

Haram gripped the back of her thighs and picked her up. Tokyo responded by wrapping her legs around his waist, as their tongues continued to roam around each other's mouth. Haram was excited as hell. So excited that if she was anybody else, he would have ripped the shorts right off her ass, bent her over and gave her hard dick and deadly strokes. But... this was Tokyo. Tokyo, Tokyo. He couldn't treat her like that. Plus, he was so into her ass that he was worried that the minute he slid in, he'd fuck around and cum too quick. So he played it safe by taking things slowly.

"It's so hard," Tokyo said into his lips.

"You believe me now?" Haram asked, before pulling away from the kiss to plant soft, delicate kisses on the side of Tokyo's sweet smelling neck.

She wrapped her hand around his neck and closed her eyes. "Mmhmm."

Haram wasn't the only one aroused. Tokyo was too. She had yet to explore her innocence, but she could *feel* how

wet she was. She wanted him so bad. The feel of his lips on her neck did nothing but excite her more.

Tokyo bit her bottom lip, as she closed her eyes, rolling them into the back of her head. His lips brushing against the thin skin of the side of her neck made her entire body quiver. She had never felt anything as good as that before. His hands on her. His lips on her. His tongue on her. Him. Haram Knight... *he* was the feeling. *He* was bliss. He ignited every nerve in her body when he lightly bit her neck and sucked on it a bit. She found herself grinding her hips on the hardness of his big dick. Before she knew it, she was moaning and digging her nails into the back of his neck.

Haram gripped her ass cheeks, while he twirled his tongue over the side of her neck, with pinched brows. Her nails, digging into his skin, felt good as hell. It was something about the pain and the pleasure that had his dick rock hard. It was harder than it's ever been before. Tokyo was unleashing something on him that he didn't think existing within her. Passion with a side of freak.

When she cocked her head further to the side and told him to bite and suck harder, he was caught off guard but he didn't miss a beat. He gave her exactly what she wanted. Within Haram was a beast he so badly wanted to unleash on her but because he was a little apprehensive when it came to Tokyo, he wouldn't give too much unless she asked for it. What he planned on doing to her body would be so good that she'd beg him to do all of the things that she didn't know he wanted to do in the first place. That was how he operated, mostly. He put so much passion behind the simplest of things, like a kiss to the neck, and the gripping of ass cheeks with

purpose. He wanted them hooked. He wanted them on the brink of cumming before he even slid his dick inside of them. And he was going to do the same thing to Tokyo.

With her, it was personal though. He *wanted* to give intense passion. He *wanted* to suck and lick every inch of her subtle, untouched body. And not for the selfish reason of hooking her neither. He wanted her to feel good. In pleasing her, he'd be pleasing himself. He literally thought about it on a daily. He was going to show her just how much he'd wanted her. He was going to show her just what she'd been missing out on.

Tokyo delicately grabbed the back of Haram's neck when his face fell into her bosom. With that bottom lip still pinched between her teeth, she moaned a little. He planted those same, soft kisses on the ampleness of her breasts as he led her to the living room couch. Laying her down, he mounted her, kissing her protruding nipples through the thin fabric of her tank. When he tugged on them, Tokyo arched her back and told him to take her shirt off. He didn't. He kept tugging on her nipples through the shirt, as he ran his hands up her calf. He didn't stop until he was inches away from her pussy. Haram didn't lift her shirt until he was ready too. Until Tokyo had arched her back so much that she couldn't arch it anymore. He didn't remove it until her soft moans grew louder. He wanted her so turned on that she'd force his hand on her inner thigh to her pussy, which she did. Haram had the desire to ravish her brown, chocolate chip sized nipples when they touched his tongue, but he didn't. He took things slow. She wasn't the type of woman to rush through things with. Not in Haram's eyes at least. She was like a gourmet meal. He

wanted to savor every moment, until he was forced to devour her.

Tokyo was so turned on that she was dry humping the palm of his hand, with her head tossed back against the couch pillows and her mouth agape. She couldn't believe he felt so good. And when he pulled away from her pussy, she couldn't believe that neither. Before she could complain, Haram began to softly run the tips of his fingers against her swollen clit. She took a deep breath and her eyebrows pinched together, as she realized that the switch he made felt a lot better than what she was doing.

Tokyo opened her eyes and looked down at the top of Haram's waved covered head, overwhelmed with so many emotions. Happiness. Arousal. and suddenly... fear. She was falling in love with him. Was she falling? Or had she already fallen? Tokyo was afraid because what if she was moving too soon? What if he'd only been so nice to her all of this time for this moment right here? What if Haram really didn't care about her?

She shook those thoughts away and decided that she was tripping. He had been the perfect gentleman. She was the one who couldn't control herself. Tokyo was just afraid because although she saw Haram in another light, she was too stunned to believe that this was him. She couldn't believe he was taking things so slow. She couldn't believe he had moved his kisses from her titties to her inner thighs, where he was making his way back up to her pussy. Haram ate pussy? Was he really like this? Was he really this gentle? This romantic? Everything that he was, was what scared Tokyo. She was completely sure. She had indeed fallen in love with him.

Looking down at him, kissing her inner thighs, while massaging her nipples... she wondered if he loved her too?

Haram kissed her throbbing clit through her lace panties, causing her to again, arch her back. He stopped twiddling her nipples to grab her waist. Leaning in, Haram pressed his face against her pussy and inhaled the sweet scent of her. Tokyo moaned and gyrated her hips, wanting him to do it again. Which, he did. She smelled so fucking good. Haram closed his eyes and did it again, this time, moving his head from side to side. He could only imagine how good she'd taste, if she smelled as good as she did.

Haram grabbed the middle of her panties and slid them to the side. He placed soft kisses on her glistening pussy before running his tongue over her puffy lips before finally taking her clit into his mouth. He softly sucked on it, making her entire body quake. Tokyo had never felt anything like it in her life. With her eyes rolling to the back of her head, she just knew that this was something that she could easily get used to.

His lips, wrapped around her pulsating clit, drove her insane. It was one of the best—no... it was the absolute best feeling in the world to her. Especially when he began to softly suck on it, lightly spitting on it with every suckle. Tokyo was so turned on that she was squirming like crazy. So much that not even the firm hold Haram had on her waist kept her still. She arched her back and her mouth and eyes widened. Tingles shot through her entire being as her body began to quiver uncontrollably.

“Wha—What is... What is *happening*?” She cried as her heartrate picked up and her toes began to curl.

Haram looked up at her and, in between soft sucks, told her that she was cumming.

Tokyo opened her eyes a little, just enough to see the soft waves on the top of his head. She placed her hand there, trying to push him away, as the feeling was too intense for her to take. The muscles in her stomach were beginning to tense up. Haram wouldn't let up though. He had been enjoying it just as much, or possibly, more than she had. Because he had a lot of practice, he knew exactly where to go, and what to do to get this type of reaction. With Khadijah, he didn't enjoy it as much as she enjoyed Tokyo though. Either she just tasted good as hell, or he was just that excited to have her on his tongue. Whatever it was, Haram's dick was rock hard. So hard, that it hurt a little. He couldn't wait to slide up in her, but he knew, that the minute her tight, virgin pussy wrapped around his dick, he'd probably nut. Not only was she tight, but she was wet as hell too. Her juices weren't the clear, sticky, jelly like substance he was used to neither. Tokyo's was thick and creamy. Sweet as hell and warm too.

Haram knew that after tonight, he'd be hooked on more than just her. He'd be hooked on all of her. For him, that was a bit scary. He'd never been hooked on a woman before. Hooked on selling drugs... Hooked on making money... Hooked on copping the newest pair of J's whenever they dropped. But being hooked on a woman? Never. Not even Khadijah had him hooked and she was his first. There wasn't a woman on earth that could hold a candle to Ms. Tokyo. She

had him, for sure. He was addicted well before he tasted her too. Tokyo had him before they had each other.

As Tokyo's orgasm began to subside, Haram slowed down, planting soft, wet kisses on her swollen bud. With dipped brows, he separated her puffy lips and mumbled 'damn' at what 'looked' back at him. She was wet. Cream oozed from her pussy. The sight of it made his mouth salivate so he dipped his tongue inside. Tokyo moaned and Haram couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed her by the waist and picked her up, flipping them over, sitting Tokyo on his face. With his tongue deep inside of her, Tokyo rode his face, as if she was riding a dick. She gripped and tugged at her nipples, as she bounced on his face, her moans turning into straight up wailing. She never wanted this to stop. She wanted to feel this good forever. She couldn't believe that she had been missing out on this. This feeling of complete ecstasy.

Looking down at Haram, their eyes met and she slowed her pace. She knew then that what she got from him she wouldn't have gotten from anybody else. None of the 'knuckleheads' in her neighborhood would've been able to compare. Haram hadn't just been making love to her with his mouth. He didn't take care of her with the physical shit. It wasn't the compliments. It wasn't the intense eye contact, identical to the exchange they were having with his tongue inside of her pussy. It was the way he took care of her heart. He was so careful with her. He made taking care of her a priority when he really did not have to. The oral sex was indeed fourplay... but the things he did outside of sex was the real fourplay.

Haram gripped her hips, lifting her a bit, to place delicate kisses on her clit before he sat her in his lap, right atop his rock hard dick. Through the fabric of his jean shorts, Tokyo could feel the release he needed. He sat up and their lips met. She moaned at the taste of her sweet nectar on his mustache. They kissed, passionately. And when Haram dipped his tongue into her mouth, she moaned again, softly sucking on it. He wrapped his arms around her body, kissing her deeper. He was so turned on by the taste of her lingering in his mouth that he thought about going down for thirds but decided against it. He needed to nut.

“You’re so hard,” Tokyo moaned, lightly grinding on him. She pulled away from the kiss completely and bit her bottom lip, glancing down into his lap. “Let me... let me um.”

Haram shook his head and told her, “You don’t have to, Tokyo. I did what I did because I wanted to. Not because I wanted something in return baby.”

Tokyo couldn’t believe how fucking sweet he was. How? Every day, multiple times a day, the question of who this man was crossed her mind. Who he really was, fascinated her. She was in such disbelief, that sometimes she’d joke, asking him what he did with the Haram she knew. He’d always correct her by saying: The Haram you *thought* you know.

Tokyo shook her head and pulled away from his embrace before tugging on the button of his shorts.

“Tok—”

“I want to. I want to take care of you, too, Haram,” She honestly said, interrupting him.

Tokyo had never given head before. In fact, she had never even held one in her hands before. She had seen her fair share of them though. She'd seen several her DM, and even at school, when a few ignorant boys took it upon themselves to flash her. But none of them compared to Haram's. When she finally got it out of his shorts, her eyes widened. He was so thick. Her small hand could barely wrap around it. Because she was pretty smart, she knew off bat that he was around seven inches.

Haram, noticing the look of nervousness on Tokyo's face, asked, "You good?"

He hoped like hell she wasn't having second thoughts about where they were headed. The head, he could do without, if that was what was worrying her. If she decided she wasn't ready for sex, it would fuck him up and he'd respectfully have to masturbate, with her permission of course. Haram was too hard, and ready to bust, to just get up and go home. He needed to nut. He wouldn't even want to hit Khadijah up. Not after seeing what he could have had with Tokyo.

To his surprise, Tokyo responded by wrapping her lips around the head of his dick. He gripped the couch cushions and closed his eyes.

"Sss," He hissed. "Watch yo' teeth baby—"

Tokyo jumped and pulled away. "Did I hurt you? Did I mess up? I'm so—"

"Nah, nah, nah... I'm good Tokyo," Haram interrupted, hating that he'd scared her. "Just watch your teeth. Open your mouth a lil' wider."

She'd scraped the side of his dick a little but not enough for him to trip. He'd rather teach her, than to startle her. Tokyo was new to this and he understood completely.

Tokyo nodded, taking note of what he'd said, before slowly guiding his dick as far down her throat as it would allow. When he hit her tonsils, she gagged. She stopped a few times before she realized how much saliva came up every time she gagged. It took her a minute, but after a while, she was in a good groove and Haram was lowly grunting. Looking up at him, she saw how turned on he was and in turn, that turned her on. She was moaning with his dick deep in her throat when he stopped her.

“Hold on shorty,” Haram said with a light chuckle, on the brink of cumming. He couldn't believe she had him squirming, moaning and shit.

She giggled and wiped the corners of her mouth. “Do you have a... a condom?”

He nodded, with his eyes on hers. “Yeah, I got one.”

Haram reached over, to fish through the pockets of his shorts for his condom. After getting it, he tore into the wrapper with his teeth. Tokyo watched, as her heart beat at what just had to be a dangerous pace. She was nervous. Excited, but nervous as hell. Watching him slide the condom over his dick, she swallowed. But the minute Haram leaned up, wrapped his hand around her neck and kissed her, she relaxed, exhaling against his soft lips.

They traded places, and Haram positioned himself in between Tokyo's legs. He then kissed her on the side of her neck as he held her leg up a little to slide into her pussy. Her

heart was back to racing. She was afraid of what it would feel like. Once she felt his thick dick against her tiny hole, trying to get inside, she wondered if when he slid in, he'd split her little hole right open. Sensing that she was worried, Haram paused and looked down at her with concern.

“You okay, baby?” He asked, as he caressed her messy hair.

She nodded with a light chuckle. “Um... Is it going to hurt?”

“It'll be uncomfortable,” Haram told her before kissing her on the lips. “But I'll be sure to be gentle.” He kissed the side of her neck and slowly gyrated his hips, slowly sliding inside of her. “If you want me to stop, tell me. Any time it gets to be too much, I'll stop.”

Tokyo dug her nails into his back as she closed her eyes tight with a rapid head nod. Her heart thumped heavily against her chest as she felt Haram stretching her pussy. She was so tight. So tight, that Haram could barely get in. She was wet, but she had an untouched pussy, which meant he'd be breaking her hymn. Every inch he slid in, he had to pause to gather himself. He hadn't broken a virginity since he lost his. He had forgotten all about how much of a struggle it could be. To get inside, and to hold his nut back.

Haram sucked in air, as he buried his face into the crook of Tokyo's neck. He deeply inhaled as he slid more inside of her. She tensed up and Haram immediately stopped.

“You good?” He asked.

Tokyo opened her eyes, her eyes meeting his, and a lone tear slid down the side of her face. She shook her head.

“It hurts,” She whispered.

She wanted to take it all without complaining, but her vagina stung so bad that she couldn't take it. She just knew that when and if they finished, she'd bleed. Haram kissed her tear away before slowly sliding out of her. She gripped his back, trying to stop him from pulling out, but before she could stop him, he was already out, planting kisses on her pulsating, sore clit.

“I don't want to hurt you,” Haram said, in between kisses.

That was it.

She knew she was in love. She had to be. Because the way he made her feel was indescribable. How was he this... perfect? He might've been flawed to some, but to Tokyo he wasn't. He was absolute perfection. He was so caring. So selfless. So... perfect. Untainted... stainless. And she wanted him to be hers.

Grabbing the sides of his face, Tokyo pulled him towards her. She kissed his lips and opened her legs further, to show him that she was completely ready. Haram grabbed the back of her thigh and slowly, once again slid inside of her. Instead of pulling away from the kiss, Haram kissed her deeper, in an effort to distract her and because she was just too damn pretty not to kiss. Tokyo softly cried with every inch he gave her but she didn't tense up. She gave herself to him because he deserved it. He deserved her. All of her. Her pussy... and her heart too. She was ready to give it all to him.

Once Haram was completely inside, he pulled away from the kiss to suck in a little bit of air.

“Fuck,” he mumbled under his breath as he closed his eyes.

He couldn't look down at her. He knew that if he did, he'd be cumming. What type of nigga would he be if he came the minute he got inside of the pussy? A sucka. A simp. But damnit if Tokyo didn't make him feel that way. With her, he was a sucka... he was a simp. He didn't want to be. It was who she made him. When Tokyo cupped his face, he sucked his teeth and moved in and out of her a little, feeling as though he would cum right there, just off the simple touch. She had his mind gone. The only time Haram's mind had been 'gone' was when he was in the middle of an episode. Never had his mind been gone in a good way. Was it a good way though? Was the way he felt about Tokyo good? For the moment, it was. But what about in the long run? What about when the way he felt about her got bigger than the both of them? What would happen then? Haram knew in his heart that getting in too deep with her was a risky thing. He'd never been attached to a woman before. Never. He didn't know what he would do with her. He didn't know what he would do with himself. He was, once again, moving into uncharted territory. Willingly too. Blindly... but willingly. He did nothing to stop the fall.

Neither did Tokyo. She was free with him. Like birds in the sky. Initially, it was a bit scary, but the closer they got to one another, the faster she 'flew'. After a couple of minutes, the pain of losing her virginity began to ease up. Before she knew it, she was moving her hips with him. But not long before Haram grabbed her waist, stopping her.

“Don’t,” He gritted his teeth and shook his head.
“Don’t fuckin’ move, baby.”

Baby.

She was getting used to being called that.

Baby in the middle of sex sounded damn good. His deep baritone voice, at a low level, in her ear, turned her on like never before. She wanted to hear him call her that again.

Tokyo wrapped her arms around his neck and cupped the back of his head. “What did you call me?” She whispered.

Even the soft, sultry sound of her voice made Haram want to nut prematurely. He closed his eyes again and moved in and out of her tight, wet, creamy pussy.

“Baby.”

She moaned.

Oh God... she moaned.

And Haram nearly lost it right there. He put his fist against the arm rest of the couch behind her and pressed into it.

“Say it again,” Tokyo moaned as her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

“You so fuckin’ pretty, baby,” Haram suddenly said, catching the both of them by surprise.

Tokyo being pretty was nothing new. She’d always been pretty. The fact that Haram said it caught them by surprise because he’d never said it before. She knew he thought she was pretty by the way he stared at her whenever they were together. But hearing it? It made her heart warm.

Haram was in a trance. As much as he needed to look away from her angelic face, he couldn't. His stare was stuck there... on what just had to be God's best work. She was absolutely flawless to him. She had almond shaped, bedroom eyes Haram could stare into for an eternity. Her pouty full lips were always puckered, begging him for kisses he always obliged to. And her nose? She had the perfect button nose. Her cheekbones were high, and when she smiled, they pushed her eyes nearly closed. She was stunning and Haram couldn't take his eyes off of her. He wanted to close his eyes. He wanted to look away. He needed to, at least. Because he knew he wouldn't last much longer, he pushed himself deep inside of her, giving her every inch he had to offer. Tokyo arched her back and her mouth fell open. Haram was literally balls deep inside of her.

He grabbed her by the waist and sat her on top of him. She placed her hands on his chest and looked down at him. Her hair fell from its loose ponytail into her face, creating an image that Haram would have etched into his mental until the day he died. How could she become any more beautiful than she already was?

"I can't—I can't do this," Tokyo stammered over her words, as she just sat there.

Haram grabbed her waist and slowly moved her back and forth. She didn't need to do any tricks or anything like it. He was already on the verge of nutting. The subtle move of her hips took him over the edge as soon as he moved them. He grunted and clenched down on his jaw as he came.

When he finished, Tokyo didn't get up. She laid on his heaving chest with wide eyes, listening to the sound of his beating heart. Haram wrapped his arms around her and Tokyo was once again, crying. This time, she cried because she was in love and afraid. Haram felt the tears seeping through his t-shirt but he didn't say anything. He was sure that she was crying for the same reason he was speechless. Love.

After a couple minutes of listening to the sound of his beating heart, Haram broke the silence.

"Tokyo," he called out.

"Hm?"

"I want this shit forever," he admitted.

"Me too," Tokyo softly replied.

CHAPTER SIX

ONE MONTH LATER

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Looking up from her phone, Tokyo's eyes met Legacy's. She was sitting on the passenger side of Haram's car, minding her business, looking down at her phone when Legacy knocked on the window. For weeks, she had been avoiding her for very obvious reasons.

Over the past month, Tokyo had been doing a pretty good job moving forward through her pain rather than sulking in it. And a lot of that had to do with not being face to face with the person she felt was responsible for a big chunk of it. As much as she had been avoiding Legacy, she'd be lying if she said she hadn't missed her. She missed her tremendously. Tempest, not at all. She was completely finished with her and there was really nothing anyone could say or do to change that.

Rolling her eyes, Tokyo looked away, back down at her phone. Legacy's feelings were, once again, crushed by her best friend's rejection. She missed Tokyo so much. Every day she thought about going over to her house to see her. Especially since she knew for a fact Tokyo was in a better headspace. She had seen Tokyo and Haram around for the past couple of weeks but instead of bombarding her, Legacy gave her, her distance. Now that Tokyo was sitting outside of her man's house, she figured now was the best time to talk to her.

Refusing to just walk away, Legacy grabbed the doorhandle and opened the door.

“What the hell!?” Tokyo yelled, trying to snatch the door from Legacy’s grip.

“Nuh uh! I’m sick of this shit, Tok! You gon’ talk to me!” Legacy yelled back, snatching Tokyo’s phone from her and running off.

It was childish, but Legacy sure as shit had Tokyo’s attention. It was the beginning of September, but it was still a scolding eighty-something degrees out. Entirely too hot to be chasing Legacy’s track running ass down the block. Tokyo was wearing a pair of jelly Coach slides too, so running in them was nearly impossible. It didn’t matter though; she could have had on a pair of running shoes and she still wouldn’t have been able to keep up with Legacy’s fast ass.

“Give me my phone, bitch!” Tokyo yelled, out of breath.

Legacy looked over her shoulder at her. “Nope bitch. You’ll get this phone back as soon as we talk! I’m not playin! You know I can do this shit all day, right?”

Legacy wasn’t lying neither. She could run around the neighborhood all day, but she knew it wouldn’t take that long. Tokyo was fit, but she was lazy and would eventually give up at any given second. Legacy had runner lungs, so it was nothing for her. Tokyo might’ve had her when it came to academics but she for shit sure couldn’t see the girl when it came to sprinting.

Tokyo didn't last but about six houses, before she was stopping to rest. Swiping her long Chinese bang from her face, she bent over, with her hands on her knees to catch her breath. As mad as she was at Legacy, she couldn't help but to laugh at the way her little, skinny legs were moving up ahead. She looked so damn silly, running at full speed, her long hair blowing in the hot ass wind.

Legacy stopped when she was about five houses down from where Tokyo was. She turned around, doing a steady, slow jog backwards. "You quit? You done yet, bitch!?"

