

A KING'S OBSESSION

N. TAYLOR

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Chapter 1



I looked at the clock behind the bar for what had to be the hundredth damn time.

11:47.

“Yeah, aight.”

Montae was officially forty-three minutes late.

I should’ve known better than to depend on his ass. Before I came to work, I told him I could catch an Uber home. He was the one swearing up and down I didn’t need to waste my money.

I got you, baby. I’ll be there.

That was Montae’s favorite thing to do—make promises like saying them was the same thing as keeping them. And stupid me, after dealing with his ass long enough to know better, still gave him opportunities to prove me wrong.

Now here I was, damn near midnight, wiping down the same table for the third time because everybody else was gone and my ride was nowhere to be found. The bar looked completely different after closing. During my shift, it stayed loud enough that I could barely hear myself think. Music blasting, glasses clinking, people yelling over each other, somebody always needing another drink or extra ranch. Now the stools were flipped upside down, the

liquor bottles had been wiped down, and the only sounds left were Tasha counting the register and the rag squeaking beneath my hand.

I tossed the rag into the bucket and pulled my phone from the back pocket of my jeans.

Three calls. Two texts. No response.

“Bitch ass,” I mumbled, staring at his name on my screen.

I called him again anyway. It rang four times before his voicemail came on, and I hung up before that annoying beep could piss me off any more than I already was.

I wasn’t leaving another message. He knew I was at work. He knew what time I got off. And unless his ass was dead somewhere—and he better not have been because I wasn’t trying to feel guilty for all the shit I was calling him in my head—there wasn’t a good enough reason for him not to answer his phone.

The messed-up part was, this wasn’t even new. Montae could be the sweetest man in the world when he wanted to be. He knew exactly what to say, exactly how to apologize, and exactly how to make me feel like maybe this time would be different. Then, right when I started believing him, he’d pull some shit like this and have me questioning why I kept expecting something from him that he had already shown me he wasn’t consistent enough to give.

“You still waiting on Montae?”

I looked over at Tasha behind the bar. She had a stack of bills spread across the counter and was watching me with that knowing little smirk she always wore whenever Montae's name came up.

“Unfortunately.”

She laughed, shaking her head as she went back to counting the register. “I told you to stop depending on that nigga.”

“And I told you to mind your damn business,” I shot back, slipping my phone into my pocket.

Tasha didn't even bother looking offended. She just lifted another bill from the stack, that smirk spreading wider across her face. “Don’t get mad at me because your man got you sitting up here looking homeless.”

“Fuck you.”

I couldn’t even keep a straight face saying it. Tasha laughed harder, and I shook my head even though I knew she wasn’t wrong. That was probably why she got on my nerves so bad sometimes. She had a habit of saying the shit I was already thinking but didn’t want anybody else saying out loud.

I untied my apron and reached into the pocket before throwing it beneath the counter. The little bit of money inside immediately killed what was left of my smile.

I counted it again.

Fifty dollars.

That was it.

Eight hours on my feet, drunk men asking for my number, somebody spilling Hennessy across an entire table ten minutes before closing, and one woman sending her wings back twice because they were supposedly too crispy.

Fifty fucking dollars.

I stared at the bills in my hand for a few seconds before folding them together. Sometimes I wondered what the hell I was doing with my life. I was twenty-four years old and worked hard enough to stay tired, but somehow never hard enough to get ahead. Every check already belonged to somebody before it even hit my account. Every dollar in my hand had somewhere to go before I could think about spending any of it on myself.

And now I was probably about to spend damn near half of it getting home.

I shoved the money into my purse.

My check wasn’t much better. Between helping Mama with the rent, keeping food in the apartment, paying my phone bill, and everything else that seemed to come up every five damn minutes, my money disappeared before I could enjoy any of it.

Living with Mama was supposed to make things easier for both of us. At least, that was how I kept trying to look at it. We split what needed to be split, I helped where I could, and she was supposed to handle her part. But somewhere along the way, helping had turned into me carrying more and more until I couldn’t remember the last month I hadn’t been worried about some damn bill.

Mama was supposed to handle the electric bill this month.

I’d already given her the money.

At least that was one thing I didn’t have to worry about.

My phone started ringing.

“Finally.”

I snatched it off the counter without looking.

“Montae, I know your ass—”

“Jru?”

I froze.

That wasn’t Montae.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and looked at the screen.

MR. HARRIS.

My stomach tightened before I even put the phone back against my ear. Mr. Harris wasn’t the type of landlord who called just to check on you, and he damn sure wasn’t calling close to midnight because he wanted to ask how my day went.

Why the hell was my landlord calling me this late?

“Oh. Hey, Mr. Harris. Sorry. I thought you were somebody else.”

“I figured.” His response was short, and I could hear the irritation in his voice. There wasn't any warmth or small talk, which immediately had my stomach doing something funny.

“You got a minute?” he asked.

I glanced toward Tasha, who was still busy with the register, before turning slightly away from the bar. “Yeah. What’s going on?”

“I’ve been trying to get in contact with your mother.”

I closed my eyes, already feeling the beginnings of a headache.

Of course.

“What she do?”

“It ain’t about what she did. It’s about what she hasn’t done.”

I straightened, slowly sliding onto one of the barstools. Something about his tone told me I needed to sit my ass down before he finished whatever he had called to say.

“What you mean?” I asked, gripping the edge of the counter.

“The rent, Jru.”

My eyebrows pulled together. “What about it?”

“Y’all are behind.”

I laughed, but there wasn’t anything funny about the sudden tightness in my chest. “No, we’re not.”

“Yes, you are,” he answered firmly.

“That don’t even make sense. I gave my mama money for the rent.” I sat up straighter, trying to keep my voice down even as my frustration started rising.

“Well, she hasn’t given it to me.”

Everything around me seemed to go quiet.

Even Tasha must’ve noticed the change in my face because she stopped counting money and looked over at me. I stared at the bottles lined up behind the bar while my mind started going backward, trying to remember every time Mama had asked me for money over the last few weeks.

“When was the last time she paid you?” I asked, my voice noticeably quieter.

“Beginning of last month. And even then, she was short.”

My fingers tightened around the phone.

“Last month?”

“Yeah. I’ve been calling her about it, but she either doesn’t answer or tells me she’s gonna bring it by.”

When Mr. Harris told me, my stomach dropped.

Hell no.

I’d given Mama money twice since then. Once when I got paid. Then again when she told me we were still short.

I could see both moments clear as day. Mama standing in the kitchen telling me we needed a little more to get caught up. Me going into my account knowing damn well I couldn’t afford to pull anything else out but doing it anyway because having somewhere to live mattered more than whatever I had planned for that money.

If Mr. Harris was telling the truth, none of it had made it to him.

“Are you sure?” I asked, rubbing my forehead as if that might somehow change his answer.

“Jru.”

He didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. The way he said my name, tired and almost disappointed, told me everything I needed to know.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Anger was already crawling up the back of my neck, but underneath it was something worse.

Fear.

Because being mad at Mama wasn’t going to make the rent magically appear. Whatever she had done with the money, Mr. Harris still needed to be paid, and I already knew who everybody was going to expect to fix it.

“How much do we owe?” I finally asked, bracing myself.

“With what was left from last month, this month’s rent, and the late fees? Twenty-one hundred.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear, staring at the screen before pressing it back against my face.

“Twenty-one hundred dollars?”

“That’s what y’all owe me, Jru.”

For a second, I couldn’t even speak.

There was no way in hell.

I didn’t have two thousand dollars sitting somewhere. I barely had fifty dollars in my purse, and twenty-six of that was about to go toward an Uber.

My eyes dropped to the purse sitting beside me on the bar. Fifty dollars. That was what I had to my name tonight, and I had just spent the last eight hours earning it. Meanwhile, somewhere between my hands and Mr. Harris’s, money I had already worked for had disappeared.

I almost dropped the damn phone.

“Mr. Harris, I’m at work right now. Let me get home and talk to her.” I tried to sound calm, but my fingers were trembling against the phone.

“I need something soon,” he replied, his voice firm but not cruel. “I been patient because I know you the one trying to keep things together over

there, but I got bills too."

"I know," I answered quietly, dropping my gaze to the counter.

And I did.

That was what pissed me off.

He wasn't wrong.

I couldn't even be mad at him. Mr. Harris had actually been more patient with us than some landlords would've been. He knew I worked. He knew I was the one usually calling when something needed to be handled. Apparently, he also knew something I was just now figuring out—that I had been giving Mama money that wasn't making it where it was supposed to go.

"I'll figure it out," I told him, forcing the words past the tightness in my throat.

I hated those words as soon as they left my mouth.

Because that was always me.

I'll figure it out.

Mama fucked something up? I'd figure it out.

Montae didn't come through? I'd figure it out.

We needed groceries? I'd figure it out.

Something was about to get cut off? Somehow, someway, Jru always had to fucking figure it out.

And I was tired.

Not sleepy tired. Not I need a day off tired. I was tired in that deep way that came from always having somebody else's problem dropped in your lap and being expected to turn it into a solution.

I ended the call and immediately dialed Mama.

No answer.

I called again.

Nothing.

My jaw tightened.

That only made me angrier because Mama kept her phone close enough to damn near sleep with it. If she wasn't answering me, either she couldn't

answer or she saw my name and didn’t want to.

Neither option made me feel any better.

“Everything good?” Tasha asked.

I looked up to find her watching me from behind the bar, the money she'd been counting forgotten beneath her hand. The teasing expression she'd worn earlier was gone.

“Nope.” I grabbed my purse, shoving my phone inside before looking back at her. “And I’m about to find out why.”

Before ordering the Uber, I tried Montae one last time.

Straight to voicemail.

I stared at his name on my screen.

“You know what? Fuck you too.”

“What he do?” Tasha asked, raising her eyebrows at my sudden outburst.

“His ass was supposed to pick me up.” I held up my phone, showing her the unanswered calls before dropping my arm in frustration.

“Ooh.” She sucked her teeth, shaking her head like that explained everything.

“Exactly.”

Normally, I might’ve laughed, but there wasn’t shit funny anymore. In less than ten minutes, I had gone from being irritated because my boyfriend was late to finding out the roof over my head wasn’t nearly as secure as I thought it was.

I opened the Uber app.

Twenty-six dollars.

I damn near threw my phone.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Fifty dollars in tips.

Twenty-six just to get my ass home.

That left twenty-four.

Twenty-four fucking dollars after working all night.

I stared at the price like maybe if I waited long enough it would feel sorry for me and drop. It didn’t. Of course it didn’t. Nothing in my life ever seemed to get cheaper just because I couldn’t afford it.

For a second, I seriously considered sleeping at the bar.

Instead, I pressed confirm.

Because apparently tonight was another episode of Jru Figures This Shit Out.

And I was getting real tired of this fucking show.

Chapter 2



At forty-one years old, I'd learned there were very few things in life worth interrupting good head for.

Malachi wasn't one of them.

Yet there his ass stood.

The door to my office swung open without warning, bringing a rush of noise from the unfinished club below. I didn't jump, scramble, or bother pretending the woman beneath my desk wasn't there sucking the skin off my dick. I simply lifted my eyes toward the doorway, already irritated before Malachi's six-foot-something frame completely filled it.

He stopped with one hand still wrapped around the door handle, his gaze dropping from my face to the top of the woman's head between my legs. The slow grin spreading across his face told me everything I needed to know. I'd been looking at that same stupid expression for damn near twenty years, and not once had it meant anything good.

“Don't,” I warned, my voice flat as I leaned farther back in my chair.

That only made the shit worse. Malachi lowered his head, his broad shoulders shaking as he tried to contain his laughter. I dragged my palm down my beard, already knowing whatever enjoyment I'd been getting was officially over. I looked down, tapped the woman's shoulder, and told her to get up.

She hesitated for half a second before rising to her feet. Her dress had ridden up around her hips, and she tugged it back into place while reaching for the purse she'd tossed onto my couch earlier. I adjusted my clothes, watching Malachi make himself comfortable against the wall like he hadn't just walked into my fucking office without knocking.

The woman lingered beside my desk, smoothing her hair as though she expected me to say something else. When her lips parted, I lifted one hand before she could get a word out.

“Don't,” I repeated, giving her a look that should've made my meaning clear the first time.

Her mouth snapped shut. Whatever she'd been about to ask, I wasn't interested in hearing it. She'd come upstairs looking for one thing, I'd allowed it, and now our business was finished. That didn't make us friends, and it damn sure didn't mean I planned on seeing her again. I nodded toward the door, my patience already wearing thin. “You know the way you came in.”

Embarrassment flashed across her face before irritation took its place. She snatched her phone from my desk, grabbed her purse, and walked out without another word. I waited until the door closed before turning my attention back to the oversized problem still standing against my wall.

Malachi hadn't stopped grinning.

“Something funny?” I asked, leaning forward and resting my forearms against the desk.

His grin widened before he caught the expression on my face. That wiped some of the amusement away, but not nearly enough. The nigga had known me too long to scare easily, which was unfortunate because I was genuinely considering making an example out of his left foot.

“Keep laughing,” I told him quietly. “I'm trying to decide if twenty years of friendship is enough reason not to shoot you in the fucking foot.”

Malachi raised his eyebrows, studying me for a moment as though he was trying to determine whether I meant it. That was the entertaining part about knowing somebody as long as we'd known each other. He understood that sometimes even I didn't know how serious I was until somebody tested me.

“Man, you need some fucking help,” he muttered, finally pushing away from the wall.

“Probably. But you still standing in my office, ain't you?”

He shook his head, laughing under his breath as he dropped onto the leather couch. Unlike the businessmen I'd spent most of my afternoon dealing with, Malachi looked exactly like where we came from. Black hoodie, dark jeans, fresh sneakers, and a watch that cost more than some people's cars. No briefcase, no unnecessary paperwork. Just two phones and the kind of calm that came from knowing violence personally.

At thirty-nine, Chi still had one foot planted firmly in the streets.

Truthfully, so did I.

Mine was just harder to see.

My gaze shifted past him toward the smoked glass overlooking the club below. VICE stretched beneath us in pieces. Plastic covered the unfinished booths, construction dust dulled the black marble floors, and boxes sat stacked behind a half-built bar. Loose wires hung from the ceiling where expensive lighting would eventually go. Right now, it didn't look like much, but I could already picture what it would become.

More importantly, I knew what it represented.

Another piece of my money that didn't need a fucking package attached to it.

“What happened?” I asked, bringing my attention back to Malachi.

The amusement disappeared from his face. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and rubbed his palms together before looking up at me. It was a small change in his demeanor, but I'd known him long enough to recognize when street business had followed him through the door.

“Tone short,” he answered.

I waited for him to finish, watching the slight tension settle around his jaw.

“Forty bands.”

My jaw shifted. Forty thousand dollars wasn't enough money to disturb my sleep anymore, but the principle behind it damn sure could. Money didn't simply disappear from my organization. Somebody took it, spent it, lost it, or lied about it. Whichever one it was, I had a problem with it.

“Where he at?” I asked.

Malachi's eyes flickered toward the glass overlooking the club, and that single movement told me everything I needed to know. I slowly pushed my chair back and stood, watching his expression change when he realized where my mind had gone.

“Tell me you didn't bring that motherfucker here.”

“He outside,” Malachi admitted, lifting one hand before I could say anything else. “He ain't in the building, E.”

“I don't give a flying fuck if he's sitting on the moon.” I planted both palms against my desk, staring at him. “Why is he anywhere near my club?”

Malachi exhaled through his nose and rubbed a hand over his beard. I could see the irritation flashing across his face, but he didn't argue because he knew exactly why I was pissed. VICE wasn't open yet, but I'd already made one thing clear. Nothing from the streets was supposed to touch this building. No product, no collections, and damn sure no meetings with niggas who couldn't explain where forty thousand dollars went.

“Aight,” he finally said, giving a short nod. “That's on me. I should've handled that shit somewhere else.”

I held his gaze for another second before sitting back down. That was one of the reasons we'd lasted almost twenty years. Neither of us needed to spend ten minutes arguing when one of us already knew he was wrong.

“Handle him,” I said, reaching for the bottle of water sitting beside my computer.

“He saying one of his young niggas took—”

“I don't care what he's saying, Chi.” I twisted the cap off the bottle and took a slow drink before setting it down. “If I give you something, you're responsible for it. What you do with it after that is your business. Tone owes forty, and I expect my forty.”

Malachi studied me for a moment, then nodded. There wasn't anything else to discuss. He knew what needed to happen, and I trusted him to make sure it did. He'd been handling shit for me since we were barely old enough to understand what we were building.

I was twenty-two when I met him. Hungry as fuck, broke compared to what I wanted to become, and already smart enough to know I didn't plan on spending my life standing on somebody's corner. Malachi was twenty, reckless, loyal, and always ready to put hands on somebody who looked at him wrong.

I thought ahead. He moved when it was time to move.

Somewhere between our first few plays and our first real money, business had turned into brotherhood. Thousands became hundreds of thousands, hundreds became millions, and eventually I'd built enough connections that I didn't need to be seen at all.

Malachi handled the streets while I controlled what moved through them. That arrangement had made both of us rich.

What I did afterward made me a billionaire.

I bought property, buildings, land, and invested in businesses most of the men we'd come up with didn't even know existed. I understood early that money wasn't worth a damn if the only way to keep making it was to keep risking my freedom.

Yara had a lot to do with that realization.

The first time she'd gone through my finances, she'd stared at me like I was the dumbest rich nigga she'd ever encountered.

All this money, Ezra, and you don't own enough shit that pays you without you touching it?

I'd wanted to put her ass out of my office that day.

Instead, I listened.

Best financial decision I'd ever made.

The vibration of my phone against the desk pulled me out of my thoughts. I glanced down at the screen and saw Yara's name lighting it up. Across from me, Malachi immediately turned his head toward the wall, suddenly finding something interesting about the paint.

I narrowed my eyes.

“What you do?”

He looked back at me, his forehead creasing. “Why I gotta do something?”

“Because you suddenly fascinated with that fucking wall, and the only time you act like that is when you done pissed Yara off.”

His jaw tightened as he fought a smile. He shifted against the couch, pulling one of his phones from his pocket before sliding it right back in.

“She been calling me,” he admitted.

“And you ain't answer?”

“Nope.”

I picked up my phone, watching the realization spread across his face.

“E,” he warned, sitting forward.

I smiled. The bastard actually looked nervous, which made answering the call worth it.

“What's up, Yara?”

“Is Malachi with you?” she asked immediately, skipping every form of greeting.

I looked directly at him. He slowly shook his head, his eyes narrowing as he silently warned me not to say a fucking word.

Twenty years of loyalty.

And I sold his ass out immediately.

“Yep.”

“Bitch,” Malachi muttered, shaking his head.

“Put me on speaker,” Yara demanded.

I tapped the screen and laid my phone on the desk. Malachi sank back against the couch, folding his arms over his chest with the irritated expression he reserved specifically for her. At thirty-five, Yara was the youngest of us, but she'd known us before the money had commas. While Malachi and I were busy building an empire nobody could put on tax returns, she'd gone to school and learned how to build the kind we could.

Now she handled the legitimate side of my world with the same authority Malachi carried in the streets.

“Before either of you start with me,” she began, her voice sharp enough to cut through the office, “I just got off the phone with the contractor. Would somebody like to explain why that man called me talking about somebody threatened to throw his ass off the balcony?”

Malachi turned his head toward me.

I looked right back at him.

Neither of us said shit.

“Ezra,” Yara snapped, clearly recognizing the silence for what it was.

“He fucked up my floor,” I answered, leaning back in my chair.

“It's a construction site, Ezra. People are going to be walking around, moving equipment, and making messes. That's generally how construction works.”

“He fucked up an expensive floor, Yara. You know how much that shit cost?”

“I know exactly how much it cost because I'm the one who approved the invoice,” she shot back. “And I also know threatening the contractor isn't going to magically repair it.”

Malachi lowered his head, pressing his fist against his mouth as his shoulders started shaking again. I pointed at him, silently warning him to keep that shit to himself, but Yara must've heard him because her attention shifted immediately.

“And you can stop laughing, Malachi. I've been calling you all damn afternoon.”

His laughter died, and he slowly lifted his head.

“Damn, Yara. What I do now?”

“Don't play with me. I sent you paperwork three days ago that still hasn't been signed.”

Malachi dragged a hand over his face, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. “I'ma get to it.”

“You were supposed to get to it three days ago.”

“I said I got you.”

“And I said I needed it three days ago. See how we're going in circles?”

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face. Watching somebody else catch Yara's attitude was always entertaining, especially when that somebody was Malachi.

“Y'all sound like a married couple,” I commented.

“Shut the fuck up, Ezra,” they said almost simultaneously.

I sat back, genuinely offended.

“See, this the disrespect I'm talking about. Both of y'all employed by me, but somehow I'm the one getting cussed out in my own fucking office.”

“Then stop giving me reasons to cuss you out,” Yara replied without missing a beat. “I'll be there tomorrow morning, and I expect both of you to act like grown-ass men for once.”

The call ended a few minutes later with her threatening to supervise the entire operation herself if she received one more complaint. I tossed my phone onto the desk and shook my head while Malachi stood from the couch, still laughing.

“Billionaire getting babysat,” he said, straightening his hoodie.

“I'll shoot your other foot.”

“You ain't even shot the first one yet.”

“Keep fucking around.”

He laughed again, but the humor slowly faded as his attention moved toward the glass overlooking VICE. For a moment, he stood there quietly, studying the unfinished space below us.

“You really trying to leave the game?” he asked.

Something about the question made me look up.

There wasn't any judgment in his voice, but I knew why he was asking. The streets had given us everything we'd once thought we wanted. Money, power, respect, and enough fear attached to our names that most problems disappeared before they reached us.

At twenty-two, I'd mistaken all of that for freedom.

At forty-one, I knew better.

“I ain't trying to be fifty still cleaning up shit like Tone,” I answered, following his gaze toward the construction below.

Malachi nodded slowly, but I could tell he was thinking about more than Tone. Getting out wasn't going to happen overnight. Too much money moved through too many hands, and too many people depended on the organization we'd spent years building. We couldn't simply wake up one morning, announce we were finished, and expect everything to disappear.

But I wasn't stupid enough to believe we could keep doing the same shit forever either.

VICE was a start.

So were the properties, investments, and businesses I'd spent the last several years putting together. I wanted money that kept coming whether I stepped outside my house or not. Money that didn't require Malachi to chase down grown men who couldn't account for what belonged to us.

“I know we got a lot of shit to straighten out,” I continued, watching a couple of workers carry equipment across the floor below. “But I'm not spending the rest of my fucking life babysitting niggas who can't follow simple instructions. We built this shit to live better, Chi. Not to stay stuck doing the same thing until somebody kills us or the feds come knocking.”

Malachi rubbed his beard, considering my words before giving another nod. He'd never been the type to run from the streets, but he wasn't foolish enough to pretend they loved him either.

“I hear you, E,” he said quietly. “We just gotta make sure everything's handled the right way.”

“It will be.”

He looked at me for another moment, then turned toward the door. I watched him reach for the handle before calling his name.

“Chi.”

He glanced over his shoulder.

I motioned toward the club below, making sure he understood exactly what I was saying.

“Keep that street shit away from here.”

The expression on his face turned serious. He nodded once, all traces of his earlier humor gone.

“Always, bro.”

The door closed behind him, leaving me alone with the distant sounds of construction and the low hum of the ventilation system.

I stayed seated, staring through the smoked glass at the bare walls, plastic-covered booths, and dust-covered floors. To anybody else, VICE probably looked like another expensive project that wasn't finished yet.

But I saw something different.

A way out.

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Chapter 3



By the time I got home, I was down almost half the money I'd made that night and one inconvenience away from committing a felony.

Montae's sorry ass never showed up. No call, no text, no explanation. Nothing. I'd already given up on him before I even left the bar, after calling his phone one last time and getting sent straight to voicemail. By the time my Uber dropped me off, I was calculating how many meals I could stretch $24 into, because apparently having a job didn't mean I was allowed to have money.

The apartment was dark when I unlocked the door. I stepped inside, listening for any sign that Mama was home before calling out to her. When nobody answered, I decided that was probably for the best. My feet hurt, my back was killing me, and I smelled like liquor, lemon cleaner, and somebody else's cigarette smoke. All I wanted was a hot shower, my bed, and maybe an explanation from Montae before I blocked his ass until further notice.

I kicked the door shut behind me and dropped my purse onto the couch. I was halfway toward my bedroom when a bright red piece of paper taped beside the light switch caught my attention.

FINAL DISCONNECT NOTICE.

My stomach dropped.

“No the fuck they didn't,” I muttered, snatching the paper off the wall.

I scanned the amount twice, hoping I'd somehow misunderstood what I was looking at. Unfortunately, the numbers remained the same, and so did the realization settling in my chest. I'd given Mama money for the electric bill. Not promised it, not offered to help when I got paid again. I'd physically put the money in her hand and watched her look me in my face while promising she'd take care of it.

I flipped the light switch, watching the lamp come on.

“For now,” I mumbled, staring at the notice.

Anger started crawling up the back of my neck. I was already mentally preparing the conversation I planned to have with Mama when something white sticking out from underneath one of the couch

cushions caught my attention. I stopped and stared at it, feeling that familiar warning in the pit of my stomach.

Something in my spirit told me to leave that shit alone.

Unfortunately, I'd never been good at minding my spiritual business.

I pulled the paper free, smoothing its crumpled edges against my thigh before reading the words printed across the top.

NOTICE TO VACATE.

For a moment, I couldn't move. I slowly lowered myself onto the couch, staring at the paper as everything I'd been trying to hold together started falling apart in my head. The electricity was about to get disconnected, the rent was behind, my boyfriend had left me stranded at work, and I had $24 to my fucking name.

Beautiful.

Absolutely fucking beautiful.

I reached for my phone and called Ashlynn. She answered on the second ring, sounding like I'd interrupted the best sleep of her life.

“Bitch, why are you calling me this late?” she complained, her voice thick with sleep. “Somebody better be dead.”

“Give me time, and somebody might be real soon.”

The sleep disappeared from her voice almost immediately. I heard movement on the other end, followed by the rustling of sheets as she sat up. “Jru, what's wrong? What happened?”

I looked down at the notices in my lap, trying to decide which piece of bullshit I wanted to explain first. “We're getting evicted, Ashlynn. And apparently the lights are about to get cut off too.”

“What?” she asked, her voice rising. “How the hell y'all getting evicted? I thought you gave your mama the money for the bills.”

“I DID!” My voice cracked with frustration, and I pressed my fingers against my forehead, trying to keep myself from completely losing it. “That's what I'm trying to understand. I gave her the electric money, Ashlynn. Put it right in her damn hand. Now I'm sitting here looking at a disconnect notice and an eviction notice she apparently thought she could hide underneath the couch.”

Ashlynn went quiet for a moment, and I could practically picture the expression on her face. She'd been telling me for months that I was doing too much, carrying responsibilities that shouldn't have belonged to me in the first place. I hated how often she turned out to be right.

“I've been picking up extra shifts, barely sleeping, and working my ass off trying to keep this place together,” I continued, looking around the apartment. “I can't even buy shit I need because every time

I turn around, something else needs to be paid. I'm twenty-four years old, Ashlynn. Why the fuck do I feel like somebody's husband?”

“Because that's exactly how your mama got you living,” she answered, her tone losing its usual playfulness. “And I've been telling you that shit. Jru, you can't keep working yourself to death trying to take care of somebody who won't even meet you halfway.”

I leaned my head against the back of the couch, closing my eyes. I knew she was right, but knowing something and being ready to do something about it were two completely different things.

“You already know what you need to do,” Ashlynn added. “Come with me.”

I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling.

Here we went.

Ashlynn had been trying to convince me to move out of state with her ever since she'd decided she wanted to be closer to Chi, or *her sponsor*, as she liked calling him. I'd never met the man, but from what she'd told me, he was older, had money, and apparently possessed some magical ability to turn my loud-ass best friend into a giggling schoolgirl whenever his name appeared on her phone.

“Ashlynn, I'm not moving out of state with you just because your sugar daddy wants you closer,” I told her, shifting on the couch.

“First of all, don't disrespect my sponsor,” she replied, sounding genuinely offended. “And second, this ain't even about him. I'm talking about you getting somewhere you can actually breathe without worrying about what bill your mama ain't paid this month.”

Despite everything, a laugh escaped me. Only Ashlynn could be discussing my impending homelessness and still find time to defend her mysterious sponsor.

She continued before I could interrupt, reminding me that Mama was a grown woman and I was her daughter, not her husband. According to her, I could move with her, find another job, stack my money, and finally start living for myself instead of spending every check fixing shit I hadn't broken.

The worst part was that she wasn't wrong.

Leaving sounded good. Too good, honestly. But Mama was still my mama, even when she pissed me off. Even when she made decisions that left me cleaning up the mess. The thought of packing my things and leaving her to figure everything out by herself made something uncomfortable twist inside my chest.

I opened my mouth to explain that to Ashlynn when a strange sound came from the back of the apartment.

My head lifted.

“Ashlynn, hold on a minute.”

I sat completely still, listening. At first, I thought maybe I'd imagined it, but then I heard it again. A muffled thumping sound followed by the unmistakable squeak of a bed.

Then a woman moaned.

My eyebrows pulled together as I slowly stood.

“Jru?” Ashlynn called through the phone. “What the hell is that?”

“I don't know,” I answered, already moving toward the hallway.

But I was about to find out.

The closer I got to Mama's bedroom, the clearer the sounds became. Heavy breathing, the bed squeaking against the wall, and Mama moaning like an eviction notice wasn't somewhere balled up underneath our fucking couch cushion.

I stopped outside her bedroom door, my hand hovering over the knob.

Now, don't get me wrong. I knew my mama was a grown woman, and grown women had needs. But something about listening to her get her back blown out while our entire living situation was falling apart was making my left eye twitch.

I pushed the door open.

And there she was.

My mama.

Ass up, face down, getting fucked without a care in the world.

For a second, my brain refused to process what I was looking at. I stood frozen in the doorway, trying to understand why this was something God had decided my eyes needed to see. Of all the things I'd expected to walk into tonight, my mama's bare ass pointed toward the ceiling hadn't been one of them.

Then I noticed the man behind her.

My gaze dropped to the clothes scattered across the floor. Black jeans, a white T-shirt, and a pair of shoes that looked painfully familiar.

I knew those fucking shoes.

My stomach dropped before my brain could catch up.

Then he lifted his head.

Montae.

My fucking nigga was balls deep in my mama's pussy.

The same motherfucker who was supposed to pick me up from work tonight.

For several seconds, nobody moved. Montae stared at me like somebody had snatched his soul clean out of his body, while Mama twisted around as far as her position allowed. Meanwhile, I stood in the doorway wondering what kind of fucked-up episode of *Maury* I'd just walked into.

Ashlynn's voice sounded distant through my phone.

“Jru? Bitch, what happened? Why you ain't saying nothing?”

I slowly lifted the phone closer to my mouth, still staring at the two people who had apparently lost their fucking minds.

“Ashlynn,” I began, my voice frighteningly calm, “this bitch is in here ass up, face down getting fucked by my nigga while we finna be homeless.”

“WHAT?!” Ashlynn screamed so loudly I had to pull the phone away from my ear.

Mama's head snapped toward me. “Who the hell you calling a bitch?”

My mouth fell open.

Out of everything I'd just said, THAT was what bothered her?

I raised the electric notice that was still clutched in my hand and pointed it directly at her.

“BITCH, YOU!”

Montae scrambled off the bed so fast he nearly tripped over his own pants. He grabbed his boxers from the floor, looking everywhere except directly at me.

“Jru, listen—”

“Listen to WHAT?” I screamed, taking a step into the bedroom. “You couldn't pick me up from work because you was too busy fucking my mama?!”

Ashlynn screamed again through the phone, and somewhere in the middle of all the chaos, Mama snatched the sheet around her body while Montae started stammering about how things weren't what they looked like.

That nearly sent me into cardiac arrest.

I threw the eviction notice at him.

“Her ass was facing the ceiling while you was balls deep in her wrinkled pussy! WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE, NIGGA?”

“Jru, calm the fuck down!” Mama snapped, clutching the sheet against her chest.

I slowly turned toward her.

And just like that, something inside me shifted.

The cheating hurt. I wasn't about to pretend it didn't. But standing there looking at my own mother, knowing she'd been hiding bills and eviction notices while sleeping with the man I'd been calling mine, made the betrayal feel so much deeper.

I lifted the red paper, my hand trembling.

“I gave you the money for this electric bill,” I told her, my voice suddenly quieter.

Mama's eyes shifted away from mine.

That was all the answer I needed.

“And you knew about the eviction,” I continued, watching her face. “You knew we were about to lose this apartment, and instead of telling me, you hid the notice underneath the couch like that shit was just gonna disappear.”

“Jru, I was going to—”

“YOU FUCKING KNEW!” I screamed, cutting her off.

Montae had finally managed to get his pants on and was inching toward the doorway like maybe nobody would notice six feet of cheating motherfucker trying to sneak out of the room.

Unfortunately for him, I noticed everything.

“And where the fuck are YOU going?” I demanded, turning toward him.

He stopped with one hand against the doorframe, looking like he wished the floor would open up and swallow him. “I'm finna let y'all talk. This between you and your mama.”

I stared at him in disbelief before letting out a sharp, humorless laugh.

“NAWWW. Don't get respectful now. You was just inside my mama. Stand in this shit with everybody else!”

Ashlynn was wheezing in my ear.

Actually fucking wheezing.

Montae dragged both hands down his face, looking exhausted as though he was the one having the worst night of his life.

“Look, Jru, I fucked up,” he finally admitted.

“Oh, really?” I asked, tilting my head. “I thought maybe you tripped and your dick fell in her.”

“JRU!” Mama gasped, her eyes widening.

I spun toward her so fast she actually leaned back.

“You don't get to Jru me! We finna have no lights, no house, and apparently no fucking boundaries!”

My chest was heaving, and my hands wouldn't stop shaking. I looked between the two of them, waiting for somebody to say something that would make any of this make sense. But Mama wouldn't look at me, and Montae suddenly found the floor fascinating.

That was when I realized I couldn't do it anymore.

Not another argument. Not another excuse. Not another night spent wondering how I was going to fix something I hadn't broken.

I turned and stormed out of Mama's bedroom, ignoring her calling after me as I marched down the hallway. I slammed my bedroom door hard enough to shake the wall, then dropped my phone onto the bed and dragged my duffel bag from underneath it.

I started throwing clothes inside without bothering to fold anything. Shirts, jeans, underwear, whatever my hands touched first. I didn't care if anything matched or whether I was forgetting something important. I just knew I couldn't spend another night underneath that roof.

Ashlynn's laughter had finally disappeared by the time I picked my phone back up.

“Jru?” she asked carefully. “What are you doing?”

“I'm leaving,” I answered, yanking open another dresser drawer.

“Like tonight?”

I stopped packing long enough to stare at the phone as though she could somehow see the expression on my face.

“No, Ashlynn. Next fucking Christmas.”

“Bitch, I was just asking!” she snapped, sounding offended.

I sucked my teeth and pulled the drawer harder than necessary. The cheap plastic knob popped off in my hand and bounced across the floor.

I didn't even bother picking it up.

Fuck the knob.

Fuck the dresser.

At this point, fuck everything in this apartment that couldn't fit inside my duffel.

“Yes, tonight,” I told her, grabbing another handful of clothes. “Come get me.”

Saying those words out loud made me stop.

A pair of jeans hung halfway out of the bag as the reality of what I'd just decided settled into my chest.

I was leaving.

Not threatening to leave. Not fantasizing about starting over after another terrible day.

Actually leaving.

“I'm serious, Ashlynn,” I said, my voice quieter this time. “Come get me tonight. I'm going with you.”

There was a brief silence on the other end before her voice changed.

“Wait. You mean with me *with me*? Out of state?”

I looked around my bedroom, taking in the chipped dresser, the pile of clothes I'd been meaning to wash, and the little things I'd collected over the years that made this room feel like mine. I didn't have a job waiting for me wherever Ashlynn was going. I didn't know anybody besides her, and I damn sure didn't know Chi beyond whatever ridiculous stories she'd told me about her mysterious sponsor.

And I had $24 to my name.

But for the first time that night, the thought of leaving scared me less than the thought of staying.

“Yes,” I answered.

“OH SHIT!”

“Don't fucking 'oh shit' me!” I snapped, although I could already feel a reluctant smile pulling at my mouth. “Ain't this what you been begging me to do?”

“Yes! Damn!” Ashlynn laughed, sounding wide awake now. “I just didn't know Montae was gonna have to fuck yo mama to get some sense into you.”

I froze.

Then I laughed.

I didn't want to. Lord knows I didn't want to find a single thing funny about the night I'd just had, but the laugh came anyway. It started small before turning into something I couldn't control, half laughter and half sobbing, until I dropped onto the edge of my bed and wiped the tears from underneath my eyes.

“You going to hell,” I managed, shaking my head.

“I'll save you a seat,” she replied without hesitation.

I laughed again, but it faded when I glanced toward my closed bedroom door. Somewhere on the other side of it was the woman who'd given birth to me, the same woman I'd spent years trying to help, defend, and take care of. I loved my mama. Even after everything I'd just walked in on, that hadn't magically disappeared.

But loving her was costing me more than I had left to give.

Ashlynn must've heard the change in my breathing because when she spoke again, the humor was gone from her voice.

“Come with me, Jru. For real,” she said gently. “Leave all that shit there. You don't have to keep living like this.”

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and looked down at the open duffel bag beside me.

Mama had made her choice.

Montae had damn sure made his.

Maybe it was time I finally made mine.

I shoved the last pair of jeans into my bag and pulled the zipper closed. Then I picked up my phone, wiped the remaining tears from my cheeks, and stood.

“Hurry up,” I told Ashlynn. “My bags packed.”

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Chapter 4



Tone had been talking since we pulled away from E's spot, and I let him. Not because anything he said was going to change what happened when we got to the warehouse, but because a man deserved the chance to get his last excuse off his chest.

“Malachi, I'm telling you, I can get the money,” he insisted for what had to be the fifth time, shifting nervously in the passenger seat.

I glanced at him before returning my attention to the road. “When, mothafucka?”

His mouth opened, but nothing came out. He looked toward the windshield, rubbing his palms against his jeans like he was trying to come up with an answer that might save him.

“Exactly,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“Just give me till Friday, bro. I swear I'll have everything straight.”

“Nah.” I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel, already tired of hearing the same bullshit. “Tone, you ain't got our fucking money. E gave you time. I gave you time. It's outta my hands now.”

His face changed when the warehouse came into view. The nervous talking stopped, and he sat up straighter, staring at the building like he was seeing it for the first time. I pulled through the gate, parked near the side entrance, and killed the engine.

Tone didn't move.

Neither did I.

For several seconds, the only sound inside the truck was the air blowing through the vents. I could feel him looking at me, probably searching my face for some sign that I was about to change my mind.

“Malachi,” he finally said, his voice noticeably quieter. “I got kids, man.”

I turned my head and looked at him. “And you had kids when you took our money.”

His jaw clenched, and he looked away.

I wasn't trying to be cold. Facts were facts. Everybody remembered what they had to lose when it was time to pay for the shit they did. Tone had known exactly who he was dealing with, and he'd still decided to play with money that didn't belong to him.

“Get out,” I told him.

“Come on, bro. You know me. You know I wouldn't intentionally—”

“Get the fuck out, Tone.” My voice hardened, and whatever argument he'd been preparing died on his tongue.

He stared at me another second before slowly reaching for the door handle.

Ten minutes later, I walked back outside alone.

The night air hit my face as I crossed the gravel toward my truck. I pulled my phone from my pocket and called E, listening to it ring while I glanced back toward the warehouse.

He answered on the second ring.

“Yeah?”

“Handled,” I told him, opening my driver's door.

There was a brief pause on the other end before he responded. “Aight.”

The call disconnected.

That was how me and E had always worked. He made the call, and I handled whatever came after. It had been that way since we were young, back when neither one of us had enough money to imagine we'd eventually have more of it than we knew what to do with.

E had always been the head of our organization. I was the muscle. He knew how to see a problem coming before it ever reached the front door, and I knew what to do when it got there. That combination had built everything we owned.

But lately, I'd noticed my brother pulling further away from the street side of things.

He hadn't announced it, and I hadn't asked him about it either. I knew E well enough to recognize when something was changing. The older we got, the less interested he seemed in the parts of this life that used to consume damn near every hour of our day. The legitimate side of our business was becoming more than something we'd built to protect ourselves.

It was becoming the life he actually wanted.

And I understood why.

We weren't twenty anymore. E was forty-one, and I was thirty-nine. There came a point when a man had to decide whether he was still doing something because he needed to or because it was the only thing he knew.

E was getting closer to making that decision.

Me? I wasn't there yet.

Truthfully, I didn't know if I wanted to be.

The streets weren't some love story to me. I knew exactly what came with them. I'd buried people because of this shit, watched men I once trusted turn into men I wouldn't leave alone in a room with my wallet, and made decisions I knew I'd have to answer to Allah for one day.

I understood all of that.

Still, this was mine. Ours.

And whenever E decided he was ready to let those reins go, he wouldn't have to wonder who was taking them.

I already had my hands out.

My phone vibrated before I could climb into the truck. I glanced down at the screen and saw a message from Ashlynn.

Ashlynn: So you just wasn't gon text me back??? 😂

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth.

This damn woman.

Me: You still coming? Plane ticket already bought.

I barely had time to lock my phone before her name flashed across the screen. I shook my head, already knowing she was about to start talking shit, and answered.

“Hello to you too, Malachi,” Ashlynn greeted sarcastically. “Damn, do you know how to speak to a woman? No hey, beautiful. No how your day going. Just you still coming like I'm one of your little employees.”

I leaned against the side of my truck, smiling as she continued fussing. “You done?”

“No, actually, I'm not. I've been texting you, and you ain't said shit all day. What if I needed something?”

“You need something?” I asked, glancing toward the warehouse.

She paused. “Well, no, but that's not the point.”

“Then what is the point, Ash?”

“The point is you could've checked on me. You know, made sure I was alive and breathing. Something romantic.”

I chuckled, dragging a hand over my beard. “Woman, I talked to you last night. You was alive then.”

“See? This exactly why you need me closer. Somebody gotta teach your ass how to act.”

I laughed, shaking my head as she continued talking. That was Ashlynn. Loud, beautiful, spoiled, and full of enough personality for three women. She flirted like breathing and had a way of turning damn near everything into a joke. Somehow, underneath all that, she'd worked her way into being somebody I genuinely looked forward to hearing from.

What we had was simple. I took care of her, we enjoyed each other's company, and neither of us had started the arrangement expecting anything serious. No titles or unnecessary promises.

At least, that was how it started.

Lately, I'd been wanting her closer. I was tired of flying her back and forth every time I wanted to see her, and she'd already been talking about leaving Rosemont anyway. Moving her to Westhaven made sense. She got the fresh start she'd been looking for, I got her closer to me, and I stopped spending money on flights every few weeks.

Everybody won.

My faith had always shaped how I viewed relationships differently too. I was Muslim, and although I wasn't perfect, I understood there were parts of my life that didn't line up with the man I knew I was supposed to be. That was between me and Allah, and I carried the weight of it whether anybody else knew it or not.

Marriage was something I'd thought about more than once since meeting Ashlynn. So was having more than one wife. Not because I wanted an excuse to collect women, but because I understood that marriage came with responsibilities beyond simply providing financially. Being fair, being honest, and standing on the commitments I made were things I took seriously.

Whether Ashlynn would ever entertain some shit like that was a whole other story.

I damn near laughed thinking about it.

That woman would probably cuss me out before I got through the explanation.

“What you laughing at?” she asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Nothing.” I straightened away from the truck and glanced at my watch. “You packed?”

“Basically.”

I closed my eyes for a second.

Basically meant no.

“Ashlynn, your flight leaves tomorrow. What the fuck does basically mean?”

“It means I got most of my stuff together,” she replied, sounding annoyed that I'd even questioned her. “Stop acting like my daddy.”

“Then stop acting like you need one. Last time I flew you out here, you almost missed your damn flight.”

“And did I miss it?”

“You got on the plane while they was damn near closing the door.”

“But I got on it, didn't I?” she challenged, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

I shook my head. “You got an answer for everything.”

“Sure do. Now, since you wanna be all in my business, there's something I need to tell you.”

Something about the sudden sweetness in her tone made me suspicious.

“What you done did?”

“Why you always assume I did something?”

“Because every time you start talking like that, some bullshit usually follows.”

She laughed before explaining that her homegirl was coming with her. When she said the name Jru, I had to think for a second before remembering she'd mentioned the girl before.

“Jru,” Ashlynn repeated. “My best friend. I told you about her.”

“Yeah, I remember.” I shifted my phone to my other ear. “What about her?”

“She coming with me to Westhaven. Some shit happened at home, and she's finally ready to leave Rosemont.”

I frowned slightly, trying to remember what little Ashlynn had told me about her friend. I knew she'd been having problems at home and had a boyfriend who wasn't worth a damn. Beyond that, I didn't know much, and I wasn't about to pry into somebody else's business.

“She straight?” I asked.

