

FAMILY TIES  
BOOK 1

THE  
*Prodigy*

SHAE

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is a departure from my usual, and may be different from what you're used to from me. It's a bit grittier and closer to Urban, although the love story is still central.

**Content:** Violence, drug use, profanity, explicit sex, death, organized crime, and brief discussion of sexual assault (chapter 30).

Also, be advised that this book ends on a cliffhanger.

Love, Shae

# JAKAZI

MY POPS ALWAYS SAID you should never shit where you eat. But sometimes, I gotta say, it's worth the risk.

Which is why I was working my ass off trying to get at this little baddie at work. Ladonna was her name, and she looked like Issa Rae, except the ass was fat.

I was grinning in her face right now, in fact, which is why I missed all my mama's texts and phone calls.

Timing is everything.

If I had been at my desk, or if I'd taken my phone with me when I marched my happy ass down two floors to holler at old girl, I might have got the news immediately, and...I don't know. Maybe shit would have turned out different.

Anyway, by the time I got back to my desk—without Ladonna's number, because her fine, mean ass was playing hard to get—I had eight texts and eleven missed calls.

I stood there looking down at my phone, stalling for time because I knew what it was. I'd been dreading it for years

now, and here it was staring me in the face.

I sat at my desk in my little ass cubicle and dialed my mama, my stomach twisting into knots. She answered on the first ring and confirmed what I knew.

“Hey, Kari,” she said, her voice hoarse from tears. “Sorry to have to tell you this, but...it’s time to come home.”



I HOPPED ON I-20 east and drove myself away from my life in Atlanta, the life I’d spent eight years building. I was headed home to Midling, Georgia. An hour away from my boring ass office job and my fly ass high-rise condo, not to mention all the bad bitches who had made a nigga feel so welcome in the A.

I wasn’t looking forward to this shit.

I got off the exit around seven or so and met so much traffic, I thought I was right back in Atlanta. I could see police lights up ahead, and as we inched further up the three lane road, I saw two cars that looked banged up. It was an accident.

I looked around me and tried to remember where the fuck I was. Growing up, I knew this town backward and forward. Shit, my family basically owned this damn city. But all my time away had left me a little lost. Shit looked different.

I spotted a strip to my left. A Krogers sat smack in the middle. Used to be a Piggly Wiggly. I guess Midling was getting fancy on me. Next to the store, there was a weave shop, a vitamin shop, a tax place, and a bar.

Hell, yeah.

Liquor was exactly what I needed.

I busted a U and turned into the plaza, glad to be out of that traffic. I wasn't in the mood to see any police. I got enough of twelve when I was downtown, I damn sure didn't feel like seeing they asses now.

I parked in the crowded lot adjacent to the bar and locked up tight when I got out. I'd brought enough clothes for two weeks, but even though this town was fairly low on petty crime, my shit was too nice to leave unsecured.

I walked into Sliders and immediately took a seat at the bar. Looking around, I saw that hadn't much changed, female-wise, since I'd been here last. We have a saying here: *Midling dimes are Atlanta fives*. And while that might be true, pussy is pussy, and sometimes the fives are more fun. They work harder, because they have to.

"How you doing?"

I looked up and locked eyes with the bartender. Short, a little thinner than I usually liked, and cute. Very cute. Velvety brown skin and shoulder-length hair. A small diamond stud adorned her right nostril, and the low cut of her Sliders t-shirt made her titties look good.

"I'm aight," I answered back, staring down her shirt. "Lemme get some Hennessey."

She nodded. "You need a menu?"

"Nah. I ain't hungry."



She didn't respond to that. A few moments later, my drink was in front of me and she was walking away. I stared after her, out of curiosity more than anything else. I wondered who her people were.

Midling ain't small, but it's small enough that everybody's people either know each other or know *of* each other. So unless she'd moved here—which didn't make sense, because who the fuck would move *here?*—she was from here. She didn't look familiar, though.

I downed my shit in one swallow and signaled her back over.

“Another?” she asked.

“Yeah. And pour you one, too.”

Her lack of reaction let me know she was used to niggas buying her drinks. Not surprising, because she was the best-looking chick in here. I stared at her juicy lips and wondered if I had time to get some ass before I went walking into the lion's den later.

She set another glass in front of me. Hers, she kept in her hands.

“We drinking to anything?” she said softly. She had a nice voice.

I picked up my glass and stared into her eyes. “Yeah. To my pops. He died today.”

I threw my drink back before she had a chance to react to that. She seemed frozen, like she'd glitched out or some shit.

“You can drink,” I said with a grin.

She blinked a few times. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

I shrugged. “I knew it was coming.”

“Still...” she trailed off.

“Throw that back, shawty.” I was feeling impatient for some reason. Maybe because the longer she stared at me, the more I felt like I should be feeling deeper emotions. Reacting a different way. Like I should feel sadder than I did.

She did what I said, and then she set her glass down and stared at me. I regretted telling her that, because now she was looking at me with sad puppy dog eyes, and ain’t a damn thing sexy about those.

“One more,” she said. “On me.”

“You always give out drinks to niggas whose daddy just died?” I teased.

“That’s not funny.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be,” I said. My muscles were starting to relax. I bit my lip and gave her the look. “I really wanna know.”

“No. I just felt like doing something nice. If you don’t want it, just say that.”

“Nah, I definitely want it,” I said, and I chuckled to myself when she looked down, all shy and embarrassed. Yeah, this might could be something.

Two Hennessys and a Jack and Coke later, I was good and numb to all the shit that was waiting for me just fifteen miles down the road. Homegirl came to check on me periodically, but I had already figured out that she wasn't with it. I wouldn't be getting any ass tonight.

I threw my hand up to signal her, then pulled my wallet out of my back pocket, selecting a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill.

“You want your check?”

I peered at her. Might as well give it one last try. I ain't have shit to lose. “What's your name, sweetheart?”

“Malika.” She crossed her arms. “You don't remember me, do you?”

Before I could answer, the door opened and a man walked in. This was notable for a few reasons. One, that nigga was big and swole. Two, when he stepped in, his eyes locked right in on me. And three, it was seventy-something degrees outside and this nigga was wearing a bubble goose. Now, I'd been a housecat for eight years, so I was out of practice on the street shit, but I remembered enough to keep myself alive.

I slid the bill across the counter. “Keep it. And thanks for the drink, love.”

“You're...welcome,” she said, but I wasn't paying her any mind. I was already on my feet.

Trouble was brewing.

# MALIKA

I WASN'T SURPRISED JAKARI didn't remember me.

I'm not all that memorable.

He was two years ahead of me at Hightower High School. He was fine, and tall, and rich, and I was bony, quiet, and dirt poor. Heavy emphasis on the dirt.

But most importantly, he was a Windermere, and they were practically famous in this town. They owned half the businesses, although that wasn't saying much. Midling wasn't exactly a thriving place. It was a medium-sized town that looked and felt like a small one, and it was pretty boring, so when I saw Jakari walk through the door, I got excited. Finally, life was interesting again.

I tried to remember the last time I'd seen him. Probably at his house. Which was huge. I'd gone to a party there—against my daddy's wishes, because for some reason, he couldn't stand the Windermers. Anyway, Jakari's little brother, Eris, threw the party for his sixteenth birthday. There were no

invitations. If you heard about it, you were welcome, which explains why my non-popular ass was able to get in. Jakari had graduated by then, but he put in an appearance that night.

He didn't notice me *there*, either.

But tonight...he almost seemed to be flirting with me, which I guess was my confirmation that he had no idea who I was.

He was still fine as hell, and my heart thumped just like it used to do when I saw him walking down the hall at school. Handsome face, a nice black beard and goatee, a diamond shining in each ear—Jakari always shined. I could barely maintain eye contact, I was so flustered.

When he announced that his father died, I was confused, because I remembered Lester getting shot a few years ago. Obviously, he survived that, but then he went underground, and nobody saw him around town anymore.

But the legend lived on.

It was an unspoken rule that you didn't mess with the Windermers. They were special. They had friends in high places. You'd be lucky to be let into their circle.

Which I was not.

To be quite honest about how I was feeling tonight, Jakari could have got this pussy in the alley behind the bar. But I was too nervous. Seeing him again like that after all these years had my head spinning. And then, just as quick as he'd come,

he was gone, and I was kicking myself for missing my chance. Who knew if I'd ever see him again.

Defeated, I was wiping down the counter where he'd been sitting when I saw that he'd left his phone on the bar. I picked it up. It was black, no case, and heavy in my hand.

I smiled.

“Max!” I shouted to my manager. “I’ll be right back!”

I left before he could answer, because I knew he'd tell me to throw the phone in the lost-and-found and keep working. But after the big tip Jakari left, and in light of the fact that he was still so attractive after all this time, I jogged around the bar and exited the front door, eager to return his phone...and see him again.

Because maybe this was the universe's way of telling me to get some dick.

Hot, humid air hit me in the face when I stepped out into the night. All around me, the air was filled with the eerie sounds of cicadas and crickets and the occasional croak of a frog. In fact, when I walked around the corner to the parking lot and saw Jakari and the man who had walked in and out of the bar a few minutes before, a frog is the last thing I heard before the gunshot rang out.

# JAKATZI

IT HAPPENED SO FAST.

I was almost at my car when he called my name. My street name, not my government. I had heat on me, so I pulled it out as I turned, keeping it at my side just in case I was being paranoid. Just in case maybe he was an old friend from high school or something.

Wishful thinking.

As soon as our eyes met, he raised his big ass arm. I was faster, letting off a round before he could even aim.

He really could have shot me in the back of the head and been on his merry way. The fact that he wanted to face me let me know he was a real nigga. You almost had to respect it.

Almost.

I knew he was dead before he hit the ground. I'd seen it before, how the light goes out in a person's eyes. It's a powerful feeling. I can't say I enjoy it, but tonight, I was

fucking relieved. It was either him or me, and it damn sure wasn't gonna be me.

I was taking a step toward him when I heard a crash behind me. I whirled around and came face-to-face with the bartender. Her eyes were wide, her hands were plastered over her mouth, and she was shaking her head as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

She saw *me*.

That shit shook me so hard, I forgot what I was supposed to be doing. I took a step toward her, letting my arm and my glock drop to my side. She backed up, still shaking her head.

She was scared.

Understandable, but I needed her to calm her ass down. The last thing I wanted was for her to scream and attract attention.

“Aye, come here,” I said, still walking, but slower this time. “Let me talk to—”

“You just shot him!” she yelled. “Oh my God! Is he dead?”

“Shhh. Just listen for a sec—”

“No, don't. I...oh my God!”

Before I could speak again, I heard sirens.

Fuck!

There was really only one thing left to do. I ran at her, and as long as I live, I'll never forget the fear in her eyes when I did. She thought I was gonna hurt her.

I wasn't—at least, not yet.



Instead, I grabbed her hand and yanked her towards me.

“Your phone...” she said softly.

“What?”

She pointed.

It was on the ground at her feet, screen shattered, but all in one piece. I grabbed it and pulled her to my car. There was no time to think. It was like I was on autopilot as I opened the passenger door and pushed her into the seat. I ran around the front of my car and jumped in, cranking it up and peeling off before either of us could get our seatbelts on.

I sped away from the traffic, searching my brain for the location I’d just decided to go to. I hadn’t been there in years.

“Where are the Heights?” I demanded.

Bartender—what the fuck was her name?—sat there, silent and frozen.

“Do you know where the Heights are from here?”

“N-no,” she stammered.

“GPS it. It’s around here somewhere but I can’t place it.”

She grabbed my phone out of the center console and dropped it twice before her shaking fingers did what they needed to do.

“Make a l-left on B-breckridge, th-then a right on Newell.”

“That sounds about right.” I shook my head. “Fuck! First day home and already in some shit.”

Wisely, she didn't respond.

I made the left like she told me and sped down Breckridge. Newell came faster than I expected, and the swerve I hit bending the corner threw her body into the door.

She still didn't make a sound.

A few minutes later, I was backing into the driveway behind a black BMW that was a few years older than mine, a sense of relief washing over me. It wasn't home, but it was the home of somebody who might could help me out of this bullshit.

I cut the car off and looked over at homegirl. She was still shaking, her eyes fixed on the dashboard.

"Yo, it's alright," I said, not even halfway convincing. "We just gotta run in here real quick, and then..." I trailed off.

And then, what? Take her home and go on about my night?

The reality was that she wasn't going home, but she was scared enough already. If I told her the truth, she'd probably pass out right here in my car.

So I got out and walked around to her side, my eyes darting all around me. It was dead quiet outside, and dark enough for the night to conceal me. I relaxed a little as I opened her door.

She didn't move.

"We gotta go," I urged. "Come on!"

She jumped, then stuck a leg out. Rolling my eyes, I grabbed her arm—gently, but with a sense of urgency. I had to basically drag her up the driveway, then to the front door.

I didn't get a chance to ring the bell, because the door swung open as soon as my feet hit the welcome mat. I nodded at the man in the doorway.

"Pretty boy Knight," he said with a grin.

"Trini Joe."

We embraced like long-lost brothers, which, if you got people that's in your corner like he'd always been in mine, was basically the truth. Like my daddy used to say, *Blood don't make you family*.

We separated, sized each other up real quick, then he stepped aside to let me and homegirl inside.

"Who's this?" he said with raised eyebrows.

I sighed and shook my head. "Lemme holler at you real quick. Is there somewhere I can put her?"

Joe frowned. "You mean..."

"I mean I need to secure her somewhere while I talk to you."

Joe nodded once before retreating into the bowels of the house. I took a few deep breaths and calmed myself. Homegirl stood where she was and kinda balled up into herself like she was trying to hide. I felt bad for her, but wasn't nothing I could do about her situation at the moment. I had to concern myself with my own.

Joe's footsteps echoed down the hall as he made his way back to us. When he returned, he had a hand full of zip ties.

Homegirl's eyes went wide as she shrank further away from me. I reached out and grabbed her hand—it was soft—and shook my head.

“Nah, just relax. Aight? It's not what you think. I just need to make sure you don't try to run.”

Okay, yeah, that didn't sound very reassuring, but fuck it. I had bigger problems.

“I'ma tie you up for a few minutes, but that's it.”

She closed her eyes.

“You hear me?”

She opened her eyes and nodded. Tears streamed down her face.

I felt bad, but I pulled her with me anyway, following Joe's lead to the kitchen. He pointed to a dining chair, and I led her to it and sat her down. I took the ties, secured her ankles to the legs of the chair, and stood back up to examine my handiwork.

She wasn't going nowhere.

“Aye, where your water at?” I asked Joe.

He waved me off. “I got you.”

He reached in his fridge and pulled out a bottle of Evian. I scanned my immediate area and spotted a bowl with fruit in it. I grabbed an apple and set it in front of her. She didn't say a word, just stared down at her feet.

“I'll be right back,” I told her.

Joe led me out of the kitchen. “Yo, who is that, for real?”

“Nobody. Listen, I done got into some shit.”

We entered Joe’s office, and I closed the door behind me.

“Yeah, I figured,” he said as he took a seat behind his desk.

“Sorry about Pop.”

“Yeah.”

“You been home yet?”

“Nah. That’s where I was headed when I caught a fucking body.” I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “There was an accident, so I pulled off the road...”

I told him the whole story. He nodded occasionally, but otherwise, he didn’t react.

That was Joseph Thomas, though. He’d been working for my family for twenty years now, so there wasn’t much that could surprise him. He’d seen it all. The war with the O’Neal family, our static with the police, buying off the Hightowers, my father’s shooting...Joe had been solid through it all.

“Who was it?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I pulled my cracked phone out my back pocket and took a seat on the couch. “I was gonna check his pockets for his ID, but then homegirl came outside and threw me off.”

“She saw?”

I nodded.

“Fuck.” He scrubbed a hand down his face and thought for a minute. “She the talking type?”

“Don’t know. I just met her tonight.”

“Well. That’s unfortunate. For her.”

We sat in silence, weighted down by the truth of that.

“Where’s the gun at?”

“Left it in the car.” I made a face at him. “Come on, man. You know I wasn’t gon’ bring it up in here.”

“Nah, I ain’t worried about that. You just need to make sure you get rid of it somewhere.”

“Yeah. I will.”

He sighed. “So what you gon’ do with her?”

I flashed him a look, and he nodded.

“Two bodies in one night,” he said. “That’s a hell of a homecoming.”

# MALIKA

NOBODY.

The man asked Jakari who I was, and he said...*nobody*.

If I wasn't zip-tied in a strange kitchen, *this close* to being murdered, I would have felt some kinda way about that.

I'd always been a nobody.

It was a painful experience when I was younger, but I got over it. I was 25 now, not 14, so it was long past time to be worried about popularity or cool points.

It's just...Jakari took me back there. All the way back to the hallway at school, my locker, the gym, the cafeteria. I was invisible to him and his friends. I was sometimes even invisible to my own damn friends.

I convinced myself I was an introvert, but the older I got, the clearer it became to me: I loved people and I loved socializing. I'd just never had a friend who made me feel comfortable enough to open up and be myself.

Those days were long gone, now.

My hands were shaking so hard, it took me a full two minutes to screw the top off my water bottle. I drank half before stopping myself, because if I drank too much, I'd need to pee, and that would mean calling attention to myself. I had enough street smarts to know it was best not to cause any trouble right now. No inconveniences. I needed to be quiet, small, and *not* a problem.

Maybe then, he wouldn't kill me.

My stomach was too queasy to eat anything, so I just stared at that apple Jakari left for me. It was the perfect shade of red, not a spot to be found. I don't know why, but I fixated on that damn apple, grounding myself in the ordinariness of it. Everything about this moment in time was terrifying, but that apple?

It was just a piece of fruit.

I hadn't been to church in years, but for some reason, I found myself thinking about the original sin. Wondering how amazing life would have been if Eve had never taken a bite out of that damn apple...

I heard voices, then footsteps, and then Jakari was here again, looking down at me from his standing position. The other guy stood a few feet away, leaning against the counter.

"Alright," Jakari said. "First of all, what's your name?"

*I told you at the bar,* I thought.

"It's Malika."



“Malika.”

It was the first time my name had ever come out of his mouth.

In any other context, I would have been giddy at the sound of it.

“Lemme ask you something, Malika. What exactly did you see?”

My heart thundered in my chest. “Are you gonna kill me?”

His quick glance at the other guy gave me my answer. My eyes welled up with tears.

“Just answer the question,” Jakari demanded.

I wanted to lie. I really did. But I was too afraid.

“I saw you raise your arm and shoot that man.”

They exchanged another look.

“So you didn’t see him raise *his* arm?” he questioned, his eyebrows raised. He didn’t seem angry. More like...worried.

“I—it happened really fast. I was only looking at you.”

*Because you’re fine as hell, you psychopath.*

Jakari sighed and looked at his friend again. “What you think?”

The man shrugged. “It’s up to you, Knight. But if you decide to do that thing, I can’t know about it.”

“Wait!” I shouted desperately. “I won’t tell anybody, I swear. Please. *Please* don’t hurt me.”

Jakari—Knight?—crossed his arms and peered down at me, his brow furrowed as if he was deep in thought. The air was thick with indecision. And my fear.

“You could keep her with you,” the other man said. “Just till this shit blows over.”

“*If* it blows over,” Jakari snapped. “You know as well as I do that it’s only a matter of time. Besides, I’m not trying to babysit no grown ass female. You know what all I gotta do while I’m home.”

“Yeah.” The other man shrugged. “Well, if you don’t wanna do that first thing, there’s always the other thing.”

*Yes, yes, do the other thing, I thought. All the other things. Just don’t kill me.*

“You said it’s not a guarantee.”

“It’s not,” the man said. “But it would improve your odds significantly.”

Jakari blew out a sigh and stared down at me. “I don’t know...”

“I got a girl at the courthouse. She’ll put whatever date we want.”

Confused, I looked back and forth between them.

“Man, that’s...I don’t know.”

“Is it really worse than the first thing?” the man said. “Just look at it like an insurance policy. You might not need it, but it’s good to have.”

Jakari's shoulders dropped, and I stared at him, wondering what was happening. And then I realized it didn't matter.

I wanted to live. That was my only objective at this point. I had a sister, and a nephew, and a father who would miss me. I couldn't go out like this.

"Please do it," I said. "Whatever it is, I'll cooperate. Just don't hurt me."

The other man approached me and knelt down next to me, right at eye-level. He was just as attractive as Jakari, just a little older. He looked exotic, like a male model.

"Do you have your ID on you?" His voice was soft and kind, the opposite of Jakari's rough, gravelly tone.

"No. I left my purse at the bar."

"Shit." He stared off to the side. Thinking. Deciding my fate. "Do you have anybody at your job you really trust? Somebody who could bring your stuff?"

"Not really."

"See?" Jakari said. "Shit is more trouble than it's worth. Neither one of us can roll up in there and get her shit without being seen. We send her, she'll run or ask for help. It's too risky."

The man rubbed his beard. "Is Jaz around?"

"Yeah, she's at the house."

"Alright, have Jaz walk her in to get her shit. If she needs to go by her place to grab some clothes, Jaz can do that, too."

Jaz?

Oh. Right.

Jazlyn Windermere. Jakari's little sister. Gorgeous girl, but dumb as a box of rocks.

Judging by the skeptical look on Jakari's face, he was thinking the same thing.

But it seemed to me he didn't have much choice.

"Aight," he said, confirming my suspicions. "I can't think of no other options, so..." he trailed off, shaking his head. "We'll do it your way, man."

I began to tremble again. His complete and utter reluctance to do whatever this Plan B thing was was disconcerting. He wasn't even this worked up over the idea of killing me.

I stared at my friend, the apple, and tried not to cry again. I was losing hope, my freedom seemingly slipping through my fingers with every passing minute.

What the hell was I in for?

# JAKARI

BY THE TIME WE got back on the road, the traffic had cleared. Yellow tape surrounded the Sliders parking lot, but there didn't seem to be any rubbernecking. I made it to my mama's house in fifteen minutes.

Malika didn't say a word the whole ride. I was fine with that, because I had much more pressing shit to worry about. First, hinging any of this plan on my little sister was shaky as fuck. I love her to death, but she can be dizzy sometimes.

Second, I knew that as soon as I walked up in my mama's house, I'd have to change up. Jakari who worked at Zenith Media would be no more, at least not for the time being. I would be Knight again, and Knight had responsibilities. Shit that Jakari moved to Atlanta to get away from.

I knew it would eventually come to this. So did my daddy.

There were hella cars in the driveway and along the street in front of the house, so I had to park all the way down the block.

That shit pissed me off, but I could deal with it for one night. Come morning, things would be different around here.

“Alright, let’s go.”

“Why are we here?” Malika asked as we walked up the driveway.

“Relax. It’s my mama’s house. Look, when we get in here, don’t say shit to nobody. Just sit down somewhere and wait for me.”

“Okay.”

“My sister’s gonna drive you back so you can get your shit. If you need anything from your place, she’ll take you there, too.”

“How long will I be...how many...h-how much should I pack?”

“Shit, I don’t know.” I stopped walking and looked at her. “Look, just assume you’re gonna be gone for a while. That’s all I can tell you.”

Once we reached the front door, I took a deep breath, then another. I turned the knob and pushed the door open, and I was met with the smell of home.

I wouldn’t say I missed Midling, but I did miss home. I grew up in this house, so the smell, the pictures on the walls, the giant blue sectional in the family room, the annoying plastic runner that covered the hallway all the way to the kitchen...it took me right back to my childhood. Happier times.

Back before the truth about my family changed my whole world.

“Oh! Look at this pretty nigga!”

That was Eris, my youngest brother. He was 25, three years younger than me, and constantly and consistently on my fucking nerves. Spoiled ass.

I walked up on him and grabbed him in a headlock. Once I felt he was punished enough for calling me pretty, I let him loose and gave him a real hug.

“How you holding up?” I asked him.

I felt him shrug.

“It’s gon be alright, E. I’m home now.”

After a few hard slaps on the back, I pushed him off me and remembered I had Malika with me. She was standing right behind me, staring at the floor.

Eris frowned when he finally noticed her. “What’s going on with her? She tending bar for the repast or something?”

“You a fool,” I said, chuckling. “Nah, it’s a long story. I’m tell it all in a minute. Where’s Mama?”

“Kitchen.”

I nodded and looked over at Malika. “Can I trust you to stay here until I get back?”

She lifted her eyes to mine and nodded. I stared for a few seconds, only because I hadn’t noticed her eyes before. They were shaped kinda different, almost like cat eyes, and they

were big, and her lashes were so long, they looked fake. I got caught up for a minute, which was ridiculous considering all the shit I was dealing with at the moment. It damn sure wasn't the time to be thinking about how pretty she was.

Pretty can make you lose your mind. And I know that because I've used it to make many women lose theirs over me.

Later for that.

“Yo, E, watch her for me. Make sure she don't leave out this door,” I told my brother.

I could have sworn I heard Malika suck her teeth. I turned to look over my shoulder, just to make sure, but she was back to staring at the floor again.

I must have imagined it.

It took me a good five minutes to reach the kitchen, because I had to walk through the living room first. That meant speaking to family, some of which I hadn't seen since I left Midling.

There was Virgil, my cousin on my mama's side; Melvin, my daddy's brother, but we called him Prez; Randall and Ced, my cousins and Prez's sons; and last but definitely not least, my older brother, Neymar.

It was cool to see everybody, but with each hug or dap I gave, there was the deflating understanding of the fact that I was responsible for all these motherfuckers now.

My daddy had left big shoes to fill.



Finally, I found myself in the kitchen. Unsurprisingly, Jaz, my Grandma Noni, and my mama were cooking. Actually, Jaz wasn't cooking. She didn't know how, so she was probably in there nibbling and getting on everybody's nerves.

Noni saw me first, and when she did, she burst into quiet tears. It had been almost four years since she'd seen me in person. I'll admit, I got a little emotional myself. She looked, smelled, and felt the same as she had years ago. The only difference was her energy. Her son was dead, and she was grieving.

My mother was next. She stood stoic at the sink, her back to me. She was crying, and I knew she wouldn't turn around until she was done. Gabrielle Windermere hated to show weakness. She hated being soft with anybody but my daddy. And now, he was gone, and I knew that at some point, maybe soon, the woman was gonna turn to stone.

I walked up on her and wrapped my arms around her, nestling my chin in the crook of her neck. "I'm sorry, Mama," I whispered, and I felt her relax. Just a little.

She patted my hand once, Gab-speak for, "Enough of that bullshit." So I made my retreat and walked over to Jaz to bop her on the back of the head. That was our love language.

"Jaz, lemme holler at you real quick."

"Wait," Noni said. "Let me make you a plate."

"I can't right now, Noni. But if you don't mind, can you make two and cover em up?"

“Two?” Mama’s eyebrows went up.

“Yeah. Long story.” I nudged Jaz with my elbow. “Let’s go.”

Together, we walked into the empty dining room. Various tasty-looking foods covered the table. I guess the word was out and folks had already started dropping shit off. I sat in front of a pound cake and cut a small piece.

Jaz sat next to me. “The prodigy son is back. Big whoop.”

“Prodigy son? The fuck is th—oh. You mean *prodigal*.”

She shrugged.

I swear, Jaz never seemed to feel any type of way about being the kind of person people joked were dropped on their heads as babies. She moved through life like a cartoon character, saying dumb shit, *doing* dumb shit, and we were her captive audience, tuning in to see what shenanigans she would get up to this week. Her happiness in life was inexplicable given what she was working with, intelligence-wise, and she seemed oblivious to everything around her.

I couldn’t decide if that was good or bad. Cuz one thing about my sister—she ain’t never been stressed out.

I swallowed a bite of pound cake. “Alright, I need you to listen to what I’m about to tell you,” I warned.

“But—”

“Jaz. Listen. Don’t say shit. Just *listen*.”

She pressed her lips together.

“I need you to do something for me.”

After our talk, I led Jaz into the family room. Malika was in the exact same spot I left her in, with Eris watching her close.

“Alright, Malika, this my sister, Jaz. Jaz, that’s Malika.”

I passed my Noni’s plate to Malika. “That’s for if you get hungry. Jaz is gonna take you to get your bag and some clothes, then you’re coming back here.”

I guess she was feeling a little braver in a house full of other people, because she finally spoke up.

“What’s going on? What’s the plan? Please, just tell me. I’m gonna have a panic attack.”

“Calm down,” I snapped. “I’m not gonna hurt you. The plan is some bullshit, but it’s the best option this point.” I pulled out my keys and turned toward the front door. “Tomorrow, as soon as the courthouse opens up, me and you are getting married.”

## MALIKA

MARRIED.

Married?

*Married?!!*

I still couldn't make sense of the word.

Jaz and I had been in her Mercedes for ten minutes and I was still confused. He'd said it and then walked right out the door like it was no big deal.

My head was spinning.

"I'm sorry about your father," I said quietly, trying my best sound normal. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Thanks." She turned the radio down a bit. "I'm close, right?"

"About five minutes away."

Despite the very easy instructions Jakari had given her—go down Newell for ten minutes, then turn right and ride until you see the bar on the left—Jaz still consulted her GPS. She said

she had no sense of direction, and now that I'd seen her in action, I saw that she was absolutely right.

I stole a few glances at her. She looked the same as I remembered, although I'd seen her around Midling over the years. She was still beautiful. Smooth, clear dark brown skin, deep-set eyes, jet black hair that was perfectly blown out. And her clothes. Jaz was always fly, even back in high school. Gucci, Louis, Versace...she was wearing shit the rest of us only saw on girls in music videos.

There were really only two factions when it came to Jaz. You either hated her, or you wanted to be just like her. I always fell into the second category. But despite being a year ahead of her, she didn't even know I existed.

Now here we were, thrown together by time and circumstance. She seemed nice. Not the bitch her haters thought she was back then.

My wheels began to turn.

She was a woman. A sister. A daughter. Maybe, just *maybe* she'd show me mercy and let me go. She probably had no idea what was going on. If I told her, she'd take my side. I was being held against my will. What fellow woman wouldn't do what she could to help?

I started slow.

"Didn't you go to Hightower?" I said softly.

"Mm hm." She turned the radio all the way down. "Why?"

"I went there, too."

Silence.

“And...um...what year did you come out?”

“Five years ago,” she said. “I got kept back one year.”

Shocker.

“So what are you up to now?”

“I work with Eris—my brother, the one you met. We work at the barbershop. I’m on front desk sometimes.”

“You like it?”

She shrugged. “It’s alright. It’s flexible, so that’s good. Sometimes my boyfriend wants to fly me out to a show, and my brother always lets me. So that’s cool.”

Jackpot. She was beaming as she said this, her voice full of pride.

“Who’s your boyfriend?” I said, even though I already knew.

“You heard of Terio?”

Uh, yeah, everybody had.

Terio’s family was from Midling. He grew up in Atlanta, but that didn’t matter. We still claimed him as our own. And he was talented, already in possession of two Grammys for his debut album. He was good-looking, too. He’d have been quite the catch if he wasn’t facing twenty years in prison right now.

“Of course I’ve heard of him,” I answered. “How’s he doing?”

She sucked her teeth. “Girl, he’s good. They can’t break him. He’s too strong for the bullshit. Believe that.”

“Drugs, right?”

She made the turn where she was supposed to, and we inched closer to my job. “They got him on drug possession, intent to distribute, and human trafficking.”

My eyes widened. “Human trafficking?”

“It’s bullshit. Some fasttail girl got on his tour bus in Miami and stayed till Memphis. Smoked up all the weed and fucked half the crew. Turns out, she lied and said she was twenty-one, but she was really sixteen. So he caught a charge.” She pulled into the back alley of Sliders. “Lying little hoe ass bitch.”

Okay, then. So much for sisterhood.

I tried another angle.

“I’m not sure what Jakari told you,” I said cautiously, “but I’m scared. Not of *you*...of this situation.”

She parallel parked like a pro, easing between Max’s car and that of Dino, one of our bouncers. After cutting the car off, she turned to me.

“I don’t know shit about shit. I just do what I’m told.”

“W-what did he tell you to do?”

“He told me to watch you and make sure you don’t say shit.” She shrugged again. “None of my business.”

“I think I’m in danger,” I pleaded.

“Why?” Her eyes narrowed. “What you do?”

“Nothing. I...I saw something I shouldn't have.”

Her eyes softened, leading me to believe I had gotten through to her. But then she spoke again and killed that hope.

“That's between y'all. Like I said, I don't know shit about shit. You ready?”

Why didn't she react to what I said? What the fuck was *up* with this family?

I climbed out of the car and stretched a little, glancing around to see how feasible it was to make a run for it. There were still a few police cars in the parking lot. Surely they would help me if I screamed loud enough.

It could work. Jaz had about twenty pounds and half a foot on me, but she was in heels and I was in flats. I could definitely outrun her.

“I hope you ain't standing here planning your getaway,” she said, almost in a teasing way.

“What do you mean?”

“You not about to get me in trouble,” she said as she came to stand beside me. “Go in there and do what you're supposed to do. Cuz if you don't, it might get ugly.”

She patted her hip, just once, and that was enough to have me shook. But then she took it a step further and lifted the bottom of her shirt so I could see the pink gun holstered on her waist. I shuddered at the thought of her being armed. And worse, willing to shoot me.



As if that wasn't enough, she rummaged around in her Gucci tote and pulled out a pink thing. I didn't know what it was until she pressed a button and it crackled.

A taser.

This girl had a gun and a taster. A *pink* gun and taser.

Seriously, this family was fucked up. Jakari was a murderer, his bestie just so happened to have zip ties laying around for tying people up, and his ditzy little sister apparently had a gun at the ready to shoot me in the head if I didn't cooperate.

Sighing, I started walking, leading Jaz to the back door.

There was no way out of this.

I was doomed.



“HOW'D IT GO?”

Jaz looked at her brother and shrugged. That seemed to be her reaction to everything. She just plain didn't give a fuck.

“It went fine,” she said. “Can I go now?”

“Nah.” Jakari stood and approached us in the foyer. “We got business to discuss.”

“We, who?”

“The family.”

He finally turned his attention to me. His fiancée, apparently.

His eyes raked over me like I was a page out of his favorite book. I shrank back under his gaze, afraid of what he might do. Afraid of what he might say. And, if I'm being completely honest, I was also nervous about...how I looked.