Tokyo sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes, steady trying to catch her breath. She did not want to talk to Legacy. It wasn't only because she was upset with her neither. She just didn't want to talk about the situation. For the past couple of weeks, she had been running from the horrible memory of seeing her sister driving off up out of her life. That was the last day she seen or heard from Space. Since Tokyo had been getting her emotions in check, she had been trying to get in touch with her. Every day, she was on the phone, calling that social worker Karen. But every time she called, she got the voicemail. And when she'd called the front desk, all they did was transfer her to Karen's voicemail. Tokyo had been up to the office and everything but Space had already been placed with a foster parent so that was a bust. As bad as things were, she had been trying her hardest to keep a level, positive head about it all. Sitting, talking with Legacy would for sure send her ten steps backwards. At least that's what she thought and feared.

"Tokyo—"

“Give me my phone, Legacy! I’m not playing!” Tokyo yelled, interrupting her.

“Aw shit, she got yo phone? Damn, that’s fucked up. You want me to grab it from shorty? I used to play football, I can fa sho catch her,” said one of the niggas on the porch in front of the house Tokyo had stopped to catch her breath at.

She looked up at him, rolled her eyes, and of course sucked her teeth. That nigga used to play football at Pershing years ago. Since, he hadn’t done anything but smoke and drink all day. Tokyo had a better chance at catching Legacy than he ever would.

“What? I Gotchu shorty. Just say the word,” He offered up again, with a cigarette dangling from his black, crusty lips.

Instead of saying anything to him, Tokyo stood up and sluggishly headed in the direction Legacy was still doing her backwards jog in. She didn’t know what Tokyo’s sneaky ass was up to. Because she was so far away, she couldn’t read her face. In her heart, she wanted to believe that her best friend was finally coming to her senses. But because she knew Tokyo and she knew she could be very stubborn at times, she wasn’t too sure of that. Tokyo was probably going to sneak up on her and snatch it and then what kind of leverage would Legacy have?

She wasn’t giving up on her friendship. That was a dub. Most chicks, like Tempest, would have been given up but the type of bond Legacy had with Tokyo was more of a sisterhood type of bond. She couldn’t just walk away from it. She would at least keep trying. Legacy wasn’t embarrassed to admit that she was, indeed, ‘pressed’. If they had their talk and

Tokyo decided she didn't want to be friends anymore, then Legacy would painfully let it go. She prayed it wouldn't come to that though.

Since they've been at odds, things had been so off. She still hadn't even really been able to enjoy her new car. Legacy missed the hell out of her best friend. She'd even backed out of the trip to Miami with Tempest. Some of the reason was because Ms. Juanita told her she wasn't comfortable with her going, but mostly, she didn't want to go cause Tokyo wouldn't be there. She and Tempest were close, but Tokyo was her friend-friend. *Her sister from another mister.* Even Syn sensed the change in Legacy. He had been trying everything to cheer her up, but nothing really seemed to work. He stayed out of women stuff, but he really couldn't wait for them to start talking again.

"I miss you, bitch," Legacy said, with her bottom lip stuck out. "Can we please just talk about this shit, Tok?"

Tokyo, still a little out of breath, stood there with her head slightly cocked to the side, eyeing her phone. All she had to do was take a couple of steps and quickly snatch it. But she really didn't want to do that. She wanted to talk to her friend. She missed Legacy so much. This summer was not supposed to go the way that it did. They were supposed to be living their best, 'grown up' lives. Instead, tragedy had struck, fucking Tokyo's entire foundation up. They were supposed to be getting an apartment together and everything. All three of them. The plan was to find jobs at the same place, work like crazy and get a nice apartment somewhere close to Midtown. Three bedrooms would be pushing it, but they would've been good with two, with a big master bedroom that Tokyo and

Legacy could share until they made enough money to get something nicer. That was the plan. Not this.

“Tell me you don’t miss me too, Tokyo,” Legacy said, breaking the silence, snatching Tokyo from her thoughts.

She took a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling. “I *do* miss you too...”

Legacy smiled and quickly threw her arms around Tokyo, hugging her. It took a minute, but eventually, Tokyo smiled just as big, hugging her back.

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Ten minutes later, Tokyo and Legacy were sitting on Syn's porch talking. They were, of course, on the subject that Tokyo did not want to be on, but there was no avoiding it. The conversation was one they had to have. They wouldn't be able to move forward healthily if they brushed over it like Juanita didn't call CPS on Tokyo.

"What my momma did was foul," Legacy said, shaking her head as she played with her long stiletto nails. She looked up and over at Tokyo. "I haven't spoken to her since. I barely even be there."

Legacy spent the majority of her time outside of the house. She wanted to desperately move in with Syn but he wanted to wait until him and Cavalli went their separate ways. He didn't want Legacy staying up in their hot ass house neither. It wasn't safe. Everybody in the hood and outside of it knew where Syn and Cavalli stayed. If they ended up in some shit and Legacy ended up being hurt behind something they did, he'd never be able to forgive himself. He wanted to wait until he could secure them something nice as hell outside of the city. He was working hard towards that too. He'd already made good on his promise to get Legacy a car. He would for sure be making good on his promise to get her out of the hood by the end of fall. At the rate that the brothers were going, he would have her out of there before fall even begun. They were bringing in so much paper. The only thing standing in the way of him moving on his promise sooner was time.

“She wasn’t even supposed to be at your house without you though,” Tokyo said, with a frown on her face. “If you wouldn’t have left her... she’d still be with me and—”

“Would she be though, Tok?” Legacy interrupted, in a sweet tone. A heavily emphasized sweet tone too. She didn’t want Tokyo to take what she’d said the wrong way. But, of course... she did.

“What do you mean would she be though?!” Tokyo yelled, jumping up from the step. “Yeah she would be—”

Legacy interrupted again, shaking her head. “No she wouldn’t be, boo. I’m not saying that to be mean neither, Tokyo. I’m just telling the truth. That social worker lady and CPS was on yo head heavy. It was only a matter of time, Tokyo. My momma was fucked up for what she did and I’d never forgive her for it...but all she did was speed the process up.”

Tokyo looked down at Legacy, with flaring nostrils and balled fists, wanting to argue her down but she couldn’t. Because despite how hard it was for her to admit it... Legacy was right. CPS was wearing Tokyo down. With the way they were living, Space probably wouldn’t have started school... they would’ve been trapped in the house hiding. And how long would that have lasted? She knew that eventually, CPS would show up with the police and a warrant to take Space. She knew that the way they were living wouldn’t last forever. Tokyo just hated how things went. She wished she could have had more time to fix things.

Since Tokyo was still standing, defensively, Legacy stood up. “I was wrong to leave her... And I’m so sorry

Tokyo.” Tears welled in Legacy’s brown eyes as she spoke. “I think about it every day. I think about what I could have done differently... about how I could’ve just waited. But damn man.... all of this... it ain’t gone fix anything, boo. Right now we need to be focused on getting her back. You hear me? We. Both of us. I’m going to help as much as I can.”

Tokyo didn’t say anything. She stood there trying to hold back tears that eventually won the fight. She couldn’t hold back any longer. Before she knew it, she was boohooing. She couldn’t help it.

“Okay,” Tokyo said, before pulling her lips into her mouth.

Legacy wrapped her arms around Tokyo, hugging her. “I got your back, always. Like I always have... I just messed up this time and I’m sorry. I hope you forgive me, Tok. Like... for real.”

Tokyo hugged her back and took a deep breath. “I forgive you, Legacy. I just... yeah... I forgive you.”

There were so many emotions coursing through Tokyo’s body. She had so many regrets. So many what if’s... but she couldn’t focus on that anymore. She had to move forward and she would. It felt good doing it with her best friend by her side. If there was anyone to blame, it would be Sahara. She was the reason for all of this. Not Juanita. Not Legacy. Not Tokyo... Sahara.

It was time to move on. Life without Legacy in it had been pretty dull. While she enjoyed the time she spent with Haram, not having her homegirl had taken a major toll on her mental. Most people wouldn’t admit it but, ‘breaking up’ with

a friend... a best friend especially... hurts just as much as breaking up with a boyfriend.

“Y’all asses finally makin’ up man?” Syn asked, as he walked out of the house with Haram in tow.

The minute Haram saw Tokyo and Legacy hugging, he was all in. Their eyes met and Tokyo gave him a light nod. Over the past few weeks, they spent a lot of time talking. Most of the conversation was about how Tokyo didn’t want to deal with her friends anymore. They stayed away from the topic of Space as much as they could, but often times, Tokyo would vent to him and each time it was about Legacy and Tempest. So, seeing them on the porch together had him on high alert.

He wanted to make sure she was good, and since she’d given him a head nod, he knew that she was. Somehow, someway, Haram had become Tokyo’s official, unofficial protector. They’re bond was impeccable. Sometimes, they would stay up for hours just vibing with each other. She was feeling him like crazy. Since they’ve gotten to know each other on a personal and intimate level, Tokyo had learned so much about Haram. He was more than his good looks and rugged ways. How cool, silly, protective and down to earth he was, was what really drew Tokyo to him. Spending time with him, be it in the hood, or out, had become the highlight of Tokyo’s day.

“Yeah,” Legacy said with a bright smile, and her cheek pressed against Tokyo’s. “I have my bestie boo back.”

“Good shit,” Syn said. “I missed you too, Tokyo, *shid*.” He laughed. “I couldn’t even recognize my shorty without you.”

He was dead serious too. Legacy was someone else without Tokyo. She wasn't his happy place anymore. All they ever did when they were together was talk about Tokyo and Tempest. She'd sulk about Space often too. But mostly, Legacy would be whining about their friendship and as a nigga with enough shit going on, he was tired of it. Especially when she dragged him into it, making him promise to tell her whenever Tokyo was around with Haram. He was the reason Legacy had caught Tokyo at the house all along. As soon as Haram pulled up with Tokyo in the car, he shot Legacy a text. Usually he wouldn't, but he was tired.

“Whatever,” Legacy said with the smack of her lips.

Her eyes followed Haram, as he maneuvered around Syn to get to Tokyo. She gave Tokyo a look, with a raised brow, silently telling her they had a lot to talk about. Tokyo wiped her face with the back of her hands with a light smile. They did have a lot to talk about. So much that she couldn't wait to catch up with her.

Haram grabbed Tokyo, holding her by the elbows, looking down at her. “You good?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I'm good. You done?”

He nodded. “Hell yeah. My bad for taking long—”

“No, it's okay. I'm kind of happy you didn't come right out,” Tokyo interrupted, looking over at Legacy. “We needed to talk. As a matter of fact... I'm going to kick back with her for the rest of the day.”

Haram was fine with that. He'd spent a lot of time with Tokyo because he didn't like for her to be alone, afraid that if

he left her alone too long she'd go into that dark place again and he didn't want that. Aside from wanting to keep an eye on her, he just enjoyed spending time with her. Especially now that he'd been busier than usual. Whenever he could, he had her on the passenger side of his 300.

“Aight,” Haram said before kissing her on the forehead.

Forehead kisses had somehow become their thing. They gave Tokyo the most comfort next to his arms wrapped around her. She closed her eyes and basked in the feel of his lips against her skin all of the time. The fact that they were outside, on the porch, in front of their peoples didn't change a thing about that neither. Haram didn't pretend when it came to her. He was completely comfortable with showing people just how much he fucked with Tokyo. In a way, he did it to brag. Tokyo had been in the hood for a minute but he'd never seen her caked up with anybody. She was sweet, and she smiled at muthafuckas when they came on to her for the most part but she didn't give niggas the time of day, for real. Many had tried to get with her but she always politely declined. She wanted that street lit type of love. When she opened her eyes and looked up at Haram, she felt like she could have that with him.

Syn draped his arm over Haram's shoulder and said, “Shit nigga... You might as well slide out with me tonight, now. Ain't no excuses now.”

Haram looked over at Syn and shook his head. “Mannn ___”

“You act like an old ass, Viagra poppin’ ass nigga. Pop out with cha’ mans tonight, pussy. Damn,” Syn interrupted before nodding towards Tokyo and Legacy, walking down the block. “Or do you need permission from girly?”

Haram scrunched his face up. “I’m a grown ass man.”

“Aight then, untuck yo nuts and act like it,” Syn joked.

Haram stood at the top of the porch with his eyes on Tokyo. He was a grown man alright, but any free time he had, he always wanted to spend it with her. He’d never admit it to anybody, but he was a little sick about not spending the rest of his day with her. Despite how selfish he had become of her, he was happy that Tokyo had one of her friends back. Before her, he didn’t do much with his free time. He kicked it with his brothers and got blunted and that was about it. Every now and then, when he was bored and needed his dick wet, he’d slide into something. But none of what he did in the past, before Tokyo, had any substance. She added light to his life, although hers was still a bit dimmed. Together, they created a unique ambiance that he had quickly become addicted to.

•••

A few hours later, Haram and Syn were walking into the bar. Mande's wasn't anything special; just a hole in the wall in the hood where people in the neighborhood went if they wanted to have a good time but didn't want to go too far to do so. It was packed though. The fact that there was only one way in and one way out made Haram uneasy. All it did was add on to his discomfort about being around so many people. He was out of his element. When it came to settings like this, Haram stayed out of them. Because he had been spending a lot of time with Tokyo and not much time with his brothers unless it was about business, he said fuck it and slid through with Syn. Before they got out of the car, they shared two blunts and tossed a few shots back. Haram shouldn't have been drinking but he 'knew what he was doing'. Syn was a bit apprehensive about his decision making but he didn't say anything. Had Cavalli been with them, Haram wouldn't have even touched the Anejo bottle. But because Syn let Haram do him, he was a lot more chill. He didn't take but one shot though, just to stay on his P's and Q's in case anything went left.

Haram was cool though. He was more mellow than anything. He was the perfect type of faded. It was just what he needed to move around the crowded rowdy bar without spazzing on someone for being in his personal space. Which happened to be lacking like a muthafucka. People were wall to wall. But as always, whenever the Knight brothers were in a room, crowds parted for them. Not in the intimidating manner that it parted when Haram was by himself though. Every step

they took, Syn was slapping hands with someone. Instead of wearing looks of concern, the people looked on with smiles, welcoming Syn with the love they always gave him. With Haram, they kept their distance as they always had though. The smiles they gave Syn, they didn't give Haram. But he didn't give a fuck. The only smile he ever cared about getting was from Tokyo and he'd gotten that so the stale, questioning looks he got from them meant absolutely nothing to him.

Once they made it to the bar, Syn leaned on it and called for the bartender. When she turned around and seen who it was, she sucked her teeth and ignored him. Syn ran his hand over the top of his head before making his way down the bar to where she was.

Syn loved Legacy—there was no doubt in his mind about it. But Diara made him feel in ways that Legacy couldn't. She was a freak in every sense of the word. Legacy was innocent. She was his little baby. The things he got from her, Diara couldn't provide if she tried. There really was no comparison when it came to the two. Diara fucked him good and Legacy made love to his soul. That was the simplest way to put it.

“Ay, don't make me act a fuckin' fool in this bitch, D,” Syn threatened with a smirk on his face.

“What do you want, Syn? I'm at work,” She said, rolling her eyes.

Haram sat on the barstool and watched his brother, shaking his head. He should have known the nigga was on some shit, wanting to hit Mande's. Of course he had motive.

He wasn't surprised to see Syn at Diara's neck at all. The shit they were on was something they had been on for years now.

He clasped his hands in front of him, resting them on the bar top, as he looked around the room. In the middle of the dancefloor, he could see Khadijah and her girls dancing on each other. He wasn't surprised to see her. Mande's was the spot everybody in the hood hung out at. If it wasn't Mande's it was another bar in the hood, which was why he didn't fuck around at them at all. Haram being a hermit was no secret. He didn't partake in the same type of festivities everybody else partook in, that was why every time he was spotted out, muthafuckas were always surprised.

He and Khadijah locked eyes and he sent a subtle head nod. In response, she rolled her eyes and looked away. Haram lightly chuckled. He didn't give a fuck about her not speaking. She was in her feelings and Haram didn't give one solid fuck. He hadn't fucked with her in a minute. He hadn't answered her phone calls or text messages neither; of course she had an attitude. As long as she kept that shit away from him, he would be straight.

“What up doe?”

Haram turned to the right of him and nodded with his top lip slightly curled up. “What up, Jive?”

The chip on his shoulder that Haram had for Jive still sat there. He still had intentions to put him in the dirt, the same way he had done his boy not too long ago. Instead of moving off impulse, the way he did with ol' boy, Haram was taking a more calculated approach. When it was time to dismiss the nigga, he would and not a soul would see it coming. It could

happen tomorrow, the next day, or in the next ten years. Whenever, however, it was going to happen. No one held a grudge quite like Haram.

Jive adjusted his shorts and sat on the barstool beside him. “I see the games been treating you well,” he stated, nodding towards the diamond encrusted Cuban link chain dangling from Haram’s neck.

Haram glanced down at it. “Copped this bitch *years* ago.” He shifted his glare back up at Jive.

“Say, you been gettin’ money huh, lil’ bro?”

“Lil bro? Nigga, get the fuck out of here with that shit,” Haram flatly replied before Syn’s eyes caught his.

Syn stood up from the barstool and ran his hand over the top of his head before turning his attention back to Diara. “Ay, fix yo’ attitude, D. I’m not fuckin’ playin with you neither.”

The other day, Diara called his phone while he was with Legacy. That would have been fine any other time, but on this occasion, Legacy picked up. She didn’t think much of it, because the number was still under the name Little Caesars. At the time, Syn was in the bathroom. When she yelled out about Little Caesar’s calling, he left that bathroom so fast that he didn’t even wipe his ass good. He snatched the phone from her and yelled at Diara, as if he’d actually ordered a pizza. Telling her to stop calling him about the order and that he’d be there to pick it up when he was ready to. That was days ago and she was still pissed about that.

Syn tossed a few bills on the bar and Diara snatched them up. From a nigga like Syn, three hundred was chump change. From anybody else, she would have smiled and thanked them but what was three hundred? When he'd gotten his girlfriend a new car, fresh off the lot, not too long ago? Why couldn't she get a new whip?

Diara rolled her eyes, stuffed the bills into her bra, and walked away. She was tired of Syn and his bullshit. She couldn't believe she had gotten herself involved with a nigga, with a bitch. A bitch he paraded around the hood with while he kept her a secret. It was degrading but she couldn't stop. Syn had a way with her that made all of her inhibitions go out of the window. Whenever she'd tell herself and him that she was done, she'd end up riding his dick that same night. It was like whatever she said to Syn went into one ear and out of the other.

“What up, Jive? You good?” Syn asked, before Jive could say something that would tick Haram off.

Jive pinched his nostrils and nodded before he put his eyes on Syn. “Yeah, nigga... I'm good. Ain't heard from you niggas in a minute. Who y'all workin' with now? Gio?”

Syn snorted and turned his mouth down as he shook his head. “Hell naw. Gio cop from us.”

Jive's eyebrows shot up with surprise. “Straight?” He averted his eyes to Haram but didn't say anything. “You niggas on like that now?”

“Hell yeah we on like that,” Syn boasted as he adjusted the all white Cartier Buff's on his smirking face.

Jive nodded with a laugh. “I hear you, my boy. Be careful with that nigga Ice, though. I heard his shit was heavily stepped on.”

“Ice?” Syn countered with a screwed look on his face. “Nah, we don’t fuck with that nigga Ice neither, *my boy*. Shit, what you need? We got—”

“You ready?” Haram interrupted before standing up. Syn was getting ready to do something he wouldn’t be comfortable with. Since they were out of business with Jive, he wanted to stay out of business with the nigga.

Syn took notice and nodded. “Yeah, bro. We up.” He looked up, towards the end of the bar where Diara was taking an order. “Ay! When I call you later you better have a better attitude and be ready to take dick! You hear me!?”

Diara sucked her teeth and dramatically rolled her eyes as she leaned over the bar to finish taking her customer’s orders. She wasn’t stunting Syn at all. She was sure he wouldn’t even be calling tonight. The majority of Syn’s time was spent with Legacy. Diara just knew that she probably wouldn’t see Syn for another couple of days or so. There was no consistency from him. He showed up and called when he felt like it. And regardless of what she had going on, she always answered. She hated that shit too. Diara told herself that tonight, she wouldn’t be checking her phone every ten minutes for a call or text from him because she already knew what it was.

Diara was wrong though. Syn would be calling her. There was only one instance where Diara would see more of Syn than usual. When things with Legacy were getting too

serious. And... things with Legacy were getting too serious. He'd bought her a new car and had even been talking about getting them a house too. Everything Syn did for Legacy was from the heart. She didn't ask for the car. She didn't ask for the house. He offered... both. He did it willingly. Without a second thought. Legacy was wearing thin on him. He was falling too deep in love with her. And whenever he caught himself doing that, Syn pulled back and hit one of the bitches he had on the side. He was, indeed, running from love.

“You up? I was just about to buy you niggas a drink,” Jive said with a smirk. “Or shit... I should be asking you niggas to buy me one. Y'all gettin' to the chicken like that!”

Haram turned the right side of his lip up with a snarl and looked away from Jive. What type of grown ass man would fix his lips to even mention drink buying to another nigga? Why was Jive even at Mande's when he had his own bar? Haram couldn't stand his ass and wished he could snatch his burner from his waistband and end his shit right then and there.

“Nah, we good, *my boy*,” Syn said. “Nah... you know what?” In true stutting ass Detroit nigga fashion, Syn pulled a knot of money from his pocket, pulled a few bills off and tossed them on the bar. “Drinks on me. Go crazy, nigga.”

Jive sneered and knocked the money off the bar. “Fuck out of here. You don't want to have a money measurin' contest with me, lil' nigga.”

Haram looked down at Jive with more disgust than he did before. He was a hating ass nigga. True enough, Syn's stutting could've gotten up under his skin but the chances of

that was very unlikely. That was what people in Detroit did. They flossed. They boasted. They stunted. Jive was the same way. So, Haram was sure that the issue Jive had wasn't with Syn tossing money on the bar. The issue was that they didn't need him anymore. Haram requesting a sit down with him after ruining the meeting made Jive feel superior to the brothers. He knew it. He saw the look in Jive's eyes when he told his guy to get Haram the drugs. He felt like they needed him. Like they were on their knuckles. Like Haram had bowed down to him. And he knew Jive would feel that way. Which was why being humble had been so hard for him. The only reason Haram did what he did because they *were* on their knuckles. He did what he did because he knew that eventually, they'd be wiping their asses with the type of money Jive made. He sat his ill feelings aside and stepped to the nigga for this very moment. The moment in time where Jive was faced with the facts. They used him. He was a steppingstone to where they were headed. If he was mad now, when they surpassed him and his connect, Jive would really be bent out of shape.

