



*grace.*  
the prism series : two.

LOVE BELVIN

# Grace

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MKT Publishing, LLC

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*the prism series : two.*

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# Chapter 1

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day

*ashira*

“Let’s go over the boomerang methods of reinforcing your stance.”

I took a deep breath, trying to recall. “If he says he’s not ready to make a decision about the merger, I can remind him I plan on looking into locations for my club this summer, maybe?” She nodded. “That’ll apply a timeline for his decision.”

“Good one. More,” she prompted while typing into her *iPad*.

“If he says he’s not going to sell, I can ask him for an expected date of him returning to the office so I can transition my executive responsibilities however he wishes.”

“Mmmhmm...” she tapped away. “One more.”

Sensing my time was up, I checked my wrist to confirm it.

*Yup...*



I exhaled again, eyes circling aimlessly through her office as I thought. “If he straight up says no to the merger, I can tell him to go fuck himself.” When her head shot up, I grabbed my purse, scarf, and jacket. “I know my time’s up. I think I have this one in the pocket.” I stood. Therapy sessions were only for an hour, unless stated otherwise in advance. “Thanks.”

Just as I was on my way to the door, she called out to me. “Ashira...”

I turned, pretty sure the irritation burning the lining of my belly wore all over my face.

She tucked her chin before softly sharing, “I know you said you don’t want to talk about what happened last weekend with the gentleman, but I’d really like for you to unload the weight it’s apparent to me you’re carrying behind what happened.”

“I’m sure I will. I’ll unload it from my shoulders and stow it with the other shit I’ve got going on.” My eyes blindly scanned the wall behind her. “Or maybe I’ll just call it what it is.”

“Which is?”

“I got fucked.” I shrugged, lips pouting. “Literally and figuratively.”

“Explain the figurative angle.”

I felt my jaw tightening, eyes rolling, and head softly shaking. Every time I thought about him—each time my mind traveled to the biggest, most stupid blunder I’ve likely committed in my adult life, a bitter tang coated my tongue.

Involuntarily, I swallowed hard. “I was stupid.”

“How?”

I shrugged. “He didn’t have to do much work to make me believe his lies. I didn’t ask enough questions and gave too many explanations for him. I spoke his excuses before he got to serve them to me in lies. Like when we parted ways at night, I’d assume his friend always drove him—even when I didn’t see the friend in my apartment parking lot. I assumed he

lived with his mother when...” I thought for a second, eyes tightening. “I’m not even sure if the guy ever mentioned living with his mother in the first place.” My head shook as the memories began trickling in. “I paid for things, like food every chance I got—even when he was on a date with another woman. And I offered to pay for other things he was insistent I shouldn’t.” I closed my eyes, scoffing at my stupidity all those times, especially at the fair last Saturday. “I’m pretty sure he’s been laughing at my arrogance since I left his place on Sunday morning.”

“Did you view him through a lens of arrogance?”

I didn’t want to talk about it. “I don’t know.”

“Can I offer, perhaps if you did, it couldn’t have been that bad because you *did* open up to him enough to allow Saturday to happen? Your feelings for him couldn’t have been all that malice if you consented to that level of intimacy with him.”

“Yeah, but I thought I knew who I was consenting to. Joke’s on me, the privileged girl from Millburn.” I rolled my eyes again and mumbled, “This is exactly why I don’t date guys from the ‘streets.’” I used air quotations. “They view my pedigree as naivety. They’re in a head game with me I never ‘consented’ to. It’s like I’m a target for a nasty, selfish agenda. This time, though, I thought I had a handle on it. I mean, you know him: he’s articulate when he wants to be, and charismatic, and cultured in his own way. At my age, I thought I was familiar with all the cards on the table and could trust the players there, too.”

“Or perhaps the culture of the player across from you is so vastly different from yours, you didn’t understand the set of rules he abides by.”

“What does that even mean?”

She scooted up in her seat, yanked and tucked her skirt beneath her. “It means your lens for life is a culmination of all of your life experiences. Everything you saw, heard, and felt. I’m sure this gentleman is no different. You went into an agreement with him based on what you saw, heard, and felt for him—with prejudice. And maybe he did the same with you.

But just because you and this person entered into this space with reservations doesn't mean any malice took place."

Peering at her with incredulity, I squinted. "You haven't forgotten 'this person' is your client as well. Right?"

My therapist shook her head. "I haven't."

"So, don't stir the pot of my boiling ego by perpetuating his bullshit identity. Say his name! You know more than the one syllable I do."

With that, I left. I meant it when I told her I didn't want to talk about him.



"Yes. I agree." He skimmed through the opened beat-up book. "Most with an unseeing eye believe Samson's story is nothing more than a cautionary tale about a man weakened under the wiles of one irresistible woman."

I nodded. "Instead of peeping how wild and insatiable Samson was. Like how he burned down the fields...the vineyard and olive groves. Bangin' prostitutes...the arrogance dude displayed over and over with his women and the Philistines. His spiral was years in the making. It wasn't just with women or didn't start with Delilah."

"I agree. Just as Atteberry says. It is why I sent you the book back when you were in Montgomery." Ezra closed the book and sat back on the sofa in the bishop's office of his church. Digging inside his beard to scratch his chin, he rasped, "I'm sensing this conversation has a deeper meaning than

expounding on a book you and I discussed by way of letters years ago.”

My eyes scraped the floor. “I feel *like*—I’m spiraling. I am. I’m spiraling.” I wanted to be frank even at the risk of seeing the shock on his face.

“How so?”

I took a deep breath, thinking about it. “It’s been a...series of events over the past few weeks. Fighting, a shakedown”—Thanks to Juggy’s bullshit. I almost whooped his ass after letting Danny Lew and his weak ass friends go that night. He knew I didn’t roll like that anymore.—“and a...chick.” My eyes lifted to meet his. “A woman.”

Ezra’s head bobbed slowly, processing the information, I figured. “Let’s start with *have you discussed any of these things with your therapist?*”

I shook my head, bringing my hand to my mouth until I caught myself about to gnaw on my finger. “I can’t talk to her about everything.”

“Then how effective and dynamic do you expect her to be?”

“Oh, she’s been effective in my pockets.”

“She’s more dynamic when you open your mind and heart.” When I shot him an empty look, he explained, “Jas, I’ve made no mystery of my experience with therapy. I would not be the self-aware, stable man I am right now without that help. What can you not share?”

“It’s not...” I took a quiet breath, feeling myself about to fall into excuses. Fuck that. I was a grown man, accountable for my actions. “I haven’t had a chance to talk about it. My session ain’t until Thursday.”

“Okay.” He sat up, bringing his elbows to his knees. “It’s clear you’re wearing this encumbrance on your back. Let’s do a preliminary run. Start with the fight.”

“In the right place at the wrong time. My club in Harlem. We’d been having some security issues there. Some cats had

been sneaking in after hours when the final count of the night was going down. They told the manager we have there that the club was gonna start getting taxed, which meant—”

“I know what it means. Someone was ‘shaking *you* down,’ extorting you.”

I nodded. “It was clear to me they didn’t know who owned the place. To be a hun’ned, they didn’t know who ran the place either. Found out a few weeks ago when the matter was addressed, dude thought it was just in my name only. But his proper knowledge didn’t come before their planned ‘heist’ when he and his young partner put a gun to my head, trying to rob the spot.”

“Christ...” He rubbed his head. “For a violent-prone man with your history, I’m sure that was akin to your first hit of a stimulant narcotic after significant time away from it.”

*Bingo...*

“And I’m wondering if it started there, because a few weeks after handling that, my guy, Jug, had a damn relapse. It was one of those he couldn’t be left hanging alone. A cat I’m in a legit, fully legal business relationship with tried to renege on me. A deal he agreed *and* contributed to. Then the nigga stopped taking my calls and texts—ghostin’ me—knowing he owed me for a shield I provided back in the day. When he finally got the balls to turn me down to my face, he got arrogant with it, showing up with his weak ‘pals,’ talking greasy and...”

Deadpanned, Ezra looked me in the eyes, almost as though bored. “Juggy didn’t take to the act of him abnegating and, therefore, lacking respect for your efforts as a legitimate businessman.”

I nodded. “He’s been riding with me on this new lifestyle. Jug hasn’t been sold on it, but for sure has been trusting me. And that night when one hammer dropped...” I swung my hand, dismissing the topic.

“I follow.” He nodded for a few seconds, eyes wide. “And what about this... ‘chick?’”

*Oh. Her...*

My attention went to a string standing boldly out of place from the seam of my jeans. I tried yanking it unsuccessfully at first, stalling. “I broke a promise.”

“To whom?”

When my heavy regard lifted to his face, Ezra’s eyes flipped in understanding.

“I *fucked up*—pardon my language.”

“With the Father,” he surmised.

I found my head shaking, lips pushed out. “I ‘on’t like this space I’m in, E.”

“Which is?”

I scoffed. “You sound like her, my therapist.”

“I’m licensed.” He reminded me. “You know this. I need to be sure I’m understanding what you’re sharing.”

I nodded, answering his question. “Against God, yeah.”

“You had sexual relations,” he didn’t ask, so much as was confirming it to be sure we were in agreement.

Inhaling, I made clear, “I did. And to be transparent, it’s one of those things on my list I was specific with Him about sacrificing.”

“Be clearer.”

“I told God the week I got home, I would...” I hated speaking it. Sharing it. But with Ezra, I knew I could without judgment. “I told Him I’d be celibate until I found my wife. That’s why I’ve been going hard, dating these women. It’s been me trying to check that item on the list.”

“So,” He sat back on the sofa. “you’re telling me you made a covenant with the Lord.”

“Of sorts,” I nodded, processing that. “I guess.”

“A pact, an agreement. You’re asking Him for something or some *things* and, in return, you made sacrifices.”

“Until my shit went weak and I broke it.” I raised my palm. “Pardon me.”

“Granted. I can understand.” He adjusted his pants at the knees. “When it comes to the nature of a man’s libido, sacrifices can become impossible. I was celibate for years until Alexis. Not being able to identify a woman I found irresistible was a breeze, but that paled in comparison to having urges going unfulfilled.”

“So, was it a struggle for you?”

“It wasn’t until it was. And it was when a giraffe of a woman fell at my feet. Her glowing features took my breath away, and her body...” Ezra made some distinct and blaring sound with his mouth then rolled his eyes. “Christ,” he whispered, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I was in serious trouble, man. Practically from the moment she lay at my feet, I was on a race to making her mine.”

My face wrinkled. “What was Lex doing at your feet?”

His brows raised. “She fell. Holding boxes stacked too high, she couldn’t see, I suppose.”

I chuckled. “Mean ass Lex bagged a pastor of one of the most prestigious religious organizations on the coast. That’s Harlem Pride right there.”

“Stranger things have happened, I’m sure.”

That made me laugh more. “I ever tell you she beat my cousin *down* in high school—a dude?”

“Those are days I’d rather not know of.”

I understood. Back in the day, Lex would have never qualified for the first lady Ezra had turned her into. You could bank a brick on that. But I respected it, though. Seeing Lex walk in this light had been inspiring to me.

“No disrespect. Just crazy to come home and find out the weirdo preacher who spoke prophetically into my life had been bagged by Lex Grier. Now, you’re this eclectic, powerful vessel she rides for. It’s a beautiful thing.”

*A friend...*

“Oh, trust me. To many I’m still the weirdo preacher. I’ve come to accept my eclecticism as well as the fact of my wife having a colorful past. But let us go back to your issue with the woman. Could this be the one I met at the safe house?”

I gave an affirmative nod. “That would be the one.” Then I thought. “Funny how you go straight to her considering we’ve never dated.”

“*Ahhh*, yes.” He snorted. “Because she’s the only one I’ve seen with a unique disregard to your rather rigorous nature.”

“Rigorous?” I scoffed. “Whatchu’ mean?”

“I’ve seen you with three women since your release. Two were prospects and then there was this young lady we’re discussing.”

“*Ashir*—Witherspoon,” I corrected myself when trying to give a name to the subject.

“Pardon me: Witherspoon.” Ezra acknowledged. “She either didn’t read your silent energy of preferring personal space or didn’t care. I hadn’t seen that level of comfortability to you from any other woman.” I didn’t get it, so I couldn’t agree. Back at the safe house in February, I wasn’t checking for Witherspoon to have measured either of our body languages, especially not hers. “She’s also intimated not being your ‘type.’ Strange declaration, considering it wasn’t a topic of discussion. And not to mention, last month while you and I were in the middle of a conversation, she *FaceTime*’d you just after Cynthia, and you didn’t hesitate to answer the call.”

“That struck you as odd?”

Ezra smiled before challenging with a raspy, “Why would it not?” We stared at each other for a few seconds. A muted boundary being pushed. “Do you plan on being with Ms. Witherspoon again?” I shook my head. “Then move on from it. You’re not cursed for a mere slip up. I believe Christ gives consequences to what we have in our hearts, not a single lapse in judgment. What is your fear from this?”

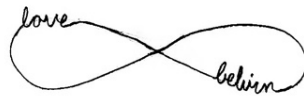
“The distraction.” I rubbed my eyes as my damn stomach turned over. “The covenant being broken...promise not kept.”



Ezra nodded in a way that made me feel he understood. “The Bible asks in Romans chapter eight, *who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness*—your slip up with Ms. Witherspoon? No,” he croaked. “Nothing. In verse thirty one, we ask, *what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, then who could be against us?*”

Nodding, I explained, “I don’t want to be the one against me. I can’t afford to lose His grace by doing reckless *shi*—things that require His mercy instead.”

“We all need both. Coincidentally, it is why they’re renewed each day. Instead of tormenting yourself about an isolated mishap, why don’t you revisit your purpose for abstinence? Remind yourself of why you vowed it. Redefine your need of a wife. That may help you put things into perspective and perhaps keep your hands off of Ms. Witherspoon.” He stood from the sofa and walked off.



ashira

“So which is it?” I posed to two in particular at a table of sixteen.

My eyes swung between Cecil, the garage manager, and Robert, the head motor vehicle technician.

Cecil’s eyes fell. “Trucks are not available—or conveniently available.”

Robert, a veteran here at *Witherspoon Homes* nearing seventy years old, sighed. “Come on, young man. That ain’t true and you know it.”

“Please reference me according to your age and not your level of maturity,” Cecil softly requested.

My father next to me cleared his throat, readjusting himself in his seat. It mirrored several people at the table. This was our staff meeting set in the conference room. The meeting was the last item on our agenda and, already, I was over it. It was almost eleven in the morning, and I had a shit load of work to pore over at my desk, other meetings with my father shadowing me, and a site visit. Sitting through Cecil’s punk ass, passive-aggressive approach to his subordinate once again wasn’t on my list of shit to endure today.

Robert’s head shot over to Cecil, who wouldn’t give him eye contact. There was a groundswell of tension in the room at this point. Even Marge-Jean twisted her neck in response to the troubled atmosphere.

Robert then peered at my father, eyes pleading. “Noel, man, you see what I mean?”

My brows shot up and I turned to my father. I didn’t know what pulled at me more, the fact that he was expected to come to someone’s defense or that he had a pulse on anything going on at the firm.

My father cleared his throat again. “Rob, I’m sure you and Cecil can work something out after the meeting.”

“No,” I enunciated. “This is the fourth time this issue has come to my attention this year. It was an issue last year and the year before. It’s an ongoing issue.” My eyes swept over to Robert and Cecil, separated by Marcia Wooden, one of the accountants. “Let’s get to the hemorrhage here. Trades are showing up to sites late, slowly shrinking the window of productivity. So let’s start from the beginning.” I glanced down at the pile of reports. “Thomas Gaft said he was late to the site because it took forty-five minutes to locate a lift. Tell me, how could that happen?”

“Oh.” Robert chirped. “I remember when Tommy came that day. It was behind the garage. I had it in line to work on that week. That’s all.”

“Cecil?” I invited him in to explain.

I saw when he swallowed. “But is that in compliance with operations, Robert?” his tone firmer.

“What?” Robert asked, face disgusted. “What you tryna tell me about the compliance rule for?” He muttered, “I been working here since two years after the doors opened. I know how to do my job.”

“That’s not the issue at hand,” Cecil argued. “No one’s questioning your ability to diagnose and fix issues with vehicles. As I’ve been telling you since I’ve come aboard as the garage manager, there are recorded procedures for how the vehicles are to be checked out and returned to their designated spots in the garage. The policy states for all vehicles to be returned to their designated parking space regardless of maintenance being needed. For years, you allow trades to just drop off vehicles anywhere outside of the parking lot as long as they leave the keys inside. It creates havoc and makes it difficult to track them down.”

“Why do they believe it’s acceptable to operate against policy?” I asked.

Dramatically, Cecil’s head whipped over to Robert.

“Ms. Witherspoon,” Robert tried to explain. “Vehicles don’t need fixing every day. We’re just talking about a handful here.”

I thumbed through the reports. “A handful that’s creating subsequent violations. Robert, when trades are late reporting to sites, projects get delayed.”

“Now, I *understand*—”

“You may be in the business of car repairs. But I’m in the home building industry. Building homes pay your bills, Robert, not your desire to rearrange operations because you’ve been here since two years after the doors opened. Now,” I went to my pen and portfolio where today’s agenda was printed out. Kenny, Marge-Jean’s assistant, leaned into the room on one leg.

His eyes were wide and forehead creased. “Ms. Witherspoon, you have two visitors.”

Without thought, and with great annoyance, I blinked hard. “They’ll have to wait. I’m closing a meeting.” My attention went back to writing my notes and I heard the door close after a stretch of time. “As I was saying: this conversation is going on record. Cecil, as the superior in this case, if another report of this nature comes across my desk, you’ll stand alone to answer for it. It’s called chain of command.”

“It’s been happening before I assumed this role,” Cecil argued, and I knew he was perturbed. When angered or focused at work, Cecil laid his queen to the side. His masculine traits dominated. It was something I had noticed since my father hired him years ago. “And what do you suppose I do when it undeviatingly happens again?” He challenged me.

I lifted the pile of reports in the air. “You do what these managers have done. Disciplinary reports.” I applied a fake smile, swinging it over to Robert. “We have procedural operations here at *Witherspoon Homes*. No one, no matter how tenured you are, is exempt from them.” I caught Cecil rolling his eyes. “That adjourns this meeting. I have to go.” I quickly grabbed my things, clutching what I could between my breast and arm. My phone vibrated with a text message as I murmured to my father, “Next one in twenty-two minutes. Take a potty break if you need to.”

“You sure you don’t need a chill pill?” he questioned, ribbing me.

“Oh, that pill is coming.” I scoffed. “It truly is.” I swiftly gaited out of the room, smoothly zipping through the space opened for me by those trying to leave, too.

I was nearing my office when Kenny called behind me. “Ahhh... Ms. Witherspoon.”

My eyes rolled and head nearly collapsed backward. Then my phone chirped again, reminding me to tend to it. It was Corinne, confirming our dinner date for her birthday.

**Me: FOR SHO. SEND GOOD VIBES FOR TADAY THO. YA GIRL IS SKRUGGLING! LMAO**

I'd made it to my office and opened the door. "Yes, Kenny," I droned to him behind me. Then, abruptly, I froze at the two figures standing around my desk. Turning, I saw Kenny had just made it to the door. "Kenny?" I croaked.

"This is what I was trying to give you the heads up about, Ms. Witherspoon."

"Who in the hell let them in my office—no one waits in my office for me," my voice desperate and shaky.

Terrell, who I'd met from touring with them, shot a side-eye to Brielle who gazed my way with blank eyes. The smirk on his face turned my stomach.

I licked my lips. "What are you doing here?"

"You mind leaving us alone for a minute, sugar plum?" Terrell requested of Kenny.

Immediately, I didn't like it. Terrell was one of Brielle's hanger-oners. He was a very condensing queen, never bringing good energy to our rehearsals and shows. I didn't have much interaction with him, but had seen a few guys and girls from my troupe on that tour cry from his harsh words. Terrell, at my height with a broad upper body and slender, knock-knee legs, would not be at my place of business. I wouldn't tolerate it.

"Don't speak to my staff from a place of authority." I remained calm. "You're the two whose presence is in question. Let's start there." I turned to Kenny whose expression was cemented in shock with wide eyes and a hanging jaw. "I'll get back to you in a minute." Returning my attention to Brielle and her sidekick, I asked, "Why are you here?"

Still looking at Brielle from the side of his eye, Terrell snickered this time. "Construction basic where?"

Brielle's eyes fell to my modest-length heeled *Saint Laurent* ankle boots then rolled up to my ripped boyfriend cut jeans, went past my black turtleneck bodysuit beneath a black, white, and brown tweed jacket. When she rolled her eyes over to Terrell, I glanced down at my clothing myself. *Chanel* was a

little over the top for work, but I dressed the jacket down. That's when I was hit with the reminder of the world belonging to Ms. Empress, but this corner of it with the name "Witherspoon" on the building was mine.

I ambled over to my desk. "Either I can squeeze some answers out of you or I can get my PR team down here to do the honors—"

"Uhn-uhn!" Terrell cried, peering nervously at Brielle.

Brielle shook her head covered with a *BSU* baseball cap, pulled low toward her eyes. The sight of it irked me. She was not a member of that elite society. The closest she came to it was her bestie, Tori McNabb, attending *Blakewood State University* for just a year. Brielle didn't deserve the distinguished association. "No need for all of that, sweetie—"

"Ashira." I blinked. "Shi-Shi, or Ms. Witherspoon is fine. But fake ass pet names will never be appropriate."

"*Ooooooh!*" Terrell taunted. "Ms. Thang ain't for the shits, Bri!" He laughed.

I wanted to call Cecil to have him come in here and serve Terrell a dose perfect for his queening ailment.

I picked up the phone again, but for Elle.

"No! I didn't come for drama," rushed from Brielle's overlined peached-stained lips. I knew I said I hated her, but it was damn hard to in the bright beam of her aura. In just an oversized grey sweatshirt, a large scarf around her neck, fitted Bermuda jean shorts, and cowboy boots I'd seen on this season's runway, this was the queen of pop—arguably. The woman had won more Grammys than any other woman in history. She won an Academy Award for her last movie—she sucked, but that was just my opinion. It was hard, but I had to stay focused. Brielle had no business in my world. She could stay in Austin's as long as she liked. "I just wanted to apologize."

I held the handset of the phone in the air. "For what?"

"For..." Her eyes jumped to Kenny. "...you know."

“Kenny, give us a minute please.”

As he turned for the door, Terrell urged, “Yeah, Ken-Ken. Give the adults a moment to discuss your Christmas list.”

I slammed the phone back onto the base. “I’m going to say this one last time, or you’ll be the next to go. Do not call anyone in this building anything other than their name—”

“And if I don’t—”

“Then you don’t say shit. Why are you here anyway? Are you security?”

Brielle snickered. “Chill, T. We’re not here for trouble. I just came to apologize for the shit with Austin.”

“What shit with him?”

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll say it. I didn’t know he had a girlfriend. In the industry, just about every guy is freed up to have...” Her head seesawed as though Brielle mentally searched for her next words. “...adult relationships.”

“The girls, too!” Terrell scoffed, rolling his eyes as he flipped imaginary hair.

Brielle’s neck snapped as she turned to him. “Oh, we’re a team today?”

“I’m just saying,” he droned deeply as in masculine, and curvy which was feminine. Terrell whipped his head to the other side. “Be fair with that shit.”

Shaking her head, Brielle turned back to me. “I didn’t know he had a girlfriend. I swear.”

I shrugged. “I don’t see how that’s possible after three years of being by his side in forty-five percent of his red carpet pix, but okay.”

“I didn’t see that. And it’s not like we have the same circle.”

Again, I shrugged and shook my head, indifferent about the information.

“I came out here because it seems he couldn’t get a hold of you. I had a few of my assistants try, too. Security won’t let anyone in your building.” Her hands flew into the air, led by her burgundy coffin-shaped nails. “We even tried calling here to your job.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not waiting for the once in a lifetime chance for Brielle to pop up on me. Some of us prefer Pixie.”

Terrell snorted a harsh chortle. “This bitch!” he cried out, laughing.

“Don’t be a bitch,” Brielle warned.

“From the bitch who fucked my man.” I blinked several times, not really awaiting an answer. “Are we done?”

“I guess we are if you’re going to act like this.”

I moved to the door. “Goodbye.”

“Uh!” Terrell leaped in the air and headed for the door. “Time *ta* go.”

Brielle took a deep breath and followed. Then when she made it to me, she slowed before a stop. “He was really fucked up about it. I don’t think he meant to hurt you.”

My eyes grew wild. “He cheated, but didn’t mean to hurt me? Wow. That’s a new logic I need to learn.”

She rolled her eyes. “He told me about your dancing. If you want to join my troupe again, I’m down.”

A flash thought of Jas’ rejection caused my nose to flare. “I’ll never dance with you again. Let’s start there.” I hated that I used his words, executing them in the same nasty manner I perceived of him shooting to me when we met. But it seemed so appropriate for her fucking audacity. “You didn’t even recall me from your troupe when I saw you at the *Ritz Luxuriate* back in February. What makes you think it would be my merit that gets me back on there?”

Brielle’s face contorted, telling of her confusion. I had no idea how anything I said went over her head. But she, once again, looked me up and down.



“I tried,” she murmured. “I respect the fact you haven’t gone to the blogs yet, making this messy. I don’t want to be known for wrecking a home. So I’m trying,” she whispered.

*Oh, that’s what this visit’s about?*

“Try again with someone who allows appointments. I don’t. And it’s still not too late to make you a headline.”

“Damn!” Terrell’s growl had me swinging my head toward him in the hallway.

His big, ugly hand was at his chest as he leaned back. When I followed his line of vision, I found a familiar brooding body sauntering our way. Jas’ eyes were locked on me. The muscles around them tight as he pointed over his shoulder.

Kenny was behind him. “Sir! I said she’d be a moment more.”

“Yeah, but you been saying that same thing for the past thirty minutes,” Jas argued, lips balled into a moue in his approach to me.

It wasn’t until then Terrell murmured with the depth of his natural voice, droning, “I say what the fuck. Damn.”

Brielle turned her body away from me to get a full view of the oncoming traffic. It wasn’t predicted, and maybe it should have been, but I saw as her lips parted and lashes clapped at his presence. Jas’ heavy and angry gaze was locked onto me when he stopped just a few feet away from the office door.

“The fuck, Witherspoon? You gone keep a nigga waiting all morning? I gotta work.”

“Ride’s on me,” Terrell chirped. I felt my chest squeeze, toes ball, and head fucking spin. “I can carry you—”

“Say the *fuck* less!” I barked.

Terrell stepped over to take Brielle’s side, suddenly coy about his tasteless outburst. Jas, now alerted to my inner-bitch, turned to look at the group he’d just walked up on. His eyes lingered at Brielle, but not in a flirtatious way. I could perceive when Jas registered who she was. His head swung back over

to me, inspecting me from head to toe, similar to what Brielle had done earlier. “You good?”

Why was he here? My eyes fell and head bounced in a small nod. Jas then sauntered into my office without another word.

“Sir!” Kenny shouted behind him.

“Kenny,” I raised my hand to him. He stopped, expression crestfallen. “I’ll take care of this. You see these two out, and never allow them back here again.”

“The hell?” Terrell chirped, swinging his heart-shaped frame away. “The bitch is taking it too fucking far. Who the fuck she think she talking to like that?” he hissed, marching down the hall.

“Terrell!” Brielle tried hushing him in warning. She pulled the scarf she donned from her neck to her mouth, covering her face as she followed him.

I walked inside my office and slammed the door, head hung and with the urge to rub my face. I couldn’t do it, though. Not with my makeup. I’d done the best natural smoky eye ever this morning. It was likely the fourth worst day of my life, but no one was worth fucking up the perfect eyeshadow.

“You good?”

My head swung up to that low bass. Momentarily, I’d forgotten he was there. Who the fuck could say fucking Brielle showed up to their job on a random ass Thursday morning? The same Thursday morning my father agreed to coming in to shadow me in hopes of oiling him into resuming his duties at his firm. Also, the same random ass Thursday morning a laborer who made me believe he was meekly disadvantaged and unaffluent popped up.

“Why are you here?” The question seemed to be a running theme for me.

“I haven’t heard from you.”

My head swung over my shoulders at his audacity. “Likewise.”

“I called you, Witherspoon. Three times.”

“Funny. I wasn’t aware.”

“Could it be because you finally blocked me?”

Snapping my fingers, I sincerely recalled that fact. “I guess I did.”

“Is that what you do to everybody you have a misunderstanding with? You block them or kick them out the way you just did ol’ girl?”

Surprisingly, that shit stung, causing me to swallow swelling emotions. “You don’t know me,” I murmured, shaking my head.

“That’s why I’m trying to talk this thing out with you. I don’t want to stop being cool. Can we just—”

“Pick up where we left off? Fucking and sucking without me knowing shit about you?”

“*Wither—*”

“I don’t even know your name. Your name—your first name. I *do* know your street name, though. I guess that boundary is safe. Am I a joke to you? Fucking with me like that fulfilled some sick need to get back at me for that first conversation in *Brown Barista*?” I switched weight on my hips when hit with a revelation. “Have you done this before? You and Juggy plotting on unsuspecting wealthy women?”

He grunted, brushing his palms down his face. “Say less.”

“No problem. Please leave.”

“Don’t do this, Witherspoon.”

“You’ve done it. You kept doing it each day before last Saturday when you had the opportunity to tell me the truth about who you are. You should have at least told me you were a liar.”

“I’ve never lied to you.”

And that was probably the most painful part. “By omission, you lied over and over and over again.”

“What can I do short of telling you what I was planning to on Sunday morning before you stormed out?”

“You can start by apologizing.”

“For what? Not knowing my P.O. was gonna show up at my crib that morning, fuckin’ up my time with you? Or for the damn incompetent electrician, who couldn’t get the smoke detector’s wiring right the first time and had to come back that morning? Do you see how crazy that sounds? Witherspoon, I swear, I was going to tell you about my house, about my complicated life. I really was.”

“I had to sleep with you for that? In order to get to know basic facts about you, I had to sleep with you?”

“That ain’t what I’m saying at all. Clearly, something had been building between us all this time—or most of it. I didn’t expect it. I let shit get out of control and for that, I *am* sorry.”

I blinked at his audaciousness. “*You* let things get out of control? So *you* were the only person developmentally capable of avoiding this fuckery?” The shit was insulting.

“That’s not what I’m saying either. Can we just talk?”

“I don’t have time. It’s not a good day for me,” I answered honestly, even though I had no interest in talking to Jas ever again. My eyes closed, once again swallowing back my emotions. “I thought you were cute. Simple, smart, uncomplicated...and a departure from what I knew.” I shook my head, dismissing what was now the memories of my old feelings for him. “Anyway... It doesn’t matter now.”

Jas scoffed, appearing offended. “So, I’m cute and fuckable being broke, but having a few dollars makes me less attractive?”

“Actually, you having me staying in the fucking pissy projects, thinking you lived there while having Cynthia’s dry Humpty Dumpty ass at your lakeside estate makes you less attractive.”

Jas’ jaw collapsed. Quickly, he caught himself and tightened it. “I can explain that, too.”

I turned for my desk. I really had to go. “Another time, maybe.”

Jas broke my stride, handing me a small envelope. “Could you read this and call me tonight?”

That was it. I was over Jas and his time in my presence was up. Before I could tell him, a knock sounded at my door. Jas pushed the envelope into my hands as the door opened and my father’s burly frame peered inside.

“You said the meeting with the township was in twenty-two minutes. That was twenty-seven minutes ago.” Then his attention met Jas’ presence. My father’s eyes narrowed and he stood straight.

Quickly glancing away, I found Jas widening his stance, chin lifting slightly higher, but he didn’t speak. Suddenly, there was a spark of aggression in the room. The atmosphere was instantly heightened by stark masculinity I’d never seen from either man. My father silently picked Jas apart, starting from his scuffed *Timberland* construction boots, hoodie, vest, and wildly coiled hair. His chin lowered, eyes remained on Jas, whose head cocked to the side. Testosteronic energies were warring in real time. It made me want to either pick a side or run for safety.

My father plucked a brow. “Am I needed in here?”

I swallowed hard, eyes rolled behind my lids. “No, sir.” I cleared my throat. “This meeting was adjourned before it got started. My gaze lifted to Jas, whose expression softened on me.

After hitting me with a leveling glare, he droned, “Please read it and call me.” Then he was off, promenading past my father with great aplomb.

Jas made it out of the office when my father asked, expression tight, “Do you know him?”

“Not in a million years. Let’s go.” I grabbed the file needed for the meeting after depositing the envelope Jas gave me into my purse, stored in a drawer.

Then I rounded my father's imposing frame to leave the office.

"Hey," he called after me. "You think you went too hard on Cecil? You know he's sensitive."

"Cecil's gay, daddy; not soft or sensitive." He blinked at my brashness. I knew what he was getting at and he was completely wrong. "He may be effeminate at times, but the man can battle a bull; physically and emotionally."

"You were definitely a damn bull in there with him—with all of them."

I shrugged. "It's the way I've survived alone all these years. It's what I've been taught." *Not by you, though...*

I'd never have the balls to share that part, so I continued down the hall.

# Chapter 2

**Part II cont'd:**

**April | Present Day**

*ashira*

“**A**lrigh**t**, ladies.” The waitress smiled, stowing her tablet inside the pocket of her apron. “I’ve put that in for you. Enjoy your drinks while the cooks get started on your appetizers!”

“Thank you!” Peach nodded with a smile.

“Thanks!” Corinne echoed as the rest of us did, too.

“A toast!” Shizu was the first to raise her martini glass. The table of six followed in action, even Peach with her lemonade in a full dinner glass. “To one of the most creatively expressive, confident, and bodacious women I know. Corinne, you’re so boss, so courageous and driven, it only makes sense that for your thirty-fifth birthday, you’ve achieved so many of your dreams. You’ve taught me—*us*—so much. Your femininity is so bold and unapologetic.” She used her free palm to pat her chest. “I know we haven’t known you long. Shi-Shi did us all a favor when she introduced you, but it’s

seriously been one of the best fucking decisions she's made. You're one of us, sister!"

"Aye!" Toya, Corinne's cousin, cheered.

"Absolutely!" Peach agreed. "One of us."

"Well, she's been one of us forever," her cousin, Frenchie, explained, "and has been teaching us how to be about our money for years."

We agreed with that statement by way of cheers, claps, and hoops in the middle of *Khaos*, one of the hottest and newest restaurants in Jersey City. It had been highly anticipated and opened two months ago. It was impossible to get a reservation here. The place was packed, energy buzzing from wall to wall in the two-story building. The multi-colored lights weren't too festive, overtaking the ambiance, and the white leather seats brought to mind my therapist's sofa, but not in a bad way. The place was really nice, the vibe alone accounting for the high menu value.

"She taught me how to help my fiancé increase his credit score." Toya danced in her seat.

I laughed hard and unexpectedly.

"Well, damn," Shizu trilled. "She taught me how to help build my nephew's credit by adding him as a user to my *Mastercard*." She cleared her throat. "And not to wait on a man to give me an orgasm. What did she teach y'all?" Her face was long, embossed with anxiousness.

"Ummm..." I stalled, peering over to Peach.

Corinne had taught me so much, but I wasn't prepared to say what.

"I taught y'all bitches how to fuck or enjoying fucking even when your man ain't doing it right!" Corinne declared.

My back slammed into the chair, arms dropped to either side, and head collapsed backward as I cracked the fuck up. I could hear the other girls hooting loudly, too. When I was able to open my eyes, I saw Peach wiping tears from her face, she



laughed so hard. This was Corinne: infectiously inappropriate. But we'd have her no other way.

"This is true," Toya vouched for her cousin.

Corinne nodded. "Peach, I've been getting you prepped for when you're ready to air out your Miss Cooch Thang. Tell me I'm lying."

Adorably, Peach rolled her eyes, muttering, "Yeah, you have been. I've been stowing your tips and tricks away for such a time."

That made me laugh, too. Peach was pure, but not innocent—or perhaps the other way around. The woman was definitely celibate, something I needed tips on.

"And Shi-Shi, who told you how to make yourself explode when Austin was having all that fun in your pretty trap?" Corinne reminded me.

I tipped my hat to her, agreeing. She sure did. As simple as the concept sounded, Corinne advised that I play with my clit during intercourse. Once I got comfortable with the special matters of reaching down there, my life had changed. "I haven't missed an orgasm since."

"See! That's why I'm here." Corinne's glass was finally in the air for a toast. "Peach's purpose is to spread the gospel. Mine is to tell y'all bitches how to have fun when spreading them legs."

Laughing, I cheered, "Here. Here!"

The ladies joined us in a boisterous toast.





Our glasses were in the air, prepared for a toast when Ken proposed, “To the best and brightest minds in winemaking.” His eyes opened wide, blue irises bright as hell. “We’re going to make a shit load of money at this rate. *Château Blevin!*”

“*Château Blevin!*” Lenny, Mark, and I repeated before tapping glasses.

This wasn’t my comfort zone, socializing over business. Strategizing and coming up with ways to expand and increase earnings wasn’t a task for me. In fact, those were things I did alone in my head while busy on a site or working out. But this shit of coming out to eat just to confirm business was some shit that had been painful to get through. But these were my guys, my team in the winery world.

“Yes!” Ken barely swallowed. “And with this expansion taking place, things are only looking better and brighter. Jaquana texted me today saying the deal is solid. Five more acres to our estate!”

“Good thinking on Jas’ part,” Mark added.

“True that,” Lenny agreed. “Jacobs was right when he said you were a thinker.” He patted my shoulder.

I understood comradery, but wasn’t quite there and needed time to ease into it. “It’s nothing.” I took a sip of my water. “We’re a team...everybody bringing something to the think tank.” I shrugged.

“True, but the restaurant on the estate?” Ken’s brows shot up. “That was genius.”

“Pure facts, bro,” Lenny agreed. “We’re including restaurateur on our resumes. A facility there with cigar service.”

“It’s about maximizing our assets.” I shrugged. “You saw the numbers from the marketing team. Cigars and wine have a viable relationship.”

*Château Blevin* was still new, but a promising budding brand. Divine helped out a lot with the marketing which followed his beloved *Mauve*. He hit the urban circuit with it hard, but not just any urban market: affluent public figures the middle class and poor are influenced by. Then he backed out, leaving me an opportunity to step up. And I had stepped up. I forced an aggressive research project for the marketing team and thought to open a restaurant on the vineyard. We launched it a month ago with such promising numbers that we’d just purchased an additional five acres to build a larger restaurant and a cigar bar on the estate. Of course, my firm would handle the construction.

Ken pumped his fist into the air. He was different. Not corny or suspect, just different. He was in his mid-forties with no wife or kids. Ken’s excitement seemed singular. He often said his one focus in life was business. It showed in his hunger for the game. These were good times.

“This is why I fucking love Jersey, man.” Ken sucked in air dramatically. “The terrain is so fucking diverse.”

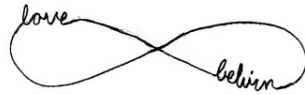
“It’s why I moved my family out here three years ago from Chicago,” Lenny added. “The weather, options for neighborhoods, coastline...”

I nodded in agreement, attention going out of our booth to the two-story restaurant. The restaurant was full, loud, and lit. It had a vibe to it: young, pretentious, and upper crust.

*Upper crust...*

That term made me scoff as my head bounced to the random song falling from the ceiling. That was until my fucking scrolling fell on smooth auburn skin on a narrow neck. Her head was tossed back as she hooted in laughter. From even at this distance, I could see the white oval row of her top teeth and the pinching of her nose.

My fucking stomach dropped to the floor.



ashira

“He was just ramming his damn finger in me, moaning,” Shizu cried. “It’s like he was telling me how to respond. The asshole wanted me to moan, too. For what? You’re not hitting one nerve—”

“Except for the one in your brain!” Corinne amended.

I laughed so hard.

“That sounds like Richard,” Frenchie spoke directly to Toya. Then she turned back to the table. “A guy I was dating from Queens. Met him at a bowling alley when my team attended a fundraiser there. He was there for the same professional reason. Cute. Tall. And dumb as hell. It took us four months to finally get together. The first time was on me. You know...I took the ride, knowing some tricks for the both of us to have fun.” She clapped her hands in the air. “That was until this imbecile slipped his finger in my ass.” She rolled her eyes.

“Now, wait a minute!” Corinne warned with eyes and tone. “That shit’ll have you cleaning his mean ass momma’s house if done right.”

“It wasn’t done right. He just put it in there and hardly moved it,” Frenchie explained. “I could tell he ain’t know much about anal play. You don’t just plug that shit digitally. You explore—”

“And find those nerve-endings.” Toya’s head bounced up and down in understanding.

I found that interesting. Anal play had never been my thing. Although I hadn't had lots of partners, I didn't trust exploring that shit to just anyone. It was something you had to measure against the guy's overall level of attentiveness and sensitivity. Most men failed at both to me, so there you had it.

"There ain't many niggas out there with good D game," Frenchie claimed. "They just seem impatient and sloppy."

"You're damn right," Toya agreed. "I don't have time to teach these fools. I ain't nobody's momma."

I nodded, understanding her point.

Corinne huffed, "*Huhm!*" then rolled her eyes.

The table got quiet and I reached for the menu. Toya did the same.

"Well, let's explore this," Peach offered softly, sporting a cheap grin. She was never short of an insightful point, and I was game. "What if our expectations and practices aren't conducive to great sex?"

"What do you mean?" Frenchie asked.

Peach planted her elbows on the table, chin resting on her interlaced fingers. "Sex is common; great sex isn't a guarantee. It takes several elements to almost guarantee good sex, but let's go with just the three big ones: chemistry, trust, and communication." She counted off on her fingers. "Chemistry is iffy. You can either have it instantly without manipulation or grow into it. But trust and communication, for sure, take time. Our generation has no time to invest in those two elements. We're the microwave generation, quite clearly. We want instant gratification, and from what you ladies are explaining, it's a fleeting satisfaction."

Toya asked, "So, what's the solution?"

Peach shrugged. "Take your time. Get to know each other before jumping into a physical relationship."

"So, no fucking, Peach?" Shizu asked incredulously.

Peach's smile was regretful and gentle at the same damn time. I knew she wasn't comfortable discussing conservative

topics publicly. She wasn't a prude, just cautious and pragmatic.

I lifted my glass. "To putting the kitty on reserve," I offered in a toast.

Hesitantly, Shizu joined me, her naturally sloe eyes even more narrow as she peered between me and the rest of the ladies at the table.

"Nah." Corinne went for her drink. "Hell no. I ain't preserving shit."

Frenchie snickered and Toya shook her head, exposing all her front teeth. When Shizu retracted her drink in the air, I shrugged, not caring at all about being alone. Then Frenchie laughed harder, understanding my stubborn sentiment.

"Who is he eye-fucking?" Toya murmured, head craned to look over her shoulder.

Corinne followed. "Who?"

That's when the whole table was on alert trying to find the subject in question.

"*Ohhh!*" Shizu sang. "We know him."

"Shit, we *do!*" Corinne declared.

They both looked my way. That caused me to search myself. Across several tables in the restaurant, on the other side of a five-foot wall topped by potted plants, Jas sat at a round booth with three other men. None looked familiar: one white, another Black, and the other looked mixed between Black and Asian. And, indeed, Jas was looking my way unapologetically. He raised his glass filled with a clear liquid I knew was water then nodded, I was sure, to me.

My nipples stung out of nowhere and my spine weakened. Nervously, I went for my drink, trying hard as hell to appear unbothered.

"Who's he over there with?" Corinne asked in a whisper as though she could be heard by Jas. "What business does he have here with them?"

“What makes you ask that?” Shizu wondered out loud.

It caught my attention, too.

“You saw him that night at the club with his goons,” Corinne scoffed. “That nigga selling that shit by the kilo.”

Toya and Frenchie snickered.

“Oh, shit!” Shizu croaked, looking back over to Jas. “You think so?”

“I don’t care what he’s selling,” Toya announced. “That nigga’s giving off big dick energy. I just know he’s packing. He’s still staring over here. That confidence only comes from long, fat johns.”

“Sell what you wanna sell,” Frenchie added. “Just *sling* good dick!”

“Selling...slanging. That’s what them niggas do!” Corinne hooted and the girls followed.

Peach’s attention was snatched by her phone.

I reached toward the middle of the table for bread. “That’s quite presumptuous of you.”

“What?” Corinne asked.

“You saw the man one time—didn’t even formally meet him—but accuse him of being a drug dealer?”

“Well...” Shizu urged me with her expectant expression and asked, “Is he?”

“A drug dealer?” I cackled hard. “No. Hell no! *He*—” I stopped because I honestly didn’t know what in the hell Jas did. Needing to stand strong for the sake of an argument, I continued, “he’s in construction. In fact, from our conversations, he made clear he didn’t sell drugs in his foolish youthful days in the hood.”

“Oh. Okay,” was all Corinne commented with a twisted mouth.

I wouldn’t hold her to her wild assumption. She wasn’t the judgmental type.

“What was he then?” Peach asked.

Then it dawned on me she was referring to his time in prison. “A typical wild Harlem kid. Excuse me.” I pushed my chair back from the table. “I need the bathroom.”

“What about your order, Shi-Shi?” Shizu asked as I sauntered off. “The waitress should be back soon.”

“I’m not all that hungry. I may ditch dinner and jump to dessert.” When I finally took off, I just knew my friends talked about me. Not in a mean way, but in the manner we did when concerned.

Having a lot of shit I didn’t want to talk about, I didn’t care. I went to the restroom, threading through tables, wait staff, and other guests. When I arrived at the back of the restaurant, I was happy to see no line. Then I recalled the waitress telling us about the four areas of the place where the restrooms were located. There were a few ladies standing at the sink, busy with washing their hands and touching up their faces, but a few stalls were vacant. I slid inside one and did my business. When I was done, I washed and dried my hands.

I’d just breezed through the doorjamb when a distinct scent tickled my nostrils, and a zapping energy awakened in me. A shiver coursed the back of my neck and head, leaving me vulnerable. I glanced up, hyper-self-aware and there he stood. He leaned into the wall on his shoulder. One hand was pushed into his pocket, the other on a toothpick hanging from his mouth. And he looked damn good. Jeans, white cotton t-shirt, and blazer was a deliciously disarming costume on him tonight.

Bizarrely nervous, I swiped the back of my neck with my hand. “And you’re here,” I murmured dryly, unable to look him in the face while saying it.

“You look beautiful, Witherspoon.”

My inspection rolled down my body. “That was the intent. Bad bitch status.”

“Forever that.” He nodded.



When I had to move to make way for a woman leaving the ladies' room, he reached for me, enlivening goosebumps all over. "Look." I swallowed. "I need to go. They're waiting on me."

"Hold up a minute." His touch on my arm was electrifying. I peered down at our connection with disdain. "I wanna be cool with you."

"For what? To continue to play on my naïveté?" I snorted. "I have real friends. They don't do that."

Beneath the mocha shell, the full pillowy lips, the naturally dark shaded beard, and bushy brows was a fire peeking through his irises. It felt dangerous. It was narrowly specific and exclusively for me. The magnetic pull was cove-molded and akin to what I felt last weekend at his place. My emotions suddenly shot to my throat, threatening to spill. The shit made me weak in the knees, hella vulnerable.

I needed to go. Jas didn't deserve my nakedness—in bed or in emotion. But the way he pinned me with that searing gaze made it hard to speak. Jas felt determined and anything but indifferent, something I'd never seen from him. I tried thinking of my escape route.

*"Ashir—"*

"What's your name?" my cords so deep, they hurt. My nostrils spread as the disgusting feelings I left his place with resurfaced, eclipsing the vulnerability. "Your full birth name. What's your name?"

His spirit deflated visibly. I saw it in the narrowing of his eyes and the slight dipping of his shoulders. "Say less, Witherspoon."

The waitress who served our table drinks was headed toward us. "You've done enough of that already. Excuse me." I pivoted to get her attention. "Could you send the entire bill for my table to this gentleman here? He's seated over there, just over the plant display." I pointed.

With a faint smile, she peered over to Jas for clarity or direction.

“You read the letter yet?”

I shrugged. “It’s in the purse I wore yesterday. Bad bitch move.”

Jas pushed, “Could you at least just read the letter?”

“The entire bill,” I repeated to the waitress.

Jas’ eyes swung from her to me and before a while, he nodded softly. That’s when I took off.

Angry, I kept my head down, struggling to switch out of the nasty mood he’d just put me in. When I arrived back at the table, it was quiet.

“Well, damn,” Corinne scoffed. “I thought I’d have to come snatch you from that passionate conversation. Peach told me to chill.”

My attention went to Peach. Her brows were peaked, head cocked to the side, and she slowly peered down at her phone.

“Yeah. What was that about?” Shizu asked.

I cleared my throat. “I was securing the tab. Eat up, ladies. Order whatever you want. Try as much shit as you want on the menu—hell, get an extra meal for lunch tomorrow. We’ve secured the bag for this culinary excursion.”

Corinne grabbed her glass and turned around. She raised it to Jas just as he was sitting back in his seat. She giggled, with Frenchie and Toya following her. Jas’ piercing gaze was on me when he lifted his glass of water in return.

*Motherfucker...*





He drove up the driveway with the low dribble, tongue hanging from his mouth. Nicholas went for the layup, face pinched with intent and focus. *Then...*

“Air ball!” I went for the ball before it hit the house. I didn’t want his moms tripping. Laughing, I joked, “I hope you do better than that when ballin’ with your boys around the way.”

Nicholas scratched his scalp, threading through his wild curls. “They don’t play with me. I’m not the cool guy on the block.”

I wedged the ball between my arm and waist. “At school?”

He shook his head. After some time, he laughed nervously. “Okay. So there’s at least one cool Sinclair in this family. Maybe so much went to you, there wasn’t any left in his nuts for me.” Nicholas cracked a dry ass smile, one side of his braces sparkled against the light above the garage.

I glanced around the small driveway of my pops’ house in Totowa, mind going. I had no idea why I took to the kid the way I did. Yeah, he was my brother, but in so many ways, I still felt like an only child. He came so late in life, there was no room for bonding at my age, especially having different mothers. But I really liked Nicholas. When he texted me yesterday, asking to hang out, I squeezed him in tonight just before my curfew, knowing damn well I’d be as exhausted as I was feeling in the moment.

“Who’re your friends?”

He shrugged, face turning red under the light. “It’s just hard. You know?”

When his heavy eyes looked my way, I caught a glimpse of that teenage misery. I'd had it, even if for different reasons. Growing up came with pain, and the type that wasn't easy to articulate. Then I nodded. "Anything I can do?"

Nicholas shrugged again, then a sudden croak arched from his throat into the air. "I told my class about you."

"Oh, yeah?"

He nodded. "My social studies class was talking about recidivism for felons. I didn't tell them everything, but said you were doing your thing. Working honest and hard."

I couldn't help my smile. "I am." Then I shook my head. "I'm not going back."

"You get your own place yet?"

"I've had my own place for a while."

He turned to me, eyes bulged wild. "Can I come over? I swear, I'm neat. I won't fuck up any—" He shook his head. "I'm talking to you like you're my mom."

I chuckled, "Or Lamont."

He smirked. "Yeah. Dad."

It was my turn to shake my head. "Look." His head popped up. "I don't mind hanging out with you—"

"Then I can come over?"

"Yeah, but..."

"You only have one bedroom? You with your mother? *I*—I don't care what dad says about her. I don't judge people. I mean, she's gotta be alright to have raised a cool guy like you..." He turned away, dejected.

My brother's assumptions rang familiar to me. Why did people build their own narrow narratives around my post-release life? I knew the answer, but still struggled with the fact.

"I was going to say, I don't mind, but I know pops is gonna trip—maybe your moms, too."

“I can talk to her. He may be a hard one to break, but I can work on my mom.”

“Nicky,” Jeanie, his mother, appeared in the doorway of the home. With one glance my way, she palmed her sandy blonde hair down her head then swiped the front of her pants. “Your father will be here any minute. After pulling that double, you know the kind of mood he’s gonna be in. He’s gonna wanna eat right away. Come in and wash your hands.” She looked my way again, ducking her chin. “Jas, there’s plenty for you.” Her gaze fell away.

“Nah. I’m good. I got a stop to make before curfew.” I had no idea what made me look at the kid, but when I did, I saw the disappointment in Nicholas’ eyes, something I believed he was too damn conversant with. Scratching beneath my nose, I pushed myself emotionally. If there was something I’d learned last weekend, it was I had to start being honest with people about my lifestyle. Even if I couldn’t share the complicated details, I could at least be transparent about the basic shit like *I’m not broke and posted up in my moms’ crib in Harlem*. Years ago, I gave up on giving a shit about what my father thought of me, so what I was preparing to do had nothing to do with that man. This decision wasn’t for him. But I’d do it for Nicholas. “But check this.” I swiped my nose. “Tell the old man I’mma call ‘im. It’ll be dope if you guys can come by the crib. Maybe dinner or something?”

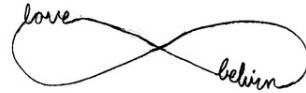
She blinked hard. “*Uh*—okay.” Her bright eyes turned to Nicholas and she laughed in a shocked way. “I wasn’t expecting that!”

Nicholas’ face lit up like the damn Fourth of July sky. His shoulders lifted and chin dipped, but different from his mother a minute ago. His smile, now more sincere, was still cheesy. I needed to work on my baby brother’s confidence and swag. He was too good of a kid to be so damn awkward.

I called him over with a swing of my neck. Nicholas took no time to obey. Quickly pulling him into an armlock, I ruffled his pretty ass, wild and mildly woolly hair. He laughed with a closed mouth. “You hit me up any day...any hour. Ya heard?”

When I tightened my grip, a playful yelp pushed through his dry lips. “Yeah! Yeah! I will, bro!”

Chuckling myself, I released him and started down the dark driveway for my ride.



ashira

“So, what happens after you break up with a dude? You do some type of cleansing process?”

Standing in my walk-in closet, I felt my face lift and brows meet. Peering over my ceiling-to-floor shoe cabinet, I asked, “Cleansing?” Using my *AirPods*, I was able to cross my arms and wait for an explanation.

“Yeah. It’s the shit y’all women are on nowadays,” Sergio claimed. “Like when you sit on some type of bucket filled with a potion and have a balloon around you while...excreting toxins from your pussy. Well, I’m guessing.” He laughed. “A girl at the club showed me a picture of her doing it a couple of months back.”

“Well...” My eyes perused my shoes until I thought to look in the closet of my guest bedroom. “I’ve done none of that and won’t be. Sounds so fucking exhausting.” Exactly how I felt. I was not in the mood to go searching for my *Asè Garb* snow boots in there. So, instead, I tossed my throbbing body onto my bed. “Uhhhh...” I exhaled miserably, yet relieved to crash into my plush bedding.

“What was that all about?” Sergio must’ve heard my expressive cry.

“Nothing. Just finally on my bed. It’s been quite a day—in fact, a year. It’s been a damn year for me.” I yawned, “But it’s nothing a vacation won’t cure.”

“You’re going away again?”

With my eyes losing focus on the ceiling frames, I answered, “Uhn-huhn.”

“Damn, girl. Your frequent flyer points must be popping.”

“That’s the plan.”

“When do you plan to leave?”

“In a few days. Shizu’s touring a property and invited me out of pity.” I rolled my eyes.

“Where?”

“Alaska.”

“Where in Alaska?”

I mentally froze, my lips pushing out to a poke. “I didn’t think to ask. She mentioned it on Monday, and I told her to say less.”

“Say less?” He scoffed.

“Yup. No need for unnecessary details.”

“What about expenses?”

“What basic shit can’t I afford in Alaska? I can even afford to fly my ass there and back home anytime I need to. And right now, I’ll be flying my Black ass out there.”

Sergio found that funny. Admittedly, his humor for it had me crack a silent chuckle, too.

There was a delayed pause before he observed out loud, “You know you’ve never invited me over?”

“You’ve been to my place.”

“Only to drop off the scarf you left at the club like two years ago. You met me in the lobby.”

“See. You’ve been over.”

“But not up to your apartment.” He pushed.

“Because I had a boyfriend, Serge. What would that look like?”

“A friend having a friend of the opposite sex over.”

My brows met. “You’ve never been an innocent friend.”

“You’re right, because that night, I almost lied to you about needing to pee just to come up.”

That made me laugh. “Then I would have politely shown you the bathroom in the lobby. It’s really nice...upscale and clean.”

“Shit,” he groaned. “But you’re single now.”

I knew what this was. Sergio was making his play at my bed.

“I am.” I gave a firm nod as though he could see it. “And on a new path. Hooking up and dating will have to wait for another year or two or three. I’ve got shit to do.”

“Like what?”

“In a word? Me. I still want to dance and open my club.”

“I told you I could help you with that.”

“Yeah, but I thought you owned *Club Sin*.”

“I never said that.”

Shrugging with my lips, I admitted, “I guess I made that up in my head because you manage it.”

“Yeah.” Sergio got quiet again. “But I told you I don’t like the cats that run and own the spot.”

“Why?”

“They’re...dark. Some really dark feeling motherfuckers.”

Suddenly, my door opened and Ines peered inside, holding my purse. “You still want me to drop this off to Robbie while I’m over that way tomorrow?”

It was my favorite work bag. A *Fendi* tote I somehow acquired from my mother’s collection back in high school. I’d



broken the strap on a job site a few days ago and it needed repairing.

I lifted my head from the mattress and turned to see her better. “Yes. I told Robbie’s apprentice to expect it. Should I arrange to have it picked up?”

“No. I can do it. It’s just that it still has your stuff in it.”

“Oh.” I sat up. “Just dump it here.” As she traveled over to my bed, I explained, “I thought I got everything out when I switched bags the next day.”

A few of my personal and work elements came tumbling down on my bed. One object in particular caught my attention as Ines sauntered out with the empty tote. An envelope.

*You read the letter yet?* His deep cords replayed in my mind as though he spoke the words over my head.

My pulse began to race instantly and my hands shook as I opened the envelope.

“You still there?” Sergio asked.

I blinked hard several times, realizing I’d forgotten my own damn name in those few seconds. “Ye—yeah. I’m here. Ines—” A chirp of laughter shot through my throat from my belly at the first three lines.

***Greetings queen from the most high.***

***I pray you out there maintaining...earning your crown every day. I pray you out there balancing ya chakras enjoying that free flow of life energy. I know the sun kisses you awake every morning. And the moon tucks you in at night.***

***Me? I’m in here maintaining, tryna elevate. I’m grabbing all the knowledge I can. I can’t wait to build with you again. Can’t wait to be outside this gate. My visions of holding ya and strolling through the park is what’s keeping my head. Me proving to you I’m a worthy king of your queendom be having me chill when niggaz wanna pop off in here.***

*Hope you good at ya pops job. Better days are ahead of you shortie. You gone have ya own as soon as I drop. I ain't rich but I gotta lotta luv 4 you. I may have to bruise my hands working hard to take care of you. Even if the house come years down the road, when I break free I'mma damn sure make you a home. No amount of years is gonna keep me from those promises.*

*In the meantime, keep ya head above the struggle. Don't let negativity consume you. Don't let people talkin shit about us hurt you. I'mma do my bid and come home to you. Only you. Just wait on the kid.*

*PS I'mma wait on ya letter. Keep building with me.*

*Yours in truth light and life*

*Jas aka Sin*

By the middle of the letter, I'd caught the flow of the scenario he'd created, the narrative of him being incarcerated and writing home to his girl. Me. My energy had dropped toward the end of Jas' satire. He'd successfully painted a nightmare of separation by incarceration. A dilemma caused by a liberty revoked. No, Jas and I were not in a relationship. I wasn't in love or even deep infatuation with him, or anything crazy like that. But we had connected over the past few months. He'd intrigued me enough to want to get to know him. To respect him.

"Hey," Sergio demanded. "Where did you go?"

"I'm sorry." I dropped my forehead into my palm. "I was reading something."

"Is it funny?" Because you fell out, laughing just a few seconds ago. Now, I don't hear shit but your heavy breathing." He scoffed. "You reading one of those nasty ass books? The ones horny mothers read to get off?"

I could hardly make out his words. Abruptly, the embarrassment from last Saturday didn't sting as much. I felt...silly for shutting down and not wanting to talk to Jas about just who in the hell he really was.

*That sound crazy as hell. Life is a gift and add freedom to it, and it's beautiful.*

Those were the words Jas used the first time he had dinner here at my place. He was big on making the most of his freedom. Our reality was he was not incarcerated anymore. We were not unable to simply talk.

*Maybe it's time to...*

"I know that clown's trying to claw his way back."

My eyes burst wide. "Who?"

"Austin."

"Oh." My lips twisted. I still hadn't spoken to Austin. Last week, his mother contacted my father. I told him to tell her to tell her son, I'll consider talking to him later this week. After the shit with Jas, I definitely have no energy for Austin. "Yeah. Well..."

I had to admit, at times like this, I wish I had the simplicity of having a boyfriend whose history I knew. Minus the cheating part, being with Austin was easy. The cheating and limited time together. Toward the end of our relationship, I didn't relish that part. But now, without Austin, I felt the snakes were let loose. Sergio here who had never spent so much time with me on the phone when I was with Au was one example. And Jas, the guy whose sensual passion had my head and body going since our first kiss was another. He was also the guy whose legal name I didn't know. Being in a relationship could have its safety features, closing you off to a world of...snakes.

Taking a deep breath, I scooted up the bed toward my pillows and reclined onto the headboard.

"Serge..." I sighed in comfort as I pulled my phone up to send a necessary text.

"Yeah?"

"What's your boss' name? Like... Who's the actual owner of *Club Sin*?" I tapped *send* on the text and smiled toward the framed ceiling.

# Chapter 3

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of the lowercase letters 'j', 'a', and 's' in a cursive, flowing style.

I noticed her from the moment she brisked out of the building of our therapist's practice. Witherspoon rocked a camel wool coat with her purse clutched between her arm and the side of her body. She turned for the trashcan just outside the door, tossing something inside before taking off toward the street again. Her hair followed behind in the air, blowing in the wind. Her face was set in a moue as she stopped once off the curb to wait for a truck to pass. The high heels of her green, suede, red bottom slingback shoes pounced on the pavement, owning her swift pace.

I sat back, blowing out a deep breath as she crossed the street for the coffee shop. This could go wrong or *terribly* wrong, I knew. It would have helped if I knew what the hell I was doing. I'd just have to wing it from an honest place. That's what I felt swell in my spirit after my prayer this morning.

When Witherspoon crossed through the door, I waved my arm high to catch her attention. Then I pointed to her coffee in front of me. With a reluctant smile, she began my way.

“Should I be concerned about what’s inside?” she proposed soft and femininely as she shouldered out of her coat.

“I don’t think so.” I considered it as I looked at the coffee I’d copped for her when I arrived. “I asked the kid at the register about your regular order. He said he had me.”

She pulled hand sanitizer from her purse and squirted some into her palm. “And the muffin?”

I felt like a damn idiot smiling. “*I* remembered that. Warmed with butter on the side.”

“I hope it’s still warm.” Her comment was cold as she grabbed the plastic cutlery packet for the knife. Witherspoon wouldn’t look me in the face.

And my stupid ass couldn’t take my eyes off of her. Things went quiet for a minute and I started to lowkey spiral. When Witherspoon glanced up and caught me eye-hustling her, I couldn’t look away.

“It’s so beautiful out.” *That* was a major fuck up.

Witherspoon’s attention went to the window. “It’s overcast and windy—” Her eyes dropped to her muffin. She knew.

*Damn...*

I needed to get my shit together. I prayed hard and long about this in my morning worship today. There was an agenda I needed to execute. Taking another deep breath, I went for my tea.

“You seem uneasy, Jas,” she murmured, head still down.

“Maybe it’s because you won’t look at me for more than two seconds.”

Witherspoon’s eyes shot up to meet mine. “Maybe it’s because you’re giving weird vibes with having my shit ordered and calling me beautiful.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Before Saturday, you never paid. Before today, I didn’t know you found me attractive, much less beautiful.”

“About the second thing: if I didn’t find you attractive, Saturday wouldn’t have happened. The shit from last Thursday wouldn’t have either.” When Witherspoon rolled her neck and plucked a brow, stirring an argument, I ignored it and kept with my point. “And about that first point: I apologize.”

Her expression fell. “For what?”

“For omitting so much about my life when getting to know you. That was wrong.”

“You lied.”

“In a way,” I nodded. “I did, and I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t deserve that.”

“You didn’t. But you also didn’t deserve my transparency either. That’s reserved for a select few. My life is complicated, Witherspoon.”

“Too complicated when it comes to me, but not much when it came to Cynthia.”

“What do you mean?”

“She visited your home—*your real home*—but didn’t get in your pants. I had to wait until you gave me the jewels to see where you lived?”

My neck gave out, face falling toward the table. “*Wither*—”

“Explain that shit, because I’ve been bombarded with revelations since leaving your place on Saturday. It’s ass backwards to me.”

“It *is*—was.”

“And were you being honest about me...” She glanced around then whispered, “popping your cherry? Or did you lie about your little virginity, too.”

I tried not to laugh. “So long as we’re clear on me not being a virgin since I was a kid—”

“Your *prison* virginity!” she whispered with mean force.

“Then yeah. That was the truth. I had not *fu*—had sex with anybody before you.”

“Then why the hell would you entertain me in the fucking projects, but have her at the luxury estate on *Lake Sha’Ron* like I’m not the baddest bitch you’ve ever encountered, much less tasted? I’m no low-level bird. I’m a well-bred bare, not a bottom-feeding *FashionNova*-rocking, *wait till I get my tax refund* classless bustdown.”

I rubbed my lips together, feeling checked. “I know that.”

“Then why the games, *Jas*—wait!” Her brows met. “Does she know your name? Your real name?”

Staring at her cold muffin, I shook my head. “Nah.”

“And why don’t I? What’s your *real* name?”

My eyes reached up to hers. “*Jas* is my real name, Witherspoon.”

“If it’s not on your birth certificate, it ain’t.”

She was irritated. This quick into my apology meeting, I’d vexed her. The only resolution I saw was a chunk of the truth.

“I own *Rizzo’s Custom Homes & Developers*.” I held my breath, afraid of her reaction. Why I cared about what she thought, I didn’t know. When it had become a thing for me to care was beyond me. But now, I did. When my eyes met her face again, Witherspoon’s mouth hung open and eyes were blank. “Say something.” My gaze fell again. “Please.”

After a moment, she breathed out, “Are you serious?”

“Do you want to get to know me or not?”

“*I*—I don’t want to be lied to.”

“I’ve never lied to you—”

“You just admitted to it. By omission, remember? Let’s keep your story straight.”

Taking in a deep breath, my attention went out the window. But I quickly reminded myself of my agenda. I had to see this through. So, I looked Witherspoon dead in the eyes. “I own several companies with *Rizzo’s Custom Homes* being one.”

She shook her head, face tight as though I’d spoken Arabic. “Are you on his board, a minor investor—”

“Sole proprietor. I’ve owned it for years now.”

“Then why do you work sites? *Wha*—why did you take all those classes?”

“Because I’m phasing into place. I learned what I could about construction in prison, but I needed hands-on experience to master it. I’ve done the trades, now I’m moving on to the administrative work. It’s what I shared with you on Saturday—what I was planning to tell you all about on Sunday before all that shit went down.”

Witherspoon dropped her head in her hands. Feeling anxious as hell about my transparency, I bit my lip, trying to keep it cool.

“Who knows this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who knows you own *Rizzo’s Custom Homes*?”

“Not many, so I’d *really* appreciate your confidence. It’s all contractual. It’s been planned. I wanted it to be gradual. The deal was made before I got locked up, but we worked out the details while I was in. Rizzo will leave either at the end of the year or next spring. It’s up to him. I knew it wouldn’t be smart to just oust the nigga as soon as I came home. He’s got a rep in the tri-state area. I need his book as I grow my own. His employees were another issue. I’ve been hiring my own, but his team is still the majority.”

“Hence your second-chance organization,” she whispered in revelation.

“Part of it, yeah. The other is building a strong team. It takes time.”



“So when he leaves, you’re left with the staff who wants to stay? How does that work?”

“Essentially, yeah. There are some I want to stay. But there are some who’ll be fired...legally.”

“Yeah, because we all know Rizzo and his people are some of the most racist, sexist, and homophobic in the business.” She blinked, shaking that well-known fact off. “That can’t be how you were able to afford the house.” Her curious gaze rolled up my face.

“Before we get to that, I need to know where we are. Are we cool again?”

“Again?”

“Well,” I took a deep breath, thinking of how to rephrase that shit. “I want to know if we’re gonna be friends, Witherspoon. I get what was fucked up about Saturday. I brought you to my crib and was about to dump a bunch of complicated shit on you the next day. I was wrong for that, too. I jumped into a sexual relationship with you too fast. It wasn’t supposed to go down like that. I wanna build meaningful relationships. Every person in my close circle has a purpose. I should have never laid a finger on you. I’m sorry for that, too.” When she blinked hard back-to-back, I didn’t know what to think of it. “I guess what I’m tryna say is, I take full responsibility for what went down, and I don’t want you to worry about what happens from here.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, I shouldn’t have gone there. You’re a true diamond, Witherspoon. Any man’s lucky to gain your attention, including me. But I shouldn’t have let it go that far. I’m on a mission. My mind’s got just one track, you know that. I’m on the market for a specific thing. I shouldn’t have pushed you in any other direction. I got ahead of myself and I’m sorry.”

Witherspoon’s mouth twisted and head bounced softly over her shoulders as she looked out the window. “Marriage.”

“Marriage.”

She scoffed. “I can’t even think that far. As you’ve perfectly articulated once, I’ve got preliminary dreams to catch first.”

I nodded. “Your dance career.”

“Yup.”

“I understand and would like to support you on that, if I can. And I guess that’s where we can intersect.”

“That sounds end of the road’ish.” She twisted her neck and squinted her eyes. “Isn’t it supposed to be me, setting the boundaries here? Like me telling you we’re going to retract? Is that what *you’re* doing to *me*?”

Sighing deep as hell, I answered her question. I *had* to cut the sex shit with her. It was a matter of my spiritual health and legal. I’d kill another man for just smelling what she’d share with me. Sex with Witherspoon was a dangerous road for me. It had quickly made me possessive.

“But I ‘on’t wanna put *you* on ice,” I needed for her to know. “I wanna be cool.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can’t deny your appeal as a woman. You’re a diamond, Witherspoon. I mean that. Believe that. I’m not tryna dead our connection. I just want to purify it, the way I should’ve done before you pullin’ up to my moms.”

“So, you want to be...”

“Friends. Yeah.” She studied me. Witherspoon was either confused or didn’t trust me. “You’re cool. If I’mma keep it a bean, you’re the first thing and person I’ve connected with since giving my life to Christ a few years back. I ‘on’t want to lose that. I just wanna be responsible with it: walk right.”

“Are you sure I’m suitable for that?”

“For sure.”

“You’re sure?”

That gave me pause. “I hope.”

She didn't respond for a few seconds. "So, I just got Renee'd," she whispered.

"Renee'd?"

"Renee'd and Cynthia'd."

"What?" My eyes strained, trying to understand her.

"You just broke it off with me. But they got three months and I got a boat ride—and head." Her brows met. "And bodied, now that I think about it." Witherspoon found that shit funny.

Her head swung back as she cackled, and my dick got rock hard under the table.

"The hell're you talkin' about, Witherspoon?"

"Your stupid ass method of dating," she tried explaining with wet eyes from laughing. "You give them three months before breaking it off. I didn't even get three months."

"You got more than they ever would have, though."

*You got into my head.*

"Care to explain?"

"I don't want to stop kickin' it with you. I don't wanna act as though we never met."

"Then what do you want? I don't even know your name."

"I want you to get to know me. My name, too." I caught a flash of excitement in her eyes. It wasn't thirst or lust. It was Witherspoon's vulnerability. It was what she exposed to me that night at *DiFillippo's* when we first kissed. It's what she shared that night at my moms' place in Harlem. And it was a glimpse of what she was open to giving me last weekend at my crib. It was a rare piece of her I wanted to be responsible with. Needed to be. "I mean... If you're down."

"Again. What does that even mean? You preface your explanation of your finances with this 'boundary,' confusing me even more. Did the sister-wives before me have to jump through these hoops to get to know basic details of your

being? Or is this privilege reserved exclusively for lucky ol' Shi-Shi?"

*Shit...*

"Witherspoon, I ain't share the shit I'm about to tell you with no woman I've dated. Period. But—"

"But what?" she lowkey yelled.

"That's my point, Witherspoon. I'm not sharing the complexities of my world to fuck you. I don't need anything from you. I'm sharing my life's details with someone I'm hoping, at least, wants to be my friend."

"Is that what you want from me? Just to be your friend? Fine! Then why did we start with my ass in your face?"

*Goddamn, girl...*

My dick twitched again. I closed my eyes, frustrated and turned the fuck on at the memory.

"I've said sorry for that."

"And now you're saying...?"

"I wanna be friends."

"But not like you are with former 'potential' wives?"

I snorted, "Nah, Witherspoon. Not like them."

"But *I* have to jump through the hoops of being a friend for basic knowledge?"

My irritation was growing. "So, I'm supposed to walk around, telling my business to anyone asking questions for the fun of it?"

"Your name?"

"There's so much attached to a name, Witherspoon. If you don't care to be friends like that, say less and we can move on."

"Well, then. Say *less*—"

"But that's not what I want!" I growled over her, unable to control that small part somewhere deep inside of me that was

aggravated by her resistance. “I wanna be friends. If you wanna know more about me, you have to be willing to be friends. Not just two people bumpin’ heads at a coffee shop across from their therapist’s office every once in a while.”

She rolled her eyes dismissively, mumbling, “I’m just so damn confused.”

“Then take some time. Give it a few *hours*—days. Think it over. I ain’t tryna rush you.”

“I don’t want to take my time. I don’t want hours or days.”

Then it hit me. “Why?” Witherspoon’s eyes rolled out to the window again. “Could it be because you like me, too, in a way you don’t wanna go back to not knowing each other?”

“I’m not even on the same planet as you,” she murmured. Then her eyes met mine. “I don’t understand you at all. But I respect you and don’t want to be the reason you keep breaking your own rules.” It was Witherspoon’s turn to take a deep breath. She grabbed her coffee for a sip. After cleaning her lips with her tongue, she smiled. “Your letter was cute.”

*Letter?*

When I realized what she was referring to I chuckled. “Oh. That.”

“Yeah, that. The jailhouse letter. Did you write those?”

“A few.”

“To women?”

I shook my head, then sipped my tea. “Nah. To friends and family.”

“It was palpable, the reality you set in there. I felt your limitations from being away. You were separated from someone you had a connection to and couldn’t...” She shrugged. “Couldn’t tend to life. It was...sad.” Her forehead wrinkled.

I leaned into the table. “But then you were able to wake up out of the mental scenario I set?”

Witherspoon nodded. “That’s why I’m here. I was reminded of your mantra about the gift of health and liberty. That’s why I’m here.” She glanced down. “With a cold muffin.”

I couldn’t help my smile at that. “I’m sure it was that warm reality and you not *really* wanting to kick my ass to the curb.”

“Oh, your ass definitely needs to be kicked somewhere.” She rolled her eyes and tore off a piece of the crumb portion of her muffin and ate it. “Besides, you can’t fuck anyway.”

*Damn...*

“Shit!” I laughed, not sure if I should be offended or not.

Witherspoon shrugged, empty expression holding tight. “Yeah. If we’re friends now, sharing is caring—honesty, that’s it. Sharing honestly: You can’t fuck, buddy.”

I dipped my chin. “True that. I appreciate the honesty.”

She nodded, as though accepting my gratitude. “Glad I can be of help.”

“Well...” My eyes stretched wide. “Any pointers?”

“Stop fucking.” The girl shrugged again. “I’m sure when you find your wife, you’ll be better at making love...or something. Anyway...” *Damn...* “About your house. Now that I’ve demonstrated friendship, tell me more about you.”

Shaking off my ego, I tried to remember where to start the explanation with her. “Yeah. About that. Speaking of complexities: It’s mine.”

“You said that on Sunday.”

“Right. Well, Frankie copped it for me when it hit the market while I was locked down. I knew I needed something spacious and official. Something in the cut. It was a great opportunity because vacant real estate in that sub-division is a rare gem. I had the dough, so we went for it.”

“But it’s in her name.”

I nodded. “Since I’ve gotten the quote-unquote job at *Rizzo’s Custom Homes*, we’ve been in a rent-to-own

agreement.”

“You couldn’t possibly afford a multi-million dollar house on the salary of a laborer.”

“The average, no. My salary isn’t average, though. I have a company...” *Damn. This is painful.* Sharing could bring about trouble I didn’t need. “A shell company that...enables me to transition from a felon’s dark reality to my true life. Again, it’s layered. Even with acquiring *Rizzo’s Custom Homes*, it had to be done strategically and took some time.”

“I bet. So, how were you able to pull that off?”

“With a team of talented and expensive ass lawyers and time. I’ve been ‘buying’ shares of the company from Rizzo for invisible pennies over the years until it was all mine on paper.”

“Why would he do that? Why you?”

My attention went out of the window. Honesty was some hard shit. I scratched the side of my face. “Me and Rizzo had some business back in the day, before I got locked up.”

“What kind?”

“Illegal shit I don’t wanna get into now. But he had a need and I took care of it for him. The expense of the deed was his business.”

Her eyes blossomed and Witherspoon sputtered, “Guns? You said that was your thing back then.”

I shook my head. “I never sold shit to Rizzo. This was deeper.” *And not shit I’m gonna scare you away with. No fucking way.* The details of the story implicated O.G. E Money Bags, and that would not be spilled by me. “And that’s all the sharing I need to do today.”

“Wait.” Her arms pushing over the table. “You got money when? Before or after prison?”

“Before. I didn’t stop getting money when locked down. It just slowed my opportunities. But I dabbled in investments like starter companies and real estate.”

Her head twisted and brows met. “How much money are we talking?”

“Not much.” I shrugged. “Enough.”

“How much is enough, Jas?” her tone was demanding. “Tens of thousands? Several hundred grand?”

“More.”

“Fuck, Jas! What’s more?”

“I had a few million before going down.”

The color left her damn face and my chest went tight. This was why I didn’t want to share. My story was delicate. I didn’t want Witherspoon carrying this shit.

Her eyes closed and I could tell she was attempting to control her breathing. “This is a lot.” Witherspoon took a deep, out-of-sync breath, scaring the shit out of me. “I don’t know you enough to know if you’re lying.”

“You’re right.” I reached for her hand. “That’s why we should stop right here. If we’re friends, we’ll spend more time getting to know each other. I just figured the job and house were things you’re now familiar with and a good place to get started.”

“There’s more?”

“Witherspoon...”

“You said more business.” She shook her head. “I know you’ve gotta go. I’m surprised they haven’t paged you yet for your appointment.”

“My session was yesterday. I don’t have one today.”

“But—” Her eyes circled. “When I texted you last night —”

“You said you had a session this morning and I told you I’ll wait for you at the coffee shop.”

“I’m sorry. I assumed...”

I lifted my baseball cap and scratched my scalp. “Yeah. You tend to do that a lot,” I mumbled while letting go of a



heavy breath. “Juggy’s outside waiting. I’ll walk you to your ride.” That was my way of gently closing this conversation.

“Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait!” She pumped her hands in the air. “*Club Sin.*” Shit. “Who owns that?” Witherspoon’s suspicious glare was on me hard. She followed each eye movement I performed, nose flared with contempt.

“I own *Club Sin*, Witherspoon.”

She let out a loud breath. “Fuck me...” Her head fell into the crook of her arm dramatically. She murmured, “You probably are being truthful with all this shit.” Then Witherspoon grabbed her muffin and coffee, and I followed her outside.



ashira

As Jas followed me to my car, I spotted the old white van where Juggy was nose deep into a booklet. I couldn’t find my usual humor in his crossword pastime. My brain was on fire. This was some shit.

*Some serious shit...*

I was ready to catch Jas in a lie, but I wasn’t expecting him to be so transparent. I had no clue what he wanted to discuss when I agreed to meeting him this morning via text last night while talking to Sergio. But one thing was for sure, I was ready to catch him in a lie about *Club Sin*. Sergio had laid it all out for me last night. He told me about Man running the place, but also “some dude” who had been locked up practically since the place opened. He said the guy was now home and Sergio felt he was “dark.” He said after meeting Jas—or *Sin*—

he now realized Man was dark, too. But when I asked him to explain, he couldn't give me anything concrete.