It was so ridiculous. The man was a murderer, and a kidnapper, and I was his *prisoner*, but here I was, worried about my hair being out of place and if I needed to freshen my makeup.

I wondered what he was thinking as he gazed at me with those cold, dark eyes. Just like in high school, it felt like he was looking through me.

“Shit,” he said with a sigh. He looked me up and down. “What am I gonna do with you?”

It was rhetorical, but I sensed an opportunity.

“Could you show me to my room?” I said. “That way I can get put my stuff away.” And call my sister for help. My cell was tucked away in my bag, out of sight.

“*Your* room?” he chuckled. “You don't have a room, sweetheart. You're gonna have to bunk with me until I figure out what's what.”

“W-with you?”

“Yeah.” He had already stopped paying attention, his eyes on the man who'd just come through the door. “Go up the stairs and hook a right. It's the last door.”

I nodded.

“Oh. Let me get that cell phone off you.”

Damn.

I reached past the apple and water bottle I'd thrown in and pulled my phone out. Jakari smirked as he took it from me, his finger brushing my palm in the process. It was an accident, I knew, but that knowledge didn't lessen the intensity of the tingles that shot up my spine.

## JAKATZI

I STOOD UNDER THE steaming water with my eyes closed, glad to let it wash the day off me. So much bullshit. So much drama. And it was only my first day home. That's what was blowing me. I hadn't even scratched the surface of what I needed to do while I was here.

I soaped up and scrubbed down. It was only when I was washing my dick that I remembered Malika.

That was a whole other issue.

When Joe suggested marrying her as the solution to that problem, I laughed in his face.

I love Joe like a brother, but that nigga's a whole ass attorney. Surely he coulda came up with a better plan than that. But I'd always trusted Joe. He was sharp, and he knew the law as well as he knew the ins and outs of my family. My daddy put him through law school and kept him around like he was kin. So I valued his opinion, and given the options I had—

murder being one of them—it didn't seem like I had any other choice.

Come tomorrow, I'd be a married man.

That shit wouldn't be a real marriage, but that ain't the point. I'd always planned to get married one day. My daddy said a man ain't grown til he got his own family. Cool. But not like this. This shit was a disaster, and Malika seemed like she felt the same way.

I couldn't blame her. She watched me kill somebody. She didn't know the whole story, so she thought I was a cold-blooded murderer. She was scared of me.

Which meant she probably wasn't gonna let me fuck.

I turned off the water and dried myself before knotting the towel around my waist. I brushed my teeth, moisturized, and threw my clothes into a trash bag before making my exit from the bathroom.

The house was quiet as I eased down the hallway toward my old bedroom. With my fiancée in it.

Fuck.

She was laying on her side when I came in, her back to the door. She was probably playing sleep to avoid having to talk to me. Or anything else. But she didn't need to worry about that. I ain't have much to say.

I stashed the trash bag at the top of the closet behind my safe. My gun was in there, too. Come tomorrow, all that shit would be gone forever.

Malika stirred at the noise but didn't turn over. I needed her attention though, because I had some information she needed to know.

I dropped my towel and slipped into bed next to her.

"Malika."

She didn't move.

"I know you ain't sleep."

Still, nothing.

"Aight, be like that. It's two things you need to know, though. First off, you're on my side. I gotta sleep closest to the door or I won't be able to rest. And two, I sleep naked."

She sat straight up.

I couldn't help but chuckle at that. And then I turned my head to look at her.

I don't know if it was the way the moonlight was hitting her face or if I was just horny, but she looked...*good*. In a way I hadn't noticed at the bar.

She'd washed all the makeup off her face and put her hair up in a bun on top of her head. It was the cute, laidback look I tended to like at home, and it looked good on her. What didn't look good was the fear in her eyes.

"Yo, chill," I said. "Me sleeping naked ain't got nothin' to do with you. And I'm not gonna touch you. I ain't that kinda nigga."

She nodded, and her shoulders dropped. “You wanna switch sides?”

“Yeah.”

I was tempted to get out of bed and walk around to my side, but I didn't. Seeing my dick might have scared her even more. So I waited until she was on her feet before I scooted over under the covers. She sat sideways on the other side, her back to me, and dropped her head.

“Are you ever gonna let me go?”

She said it so quiet, I had to strain to hear her.

“Yeah,” I finally said. “At some point.”

“Can I at least call my sister? She's probably worried about me. If she doesn't hear from me by morning, she'll call the police. I never stay out overnight.”

“You don't?” I thought about that for a minute. “So you ain't got a nigga? Ain't nobody taking you out on dates and trips and shit?”

She sighed. It seemed like she was getting ready to answer and changed her mind at the last minute. “Can I please just call my sister?” she said. “You can listen while I talk to her.”

Seemed reasonable. “Yeah. I would get up and get your phone, but I'm naked. Unless—”

“No, I'll get it,” she said quickly. “Where is it?”

So she *really* didn't wanna see my dick.

“That red gym bag on the floor by the desk. It’s at the bottom.”

I watched her cross the room, paying special attention when she bent down to unzip my bag. I couldn’t see much in the dark, but that was probably for the best. I was on ten. Horny as fuck.

“You got other family?”

“What?”

“Besides your sister. Anybody that would be looking for you.”

She found her phone, pulling it out and inspecting it. “My dad, but he lives in Florida. We don’t talk every day.”

“What about your moms?”

“She’s...gone.”

“Passed?”

“No. I don’t know.” She sighed again. “I haven’t seen her in years. I don’t know where she is.”

“Oh.” I searched for something nice to say. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Mm hm.”

I wouldn’t know shit about that. Me and my moms were tight. She wouldn’t get lost even if I begged her to.

There was silence for a minute, then footsteps as she approached the bed. She sat, but she didn’t lay back down.



“Look, I know all this shit probably got your head spinning right now, but it’s gonna be alright.”

She chuckled. “Head spinning is an understatement. I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“I guess you probably ain’t never seen somebody get shot before.”

“I was at a party that got shot up, but I didn’t actually see the person that got killed.”

“You talking about out there at the skating rink?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. I heard about that.”

It was always some shit going down at Spinners, even back when I was in high school. Mostly fights. You didn’t have to worry about niggas pulling out guns back then, though. We threw hands, and if you lost, you just dealt with that shit. Nowadays, niggas had to let off and air shit out.

“Am I allowed to ask you a question?” she said softly.

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“I’m your prisoner. Or hostage, or whatever. I don’t...I don’t know the rules.”

I wanted to be mad at that, but I couldn’t. From where she sat, she was right.

“What’s your question?”

“Why did you kill that man?”

I rolled my eyes in the dark. Shorty was real bold asking me that shit. I almost had to respect it.

“He had a gun,” I answered. “It was either me or him, and I wasn’t about to let it be me.”

“Were y’all arguing?”

“Nah. Somebody sent him to kill me.”

“Why?”

“That’s the million-dollar question, Malika.”

She took a deep breath. “What are y’all into?”

“Y’all, who?”

“Your family. Why would anybody send somebody to kill you? And why do you hang with people who have a secret stash of zip ties? And why does your sister carry a pink gun like it’s a cute accessory and not a deadly weapon? And why didn’t anybody bat an eye when you dragged me in this house against my will? What the fuck is going *on*?”

She was breathing hard like she was about to hyperventilate. I didn’t know how to help her with that, so I just waited until she calmed down.

“Let’s just say we got enemies.”

She didn’t respond to that.

Instead, she called her sister. I listened closely for some coded words or help signals, but there weren’t any. She was straight up, telling her sister she was fine and would call tomorrow. After she hung up, she sat there and looked like she

was staring at the wall. I tried to think of something to say to her so she would know she was safe...for now. But I couldn't find the words.

She laid back down, finally, and she was still for so long, I thought she was sleep. I stared up at the ceiling, knowing my own sleep wasn't coming any time soon. Insomnia was my fucking demon, following me around everywhere I went, stalking me, lurking in the shadows, waiting for my head to hit the pillow. The only cures were weed and sex, and I didn't have access to either one right now.

Alone—kinda—in the darkness, with silence all around me, the whole marriage thing started to sink in. When I was all keyed up and geeked up on adrenaline and fear, it seemed like the logical thing to do to keep my ass outta prison. Way better than catching another body, especially a woman. But now? That shit made no fucking sense.

This chick was a total stranger.

“So how is this gonna work?” she said. “This whole marriage thing?”

“Damn, I thought you were sleep.”

“No. Just thinking.”

“It's funny, cuz I was just thinking the same thing.” I pushed the covers down to my waist. I was starting to get hot. “Honestly, I have no fucking idea. I just know it's the best play for me at the moment.” I paused. “And for you.”

“I won’t testify against you. I swear, I’ll just go on about my business like it never happened. No snitching.”

“It don’t work like that. If they subpoena you, you won’t have a choice.”

She thought about that for a minute. “I could go stay with my dad. In Florida.”

“Sweetheart, if they want you in court, they’ll find your ass. Easy. All they gotta do is look up your kin.”

She went silent again.

“It ain’t gon’ be a real marriage,” I reassured. “Like I said, I won’t touch you. Ever. Unless you want me to.”

More silence.

So I guess that was the end of that.

“When this shit blows over, you can go on your merry little way. For now, just deal with it. Cuz honestly, it could be way worse.”

I didn’t mean it to sound like a threat but...I guess there’s only one way to take something like that.

I couldn’t worry about that, though. I had to get my daddy in the ground and tie up a bunch of loose ends before I got the fuck out of Midling. For good this time.

## MALIKA

MIDLING'S COURTHOUSE WAS NICE enough, I guess, but in all my wedding dreams and fantasies, it was a big, beautiful chapel full of flowers that acted as the venue, not this place where criminals came to learn their fates.

I looked up at the ceiling as we entered, somewhat pleased with the skylights. The wood columns lining the walls were nice, too. Stately. It was all just so impersonal and ordinary.

It was another apple.

My groom, such as he was, stood tall and fine in a grey suit. If I wasn't his prisoner, and this was an actual wedding, I'd be ecstatic. Criminal or not, he looked good. Very good. Suit fitting right, fresh lineup, skin moisturized, smelling good... any woman would be happy to walk down the aisle toward him.

Any *free* woman.

Which I was not.

Still, a small part of me did feel a twisted sense of accomplishment. Crazy, I know. But I'd crushed on this man since I was a young teenage girl, and now, he was gonna be my husband. Legally. Which was more than any other girl had ever gotten.

And there had been plenty of those.

I remember his main girlfriend. Jamie Newsome. A brickhouse, even back in the tenth grade. Jakari was a senior then, she was a sophomore, and everybody gushed over them like they were the president and first lady. It's stupid now, but back then, I thought Jamie was special. He treated her like she was, so everybody else did, too. When she started dating Jakari, girls started styling their hair like hers and trying to dress like her. She was popping because he was. He elevated her.

Whenever he saw her, he would yell out, "There she is!" like he'd been waiting all day just for a glimpse of her. It was sweet, and also sad. For me. Because no boy had ever waited for a chance to see me.

And then there was the stuff.

He spoiled her rotten. Valentine's Day that year, he filled her locker with balloons. My locker was two sections down, and I remember pink balloons flying out at her as she laughed and swatted them away. And the roses. The cookie cake with her name on it. The gold herringbone chain. The stack of cash wrapped in a red bow.

I was so jealous, I wanted to cry.

And now, he was marrying me, but I didn't feel the least bit special. Or spoiled. Or cherished. I just felt numb, and no matter how handsome he looked in that suit, the numbness refused to subside.

Because this wasn't love. It was damage control.

At any rate, the ceremony was fine, if impersonal. Just like my dress, a white off-the-rack fitted maxi dress his sister picked out for me from Belk. Jakari barely looked at me, and never in the eye. His eyes kept flickering over my cleavage. His words were flat and lifeless. He seemed bored and irritated. I just wanted to get it over with.

After the ceremony, Joe, who was our witness, met up with us in the hallway.

"Alright. Everything's signed and backdated," he said, handing Jakari a thin stack of papers. "As far as the state of Georgia is concerned, y'all got married a month ago today."

Jakari seemed pleased by that. His eyes raked over the paperwork. "So if by chance they kick my door in tomorrow \_\_\_"

"You're straight. She can't be compelled to say a damn thing."

"Why do y'all keep talking about me like I'm not here?"

Jakari looked at me like he'd finally noticed me standing there. "My bad," he gritted. "Didn't know you wanted to be included in this shit."

“If ‘this shit’ means our marriage, then yeah, I wanna be included.”

Joe snickered. “Ain’t been hitched five minutes and already sounding like an old married couple.”

“Whatever, man. So we’re good?”

“You’re good. Congratulations.”

“Cool. And one more thing.” Jakari looked around, then lowered his voice. “Did you look into that other thing for me?”

“Yeah. I got somebody on that. I’ll call as soon as I hear something.”

I wanted to ask what that was about, but I didn’t wanna get snapped on. It wasn’t my business, marriage license or not.

Back in the car, Jakari cranked up, but then we just sat there. He stared at the dash, barely blinking.

“Are you okay?” I finally said.

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

He sighed. “How this shit is gonna play out. The story we’re gonna tell to make this make sense.”

“Can we talk about it over lunch? I’m starving.”

He looked at me sideways. “You ain’t eat this morning? I know my mama cooked.”

“I was too nervous to eat.”

“Why were you nervous about a fake wedding?”



“It’s not fake to me,” I said. “I mean, it *is*, but it’s still...I’m still married to you. Legally. And for some strange reason I can’t figure out, it feels like something.”

He stared into my eyes. It was intense, like he was trying to get a glimpse of my soul. I stared back, but I could only stand it for a couple of seconds before I had to look away. I only brought my eyes back to his face when he spoke again.

“Alright,” he said. “Where you wanna go?”

We ended up at River’s Run, a cool little seafood place near the mall. The last time I ate there was prom, which I attended with three of my girl friends.

Once we were seated—outside overlooking the Oconee River—Jakari immediately picked up his phone.

“Can we set a rule?” I said quietly.

“What?”

“No phones at the table.”

He slowly lowered his phone, smirking at me as he took in what I said.

“You making rules now? That marriage license got you feeling yourself, huh?”

He was teasing, but I wasn’t in the mood for it. “No. I don’t know,” I answered. “I guess I’m trying to make the best of this whole thing.”

The smirk fell from his face. “You know what? I can’t be mad at that. You probably never pictured yourself getting

married in a courthouse. To a stranger.”

*Who shot someone*, I thought to myself.

I didn't respond to what he said. Instead, I leaned in close and took a risk, whispering, “What thing is Joe looking into for you?”

His eyes narrowed. “It don't concern you, Malika.”

“We're married now.”

He shook his head. “On paper. Don't ever forget that. Now, since we got the papers, you can go back to your job if you want. Chill with your friends. *Girlfriends*,” he emphasized. “Long as you keep to the story.”

I decided not to push the issue, especially now that I was apparently getting some of my freedom back.

“What's the story?” I said.

“We got married secretly because...shit, I don't know.” He rubbed his beard. “Maybe...your pops didn't approve.”

That was plenty plausible, actually.

I hadn't even begun to think about how or when I was gonna tell my father about this. Or what I'd say. I wasn't in the habit of lying to him, but it didn't seem like I had much of a choice.

The truth wasn't safe to tell right now.

“Okay, that's the story.” I hoped that would satisfy him. If I could keep him content, he'd probably loosen the reins. Maybe even let me go back home.

His attention was already elsewhere. The menu. The window. The candle at the center of the table.

I sighed.

“So what about dating?” I said.

His eyebrows knitted together. “Dating who?”

“The marriage isn’t real, right? I don’t wanna sit around alone. I like going on dates.”

“I mean...” he trailed off, his forehead creased as if he was in deep thought. “You can’t be out here dating. That wouldn’t make a lick of sense. No nigga worth his salt is letting his wife go out with other dudes. Nope.”

“So then...what?”

“So then I guess I’ma have to take you out sometimes if that’s what you like. If that’ll keep you from shriveling up and shit.”

I chuckled at that. “Gee, thanks.”

He drank half of his water. “So we established that you like to go on dates. Can we talk about what *I* like to do?”

I already knew. Well, one particular part of me did, anyway. It was obvious by the way he was looking at me, his eyes sitting low, lip pulled between his teeth. My mind wanted to me to resist, but my body was good and ready.

I swallowed hard. “What do you like to do?”

His full lips curved into a grin, and a chill went up my spine at the sight of it. “Just keeping it a buck, I love sex,” he said.

“I need it, too. Sometimes I can’t get to sleep unless I nut one good time.”

How romantic.

Our waiter came just then to take our drink orders. I ordered a pina colada. Jakari thought that was hilarious. He laughed at me, then ordered himself a Hennessy and Coke.

“Bartender ordering a pina colada. Ain’t that some shit. Anyway, that’s my thing. I like to fuck. Where do you stand on that? I know I said I wouldn’t touch you, and I won’t if you don’t want me to. But you gotta understand. I can’t go too long without it.”

“Are you asking for permission to have sex with other women?”

“I ain’t *askin*’ shit. I’m telling you where I stand.”

“So you’re *telling* me you’re gonna cheat.”

He spread his hands. “I’m giving you the real and letting you decide.”

I thought that over. “So if I say no to sex, that’s me deciding to let you cheat. Is that what you’re saying?”

He peered at me. “Why do you call it cheating?”

“Because we’re married, and because you think me dating is cheating on you.”

“Well...that’s different.” He rubbed his hands together. “Niggas have sides. It’s just what we do. Wouldn’t nobody bat an eye at that, so it’s not like I’d be out here disrespecting you.

And I wouldn't be parading none of these hoes all over town. But you out in public with another nigga?" He shook his head. "That don't work for me."

"Okay, then what if I wanted to have sex with somebody else in private. Would that be okay if nobody knew?"

His face balled up. "So you won't fuck *me*, your *husband*, but you'd fuck another nigga? Hell, nah. That don't work, either."

"So basically what I'm getting is that until I'm ready to sleep with you, you'll be sleeping with somebody else."

He smiled. "I'll try my best not to, wifey, but I can't make no promises."

# JAKATZI

I WASN'T HERE TO lay my father to rest. In my mind, I'd done that already. Years ago. I was twenty years old when he got shot. Three bullets to the torso. He should have been dead. I thought he would die at the hospital, but miraculously, he survived.

It was bittersweet.

He wasn't the same Lester Windermere. He went through a gang of surgeries, some of which were touch and go, then he needed dialysis, and rehab, and nurse care for the days my mama had to be away. It was a lot on him. And her. And I guess I just made my peace with his death. Every day, I woke up and wondered if today was the day I'd get the call.

So in some ways, this funeral was a relief. The daddy I knew died the day he was shot, and the one I came to know after that was a shell. He hated living like that. Probably would have been better off if we'd let him die. But we didn't. We needed him alive. For love.

And for business.

My daddy ran the family business, and the family business was too important.

I bowed my head as Pastor Franklin led us in prayer. Morris Franklin married my parents, and he'd baptized me and all my siblings. His old ass had one foot in the grave himself, but he was still kicking. The streets said his mistress just had a baby, but I don't go up for all that personal gossip. My only concern is business. Always business.

"Amen," I said begrudgingly. With the prayer out of the way, I finally got a chance to scope out the mourners.

Marshall McGrady was here looking like his usual clown-ass self in his Steve Harvey suit and matching gators. We all roasted him for his fits, but he was solid. He'd been head of security since I was in diapers. Gray Hightower was in the building, too. Only white boy to spend more than ten minutes on this side of Midling. Gray was the descendant of the original settlers of the county, and our high school was named after his people.

Gray was a powerful man.

Byron O'Neal caught my eye and nodded upwards. I returned the favor, but I wasn't exactly happy to see him. He was my father's rival for years before he gave up and got with the winning team. But I never trusted his ass. Still didn't, but I would deal with that later.

I peeped Aubrey Jones standing next to Nay and figured she was his chosen one today. She had his two oldest kids. Shavonne Nash, his other baby mama, was off in the cut with Nay's youngest on her lap.

A few rows back on my right side was my...wife. Fuck, that shit still didn't sound right to me. But there she was in her black dress, only here because I didn't trust her enough yet to leave her home by herself. I would have made Jaz watch her, but she was grieving. I didn't wanna put that on her.

I looked to my left to make sure she was okay. Mama was next to me, and Jaz was next to her. On Jaz's other side was Milo Combs. My eyes narrowed as I watched his arm snake around her waist.

It wasn't that I had any kinda loyalty for Jaz's boyfriend, Terio. I knew he was trouble before I even heard a word of his shitty music. Nah, this shit had my antennas up because Milo was Terio's manager. When he got locked up this last time, he made Milo promise to look after Jaz.

Maybe we had different definitions of looking after my little sister. Mine didn't include fucking on her while she was vulnerable.

I had my eye on that.



THE RIDE TO THE cemetery was quiet. Mama was holding strong, I guess, her eyes hidden behind her Gucci sunglasses. Her emotions were always hidden, though. I'd only seen her



cry like twice in my life. But that's what made her so frustrating. Holding shit in the way she did made the explosions inevitable.

And dangerous.

As soon as they lowered my daddy into the ground, tears burst out my eyes and ran down my face. This shit hurt, I couldn't even front. It felt like my heart, the actual physical organ, was being squeezed into a ball. I guess I'd been in denial about how fucked up I really was behind losing him. He was a complicated man, but I was gonna miss him.

Eris put his arm around me, and Nay came up behind us and put his hands on our shoulders. Three brothers, bonded by grief.

A funny thing, grief. Strong enough to overcome a lifetime of competition and jockeying for position, but could we keep that going after today?

I wasn't hopeful.

Now that my daddy was in the ground, choices had to be made. And after we'd all had a plate at the repast, and I made sure McGrady was watching Malika, we headed to the study to get started making those important decisions.

Time was of the essence.

The game waits for no one, grieving or not.

"Alright," Mama said as she looked around the room. "Nobody wanted this day to come, but it's here. And I'm not

in the mood for no bullshit. We ain't about to be arguing up in here.”

She fixed her gaze on me. “Your daddy wanted Knight to step up into the top spot. Period.”

I hated that fucking nickname. It was my mama's whole thing. She was the queen—that much I agreed with—and Nay was the Duke. I was the Knight, Eris was the Prince, and Jaz was the Princess.

Anyway, it was quiet for almost a full minute before shit popped off.

Nay jumped up and stormed off toward the door, but my uncle Prez got there first. All he had to do was shake his head and Nay stopped right where he was.

“Boy, come sit back down,” Mama said with a sigh.

“Kari?” Eris said. “He ain't even the oldest! I could see if it was Nay, but him?”

“Let alone the fact that his ass ain't been home in years!” Nay said with the assist. “This some bullshit!”

“Why can't y'all all just be at the top together?” Jaz said, and we all ignored it.

Mama pulled a cigarette out of her case and brought it to her mouth. Before she could even get it between her lips, Prez was in front of her with a gold lighter. She accepted his light and took a couple of puffs before she returned her attention to us.

“Knight, the first thing you need to do is get with Gray Hightower. I think he’s okay, but I need you to make sure.”

“Hold on,” Nay said. “So we not even gonna talk about it? It’s Knight, the end?”

“Yeah, basically,” Mama agreed. “Frankly, Duke, and I think you know this...your judgment ain’t shit. You lack self-control. And Prince, you’re too soft. That ain’t a insult, it’s just facts. But most important, this is how your daddy wanted it.”

Nay looked at me sideways like any of this shit was up to me. Eris just stared at the floor, pouting like the annoying little brother he was.

“But if one of you boys feels like you could do better,” she continued, “feel free to try your best to rise to the top. It’s Knight for now, but nobody said it has to stay that way.”

If Jaz felt any kind of way about not even being in the running, she didn’t show it. She just sat there, bored, watching to see what would happen.

“You ain’t got shit to say?” Eris asked me, his nostrils all flared out.

“Not really. I can’t honestly sit here and say I wanna be in this position, but if it’s what Daddy wanted, I guess I’ll do what I gotta do.”

“He don’t even want this shit,” Nay barked.

Eris nodded. “Not only that, but this nigga got a whole fake ass wife out there in the living room. That’s a distraction.”

“No it ain’t,” I defended. “I’m keeping that girl close to keep her quiet, that’s all. Can’t be distracted by something that’s fake.”

“I sure hope that’s true,” Mama said. “I got enough problems dealing with those two bitches Nay knocked up. I don’t need no more female drama.” She looked at my sister. “You got anything to say?”

Jaz shook her head.

“Good.”

“You know what’s foul?” I said. “Ain’t nobody said shit to me about the nigga that tried to kill me. That’s the whole reason I’m in this situation in the first place. Somebody’s at me, and nobody’s making a big enough deal about that for me.”

I looked around the room. “It wouldn’t be one of y’all, would it?”

Everybody had the good sense to look shocked at that accusation, and I’ll admit, I didn’t really think any of my family would put a price on my head. But I’ve been on this earth long enough and seen enough bullshit to know that you can *never* say never.

“You been beefin’ with anybody?” Eris said. “If so, we can dead that shit quick.”

I hid a smile. Competitive or not, me and my brothers didn’t hesitate to ride for each other.

“Nah,” I answered. “I’d only been back here for an hour when dude tried to kill me. That ain’t enough time to piss nobody off.”

“What if it’s the same person who tried to kill Daddy?”

We all looked at Jaz, then I locked eyes with Mama. She was stone-faced as usual.

“It’s possible,” I said. “Anything’s possible.”

“Alright, alright,” my mother said dismissively. “We got guests out there. We’ll convene again tomorrow morning.” She stubbed out her cigarette. “Knight, stay behind.”

I stayed where I was on the couch, marveling at what my mother had become. When my daddy was healthy and strong, she was always in the background and just fine with that. But once he was down, she took over seamlessly, and she did a good job running shit.

McGrady closed the door to the study, leaving just me and mama in the room.

“Why you talking like they have a chance?”

She rolled her eyes. “I just put my husband in the ground. I wasn’t in no mood to argue.” She came and sat next to me. “It was always gonna be you, Knight. You’re the only one with the brains and the temperament for it.”

“And what if I said I didn’t want it?”

She blinked slowly. “I’d be very disappointed. I mean, your brothers are competent, but *you*. You’re a...” she trailed off,

searching for the words. “You’re like a prodigy.”

I chuckled remembering Jaz’s airheaded mistake. “I don’t think that’s true. And listen, I don’t mind helping out. I’m not trying to leave y’all high and dry. I just ain’t trying to stay here too long. I got a life in Atlanta.”

“You were supposed to be out there laying low, not setting up house.”

I shrugged. “I like it there. No demons. No memories.”

She looked away, and I wondered if she felt bad. Or ashamed. “Well, listen, life would go on whether you took over or not. It would just be a very different life, that’s all. This house would probably have to go eventually. The cars. Private school for the kids, that would all have to stop. Vacations. Fancy dinners—”

“I got it, Mama.” She was so good at guilt-tripping. “I’ll do what I can. Gray tomorrow, and we’ll go from there.”

She smiled, and I knew that to mean the conversation was over.

But then she started a new one.

“What’s the deal with wifey out there?”

I made a face. “Ain’t no deal. I’m keeping her close to keep her mouth shut.”

She nodded. “That was a good idea Joe had.”

“Eh. Not really.”

“You don’t like her?”

“I don’t know her.”

I looked down at my buzzing phone.

*Hey, I heard. I just want u 2 know  
I’m here 4 u, baby. If you need 2 talk  
or...anything else*

I smiled. Kittora Wilkins. I called her kitty cat because of her name, and also because her pussy was so good. She was my little piece here in Midling. Since I’d been in Atlanta, we didn’t see each other as much, but a couple of times a year, I would have her driven up so we could chill.

*Preciate it. I’ll hit you up*

I almost told her I’d be in Midling for a while, but after what happened, I didn’t think it was a good idea to be telegraphing my moves to people. I didn’t put it past no female to be a honey pot, especially now that my pops was gone.

Somebody was at me. I just didn’t know who.

I left the study and went to the kitchen to get something to eat. On my way there, a female caught my eye. Somebody I knew well. Somebody who had meant something to me a long time ago.

I stopped right where I was and stared at her, and when her eyes met mine, she smiled.

Suddenly, my day got a little better.





# MALIKA

JAMIE NEWSOME.

Jamie *fucking* Newsome.

I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing. *Who* I was seeing.

She looked almost exactly the same other than a little extra weight and her hair, which was to her shoulders now instead of the Toni Braxton cut she used to rock back in high school.

Jakari's eyes lit up when he saw her. It shouldn't have mattered, and as his hostage, I shouldn't have cared, but as his wife—*technically*—it was a punch to the gut. He looked at me like I was a nuisance. A gnat to be swatted away.

Yeah, I was jealous. *Again*. Of Jamie Newsome. *Again*.

Seething, I watched them hug for a little too long and debated with myself...Say nothing? Go say hi to make my presence known? Make a scene and cuss them both out?

Ultimately, I decided to say and do nothing, because I wasn't actually his wife for real, and therefore had no claims to him. But more importantly, his father was dead. He was grieving, and an old friend was comforting him.

I realized I hadn't done that at all today.

Then again, why would I?

It was so confusing, trying to figure out my place. Is an on-paper wife—married against her will—supposed to be by her legal husband and kidnapper's side?

I hated this.

And I hated that I was even debating it with myself, because that let me know I was actually considering a relationship with this man. With this *murderer*.

I tore my eyes away from Jakari and Jamie and found myself locking eyes with his mother. Her expression was one of amusement, and it made me uneasy.

I didn't like the way she stared at me. It was almost like she was studying me. It was creepy.

She and I had yet to say two words to each other, even though we were living in the same house.

Oh, well. A silent mother-in-law is better than a messy one.



THE NEXT DAY, AFTER a rough night of Jakari tossing and turning, I was getting ready to leave for work when he came out of the kitchen and stopped me. He looked scrumptious in

all black, and I was so flustered, I didn't notice the huge man following behind him at first. I'd never seen him before.

"Yo, this is Cyrus," Jakari said. "He's gonna drive you over the next few days. Maybe longer."

I looked from Jakari to the overgrown man in front of me, then back to Jakari.

"Why do I need a driver? I thought you had somebody drive my car here."

"I did. But this ain't about that."

"So what's it about?"

He stared blankly. "Look, you can either have a driver or a babysitter."

"Babysitter?"

He made a face like he was already sick of talking to me. "If *you* drive, somebody's gon' have to follow you to make sure you go where you're supposed to. If you ride with Cyrus, he'll just drop you and pick you up. That seems better to me, but it's your choice."

Sighing, I put my purse on my shoulder and grabbed my keys, which were useless now.

"When do I get my phone back?"

"When I can trust you," he said matter-of-factly.

The fact that he hadn't budged an inch on that issue was irritating.

I looked up at Cyrus the Giant and rolled my eyes.

“Fine,” I huffed. “I get off at eleven.”

“Oh, we know,” Jakari said, waving me off.

Of course he knew. And his disinterest and sheer fucking *boredom* when it came to me was also irritating. But then again, why did I even care? I was his prisoner. I didn’t wanna be here any more than he did.

That’s what I kept telling myself.



“CAN I HELP—OH. HEY, Dario.”

I didn’t show how shocked I was to see my ex-boyfriend at my job. It had been at least a year since I’d seen him last, and the way he rolled out of my apartment at the crack of dawn without saying goodbye hadn’t left me with good feelings.

He smiled brightly as he settled onto a bar stool. “Miss Malika. Ain’t seen you in a minute. Where you been hiding?”

“Nowhere,” I said with a shrug. “I’ve been right here. You’re the one that’s been MIA. What’s been up with you?”

“Just got back from DC.” His beard and goatee had finally connected. He looked good. Really good.

But not as good as Jakari.

“And what were you doing in DC?”

“Work shit.” He eyed me seductively. “Look at you. You still got it.”

I smiled at that. “Stop it.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Are you gonna order something, or just stare at me?”

“Why not both?”

I chuckled at that as I picked up a bottle of Jack Daniels. I knew exactly what he wanted. He smiled as I poured, then lifted the glass to me before swigging half of it.

“Alright.” He set his glass on the coaster and leaned forward on the bar. “What’s your situation?”

“What do you mean?”

He grinned, showing off his perfect white teeth. “We had fun last time I was here. It seemed like you were down for more. Then I didn’t hear from you.”

I twisted my lips. “Don’t even get to lying, Dario. You left my place and then I never heard from you again.”

“Come on, now. I texted you.”

“Like...a month later.”

“Well, you could have called me if it was that deep. You lowkey ghosted me.”

I let him play in my face because he was a good tipper when he was in a good mood. But deep down? It was fuck him.

“So for real, Malika. What’s been up? You don’t have anything else going on besides pouring drinks?”

“Nope.”

“What about school?”

“Not yet.”

“Sorry.” He sighed his disappointment.

Dario was always on me about school back then. We dated for two years in high school, then he went off to college and we went our separate ways. I stayed here and poured drinks while Dario finished up at Morehouse in three years. He'd always been smart like that.

I think me not going to college ruined his plan to ask me to marry him. He came from a family that cared a lot about status. As a bartender with a high school diploma, I didn't have any.

He eyed me with concern. “No, um...news? About your mom?”

“None at all.”

“Sorry.” He sighed again, then reached out and patted my hand. “I'm here if you ever need to talk.”

I nodded, my eyes filling with tears. I didn't like thinking about my mother. As time passed, it got easier, but when I did let myself remember, I preferred to be at home. In private. Where nobody could see my tears.

“What time do you get off?”

“Eleven.”

“I wanna take you to get something to eat. I'll wait around.”

“No, that's—”

“I just wanna make sure you’re okay. Plus, I feel like I owe you one.”

I blinked the tears away. “I’m fine, Dario, I promise. Just more of the same. But I can handle it.”

“Okay.”

It was at that moment that I remembered my...husband. And his instructions. Even though he wasn’t around, his presence was felt. I didn’t wanna piss him off and lose the little bit of trust he had in me.

“I don’t wanna give you the wrong impression, so I’m just gonna tell you now. I’m married.”

Dario sat back on the stool and frowned. I think he was waiting for me to say I was kidding.

“It just happened,” I explained. “Not even a month ago. I’m a newlywed.”

Weird how a smile materialized on my face as I said it.

“Anybody I know?” he asked, glancing at my empty ring finger.