“We really don't, my guy,” Syn said with a laugh as he pointed at one of Jive's men. “I see you eyein' that five hun. Pick it up, fam. I know dawg ain't payin you niggas much. You smaller than you was a couple months ago. You niggas not eatin. Shit my guy... you need that five. Pick it up.” He paused and slammed his hand down on Jive's shoulder. “You might want to use some of the money you wanna compete with me, with and give it to yo' niggas. You know money is what makes *this* world go 'round right? I don' seen the most loyal niggas flip over that pape. Do the—”

“Syn,” Haram interrupted, growing sick and tired of the theatricals. Theatricals only Syn could pull off so well.

He was bitching Jive, but because he talked in a jokey tone, Jive didn’t really catch an offense to it. Not the way he would have if Haram had said the same exact thing. It was Syn’s cadence. It was the theatrics. Theatrics Haram didn’t use. For that very reason, he was the least favorite out of the brothers, but who cared? Not Haram. He didn’t want to be liked. He wanted to be left alone and his standoffish ways did a great job at keeping muthafuckas at bay.

“Dang, you can’t speak to nobody?” Khadijah said, as Haram and Syn walked right by her on the dancefloor.

She was doing the most. If it weren’t for the shorts covering her pussy, she would have been fucking the nigga she was dancing with. She didn’t even particularly care for the dude. She was putting on a show—or trying to at least. Haram hadn’t paid her any mind.

He nodded at her, although he had already spoken earlier. “What up, ‘Dij?”

She eyed him up and down, lightly staggering, with a cup in her hand. “Shit, you tell me. I thought you were dead or something.... The way my messages been stuck on delivered. I’m not even good enough to have my messages read, huh?”

“I’ve been busy,” Haram flatly replied, as he stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his shorts.

Khadijah smirked. “I know. I heard you were in a relationship now. Cute.”

“Fuck what you heard,” Haram spat with a frown on his face.

She drew back with an attitude before putting her drink in his face. “You need a drink? Yeah you need a drink... talking to me crazy... you need something!”

Haram didn't need a drink. What he needed was for her to go back to partying, as if he wasn't in the room. So, he told her just that.

“I don't need a drink. I need you to get the fuck from around me with that ‘you heard shit’, knowing I never gave a fuck about what was heard, or said about me.”

Haram despised hearsay and Khadijah knew it. He hated that he was always the topic of conversations he'd never be a part of. People loved to speculate when it came to him. Especially when it came to his love life. In the beginning of the thing he had with Khadijah, people were talking about they were together. And when Khadijah picked up a few more pounds in her midsection, it was ‘Khadijah and Haram having a baby’. It was all bullshit. Bullshit that Khadijah stayed coming at him with every single time there was something new about him being spread around the hood.

“Okay, Haram. I was just sayin,” Khadijah said, lightly slurring over her words. She was already pretty drunk with a full cup in her hand.

Haram thought about mentioning how she needed to chill and take her ass home but how Khadijah carried herself was her business. Because they had history, he looked out for her every now and then. But because she'd pissed him off, he

didn't give a fuck enough about what she had going on to tell her to go home.

She smiled. "Are you though? You ain't deny it."

Haram locked eyes with her. "Yeah, I am," he sternly replied before walking off.

Khadijah's stomach dropped and her eyebrows immediately furrowed.

She couldn't believe it. Haram? In a relationship with someone other than her? How? She knew something had to be up with him and Tokyo when she saw her on his couch. But then, people were just talking about how he was just looking out for Tokyo because he felt bad for her. It didn't take long for the relationship rumors to circulate around the hood. Turns out, they weren't rumors, though. Sadly. For Khadijah at least.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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“How did it go?” Legacy asked Tokyo as soon as she got into the car.

She couldn't tell if the girl had gotten the job or not. She stared at her, studying Tokyo's face and body language as she walked to her car but she couldn't read her for shit. Tokyo's facial expression was just... flat.

Tokyo pulled her seatbelt on, took a deep breath, and looked at Legacy. “I got it! Bitch I got the fucking job!” She yelled, before excitedly dancing around in her seat.

Legacy sighed a sigh of relief before playfully shoving her. “You scared me ho! I thought you looked mad.”

Tokyo dramatically finger combed her bone-straight wig and popped her lips. “I had to play it cool in case they were watching me on the cameras and shit.”

The girls shared a laugh and Legacy sped off in the direction of home. It had been about two weeks since they had rekindled their friendship and they were on like they never left. Within those two weeks of catching up, Legacy played tag along to every interview Tokyo had. She could have easily driven herself, but Legacy had a lot of making up to do. Plus, she wanted to be there for her girl, for moral support.

Tokyo appreciated it so much. It felt good kicking it with her girl again. So much so, that she didn't even miss Tempest. There weren't any bad vibes, or weird energy or anything remotely close to that. Tokyo had peace, and now

that she had secured a job at Chase Bank, pretty soon, she'd have Space back.

After weeks on top of weeks of trying to get answers, Tokyo finally heard from Karen. It took her reaching out to Detective Greene for some assistance to actually hear something though. Not even two hours after she called him, he was pulling up at the house, taking her down to the office. When they got there, the lady at the desk tried to give them a hard time but Detective Greene wasn't letting up. He figured, it was the least he could do. He admired Tokyo's strong will and the fight she had in her too. He wanted to see the young girl prevail. Prevailing would take a lot longer than she liked though. Karen was making it hard on her. Tokyo had to have a steady job and to prove so much stuff that initially, she was a bit discouraged but she took a deep breath and told herself that there was no room for discouragement. As she stared across Karen's filthy desk at her, Tokyo decided that she had a point to prove. She was going to get Space back. She would stop at nothing.

"So, when do you start?" Legacy asked, glancing over at Tokyo who was smiling hard as hell at her phone. "Helllllo? Tok!"

Tokyo looked up, flinching a little. "What?"

"That's all yo ass do! Swear, you just as bad as Tempest with that shit."

"Really?" Tokyo said with her face screwed up. "Don't be mentioning that bitch name to me."

Legacy rolled her eyes. "Here we go... anyway... Like I was saying! You stay smiling at that phone." She grinned.

“The fact that you and Haram are a thing is still crazy as fuck to me!”

She really couldn't believe it. She'd never heard Tokyo say one thing about Haram before. It was Tempest who was crazy over him. Tokyo never paid him any attention, so to see her blushing at her phone and stuff was crazy to Legacy. Especially whenever they'd all be kicking it. They had even done the double dating type thing. It was a bit odd at first, especially after Tempest asked her what she did that same day. She couldn't tell Tempest that she'd gone on a date with Haram and Tokyo. It was weird to her. Tempest was still pretty clueless when it came to Haram and Tokyo and Legacy wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

“I know right,” Tokyo said with a deep breath and a smile, after reading the text from Haram that had just come through. “It's crazy to me, too.”

Tokyo had been in complete bliss. Time and time again, Haram had proved to her that he was more than what she thought he was before. And every time he did, she was amazed. Haram was everything. Literally. One of her best friends, sometimes her therapist, her solace, her peace. Everything. She didn't think one person could be capable of fulfilling nearly all of her needs. But he did. She didn't want for anything when it came to him. If there was a problem she had, Haram was Johnny on the spot to fix it. If he couldn't tend to her personally, he'd have someone there to help her with whatever she needed.

The other day, she needed her tire fixed and Ave pulled up on her within ten minutes. She and Ave had become very

acquainted. He was a jack of all trades. He'd fixed her leaky sink, switched light bulbs, and everything. Haram would have been more hands on, but the business had been keeping him very busy. He hated it, but when he was able to, he was there.

"I'm happy for you though, friend," Legacy said with a smile. "It's been a while since I've seen you really smile."

Tokyo nodded. "Yeah... I'm trying. I'm getting back to me. I can't do what I need to do if I'm depressed and just a mess all day, every day."

"Exactly," Legacy replied with a nod. "When do you start though? I know you can't wait."

"Next Monday. I wanted to start tomorrow but," she paused and sucked her teeth. "They have a process or whatever, I guess."

"Well, at least that'll give you a little time to get ready. You have to go see Karen about the job, right?"

At the mention of the bitch she hated most, Tokyo rolled her eyes. "No. I don't have to report shit to her." She paused and replied to Haram's text, letting him know that she'd be home in about fifteen minutes. "I want to get two checks before I even tell them I'm working. I need them to see how serious I am. This fifteen an hour is really going to help me get my baby back."

Legacy grinned, giddily. "I know that's fuckin' right! Spacey will be home before you know it!" She paused, looking over at Tokyo. "I'm so fuckin' proud of you."

"Thank you, Legacy." Tokyo leaned her head back against the headrest. "I'm proud of me too."

Hearing the words 'I'm proud of you' felt good. It had been so long since someone had told her that. The last person to tell her that was granny, on her graduation day. She had a lot to be proud of back then, but then she just felt like she was doing what she had to do. This time, those words had a deeper meaning. She'd literally pulled herself out of darkness to level up. That was something to really be proud of. The shit Tokyo had been through, a lot of people would have folded. But she was strong. At the age of eighteen, she had survived what most would've died from. Literally. Especially when she was younger without parents, fending for herself. As she sat with her head against the headrest with her eyes closed, Tokyo thought about how all of her life she had to be strong. She longed for the days that having to be strong was a thing of the past. For once, she wanted to have it easy.

...

“What’s got you smiling like that?” Krystal asked, giving Haram the side eye.

Haram looked up from his phone with raised brows. “Huh?”

“Huh?” Mocked Krystal. “You’ve been standing there smiling at your phone for about ten minutes now. I’m talking to you and I don’t think you’ve heard a damn thing I’ve said.” She giggled. “My baby boy in love?”

Haram sucked his teeth and ran his hand over the top of his head before sitting his phone down. “Man... what?”

“You see a man standing here?” Krystal joked with a cocked brow. Taking a sip of her coffee, she looked across the kitchen table at him. “Who is she?”

Haram wasn’t in love... was he? He did spend a lot of his time thinking about Tokyo, but... that wasn’t love right? Any free time he had, he wanted to spend it with her... and whenever her name would come up on his screen, he was smiling. But... that wasn’t love... was it? He didn’t know what it was, but what he did know was that he was feeling her like crazy. If he wasn’t working, he wanted to be with her. Hell, he wanted to be with her even when he was working. He’d never craved to be in anyone’s presence as much as he craved her. It was crazy and scary at the same time. He was forming a dependency and he had never depended on a thing. Not even his medication. He couldn’t go a day without Tokyo... the Lithium he could easily go without.

“No one,” Haram replied before digging into the bowl of leftover chili and getting up from the chair. He walked around the table, kissed his mother on the cheek and told her he’d see her later.

“You just got here, Haram,” Krystal complained. “You didn’t even finish the chili...”

Haram was always in and out. He’d only stopped at the house to grab some money from his safe. He was rarely ever at the house. He spent the majority of his time working, or at Tokyo’s house since she had the crib to herself. He’d been spending so much time out of the house that he had been giving getting a spot of his own more thought. He had absolutely no reason to stay at Krystal’s anymore. He was taking his sweet time though. He knew how his mother could be. She’d just gotten him back, after his episode. He didn’t have to, but he was being careful with his mother’s feelings. Moving out, leaving her, would be a big step for her. Not for him. Haram had no attachment to home. But because he didn’t want his mother to have a complete meltdown he was waiting a few more weeks before breaking the news to her. He felt like he owed her that much.

“I know. I got some—”

“Stuff to handle,” Krystal said, finishing his sentence for him. “I know... I know.”

Krystal could literally feel Haram slipping away from her. She didn’t know what was going on with their ‘little business’ as she often referred to it as, but from the looks of things, they were picking up. Haram was coming home wearing that duffle or backpack more than he used to. And

she'd heard him in and out of his safe multiple times a day, throughout the week. He was making a ton of money. And that scared her.

To her, more money meant more problems. Not only was he busy with that, but she could also see that some 'little girl' had his attention too, which scared her more than the money thing. As tough as Haram was, she knew he was fragile too. Not only because of his mental illness neither. Haram loved hard. There was no secret to it. He didn't love freely, but the ones he did love—his family, he loved with his entire heart. And if he was in love, or somewhat close to it, Krystal knew that the girl had to be someone really special. In Haram's eyes she was at least. She just prayed that she was as special as her son saw her. She'd hate for him to get a broken heart. That would crush her possibly more than it'd crush Haram.

"I'll be back tonight," Haram reassured his mother. "You hear some noise in the back... that'll be me."

Krystal playfully hit him. "Don't be climbing in my window, Haram Knight."

She got up from the table and followed him toward the front door. She might've been fussing at him, but she'd be happy to hear him climbing through her window. It had been so long since he'd done it. These days, he didn't even come home at night anymore.

Haram pushed the screen door open and walked out, looking over his shoulder at Krystal. "You want me to knock at three in the morning?"

“I want you to come home at a respectable... Well... Hello,” Krystal said, speaking to Khadijah who was standing at the bottom of the porch, midsentence.

With dipped brows, Haram turned and looked down at her. “What we doin’ ‘Dij?” He asked, wearing a scowl. “You gon’ keep poppin’ up at a nigga’s house huh?”

There she was again, showing up at his house without notice. He hadn’t spoken to Khadijah since that night at the bar and by the look on her face, he could tell it was eating her up. She was feeling rather neglected and it was most definitely eating her up. She still hadn’t been able to fully digest him being in a relationship. Khadijah just knew that what Haram had with Tokyo couldn’t be serious. But the more he ignored her calls and texts, the more she began to realize that he was actually done with her, and in a full blown relationship. The last thing she wanted to do was to pop up on him. If he’d just answer his phone, she wouldn’t have to show up unannounced all of the time.

Khadijah snarled at Haram before looking past him to speak to Krystal. “Hi Ms. Krystal. How are you doing?”

Krystal smiled. “I’m doing great. How are you? Is it you that’s been having my son blushing all day?”

“Ma...” Haram said, looking over his shoulder at her.

Khadijah’s face burned with rage as she forced a smile. “Nope. Not me.”

Krystal’s eyes widened a bit, as she realized that she had fucked up. “Okay... Son... Call me okay? Love you!”

She didn't even wait for a response before she was closing the door. Behind the door, she peeked through the peephole, as nosey as she's ever been.

"You aight, shorty?" Haram asked as he jogged down the steps. "This what we doin' now?"

Khadijah pursed her lips together as her nostrils flared. She wanted to hide how mad she was so bad, but she couldn't. She was in utter disbelief. Haram had been ignoring her for Tokyo? Tokyo!? She was worried. This had never happened before. Haram had been with many women but he'd never cut her off.

"What are *we* doin, Haram? You tell me," Khadijah said, as she followed him to his car. "I thought we were.. you know."

"You thought we were what, Khadijah?" Haram countered, with a cocked brow. "It's what it's always been, my baby. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Nothing less? It's sure feeling like that these days. You got a girlfriend and just don't even want to be friends anymore. Damn. That's fucked up!"

"You need somethin' Khadijah?" Haram asked, having very little interest in an exchange with her. He didn't do this. He didn't bicker back and forth with women. To him, that was female shit. And in his book, any nigga going back and forth with a woman to him classified as a bitch. He didn't see the purpose behind it. Arguing with women did nothing for him. He'd rather walk away.

Khadijah stood across from him with her arms crossed over her chest. As she looked up at him, she couldn't help but to feel worthless. She could see by the look in his eyes that she didn't mean as much to him as he meant to her and that revelation stung like hell. The thought to play herself by bombarding him with pitiful questions of why crossed her mind. She wanted to fall to her knees and ask him why. She knew why, but still... she wanted answers. Why was it that he didn't even give her the option of a relationship? But he'd given it to Tokyo? Why was it that their friendship had always been based on sex, but the one he had with Tokyo wasn't?

Granted, she didn't know much about what he had going on besides their relationship. But a blind man could see that Tokyo was indeed very special to him. She *had* to be for him to cut her off. He hadn't come by her house in over a month. That never happened, regardless of what he had going on. Haram always made time for her, because in making time for her, he was fulfilling his own sexual appetite. He hadn't been too *hungry* these days, though, apparently.

Standing there, Khadijah wondered if he no longer desired her. Was she nothing to him now? What would she do if she was? Would all of the years they spent connecting sexually be a waste? Would she be forgotten? Did she really mean nothing to him?

Sensing that something was really wrong with her, Haram lightly hung his head before looking back up at her. "Dij... What's good my baby?"

She shrugged her right shoulder. "I haven't seen you. I mean... I know we ain't together or whatever but... I mean..."

I don't know. I just thought we were better than this." She paused and gestured toward him. "If you weren't fucking with me anymore, I mean... I thought we were close enough where you would respect me enough to just tell me that."

The thing about Haram and Khadijah was that he did respect her. He respected her a lot. Although he could never see himself in a relationship with her, he did care about her. She wasn't just a piece of pussy. She wasn't just some random bitch he fucked with every now and then. They grew up together. They were each other's first. Haram didn't have romantic feelings for her, but he did give a damn about her.

"Hello?!" Khadijah snapped, the sting of embarrassment flowing through her veins.

Haram ran his hand over the top of his hair and took a deep breath. "I didn't have to tell you shit, to be honest Khadijah. We weren't rockin' like that," He nonchalantly replied. "I told you what it was already though. You popped up over here for nothin'."

"Being 'with' someone never stopped you from pulling up on me before. Be real, Haram. Just tell me you in a real relationship this time so you ain't fucking with me no more." She shrugged. "It's nothing. Whatever. I really don't give a fuck. I just want you to be real with me."

Haram lightly chuckled. It was nothing but she had popped up on him on two different occasions, looking for answers. Haram was no fool. He could see beyond the tough act Khadijah was putting on. She wanted to play tough, he would treat her like she was it.

He nodded. "Aight, yeah. You got me, shorty. I'm in a real relationship 'this time'." He laughed. "I don't know what the fuck you mean by this time 'cause a nigga ain't never been in a fuckin' relationship. But yeah, that's what I'm on. That's where we at with it." He opened his car door and proceeded to get inside. Before he got in, he said, "Don't bring yo ass 'round my crib again, Khadijah."

"So, you done fucking with me?" Khadijah asked, ignoring what he'd said about popping up at his house. "Is that what you're saying?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Lower yo voice too, baby girl."

Khadijah nodded with her mouth turned down a bit. "Okay. I hope your new bitch prepared to be a step momma," she mumbled before storming off.

Haram's eyebrows snapped together before he took the one leg he put inside of the car out. Slamming the door, he followed behind her.

"Yo, what you just say to me?" He asked.

Khadijah, with tears pouring down her face, looked over her shoulder at him, steady speed walking. "You heard what I said!" She yelled.

Khadijah was twelve weeks pregnant. She'd known for about three weeks. Since finding out, she had been debating about what to do with it. Had she and Haram been on good terms, it would have been a lot easier to decide. But he didn't fuck with her and because of that her heart was broken. So broken that she decided that maybe she should get an abortion.

When she saw him at the bar that night and he confirmed the rumors, she really thought getting an abortion was the best thing. But after talking to her girls, they convinced her that she had been making serious decisions based on her broken heart, rather than really thinking about what having an abortion meant. After a couple of days of just sitting back, thinking, she made the decision to just have it. Since then, she hadn't had much courage to tell him. She'd only made the snarky comment about his new girlfriend being ready to be a stepmother to ruffle his feathers a bit. She hadn't been able to get a rise out of him, but she knew for certain that, that would and she was right.

Haram was on her heels, as she treaded down the street, walking as fast as she could. Khadijah hated how that had him wanting to chase after her. What about the sadness in her eyes? Yeah, she told him she didn't care but she knew he knew she did because she knew Haram. He didn't too much give a fuck about what a person said. He studied body language, which was why it was easy for him to get her to agree to exploring with one another, all of those years ago. He knew she was feeling him, despite how platonic their friendship seemed to be. So, she knew, he knew she loved him. Of course he had to know. When they laid together, it wasn't just a quick turn around and let me fuck you from the back. Haram *was* passion. Not passionate... he was *passion* and the embodiment of the word. He made bitches fall in love with him.

“Khadijah!” Haram called out, before roughly grabbing her arm.

She yanked away. “Don't be grabbing me, Haram!”

Haram tossed his head back a little before massaging the back of his neck. She was putting him in a fucked up position, playing mind games. Women came with too many emotions. Why was Khadijah complicating shit by putting feelings in the mix of what they had going on? For months, Haram noticed her slipping but since she was quiet about it, he didn't give too much of a fuck about it. Those feelings she had for him were starting to cause problems in his already problematic life and he hated that.

“My bad.... Look... What the fuck did you just say?” Haram breathed out, trying his damndest not to lose his cool. He had heard her loud and clear; he just wanted her to repeat it. He wanted to be able to look into her eyes when and if she said it this time. She couldn't be pregnant, right? Haram squinted, as she avoided eye contact with him.

Khadijah gripped the strap to her Coach crossbody bag and looked up and down the block, ignoring him. She wanted to walk off again, but she was out of breath from speed walking like a mad woman. Besides, she knew if she tried, Haram would be stopping her again and they had already started to draw attention from the neighbors.

“Khadijah—”

“What?” She snapped. “I said...Man, you heard what I said.”

Haram grabbed her jaw, forcing her to look his way. “I heard what you said, but I need you to repeat that for me, Khadijah. Look me in the face and say that shit again.”

Khadijah swallowed and tried to pull away from his grip, but every time she tried, he gripped tighter. “You're

hurting me,” she lied.

She was looking for sympathy. Something that would tell her that he cared a little about the way that she felt. And when he loosened his grip, Khadijah’s heart smiled a bit. He cared. Maybe there was hope for them?

“Dij,” Haram said in a low, harsh tone.