“She will be once I get her out of here,” Ashlynn answered, her voice losing some of its playfulness. “She's been dealing with a lot, Chi. I just want her somewhere she can start over.”

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. “Aight. Long as you got everything worked out.”

“We do,” she assured me, then paused.

I knew that pause.

I'd heard it enough times to know the woman was about to ask me for something.

“What you want, Ash?”

She laughed softly. “Why I gotta want something?”

“Because you only sound that sweet when you do. Spit it out.”

“Okay, so don't say no before you hear me out.”

I tilted my head back toward the sky.

“Here we fucking go.”

“Malachi!” she complained, laughing. “I'm serious.”

“I'm listening.”

“Can you get Jru a job at the club?”

There it was.

I rubbed my palm over my beard, considering the request. “Ashlynn, I don't know that girl.”

“But you know me,” she replied immediately.

“That ain't helping your case.”

“Fuck you,” she laughed before continuing. “I'm serious, Chi. She already works at a bar, so it's not like she don't know what she's doing. She's got experience, she works hard, and she's dependable. I'm not asking you to hand her a job she can't do. Just give her a chance.”

That made a difference.

Experience was something I could work with. We still needed people for VICE, and although I wasn't about to hand somebody a position simply because Ashlynn asked, an interview wouldn't hurt anything.

“I'll meet her when y'all get here,” I finally told her.

Ashlynn squealed so loudly I had to pull the phone away from my ear.

“Girl, calm your ass down. I said I'll meet her. I ain't say she got the job.”

“I know, I know!” she replied excitedly. “Thank you, baby. I knew you loved me.”

I laughed under my breath. “I ain't say all that.”

“You don't have to. Your wallet does.”

I shook my head, smiling despite myself.

Spoiled.

Completely fucking spoiled.

But I'd created half that monster myself.

“Listen to me, Ashlynn,” I said, making sure I had her attention. “Don't go telling that girl she already got a job. I'm serious. She still gotta come in, talk to us, and show she can handle the position.”

“I won't,” she promised.

“Ashlynn.”

“I said I won't!” she repeated, laughing. “Damn, you act like I don't know how to keep my mouth shut.”

I raised my eyebrows.

The silence that followed must've told her exactly what I was thinking because she started laughing even harder.

“Whatever, Malachi. I'm about to finish packing.”

“Good. And don't miss the flight.”

“Please,” she scoffed. “You think I'm missing first class?”

Considering she'd almost missed the last one, yes.

I decided not to remind her.

“Get your ass to Westhaven,” I told her, opening my truck door.

Her voice immediately softened. “Awww. You miss me.”

I smiled to myself before ending the call.

The phone started ringing again before I could even slide it into my pocket. I glanced at her name flashing across the screen and laughed.

Hell nah.

She'd survive.

I climbed into my truck and pulled away from the warehouse, letting the conversation settle in my mind as I headed back toward the city.

E was getting closer to being done with the streets, and I wasn't. Whenever that day came, I'd take the reins and keep shit moving. Until then, I had enough on my plate.

Ashlynn was moving to Westhaven, and apparently, she was bringing some woman named Jru with her.

I didn't know Jru, didn't know what she looked like, and didn't know the full story behind why she needed to leave Rosemont.

All I knew was Ashlynn vouched for her.

For now, that was enough.

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Chapter 5



I woke up on the thirty-something floor of a luxury high-rise in Westhaven, wrapped in sheets I damn sure didn't pay for, staring through windows that made the entire city look like it belonged to me. Malachi had taken care of everything before I arrived, from the apartment to the furniture sitting inside it. All I had to do was show up with my bags, and naturally, I'd made sure Jru had a room of her own. My girl needed somewhere to get herself together, and I wasn't about to let her worry about rent while she was trying to start over. Now this was more my speed.

Working a nine-to-five had never been on my bingo card. I liked luxury, I liked being kept, and I liked having a man who understood that taking care of me was part of the package. And before anybody got shit twisted, I wasn't no gold digger. I knew how to make money when I needed to. I just preferred my man's money over mine. Why the hell would I struggle on purpose when somebody actually enjoyed spoiling me?

“You been up?” a familiar voice asked from the doorway.

I turned toward Jru, who stood there looking half asleep, her glasses crooked and her bonnet leaning to one side. Four days in a luxury apartment, and she still looked like she'd just rolled out of bed in Rosemont.

“Unfortunately,” I answered, stretching beneath the sheets.

She walked farther into my room, stopping near the floor-to-ceiling windows. “I still can't believe we live here,” she admitted, shaking her head at the view.

“Believe it, bitch. Welcome to the soft life.”

“Your soft life,” she corrected, dropping onto the edge of my bed. “I need a job, Ash. I can't just sit around here doing nothing.”

I rolled onto my side and propped my head against my palm. “And you got an interview tonight, so what exactly are we stressing about?”

“I'm trying not to,” she muttered, picking at the comforter.

“No, you're not. You've been walking around here scared for four days, acting like somebody's gonna knock on the door and tell you to pack your shit.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I moved my whole life in two days, Ashlynn. Excuse me if I'm still trying to figure out what the hell I'm doing.”

Okay, she had me there. Four days ago, Jru was still in Rosemont dealing with a crackhead mama, a sorry-ass boyfriend, and responsibilities that never should've belonged to her. I hated that it took Montae messing with her mama for her to finally leave, but at least she'd made it out. That was what mattered.

“Which is exactly why we're going shopping again,” I announced, reaching for my phone.

Jru turned toward me, looking completely exhausted. “How the hell did you get shopping from anything I just said?”

“Healing,” I answered with a straight face. “Retail therapy is real, bitch. Look it up.”

“With whose money?” she asked, folding her arms. “Because I know damn well you ain't talking about mine.”

I lifted my phone with a satisfied smile. “Malachi's.”

Jru burst out laughing, dropping her head into her hands. “You are so fucking ridiculous.”

“And housed,” I reminded her, gesturing toward the bedroom.

That only made her laugh harder, and I smiled as some of the tension finally left her shoulders. There was my girl. Me and Jru went way back, and although we handled life differently, we'd always balanced each other out. She carried everything, even what didn't belong to her, while I refused to carry shit I could put down. So when she finally agreed to leave Rosemont, I wasn't giving her enough time to change her mind.

If I was moving to Westhaven, my girl was coming too. Period.

***

By that afternoon, I'd dragged Jru through enough stores for her to threaten to leave me in the mall. Good. At least she wasn't spending the whole day worrying about Rosemont.

That evening, I sat on her bed watching her change her earrings for the third time. She'd been standing in front of the mirror for nearly twenty minutes, studying herself like one wrong accessory was going to cost her the job.

“Girl, leave them damn earrings alone,” I told her, crossing my legs.

“I'm nervous,” she admitted, fastening one of them again.

“I know. You've told me six times.” I gave her a look before letting my eyes travel over her outfit. “And for the record, you look good.”

The burgundy jumpsuit hugged her little frame perfectly, stopping below her knees before giving way to black strappy heels. Its square neckline showed just enough, and the gold jewelry we'd picked out earlier pulled everything together. Her sleek bob framed her smooth, rich brown face, while those glasses gave her an innocent look that was pure false advertisement. I knew my friend, and innocent wasn't always the word I'd use to describe her.

“Turn around,” I instructed, motioning with my finger.

Jru looked at me through the mirror. “Why?”

“Because I said turn around. Damn, let me see the whole outfit.”

She sighed but did it anyway, holding her arms out slightly as I inspected her. I nodded my approval, satisfied with what I saw.

“You look good, girl. Stop stressing.”

“You don't think it's too much for an interview?” she asked, smoothing her hands over her hips.

“First of all, you're meeting them at a nightclub, not Bank of America. Second, no. You look like somebody who knows how to present herself.”

Her eyes traveled over my outfit before she raised an eyebrow. “And what the hell are you dressed for?”

I glanced down at my burgundy-and-black jumpsuit, which hugged every curve on my five-two frame. The halter neckline dipped low in the front, and my long, bone-straight bust-down fell almost to my waist. I loved me a good thirty-inch wig, but don't get shit confused. I wasn't bald-headed underneath it. My real hair was healthy; I just preferred letting somebody else's hair do the work.

Jru was still waiting for an answer, her arms folded across her chest. “You gonna tell me or just keep admiring yourself?”

I smoothed my hair over one shoulder and smiled. “I'm dressed for Malachi.”

She burst out laughing, shaking her head. “At least you honest.”

“Always, baby.” I reached for my phone when it buzzed beside me.

Malachi: Y'all ready?

I smiled before I could stop myself, and Jru caught it immediately. She turned away from the mirror, one hand settling on her hip as she studied my face.

“Look at you,” she teased. “That man got you bad, Ash.”

“Mind your business,” I told her, trying to hide my smile while typing my response. “He got money. There's a difference.”

“Mhm,” she hummed, shaking her head like she didn't believe a word coming out of my mouth. I rolled my eyes and ignored her, although the smile on my face probably wasn't helping my argument.

Malachi and I had met months ago, and neither one of us had pretended our arrangement was something it wasn't. He liked me, I liked him, and he enjoyed taking care of me. Sponsor, sugar daddy, whatever somebody wanted to call it, I didn't care. Especially when my sponsor was tall, dark, built, with light brown eyes, a full beard, and waves that stayed right. Thirty-nine years old and fine as hell.

Unfortunately, somewhere between the trips, gifts, and late-night conversations, I'd started liking the man attached to the wallet. That complicated things, especially considering Malachi was Muslim and had mentioned wanting more than one wife someday. I respected his faith completely, but may Allah bless that man from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, because I wasn't sharing my husband. Maybe somebody else could do it. Couldn't be Ashlynn.

He didn't know I was thinking that far ahead anyway. For now, I was enjoying what we had.

Besides, I had another little plan brewing.

Ezra.

I'd never met Malachi's best friend, but I'd heard enough about him to be curious. If he was anywhere near as fine as Malachi, maybe Jru needed to realize Montae wasn't the last man God created. Preferably, the next one could have some money. A lot of it.

“Why you looking at me like that?” Jru asked, catching me staring.

I smiled innocently. “No reason. Can't I admire my best friend without getting interrogated?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Not when you got that sneaky-ass smile on your face. I know you, Ashlynn, and I don't trust you.”

I laughed, grabbing my purse from the bed. “You shouldn't, but right now you need to worry about getting that job instead of trying to read my mind.”

She followed me toward the door, still shaking her head. “See, that's exactly why I don't trust your ass.”

“Girl, walk,” I told her, reaching back to grab her hand. “We got somewhere to be.”

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The club Malachi told us to meet them at wasn't theirs. Their spot was still being finished, so he and Ezra had been checking out different clubs around Westhaven, peeping the competition before their own place opened. Apparently, Jru's unofficial interview was happening while they did it.

The place had a nice atmosphere, with low lighting, plush sections, and a long bar stretching across one wall. Music rolled through the room while servers moved between tables, and the crowd was just thick enough to give the place some energy.

Jru leaned closer as we walked inside, scanning the room. “They interviewing me here?”

“Girl, just go with it,” I told her, searching for Malachi.

She gave me a sideways glance. “You don't know what's going on either, do you?”

“No, but I look confident, so nobody can tell,” I replied, making her laugh as we continued through the club.

Then I spotted Malachi sitting in a section toward the back, looking good enough to make me forget what we'd come there for. Black shirt, expensive watch, beard disrespectfully perfect. Whew. That man.

“There go your sugar daddy,” Jru murmured, following my gaze.

“Don't hate,” I told her, smiling.

“I'm not,” she laughed, but her attention shifted when the man beside Malachi turned slightly.

And baby, when I saw him, I nearly stopped walking.

Malachi had left out some very important fucking information. Ezra King was fine as hell. Not cute or *he looks good for his age* fine. I meant fine, fine. He had to be around six-three, caramel-brown, broad-shouldered, and built. Gray threaded through his hair and beard, making forty-one look entirely too damn good. His eyes were some kind of hazel-green that seemed to change with the lighting, and everything about him screamed money and authority.

“Which one is Malachi?” Jru asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Black shirt,” I answered, nodding toward the section.

Her gaze followed mine before settling on the man sitting beside him. “And who's that?”

“Ezra,” I replied, watching her expression. When she asked if that was Malachi's friend, I nodded, waiting for some kind of reaction. She gave me absolutely nothing. Damn, tough crowd.

Then I glanced back toward Ezra and caught him looking directly at Jru. His eyes moved over her once before returning to her face, lingering long enough to make me raise an eyebrow. Well, well, well. Maybe I wasn't the only one who thought my girl looked good tonight.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing Jru's hand and pulling her toward the section.

Jru glanced down at our joined hands before looking up at me, her eyebrows pulling together. “Why are you smiling like that?”

I tried to straighten my face, but it was too late. “I'm not smiling,” I lied, tugging her forward.

“Ashlynn,” she warned, dragging out my name as she resisted just enough to make me turn around. “What are you up to?”

I laughed, tightening my grip on her hand. “Girl, walk. You got an interview to worry about, and I ain't about to let you stand here interrogating me.”

She shook her head but followed, mumbling something about how she should've known I was up to no good.

By the time we reached the section, Malachi was already standing. His eyes traveled down my body before returning to my face, and the smile pulling at his mouth told me he'd noticed exactly what I'd worn for him.

I gave him my sweetest smile. “Hey, friend.”

His eyebrows pulled together as he looked at me. “Friend? That's what we calling each other now?”

I laughed at the irritation in his voice, and Jru snorted beside me. Malachi shook his head before turning his attention toward her.

“You Jru?” he asked, extending his hand.

She nodded, introducing herself with a polite smile. Malachi greeted her before motioning toward the man beside him.

“This E,” he said.

Ezra stood, and Lord have mercy, the man looked even better up close. His eyes briefly landed on me before shifting toward Jru, where they lingered long enough for me to notice. He extended his hand toward her, introducing himself in a deep, commanding voice. “Ezra King.”

“Jru Sinclair,” she replied, placing her hand in his.

I watched as his gaze dropped toward their joined hands before slowly returning to her face. Interesting. There was something about the way he looked at her that caught my attention, but before I could figure it out, he released her hand and turned toward Malachi.

“This the girl interviewing?” he asked, his expression barely changing.

Well, damn. No nice to meet you, no smile, no attempt at small talk. This man went straight to business like being friendly required an appointment. He wasn't necessarily disrespectful, just dry as hell, and apparently smiling wasn't something he did often. Still, I couldn't deny the man was fine as fuck.

We settled into the booth, and Malachi started asking Jru about her experience working at the bar in Rosemont. She sat a little straighter at first, answering carefully, but as he continued asking questions, she relaxed and began explaining the responsibilities she'd handled at her old job.

I tried to pay attention, but Ezra kept distracting me. Every time Jru spoke, his gaze shifted toward her. When she pushed her glasses higher on her nose, his eyes followed the movement. When she turned toward Malachi, Ezra leaned back against the booth, watching her with an expression I couldn't quite read. And when she shifted in her seat, his eyes dropped briefly before returning to her face.

Oh, bitch. I knew that look. He might've been mean, but he damn sure wasn't blind.

I sat back against the booth and took a sip of my drink, hiding the smile threatening to spread across my face. Four days in Westhaven, and things were already looking up. Jru was finally out of Rosemont, Malachi seemed interested in giving her a chance, and Ezra King had looked at my best friend enough times for me to know it wasn't accidental.

I didn't know what he was thinking, but I knew a man checking out a woman when I saw one.

And something told me this was about to get interesting.

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Chapter 6



I had a fucking problem, and unfortunately, she was sitting directly across from me wearing glasses she couldn't seem to keep on her nose.

I hadn't expected Jru Sinclair to catch my attention the way she had. Truthfully, when Malachi told me Ashlynn's friend was interviewing for one of the positions at Vice, I'd barely given it a second thought. Shit, we needed people. She needed a job. If she could handle the work, cool. That had been the extent of my interest until I looked at her. Really looked at her. And then I smelled her.

That shit had been fucking with me since she sat down. I didn't know what the hell she had on, but every time she moved, I caught another trace of it. Something warm and sweet with a little vanilla underneath, mixed with something I couldn't quite place. Whatever it was smelled expensive as fuck, and it clung to her without being overpowering. Somewhere between listening to her answer Malachi's questions and watching her push those glasses up her nose for the third time, I'd stopped thinking about whether she'd make a good employee.

She would. That wasn't the problem. The problem was Jru was fucking beautiful, and I wanted her. Bad.

Smooth, rich milk-chocolate skin. A sleek bob framing her face. Pretty light brown eyes sitting behind glasses that should've made her look innocent but were having the exact opposite effect on me. Then there was that burgundy jumpsuit hugging her little frame like whoever made the shit had done it specifically to piss me off. She wasn't flirting or trying to impress me either. Her attention stayed mostly on Malachi as she answered his questions, calm and sure of herself. If she didn't know something, she admitted it. If she did, she explained it without turning a simple answer into a damn speech. I liked that about her.

My eyes dropped toward her body again, and I immediately regretted it. The jumpsuit fit too fucking well. I rubbed a hand over my beard, trying to redirect my thoughts before they went somewhere they had no business going during a job interview. I wondered what she'd look like without all that composure, whether those glasses would stay on when—

Fuck.

How old was she?

The question hit me out of nowhere. I studied her face again, suddenly realizing I didn't know a damn thing about this woman beyond what Malachi had mentioned. She looked young, but I couldn't tell exactly how young, and the longer I sat there wondering, the more it irritated me.

Malachi was in the middle of asking her something when I interrupted. “How old are you?”

He stopped talking, turning his head toward me with a confused expression. Jru looked just as surprised, her eyebrows drawing together behind her glasses.

“Excuse me?” she asked, sitting a little straighter.

I leaned back against the booth, keeping my eyes on her. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four,” she answered, although the way she looked at me made it clear she didn't understand why I was asking.

Twenty-four. I was forty-one. Seventeen fucking years between us. I did the math twice in my head like the numbers were somehow going to change. They didn't, and before I could decide what to do with that information, she tilted her head.

“What does that have to do with the job?” she asked, her tone polite but direct.

“Nothing,” I admitted, rubbing my thumb across my bottom lip.

“Then why'd you ask?”

Beside me, Malachi lowered his head, already trying not to laugh. I ignored his ass and kept my attention on Jru, who was still waiting for an explanation.

“Curious,” I finally answered.

Her eyes narrowed slightly before she leaned back in her seat. “Well, since my age was important enough to interrupt my interview, how old are you?”

Malachi coughed into his fist, but I knew that nigga was laughing. I cut my eyes at him before answering her. “Forty-one.”

Jru's eyebrows lifted, and a quiet little “Oh” slipped out of her mouth. It wasn't loud or disrespectful, but something about the way she said it made me frown.

“What the fuck 'oh' mean?” I asked, watching the corner of her mouth twitch.

“Nothing,” she replied, adjusting her glasses like she hadn't just thrown a little shade.

“Didn't sound like nothing.”

“You asked my age, and I answered. I asked yours, and you answered. We even.” She gave a small shrug, clearly satisfied with herself.

Malachi's shoulders shook beside me. I turned toward him, irritation already settling across my face. “Something funny?”

“Nope. Nothing at all,” he answered, looking everywhere except at me.

His lying ass.

I looked back at Jru, who was still fighting a smile, and felt my jaw tighten. Twenty-four years old and already getting smart with me. The worst part was that I liked it. That little attitude, the way she held my stare without looking intimidated, did something low and immediate to me. My dick tightened beneath the table, forcing me to shift in my seat before either of them noticed.

Yeah. I was done with this fucking interview.

“Malachi, let me holler at you,” I said, pushing myself up from the booth.

He studied me for a second before standing, amusement still written all over his face. “We'll be right back,” he told Jru.

Ashlynn, who'd been waiting nearby at the bar, noticed us getting up and headed toward Jru while Malachi followed me away from the table. We stopped near the railing, far enough away that the women couldn't hear us over the music.

“I don't want to hire her,” I told him.

Malachi stared at me without saying anything. Then his eyes moved past my shoulder toward Jru before returning to my face. A slow grin spread across his mouth, and I already knew I wasn't going to like whatever came out of it.

“You want her,” he said, sounding entirely too pleased with himself.

There wasn't a question anywhere in it. I glanced back toward the table, where Ashlynn had taken my seat and was talking to Jru. My eyes lingered on Jru for another second before I looked at him again.

“Yeah.”

Malachi's grin widened. “I fucking knew it.”

“Don't start, nigga,” I warned, pointing a finger at him.

“Oh, nah.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I thought you ain't like fucking with younger women? What happened to all that shit you used to talk about needing a woman closer to your age?”

I cut my eyes at him, already regretting admitting anything. “She grown, fool.”

“Twenty-four,” he reminded me, holding up his hands like he was presenting evidence. “Your ass forty-one. That's seventeen years.”

“Man, fuck you. Ain't your girl thirteen years younger than you?” I shot back, enjoying how quickly his smile disappeared.

“That ain't the point,” he argued, straightening his face.

I laughed. “Exactly.”

“Nah, the point is I never sat around talking about I don't fuck with younger women. That was your old ass.”

“Old ass? Nigga, you thirty-nine,” I reminded him, looking at him like he'd lost his damn mind.

“And you forty-one,” he answered immediately, that irritating grin returning.

“Two fucking years, Malachi.”

“Two years closer to fifty than me.”

I stared at him, wondering whether knocking his ass over the railing would be worth the trouble. Malachi took one look at my expression and busted out laughing.

“You done, nigga?” I asked, rubbing a hand down my beard.

“Hell nah.” He shook his head, still laughing. “Them damn glasses done changed your whole outlook on life.”

“Fuck you,” I muttered, although I couldn't stop myself from laughing a little.

“I'm just saying.” He glanced toward the table again before his expression turned slightly more serious. “So let me understand this. She interviewed good, we need people, but you don't want her working at Vice because you want her?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying,” I answered without hesitation.

Malachi studied me for a moment before shaking his head. He knew I wasn't the type to mix business with pleasure, and I damn sure wasn't about to spend every night watching Jru walk around my club while pretending I didn't want her. That sounded like a headache I could avoid before it started.

“You got it,” he finally said, although the amusement hadn't completely left his face. “What you want me to tell her?”

“We'll be in touch.”

“Cold-blooded,” he muttered, looking toward Jru again.

“Malachi,” I warned, letting him know I wasn't in the mood for another speech.

“Aight, damn.” He lifted his hands before turning back toward the section.

We returned to the table, and Ashlynn moved back to where she'd been sitting. The look she gave Malachi told me she planned on getting every detail out of him later, but he ignored it and settled into his seat.

“We still got some things to handle before Vice opens and some other people to talk to,” Malachi explained, looking toward Jru. “So we'll be in touch.”

Disappointment crossed her face before she managed to cover it. I caught it anyway. She nodded politely, reaching for her purse as she thanked us for meeting with her.

Ashlynn caught her arm before she could stand. “Uh-uh. Sit down,” she instructed, pulling her attention away from the interview.

Jru gave her a tired look. “Girl, I came for an interview.”

“And the interview is over,” Ashlynn replied with a smile. “Now you came to have a drink with me.”

Jru glanced around the club before sighing. “One,” she warned, lifting a finger.

“That's all I need,” Ashlynn promised, looking entirely too innocent.

Malachi laughed from beside me. “That's a damn lie.”

Ashlynn cut her eyes at him. “Nobody asked you.”

“Good thing I don't need an invitation to insert my opinions,” he answered, leaning back with a satisfied grin.

Their arguing continued as the club started filling around us. The difference between the place we'd walked into earlier and the one surrounding us now was damn near instant. Music got louder, the lights dimmed, bottles started moving, and bodies filled the empty sections. That was the part I'd wanted to see. How the room changed once the crowd came in. How quickly the staff adjusted. Which sections filled first and whether the bartenders could keep up with the rush.

I watched all of it without making it obvious. The owner thought I was there to conduct business in a private setting, and that was true. He just didn't know I was also studying the atmosphere for Vice. Nobody knew about our club yet, and that was exactly how we wanted it. The fewer people who knew what we were building before we were ready to announce it, the better.

For the next hour, the four of us kicked it. No interview, no business, at least not the kind anybody else could see. Ashlynn kept everybody laughing, mostly at Malachi's expense, while he gave it right back. Jru was different once she relaxed. She laughed more, talked more, and even caught me looking at her a couple of times. The second time, she held my stare long enough for me to lift my glass in acknowledgment. She shook her head, but that little smile she gave me did something I wasn't prepared for.

Eventually, Ashlynn jumped up when a song she liked came on. She reached for Jru, trying to pull her toward the dance floor, but Jru shook her head and told her she was good. Ashly tried once more before giving up and grabbing Malachi's hand instead.

“Fine. You coming,” she announced, tugging him out of the booth.

Malachi didn't resist worth a damn. “Shiiiiit, you ain't gotta tell me twice,” he answered, already following her toward the crowd.

I laughed as they disappeared between the other people dancing. Jru watched them for a moment before reaching for her drink, and for the first time all night, it was just the two of us.

She took a sip, looking at me over the rim of her glass. “So… forty-one.”

I leaned back against the booth, amused by the way she said it. “We still on that?”

“You're the one who interrupted my interview to ask how old I was,” she reminded me, setting her glass down.

“And you made sure you asked mine.”

“Because I wanted to know why mine mattered so much,” she replied, studying my face like she was trying to catch me in a lie.

“It didn't,” I answered, keeping my expression straight.

Jru lowered her chin slightly, looking at me over the top of those glasses. I couldn't help smiling at the disbelief written all over her face.

“You don't believe me?” I asked.

“Not even a little bit,” she answered, her lips curving.

I shook my head, laughing under my breath. “You always this mouthy?”

“You always this nosy?” she shot back without missing a beat.

“When I want to know something,” I told her, leaning forward slightly.

“And what else you wanna know?” she asked, tilting her head.

I held her gaze for a moment, letting the question settle between us. “Plenty.”

She set her glass down and folded her hands on the table. “Like?”

“How long you been in Westhaven?” I asked, deciding to start somewhere simple.

“A few days,” she answered. “Why?”

“Where you from?”

“Rosemont.” She tilted her head, a small smile returning. “Which was on my résumé, by the way.”

“The interview is over,” I reminded her, enjoying how quickly her expression changed.

“Then why are you asking?” she questioned, narrowing her eyes.

“Trying to figure something out.”

“What?”

I leaned a little closer, keeping my eyes on hers. “You.”

That shut her up for a second, but not nearly long enough. She studied me like she was deciding whether I was serious before asking why.

“I ain't figured that part out yet,” I admitted, making her laugh softly.

“At least you're honest,” she said, relaxing against the booth.

“Usually,” I answered with a slight shrug.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Usually?”

“Depends who's asking.”

She laughed again, and when she shifted closer so she could hear me over the music, that damn scent hit me. Warm, sweet, clean. Whatever the fuck she had on had been bothering me all night, and now that she was sitting this close, I couldn't ignore it anymore.

“What the fuck you got on?” I asked, looking directly at her.

Jru pulled back slightly, her eyebrows drawing together. “What?”

“Whatever you're wearing. What is it?” I clarified, watching her expression change.

Her lips curved into a slow smile. “Why?”

“Because I've been smelling it all damn night,” I admitted, rubbing a hand over my beard.

Her smile grew wider, and I could tell she was enjoying herself. “You like it?”

“Too fucking much,” I answered before I could think better of it.

Jru laughed, shaking her head as she reached for her glass. I watched her take another sip, already irritated that she hadn't answered my question.

“So what is it?” I asked again.

“I'm not telling you,” she replied, setting her glass down with a satisfied little smile.

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Because now I know it bothers you,” she answered, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

“It don't bother me,” I argued, although the smile pulling at my mouth wasn't helping my case.

“That face says otherwise,” she teased, pointing toward me.

I shook my head, laughing despite myself. “You something else.”

“And you still ain't figured me out,” she reminded me, leaning back in her seat.

“Working on it,” I told her, holding her gaze a second longer than necessary.

I asked what brought her to Westhaven, and she nodded toward the dance floor, where Ashlynn was still enjoying herself with Malachi.

“Ashlynn, mostly,” she explained. “I needed a change, and she told me y'all were hiring.”

“So you just packed up and came?” I asked, curious about what would make somebody leave everything behind that quickly.

Jru's expression shifted slightly. “It wasn't like I had a whole lot keeping me in Rosemont.”

Something about the way she said it told me there was more to that story. Her voice hadn't changed much, but her eyes had, and I knew better than to start pressing somebody about shit they clearly weren't ready to discuss. Instead, I let the subject go.

She traced one finger around the edge of her glass before looking at me again. “I'll like Westhaven a whole lot better once I find a steady paycheck, though.”

“You need the job that bad?” I asked, studying her.

Her eyes lifted to mine, and the playful expression she'd been wearing disappeared. “I need a job that bad,” she corrected quietly.

There was a difference, and I heard it. She wasn't asking for a favor or looking for somebody to hand her anything. She wanted to work. Wanted to make her own money. And here I was, making sure she didn't get hired because I couldn't keep my damn eyes off her.

Before I could say anything else, Ashlynn and Malachi returned, laughing about something that had happened on the dance floor. Ashlynn was fixing her hair while Malachi looked entirely too pleased with himself. Whatever moment had settled between Jru and me disappeared as Ashlynn slid into the booth and started talking.

But Jru's words stayed with me.

She needed a job. I had more than enough money, but I wasn't about to insult her by offering to throw some at her. I needed to figure out how to help her without putting her on my payroll at Vice, because that was one decision I wasn't changing.

I glanced toward her again as she laughed at something Ashlynn said. She had no idea what she'd started tonight, and if I was being honest, neither did I.

I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do about Jru Sinclair yet.

But I knew I wasn't done with her.

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Chapter 7



Three weeks in Westhaven, and for the first time in a long damn time, my life felt quiet. Not boring. Peaceful. There was a difference, and I was finally starting to appreciate it.

“Your phone ringing again,” Ashlynn said from her spot on my bed.

I glanced toward the dresser while fastening the gold watch around my wrist. Mama's name flashed across the screen for the third time that evening. I watched it vibrate against the wood before turning back toward the mirror.

“You ain't answering?” Ashlynn asked, looking up from her phone with her eyebrows raised.

“Nope,” I answered, reaching for my earrings.

She studied me for a moment, probably because she'd expected a different answer. Hell, so had I. Three weeks ago, Mama calling me back-to-back would've had my stomach in knots. I would've answered before the second ring, already preparing myself for whatever emergency she'd managed to create. Tonight, I let it go to voicemail.

I adjusted the structured black pinstripe corset hugging my waist, its pointed hem dipping over my dark wide-leg pants. Gold earrings, chunky bracelets, my watch, and pointed gold heels pulled everything together. My sleek bob curved neatly against my jaw, and after pushing my glasses higher on my nose, I reached for my perfume. A little Coach Gold Parfum first, followed by Armani My Way Sunny Vanilla.

“Fuck both of them,” I muttered, spraying the perfume across my neck.

Ashlynn's head popped up. “Oop.”

“I mean it.” I set the bottle down, catching her reflection in the mirror. “She wasn't answering my calls when she was fucking my man, and Montae damn sure wasn't worried about me when he left my ass stranded at work.”

The amusement disappeared from Ashlynn's face. She lowered her phone into her lap, studying me with an expression that softened around the edges.

“I'm just surprised you haven't answered,” she admitted.

Truthfully, so was I. Mama had been leaving voicemails about being homeless and needing me, while Montae kept calling from different numbers after I stopped answering his. I didn't know what the fuck he wanted, and I didn't care enough to find out. Mama was harder. Every time her name appeared, that old instinct kicked in, making me wonder whether she'd eaten, whether she was safe, or whether she'd gotten high again.

Then I remembered the shutoff notices, the missing bill money, and all those nights I'd spent worrying about shit she should've been handling herself. And finally, Montae. That usually did it.

“I'm tired, Ash,” I admitted, slipping a ring onto my finger.

Her expression softened even more. “I know, girl.”

“No, I'm really tired.” I stared at myself in the mirror, struggling to explain something I'd been feeling for years. “I spent all that time making sure everybody else was straight, and neither one of them gave a damn when I wasn't.”

Ashlynn was quiet for a moment before nodding toward my phone. “Then let their asses figure it out.”

I turned toward her, lifting an eyebrow. “That's your comforting advice?”

“That was very comforting,” she answered seriously, making me laugh despite myself.

“You're terrible.”

“And yet you moved across the country with me,” she replied, shrugging like she'd made some profound point.

“City, Ashlynn. I moved across the damn city.”

“Same shit.”

I shook my head, smiling as I grabbed my structured black bag. Ashlynn finally got up from the bed and walked over, giving me a slow once-over before letting out a whistle.

“Okay, manager,” she said, circling one finger to make me turn around.

“Don't start,” I warned, although I gave her half a spin anyway.

“Nah, bitch. You look good. That corset is everything.”

“It better be. You talked me into buying it,” I reminded her, smoothing my hands over my waist.

“And was I wrong?” she asked, her grin widening when I didn't answer.

I rolled my eyes, but she knew she wasn't. I looked good. Underneath all that confidence, though, my stomach was doing a little something. Ashlynn must've noticed because she stopped admiring my outfit and tilted her head.

“You nervous?” she asked.

“A little,” I lied, looking away.

Her expression told me she wasn't buying it. I sighed, dropping my shoulders. “Fine. Yes, I'm nervous.”

That got a laugh out of her, but she reached over and squeezed my arm. Malachi had called a few days after my interview and offered me the position managing Vice's floor staff and bar. I'd made him repeat the salary twice because I was sure I'd heard his ass wrong. I hadn't.

I knew bars. I knew customers, drunk people, irritated people, entitled people, and people who suddenly forgot how money worked after ordering shit they couldn't afford. But this was bigger than anything I'd done before. For the first time, the money I earned didn't already belong to somebody else. I could save, make plans, and eventually get my own place. Hell, I could finally breathe.

Ashlynn grabbed her purse and headed toward the door. “You ready? 'Cause I'm trying to drink for free tonight.”

I stopped behind her, giving her a look. “You're paying.”

She opened the bedroom door without turning around. “Girl, bye.”

I laughed and followed her out.

***

Vice looked completely different with the lights down and the doors finally open. For weeks, I'd watched pieces of it come together. Furniture arriving, staff training, liquor deliveries, and contractors finishing last-minute shit while Malachi walked around looking like he was two seconds from firing everybody.

The one person I hadn't seen was Ezra. Not once.

I'd been in and out of Vice for training, meetings, and everything else we needed to get ready for opening night, and he hadn't shown his face. I didn't know where he'd been or what he'd been doing. Not that it was any of my business, but every now and then I'd catch myself wondering if he was going to walk through those doors. He never did.

Nearly everything inside Vice was black. Dark walls stretched toward ceilings that seemed to disappear overhead, while polished black marble floors caught the glow of low amber lighting. Smoked-glass shelves climbed behind the long bar, bottles glowing beneath soft backlighting. Deep burgundy velvet covered curved booths and VIP sections, with gold fixtures breaking through the darkness along tables, railings, and shelving. Upstairs, more burgundy seating overlooked the main floor.

Dark. Sexy. Expensive. And by eleven, packed as hell.

“Jru!” one of the servers called, rushing toward me with panic written all over her face.

I turned, already checking the tablet in my hand. “What's wrong?”

“Section six says they ordered another bottle twenty minutes ago,” she explained, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

I checked the order history before looking back at her. “It's been eight minutes. Stop letting people scare you because they spent money on a section. Tell them it's coming.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly, and I gave her an encouraging nod. “And smile. You look terrified.”

She immediately smiled at me, making me laugh. “Not at me, girl. At them.”

She laughed too before disappearing into the crowd. I shook my head and kept moving, the bass vibrating beneath my heels while servers weaved between sections carrying bottles and sparklers. Behind the bar, glasses clinked and somebody yelled for more ice. One of the bartenders caught my attention, pointing toward a nearly empty bottle on the back shelf. I held up two fingers, letting him know we needed another backup run.

Security had already shut down one argument near the entrance before it turned serious, and two servers kept ringing orders incorrectly, but overall, we were killing it. Malachi had been moving through the building since before the doors opened, checking on everything without hovering.

Ezra, on the other hand, was still nowhere to be found. Not that I was looking for him. I was checking the room. There was a difference.

At least that was what I told myself right before I turned toward the entrance and saw him.

Well, speak of the old-ass devil.

Ezra walked inside dressed completely in black, his broad shoulders filling out his shirt like the damn thing had been made specifically for him. The gray threaded through his waves and beard caught beneath the low lighting as he surveyed the club. Then his eyes found me.

He stopped for barely a second, but I noticed. His gaze traveled down my body, slow enough that I damn sure noticed that too, before returning to my face. His eyebrows pulled together, whatever appreciation had been there disappearing as he looked toward Malachi.

Uh-oh.

I went back to work, refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing I'd noticed him. A few minutes later, I was passing near VIP when his voice cut through the music.

“What the fuck is she doing here?” Ezra demanded.

My steps slowed just enough for me to catch Malachi's response. “Working.”

“I told you I didn't want her working here.”

My fingers tightened around the tablet, but I kept walking, my expression neutral even as irritation crawled straight up my spine. Oh, so that was what we were doing? Three weeks ago, his ass had been sitting across from me asking questions that had absolutely nothing to do with a job interview. Now he didn't want me working here.

Fine. For what they were paying me, Ezra King could hate my ass from VIP. I had money to make.

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The irritating part was that for somebody who supposedly didn't want me there, Ezra couldn't stop fucking looking at me.

At first, I thought I was imagining it. Then I caught him watching while I helped a bartender fix a tab, again when I crossed the floor, and again while I stood talking to security. By the fourth time, there wasn't shit imaginary about it.

I was behind the bar checking a ticket when that prickling feeling hit the side of my face again. I looked toward VIP, and there he was, sitting back against a burgundy booth with one arm stretched along the seat behind him. A glass rested loosely in his other hand as he watched me. People moved between us, but he never looked away.

Neither did I.

His head tilted slightly before one corner of his mouth lifted. I rolled my eyes and turned back toward the register. Asshole.

“Girl,” a familiar voice called from across the bar.

I looked up to find Ashlynn leaning toward me, two women she'd met since moving to Westhaven standing behind her laughing about something. Because of course Ashlynn had already collected new friends.

“What?” I asked, setting my tablet down.

Instead of answering, she glanced over her shoulder toward VIP. When she looked back at me, that damn smirk was already on her face.

“That man been watching your ass all night,” she announced, leaning closer.

“Girl, he ain't thinking about me,” I argued, reaching for a receipt.

Ashlynn slowly looked over her shoulder again. I refused to follow her eyes. She took a sip of her drink and made a little *mm-hmm* sound that immediately got on my nerves.

“What?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes.

“Nothing,” she answered, although her smile said otherwise.

“Ashlynn.”

“I'm just saying.” She leaned farther across the bar, lowering her voice even though the music was loud enough to swallow half our conversation. “Girl, that man got money.”

“Clearly,” I replied, unimpressed.

“No.” She gave me a serious look. “I mean money money. Malachi got money, but Ezra? That motherfucker is loaded.”

I glanced toward VIP before catching myself and looking back at her. “And what exactly does that have to do with me?”

Ashlynn's grin told me I already knew I wasn't going to like her answer. “You sure you don't wanna be somebody's little sugar baby?”

I stared at her. “Girl.”

“What?” She lifted her glass innocently. “I'm happy you got your job. Proud of you and everything. But look at me.” She motioned down her body with her free hand. “Bills paid. Apartment paid. Skin glowing. Blood pressure excellent.”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head at her foolishness. “You are so damn stupid.”

“And I don't clock in nowhere,” she continued, taking another sip before nodding toward VIP. “Meanwhile, you got Mr. Billionaire over there damn near burning a hole through your clothes with his eyes.”

“Ashlynn,” I warned, trying not to laugh again.

“I'm just saying. If Malachi's pockets got me living like this, imagine what his rich-ass best friend could do.”

I nearly choked. “So now you trying to recruit me into the sugar-baby association?”

“Absolutely,” she answered proudly. “Membership got benefits.”

“Goodbye,” I told her, waving a hand in dismissal.

Ashlynn laughed, but her eyes slid toward Ezra again. “Girl, you better quit playing and let that old man change your tax bracket.”

Before I could answer, one of my bartenders called my name. I held up a finger toward Ashlynn and handled the issue, correcting an order before turning back around. She was still standing there, still smiling.

“You're irritating,” I told her, reaching for my tablet.

“And housed,” she reminded me with a wink.

I laughed and waved her away, but she stopped after taking two steps. Turning back toward me, she studied my face with that same irritating little grin.

“You like him,” she announced.

“I don't even know him,” I argued, feeling my face warm.

Ashlynn's smile widened. “That wasn't what I said.”

Then she disappeared into the crowd before I could throw something at her. I shook my head and reached for my tablet, but my eyes betrayed me. They went straight toward VIP.

Ezra was still watching.

This time, something about it hit differently. Maybe because I knew for sure. Maybe because Ashlynn had said it out loud. Whatever it was, heat crept beneath my skin, and I looked away first. That irritated me too.

We barely knew each other. He didn't have my number, and I didn't have his. We'd met once, talked once, and that was it. And forty-one? Girl. I didn't even like older men. At least I didn't think I did. So why the fuck had this forty-one-year-old man with that beard and those pretty-ass eyes been randomly crossing my mind for three weeks?

I didn't know. And now I'd found out he hadn't even wanted me working here. Perfect. Whatever Ezra King's problem was with me, he could keep it.

***

By the time the last guest left, my feet were screaming. The bass had disappeared, leaving behind that strange ringing silence clubs had after hours. Staff moved through the room collecting glasses and wiping tables while bartenders counted inventory behind me. I leaned against the bar long enough to take some pressure off one heel while reviewing the final numbers.

Opening night had gone better than I'd expected. A few mistakes, sure, but nothing we couldn't fix. I was halfway through checking the inventory report when a deep voice interrupted me.

“Sinclair.”

I looked up to find Ezra standing a few feet away. He'd rolled his sleeves up sometime during the night, exposing his forearms, and his expression gave me absolutely nothing.

“Office before you leave,” he instructed before turning and walking away.

I stared after him, irritation settling across my face. No please. No when you get a chance. Just office, like I was supposed to drop everything because he said so.

“This motherfucker,” I muttered under my breath.

The bartender beside me looked over. “Huh?”

“Nothing,” I answered, straightening and returning to my numbers.

He could wait.

Twenty minutes later, I knocked once before stepping into his office. Ezra sat behind a wide black desk, his attention on paperwork spread in front of him. I stopped across from him with my tablet tucked beneath one arm. He looked tired, but unfortunately, still fine.

His eyes lifted slowly. “How you like working here?”

“It's a job,” I answered, keeping my expression neutral.

One eyebrow rose, and I knew he could hear the attitude in my voice. I also didn't care. Ezra watched me for another second before leaning back in his chair.

“Give me the rundown from tonight,” he instructed.

I pulled up the numbers on my tablet, deciding to keep things professional. “Bar sales were strong. VIP carried most of the bottle revenue. We got backed up twice because two servers kept ringing orders wrong, but I fixed it before it became a bigger problem.”

He nodded once, so I continued, scrolling through the report. “We need another barback tomorrow, probably two on weekends if tonight is any indication. Security handled one issue near the front before it got out of hand, and we're low on two premium bottles. Floor staff did good overall. A couple of them need more training, but nothing I can't handle.”

Silence settled across the office. When I looked up, Ezra wasn't studying the paperwork. He was looking at me again, his gaze lingering behind my glasses before slowly dropping toward my mouth.

There it was. That same damn look he'd been giving me all night.

I tucked the tablet beneath my arm. “All right. Is that all you wanted? 'Cause I got somewhere to be.”

His jaw shifted, but he didn't answer. I turned toward the door, ready to leave before my attitude got me into trouble. The scrape of his chair against the floor sounded behind me, and my fingers had barely closed around the handle when a large hand landed against the door above mine, pushing it shut.

I froze, not because I was scared, but because suddenly I could feel him standing behind me. Close enough that the warmth coming off his body seemed to settle against my back.

I turned slowly, lifting my chin as Ezra stepped around me. He stopped directly in front of me, leaving barely any space between my back and the door. His height was irritating up close. So was that beard. And those damn eyes.

His nostrils flared slightly before he took another slow breath. Recognition moved across his face, and his jaw tightened.

“That fucking perfume,” he muttered, looking down at me.

My stomach tightened. Of course he remembered. The first night we met, he'd damn near interrogated me about what I was wearing.

I lifted an eyebrow, refusing to look intimidated. “What about it?”

His jaw flexed. “You know what.”

I did, but I wasn't about to tell him that. Ezra moved closer, and my back met the door. His cologne mixed with the Coach Gold and My Way Sunny Vanilla lingering on my skin, making the office feel warmer than it had a second ago.

His eyes searched my face while I held his stare, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing he was making me nervous. Then his hand came up, and his fingers settled beneath my chin. Every smart-ass thought in my head disappeared for half a second as he gently tipped my face higher.

“Do we have a problem, Miss Sinclair?” he asked, his voice low.

I forced my breathing to stay even. “No.”

His thumb moved once beneath my chin, sending an unexpected warmth down my neck. Ezra studied my expression like he was waiting for me to admit something.