I stared down at the bar, not wanting to look in his eyes when I said it.

“Jakari.”

“Windermere?!?!” His eyes bucked and his mouth dropped open. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Why?” He knocked back his drink and slammed his glass on the bar. “That family. They’re...you just, you don’t wanna be mixed up with them.”

“Why not?” I said, hoping he had the answer to the question I’d had ever since I saw my husband shoot someone.

Dario looked around nervously. “They have a lot of power in this town, and I’m not sure they got it the right way.” He eyed me. “You’re one of them, now. You should know better than me.”

“All I know is that they own a bunch of businesses.”

He shook his head. “You know what? I’m not getting involved. I want no parts of any of this. But be careful, Malika. They’re as bad as the Hightowers.” He paused. “Maybe worse.”





# JAKAZI

KITTORA KISSED MY NECK with those soft, sweet lips. I'd missed them. Her, too, I guess, but her lips were lethal. I relaxed into the couch cushions as she dotted me with kisses, letting my eyes close, feeling the tension slowly seep out of me.

“You missed me, huh?”

She ran her hands down my chest. “I did,” she whined. “You made me wait too long. I should throw your ass out of here and not let you come back.”

I grabbed a handful of her ass and smirked. “You wouldn't do that, though. Then you wouldn't get this dick.”

She moaned softly and pressed her lips against mine, instantly making me hard.

“That's what you want, ain't it?” I said against her lips.

She nodded.

“Nah, tell me.”

“I want that dick so bad.” Her hand trailed down my body until it was resting on my dick. “It’s ready for me.”

“It’s always ready for you.”

I was leaning up to stick my tongue in her mouth when my phone buzzed. I sat up, accidentally pushing her backwards, and had to catch her before she fell.

“My bad,” I said, distracted. “Lemme just check this real quick.”

“Uh uh.” She sank to her knees in front of me. “The only thing you need to worry about right now is nutting down my throat.”

I wasn’t about to argue about it. I let her suck me off, something she was a pro at. She gagged on my dick, slurping, sucking, moaning. After a few minutes, I gave her the nut she asked for. Shit was good, too. But it always was with her.

My phone buzzed again. This time, I grabbed my phone before Kittora could object. It was a text from one of McGrady’s men.

*Some nigga been in her face all  
night. I don’t recognize him.*

Frowning, I typed back.

*She playing him off or is she into it?  
Can’t tell from where I’m at. She  
keeps laughing though*

Yeah, that shit wasn’t gonna work.

“Something wrong?”

I looked over at my kitty cat and shook my head. “Nah, I just gotta handle something.”

She pouted and flopped down on the couch beside me. I knew she was in brat mode now, and while that usually turned me on, I was too distracted to play along tonight.

“No,” she whined. “You’re not about to leave me wet and turned on. Bring your ass over here.”

I checked my watch. Nine-fifty.

“Raincheck. Alright?”

“You serious?” Her lips formed a pout. “You’re really leaving?”

“Yeah. You know I wouldn’t leave if I ain’t have to.”

More pouting. I leaned over to taste her lips one more time, and her little moan almost made me stay.

I met Kittora at the barbershop. She ain’t have nan son or nephew, but she would find reasons to come up in there and hang out. That’s how I knew she was for the streets. But even after we started fucking, she turned out to be cool. She was easy to talk to. I used to talk to her about a lotta the shit that was on my mind, and she listened. She was good at that, too. Thankfully, she wasn’t the talking type. I hoped it stayed that way.

I made it home in twenty minutes and went straight to the study. After doing some looking around on the net, I made a

decision. And a purchase.

I was just closing out when Mama walked in wearing a housedress, a beer in one hand and a cig in the other. She didn't look anything like herself, but I guess that happens when you're grieving.

"You got a minute?"

I nodded.

"How do you feel now that it's all over?"

I shrugged. "I don't really know, to be honest. You?"

"I'll miss him, but I made my peace with the fact that I lost him a long time ago."

"Mama. You can't let one little thing undo all the years y'all were together."

She blew out a smoke ring. "Fucking another woman is one little thing?"

"In the grand scheme of things. Right?"

"Wrong."

"I know he hurt you. It hurt me, too. But what's the point of dwelling on it? I'd say he learned his lesson."

She chuckled. "That, he did."

We sat with that for a moment.

That's the thing about betraying your family. Not only do you hurt them in the moment, but you rob them of their right

to grieve you completely when you pass. You leave a legacy of confusion, tainted memories, and resentment.

I loved my daddy, and I always would, but I hated him for that.

Mama drank from her beer. “So how do we go about finding your assassin?”

“No need to find him. He’s exactly where he should be. Six feet under.”

“Who sent him?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Find out.”

“I mean, I got people on it, but it ain’t that easy.”

“It is for you.” She smiled fondly. “You always been smart. I think God gave you extra smarts. Probably gave you Jaz’s brains by accident.”

“Ease up, Ma. For real.”

“Oh, you know I’m just playing around.”

She wasn’t, and we both knew it.

“Speaking of, I got a question for you. What’s the deal with Jaz and Milo?”

Mama shrugged and blew a puff of smoke to her right. “Far as I know, he’s looking after her.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Nope. In fact, I’d love to see somebody slap a ring on that girl and drag her the hell out of here. She’s stunted. Emotionally, or something. I don’t know. I did my best but that girl...she ain’t all there.”

I sighed and shook my head at that. One more thing to add to my fucking plate. Mind you, Jaz wasn’t smart. It was common knowledge. But the way my mama talked to her was way outta pocket. Nobody ever stood up for Jaz like that because they didn’t wanna find themselves on the wrong side of Gab Windermere. But something had to give.



I WAS HANDLING SOME business on my phone when Malika came home from the bar. It was a little after midnight when she walked in and greeted me. I stared at her reflection in the dresser mirror and decided to set something straight.

“How was work?”

“Fine.” She took off her earrings. The bracelets followed. Then the watch. “It was work. Same as always.”

“I heard it was like a party up in there tonight.”

She frowned at me in the mirror. “What are you talking about?”

“Something about some nigga grinnin’ all up in your face.”

She turned around. “You were watching me?”

“Somebody was.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’s just a friend.”

“What’s his name?”

“Why, so you can kill him, too?”

I chuckled at that, and at the fact that her eyes went wide after she said it, like she knew she fucked up.

“You funny,” I said. “Nah, just making sure nobody’s getting at you to get at me.”

Her face fell, then she frowned before letting out a loud sigh. “His name is Dario. We went to high school together. That’s all.”

“Y’all fucked?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“So, yes.”

She crossed her arms in front of her. “Did you fuck Jamie Newsome?”

“Hold up. Where that come from?”

“She was comforting you yesterday. I know y’all used to mess around.”

“How you know that?”

“I went to high school with you, Jakari. I was in the same class as Jamie.”

I narrowed my eyes and stared, trying my best to place her face. I came up with nothing.

“Damn. I don’t remember you.”

“I know that.”



“Don’t take that shit personal, sweetheart. There were a lot of girls at Hightower. I probably just never got around to you, that’s all.”

“Ugh.” She shook her head in disgust and turned back around to look at her reflection.

I watched her pull a hair tie off her wrist and use her hand to pull her hair to the top of her head. She wrapped it in the hair tie, making a little bun. With her hair up, I had a direct view of the back of her neck. It wasn’t an area I’d ever paid attention to on a female, but for some reason, I stared at it.

The skin was smooth. The color, almond brown. There was a little black mole on the right side. When she went to brush the stray hairs up into the bun, I noticed her fingers. They were long and pretty with clear polish on the nails.

Since I was already staring, I let my eyes drift down, past the Sliders logo on the back of her work t-shirt. They stopped at her waist, and I admired the slight curve there. Malika wasn’t the thickest by any means, but she had a sexiness about her.

Kittora’s fineness was in your face like BAM! Ass, titties, hips. You can’t help but see when you look at her. I loved that, but I wasn’t mad at what Malika was working with. You kinda had to look for it, but when you did, it was like finding a buried treasure.

Like the slight curve of her ass and the shapeliness of her thighs. Her body reminded me of a dancer.

Why *didn't* I notice her in high school?

“You bout to take a shower?” I asked quietly, still staring.

“Mm hm.”

“Alright. Enjoy yourself.”

That was a stupid thing to say, and judging by the look she shot me, she thought the same thing. It wasn't my fault, though. I just couldn't think of anything to say in the moment that wasn't about me fucking her from behind.

She showered quick and was back in ten minutes, fully dressed in leggings and a long t-shirt. I was a little disappointed by the amount of clothes she was wearing, but I guess I couldn't blame her.

She stood in the mirror and rubbed some cream on her face.

“To answer your question,” I said, even though I didn't really owe her an explanation, “me and Jamie had sex in high school. We were together. We're not fucking now, though. I ain't seen or talked to her in years.”

She shrugged like she hadn't asked me the question. “It's whatever. It's not really my business.”

“Then why you ask me?”

She stopped rubbing and turned to face me. With no makeup, and kinda shiny, her face was pretty as hell.

“Because you asked about Dario.”

“You never answered.”

“Okay, yes. Back in high school. He was my first.”

I nodded. Truth be told, I'd fucked so many girls, I couldn't even remember who my first was. And I started way before high school.

"You still got feelings for him?"

"I don't know."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. I'm not sure why it bothered me, but it did.

"He treated me very well," she continued. "A lot of girls regret their first, but I don't. I'll always have good feelings toward him." She crossed her arms. "Do you still have feelings for Jamie?"

"Nah. Not like that." That was the truth. "It was cool of her to come to the service, but I'm good on her."

"Well, Dario asked me out. Tonight."

"And what did you say?" I tried to keep my voice even and not show how much that irritated me. She wasn't my wife for real, but...shit. I don't know. I wasn't feeling dude being up in her face while she was married to me. Point blank.

"I said no. Like you ordered me to," she answered.

"Why you say it like that? *Ordered*, like I forced you."

"That's how it came across when you forbid me to date anybody else."

I sighed. "Look, let's just...let's make the best of this shit. I know it's a fucked up situation, but you ain't gotta keep reminding me."

She made her way over to her side of the bed and sat. “I’m a prisoner, no matter which way you look at it. I don’t think it’s fair to expect me to act like I’m happy about being held hostage.”

So fucking dramatic.

She smelled good as fuck, though.

“Okay, well, what would make you feel like you free and not a *hostage*?” I emphasized it so she’d know how ridiculous it sounded. “Keep in mind that this shit gotta look believable to everybody else.”

“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess. I can’t go home, so…” she trailed off.

“What’s at home?”

“My sister. My nephew. My bed. My snacks and candles and books.” Her eyes bounced around my room. “This is a really nice room, but I don’t feel at home here.”

Yeah, my room was nice. Big, high ceiling, a gang of windows. My mama hadn’t changed it since I was here last, but my taste had always been good.

But I guess none of that mattered to Malika. And I couldn’t really blame her.

“Alright, here’s what we’ll do,” I said. “Tomorrow, we’ll go to your place so you can visit with your people. You can grab some of your shit while you’re there.”

I expected her to be happy about that, but instead, she just looked away and said, “That’s okay.”

I had a feeling she didn’t want me anywhere near her family. I understood *that*, too.

“Then let me take you shopping. Buy some shit you like. Shit that’ll make you more comfortable. Then we’ll get lunch or something. That’ll meet my date quota for the week.”

She rolled her eyes, but it was playful. “Fine.”

With that taken care of, I finished up the business I was handling when she came home. After setting my alarm, I tried and failed to fall asleep, once again cursing my appetite for sex. Just one orgasm would have knocked me out, but it wasn’t happening.

I was laying next to my wife and couldn’t even touch her.

“My bad for not noticing you back in the day,” I said in the darkness. “I don’t know why I didn’t.”

The only sound that followed my comment was her soft, slow breathing.



# MALIKA

“SORRY, I DIDN’T KNOW you were in here.”

Ms. Windermere blew out a smoke ring and smiled. It was an unsettling image, a bit like the calm before the storm, or the baring of fangs before the animal attacks and bites your face off.

But all she said was, “Are you hungry?”

“No ma’am. Just thirsty.”

“Girl, call me Gab. None of that ma’am stuff around here.”

“Okay.”

It was early afternoon. I didn’t have to be at work until five, so I was killing time until Cyrus showed up to take me to Sliders. Jakari was gone when I woke up, so I sat holed up in the bedroom reading an old magazine I found in his closet. I would have stayed there if I hadn’t gotten thirsty.

I made my way over to the refrigerator to hunt down a bottle of water. I could feel her eyes on me, boring holes into

my back like red laser beams on a rifle. I shuddered as I grabbed a bottle and closed the fridge door.

“Who are your people?” she said.

I turned to face her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, who are your people. Y’all from Midling?”

“Oh. Yes. Well, my dad is. My mom wasn’t.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Who’s your daddy?”

“Freddie Andrews. He went to Blane.”

“Oh, okay. I went to Hightower.”

“Me too.”

“That’s why you look familiar.” She took another pull and released the smoke through her nostrils. “You were in Kari’s class?”

“No. A few years behind. He didn’t know me.”

“Yeah. But you knew him, right?”

I nodded.

“You knew him but he didn’t know you. That’s how it goes.” She smiled. “You had a crush on him?”

“Everybody did.”

She chuckled. “And now you’re married to him. So I guess you won.”

“Technically. On paper.”



“Right.” She peered at me. “Well, make yourself at home. Might as well get comfortable.”

I nodded. “If you ever need me to do the dishes or take the trash out or cook something, I can.”

Gab’s eyes bucked for a split second before she caught herself. She struck me as a woman who liked to keep her emotions in check. After a few beats, she smiled. “That’s very nice of you. I’ll let you know. Or you can just step in whenever. There’s plenty to do around here.”

“You have a beautiful home.”

She shrugged. Her face was free of obvious makeup, although I suspected she was wearing foundation, or at least concealer. Her skin was smooth and even, her features perfectly symmetrical. She was beautiful. You could see the years on her face, but they were kind years, and the lines and crinkles only made her more attractive. But her eyes were tired and her posture was poor. She looked beat down.

“I don’t think I got a chance to tell you I’m very sorry for your loss.”

Gab didn’t respond. Jaz walked in just then, her face firmly in her phone.

“We were just talking about you,” Gab said.

I frowned at that.

Jaz looked up. “Huh?”

“I was just telling Malika here that I should make her my daughter and you the daughter-in-law. She actually believes in contributing to the household.”

Gab forced out a laugh as Jaz’s face fell. I felt terrible for her, but I didn’t dare negate anything her mother had said. Something told me not to get on that woman’s bad side.

“Just kidding,” Gab said flatly. “There’s lunch in there if you’re hungry. Chicken salad.”

Jaz put her phone on the counter and walked over to the fridge. She looked fly as always. Gab looked at me and rolled her eyes, making me a co-conspirator in whatever was happening here.

I wanted no parts of it.



“SO *all* the candles gotta smell like cookies?”

“They don’t all smell like cookies.”

“Okay, cookies and pumpkins.”

I laughed heartily, something I hadn’t done since this whole ordeal began.

Jakari had done just fine at the grocery store when we bought the snacks I like, and at Target, where I got my toiletries and a few books, but for some reason, Bath and Body Works and these candles were where he drew the line.

“They aren’t as loud when you burn them,” I defended. “Besides, you said you wanted me to be comfortable.”

“Aight, whatever.”

He stared at his phone while I selected my last candle. He'd been looking at it all day. I also noticed that he looked around a lot, almost like he was scanning the area for threats. It was weird, and a little concerning.

After he paid for the candles, he took my bags from me. It was a nice gesture, relatively, I guess. I was still his prisoner, after all.

But it was...I don't know...kind of turning out to be a gilded cage. Now that I knew he wasn't gonna shoot me and dump my body somewhere, I was relaxing a little. Letting my guard down. And remembering just how hard I used to crush on him.

When we got to the car, he opened my door as he'd done all day. The chivalry was nice, too.

He settled in on the driver's side and cranked up the car. When the radio came on, the bass made my ears rattle. He turned it down to ask, “You know where you wanna eat?”

“I don't know. You can pick.”

He smirked. “Lemme find out you easy.”

“Easy?”

“Yeah. Low-maintenance.” He pulled into the afternoon traffic. “Last girl I asked where she wanted to eat, it turned into a fight.”

“I don’t really like to argue or fight. I guess that’s easy, I don’t know.”

“Don’t keep shit bottled up, though. You gotta know how to defend yourself. Be about your business and don’t let nobody run over you. Even me.”

I didn’t respond to that.

We ended up at Applebaum’s, which is Midling’s bootleg version of Applebee’s. Country as hell, but it was pretty delicious.

“What else you like to do on dates besides eat?” Jakari asked.

“Well, it’s Midling. It’s only so much you can do here.”

“True. I bet you’d like Atlanta, though.”

“Maybe.” I broke off a piece of bread and popped it in my mouth. “Oh my God, this bread is everything.”

He smiled. “Slow down, girl. We bout to feast, but you gotta pace yourself.”

“I like to eat.”

“Shit, me, too. We got that in common, I guess. I don’t know where your food goes, though, Lil Bit.”

I *hated* that nickname when I was younger, but somehow, it didn’t sound bad when he said it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “I got you something.”

He set it on the table. My brain didn’t register it at first; it’s like I saw it but didn’t understand.

It was a small, black, velvet box.

I swallowed quickly. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Open it.”

I did, and it was exactly what I thought it was.

Round cut. Platinum setting. Smaller diamonds graced the band. I stared at it and felt conflicted. It was gorgeous, the kind of wedding ring you dream about, but this wasn't a real marriage. I was a prisoner.

In a gilded cage.

“Why did you buy me this?”

Jakari shrugged and took a sip of his water. “Can't have you out here looking single.”

“It's beautiful.”

“I know. So why you ain't put it on your finger yet?”

“I...” I tore my eyes away from the ring to look at his face. “I don't know. I'm sure there were probably much cheaper ways to mark your territory.”

He ignored that. He wiped his hands on his napkin before reaching over to grab the box. He pulled the ring from its cushion and gestured to my hand.

I gave it to him and let him slide that beautiful ring onto my finger. The fit was perfect somehow, and I couldn't stop myself from turning my hand back and forth, staring at the sparkles and hiding my smile.

He didn't hide his, though.

“Cool,” he said. “Now it’s *official* official. Technically.”

“What was it before?” I teased.

“Shit, I don’t know. Lemme see.”

I held my hand up.

“Check you out. Lookin’ like a trophy wife.”

I laughed at that.

But I had to admit...this was fucking *weird*.

I felt disoriented, like I was watching someone else’s life take place. My good sense kept trying to remind me that I was a *victim* of this man, but looking at his handsome face, and the rock on my finger, was making my good sense fade. Fast.

“My daddy always said you gotta reward people for their loyalty,” he said. “You been in this for a few weeks now and you ain’t snitched. You been real cool about the shit, actually, so consider that a thank you.”

I nodded.

We got to talking, and by the time our entrees came, I’d learned that he loved kids but didn’t have any, his favorite color was blue, his middle name was Lawrence, and that he left Midling eight years ago.

But he didn’t say *why* he left, and I was very curious about that.

I didn’t get the chance to ask, though, because he started opening up a little.

I wasn’t prepared for what came out of his mouth.

He cleared his throat. “Listen. I feel like...you’re in this family, now. On paper, but still. So you have a right to know what you’re mixed up in.” He drank from his beer bottle. “I’d wanna know if I was you.”

“Okay...” I said, my stomach tying itself into knots.

“My daddy’s side of the family been in Midling since...shit, the 1800s.”

“You can trace that far back?”

He nodded. “Not all the way. I don’t know exactly when they came here, but I know my great-granddaddy was a sharecropper. Picked cotton all day. After a while, him and his son was basically like, ‘this some bullshit.’ They started making moonshine and selling it like water. Came up big time.”

“Wow. Was that legal?”

“Nah. Midling was still dry back then, and that was after Prohibition. They were on some extra religious shit, for real. No alcohol, no jazz...you know they called it devil music.”

I laughed at that.

“Nah, for real.”

“That’s amazing, though. That they were able to make money back then when everything was so bleak for black folks.”

He nodded.

“So your family is in the liquor business?”

“Not exactly.” He took another swig and leaned closer to me. “My daddy got involved in the business when he was, like, sixteen. He was young. And it just so happened to be during the crack era.”

My heart sank.

“I can see in your eyes that you know where I’m going with this.”

“Y’all are drug dealers?”

“Not anymore. My father got out...well, if you can call it that. Maybe it makes more sense to say he transitioned to a different business. He started cleaning the money. And that’s what we do now. We’re cleaners.”

I stared blankly. “I don’t know what that means.”

He leaned even closer, his eyes darting wildly before he finally said, “You never heard of money laundering?”

“Yes, but I can’t say I know the ins and outs of it.”

“Almost all the drug money in this city comes past us. We run it through our businesses. Pretty simple. Safer, too.”

“Except...somebody tried to kill you, right? How is that safer?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I’m not convinced that was about work. I...I don’t know yet.”

I wanted to ask if I should be worried, but it seemed like a stupid question. A *real* wife would worry, but I—his prisoner—should have been excited by the possibility that someone



might come along and take him out of the equation. Free me. Get rid of all my troubles.

But I wasn't.

At all.

The thought of him being killed actually made me ache.

“So I take it this whole cleaning thing is illegal.”

“Of course. But we got enough powerful people on the payroll to make sure it ain't a problem.” He ate the last of his burger. “But now that my daddy's gone, some shit might change. And not for the better.”

I didn't bother to ask for details that I knew he'd never give. Instead, I said, “Is it something that's fixable?”

“I hope so. I ain't trying to stay in this town no longer than I have to.”

I waited a few beats before gathering up my courage. “Why did you leave?”

“A few reasons.” He answered too fast for me. I knew he was hiding something.

“Reasons like...?”

“It don't matter.”

“It must matter if you won't tell me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I told you this already, but I'm gonna repeat it. Just this once. Don't ever let yourself forget that we're only married on paper.”

I nodded. Duly noted.

I'd been thinking about letting him hit, too.

Too bad. He just killed it.



# JAKAZI

*I STEP THROUGH THE front door on high alert. I know something's wrong, but I don't have the details. I hear my mother crying. At least, I think it's my mother. Before I see anything, I smell blood. It's so strong, I can taste the metal on my tongue. My stomach churns.*

*Everything in me is telling me to run, but I press forward, one foot, then the other, until I see. My heart sinks. My eyes water and blur. It's my father.*

*Oh, no.*

*So much blood.*

I woke up with a start, gasping for air and drenched with sweat. Malika was still knocked out on her side of the bed. I was glad. I didn't feel like explaining my disheveled state. I wanted to forget everything, but I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

The nightmares were back.

I hadn't had one since I moved to Atlanta. Eight whole years of freedom. That couldn't have been a coincidence. But now? I was haunted once again. His face. Her face. The blood. The fear. The confusion.

I scrubbed a hand down my face and laid back down, still dazed, my heart still pounding.

Coming back here was a big fucking mistake.



I STOOD IN GRAY Hightower's two-story foyer and looked around me. Gray had the kinda house that was designed just to impress you. It didn't look like a place where people actually lived. It was big as fuck, lavish, and kitted out, but cold. Nothing like my parents' house.

"So how long's it been?" he drawled after we shook hands.

"I don't even know. Last time I was in Midling, you were in...Chicago?"

"Toledo," he corrected.

"What's in Toledo?"

"Not a damn thing, I'm afraid."

We shared a laugh at that, and Gray began leading me toward the dining room. He was a strange man, but then again, he was white. Not cool, down-ass white like some of my boys from high school. Gray was *white* white. Country club, ivy league, ancestors pulled up to this bitch on the Mayflower white.

White like cocaine, too. My daddy said he learned the phrase “hookers and blow” from Gray and his circle. He was drunk when he told me that. He never would have, otherwise.

“Mimi made something good,” he said. “We’ll sit and talk over dinner. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Yeah, man. Starving.”

As soon as we were seated, Mimi appeared. She was in a black and white maid uniform and smiling bright, almost like one of those black women you see in those old racist movies. Like the maid on *Gone with the Wind*.

“Gentlemen,” she said with a nod. “Tonight, I’ll be serving braised pork shoulder, roasted rosemary new potatoes, green vegetable medley, and honey butter cornbread.”

Gray rubbed his stomach. “Sounds amazing, Mimi. We’re ready.”

She grinned, and I wondered if she was really that damn happy to be cooking and cleaning for these white folks.

Anyway, when she shuffled off to get our food, I scooted my chair forward and raised my eyebrows.

“Not yet,” Gray said. “Let’s wait for the wine.”

I nodded. I could small talk for a little while.

“So, how are your kids? Cece and...Brent?”

“Brett,” he corrected. “They’re fine. Cece got married last year. I fucking hate her husband.”

“Word?”

“Completely useless. I had to bring him on at the firm just for him to be able to get a house.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t even wanna talk about it. Brett’s doing exceptionally well. He finished up his residency and opened his own practice up in Southland.”

“Oh. Nice. Good for him.”

I didn’t give a fuck about none of that.

Ten minutes later, with wine in hand, Gray finally got to the business of why I was here. I was glad, because I wasn’t comfortable in his house.

“I have to tell you,” he said, “I’m concerned about the future of our enterprise.”

*Our* was a strange choice of words, but I let him cook.

He sipped his wine. “Ever since you’ve been back, there’s been an uptick in crime.”

“Aside from that incident at Sliders, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A murder is hardly an incident.”

I shrugged that off. “What else was there, man?”

He set his glass on the table. “A shooting on Hyacinth near the barber shop. A fire at the bakery. And just yesterday, somebody broke into that clothing store near the new Publix. These were all Windermere establishments, last I checked.”

His eyebrow raised as he studied my face. “You didn’t know?”

“Of course I knew,” I lied. “I’ve been busy the last few days laying my father to rest. Wasn’t much time to deal with anything else.”

“Of course. I understand. It’s just...I don’t need the city council up my ass. And don’t get me started on the police.”

“I’ll handle it, Gray. I just need a little time.”

He picked his glass back up and swirled his wine. “I’m curious about something.”

“What’s that?”

“Why did your father leapfrog over your brother to put you in charge?”

I took a deep breath. “To be honest, it’s complicated. He had his reasons. But we all respect it. We’re on one accord.”

Gray chuckled. “Family dynamics are complicated. I get it.” He took a slow sip and swallowed. “When Neymar came to me a while back—”

“Wait. My brother? When was this?”

He was trying his best not to smile. Messy ass.

“Last month.”

I spoke slowly and tried to keep my voice even. “And what did he want?”

“He wanted the same thing I want.” Gray downed the rest of his wine. “For the transition to go smoothly. He was speaking of the future, of course, but we were in agreement.”



I let that sink in. My mind raced for a minute thinking about Nay and the fact that he didn't tell me none of this before I walked my ass up in the Hightower house. But I shook that shit off and got myself together.

“Well, I agree, too. I want everything to go smooth. There shouldn't be any changes to the setup, the traffic, the points. Matter of fact, if I had my way, the points would be going up by a percentage or two. But I'll need to figure that out.”

Gray nodded. “It's uncanny.”

“What is?”

“You sound just like your father.”

He meant it as a compliment, but it just made me more uneasy. I didn't *wanna* be good at any of this shit. I wanted to go back to Atlanta and leave Midling and all its skeletons in my rearview mirror.

“By the way, I, uh, recently got married.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

Mimi came back in just then and delivered our meals. They looked and smelled good as hell.

“I guess my invitation got lost in the mail,” Gray joked.

“There weren't any. We went to the courthouse. Just wanted to hurry up and make it official.”

“Anyone I know?”

I bit into the cornbread and felt the urge to slap my mama. “Not sure. Malika...”

Fuck. What was her last name?

“...Andrews. You know her people?”

Gray looked away for a second and cleared his throat. “Doesn’t ring a bell. But enjoy it, man. Especially the beginning. The honeymoon stage is a blast.”

I wouldn’t fucking know.

Me and Gray finished up our business by the time dessert—peach cobbler—was served. But other than a nice case of itis, I didn’t feel better when I left. I just felt like the shit I had to do had multiplied by a hundred.

I dialed up Joe on my way home, hoping he had some news on the shooter and the investigation. His ass didn’t answer. Probably laid up with some female. I needed him to work a little harder and a lot faster. If the police weren’t sniffing around me, that meant I could end this fake ass marriage and be done with Malika.

Not that I hated her or anything. She was cool so far, especially given the situation she was in. Cool as fuck, really.

Like that first night at the bar. I didn’t miss how she reminded me to grab my phone—evidence that pointed to me—before we escaped. That’s some real rider shit. I expect that out of girls like Jaz and Kittora, because they were about that life. But Malika wasn’t, and it still came natural to her. A natural rider. I fucked with that heavy.

It didn’t matter, though. Just cuz she was cool didn’t mean I wanted to stay married to her, especially since I couldn’t

smash.

The house was quiet when I came home. I went straight to the shower, and when I went into my bedroom wearing my towel, Malika was sitting up in the bed, her eyes on my body.

“What’s up with you?” I asked. Making more small talk. “How your day go?”

She smiled and brought her eyes up to my face. “It was fine. Talked to my nephew. I missed him.”

I went to my dresser to get some lotion. “You called from work?”

“...Yes. Was that wrong?”

“Nah. Actually, you can probably get out there to see him soon.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed cherry almond Jergens—my favorite—on my body and caught her staring at me again in the mirror. It excited me.

“You would let me go by myself?” she finally said.

“Maybe.”

Her face fell.

“Look, it’s gonna take me a little time to trust you, that’s all.”

“Whatever.”

I turned around. “Aye, it ain’t no need to catch a attitude. This ain’t the ideal situation for me, either. I gotta lay next to you every night and not fuck, and I can’t fuck nobody else. That shit is frustrating.”

She scrunched her face all up. “Why do you say fuck all the time?”

“Cuz I can. What’s the fuckin’ problem?”

Nothing.” She rolled her eyes. “I cuss, too, but not as much as you.”

“Like I said, I’m frustrated. As *fuck*.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

I stared at her. “When can *I* get that?”

As mad as she was, she couldn’t stop herself from laughing.

“I’m serious. You got a nigga struggling.”

“I wish I had an answer for you,” she said. “I don’t know.”

“I’m trying to figure out the issue.” I walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of my side. “I mean, I know you’re attracted to me.”

“Your mother told you that?”

“Ain’t nobody gotta tell me that. *Look* at me.”

I was joking, but she damn sure looked, and it was clear she liked what she saw. “So with that being the case, what you waitin’ on?”

She tore her eyes away. “I need to be comfortable with you.”

“I thought we were making progress on that.”

“We made some progress, yes. But like you said, it’s gonna take me a little time to trust you.”

“Using my shit against me. That’s cold.”

She sighed. “Okay. You want me to spell it out? Fine. The issue is that my pussy will never get wet for the man who kidnapped me.”

Something about the way she said *pussy* made goosebumps erupt all over me. My eyes fell from her eyes to her lips. They were full. Looked soft. All of her did, though.

“You still on that? First off, I didn’t kidnap you. And second —”

“What do you call this?” She gestured to my room around her. “I’m stuck here. You won’t let me leave!”

“It’s not that I won’t. I can’t. Not right now.” I turned and stretched out on my back on the bed, getting comfortable in my spot. “And second, you can’t say never about your pussy.”

“It’s *my pussy*. I can say what I want.”

“You can say that about niggas you already fucked with, but that never shit don’t apply to me.”

“How do you figure?”

I looked over at her and smiled. “Cuz your pussy ain’t met me yet.”

Her mouth fell open.

“I’m just saying.”

She swallowed hard. “I’m not ready.”

That made my smile even bigger. “So not no, just not *yet*.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Yes it is.”

She was quiet.

“Look, it’s whatever. I ain’t gon press you no more. But we been married for a little while and we ain’t even kissed yet.”

“Well...”

“I know I told you I love sex, but I also love kissing.”

She was quiet for a long time, so I thought the conversation was over.

“Why?” she said. “Why do you love it?”

“I don’t know. The intimacy of it, I guess. It’s sexy.”

“Right. It gets everything started. Why would I kiss you knowing I’m not sleeping with you?”

“Cuz it can also be like a...shit, a preview. And look, I ain’t no teenager. A kiss ain’t gon get me riled up like that. Trust me.”

“Good to know.”

“Yeah. So...what’s up?”

“Jakari.”

“Let me taste them lips, Malika.”

She was real quiet, thinking about it, I guess. While she sat there wasting time, I got up and walked over to the wall to turn off the light. The lamp on the nightstand was still on, but that was fine. I wanted to see her. I kinda liked looking at her.

“So what’s up?” I repeated.

I was surprised when she stood up. She approached me slow like I was a wild animal or something. That was kinda true, though, I suppose. The way I was feeling, I wanted to pounce on her and tear her little ass up. All night long.

Instead, I waited, staring at her face as she got closer to me. Those big eyes stared right back, and I started feeling weird. Like I’d had a few drinks. I noticed her hair was out and wild around her face. She looked sexy as fuck.

When she was right up on me, I stared down at her lips and wrapped an arm around her waist. She fit right in there, and something about that made my heart beat faster.

“Just one kiss, Jakari.” She almost whispered it.

I chuckled and pulled her to me. “I told you, a kiss ain’t nothin’ to me. I’m good.”

She nodded and leaned in. I dipped my head to meet her. The second our lips touched, my eyes closed and everything went quiet around me.

They were soft and silky, and so pillowy, they seemed to collapse under the weight of mine. Warm. Moist. I breathed

deep as my other arm snaked around her waist, pulling her in closer until her body was pressed against mine.

Her kiss was needy. Her lips grabbed mine and told them to give her more. So I did, and when her arms circled my neck, my dick stood at attention. I'd told her a kiss didn't mean shit, but that was a lie. Kissing always took me there, and I knew that, but I didn't wanna scare her away, so I lied.

And it was worth it.

Especially when she slipped her tongue into my mouth.

The fact that she was the one to take it there got me going even more. Riled up now, I deepened the kiss and let my hands drift lower and lower until they were gripping her ass. Malika wasn't working with a whole lot, but it didn't matter. Her little curve felt good against my hands.

"Mmmmmmm," she moaned softly.

Fuck.

*That* was the wrong thing to do.