I wondered if Sergio sensed the same sordidness in Jas I had a time or two, or did he just not vibe with streety guys. That's what Jas, Juggy, and Man were. They were from the slums of Harlem. But violent? I couldn't imagine seeing Jas in that light. He was so cool, levelheaded, practical, and rational. And I'd likely turned him off in the coffee shop, being all in his business.

*It's just...*

I had no idea what to believe. I'd never met a man like Jas in my life, so cryptic and enigmatic. So wise and...godly. But dark? That wasn't Jas. Suddenly, I felt regretful and protective. I didn't totally trust him, but labeling a man because of his environmental mannerisms didn't seem right. Urban Black men didn't deserve the prejudices their counterparts threw their way. I was fine with slowing down on sex and the other shit, but I wasn't about dismissing a guy because he lied about having money.

*Money I don't fully understand...*

We'd made it to my car when I realized I had to say something to him. Something to not make him feel dismissed. God knew I was all too familiar with that pain. Hell, no, no more sex. I couldn't untrain my eyes from Jas, but I didn't want to be a bitch either, and I wanted to somehow tell him that.

*"Listen—"*

*"Let's get up again."*

The muscles in my face dropped. "Here?"

His cheesy smirk was kind of cute. "Nah." Jas glanced away. Was he uncomfortable? "Like... Out."

*"I'm confused again."*

"Let's go out to eat or something. You know what?" He clapped his hands together. "I know where. Lemme make a few calls and then I'll hit you up for your availability. Cool?"

“That sounds like romance? Eating...suspense.”

“I thought you wanted to get to know me.”

*I do...*

My attention went to my key fob and I unlocked my car.

“A’ight then.” Jas stepped back. “I’mma hit you.” He took off for the corner.

“Aye, yo, Shi-Shi!” I turned to find Juggy hanging out of the driver’s side of the van. “I got my teeth bleached. The kid’s sparklin’ now.” He tossed his chin my way while cheesing from ear to ear. “You still got me, right? A nigga ready for a real one.”

In spite of myself, I hung my head and laughed my ass off.

# Chapter 4

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day



**A**s I stood, holding the office door open for them, I gave a neck bow. “I can’t wait till we break ground.”

“Yes!” Mrs. Fletcher stomped her feet, turning to her husband. She schooled her facial expression to one of a toddler’s. “This is my dream come true. Second home.” She hip-bumped him. “You know what that means.”

Mr. Fletcher’s face heated to a red hue. “A baby,” he explained to me. “She wants my old ass to give her a baby. I already have three. Those bastards are expensive,” he expressed, pushing his index finger in the air.

I laughed along with Lewis and Chung. Lewis was my acting assistant while Louise, the office administrator, was handling other shit this afternoon. And Chung was an architect I pulled into the firm last year to start taking on more modern home designs. It had taken some time to attract customers from that market, but here we were, well on our way.

“His three are grown. I need my own babies.” Mrs. Fletcher’s moue game was tight. I could tell she worked him over for her benefit often. She looked a lot younger than him, too. “I’m ready to be a mom.”

He nodded, goofily. *Hey...* I wasn’t mad. They were married and he should have wanted to make her happy, no matter the expense. Still and all, this was a conversation I had no business being privy to. I caught myself glancing outside of the office at nothing in particular. Until one thing catching my attention was the office administrator, Louise. She seemed to be introducing a Black woman to people in the vicinity. Their backs were to me, and there was another situation I didn’t need to be in the know of.

“Well, we’ve taken up enough of your time,” Mr. Fletcher ended the madness. “Jas, thanks for being a man of your word. You’ve saved me nearly forty grand. I’ll be spreading the Rizzo name around to my friends.” He winked.

I couldn’t come up with a polite way to say, *Forget about that name. The only one you need to share is mine.* Besides, I hadn’t decided when Rizzo’s name would come off the building just yet.

So, I grinned and shook the hands of the Fletchers. “I’m a man of my word, John. Lewis is gonna walk you guys out.”

Lewis was already on his feet as Chung shook the couple’s hands, saying goodbye. I waved them off then walked over to my desk and collapsed in the chair.

“You did it,” Chung observed out loud.

I sighed, eyes closed. “I told you we would.”

“No, brother. This was all you. Between the Fletchers in Cranberry and the Alvarezes in Watchung, I’ll have my hands full for a little while.”

I rubbed my eyes. “That’s the plan. I eat, I serve everybody. You eat, I’m satisfied.”

Across the room, he played on the computer feeding into the poster-sized monitor on the wall using BIM and CAD software. It allowed us to show the proposed home and its

features to clients virtually. “It should take no more than a day for me to implement those additions Mrs. Fletcher mentioned...” he murmured, lost in the blueprints.

My cell phone rang and I was happy to see Mehki’s name on my screen.

“Yo?” I answered.

“Yeah, man. I can do next week while I’m on the East Coast. I’ve got like two vacant locations, possibly three. I’m working on that now. You know how soon she’s looking to move on this? That’ll help a lot.”

“Nah. I ‘on’t know. I got you. I can find out for you. Which days are we talking next week? I need to run it past her.”

“That depends on this third prospect. Give me a couple of days to work on it, and I’ll have answers for next week.”

“You got it, chief.”

“Okay. Cool, Sin.”

As soon as I hung up, Louise was at the door in full beam, walking the Black woman in. The woman now looked like a girl. Her countenance was too damn bright and demeanor green and reserved. Unblemished skin, long thick hair, high heels, small shoulders beneath her suit, and the brightest eyes. The girl was young as fuck.

“And this is Jas,” Louise explained, swinging her arm my way. “We’re able to drop in on him after all.” Both women laughed. Chung stood straight from his chair, looking over to the women. “Oh! Chung!” She shared with the young lady, “Chung Wong here is one of our newer architects. As I explained earlier, *Rizzo’s Custom Homes & Developers* is under construction in terms of management and even services. Mr. Wong is a modern designer as we’re growing past general design models.”

Chung walked over to shake her hand, tongue practically hanging from his mouth. “Nice to meet you. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh!” Louise chirped in realization. “I guess I didn’t do that.” The three of them found that funny. “This is Ava Dallas. She’s the new apprentice and will be studying under us.”

“Oh, yeah?” Chung was checking her out. “For what purposes?”

“She’s deciding where in building she wants to plant her feet,” Louise explained. “She’s a recent *Blakewood University* graduate with dual bachelor’s degrees.”

“What are your degrees in?” Chung pushed and even I was interested in what the young lady had to say.

“Well,” Her smile was blinding as she turned my way to include me in the conversation. “I have a bachelor’s in business management. I also have one in an accelerated architect program.”

Chung pushed his hands into his pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet. “In what specific area?”

“*BSU* had a new accelerated program with undergraduate courses, including a few that intersect with graduate programs. I took advantage of that. So, my other undergraduate degree is in architecture with the understudy of a Master of science in management.”

He asked, “Does that mean you have your master’s already?”

She shook her head, doe eyes just as innocent as my cousin, Chelsea’s—*but different*. This girl seemed more fluid in her femininity. Or maybe that’s because Chels was blood and I could never see her even attempting to be sexy. “I earned two bachelors last May. I took a year off to travel and...” She rolled her eyes and laughed at herself, “...grow up. Now, I’m back on the saddle, deciding how soon I’ll return for my master’s. But when I do, it would be an accelerated experience because I’ve done many of the requirements.”

“Why architecture? I don’t see many young Black women in the field?”

*Damn, Chung...*

I didn't know him well, but certainly never took him for a chatterbox.

Again, she looked my way. "It's the only thing I've ever wanted to do. My parents said from the time I could make requests for toys, they were always trucks and building blocks. Then I moved on to sketching designs for my Barbies." She giggled. "Next was building them. I built dog and tree houses in my yard during my entire childhood. I spent my high school summers in architectural programs. I've studied under *Ryan Homes'* top designer. I worked as an intern at *K. Hovnanian* the last two summers."

Chung's gaze rotated toward me when he expressed flatly, "Wow. And you decided to pursue an apprentice position at *Rizzo's Custom Homes & Developers?*"

He had a point. At the end of last year, I shared with Louise, who was in full knowledge of my relationship with *Rizzo's Custom Homes*, that in order for me to transition to full management when Rizzo left, I was to have a top-tier assistant. I didn't just want a random secretary. I needed someone with working knowledge in construction. The person had to be sharp and passionate about the industry. We'd gone through, possibly, thirty people before finding a candidate. Most were white middle-aged women I couldn't relate to unlike I'd been able to do with Louise, ironically. Chung was correct about the number of young Black people in this industry other than laborers. But...

*She's the candidate?*

"Well, Jas?" Louise forced a smile to cover up the awkward moment my silence must have been causing. "What do you think—*oh!* Ava, remember, Jas here is who you'll be apprenticing under. Mr. Rizzo is fading into retirement mode, transitioning all matters to Jas. It's very much internal knowledge, but important for you to understand."

She nodded, eyes locked to mine with sober understanding. "Yes. I'm fully aware."

"Okay. Great!" Louise sucked in a breath. "Because there are lots of legalities with that. Something we'll be undergoing



for a couple more years to come.” She applied a wink and smiled. “Well,” she breathed out, looking my way, “are you at least going to say something, Sinclair?”

I couldn’t help it. My mouth opened and I blurted, “How old are you?”

A stark flutter of laughter shot from Louise’s belly. It sounded, as she glanced nervously over to Ava. “Oh, Jas, we can’t ask her that! You’re a few years behind on that liberty. That’s illegal nowadays.”

*Shit...*

My eyes closed. She was right. I was an employer now and had a shit ton of rules to follow. I’d just have to check her file if I wanted to know.

Ava laughed softly, too. “It’s okay. I know. I’ll be the baby of the office. I’m used to it. I’ll be twenty-four in September.”

“Yo, you *are* a damn baby.”

“Oh, Jas,” Louise started. “You can’t make comments about *her*—”

“I’ll be the best hand around here you never knew you needed,” Ava quickly assured, cutting Louise’s warning.



*ashira*

Rubbing lotion into my hands, I journeyed out of my bathroom then bedroom, into the hall for the kitchen. The place smelled of a palate-holiday. Once I was done with frying the hushpuppies, I could sit down and eat.

“Damn,” Corinne grunted as I entered the kitchen, resuming my place at the counter where I was mixing the ingredients. “You had to take a shit?”

Becky, touring her *iPad* at the other end of the counter, snickered.

I shook my head. “Monthly visitor arrived in my uterus this evening.” My tone was flat.

“Oh.” Corinne popped a fried salmon bite into her mouth. “Silver lining?” I didn’t respond, but Becky glanced up to her curiously. “You ain’t fucking, so it won’t ruin your night.”

“How do you know Shi-Shi’s bed is cold?” Becky challenged her.

Ines, standing over the stove, turned our way.

“Well, damn, Shi-Shi! You holding out?” Corinne laughed, spooning her bowl of Ines’ beans.

I rolled my eyes. “I thought you were going to say the silver lining is me not having to dance. But I can always count on you to be you, Rinny.” Corinne shrugged, understanding my gibe. “Is that grease still ready?” I asked Ines.

“Yup. Nice and hot.” She adjusted the dial on the stove.

“How’s the new staff coming along at the store, Corinne?” Ines asked.

“So far, so good. The new girl has been with us for a month now. And Rod’s getting along with her when they share a shift. She brings him in cookies and shit from her granny.” Corinne grunted. “I still don’t trust them, though.”

We laughed and Becky asked, “Why?”

“I don’t need my employees to be friends. I need for them to just get along. Next thing I know, they’ll be conspiring to rob me. I’ll be headed over to the shop before going home.”

“You should want a family environment there,” Ines advised with a smirk.

Corinne could be a riotous bitch when she wanted.

“Family steal, too, Ines!” Corrine argued. “Hell no! If I wanted that, I would’ve hired my sticky-ass finger family.”

As we cracked up, the doorbell rang.

“That must be Peach,” I thought out loud, dropping my first batch of hushpuppies into the bubbling grease.

“I’ll get it.” Becky abandoned her *iPad* and sauntered out of the kitchen.

“I see you over there grinding those hips, Ines.” Corinne teased before pushing another salmon bite into her mouth.

Ines snickered. “This was real music.”

“Stephanie Mills is talking about being a jumpoff,” I noted. “I guess that is real.”

“She’s talking about a mistake.” Ines shook her. “Her heart was pure. Being in love can be so painful.”

“You were a jumpoff, Ines?” Corinne asked.

Ines’ face remained toward the vegetables she was cutting for a salad. “I’ve lived, honey.”

Corinne and I exchanged a glance of discovery. Ines rarely talked about her past.

“You know what song I like of hers?” Corinne tried circumventing the awkward moment. “*If I Were Your Woman*. Stephanie Mills was talking some *G* shit on that. She was telling a man she would be a better woman to him than his woman!”

Ines’ head rocked as a soft grin warmed her face. “I ain’t think you young girls could understand that type of declaration. By the way, that’s off this album. Sometimes you just know you can be better for a man than what he keeps choosing. You can have a connection with him intense enough to know his needs better than him. You just gotta be sure you’re up for the job. You may have the knowledge, but still lack the wisdom to carry it out. Finding a man you can connect with on a deep level is rare for women in your generation. You’re too damn independent. You think paying bills is the only thing a man could bring to the table.”

Corinne's eyes rolled toward the ceiling, forehead pinched.

Feeling the same confusion she expressed, I asked, "What else is there?"

"Dick?" Corinne guessed. "Because you can come to Lodi and I've got every color and size of those you need."

"Hey, hey, y'all!" Peach announced herself as I snickered.

"Hey, girl!" Corinne turned to greet her with a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Your hair looks amazing!"

"Thank you!" Peach beamed. "I hit up ShawnNicole this morning, and actually got in her seat."

"That's the celebrity stylist chick?" Becky asked, adjusting herself onto the stool.

"Damn!" Corinne howled. "How you get in there?"

"The pure grace of God. I've been researching her hair care treatments everybody's been talking about for a few months now. Then I decided to make the call, but I didn't know how I would actually do my hair. I couldn't believe it was her when she walked up on me, touching my hair. She's really cool. Sweet demeanor and very personable! Hey, Ms. Ines." She reached for a hug. "I know you're cooking and I've got my coat on, but I gotta give you some love."

"Hey, baby," Ines leaned into her. "You look pretty."

"Thank you!" Peach smiled from ear to ear, swinging her tresses from side to side. "I love it. Bought some products, too."

"How much did that set you back?" Corinne asked. "Because I know she charged seventy-five dollars just for you to walk through the doors."

I shook my head, chuckling while turning over the hushpuppies.

"It wasn't cheap, but well worth the pursuit." As Peach approached me, she pouted. "Can you fix me a plate to go?"

"You ain't staying?" Corinne asked as Peach reached me for a hug.

“You’re gorgeous,” I reminded her, not that she needed it.

“Thanks, sister from another mister and madam.” She winked at me before turning to Corinne. “No. I’m tired. I’m just coming to pick up a suit from Shi-Shi. I’ve got an event tomorrow I want to borrow it for.”

“The one she told you to buy when it was on sale at *Neiman*, but you didn’t?” Becky asked.

“That would be the one. Shi-Shi was right once again.” Peach pushed her lips out, feigning being pitiful.

I rolled my eyes, laughing. “It’s in the sitting room waiting for you.”

“Oh, good!” Peach’s eyes roamed the island loaded with food. “Now, my plate, ma’am.”

“Oh. Your diamond earrings...” My throat tingled out of nowhere. “I put them in the pocket.”

“Peach’s studs?” Becky’s eyes lit up.

I nodded, nose suddenly itching.

“I forgot all about those earrings. It’s only been what? Since Thanksgiving?” Peach asked.

“My bad. I forgot about them, too. But they’re in there.”

“Can I borrow them?” Becky asked. “My dad’s birthday party’s next month.”

“Now that I’ve got them back, I’m going to wear them tomorrow.” Peach told her. “Pick them up anytime after. Where’s Shizu? Shi-Shi, you told me you were cooking, but I didn’t know like this. Those your butter beans, Ines?”

“She’s with David,” Becky answered.

“David?” Peach’s face folded. “David, David?”

“That would be the David. I don’t know why she keeps trying. He ain’t that nigga for her.” Corinne grabbed her wine glass, rounding her neck.

“Well, first, he’s Filipino,” Becky corrected.

“And?” Corinne challenged her.

Becky's brows furrowed and eyes squinted. "I didn't think..."

"You ain't gotta be Black to be a nigga or fuck boy. They come in all shades and sizes."

I howled in laughter as Becky shook her head. "I'm gonna take another shot. Thank God I'm married."

"Oh, praise Him," Peach added, likely half serious.

The itch behind my nose started. The one I had to scratch by clicking my throat. Something was off and so quickly.

Becky downed a shot of rum. "Anyway. Why do you think they're doomed?"

"Because the nigga has money, owning the luxury car rental company and two *Dunkin Donuts*. He's gotta be worth at least a couple of million."

"That's what he told Shizu," Peach added. "Two and half million. Self-made."

"And," Corinne continued, shaking her head in agreement with Peach, "He's wined and dined her, taking her across the globe and even banged the cooch."

"Then what's the problem?" I asked, not understanding.

"Let me tell y'all something." Corinne placed her wine glass down. "When a man has money, treats you well and generously, but don't fuck you right, for some cultured women like Shizu, it's an incurable deficiency. After they fucked in Cuba last summer, she told him she wanted to slow things down...dial it back romantically. That was a red flag for that nigga. Shizu's wasting her time. She doesn't want him."

I sneezed. Then again. And again. The fourth sneeze had me backing into the fridge.

"You okay?" The ladies asked simultaneously.

"Sounds like an allergy attack," Ines correctly perceived.

I leaped to the counter near the stove to grab paper towels. "Peach, *wha*—where were you? Back away!"

Alarmed with large saucer eyes, she obeyed, sniffing her coat. “What did I do?”

“Where are you coming from?”

She shrugged, face tight and puzzled. “I was...” She tried to think. “I was at a parishioner’s house—Cynthia’s, you know her.”

“That bitch has cats?”

“Shi-Shi!”

“My bad, but that shit’s in my apartment! I’m allergic to cats.”

“Ah, man! I forgot all about that. I’m sorry!” She continued backing away.

“I’ll fix you a plate to go, honey.” Ines turned to a cabinet and pulled down a bottle of an antihistamine. She opened it and handed me a pill. “Take this.”

I grabbed my wine and swallowed back the pill with an itchy throat.

“I’m sorry, friend,” Peach sounded regretful.

Then I felt bad. I didn’t mean to snap at her. “I’ll live. Why were you over there?”

“Her father, Deacon Pollard, has been sick. His doctor doesn’t seem to know what’s going on.”

“What’s he presenting with?” Becky asked.

“High blood pressure, fever, nausea...a few things of concern, but nothing matches up. His wife called my father, but Dad’s in Trenton at a governor’s ball. He asked me to go and lay hands on him. He’s been to the emergency room four times in like six days.”

“Damn,” Corinne chirped.

“Yeah. Tell me about it. His daughter, Cynthia, was just diagnosed with diabetes and she’s dealing with personal...crap.” Peach sighed.

“A man.” Corinne assumed. “It’s always a man. What he do?”

My eyes shot over to Peach. She met my gaze before tossing hers away. “She got her heart broken, I guess.”

*Oh, whatever, Cynthia!*

I was more confident now than ever that she and Jas weren’t compatible. She was nowhere in his league. This, I knew for sure. They had no intimacy at all—

*Did he kiss her?*

Did I care?

“How?” Becky asked.

“Dumped. But anyway, I’m sorry again, Shi-Shi. I’ll wait in the front for my food, Ms. Ines. Bye, girls.”

“Bye, Peach,” Corinne bade.

“I’ll walk you out.” Becky offered, leaving the island again.

“Love you, girl.” I tried blowing her a kiss, but a sneeze was more persistent.

“Love you more. Sorry!” Peach shouted from the hall.

When they were well into the hall, Corinne gazed my way with her brows in the air. She pulled her glass up for a sip and hissed, “A bitch ain’t crack one joke or hit one twerk since I’ve been here.” Ines tossed her a glance from over her shoulder, most likely shocked, but possibly agreeing. “You’re off tonight.”

Tossing the final batch of hushpuppies in, I twisted my mouth. “I know.”



An hour later, I was stretched out on the chaise lounge in my bedroom, listening to music while drinking wine. The medicine to combat the allergic reaction had me a bit drowsy.



When my phone rang in my hand, I was shocked to see who was hitting me up via *FaceTime*. Quickly, I sat up, fingered my loose hair to give a wild appearance, and licked my dulled, pink-stained lips.

When I tapped to answer, the image loaded and my breath was stolen. Jas rubbed his face and his tight coils glistened. When his face was revealed, I saw how tight his eyes were. It brought back intimate flashes of erotica. Jas' eyes—his expression—was identical to when he licked my thighs and pushed his tongue into my cleft.

“What it do?” he droned, thick testosterone-soaked cords.

That brought back inappropriate memories, too. I'd slept and woke up with Jas twice, and both times my entire frame was heightened with arousal. Each cell hyperaware and needy for his attention. That had never happened to me before, and suddenly, I was glad I never told him.

“It...*does*?” My lips quirked.

Jas' silent snicker caused my own. “You in for the night or down...?” He seemed to be looking deeper into the camera.

That caused me to scan my surroundings. “I'm home.”

“Oh. Don't look like your living room furniture.”

“Because it isn't. I'm in my bedroom.”

“Gotcha.”

“You look freshly...showered.” *Why did I say that?* “It's after nine at night. What are you still doing awake?”

Jas chuckled again. “I know. Right? I'm tired as hell.” He yawned, bringing his big hand to his mouth, his head reclined slightly. “I got in late today, but needed to put some work in before taking it down.”

“I thought you worked out in the morning?”

“For sure. But I had site visits I needed to hit before crews pull up in the morning.” I nodded, understanding the need to stay ahead of your crew at times. “Chillin?”

My head bobbed again. “Relaxing...waiting on my guests to come back in.” I lifted to peek out of the curtain of my French door.

“Oh. What are *they* doing out there?”

“Conversing with MaryJane.” I motioned, smoking a blunt with my hand.

“Anybody I know?”

I blinked hard. Was Jas being nosy?

Licking my lips, I decided to answer. “Becky and Corinne. I fed them well and now, they’re having their dessert.”

“So you *do* cook?”

“I told you I did.”

“You smoke, too?”

I shook my head. “Hardly. It loosens me too much. After two or three hits, I’ll be oiled, calling my last fuck boy back for the tool.”

At first, he didn’t react. This meant I was victorious in disarming Jas after he’d done the same to me with his question about my guests. Jas said he only wanted to be friends. Even though I totally agreed, I didn’t forget about that move. I hated that it was him playing the card.

*Checkmate...*

Jas shrugged with his lips. “Cool. Well, I hit you up ‘cause I wanted to know if you’re busy Thursday around eleven.”

My face folded. “In the morning?”

Jas scoffed, “You think I’ll be available at night?”

*Oh...*

“For what?”

“I’m looking at a commercial property I wanna know your thoughts on.”

*Commercial properties?* He was really a new guy, this Jas. The old one would never be looking at properties unrelated to

work.

While he was on screen, I tapped into my calendar. “I have an open window from ten-fifteen’ish til two. Where’s the place?”

He scratched his head. “Bloomfield.”

“Oh.” *Bloomfield*. “Okay. Send me the address.”

“A’ight. I’ll do that.”

Then Jas stared at me. With those swollen lids and full lips, his dark irises danced across my face.,

“You only called for that? You could have texted.”

His eyes narrowed even more. “I ain’t wanna fall asleep waiting for your response.” As confident as that sounded, I didn’t believe him. “I’mma let you go, Witherspoon.”

“Goodnight, Jas.”

I was, thrillfully, the one to disconnect the call.



As I texted Ava back at headquarters with ordering new office furniture, I peeped Mehki at the empty, dim bar checking his wrist again for the time. Just as I sent off the text, approving wood finishing and an office chair, the door burst open and in clacked her fit body in a cropped sweatshirt, slightly exposing the middle of her belly, high-waisted jeans covering her navel with slits in the loose legs. Her python pumps made the first statement.

Her next was, “I swear, I’m so sorry. I hope your agent didn’t *lea*—” Witherspoon peeped Mehki pushing off the bar in approach to her.

“Hakeem Mehki Timber.” He offered his hand. “You can call me Mehki.” When Witherspoon met his palm, the door opened again and a young woman nearly her height walked in. Mehki hesitated. “I’m assuming you’re Ashira...?”

Witherspoon glanced over her shoulders, discovering the confusion. “Oh, yes. I had to make an emergency stop to pick up my baby sister from *school*—”

“I’m nobody’s baby,” the girl hissed.

That’s when I remembered her from Witherspoon’s apartment. Little cutie, similar to her big sister in features.

“Anyway,” Witherspoon rolled her eyes and found me a few feet away on the opposite side of the room. “Did I miss the tour?”

I made my way over to them. “Nah. We’ve been waiting for you the whole twenty-eight minutes.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, seemingly regretful.

I shook my head, insincerely blowing it off. “Light-weight. Mehki’s only in town for another eight hours before he’s gotta fly out.”

“Shit,” Witherspoon swore beneath her breath. “Please forgive me. How big is the place? Are you thinking about opening another club? A *Sin* two?”

Mehki shot me a gaze of anticipation. I needed to hurry things along, so I explained, “Nah. I asked Mehki to look into a few properties for your club.”

Her eyes grew wild. “*My*... What club?”

“The one you’re going to own as you walk into your destiny. That’s what you’re planning. Correct?”

Witherspoon’s mouth held open, jaw sprang softly, and glossed lips contracting. “*I*—I didn’t know.”

“Yeah,” Mehki inhaled. “He told me that. Well, let me show you this place and if you’re interested, we can talk more. If you’re not, I have two more I can show you as soon as this weekend.”

Witherspoon stared at me. Hard. I counted twenty seconds before I nodded, trying to move her along. “Time is a commodity, Witherspoon.” I pleaded with her sensibilities. “Mehki’s a patient man, but in high demand. This time is costing us all.”

Witherspoon snapped her mouth shut. She nodded back to me before turning toward her sister. “Sit tight and stay off that phone.” The young girl rolled her eyes while taking off to the bar. Snapping back into action mentally, Witherspoon asked Mehki as they began walking off, “What’s the asking price and square footage?”

Leaving them to it, I turn my attention back to my other phone, receiving a text from Cynthia.

***Cynthia: He’s doing okay today. We’re trusting God for this being his turn around season.***

Cynthia hit me up a few days ago, telling me her pops had been battling crazy health issues and sharing how it had been stressing her out. She apologized for reaching out to me since we weren’t kicking it like that anymore—*my phrase*—but I told her not to sweat it. It was obvious she needed to get what she was going through off her chest and if the person she chose was me, I was cool with it.

On my way here, I decided to check in when she sent another random scripture text. She’d been sending them since I responded to the one about her pops. It was something Cynthia told me she did daily for a handful of people in her contacts. I hated those shits; they were so impersonal and lacked sincerity. So, I thought a better response to it would be something more personable, so I asked about her pops.

**Me: GLAD TO HEAR THAT. I’VE BEEN PRAYING TOO. HIT ME UP IF THERE’S ANYTHING I CAN DO.**

Glancing up, I noticed the young girl at the bar, tapping away on her phone. The one thing she was told not to do. Her rebelling tickled me.

“Noelle, right?” The little girl’s attention raked up to me with heavy eyes and she nodded before returning her attention to her phone. “I hope I ain’t break up ya sister time.” I leaned against the bar, giving her, her personal space.

She sucked her teeth, face still toward the floor. “I wish I could say that. She’s being a bitch today for no reason.”

*Damn...*

“Sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged. “I guess. I don’t like talking shit on my sister, but she’s giving ‘Lattice’ today.”

“Lattice?”

Her tiny shoulders shrugged again. “My mother.”

“Oh! I got you. Big sister vibes: I guess that can be like ya moms.”

“Shi’s cooler than my mom will ever be. She has my back—unlike like today, though.”

At this point, I was still having the conversation with the top of shortie’s head.

“I’m sure this was isolated. She’s got a lot on her plate. You know?”

Her face swung up from the phone. “Not exactly. She didn’t even give me a chance to explain. When she came to pick me up, she told me to stuff it in front of my guidance counselor. I mean... I could’ve called Lattice for that type of judgment and totalitarianism.”

*I wouldn’t have put it that way, but... Okay...*

“I feel you. But I’m sure after she’s done with this, she’ll be ready to kick it about what happened.”

“The damage is already done. She humiliated me. If my school’s staff sees my own sibling doesn’t take me seriously,

they'll continue to believe they don't have to."

"Damn..." That was all I could say. Lil' momma was serious.

"Right. All I was doing was defending myself."

*Here goes the bullshit...*

I really didn't care to know what went on. Yeah, I was regretful lil shortie was vexed, but getting into her drama wasn't mine to care to know about.

"Then she'll understand."

"She should've come with an open mind!" Noelle yelled before catching herself.

*And...*—I looked over to Witherspoon.—*Yup*. She'd heard it and was shooting daggers our way. I didn't want her tripping, so I waved her off and tried to include a friendly smile. Her little sister and I were good.

"Again, I feel you. Just give her some *time*—"

"Oh, fuck you!" she whispered hard to her phone. Her dark, angry eyes met mine. "Would you believe this asshole is texting me right now? Like...really?"

"Uhhh..." Stuck, I found myself looking over her head. Then I turned to see just how far away Witherspoon and Mehki were, needing help.

"Hey! You!" Noelle called my attention back to her. "He lied on me."

"How?" That seemed like the only logical response to her aggressive energy.

"Okay." Noelle took a deep breath, rolling her eyes as she straightened her spine. "So, Darius McCoy's a new kid at *Yancy Academy*. He transferred in last November from Yonkers." She rolled her eyes again. "His mother got hit by a bus and successfully sued for a couple of millions. So anyway, my best friend, Brandy, thought he was cute at Joshua McMillian's birthday party in December. He asks for Brandy's number, and because she's with Levi Washington, she decides

to give him *my* number.” Rolling her eyes again, she breathed out. “And let the drama begin. So for months, when Bran’s with me, she uses my phone to text Darius. I don’t think much of it. It’s not really cheating. Right?”

I blinked, shocked as hell that little mommas could run the ball like that. “*I—uhh—*”

“It got a little messy because he’s texted me a few times asking for her, but she wasn’t with me. And he’s dumb. He’ll text at like eleven at night on a weekday. Like...wouldn’t she tell you if she was staying over at my place or I was gonna sleep at hers if it was going down?” Another eye roll. “Well, this morning when I got to school, shit was all abuzz about me texting Darius McCoy. Everybody was talking about it: Marjorie from the cheer squad, Anthony from the football team, Lauren from drama—everybody. So when I asked where it came from, they showed me screenshots of him texting he liked me and me saying I liked him, too.” Her mouth opened wide in shock.

I started to ask if she was in the drama club with Lauren, because her high energy screamed theatrical. But she was cute and so was her problem.

“Oh, word?”

“Word! So, you know the first thing I do. Right?” I wanted to remind her I didn’t know her, but by this time, I didn’t think I should try little momma. “I went straight to his locker and asked him what the hell. Would you believe all he did was laugh in my face then walked away? The unmitigated gall of that new rich/soon broke motherfucker! I lost it. I told that prick I’d call my family from Newark to run down on his ass!”

It took so much for me not to laugh. Witherspoon’s little sister may have been fiery, but she was for sure a prep schoolgirl, too. I tossed my chin at her, thinking. “Is that all he said when he texted you *where your girl at?*”

“Sometimes he’d ask what I was doing.” She shook her head, eyes closed in irritation. “But I always ignore him. It’s weird.” I nodded. “No, the fuck—” Before I knew it, she’d answered her phone and was going *in* on her screen. “*I got*



sent home and you still want to call and fuck with me? Wait *til* —”

“Man, would you chill the fuck out?” I heard the squeak of a young boy’s voice.

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?” Noelle grounded out from the pit of her belly.

“Yo, Noelle! I ain’t call you for all this hype, man.”

“You didn’t have to hit my phone at all, creepy *caller*—”

“Yo! It was just a *joke*—”

“A joke! So my reputation is a joke to you? You may be new, *but*—”

“Yo, lighten the fuck up and let me talk!”

I took the phone from Noelle when it hit. “Yo,” I spoke before I even saw the little nigga. “Why don’t you say what the fuck you gotta say and cut the fuckin’ line?”

I was sure Noelle behind me, standing on the stool, didn’t help his discomfort. His mouth hung open. “Yeah, nigga! I told you I’d call my people. Who the fuck do you take me for?”

“Noelle!” Witherspoon shouted from afar.

Both Noelle and I were too far gone to give her any attention. Little nigga’s eyes blew the hell up.

“Like I said, young hoppa. Say what the fuck you gotta say before I hop in my ride and pull up to ya crib. I know where you stay, too.”

“What you mean?” I could see the hike in his breathing.

The shit was too easy. I owned the art of intimidating men, so scaring kids shitless wasn’t even a challenge for me.

“You know what the fuck I mean. You know why you let that lie fly. Now you need to man the fuck up and let her know.” When he didn’t speak, only brushed his tight waves down nervously and roughly with his palm, I pushed. “You ain’t got all day, and I damn sure don’t. You can either be a G

about this shit or get hemmed the fuck up. Go call ya daddy, uncles, and cousins ‘cause I’m pulling the fuck up *today*—”

“Man, what you want me to say?” croaking, he demanded with watery eyes.

“Tell her the truth, something you should’ve done before pumpin’ that lie in the veins of *Yancey*...”

“*Academy*.” Noelle helped me out. “Yeah! Didn’t I tell you I’d make a few calls, McCoy?”

I pushed the kid, too. “Just tell her!” The kid didn’t answer. I knew I’d be repenting about all of this bullshit later, but in the moment, I was impatient. I needed to leave Witherspoon to explore this place while I got over to my site. “What’s his address, Noelle?”

“It’s right in my phone.”

The moment she reached over my shoulders to retrieve it, the kid squeaked, “Because I like her—you. I was just playin’—I was gonna fuckin’ tell you!” His face collapsed out of the phone, I was sure from his bubbling emotions.

My job was done and I handed the phone to Noelle. When her speechless attention swung between me and her *FaceTime* caller, I dropped my chin, bidding her a good day. “Tell ya sister to holler at me when she’s done. I gotta get back to work.”

And with that, I was off.

# Chapter 5

**Part II cont'd**

**April | Present Day**

*ashira*

**M**y eyes browsed the layout as I hummed to Whitney Houston's "*I Wanna Dance with Somebody*." Using my palm and thigh to play tambourine, my patience began to boil, allowing defeat to take over. My head fell to the side as I perused a particular shelf. Why were there so many options?

When my phone rang in my other hand, I lifted it to my face, not looking until it arrived.

"Hey, Peach."

"What are you up to, Shi-Shi?"

"Oh, nothing. Just possibly wasting time at *Lowes* before a meeting."

"What are you doing there?"

"Deciding between snake, spider, foliage, or succulent—hanging pot or a standing one..." I spotted a bamboo plant. "Peach, what do you think about bamboo plants? You don't

think they have spiritual significance, do you? I don't need anything conflicting with my beliefs.”

“What are your beliefs, Shi?”

My eyes rolled to the right as my body froze. “Well, damn. That was cold.”

“Anyway, I called to ask if you remembered Vera Cox.”

“From *Yancey Academy*? Vaguely, yeah. She was the one who gave you hell over David Greene. The girl acted as though he belonged to her and beyond. She was so damn possessive.” My attention returned to an aloe plant. I wondered if the leaf would prick my skin.

“Yup. Her.”

“I was going to beat her ass. You should have let me.”

“It wasn't necessary. I didn't like David like that.”

“But she was rude and bold.”

“And you were no fighter.”

“For you, I'm Tori fuckin' McNabb—before there was a Tori McNabb.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Peach sighed. “I know. Elder Peterson called me this morning. You remember him?”

I sniffed a Japanese Red Maple Tree. “History teacher. Yup.”

*This is out of the question...*

“He told me Vera died two days ago.”

My body steeled again. This time, I was leaning over, pulling out a Benjamin Ficus tree. I was sure I looked awkward as hell. But did I hear... “Died?”

“Yup.” Her tone was nonplussed. “Dead.”

“How?”

“I don't know. She'd been having some health issues regarding her asthma over the years, but nothing major. She was found dead in her bed.”

“By whom?”

“Her mother.”

I stood to full height. “Shit.”

“Right.”

The girl was our age, give or take a year. News of her passing was unbelievable.

“I’m sure it’s too soon to have any arrangements finalized.”

“Yeah, which is why he called me. The family asked someone from the *Academy* to do the eulogy. Elder Peterson asked if I’d do it.”

“You’re not an employee of the school.”

“Yeah, but I’m alumni. He remembered us being at the *Academy* together and asked if I was up to it. I’m considering it.”

“Oh.” I croaked, interest in plant shopping thwarted. “I understand.”

“Well, okay.” She sighed. “I’m going to let you go.”

“Thanks for hitting me up. One last thing. She had no kids. No husband. Right?”

“No. I don’t believe she did. She owned a daycare in Passaic alongside her mother. Remember, her mother had started opening them when we were in high school. Last I heard, she was really devoted to the kids in that city. They did clothing and food drives all the time. She even let homeless families stay in the basement of the school they renovated into an efficiency apartment.”

“Damn.” What a way to go.

It sounded so...lonely. It sounded so...

*Me.*

I’d been working my father’s passion. I had no kids or husband to speak of. No dream of my own in true pursuit.

“Shi-Shi...”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t need a plant.” I blinked at her words, partially confused, half spooked. “You don’t need a dog and you don’t need a plant—unless you’re looking to purify the air of your home or to decorate it.”

I hadn’t thought about air-purification. Neither had I been redecorating my place. Since Ines moved in, she’d do small updates every now and then. It was official. I was over the garden of *Lowes*.

“Say less.”

“Huhn?”

I shook my head, realizing she had no idea what I meant. “In other words, I agree. I’m going to get to this meeting in Jersey City. Keep me posted on Vera’s arrangements. I’d like to support you and pay my final respect to her.”

“Alright, girl. Love you.”

“Love you.”

When the call was disconnected, I stood in the aisle, still shocked at the passing of Vera Cox. Memories of her laughing, her arriving to prom in a vibrant green-hued dress with tight curls, the way she’d clutch her books to her chest when traveling the halls...they all came flooding in. Then the one I conjured myself of her cleaning the snot from countless faces of inner-city children with the patience of Mother Teresa. It was sad. Disgusting. Where was her legacy? Did Vera want that to be it? The influence of a saint and not something of her own?

My phone rang again and I halfway registered Jas’ name.

I turned for the exit as I answered, “Hey.”

“Whaddup? You good?”

“I guess I am. How are you?”

“I’m good. Just wanted to check in to see what you thought of the properties Mehki showed?”

Jas had left early yesterday as his real estate agent friend and I were wrapping up. Later in the evening, I met Mehki at a vacant property in Greenwich Village. There was no way my nerves would allow me to dream of opening a club in a Manhattan hot spot.

“I actually liked Bloomfield. The owners are looking to rent it, but I’d want to own it in a few years if the venture proves to be successful.”

“I feel you on that.”

“We’re meeting next week to look at a place in Montclair. Apparently, the owner’s still deciding on what to do with his plunging billiard business. Mehki thinks he can have me as the first in his face for a promising offer. I’m looking forward to it.”

“So am I. Congratulations.”

“On what?”

“On taking your first steps toward owning your dream.” The confidence and thick tenor in his words tickled something sensitive within me.

“I don’t know. I feel like I’m being pushed, and by a guy I hardly even know.” I couldn’t help my smile. “I thought we were supposed to be pumping the brakes, yet you’re here, hooking me up with a realtor.”

“I’m being a friend, something I should’ve been from the door. But speaking of you getting to know me, let’s have dinner.”

I stopped at the driver’s side of my car, reaching for the door handle. “That sounds like the antithesis of what you said we should do.”

“It’s not. I said instead of *fuck*—having sex,” Jas corrected himself, “we could be friends and you can get to know me.”

My eyes bounced around the busy parking lot, considering his proposal. It sounded logical. Did I need to get to know Jas? No, but it would be interesting to. It would be interesting to know if the other side of the enigmatic felon was just as

compelling as the one that had me breaking all my rules to jump his bones.

Also, what did I have to lose? My life before being able to feel a passion of my own and no one else's? I didn't want that.

“Okay. When did you have in mind?”

“How about Friday?”

“Friday?” I hummed, recalling my itinerary. “What time?”

“For what I have in mind, we need to drive out. I can pick you up at five.”

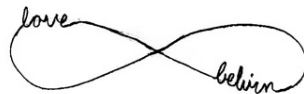
“Okay. Where are we driving to?”

“Central Jersey.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.” I heard his low chuckle. “Gotta go. I'll holla.”

“Bye.” I had no idea what I'd just agreed to.



“That was your *first* time?” I couldn't trust my ears.

Across the linen topped table from me, Jas nodded, expression as sober as I'd ever seen it. “My first and only time on a plane.”

I leaned into the table, grabbing my delicious wine. “I can't imagine what that must've been like for you.”

“What you mean?”

“Were you nervous? Anxious? Wanted to shit your pants?” When Jas snorted silently, his head bounced back. “I know you had to be scared.”

“Scared?” He hummed, head seesawing from side to side. “I don't think fear is the description I would've copped to back then. Now—at over thirty years old—I can say I was afraid of the unknown. But back then, we were taught not to fear



anything. I was hyperaware of everything, except being in the air for the first time.”

“Your first time flying was to prison,” I considered it out loud.

“Crazy. Right?”

I nodded. “It is. I’m still finding it hard to believe you’ve done all that time. I’m not sure if I can even believe you’d break a law.”

Jas laughed, eyes narrowing. “I’ve broken more laws than shoes you got in ya closet.”

“Were you scared when you arrived? Where were you incarcerated again?”

“My first spot in the *FEDs* was in Colorado. I shouldn’t have been that far from family and friends, but they claimed there was no vacancy in the area. But God was still good to me because I landed in a low security facility. My conviction was non-violent, so I qualified. They could’ve put me where I had to lay ‘em hands and wild out every day. The cool thing was there was a team of doctors doing research in a few prisons across the region. I’ve got my inclinations as to how they targeted me but can’t confirm them.”

“Why did they target you?”

“Because of my history with violence.”

“But you said you were convicted of a non-violent crime.”

“Nah. But I had a record. Like I said, I think I was targeted.”

“Shit,” I whispered before taking a sip of my wine.

“Yup.”

“What did they do?” It was Jas’ turn to take a sip of his water, and I didn’t know if it was a stalling maneuver. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I wish there were no questions for you to ask. I wish we could be cool based on what I’ve given you in *Brown Barista*. But I know that ain’t, so...” He cocked his head in a shrug.

“They manipulated my environment from the time I landed. They put me into cells and pods with defined populations. The first one was crazy violent. I was sure some of them niggas wasn’t even supposed to be in that prison. According to the COs, they were just holding them there until a bed opened in medium or high-security facilities. So, the first month or so, I was fighting.”

“Fighting?” I dipped my chin, needing clarity.

“Bustin’ niggas asses, trying to survive.”

My eyes grew wide, “You were fighting?”

This man pledged allowing me to get to know him, and so soon into this dinner—at what felt like a museum—he’d been keeping his word. Perhaps it was the distance we drove to get here or the delicious food or the superb wine. Either cause, I was not prepared.

Jas leaned into the table, brows pinched. “Witherspoon, violence is so ingrained into my DNA that it’s a parent to me. A toxic one, but an attending, teaching, and protective one.”

It was there. The raging storm in his eyes. The inner voice of mine. *DANGER!* A subsistence just as authentic as the virile scent of his cologne and body oils wafting into my nostrils and mouth.

And still, I uttered with seized lungs, “I can’t see it.” Snapping out of a trance, I corrected myself. “I mean, it’s clear you’re a bit edgy and...I’d even put my money on you in a street fight, but violent?” I shook my head.

“Good.” Jas pulled in a strong, audible breath from his nostrils then adjusted himself in his chair. In the dim, private dining room, he brought his elbows over the table and rested his chin over tented fingers. “This team followed me for years, even though I was only in Colorado for about a year and a half. After observing us in manipulated settings, they labeled and diagnosed us. Again, God was working on my behalf before I even knew Him. They realized I was prone to violence but with circumstance.

“There were four categories. Some in our group were violent only when in self-defense, meaning harm had to be brought to them. Some participated in violence when they wanted to dominate in a group setting. You know the saying. When you get thrown in the cell, make sure you mark your territory...divide and conquer?”

When I nodded, Jas continued. “Well, that’s a category; being violent to dominate in a group. Then there’s impulsive violence where niggas can be triggered by anything. They can set it off without warning for logical reasons.” He counted off on his fingers. “The last category is calculated. These individuals cause violence in a planned out fashion...premeditated. They may possibly have goal-oriented reasons to perform. They plot, plan, and have a pay-out method in mind.”

“Which one were you?”

“I am more than one, according to them. When I got sent to the *FEDs*, I ain’t give a shit about dominating the inmates. Being top guy brings too much exposure. Being flashy can blind you to adversaries. I just wanted to be respected and left the hell alone, which is—”

“Probably normal.” I believed. “At least, that’s what most people I know would want under those circumstances.”

“Exactly. Being the big man in the pod is constant work. That wasn’t my thing.”

This shit was more fascinating than “*Taking Tips from Tynisha!*”

“What about impulsive? You can’t convince me of that for you.”

With a soft smile, Jas shook his head. “Nah. I’m a laid-back dude. Even before prison, I stayed low.”

“Then that leaves...” I did a quick calculation in my mind. Then I remembered and swallowed. “...self-defense and calculated. Which one?”

Jas nodded. “I didn’t go into prison to incite violence or start trouble, but I damn sure handled all the shit that came my

way. I was young—*mad young*—and so were my contemporaries. It was like living with a bunch of kids in there. So, I acted violently in self-defense. Apparently, I'm also calculating with it."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I am. We had lots of educational and psychiatric sessions. Apparently, I tend to demonstrate antisocial personality disorder traits."

"Like what?" *First of all, what is that?*

"Let's see..." He sucked in a breath, and somehow my focus latched onto his lips. "Not often delineating between right and wrong."

My forehead stretched. "Like a psychopath? Come on!" I rolled my eyes. "Or a sociopath?" Then I sighed deeply, "You've got to be kidding me."

"Someone said the difference between a sociopath and a psychopath is having a conscience."

"Clearly..." I was trying to understand. "you have a conscience." I mean...why would he make the effort of allowing me to get to know him—to helping me find a club?

"I do. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. I don't even think either of those are diagnoses anymore. Doctors view those categories as antisocial behaviors, which can be so many diagnoses. So, with mine, I was told I'm Cluster B."

"Cluster B?"

"There are categories with those, too. But mine is when a person exhibits strange or odd behavior."

My hand clutched the glass. "Such as?"

"Antisocial personality disorder." He slowly explained. "Not conforming to what's deemed 'normal' rules of behavior, wildin' out when agitated, lacking responsibility and accountability...overall cold-hearted and unsympathetic. That type of personality's got a history of legal troubles. They're aggressive and violent in relationships—all types. Feeling no remorse and never showing respect...basically not giving a

shit about how their actions affect other people. That category usually abuses drugs and alcohol to help when they're stressed, feeling tight and..." Jas shrugged. "...feeling bored."

I was shaken. My ankles trembled and chest pounded. Jas had described a monster, and suddenly I wondered what lived in the storm he housed. What was behind the curated walls I'd been met with these past few months when trying to interact with him.

With little air in my lungs and no capacity to run from the table, I squealed, "Why haven't you told me your name yet?"

Hardly perceptively, Jas nodded, eyes soft. Regretful. "At first, it was because I didn't like you. The simple sight of you made me want to rebel. I knew you had your cold perception of me and it was correct. I didn't want to fit it, but couldn't deny it. I've never run from my past. I embrace who I am and the mistakes I've made. Sharing it all with you would have put me in yet another damn category. I've been labeled and filed away all my life. Don't ask me why, but after you wouldn't stop reaching out, I knew I ain't want to be categorized by you. And now?"

"Yeah." My throat painfully tight, words emitting lowly. "Now?"

"Now, I ain't tryna scare you away."

"But you're sitting here, telling me about your sociopath diagnosis," I could hardly get the words out against the furious pulse in my neck. "You're not afraid that'll scare me away?"

His eyes widened and forehead shrank when he confessed, "I 'on't know. But I promised you me, and that's why I'm starting here." Then Jas' eyes peeled from me and lifted to the right.

"How was that?" I didn't even sense the waiter nearing. He smiled, bringing my attention to my empty plate. "I think the chef did a great job."

It was the best crispy baked chicken breast with creamy leek and thyme sauce I'd ever had. Being reminded of it had me thumbing the plate for the last time.

“Exquisite,” I commented with lackluster inspiration because of the headspace Jas had put me in by telling me he was a damn nut case with the best dick on the planet. Apparently, a financially stable one, too. “I’ve gotta look up the recipe.”

I saw when the two men’s eyes met and lit up.

“We can arrange a printout before you leave,” the waiter, John, offered with a head bow. A tall and thick man of Asian descent with Western swag. “In the meantime, are you ready to look at the dessert menu...” He hesitated. “...or should I bring the cigar options?”

My attention raced to Jas, who took his time returning my regard. “Cigars?” I knew the wine would be superb, seeing we were on the vineyard of one of my favorite brands. But cigars?

Calmly, Jas snorted, sitting up in his seat. “Witherspoon, the *Château Blevin* estate not only houses the vineyard and winery, but it hosts a brand of cigars I believe tickles ya fancy.”

“*Por el Amor del Amor?*” I asked Jas, shocked beyond life.

“That would be the one. We have a torcedor ready for you up in the roller room.” John pointed to the second level. “I can bring out the menu for you to decide which you would like. You can watch the roller at work or he can have it ready for you.”

I was speechless, gaping at Jas like a complete idiot. I didn’t know what to say or do as two other waiters appeared, clearing the table.

“John, just bring out both menus. She’ll decide when she’s ready.”

“Indeed, Mr. Jas, sir.” He gave a neck bow again before grabbing the salt and pepper tray from our table.

“Say something, Witherspoon,” Jas urged in the deepest tenor.

My brain tripped when he brought his elbows and hands together over the table, leaning his head against it. The balls of

his biceps looked Herculean, but his body language and energy read tender and vulnerable. I couldn't do this. I wouldn't be that woman turned on by raw, broken, uncouth, illegal-prone, brusque, ill-articulate, culture-lacking street men.

*No...*

But when his big hand reached across the table and planted its heaviness on mine, stroking my knuckles, I knew Jas met few of those adjectives. He wasn't broken, lacking compassion, uncouth, aggressive, ill-articulate, callous, or a hoodlum. He was...

Jas.

"You've said a lot," I murmured, finally finding my voice.

"Don't make me regret it. Please."

After a long pause and me staring into his eyes, I could see the vault had been cracked, but not fully opened, I felt compelled to jeer, "I feel like if I don't, Noelle would probably try to beat my ass. She's in love with you, you know."

Jas' eyes rolled and closed. "I'm so sick of females being in love with me, Witherspoon," he groaned and I didn't like the way my needy body reacted to his vulnerability. Jas seemed to be in agony. "Everybody loves Jas, except for the right one." *His wife*. Jas' eyes flashed open. "And you."

"I'm here, aren't I?" I playfully rolled my eyes and sat back in my chair, crossing my legs and arms. My foot bounced, vibrating my entire body. "I made sense of how you know Azmir. But you still haven't explained how you own *Rizzo's Custom Homes*." Then I thought wiser and amended, "Not that you owe me any of this. I'm just so confused."

"I understand." He straightened from over the table, too, long arm retracting. "Remember, the calculated category?" I nodded. "That's 'consistent' with my past behaviors. Back in the day, I did a job—I can't and won't get into details about—that involved Paulie Rizzo. He had a need and I was a fixer. We bartered a deal and my payment request was his business."

I sucked in a heap of air. “That must’ve been one hell of a job! Is Rizzo in the mob?”

Jas chuckled. With his eyes locked on me, he shook his head. “Not that I know of. You gotta understand, Witherspoon: there’s a whole dark world operating beneath legitimate business.”

“Is *Rizzo’s Custom Homes* a shady firm? Is it a front for an illegal trade?”

Again, he shook his head. “There’s nothing nefarious or immoral happening at *Rizzo’s Custom Homes*...other than the laziness from some older trades that cost us in delays. It’s a clean, legally functioning business. Witherspoon, I don’t operate illegally anymore. I haven’t since getting locked up.”

“So, all the time you were in prison, Rizzo didn’t renege?”

“Right,” he murmured. “We were legally bonded before I turned myself in.”

“How?”

Jas shrugged. “My lawyers.”

“What in the white crime nation was this transaction?”

He leaned into the table again. “Remember how Divine—”

“Who?”

“Azmir.” He corrected himself. *Oh*. I had to get used to that name. “Azmir said I was the laid-back kid who watched? I observed men with money. I saw most of them blow it, and I saw a few stash and invest it.”

Suddenly, I recalled. “He said you were calculating, too.”

“He did, didn’t he? Well, he also touched on the O.G.s I stuck around. I learned a lot from them and they took a liking to me—including Divine. They schooled me right. Got me work and taught me how to stack my dough. I was never flashy, didn’t need cars, wasn’t into girls or women past needing to knock my shit off—pardon my language, but you know what I mean. I didn’t wear the latest clothes or have any bad habits that ate up my money. I was good at stashing.”



“But how?”

“That’s for another trip.”

I laughed. “Well, damn!”

“But to answer another question you had for me: that’s how I bought the house.”

“That house is worth, at least, several million.”

“I bought it for one point eighty-five. Its value now is close to two and a half. I put a lot of money into upgrading it. The last owner was old and went broke.”

“You funneled the money through...” I struggled to remember the old Linda Hunt lookalike.

“Frankie.”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat. “Her. You transferred the money to her and she bought the house?”

“Something like that, but pretty much. Yes.”

“I don’t know what guns go for, but I can’t imagine you still have money left over from thirteen years or so ago. How have you been maintaining your lifestyle? Your *G-Wagon* is sitting outside, sir.” I pointed behind me, still in disbelief about his wealth.

His truck was at least twenty grand more than my *AMG GT Coupe*! It was quite a luxury ride down to Central Jersey this afternoon.

Jas’ brows hiked. “You still trippin’ off the ride, Witherspoon?”

“And if I am? If you wanted to shit on me for thinking you were poor, just say that then.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “A poor laborer with child support from six baby mommas, and what else?”

I covered my face in shame, trying not to crush my lashes. I croaked behind them, “Can I get another glass of wine please?”

“Sure.” Then I heard him call out, “Aye, yo...”

Seconds later, the sommelier was at my side, pouring more yummy red blend.

“Thank you.” I granted when he was done. “Now, why do you and Juggy drive around in that white van?”

Jas’ face contorted into an expression of confusion. “We work almost every day. That’s the work van.”

“It’s beat up.”

“It’s perfect. We get around in it.”

“And it’s yours?” He nodded. “And Juggy just likes driving you around in it?”

He shrugged. “Jug is my guy. We’re legal now, but we all got roles. He likes to drive. I thought I told you that.”

“I thought you were bullshitting me.”

John returned with the menus and left as quickly and quietly as he’d arrived after placing them on the table.

“I try not to do that, Witherspoon.”

Ignoring his white flag, I pressed on. “And where does Juggy live? With you? I know it was him helping you out on Saturday with that romantic setup.”

I eyed him closely, keenly watching for inconsistencies in his tenor or expressions.

But Jas chuckled again quietly, swiping the side of his nose with his thumb. “Nah, man. Jug stays at the crib a lot. Even got his own space on the lower level. But he don’t live there. Jug owns properties here in Jersey and in Harlem, mostly apartment buildings. He’s with me more than anything, so he stays at my spot more than he does his apartment.” Then he lowered his face and raked his hands from the nape of his neck to his forehead. “And I hope I ain’t freak you out with the candles and flowers. He did help set it up while we were on our way there, but I can vouch for my man not being a creep and watching the show.”

An unexpected grin spread on my face and I didn’t catch it in enough time to kill the stupid thing. Embarrassed, I forced

myself to look away with crossed arms.

“It’s all good. We’re moving beyond Saturday. Right?” Jas’ voice was nurturing. Sincere. “You ready to decide on dessert or cigars?”

I reached for the menus. “So, you don’t drink or smoke... or pop pills?” He shook his head, going for his water. “Then what do you do?”

Jas shrugged. “I work and I...worship.”

“That sounds boring.”

“It keeps me out of trouble, Witherspoon.”

That made me think of his mental health. “Is that really why? Are you afraid of returning to your illegal life?”

Jas shook his head. “Not at all. I’m good where I am. I’ve got a few businesses here and there that have been profitable. It takes up a lot of my time.”

“And what about violence? Do you struggle with keeping your cool?”

His eyes raked up to me. “That’s more of a fear of mine. That’s why I don’t do clubs or social shit with a bunch of people.”

“Then how do you own and run a club?”

“It’s one of the things I invested in before getting locked up. I’ve never run it. The deal was I would when I came home. Lately, I’ve been trying to figure out a way to ask Man to take it off my hands. I ain’t interested in nightlife.”

“Then why were you at the Young Lord concert?”

“Politics.”

At that cryptic answer, I began to look over the dessert menu. I wasn’t in the mood for anything sweet at the moment, my mind was in overdrive with the revelations the creature across from me was unpacking.

“One last question.”

“Go for it.”

“You tell any of this to the women you’ve dated?” Jas shook his head and I believed him. Who would share these delicate details of their past with just anyone? But I didn’t understand what made me so special. Why was he telling me? “Another question.”

“You said the last one was the last one.”

“Jas...” I whined.

“I’m fuckin’ with you.”

“Okay.” Excitement filled my lungs. “Are you still dating? Who’s the girl of the month now?”

“Witherspoon, after my fuck up last weekend, you think I had time to go fuck up some more?”

“You’ve got the filthiest mouth of any worshiper I’ve ever known.”

“I know.” He grabbed his glass of water again, eyes faltering. “I’m working on it.”

# Chapter 6

**Part II cont'd**

**April | Present Day**



**U**nder the exhaust fan over the stairs leading to the rolling room, I watched her long neck as Witherspoon stretched over six steps, one leg hiked higher than the other while she pulled from her stick. Holding my phone in my hand, I'd abandoned the conversation I'd been in with Ava on one text thread and Man on another. Everything this chick did fascinated me.

Witherspoon decided on a cigar over dessert. I was cool with that. Today was about her. I told her we could have her dessert to-go. John had put in the order. When we finished her question session in the dining room, we walked up the same staircase we were hanging out on now while she enjoyed her cigar made in the roller's room. After learning her options from the torcedor—a term among lots I learned when getting into the business—Witherspoon settled on a *Mauve*-infused Maduro wrapped stick. It smelled amazing, like her.

Her eyes were low, hair half on the stair and her shoulder. Being stretched out, I peeped her belly. Her cute single ab was hilarious and tempting at the same damn time. Her high heels wore like second feet for her, and her agile body was a treasure like none other.

“I’m in a restaurant, smoking a *Mauve*-infused *Por el Amor del Amor*—or...” she paused. “Is this a real restaurant or a winery...or a cigar factory?”

When her heavy eyes hit me, I laughed. “All of the above, kinda.”

“What does that mean?” Witherspoon’s laughter was breathy and...uncontrolled.

Tipsy and somewhat influenced by the premium cigar, she was still free—carefree. She could have run out of here like a bat out of hell when I got real with her about my past, but like a G, she’d stayed. Her body language told it all. Her spirit was free around me. Still.

I went back to my text, trying to type as I explained. “It was originally a vineyard.”

“Right. *Château Blevin*’s.”

I hit send on the text message. “True that. Then the heads of both companies decided to do a land-share and profit split deal. Then, I guess, someone came up with the idea of using this building for a small, exclusive restaurant.”

Witherspoon’s attention traveled a few feet away to the area we’d just eaten in. “That place looks like it could fit six tables. I wonder why there’s only one table tonight.”

“Hmm.” Was my response to that last point. “The dining room seats eight. The place is consistently sold out.”

Witherspoon blew out *Mauve*-infused smoke. “Wonder what happened tonight.” She scoffed, gazing lazily my way. “I guess they found out the two therapy patients were coming and canceled.” She found that funny. And I found *that* hilarious. Then she spit out a hard ass titter. “I remember when we were like eight or nine, my best friend, Becky’s, dad rented out the bowling alley for her birthday and had *KFC* cater it.

Shizu and I were hot with envy, man! But her mom, Mrs. Robinson, was livid, thinking it was the cheesiest, low-class thing to do.” She howled in laughter.

“That’s crazy.” Her humor felt good.

“Yup.” She tapped her stick in the ashtray near my boot. “And then at my other best friend, Shizu’s, birthday party, her father rented out the skating rink and had *B-Way Burger* cater it. Mrs. Katō was fine with it, but Shizu and Becky were hot. He totally stole Mr. Robinson’s idea!” She cracked the hell up. “I think I was the only person perfectly content at both parties because I thought it was bad ass to buy out the whole facility like that, you know.” She took a pull from her stogie.

“Word? Y’all parents did things like that all the time?”

She shook her head. “I had a great childhood, but not mine. My mom held all of my events at our house. She kept them intimate and on the property. She once said she had my father buy the right lot and built the perfect amount of amenities to hold all of our celebrations on the property. It never got boring.” With her eyes closed, she took from her stick again then blew it out masterfully. “In so many ways, I’m like my mom with that elegant simplicity for events. It’s like your estate. You can have your wedding out there—if it’s small—your baby showers and kids birthday parties. You have space on both sides of the veranda back there.” Then her brow line went tight. “Damn. It feels so sad to bring up those events in your life.”

“Sad?”

“Yeah, because I won’t be a part of them.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” I was confused as hell. It’s not like I was moving.

“Because your wife wouldn’t want the woman who took your post-lockup virginity at any of her events!” Witherspoon fell out laughing again.

I shook my head. “Leave it to you women to think so far down the line.”

“Well, according to your rigid timetable, you’ll be married by the end of the year.”

*Damn...*

That shit did sound sad. But why? I wanted a wife. I wanted kids, too. But that meant no Witherspoon.

“What?” her soft tone pulled me out of my head.

Looking deep into her eyes, I searched for questions I couldn’t speak and answers Witherspoon couldn’t give. God, why had I crossed paths with her again? Why couldn’t my wife be as accessible...as fascinating? Why did I feel the confusion I’d been feeling? How long did I have to deal with the pointless shit I’d been feeling for this girl for months now? Witherspoon was not my destiny. Each moment with her drove me away from my plan. My future. This had been dead time. Time lost.

“Give me another chance.” The words floated from my chest and melted from my mouth. I had no fucking clue what I was saying.

But I did...

“*Wha—*” Witherspoon scoffed, blinking as she sat up. She was shocked, caught off guard. And it was probably because I sounded like a simp, longing. “What do you mean? A second chance at what?”

“At pleasing you. You said I was wack. Give me another chance.”

“How?”

“We can get a room at the spa up the street—a suite.” I corrected myself, remembering her pedigree.

“*Cra—Crystal K’s?*”

I *thought* that was the name of the spot. When some of the partners here needed a place to stay when visiting the property, they’d stay there. I was told it was pure luxury and our company had an account there, almost guaranteeing us a vacancy.



With her eyes, Witherspoon studied each inch of my face. Her mouth opened and the muscles in her face tensed. I'd fucked up. I broke the promise I made of only allowing her to get to know me. First John spoke about that in the second chapter. "*But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.*" More than that, I wasn't demonstrating leadership. Women craved leadership, even on the low.

"I can't," she damn near whispered, eyes falling and swinging left to right. "I'm not prepared to stay down here."

"I can get you anything you need."

She shook her head again, pulling from the cigar. Witherspoon blew it out. "I can't stay down here, Jas."

"Here you are." John was back with two small bags for Witherspoon. "In here is the tiramisu you ordered to-go. The chef wrote down the recipe for the creamy leek and thyme sauce." He raised the other paper bag with the printed cigar estate's logo on it. "And here are three more sticks Mick, the roller, made for you. He said one is what you're hopefully enjoying now and the others are variations of *Por el Amor del Amor.*"

"Wow," she breathed, standing on the stairs to receive them. "You guys are so generous here. So, kind. Thank you!"

"You're very welcome. It's our aim to please, but for guests of Jas, our goal is to impress."

"You have!" Witherspoon assured in her Nubian Karen flair. Then she took it down. "Man, I wish I'd known about this place a few days ago. We celebrated my best friend's birthday. This would have been a way better vibe. But now I know, so thanks again."

"You're very welcome, Ms. Witherspoon." He bowed his head out of courtesy. "Jas, I hope we met your expectations tonight."

I stood and pulled out an envelope. I knew the crew was tight and didn't want to have them working just on GP, so I came prepared. But when Witherspoon went to the bathroom

before sparking her cigar, I added more bills. Her happiness with the experience had me feeling generous instead of obligatory. “Here you go, chief. Tell the crew they did their thing tonight.”

John’s face opened. “Oh, man! *Than*—thank you!” He smiled widely, stuffing the thick envelope into his pant pocket. “I’ll let them know. We’re stoked about the grand opening of the new location. I’ve interviewed a few people I believe will blow everyone away.” He winked.

“Looking forward to it.” I nodded.

“Well...” John’s eyes bounced between Witherspoon and me, face lit with joy. “Goodnight to you two.”

“Night,” Witherspoon muttered before turning to me.

As John took long lunges toward the door, I asked her, “You ready?”

“Why didn’t he give you a bill? Do they do a pre-payment type of thing here?”

I scoffed. “Nah.” I took her bags from her hand, seeing the cigar was still lit.

“Good. Because that wouldn’t pair well with why you’re tipping them a drug dealer’s mattress stash of cash inside an envelope.”

My head fell to the side, begging her to chill.

“No.” Witherspoon shook her head. “You told me this was about getting to know you. I have the right to ask.”

“Maybe you do. Maybe you don’t.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why is this so hard for you?”

“Because I’m lowkey.”

“So I’m right. There is something you’re not telling me about this place.”

“Are you done?” I tossed my chin to her cigar.

She glanced down at her smoking hand. Then Witherspoon drew the stogie to her mouth, eyeing me while inhaling the

*Mauve*-infused tobacco. Blowing it out, she asked, “This doesn’t bother you?” I shook my head, answering honestly. Then she stepped closer, agile as a feline in her leather heels. She took another pull and exhaled the fumes up into my face. My dick thickened. “Now?” I shook my head. “Why not, Jesus freak? Did Cynthia and/or any of her party of eight wife-sisters smoke?”

“No.”

“Then why isn’t this offensive to you?” She backed away to be able to look into my face.

She was testing me.

“I’m still tryna figure that out.”

“And about this place?”

She wasn’t dropping it. “I’m an investor.”

“In the winery?” I nodded. “And what about the cigar factory on the second level?”

“It’s not a factory. Just a portion of the production space here in the U.S. The factory’s in Cuba and the products are imported here...amongst other countries.”

“And you’re an investor in *Por el Amor del Amor*, too?”

“Nah.”

“Then what?”

“I’m an owner.”

She staggered backward, jaw dropped. “This can’t be real.” Her shocked eyes fell to the smoking stick in her little hand. She studied it with foreign eyes. “You own this?”

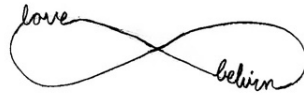
“Along with someone else, yeah.”

“And this wine estate?”

“Along with a few other people, yeah.”

I couldn’t share the specifics if I wanted to. She was freaking out over the summary.

Dramatically, she pulled in a deep breath and let it go, dropping her shoulders as she did it. “I have no idea what I’m going to do with you, guy,” she mumbled, laying her cigar in the tray left on the stairs. She brought it over to the table. “I need the ladies room before we hit the road.”



We’d been driving in silence for almost thirty minutes with an Afrobeat playlist she selected serenading us. I didn’t rock with that genre of music, but wasn’t turned off by what was apparently Witherspoon’s vibe. The farther north we traveled, the more dread I felt about parting ways with her. I knew I said no more and never again, but something about not being with her tonight felt unnatural.

*The fuck is wrong with you, man?*

I berated myself for the stupid ass longing I felt. It was what I deserved for playing with fire last week...tasting her bare skin, eating her pussy and ass, and then ultimately having her in my home. In my bed.

My whole body was tense driving home. Even my grip on the steering wheel was tight. This urgency was no joke. I readjusted myself in the chair then turned down the heat. When that didn’t work, I cracked my window for a small blast of fresh air.

“You okay?” she inquired over the music.

*No!*

Then she reached up and lowered the volume although it wasn’t high at all.

When it was clear Witherspoon was waiting on an answer, I did what I always purposed to do with her.

“Stay with me at my place tonight. I can have you home whenever you say.”



ashira

My lungs filled with air and thighs squeezed together. I knew Jas was wrestling with something, but hadn't expected that. He'd been quiet since we left the winery and I thought it was because I pushed him too hard about his businesses. I didn't mean to pry, I'm just not used to dealing with men like Jas. He's so damn mysterious—uncommunicative. And while reticence is good for a criminal in an interrogation room at a police station, it sucked for me. In spite of myself, I really liked this man. He was in my system in a way. Shamefully, I wasn't ready to dismiss him from my life.

*Again...*

I swallowed, glancing out of my dark window on the passenger side of his SUV. "I can't."

"You said that." There was no emotion in his voice, but I knew he was asking for an explanation.

I looked his way again. "My period is on."

For a while, Jas didn't say anything. I, on the other hand, didn't know how to feel about disclosing such personal information to a man who wasn't my boyfriend.

"I—" he tried. "I 'on't know what that mean."

The moment I decided to laugh in response, I recalled his social handicap. "I'm sure you know about women menstruating. Right?" My face contorted. *Right?*

Seconds later, he murmured, "Yeah."

“Okay. Yeah. That’s me. I’m bleeding. Doesn’t make for anything romantic.”

“Oh. A’ight.” He replied coolly, nodding.

It read as dejection. And *shit*, I didn’t want to reject him, not tonight. Hell, maybe not tomorrow either. I wanted to be with him...physically. Suddenly, I wanted to be consumed by his penetrating energy. Each time we’d been intimate, I enjoyed the facets of Jas that were vulnerable *and* perfectly-endowed for the sensuous acts. Me. I relished him that way. And now, as we were approaching my exit, I knew I didn’t want to be without him tonight. Parting with Jas wasn’t something I wanted to do. It was hardly eight at night. The day was still upon us.

Twenty minutes later when we pulled into the parking lot at the back of my building, I twisted my neck to look at Jas, too nervous to fully turn and face him. “I can’t stay at your place, but you can come up.”

“You don’t wanna pull up to the crib no more?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t say that. I’m talking about tonight. It’s messy.”

“What?”

“Trying to do anything sexual with me right now.” Jas looked away. “Did you hear me? It really is. I don’t want to gross you out.” *I* didn’t want to be grossed out.

His head whipped my way and, with a gaze searing to my core, he husked, “Ain’t nothing about ya body that can gross me out, Witherspoon.”

A gush of anticipation saturated my tampon. I knew the difference. That was not my monthly expelling in a mass glob between my legs. I cried in delirious panic inside. *What am I doing?* This was inexcusably deplorable.

Yet as Jas and I trucked into the building after parking his truck, I couldn’t think of anything but his taut, hairy skin against mine. As he peered up at the numbers over the elevator while we ascended, his sedated demeanor did nothing to kick in my consciousness and better judgment. My heart raced

faster and faster each step to my apartment door. Relief flooded when Ines was nowhere in sight as we crept into my bedroom. I closed the door behind him before removing my coat.

“I would offer you a drink, but...” I received his jacket and tossed it, too, over my chaise lounge. After powering on the stereo and adjusting the volume, I found Jas, peering over the art on my wall. “I’m going to get the shower started and brush my teeth. Meet me in there in a few minutes?”

With his chin low, but eyes blazing my body, Jas nodded. I toed out of my shoes before heading to the bathroom. I left the door ajar as I stripped, pee’d, and washed up over the sink. In no time, I was finishing brushing my teeth, rinsing my mouth when a wind from the door being pushed fully open cut through the steam that had quickly accumulated from the hot shower.

“Should I brush my teeth, too?” his tenor thick behind me.

I turned to him with a smile burning my face. “You don’t have to. I’ve had a cigar. If you indulged, I wouldn’t be so self-conscious about smokers’ breath.” Then I thought, “You have condoms?”

I saw the revelation shoot through Jas’ mind like a burning star, lighting his eyes. “Shit. *I—*”

“Out of practice.” I understood. “I don’t have any either. Now,” I exhaled. “comes the conversation only appropriate for people in long term, exclusive relationships.” Once again, and bizarrely, I didn’t apply the rules to Jas. I sidestepped, adjusting to his lack of life experience. Most of all, I trusted him. Turning off the water and dropping my toothbrush in its holder, I turned to him, as naked as I was on my birthday. “How do you feel about unprotected sex? Have you had sex with anyone since Saturday?”

Two things happened. Jas’ face contorted and I caught the bulge in his boxers from my peripheral. It was hard to apply formality when so soon his body had become a weakness for me.

“Witherspoon,” His head cocked to the side. “you really asking me that question?”

My throat was tight when I explained, “It’s the responsible thing to do, Jas. You can’t be out here raw doggin’ it with everybody. Shit, if I didn’t believe you were a virgin before last Saturday, I wouldn’t be chancing it tonight. I’d send your big ass out for condoms—I still should be considering that...”

“What?”

That’s when I really had to ask. “Are you sure you want to try this?”

“Be with you?” The poor guy seemed genuinely confused.

“No.” I shook my head. “I know you want that.” I pointed to his compacted erection.

“Then what?”

“My period, you fool. Guys freak out over their girls’ period. That’s when they actually stay away. It’s gross—”

His big palm was at my neck, broad hairy chest pushed into my bare nipples, and fruit-scented lips on mine. Jas pushed his tongue into my mouth, sweeping until he found mine. Hungrily and with a pathetic burst of need, I moved against his tongue. Instantly, I was delirious with lust. With closed eyes and a racing pulse, I kissed his soft lips and sucked on his tongue. Breathless, I wanted to taste the man more than I needed air. I couldn’t break away no matter how bad my lungs burned and legs lashed in a fit.

Jas pulled back, peering wildly into my eyes. “Nothing about you will gross me out. I wish you’d stop saying that shit, Witherspoon.”

**DANGER!**

His grip on my neck was firm, yet I could breathe. I took inventory of my being the minute I realized his rapid and stealth move. I was half perched on the vanity, palms gripping his lower arms as he palmed my face. I was all breath and liquid. Incongruently, I was soft, pliant, and ready to receive his rigid thickness, his stiff veiny pleasure.



When his lips brushed down my neck, my spine bowed. Jas' mouth dragged against my skin, scorching a blaze. He pulled a nipple into his mouth hard then sucked soothingly. He worked my pebble using the tip of his tongue with delicious relentlessness. My head collapsed backward enduring him.

"Tell me what to do," his sotto voce whispered in my ear, reverberated in my core.

"You're doing it," I whispered back.

Needing him to shut up and just be in the moment of lechery with me, I twisted my neck to capture his mouth. My hands reached for the elastic waist of his boxers and with the assistance of my feet, I managed them down. I could live and die kissing this man. He was so eager yet wonderfully vulnerable, but Jas was also determined with his mouth. I loved it. Each time.

This time, I pulled away. "I need to do something. Go get in the shower. I'll be right in there."

Hesitantly, and after long seconds of him reading my eyes, Jas backed away and pulled down his fitted boxers. Then he turned and sauntered into the shower. His stride was powered by his beautiful glutes.

Sighing, I quickly trekked over to the toilet so I could unplug myself. I didn't want him to see that part, but when I glanced up after flushing the toilet, his dark and heavy eyes were on me. They were filled with confident possession and yet insecurity. I tried mustering a smile as I toed in. Right away, I grabbed my mesh sponge and squirted body wash from the wall dispenser. After lathering it up, I reached up to his shoulder with questioning eyes.

Jas didn't grant permission, likely because this was all new to him. So, gently, I went about rubbing him down, starting at his sculpted shoulders and arms then his defined chest and hilly abdomen. When I instructed him to turn, he did so with reluctance yet I could sense the unusual faith Jas was applying to me.

“I’m guessing you’ve never been washed by a woman before?” With his face to the floor, Jas shook his head. “Another cherry-popping experience from me.” I snorted, but the humor faded as soon as it came.

His body was pure godly architecture. Each muscle was defined, the hairiness and veiny presence of his virility held evidence of divinity. My hands trembled and mouth watered as I lashed the soapy scrub over his carved back. His legs were hard logs as I worked my way back to the front of him, unable to ignore the other log-like figure standing midair.

Swallowing with my hungry eyes stapled to him, I returned to the soap dispenser and squirted more. I didn’t ask Jas to wash me in return. There was something arousing about him watching me. And he did just that in silence, but the volume from his eyes was blaring. It was encouraging, mutedly granting me the empowerment I needed to seduce him. We shared uninhibited stares and reactive squints until I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d rinsed and was ready for Jas.

Dropping the mesh sponge to the shower floor, I leaped over to Jas’ big body, catching him off guard. My mouth was on him, legs wrapped around his waist. I felt feverish with lust and surprised by my instant comfortability around this man. With Jas, I didn’t feel shy or modest. I felt beastly and wanton. His inexperience turned me on, making *me* feel possessive of his naivety and desire of me.

And he caught me in all of my rabid impulsiveness. His kiss was just as desperate as mine. His touch just as greedy. We landed on the bench where I took him at his head and fed his mouth to mine devouring him. I glided against his soapy body with ease and need. The bristles of his hairy thighs teased my ass, his chest tickled my nipples.

My comfort level with Jas read as though we’d been lovers for decades. His big, calloused hands toured my neck and back, inspiring my hips to move into his hardness. So quickly, I felt lightheaded with anticipatory bliss. This was a first for me.

I lay my face against his to whisper in his ear, “None of your concubines ever made you feel the way I’m about to.”

“Tell me what to do.” This time the request, though low, sounded desperately urgent.

*What?* I was ready to talk more shit and he was still on this weird request.

Suddenly, I pulled back from his ear and looked him straight in the face. Jas’ eyes were so soft, he appeared so tender. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because you told me I can’t fuck and I wanna...” He stretched his forehead, forging ahead. “please you. I wanna make you feel good. I ‘on’t wanna spin the block and not handle you.”

*Shit.* I did say that.

I rolled my eyes, totally at myself. “I was talking shit to you.”

“Huhn?”

“That day at the coffee shop. I was angry and embarrassed. You said you didn’t want this anymore and I didn’t have any leverage.”

Jas looked confused. “Nah. You said it with your chest, Witherspoon.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“So, there had to be some truth to it.”

“Yeah.” I nodded again. “The truth was I came last Saturday.”

“Came where on Saturday?”

“Orgasm.”

His eyes blossomed. “Oh.”

“Yeah. The big O. That rarely happens for me. I haven’t been with a lot of guys, but I do know when you’re sexing outside of a committed relationship, there’s not always time for girls like me who can’t...cum often.”

“So because you came, I can’t fuck?” I was convinced Jas was doubly confused now.

“Because that’s all last weekend was supposed to be. Us... fucking. Having fun.”

“Oh.”

I mocked him, just as he once did me recently. “Oh.”

His eyes circled across my breasts, thinking. “So, is that all this is, too?”

I thought about that. “I hope you’re having fun with me.”

Jas’ face dripped as his gaze traveled up to my face. “You deserve more than ‘fun.’ You deserve the world.” My heart sheared instantly, breath stolen. I searched his face for traces of humor. There was nothing detectable. “Can we see if you can cum again? I wanna see what it looks like.”

“I told you,” my voice was weak. “It hardly ever happens for me. You’ll go before I will.”

“Let’s try.”

I laughed. “Jas, you’re not wearing a condom. You’ll cum before my next breath.”

He grabbed himself at the thick wiry root. “Take me in.”