“I’m pregnant. I wasn’t trying to—”

Haram let go of her completely and turned to walk away. As he walked in the direction towards his car, his nostrils flared as he clenched and unclenched his fists. He couldn’t have any baby’s. Physically, he was capable but Haram couldn’t bring any children into this world. Why would he do that? Willingly? Why would he want a baby, knowing what and who he was? Knowing he had this crutch... a crutch that would most likely be passed down to his child? He didn’t want to bring a human being into this world. He didn’t want to burden his child with what’s burdened him his entire life.

“You just gone walk away!?” Khadijah yelled, marching behind him. “You serious right now!?”

Haram ignored her, as he continued to clench and unclench his fists. He couldn’t speak to her. He needed to collect his thoughts. He dug the nail of his index finger into the top of his thumb as he continued to his car. The sound of Khadijah’s annoying voice grew louder with every passing second, letting him know that she was getting closer.

“Haram!” Khadijah yelled as she snatched the back of his shirt.

Off impulse, Haram turned around and wrapped his hand around her neck, backing her up against his car. She gripped his wrist, as she stared into his menacing eyes, paralyzed with fear. She had never in all of the years knowing him seen him so angry. His eyes were bulging and there was a long, thick vein running down the middle of his forehead. Khadijah was petrified.

“What is wrong with you, Haram?!” Krystal yelled, as she jogged down the stairs. She had been watching from the peephole the whole time. When Haram and Khadijah were out of view, she started to walk away until she heard their voices again. She wasn’t prepared to see her son pinning Khadijah up against his car. She just knew Haram had to have lost his damn mind, pulling something like that. Krystal liked to think that she raised him a lot better than that. What he did in the streets was one thing but getting physical with a woman was a totally different lane.

Haram briefly looked over his shoulder at Krystal before letting Khadijah go.

“What the hell is wrong with you, boy?!” She yelled, as if Haram had actually put hands on Khadijah. She turned to her, with pinched brows and worry written all over her face. “You okay, sweetie?”

Haram walked away, rubbing the back of his neck. He couldn’t deal with Khadijah. He had enough on his plate. He had too much going on to worry about some alleged baby. The question of rather she was actually pregnant or not had been on his mind since she said that shit. There was a great chance that she was. They rarely ever used protection but Khadijah

was supposedly on birth control. After all of the years of them fucking around, she hadn't gotten pregnant before. How convenient would it be for her to end up pregnant now after Haram had stopped fucking with her? He didn't trust it. She could've been on some bullshit because she wanted some attention from him.

Haram paced the pavement, looking over at his mother consoling Khadijah, and wanted to spazz. What the fuck was she consoling her for? As if Haram had whooped her ass or something? He couldn't believe the shit Khadijah was pulling.

Haram shook his head and walked back down to his car. Snatching the car door open, he ignored the sound of his mother calling out for him. He was too upset to speak with her. He was livid. He thought he and Khadijah were better than the shit she'd just pulled. If she had a positive pregnancy test, why hadn't they sat down like the friends they were and talked about the shit like civilized people? If she was pregnant, why was she at the bar not too long ago, drunk as fuck? Why did she wait until they were in the middle of an uncomfortable conversation to drop that bomb? The way she handled it made him second guess the whole 'pregnant' thing.

He wasted no time shifting his car in drive and speeding off. Krystal was making her way around the car when he did, but he didn't give a fuck.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hours later, Haram was back on the block. Instead, he wasn't at home. He was parked in front of Khadijah's house, with his head leaned back against his headrest. He'd been sitting there for a good ten minutes, trying to figure out what to do. For the past three hours, Haram had been parked in the end of a dead-end street, trying to collect his thoughts.

His heart raced at the thought of becoming a father. He couldn't bring a child into this world. If he was old enough, he would have gotten a vasectomy a long time ago. He refused to subject his seed to his everyday struggles. Haram felt cursed. Because he knew he had his issues because of his father, he never wanted to have children himself. That decision was made the minute he learned that Bipolar could be hereditary. His decision wasn't solely based on bringing a mentally ill child into the world though. Haram was afraid of the kind of father he would be, considering his own was a piece of shit.

Shifting his thoughts to his father, Craig, always put him in a very, very dark headspace. He hated Craig with every fiber of his being. Haram didn't feel such hatred for anybody but him. Not only was Craig responsible for Haram's mental illness, but he treated him like shit because of his own. For the first seven years of Haram's life, he was treated horribly by his father and his family too. He stayed with him. Because Craig was a wealthy white man, living in the suburbs of Macomb, MI, he won custody. It didn't matter that Krystal's argument was based on his mental illness and his inability to take care of a child with his demanding work schedule. He won because one, he had money, and two, he had 'white privilege'. Haram

was very well taken care of, financially, but mentally and physically, he suffered horribly.

Craig worked a lot of hours. He was rarely ever home, leaving Haram there with Craig's hateful wife who did everything in her power to make his life a living hell. She punished Haram for the affair Craig had. Every chance she got, she made sure to treat Haram like shit although she should have had that hate for her husband. Craig was the one who'd stepped outside of his marriage by having sex with his nurse, a colleague, at Beaumont Hospital. What Jena, Craig's wife, thought was a one-time thing, was much more than that. Haram was proof of that when Krystle ended up pregnant a few weeks after she'd told Craig to stop the affair. She did the math and by her calculations, Craig never stopped. She threatened him with leaving, but she never did. She ended up taking care of his bastard child but in the worst way possible.

Jena made it her business to tear Haram down every single time they were together. She called him niggers, and always tore him down about his curly, textured hair. If that wasn't enough, when Craig was at work, she wouldn't feed him. Haram wouldn't eat until Craig came home from work and he was completely clueless about it all.

At the time, before things got worse than what Haram thought they could, he thought Craig was an ally. He told him about Jena and Craig did nothing about it. He promised to get a nanny, though, which he never did. Things quickly took a terrible turn for the worst when Craig lost his job due to misconduct and sexual harassment of yet another nurse. He not only lost his job, but his reputation was stained too,

making it very hard for him to find another hospital or clinic to practice at.

Craig's work life spiraling out of control made his real life spiral too. He had several manic episodes. He was irritable and depressed a lot. Haram went from only eating and being taken care of when Craig was home, to not being taken care of at all. He didn't eat unless Jena was away. Then, he'd sneak into the kitchen to eat dry cereal or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Craig did absolutely nothing to take care of him. All of his time was spent in the room, depressed, or in a horrible mood. If that wasn't the case, he take on various job interviews which would always end up being a waste of time, leading Craig to heavy drinking. The heavy drinking led to severe manic episodes every time. It was an ongoing cycle.

To make matters worse, whenever family would come over, they would whisper about Haram. His cousin's called him a mutt and his grandparents might not have called him a nigger directly, but they always... *Always...* called Krystal one. Haram could vividly remember them calling her a homewrecking nigger on several occasions. Whenever he'd walk in on them speaking ill of his mother, using racial slurs, they'd force smiles and act like they cared about him.

Krystal was supposed to have weekend visits, but those stopped once Craig lost his grip on his mental health. Every time she'd visit, they wouldn't answer the door. Her calls weren't answered neither. It took some time, but eventually, after about a month of not seeing her son, she'd had enough. Instead of just showing up there, she brought the police with

her, claiming she needed to do a wellness check on him. Which, in a way, she really did need to. When she saw how small, and frail Haram was, she broke down on her knees, apologizing, promising to make everything right again. It took a while, but eventually, Haram moved in with his mother and brothers. It was then that he really felt loved. He was accepted. He wasn't called racial slurs or given snooty looks. In the hood, the only thing he was subjected to were the pretty boy comments. It didn't really matter to him because in his house, he was finally seen as an equal.. Right up until he was diagnosed with Bipolar.

Dragging his hands down his face, Haram let out a loud grunt. Khadijah's little announcement had indeed sent him over a cliff of mental catastrophe. He didn't know if he should run in the house and strangle her to death, or if he should just make her take the two pregnancy tests he picked up on the way. The saner side of him told him to just go in there, give her the tests, and let the rest of her pregnancy play out until they were able to have a DNA test done. But then... there was the insane side of him that told him that strangling her would get rid of two problems at once. Her mother wasn't home. She had the house to herself, so the opportunity had pretty much presented itself. Haram knew he could've taken an easier approach by asking Khadijah to get an abortion but the fact that she had even told him about the pregnancy was proof that she'd already made her mind up.

The chances of Khadijah being pregnant by him were very high. He'd be doing the baby a favor, killing it and his mother at once. He'd be saving the baby a lifetime of pain, sorrow, and mental illness if he took that route. Not only

would he be helping the baby, but he'd also be helping himself. He didn't want to have a child at all. Especially not with Khadijah.

Closing his eyes, he thought about Tokyo and decided that with her... the possibility of a child would be okay. Maybe. Even then, he was sure he'd still feel indifferent about it.. Haram's mind had been on a million things at a time. What would Tokyo think when he finally found the perfect time to tell her? Would she think he cheated on her? And even if she believe that the baby was conceived before her, would she stay with him? How would she feel about becoming a stepmother at her age? He'd lose her. Clenching his jaw again, Haram decided that he couldn't lose her. She was for him. He couldn't just go back to living a simple life of routine. A life where the only thing he did was make money, spend it, fuck a new bitch every now and then, and then go right back to the same cycle. For most young men that would be enough. For him it had been enough. But now? Now after experiencing her... he couldn't just go back to that. Sure, there were other women in the world that he could build with if things between him and Tokyo didn't work out but the problem then would be that they weren't her. Tokyo... the literal light of his life.

If Khadijah was pregnant with his child, there was a big chance that he'd lose Tokyo and he couldn't lose her. That right there was good enough reason to just go ahead with strangling Khadijah. Haram couldn't be without Tokyo. He physically and mentally just could not. She had quickly become an addiction. A healthy one, he believed. He just... he couldn't lose her.

Looking up at the house, Haram snatched his key from the ignition and got out of the car. He tossed the hood of his Nike pullover hoodie over his head and stuffed his hands into its pockets. The block was quiet. There wasn't a soul out. Not that he could see at least. The weather was beginning to break, so things were starting to calm down.

He jogged up the stairs and looked around the block for a few seconds before knocking on the door. Haram gritted his teeth and shook his head a little, trying to settle the thoughts racing in his mind.

After a couple of seconds, Khadijah opened the door. She was surprised to see that it was Haram. Because of the way he reacted to her telling him she was pregnant, she assumed he wouldn't be speaking to her at all. When he sped off from in front of the house, Ms. Krystal asked her what happened but she couldn't bring herself to tell her, so she just sobbed. Eventually, she went home just to cry herself to sleep. She thought about calling and texting him to talk about what she'd told him but she couldn't. The look he gave her with his hands wrapped around her throat had been haunting her ever since.

“Hey,” Khadijah said with a smile.

Haram stood at the door, looking down at her with a menacing scowl on his face. “You gon' let me in?”

Khadijah didn't know if she should've. The look on his face then was just as petrifying as the one he gave her earlier. But because she knew in her heart that Haram wouldn't hurt her, she unlocked the screen door and let him in.

Haram walked inside of the house and before Khadijah could say anything else, he tossed the two pregnancy tests in her face. Literally.

“Really?!” Khadijah said. “Nigga you—”

Haram stood in her face and calmly said, “Take the fuckin’ tests, Khadijah.”

Khadijah swallowed her words and stepped back to pick the tests up. She knew firsthand how crazy Haram could get. She’d witnessed him on several occasions demolish niggas for less.

“Okay...” She rolled her eyes and walked off, towards the bathroom. Looking over her shoulder, she noticed Haram following her. “You gon’ watch me piss, Haram?”

Haram didn’t say anything, he just kept following her. Right up until she walked into the bathroom, too. He sat on the tub, directly across from the toilet she pulled her panties down and sat on. Khadijah hadn’t a worry in the world. She knew she was pregnant. She’d gone to the doctor and had a blood test. Him sitting across from her, watching her made her nervous though. So nervous that she couldn’t even open the packaging.

Haram uncrossed his arms and snatched the box from her. He ripped into it before tossing the test at her. It bounced around her hand, nearly hitting the floor, before she could get a good grip on it. Khadijah’s bottom lip quivered. She couldn’t believe Haram was treating her like some random hoodrat from the block.

“I really can’t believe you’re treating me like this, Haram. You keep throwing shit at me. Talking to me like... Like I did something to you. Like you hate me or something. For real? I’m not just some random ass bitch you—”

“Pee on the fuckin’ stick and stop talkin’ me to death,” Haram interrupted.

She was lucky he’d decided to give her the test instead of killing her. Haram wasn’t that bad off. Although that cloud of darkness was starting to Hoover over his head, it hadn’t consumed him to the point where all logical thinking had gone out of the window.

Khadijah with tears rolling down her cheeks nodded and leaned forward to pee on the first test. While she did that, Haram grabbed the other box from the floor and opened that one for her too. Instead of throwing it at her, this time, he simply handed it to her. Khadijah thought maybe her tears were moving him, but she was wrong.

Khadijah hadn’t done anything to him. He was treating her like he hated her and he really didn’t. If she was pregnant, then it wasn’t just her fault. He was the one that had recklessly slid up in her without a rubber. If there was anybody to blame it would be him. Sure, Khadijah said she was on birth control, but Haram was smart enough to know that none of that shit was one hundred percent safe. He should have been careful. He couldn’t blame her for any of this. The only thing that had infuriated him about the situation was the way she handled it. She handled it like a woman scorned, with vengeance instead of coming to him with the respect she wanted him to treat her with.

After Khadijah finished the first test, she went right to the second one. Luckily, her bladder was full, from the water she'd drunk before she'd cried herself to sleep. While the tests did their thing, they sat there in silence. Not for long though. Khadijah just couldn't let go of the way she felt about how Haram was treating her.

“You don't want this baby, do you?” Khadijah sadly asked.

Haram didn't say anything.

“Well... I do. I plan on having it. And not because I'm trying to trap you neither. I just don't want to kill it. I can't do no shit like that,” Khadijah continued before shrugging. “I didn't want to tell you like that neither. I was just... Haram I was in my feelings. You just... You just don't know—”

Without warning, Haram jumped up from the tub and snatched the first test up. He didn't give a damn about anything coming out of Khadijah's mouth. He hadn't even been listening. He was waiting, with his eyes on both tests, mentally counting the two minutes they had to wait before checking.

The two lines on the test didn't really come as a surprise to Haram. He figured she was actually pregnant when she didn't give him much argument about taking them. Her confidence spoke volumes. Haram just needed to see it for herself. He didn't even bother looking at the second test. He walked out of the bathroom without uttering a single word to Khadijah. He didn't have anything to say to her. He didn't have anything to say to anybody. Haram felt as if his life was over. That cloud of darkness hovering over him had most

certainly consumed him at this point. Being sure about something was one thing, but actually seeing proof of the pregnancy was another.

Khadijah following him out of the bathroom, yelling didn't even get a rise out of him. Haram was numb. He could've turned around and ended it all right then and there, but he didn't have the strength to. The only thing Haram wanted to do was to go home.

...

Tokyo looked down at her phone with dipped brows before turning her attention back to Legacy who was running her mouth about Syn.

“I don’t know, girl, I think we might be moving in together soon. Shits been getting serious,” Legacy said, as she sat in front of the mirror, on the floor, putting knotless braids in her hair. “I already been thinking of what to say to my momma when the time comes. You already know she’s going to have so much shit to talk. But...” Legacy paused and shrugged. “I’m grown. I can move out.”

Tokyo, with her head propped up on her fist, sitting Indian style on the couch nodded. “Right. He’s already gotten you a car. I wouldn’t be surprised if y’all had a place in a few weeks.”

Legacy had been rambling on and on for the past thirty minutes about Syn and Tokyo had only been halfway listening. She hadn’t heard from Haram and it was bugging her. It had only been two days since they last spoke, but for them, that was huge. Especially since he never visited her like he’d promised to the day of her interview. She texted him a couple of times and was immediately worried when she didn’t hear from him at all. She stopped worrying when she talked to Legacy though. She was out with Syn and things were good, so she knew Haram had to be too. If something horrible happened, Syn would not have been with Legacy.

Since they had gotten serious, they spent every single day together. And if they couldn’t for whatever reason, they

talked on the phone or texted. Every text Tokyo sent went unanswered. He hadn't even opened them up. Tokyo thought about asking Legacy to see what was up with Haram but she decided against it. She didn't want anybody to think she was 'sweating' him like that. Which... she really was.

Legacy annoyingly squealed. "I swear to God! Tok... if we get a house... I'm throwing the biggest fucking party!"

Tokyo giggled and glanced down at her phone again. This time, Legacy noticed. She took a deep breath and cocked her head to the side.

"You still haven't heard from him?" She asked.

Tokyo shook her head and pulled her legs from underneath her bottom. "Nope. Not since he sent me that congratulations text, telling me we would celebrate later, or whatever." She shrugged her right shoulder. "I'm good though."

Legacy twisted her lips up at her. "You are not good. You sure you don't want me to ask Syn—"

"No. Don't ask him anything," Tokyo quickly interrupted. "Clearly he's okay. I'm not about to be on his dick, pressing him like that. Fuck it." She grabbed her fanny pack off the table and strapped it on. "Maybe this lil' fling we had is done. I do not give a fuck."

"Girllaaa," Legacy dramatically said with an eye roll. "Why do you keep acting like you don't love him? He popped that lil' cherry and everything. You like him. You love him. You been on his dick, bitch... Literally."

Instead of responding to that, Tokyo asked her to walk to the coney island with her. She was in no mood to talk about her feelings for Haram. She did love him. And he did ‘pop her lil’ cherry’. Those were the specific reasons she was in her feelings like she was. Tokyo felt cheated. She was afraid that she had him wrong all along. What if he did just butter her up to get the panties? Granted, things had been great between the two of them for weeks after that but what if he had been playing some long game all along? Not knowing what was going on with him was driving her insane. She couldn’t quiet her racing mind for shit.

Legacy pulled up from the floor with a grunt before snatching her hat off the end table. “Yeah. I’m hungry and my hands are hurting anyway.”

As if Legacy hadn’t talked enough about Syn, she talked more about him the entire five minute walk to Deluxe Coney Island. Just like before, Tokyo’s mind was on Haram. There was so much she wanted to talk to him about. She wanted to tell him about how her first drug test went this morning. She really just wanted to talk to him in general. Chilling and talking with him about a bunch of nothing was what she’d been missing the most over the past two days. Tokyo hated how attached she had gotten to him. She kicked herself for getting so close to him.

Walking into the coney island, the first person Legacy and Tokyo spotted was Tempest.

Legacy mumbled, “Aw shit.”

Tokyo frowned. “Aw shit what?”

Legacy shrugged and awkwardly scratched at her head. “I was just sayin.”

When it came to Tokyo and Tempest, Legacy was in such an awkward place. She was friends with the both of them and wanted for all of them to be friends together, again. But she was dealing with Tokyo’s stubbornness and Tempest’s grudge. She hadn’t gotten over the ass whooping Tokyo gave her, which was very well warranted. Legacy just wanted things to go back to normal.

When they walked up to the counter to order their food, Tempest noticed them. She immediately turned her nose up at Tokyo and rolled her eyes. She was tempted to repay her for the way she snuck her. She hadn’t seen much of her since then and would have done it sooner, had she seen her. Tokyo had been out of the way but Tempest was going around the hood claiming that Tokyo was ducking and dodging her. Luckily, that little lie hadn’t gotten back to Tokyo. Had it, she would have addressed it by showing up at Tempest’s door to whoop her again.

“Hey Temp,” Legacy spoke, as an attempt to lighten the tension in the restaurant.

The tension was so thick that not even a katana would’ve been able to cut through it. Tokyo was nonchalantly looking down at her phone without a care in the world. The only reason there was any tension was because Tempest had anger practically oozing from her pores. She was so bothered by Tokyo’s presence that it didn’t make any sense.

“Hey bitch,” Tempest spoke back, wearing a cocky smirk. “Hey Tokyo, girl. You know I should beat yo’ ass

right?”

The few people in the restaurant snickered and Tokyo looked up from her phone. “I’d like to see you try it, bitch.”

Tokyo was the soft spoken girl with the lethal hands that everybody talked about. She was the sweetest, but she’d beat the brakes off anybody that disrespected her. That was the main reason she wasn’t bullied when she first moved to the neighborhood. There were a few people that tried that her but failed miserably. After she beat the toughest broad in the hood up, everybody saw what really lied behind Tokyo’s sweet smile; an ass whooping for anybody that tried her. They went from fucking with her to admiring her. It was quite the flip.

Tempest sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes. “Nah. I’m going to catch you slippin’ one of these days like you caught me slippin.”

Tokyo locked eyes with her and said, “Good luck with that.”

Tokyo’s upbringing kept her on her P’s and Q’s. She was a young girl, fending for herself in the hood. She learned the importance of watching her back at a tender eight years old. Since she was always by herself, she was naturally skeptical and kept her eyes peeled for danger. One day, she slipped and was nearly pulled into an abandoned house by one of the neighborhood pedophile crackheads. If it wasn’t for how fast she was, he would have gotten her. Being fast was another thing she absolutely had to be. She couldn’t be caught after stealing food from the corner store.

After her run in with Skeebo, she walked around with a steel pipe on her, looking over her shoulder, ready to crack

someone's head open. Mae taking her in did make her a little comfortable though. She didn't have to look over her shoulder as much as she did when she was alone. She didn't have to walk around with a steel pipe. She didn't have to keep up with her running because of how fast she needed to be to steal. Tokyo didn't put herself in situations that she needed to have her survival instincts on at all times, although she was in the hood. It was different for her. Now that she was alone, and apparently had beef, those survival instincts she thought she lost, had come back tenfold.

"Ay, you remember what she did to Sabrina," said one of the guys, leaning against the wall, waiting for his food. "You trying to get dragged up the block, Temp?"

Tempest, slightly embarrassed, looked over her shoulder at him and sucked her teeth. "Nigga, that was like... six years ago. Get out of here with that weak ass old shit. Tuh! I ain't Sabrina!"

"But nah, shorty just beat yo' ass last month though. Her hands still valid. Fuck you mean?" Another guy said. "That shit sexy, too."

Tokyo hated to be the center of attention, so she just lightly smiled and went back to looking at her phone.

"Nigga you betta chill," the other guy said. "That's 'Ram."

Tempest drew back with a frown. "Who's 'Ram? I don't go with him."

The guy laughed. "Duh, bitch. I'm talm'bout shorty. Ali. That's 'Ram."