“You sure about that?” he asked, one corner of his mouth lifting.

“Positive,” I answered, refusing to break eye contact.

“Could've fooled me.”

My eyes narrowed, and just like that, my irritation returned. Good. I could work with irritation. I tilted my head slightly, giving him the sweetest smile I could manage.

“Maybe you should stop watching me long enough to pay attention to something else.”

His thumb stilled, and for one brief second, surprise crossed his face. Then it disappeared, replaced by a slow, dangerous-looking smile.

“So you noticed,” he murmured.

I swallowed before pulling my chin away from his hand. “You weren't exactly subtle.”

His smile widened just enough to make my stomach do something stupid. I should've stepped away, should've opened the door and gotten the hell out of there. Instead, I stayed exactly where I was, staring up at him like I had something to prove.

Ezra King was about to be a fucking problem. I could already tell.

And if he didn't get the hell out of my space soon, I had a feeling I was about to become one of his too.

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Chapter 8



I knew E was gonna be on my ass. I knew it the second I told Jru she had the job.

He'd made himself clear after her interview. He didn't want her working at Vice. Normally, I would've left that shit alone. E and I had been doing business together too long for me to ignore him just because I felt like it.

But two days later, he had to leave Westhaven to handle some business and left me in charge of getting Vice ready to open.

So I handled it.

I interviewed four more people. One knew the bar but couldn't manage people worth a damn. Another had management experience but didn't know enough about liquor to tell tequila from fucking dishwater. The other two weren't worth remembering.

Jru could do both.

I needed somebody who could run my floor and keep an eye on my bar until I found the right people to split the responsibilities between. She had the experience, carried herself right, and after watching her work last night, I knew I'd made the right call.

E knew it too.

That was probably why he hadn't said much after asking me what the fuck she was doing there.

He was still pissed, though. I could tell.

"Why you sitting over there looking like somebody died?" Ashlynn asked, pulling my attention away from the shit running through my head.

I looked across the kitchen, finding her sitting on the other side of my island wearing one of my T-shirts, her bare legs tucked beneath her. Her bonnet was halfway off her head, and she was eating bacon off my plate even though the same damn bacon was sitting untouched on hers.

This wasn't new.

For damn near ten months, I'd been flying her to Westhaven whenever our schedules lined up. Sometimes she stayed a weekend. Sometimes longer. Somewhere along the way, she'd stopped asking where shit was in my house.

She had a toothbrush upstairs, clothes in one of my drawers, hair products underneath my sink and enough shoes in my closet to piss me off every time I opened the door. Truth was, that was part of the reason moving her ass to Westhaven had made so much sense to me in the first place. With as much as I was flying her back and forth, she damn near stayed here already. I was paying for flights, sending cars, working around schedules and doing all that extra shit just to get her right back here every chance we got.

Getting her an apartment fifteen minutes away had been the smarter move financially, and I liked knowing she had her own space while she got settled in Westhaven. At the time, it made perfect sense.

Now, sitting there looking at her comfortable as hell in my kitchen, wearing my shirt and eating my fucking food while half her shit was already upstairs, I was starting to wonder why the hell I was paying for an apartment at all.

"What's on your mind?" she asked, watching me over her plate.

I rubbed a hand down my face before dragging my fingers through my beard. "E pissed at me."

Ashlynn immediately looked interested, her attention shifting away from the bacon she'd been stealing. "What you do?"

"Why I gotta be the one that did something?" I asked, giving her a look.

She didn't even bother answering. The expression on her face said enough.

I shook my head. "Man, if I tell you this shit, don't get mad at me."

Her fork stopped halfway to her mouth, and she narrowed her eyes. "Why would I be mad?"

"Because it got something to do with Jru."

Her whole expression changed, and I could already see the questions forming before she opened her mouth. I told her E hadn't wanted me to hire Jru. Before she could get worked up, I explained that I'd interviewed everybody worth interviewing and none of them could do what I needed.

"Then what was his problem with her?" Ashlynn asked, leaning forward like she was trying to figure out what the hell she was missing.

I stared at her for a second, debating whether I even wanted to open my mouth. Knowing Ashlynn, this conversation was about to turn into something I didn't feel like dealing with.

Fuck it.

“Man, that nigga want her.”

Ashlynn’s eyes got big as hell, and she damn near jumped off her stool. “I fucking knew it!”

“Why you hollering?” I asked, frowning at her sudden excitement.

“Because I knew it!” She slapped her palm against the island, looking entirely too pleased with herself. “I told Jru! His old ass was watching her all fucking night.”

I frowned harder. “Why he gotta be old?”

Ashlynn looked at me.

I looked back at her.

“You thirty-nine,” she reminded me, her lips already twitching.

“Exactly. Watch your fucking mouth.”

That only made her laugh harder. “Baby, you old too.”

“And your ass twenty-six fucking with me, so what that make you?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Smart.” She reached across the island and stole another piece of bacon from my plate, smiling like she'd just made the best point in the world. “Very smart.”

I smacked her hand away. “Eat your own damn food.”

“Yours taste better,” she argued, pulling her hand back before I could smack it again.

“It came out the same fucking pan.”

“Still taste better.” She shrugged and popped the bacon into her mouth.

I shook my head, fighting a smile. This woman got on my fucking nerves, and I liked that shit way more than I should’ve.

My phone started vibrating against the island before she could start interrogating me again. I glanced at the screen and almost laughed.

E. Of fucking course.

Ashlynn leaned sideways, trying to see who was calling. The second she caught his name, a slow smile spread across her face.

“Answer it,” she urged, sitting up straighter.

I looked from my phone to her. “Why you smiling?”

She reached for her orange juice like she wasn’t plotting shit. “I’m not.”

“Yes the fuck you are.”

That made the smile worse. She leaned forward against the island, looking entirely too eager. “Put it on speaker.”

“Hell nah.” I shook my head, already knowing that was a bad idea.

“Malachi.” She dragged my name out, giving me that look she always used when she wanted something.

I should’ve taken the call upstairs. Instead, against my better judgment, I answered and hit speaker.

“What up?”

E didn’t bother with good morning. His irritation came straight through the phone. “Explain to me again why the fuck Jru works at my club.”

I dropped my head, rubbing my beard while Ashlynn pressed her lips together across from me. “Our club,” I corrected. “And because we needed a fucking manager.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” E snapped, clearly not interested in my explanation.

“That’s exactly what you asked me.” I leaned back on my stool, refusing to entertain the same argument we'd already had.

Across the island, Ashlynn’s shoulders started shaking. I pointed at her, warning her without saying a word, but a little snort escaped anyway.

Silence came through the phone.

Then E’s voice dropped. “Is Ashlynn over there?”

I looked at her. She slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with amusement.

“Nah.”

“Nigga, I can hear her.”

That broke her. Ashlynn folded over the island laughing, one hand pressed against her stomach. “Good morning, Ezra!”

I closed my eyes, already regretting every decision that had led to me putting his ass on speaker.

“Fuck both of y’all,” E muttered before the call ended.

I stared at my phone, listening to the silence he'd left behind. Forty-one fucking years old. Rich as hell. Hanging up on niggas because he couldn’t have his way.

Ashlynn wiped underneath one eye, still laughing. “Oh, yeah. That man like my friend.”

“Stay out they shit,” I warned her, setting my phone back on the island.

“I’m absolutely not staying out of it,” she replied without the slightest hesitation.

I believed her. That was the fucking problem.

She was still smiling when I looked at her again, but my mind had already gone somewhere else.

Almost ten months.

When Ashlynn and I started fucking with each other, neither one of us had put expectations on it. I liked her, she liked me, I took care of her, and we enjoyed each other.

Simple.

Except somewhere along the way, the shit stopped feeling simple.

At thirty-nine, I wasn’t interested in doing this forever. I’d spent enough years moving like tomorrow wasn’t promised because, for a long time, it really wasn’t. I’d buried people. Watched niggas disappear into prison cells and graves. Made decisions I knew I’d eventually have to answer to Allah for.

The older I got, the more I thought about what came after all this.

Not money. Not streets. Not Vice.

A home. A wife. Children, if Allah blessed me with them.

And lately, whenever I pictured that shit, this loud-ass woman kept showing up in it.

“You want kids?” I asked, watching her reach for another piece of bacon.

Ashlynn slowly lowered her hand, giving me a confused look. “Nigga, what?”

I almost laughed at her expression. “It’s a question.”

“At nine in the morning?” she asked, glancing around the kitchen like she was checking whether she'd missed something.

“Kids only exist after noon?”

She stared at me for another second before apparently realizing I was serious. Her expression settled, and she leaned back slightly. “Eventually, yeah. Why?”

“What about marriage?”

Now the bacon went down completely. Ashlynn studied my face, searching for some sign that I was fucking with her.

“Okay. Where the hell is this coming from?”

I leaned back and studied her. “Where you see yourself in five years?”

“Malachi—”

“Ten?” I pressed, keeping my eyes on her.

“Why are you interviewing me?” she asked, her eyebrows drawing together.

“I ain’t interviewing you.” I paused, giving her a moment before continuing. “We been fucking with each other damn near a year, Ash.”

That quieted her. She stopped reaching for her food and gave me her full attention.

“I ain’t getting younger. Taking care of you, flying you out, kicking it—all that was cool when we started. But I invested more than money in you. I invested my time, and I don’t give everybody that shit.”

Her expression softened as she listened, and I glanced toward the stairs, thinking about the clothes, shoes, and everything else she already had upstairs.

“Honestly, I don’t even understand why the fuck I’m paying for a house and an apartment,” I admitted, looking back at her.

Her eyebrows pulled together, and she tilted her head slightly, waiting for me to explain what I meant.

“Move in with me.”

Ashlynn stared at me, her lips parting like she had something to say but couldn't quite get it out.

I kept going before she could turn it into something it wasn’t. “Half your shit already here. You sleep here more than your own place anyway. I’m paying for both places just for you to keep coming back over here.”

“This your romantic way of asking me to live with you?” she asked, a small smile finally breaking through her surprise.

“I ain’t finished,” I told her, holding her gaze.

That shut her up.

“I’m trying to settle down, Ash. I ain’t asking you to move in so we can keep doing the same shit with a different address. I’m talking about seeing where this goes for real. Marriage. Family. All that.”

For once, Ashlynn didn’t have shit to say. She sat there looking at me, her expression shifting as she took in what I'd just told her.

Then her eyes narrowed.

“But you Muslim.”

I already knew where she was going. “And?”

“And I ain’t sharing my motherfucking man with no bitch, so we not doing that multiple-wife shit,” she declared, folding her arms across her chest.

“Watch how you say that. Ain’t nothing wrong with my religion.” My tone grew serious because that was one thing I wasn't about to play with.

Her face softened immediately. “You know I respect your faith. I’m talking about the multiple-wife part. That ain’t for me.”

I nodded slowly, studying her. “So if I wanted more than one wife?”

“Then may Allah bless you from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet.” She reached for her juice, completely unbothered by the possibility of offending me. “But you better go find you another wife number one, because this bitch right here does not share.”

I stared at her for a moment before a laugh broke out of me. Leave it to Ashlynn to turn a serious conversation about our future into some shit that had me laughing in my own kitchen.

Truth was, I wasn’t nearly as bothered by her answer as I probably should’ve been.

I’d seriously considered plural marriage before. But thinking about something and actually wanting to live it were two different things.

And looking at Ashlynn sitting in my kitchen wearing my shirt, eating my food, with half her belongings already upstairs, I wasn’t thinking about adding another woman to the equation.

Hell, I wasn’t too fond of having to take care of a busload full of women no fucking way.

Ashlynn was enough headache by herself. Loud, spoiled, stubborn, and nosy as hell.

And apparently, I wanted to marry her ass. And I was real soon.

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Chapter 9



By the time I got back to my apartment, Malachi had completely fucked up my mood. Not in a bad way either. That was the problem. I dropped my purse onto the kitchen counter and stared through the floor-to-ceiling windows at Westhaven, like the city could tell me what the hell I was supposed to do with a thirty-nine-year-old man casually asking me to move into his house while talking about marriage and children before I'd even finished breakfast.

Especially children. My hand almost drifted toward my stomach before I caught myself. Three positive pregnancy tests were hidden at the bottom of my makeup bag, and I'd known for three days. Three long-ass days. The first test was because my period was late. The second was because I'd convinced myself the first one was defective. By the third, even I had run out of excuses. I was pregnant. By Malachi.

That morning, while he'd sat across from me asking whether I wanted children one day, I'd looked that man dead in his face knowing one day might already be growing inside me. I hadn't told him. Hadn't told Jru either. I hadn't told a soul, and it wasn't because I thought he'd run. Malachi had made it clear where his head was without knowing a damn thing about the baby. I just needed a minute to wrap my own mind around it.

I liked him. A lot more than I'd allowed myself to admit. The problem with liking somebody enough to picture a future was trusting them enough to possibly fuck that future up. I'd been down that road before. Men had disappointed me enough to teach me how fast sweet words could turn into bullshit, so I'd learned to keep things light. Have fun. Let a man spoil me if he wanted to, but never put myself in a position where his feelings determined whether I could survive.

People saw the clothes, trips, purses, and lifestyle and assumed I was some dumb bitch waiting around for a man to fund my next shopping spree. Let them. While they were busy judging, I'd been stacking my money. Every gift didn't have to turn into another purchase. Some of it could turn into something that belonged to me.

“Why you standing there looking like somebody just told you Santa Claus ain't real?”

I turned to find Jru coming down the hallway, her glasses low on her nose, phone in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. She studied my face before lowering her phone. “What happened?”

“Malachi asked me to move in.” I crossed to the couch and dropped onto it, pulling a throw pillow into my lap. “And before you start grinning, he started talking about marriage, kids, five-year plans, ten-year plans. That nigga damn near interviewed me over breakfast.”

Jru sat across from me, her mouth curving anyway. “So basically, you're panicking because that man actually likes your loud ass.”

“Fuck you.” I laughed despite myself, letting her clown me for a minute. I needed it. If I sat there thinking too hard about the life Malachi was offering, my mind would circle right back to the secret sitting at the bottom of my makeup bag. So I changed the subject before she could notice how distracted I really was.

“Oh, since we sharing shit this morning, your boyfriend didn't want you working at Vice.”

Jru stopped mid-sip, slowly lowering her water. “My who?”

“That old nigga with the pretty eyes.” I stretched my legs across the couch, enjoying the way her expression tightened.

“Ashlynn.”

“I didn't say his name.” I laughed before telling her what Malachi had admitted. Ezra had told him not to hire her, but Malachi had done it anyway because she was qualified and Vice needed somebody who could handle the floor and bar. When I got to the reason Ezra supposedly didn't want her there, Jru sat forward.

“Malachi said that?” she asked, looking at me like I was making shit up.

“Word for word? No. But yes, bitch. That man wants you.” She looked away a little too quickly, and I narrowed my eyes. “Hold up. What happened last night?”

“Nothing happened,” she answered, suddenly very interested in the cap on her water bottle.

“Jru.” I leaned forward, waiting. She sighed, twisting the cap back and forth before finally telling me Ezra had called her into his office after closing. He'd shut the door when she tried to leave, stepped close enough for her to smell his cologne, remembered the perfume she'd worn the first night they met, and touched her chin while asking whether they had a problem.

I stared at her the entire time. By the time she finished, my cheeks hurt from smiling. Jru pointed at me before I could get a word out. “Don't.”

“Oh, I'm doing it.” I sat up straighter. “Did you move when he got in your space?”

Her lips pressed together. That was all the answer I needed. I leaned back against the couch, nodding slowly. “Bitch, you want him.”

“I barely know that man,” she argued, rolling her eyes.

“That wasn't what I said.” A little smile fought its way onto her face, and I let her off the hook. For now. Whatever was going on between them, she'd tell me when she was ready. Besides, I had something else I wanted her to see.

“Come look at something with me,” I said, getting up to find my purse.

Jru checked the time. “I gotta go to Vice later and do inventory. I'm not riding around with you all damn day while you shop.”

“Who said anything about shopping?” I asked, offended on principle.

She gave me a look that said I did, every other day. I rolled my eyes and headed for the door. “Girl, bring your ass on.”

An hour later, we pulled into a commercial strip about fifteen minutes from downtown Westhaven. Jru looked through the windshield at the vacant storefront before turning toward me, confused. I only smiled and got out. She followed me inside, her heels clicking against the concrete floor as she took in the plain white walls, exposed plumbing along the back, and wide front windows that flooded the empty room with sunlight.

To anybody else, it probably looked like nothing. I could already see styling stations along one wall, shampoo bowls in the back, dryers farther down, and a reception desk near the entrance. Maybe two private suites toward the rear for stylists who wanted their own space. I could picture the mirrors, the chairs, the women coming in for appointments, and my name on the front door. The whole damn thing.

Jru caught the look on my face. She'd sat in my chair enough times to know I knew what the fuck I was doing when it came to hair. What she didn't know was how far I'd taken the idea. “You been looking at shops?” she asked, turning slowly to take in the room.

“For a while,” I admitted, walking farther inside. Her eyes found mine, and she said my name in that quiet way she did when she realized something mattered to me. I leaned against the empty counter near the wall. “I got my master's in business and accounting for a reason. I always wanted my own shit. I just never had the money to open the kind of salon I wanted.”

Her expression softened, but I kept going before I talked myself out of telling her the rest. “Everybody thinks every dollar a man gives me goes straight to bags, shoes, and trips. And don't get it twisted, bitch, I do spend money.” She laughed, and I smiled. “But I save too. Been putting money away for years. I got enough stacked now to really do something.”

“Enough for this?” she asked, glancing around again.

“Enough to get started.” Saying it out loud made my chest tighten. I'd always been comfortable letting people misunderstand me because explaining myself took energy I didn't owe them. I liked being taken care of. There was no shame in that. But enjoying a provider and having absolutely nothing of your own were two different things, and I refused to be the second kind of woman.

“And honestly,” I said, watching Jru examine the windows, “you inspire me a little.”

Her eyebrows lifted, and I immediately pointed at her. “Don't get excited. I said a little.”

She laughed, but I meant it. “You always go get your shit. Even when everything in Rosemont was fucked up, you kept working and figuring something out. I always respected that about you.” Her smile softened, and I looked around the storefront again. “If I move in with Malachi, I want something that belongs to me too. I know that man ain't gonna make me pay bills, and I'm not about to fight him to do it. But I still wanna bring something to the table, even if he never asks me to use it.”

That was what had been bothering me since breakfast. Marriage sounded good. Being somebody's wife sounded good. But I wanted to walk into that marriage knowing I'd built something too. Something that couldn't disappear because somebody woke up one morning and changed his mind.

My phone started ringing inside my purse. Malachi. I answered while walking toward the front windows, smiling before I could stop myself. “What?”

“Damn. That's how you answer the phone?” His voice was low and amused, and I could practically see him shaking his head.

“What you want?” I asked, leaning against the window.

“What you doing?”

“Out with Jru handling something.” I watched a car pull into the lot while he asked what we were handling. “Why you being nosy?”

“Ashlynn.” There was a warning in his voice, but I could hear the smile beneath it.

“We looking at something. What you doing?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder. Jru was still walking around the space, studying the walls like she was already helping me decorate.

“Trying to see how much longer you gonna be out.”

“I don't know. She gotta do inventory at Vice later, so probably not too much longer. Why?” He went quiet for a second, and I straightened. Then he spoke again.

“You called me old this morning.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear to look at the screen. “Nigga, did you call me just to argue about your age again?”

“Nah.” The playfulness faded from his voice. “I called because you right.”

I stopped smiling. “Oh, shit. Say it again. I need to record this.”

“See, this why I don't tell your ass shit.”

I laughed softly, pressing my free hand against the glass. “Okay, okay. I'm listening.”

“I'm already old, according to your ass, so I ain't got time to be playing house.” He paused, and something in his tone made my stomach flutter. “I been thinking about what we talked about. I meant what I said about you moving in, but I ain't comfortable with us just shacking up. That shit don't sit right with my faith.”

I turned away from Jru, suddenly aware of how hard my heart was pounding. “So what are you saying?”

“I'm saying you can have whatever wedding you want later. Big wedding, little wedding, fly everybody across the fucking world. I don't care. But first, we going to the courthouse.”

I stared through the window, speechless. This man had no idea. No idea that three days ago I'd been standing in my bathroom staring at two pink lines. No idea that when he asked about children that morning, I was already carrying his. Somehow that made his words hit harder. Malachi was choosing me without knowing about the baby.

“Are you asking me to marry you over the phone?” I finally managed, my voice quieter than I intended.

“Nah,” he answered, calm as hell. “Finish what you doing. I'm coming to get you.”

“For what?”

“So I can ask you in person before we go to the courthouse.”

The line went dead. I slowly lowered the phone and stared at the screen, trying to catch up with the last thirty seconds of my life. Across the room, Jru had stopped walking. She was watching me, her brows drawn together.

“What?” she asked, taking a step toward me.

For a second, I couldn't answer. My hand settled against my stomach before I realized what I was doing, and I moved it quickly. Jru's eyes followed the motion, but I grabbed my purse before she could think too hard about it. One bombshell at a time. The salon. Marriage. The baby could wait a few more hours.

I looked down at my phone and shook my head, half terrified and half ready to laugh. Well, shit. I guess I was about to go marry this nigga.

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Chapter 10



Whatever Malachi said on that phone had lit a fire under Ashlynn's ass.

That was the only explanation I had for why this bitch pulled up in front of Vice, barely put the car in park, and looked at me like I was holding up traffic.

I slowly unbuckled my seat belt, watching her reach for something in the center console. "So you just dropping my ass off?"

"Girl, I got somewhere to be," she answered without even looking at me.

"Where?" I asked, turning toward her. Whatever had her rushing off like this clearly had something to do with that phone call, and I wanted to know what the hell was going on.

Ashlynn reached across me and pushed the button to unlock my door. "None of your business."

I stared at her, waiting for her to laugh or give me some kind of explanation, but she stared right back like she was perfectly serious.

Whatever happened on that phone call had changed her whole energy. She wasn't upset. If anything, she looked nervous and excited at the same time, which made me even more curious.

"You acting weird," I told her, narrowing my eyes.

"And you still sitting in my car," she shot back, glancing toward the entrance of Vice.

"Ashlynn—"

"Jru, get out." She pointed toward my door, fighting a smile.

Laughing, I grabbed my purse and climbed out. Before I could close the door, she was already telling me she would call me later.

"Girl, you better," I warned, leaning down to look at her one last time.

I barely got the door shut before she pulled away from the curb. I stood there watching her disappear down the street, shaking my head.

"What the hell was that about?" I muttered.

Whatever it was, it wasn't my business until she made it my business. Turning toward Vice, I headed inside.

The club looked completely different during the day. Without music vibrating through the walls and bodies packed around the bar, I could actually appreciate how big the place was. The amber lighting was turned down, leaving most of the room illuminated by the brighter work lights. Burgundy booths

sat empty, bottles lined the smoked-glass shelves behind the bar, and the polished black floors still looked damn near untouched.

I had work to do.

Opening night had shown me exactly where we were strong and where we needed work. Two of the bartenders were coming back in for additional training, inventory needed to be counted, liquor orders had to be checked against what we had burned through, and somebody had somehow managed to put two cases of tequila in the wrong storage area.

Work usually settled my mind. Today, my thoughts kept wandering.

I was still thinking about the shop Ashlynn had shown me. More than that, I kept thinking about what she had said. You inspire me a little bit. It had touched me more than I let her see.

Most of my life, I had never felt like somebody worth looking up to. Half the time, I had been trying to survive one problem long enough to make it to the next one. I worked because I had to. I kept going because lying down and letting life beat my ass had never been an option.

I never considered that somebody might have been watching me and seeing strength where I only saw survival.

I was checking bottles against the numbers on my tablet when one of the bartenders called my name.

“Jru?”

I looked up from the screen. “What?”

She nodded toward the entrance, and I followed her gaze. A woman I had never seen before was walking across the club. And she was beautiful. Not cute. Not she cleans up nice. Beautiful.

Light skin, soft makeup, hair laid perfectly and an outfit that looked expensive without a designer logo screaming from every inch of it. Even the bag hanging from her arm looked like it cost more than the raggedy car I used to drive back in Rosemont. She moved through Vice like she had been there a hundred times before, heels clicking against the polished floor without the slightest hesitation about where she was going.

Her eyes swept across the room before landing on me behind the bar.

“Hey. Where’s E?” she asked, approaching the counter.

My finger stopped over the tablet. I looked at her for a second longer than necessary. E? So we calling this nigga E now?

Everybody else I had heard call him Ezra, except Malachi, and that was his best friend. Meanwhile, this woman had walked in looking expensive as hell and asking for E like she had every reason in the world to be familiar with him.

“I don’t know,” I said, turning my attention back to the tablet. “He was here earlier.”

“Of course his ass was.” She pulled her phone from her bag and tapped the screen with a manicured finger before bringing it to her ear.

Whoever she was, she clearly wasn’t intimidated by Ezra King. That shouldn’t have bothered me. It did.

She listened for a few seconds before lowering the phone with an irritated sigh. “I’ve been calling this man all day. Now all of a sudden he doesn’t know how to answer a phone.”

I glanced up despite myself. “Maybe he’s busy.”

Her eyes met mine, and instead of catching an attitude, she laughed softly. “He’s always busy. That’s his favorite excuse.”

Oh. So she knew his excuses too. Great.

I went back to my inventory before my face started telling this stranger things that weren't any of her business.

She moved closer to the bar and rested her bag on top of it. "You know if he's upstairs?"

"I haven't been keeping track of him," I answered, a little sharper than I intended.

Her brows lifted slightly, but she didn't comment on it. "He better be somewhere in this building. I moved two meetings around for him today, and we have too much going on for him to be ignoring me."

Meetings.

That should've made me feel better. It didn't.

Because what kind of meetings? Who was she to him? An employee? Business partner? Girlfriend? Ex-girlfriend who still handled business with him? Did they mess around?

My eyes dropped back to the tablet. And why did I care?

I barely knew this man. Ezra had gotten in my space one time, touched my chin, remembered my perfume, and apparently that had been enough to make me lose some of the common sense God gave me.

Ashlynn's voice immediately played in my head. Girl, you want him.

I pressed my lips together. She was getting on my nerves, and she wasn't even here.

The woman tried Ezra again while I went back to counting bottles. I entered one number, looked down at the shelf, then realized I had counted the same bottle twice.

"Shoot," I muttered, deleting the number and starting the row over.

"You good?" the woman asked, drawing my attention back to her.

My head came up. She was watching me now, and I suddenly felt ridiculous for allowing a complete stranger to distract me from my own work.

"I'm fine," I replied, straightening my posture.

"Okay." She dragged the word out slightly before looking back at her phone.

I didn't know if she had caught the attitude or if I was imagining things because I was already irritated. Either way, I needed her away from my bar before I embarrassed myself.

Her call apparently went unanswered again because she lowered the phone and muttered something under her breath.

That did it.

I set my tablet on the counter a little harder than I intended. "You know what? I'll go get him for you since it's that important."

Her eyes dropped briefly to the tablet before coming back to me. For half a second, I thought she might say something about my tone. Instead, she smiled politely.

"I'd appreciate it. Tell him Yara is looking for him."

Yara. Of course even her name was pretty.

"Got it," I answered, stepping from behind the bar.

I headed toward the stairs, irritated by the click of my own heels and even more irritated that I was irritated at all.

I didn't know that woman. I didn't know what she was to Ezra. And Ezra damn sure wasn't mine.

So there was absolutely no reason for me to be marching upstairs like I was about to retrieve somebody's cheating husband.

Yet here I was.

By the time I reached his office, I had managed to convince myself that I was only doing this because Yara was distracting me from inventory. That was my story. And I was sticking to it.

Ezra's office door was partially open when I reached it. I knocked once before pushing it farther.

He sat behind his desk with his attention on his laptop, sleeves pushed up his forearms and phone lying face down beside him.

Of course.

He looked up, his eyes moving over me before settling on my face. "What?"

"There's some light-skinned woman downstairs asking for you," I told him, folding my arms.

His brows rose, and then his mouth twitched. "Some light-skinned woman?"

"Yes," I answered, refusing to give him anything more.

"That's her name?" he asked, the amusement becoming more obvious.

I shifted my weight onto one leg. "She didn't introduce herself until after I agreed to come get you."

The amusement on his face grew, which only irritated me more.

"She said she's been calling you all day and y'all have some important business to handle," I added, wanting to get this over with.

Ezra leaned back in his chair. "Yara."

"So you do know how to identify her. Good."

His eyes narrowed slightly, but that little smile was still there. "You got an attitude?"

I laughed once, although there wasn't a damn thing funny. "Why would I have an attitude?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking." He watched me closely, looking entirely too entertained by this conversation.

"I came up here to tell you somebody was looking for you. Mission accomplished." I gestured toward the hallway, making it clear I had nothing else to say.

He rubbed his thumb slowly across his bottom lip, clearly enjoying himself now.

I turned toward the door.

"Jru."

I looked back, trying not to show how quickly his voice had gotten my attention.

"Send her up," he instructed.

"Gladly," I replied before stepping into the hallway.

His quiet laugh followed me out of the office.

Asshole.

By the time I got downstairs, Yara was standing near the bar typing on her phone.

"He said come up," I told her, gesturing toward the stairs.

"Thank you." She smiled before walking past me.

I watched her go for exactly two seconds before forcing myself back to work.

For the next hour, I trained two bartenders while pretending I didn't notice that Yara was still upstairs. I corrected pours, went over bottle placement, showed them the inventory system again and made one of them redo an entire count after she tried estimating instead of physically checking what was left.

By the time Yara finally came downstairs, I had almost convinced myself I didn't care.

Almost.

She crossed the floor while typing something into her phone, called goodbye to one of the security guys and left without looking remotely like a woman who had just spent an hour upstairs doing anything besides business.

Not that I had been thinking about that.

I hated myself.

My phone buzzed a few minutes later. Ashlynn.

I grabbed it quickly, expecting an explanation for why she had thrown me out of her car earlier.

I'll call you later. Don't wait up.

I stared at the message. Don't wait up?

My eyes narrowed. Then I remembered the conversation from that morning. Malachi had asked her to move in.

Shit.

My gaze moved around Vice as another thought settled in. If Ashlynn moved in with Malachi, what the hell was I going to do?

That apartment was hers. More accurately, it was the apartment Malachi paid for. And I seriously doubted he was going to keep paying for a luxury high-rise apartment so his woman's best friend could live there alone.

I had a job now. A good one.

But good money and thirty-something-floor luxury Westhaven penthouse money were two entirely different things.

I needed to start looking for my own place.

"Everything good?"

I nearly jumped at the sound of Ezra's voice. I hadn't heard him come downstairs, but there he stood on the other side of the bar with his hands tucked into his pockets, looking entirely too comfortable for somebody who was already getting on my nerves.

"Fine," I answered, locking my phone and reaching for the tablet without giving him anything else.

His eyes moved toward the two bartenders gathering their things at the other end of the bar before coming back to me.

"Training?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Inventory?"

"Almost finished."

I tapped through the liquor counts, fully aware that my answers were short as hell and not caring. I had spent the last hour wondering what he and Yara were doing upstairs, then another ten minutes getting irritated with myself for wondering in the first place.

I wasn't in the mood to stand there and make pleasant conversation with him now.

The problem was, Ezra didn't leave.

I could feel him watching me while I checked the same line twice. Finally, I lowered the tablet enough to look at him.

"What?" I asked, meeting his eyes.

His head tilted slightly. "You always this pleasant when people is around?"

I gave him the sweetest fake smile I could manage. “Only when I’m blessed with your presence.”

A slow smile spread underneath his beard, and I immediately regretted giving him something else to be amused about.

I rolled my eyes and went right back to the tablet.

God, he was irritating.

And fine.

I should’ve left it alone.

Instead, I kept my eyes on the tablet and said as casually as I could, “I see your little girlfriend left.”

Ezra was quiet just long enough to make me glance up. The smile underneath his beard told me I should’ve kept my mouth shut.

“My girlfriend?” he repeated, looking entirely too pleased.

I shrugged and went back to the inventory. “Whatever she is.”

“Yara?”

“Is there another one?” I asked before I could stop myself.

His eyebrows lifted slightly, amusement settling across his face. “You asking?”

“No. I really don’t care.” I scrolled to the next section of the inventory sheet. “She came in looking for you, disappeared upstairs for an hour, then left. I made an observation.”

“Mhm.” He dragged out the sound, making it obvious he didn't believe a damn word I was saying.

I looked up. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Then stop looking at me like that,” I snapped, irritated by how easily he could get under my skin.

His smile deepened. “Like what?”

“Like you got something to say.”

“I don’t,” he answered, his expression suggesting the exact opposite.

“Good.” I went back to my tablet, refusing to give him anything else.

A few seconds passed, and he still hadn’t moved.

I sighed, finally looking up again. “Don’t you have billionaire shit to go do?”

A quiet laugh left him as he pushed away from the bar. “Yeah. I do.”

“Okay then,” I muttered, returning my attention to the inventory.

He walked off still smiling, which irritated me because I knew he had caught something in my tone.

I just hoped he hadn’t caught all of it.

By the time I finished, the bartenders were gone, the orders had been entered and every bottle in Vice had been accounted for.

I was behind the bar gathering my things when Ezra appeared again.

“I need you Monday,” he announced, stopping on the other side of the counter.

I didn’t look up from my bag. “I’m scheduled?”

“No,” he answered.

I finished sliding my tablet inside before looking at him. “Then what do you need?”

“I’m going out of town.”

“Congratulations,” I replied dryly, continuing to organize my things.

“I wasn’t finished.”

The sharpness in his voice made my eyes lift fully to his.

Ezra stood on the other side of the bar with one hand in his pocket, staring at me with that same serious expression he wore ninety percent of the time.

“Yara set up meetings with some commercial real estate brokers. I’m looking at properties for another Vice location. You’re coming with me.”

I blinked, certain I'd misunderstood him. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” he replied, completely unbothered.

“I heard you. I’m trying to figure out what looking at real estate has to do with me.”

“You manage my floor and my bar. I’m looking at opening another club. That makes it part of your job.”

My eyebrows rose. So this was the type of time he was on tonight.

“You have Malachi,” I reminded him, folding my arms.

“Malachi has other shit to handle.”

“Then take Yara.”

“Yara is already involved. She handles the business side, investments, numbers and meetings. That ain’t your job.” He stepped closer to the bar, his eyes never leaving mine. “Your job is operations. I need somebody looking at these buildings who knows what happens once customers actually walk through the doors.”

I folded my arms tighter. “You seemed to know how to open this one without me.”

“And now I got a floor manager whose job is to make the next one run better,” he countered without hesitation.

The way he said it left almost no room for an argument.

Almost.

“I’ve been here three weeks, Ezra,” I pointed out, studying his face.

“And in three weeks, you caught shit people who been doing this longer than you missed. You know what slows down the bar. You know where staff gets backed up. You know what storage needs to be close to the floor and what kind of layout makes service easier.” He paused, his jaw tightening slightly. “That’s why Malachi hired you, right?”

I stared at him, surprised that he'd apparently been paying that much attention to my work.

“Right?” he repeated when I didn't answer.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Aight then.” He pushed away from the bar like the conversation was settled.

It was not.

“You could’ve asked me,” I called after him.

That stopped him. Ezra slowly turned around. “Asked you what?”

“If I could go,” I answered, lifting my chin.

“I don’t need to ask you.”

A short laugh escaped me. “The hell you mean you don’t need to ask me?”

“I mean exactly what I said.” He came back toward me, stopping on the other side of the bar. “This ain’t me asking you to take a vacation with me, Jru. I’m expanding a business you manage. If I need my manager there while I look at another location, then my manager goes. That’s part of the job.”

My lips parted, but he kept going.

“We’re going during the week while Vice is closed. You’re getting paid. Your flight, hotel, food and whatever else comes with you doing your job is handled. So what exactly am I supposed to be asking permission for?”

I hated that he had a point. I hated even more that he knew he had one.

“I have things to do too,” I argued, shifting my purse onto my shoulder. “I need to start looking for an apartment, for one.”

Something shifted in his expression. “Why?”

I immediately regretted saying it.

“Because I do,” I answered, hoping he'd leave it alone.

“What happened to where you staying?” he asked, his gaze sharpening.

“Nothing happened.”

His eyes stayed on me long enough to make me uncomfortable, but thankfully, he let it go.

“Handle it when we get back,” he instructed.

I frowned. “You really do think you can just tell people what to do.”

“When they work for me?” He gave me a slow once-over before meeting my eyes again. “Yeah. Sometimes I do.”

This arrogant man.

“And what if I say no?” I challenged, watching him closely.

His face didn’t change. “You’re not.”

I actually laughed. “You don’t know what I’m gonna say.”

“I do tonight.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone like I wasn’t standing there two seconds away from throwing something at his head.

“Be ready by seven Monday morning.”

I stared at him for a second, waiting for him to crack a smile or give me some indication that he realized how demanding he sounded. Nothing. Ezra simply stood there with his phone in his hand, looking completely unbothered, like he hadn’t just planned four days of my life without consulting me first.

“You are really an asshole,” I told him, shaking my head.

One side of his mouth lifted as he glanced down at his phone. “Probably.”

The casual response irritated me even more. I snatched my purse off the bar and shoved the strap onto my shoulder hard enough for it to slide right back down my arm.

“I’m serious. You don’t get to stand there barking orders at me like I’m one of your little soldiers just because my name is on your payroll.”

That got his attention.

Ezra slowly lifted his eyes from his phone. He slid it into his pocket, then took a few steps toward me until only the width of the bar separated us.

“And I’m serious too,” he said, his voice lower now. “When it’s personal, you can tell me no all day. When it’s business and I’m telling my manager where I need her to be for the job I’m paying her to do, I expect her to be there.”

I tightened my grip on my purse. The messed-up part was, I knew he had a point. That didn’t mean I had to like the arrogant way he delivered it.

“I hate you,” I muttered, narrowing my eyes at him.

Ezra’s eyes moved over my face, lingering long enough to make heat creep up my neck. Then that irritating little smile returned beneath his beard.

“No, you don’t.”

My hand froze on the strap of my purse. The confidence in his voice irritated me almost as much as the fact that he was probably right.

I narrowed my eyes at him before turning toward the door. “Keep telling yourself that.”

His quiet laugh followed me across the empty club, making me walk a little faster before I did something stupid—like turn around and prove his arrogant ass right.

His voice followed me again before I made it to the door.

“Pack for four days, Miss Sinclair.”

Four days?

I turned around, my eyebrows drawing together. “Where the hell are we going?”

Ezra slipped his phone back into his pocket, looking at me like the answer should've been obvious.

“Miami.”

Then he walked away like he hadn’t just informed me I was spending four days in another state with the same man I had spent the entire afternoon being jealous over.

I stood there staring after him, trying to process what the hell had just happened.

Ashlynn was getting on my nerves, and she wasn’t even there. Because I could practically hear her now.

Girl, you want him.

Unfortunately, I was starting to think she might be right.

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Chapter 11



Hell yeah, I was still pissed at Malachi.

Not as pissed as I had been opening night when I walked into Vice after being gone for damn near three weeks and saw Jru working behind my bar, but I hadn't completely let that shit go either. I'd told him one fucking thing. Don't hire her.

It wasn't because she wasn't qualified. I knew she could do the job after the first conversation I had with her. The problem was I wanted her, and having her working inside my club put her in my face more than I needed.

I'd thought being away would fix that. Yara had kept my schedule packed with meetings, investments, and properties, leaving me with more than enough shit to occupy my mind. Didn't matter.

I'd still find myself thinking about Jru's perfume, the way she'd looked sitting across from me during that interview, and another fucking problem was I couldn't stop seeing her in different positions on top of my dick.

That was exactly why I hadn't wanted Malachi to hire her.

Women had been simple for me for years. I hadn't had a real relationship since my twenties. Fucking bitches, getting to bust a nut, and going on about my business worked just fine.

Jru was starting to feel different, and I didn't like that shit.

The sexual thoughts I understood. It was everything else that had me fucked up—like wondering what she was doing while I was away or enjoying that little bit of jealousy I'd heard in her voice yesterday when she referred to Yara as my little girlfriend. She'd tried to play it off immediately, and I let her. But I'd caught it. She didn't like Yara around me. And I liked knowing that more than I should've.

My phone vibrated against the bathroom counter before I could give that shit another thought. Yara. Of fucking course.

I answered and put her on speaker while finishing getting dressed.

“You better be awake,” she said, her voice sharp enough to let me know she'd already been working for a while.

“It's six in the morning, Yara,” I reminded her, fastening my watch.

“And your flight leaves at seven,” she replied without missing a beat. Before I could say anything else, she went straight into business. “First broker pushed the meeting back thirty minutes, and another property opened up in Wynwood. I added it to today's schedule and sent you everything.”

I grabbed my jacket, already mentally rearranging the day. “Aight. I'll look at it on the plane.”

“Good.” Papers shuffled on her end, and I could practically picture her sitting behind her desk with three different things going on at once. Then her tone changed. “Jru still going?”

There it was.

I shook my head, even though she couldn't see me. “Why wouldn't she be?”

“No reason,” she answered a little too quickly. “Just making sure I don't need to change the arrangements.”

“Yara.” I let her name hang there as a warning.

She laughed. “What? I'm doing my job.”

“Do your job without being nosy,” I told her, grabbing the last of my things.

“Fine. Separate suites are booked. Have fun in Miami with your little floor manager.” The amusement in her voice told me she was enjoying this entirely too much.

“It's business,” I said, already tired of explaining myself.

“Mhm. Whatever you say, E.”

I hung up before she could say anything else.

Everybody had jokes now.

My phone hadn't been down thirty seconds before it rang again. Malachi.

I answered while reaching for my coffee. “What?”

“Good morning to you too, motherfucker,” he greeted, sounding entirely too cheerful for somebody calling me this early.

“You calling me before seven. What happened?” I asked, bringing the mug toward my mouth.

“We got another problem.” The humor left Malachi's voice, and that alone was enough to put me on alert. “Money came up short again.”

I stopped with the mug halfway to my mouth. “How much?”

“Eighty thousand.”

I slowly lowered the mug to the counter. “Eighty fucking thousand?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed, his voice flat.

My jaw tightened. “Who touched it?”

“Got two names, but I ain't pressed either one yet.”

“Don't.” I leaned against the island, my mind already working through what that meant. This wasn't the first time money had come up wrong lately, and neither one of us believed in that many coincidences. “Somebody's stealing from us.”

“That's what I'm thinking,” Malachi agreed.

“And eighty bands ain't somebody getting greedy and thinking we won't notice. Either they think we've gotten too comfortable to pay attention, or they're doing this shit on purpose.” I stared at the counter, irritation settling into something colder. Somebody had gotten real comfortable playing with money that didn't belong to them.

Malachi went quiet for a second before responding. “Either way, they got our attention.”

“Don't let them know that yet.” I grabbed my keys from the counter. “Pull everybody who had access, find the connection between the shortages, and don't touch nobody until we know who's behind it.”

“Aight. I'll have something for you by the time you get back,” he assured me.

“Good. Then we handle it.”

Simple.

We'd built the organization together. I didn't need to explain to Malachi what happened to people who stole from us, and he damn sure didn't need me teaching him how to find them.

I picked up my bag, ready to end the call, but Malachi wasn't finished.

“Oh, and E?” he called, his tone shifting.

The change in his voice told me immediately that some bullshit was coming.

“What?” I asked, already heading toward the door.

“You taking Jru to Miami?”

I kept walking. “For work.”

“Mhm.” He let that little sound sit there like he had something else to say.

“Malachi.” I said his name slowly, warning him not to start.

“I'm just asking. Four days is a long time for a nigga who didn't even want her working at the club.”

“Worry about finding our money,” I told him, reaching for the door.

His laugh came through the phone. “I'm handling mine. You handle yours.”

I hung up on his ass.

Asshole.

But as I locked the door behind me, his last words followed me to the truck.

You handle yours.

That was exactly what I intended to do.

I just didn't know what the fuck handling Jru looked like yet.

At 6:58, I pulled in front of the building Malachi had put Ashlynn in.

I'd originally planned to send a driver for Jru, but somewhere between last night and this morning, I'd changed my mind.

At seven-oh-two, she stepped outside pulling a black suitcase behind her. The second she spotted my truck, she slowed, surprise crossing her face. I got out and walked around to meet her.

“You came yourself?” she asked, looking from me to the truck.

“Good morning to you too,” I replied, reaching for her luggage.

She smiled a little. “Good morning. I thought you were sending a driver.”

“I was.”

“And then?” she asked, watching me like she expected some kind of explanation.

I took the suitcase from her. “I changed my mind.”

“Oh.” She studied me for another second before letting go of the handle. “Okay.”

That was it. No questions about why I'd changed my mind, which was good because I didn't have an answer I wanted to give her.

I loaded her suitcase, and we got in. The second I shut my door, her perfume hit me.

There it was again.

Jru caught me looking at her while she fastened her seat belt. “What?”

I started the truck. “You ever gonna tell me what perfume you wear?”

Her eyebrows lifted, and she turned toward me. “Why?”