Such an odd way to phrase it, but how could I resist? I shuffled forward and lifted to position myself to receive his girth. Pushing down on him, Jas was just as I recalled: present and generous. As I worked him in, he examined me, holding me at the hips. Then Jas kissed my neck, loosening my core, lubricating me. When his mouth reached my breast, my palm pushed into the glass wall behind him to anchor myself.

Soon enough, we were all shower falls and heavy breathing as I rode him. His abs contracted and jaw collapsed as he watched me work him. His eyes, they expressed something more than satisfaction. I felt adoration from Jas as he eyed me from the crown of my head to my pussy enclosing him.

“You’re so fuckin’ beautiful. And so warm and soft.” His words were breathless. “...make me weak, Witherspoon.”

It was too much. His words were robustly encouraging. Jas was so cute, manly, and green in so many ways. But he thought something of me, more than any street guy had when I was coming up. In his eyes, I believed, I was appealing. I trusted every word he gave me. Why would Jas have to lie?

Feeling overwhelmed in emotion, I leaned over and took him by the sides of his face again. Leading with my tongue, I stabbed his lips open and kissed Jas with more excitement than I could recall ever having. The pads of my feet began to tingle. Then my groin churned deliciously. The more it stirred, the faster I thrust onto his pulsing dick. When the stir intensified, I broke away from his mouth, needing to breathe. That’s when I knew.

My lips parted and thighs tensed around him as I plunged and plunged. Then my head fell backward and Jas’ mouth was on my nipple, flicking with the tip of his tongue. And then my groin opened like petals on a flower.

“Ooooooooooh!” I was opened to him in every way.

He had total access to me in those few seconds, which felt like an eternity while I threw myself onto him, needing Jas like never before.

In my noisy mental haze, I heard a feral growl. A fucking growl as I was being lifted from beneath my thighs. I didn’t stop thrusting even when my back was against the cool shower wall. I couldn’t. Jas’ strong, passionate drives into my throbbing pussy dizzied me. His expression was hard, fiercely determined. Hard muscles beneath me and inside of me, his evidential strength holding me weightless in the air. His plunging thickness in this new angle. He was a fucking god.

Jas grunted, emptying himself into me. His fingers indented the meat on my thighs as I covered his big frame in a bear hug.

“See,” the croak in his thick tenor teased my contracting groin. “You did it, baby.” Jas was all breaths and a pounding

chest against me.

# Chapter 7

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day

*ashira*

“**Y**ou’re in your head,” I murmured into the darkness of my room.

Shower and showtime were over, the stereo was powered off, and the day of most my neighbors had retired. But Jas and I were still awake. We lay in my bed with nothing but the stars shining into my bedroom from the open curtains of my balcony dimly lighting the room.

“I’m in your bed.”

I turned to him, a grin hiding in the darkness. “What are we rhyming here? Or is that your explanation?”

“Remember, this is all new to me.”

“Even before you got locked up, you never spent the night at Samona’s?”

“You remember her name?”

I scoffed, rolling over to face Jas. “Oh, I know you’re being an asshole now.”

“A little.” He pulled in a breath through his nostrils. “But I’m being real, too. I’m surprised you remember shortie’s name.”

I shrugged, head in my palm with my elbow resting on the mattress. “There’s not a lot to forget when there’s not much you know.”

“What was up with that concubine mention in the shower?”

I shrugged again, not sure if he could see me. “I get off on ribbing you.”

“I think we know there are other ways we can get you off.”

That embarrassed me. It had me returning to my back, giggling. “That was amazing. Don’t do me like that.”

“So, I know if I should take it literally, are you talking about sex or—”

“Ribbing me!” I laughed. “Don’t make fun of me about my...” I tried answering with my hands.

“Lack of experience?”

“Exactly.”

“Then don’t hold mine against me.”

I twisted my neck to see his outline. “When did I do that?”

“When you mentioned how I date. I’m doing the best I can to be a responsible adult. Me dating to find a woman I can settle with ain’t funny.”

“It’s not. The way you go about your hunt is.”

“Then what advice do you have? You don’t wanna get married at all?”

I shook my head. “I don’t. No time soon anyway.”

Things got quiet for a while. Still reeling from what took place in the bathroom, silence was an incredibly uncomfortable place. Then it dawned on me. “Are you having



second thoughts about what happened in there? Did I gross you out?”

My mother used to tell me I didn't think things through when excited.

“I told you nothing about your body can gross me out.”

“I've never done that before.”

There was a break in time before he replied, “A'ight.”

“I mean. I've only had one one-night stand. It sucked,” I snorted. Jas didn't respond and I kept talking. “He was sloppy and nervous and—it was just awful. It was then that I told myself, no more of those. Just because a guy looks good or is tall doesn't mean there's chemistry.” Still nothing. “It was nothing like with you. I mean...” I laughed. “I don't think Austin and I got a rhythm for months, you know? Because I can't vibe with just anybody. That first one-night stand experience taught me how valuable—”

“You think I'm judging you?”

My eyes rolled to the right of me where he lay, though my sight couldn't reach him. “Are you—I mean—I hope—”

“Witherspoon, I just realized from fuckin' with you that most of the sex I've had wasn't much more than one-night stands,” his voice low as though thinking while speaking.

“Don't forget Samona.”

“You won't let me.”

I snickered. “I'm just saying.”

“There was this one chick before Samona. She used to stop by my mom's crib at night...bring indo, *Mystic* drinks, and snacks. We smoked a blunt, did our thing, and ate snacks while watching TV, but that was it.”

“Damn. You let her pay for the weed and the food?”

The mattress vibrated when he snorted. “Nah. I used to hit shortie off with like two, three bills almost every time.”

“And how long did that last?”

“Maybe like...a year and a half, on and off.”

“That’s sad. What happened?”

“I ‘on’t know,” his delivery was low and throaty, unlike the usual, and I loved it. “I think I moved over here to Jersey with my pops or something. I remember my moms telling me she kept coming over asking about me. Then, a few years later, I stopped to fill up the tank with Samona in the ride and I saw her walking past with a big belly, pushing a stroller.”

“I guess she got a new smoking and bang partner.” I laughed.

“Yeah,” he exhaled soberly. “Good thing she did. I ain’t know what I was doing back then.”

“Do you know now?” I asked softly, suddenly feeling timid.

“I’m older, more mentally and emotionally *settled*—”

“I mean here, with me. You want to get married, have kids, and go off to some spiritual convent in Jerusalem when your parole is up—”

“Don’t play, *Wither*—”

“I know, I’m being silly. I’m evading my own stupidity. Do you know what you’re doing here with me?”

We were on our backs, half clothed, necks twisted to face each other. Jas shook his head. “No clue.”

“Me either.” Looking ahead, I swallowed. “I just don’t want a world where it’s appropriate for you to call me Witherspoon.”

“You told me last Sunday I had to call you that.”

“When I found out you lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie.”

And I didn’t want to rehash that argument. “You get my point.”

“Nah. Actually, I don’t.”

I rolled over to face him. “I like you in a way.”

“A way that requires a name other than Witherspoon?”

I nodded. “With you, it seems so formal...creates a distance emotionally. I don’t like being distant from you.”

“Emotionally?” he asked for clarification.

“Emotionally.” I nodded, biting my lip. “I don’t mean in a request to be a sister-wife way. Just a—”

Jas cracked the hell up in the dark of the night. Like hooted a genuine cackle. “Yo, I’mma need you to stop clownin’ me for the way I’m going about finding a Misses.”

I leaned into him, wishing my period wasn’t on. “A Misses what?” I tried testing him for his last name, but would have preferred another go at Jas.

“A Mrs. Jas.” He sputtered, chuckling, and I giggled with him. “Whatchu mean?” He challenged me and I could pick up the outline of his handsome grin.

“Oh, yeah?” I turned around and reached for the tub of a nighttime hand lotion my aunt, Kimberly, kept me stocked with. After opening it, I scooped out a generous amount then returned to Jas. Rising to my knees, I walked over to settle between his thighs. “Well, until she majestically appears, let me make up for not being able to go a second round.”

“Second round—*ohhh...*” He surmised it as I yanked at the elastic waist of his boxers.

He assisted with pulling them down, now understanding my agenda. I took my time saturating Jas’ generous member as it stood erect in the air. Each fat vein, the muscular ridges, and even swollen lip at the head was a wonder to explore. That was the red pill. But the blue pill was his penetrating gaze on me. Once in a while it would visit my handiwork, but mostly it stayed on me. I felt his pride for what he brought to this event and his silent approval for my careful ministrations.

I couldn’t decide which I’d preferred more: him plunging into my core or throbbing inside my mouth until he exploded with pleasure. It didn’t matter, though. Going down on Jas right now didn’t feel right. I didn’t want him thinking I was a slut. It was clear he had conservative views when it came to

women and I didn't want to be used as his fantasy doll until he found the proverbial chaste wife in waiting.

But he'd been becoming a tool of illusory for me, though. I fantasized about being the cause of Jas' undoing. Even now, as I drove him closer to his happy ending, the groves in his chest and abs when his torso jumped...the way his glutes squeezed and thighs sprung just slightly at the rhythm of my palms milking his thick cock from root to its mushroom head...when his eyes closed in defeat and Jas bit his top lip with furrowed brows. It all saturated the plug I wore. The bed creaked from the motion his big body created, losing his shit. All those reactions had me pulsating deep inside. And when I shuffled to his side, being sure not to break the cadence of my hands just in time to kiss him, he exploded like a fucking volcano within seconds.

“*Gohdamn, Ashira!*” he cried helplessly, vulnerably, a total contradiction to his size and civilian history.

Hot cum shot in to the air as I jerked him fast and long. With one tight grip at his base and the other fisting his bulbous head, spurts of his essence leaped into the air, some landing on my labored arm and others on my naked belly. His dick swelled even more, contracting in my hands and my mouth went cotton dry with envy. My pussy throbbed in crying need while watching the rolling of his perfect abdomen, his bubbled chest. His thick, hairy thighs.

This.

Him.

Jas was my fantasy. Every inch of him.

But now that I'd had him, what in the hell was I going to do with Jas?

I stroked him until I could tell he grew sensitive to my touch. Enjoying the sounds of his heavy pants, I crawled from the bed and slipped into the bathroom to lather a warm washcloth with soap. Jas was in the same place I left him in when I returned to the bed. He lay quietly and unmoving as I washed the lotion and cum from him. I went to the bathroom

again to rinse and lather, and when I thought he was clean, I rinsed him thoroughly.

Thinking I was done and should try to get some sleep, I toed back to the bed. The moment my knee hit the mattress, my torso was yanked down onto his hard, hairy chest where he kissed me long and with unveiled desire. It was easy for me to return the passion. Jas did that shit to me. He made me lose all logic. The familiarity I felt around him was unreal. The insatiateness my body and mind experienced for him made me question myself.

We kissed there on my bed in the dark, both topless with just underwear on for a spell. My lips grew sore and mouth dry, but heart wouldn't stop roaring in my chest. The kiss ended when my languid body rolled off of Jas', landing me on my back with my arms stretched out: one on him and the other half off the bed.

Then my damn phone rang. At this ungodly hour, in the escape of lustful passion, my damn phone rang. It was my house phone, which alarmed me. Very few—and I mean a select few—called my landline. There were so few with the number because my general “home” number was shared with Ines. The ringing ended and exactly what I'd feared was happening came to fruition. My old fashion answering machine sounded.

“It's me. I'm not available. Leave a message.”

*DING!*

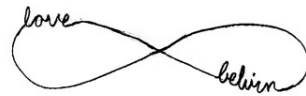
“It's *me* and I *will* be available.” Every hair on my body straightened and my stomach quivered. “I'm coming to the States at the end of May and I expect to see you there. You have, virtually, one whole month to plan. See you then, chipmunk.”

*ZIP!*

When the ding sounded, noting the end of her message, my heart beat doubly fast and the repose state I was tossed into had been fully interrupted at this point.

“Who was that?”

With a dry mouth, I squealed, “My immediate punishment for the nasty shit I did with you tonight.”



I pushed off my right foot then slid out of the bathroom. “I need a boooooooy frieeeeend! And I need him right now,” I sang to the track, thrusting my hips.

The girls laughed, which was the reaction I was going for.

Corinne snapped her fingers and rolled her shoulders. “Huggin’, and fuckin’, and suckin’ you tight!”

“Never let him go!” Becky finished the chorus.

Laughing, Peach declared, “Y’all ain’t right!”

I continued my thrust then spun my way into Shizu’s living room where they’d been sitting.

“That looks good on you, Shi-Shi!” Shizu complimented. “I should take a pic and send it to my mom.”

“You know she’d love that,” Becky commented. “Any and everything Shi-Shi did was a wonder for Mrs. Katō.” She rolled her eyes playfully.

“Your hesitant, snobbish ass made her feel uncomfortable.” Shizu rolled her tight eyes, too. “Shi-Shi was always down for whatever.”

“I’m still down for whatever.” I managed a cartwheel in the modest space.

A few of them cheered me on.

“Damn. Sometimes I forget how much of an outlier I am among you bitches.” Corinne’s brows met.

Peach’s head bounced back. “Why you say that?”

“Because all of y’all have this history I wasn’t a part of until a few years ago when I met Shi-Shi.”

“Then that should prove how loving and inclusive we are as friends because I don’t even think about that.” Peach tried.

“I guess that’s true, Corinne,” Shizu agreed, seemingly not considering Peach’s stance.

“Yeah,” Corinne added. “You were all bridesmaids at Becky’s wedding. I was a damn guest.” We all laughed. I almost spit out my drink. “Who was your maid of honor, Becky? I was too embarrassed to ask that day and too drunk to remember to ask that night.”

“My sister, even though I hate the bitch.”

Corinne howled, Peach shook her head, and Shizu snickered while shaking her head.

“That’s that white people shit,” I commented.

“What?” Becky asked.

“Hating siblings,” I explained. “I could never! I loathed growing up an only child. In some ways, I think I willed Noelle’s annoying ass to life.”

“Yeah,” Shizu coughed. “Just to the wrong womb.”

Peach shook her head expressively. “Let’s not go there.”

She was right. That subject conjured bad memories and sad realities for us all.

I decided to share. “But before we get off the subject: *she* called last night—well, this morning actually.”

“Saying what?” Becky asked with bated breath.

“She’s coming to the States,” Shizu correctly predicted.

I fired a shot at her with the gun made from my hand.

“I guess it’s about time, huhn?” Corinne shook her head.

“When?” Peach asked.

“Next month.”

“You want me to come with you?” Peach offered. “South Carolina again, right?”

I nodded with pursed lips. “Yup. Her only home here in the U.S. I’m still figuring this shit out. I’ll let you know if I need you.” It was still embarrassing to need friends present as

support units when visiting my mother. “But I ain’t gone sweat it.” I got into a ballet dancer’s position, completing all five before singing, “I’d rather sweat it out, sweat it out, sweat it out!” I floated in the air, performing pump turns before landing gracefully on my right knee.

Shizu cheered and clapped, Becky hooted, pumping her fist, Corinne clapped, and Peach grinned. The girls fell into another conversation and some into their phones as I continued dance moves. Silk Sonic’s “*Leave the Door Open*” began on the stereo and I got lost inside my head.

“Shi-Shi!” I heard over the music as I fell into a split.

Becky’s cheeks were flushed, laughing her red head off.

“Did you hear anything she said?” Shizu asked.

“No.” I was confused. “What?”

“She asked if you’re sure you have all your shit for our flight in the morning.”

“Oh.” My lips pushed into the air. “I better have.”

I was staying here tonight because Shizu’s and my flight to Alaska was so early. She wasn’t an early bird, so I ordered a car to pick us up from here to take us to the airport.

Peach stood from the couch. “This piña colada is hitting on something. Let me go refill before one of you pour rum into the pitcher thinking I’m done.” She started out of the living room, but stopped when her phone alerted in her hand.

I stood and performed a two-step, loving this track. Bruno Mars usually had one song on each album of his that spoke to my soul. Silk Sonic had two, and this was one.

“Is it the key lime pie martinis you made having you like this, or are you just horny?” Corinne asked.

I pushed my arms in the air and thrust my hips in a lewd fashion. This was nothing new for my girls. I always performed for them. Oftentimes, they’d join me.

Snickering, I explained, “I’ve only had two drinks. And horny? Not so much, especially after the cell D block dick I



had last night.” I winked, sticking my tongue out then flapping it in the air.

“Damn, girl!” Shizu cheered. “Fuck up that new single title!”

“Whoop! Whoop!” Becky jumped from the couch and attempted a twerk.

Becky couldn’t twerk. So as a best friend should, I leaped in the air, landing right next to her and demonstrated a simple one.

“*Aht! Aht! Aht! Aht!*” Corinne chanted rhythmically, psyching us up. “Fuck it up, Eb and Iv! And look at Shizu’s little ass joining y’all.” I turned to my left and, sure enough, Shu was there tossing her ass. She could actually twerk. Shizu had always been a better dancer than Becky, and Becky lowkey hated it. But Becky wasn’t bad. She’d beat Corinne in a match easily, especially when tipsy. “Fuck it up,” Corinne continued. “*Aht! Aht! Aht! Ah*—wait a fucking minute.”

Becky broke sequence, grimacing. “Shit, Corinne, I was getting there!”

“No. Not you.” Corinne pointed to me. “You. Didn’t your period just come on a few days ago?” My hips stopped. “And ‘cell D’ dick? You talking about that guy—the one we saw at *Khaos*? The one you told Becky and Shizu about on the beach in the Caymans when I left? The one you wanted to T-Pain? Oh my god, Shi-Shi! You T-Pain’ed him?”

“The one I told you to keep your fucking mouth shut on, Corinne?” Becky straightened out her clothes, still beat red.

I nodded. “Yeah, Beck. That would be the one. Thanks, Corinne.” I shook my head.

Corinne recoiled, realizing her violation.

Shizu cackled into her hand. “I guess I see the two who won’t be maids-of-honor at Shi-Shi’s wedding.”

“Damn, Beck.” Corinne bit her lip. “I didn’t mean to. At least, I didn’t tell Peach. That’s who Shi-Shi didn’t want to know.”

I whipped my neck, begging her pardon. Corinne had obviously had too much to drink.

“It’s the period thing for me.” Peach’s eyes were wide, one palm in the air. “Did I miss something? Like...ain’t that reserved for husband status—if at all?”

“She’s right, Shi-Shi.” Becky’s expression was one of apology. “Period sex is pretty gross. Connor begged me for it on our honeymoon and I couldn’t.”

“That’s because you have painful periods...heavy bleeding, lots of clotting—just horrible periods,” Shizu argued. “Mine used to be kind of bad, but have been good since I got on birth control in high school. My mother tried to tell Mrs. Robinson, but she thought that putting you on birth control would be giving you permission to fuck. But you were already getting those flapjacks tossed.”

“Dear Lord!” Becky rolled her eyes, playfully slapping her forehead. “Let’s not go back there!”

“I’m just saying,” Shizu shrugged. “Shi-Shi’s periods were always mild.”

“It’s noted that women with bad experiences and negative views of their periods never consider having sex when they’re menstruating,” Corinne chimed in, nodding with approval.

“Can we not!” I begged, never having meant to bring this up in the first place.

“But *you* did!” Peach argued. “You had sex with that man with your period on.”

“Is this about second-hand Cynthia?” I would cuss Peach the fuck out tonight. “Because I’m pretty much over something they never had.”

“Who?” Becky asked, confused.

Peach blinked. “Did I bring her up or did you? I only brought up the period part.”

“And what’s so wrong with that?”

“Maybe the fact that you’ve never done it with anybody else like—”

“Your boyfriends,” Becky finished Shizu’s sentence.

I hated myself for cringing in front of them. I would not be judged for what I did. It was fun and beautiful, even if I’d never do it again.

“Then that’s y’all bitches faults!” Corinne declared. “Who created the fucking rules about fucking outside of religious constructs? And Becky, it was probably your ancestors who invented fucking when menstruating from the get-go.”

“Why?” Becky asked.

“Because white people have the tendency to be nasty on all levels,” Peach added.

Becky sucked in a breath. “That’s just racist, Peach.”

“No, it ain’t!” Everyone screamed at Becky, some out of sync.

“Okay!” Her eyes squeezed closed and she lifted her “power to the people” fist into the air. “Okay. I forgot!” She inhaled deeply. “Black people cannot be racist. Mr. Malcolm X and all that shit.”

I dropped my face into my palms. This was turning into something messy so unnecessarily.

“Look!” I tried.

“And you don’t want a relationship with him, Shi-Shi.” Corinne wasn’t asking. “I know you.”

“Hell, no, I don’t want a relationship. The last guy I gave my heart to sold it for tickets to a Brielle private show.” I shook my head, eyes closed. “I’m good. This is good.”

“Then what?” Shizu asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “But I’m good, ladies. I swear.”

“You can’t be good if you don’t know what you’re doing with a man you gave your bloody pussy to.”

I flinched. “Damn, Beck.”

“Shit,” Corinne breathed. “What’re you over there thinking, Prophetess Peach?”

That question had me leaping in the air to face Peach.

Peach shook her head. “Nothing. It’s just that...” She shook her head again. “I told you there was something between you two at the fundraiser. I knew this wouldn’t be good.”

“For who?” Corinne asked. “For the Cynthia girl? Because Shi-Shi just told us that dick was lethal last night, so we know it’s been good for her.”

“I really don’t know, but for sure, it can’t be good for Jas.” Peach’s eyes were on me.

I switched weight on my hips. “And why the hell not?”

“Because you’re Ashira, Shi-Shi.” She gestured toward me with both hands, her glass clutched in one. “The one who will prevail even to your own detriment. You’re fire and ice, and will continue to burn until the ice melts and, at the same time, stay cold to anything you’re not with. Your will, your resolve, your way.”

“But you’re being one-sided. No one’s perfect, Peach,” I argued.

“True. I don’t know this Jas guy, but I’ve seen him in passing and there’s so much energy behind his eyes. Such an intensity he keeps guarded. It’s weird, but I’ve felt it. But I’ve also felt he knows the Holy Spirit. He’s God-fearing and I haven’t had the chance to think much about why I couldn’t marry the two because...” She shrugged then shook her head with indifference. “I don’t know that man. He’s not a friend or a parishioner. We’ve only talked about books and a pastor we followed in common.”

“Who?” Shizu asked.

“Bishop Ezra Carmichael.”

“That’s the guy you love, Peach?” Corinne asked.

“In a very mentoring type of way,” Peach qualified. “But anyway, this guy, Jas: he’s a bit strange.”

“Like that pastor,” Corinne added then pretended to sip her drink with big eyes. “That sermon you had me watch of him. Good stuff, but he’s weird.”

“And they’re friends,” I added, biting my thumb.

“What?” Corinne asked. “This Jas guy and the pastor.”

Gazing at Peach, I nodded.

“Like...” Peach’s neck twisted. “...he’s met Bishop Carmichael at his church?”

“Like...I *FaceTime*’d Jas while we were at Becky’s bachelorette party and he was casually kicking it with the pastor. It was horrible, Peach. I made a sexual reference Jas taught me and used profanity because I didn’t know he was with him. In fact, Jas referred to Carmichael as his pastor.” Then I thought. “I met him before then. His wife, too. They’re pretty tight. Like...really tight.”

Peach stared at me for a while. It felt more like a glower. “Ashira, be careful.”

“Why? Because he’s a felon?”

“Fuck!” Becky chirped. “A felon?”

“Wait.” Shizu’s head bounced back. “You didn’t say that.”

“Damn, you got some ‘splaining to do, Lucy!” Corinne spoke over them all.

Peach shook her head. “The felon has more to worry about with you. Seems to me you two are unequally yoked. The things Cynthia shared with me about Jas were that of a focused man on a pilgrimage for Christly things. You’re young, worldly in culture, far more sensitive than you give off, and financially independent. Those elements don’t work well with guys holding conservative views. Especially guys able to veil the force I’m feeling this guy is holding back. He’s probably very loyal and attentive, but also possessive and purposeful. I don’t think that’s a good look for you.”

She could have said more, but it would have been offensive no matter how true. Peach knew me well. Hell, all these girls did. So hearing your shortcomings publicly could be painful, but Peach always used tact when making her points.

*Thankfully...*

I scoffed, ready to be off the topic. “I’m not looking to marry Jas or anybody.”

“Which is the problem, Shi-Shi, because if I’m not mistaken, he *is* ready to marry.” I hated Peach’s tone. Hated when we didn’t agree.

“Yeah, but not me,” I argued. “He knows I’m not on the market.”

“Then what are you doing with him?” Corinne demanded. “A felon?”

“Yeah!” Peach’s hand went to her hip.

“Yes, he is a felon. Okay? His story isn’t typical—” I pulled in a calming breath. “This conversation wasn’t even supposed to be. I would have never brought this up—”

“Since when do we keep sex secrets?” Corinne’s face was tight.

“That’s what I was gonna ask, Shi-Shi.” Becky twisted her lips, looking slighted.

“It’s not that. It’s just the act was unexpected, unusual, and incredibly personal. I haven’t really sat with it yet, so it’s a little embarrassing to discuss with my friends.” And besides that, I knew Jas wouldn’t have appreciated my friends being in the knowledge of what we’d done. “Can we kill the weirdness?”

“Yeah!” Shizu piped up, eyes studying me as she spoke. “I can see how weird and borderline judgmental this can be. Why don’t we all share something lowkey dirty.” She lifted her nose. “I fucked David hours after giving Ben head.”

“Wait!” Corinne chirped. “How many hours are we talking?”

Shizu shrugged as she squealed, “Hardly two.”

“Damn!” Corinne and I barked at the same time.

“I farted while Connor was going down on me last night. Swear to god!” Becky’s eyes ran between the four of us for our reaction.

*The hell?*

Corinne turned her back to Becky so she could react privately.

Peach blinked hard. “Okay!” she exhaled. “I burped in Micah’s mouth once while we were kissing.”

“Ewwww!” Shizu cringed.

“Well, I’ve done some nasty shit that I ain’t never trip on.” Corinne twisted her neck, expressing her boldness. “I’ve fucked with my period on a few times. I sucked a sweaty dick before in a gym bathroom.”

“Why?” I needed to know.

“Because Jared White was fine as fuck and needed to know about me. Dumped all his lil girlfriends for this big momma. He never forgot me after that.” She winked.

“And I bet you haven’t forgotten the scent or taste of those musky ass balls,” I hissed with widened nostrils. I was playing. Partially. “Ya nasty, Rinny!”

“Girl, nasty and have lived. I see you trying.” She rolled her eyes and headed for the opening of the room, leaving us all cracking the hell up.





“West Caldwell’s coming along pretty well. And the Wayne property was completed ahead of schedule,” Rizzo thought out loud as we went over the current load of projects. He clicked a remote to change images on the plasma screen mounted on the wall of his office. “The Oakland project looks amazing.” His delivery was monotoned, but I knew he was impressed.

“And now, you want to purchase the property in Clifton?” Marion Lucci, president of *Rizzo’s Custom Homes & Developers*, asked.

Ignoring his tone of superiority, I replied, “It’s in the works. The purchase should be final by Wednesday.”

“And you want to build apartment units?” Marion looked to Rizzo for support. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. The community won’t like it. It’ll bring in a younger and rowdier demographic the town isn’t known for.”

A knock at the door transitioned all of our attention. “Jas.” Louise, with expressive eyes, was holding a black box in her hand. “You’ve got a delivery.”

“What is it?”

She quickly glanced over the box. “I’m not sure, but I know this place and I can safely say whatever’s inside is sweet.” She winked. “Should I put it in the break room or...” Louise waited.

“You can put it on my desk. I’ll be right there.”

“Oakie dookie!” she sang, spinning out of the doorframe.

I turned back to Marion. “The median age for Clifton residents is almost forty, Marion. Our research team found a significant number of those residents were raised in the town



and, like their parents, don't want to leave. That creates a market for downsizing and not having to leave their beloved town."

Marion sighed, pushing his arms in the air then turning to his sidekick. "Paulie!" he cried. "I don't find this to be very prudent!"

Paulie pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and shrugged his slender shoulders. "You know what this is, Lucci." He turned, strolling away. "Not much can be done at this point." Marion then squatted against his desk. "But I'll give it to you, Sinclair; you've got an eye on you. If I'm being honest, a few of my parents' friends would have preferred downsizing to moving in with their children or going miles away to a decent senior living facility."

"Wait a minute." Marion's brow peaked. "So, this is going to be a senior facility?"

I laughed, heading for the door. "Nah, Lucci. But it will be good enough for decent people to live in. Watch me work."

Mentally shaking my head, I wanted to really laugh in his face. Paulie Rizzo understood his future here at the firm. He'd grown more into a mentor—*not the friend type*—since the top of the year. A part of me believed he was looking forward to retiring. His president, on the other hand, was still grasping at straws to maintain control of the firm. Rizzo didn't want the fight.

The sounds of snickers in the distance had me lift my head, breaking my thoughts. As I approached my office area, Ava was outside my door at her desk fighting a smile. Louise was at the door laughing at Juggy, who was in my office standing over my desk. Marie, another office assistant, seemed to be leaving my office as she snickered, too.

*What...*

Louise slapped my shoulder good ol' boys style as I crossed into the office. That was weird as hell. She couldn't stop laughing.

“She wild, yo!” Juggy damn near shouted as I walked to my desk. “Fuckin’ wild, yo!”

Then I saw it. A box of chocolate covered strawberries. There was a dozen with a white coating, and on top of each were letters spelling out “BEST DICK EVER” with the letter I in the shape of a cock. *An actual Black cock with balls.* I was stuck, staring at the shits, at first confused.

“These came for...*me*?” I asked Louise.

And damn. When I looked up, Ava was at the door fighting to keep her mouth closed as she giggled.

“Yes, sir. And based on the timing and notes, I guess we know you had a pleasant weekend.” She could hardly finish her sentence, laughing so hard.

“Damn!” Jug shouted in response. “It’s like that, bruh?” I knew that question was sincere.

The last Jug knew of Witherspoon and me, she was running out of my crib. He knew we talked last week at *Brown Barista* but I never shared the details. Even when I missed my curfew on Friday, pulling up at home early in the morning, I didn’t talk to him about why. I figured he had a clue.

“Yo, don’t you have that site inspection in Totowa?” Jug had to go.

“I was just ‘bout to leave, but then L told me to come look at this shit,” he snorted on his way to the door.

Just as he passed Louise, she rubbed her nose. “Just let me know if you need help eating those.” Laughing again, she turned and walked off.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Witherspoon. The call went to voicemail and quickly, I decided on leaving a message.

“Yo, you know better than this.” I tried keeping the smile out of my voice. “I just told you my situation here and then you go do this? I’mma spank ya ass. Hit me back.”

When I ended the call, I complimented myself on sounding angry. I should have been angry.

*Who does shit like this?*

And then to think, she had me believing my shit was trash all last week.

“Would you like for me to take those?” Ava, standing at the door in her silk pink blouse and white dress pants, startled my ass.

“Uh...” I looked down at the strawberries. “Yeah. Thanks.”

She walked over to my desk, grabbing the box. “They say you’re intense and a whip-snapper. Nice to know you have a life,” her voice was soft, but not flirtatious. And that’s all she said before leaving out.

My thoughts raced back to Witherspoon and I found myself wondering where she was. I hadn’t heard from her since leaving her place on Saturday morning. I wanted to call her yesterday but thought to give her some mental distance from me, considering what we’d done with her period being on. That night, I’d gotten the feeling Witherspoon’s desire for it embarrassed her. That shit was deep, and the last thing I needed was “deep” with Witherspoon. We didn’t want the same thing and somehow it felt like we’d been using each other to satisfy our mutual physical attraction.

Somehow, I found my way to her *Instagram*.

*Those damn braids...*

That’s when I saw why I hadn’t heard from Witherspoon all weekend. She was away on vacation.

Again.

# Chapter 8

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day

*ashira*

“Damn it, David!” Shizu groaned while tapping into her phone. “Can I get back in town before you start with your needy shit?” Dramatically, she plopped back deep into her seat.

We were leaving the airport, being driven to Shizu’s place where my car was.

“What’s he saying?” I was half curious.

“He’s asking what he should have his chef cook for us today, as though I’m coming by.” Shizu sucked her teeth. “I’m trying to lay up with Ben tonight. If he would just hit me back with the time.”

“Ben in new Brooklyn?”

She nodded. That’s the way we identified people living there with money. Ben was a wealthy investor she met on a flight back to the States from Japan a year ago. They’d been dating on and off without any serious commitments.

I turned back to my window where the sun was setting as I twirled a braid in between my fingers. Boy, was I happy to be home. Palmer, Alaska was a cool getaway in the middle of nowhere—hence the opening of a new resort for Shizu to test out—but each day, I counted down to when I'd be back on Garden State soil.

“You sure you're okay, Shi-Shi? You didn't get much sleep last night, and you said you didn't sleep on the plane either.”

“I closed my eyes on the plane,” I weakly argued. A blind man could see I'd been toiling with something. “I've got a shit load of work to get back to. You saw the calls I had to field these past few days.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, but still engaging her phone. “They were blowing you up.”

“Plus, I have that meeting with my father I need to mentally prepare for.”

She peered up from her phone. “Damn! You're ready for that?”

“No, but I'm tired of putting it off. My therapist has been helping me out with how to go about it.” *And I've got tools for my next venture in the works.*

I glanced down to my phone, hoping Jas had finally texted me back. A half dozen of others had, including the staff at my studio, but not Jas.

“I can't believe you're going to finally do it. That's huge, girl! But you're sulking like you're about to drop the hammer this afternoon. What are you about to get into?”

I turned to her, smirking. “Well, it seems you're about to be preoccupied with getting ass. So, chillin' with you is out of the question,” I teased, going back to the window as she chortled. “I need to stop by two sites and the studio.”

“See, you're back, strapping on the cape.” Shizu believed that and meant for those words to encourage me.

They didn't.

I sighed, watching the cars pass on the other side of the Turnpike, “Yeah. That thing.”



Later that day, at close to nine thirty at night, I pushed the doorbell button of a home on *Lake Sha’Ron*. My heart pounded in my chest and my mouth was completely dry. I was here but wasn’t. It felt as though I was watching myself instead of controlling my actions. Looking back at my car in the horseshoe driveway, I found myself ringing the bell again.

A half a minute later, the door opened. Juggy’s eyes came alive as his mind processed my being. “*Oh!* What up, yo!”

His appearance in sweats, a white tank undershirt, and an open robe would have been comical if my head was together. Juggy wore grandpa slippers.

“Hey,” I breathed out, not knowing what to say. Not understanding why I was here. “Is he here?”

Juggy snorted, backing away, widening the opening of the door to invite me in. “The nigga’s on parole. Where else he gone be this time of the day—oh, my bad. Unless he in Edgewater.” He gaped at me sideways and I didn’t know what that meant as he waved me inside.

The place was plushly grand: tall walls, high ceilings, beautiful archways, and vivid art and wall décor. My heels clanged against the spotless, black marble flooring. The living room had a contemporary feel even from afar. From the foyer, I identified the dining room, too. I could only see a small portion of the end of what looked to be a lush table set from an end chair.

*Hmmmmmm...*

This layout was totally different than what I’d perceived two weekends ago when I visited for the first time and at night.

“Let me call him,” Juggy mumbled, thumbing through his phone, “see where he at.”

I found myself still sauntering the entryway. The spiral staircase was breathtaking and much taller than it felt when I left that Sunday morning. Then I stopped. It was the room. The one Jas and I christened. It was for sure not the dining room I had assumed that night. It was the family room or den. And now, it was furnished, unlike the empty space filled with mirrors and a bench.

Snickers had my attention going to Jug. With a perceptive sleek grin, he rubbed his chin. “Maybe you can ask chief for a real tour.” Then his eyes shot down to his phone. “Oh. He coming from the kitchen. You can probably catch ‘im down that hall.” He pointed to the left of me.

I glanced over my shoulder then back at Juggy, who’d turned off in the opposite direction. Swallowing hard, I ambled toward the hall he instructed and almost immediately, I saw the outline of his thick frame swaying my way. Jas was striking in just basketball shorts hanging low on his pelvis, ankle socks, and black shower shoes. I fucking hated how my body responded to the mere sight of his thuggery. His chest was bubbled and defined, arms were modestly swollen, and abs hilly with sprouted hair. There was a shirt hanging from his right shoulder and two books clutched in his left hand.

Jas was in the middle of a neckroll when the claps of my heels alerted him to my presence. He peered at me with pinched brows. “Aye...”

“Hey.” I found myself smiling stupidly. I wasn’t happy or in a good place. Why was I smiling? Jas stopped, clearly surprised by my presence, but I continued toward him. “Juggy didn’t tell you I was on my way to you?”

I watched his eyes take me in from my shoes to my head. “Nah. He ain’t even say you were here. He only asked where I was.”

“Oh.”

With hard eyes on me, he parroted, “Oh.”

*Here we go...*

“I haven’t heard from you. Haven’t seen you since you left my place on Saturday morning.”

“I hit you back after your lil delivery to *Rizzo’s*.”

An unexpected gush of air shot from my nostrils in amusement. I was embarrassed, had briefly forgotten all about my cleverness with the chocolate covered strawberries. Quickly, I got control of myself. “Yeah. You did.” I shook my head, recalling my stupid stance. “*Yea*—I’m sorry about that.”

“About what?” Jas straightened, crossing his arms, cupping his hardcover books in both hands now.

Taking in a painful breath, I tried looking him in the eye. “I fucked up. *I...*”

“S’all good, Witherspoon—”

“No. Let me explain. I needed a few days to create a distance from Friday night. I shouldn’t have put you in that position. Having sex with my period on,” I whispered, “was so not cool. I got ahead of myself and felt like I drug you along with me.”

“Drug me with you? So, what am I a child now?” I was confused. “You ain’t think I knew what we were doing—were gonna do?” His forehead lifted, challenging me.

“*I—I...uh...*”

“Look, Witherspoon, it’s all good. I agree: it was a lot. And I enjoyed you, I really did. But let’s keep it trill, it won’t lead us to where either one of us is trying to go. So, you not hittin’ me back wasn’t a bad thing. The distance was good.”

*Damn...*

Was it, really? That blow felt similar to the one he dealt, saying he didn’t want to have sex with me anymore.

“There goes that look again.”

I bit back defensively. “What look?”



“The one you had in *Brown Barista* when I said I wouldn’t let it go there again.”

I sucked my teeth, head bouncing back. “There’s no look. I’m not pressed, Jas. It’s just...”

“What?”

I rolled my eyes behind closed lids, feeling the exact dread in my stomach I had for the past two days. “I like you. I *want* to be friends. I like hanging out with you.”

“Apparently, you like fuckin’ me, too—”

“No!”

“No?”

“*No*. I’m not saying *no*. I’m *saying*—I feel like you said. It’s different.”

He lowered his chin, one brow peaking. “What’s different?”

“Our arrangement.”

“You’ve never had sex with a dude who wasn’t ya man, Witherspoon?”

“Once or twice, yeah, but that’s not what I mean—that’s actually *exactly* what I mean, Jas! With you, it’s different.”

He straightened, now peering at me from above his nose. “How?”

I swung my head, trying to gather my thoughts. “I think you’re cool.”

Jas eyed me warily. He didn’t understand and neither did I. For a while, our eyes bounced against each other, warring in inarticulation.

“I’m good on it, Witherspoon. It’s all good.”

Wanting to change the subject, I gestured to the books in his hands, trying to avoid his naked torso, and asked, “Where were you going?”

“To the theater room to read before I fall out.”

“Is that where you read?”

He nodded. “Sometimes.”

“Okay. Then don’t let me stop you.”

Those brows shot up again. “You leaving?”

“Not unless you want me to. I can use a quiet moment. I flew in a few hours ago and had to make a few stops, including my studio. I haven’t been home yet. Your theater sounds cool. Can I see it?” Jas’ face wrinkled. He was likely confused. “I’m in no way plotting to get into your pants, man. I don’t even have condoms...and I know your virgin ass don’t either.”

With a puzzled expression, Jas managed to put on the t-shirt draped over his bulbous shoulder.

“Right this way.” He crossed me to continue to the room.

Trailing behind him, I soon learned it was on the lower level on the opposite side of the family room. The theater sat six people with oversized swanky leather seats. My dad’s sat ten. Jas adjusted the lighting so he could read. I took the seat next to him, placing my purse on the floor and minutes later, kicking off my heels. He cracked open one of the books and began his journey, it seemed. The energy between us crackled in the noiseless room, but it was nothing sexual. Though I couldn’t quite define it, I knew it consisted of confusion and a lack of communication. We simply didn’t know what to do or say to improve the energy.

Eventually I closed my eyes, just to center myself and take advantage of the silence. Jas’ manly scent surprisingly didn’t ruffle me in a way I couldn’t try to relax. I could do this. Sharing a private space with Jas without any expectations felt great.

Then there was rapping behind us. Juggy leaned into the doorframe. “Yo, the food Consuela said she left still here?”

“Yeah.” Jas shared, his face still in the book. “It’s in there. I had some lasagna and rice and beans earlier.”

“Oh, a’ight.”

Then I blurted, “No vegetables?”

Jas peered over to me. “There’s some mixed vegetables in there.”

“But you didn’t have any.”

He scoffed. “Nah.”

“You want something, Shi-Shi? It’s mad shit she said.”

My stomach growled on request.

Jas must have heard it, too. “That’s been ya stomach making that noise?”

I pushed back my cheeks, exposing my teeth. “I might’ve not eaten today.” *Or much yesterday...*

Concern etched his face. “Why?”

I exhaled, shaking my head. “It’s been a lot.”

“A lot like what, Witherspoon?”

I shrugged, really not wanting to get into it. “A lot like life.”

“And what does that consist of?”

I tried to quiet him with my eyes. Juggy was still a few yards away. “Jas...”

“Anything happened to you on ya lil vacation I ain’t even know you were on?”

“What makes you think my vacation was little?”

“You just said you were stressed. Was it ya man?”

“My ex?” I corrected him. “Hell no!”

“Then what?” When I didn’t answer, he shook his head. “That’s why you shouldn’t be hoppin’ ya ass all over the place.”

“It’s called vacation and I can go wherever I want.”

“But you’re gone all the time.”

“And? I’m grown.”

“Grown and can’t protect yourself, Witherspoon. That’s the problem I had with ol’ boy. He ain’t never take no precautions to protect you.”

I angled my head. “I’m sorry. Who do I need protection from?”

“Any and everybody. Your ex is a celebrity. That makes you a target. You never know who’s gonna try to run up on you. Besides that, you’re a pretty young lady, flocking around with no protection.”

“Again, I don’t need security. Jas, I travel like any other adult not at risk for some imaginary attack.”

He shook his head and pretended to go back to reading. Then a thought occurred.

“You said you didn’t know I was gone.” Of course, he didn’t. I wasn’t obligated to tell him my whereabouts. “I told you why I didn’t return your call. But you haven’t said why you didn’t call again. Is that why? Did you know I was away?”

“Yeah, because you post your locations on ya *Instagram*.”

I gasped. “You were on my page?” I kind of liked that revelation. *Holy shit!* “So, was your issue that I was away or that I was away with no ‘security’ you think I need?”

With his face still toward the book, Jas muttered, “Go get something to eat, Witherspoon.”

“No. Let’s explore this shit.”

“No need. It ain’t like you’re mine.” That shit burned, too.

“And if I was?” I couldn’t believe this. Jas was bitching out on me. “What do you think you can do about my travel?”

“If you were mine, Witherspoon, you wouldn’t be sky-hoppin’ like you do because you’d like being home with your man. And when you did go away, it wouldn’t be alone.”

“I wasn’t alone. I was with my best friend, Shizu.”

Juggy’s sudden burst of laughter in the back reminded me of his presence, but I was too far gone to care now.

“That ‘on’t mean nothing to me. I ‘on’t know her.”

“Then what would you have done, Jas, for this grown ass woman?”

“I would’ve, at least, sent Chelsea.”

“And what in the hell would she have done?”

“Made sure you were good. Either that or sent some real muscle.”

*Right, because I now know you have money and can possibly afford it?*

Or could he? I didn’t know what Jas could afford.

“And what the hell would security do?”

“Keep your little ass safe, Witherspoon,” his tone soft and exhausted.

“You aren’t just upset about me not calling you back.” It was a reach, but I sensed it.

He finally turned toward me again. “I don’t like when you leave town.” He shrugged. “I don’t fuckin’ like it. I know it’s messed up, but I told you I won’t lie to you. And then for you to be out with no protection? It just don’t sit right with me. But I see what you mean: you don’t belong to me so I don’t have a say. Go eat, Witherspoon. It’s late.”

Aghast, all I could do was gape in his face. When faced with someone’s brutal and vulnerable honesty, it could stun you into silence. Flustered, I turned to confirm Juggy would add to my embarrassment to see he had disappeared. I wondered when during Jas’ tirade.

Shaking my head, I took from my seat, leaving my shoes behind. It wasn’t until I was out of the room that it dawned on me how I didn’t know my way around his place. It didn’t take long for me to find the kitchen. Like the rest of the home, it was large and modernly styled. Juggy was in there, loading his plate with hearty foods like rice and beans and stewed chicken.

He glanced up at me and snorted. I didn’t like that. Trying to ignore him, I found the kitchen sink and soap dispenser and

began washing my hands. “I have no idea what’s so funny.”

“Puppy love and shit,” Juggy murmured with the confidence of a seasoned woman.

I turned his way with my hands still under the faucet. “Puppy love?” I scoffed. “I have no clue what this is, but *that* ain’t this.”

“Y’all like each other.”

I shut off the faucet. “I like *him*. *He* doesn’t even want to tell me his last name. I don’t think that qualifies as puppy love.” I yanked off a few paper towels to dry my hands. “Puppy love is innocent, pure, transparent to the point of foolishness. *That* ain’t me and your boy. We’re...” I took a moment to consider it. “like all passion with no purpose. And even with all that passion, at this rate, *this* will be done within enough time for him to find the virtuous, soft-spoken, no life-having wife he’s seeking.”

Juggy placed his plate in the microwave then set the timer and hit start. He then turned my way, crossing his arms and legs. “If you think that nigga’s gonna let you go because of this childish ass bickering y’all do because you won’t face the facts, then you ain’t as bright as I thought, girl.” He pointed toward a corner in the room. “The paper plates in the pantry over there. The real ones in the low drawer by your legs.”



When he lifted me from the theater chair, I woke up but wasn’t startled as he adjusted me in his arms and chest. I’d been dozing off for over an hour since eating that heavy food. It was good and sedating. I was exhausted beyond measure and childishly didn’t want to go home. Before giving in to sleep as he read in silence, I weighed the costs. I’d slept in Jas’ bed before and recalled it being delightful. If he didn’t put me in a guest bed or worse, on a couch, I’d be fine.

“You good?” I heard who had to be Juggy in the distance.

“Yeah. Grab her purse and shoes,” Jas instructed. “Her coat and phone...over in that seat over there.”

“Damn.” Juggy’s voice drew closer. “I knew her ass was gonna fall asleep. I told her that *Mauve* be putting me on my ass. Be making me have to shit, too.” I’d only had one glass of it when he offered the brandy in the kitchen before I left with my food. I was too tired to have more. Juggy was so damn dramatic. “You gonna take the elevator? Got to.”

*Elevator?*

I played sleep while Jas carried my dead weight out of the room. As my braids swayed in the air, my side lay against his beating heart. His body hot, hard, and fragranced. Yup. I was too comfortable. My hand tapped the metal of what had to be the doorframe when we boarded the elevator. Juggy joined us. My eyes were too heavy to satisfy my curiosity as to how big the car was, but I sensed it was small because Juggy felt and sounded close.

The door closed and the car jolted before moving.

“She said you ain’t tell her ya last name,” Juggy muttered.

Jas didn’t respond right away, but I felt the snort of his chest against me. The elevator eventually stopped and the car opened. Jas managed me out without me touching the frame of the door again.

Into his even pace, he lifted me closer to his face, his goatee prickling my chest as he sniffed. Instantly, my nipples pebbled and pulse beat in my neck. “She’ll know all my names soon.” His tone was untroubled and laced with confidence.

I could hear Juggy’s snickering in the distance. “Yo, man. You want me to head out in the morning by myself to give you some time to handle this? I can hit the sites then circle the block to snatch you when you ready.”

“Nah,” Jas’ thick cord trinkled, exhaling with that one word. “Regular schedule tomorrow.”

The scent changed and so did the temperature. Jas walked a few more yards. Then I was being lowered onto a cushioned surface. His bed. My back and head pressed against fluffy

pillows as my legs were moved to lay straight. Jas even arranged my braids over the pillows. This was almost comical. I hadn't played sleep since I was six years old, not wanting to walk after the engine was cut once arriving home. But more than that, this was humorous. It was pathetic of me to stoop this low just to feed my curiosity of this man.

"A'ight. I'm out. 'Bout to hit up the titty bar," Juggy announced from afar.

"With who? Jos-Renee?"

"Yeah," he sighed, sounding annoyed. "You know how her ass be trippin' when she 'on't get her way. Fuckin' Scorpio. Never again, man."

Then I heard the door close.

I could sense Jas' footsteps moving away. What am I doing? I took a deep breath, trying to streamline my behavior. But I was truly tired, completely exhausted, which was likely why my behavior was irrational. Either way, I felt no guilt. I would lay here *and*—

A ball of soft fabric smacked my face.

"I know ya ass ain't sleep. You gonna have me undress you or you gonna put that on yourself?" My eyes shot open just as Jas was headed to the en suite bathroom. "I'll grab your toothbrush from the last time you were here unless you want a new one."

I blinked against the bright ass light of his master suite, it was indeed where I was. At least he lay me on his bed rather than the couch.

*I should be so embarrassed...at myself!*

But I wasn't.



A weighted plop at the foot of the mattress had me awakening from my sleep. I looked to my left and didn't see Jas. Then I lifted to investigate what had startled me. There he



was. Jas was sitting at the far end of the bed, his shoulders were slumped over, head to the side, and face low. His right arm was extended into the air, wrist relaxed. I waited for a few seconds to see what exactly he was doing, but Jas didn't move. I even heard him snuffle in a soft snore but he didn't move.

I glanced around the room, lifting the comforter protectively over my chest. What was this? He told me he was crazy. *They'd diagnosed him in prison.* But this wasn't mental illness. It appeared to be some weird ass insomnia. I'd spent three nights with Jas before now. The first, second, and third, we'd been up all night fondling, fucking, and talking—heavy on the fondling and fucking. Tonight would be the first we completely slept.

*What the fuck, Jas?*

I didn't want to freak out, but couldn't forget the repeated fact of not really knowing this man. I had no clue of what to do in this instance. The one thing I could recall was not waking up a sleepwalker. Was this equivalent to sleepwalking? I wish my Aunt Rose texted. She was certainly up at this hour. She'd be able to tell me what this shit was and what I should do if not run for my *life*—

“...incler 92810-752,” he mumbled, and I didn't catch it all to make sense of it.

Within seconds, Jas stood and gaited over to the left side of the bed. He pulled the comforter back and crawled inside. He didn't 'fall' asleep. Jas had been asleep the whole time.



My eyes opened again. And again, it was dark. And again, Jas was not in bed. Lifting my back from the bed and resting on my elbows, I scanned the main room. It took seconds, but I saw the glass door of his sitting room ajar. I sat up fully and found a grainy version of flesh. Tossing the comforter to the side, I left the bed and toed to the door. Jas was in there, on a mat on the floor, in a prayer position.

*Shit...*

*This is why you should stay your ass home, girl!*

The man had been trying to keep in his own corner all this time, maybe this was why. Jas was a strange one. Beyond miscellaneous, the man lived in an underworld above ground, before our eyes. He was otherworldly personified. From the door, I could hear rumbling. It sounded like chants as his forehead kissed the mat. His big hands were on either side of his body, curled into a fetal position. As the religious community would call it, Jas was in the bow position. He was praying.

*At this hour?*

I turned for the clock on his nightstand. It was minutes after five in the morning. Did the man sleep? His voice increased in volume and I could pick up a chant. What was it? My breathing grew heavier and pulse thicker. Without thinking, I toed inside the sitting room, my bare feet on the rustic stone flooring. It could be questioned if it was the schadenfreude in me wanting to get close to him while in his state. Quietly, I sat on the couch before him. Yes. I was bold while afraid. But oddly, with Jas, I felt an inherent pull to him. There was something to his aura, his odor. It was like his biochemical bouquet manipulated my hormones...*and good senses*. His scent, it attracted me, body odor aroused and sedated me.

I stretched out in front of him, comforted by his rhythmic intonation. This was strange. Really weird, but I didn't feel unsafe. That was until a sensation settled between Jas and me. It was a widening transparent wedge, a light I couldn't see. Then I heard incanting. It was new to me...like a foreign language. Just as I sat up to leave, feeling this had exceeded my threshold for creepiness, his big hand reached over to my forehead. While chanting and with his body still in position, Jas' hand was weightless, but I immediately became winded. Drowsiness rushed in and I lay back down and blacked out.

# Chapter 9

**Part II cont'd**

**April | Present Day**

*ashira*

I woke to a stir. My eyes opened to the morning sun and momentarily, my body felt heavy. I'd slept hard, I could tell. What time was it? I rubbed my hazy eyes before glancing around the room. Like before, Jas' bedroom seemed larger in daylight than it did at night. The fact of the matter was the area was enormous, almost twice the size of my master suite. The sitting room was empty and so was the left side of the bed. I wondered where he was.

When I grabbed my phone from the nightstand, I remembered I'd shut it down when the *Instagram* app videos were glitching. *Damn it.* I fell asleep before powering it back on. After the phone loaded, I learned how late it was. Almost eight am. *Shit!* Had I slept that hard? Maybe after the night I'd had. Before I could gather my thoughts, the notifications began loading and seconds after that, the damn thing rang in my hand.

“*Guh—*” I cleared my throat. “Good morning.”

“Are you sleeping, Ms. Witherspoon?”

I blinked, clearing my throat again. “Apparently not, Marge-Jean, if I’m answering your call.”

“Nice of you to lie *and* be flippant when you have the eight-fifteen meeting”—my eyes closed the second it came to memory—“with the cleaning company, Ms. Witherspoon!”

I rubbed my swollen face, not needing this first thing in the morning. Not after the night I’d had and the lack of sleep the few before it. “Yeah. I’m sorry, but do you think you could handle that for me?”

“But you said it would be best you did because of my temper.”

I cocked my head to the side, pressing the phone to my ear. “Well, you’re going to have to control it for the betterment of the company and in the name of professionalism. Right?”

“We’ll see,” she challenged, but conceded. “What time can we expect you in? There is a stack of contracts waiting for your review.”

“I know.” I finger-combed my hair, looking around for my purse. “Ummmm... I don’t quite know. Let me make a few calls to know for sure. I’ll call you back in a bit.”

“Oakie doakie,” she sang dryly.

When the call disconnected, a wave of arousal coursed through me. Call it female morning wood or whatever hocus-pocus shit Jas pulled on me a few hours ago, but I was horny as fuck. Horny and disoriented because I woke up in a foreign place. This couldn’t be a good thing.

**Me: WHERE ARE YOU?**

I checked my text messages, seeing one from my dad saying he was on *Marye Island* and wouldn’t be returning until tomorrow. Cecil texted asking about hanging out this weekend. Noelle texted three times wondering why she hadn’t heard from me since I’d been back in town. *Shit*. I made a mental note to hit her back right away although she’d be in school.

The moment I shifted from the mattress to head to the bathroom, my phone vibrated.

**Jas:** *ON MY SECOND SITE. YOU GOOD?*

So, he'd left me here alone? Slowly, I began to regain my wits, turned on the shower, and drew my braids up into a ponytail on top of my head. Then I washed my face and brushed my teeth. While showering, my body began energizing and thoughts developed. Vitality had begun to mount, and that arousal didn't calm. An idea occurred. I left the bathroom in search of clothes to throw on. A tee shirt and sweats could possibly do until I made it to my studio.

I dried off after the shower and wrapped the towel around, wondering what I'd throw on. My phone rang just as I left the bathroom. The caller was unknown, but I was too preoccupied with getting out of here to think twice about answering.

"Hello."

"Oh, god," she breathed. "You answered. Listen, Shi-Shi, I've really tried giving you your privacy." That's when I recognized her voice. "I stay out of grown folk's business, but it's been over two months."

"Ms. Willimina, right now's not a good time. Is there anything wrong?"

Finding my way to Jas' walk-in closet, I was shocked by the hollowness of the space compared to how large it was. I immediately considered how unprepared Jas was for an estate of this enormity.

"Wrong?" She gasped. "Honey, I think we're past those games, don't you? Austin's been sick, trying to reach out to you. I've even called your father. Do you know how evasive that was for me?"

*And this call isn't?*

But I couldn't focus on that—would never be rude to Austin's mother. Besides that, I couldn't believe what I was looking at. The closet was a circular shape with two-tier hanging rods. Out of the ten cubbies, Jas only occupied two and very sparsely.

“I’m here now, Ms. Willimina. How can I help you?”

“By putting your selfishness aside and at least having a conversation with Austin.”

“I’m being selfish?”

“You are at this point. He hasn’t heard from you.”

“Ms. Willimina, I don’t think he’s supposed to. That’s kind of what happens when you get caught cheating. Red-handed, might I add.”

In two parallel areas were shoe racks and he only had six pairs of shoes displayed. I fingered through the few garments he had hanging as I strolled the room.

“I can’t speak for what happened. I wasn’t there,” Austin’s mother shrieked. “I’m just asking you to be an adult now and call him.”

“And what do you suppose I say?” I was emotionally disconnected from the conversation from the start.

Exploring Jas’ closet had captured all of my senses. The empty place sort of smelled like him, too, in addition to pine and, perhaps, apple notes.

“You can always start with being of the mind of an adult and figuring it out.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “Are you trying to insult me? Because that felt like a jab.”

“I’m trying to speak some sense into you two young people. Listen, Shi-Shi, I know you haven’t had a mother helping to guide you into womanhood, but I’ve always taught my children to look at the bigger picture when in conflict with a partner. That’s all I’m asking you to do. If your mother were around, I’m sure she’d say the same.”

The mother jabs were offensive, but I wouldn’t let her know. I rarely let anyone know and I wouldn’t today.

*This place...*

It was a diva’s haven. In the center was a gigantic marble wardrobe. *A dresser...* It looked like a massive kitchen island.

I began opening drawers in hopes of finding a shirt and sweats. Out of the two dozen compartments, Jas scarcely occupied four.

“Ms. Willimina, Austin cheated on me. Full stop. I will not allow you, him, or even my mother to tell me how to move on from *it*—”

“But there’s been no closure.”

“For me, it was when I left him and his jumpoff naked at the hotel. I’ve closed the door. I’m done and moving past it. Past him. And right now with this call at an inconvenient time, you’re not helping. I’ve got to go. Thanks for reaching out, but you don’t have to again. My best to you all.”

“Did she *hang*—did you hang up on me, girl?” she shouted.

“I wouldn’t do that. I’m still here, but this conversation is over with. Okay?”

“Goodbye, young lady!”

She hung up. I placed the phone on the marble top of the dresser and squatted to open a drawer. His underwear, socks, tees, basketball shorts, sweats, and jeans were folded immaculately and organized according to color. So detailed, I was uneasy about burrowing anything. With my mind racing, I turned to observe the empty space again. Who was this man? A few hours ago, I experienced a spiritual wizard and now, I see an unrefined felon. A toddler boy trying to walk in his father’s shoes.

The pings and ringing of my phone wouldn’t allow me to sit in my thoughts. So, I quickly grabbed what I needed from the drawers and got dressed. When done, I gathered my things and headed down the stairway. On the main level, traveling the hall was a woman dressed in black scrubs and *Crocs*. She seemed shocked to see me. And I damn sure was uneasy about the sight of her.

“Shi-Shi?” she asked as I’d just made my way to the last step.

Her hair was jet black, silky, and parted down the middle into a sleek ponytail. She was a little busty, but nothing vulgar. The woman was a healthy size with hips and a tapered waist. Her lips were painted a blood-stained hue and perfectly lined as were her dark defined eyes.

“Hi...” I didn’t know what to say.

Her focused gaping made me feel self-conscious. The last thing I needed was another surprise like the last time I was here at Jas’ place.

“Are you hungry?” That’s when I detected a thick accent. “Jas told me you were here and may want breakfast.”

I couldn’t help it. “Who are you?” I tried laughing it off, but the frigidness in my tone still lingered.

She laughed, uneasy, too. She was a very good-looking, mature woman I finally assessed. “I’m sorry. I’m Consuela, Jas’ housekeeper. I’m happy to finally meet you.” She blinked a few times, perhaps nervous. Long curled lashes. She was a housekeeper? “He left after his workout...early as usual. But he said you were here.”

“I am.” I tried smiling.

“Food?” She reminded me.

“Oh!” I giggled awkwardly again. “No. I’m fine. I actually need to run.”

Her surveilling eyes wouldn’t leave me. “Okay.” She chortled, but wouldn’t move.

“Okay.” My faux beam widened. “This is awkward.”

Her eyes blossomed and mouth formed an *O*. She then placed her palm over her forehead. “*Maldición!*” she whispered, cursing herself then shook her head. “Juggy told me about you.”

“Okay...”

“He said you were popular...a dancer on *TikTok*?”

I nodded. “Amongst other platforms.” *Including my own studio, Juggy. Ugh!*



“He said you were an entrepreneur, too. In building like him and Jas with your own company.”

“Yeah.”

“He said Jas is crazy about you. I knew when I had to clean up the candles and rose petals.” She grinned coyly. “Jas don’t have women over. Not like that.” Her head shook softly.

I didn’t know what to say to that. Perhaps I understood with all of Jas’ unrealistic dating expectations. But the way this woman regarded me felt there was more she perceived.

“That Juggy is a talker, huhn?” Because what else could I say?

Consuela smiled with a closed mouth and meeting brows. “He didn’t say how beautiful you were. He said pretty, but... you know how Juggy talks. Jas neither. They never said how gorgeous you are.” Her eyes fell as she nodded.

That felt sincere. And based on the features of Jas’ dating contestants, I could see why she may have been taken aback.

My hand went to my dry, naked face. Not having used my daily moisturizer, I was sure I looked a sight. That aside, it felt amazing receiving a compliment from a stunning woman herself. An unexpected beam lit my face. “With the type of few days I’ve had, I think I needed that. Thanks, Consuela.”

She bowed at the neck. “Have a great day, Shi-Shi.”

“Thanks.” I nodded then continued to the front door.

love  believe

*Jas*

I wiped my mouth, chewing as Danny Lew approached our table. His nose was a cranberry shade and I watched as he rubbed it and sniffled on the way. Peeping my attention going over his head, Jug turned and laughed.

“Yooooo, DL! You on time?” When Danny’s response was just the rolling of the eyes, Jug laughed again. “Yeah. I’ll be mad at my moms naming me DL, too. You down low ass nigga. Where ya fat belly friend today?”

Meeting us at a pizzeria today, Danny was alone. I didn’t have time to figure out why. When he stopped at the table, I tossed my chin to Jug. He wiped his hands then pulled out the envelope with a check written to Danny Lew from my LLC. I was following our plan since the first day we agreed on me being on the backend of *Just Homes* acquisition process as a partner instead of *Rizzo’s Custom Homes* being included. It was, ironically, similar to how I acquired *Rizzo’s Custom Homes & Developers* on paper. The difference was with Paulie Rizzo, my payments were only paper because the company itself was his debt to me. We worked it all out to appear legit. My legal team was the best.

“Yeah,” Danny took the envelope and placed it in the inside pocket of his jacket. His eyes were red and he kept sniffing his runny nose. “well, this shit may be happening sooner than planned.”

“How do you mean?” I asked before taking another bite of my pizza.

“I just came from the rehab facility, visiting my old man. He fell last week in the shower...broke his hip. There’s no way he can finish up the proposals. He’s crazy medicated...on the heavy shit. I’ve gotta step up.”

*Oh, damn.*

My first and dominant thought was compassion. I’d be sure to include Dan Lewinski in my prayers for healing over the next few months.

Still, the words shooting uninspired from my mouth were, “Then that means you’ve got work to do. Don’t it?”

“But you’s smart for droppin’ that dead weight ridin’ with you, though.” Jug taunted. “You need dogs around you, not pussies. And stay the fuck outta pops’ pill stash. Cop ya own, my nigga.”

“Oh, fuck you, bro!” Danny grunted, trying to keep his voice low. “You know, you didn’t have to shove that gun in Bobby’s mouth. He had to wait until the swelling went down and is still waiting to have his teeth replaced.”

Jug laughed at him again. “Fuck you think I was pose’d to do? Let y’all pussies think it’s okay to take my man’s money and not hold up your side of the deal? You know what we call that where we come from? Sucka suckin’. Sin ain’t no sucka and ain’t suckin’ shit off you, bitch.”

My phone chirped as Danny Lew used his sleeve to swipe his nose.

**Witherspoon: *HEY TO YOU TOO. I DIDN’T SLEEP IN YOUR BED LAST NIGHT. DIDN’T WAKE UP IN IT THIS MORNING EITHER.***

She damn sure didn’t. I struggled two nights ago when she faked falling asleep at my crib. Of course, I wasn’t going to put her out. The girl was tired. I could see it all in her pretty face the moment I found her wandering in my hallway. But I wouldn’t lie about the discipline I applied to not touch her. Smelling her between my sheets made it difficult for me to leave her there when I headed down to my gym and then again when I showered and left for work. I’d been torn so bad with how to handle this girl. Each time I said was the last time, I meant it. But I hadn’t been able to actually leave her alone.

**Me: MS INES COOKING TONIGHT?**

Even my immediate response to her was open. I didn’t even think if it was the right thing to do, I just went with my inclination. Witherspoon weakened my flesh and not just in a sexual manner. I was drawn to her and didn’t like it, but didn’t know what to do.

Either way, that was that. I’d put it out there and wouldn’t pull it back. Just like with Danny Lew and his agreement to

our deal. Initially, it was to be a joint venture with *Just Homes*. Now, seeing the visible monkey on dude's back, I knew I could never partner with the likes of him. The dilemma was how I couldn't kill the deal at this point in the game. *Nah*. Now, I had to cook up a deviated route to get to the goal.

Unamused by it all, I paid Danny Lew and his red running nose empty eyes. "Sorry to hear about ya pops. Keep ya head up, Danny Lew." I tossed my chin, dismissing him. The demons attached to him irritated my spirit.

And with that, he turned with a long face and walked off. The monkey on his back was happy with the fat check in his pocket. My spirit, on the other hand, was being tortured by a desire I could never obtain. Similar to Danny Lew's monkey, I couldn't shake it off.



As I raised my arm to ring the doorbell, fucking butterflies exploded in my belly. That was some shit; I never got nervous. I moved heat without fear more than half my teen years. I'd pulled my first gat on a man twice my age and experience with guns. I'd gone to war with the Latin Kings over territory. I'd initiated a deal with the Brim Bloods out of Passaic over a punk ass white boy I ain't even know. I'd fired off and hit a few. I'd turned myself in for a hit I didn't make a clean getaway from. I stood trial for the bodies and even took a plea to a lesser charge and was sent to prison for it. None of those events had my stomach flipping in excitement like visiting this chick.

I waited a few seconds before the latch sounded and the door was pulled open. Her eyes were low, cheeks high, and mouth closed as she grinned my way. What was this? Was Witherspoon excited to see me, too? At first, I couldn't speak. I tried letting her take the lead. It was too dangerous for me to. I couldn't trust myself with Witherspoon, and that fact had been kicking my ass.

And she looked so good. Wearing a black tank top and loose cropped sweats, Witherspoon was casual but beyond cute...as usual. Those braids still hung down her shoulders and a translucent layer of gloss with soft, gold specks topped her full lips. My dick stiffened and I felt no shame.

Then her eyes fell, an unusual display of feminine modesty. Witherspoon was acting like a girl.

“If you’re hungry for more than Ines’ food just say that, Jas.”

“Say more, Witherspoon.”

Her head shot up and with a gleam of understanding in her eyes, she shook her head. Witherspoon stepped backward to let me in. “I’ve got company,” she informed as I walked inside.

“At least you’re dressed appropriately.”

“I’m always dressed appropriately for guests.”

“Not the first time I *pulled*—” Noelle creeping into the small foyer had me biting my tongue.

“Hey, Jas!” Her eyes were big and expressive.

“Aye. Hey, Noelle.”

My eyes popped wide when she rushed me with a big ass hug. “Thanks for handling that for me last week. Come here. I want you to meet my best friend, Brandy.” She spun a one-eighty and yelled, “Brandyyyyy, look who’s here!”

I turned back to Witherspoon for answers. Her smile broadened but her eyes remained just as soft as they were when she answered the door as she shrugged.

Noelle walked me into the living room where music was playing and the coffee table had been moved. Brandy looked up from her phone and did a double take our way.

“This is Jas, Bran,” Noelle informed her. “Jas, this is my best friend. I told her how you had Darius McCoy shitting his pants last week! That clown walked around all week not being able to look me in the eye.” She high-fived me.

Brandy didn't appear as satisfied as her bestie.

"Everything all good now?" I asked.

"Yup!"

"She told the school you were a lieutenant." Brandy shared.

My face folded. "Like a cop?"

"No," Brandy answered. "In a gang."

"You're Blood, right?" Noelle asked and I could hear her sister snickering behind me. "Crip?"

"I'm a part of a gang, yeah."

"See!" Noelle leaped off her toes, beaming proudly to her friend. "Which one?"

"The Witherspoon Queens." Noelle's face fell at my words. "I ain't gay or nothing, but somehow got initiated last week by handling Darius McCoy."

Brandy cracked up laughing while Noelle's whole mood disappeared.

"Good one, Jas," Witherspoon murmured, toeing past me to sit on a sofa chair.

Noelle dropped her body on the sofa across the room. "Well, you're still good with me. How do you two know each other anyway?"

"Yeah," Brandy seconded her bestie while unscrewing a bottle of nail polish. "And did y'all know each other before the Austin breakup or after?" She wiggled her brows, but before anybody could react, she laughed. "I'm just kidding." She laughed again, this time Noelle was with her. "Because we know Shi-Shi's type. She wouldn't know what to do with a real G. You either, Noelle."

"Excuse me?" Witherspoon spit out, laughing.

"She's right, Shi-Shi." Noelle snickered. "You told me about the one guy from Newark you used to date and how he

used to have you riding him and his friends around the hood in your baby *Beamer*.”

Smiling, Witherspoon rolled her eyes. “That was eons ago. I was like a senior in high school. I’m a grown ass woman now. I know my speed.”

“Where are you from?” Brandy asked me.

I noticed Noelle’s curious eyes immediately.

“Harlem.”

“And where did you two meet? You haven’t answered that.” Brandy was hella forward for her young ass age.

“Work.”

“Oh.” Her brows hiked. “You two work together?”

“You work for my Dad?” Noelle chirped at the same time.

“Nah.” I kicked forward a leg, adjusting myself in the chair. Talking to young girls was work. “I work for another firm.”

“No.” Witherspoon shook her head, the same girlie grin on her face since I showed up. “We’re not going to do this, Jas.” She addressed the girls, who were following every word of ours. “Jas owns his own firm. We met at a coffee shop.”

“So, you two are rivals?” Brandy surmised.

“Well, that’s good to know.” Noelle’s mouth balled as she looked to be chewing on a thought.

Witherspoon asked, “What is?”

“That you two aren’t creeping or any weird shit like that. I know you’d never lay down with the enemy. You’re too competitive for that.”

“I’d say smart,” Brandy added.

Witherspoon stood, sighing. “And not to mention, straight out of a three-year relationship. I think dinner’s ready, girls. Or do you need more time to analyze me in front of a total stranger?”

“You and Au were together for three years,” Brandy corrected her.

“Yeah. And do you have a girlfriend, Jas?” Noelle asked.

Brandy sucked in a breath. “He’s too old *for*—how old are you?”

“Shut up!” Noelle rolled her eyes. “You have no idea why I’m asking.”

Brandy rolled her eyes to the table, dipping the brush into the polish. “If you say so.”

When Noelle asked the question again, with her eyes this time, I peeped it. Brandy was right; little Noelle was checking for me. This was messed up. I glanced over to Witherspoon, who rolled her eyes. She knew it, too, but it seemed she wasn’t going to help me out here.

I cleared my throat. “Older than your sister.”

“Oh.” Her eyes ping-ponged before she asked, “So, how old?”

“Say less, Noelle! Let’s go eat,” Witherspoon demanded, making me shoot from my seat.



“Thanks, Ines,” I muttered with a full belly when she placed a slice of some kind of fancy cheesecake in front of me. “What’s this red cake?”

“Red velvet,” Witherspoon answered.

“Oh.” I stared at it. “I guess you really do make fancy food.”

“I didn’t make that,” she shared with her back to me, headed to the opening of the dining room. “Shi-Shi did.”

My eyes went to Witherspoon. She pulled her tea mug to her mouth, snapping her neck, being cocky.

“So you can cook.”



“I told you I could. Guess you don’t believe my truths because I’m an open book,” she murmured, being sassy before taking another sip.

“Here’s the website,” Noelle told Brandy. “I’ll *Airdrop* it to you.”

“Y’all want dessert?” Ines asked the girls.

Noelle wrinkled her nose while shaking her head. “Nah. Gluten-free for me.”

“Yeah,” Brandy agreed. “Me, too.”

Witherspoon snapped her neck again. “After y’all just inhaled pasta primavera?”

The girls’ heads whipped to face each other, questioning that fact.

“I thought you said it was gluten-free pasta,” Brandy challenged Noelle.

Noelle tossed Ines a stare over her shoulder. “You know I’m allergic to gluten.”

“Since when?” Witherspoon asked.

“Girl,” Ines hissed. “Bye, Noelle.” She walked out of the room.

“Ugh!” Brandy went back to her phone. “Now, I really need a gluten-free dessert. What does this bakery downstairs have?”

In the lobby of Witherspoon’s luxury apartment building were restaurants, a gym, and a few shoppes. It was fitting for a woman like her.

“So,” Noelle’s eyes swept over me a few seconds before she spoke. “You only came over for dinner?”

I nodded. “Ines cast a spell on me a few months ago and I keep coming back.”

“It’s just this is only my second time seeing you over here, is all. I’m here a few days a week.”

I didn't know what to say. Witherspoon's sister was a straight shooter. I had to keep up.

Holding a piece of cake to my mouth, I smiled. "Then I'm sure I'll be running into you again."

"They have brownies and no-bake oatmeal cookies." Brandy shot up from the table.

Noelle followed her. "Maybe we'll see Young Lord or his wife again."

My attention went to Witherspoon. "They own a unit in the building over," she explained as my phone rang.

The girls had just left the room when I took a forkful of the cake and stood myself. "I gotta take this."

"Hey," I answered Ava while randomly making my way to the kitchen.

"Hi. I'm just leaving the site. All of the light equipment is there. They're locked in the trailers we ordered. Hall has been issued the down payment."

"A'ight." I leaned against the counter, crossing my legs and one arm across my chest.

"I explained to him your promptitude preference and tried to slickly warn him that if tomorrow doesn't go well, you'd likely cancel the shoot with him in Passaic next week."

I chuckled silently. "True that."

It was true. I hated running late. Time was money.

I could hear a car door close and assumed it was Ava safely getting inside. "The crew was reminded to arrive tomorrow ready to work as usual. If they're needed in any capacity, they'll be notified."

"That's what's up."

I observed Witherspoon's kitchen, realizing how I would have never guessed a meal was cooked in here an hour or so ago. Ines left the joint spick and span. Their arrangement was so weird to me, but I figured "different strokes." Who was I to

need to understand an arrangement between two adults no matter how unconventional it was?

I listened intently as Ava ran down updates on projects we'd been working on, including the instruction on the firm's site to expand office space for a few minutes. Already, she was the bomb. She jumped in headfirst, trying to acclimate to the system. Smart, efficient, and unafraid to exert leadership on my behalf. And Ava was, so far, easy to work with. I still didn't know her. She didn't seem to have the biggest personality, though she smiled and joked mildly. But she'd been exceptionally professional in my presence, and even Juggy mentioned her being unfazed by his meek attempts at her. Attempts his ass knew I'd dig into his shit about if I saw it. Fraternizing was a no-no in my book. Keep your work separate from play.

*Like now...*

Witherspoon appeared in the kitchen, floating toward me with that look in her eyes. The same one she answered the door with. It made those damn butterflies return. My goofy ass smiled back.

"Aye, Ava, I'mma have to run. One of our competitors just entered the room and I don't want no espionage shit going down on my watch."

Ava laughed into the phone. "Okay. We can finish in the morning. Goodnight, Jas."

Witherspoon's soft body crashed into my chest as I returned, "You be safe."

When hanging up, I reached over her little arms wrapped around me to slip the phone into my pocket.

Those pretty ass deep eyes and long lashes beaming at me with her smile hidden behind those soft lips had me mesmerized. Almost like reading my mind, Witherspoon pushed up from her toes and kissed me. Before I could think of my next move, her tongue pushed smooth into my mouth. I grabbed her at the back of the head, fingers moving into the parted braids on her scalp. She smelled so damn good and

tasted even better. Witherspoon moaned into my mouth, expelling her warm breath all over my face. She liked my hands in her hair and I did, too. My dick swelled instantly and I leaned into her more. The sounds of our tongues caressing and lips smacking turned me the fuck on.

But I pulled back, not wanting anyone to walk in and catch us acting like horny ass teenagers.

Witherspoon's smile returned, tight eyes opening. "What are we doing here?"

I studied her beauty for a while. "If you're asking what I'm doing here, I think you already know."

"Not for Ines' cooking, for sure." Her tone so soft, so tender.

She understood.

*Good...*

I shook my head, caressing the side of her face. "Not totally."

"Then why not say it?"

"In front of your baby sister and her friend?"

She blinked. "No." Her head shook. "This thing between us is too complicated. I couldn't begin to explain it to her because I don't understand it myself. As far as she and the world knows, I'm still recovering from a broken heart thanks to my ex." She licked her lips. "Plus, I'm convinced Noelle will have an issue with me boning her latest crush."

"Cut that shit out, Witherspoon." She tossed her head back and laughed in my arms. As gorgeous as the mole on her smooth neck was, I wasn't playing. "I mean it. That girl is young. Too young to even be thinking about a boyfriend or a damn grown ass man."

She straightened into my chest again. "Sorry to have to break the news, but Noelle likes you. It's cute."

"No the hell it ain't."

Her smile wouldn't fade. "I can understand why. I've been there before as a kid. She'll get over it soon enough. Then maybe by then..."

I pushed her chin up with my index finger, trying to catch her eyes again. "Maybe by then what?"

She whispered with weary eyes directly on mine. "Maybe by then we can be comfortable with this thing between us."

"What is this thing?"

"What do you think?"

"That's the problem. I don't know what to think. You've got way more experience with shit like this than I do."

"Yeah." She swallowed, eyes still dancing between mine. "I forgot. But this is different."

"How?"

"It just feels different. Plus, I'm on borrowed time with you. You're looking for something I can't fathom for years to come. And I'm..."

When her eyes fell again, I pulled her chin up so she could face me. "You're what?"

"I don't know. I told you I like you. And I think I don't want to waste time trying to figure out why anymore."

That confused me. "Then whatchu wanna do?"

Witherspoon's little arms tightened around me even more and her eyes narrowed as she whispered, "I want to embrace it. I don't want to question if I can touch you like this. If I should call or text you. If I should show you how I pleasure myself with you in mind." She shrugged. "I just want to do it and not be judged by you. If I asked you to show me how you pleased yourself while in lockdown, I don't want you to think I'm a heathen."

That killed my arousal. "Why would I think you're a heathen? You know the Word, Witherspoon. You just don't care to apply it."

There was a break of silence before her lashes clapped and she murmured, “When I stayed over two nights ago, I woke up once and you were sitting at the edge of the bed holding your arm out.” *Shit*. “Then you recited some numbers before getting back in bed. Later on that night—well, in the morning, I woke up again and you were in the sitting room praying. Not knowing what to do, I laid on the couch in front of you. It was stupid, but I was... a little scared and disoriented from being in a new space and seeing you at the foot of the bed earlier. But before I could get comfortable, you reached up and covered my face with your hand. Next thing I saw was the sunlight when I woke up in your bed. Did you put a hex on me?”