My dick was painfully hard now. Every soft swipe of her tongue made it jump, and I knew if I didn't stop now, I'd pay for that shit later. So I gradually eased up, giving her a final peck before I pulled away.

"See?" I said, trying to play it cool. "No big deal."

Her eyes left mine and fluttered down to the tent my dick was making in my towel. Embarrassed, I stepped back and



adjusted myself as best I could. She kept staring, her face blank.

“Study long, you study wrong.”

“Huh?”

“Quit staring at my dick, Malika.”

She finally looked up. “But I thought you said—”

“I told you I like to kiss. I can’t control my body’s reaction to it. It don’t mean shit. I’m good.”

If she knew I was lying, she didn’t let on. I knew, though, and a few minutes later, I was in my bathroom beating off, trying to ward off the blue balls I knew were coming.

It didn’t quench my thirst, though.

I wanted *her*.



# MALIKA

I WASN'T DRESSED NICELY enough for Briar Lake Baptist Church.

It was like a fashion show, and every female congregant I saw was flyer than the next. I was hella self-conscious in my skinny jeans, sweater, and flats, but it was all I had. I couldn't fit anything of Jaz's, hard as I tried.

Apparently it was the one day a month when the whole family went to church with Gab. No exceptions. I couldn't believe all these grown ass adults let themselves get roped into it, especially since it was clear none of them wanted to be here. but there we all sat in the pew, playing the role while Gab smiled and waved and acted like the queen of everything.

The pastor—Pastor Franklin—called Jakari out by name to welcome him home. I still wanted to know why he left and what the big deal was, but I made peace with the fact that he might not ever tell me. Why would he? Despite our kiss the night before, we were still strangers. He had no reason to trust me.

After the service, we had to greet and hug a bunch of people. Jakari was gracious through it all, and it was interesting to watch. He was skilled at making each person feel like he missed them the most. Like he was super interested in what they'd been up to while he was gone. He was charming and kind. Nothing like the scary man I saw outside of Sliders that night.

Although...maybe that man wasn't scary at all. Maybe he'd really just been defending himself. And isn't that what you want? A man who doesn't back down, who doesn't let himself get caught slipping, a man who's one step ahead. Doesn't every woman want a man who knows how to handle himself?

Gab wanted everyone to go to brunch after church, and I was relieved when Jakari declined the invitation. Once he said no, she immediately changed her mind and decided to cook brunch for everybody at the house.

Their dynamic was so strange to me. There was something there, I just wasn't sure what.

On the car ride home, I turned off the radio and turned to my on-paper husband.

“You didn't introduce me to anybody.”

It was a statement, not an accusation. I was relieved when he took it as such.

“Yeah, I didn't wanna lie in church. Besides, you didn't seem like you wanted to be there anyway. If I'd introduced you as my wife, we would have been there another two hours.”

“Well then I appreciate it.”

He chuckled.

“You like going?” I said.

He shrugged. “I don’t *dislike* it. I really only go for my mother.”

“Yeah. I get that. That’s how it was for me. I grew up going to Lindell Street Baptist. I stopped going a few years ago, though.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “It didn’t feel the same without my mom.”

“Yeah, what’s the deal with that? You said she left, but like, where’d she go?”

I let out a sigh. “I have no idea. One day she was there, the next, she wasn’t. My dad...” I trailed off. The pain was still fresh, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to share it with him. I didn’t really talk about it anymore, with anyone. Not even Dionne.

“What about him?” Jakari asked.

“He...he never even looked for her.”

“Why not?”

“Well, she was...erratic.” I stared out the window, dreading the next part. I didn’t like thinking about it, much less saying it out loud. “She’d been on drugs before, but I’m pretty sure she was clean by the time she left. I don’t know.”

“She never called? Texted? Nothing?”

“Never. And I always got the feeling my dad knew what happened and didn’t wanna tell us. The way he acted...it was weird.”

“Damn. I’m sorry.”

I nodded. “You know what else was weird? He packed up and left. A few years ago, he said he had to get out of Midling.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Tampa.”

“That’s better?”

I chuckled as tears filled my eyes. “Right. It doesn’t make sense.”

“You think your pops had something to do with it?”

“No. I don’t know. I watch a lot of *Dateline*. I know the husband is usually the one. I can’t see him doing that, but why would he move? The only reason I’m still here is because... what if she came back? What if she showed up on the doorstep and all her family was gone? How would she find us?”

A lone tear streamed down my cheek.

The car came to a stop. Thinking we were home already, I looked up. We were in a Wendy’s parking lot.

“What are we doing here?”

Jakari put the car in park and turned to face me. “I don’t know. Just wanted to pull over and make sure you were okay.”

He stared at me intently, like he was trying to read me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He was quiet. “When I think about it, I don’t know if it’s better to know. I guess it is. I mean, you still have some hope that she might come back. Is that better? Like, do you prefer that to...dead? Like my pops?”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it.” I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. “But I do wanna know, one way or the other. If she’s...gone, I’d have to make peace with it, but at least my life would go on.”

“So that’s why you’re keeping yourself stuck here in Midling? Just in case?”

“I guess.”

His eyes fell to my hand like he was thinking about holding it. But he didn’t. “What would you be doing otherwise?” he asked.

“I wanna go to school. And I’d wanna move to a bigger city. Atlanta, or maybe Houston. Maybe even New York,” I said, smiling. “My daddy told me it’s not my burden, but it feels like it is.”

“Shit. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. Thanks for listening, though.”

He nodded and pulled off.

To take my mind off things, I pulled up Instagram so I could zone out and mindlessly scroll. Instead, I found myself laser focused on some gossip about one of my new family members.

“Uh...wow,” I said. “Did you see this? About Terio?”

“Fuck. What now?”

I stared at the giant headline. “Some stripper is saying he got her pregnant.”

Jakari’s jaw tightened several times before he shook his head. “It’s always something, man. I swear.”

“Maybe she’s lying.”

We eased down the street, past the cars lining the road in front of the house. But amazingly, there was a clear path to the front of the driveway, and Jakari pulled right in and parked next to Gab’s Mercedes.

He cut the car off and looked over at me. His face was tight.

“I gotta go holler at my sister. But listen, when you get inside, make me a plate of whatever my mama cooked. Bring it to me in the room.”

“Okay.”

I went to get out, but he grabbed my hand.

“Hold up,” he said.

“What?”

“I forgot to say please.”



My eyes met his. I was still acutely aware of his touch on my hand, of his warm, rough skin pressing against mine. My heart raced, my skin tingled. But when I saw the look in his eyes, I felt warm. All over. Especially down below. My clit thumped so hard, I wondered if he could hear it.

He stared at me with the question in his eyes. I knew exactly what he wanted, and it wasn't a plate of his mother's food. The thing was, I wanted it, too.

I leaned in and pressed my lips softly against his, my body going into overdrive as it registered the mild sensation. Just like last night, when he set me on fire. I wanted him so bad after that kiss, I almost cried myself to sleep.

I pulled back immediately, snatching my hand away. Because this? Was trouble.

He was sucking me in.

His tongue swiped across his bottom lip, then he bit it before saying, "Thank you."

I fought against the urge to do it again. Instead, I made a joke like a shy thirteen-year old girl.

"So we kiss now? Like, that's a thing we do?"

"Shit, we married. Married people kiss. Et cetera," he added with a smirk.

"We're fake married, though."

"That kiss felt real, though, didn't it?"

My eyes shifted away from his.

“I hate to break it to you, shawty, but me and you got chemistry.”

“I know.”

Our eyes locked again.

His tongue swiped across his lower lip again, and I wished it was mine. “You need to go on in the house Malika.”

I breathed in deep. “Why?”

He stared down at my chest. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll go in the house. Right now.”

I wanted to stay and flirt, because he had left that door wide open, but that was my body talking. My mind was telling me no. It was warning me to put a stop to this now before it went any further. This wasn’t a good situation at all, and if I kept on with this, I would only make things worse.

I gathered all the courage and willpower I could and dragged my ass out of the car.

His pull was so fucking strong, though. I could feel his eyes on me as I made my way up the driveway.

I’d seen the man kill somebody, so I knew he was dangerous. But the way he had me feeling...well, it was a different type of danger. And it was terrifying.



# JAKAZI

*SO MUCH BLOOD.*

*My mother screaming.*

*I freeze where I stand, paralyzed with fear. I don't wanna step in my daddy's blood, but my mother is yelling at me. I want to shut down, to cover my eyes and ears and shut out this hostile, chaotic scene. But I have a responsibility. I know why I'm here. Still, it terrifies me.*

*I step forward and realize there's someone else in the room...*

I sat straight up, gasping for air. I must have jostled Malika because she turned over to look at me. Her eyes looked like two little pools of water in the moonlight.

“My bad,” I said, embarrassed.

“Are you okay?” Her voice was hoarse from sleep.

“I'm fine,” I barked back. Sighing, I turned slightly to face her. “Just...a fucking nightmare. Fuck!”

“O...kay. Everybody has them, Jakari.”

“Not like this.”

She sat up slowly, like she wasn't sure if she should. Her hand went to my bare back and rubbed softly, up, down. My head dropped as my muscles relaxed into jelly. It felt good, and it was a good distraction from the horror story in my dreams.

“You wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head, but my mouth opened anyway, and out it came.

“My father...when he got shot...” I trailed off, squeezing my eyes shut. “I saw him. I was there, and...”

“I'm sorry.”

“Fuck it.” I twisted away from her touch. I don't know why I did it, but it didn't seem to faze her. She scooted over and put her hand right back in its place. My body stilled, but I was tense, and she must have felt it because she maneuvered herself behind me and put the other hand on my back.

“Jakari.”

“What?”

“You want me to get you something from the kitchen? Some water or something?”

“Nah.”

I couldn't tell her what I really wanted. And *needed*. She wasn't ready for that.

But when she wrapped both arms around my neck and pulled me into her, I wondered if that had changed. Her hands on my chest and her soft lips on my cheek said maybe. Her hand turning my face toward her, and her tongue in my mouth, said probably.

It felt so good.

I pivoted my body and had her on her back in seconds. I waited for her to press the stop button on it, but she didn't. She pulled me closer, and I let her until I was laying on top of her.

Her t-shirt was thin. Her panties were even thinner. My dick pulsed as I thought about the fact that only a single flimsy layer of cotton separated me from the pleasure I was longing for. Her body was warm and soft. I wondered if her pussy was wet.

Most definitely.

I had that effect on women.

But none of that mattered if she wasn't ready. I was opening my mouth to ask her, and make sure, when she wrapped her legs around my waist.

A groan rumbled in my throat.

I never got the words out because she pressed the back of my neck, pulling me down, smashing my lips to hers.

If she fucked as passionately as she kissed, I was in trouble.

As our tongues tangled, I let my hand wander. It touched the delicate skin on her neck, and I thought about what it might

feel like to choke her. It drifted down to squeeze her breast before my fingers found her nipple—it was already hard. I teased it for a minute, and she moaned into my mouth. My dick throbbed at the sound of it, and that basically put an end to my tour of her body. My hand dropped straight down, and I inched it between us until my fingers found the promised land. I rubbed her clit through the thin fabric, and her moan turned to a whine as her nails dug into my back.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I eased the fabric to the side and lifted my body so I could line my dick up. As soon as she felt the tip, she yelled, "Wait!"

I sighed, more disappointed than surprised.

She pushed me off of her and sat up. "I'm sorry. I want to, I just—"

"I know you want to."

I stared between her still-open legs. Even in the dark, I could see the big wet spot on her panties. My eyes moved up to her shirt and the wet spot my precum had left there.

"It's cool," I said. "You might wanna change though."

Her eyes followed mine, and she let out a quiet sigh. "I don't know what it is. I'm so turned on right now. There's like...a mental block or something."

I didn't bother to ask why, because I already knew the answer.

“We ain’t gotta talk about it,” I said. “I’ma try to go back to sleep.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t even worry about it.”

She got quiet on me. It was weird how I could feel the tension in her. I knew she was wrestling with something. I waited, and sure enough, she came on out with it.

“Why did you move to Atlanta? Because of your dad?”

I closed my eyes and breathed in, slow and deep. Part of me wanted to tell her it was none of her fucking business, but the other part of me wanted to tell her everything, because I’d never talked about it. Shit was still weighing on me heavy, especially now that I was home, but...fuck. I couldn’t talk to her. Not about this. Not with her still basically being a stranger to me. That piece of paper in my safe, and that rock on her finger, made her my wife legally, but she wasn’t my wife in the most important way. The kinda way where you can trust that person with the shit that’s way down in the depths of your soul. That’s what my mama and daddy had. But me and Malika didn’t have that yet. If we ever would.

“Nah,” I lied. “That ain’t why.”

She didn’t respond, and a few minutes later, her soft, slow breathing told me she had drifted off.

I never got back to sleep.





THE NEXT DAY, I dragged my tired ass into the study to lead the meeting I'd called. It was just me and my brothers today. Some shit needed to be hashed out, and it couldn't wait much longer.

But first things first.

"Anybody talk to Jaz? She didn't come to brunch yesterday," I said. "I wanted to talk to her about that nigga Terio."

Nay shrugged. "I can't keep up, man. I got my own shit to deal with."

That was an understatement. Two baby mamas, secret meetings with Gray Hightower.

I'd get to that in a minute.

Eris downed his bottle of Gatorade. Nigga showed up in a blue onesie and shit. It was his workout gear, but he looked like a damn fool.

"So supposedly he got some stripper pregnant," I said, bracing myself for their reactions. They didn't disappoint.

"I know somebody inside that can touch him," Nay said all nonchalant, like he was talking about ordering a pizza instead of a hit.

Eris nodded. "Or we can pick him up when he makes bail. Take his ass out to the Bonner Street warehouse and fuck him up."

"Either way," Nay said, "I'm open to fucking him up."

“So y’all ain’t know?”

“Nah. I don’t keep up with all that celebrity shit,” Nay said. “Besides. Jaz can handle herself. She been doin’ it for eight years now.”

Okay.

So that’s what we were on right now.

I knew it was coming at some point.

“So it seems like you feel some kinda way about me being gone,” I said to Nay. “Wanna hash this out so we can move on to business?”

“It ain’t the ‘gone’ part I don’t like,” he answered. “It’s the ‘few weeks back and already trying to regulate’ that’s got me agitated.”

“Pop wanted it like this.”

“But why, though? Why you, when me and Eris been in the trenches taking care of him while you were wildin’ out in Atlanta.”

“I wasn’t wildin’ out.”

Eris snorted. “What businesses did you open when you were out there?”

I didn’t have an answer for that. Well, I did. The answer was zero, but I didn’t want them to know that.

That whole thing—me moving to Atlanta to expand the business—was my cover story, thought up by my mama.

Nobody could know the real reason I left, so she cooked that up. I was regretting going along with it now.

“Listen. I did what the fuck I was told, and I was told to go out there. And when I asked to come home, Pop always said no, not till he was gone. That’s the truth.”

“Why, though?”

I stared at Nay. I hated lying to him, but I didn’t have a choice.

“I don’t know. Like I said, I just did what I was told.”

I could see on their faces that neither one of them was buying it, but it was gonna have to do for now.

“I got a question for you, Nay. Did you really meet with Gray last month?”

He looked surprised. “How you know about that?”

“He told me.”

“Well, I mean, it wasn’t no big secret. Pop was fading, man. We all saw it. You would have seen it too if you were here.”

“So what that mean?”

“I met with him just to let him know Pop might be close to the end and that the transition would be smooth when it happened. That’s all.”

I nodded. “Okay. I respect it.”

Nay narrowed his eyes. “So what’s the deal with dude? You know anything yet?”

“Nah. Still waiting on Joe.”

“What’s his deal lately?” Eris said. “He been acting funny for a minute now.”

Nay nodded, and I added that to my already long ass list of shit to follow up on.

Why did niggas like being in charge? That shit was beyond me. You’re always on guard. Always having to monitor everybody around you. Head always on a swivel. That shit was exhausting, and I’d only been at it for a minute.

I wasn’t cut out for this shit.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and answered before checking the number, which is something I never do. I was off my game today. Too much on my mind.

“Hey, Sexy.”

Normally I would smile at the sound of Kittora’s sexy ass voice, but my face stayed blank. “Hey, girl. What’s good?”

“Just checking on you. And feeling a little lonely. You wanna come through?”

“I don’t know...”

“You don’t know?” she huffed. “Since when don’t you know about droppin’ off some dick? What’s your problem?”

“Ain’t no problem, K. Just—”

A text came through.

“Hold on right quick.”

I took my phone off my ear and navigated to my text messages. Inside was a close-up shot of Kittora's pussy.

It was completely smooth, and glistening. Looking like a glazed donut and shit.

My dick sprang up as I stared, and I had to be honest about the fact that her shit was pretty as fuck. But I deleted it quick and brought the phone back to my ear. She'd always been able to manipulate me with that shit, but not today.

"Thanks for the pic, love, but I'ma have to decline."

"Excuse me?"

I took a deep breath. "Look, you gon find out at some point, so...I'm married."

"What?! Since when?"

"A few weeks."

"Were you married when you asked me to suck your dick?"

My face balled up. "First off, I ain't ask you for shit. And second, the when don't matter. Just know I got love for you and I appreciate you. We can still be friends, but—"

"Fuck you."

*\*click\**

Nay was laughing when I hung up.

"Yo, now you see the shit I be dealing with."

"Nah, nigga. I might got pussy problems, but I ain't got the crumbsnatchers to go with it. We different."

It was Eris' turn to laugh. Nay glared at me, but he was smirking, too. It was all love, he knew that. He also knew his baby mama drama was his own damn fault.

“Speaking of, what’s up with old girl?”

I looked at Eris and frowned. “Which girl?”

“Your wife, nigga!”

“Oh.” I chuckled. “Damn, I be forgetting that shit sometimes.”

“So, y’all good?”

“I mean...she’s cool.”

“So what’s it like being married? Locked down.”

“I wouldn’t know. We ain’t *married* married. Y’all know that.”

“So basically, you ain’t smash yet. That’s what you sayin’, right?”

I sighed. “Basically.”

It was embarrassing. I’d never had a problem getting ass. In fact, I used to have to beat hoes off with a stick. The fact that I had one laying next to me every night who was legally bound to me and *still* wouldn’t let me beat was demoralizing as fuck.

“Look, this marriage is about keeping her mouth shut. The sooner all this shit blows over, the quicker I can get divorced or annulled or whatever the fuck.”

“So she really went along with this shit? That’s wild.”

“She ain’t have a choice.”

“You was gon’ pop her for real?”

I smiled at Nay. “If I had to.”

After we finished handling business, I headed up to my room. I was tired as fuck and wanted a nap, but I had too much shit to do. I was pulling up on Joe today, then I had to go out and check on our bakery and the clothing shop that got broken into.

Kings never sleep.

Malika was sitting up in the bed reading one of her books. I can’t explain why, but seeing her reading like a little nerd was sexy as fuck. Maybe it was because I was used to ratchets, and ratchets don’t read shit but club flyers and fast food menus.

She didn’t look up when I passed her to go into my closet. I opened the safe and retrieved what I was looking for before sitting next to her on the bed.

“Aye, here.”

She stared at her phone like she couldn’t believe it was there. “You’re letting me have it? For good?”

“Yeah.”

When she took it, her fingers brushed my palm. Even *that* made my dick hard.

I was down bad.

“Thank you for this.”

“You ain’t gotta thank me.” I shrugged. “It’s your shit.”

“I know, but...you know. For trusting me. Finally.”

I nodded. I hadn't realized it until that moment. I guess I did trust her a little bit.





# MALIKA

“*THEE* Jakari Windermere?”

“The one and only.”

My sister’s squeal pierced my eardrum through the phone. I yanked it away a second too late and cursed the ringing in my ear.

“I’ma need you to calm down, Dionne.”

“But it’s...him! Your crush! And you go with him, now.”

I smiled. “We more than go together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t even have time to get into it.”

“Well, obviously y’all live together. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I promise, I’ll explain soon. How’s Chasey-poo?”

“He’s fine. Four going on forty, as always.

“And how are *you*?”

She was rolling her eyes, I was sure of it.

“I’m fine, Mal. Just like I always am.”

“Don’t be like that.”

She hated being mothered by me.

I guess I couldn’t blame her. She was fifteen when my mother disappeared, and I was only two years older than her. It had to be jarring for me to go from best friend and big sister to mother basically overnight.

But I had to. My dad was...well, useless. I realized *now* that he was grieving, but back then, it felt like he abandoned us. Like he just washed his hands of the whole parenting thing the way you would with some hobby you tried and got tired of.

Some people fall apart after a tragedy. Others wipe their tears, make a list, and get shit done. I’m others. That’s how I dealt with it. I took over dinner, and cleaning, and driving, and doctor’s appointments, and conferences with Dionne’s teachers. And when my dad lost his job at the factory because of his drinking, I had to find a way to get money. I did a few things I’m not proud of.

It is what it is.

And it was all worth it in the end. I got Dionne out of high school and into college. I didn’t get to go, but that was okay with me. At least that’s what I told myself.

When she got pregnant with Chase, I was livid. I thought it meant she’d drop out of school and, honestly, it made me feel

like everything I'd been through had been a waste. Kinda selfish, I suppose, but I'm human. And I went through a lot.

But Dionne? A superhero. She waddled to class every day and did what needed to be done. Graduated Magna Cum Laude and made me proud.

I loved that girl so much. And I loved my nephew.

After we hung up, I checked my phone to see if anyone had texted me. And by anyone, I meant Jakari.

Life with him was so confusing. One minute we were up—kissing, talking, getting my phone back—and the next we were down.

What's worse, I cared. A lot. Because I liked him. A lot.

The man who kidnapped me and forced me to marry him so that he wouldn't have to kill me was slowly inching his way into my heart.

Pushing that out of my mind, I wiped down the bar where a young couple just been sitting. It was pretty slow tonight, not that odd for a Thursday, and I was ready to go home.

*Home.*

I frowned at that thought. Why the hell would I be thinking of Jakari's mother's house as home? I was barely comfortable there, and that was mostly when I was in Jakari's bedroom. Every other room in the house made me nervous, like I was an intruder everyone was tolerating.

That was actually true, I guess.

A girl walked in just then in a tight royal blue dress. Her makeup was flawless. Her body was what I would show to a surgeon if I ever decided to get a BBL. The girl was bad.

I pasted on a smile as she approached the bar. Grant and Wayne were both eyeing her, but she seemed to zero in on me, returning my smile as she sat on a bar stool.

“What can I get you?”

Her eyes flickered over my nametag. “Hey, Malika. I’ll take a shot of Fireball.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I poured the girl her shot, giving her a little bit extra because of how much I liked her dress and makeup. I really admired women who were well put together. Jaz was another one. It was something I never mastered, mostly because I didn’t have a stylish bone in my body, but also because we never had the money for it. It takes funds to be flawless.

Like they say: You aren’t ugly, you’re just poor.

I slid the shot across the bar and smiled at the woman again. She smiled back as she lifted the glass to her lips, but just before she took a sip, she flicked her wrist and splashed the liquid directly at my face.

Thankfully, her aim was bad, so most of it hit my chin and neck. But it was the principle. I wiped at my burning eyes as she laughed maniacally.

“Bitch, tell your husband this pussy is off limits now,” she yelled. “I don’t know why he wifed your bony ass, but—ow!

Get off me!”

Out of my right eye, which was clear now, I saw Dino strong-arming the bitch toward the door. I was near tears, but they were angry tears. I wanted to rush her and beat the brakes off her, but all I could manage to do was spit out, “Fuck you!” before Dino tossed her ass out the door.

“Yo, what the fuck was that?” Grant said.

I grabbed a stack of napkins and dabbed my face and neck. My hands were shaking so bad I dropped most of them.

Wayne was at my side with his hand on my back. “You good?”

“Yeah.” I hoped my voice wasn’t giving away how upset I was. “I don’t even know that bitch.”

“Her ass ain’t comin’ back up in here,” Dino said. “Believe that. I’ll have her picture on the wall by closing.”

That was all well and good, but it didn’t change the facts. The damage was done.

Jakari already had me mixed up in some bullshit.



# JAKAZI

“MAMA, YOU PUT YOUR foot in this,” I said, not even trying not to smack. “Can I get some more sweet tea?”

Mama stood from her seat at the table, leaving her own plate to get my drink. She’d made all my favorites; fried whiting, hush puppies, home fries, collards, and cranberry sauce. That last one don’t really fit, but I love it. Just the right amount of sweet.

She set my tea in front of me and got back to her food. We both grubbed so hard we didn’t speak until we were done.

“Where Jaz at?” I asked of my little sister.

Mama shrugged a shoulder. “I’m more worried that Nay and E didn’t show up.”

“They’re handling business.”

Her eyebrow went up. “Is that right?”

“Yep.”



“So you already got them in line. That doesn’t surprise me one bit.”

Here we go with this shit.

I mean, yeah, my brothers fell in line. But that’s just cuz they knew what needed to be done. Keeping shit running was of the utmost importance. With my daddy gone, there were wolves circling. That’s just the nature of the game. So we were all doing our part. That’s all.

“Mama, I know you want this for me, but I don’t. I’m just trying to set up all the pieces before I head back.”

“Why are you fighting your destiny?”

“Destiny?” I laughed at that. “This ain’t the *Lion King*. I’m not the chosen one.”

“Then why did your daddy choose you?”

My eyes narrowed. “You know why.”

“And so do you.” She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. “You know how to do what needs to be done, and that’s the most valuable trait in the world.”

Before I could respond to that, Malika stormed into the kitchen. She looked pissed off, and the front of her Sliders shirt was soaked. Her hair looked different, too. It was down when she left, but it was pushed back now, and puffy.

“Hey, Malika.”

She stopped walking and glared at me. “Don’t ‘hey Malika’ me.”

“Excuse me?”

Her lips curled into a snarl. “One of your hoes came up to my job and threw a fucking drink in my face!”

“Okay, calm down. What’d she look like?”

“How many rabid hoes do you have out here that you have to figure out which one?”

Mama snickered.

“Nah, it’s just...look, let’s go to the room and talk about—.”

She stomped off without even speaking to my mama. I don’t think she cared, though, given the way she busted out laughing once Malika was out of sight.

“It’s funny?” I said as I stood from the table.

“The fact that you’re about to get cussed out? Yeah. I hope she rips you a new asshole. Leave your plate.”

When I got to my room, Malika was on her knees in her bra and panties, fumbling through her gym bag. She must have been real pissed, because she didn’t even cover up when she saw me.

“What happened?”

“I told you what happened.” She found what she was looking for. A shirt, which she angrily pulled down over her head.

“That was probably Kittora. She had red hair?”

“A Kool-Aid red weave, yeah.”

“That was Kittora.”

“Great.” Malika stood and looked me dead in my eyes. “She said to tell you her pussy is off limits. You been fucking her?”

“Nah. I...okay, one time right after we got married, I let her dome me up. But it didn’t mean shit, and I ain’t seen her since. It wasn’t a real marriage then. You know that.”

Why the fuck was I explaining myself? I couldn’t figure it out fast enough to stop.

“So you haven’t seen her. Have you *talked* to her?”

“Today.”

“Why?”

“Shit, I don’t know. She called me, and then she texted me a picture of her pussy. I told her ass to chill cuz I’m married.”

Malika shook her head like she didn’t believe a word out my mouth. “Do me a favor and put all your hoes on notice. I’m not trying to get shot behind your dirty community dick.”

“Hold up. You talkin’ real reckless right now.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “It ain’t no other hoes. And I just told you, she ain’t a factor. I told her I was married.”

“After you let her suck your dick.”

I threw my hands up. “What you want me to say? I’m not bout to apologize when I ain’t do shit. I did the right thing when I didn’t have to. I would think that would mean something to you. Give a nigga some credit.”

“What, you want a cookie?” she taunted. “Nigga, you better carry your ass down to that bakery y’all own. I ain’t the one.”

I raised my eyebrows. “It’s like that?”

“Yes it fucking is.” Her little neck roll was adorable. So was her mad face. I’d seen her scared and shy, but I hadn’t seen this Malika. She had a little bit of firecracker inside.

I laughed. “I ain’t know you had it in you. I guess you can take the girl outta Hightower but you can’t take—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Wait, hold on. You ain’t finna be disrespecting me in my house.”

“It ain’t your house, it’s ya mammy’s house.”

My eyes narrowed. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

“Fuck you, Jakari.”

I stared down into her eyes and mentally cursed my dick for rocking up.

“You want to.”

She stared right back without blinking. “Listen to me. Shut, the *fuck*—”

I ran at her and put my hand to her neck, pushing her until her back pressed against my bedroom wall. She didn’t make a sound, just stared at me with those eyes.

“I ain’t gon’ tell you again,” I gritted. “Watch your fucking mouth when you talk to me.”

Her chest rose and fell rapidly. I saw the anger slowly leave her face. Lust took its place, and then she leaned in and planted her lips on mine.

I couldn't control myself. I kissed her sexy ass right back, shoving my tongue past her lips as hard as I could. Aggression was driving me. And thirst. And desperation. I hadn't ever felt like that before.

I let go of her neck and brought my hands to her titties. She moaned as I squeezed them, shuddering against me as she pushed her tongue deeper into my mouth.

She was ready. I knew this.

So I pulled back, grabbed her hand, and led her over to the bed.

“Jakari—”

“Shh. I just wanna taste it.” I turned and bent down to kiss her neck. “You gon' let me taste it?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

I sat her down at the end of the bed and kneeled in front of her, running my hands up her thighs until I was able to hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties. She lifted slightly and I pulled them off her, tossing them aside before pushing her knees apart.

The skin on her thighs was like silk. That was the first thing I noticed. The second thing was her scent. I breathed in deep and leaned forward to get closer to the source, ready to bury my face in it until I couldn't breathe anymore.

I can't even begin to describe how much I love eating pussy.

Before I started, I looked up at her.

Her eyes were wild. She was breathing all hard.

“Last chance to change your mind,” I said, my hands rubbing up and down her thighs. “Before you decide, I think you should know I'm a fucking beast.”

Her eyes widened a little bit. “What do you mean?”

“I can show you better than I can tell you. So, yes or no?”

She swallowed hard and nodded.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

Nothing else needed to be said.

I dove face-first between her thighs and licked up all the wetness that covered her lips. I used my middle and pointer fingers to spread them, and with my other hand, I slid two fingers inside her.

Feeling her walls clench around my fingers was so fucking arousing. So was imagining that it was my dick that was buried inside her. But that would come in time. Hopefully.

For now, I was cool with getting her off. I kissed her little bud until it hardened against my lips. There was more wetness, so I licked all that up before I made my way back to her clit. I teased her with soft, short licks until she begged me to stop.

“I ain't stoppin'” I warned. “I wanna see you squirm.”

“Please...”

I looked up. “Please, what?”

“Don’t tease meeeeeee.” She was whining like a kid who can’t get their way. And one thing about me, I love that bratty shit.

I smiled. “Or what? What you gon do about it, Malika?”

“I—”

“I’ma tell you. You ain’t gon do shit but sit there and get your pussy ate. Then you gon cum on my face. You might scream my name, too. That work for you?”

She nodded.

“Does. That. Work for you?”

“Yes, Jakari. Yes.”

“Yeah. Thought so.”

I put my face back in it, but this time, I sucked her clit between my lips and caressed it slowly with my tongue, like I was French kissing it. Damn near felt like it was kissing me back, too. Malika started squirming just like I wanted, her back arching, legs spreading even wider for me.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh. Oh God...”

I put my fingers to use inside her, curving them like I was calling that nut to me. I felt her hand on top of my head. She was pulling me closer. Grinding her hips. Creaming on my tongue. Moaning my name. Pulling my hair.

I groaned against her lips. I couldn’t help that shit.

“Jakari! I’m...I’m—”

“I know, baby.”

“Fuck! Jakari!”

That was it. I felt it around my fingers and on my tongue. Her pussy pulsed steady like a drum, and I stayed right where I was, enjoying the beat.

Once she calmed down, I kissed her sensitive bud just to watch her react one more time. I nuzzled it with my nose before kissing my way straight up her stomach, chest, neck, then her lips so she could taste herself. She must have liked it because she attacked my mouth. I had to come up for air.

“Jakari.” She panted. “That was so...oh my God.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I didn’t mean to let you do that.”

“Okay.” I laughed. “I must have had you pinned to the bed or some shit, the way you stayed right in place to let me eat you out.”

“Whatever.” She stared down at my dick.

I followed her gaze. “Oh, don’t worry about that.”

“Why not?”

“You ain’t gon do nothin with it so why worry about it?” I sighed. “And sorry about Kittora. But I’m a handle that, trust me.”

“Okay.”



“Can I ask you something?”

“After what you just did, you can ask me anything.”

I chuckled at that. “I just been wondering...you could have run. A few times now. Why didn't you?”

“I don't know.” She hesitated. “I can't lie and say I haven't thought about it.”

“So why didn't you?” I repeated.

“I told you, I don't know.” She looked away from me.

“I think you do know.”

“Leave it alone, Jakari.”

“Fine.” I got up and walked to the door. “I got work to do.”

She nodded, and that's how we left it.

But I didn't really have shit to do. I mean, I did, but I wasn't in the mood for it. I was horny and frustrated and on edge. If I didn't fuck my wife soon, I was gonna have to end it. Cuz how much is a nigga supposed to take?

I picked up my phone and went to my contacts. I was about to block Kittora, but not before giving her a parting shot:

*come near my wife again hoe. bet  
money i won't fuck you up*



# MALIKA

## THE MORNING AFTER.

Okay, we didn't have sex, but I had the strongest orgasm I'd ever had. That counted for something.

I woke up with a smile on my face.

I don't even know how it happened. One second, I was pissed off at Jakari and his little girlfriend or whatever, and the next, I was clutching the top of his head and cumming all over his face.

He was just...how do I explain this?

Skilled doesn't even describe it. His tongue was lethal. He was like a...a cunnilingus savant or something. If there was an award for pussy-eating, he'd be the reigning champion.

But it wasn't *all* good.

Whoever Kittora was, she was bold enough to come up to my job and act a fool. Even if Jakari told her to take her ass on

somewhere, she didn't seem like the type to go quietly into the night.

Wait.

Hold up.

Did Jakari...?