“Because every time you get around me, I smell that shit,” I told her, watching the little change in her expression.

A small smile touched her mouth. “You don't like it?”

I looked at her before pulling away from the curb. “I ain't say that.”

“Then why you worried about what it is?” she asked, looking entirely too amused with herself.

I glanced at her again. “Just answer the question, Jru.”

She laughed softly, settling back into her seat. “No.”

I shook my head and pulled into traffic.

Smart-ass.

But she smelled good as fuck.

Jru didn't realize where I was taking her until we turned toward private aviation. Her eyes followed the road, taking in the smaller terminal and the jets lined along the tarmac.

By the time I parked, she was staring through the windshield.

“We flying private?” she asked, turning toward me like she needed to hear me confirm what she was looking at.

“Yeah,” I answered, reaching for my door.

She looked at the jet, then back at me, a little smile spreading across her face. “Okay, Mr. Billionaire Airlines.”

A laugh slipped out before I could stop it.

Jru looked over at me, clearly pleased with herself.

“What?” I asked, noticing the way she was watching me.

“Nothing. You just barely smile, and now you laughing.”

“You funny sometimes,” I admitted, shaking my head.

“Sometimes?” she repeated, her eyebrows lifting.

I got out before she could start. “Don't push it.”

She followed me toward the terminal, and I could still hear her mumbling underneath her breath.

Twenty minutes after takeoff, Jru had a tablet in her hands.

That surprised me more than her reaction to the jet.

Breakfast had been set out before we boarded, but after eating, she hadn't stretched out or spent the flight staring through the window. She'd gone straight to work.

I had my laptop open across from her, going through the financials Yara had sent when Jru shifted forward in her seat.

“Which property are we seeing first?” she asked, looking up from the tablet.

“The Brickell property,” I answered, returning my attention to the numbers.

She opened the itinerary and scrolled. “How big is it?”

I gave her the square footage, watching her nod slowly as she took in the information.

“How many bars are you thinking?” she asked next.

“Depends on the building,” I replied, still looking at my laptop.

“And VIP?”

“Same.”

Her finger moved across the screen as she studied the plans. “Kitchen?”

“Maybe.”

That answer finally made her look up. “So what exactly are we looking for?”

I lowered my laptop. “That's my job.”

A little irritation crossed her face, and she sat back. “You dragged me to Miami because you said this was part of mine.”

Fair.

I turned my laptop toward her and motioned for her to come closer. “Then look.”

Jru moved into the seat beside me and leaned forward over the screen.

For the next thirty minutes, she forgot she was supposed to be irritated with me.

And I learned something.

She knew her shit.

She didn't ask me about decorations, booth colors, or any of the surface-level shit I half expected. She wanted to know how I envisioned the club functioning.

Where would liquor be stored?

How many employees would move through the floor during peak hours?

Would VIP have its own service station?

Where would security stand?

Did I want the second Vice to duplicate Westhaven or operate as its own concept?

Then she pulled up the current Vice layout and pointed toward the main bar.

“This needs to be different,” she said, enlarging the section on the screen.

I leaned closer to see what she meant. “What's wrong with it?”

“Nothing if you're a customer looking at it. It's pretty.” She enlarged the layout and traced a finger behind the bar. “But whoever designed it cared more about how it looked than how people actually have to work back here.”

That got my full attention.

“Explain,” I told her, shifting my attention completely away from the financials.

“When we got slammed opening night, everybody kept crossing each other trying to restock. That's why I said we needed another barback, but that's only fixing part of the problem. If you're starting from scratch with the next location, move storage closer to the busiest bar.”

She shifted the screen and pointed somewhere else, looking more comfortable now that we were discussing something she clearly understood.

“The VIP stairs are another problem. Servers carrying bottles upstairs shouldn't have to keep cutting through customer traffic. Especially once everybody's drunk and standing wherever they feel like standing.”

I looked at her instead of the screen.

Three weeks.

She'd been inside Vice for three fucking weeks and had already noticed problems nobody had brought to me during planning.

“What else?” I asked, wanting to hear what else she'd picked up on.

Jru's eyes lifted to mine. “You actually asking my opinion?”

“That's why your ass is on the plane.”

Something changed in her expression.

It wasn't dramatic. Just a brief flicker of surprise before she looked back down.

But I saw it.

And right then, Malachi managed to piss me off from several hundred miles away without even being in the fucking room. Because the motherfucker had been right.

Hiring Jru had been good for Vice.

Bad for me.

But damn good for Vice.

My phone rang before I could tell her to keep going.

Yara.

I answered while Jru returned her attention to the layout. Yara ran through the latest changes to our schedule and told me the broker for the Wynwood property had confirmed our afternoon walkthrough.

“Make sure he has everything ready before we get there,” I told her, glancing at the itinerary. “I'm not spending two hours listening to a sales pitch.”

“I already told him. And call me when you land because I need your answer on Thursday's meeting,” she replied, sounding like she was already moving on to the next thing on her list.

“Aight.”

“Is Jru with you?” she asked before I could end the call.

My eyes moved toward her.

Jru's finger stopped against the tablet for half a second.

“Yeah,” I answered, watching her reaction.

“Good. Tell her I said have fun.”

I almost smiled. “Goodbye, Yara.”

I ended the call.

Jru didn't look up.

I gave her a few seconds.

Nothing.

Interesting.

“Yara gay,” I told her, leaning back in my seat.

That got her attention immediately. Her head lifted. “I didn't ask you that.”

“I know,” I replied, keeping my eyes on her.

“I don't care who Yara sleeps with,” she added, a little too quickly.

I leaned back into my seat, watching her face. “Didn't say you did.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly before she returned to the tablet with more interest than the damn floor plan deserved.

I let her have it.

She'd already told on herself yesterday.

I didn't need to make her do it twice.

Miami heat hit us the second we stepped outside.

A truck was already waiting, and with the first appointment pushed back, we had just enough time to get across the city without rushing.

The commercial real estate broker met us outside the first property and started selling the building before we'd made it through the front door. Two levels. High ceilings. Good square footage. Strong location. Enough room for me to do damn near anything I wanted.

On paper, it checked almost every box.

Jru barely spoke during the first ten minutes.

While the broker walked beside me talking about zoning, capacity, surrounding developments, and projected foot traffic, she stayed a few steps behind us with her tablet in one hand, looking at everything.

Not admiring it.

Studying it.

I noticed the difference.

Halfway through the broker explaining how the upper level could be converted into VIP space, I looked behind us.

Jru was gone.

I stopped walking.

The broker stopped with me. “Everything okay, Mr. King?”

“Where Jru at?” I asked, looking past him toward the hallway we'd just walked through.

He looked behind himself like he'd only just realized we'd lost a whole person.

A few seconds later, she appeared from a hallway near the back of the building. I motioned her over.

“Come here.”

She walked toward us, glancing once more over her shoulder before stopping beside me.

“What?” she asked, looking between me and the broker.

I nodded around the building. “What you think?”

The broker immediately opened his mouth.

I lifted my hand without looking at him. “I asked her.”

Jru looked between us, then slowly surveyed the space again. “It's nice.”

“That's it?” I asked, watching her closely.

“No,” she admitted, glancing toward the rear of the building.

“Then talk.”

She hesitated, and I could tell she was deciding how honest she wanted to be in front of the man trying to sell me the building.

Finally, she pointed toward the hallway she'd just come from.

“If this is supposed to operate anything like Vice, I wouldn't take it.”

The broker's practiced smile slipped.

“May I ask why?” he questioned, turning his attention to her.

Jru faced him. “Where would liquor storage go?”

He pointed toward the rear of the property, looking like he didn't understand why she was asking.

“Exactly,” she replied.

I looked in the direction he indicated.

Jru stepped closer to the center of the room and explained what she saw. The distance between the proposed main bar and storage would force employees to repeatedly cross service paths during the busiest hours. The obvious location for VIP created another traffic problem, and one of the corridors we'd need employees using would become useless if the crowd spilled over the way it did at Vice.

The broker tried explaining possible renovations. Jru listened before shaking her head.

“You could fix it,” she said. “But if you're already spending that much just to make the building function the way you need it to, you're paying for problems before you even open.”

I looked around again.

This time I saw what she saw.

By the time she finished, the broker wasn't smiling anymore.

I was.

Not because I enjoyed watching her tear apart a multimillion-dollar property.

Because she was right.

Outside, Jru waited until the broker walked ahead of us before looking at me.

“What?” she asked, noticing the way I was watching her.

I slipped my sunglasses on. “Nothing.”

“You keep saying nothing after staring at me,” she pointed out, studying my face.

I opened the truck door for her. “You did good.”

That stopped her.

The smart remark I expected never came.

Instead, something softened in her expression before she climbed inside.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Two simple words.

No attitude.

No slick comeback.

For some reason, that did something to me too.

Fuck.

By the third property, I had learned something I would've been better off not knowing.

I liked working with her.

Jru didn't agree with me because my name was attached to the check. At the second property, I liked a feature she thought would become a problem during actual club hours, and she told me exactly why.

At the third, the broker tried selling me on a massive VIP section that looked good as hell but would've taken too much usable space from the main floor.

Jru waited until he finished before quietly pointing out the numbers didn't make sense for what I wanted.

She was right again.

By the time we got back into the truck, the sun had shifted lower over Miami and Jru looked exhausted. She dropped her head against the seat and closed her eyes for a moment.

I watched her before starting the truck.

“Still think I brought you for no reason?” I asked, glancing at her.

Her eyes opened. She turned her head against the seat to look at me. “I never said you brought me for no reason.”

“You damn near did,” I reminded her.

“I said you could've brought Malachi,” she corrected, the corner of her mouth lifting.

I started the engine. “Malachi would've walked through those buildings and asked where we putting the liquor.”

Her laugh came before she could stop it.

A real one.

Not the little sarcastic sound she made when she was trying to be slick.

I looked over.

She caught me watching her almost immediately.

“What?” she asked, still smiling.

There was that question again.

“Nothing,” I replied, turning my attention back toward the windshield.

“Ezra.” She said my name like she knew I wasn't telling her everything.

I turned my attention back to the road before I did something stupid.

We still had three more days.

Three more days of meetings, properties, meals, and riding around Miami together.

Three more days of that perfume.

That mouth.

And now I knew something I hadn't known before bringing her here.

Jru wasn't only somebody I wanted to fuck.

I liked having her around.

That was worse.

Much fucking worse.

For years, I'd kept every part of my life in its place. Business was business. Sex was sex. The streets were the streets. I didn't mix shit because mixing shit created problems.

The phone call with Malachi that morning was proof enough of why those lines existed. I could be looking at multimillion-dollar properties in Miami while somebody back home was stealing money from an organization that had existed long before Vice ever opened its doors.

My life already had enough complications.

I didn't need another one.

Yet Jru had been inside it for three weeks and was already crossing lines without even knowing those lines existed.

My employee.

A woman I wanted.

A woman whose opinion I respected.

A woman I was thinking entirely too fucking much about.

I glanced toward her.

She'd turned toward the window, watching Miami pass by as the city blurred beyond the glass.

Somewhere between the first property and the third, one of those crazy thoughts I'd been having finally started making sense.

I didn't want her working for me.

Not because she wasn't good at it.

That was the fucked-up part.

She was damn good.

Today had proven Malachi right about hiring her, and somehow my conclusion was still the exact opposite of what it should've been.

I wanted her out of Vice.

Out from under me as an employee.

Because every hour I spent around her made my original problem worse, and I was getting tired of pretending wanting her was some shit that would disappear if I ignored it long enough.

I looked back toward the road as a slow smile pulled at my mouth.

Yeah.

I was about to fire her ass.

Whether she knew it or not.

And for the first time since those crazy thoughts started running through my head, I wasn't planning on ignoring them.

I was about to start putting some of that shit into motion.

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Chapter 12



I couldn’t believe I married this girl.

Shit, I was a married man.

And apparently that meant standing in her apartment with a box pressed against my hip while she argued with me about shoes she hadn’t worn since I met her.

“Baby, you need all this?” I asked, glancing down at the shoes in my hand.

Ashlynn barely looked over her shoulder, too busy digging through the closet to give me her full attention. “Yes.”

“You ain’t even look.”

“Whatever you holding, put it in the box,” she instructed, already reaching for another purse.

I looked down at the shoes, then back at her. My house had plenty of room, but at this rate I was going to need to add a wing just for her shit.

“You moving in or opening a store?” I asked, watching her pull another bag from the shelf.

She shot me a look over her shoulder. “Keep talking. I’ll put your stuff out to make room.”

I laughed and dropped the shoes into the box. I liked hearing her talk about my house like she already belonged there. She did. Still had me catching myself smiling when I was supposed to be helping.

My phone buzzed, and I checked it before setting the box down.

Ezra was probably still pissed about Jru, but shit, he’d get over it. She could do the job. Whatever else he wanted from her, he needed to figure that out. We had bigger shit to handle with the organization anyway.

Eighty thousand dollars was missing, and Darnell’s name had come up behind it. A nigga from our past who’d wanted his own shit, so we’d gone our separate ways. Now I was hearing he had somebody in with us helping him take our money. We’d walked away from each other, and this motherfucker was trying to cross us.

I’d told E about the money, but not everything I was hearing. He was in Miami looking at clubs. I was keeping an eye on this until I had more to give him than somebody running their mouth.

“Can you take these?” Ashlynn asked, pushing two bags toward me without waiting for an answer.

I grabbed the handles, and the weight damn near pulled one out my hand. “The fuck is in here?”

“My products,” she answered casually, like she hadn’t just handed me enough shit to stock a beauty supply store.

“You got enough shit to wash everybody in Westhaven.”

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the smile she tried to hide. Before she could answer, E’s name lit up my phone. I set the bags by the bedroom door and answered, already grinning.

“You still pretending you took that girl down there just to look at clubs?” I asked, leaning against the doorframe.

“Man, fuck you,” he answered, sounding irritated before we even got started.

I chuckled, shifting my weight against the frame. “That bad, huh?”

“I called to tell you she knows her shit. You was right about hiring her.”

I pulled the phone away and looked at it, making sure he heard me laughing when I put it back. I’d been waiting on that admission since he gave me hell over the interview.

“Say it again,” I told him, grinning harder. “Put some respect on it this time.”

“But I still wanna fire her,” he added, completely ignoring me.

“Here your ass go again.” I shook my head, already knowing this conversation was about to go left.

Ashlynn stopped folding a shirt and looked in my direction. “Who he firing?”

“Your friend,” I answered, watching her expression change immediately.

She dropped the shirt onto the bed and walked straight over, reaching for my wrist. “Put that nigga on speaker.”

I did, holding the phone between us while she planted her hand on her hip.

“Ezra, if you want my friend that bad, do something about it,” she started, her voice carrying that familiar attitude I was getting used to. “Hell, Malachi made me marry him and trapped me. Better figure it the fuck out. But don’t fire my bitch and leave her with no income. She ain’t a fan of the sugar baby association.”

I bent forward laughing, looking up at her like she'd lost her damn mind. “The what?”

“You heard me.” She bumped my shoulder, but she was smiling too. “Jru likes her own money.”

E went quiet long enough for us to look at each other. Then his voice came through the speaker, louder than before.

“Y’all motherfuckers married?”

I rubbed my hand over my beard, still grinning. “Yeah. About that, nigga… yeah.”

“When the fuck was somebody gonna tell me?” he demanded, and I could practically picture the look on his face.

“When you stopped acting like my friend’s employment was a personal attack,” Ashlynn answered before I could, snatching the shirt back off the bed.

He laughed then, low and disbelieving. “Damn, Chi. She got you signing papers and carrying bags?”

“Don’t be mad ’cause I ain’t scared to take what I want,” I shot back, glancing at my wife. “You down there scared of a woman you flew to Miami.”

“Ain’t nobody scared,” he argued, his tone turning defensive.

“Then quit threatening her job every time your ass get uncomfortable.”

Ashlynn nodded beside me like I was giving a sermon. I slipped my arm around her waist, and she leaned against me while E let out a long breath.

“So y’all want me to make a woman I ain’t even sniffed her pussy yet marry me?” he asked, sounding genuinely confused by the suggestion.

That shit caught me so off guard I nearly dropped the phone. Ashlynn folded against my chest laughing, one hand gripping my shirt.

“Yet?” she managed between laughs, lifting her head to look at the phone. “Listen to your thirsty ass.”

“Both of y’all can kiss my ass,” he muttered while we continued laughing at his expense.

I waited until I could get a sentence out without laughing. “Nigga, start with telling her you want her. You skipped all that and went straight to the unemployment line.”

“I know how to talk to a woman,” he insisted.

“Then do that,” Ashlynn told him, finally managing to straighten herself. “She grown. Let her tell you what she wants.”

I kissed the side of her head before easing away. “Let me finish talking to this nigga.”

“You better come back and finish these boxes,” she warned, pointing toward the floor.

She pointed toward the floor, and I stepped over a bag with her warning me not to trip on the way out. E was laughing in my ear by the time I reached the apartment door. I took him off speaker and walked outside, shaking my head.

“You enjoying this too much,” he said, his amusement still lingering in his voice.

“Been listening to you bitch about hiring her for too long. Let me have my moment.” I leaned against my truck, looking out across the parking lot before continuing. “But she ain’t lying. Jru wants her own money. Why don’t you open another club with her and let her run it? Y’all still make money together, she got her own income, and you ain’t her boss.”

He didn’t answer right away. I watched a car pull into the lot while he thought about it.

“Come up with something, E,” I continued when the silence stretched. “Don’t take the girl’s job just because you wanna be more than the nigga paying her salary.”

“I’ll work it out,” he finally answered.

“And work this out too. Once Ashlynn’s shit is out, I’m done paying on this apartment. I ain’t housing your woman.”

“Now she my woman?” he asked, sounding amused again.

“If I call her your employee, you wanna fire her. Pick something, motherfucker.”

He laughed, and I smiled before checking the message that had come through earlier. Business had waited long enough.

“Got more on that eighty thousand,” I told him, my expression settling as I looked over the message. “Darnell’s name came back to me.”

His laugh stopped. I straightened off the truck.

“I’m hearing he got somebody in with us,” I continued, lowering my voice. “Still checking it. We’ll go over everything when you get home.”

“Anything changes before then, call me,” he instructed, all traces of our earlier joking gone.

“You know I will.”

After we hung up, I stood there looking at the apartment. I’d enjoyed fucking with him, but that name was still sitting wrong with me. I put my phone away before Ashlynn opened the door and caught me standing around.

“Malachi!” she called, her voice carrying across the parking lot.

Too late.

I looked up. She had another bag in her hand.

“Bring your married ass back in here!” she demanded, holding the bag up like I needed a reminder of what I was supposed to be doing.

I pushed off the truck, laughing under my breath. “See? This why I should’ve took you to my house with nothing.”

She held the door open, watching me approach with a satisfied little smile. “You would’ve just had to buy it all again.”

I took the bag from her and kissed her before she could say anything else.

She had my ass there.

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Chapter 13



By our third day in Miami, I was tired of looking at buildings that photographed better than they functioned.
The last one had been beautiful until we got inside. Too much money for too little usable space, with a layout that would have us spending another fortune before we could serve the first drink. Yara's list had gotten shorter, and Ezra's patience had gone with it.

So while he handled calls that morning, I did some digging of my own.

By the time he came downstairs, I had a listing open on my tablet and three reasons we needed to see it before we left.

"I found something," I announced, looking up from the screen as he approached.

Ezra stopped beside my chair, his attention shifting to the tablet. "Show me."

I turned the screen toward him, explaining the square footage, the asking price, and what the previous owner had already put into the space. He leaned over my shoulder to look, close enough that I lost my place for half a second.

"What's the catch?" he asked, studying the listing.

"I haven't seen it in person yet." I pulled up the floor plan, pointing toward the different sections. "But look at this. We could keep the main bar here, use this side for sections, and still have enough room for staff to move without fighting through customers."

His gaze shifted from the screen to me, his expression thoughtful. “You called somebody?”

“The agent. He can meet us at eleven,” I answered, watching him glance at the time.

Ezra glanced at his watch, then straightened. “Get your things.”

After a walkthrough and going over the charts and numbers, we confirmed the building was exactly what Vice needed in Miami. Ezra put in an offer, then had Yara working the numbers and paperwork to get the deal done.

I was still smiling when we got back to the hotel.

“Don’t get comfortable,” he told me as we reached the elevators. “We have a meeting tonight.”

My smile faded as I turned toward him. “Another one?”

“Seven thirty. Meet me downstairs,” he instructed, looking entirely too comfortable with giving me half the information.

“What kind of meeting?” I pressed, trying to read his expression.

He looked down at me, mouth barely lifting. “Your wardrobe’s handled.”

That answered absolutely nothing.

Apparently a successful morning hadn’t earned me the right to know where my own ass was going. I watched him step into the elevator, fighting the urge to tell him a calendar invitation would work just fine.

A garment bag arrived at my room an hour later, followed by a box containing shoes. I unzipped the bag and stared.

The dress was red. A deep, rich red, with a halter neckline that plunged almost to my waist. Oversized fabric roses curved down one side of the opening, and the fitted skirt fell all the way to the floor. Even on the hanger, it looked like something a man sent when he wanted to spend the night staring.

I called Ashlynn and put her on speaker while I stepped into it.

“Girl, he sent me a dress,” I told her, still trying to figure out what kind of meeting required something like this.

“Who? Ezra?” Her voice perked up immediately. “Let me see.”

I switched to video and propped the phone against the mirror, backing up so she could see the red fabric settling over my hips.

Ashlynn leaned toward her camera, her eyes widening before a knowing smile spread across her face. “Oh, he got plans.”

“He said we have a meeting,” I reminded her, looking between my reflection and the phone.

“With who? Your titties?” she asked, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

“Ashlynn!” I laughed, adjusting the neckline. “Be serious.”

“I am serious,” she insisted, still grinning. “Ain’t no business meeting require all that.”

I turned sideways, smoothing a hand over the skirt. The dress hugged my waist and hips without bunching, the roses framing skin I wasn’t used to having out in front of my boss.

“What if somebody else is there?” I asked, glancing at her through the mirror.

“Then they better mind their business.” She grinned, giving me another approving look. “You like it?”

I looked at myself again, letting my eyes travel over the dress before answering. “Yeah. I do.”

“Then quit picking at it. You look good,” she told me, her expression softening just enough to let me know she meant it.

I reached for my perfume, trying to hide how much that helped. “I’ll call you later.”

“Please do. I wanna hear about this meeting,” she answered, already laughing again.

I hung up while she was still laughing and checked the time. By seven twenty-five, I was downstairs trying to act like I hadn’t checked my reflection four times before leaving my room.

Ezra stood near the entrance in a dark suit, looking at his phone. When he saw me, his hand lowered slowly.

His eyes traveled over me without a single attempt to hide it.

I stopped in front of him, suddenly more aware of the dress than I had been upstairs. “This appropriate for the meeting?”

“Very,” he answered, his gaze lingering before finally returning to my face.

His voice had changed. Just enough for me to hear it.

He offered his hand to help me into the black truck waiting outside. I took it, and his thumb brushed over my knuckles before he let go.

During the ride, I tried to ask who we were meeting. He told me I'd see when we got there, then went back to looking at me like he knew something I didn't.

By the time we reached Klaw, I was getting suspicious.

By the time we stepped onto the rooftop, I knew I should have asked more questions.

Candles glowed inside glass holders, rose petals scattered around a table set for two. A breeze moved the edge of the tablecloth, carrying the warmth of the night across my bare shoulders. Beyond the terrace, lights shimmered over the dark water.

There were no other diners.

I slowed down, looking from the table to Ezra. "I thought you said this was a business meeting."

"It is," he answered without hesitation, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"With who?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"You," he replied, holding my gaze like that explained everything.

He rested his hand at the small of my back and guided me toward the table. I let him, partly because I wanted to see how far he intended to take this explanation.

"You rented out the rooftop for a meeting with me?" I asked, glancing around at the empty terrace.

"The restaurant," he corrected casually.

I turned my head toward him, certain I hadn't heard him correctly. "The whole restaurant?"

"Jru." He pulled my chair out, giving me a look that suggested he was already enjoying my reaction. "Sit down."

"I know how chairs work, Ezra," I muttered, looking at him over my shoulder.

His mouth twitched. "Then you shouldn't have a problem using this one."

I sat, still looking around. Men had invited me to dinner before. None of them had removed everybody else from the building to do it.

The waiter greeted us and went over the evening’s menu. I picked what I wanted, conscious of Ezra watching me over the rim of his glass. When we were alone again, I folded my hands in my lap to stop myself from touching the petals beside my plate.

He leaned back, comfortable enough to make my nervousness feel obvious.

“I’m impressed with you,” he said, setting his glass down and giving me his full attention.

“Thank you,” I answered, sitting a little straighter under his gaze.

“I don’t mean just today. You’ve been paying attention since we got here. You found something that works, and you could tell me why it works.” His gaze held mine. “I like that.”

The praise hit harder than I expected. I’d worked too many jobs where doing something right only meant somebody finding more for me to do.

“I wanted us to leave with something,” I explained, relaxing enough to meet his eyes. “We couldn’t keep looking at the same places and hoping the floor plans changed.”

His laugh was quiet, and he nodded like I'd said exactly what he'd been thinking. “Exactly.”

For a moment, I relaxed. Then he leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table.

“I have an offer for you,” he announced, watching me closely.

“What kind?” I asked, my curiosity returning.

“A promotion, if you wanna call it that,” he answered, his expression giving away nothing.

I glanced at the candles before looking back at him. “I already manage the bar and the floor. How much more managing can I do?”

“My original plan was to fire you,” he admitted, watching my reaction.

My back straightened, and whatever warmth had been building between us disappeared. “Excuse me?”

“But I came up with something better,” he continued, looking entirely too calm about what he'd just said.

“No, go back.” I leaned forward, staring at him. “Why were you going to fire me?”

“Because I want you,” he answered without hesitation.

He said it so plainly I forgot the question I was about to ask next.

Ezra watched my face, letting me sit with it. There was no smile to turn it into a joke. No easy way for me to pretend he meant anything else.

“You wanted to fire me because you want me?” I repeated, trying to make sense of what I was hearing.

“I don’t want to keep being your boss while I’m thinking about you the way I am,” he explained, his eyes never leaving mine.

My stomach tightened, and I shifted in my chair. “And how are you thinking about me?”

His eyes dropped to my mouth before coming back up.

“You sure you want that answer right here?” he asked, his voice lowering just enough to make my pulse jump.

I reached for my water. He let me take a drink before continuing.

“I’m opening another spot in Westhaven. Smaller than Vice. Restaurant and bar. I want you in it with me as my business partner.”

I lowered the glass carefully, studying his face. “A partner?”

“An actual stake,” he clarified. “Your name in the paperwork. Your income. You run it, we build it.”

My mind started moving faster than I could sort through the questions. A place I could help shape instead of walking into somebody else’s rules. Something that could belong to me.

Then he added, “But I want you as my woman too.”

I stared at him, the excitement over the business offer suddenly tangled with something much more complicated.

“So that’s the condition?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“That’s what I’m putting on the table,” he answered, watching me carefully.

I looked past him toward the water, needing a second without his eyes on me. I could feel how badly I wanted both things. That was what made me nervous.

“I don’t want to be bought, Ezra,” I told him, finally meeting his gaze again.

“I know,” he answered quietly.

“You don’t know me well enough to know that,” I challenged, unwilling to let him make assumptions about me.

“Then tell me,” he replied, leaning back and giving me room to speak.

I turned back toward him. He wasn’t reaching for a phone or looking over my shoulder. He was waiting.

“I like being able to take care of myself. I like knowing where my money comes from. If we argue, I can’t be wondering whether I still have a job.”

His jaw shifted, and he nodded once.

“You keep your job if you tell me no tonight. I wanted to fire you. I didn’t do it.” He moved his glass aside. “And if we open that place together, we put the business in writing. You don’t lose your share because you pissed me off.”

I studied his face, trying to decide whether he understood what I was asking for or simply knew how to answer it.

“Then why tie it together?” I asked, still trying to understand his reasoning.

“Because I want both, and I’m telling you that instead of acting like I brought you up here to discuss staffing,” he answered, his expression completely serious.

That pulled a laugh out of me before I could stop it.

“You did tell me we had a meeting,” I reminded him, shaking my head.

“We’re meeting,” he replied, looking pleased with his own explanation.

“You’re ridiculous,” I muttered, fighting a smile.

“And you keep smiling at me,” he pointed out, watching my mouth.

I tried to stop. That only made it worse.

The waiter returned with our food, giving me a few minutes to breathe. Ezra asked what I would change if the bar was mine. I answered carefully at first, then caught myself explaining an idea with my hands while he listened.

My phone vibrated inside my bag.

“Why Westhaven?” he asked, watching me across the table. “What made you leave Rosemont?”

“Ashlynn,” I answered, hoping that would be enough.

His eyes stayed on mine. “She gave you somewhere to go. What made you need it?”

The phone started again. I pulled it out, saw Mama’s name, and turned it facedown beside my plate.

“Somebody you need to answer?” he asked, glancing toward the phone.

“No. I’m at dinner, ain’t I?” I replied, a little sharper than I intended.

“You are.” He set his fork down, letting my attitude pass without an argument.

I smoothed the napkin in my lap. For a moment, I almost told him it wasn’t anything worth talking about. But he’d been honest with me, and I was tired of acting like leaving home hadn’t hurt.

“My mama’s been on drugs most of my life,” I began, keeping my eyes on the table. “I was working, giving her money for bills, and she was spending it on getting high. We owed twenty-one hundred on the rent. The lights were about to get cut off.” I swallowed, feeling that familiar tightness creep into my throat. “I thought I was keeping us afloat. I didn’t even know how far behind we were.”

The screen lit up again.

Montae.

I declined it, my stomach tightening. “And this nigga I was dealing with left me stranded at work. Told me he was coming, then wouldn’t answer his phone.”

Ezra glanced at the name before looking back at me, his expression growing more serious.

“When I finally got home, I found out why,” I continued, forcing the words out. “He was fucking my mama.”

Saying it still embarrassed me. I knew it shouldn’t, but I looked down anyway, blinking hard.

“We’d never even had sex. And she knew I was messing with him.” My voice cracked as I struggled to keep myself together. “I was trying to keep a

roof over our heads, and she—”

“Jru,” Ezra interrupted softly, his voice cutting through the emotion before I could force another word out.

He moved his chair beside mine and took my hand. I tried to finish, but he shook his head gently.

“You ain’t gotta keep going,” he told me, his thumb brushing across my knuckles.

A tear slipped down my cheek. He wiped it away with his thumb, his face close enough that I couldn’t hide mine.

“I got you now,” he said, looking directly into my eyes.

I pressed my lips together, but another tear fell. I’d been holding myself up for so long that hearing somebody say that almost made me cry harder.

“I’m not trying to ruin dinner,” I whispered, embarrassed by how quickly my emotions had gotten away from me.

“You’re not ruining shit.” His hand tightened around mine. “Look at me.”

I did.

“What they did ain’t on you,” he continued, his expression steady. “And you don’t have to sit here explaining it till it hurts all over again.”

My phone buzzed against the table. I reached for it and powered it off, then let him draw my hand back into his.

“I called Ashlynn that night,” I said, my voice quieter now. “I just knew I couldn’t stay.”

He nodded, staying beside me while I got my breathing together. No rushing me to smile. No asking for details I didn’t want to give.

“Now you see why I get funny about my money?” I asked, looking down at our joined hands.

“Yeah, baby. I do,” he answered, giving my hand another reassuring squeeze.

He moved my water closer, and I took a drink. We ate a little more, the conversation returning slowly. By the time he teased me about rearranging a bar we hadn’t opened yet, I could laugh without forcing it.

I asked about his businesses, about why he kept building when he already had so much.

“I’m forty-one,” he said, settling back into his chair. “I know how to make money. I don’t want that to be the only thing I know how to do.”

I set my fork down, studying him with renewed curiosity. “What else do you want?”

“Something solid. Somebody I want to come home to.” He held my gaze, his expression more serious than before. “A kid one day. Not tomorrow. But eventually. Somebody to leave all this to.”

There was no joke in his voice now. I felt myself listening differently, hearing something beyond the man who could reserve an entire restaurant without blinking.

“And you think that could be me?” I asked, surprised by how much I wanted to hear his answer.

“I think about you when I’m supposed to be doing other shit. Your voice. That perfume you wear. The way you look at me when you think I’m talking crazy.” His mouth curved as his eyes moved over my face. “Then you get to work, and I have another reason to want you around.”

My fingers tightened around the stem of my glass.

“I’m not trying to tell you I know everything about you,” he continued, his tone growing softer. “I want to find out. But I’m too grown to keep pretending I don’t want you while you sitting right in front of me.”

I looked down, smiling despite myself. The breeze lifted a strand of hair across my cheek, and he reached over to move it, his fingers lingering near my jaw.

“Look at me, Jru,” he murmured, waiting until I raised my eyes.

I did.

“You want me?” he asked, his gaze holding mine.

I could have made him work harder for the answer. Could have hidden behind the business offer, the dress, any of the reasons I’d been giving myself to keep this professional.

But I was tired of pretending too.

“Yes,” I admitted, barely recognizing how softly the word left my mouth.

His expression changed before he smiled. Something in his shoulders eased, though his eyes stayed fixed on me.

“Come here,” he said, extending his hand toward me.

I stood and went around the table. He drew me between his knees, one hand settling at my waist while I rested mine against his shoulders.

Up close, all that confidence was harder to defend myself against. So was the way he waited, giving me enough time to move away before I leaned down.

Our first kiss started slowly.

Then his hand tightened at my waist, and I forgot about the candles, the skyline, the waiter somewhere beyond the terrace. I held on to his shoulders, feeling his smile when I kissed him again instead of stepping back.

“You still got questions about the meeting?” he murmured against my lips, his hand remaining at my waist.

I laughed against his mouth, still close enough to feel his breath. “A few.”

“Bring ’em with you,” he answered, smiling before finally letting me step back.

The ride back felt shorter. His hand rested over mine, and neither of us bothered pretending the quiet meant we had nothing to say.

At the hotel, he walked me to my door. I found my key, then stood with it in my hand while he watched me.

“Goodnight, Mr. King?” I asked, looking up at him with a small smile.

He smiled back, his eyes searching mine. “That what you want?”

I shook my head, suddenly finding it harder to be bold with him standing so close.

“Then tell me,” he encouraged, making no move to leave.

I opened the door and caught his hand before he could step away.

“Come inside,” I whispered, holding his gaze.

He followed me inside, and I set the key down with hands that suddenly didn’t know what to do next.

“You got quiet,” he observed, watching me with a faint smile.

“Enjoy it. Probably won’t last,” I warned, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

He laughed and drew me closer. I caught the front of his jacket when he kissed me, forgetting to be nervous for a moment. When he pulled back, I followed him before catching myself.

“Don’t start smiling,” I warned, noticing the amusement spreading across his face.

“Too late,” he answered, his smile widening.

I rolled my eyes, smiling too. He laid his jacket over a chair, and I took his hand. But once we sat on the edge of the bed, my fingers tightened around his.

He noticed immediately, his expression softening as he looked at me. “What is it?”

I looked at our hands, trying to find the courage to say what I needed him to know. “I haven’t done this before.”

He waited, and I made myself look up.

“I’m a virgin,” I admitted, feeling my face grow warm the moment the words left my mouth.

His expression changed. Heat rushed into my face.

“Don’t look at me like you trying to decide what to do with me,” I told him, suddenly wishing I could read his thoughts.

“I’m listening to you.” He shifted closer, his voice calm and reassuring. “You want me to stay?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation.

“Then I’m staying. We don’t have to do anything else tonight,” he assured me, keeping his hand wrapped around mine.

I searched his face, needing to know he meant it. “You’re not disappointed?”

“No,” he answered simply, without a moment of hesitation.

He said it so easily that some of the tension left my shoulders. I wanted him here. I just wasn’t used to saying what I needed and believing somebody would care.

“Kiss me again,” I whispered, lifting my eyes to his.

He brushed his hand along my cheek and did. This time, when the kiss ended, I stayed close instead of finding a joke to hide behind.

“Stay,” I whispered again, resting my hand against his chest.
“I’m here,” he assured me, his voice quiet against my forehead.
I rested my forehead against his and let myself believe him.

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Chapter 14



After Jru told me she was a virgin, we stayed up talking for a while. Nothing deep. Just regular shit. Music, food, places we'd been, places she wanted to go. Every now and then she'd laugh at something I said, then swear I wasn't funny when I caught her doing it.

By the time we changed and got in bed, she was a lot more relaxed than she'd been earlier. The conversation followed us under the covers, getting slower the later it got. At some point, Jru stopped lying on her side and ended up halfway across me, her head on my chest and one leg thrown over mine.

Her answers got shorter until she stopped answering altogether.

I looked down at her, watching her sleep like she hadn't just made herself comfortable across my entire body. "Just gone use my chest like a fucking pillow. Bet." I waited a second, almost expecting one of her smart-ass responses, but she didn't so much as twitch.

Nothing.

I smirked and rubbed my hand slowly down her back. She was knocked the fuck out, but sleep wasn't hitting me yet.

My mind kept going back to dinner.

Her mama. The drugs. Coming home to eviction notices and utilities getting cut off. Then walking in and catching her own mama fucking her boyfriend.

That shit was foul.

Then there was her phone. That motherfucker had rung enough times for me to notice, but she never answered it or offered an explanation. I hadn't asked either.

I let it ride.

For now.

My hand moved up her back again as I looked down at her. The more I learned about Jru, the more certain shit about her made sense. She wanted her own money. Her own work. Something with her name on it. She'd made that shit clear.

I respected it. Preferred it, actually.

I had money. I didn't need a woman whose whole plan was to attach herself to mine and stick her hand out every time she wanted something. Jru wanted to know she could stand on her own whether I was there or not.

That shit was attractive.

Then there was this virgin shit.

Man.

I still didn't know what the fuck to do with that information.

I wouldn't have guessed it. Not because she acted loose. She didn't. Jru just had this confidence about her. That mouth. The way she looked a motherfucker dead in the face and said whatever she had to say.

Finding out nobody had ever had that part of her made me want her worse.

But not tonight.

Not after the shit she'd just told me. Whenever it happened, I wanted her mind on me—not her mama, not that nigga she used to fuck with, not all the shit she'd been through.

She shifted on my chest, her fingers curling against my shirt before her eyes slowly opened. She blinked up at me, still looking half asleep. "You still up?"

"Obviously." I looked down at her, wondering what the hell else she thought I was doing.

Her sleepy frown made me laugh. "Don't start," she warned, narrowing her eyes at me even though she could barely keep them open.

"You asked me a question," I reminded her, still rubbing my hand over her back.

"And you could've answered it like a normal person." She gave me another irritated look, but the corner of her mouth twitched.

“Could’ve.” I shrugged, knowing damn well I was getting on her nerves.

She rolled her eyes, but instead of moving away, she snuggled closer and tucked her face against me.

I ran my thumb over her arm, thinking about the question that had been sitting in the back of my mind. “Let me ask you something. What made you stay a virgin this long?”

That woke her ass up.

Her head lifted from my chest, eyes narrowing while she studied my face. “That’s what you been laying here thinking about?” she asked, looking like she couldn't believe I'd waited until the middle of the damn night to bring it up.

“One of the things.” I kept my eyes on hers, letting her know I was serious about wanting an answer.

She stared at me another second before laying her head back down. Her fingers picked at the front of my shirt while she got quiet.

“My mama,” she finally answered, her voice softer than it had been a moment earlier.

My hand slowed on her back.

“When she got bad on drugs, it was always different men around,” she continued. “Some stayed for a while. Some I’d see once and never see again. I used to hate waking up and not knowing who was in the house. Or coming home and seeing some man I didn’t know sitting in our living room like he belonged there.”

I didn’t interrupt. I just let her talk.

Her fingers went still against my chest. “I hated it. And the older I got, the more I knew I never wanted my life looking like that. So I stayed away from all of it. I always said I was waiting until marriage.”

Marriage.

Well, shit.

I must’ve looked at her a little too long because she lifted her head again. Her brows pulled together as she searched my face. “What?”

“Nothing.” I tried to keep my expression straight, but apparently I wasn't doing a good enough job.

“That don’t look like nothing.” She continued studying me, clearly not buying my answer.

I laughed under my breath, wrapped my arm tighter around her and pulled her back down. “Go back to sleep, Jru.”

“You weird,” she muttered against my chest, shaking her head.

“Yet you laying all over me.” I glanced down at the leg she still had thrown across mine.

“I can move.” She started to lift herself off me, and I tightened my arm around her before she got anywhere.

“You better not.”

She laughed softly against my chest. “There you go being bossy again.”

“Go to sleep.” I settled my hand against her back, ending the conversation before she found something else to argue about.

She mumbled something I couldn’t make out, but a few minutes later her breathing evened back out.

Mine didn’t.

Marriage.

Shit, maybe Malachi was on to something.

I was getting old as fuck. Forty-one with no kids, and if one thing was for certain and two things were for sure, I wanted Jru. Every new thing I learned about her only made that shit worse.

Wife. Business partner. Shit, maybe the mother of my kids.

Yeah.

I could see all that shit.

Fuck I needed to wait for?

I knew what I wanted. And if this shit blew up in my face? Shit, it was always divorce.

I glanced down at the woman sleeping comfortably on top of me like she hadn’t just put a whole idea in my head.

A slow grin pulled at my mouth.

Yeah.

I was calling my attorney first thing in the morning.

By the next afternoon, Yara had everything under control, which meant there was no reason for me to hang around Miami.

Me and Jru were on the plane headed back to Westhaven. She'd spent most of the flight on her laptop, glasses low on her nose while she clicked through something I wasn't paying enough attention to understand.

I was ready to get home.

More importantly, I was ready to see her face when she realized where the fuck home was.

She finally shut her laptop and stretched her arms over her head. "So when do I get to see this restaurant you keep talking about?" she asked, turning toward me with an expectant look.

"When we get back." I kept my answer simple, watching her settle back into her seat.

"You found one already?" Her interest picked up immediately, and she turned her body toward mine.

"Been looking at one."

That got her attention. She turned toward me, pulling one leg beneath her. "And you haven't bought it?"

"Nah. I want you to see it first." I watched her eyebrows rise, already knowing she was about to question me.

"Why?"

I stared at her. "Because it's yours too."

She went still.

I reached beside me, grabbed the folder I'd been waiting to give her and dropped it into her lap.

"Forty percent."

Her eyes shot to mine before she opened the folder. Right there on the first page was both our names and the ownership split.

EZRA KING — 60%

JRU SINCLAIR — 40%

She looked at it, then back at me, her fingers holding the edges of the paper. "You serious?"

“I don’t joke about business. And I was serious when I told you I wanted to fire your ass.” I leaned back, giving her a moment to process what she was looking at.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but I kept going.

“I don’t want you working for me, Jru. I want to do business with you. And I want you to be my woman. Two different things.” I held her gaze, making sure she understood the distinction.

For once, she didn’t have some smart shit ready to fire back. Her eyes dropped to the paperwork, and her finger moved slowly over her name beside mine.

“Ezra, forty percent is a lot.” She looked back up at me, her expression caught somewhere between excitement and disbelief.

“Then make that shit worth it.” I wasn't interested in having her thank me a hundred times. I wanted her to take the opportunity and do something with it.

She looked back at me, a smile trying to creep onto her face. “I will.”

“I know.” And I meant that shit.

She lowered her eyes to the folder again and pushed her glasses up her nose.

I frowned. “Matter of fact, we adding vision to the budget too.”

Her head snapped up. “What?” She looked genuinely confused, which only made me want to laugh.

“Some new glasses. Contacts. Something. ’Cause you stay pushing them motherfuckers up your nose every five seconds.” I pointed toward her face, making sure she knew exactly what I was talking about.

“There is nothing wrong with my glasses.” She frowned and adjusted them again.

“They clearly trying to leave your face.”

She pushed them up again without even realizing it.

I pointed at her. “See! That shit right there.”

She froze, then rolled her eyes. “Shut up.”

I laughed. “My partner gotta be able to see.”

“I can see enough to read this contract.” She lifted the folder slightly, giving me a pointed look.

“Then get to reading.” I nodded toward the paperwork, still grinning.

She flipped me off before looking back down.

There she was.

She spent a few minutes going over the partnership agreement, paying the most attention to her forty percent, the profit split and what decisions would be hers to make. She asked a couple questions, I answered them, and once she was satisfied, she picked up the pen.

After that, she followed the tabs, signing and initialing the supporting documents without reading every damn word.

Exactly what I needed.

My attorney had buried the marriage agreement right in the middle of them, looking like just another document connected to our partnership.

Jru flipped to it, skimmed the page and signed her name.

Jru Sinclair.

I rubbed my hand over my beard to hide my grin.

My fucking wife.

She didn’t have a clue.

A few minutes later, she closed the folder and shoved it toward me. “Take this shit. I’m done.” She leaned back with a tired sigh, looking like she'd just finished signing away her entire afternoon.

I laughed and slid it into my bag. “Already tired of being a businesswoman?”