I ain’t know if she was serious or showing her sense of humor, but ain’t like it at all.

“Nah. I remember finishing up praying and seeing you on the couch. It was weird to me.” ...*but cute as hell that you followed me into my prayer room*. “But I picked you up and carried you to the bed. You were sleeping mad hard.”

“Well, yeah! After your abracadabra act!”

My head cocked and I just looked at her. “Witherspoon, I know I ain’t the best representation of Christ. I’ve got residue from my old culture I’m still fighting through, but my spiritual walk ain’t no *gimmick*—”

“I never said it *was*—”

“That means I read my word and I pray. I walk and talk with God. His Holy Spirit resides in me. I don’t do potions or spells. That ain’t what my God’s about—”

“I *know*—”

“Then why in the *hell*—”

“I don’t know.” She buried her face in my chest, giving me all the damn feels. “It was a little scary.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t even remember touching you until I was done praying. Maybe that was the Holy Spirit telling ya lil nosy ass to chill.”

My other phone rang as she laughed hard, eyes filled with suspicion. “Your mouth!”

Before answering the phone, I reminded her, “You like it.” Witherspoon cracked up even more. “Chels, whaddup?”

“Hey,” my cousin, Chelsea, answered. “I hope you’re not too busy.”

I grabbed Witherspoon’s head and kissed her lips. “Never for you. What it do?”

“I just hung up with Tanya. We want a cousins get together. You down?”

“When?”

“Saturday. I know it’s last minute, but you know how we do!” She put on her Harlem Pride vibe for that. Her corny ass reminding me of Witherspoon, who was staring into my eyes.

“What time?”

Witherspoon pointed over her shoulder while mouthing, “*I’ve got to take care of something.*”

“Like four. At Tanya’s.”

Her warmth left me and I watched Witherspoon’s ass through the loose sweats jiggle. “Can I bring somebody?”

“Who?”

“Your girl.”

At that, Witherspoon stopped and turned to me curiously. Her face was tightened with confusion.

“Shi-Shi?” Chelsea correctly guessed.

“Yeah.”

“Are you two...” Chelsea left the question open.

“Are we what?” Replying to my cousin, my eyes were on Witherspoon who was waiting for a clue about the conversation she could only hear one side of.

“Like...dating?”

“Nah. She’s just the lil homie. Right, Witherspoon?”

“Wait.” Chels chirped. “She’s there with you?”

“Who is that?” Witherspoon finally asked.

“My romance novels reading ass cousin.”

Witherspoon smiled. “My girl, Chelsea?”

I nodded.

“Tell Shi-Shi I said hey! And I would love to see her on Saturday, if she’s interested.”

“You busy Saturday night?” I tossed my chin to Witherspoon. “My peoples getting together at my cousin, Tanya’s.”

“That’s where the birthday party was?” I nodded. Witherspoon’s eyes circled the room in thought. “I’m at the studio all day Saturday. Let me see if I can pull in coverage for that night.” The girls appeared out of nowhere in the hall, just outside of the kitchen. “You two ready? I’m staying over at Corinne’s tonight and need to head to my room and pack a bag. I’ll drop you guys off at home as soon as I’m done.”

The girls nodded, chewing hard while holding bags with the word “bakery” in the logo. Noelle found me in the kitchen before she turned in the direction of the dining room.

Witherspoon left and I spent the next few minutes chopping it up with Chelsea, then Man called and I had to cut the conversation to kick it with him. When we were done, I figured I should leave. So, I went toward the back of the apartment for Witherspoon’s room. One door was closed so I walked past it. Another was opened with the light off, so I kept going. It was the last room in the hall left, and I approached the door. I eventually found Witherspoon over her bed, placing a small box of condoms into her *Louis Vuitton* duffle.

She caught me in the doorframe as she was about to take off. Her mouth dropped open in surprise. That knowledge had me feeling insecure like a motherfucker. I didn’t know what to say.

“I’mma head out.” My mouth went numb. “You and Corinne gonna be good tonight?”



With dancing eyes, Witherspoon licked her lips. “Yeah.”

My head bobbed out of sync a couple of times before I walked off. So stuck on what I’d just seen, I didn’t even stop in the dining room to say goodnight to the girls, neither did I express my thanks to Ines. I let myself out.

# Chapter 10

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day



**I**t was nearing ten when I crawled into my bed and killed the last light in my room. Feeling my body throb from lifting weights when I got in from Witherspoon's, my bed felt incredible as I stretched out beneath the blanket after a long hot shower. I needed to find sleep. Tomorrow would be the first shoot day of our commercial for *Rizzo's Custom Homes*. I arranged for two, linking up with brothers out of Princeton who Zebedee Baker and Ragee had worked with for years for their commercial units. This would be next-level for the firm. In a year or two, I'd own most of the building firms in the region. Then I'd have to change the name of the company to something more suitable to the legacy I'd been building. Everything was falling into place. Each item on my checklist had been checked off or would soon be coming into fruition.

*Everything except...*

Exhaling, I turned over onto my stomach. My eyes trailed over to the surveillance corner in my room. My property was secured, inactive per the live feeds of the cameras. Jug would likely be leaving out soon to get into whatever the hell it was Jug did at night when I turned in early. My attention went to the ceiling fan over my bed. It wasn't on, but I found myself staring up there. My thoughts flowing.

She caught me in another one of my sleepwalking episodes. I hated those shits. When I was fresh out, I fell asleep once down in the den. Jug was up late one night and walked past to find me sitting up with my arm stretched out. He said he waited until I mumbled some words then laid back down. I knew right away what that shit was. Then we had Frankie stay over one night and test it out around the same time and it happened again.

I hoped that after being home for some time, the habit would stop. Having that happen with a woman in your bed or small kids in the house wasn't a good look. My therapist said it would go away. Well, I knew now it hadn't.

A change in the darkness of the shadows happened in my peripheral. I glanced over to the monitors in the corner of the room. A car had pulled into the driveway and parked. The lights powered off and I could make out the back of the *GT Coupe*. My pulse beat hard in my throat. Witherspoon walked in heels to her trunk and pulled out the *LV* duffle. She then strutted to the front door, and my dick started to swell.

I didn't get it. Why not just tell me she was coming through? Why lie about chilling with Corinne? *And a damn box of condoms*. I couldn't think of her fucking another man. Proof of it would fuck with me for a while. I vowed to make sure she wouldn't, but that was before I had a plan in place to ensure it. When she did shit like this, it powered that possessive inclination I wrestled with.

My phone vibrated.

**Juggy:** *SHI-SHI HERE*

I quickly typed back.

## Me: Up

Then I reached beneath the blanket and pushed my boxers down, kicking them off. I waited with a pounding chest for her to make it to my door. My dick was so swollen it throbbed. The fuck was this? It took her some time to make it up to the second floor, but the minute I heard the clacking of her heels, I grabbed my cock in my hands. She unlatched and opened one of the two doors to my bedroom. Seeing the darkness halted her steps for a second. When I could see she was alone and not followed by Jug, I yanked the blanket off, shuffling it down my legs so she could see me stroke myself. Witherspoon gave me the idea earlier in her kitchen. I may not have responded to her words, but I damn sure recorded them mentally.

“Take off your clothes, Shi,” my voice was so raw, so vulnerable. “Show me what you do to yourself when you thinking about me.”

I could see her chest and shoulders rise, processing that request. Then she pulled out her phone and used the flashlight function to illuminate the room before closing the door. Witherspoon laid the phone on the floor and I could see her whole body from this angle. She unknotted her trench coat then slowly unbuttoned it. I swallowed so fucking hard the moment I saw her round tits and hard nipples when she pulled it open. Witherspoon was skin-naked up top—no shirt or bra. She pushed out of the coat, dropping it to the floor, then untied the drawstring of her sweat pants that hugged her hips and pulled them down to her ankles.

Witherspoon turned around and kicked out one leg to untie the boots reaching just above her ankles. Her dancer’s pose was artful as hell. This chick knew her body was sinful. There wasn’t an inch I didn’t want to caress with my mouth. She did the same with the other leg before toeing out of her booties and stepping out of the sweats.

I watched her turn for the duffle and after digging through it, she pulled out a box. *The condoms*. Slowly, she strutted to the foot of the bed, still gracefully poised as a dancer, but rather an exotic one. When she reached the foot, she placed her palms down to crawl to me.

“You stopped,” her voice soft.

I couldn't see much of her facial expression because of the flashlight now being behind her. It took me a few seconds to realize I'd stopped stroking myself. She meant my fist-fucking. How could I concentrate on that with all the glory of Shi-Shi seducing me in my bedroom? I was sure mad niggas would pay top dollar for this experience, me included. I'd beat my shit enough over the years. Right now, the act didn't appeal to me. Her body did. But I obeyed her anyway.

When Witherspoon made it to my legs, she stood to her feet, placing them outside of me. Her finger went between her thighs, lightened thanks to the flashlight of her phone. Her other hand trailed up her belly until it reached her boob and she fondled herself. She pulled at her nipple, flickered the tip, and palmed the underside of her breast. Her head tossed back and soft mewls danced into the air. I was hard and throbbing, but didn't want to blast off this way. I wanted to be inside of her.

Her hips started to gyrate, making me believe she was going to cum soon, too, and I didn't want that either. I could make Witherspoon explode inside and out. Right now, I needed the privilege.

“Come here, Ashira.” Her head shot up at the sound of my voice. Without hesitation, she started to lower her body. “No. Walk like that.”

Witherspoon caught on and the moment she was within arm's reach of me, I pulled her close by the soft cheeks of her ass and brought her pussy to my mouth. The moment my tongue touched between her wet lips, she moaned. I licked all over, holding her with both hands now, reaching as far inside her sweet cave as my tongue would go. Her hands cupped the back of my neck, using it as an anchor. The feel of her ass cheeks straining so she could grind on my face sent me wild.

When I slithered out and across her swollen clit, her moans grew louder and her grip on my head tightened enough for me to reach for the box of condoms. While my tongue flapped against her clit, I managed to rip open the box and take out a

packet. I wanted to see her cum on my cock again. The shit was addictive.

“Right there,” she cried, killing my plans. “Don’t move. Please!”

I dropped the rubber and grabbed her ass again, flicking harder and faster. Not being able to breathe, every muscle clenched tight as I concentrated every cell of my body to send her over.

“*Ohhhhhh...*” she moaned, pop-locking on my head. “Jas!”

Finally, I was able to relax, feeling her legs wobble against me as she exploded in my busy mouth. Witherspoon rubbed her pussy against my mouth until she tapped out. Unsteady, she was now leaning against me in an awkward position, so I helped lower her to the bed. When her back met the mattress, those long legs opened wide, inviting me in. Witherspoon’s hands were all over my chest and arms.

“Grab the condoms,” she groaned, half satisfied, still hungry.

Obedying again, I sat up on my knees, bit the foil package open, and rolled the rubber onto myself.

“You good?” I needed to know before going in.

She reached up and cupped my heavy balls, demonstrating she understood my question. I covered her with my weight, lowering as my dick sunk into her softness. Our breathing strained a bit at first, but as I began to slide in and out, we both loosened up. Her arms stretched out and wrapped around me, one hand going straight to my ass. She grabbed tightly, the tips of her long, pointy nails encouraging my strokes. Her mouth suctioned my shoulder, alerting me to another pleasure point. Or maybe anywhere this girl touched me could make me feel so damn incredible.

I stroked, I pounded, I circled to stretch her walls for me even more. And when Witherspoon was ready, she began lifting and meeting my dives into her sweet soft pussy. She pulled my face to her and kissed me. Her tongue pushed deep

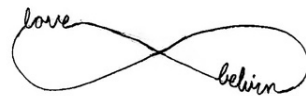
inside my mouth and she moaned, thighs tightening around me similar to her walls. My body reacted, hips thrusting harder and faster. My coiled body slapping against the fat of her ass. Once again, I found myself not being able to breathe just before she exploded. It was a minor sacrifice for me to bring her pleasure.

That was until she cried, sucking my tongue, slamming into my dick with quivering walls. My balls juttled and spine arched, and I blasted inside of her while gasping for air. For her. My head spun, making me feel drunk with pleasure as Witherspoon showered my face and neck in kisses, out of breath herself.

I collapsed, face buried in her pulsing neck. “Marry me.”

Her laughter was feathery and crisp, echoing against my chest. “What’s your real name?”

*Shit...*



“What are your long term goals?” Witherspoon asked in the darkness of my bedroom.

She killed the flashlight on her phone when we left the bed for the bathroom. She had to pee and I needed to toss the rubber.

I licked my lips and swallowed, considering that. It wasn’t a question I was prepared to be asked at eleven at night and in the dark. “Like what? A year from now?”

“Yeah. A year, two years—whatever.”

“Personally or professionally?”

She giggled. “God, I already know what you want personally. I’m asking what about outside of being married and having kids. What are your goals?”

“I want to monopolize the majority of residential construction real estate in the tri-state area.”

“Damn. The majority? Looks like Dan Lewinski’s ten steps ahead of you.”

I rubbed my nose, internally scoffing. “So, it seems.”

“Majority. Wow. That’s a lot for a small firm to assume. Even though I’m encouraging my father to sign on with Lewinski, I’m not sure that isn’t a huge undertaking for him. And I’ve heard he’s sick. Broke his hip bone or something. Either way,” she sighed. “there are the big firms who are larger and some with more years in the industry.” She paused for a while. “Mergers and acquisitions at this level make perfect sense, only on paper and prayer pillows.”

*Interesting...*

“What’re your short term plans?”

She sucked her teeth and snorted, “Why specifically short term for me?”

“Because I know your long term is dancing. Your club and studio.”

“Oh.” She giggled. “True that. Ummmm...” Then she exhaled. “Well, I’ve got one more place to look at with Mehki. I plan on making an offer soon after with whichever I settle on.” She nudged me with her elbow. “Thanks for that, by the way. And ummm... Beyond that, who knows.”

“What about ya sky hopping?” I yawned.

“What do you mean?”

“Traveling.”

“Oh! Traveling? Ummmm...” she hummed again. “I’m thinking about doing something right after visiting my mom in South Carolina in May. So sometime in June, I’m hoping.”

“Where?”

“Maybe *Red’s Island*.”

The familiarity of that name gave me pause. “In the Caribbean?”



“Mmmhmm. I’ve heard lots of good things about it. Their nightlife is amazing.”

“And dangerous.”

She laughed. “What do you mean?”

“That’s the place Wally shot his video a few months back. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Witherspoon, the island may be pretty and the clubs may be live, but it’s an active island.”

“What does that mean?”

“As in gangs. They have a strong presence there.”

“Are you saying that because of those reports of Wally getting in trouble out there when shooting the video?”

“Yeah.”

“But everybody knows Wally is a hothead. You can’t go to someone’s home and try to play tough guy gangster all the time. Sounds like he tried being wild on the wrong island.”

I shook my head even though she couldn’t see me. “Nah, baby. That’s not...” I didn’t know how much of it I should share. I didn’t want “Harlem Pride Sin” in her head. She would never know that nigga. Now, I was a new creature, thanks to Christ. That’s the only man I needed her to know. To trust. But I also remembered Witherspoon didn’t like not knowing all of me. “Wally went over there before clearing it with his captain. If he had done that, proper channels would have been traveled to get permission to be out there working on their turf.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. Who’s Wally’s captain and what proper channels?”

“It’s gangland. Lord is Wally’s captain. When you’re familiar with street politics, you know just how limited safe travels can be for people, especially celebrities when they’re from the streets. It’s like I was trying to tell you the other day with your ex. He’s a target simply because of his status. That

made and still makes you a target, too. There are politics mostly everywhere for high profile people, especially in the slums. *Red's Island* has a slum on the other side of the picturesque beach it has. That's where the gangs are. They should have been paid for Wally's visit."

"Why?"

"Simply because they say so. I've seen it happen in Harlem. Rappers from other cities come through wanting to explore or pose like tourists and ended up getting robbed and fucked up for not paying their dues. If they pay, they don't get robbed by the reigning gang and it's made sure that they'll be protected from any other gang while visiting."

"So, *I* have to pay the local gangs to visit *Red's Island*?" Thick sarcasm was laced in her words.

"No. You just don't need to go. Why don't you try Dubai, *Saint Justin*, Mexico's Baja California peninsula, Hawaii... *Marye Island*'s got water transportation to the other keys and the mainland. You and your girls ain't saving pennies to explore."

Witherspoon didn't respond. For a while, we lay in silence, nothing more being exchanged but our breaths. Then I felt her little warm hand inching up my thigh.

"You know who needs protection from my exploring?"

My dick was hard instantly.



"Mmmmm!" I moaned gloriously into the air.

His pelvis smacked into my ass, big hands gripping my quivering hips. The sun pierced through my lids, announcing the vanishment of the night. *Last night*. Last night Jas was slow, pacing, observant, and patient. And that was exactly how he started off this morning, waking me with soft wet kisses up the back of my thighs. I moaned to my consciousness this morning. After his mouth traveled to the back of my neck, those big calloused hands were at my hips, lifting them into the air.

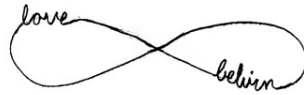
Brain still foggy but body lit afire, I spread my knees wide, understanding the position. The command. He slid inside my swollen walls, amid their memory of him from just hours before. At first, I was with him, enjoying his generous strokes. Jas began delivering them faster and diving deeper. The massage intensified in no time and I imploded in an orgasm. That didn't slow Jas who grunted behind me, pounding me into delirium. It all became too much rather quickly. I wasn't in pain or discomfort, but the bed was more than creaking. It felt as though the frame was leaping from the floor. I didn't want to stop and wouldn't dare create an awkward moment by speaking, so I endured his rabid thrusts, hoping we'd be fine. Then, before I knew it, another orgasm rolled over me.

“*Jasssss!*”

My back arched and hips spread for him even more. I cried out until the deep moans turned into helpless whimpers. This time, Jas gave a cue.

“Shit, *Shi...*” he ground almost incoherently, plunging into me with wild abandon.

And I loved it, pushing my hips back more, squeezing my sex around him tighter. His big trembling palms gripped tightly on the skin of my damp, jerking waist. I even reached back and held my cheeks open for him. That was a bad idea. Jas' thrusts turned even wilder as he grunted, panting loudly in pleasure until the corner of the bed fell to the floor. Without skipping a beat, Jas took me by the shoulders, clenching me protectively while still inside, *still* shooting his hot spring into my core.



Nearly two hours later, I found my way to the kitchen. Thankfully, Consuela was in there, busy shearing potatoes. She peered up when sensing my presence. I needed to go, had a gamut of appointments starting with my therapist. Jas had left a half an hour ago, having to head to check in with his parole officer.

As I tried clasping my cufflink at my wrist, I smiled cheekily, hoping not to put this woman off with this. But I needed her help. “Morning.”

She smiled beautifully. “Buenos dias, Shi-Shi. You look amazing.”

Finally catching the clasp, I swung my arms in the air then smacked my thighs. “I brought my overnight bag this time. Makeup and things.”

Consuela shook her head. “You don’t need it. You’re beautiful and young. I remember those days.” She winked.

“So, speaking of those days...” I hesitated, but didn’t have time for coyness. I really had to go. “I need to replace his bed.”

Her eyes blossomed. “His bed?”

“Yeah. I kind of broke it this morning and after a bit of investigation, I don’t believe it was quality furniture to begin with. In fact, none of his bedroom fits the motif of the house.”

She laughed. “That’s because his bedroom was the only room Frankie didn’t have designed before he came home. He said he’d take care of it.”

I pointed over my shoulder. “That was taking care of it?”

She hummed she didn’t know. “Jas is a low-maintenance man. I just clean around him and let him be. Easiest job ever.”

“Does that mean you would be able to help me pick out a set? Like something suitable to his taste?”

“You’re suitable to his taste,” a small voice announced itself as Frankie turned the corner, carrying cloth shopping bags into the kitchen.

Consuela laughed silently, focusing on her shaving craft.

“Good morning.” I didn’t know what else to say to the Linda Hunt lookalike, the woman I now knew was Jas’ bank and partner.

“Hi, sweetie.” She dropped the bags onto the countertop nearly her height. Then Frankie smiled at me, not at all alarmed about seeing me in Jas’ kitchen at seven-thirty in the morning. “Didn’t catch much of it, but is it something I can help with?”

“Uhn-uhn,” Consuela answered, face to her handiwork. “Jas’ bed is broken. Shi-Shi wants to replace it.”

“Ohhh...” Frankie stiffly turned back to me, her whole body instead of just her neck. “Broken?” I nodded with a tight smile. “His big ass. I told him that bed wasn’t fitting for him, much less him and a woman.”

“Do you know if he has a particular furniture store he fancies? I hear you furnished this place. Do you have one?”

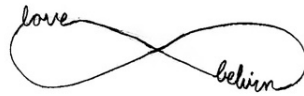
Frankie shook her head. “I hired a designer. That was many moons ago. I mailed him pictures as options and Jas approved what he liked over the phone. I have no clue where the designer shopped.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay,” I singsonged. “I have a place I like. Let’s just hope he does, too.” I pulled out my card loaded with my personal contact information and placed it on the counter then started toward one of the kitchen entrances. “My goal is to have it delivered today if they have something decent in stock. I guess I should arrange for some bedding, too. *Shit*,” I swore to myself.

“Someone will be here all day, whether it’s me or the boys,” Consuela’s heavy accent carried.

“Great. Have a wonderful day, ladies.” I waved as they returned the sentiment.

My day had just gotten longer.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are stylized and cursive.

“Still employed by *Rizzo’s Custom Homes & Developers*?”

“I am,” I answered my parole officer, my attention on a familiar-looking face across the way in a holding cell.

His head was low and he kept twisting and turning, but couldn’t go far while cuffed.

*Damn...*

His ass was going back up.

“Paystub available?”

Grabbing them from my back pocket, I handed Reed the printed paystubs. With technology as it was, I wondered why parole still required paper stubs. I could have emailed them. But I understood nothing about parole was supposed to be convenient, and especially not for Black and Brown men and women. They complicated shit just to keep us down.

“No raise yet, I see,” he observed, reading over them. “Not that I’m critiquing. Your salary is handsome for most men. But it looks to have been shrinking. You putting in less hours?”

I shook my head. “Buying stock within the company.”

Reed lowered his glasses. “Stock?”

“More like equity.”

Then he completely removed his glasses. “You mean to tell me you’re buying into that building firm?”

I shrugged. “Rizzo’s got great opportunities happening over there. Maybe one day, I’ll own the company.”

“Well, shit, Sinclair!” He belted a robust hoot. “I guess if some miraculous shit like that happens, it would be to a fella like you.” Then Reed paused and sobered. “Listen, kid.” He then looked me in the eye. “About the other week. We’ve been inundated with demands from the higher-ups to up the quota. I’d been out all that weekend performing negative checks and when I got to your name and saw you hadn’t called in earlier that week...” He sighed. “I was on a warpath, I guess. I’m sure the young lady understands how this game goes.”

He looked to me for confirmation. The nigga didn’t apologize, but wanted me to approve his mistake. I liked Reed, I really did. But I looked forward to the day when I had to answer to no white men. He was the last one standing.

“I’m good, sir.” That was the best I could give him.

In this instance, he had me by the balls in more ways than one. I needed something only Reed could grant.

He nodded, accepting those words as forgiveness for a transgression he didn’t cop to. Then Reed slid his glasses back on, resuming his typical questions. “Have you been around unlawful weapons such as firearms and such?”

“No, sir.”

“Have you entered your hot zones like the Iron Bound section of Newark?”

“I still haven’t had the pleasure,” I answered, quickly regretting being an ass about it.

But Reed knew he had no right to ask me anything not related to my charges, at least not a failed trial.

He scribbled something into my chart. “And how are those sessions with your therapist?”

“Still expensive as hell.”

I sat through a few more standard questions before he began to wrap up this visit. “Okay, Sinclair.” Reed closed my file. “No need to have you piss. I’ll save that for a later visit.

You know, you're one of a small minority—*no pun intended*—who don't indulge in alcohol or other prohibited substances.”

“Doesn't make for an entertaining life, I guess. Reed.” I sat up in my seat, needing to get my words together. “Other than a couple of weeks ago, I've been laying low, staying out ya hair. I need something.”

His narrowed lips pushed out. “What's that?”

I understood his confusion: I've never asked for anything from this man, not even patience.

Scratching beneath my goatee, I just came with it. “Travel. I wanna travel.”

“Where to?”

I inhaled a heap of air. “I 'on't know specifically. But want to be able to go away for a few days.”

“So, we're talking national and international travel. For what?”

“Recreation.”

He stared at me deeply. “Exclusively for recreation?”

“Yeah, man.” I exhaled, trying to use my hands to help explain. “You see the hours I put in at work. The weather's breaking and I'd like to start exploring a little. Maybe The Bahamas...Cabo?”

Reed's eyes locked into me even more, if that was possible. He was trying to read me. I was sure not many parolees came in here asking to island hop. I needed this. *God, I need this.* It was the chick. Witherspoon.

The man gaped at me for so long, the energy grew awkward. At this point, I wanted him to say no so I could go about my day and stop feeling helpless, waiting for approval. I'd even begun thinking of a way of cockily saying, *Never mind. You got it.*

“You know, Sinclair, I know I'm not supposed to say this to you, but I am. You were supposed to be a problem. You were assigned to me because the *FEDs* put you on a 'return at



any time, for any reason' list, courtesy of Newark PD. They still have it out for you and have given me unlimited surveillance support. You've not been perfect, Sinclair, but you've not been stupid. Plus, I went to school with the commanding officer over the Bartnicki case at the time. He was a pompous asshole. So was the big brother, so was the father.

"I'm going to grant you traveling privileges for one reason: your expiration date is fastly approaching. But there are conditions!" His volume increased as he warned. "You must submit your requests at least one week in advance and that is to be accompanied by all of your travel arrangements."

I nodded. "Understood, sir." I would not thank him.

"Sinclair."

"Sir."

"You fuck me over, you'll regret being assigned to me. I have a few tricks in my bag and Newark PD has more."

"Understood, sir." I gave a pause before asking, "Does that conclude this check-in?"

After another long glare, Reed turned his back to me, going into his computer. I didn't take it personal. Understanding the visit was done, I stood to leave with a W on the scoreboard. Reed could be dramatic by his damn self.

I had a chick with wings, taking off every and anywhere. I'd just been given mine, too, to keep up with her ass.

love  
believe

ashira

“You sure you don’t want a stick?”

I shook my head, eyes rolled around my father’s smoke room on his estate. He sat across the small table from me, having just sparked a stogie. We’d had dinner and I agreed to join him in here because I couldn’t regain the courage to break the news to him. I don’t know if I was more annoyed at him for putting me in this predicament, or myself for delaying the moment since I arrived tonight.

I hadn’t been in here in years and could tell it had recently been renovated. The walls were a navy blue instead of the old black, the ceiling a cool gray, and even the cognac leather single seats circling the table were new. But the photo above the bar was not. It was a painted photo of him and my mom at a bar he used to own in the eighties. My mom’s slender caramel frame draped around his vastness as he held court in the main room. They seemed happy and wealthy...influential, too. He’d still been holding on to those days—the time when she was as crazy about him as he was her, if not more.

“It was a wonderful time,” he observed out loud, seeing my gaze on the large painting.

“Apparently,” I murmured. “That was eons ago, but it made the new design cut, I see.” Then another thought occurred, spurring my nerve to say what I needed to say. “You’ve redesigned the room.”

Daddy blew out smoke. “A few rooms. Been doing upgrades here and there since last winter.”

“Like a retiree.” I cleared my throat, sitting up in my chair.

He groaned with the cutest smile, “Let’s not start this shit again, baby girl.”

“Well, let’s try me finishing it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m submitting my resignation. It’s been typed up and signed. I wanted to tell you face to face first. I’m done, Daddy. I need to move on.”

Daddy blew out more smoke. He leaned forward, eyes low from the cigar and him studying me. “Are you serious?”

“I couldn’t be more serious.”

“When?”

I swallowed hard, trying to brave through this. “You’ll have me until July, but very limitedly. Either way, by that time, Lewinski’s merger would have begun.”

He shook his head. “I need more time than that, Ashira. I’ve not decided to sell. I may renege on the merger. What if I’m not ready to part ways with the company I spent the better part of my years building?”

*Boomerang...*

“Then you can start searching for my replacement, I can help with that as much as I can until the end of summer.”

“What if I need longer?” his tone terse.

I swallowed hard again, struggling not to cry. “You don’t have much longer. I’m deciding between two properties right now for my club. I hope to be in closing by the end of next month.”

I sat breathless while he ruminated, seething a few feet away from me. My father was processing this. I’d been warning him for years, nearly to tears at his every blocker of my feelings regarding this. Tonight was different because I’d finally told him what I planned to do versus what I wanted to. This was it, the moment that separated the grown woman from daddy’s little girl. My therapist predicted this. I’d just hoped I didn’t lose my last standing parent.

“This is sounding really Celestine’ish.” He eyed me suspiciously. “Have you spoken to her?”

That hurt. “Why would you say that?”

“Answer me!”

“She called the other day saying she’d be visiting soon, but you know there’s never much more to her than that. Please don’t accuse me of siding with a woman who doesn’t even like

me.” I fought not to cry. The accusation in that tone was cruel. “You’re implying betrayal. I can’t deal with that from you, too!”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You just don’t understand, honey. You’re not a parent. My legacy is at hand right now. I built *Witherspoon Homes* just for you.”

“And Noelle,” I amended, annoyed by having to again.

My father’s eyes closed in frustration. “Don’t start that shit, Shi-Shi. You know what I mean. It feels like you don’t appreciate my *sacrifice*—”

“I’ve been carrying that sacrifice for most of my adult years. It’s become *my* sacrifice. Killing *my* dreams!”

“Hey, I know you’re going through a lot with the breakup and all, but honey, I need you to focus on what’s important here. Don’t think the world as you knew it is over. Don’t make permanent decisions based on temporary emotions. Now, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this thing with *Austin*—”

I rolled my eyes, waving off his mention with my hand. “That was *so* two months ago. Why is his name even coming up? I’ve already been forgotten how to spell it.”

I was being facetious, of course. But I needed him to not even bring my ex-boyfriend into a serious matter like this.

“No. No. No. I told him I’d talk to you. It’s just that I’ve been so busy around here.”

“First, there’s nothing to discuss about that dude. Secondly, you’ve been busy doing what? Counting your bank accounts? Speaking with your interior designer?”

His index finger on the hand holding the cigar pushed into the air. “Now, don’t you go getting flippant with me, young lady!”

“You know what?” I rolled my eyes and grabbed my glass of wine, downing it. Then I rose to my feet. “Don’t even worry about it, Daddy. Expect my resignation in your inbox. I can have it mailed out to you, too.”

I stormed out of his smoke room, heels knocking against the hardwood flooring.

# Chapter II

## Part II cont'd

April | Present Day



“**Y**eah, man.” My cousin, Snoop, dealt cards around the table. “It’s fucked up.”

Standing over the dining room table at Tanya and Antoine’s card party, I felt a heavy sense of sadness. “And you said this was yesterday that old girl went to visit her?”

“Yup.” Snoop lifted the headband he wore each day to cover his absent ear for a scratch. “Said Teea’s whole shit was swole the fuck up.”

“And if she with them *Pretty Girl Slice and Dice* bitches, it’s gonna be rough on ol’ girl. You feel me?”

“Word,” my cousin, Gina, agreed. “I told Tasha from Uptown to get the word out. If a hair on her mufuckin’ head is snatched, I’mma be collecting bodies all month. Straight up, yo!” She slammed the table. “Them bitches know how I move.”

The shit saddened me no matter how much I knew it was a part of the game. My cousin, Teea, was arrested for a warrant two days ago. There hadn't been a bail set, so she'd been stuck so far. While in the jail, she had an altercation, which is expected when you have a rep on the streets and move as vicious as my female cousins who are known as stickup queens. I'd just kicked it with Teea, Gina, and Tiny recently about getting out of the game. As an O.G. in my family, I had the authority and respect of their attention. My family admired me.

Teea wasn't even thirty years old yet, but had three grandchildren. That was how out of order her life had always been. They respected me for the heeding and even all said they'd look into some vocational training that I'd pay for. But I knew it was easier said than done. The streets was the master seducer when you had no fucking clue about just how transient freedom could be dealing with the law.

"Yo, that chick, Shi-Shi, here!" my cousin, Leo, announced to the room, skipping in with his fist over his mouth. "Let me go take this wave cap off so she know what a kid be working with. Ya heard?"

"Damn, that bitch bad!" a family friend, B-Sure, croaked at the table.

Immediately, Jug and I caught eyes. He sat up at the table. "Easy, youngin'. She's a guest and won't be feeling uncomfortable."

"Oh, my bad, big homie." B-Sure tapped his nose with a closed fist. "No disrespect. I'm just saying shortie be takin' nem to school, and all I wanna do is take her home. You feel me?"

He snapped fingers with Antoine, Tanya's husband, who laughed.

"Show that ass what a Harlem nigga all about," my cousin, Deedot, laughed.

B-Sure, still laughing, agreed. "It's only right."

“Enough of dat,” Jug spoke over their amusement. “Just watch what the fuck you say when she around. Don’t talk shit about Sin. No names, no nothing. And keep that fuckin’ hyena shit to ya’selves.”

Deedot made a face, but knew not to speak a word of challenge. Jug would have his ass hanging from the ceiling before Witherspoon made it to the back of the house.

Chelsea walked into the room and sang, “Look who’s here!”

“Heeeey, y’all!” Witherspoon mildly shouted out, rocking her million-dollar smile as she strutted in heels behind my cousin.

I could tell she was nervous but pushed through the anxiety to meet the occasion. She looked fucking delectable. Witherspoon’s waist disappeared in the body suit she rocked. Her long legs were in track pants where her thighs couldn’t go unnoticed. The high-heeled strappy sandals not only arched her back, poking her ass, but also exposed her pretty toes painted yellow.

She found me right away and I tossed her a nod of acknowledgment, still not cool with having her exposed to my family. Boundaries could only be set by association, but Witherspoon wasn’t my girl. Her little celebrity made the shit even more complicated.

“Texas Hold’em,” Witherspoon observed out loud.

“You play?” Deedot asked her. The slickness in his tone couldn’t be missed any more than the dirty eyes he hooked into her.

*Thirsty ass...*

“Nah. I don’t play. I sweep,” Witherspoon answered, earning a snicker around the room.

“Oh, word?” Deedot’s smile was goofy as hell.

“Wanna play, Shi-Shi?” B-Sure asked, licking his dry ass lips.

“Not right now.” She looked around. “I need a drank.”



“Oh!” Chelsea chirped. “Let’s get you one. *Corona*, wine, tequila...?”

Witherspoon peered my way, biting her bottom lip in a second of uncertainty. “*Corona* in a bottle?”

“What you mean?” Antoine asked with a smirk. “You ‘on’t think we do it right here?”

Witherspoon giggled. She was nervous, and I hated and enjoyed it with equal measure. She was out of her comfort zone here in Harlem, but braved her presence. But for what?

Chelsea brought back beer for the two of them and they performed some weird toast, snickering before taking their first sip.

“Yo, how y’all know each other?” B-Sure asked.

Witherspoon and Chelsea exchanged a glance before my cousin answered. “We met at a play.”

“A play?” Antoine asked, being bold as hell because Tanya wasn’t in the room.

The salivating these niggas were doing, thinking they were laying low was hilarious. Then I wondered if I looked as goofy as these motherfuckers every time I saw Witherspoon’s fine ass, because too many times did my dick react on sight of her.

“Mmmhmmm.” Chelsea swallowed her beer, nodding. “A few months ago.”

Deedot asked, “And y’all just started kicking it?”

The girls looked at each other again then Witherspoon glanced quickly my way.

“Yeah. Well, I recognized her...amongst the bodyguards and other patrons swooning over her boyfriend.” *The nigga that not only ignored her, but let her roam without protection.* “We caught eyes and...” Chelsea shrugged. “...well, you know I fan-girled, but she was cool with it. Right, Jas?”

Deedot and B-Sure looked my way. Antoine did, too. “You, Sin?” Deedot asked.

“At a fuckin’ play.” Deedot seemed shocked, and I understood why. “C’mon, my G.”

I chuckled. “Shit was proper, too.”

The room laughed.

“Yeah.” Chelsea nodded again. “I was so stoked he allowed me to treat him *and* to a play?”

“You were winning, winning!” Witherspoon gassed her.

“Okay?!” Chelsea high-fived her. “And I got me a new fren!”

Witherspoon snapped her fingers. “A fren, fren!”

Those two were cute. I was amazed at how fast they clicked. Chelsea was a good girl with great energy, a lot sweeter than her big sis, Tanya. But Tanya was cool with me, too. She wasn’t as carefree and friendly, but always showed love and respect, even when I had to beat Antoine’s ass for crashing a brand new whip I’d bought Samona years ago when driving while drunk.

“Wait.” Witherspoon looked confused. “You treated Jas?”

The big ass smile on Chels’ face was priceless. Why was this a big deal? I sat in a chair against the wall.

“Yup. Wasn’t equivalent to two degrees, but it was a great time. And we met Shi-*Shi*—well, I met Shi-Shi. She and Jas are work acquaintances.”

Witherspoon’s nervous eyes were on me again.

Deedot turned away from the table to look at me. “Oh, word?”

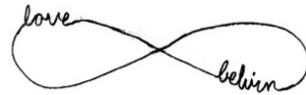
“You be knowin’ people like *that, that*, from work, Sin?” B-Sure asked.

Processing that question, I caught a flashback of the new bedroom set I walked in to the other night. Witherspoon bought it after we broke my old one fucking. My set was cheap, something I picked out myself, not needing much for comfort. *Shit*. Anything was better than the cots I’d been used to. I was never self-conscious about my personal space

because I didn't have any woman in there but Consuela to clean. But never did I imagine having a woman of Witherspoon's caliber on there and breaking the damn frame.

My stupid ass shrugged at B-Sure's question. I was halfway hard as a fucking brick at this point. I stood to leave the room before I embarrassed myself.

*Why the fuck did you come through, Witherspoon?*



*ashira*

My eyes roved the table for any possible clues or cues. We were playing spades and only going to three hundred and fifty, so that everyone would have a chance to play a game or two. Jas and I had a score of three-twenty, and Antoine and Tanya had three-eleven. It was the last hand. Jas and I placed our bid of six, since he saw three books and I saw three myself. We also knew that if we went for six, they had to go for seven to win. It all came down to the last book as both teams had six books sitting in front of us. So, whichever team won this last book would win the game.

The only cards left to be played were the big and little jokers, the ace of spades, and the queen of spades, which I was holding. My card math was sharp. Tanya was to my right and led with the ace of spade. I played my queen then looked at Antoine, who wore a defeated expression, causing me to check in over at my partner, Jas.

When I saw *that* big joker stuck to Jas' forehead, I dropped my face towards my chest. *Damn...* This round was even more stressful than the last. The crowded living room opened in shouts, applause, and other expressive gestures. As much as I

wanted to do my usual silly manner of gloat-filled celebrating, I had to pee.

“Them construction people damn good at Spades.” Jas’ little cousin, Jonathan, jeered. “That’s what y’all be doing instead of actually building them muthafuckin’ houses, I see!”

He slapped hands with Juggy. “Unforeseeable delays, my ass!”

I shook my head at Juggy feeding into that fallacy as I stood. Catching eyes with Tanya, I asked, “Where’s the restroom? My bladder is crying.”

The swiftness in which her eyes swept me from head to toe with a twisted mouth shocked the hell out of me. My gut told me this had nothing to do with her and her husband, Antoine, losing the Spades game to Jas and me. When I arrived today, she hardly spoke and gave very little eye contact.

“Down the hall, to the left.” She sauntered off in the opposite direction.

Stunned, I quickly decided to move on. After using the bathroom, I found my way into the kitchen where it was less crowded and a place I could return the trillions of text messages from my phone and check the alerts, too. Of course, much of it was work and the studio. There were a number of alerts from social media, too, which likely meant my latest dance video had gone viral again *or* Austin had caught a headline. I hated that people tagged me in shit associated with him. There was no time for me to grieve the relationship, although according to my therapist, I hadn’t opted to take the time.

*Whatever...*

I kept scrolling through professional athletes and rappers trying to holler via the DMs.

*Meek! Again? Ilk!*

“Yoooo! Shi-Shi!” I glanced up to find Jonathan strolling into the kitchen, wearing the same trench coat he did last month at Sean’s birthday party. “What you into, ma?” He

splayed open his coat. “I got pills and trees. I bet dope ass queens like you into gummies. I got brownies, too, see...”

Before he could locate whatever he was looking for in his pharmacy of a coat, a familiar throaty tender hissed, “Fuck outta here with that shit.”

“Fuck!” Jonathan’s eyes stretched wide as he snatched his coat closed.

The way he scurried around his big cousin to leave the room was almost comical.

“Really?” I asked, trying to keep from laughing. “I ain’t even get to place my order yet.”

Jas didn’t reply to my dry humor right away. Instead, he approached me with the quiet confidence that shook my soul since the first day I lay eyes on him a few months ago. His scent grew lasciviously dangerous the closer he got to me. My lungs seized when he leaned his hard body into mine, nose grazing my neck. I couldn’t think to react, but my damn body did. He’d never been this bold publicly. Someone could walk in at any moment. Did he want that?

“He wanna fuck you,” he whispered in my ear.

Breathlessly, I murmured, “So, does every hetero guy in this house. That’s nothing new.”

Jas scoffed against my neck.

Damn.

*Just kiss me.*

*Please!*

“What would you consider new?”

“You fucking me here at your cousin’s house.”

Jas froze over me. I caught his relaxed eyes as he backed away, licking his lips. The way he swiped his nose, rebounding from my challenge made my pussy pulse.

“That what you into, Witherspoon?”

My eyes fell from sudden embarrassment. I hated how small my voice was when I replied with honesty, “I’m into *you*. Fucking *you* anytime and any way I can.”

He leaned against the countertop across from me. “Tonight’s not soon enough?”

I shook my head. “We’re taking my aunt, Kimberly, out for her birthday. Then it’s my night to close the dance studio.”

I knew Jas would be on his fifth dream by the time I’d be able to make it to *Lake Sha’Ron*.

“Oh, here you are!” Chelsea brisked inside the small kitchen then sauntered right back out, shouting into the hallway. “Quick family meeting in the kitchen! Real quick for the cousins, please!”

Jas’ face tightened in confusion. I, myself, was curious. Was this normal? Jas’ family, though undoubtedly...hood, were a solid unit from my little experience with them. It was clear, he was high-ranked in terms of respect and admiration here. Perhaps it was because of serving such a long prison term and coming home as a devout Christian insistent on not touching alcohol or anything mood-boosting. *Except for pussy*. Jas had been indulging in mine quite well.

“What’s this about, Chels?” Jas finally asked as people were obediently populating in the kitchen, picking over food and pouring drinks.

Tanya and Juggy were the last two to enter.

“So, really quick.” Chelsea slapped her palms together, smiling brightly. “I know some of you are in the middle of whatever games you’re playing, but some of us have to go. I didn’t want to leave today without initiating solid plans for the next birthday we have in the family. Care to take a guess on whose it is?” Once again, her beam was brilliant.

Chelsea’s aura was vastly different from her sister, Tanya’s. There was a street edge to her persona, something undetectable in her baby sister’s.

After a few false guesses, Chelsea singsonged, “Jassy!”

All eyes flew to Jas, who was posted up against the wall at this point, behind the group.

“Oh, shit,” Antoine murmured.

“Word? When ya born day, big homie?” his cousin, Leo, who couldn’t stop staring at me, asked.

“In a few short weeks,” Chelsea answered.

“May tenth,” Tanya shared over her sister.

Jas shook his head. “Nah, Chels. ‘S’all good. You know I ‘on’t need all that. We good.”

I continued to shoot bricks Jas’ way. *May tenth?* That was less than two weeks away! I had no idea he had a birthday coming. *Shit.* We still didn’t know each other. When his eyes slowly landed my way, I knew he could feel the heat emanating from me. We both knew he would have never told me. It was the kind of stupid shit Jas did to me all the time.

She shook her head. “No, we’re not. I told you guys we would be better as a family and that means celebrating each other’s birthdays and other special occasions. Now,” she exhaled, “any suggestions for how we can celebrate the *big homie?*” she emphasized the way I’d noticed some here referenced Jas, only Chelsea’s diction wasn’t authentic, which was odd because she definitely had the Harlem accent. “Any?” she urged, looking as foreign amongst this group as I actually was.

“Jug, my nigga,” Jonathan proposed. “what O.G. be into?”

Juggy scoffed. “Shiiiiit. Working, praying, winning. That’s all a nigga do.” The room laughed. “He ‘on’t need none of y’all asses to do them three things.”

“Yo, Shi-Shi,” B-Sure tossed his chin over to me. “What you construction people like to do after clocking out?”

The small room got quiet in anticipation of my answer. I hated how jealous I felt in the moment. How could I not know this pertinent information about him? This. *This* was what frustrated me about his enigma. At first, it was cute. Now, it had turned categorically rude. Nonetheless, right here and

right now was not the time to express that. I needed to swallow back my feelings and spread over his mishap, smoothly like butter.

“*Ummm...*” I used the tip of my thumbnail to scratch my nose. “I’m really glad you guys are bringing this up while I’m here. A few of our peers in building have been planning a trip to celebrate.” What the fuck was I saying? I had no idea of the words coming from my brain until after they’d left my mouth.

“Where?” Tanya demanded, expression tight.

My smile was tighter and I could feel the heat shooting my way from where Jas stood. I didn’t care. “I suggested the Caribbean.” The verbal and facial reactions in the room were priceless. “It’s not too far or particularly *expensive*—”

“How much?” a female cousin, whose name I could not recall, asked, jaws popping gum sharply around the room.

Leave it to Black people to lead their interest with that question. And leave it to my silly ass to have no answer prepared.

“Well,” I kicked my feet out, killing time. “That’s where we left the conversation off the other day. We know May tenth is quickly approaching and that we’re late on the planning. I told them about my best friend, Shizu, who is a travel agent. I can check in with her for great rates for hotels and flights. If anyone can work a miracle, Shizu can.” I winked. “She did a dirty thirty destination party for something like five hundred per person. That included flights and an all-inclusive four-star resort.”

“All in what?” Tiny asked, face screwed.

Tanya rolled her eyes, smiling. “It mean food and drinks included.”

“That’s what’s up! I ain’t spend all my tax refund! *Owww!*” she pushed out her pierced tongue, splattered with dots all over.

A few of the guys, including Jonathan, grabbed their crotches, declaring their participation.



“That’s cool, Shi-Shi! Okay?!” Chelsea snapped her fingers and whipped her neck. “Seems like a few people are down. So, I’m going to wait until you get back to me with numbers and I’ll share it in our cousins text thread.” She turned to the others, which gave me the opportunity to steal a glance at Jas. He stood expressionless and left out of the conversation. His eyes were empty until they rolled across the room. I followed his line of vision over to Juggy. With a crooked grin, his inspection left Jas and landed on me. Juggy let out a silent snort and dropped his head. “Now, keep in mind, his big day falls on a Monday. If you can’t get off, oh well.”

Chelsea continued with her announcements and the room was clearing just after. Jas remained with the stragglers, diving for food.

He sidled up next to me. “What’re you doing, Witherspoon?”

“About to plan a birthday celebration for my jailhouse boo.”

“Oh, word?”

I was sure I sounded just as corny as Chelsea earlier with the ‘big homie’ comment when I pivoted, grabbing my purse from the counter and answered, “Word. Maybe this is where I should be more often, learning basic information about the convicted felon who breaks his bed on my ass.” Then I began out of the kitchen, I had to beat the Saturday traffic back to Jersey.

“Witherspoon,” he hummed, not pressed, but pressed.

“By the way,” I turned back to face him. “September thirteenth. That’s when this ass was born.”

Then I strutted out, leaving him to his Harlemites family.





When she answered the *FaceTime*, I was kind of relieved to see she wasn't still at the dance studio. The video showed an upward view of her, face illuminated by streetlights in the dark of her commute.

“You alone?”

“Mmmhmmm...” She licked her lips, rocking the same peach color lipstick as earlier, though the color seemed less vibrant from this view.

“Yo, Witherspoon,” I inhaled, ready to spit out my point in hopes of being done with this. “never had I ever thought about my birthday since...kicking with you around the therapist's office.”

“I don't understand what you're saying,” her tone stiff, unyielding.

Either the chick was tired or still pissed with my ass.

“I mean...” This time, I exhaled. “Me not telling you when my birthday is ain't no slight to you. It's not a big deal to me. It ain't a big deal at all.”

She rolled her eyes. “Seemed to be a big deal earlier.”

“Nah. My family know that. The only reason Chels made a big deal about it is because she's so damn bull-headed. Last year, we made a deal to not flex over it if I would let her do something this year. I made the agreement to blow her off, and it bit me in the ass today.”

“What's the big deal about celebrating your birthday, Jas?” Her beautiful eyes swept down to the phone for a cursory glance. “Who doesn't want an excuse to celebrate? And you're pretty popular in your family. Y'all got like a weird

“*Godfather*” vibe going on over there. I just hate that you don’t trust me to share basic shit.”

Laying in the bed, I placed the book I’d been reading, *Up in Black Arms* by Tyler Thomas, on the nightstand and clicked off the lamp. “My bed ain’t basic, and I wanna share it with you.”

Witherspoon didn’t respond for a while. She kept driving in silence.

“You never even said if you liked it.”

“What?”

“You know what?”

“The bedroom set?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t get a chance to. Chels’ big ass mouth came in the kitchen, talkin’ about something that ain’t matter to me. I was talkin’ to *you* about what mattered to me—or at least, trying to.” My tone dipped when I copped to her. “I like it. A lot. I was surprised.” Damn surprised, coming home after a long ass day. I was prepared to sleep somewhere else until having the mental capacity to order a new bed. “I was planning on just replacing the bed. You got me a whole new bedroom set. I ain’t even recognize my spot when I walked in.”

Witherspoon ordered the bed with a big ass headboard, matching nightstands, and sofas and tables for my sitting room.

“Did you see the mat?”

“In the sitting room?”

“Yeah. It’s thick and purple.”

“For royalty. It’s for when you pray.” *Shit...* I wasn’t expecting that. “I figure since you spend so much time in that position, you might as well save your knees. Consuela said she’d take care of everything. The sheets...pillows and stuff... making up the bed for you.”

“She did. She stayed late and made the bed with clean sheets and everything.”

“Bed pillows, too,” Witherspoon emphasized. “Your shits were lumpy.”

“Well, damn.” I laughed. “Tell me how you really feel, shortie.”

As I turned onto my side, I watched Witherspoon bite her bottom lip. Her forehead strained as though struggling with something. “I don’t want to feel like an interloper anymore. That’s how I feel. I’m not a threat to you. I’ve let you in emotionally, I feel I need the same. I’m over the surprises, Jas.”

“I want to, Witherspoon.” My stomach turned over. “I think I do. I just need time. This is all new to me.”

“And it isn’t to me? I just found out my boyfriend hid a whole damn lover from me. You don’t think that fucks with me?”

“Man, fuck him.”

“No. I’m fucking you. And I don’t even know your real name. The best I got was a damn street name.” *Not this again.* “Now, I agreed to this arrangement with you under these circumstances, but damn, Jas, your birthday is barely weeks away and I had no clue.”

“Because I ain’t the birthday type.”

“Well, I am. So when September rolls around, be prepared to celebrate with Shi-Shi all month!”

“You plan to still have me around in five months?”

“If I don’t lose you to marriage with some hobo, maybe.” She rolled her eyes again.

A hard croak left my throat and I cracked the hell up. It was girly and petty, two things most people didn’t get from her boss bitch persona. Perhaps I was a lucky man beyond being a blessed one.

“*Witherspoo—*”

“Anyway. I don’t want to think about that unrealistic list you have. I want to focus on celebrating you now.” Her voice had perked up and it seemed to be accompanied by her good mood. “I’m going to call Shizu when I get home tonight and see what magic she can serve up at the last minute.” She glanced down at the phone. “You mind if I bring some of my friends if we do this?”

I groaned into the pillow. “Ashira, please!”

“Did you just Saucy Santana me again?” she shouted, laughing.

“Huhn?” I was confused.

“Never mind. Anyway. We’re so doing this!” Her body tensed behind the wheel in excitement. Whole mood change. “You said you hate that I travel so much and you’re missing out. Well, here’s your chance to keep up. We’re gonna have so *much*—”

“C’mon, Ashira.” My eyes squeezed close. “You’re killing me here. Fuckin’ up my list for real.”

“Don’t start your shit!” she warned, rolling her eyes again, this time directly to the phone.



I pulled up to the address Jas texted. It was Rizzo’s Oakland worksite. They’d been putting up a development for months. The bid to build was an option for my firm a couple of years ago but I decided not to pursue it, so busy with other projects. As I pulled up to the third home on the left, next to a

compactor, I could feel my hands slipping on the steering wheel. That let me know my palms had been sweating.

Still, I braved on, cutting the engine and leaving the car. It was an active site, trades moving about working, some eating during the lunch hour. Many faces were familiar—the white ones, at least. Rizzo's team had been in the game for years. I'd run into them some way or another. I was happy to see quite a few Brown and Black faces—men and women—too.

“Aye, Witherspoon!” someone shouted behind me. “You're a long way from Daddy's house!” Michael-Angelo tapped his friend's shoulder as he burst in laughter.

“But your momma ain't,” I retorted calmly. *Shit*. Did I not count up the cost of coming here? I didn't have time for his little ass. “When I left Daddy's estate, she was face down, ass up.” I stuck out my tongue.

His colleagues all in the vicinity of my voice howled. It was what Michael-Angelo and I did for years. He used to try to flirt with me when I was younger. One year, when tired of my declining, he developed a new approach to interacting with me: taunting. Since then, I'd been teaching him I'm a better roaster than a piece of ass. He flipped his middle finger then turned his back to me.

“Yoooooo! Look who's here!” Juggy's droopy eyes were slightly slanted as he gaited over to me, his arms stretched welcomingly with a word search booklet in one hand. “Everything good?”

I assumed Juggy sold crack at some point—maybe not, according to Jas. But if he did, I wondered if he could sniff out the crackhead-like feigning similarities in my countenance. I tried for a smile, I couldn't manage to reach my eyes. “I told Jas I was stopping by.”

“Awwww. That's cute. You taking the general to lunch?” He slapped the rolled booklet into his palm. “Let me find out you crushing, crushing on my nigga, Shi-Shi!”

Filled with juvenile shame, I rolled my eyes. “Fuck you, Juggy.”

“Ouch,” his tone unfazed. “A’ight. Lemme go grab ‘im for you.”

Waiting, I glanced around the site, counting six homes with three complete. The foundation of the seventh had begun. Then, in my builder’s mind, I did a mental calculation of the number of potential units for the total available building lot and how long until completion, given the successful sales of them.

A car pulling up not too far from mine caught my attention. A metallic gray *AMG GT C Coupe*. The model looked identical to mine but I knew, as a subscriber, the *C Coupe* came with more bells and whistles, upping the price.

The engine died and out came a young woman in a tailored suit. She was thin, fit with a simple ponytail that looked natural. It was fairly long and healthy, blowing in the wind as she peeled out of the cropped suit jacket, placing it inside the car. She reached back inside and pulled out a business portfolio then closed the door. Her earrings were small classic diamond studs as her big wavy ponytail swayed in the air as she approached the house closest to me.

Momentarily, her attention landed on me and she was, I could immediately determine, very pretty, resembling Christina Milian. Her waist was narrow and breasts modest on her petite frame. Judging from the stops and stares she received from the men in the vicinity, I could tell they found her attractive, too. Her eyes brushed against me, having me nervously switch the weight on my hips while leaning against my car. She didn’t react or linger as she kept walking toward the unit in tall *Saint Laurent* wedges. I knew because I owned two pairs of those myself.

On her approach, she intersected with Jas. Based on his expression, he recognized her immediately. The two stopped hardly feet from each other, exchanging words. My temperature spiked watching him remove his gloves slowly, so consumed by her words. He placed them in the back pocket of his sagging work jeans. Fixedly, he listened to whatever she expressed, pointing into her opened portfolio. Neither smiled, both with hard faces and nods. He said a few things to her, to

which she nodded in agreement and followed up with affirming words. Then Jas dismissed her with a smile and single pat on the shoulders before walking off. She continued inside the unit and I waited on bated breath as he searched for me.

It didn't take long at all for Jas to locate me. His face lit up in a way that was inarguable. I caught his tongue swiping the side of his mouth before he wiped roughly, making me jealous of his hand.

He lifted the hardhat from his head as he beamed my way, eyes squinting from the sun. "How can I help you, Ms. Witherspoon?"

The silly giggle bubbling from my throat was fucking embarrassing. "By letting me take you to lunch."

He checked his wrist. The sight of the hunter green *Moments & Measures* watch warmed my heart.

Smiling with mostly teeth and still squinting with his head angled, Jas answered, "I'm in the middle of the workday, sweetheart."

"Have you had lunch?"

His brows shot up, likely in realization. "Nah. I haven't."

"*Rizzo's Custom Homes & Developers* isn't in the practice of providing lunch breaks?"

"There're no laws mandating it." His breathtaking smile came alive.

I loved his cheekiness at play here.

Walking over to the passenger side, I opened the door to my car. "Good thing I know the owner. Even more dialogue to share over lunch."

I wasn't taking no for an answer.

"More dialogue?" He pulled out one of his phones out and began typing in it. "You better not have me in no *DiFillippo's* with construction gear on, Witherspoon."



“I would never!” I fake gasped, closing the door once he was inside.

Feeling accomplished but still anxious as hell as I traveled back over to the driver’s side, I found myself eyeing the *AMG GT C Coupe*.

# Chapter 12

**Part II cont'd**

**April | Present Day**



**A**s we rode, I typed into my phone, head bopped to the slow song streaming from the speakers.

“You remember this group?”

“Kut Klose?” I nodded. “This was my shit as a kid.”

The track, “*I Like*,” went hard.

“Try as a baby.”

“And you were a baby, baby.”

Witherspoon smiled, avoiding agreeing with me. I couldn’t believe how many text messages I’d missed today. The day had zipped by so fast, similar to the last two. I worked on Sunday and fell right into the work week yesterday, which meant I hadn’t seen Witherspoon in three days. That made it hard to say no, no matter how crazy the day had been going. She showed up in a denim dress, stopping just below the knees and outlining her hourglass shape with high yellow heels. How in the hell would I say no to that?

“Who’s the *C Coupe* chick?”

Witherspoon’s eyes were on the road awaiting an answer.

“*C Coupe*?”

“At the site. The metallic gray *AMG CT C Coupe*?”

“*Oh!* The whip.” I went back to texting. “Dallas.”

Witherspoon glanced my way. “She drove Dallas’ car?”

I looked over to her confused. “Dallas is Ava. Her name is Ava Dallas.”

“Oh,” she chirped. “So, who is she?”

“An apprentice.”

“New?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Okay.” Witherspoon went silent for a while and thankfully. I was in a texting conversation with Roberto Perez, putting out another fire. “An apprentice? A young girl, pulling up in a top-tier *Mercedes* is an apprentice at *Rizzo’s*?”

I shrugged while trying to read. “She’s a young girl with specific plans. I ‘on’t know, man,” I murmured.

“*Hmmmm...*”

She didn’t speak much after that and I hardly looked up until we were gliding into a parking garage. I fired off the last message just before leaving her car.

I halted my steps, crazy self-conscious. “You sure I’m good for a hotel restaurant?”

“I would never embarrass you, Jas. You can trust me.”

“But, Witherspoon...*I...*” I yanked on my long sleeve t-shirt. The stained cotton wasn’t even appropriate for her whip.

She blinked deeply, chin dipping. “You have to trust me, Jas. Will you?”

Relenting, I swung my arm, inviting her to lead the way. We didn’t enter through the restaurant. And when I thought we

were headed into the lobby of the swanky ass hotel, we made a beeline for the elevators.

*What the...*

I followed her into a car and she pressed the panel to go up. This was mad strange.

“The oysters here are amazing,” she muttered, eyes not meeting mine. “French fries, too.”

The elevator tolled and I followed her off. It happened so fast. She was pulling out a key card and pushing the door open. I followed her into a whole damn suite. The walk-down living room was attached to a dining room. The big windows brought in the bright sun.

When the door closed behind me, I turned around. Witherspoon rested back on the door looking to be waiting for my reaction.

Shocked—*and hard*—as hell, I could hardly get out, “You set me up to get fucked, Witherspoon.” I was out of breath and painfully aroused. *Is that what this chick did?* “I’m thinking I’m about to grub and you had other plans? That’s fucked up, girl.”

*But it ain't...*

I’d never had a clever female to trick me out like this. Witherspoon was cut from a different cloth. Doing shit like this reminded me of that. She liked fucking me—though it felt like more. I wanted it to be more. Fucking was reserved for something unlike what a woman like Ashira Witherspoon was built for.

Witherspoon nodded very coolly. She was really pimping a nigga. “Yeah. It may be,” she muttered. “Either way, the way I see it, you can eat now or later. But you won’t leave here without me feeding you.” She shook her head. “Full stop.”

I dropped my face toward the floor, excited as shit. This was a man’s fantasy. Ashira Witherspoon plotting for sex.

*God, what have I done to deserve this?*

I plucked my shirt again. “I mean... Do I, at least, get a chance to shower? I ‘on’t think you wanna be smelling wood while I’m pounding on you.”

She exhaled and this time, *her* face fell toward the floor. I didn’t know if it was from relief or irritation. She shook her head before looking up at me again. “I’m going to let you shower, but...”

“But...”

“After today, you don’t call me Witherspoon again. I hate that shit from you. When you call me anything but, it tickles me...” Her eyes rolled away. “...down low.” *Shit*. Then they were on me again. “And now that I know you refer to colleagues by their surnames, I know it’s definitely not fitting for me. The shower’s through those doors on the right.” She pushed up from the door and rounded me for the bedroom.

I followed her directions, chewing on that high-alarm warning.



Naked, standing against the desk in the bedroom of the suite, my body hummed. I was unbelievably horny and so damn anxious. I turned the box of condoms upside right to be sure to catch his attention.

Yes. I’d set Jas up. But I wanted to. *Needed to*. It had been a stressful three days and, pathetically, I’d missed him. Not only that, I had something to celebrate and request of Jas, so having him off-kilter could either work in my favor, or not. On the other hand, I did feel a twinge of guilt for playing on his

lack of life experience. I now questioned my audacity. One could guess Jas had never had a woman pull him from work on a random day for sex in a luxury hotel. That didn't make my intense cravings less viable. I felt this odd need of him.

And now, I was nervous as fuck, trying to find a seductive position to wait for him in. A felon or not, the man was fucking intimidating. He was charmingly handsome, smart, well-read, reserved, and exuded confidence—all of that before possibly being wealthy. I'd been out of my league with this guy, *hence standing on my fucking toes, waiting for him to "find me!"*

The door clicking then opening had me falling to the flats of my feet. Casually, Jas appeared stark naked, rubbing a towel over his wet hair. His feet and thighs were at a virile distance apart. His abs rolled and bubbled, chest flexed as he sauntered out of the bathroom, dick thickening with each step. His engorged head bounced in the hair, the thick shaft sprouting upward and to the left. His bulbous heavy scrotum moved intimidatingly stiff.

Smoothly, Jas promenaded right up to me, tossing the towel on the way. Immediately, his thick, tatted arm reached for me, bringing me into his dewy chest. His tongue was in my mouth and my knees gave out, shaking like young tree branches. Jas pulled me in and, weakened and bizarrely intimidated, my shoulders caved and trunk pushed out and away. His energy was confidently hungry, something I wasn't used to, but damn, I wanted it so bad. Suddenly, I felt reduced to a girl, vulnerable yet incredibly curious.

Jas moved into me, caging me against the desk. Lightheaded, I fell into him, surrendering to his intentional touch. My lips relaxed, relenting to the seduction of his tongue. My pulse raced and body tingled at his aggression. I may have been the bold ass that got him to this suite, but Jas' energy was guaranteeing he understood the need and would take it from here. And I didn't want him to stop. My shaky hand reached for the back of his damp head, holding on to his solid frame. Sparks of hyper-arousal interspersed in my groin, shooting all over. I whimpered into his mouth.

With a swift motion, Jas pulled back and lifted me into the air. I landed on my knees on top of the bed, palms scrambling to balance my upper body. The box of condoms was tossed next to me. When I felt his mouth on my ass, my face fell onto the mattress. More heat pooled in my groin at the feel of his big palms grabbing my hips. His tongue swam its way to my clit. The massage of his thrashes had me rocking into them. The rising pressure, the rhythm of our movements, the flapping of my jerking ass...the sound of his slurping. They all worked together ascending my groin until I moaned at the onslaught of sensations leading to an explosion. And as though Jas could sense it coming on, he growled. Growled like a fucking animal.

“*Fuck!*” rushed with urgency from my lungs, ass and hips shuddering in his face.

My body tensed to the point of vibrating, shoulders jolted as bliss danced on every cell.

Another subterranean rumble from him reverberated, cutting into the pleasure ringing in my head. I was lifted again, flipped in the air and landed on my back. His thick frame was over me, mouth on my neck as I gripped the wings of his taut back. Jas licked down to my breasts, massaging them firmly, flickering his tongue on my pebbled nipples. It felt good—*unbelievably* amazing. His mouth teased me to the point of my hips lifting for him, my sex needing friction, too.

“Jas,” I moaned helplessly.

And almost as though he could read my mind, his tongue trailed down my belly until his mouth hit my dripping sex. I was implausibly wet. More than that, my body was teetering on the edge of hysteria. Proof of it was how fast I came when Jas plunged his tongue into my canal at the speed of sex.

“*Kiing!*” I whimpered, holding onto his head, writhing beneath him.

My body jerked, hips plopped, bouncing from the mattress. And Jas was with me, rubbing my thighs covetously, encouraging my ascent. When I was able to resume control of my limbs, Jas’ tongue retreated and he showered kisses in my

inner thighs until the sound of my breathing didn't overwhelm the room.

Jas stood on his knees. "Your fountain is flowy, Shi." His expression stark, pure.

I bit my lip to hide my abashed delight. I was still out of breath when asking, "What do you mean?"

His eyes brushed down my body, but not in a creepy hungry manner. "You're beautiful, got the body of a goddess, and taste so damn good." His palms shot up to his face and he muttered through them. "This 'bout to sound so fucked up," his words were delivered strained and in agony, even with a weak chortle.

Panic coursed through me. "What?" I was desperate.

"Psalms one hundred three. You familiar with that?"

I swallowed, struggling to think about the Bible while recovering from consecutive orgasms. "I...uhhh..."

"*Who crowns your lovingkindness and tender mercies.*" He reached between my thighs and swiped the liquid silk from swollen lips. "*Who satisfies your mouth with good things.*" Then Jas' head collapsed backward and he muttered thickly, "I'm worshipping God for a body that don't belong to me. This can't be good for me."

My heart cracked, facial muscles distorted. "Why?" I reached for his gloriously stark naked frame.

Jas dropped his arms. "Because you're not mine. It's fucked up, Shi," the softness in his baritone made me feel like shit, and just after a toe-curling orgasm—*my second within ten minutes.*

"Jas," I was begging at this point. "Stop. Don't do that. This is beautiful—you're beautiful. We're perfectly fine. What we have is so..."

"So what?" His attention rested upon me lazily. Relaxed eyes and a hard dick, both gazing down on me temptingly.

"Pure. It's pure." I didn't like opening myself like this at all. "It's safe and pure. I can't remember the last time I trusted



a guy so much. And I'm actually okay with giving you time to trust me back."

"I 'on't want you to feel like you're settling."

My gaze swept from his pleading eyes to his steely dick. "Who says I'm settling?"

"You just left a relationship. It was exclusive."

"To a man who had been cheating on me. I can't believe that was his first rodeo." Frustration flashed and I closed my eyes, trying to stay in this blissful...magical space we'd created here. "I'm at the best place emotionally and mentally I've been in years. My focus on my future is like a laser..." I peered up into his relaxed eyes. "...and that has a lot to do with you."

"How so?"

I shrugged. "Before even learning about your wealth—and definitely since—you make me feel so bad ass. Bad ass and wasteful at the same time."

"Wasteful?"

"Wasteful of time. I've got all this shit to do and instead of executing, I'm being a coward. I've been thinking I've been locked in an unfavorable situation I had no control over."

"You 'on't think that no more?"

I shook my head then I lifted to stand on my knees, too, placing one arm around his still damp frame while using the other to reach for the box of condoms. "I've got the most important tools known to man." I brought the box behind his neck and began unraveling it. Jas' face contorted with confusion. "I've got my life, good health, and freedom. I can do anything. *Anything*," I emphasized, rubbing my belly against his veiny stiffness. Jas was hot and gloriously engorged. "And speaking of the rodeo..."

When he caught on, the muscles in his face immediately dropped. Jas' eyes bounced between mine attentively. "You something else, ain't you?" he whispered in awe, it felt.

My brows plucked. “Say less. We’re wasting time with words. I told you I’d feed you. You’ve eaten twice.” I kissed his Shi-stained lips. “Now, you need to work through this box of condoms, and then maybe I’ll treat you to lunch.”

Jas grunted, taking me at the ass. “You *are* something else.”

Smoothly, he flipped me into the air and once again, I landed in a position of his choosing, allowing him to ravish me.



“That was amazing.” I hummed a sigh of satisfaction.

Jas kissed my forehead. “You’re amazing.”

I thought about that for a second then peered up to him. “I feel amazing. Today’s been an amazing day.”

His eyes lit ablaze. “And you wanted to share it with me?”

Biting my lip, I nodded. “In both ways.”

“What do you mean?”

I pulled in air, filling my lungs before announcing, “My dad’s signing the merger deal with Dan Lewinski.”

“Word? He decided?”

“*Mmmhmm*. But that’s not it.” I fingered through the hairs of his chest. “He officially returned to the office this week.”

“Whoa,” his tone sensitively soft.

I nodded. “Yup. Today was day two of his return. He even asked for time in his office, which pushed me out.” I shrugged. “It’s all good, though.”

“What brought all of this about?”

“I spoke with him last week. I finally put my foot down and told him, I’m pursuing my dreams...thanks to a certain special person—I *didn’t say all that*. Just the part about pursuing my dreams with the club.” I laughed.

“Oh, I know you ain’t say all that.” Jas caught my humor. “But, man,” his tone still intimately low. “That’s golden. I’m proud of you.” He kissed my forehead again and heat blossomed in my chest.

“Thanks. I’m proud of me, too.” I struggled with my cheesy smile. Jas’ chest and abs vibrated as he chuckled. “I know! I feel like just when I thought I knew who I was, here comes this weird ass felon flying to my therapist, making me re-measure my self-confidence. I’d been learning about my insecurities, but didn’t know my thoughts of my own power had been compromised, too.”

“You been kickin’ it about that in therapy lately?”

I lay on his chest and nodded. “She’s been pulling it out of me. I thought I’d been doing great at managing imperfect parents, but instead I’ve been aiding and abetting.”

“Both?” he asked just above a whisper over my head.

“Yup.”

“Didn’t your moms say she’s coming to visit?”

I lifted to peer at him again. “That’s another reason I wanted you alone today.” His brows met adorably. “I want you to come with me.”

“Come with you where?”

“To see my mother.”

He reared his head and pursed his lips while expressing confusion as well. “Okay... Where?”

I studied his eyes, fearing a probable decline. “South Carolina.”

“Word?” I nodded. “That’s where she lives?”

Shaking my head, I explained, “That’s where her family is from. My mother lives in Brazil. She’s been there forever. When I see her, it’s when she comes to visit her family. I fly down, endure her bullshit for two to three days then, with a battered heart and mind, chuck the deuces until the next time. Wash and repeat.”

“And you want me to come?”

“I want you to be my buffer.”

“You take your man to that?”

“Austin?” I nodded. “He’s met her twice, but it wasn’t about anything serious. I’ve taken my best friends with me lots. I just don’t prefer going alone.”

“Why? What she gonna do?”

“Pick at me. You’d share her focus of me. Having someone with me makes her energy...*indirect*? If that makes sense. It lessens the blow similar to when she’s over four thousand miles away. I can tune her out better.”

“So, you need a shield?”

“But not for the combat you may think. I need a distraction.”

Softly studying each inch of my face now, he pledged, “I’ll be any type of shield you need me to be. Ain’t nothing.”

That pronouncement struck a chord in my heart because I believed him. Protection had been a big deal to Jas and, for some reason, that care had extended to me. Finally, I was prepared to accept it.

“Thanks.”

“Nah. No worries. I just need advance notice to travel.”

My mouth fell open. “*Oh!* Right. Well, my mother will be in the States for Memorial Day, but speaking of which, your *birthday*—”

“Annnnnnh!” he groaned, bringing his palm to his face, exposing globular muscles of his arm. “Not this again.”

“Yes. This.” My head bounced up and down dramatically. “You never responded to the text I sent you and Chelsea about the resorts Shizu found in The Virgin Islands and St. Vincent.”

“Because Chelsea did.”

“But the text wasn’t sent to only Chelsea.”

“It’s whatever y’all wanna do, Ashira.”

“No. It’s your birthday.” I stabbed his chest with my index fingernail.

“Yeah, but it’s causing hysteria over there in Harlem, man. Got like thirty people wanting to go. That means most of the thirty people hustlin’ up the money by any means possible. Some of thirty people scrambling, tryna borrow the money. And a smaller portion of that thirty, scheming to get days off for a trip happening in less than a week. Bigger than that, it means countless heads knowing about my whereabouts. That ain’t cool where I come from. We move in silence.”

Jas was being extra with these extraneous concerns. “You know what I think it is? You’re not used to being celebrated. Look how they all want to be down to celebrate you. I see how your family acts around you. They respect you to the point of intimidation. Even Tanya who, for some reason, don’t care for me, curves her tongue around me because I’m friends with you.”

Jas exhaled, tossing his wrist in the air. “Tanya ain’t pressin’ on shit. She know better.”

“I know. That’s what I’m saying!” *See!* “Being celebrated is a new culture for you. Being my friend, you’ll get the first-class experience!” Then a thought occurred. “Oh! If they need help with the accommodations, just pick a reasonable number of them and I can *help*—”

“I ‘on’t need you to help my family with money, Witherspoon.” His nostrils were wide and behind his eyes, something shut down.

Suddenly, the mood was cold.

“Well, I didn’t *mean*—”

“Nothing. I don’t need you to do anything. If your friends need help, there you go. But as for me and mine, say less. We good.”

With a collapsed jaw, I was stuck, unable to speak. *What in the hell just happened?* That familiar foe, rejection, had just re-entered the room with Jas and me. He’d effectively shut me down. Dumbfounded, I didn’t know how to rebound just yet.

Then his warm hands cupped my face and he kissed me, soft full lips pressing meaningfully into mine and holding for a few seconds. “I gotta go. Gotta get back to the site. Need to shower and brush my teeth first, though.”

Jas slipped from beneath me and powered into the bathroom as ass naked as he’d come out earlier.

When he closed the door behind himself, one thought came straight to mind.

*He left for lunch over two hours ago and hadn’t eaten anything—but me...*



“Damn, this is nice.” Nicholas looked around the *Passaic County Pier* as the sun was setting.

Even though a commercial property, I was able to pay a cat I knew a few dollars to let me dock for a few minutes to pick them up about an hour ago and now drop them off. He even watched my father’s *Kia Forte*.

“Yo, Nick!” Pops barked.

Nicholas’ cringed. “My bad. But Dad, this was pretty cool!”

My father’s head cocked to the side, warning him. That was something I was granted very few times as a kid. With me, it was a barrage of toxic words in the name of discipline. It was all good, though. Nicholas didn’t need toxicity. Every Black kid needed grace and patience.

“This was nice,” pops addressed me.

I'd taken them out on my boat, determined to keep my word with Nicholas of staying in touch. It was the most neutral grounds I could think of when I made the plans with them a few days ago after leaving the hotel with Ashira. I didn't like how that felt and, in an effort to make improvements on being connected and open with the people I cared about, I thought of this.

"See!" Nicholas shrieked.

Ignoring his excitement, my father scratched his chin and announced, "You've got a big day coming up in a few days."

"Big day?" I was confused.

"Your birthday," my father elaborated.

*Oh. That...*

I wasn't used to the day being acknowledged. All of a sudden, for my thirty-third, everybody seemed to have brought it up. For what? It all seemed weird and unnecessary to me.

"Oh, wow." Nicholas perked up. "When's your birthday, Jas?"

When I took too long to respond, my pops answered, "Monday."

"Oh." Nicholas' face brightened up. "We can do something. *Uhhh...* You should come by the house. Mom can make you a cake! She digs that corny stuff. Right, Dad?"

Jeanie, his mother, worked at the bakery her family once owned in Clifton. When her mother, the primary baker, got sick years ago, her shady ass father paid an overdue gambling debt using the bakery with a mid-level Italian family high-ranking at the time. It was either that or his fucking knees. They worked it out so that they owned it, but the family still worked it. Jeanie still worked there, I guessed, not opting for another gig.

Slowly, my father turned, acting like he was detailing my *60 Cantius Cruisers* yacht. "*Uhhh...* Yeah." He turned back to me. "I guess she would."

“So!” Nicholas was eager. “You wanna come by on Monday, Jas? I’ll make sure she won’t make it too weird. No party hats or *shit*—”

“Nicholas!”

“I’m sorry, Dad.” I could have sworn his cheeks reddened. “It’s just...”

After an awkward moment, my father offered, “We can make it happen, I guess.”

I snorted, uncomfortable by his obvious unease. “Ummm... Thanks, but I actually have plans. I rubbed my hairy chin. “I’ll be out of town.”

“Where?” Nicholas was eager.

“A trip with my cousins.”

“A trip?” my father seemed curious.

“Umm... Yeah. A trip. My cousins’re planning something.”

“Where?” Nicholas wanted to know. “Can we go?” His head swung between Pops and me.

“Ummm... The Caribbean. It ain’t nothing, really.” I was ready to change the subject. “They wanna go somewhere.”

“The Caribbean?” My father’s delivery more spirited. “Aren’t you on parole? Your P.O. knows about this?”

*And here we go...*

This was why honesty about my complicated life was hard to give. But I was cool with it.

“Yeah, Pops. He do.” Then I turned to my lil bruh. “Look, man. I can’t make Monday happen, but I promise, we’ll chill again soon. Cool?”

Nicholas’ lips twisted to the side in disappointment and he nodded.

“Look,” My father clapped his hands together. “I know you need to get this rental back. I *guess*—”



“How much you pay to rent this?” Nicholas’ hype had returned. “We need to get one like this again!”

I took a deep breath. “This ain’t a rental, man. Anytime you wanna go out, we can. Just need to make sure I’m not working.”

“You borrowed this?” My father closely studied the details of the boat again.

I swiped my nose, licking my lips. This shit was awkward as hell, but I wouldn’t fold. I couldn’t. “Nah.”

“No, what?” My father looked me dead in the eyes.

“It ain’t borrowed.”

“Huhn?” Nicholas appeared genuinely confused.

My arm swung out, palm stretching to gesture my baby. “This is mine.”

“How?” my father’s entitled tone appeared. “I hope you didn’t put your pennies into this, but still living in Charmagne’s apartment. You went out and bought a damn boat instead of getting an apartment for *yourself*—”

“Dad,” Nicholas weakly pleaded. “Please.”

“It’s all good, Nick.” I scratched the back of my head. “Pops.” I scanned the wavy water beyond him. “I know we ‘on’t kick it a lot, but I’m good. I keep a lot to the chest, but maybe we can build some more and I can share details of my life to get you to get me. But...” My attention returned to him. “I’m tryin’ to work us into that space.” *God, help me with the words...*

For a long ass while, my father measured me with his eyes. I hated it. It made me feel as though he was deciding his safety, along with his younger son’s, against the threat of me. This scenario was somewhat familiar. It brought back those feelings of our rift. Discord was all I knew with Mark Lamont Sinclair. It was a familiar and very inconvenient truth. It was a singular insecurity I sensed Nicholas had with our father, too.