Was that a *distraction*?

Did he eat me like a gourmet meal to take my mind off his side bitch?

And did I *fall* for it?

I sat up and stretched, then I dragged my ass off Jakari's bed and headed to the bathroom to get cleaned up and dressed. The thought of him tricking me was still looming in my mind, but the memory of that climax overshadowed it. I practically floated down the stairs, still on cloud nine, but when I rounded the corner, I came crashing back down to earth.

*She* was in there.

Only...she was on the phone. She didn't see me come in.

"Everything's going fine...yeah...I'm handling it, okay? Just give me some time...okay. I miss you, too." She chuckled. "Okay. Bye."

I wanted to believe it was innocent, but her tone of voice and the fact that she was lowkey whispering told me she was up to something.

But it wasn't my business.

Or was it?

As loudly as I could, I walked past her to get to the pantry.

“Good morning, Gab.”

“Yeah, hey.” She stared blankly, like she was trying to figure out if I’d heard her. “I cooked breakfast, but you missed it.”

“It’s okay. I’ll grab something when Jakari comes back.”

“That might be awhile.”

“Oh. Is he...he didn’t tell me where he was going.”

Her smile was tight. “He’s handling business.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She stared at me in that special way. The way that made me feel like she was studying me. “Your eyes are so big and pretty, but kinda oddly shaped,” she said. “Very unique. Anybody ever tell you that?”

I smiled. “Yes. I get it from my mom. She has them, too.”

“You have any pictures?”

“Not on me.” I frowned at that question. Why the hell would she ask me that?

She shrugged and grabbed her purse off the counter. “I’m headed out.”

“Okay. See you later.”

That was weird.

Jaz walked in wearing the cutest dress I'd seen on her thus far, plus a Prada bag and some gigantic diamond earrings. She was an Instagram baddie come to life. It was amazing.

“Morning.”

She looked up from her phone. “Hey. I'ma need you to get dressed. You're coming with me today.”

“Coming with you where?”

Her eyes traveled upward as she took in my messy bun. “To get your hair done. And some other things.”

“O...kay. Who said I need my hair done?”

“My brother. He said something about your hair getting wet last night.”

I wasn't sure how to react to that.

“Yeah, I see your edges snatching back. I'ma take you to my girl. She's good.”

Well, no arguments there. Jaz's hair was never not on point.

“Is your girl expensive?”

Her face balled up. “Does it matter? Kari's paying.”

“He is?”

She sighed. She was starting to lose patience, I could tell.

“The appointment is in an hour, and she don't take late clients.”

“I'm ready.”

Her eyes scanned me again from head to toe, taking in my oversized Falcons t-shirt and black leggings. “Malika. Sis—”

“Okay, okay. I’ll go change.”

---

TWO HOURS LATER, I was sitting in a pink leather salon chair getting my hair blown out by Luna, whose blowdryer must have been set to Hell. My poor scalp cried for mercy, but Luna didn’t hear it. I know she saw me grimacing in the mirror, but she still didn’t let up.

I’ll admit, her technique was impeccable. My blowout looked like a fresh flat iron. That takes a skill I’ve never had, which is why my flat iron jobs always looked like I’d just stepped out of a sauna.

As soon as the dryer went off, Luna and Jaz went right back to their conversation like I wasn’t sitting there between them. I got caught up on all the Midling gossip. Who was pregnant, who was cheating, whose baby daddy got locked up, whose baby mama was passing off a kid that wasn’t her boyfriend’s. It was riveting.

“So anyway,” Jaz said, “after this, I’ma take you to Phipps.” She raised her eyebrows at me. “Malika?”

“Oh, you meant me?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re taking me to Phipps Plaza? In Atlanta?”

“Mm hm.”

“For what?”

“Because.” Her eyes drifted downward. “I just can’t have you walkin’ around in them busted ass shoes, sis.”

I looked down at my sensible black flats. “What’s wrong with my shoes?”

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

“Your role.”

I stared blankly. “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

She took a deep breath and set her phone in her lap. That’s how I knew this was serious.

“Okay, you might not understand this now, but you’re married to a real nigga.”

“What does that mean?”

Her perfectly lined eyes rolled. “It means you can’t be running all over town looking like you married to the manager at Walgreens.”

“You know our marriage isn’t real, right?”

“It don’t matter. You’re wearing his name. Everything else on you needs to match.”

“I really don’t think Jakari cares about this. He’s never mentioned it.”

“And he won’t. That’s why I’m here.”



She looked at Luna and inclined her head to the left. Luna nodded and walked off.

Jaz leaned closer. “Listen. Being married to men like ours, you probably ain’t never gon’ have your name on the account. Shit, you probably won’t know what’s in it either. But trust and believe, they got it. And they want us to ask for it.”

“I’m good.”

“You’re not, though.” Her eyes flickered over my clothes. “You look like the help. It don’t matter whether you wanna shine or not. You *need* to shine, otherwise what’s it all for? Why are they out here hustling?”

That...actually made sense.

“Why you think Terio is with me?”

“Because he loves you.”

She snickered. “Maybe he does, maybe he doesn’t. But love don’t have shit to do with why I stay fly. When he’s tired on the road and going through a bunch of bullshit, he knows he’s working hard to keep me dripped out. And I bet you right now, he’s sitting up in his cell trying figure out how to keep me happy, cuz he knows it’s just a matter of time before some other nigga tries to take his place.”

She checked her phone, then put it face down again. “When I’m on his arm, I make him look good. Everybody else knows he’s a baller, because a fly bitch like me wouldn’t be caught dead on the arm of a bum ass nigga. You get me?”

I nodded.

“And one more thing. These bitches are gonna try you.”

“He told you about that?”

“Mm hm.” She crossed one leg over the other and tucked her perfect hair behind her ear. “These bitches gon’ take one look at you, the plain girl, the nice girl, and assume you don’t care if your nigga gets took. But when you on top of your shit, they at least gotta respect you. They might still try to get at your man, but they’ll know enough to go behind your back with it.”

“And that’s better?”

She smiled. “You’ll see how it works. Kari might not have said anything to you, but trust and believe, it’s crossed his mind.”

I thought about that while Luna flat ironed my hair. Smoke rose all around me as she tortured my strands into a sleek, shiny, shoulder-length bob. As I stared at my reflection in the mirror, I started to feel different.

“So what else do you think I need?” I asked my new sister-in-law.

Her eyes scanned me from head to toe. “Nails. Toes. Makeup. Jewelry. Clothes. Shoes.”

“Bag, too,” Luna chimed in. “That little Liz Claiborne purse ain’t giving, sis.”

The three of us laughed. They were probably laughing *at* me, but I didn’t care. High school had toughened me up, so I was immune to the ridicule at this point. Although Liz

Claiborne was actually five levels higher than the shit I used to wear back then.

“Are you sure Jakari is okay with all that?”

Jaz rolled her eyes and pulled out a credit card. She held it up. “You see this? I asked for it. When he handed it over, he knew I was gonna spend whatever the fuck I want. Real niggas don’t give you a budget.”

“Let her know,” Luna cosigned.

“I want you to practice.” She put the card back in her bag and spoke in a higher-pitched voice. “Baby, I saw a few things that would look amazing on me. Can I get your card? I promise I won’t overdo it.”

“But you just said—”

“And then when you come home with way too much shit, you pout and pretend like you’re sorry, then you show him what you bought, and then you suck his dick. Simple.”

“Ew. You’re talking about your brother.”

Jaz laughed. “No, I’m talking about *all* niggas.”

Fair enough.

“And that works?”

“Yes!” they said in unison.

“So it’s basically just foreplay, then?”

“You got it,” Jaz laughed. “You learn quick.”

Strangely, I was getting excited. “Does that work with *everything*? Like if you want him to do something that doesn’t involve money?”

“If you know what you’re doing, you can finesse anybody out of anything.”

A smile spread across my face. I’d never gotten anything by finessing. Being straight up was the only strategy I knew. But now, it felt like a whole new world was opening up for me.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m in. Whatever you wanna show me, tell me, buy me...teach me your ways, Jaz.”

She beamed. “You won’t regret it.”



# JAKAZI

“WHERE THE FUCK YOU been, man?”

Joe sighed on the other end of the phone. “You know I got legitimate clients, Knight. And I was waiting on my man at the precinct. He has to sneak around. It ain’t easy.”

“Alright, alright. What you got for me?”

“Okay. The good news first. Sliders has a gang of surveillance cameras outside, but none of ‘em were working that night.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. “You just made my fucking day.”

“Hold on, now. I didn’t give you the bad news yet.”

“Go ahead, man.”

“Alright. Dead man’s name is Henry McDonald. Street name, Tank. That ring a bell?”

I racked my brain. “Nah. Not at all.”

“Well, my man pulled all the toll footage and looked through it. Whoever old boy is, he followed you out of Atlanta. Came through the toll a few minutes after you did.”

“Fuck.”

I already knew it wasn't random, but the fact that I was followed out of Atlanta meant it was somebody who knew my moves. And that list was too small for my comfort.

Somebody betrayed me.

I rubbed a hand across my forehead. I could feel a headache coming on. “Alright, when can you get out here to the house?”

“When do you need me?”

“Let's do tomorrow. I'ma get the family together.”

“I'll see you then.”

I hung up and slammed my phone on the desk. After a long stretch of me staring into space, I stood and walked over to the bar cart, pouring myself enough bourbon to light this whole motherfucking house on fire.

How did my pops deal with this shit and not go crazy? My fucking head was spinning. Didn't know who to trust, who to suspect. This shit wasn't easy.

I now had a greater appreciation for how hard he worked to take care of us. And not just his wife and us kids. He took care of everybody on his payroll. They were all considered family, blood or not. And now, one of them was at me.

If I could go back to Atlanta tomorrow, I would.

I was halfway to the bottom of my class when I heard a voice behind me.

“Hey. You busy?”

I turned around and almost dropped my glass.

It was Malika. My wife. Looking bad as *fuck*.

My sister dressed her, I could tell that right off. But I wasn't worried about the clothes. Her hair looked good. Makeup, too. Nails and toes on point. But that ain't what made me stare with my mouth hanging open.

It was how at ease she looked. How relaxed and just... happy. Her face was glowing. She was standing straight up and proud, not hunched down like she'd been ever since I walked into her life. She was feeling herself, and it made her sexy as hell.

I was so distracted, I missed the fifty-seven shopping bags she was carrying.

She must have thought I was about to fuss at her because she looked at the bags, then me, and said, “Okay, let me explain.”

“Explain what?”

“I didn't mean to buy this much.”

She set the bags down and approached me cautiously. Her hand went into her brand new Louis bag and pulled out my AMEX. The corners of her mouth lifted slowly as she held it out to me.



“It was Jaz’s idea.”

“Oh, I know.”

“But I went along with it. Because apparently, I like pretty things.”

I chuckled at that. “It’s all good. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“I really did.”

“Good. You look good. Top to bottom.”

She beamed. “Thank you.”

“Just one thing, though.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“You ain’t gotta dress like Jaz to catch my eye.”

She looked down at her dress. “You don’t like it?”

“Nah, I told you. You look good. But you looked good to me yesterday. And the day before. And all the days before that. I mean, I like seeing you shine, but you ain’t gotta be extra unless it’s what you like. I’m good either way.”

She nodded.

“I just wanted you to know that.”

She took a step forward. “So I had already caught your eye?”

I nodded. “You caught my eye that night I saw you at the bar.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I was gon’ try to hook up with you but you didn’t seem to be feeling me like that. And then that other thing happened.”

“You didn’t think I was feeling you?” She made a face like she didn’t believe it.

I shrugged.

“Jakari.” She shook her head. “I was a freshman at Hightower when I first saw you. I crushed on you so hard, it’s almost embarrassing.”

I stared her down while I thought about that. According to most girls, I been fine since sixth grade. And being fine for that long, you get used to the admiration. You get used to getting chose. But hearing those words out of Malika’s mouth...I don’t know. It moved the needle.

“I still don’t know how I missed you back then.”

She bit her lip. “I didn’t look like this back then. I was skin and bones. My clothes didn’t fit. They were dirty sometimes, too. And I was really quiet.” She got a far off look in her eyes. “Nobody paid me any mind except to make fun of me.”

“Why’d you have it so hard?”

“Long story. We were already struggling when I was little, but after my mother disappeared, my father lost his job and couldn’t cope, and I basically had to fend for myself. And my little sister.”

“Your pops couldn’t flip burgers? Mow some lawns or something?”

“I guess not.”

It was like she was speaking a different language. That shit didn't compute. “How do you have kids—*daughters*, and not provide?”

“He was going through something.”

“What man ain't goin' through some shit?”

Her eyes lowered to the floor.

“Look...I don't mean to talk down on your pops. That shit just surprised me. Cuz my father used to have this little saying. He'd say, ‘I'd die a thousand times before I let my family starve.’ And he meant that shit, too.”

She looked up at me and I saw pain. “What was that like?”

“I guess I never really thought too deep about it. It's just... the way life was.”

“But what did it feel like to ask for something and know you were gonna get it?”

“Oh. It was cool. It meant a lot.”

That was a lie. Truth was, I really never thought about it because it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. I thought all fathers felt that way. Apparently not.

“What did you want that you didn't get?” I asked.

“When I was younger, I wanted all the things other kids had. I wanted the clothes and jewelry and a car—” she chuckled. “I knew *that* wasn't happening, so I didn't bother asking. Oh, and a puppy.” She paused. “But after my mother

disappeared, all I wanted was for my dad to find her. At least *look* for her. But he didn't even put up a single flyer on a telephone pole. And then he just...left."

I set my glass down and took a few steps toward her. She tensed up at first, but when I wrapped my arms around her, I felt her relax and melt into me.

"I wish I knew what to say." I squeezed her tighter. "I don't really know what I am to you right now, but I know I don't like to see you feeling like this."

She sniffled. "It's okay. I just had a moment. I'm fine."

"Still..."

"And what do you mean you don't know what you are to me? According to this rock on my finger, you're my husband."

I smiled. "Yeah, and that rock damn sure wasn't cheap."

She laughed into my shirt.

"Well if it's one thing I do know, it's what a husband is supposed to do. So let me do that for you."

She pulled back to look up at me. "Do what?"

"Let me help you find her."

She blinked rapidly. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I can't make no promises, but I got people who can dig into that kinda thing."

Tears filled her pretty eyes. "You would do that for me?"

"Yeah."

“Why?”

I searched for an answer that wouldn't make me sound like the simp I was becoming.

“Because it's what you want, and I'm supposed to give you what you want when you ask for it. Or even if you don't ask.”

She went to her tippy-toes and kissed me softly. “Thank you,” she whispered.

I nodded and brushed her tears away with my fingertips.

She smiled. “Is there anything you can't do?”

*I can't get you to let me fuck*, I thought, but all I said was, “Nope.”



ME AND MY BROTHERS rode through Midling checking on our establishments. The warehouses, the bakery, the nail salon, and the clothing store were all we could fit in for the day. There were still a few other locations I needed to see.

They expanded a lot when I was gone.

That explained all the extra cash. My pops was paying for my condo and expenses out in Atlanta. That was running him around six racks a month. Then he started sending seven, then seven-five, and by the time he passed, he was sending ten racks a month. No reason for it either. I guess he just had more to give. I was working, so I banked the money I didn't need. There was almost a hundred k sitting in Wells Fargo. Legit money that couldn't be linked to anything illegal.

Pop was thorough like that.

Malika was actually in the living room when I got home, which told me my mama wasn't around. I didn't miss how hard Malika tried to avoid being around her.

“Hey.”

She turned to look at me and smiled. “Hey.”

“You hungry? I know my mama's cooking tonight, but I ain't really in the mood to sit around the table with my family. Let's go out.”

She picked up the remote and turned the tv off. “Something happen?”

“Nah. It's all good. I'ma see them niggas tomorrow.”

She nodded. “Can I ask you something? I was gonna bring it up earlier but I got distracted.”

“What's up?”

“Is your mom...seeing somebody?”

My eyes narrowed. “Seeing? Like, dating?”

“Yeah.”

“Where that come from?”

“I heard her on the phone today. Talking low. Laughing. She told somebody she misses them.”

“Mighta been my grandma.”

Not Noni. My mama couldn't stand Noni. Truth be told, my mama wasn't a big fan of her own mother, either. My

Grandma Eva. But that was the only thing that made sense to me right now.

“It didn’t sound like that kinda call,” Malika explained. “It sounded...romantic.”

“Nah. You probably heard wrong.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” She cleared her throat. “So...just out of curiosity, have you ever thought about us getting our own place?”

I damn sure wasn’t expecting her to say *that*.

“Me and you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would we need our own place?”

“Privacy. I mean, I know it’s not a real marriage, but still. Don’t you want a place to yourself?”

I walked over and sat on the recliner across from the couch so I could look at her straight on. “I mean...ain’t like we be in here fuckin’ or something. I could see if *that* was happening, but...”

“Wow. Did you really just throw that in my face?”

“Ain’t throwin’ shit. Just giving my opinion on your suggestion, that’s all.”

She rolled her eyes. “It just feels crowded around here. And your mother—”

“What about her?”

“I don’t think she likes me.”

“She don’t even know you.”

“Yeah, and I don’t think she wants to. I always feel...*weird* around her.”

“I mean, her husband just died. She probably ain’t feeling all that friendly right now.”

Her face softened. “Damn. I keep forgetting that. Sorry.”

“It’s cool.”

We sat in silence for a minute. I was getting ready to go to the office when she spoke again.

“So...um...about last night...”

“You want a repeat.”

She smiled and stared down at her feet.

“Now you wanna act all shy about it? You wasn’t shy when I had my tongue in your—”

“It’s not that. I just...I appreciate that you did it.” A smile crept across her face. “I liked it.”

“Oh, you made that clear.”

She bit back a laugh.

“Just so you know, I liked it, too. I like how you taste.”

She looked away from me.

“Nah, don’t look over there. Look at me.”

She brought her eyes back to mine.



“You taste sweet, you know that?” She shook her head.  
“You do. And your pussy was wet as fuck. And when you came, it pulsed real hard, which makes me think your walls probably grip real tight. And—”

“Okay, okay. Stop.”

“Why? It’s turning you on?”

“Actually, yes.”

“That’s a problem?”

I waited to hear what I already knew. *I’m not ready*. But I was starting to think that was bullshit. Because she damn sure was ready to get ate out, and to move to a new place with me. You don’t do all that when you don’t want the dick.

“Well, look, when you’re ready, you know where to find me.”



# JAKAZI

“DAMN. THE GANG’S ALL here.”

I surveyed the room. Joe was right; everybody who was anybody was here. My brothers, my sister, my mama, my Uncle Prez, and my cousins Ced and Randall.

“Aight, listen up.” I cleared my throat. “Everybody in this room knew I was in Atlanta. Nobody outside of y’all had that information. So that lets me know one thing.” I looked each of them in the face. “Somebody in this room opened their mouth.”

I waited for somebody to speak up and fail my test. The silence was thick and uncomfortably long, but that’s exactly what I wanted. I wanted them to think I was on the wrong track.

But nobody said shit.

“So nobody’s gon’ cop to talking about my whereabouts? I mean, if you did, I ain’t mad, I just need to know.”

“Why?” Ced asked.

“Cuz whoever went at me followed me out of Atlanta. That’s why.”

Their faces fell as that news sank in.

“I hope you don’t need to hear none of us say it,” Nay said. “You gotta know everybody in this room is blood, and we don’t go against blood.”

Yeah. My daddy used to say that, too. And then he went and did exactly that. My loyal, still-grieving spirit wouldn’t let me call it hypocrisy, but that’s exactly what that shit was.

“Why you think I asked if y’all talked?” I smiled. “I know none of y’all would do that. But somebody might have mentioned it in passing or something. That’s all.”

Again, I was met with silence.

I locked eyes with Joe for a second before moving on to the next topic.

“Alright, then. Moving on.”

It was trippy, me presiding over shit like I had any right to fill my daddy’s shoes. Shit almost felt like a movie. Why did these niggas even listen to me? Why did they basically sit at my feet like I was their god and promise to do my bidding? Shit made me uncomfortable, but at the same time, a small part of me couldn’t imagine it any other way. I couldn’t see myself in none of their shoes, taking orders from somebody knowing I knew better.

The meeting droned on, but at least we got some shit done. It was decided that we needed to get some new businesses in

our portfolio. With my daddy gone, nobody on our payroll was a guarantee anymore, so it was a good idea to build up a new base just in case.

We wrapped up, but everybody sat around for a minute, talking amongst themselves, deciding if they were gonna sleep over or drive home. The Windermere house was everybody's second home, so all were welcome.

Eris looked around. "Ayo, where your wife at?"

"She's at her sister's."

"Alone?" Everybody looked at each other like they had opinions on how I conducted my motherfucking relationship.

"Yeah. She's good." I stared at them, daring them to challenge me.

"Did you at least put Cyrus on her?" That was my Uncle Prez.

"Man, what I just say? Don't none of y'all need to worry about Mal. She solid."

After we called it a night, everybody trickled out to go on about their business, whatever it was. I headed into the kitchen for a snack. Mama came in a few minutes later when I was heating up some pork chops from last night. She waited til I was sitting down at the table before she got started.

"So...Mal, huh?"

"What?"

She smirked. “You shortening her name now? Y’all that familiar?”

I shrugged and bit into a hunk of meat. “What you want me to say? We’re...friends, I guess. We ain’t strangers no more.”

“Baby, don’t talk with your mouth full.”

We both knew she didn’t mean it. Mama loved to see us grubbing on her food.

“I’m not against y’all being familiar. I was just wondering.”

I frowned at her word use there. It ain’t too many ways you can be against a grown man’s decisions, especially if that man is running shit.

I let it pass. “I need your brain,” I told her.

Mama slid into the seat next to me. “It ain’t none of my sons. Not in a million years.”

“Yeah, I agree with that.” I took another bite. “What about Prez?”

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Not his own nephew.” She paused. “Have you ever considered Joe?”

I frowned. “Joe probably has the least to gain out of everybody.”

“Not Ced, either. Definitely not Randall.”

“Well, hell, that’s everybody.”

“No, there’s one more...” she trailed off.

“Jaz?” I burst out laughing. “You’re playing, right?”

Mama shrugged.

“Jaz don’t want no parts of none of this,” I defended. “She wants to look pretty and get attention. She don’t wanna be no kingpin. Come on.”

“I was half serious.” Mama chuckled. “Although it would be quite entertaining if her ditzy thing was an act. Some kinda elaborate plan to take over.”

I laughed with her. “Yeah, that would be crazy.”

We sat in silence while I finished my food. Nay came through to grab some red velvet cake, throwing up the peace sign on his way out.

“So how you doin’, Mama? You look tired.”

She sighed. “I’m living.”

“You seem like you’re...I don’t know. Like you’re holding it together.”

“Is that how it looks?”

I reached over and grabbed her hand. “If you ever feel like you’re not all that together about anything, you can talk to me.”

“I know that, Kari.”

“I’m serious, Mama. It’s okay to grieve.”

“I did that a long time ago.”

I let out a sigh and pulled my hand away.

“By the way, don’t ever tell a woman she looks tired.”

“Why not?”

“Because nine times out of ten, she’s tired from dealin’ with yo ass. Pointing it out don’t do nothing but make her feel ugly.”

“Well you are most certainly not ugly. Never was, never gonna be.”

She smiled. “Damn right.”

“You been out with your friends? Miss Sandra or Miss Jocelyn?”

She rolled her eyes. “Me and Sandra fell out. And Jocelyn...” she trailed off. “Jocelyn ain’t shit. She done got her hooks into some new man, so now she ain’t got time for little old me.”

“Well you could hang out with me if you want. I’ll take you to the club, let you turn up. Tastefully.”

That made her laugh. “You’re so silly.”

I cleared my throat. “What about a date? You seeing anybody?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I just buried my husband.”

“I know, but...it wasn’t a regular situation and...well, you know.”

“Why would you ask me that?”

“It was just a question. I asked about your friends and now I’m asking about your love life.”

“Uh huh.”



“Anyway, if you need to talk—”

“I know, I know. Don’t you worry about Gab. I *always* land on my feet.”



# JAKAZI

*I DON'T WANNA STEP in my daddy's blood, but my mother is yelling at me. I want to shut down, to cover my eyes and ears and shut out this hostile, chaotic scene. But I have a responsibility. I know why I'm here. Still, it terrifies me.*

*I step forward and realize there's someone else in the room. More blood. More carnage. My heart pounds harder and faster. My mother's still screaming.*

*I go to my father first. He's distraught and in pain. He shakes his head. Points past my mother to the other person, but I can't turn away. I won't. I have to get my daddy help. I can't lose him. I can't.*

*I won't.*

*God, please don't let my daddy die.*

I sat straight up, gasping for air as the nightmare slowly released me from its icy clutches.

Malika sat up. "What's wrong? You okay?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to control my breathing.

“I had another nightmare.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Nah.”

She sighed and reached for me in the dark.

“I said I’m good,” I snapped as I twisted my way out of her grasp. She didn’t reach for me again, and I regretted snapping at her and ruining my chance for comfort. Last time this happened, she rubbed my back. That shit helped.

“I have them, too,” she said quietly.

I wanted to tell her I didn’t give a fuck, but that’s not how I really felt. I was just fucking pissed off that I was going through this shit again.

I shifted a little in my spot so that I was facing her, something she could feel in the dark, even if she couldn’t see me.

“About my mom.”

I kept myself still. Listening.

She took a deep breath. “In my dreams...well, nightmares... she’s gone, and I know she’s gone. It’s weird, because it’s like I’ve always known. Me in my nightmares isn’t surprised by it. Anyway, sometimes I see her, and she looks like her, but a little off. It’s hard to explain. And she’s calling my name.”

“Can you tell where she is?”

“Never. The place seems familiar but I can’t tell. And believe me, I’ve tried.”

Her voice broke a little on the last word. I reached out and touched her somewhere. It felt like a shoulder, but I didn’t really register it because I got distracted by her sobs.

I scooted closer and wrapped my arms around her. It seemed like the right thing to do in this situation.

And then I found myself letting my guard down a little.

“Mine are about my daddy. The night he got shot.”

“You saw him get shot?”

“Nah. Just the aftermath. It was...hard.”

I felt her shaking her head. “I can’t even imagine.”

“This shit didn’t start back up until I came home.” I squeezed my eyes shut as hard as I could, and I didn’t stop until I saw dots dancing behind my eyelids. “I need to get the fuck out of Midling. Ain’t shit here for me anymore except for misery.”

“What about your family?”

I didn’t respond to that. I didn’t have shit to say. The only reason I was here was for them, but I wasn’t sure it was enough anymore.

“I’m tired.” I glanced at the clock. Almost three am, and I had to be up early to make the rounds at the rest of our businesses. “Let’s go back to sleep. Or try to.”

I felt her nodding. I went to move my arms from around her, but for some reason, I didn't. I just leaned us backward until we were lying down. Her being snuggled up against me felt right.

It was silent for a while. Can't even say how long. Her slow, deep breaths make me think she was sleep, and good for her if she could just drift off like that. I wasn't that lucky. I'd probably be watching the sun rise.

"You sleep?" she said.

"Nah. Trying to be, but no dice."

She sat up. I could feel her staring down at me. Before I could ask what she was doing, she was hovering over me, finally coming to rest on top of me. My dick immediately got hard, but I knew better than to get excited. So I just waited.

Her lips pressed against mine, then her tongue was pushing its way into my mouth. I let her kiss me, trying to keep it together, but after a while, my hands went straight to her ass and squeezed. That musta did something to her because her legs opened and then she was right on top of my dick. The heat from her pussy made me lose all sense of time and space.

The kiss turned nasty. She sucked my tongue, I sucked hers back. She bit my lower lip, I nipped hers. My dick was hard as a rock, and when she started grinding on it, I knew I had to stop her. There was only so much I could take.

"Hold up, Malika." I held her body still. "I can't take all this teasing. If we not fuckin', I'd rather just go to sleep."

It was quiet for a few seconds, and then she said, “Who says we’re not fucking?”

I was glad for the dark so she couldn’t see the big ass grin on my face.

“You with that? For real?”

“I know what a wife is supposed to do. So let me do that for you.”

“Word? You using my line?”

“Jakari. Do you want this pussy or not?”

“Yes ma’am.” I reached over and twisted the little thing on the lamp, filling the room with a yellow glow.

She lifted up and maneuvered herself out of her panties before sinking right down onto my dick. I wasn’t ready, but I wasn’t gon complain. That shit felt so good, my teeth gritted and my toes curled.

“Why is it so big?” was her panicked question.

I laughed. “Didn’t nobody tell you to drop down on it like that. You could have worked it in.”

“I wanted you too bad,” she whined.

“Mm. Malika...girl, you sexy as fuck.”

She laid down on top of me.

“Hold on. You got too many clothes on.”

She sat back up and pulled her shirt over her head. I watched her titties bounce out and felt my mouth watering.

When she laid back down, they pressed against my chest. They were soft, just like the rest of her.

There's nothing like the feel of a woman.

"Relax for a second. Let yourself get used to my dick," I said between kisses to her neck. I let my hands explore her soft skin, touching everywhere I could reach. She liked that. Her moans sounded so sweet in my ear.

"You ready? Them noises you makin' got me ready to bust you wide open."

"I'm ready."

I grabbed her ass and braced myself, but I still wasn't prepared for how good her pussy felt when she started riding me. That thing was hot, juicy, and tight, just the way I like 'em. Deep, too. She was taking every inch of me, and from everything I'd heard, that wasn't no easy task.

"What the fuck," I groaned. "That thang *wet*. Shit."

"Fuuuuuck," she moaned. "That feels so good."

This was a whole other side of her. I wasn't mad at it at all. Just surprised. All that holding out on me had me wondering if she was one of them ice cold, frigid bitches that lays there like a dead fish. But, nah, Malika was hot in the ass. She was putting it on me good and proper.

"You like this dick?"

"Yeah," she breathed.

"I can tell."



“You feel how wet my pussy is?”

“Yeah.”

“You feel how deep it is?”

“*Fuck*, yeah.”

“You want it to be yours, don’t you?”

“I—”

“You wanna own this pussy, don’t you?”

In the midst of my pleasure, I frowned, because I realized she was running me, and I wasn’t used to that.

“You wearin’ my ring, so yeah. That pussy mine.”

Her response was to speed up and go harder.

“Nah, nah, chill,” I warned. “You gon’ make me nut.”

“That’s the goal, ain’t it?”

I grabbed her ass and fucked her back, thrusting up into her in time with her ride. She moaned so loud, I stopped and held her still. “You loud, ma.”

“Don’t fuck me so good and I won’t be.”

“You talk a lotta shit.” My eyes rolled back. “You backin’ it up, though. *Goddamn*.”

I reached up and palmed her titties, rolling her nipples between my fingers. She moaned again, and it sounded so good, I stopped giving a fuck if somebody heard. We were both grown, so oh fucking well.

“I’m about to cum,” she whimpered.

“I know.”

Her face looked so pretty with ecstasy stamped all over it. One day I'd slap my dick across it, but one step at a time. I leaned up and sucked a nipple into my mouth, caressing it with my tongue as I pinched the other. Her walls started to flutter and tighten around me. The vibrations made me moan right along with her, and then she was cumming on my dick.

Man.

*Man.*

Her pussy just...fuckin' *swallowed* me. Over and over and over. Shit felt so good. Her body jerked as she switched up her ride, and the way she was grinding on me all slow and hard while her walls squeezed around me was too much to handle. And I done handled plenty. Before I could even wrap my head around the pleasure of the nut that was creeping up on me, that shit just exploded out of nowhere. I came so fucking hard I started rambling gibberish. I know I cussed her ass out in the process, but I have no idea what I said. I just held her down while I happily shot my nut deep inside her pussy, painting my name in graffiti on her walls.

My wife had some bomb ass pussy.

What a delightful surprise.

And I ain't the kinda nigga who would *ever* use the word delightful.

Malika collapsed onto my chest. We both panted for a while. I don't know about her, but I didn't know what to say. I

mean, I'd been wanting to fuck, and I was damn sure glad I did, but what now? Like, were we for real married? Had anything changed? I didn't know, and I couldn't believe I was even worried about shit like that.

"I'ma sleep good tonight."

She chuckled. "Me too."

Right at that moment, post-nut clarity hit me like a freight train.

"Please tell me you're on birth control."

She breathed in deep but she didn't answer, which immediately sent me into panic mode.

"Malika?"

"I'm not, but it's fine."

"How is it fine?"

"I know when I'm ovulating, and I already did this month. My period is due any day now. We're good."

I waited for my blood pressure to go down, then I thought about my brother Nay's three-by-two headass and realized it coulda been me. This time, at least. I ain't never been caught up like this before with no other female, but I guess I just hadn't experienced pussy this good.

Yeah. It really coulda been me.

"I really appreciate what you just did to me."

She chuckled. "I enjoyed it, too. And just like my pussy is yours, your dick is mine."

“Yeah. That’s how it works.”

“Yeah, which means you don’t fuck anybody else. I’m serious.”

“I haven’t.”

Why was I...? Since when did I answer to her?

Since now, apparently.

“Cool. We understand each other.” She turned over and sighed happily. “Good night, Jakari.”

“Good night.”

I didn’t know what the fuck just happened, but fuck it. I had the best sleep I had in years.



# MALIKA

“DADDY, I HAVE SOMETHING to tell you.”

“Good news, I hope.”

I was glad he couldn't see the grimace on my face. I was terrified of having this conversation, but I didn't wanna keep putting it off.

“Good news. Ummmmm...well, that depends on how you look at it, I guess.”

“You're going to college?” The hope in his voice broke my heart.

“No. Well, not just yet. It's...it's something else.”

“Okay. Lemme brace myself.”

His loud, braying laugh made me smile, but my joy was short-lived.

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I got... married.”

Somehow, the silence on his end of the phone got even quieter. I listened intently, hoping to hear a breath or a chuckle or some indication that he wasn't about to fly up from Tampa and make me pick out a switch.

“Did you just say *married*?”

“Yes.”

“Is this a joke? You know I don't like that.”

That, I knew. The man was notorious for lacking a sense of humor. Me and Dionne played an April Fool's trick on him once, and, well, never again.