“I’m tired of paperwork.” She stretched her fingers before reaching toward her laptop.

“Better get used to it.” I zipped the bag closed, keeping the folder safely inside.

She reached for her laptop, then paused. “Wait. Does the restaurant already have a name?”

“Vice 2.0.” I watched her face, waiting for the reaction I knew was coming.

Her face twisted immediately. “Absolutely not.”

I laughed. “Then name the motherfucker yourself.”

She blinked. “For real?” The disgust disappeared from her face, replaced by a grin.

“You own forty percent, don’t you?”

A grin spread across her face. “Gladly.”

“Good.” I settled back, leaving her to figure it out.

She reopened her laptop while I settled back in my seat.

Forty percent of the restaurant.

One hundred percent my wife.

She only knew about the first one.

For now.

By the time we landed in Westhaven, the paperwork was the last thing on Jru’s mind.

The truck was waiting outside the airport, and for the first part of the ride, she stayed buried in her phone while I handled a few messages of my own. It wasn’t until we got deeper into the city that she finally looked up.

Her eyes followed the buildings outside for a few seconds before her brows slowly pulled together.

I knew exactly when she realized we weren’t headed toward her apartment.

“Where are we going?” she asked, turning away from the window to look at me.

“Home.” I slipped my phone lower in my hand, already waiting for the next question.

She turned toward me, phone still loose in her hand. “My apartment is the other way.”

“What apartment?” I asked, keeping my expression straight.

Her head snapped toward me.

“Excuse me?” She stared at me like she needed to make sure she'd heard correctly.

I slipped my phone into my pocket. “Ashlynn moved the fuck out and moved in with Malachi. He got rid of the apartment.”

Jru stared at me for all of two seconds.

“Oh, hell no.” She sat forward, her eyes widening as the information finally registered.

She snatched her phone up and immediately called Ashlynn.

I leaned back against the seat and let her. Shit, call whoever you wanted. Wasn’t changing where we were headed.

Ashlynn answered on the second ring.

“Bitch,” Jru started before she could even say hello, “please tell me Ezra is lying. Did you move out?” She pressed the phone tighter against her ear, waiting for an answer.

Whatever Ashlynn said had Jru sitting up straighter.

“You WHAT?” Her voice rose so sharply I turned toward the window to hide my smile.

“And Malachi got rid of the apartment?” Jru asked, louder this time. She listened for another second before throwing her free hand in the air. “So when the fuck was somebody gonna tell me I was homeless?”

I looked over. “You ain’t homeless.”

She covered the phone and glared at me. “Stay the fuck out my conversation.”

I laughed and looked away.

Ashlynn said something else, and Jru’s expression changed.

“Wait. What you mean you got some shit to tell me?” Her brows drew together as she listened, momentarily forgetting she was supposed to be mad at me.

A pause.

“Ashlynn—” She pulled the phone away from her ear when the line suddenly went quiet.

The call ended.

Jru slowly lowered the phone and stared at the screen.

“She hung up on me.” She looked genuinely offended, and I couldn't help myself.

“Smart girl.”

Her head whipped toward me. “And where the fuck is my stuff?” She narrowed her eyes, already suspicious of whatever answer I was about to give.

“My house.”

Her mouth fell open.

There it was.

“You moved my shit?” She turned fully toward me, her disbelief giving way to anger.

“I had it moved.” I rubbed a hand over my beard, keeping my voice calm while she looked ready to lose her damn mind.

She shoved her glasses up her nose and stared at me like she was deciding which part of my body to stab first.

“Ezra, I swear to God—” She leaned forward, pointing a finger at me, but I lifted my hand before she could finish.

“Aight. We can turn around.” I nodded toward the windshield, watching her expression shift.

That stopped her.

I nodded toward the window. “Just tell me where you want him to take you. Apartment gone. Ashlynn living with Malachi. Your shit at my house.” I shrugged, letting the situation speak for itself. “So you can come home with me, or your ass can be homeless. Pick one.”

Her jaw dropped.

“You are a fucking psychopath.” She stared at me in disbelief, shaking her head like she'd finally decided I had lost my mind.

“Probably.” I didn't even bother arguing with her.

“I cannot believe you moved my shit.” She looked away for a second before turning back toward me, still trying to wrap her head around what I'd done.

I laughed, and that only made her madder. She folded her arms across her chest and turned toward the window, jaw tight while the city passed outside.

“Crazy ass motherfucker,” she muttered, shaking her head.

I rubbed my hand across my beard and looked the other way before she caught me smiling again.

That conversation was over.

Malachi had gotten rid of the apartment. Her belongings were already at my house, and whether she liked how I'd handled it or not, she didn't have a place to go back to.

She could cuss me out the rest of the ride if it made her feel better.

Her ass was still coming home with me.

And the folder in my bag was headed straight to my attorney.

Jru thought finding out she didn't have an apartment and I'd moved her shit into my house was the craziest part of her day.

She had no fucking idea.

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Chapter 15



I stared at my phone after hanging up on Jru, knowing damn well I had just made the situation worse.

My girl was probably sitting somewhere ready to beat my ass, and if I was being fair, she had every right. I should've told her I was moving in with Malachi. I damn sure should've told her he was getting rid of the apartment.

But shit had happened fast.

Too fast, if I really thought about it.

A few months ago, Malachi was just supposed to be my good time. A fine, grown-ass man with money who spoiled me, kept me laughing, and knew exactly how to handle me. I liked our arrangement. I liked not having to ask twice for shit, and I especially liked spending his money instead of mine.

Marriage had not been part of the plan.

Neither had moving into his house.

And I damn sure hadn't planned on being pregnant.

Yet here I was, sitting in the middle of our bedroom surrounded by open suitcases and shopping bags, wearing his last name and carrying his baby.

Life had a funny-ass way of not giving a damn about plans.

Still, I didn't regret it.

And as fucked up as it sounded, I didn't completely regret what happened with Jru either. My girl would think herself out of a blessing if you gave her enough time. She was so used to struggling and figuring shit out by herself that sometimes she couldn't tell the difference between being independent and being scared to let somebody show up for her.

Ezra wanted her. That much was obvious.

And Jru wanted his ass too, no matter how much she tried to act like she didn't.

So maybe I had given life a little push.

A big-ass push, considering she was technically homeless now, but still.

The bedroom door opened, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Malachi walked in fresh from the shower with a towel hanging low around his waist. Water still clung to his chest, and his beard looked freshly brushed. He took one look at my face and started grinning.

“That was Jru, wasn't it?” he asked, already looking entirely too amused with himself.

I slowly lifted my eyes to his, giving him a look that should've answered his question without me having to open my mouth. “Nigga, you know damn well that was Jru.”

His grin broke into a laugh as he crossed the room toward the closet. “Yeah, she finna fuck y’all up.”

“Y’all?” I tossed my phone onto the bed and pointed at his back. “Don't do that shit. This is your fault too. You the one got rid of the damn apartment before I could even tell her I was moving.”

Malachi glanced over his shoulder while pulling a black T-shirt from the closet. He looked completely unbothered by my accusation, which only irritated me more. “You moved in with me. What the fuck I was supposed to keep paying for it for?”

“Maybe until I told my best friend she was homeless, nigga!” I threw my hands up, wondering how the hell he could stand there acting like that

wasn't a reasonable suggestion.

That only made his ass laugh harder.

I grabbed one of the pillows and threw it at him. Malachi caught it against his chest, still laughing, before tossing it onto the chair in the corner.

“She ain't homeless,” he said as he pulled the shirt over his head. “She with E.”

“And that's supposed to make me feel better?” I asked, folding my arms while he straightened his shirt.

He looked at me like the answer should've been obvious. “Yeah.”

I rolled my eyes.

Men.

The problem was, he wasn't entirely wrong.

Jru had spent so much of her life worrying about everybody else that I wanted to see what happened when somebody worried about her for a change. She'd probably fight Ezra every step of the way because that's just who the hell she was, but I couldn't say I hated the idea of somebody making her put her guard down.

I picked up a stack of clothes and started putting them into the dresser. “She gone cuss my ass out when I see her,” I muttered, already imagining the look on Jru's face when we finally came face-to-face.

“Probably.” Malachi didn't even bother looking up, which told me exactly how much sympathy I was getting out of his ass.

“I'm blaming you.” I glanced over my shoulder, making sure he heard me.

“I don't give a fuck,” he replied without missing a beat.

“I know.” I smiled to myself as I folded another shirt.

For a few minutes, the room got quiet. Malachi moved around behind me getting dressed while I continued unpacking. The longer I stood there

putting my things into drawers that used to belong only to him, the heavier that little thought I'd been trying to ignore became.

I stopped with one of my dresses still in my hands.

“Malachi?” I called, my voice quieter than it had been a few minutes earlier.

“What's up?” He was still moving around behind me, but I could hear him pause when I didn't answer right away.

I turned around. He was sitting on the edge of the bed pulling on his socks, but something in my face must've told him I wasn't about to say anything funny because his expression changed.

“You ever feel like we moved too fast?” I asked, watching him closely.

His hands stopped.

I rubbed my thumb across the fabric of the dress, trying to put into words something I'd been thinking about since we'd gotten married. “I'm serious. We went from doing what we were doing to married, living together, and now I'm pregnant. Sometimes I just sit here and think, damn. How the fuck did all this happen?”

Malachi watched me for a moment before standing. He crossed the space between us and took the dress from my hands, laying it on top of the dresser.

“Nah,” he said, looking directly at me.

I searched his face, trying to find even the smallest sign that he'd been having the same thoughts. “Not even a little?”

“Ashlynn, I'm thirty-nine years old.” His hands settled on my hips as he pulled me closer. “What the fuck I need three years to figure out if I want you for?”

My mouth twitched.

He wasn't smiling.

“I knew what I was doing when I married you,” Malachi continued, holding my gaze while his thumbs moved slowly against my hips. “Fast don't mean wrong. It just mean I didn't waste no time.”

That shut me up.

His hand slid around my waist, and I rested mine against his chest.

For somebody who got on my damn nerves as much as he did, he had a way of saying shit so simply that I couldn't argue with it.

Then his eyes dropped toward my stomach.

“Only thing we moving too fucking slow on is getting you to a doctor.” His expression shifted, and just like that, the sweet moment we'd been having was over.

There he went.

I pushed against his chest. “Damn, can your baby finish growing some organs first?”

“My baby got enough organs for you to make a fucking appointment.” He looked so serious about it that I couldn't tell whether he was joking or genuinely believed the shit coming out of his mouth.

I stared at him.

This nigga.

“Do you even know how pregnancy works?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Nope.” He kissed my forehead before stepping away, looking entirely too pleased with his answer. “That's why we going to the doctor.”

I laughed despite myself and reached for my phone. “Fine. I'll make the damn appointment.”

The second my screen lit up, I froze.

Eleven unread messages.

All from Jru.

“Oh, shit.” I stared down at the notifications, already knowing I wasn't about to like what I saw.

Malachi glanced over while fastening his watch. “What?”

I opened the messages.

JRU: BITCH ANSWER THE PHONE

JRU: YOU KNEW THIS CRAZY MF MOVED MY SHIT???

JRU: AND YOU LET MALACHI GET RID OF THE APARTMENT???

I bit the inside of my cheek, trying not to laugh.

Another message came through while I was staring at the screen.

JRU: ASHLYNN I SWEAR TO GOD YOU BETTER CALL ME BACK

“Your friend?” Malachi asked, glancing at the phone in my hand before looking back at my face.

I held the phone against my chest, refusing to give his nosy ass anything else to laugh about. “Mind your business.”

His phone started ringing before I could finish the sentence.

He pulled it from his pocket, looked at the screen, then looked at me.

“E.” He turned the phone slightly, showing me the name on the screen.

My eyes widened. “Don't answer that shit.” I pointed at him, already knowing exactly why Ezra was calling.

Malachi's smile came back as he accepted the call and put it on speaker. “What's up?”

I couldn't even hear Ezra's full response before Jru's voice exploded through the phone somewhere in the background.

“IS THAT MALACHI? TELL ASHLYNN TO ANSWER HER FUCKING PHONE!”

My mouth dropped open.

Malachi looked at me.

I looked at him.

Then both our asses lost it.

“THIS SHIT IS NOT FUNNY!” Jru yelled through the phone, sounding like she was about two seconds away from snatching Ezra's phone out of his hand.

That only made it worse.

I dropped onto the bed laughing while Malachi leaned against the dresser, shoulders shaking. Somewhere on the other end, Ezra was laughing too, which apparently pissed Jru off even more.

I wiped underneath my eyes before my lashes started lifting. “Tell that bitch I'll call her back!” I managed between laughs, barely able to get the words out.

“I HEARD YOU!” Jru shouted, making me slap a hand over my mouth.

“Oh.” I blinked at the phone, realizing she'd heard every damn word.

Malachi damn near folded over.

I grabbed another pillow and threw it at him. “Hang up!” I demanded, laughing so hard my stomach was starting to hurt.

He finally ended the call, still laughing as he shook his head.

I looked back down at my phone. Between Jru's threats, the doctor's appointment I still needed to make, the half-unpacked bedroom around me and my husband standing there getting entirely too much enjoyment out of my problems, I couldn't help smiling.

This was really my life now.

A husband.

A baby.

A home that somehow already felt like mine.

And my best friend apparently getting dragged into the same kind of crazy shit I had gotten myself into.

I knew Jru, though. She wasn't going down without a fight.

I shook my head and opened my phone to make the doctor's appointment.

Shit was about to get real.

Because Ezra was just as fucking crazy as Malachi.

If not crazier.

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Chapter 16



Eighty thousand dollars wasn’t shit to me or E. The money was never the problem.

Darnell was.

I’d spent the last few days making sure what I heard was true before I brought anything to E. Now I had proof. Darnell had Terrance inside our organization feeding him information and helping him take from something that belonged to us.

Me, E and Darnell went back. We’d made money together before Darnell decided he wanted his own organization instead of continuing to build as a team. Neither one of us had been mad about it. We divided everything clean, wished him the best and went our separate ways. His territory was his. Ours was ours. Same with our connects.

Darnell knew that shit better than anybody.

I called him.

“Chi,” he answered, sounding relaxed, like he wasn't expecting anything other than a regular conversation.

“What’s happening?” I asked, leaning back in my chair while I waited to hear what kind of mood he was in.

“Same shit. What’s good?”

“Been a minute. Pull up and have a drink with me.” I kept my tone casual. No sense in giving him a reason to think something was wrong before we sat down.

“Where?” he asked without hesitation.

I gave him the name of a little bar deep on the west side, somewhere we could sit down without everybody being in our fucking business.

“Aight. Give me about forty-five,” he replied.

“Bet.” I ended the call, staring at the screen for a moment before pulling up E's number.

As soon as we hung up, I called E.

He answered on the second ring. “What’s up?”

“I confirmed that shit.” I didn't bother easing into the conversation. E already knew what I'd been looking into.

A short silence came through the phone before his voice changed. “Darnell?”

“Yeah. Terrance been feeding him information.” I rubbed a hand over my beard, still irritated that somebody we'd known that long had decided to pull some snake shit.

“Where you at?” E asked, his voice losing whatever patience he'd had when he answered.

“I’m meeting Darnell at that little bar off Mercer in about forty-five. Let me get there first. Give us about twenty minutes, then come through.”

“I got you.”

That was all we needed to say.

The bar was low-key, dark and full of people who knew how to mind their fucking business. I grabbed a booth toward the back, and Darnell came through not long after.

“What’s good, Chi?” he greeted me, approaching the table with the same easy smile he'd always worn whenever we got together.

I stood and clasped his hand before we sat down. “Same shit. How you been?”

“Can’t complain.” He settled into the booth across from me, glancing around the bar before getting comfortable.

He ordered a drink, and we spent the next few minutes catching up. Nothing deep. Just two niggas who had known each other a long time and hadn’t sat across from each other in a while.

Darnell was in the middle of telling me some funny shit when his attention shifted over my shoulder.

His smile faded slightly.

I didn’t have to turn around.

E was right on time.

“What’s happening, Nell?” E greeted him, approaching the table like he'd just happened to run into an old friend.

Darnell looked from E to me as E reached the table. “Well, damn. Where the fuck you come from?” He laughed, but his eyes lingered on me a second longer than they had before.

“Around.” E clasped his hand and slid into the booth beside me, looking entirely too comfortable for somebody who'd just walked into a situation like this.

Darnell laughed. “Ain’t seen both you niggas together in forever.”

“Been a minute,” E said, leaning back against the booth while keeping his attention on Darnell.

The conversation lasted maybe another minute, but Darnell was paying closer attention now. E showing up had thrown him off, even if he didn’t know why yet.

I wasn’t about to drag the shit out.

I rested my forearms on the table and looked directly at him. “Terrance told us everything.”

Darnell went still.

That was all I needed.

E watched him from beside me. “You knew better, Nell.” His voice was calm, but there wasn't a damn thing friendly about the way he was looking at him.

Darnell’s jaw tightened as he looked between us. “Chi—” He started to lean forward, but I shook my head before he could finish.

“Nah.” I held his stare. “You knew.”

We didn’t need to remind him of the agreement or explain why we were pissed. Darnell knew exactly what he’d done.

I finished my drink and stood. “Come on.” I looked down at him, waiting for him to get up.

This time when Darnell looked at me, he knew we weren’t going somewhere else for another drink.

The warehouse sat damn near an hour outside Westhaven, surrounded by nothing but dark road and trees.

By the time we got there, Darnell knew what time it was.

He stood beneath the single light in the middle of the warehouse and looked between me and E. “I fucked up.” His voice was quieter than it had been at the bar, and for the first time that night, he looked like he understood just how badly he'd fucked himself.

“Yeah,” E said, standing a few feet away with his hands at his sides. “You did.”

“I can give the eighty back.” Darnell looked between us, searching our faces for some sign that the money might be enough to fix what he'd done.

E laughed under his breath. “You think this shit about eighty thousand dollars?” He shook his head, looking at Darnell like he couldn't believe the nigga was still missing the point.

Darnell didn’t answer.

“You could’ve called either one of us if you needed eighty,” E continued. “You know that. This ain’t about money.” He held Darnell's gaze, letting the words settle between them.

Darnell looked at me. “Chi, we go too far back for this.” His expression shifted, and I could see him reaching for the history we'd shared, like that was supposed to erase what he'd done.

I held his stare. “Exactly.”

That should’ve mattered before he crossed us.

There wasn’t anything else I needed to hear. No apology was going to change what he’d done, and no excuse was going to make me trust him again.

I pulled my gun.

Darnell’s eyes dropped to it. His entire body stiffened, and he looked back up at me. “Chi—”

The shot echoed through the warehouse.

After that, there wasn’t shit left to discuss.

Outside, I headed toward the truck before realizing E had stopped behind me. He stood staring back at the warehouse, rubbing a hand down his face.

“You good?” I asked, turning toward him when he didn't immediately follow.

“Bro, we gotta get the fuck out this shit.” E finally looked at me, and something about his expression told me he wasn't just talking because of what had happened inside.

I turned toward him.

“I’m serious, Chi. We too fucking old for this.” E shook his head, dragging his hand over his beard before looking toward the truck. “We got more money than we know what to do with. Vice, properties, investments, Miami, the restaurant with Jru. Our kids’ kids can be straight without us touching another dollar from the streets.”

He wasn’t wrong, but getting out wasn’t as simple as saying we were done.

“Too many people eat off what we built. We can’t shut everything down tomorrow.” I folded my arms, thinking about how many different things we had going on and how many people depended on them.

“I know. I’m not saying this shit gonna be easy for us to step away from. We been in it too long, and it’s too many moving parts. But this shit gotta happen before something happen to one of us, bro.” E looked at me, waiting for me to understand that he wasn't talking about some temporary change of heart.

My mind went straight to Ashlynn and the baby growing inside her. There was a time when I accepted whatever came with this life. Now I had a wife waiting at home and a child I wanted to watch grow up.

“After marrying Ashlynn and finding out this baby on the way…” I nodded, letting out a slow breath. “Yeah, man. I feel you.”

“We do it smart,” E said. “Start pulling back. Move what can go legit. Shut down what can’t. It might take time, but long as we moving toward the door instead of deeper into the room, we good.”

I could live with that.

I reached for the truck door, then caught the look on E’s face. The nigga was rubbing his beard trying not to smile.

“What the fuck you done did?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him. I knew that look too damn well, and it usually meant he'd done something I wasn't about to agree with.

His grin broke loose. “Since we talking about wives and shit, I married Jru.”

I stared at him, waiting for the punch line that never came. “You did what?”

“I married Jru,” he repeated, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“When?” I asked, still trying to figure out how the fuck that could've happened without me knowing.

“Today.”

Something wasn’t adding up. Jru had been raising hell over this nigga moving her belongings. There was no way she’d turned around and happily married him a few hours later.

I narrowed my eyes. “Does Jru know she married?”

E rubbed his beard. “She knows she signed some papers.” The grin on his face told me everything I needed to know before he even finished answering.

There it was.

“E.” I stared at him, already knowing I wasn't going to like whatever came out of his mouth next.

“She thought they were for the restaurant.” He shrugged like he'd just told me something perfectly reasonable.

I stared at this motherfucker. We had just finished discussing how we were too old for bullshit and needed to make smarter decisions, while his ass had secretly married a woman.

“Nigga, what the fuck is wrong with you?” I asked, dragging a hand down my face.

“She should’ve read everything before she signed it.” E said that shit with a straight face, which somehow made the situation even worse.

“You married a woman who don’t know she married?” I looked at him, trying to give his ass one last opportunity to hear how crazy that sounded.

E shrugged. “She told me she was waiting until marriage.”

“So your solution was to secretly marry her?” I threw my hand out toward him, wondering what the fuck kind of logic he'd used to arrive at that conclusion.

“Problem solved.” He looked at me like there wasn't another damn thing to discuss.

A laugh came out before I could stop it. “You know she gon’ fuck you up, right?”

“She’ll be mad.” E rubbed his beard again, still looking entirely too satisfied with himself.

“Mad?” I opened the passenger door, shaking my head. “That girl damn near lost her mind because you moved her shit. Wait until she find out she Mrs. King.”

“She’ll get over it.” He headed around the truck, clearly convinced his little plan was going to work out exactly the way he wanted.

I climbed into the truck laughing. Ashlynn had asked me if we moved too fast, but compared to E’s crazy ass, we had taken our sweet fucking time.

I had Ashlynn and our baby waiting at home.

E had Jru—his whole fucking wife.

She just didn’t know it yet.

Getting out the streets might’ve been the smartest decision we’d made in years, because at the rate E was going, the streets weren’t the motherfucker he needed to worry about.

Jru was.

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CHAPTER 17



I'd been staying at Ezra's house for two weeks, and as mad as I still was about how I ended up there, I couldn't lie. The place was beautiful.

The huge cream-stone house sat behind private gates, surrounded by enough land and trees to give him all the privacy in the world. Inside was dark wood, black-framed windows and expensive furniture in shades of brown, cream and gray. It looked exactly like a rich single man lived there.

Ezra had originally put all my stuff in his bedroom because apparently boundaries didn't exist in his world. The first night, I moved what I needed into a guest room down the hall. He hadn't liked it, and I hadn't cared.

Things had been slightly awkward since Miami, mostly because I'd been avoiding him. We still talked and ate together. One night, I fell asleep watching a movie and woke up in the guest room, which meant his bossy ass had carried me there instead of taking me to his bed. I appreciated that, but I still wasn't playing house.

Then there was Ashlynn. Every time I called, she either didn't answer or rushed me off the phone. At first, I thought she was avoiding my attitude about her moving in with Malachi and letting him get rid of our apartment. After two weeks, I knew better. That girl was hiding something.

On top of that, Ezra had replaced me at Vice, and I hadn't worked in two weeks. I figured we would be working on the restaurant, except he hadn't

said another word about it.

I owned forty percent of a restaurant that, as far as I knew, didn't even exist yet, and I was sitting in a mansion with no paycheck coming in.

That wasn't going to work for me.

This morning, I'm done avoiding his ass.

I find Ezra in his office behind his laptop. One look at my face and he leans back in his chair like he already knows I came in here with an attitude.

"What is going on with my restaurant?" I demand, stopping in front of his desk with my arms folded.

"Good morning to you too." He leans back farther, looking entirely too comfortable for somebody I'm about to get into it with.

"Ezra, I'm serious. You replaced me at Vice, I haven't worked in two weeks, and you haven't said anything about this restaurant I supposedly own forty percent of. Right now, the only thing I own forty percent of is a stack of paperwork." I gesture toward his desk, waiting for him to give me an actual explanation.

His eyebrow goes up at supposedly, and the corner of his mouth starts lifting.

"Don't smile," I warn him, narrowing my eyes.

"I ain't smiling." He presses his lips together, which only makes it more obvious that he's trying not to laugh.

"You're about to." I point at him, refusing to let him turn this into another one of his little jokes.

He is, until I tell him I'm not comfortable sitting around his house with no income and depending on him for everything. That wipes the amusement

off his face.

Ezra closes his laptop and stands. “Go get dressed.” His tone changes, and I can tell he's already decided what we're about to do without bothering to tell me.

I glance down at my leggings and T-shirt. “I am dressed.”

“Put on some real clothes.” He grabs his keys before I can argue. “Come on. Let’s go look at your restaurant.”

Well, shit.

Ezra pulls up in front of a large brick building on a busy Westhaven street. Before I can ask if he already bought it, he tells me he hasn’t. He wanted me to see it first.

That alone quiets some of my attitude.

The place needs work, but the second I walk inside, I can picture what it could become. Tall windows cover the front, exposed brick runs along one wall, and the open floor gives us plenty of space.

I point toward the far wall. “The bar should go there. Keep the middle open for tables. I want it grown and sexy, but not stiff. Somewhere you can come on a date or with your girls, eat good, have drinks and actually hear each other.” I turn slowly, taking in the room from different angles while the ideas start coming together in my head.

Ezra listens as I walk through the space, only getting offended when I tell him it’s not going to look like Vice.

“What the fuck wrong with Vice? My club nice as fuck.” He looks at me like I've personally insulted something he gave birth to.

I laugh. “I didn’t say it wasn’t. But it’s a nightclub.”

“You said that shit with your face.” He points at me, shaking his head while I try not to laugh harder.

What I don’t say is how much I like that he’s actually listening to me. Ezra could’ve bought the building, hired whoever he wanted and handed me a finished restaurant. Instead, he waited for my opinion.

When he asks if I like it, I don’t have to think about my answer. “Yeah. I really do.” I glance around one more time, already imagining what the place could look like once we finished it.

His grin appears. “So I can buy the motherfucker?”

“Yes, but we are not calling it Vice 2.0.” I turn toward him, making sure he understands that part isn't negotiable.

“Ain’t shit wrong with Vice 2.0.” He spreads his hands like he's presenting me with the greatest restaurant name anybody's ever thought of.

I give him a look. “That name is horrible.”

He reminds me that I only own forty percent, and I remind him that I’ll use every bit of my forty to fight that ugly-ass name.

Laughing, Ezra heads for the door. “Then name the motherfucker.”

I follow him outside, still thinking about names, until I see the black Mercedes-Benz GLE Coupe parked near the curb.

Red interior.

Then I see the key in Ezra’s hand.

“No.” I stop walking, looking from the car to his face.

“You don’t even know what I was about to say.” He holds the key loosely between his fingers, already wearing that smug expression I know too damn

well.

“Yes, I do.” I shake my head, refusing to move another step.

He holds the key toward me. “Come get your car.”

Instead of taking it, I look from him to the Mercedes. The building was one thing. This is something else.

“What are we doing, Ezra? You moved me into your house, replaced me at Vice, gave me forty percent of a restaurant, and now you bought me a car.” I look at him, trying to understand how he can keep making decisions this big without ever stopping to ask how I feel about them.

He looks at me like the answer should be obvious. “You my woman.”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He doesn't smile or look away, which tells me he means every word.

When he steps closer, I put my hand against his chest. “You don’t get to just decide I’m your woman. That is not how relationships work.”

“Maybe not yours.” His hand closes loosely around my wrist. “I’m not fucking with nobody else, Jru, and I don’t want nobody else fucking with you. I moved you into my house because I want you there. I’m doing business with you because I believe you can handle that shit. So yeah, you my woman.”

The crazy part is he says it like there’s nothing left to discuss.

“I don’t need you taking care of me.” I keep my hand against his chest, refusing to let him think all this money is going to change who I am.

“I know.” His answer comes so easily that I almost don't know what to do with it.

His answer catches me off guard, and he must see it on my face because his voice loses some of its edge.

“I know you can take care of yourself. That don’t mean I gotta sit around and watch you struggle just so you can prove it.” His thumb moves gently against my wrist, and for once, he isn't trying to argue me into agreeing with him.

I look away, because I don’t have a smart response ready for that one. What I do have is a problem with not making my own money, and I tell him that.

Ezra doesn’t argue. If I want to work at Vice until the restaurant opens, he’ll put me back on the schedule.

That eases something in me.

“You’re still bossy,” I tell him, looking back at his face.

“Yeah.” He doesn't even attempt to deny it.

“And possessive.” I raise my eyebrows, waiting to see what he has to say about that.

A grin tugs at his mouth as his hand settles around my waist. “Very.”

“That’s not cute.” I try to keep my expression serious, but he's already looking at me like he knows better.

“You like that shit.” He pulls me a little closer, watching my face.

“Who told you that?” I challenge him, lifting my chin.

“That face you making.” His grin widens, and I know I've already lost this argument.

I try to turn away before he sees me smile, but he pulls me closer and kisses me.

By the time he lets me go, my hand is gripping the front of his shirt. “So this is your way of asking me to be your girlfriend?”

His face twists. “Girlfriend sound young as fuck.”

“You are old.” I laugh, enjoying the way his expression changes.

“Keep playing.” He narrows his eyes, but the smile tugging at his mouth ruins whatever threat he's trying to make.

I laugh. “What am I then?”

His eyes stay on mine. “Mine.”

Of course that would be his answer.

He presses the Mercedes key into my palm, and when I remind him that I still haven’t agreed to any of this, he opens the driver’s door.

“Discussion over.” He gestures toward the seat, looking entirely too satisfied with himself.

I swear this man gets on my nerves.

I pull the Mercedes into Ezra’s driveway behind him, still not believing he really bought me a car. A nice-ass car too.

He catches me looking back at it when we get out.

“You know I might give this back, right?” I ask, folding my arms as I look between him and the car.

“You drove that motherfucker home. Your ass ain’t giving shit back.” He laughs and heads toward the house without waiting for me.

I roll my eyes and follow him inside, barely making it through the foyer before the smell of food hits me.

“What you cook?” I ask, looking toward the kitchen.

“I ain’t cook shit.” He keeps walking like the smell isn't filling up the entire house.

“Then why it smell like somebody been in your kitchen cooking all day?” I follow behind him, already trying to figure out what else he's got going on.

Ezra glances back at me. “Shit, it’s your kitchen too.”

I stop walking. “See, there you go. Just deciding stuff again.”

“Ain’t shit to decide. You live here.” He gestures around the house like the matter is already settled.

“According to you.” I give him a pointed look.

“According to all your shit upstairs.” He keeps walking, clearly enjoying himself.

I’m still rolling my eyes when I follow him around the corner and see a chef behind the island plating dinner. Then I notice the candles and two place settings on the table.

This was already planned.

The realization makes me look at Ezra differently. I walked into his office this morning raising hell, thinking he’d forgotten all about the restaurant while I sat around his house with nothing to do. Meanwhile, he already had the building lined up, the car waiting and this dinner planned.

“You already had all this set up?” I ask, glancing between him and the table.

Ezra pulls out my chair with that little grin on his face. “Sit down, Jru.”

I shake my head, fighting my own smile. “You get on my nerves.”

“But you smiling.” He waits beside the chair, looking pleased with himself.

I sit.

Dinner is good enough that I stop questioning him long enough to enjoy it. We talk about the restaurant, and Ezra throws out a few names that prove I should never let him anywhere near the naming process.

“Velvet,” he says at one point, looking across the table like he's just come up with something brilliant.

I put my fork down. “That sounds like an old strip club.”

The look on his face lasts two seconds before he starts laughing.

My phone lights up beside my plate before I can enjoy being right.

Ashlynn.

I answer immediately and barely get through asking why she’s been ducking me before she claims Malachi is calling and hangs up.

I stare at my phone.

Ezra laughs from across the table.

“She’s hiding something,” I mutter, setting the phone down beside my plate.

“Probably.” He reaches for his fork like he hasn't just said something suspicious.

My eyes lift. “What do you mean, probably?”

The man suddenly becomes extremely interested in his food.

“Ezra.” I narrow my eyes, watching him avoid looking at me.

“I don’t know shit.” He answers too quickly, barely giving me a chance to finish saying his name.

He says it too fast, which tells me all I need to know. Whatever Ashlynn is hiding, Ezra knows something about it.

I’ll deal with both of them tomorrow.

Right now, I’m full, a little tipsy and enjoying myself too much to ruin my own night.

When I push my chair back, Ezra stands and tells me to come upstairs. I remind him that I know exactly where my room is, but apparently he has other plans.

“You ain’t going to your room.” He waits for me beside the stairs, giving me that look that says he isn't interested in another argument.

I should go straight to the guest room just because of his attitude. Instead, I follow him upstairs.

I’m starting to see how this man keeps getting his way.

Ezra opens his bedroom door, and I stop when I see candles burning around the room, music playing low and a massage table set up near the bed.

“What the hell is that?” I ask, looking from the table to him.

“What it look like?” He steps farther into the room, acting like the answer should be obvious.

“I know it’s a massage table, smart-ass. Who’s massaging me?” I fold my arms, waiting for him to explain himself.

He starts rolling up his sleeves. “Who the fuck you think?”

I laugh. “You?”

“Yeah, me. Take that shit off and get on the fucking table.” He nods toward it, looking completely serious.

My eyebrows shoot up. “Is that how you talk to somebody after setting up candles?”

“Jru, I done fed you, bought your ass a car, and got candles burning all through my damn bedroom. Don’t start acting difficult now. Take that shit off and get on the fucking table.” He gestures around the room, looking offended that I'm questioning his version of romance.

“You really don’t know how to be romantic.” I shake my head, trying not to laugh.

“Apparently I do. You still standing here smiling.” He gives me a smug grin, clearly convinced he's won another argument.

I tell him to turn around, grab a towel and disappear into the bathroom before he can say anything else.

The second the door closes, some of my attitude disappears with it.

I’m nervous.

I’ve kissed Ezra. I slept beside him in Miami and woke up on his chest, but tonight feels different. I can feel it even while I’m telling myself not to overthink it.

When I come back out wrapped in the towel, Ezra looks at me without making one smart comment. He simply pulls the sheet back and tells me to come over.

His hands settle on my shoulders once I’m facedown, and I tense.

“Relax.” His voice comes from somewhere behind me as his palms rest against my shoulders.

“I am relaxed.” I try to loosen my muscles, but apparently my body isn't cooperating.

“You stiff as fuck.” His thumbs press gently against the tight muscles near my neck.

“Maybe because you keep telling me to relax.” I turn my head slightly, giving him a look over my shoulder.

His laugh rumbles behind me before his thumbs press into a tight spot between my shoulders.

“Oh.” The sound slips out before I can stop it, and I immediately close my eyes.

He laughs again, and I immediately warn him not to start.

“I ain’t say shit.” His hands keep moving, and I can practically hear him smiling.

He doesn’t have to. I can hear the grin in his voice.

I hate to admit it, but he knows what he’s doing. After a few minutes, my eyes close and the tension I’ve been carrying starts leaving with every pass of his hands.

When I ask if he’s done this before, he turns it around on me.

“Why? You jealous?” His voice carries that teasing edge that tells me he's enjoying getting under my skin.

“Boy, please.” I keep my face turned toward the pillow, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing my expression.

“There she go.” He chuckles and continues working the tension from my shoulders.

I leave that alone.

A few minutes later, he tells me to turn over. My nerves return so fast that he notices before I move.

“You ain’t gotta.” His voice softens, and his hands stop moving while he waits for me to decide.

That softens something in me.

I turn over beneath the sheet, and for a second we just look at each other. When he reaches to move a strand of hair away from my face, I catch his wrist and pull him closer.

His mouth touches mine softly.

I kiss him again, and this time I don’t let him pull away as quickly. When he finally does, I keep my hand around his neck.

“You remember what I told you? Why I waited?” I ask quietly, searching his face.

His expression changes. “Yeah. I remember.”

“We ain’t gotta do shit tonight, Jru.” His voice is steady, and he looks directly at me, making sure I understand he isn't expecting anything.

Ezra eases back enough for me to see his face. His hand stays against my cheek, but he isn’t leaning toward me anymore. He’s waiting.

“I know.” I keep my eyes on his, letting the words settle between us.

And I do. He could finish the massage, kiss me good night and let me walk right back down the hall. Somehow, knowing that makes it easier to admit what I want.

“I want to.” My voice is quiet, but I don't look away.

He studies my face. “You sure?”

“Yes.” I nod, making sure he understands that I'm not saying it just because he wants to hear it.

I sit up, gathering the sheet around myself, and he helps me off the table. When I reach his bed, I sit on the edge, and Ezra settles beside me. Before he can say anything else, I reach for the front of his shirt and pull him closer.

“Jru—” He starts to speak, but I shake my head before he can finish.

“I want you, Ezra.” I hold onto his shirt, refusing to let my nerves make the decision for me.

I hold his gaze. I’m nervous, but I’m not confused. I know what being in this bed with him means. I knew before I asked him to sit beside me.

“I know what I told you about waiting,” I continue. “You don’t have to remind me. I’m the one changing my mind.”

His eyes move over my face before returning to mine. “Ain’t trying to change it for you.”

“You’re not.” I slide my hand against his cheek. “I’m telling you what I want.”

For once, the man who always has something to say goes quiet.

“What?” I ask, studying his expression.

His mouth curves. “I’m listening.”

“Well, listen closer.” I lean toward him, closing the distance between us.

I kiss him, and this time there’s nothing hesitant about it. My fingers settle at the back of his neck while his arm wraps around me, drawing me closer.

I’ve spent enough nights wondering what it would feel like to stop pulling away from him. Tonight, I don’t.

When our mouths separate, I stay close.

“I’m nervous about it hurting,” I admit, looking into his eyes. “That’s all.”

His expression softens without turning pitying. “We taking our time. You need me to stop, tell me.”

“I will.” I nod, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders.

“I mean that shit, Jru.” He keeps his eyes on mine, waiting until he knows I'm listening.

“I heard you.” I give him a small smile.

He brushes his thumb along my cheek, waiting until my eyes meet his again. “You ain’t gotta push through nothing for me.”

Something in my chest loosens. I brush my thumb along his jaw, taking in how closely he’s watching me. For all that mouth he has, he’s being gentle with me, and it makes me want him even more.

“Then quit looking at me like I might run,” I tell him, trying to lighten the moment.

A low laugh leaves him. “Your ass been running from me for two weeks.”

“And now I’m sitting in your bed. Catch up.” I lift my eyebrows, giving him a look that makes his grin spread.

His grin spreads before he kisses me again.

I ease back against the pillows, bringing him with me. The nerves are still there, but so is everything else—the way he looks at me, the warmth of his hand around mine, how much I want this man close.

He pauses, brushing his lips against my forehead.

“Talk to me,” he murmurs, keeping his face close to mine.

“I’m good.” I look up at him, wanting him to see that I mean it.

His eyes stay on mine. “I got you.”

“I know.” I draw him back down to me. “Come here, Ezra.”

This time, I don’t leave any space between us.

Afterward, I’m curled against Ezra’s chest while his fingers move slowly along my back.

Two weeks ago, this crazy man moved all my stuff into his house, and I claimed a guest room out of spite.

Now I’m naked in his bed.

Life has jokes.

I lift my head when I feel his chest move beneath me. “Why are you smiling?” I ask, watching that familiar grin spread across his face.

His hand settles at my waist, and his grin gets wider. “Now that you done let me get that, you definitely mine. Ain’t no backsies.”

I stare at him before a laugh slips out. “Ain’t no backsies? How old are you?”

“Old enough to know your ass ain’t going back down that hall.” He pulls me a little closer, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“You are so fucking possessive.” I shake my head, still laughing.

“And you knew that before you got in my bed.” He raises an eyebrow, daring me to argue with him.

I slap his chest, but he catches my hand and kisses my fingers. That tiny gesture hits me harder than the car, the chef or the candles.

I settle back against him, thinking about everything waiting for me tomorrow. I still need to find out what Ashlynn is hiding, name a restaurant and get back on the schedule at Vice.

Then there’s this possessive forty-one-year-old man who spent the day telling me I’m his woman.

After everything today and especially tonight, I'm definitely his woman. For the first time, I'm done fighting it.

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Chapter 18



Six in the morning, and I was sitting on the side of my bed with a naked woman behind me instead of sending one home.

I looked out at the sun coming up, then back at Jru. She was on her side, tangled in the sheets, sleeping like she hadn’t spent two weeks avoiding this room.

A laugh slipped out of me.

I reached for my shorts, still looking at her.

Last night was different as fuck. I’d never been with a virgin, and keeping myself in check wasn’t easy. Had to slow my ass down, though. We had a couple awkward moments, but we figured that shit out. Wasn’t about to fuck up her first time being impatient.

If she thought her ass was going back to that guest room, she had another motherfucking thing coming.

Then I remembered the condom I never put on.

I paused with my shorts in my hand.

Well, fuck.

The possibility of getting her pregnant should've had me doing more than sitting there. Instead, I looked at her and thought about a little girl with that same smart-ass mouth.

Two of them telling me what to do in my own house.

I shook my head, grinning. That shit didn't bother me nearly enough.

We'd talk about it when she got up. I pulled on my shorts and stood.

"Where you going?" Jru's sleepy voice stopped me before I made it to the door. She barely opened her eyes, lifting her head just enough to find me standing beside the bed.

"Downstairs. Got calls to make." I glanced back at her, taking in the way she was already trying to fall asleep again. "Go back to sleep. I'll wake you before we meet the contractor."

She nodded and pulled the sheet higher. I left before I found a reason to get back in bed.

By the time I got downstairs, I had coffee in my hand and Malachi on the phone. Yara had sent over the contractor's estimate and the documents we needed to sign. I opened them on my laptop at the kitchen island.

"Crew still starting Monday at the new club?" I asked, scrolling through the paperwork while I waited for his answer.

"Yeah. I'm meeting the foreman this afternoon." Malachi sounded like he was moving around, probably handling his own morning business.

"Good. Me and Jru meeting the restaurant contractor this morning." I opened another document, checking the numbers Yara had sent over.

Before he answered, the chef came over to ask about breakfast. I told him French toast, eggs, turkey bacon and fruit for Jru, then asked if the flowers had arrived.

Malachi heard every fucking word.

“Flowers?” The way he said that one word told me his nosy ass was already smiling.

“Don’t start.” I took another sip of coffee, knowing damn well he wasn't about to leave it alone.

His laugh came through the phone. “You got her a car yesterday. Now you ordering breakfast and flowers? What happened last night?”

I took a drink of coffee, letting his nosy ass talk while the chef went back to work.

“All I know is she better not start that guest-room shit again.” I leaned back against the island, thinking about how comfortable she'd looked sleeping in my bed.

“Oh, so that’s what happened.” He laughed harder, and I could practically picture the stupid-ass grin on his face. “Got your ass downstairs making arrangements.”

“Ain’t you married? Go arrange some shit for your own woman.” I shook my head, already tired of hearing his mouth.

Another call came through before he could answer. I looked at the number, frowned and told him to hold on.

“Who this?” I answered, not recognizing the number.

“It’s Simone.” Her voice came through like I was supposed to be happy to hear it.

I let out a groan. Fuck. Let a bitch suck my dick one time, and now she calling my personal phone.

“How the fuck you get my number?” I asked, staring at the screen like that shit might explain why she thought calling me was a good idea.

“Somebody gave it to me. I’ve been trying to reach you.” She sounded entirely too comfortable for somebody who had no business calling me.

“Then lose it. You got no business calling my personal phone.” I pushed away from the counter, already irritated.

She laughed like I was playing. “Why you acting like that? We had a good time.”

“We had one afternoon. Whatever you thought that was, it’s done. Don’t call my motherfucking—”

Somebody cleared their throat behind me.

I turned around and forgot what the fuck I was saying.

Jru stood barefoot in my kitchen wearing one of my T-shirts. Her hair was all over her head, her glasses were crooked, and she had a crease on her cheek from my pillow.

Damn.

She adjusted her glasses. I looked at her legs, then her face.

How the fuck she roll out of bed looking like that?

She hadn’t done a damn thing but wake up, and I was already thinking about canceling appointments.

“Ezra?” Simone called, dragging my attention back to the phone still pressed against my ear.

I remembered the phone against my ear.

“Bitch, stop calling my phone.” I ended the call before she could say another word, then switched back to Malachi.

“Call you later,” I told him, already reaching to end that conversation too.

“Hold up, who—”

I ended that call too. Too many motherfuckers asking questions before breakfast.

Jru folded her arms, shifting her weight onto one leg while she watched me. “Who was that?”

“Nobody.” I set my phone down, already knowing she wasn't going to accept that answer.