My little brother was my only motive for subjecting myself to it at my age. I ain’t need this man. All the good he could do

was wasted years and years ago. As far as I was concerned, I didn't have to share the same air as this man ever again in life. But his younger seed, Nicholas, had me here, enduring his inexplicable disdain for me yet again. And I'd stand tall—*solid*—in the face of the raging dragon all for the kid.

Pops reached for Nicholas, bringing the kid to his side. “This was...different, Jas.” He positioned Nicholas in front of him protectively, prompting him to step off of the boat, onto the steps of the pier where dude I paid was waiting to escort them. “I see you'll be away for your birthday. Be safe.” He pushed Nicholas to leave the boat.

“Night, Jas,” my brother bade.

“Later, kid.”

Nicholas hung his head and left the boat. My father paid me a last gesture of pity before following.

# Chapter 13

**Part II cont'd**

**May | Present Day**

*ashira*

**A**fter pulling my suitcase from Shizu's trunk, I glanced around for the coordinates so we'd know where we parked when returning home. We decided to drive ourselves to the airport and park for this excursion. Becky spent the night with Shizu to not risk running late. Corinne picked me up at the crack of dawn to meet at Shizu's. It was just before eight in the morning when we pulled into a parking space.

Corinne, reading my mind, called out, "Fourth floor, B7." She pointed to the left and I snapped a picture as Becky pulled her duffle from the trunk.

As we high-powered it to the elevator, I began feeling anxious and didn't exactly know why. I did, however, know the source. By the time we made it inside, I hit send on a text.

**Me: HOPE YOU'RE READY TO SEE THE BADDEST BITCH YOU'VE EVER SEEN IN A BIKINI ON BLACK SAND AND IN CLEAR WATER.**

Boarding the elevator, Shizu singsonged, “St. Vincent, here the fuck we come!”



“You sure you don’t want anything?” Becky called back while waiting on the *Starbucks* line. I shook my head, not able to think about eating at this hour. It was mere minutes before boarding and I came with her to get her needed espresso macchiato. “Oh, my god,” she droned. “I’m like fucking shaking, I need this so bad right now. Connor gets his ass up at the crack of dawn to have a quad ready for me.”

I snickered, shaking my head. “You forget how many I’ve gotten for your mean ass over the years.”

“Oh, yeah.” Becky tried to laugh, but I was sure was too preoccupied with getting her first hit of caffeine. “Did you bring those *Tylenol* pills? I think I may get wasted the first two days.”

I glanced at my phone to see no text alerts. “Ibuprofen.”

“Shit,” she hissed, grabbing her coffee from the counter. “I forgot you use those. You think we can find Tylenol here really quickly?”

“They’re calling our flight,” Corinne announced, whisking past us with Shizu on her heels.

I looked over to Becky who was instantly crestfallen. “Just focus on getting that macchiato into your veins. Besides, you know *Tylenol* may fuck with your birth control.”

Becky’s face turned red. “Shit!”



Finally taking my seat on the plane, my stomach began to turn over. The second I was prepared to text the motherfucker something to disturb his soul, my phone chirped.

**Jas:** *LOOKING FORWARD TO IT AND YOU. SAFE TRAVELS BIG BOOTY GIRL.*

The kissy face emoji took my damn breath away. I didn't realize I'd collapsed into the seat until Corinne, to the left of me in the aisle seat cried, "What the fuck is up with you? We're on our way to Saint *fuckin*g Vincent, a brand new resort. Why are you over here banging up your head? You've been off all morning—well, I know most people can't function in the morning. But Shi-Shi's morning travels for vacation have been known to be legendary."

Her scowl and curt energy were too much for me in the moment. I couldn't even process her words. They didn't matter, honestly.

Angling my head, my brows furrowed when I asked, "You think my booty's big?"

Corinne's nostrils widened and top lip curled. "Girl, bye!" She rolled her eyes away and buckled her seatbelt.

A silly smile warmed my face.

*He likes my booty...*

My morning had been made.



My mood had dipped again while waiting in the Customs line once in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It was one of those peak times for herds of us tourists to be arriving on the island. We'd been snailing in a long ass line for over twenty minutes and were hardly halfway to the Customs booth.

This would be Jas' first time visiting another country. He'd have to experience the navigation of the jungle that was the airport. Then he'd land and have to feel like cattle slowly being herded to the other side of these officers. I'd done this countless times and I was suddenly overwhelmed by the anxiety of being monitored.

Biting my lip, I checked my phone again.

“No phones,” Becky reminded me.

I rolled my eyes again, sighing. “This is bullshit. Are all the booths open? Like, how humane is this waiting in a stuffy ass warehouse? I mean, really?”

Shizu scoffed. “You’ve done this a million times. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah, but what about first timers? Any reasonable adult can have a fucking panic attack under these circumstances!”

“Like a certain felon?” Corinne questioned knowingly.

I swung my head her way. “Bite my ass.”

“It’s big enough and I’m starved.” She winked with sarcasm and turned away. “Told y’all she’s been tripping.”

“Who?” My eyes scanned them all. “How am I tripping?”

“Over this Jas guy. He’s hot...a bad boy. I get it.” Becky calmly chewed her gum, one cheek red, likely from the hot humidity of the space we shared with a thousand other people.

“But he’s an adult man. He’ll fare well in his travel like everyone else, Shi-Shi,” Shizu brayed.

I hated when she did that shit and she knew it, but did it with the purpose of annoying the hell out of me.

“Says your privileged ass.” My words were for all three of them, though Becky was the only one peering my way with a glare. “This’ll be his first time traveling. You ever think of that?”

“And he’s traveling with a gang of his family.” Shizu rolled her eyes. “Chill out, Shi-Shi.”

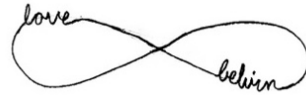
I gasped. “A gang?”

“We ain’t starting this racism accusation shit,” Corinne hissed. “Not off U.S. soil where I can’t get a local attorney who speaks my language. Move the fuck on!”

When Becky motioned behind me with big eyes, essentially telling me to move up in line, I caught on and obeyed.

“This bitch getting dick she ain’t never have, and it shows.”

I turned for Corinne, ready to curse her out when all the ladies yelled, “Go, Shi-Shi!”



I was bone tired and a tad tipsy when I toed out of the bathroom from a shower, washing off my makeup and brushing my teeth. Of course, I went straight to my cell phone. Disappointment from not seeing a return text from, at least, Chelsea slapped me in the face. I sent Jas two texts since arriving, neither of which he responded to. This was strange. Also, I didn’t have his second cell phone number.

*Is the one I have his first?*

Shit!

I threw myself onto my bed, mind racing. This disconnect in communication from Jas all day made me realize I didn’t know anything about his accommodations. I had no clue of which building or side of the resort he and his crew would be staying in. Then suddenly, it dawned on me: I’d never confirmed his flight. All I knew was they’d be flying in first thing tomorrow morning. Why would I have asked him for booking verification? This was *Jas’* birthday celebration. We were out here in St. Vincent for *him*. I did my part in having Shizu give them booking information including codes for this brand new luxury resort as well as flight suggestions. I didn’t have Juggy’s number. Did he have mine? I was too exhausted to recall.

*Fuck it.*

I was done for the day.





My thumb hovered over the keypad of the face of my cell. I stared blankly at the text thread with Witherspoon, not knowing what to type. Then my attention went to the green rubber band of the *Moments & Measures* watch. The sight of that had me subconsciously gaze at the faux leather coated, red shopping bag on the chair across from me. I took a deep breath and glanced down to the Bible resting on my left thigh. Shit had been that real. The anxiety leading up to getting on the plane had been fucking unbelievable and nothing I experienced the last times on one.

Then to add traveling with a group of family to my hesitation had me ready to cancel this shit. I'd been up praying since four this morning—I fell out praying late last night in my bed. Work had beat my ass over the past few days. Delays on projects, closing down of sites because of the heavy rain for the past four days, my cousins calling me every other hour with questions about passports and/or bringing their friends. What was supposed to be a six-party trip grew to ten within days. What was worse was I didn't want to do this shit anyway. I ain't want no damn birthday celebration like this.

My eyes went down to the cell in my right hand.

*I only wanted to be with this chick...*

“Yo, Ahk!” Hands slammed on my shoulders, snapping me out of my head. “They wildin’ back there, talkin’ bout some mile high club!” Juggy laughed.

I blinked, registering what the hell he'd said. “You tell their asses they can high mile it off here right now if they wanna try it.”

“You know how Tanya be fuckin’ around. You know Ant gonna keep her drunk ass in line.” He waved it off as I could



hear my crew cutting up behind me. “You good, yo?” He leaned over a seat with a blunt planted behind his ear. Looking out of the small window to the left of me, I nodded, hearing the movement beneath the plane from luggage being loaded. “You heard from Shi?”

I glanced back down at my phone, remembering the task at hand. Witherspoon hit me up twice yesterday, saying she’d arrived safely and had checked in. I got the messages right away and was grateful for her keeping me posted. I’d much rather had flown in with her, but with the fucking anxiousness I’d been feeling leading up to boarding, I wouldn’t have wanted her to see me this way. But a small part of me wondered if she would’ve made it easier.

*She always make shit better...*

“Bout to hit her now. Let her know we’re about to take off.”

*If my damn brain would let the fuck up...*

“She gone be good when she see that.” Jug tossed his chin toward the red gift bag then walked to the back of the plane. “You, too, my nigga.”

“Okay, folks. It’s the captain here.” My cousins went up when hearing the voice from the overhead speakers “I know it’s early, but now that we’ve gotten all the kinks worked out, we’re going to get you down to St. Vincent where the temperature is a sunny eighty-five degrees—”

“Damn! We bout to be real, real lit out this bih!” my little cousin, Jonathan, shouted.

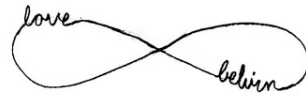
He’d better not have his street pharmacy on him or Customs would eat his little ass up. I’d warned him last night.

“Yes,” the captain continued. “You have every reason to be excited. Right now, we’re going to ask that you turn your devices on Wi-Fi...”

*Shit.*

I tuned him out to text Witherspoon something before opening the Word and flipping between Philippians chapter

four, verse six and second Timothy chapter one, verse seven.



ashira

*“And when the juices meet the meat!”* We bobbed our heads, rolled our shoulders to the beat in our minds. Of course, my performing ass went the extra mile to stand on one leg balanced on the barstool and twerk a little. *“And when he feel this heat! And when I skeet-skeet, that nigga knees get weak!”* Corinne, Shizu, Becky, and I grabbed our shot glasses, licked the salt, tossed the tequila shot back, and finally sucked on the lime.

*“Ahhhhhhh!”* I exhaled, wagging my head wildly.

Corinne spit out the lime slice and shouted, “Damn!”

Becky shimmied and Shizu did the dancehall Thunderclap dance on the other side of the bar. It got the attention of the other patrons. Slowly, the reggae tunes floated blissfully in the air as we hid under the palm thatch roof of the bar tent from the blazing sun. The poolside bar wasn’t too packed, but definitely populated with wet patrons wanting their next liquid escape. It was minutes before two in the afternoon, which was our reservation for an excursion. We stopped here to get oiled up to enhance our Vincentian adventure.

“Hit me!” Corinne smacked the bar top.

The bartender began sliding fresh shots to the four of us. Once collected, we found each other’s eyes before singing out of tune, “Be my *whoooooooooore!*”

Then we licked, swallowed and sucked. When she could manage, Shizu pulled out cash to tip the bartender.

“Damn, I can go for another,” Corinne mumbled.

Shizu agreed. “Same.”

“We can save it for the party.” I bounced on the barstool. “Drinks’re on me tonight!” I threw my arm in the air. “My word.”

The girls laughed at my silly ass. Finding it funny himself, the bartender collected our glasses. And just when I caught myself going to check my phone again, I stopped. It was inside a plastic protector pouch, hanging around my neck.

“Shi-Shi, you cool on ‘im?” Corinne asked with a spark of mischief in her eyes.

“Cool on all these niggas!” I rolled my neck. “Gotta remind them bitches of my name!”

Although it may have appeared so, I hadn’t even begun to feel the tequila. It would only be a matter of seconds for me, but not quite yet. No. What I was feeling was frustration and regret for opening myself again to a guy who seem to not have a fucking clue.

Chelsea texted me back late last night, telling me there were a total of ten people traveling with them. So what did my dumb ass do? Bought up tickets for their group of ten and my group of four at one hundred eighty-five dollars a pop for this excursion I told her we had to meet by the beach at two pm today for. She sent a “Roger that” to my instructions and assured they’d be down here. Then I woke up to a text from Jas just before eight this morning apologizing for just getting back to me. He said they had boarded and were about to take off. But I hadn’t heard from him since.

It took every ounce of womanhood in me to not send him a single text today to check on him. The urge to and the fact that he’d been so elusive these past two days had been giving me teenage Shi-Shi with street guys vibes. I was no longer a girl and would not behave emotionally irrational over a guy who didn’t have the decency to just check in. I’d just take the two thousand dollar “L” along with the lesson and keep it moving.

“How do you plan to do that, Shi-Shi?” Becky seemed to be gassing me, but I didn’t care.

“Show these Vincentian niggas what Shi’s working with!” I smacked the bar top, ready to stand.

“And what’s that?” My blood instantly heated at the sound of those velvety cords. They were deep and his Harlem accent so sharp in the Caribbean.

Then I felt a warm object slide over my right shoulder. It was a purple square box. The gold calligraphy gave it away. A box of *Por el Amor del Amor*, the reserve line. These were premium, had to be a two-hundred-dollar box, easily.

After catching the box before it fell into my lap, there was a gentle yank of one of my braids. I whipped around, finally feeling the first wave from the shots. Standing, my damn breath was stolen. He wore sunglasses, a fresh white crew cut t-shirt, pink trunks, and black water shoes. In those four basic swimwear pieces, the asshole made my lungs seize and damn spine jolt. I could identify the breath of his pecs in the t-shirt and his hairy legs were suddenly added to my favorite feature list.

“You look...” Jas made a show of quickly giving me a onceover, “...like paradise, girl.”

I cleared my throat. “And you’re an asshole.”

“Can I buy you a drink, Jas?” Corinne asked thirstily.

Jas chuckled. “Nah. I’m good, but thanks.” He asked my friends, “Y’all good? Been a’ight out here?”

Why did he have to be so protective?

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

“Better now that y’all are here,” Becky answered.

“Shi-Shi,” I heard singsonged. Juggy approached us. He wore a swim outfit with mid-thigh cut blue, paisley trunks, a matching button-up short-sleeve shirt, and water shoes. “We gotta wear these shits?” He kicked his foot in the air.

“I need your number?” Was the first thing I could get out while pulling out my phone and unlocking it. I handed it over for him to program it. “Both if you have more than one. And while you’re at it, add his ‘other’ cell to that.” Juggy took the phone, throwing Jas a cautious and, likely, questioning gaze. Jas’ chuckle told of how cool and relaxed he was against my abrasiveness. “Second, yes. You have to wear shoes for the excursions today. We’ll be in water, but may have to walk through rocky terrain.”

My eyes, unwilling, returned to candy. Even Jas’ teeth looked brighter in the sun. Island life looked amazing on him. So busy trying to catch up with my brain, I didn’t realize Jas was holding his phone until he held it still focused on me. He took a picture of me. *Oh, my god!* A satisfied grin spread on his face.

“Did you just take a picture of me?”

“I did.” His demeanor tranquil as the breeze.

“We need to go,” Corinne warned.

“Oh, this ya friend you flew out with, Shi-Shi?” Juggy asked, typing into my phone.

“Friends,” Shizu corrected him, pushing one finger into the air.

Juggy glanced up. “Oh!” His head pushed back. “Ling-ling, you with Shi-Shi? Oh, shit!”

“Don’t forget about me, Becky.” She raised her hand.

“Damn, Shi-Shi! A Becky, too?”

I shook my head and before I could speak, Becky clarified, “No, boy. My real name is Becky.”

Juggy’s droopy eyes lit again. “Oh, that’s what’s up, ma!”

“Sin!”

“Jas!” were shouted simultaneously from down by the beach.

That’s where I saw Tanya’s husband patting his pockets. The banana boats were out there waiting for us to board. I now

saw Tanya, Chelsea, and several other cousins, including Man, Jas' friend.

"Jas," A beautiful full-figured woman with false lashes too long approached him, concern topping her expression. "they said we need bracelets to get on. It's one eighty-five. We ain't bring no money." She pointed back to the group waiting at the water.

"Oh, we have their bracelets," Shizu announced.

"Word?" Jas tapped his pockets. "One eighty-five for ten of us. Who do I pay it to?"

"Shi-Shi," Becky answered as the girls filed out of the tent covering for the water.

I noticed when Jas' expression descended. He stared me deeply in the eyes, communicating something I couldn't readily identify, but felt keenly familiar with.

"Don't worry about it, Sheema," he muttered. "Shi-Shi's got everything figured out."

I started off after the girls. Fuck Jas. With all of the anxiety I'd been experiencing over the past thirty-six hours, he should have been grateful. I met the group by the water, immediately greeting them—some—and handing out bracelets. Chelsea was sweet as usual, hugging me as she took a shot of us with her phone.

"Oh, whaddup, Shi-Shi," Tanya's husband, Antoine, acknowledged me.

"Hey! These are my best friends, Corinne, Shizu, and Becky," I explained, not exactly knowing how to feel around Jas' family.

Our connection hadn't exactly been solidified yet. Some seemed afraid to interact with me and I knew it was because of Austin's celebrity status. I hoped that we could get to know each other here in St. Vincent. Well, some of them.

Tanya didn't look me in the eyes when mumbling thanks. In fact, the woman didn't say thank you, she hummed, "*Mmmhmmm*," taking two bracelets from me and handing one

over to her husband. The driver handed out life vests and made sure they were correctly secured on. Chelsea helped with getting them all to sign waivers, including Jas and my girlfriends, before we all waded through the warm water near the shore for the banana boats awaiting us.

We were on the boats for a good four minutes before the other one with Chelsea and a few others from their family skipped the water then flipped into the air. Ours followed seconds later, discarding us into the ocean. The sound of the speed boat's motor changed drastically as my body submerged. Before I could gather my bearings, I could feel a reverse pull, bringing me back up to the surface before I was expecting to be. It was weird, but I didn't fight against the force. The screams, and some laughter, were eardrum-piercing. When I surfaced, I tried doing a wellness check. Panic set in when I realized Jas couldn't possibly know how to swim and my pulse banged in my throat. *Oh, no...* My head whipped around, taking inventory. Tanya and Antoine were fighting the water.

"The fuck!" Tanya screamed while Antoine quietly struggled for security. "Get ya big ass off of me! You gone kill both us!"

Just as I was about to swim over to help, my vest was yanked behind me. It was Jas. He was pulling me towards him.

"Man!" he shouted behind me, a firm grip on my torso while floating in the water. "Grab Twan!"

"Are you okay?" I was still frantic.

His eyes fell to me, dripping brows drawn tight. Then a smooth smile opened on his face. "That shit was lit."

"Come on, Shi-Shi!" Becky called from a few yards away. "The jet skis are right over there!"

"Are you okay?" I asked Jas again, turning to face him.

"Yeah. I'm good." He laughed, arms flaying with natural ease. "I wanna do that shit again!"

He was okay. Jas was safe and...happy. Quickly, I performed a headcount and wellness check for the entire

group. Then it dawned on me.

“How did you find me so fast?”

“I sat next to you on the boat.”

“You landed next to me, too? Did you pull me up from the water like I can’t swim?”

“You were down there for too long.” He heaved, but not as much as I was.

I was still annoyed with Jas for his lack of communication over the past few days. *Peeved!* So the next words out of my mouth were without care. “Too long? I’ve been swimming in the ocean several times a year, every year since out of *Pull-Ups*. What about you, my G?” I screamed at him.

Then I was really out of breath, eye-fighting with Jas. I couldn’t hear anything but the combined sounds of our heavy breathing, and even that shit irritated me. His lips were full and his mocha skin glistened under the overzealous sun. I could’ve caved. Could have reached over and tasted the sea salt on his lips, the lips I’d been craving for days. Then I remembered I gave up thugs twenty-five minutes ago.

“C’mon, bad ass,” he growled then swam off in the direction of the jet skis awaiting us.



“Damn. This shit good as hell.” Myron stuffed his mouth with more food, hardly chewing in between. “Let me taste that fried lobster,” he requested, chomping his food.



“Damn!” his baby’s moms—one of them—Sheema, chirped. “I gave you my fuckin’ corn on the cob already. Can I have something to myself? I might as well brought the baby out here, sharing my food and shit.”

Myron’s jaw paused and he looked at Sheema. “It ain’t like you paid for it.”

Sheema whipped her neck. “Nigga, you ain’t pay for none of this shit neither!”

“Man, just cut me a little piece,” Myron demanded as I cut into my blackened chicken. “I ain’t never had no fried lobster.”

“It’s tempura,” Chelsea schooled from across the picnic table. I couldn’t believe my family was breaking bread on a remote island, on the damn beach. Everybody was safe and we were chilling by the water, enjoying nature. “I know it’s fried, but it’s the frying technique. Remember those sushi rolls of mine you had when we were at Aunt Pat’s?” Myron nodded. “Those were shrimp tempura. Same technique.”

“Oh! With the long, breaded tail coming out?” Myron asked. Chelsea hummed in the affirmative. “Those shits was little, but good as fuck.”

“Everything good as fuck to you.” Man mumbled, “Greedy ass,” before biting into his chicken leg.

Jonathan’s little ass snorted hard before laughing even harder. Juggy was right behind him. But when Sheema’s face dropped, joining in, internally, I rolled my eyes.

“I know you ain’t laughing,” Man challenged Sheema, who was just as meaty as Myron.

“Oh, fuck you!” Sheema rolled her eyes into her plate.

Man quickly shot back, still muttering, “And break my fucking back...”

This time, the whole table except for Myron and me cracked the hell up. Man always fucked with Myron. Knowing him as well as I did, I knew it was nothing personal. He had people in his own family he fucked with the same way. It was just Man, had always been.

“Come fuck with a big bitch and gather your life, darling,” Corinne growled, taking in on the fun.

Man looked over to her and nodded. “I got you. My shit strong enough, too!”

“I’ll be the judge of that!” Corinne’s brows lifted.

Smiling beautifully at the middle of the table, Witherspoon brought her phone over to Corinne to take a pic of the two of them. She’d been ignoring me since the banana boat turned over in the water. We spent almost an hour jet-skiing. Everyone had fun doing that, except for Tanya and Myron’s baby’s mother, Sheema. Those two couldn’t get a grip of the vehicle and even fell off a few times, causing us to circle back to get them straight.

The next excursion was parasailing in which Witherspoon took part with Shizu, leaving me to kite in the air with little Jonathan. Afterwards, a few complained of being hungry, leading Shizu to recommend this small, secluded island filled with restaurants. Sitting here, at the head of the table in paradise with the clearest waters and bluest sky, brought a satisfaction I didn’t anticipate. Being surrounded by family and the most beautiful and sexy woman I’d ever seen was a dream never occurring in my sleep.

And this was my life. From the streets to the *FEDS*. From the cell to *Lake Sha’Ron*. Then from worksites to paradise. What man could claim that pathway? I quietly praised God for His provisions. For years, I believed just having freedom from the *Department of Corrections* was good living. Turning from the water and finding Witherspoon chowing down on her steak and salad, I realized this is the next level of living in freedom. That next tier was here and now with her.

A chill struck my spine, traveling all the way up to the back of my skull. I blinked a few times, eyes still planted on the stubborn girl insistent on ignoring me. She was mine. In that moment, I knew Ashira was the woman for me. A woman I could see at my side, raising my seeds and providing more life in her companionship than I imagined receiving from any other chick I’d met. Sitting here, in this moment, I felt the shit

in my bones. Now, I had to figure out a way to express it to her. The woman was specific in her life pursuits and a damn tour de force when it came to me. If I was going to get her on the same accord with me, I'd have to start working ASAP.

Disrupting my trance, Witherspoon whistled with her fingers for the waiter. Immediately, my attention went to Jug, who was on it. I couldn't make out Witherspoon's words to him, but peeped when she spun her index finger around, gesturing the entire table. When done, the waiter nodded and took off. Jug swung his chin toward the direction the waiter was headed to in question and I nodded in the affirmative. If Witherspoon thought she'd pay for the food this afternoon, she had some other shit coming.

It was clear Witherspoon and two of her girls were done eating when they left the table to take pictures closer to the water.

My back was to them, so I didn't know what they were doing until I heard Chelsea's friend, Chrissy, comment, "How can she eat a whole New York strip steak and plate of a fully loaded salad and still not have to hold her stomach in when taking pix? This crab salad got my belly pushing out." She frowned, stabbing the lettuce on her plate with a fork.

"Tuh!" Tanya rolled her eyes. "Girl, eat what you want. A good man'll find you. Look at me...two thirty-three. Been married for nine years. All women ain't skinny just like not all skinny girls got a man."

"Damn!" Jug coughed in his hand, coming back to the table, having heard Tanya's words likely aimed at Witherspoon. "What that mean, T?"

"The fuck you want it to."

"Chill with that shit, man," Antoine warned. "Errbody vibin' out here."

Tanya rolled her eyes. "I said what the fuck I said."

But she didn't say it with her chest. I knew from our childhood interactions, Antoine, her husband, had leveled her with those two sentences. And I was happy because if I did it,

the sting would be far worse. Tanya had been giving Witherspoon the cold shoulder since the card game at her house. Witherspoon ate it, but shouldn't have to. The thing was, Tanya would be on chill with the coldness toward Witherspoon if she knew Witherspoon was mine. But my family didn't even know we were fucking. Our public chemistry had been that cool. And that was something I wanted to change.

"That nigga was dumb as fuck," Jonathan mumbled, attention behind me, toward the water.

"Who?" Myron asked.

"That nigga, Austin Seers. He let *that* go? Man, she be applyin' that pressure. Ya heard?" Jonathan blew out air. "Muthafuckas 'on't know how to keep the home happy while outside doing them."

"I heard the nigga was cheating with Rihanna," Myron shared.

"Easy!" Jonathan shook his head. "That's Harlem pride right there. Be careful what you putting on the homie's bitch."

"Bitch," Chelsea croaked, able to hear from her distance. "Jonathan, grow the hell up and maybe you'll get a girl with a quarter of Rihanna's success and capabilities." She left the table and Chrissy followed her.

They walked past me, down by the water.

"*Yaaaaaay!*" I recognized Witherspoon's cheer. "C'mon, Chels and Chrissy! Let's flick it up!" Her delivery was dramatically silly.

I wanted to laugh with her, but held my shit together. Witherspoon sure had three personalities. There was the bitch and then then the silly girl and then the seductress. I could handle all three, but preferred the last two.

"Maybe she just ain't do it for him," Myron added while Sheema got lost in her phone.

"Like she can't fuck?" Jonathan asked. "Yo, you see her on the *Gram*? She a dancer. Of course, she know how to fuck, and

good.”

“Her head is trash,” Myron guessed again.

“Or she ‘on’t give neck at all, my nigga.” Jonathan shook his head, looking back out to the water, I knew at Witherspoon in her rust-colored bikini. “It gotta be something.”

My whole body went tense. The fuck were they talking about?

“Rainbow ass nigga,” Antoine shouted, trailing behind Tanya, walking away from the table. He rocked a knowing grin, contributing to the conversation.

The guys laughed.

“Yeah!” Jonathan hooted. I picked up my glass of water for a sip, trying to drown out their shit. “The nigga *gotta* be gay to fuck that up.” His head bounced up and down, fist rhythmically yet softly pounding the table. “Damn. And that pussy fat. I *know*—”

I spit out my drink. “*Yo!*”

At the same time, Man and Jug barked at his ass, too.

Jonathan turned away, rubbing the top of his head like a rebuked puppy.

“Hey,” Witherspoon appeared at my shoulder, off timing. “Has the waiter brought the bill back?”

Jug’s big ass eyes swept over to her. “Yeah. *Si*—Jas took care of it.”

“You didn’t have *to*—”

“It’s been handled.” I kind of snapped, not even looking in her face.

“Oh.” There was a pause. “Okay.” Another pause. “Then I guess we’re off for the last excursion of the day.”

“What’s that?” Myron asked.

“Snorkeling.”

“Shit,” he sighed. “Lemme go handle my biz in the bathroom before we roll out.” He left the table and Sheema

followed.

“I was going to tell you and Juggy you two need to lather up before we go back out. You’re probably baking now.” A bottle of sunscreen appeared over my shoulder.

“Him and Jug?” Man questioned. “Damn. What about me?”

“I’ve been coming to your club for years and you’ve never expressed so much as a hello to me.”

“That ain’t *my* club.” Man motioned toward his chest with his hands.

Slowly, Witherspoon walked into my eyesight and spun around, looking me dead in the eyes. “So, I’ve been told. And therein lies the problem.” She applied a fake smile and spun back around, switching that bouncy ass in the opposite direction of the beach.

“Fuck!” Jonathan whispered.

Without thinking, I leaped from my chair, across the table, grabbing him at the neck.

# Chapter 14

## Part II cont'd

### May | Present Day

*ashira*

**T**he whistle blew over my head, announcing the conclusion of the adventure.

*Yellow fish—wait! Are those purple fish?*

I flayed my arms, swimming just below the surface of the cool water. Because we were in such shallow water, I didn't expect to see as many sea creatures, but this snorkeling expedition had been cool. It was time to call it quits, but I took my time trying to capture all there was to see. I managed a few pictures of the school of purple fish, hearing faint voices from above. Just as I was preparing for a second shot, my legs were spread and an object rubbed against my ass then my sex. I knew it was a human being when I tried turning to investigate and big hands gripped my thighs, preventing me from flipping around. He let go of me after several lascivious rubs against my private parts.

Jas released me and swam backwards, revealing his identity. Heat coursed my body, starting from my feet. It was

pathetic how much I wanted him, and the one thing between me having Jas was my stubborn pride. I was over his anonymity. Done with the wall of privacy he erected between us. Jas offered no explanation for slowing his communication since we parted ways a few days ago. Yes, I was feeling insecure about him showing to St. Vincent, something I had to deal with. But I wasn't sure where keeping so much from me had derived from.

Shaking off my thoughts, and in an attempt to distract my mind from my body's needs, I swam back toward the boat. Jas had been two feet behind me our entire afternoon of expeditions. It was time to end my anger and embrace his birthday getaway. I went for my towel as soon as I stepped off the ladder and into the boat. Jas was right behind me, going for his when his cousin, Myron, began talking about his ill-experience with reconciling his breathing into a tube.

Jonathan was the last to get on the boat, wiping the water dripping in his face. "Yo, that shit was a'ight! I wanna go back in, my G!"

We cracked up all the way back to the resort as he raved about his experience all the way there. I was happy to see his mood back in upswing after Jas had him in a chokehold just before we left the chow island. It was sudden and shocking to see Jas angry. Man and Jug along with Tanya had to quietly beg Jas to cut him loose, which he did after heavy heaving and successive blinking. I would definitely be asking what that was all about later.

The sun was setting when we were dropped off at the shore where we walked over to the beach, kicking up water. Jas' family congregated in one area, I noticed. Maybe they were waiting for prompting for the next activity. I needed a break. A shower, a slow fuck from Jas, and a nap were on my agenda.

"Hey," Shizu announced, waving her little arms to get everyone's attention. "We've just had an amazing array of activities and I'm sure you guys are exhausted, having just flown in this morning. Maybe we can take a breather, go to our rooms and chill. Then we can meet back down by the pool on



this side of the resort—*hang on.*” Her forehead wrinkled. “Where are your rooms? Which side of the resort are you on?”

“Resort?” Jonathan asked.

“We’re *about*—” Chelsea was interrupted by Jas.

“We copped a house about fifteen minutes east of here.” He tossed his thumb over his shoulder.

*What?*

My stomach flipped in disappointment. He was doing it again, surprising me with another secret of his.

My eyes blew the hell up as Shizu’s head whipped my way.

“Oh,” she uttered, blinking. “Did you guys run into issues when booking?” Shizu looked my way again for answers I didn’t have. “I could have helped out.”

“Nah. It’s just that so many people were saying that they wanted to come to the point I thought it would be more economical to rent one unit.” Jas pulled his t-shirt over his head, demonstratively killing my plans for the evening as they concerned him.

It was rejection.

Again.

“It’s lit over there if y’all wanna pull up,” Myron invited us, or more specifically, Shizu. He’d been throwing her the hungry eye all afternoon. He wasn’t alone: Man had, clandestinely, asked her for her number just before we had lunch earlier. “It’s one thousand over at the crib!”

“Word!” Jonathan scratched his head, yawning.

“The resort’s throwing a grand opening party tonight. We’ll be there,” I shared before ambling off for my room.



jas

**6:38 PM**

**Me: BOUT TO HAVE DINNER. YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANNA COME THROUGH?**

**7:19 PM**

**Me: YOU GOOD?**

**8:21 PM**

**Me: YOU AT THE PARTY? STILL?**

**9:13 PM**

**Me: BEEN A LONG DAY. I'M DOZING OFF. PLEASE CALL. I'M LEAVING MY RINGER ON.**

love  
belwin

ashira

“This shit is sweet?” Corinne marveled, stepping out of the *Sprinter*.

“Is this an *Airbnb*?” Shizu inquired out loud.

When I dropped out of the van Jas sent for us—*thanks to Man calling Shizu this morning*—I was able to see why Jas’ crew was content staying at their rental. It was a massive piece of property, another waterfront view for Jas. Only a paved

road separating the house from the shore. The home was a two-story colonial, all white with columns. From the screams and splashes I could hear coming from this side of the house, I knew there was a pool on the property.

“They here!” I looked toward the door, and Jonathan stood holding a tray of shot glasses. “We touchin’ the sky today. I got skunk, too,” he announced, but in a lower tone as we climbed the porch. “I snuck gummies in ‘cause Sin be trippin’ the fuck out on a young nigga. But we found the hash over here. It ain’t bad either.” He kept talking as we passed inside, plucking glasses from the tray.

“How many bedrooms?” Shizu just had to know.

“I think they said ten, but I ain’t seen them all.” Jonathan closed the door. “Mine on the second floor, in case...” I turned to him, catching the scratching of the back of his head. “Never mind. We out by the pool. The shit is proper, right?”

We followed him through the house, passing by the living room, dining room, and what appeared to be a den. The place was styled as a rental: minimally yet tastefully furnished. The décor was strategically arranged to give a warm feel to the place though it was not a home. The artwork told of a cultured owner. Thematic seventeenth and nineteenth century pieces hanging throughout.

“Where’s the master suite?” Shizu asked. “Did they close that off? Sometimes they do when the owner wants to maintain some level of privacy for when he or she visits?”

“I ‘on’t know ‘bout all that,” Jonathan replied. “I just know it’s dope as hell up there. Sin got it.” He stopped near the staircase and pointed upward. “And that shit litty as hell, yo. Word.”

That’s when I made a beeline to the staircase, hopping up the steps quickly, two at a time. I tried gathering my pleated coverup in the cut of a short cheerleader skirt as to not expose my ass.

“Damn, Shi-Shi,” Becky called behind me.

“Shit, she fast.” Jonathan laughed, calling after me. “On god, that nigga ain’t up there!”

“She’s a builder,” Shizu began to explain convincingly. “She’s got to explore big homes.”

I didn’t hear anything else as I landed on the second level. Some of the bedroom doors were closed, others open. I passed by a large main bathroom and linen closet left wide open. Eventually, I landed at what could only be described as the master suite, accounting the double doors. They were closed, but I entered with great audacity anyway.

The man was frustrating me again. He called and texted several times last night after they left the resort, but I ignored them all. I was embarrassed by his arrogance to not use the accommodations my best friend gathered in the name of his birthday. He made me look stupid in front of my friends. That made me regret letting them know I’d been sleeping with Jas. Why did I trust him with my pussy when he couldn’t even trust me with his full name?

The room was sparse, his clothes tossed on the sofa, floor, and over a chair, yet I detected faint notes of his natural body scent and cologne. I’d never seen his bedroom at home like this and somehow it made me insanely jealous. Jealous of others having knowledge of him I didn’t. His suitcase was open, clothes folded. The en suite bathroom was massive, a clean feel with cool gray and white walls. A whirlpool, walk-in shower, toilet room, and double vanity. As I walked back into the bedroom, I thought how much more luxurious this bedroom was than my suite at the resort—*and I thought the resort was nice as hell.*

An *Asè Garb* duffle bag on the floor next to the patio doors caught my attention. I had no clue Jas was into major fashion designers. Just having to see the view, I journeyed outside. It was massive; the view and the balcony. Mine at my apartment paled in comparison by far. I could see just a bit of the neighbors to the left and right, demonstrating privacy. The furniture was plush and ocean was endless from here. St. Vincent was breathtakingly gorgeous. Back at the resort, my

ocean view was beautiful, but here was exclusive and peaceful.

A burst of laughter pulled my attention below. Jonathan was right. Jas was outside, sitting with Man and Juggy on the short, concrete bordering wall, delineating the property from the paved walkway, which separated the beach. They were chatting down there, facing the water. The three men were shirtless and possibly shoeless, geared up in their trunks. Juggy's thin frame tickled me. Man was slightly heavier, but Jas was the thickest and most fit out of the three. The cut and grooves of his back were far more defined and deliciously virile. My sex pulsed immediately, causing me to flinch.

*I hate him...*

They broke out into a chorus of laughter again. One immediately hushed. It took no time for me to see the two women strolling from the walkway to the beach. They were dressed in bikinis covering very little. One was all boobs and the other thick all over. I was neither, but loved every inch of my body.

As the guys seemed to be checking them out, I recalled believing Jas loved every inch of my body, too.

love  believe

*jaz*

“*On god* I woulda brought her ass down here just for that!” Jug shouted, pointing toward the girls on the beach. “Shit! *Just for that*. These chicks need to know we ain’t no average niggas, my G!”

I laughed and while Man did, too, he challenged Jug. “So, if I woulda brought La-Kim down and she see all this nature... thinking the shit romantic, how would I break shit off?”

La-Kim, Man’s girl, told him she needed time to herself last week. Man had been taking it hard, but was okay walking away from a three-year relationship. He said she’d been tripping. I knew my guy: Man’s ass wasn’t ready to settle down. A year older than me, he felt it was too soon for a man his age.

“A’ight,” Jug began, swinging his arms in the air. “You was ‘posed to bring her ass here, dick her down good, then let her see you on the island, chillin’ with us single men. When she saw that, she woulda known you the fuckin’ man wit’ a whole bunch of cold options.” He gestured the girls on the beach who’d walked near us, half afraid and half thrilled to steal away glances our way.

“My nigga!” Man laughed. “Then why you ain’t bring Jos-Renee’s ass down here?”

“Because she be on some bullshit, my nigga!”

I cracked the hell up as Man sighed, “You ain’t saying shit. You been spinnin’ the block with that chick for like sixteen years and she still can’t get a flight out to St. Vincent. But you trippin’ on *my* bitch?”

“Nah. Shit different with me and Jos-Renee. You know that, man.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You know, man.” Jug was closing up. Nose flared as he swiped it, big ass eyes to the water.

And Man kept pushing. “Nah, my nigga. I ‘on’t know.”

“On god, you know, my nigga. You know.”

“Say it.”

“Man, you know when Sin got sent up how that shit fucked with me. I know it fucked with you, too, but that shit sent me so low, man. For a while, you know a nigga couldn’t even fuckin’ breathe some days with being in pain. Yeah, I

was drinkin', smokin' more, and poppin' them shits to help get through the day. But instead of supportin' me, she did her."

"Ah, man!" Man mumbled, turning his head, dismissing the point. "Can't count them years. I don't. The sun ain't shine for like eleven years...far as I'm concerned. The general went up for a stretch, none of us was good. Don't hold that shit against her, my nigga."

"I ain't. She got two houses...*on me!* Jos been riding pretty on shit less than two years old err year...*on me.* She play her cards right," He nodded. "she straight for life."

"Yeah, but she got her degrees and shit, too. She make her own money," Man correctly argued and I nodded in agreement. "She live in the house *she* bought."

"Yeah, but the other two I bought her is what lace her pockets. Them shits let her go down to Atlantic City and to The Bahamas with her girls. Fuck you mean? She clock in and out of a nine to five, but when her coworkers walking to they Kias, Jos' ass struttin' to a fuckin' *Audi A7...on me!* She eat good, living good 'cause *I* provide the cushion her fuckin' degrees can't. And I do it in spite of her bullshit back then. So, don't compare my shit with yours and La-Kim. That chick been ten toes down with you. Y'all ain't got the baggage we do. Y'all fresh and new. Believe that."

"Yeah." When Man licked his lips, I knew right away women were around. "I'm 'bout that fresh and new. Ya heard?" He tossed his chin and I followed his vision to Witherspoon's friends who'd just walked up on us.

"Y'all see Shi-Shi?" Witherspoon's Chinese girl asked.

That question alarmed the hell out of me. Where the hell was Witherspoon?

"Nah. But thanks for pullin' up." Man smiled. "I wanted to see you. Maybe you could teach me a new language." He tossed his chin to her. "Konnichiwa and all that shit."

I tried hard not to laugh.

"Ahhh!" She wagged her index finger in the air.

“Ahhh!” Man mimicked then jumped from the wall to approach her. “I’m ‘bout to be real conversant with the Japanese culture in a minute.”

“Trust me,” She winked. “it does a body real good.”

*She’s Japanese, not Chinese. Got it...*

“And what about ya body?” Jug tossed his chin toward Witherspoon’s thick friend.

“Mine?” she placed her hand on her chest. “It can’t be handled by beta men. That’s for sure. Inquire wisely, sugar.”

Jug jumped down next. He had a thing for plus-size women. Honestly, Juggy didn’t discriminate.

“Oh, there you are,” the white friend exhaled. “We saw he was out here while you were in there, girl!”

I craned my neck and peeped Witherspoon trekking down the lawn toward us. She rocked a black bikini top and white cheerleader skirt landing at the top of her thighs. The sight of her made my heart pound and stomach do fucking flips. It didn’t matter that she didn’t look my way in her approach. I was fucking happy to see her. It clicked in that moment that Witherspoon represented some form of kinship for me. When seeing her out and around people like this, I felt a liaison I didn’t want shared with anyone else.

“I told Jonathan to bring down more shots so I can show out on this private Vincentian beach Shi-Shi style!” She pranced past us, crossing over to the beach, strutting in all her sassiness.

When she yanked at her skirt, pulling it clean off, I blinked hard. Her full ass was exposed, swallowing up a black strip between her cheeks. Witherspoon turned around, braids whipping in the air, and stretched the tip of her tongue toward her chin as her friends laughed on. She waggled her body seductively and if I wasn’t so wiled by it, I would’ve found humor in her actions, too. Before I knew it, I found myself jumping from the wall finally, headed toward the beach.

“Damn!” one of the girls shouted, but I didn’t care to know who.



“Ooooh, Shi-Shi! Sin ‘bout to beat that ass!” Jug shouted.

Nah. I was more or less prepared to bite it. When I arrived to Witherspoon, I pulled her little body into me. She stiffened right away.

“Let it go,” I demanded calmly.

“*Wha—*”

“Let it go, Ashira.”

“Let what go?”

“All that shit that’s got you so hard right now.” I rubbed her back in an attempt of relaxing her. She wouldn’t loosen.

“What? Like the fact that you keep demonstrating your lack of trust for *me*—you know what? I think I’ve finally got the revelation: you really *don’t* want me.”

I groaned, dropping my head back. She was being ridiculous. “You have no idea how wrong you are. I want you so bad the shit scares me.”

Witherspoon’s eyes blew up and she finally looked me in the face. “You have a horrible way of showing it. We’re out here for your birthday and you rent a whole house twenty minutes away from the resort we planned for you?”

“You assumed all those people who told you a ‘destination birthday’ was a good idea had the money to participate. I told you yesterday, I had to figure out what was most cost-effective.”

“So, you’re covering all of this?”

“Well, you paid for the activities yesterday.”

She rolled her eyes and tried to push me away. “You’re doing it again. Instead of giving a forward answer, you’re using charm to throw me the hell off, Jas.”

Quickly, I pulled her back into my chest where she felt best. “I know. I know. Don’t pull away from me, baby. I’m trying. You’re making me see more and more why Divine told my ass to get into therapy. This shit is hard.”

“What’s so hard about being straight up?”

“The fact that I got mad feelings for your ass,” I gripped her ass cheeks, pulling her body closer, “and I actually care about what you think of me. I want you to feel me, too.”

“How can I ‘feel’ somebody I don’t know?”

“How can I tell you everything and expect you not to run?”

She stared into my eyes, straight up conflicted. Witherspoon wasn’t alone in that state. Being with her conflicted with my plans. My list.

“Yurp!” Witherspoon looked over my shoulder to see who’d made that call. I knew it was one of my people. Harlem pride was loud and distinct. “Yoooooooooooo!” *Jonathan*. He appeared in my peripheral, carrying a tray of drinks. He studied our proximity as I held Witherspoon’s ass in my hands, and I was waiting for him to try and look at it. I’d knock his little ass out. It was bad enough she flashed my mans. “This really you, unk? *Daaaaaaaamn*, and it’s like that?” He gestured my hands then whistled, impressed. “They was right. I guess I was wrong.”

“Wrong about what?” Witherspoon asked.

“Wrong about y’all being just cool. Myron and Ant said Sin been tryna smash. Chels and ‘nem said some shit about ‘platonic relationships matter.’” He twisted his lips. “I said nah. The big homie came home on some weird, calm shit. I ain’t never see you so... *So...*” He searched for the words. “So damn peaceful and legit, ya heard? Shi-Shi got that flavor. She need a commercial nigga. You ain’t commercial. You feel me?”

Wearing a goofy ass smile, Witherspoon faced me again. “What is he, Jonathan?”

“Too fuckin’ real.” He offered her a drink, pushing the tray topped with alcohol toward her. “The nigga’s fuckin’ real. Take as many as you want. O.G. don’t fuck with it.” Witherspoon took not one, but two shots and returned them to the tray empty before Jonathan started to take off. Then he stopped, face wrinkled. “Yo, I could tell them ‘bout this?”

“What’re you gonna tell them?” I asked.

“Y’all smashin.”

“Nah, man.” That shit ain’t feel right to me. “She’s my friend.” I looked down at Witherspoon as she ran her tongue over her teeth with a closed mouth. “And I’m tryna convince her she’s more, but I’mma give her grace and be patient.”

Witherspoon writhed in my arms, warm breath hitting my bare chest. “I’m so fucking confused.” Then she wrapped her arms around my waist, laying her head against my chest.

“You got it, big homie.” Jonathan finally left us alone. “Ya fuckin’, but respectfully.” He nodded his understanding, taking off down the beach.

I bent down and picked her up, kicking sand in the air. Witherspoon’s scream of shock expanded my chest.

“Where’s your phone?”

“I left it in your room.”

I started walking toward the water and quickly stopped. “My *roo*—you were in my room, Witherspoon?”

“Yup! Trying to find out your next secret.” She stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes.

God, this girl was beautiful, even when being silly.

“Why you ain’t call me to join you? Then my next thing wouldn’t be a secret at all.”

I kissed her while treading through the cool water, and Witherspoon let me, pushing out a long breath in my face. Before my dick could inflate, I tossed her into the water, now deep enough.

She sucked in a breath, eyes wild. “*Motherfuck—*”

*DOOSH!*

Witherspoon was down under. I reached in to pick her up, kissed her wet lips again then tossed her.

“*Jaaaasss!*”

When I picked her up this time, she clawed onto me, trying to secure herself to my body. Her braids now wet and heavy.

“Not again!” she heaved heavily.

“You beggin’, yo?”

“Fuck you!”

I laughed. “You promise?”

“Jas?”

I fucking beamed at her. “Yes, baby.”

She panted, wiping the water from her eyes. “Why couldn’t you just tell me you wanted to rent a house?”

“Because it happened so fast. I mentioned coming out here to Divine. He said something about renting a house. Then I kicked it with Ezra about some other shit, and I brought it up to him when he asked about me meeting with him about a project he wants me in on. He asked where I was staying,” I shared, playfully rocking her in my arms like a baby. “I told him about the resort and what Divine suggested. He was on board with the rental. My ass didn’t know how to go about finding a house. So, I asked my apprentice if she knew. Two hours later,” I swung around to face the house, “we had this. Then I had to figure out transportation. Mind you, I’m still working, still shooting commercials, still putting in the request to my P.O., who wants a damn thesis on where I’m going and why by a specific date...” I kissed her again. “I was taking care of things while trying to get all of them out here. Please don’t make me do this shit again.”

She giggled. “Do what?”

“Bring so many people with me. I’m a lowkey kind of cat. I love my family and happy I’m able to do this for them, but I prefer something with just you—and at most, my niggas.”

I peeped Jug in the water with two of Witherspoon’s friends. Man and the other one lay out on the sand while he was on the phone.

“Your family’s cute—at least the ones who can stomach me. I think Tanya wants you for Samona only.” Then her eyes

went crazy crossing in a silly way again. “Or does she treat the tribe of wives this way? I think that’ll make me mad.”

Ignoring what didn’t matter, all I could do was smile. “I’m mad happy to be out here with your braids.”

“My braids?”

I nodded. “You get them when you go away.”

Witherspoon patted her head. “I guess it seems like that, huhn?” She laughed.

“Got me feeling like Brandy.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been wanting to be down with you and the braids for a minute now. Had me beggin’ the white man for permission to leave the state.”

“Awwww!” She seemed to sympathize. “The irony in that is you likely have a bigger home than his and he can’t afford to rent out massive beachfront homes like this.”

I nodded again, feeling the waves break at my legs. “And still need permission to live.”

Her hand came up to stroke the side of my face. “I’m sorry,” her voice soft, small.

“For what?”

“For giving you attitude. It’s your birthday. I shouldn’t be this way.”

“How should you be?”

She took her time answering, “I don’t know.”

“I do.”

“How should I be?”

I kissed her lips again, not caring about the saltiness. “Mine. You should be mine, Witherspoon.”

“I don’t even know your last name. *And* you want to get married. How am I supposed to take on a name I don’t even know?”

Immediately, my ass got lost in that thought. If Witherspoon became mine, she'd know everything. Everything. The concept seemed so remote for me.

“Yo, there they go!” Man, now in the water, called over from a few yards away.

I glanced up and saw the boat one of our housekeeping staff was returning. He used it to fish for our food today. I'd been waiting on him to get back so I could have my personal time with Witherspoon.

“Come chill with me for a bit.”

She turned in my arms, trying to find what I was looking at. “On that boat? That's not like your boat at home.”

I snorted. “Nah. This a lil fishing boat. I would take one of the jet skis, but they may need it to entertain your girls.”

“Yeah. How long so I can tell them? Where are we going?”

“About five minutes east. There's a lil islet belonging to the owner. I figure we cop a spot over there and chill.”

Jug ran down with the book bag I'd left by the concrete. “Here you go?” He handed it off to me as I let Witherspoon down.

“You tell her girls where we're going?”

“Yeah. Y'all go head,” Juggy ordered. “Me and Corinne got some shit to get off our chest. Prolly best you ain't around for that explosion.” Juggy cracked the hell up.

Witherspoon laughed. “You're so crazy! Aye!” She waved her arms. “You okay with me leaving?”

“Take your time, boo!” the white girl shouted back. “If you're not back by the time we leave, we know you're smacking pelvises with the birthday boy!”

That made me laugh. Jug, too. Witherspoon's girls were snickering.

“Happy birthday, Jas,” the thick one greeted.

“What's her name?” I whispered to Witherspoon.

“Corinne.”

“Thanks, Corinne,” I shouted back. “I appreciate that!”

“Bye, babes!” The Japanese one waved at Witherspoon while kicking it with Man.

We left for the boat where the guy held it for us until we took over. We rode a few minutes over to the small, shaded island I was shown last night. It was a secluded inlet with a hammock and padded furniture. There was also a grill and picnic table with benches.

Witherspoon stayed in the boat while I secured the bookbag on dry land before anchoring it. I helped her out and as she explored the area, I set up music using my phone and *Bluetooth* speaker. I set up the table with her cigars and accessories, *Château Blevin*, *Mauve*, glasses, a cheese and fruit tray, and water for me.

“I saw your Bible in the room,” she noted behind me, turning over seashells with her toes. “You know they have apps for that now.”

“Necessary travel companion.”

“How would you know? You don’t travel.”

I turned to her. “Can I keep it a bean with you?”

“If a ‘bean’ is honesty, you keep me thirsty for that.” Witherspoon tried to smile, but even I saw her raw vulnerability through that.

“I was nervous. Actually hella anxious.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “About what?”

My eyes gestured the setting. “About all of this. Leading up to takeoff, I questioned if I should even go through with it. My first time out of the country, leaving work for days and without leaving my deputy behind to keep an eye on things. Truthfully, even traveling with my cousins made me uneasy. Jonathan and his shit. Didn’t want him bringing nothing illegal and getting us caught up. And just my family in general.” I scratched the back of my head, trying to explain. “They know me, but don’t really know me.”

She eyed me warily for a long while before walking my way. Witherspoon stood directly in front of me. “Who really knows you? Juggy? Man?”

My damn chest tightened. I shook my head. “They’re conversed with the old me.”

“The one before eleven years of incarceration.” I nodded, wanting to get off the topic.

“Does Ezra know you? Azmir?”

“E knows the new creature. The one who’s chosen to follow Christ. Divine comes closest in knowing both, but he don’t know me, know me either.”

“So, no one knows Jas?”

My eyes met her pretty sun-bronzed face. “I want you to know me.”

She scoffed, “You must be joking. I don’t even know *your* —”

“Name.” I swung my head from ear to ear, left to right, mocking her. “I know. But I told you why. I don’t want you looking up my past.”

“Then how am I supposed to know you, Jas? Your family is even good at keeping your basic identity away. I asked Chrissy your first name and she basically ran out of the room today.”

Yeah. That was another piece of my damn anxiety. I had Chels drill their asses about what not to say in front of her back before Sean’s birthday party. I had her and Jug do it again before we boarded for here, and I made sure to repeat it while on the plane. I didn’t care if they were drunk. If they opened their mouths, they had to see me.

“Because I want to tell you myself.”

“Okay.” She folded her arms. “When?”

“When I think I can trust you to hold it. To carry it like the cross *with* me.” I shrugged. “When you say you’ll be mine.”



Her head reared back. “As in the three-month trial period?”

My eyes rolled over her head as I processed that. “Nah. No.” *Hell no.* “I mean like mine.”

“As in marriage?”

“I mean...we’re adults. What else would the goal be?”

“But, Jas, you want me married in thirty days, barefoot and pregnant every eleven months, and baking cakes for the children’s ministry at your church in between. That vision is depressing to me. It’s stifling and reminiscent of what I’m going through with my father. I don’t want to live anyone’s vision for my destiny. I want to build my own.”

“And if ol’ boy was going to propose to you, you would’ve said no because you haven’t lived out your dreams?”

“I would’ve said no because I wasn’t ready for such a commitment with him.”

“And when you got ready?”

“And when I got or get ready for marriage, it’ll be with a man I’ve set a vision of unity together, not just applying his narrative for ‘happily ever after Shi.’ It would be a joint venture.”

“And what’s your vision for ‘happily ever after Shi,’ Witherspoon?”

She cocked her head to the side, correctly perceiving my thirst for an answer. “It would start with my partner not calling me my father’s name.” A cunning smile opened on her pretty face and she sashayed backwards, then pivoted to the table and grabbed my phone. “What’s your password? Let’s hear some tunes.”

“Shi-Shi.” I turned to power on the *Bluetooth* speaker.

“Stop fucking around, Jas. Here. You can put it in yourself if you don’t want me to know it.”

I turned back to her, lowkey offended. “Or you can put it in yourself if you don’t believe me. I told you I ‘on’t lie to

you, girl.”

With a smirk, she rolled her eyes then began tapping into the phone. “Shit,” she breathed with wide eyes.

“Yeah. Now, I’m changing that shit.”

She laughed—the laugh that did shit to me. “Don’t do that. To what?”

I shrugged. “Maybe Ashira.” Then I remembered. “Nah. That’s the password for my other phone.”

She gasped as I plopped a grape into my mouth. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t lie, Witherspoon. Matter of fact.” I took the phone from her. “I’m setting the playlist.”

“Speaking of which, why don’t I have your other number?”

As I tapped on the app to find a playlist, I thought. “I ‘on’t know. Never thought about it.”

“Well, I want it.”

“You got it.” I remembered her phone was back at the crib.

“I should probably have some of this, too.” She plucked cheese and a cracker from the tray. “Because I’m about to light one up and shouldn’t do it on an empty stomach.”

“You hungry?”

She shook her head smiling and swaying to the music playing. “I didn’t have breakfast, though.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was mad. At you. You stress me out, Jas. I broke up with my boyfriend to be stressed out by a guy I got my shit out the dirt with.” She shrugged angrily with her head and shoulders.

I couldn’t help cracking the hell up. Her wink had me howling. This girl was shot out and I loved it.

Witherspoon nibbled on the tray before lighting her first cigar. The cavern created by trees amplified the volume of the

speaker, bringing about an automatic vibe. I lay out on the hammock, peeping her get lost in dancing. It was a jazzy playlist, making it interesting to see how she interpreted the music. Everything about her fascinated me.

Her body—smooth brown skin, lengthy legs, small waist, and palm-sized tits—was heaven-made. As I swayed in the shade, Ashira became my focus and I wondered if she knew I was her captivated audience. Didn't matter either way. I had her to myself and would squeeze all the joy from this opportunity. Temporarily, all the anxiety I had leading up to this trip was on hold. Temporary. This could all be temporary.

For a length of time unrecorded, Witherspoon danced and I swung in the shade, enjoying her. Witherspoon's cigar was done, allowing her a second hand. Her arms flapped, hips swayed, and head whipped at times.

*“I am the LORD, and when it is time, I will make these things happen quickly.”*

It happened again. The inner voice dropped in my spirit with a roaring presence yet gentle volume, causing a fucking thunder in my chest. Suddenly, I was out of breath and a little lightheaded.

“What's this?” Ashira called out.

I swallowed hard, fighting to come down. “Huhn?”

“This track playing. What is it?”

I thought for a minute, trying to slow my breathing. Alarming her was not in the plans today. “Uhhh.” I closed my eyes. “Kamasi Washington. I think this one is ‘Truth.’ I think.” *Damn*. The phone was too far to check. “Good stuff. Right?”

She nodded, moving rhythmically. The girl was born to dance. This track was moving, definitely feeling spiritual to me. The notes ascended into a choir vibe, forcing you to align with it. And Witherspoon did. She spun, kicked, flipped...did all kinds of impressive moves.

# Chapter 15

## Part II cont'd

### May | Present Day



**B**utterflies broke loose in my damn stomach, and abs and hands shook with nervous need as I rolled the rubber on. Witherspoon's *Mauve*-scented breath blew over my head, waiting impatiently. Before I could move my hand away, she was sitting down on me. My eyes closed, rolling to the back of my head.

She lifted and dropped, bucked, and stroked, trying to fit me in. "*Mmmm...*" she moaned, eyes closed tight.

I looked up to her, seeing her head just over her naked tits and the heavens just above her head. What a damn view as she rode me on the hammock. My hands reached up and squeezed her boobs, the bikini top pushed up to give me access. Witherspoon strained as she plummeted down on me, I did the same stroking upward while trying to keep a balance on the swing.

I asked her if we should do this on here when she climbed aboard, licking my chest. The condom was in her hand and the

agenda of fucking planted in her mind. She'd found them in my book bag. And now biting her bottom lip, I regretted taking the chance, wishing for a sturdier surface to make her scream my name from.

When her two fingers pressed against my lips, I traced them with the tip of my tongue then pushed in between and flickered. She watched me mimic eating her pussy with tight eyes while riding me. The center vein of her forehead was thick as the muscles in her face strained. With them still to my mouth, I reached up to pull her at her nipple and sucked on it.

"You're about to make me cum..." she whimpered again.

And she did. That fast, she began swallowing and squeezing my cock faster and faster. Even on a hot ass beach, she felt warm, soft, creamy...milky. And she took all of me, letting me fill her completely as she grabbed me at the shoulders, pointy nails digging into my skin.

*"Oh, gosh. Jas!"*



"I don't like fighting with you."

The next wave rolled into us and we jumped to avoid having it hit our faces.

"I 'on't like fighting no more. At all." I wanted to make clear.

"Then why do we?"

We'd been out in the water, traveling deeper and deeper until now. I loved this space. Permanently mentally recorded this moment in time of being in paradise with my "paradise."

"Because we're imperfect people. We're going to make mistakes while getting to know each other."

"But my issue with you is you opening up to me."

"And my issue is trusting you to not judge me."

"I feel like we're repeating the same arguments."

“Good!” I pretended to blow out a frustrating breath. “Then we’re gucci ‘cause that’s what we’re doing and I don’t want to keep chasing our tails.”

“Then what do you want to do?” Her expression was sober as we jumped another wave.

“I wanna do the work. Just like I work on my list and at my businesses, I wanna work at being a good man in your eyes.”

Witherspoon’s brows met. “You serious?”

I tried to nod, but didn’t know if she could see it in the height of water we’d made it to. “I do. I’m good at working. You remember Proverbs thirteen, verse four.”

She glanced away. “You know I don’t.”

*“The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing. But the soul of the diligent shall be made rich. I don’t just want to be right by you: I want to do right. That’s an action verb. I wanna put in the work the same way I do all of my other pursuits, Witherspoon.”*

“When you say other pursuits, you don’t mean the sister wives—” She was overtaken by a wave I managed to jump.

I cracked up when she rose from the water, wiping down her face. “That’s what ya silly ass get for making a stupid ass joke when I’m pouring my heart out to you.”

“Not funny!” she whined and pouted like a baby while wiping the water from her face.

“C’mon!” I lunged over to her, escaping another incoming. “That’s our lunch coming.”

The motor boat could be heard nearing the small islet. We’d fucked twice, gave each other orgasms with our hands, laid out on the hammock listening to music, and talked for over two hours when I called for food. I was mad hungry and I knew she was, too.



love  
believe

# ashira

*This was remarkable...*

That was my very thought as we sat out on a towel, watching the housekeeping staff cart off with our discarded food and eating utensils as the sun set. They'd packed so much for lunch and even grilled fish, shrimp, and scallops here on the small island. We couldn't finish it all. After lunch, Jas and I napped on the hammock and I was awakened by his finger, rubbing my swelling clit. The orgasm rolling over me was the best wake-up call ever.

We swam again for a while, talking less that time. Eventually, Jas came over to me, wanting to horseplay in the water. I loved his physicality. Loved the jovial playfulness against his quiet, inward ruminative nature. I was that quickly addicted to his aura. I'd had Jas all to myself for a piece of time. The vulnerability I experienced in these private stolen moments with him revealed things Jas couldn't hide from me if he tried. His eyes told me I was uniquely beautiful. His touch told me I was divinely created. His ears let me know how important I was to the world.

A familiar tune crooned through the speaker. It sparked a desire.

"Come on," I grunted while hopping to my feet. "Let's go. The speaker's going to die soon. Right?" The housekeeping staff forgot to bring another portable charger although Jas requested it when ordering the food. "I love this song."

With little hesitation, he rose from the shore and opened his arms to me. I fell in right away, pressing my face into his hard shoulder. Even salt and sex smelled good on him.

"This old school, old school," he murmured over my head. "My moms used to rock out to this."

I wanted to remind him it was the song playing when I walked into his home for the first time, believing it was a rental. But bringing that up would spoil the mood and that's not what I wanted. I wanted peace with Jas. The type of peace that would guarantee the growls he gave when we were naked and at each other.

"Mine, too!" I hated the whimsicality in my voice. "She would dance with my dad to this."

"Is that the type of 'happily ever after Shi' you want? What your pops and moms had?"

I kissed his hot shoulder.

"No. I want my own. I want something that would last the test of time, as the old school songs would say."

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a small blue mark above the 'j'.

*Well, I want you. All of you...*

Of course, those words never left my mouth. Witherspoon was too damn headstrong with her independence. I'd just have to pursue her as I did every other desire I'd achieved and had so successfully accomplished. She was now on my list. The list that never steered me wrong.

We danced in each other's arms until the speaker died. Then we kissed for what felt like forever. It was good, complete. When we packed up and headed back to the house on the jet ski left behind for us, Witherspoon held on to me with one arm and a bottle of *Château Blevin* in the other hand, singing the lyrics to a random ass Ragee song.

*"Be my whoooooore!"*





ashira

“Yeah.” I doodled on a writing pad I managed to find in the kitchen. “Just send my whole bag.”

Becky, on the other line, slurred over the Caribbean tunes, “Your room is a fucking mess, Shi-Shi. That’s gonna be a lot for me to clean.”

I let out a big yawn then chuckled. “You’re drunk. My room isn’t messy; I swear. Just dump everything in my suitcases.”

“And your makeup?”

“Oh, yeah. Be sure to put all the shit I left out in the bathroom in the toiletry bag first. Then put that into the suitcase.”

“Duh, bitch. Who do you think I am? A child?”

“You know how trifling you are. Now, can I trust you to remember everything I’ve said, or do I have to set my phone to call you crazy early in the morning?” Another yawn pushed from my chest.

“Yeah, yeah. I got it. Go, enjoy your big dick boo.”

I was too tired for the guffaw that adjective deserved, but I managed a chuckle. “Who said all that, Becky?”

“Girl, I could tell by his dick print when he was carrying you to the water! He was fucking hard, bitch, and I don’t think that shit was fully inflated. *Damn*, why did I marry white?”

I pursed my lips and rolled my eyes up to the corner of the room. “Maybe because you’re white?”

“Oh, what the fuck ever, Shi-Shi! I could’ve married the fucking rainbow. I’ve fucked them all anyway.”

I sat up, too exhausted to continue with her drunk ass. “Goodnight, Becky.”

I caught her gasp. “Bye, bitch!”

She hung up on me and all I could do was shake my head.

“There’s some hoes in this house! There’s some hoes in this house!” Juggy chanted, walking into the kitchen for the door letting out toward the ocean. He sauntered inside of a pink flamingo pool tube as he wore bright yellow sunglasses, swimming trunks, black crew socks, and slides. Behind him was Myron. He was a sight, too, boldly shirtless with a belly protruding to the point of possibly bursting the black dragon pool tube he was able to manage around his torso. With a blunt behind each ear, Myron carried a half gallon of Hennessy as he performed the marching drill behind Juggy.

I checked my phone and saw it was almost midnight. The time had flown by. After coming in from the private island, Jas and I showered and had dinner on the balcony connected to the dining room. It was nice although I had no clothes and had to wear his boxer briefs and t-shirt without a bra while my bikini was in the dryer.

We returned to his bedroom and laid out there for a while as he read his Bible and I thumbed my phone, tending to work and browsing social media. I struggled with not posting pictures from today. Jas and I captured a number of great ones together: it felt like a crime not to share. Women everywhere needed to know there was life after a cheating ass boyfriend, even if the world at large didn’t know Austin had cheated on me. I didn’t post any today, though. A private life felt right for the time being. Especially considering the picture I got of Jas sleeping on the lounge chair. He’d crashed early. The poor man was likely still exhausted from his travel in yesterday and being out in the sun since arriving. I woke him up for bed, which was great because I had to get a few plans underway for his big day.

“Hey!” I called over to Juggy before he crossed through the French doors. “You guys going out?”

Juggy turned my way and repeated while nodding, “There’s some hoes in this house. There’s some hoes in this house. They gone get *Jugged* tonight. They gone get *Jugged* tonight.”

Myron’s bear frame danced to the ditty Juggy created, as he pointed out the door.

“Who are you guys talking about?” I moved toward the door and immediately heard the feminine chortles of merriment I was sure didn’t belong to the women who flew down here with the men; Myron’s girlfriend, Sheema, in particular. “Oh. Okay.” I backed away from the doors with my forehead suspended in the air. “Just be sure you’re up bright and early to let the caterers in and to pick up the cake.”

“Jug’ll be on the job, Shi-Shi. Right now, Jug gotta let a few off in these chicks from *Croatia*—”

“Canada,” Myron corrected.

“Man, what the fuck ever. C’mon!” Juggy headed out the door.

Behind him, Myron shook his head, following.

“You still here?” I turned to find Tanya limping toward the refrigerator.

I pulled in a deep breath through my nostrils, not in the mood for negativity. “I am!”

“For how long? Don’t you got a spot at that hotel?” She pressed for ice from the dispenser, depositing it into the *Ziploc* bag she brought in with her.

“At the resort, yeah.” I leaned against the colossal white marble island. “I can also use the bed up in the master suite, too.” I winked, being cheeky.

What was Tanya going to do? Fight me? Jas would never allow that.

“*Hmmm...*” She sat on one of the stools, lifting her foot on the one next to it. “For how long?”

“Come again?”

“How long you gone be around?”

“You mean for the *night*—”

“Nah. Period.”

*Ahhh...* I’d forgotten about Jonathan telling their family about Jas and me being more than industry contemporaries.

I tossed my head, shrugging. “For as long as he’ll have me.”

“He ain’t like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like your kind.”

“Which is?”

“Hollywood. *Rich*—”

My brows shot up. Then I made a show of gesturing the luxurious kitchen we *both* knew Jas expensed for his family. “Are you sure you wanna go there?”

She rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth. “You know what the fuck I mean.”

I shifted my head to the side. “Actually, I don’t. I didn’t know I was a kind. Again, what kind?”

“He ain’t all over social media, telling his business. I ‘on’t even think that nigga know what *TikTok* is. Sin ain’t flashy or none of that shit. I know you the reason he out here.” She tossed her three-inch loud nails in the air, referring to the posh estate. “*This* ain’t Sin speed even though he got it. So, if that’s the type of niggas you into, go ahead somewhere else with that. We real niggas and bitches over here. We do real shit that’ll scar pretty faces—*shiiit*, make muthafuckas disappear. We ride for ours. I’m just saying, choose wisely ‘bout hittin’ a lick.”

“Are you implying I’m using Jas for likes and comments or his money?”

“I see the car you drive, the designer shit. Postin’ that glam shit on the *Gram* for all them people to see. You got all them people following you to see what your ex was doing.” Her meaty arm thrashed the air and Tanya shook her head. “Look, I ‘on’t know what the fuck you around him *for*—”

“Easily because you don’t know me. I have my own money for my own car and clothes. My following on *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and everywhere else are purely generated by my hard work. I’m an artist and entrepreneur. I don’t need a damn man for followers or to maintain my lifestyle. So, again, I ask, what’s my kind?”

“Man, I ‘on’t even be gettin’ in the O.G.’s business like that. All I’m sayin’ is Sin need a real bitch. He a made nigga. And *real*, made niggas need real bitches.”

“Like Samona?”

Tanya laughed, waving me off with that free hand. “Man, look atchu. That’s some old shit. You insecure about a ex that don’t give a fuck about nothing. She ‘on’t even know you exist, yo. Plus, Sin and Mona deaded that shit while he was biddin’. She wit her new man, happy and shit.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “Really?” My lips drew up to appear in a contemplative state. “Are we sure about her not knowing me? You do...and from social media where life ain’t real. And are we also sure she lost all feelings for him while he was in prison?” My face contorted in confusion even more.

Either Tanya didn’t know about Jas and Samona hooking up when he was first released or she didn’t know I did. And I never forgot them furtively talking about me the first time I visited Tanya’s home for Sean’s birthday party. Women know women, especially with that catty number they pulled. Jas was a god amongst his tribe, and that had been proven to me each time I’d been with them. So, Samona visiting that day was clearly about Jas. I almost wondered if he made sure Samona wasn’t present for the card game, knowing I’d be there. Tanya knew that answer.

I drew in a deep breath, standing straight from the island. “Well, this Ted talk has been nice. At least you confirmed one thing for me.”

“I ain’t confirm shit,” she barked defensively.

I nodded. “You did. I’m a bad bitch—*no*.” Grinning confidently, I shook my head. “I’m *that* bitch for Jas.”

“*Puh*.” She snickered, though I knew Tanya found nothing funny. “Crazy how I’ve known that nigga all his life. Sin family, ma-ma. Never forget!”

Done with this conversation, I started out of the kitchen. “Yeah, but you and I both know yesterday’s Sin ain’t today’s Jas.”

I tossed her a wink, and after that, there was nothing more to say.



*A ripple of cool air hit my body.*

I was miserably hot. Again. It’s what they wanted. In solitary confinement, basic human rights were granted at a bare minimum. The winters were teeth-chattering, and you met Satan in the summer. In fact, that nigga was around this bitch all the time. He was the only loyal figure here in the hole: even the guards changed shifts. But the devil welcomed you to his home and talked to you. He brought comfort to do whatever you wanted in his home.

If you wanted to scream, you’d yell as loud as you want and he would encourage it. If you wanted to just talk, he was

right there for that. He never told a soul your shit. The guards could only hear what you said, so some niggas resorted to whispering. The devil was a decent sparring partner, too. You could throw the one-tvos. Just don't let him get near a wall. He loved that shit. Get your knuckles busted, sending shards of pain up your arms and into your chest. That, added to the haunted energy of hopelessness, a broken mind, and abandoning the despair. *End it all*. Fucking permanently. The devil was down with that shit in his house, too.

But today felt different. That rare breeze had my damp skin cooling me. That instantly, no longer was I insufferably hot. In fact, the temperature for once was just right. Shit. I could sleep the damn day away at this rate. I could breathe freely. Could pretend being somewhere else—*any fucking where*—other than Satan's crib. And it felt good.

*Shit...*

Horns. I could hear horns. Then other instruments...like an ensemble of them. Strings, drums, and *bold horns*. Winds. I could hear that shit, too. *Feel* it. When a choir sounded, I questioned my sanity. *Again*. That particular checkup was regular here in the den. You heard and felt shit differently in here. But this... The ascension in harmony gave off a vibe. The marriage of the notes, choir, and horns all felt like a celestial experience.

*The fuck?*

There was a gravitational pull I didn't want to fight. Not like I did the devil when in here. He was a seductive manipulator, I knew it. There was no confusion. *But with this...* It felt fucking good. Flat on my back with arms stretched wide, my body was ascending, too. I was climbing and the higher I reached, my body began warming from my belly. The shit felt so good, I couldn't stop it if I knew how to. The melody played for so long the musical piece felt familiar.

Then I could hear another sound I'd been conversant with. Slathering, stroking. *Suckin*—

I fought to break from my trance because *this shit ain't never happen before*.

*Not the fuck in here!*

My eyes burst wide. The room was all white and cool, fresh air flowing all around as I lay in a big ass bed. Directly in front of me—between my damn legs—was a sheet-covered mountain. Beneath the sheet, the silhouette of her spread hips could be identified from her lengthy torso. *God, I love her height.* And immediately beyond that unbelievable sight were the open balcony doors, bringing the Caribbean Ocean to my bedside. The breeze was unspeakable. And that warmth in my stomach began to heat up, blooming into my chest.

I lifted the stark white sheet in search of her. And there she was, spread like an eagle with her face busy in my crotch, a bottle of lube on the other side of my leg. With one hand stroking the base of me, Ashira plopped me from her mouth and smiled with sleepy eyes.

“Happy birthday, king,” tone husky...hungry.

I watched her colorful nails move marginally as she polished me with her palms. And when her head ducked again, capturing my thumping erection, it had finally clicked. I was getting necked down by Ashira Witherspoon. During this act, she wasn't the pain in the ass, boss bitch I admired and had recently come to crush on. Nah. She was the sexy and *very* dominant bad bitch I craved every damn day. She watched me watch her as her hands glided over my cock, lips puckered and jaw suctioning around me.

*Happy birthday...*

Ah, damn.

Today was the day. The one everyone made a big deal out of for some reason. When you're on lockdown, your birthday gets buried under the resentment of your circumstances. Nobody gives a fuck about your birthday. I used to prefer sleeping the whole day away. After starting your bid, the next and only significant day of your life is when you're released. And the ones with life sentences would just have to wash, rinse, and repeat day after day, year after year.



But I was no longer in the *FEDs*, no more trips to solitary confinement. But confinement on the outside wouldn't be too bad...if Ashira was with me. We didn't need a gang of people with us to connect. We only needed our willingness to understand one another...her body...and this water. The volume of the music she played seemed to reach outside. It was a nice touch: Kamasi Washington's "*Truth*," a track she'd learned of less than a day ago.

For me, Ashira was the truth. She was more than I ever envisioned for my life when thinking of a wife. The girl was beyond gorgeous, intelligent, educated, cultured, and had a crazy sense of humor. Spiritually, Ashira didn't seem inspired, but I'd work with her on that. And sexually...

I sucked in a deep breath, palms misting, and my damn thighs vibrating with a weird ass energy because I was pacing myself. I had no idea how long before I woke up she'd been working on me, but busting off like this wasn't what I wanted.

*Right?*

"Shi," I grunted, not wanting her to stop even for a second to hear my weak ass plea. When she didn't answer, I licked my lips and tried again. "Baby girl, I'm 'bout to..."

Her eyes opened just a smidge to acknowledge me. Then while stroking and sucking me off, she hummed over me, bobbing her head. Ashira was granting me permission to blast in her mouth. I didn't think twice about whether or not I should. Nah. Actually, I thought about getting used to the idea of the softness and warmth of her mouth and skillful grip of her hands. This woman was mine. For life. I just needed her to get on board with that inevitable fact.

And right now, she was telling me to bust in her perfect mouth.

*Say less, Shi...*

My hips drove up to meet her hot and sphincter-like drawn mouth. Her slippery hands felt like silk but with a mean grip at the base of my dick. *Life...* This was mine. My life after over a

decade of birthdays spent in the cemented, cold—and seasonally hot—walls of prison.

I felt my shit jut then I spilled inside of her bobbing head. My legs trembled and torso lurched mid-air. I tried watching her, but so damn delirious with a different stimulation, my lids felt heavy to the point of closing. I came long and so damn hard that when I was done, I collapsed onto the mattress while signaling to Ashira, my shit was too sensitive for stimulation. She had to stop.

She kissed my legs a few times, as I'd done her, and roped her arms around my thigh, squeezing before crawling from the bed as my body continued to spin. The sounds of her weight against the floor led me to believe she went into the bathroom. After hearing the toilet flush and the sink run for a while, my assumption was confirmed. It was all good; I needed a moment to myself. My damn soul shook with her between my legs.

The door to the bathroom opened and the volume of the music lowered. Before I knew it, she'd returned to the bed. I sat up, laying against the headboard. Ashira rocked a grin as she climbed up my body, settling in a straddling position. Her mint-scented lips caressed mine.

“So, you're diggin' my guy, Washington?” I smiled at her pretty morning face.

“Who?”

“Saxophonist. Kamasi Washington.”

“Oh. The music?” Her grin was soft. “‘*Truth*' is the truth.” She tossed her chin toward me. “And so are you.” Now in a super relaxed state, to express my appreciation of her compliment, I yanked at one of her braids while admiring her perfect body on top of me. “You okay?” Ashira cradled my face in her soft palms. “The plan was for a happy awakening, but you were a bit defensive in your sleep at first when I was down there. A little jerky just before waking up.” Her lips twisted in sadness. “Not the brightest idea? Considering...”

“I’ve only been home for a couple of years and haven’t shared a bed with a woman to be used to surprises like that?” Her eyes rolled closed, confirming my assumption. “S’all good, Shi. Say less.” I leaned in and kissed her.

Ashira surprised me by pushing her tongue into my mouth, deepening the kiss. My hands shot to her ass and squeezed. In this kiss, I felt her hunger and openness mixed like a cocktail. She pulled back, licking her lips. “Good because I’ve been anxious about doing that for a while now.”

“What’s a while?” She shrugged, fighting a grin for a moment. “C’mon.” I gave her hard nipple a gentle pluck. “Tell me.”

She faced me again, lips pressed tightly together. “Well, it’s been on my mind for a while, but that night I ran into you at the Young Lord show at *Club Sin*.” She rolled her eyes and giggled. “You popped up with big dick energy I needed to try out...in my mouth—*shit!*” She cringed over me. “That shit sounded very loosey goosey.” Ashira laughed. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s not like I go *around*—”

I kissed her again, loving the feel of her naked boobs on my bare chest. “It’s not a seed I want you to plant in my mind with unnecessary words.”

“Good.” She sighed. “Because I’ve got enough shit on my mind. Today’s supposed to be filled with celebration for an extraordinary man.” She fingered my scalp, whispering affectionately. “I’m so happy.” Her tight smile was convincing. “It feels like my birthday.”