“Anyway,” Legacy said, hoping that she had switched the subject. “How was the trip—”

“You go with Haram?” Tempest interrupted, with her eyes locked on Tokyo. She laughed. “Bitches wanna be me so bad!”

Tokyo looked up and stuffed her phone into her pocket. “Who wants to be you, Tempest?” She nodded at the Telfar bag on her shoulder. “You’re wearing my old Telfar bag with my old wig in your head. If there is anybody who wants to be someone, it’s you wanting to be me.” She turned her back to order her food.

“Whatever bitch! You gave me this shit. Why in the fuck would I want to be you? Yo’ sad ass—”

“Tempest!” Legacy yelled, cutting her off. “You doin’ too much!”

“What?! I’m doing too much?! How in the fuck am I doing too much when this bitch is with a nigga I’ve been feeling for years?! How is it that she’s not doing too much, Legacy!? Fuck both you fake ass bitches! That sad, depressed, lonely bitch been fake as hell. Been plottin on the nigga! Clearly! Had to get some sympathy dick, huh?! ‘Cause that’s exactly what the fuck he gave you!”

Tokyo’s nostrils flared and her eyes burned with anger. She was on the verge of turning around and beating Tempest’s ass again. Tempest was doing a very good job trying to get underneath Tokyo’s skin. Getting up under Tokyo’s skin wasn’t an easy feat, but because Tempest knew her very well, she knew just what to say. Usually, there wouldn’t be anything

to say to hurt Tokyo but since losing Mae, she'd been very on edge about that.

“Ignore her, Tokyo. She don't mean that—”

“Who don't? Bitch I mean every fucking word I said. She trying to act like I'm a hand me down ass bitch when it's not even that! The fuck? Talking about I want her life. Whaaaat? For what? I have a mother. I have a grandmother. I have my siblings. The fuck? Bitch, my life is a flex—”

Tokyo had heard enough. Before anyone could react, she was pouncing on Tempest. She hit her in the mouth and Tempest stumbled back a few times, falling into one of the guys who immediately pushed her off of them.

Tempest balled her fist up and threw wild punches at Tokyo, who dodged them as best she could, considering they were coming fast.

“*Ayooo!* What the fuck goin' on in here?!” Syn yelled, walking into the coney island with Cavalli in tow.

At this point, Tokyo was on top of Tempest, sitting on her arms, hitting her in the face again. She was so in a trance that she didn't hear a thing when the guys walked in. Tokyo had never been the type to go into blind rage but with everything going on in her life, she had indeed done just that.

“Aight, lil' mama,” Cavalli said, as he pulled Tokyo off of Tempest.

She swiped her wild hair out of her face and paced, with her hands on her hips, trying to steady her breathing.

“What the fuck happened?” Syn asked Legacy, with his arms wrapped around her.

“They just... They just got into it,” Legacy said, before kissing Syn on his lips. “Hold on, bae.”

She pulled away from him and walked over to Tokyo. “Tok, you okay, boo?” She asked, as she helped Tokyo put her bun back in her hair.

Tempest pulled herself up from the floor and immediately tried to attack both Legacy and Tokyo, but Cavalli wrapped his arm around her neck, holding her back.

“Fuck both of you fake ass bitches!” She yelled, trying to get to them, like she didn’t know that was a fight she’d most certainly lose.

Tempest was outraged and heartbroken. She couldn’t believe how things had turned out between her and her childhood friends. She’d never admit it, but she felt bad about how everything had transpired. She was responsible. Tempest knew she should have had more compassion for what Tokyo was going through. Since she hadn’t spent much time with them, she had a lot of time to self-reflect. She felt bad about how she handled her best friend’s grief. But she was too stubborn and had too much attitude to ‘bow down’. Because Tokyo had embarrassed her, not once but now twice, she would always have beef with her although what she really wanted was her friend back. Even after learning about Tokyo’s relationship with Haram. That hurt her more than the fight did.

Legacy frowned up. “No bitch! Fuck you! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Before she could really react, Syn was grabbing her from behind. “Chill out, baby,” he said before kissing her on

the side of her neck. “I can’t have you out here fighting. You too damn pretty for that.”

Legacy wasn’t much of a fighter, no way. She was afraid of getting her pretty, light skin scratched up. Tokyo might’ve been viewed as the sweet one in the group, but Legacy was the true version of it. She didn’t have a savage side to her. Not like Tokyo, who was indeed very, very rough around the edges. Legacy just wanted everybody to get along. Seeing her friends divided was truly heartbreaking to her. She couldn’t help it. She was gentle, soft spoken, and wouldn’t fight unless she was absolutely provoked to do so.

“You straight?” Cavalli asked Tokyo, who’d stepped back at the window to order her food.

She nodded, before briefly looking over her shoulder at him. “Yeah... I’m okay.”

“Weak ass bitch always sitting on somebody’s arms! Square up bitch!” Tempest yelled, steady trying to get at Tokyo.

“Tempest... You do not want to square up. Look just leave me alone before I beat your ass for a third time,” Tokyo calmly told her. “I just want to order my food and go home.”

Tempest was hysterical, but Tokyo was calm and really did just want Tempest to stop. She couldn’t believe Tempest had gone so low. Who did she think she was? Throwing the fact that she had family up in her face? Was Tokyo just supposed to stand there and take that? Every time Tempest opened her mouth, she was coming out of it with something not only disrespectful, but hurtful too. How could Tempest say those things to her? They might not had been friends anymore,

but what happened to the love? Tokyo couldn't stand her and no longer wanted to be friends with her, but she still loved her. She did before today, at least. Now Tokyo downright hated her. Their friendship was completely dead, at this point. Tempest could die tomorrow and Tokyo wouldn't shed a single tear.

“I'm just—”

“Ay, chill the fuck out,” Cavalli interrupted, as he pushed Tempest towards the restaurant's exit. “She said she don't want to fight yo ass. Carry yo ass home, damn!”

Tokyo looked over her shoulder at Cavalli defending her and felt such a sense of protection. She knew that came from Haram more than it did from Cavalli. And she was right. Cavalli had Tokyo's back because Haram cared about her. And since she was Haram's girl, she was his unofficial little sister.

“I'm going to catch you bitch and when I do, it's over!” Tempest continued to yell as Cavalli continued to push her out of the restaurant. “Disloyal ass ho!”

Tokyo just ignored her. She had no desire to argue with her about what she assumed. Tokyo didn't purposely fall in love with Haram. It wasn't done out of spite. It just happened. She refused to explain that to someone she was done giving a fuck about. Tempest was going to believe what she wanted to believe anyway.

After ordering their food, Cavalli gave the girls a ride back around the corner to Tokyo's house. She sat in the backseat, fumbling with her plastic bag, quiet, while they talked. She wanted to ask them where Haram was so bad, but she was too nervous to. She didn't particularly have a

relationship with Cavalli and Syn. Because she spent a lot of time with Haram, she saw a lot of them but they didn't kick it or anything. If anything, they were almost as intimidating as Haram was, so she was always shy around them. Thankfully, her best friend opened her mouth and asked Syn about him.

“Where is Haram? My bestie been calling and texting his ass for days. I know he ain't trying to play her!” Legacy said, leaned up against the two front seats.

Cavalli and Syn exchanged awkward glances before Syn turned around and looked at Tokyo.

“He been tied up with some shit,” he told her.

Legacy hit him upside the head. “He ain't too busy! You niggas still out in the hood! He trying to play my bestie, Syn? You better tell the truth too!”

Syn laughed and ducked when Legacy tried to hit him again. “Man chill! He ain't playin' her.” He locked eyes with Tokyo and said, “On some real shit, sis... he ain't on no bullshit.”

Tokyo just shrugged and looked out of the window. Of course his brother would say he wasn't playing her. Tokyo knew something was up. She couldn't stop thinking about that little exchange of looks Cavalli and Syn had when Legacy first asked them about Haram. They were clearly lying about something. And as much as Tokyo didn't want to, she felt like Haram was playing her. He'd gotten what he wanted from her and decided to just ghost her.

...

Haram ignored yet another call from Khadijah before sitting his phone back on the nightstand. He was in bed and had been most of the day. Her calls and texts weren't the only ones going unanswered—he hadn't answered for anybody. He didn't want to be bothered. Especially not with her. Often times, he had moments like this, where he didn't want to speak to a soul. Times where he wouldn't even have the strength to get out of bed. Those were the days that repeating 'today will be a good day' wouldn't work. He just dealt until the mood passed, which typically wouldn't for a few days. He felt like these bad days would last longer than they typically would though.

Khadijah and this unplanned pregnancy was what had him where he was. Haram was under so much stress. The stress of what to do pegged him tremendously. He wasn't the type of man to turn his back on his responsibilities. He'd be forced to take care of a child he never wanted. A child he would resent. A child he would pity. A child with a great chance of becoming like him. A child that would be damned.

Turning over on his back, he cupped his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. The minute he did, visions of *her* flooded his mind. His Tokyo. His baby. Krystal's question about if he was in love had been on his mind heavy, too. It was something. Because he'd never been in love before, Haram was unsure of if he actually was. One thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't get her off his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about the way she smelled, tasted, felt... he couldn't stop thinking about her at all. Whenever his

mind would get crowded with thoughts of Khadijah's pregnancy, he would shift them to Tokyo and feel such a sense of calmness that only she could give him.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Bro?" Syn called out from the other side of the door.

"What up?"

A couple of seconds later, Syn walked in. As soon as he did, he walked over to the windows and drew the curtains, letting the bright, afternoon sun, shine into Haram's dark, gloomy, bedroom.

"You been in this bitch all day?" Syn asked, briefly looking over his shoulder at Haram.

Haram nodded before blocking his eyes from the blinding sunrays. "Hell yeah. What?"

After opening the curtains on every window in the room, Syn turned around and took in the current state of Haram's bedroom. There were several plates of uneaten food on his nightstand. Food he was sure his mother had been bringing in, to him. Syn took a deep breath and picked the plates of food up before taking them out of the bedroom into the kitchen.

After washing his hands, he rejoined Haram in the bedroom. He picked up a few articles of clothing from the foot of the bed before sitting down.

"You straight?" Syn asked, locking eyes with his baby brother.

Haram nodded. “Hell yeah. Just needed a couple more days to rejuvenate.”

“Rejuvenate from what?”

“Life nigga,” Haram answered with dipped brows, before reaching over to turn his buzzing phone off.

“Nigga... you don’t have shit to rejuvenate from,” Syn said with a light chuckle before running his hand over the top of his head. “I need a cut. Hit the shop with me real quick. You need a fresh cut too, bitch.”

Haram took a deep breath and ran his big hands down his face. “Nah. I’m straight. I’ll slide through there in a couple days.” He paused and locked eyes with Syn. “I’ll get up with you in a couple too, fool.”

“Nah, you gettin’ up with me now nigga. The sun out shining and shit. You in this bitch lookin’ a lil whiter than usual,” he joked. “You need some vitamin D. Pause.”

Haram laughed a little, turned over on his side, and grabbed the edge of his sheet before pulling it up over his shoulders. “Turn the air down on yo way out. Moms trying to freeze a nigga out of bed.”

She was. If it was up to Krystal she would’ve stayed home today, but she couldn’t. She had bills to pay and because she refused to accept drug money from her bills, she had to work to pay them. Leaving Haram when he was having one of his moments was one of the hardest things she had to do. She’d often call Cavalli and Syn to check on him, dropping the keys she took from them, off to them before she went off to work.

Catching Haram's depression was easy for them. It took the family a while to pick up on the other episode because Haram was naturally an impulsive person. It was usually hard for them to distinguish between him going through manic episodes, or if he was just simply being himself. There were only a couple of instances where they could see that something was wrong. When he was snappy, irritable, and quick to respond with violence, they couldn't. Anything outside of his natural personality would be a clear giveaway.

Syn snatched the thin sheet off the bed and stood up, tossing it across the room into the full laundry basket. "Come on nigga."

Haram didn't move. Instead, he curled up in fetal position, staring across the room, trying to warm himself up. "Get out."

Syn clenched his jaw. "Nah nigga... Get up. You in this bitch on some pussy ass lay up type shit."

Haram didn't say anything. Any other day, Syn wouldn't have been able to talk to him like that. The minute he violated by snatching his sheet off of him, Haram would have jumped up and checked his jaw. Today he didn't have the strength to do it. The fact that he hadn't jumped up and reacted that way pissed Syn off. His mother told him to handle Haram with a certain fragility when he was like this, but he couldn't. Handling Haram as if he had a fragile sticker on him didn't even sound right to Syn. Haram? Fragile? Hell naw.

"You ain't been on shit all week, for real. What the fuck you so tired from, nigga?" Syn gritted, with pinched

brows. “Shorty asked about you too. Tokyo. ‘Val just had to pull her off that one bitch they used to be with all the time. You need to hit her up. She wylin’.”

Haram, again, said nothing. Syn watched as he closed his eyes, slightly shivering and decided he would just leave him be. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Syn grabbed the sheet from the laundry basket and tossed it over him. Haram reached back and pulled the sheet over his shoulders again, refusing to look in Syn’s direction.

“Yo, if you need something, hit me up, aight?” Syn lowly said before turning to walk off.

Haram just laid there with his eyes closed, wishing the nigga would get the fuck away from him. Did Syn for one second think about the way he felt, being seen in such a fragile state? Haram’s entire life had been based on his strength and how tough he was. This was a side of himself he wanted to keep away from the rest of the world. Tokyo especially.

He felt bad about the way he’d been dodging her. But she couldn’t see him like this. Hearing that she’d been in a fight made him want to check in on her, but he couldn’t. As much as he wanted to, the will to pick his phone up and call her just didn’t exist. Which was crazy, considering how much he cared about and missed her.

Syn glanced over his shoulder and stood in the doorway for a couple of seconds before leaving out. He hated when Haram was depressed. He hated to see him in a light outside of his natural one. It fucked with him to the point where he’d nearly be moved to tears. There were times that Syn would hop on his phone, Googling how to cure Bipolar.

One time, Haram had an episode so bad, he ended up in the hospital and Syn tried to pay the doctors to fix him. Syn rarely ever showed how much he cared and loved Haram, but at times like this, he couldn't help but show it. He was fucked up.

Walking down the hallway, he stopped at the thermostat and turned the AC off. It wasn't even hot enough for the AC. Krystal was indeed, trying to freeze Haram out of bed. Too bad it didn't work.

...

Tokyo sat on the couch with her knees pulled up to her chest, staring off into the darkness of the kitchen with her eyes on the spot that Mae had died in. She was slipping. She needed to get out of the house. But there was a place in the back of her mind told her that, needing to get out of the house wasn't the problem. The mood she was in had been triggered by not hearing from Haram for three days. She was so confused. What had she done to be ignored? What had she done to deserve the cold shoulder he was giving her? She just knew his brothers told him about the fight. He didn't even care enough to check up on her?

Tokyo wasn't only pissed—she was sad too. Sad, and disappointed. She couldn't believe she had given him a chance just for him to turn out to be exactly who she'd always thought he was. An asshole. And now, she saw him as a user... A despicable user at that. He'd preyed on her. He'd taken advantage of her grief just to have sex with her, just like Tempest said. Who does that?

Tokyo's thoughts were running wild. She couldn't believe the audacity of him. How could he do that to her? She kicked her legs from underneath her bottom and pushed up from the couch. Pacing back and forth, she thought about marching down the street to confront him. Who did he think he was? Did he think he could just get away with what he'd done? Tokyo couldn't believe she'd foolishly fallen in love with him. That hurt the most. She hated to have wasted her love on him. He was her first love. A man who'd used her.

Tokyo should have known better. But, God, he was so good at what he did.

She hated to think that he thought he'd get away with hurting her though. Did he think that just because she was often seen as sweet and soft spoken that she'd just lay down and take that disrespect? Or did he assume that just because she was grieving that she was weak? Tuh!

Tokyo slid her freshly pedicured toes into her Marc Jacobs slides before walking out of the house. It was only after ten, and pretty chilly out, so the block was very quiet, with the exception of a few corner boys lingering around. On her way down the street to his house, she was catcalled a few times but she ignored them, as she always did. They didn't get sweet rejections like she'd usually give, this time though. Tokyo was in no mood to be nice.

Once she got in front of Haram's house, she took a deep breath at the sight of Krystal's car parked in the driveway behind his. She wished she was away or something. She didn't want to be disrespectful in her house, but so what? Tokyo was pissed. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her pink Nike hoodie and treaded up the stairs.

After knocking on the door, Tokyo smoothed her ponytail over and took another deep breath. She didn't know what she would do or say once she was face to face with him. She hadn't thought long enough to come up with a plan as to how she would confront him. Tokyo just knew it had to be done.

A couple of seconds later, Krystal answered the door, pulling her robe closed.

“Hi, Ms. Krystal. I’m sorry to be knocking on your door this late. I was just wondering... Is Haram here?”

Krystal turned the porch light on and pushed the screen door opened. “Hey sweetie. Yeah... Haram is here, but,” She paused and cleared her throat. “He’s not feeling too well.”

Tokyo lightly chuckled, shook her head and huffed. “... Okay Ms. Krystal.”

She could tell by the way Krystal paused that she was lying. Tokyo knew for certain that he was ignoring her then. He’d even had his mother lying.

Krystal felt bad. She didn’t want to lie to the girl. As Tokyo turned to walk away, Krystal couldn’t help but notice the look of sadness and rejection in her eyes. It was then that she realized that the girl who’d had her son blushing the other day was Tokyo. She didn’t know why she hadn’t come to that revelation sooner. Of course it was Tokyo. He’d been spending a lot of time with her. Krystal just thought it was platonic. But now she saw that it wasn’t. She knew for certain that Haram wouldn’t have wanted Tokyo to see him in such an unappealing position. Haram was already embarrassed—Krystal didn’t want to embarrass him any further. So, instead of calling her back like Krystal had half a mind to do, she just closed and lock the door.

Leaning up against it, she closed her eyes and sighed. In a way, Krystal hoped that Tokyo and Haram would end. Haram was in no way, shape, or form ready for a relationship. And Tokyo was too fragile to handle her son. He came with a lot of baggage. She shook her head, disappointed in herself. Who was she to say that Haram didn’t deserve to live a normal

life? She was, once again, trying to control him based off her own fears.

Pushing away from the door, Krystal walked down the hallway towards his room. The house had been so cold, dark, and quiet since Haram slipped into his depression. Krystal's heart broke every time she walked into his bedroom. She wanted answers. She wondered if something with Tokyo triggered him into depression. Her eyebrows dipped with anger, as she thought about turning around and confronting Tokyo about it. Something happened. Haram had been dosing, as promised. Krystal knew because she counted his pills every day to make sure. Whatever happened didn't happen because of any carelessness.

But it couldn't have been Tokyo's fault, right? She didn't get any bad vibes from her. The girl genuinely seemed concerned. Besides, Tokyo had a reputation for being really sweet and innocent—she couldn't see her causing any issues in Haram's life to trigger such a deep depression. It could've been a lot of things. She decided she wouldn't act an ass, blaming Tokyo for something that she most likely had absolutely nothing to do with. As tricky as Bipolar was, it could've just been that and that alone.

Krystal took a deep breath and headed to Haram's bedroom. She knocked on the door a few times before walking in. Haram was, as he'd been all week, in bed, underneath the covers.

She sat at the foot of his bed and rubbed his calf. "Son."

"Yeah?"

“Tokyo came by.”

At the mention of Tokyo, Haram shifted around in bed a little and took a deep breath. Not because he was annoyed neither—but because she hadn’t given up on him. He hadn’t spoken to her in days, but she still cared enough about him to stop by his house, looking for him. He hated that he’d been avoiding her. He wanted nothing more than to be with her. To smell her. To feel her. Inside, and out. He wanted to hold her and to kiss her more than anything. He missed the fuck out of her. And hoped that when he finally came out of this, she’d be willing to forgive him.

“Oh.”

Krystal rubbed her lips together before saying, “I think you should talk to her.”

“Ma—”

“Hear me out, Haram,” Krystal interrupted. “I’ve never seen you smile like that before. Not looking down at your phone, I haven’t. I know it was her you were texting with. Y’all got something going on and whatever it is... it must be something serious... got my son smiling and blushing.” She lightly giggled and tapped his leg. “You like her, ‘Ram. She’s not just some random girl, is she?”

“Nah,” he flatly replied.

“You’re growing up, Haram. You won’t be able to hide this from the people you care about. You won’t be able to carry on with a real relationship if you do. You deserve to experience love. You deserve to be happy. And I’m afraid that if you’re not honest with the women you care about...”

Krystal sighed and shook her head. “ Look. I just feel like... .you like her... if she’s as special as I can see that she is to you... you’d be honest. You’d open up to her.” She paused. “In no way, shape or form am I trying to force you to do anything, Haram. I want what’s best for you. And I just—”

“Alright. I hear you,” Haram interrupted, wanting Krystal to stop talking.

She was stammering over her words, a nervous wreck and Haram knew it was because she didn’t want to upset him. What Krystal didn’t know was that she didn’t have to tiptoe or walk on eggshells with him. Haram didn’t even have the strength to be upset. He’d been in bed for days, but he was exhausted. Mentally and emotionally.

“Okay,” Krystal said with a light smile. “I’ll leave you alone. If you—”

“*Need me let me know,*” Haram interrupted, finishing her sentence. “I will.”

Krystal pushed up off the bed, told Haram she loved him and walked out of the room. Haram laid on his back, with his fingers interlocked behind his head, with his eyes on the ceiling. Krystal might’ve thought differently but he was listening. He didn’t just tell her he heard her because he wanted her out of his room. He needed time to collect his thoughts without her talking him to death. Haram needed silence.

What she’d said made a lot of sense. He wanted something more with Tokyo. He didn’t just want what they had now. He wanted Tokyo in his life, period. Not just for a season. Not just for a couple of months before he allowed

Bipolar to push her away. He wanted her in his life until he took his final breath. That was just how much he cared for her.

To have that though, he'd have to be transparent about who he was. He wanted her to understand him. He wanted her to understand that he hadn't been ignoring her because he didn't care for her. He wanted her to know that, although he hadn't been there for her, he was still very much present. The feelings he had for her hadn't wavered. If anything they'd tripled. They had to, if he was entertaining the thought of telling her his truth. A truth he hadn't shared with anybody outside of his family.