Her eyebrow lifted. “Nobody had a good afternoon with you?” She tilted her head, and I could tell she'd heard enough of that conversation to put some shit together.

“Somebody from before you. Somebody I just told not to call me again.” I held her gaze, making it clear I wasn't entertaining that woman or anybody else.

She watched me for another second. I closed my laptop and walked over, catching her hand before she could tuck it back beneath her arm.

“Come eat.” I tugged gently at her fingers, trying to get her moving toward the table.

“That’s your answer?” She stayed where she was, looking up at me like she was deciding whether to start an argument before breakfast.

“That’s my answer. Asking again ain’t getting you a different one.” I wasn't about to spend my morning discussing some woman who didn't mean shit to me.

She let me lead her to the table, but I could tell she hadn’t liked hearing that call. Then she noticed the flowers beside her plate and stopped.

“These for me?” Her eyes moved from the arrangement to my face, and some of that attitude she'd walked downstairs with started slipping.

“Nah. Chef been doing a hell of a job.” I kept my face straight, enjoying the way she cut her eyes at me.

She cut her eyes at me before leaning closer to smell them. I pulled out her chair, watching the smile she tried to hide.

“Thank you,” she said as she sat, looking up at me with a softer expression than she'd had a minute ago.

“You welcome.” I pushed her chair in before taking my seat.

Once the food came out, I told her what we had lined up. After breakfast, we’d finalize the building paperwork and meet the contractor to go over the restaurant work. Yara had the appointments organized, and Jru needed to be there to approve what she wanted done.

Halfway through her French toast, she was making notes on her phone about the kitchen and bar.

I watched her talk with syrup on the corner of her mouth, then reached across and wiped it with my thumb.

“Finish eating first, woman. Building ain’t going nowhere.” I nodded toward her plate, watching her glance down at the food before giving me one of those looks.

By ten that night, I was upstairs at Vice reviewing paperwork while Jru worked downstairs.

We’d handled the building paperwork and met with the contractor earlier. With the restaurant a few weeks to a month away from being ready, Jru had

time to train the new manager. I hadn’t wanted her back at Vice, but this motherfucker was already struggling to run the floor. Somebody needed to show his ass what to do before he ran my club into the fucking ground. Might as well be the woman who knew how it was supposed to run.

A knock pulled my attention from the desk.

“Yeah?” I called without looking up, finishing the line I'd been reading.

The door opened, and Simone stepped inside wearing a belted coat.

I set my pen down.

“You lost?” I asked, leaning back in my chair as I looked her over. I couldn't believe this woman had the nerve to show up at my club after the conversation we'd had that morning.

She shut the door behind her. “I think we got off on the wrong foot this morning.” She smiled like we were about to have some friendly conversation.

“Nah. I told you to lose my number. Why the fuck would you come up to my establishment? Is you cool?” I stared at her, trying to figure out what part of our last conversation she'd misunderstood.

“You enjoyed yourself last time.” She untied her belt and slipped off the coat, draping it over the chair. Lingerie underneath. Apparently, she thought that settled the argument.

I looked at her. Pissing me off or not, I wasn’t gonna hold you. She had a body out of this world. Still, she had me fucked all the way up, though.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Bitch, you came in here dressed like that thinking I was gonna change my mind?”

“Come on, Ezra.” She walked around the desk, reaching for my shirt with a smile that disappeared the second I moved away from her.

I stepped back and pulled my gun.

Simone froze, then snatched her hand back. Her eyes went wide.

“Bitch, I ain’t got too many more times I’m gonna tell you to get the fuck out my office.” I kept my eyes on her, waiting for her to understand that I wasn't playing.

“I thought we had something.” She backed up, her voice catching as she glanced between me and the gun. “I just wanted to finish what we started.”

“Ain’t shit to finish. I’m married. Unless you my motherfucking wife, get the fuck out my office.” I was done having this conversation, and I damn sure wasn't about to keep repeating myself.

The office door opened as the last words left my mouth.

Jru stood there, her hand on the knob. She looked at Simone, took in the coat hanging over the chair, then looked at me and the gun in my hand.

Her fingers tightened around the knob, and she stopped just outside the threshold.

Fuck.

I lowered the gun and put it away. Simone grabbed her coat, pulling it around herself as she hurried toward the door. Jru moved aside just enough to let her pass, her eyes staying on me.

I waited until Simone was gone, then stepped forward to close the door.

“Leave it open.” Jru's voice stopped me before I could pull it shut. There was something about how quietly she said it that made me look back at her.

I stopped with my hand against it. Jru stood near the doorway, arms folded tightly across her chest.

“So that’s nobody from earlier, right?” Her eyes moved toward the hallway where Simone had disappeared, then came back to mine.

“That’s somebody I told not to call me. She showed up anyway, and I told her to leave.” I kept my voice even, hoping she'd at least heard enough to understand that part.

Jru gave a short nod, pressing her lips together. I reached toward her, but she stepped back before I could touch her.

“Nah. You’re married, Ezra?” Her voice was low, but the way she looked at me made my stomach tighten.

I dropped my hand.

She looked straight at me. “This whole time, you’ve been married?” Her eyes searched my face, waiting for me to tell her she'd misunderstood what she'd heard.

“Yeah.” The word came out before I could figure out how the fuck to explain the rest.

Her arms fell to her sides. For a second, she just stared at me, and I knew exactly what she thought I’d admitted to.

“Jru, listen—” I stepped toward her, but she shook her head.

“After last night?” Her voice cracked, and I watched her struggle to keep her expression together. “After everything I told you? I trusted you.”

“I know. Let me explain.” I reached for her again, but she moved back before my hand could touch her.

“Then who the fuck is your wife?” She swallowed, looking away for a second before facing me again. “You moved me into your house. You’ve been telling me I’m your woman. Why would you pursue me if you’re already married?”

“Jru—” I started, trying to get her to slow down long enough to hear me.

“No. Answer me.” Her voice rose, and she stood there waiting, her jaw tight.

We stared at each other. She waited, her jaw tight, while I tried to figure out how the fuck to explain what I’d done without making this worse.

“Jru, let me—” I took another step toward her, but she wasn't letting me get close enough to explain anything.

She raised both hands and took a slow step backward. Then another.

“I don’t even know why the fuck I’m here.” Her voice dropped, and for a second, she looked more hurt than angry.

I moved toward her, but she shook her head.

“Fuck you, Ezra. I’m done.” She turned before I could get another word out.

She turned and walked off, passing Malachi as he came down the hall. He looked after her, then back at me.

“Man, what—” Malachi started, his expression changing when he saw my face.

“Fuck!”

I snatched the glass off my desk and hurled it against the wall. It shattered beside the cabinet, scattering across the floor.

Malachi stopped in the doorway. “What the fuck going on?” He looked at the broken glass before turning his attention back to me.

I braced both hands on the desk, staring at the papers spread across it. A few hours ago, she’d been sitting beside me signing off on plans for her

restaurant. Now she thought I'd made her somebody's side bitch.

"She heard me tell Simone I'm married." I dragged a hand down my face, already knowing how bad that sounded without the rest of the story.

"Simone?" His eyebrows drew together. "What the fuck she doing here?"

"Does that shit matter right now?" I snapped, looking up at him.

He glanced toward the stairs. "Then tell Jru who you married to."

I looked up at him.

Telling her she was my wife would clear up one thing and give her a whole new reason to walk away.

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Chapter 19



If this baby was trying to kill me, it could at least wait until I got my salon open.

I'd spent twenty minutes staring at flooring samples on my laptop before a picture of somebody's lunch sent me running to the bathroom. Wasn't even real food in front of me. A fucking picture.

Now I was back on the couch, sucking on a cracker like it owed me money.

Malachi had left water, crackers and enough instructions to make me feel like I needed adult supervision. I appreciated him. I did. But if he asked whether I'd eaten one more time, I was throwing up on his shoes.

My phone sat beside me. Jru's name was still near the top of my recent calls, reminding me I'd hung up on her yesterday during dinner.

I'd been sick, overwhelmed and avoiding a conversation I should've had weeks ago. Those were reasons. None of them made me a good friend.

She was already mad about the apartment. How was I supposed to follow that with, Surprise, bitch, I'm married and pregnant?

Then I'd overheard Malachi on the phone with Ezra.

Paperwork. Jru's signature. A marriage she knew nothing about.

I’d stood outside the bedroom listening, waiting for one of them to laugh and say they were playing. Neither did. Malachi didn’t know I’d heard, and Ezra damn sure didn’t.

Every time Jru called after that, I could barely get through hello. I wanted to tell her, but I knew she’d ask how long I’d known. The longer I waited, the uglier that answer got.

Tonight, I couldn’t settle. I closed my laptop and reached for my phone just as Malachi called.

“You need to check on your girl,” he said before I could speak, his voice carrying enough urgency to make me sit up. “She just left the club crying. Some shit happened with E.”

My stomach tightened. “What happened?”

“She heard him say—”

I hung up. Whatever he was about to explain, I needed to hear Jru first.

Her name appeared on my screen before I finished finding it.

“Friend?” I answered immediately, already bracing myself for whatever she was about to tell me.

“Please don’t hang up on me.” Her voice broke, and I could hear her struggling to get the words out. “Ashlynn, I really need to talk to you.”

My stomach dropped.

“I’m here. Where you at?” I asked, pushing myself off the couch and reaching for my shoes.

“In the car. I don’t know where I’m going.” She sounded completely lost, and hearing my girl like that made my chest hurt.

“I’m sending you the address. Come to me. And if you can’t see through them tears, pull over.” I kept my voice steady, even though I was already worried about her driving around upset.

I stayed on the phone until she sounded steady enough to drive, then went to wait by the door.

When she arrived, she barely made it inside before falling against me. I wrapped my arms around her, and she cried into my shoulder so hard I stopped trying to ask questions.

“Come sit down,” I whispered once she could breathe, rubbing my hand slowly over her back. “I got you.”

On the couch, Jru pulled her glasses off and wiped her face with both hands.

“I’m so fucking stupid.” She stared down at her lap, shaking her head like she was angry with herself for even being there.

“Don’t do that.” I moved closer, hating the way she was talking about herself.

She shook her head. “Everything was too good to be true. I knew it, and I still let him—” Her voice caught, and she pressed her lips together before she could finish.

I looked at her. Something about the way she'd stopped talking made me nervous. “Jru, did you have sex with him?”

Her face crumpled.

“Last night.” She barely got the words out before another tear slipped down her cheek.

“Fuck, Jru.” I leaned forward, my own panic getting ahead of me. “Bitch, please tell me you used a motherfucking condom.”

She looked down at her hands.

I closed my eyes for a second. “Girl. What if you get pregnant?” The question came out sharper than I meant it to, and I regretted it the second I saw her expression.

“Please, Ashlynn. I can’t think about that right now.” Her voice broke again, and she wiped angrily at her face. “I already feel stupid enough.”

I swallowed everything else I wanted to say and moved closer, taking her hand. “Okay. Talk to me.” Whatever I thought about the situation could wait. Right now, she needed her friend.

“He knew why I waited, Ashlynn. I told him I didn’t want to end up like my mama, giving myself to men who didn’t give a fuck. I wanted it to mean something. I wanted to be married.” She covered her mouth, fighting to keep herself together before lowering her hand again. “And I changed my mind because I trusted him.”

I couldn’t look away from her.

“Trusting somebody doesn’t make you stupid,” I told her, squeezing her hand.

“Then why do I feel like this?” She drew a shaky breath, her eyes filling again. “Some woman called him this morning. He acted like it wasn’t shit. Tonight, I go upstairs, and she’s in his office wearing lingerie.”

“Was he—” I started, trying to figure out exactly what she'd walked in on.

“He was telling her to leave. I heard him. But then he said he was married.” Her eyes met mine, and the hurt in them nearly took me out. “He told me yes when I asked. Friend, this whole time.”

My stomach rolled so hard I barely got my hand over my mouth.

I made it to the bathroom, dropped to my knees and threw up. Behind me, Jru followed, her hurt giving way to alarm.

“Ashlynn? Girl, are you okay?” She crouched beside me, reaching for my hair before I could answer.

She gathered my hair off my neck while I leaned over the toilet. When it finally stopped, I reached blindly toward the counter.

“Hand me that towel,” I managed, keeping my eyes closed while I waited for the room to stop spinning.

She passed it to me and rubbed my back. I wiped my mouth, flushed, then sat against the cabinet with my eyes closed.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked softly, kneeling beside me with her hand still resting against my back. “You sick?”

I looked up at her worried face and couldn’t dodge another question.

“Fuck it. Cat’s out the bag, bitch. This nigga got me knocked up.” I let my head fall back against the cabinet, waiting for her reaction.

Jru’s hand stopped on my back.

“You’re pregnant?” Her eyes widened behind her glasses, and for a second, she looked like she'd forgotten everything that had brought her over here.

I nodded.

“And we married.” I lifted my left hand before she could ask another question.

She sat down on the bathroom floor.

“Bitch.” She stared at me like I had just announced I'd been living a whole second life.

“I know.” I gave her a weak smile.

“Pregnant and married?” Her gaze dropped to my ring again, then returned to my face.

I lifted my left hand. She stared at the ring, then at me.

“How the fuck you skipped both announcements?” she demanded, looking genuinely offended that I'd managed to keep two things that big from her.

I laughed, and it came out shaky. “I found out I was pregnant right before I showed you the shop. Then he asked me to marry him. We went to the courthouse, and afterward I told him about the baby. Everything happened fast as fuck.”

“And moving?” She leaned back against the cabinet, still trying to piece everything together.

“He wasn’t doing the living-apart shit after we got married. Next thing I knew, I was here, you were pissed about the apartment, and I didn’t know how to tell you the rest.” I rubbed my forehead, knowing how ridiculous it sounded now that I was finally saying it out loud.

She leaned her head against the cabinet beside mine.

“So you just stopped answering?” Her voice wasn't as angry as before, but I could hear how much it had bothered her.

“Bitch, I’ve been throwing my motherfucking back up. Every time I got on the phone with you and started talking, here come this shit again. I had to rush off before I threw up in your ear. I wasn’t avoiding you like that.” I wiped my mouth with the towel, wishing the nausea would give me a damn break. “Now, telling you I’m pregnant and married? Yeah, I kept putting that off. But I wasn’t just hanging up because I didn’t wanna talk to you.”

Jru looked down at my stomach, then back at me.

“Bitch, I thought you dumped me off on this nigga and just ran the fuck off.” She shook her head, and even through everything she'd been crying about, I could see the familiar attitude coming back.

A small chuckle slipped out of her, but she was still waiting for an answer.

“Girl, where the fuck I’m running? I can’t even make it from the couch to the refrigerator without gagging.” I gestured toward the bathroom around us, because this shit was proof enough.

She shook her head, wiping beneath her eyes. “You know what I mean. Your ass got a man and forgot how to answer the phone.”

“You right. I’ve been a shitty friend.” I reached for her hand, making sure she looked at me. “But I ain’t forgot about you. I just kept putting off telling you, and now look at us. Having a fucking meeting beside a toilet.”

“Could’ve told me before I rubbed your back. Had me thinking you ate some bad chicken.” She gave me a sideways look, and I knew she was finally starting to forgive my ass.

“Bitch, I wish it was chicken. Chicken leave. This motherfucker moving in for nine months.” I pointed toward my stomach, shaking my head.

She laughed, then looked at my stomach again. “Don’t call my godbaby a motherfucker.”

“Oh, now you claiming it?” I raised an eyebrow, pretending to be offended.

“Somebody got to. You already talking shit.” She reached over and touched my stomach, smiling through the last of her tears.

I leaned into her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. She hugged me back, and for a minute neither of us said anything.

Then she pulled away and pointed at me.

“Don’t throw up on me.” Her face twisted like she was suddenly remembering how close she was sitting.

“Then get your elbow out my stomach, bitch. You pressing the button.” I pushed lightly against her arm, laughing when she jumped.

She scooted back so fast we both started laughing.

Back in the living room, I got her water and sat beside her. Jru stared at the Mercedes key in her palm.

“Thanks to your ass, all my stuff is at his house. I’m not going back there.” She turned the key over in her hand, looking like she wanted to throw it across the room.

“You can get your things later,” I told her, watching the way her shoulders tightened.

“And go where? I’m damn sure not going back to Rosemont. Ain’t nothing there for me.” She looked up at me, and I could see the fear underneath all that anger.

I hesitated. “Maybe you should hear him out.” The words felt heavy coming out of my mouth, especially knowing what I knew.

She looked at me sharply.

“No. After my mama and Montae, I’m not doing this shit again. I don’t care what explanation he got.” Her voice was firm, but the way she held that key told me she was still hurting.

I understood why she said it. I also knew the explanation, and holding it in while she cried beside me was making me feel like somebody I wouldn’t trust either.

“Okay,” I said, nodding slowly. “You need somewhere you can breathe.”

I picked up my phone and sent her two thousand dollars. Hers buzzed in her lap.

“Ashlynn—” She looked at the notification, then back at me, already getting ready to argue.

“Get you a room. Somewhere you choose. We’ll figure the rest out.” I kept my voice firm, because I wasn't about to let her spend another night feeling like she had nowhere to go.

“Why can’t I just stay here?” She frowned, glancing around the living room.

“Because this is the first place he’ll come looking.” I held her gaze, hoping she understood that I wasn't trying to send her away.

She glanced toward the door, then back at her phone.

“What the fuck am I gonna do for a job? I can’t work at Vice, and I’m not doing that restaurant with a married man.” Her voice cracked again, and she looked down at the Mercedes key in her hand.

“Push come to shove, you can work with me when the shop opens.” I leaned toward her, wanting her to understand she wasn't about to be left without options.

“Bitch, I can’t do hair.” She looked at me like I'd completely lost my mind.

“Did I ask you to install a wig? You can answer the phone, fold some towels and sweep a fucking floor. We’ll find something you can do and make sure you get a check.” I waved my hand, already thinking about the little things I could have her doing.

Her mouth lifted a little.

“You hiring me before you even open?” She looked amused for the first time since we'd left the bathroom.

“Apparently. Don’t make me regret it.” I gave her a look, and she finally let out a real laugh.

We looked at hotels on her phone until she found one and booked it. I packed crackers and water into a bag, partly because I had plenty and partly because she hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

At the door, she turned back and looked at my stomach again.

“Damn. I’m really gonna be an auntie.” Her expression softened as she looked from my stomach to my face.

“Godmama, too.” I smiled, already knowing there wasn't anybody else I'd want in that role.

She pointed at me. “You better ask me properly. I deserve one fucking announcement.”

I laughed and hugged her. “I love you, friend.”

“Love you, too. Call me tomorrow. Don’t make me come back over here.” She hugged me tighter for a second before finally letting go.

I promised, then watched until she pulled away.

My phone rang while I was still by the door.

Malachi.

“Was Jru there?” he asked as soon as I answered, sounding like he'd been waiting for me to pick up.

“Yeah. She just left.” I closed the door and leaned against it.

“Where she going?” His voice sharpened, and I knew he wasn't asking just because he was curious.

I looked down at the empty water bottle she'd left on the table.

"Before I answer that, we need to talk about what Ezra did." I straightened, feeling my irritation come back as I thought about everything Jru had just told me.

"Ashlynn, what the fuck you talking about? I'm trying to find Jru." Malachi sounded frustrated, but I wasn't about to let him rush me off this conversation.

"And I'm talking to you. I know about that paperwork Ezra had her sign, and I know it wasn't all about no fucking restaurant." My voice rose as I finally said what I'd been holding in for weeks.

The line went quiet.

I tightened my grip on the phone.

"And before you get to fucking lying, nigga, I know who Ezra's wife is."

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Chapter 20



I sat in my truck with the phone against my ear, trying to figure out how my wife knew about paperwork that had nothing to do with her.

“Hello?” Ashlynn screamed into the phone, her voice loud enough to make me pull it away from my ear.

“Huh?” I muttered, still trying to figure out how much she'd overheard.

“Nigga, if you can huh, you can hear. What the fuck is going on, Malachi?” She wasn't playing, and I could hear the frustration building with every word.

I closed my eyes.

“And what happened tonight? Who was that bitch in his office wearing lingerie? Why the fuck did Jru leave that club crying?” She fired off the questions without giving me a chance to answer the first one.

“Ashlynn, calm the fuck down. I’m on my way home. We gonna talk.” I rubbed my forehead, knowing damn well that wasn't the answer she wanted.

“Yeah, you better.” Her voice dropped, but somehow that sounded worse than the yelling.

She hung up before I could say anything else.

I looked at the phone, then started the truck. Somehow, E had pissed off his woman and mine. Talented motherfucker.

By the time I reached the main road, I was sweating like a hooker in church. I wasn't the nigga who slipped papers into a restaurant agreement and married somebody without telling her. Why the fuck was I headed home feeling like I'd done it?

I'd told E to go get his girl. Pursue her. Take her somewhere. Buy some fucking flowers. Regular shit.

This nigga apparently heard, Go commit to that woman on paper before she can argue.

I knew once he told me. Had called his ass crazy, too. But knowing he'd done it and being the one who did it were two different things. Hopefully, my wife planned on recognizing that distinction before I got through the front door.

Then there was Simone. The woman had come around while we were getting Vice together, showing E some shit for the building. Next thing I knew, I walked into his office and she was on her knees. He sent her home, and as far as he'd told me, that was the last of it.

How the fuck she'd turned one afternoon into permission to show up whenever she felt like it was beyond me.

My phone rang as I pulled into the driveway.

E.

"She ain't at the house," he said the second I answered, sounding like he'd already searched every damn room. "She at yours?"

"Ashlynn said she came through and left. I just pulled up." I shifted the truck into park, looking toward the house.

“Left where?” His voice sharpened immediately.

“I don’t know yet. Nigga, you got me in some deep-ass shit. My wife chewing my motherfucking head off, and I ain’t even made it to the door.” I glanced at the front entrance, already dreading the conversation waiting on the other side.

“What she mad at you for?” E asked, sounding genuinely confused.

“Apparently, being your fucking friend.” I put the truck in park. “She knows about the paperwork.”

He went quiet.

“Yeah. So you need to make this shit right. Let me go in here and find out what’s going on.” I grabbed my keys, ready to deal with my own household before he dragged me any deeper into his mess.

“Call me,” E said through the phone, his voice serious now.

“I got you, bro.”

I ended the call and headed inside.

Ashlynn sat on the couch with a blanket across her legs, eating crackers. Her laptop was open beside her, and the second she looked up, I knew this wasn’t gonna be quick.

I leaned down to kiss her.

She turned her head and put her palm against my face.

“Nah. You need to get to talking.” Her eyes narrowed as she pushed my face away, making it clear I wasn't getting out of this conversation with a kiss.

I straightened up. Damn. Couldn’t even get a courtesy kiss.

“All right. What you wanna know?” I asked, watching her set the crackers aside like she was preparing to interrogate my ass.

“For starters, I heard you on the phone with E. He slipped marriage papers in with that restaurant agreement and had her sign them without telling her what they were.” She set the crackers down, fixing me with a stare that told me lying would be a terrible idea. “Tell me I heard wrong.”

I sat in the chair across from her.

“You heard right.” There wasn't any point in trying to dress that shit up.

She stared at me, then shook her head. “So she thinks this nigga got some wife hiding somewhere, and the whole time she’s the fucking wife?”

“Yeah.” I nodded once, already bracing myself.

“Malachi!” she screamed so fucking loud it echoed through the whole damn house.

“I didn’t tell him to do that shit, Ashlynn.” I leaned forward, holding my hands out before she could start blaming me for his crazy ass. “I told him to go get his girl. Thought he was gonna pursue her. He went and did all that on his own.”

She picked at the corner of the blanket, her mouth tight. “And Simone?” Her eyes lifted to mine again, and I could tell we weren't done with the interrogation.

“She did some work for us when we were getting the club together. Something happened between them one time. Before Jru.” I rubbed my jaw, trying to remember the last time I'd even heard her name. “Far as I know, he hadn’t talked to her since.”

“Then why she comfortable walking upstairs taking her motherfucking clothes off?” Ashlynn demanded, throwing one hand up in disbelief.

“You gotta ask her that. He told her to leave.” I shrugged, because I damn sure couldn't explain what was going through that woman's head.

“He got loose ends walking around that club while he’s doing all this shit with my friend.” Her eyes narrowed at me, and I knew that look meant the conversation was about to become personal. “And I know one thing. You better not have some random-ass bitch walking up on you in lingerie.”

I leaned forward. “What the fuck that got to do with me?” I asked, genuinely offended that E's situation had somehow turned into a warning for my ass.

“I’m making myself clear. You wanted a wife. You wanted a baby. You got me over here married, pregnant and sick as fuck.” She pointed toward herself, her voice rising again. “Don’t play with me, Malachi. I already told you I ain’t doing that multiple-wife shit.”

“And I told you I ain’t asking you to.” I held her gaze, making sure she understood me. “Nobody walking up on me like that. I’m not E, and you ain’t gotta argue with me over some shit he did.”

She looked away, rubbing a hand across her forehead. I waited instead of adding anything else. Ashlynn could fuss all night if I kept giving her something to answer.

“I feel like a bad fucking friend,” she said finally, her voice losing some of its edge.

Her voice had changed enough that I moved to the couch beside her.

“Why?” I asked, settling close enough to reach for her hand.

“Because I know, Malachi. I already hid the pregnancy and our marriage from her. I finally told her tonight, and we’re good.” She looked down at her hands, shaking her head. “But she sat right here crying, thinking she gave herself to somebody else’s husband, and I didn’t tell her.”

I looked at her. “She knows about us now?”

“Yes. Don’t get distracted.” She gave me a warning look, and I knew better than to ask another question.

I shut my mouth.

“This secret worse than the other two,” she continued, her expression tightening. “She needed me, and I’m sitting there telling her to hear him out instead of telling her why.”

“Then let him tell her. Stay out that motherfucking business, bruh.” I rested my elbows on my knees, trying to get her to understand why I didn't want us caught in the middle. “I already told him to handle his shit. We don’t need to get in the middle.”

She turned toward me. “I’m already in the middle. She came to me.” Her voice was quieter now, but the point landed harder than all the yelling she'd done earlier.

Fair point. I rubbed my jaw, choosing my next words.

“I’m saying he needs to explain what he did himself. You shouldn’t have to answer for it.” I looked at her, hoping she'd at least agree with that much.

“Then he better explain it soon.” She leaned back against the couch, clearly done making excuses for either of us.

I nodded. Couldn’t argue with that either.

“Where she go?” I asked after a moment, remembering E was still waiting on me to call him back.

“She left, Malachi.” Ashlynn gave me a flat look.

“I know she left. Where?” I tried again, watching her expression close off.

Ashlynn gave me a look. “Nigga, I’m not telling you where the fuck she went. Why? So you can tell that nigga and he go looking for her? No.” She shook her head, pulling the blanket higher over her legs. “She needed somewhere to calm down and get her thoughts together.”

I let that sit. E wasn’t gonna like it, but asking her three more times wasn’t gonna get me an answer. It might get my ass put out, too.

I scooted closer and put my arm along the back of the couch. She watched me like she knew I was trying to change the temperature in the room.

I was. This nigga had my household fucked up, and my wife was already pregnant, irritable and mean enough to hurt my feelings before breakfast. I didn’t need his shit added to the daily rotation.

My hand settled over her stomach.

“What my baby been doing today?” I asked, rubbing my palm gently across her belly.

“What the fuck you think? Trying to bring my organs up through my mouth.” She looked at me like I'd asked the dumbest question imaginable.

I laughed, and she pointed at me.

“Keep laughing. Next time you can hold the bag.” She narrowed her eyes, but the corner of her mouth twitched.

“I’ll hold it.” I nodded, still smiling because I knew she wasn't joking.

She leaned back against the couch. “I barely got anything done for the salon. Every time I sit down to work, I gotta get back up and throw up.”

“You ain’t gotta keep stressing over that.” I continued rubbing her stomach, knowing she'd been pushing herself too hard.

“Malachi, the building not gonna put itself together.” She turned toward me, looking frustrated all over again.

“I know. That’s why I gave your designs to the contractor.” I kept my hand where it was, waiting for her to process what I'd just said.

Her head turned.

“You did what?” She sat up, her eyes widening.

“Bought the building already. You had the layout saved, the stations picked out, all that shit. I sent it over.” I nodded toward her laptop, knowing she was about to check every detail. “He’s getting the schedule together, and they start the build-out in a couple weeks.”

She sat up, reaching for her laptop. “Which designs?” Her fingers were already moving toward the keyboard.

“The final ones you sent me. Relax. Ain’t nobody putting a chair somewhere you didn’t want it.” I leaned back, letting her check for herself.

She opened the folder anyway, and I waited while she checked. My wife liked knowing what was happening with her business. Giving her one less thing to do didn’t mean I got to skip telling her.

“He needs my colors,” she said, still looking at the screen.

“That’s what I need from you. Final colors and finishes. You can talk to him yourself before they start.” I watched her scroll through the folder, making sure she was satisfied before I said anything else.

She looked at me for a moment, then closed the laptop.

“Thank you.” Her voice softened, and she gave me a small smile.

I tapped my cheek. “Can I get what I came in here for now?” I leaned toward her, waiting for the kiss she'd denied me at the door.

“You so fucking needy.” She rolled her eyes, but she was already leaning closer.

She leaned over and kissed me anyway. I pulled her closer, letting her settle against my side while I rubbed her stomach.

“Rest tonight,” I told her, pressing a kiss against her temple. “The shop moving. You ain’t gotta finish everything from this couch.”

“Tell your baby that.” She rested her head against my shoulder, finally looking like she might relax.

I smiled, but my phone buzzed in my pocket before I could answer.

E again.

I looked down at Ashlynn. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn’t asleep.

“He better tell her, Malachi,” she murmured, keeping her head against my shoulder.

“I know, man.” I glanced at the phone, already dreading whatever E had to say next.

This nigga better figure his shit out before my wife tells Jru the whole fucking truth herself.

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Chapter 21



I came to Westhaven looking for a better life. Somehow, I'd managed to fuck around and end up worse off than I was in Rosemont.

At least back home, I knew what kind of bullshit to expect.

I lay in the middle of a king-sized hotel bed, staring at the ceiling like it had the answers to all my problems. The curtains were pulled shut, but sunlight still managed to sneak through the cracks. My head was pounding, my eyes felt swollen, and the same clothes I'd worn yesterday were twisted around my body.

I'd cried so much last night that I didn't think I had another tear left in me.

My phone had been off since I checked into the hotel. I didn't want to hear from anybody, especially Ezra's lying, married ass.

Married.

That word had been beating my ass since yesterday.

Almost two hundred dollars for one night in a hotel forty minutes outside Westhaven. I'd driven this far hoping Ezra wouldn't think to look for me out here. Knowing his crazy ass, he'd probably have somebody searching every hotel in the city.

Well, good luck, nigga.

I dragged myself out of bed and went into the bathroom. After washing my face, I stood there gripping the sink, staring at my reflection.

"Girl, you look like somebody dug your ass up."

My eyes were puffy, my lips were dry, and my bonnet was halfway off my damn head.

I had no job, no apartment, and every damn thing I owned was sitting inside a house that belonged to somebody else's husband.

How the fuck did I get here?

When Ashlynn convinced me to leave Rosemont, I thought I was finally getting away from all the bullshit I'd spent my life dealing with. And for a minute, things were actually looking up.

I had a decent job at Vice, money coming in, and a little something saved. Then Ezra started talking about opening a bar with me, giving me forty percent ownership so I wouldn't have to be his employee anymore.

And my dumb ass believed him.

I really thought I was about to have something of my own. Now I didn't even know if that bar was real or another lie he'd fed me to get what he wanted.

And then there was Ashlynn.

I loved that girl, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little pissed off with her too. She'd convinced me to come down here, promising we'd be together and living better than we had in Rosemont. I knew Malachi was supposed to take care of her, but I wasn't expecting her to get married behind my back and move out of our apartment, leaving me trying to figure out where the fuck I was supposed to go.

I couldn't afford the place on my own, and that's how I'd ended up under Ezra's roof.

I knew Ashlynn hadn't intentionally put me in that position. Hell, she'd helped me more than anybody ever had. But that didn't change the fact that I was right back where I started, depending on somebody else for a roof over my head.

Only this time, I'd been stupid enough to fall in love with the motherfucker.

I closed my eyes, remembering the way Ezra had held me after taking my virginity. How safe I'd felt lying against his chest, believing every word he'd whispered to me.

All while he had a whole fucking wife.

"Stupid ass," I muttered, turning away from the mirror.

Back in the bedroom, I grabbed my purse and dumped everything onto the bed. I checked my bank balance, already knowing it wasn't enough to get me very far.

Between what I'd saved at Vice and the money Ashlynn had given me, I could survive for a little while. But Westhaven wasn't cheap, and without a job, getting approved for an apartment was going to be damn near impossible.

I tossed my purse aside and sat on the edge of the bed.

Maybe I could find another bartending job. Or a cheaper place outside the city. Hell, at this point, I might have to rent a room from somebody.

Anything was better than going back to Ezra.

I reached for my phone and powered it on.

Within seconds, notifications started pouring in.

Missed calls. Voicemails. Text messages.

Ezra's name was everywhere.

Ashlynn's too.

I stared at the screen, debating whether I even wanted to read any of that shit. Before I could open a message, my phone started ringing.

Montae.

I stared at his name flashing across the screen, wondering what the hell he could possibly want. The last time I'd seen that nigga, he'd been in bed with my own damn mama. Just seeing his name was enough to piss me off.

I rolled my eyes before answering.

"What, Montae?"

"Jru." His voice sounded unusually serious. "Where you at?"

"Where I'm at don't matter. What you want?" I asked, already regretting answering his call.

He hesitated, and I could hear him breathing heavily through the phone. "Look, I know I'm probably the last person you wanna hear from, but something happened."

I sat up straighter, frowning at the sudden change in his tone. Montae wasn't the type to beat around the bush, especially when he knew I didn't want shit to do with him.

"What happened?"

"It's your mama," he said quietly.

My stomach tightened. "What about her?"

There was another pause, followed by a shaky breath. "They found her underneath the bridge off Mercer this morning. Jru, she didn't make it."

I stared straight ahead, trying to make sense of what he'd just told me. For a second, I thought I'd misunderstood him.

"What you mean she didn't make it?"

"She dead, Jru. They think she overdosed."

The room suddenly felt too small. I pushed myself off the bed, pressing my free hand against my forehead as I tried to steady my breathing.

"No. How you know it's her?"

"They found her ID. Police been trying to locate her family, and somebody gave them my number." He paused, his voice growing softer. "They need you to come identify her."

I shook my head, pacing toward the bathroom. "But you ain't seen her, right?"

"Nah, I ain't seen her. That's why they need somebody to confirm it's her."

I stopped walking, gripping the bathroom doorframe as my knees threatened to give out. My mama had done a lot of fucked-up things, but dying underneath some bridge wasn't how I'd imagined her story ending. Not when some part of me had still believed she'd eventually get herself together.

"Where she at?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Montae gave me the name of the medical examiner's office. I hurried back to the bed, digging through my purse for a pen before grabbing a receipt off the nightstand. My fingers trembled so badly that I had to ask him to repeat the address.

"Jru, I'm sorry," he said after I'd finished writing. "I know things was fucked up between y'all, but—"

"Don't." My voice cracked as I interrupted him. I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting the tears gathering behind them. "Just don't, Montae."

He went quiet.

I stared down at the receipt, struggling to read the address through my blurred vision.

"All right," he finally said. "Just be careful getting here."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Okay."

Before he could say anything else, I ended the call.

For several seconds, I stood beside the bed with my phone still pressed against my ear. My chest rose and fell in shallow breaths, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get my hands to stop shaking.

Then my eyes dropped to the address scribbled across the receipt.

The medical examiner's office.

My mama was really gone.

My legs gave out, and I sank onto the edge of the bed as the first sob tore through my chest.

"Ma, what the fuck?" I cried, pressing both hands against my face.

The last time I'd seen my mother, I'd caught her in bed with my boyfriend. I'd walked out of that apartment so angry I couldn't see straight, swearing I was never coming back. And now the next time I saw her, she'd be lying on a cold table somewhere.

I grabbed my purse and started throwing everything inside. My charger, wallet, glasses case. I couldn't think straight, couldn't remember what I'd picked up or what I'd left behind. My hands were shaking so badly that I dropped my car keys twice before finally getting them into my pocket.

I hurried out of the room, barely remembering to pull the door shut behind me.

By the time I made it to the parking lot, tears were streaming down my face again. I climbed behind the wheel, tossed my purse into the passenger seat, and punched the address Montae had given me into the GPS.

My phone started ringing.

Ezra.

"Not now, nigga," I sobbed, declining the call before throwing the phone onto the seat.

I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, gripping the steering wheel so tightly my fingers ached.

The first hour of the drive was a blur. I kept wiping my face with the back of my hand, blinking through tears as the highway stretched ahead of me. Every few minutes, I'd catch myself shaking my head, still trying to convince myself that Montae had gotten something wrong.

My mama couldn't be dead.

Not like that.

Not underneath some fucking bridge.

At one point, I had to pull into a gas station because I was crying so hard I could barely see the road. I sat there with the engine running, my forehead resting against the steering wheel as I tried to catch my breath.

"God, please let this be a mistake," I whispered.

But deep down, I knew it wasn't.

I stayed there until I could see clearly enough to drive, then got back on the highway.

By the time I reached Rosemont, my head was pounding and my stomach felt like it was tied in knots. I followed the GPS through streets I knew like the back of my hand, finally pulling into the parking lot of the medical examiner's office.

For a moment, I couldn't make myself get out of the car.

Then I looked at the building.

Somewhere inside was my mama.

I grabbed my purse and hurried through the entrance.

The woman behind the front desk looked up when I approached. She was older, with glasses resting low on her nose and a soft expression that made my throat tighten before she even spoke.

"Can I help you, sweetheart?"

I swallowed, gripping the strap of my purse.

"Um... somebody called me about my mama." My voice cracked. "They said I needed to come identify her."

The woman's expression changed immediately.

"What's your mother's name, baby?"

I told her, struggling to keep my voice steady as she typed something into her computer.

"And your name?"

"Jru Sinclair. I'm her daughter."

She nodded gently before picking up the phone and speaking quietly to someone on the other end. I stood there rubbing my palms against my jeans, watching her lips move while my heart pounded against my ribs.

A few minutes later, a woman wearing dark scrubs came through a door behind the desk.

"Ms. Sinclair?"

I nodded.

"I'm Ms. Harris. Why don't you come with me?"

I followed her down a quiet hallway, my shoes squeaking against the polished floor. The farther we walked, the colder the building seemed to get.

Ms. Harris stopped outside a small room and turned toward me.

"Before we go in, I want you to know that you can take as much time as you need. If you'd rather sit down for a moment, that's perfectly fine."

I shook my head.

"No. I just wanna see my mama."

She studied my face for a second before giving me a sympathetic nod.

"All right."

She opened the door and guided me inside.

There was a covered body resting on a metal table.

My breath caught.

I stopped walking.

Ms. Harris moved beside the table, placing her hand near the edge of the sheet.

"Are you ready?"

I wanted to say no.

I wanted to turn around, walk out of that building, and pretend I'd never gotten Montae's call.

But instead, I nodded.

She carefully folded the sheet back.

And there she was.

My mama.

Her eyes were closed, her face still, and for the first time in my life, there wasn't a single trace of anger in her expression.

I took one unsteady step forward, pressing my hand against my mouth.

"Oh, Mama..."

My knees buckled, and Ms. Harris quickly reached for my arm.

"Easy, sweetheart. I've got you."

I barely felt her helping me into a chair. I couldn't take my eyes off the woman lying in front of me.

Even after everything she'd put me through, some part of me had always believed there would be another chance. Another conversation. Another opportunity for her to finally get clean.

But looking at her now, I knew there wouldn't be.

Ms. Harris crouched slightly beside me.

"Ms. Sinclair, can you confirm whether this is your mother?"

I tried to answer, but my throat closed around the words.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I nodded.

"Yes," I finally whispered. "That's my mama."

Ms. Harris rested a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

I stared at my mother's face, my chest aching so badly I could hardly breathe.

I'd spent my whole life begging that woman to choose me over the drugs.

Now I was sitting in a room wishing she'd just open her eyes.

"Ma," I whispered through my tears, "why couldn't you just get better?"

And for the first time in my life, there was no chance she'd answer.

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Chapter 22



SIX MONTHS LATER — BRIARWOOD

If somebody had told me six months ago that I'd be living in a town where the most exciting thing to happen was the grocery store getting a new self-checkout machine, I would've told them to put the crack pipe down.

Yet here I was. Briarwood. A quiet little town tucked between Rosemont and Westhaven, where the traffic was light, the people were friendly enough, and everybody seemed to be in bed before ten.

Surprisingly, I liked it.

My apartment wasn't anything extravagant, but it was mine. One bedroom, one bathroom, a cozy living room, and a kitchen with enough counter space for me to cook without knocking shit over. I'd caught some good clearance sales when I first moved in and managed to furnish the place without spending a fortune. My cream-colored couch sat against the living room wall with a couple of decorative pillows, and a glass coffee table rested on the rug I'd found at HomeGoods. A few pictures, some curtains, and a couple of plants had turned what started as an empty apartment into somewhere I actually enjoyed coming home to.

The neighborhood was quiet, the complex was well-maintained, and my neighbors mostly kept to themselves. It wasn't some luxury apartment with a rooftop pool and a concierge, but it was comfortable, clean, and safe.

Most importantly, it was mine.

I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, smoothing my fitted black maternity pants over my stomach before adjusting the cream blouse I'd picked out for work. My belly had grown enough that pretending I wasn't pregnant was officially out of the question.

Five and a half months.

I turned sideways, examining my reflection before resting a hand against the roundness beneath my blouse. Sometimes I still couldn't believe there was an actual human being growing inside me.

"Look at you," I murmured, smiling at my reflection. "Got your mama out here looking like she swallowed a basketball."

A small flutter moved beneath my palm, making me laugh.

"Don't start kicking me. I'm just saying."

I reached for my cardigan, pulling it over my shoulders as my thoughts drifted to the one person I'd spent the last six months trying not to think about.

Ezra King.

Just thinking about that man made my chest tighten. I could still see that damn near naked woman standing in his office, hear him telling her he had a wife. And when I'd confronted him, asking if he'd been married the entire time, that man looked me in my face and said yes.

I'd given him my virginity, my trust, and my heart, only to find out he'd been married the whole fucking time. Sometimes I wondered whether he'd ever loved me or if he'd just love-bombed me until he got what he wanted.

The fucked-up part? I still missed his ass.

But I wasn't about to be anybody's mistress.

I turned away from the mirror and reached for my shoes. I'd spent enough time trying to make sense of that man. These days, I had somebody else depending on me.

After my mother's funeral, I'd been emotionally drained. What was supposed to be a small, intimate service somehow turned into a family reunion. Relatives I hadn't seen in years showed up, along with a bunch of people I didn't know from a can of paint. Everybody had something nice to say about my mama, and half of them acted like we'd been one big happy family.

I didn't have the energy for any of it. By the time the service was over, I was ready to leave everybody and everything behind.

Surprisingly, my mother hadn't been evicted from the apartment yet. I went back, thinking I could stay long enough to figure out my next move, but the minute I walked through that door, I knew I couldn't do it. Too many memories. Too much hurt. I'd spent years trying to get out of that place, and there was no way I was going to make it my home again.

So I packed whatever I could fit into my car and left Rosemont. Westhaven damn sure wasn't an option, and I had no intention of going back.

Between my savings and the money Ashlynn had given me, I had exactly $6,050 to start over. I didn't have a destination in mind. I just drove until I stumbled across Briarwood.

I stopped to grab something to eat, ended up staying a few nights at a hotel, and started looking around. Within two weeks, I'd landed a front-desk job at Briarwood Family Medical making seventeen dollars an hour. A few weeks later, I moved into my apartment.

It wasn't the kind of life I'd imagined for myself when I first left Rosemont with Ashlynn, but I was proud of what I'd managed to build. My bills were

paid, I had groceries in my refrigerator, and I was putting a little money aside for the baby.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I could finally breathe.

My phone vibrated on the dresser, interrupting my thoughts. I glanced at the screen and saw a reminder for my next prenatal appointment.

I picked it up, checking the time before slipping it into my purse.

I hadn't changed my number when I left Westhaven. I'd simply blocked the people I wasn't ready to speak to.

Ashlynn had called so many times during those first few weeks that I'd eventually stopped counting. Ezra wasn't much better. His messages had started out angry and demanding before slowly turning into something else. Concern. Worry. A few had simply asked me to let him know I was safe.

I'd listened to his voicemails more times than I cared to admit before finally blocking his number.

And Ashlynn...

That hurt was different.

She'd been my person long before Westhaven, before Ezra, before any of this shit happened. When she'd convinced me to leave Rosemont and start over, I'd believed we were stepping into a better chapter of our lives together.

Instead, it felt like I'd been pushed into a life everybody else had already arranged for me. My belongings had ended up inside Ezra's house without anybody asking me, and the same friend who'd helped make that happen couldn't even trust me enough to tell me she was pregnant.