“Then what’s got you stressed?”

“Oh.” She shook off the thought. “Shizu texted me early this morning. Our flight back home got canceled. She’s been checking for new ones since. The earliest she found was Friday morning. We’ve all got shit to get back to like work: we can’t stay another day. I haven’t heard back from her with any good news.”

“Don’t sweat it. I got you.”

She snorted. “What does that mean? Are you delusional because my boobs are in your face?” Ashira covered them with her arm, laughing softly before removing it.

I shook my head, amused myself. “Nah. Let me look into something. Don’t y’all sweat it.”

“I have no idea what you think you can do, but for some reason, I believe you do.” She kissed me again.

Ashira’s kisses were packed with so much passion that I tasted faith and understanding. I hoped I wasn’t mistaking that last one.

She drew in a deep breath, pulling away from my mouth. “You didn’t pray this morning.” Her attention kept falling from my face.

“That bothering you, too?”

Her shoulders fell, answering in the affirmative. “I just want to be good to you. I feel horrible about breaking so many of your rules. Not all of them are stupid. Some are cute. I love how you love God. I want that for you. *Shit*. If I interfere too much for too long, bye goes Shi-Shi.”

Even when being honest, she was hilariously cute. “Girl, my relationship with God ain’t gone change because I skipped morning worship on my birthday. In fact, if you were mine, what you did to me this morning would be considered worship.” I winked.

Ashira slapped my chest, mumbling, “You play too much.”

“Nah. I’m just messing with you, but it’s true.” She rolled her eyes. “Besides, I already know what He’s got me chewing on. God deals with me through themes. Like...repetitive messages.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like...a few years ago, when I was praying and even building with other people doing the walk, mercy would come up. God had demonstrated mercy to me years ago over and over, especially when I got locked up. That could have been an entirely different experience if it wasn’t for His mercy.”

“And what about now? Has the theme changed?”

I nodded, brushing my hands down my face. “I kept hearing *grace, grace, grace*. The Lord said in this season He’d give me grace. If He could still love me after all my shit—my past transgressions—you can provide me a little grace, too.” I tickled her, wanting to lighten the conversation.

When Ashira was ready for that conversation, I’d be more than willing to have it with her. As for now, I wanted her light and carefree. I loved her in that mode.

That breathless cackle made me feel a happiness I’d never considered. “Why should I?” She playfully challenged.

I leaned back, studying her nude face then her body. The smell of her pussy anointed the air all around me. My finger trailed from the top of her chest just beneath her neck, down to her navel. “Because you like when I put my mouth on you. And apparently your pussy talk back to me when I’m inside of her.”

The muscles in her pretty face strained as she looked me dead in the eyes and nodded. “I do.” She quickly swallowed. “And she does—*we*—do.” Then she leaned to the left and stretched long enough for her right leg to hike over me. Ashira brought back the box of open condoms from yesterday. Then she wiggled against my swollen dick. “I see you’re ready. Am I being greedy?” Her lips twisted in shame.

I reached inside the box for a foil package. “It’s my birthday, but you get whatever you want today.”

Her eyes lit up. “What’s your name?”

“Say less, Shi.” I pulled her to me by the neck for another kiss. My dick was too hard for games.

# Chapter 16

**Part II cont'd**

**May | Present Day**

*ashira*

“**I** interviewed for a gig.”

I sat up in the bed, pulling up the sheet wrapped around my naked body. While against my ear, the phone vibrated, alerting me of a text message. Pulling the phone down and changing the setting to speaker, I saw it was a text from the thread my best friends and I were using out here.

**Corinne:** *ON OUR WAY! GET HIS DICK OUT YOUR MOUTH BY THE TIME WE GET THERE.*

**Becky:** *OUT YOUR ASS TOO!*

“Oh, yeah? With who?” I asked Sergio before texting back to the girls.

**Me:** *DON'T FORGET TO TAKE PIX OF YOUR PASSPORTS!*

*God, please don't forget.* Although I wasn't sold on Jas being able to get us home tomorrow, I followed his instructions on what he needed to make it happen. After making sweet, slow birthday love this morning, I lay here in

his bed while Jas made a few phone calls. He confirmed he could get the girls and me out of here tomorrow as planned when he and his crew left. He needed passport information from us all to make it happen. I was a tad reluctant, but figured it wouldn't hurt to entertain him.

Not too long after Jas left to shower, Sergio called. I immediately regretted taking the call. But I knew I had a performance coming up at *Club Sin* and we needed to iron out the details for my troupe. Just a minute into the call, he'd introduced an ancillary topic. And, being distracted, I walked us further into it.

"The heads of *Fontainebleau* are starting a new venture in South Beach. They want experienced club managers. The competition is steep, but I know I killed it. Even made them drinks as they interviewed me."

"Oh." I blinked. "That's good. But that means no more *Club Sin*."

"Fuck *Club Sin*. These cocksuckers aren't really about this life. The one guy who's an owner by name only knows a little something about the business, but doesn't have full ownership. The real owner knows shit about the business and has only been here once or twice to learn the program systems we use as though he'll apply them one day. He thinks by throwing money at a club named after a fucking scum of the earth Harlem pillager, the business will be successful. It's all bullshit!"

My forehead strained. "Is *Club Sin* not doing well, business-wise?"

"For now," he muttered dismissively.

"Has it not been so well?"

"I mean—you know what I mean!"

"No." I cleared my throat. "I don't. You've never said why you're unhappy there."

"This just isn't the vibe for me."

"Why?"

“The owners—whichever the hell is the one. Management in general. All of it is beneath me.”

A shiver coursed my spine and instinctively, I knew he was there. Jas had strolled out of the bathroom, stark naked as the day of his birth—no pun. He stood powerfully with spaced, muscularly sculpted thighs, pelvis forward as he rubbed his head with a towel. The size of his resting cock made my tongue twist. I craved him. I’d take Jas in my mouth again if he let me. Why had I waited so long to explore that part of him? It was one of the most erotic experiences of my life, an uphove to my sensuality.

Leisurely, Jas walked over to the closet, the muscles of his tight ass stiffening his stride powered by his broad shoulders.

“Ummm...” I scratched in between my braids to my scalp. “Something just came up.”

“*Wha*—wait. When? You guys down for the dates I gave you?”

“*Yea*—I gotta go. Text them to me and I’ll confirm once I get back home. Alright? Chat later.” I disconnected the call, not giving Sergio another second to share my sphere of attention with the king-body who casually strolled past me with treasure hanging from his pelvis.

Regrettably, when Jas reappeared, a lucky towel was wrapped around his waist. “You tell them about the passports?” he referenced the call I’d just ended.

I nodded, anticipating his return to the bed. God, I was a greedy bitch. *For Jas.*

“I want you to check out something.” I didn’t notice him carrying a photo album onto the bed. “I had to dig deep for this one.”

“What is it?” I asked, sitting up against the headboard and crossing my legs in the pretzel position.

He opened the first page and, in no time, I understood exactly what the photo album held. It was a collection of pictures of Jas from his days as a baby. The very first page of the tattered book was of him, presumably at the hospital in the



bassinet. His face was swollen, eyes tight and lips tiny. And, boy, was he pale! Were all Black newborns pale after hours out of the womb?

There were several pictures of infant-Jas with a pacifier, bottles, and bibs.

“Oop!” I sucked in a breath, silently laughing while pointing at the image of his diaper change. Jas’ little winker was exposed. “Boy, have you come a long way.”

“You think so?”

“Uhhh.” I rolled my neck. “I would have left Charmagne’s apartment in the middle of the night if I hadn’t felt that brick between your thighs!”

Chuckling faintly, Jas shook his head, unfazed by my off-color humor. I continued browsing, thoroughly enjoying this trip, chronicling the life of one Jas—last name pending. He was even an adorable toddler in a fresh pair of *Air Jordan* sneakers, appearing unbalanced while trying to walk along a familiar coffee table.

“Charmagne still has this table!”

Jas nodded. There were images of a young, school-aged Jas with a youthful gleam in his eyes as he did the RUN DMC pose side-by-side with another kid outside his project building...or one of them. Charmagne was present in lots of these pictures, and evident to me was her physical decline. I didn’t know what her decided vice in life had been, but it clearly won a bout with her. Her natural, gorgeous features had faded as Jas grew in size.

I flipped to the high school pictures. There were only two: one with him near a locker and another of him seated at a desk. The next few pictures, Jas hadn’t aged much, but what was different was the absence of the beam in his eyes. No more smiles or loose, silly expressions. The images had turned to ones of cold and empty eyes and pouted lips. Even the ones with him, Man, and Juggy. Where Juggy’s smile shone into the camera, the muscles in Jas’ face were collectively downcast. He didn’t appear sad either. No. Jas was angry.

“Why aren’t you smiling in these?” I didn’t peer up from the book, not wanting to miss a picture, neither did I want to appear critical.

For a beat, he didn’t respond.

“I’m not a smiler.”

“I’ve seen you smile...lots,” I murmured, not quite believing him.

“You’ve *made* me smile...lots.” Then Jas supplied a tight smile I knew was just to appease me.

If he wasn’t so fucking handsome, I’d be offended by the disingenuous act. That was also confirmation for how much I’d grown attached to this guy. Even when he did arrogant shit, I didn’t get turned off.

I continued to peruse images of Jas well-dressed in designer clothing: *Gucci, Fendi, Louis Vuitton, Versace*—you name it. His sneakers were always clean and boots appeared fresh out the box. I had no idea of Charmagne’s skill set or formal training, but she didn’t strike me as the type of professional who could afford to drench her teenage son in designer garb from head to toe. Then I remembered Jas telling me about his illegal trade experience.

“Who’s this man?” He looked eerily familiar.

Jas leaned over to see. “Pops.”

My eyes blossomed wide and head reared in shock. “You stole that man’s face!” my tone accusatory. I studied the picture more. “The only thing Charmagne gave was your complexion!” I have no idea why this discovery was so overwhelming for me, but it was. Honestly, the entire viewing of this album blew my mind. “You’re sad.” My gaze lifted to him. “In these three pictures with your father, taken on three different occasions based on your clothes, there’s a sadness in your eyes.”

Jas shrugged with his forehead, pulling in a breath. “Those were never good days for me.”

Understanding the unspoken truths about Jas' relationship—or lack thereof—with his father, I nodded. I decided to kill that topic, not wanting to sour the moment. Instead, I continued with the journey, almost through with the gigantic, weathered album. Familiar faces appeared in the oncoming pages. Tanya, Chelsea, of course, more of Man and Juggy, Jonathan as a child with his mother, and even a few with Samona. Most pictures were of them in candid juxtaposition. In a couple, the pair was posing. Jas' long arms curled around her small frame wearing a retro-*Gucci* sweat suit.

*This bitch is going to be buried in Gucci...*

I was undeniably jealous and didn't care. Shit. I didn't even fight the compulsion of molding my hands to demonstrate holding a butcher knife and gestured stabbing the "cutesy couple" pictures of them. When I glanced up at Jas, his eyes were closed and head swaying side to side, eyes perceptively rolling behind closed lids.

"Oh, so you the jealous type, Shi?"

The man was so damn fine sitting a mere foot away, wearing nothing but rippling abs, a chiseled chest, and a damn towel. His smooth brown, tatted skin glistened, nipples dark and erect. I reached over, taking him at the sides of his face and kissed him filthily, mostly with my wild tongue.

When I pulled back, I rolled my eyes petulantly while wiping my mouth. "I'm the Jas type. And don't you forget it!"

With words unspoken, I went back to the album, now at the end. At two page-flips in, I saw a peculiar frame I'd seen before. Jas, clearly having just graduated from high school, considering his cap and gown, appeared young, but Frankie, the Linda Hunt lookalike, hadn't changed in features. Back then she was still short, face still wrinkled with a pouty heavy lower lip, and personality-infused glasses. She stood next to Jas, arm wrapped around his waist while clutching a program booklet to her chest. There was an undeniable stamp of pride on her face, the peculiarity both sad and sweet.

"You've known her for a while," I surmised out loud.

“Frankie’s a thoroughbred, Harlem Pride. She was born and raised there, but left for college. According to her, she and her college friends drove down to Atlantic City one weekend to party and she met a guy the first night they got down there. The nigga was so taken by her short stature and Harlem tongue, he tricked her girls out, upgrading them to a penthouse suite. But Frankie, he took home with him. Things were pretty intense for them and he proposed. They got married while she was still in school and Frankie moved in with him in Jersey.”

Jas chuckled, scratching his nose with the nail of his thumb at casual speed. “Frankie’ll hit you with those details first. Then she’d cop to knowing he was the son of one of the reigning mob families down there.” *Damn...* “Her husband provided muscle for his pops’ organization. He was the hitman. Back then, the Italian mobs were still powerful. So, there was work to put in. And crazy enough, Frankie was with the shits. Ol’ girl still tells stories of his cleverness in hittin’ people, a few of which, she was present for, even at a distance. She let him do his thing while she went to school and finished her degree.”

Then Jas’ eyes trailed out to the water as he rubbed the back of his head. “Little lady graduated from college one day. And her husband rounded up all his friends and some of hers to celebrate at a restaurant. They’re all eating, drinking, and kickin’ it at the table and some kid walks up with the hammer and put two in his head and one in his chest. Ol’ boy fell on Frankie, quickly fading.”

“Oh, my god! That’s so heartbreaking!”

Jas turned back to the photo album. “I think so, too.”

“Did the police find the guy?”

“Dude with the hammer didn’t make it off the block before catching a few. By the next morning, his whole household was dead, bodies charred from a fire. The family didn’t play. And even though her husband’s death was avenged and then some, Frankie couldn’t rebound. She got a degree in business finance and never worked ‘officially’ a day of her life in that profession. His family was generous with Frankie—hella

generous. Dude had great investments in the city and real estate projects all throughout the state. The family allowed Frankie to assume all of it—they were devastated, too. Heartbroken, she decided to leave Jersey. Too many memories of him there. She came back to Harlem. Home.”

I cleared my throat, swallowing the sadness of the tale. “I’m sure her family was happy to have her back. To support her.”

Jas shook his head. “Frankie was an orphan. She never knew her parents. Always been on her own...until me.” My eyes shot wide in confusion and shock. “Yeah. She opened up a tea shop—in fuckin’ Harlem where Black folks ruled. But she got patrons here and there. Of course, it was never booming in business, even with adding food and spirits. Some days business would be so dead, she’d sit outside and read the paper.

“Her spot was where my pops would pick me up from when I’d go visit him in Jersey. I’d stand out there and wait for him to pull up. For years, Frankie would see me out there, sometimes through the window, but we ain’t never speak. She would see how my father would pull up and always have some negative shit to say about me...my moms. It was clear to her I hated going to see that man. One day, she brought some tea out. This tiny ass white lady with big glasses brought my damn thirteen-year-old Black ass out some tea.”

I laughed so hard at the visual. Jas chuckled, too, shaking his head. “But what she said after handing over the tea blew my mind.”

“What did she say?”

“She said I could leave the book bag filled with guns and cash at her restaurant until I was done with my pops in Jersey.”

“What?”

Jas nodded, expressing understanding for my stunned reaction. “My mind was blown. All those years of seeing the midget out there, I never considered she had been paying attention to the conversations I had with my boys when they’d

walk me to my pops' 'pick up' spot. Didn't know I'd been talking loud enough on my cell when she was around. I didn't realize she'd seen my exchanges with my mom when I'd run into her out there in passing or she'd walk me there, begging for money to last her until I got back."

"What did you do?"

"I left it with her."

I gasped. "You didn't even know her! What if she was law enforcement? She could have stolen it all from you."

"If she was police then the drop would've happened then rather than when I got over the bridge and my pops found it. A few months before, he found a wad of cash and went berserk, telling me the next time he'd call the cops. So, I knew if he'd found this, he would have acted on his word." *Damn...* "And her stealing from me was never a fear. When I handed the bag over, I promised her that if she stole a single bill or gat from me, I would find her. Then I would take her in the basement of my projects and let the crackheads run a train on her until she passed out. Then I'd bring her back to her tea shop and gut her alive."

That was the most vile—savage—threat I'd ever heard. And there was the flash of darkness in Jas' eyes I'd sensed before. Nervous, I snorted. "She knew your young ass was just talking shit."

Jas' head shook with sober assurance. "Frankie was Harlem, Shi. I was a peon only to my pops. On the streets, I was a little ass terror. She knew I meant and could carry out every word. I knew I meant what I said, but later I learned she knew those words were like vows when they left my mouth. The old lady had a pulse on the whole city. Remember, Frankie's with the shits. I came back for my stash and she handed it over intact. That was the first of many times she served as my bank. The relationship grew from there. Frankie never had another love after her husband and she never had kids. I could only fulfill one of those roles. She took me in from that day on. She even helped my mother get into rehabilitation programs over the years. She's like my third leg

or arm. I couldn't have been this successful without her loyalty.”

I pulled in a deep breath, trying to stew on this overwhelming information. But it made sense to me: the house being in her name, likely his vehicles, too.

“Is *Rizzo's Custom Homes & Developers* in Frankie's name, too?”

“Nah. Up until recently, it was in Frankie's name. But it's now all me. I had to start legitimizing myself. Can't stay a John Doe forever.”

“She's like your administrative assistant, Frankie.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she takes care of your affairs, from your assets to your transactions.” My eyes gestured the room. “Like she booked these accommodations for you.”

“Nah. Ava did all of this.”

*Ava?* “The apprentice?” When he affirmed with a nod, I masked my irrational jealousy by going back to the photo album. Then I recalled, in all of my fury yesterday, Jas did mention that awful detail. I'd already demonstrated the green-eyed monster once this morning. No need for another.

The last series of pictures were of Jas in prison. In them, I saw his body transform from tall and stalky to tree-height hulking to lanky and reasonably robust, just as he was now.

“You were huge,” I commented, hoping to mask the sadness I felt seeing him in varied prison uniforms.

“There's not much else to do in there.”

I licked my lips and swallowed. “Here's the picture Charmagne has up in her apartment. You are bigger now than then.”

He nodded. “I guess I had to get naked to prove it to you.”

I giggled. “You did.”

Jas reached for me. “You’re laughing, but I can see something’s bothering you.”

I tried shaking my head, dismissing my silliness. “This is the end of the photo album.”

“It is.”

“It ends with pictures of you in prison.”

“It does.”

“But life didn’t end while you were in there. You’re not still in there.”

“I copped this from my moms a few days ago to share with you today.” He shrugged. “She probably stopped collecting pictures of me because I haven’t taken many since being home. I work all the time.”

“You do work hard. But you...” I tried to think. “...spend time with your family. Look. They’re with you now for your birthday.”

“They’re with me for my birthday because of you. You planned all of this.”

“But they would have done something back in Harlem if I didn’t mention a destination birthday.”

“If you didn’t lie about planning one with my ‘boss.’” He used air quotations.

“I was mad.” I pouted like a child, not caring about risking my dignity. “You never shared your birthdate with me.”

“A’ight.” He inhaled deeply. “We not ‘bout to rehash that argument. It’s incongruent to the moment. We’re here now. I’m sharing with you. Yesterday, I told you I want you and today, I’m sharing something that reveals what my life’s been like. It’s like a highlight reel.”

“I know,” I murmured. My eyes brushed over the album. I guessed I could see his point. “And I thank you for this. I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate it. It’s just that your life—who I feel you to be—is so much bigger than this photo album. It stops at prison. When I see you, I don’t see a felon. I



mean, yeah, I guess I believe your story about having been there, but I've yet to meet the nefarious felon."

Locked into my eyes, he murmured, "And I pray to God you never will. That's my past." He pointed to the album. "I'm working on my future." He pointed to me.

Then he reached down, off the bed near his feet, and brought back a red *Cartier* bag. I didn't know what to think at first. Jas pulled out a large square, red leather box and handed it to me.

"Ooooh!" I sang, shimmying my shoulders. "The *red* box. What do we have here?"

I pushed in the gold knob and the lid ascended, revealing a necklace. "The diamonds." I peered up to him. "It's very pretty."

"*Juste un Clou.*"

"Yeah. I know. I love that line," I whispered, lost in awe. "Please put it on."

Jas retrieved it from the box and I leaned over to let him fasten it beneath my braids. When I straightened, I lifted the golden pendant with diamonds, though I couldn't really see it from this view.

I leaned over toward him again, pulling him in for another kiss, muttering, "Seven thousand dollars on my neck. This is a first. Thank you, Jas." He kissed me back, warming my core.

Jas reached back inside the bag, pulling out another box. This one was purple with gold detail. I knew this jeweler, too. My heart began to race in unwanted anticipation.

"*Andreatta's.*"

Jas only responded with a flexing jaw and determined eyes. A step above *Tiffany & Co.*, *Andreatta's Promises* was renowned for their rings. *Engagement rings*. So many celebrities bought their physical representation of forever from this place. This was clearly a ring sized box. I knew the man was off about his desire for marriage, but was Jas this off about me? I mean... I liked him—god, I more than "liked" this

man. To me, my feelings were irrationally advanced for Jas. I'd just gotten out of a four-year relationship for crying out loud. A relationship with a man I thought of considerably less than I did Jas on any given day.

But a proposal?

My palms were misty when he handed the box over, mouth dessert-level dry. My hands trembled as I paid him a final glance before our god-inspired rendezvous would be forever changed. Holding my breath, I detached the button and lifted the lid. I could hear my pulse in my head, I was so damn nervous. Inside was—*were*...earrings. They were infinity posts.

“Platinum. I hope you ain't allergic.” His face was still set in stone.

“You're nervous about giving me a pair of earrings?” In this moment, I should have been relieved, but instead I felt a sting of rejection. It was illogical, but hey; so were my feelings for him.

When he didn't answer, I laughed because his lack of words provided an answer.

“You were scared, thinking there was a ring in there.”

I tried to contain my humor. “I won't lie. I did think there was a cut hollow emerald in here. But thankfully all you got right was the metal!” I cheesed.

“So you want a platinum, emerald diamond?”

Studying the earrings, I nodded. “Yeah. But these have some—oh, wow!” Engraved into the infinity symbol were our names: Jas on one loop and Ashira on the other. “This is so sweet.”

“And meaningful.”

I glanced up at him. “Infinity *mean*—”

“Forever.” The exaggerated movement of his lips to fully enunciate the word sent an incredible chill down my spine. A sensation coated my skull as it tightened over my brain.

“Forever means...?”

“How it’s defined in the dictionary. I plan on being around forever.”

“Which means?” My eyes narrowed and neck twisted slightly to the left.

God, I was a fucking asshole. But I couldn’t help it.

“It means get used to never fuckin’ another man for the rest of your life. And I mean *ever*—” There was a knock at the door. “Yo!” Jas shouted.

“Oh, hey!” a small voice sounded on the other side. “We’re here! I have Shi-Shi’s things.” That was my Shizu. I could identify that voice anywhere.

“Coming, Shizu!” I called out to her. “One sec! I’m just in here getting pre-proposed to!”

“What?!” That was Becky.

Jas’ deathly glare never left my face. There was so much to unpack here, but the time wasn’t right. We had to go. There were people ready to celebrate the birthday boy. So, immediately, I thought to put the earrings on in my second lobe-hole. “You need to put on some clothes. I don’t do community peen with my girls. And they’re dying to confirm your measurements.”

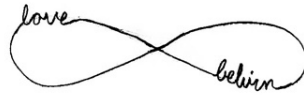
Jas’ chin dropped and face wrinkled with incredulity. “What?”

“We’ve gotta go, birthday boy. I need to shower. Go have breakfast with your family. I’m sure they’ve been waiting on you.”

Jas snorted. “I doubt they’re awake.” He stood from the bed.

“It’s your birthday. All day, which means it will be fun. All day. Shi-Shi will make sure of that. And by the way,” I spoke while he gaited to the closet. “Thanks for gifting me on your birthday.” Jas nodded his acknowledgment of my gratitude without a glance my way. “One last thing!” This time, Jas did stop and peered at me. “What’s your full name?”

Pulling in a breath, his eyes rolled adorably in the air. “Ashira,” he grunted, continuing until he disappeared into the closet.



jas

As I sat at the table eating and in the middle of texting, realization hit. It was crazy. All the women wore the same black bathing suits with “Sin’s 33rd” in gold embroidery. Even Tanya’s mean ass was all smiles in hers. It was good to see after finding out she’d stubbed her toe, swinging on Antoine when he was flirting with a girl on the beach last night after I’d gone to bed. I was happy she was happy now. I didn’t need that drama out here. And I’d hoped her good mood would continue when Ashira got down here. She’d still been upstairs with her girls, getting dressed for the day.

When I came downstairs after leaving Ashira, Becky, and the Asian girl whose name I needed to commit to memory, my family and Ashira’s girl, Corrine, were all in the living room waiting and shouted *happy birthday* as I plopped down the stairs. It soon became evident that they all gathered to give gifts.

*My gifts.*

*Man presented me with keys and the title to a brand new Audi R8 Spyder. As my family ooh’d and ahhhh’d at the gesture, he pounded his chest.*

*“That muthafucka’s being delivered to ya crib today!” His expression tight, holding back his bubbling emotions. It’s what we did.*

*Jug's gift was the deed to land with eight brand new condos in North Caldwell. All the units had been sold with an option to buy by the tenants.*

*"Oh, fuck!" Chrissy, Chelsea's girl, jumped up and down. "He gets paid whether they're rented or purchased full out. This is some real Black ass boss shit happening right before our eyes!" She was able to explain to the room just what the gift was and was right.*

*My niggas and I gifted wealth now. Clothes, jewelry, and footwear were all cool, but there were many nights we dreamed of investing and blessing each other. We'd reached that season in our lives years ago when I was in prison. I'd gifted them land, vehicles, and investment lots just as Divine had me. We were of a new culture now, and I guessed it was kind of cool that my family got to experience it.*

*"Sin, my nigga, from the pissy hallways to buildings. From the block to Harlem. From Harlem to the Tri-state. From the first M to the FEDs." His voice trembled with bubbled passion. I wanted Juggy to let that bid shit go. I did it, he held me down, and I was now home on my king shit. Ashira confirmed my supremacy this morning, waking me up with my cock in her mouth. It was over. I'd survived. We were here. "To more Ms and endless opportunities." He raised his bottle of Mauve in the air. "From Harlem, always wit' that Harlem Pride, to life."*

*"Aye!" I cheered.*

*At the same time, Man and I chanted, "Always with that Harlem Pride!"*

*My cousins shouted and cheered, too! I hugged my niggas, appreciating their generosity.*

*A clearing of the throat got our attention. It was Chels, shoulders tight, holding a box in her little hands.*

*"Your cronies here are a hard act to follow." We snickered at that. "Jas, you know our family isn't much for pomp and circumstance—unless it's for violence or prison releases." She*

rolled her eyes as they agreed through affirmative shouts and laughter.

*“Free my bitch, Teea!” Sheema shouted.*

*“You know what you mean to our family—I hope you do. You’ve been a leader since you were a kid. I’m just grateful for being able to give you your flowers on this side of heaven.”*

*“Amen,” I found myself mumbling.*

*She continued, “I’m sure Harlem is celebrating you back home. But with the generous assistance of Juggy, Man, and Shi-Shi, we pooled our pennies to get you this. We love you.” She handed me the box.*

*“Word,” Antoine agreed.*

*Myron affirmed with, “On god, my nigga!”*

*I opened the wrapped box to find a Rolex watch. I wasn’t a timepiece type of guy. The one I wore every day now was from a classy chick I’d come to adore. But this was beautiful.*

*“Damn!” Jonathan belted with a booming laugh. “That’s what my three G’s went to?”*

*“Yeah, right, lil nigga.” Sheema laughed. “More like twenty dollars.”*

*As they laughed, Chelsea rolled her eyes*

*Then Jonathan blurted, “How much your broke ass baby daddy put in? Three twenty-five dollar Home Depot gift cards he boosted off the job?”*

*Even I had to snicker at that. Corinne, who stayed behind, cracked the hell up, too.*

*“Easy, you college ass drop out,” Myron moped.*

*Once the room quieted enough for her to be heard, Corinne spoke up. “Well, with money like this, I want into this family!” We laughed. “I’m sitting next to Juggy all day. I need land.” She winked.*

*“C’mon. I got room in my lap for you, baby girl.” Jug was dead ass.*

*I brushed my hands over my face to hide my humor. No one else tried. This was crazy!*

*“Anyway, since Shi-Shi can’t hurry her ass along, she asked me to share this with you. It’s her ‘birthday gift’ to you, though I’m sure she gave her goodies already.”*

*Chrissy gasped then fell into Chelsea, cracking the fuck up. The group responded in a similar manner. I had to remember for them, Ashira was a “celebrity” between her having been with the Austin kid and her social media presence.*

*Corinne shook it off and forged ahead, showing me her phone. It was a picture of a glistening white utility van, apparently parked in front of my crib. Everyone jumped to my side to get a peep. “She said she had your housekeeper sign for it yesterday.”*

*“Damn! Living large, O.G.!” Myron shrieked in my damn ear.*

*The room agreed with his sentiments. I passed Jug a knowing look.*

*His droopy eyes grew wide. “Damn. Shi really hate the work ride, huhn!”*

*I shook my head and thanked the group.*

That’s when Chels herded the group into the kitchen to eat a crazy spread that had been prepared by a gang of chefs. We ate from the big ass spread, conversations flowing all around me. Tuning them out, my thoughts went to work. How much of it was I missing out on? I told myself when I’d finally decided to entertain Ashira with this trip how this would be training grounds for Ava Dallas, my new apprentice.

I’d even given her some light work to handle for me with *Por el Amor del Amor*. It was nothing too risky, but definitely a few things I didn’t have time to do before leaving and what had to be done before my return tomorrow. While taking my morning shit before showering this morning, I checked in with her, and her response assured me things were being handled in a manner that exceeded my expectations. She had been

working on getting Ashira and her girls on the flight back home with us tomorrow.

“Yo,” the ear-piercing sounds of Jonathan licking his fingers snatched me from my thoughts. “I’m about to go help the chefs in the kitchen cook us up some goodies to get this shit lit!”

*Shit.* I was clued into what he meant. I had mad love for my cousin. He was young and had always been bright, but directionless. For some reason, Jonathan craved immorality in the form of drugs. The kid’s mind was brilliant with varied elements and calculations, cooking up illegal substances and distributing them, somewhat like me coming up—only my hustle was guns, for the most part.

What also separated him from me was he made no dough from his hustle. He seemed to have gotten off on creating drugs for all and getting high off his work. It was dumb as hell to me. I’d been trying to kick it with him, connect with the kid for wisdom. But my influence on him was limited to Jonathan giving me his ear just off my reputation, totally dismissing my heeding. He pushed back from the table and was headed to the kitchen when the girls had finally joined us.

“Nigga fucked me good...I’mma take his ass to *B-Way Burgeer!*” Ashira appeared singing, strutting into the room with one arm in the air and her two girls behind her dancing.

Corinne shrieked, “Say what?!”

“Nigga fucked me good...I’mma take his ass to *B-Way Burgeer!*” Ashira repeated.

“*B-Way Burger?*” the Asian girl added, striking a pose.

“Who dat?” as though performing an act, Corinne asked dramatically.

It was obvious their humor played off each other’s.

“Supreme!” Ashira twirled a three-sixty on one foot.

“*To Supreme!*” the two women behind Ashira came through on cue. They were all amped when reciting, “*You couldn’t live out ya dreams. Father to a mass of soldiers... We*



*stand on ya shoulders.*” By this time, a few at the table had caught on and joined in. *“Life don’t end ‘cause you down in the pen. Every day I breathe a free man, I’m soaring on the wings of ya sins.”*

Ashira continued a cute two-step infusing her b-boy postures. She had the attention of the room and, as a dancer, was extremely comfortable in her impromptu performance.

Shit was sweet until, completing her way to the table, Ashira hit us with, *“I pay homage to that gangsta, properly named SIN. Took out them Polack niggas...”*

Her girls joined in with, *“Missed the charges then ate the FED’s pen. Sat quiet, never a rat. Nigga ‘bout to hit the streets.”*

Several at the table fell in line reciting Young Lord’s *“Homage”* lyrics, *“Ran the cellies...now ready to spin the block... Fuck y’all niggas, jerkin industry cock!”*

Then the room drew eerily quiet as Ashira sashayed to me, ending her grand entrance. Her girls found seats at the table.

“Damn,” Becky, the white girl, chirped. “Why y’all looking like you’ve seen a ghost? We’re just having fun.” She reached behind her seat and grabbed a plate to start piling on food. “And I don’t use the *N* word.” She rolled her eyes and flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder.

No one laughed at that well-timed joke. Adamantly, swallowing down my paranoia, I read the fucking room. Myron wore a goofy expression, eyes swinging between Ashira and me. Tanya’s eyes were big as hell as she rolled them, hiding a smile and making a dramatic show of going back to her food. Chelsea’s brows seemed to have been stuck to the ceiling, she was so uncomfortable.

Jonathan, near the buffet table by the drinks, appeared shocked, too, examining the room. Then his wonderment won over and he hooted, “Oh, shit! You know, *know!* You know my nigga a real thoroughbred! See, Sin. Shi-Shi and her peoples be with the shits, my nigga! She dope as hell. The whole crew,

on god! Even the white girl respect ya work with them ‘Lacks!’ He grabbed his crotch, laughing hard as hell.

“Oh, shit!” Antoine quickly bought into the narrative. “Sin let her in. Shi-Shi, you cool as fuck, yo!”

Tanya slapped his meaty ass arm so hard, the sound reverberated around the room.

“Wait.” The Asian girl’s narrowed eyes got even smaller. “You’re *that* Sin Young Lord’s rapping about?”

Becky dropped the sausage she’d gripped with the serving fork, making a clash of it.

“The fuck?” Corinne grumbled, eyes dead on Ashira.

*Fuck!*

*No!*

My head swung up to Ashira standing over me. Her eyes communicated confusion and a demand for answers. This shit happened way too fast. *God, help me.* I couldn’t feel my damn lungs. My stomach felt fucking queasy like I needed to shit. I couldn’t remember the last time my heart pounded in my chest like this outside of working out or blowing one in the woman who, now, appeared just as small as she did when I’d purposely shut her out. It had been a theme since I met her. An expression I’d been indifferent to until I started catching feelings for her. Those feelings had now gotten ahead of my ass. Now, I was all in, needing her smile and happiness. The days of not giving a shit about what this girl thought of me were over. And it was in this moment that I realized not giving a shit was a barrier protecting me from the tightness in my chest growing exponentially each second I didn’t reply. I had to gain control of the moment.

*C’mon, Sin. Act on it now!*

“Yeah,” I answered with a straight face.

Ashira blinked. “Like...everything?”

And without thought, I snorted, schooling my demeanor, “You know niggas embellish on wax. He must’ve heard about

my ammo work through street channels,” I shrugged. “and added the cinematic bloodshed shit to it.”

“You know us hood niggas fucks with them mafia movies, Shi-Shi. It was just a dope story Lord put together about Sin,” Jug helped me out.

“The nigga was just paying homage to the track he wrote about paying homage.” Man came through for the layup just before the final buzzer.

I could see her chest rise and fall in heavy heaves as she processed our words. Ashira’s eyes measured the room. Each second we waited, my balls and armpits literally secreted uncontrollably.

# Chapter 17

**Part II cont'd**

**May | Present Day**



**M**ercy. Mercy. Mercy...

I prayed, silently watching for her final reaction.

Grace wasn't appropriate in this instance. I'd lied to my girl, something I hadn't done and told her I didn't and wouldn't do to her. I'd done wrong by her and God. But right now, she wasn't ready for my ugliness. She didn't deserve my truth in this fashion. Breaking Ashira's heart wasn't what I'd ever wanted to do. She'd kicked off my birthday by sucking my dick to awaken me this morning. Now, while I was no fool to believe that was her first blow, I also had to believe Ashira didn't go around sucking niggas' dicks casually. If she had, mine would've been waxed by her pillowy lips long before today. This was fucked up. This was why I knew bringing my family down here wasn't a good idea. I was losing my shit in a way I hadn't since my pops had a hold on my subconscious as a young pup.

*God, please. Suspend your mercy upon this room...*

And within seconds, the beautiful features of her face settled, relaxing. Slowly, they transformed into a jovial expression. Ashira leaned down over me, gunning for the piece of pancake I had suspended in the air since the moment I'd become aware of her strong compelling presence like everyone else. She moved in seductively and ate from my fork.

“Mmmm...” She licked her lips and chewed. “Maple syrup!” Then she kicked her long, toned leg between the table and me and planted herself in a straddling position on my lap. That's when I noticed her black bathing suit although she wore short shorts with it. Only, embroidered on Ashira's chest was “*Sin's #1.*”

Relief washing over me and still reeling from what had almost gone down, I was too overwhelmed to react to her thoughtfulness. Instead, I gushed, “Is that what kind it is? I knew there was a kick to it,” my heart pounding rowdily in my fucking chest.

“Yup,” her lips popped at the *P* in the word. Then, returning to her celebratory performance, Ashira rolled her body over me with agility, one arm back in the air. “My body burns for this decadent boss nigga.” She twirled her neck then twerked on me again as the table went up in a roar.

Then Ashira grabbed me at the sides of my face, something I'd come to realize was her thing, and kissed me with her tongue. Everything went silent and unmoving all around me, and I fell weak, kissing her back, withholding nothing. That's what this suburban chick did to me. Our tongues swirled against one another's hungrily until she pulled back.

She stared me dead in the eyes, the tension in her face reminding me of her expression less than an hour ago when I was pounding into her sweet pussy, balls slapping against the fat of her ass. The flash memory warming my fucking blood until I wanted her all over again. While staring her in the eyes, a deep growl lurched from my damn belly.

Then the bubble burst and I heard the explosion at the table, a string of profanities, snapping me into the here and now.

I couldn't decipher who barked, "Damn, Sin!"

"Fuck, that's hot!" I knew came from Becky.

"Get a damn room!" I believed came from Sheema.

So many remarks about a private matter, I still hadn't become accustomed to. Ashira's radiant smile teased me, adding to the reality that she'd revealed my intense sensuality to my family, outed my true animalistic nature as it related to her powerful aura.

A helpless smile I didn't deserve broke out over my face, intensifying the reaction of the room. But I didn't give a shit, I was crazy about this girl. My dick was hard, ready for her. All of my insecurities from minutes earlier had dissipated under Ashira's magic. Right now, even if we didn't fuck, I needed her alone with me.

I slid us back in the chair, away from the table, and grabbed her at the hips to stand. My dick was brick hard and no one needed to know, but her. And Ashira very well did. She felt me against her hot pussy. Laughing deliriously, she wrapped her legs and arms around me.

"Got me open in front of my damn family. Let's go!" I grumbled, carrying her out the room for the water. Anywhere alone. I shouted over my shoulders, "Yo, Jonathan! Don't play pharmacist in here! Keep them drugs away from this house!"

"Man, I got you!" he returned as I carried my girl away.



The day went by almost in a blur, at the promise of "Shi-Shi's entertainment." We started at the pool, blasting music and swimming. To my surprise, there was a gang of big ass balloons everywhere, making it an official celebration. A banner hanging from the deck reading, "*HAPPY BIRTHDAY*"

*SIN!*” blew in the wind. All around the property were stick signs with the hashtag, “*Sin’s NO IG Birthday Bash.*” I wouldn’t know what that meant until later on.

Nonetheless, I was able to get Ashira and her girl’s passport information to Ava and received confirmation for them being able to get in on our flight home tomorrow while celebrating. I shared the information with the girls and they were able to map out plans to meet us at the airport before Becky got too wasted to care. She was hilarious; sweet, too.

Eventually, the crowd made it to the beach where there were more of the same signs. This was all Ashira, I knew it. Yeah, I was sure Man, Jug, and possibly even Chels assisted, but all at the request of Ashira. It’s what she and her crew did. They had elaborate, college-level festive celebrations. Proof of that was the small yacht waiting for us in the water. We took small motor boats to board it. Everyone with a vice or two in their hands, be it beer, wine, *Hennesy*, or a blunt. Ashira had a glass of *Mauve* and a stogie, and I had her: my vice and blessing all wrapped in five feet and eight inches.

We sailed the Caribbean, cruising through the lively waves. Somewhere around there, another revelation dawned on me. Ashira had orchestrated this whole thing: the gifts, gift time—some shit my family didn’t do, not great at expressing their feelings through sobby celebratory words—the bathing suits, the balloons, catered food, a yacht ride. All of it. This was her, Ashira putting her touchstone on my life.

I glanced at her dancing to Michael Jackson’s “*Off the Wall*” with both occupied hands in the air. Catching her expressive vibes while dancing, interpreting the energy from the song, I’d quickly declared it my favorite track by the king of pop. Everyone else watched her infectious carefree spirit and fell right in line. The girl was magic, lightning in a damn bottle. I could get used to this. Could facilitate the lifestyle she needed to be free and fun just like this whenever she wanted.

Even when the yacht docked in the middle of the water and a wibit and inflatable slide appeared, my mind was blown by the endlessness of her mind. A well-read man myself, I’d never even heard of a wibit. It was a clear demonstration of

my lack of culture. Ashira and her crew taught my family and me how to have fun in a damn bouncy house in the middle of the ocean. And it was fun. Sliding down from twenty feet in the air into the water carried a thrill I'd never felt. Of course, Tanya and Sheema didn't participate, too scared of the water. They stayed on the yacht with the drinks, food, and music, taking flicks.

After being out there for a few hours, we headed back to the house and partied on the beach. Ashira tried uselessly to get me to take a shot. In all honesty, if it were just the two of us, I'd do it for her. But my cousins were present and loose. They'd drank themselves merry, including their other illicit add-ons. I wasn't mad. They didn't experience this every day, and St. Vincent was paradise. I just couldn't let go of my role as their protector. Between them wildin' out and Ashira and her girls being their normal carefree intoxicated selves, someone had to be levelheaded.

At one point, I found myself on the front porch, waiting on Ashira. I'd walked her to the house for the hundredth time for her to pee. She was tipsy as hell, and I understood it came with the territory. While waiting, I was tempted to snack on the buffet of finger foods piled on the table. I nibbled on cheese, crackers, chicken wings, and even topped it off with a couple pieces of brownies. I'd just downed the second one when Ashira had come out of the house, pulling me by the waist of my trunks. She was ready to return to the beach.

About an hour later, the crew was still lit, dancing, eating, drinking, and some even flirting. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Corinne throwing her ass into Jug's crotch. His arms were stretched wide, one hand holding a bottle of *Mauve*. Her moves were sensual and agile for her voluptuous size. She'd earned my respect. Man was damn near tonguing Shizu—I'd finally gotten it after hearing it all day—down in the water.

"You are really cracking up," Ashira observed out loud, but with a twinge of concern in her voice. She pulled from her cigar again, blowing the smoke away from us.



I couldn't help it. It was funny to me how these two were hooking up randomly. It was like old times before I got knocked. I'd been the least into romance out of the three of us. I didn't go for the chicks who liked the chase. Instead, I kept a few on rotation who didn't make me work hard for a nut. But these two niggas made an art of getting pussy. It was all they wanted. And in that moment, the revelation seemed funny to me.

"Yo!" Myron called out. "Shi-Shi, tag me in that pic of all of us on the boat."

"I have a couple," Ashira returned while wrapped under my arm. "DM me your handle."

"Me, too, Shi-Shi," Chrissy requested. "Did you see I tagged you in the one with us and Chelsea?"

"Yeah." Ashira giggled. "That one was cute!"

"I thought this was a no IG party." I nipped at Ashira's ear, earning another giggle from her.

"Yeah." She stayed at her phone. "That's the point. It's a joke. We've been posting all day. We know how lowkey you are. I thought it'd be cool to put you on blast a little." Then she twisted her neck to look up at me. "I especially think it's a good idea now that I know the whole world knows your reputation." She rolled her eyes. Ashira was still tripping about the Young Lord song.

I pulled her face back up by rotating her forehead. "Don't do that, Shi-Shi." I kissed her lips.

She let me, closing her eyes and puckering her lips. "Don't try to soften me up by using a reference other than Witherspoon."

"I'm not. You don't like it when I call you that, though."

"I don't. At least I know, an old dog can be taught new tricks. Now, I have hope for our future." She finessed me by pushing from her toes to kiss me before I could ask what that meant. "Go, Rinny Rin!" Ashira cheered on her girl.

When I looked their way again, Jug had lifted one leg and air thrust her. Laughing at them, I'd begun feeling a little woozy. A few more minutes passed and I realized my head felt a little loopy. My movements felt slower than my brain's perception. Like when I saw Jonathan walking the beach as the sun was setting, wearing a white chef's jacket and holding a tray of food, my brain registered him being up to no good. But instead of reacting to that, I laughed. When he noticed my humor, Jonathan approached Ashira and me.

"Yo, Shi, you good? I got some goodies the big homie 'on't want." He winked and I knew what he'd meant.

But instead of addressing it, I only looked on the tray.

Myron ran up on us, wanting to catch Jonathan. "I was waiting on these. Sheema had the cookies and said they was good."

"I ain't got no more. This all that's left. I'm limited out here, my nigga."

Myron asked. "What you got then?"

"Nigga, what you think?" Jonathan snapped, for some reason being evasive.

Ashira laughed.

"They the brownies right?"

"The fuck you think?" Jonathan got even louder.

That's when it clicked. "Yo, I had brownies up on the porch..." I couldn't even finish my thought, my brain whirred and I couldn't speak the unbelievable.

Jonathan's face opened wide. "Yo, you mean that plate." His eyes pointed to his tray. "The one I left out there when I had to take a leak? Shit, O.G., I *ain't*—"

In less than two seconds, I'd released Ashira. "T'mma fuck you up, yo!" I lunged for him, hearing the screams from the ladies and barks from the guys.

"Wait!"

"Sin, yo!"

“The fuck?”

All shouted around, but I couldn't focus on the alarm. Jonathan tried to break for the lawn, but I caught his little ass by the back of his trunks. My other hand caught him at the neck, and I lifted him into the air then slammed him on the ground. Out of nowhere, I felt a bunch of hands on me, breaking my grip from his ass. Some small, some hard and strong.



Trey Songz sang, “*You bring out the...animal!*” as Ashira’s pretty features beaming in my face egged me on. In my mental fog, I didn’t know who controlled the music, but knew she selected the song. She’d made comments about my growls at her, an act I didn’t know I was capable of until her. I wasn’t a man of many words, but I did respond to her beauty and sensuality as best I could.

There on the beach was a *Soul Train* line and our turn was now. Dancing was never something I did in crowds, although I had a mean two-step. But she had me out here, about to chart a line created by my peoples. And high as hell, I obeyed, returning her smile.

Ashira led me by the hand, twirling beneath my arm as we progressed. Still attached to me, she spread her legs and bent toward the sanded ground, swaying her hips while looking back at me. Per usual, my family ate it up, cheering all around. Her girls encouraged her as they always did. If it weren’t for them, I’d think Ashira had been performing just for attention, but it was her turn up persona I had to get with or miss the blessing of.

My baby girl was fun and bold. She was cunning enough to coax it out of me, too. As high as I was, all I wanted to do was sleep it off. But Ashira begged me not to end the night prematurely. She said it was best to work it off. The girl even ate a few gummies Jonathan had cooked up, too, saying she

would be high with me. I ain't like it at all, but because my mind was so gone, I couldn't do shit about it.

And now, I was squatting low, grabbing her at the hips while grinding, no different from Jug's stupid ass earlier.

“Oh, my god! My cousin can dance his ass off!”

“Yo!”

“He better! That's Shi-Shi he gotta keep up with!”

“Awwww! Ain't they cute!”

“Fuck him up, Shi!”

“Shit!”



“Happy birthday to you!” the crowd sang as a dude I ain't know held the big ass cake up in the air on the beach. “Happy birthday, dear Sin—*Jassssssss!*” It sounded like a mixture of my names. They finished the song and it was time for my dizzy brain to blow out the candles.

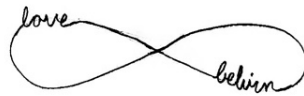
“Make a wish!” Ashira urged as I clung to her.

“Make one for me,” I whispered in her ear for absolutely no reason at all and thought the shit was funny.

*God, if I already haven't, I'mma kill Jonathan's little ass for this...*

Ashira made a sharp whistling sound with her finger and thumb. “Attention, everyone! Attention!” When they were done laughing, she announced, “My baby daddy wants me to make a wish for him. I don't think I'm sober enough for the honor, but I'll take it.” She turned to me, chin upturned to stare into my tight eyes. “Jas, for you, I wish your every prayer is answered by God. I wish for everything even though getting everything on your wish list will eventually eliminate me. But I've been better after having known you,” She reached up to kiss me, “baby daddy of the kids I don't want.” She fell into my chest, laughing along with the others.

I was stuck at the baby daddy title. Ashira took street dialect too far. I had no desire to be anyone's baby's daddy.



“Oh, baby!” Ashira’s thighs clenched around me, arms clutching me at the shoulders.

Her breathing was harsh and delicious, loud in my ear. My heart beat so fast and hard. Goosebumps were all over my body, skin tight and tingling.

The fat of her ass smacked over and over against my opened thighs as she rode me and I drove into her from below, holding her at the shoulder. She kissed me sloppily, tongue touring my whole mouth. Her heavy tits bouncing ferociously, nipples rubbing against the standing hairs of my chest. Then my hand gripped her small waist, grains of sea salt coarse between our touch.

I groaned hard when she caught my bottom lip between her teeth and clasped, the soothe of her tongue swiping the piece of flesh caught in her mouth. She was so fucking seductive, it blew my mind each time.

*Is that rain?*

I had no idea how we ended up out here fucking on the beach, my mind had been going in and out, the effects of the edibles still in my system. But that ain’t stop my need for her, and neither did the rain as I leaned back with one palm and my feet planted on a soaked towel on the sand. I was too far gone to be sure we were alone. I didn’t have all my faculties to protect her honor. *This* was Ashira’s show: she was the director and I was too happy to be the producer.

“Fuck, Jas, I’m about to come again!”

*Again?*

How long had we been out here? I only knew I didn’t want to stop. Fuck the rain.

I felt the walls of her pussy quiver, her thighs vibrating around my waist as she increased her rabid dips on my dick. I met her spasming walls each time she'd drop down on me until she surged upward on a teasing grip. Ashira was so fucking wet and warm inside. She shivered sucking in short breaths as I pounded her from beneath, holding her in place by her waist. She took it all, body straining, pussy pulsating.

"Aye..." She pulled me back into the kiss and I pulled away from her mouth again. "Yo..."

"What?" She smiled, keeping with the rhythm over me.

"Ya ex..." Ashira didn't stop and neither did she answer. I was so high, I didn't have enough good judgment to take that as a hint. "Yo, Shira."

"Yes, baby." She kissed me again, just a peck this time.

"Ya ex..."

Her strokes slowed a little. "What about the loser, babe?"

"He ain't call you."

"No, baby. He *haseen*—hasn't called." Ashira circled on my lap.

"I know he ain't. 'Cause I told him not to."

"Okay." She kissed me again, this time with tongue and, at first, I was with it.

But a strange thing happens in the mind when intoxicated: you still lived in real time. Issues were still present, though most times, pushed to the back. So, I could still remember her need for me to be open with her.

So, I pulled back from her soft mouth again. "Nah, Shira. You ain't hearing me. I told that nigga not to hit you up. I had Divine get me to him." I smiled like a goofball. "I told him that, but you used this trip to tell him about me."

"Yes. *Yess*," she whimpered, plunging down on me even faster.

Ashira was coming. When my brain finally perceived it and sent the FYI to my body, heat crept up the underside of

my balls, my damn toes curled, and I shot hot and hard into her. My lungs were fucking lost when she captured my mouth again with a kiss that kept me under a spell I didn't want out of. I groaned into her mouth, abs jerking, sending her higher in the blackness of the air.

Pushing hot breaths against my mouth, Ashira chuckled, "You came again, too. Well, at least the condom didn't break." I was too lost to find her amusement. She didn't wait for me to either. "One more time," she panted, heavy dollops of rain escaping between our faces. "One more time in case it's supposed to thunder out here, too."

Trying to catch my breath and keep the rain from my eyes, I nodded hard, down for whatever she wanted. I was her producer. My brain had given up in real time. Nothing else mattered at that point, but Shi-Shi.



ashira

The scenery turned industrial, cueing me in to our arrival at the airport. They drove too fast and reckless for the countryside roads for me. As much as I'd enjoyed my time in St. Vincent, I didn't want my last days to be here.

Speaking of which, I'd be a liar if I didn't admit to feeling guilty as hell. For as much trouble as I'd gone to, to change the location of Jas' birthday yesterday, the day turned out to be wilder than expected. I had no idea his cousin, Jonathan, would have drugs there. Honestly, it wasn't so bad because it was just marijuana. But I hated that Jas accidentally ingested it. He didn't deserve that. Jas had been the only guy I'd "dated" who didn't indulge in anything. Yesterday, he even

declined a shot for his birthday. Then the poor guy ended up intoxicated all night. It was fun and because of that singular fact, I felt like shit. A high Jas was adventurous and loose. *And he was a fucking sex god.* Oh, my god. The many times he came last night—the countless times I’d orgasmed was one for the books.

I closed my eyes, rolling them behind my lids in frustration. I needed to be with Jas this morning. Like me, he got little sleep. When we finally left the beach last night, it was almost five in the morning. We showered together because I didn’t want to leave him alone for a second—*I think.* Afterward, Jas fell completely out, snoring to incredible volumes, something I’d never seen of him.

With little energy myself, I tried packing his clothes. I even checked the drawers in the bedroom and bathroom to ensure had he woke up this morning with a foggy brain, at least those fine details would have been covered. By the time I was done, I lay down next to Jas in the bed, allowing the rhythm of his chest to lure me to sleep, the sound of his raucous snoring be damned. And in the blink of an eye, Becky was knocking on the door, telling me our ride had arrived to take us back to the resort to wash and pack before coming here to the airport. I was operating on less than two hours of sleep and guilt.

“Wait,” Corinne spoke up. “Why are we turning into this lot and not the main entrance of the airport?”

“Because, ma’am,” the driver replied with a thick Caribbean accent. “‘tis is where I was told your flight leaves from.”

“Are you sure?” Shizu challenged him, going into her phone for the instructions from Jas. “We’re hardly on time. We can’t afford to miss this flight.”

Corinne was already looking in hers. “He doesn’t say which gate or airline.”

The ladies’ questioning eyes were on me when the driver assured, “You’re right here, ma’am.”



We turned into a gate where there were a few small jets and larger planes. There were also a few cars parked not too far from some of the aircrafts. I knew this scene. We didn't belong here.

“Sir, where did you get your instructions from?” I asked, now challenging his confidence. Shizu was right. We were running against the clock.

“Ma'am,” his tone a little forceful just as we neared a few familiar silhouettes standing next to a large plane. “We are here. Do you see this *Bombardier* right here?”

He was right. I could make out *Ellis Bombardier* on the plane Jas and his friends and family stood next to, seemingly speaking with a captain.

“Holy shit!” Shizu must have recognized them, too. “Are we flying home private?”

“Well, I'll be damn,” Corinne hissed.

Muted from betrayal, I saw red.

We filed out of the van while our luggage was being removed and taken to the plane.

A beautiful Black woman in professional blue and gray livery and high heels sauntered over to us. “Hi, ladies! So glad you made it on time. I'm Mel, your flight attendant back to New Jersey. I just need your identification and passports. Drivers' licenses will suffice.” Her smile beamed with crimson-stained full lips.

I obeyed, attention going between my purse and Jas, who stood in a group with the captain, *I assumed*, Juggy, Man, and Myron. His legs were long and thick in an all-black sweat suit and black baseball cap pulled low on his face, damn near hiding his eyes. He stood tall, broad, and strong, exuding urbane alpha energy, holding a cup of coffee. The man didn't appear to have lost an ounce of sleep last night from fucking me all night long, into the morning. I didn't give a fuck about how handsome and delectable he appeared, I was fucking done with him.

“Hey, y’all,” Man called over as we were finishing up with Mel.

I was third in line and ambled over to him while putting my things away. In that moment, I didn’t know how, but had decided to keep cool the entire flight home. If I confronted Jas, because we weren’t alone, I’d share with his family and friends how stupid I was for fucking a man I knew shit about. And at this point, I was sick of the narrative my damn self. I would not crack out here on the tarmac.

“Aye,” Jas called over to me, tone commanding and clear as I followed Man, Corinne, and Shizu toward the stairs of the plane. Swallowing back my anger to get this shit over with, I strolled over to him. “Captain Willie, this is my lady, Ashira Witherspoon.”

“Oh, wow!” the older Black gentleman beamed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve been told you hosted a festive past few days.”

I mustered a smile and met his proffered palm. “That was what I was aiming for. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Captain.”

He gave a bow. “Okay. I’m going to join my son in there so we can get you guys back to the States.”

“Thanks, Captain Willie.” Jas shook his hand. “I appreciate you accommodating us.”

“No worries at all, sir.” He took off for the boarding stairs.

“You good?”

“Me?” My face opened wide and I inhaled deeply, trying not to lose my shit. “I’m surviving moment by moment. The title you gave me in that introduction is laughable, however.”

Jas’ head angled, eyes narrowed even further under the brim. “You ain’t my lady, Shi?”

I tried smiling past the hurt. “I don’t think I’m anything past a lover, at this point.”

Jas sighed, head rolled. “Let’s get the shit over with. It’s the plane. Right?”

“It’s the vibe of this entire...situationship we’ve found ourselves in. I’m your lady, but you don’t even tell me you’re flying down here privately? I only know about the redeemed man in a striped prison uniform, but apparently everyone else knows about the influential and apparently wealthy Harlem icon. I mean...what kind of money do you have to do this?” My arms swung toward the plane.

“It’s not mine. A good friend—former mentor—was able to help me out with my dilemma.”

“Oh, so spending your birthday with my friends and me was a dilemma?”

*The fuck?*

Jas took one aggressive step toward me, nostrils flared. “No. Bringing my family on a trip they couldn’t afford a single night of was. You think them people got lifestyles they could up and suspend to fly out to the Caribbean...stay at a four star resort, afford the food and drinks? Nah. That’s the lifestyle of your friends, Ashira.”

“I offered to help with the *accommo*—”

“I don’t need your help!” There went that stinging sensation I felt each time he rejected me. But Jas didn’t retreat as he usually did. His thick body was against mine, pinning me to him in less than three seconds. His big, hot hand was splayed at the small of my back possessively. Familiarly. “I only need you,” he whispered in my ear so clearly.

My betrayal had upended from my belly, ready to spill from my damn eyes. “But this is me.” My tears held in my throat. “I don’t judge, Jas. If they love and support you and want to be in your life, being me is making that happen.”

“I got help with those details.”

“From who?”

“My apprentice.”

My stomach flipped with jealousy. “Why did a young apprentice for *Rizzo’s Custom Homes* get the task of something for your personal life when I’m here, able and willing to?”

That's with my heart and wallet." I pulled my head back to peer into his face. "Does she read the Bible with you, too? Suck you off when you're in need?"

"Oh, shit!" I didn't even know Juggy had stayed back after the captain left. "I'm out!"

He walked off and I left Jas' hold. We silently glowered at each other as I tried to taper my tears. "It's so hard at my age to deal with the barrage—violent storm—of emotions I feel every day over the guy I'm hopelessly falling for increasingly. And increasingly, I'm discovering the walls he has erected to not let me in. I feel alone in this. Fucking adrift, and I'm completely over it. Over the cloak-and-dagger that is Jas... whatever your real name is!"

With a flexing jaw, Jas dropped his head. "I understand. I swear to you, I do," he droned. "I'm working every day to do better." I scoffed and rolled my eyes, unimpressed by that weak ass declaration. Angered by my dismissive response, Jas gritted his teeth. "Adrift? I want you. I want you in a way you don't want me, and I accept that. If that ain't being adrift, I 'on't know what is. So, please work with me. Give me grace while I'm trying to open up to you. It's hard opening my complicated shit up to a woman who has no interest in being mine in the way I want her to be. Officially. So, grace." His head bounced softly with adamance. "A'ight. So, as I'm giving patience to whatever it is we got going on here, I need you to give me patience and understanding, too."

I swiped a wayward tear away, shaking my head. "I need more." My voice was weak, heart exposed and compromised. "Fuck that. I need more."

Jas took another deep breath then reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys and handed them to me. There were two keys on a sparkling sterling silver *Cartier* ring.

"What is this?" I was all breaths and emotions.

"Me working with you. Those are the keys to my crib. Come and go as you please. Please, come...a lot."

My belly flipped in a manner incongruent of the moment and all I could do was stare at the silver elements in my hand. I couldn't recall ever being given the keys to a man's home. When I peered up to meet Jas' handsome face, cast by a shadow from the hat, he continued his heated glowering. I swallowed hard, suddenly disarmed and once again taken by his confidence and quieted knowhow. The man may have been a loose puzzle, but Jas' action spoke of a leader.

Slowly, I saw his expression relax. It was a process given the enormity of elevated emotions just moments ago. Eventually, a smile appeared in his captivating eyes first.

“*Shit*,” gushed from my suspended lungs and I chortled. “I had to find out about a private plane to get the keys to your home? *Ummmm...*” I switched weight on my legs and pretended to scratch my scalp.

“Nah.” Jas held motionless. “It was the superb head you woke me up to yesterday. I want more of that.”

My head tossed back as I belted out the hardest laugh. Yes, I was corny as hell, being so extra, but this moment felt good.

“No, it wasn't. You brought this key ring before this trip. Unless it's yours.” That was another possibility.

“I was going to give it to you with your other gifts, but we got interrupted by your girls.”

Another engine sounded on the *Bombardier*, alerting me to our limited time. I nodded, demonstrating my understanding. Jas had planned this. He'd given thought to having me around longer and therefore opening a little more. Dare I say I was happy?

My smile must have communicated the sentiment for me. Jas wrapped his arm over my shoulder and prompted me to walk toward the stairs with him where Mel was waiting patiently.

“You never said what you thought about my birthday gift to you.”

“Which one? The van or the watch?”

I'd only contributed a couple of thousand dollars to the watch when Chelsea called asking which model they should get. I added on the money to get the one I found best fitting of the man himself, considering their budget.

“Either, I guess.”

We stopped at the staircase when he turned to me. “The van was creative and the watch was thoughtful. But you,” His index finger poked the center of my chest. “were, by far, the best birthday gift I’ve ever had in life. You were a fantasy come true. This was the best time of my life...thanks to you. I’m gonna make sure not another man gets to feel what I’m feeling now. And, Shi,” My brows lifted in response, observing the flash of darkness in the flip of his pupil. “he won’t.”

Then he kissed me, conveying a thousand more words without volume.

# Chapter 18

## Part II cont'd

### May | Present Day

*ashira*

“**A**nd here’s the final one.” My attorney, Larry Jones, slid over yet another document for my signature as we sat at the bar in the empty club. “It’s an environmental indemnifications document.”

Diligently, and while brimming from uncontrollable excitement, I obeyed. I peered up, returning the document to a smiling Larry then beamed at my only personal companion here today sitting next to Mehki, my realtor.

“Yes, girl,” Cecil cheerfully murmured while clapping his hands quietly. I knew he was trying to keep it professional in front of strangers, closing on a business deal.

“Thank you,” I shimmied, maintaining his low volume and mild celebratory expression.

“Well, that’s it for the closing,” Mehki announced to the group of seven. “Congratulations, Ashira, on purchasing the building for your new club.”

I cheered again, relieved the process was finally over.

“What’s the name of it?” the seller’s attorney asked.

My eyes rolled contemplatively to the ceiling. “*Hmmmm...* I’m between two.” I beamed. “But I guess the clock is officially ticking on my decision, huhn?” I winked.

As they laughed, some began standing from the stools. We gave our goodbyes to one another, Cecil participated in that with pink hair and oversized square glasses. His demeanor was calm and gracious, two things he’s typically not. Mehki was the last to leave, running off a few reminders on his way out the door.

The moment the door closed, Cecil spun around in a ninety-degree angle. “*Beeeetch*, you got yo club!” he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Expecting his queenery, I leaped in the air over and over in my snakeskin *Ralph Lauren* sandals. I squealed before performing a twirl reaching the middle of the dance floor.

Cecil was on my heels, attempting the same, just not as fluid. “Yes, Shi! Yes!” Then his palms clenched his generous waist. “It’s Friday! Now, which club do we go to, to celebrate owning a club?”

I paid that question a moment or two before biting my lips together to conceal a devilish grin. As an entrepreneur, stealing away five days to have work/life balance could cost you double that time getting back on track. That truth seemed to have served true for Jas and me upon our arrival to the States. It had been nine days since we left St. Vincent, and I’d only seen Jas once since.

We both dove headfirst into work and other professional obligations. Yeah, we spoke every day since, by way of calls, texts, and *FaceTimes*—mostly several times a day—but nothing equated to being in his arms...or in his lap. On Monday, four days ago, we both so happened to have morning schedules with our therapist the same way we did when we met. The longing gazes, reverential hand caresses, soft tones, and final kiss before my session began only intensified my



need for him. Being completely honest, I left St. Vincent with a swollen sex and tender pelvis from all of the frolicking Jas and I performed on that beach. But that was nine days ago, and I was now beyond starved of his sensual attention.

I nodded with puckered lips. “The only club getting beat up tonight is the one between these thighs.” I winked.

“Bitch, from who?” His arched brows met. I totally didn’t realize I hadn’t told Cecil about Jas and me—whatever Jas and I were. “And don’t tell me to mind my business. We ain’t on the job. You ain’t Witherspoon. Bitch, you Shi-the-fuck-Shi!” He swung his neck, emphasizing his adavance.

I bit my lip, enduring the butterflies in my belly that was always accompanied by thoughts of Jas. “Help me lock up my new place and I’ll share enough to strain your briefs on the way to our mani and pedi appointment.”

“Oh, shit! I’m swelling already!”



While laying in his bed, I glanced up from the report I was working on from my laptop. I watched from the surveillance monitors as Jas and Juggy arrived at their home, ending the workday. My pulse raced in anxiousness and legs shuffled beneath the comforter in want. Would he appreciate my spontaneity as a romantic gesture or would Jas shut me out, telling me my abrupt visit to his home wasn’t a good idea? Today was the first time I used my keys, trying to surprise him. I arrived close to six in the evening and lucky for me, Consuela, his housekeeper was just four minutes away, having just clocked out.

When Jas gave me the keys to his home on the tarmac in St. Vincent, neither of us considered the code to his high-tech security system. The cops could have come had it not been for Consuela, who so happened to have stayed late, waxing the floors. After promising her I’d avoid the hot spots of the house she’d worked on, I climbed the stairs for Jas’ bedroom, dizzied

by the alluring scent of him the moment I hit the French entryway.

Appropriately waxed, showered, moisturized, and fragranced, I now questioned my impropriety. Jas referred to me as his lady in St. Vincent, but no practice had been put into the act since we'd returned, thanks to our demanding careers.

I watched them disappear from the screen once they left the corridor off the garage, removing their boots. I caught Juggy a few minutes later, gaiting toward the front of the house on the main floor where I assumed his bedroom was located. My pulse quickened in my neck and palms clenched to fists in anticipation as I waited for Jas to reappear. He finally did at the landing of the rear stairway where he hopped two steps at a time up the steps. Within the span of forty seconds, he appeared in the doorway.

Jas' eyes were heavy on me. I swallowed back a gulp of pooled saliva, cat having my tongue. Even soiled from woodwork, the man looked decadent. I watched as he pulled off his "*I'll Never Love Another*" hoodie then black tank undershirt. The ripples of his taut skin and the flexing of his abs had me swallowing again. I shifted in the bed, clearing my throat as I waited for him to give some indicator of his feelings on my popup visit.

"You still working?" He tossed his chin my way, delivery virile and husky, indicative of a man who'd worked with his hands all day long.

Confused, I glanced down past my bulging breasts in a turquoise teddy and found my computer. *Oh!* "Yea—I was." I closed the laptop, clearing my throat again before freezing *again*.

After a spell under his heavy gaze, Jas murmured, "Mind if I shower?"

"*Sha*—sure!" I chirped with bright eyes.

I watched as he turned for the bathroom, carved shoulders swaying stiffly as he unraveled the button of his soiled jeans.

A laborer—*an owner!* I had to correct myself. Jas said he owned *Rizzo's Custom Homes*, and after doing a little digging with my industry peers, there had, in fact, been talk of Rizzo having sold the firm for years. It was simply odd that Paulie Rizzo still showed up every day, appearing to lead the company.

Either way, I placed my laptop on the nightstand to the left of me and rested on the oversized upholstered headboard, trying to relax. I wanted this. Needed him so bad, just knowing the only thing separating me from his naked body was a wall and water had me to feverish degrees. But I endured, only because I wasn't sold on Jas being okay with my initiative in his private quarters.

And I waited.

When Jas emerged from the bathroom drying his hair with a towel, he was stark naked, chiseled body a work only God himself could craft. My face spasmed in torture. He gaited over to the nightstand for a remote, clicking on a few buttons. The first was to lower the lights. The second was to power on music. He tapped until he found a station of slow R&B music. Old school Brandy, "*When You Touch Me*," was in flow as he adjusted the volume to low. My lungs seized and sex pulsed with hungry need.

Jas returned the remote then tossed the comforter back, exposing my pantyless pelvis and legs, and pulled me to the middle of the bed. Breathless, I allowed him to adjust me, spreading my knees and crawling in between. He brought the comforter over his shoulders then settled on top of me. His skin deliciously fragranced and dewy, cock laying on my pelvic bed, extending up to my lower belly was hard, hot, and weighty. It was welcomed as much as Jas.

Suddenly, I felt emboldened by his acceptance of my presence. I smiled at him, adjusting to his weight. Jas captured my mouth in a passionate kiss, his minty tongue moved slowly at first, allowing me to taste his need for me, too. I writhed beneath him, immediately caught up in lust, feeling my sex lubricate in anticipation of his dwelling.

He lowered his torso so I could feel the heft of his pulsing thickness between my lips. His shaft rolled over my nub, swelling me with each stroke. His palms at the back of my skull, holding me in place while he tortured me with building pleasure. Our tongues reacquainted as did our genitals, my gooey need seeping out, lathering on his roving dick. My sex moved against him, rubbing to expel a growing sensation. With my toes planted into the mattress, I pushed into him until I exploded beneath his imposing and damp body.

I was all breaths and tingly cells when he left my mouth. “You should be ready now,” he murmured raspy into my beating neck.

Somehow, I managed the condom I’d hid clandestinely beneath the pillows earlier. I pushed back on his hot, stony frame to open the package then rolled on the condom with shaky hands, I wanted him so bad. The wide crest of his head was slippery with precum and I reveled its throb in my hands down to the thick, wiry root of him. When I’d successfully applied the rubber, Jas wasted no time and dipped to enter me. I sucked in a breath at the strain, reminded of our distance over the past few days. His eyes strained over me as his hips made shallow thrusts in a circular fashion.

Our mouths met again in my desire to taste him, inhale his virility. In time, Jas drilled through my pliant walls, settling into me so the real games could begin. He pulled back from my mouth and sighed heavily as though tortured by his new depth. Those soft lips brushed down my chest as he thrust deep.

“See,” I panted. “Doesn’t it feel good to throw...caution to the...wind”—his weight was heavy, girth swollen, penetrating me—“and go with what feels good?”

He *had* to be happy with my impromptu visit tonight. This was evidence of it.

I felt his nod in my bosom. Then Jas lifted his face, exposing the loose muscles around his eyes and mouth, countenance appearing drugged as he pulled torturously out of me. His breathing was ragged as he peeled the condom from

his fullness. I gasped when he glided into me again, feeling more at home than ever. His half-mast eyes hooked into mine almost as though daring me to admonish him. Is this what he wanted? Did Jas want to feel me without a barrier? Was I okay with that? I was too sedated with pleasure to know.

And after a few thrusts, coating his bare skin with me, logicality dissipated by the second. Taking over was a sensation so overwhelming, so powerful. It was too much to endure. He moaned into my neck. My thighs widened and upturned hips moved against his potent strokes. Jas had been thinking of me. He wanted to remove another barrier to expose his being to me. That's what my mind registered, and from there, my body understood the assignment. Before I knew it, another orgasm had approached, ravishing me, stealing my breath, vision, and mind as I squeezed around him.

When I could see again, I reached for Jas' face and kissed him deep. He pulled one of my legs over his shoulder, then the other. I was too full, he was too thick. The pressure of his weight everywhere was a new height of pleasure, forcing me to let go of his mouth to breathe through this. Each plunge was felt even without filling me to the hilt. The depth didn't matter in this position. Jas' generous girth did all the work. I couldn't take him all in comfortably, but in the overwhelmingness of the tension, he rubbed against nerve-endings that deliciously eased the pressure.

“Shi...” he droned, head snapping back as though pained.

I grabbed the flexing wings of his back, encouraging his quest. This position wasn't new to me, but the sensation was. I'd never known a relationship between pain and pleasure. And Jas' powerful body and vulnerability was a heady concoction. He pushed at the back of my hiked thighs, sitting up and widening his knees around me on the mattress, altering the angle again. I glanced down at our meeting point, stunned by the sight of his thick, pulsing shaft coated by my need of him.

“You good?” He reached over and rubbed my clit, sending a surge of pressure pleasure straight to my groin.

I trilled breathlessly, “I’m full.”

“You’re beautiful this way.”

I reached up and thumbed his bottom lip, pressing in toward his chin. “You make me feel beautiful in every way.”

“Because you are. You’re the baddest thing I’ve ever seen,” he strained. “This can’t be good for me.”

But Jas kept with gentle thrusts, thrusts creating a warmth in my groin. No way I could come like this. I could barely breathe!

“I’m...perfect for you.” The pressure from my thighs being pushed into my chest and the warmth of his roving finger on my clit made it hard to speak.

“I ain’t like not seeing you every day. Feeling you every day.” His face looked pained again. “Even apologizing to you. I missed it...all. I ‘on’t wanna miss you, Shi.” He glided in and out of me. “I wanna...have you. Want you to have...me. All of me.”

*Baby...*

My heart blossomed and head pushed back, deeper into the mattress. My tongue darted out to wet my dry lip. “Tell me.” I began to stroke upward, meeting the pleasure.

“Tell you what?” he whispered, eyes threatening to close, Jas was enjoying this friction, too.

He drove deeper into me, fingers polishing faster.

I was breathless, demanding, “Tell me.”

“What?”

Jas was playing coy when there felt to be a shortage of time. “What’s your name?”

The speed of his fingers quickened and the walls of my sex softened during contraction, taking more of him in. Pleasure mounted and mounted.

*Shit!*

He felt amazing everywhere. My pussy writhed around him, hips jerked as I exploded, screaming, overwhelmed by the onslaught of delicious bombs. My head pushed back into the mattress, trapping me, limiting my movements. All I could do was take the pleasure shooting throughout my body. Then Jas leaned over my jolting body, encroaching with his heavy presence, and kissed me. His tongue muting my cries until they stopped, hips still plummeting powerfully.

When he pulled back, his mouth went to my ear, breaths lewdly heavy. “Oh, Mrs. Sinclair, you just came for me so *goood*,” he droned. “I’m gonna make you do it again.”

*Sinclair? Who was Mrs. Sinclair?*

But I couldn’t ask. Suddenly, he felt bigger. Jas’ mewled tampered cries, blasting inside of me while plundering into my core with wild abandon.



A handwritten infinity symbol in black ink. The word "love" is written in the upper loop, and the word "believe" is written in the lower loop.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas".

I stretched my arms over my head, fists hitting the tall ass headboard. My back cracked and I yawned, tired as hell. Ashira walked into the bedroom, holding a big ass tray of food.

“I knew you were up to something down there.” I sat up in the bed. “What’s this?”

“I hope you aren’t too sleepy. I ordered groceries last night. They were delivered this morning.” She kissed me before settling on the bed. “I had Ines put this together. I hope Consuela doesn’t mind me warming up the meats in her kitchen.”

It was a big ass wooden board topped with food. An assortment of sliced cheese, strawberries, blueberries, sausage, grapes, nuts, spreads, crackers, breads, and steak.

“So you been plottin’ on me since last night?”

Ashira hummed, plopping a sliced strawberry into her mouth then giggled. “I plead the fifth.”

“What’s all this?”

“A charcuterie board. I need to get you cultured for my family.”

“This what y’all do?” I grabbed a grape and almond.

“Mmhm.” Ashira plucked nuts and another strawberry. “The Nivleb tribe will serve from a charcuterie board in a heartbeat. They top these things with all types of goodies.”

“What’s Nivleb?”

“My mother’s family. Their roots trace back to Central Africa...Cameroon. The Nivleb tribe. They were brought here during the slave trade, landing in South Carolina. Once the first Black man in my family was freed and able to own land, he bought and settled in *Della*. He worked to buy his wife and kids. Eventually, relatives began flocking to the massive land he owned, creating an ecosystem of sorts, making the land as sustainable as possible. Within decades, nearby plots of land were purchased by relatives and a village was established. It’s been in my family ever since. But you’ll learn more about it next week, I’m sure.”

“Next week’s the time, huhn?”

“Yup. You meet my mom and can’t take back your decision.”

“I won’t.” I’d already put in the request to my P.O. “They gonna drill me?”

Ashira’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling and she hummed. “No. My family, on that side, is holistic. They’re simple on the surface, but very spiritual. They preserve many of the religious teachings of their native land. My Aunt Rose is a seer. She’s crazy weird, but good people.”



“Damn. So, it’s not just ya moms I gotta be worried about?”

Ashira, obviously hungry herself, bit into a fat yet short sausage. “No. I’m the only person who needs to be worried. You’ll be my sage.”

“Well, since we’re on the topic of helping each other out, I can use some assistance.”

“On what?” I snatched the rest of the sausage with my mouth from her hand. She laughed. “Well, damn. There’s more.”

“It was hard seeing your mouth near that.” I chewed down the meat.

“Why?”

“Because it makes me think of your mouth on my dick.”

Her brows smacked together in a flutter. “Oh. You don’t have to just think about it. You can see it.” My whole body tensed. I enjoyed Ashira’s mouth on me, had thought of it every day since. “It’s okay, Jas. It’s perfectly fine to make requests.” When I didn’t respond, she only grabbed a few grapes, she murmured, “You’re so damn cute. Jas, I plan on having your face between my legs before I leave here. We can do each other at the same time.” My dick lurched beneath the comforter. Then she cleared her throat. “What’s your favor?”

I rebounded quickly. “My pops.”

“What about him?”

“You haven’t been the only person I’ve been trying to...let in lately.”

Ashira’s jaw fell. “I’m jealous already. You don’t do what you did to me earlier then deliver shit like this.”

I shook off her silliness. “It’s my little brother.”

Her forehead tightened. “Oh. I forgot you had one.”

“Yeah. He’s been wanting to spend time...get to know me.”

She went for another strawberry, exhaling, “Tell him to fall in line.”

“Yeah. But with him, that means roping my pops in, something I’d stopped trying to do for years.”

“Why does he have to be involved?”

“Because Nicholas is his prized kid and he’s not an adult yet. I would wait until he is, but Nick ain’t tryna have that. He wants more time with me.”

“I’m confused. You want me to facilitate that?”

“Kinda. You know how you described me as a buffer for ya moms?” She nodded. “Well, I need for you to be your usual polished self for my pops.”

“You want to...” She shrugged, thinking. “have dinner at *DiFillippo’s*? I can arrange for that.”

I shook my head. “Pops don’t know about me.”

There was a long break before she understood. “Your money. Your father doesn’t know you have money. Damn it, Jas. Then who else does? Who knows you?”

“We’ve been through both those questions before, Ashira. Anyway, I need something lowkey but proper. You know?”

“Something not very flashy, but elegant.” Her eyes were across the room. “Mind if I host?”

“Where?”

“At my place, silly.”

“You want people you ‘on’t know in ya crib?”

“These are your people, Jas, not strangers. Besides, if you want a bit of a distance, I’ve hosted meetings in the private dining room of my building. It’s for small dinner parties. I can hire a caterer or Ines, and I can throw a meal together. In fact, because it’s for you, she’d prefer cooking.”

“Is that all Ines does for you is cook?”