Haram took a deep breath, turned over and grabbed his phone from the nightstand. Turning it on, he told himself that he was making the right decision. Tokyo wasn't just some random girl. She was someone who'd shared some of the darkest moments of her life with him. She knew what it was to be depressed. She knew what it was to be afraid to open up about the things that weren't viewed as pretty. He trusted her.

Once his phone was on, Haram ignored the many text messages and voicemails from Cavalli, Syn, and of course Khadijah. When he clicked on Tokyo's name, he felt horrible. She'd sent him multiple text messages. The last one stood out to him the most. She'd told him she was done and felt like such a fool for falling for him and his bullshit ass game. Instead of responding to any of them, he called her.

After the third ring, Tokyo picked up.

“What?” She spat.

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. “Come here.”

“For what? Aren’t you sick—”

“Baby...” He interrupted. “Come here.”

Tokyo’s stomach filled with butterflies and a wave of unexplainable emotions rushed through her body. It was crazy... what a simple word could do to her.

Before her phone rung, Tokyo was laying on the couch, crying. She didn’t like rejection. She’d dealt with rejection from her parents all of her life. Dealing with it from someone new was triggering and made her feel like that sad little girl from before.

As upset as she was, Tokyo couldn’t ignore the sound of desperation in Haram’s tone. She decided that she would go back down there. At least she’d be getting some kind of closure.

“Okay, Haram,” Tokyo said before quickly hanging up on him.

•••

Haram pulled himself up from underneath the covers and leaned against the headboard when he heard his bedroom door open. He needed to get up and do something with himself but there was no time for that now. Tokyo was there and he knew she wanted answers, which she deserved.

“Yeah?” Tokyo flatly greeted, once she walked into his bedroom.

She was completely taken aback by his appearance. Haram’s usually freshly cut hair had grown a few inches and his facial hair was even untamed. It wasn’t just that, but his skin was pale. He looked like he was full blown white, rather than biracial. The only thing that gave his biracial ethnicity away was his wild, curly jet black hair. Tokyo felt bad, because he did look sick. Maybe his family hadn’t been lying after all. The sadness and emptiness behind his eyes was a dead giveaway too. She felt horrible and decided to dial the attitude back a little.

“What up doe? Close the door for me,” Haram told her before clearing his throat.

He was a nervous wreck. He didn’t even know what to say.

“I thought your family was lying,” Tokyo said, as she sat down on the bed. “But... I guess you are sick.”

Haram embarrassingly chuckled before scratching at the back of his head. “Something like that.”

“You couldn’t answer the phone and just tell me that? I mean... should I even be here?”

Haram locked eyes with her before looking away... just to lock eyes with her again. He was letting ‘his bitch’, as he often referred to his embarrassment as, show and he didn’t like it. As embarrassed as he was about talking to her about his illness, he couldn’t break eye contact. He couldn’t show just how crippling the shit was to him.

“What I got isn’t contagious,” He said. “Hereditary... but not contagious. You good, love.” He chuckled again. “You won’t catch it.”

Tokyo with pinched brows looked around with a confused look on her face. “What do you mean?”

How sick was he? Did he have some kind of deadly, incurable disease? Tokyo couldn’t stand the thought of losing someone else that she cared about. Her heart began to race as she thought of the possibility of Haram being on his death bed. Was he dying? Had she been upset with him and this whole time... he was at home... literally fighting for his life? *Oh God.*

Tokyo jumped up from the bed and began to pace. “Haram... Please... Please don’t tell me I’m losing you too. You’re—you’re dying? You—”

Haram lightly chuckled and reached out for her. “Nah, nah, nah. Calm down. Come here, baby.”

She shook her head as her eyes swelled with tears. “What is going on then? I don’t—”

“I said come here,” Haram repeated, extending his hand out to her. Tokyo quickly placed her hand in his and for the first time in days, Haram felt whole. He’d missed her so much. He couldn’t believe he survived so long without her. Tokyo too. When their hands met, the both of them let out a simultaneous sigh of relief.

“I have bipolar,” Haram blurted out, after locking his fingers with hers.

The second he said it, he felt a strong sense of relief. *Finally*. He’d said it. He wasn’t just relieved because he’d told her. He was too, relieved because he’d never said it out loud before. Saying it... after avoiding the word like the plague was somewhat therapeutic. Not as therapeutic as her hand in his... but therapeutic, nonetheless.

He had been running away from that word since he was diagnosed with it. He chose to ignore it, hoping that in ignoring it, it’d just go away. Every day, he was faced with the sad truth that no matter how much he ignored it, it’d still be there. Stuck to him... following him everywhere he went and it would be for the rest of his life. Damn.

The minute he said he had bipolar, what felt like a million thoughts ran through Tokyo’s mind. She wondered if she had been so nasty toward him all of those years for nothing. Had she looked at him with disgust based on behavior he had no control over? Tokyo felt horrible. Before, she was ready to chew him out. But now... all she wanted to do was to wrap her arms around him and to tell him that she was sorry for what he was going through.

“Huh?” Tokyo asked, with furrowed brows, and her head slightly cocked to the side. “You have... Haram... You’re ___”

“The same nigga I’ve always been. So please... Stop looking at me like that,” Haram interrupted.

She had that look in her eyes. That look that his mother still gave him after so many years of being faced with his bipolar head on. Pity. He didn’t want to be pitied. He wanted Tokyo to look at him through the same love tinted lenses she’d been looking at him through since they made things official.

Because Tokyo didn’t want him to think she pitied him, she quickly wiped that look—the one she was so familiar with—off her face. She didn’t want him to think she thought any less of him. If anything, Tokyo thought more of him. She thought he was stronger... she thought he was more courageous. She was proud of him.

Tokyo didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know if there was actually anything for her to say. She wasn’t sure of how to approach him. The awkward silence that quickly filled the room didn’t make things any better. She wasn’t sure if she should’ve kept the conversation about his bipolar going, or if the best thing to do would be to change the subject. He was uncomfortable and although she had questions, she didn’t want to make him feel any worse than he already did.

Forcing an awkward smile, Tokyo chose to change the subject. If and when he was ready to talk they would. She wouldn’t force him.

“Drug tests are so weird,” Tokyo said with a light giggle. “I never had to pee with someone standing outside of

the door. It was so hard for me—”

“I apologize,” Haram interrupted. Not to disregard what she had to say about taking her first drug test but because he knew she really didn’t want to talk about that and because he was genuinely sorry.

Tokyo deserved better. What she deserved was more than what Haram could give her. Who did he think he was? Getting involved with her? Making her fall in love with him? Knowing what he was... who he was. Tokyo didn’t deserve this side of him. She deserved complete happiness. She deserved to someday get married. She deserved to have children—healthy children—with someone with a sane mind and body. Not him. He was a stain.

“What are you apologizing for, Haram?” Tokyo asked, after kicking her slides off and swinging her legs into the bed. She balled her fist and pushed back on them, against the headboard.

“I’m apologizing because I should have answered the phone. I just—”

“It’s okay,” Tokyo interrupted.

Haram gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. “Please don’t say that.”

Nothing bothered him more than those two words. He hated them. He hated them so much. It wasn’t okay. He should have handled things differently with Tokyo. Instead of shutting her out, he should have given her honesty. But... he was embarrassed. What would she think of him? How safe she told him she felt with him... would she still feel that way? Would

her perception of him change? Would she think he was just another weak ass, soft ass light skin nigga with light eyes? Would she think he was a fraud? How did he look? How could he be a depressed gangsta with a mental illness? To him that shit didn't even look right. Haram hated giving a fuck about things like that. He hated feeling less than what he actually was. He absolutely hated to be seen as something less because of something he couldn't control.

“Okay,” Tokyo whispered, before pulling lips into her mouth. She timidly looked over at him with his head tossed back against the headboard. She wanted to cup his face and tell him it was okay because it was. By the way he responded a second ago, she knew it wouldn't be.

“Like I was sayin,” Haram began after clearing his throat. “I apologize for ignoring you. You don't deserve that shit.”

“Okay,” Tokyo repeated, wanting to say so much more but deciding not to because she was unsure if she should or not. *Okay* was the safest route to take.

Haram clenched down on his jaw and took a deep breath. “I've had the shit for most of my life. Sometimes I get like this.” He paused and gestured towards himself. “Sometimes I want to kill every fuckin' thing in my way. And shit.” He paused again and lightly chuckled. “Sometimes I grab a couple of stacks of money from my safe and buy a bunch of shit I don't need.”

Tokyo lightly giggled. “Ohhh. Take me with you, when you get in one of those moods,” she joked, playfully bumping into his shoulder.

Haram laughed a little and looked over at her. When his eyes met hers, he knew then that something had to change. She was too pure for him. She was too... perfect. The stain that he was, would taint her and he didn't want to do that.

She'd joked about him taking her along on one of his manic motivated shopping sprees, but what Tokyo didn't know was that at any given time he could flip on her. What Tokyo didn't know was that, as a way to cope with his bipolar Haram clung on to things. Whatever made him feel good, he held on to it. He held on to materialistic things, like his 300C because attached to it were memories... feelings.

He could've easily copped a new car a long time ago, but the 300C was his first. When he put that key into its ignition, a certain type of happiness radiated through his body that he couldn't quite understand. He held on to it because, in his darkest moments, he could climb behind the wheel of it, wrap his hands around the steering wheel, close his eyes and escape to that feeling... that moment. He knew that was what Tokyo was starting to become for him. But she was much, much, much more. She wasn't just happiness. She was peace. She was clarity. She was his solace. It was scary. Haram had once again moved into uncharted territories. The unknown. The unpredictable. It was absolutely petrifying. He didn't know what limits he would go when it came to Tokyo.

He should have stayed away from her. He should have kept things completely platonic. Why he thought it was smart to lead her on was inconsiderate of him. She deserved a normalcy he wouldn't be able to give her. As much as it fucked him up to come to that realization, he had. He cared too much about her to lead her down a path of nothingness.... a

path that lead to broken promises and a dead end. With him, she wouldn't go far. They wouldn't get far. He couldn't give Tokyo what he knew she desired. He knew she wanted that hood fairytale type of love. And for a while, he felt like maybe he could give that to her. But the difference between the life she'd live with him and the life between those pages was that there would be no happy ending.

“What?” Tokyo whispered with a cute smile. “Why are you staring at me?”

Tokyo placed her hand on top of his and wrapped her hand around his before giving it a light squeeze. Haram looked away and rested his head against the headboard with his eyes closed, basking in the feel of her. Her hand on top of his sent an adrenaline rush through his entire being. Every nerve inside of him seemed to just... wake up. Damn she felt good. Too good.

Clenching down on his jaw, he pulled away from Tokyo's touch and sat on side of the bed with his head low. Clasp his hands together, he said, “Ay, I'll get up with you in a couple of days alright?”

Tokyo swallowed, staring at his back, with a heavy beating heart. He was rejecting her. She figured he'd do that. He was embarrassed. It was obvious. She should have mentally prepared herself for that. She hadn't though. The rejection stung like a *mutha*, but instead of responding, and letting her emotions get the best of her Tokyo crawled over to where he sat and wrapped her arms around him from behind. When he tried to pry her away, she interlocked her fingers as tight as she could, and laid her head on his back.

“I’m not leaving, Haram. You... You never left me,” She said, as tears fell from her eyes. “So... I’m not leaving... okay?”

Haram took a deep breath and pulled his lips into his mouth.

“You’re going to have to do more than have a mental illness to get rid of me, Haram Knight,” Tokyo said against his back, with a light chuckle.

“I’m not trying to get rid of you; I’m trying to save you,” Haram told her.

“Good thing I don’t need saving,” Tokyo countered.

She was completely clueless. In that moment, she saw him at his lowest but what about when he had an episode that wasn’t so... low? What about the high’s he could go? What would she do when he was irate? Or when he was hyperactive, unhinged, and completely unpredictable?

“I missed you so much,” Tokyo told him. “Please let me stay.”

As much as Haram knew she needed to go, the feel of her was too good to deny. Giving into the euphoric feeling that was Tokyo came easy. It had been days since he felt as good as he did, with her body pressed against his and her warm, minty breath in his ear.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Haram eased the grip on her wrist and exhaled. He was letting go and letting her in. Tokyo snuggled closer to him and listened to the beat of his racing heart against his back, silently crying.

Hours later, Tokyo woke up in Haram's arms. He was laying with his face buried into the back of her neck, snoring. She snuggled closer to him and interlocked her fingers inside of his. Last night was rough.. He kept trying to get rid of her and Tokyo kept a rebuttal. It took a while, but after a lot of convincing, Haram relaxed and let her stay.

Tokyo laid awake for hours, dissecting Haram's past. She reflected on the many times she's watched him beat someone bloody and wondered if maybe it was him, or his bipolar that took him to those lengths. She had so many questions. But because Haram was in such a delicate state, she let them go.

Krystal softly knocked on the door before slowly pushing it opened. She walked over to the side of the bed Tokyo was on and whispered, "I'm about to go to work. Could you please... Please get him out of bed today?"

As hard as it was for her to accept Tokyo for who she was as Haram's girlfriend, she was grateful. From what she could see, Tokyo was good for him. She had her head screwed on right and Krystal could see that Tokyo really cared for him. She had to; Haram hadn't showered in days and she was laying up in his funk with no problem.

Tokyo nodded. "Okay, I'll try."

Trying was all she would do. She wasn't going to force him like Krystal wanted her to. She respected Haram and would never force him to do something he wasn't mentally ready to do. Tokyo understood depression. She understood how hard it could be to do the simplest of things. She understood not wanting to bathe for days. She understood the

multiple plates scattered around the room covered with uneaten food. Because she understood, she'd give him support instead of misery.

“Okay,” Krystal said, with a smile. “Thank you so much, Tokyo. My son is lucky.”

Tokyo smiled and nodded. He wasn't the only lucky one; Tokyo considered herself lucky too.

As soon as Krystal walked out of the room, Tokyo turned over and ran her hands over Haram's beard.

“I know you're awake, Haram.”

He opened his eyes and drew back a little. “How did you know?”

“Your breathing changed,” Tokyo said, before pulling him closer, laying her head back on his chest.

Haram was uncomfortable. He needed to shower. Tokyo had been in his personal space all night. He knew she had to be uncomfortable too, although she hadn't expressed it in any way. Still, he was very self-conscious and wanted her to leave because he was in no mood to shower.

“Tokyo—”

“It's a very nice day. Yesterday, I checked the weather and it says it's going to be seventy-five. Shouldn't it be colder by now? Michigan's weather been on bullshit all year,” Tokyo interrupted before lifting her head to lock eyes with him. “It's the perfect day to go to the riverfront.” She paused and draped her arms around his neck. “There's something about the sound of waves crashing together that brings me peace.”

She was using his words on him. He swallowed and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer to him than she already was. He loved her. So fucking much that it made him crazy. What would he do without her? Now that she'd seen him. Completely... All of him. Not only had she seen him but she accepted him. She accepted what he believed was a flaw. What got him was the fact that the look in her eyes hadn't changed. She didn't view him through lenses tinted with pity... not anymore. She looked into his eyes through the same lenses she'd looked at him through since they became more than just neighbors... love tinted lenses.

In that moment he got the answer to the question that had been pegging him for days. He loved her... Of course he loved her. How could he not?

CHAPTER NINE

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Do you like it here?” Tokyo asked Space as she scribbled the word ‘follow’ on a flashcard.

Space shrugged her shoulder. “I guess. It’s okay. Ms. Jones makes good sloppy joe.”

Tokyo forced a smile and shuffled the flashcards she’d just made her sister. “That’s good. How is Mr. Jones? He’s nice right?”

Space nodded, before digging into her bag of Cheetos. “Yep. He’s nice too.”

Tokyo cocked her right brow. “Don’t forget to tell me if anybody does something bad to you, Spacey. You remember what Granny use to say? About people touching your private parts... right?”

Space bashfully giggled, a bit embarrassed, before looking around. “Toky! I remember. Nobody touched me in my private parts.”

Tokyo locked eyes with Space and stopped shuffling the cards. “I’m serious, Space. Don’t laugh. It’s serious—”

“Okay, Toky. I know. I’m sorry,” Space interrupted before lowering her head, still a bit embarrassed.

Tokyo couldn’t help but to be overprotective of Space. As much as she could be at least. It had been about a year since Space was taken and every day since had been a struggle

for the both of them. Things were hard for them. Especially for Tokyo, who had been fighting tooth and nail to get her back. The process was so long, stressful and drawn out thanks to Karen, the social worker from hell. She was making things really hard for Tokyo, claiming that she was an endangerment to Space who would be better off in the system with her foster parents Mr. and Mrs. Jones. It didn't matter that Tokyo had a job and had been taking care of everything she was supposed to. The fact that Tokyo gave Child Protective Services such a hard time before was working against her.

Tokyo's young age played a factor in it too. The courts felt that at nineteen, Tokyo was too young to care for a child, especially since she was working a full-time job. They were making things really hard for Tokyo but she refused to stop. She was going to get her sister. Especially with the help of the attorney she'd hired a few weeks ago. It didn't make any sense to Tokyo that they were putting her through so much bullshit. She was, however, happy that Space was with a loving family who didn't mind her coming by three times a week, against the court ordered once a week.

Space had been with the Jones's for a little over three months and every time Tokyo came by she seemed happier than before. She was very well taken care of. Her hair was always done, and she had picked up a few pounds and had even grown a few inches. Space was growing so much. She was almost seven. There was so much in Space's life that Tokyo felt like she was missing out on. So, every chance she got, she helped her with schoolwork and took a lot of 'usies' to ogle over all day, and night.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Spacey. I’m not mad. I just want you to be safe,” Tokyo somberly said before taking a deep breath. “That’s all.”

Space nodded. “I’m safe.”

Looking around the house, Tokyo nodded. “I see...”

The Jones’s had a very lovely home. Mr. Jones was a police officer for the Detroit Police Department and Mrs. Jones worked as a legal secretary for one of Michigan’s largest law firms. Tokyo knew Space was very well taken care of. So much so, that she hoped and prayed that Space wasn’t getting too comfortable. More than anything, Tokyo prayed that the Jones’s weren’t. They couldn’t have kids of their own, so they worked with the system, taking in as many children as they could as often as they could too. They had the room for it. The big, six bedroom, four bathroom house was immaculate. Anything Space needed, she got it. When she first arrived, she was greeted with a brand new wardrobe, a new iPad, and there was a big pool out back. Space was blessed. There were so many horror stories about the foster care system, but luckily she hadn’t experienced any of it. As crazy as it may be, Tokyo hated that everything had been so perfect.

She’d never admit it, nor would she ever say it out loud, but she hated that Space had, had it so easy. She wanted her sister to be safe, of course, but there was a dark, jealous side of Tokyo that made her nervous about it all. Would Space even want to come with her when she’d finally won custody? What if Space decided she’d rather stay with the Jones’s? What if they decided that they liked Space so much out of the other five kids they had living there, that they wanted to adopt

her? How would Tokyo compete with that? The Jones's could afford a nanny... they worked very prestigious jobs... and they had a very good track record. Tokyo wouldn't stand a chance against them. Not on paper she wouldn't at least.

Instead of dwelling on the negative what ifs, Tokyo took a deep breath, smiled and went back to helping her sister with her sight words. Over time, she'd learned to see the silver lining in every obstacle thrown her way. Instead of thinking about how fitting the Jones's were, she was grateful for them. At least Space had a nice place to call home. At least she was fed, taken care of, and not being mistreated. It was a great thing that Space wasn't experiencing what so many other children in the system experienced. Tokyo told herself that even if the things she worried about came into fruition, she knew she'd always be in Space's life regardless.

After about three hours of spending time together, it was time for Tokyo to go. After months full of goodbyes, it was still one of the hardest things for the both of them to do. Their hug always lasted five minutes too long, but neither girls cared. When it came to showing love to one another, they did it freely. At least now they didn't cry when they parted ways. Not around each other at least. As good as it seemed like she had it, Space still cried herself to sleep most nights. She wasn't happy where she was at. All of the toys, and expensive electronics in the world couldn't make up for the void she felt in her heart behind missing her sister.

Tokyo walked down the massive driveway, looking over her shoulder at Space, who always stood in the window until Tokyo drove off. She smiled at her and waved before quickly turning away to wipe tears from her eyes. She took a

deep breath and looked to the sky, trying to keep her emotions in check. God she missed her sister so much.

Once she made it to the car, she got inside and tossed her head back against the headrest. Before pulling off, Haram placed his hand on her thigh and gave it a light squeeze before running his hand back and forth over it.

“She good?” He asked her, glancing over at her with worry.

The sight of tears rolling down Tokyo’s honey brown cheeks made him clench down on his jaw. He hated to see her cry. He hated that there was absolutely nothing he could do to make Tokyo’s situation easier. All of the money in the world couldn’t get her Space. The thought of waving money around definitely crossed his mind, but custody is a tricky thing so they were proceeding with caution. Especially since the money he’d be waving around would be drug money. They had to do everything by the book.

He did, however, get Tokyo the best lawyer money could buy. The costly price tag for Vivian Wright’s legal defense meant nothing to him. He’d pay that amount a hundred times over if it would heighten Tokyo’s chances of getting her baby sister. With the way money has been flowing in for him and his brothers, he wouldn’t miss it.

They were up. Finally, Cavalli’s promise to put them on to bigger and better opportunities had panned out just the way he knew they would. They had moved up so much that they were supplying hustlers around the city and out of state too. Their rise to the top was almost instant. The connections

Cavalli put them on did nothing but awaken a resting beast in the three of them. They hit the ground running.

The Knight brothers weren't only selling crack cocaine; they were in the pill business too. Which happened to be where more of their revenue came from. They were running damn near a billion dollar drug empire. Despite how busy the business kept him, Haram always made time for this. Her. His Tokyo. Especially when it came to giving emotional support on the days she'd visit Space. Those were the days she needed him most and nothing would keep him from her.

As beautifully as things had been going for them financially, Tokyo was still working at the bank. It was the safest thing for her to do, although she didn't need the money. She worked for other reasons. She was still in the process of gaining custody of Space—she needed to show provable income and she couldn't do that with the money Haram gave her.

The money he gave her, she was saving for her own business. Tokyo wanted to open up a bookstore. Not just any bookstore though. What she had in mind was next level. The minute she got Space, she was going to quit her job at the bank and start on that. She couldn't wait.