I wasn't upset that she'd found happiness with Malachi. I wanted that for her. I just couldn't understand how we'd gone from telling each other

everything to her keeping something that important from me.

Maybe she'd had her reasons, but I wasn't ready to hear them.

I grabbed my keys and headed toward the front door, giving my stomach one last rub.

"Come on, little person. Your mama got bills to pay."

By four-thirty that afternoon, I was ready to clock out and put my feet up.

Working the front desk at a medical office wasn't difficult, but dealing with people all day could wear on anybody's nerves. I'd spent the better part of my shift answering phones, verifying insurance, and explaining to one particularly irritated woman why arriving thirty minutes late didn't mean she could walk straight into an examination room.

Apparently, that was my fault.

Because clearly, I controlled time.

"You heading out, Jru?"

I glanced up from shutting down my computer to find Denise, one of the medical assistants, standing beside the counter with her purse over her shoulder.

"Girl, yes. My feet are about to file a complaint with human resources."

She laughed, leaning against the counter as her eyes dropped to my stomach. "How's my little baby doing today?"

"Your little baby been using my bladder as a trampoline since lunchtime."

"That means they're healthy."

"That means they're disrespectful."

Denise threw her head back laughing, and I couldn't help joining her. She'd become one of the few people I genuinely enjoyed talking to since moving to Briarwood. She was in her early forties, married with two children, and had taken it upon herself to give me pregnancy advice whether I asked for it or not.

"Have you thought any more about finding out what you're having?" she asked as I gathered my things.

I shook my head. "Nope. I think I'm gonna wait."

"You're better than me. I needed to know everything."

"See, I already know too much. Every appointment, somebody telling me something new. Don't eat this, don't drink that, sleep on this side, take these vitamins." I slipped my purse over my shoulder. "I'm surprised they ain't told me what direction to face when I sneeze."

Denise laughed again before wishing me a good evening.

Outside, the afternoon breeze felt good against my skin as I made my way across the parking lot. I unlocked my car and slid behind the wheel, tossing my purse onto the passenger seat before settling back against the leather.

One thing I could say about Ezra King was that the man had made sure I had reliable transportation. As much as his ass had gotten on my nerves, I couldn't complain about the car he'd bought me. It was paid for, drove like a dream, and had saved me from having to spend any of my money trying to find something dependable when I moved to Briarwood.

"Can't stand his controlling ass sometimes, but thank God for this car," I mumbled, running my hand across the steering wheel. "At least I got something out the fucking situation."

I chuckled to myself, shaking my head as I pushed the start button. Lord knew that man had put me through enough, but I wasn't about to sit here

and pretend I wasn't grateful. Having a paid-off car was one less bill to worry about, especially with a baby on the way.

And considering how much these damn baby strollers cost, I needed every dollar I could keep.

I pulled out of the parking lot, already thinking about what I wanted for dinner. I'd planned on cooking some chicken and rice, but by the time I made it to the next traffic light, my stomach had other ideas.

I wanted hot chips.

And pickles.

Together.

"Don't judge me," I told my stomach, glancing down as I waited for the light to change. "You the one asking for this crazy shit."

A flutter beneath my blouse made me laugh.

"Exactly. That's what I thought."

Instead of heading straight home, I turned toward the grocery store a few blocks away.

Twenty minutes later, I found myself standing in the snack aisle holding a bag of hot chips while debating whether I really needed the second jar of pickles sitting in my basket.

Pregnancy cravings were some strange shit. Last week, I'd wanted nothing but watermelon. Now, apparently, my child had developed a taste for anything that could burn a hole through somebody's stomach lining.

"You're gonna come out here with heartburn and an attitude," I murmured, dropping the chips into my basket.

I reached toward the shelf for another bag when a familiar voice stopped me cold.

"Jru?"

My hand froze against the shelf.

Oh, hell no.

"Jru Sinclair?"

I turned slowly, and there stood Malachi, dressed in dark jeans and a fitted black shirt, staring at me like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Well, I'll be a motherfucker." He blinked, then broke into a disbelieving laugh. "Girl, where the fuck you been hiding?"

"Hey, Malachi." I gave him a nervous smile, wishing I could disappear behind the shelves.

"Hey, Malachi?" He laughed again, shaking his head as he approached me. "You know how much fucking hell I've been catching behind your ass? Ezra got me running all over the damn country looking for you, and my wife won't let me hear the end of—"

He stopped.

His eyes had dropped to my stomach.

For a second, he just stood there, staring at the unmistakable roundness beneath my blouse.

Then his gaze snapped back to my face.

"Hold the fuck up."

I swallowed, tightening my grip on the basket.

Malachi looked at my stomach again, his eyebrows climbing toward his hairline.

"Jru..."

I instinctively rested my free hand against my belly.

He took a small step back, dragging a hand down his beard.

"Is that Ezra's baby?"

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Chapter 23



"Is that Ezra's baby?"

Jru stood there looking at me like I'd asked her for the damn nuclear launch codes.

My eyes dropped to her stomach before returning to her face. I blinked twice, trying to make sure I wasn't seeing shit.

"OH, HELL NAH!"

"Malachi!" she hissed, glancing around the grocery aisle. "Lower your voice!"

"Lower my voice?" I pointed at her stomach. "Girl, you disappear for six months and pop up pregnant as fuck in the middle of Bumfuck, Wherever, and you want me to whisper?"

She looked down at her belly before giving me a look that suggested I was the dumbest motherfucker she'd ever encountered. "What does it look like, Malachi?"

"Don't get smart with me, Jru! I'm trying to process some shit!"

A woman pushing a shopping cart slowed beside us, pretending to examine a bag of pretzels. I caught her looking and raised my eyebrows.

"Ma'am, you need something?"

She quickly dropped the pretzels into her cart and kept moving.

Jru covered her face with one hand. "Oh my God. You're embarrassing me."

"Embarrassing you?" I let out a disbelieving laugh. "Girl, you got some motherfucking nerve."

For six months, I'd been dealing with two people who'd apparently made it their personal mission to drive me into an early grave.

Ezra had been losing his shit over Jru's disappearance. Every lead we followed turned into a dead end, and that nigga took his frustration out on anything within reach. He'd even cussed out a printer for jamming one afternoon. I stood there watching a billionaire threaten to beat the fuck out of office equipment.

Meanwhile, Ashlynn was eight months pregnant with our twins, and her hormones had been beating my ass worse than any enemy I'd ever faced. We'd already had one hospital scare that left me terrified for her and the babies. I wanted my wife resting, but she couldn't stop worrying about her best friend.

Now here stood the very woman everybody had been looking for, holding a basket full of snacks with Ezra's child sitting in her stomach.

And she had the audacity to look irritated with me.

"Girl, do you have any idea what the fuck I've been dealing with?" I asked, dragging a hand down my face. "My wife been threatening to divorce my ass every other Tuesday because I can't find you, and Ezra been acting like somebody stole his last fucking brain cell!"

Jru pressed her lips together, but I caught that little smile trying to sneak out.

"Ain't shit funny, Jru! What the fuck?" I threw my hands up. "I'm catching hell from both sides, and here you are, pregnant as fuck, asking me not to tell nobody!"

"Malachi, please lower your voice." She tightened her grip on her basket, glancing at the people passing us. "Everybody's looking, and I really don't want to do this right now."

"All right. Bet. You don't wanna do this in here? We can take this shit outside."

"No, Malachi. That's not what I meant." She shook her head, attempting to step around me. "I have to get home. We can talk another time."

Another time?

This girl had lost her motherfucking mind.

Before she could escape, I slipped one arm behind her back and the other beneath her knees, carefully lifting her without putting pressure on her stomach.

"MALACHI!" Her basket swung from her wrist as she grabbed my shoulder. "PUT ME DOWN!"

"Girl, hush! You said you didn't wanna talk in here, so we going the fuck outside!"

A couple of shoppers stopped to stare as I headed toward the entrance with Jru fussing in my arms. I ignored every last one of them.

"Everybody's staring at us!" she complained, hiding her face against my shoulder.

"Well, tell 'em to take a motherfucking picture! I ain't got time for this shit!"

By the time I reached the automatic doors, she was threatening to kick my ass, which would've been a whole lot more convincing if she wasn't holding on to my neck.

I carried her over to a bench near the storefront and carefully lowered her onto her feet.

She immediately straightened her blouse and glared at me.

"Have you lost your damn mind?"

"Several times. Thanks for asking."

"Malachi, you can't just pick people up like that!"

"And you can't disappear with my brother's baby and expect me to act normal when I find you!"

Her expression changed. She looked away, resting a hand over her stomach, and the fight seemed to drain right out of her.

I rubbed the back of my neck, realizing I'd probably gone too far.

"Look, Jru. All jokes aside, I'm glad you're okay."

"I know." She stared toward the parking lot. "But I needed to get away, Malachi. I couldn't stay there after what happened."

Fuck.

I knew exactly why she'd run.

Ezra had pulled some sneaky-ass shit, marrying that girl without her even knowing what the fuck she'd gotten herself into. Then, instead of telling her the truth when she confronted him about having a wife, his dumb ass had looked her in the face and said yes.

Technically, the nigga hadn't lied.

But he damn sure hadn't told her the truth either.

And now I was standing in front of his pregnant wife, knowing the one thing that could clear up this mess was the very thing Ezra had no business keeping from her in the first place.

"Jru, listen. I know Ezra fucked up. Believe me, I know. But there's some shit you don't understand about that situation."

She turned toward me, her expression hardening. "What's there to understand, Malachi? He's married. He admitted it himself."

Lord, give me strength, because my brother was one stupid motherfucker.

"All I'm saying is you need to have a real conversation with him. That shit ain't exactly what you think it is."

"Well, whatever it is, he can keep it. I'm not interested in being anybody's mistress."

I pressed my lips together, fighting the urge to tell her right then and there that she was the whole damn wife.

This secret was getting harder and harder to keep.

I dragged both hands down my face. "Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and everybody else in the fucking Bible. Girl, I'm about to have a motherfucking stroke."

Before Jru could respond, my phone started ringing. I pulled it from my pocket, and the second I saw my wife's name flashing across the screen, I sighed.

"Speak of the damn devil."

Jru glanced at my phone. "Is that Ashlynn?"

"Yeah, and if she calling to cuss me out about something else, I'm changing my fucking identity."

I answered, bringing the phone to my ear.

"Baby, before you start, I need you to—"

"MALACHI!"

The panic in her voice wiped the smile clean off my face.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"My water just broke!"

I froze.

"Your what?"

"MY WATER, MALACHI! MY FUCKING WATER BROKE!"

My eyes darted toward the parking lot like somebody out there might have an explanation for what the fuck I'd just heard.

"Are you sure? Right now? Right now your water broke?"

"NO, MALACHI! NEXT FUCKING THURSDAY!"

"Well, goddamn! I'm just asking!"

Jru's head snapped toward me, her eyebrows pulling together.

"Baby, where you at?" I demanded, already reaching for my keys.

"AT HOME! WHERE THE FUCK ELSE WOULD I BE?"

"Okay, okay. Don't panic."

"YOU THE ONE PANICKING!"

She had a point.

I started pacing in front of the bench, trying to remember everything we'd discussed with the doctor.

"All right, listen. Get your hospital bag and—"

"Malachi, I'm eight months pregnant with twins! I'm not carrying no damn bags! WHERE ARE YOU?"

"Fuck! Okay! I'm coming!"

"Call the hospital, Malachi! And hurry!"

"I got you, baby. I'm calling right now!"

I ended the call and turned toward Jru, who was watching me with both hands covering her mouth.

"Oh my God!" she whispered. "Ashlynn's having the baby?"

"Babies, Jru! BABIES! Two of them motherfuckers! TWINS!"

Her mouth fell open.

"TWINS?!"

"YES, TWINS! AND BOTH THEIR ASSES TRYING TO COME OUT TODAY!"

"Oh my God, Malachi!" She grabbed my arm, her eyes filling with tears. "Ashlynn's having twins? Why didn't anybody tell me?"

"JRU, HOW THE FUCK WAS WE SUPPOSED TO TELL YOU? YOU BEEN MISSING FOR SIX MONTHS!"

She blinked, then pressed her lips together.

"Okay, you got a point."

"YOU DAMN RIGHT I GOT A POINT!"

She looked toward the parking lot, already shifting into motion. "Is she by herself? Has somebody called the hospital? Malachi, we have to go!"

I stopped.

"We?"

"Yes, we! That's my best friend!"

I stared at her. Five minutes ago, she'd been trying to get away from me. Now she was ready to haul her pregnant ass straight back to Westhaven.

"Oh, you bringing your ass with me. Fuck that. Come on!"

She hurried after me before suddenly stopping. "Wait! My car!"

"Where it's at?"

"Over there!"

"Good. Lock that motherfucker. We coming back for it!"

"What about my groceries?"

I looked at the basket still hanging from her wrist.

"Jru, my wife is about to push two whole human beings out her coochie, and you worried about some motherfucking HOT CHIPS?"

She set the basket on the bench.

"Okay! Damn!"

I grabbed her hand and headed toward my truck, then remembered she was pregnant and immediately slowed down.

"Come on, girl. Walk fast, but don't walk too fast. Shit, I don't know! Just walk!"

"Malachi, you need to calm down!"

"EVERYBODY KEEP TELLING ME TO CALM DOWN! AIN'T NOBODY TELLING ME HOW!"

I nearly dropped my keys trying to unlock the truck. Jru watched me fumble with the buttons before reaching over and pressing the unlock button herself.

"Call somebody to stay with her until you get there," she suggested.

I looked at her. "That's actually smart."

"Thank you."

"Don't get cocky. Get in the damn truck."

She rolled her eyes but climbed into the passenger seat while I called the hospital. After explaining that my wife was eight months pregnant with twins and her water had broken, I was told she needed to come in immediately.

I hung up and dialed Yara.

"What's up, Malachi?"

"Listen, I need you to get to my house right fucking now. Ashlynn's water broke, and I'm out of town."

"Oh, shit! Is she okay?"

"She's talking and cussing, so I'm assuming she still got some life in her."

"Malachi!"

"Just get over there, Yara! Please!"

"I'm on my way. I'll call her now."

I thanked her and ended the call, gripping the steering wheel as I stared through the windshield.

The thought of something happening to Ashlynn or our babies made my stomach twist. I could handle a lot of shit, but losing my family wasn't one of them.

Jru reached across the console, resting her hand against my arm.

"She's gonna be okay, Malachi."

I nodded, swallowing past the tightness in my throat. "Yeah. She better be."

I started the engine and called Ashlynn back through the truck's Bluetooth as I pulled out of the parking space.

"Malachi, where are you?"

"On my way, baby. Yara's coming to get you to the hospital. Don't wait on me."

"Okay," she breathed. "Just hurry."

"I'm coming, beautiful. I promise."

After hanging up, I glanced at Jru. She sat quietly beside me with one hand resting over her belly, watching the road ahead.

I shook my head as I merged onto the highway.

"Lord, I don't know what the fuck You got planned for today, but You doing entirely too much."

Jru busted out laughing, clutching her stomach as she turned toward me.

"Nigga, I thought you was Muslim!"

"SHIT, I AM!" I snapped, gripping the steering wheel. "But right now I need Allah, Jesus, Moses, AND whoever else up there taking requests! Somebody better come down here and help me with this shit!"

Jru laughed so hard she had to wipe tears from her eyes, and despite everything happening, I couldn't help cracking a smile.

I was about to become a father.

My wife was about to have our twins.

And I was bringing Ezra King his missing wife and unborn child.

All in the same motherfucking day.

Somebody was going to have to sedate my ass before we reached Westhaven.

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Chapter 24



"OOOOOH, FUCK!"

I gripped the kitchen counter, bending forward as another contraction tightened across my stomach. The pain wrapped around my lower back, stealing every bit of air from my lungs. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to remember the breathing exercises the nurse had taught me, but the only thing coming out of my mouth was a string of curse words.

"Shit! Shit! SHIIIIIT!"

When the pain finally eased, I straightened and glanced at the clock on the microwave.

Where the fuck was my husband?

I'd called Malachi almost twenty minutes ago, and somehow, I was still standing in my kitchen with wet panties, a puddle on the floor, and two babies apparently trying to make their grand entrance without consulting me first.

"I don't know where the fuck Malachi at," I muttered, waddling toward the living room, "but he better get his ass here before I have these babies on this motherfucking floor. Or in the damn toilet."

I wasn't even supposed to be doing this yet.

Eight months. I was only eight months pregnant, and after that hospital scare a few months ago, my doctor had been monitoring me closely.

Everything had finally started looking good. I'd even convinced myself that maybe, just maybe, I'd make it through the rest of this pregnancy without another emergency.

Apparently, my children hadn't gotten the memo.

Another contraction hit before I reached the couch.

"Ohhhhh, GOD!"

I grabbed the back of it, bending my knees as pressure spread through my stomach and back. My breathing turned into a series of ugly gasps while I tried to concentrate on getting through it.

In through the nose. Out through the mouth.

Bullshit.

I couldn't even remember where my damn nose was.

"Okay, Ashlynn. You got this," I whispered, pressing one hand against my stomach. "Mama got y'all. Just give me a minute, okay?"

One of the babies shifted beneath my palm, and tears sprang to my eyes.

"I can't do this shit. What the fuck?"

A frantic knock sounded at the front door.

"ASHLYNN!"

Yara.

"IT'S OPEN!"

The door flew inward, and Yara rushed inside with her purse hanging off one shoulder and her car keys in her hand. She stopped when she saw me gripping the couch, her eyes traveling from my stomach to the wet spot on my pants.

"Oh, hell no."

"Yara, please!"

"Okay, okay, okay." She dropped her purse onto the coffee table and hurried toward me, slipping an arm around my waist. "We need to get you to the hospital. Can you walk?"

"No, bitch, I'm thinking about flying!"

"Well, damn! I'm just trying to help!"

She attempted to guide me toward the door, but another contraction had me grabbing her forearm so hard she winced.

"WAIT! DON'T MOVE ME!"

Yara froze, looking down at my stomach like one of the babies might reach out and grab her.

"Is it supposed to hurt like that?"

I slowly turned my head toward her.

"Yara, I swear to God, if you ask me one more stupid-ass question—"

"Okay! My bad!"

She waited until I could stand upright before helping me toward the entryway. Halfway there, she glanced around the living room.

"Where your hospital bags at?"

"FUCK THEM BAGS!"

Her eyes widened.

"Well, excuse the fuck outta me!"

"I don't know where they at right now! Get me to the hospital! We can worry about the bags later!"

Yara snatched my purse and phone from the entryway table, grabbed her keys, and practically dragged me through the front door. By the time we reached her car, sweat was rolling down my neck, and my legs felt like somebody had replaced my bones with spaghetti noodles.

She helped me into the passenger seat, carefully positioning the seat belt beneath my stomach before running around to the driver's side.

"Okay. We good. Hospital."

"YARA, DRIVE!"

She backed out of the driveway so fast I grabbed the door handle.

"OH, HELL NO! DON'T KILL ME BEFORE I HAVE MY BABIES!"

"You just told me to hurry!"

"I SAID HURRY, NOT TAKE ME TO MEET JESUS!"

She slammed on the brakes at the stop sign and looked at me like she was seriously considering leaving my ass on the curb.

"Girl, I don't know what you want from me!"

Neither did I.

All I knew was my stomach hurt, my back felt like somebody was trying to break it in half, and Malachi's big-headed ass was nowhere to be found.

Yara pulled onto the main road, weaving through traffic while I gripped the seat belt and tried to concentrate on anything besides the pain.

"Okay, Ash. Just breathe. In and out, nice and slow."

I turned toward her as another contraction began building.

"STOP TELLING ME TO BREATHE! I CAN'T FUCKING BREATHE! I GOT TWO MOTHERFUCKING HUMANS TRYING TO COME OUT OF ME!"

"Oh, hell no!" She slapped one hand against the steering wheel. "You know what? I'm calling your husband!"

"GOOD! TELL HIM I'M ABOUT TO KILL HIS ASS!"

She tapped Malachi's name on the dashboard screen. He answered almost immediately.

"Yara? You got her?"

"YES, I GOT HER! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?"

"I'm coming! I'm about thirty, forty-five minutes out. I'm moving as fast as I can!"

I leaned toward the dashboard, my face twisting with another wave of pain.

"THIRTY TO FORTY-FIVE MINUTES? MOTHERFUCKER, YOU BETTER HURRY UP AND GET HERE! YOU NEED TO DO THE DASH ABOUT ME AND THESE BABIES!"

"Baby, I am! I swear I'm coming!"

"YOU DID THIS SHIT TO ME! I HATE YOU FOR THIS!"

"Okay, baby. You can hate me when I get there."

"NO, I'M GONNA HATE YOU RIGHT NOW!"

Yara pressed her lips together, but I caught her shoulders shaking.

"AND AIN'T SHIT FUNNY!" I snapped, pointing at her.

Her expression immediately straightened. "Wasn't laughing."

"YES, THE FUCK YOU WAS!"

Malachi's voice came through the speakers again, softer this time. "Ash, listen to me. Yara's gonna get you there, and I'm gonna be right behind y'all. You hear me?"

I opened my mouth to cuss him out again, but my chin started trembling instead.

"I need you," I whispered.

"I'm coming, beautiful. I promise."

Tears slipped down my cheeks before I could stop them. I'd spent months complaining about swollen feet, backaches, and not being able to sleep, but now that it was actually happening, all I wanted was my husband beside me.

Yara reached over and squeezed my hand when we stopped at a red light.

"We almost there, Ash."

I nodded, wiping my face.

Then another contraction hit, and I nearly ripped the damn seat belt off.

"OOOOOOH! FUCK! YARA!"

"I'm going! I'm going!"

By the time we pulled into the hospital's emergency entrance, I was crying, sweating, and threatening to sue everybody responsible for childbirth.

Yara barely got the car into park before waving down an employee near the doors.

"My friend is in labor! She's having twins!"

A nurse appeared with a wheelchair, and between the two of them, they helped me out of the car. My legs trembled as I lowered myself into the seat, another contraction forcing me to grip the armrests.

"How far along are you, sweetheart?" the nurse asked.

"Eight months," I managed through clenched teeth.

"Has your water broken?"

"YES, MA'AM! AND I WOULD REALLY APPRECIATE IT IF SOMEBODY COULD GET THESE BABIES OUT OF ME!"

The nurse remained calm, which irritated the fuck out of me. How was everybody acting normal when I felt like my insides were trying to relocate?

They wheeled me upstairs to labor and delivery while Yara hurried behind us carrying both our purses. After getting me into a room, the nurses helped me change into a hospital gown and attached monitors to check the babies' heartbeats.

I watched their expressions while they worked, terrified somebody was about to tell me something was wrong.

"Both babies' heartbeats sound good," one of the nurses assured me.

I released a shaky breath, my eyes filling again.

Thank God.

The doctor came in shortly afterward, examined me, and explained that because I was early and carrying twins, they needed to watch how labor progressed. I tried to pay attention, but another contraction had me gripping the bed rails before she finished speaking.

"OOOOOH, SHIT!"

Yara hurried to my side, rubbing my shoulder.

"Okay, okay, just brea—"

I whipped my head toward her.

"YARA!"

She threw both hands up.

"MY BAD! I FORGOT!"

The doctor gave us a sympathetic smile before stepping out to speak with the nurses. I sank against my pillows, exhausted, while Yara adjusted the blanket over my legs.

Her phone started ringing.

She glanced at the screen, rolled her eyes, and answered with one hand on her hip.

"Ezra, not right now, motherfucker. Ashlynn's having the babies, and I'm at the hospital with her."

Whatever he said made her glance toward me before rubbing her forehead.

"Yes, both of them. Her water broke, Malachi's on his way, and I'm trying to keep your sister-in-law from cussing out the entire maternity ward."

"I'm on my way," I heard him say through the phone.

Yara frowned. "What the fuck you coming up here for?"

I turned my head toward her. "Yeah, what the fuck he coming up here for?"

Yara looked at me, shrugged, and put the phone back against her ear.

"Whatever, Ezra. Just don't come up here with no bullshit."

She ended the call and slipped her phone into her pocket.

I shook my head, adjusting myself against the pillows. Ezra King was the last person I felt like dealing with while my body was trying to split itself in half. The man barely knew how to have a normal conversation without looking like he wanted to fire somebody.

Another contraction started creeping through my back, and I grabbed the bed rail before it could get worse.

"Shit," I whispered, closing my eyes.

Yara moved beside me, letting me squeeze her hand while I breathed through the pressure. She didn't say anything this time, and I appreciated that more than she knew.

When the pain eased, I opened my eyes and found her watching me with a worried expression.

"You okay?"

I nodded weakly. "I'm tired."

"I know, girl." She brushed a damp strand of hair away from my forehead. "But you're doing good."

I managed a small smile before her phone rang again.

She answered, listened for a moment, and glanced at me.

"Okay, come on up."

She hung up and moved toward the door.

"Malachi's here."

Relief washed over me, but I didn't have time to say anything before another contraction tightened across my stomach. I grabbed the bed rail, squeezing my eyes shut as the pain spread into my back.

"OOOOH, FUCK!"

Yara hurried to my side, rubbing my shoulder while I tried to breathe through it.

By the time the contraction eased, the door had swung open, and Malachi was rushing toward me with his face full of worry.

"Baby, I'm here."

"YOU TOOK YOUR SWEET-ASS TIME!" I cried, reaching for him anyway.

He crossed the room in three long strides, leaning over the bed and wrapping his arms around me. I buried my face against his chest, clutching his shirt while he kissed the top of my head.

"I'm sorry, beautiful. I'm here now," he murmured, rubbing my back. "How you feeling?"

"Like your big-headed ass put two bowling balls inside me."

He chuckled, pressing another kiss against my forehead. "You want me to get the doctor?"

"I want you to hold my damn hand."

He pulled a chair closer and sat beside me, slipping his fingers through mine. The warmth of his palm against mine settled something inside me that had been unraveling since my water broke.

I looked at my husband, noticing the worry still sitting behind his eyes. For all the shit I'd been talking, I knew he'd been scared too.

"I'm sorry I said I hated you," I whispered.

He brushed a tear from my cheek, a small smile tugging at his mouth.

"Baby, you called me every name but the one my mama gave me. I figured you was going through something."

I laughed, leaning into his hand.

Then I noticed somebody standing near the doorway.

At first, I couldn't see past Malachi's broad shoulders. But when he shifted, a woman stepped farther into the room, her dark hair framing a face I knew better than my own.

For a moment, my brain refused to make sense of what my eyes were seeing.

Then she smiled nervously.

"Hey, Ash."

My heart damn near stopped.

"Jru?"

She nodded, tears already gathering in her eyes.

I stared at her, afraid that if I blinked, she'd disappear again.

"OH MY GOD!"

She barely made it two steps before I started crying.

"BITCH, WHERE THE FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN?!"

Her face crumpled as she approached the bed. "Ashlynn, I'm so sorry."

"SORRY?" I pushed myself upright, ignoring the ache in my back. "DO YOU KNOW HOW WORRIED I'VE BEEN ABOUT YOUR ASS? I BEEN CALLING YOU FOR SIX FUCKING MONTHS!"

"I know." She wiped her cheeks, her voice trembling. "I know, and I'm sorry."

"I THOUGHT SOMETHING HAPPENED TO YOU!"

"I didn't mean to scare you."

I wanted to keep yelling. I had six months' worth of questions, hurt feelings, and cuss words saved up for her.

But looking at her standing there, alive and safe, all that anger fell apart.

"Oh my God," I sobbed, reaching for her. "Come here, bitch."

She leaned over the bed, and I wrapped my arms around her neck, holding her as tightly as my stomach would allow.

"I missed you so much," I cried against her shoulder. "You don't ever do that shit to me again. You hear me?"

"I missed you too," she whispered, holding me just as tightly.

Her body shook against mine, and I knew she was crying just as hard as I was. I didn't care who was watching. My best friend was finally standing in front of me, and for the first time in months, I knew she was safe.

When we pulled apart, I held her face between my hands, studying her like I needed proof she was real.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm okay."

I wiped her tears with my thumbs, then glanced down as she straightened.

And that's when I saw it.

Her stomach.

I blinked, my eyes traveling over the unmistakable curve beneath her shirt before slowly returning to her face.

"Wait a motherfucking minute."

Jru bit her bottom lip, a nervous smile appearing through her tears.

I pointed at her belly.

"JRU."

She glanced down.

"Oh my God." My hands flew to my mouth. "YOU'RE PREGNANT?!"

She nodded, fresh tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Five and a half months."

"FIVE AND A HALF—"

I stopped, looking between her and Malachi.

He held both hands up.

"Don't look at me! I just found her ass in a grocery store!"

I turned back to Jru, overwhelmed by everything hitting me at once. She was pregnant. She'd been gone all this time, carrying a baby without any of us knowing.

I reached for her hand, pulling her closer.

"Girl, we got so much to talk about."

"I know," she whispered, squeezing my fingers.

Yara had been watching us from the foot of the bed when her expression suddenly changed.

"Oh, fuck."

Malachi glanced at her. "What?"

"Ezra. I forgot that nigga said he was coming up here."

The smile disappeared from Malachi's face.

Before he could respond, the door opened.

And Ezra King walked in.

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Chapter 25



“Malachi, bruh, why the fuck you ain't answering your—”

The rest of my sentence died in my throat.

For a second, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. It wouldn't have been the first time. Six months of looking for the same woman had gotten me to the point where I'd catch a glimpse of somebody with a similar hairstyle or a familiar walk and damn near break my neck trying to see her face.

But this wasn't some stranger walking down the street.

This was Jru.

My Jru.

Standing beside my sister-in-law's hospital bed, wearing a cream-colored cardigan over a fitted black dress, her glasses sitting on that pretty little nose I'd kissed more times than I could count.

And she was pregnant.

My eyes dropped to the unmistakable curve of her stomach, and something inside my chest shifted so violently I forgot how to breathe.

What the fuck?

The room went quiet around me. Malachi stood beside Ashlynn's bed with one hand resting against her shoulder, while Yara watched me from the opposite side. Nobody said a word.

Jru's eyes met mine.

The smile she'd been wearing disappeared.

“Ezra.”

Hearing my name come out of her mouth after six fucking months nearly brought me to my knees.

Then Ashlynn screamed.

“OOOOOH, FUCK! MALACHI!”

Her body curled forward as another contraction hit, and Malachi immediately reached for her hand. I barely registered the movement. My attention stayed locked on the woman standing less than ten feet away from me.

Her face was fuller. Her hips had spread beneath that dress, and the little belly she'd never had before was sitting right there in front of my fucking eyes.

I took a step toward her.

“Jru?”

She moved backward, her hand flying to her stomach.

That movement snapped something in me.

“What the FUCK?”

“Ezra,” Malachi warned.

I pointed toward Jru, looking between her and my brother. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Bruh, listen—”

“LISTEN TO WHAT?” My voice bounced off the walls. “You telling me this whole fucking time she's been—”

“EZRA!” Yara snapped.

Jru flinched.

I saw it. Saw the fear flash across her face, and for one brief second, I hated myself for putting it there.

But then my eyes dropped to her stomach again.

Pregnant.

She was fucking pregnant.

Six months without a phone call. Six months without knowing whether she was eating, sleeping, or even alive. And now she was standing in front of me carrying a baby.

Whose fucking baby?

Malachi moved between us, placing a firm hand against my chest.

“Hey, bruh. Not here.” He glanced toward his wife, who was gripping the bed rail and groaning through another contraction. “Yara, get Ash real quick.”

Ashlynn's head snapped toward him.

“Get Ash WHAT? I KNOW FOR A FACT YOU AIN'T ABOUT TO LEAVE ME OVER HERE PUSHING OUT YOUR BIG-ASS BABIES BECAUSE THIS NIGGA WANNA LOSE HIS FUCKING MIND!”

“Baby, ain't nobody leaving you.” Malachi kept his hand against my chest while trying to reassure his wife over his shoulder. “I'm just trying to keep this motherfucker from getting us all thrown out the hospital.”

I barely heard either one of them. Jru had lowered her eyes, one hand still resting against her stomach, and something about the way she wouldn't look at me made my thoughts go places they had no business going.

“Jru, whose baby is that?”

Her head lifted slowly. For a moment, she looked genuinely confused, like she was waiting for me to explain what the fuck I'd just asked her.

“Ezra, are you serious right now?” Her eyebrows pulled together as she glanced at Malachi, then back at me. “What the hell do you mean, whose baby is this?”

I dragged a hand across my beard, trying to make sense of the six months she'd been gone and the pregnant woman standing in front of me.

“I'm asking you a question, Jru. You disappear for six motherfucking months, and now you standing here pregnant. What the fuck am I supposed to think?”

Her mouth fell open, and I watched the hurt flash across her face before it turned into anger. She let out a bitter laugh, shaking her head as though she couldn't believe what she'd just heard.

“Oh, so that's what we doing?” She adjusted her glasses, her eyes beginning to water. “After everything we've been through, that's the first thing you wanna know? Who I've been fucking?”

“Jru, I ain't say all that.”

“You ain't have to!” Her voice rose as she took a step back from me. “And so WHAT if I went off and got pregnant by somebody else? Nigga, YOU FUCKING MARRIED!”

She didn't wait for an answer. She turned and headed straight for the door, wiping angrily at the tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Jru, wait a motherfucking minute!”

I started after her, but Malachi caught my arm.

“E, let her go for a minute.”

“Get the fuck off me!”

I jerked away from him and drove my fist into the wall beside the door. Pain shot through my knuckles, but it wasn't enough to touch the frustration burning through my chest.

“FUCK!”

“OH, HELL NO!”

Ashlynn's scream cut through the room, pulling everybody's attention toward the bed. She had one hand wrapped around the side rail and the other pressed against her stomach, her face twisted as another contraction rolled through her.

Malachi spun around so fast I almost laughed despite the shit going on around us.

“Baby, I'm right here.” He hurried toward the bed, reaching for her hand, but Ashlynn snatched it away long enough to point toward me.

“THEN GET YOUR ASS OVER HERE AND HANDLE YOUR FUCKING CHILDREN! I'M NOT ABOUT TO HAVE THESE BABIES BY MYSELF!”

Yara moved to the opposite side of the bed, rubbing Ashlynn's shoulder while Malachi tried to help her through the contraction. I stood near the door with my hand throbbing, watching my brother get cursed out by a woman who looked two seconds away from climbing out of that bed and beating his ass.

“Breathe, Ash,” Yara said, keeping her voice steady.

“YARA, IF ONE MORE PERSON TELLS ME TO BREATHE, I'M GONNA STOP FUCKING BREATHING ON PURPOSE!”

The door opened before anybody could respond, and a nurse stepped inside. Her eyes traveled from Ashlynn to Malachi, then landed on the damage I'd put in the wall.

“What's going on in here?” she asked, her expression tightening. “We need to keep this room calm. She's in active labor.”

Yara immediately stepped forward, smoothing a hand over the front of her blouse. “I'm sorry. Family situation. We're handling it.”

The nurse looked directly at me, clearly deciding I was the source of the problem. Smart woman.

“Sir, if you're going to remain on this floor, I need you to lower your voice and stop disrupting the other patients.”

I opened my mouth, but Malachi shot me a warning look from beside the bed.

“Ezra. Don't.”

I clenched my jaw and looked away, letting the nurse finish checking Ashlynn's monitors. The last thing I needed was security dragging me out of the hospital before I got a chance to talk to my wife.

My wife.

The same woman who'd just run out of the room thinking she'd been sleeping with somebody else's husband.

Fuck.

Once the nurse was satisfied that Ashlynn and the babies were doing all right, she reminded us to keep the noise down and stepped back outside. I was still trying to get my head together when Ashlynn called my name.

“Ezra.”

I turned toward her, finding her glaring at me through tear-filled eyes.

“You stupid motherfucker.”

“Ash, I—”

“No, don't Ash me.” She shifted against the pillows, wincing as she tried to get comfortable. “You had that girl thinking she was somebody's mistress, and the first thing you do when you finally see her is question who she's been fucking? Are you out your motherfucking mind?”

I rubbed my beard, feeling the sting of her words because every damn one of them was true.

“I ain't know she was pregnant.”

“And whose fault is it that she ran from you in the first place?” Ashlynn demanded, her voice cracking with frustration. “You better tell her about

that marriage, Ezra. I'm so sick of this shit. I swear to God, if you don't tell her, I will."

Yara's head turned toward me so fast I knew I was about to catch another round of bullshit.

"Wait a minute. What marriage?"

I looked at Malachi, hoping the nigga had enough sense to keep his mouth shut.

He looked toward the ceiling.

Motherfucker.

Yara folded her arms, narrowing her eyes. "Ezra King, what the hell did you do?"

"Ain't nobody got time to explain all that right now," I muttered, glancing toward the door.

"Try me."

Malachi sighed, rubbing his forehead before answering for me. "He married Jru without telling her."

For a second, Yara didn't move. She just stared at me, her lips parted like she was waiting for somebody to tell her we were joking.

Then she walked straight over and smacked me upside the back of my head.

"OW! Woman, what the fuck?"

"I TOLD YOUR ASS THAT WAS A BAD IDEA!"

"Yara, goddamn!"

"Is that shit even legal?" she demanded, standing there with her hands on her hips like she was somebody's disappointed mother.

"It's handled."

"That ain't what I asked you!"

Before she could get started again, Ashlynn let out another groan and grabbed Malachi's arm.

“CAN Y'ALL PLEASE SHUT THE FUCK UP? I'M TRYING TO HAVE SOME BABIES!”

Malachi immediately turned his attention back to her, rubbing her lower back while she worked through the contraction. I watched him bend close to his wife, speaking softly against her forehead even while she threatened to break his fingers if he squeezed her hand too hard.

The sight should've been funny.

Instead, it reminded me of everything I'd missed.

I looked toward the door, thinking about Jru standing somewhere in this hospital with my child inside her. Five minutes ago, I hadn't even known I was going to be a father. Now all I could think about was how long she'd been pregnant and how much of it she'd gone through without me.

“How far along is she?” I asked, looking at Malachi.

He glanced over his shoulder, keeping one hand against Ashlynn's back. “Five and a half months.”

Five and a half.

I did the math in my head, and my stomach tightened.

“That's my baby.”

Malachi gave me a look that would've been funny under different circumstances.

“No shit, Sherlock.”

I ignored him, rubbing my hand across my mouth. “How the fuck you find her?”

“Ran into her at a grocery store in Briarwood. I was out there handling business.” He shook his head, apparently reading the next question on my

face. “And before you start thinking some crazy shit, ain't nobody been hiding her from you. I just found her myself.”

“Briarwood?” I repeated, trying to understand how she'd managed to stay that close without anybody finding her.

“Yeah, Briarwood. Now, bruh, I love you, but my wife is over here trying to push two human beings out of her body. My part in this shit is done.” He pointed toward the door with his free hand. “Go find Jru, tell her the truth, and stop making shit worse.”

I stared at him for a moment before shaking my head.

“Fuck you.”

“Love you too, nigga. Now get out.”

I stepped into the hallway before somebody else decided to slap the shit out of me.

For a moment, I stood outside the room, flexing my swollen fingers while I tried to get my breathing under control. The pain in my hand was nothing compared to the shit happening inside my chest.

Six months.

Six long motherfucking months.

I'd barely slept since Jru disappeared. I'd hired people, called in favors, searched places I never thought she'd go, and chased down every lead that came across my desk. Every time somebody thought they'd found her, I'd gotten my hopes up just to have another door slammed in my face.

The restaurant we'd planned together was finished. Everything she'd picked out was exactly where she wanted it, right down to the last damn detail. But the doors were still locked because I couldn't bring myself to open that motherfucker without her.

And now I knew she'd been carrying my child while I'd been searching for her.

“Ezra.”

I looked up as Yara stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind her. Her eyes immediately dropped to my hand, and she shook her head.

“You need to get that checked.”

“I'll live.”

“Unfortunately, that's never been the problem with you.”

I gave her a look, but she didn't even crack a smile. Instead, she stepped closer, lowering her voice so the nurses wouldn't hear us.

“Listen to me. I know you've been going through it. We all know. But you cannot go running up on that girl yelling and acting crazy. She's pregnant, Ezra. And you already embarrassed her in front of everybody.”

I rubbed my beard, glancing down the hallway. “I know, Yara.”

“And that marriage shit?” She shook her head again, looking at me like she couldn't believe I was standing there. “You should've told her a long time ago. You can't make decisions like that for somebody and expect them to just be happy about it.”

“I heard you.”

“Apparently, you didn't.”

I turned toward her, trying to keep what little patience I had left. “Yara, I love you like family, but if you hit me in my motherfucking head again—”

“You'll what?”

I stared at her.

She stared right back.

“Exactly,” she said, turning toward Ashlynn's room. “Now go find your wife and use that expensive-ass brain God gave you.”

I shook my head as she disappeared inside.

Everybody had jokes today.

I approached the nurses' station and asked if they'd seen a pregnant woman wearing glasses come through. One of the nurses pointed me toward the family waiting area, and I thanked her before heading down the hallway.

I found Jru standing near the windows outside the waiting area, wiping beneath her glasses. For a second, I just watched her, trying to get used to the sight of her again. The little woman I'd spent half a year searching for was standing less than twenty feet away, carrying a part of me I hadn't even known existed.

She must've sensed somebody approaching because she glanced over her shoulder. The minute she saw me, her expression hardened, and she turned toward the hallway.

“Jru, hold up. Let me talk to you.”

She stopped, looking back at me with an expression that told me I was already on her last nerve. Her eyes were still wet, but there wasn't a damn thing soft about the way she looked at me.

“Talk about what, Ezra? Remember, you don't know who my baby daddy is.” She let out a bitter laugh, adjusting her glasses. “Apparently, I'm out here fucking everybody.”

I rubbed my beard, knowing I'd earned every bit of that attitude. The accusation had come out of my mouth before I'd given myself a chance to think, and now I had to stand there and hear exactly how ugly it sounded.

“Baby, I was shocked. I ain't seen you in six months, and then I walk in and see you pregnant. I said some shit I shouldn't have said.”

“Some shit?” Her eyebrows lifted as she looked me up and down. “You know you're the only man I've ever been with, Ezra. You know what it took for me to trust you enough to even give myself to you. And that's the first thing that comes out your mouth?”

The disappointment in her voice hit harder than the attitude. I remembered how nervous she'd been when she'd finally trusted me enough to let me touch her, how careful I'd promised to be with that trust. And the first time I'd seen her in six months, I'd thrown that shit right back in her face.

“I was wrong for that, Jru,” I admitted, keeping my voice low. “I ain't got no excuse.”

She shook her head, wiping another tear before adjusting her glasses. For a moment, she looked toward the hallway like she was deciding whether I was worth another second of her time.

“And on top of that, you had me sleeping with somebody's husband. I can't believe I let myself get caught up in this shit.”

“Jru, listen.” I stepped closer, needing her to understand at least one thing before she walked away again. “You ain't been sleeping with nobody's husband but your own.”

She frowned, turning fully toward me.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I held her gaze, knowing the next words out of my mouth were about to change this whole conversation.

“It means you're my wife.”

She stared at me, her eyebrows pulling together behind those glasses.

“Ezra, what?”

“We married, baby.”

A short, disbelieving laugh escaped her lips as she searched my face for some sign that I was joking. When she didn't find one, she shook her head.

“When the fuck did we get married?”

I rubbed my beard, wishing there was a better way to explain what I'd done. “Remember all that paperwork you signed when we were putting the restaurant together? I had the marriage paperwork mixed in with those contracts. You signed it, and I took care of everything else.”

She blinked a few times, staring at me like I'd lost my motherfucking mind. Her mouth opened, then closed again, and she looked away for a second before turning back toward me.

“Un-fucking-believable.” She let out a sharp laugh, shaking her head. “I cannot believe this shit. Ezra, you could've just asked me!”

“Hell, I know that now.” I shifted my jaw, glancing down at my swollen hand before looking back at her. “But at the time, all I was thinking about was securing what I wanted, and that was you. I wanted you as my wife, Jru. I just went about the shit wrong.”

She pressed her fingers against her forehead, clearly struggling to process what I'd told her. I could practically see the questions running through her head, but before I could offer another explanation, she dropped her hand and glanced toward the hallway.

“You know what? None of that even matters right now.” Her voice was tight with frustration as she adjusted her purse on her shoulder. “This is not the time or the place for this conversation. Ashlynn is in there about to give birth to two babies, and I've already missed so much with her. I need to be there for my friend.”

She started walking, and I took a step after her, my frustration rising at the thought of letting her disappear around another corner.

“Jru, come on. We need to talk about this shit, don't you think?”

She stopped, turning halfway toward me. The look she gave me made it clear she was running out of patience.

“And we will. But not right now, Ezra. I need some space to process everything.”

“Space?” I frowned, staring at her like she'd just told me she was moving to another damn planet. “Baby, you done had six months of space. What the fuck you need, another six? We got some serious shit to figure out.”

She turned toward me completely, her eyes narrowing behind her glasses. For a second, I thought she was about to let me have it again, but she took a breath and adjusted the strap of her purse instead.