She shook her head. “She gets in my ass about stupid shit, too. But mainly, Ines lives life as aimless as she wants. She’s

content and I'm happy for her. She enjoys cooking." Her relationship with Ines was still odd to me, but I ain't press her on it. Everyone is allowed a little privacy when it comes to the complicated details of their lives or, in this case, the weird ones. "When were you thinking of doing this?"

"I spent some time with Nick just before St. Vincent. Took him and my dad on my boat."

Her face opened with fondness. "Ahhhh!" she whispered. "The boat. That was fun."

"You liked it?" Why did that excite me?

Ashira smiled, chewing on grapes. "It was...aphrodisiacal. You were sexy operating it, but now that I know you own it..."

"Now, what?"

"It makes you so fucking hot." She wouldn't look at me.

"Is that hard to share? That me owning a boat turns you on? But you want me to tell you how bad I want your lips around my dick? Ain't that hypocritical?"

Her eyes rolled up to me and Ashira swiped the insides of her hands together, ridding herself of food debris. "It wouldn't be hard hearing you want me to suck you off on your boat. We can arrange for that after I host the shit out of your father and brother."

"I gotta wait that long?"

"I can do it as soon as we come back from seeing my mom in Della." Turning my lips up, I nodded in concession. Can't make a woman do anything she doesn't want to. Ashira crawled off the bed, returning for the wooden board filled with food. "But I'm about to get some head before you doze off, old man. All this talking about it has gotten me all revved up again."

I dropped my chin, dick swelling with excitement. "Word?" Yeah, I played disinterested, but the truth of the matter was I loved eating her pussy. The sound and unique

taste of her drove me wild. It was another daily thought I'd struggled getting under control.

Ashira untied the belt to my robe and let it drop to the floor. "Mmhmm." Then she mounted the bed, crawled toward the foot, and lay on her back. Her legs spread wide, exposing her clit and my head spun. The dark tips of her boobs were hard and inviting.

*Damn...*

This was going to be a long night.



*ashira*

An abrupt thump on the mattress spurred me from my sleep. My eyes pried open, and I realized I was facing Jas' side of the bed. His pillow was dented and empty. Then I forced my heavy body to twist so I could lift from my arms. The room was dark but for the recess lights out in the hallway, one door open, allowing the illumination.

Jas was at the foot of the bed, one arm stretched forward. My pulse quickened. It was happening again. Jas was subconsciously awake...so, I figured. To me, it resembled sleepwalking. He was totally naked; waist tapered, back chiseled, and shoulders wide and carved. No matter how big and strong he appeared, Jas was also perceptively vulnerable.

The balls of my eyes scanned the massive suite. "Jas," I whispered. "*Bu-baby...*"

This shit was crazy. I couldn't leave him like this. It didn't feel good. Unlike the last time, I now felt responsible for him—like *for real*. My feelings for the guy had grown

exponentially. So, gently, I crept down the bed, being sure to make my movements stealth. I didn't want to scare him awake.

“*Ja—*” I shrieked, jumping off the bed when his torso whipped around and he nudged me away, applying a level of strength I didn't know from him.

My chest heaved and I leaned away from him, holding myself protectively, suddenly afraid. But then Jas resumed the position and extended his arm. This jailhouse bullshit was insane, but I couldn't leave him. He was alone, in his mind. I wanted to be with him, bring him out of that...psychotic place. Mental diagnosis be damned; he was a real human being, not a damn caged animal in a thuggery gymnasium.

“You got me fucked up,” his tone gravely thick, words choppy but just as piercing. His top lip curled upward and nostrils spread similar to when he attacked Jonathan in St. Vincent, only his pitch wasn't *this* dark. I trembled helplessly. “Try that shit again, nigga.” His head jerked back and forth, emphasizing his words. “I'm snappin' ya fuckin' neck. You read my paperwork. Ask around, my nigga. My work legendary. You heard about me?”

His inflection increased with that question, eerily relative. *And* I believed every word of his threat. Jas had definitely transported away from here. My mouth felt like sandpaper, bladder began to dance from anxiety.

*Baby, wake up. Come back to me...*

My heart bled, twisting in my chest. *What to do?* Suddenly, I questioned my safety. *Maybe I should call Juggy for help.* Would he snap Juggy's neck? He could never *hurt—*

Jas mumbled, “Sinclair 92810-752.”

Stunned, my eyes blossomed wide. He'd repeated the same amount of syllables as the last time I'd seen him in this state. But tonight, the word was clearer. Jas said ‘Sinclair.’ He called me Mrs. Sinclair earlier. He hadn't lied. His name was Sinclair.

jas

*It's fucking freezing in here...*

*Again. My body shivered, hands were numbing, cold as fucking ice cubes. The coat and blanket was never enough for the brutal winters. I was alone in my cell, which was cool on most days, but at least when the temperatures were this low, having another body could mean a little more heat. But I was in the hole now, Satan's den. It wasn't always decorated with fire that burned.*

*It felt like I'd just gotten into a warm position when count time came around. This shit was driving me crazy. I hadn't been outside in three days and the food was shitty and cold. Something in here bit me the other day, and now there was a fucking rash on my leg. These niggas wouldn't even let me go to the infirmary to get it checked out. So between that and the damn cold, I felt fucking defeated once again.*

*I had too many days left in my sentence to bitch up. Way too many. Couldn't crack now. Prison was tough, but solitary confinement was torture. Each day you sank deeper, the devil's presence became more acute, the value of your life decreased, and hope seeped from your soul, moment by moment.*

*So, having to wake from preferred sleep to do a fucking count had me wondering why was I doing this again today? Shivering, I asked myself why waste my time trying to do the bid. Why not end it all here? What was so fucking important on the other side of my sentence to get to? More bullshit?*

*I'd have to table that thought because the footsteps grew nearer, keys clanging against each other. Then the small sliding window on the door to my cell opened.*

*Knowing the play, I gave him what he wanted. I pushed my hand through the small opening so he could read the*

*identification on my wrist bracelet.*

*Then I recited the usual. "Sinclair 92810-752."*

*Out of nowhere, the shivering slowed to a stop. Then my body tensed. Goddamn, my groin tickled in a way I ain't feel since before turning myself in to NPD. Not wanting to give in to any sensation, especially one feeling this fucking good in this place, I steeled, tensing my whole body to end the shit. But my dick started growing and my whole body heated up.*

*What the fuck, yo!*

*Not in here. Not in here! I jerked off on occasion, hell yeah. But not in here. This place didn't give space for a mental escape. I always had to be on my toes, ready to fucking kill. That's how I got thrown in the hole this time. I'd choked a nigga out for cutting in front of me like I was a pussy. They tried me in here because I was new. This was a fucking low security facility, I'd run through all these muthafuckas in here, eating their asses for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I knew it had to start this way, but shit...*

*Never did I think the devil gave head.*

*That's what I felt, small fists around my shit, stroking me. I felt a glop of spit hit me, that shit felt good, too. Damn, my legs were broken apart, giving deeper access down my shaft. Now, I was feeling like shit because I didn't put up a real fight to keep them together.*

*This what they did in fucking Colorado, man?*

*There were goddamn ghosts in the bitch, fondling niggas?  
Oh, hell no!*

*The shit felt good, the grip on my cock just right.*

*"Jas..." a feminine voice called out in a cry.*

*I whipped my head back, snatching my arm from the window. Who the fuck was that? Not today, devil! I ain't fuck with dude like that. No fighting, talking, or sparring. I only slept and shitted in here. Sometimes I ate, but mostly, I slept. This shit couldn't go down!*

*Then the strokes became more intense, my hips rocking into it without my permission. I could hear the macaroni and cheese swishes, the sound that could only come from fucking or giving neck. Sucking. The sensation of a tongue rolling over and over the head of my cock while my shaft was being stroked had me torn. I should be fighting—KILLING A NIGGA! But I was as powerless as a kid. The saliva dripping from my balls had me all in: fucked up!*

*Then I felt lightheaded, head in a dizzy spin, and mind in a fog. The sounds grew clearer, and the massage on my shit firm, and—*

*Goddamn it!*

*I started to blow. My hips lurched in the air, intensifying the pressure. Hard breaths pushed from my stomach, jerking each time I juttet. I didn't fully come down until I panicked.*

The room was shadowy. Only the light from the hall coming through. What the fuck was I doing at the bottom of the bed ass *naked*—

Ashira was on her knees between my legs, shivering like a kitten. Her cheeks trailed with tears, chin wet and lips swollen.

*“Ashi—”*

She leaped from the floor, pouncing on me. “Oh, my god, Jas, I was so scared! Don't ever...” She screamed, arms wrapped tight around me.

I could feel her heart out-beating mine, whole tight body trembling.

“What *did*—you didn't have to do that, Shi,” my voice cracked, I was so scared for her.

“I did! I did!” she continued to scream. “And I'll do it again! Please don't leave me like that again!”

“*Shhhhh!*” I rubbed her cold back. My girl curled into me, gripping me so tightly. I felt like shit. “*Shhhhh!* I'm here, Ashira. I'm here, baby,” I whispered over her winded sobs.

When I heard stomps approaching, I yanked the comforter, gathering as much as I could to cover her. We were both



naked.

“Aye! Aye!” I called out, knowing it was Juggy.

It was too late. He was in the doorway, strapped with metal, wearing basketball shorts and *Timbs*. “Y’all good up here—*shit!*” He backed out of the doorframe, noticing I was naked. “Y’all good, capo?”

Feeling my heart go from a race to a tear, I rocked my girl tightly. “We good, fam. We good.”

# Chapter 19

**Part II cont'd**

**May | Present Day**

*ashira*

“**T**hat’s awful, Peach,” I squawked into the phone, sincerely. “And that’s who found him?”

“Yeah. Cynthia’s mother said she feels so guilty about leaving her home with him. But that was unfair to her. Mother Pollard shouldn’t have assumed the role of caregiver for Deacon Pollard alone. Cynthia’s been supportive, which is why she encouraged her mother to go out and do something for herself.”

“Damn...” I whispered, entranced, wondering how Cynthia and her family were faring in the moment.

If I’d found my father indisposed after falling from the toilet seat, I’d be traumatized.

“Yeah. I know.” She exhaled. “I didn’t mean to get heavy, but it’s what I’ve been dealing with over the past twelve hours or so. I’m on my way home now to shower and...” Another

deep sigh, “pray. I just need to release this so I can return to the family in a few hours.”

“I can dig it.” Although my prayer life was to shit, I’d recently developed a fondness to the act, even if for meditational purposes—though I knew it to be so much more. “Yeah. Do what you need to do. You know I’m always on you about finding that balance between ‘Peach’ and being that conduit you are as a preacher.”

“Thanks, girl. It’s a work in progress.”

“And I’m sure lonely. Wish you had a dick you could bounce on to help mitigate some of that energy you absorb from your constituents.”

“Shi-Shi,” she groaned into the phone.

I continued shutting down my office for the day. “I know. I know. Your satisfaction comes in the form of your worship.”

“Anyway, I just wanted to touch base with you before you left for *Della* tomorrow. You fly out in the morning, right?”

“First thing. I was hoping to find a flight for the night so I can quickly end day one, but the airlines weren’t cooperating.”

“I hear you. I wish I could be there for you.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s all good.”

“Who’s going this time?”

My eyes rolled up to the ceiling as the office phone was cradled between my face and shoulder. “Ummm... Jas.”

There was a hiccup before she echoed, “Jas. Oh. Okay. Sounds so...official.”

I sulked, but thoroughly happy. “Unfortunately, so it is.”

“You don’t seem too happy about it.”

Inhaling deeply, I sat up at my desk, still peering up to the ceiling. So many thoughts tumbling in my head, so many emotions bursting in my heart. It had been a whole seven days since Jas’ sleepwalking/sitting episode, and I’d been by his side each night all of six. Last night, I stayed home only

because, after a long day at the dance studio and me meeting my goal of laundry and the start of packing for this Memorial Day weekend, I'd fallen asleep next to a suitcase after telling myself to lay down for a few minutes to ease the throbbing of my feet from dancing. I'd awakened to a call from Jas, checking in on me close to eleven. He'd been expecting me because it was my plan to stay with him last night.

I'd been hit with five revelations over the past week, discoveries about my preferences as a woman I wasn't aware of, likely because with Austin, I rolled with the punches instead of exploring my needs. One discovery was I liked soft, random touches. They didn't have to be accompanied by words, but silent acts of affection were so powerful to me. Like when Jas, Juggy, and I would be in the kitchen or dining room eating and deep in conversation, Jas' possessive hand on me was soothing.

Also, I enjoyed sleeping completely naked or, at most, in a man's tee shirt. Twisting and turning at night didn't awake me as much when my bare skin was against a hot virile body. Those innocent bodily contacts subconsciously revved my mind and body up for explosive sex in the morning.

The third revelation was a kicker. Sucking dick was a pleasurable experience for me. Unraveling a titanium coated former gun-slinger and Harlem legend like Jas was so fucking empowering. The man all but cried with his most private and precious possession in my hands and mouth. The way he peered helplessly down at me, face strained and body rippling as I controlled him was fucking therapeutic.

Another revelation I'd come to was the power of worship. Each morning, Jas awakened to pray and even when he did on occasion at night, wasn't a one-sided act. There was a presence looming in the room when Jas went into his prayer posture in his sitting room and took to his knees and elbows. He wasn't loud and didn't do weird movements. But his dedicated practice and the low rumbles of incanting was a peaceful, powerful sight to behold. I felt lighter in spirit when not coated in guilt for being present during such an intimate act.

But Jas' confidence and unspoken decision of having me around when he prayed was a major turn-on, which had been the final revelation. The man carried a poised conviction like I'd never seen. Even Austin got nervous when practicing lines in my presence. But Jas? He'd even pray for me at night. I caught him a few times when I'd dozed off, but not lost to slumber. He lay his big hand over my arm or hand and would go quiet and unmoving before a squeeze then released me. Turn-on! It was hot, and inappropriately so. Something I would have loved to share with Peach, but I knew she'd kill me for my views. And I especially couldn't tell her my thoughts of when he quietly read in bed at night, especially his Bible, and all I wanted to do was jump his bones.

So, no. I wasn't happy about the rampant speed at which my feelings were growing for a man I'd just met three months ago. It was a little complicated considering I'd broken up with my boyfriend of three years in nearly the same time. It was unreal and so not like me, yet I was the same woman impatiently waiting to see him tonight although I'd been with him, virtually, for a week and would be with him the entire holiday weekend.

No, I was not happy with my attachment to a man whose full name I didn't even know.

Taking a deep breath, I stood, ready to go. "Yup. Unhappy with the fact that I'm so damn happy."

"A conundrum."

"That would be Mr. Sinclair. Look, I'm on my way out of here. I'm checking out early to have a late lunch with Noelle, then I need to finish packing."

"Okay. I'm here if you need me—well, I'm sure I'll be with the Pollards, but you get what I mean."

"I do. Love you."

"Love you."

"Bye." I placed the phone into its cradle and grabbed my things.

That's when I realized I'd forgotten about the address. I stepped out of my temporary office, since I'd given my father's back to him, and found my way to Marge-Jean's desk.

She'd just hung up on a call when she spun around in her chair, finding me there. Her eyes were wide behind her thick glasses and the silver wig on her head slightly off-kilter. "Shit. You scared me."

"My bad. I'm checking out."

"I know. I mean..." She waved her wrinkled hand across her desk, gesturing the mess. "You get to leave anytime you want while others do the real work around here until it's done."

I winked. "It's called the business of the day. Not business until the end of the workday. Anyway, I came to ask you to please send a sympathy bouquet over to the Pollard family. I'll text you the address within the hour. I'll have to get it from Peach."

"Peach? Someone died in her family?" Her little jaw collapsed.

"God, no!" I scoffed. "One of her parishioners."

"Oh, shit!" She placed a palm to her chest, expressing relief. "I really like Peach. She's polite, unlike so many of her contemporaries."

I gave her a hard stare. Marge-Jean loved fucking with me. But today, I wouldn't take the bait.

"You leaving?" My father stood in the doorjamb of his office, my former office.

I straightened, pivoted to face him. "Yes, I am. I told you I'd be checking out early."

"I was just coming to ask about this weekend. I want to invite a few people over. Maybe you can talk to Basil about adding a few more things to the menu."

Marge-Jean's face dropped to her lap and she pushed from her toes to have her chair roll closer to her computer. She, too, understood how frustrating my father could be.

Supplying a tight smile, I replied, “Daddy, I will not be in town this weekend. I’m leaving out in the morning.”

His eyes circled in the air, computing. “Oh! Your mother!”

I gave one affirmative nod. “That would be the event. I’m taking off early because amongst the gazillion things I have to do, having an early dinner with Noelle is one of them.”

His forehead wrinkled as he adjusted in his stance, the old intimidation tactic. “Who are you going to *Della* with? Your sister?”

When I cocked my head to the side, a smile broke across his face.

I pivoted away. “Yeah. You want both your daughters dead, huh, Noel.” I turned to Marge-Jean who shook her head, eyes ahead on her screen. “Expect that address within the hour.” Then I blew a kiss to my dad while striding away. “Do not forget to arrange for Noelle’s transportation this weekend. I’ll be tied up.”

“Wait,” he called behind me. “Who’s going with you?”

He, too, knew I didn’t brave my mother alone. “I’m covered,” was my only response.



The bathroom door opened and his gorgeous frame appeared. Jas was dressed in blue jeans and a simple long-sleeve tee-shirt. Those legs were long and thick and that chest broad beneath the cotton. His head and face recently groomed and his curious eyes on me as I squirmed in the tub beneath a sheet of bubbles. I’d been saturating and re-running hot water for an hour now, trying to soak off the anxiety of the impending weekend. Seeing Jas eased the knot in my belly.

“That looks tempting,” his coarse vocals produced.

“The garden tub with bubbles or me?”

“Always you. But...” He pushed his lips together, expressing a regretful mental debate, “now I’m confused about

what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“When Ines let me in, the scent of her food had my stomach rumbling. I decided I’d eat first. And now, seeing you laid out in there...”

“You’re confused about what to eat first?” Slowly, his head rocked up and down. “I don’t mind being the appetizer. I’ve been known to be your favorite dessert, too.”

“Word.” He continued to nod. “You damn sure are. How long you gone be in here?”

It was the end of a Friday, less than twenty-four hours before I’d see my rambunctious mother. This tub had served as my hub, my safety corner in the ring before the battle.

I shrugged, not feeling as strong and secure as I’d liked to. Hating the way I couldn’t articulate my feelings of fear to Jas. I needed him for the pre-show. I wanted his arms around me and his deep, husky comforting voice showering away my stupid anxiety. I needed him, just knowing he’d shown up tonight to fly out with me in the morning would do. Jas was my lodestar. My peace of mind had arrived.

He stretched, arms pushing over his head as he yawned without knowledge of his superior features: roasted chestnut skin, pentagonal-shaped face, incredibly thick brows, round smooth lips with a slightly pronounced cupid’s bow, and that tapered manicured goatee. And I knew of the hidden wonders beneath his clothing.

I needed him...in some capacity now.

“Let me at least kiss you hello,” he mumbled on his way to me as though reading my mind.

My torso and chin lifted in anticipation while he was in pursuit. His scent hit me first. The familiar notes warming my belly then shooting out to my limbs. My heart. Leaning over my garden tub, he reached me, taking me at the side of my face with the beautiful possession he always did now. First his soft lips pecked mine. I allowed the innocent gesture twice



before opening my mouth and darting my tongue, demanding more. Needing more.

As usual, Jas met my greedy demands, caressing his tongue against mine. His throat elicited a delicious moan, tempting me to pull his body into the water with me fully clothed. We kissed and through it, I tried conveying my anxieties, my need for him, my belief in his quest to protect me at all times. I wanted to express my appreciation for his innate thuggery I cherished.

That was until my throat thickened and nose tickled in an awful way. When I couldn't breathe, faced with the threat of a sneeze, I pulled away.

*What the hell?*

Then the first sneeze shot from my nose, burning from the explosion. The second was just behind, at a speed that I knew I couldn't expel through my stinging nose. I tried catching it with my hands, and that wet my face horribly. The third followed immediately and the fourth was just as harsh. My mind caught up, and I realized this could only be one thing.

Anger stirred in my belly and my head spun from the audacity. My eyes exploded only to be squeezed close by another violent sneeze. I was seething.

“Did you have *to*—” Another sneeze. “—go over there? Aren't your duties to *her*—” *Sneeze*. “—over with? You think I'm with that sister-wives *bull*—” *Sneeze*. “—shit! You must be out your *fuck*—” *Sneeze*. “—mind!”

Jas stood from the tub, face tight. “What're you talking *about*—”

“*Back*—” *Sneeze*. “—away!” I screamed, sneezing again.

My nose began to run at this point.

“Ashira,” he tried.

“Don't fucking Ashira me!” *Sneeze*. “You were with fucking Cynthia!”

“*Ya*—yeah. But I don't get why...” He obediently backed away.

“The *bitch*—” *Sneeze*. “—got cats!” I knew this from when Peach stopped by a few weeks ago. I was surprised I didn’t react to her cats the night I served them back in February. It could have been the outdoor, frigid winter temperature.

“She hit me up this morning saying her pops passed away. I stopped by to pay my respects on my *way*—”

*Peach*. He must’ve run into Peach!

“Do you know how *embarrass*—” *Sneeze*. “We’re together, Jas!”

“Okay...”

“You and me! *We’re*—” *Sneeze*. “—we’re together and you’re showing up and supporting a non-factor former contestant and my best friend was there to *witness*—” *Sneeze*. “—it! I’m fucking you and *sucking*—” *Sneeze*. “—and worshipping you to my friends, but you show up for that bitch?” I sneezed again, but managed to stand.

“Yo, *Ashira*—”

“Get the fuck out, Jas! You’re making me sick!” *Sneeze*.

“*Ashir*—”

“Fucking go!” I yelled at the top of my lungs feeling so betrayed and angry.

I felt bad for Cynthia, I really did. But her life didn’t intersect with mine. The ghost of her was impeding, not just on my life, but something very sacred to me.

He backed away with a stretched forehead, expressing his disbelief. This was all becoming too familiar to me. It was giving me Austin and Brielle vibes. Why couldn’t one woman be enough for these niggas? Why couldn’t I be enough? I’m sure my mother could answer that—would love to!

Jas disappeared and I was incongruently grateful for it. I stepped out of the tub and reached for my towel. Still sneezing, the act of drying off took longer than necessary and was an incomplete task. I had to go into my drawer for an antihistamine. When I’d gathered enough faucet water in the

palm of my hand to swallow down the medicine, I felt a presence.

It was Ines, brow line tight. “What the hell was that?”

I managed with a runny nose, “Fucking allergic reaction.”

“To Jas?”

“To his fucking concubines.” I sneezed again.

“Now, you ought to stop it.” I threw her a nasty glare. “He left, Shi-Shi. Left.” Her head fell to the side.

That news sheared my heart.

“Good. Now, I can gain control over my diaphragm.”

“That ain’t the only thing you want.”

*Sneeze.* “What?” I blew my nose with a facial tissue from my vanity.

“I said that ain’t what you want. Y’all leaving for *Della* in a few hours.”

“And?” I’d go alone.

“And you know why you asked him to go. You been on edge all evening and you know why. That young man walked into the middle of a firing squad that’s supposed to start tomorrow. He ain’t supposed to be the target either.”

Catching another sneeze in the tissue this time, I grew even angrier.

*Oh, so I’m here sneezing my guts out, but Jas is the victim!*

He brought the second-hand queen to my home. I didn’t go after her!

When Ines took off, shaking her head, my anger increased two-fold. I went for my cell on the vanity.

The phone rang a few times before she picked up. “What is it now, Ms. Witherspoon?”

“That sympathy arrangement. Cancel it.”

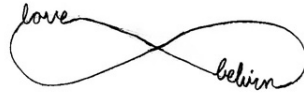
“*Wu*—what?” There were some swishing sounds on Marge-Jean’s end. “Ms. Witherspoon, it’s after nine at night.

Surely, the florist is closed.”

“Call and leave a message. Follow up with an email.”

“Ms. *Witherspoon*—”

“*Cancel that fucking bouquet, Marge-Jean! Now!*” I screamed into the phone, body trembling with rage, then effectively ended the call.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are stylized and connected, with a small blue mark above the 'j'.

One heavy knee hit her mattress and she stirred with a gasp. “Jas!”

Ashira rolled over, standing on an elbow at first. “*Mmmhmm*,” I hummed, tired as hell.

It was way past my bedtime.

“Oh, *my*—you’re here. I didn’t...”

When I brought my other knee onto the bed and crawled for the spot I’d lay down, Ashira rolled underneath me with a reminder of her nimble dancer’s agility. She literally flipped and shuffled in place until we were face to face with her back flat on the mattress. Her hands caressing my face.

Her little hands roved over my chest and arms a few times before she spoke. “I’m sorry. I was wrong.” She sounded stuffy and dry, hoarse.

I didn’t reply, was too tired to. Plus, I wasn’t tripping. Ashira sent a text when I left, apologizing. My response were two words: I’m good. Shortie didn’t like that I was being kind to an old buddy. I could respect that. Cynthia wasn’t an ex-girlfriend of mine. If Ashira didn’t want me interacting with

ol' girl, it was nothing for me to make that happen. It was just that I'd met her pops on a few occasions. He was a solid man of God by all accounts.

"I swear, I didn't know I had a jealous streak until you. Austin had his pick of the litter with women, access to them, too, but I never concerned myself with the possibilities of him being with anyone because *I*...I don't know. My words aren't coming together because of the drowsiness from my meds, but I know what I feel. I'm not the jealous type...until you. And it's stupid because I don't think you'd cheat on *me*—I mean, neither did I with Austin. But the difference with him was I didn't pre-occupy my thoughts with the possibility. With you, I feel there's a moral code in here." Her soft hand gently pushed into my chest. "The urban urbane has a moral code in there I can feel. I just don't see cheating being your thing. At least not with me."

"So, you mine?"

"What do you mean?"

"I 'on't really know how relationships go. I ain't got much experience with them. But I do think we should agree on some things to make it official."

"Okay. Like what?" She reached up and kissed me. Her tongue swirled against mine, thickening me. "Whatever you want me to agree to—outside of being married with swollen feet, nine babies, and a missing tooth—" her voice dipped and hand reached inside my boxers, fully awakening my shit. "—I'm down for."

Then she reached for the elastic waist of my boxers, pulling them down with her hands then feet. I steeled over her when Ashira wrapped her legs around my ass, lifted, and rubbed the head of my cock against her soft, hot, wet ass folds. She smeared her juices all over me until I was fully wet with her. Then she positioned me at her opening and pulled up until I reached deep inside of her.

She panted and eventually moaned. I filled my lungs with air, holding it in until she'd developed a rhythm so good, I grunted it out. I didn't move, too unsure and amazed by her

passion to. I wasn't a man who fell victim to the trap of intimidation—*by no fucking body*. Since my late teenage years, I was keen to everyone not only having flaws, but weaknesses, too. And with that simple philosophy, I'd never allowed people to intimidate me. The last man to get that off on me, his daughter was drowning me with her eager pussy. And it was her pussy that could possibly trip me up with the reminder of Ashira not being the average woman I'd encountered in my teenage years. The way the soft walls of her pussy gripped me confirmed it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered almost in a cry from beneath me, arms clasped to the wings of my back as she climbed me with her most intimate part. "I hated that you left. I thought it was for good."

Straining over her, I croaked, "Don't sweat it." She really didn't have to. I simply went home, showered, changed, and made a few phone calls about the Lewinski mergers. Coming back had been in my plans since I walked out, vexed as hell about her tone with me. I was crazy about this girl in a way I knew was dangerous—spiritually and emotionally. But there was one thing I knew for sure. "You'll never have another man in your bed or between your legs." I fought the intoxicating sensations Ashira was bringing me to. "Neither will I."

Her hips worked harder and, out of nowhere, her breathing grew loud until she shook, vibrating around my cock and beneath my tense body. Baby girl was coming, using me without my efforts.

I was sure Ashira thought my words were filled with just passion from being caught up.

Little did she know, I never missed in life. She'd been added to my list.



We strolled up to a grand entrance of a colossal neo-classical style home. Ashira's clutch of my arm seemed more protective than affectionate. Either way, I'd take it.

“We’ve added on to the original style my family started with when they built this home by hand,” Ashira explained in our approach.

It was far more contemporary than the rest of the massive property, mostly unpaved roads and smaller homes, almost like a camp. Even the one we were staying in; we’d dropped our luggage off and changed into cooler clothes so she could take me on a forty-eight acre land tour. Where we were due to stay was a cabin with one and a half bedrooms, a single bathroom, kitchen, and living room. Ashira described it as cute and I understood it was because of the quaintness of the structure: small yet efficient. There were about four more just like it dispersed on the land.

This place was like a private village, family owned and operated. A farm with cows, chickens, pigs, horses, and other animals. Some were for food and others breeding. The lake, not far from our cottage, took up about eleven miles wide and a ten-mile length of the estate. There was an impressive stretch of cropland, too, where the family harvested their own grains, vegetables, and fruits. The ‘village’ was self-sustaining, its ecosystem impressive as hell. A Harlem kid like me was overwhelmed with the rurality of the layout. It was all dope, though. A former Black slave started this. His powerful legacy continued and maintained it.

“It was first a five-bedroom home. Took quite some time to complete, but he made it work. And of course, over the years, the family has expanded the structure,” Ashira continued.

“This is fly as hell,” I whispered, glancing around at the tall trees, craftly laid cement work of the driveway, and pillars framing the front of the main house.

We made it to the porch, carrying bags we’d brought along on the flight. Ashira turned to me. “The weekend has finally come. Enduring two days with my mother...” She pulled in a deep breath, shoulders relaxing as she let it out.

It was too late for her to explain what she meant by that, so I didn’t ask. Besides, whatever she wanted me to know about

her moms, Ashira would have shared it before showing up to her peoples' property.

"You never have to stay where you're uncomfortable, especially when I'm around."

Her response was a nod I was sure was a sign of her lack of confidence. It was like premature defeat. Then she opened the door.

"Hello!" She walked inside and I followed into the circular foyer. "We're here!"

"Hey, Shi-Shi," someone called out.

"We're in here waiting," another shared.

Ashira followed the sound of their voices and turned the corner into a great room ahead of me. "Oh, my goodness!" she shrieked. "You're all here!"

I waited, watching her hug eight people, most elderly. They smiled and seemed genuinely happy with her presence. Ashira then turned and introduced me to her great-aunts and uncles and cousins. "Sabrina here is my mother's niece. She's a physician, finishing up her Master's in public health," Ashira explained to me while the room beamed at that accomplishment. "Talk about goals!"

"Girl, please," Sabrina waved her hand. "You run a construction firm. We grew up in the shadows of the giant who started that company, always in awe. Now, look who's filled those shoes!" Then Sabrina addressed me. "I don't know what industry you're in, but building homes isn't as easy as most would think. And a Black business lasting almost half a century is almost unheard of."

"What do you do, young man?" her great uncle, Frank, asked.

Before I could answer, Ashira gushed. "I think an easier answer for us is what Jas doesn't do." She lifted the bag she held and reached for one of mine. "And we can start with these. Here are bottles of *Mauve* and *Château Blevin*."

"Oh." Sabrina blinked. "The limited edition!"



“So, you’re familiar?” Ashira asked with an uncontrolled smile and a posture of pride that turned me on in yet another way I’d never felt. My girl looked to be proud of my work. *Damn...* “Yes. Jas is a minor investor in *Mauve* and he owns *Château Blevin*.” She shook her head, grinning hard as hell. “And that’s just where we’re beginning.”

There Ashira went with that lexical upper-crust expressions. But to be real, I wasn’t offended. It was actually cool to hear my accomplishments being run down in an official way.

*And by my girl...*

I was still getting used to that, too.

Sabrina turned to me with a hole in her face, her mouth was that wide open. A few others in the room had similar reactions. I pulled off a humble smile, not wanting to be one of those emotionless idiots from the block. I could tell by the contemporary design of the home and the posture of the people that Ashira came from proper stock. This all seemed so...her—but was definitely all good for me. This trip was about her.

“*Mauve* and *Château Blevin*,” an even more exaggerated feminine voice was introduced to the room. “Then his portfolio must exist in *Forbes*.”

*Holy shit...*

She was gorgeous. If it was possible, the woman was even more beautiful than she was seventeen years ago. She was still regal in demeanor: chin high, shoulders back, and with a charming and captivating smirk. Even in a big ass robe with beads and rhinestones at the neck; the back flowed behind her. She still seemed to be the same size underneath based on how the dress drew in at her small waistline. Ashira’s mother was a fine ass, imperial, Black woman.

“Mommy,” Ashira’s voice weakened, her hands collected at her waist. “You look great.”

“As do you,” her mother replied with light in her eyes, “but then again, you are my child; that is the least I can still

have.”

Sabrina cleared her throat, hand massaging the back of her neck.

“Your abaya’s beautiful, too. The embroidery...” Ashira’s face dropped.

Like dropped. My girl transformed into a child, and I mean...I got it. Ashira may have represented the quintessential pretty girl from the other side of the tracks a nigga from the streets would want to marry. But her moms was easily the subject of my private time activities as a kid. She was bad as hell! This was the only time in my life I’d seen a mother’s beauty and swag compete with their fine ass daughter—*because there was no one on this earth as bad as Ashira Witherspoon*. I’d been convinced for some time now.

“Rose said you left Jersey this morning,” Ashira’s mother addressed her with a slight twist in her neck. “It’s supper time and you’re just showing to the main house?”

“Yes. Well, we had brunch at *L’amour est dans la Nourriture* in town,” Ashira explained. “Then I took him on a trip in town for the historical sites. After which, we arrived on the estate and dropped our things to explore the grounds here. I wanted to give Jas here the full tour.”

“*Ahhh...*” Her mother slowly turned my way, charming grin fading. “*L’amour est dans la Nourriture*. My favorite restaurant in town.”

“Yes,” Ashira affirmed. “I told Jas.”

“Does Jas here have a last name?”

“Sinclair,” I finally answered, being sure my delivery was pleasant and firm. I was becoming convinced Ashira’s mother was computing my face. She *couldn’t* have remembered me. *Could she?* “Jas Sinclair. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Instead of returning the greeting, just as she’d done with Ashira, she avoided the opportunity with a demanding question. “And who are you to Ashira Chivon, Mr. Sinclair?”

“Shi-Shi said he’s her boyfriend, Celestine.” Ashira’s aunt, whose name I couldn’t remember, answered with a country accent.

*Ahhh... Celestine is her name...*

Celestine’s brows shot up. “Boyfriend? Oh, my.” Then she looked over to her daughter. “So many fine details of your life I’ve missed.”

“I’m sure you knew about Austin and me breaking up,” Ashira replied. “It’s been all over. Even the entertainment news outlets has reported on it.”

“Yeah, I saw it on *E!* back in February,” a gentleman shared.

Sabrina snickered. “What are you doing watching entertainment news, Uncle Peebo?”

“To keep up with you kids!” he shot back expressionless.

The room found that funny.

“You look eerily familiar.” Ashira’s moms had been eyeing me this whole time.

Ashira’s arm wrapped around mine again. “Jas is from Harlem, Mommy.”

Celestine shook her head, eyes narrowed on me. “I never forget a face. Especially not a handsome one.” Then her grin made a reappearance.

The confidence in her expression now concerned me, but I wouldn’t trip. I prayed before coming down here, had even prayed over Ashira after she’d fallen into an allergy medication and orgasm-induced coma last night. I also knew my time of anonymity had been coming to an end.

“Hey, yawl.” An older, meaty woman with heavy shoulders and what looked to be a missing eye, the socket was that low, tromped into the room. She seemed to be moving on a dead leg, slithering. “Table done been set. Time to eat.” She looked to me then turned to Ashira and smiled, “Oh, hey, Shi-Shi. Fine day.”

“Aunt Rose!” Ashira’s cheeriness had returned. “Only because I’m sharing it with you.”

Rose nodded, turned, and slithered back out.

Immediately, people began to move about, reacting to the announcement. Ashira stayed in place, so I did the same.

“We’re gonna go,” a woman informed, one of Ashira’s aunts.

“Oh, all of you?” Ashira asked, surprised.

“Betty and Charles’ grands are up for the weekend. Peebo gotta clean the pavilion area for the barbeque tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Ashira chirped.

“I’m staying, cuzz,” Sabrina winked, heading out, too.

When Ashira turned to take off, I followed behind her. That was until her mother, Celestine, grabbed my arm gently. When I turned, caught off guard, her gaze cut into me again. “Noel went too hard on you, was way too preoccupied with your situation.” My chest tightened. At the same damn time, Ashira must have realized I wasn’t on her heels and turned around. Celestine spoke even louder. “I *never* forget a handsome face, love.” Her smile so fucking beautiful.

Softly, yet it could definitely be heard, Ashira huffed, stepped back smoothly, and snatched my other arm, pulling me out of the room.

# Chapter 20

**Part II cont'd**

**May | Present Day**



“**H**ow’s your aunt, Kimberly?” Celestine dabbed the sides of her mouth with a cloth napkin. “She still thinks your father’s the holy grail of siblings?”

Ashira cleared her throat, pulling her wine glass closer to her plate. “Still pretentious with conviction, but she’s around. Very present.”

“Interesting,” Celestine chirped.

“So, you bought your own club, I hear.” Sabrina’s brows raised when looking at Ashira.

“Boss shit.” Ashira winked, but wasn’t her usual silly self.

And I knew why.

For some reason, her moms didn’t seem to be that loving, doting mother I experienced the first time I’d seen Celestine and Ashira. Something happened, something that tore these two apart. It made sense why Ashira hadn’t even made mention of her mother for a while since we’d been in touch.

“How are the girls, mommy?” Ashira asked, face toward her plate.

“Ah!” Celestine’s eyes lit up. “They’re marvels. Young, brilliant marvels. I wish you could see this year’s troupe. They remind me of you when you were ten: energetic, inspired to follow instructions, and quick learners. It’s truly my fortune to see my life’s work play out, day after day by way of those young girls.”

Ashira’s lips twitched as she cut into her chicken. I could swear to her fighting off a cry.

“So, what makes Mr. Sinclair here desirous of such a title of boyfriend—and so soon?” Celestine continued the conversation.

Ashira chewed, fork stabbing into her food. “Because he gives me Brandy vibes,” she muttered, and I was lost.

“Who?” her cousin, Sabrina, chirped.

Ashira answered, still speaking in code, “Brandy Norwood.”

*Oh, damn...*

“The singer?” Sabrina guessed.

“Yup.” Ashira forked food into her mouth then grabbed her wine for a sip, swallowing it back.

“I’m sorry,” Celestine interjected. “Perhaps it’s my age, but what does that young lady have to do with Mr. Sinclair here?”

“She wanna be down,” Sabrina laughed.

I wanted to, too.

“Precisely,” Ashira’s voice remained soft, but determined. “He makes me wanna be down,” Her eyes hit her mother. “with him. He’s that magnetic of a man. It’s also in when he *touches* me.”

I choked, not expecting that. It was what I’d told Ashira I felt about her back in St. Vincent. Now, she was spinning the block on the same sentiment. The song she referred to “*When*

*You Touch Me*” also played when we got it in the night I found her little sneaky sexy ass in my bed, using her keys for the first time. I was alerted to it when the alarm sounded and the notification came to my and Juggy’s phones at the same time. Consuela hit me up almost immediately, explaining Ashira had pulled up. I knew from that moment on I was done with rubbers and would go raw dog with her—at least try—that night. My dick was half hard until I got home and showered. Then my shit wouldn’t go down until I was nested inside her, balls deep. Celestine wasn’t expecting Ashira’s explanation either, judging by how wide her eyes shot open.

Sabrina busted out laughing even harder. “Oh, my god, Shi-Shi, I love that one, too!”

“But to be more specific and rated G,” Ashira’s head rounded over her shoulders, stretching while her jaw flexed. “He’s the purest man I’ve ever met. He’s honest, and not in a way like I know everything about him, but in the way of understanding his shortcomings and working hard every day to overcome them. I aspire to that. I want to be that person. And he pursues all things pure and...holy.” She shrugged. “And I’m his lucky pursuit.”

“*You’re lucky?*” shot from Celestine’s gut.

Ashira nodded calmly, attention back down to her plate. “He’s seen a bit of my ugly—”

“What’s that?” rushed from Paulette, Celestine’s first cousin.

“My pretentiousness, judgmentalism, pompous display of my ego by way of ‘helping’ someone ‘less fortunate,’” Her gaze returned to her mother, “and my insecurities.”

“But you’ve known each other...” Celestine scoffed. “for no time at all.” She asked me, “Am I correct?” And I knew what time it was.

“You’re correct,” Ashira’s voice projected over the silent message I felt Celestine sent to me. “It’s only been a few months and already, he’s been able to have that effect on me. But let’s move on. I, in no way, want Jas feeling

uncomfortable while with my family. I'll reserve that coveted distress for me alone."

"Oh, don't be silly, Shi-Shi." Celestine held her wine glass in the air. "You're not in touch with your family day to day. You brought a man to our family's estate, and mere months after breaking up with your Hollywood boyfriend. Certainly, you'd know we'd have questions."

"About what?" Ashira asked directly.

"About your mental and emotional process. I've never understood how you made decisions," Celestine answered. When Ashira shook her head, her mother continued. "I mean, think about it: look how easily accepting you were to the woman your father was unfaithful to me with—*again*. Look at how you allowed her to waltz into the life I spent year by year building without batting an *eye*—"

"That's not true and you know it," Ashira answered with gritted teeth.

My lady was heated.

"Celestine," Paulette cried. "Not this again."

"Is it not?" Celestine wasn't backing down. "You've accepted their love child seamlessly, have you not? You spend copious amounts of time with her as well."

"She's my sister. My blood sister." Ashira's voice was shaky as she looked at her moms. "Biological."

"Yes, dear." Celestine's forehead was high. "The spawn who *biologically* ended my family."

*Oh, shit...*

"Ashira's chin lifted as she swallowed hard. "No, Mommy," I could hardly hear. "You did the leaving all by yourself."

"I left and you stayed, taking in everyone who'd hurt me. You were totally adverse to every strain of DNA I put into you." When Celestine fixed her gaze onto me again, my heart dropped. *No...* "I'm sure you're familiar with my only child's roommate, Mr. Sinclair."



*Oh, wait.*

*Huhn?*

Ashira shot back, “She’s not *my*—”

“Then how else do you explain having a woman who is middle-aged and homeless, popping up out of thin air living with you?”

“Celestine,” Paulette tried again.

The aunt at the table, Rose, sat and ate quietly as though in the room alone.

“She’s your sister! Biological sister!” Ashira finally spoke from her gut. “Blood, which means she’s mine, too.”

Celestine scoffed, “And with perfect timing.”

“No.” Ashira’s head fell to the side. “With unfortunate circumstances. I showed her humanity at a time she needed it.”

“Does she still need it, Ashira?” Celestine challenged, sarcasm glistening in her eyes. “Because I can guarantee she still lives there and rent-free, too. You think because you installed a new phone line she doesn’t have access to I would think she vanished?” A breathy snigger pushed from her stomach it seemed. “Of course, she hasn’t left. You live in a twenty-two hundred square feet high-rise luxury apartment, paying nearly four thousand a month—*alone*—why on earth would that vagabond leave you, dear?”

“Maybe she doesn’t share the abandonment DNA with you.” Ashira was damn near shaking in her chair with clenched fists.

This was getting out of hand and so soon.

Celestine’s head flew back and she raised the back of her hand to her forehead dramatically. “Is that what you tell that overpriced shrink you see, dear? That I abandoned you?” She clicked her tongue. “Oh, but if she knew how disloyal and simpering you are. How you fawn over your father to the point of sacrificing your youth on manifesting his dream. We both bore a child. What did Noel get from our *only* offspring? A workhorse to run his company and caretaker for the bastard

child he ruined our marriage with. What did I get? A caretaker of an alleged sister against my wishes.”

“You left,” Ashira argued. “Not me. Not Dad. You!”

“What other choice did I have? What reason did I have to stay? To watch you take in strays like the local animal shelter?”

Ashira pushed back from the table. “I’ve had enough of this.” She looked across the table. “Sorry, Aunt Rose. I really am. I thought I could endure two days again, but I see I’ve outgrown being the punching bag to all of this toxic rhetoric.” Rose never regarded her, but Ashira then rolled her eyes at her mother and took off from the table.

“Oh!” Celestine chirped. “Toxic. Is that what you claim now to your shrink?”

This was some ol’ sitcom energy happening here and Ashira’s storming out was my cue to follow. I dropped my fork and pushed back from the table, too.

Just as I stood, Celestine pulled on my arm again. Her beautiful face strained with anger as she murmured, “There’s no way Noel knows about you two. His pathetic, begging ass would have called me, bitching about it by now. Then she would have decided against you, taking on his influence instead, *just* as she has me. Tread lightly with that one.” She used her forehead to point into the direction Ashira had left the room in. “She may be glittering and supple on the outside, but on the inside she’s too soft, too selfish to be understanding of a history like one of yourself. Beware.”

The pinch between her eyes was as mesmerizing as the chick who had my balls sewn up for life. The swelling of her narrow nose and the determination in her tanned lips and straining chin reminded me of the feisty woman I’d been sharing a bed with for weeks. Still, I had nothing to give Celestine. My loyalty was with the bad ass, judgmental, smart, generous, and upper-crust daughter.



“Yo!” I called out to Ashira powerwalking away from the house. “Wait up, girl!”

She didn’t slow. I followed her to the lake where she hiked alongside the water as the sun began to set. She stopped under a willow tree, its branches nearly reaching the ground.

She paced toward me, head arched to my chest. “I’m so sorry. So sorry I dragged you down here. I thought I could take her this time...maybe she’d put her focus on you enough not resurrect the same narrowed point-of-view narrative she’s spewed for years.”

I wrapped my arms around her, chin over her bowed head as I rubbed her back. “*I’m* sorry, baby.” That’s all I had.

“I’m just so sorry. I’m not weak, I swear to you,” she cried into my chest. I knew Ashira wasn’t weak, even after the number her mother did on her in there. It all made sense to me. Now, I understood why Ashira never spoke of the woman, why she had so much anxiety coming down here. “It’s just... *she*—I just don’t understand her.”

“Why was she so incensed right out the gate?” The enormity of the situation was coming clear in my head.

“Shi-Shi!” We turned at hearing her name. It was her aunt, Rose. The woman walked, dragging a leg and seeing with what still looked to be one eye. We began her way. I wanted to be sure she didn’t fall. We hiked up the small hill to avoid her risking a fall to come down. “You don’t let that foolishness get to you now.”

“It’s okay, Aunt Rose. I’m not going to brave through it. We’re leaving in the morning. I’ll find us a flight out soon. I just needed a moment out here by the lake.”

“I just wish Celestine wouldn’t be so hard on you. It ain’t you she mad at.”

“Then what is it, because I’m getting too old to continue to catch it all.”

Rose’s eyes, even the one that appeared missing, rolled up toward the sky. “She mad at the glow.”

“What glow?”

Rose’s attention remained skyward. “The one from this young man here. I knows why you ain’t with that boy no more. I knownt all this time he wasn’t gone be in your destiny fa long.”

Ashira’s head dropped. “You told me that when you met him.”

“Mmhmm. That’s neither here nor there. Your momma need to deal with her own mess. I just wanna tell this young man I can read his spirit.”

Nervously, Ashira’s gaze swung up to me. “Jas is wonderful, Aunt Rose. He really is. He’s nothing like he appears—*an*—and nothing like Austin. He may be rough on the exterior, but he’s so soft on the inside. He’s so damn smart. The smartest man I know, in a worldly sense and intellectual. He reads every chance he gets and is unbelievably articulate. His emotions are even balanced. And he’s the most protective man. He’s fixated on it. Really!”

“Mmmhmm.” Her lashes fluttered, gaze still in the air. “I knows those things and lots more, too.” I was picking up vibes I couldn’t put a name to with this lady. Ashira’s arm around my own squeezed, telling of her anxiousness. “I knowed you a man with a spotty past. A man fighting to be normal, but you ain’t. You ain’t never gone be because that’s not the way the good Lord made ya. You’re peculiar, young man. Ya can’t fight that. The sovereign God made you like a prism: two feet planted and one head toward the heavens. You ain’t swayed by circumstance. Things—*people*—is *all* one way for you.” She looked over at Ashira and pouted. “Well, until now.”

Fighting a smirk, Ashira glanced my way again, murmuring, “Azmir Jacobs said something similar.”

*A prism.* The third time I'd heard it, but this time I had a better idea of the analogy. This was like what Ezra and Divine mentioned, but with a different twist. It hit different.

“Look a here, Shi-Shi. Don't worry about ya mamma. She need to make peace with herself before she gone make sense. I sa'pose it don't feel good seeing ya only child you been away from for so long glowing like this. I sa'pose it's always been hard to see you shine when she left you in the shadows. She love ya, baby. She do. But she got ta get right with herself first. Celestine is selfish. You gotta bit of that in ya, too, believe it or not. It just ain't activate in ya yet 'cause you ain't got no chirren. But don't wait on Celestine. Prepare for *your* life.” That's when her face turned toward me. “I see just well, but not everything. You been given a promise, son. Alls I can say is fight for the promise. Wait. Just wait and wait some more.”

*Promise.* That was another keyword for me, but I needed time to think on it. Her words were coming so fast and her accent was something to adjust to, too.

“My aunt deals with spirits,” Ashira whispered apologetically.

“Mmhmm.” Rose's eyes were to the sky again. “I'mma get on back to the house 'fo it get too dark fa me ta see. But Shi-Shi, his activities in his sleep'll pass.” She pointed to me. “You just keep reminding him of his reality. That's you, baby. You this young man's reality, come spring, summer, winter, fall. Ya hear me nah?”

Without another word, Rose slugged away. A young man ran toward her. He waved at Ashira then took to Rose's side and walked off.

Ashira's gaze hit me. “Well,” she sighed, “now we know why my mother didn't spread out her toxicity over the weekend.” Her head hit my chest again and I pulled my arms around her.

“Y'all always been this way?” I asked, feeling like she needed to start unloading the negative energy set off in there instead of stewing in it.

I felt Ashira's head shake against my chest. "My dad cheated on her. I don't know how many times—even find it hard to believe because of how much he still worships her—but he did. The affairs weren't anything grand or long term because my parents were able to keep them away from me. That was until Noelle was conceived. Her mother, Lattice, refused to abort the pregnancy. Whether she thought she'd hit a lick or was truly in love with my father, I never knew. It was a minor detail against my family splitting."

She adjusted her head and lay her cheek on my chest as I continued rubbing her back. "My mother left us. Me. I'm not even sure if she asked to take me. I literally came home from school to my housekeeper breaking the news my father couldn't. My mother had left. He was distraught, regretful. Jas, I was ruined. It was so bad that I was sent to a therapist and prescribed medication to address the extreme anxiety and depression I fell into. It took me years to regain my feet."

"And you accepted Noelle?"

"I had no choice. She was adorable. The baby was a huge distraction while dealing with my mother's absence. My father caught on to that and would have Noelle over just to see me smile. He may be a flawed man, but Noel Witherspoon is obsessed with the well-being of Celestine and me."

"Not your sister?"

"I'm still working on that with him. I'm sure he loves her, but he's so hands-off in a way he'd never been to me growing up. I really try to facilitate a bond between those two, feeling like Noelle will be the better for it. It's another struggle of mine at the hands of Noel Witherspoon."

There was silence for a while. Only the sounds of insects playing the background.

"So Ines' your aunt?"

Her head moved against my chest. "Yup. She doesn't like throwing the label out there and I'm sure it's because of my mother's rejection."

"They grew up together and lost touch or something?"

Ashira's head pulled back and she motioned the ground, pulling my hand to prompt me to sit next to her.

“When my mother left. She stayed here for a few years. Did a lot of traveling the world on my dad's dime, of course \_\_\_”

“Oh. Damn.”

“In retrospect, I don't blame her. You cheat, you pay.” Ashira shrugged, shoulders and mouth. “That part of her DNA *is* in me. Loyalty is everything between family and lovers.” Her eyes were on me, communicating what I understood to be a warning. “Anyway, she'd call regularly and check in with me. I couldn't travel with her much because of school and my dance competitions, but also, sometimes I wasn't invited. She'd heard of my bonding with Noelle. It angered her. *But* she'd still call. And I'd see her here in *Della* on the estate. This has always been my mother's home base.

“Her contact with me slowed drastically when Ines turned up one year. I was grown by this time. She contacted my mother's, father's side of the family, doing an ancestry tracing online. Ines connected with a few cousins and they put her in contact with my mother and her brother, Gary. Gary flew to Michigan to meet Ines and there they took a DNA test, confirming their connection.” *Damn*. “My mother and Ines met one year. Ines flew down here to *Della* while my mother visited from Brazil. I so happened to be here, too.” She scoffed. “The meeting didn't go too well. My mother refused to accept their relationship, denouncing the DNA results with their brother. She was so cold to Ines and, deep in my heart, I knew why.”

“Why?”

Ashira looked at me. “Because meeting Ines the way she did was too close to the betrayal she felt from my father having Noelle. It was a surprise ‘intrusion,’ a painful telling of her father's lies and secrets. My grandparents—my mother's parents—were married at seventeen and died months apart, they were so close. I'm guessing my mother felt her father betrayed their family just as my father had.

“Anyway, Ines left angry. She didn’t cry; I know her well enough to know she doesn’t express her emotions that way. She grew up with an abusive mother and went into the military right after high school. But the way her eyes blinked successively.” She shook her head. “Well, let’s put it this way: I’d been on the receiving end enough at that point in my life with my mother for the same reasons I felt she was condemning this woman.

“So, I snuck out after Ines and took her to a coffee shop in town to talk to her, unlike mother. She didn’t give me everything upfront, I guessed having her pride. But I soon learned she had no money and technically no home. After being in the military for over thirty years, she developed PTSD and for the most part roamed. That day, I put her up in a hotel room. Then flew her home with me the following day. To be honest, Ines may bitch every now and then, but her spirit is so light and loving in her own way that I’d come to depend on having an older woman in my home.”

“Because you didn’t have ya moms?” I studied her.

Ashira’s gaze swept up to the orange sky. “I think so. And she resembles my mother so much, just without the disdain for me. Ines never intended to live with me. She’d gotten several jobs as a cook—even took out a loan for culinary school, and is clearly good at it. But there are things about her brain...the way she processes things, we learned over the years, that would make it difficult for her to maintain her own place. It’s the PTSD, I know. So, I figured why push her out? I’d gotten so used to her presence.”

I nodded. “That’s really cool of you.”

Ashira forced a smile, eyes softening. She elbowed me. “You want to know what’s really nice? You staying with me.”

“Why you say that?”

“I know you’re going to say I’m being judgmental again—and I probably am. I can’t help it. But I didn’t think you’d support me emotionally the way you have today.”

“How would I not have done that?”



She shrugged, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. “I don’t know. Maybe just go back to the cottage and think about how to break things off with me while I stayed out here and cried my eyes out.”

My damn stomach rolled over. “Ashira, *I*—I wanna marry you.”

*Shit...*

I meant what I said, just didn’t plan to say it, and definitely not the way I did.

The rocking of her body stopped.

“I didn’t mean *tha*—well, I ‘on’t deny *tha*—” I gave up, looking in the opposite direction to gather my thoughts.

“I’m in love with you,” her voice so small, so insecure. My head whipped to face her. A single tear fell from her right eye followed by the left before they both streamed. She wiped her face while nodding and smiling. “I know. Too soon. But I didn’t want to leave you out there alone with that proposal.”

“Leave me out there like how?” I was confused.

She elbowed me again. “You know. The marriage thing you want. It’s crazy as hell to expect from someone you’ve known for only three months. Just like it’s crazy for me to not only love you as a human being, but be in love with you as my man. I’m lost to you and I hate it.”

There were so many things to unpack with that.

“So, you think I’d ask you to marry me and not love you, too?”

She laughed. “Jas! Marriage is on that bible-like list you keep tallying. You trying to tell me you loved Cynthia and Maria and the other covenant-sisters, too?” She scoffed. “I don’t mean to sound conceited, but you never had the connection with them that we’ve grown *together*—” Her eyes grew big as hell. “Shit!”

“What?”

“Three months! We’ve hit three months. Your rule is to marry or flee after three months. So is your proposal a sign that I’ve made the cut?”

My eyes closed tight and I dropped my head. Ashira, though not agreeing with my tactics, took me too seriously.

With my eyes still closed, I tried, “Ashira, I ain’t been fuckin’ with you since February.”

“Oh, right.”

I looked at her. “Right. I know my process was bullshit. I didn’t know it then, but I damn sure see it as a joke now. Right now, I’m feeling shit for you I ain’t never feel for even my own mother.” I shook my head. “*My own mother.*” I needed to be real with her. “I feel a love for you I’m possessive about. Ashira, you got a magic over me that scares me shitless. It’s so strong that it threatens the confidence I’ve built as a man over the years. It makes me question just how strong I *am*—”

“Why? Because you now see how weak *I*—”

“Because you don’t know my name!” I yelled, suddenly irritated.

When all the muscles in her face dropped, appearing pained, my head fell back. “I’m sorry. *Damn*—I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She sniffled, producing a weak giggle. “It’s been that kind of day.”

I shook my head. “It’s kind of been that type of past few months for me, especially since the night you danced for me at your studio. The day before, after the Lord concert, I had a gun pulled on me. Two cats tried to rob the club.”

“Oh. Jas!” She wrapped her arms around me.

“Nah. It was light work, I swear. But for a minute, I thought about all the shit I’d miss out on in life had my life ended then and there. The list was too damn long. But my takeaway from that night was I’d give into what I’d been feeling about you. I wasn’t gonna fight it no more. Your beauty, your culture, your immense intelligence, your wild ass presumptions. I said I’d give it a go. Then from the dance, I

fell hard, Ashira. So fuckin' hard, so fuckin' fast. I've been gone ever since."

"Now you know how I feel." She studied my face. "Does that bother you, too?"

"It does."

"Why?"

"Because of the same thing I resented you for the first time you approached me at *Brown Barista*. I ain't believe you'd accept my past. That's the reason why I've not told you my full name."

"Exactly why?"

There was so much shit to unpack.

"Because I 'on't want you googling my shit, Shi," my voice cracked, forcing me to clear my throat. I needed to stand ten toes down on this. I wouldn't allow even Ashira Witherspoon to condemn me for what I had already forgiven of. "I 'on't want you judging me." I shook my head. "I don't want you to see me as anything less than what I give you." *Because I'm here forever.*

She stared at me, brain turning over behind her eyes. "You were in prison for guns. I know you were a gun dealer. You made a living from it." She scoffed. "A damn good one apparently." With her eyes pinned to me, searching for *the* answer, Ashira shook her head. "You told me about the diagnosis. I get the need for a therapist; remember, we share the same one." She kept going. "If it's the PTSD from being incarcerated for so long, I think I proved last week with your 'sleep sitting' that I'd go to extreme measures to bring you back to me. Even Aunt Rose said it's nothing to worry about. And I take her every word at it..."

That reminder was like a punch in the damn gut. She'd sucked my dick while I was in another dream, penetrating the nightmare. In fact, I'd considered those episodes dreams because nothing really happened outside of me believing I was still locked down. Her necking me and having me orgasm in

my sleep was a nightmare. I'd never had no weird shit like that happen to me in prison.

“Okay, Jas,” her deep sighing had me coming back to the here and now. “Are you going to make me resort to *guess*—” She jumped dramatically to her feet. “You’ve never raped a woman, have you? Because *that* would gross me out. I mean, I felt a possessiveness when we’ve made love”—*Made love*... That term stopped the unbearable tightening in my chest just for a moment. It sounded so official. *Yeah*. I did make love with Ashira. It was one of the most humanizing acts I’d had in life. She was beauty and I was the beast until we touched. It was pure, revealing, and satisfying.—“but I’ve taken that as a ‘*I took his virginity, so of course, he’d go ape on the kitty*’ type of thing. That’s as far as barbaric that I’d ever felt.”

I shook my head, dismissing that false notion. I had more of a passion for money than pussy as a kid. “I had a trial... before I got hit with the federal charges. I cut a deal with the *FEDs* and that’s what sent me up.”

“Okay.” She switched weight on her hips, standing in front of me. “You served time for guns. What else am I *missin*— Oh...” She blinked hard. “Your trial. What were you on trial for?”

That’s when I stood to my feet. I stared her straight into her eyes hardening before me.

Ashira’s head shook softly. “All I’m saying is give me all the information. You’re here talking marriage, and I don’t know your legal name.” Her face wrinkled. “I’m in love with a man whose name I don’t know. Do you know how ridiculous that is for a woman like me? We’re talking marriage and, like you said, I don’t even know all of your past.”

Hope blossomed in my chest. “You sound like you’re open to it...marriage.”

“I’m open to getting to know *all* of you because apparently the parts I do know made me lose rein of my heart.” She stepped closer, nose expanding. “But what I don’t like is to be treated like a child who runs purely off emotions and can’t handle shit. I am strong.” She stabbed the air below with her

index finger. “At the very least, I proved it earlier today with my mother. I’m still here. I’m handling it. After this ‘damning’ news, I’m sure I’ll still have my health and my freedom.” *Damn*. She used my words against me. “With those two things I can conquer any obstacle. So, tell me what it is, Jas.”

That’s when *she’d* arrived. That split second was when the thousand dollar suit-wearing, red sole-walking, and diamond frozen ear and wrist bad bitch I was familiar with had arrived. Ashira was right: she was all of those things. And on the other side of this conversation was possibly my forever with her.

With a racing heart, I forged ahead. “I was charged with quadruple murder, a massacre is what some news outlet called it at the time.” When she didn’t flinch, I couldn’t stop. “I did it. You may ask why. It was a contract hire type of thing. Someone I knew, knew someone who needed it done. I was that guy. No, it wasn’t something I was known to do, but it was very much known that I’d do it. I took the job, got hemmed up when it was done and was found out.

“The local police came after me and so happened to do an illegal search to try and prove I’d done it. They couldn’t, but found the guns I told you about instead. It was enough to get the ball rolling on my prosecution. They were able to place me in the vicinity the night of the murders, and I sat for trial and paid the sharpest criminal lawyers I could find. I beat the case. But the moment the verdict was read, the *FEDs* showed up with an affidavit and took me into custody from the local police department. I pled out for the guns found in my car, and you know the rest.”

When she knew I was done, Ashira stared at me for a long time. Her poker face was so tight, and I didn’t know what was going on in her head. I had no damn clue of what the girl was thinking, but my sick ass would wait for her. She was worth it. Even if she said she wouldn’t fuck with me after this, I would wait. But giving up was not an option.

*Please. Give me something...*

Knowing Celestine knew who I was, there was only one thing to do: this thing I knew could push Ashira over the edge.

But I needed it to come from me and definitely not the vicious woman I'd just experienced in that house. Couldn't have. The mom—or *Celestine*—I saw at sixteen years old didn't carry this energy that day. Shit, I'd built my whole plan for success, inspired by what I'd seen on that day between those two. What I witnessed today was a perfect example as to why I didn't allow shit to intimidate me. It was why I didn't believe any man or woman on this earth to be superior to me. Prayerfully, one day soon, I could teach that same discipline to my girl.

*But...*

Ashira didn't speak. She turned to the water, studying the reflection of the moon off the ripples without a word.

And I waited.

Finally, she took a deep breath and turned to me. "I'm going back to the cottage. It's late and I need to find us a flight out of here, preferably a redeye."

She turned away and walked off.

# Chapter 21

## Part II cont'd

### June | Present Day

*ashira*

I was breathless with unrelentingly adrenaline pumping throughout my entire body. It was one of my most favorite mental and physical highs. Slapping palms with my troupe after killing a self-built choreography at *Club Sin*, I felt an extraordinary high. The shouts and pats on the back from people I'd been seeing here over the years was the best dopamine. It made all the hours and blisters from practice over the past eleven days since returning from *Della* worth it. This night was what I'd made my focus outside of transitioning my role at work, having major upgrades done to my new club, and therapy.

I lived to dance. Out of breath and misted from exertion, I returned the daps and love given as my team dispersed, leaving the center floor.

Sergio appeared with a drink in his hands. "A refreshing limoncello for the most beautiful hooper in town," he tried

speaking over the music, his curly hair parted perfectly down the middle as he performed a bow.

My brows raised, challenging that mild compliment. “Only in town? Weren’t you just in Miami?”

“Let’s get you cooled off.” Taking me at the shoulder, he led me to the side of the main room toward an emergency door. “You’re the finest woman I’ve ever met, Shi-Shi. I haven’t seen dancers outside of Harlem.” He led me into a hallway, the heavy door closing behind us silenced off the energy from the club so completely, I thought my ears needed popping. He handed me the drink. “Remember, this is the first club I arranged for this type of performance, keeping an open mind. Your beauty and elegance are what opened me to the possibility and it’s paid off. I broadened the weekday flare to this club. Too bad the imbeciles funding this place can’t acknowledge that.”

I smiled, though that mention dampened my mood, dissipating my high. My gaze fell to the cool glass in my hand. “You know...I closed on my club.”

“Excuse me.” Sergio’s face contorted. “What club?”

I laughed nervously, never having found the announcement easy to make. I’d been slowly telling the people closest to me. While Sergio didn’t exactly make the cut for said group, the subject matter did allow him a temporary pass. This guy, though handsome in a fashion model type of way, wasn’t exactly my type. The silky curly hair and smooth pecan skin would make for gorgeous Black babies, but he’d been no different from Jas, now that Jas was a thing to me.

Sergio had no past. As much as we talked over the years, especially since breaking up with Austin when Sergio had been vying hard at my personal time and calling more frequently, I didn’t know anything about him. Our commonality was being two good-looking people sharing an affinity for night clubs. That was it.

“Yeah.”

“Where? When?” the urgency in his tone was cute.



“In Montclair. I bought the place outright.”

He gasped. “Dear, god, you’re bold, woman! You didn’t rent it first?”

“Nah.” Smiling, I shook my head, eyeing the drink blindly. “What would have been the thrill in that. Right? I figured, I’ve been dreaming of it for so long and recently prayed it into manifestation. Why stop for fear now?” Then I shrugged. “I figured, if for some wild reason, it fails, I can dump a few dollars into it, put it on the market for more than I paid, then turn a profit. Maybe then rent it out to someone like you with a proven successful vision.” I shrugged with my lips. “Not much different than flipping houses.”

Stunned, Sergio was speechless at first, all wide eyes and parted lips. “*I—man!*” He exhaled, finger-combing his thick, dark curls. “Are you sure nothing serious is going on between you and the Sin guy?”

*Wow!*

I wasn’t expecting that twist in conversation.

I placed the flat of my foot against the wall behind me and reclined. “Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like I want to be in the know of the play and the players.” Then he chuckled lowly. “You know I’ve been wanting you for years now, Shi-Shi, and I’ve been respectful.”

“Okay...”

“And after I saw those pictures on *Instagram* of you and him...and them for his birthday.”

Sergio’s mention of that trip reminded me of the purpose behind the theme of Jas’ birthday party. That was the reason: to let the world know he was connected to me and I was to him.

*But that was before...*

I smiled generously. “Sergio, I don’t believe in answering to my personal life until I’m moved to. I think if you have

something to say, you should lead with that instead.” I tapped the side of his arm with my fist to soften the blow.

“Fair enough.” He wiped down his face, pivoting while nodding. “Fair enough. You’re going to need a manager. You know that. Right? There’s no way you’re going to come out of construction and dance, and successfully run your first night club without experienced help. I would love *to—*”

A blast from the door being pushed open and the music blasting in from the club startled the both of us. It literally had me leaping from my feet, dropping the glass. Broken shards bounced against the concrete floors.

Jas entered first. His eyes dark, shoulders broad as he whipped his neck, appearing to loosen tension. His fingers flexed, splaying wide then curling into fists. Juggy was right behind him, big, droopy eyes empty and jaw flexing.

Then Man followed the duo, closing the door behind him.

Sergio, alarmed, tried, “Is there a *prob—*”

“Time to go, Ashira,” Jas ordered.

I blinked hard, not knowing what to say, but feeling impossibly guilty at the same time. Did I do something wrong? I didn’t even know Jas was here tonight.

Sergio turned to look at me in my periphery but, I couldn’t take my eyes off of a seething Jas. “Hang on. What’s going on *here—*”

“Shut the fuck up.” Jas widened his stance, voice so low and calm it made my stomach do flips. I hardly recognized him, his aura so powerful, so...menacing.

Sergio, still as stuck as I was, turned to me again, possibly looking for answers. I had none. I was slightly fearful and wholly shocked. “What the fuck is *goin—*”

“I said shut the fuck up,” Jas’ volume slightly higher, yet smoothly frightening.

“Yo, walk,” Man ordered Sergio.

Sergio's head kept swinging back and forth. The pulse in his neck visibly beating fast and an involuntary swallow cracked his voice. "I'm just *sayin*—"

"Serge, man. I may be polite, but I ain't patient," Jas warned him.

"Man, get the fuck outta here." Juggy began toward Sergio until Jas put his arm out, signaling patience.

"Fucking walk!" Man barked.

Sergio's hands went into the air defenselessly and he pivoted to amble in the opposite direction.

"Yo," Jas barked at him. When Sergio turned around, a shadow of fear and defeat colored his face. "Don't you ever in ya fuckin' life serve her a drink or food. Do we understand each other, chico?"

Demeaning. Jas' tone and actions embarrassed me into silence. I felt the immense helpless humiliation I hadn't since a kid when my father picked me up from Jeremiah Scott's house party when his parents were out of the country on business. My father was the only parent storming the party that night. I didn't speak to him for a week. I didn't care that I'd snuck out, humiliation was never the solution.

When Sergio, wordlessly, turned and continued down the hallway, Jas directed his commands my way. "Let's go."

That's when I gained my wits. "Go where?"

"Out of here. Your show was superb as usual, mission complete, the night is over."

I loved this man. The man before me who I didn't recognize. Clearly, I loved him because instead of refusing his control, I swallowed unexpectedly and chirped, "I don't have my things."



juggy

Shi-Shi sniffled again in the backseat and I ain't know if she was crying or fucking stuffy. Sin ain't mutter a damn word since we left Harlem.

Now, we pulled up to the crib and I put the *G-Wagon* in park. I waited. Sin left the backseat first. I watched him from the rearview mirror, cross over the back and go to Shi-Shi's side. When he opened the door and held his hand out for her, she bawled her lips.

"Juggy, take me back to get my car."

*Shit...*

"Your car is on its way, Ashira," Sin reminded her.

I ain't know how she forgot. He told her that when she handed over the keys to Man before we peeled off from the club.

"Then I'll wait here until it arrives."

Sin ain't say shit at first, just took a deep breath. "I'd rather you not."

*I'd rather you not.*

*See!*

This relationship shit had Sin weak as fuck. I mean, I was happy for him, but ain't want him walking through the bullshit at the same time. When he came home on his Jesus shit, it wasn't for me, but I always respected Sin's moves, so I rolled with it. When he said no more illegal hustling, that was some shit I couldn't even visualize, but the nigga made it happen, and now I had a couple of *Ms* spread across *a few* bank accounts. My family been eating good, good.

But when he started to fuck with Shi-Shi, I knew it wasn't what the nigga needed. Not only was his mind and background too much for a straight chick like her, but Shi-Shi being a quality broad would make Sin come out of the comfort zone he had always been in with chicks: he wasn't moved by them. When we was kids, the nigga got ass when he needed it, but Sin was never for the girlfriend game. He ain't flirt with chicks like that, ain't never promise them a little change or drop a few to stroke his own ego. He left that to Man and me.

Shi-Shi was a high maintenance chick. One that had her own chips and spent them shits luxuriously, too. She tricked on herself. Sin would have to give a damn to reach her level of tricking. And the thing about giving a damn for Sin was he was fucking pussy-whipped. *Beyond!* Shi-Shi had the nigga open. What was even crazier was he had her ass going, too. But chemistry could be dangerous. Chemistry could get niggas killed. And if these two ain't see this shit for what it was, Sin would jeopardize the entire empire he built.

I hated to see it.

“Fuck you, Jas!” Ashira cried. “Who do you think I am? One of those broke ass, pissy ass, welfare receiving ass bitches you grew up with?” *Oh, shit...* “You think you can humiliate me in front of my friends, have me leave a club I've been going to for years because I'm talking to an old friend?” She sat up in her seat, staring straight ahead. “Like I said, fuck you, Jas. My name is Ashira fucking *Wither—!*”

He slammed the door in her face and hiked it to the house.

I really wasn't in the mood for this shit. Call my old ass old, but I ain't even want to hit up *Club Sin* tonight. I had to because Jas heard about Shi-Shi's performance and said he was riding out. And wherever that nigga went, I followed unless uninvited. That was my role, my purpose, and my damn pledge in life: protecting and supporting Sin would be till the death of me. Believe that.

But now instead of being between Jos-Renee's thighs, I was stuck with the fucking kiddies.

I pushed my head back in the seat and took a deep breath. “Whatchu you gone do, Shi?”

“You know what?” She reached for her bag. “Take me home! I have another car. He got me fucked up thinking he can control my every move. He forgets I ain’t no broke bitch!”

“And you can handle that he ain’t one, too.” I started the truck.

“What?”

“Nothing, Shi-Shi. I’ll drop you off at home.” She was sounding like a corny ass valley girl now, I ain’t wanna get her no more hyped than what she was.

“No! Say what you gotta say! You obviously agree with his hood antics. You ran up on Sergio like a pack of damn wolves, too! What were you thinking?”

I took my hands off the wheel, taking another deep breath. “Shi-Shi, we ain’t run up on that little nigga. We played like gentlemen. You ‘on’t know that ‘cause you ‘on’t know the old Sin. You only know Jas.”

“And that’s the fucking problem!” She shouted. “Who the fuck is *he*—wait! Was he going to kill Sergio if Sergio didn’t want to be the mature party back there? He already told my ex to stay away from me. I mean... Is that what you Harlem niggas do?”

“Nah. [Divine](#) from BK.”

“What?”

The joke went over her heated head.

I continued in my calm voice. “Shi-Shi, we sitting on *Lake Sha’Ron* after a whole night with no violence and you talkin’ ‘bout death and Harlem Pride.”

“Don’t try to deny it! He told me. He told me he murdered four people, Juggy!”

*Sin got more than four bodies, sweetie...*

I shrugged. “So what now? You ‘on’t wanna fuck with the nigga no more, Shi-Shi?”

“Oh, now we’re going to turn this around on Shi? I never said I’m not fucking *with*—”

“I know!” I finally raised my voice. “Cause you been over here in his bed, fuckin’ him damn near every night since y’all got back from down south! You creep in here after hours, knowin’ the man knocked the hell out. You fuck him for hours then yo ass creep back out before the sun come up. So we know you ain’t got no plans to stop fuckin’ him!”

“How is that your business, Juggy? We’re grown! If Jas didn’t want me over, he’d have taken my keys by now.”

“He ‘on’t want ya keys! The nigga want you! He want you to accept him for the honorable man he *is*—”

“I don’t even know his *name*—”

“You cry about not knowing the nigga. *Blah. Blah. Blah.* The nigga slowly tell you about his past, constantly showing you who he is now! He done changed his life to fit a woman like you in it, and I ‘on’t know why ‘cause the acceptance and understanding he looking for I ain’t sure a broad like you can give that man. And you wanna know why the fuck I care? ‘Cause it’s me having to get up after you decide you done with ya rounds of fuckin’ and follow you home to make sure ya ass get there safely!”

“Then don’t do it! Make messiah Jas do it!”

“He couldn’t till today!”

“What?”

“That’s why he pulled up on you at the club. You ain’t invite him—ain’t even follow through on ya word with breaking bread with his pops and little bruh. But the nigga wanted to surprise you with support and telling you today was his first discharge day from parole!”

I was fucking out of breath, watching her eyes blow the hell up and her mouth stretch wide as fuck. Shi-Shi ain’t say shit at first, still chewing on that shit.

Tears started to race down her face. “I didn’t know.”

“Nah. You ain’t. The nigga wanted to tell you he could come with you and ya girl’s to *Red’s Island* now without asking the white man permission. It’s a lot of shit you ‘on’t know ‘cause I ‘on’t think you can handle shit.”

“Telling me about no longer being on parole and being able to vacation with me freely isn’t that big of a deal, Juggy. Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Yeah, but since that nigga told you ‘bout the charges he beat, you only been wantin’ a part of him, not the whole package. That’s fucked up, Shi-Shi.”

“Murder is a big fucking deal, Juggy! Sorry if that’s too hard for me to understand as a law-abiding citizen. The guy I’m fucking in love with has *killed* people. I’m a whole human. Forgive me!”

“Yeah, Shi?” I was over this shit. Done. “And he a whole ass new human being. Wanna know how? ‘Cause the old Sin ain’t give a fuck about about—*pardon me*—no bitch enough to run down on a nigga in a club. And please believe if we still had the old Sin back, that tropical ass nigga back there woulda likely spent the night at the hospital, healing up some shit that woulda left his ass permanently scarred.” I shook my head. “But instead of that bullshit, y’all need to decide if this shit’s worth it.”

She sucked in a breath. “What does that mean, Juggy?”

“I mean: shit or get off the fuckin’ pot. You go back to the soft niggas you used to and let him find his dry ass church girl. At least, y’all match with ya speed and don’t leave this nigga looking like...a normal nigga: fuckin’ heartbroken and weak. The nigga ain’t even smart enough to have more than one in rotation.” I laughed. “Bitches be throwin’ that shit at a nigga every day, but he prefers stayin’ low. Couldn’t be me. And it couldn’t be me trippin’ like y’all do all the time. Just end the madness and go ya way and let him find something that work for him.”

She grabbed her nose like I punched her. “That’s, by far, the worst thing you’ve ever said to me, Juggy! I thought we were friends!” Shi-Shi was crying.



“You trippin’ ‘bout the mention of y’all fuckin’ with other people, Shi-Shi? That’s got you buggin’ right now? For real?” She ain’t answer. Matter of fact, Shi-Shi was acting like something I expected from her homegirl, Becky. This was what I meant. Shi wasn’t cut out to be with a nigga as real as Sin. “Look, man, Shi-Shi.” I took a breath, trying to find the words. “I ain’t mean no disrespect, actually got mad love for you. You know that. If I had it my way, y’all niggas’ll be together without this drama. But I’mma always keep it one thousand.”

“You think I’m going to let him go? You’re fucking insane! I can’t!” She wouldn’t stop crying.

Nodding, understanding she was far gone in her feelings, I turned for the steering wheel. “I’mma get you home, Shi-Shi.”



ashira

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked, shading in my eyebrows in the mirror at the vanity.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Noelle’s voice was so small over the phone. The girl sounded her age, a rarity.

“Are you sure? Where’s your mother?”

“Out in New York with Aunt Brenda.”

I rolled my eyes in the mirror, feeling like I could choke my father for what he’d done to her. Again.

I sighed, “Okay, noodle head. I’ve got to get out of here.”

“You should’ve taken me with you. Father’s Day weekends are for fathers.”

*Yeah. Attending ones, though...*

“I know.” I brushed a shimmery bronzer onto my cheeks. *Asshole!* “But remember, this trip is adults only. We’re trying to hit the club tonight.” Finally.

“Yeah. Yeah.” Noelle’s words were spiritless. “I doubt if they even card down there. People think we’re close in age when we tell them we’re sisters.”

I laughed. “If you say so. Again, I’ve got to go. The girls are probably downstairs taking shots without me. We leave tomorrow afternoon. If you want, you can *Uber* it to my place or have your aunt, Brenda, drop you off. Ines is there. Just let her know first. I can take you to school on Tuesday.”

“Or we can play hooky from life together.”

“Noelle...”

“Awww, c’mon! Shit’s boring anyway. I can’t wait to be grown.”

“You’ll get there soon enough.” I rolled my eyes then admired my shadow work when my eyes focused in the mirror again.

“Speaking of which, the dude, Jas.” I stiffened on the bench. “You think I can have his number? I can use a friend: my big sis is vacationing in *Red’s Island*.”

Before I could respond, heavy thuds from his footsteps sounded as he neared me. With just a towel caping his hard hips, ass, and thighs, Jas sauntered straight up to the sink, next to the vanity, to brush his teeth. It was ten at night, and we’d spent much of the afternoon and evening making love. Jas gave me more limb-contorting orgasms with his mouth than my body could take.