“She's happy,” Tokyo managed to croak out in the middle of crying. She turned to face him. “Do you think she'll want to come with me? The Jones's give her anything she wants.”

“And so will you,” Haram told her. “Plus, Space cares more about you than she does that material shit.”

Tokyo sighed and shrugged. “How do you know that Haram?”

He stopped at a stop sign and locked eyes with her. “Because y’all are cut from the same cloth.”

Tokyo looked at him and took a deep breath before resting her head against the headrest. She grabbed his hand and interlocked her fingers with his. He knew just what to say to give her the peace she needed when she was on the brink of losing every bit of peace she worked so hard to regain. Haram had quickly become something a lot more than just a boyfriend. He was her everything. Sometimes, Tokyo was so overwhelmed with emotion that Haram would feel like her world.

Over the past six months life had gotten overwhelming for the both of them. Tokyo was working like a mad woman, and Haram was busy running his drug empire with his brothers. Whenever they came together, though, the problems they faced seemed to fade to the back. The anxiety Tokyo was just about to worry herself into had subsided substantially and she knew it was because his hand was in hers. They had formed such a strong dependency for each other that sometimes, they feared that the way they loved each other was unhealthy.

Haram especially. Every now and then, his thoughts would slip and he’d be worried about his issues becoming too big for Tokyo to withstand. But then she’d walk into the room and do something that would flip his entire perspective. However, there was still one thing he worried about and that was Khadijah.

That cat was still tucked safely in a bag. She had the baby a couple of weeks ago. He was going to tell Tokyo—right after he got paternity test results. Haram figured, it made more sense to tell Tokyo about the baby only if it was his. He didn't see a purpose behind telling her before, when he was only about eighty percent sure the baby was his. All telling her beforehand would do was cause unnecessary friction in their relationship and who wanted that? Things between the two of them had been too perfect to taint it with something that hadn't even been proven.

“Do you have time to help me put masking tape on the top of the wall before you meet with your brothers?” Tokyo asked as Haram leaned out of the window to put the code to the gate outside of their home in the keypad. The Jones's didn't live but about ten minutes away from them so they made it home in no time.

Tokyo had been decorating Space's bedroom since she and Haram moved into their new house three months ago. It was a beautiful four bedroom, five bathroom home in Grosse Pointe Park, MI off the water. Despite having a few negative thoughts about the custody battle she was in, Tokyo prepared for the best anyway. The custody hearing would be happening in two days and she had been a nervous wreck all week because of it. Seeing Space, and taking it all in the day before the hearing was a lot for her to process. To calm her nerves, she decided that she'd just add the finishing touches to Space's room. That always put her in a positive headspace.

Haram nodded and drove through the parting tall, steel gates. “Yeah, I have time.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. “I want it to be perfect when she comes home.”

Haram leaned down and kissed her on the top of the head. “It will be, gorgeous.”

As Haram was pulling into the driveway, his phone buzzed. He didn’t bother checking it. He had a good feeling it would be Khadijah since they were meeting in an hour to finally take care of what needed to be taken care of.

•••

Forty minutes later, Haram was walking into the clinic where the paternity test would be taken. Khadijah and the baby were already there, sitting up front, closer to the reception desk. Haram walked right by them, to the back of the clinic where he sat against the wall. He literally wanted nothing to do with Khadijah and the baby. Not until he knew for certain that the little boy was his.

Khadijah's nostrils flared as she glanced back at him. She turned her attention back to the baby and rocked the car seat he was sitting in. Her eyes stung with tears. She couldn't believe she'd spent her entire pregnancy alone. And by the looks of things, she'd probably end up a single mother too. As fucked up and stressful as things had been for Khadijah, she didn't regret keeping her baby, Jaram.

The past six months for her had been spent crying. While Haram was living in the fabulous, upper echelon community of Gross Pointe Park with his girlfriend, she was in the hood, going through hood shit, pregnant and alone. She was jealous. So jealous they she had created fake social media accounts to stalk Tokyo on. As much as it hurt her to see it, she stared at pictures of the two of them all of the time. Tokyo was getting everything she had always wanted and that burned her the hell up.

"Ms. Brown?" called the reception at the time of their appointment.

Khadijah stopped rocking the car seat and the minute she did, Jaram began to cry. She glanced over at Haram,

wishing she had just a little bit of help but he was looking up at the TV screen with his arms stretched across the back of the chairs next to him, watching highlights from the basketball game last night.

Instead of saying anything to him, she bent down, unbuckled the seatbelt and put Jaram over her shoulder. Stepping up at the reception desk, Khadijah forced a smile.

“Yes?”

“We’re ready for you guys,” She paused and looked towards the car seat and diaper bag. “Do you need help with your things?”

Khadijah wanted to yell about how Haram was going to get it but the last thing she wanted was to cause problems, so she just nodded instead.

She turned around and looked over at Haram, who was completely unbothered by Jaram’s crying and wanted to bash his face in. Whenever she saw him, be it on social media or in the hood, she wanted to. Either she wanted to kick his ass or ride his dick. Khadijah was so confused.

“It’s time,” she yelled out to Haram, as she pat Jaram on the back, trying to soothe him.

Haram took a deep breath, pushed up from the chair and stuffed his phone into his pocket. Since leaving the house, there had been a frown on his face. He hated the situation he was in. What he really hated was having to lie to Tokyo. It was so hard for him to keep this from her. He was hoping like hell that the results came back negative. He couldn’t imagine being tied to Khadijah for the rest of his life. The negative test

results would be a good thing for the baby too. At least then, he wouldn't have to worry about the things Haram had to worry about. Medication. Triggers. Shit that literally drove Haram crazy on a day to day basis.

It was a blessing that this mess he was in with Khadijah hadn't triggered him since the first time. For the most part, Haram had been pretty smooth. He took his medication daily and he tried his damndest to keep his stress levels low. Although, he was sure that by the end of this appointment, he would need to face a couple of blunts to keep his temper at bay.

"It's okay, Jaram. Stop crying," Khadijah said once they were situated in the testing area.

Haram quickly averted his eyes over at Khadijah with menacing scowl on his face. With his eyes locked on hers, Haram wished he would have strangled her ass that day. Did she really name the baby after him? What the fuck was wrong with her?

"What?" Khadijah snapped, rolling her eyes. "You don't like this name?"

Before Haram could respond, the nurse walked into the room. As she gave them the rundown on what to expect in the next coming weeks, Haram's eyes stayed locked on Khadijah. She'd be lucky if by the end of all of this shit, she didn't end up somewhere leaking.

CHAPTER TEN

“Breathe, baby,” Haram told Tokyo, as she cried in his arms.

She was a complete mess. The verdict to Space’s custody hearing was just given and Tokyo was having such a hard time keeping herself together. She couldn’t believe that after almost a year, things unfolded the way they did. She shouldn’t have been surprised, but she was.

“I just—hold on.” Tokyo pulled away from Haram’s embrace and paced the freshly waxed floors of the courtroom, fanning herself. She hadn’t been able to control herself since the judge’s gavel hit its wooden block. For the first three seconds, she couldn’t even move. Haram had to interlock his arm with hers to pull her out of the trance of disbelief she was in. All of the days, weeks, and months she spent preparing herself for this moment were useless. There was no amount of preparation in the world that could have possibly prepared her for what came.

As she was pacing, she briefly looked up to meet the eyes of Mrs. Jones. She was coming her way and Tokyo was tempted to walk away, in the opposite direction. She couldn’t face her. Not now. Not while she couldn’t control her emotions. How did she look? Crying her eyes out, having a complete meltdown? She couldn’t even control herself. Tokyo didn’t want to look weak in front of who she’d considered her opponent for the last few months.

“Tokyo... Is it okay if I hug you?” Mrs. Jones asked once she made it to where Tokyo was pacing.

Tokyo looked up at her, took a deep breath and nodded.

Mrs. Jones wrapped her arms around Tokyo and held onto her as tightly as she could. In her ear she whispered, “I’m so proud of you.”

Tokyo pulled away from the hug to lock eyes with her. “Why? You—you don’t even know me.”

Mrs. Jones smiled and shook her head. “I know you. I know you because Space spent many days talking about you. I know that you’re the light of her life. I know that she looks up to you. And I know that you’re going to do such a great job raising her. Despite what that Karen said... you deserve Space. You two deserve each other.”

Tokyo had custody of Space. Finally. After fighting tooth and nail to get her baby sister back, she had her. The tears pouring down her face were tears of happiness. Completion. Relief. Finally... She could breathe. Finally... she had her sister back. She was so overwhelmed with happiness that she could barely contain herself. When the judge awarded her custody, it was as if the weight of the world had literally been lifted from her shoulders. She was close to falling to her knees and if it wasn’t for Haram holding her up, she would have. She just couldn’t believe she had won.

Everything the Devil and Karen had tried to throw her way had been a complete waste. Tokyo persevered. Everything Tokyo had gone through had been for this moment right here. Victory. She couldn’t wait to wrap her arms around her baby sister. She couldn’t wait to go on sister dates for mani and pedis. She could wait to spend the rest of her life with Space.

Tokyo had never been as happy as she was in that moment before.

Mrs. Jones cupped Tokyo's face and wiped a tear from her cheek. "You're such a beautiful, strong, girl. You stop that crying, okay?"

"I just... I just can't believe it."

"Why can't you?" Mrs. Jones asked with a cocked brow. "Believe it, Tokyo. I've never seen a young woman as determined and strong as you are. If you need anything... and I mean anything... don't hesitate to call me or my husband okay? Taking care of a child isn't an easy feat. So, please don't try to do it all on your own. Remember to live for yourself, too, okay, Tokyo? Take some time for yourself. Enjoy life. Any time you need a break, I'm only a phone call away."

Tokyo couldn't believe she had spent so many days resenting Mrs. Jones and her husband, just for her to treat her like this. For months, Tokyo thought Mr. and Mrs. Jones had a secret agenda against her. She thought they had only been nice to her because they had ulterior motives. For a while, she wouldn't even take Mrs. Jones up on her offer to go against the court ordered weekly visitations. She thought it was a trap. But she had been wrong about them all along.

Mrs. Jones was truly heaven sent. In that moment, Tokyo questioned why her own parents couldn't have been like Mrs. and Mr. Jones. Life for her and Space would have gone completely differently. She shook those thoughts away though and embraced what was. There was nothing she could do about the past, but there was so much she could do about

the future. Today was just the beginning of what would be a very promising, happy life for her and Space.

“Okay,” Tokyo said, with a smile. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Jones.”

“It’s okay. You can call me Amina,” Mrs. Jones winked.

A second later, Karen and Space came from behind a closed door. The minute Tokyo and Space saw each other, they took off running towards one another. Space roughly collided with Tokyo and wrapped her arms around her. Tokyo kneeled and hugged Space tighter than she’d ever hugged anyone before.

“I told you I would fix it. I told you we’d be back together, Spacey,” Tokyo cried.

Space laid her head on Tokyo’s shoulder, crying her little eyes out. She had missed her big sister so much. The visitations weren’t enough. She always hated when Tokyo would leave. Now she wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore. Tokyo would be picking her up from school. Tokyo would be tucking her in for bed at night. She was so happy.

“I missed you, Toky,” Space cried.

“It’s okay. We’ll never, ever, ever be without each other again.” Tokyo cupped Space’s face and locked eyes with her. “Okay? I promise.”

Space nodded and threw her arms back around Tokyo’s neck. “I love you, Toky.”

“I love you too, Spacey. So, so, so much!”

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. TWO WEEKS LATER .

Tokyo peeked into Space's bedroom and just stood there for a moment, watching her. It had been two weeks since she got custody of Space and she still was in a bit of disbelief. Every now and then, Tokyo would lock herself in the bathroom and just cry. She was overwhelmed with happiness. The feeling of having her sister back was so surreal. She had been making up for so much lost time. They had done so much within the past two weeks. Anything Space wanted to do, Tokyo was making it happen.

The first week of them being together they went to Sky Zone, Urban Air, Airtime, and Dave and Buster's too. By week two, Space was drained and just wanted to spend time with Tokyo at home. Tokyo made the most out of that too though. They had movie nights, ordered pizza, and had even cooked a couple of meals together too.

After standing in the doorway for about five minutes, Tokyo walked into the room and took Space's headphones off her ears.

"Come on. I need to go check on the house," Tokyo said.

Any other time, Haram would be taking that trip to the hood with her, but because he was out of town, handling business, it would just be Tokyo and Space.

Space jumped up from her beautiful canopy bed. "Okay! Can I go see Jaya before we come back?"

Tokyo took a deep breath at the mention of Legacy's little sister. "I don't know yet, Spacey. We will see... okay?"

Space rolled her eyes, pouting. "Okay. I just miss her."

It had been nearly a year since Ms. Juanita called CPS on them but Tokyo still hadn't been able to move on from it. Granted, she had Space back and she should have but it was hard for her. Tokyo held grudges like crazy and she wasn't ashamed of it neither. Once someone did something to wrong her, it was hard for Tokyo to just move on past it. What Juanita did was seen as unforgiveable to Tokyo. She'd never trust her again.

Although Tokyo didn't live in Mae's house anymore, she still took very care of it. The taxes and the bills stayed paid and she'd even had Ave stopping by to take care of the lawn maintenance. Every now and then, she'd drop by to pick up mail that hadn't gone through the mail forwarding process yet. Other times, she'd just go there to sit and think about Mae. She missed her grandmother tremendously. She could think about her anywhere, but Tokyo felt the closest to her at home.

Both Tokyo and Space still had their moments where they would cry about Mae, but they pushed through the grief instead of wallowing in it. Because Space was young and didn't quite understand the concept of death, Tokyo had to explain it to her. Space thought that Mae would be gone for a little while and would come back when God made her 'booboo' better. For the first couple of days, Tokyo kind of brushed past Space's innocence and let her think what she wanted to. But one day, Tokyo was caught crying in the kitchen and Space said that it would be okay and that Tokyo

didn't need to cry because Mae should be better and would be back home any day. Despite how hard of a conversation it was to have, Tokyo then realized that it was one that they couldn't go without. Once she explained it to Space, consoling her was nearly impossible. Space cried all day and night to the point where Tokyo had to sleep with her. Two weeks later, there were still days that Tokyo had to sleep with her.

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About forty minutes later, Tokyo was back in her old neighborhood. As she cruised down seven mile in her cherry red 2020 7 Series BMW, she wore a smile. Being in the hood was always nostalgic. There was something about the hood that you couldn't get from anywhere else. The minute she took the exit off I-75 it was like she had stepped over into a different world. Her world. Where they stayed, in Grosse Pointe Park wasn't her natural habitat. Tokyo was from the hood. The guttah. So despite how bad it might've been, she was always her most comfortable there. The hood might've held a lot of bad memories for her, but the good always outweighed the bad.

When she turned on her old block, and took in the atmosphere, her smile grew bigger. It was Spring break and all of the little kids were out playing. She spotted Legacy and Tempest's little sisters riding their bikes and Space did too. She tore her headphones off her ears and rolled her window down, yelling at them. Tokyo had half a mind to go ahead and let her play with them for a second. But the moment she got closer to the house and spotted Sahara and Mike out front, that thought was wiped right from her mind. The smile on her face was wiped off too.

Tokyo grabbed Space's arm and told her to roll the window up. She hoped that Space hadn't seen them. She hoped that she had been too busy looking up the block, yelling at her friends to see them.

“Can I go play with Jaya while you check the mailbox, Toky? Please!” Space yelled.

Instead of parking directly in front of the house, Tokyo stopped in front of Ms. Della’s and nodded. “Yeah, you can go play with them. Stay across the street too, okay?”

She figured distracting Space with her friends was the best route to take. She couldn’t risk her sister seeing them. There was still a chance of Space seeing them, but at least now the chances were lowered a bit. What Tokyo had to do was to be careful to be discreet. But how would she do that? When what she really wanted to do was to grab the gun from her glovebox and blow both of their brains out. Yes, in broad daylight. She didn’t give a fuck. That was just how upset she was about seeing them. But as she watched Space hurriedly get out of the car, she knew she had to give a fuck. She couldn’t lose sight of the bigger picture. Space. What good would she be to her in a jail cell?

Once Space was out of the car and safely across the street, Tokyo unbuckled her seatbelt and hit the button on the glove box. She grabbed her nine, slammed the glove box shut, grabbed her purse, and got out of the car. Haram made sure she stayed strapped. Not only were there two guns in the car—one under her seat, and the one from the glove box—but the house was full of them too. When it came to his family, he wasn’t taking any chances, regardless of how quiet the business had been for him.

On Tokyo’s way up to the house, a group of little girls sitting on the porch next door to Ms. Della’s spoke to her. With her gun concealed, Tokyo smiled and waved at them. She did

the same thing when Legacy and Tempest's sisters spoke to her, too. After speaking, Tokyo had razor vision on her crack head parent who were making their way on side of the house. It didn't take Tokyo long to see that they were trying to break in. Little did they know, when they did finally get in, they'd have a surprise waiting for them.

She crept up the creaky stairs with her bottom lip pinched between her teeth, hoping they wouldn't hear her. She doubted if they would. By the look of how they were moving, they were feigning and their only focus was getting to anything valuable inside of Mae's house. How disgusting. Rage grew from the pit of Tokyo's stomach before consuming her completely. She couldn't believe Sahara had the audacity to come back there. Was she that far gone that all common sense had been washed away by the drugs she was on?

With tight lips, Tokyo unlocked the door and stepped inside. She stood in the living room, with her gun up, waiting for Mike to get through the window Sahara was pushing him through. The window he was climbing through was broken and could only go up so much. Because the chances of anybody getting in it was very unlikely, it wasn't locked like the other windows. Had Tokyo been thinking, she would have locked it anyway. A boney ass crackhead could clearly fit through with the right amount of determination.

“Get cha fingers out my damn ass, bitch!” Mike yelled, as Sahara's fingers slipped as she was pushing him through.

“Who you callin' a bitch?! I don't see why we couldn't just break the damn window!” Sahara fussed back.

“You know them boys lookin’ for me! You think I want to draw attention? Yeah, I bet that’s what you want so you can smoke all the rock up by yo damn self”, while I’m locked up! Stingy bitch!”

“Don’t start that shit with me, Mike. Like you didn’t leave me that night!”

“Why you bringing up old shit, bitch!?! That’s why we ain’t never work!” Mike yelled, before finally making it completely through the window. Right after Mike climbed in, he rushed to the backdoor to unlock it for Sahara. He was so distracted that he didn’t even see Tokyo standing in the living room, witnessing it all. It was almost as if she was completely invisible.

As she watched him let Sahara in, Tokyo’s eyes stung with tears. Tears that came from a place of anger, more than it did sadness. She could just end it all right then and there. She could get revenge for Mae’s death all the while getting revenge for herself too. They deserved every bullet in her clip. She was in a position to repay them for all of the days and nights she went hungry, waiting for someone to come feed her. She could repay them for years of childhood trauma that had most certainly spilled over into adulthood. She could repay them for taking the one person that cared about her, away from her. Right then and there, with the bullets in her gun.

“Mikey,” Sahara said, once her eyes met Tokyo’s. He was busy rummaging through the empty cabinets, as if there would still be money inside of them.

“What damnit!?”

“Mikey!” Sahara yelled before Tokyo cocked her gun back.

She had shot a gun before. Her and Haram frequented the shooting range. But she’d never shot an actual, breathing, moving, target and there wasn’t a nervous bone in her body. Tokyo was fueled by revenge. Fueled by pain... fueled by anger. Why did they deserve to live? While Mae’s body laid, rotting in the ground. How was that fair? How was it fair to her? They didn’t deserve to live. She wanted them both dead. Tokyo decided that she’d deal with the consequences later. She was sure no one would call the police after hearing the shots. Hearing gunshots in the hood was like hearing fireworks on the Fourth of July. The bodies, she could call her man to get rid of. He might’ve been thousands of miles away from where she was, but Haram would make a way. He always did.

“He—Hey Tokyo,” Sahara spoke with a rotted smile. “We came to check on you and Space.” Shifting her eyes away from Tokyo she said, “Hey Space. You grew up on me! How old are you now!?”

Tokyo had been in such a deep trance that she didn’t even hear Space come into the house. She immediately stuffed her gun into her Louis Vuitton and wrapped her arm around Space’s shoulder, pulling her closer. Tokyo was fully prepared to paint the off-white walls with Sahara and Mike’s blood. If Space would have shown up a second later, it would have been done. She couldn’t subject Space to such trauma, though. As bad as she wanted them dead, she refused to kill them in front of her sister.

“Tokyo,” Space whined, ignoring Sahara. “What’s going on? Who... Who are these people?”

Sahara looked so bad that Space didn’t even recognize her. She’d dropped at least twenty pounds since they had last seen her. Her skin was dry and cracked, and the hair on her head was matted and untamed. Sahara looked a complete mess. But since Tokyo had witnessed Sahara at her worst for most her life, she had no problem recognizing her.

Sahara looked down at herself and embarrassingly smiled. “It’s mo—

“Get out,” Tokyo gritted, before Sahara could cause any more damage than she already had.

Mike put his hands up and backed away, towards the back door. “We just need a couple dolla—”

“I said get the fuck out!” Tokyo screamed at the top of her lungs, startling Space to tears. Glancing down at her, Tokyo rubbed her shoulder and pulled her closer. She hated to see Space cry. She hated that already, she’d put her sister in a traumatizing situation.

Once Sahara and Mike were out of the house, Tokyo sat on the couch, consoling Space, telling her that it would be alright. With her eyes locked on the spot that Mae died in, she wished she could have flipped it and made it the very spot she killed Mike and Sahara in, instead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You sure you don’t need me to come over?” Legacy asked.

Tokyo shook her head and sat down on the stool at the kitchen island. “Nope. I’m good. I’m about to hop in the shower and read until I pass out.” She sighed and ran her hand through her loose hair.

It had been a few hours since the ordeal with her parents and she was completely drained. Both her and Space, who’d fallen asleep on the ride home, were. Tokyo spent most of the ride home on the phone with Haram, trying to convince him to handle his business, instead of coming home, the same way she was convincing Legacy. She didn’t need people to drop everything they were doing to rescue her.

“You sure?” Legacy asked, as she fiddled with the ring on her middle finger. “You know I don’t care about coming over there, right?”