“It's not a joke, Daddy. I really got married.”

“And you didn't invite me?”

The pain in his voice was unmistakable. I closed my eyes and willed myself not to tear up.

“Nobody was there but me and him. We went to the courthouse.”

“Courthouse? Are you pregnant?”

“No. That's not why I did it.”

“Then, why?”

Well, shit. I couldn't exactly tell him the truth.

“It just happened. We got caught up in the romance.”

“Okay.” He chuckled. “Okay. This sound like some bullshit to me, but okay. I ain't even gon' fuss at you. You're old enough to be as reckless and stupid as you see fit.”

“Ouch.”

“Put yourself in my shoes, Malika.”

“I know.”

“Did you honestly expect me to be happy about this?”

“No, of course not.”

“Lord, have mercy,” he said, to himself. “This some bullshit.”

“Daddy. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

As we sat there in silence, I started wondering why I went this route. I could have saved my daddy the pain he was feeling by just keeping the marriage to myself and riding it out until we could get a divorce. But I didn’t do that, so I had to question if maybe, somewhere deep down inside, I was actually thinking about...staying married.

The thought was too ridiculous to consider, and yet here I was. Considering it.

“Well, congrats,” he said flatly. “Anybody I know?”

Shit.

Might as well rip off the band aid.

“Jakari Windermere.”

“Wait, what? Did you say *Windermere*?”

“Yes.”

“You married one of the *Windermere* boys?”



“Yes.”

“Goddamit!”

He was so loud, I flinched and yanked the phone away from my ear.

“Of all the families in the entire state of Georgia, you married into the Windermers?”

“Daddy—”

“No. No. Don’t say shit to me. Not when you’re mixed up with those people.”

“They don’t...they’re not doing that anymore, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I waited, listening intently.

“Doing what, Malika?” he said quietly.

“You know.”

“No, *you* know. You knew what they were about, and you did it anyway. I taught you better than that, little girl.”

“It’s not...I—”

“I gotta go. I can’t deal with this shit right now.”

The phone went dead.

I ended the call and tossed my phone to the end of the bed. I knew he wouldn’t take it well, but to hang up in my face? He’d never done that. Not when I ran into a mailbox in his car. Not when I got caught stealing from Piggly Wiggly. Not even when I failed all of my classes one semester.

This was different.

I threw myself backward, landing on my pillow. I didn't even have the energy to cry. Or maybe I didn't have the emotions to cry. Because honestly, I wasn't sad. I felt bad for disappointing my daddy, but I didn't care that I didn't have his approval. After everything I'd been through on his watch, I didn't look up to him as an authority. I simply thought I owed it to him to let him know.

They say when you marry, you leave and cleave to your spouse. But my daddy didn't give me anything to leave behind. *He's* the one who left, and I was still dealing with that pain.

And for all his negative thoughts about the Windermere family, the Windermere *I* married was doing a better job of taking care of me than my daddy ever had.

It was kinda ironic when I thought about it.

My growling stomach kept me from dozing off, but I wasn't trying to go downstairs and possibly run into Gab. I just didn't have it in me to deal with her.

Instead, I looked around the room, hoping Jakari had left a bag of chips somewhere. No such luck.

I checked my tote bag, hoping I'd left something in there, but all I found was an apple. *The* apple.

It was the one from that night, and it was in pretty bad shape. Brown blemishes, small bruises, and a few mushy spots. But there was one part that was still smooth, firm, and

blood red. Without thinking, I took a big bite of the good part and chewed, enjoying the sweetness. I wrapped up the rest of it in a grocery bag and sat it by the door to remind myself to throw it out in the garbage can outside, then I laid back down.

As I stared up at the ceiling and watched the fan spin in lazy circles, I wondered ,*what next?*

Just before I nodded off, it came to me.



“ARE YOU SAFE?”

Jakari looked up from the computer and frowned. “What you mean?”

I came all the way into the room and walked to the side of the desk. “The guy at the bar. The one who was after you. Are there others?”

His face relaxed. “Honestly, I don’t know yet. Somebody sent him, I just gotta find out who.”

I nodded. “And when you find out?”

His eyes were back on the screen. “When I find out, I’m a handle that shit.”

I found myself oddly excited by that declaration.

“Was that the first person you killed?”

He looked up again. “You wearing a wire?”

I laughed. “No. You wanna check?”

He smirked at me. “I won’t never pass up a chance to get you out them clothes.”

“Seriously, I’m asking. I wanna know. I wanna know *you*.”

He sighed and swiveled the desk chair so that he was facing me. “Okay. No. He wasn’t the first. He was the second.”

“Who was the first?”

He raised an eyebrow and stared me down, maybe trying to figure out what my angle was. But I’d told him the truth. I just wanted to know him better. He was my...husband. Technically.

“Aight.” He sat back in the chair and stretched his legs in front of him. “You know my little brother Eris.”

I nodded.

“You seen how he dresses. He likes to dress nice. *Obviously* nice. We use to tell him about that shit all the time, but you can’t tell a little hardheaded nigga like him what to do. They gotta see firsthand. So one day when he was up at the gym playing ball, somebody broke in his locker and stole his Rolex, chain, and this pinky ring he used to wear. He figured out who it was and confronted him. Eris was just gon shoot a fair one, but the other nigga brought a gun to a fist fight.”

“Were you there?”

“Nah. Eris came home and told us. Dude had pistol whipped him. Shit was bad. His eye was all fucked up. And apparently, he threatened Eris after all that. Told him he better not see him at the gym again. Now, mind you, it ain’t nowhere in this

fucking city where a Windermere nigga can't go. I don't know if buddy was gone off some good shit or what, but he signed his warrant with that shit.

“One night, me and Nay rolled up on buddy when he was coming from some girl's house. We was just gon beat his ass and remind him who he was fuckin' with, but he started talkin' shit, and he threatened my brother again. That let me know he was serious, so he had to go.”

“You shot him?”

He smiled. “Let's just say it was quick, and we didn't make him suffer.”

I sat silently while my mind raced. Not because I'd just found out my husband was a double-murderer. I was reeling because it *didn't bother me*. Not even a little bit. It actually kinda turned me on.

Was this what my father was so worried about? And Dario? That I'd be corrupted? I mean, I still felt like the same old me, but maybe they were right. My thoughts were starting to change, and that was kinda scary.

“Why you wanna know me so bad?” He stared at me intently. Goosebumps prickled on my skin.

“Because,” I said. “You're my husband. Technically.”

“You like me, huh?” He smirked. “That dick got you choosin'.”

“We're already married, stupid. And you chose *for* me.”

He laughed. "It's all good. I can admit your pussy got me choosin'. You caught a nigga off guard with that shit, for real."

"Okay, so we both liked it. What happens next?"

"First off, I didn't just like it. I loved it. And as far as next goes, I guess we just...keep doing what we been doing."

I nodded. "How would you feel about me being a Windermere?"

His brows creased. "You mean like...changing your name?"

"Yeah. Is that too much?" I waited expectantly, pretending it didn't matter and I didn't care, when in reality, I very much wanted him to want me to do this.

"Nah. That ain't too much. I mean, not if that's what you want."

Knowing him a little now, I knew that was the closest I would get to a clear and obvious approval.

"I know we haven't talked about where we are relationship-wise, but it just feels right to me."

He nodded. "It feels right to me, too."

"And not that I'm saying we have to stay together."

"Right, I know. I was thinking the same thing. It don't really mean anything."

"Right. So we're on the same page then. That's cool."

"Yeah."

Awkward silence filled the air.

“So what are you working on?”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Numbers. Which I fucking hate.”

“Don’t you have somebody to do that for you?”

“Yeah, but that don’t mean shit. My daddy always checked behind the number man. You can’t trust nobody.”

“You can trust me.”

He stared at me, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “You tryna be part of this?”

“Maybe?”

“That’s serious business, Malika.”

“I know.”

He nodded. “Lemme think about it.”



FOR SOME ODD REASON, Jakari thought it might be a good idea for me to help his mother cook tonight’s dinner while he finished up with the numbers. I wasn’t interested in that at all, but I figured it was the least I could do after everything he’d done for me. I mean, everything after him kidnapping me and forcing me to marry him.

When I thought about that now, it seemed like a lifetime ago, and it almost seemed like a joke in my head. Like a funny story I’d tell our grandkids one day. But what the fuck did that

say about my mental state? Was I one of those people who starts to love their kidnapper? Stockholm syndrome, I think.

I hoped not.

Because I was in deep now.

“You’ve never done this, have you?”

Gab was staring at me, watching me cut tomatoes into tiny cubes like she asked me to. I was failing miserably, but what difference did it make if they were shaped a certain way? They were still gonna taste the same.

“Not like this, no,” I answered. “Sorry, I’m not very good at chopping vegetables.”

“Yeah, I see.” She chuckled and went back to chopping onions. “Jaz, check those beans for me.”

“Gab, I have a question. Have you ever thought about hiring somebody to cook?”

She stopped chopping. “It crossed my mind before, but I never did. My husband liked my cooking. Besides, my mama taught me you never let another bitch come in your house and cook for your man. And Lester wouldn’t have wanted a strange man in our house like that.”

“Oh. Makes sense.”

“Beans are done, Mama.”

“Pour the water off and take the shells out.”

With a loud sigh, Jaz did as she was told. She was especially on point today in her Gucci dress, so I knew covering it with



an apron and getting bean aroma in it had to be killing her.

“Hey, Mama.”

I turned at the sound of Jakari’s voice. He breezed in and planted a kiss on Gab’s cheek before popping Jaz on the back of the head. I shivered when his eyes locked on me and roamed my body.

“Malika, I need you for a second.”

That *voice*. So deep and rough.

“Okay, let me finish these tomatoes real quick.”

“Nah, I need you now. It won’t take long.”

I glanced at Gab. “Okay.”

He nodded and walked out. I wiped tomato juice off my hands with a paper towel, then followed him out. He didn’t say a word, just led me to his room. Once inside, he closed the door behind me.

I looked at him expectantly. “Everything okay?”

He licked his lips. “Ain’t nothin’ wrong. I just need a nut, that’s all.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. It ain’t gon’ take long.”

My eyes traveled down from his face to his print, rock hard and straining against the fabric of his jeans.

“Your mom is gonna know what we’re doing back here.”

“And? I’m grown.”

“I know.”

“If you know, then turn around and take this dick.”

I wasn't gonna argue. I was wet already just listening to him speak. I had no reason to pretend like I didn't want it just as bad as he did.

I positioned myself on my hands and knees at the foot of the bed. My eyes fluttered shut as he pushed the bottom of my dress over my hips. His fingers brushed my skin when he pulled my panties down. He entered me roughly, but it felt so good.

His strokes were slow and easy. I relaxed and let myself feel the sensations, but I flinched and tensed when he ran a hand down the back of my head.

He chuckled. “Don't worry, I know you just got your hair done. I ain't gon' fuck it up.” His hand traveled down and went to my hip, gripping the flesh there. Hard. “Can't say the same about this pussy, though. I'ma beat this motherfucker like it stole something.”

“Mmmmmmmmm.” I was trying to be quiet, but it felt too good. “*Fuck, Jakari.*”

“You like that?”

“Yeah.”

He stroked me harder. His dick was too long and thick for all that, but I took it, and I kept my mouth shut, because I was trying to see something.

“Pussy so fuckin’ wet,” he gritted. “Yo shit grip so tight.”

I squeezed my eyes and my lips shut as he hit my g-spot. Over and over. It was exquisitely unbearable. A few whimpers escaped.

“I’m bout to bust all in this pussy.”

I said nothing.

“Shit...ohhhhhhh shit. I’m cumming...”

My eyes rolled back as he came inside me. I felt it physically, of course, but also in another way I couldn’t explain or make sense of.

He sighed as he pulled out of me. With his help, I got down off the bed and stood on shaky legs. He pulled me into a kiss, thrusting his tongue into my mouth as his seed spilled down my inner thighs. It was kind of erotic, but my unsatisfied pussy throbbed with desire. I wanted to cum, too.

He pulled away with a smack. “Preciate that.”

I nodded.

“I got you later.”

“It’s fine.”

“You were so quiet, though.”

I smiled up at him. “I just didn’t want your family to hear me. That would have been embarrassing.”

“Maybe for *them*.”

I chuckled. “I can’t wait till we have our own place so I can scream as loud as I want when you fuck me.”

I left him with that thought as I headed off to the bathroom to clean up.



JAKARI’S UNCLE PREZ SAID grace. It was a good one, too, which is why I felt so guilty about the fact that all I could think about was Jakari’s dick.

After grace, we all dug in. Gab wasn’t much as a mother-in-law, but her weird ass could cook. No denying that.

“These burritos bussin’, Mama,” Eris said.

“Thank you, baby. Malika helped.”

“And Jaz,” I added. Gab rolled her eyes.

“I’m miss this food, for real,” Jakari said out of nowhere. I turned my head to the right to look at him, my eyebrows creased in confusion.

“Why would you miss it?” Gab said, her own eyebrows raised.

Jakari shrugged. “Me and Mal probably gon’ be moving soon.”

You could have heard a pin drop.

I smiled at my plate. Jakari stuffed another bite of food in his mouth. Gab’s fork clinked as she set it on her plate.

“You’re moving out?” she said. Her voice had an edge to it that made me uneasy, but I wasn’t as shook as I usually was. Having Jakari near me made me feel safe.

“Yeah,” he answered. “It’s kinda crowded around here.”

“Well, listen, if this is about y’all having loud sex the other night, don’t worry about it. We’re all grown.”

Eris and Nay snickered. My cheeks heated, but I kept my face neutral. She wanted to get a rise out of me, and I wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction.

Jakari didn’t seem fazed. “We’ll talk about it later.”

That was that. But that was always that with him. He wasn’t the kind of man you questioned, especially openly and in front of other people. He commanded respect, even from the woman who birthed and raised him.

It was a turn-on.

I would show him how much later on tonight.



# JAKATZI

JOE STUCK AROUND AFTER dinner, which I took as a sign that he had some news for me. So I was disappointed as fuck when he came into the study and plopped down on the leather couch with a sigh.

“What, man? What’s the bad news?”

He pulled out his notepad and flipped to the page he was looking for.

“Alright. I couldn’t find a single link between Tank and anybody in the family.”

That was a relief, I guess. “Even my uncle?”

“Yeah. I did find out that Tank is part of the Adams crew.”

“Refresh my memory.”

“They move all the heroin on the north side. It’s Tank, his brother Horace—he goes by Shaka—and some other niggas from the west side that joined up with them.”

“Why would them niggas have beef with me?”

“From what I can tell, they wanna go legit, and we happen to be in the way. They probably been planning it for a while, and then when Pop passed, they made their move.”

I nodded. “It makes sense, I guess. But what’s the link, man? How they know where I’d be?”

“I’m digging, Knight. I’m working as hard as I can.”

“Alright. What else?”

He sighed again. “The police don’t like having an unsolved homicide on the books. They’re spending a lot of money on the investigation.”

“That’s their fucking job.”

“Right. But with the other shit going on, it looks bad. They’re agitated.”

“What you want me to do?”

“Get with Gray again. Smooth shit over. He’s buddy buddy with the district attorney. If by some chance you get on the police radar, Gray could make that shit go away with a phone call.”

I nodded. “And Malika’s mother?”

“Still working on that. I should have something by tomorrow.” He sank down into the leather. “So I take it y’all are getting along.”

“Yeah. She’s cool.”

“Cool, like, you wanna stay married?”



“I ain’t say all that. I’m saying...for where I’m at right now, I’m cool with how we are. If at any point I ain’t cool with it, I’ll ring your nosy ass and you’ll handle it for me.”

He laughed. “Keep me posted. Oh, your mama’s waiting outside.”

“Of course she is.” I closed my eyes and tried to rub the tension out of my temples. “Thanks, Joe. I don’t think I’ve said that lately.”

He stood and dapped me up. “You don’t have to.”

He gave my mother a hug and kiss on the cheek as he passed her. She entered and closed the door behind her.

“You busy?”

“Never too busy for you.”

She smiled as she approached, and ended up sitting where Joe had just been. “Any news?”

“Nah. It ain’t kin. That’s the only news.”

“That’s good news to me.”

“Yeah, but now I got more questions than answers.”

“Well, I have no doubt you’ll figure it out.” She lit up the cigarette she took from behind her ear. “You are the living embodiment of everything your daddy stood for. You got the brains...the authority...the courage. And you always put the family first. That’s why you’re sitting in that chair. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you.” I couldn’t help but blush a little bit. “It’s some Gabrielle in me, too, now. Don’t get it twisted.”

She chuckled. “You’re so silly.”

“What’s up, Ma? You waited around for a reason.”

She spread her hands like she knew she’d been caught. “Okay. Fine. It’s true. I want you to consider staying here a little longer.”

“Why?”

“I’m worried about you.”

“I can handle myself.”

“I know, baby. I know that better than anybody. It’s just... I’m still working through some things related to your daddy. I’m worried that you might be too, and maybe you’re running away from it.”

I frowned. “I’m good.”

“You’re such a man. Y’all always think you’re good.”

I sat back in my chair. “What’s up, Mama? You always speak your mind. Don’t let up now.”

She stared at me with a blank expression. I stared right back. Finally, she shrugged.

“What all do you know about this Malika girl?”

There it was.

I knew it was coming eventually.

“Not much,” I admitted. “Just that she was working at Sliders when I walked through the door and changed her life.”

“For the better, I’m sure.”

“I wouldn’t say all that.”

She gestured to the space around her. “This big ass house? Brand new designer clothes? *You?* Trust me, that bitch is living it up. She walked up in here lookin’ like a black Orphan Annie, and now look at her. She’s a ghetto Meghan Markle. You done elevated her narrow ass. I’m a look up one day and the bitch gon’ be the queen.”

“I mean...she got family, though. And she had a life before me. And she saw me kill somebody. She’s probably traumatized and just ain’t telling me.”

“She don’t seem traumatized to me.”

I tilted my head, crossing my arms in front of me. “Where are you going with this?”

“I just...I don’t know how to feel about her.”

“Yeah, she knows. She thinks you don’t like her.”

Her rolling eyes and curled lip told me that was true, but what she said was, “I don’t know her to say one way or the other.”

“Maybe you could get to know her.”

“Maybe. But you definitely should. Have Joe look into her background. Just to make sure.”

“Of what? Ain’t like she the one that sent a goon at my head. Why would I—”

“Just trust your mama. For peace of mind. And maybe don’t play house with her just yet. You don’t wanna be stuck with somebody you don’t know anything about. Right?”

“I hear you.”

It made sense. Me moving with Malika wasn’t decided with a clear head. I was drunk off her pussy and not thinking straight.

“You right, Mama. I’ll hold off.”

She smiled. “And that’s why you’re the king.”

Malika was in the shower when I got back to my room. That was cool, because it gave me time to think.

I took off my shirt and tossed it onto my dresser. There was so much shit on my plate right now, but the most pressing issue was getting the police off our back. We had a couple on the payroll, but that shit don’t mean shit if the bosses wanna crack down. The last thing I needed was for the police to go sniffing around Windermere establishments.

Malika walked in wearing nothing but a pink towel. She closed the door behind her and flashed a smile.

“You okay?” she said. “You look like you have a lot on your mind.”

“I do. But it ain’t nothing your pussy can’t cure.”

Her smile fell as her eyes dropped to my bare chest.

“You like what you see, Malika?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Yeah, me too. Drop that shit.”

She dropped her towel and stood there, naked and wet, while my eyes studied her flesh. Every curve, every dimple, every tiger stripe, every spot...my dick swelled slowly as I stared at my wife.

*Wife.*

That shit was still wild to me, but also, kinda sexy. To think that this woman in front of me was mine, and I was hers, and that in the eyes of the law and the Lord, we were one.

That shit is deep.

My eyes settled on that pretty little space between her hips. She wasn't bare, but she trimmed it close. I loved the low patch of black hair there, and the little peekaboo thing her clit was doing from between her lips. My mouth watered at the thought of sucking on it.

“I know I owe you one,” I said, my voice low.

She smiled. “Just one?”

“Aight, don't get yourself in trouble.”

“Have you ever considered that maybe *I'm* the trouble?”

My dick jumped at those words. I was feeling the way she held her own with me.

“We'll see,” I warned. “Come ride my face. I wanna feel the first one on my tongue.”

I laid back on the bed and waited. I loved the feeling of her slowly crawling up my body until she got to my face. She looked down at me and smiled, but that smile fell off quick when I sucked her clit into my mouth. She gasped and jerked upward, but I grabbed her and held her tight, forcing her to come closer.

“Mmmmmmm, Jakariiiiiii.”

Her moans sounded so fucking good to me. I was about to tell her to ride my face, but she beat me to it. Those little hips starting rolling. Her pussy started teasing me just like I was teasing it. Like a game of cat and mouse, except we were both gonna win.

I groaned against her center, letting my tongue do the real talking for me. Fast, slow, circles, up, down. I feasted on her pussy like it was my last meal, and she served it to me on a silver platter. The way she moved was sexy. Sensual, I think they call it. My dick ached to be inside her.

“Right there,” she informed me. “Stay...right...there! Yes! Fuck, don’t stop. Don’t stop...”

A gush of wetness hit my mouth as she came. I felt it drip down the sides of my face. It was crazy how her body reacted to me. I loved that shit.

I looked up and grinned. Her head was back, her eyes squeezed shut. Her titties bounced with every jerk of her body. She looked beautiful.

I was about to fuck the shit outta her.

I gripped her hips and lifted her up so I could ease my way out from under her. She squealed when I turned her around and pushed her onto her back, but she got focused real quick when I started taking my clothes off.

Her eyebrows raised when she heard me chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

I shook my head. “You don’t wanna know.”

I guess I should have known better than to laugh anywhere near a woman when she’s naked. Because that’s when she’s most vulnerable. The worried look in her eye confirmed that.

“You really wanna know?”

She nodded.

“It was just a thought that ran through my head.”

“Which was...?”

“That little bitch finna get tossed around like a baseball at Yankee Stadium.”

She burst out laughing.

“I thought you was gon be offended.” I got on the bed one knee at a time and settled between her open legs. Felt like home. “So you ain’t offended?”

She put her hands on my face and stared into my eyes. “Why would I be?”

“The bitch part. You don’t talk like that, so I thought you would think I meant that shit literally.”

“I’m good, baby. I knew what you meant.”

Why did she sound so sexy when she said that? It was almost like she purred it.

I closed my eyes. I was...happy as fuck to be here, honestly. It was weird. It felt like the whole world was right side up. For the first time in my life.

Shit was trippy.

“Lick your tongue out,” she said.

I did it.

She lifted her head and closed her lips around my tongue, biting gently and pulling me with her as she rested her head on the pillow. Then she sucked on it, which of course made me imagine her sucking my dick. Overstimulated, I reached down between us and rubbed her clit. She moaned and grinded against my fingers. Teasing me. Driving me crazy.

I pulled back to say, “I can’t take it no more.”

“So put it in.”

I stuck my tongue back in her mouth and slid right on in. Once again, she felt like heaven on this ugly earth. I groaned my way through every stroke, helplessly aroused and insatiable even though I was buried deep inside her. It felt too good to be true. Like a dream I was scared I was gonna wake up from.

I pounded her pussy without mercy. Hard, fast, and deep, I stroked her until I’d had enough missionary. I lifted my body,



bringing her with me, until I was standing. Just like I'd said, I tossed her a few inches in the air and let her slam down on my dick. Again. Again. Over and over, I bounced her up and brought her back down until her head fell back and she was screaming my name. Sweat poured down my forehead as I worked her out. I studied her face, her lips, her titties, the creamy wetness she left on my dick.

“Fuck!” I yelled out. “Your pussy got me fucked up, Malika. Feel so fuckin’ good, girl.”

She didn't say anything, just fixed her lips to my neck and sucked hard. I was close, but I still had more tossing to do.

I lifted her off me and threw her on the bed. With my right arm, I flipped her over. With the left, I pulled her hips up, then pressed her face onto the sheet.

Backshots were the grand finale, and they didn't disappoint. She arched that back like it was her job and took my dick as best she could. I felt her flinch, so I let up a little and leaned down to get in her ear.

“You good? You need a break?”

“A break? What's that?”

I chuckled and ran my tongue up the shell of her ear. “I felt you flinch. I know it's big, but your pussy is deep. I thought you could take it.”

“I *can* take it.” She was defiant. “Fuck me, Jakari. I promise I'll take it.”

“You will, huh? Aight, let’s see.” Cuz I went easy on her last time. Not tonight, though. Tonight, it was a go.

I lifted my leg and planted it beside her. She arched a little higher for me and grabbed two handfuls of sheet.

The first stroke made her whimper. The second one made her moan. I kept it slow, but not easy. I was trying to knock the bottom out. Baby girl was taking that shit, too. I was impressed and happy.

Quietly, she said, “Jakari?” and I thought she was about to fold. But nah, she threw me a curve ball.

“You can call me that if you want to.”

“Call you what?”

“Bitch.”

“Um—” The sound of our skin slapping made it hard to hear her. I *thought* I knew what she said, but—

“I’m your bitch, Jakari. Right?”

Okay, so she did say that. I fucked her a little faster. “Yeah. That’s right.”

“Mmmm. Don’t you have something you wanna say to me?”

She was on one, and I liked that shit.

“Yeah.” I spread her cheeks and watched myself fuck her, knowing the end was near. But I said it anyway.

“Cum on this dick, bitch.”

She came, and I groaned and nudded longer and harder than I ever had. Her walls squeezed and milked every drop out of me.

“Fuck!” I yelled out, still shooting off inside her. Shit was never-ending. “Shit. Malika. Fuck. I—”

“Jakari. What are you doing to meeee?”

“Shit, what you doin’ to *me*? Damn.”

It took all my strength to pull out of her. Exhausted, I collapsed on the bed next to her, but she got up and left me there. I guess she went to the bathroom, I don’t know. My eyes were closed.

Eventually, she came back and laid down beside me.

“Shit.” She shook her head. “I can’t even deal with you, Jakari.”

“Dick too bomb?”

“Yes, it is.”

I chuckled. “What can I say? I put it down.”

“You really do.” She cleared her throat. “So...when should I start looking at apartments?”

Fuck. I had forgot about that.

Why women always wanna talk after sex? This shit was about to blow my high, I could feel it.

“You know what, let’s hold off on that for now.”

She sat up and stared down at me. “Why?”

“Just...ain’t the right time.”

She was quiet for a minute. I stared at her face, then her titties, and got distracted until she said, “Is that you talking, or your mother?”

I sat up too, shaking my head. “Don’t do that. I don’t like that shit.”

“What?”

“You questioning me about my mama. You might not have meant it no kinda way, but that shit sound disrespectful to me.”

“Sorry. I’m just trying to figure out what changed your mind.”

“Then ask me what changed my mind. Be straight up with that shit.”

“Okay. Got it.” She rolled her eyes.

“To answer your question, *I* wanna wait a little longer. That’s all. And that’s all you need to know.”

Without another word, she got up and walked over to her bag. I watched and smiled to myself. Her ass had a little more meat on it now.

She pulled out a long t-shirt and pulled it over her head. “No offense, but she has a weird hold over you.”

“Whatever.”

“She does. And she treats you like...I don’t know. Like you’re different.”

“I *am* different.”

“How?”

“That falls under the category of shit you don’t need to worry about.”

Her hands went to her hips like she was about to fuss at me, but all she said was, “Fine. I won’t ask you anything else since it triggers you so much.”

“Whatever, Malika. Smart ass.”

“Glad you recognize.”

If she said anything else, it was lost on me because I threw my arm over my eyes and dozed off. Her pussy knocked me out til the next morning.



# MALIKA

“MARRIED? ARE YOU FUCKING kidding me?”

I laughed at Dionne’s outraged face. She was teeny tiny, even smaller than me, so anger always made her look like a toddler whose toy got taken away. And cuss words coming out her mouth always sent me. She was adorable.

“Daddy didn’t tell you?”

She rolled her eyes. “No. But now I understand why he’s been all aggy.”

“Girl, it’s a long story. And some parts, I can’t tell you.”

“That’s not mysterious at all.”

I shot her a look. “Just listen. Okay, so we had to get married because of...certain circumstances. It was *not* a love thing, trust me. But we’ve been kinda getting to know each other and...I don’t know...maybe—”

“You love him.”

I recoiled. “Hell, no. I mean, I like him, but love is too strong a word. We’re just...vibing.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And by ‘vibing,’ you really mean fucking.”

I shook my head at her antics. “See, I try to have a serious conversation with you—”

“Girl, shut up. Y’all are fucking. Admit it!”

“Okay, yes. We are. And it’s amazing.”

She snapped three times. “Love to see it.”

“Whatever. Did you get the rent money?”

“Yeah, it hit yesterday. How long are you planning to stay over there at his mama’s house? Cuz if I need to move, I’m a need some warning.”

“Honestly? I don’t know. For now, just assume you’re staying put. I’ll keep paying my share. I wouldn’t have you and Chase out here scrambling. You know that.”

She smiled. “So he’s ballin’ out on you, then. I see that bag and those shoes. Your hair is on point. I bet that Windermere money feels extra nice when you spend it.”

My daddy used to say, “*All money ain’t good money.*” I’d heard that before, but he added his own addendum: “*But with that said, the bad money pays for just as much heat and water as the good.*”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s mostly Jaz taking me shopping.”



She frowned. “I don’t know how I feel about you having another sister.”

“Nah, Jaz is cool. She don’t really pay me any mind except to fix me up. I’m like her doll or something.”

“Okay, so what’s it like over there? You get along with everybody? What’s his mama like?”

“It’s okay. I don’t really fit in yet, but it gets less awkward the more days pass. His mom is...she’s weird. Always staring at me, asking weird questions. I feel like she doesn’t like me, but not in the way that women don’t like other women they don’t know. It almost feels like she has a grudge against me.”

“That *is* weird.”

“And it’s not anything she says. It’s just a...a vibe. But the worst part is that Jakari is under her spell or something. She manipulates him.”

“That sucks. That’s supposed to be *your* job.”

“Shut up.”

She giggled.

“Anyway, it’s not horrible. Jakari makes it all bearable.”

“Yeah, I bet. He still fine?”

“Girl, finer.”

“I hate you. Actually, I don’t. Introduce me to one of his brothers.”

“I most certainly will not.”

That would be a disaster. Nay was definitely out. I didn't want my sister dealing with baby mama drama. Eris was cute and he seemed nice, but I didn't have a good feel for him yet. What I'd seen so far gave me spoiled vibes, and I wanted my sister to be the spoiled one in the relationship.

While Dionne was getting dressed for work, I went into my room to grab a few things. Highest on the list were my documents, because I planned to change my name sometime this week. I grabbed my birth certificate and social security card. I also grabbed my last few bank statements, utility bills, and credit card statements. Without thinking about it, I pulled my two photo albums out of my bottom drawer as well, and made my way back into the living room.

“Hey D, let me ask you something.”

She was putting her lunch in a Tupperware container. “I'm listening.”

“Do you ever think about her?”

Her hands froze, the wooden spoon suspended in air. “I think about her every day.”

“Me, too.”

She set the spoon on the counter and peered at me. “Where did that come from?”

“I don't know. Actually, I do. Jakari has somebody looking into it.”

“For what? If the police didn't find anything, how would anybody else?”

“He has people in high places,” I said proudly. “He has more power than you would think.”

“Interesting.”

“If he finds something, would you wanna know?”

Dionne stepped out of her heels, abruptly losing a few inches in height. “I don’t know,” she said. “I made my peace with the way things are. Finding out something, no matter which way, would disrupt that peace. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.” I sighed pitifully. “I was so excited when he first told me he would look into it. But now, I don’t know. I’m almost scared to learn something. Like you said, either way, it’s gonna hurt. If she left, that means she left us. If she was taken...” I trailed off. The rest didn’t need to be said.

“I miss her.”

She said it so quietly, I almost missed it. Those whisper thin words floated in the air between us like smoke, and I passed right through them to get to my little sister. I pulled her into a hug and we held each other, as we’d done so many times before. Kenya’s girls, bonded by blood, love, and pain.

I had plenty of tears left to fall, but whenever Dionne got sad like this, it was like my tears retreated to give her the space to cry.

As she sobbed quietly on my shoulder, I stroked her hair and cursed the day my mother left, and whatever or whoever

took her away, be it her own demons or some person with bad intentions.

“It’s okay, D,” I told her. “Whatever happens, we have each other. Okay?”

I felt her nod. With one last squeeze, we parted ways and I kissed her goodbye and headed to my car. I had a missed call and text, both from Jakari.

“Hey, you called?”

“Hey, beautiful. Where you at?”

“Leaving my apartment. What’s up?”

“We have a dinner thing tomorrow. Handling some business, so I need you to dress nice.”

“Uh, okay. I don’t think I have anyth—”

“Get up with Jaz. She’ll know what to get.”

“Okay.” I smiled. Retail therapy was exactly what I needed.



NEITHER OF US FELT like traveling to Atlanta, so we hit up Macy’s at Overbrook mall instead. That was fine with me, especially because I was lucky to even get Marshall’s clothes growing up. Macy’s might as well have been Chanel. But Jaz, of course, was slumming it, and not at all happy about it.

“So where is this dinner at?” she asked, snapping her bubblegum like a big kid.

She was sifting through racks of clothes like an expert. Watching her was like watching an artist at their canvas. She had a knack.

“I forgot to ask,” I answered.

“Always ask, girl. How else you gon’ dress for an event?” She eyed an emerald green pantsuit, shifted her eyes to me, then shook her head. “Not the right shade of green for your coloring.”

“Is this a regular thing, these business dinners?”

“Girl, I don’t know. I don’t pay attention to none of that. I just go where I’m told and do what I’m supposed to do.”

“Is there anything else you’d wanna do? Like maybe... stylist for example? You’re so good at it.”

Her face lit up. “You think so? I’ve heard that a few times before. It’s crossed my mind.” She pulled a white skirt suit off the rack and held it up in front of me. “My mother told me to get by on my pretty and don’t worry about work. I think she thinks I *can’t* do anything but that.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s a mean thing to say to your daughter.”

“Honestly, Malika? I don’t even let that lady faze me anymore. That shit rolls right off my back.”

“How’d you get to that point?”