“Ezra.” Her voice was firm enough to stop me from saying anything else. “I said this ain't the time or the place. I'm going to be with Ashlynn.”

I started to speak again, but she turned and walked away before I could get another word out.

I stood there watching her disappear around the corner, my jaw tight and my hands planted on my hips. Every instinct I had told me to follow her, to finish the conversation, to figure out how the fuck we were supposed to move forward now that I knew she was carrying my child.

But she'd made herself clear.

And as much as I hated it, I knew chasing her back into Ashlynn's room wasn't going to do anything but make another bad situation worse.

Six months I'd spent looking for that woman. Now I'd finally found her, learned she was carrying my child, and discovered that telling her we were married hadn't fixed a motherfucking thing.

I'd spent my whole life making moves and dealing with the consequences later.

Well, the consequences had just walked away from me wearing glasses and carrying my baby.

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CHAPTER 26



A MONTH LATER

If somebody had told me six months ago that I'd be walking around almost seven months pregnant, arguing with a forty-one-year-old billionaire through text messages, I would've told them to get the fuck out of my face.

Yet, here I was.

My phone vibrated against the passenger seat for the third time since I'd left work. I didn't even have to look to know who it was. Ezra King had apparently decided that unblocking his number meant I'd signed up for daily interrogations.

Ezra: You good?

I sighed, stopping at a red light before picking up my phone.

Me: Yes.

Ezra: My baby good?

Me: Yes, Ezra.

Ezra: You eat today?

Me: Goodbye.

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

Ezra: Love you too, wife.

“Nigga, please.” I tossed my phone back onto the seat, fighting the smile threatening to spread across my face.

It had been a month since the hospital. A month since Ezra revealed that the marriage I'd spent months believing belonged to another woman was actually mine. He'd been trying to get me to sit down with him ever since, but I wasn't ready.

I'd finally unblocked him two weeks ago, mostly because I was tired of him calling Ashlynn and Malachi every time he wanted to know whether I was okay. I answered his messages when I felt like it, kept our conversations about the baby, and ignored every invitation to come back to Westhaven.

I wasn't trying to punish him. I just needed to figure out what I wanted without him standing over me trying to make the decision for me.

Besides, I had enough going on. Between work, doctor's appointments, and my weekly trips to Westhaven to see Ashlynn and the twins, I barely had time to sit down. The babies were growing like weeds, and watching Malachi attempt to change two diapers at once had become my favorite form of entertainment.

Ashlynn and I were finding our way back to each other. Things weren't exactly how they'd been before, but we were laughing again, talking every day, and slowly rebuilding the trust we'd lost. That meant more to me than she probably realized.

As for Ezra? That was a whole different situation.

I pulled into the medical building's parking lot, grabbed my purse, and carefully climbed out of the car. My stomach seemed to get bigger every time I looked down, and lately, bending over had become a full-body workout.

“Baby, you better be worth all this,” I muttered, rubbing my stomach as I headed inside.

The elevator carried me to the third floor, and I was halfway down the hallway when I heard a voice I knew entirely too well.

“Damn. Look at my baby.”

I stopped walking, slowly turning my head toward the waiting area. Ezra King was sitting there like he had a standing appointment, dressed in a fitted black shirt, dark jeans, and a diamond watch that caught the light when he stood. His haircut was fresh, his beard was lined perfectly, and that same cocky-ass smile was already working my nerves.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I demanded, tightening my grip on my purse as he approached me.

“Damn, baby. No hug? No kiss? Nothing?” His eyes traveled over me, lingering on my stomach before returning to my face. He looked genuinely pleased with himself, which only made me more irritated.

“Ezra, I'm not playing with you.” I lowered my voice when the receptionist glanced in our direction. “How did you even know I had an appointment today?”

He slipped a hand into his pocket, looking entirely too comfortable. “I got my ways.”

“Your ways better not involve somebody giving you my medical information, because I swear to God—”

“Relax, woman. I ain't asking nobody for your medical records.” He glanced at my stomach before meeting my eyes again. “I found out about the appointment. That's all.”

“And you don't see a problem with that?” I questioned, folding my arms.

His smile faded slightly. “I see a problem with missing damn near seven months of my child's life. I know I fucked up, Jru. But I'm trying to be here now.”

I studied his face, irritated that he'd shown up uninvited and even more irritated that part of me was glad to see him.

Before I could respond, the receptionist called my name. I finished checking in, then turned to find Ezra following me toward the waiting area.

“Where are you going?” I asked, stopping beside an empty chair.

“To sit down. And when they call you, I'm going back there too.” He pulled out the chair beside mine, smiling when I narrowed my eyes.

“You really don't know how to take no for an answer, do you?”

“I'm learning.” He settled into his seat, stretching his long legs in front of him. “But you ain't said no yet.”

I shook my head, dropping into the chair beside him. “You get on my fucking nerves.”

“Missed you too, baby,” he replied, grinning when I turned away to hide my smile.

By the time the nurse finished checking my weight and blood pressure, Ezra had asked enough questions to make me wonder whether he planned on delivering the baby himself. I sat on the examination table while he settled into the chair beside me, watching me so closely that I finally turned toward him.

“Are you gonna stare at me the whole appointment?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Shit, you won't talk to me. What else I'm supposed to do?” He leaned back, his gaze lingering on my face. “Ain't seen you properly in six months, baby. I'm catching up.”

I looked away before he could see my smile. “You think everything is a joke.”

“Nah.” His expression softened. “Ain't nothing funny about missing you.”

Before I could respond, my doctor entered, greeting me warmly before noticing Ezra. When she asked who he was, he stood and extended his hand.

“Her husband. Ezra King. Nice to meet you, Doc.”

My doctor's eyebrows lifted. “Your husband? I didn't realize you were married.”

“Neither did I,” I muttered, making Ezra press his lips together to keep from laughing.

After reviewing my measurements and symptoms, my doctor assured me everything was progressing well. Ezra listened closely, asking a few questions before leaning forward.

“Doc, what we having?”

She smiled, glancing toward me. “Jru decided earlier in her pregnancy that she wanted to wait until delivery to find out.”

Ezra turned toward me, looking genuinely confused. “You don't know?”

“No, Ezra. I wanted to be surprised.”

“Hell nah. I wanna know.” He looked between us, shaking his head. “Baby, come on. That's my child too.”

My doctor gently reminded him that I had to be comfortable with sharing the information. I looked at Ezra, expecting another argument, but he simply watched me. Beneath all that arrogance, I could see how badly he wanted this moment. He'd missed enough already, and although I hadn't planned on finding out today, I wanted us to experience something together.

I sighed, looking toward my doctor. “Fine. Tell us.”

Ezra sat forward immediately, his eyes widening. “For real?”

“Yes, before I change my mind.”

My doctor smiled as she checked my chart. “Congratulations. You're having a little girl.”

For a moment, the room went completely quiet. I looked down at my stomach, my hand moving instinctively over the curve of my belly. A daughter. I was having a daughter.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, feeling my eyes fill.

Beside me, Ezra sat completely still. When I turned toward him, he was staring at the doctor like he needed her to repeat herself.

“A girl?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, smiling. “A little girl.”

He lowered his head, dragging a hand over his face before letting out a disbelieving laugh. “Damn. I'm having a daughter.”

When he looked up, his eyes were wet. He reached for my hand, and I let him take it, swallowing around the lump in my throat as he brushed his thumb across my knuckles.

“Thank you, baby,” he whispered.

I looked at our joined hands, then back at him. For the first time in months, we were sharing something beautiful without an argument hanging over our heads.

And I hadn't realized how much I'd missed that.

Outside, I stopped beside my car, still thinking about the look on Ezra's face when he'd found out we were having a daughter. He'd barely stopped smiling since we left the examination room.

“Well, thank you for coming,” I told him, reaching for my keys.

He stopped walking, staring at me like I'd lost my mind. “Thank you for coming? Jru, what the fuck am I, a guest speaker?”

I burst out laughing before I could stop myself. “Ezra, please.”

“Nah, don't 'Ezra, please' me.” He stepped closer, shaking his head. “We just found out we're having a daughter, and you trying to dismiss me like I came to fix your damn cable.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to regain control of my face. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to talk to me.” His expression grew serious as he glanced toward my stomach. “I wanna be there for the rest of this pregnancy, Jru. I want my wife and my daughter home. I know I can't make you come back, but damn, baby, give me something.”

The humor slowly faded as I looked at him. I knew how much he wanted us back in Westhaven, but wanting something didn't mean he could skip over everything that had happened.

“You hurt me, Ezra,” I reminded him quietly. “And finding out we're having a daughter doesn't erase that.”

“I know.” He nodded, his eyes holding mine. “I'm not asking you to forget. I'm asking you to let me try to make it right.”

I glanced toward my car, thinking about the six months I'd spent learning how to live without him. Then I looked back at the man standing in front of me, waiting for an answer.

“You can follow me home,” I finally said. “We can talk there. But that's all I'm promising.”

He exhaled, nodding slowly. “Aight, baby. I'll take it.”

Ashlynn called before I'd made it halfway home. I answered through my car speakers, already knowing she was probably checking on my appointment.

“Hey, bitch! How was everything?” she asked cheerfully.

I glanced into my rearview mirror at Ezra's truck following behind me. “Did you tell Ezra I had a doctor's appointment today?”

There was a brief silence before she cleared her throat. “Now, why would you ask me something like that?”

“Ashlynn, don't play with me.”

She sighed dramatically. “Bitch, this been going on long enough. Y'all got a baby coming, and whether you stay with that man or not, he's still that baby's father. Put your big-girl draws on and figure this shit out.”

I shook my head, irritated that she'd gone behind my back but unable to completely disagree with her. “You sound just like Malachi.”

“Good. Maybe somebody will finally get through that hard head of yours,” she replied, making me roll my eyes.

“Fuck you,” I muttered, earning a loud laugh from her. “Anyway, we found out the baby's gender today.”

Ashlynn gasped so loudly I nearly jumped. “BITCH! WHAT IS IT?”

I laughed, rubbing my stomach. “A girl.”

Her scream nearly blew out my speakers. “MY NIECE! Oh, I'm about to act a fucking fool!”

“Girl, you already got two babies to spoil.”

“And now I got another one. Mind your business,” she replied, laughing.

I shook my head, smiling as I turned toward my apartment. “Anyway, I can't stand you. Give my babies a kiss for me, and I'll see y'all this weekend.”

“Might be sooner than that,” she teased before bursting into laughter.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I demanded, but she'd already hung up.

“Messy ass.”

Ezra followed me inside, glancing around briefly while I kicked off my shoes. He slipped his hands into his pockets, taking another look before turning toward me.

“This is cool,” he said, nodding approvingly.

“Yeah. It ain’t no mansion, but it’s mine. Can’t nobody take it from me.” I set my purse on the counter, catching the slight change in his expression.

“Ain’t nobody took nothing from you, Jru.”

I turned toward him, folding my arms. “Speaking of which, what happened to that restaurant you promised me forty percent of? Because I remember walking through that building with you, telling you exactly how I wanted everything. But how can I trust any of that paperwork after the mess you pulled.”

Ezra rubbed his beard, looking almost offended. “Woman, that restaurant is finished. The bar, the kitchen, everything. Got a whole damn staff waiting to work. Your forty percent is legally documented, and you can have a lawyer look at every page. I ain’t opened it because I was waiting on you.”

I stared at him, surprised. “You’ve been sitting on a finished restaurant this whole time?”

“Shit, what you want me to do? Have the grand opening without my business partner?” He shook his head before his expression softened. “I meant what I told you, Jru. That place belongs to you too.”

I looked away, trying to process what he’d said. The restaurant was finished. He’d actually followed through with everything we’d discussed, even after I left. Somehow, knowing that made the conversation I’d been avoiding even harder.

I walked over to the couch and sat down, rubbing my stomach as Ezra took a seat at the opposite end. For a moment, neither of us spoke. I could feel him watching me, but for once, he wasn’t rushing to fill the silence.

“You know what hurt me the most?” I finally asked, turning toward him. “It wasn’t even just that woman in your office. It was hearing you say you were married and realizing I might’ve been somebody’s mistress without knowing it.”

Ezra’s jaw tightened, but he stayed quiet as I continued.

“And while I was trying to deal with that, my mama died. I had to identify her body, Ezra. Then I found out I was pregnant, and suddenly I’m trying to figure out how to be somebody’s mother when I ain’t even finished grieving my own.” My throat tightened, and I wiped at my eyes before the tears could fall. “I needed you. That’s the part that pisses me off. I needed you, and I couldn’t trust you.”

“Fuck, baby.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I knew you was hurting, but I ain’t realize how much of that shit you was carrying by yourself.”

“Because you never gave me a chance to tell you.” I looked directly at him, no longer trying to hide my tears. “You made me your wife without asking me, Ezra. Then everybody around me knew things about my own life that I didn’t. I felt like I couldn’t trust nobody, not even Ashlynn. I’m tired of people making decisions for me.”

He sat back, dragging a hand over his face before meeting my eyes. “You right. I was a selfish motherfucker. I wanted you so bad I convinced myself marrying you would keep you from leaving. That was fucked up, and I ain’t got no excuse for it.”

I watched him carefully, surprised that he wasn’t trying to justify himself.

“I’m forty-one years old, Jru, and you got my mind fucked up,” he continued, shaking his head. “Your smart mouth, that attitude, the way you work your ass off because you refuse to depend on anybody. Hell, even that damn perfume you won’t tell me the name of. I’m obsessed with all of it. But loving you don’t mean I get to make your choices. I understand that now.”

A shaky laugh escaped me at the mention of my perfume, but the tears were still coming. Ezra shifted closer, then stopped when I stiffened.

“Can I hold you, baby?” he asked quietly.

I looked at him for a moment before nodding. The second his arms wrapped around me, I buried my face against his chest and cried. He held me without interrupting, rubbing my back while I finally let go of everything I’d been trying so hard to keep together.

When I pulled away, he brushed a tear from my cheek. “I can’t change what happened, Jru. But I can do better. You want counseling, we’ll go. You want a lawyer to review that marriage paperwork, I’ll pay for one. Whatever it takes to make this right, I’m willing to do it.”

I studied his face, wanting desperately to believe him. “I love you, Ezra. I never stopped. But I don’t want to lose myself loving you.”

“Then don’t, baby. I fell in love with Jru Sinclair, not some woman who’s gonna sit around waiting on me to tell her what to do.” A crooked smile

appeared as he added, “Besides, you wouldn’t listen to my ass anyway.”

I laughed, wiping the last of my tears. “And I’m not promising to move back today.”

“Aight. I heard you.” He raised his hands before I could argue. “Look at me, learning how to listen and shit.”

I shook my head, smiling despite myself. “You’re so damn stupid.”

“Yeah, but you love me.” His grin softened when I reached for his hand, and for a moment, we simply sat there looking at each other.

Then our daughter kicked.

I caught his hand and placed it against my stomach before he could ask what was wrong. When she moved again, his eyes widened, and he stared down at my belly in disbelief.

“Hold the fuck on. That’s her?” he asked, looking up at me.

I nodded, laughing at his expression. “That’s your daughter.”

He kept his palm against my stomach, waiting until another little kick pressed against his hand. His smile slowly faded into something softer as he leaned down and kissed my belly.

“Daddy here now, princess,” he whispered.

I swallowed hard, watching him. I’d imagined this moment more times than I wanted to admit, and seeing him so completely fascinated by our daughter made my chest ache.

When he lifted his head, I reached for his face, brushing my thumb along his beard. “I missed you, Ezra.”

He covered my hand with his, his eyes searching mine. “Missed you too, baby. Every fucking day.”

I leaned forward and kissed him. He responded slowly, one hand settling against my cheek while the other remained on my stomach. When I pulled

back, he rested his forehead against mine, giving me a chance to change my mind.

“You sure?” he murmured.

I smiled, slipping my fingers into his beard. “Yes, Ezra. I’m sure.”

He kissed me again, and this time I didn’t hold back. I let myself enjoy being close to him, the familiar warmth of his body and the way he held me like he’d been waiting months to do it. Eventually, I took his hand and led him toward my bedroom.

That night, we found our way back to each other without pretending everything was fixed. There were still conversations to have and trust to rebuild, but neither of us was running from it anymore.

Later, I lay against his chest while his fingers moved lazily along my arm. He looked down when I lifted my head, already smiling like he knew I had something to say.

“Let me make one thing clear, Ezra King. You ever pull some sneaky shit like that again, I’m divorcing your ass.”

He laughed, tightening his arm around me. “Damn, woman. Can I enjoy being married for five fucking minutes?”

“Not until I see that restaurant paperwork,” I replied, raising an eyebrow. “And no more secrets. About anything.”

His smile softened as he brushed my hair away from my face. “You got my word, baby. No more secrets.”

I studied him for a moment before settling against his chest again.

Tonight, I didn’t feel like I had to choose between loving him and loving myself.

“I love you, Jru,” he whispered, kissing the top of my head.

I smiled, closing my eyes. “I love you too, Ezra.”

And for the first time in a long time, saying those words didn’t feel like surrendering myself.

It felt like choosing what I wanted.

And this time, the choice was mine.

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CHAPTER 27



Three Weeks Later

Having my wife back home was supposed to mean I could finally relax. Instead, I was sitting in my office staring at my bare left hand like the shit had personally offended me.

Jru had finally agreed to quit her job in Briarwood and move back to Westhaven. It took some convincing, but she'd made it clear that coming home didn't mean she was giving up her independence. She was already making plans to help with the restaurant once the baby arrived, and I wasn't about to argue with her. I'd learned my lesson about making decisions for that woman.

For the first time in months, my house felt like a home again. Her clothes were back in my closet, baby shit was arriving almost daily, and every morning I woke up with my wife beside me. I had everything I'd been fighting to get back, yet something still bothered me.

Neither one of us had a wedding ring.

I picked up my phone and called Malachi. He answered on the third ring, sounding distracted by whatever was happening around him.

"What's good, E? Everything straight?" he asked.

"Yeah, everything good. Let me ask you something." I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my thumb over the empty space on my ring finger. "Jru ain't never asked me for a ring. Even after we worked everything out, she ain't brought it up. But it feels weird as fuck being married and neither one of us wearing one. You think I should get her something?"

The silence on the other end lasted about two seconds before Malachi started laughing. I could picture the stupid grin on his face without even seeing him.

"Nigga, you calling me to ask if you should buy your wife a wedding ring?" he asked, sounding entirely too entertained by my situation.

"I'm asking your opinion, smartass. I ain't trying to fuck this shit up again." I turned my chair toward the windows overlooking the backyard. "Every time I think about bringing it up, I wonder if she'll think I'm trying to pull some more sneaky shit."

Malachi laughed harder, and I heard him moving around before he finally answered. “Man, you a whole billionaire scared to buy your own wife a ring. That little woman done turned your brain into mashed potatoes.”

“Fuck you, Chi.” I shook my head, already regretting asking his ass anything.

Before he could respond, I heard Ashlynn questioning him in the background. Malachi tried brushing her off, but that only made her more suspicious. The moment she heard my name, I knew the conversation was about to become everybody’s business.

“Hold on. Is that Ezra?” she demanded, her voice growing louder as she apparently moved closer to the phone. “What the hell y’all talking about?”

“Baby, we handling some business,” Malachi told her, sounding like he was already tired.

“What business? Because I just heard something about Jru and a wedding ring.” There was a brief struggle over the phone before Ashlynn’s voice came through loud and clear. “EZRA KING!”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Why the fuck you hollering, Ashlynn? I can hear you.”

“Good! Because apparently somebody needs to explain how marriage works to your grown ass.” She didn’t even give me a chance to respond before continuing. “Nigga, you tricked my best friend into signing marriage papers, stressed her the fuck out, got her pregnant, and now you sitting around wondering if she deserves a ring?”

“That’s not what the fuck I said.” I sat forward, already feeling my blood pressure rising. “I said I was thinking about getting her one. Damn, woman, let somebody finish a sentence.”

Malachi was laughing in the background, which only irritated me more. I could hear Ashlynn telling him to shut up before she turned her attention back to me.

“Listen, Ezra. My friend deserves a big-ass rock and a bomb-ass proposal after everything you put her through. And don’t you dare go buy her some little ring, hand it to her over dinner, and think that’s enough. You got billionaire money. I expect billionaire behavior.”

I couldn’t help laughing at that last part. “Woman, who said anything about buying her a little ring? You think I’m about to put some bullshit on my wife’s finger?”

“Then what’s the problem?” she challenged.

I looked down at my hand again, turning my wedding band idea over in my head. “Ain’t no problem. I just wanna do it right this time. She ain’t asked me for shit, and I don’t want her thinking I’m doing this because I feel guilty.”

For once, Ashlynn didn’t immediately have something smart to say. When she spoke again, her voice had softened considerably.

“Ezra, Jru loves you. That girl would’ve stayed married to you without a ring because she finally believes y’all can make this work. That’s exactly why you should do something special. Not because she’s asking, but because she deserves it.”

I sat quietly for a moment, letting her words settle. She was right, and as much as I hated admitting it, I was glad she’d overheard the conversation.

“Aight,” I finally said, a smile pulling at my mouth. “I think I know what I’m gonna do.”

Malachi groaned dramatically in the background. “Aw, shit. Here this nigga go. Whatever you planning, don’t involve my pockets.”

“Your pockets ain’t got shit to do with it,” I told him, laughing. “But I’m gonna need both of y’all to help me pull this off.”

Ashlynn squealed so loudly that I had to pull the phone away from my ear. Malachi started complaining about his wife being too excited over another man’s proposal, and I ended the call before either one of them could give me a headache.

I stared at my phone for another second before dialing Yara.

If I was doing this, I was doing it right.

Four days later, I stood beneath a canopy of trees overlooking one of Westhaven’s most beautiful lakes, watching Yara direct the final preparations for what had somehow turned into the biggest event I’d planned in years.

The private park was surrounded by towering trees, with a stone bridge stretching across a narrow section of the lake. White roses lined the walkway, hundreds of tiny lights hung from the branches, and floating candles shimmered across the water. At the end of the bridge stood an enormous floral arch decorated with white flowers and illuminated lettering that read, WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Beyond the trees, the Westhaven skyline glowed against the evening sky. A horse-drawn carriage waited near the entrance, ready to bring Jru through the park once Ashlynn arrived with her.

I had to admit, the shit looked beautiful.

“Ezra, could you please stop standing there looking like you’re inspecting a construction site?” Yara asked, walking toward me with her tablet tucked beneath her arm. “Everything is exactly how you requested it.”

I glanced toward the decorators adjusting the flowers around the arch. “Then why the fuck they still moving shit?”

“Because I’m making sure it’s perfect.” She gave me a pointed look before straightening my jacket. “Now relax. You’re making everybody nervous.”

“I’m paying everybody. They can afford to be nervous.”

Yara rolled her eyes and walked away, muttering something about needing a vacation. I laughed under my breath just as Malachi approached, looking around the park with his hands tucked into his pockets.

“Goddamn, E.” He stopped beside me, studying the decorations before letting out a low whistle. “You really went all out for this shit.”

I shrugged, reaching inside my jacket for the velvet ring box. “My wife deserves it.”

Malachi leaned closer when I opened it, and his eyebrows shot toward his hairline. The diamond caught the light, sending flashes across the black velvet.

“Nigga!” he exclaimed, grabbing my wrist for a better look. “You trying to marry her or blind her?”

I laughed and pulled my hand away. “Both, if she keep getting on my nerves.”

He shook his head, still grinning as I closed the box and returned it to my pocket. For a moment, neither of us said anything. Then Malachi rested a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m proud of you, bro. For real. You got your family back, and you’re doing right by them. Just keep it that way.”

I looked over at him, appreciating the rare moment of sincerity. “I plan on it.”

“Good. Because Ashlynn already told me if you fuck up again, she helping Jru bury your ass.”

I burst out laughing. “Man, fuck both of y’all.”

My phone vibrated before he could respond. Ashlynn had sent a message letting me know they were five minutes away and Jru didn’t suspect a thing.

I slipped the phone into my pocket and took one last look around the park. Everything was ready.

Now all I needed was my wife.

The carriage appeared just as the sun disappeared behind the trees. I watched it travel slowly along the lantern-lit path, the horses carrying Jru toward the bridge while Ashlynn sat beside her, probably talking her damn ear off.

When the carriage stopped, Ashlynn climbed down first and helped Jru step onto the walkway. My breath caught the moment I saw her.

She wore a long champagne-colored dress that hugged her pregnant belly, her hair falling beautifully around her shoulders. One hand rested against her stomach as she looked around at the lights and flowers, completely unaware of what was waiting for her.

Then she spotted me.

“Ezra?” Her eyebrows pulled together as she glanced from me to Ashlynn. “What are you doing here?”

I smiled and held out my hand. “Come here, beautiful.”

She approached slowly, taking my hand while her eyes wandered toward the lake. I could see her trying to piece everything together, especially when she noticed there wasn’t another person in sight besides the people she’d arrived with.

“Baby, what is all this?” she asked, her voice softening as she looked toward the bridge. “This is beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I guided her a little farther along the walkway, watching her expression change when she finally noticed the floral arch.

Jru stopped so suddenly that I almost kept walking without her. Her eyes widened as she read the illuminated words, and when she turned toward me, tears were already gathering along her lashes.

“Ezra King,” she whispered, pressing a hand against her chest. “What are you doing?”

I chuckled and brushed my thumb across her knuckles. “Something I should’ve done a long time ago.”

Behind us, Ashlynn made a strangled noise that sounded suspiciously like the beginning of a sob. Malachi immediately told her to let me finish before she started all that crying, which made Jru laugh

through her own tears.

I took both of her hands and waited until her attention returned to me.

“Baby, I know I went about this marriage shit all wrong.” I paused when she raised an eyebrow, a small smile appearing on her face. “Aight, I went about it completely fucked up. You ain’t gotta look at me like that.”

She laughed, shaking her head as another tear slipped down her cheek.

“But I want you to know something.” I stepped closer, keeping her hands in mine. “Before you came into my life, I was used to getting whatever the fuck I wanted. Didn’t matter what it was or what I had to do to get it. Then you came along and showed me that loving somebody ain’t about controlling them or making decisions for them.”

Her expression softened, and I reached up to wipe the tears from her cheek.

“I had to learn that shit the hard way. And knowing your stubborn ass, I’m probably gonna be learning something new every damn day for the rest of my life.”

“Ezra,” she whispered, laughing as she shook her head.

“Don’t interrupt my speech, woman. I practiced this shit.”

She covered her mouth, laughing harder, and I couldn’t help smiling with her. Once she settled, I took a breath and continued.

“You gave me something I didn’t even know I was missing. A real family. A home I actually look forward to coming back to. And now we’re about to bring our baby into this world.” My gaze dropped briefly to her stomach before returning to her face. “I love you, Jru. More than I ever thought I could love another person.”

By then, tears were streaming down her cheeks, but she hadn’t stopped smiling.

“I know we’re already married,” I continued, reaching into my jacket. “But the first time, I took that choice away from you. And I promised myself I’d never do that shit again.”

I lowered myself onto one knee, ignoring the way my heart started pounding when I opened the velvet box.

Jru gasped, both hands flying to her mouth as she stared at the diamond.

Behind her, Ashlynn completely lost her shit.

“OH MY GOD!”

“Ashlynn, baby, please!” Malachi pleaded, making everybody laugh.

I shook my head before looking back up at my wife.

“Jru Sinclair King, will you marry my crazy ass? Again. But this time because you actually want to?”

She was crying so hard she could barely speak. For a second, she just nodded, staring at me with the biggest smile I’d ever seen on her face.

“Yes,” she finally managed, laughing through her tears. “Yes, Ezra. Of course I’ll marry you!”

I slid the diamond onto her finger, and before I could stand completely, she threw her arms around my neck. I caught her carefully, laughing as she kissed me with tears still running down her cheeks.

The cheers behind us grew louder, but I barely heard them. All I cared about was the woman in my arms.

“You happy, baby?” I whispered against her lips.

She nodded, smiling as she pressed her forehead against mine. “So happy. I love you.”

“I love you too.” I kissed her again before glancing at the ring sparkling on her finger. “And you better be happy, because that damn thing cost too much for you to be walking around mad at me.”

She smacked my chest, laughing. “Ezra!”

I pulled her closer, grinning. “What? I’m just saying.”

Twenty minutes later, Ashlynn had taken enough pictures to fill an entire damn photo album, Yara was making sure the photographer captured every angle of the ring, and Malachi was complaining that I’d officially ruined every anniversary gift he’d ever bought his wife.

Jru stood beside me, holding her hand beneath the hanging lights while Ashlynn admired the diamond for what had to be the fifteenth time.

“Girl, this ring is ridiculous!” Ashlynn exclaimed, turning Jru’s hand toward the light. “Ezra, I take back at least three of the bad things I said about you.”

I laughed, slipping an arm around my wife’s waist. “Only three? After all this shit?”

“Don’t push it,” she warned, grinning as she released Jru’s hand.

Malachi shook his head beside her. “Man, I’m never letting my wife help you plan another damn thing. Now she looking at me like I owe her another wedding.”

Ashlynn turned toward him with a sweet smile that didn’t fool anybody. “Well, since you brought it up—”

“Nah, hell nah.” He held up both hands, backing away as everybody laughed. “Don’t even finish that sentence.”

I was still laughing when Jru suddenly grabbed my forearm. Her fingers tightened around it, and I looked down, expecting her to complain about her feet hurting again.

Instead, she was standing completely still.

“Baby?” I asked, noticing the strange expression crossing her face.

She looked down at the ground, then slowly lifted her eyes toward mine. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out at first.

“Ezra…” Her voice sounded different enough to make me straighten immediately.

“What is it? You hurting?”

She swallowed, glancing down at her dress before looking back at me.

“Baby, I think my water just broke.”

I stared at her.

Then I looked down.

There was a small puddle forming beneath her feet.

For a second, my brain refused to process what the fuck I was seeing.

“The fuck you mean your water broke?” I asked, my eyes widening.

Jru grabbed my hand harder. “EZRA! MY WATER BROKE!”

Malachi turned around at the sound of her voice, and Ashlynn rushed toward us, demanding to know what was happening. I barely heard either one of them as I stared at my wife, trying to remember everything we’d learned about having a baby.

Then it hit me.

My baby was coming.

“OH, FUCK!” I shouted, looking around wildly. “CHI! GET THE FUCKING TRUCK!”

Malachi immediately started digging through his pockets for his keys while Ashlynn screamed that the baby was coming. Yara already had her phone against her ear, calmly arranging for the vehicles to meet us at the entrance.

Jru grabbed my jacket as I bent down and scooped her into my arms.

“Ezra, what are you doing?” she cried, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“WHAT THE FUCK IT LOOK LIKE I’M DOING? WE GOING TO THE HOSPITAL!”

She started laughing despite the panic spreading around us. “Baby, put me down! I can walk!”

“YOU AIN’T WALKING NOWHERE!”

Malachi came running toward us, laughing so hard he could barely get his words out. “E, nigga, calm the fuck down! Her water broke. That don’t mean the baby coming out right this second!”

I turned toward him, still holding my wife.

“AND HOW THE FUCK YOU KNOW? YOU A DOCTOR NOW?”

Jru buried her face against my shoulder, laughing as Ashlynn hollered for everybody to hurry up.

I looked down at my wife, who was somehow the calmest person in the middle of all this bullshit.

“Baby, you good?” I asked, tightening my hold on her.

She smiled up at me, her eyes shining with tears.

“I’m good, Ezra. But we really do need to go.”

I kissed her forehead and started toward the waiting vehicles, ignoring Malachi’s laughter behind me.

Four days of planning. A beautiful proposal. A diamond that cost more than some people’s houses.

And my daughter had apparently decided she wasn’t about to miss the damn celebration.

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EPILOGUE



Three Years Later

“Liora Sky King, if you don't bring your little ass back over here!”

My daughter stopped in the middle of the living room, turned around, and looked at me like I had personally offended her. Her little eyebrows pulled together as she glanced between me and the shoes she'd abandoned beside the couch.

“Mommy, don't say bad words.” She frowned, shaking her head with the same disapproving expression her daddy gave people when they got on his nerves.

I blinked.

This little girl had some nerve.

“Then stop making me say them.” I pointed toward the couch, trying to keep a straight face while she stood there looking entirely too pleased with herself.

She planted both hands on her hips, her little pink dress swaying as she shifted her weight. At three years old, Liora had already mastered the art of arguing with grown folks, and unfortunately for me, she had inherited every bit of her daddy's attitude.

“I want Daddy.” She lifted her chin as if that settled the entire conversation.

“Of course you do,” I muttered, reaching for the shoes she'd abandoned beside the couch. “Because Daddy lets you do whatever you want.”

She smiled, showing every one of those little teeth. “Daddy loves me.”

“And what the hell do I do? Pay your bills?” I stared at her, waiting to see what smart little answer she'd come up with next.

Before she could answer, I heard a familiar deep laugh coming from the doorway.

“Why you arguing with my baby?”

I turned around to find my husband standing there in a black designer T-shirt and gray sweats, looking entirely too amused for somebody who was responsible for half my daily headaches. He

leaned against the doorframe with his arms folded, watching us like he'd just walked into the best entertainment of his day.

“Ezra, come get your child.” I held up her shoes, already knowing he was about to take her side.

He glanced at Liora, who immediately ran toward him with both arms raised. Without hesitation, he scooped her up and kissed her cheek.

“What happened, princess?” he asked, smoothing his hand over her hair.

“Mommy being mean.” She wrapped her little arms around his neck and buried her face against his shoulder, putting on a performance that deserved an award.

I threw my hands up. “Are you serious?”

Ezra looked at me over our daughter's head, fighting a smile. “Damn, baby. What you do to her?”

“Don't start with me.” I narrowed my eyes at him, but the way his mouth twitched told me he was enjoying every second of this.

He laughed and kissed Liora's forehead before setting her on his hip. “You heard your mama. Go put your shoes on.”

“But Daddy—” Her bottom lip pushed out as she looked up at him.

“Liora.” His voice grew a little firmer, although the affection in his eyes never changed.

She pouted, and I watched my forty-four-year-old husband almost fold like a lawn chair.

Almost.

“Go on, princess. Daddy got you.”

And just like that, she was smiling again. He lowered her to the floor, and she hurried toward the couch to collect her shoes.

I shook my head as she ran off. “You have created a monster.”

“Nah.” He walked toward me, sliding an arm around my waist. “I created a queen.”

“A spoiled-ass queen.” I rested my hands against his chest, giving him a look that let him know exactly who I blamed for that.

“Just like her mama.”

I smacked his chest, but he caught my hand and pulled me closer, pressing his lips against mine.

Three years.

Three years of marriage, motherhood, building businesses, and learning how to love a man who had once believed he could control everything around him.

And somehow, I was still crazy about his arrogant ass.

“You ready for tonight?” he asked, brushing his thumb across my cheek.

“I would be if your daughter would cooperate.” I glanced toward the living room, where Liora was taking her sweet time doing the one thing I'd asked her to do.

“Our daughter,” he corrected, his lips curving into another smile.

“She yours when she acting like that.”

He laughed again before kissing my forehead.

Tonight was special. We were celebrating the third anniversary of our restaurant and bar, VÉLORA, along with another major milestone for King Enterprises.

What had started as one restaurant had grown into one of the most successful businesses in Westhaven. VÉLORA had become known for its upscale dining, beautiful atmosphere, and lively bar. We had expanded, hired an incredible management team, and built something I was genuinely proud of.

And the best part?

My name was on every bit of it.

Not because Ezra had handed me something to keep me occupied, but because I'd worked my ass off learning the business, making decisions, and proving that I deserved my seat at the table.

My husband had finally learned that loving me didn't mean making every decision for me.

And I'd learned that accepting his help didn't make me any less independent.

We'd come a long damn way.

By six that evening, VÉLORA was packed.

The dining room glowed beneath elegant chandeliers, soft music drifted through the space, and every table was occupied by people who had come to celebrate with us. Servers moved between tables carrying drinks and appetizers while our management team made sure everything ran smoothly.

I stood near the entrance greeting guests when Ashlynn came walking through the doors looking like she belonged on somebody's magazine cover.

“Bitch!” She stretched her arms toward me, smiling so wide that I couldn't help matching her excitement.

I laughed as she threw her arms around me.

“Girl, you look good!” I stepped back to admire her outfit, shaking my head because my best friend had never been the type to show up looking anything less than fabulous.

“Thank you, because your godchildren almost made me late.” She rolled her eyes, adjusting her purse on her shoulder.

I stepped back, looking behind her. “Where are my babies?”

“With their daddy. And before you ask, yes, we finally hired a nanny.” She released a long breath, looking relieved just saying the words.

“Thank God.”

“Girl, you don't understand.” She adjusted the strap of her dress and exhaled dramatically. “Between the shop, traveling, and those two little boys, I was about to lose my damn mind.”

I laughed because I knew she wasn't exaggerating.

Ashlynn had finally opened her beauty salon, and to say she was successful would have been an understatement.

Her appointment books stayed full for months. Celebrities flew into Westhaven specifically to sit in her chair, and she'd already built a reputation as one of the most sought-after hairstylists in the industry.

I'd watched her go from dreaming about owning a salon to running a business that had people fighting for appointments.

And I couldn't have been prouder.

“Speaking of the shop,” I said, linking my arm through hers, “how did that actress appointment go?”

“Girl, amazing. Her team already booked me for two more events.” Her entire face lit up as she spoke.

“Look at you!” I squeezed her arm, genuinely happy to see everything she'd worked for paying off.

“Don't play with me, bitch. I'm expensive now.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder, lifting her chin like she was posing for a camera.

We both burst out laughing.

“You've been expensive,” I reminded her.

“Exactly. Now everybody else knows it.”

A deep voice interrupted us.

“Y'all gonna stand here talking shit all night, or somebody gonna tell me where the food at?”

I turned to see Malachi approaching with one of the twins holding his hand while the other rested on his hip.

Those boys were their daddy made over, and they had inherited his talent for causing trouble.

“Look at Daddy Malachi!” I teased, laughing as I reached for the little one on his hip. The baby immediately leaned toward me, stretching his arms out while Malachi adjusted his grip.

“Don't Daddy Malachi me. Where the food at?” He looked past me toward the dining room, rubbing his stomach like somebody had been starving him all day.

Ashlynn rolled her eyes. “See what I deal with?” She gave her husband a look, but the smile tugging at her mouth ruined the attitude she was trying to give him.

Malachi leaned down and kissed her cheek. “You love me.”

“Unfortunately.” She shook her head, although she leaned into him before he pulled away.

He grinned before looking at me. “Where E at?”

“Probably somewhere pretending he's not checking on everything.” I glanced toward the hallway leading to the private offices, knowing my husband was likely making one last round.

“That sound about right.”

I watched Malachi head toward the bar with one of his sons following behind him, and for a moment, I couldn't help smiling.

If somebody had told me three years ago that these two men would be living the lives they were living now, I wouldn't have believed it.

But they'd done it.

Ezra and Malachi had officially walked away from the drug game.

Completely.

No more late-night meetings with dangerous people. No more watching over their shoulders. No more wondering whether the past would come knocking at our door.

They'd spent months carefully arranging their exit, settling accounts, dividing their money, and transferring control of their old operation to a trusted member of their crew.

They'd walked away clean, without a war or anybody coming after them.

And they'd taken the money they were able to move into legitimate investments and built something even bigger.

King Enterprises had become a name people recognized for business instead of fear.

Their original club in Westhaven was still thriving, and they'd opened three more locations in Miami, New York, and Atlanta.

California was next.

Between the clubs, restaurants, commercial properties, and other investments, they had more than enough to keep themselves busy.

But what impressed me most wasn't the money.

It was watching those two men come home every night to their families.

No guns sitting on tables. No secret conversations. No disappearing for hours without explanation.

Just two husbands raising their children and enjoying the lives they'd worked so hard to build.

I was proud of them.

Especially mine.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention?”

Ezra's voice carried through the restaurant as he stood near the center of the room with a microphone in his hand. Conversations gradually faded, and guests turned in his direction as he waited for the room to settle.

I looked up from my conversation with Ashlynn just as he found me in the crowd.

That familiar smirk spread across his face.

Oh, Lord.

“First, I wanna thank everybody for coming out tonight. Three years ago, my wife and I decided to build something together. And anybody who knows my wife knows that wasn't always the easiest damn thing to do.”

The room erupted in laughter.

I folded my arms, raising my eyebrows at him because I already knew where this was going.

“Ezra!”

He grinned. “See what I'm talking about?”

Malachi laughed so hard he nearly spilled his drink.

“But seriously,” Ezra continued, his expression softening as he looked at me, “I've built a lot of businesses in my lifetime. Made a whole lot of money. Had things most people could only dream about.”

He paused, lowering the microphone slightly as his eyes stayed on mine. The teasing expression disappeared, replaced by something that made my chest tighten.

“But none of that shit compares to what I got waiting on me when I walk through my front door.”

My smile softened.

“My wife gave me something I didn't even know I needed. A home. A family. A reason to stop chasing shit that could've cost me everything.”

For a moment, the room grew quiet.

“And she gave me a beautiful little girl who apparently thinks my money belongs to her.”

Everybody laughed again.

From somewhere near the front, Liora yelled, “It does, Daddy!”

I covered my face, already knowing everybody was looking at our daughter.

Malachi bent over laughing.

Ezra shook his head, smiling so hard his cheeks lifted.

“See? That's my damn problem right there.” He pointed toward Liora, who was sitting there looking proud of herself.

He waited for the laughter to settle before looking at me again.

“Jru, baby, I'm proud of you. Proud of the mother you are, the woman you've become, and the businesswoman you worked your ass off to be. This restaurant wouldn't be what it is without you.”

My eyes started burning. I pressed my lips together, trying to hold back the tears as Ashlynn reached over and squeezed my hand.

“And I know I ain't always been the easiest nigga to love.”

“Ain't that the truth!” Malachi hollered, leaning back in his chair with a grin.

Ezra turned toward him. “Nigga, shut the fuck up before I tell everybody how Ashlynn run your household.”

The entire room lost it.

Ashlynn lifted her glass. “Tell 'em, E!” She laughed, completely unbothered by the fact that her husband was glaring at her.

Malachi pointed at his wife. “You supposed to be on my side!”

“Boy, please.” She waved him off before taking another sip of her drink.

Ezra laughed before turning back to me.

“But through all the bullshit, my wife never stopped being herself. And that's what I love most about her.”

He raised his glass, looking around the room before his gaze returned to me.

“To my wife, my daughter, our family, and everything we've built. May we keep growing, keep loving, and keep finding reasons to celebrate.”

Everyone raised their glasses.

I wiped beneath my eyes before my makeup could run.

That damn man.

Later that night, after the last guests had gone and our exhausted daughter had fallen asleep in her car seat, Ezra and I finally made it home.

I kicked off my heels the second we walked into our bedroom, groaning when my bare feet touched the floor.

“Jesus, my feet hurt.”

Ezra chuckled as he placed Liora's little purse on the dresser. “That's what happens when you insist on wearing them tall-ass shoes.”

“They were cute,” I argued, rubbing one of my feet.

“They were dangerous. Damn near broke your neck twice tonight.”

I rolled my eyes, laughing as he disappeared down the hallway to check on our daughter. A few minutes later, he returned, loosening the collar of his shirt.

“She out?” I asked.

“Gone. Didn't even move when I took her shoes off.”

“Good, because tomorrow she's cleaning that playroom.”

Ezra gave me a look, and I immediately narrowed my eyes.

“Don't.”

“I ain't say nothing.” He held up his hands, that familiar smirk spreading across his face.

“You thinking it.”

He laughed, stepping between my knees and brushing a strand of hair away from my face. “You know I love you, right?”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, smiling up at him. “I would hope so after everything you put me through.”

“Damn, woman. You ever gonna let me live that shit down?”

“Eventually. Maybe when we're eighty.”

He threw his head back laughing before leaning down to kiss me.

As I looked at my husband, I couldn't help thinking about how far we'd come. Three years ago, I was a girl from Rosemont with nothing but a couple of bags and a best friend who refused to let me give up on myself. Now I had a beautiful daughter, a successful business, and a husband who'd learned that loving me didn't mean controlling me.

“You happy, baby?” Ezra asked, his thumb brushing across my cheek.

I smiled, resting my hand against his beard. “Very.”

“Good. Because I ain't done spoiling you.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You and that damn spoiling.”

“What? My wife can't have nice things?”

“Your wife has plenty of nice things, Ezra.”

“Then I guess I gotta find something else to buy you.”

“Ezra!”

He laughed, pulling me against his chest. “What? I got a reputation to maintain.”

I shook my head, smiling as I wrapped my arms around him.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't waiting for something to go wrong. Our daughter was sleeping peacefully, our businesses were thriving, and the people we loved were happy and healthy.

The greatest thing Ezra King had ever given me wasn't his money, his last name, or the beautiful life we'd built.

It was the freedom to be myself while knowing I was loved completely.

“I love you, E,” I whispered, looking up at him.

He kissed my forehead, tightening his arms around me. “Love you more, Mrs. King.”

And for once, I didn't argue.

Because somewhere between all the chaos, heartbreak, obsession, and love, we'd finally found our happily ever after.

THE END.

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