Legacy needed to get out of the house. On one hand, she was trying to get to Tokyo because she felt her friend needed some moral support after her run in with her parents, but on the other, Legacy needed a distraction. The past six months with Syn had been pretty blissful for the most part. She was out of her mother’s house, staying in a four bedroom home in the suburbs. She was pushing a Mercedes Benz, and she had everything she could possibly dream of. However, there was a void that materialistic things could not fill. Her relationship was on a huge decline. She didn’t know what it

was, but something was off between the two of them. Syn was rarely ever home and it wasn't just because of business.

At first, Legacy thought that maybe they had bitten off more than they could chew by moving in together. She thought maybe he was spending a lot of time outside of the house because of that, but eventually, she realized it was much more. Syn was distracted when they were at home too. Sometimes, she'd catch him in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet on his phone. Other times, she'd find his personal phone in odd places, on airplane mode. And for some odd reason, Little Caesars stayed calling him about orders she didn't even know he'd placed. Something was off. She was a smart girl, so she knew that there was a great chance that he was cheating, she just didn't want to admit it.

“Yeah I know,” Tokyo said. “I'm good though, Legacy. I promise.”

She was good. Seeing her parents had been extremely triggering but she didn't give them as much power as she used to. In the past, she would have found herself in a deep, deep, hole of darkness. Not today though. Today she held her head high and pushed through because she had to. Not just for herself, but because of the little girl she had looking up to her. Space was her strength. She was a constant reminder of where Tokyo couldn't go back to. She refused to allow anything to disrupt the happiness she was in. She had fought too hard to get back to who she was, just to allow her deadbeat, dope fiend parents, to send her back to that dark mental space.

Tokyo accepted life for what it was. She didn't worry herself with the question of why anymore. She accepted that

she was given nearly impossible to defeat battles because God believed she was strong enough to survive, which she had proved time and time again. Besides, Tokyo was simply tired. Tired of giving a fuck about what tragedies Sahara and Mike put her through. Tired of crying and being depressed about losing Mae. Tired of having to fight out of darkness. Just... tired. So, no... she wouldn't let earlier swallow her whole. She was okay. She would've been happier if she would've been able to put a bullet through their heads, but she was okay.

“Alright,” Legacy breathed out.

She wanted to tell Tokyo about what she had been going through so bad, but she couldn't. She felt foolish. How would she look? Crying to her friend about how she thought Syn was cheating on her? After everything she did to keep her relationship intact? Since she and Syn had gotten together, Legacy made it her business to keep women away from him but it was starting to look like that didn't matter. Legacy couldn't help but wonder if she had wasted her time. Tempest used to always tell her that she needed to have fun and stop being up under Syn so much... now that things were starting to go bad, Legacy couldn't help but to wonder if Tempest had been on to something all along.

“Are you okay?” Tokyo asked with pinched brows.

Legacy lightly giggled. “Yeah, girl. I'm okay. Just bored in this big ass house.”

“Well, yo maaaaan will be home tomorrow,” Tokyo joked. “Our men. What time did they say they'd be back, again?”

“After twelve.”

“Mm,” Tokyo said, as she scratched her head, her thoughts immediately shifting to Haram.

Just like that, she had a craving.

A craving to hear his voice.

A craving to see his face.

“Well... alright boo. I’m about to call him, take a bath, and go to sleep. Space knocked out in the car, so it’s quiet over here too.”

“Alright, ‘seester’,” Legacy joked. “Talk to you tomorrow. Hey... Don’t hesitate to call me if you need me to come through.”

“You know I won’t. Love you.”

Legacy told Tokyo she loved her too and they got off the phone. As soon as they did, Tokyo face timed Haram. He hadn’t even picked the phone up yet, and she’d already had a big smile on her face. They had just talked on her way home, but Tokyo was excited as if she hadn’t spoken to him all day. That was just how obsessed she was with him.

After the second ring, Haram answered. Tokyo let out a soft groan when his face came into view. She propped her head up against her fist and just stared at his smiling face.

“What up, baby? You good?” He laughed. “Tokyo?”

She couldn’t get over how fine he was. He’d started to let his hair grow out, so his usually low cut hair was now a curly bush on top of his head. At one point, he used a sponge as an attempt to give him that spiky look but because Haram had what people would consider ‘good’ hair, all the sponge did

was give his curls more definition. He hated that shit. So, instead of using that, he just let his hair do its own thing. If he was at home, Tokyo would have put a few plats in it.

“Hey,” She said with a cute giggle. “What are you doing? I miss you.”

“How much you miss me?” Haram asked, with half a smirk on his face before leaning up to reach for the glass of 1942 he had been nursing all night.

He was taking it easy. These days, he didn't drink much. If at all. He had been taking the rules on his medication label more seriously. He wanted to be the best version of himself for his lady and to do that, he'd have to take his medication the way he was supposed to.

Tokyo watched him put the glass to his lips but she didn't say anything. However, her eyebrow did a little involuntary twitch that she hoped Haram hadn't noticed. She tiptoed around his diagnoses. A few days after finding out about Haram's bipolar, her and Krystal talked and that conversation stayed on replay in Tokyo's mind. She stressed the importance of letting Haram do his own thing and staying off his back. But after doing a lot of extensive research on Bipolar, Tokyo worried about him more than she expressed.

“A whole lot,” Tokyo said, dragging the word ‘whole’ out. “Legacy said y'all are coming back around noon. What time will you be *here*?”

Haram's flight landing at noon didn't mean he would make it home by noon. Tokyo had gotten used to that. His schedule was all over the place. One minute he could be on his way home, the next minute he would be hopping on a flight to

Atlanta. For the moment, he was in Tulum, Mexico, meeting their new supplier, Juan. He was a Columbian with heavy ties to Columbia, where he got the purest cocaine known to man.

“Twelve thirty,” Haram told her before sitting his glass down. “I might fuck around and push the whip to two hunnet, to get home to my baby.”

He especially wanted to get home to her since her run in with Mike and Sahara. He hated not being able to be home to protect her the way he felt she needed to be protected. At all times. Around the clock. He didn't think Mike and Sahara posed as a threat, but still... he wanted Tokyo okay all of the time.

Tokyo blushed and rubbed her lips together. “Don't do too much. I need you here in one piece; not multiple.”

They laughed and Haram told her, “No bullshit though. As soon as the jet lands, I'm coming home. I miss you. This face time shit don't do shit for me.”

He wasn't lying. Haram missed the hell out of Tokyo. She was always the first thing he wanted to see, touch and smell after a long stressful trip. Which, the trip to Tulum had been. Juan was professional. He set the brothers up in one of the three bedroom properties on his compound. It was a very spacious, luxury home. To their disposal was top shelf liquor, aged wine, a full of staff and a plethora of beautiful women that Haram didn't care for. Juan treated them with the utmost hospitality. Despite how easygoing the trip had been, Haram couldn't relax.

The compound was heavily guarded and there was something about Juan that made him uncomfortable. He was

too nice. As a young man from Detroit he was skeptical of people like that. The ones that came baring smiles were always the ones to worry about. Cavalli told him that he was looking too deep into shit, but Haram knew in his gut that something was shaky about the nigga. But because they stood to make more money with him than they did with any of their other business associates, Cavalli wanted him to play nice. Which he had by being quiet, opting out of the extra festivities Juan had invited them too, and by keeping his strap in his hand almost ninety percent of the time. Syn called him paranoid—Haram called it smart. To him, Juan wanted them comfortable, fed, and fucked good for a reason. He hadn't figured out his angle, but still... Haram didn't give too much of a fuck about what his angle could be. He just knew something was off about him.

Every now and then, he'd wonder if he was thinking too deep into it because they hadn't been shown as much love as Juan showed them from anybody else. None of the other people they fucked with on the drug tip was getting paper like Juan though. They didn't have compounds and shit. So, he could have been wrong, but he'd never treat any situation lightly just because he could have been wrong. There was always that possibility of him being right. And if he ended up being right, at least he'd be prepared. How he could prepare to go against fifty, sixty niggas with his nine was questionable but if it came down to it, at least he'd go down fighting.

For the past two nights, it had been a challenge to quiet his paranoid mind, so in an effort to relax a bit, he cracked the seal of one of the 1942 bottles.

“It's not enough for me neither, babe,” Tokyo mumbled before getting down off the bar stool.

She hated when he was away. She was grateful to have Space with her now to distract her from missing him though. If she wasn't using Space as a distraction, Tokyo was putting her attention on her business. She busied herself by reaching out to authors, and contractors to get her bookstore opened. If she didn't keep busy, she'd be missing him to the point of tears. That was just how addicted to Haram Tokyo had become. She depended on him for so much. She depended on him for everything.

“Where's Space? She alright now?” Haram asked.

He'd grown so close to Space over the past two weeks. He tagged along with them on their outings and each time, he had a blast. She was like his very own little sister. Sometimes, he'd find himself having so much fun with her that the possibility of having a child didn't sound so bad. The minute he'd think like that, he'd frown up. He didn't want to have a baby with Khadijah. He didn't want to have one at all, but if he was going to entertain that thought, he'd want his first to be with Tokyo.

“Yeah,” Tokyo said with a sigh. “She's okay. She ended up falling asleep in the car. I thought she'd stay up after I woke her up but she didn't. She fell right back to sleep, with her shoes still on and all.”

Tokyo lightly giggled.

“How are *you*?” Haram asked, staring into her beautiful face, wishing he could be there with her.

“I'm okay.” Tokyo shrugged. “It's over. I just hope I never have to see them again.”

“You sure you okay?”

Tokyo playfully rolled her eyes, as she walked down the dimly lit hallway towards the staircase leading to the second floor to their bedroom. “I’m okay. I promise. I had to talk Legacy out of coming over here earlier, she was so worried. But I promise, big daddy, I’m okay.”

“You know I’ll charter the—”

“Yeah I know; you said that earlier and what I say? Stay yo butt right there. Handle your business. I’m good. I swear I am,” Tokyo interrupted.

She understood him worrying. She understood Legacy worrying too. Sahara and Mike had turned her life completely upside down. A year ago, Tokyo would be in shambles. But today was a new day and she was a stronger Tokyo. There was nothing they could do to send her back to that dark place. They had done all they could do to shake her world up.

“Aight,” Haram said with a sigh as he picked his glass up.

Tokyo eyed it again and scratched her head. “What you drinkin?”

Haram lightly laughed. “1942. First and last glass, beautiful.”

Tokyo laughed. “I was just asking,” she replied, being as coy as possible.

But Haram knew exactly what she was doing. He’d noticed her eyebrow rise a little earlier too, he just decided not to say anything about it.

Tokyo walked through the towering double doors to their bedroom and began to disrobe. "I'm about to shower." She bit her bottom lip and asked, "You want to watch?"

Haram looked towards the closed bedroom door he was in, pushed up from the chair and locked it. "Hell yeah I want to watch."

When he sat back down, he undid the button on his shorts.

•••

The next morning, Tokyo woke up to the sound of the TV. Space had it so loud. She turned over, grabbed her phone from the nightstand and checked the time. It was nine, on a Saturday morning. Tokyo sighed and pulled herself up against the headboard. She responded to a few emails from authors she'd reached out to before sitting on side of the bed. She slid her feet into her fluffy house shoes and pulled her bonnet off her head. Standing at the window, she pulled the drapes open, to let some natural light in.

As she was standing at the window, she noticed a car stop at the mailbox and then drive off. Looking down at her phone, she checked the status of her Amazon orders and saw that she had one to be delivered today, but it was still marked as Arriving by 9PM. Thinking nothing more of it, she walked away from the window to make Space something to eat before they had to leave.

Since Haram would be coming home today, she was going to surprise him with a gift. He said he'd be home by 12:30 but Tokyo wouldn't bet on it. So instead of having just a couple hours to get to the mall and back, she felt like she had more than enough time to prepare. Since Haram's schedule was all over the place, she added two hours to that 12:30.

"Space, why is the TV so loud?" Tokyo asked, as soon as she walked into the living room.

Space was sitting on the couch, with her iPad in hand, and Looney Tunes on full blast. She wasn't even watching the TV but had the nerve to have it at such a high level.

“I couldn’t hear it,” Space said, as she watched an unboxing video from one of her favorite YouTubers.

“That’s because you have the volume on that iPad up too. Girllllaaa!” Tokyo grabbed the remote from the coffee table and cut the TV off.

“Tokkkkyyyy!” Space whined. “I was watching that!”

“No you weren’t,” Tokyo said with her mouth scrunched up. “Did you brush your teeth? I’m about to make some waffles and sausages real quick. We have to go to the mall.”

“Yea, I did,” Space replied before getting off the couch, following Tokyo to the kitchen. “Oohhhh! Can I get something!?”

Tokyo looked over her shoulder at Space with a smile. “Yep. What do you want?”

There was no limit when it came to Space. Anything the bubbly, sweet little girl wanted, she got it. Tokyo couldn’t tell her no. She was just so happy to have her sister with her again. She wanted to spoil her rotten. Not because she thought she could buy Space or anything like that. She did it because Space deserved it.

“Jessica was showing this lip-gloss she got from Ulta. But it has color so you might say no,” Space pouted as she jumped up on the bar stool.

Tokyo opened the refrigerator for the sausages. Sitting them down on the kitchen island she shrugged. “You can get it. You just can’t wear it to school. You can play around with it

though. Don't even try to sneak to wear it to school neither. If you try me, I'll be taking it. I'm not—”

Space beamed with happiness. “Okay Toky! I won't! I promise! I promise!”

Tokyo giggled. “Okay, Space.”

“My big sister is lit!”

Tokyo laughed. “Girl what?!” She playfully shrugged. “Facts though!”

About forty minutes later, Tokyo was dressed in a simple two piece running errands set, starting her car up. She had on a pair of Yeezy foam slides and her natural hair pulled back into a bun. Because she was trying to hurry up to the mall, she didn't bother switching her bag. The Louis Vuitton Neverfull pretty much went with anything, anyway. Space tried to copy Tokyo's look by wearing a two piece set and Yeezy foam slides too. She'd even talked Tokyo into letting her wear her small, Louis Vuitton crossbody. Her hair was done up in the same bun too. How Space wanted to dress like her, reminded Tokyo of her graduation day, when Space just had to wear her little plastic dress up heels.

As Tokyo pulled out of the driveway, she remembered the order her Amazon driver left in her mailbox and checked it. Except, when she went into the mailbox, there was a white envelope instead of the brown Amazon envelope she was expecting. With a confused expression on her face, she tore into the envelope.

“What the fuck is this...” Tokyo mumbled as the words DNA Diagnostic Center caught her by surprise. What stood

out the most to her was Haram's name listed under the title *Alleged Father*. Shifting her eyes to the other side of the page she squinted at the child's name. Jaram Brown. Racking her brain she cocked her head to the side, trying to figure out why the name Brown was so familiar to her. She picked her phone up and clicked on the Facebook App. Strolling through the People You May Know section, the name Khadijah Brown caught her eye.

“Wow,” Tokyo said with a low, angry chuckle.

“What?” Space asked, totally oblivious to the shattering of Tokyo's heart beneath her chest.

“Nothing, Spacey. I was talking to myself.”

She took a deep breath as she continued to read the page, with tears pooling in her eyes. When she got to the results it felt like all of the air had been sucked out of her lungs.

Probability of Paternity: 99.999995%.

...

“You up, nigga?” Cavalli asked Haram as they slapped hands.

He stretched, the six hour flight wearing him down. “Hell yeah. I’ll get up with you niggas tomorrow or something. Don’t call my fuckin’ phone or none of that shit.”

Syn laughed and slapped hands with Haram. “You tryin’ to get home to be up under shorty. Pussy ass nigga ain’t slide in shit the whole trip. You found a ring yet?” He joked.

Haram laughed. “Fuck you, bitch.”

The brothers had just landed about ten minutes ago and Haram was fishing around his pocket for his car keys. He couldn’t wait to get home to Tokyo. The entire plane ride back home, he thought of her. He never thought he’d be the type, but he had separation anxiety like a muthafucka. He couldn’t sleep unless he watched a few videos of her first. Haram wasn’t afraid to admit it—Tokyo had him wrapped around *all* of his fingers.

“We need to talk about—”

“Nigga, if a muthafucka ain’t dying... don’t call me,” Haram interrupted Cavalli as he dragged his Gucci luggage towards his G-wagon.

Cavalli laughed. “Pussy whipped ass nigga!” He joked. “I was just fuckin’ with you anyway!”

Haram laughed and tossed the middle finger up as he continued to his car. Tulum was beautiful. Some would even consider it breathtaking. Most would have been sad to leave,

but not Haram. He was ecstatic when the announcement that they were in Michigan came through. He was still about forty minutes away from home, but at least he wasn't over three thousand miles away.

The entire ride back to the house, Haram thought about Syn's comment about finding a ring. He was joking, but Haram had actually found one. Weeks ago. He didn't know what to do with it though. On one hand, he felt like he needed to just ask her to marry him since he was completely, one hundred percent sure that Tokyo was the only woman he'd want for the rest of his life. But then, he'd think about Khadijah and her baby and reality would slap him in the face. There were things he needed to talk to Tokyo about first before he even took such a huge leap like asking her to marry him. Which, he was sure she'd say yes to... if he asked her before he told her about the potential baby. To him, that was unfair and underhanded and when it came to Tokyo he always wanted his actions to represent just how good his intentions were.

Haram took a deep breath and ran his hand over the top of his messy curls as he sped down the freeway. The shit with Khadijah had been wearing him down. He was expecting the results from the DNA test any day now. She made it her business to remind him about it every chance she got. Considering the history they had, Haram didn't think Khadijah could ever turn out to be an enemy but he had been wrong. He hated her ass. She was a poison he couldn't wait to get out of his life. She texted and called him all of the time, asking for money and help with the baby, which Haram declined every time. He wasn't coming up off of anything until he knew for

sure that Jaram was his. He didn't feel an ounce of guilt about it neither. Jaram was only a few weeks old. If Haram was indeed the father, he wouldn't have experienced any kind of neglect. That was why Haram was so adamant about getting the test done shortly after the delivery. He didn't want to miss out on too much, nor did he want to keep this secret away from Tokyo for too long. Especially not after he'd purchased a ring.

He hadn't spoken to anyone about it, neither. He knew they would feel indifferent about it. Krystal would argue that he was too young. Haram wanted to ask Tokyo to marry him—that didn't mean they would have to get married right away. There was no pressure there. He just wanted to show her just how much he loved and cared about her. He could talk about it all day, but he wanted to show it to her in a way that would reflect just how serious he was. His brothers liked Tokyo but they would most likely think he was tweaking, considering he was only twenty-one. All of them would think that he was making a reckless decision. They would probably think he was manic, just making decisions based off the chemical imbalance in his brain. But Haram was sure. He was completely, one hundred percent sure about what he wanted. The only chemical imbalance that had swayed his decision to buy a ring was love.

Haram fished his phone from his pocket and called Tokyo. Thoughts of her always gave him the urge to pick his phone up and call her. When she didn't answer, he assumed she might've been busy with Space, or planning something for his arrival as she did every time he came back home from a trip. Shit like that was what really had him head over heels in

love with her. She did things like make him a grand lunch or dinner with balloons, confetti, and gifts after a big trip. One time, she surprised him with a candle lit dinner on a beach in Mackinac Island. On a daily, she showed him just how special he was to her. He never thought he'd experience what he had with Tokyo. And for a long time, Haram didn't think he was worthy of the type of love she gave him, neither.

About forty-five minutes later, Haram was pulling into his driveway. He was so excited about seeing Tokyo that he didn't even bother to park in the garage. He kept his G-Wagon parked crooked in their circle driveway. Hopping out, he wished he would have stopped someplace and picked her up some orchids and a new book. But he was too damn excited to get home to even think about stopping. For the past couple of days, he's craved nothing more than the feel of his 'baby' in his arms.

As soon as he walked into the house, he called out for her, since she didn't meet him at the door like she always did when he came home from a trip. He was surprised at how quiet it was. Usually, Space would have the TV and her iPad on sky high.

Tossing his keys in the dish on the side table, Haram slid out of his Balmain gym shoes and called out for Tokyo again. "Tok!"

When he didn't get a response, his eyebrows furrowed and he went into his pocket for his phone again. Shaking his head, he figured she didn't believe him when he said he'd be home at twelve thirty. She never believed him and usually, it would've been for good reason. Today, he made good on his

promise... well... sort of. The time on the top of his phone read 12:47PM.

This time when he called her, the phone went straight to voicemail. Haram didn't know what the hell was going on. The first thing he did was panic. He was worried that something horrible might've happened. He turned to grab his shoes and his keys to leave but the slightly folded up piece of paper sitting on the table next to the dish caught his eye. If it wasn't for the top of it being slightly exposed, he wouldn't have paid it any attention. All he had to see were the words DNA Diagnostics to know that Tokyo wasn't in danger. Unfolding it, his eyes immediately went to the bottom. After seeing the results, Haram knew for certain that the empty house and her phone going to voicemail wasn't coincidental.

She'd left him.

TO BE CONTINUED

KEEP UP WITH MISS CANDICE

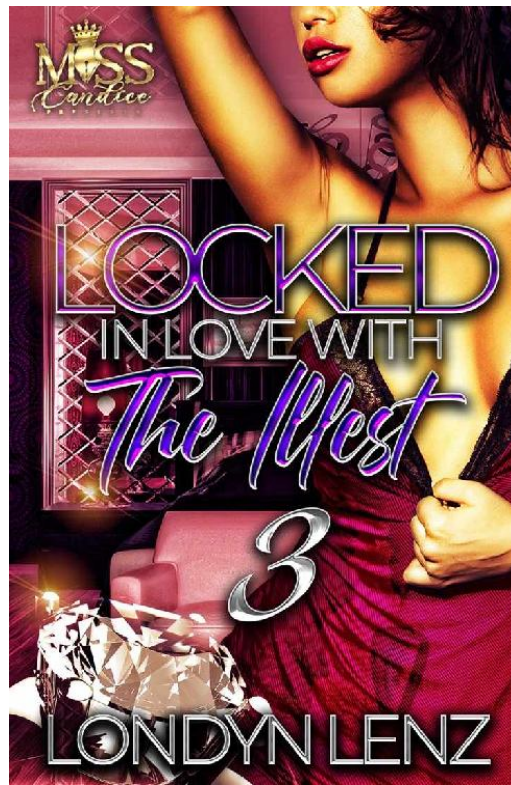
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