“Don’t know.”

“Why do you think she acts like that with you?”

“Oh, she’s jealous of me. I been knew that.” She pulled a gray dress off the rack. “She was the queen bee when it was just my daddy and my brothers. When I came, she wasn’t the only woman anymore. I was the princess.” She smiled. “My daddy’s princess.”

I nodded. “How are you doing with that?”

She shrugged. “Just taking it day to day. I appreciate that you asked, though. Don’t nobody really check on me like that.”

“Jakari doesn’t?” I made a mental note to get on him about that.

She shrugged a shoulder. “He got a lot on his mind right now.”

“So if you don’t mind me asking...what was it like to be your daddy’s princess?”

“It was cool. He never told me no. Ever.” She laughed. “Gab hated that, too.”

“I bet.” I laughed with her. “It sounds like y’all had a special bond. I love that for you.”

“You not close with your daddy?”

“Not really. He was there. He just...he was nothing like yours. Believe me. I mean, he wasn’t bad, he just wasn’t...it wasn’t special.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. But anyway, I’m grown and it’s in the past. Can’t do shit about it now.”

She handed me a black dress and kept scanning. “That’s my motto. Why the fuck would I crease my face worrying about some shit that already happened? I clear my mind at the end of every fucking day. Blank page. That’s how I stay stress-free and fine. Let these other fools stay up at night worrying about life.”

“I hear you.”

The privilege in that statement was appalling, but also kind of admirable. I was trying to live stress-free, too. I’d been through enough bullshit for three lifetimes. A bitch was *tired*.

Her phone buzzed. She picked it up and smirked before her perfectly manicured fingers flew across the screen typing a response.

“Who got you smilin’ over there?” I teased.

“Milo. His thirsty ass.”

“Isn’t that your boyfriend’s manager?”

“Mm hm.” She typed again, then dropped her phone back into her bag. “I’m gonna fuck him at some point. He knows that, and now he won’t leave me alone.”

“O...kay. I...don’t know what to say to that.”

She shrugged. “Terio fucked a stripper and mighta got her pregnant.”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that, but I didn’t wanna ask.”

“Bitch, please. We’re family now. Ask all you want. I might not answer, but you can ask.”

“Okay. I’m asking. Is it true?”

“Well, the baby part, we don’t know yet. But it don’t matter. I know he fucked her. So what I’m a do is fuck his manager while he’s locked up so he knows how that shit feels.” She blew a big pink bubble. When it popped, the sweet smell of cotton candy filled the air. “My daddy called it natural consequences.”

As I watched her flip through more dresses, I smiled and felt a little proud, strangely enough. People could call her stupid all they wanted, but the more I got to know her, the more I felt like Jaz kinda knew what she was doing in this thing called life.





# JAKAZI

“DAMN. LOOK AT MY wife, y’all. She bad as fuck, ain’t she?”

Jaz and Eris smiled as wide as I did when Mal walked down the stairs toward me. Black dress, black stilettos, a gold purse, and gold jewelry to match. She was glowing.

She cheesed as she got closer to me, but in a shy way, like she didn’t know just how motherfucking sexy she looked.

“Did I get it right?” she said softly. “Well, did *Jaz* get it right?”

“Jaz hit it out the park.”

She beamed. “You look good too, handsome.”

I popped my collar. “I know, but I’m glad you agree.”

Once we were on the road, Mal checked her face in the mirror.

“What you lookin’ for? You can’t no finer than that reflection right there.”

“You’re so sweet.”

“With you, yeah. You bring that shit outta me, I guess.”

She chuckled. “So where are we going? You never said.”

“To handle business. There’s this guy...well, you probably know him, or of him. Our school was named after his people.”

She swallowed hard. “Hightower?”

“Yeah.”

“W-which Hightower are you doing business with?”

“The daddy.”

She nodded, and then it got real quiet in the car. I didn’t think much of it. I turned the dial up and blasted Young Thug all the way to the restaurant.

Fuse was valet only, so we hopped out at the entrance and made our way inside. Niggas was breaking necks to look at Mal. Can’t lie; my chest was puffed out.

Gray stood up when he saw us approaching the table, and I didn’t miss the way his eyes zeroed in on Malika.

Not that I could blame him.

“Mr. And Mrs. Windermere,” he greeted with a grin. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

That was directed at Malika, but she didn’t seem all that happy to hear it.

“Gray, this is my wife, Malika. Mal, this is Gray Hightower.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said.

She stood there like a deer in headlights.

“Malika?” I nudged her with my elbow.

“Oh. Sorry. Um, yes, nice to meet you, too.”

Gray nodded. “Let’s take our seats.”

That’s when I realized somebody was missing.

“I thought you were bringing your wife.”

“So did I.” He laughed. “At the last second, she had to rush off to a PTA meeting.”

“Well, make sure you tell her I asked about her.” I looked over at Malika. She was staring at the menu, but her eyes weren’t focused. She looked like she was in a trance.

“You good?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Just trying to figure out what I want.”

I wasn’t buying it, but it wasn’t the time to get into it. Instead, me and Gray talked shop—after the wine came, of course—and Malika just stared into space or around the room. I tried to include her in the conversation a few times, but she wasn’t with it. She only woke up when dessert came.

“So, Malika. What’s it like being a brand new member of the Windermere family?”

She looked up at Gray and took a deep breath. “It’s fine. Jakari is...um...he’s a good husband to me.”

I should have been happy to hear those words, but the way she said them, and her energy—everything was off.

Gray smiled at me. “Treat this one right, Jakari. I bet could have any guy she wanted. You better stay on your toes.”

“No doubt.” I looked at Mal again and could tell she was uncomfortable.

Lowering my voice, I leaned in toward Gray. “So you’re tight with the DA, right? Golf buddies and shit?”

He snickered. “Pretty much.”

“Keep him off our back, man. It ain’t good business.”

“Trust me, I know.” He drained his wine glass. “It seems like those earlier incidents were just flukes. Things are calmer now. Let’s try to keep it that way, because this,” he gestured between the two of us, “only works if we’re both doing our part.”

“Of course.” Next to me, Malika was inhaling her piece of cheesecake. “We’re on the same page.”

“Great. Glad to hear it.”

Malika was just as quiet in the car. I was worried, now, because she hadn’t acted like this sense the night we met. She was terrified then, but she had a reason. Tonight, though? I couldn’t think of a single reason for how she was acting.

“What’s up with you?” I finally said.

“What do you mean?”

“Your vibe been weird all night.” I pulled out of the parking lot. “Is it something I need to know?”

“Something like what?”

“You know what I mean. Is there something I need to know? Yes, or no?”

“No. I’m just tired, I guess.”

I drove a few miles down the road. No radio. Just thick silence.

“Listen. I don’t like secrets. For me, it’s like lying in my face.”

“I hear you.” She seemed agitated. “I told you, nothing’s wrong.”

“Cool.”

I said that, but I wasn’t stupid.

Something was up.



# JAKAZI

*I HAVE TO GET my daddy help. I can't lose him. I can't.*

*I can't.*

*God, please don't let my daddy die.*

*My mother's screams pierce my ears and my heart. She's pissed, but I know it's pain talking.*

*I touch my daddy's wound. His eyes roll and it scares me. I snatch my hand back. My heart is pounding. My blood runs cold.*

*But I know what I have to do.*

*I kiss my daddy's forehead. The salt from his sweat stings my dry lips. And then I turn away to do what must be done.*

*I have a body to bury.*

I was soaked with sweat when I woke up out that nightmare. Malika didn't wake up, but she was moving around like she was about to. I laid still until she stopped, then I got up and walked down the hall to the bathroom.



After I took a leak, I stared at myself in the mirror. I could see dark circles starting to form under my eyes. My reward for coming back here and trying to do the right thing for my family.

Back in my bed, I got to thinking hard about my future. I was torn between two options. I could get the fuck out of Midling and settle down in Atlanta for good, maybe set up shop there like everybody thought I was gonna do when I left the first time. Or I could say fuck it and bend this fucking town to my will. The second option would be harder. Blood would probably have to be shed. But at least I wouldn't be a coward.

I turned my head and looked at my wife's back. She was naked. Her soft skin was calling me, begging to be touched. But I just stared at her and wondered how she fit into all this.

I wasn't sure. Didn't really wanna think about it, to be honest. I couldn't see staying married to her, but the scary part was that I couldn't see myself leaving her behind, either. I didn't love her—I don't think—but I was getting used to her. Her presence was cool. She didn't add stress to my life. If anything, she took some of that shit away.

Yeah, I didn't wanna think about it. I pushed that out of my mind.

I checked the clock. 5:43 am.

Might as well get a jump start on the day. I had a lot to do.



I GOT A HERO'S welcome when I walked into The Block. It was the first legit business my grandfather opened. A barbershop that catered to the black clientele, only it was somewhat upscale, unlike the dusty-ass corner shops that had sprung up since.

My Uncle Prez ran it now, and he was doing a good job of it, too. After my shower this morning, I looked at the numbers. Everything looked good. But Prez was solid like that. My pops told me that a long time ago.

I popped Jaz in the head on my way past the reception desk before I made the rounds, catching up with old friends and encouraging the employees.

Then I took a seat in Tay's chair. Me and that nigga went way back, and he'd been cutting my hair since I was like 12.

If I had to guess Tay's age, I'd probably say he was a year or two older than me, but I don't think he ever graduated. It wasn't something we ever talked about. We only ever talked business and hair. Still, I would say we were close. I trusted him.

"How long you here for, man? And who been lining you up? Them Atlanta niggas ain't nice with the clippers, huh? That's a damn shame."

"Aw, here you go," I laughed. "I'm home for now. That's all I can say. And while a nigga did find a new barber out there, it's always been you, Tay. You complete me."

"Nigga, fuck you," he laughed. "What we doin'?"

After I reminded him how I wanted my shit done, we caught up on what he'd been up to, and what was happening around the shop. I kept my ears open for any kinda hint of shadiness or bullshit, but I didn't hear anything.

Didn't mean there wasn't any, though.

After Tay got me right, I took a look around the back office. Prez wasn't in today, so it was empty, but everything looked like it was in order.

I said my goodbyes and headed for the exit. I stepped out and looked up at the sky. Bright blue, wispy white clouds. I was always happiest when the sky looked like that. Maybe I was one of those people whose mood changes with the weather, I don't know. Either way, a nigga was feeling good today.

I heard a loud pop at the exact same time somebody pushed me hard. I looked around to see who did it, but there was nobody there. I was confused for a minute before I heard another pop, and then the glass behind me shattered. That's when I realized what had actually happened.

I heard voices, then somebody was pulling me. The world spun around me, and then I was lying on the floor and Jaz was standing over me, crying and yelling for somebody to call an ambulance.

I tried to sit up, but Tay's voice was in my ear telling me to chill. I wasn't in pain, but I was tired as hell, like I'd been up for five nights straight. I was sleepy.

Jaz told me to stay with her, but I was too sleepy. The last thing I heard before I fell asleep was the sound of sirens.



# JAKAZI

I THOUGHT I WAS dead when I woke up. All them faces smiling down at me and shit. I looked at each one...Nay, Eris, Jaz, Mama, Joe, Uncle Prez, Tay, and Cyrus...and wondered why the fuck they were standing over me and why they were in my bedroom in the first damn place.

Then I realized.

“What happened?” I coughed. My throat felt like sandpaper.

“Here, baby.” Mama handed me a cup of ice water. I drank half of it.

“What the fuck happened?” I asked again.

“You got shot,” Nay said. “Outside the shop.”

I thought about it for a minute. Made sense. Then the pain set in. Funny how that works.

“My shoulder,” I said, and everybody nodded. “Did anybody see anything?”

“Nah.” That was Tay. “We heard a car screeching off, but nobody saw who it was.”

That was convenient.

I coughed again and moved to sit up, but Mama pushed me back down.

“Don’t try to move,” she ordered. “You’re okay but you have a wound and stitches. Do you need some painkillers?”

I debated that. Painkillers would make me cloudy, and I needed a clear head to make sense of this shit.

“I’m good.” It was then that I realized somebody was missing. “Aye, where’s Malika?”

They all exchanged looks. My heart raced when I saw that shit.

“Where’s my wife?” I demanded. “Is she okay?”

“Calm down, man,” Eris said. “She’s still at work. She’s fine.”

Okay, that was good. She was okay. I breathed in and out, slowly, to calm myself down.

“Does she know I’m in the hospital?”

They all looked around again, stuck on stupid, mumbling about how they didn’t tell her or didn’t think to mention it.

“Let me get this straight. Y’all made sure to call each other, but didn’t nobody think to call my fucking *wife*?”

“We didn’t realize...” Joe trailed off.

Mama shrugged. “We didn’t think...”

“We just thought you’d want family here,” Nay finished. “Real family.”

“She *is* real family.” I rubbed my temples and tried with all my might not to go HAM on these niggas. “Cyrus, go get Malika and bring her here.”

He nodded once and left the room.

“What can we do?” Prez said. “Anything you need.”

“I need...” I took a deep breath. “I need a minute to think. I love y’all and appreciate y’all being here, but just let me get my mind right. And send the doctor in here.”

Prez, the deacon, looked around. “Can we pray for you first?”

“Yeah, man. Go ahead.”

Prez grabbed the hands next to him, then everyone did it until they formed a circle around me.

“Bow your heads,” he said.

Everybody did it. Everybody except me. While they were praying for my speedy recovery and covering me with prayers for my continued safety, I was studying all their faces. Looking for a crack in the armor. Seeing if anybody’s mask would slip.

I hated having to live like this.

Fuck.



After the amens had been said, one by one, they left the room. All except my mother. Her face fell when I glared at her.

“Me, too?” she said softly, and I could hear the pain in her voice.

“It ain’t personal, Mama. I just need a few minutes, then you can come back in.”

Knuckles rapped on the door. “Mr. Windermere?”

“It’s okay, Mama.” I looked over at the doctor. “Yeah, come in, man.”

Mama left without another word, and the doctor took her place at my bedside. He was a black dude, which I liked to see. Small and nerdy, he peered at me from behind his thick glasses.

“Mr. Windermere—”

“Call me Jakari.”

“Of course. I’m Dr. Shields.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“I’m glad to see you’re awake. How’s your pain? Scale of one to ten.”

“About a five.”

“Okay, I’ll get the nurse in here to manage that for you.”

“Okay, but first, I need to know what happened.”

“Certainly. You presented with a gunshot wound to your left shoulder. Luckily, the bullet missed your subclavian artery and

your bones. The way it passed through your tissue was almost like a graze. Truly a case of good fortune.”

“Did I have surgery?”

“Yes. We successfully removed the bullet fragments and stitched the wound. As you see, I propped your arm. We do that to keep it elevated above the heart. That helps.”

I nodded. “What about recovery?”

“I’m going to tentatively say you should start feeling better in a few weeks.”

“Alright. ‘Preciate it. How long do I need to be here?”

“If all your bloodwork checks out, you can go home tomorrow.”

“Perfect. Also, I’m probably have a couple of guys posted up outside my room tonight. Security.”

The doctor swallowed. “Security for what?”

“For me. I don’t know what y’all’s visitation rules are, but I’m gonna have two people outside my room tonight. I need you to let your staff know.”

He nodded slowly, having gotten the message. “Very well.”

“Also, my next of kin is Malika Windermere. She’s the only one who can get information from your staff. If anybody else asks questions, refer them to her.”

“Of course. There’s a form—”

“Have the nurse bring it in.”

“Right.” He looked at his clipboard. “We have you on a morphine drip right now. We typically start to wean you off so you can make the switch to pills, but if you like—”

“Nah, you can taper that off right now. And I don’t need pills. Just have them bring me some Advil.”

“Okay, but—”

“The strongest drug I want in my system is Advil.”

He nodded. “Very well. I’ll inform my staff. But...are antibiotics okay? Actually, I’m afraid I have to insist on those.”

“Yeah. That’s fine.”

He looked relieved. “Mr. Windermere, I’m...well, typically with gunshot wounds, the police come to the hospital and—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I snapped. “Ain’t nothin’ criminal goin’ on. It was an accident.”

The doctor nodded and left, probably relieved to escape.

I found the button to move the bed and used it to elevate my upper body. My left arm felt like it weighed two-hundred pounds, but I could handle that. What I couldn’t deal with was the fact that this was the second attempt on my life. And worse than that, it was somebody in my circle. Had to be.

Before I could torture myself trying to figure out who, Malika opened the door. She stood there and stared at me, her eyes full of fear. The air rushed out of me when I saw her, which was weird. I was relieved to see her. I felt it.

She approached me slowly, her eyes filling with tears. That shit touched me.

“I’m okay,” I said. “It’s just my shoulder.”

She burst into tears then, and I felt bad for making her cry.

“Calm down.” I reached out with my right hand. “Come here. Malika. Come on.”

She finally came within arm’s length of me. I grabbed her hand and pulled her closer until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. I wrapped my right arm around her.

“What you cryin’ for?”

“I don’t know,” she whined. “Seeing you in this bed with the IV, it just...it scared me.”

“I’m fine. Just a few stitches, but I’m good. They can’t take me down. Alright? I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“I asked you if you were safe. This is what I was talking about.” She squeezed my hand. “This is serious. Somebody really tried to kill you. Again.”

“I know, but—”

“Why the fuck were you even out without security? The first time wasn’t enough of a warning?”

“I—”

“What’s the security guy’s name?”

“McGrady. I already—”

“He needs to do his fucking job. Do I need to talk to him?”

“Chill. I’m already on that.” I chuckled. I was kinda enjoying this. “I’m handling things. But I appreciate your concern.”

She sighed. “Okay. Good.”

“You ain’t gon like this, but I don’t want you working. Not right now. Not until I figure out who’s at me.”

“I doubt they’d do anything to me. I mean, look at your family. They didn’t even bother to call me. Nobody thinks this is real.” She shook her head. “Not that I’m saying it’s real. Just —”

“No, I got you. I know what you meant.”

We sat in silence for a while. It wasn’t awkward this time, though. Just quiet and comfortable.

“So how are you feeling?”

For the first time since I woke up, I told the truth. To her, and to myself.

“Man, I feel like shit. My shoulder hurts, my throat hurts. And I’m fucking worried. Somebody really wants me out the paint. That shit is...it’s fuckin my head up.”

She nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just...I need you to ride for me. To be straight up, and keep my secrets close, and keep an eye on shit that I might not see. For whatever reason, I trust you. So I just need you to maintain that trust. Be in my corner.”

She leaned over and pecked my lips. “I’m already there.”



# MALIKA

I ACTED MY ASS off when I got to the hospital.

I knew something was wrong when Cyrus showed up at my job and demanded that I come with him. He had another guy with him who I didn't recognize, and that guy drove my car back to the house.

The whole way to the hospital, I asked him where we were going, what was going on. I begged him, but all he would say is that he'd tell me when we got there. Pulling up in front of Midling General sent my mind into overdrive. I thought maybe something was wrong with Dionne or Chase.

That's when he told me Jakari got shot. Funny thing was, I got just as emotional as I would have been if it had turned out to be my sister or my nephew.

"Pull yourself together," he instructed. "He not gon' wanna see you broke down. When a nigga's laid up, he needs his woman to be strong."

That was easier said than done.

Once I actually laid eyes on him, the tears just came. I couldn't stop them.

But once I got them out of my system, I put myself on alert. Forced myself to be strong. And when he told me what I needed to do, I decided I was gonna do that for him even though the logical thing to do was to run and never look back.

I never even considered it.

It's so fucking strange. I still didn't know what we were to each other. I didn't have a blueprint for how to navigate this fake marriage. So I resigned myself to letting my feelings lead me. They were my beacon, and right now, they were telling me I was invested in this. That I had a stake in what was happening to Jakari. I had a role to play, and as long as I wore his ring and his name, I was gonna play it.

Right now, I was in a chair next to his bed. We were watching *Fresh Prince* reruns on the tv. Every now and then, he would shift position and grimace. He was in pain, but he wouldn't take the pain meds they offered. He only wanted ibuprofen. I didn't understand it at all, but it wasn't my job to question it.

I picked up his cup and shook it. Empty.

“You need some more water?”

He nodded. “I don't want tap, though. That shit tastes like plastic. See if they got some Evian or Fiji or something.”

“Oh, you a bougie thug, is that it?”

He chuckled. “Guess so.”



“Just water? Nothing else?”

“Nope. Just water.” He paused. “And you.”

Smiling, I grabbed his cup and exited the room, shutting the door behind me. Before I could take two steps, Gab was in my face.

“Is he awake?”

“...Yes.”

“Alright. Excuse me.”

She pushed past me to the door, and I didn't have the strength to argue about it. Or the authority. Say what you want about her, but Jakari was her baby, and there was no way in hell she was gonna let me regulate anything about him as it related to her. So I went on my way to get Kari some good water. She could have this one.

Two gigantic men sat on either side of the door. They must have come when I was in the room. I was walking past them when I stopped and turned back.

“Hey, we haven't met.”

They both looked at me with cold, dark eyes. These men didn't play, I could tell.

“I'm Malika. Jakari's wife.”

The energy changed instantly. They both jumped to their feet and extended eager hands to me.

“Nice to meet you, misses.” That was the one with the glasses. “I'm Will.”

I shook his hand, then turned to the other one.

“I’m Bo. Nice to meet you, Ms. Malika.”

I shook his hand, then held up the cup. “I’m going to get him some water. Can I get you guys anything?”

They shook their heads and returned to their seats. They were clearly men of few words.

That was fine. Long as they had weapons and knew how to use them.

I found a vending machine, but the only water it had was Dasani. I turned my nose up and went to the elevators. The cafeteria didn’t have bottled water, only tap, so I returned to Jakari’s floor with a cup full, disappointed that I had failed at my first task.

Eris walked up to me as I passed the waiting area.

“How’s he doing, sis?”

“He’s okay. Watching tv. He wanted some bottled water, but they don’t have any.”

“Evian, right?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll run out and grab some.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.”

“Not a problem. You need anything while I’m out?”

“No, I’m good.”

I smiled as I watched him leave. There was something so... *normal* about that interaction. I can't explain it, but it felt real. Like I was actually part of this family.

As Eris walked away, their uncle Prez approached me. Having seen Lester around town when I was younger, seeing his brother was like *deja vu*. They could have been twins.

"How's the patient?" he asked.

"In good spirits. It's gonna take a lot more than that to take him down."

He smiled. "Listen to you."

"Is his grandmother coming?"

Prez's face fell. "No. We didn't tell her."

"What? Why not?"

"She's still grieving my brother. We knew it was just a shoulder wound, so...why put an old woman through that again?"

"Yeah. I understand."

He nodded. "I have to run, but do me a favor and tell my nephew I love him, and I'll get up with him tomorrow."

"Okay."

He went to turn, then he turned back and was on me with his arms around me. Startled, I hugged him back.

"Sorry. We hug in this family."

I chuckled awkwardly and pulled away. As he swaggered off, I wondered where the cousins were.

Bo and Will nodded at me as I passed. When I walked back into Jakari's room, Gab was sitting in my chair. I didn't say anything, I just walked to the other side of the bed and sat against the window sill.

"They only had tap, so I sent Eris out for some bottles."

Jakari looked over at me and smiled. "Okay. Thank you, baby."

Warm tingles shot through me as his words echoed in my head.

"You're welcome."

Next to him, Gab rolled her eyes. "So anyway, I brought my overnight bag with me. I'm okay to sleep on the chair. I'll probably hurt in the morning, but that's okay."

"Actually, you can go on home, Mama. No sense in you sitting up uncomfortable all night."

"Uh uh, you ain't gettin' rid of me that easy. Somebody's gotta watch over you. I know the doctor said you're fine, but you never know."

"It's okay, Gab. I was gonna stay with him."

You could have heard a pin drop.

Gab cut her eyes at me, but when she spoke, her words were sickly sweet.

“Malika, bless your heart. I think we’ll be okay. I’m sure you’re tired from working all day. You should go on back to the house and get some rest. You can come back in the morning.”

I smiled back. I wasn’t gonna argue with her about it. If Kari wanted me to go, I’d go. And given their relationship, I was pretty sure that was how this was gonna play out. So I stood and reached for my purse.

“Hold up, Mal. Mama, Malika’s staying with me.”

I froze where I was and waited.

“Are you sure?” Her voice was laced with disbelief.

“I’m positive,” he said. “I love you. I’ll call you before I go to sleep.”

“I don’t wanna leave you.”

I rolled my eyes. This whole conversation sounded like she was dropping her little boy off at summer camp or something.

I set my purse back in its spot. She stood and stretched, giving me another glare before she bent down to hug and kiss Jakari.

“Bye, Gab,” I said. “Drive safely.”

*Bitch.*

She flashed me a fake smile and blew Jakari a kiss on her way out the door.

Kari looked at me and shook his head. “What am I gon do with y’all?”

“What do you mean?”

“You think I can’t feel that tension?”

“She holds onto you extra tight. She thinks I’m taking her place. It’s not rocket science.”

He sighed. “She can be a little possessive, I guess.”

“Yeah, I bet. Was she like that with your dad?”

He looked away. “What time did Eris leave? I’m thirsty.”

“Twenty minutes, maybe.” I didn’t miss how he ignored my question, but I left it alone.

A few minutes later, Eris came in with a brown paper bag.

“I got you a six-pack,” he announced. “And some pork rinds, ol’ country ass nigga.”

“Preciate it, bruh. I been lowkey feenin’ for them shits lately.”

I turned my nose up at the sight of the bag. “You eat pork rinds?”

“Shole do,” he said with a grin. “I ain’t like the little prince over there, eatin’ crudites and lobster bisque and shit. I eat like my ancestors.”

“Granddaddy didn’t eat no damn pork rinds,” Eris said. “Swine’ll kill you, bruh. Well, that and getting shot.”

“Seriously?” I said, but the two of them were laughing their asses off. Frankly, I didn’t find it funny, but I realized this family’s humor was kinda dark. I was gonna have to learn how to speak their language.

After Eris left, I reclaimed my spot next to the bed and put a hand on Jakari's forehead. Not to feel for temperature. Just to be touching him.

“So, I've been thinking about what you said.”

He looked away from the tv and brought his eyes to mine. “Which part?”

“The things you asked me to do.”

“Oh. I mean, if you feel like it's too much—”

“No, not at all. I was actually thinking it feels right being here in your world. Riding for you. Taking care of you.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. I just...I think I could be better at it if I was really part of everything.”

“I don't mind bringing you in on the business, but are you sure that's what you want? Because that would make you a co-conspirator if some shit went down. You ready for that?”

“I think so.”

He peered at me. “You got feelings for me, Malika?”

I nodded.

“Okay, good, cuz I got 'em for you.”

He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips. We shared a smile, and then we turned our attention back to the tv and watched like an old married couple.





# MALIKA

I STARED AT MY ringing phone and hit the ignore button for the third time today.

It was my father, and I wasn't ready to talk to him yet.

Besides, I was busy today. I had to get Jakari home and make sure he was straight. Then I had to go down to the social security office to file for my name change. Then the DMV. Then the bank. And then I had to be at work at six.

My father could wait.

Gab had been cooking since I got home this morning. She said she was making all of Kari's favorite foods. I left her to it, wanting no parts of her or that kitchen. I took a long nap, then showered and dressed before changing the sheets and straightening up our room.

I went into the closet to find the file folder I'd brought my papers and albums home in. It wasn't on top of the safe where I left it. It was on the second shelf, and my papers were out of order. Frowning, I searched through the stack to make sure

everything was there. It was, but someone had gone through it and rearranged them.

I heard loud voices downstairs. My husband was home, so I stuffed my papers into my Neverfull and went downstairs to greet him. Whatever was going on with my stuff would have to wait.



A FEW DAYS LATER, I was standing at the register when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Well, well, well.”

I turned around and came face to face with Brett Hightower. Standing at the bar. Leering.

I stood there, frozen, as those old feelings came rushing back; fear, anxiety, and anger. They say time heals all wounds, but mine were still raw. I wanted to run and hide.

Instead, I composed myself and painted on a smile.

“What can I get you?”

He looked me up and down, his pale skin flushing pink. “You don’t remember what I like?”

“Jameson, right?”

“Good girl.”

My skin crawled at those words, and the way they oozed out of his thin lips. “It’s pretty dead tonight,” I said. “Why don’t you take a table and I’ll have someone bring your drink.”

He grinned. “I think I’ll sit at the bar. The company looks good.”

Reeling, I turned away, and with shaking hands, I poured his drink, willing myself to stay calm. But when I went to slide it across the bar toward him, he winked at me.

Enough was enough.

I backed away slowly until my butt hit the door to the back office. I slammed through it and went straight to my cell phone.

“Hey, Malika. What’s up?” Dario sounded like he was laying down.

“He’s here.”

“Who?”

I let out a shaky breath. “Brett.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.” I heard rustling, and then his voice came through a little clearer. “What’s he doing?”

“Sitting at the bar. Smiling at me. Taunting me.”

“You want me to come up there?”

“No. No, it’s okay. I just needed to talk to somebody.”

“Can you stay in the back until he leaves?”

“No. Grant called out, so I’m behind the bar by myself.”

He sighed. “Alright, I’mma come up there.”

“But—”

“I’ll sit in the back. I just wanna make sure you’re okay.”

I closed my eyes and nodded even though he couldn’t see me. “Thank you, Dario.”

“Not a problem.”

Twenty minutes later, he walked through the front door. We locked eyes and he nodded upwards, but he didn’t go to the back like he said he would. Instead, he took a seat at the far end of the bar and glared at Brett like he was ready to throw hands. I had to admit, having him there was comforting.

Besides my father, Dario was the only one who knew my history with the eldest Hightower sibling.

I gave Dario some Jack Daniels, but we didn’t speak at all until an hour or so later when Brett threw a fifty on the bar and left out the door. Relieved, I poured myself a shot of tequila and made my way back to Dario.

His face was creased with concern. “You good?”

“Yeah. I really appreciate you coming down here.”

“It’s not a problem. But one thing doesn’t make sense to me.”

“What?”

“Your husband. Why isn’t *he* in this seat?”

I looked down at the oak bar top. “He doesn’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t talk about it. I don’t wanna talk about it ever again.”

“I mean, I get that, but—”

“Leave it alone,” I warned. “I’m handling it the best way I know how to.”

“Okay.” He put his hand on mine. “You know I always got your back. I know I ain’t always been the best boyfriend, but I’m your friend, and I care about you. So I’m here.”

I smiled. It felt good to hear him say that.



# MALIKA

JAKARI WAS SITTING UP in bed when I got home. I smiled at him when I saw him, but he didn't return the expression.

I set my purse on the dresser. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"I'm straight," was his short, clipped answer.

"You need anything?"

He chuckled, but not because something was funny. He was clearly pissed. "How bout the fucking truth?"

"What do you mean?"

His face creased into a frown. "I mean your boyfriend hanging out at your job all fucking night."

It took me a minute to put it all together.

"You *still* have people watching me?"

"Ain't no *still*. After I got shot, I had McGrady put a man on you, that's all. It wasn't about watching you. It was me trying to keep you safe."

I crossed my arms in front of me. “Is that why you looked through my stuff?”

“Fuck you talkin about? What stuff?”

His confusion seemed sincere, but then again, I didn’t really know him well enough to say for sure.

“My papers and stuff that I put on top of your safe.”

“Nah, I ain’t go through your shit. If I wanted to know something, I’d ask. Or I’d have somebody pull all your shit. I didn’t do none of that.”

“Well, somebody went through my papers.”

“We ain’t talkin about that right now. Focus on my question.” His lips tightened into a thin line. “Why the fuck was that nigga hanging around your job all night?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Then what the fuck is it? I told you I don’t like secrets, Malika.”

“It’s...” I sighed, my shoulders dropping in defeat. “I never wanted to tell you this. I never wanted to tell *anybody*.”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

I sat on the bed and closed my eyes. “Brett Hightower came into the bar tonight.”

“And?”

“I have...history with him.” I looked over at him. “It was a long time ago.”



His jaw clenched. “What kinda history?”

“Okay. Do you remember Badger season?”

Jakari nodded, because of course he remembered. Every kid in Midling had not so fond memories of the lazy ass Midling police slacking off all year, eating and gossiping like bitches until prom and graduation season rolled around. That’s when they’d assemble like the Avengers and stalk us, using us kids to meet their arrest and ticket quotas for the year. We called them badgers because they wore badges, and because they wouldn’t leave us the hell alone.

“Well, I got a ticket in one of their sweeps senior year and had to take one of those traffic school classes. Brett got caught with drugs in his car, but his daddy called somebody and got him off the hook for it, as long as he took the traffic school class. So that’s how we met. I mean, I knew of him because of his name, but he went to private school.”

Jakari nodded again.

“We got to talking after class and he asked me out. I went, and that night...after the date, he asked if I wanted to see his house. The mansion.”

I stopped to take a breath, because this part was as embarrassing as it was painful.

“I’d driven by that house before, but I’d never seen the inside. It was stupid...I should have known better, but I said yes. I was star struck, in a way. And...when I was in his house, he...” I closed my eyes. “He forced himself on me.”

I felt a shift in the bed. I opened my eyes and saw Jakari moving around until he got to my side. He sat next to me and leaned slightly until his shoulder was touching mine. “Are you saying he raped you?”

“No...I don’t know. I mean...he kept pushing, and I kept saying no. He didn’t hit me or anything, but he kept asking, and then he pushed me down and...I was too scared to say no. I...I don’t know what you call that.”

“I call that rape.”

“I was so embarrassed. I still am.”

Jakari put an arm around me and pulled me closer. I was grateful for the comfort.

“I told Dario,” I continued, “and he told me I should call the police. So I did, and they said I’d have to come in and get examined and I...I didn’t know what to do. I told my dad, and he was gonna take me to the police station, but apparently somebody there had already told Gray. He had friends in the department. The next day, first thing in the morning, he came to our house and begged me not to press charges, and then he wrote us a check for fifty-thousand dollars.”

Jakari’s eyes bucked. “The fuck?”

My face crumpled. Tears streamed down my cheeks. “My father...my father...” I devolved into sobs, barely able to get the words out. “My father convinced me to take the money.”

Jakari jumped to his feet. “Your fucking *father* wanted you to take the money? Instead of bashing that motherfucker’s face

in?”

“Yes. And I did. Because we *really* needed that money.”

“I can’t believe this shit.” He paced the floor, wearing a path in the plush carpet. “So nothing ever happened to him? He just been walkin’ around breathing air?”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

Kari paced his way over to me and knelt in front of me. “How did you deal with it? Did you see a doctor? Talk to somebody? Cuz how do you get over shit like that?”

I shook my head. “You never do.”

“I’m sorry.” His nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched. “I’m so sorry.”

I gave him a nod. “It is what it is.”

“Alright, well....I just got one motherfucking question.”

I looked at him and waited.

“I got a sawed off, a Glock, and a forty-five. Which one should I use to blow his fucking cap off?”

“Don’t. You can’t.” I grabbed his face in my hands. “You cannot do this.”

“I can, and I will.”

“I wasn’t your wife then, Jakari.”

“What that got to do with anything?”

“I appreciate you wanting to protect me, but it doesn’t have anything to do with you. It’s not your battle to fight. And

honestly, I just wanna forget the whole thing. I've been pretending it never happened ever since it happened. It's just...seeing him today brought it all back."

He looked like he didn't believe a word I was saying. "Alright. I won't blow his cap off," he said, probably lying. "But I can make it so he don't bother you. Ever again."

"You can't. You need the Hightowers on your side."

"For now."

I frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

"Kari. You said I could be in this with you."

"You can't be in on everything, Malika."

I released his face, dropping my hands to my side. "You're still gonna do it, aren't you?"

"What did you think I was gon say when you told me this? You had to know I would react."

"Honestly? I wasn't sure one way or the other."

He made a face. "Didn't I tell you I got feelings for you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Ain't no but. I got feelings for you. And you're my wife. Technically. But that means something."

I wrapped my arms around myself. "What does it mean?"

"It means making sure you're straight. Not letting nobody fuck with you. I don't give a fuck about no goddamn business

deals. My daddy always said a man's first order of business is his family. And you're my family now, Malika. You got my name. You got my ring. You got my fucking heart, too. So this was only ever gonna go one way. Know that."

"I hear you. And I appreciate it. But I need you to promise you won't do anything."

He chuckled. "I'm not even gon' waste our time pretending like I can do that."

"Jakari! I'm not your only family. Think about your brothers. Jaz. Your mom. Your nieces and nephews. You love them, and they need you to handle the business. The Hightowers are part of that, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No. No buts. Promise me you won't do anything to him."

"Alright." He stared into my eyes. "I promise I won't do anything to him."

I realized my mistake immediately. The speed of his answer and the look in his eye told me he'd just got me on a technicality. Ordinary men can be trusted with a promise like that, but not a man like Jakari. That's a man who has power and influence. That's a man who only has to give a nod and someone *else* will do his bidding. He could snap his fingers and someone would snap a neck for him. He didn't even have to be there.

And that's the man I was married to.

That should have been terrifying, but honestly?

It felt like a blessing to me.



# JAKAZI

BRETT HIGHTOWER HAD TO die.

There was really no other way this could end. It was really a question of timing, but just knowing I was gonna put his ass in the dirt was enough to satisfy me for now.

That motherfucker was walking around on borrowed time and he ain't even know it.

“Joe. Why the fuck you got your shirt off, man?”

He laughed and pulled a white t-shirt over his head. “I just got out the shower, bruh.”

We were on FaceTime, and I'd just seen more of him than I wanted to. “What you got for me?” I demanded, eager to get things going.

“Man, listen. I done found some shit.”

“That's what I asked for.”

He sighed. “Alright. First off, in a span of three years, Kenya Andrews had eight arrests for drugs. Possession,



mostly. One intent.”

“Yeah, Mal said she was an addict.”

“Okay, but that ain’t the worst part. She was off the radar for a few years, then three more arrests. Each time, she was bonded out by Bo Thomas.”

“Wait—”

“McGrady’s man.”

“One of the niggas that’s guarding me right now.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, so maybe...fuck. How did he know her?”

“She must have been mixed up with the family some kinda way. Maybe she bought offa one of our guys—”

“We been out that game for too long. The timeline ain’t adding up for that.”

“You think Gab would know something?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it.” I took a deep breath. “Alright man, what else?”

“Last sighting seems to be around eight years ago, somewhere around June. It’s hard to pin down, though, because the police didn’t really investigate it and it doesn’t look like she was working when she disappeared. She’s like a ghost.”

“Where was the last sighting?”

“Her house. Daughters woke up and said goodbye like a regular day. Came home from school and she was gone. Never saw her again. The oldest daughter called it in the next day. She said something just didn’t feel right.”

I shook my head. Poor Malika, having to go through that.

“Anything else?”

“Not on Kenya, but I’ll keep digging. I still ain’t found no links between Tank and the fam. My people looked hard, Knight. We did a deep dive on Tay and all them barbershop niggas, too. Nothing.”

“Keep looking.”

“We will.”

“Aight, man. ‘Preciate it.”

My stomach was balled up tight. Throat dry. Head starting to hurt.

Something didn’t feel right about this.

Bo had been with my family since I was little. He was a teenager back then. A six-foot-tall, two-hundred and fifty-pound teenager. His pops had come up in the drug game with mine, and when he went in the pen, he didn’t snitch on nobody. He got life and stayed ten toes down, so my pops made sure to put his son on the payroll. Gave him a living so he wouldn’t have to be out here scratching for shit.

But where did Malika’s mama come in at? McGrady’s men bailed our employees out all the time. That was part of their

job. But ain't no way Malika's mama was working for us. It had to be something else.

I picked up my phone and texted Bo to meet me in the study. Him and Will had been on me since I left the hospital, so they were never too far away.

“What's up, Boss, you need me?”

I motioned for him to come in the room. “Close that behind you.”

He shut the door and took a seat across from the desk, facing me head-on. I needed to look in his eyes when I asked the question.

“Who's Kenya Andrews?”

He frowned. “I don't know that name.”

“Yeah, you do. You should. You bonded her out of jail three times.”

“Lemme think.” He sat there and stared into space. I could tell he was really thinking on this shit. He wasn't faking that.

“I'm sorry, Boss. I done bailed a lot of folks out over the years. What she look like?”

“I don't know.”

“What were the charges?”

“Drug shit. So you don't remember us having any employees by that name?”

“Nah. I mean, I believe you if you say I did it, but I can't remember her specifically. Maybe if I had a picture.” He was

quiet for a minute. “Unless...”

“Unless, what?”

“Nah, if it...well, okay. Lester—your pops—he had a couple of girls he dealt with. On the side,” he whispered, like that would make it better. “Some of ‘em were pros. But if it was that, the charges would be different. So I don’t know.”

“Did you always know the charges when you bonded them out?”

“I *never* knew. It wasn’t my job to know. I just paid the fee and dropped ‘em off wherever they wanted to go.”

This wasn’t getting me anywhere.

“Aight, man. Back to work.”

“Gotcha, boss.”

“But look, if you think of something, come straight to me.”

He nodded and took his leave.

I wasn’t satisfied. It wasn’t his fault. I just hated mystery. I like shit straightforward and right in front of my face, not hiding in the shadows, out of my reach.

Something was off with this. I just wasn’t sure what.

Yet.



# MALIKA

I STARED AT THE rows of gel polish and tried my best to make up my mind. It was only my second time here, and the options were overwhelming.

“Girl, would you just pick one? Damn!”

I laughed at Jaz’s impatience. She was right behind me, looking over my shoulder and sucking her teeth.

“It’s so hard to choose...”

“I’ma choose for you.” She came around and stood next to me, her eyes scanning my outfit. “You seem like a baby pink kinda bitch.”

“I hate pink.”

“No you don’t.” She selected a pale pink one and held it against the back of my hand. “See how pretty that is?”

It actually was. Very princess-y, which is how I’d been feeling lately.

“Okay. I trust your taste, especially since I don’t have any.”

“Mm hm.”

“You were supposed to tell me I’m getting better,” I teased.

“I will. Whenever that day comes,” she laughed.

We took our seats next to each other and waited for our nail techs to get started.

“This is ours,” Jaz said, gesturing around us. “So I guess it’s partly yours, too.”

“The nail salon?”

She nodded.

“I doubt I’m included in any of this,” I said. “Not that I wanna be. I’m just saying. Kari doesn’t really tell me stuff. And that’s fine. It’s not a real—”

“Fuck both of y’all!”

“O...kay. Where did that come from?”

“Y’all are annoying as shit. ‘*This ain’t a real marriage*,’” she said in an exaggerated deep voice. “‘*Oh, I’m not part of this and that’s fine*,’” was her high-pitched mockery of me. “Y’all are in denial and I’m over it. For real.”

Before I could respond to that, our techs took their seats in front of us.

“Hey, y’all. This Malika, Kari’s wife. That’s Kareema and Krystal. They’re twins, but as you can see, Kareema’s prettier.”

My eyes widened as the three of them dissolved into giggles. Once again, the humor was lost on me, but I pushed

out a laugh anyway. I wasn't fluent yet, but I was starting to understand better.

Two hours later, I admired my baby pink coffin nails, and the white cursive Jakari they convinced me to get painted on both ring fingers. It was cute, I had to admit, and I was looking forward to showing him.

I remembered high school, when girls would get boys' names airbrushed on their nails. All I had was bitten stumps, so no airbrushing for me. No boys, either, except for Dario and a few dates.

What a difference ten years made.



“I HAVE A SURPRISE for you.”

Jakari looked up from his phone. “Oh yeah? If it's pussy, you ain't never gotta surprise me with it. Just climb on.”

“It's not. At least, not right now.”

He laughed as I walked toward him. He looked better, almost good as new. It had been almost a week since the shooting, and you'd never know he was hurt from looking at him. I saw his wound every day when I changed the dressing for him, but beyond that, he was the same Jakari. His spirits were high.

“Look.”

I wiggled my nails in his face. He leaned back a bit to get a look.



“That’s your name.”

“I see that,” he said proudly. “They look good.”

“And...,” I held up my new driver’s license with my other hand. Jakari peered at it, his smile growing bigger by the second.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Windermere. You stuck with a nigga for life.”

I laughed at that. “Maybe, maybe not. We haven’t talked about that.”

“Let’s talk about it, then.”

I reared back. “Oh. I wasn’t—”

“Nah, let’s talk. I wanna know where your head is at.” He patted the bed next to him and I took a seat.

“Well, my head is all over the place,” I said. “I mean, look at how we started. You know?”

He nodded.

“I didn’t even tell you what my daddy said.”

“I mean, to keep it a buck, I don’t really give a fuck what that nigga has to say. I know that’s your pops, but it don’t seem like he did what he was supposed to do.”

“I can see how it might look that way—”

“Ain’t no look. He didn’t work, he didn’t look for your mama when she left, he ain’t have no motherfucking smoke for the nigga that forced himself on you. What am I supposed to feel for his ass? Not respect, I know that.”

“I hear you.”

“Good. I ain’t gotta meet him. We ain’t gotta have no kinda relationship. I’m good on him.”

“Okay, then.” I was quiet, letting that sink in. I wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“You mad at me cuz I said that?” Jakari asked.

“No. I get it. I just wish things were different.”

“My daddy used to say, you can either wish for a life that don’t exist or you can move according the life you got.”

I nodded. “Your daddy was a wise man.”

“Yeah. It depends on the subject, though. He had his faults, believe me.” He sighed. “Anyway, where your head at, Malika? What’s the deal?”

“As smart as you are with everything else, you can’t figure out where my head is at?”

“I asked, didn’t I?” he said with a grin.

“I changed my name, Jakari. I still live here with you, away from my sister and my nephew, who I love. I never told a soul what I saw that night. And I never will. Because I got you. I’m a ride for you for as long as you need me to. I’m in this. I don’t even know when it happened, but I don’t feel like your prisoner anymore. I feel like your wife.” I paused to catch my breath. “I can’t believe I just told you all that.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“Where’s *your* head at?”

He smiled. "I wasn't finna leave you out there by yourself. I was gon tell you." He took a deep breath, and I realized he was nervous. "Grab my bag out the closet for me."

I retrieved the mysterious black bag and brought it to him. He accepted it with his good arm and I returned to my spot next to him.

"Aight." He pulled out a short stack of papers. "Niggas don't like to think about shit like this, but my daddy told me a man always prepares for his death."

He pulled a sheet off the top of the stack and handed it to me. "That's a life insurance policy. A hundred racks. If I go, it goes to you. You just call that number up top."

"Are you serious?" I stared at the paper like it would come alive and fly away.

"I know it ain't a lot, but on paper, I only make forty thousand. If you get policies that pay out way more than you make, they get to asking questions. You'll get more than that under the table, so don't worry about it. Aight, this right here is your bank account number. Keep that, file that shit away. It's for emergencies, only. If you need something on a Wednesday or some shit, you use this card."

He pulled out an American Express card. My name was on the front.

"Eat, shop, whatever the fuck. That's yours." He handed me a key. "Now, this right here goes to a storage unit out on Route 86. If shit goes down, you go straight there. It'll be some

instructions, some cash, and a burner phone. Hopefully you never need it, but if you do, it's there. And this right here..." he reached down under the bed and pulled out a box.

"Sometime next week, I'ma take you out and show you how to use it."

Inside was a gun. The most beautiful shade of blue, like a Tiffany's box. I touched it with my index finger, then snatched my hand back.

"You bought me a gun? I hate guns."

"Not anymore. If you in this, you gotta be able to protect yourself. I ain't gon be with you every second of every day. Neither will security."

"Okay." I stared at the gun, then at my husband's face. "You did all this for me?"

"Yeah. Cuz while you been riding for me, I been riding for you, too. That's my motherfucking job now. And it ain't just cuz the law say we married."

He turned and stared into my eyes. "I always knew it would come a day when somebody got me, and here it is." He shook his head. "I'm feeling you, Malika."

It wasn't an I love you, but I didn't mind. I wasn't ready to say it, either.

"I'm feeling you, too."

He took the gun box placed it on the floor next to the bed. "I want you to go ahead and start looking for a place for us."

Somewhere that takes pets.”

“Our own place? For real?”

“Yeah. Something we can rent month to month, cuz I’m still not sure how long I’m staying here. How long *we’re* staying.”

I stiffened at that, and he noticed.

“I know you don’t wanna leave here. And if I decide to go back to Atlanta, I’ll want you with me, but I’ll understand if you don’t wanna go.”

“You know what?” I tilted my head back and stared up at the ceiling. “Maybe it’s time.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean...my sister’s still here. And maybe I just have to accept the fact that my mom isn’t coming back. Whether she left on her own or...something worse, she would have reached out to me by now if she wanted to. If she was able. Right?”

“I don’t know, babe.” He leaned in and pecked my lips. “I can’t really say.”

I nodded.

“I got one more thing for you.”

He stood and walked out of the room, returning with a large brown box. He was struggling to hold it with his good arm, and that’s when I realized the box was moving.

“What the hell is that?”

He set the box next to me and pulled off the top. Inside was the *cutest* little tan puppy, with curly hair and huge brown

eyes. I squealed and reached for him while Jakari smiled down at us.

“You got me a puppy?” I pulled the dog into me and let him lick my cheek. “Is he mine?”

“He’s yours, baby. You said you always wanted one, so there he is.”

Tears filled my eyes. “Jakari,” I whined. “I can’t believe you got me a puppy.”

“And a hundred racks and a bottomless credit card, but nah, the puppy is the *real* gift.”

Laughing, I tugged at the hem of his shirt to pull him to me and gave him a long, sloppy kiss. Puppy licked the side of Jakari’s face, not wanting to be left out, apparently.

“Oh, nah,” he said, standing up abruptly. “We ain’t even finna get that shit started, little buddy. You ain’t gon be licking all on me. No sir. That’s ya mama’s job.”

I rolled my eyes playfully.

“Alright, I got some bad news, too.”

“That explains it. You were buttering me up.”

“Nah.” He returned to his spot next to me. “It’s about your moms.”

I froze. “Oh no. What did you find? Is she—”

“Nah, the bad news is that my people ain’t found anything yet.”

I let out a sigh. “I thought you were gonna tell me she’s dead.”

“Shit. My bad. Nah, it’s just...I know you said she was using, but did she do anything else that mighta put her on the police radar?”

“Like...?”

“Like maybe tricking?”

“What? No. Absolutely not.”

“Yeah, I figured. Just wanted to make sure.”

“Why did you ask me that? You must have found something.”

“Some arrests. You knew about that?”

“Yeah. Unfortunately.”

He nodded. “We’ll keep looking. I ain’t gon stop until I get you some answers.”

“Thank you, Kari. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

He pecked my lips. “Anything for you. All you gotta do is ask.”

I looked down at my new baby. “What am I gonna name you?”

He licked my chin in response.

“Fluffy? No. Curly? Ooh, Teddy, because he looks like a teddy bear. What do you think?”

Jakari shrugged. "That's all you."

"So that's why you told me to look for a place that takes pets. I didn't even catch that."

"You been hanging with Jaz too much."

"Shut up. You know, your sister might not be book smart, but she's people smart."

"If you say so."

"I'm serious. She was putting out fires today. We stopped by the barbershop after we left the salon and your uncle was there having a fit about something. Jaz smoothed it over."

His eyes narrowed. "What happened?"

"Some guy was arguing with your uncle about something. Jaz said the guy had just been in last week mad. Anyway, she got your uncle to calm down and she talked to the customers and made up some shit on the spot to keep them from wondering if something was gonna pop off."

"Who was the guy?"

"I don't know. I think she said his name was Shaka."

Jakari's entire face changed. It was like the sun had set behind his eyes. It startled me.

"What's wrong?" I said. "Is everything okay?"

"Nah. But it will be." He bent down to kiss my lips again. "I gotta run out, but I'll be back soon. Go ahead and start looking at places."

I watched him grab his wallet and keys off the dresser.



“What’s the budget?”

“Ain’t none.”

And then he was gone.

I stared at my puppy and felt a sense of dread creeping up on me.

Something was wrong.



# JAKAZI

NAY CLENCHED HIS JAW. “We don’t know for sure.”

“What else could it be?” Eris said, his voice rising in panic. “Ain’t no good reason for that nigga to be there. None whatsoever.”

“I mean...it’s Jaz, though.”

I cut my eyes at Nay. “Exactly. Why the fuck would she lie about this shit?” I shook my head. “Maybe if I took her serious all along, I woulda had this information two weeks ago.”

Joe finally re-emerged from his office with a stack of papers in his hand.

“My bad. I swear I had this shit organized, but...it’s a lotta shit.”

He took his seat at the head of his dining room table, spreading the papers in front of him. “Alright. Prez got his hands in a lotta shit. Pop trusted him, so he was deep in the mix. And then, of course, there’s your cousins. What do we think?”

We all thought for a minute.

“It’s hard to say, man.” I scrubbed a hand down my face.  
“This shit so fuckin’ stressful to think about.”

Joe nodded. “We can put some men on them. See if there’s any contact. I just worry about us spreading ourselves too thin. We got Hightower, Prez, and now Ced and Randall.”

“Let’s hold off on that,” I said. “We’ll focus on Prez for now. Maybe it’s a way we can smoke them out about their father.”

“That’s a plan,” Nay agreed. Eris nodded.

I looked down at my buzzing phone and saw that Malika was calling.

“Hold up, y’all. I gotta take this.” I pressed the button.  
“Hey. What’s up?”

“Okay. Don’t get mad.”

I shook my head, but I was smiling. I already knew what she was on.

“How much did you spend, Malika?”

She laughed. “No, I haven’t been shopping. Me and Jaz were scouting apartments and I found something.”

“I told you it ain’t no budget.”

“I know, but I still wanted to check. I would never wanna waste your money.”

“I respect that. So how much we talkin’?”

“Well, first, let me tell you the amenities.”

Nay and them were looking at me all impatient like I was holding them up, but I didn't care. Mal sounded happy as fuck, and I wasn't about to interrupt that.

“Twenty-four-hour gym, pool and Jacuzzi, spa, balcony with a view of the river—”

“Oh, you talkin' about The Cove at Lexington?”

“Yes...” She sounded uncertain, like she thought I'd say no.

“Y'all there right now?”

“Yes...”

“Aight. I'll send Cyrus up there with the deposit.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Give him about a half hour.” She didn't know it, but Cyrus was already there. Probably just a few feet away. I couldn't take any chances now that I knew my uncle was up to some shit.

“Thank you, baby. I'm so excited!” she said. “This apartment is bigger than the house I grew up in. Can you believe that? It's so beautiful, you're gonna love it.”

“Aight, I'll call you in a little bit.”

My brothers were cheeing when I hung up.

“First off, fuck y'all. Second, don't say shit. Wives are off limits.”

They all laughed. Shit, I was defensive. I felt weak, and I didn't like it. Not in front of them.

Nay shook his head. "We wasn't finna clown her, we were finna clown *you*."

"Whatever."

"And since when can't we talk shit about females? You clown my baby mamas all the time."

"Nigga, I said *wives*. My bitch got a ring on her finger. You put one on one of yours, then I'll keep my mouth shut."

Nay waved that off.

"Actually," Eris jumped in, "we had something nice to say about your wife. Me and Nay were talking about it yesterday."

"Word? Whatchu say?"

Eris grinned. "Her ass gettin' fatter, dog. Good for her."

"Yeah. So y'all be *fuckin'* fuckin'." Nay snickered. "I hope you wrappin' it up, though. Ain't no such thing as a fake baby."

"You would know, bitch."

We all shared a laugh.

"Anyway, here's what I'm thinking..."

By the time I left Joe's house, a plan was in motion.



"ARE YOU GONNA TELL me what's wrong?"

I shook my head.

Malika poked her bottom lip out. “I thought you were gonna let me in.”

“I am. But...you can’t be in on everything, baby. It’s too dangerous.”

She raised her hand and reached out to touch my cheek. We were laying side-by-side, naked and tired. Too tired to fuck, at least tonight. I hated to admit it, but all the stress was getting to me. Draining me.

I didn’t wanna get old too quick, but I felt like I’d aged a year since I’d been back in Midling.

I stared into her eyes while she traced her fingertip across my eyebrows, then down my nose. Her touch was soft. She wasn’t being sexual, but that didn’t stop my dick from waking up.

Maybe we’d fuck after all.

But this was nice, too. Intimate. I reached out and did the same to her, except I kept going past her nose to touch her lips. She poked them out to kiss my finger, then waited while I traced the heart-shaped outline of them.

“Do you love me?”

Her eyes went wide. Shit, so did mine. I couldn’t believe I said that out loud.

“You ain’t gotta answer that. I don’t know why I even—”

“I don’t know.” She grimaced. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah. I’m glad you were honest.”

She nodded. “Do you love *me*?”

“I don’t know.”

She smiled. “We did everything backwards.”

Chuckling, I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed the back side of it. “I’m glad I came into your job that night. Honestly, you’re the only good thing about this town.”

“Your family.”

“Yeah, but they been here. I mean, you been here, too. I just didn’t know. Which was my fucking mistake.”

She smiled again. “You like me.”

“Yeah, ain’t no question about that. I like yo little ass.”

She laughed. “I like the way you treat me. I mean, aside from the whole kidnapping thing.”

“Malika—”

“I know you hate that.” She laughed. “You shouldn’t let the enemy know your weak spots. Now I know how to annoy you.”

“First off, it’s a long list of shit you already do that annoys me. Like leaving your makeup all over the dresser and taking your shoes off and letting them sits sit in the middle of the damn floor.”

She shrugged. “And second?”



“Second...you ain’t my enemy. You’re my wife. Technically, yeah, but you also *act* like my wife. You treat me how I wanna be treated, and you ride for me. We ain’t even gotta say I love you for this shit to feel good. And it does, to me.”

“It feels good to me, too.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah. Cool.”

“Come ‘ere.”

She inched closer and rolled on top of me. As she stared down at me and I stared up at her, I said I love you in my head. My mouth wasn’t ready to say it, yet, but that was fine. We had the rest of our lives to say it.

Technically.

We kissed, touched, and teased each other until we both had enough of the pregame. She sank down onto my dick and waited, letting her pussy adjust.

“This feels good to me, too,” I said. “You be so wet, Malika. And you little, but you be takin’ my whole entire dick. That shit so fuckin’ sexy.”

She smiled down at me. “You know what they say about Midling dimes.”

“Fuck that.” I grabbed two handfuls of her ass and held on for dear life. “You a dime in Midling, in Atlanta, in LA...shit, you a dime in space. Baddest bitch in the Milky Way.”

She giggled. “I didn’t know you had a corny side.”

“Me neither. Maybe you bring it outta me.”

“Maybe.” She bent down to kiss me, and I moved my arms up to hold her to me. My left arm ached, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to get lost, and forget about all the bullshit and betrayal and treachery and just enjoy this one moment in my life that didn’t feel like hell on earth.

My daddy once told me that when you find a woman who feels like home, keep her and *give* her a home. That’s some shit I never felt with Kittora. The sex was crazy, but I knew off top we would never be anything else. It was like that in Atlanta, too. The women were bad as shit, but I didn’t connect with none of ‘em past a nut or two.

Malika, though? Okay, yeah, we started out on some fuck shit. Can’t deny that. But I don’t know...something about it felt right. And deep. Thinking back on it, I probably did see her a time or two in high school and just didn’t register it, but not because she wasn’t worthy. It was because I was looking for the wrong shit.

I thought a certain texture and length of hair meant something. Thought a fat ass and big titties meant something. Thought light eyes were top tier, and dressing fly and shining were good character traits. Had to be popular, too, because it made me look good to pull a popular bitch.

All that is cool, and it ain’t nothin’ wrong with it, but what did chasing after that shit get me? Not a damn thing. A good

time, maybe. Props from other niggas. And sometimes, trouble.

Maybe I can chalk it up to being young, but whatever. What if I hadn't come back here? I would have never met Malika. Sweet, honest, loyal, pretty, sexy Malika. Bitches like Kittora are fun, but you gotta keep your head on a swivel always. You can't give 'em no keys, no security codes...they'll have another nigga kill you for the life insurance, and if you piss them off, they might just shoot your dick off. You can't trust 'em.

But I trusted Mal.

What did it all mean? Maybe nothing.

Maybe everything.

Maybe she was it for me.

Now wasn't the time to decide, though. Not when she was riding me all slow and passionate to the point I couldn't even remember my own fucking name. Kissing and biting on my neck. Moaning and licking my ear. Sucking on my bottom lip.

Yeah.

I didn't really need anything else. At this moment, I had it all.

"You close? I can't hold it much longer. Your pussy too good."

She giggled. "Yeah. Play with my titties."

Gladly.

She sat up and braced her hands on my chest. I reached up and palmed her titties—which were also getting plump—rolling her nipples between my fingers until they were stiff. Her head fell back. Her moans got louder. I felt myself getting close.

“Kariiiiiiiii...” she whined. “I’m about to cum.”

“Yeah. I feel that shit.”

Her pussy got wetter, and her walls got tighter. My eyes rolled back as her movements came faster. “Fuck. I’m close. Can I cum inside you?”

“Yessss!”

I busted at the same time she did. That shit felt so good. It was intense. It took a few seconds for my hearing and vision to get back right.

After, we both dozed off.

I slept great. No nightmares. Just peace.



THE NEXT DAY, MALIKA got busy setting up everything for our move. I told her to pick out whatever furniture she wanted. I wasn’t really pressed about interior decorating or whatever. Plus, Jaz was with her.

For the first time in a long time, I felt good. Like, excited. Hopeful for the future. I had some plans in motion for some moves we’d be making. The Windermers were about to level the fuck up.

It wasn't gonna be easy, though. We already had enemies, but we were about to make some more. And unfortunately, a few more people were gonna have to die.

It was time to tool up.

I was on the back patio smoking weed, zoning the fuck out, when my mama came outside with a bottle of Hennessy and two glasses.

“So you're really leaving, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Have a drink with me.”

I gotta admit, I was shocked she didn't try to talk me out of it like she did last time. She almost seemed like she knew it was coming.

But that was my mother. Always knowing shit. Always a step ahead.

That's where I got it from, I guess.

She poured me some Hennessy and handed it to me, then poured one for herself before sitting in the lawn chair next to mine.

“It's so peaceful out here.” She sounded like she was in a trance. Judging by the bottle, she'd already started before she came out here.

“Your daddy never wanted that pool,” she said as she gazed at the water sparkling in the setting sun. “But I wanted it, so there it is.” She turned back to me. “Here's to new

beginnings,” she said with a grin. It almost looked hollow, though. Kinda creepy. There was something in her eyes that was making me uneasy.

“What’s on your mind, Mama?”

“I heard Prez is to blame for all this foolishness.”

“Who told you?”

“You didn’t want me to know? I’m out the loop, now?”

“Of course not.”

Her eyebrow went up. “Does your wife know?”

“Yeah. She does.”

She took a sip. “That’s interesting. You didn’t used to talk shop with her.”

“So you don’t know how I found out, do you?”

She shook her head.

“Jaz. She told Malika.”

“I see. So she *is* an evil genius.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

We shared a laugh at that.

“She didn’t know what kinda info she had when she gave it,” I explained. “But regardless, she came through.”

“Well. Good for her.”

She didn’t mean that, but it was whatever.

“So you had to know I was gonna beg you to stay, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you, Jakari. So much. I just...I worry about you.”

“More than Nay and E?”

“Nay and E don’t have the whole world resting on their shoulders.”

“It’s what daddy wanted.”

She sighed. “Your daddy.” She was quiet for a while, staring out at the trees on the other side of the yard. “Do you ever think about it?”

“Try not to. I dream about it, though.”

“In your dreams...you save him, right? Make him back whole again?”

“Nah. I always wake up before...” I trailed off. “I think I need more liquor to continue this conversation.”

She poured me more. “We’ve never talked about it.”

“Nope.”

“I always wondered what happened after you left the house that night.”

My jaw clenched. “I did what y’all asked me to do.”

“And you did it well.”

“Mama—”

“You didn’t ask questions. Didn’t buck. Just...took care of business.”

“It wasn’t business, though. That shit was personal.”

My mama's screams echoed in my mind. Her sobs. Her words...they haunted me. I could still hear them echoing between my ears.

*"I should shoot your fucking dick off, you piece of shit! How dare you? How dare you? I fucking hate you! I love you but I fucking hate you! How could you do this to me?"*

I closed my eyes and took another pull. My high was getting low real fast remembering this shit.

"You never asked about...her."

I opened my eyes. "Wasn't my business."

"So you weren't curious? You didn't wonder who she was?"

"All I knew was that she wasn't you, so therefore, I didn't care."

Mama sighed. "Where'd you put her?"

"Four feet under." I took my Henny to the head. "Woulda been six, but my arms got tired."

Mama laughed. She *laughed*. She didn't feel bad about it at all. I'm not sure why I would expect her to, though.

"Did *you* know who she was?"

Mama smiled sadly. "Not until recently."

I frowned. "What do you mean? You went looking for her?"

She stared at the pool. I could see the water reflecting in her eyes.



“He loved her.” She shook her head. “I always knew there were other bitches. Men like your daddy, they always got another bitch waiting in the wings. Look at Nay. Following in your daddy’s footsteps. But at least your daddy was smart enough to wrap it up.”

“What did you mean when you said—”

“But he never brought any of them into my home. Where my babies played. Where I cooked, and cleaned, and made sure my family had a peaceful place to rest, away from all the bullshit. My fucking *home!*” She threw her glass to the patio floor. When it shattered, shards went everywhere.

I stared at them, stunned, then brought my eyes to hers. “Mama.”

She was still in a trance. She didn’t even hear me.

“I’m not sorry. Not even a little bit. That bitch got what she deserved, and so did your daddy.”

Three shots to the torso. She yelled about shooting his dick off, but in the end, she couldn’t do it. She loved him too much.

I keep asking myself if he deserved the love. Or the bullets. Niggas cheat all the time, but my mother’s pain was real. It was deep. So whatever arrangement or rule they had, he broke it.

He broke *her*.

“Why did you...what did you mean when you said—”

“Did you get a good look at her?”

“Not really. You shot her in the face. It just looked like a bloody head to me.” My stomach churned at the memory.

“I saw her real good. Straight on. I didn’t recognize her. She had these eyes, though. Like cat eyes. Very pretty. Sultry.” She sniffed. “I’ll never forget those eyes.”

Something told me to keep my mouth shut and just listen, but I had a feeling I wasn’t gonna like what was coming.

“Don’t you wanna know?” Her eyes pierced my soul. “Be honest, Knight. Don’t you wanna know who you buried?”

“I don’t care, Mama.”

“I think you should.”

“Why?”

She shook her head. “Never mind.”

I wanted to stand up and leave. Not just the patio, but the house. I wanted to leave and never come back. This place was haunted.

“Are you happy?” she said.

“Yeah. I am.”

She didn’t respond to that.

“I was in your room the other day. Snooping.” She chuckled. “I had a hunch, and I ended up being right.”

“Right about what?”

“The eyes.”

My body seemed to register it before my mind did. I sat straight up and turned toward her, terrified of what she was gonna say.

“Mama...”

“It was her. Her name was *Kenya*,” she spat. “Kenya Andrews. I’m sure you know that name by now.”

My mouth dropped open.

She smiled weakly. “That’s right, Kari. Your crackhead hoe of a mother-in-law was fucking my husband in my house, so I shot the bitch right between her pretty eyes.”

She jumped to her feet, stumbling a little before grabbing the bottle of Hennessy, and walked away, only stopping to call over her shoulder, “Be sure to send me your new address. I bought a plant for y’all.”

I stared after her. My mind raced, my stomach churned, and when I opened my mouth to call out after her, I doubled over in pain and threw up.

It was over.

The new life I was building, my happiness and future and all the plans I had...all of that was dead.



JAKARI AND MALIKA WILL return in [The Prodigy 2: Rise of a Queen](#).

# THANK You

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed this novel, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads so other readers can enjoy it, too!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shae Sanders grew up sneaking her sister's Jackie Collins novels when she really didn't have any business reading them. But they stoked a love of edgy and steamy romance against the backdrop of business and power. Now, she writes about black love, lust, and relationships with a side of social stuff thrown in for a little razzle dazzle. In her spare time, Shae spends time with her husband and kids, watches her favorite shows over and over again, and teaches as an adjunct professor.

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