Now, my sister was trying to finesse me for his number.

My eyes closed. “Noelle...”

“I’m fucking with you, sister. I know you’ve been jerking the pole, girl.”

I inhaled. “Excuse me?”

At the same time, Jas' head whipped my way. One dark, bushy brow hiked. He, too, surprised by her words.

I hadn't exactly shared my relationship status with anyone. Jas and I had been happening so fast, the union so delicate and, oftentimes, unstable. Since *Della*, Jas and I had been struggling to get back on track. I'd hoped this trip to *Red's Island*, he seemed to hijack, would do the trick.

"It's just jokes, sis—*well*, everything except for the number part. I'm sure he's available to help me make sense of my father's hyper-sexual proclivities preference to me. Then again, my Dad prefers anything to me," her voice still flat.

*Hyper-sexual proclivities? Is that what they're teaching now at Bishop John Yancey Christian Academy?*

I shook my head. "I will not be giving you Jas' number."

"Why?"

"Because it's inappropriate, Noelle. He's an adult, you're a child."

"He knows that. He's no perve, I'm sure, Shi-Shi." *He's my perv. Trust me.* "I think you're being extra."

"That's fine. I'll be that for you. Besides, Jas has his own life. I'm sure he's out living it now."

"Like what? On a date?"

Jas' neck careened to face me again. "Yeah. Possibly. He has his health and freedom." My eyes on him. "I'm sure he's making the most of it." With a faint smirk, Jas returned his attention to his own mirror, continuing to brush his teeth. "Anyway, Noelle. I've really got to go. Don't forget to let me know if you're going to stay over tomorrow."

"Alright," she sighed. "You're no bad fun, which is good fun, making you a horrible big sister."

"Luh you, though."

"Bye."

I may have successfully gotten Noelle off the phone, but my heart was still heavy for her. Leaving the bench of the

vanity, I toed over to the double sink and hopped up on the counter.

After rinsing his mouth, Jas wiped his face with a hand towel and asked, “Everything good?”

It was Father’s Day and we’d arrived in *Red’s Island* two days ago. Before leaving, I laid out specific instructions on how my father and Noelle would spend the day in my absence. He said he was open to spending time with her, so I figured if I arranged for her transportation and purchased her gifts for him in advance, the two would be fine. Not true. My father had obviously forgotten about the girl coming by. So when Noelle searched the house for him, she found him in the pool house with two young women, all naked and engaged in acts Noelle had only heard about in the locker room. She called me crying, interrupting my blowjob number on Jas a few hours ago. I calmed her down enough to get her off the phone. The call I’d just hung up from was me circling back, checking in on her.

My shoulders dropped, exhaling deeply. “I don’t know. I could choke the man. Literally. She’s been through so much, trying to be seen by him.” I shook my head, a chill running up my spine.

“You called him, too?”

“No. I have nothing to say to him.”

He straightened. “You wanna go home.”

I balked at that statement. “We’re about to head out and hit the streets. Our friends are downstairs waiting on us...so is your unnecessary security.” I paused for his reaction.

It had been a point of contention the entire trip. A week after Jas humiliated me in front of Sergio, he met me at *Brown Barista* in between our therapy sessions and laid out the plans for my friends and me traveling here to *Red’s Island*. Not only did he rent out a four thousand square foot estate for us to stay in and provide a private flight on the *Ellis Bombardier*, but he hired local security to patrol the majestic grounds and shadow us when we went into town to eat and shop.

It was extreme and completely unnecessary. Jas had even asked several times since we arrived if we wanted to skip the clubbing experience here. It was annoying. Of course, we didn't. We thought we'd hit one every night, but Sinclair killed those plans, saying just one night of partying with the locals.

I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him between my thighs. "Why do you hate *Red's Island*?"

"I don't." He peered at himself in the mirror, over my head, brushing down his sharply groomed goatee. "It's actually gorgeous out here. Good food, pleasant people."

"See!" I squeezed my thighs around him.

Jas scoffed, "Chill! You only got panties and a bra on, Shi!"

*Awwww...*

"You afraid to be tempted by my feminine chicaneries again?" I kissed his carved shoulder.

"I'm tempted just smelling you...hearing you. Thinkin' of you." His attention still over my head, delivery monotoned. But I knew he meant every word.

I felt a sensation lance my chest. I loved this man, something I couldn't fathom how it had happened, much less so quickly. Still torn over the details of his sordid past, I struggled with the intensity in which my soul easily entwined with his. A murderer? I couldn't reconcile that with the man whose body I easily melded into. The one who took over the plans my girlfriends and I had for this trip and paid for our flight and stay—food, liquor, and transportation.

"Let's stay here." I thought about it even more. "Let's stay on the island, buy a smaller house, and live out the rest of our *days*—"

"As Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair?" He captured my chin, cool, minty mouth millimeters from my own. "Say less, Ashira."



jaz

“Hey!” Becky shouted. “You two horny bastards are finally ready?” The room turned to Ashira and me as we entered the open kitchen connected to the great room of the house.

“We thought y’all changed your minds,” Corinne commented, arranging shot glasses on the quartz island top.

Man headed my way, tanned ass with a button-up halfway done to show off his chest. “Yo, security’s outside. They brought four SUVs. Said two already at the club.”

I nodded, watching Ashira show off her outfit: a pair of tight and short, black shorts with a shimmery gold bikini top not hiding much of the contour of her tits. The gold, high-heeled sandals matched the top, curving her spine and pronouncing her ass provocatively. Yeah. She was applying pressure tonight.

“Damn, Shi-Shi!” Shizu made a whistling sound with her fingers. “That’s how you feeling?”

“If you ain’t do it by now,” Becky added. “y’all are going to make a baby tonight. It won’t take Jas that long to pull you out of that number.”

“Can I watch?” Corinne asked casually. Then she winked. “I can direct, too.”

“You can direct and produce over here, shortie.” Juggy walked up on her from behind, two-stepping with his hands in the air.

The girls laughed, including Corinne as she rolled her eyes. “Okay. Time for our pre-club toast. Grab your glass or two.”

Ashira grabbed a shot glass and looked my way. “You’re gonna sit this one out, too, Sin?” She was being cute with that reference, making my niggas laugh.

“Yeah.” I sighed, fighting off fatigue. It was way past my bedtime.” I’mma sit this one out, lil homie.”

My damn stomach was in knots and I couldn’t figure out why. I tried being in the moment, even attempted to fuck off my anxiousness for hours upstairs with Ashira. It medicated the lowkey worry, but didn’t kill it. At this point, I wanted to get to the club, let the girls have their fun, and get back here where I knew we were protected and could handle any potential invaders.

“*And when the juices meet the meat!*” The girls started rapping in unison out of nowhere, holding their glasses in the air while bobbing. Ashira swung her ass seductively and Shizu was right with her. “*And when he feel this heat! And when I skeet-skeet, that nigga knees get weak!*” My niggas laughed, and all I could do was shake my head and chuckle. This was my girl’s thing with her people. They were so cute it was hard to view them as corny.

“Say less.” Ashira licked salt from her hand, tossed back the shot, and sucked on a lime, pacing with her girls’ speed. Jug and Man followed suit, tossing them back. “Say more!” She went for her second while the group did the same.

When she was done, Ashira shot an arm into the air and swung her hips from side to side. This was the side of her, her girls knew: the entertainer. My fellas knew by now, too. They watched and cheered her on. Ashira, on a mission of self-expression, continued, falling into a full on twerk. It was tasteful, nothing as seductive as I’d seen of her privately. The girl loved to dance. This was what I lived for. Seeing Ashira and her friends in a circle, dancing, drinking, and enjoying life innocently and without concern of harm.

*So, why am I tripping?*

# Chapter 22

## Part II cont'd

### June | Present Day

*ashira*

It was well worth the trip. The club called *Shades* was everything it was purported to be: high energy, great drinks, clean facility, and a top-tier deejay. *Klipse*, the new R&B group signed to *L.I.T. Records*, were in the house and performed two songs off their debut album. The old group, *B-City*, had hit the stage, too, but minus the old member, Teke. He'd been replaced by a guy not as dynamic or good-looking, but was talented, nonetheless. When Irv, one of the original members, tried to pull me on stage without my permission, Juggy and a female detail derailed his plans, intercepting me. That's when I learned some of the patrons were undercover security. I was too tipsy to express how ridiculous it was. I was also having too much fun to complain.

Feeling thirsty while dancing, I left the thick crowd for the bar. I was a pulse-racing mess, misted all over from dancing most of the night. I ordered a bottle of water and another two-thumb *Mauve* served neat. When it was time to pay, bills of the local currency were handed to the bartender. A Black man



wearing khakis, a black tee and suit jacket in this hot place. He had to be security. To confirm, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Juggy dancing on Corinne's ass just feet away when I'd left them deeper on the dance floor. He nodded and winked.

Turning around, I thanked the security and the bartender before collecting my things. Then I headed over to Jas who stayed in the VIP section just off the dance floor. The area was elevated, giving him a bird's-eye view. Man was with him as well as three other men I figured were security also.

I went straight to his lap and planted myself comfortably. "This is for us to share," I spoke closely to his ear, handing him the water.

"You still having a good time?"

"Being babysat? Of course!" Opening the cold bottle of water, Jas issued me the side eye. "I'm kidding. This place is fucking litty!" I took a sip of the brandy. Then I put it to his mouth. When Jas stalled, I cried, "Awww, c'mon! I'd like to see you loose in this lifetime when you're not banging my guts out."

Jas snickered at that, shaking his head. "I'm good."

"One tiny sip, bible-thumper!" I was nearing drunk for sure. Jas accepted the glass, taking a quick sip I couldn't measure. His face contorted as he swallowed. "Not fair. Doesn't seem like you had a lot!" I studied the tumbler.

"Shi, I'm good. You have a good time with; it'll be your last while we're here."

I pouted. "Why?"


"Because I want you to have a good time and not wake up with regrets. Plus, you gotta be on guard for safety reasons."

I barked in laughter. "I've got like twelve niggas shadowing me. Even Juggy won't let me out of his sight!"

"He ain't supposed to."

"Well, he's about to be out of luck, 'cause momma gots to pee. He can't come in there." I stood, taking off with my swag walk.

Yup. My ass was nearing drunk.



“She ain’t give me the pussy yet, but shortie had my ass singing up the chair with her hand game work, yo!” Juggy shouted over the music, making the jerking off movement with his hand. “She did this slow stroke shit thing that blew my mind! Broad ain’t even have to use her mouth!”

Man shook his head, laughing while I only shook my head, looking toward the bathroom. Ashira had been in there too long. Shizu had come up to talk to Man since she left and I asked her to check in on Ashira. That was almost five minutes ago. Frustrated, I looked back at the cat I had posted with me in the VIP section. He was talking on his earpiece, something I wasn’t sure was possible: the music was loud in here.

Anger coated my fucking chest in a way I knew could grow uncontrollable if I didn’t get my shit together. Doing that meant giving the unease spinning in my belly to God. This may have been my anxiety over the girl’s safety as it had always been, I wasn’t sure. I turned forward again, eyes toward the bathroom.

*Calm down. You ain’t got no reason to believe everything ain’t okay.*

*Jesus, help me.*

Then scripture began flowing into my mind that I could only describe as supernaturally. It had to be because the dark space I’d been internally gravitating to was not biblically based.

Psalm ninety-one verses four and five didn't cool the heated churn in my belly. My armpits grew damp all of a sudden. Deuteronomy chapter three verse nine didn't cure it. Not Psalms one hundred-fifteen verse eleven. Isaiah forty-one verse ten didn't do it either. Second Timothy chapter one verse seven was when I gave up.

I stood to my feet and when I turned to the security, his head flew up, eyes toward the bathroom. I swung around and found a woman, likely security, trying to ram the door open.

"Sin," the security behind me shouted. "Somet'ing's wrong. Someone heard an explosion, and the door to the ladies' room is locked."

I knew the play, at least I thought I did. "Get that fuckin' door open!" I pointed across the room. "Yo, Man, follow me! Jug, get the girls!"

I jumped over the metal gate separating us from the dancefloor and pushed my way to the entrance. Once outside, ignoring all the nasty words from the patrons I pushed aside, I tried to figure out which side of the building the bathroom was on.

I turned to Man. "They blocked off the bathroom. They blew up a wall back there. Which way for that bathroom?"

Man looked up and around the building then took off for the left side. I followed on his trail with a pounding chest and feet I couldn't feel. The warming in my belly grew hotter and my heart felt heavy.

We turned a corner so fast, Man ran out of one of his boat shoes. When we turned the other corner of the building, I spotted a running van and my worst fear was spot on. These niggas was trying to take my baby. I ran even faster and, out of nowhere, the barrage of thoughts firing across my skull like fleeting synapses happened again.

*I've never had a home.*

*I've never lived with a woman other than my mother and grandma.*

*I've never proposed to Ashira.*

*I've never worn a ring.*

*I've never been called Daddy.*

*I've never made a family.*

Man pulled out his gat seconds before I saw there were guns out already. Terrifying screams and aggressive shouts rang out in the air. There were girls with short skirts and mini dresses with their hands over their heads, wailing frantically. The doors of the back of the van were open. Inside were girls with blindfolds over their eyes and hands tied behind their backs. A nasty, bitter film covered my tongue.

“Ashira!” I called out. “Ashira!” I looked all around, body swinging wildly. Women with their breasts and ass out from being shuffled and maybe having wrestled to get away were crying like crazy.

“Sin!” someone called me. “Over here! We got ‘em, man. Just in time!”

“Ashira!” I yelled again.

“She over here, bro!” Man called out.

“Where?” The sobbing from the women. The struggling of niggas on niggas. I had no idea who was what and ain’t give a fuck about nobody. Shoving someone aside, I found Man holding Ashira then going for the zip-tie behind her. She bawled in silence, body shaking uncontrollably, face completely wet, and a bleeding cut on her knee.

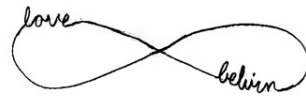
“Baby,” I could hardly get out, so sorry about this.

“I got her.” Man pulled out a Swiss army knife and yanked at the plastic cord.

I jumped to my feet. “How the fuck did this happen?” My eyes searching for familiar faces of the security team. “I paid fifty fuckin’ stacks. I wanna know how the fuck did this happen?”

“Sin!” Marty, one of the main guys I communicated with, called out, “Calm *down*—”

“Fuck that!” I caught a glimpse of a rip in the suit jacket of one of our security team. He was wrestling a dark skinned nigga with gray eyes. We caught each other’s attention at the same time. My blood turned cold, neck began spasming. “Who did this?” I walked up on them. “*WHO THE FUCK JOB WAS THIS?*”



*ashira*

It was like a movie, completely unreal. I couldn’t decipher between my inebriation and reality. One minute, I was squatting over a toilet peeing and the next, I was being dragged out of the bathroom stall with my shorts down. With a gun pointed to my face, my body shook violently as I struggled to pull them up. I didn’t even button them in place when a bomb sounded and we were being shoved toward a smoky hole. None of us could see, crawling through rubble and debris, I cut my legs trying to follow the girls ahead of me. My mind was on Shizu. She’d come into the restroom as soon as it was my turn to go into the stall. I laughed before closing the door, shuffling before I peed on myself.

Where was she? Was my best friend okay?

As soon as they got us on the other side of the hole which was outside, there were other guys waiting with zip-ties who bound our arms. I was just about to be blindfolded and gagged when a few other guys showed with guns. I was so fucking scared I forgot to scream. Although the other girls around me were yelling, between the music from the club and the explosion in the bathroom, my ears felt clogged.

*Man!*

I saw Man and Jas was right behind him. I wanted to jump into his arms. I knew he'd protect me, take me far away from here. My god, I could have been killed. The thought hadn't occurred until now. This was human trafficking on an intricate scale!

Jas walked away. Then Man left me and, before I could panic, he'd returned with Shizu's curled body. She was filthy, covered in black debris like me, but even more so on her milky skin tone. I hugged her with weighted arms as Man removed the gag cloth from her mouth then uncovered her eyes. Her eye makeup was purely intact, but for the raccoon undereye from her tears. I couldn't hear clearly still, but could see she was still bawling her eyes out. I hugged her hard, squeezing as I wanted to Jas, but he'd left me.

"This was you?" sounded muffled to me, but bodies shuffled and a path was opened to Jas brooding, back flexing and neck twitching. "You?" he shouted.

A man I'd never seen before was bound with two guys surrounding him. His gray eyes glistened against the one lightbulb now shining out here. When we crawled from the hole in the wall, it was pitch dark, so I didn't see much of the people around me. The guy's body swayed as they forced him to his feet. His grin was cocky, eyes straight on Jas, head to the side. He was slightly larger than Jas' six-foot even frame and nearly twice his width.

Jas spoke again, Man and Juggy taking to his sides now as he motioned to the guy. The two security released the gray-eyed man.

And without a minute to spare, he and Jas charged each other. Man and Jugg never left Jas' side. They kept a close eye as Jas threw several rapid punches landing on the man's face, chest, and belly. The guy's head bounced back at the last one, swinging behind his shoulders at whiplash speed. Jas positioned himself to move around the man and leaped into the air, grabbing him at the head and shoulders. It all seemed like a "*Gladiator*" choreograph. The man's hands thrashed the air then reached back, slapping Jas in the face.

Undeterred, Jas hung on to him, eyes going empty, face tight. The ropes in Jas' muscular arms flexed, veins swelled with power. Within seconds, the flaying arms failed the man. Seconds after that, his knees gave out on him. A few barks could be heard from the guys apprehended, lying on the ground. It was now clear to me who the players were. This was a heist disrupted.

Jas was angry. *No*. That wasn't Jas at all. His face so swollen from strain, I didn't recognize him. I watched as the grey-eyed man's face began to turn purple, the white of his eyes red. That's when I knew.

Jas was going to kill him.

His body clenched the man's neck with the intensity I documented in his eyes when we made love. It was passionate force I saw when he exploded inside me, especially since we'd been skin-to-skin. It was that same intensity he maintained after leaving *Della* when I'd judged him, doubted us. Jas never turned me away when I came to his bed at night, attempting to satisfy the need to connect with him in the most cowardice way. He didn't call me out when I gained the courage to resume our meetings during the day either. Our conversation in *Della* at the lake had still been left drifting in the winds as I tried to outrun the torrid growth of my perfervid emotions for him.

And apparently, he was acting out his ardent passion for me. Or was Jas being Sin? Was this the evil he'd warned me about? Had I finally met Sin who'd been diagnosed with Cluster B personality disorder?

I jumped to my feet, rabidly searching my brain at the same time. "Jas, no!" Juggy caught me before I made it to the cobra choke that was about to take a man's life. "Jas, baby!" I screamed, stomping my heeled feet. "I'm okay. Look at me! Look at me! I'm right here. I'm fine!" Frantically and through tears, I gazed at Juggy. "Help me! He's going to kill him! Is that what you want? You want to lose him again!"

"He gone now, Shi-Shi. Sin don't come back when he out this far. You gone get hurt if you try!" Juggy warned as my

girlfriends begged me to stop.

I swarmed in his arms. “No! Goddamn it! Jas, baby, listen to me!” my cords strained painfully. “Baby, I’m right here. Please, don’t do this to me. Jas, we have to go home. Together!” I tried searching the recesses of my mind for one—*anyone*. Then it hit me. “The old has passed away! The old. The old...” I struggled to recount it. “Behold, the new has come!” Growing frustrated, I blurted, “Corinthians, chapter five! If anyone is in Christ, he’s a new creation. The old has gone, the new is here!”

I gave up being accurate. It was clear, I hadn’t retained my Bible verses from my primary education. But that should have been enough for him to hear.

“Jas!” I cried, seeing the now black-eyed man’s hand twitching. “New! New!”

He was dying. That was it. Jas had killed the man as everyone watched on.

The next thing I knew, a ferocious shout hurled from Jas’ chest and he released the guy. Jas’ chest heaved hard and hands flexed at his sides as he eyed the man with complete abhorrence.

Juggy left my side as I watched every move Jas made.

Two trucks pulled up and Man shouted, “Let’s fuckin’ go, Ahk!”

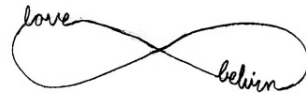
I turned at his alarming yelp. People were crowding the area. Juggy was directing Becky and Corinne to one of the trucks. I watched him pick up Shizu’s tiny frame and urge the other girls to go. Snapping into action, I charged at Jas, nearly twisting my ankle in the heels.

“Baby,” I tried grabbing his face, but Jas wouldn’t budge at the neck. I moved into his line of view, my body shivering, words sputtering. “*Le*—let’s go, baby. *We*—*wa*—we’ve gotta go!” Finally, he peered down at me. “Jas! Let’s go.”

“Yo!” Man shouted again. “Popo’s a block out!”



I pushed him as hard as I could, mirroring his typical intensity, though it was useless. But Jas did finally break. With heavy panting, wide nostrils, and dark eyes, he took me at the arm and we took off for the truck.



love believe



jas

“Are you sure I can’t get you another bag of ice for your fists?” Mel craned her neck into the door of the bedroom and quietly asked.

We were in the air for the States in less than three hours. If it weren’t for Captain Willie and his son arriving on the island this afternoon, opting to spend a day touring tomorrow, God only knew what the next few hours would have turned into. The security team I’d hired advised us to leave the island as soon as we could. It was all good; that was my plan anyway.

I glanced down at the arm I had draped around Ashira’s body curled into a fetal position and saw how swollen and cut my shits were, I shook my head. “No thanks, Mel. Maybe some tea for her.”

“Absolutely.” She closed the door, leaving me with a resting Ashira and in a quiet space for conversation with the Lord.

I’d fucked up. So bad, I’d fucked up. The thing about falling for a girl was you can’t control your emotions regarding her. It weakens your judgment and makes you behave irrationally. The worst of it was I didn’t regret my actions, only questioned why I didn’t put that motherfucker out of his misery.

I warred spiritually since I came through to full consciousness on the speedy ride back to the estate. As Ashira cried, throwing her things into the luggage then helping me with mine while I communicated with Ava who had reached out to Captain Willie and his son, I fucking warred in spirit.

We'd loaded in the truck, drove nearly an hour to the airport, and I prayed silently in the spirit. When Mel was processing our identification and our luggage was being stowed beneath the aircraft, I sought the Lord in prayer. As everyone grabbed their respective places of comfort on the *Ellis Bombardier* and I insisted Shizu and Ashira took the bedrooms and that I'd be with Ashira, I beseeched Him. Mel and her crew got us settled in, understanding we needed to eat and sleep. She even took care of Ashira and Shizu's scratches and cuts after they showered here on the plane. I'd been given an ice pack for my hands and face where that pussy caught my jaw. And now, as I lay here, needing to feel her as she slept, I sought out my God.

ashira

My eyes slowly opened, letting me know I'd dozed off. I didn't mean to. I'd showered and eaten what I could. When it was Jas' turn to shower, I lay here waiting for him to come out so we could talk...or just hold each other. I could feel the unbearable weight of the anguish he carried from the moment my full senses had returned once we'd left the house. No one spoke. It was the most silent my friends and I had ever been together. Juggy and Man, unaffected yet sensitive to the moment, tended to my best friends. I couldn't provide the comfort I normally would because, quite frankly, I was devastated, traumatized by the 'could haves' and the possibility of the aftermath coming back on Jas.

Rubbing my eyes, I yawned feeling my bruised cords, then turned over to Jas. I loved his heavy arm on me, extending his protection. The amount of safety and relief I'd felt couldn't be measured.

“Hey...” my voice brittle and whispery.

His head rolled my way and the dark circles around his eyes were just a small detail of his duress. With his swollen hand, he caressed the side of my face, acknowledging me. “You good?”

Instead of lying, I rasped, “Did you eat?”

“I tried. You're hoarse.” Then he tossed his chin. “Mel brought you more tea.”

Instantly, my mouth felt dry. I tried flipping over again, my legs protesting in pain, elbows, too. I did, indeed, see a silver tray topped with a tea kettle, mugs, and an assortment of sugars and honey. But there, just in behind the mug and saucer of sliced ginger and mint leaves, was a purple velvet box.

*Andreatta's Promises...*

My pulse raced and body jolted then locked. I was out of breath, and for no reason all of a sudden. Slowly, I rose to reach for it. Inside was an emerald-cut hollow ring with pave diamonds going around the platinum band. Its radiance beamed, flashing in my eyes against the silver tray. And I cried. A torrid of tears rushed down my face as I turned and threw my arm and aching leg around Jas.

“Why are you crying?” he asked with a violently beating heart.

“Because I love you so much.”

“I know your answer's no. Knew it when I brought it out here.”

I pulled my face from his stony shoulder and peered up finding his glowering expression. “Then why did you buy it? Why did you show me? For me to say no and feel like shit?”

“Why would you feel like shit for being real?”

I choked on my tears, trying to convey, “Because even though I can’t say yes, I know with all my heart you’re the only man I *wan*—need. I can never see you love another *wom*—another being. I was a spoiled, pampered only child for so long. Still, you’re the only man who’s made me paranoid about having to share your fixation and affection. A murderer and a felon. I could have just about any man on the planet. Any man, Jas!” I rasped in tears. “But my *entire* soul belongs to a murderer and a felon and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Why wouldn’t I feel like shit under these fucked up circumstances?” Those last words fell in a whisper.

My throat had given out. My heart was gone, too.

Jas owned me, though I’d never confirm it.

I didn’t even know his name.



ashira

“This was really tasty. Thanks.” Lamont smiled as he handed his plate to Ines.

She went all out for tonight, actually wearing her chef’s coat for the event.

“Are you done?” Ines asked Nicholas.

Stuck, Nicholas glanced down at his half-eaten plate and grinned sheepishly. “*Uh...* Yeah.”

Charmagne laughed while stuffing a grape from one of the appetizer trays Ines left behind. “You couldn’t eat, staring at Shi-Shi.”

His father, Lamont, chuckled, reaching over to finger his son's wild curls. I laughed at that myself. Nicholas was cute: tall, bright-eyed, and polite. He was extremely shy, too. Maybe Charmagne was right. Perhaps I was the reason for Nicholas' reticence tonight.

"Mmmhmmm." Charmagne smacked loudly on the grapes.

Nicholas' cheeks heated. "Nah. It's just that... Shi-Shi? My brother's dating Shi-Shi from the *Gram* and *TikTok*!"

His father chuckled warmly at that. Ines shook her head, carrying the plates into the miniature kitchen just off the main room. At the head of the table with his parents on either side of him, Jas' beam was imperceptible, but I knew it was present. I also now understood how infectious Nicholas could be. It was clear why Jas would want to rope him into his world.

"So," Lamont's eyes bounced between Jas and me, "is this official?"

Jas' attention rolled over to me. Embarrassed by the sudden spotlight, I giggled while chewing my food.

"Sounds like it to me," Charmagne supplied in a mumble. "But ain't nothing official till I get some grandbabies."

My eyes popped wild. This was my third time being in Jas' mother's presence and although on each occasion, she treated me as if it was our millionth time seeing one another, I was still reactive to her peculiarly strong personality.

"No grandbabies before you get a daughter-in-law," Jas made clear and my belly churned.

It was a striking reminder of his simulated proposal nearly three weeks ago on the plane back home from *Red's Island*. So much had been hanging in the balance of that trip. Truthfully, so much had been unresolved since our trip to *Della*. The only thing clear between Jas and me was we didn't want to let go of each other. That was completely off limits for us a both.

Charmagne sucked her teeth. "Oh, I forgot. You like ya daddy with that order shit. Just make some babies and don't

cheat. Hell, have a wedding in the back yard in between. Just be happy. You feel me?"

Lamont took a deep breath, dumping his napkin onto the table. "At least he's gleaned something from me."

"What that mean?" Charmagne asked.

With raised eyebrows, Lamont answered her with nasty authority. "I will not entertain such a conversation." I caught Jas' eyes swinging to the wall. Nicholas' face was toward the table, but eyes swinging between the parental players. Then Lamont addressed his oldest son. "You know there are prerequisites for getting a wife."

Jas sipped his water. "Oh, yeah. Like what?"

"Like a stable job—and don't get me wrong, it's admirable to work with your hands, but doing the same with your head comes with less risks. I know you mentioned having gotten a promotion, but you should aim higher. Also, you need a place to stay." Lamont's gaze brushed over me, then the private dining room in my building. "If this is an indicator for what Shi-Shi is accustomed to, you should be able to help maintain this. I'm sure your plan is to move in with her at some point." Okay. I was officially uncomfortable. "I mean, son. You've been doing well with your release, but there are things you must put in place before you can think about marriage. Yes," He turned to Charmagne, "there is an order."

"Sin dining room bigger than this room. Hell, his fuckin' closet bigger than this room," Charmagne's long, red nails flipped up in succession in the air. "Fuck you mean, Lamont?"

"Excuse me?"

Jas sat up in his chair. "Pops," he tried as Lamont scowled at Charmagne across the table and she chewed with her mouth open, challenging his glare. "Look." Jas cleared his throat. "This gathering and conversation been overdue. That's why I asked Ashira to host us tonight."

"Yeah. Why we ain't in *Lake Sha'Ron*, so we can show niggas you come from good fruit? I ain't fuck nothin' up here."

“Ma,” Jas warned.

But not before Lamont begged her pardon again. “Excuse me?”

“Ma, for real. Chill,” Jas demanded. “Pops, I’m trying to share some things with you.”

“What things?” Lamont demanded and I now knew how different Jas was from his father. Yes, as a father, you’d want to be in the know of your child’s life, but Lamont’s tone was demanding and a tad aristocratic. Those traits couldn’t be further from his son’s. “You want to marry Shi-Shi? I get that.”

“Nah. Not that,” Jas explained. “I mean, yeah, it’s true, but there’s more.”

Lamont, wearing a baby blue short-sleeve polo and khaki shorts, scoffed, “I’m listening.”

It was also clear how Jas could speak fluently with proper dictation when he wanted. Lamont must have been that model for him coming up. That made Jas’ parents a gross mismatch to say they’d once conceived a child together.

Jas’ nostrils widened. He was losing his patience. “For one: I’m no longer on parole.”

“Since when?”

Charmagne snickered.

“I was discharged a month ago.” Jas waited for his father’s reaction, because even I assumed it was coming.

Apparently, uncomfortably, Lamont shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. “Well, that’s good, son. Glad it’s past you.”

Jas snorted. “The next thing is I am the sole operator of my construction firm. I own the company, too.”

Nicholas’ face swiped up from the table, eyes stretched wide, and mouth formed an O.

Lamont’s forehead wrinkled. “How is that remotely possible?”

Jas' eyes brushed against me as he exhaled. "It's *complicat*  
—"

"I'm the parent who can follow data," Lamont's volume higher than Jas'.

I blinked hard at his audacity. Charmagne grinning, shook her head in silence.

Jas tried again. "Rizzo, the former owner, knew years ago he'd bow out of the game. I was able to purchase small portions of the company until I could afford the whole thing."

"And how did you come across the money?"

Jas rubbed his lips together, seemingly fortifying himself. "Old money."

"As in illegal money?"

"Nah." Jas shook his head. "Everything was done legally, which brings me to another point. When I was locked down, I bagged a crib."

Lamont blinked. "Pardon me. I don't do slang that well... have even taught my son here not to so I'm confident he can't explain what bagged means." He thumbed Nicholas, whose face shaded even more scarlet.

"I purchased a home." Jas' chin lowered. The man was visibly fighting for patience. "A few years before my release, I bought a home."

"Again, Jas. How could you afford that? If a significant portion of your 'old' money went into the construction business, how did you have more for a house? And what house are we talking about—" His attention swung over to Charmagne. "Don't tell me you're talking about *Lake Sha'Ron? The*—that's impossible!"

"Why?" Charmagne asked, brows hiked, head cocked to the side as she rocked in her chair.

"Because—you know why? That neighborhood is wealthy." He turned to Jas. "Is that what we're talking here? *Lake Sha'Ron?*" He sputtered, "Impossible!"



He was utterly stunned and regretfully, I could relate to Lamont—though the jury was still out on if I liked the man. But in this instance, I could relate. Normal, everyday, poor or middle-class working people would never in their lifetimes be able to afford a home on *Lake Sha’Ron*. I couldn’t afford a home there. Even if possible, I’d never be able to afford furniture or the upkeep of a home there.

“And you’re telling me this is all legal? Don’t insult me, Jas!” Lamont’s tone once again made me feel uncomfortable.

A part of me felt like a twelve-year-old interloper having dinner over my classmate’s house and catching their father discipline with an iron sword of a tongue. It was slightly intimidating and I’d also decided I didn’t like it for Charmagne. *And Jas...* He commanded the respect of his hoodlum—and some savage—tribe in Harlem. The most radio and concert-popular rapper in the world recently made a record paying homage to Jas, validating his street cred as a murderer who’d stood trial without ratting out his associates. I’d seen him, just weeks ago, taking a man to seconds within his death. But here, his father spoke to him as though he was the same age as Nicholas. I didn’t like it.

“I ain’t bring you here to insult you. Neither did I invite you to be insulting. I’m speaking to you as a man, sharing what I’ve been up to since my release. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Lamont brushed his palms down his face, taking a calming breath. “Why are you telling me these things now? Why after all this time you’ve been home, Jas?”

Jas’ attention traveled over to the scarlet-cheeked, collapsed jaw kid to the right of their father and directly across the table from me. “Because I’d like to be a big brother to Nicholas.”

“You are his big brother. That won’t change,” Lamont noted out loud.

“I’m more of a legend to the kid. A cautionary tale for him to measure himself against. I’m more than that. I’m a victor. I’ve been redeemed.”

*Damn...*

Lamont sat muted for a few seconds, then scoffed, “Well, I appreciate that, son. I really do. But it’s hard to believe in your change of character when this all feels reminiscent of the years of your youth.”

“How?” Jas asked with a wrinkled forehead.

“You have these extravagant means I’ve been unaware of, unlike your mother. I can’t help but to question if they’ve been earned by the same illegal methods that stole over ten years of your life? Can I entrust you to my impressionable teenager? What proof do I have that you’ve changed, son?”

Jas’ eyes were on his hand as he tapped his fingers against the table. It was clear to me he was struggling with that question. For a long while, my love didn’t utter a word.

Ines entered the room, carrying dessert on a platter. I caught eyes with her right away and shook my head. Catching on, Ines backed right out.

Finally, Jas murmured, “This ain’t about you, yo.” His eyes roved up to his father.

“Pardon me?” Lamont demanded once again.

Jas’ head shook softly, continuing his point. “This...” He motioned the room. “None of this is or was about you. My lady’s efforts in hosting us tonight was never about you. I mean...yeah. I wanted you to feel comfortable...for you to see I’m not a savage or a bum struggling to find my footing in society. But I could’ve taken my mom out to eat wherever she wanted. I could’ve had Ashira feed my moms upstairs in her actual apartment.” He scoffed, “I could have had my lady and my moms at my own crib. I just ain’t wanna overwhelm you.”

Lamont nodded, twisting his mouth as though chewing on the blazing innuendo Jas had just shot his way. “Okay. I see where this is going. Again, very reminiscent of the stellar job Charmagne did in your youth.” He stood from the table. “I won’t give her an opportunity with this one. Let’s go, Nicky.”

Dazed, Nicholas took to his feet, shoulders caved in, the scent of defeat hovering over his head.

“I tried, Nick,” Jas shared as his brother trailed behind his father.

Nicholas turned to Jas and nodded. “Thanks,” his voice weak. “Thanks for dinner, Shi-Shi. Nice meeting you, Ms. Charmagne.”

“Bye, baby!” Charmagne replied.

I could only offer a shaky smile from fighting back the tears. Why in the hell was I affected by this? I didn’t even know these people. But I knew Jas and, in a way, I was akin to Nicholas, pining after a blood relative. Only in Nicholas’ case, the relative wanted to be there.

“Bye to you, too, Lamont!” Charmagne called out. “Sorry ya ego got the best of you again with this one.” She referred to her son.

Lamont turned around, face tight. “Don’t go there! At all. Don’t go there, Charmagne. I’ve been really nice to you all evening. I’m sorry, Shi-Shi. This was really nice. Thanks for being so generous, although you shouldn’t have gone through the trouble. I hope all works out for you.” He shook his head, turned to continue his way out. “I really do.”

“Yo, hang on a second.” Jas left his chair, head cocked to the side like his mother’s earlier. “This shit is getting tired, man. You thinking you got the cornerstone of morality... parenting and even better judgment when it comes to my moms. The shit is getting tired.”

“I never said those things and I don’t deserve that tone from you.” Lamont’s chest expanded, going into defense mode against Jas’ apparent offensive aura.

“You always say it—always said it. It’s even when you ask about her.”

“What’s the problem with me asking about your mother, Jas?”

“The fact that you really don’t care. You don’t. What you’re looking for is another reason...more justification for your judgment of her.”

“It’s in her documented history—yours, too. Charmagne hasn’t always made the best decisions in *life*—”

Charmagne sucked her teeth. “Nigga, *what*—”

“And neither have you!” Jas shouted, causing me to leap in my chair.

Suddenly, I felt nauseous.

Lamont’s head bounced back and he blinked incredulously. “Excuse me? I have maintained a steady job. I don’t have an arrest record. I pay taxes. I never condoned my son’s illicit *behavior*—”

“Where did you meet her?” Jas didn’t exactly yell this time, but spoke with a keen tone at a level above his father’s.

Lamont grimaced. “I don’t understand the *relevance*—”

“Where did you meet her, pops?”

“*This*—that’s an old story. I don’t *understand*—”

“You met her at an employment resource center because like her, you needed a job. Like her, you were down on your luck. You thought she was fly and kept talking to her, sniffin’ up her ass. Like her, you liked to ski on that powder.” His inflection changed. “Unlike her, your use was recreational. She told you how she made money over the years. Told you she tricked a little in her past. You ain’t condemn her then. What you do, though?”

“Jas!” Lamont tried.

“You fucked. Yeah, you did. And guess what? You liked it. But what’s even better than that, you ran up in that raw. And then what?” Jas’ hands shot into the air. “Surprise, surprise, world. Sin was born. Nah, she ain’t make the calls you wanted her to make when raising me. Yes, she accepted shit with me she had no control over. But guess, what? She did her best. And guess what again? I did my best with what God had given me in terms of parents. But, Pops, did you do your best when it came to fuckin’ dope heads raw in the bathrooms of the employment resource center?”

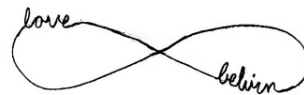
Lamont's eyes bounced around the quiet room. Then he addressed his son with a cocky grin, tossing his hands in the air. "I guess *not*—"

"I'm glad I was able to make sense of your fuckin' misery for the past thirty-three years. You have my high-rate ass therapist to thank for that gem. Nick," He moved along seamlessly, "You'll be eighteen in a few months. Holla at me."

"He'll be eighteen, but still in my house, in the bedroom I provide, buddy. Good luck with that. Let's go, Nicky!" Lamont barked.

"I got seven of them shits," Jas spit back. "Choose between four of 'em. It's what nonjudgmental family do. Get at me, Nick!" His tone was pure Harlem.

I'd never seen the man so out of sorts...verbally.



Less than an hour later, upstairs in my apartment, Jas strolled into my bedroom. I was on my way into the bathroom. With a tight jaw, he twirled his keys around his index finger.

"I'm going home tonight."

"Oh." I didn't know how to respond to that at first. "You need to be alone?"

He shook his head, determined eyes pinned to me. "Nah. You coming, too. Pack a bag."

Confused, I asked, "Why can't we stay here? We can catch up on the last two episodes of '*Taking Tips from Tynisha*' in the living room."

"Because I ain't tryna hear Ines complain again about not being able to sleep because of your loud ass moans."

As I rolled my eyes hard, I couldn't help my smile. "Jas, Ines doesn't sleep anyway. *She*—"

"Pack ya bag," he demanded, turning on one heel for the door, effectively ending the conversation.

Rolling my eyes again, I continued toward the bathroom and closed the door. I went straight to the top drawer beneath the sink and looked at the six plastic-wrapped boxes and exhaled, “Welp. New time. New location.”

# Chapter 23

## Part II cont'd

### July | Present Day

*ashira*

“...**S***hira*,” a faint yet familiar voice called out. Then a gentle nudge at the back of my bare thigh stirred me further from my sleep. “Ashira.”

I pulled my head up from the pillow saturated with the scent of the man gazing upon me. “What time is it?” I rubbed my nose.

“It’s still early, but I just got a call. We need to talk. Shower and I’ll fix you some coffee while I wait for you down in my office.”

The urgency in his energy suddenly felt familiar. Being silly, I sat up in his bed and leaned forward, pretending to listen keenly, cupping my right ear.

“What’s up with you?”

“Listening out for an errant smoke detector or an angry parole officer.” I smiled widely and rubbed my eyes again. Jas knew my sense of humor by now. He should have also known

I wouldn't let him live that chaotic experience down. But we were so far from that dreadful April morning, it was easy to joke about it. "Remember that god-awful day?" A yawn started in my chest, shooting from my mouth as my arms pushed over my head in a deep stretch. When I opened my eyes, Jas was steeled over the bed, eyes locked into my naked breasts. "Oh, stop! I told you about this after letting you have your way with them all last night." I rolled my eyes. "Once my period comes, they'll look like normal again." I'd hoped.

The muscles in his face loosened and a coolness in his mood stretched Jas' forehead. "I'mma let you get dressed. Meet me downstairs."

Winking, I snapped my fingers, forming a gun with my right hand. "Gotcha, Sin."



Jas' office was huge. Rich maple wood flooring, a paisley wool rug lay center the room. A patio was just off the room and the views were unfair. One side was of the manicured lawn and the other of the dancing lake. The room wasn't packed with furniture, but full enough to be considered a functional office. Juggy was sitting on the corner of the desk, tapping into his cell while Jas was on the phone.

Jas' heavy, loving eyes hit me and it felt as though I glided toward him. He pointed to one of the chairs in front of the desk. I swear, I could easily forget this man's nefarious past simply by his lifestyle and posture. There were no dark spots around Jas' eyes, hard scars on his face, or a tell-tale sway in his walk from sagged pants—unlike Juggy. I still found it hard to believe Jas was a gun-dealing murderer for hire. It was an alleged fact I didn't like to give too much thought to, *especially today*. But now was the time.

Jas hung up the phone and issued Juggy a nod.

"You good on the coffee?" Juggy asked me.



I glanced down at the mug Jas was sure to select with my first initial. “Why, Jug? You gonna run out to *Brown Baristas* if I say no?”

With the most hilarious, yet endearing roll of the eyes, Juggy stood from the desk to leave. “You know I would, Shi-Shi.” His voice was spiritless and sad even.

That concerned me. There was too much brewing in the air on *Lake Sha’Ron* this morning. I tossed a questionable gaze to Jas. “Did he hear us last night...*this morning*?”

With a deadpan expression, Jas left his chair and rounded the desk, squatting against it in front of me. His eyes were toward the floor, Jas, too, appearing dejected. He wiped his face with both palms. “Look, Ashira,” he sighed. “I’m sorry. I *swear*—” He took another breath and suddenly, I was worried. “Ain’t no other way to handle this but being straightforward. I know you say I hide shit and that, in turn, don’t make you feel respected. I get that, so I’m gonna just come with it. Especially in light of what went down with my pops last night.”

When he paused, I murmured, “Except you aren’t. You’re stalling and that shit annoys me, too.”

He pinched his beautiful lips with his thumb and finger, eyeing me from head to toe. “Ashira, back in February, Dan Lewinski and his team came to *Rizzo’s Custom Homes* and pitched a merger.”

I nodded, knowing that bit of information. “You know he did the same with *Witherspoon Homes*. My father signed. I told you that a while ago.”

“Yeah.” He pulled in a deep breath through his nostrils. My love was struggling with something.

I reached over and clasped his hard abdomen with my free palm and clawed with coffin-shaped nails for comfort—mine and his. “Jas, I know you’re the CEO of *Rizzo’s Custom Homes*, but you don’t ever have to worry about competitor’s conflict between the two firms. For one; you and I are solid, and two; I’m practically out of the business. I haven’t been to

the office in weeks. I'm living out my vacation days." I winked.

*And I haven't been "vacationing" alone, apparently...*

"Yeah, but it's deeper than that. The only way I can break it down is by walking this out. When Lewinski was at *Rizzo's* giving his pitch, he mentioned having a son, Danny. I 'on't know how, but almost right away, I knew who the kid was. We were in the county together—*jail*—when I was on trial. I helped him out with a gang fuckin' with him, which allowed him to finish his time in that facility without harassment. Fast forward to February, when I learned about the connection, it clicked for me. I found Danny Lew, which is what I knew him as in the pen. We met up and I asked for him to pay out his debt."

"From jail?" Jas nodded. "How many years ago was that favor?"

"Many, but for people in that life, those debts never expire."

A faint, hopeless smile lifted on my face. "But you're not in that life anymore, Jas," my voice but a whisper.

"I'm not, but old dogs master old tricks. It was *instinctive* —"

"What did you do?" I demanded, my brain moving faster than Jas' words.

Something smelled very wrong here.

Jas' eyes fell again, lips twisted before he answered, "I asked him for a partnership."

"How? Dan Lewinski would never allow an outside partnership to his legacy. He's a fucking racist bastard, too. My father has stories of the good ol' boys club for days, starring both Lewinski and Paulie Rizzo."

Jas' head nodded softly. "Danny Lew told me his pops would be retiring by the end of the year and he'd be taking over."

“But...” My eyes raced back and forth. “It’s not the *end*— Dan is incapacitated. The fall. He’s not returning to *work*—”

His head bobbed. “Expediting Danny Lew’s succession. Yeah.”

“I’m so confused, Jas.”

“The plan was for Danny Lew and me to run the new conglomerate with all of its mergers.”

“Damn.” My head bounced back with revelation. “That means you’ll own...everything?”

“Ashira,” he used my name again, this time lowering to a squat in front of me. “I met with Danny Lew a few times over the past few months. Each time, the nigga was high and less like the man I signed the original, contingent agreement with. I didn’t wanna lose out on this opportunity. It was a once in a lifetime one for me, so I went all *in*—”

“What does that mean?” Jas was giving too many potatoes and not enough steak with this story.

“It means, I had Danny Lew sign all of his stakes over to me before his father had to prematurely retire.”

“Wait!” I grabbed my forehead, struggling, and shook my head. “So, are you telling me, you’ll possibly be the owner of *Just Homes* one day?”

Jas’ eyes went blank and I didn’t understand it was a protective measure in that moment. “Ashira, I got a call this morning. Danny Lew’s body was found in an abandoned warehouse in Passaic.”

“Passaic?” Danny Lewinski was a Saddle River kid. “As in dead?” Jas nodded. “So... Wait. What does this have to do with us?”

Jas’ head lifted then dropped with fortification. “It means, I own *Just Homes* and all of its assets. I’m sure the Lewinski family will try to challenge this in the courts, but the language on the contract is pretty descriptive. He’s locked in. My lawyers made sure of it. Whether it’s next month or next year, I will add that firm to my portfolio.”

That's when it clicked. "My father's firm, too." It wasn't a question. When it came to Jas, I was slow because my heart derailed my good senses, but I was no fool. I shook my head, disgusted by his audacity and overwhelmed with how his move to *take over the world* just complicated our lives in more ways than one. "Are these the same lawyers who got you off for a quadruple murder?" I leaned over and placed the coffee mug on his desk. "Do they accept coupons or just dirty money?"

Jas shook his head. "I had criminal attorneys for that case, *Ashira*—"

My palm shot into the air, head waved around my shoulders. "Don't." I took a deep breath, closing my rolling eyes, trying to calm the churning of my stomach. I felt faint. Another rug had been pulled from beneath me. Two in one day, in fact. "Until now, I could never seem to believe you were the horrible things you've been spoon-feeding me about your past. There's no way a man as morally-grounded, intelligent, and humble as you could have such a reprehensible former life. *No way!* But then the answers were in front of me all this time: the implausible luxury home, the boat, hijacking Rizzo for his astutely-built firm, the international street cred, the ability to vacation *my* hyper-vacationing ass. All these things are signs of an underhanded, cunning, low down, gutter nigga."

I lifted my index finger in the air, surprised by my crushing pain and abundance of anger. And that's when I realized, I'd been exhausted from being surprised and hurt by Jas. "You even knew to tell me to shower before coming down here. You knew I'd leave after this news." The way his face lifted and eyes rolled to the side of the room, Jas confirmed it. "Did you plot on me, too? The whole Jesus, felon act. The therapist—how long have you been "seeing" her? And let's not forget about you telling my ex to stay away." I stood to my feet. "How do I know this hasn't all been a ploy to take over the metro home-building industry by way of me?"

"You know that ain't true, *Ashir*—"

“*WITHERSPOON!*” I shouted for the first time then took it back down, remembering. “*Leave your father’s company, Witherspoon,*” I mocked the words he’d spoken to me on several occasions. “*You can do anything as long as you’ve got your health and freedom.* Remember that bullshit line you’ve had me quoting like a damn fool?” I laughed, still feeling my heart shear in my chest. In fact, this was all an out-of-body experience. Or perhaps Jas hadn’t awakened me yet and my brain was subconsciously acting out my irrational fears. All of them. “That why you found me a very competent commercial real estate agent, ensuring I’d find my club?”

“You know that’s all bullshit!”

“Bullshit!” I laughed more. “See! It never made sense to have a Christian man with a sailor’s mouth. Nothing about you makes sense. You’re a walking conundrum. No wonder you’re full of secrets, who could keep a crafty enigma like ‘Jas Sinclair’ together?”

Shaking my head, I promenaded for the door.

“One last ‘*secret,*’” I heard the quotations in his inflection.

I gasped suddenly and hard, spinning on my heel to face him. “Your name? Oh, hell no! Don’t waste my time with shit that’s irrelevant to even the next second of my life. Whatever your name is, the crimes you’ve committed, and the companies you’ve purloined, fuck off forever!”

Then a thought spurred and I spun around again, surging to his desk. I reached into my pocket and pulled out all six soiled pregnancy test sticks.

Jas’ face contorted, observing them like foreign objects. Perhaps, to him, they were. His head shot up, eyes wild. “*You—when?*”

“This morning. I took them this morning before showering. You see how complicated life is without secrets? I would never keep this from you—didn’t even plan to delay telling you. Because I’m a decent human being with a heart.” I snorted, not believing this was my life in real time. “Like father, like son. Lamont isn’t the only one liking to go raw

with a woman who knows shit about him.” I shook my head and walked off again.

“When I was sixteen,” he announced behind me. “I was *fuck*—messing up in school again. I just got arrested...*again* and my pops put me in a summer program here in Jersey to keep me out of trouble. The other kids were able to pick a professional to shadow all summer for extra credit. I came in at the last minute and couldn’t. Mine was picked for me. The very first day, my field advisor was working on an addition to the side of his house and I had to bum a ride there.” He scoffed.

“All the way to Millburn, New Jersey, the ideal quaint, affluent township. I didn’t expect to be on a property as big and grand and neither had I ever had a dream or goals outside of getting fast money. That was until that day when I saw the prettiest fuckin’ girl in my life.” His voice turned hoarse, scratchy and my heart rented even more. I turned to face him. “The image of her cute face and sexy body in an oversized bikini top became my fixation for years to come. Then the sight of her mother... The way she whispered into the girl—*my* girl’s—ear knowing they were judging me against my better-dressed cohorts, wrapped around my heart like a fuckin’ vine.” Jas shook his head.

“I tried forgetting about you for years—sometimes I did. Or I thought so until I got a moment to myself and could see your long, shapeless chicken legs crossed on that float in the pool. Then I started mentally making goals of how I’d either have a girl like you or make one with a woman like your moms. I know it sounds sick, but I’m giving you my fuckin’ truth, Ashira. I met you before February—not formally—but I knew your kind. I’d seen your home, knew your beauty and pedigree. And I damn sure knew to run like hell from you at that coffee shop.”

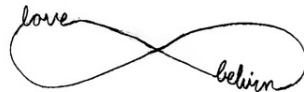
Stunned and breathless, I declared, “I wish you would have, too, Jas.”

“I’m glad I didn’t. I love you, Ashira. I do so much it hurts because it always seems to be something between us.”

“They’re called your lies.”

I left. I left him in his office and took off for his bedroom. After making sure I packed up everything, including the contents of the drawers I found myself occupying in his bathroom, bedroom, and closet, I left Jas’ home and, perceptively, his life for good. This time, I had no tears from shock or betrayal.

*Fool me twice...*



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "jas". The letters are fluid and connected, with a small blue dot above the 'j'.

Juggy cutting the engine had me mindlessly turning back toward the *G-Wagon* as I stood in the piazza. That’s when the door opened and a small, smiling lady wearing scrubs gave me a neck bow.

“Mr. Jas?”

“Yes.”

“Come in.” She backed away, making room for me. “Shi-Shi’s waiting for you.” I stepped inside the gigantic, elegant foyer and subconsciously decided here was where my funambulism would begin. The Witherspoon estate was vast and intimidating, almost as much as Double E Bag’s. From the time I entered the security gate, the same impression of otherworldly wealth I felt but couldn’t articulate as a kid was still very much present. “Can I offer you anything? Perhaps an evening *cap*—”

“Jas doesn’t drink, Marabella.” Ashira appeared out of nowhere, copper skin glowing in neon pink pleated shorts exposing her toned thighs and a matching tank.

Of course, she rocked it with heels: gold strappy sandals bringing my attention to her white manicured toes. My baby looked good. Three thin gold necklaces increasing in length down her cleavage. The longest being the *Juste un Clou* piece I'd gifted her on my birthday. Her stance was one of a model's: one leg kicked out further to the side, showing off her powerful thighs and posture embellished by the high heels. Her belly was flat, still giving no signs of a baby cooking in there, but her tits told it all. They were swollen and tempting. I found myself pinching my lip, struggling for control.

I hadn't seen her in two weeks since her first obstetrician appointment. She invited me via a text written in a manner that told me she thought I'd decline. Ashira had no clue that I'd turn heaven and hell upside down to accommodate her in any way in this process. She didn't talk to me much during the appointment, but thanks to technology, I saw the formation of the baby and heard its heartbeat. That was one of the scariest and sobering experiences of my life. A baby. I'd created a fucking baby.

*And with the baddest bitch on the planet...*

"Nice that you could make it." She flipped her straightened hair parted down the middle over her shoulders. But Ashira didn't smile.

"I wouldn't miss it for the new episodes of *Taking Tips with Tynisha*."

That's when her gorgeous face cracked into a grin. Her eyes rolled to the wall, hating to share an ounce of joy with me. "So, you're not caught up?"

I shook my head, finding myself glancing down to my sneakers. "Work's being killin' my ass. That and I started a course at *Redeeming Souls* church in Harlem Ezra's been heading up twice a week."

She blinked, straightening in stance. "A course?"

I shrugged, not considering it the biggest of deals. "An informal meeting outside of the sanctuary. A seven-week series."



“On what?”

Was she interested? I’d been so fucking blue without her. I hated not seeing her face every day, hearing and seeing her breathy laughter, experiencing her selective sense of humor, which was mostly goofiness that drove me wild on the low.

“The fruits of the Holy Spirit. Gifts Jesus left behind to help us live on earth while He’s in heaven. Supernatural applications to help us until we meet Him again with the Father.” I shrugged, not feeling inspired at all in the moment.

Her throat dipped when she swallowed. “Oh.” She shifted her arm and open palm behind her. “Well, they’re waiting. Daddy’s impatient and is asking why I will not have a nighttime burn with him.”

I nodded, and when Ashira began into the house, I followed. We turned a few corners with me fortifying myself for the shit show. This wouldn’t be good and I knew it, which was why studying the bounce of her ass was my focal point, but not in a perverted way. It somehow soothed me before the war.

We turned into a great room with two sets of congregating furniture on both sides. A fireplace was centered in a wall with walkout doors to the patio aside it. There were three people sitting on one set of the sofas near the entrance. Two stood right away as we stepped inside.

Noelle spoke first, eyes wide with surprise. “Hey, Jas!”

I knew she’d be here, but didn’t really anticipate her bubbly energy because I’d been more than prepared for the arrogant motherfucker still sitting on the sofa. The light skinned thick woman with mild makeup and short hair was who I didn’t anticipate.

My focus shifted back to Noelle. “How you doin’, No.”

“Cool to see you again!” Then her beam faded. “I hope. Everything okay?” she asked her sister.

“Of course, it is!” Ashira stroked her baby sister’s shoulders before walking deeper into the room inside the sofa maze. “Jas, this is my dad’s sister, Aunt Kimberly.”

Immediately, the woman batted her lashes while aligning one shoulder with her chin and smiled. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Jas?”

I walked over for her hand and shook it. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Kimberly. No debt at all.”

Her eyes swiped down my entire body and again for the second time. “This should be interesting. What is it that you do...Jas?”

*Damn!*

But I played along. “I’m in building.”

“Interesting. As in homes?”

“Yes.”

“Is that your family’s line of work, too?”

I pushed the tips of my fingers into my pockets. “Not at all. It started with me.”

“Ah.” She shrugged with one shoulder and her brows like an aristocrat. Aunt Kimberly was bringing back my early days this year with Ashira in *Brown Barista*. Nosy and entitled to my personal information as fuck. But I wasn’t tripping. Tonight would likely bring it all out. “Very interesting. What line of work is your *fam*—”

“Uh, Auntie,” Ashira giggled politely, “kindly allow me to finish introducing the room.” She gestured toward her father.

“Oh!” Kimberly giggled. “My apologies.” She resumed her seat, eyes still batting.

And she didn’t stop studying my body. It was clear to me Ashira’s aunt was feeling the kid. I was confident a man like me was not what she was checking for in a husband when she was on the block, if she’d married at all.

*Hilarious...*

“Daddy, this is Jas. Jas, this is my father, Noel Witherspoon.”

Our eyes met and locked as I quickly identified the arrogance in the fat fuck and challenged it.

For a minute or so, no words were exchanged until Witherspoon broke. “So, that’s the name you’re going by nowadays?”

“Because it *is* my name,” I made clear. “Should I go by another?”

His attention went to Ashira. “Does he need a job? Has he coaxed you into bringing him to my home to ask for a second chance?”

“Wait.” Ashira’s head whipped. “You know *him*—you two know each other?” She looked my way.

“I ‘on’t know him.” I shook my head. “Neither do he know me. We’ve crossed paths a couple of times in the past.”

“How?” Ashira asked, beautifully arched brows damn near touching. “That day in my office back in April? You told me you didn’t know him, Daddy.”

“He don’t.” I shrugged to emphasize.

“Let’s not do that, son.” Witherspoon scoffed. “I know you’re a criminal. A goddamn murderer for hire. And I have no clue as to why you’re standing in my home? How are you even out of *prison*—”

“Wait!” Ashira’s eyes were wild, her lips parted. “What in the hell is going on here? How did you know that, Daddy?”

“Let me answer his question,” I took control of the navigation. “I’m outta prison because I did my time for what I was charged with. I’m now a free man, pursuing the American dream just like people like you.”

“You’re nothing like me, boy. Let’s make that clear.” Witherspoon looked to his oldest daughter. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out!” Ashira hissed, untrusting.

“Well, if it’s about a job,” Witherspoon announced, “the answer is hell no. I see you recently hired four felons and that’s more than I’d like to risk. And you know not to be in spectacular fashion, bringing anyone to my home for work.”

“I don’t need to bring anyone here to ask for a job, Daddy. I’m no longer with the firm to give a damn. Much less, Jas doesn’t need a job; he *owns* your firm—or will possibly own it in the future.”

Witherspoon’s head shot backward. Eyes swinging between his daughter and me, he chuckled while asking, “What the hell are you talking about, young lady?”

“This is one of the things I felt we should disclose tonight. *Witherspoon Homes* and how it involves Jas.” She massaged her temples, obviously frustrated.

“What does my company have to do with this...” He scooted his fat ass up on the sofa and shouted, “This punk! Why is he in my home with my daughters and sister, Ashira?”

“Why are you treating him like a damn ruthless misfeator, Dad? Let’s start there!”

I decided to come with it. “Because the summer I was sixteen—the one I told you about—your father was a highbrow-ass snob socialite who belittled me the whole week I interned under him.”

“Highbrow?” Witherspoon scoffed. “A damn snob and socialite. You were grooming into a criminal. A punk who took no direction and didn’t want to work. If I’m not mistaken, the damn guidance counselor begged me to take you on. And even after she shared with me your gun charge, I thought to do the right thing and take you on. You showed up late damn near every fucking day and couldn’t stop being a goddamn tough guy for a mere eight hours to learn shit.”

I shook my head. “I was late one day; the first day because I had to find a way out here, which was running in the damn summer heat for at least five miles. You kept bustin’ my ass over the way I spoke, stood, and even sat. You ain’t wanna focus on teaching me your craft, you wanted to insult me in

front of the rest of them cats, squares just like you. I ain't have an issue spending the summer learning from a square with other squares; it was being reminded all damn day, every day that I was the circle that got to me. That's why I *left*—look, I ain't got no interest in rehashing my behavior as a kid. I ain't trippin' over no summer camp bullshit.”

“I don't even know what that means, but it doesn't negate your criminal history. You're a convicted killer. A fucking convicted murderer.” He laughed, glancing at his daughter. “It was all over the news and in the papers. Shit, all over the internet!”

I shook my head again. “No, I'm not. That's where you thought you left me.”

“Hang on here! What are you talking about?” Ashira demanded. “And why does it sound like you two have had more than ‘a couple’ of encounters?”

“I met your father that week of the summer program. The next time I saw him was when I was on trial for the *murders* \_\_\_”

“Noelle, please leave the room.” Ashira's eyes were squeezed closed. It was the mention of murder again. Not a typical great room conversation in the Witherspoon palace, I now understood. I was embarrassing her. Hurting her once again. “Aunt Kimberly, maybe you should, too.”

“Nah,” I shook my head and softly turned to her. “I'm here...” My attention shot down to her belly. “...for life. I'm in. And what I don't want is to hide behind shit. Since I'm going to be here, let me stand on this.”

“I'm not going anywhere.” Kimberly's chin lifted. “There's something going on here I need to know about.”

Ashira shook her head, defeated. Witherspoon sighed, shaking his head. Noelle was all wide eyes and a damn hanging jaw. I could have felt like shit from that impression alone, but I'd been prepared. I was going to keep it one thousand here. I had nothing to prove at this point in my life. My time for my conviction had been completed. For some

time now, I'd been working on myself with the assistance of a licensed professional dutifully. I'd given my past and future to Christ and He carried the debt from there. My shit was ugly, but I wouldn't hide beneath it. I deserved better than that for myself.

*Fuck that!*

“Like I said,” I continued. “When I caught the charges and was on trial, one day I was in the holding cell for court. Guess who popped in *unannounced*—”

Witherspoon spat, “Let's not be so damn dramatic, man!”

“Nah, I leave that to squares like you. You found me. You followed the headline, found weird ass, Black-male-Karen energy and came to the courthouse. I ain't know how you pulled it off or why until your arrogant ass chuckles in my face while I'm chained to a bench in a room full of niggas. But you remember what you said?”

“What I said holds no *relevance*—”

“Wait, Daddy,” Ashira interrupted the start of his self-righteous rant. “If you hadn't seen him in years, why go to the courthouse?”

There was a thick silence in the air Witherspoon needed a minute to choke on. “I'd seen the headlines, saw it on the news. I knew I remembered him. Knew I was right about him. You know, you tried to describe me as an Uncle Tom a few minutes ago, but remember, I selected you even knowing your past. I was trying to help you. Give you good game that week you were with me. I saw the path of destruction you were headed down. I did my part as a successful Black man! I was trying to warn you, son!”

“Warn me by coming down there to gloat.” My face went tight at that bullshit. “You told me three things you called in life: you'd be rich, you'd have only a daughter, and that I'd be sitting exactly in the room I was in, chained the way I was, and going to a cold cemented cell where I belonged.” Ashira gasped hard, covering her mouth. “You know what type of evil you gotta have in your heart to say that to a kid?”

“Damn, Daddy,” Noelle breathed behind us. I couldn’t see her, but caught every syllable.

Kimberly cleared her throat, swiping her neck. “Noel, that was... *uh*... That was...”

“Fucking savage, Daddy,” Ashira choked on tears I knew she fought to keep away.

“I’m sure I *didn’t*—well, even if I said those things, they didn’t come out *that* way,” Witherspoon argued. “And even with all of that holding true, I still don’t understand why he’s in my home, Shi-Shi!” He rubbed his head, looking frustrated.

“He’s here—” Ashira cleared her throat. “—because clearly full circles are a thing. I met Jas back in February when I switched my therapy sessions to the morning to maximize on my hours for work and the dance studio. We have the same therapist. For a few weeks, we talked and...” Her eyes closed again, the air stiff as fuck. “...I guess I was drawn to him. I found him attractive and it took some time, but he finally showed signs of being interested in me, too.”

“Oh, shit!” Witherspoon rolled his eyes. “If this is about you asking for my approval to date, don’t waste your breath, sweetheart. This guy is bad news. The scum of the earth. Look him up!”

“Look her out,” I proposed with a shrug. “Have her *Google* me. What’s my name?”

Witherspoon’s eyes fell and face dropped as though he was trying to think. “It’ll come to me.”

I shook my head. “You can still have strong adverse feelings about me, but can’t recall the kid with Harlem Pride’s name.” *Unbelievable!* I snorted, “That’s golden.”

“I don’t need to remember your name to know who you are and that my daughter has no business with a punk like you!”

“Well, let’s slow down.” Ashira’s palms raised. “I think we’re past the point of Jas and I being *togeth*—”

“What?” Witherspoon shouted. “How? You just broke up with Austin!”

“No. Austin and I broke up in February. It’s now August. Remember, I said I met Jas in February.”

“Did you do this on purpose?” Witherspoon’s tight attention was on me. “You get out of prison on a few murder charges and you came to seek some type of revenge on me and chose to do it through my daughter? Look, my man, you got another thing coming. Nothing comes between Shi-Shi and me. Nothing!”

“Trust me, in my most cynical thoughts, I wondered the same thing,” Ashira scoffed. “But then I recalled how long it took him to even enjoy my company. The many times he rejected me. And let me tell you, I might as well be with another actor, an Oscar-worthy one, to believe Jas sought me out. This thing was a slow burn for him.”

*She’s fucking overexaggerating with that. The girl had me open in no time!*

“Again, what the hell is this?” Witherspoon was impatient.

“This is the bond Jas and I created. We’ve been seeing each other *a lot* into the spring and summer. We’ve vacationed together and I even took him to *Della*.”

Witherspoon’s chin dropped. “That’s who you took to see your mother?”

Ashira nodded. “That’s when he told me about the murders and the charges. That’s also when things got a little muddy for us, but not enough to break the bond. We continued to see each other...continued to bond. *A lot*,” her voice was so sad, it was painful to hear. “Enough to create a baby.”

“A baby!” Kimberly shot to her feet, examining Ashira’s tiny waist. “How far along are you?”

“Oh, *daaaaaaaamn!*” Noelle collapsed on the sofa behind me. Then she, too, came over to take a look at her sister. “Yo, I knew you were wildin’ on him!”



I wanted to reach for my girl. To hug her protectively. In a way, I could sense her bravery in this. Her shame, too.

“Hang on,” Ashira whispered, wiping an escaped tear. She tried to laugh. “I’ve got to finish. The day I found out about the pregnancy, Jas learned about the future of *Just Homes* in the wake of Danny Lewinski’s death. Daddy, you know they found the kids who sold him the fentanyl-laced heroin. Well, he and Jas were in agreement to partner. The family’s contesting the contract and court proceedings have been scheduled.”

I guessed Ashira had a plug in our circle because I hadn’t shared any of that with her. She’d shut me out, still taking days to return texts and calls when I checked in on her. That’s why I came here today, prepared to share everything. I had nothing to lose at this point. Ashira had been deciding every day she ignored me that we were over.

Except for a week ago when she used her key and the security code this time to slip into my bed one night after I’d dozed off. She fucked me for over an hour, only allowing a few minutes for me to recover in between. When she was done, Ashira showered and disappeared from my grasp as smoothly as she rolled into my bed. I tried calling to be sure she’d gotten in safely only to get a text back saying she had. That was a half an hour *after* Juggy had returned home from following her. Ashira had made a decision. She didn’t want what we’d once had.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying,” Kimberly cried.

Ashira nodded. “Yes. It’s possible that Jas could be the owner of *Witherspoon Homes* if his contract holds up in court. Daddy, I’m sorry. I had no idea. And that is the sole reason I’ve decided to end my relationship with Jas.” Ashira didn’t breathe through those words, delivering them with pain.

I felt the same way, but had no control over her. I’d respect her decision. I had to.

Kimberly’s hand laid over her chest. “That is awful! The family’s legacy!”

At the same time, Witherspoon's meaty ass shot to his feet. "So, what do you want to do, Shi-Shi? We can be very discreet about this."

*The fuck?*

"Discreet?" Ashira chirped.

"Yes," Witherspoon confirmed and this all felt too sitcom-y. "Baby, I understand you made a bad call. I'm still here. I can help you out of this. It's your body, your decision."

She eyed him with disbelief, nodding her head. "Yes," she breathed. "This is my body. And I chose. I chose the moment I learned my baby existed." Her eyes dropped, followed by her head. "The timing is god-awful. The last thing I want is a child; I've got so much on the line. I've been working on the club to hopefully open this fall. I auditioned and got a gig doing an *Asè Garb* commercial. And just yesterday, I got a call for my troupe to audition for Alana and her team. A baby fits nowhere into the equation of the next phase of my life. It just doesn't make sense."

She shook her head, eyes pleading with her father. "But I can't abort a baby. I'm not a poor high schooler or a struggling college kid. I'm over thirty years old and have amassed enough resources to take on a child. I have my family—I have you, my aunts, my best friends. And I have Jas who, despite the pain and betrayal I feel for him, I know will go over and beyond to be sure this baby has the best that life can offer, just as you did with me."

"Are you sure, honey? This seems so sudden!" Kimberly squealed.

"Have you told your mother?" Witherspoon asked, hope resounding in his tone for a co-conspirator to kill my baby.

"I did actually. Her response was as to be expected. *And* she wanted to know your reaction."

That resonated with me. Celestine was a spiteful woman. Somehow she remembered me, too. It was obvious to me that her husband had possibly told her what he'd done back then when I was on trial. But she knew who I was and, apparently,

my past didn't alarm her with concern. But she knew it would Ashira's father. Shit was crazy.

Witherspoon walked out of the room shoulders first with his head low. The room went silent until he turned the corner.

"Holy shit! A baby?" Noelle whispered hard.

"Excuse me, young lady?" Kimberly chastised her. "Did you forget I was here?"

"I'm sorry, Auntie!" Noelle slapped her forehead. "I did."

"I'm going to see Jas off. I know you two want to discuss this more, but there's no need to keep him around."

*Shit!* Those words cut like knives. I was invited only for a portion of the announcement. Now, following her out, I felt discarded, rejected as Ashira claimed I'd done to her months ago. The shit hurt bad.

Back in the foyer, at the front door, she turned to me, head angled with a big smile I couldn't decipher.

"That was weird." When I didn't respond, her beam faded. "I did the best I could. My family needed to know no matter how ugly this all is."

"I'm sorry. I swear to you I'm sorry you're in a situation you don't want to be in." But I had no regrets. "I didn't mean to connect with you. You weren't on my radar. I didn't know I'd be a part of any acquisition outside of *Rizzo's Custom Homes*. But on my list was to dominate the building industry and while getting to know you, I acted on the opportunity."

"Yeah." She sucked in a breath, shaking her head. "I was an accidental casualty, I get it. Better a random loss than an unknowing target. But then, at least if I was a target, I'd know for sure I'd satisfied you in some way." Her giggle was disingenuous as hell, but I knew it was simply her poker face.

You needed one to thrive the way she had in business and to be in a relationship with a public figure. That meant I was on the outside now.

"I'm here for you any day, at any hour. You know that. Right?"

She nodded then cleared her throat and straightened in stance. “I’ll keep you abreast on the doctor’s visits.” Ashira scoffed, rolling her eyes. “This goodbye sounds...crazy!” She laughed, obviously sad.

“Because ain’t no goodbyes between soulmates. And that’s what you are for me, Shira. You’re my one.”

She rolled her eyes again. “*Jas—*”

“One thing.”

“What?”

It pained me to be so harsh, so direct. I shook my head, staring straight into her beautiful brown eyes. “I know you have an active social life. And I even know I can’t control who you spend ya time with, but you can’t fuck another man.”

Her eyes blossomed wide then forehead wrinkled. “*Excuse—Jas* you don’t control my body.”

“Your pussy—every sexual organ—ain’t negotiable, Ashira. I know you don’t know the old me. You only know what I’ve evolved to, but I swear on everything holy that when it comes to your body—even outside of the safety of my child—I’ll risk it all.” I nodded. “I’ll go back in. And I ain’t trying to be vague at all with my words. Ashira,” I rocked my head slowly, left to right. “Another man will never know what you feel or taste like. Ever.”

She didn’t speak at first. Her eyes bounced between mine, chin lifted to see me clearly. I meant every word I said and even those I didn’t. It wasn’t my attempt to scare her, but Ashira needed to know what the stakes were.

“And there it is.” A tear ran down her cheek. Again. Then the other.

“There’s what?”

“That storm deep in your eyes you fight to hide. The sinister in your aura you manage to temper well. Even after seeing you strangle a man inches from his death, I stupidly didn’t make the connection.” She whispered, spooked, “You’re a murderer.”

“I was and, with as deep in as I am with you about to be the mother of my child, I know I can find it in me to be it again.”

Her shoulders jerked as her face folded with streams of tears. It was as if her spine shivered with fear. If that’s what Ashira Witherspoon needed to understand how serious I was, I wouldn’t fight off a brief reveal of the monster.

Her belly jerked as she cried silently. “What’s your name?” she whispered so low I wouldn’t have caught on to the words if I wasn’t so familiar with the fucking question.

Escaping the sight of my world—*my fucking world*—on fire before me, all I could return was, “Say the fuck less.” I stepped around her for the door, closing it behind me.

# Bonus

## Part II *cont'd*

### March | Present Day

*ashira*

The New Jersey air was frigid in March, but the sun balanced out the beauty of the day and a terrible longing for spring. My door was opened for me and a proffered hand appeared. With his strong assistance, I successfully stepped out his *G-550*, landing balanced on my feet in one hundred-five millimeter *Dolce & Gabbana*, Nappa Mordore heels. It was a risk, yes, I knew, but it was also my pride. At nine months pregnant, I felt pretty good and wanted the world to continue to see.

“You good?” he murmured.

I pulled in a deep breath, taking in the fresh, crisp air and the zesty citrus mixed with a powerful note of cedar and a hint of sandalwood scent flowing from his solid frame. I smiled at him. His virile figure glowed in the bright sun. No longer seeing him regularly, I couldn't fight being taken aback by his handsome countenance. His wild, brown, and rich coils groomed by a lineup cut with savant precision. His dark and bushy brows, defined five o'clock shadow, and lightly sheened

full lips were still a sight to behold. He also looked breathtakingly stately in a camel wool coat. Such a remarkable contrast to his warm walnut skin.

“I am. Thanks.” I observed the lawn around my father’s estate as we approached the pool house then was struck with a thought. “Did you finish the nursery?”

His forehead tightened, clearly thrown by my question. “Yeah. Just waiting for the crib. The dressers and changing table came in a few days ago, I think.”

“Oh, nice. Which hue did you decide on?”

“Ava liked the off-white wood, Jug voted for the ebony, and Frankie wanted the white.” He shrugged with his lips. “I thought the off-white worked better with that pink.”

“It’s mauve.” I snorted. “Not pink.” I knew because he stole the color from me when I discarded it as an option for the nursery at my place, deciding on lilac, eggplant, and ivory. Those were the type of conversations we had while waiting at my obstetrician visits. That was the most of what we saw of each other, and certainly the only time we held conversations. “You can’t jack my color and not even pay it any respect. It’s the name of one of the companies you have shares in for crying the hell out loud.”

He chuckled, leading me inside. “Yeah. I got you. But I’m pretty much done. Ava knows everything should be done by Wednesday. Then I’ll have my final walk-through.”

*Ava...*

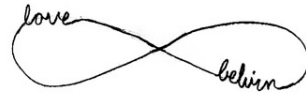
I rolled my eyes internally.

“Like you do at work with your houses?”

One cheek lifted on his classically beautiful face. “Yeah. Right. I guess so.”

We made it to the glass French doors and I could already see the mauve, gold, and ivory décor. Eight foot ivory giraffes with gold patches stood next to each door. Jas opened one of them and immediately, eager guests packed in the eighteen hundred square foot room shouted, “Welcome, Baby Sinclair!”

Gushing and overwhelmed with the onrush of enthusiasm for the bundle in my belly, I turned to Jas, who grinned with a closed mouth, eyes soft on me yet alive with so much passion.



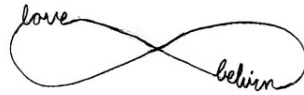
“So, in closing, I’ll say this.” Peach scratched the side of her nose, considering her words. With all of my best friends aside her, allowing her to speak on their collective behalf, my best friend spoke in the lowkey authoritative tone I’d harkened to since I began to understand her weird gifts when we were children. “When frustrated with life, you’d often say, ‘*I need a dog*’ or ‘*I need a plant*’ or ‘*I need to volunteer at the senior home.*’ And to those alleged needs, sometimes I’ve said, ‘*You don’t need a dog or a plant or to volunteer.*’ Then there were other occasions when I said, ‘*Okay. Start with a plant, move on to life form and eventually, you’ll get to what your heart truly wants.*’”

The room found humor in that. I smiled warmly as I sat next to Jas in oversized tuft seats at the top of the room, recalling those conversations.

“Well, to that I’ll say this is what your heart truly wanted,” Peach continued. “I won’t get too detailed publicly, but what I will share with you and Jas is that your heart was made to grow and nurture a family of your own. Your journey as a mother will mature your spirit and expand your mind to widths and breadths that will allow you to feed a community. *Then* will you bask in your purpose on this earth.

“But never forget, this is a journey, not a marathon. The maturation won’t be overnight, but purpose will have its day.” The room went up in applause as I tried fighting back welling tears. I joked about Peach being a sorcerer and mythical shit like that, but I knew she was the real deal. “Congratulations, Jas and Ashira.” Peach gave a neck bow. “We’re excited to see what this next installment of life will bring.” While the room continued their passionate ovations, my besties each air-kissed me while leaving the podium.





My shower was more than I ever dreamed of because when I turned thirty and realized I wasn't close to being married to have children, I stopped dreaming for me. And I certainly didn't consider the guests at such an event. Having mixed company in a room for a celebration was an event for me alone. At one point, Charmagne was at the podium with my dad. Of course, he didn't invite her to stand with him, but Charmagne found her way up there feeling compelled to sing my praises when she saw him doing it. She included her son's in there, too, which was to be expected.

Jas' little cousin, Jonathan, brought his new girlfriend. He boastfully introduced her to me, a college girl from Queens, studying pre-med. Tanya and Antoine were in the building, too, gifting us several boxes of pampers. When I got to them, she winked and pointed my way. I knew either I'd warmed on her in St. Vincent. That or the premium liquor served today had.

Earlier, I'd seen my aunt, Kimberly, in what appeared to be a fascinating conversation with Chelsea. That swelled my heart. If anyone could win over my über-snobbish aunt, Chelsea could. She was amazing, that one. Shizu and Man behaved as strangers and likely because his girlfriend showed today. I doubted if my best friend cared; she and David had been hot and heavy since returning from Italy where they vacationed the week before my birthday back in September. He'd been talking marriage and Shizu didn't balk at the idea.

Noelle and her friends played the dance floor hard stealing glances at Jas' little brother, Nicholas. He was glued under his reticent parents until I pulled him out there for a jig where I was able to spark a smile that warmed him enough to laugh at my silly moves. I hadn't seen him since July, but still thought he was the sweetest and, so damn cute, it roped my heart by the strings.

We weren't the only ones enjoying the deejay's tunes. Juggy brought Jos-Renee. I'd finally met her. She was a classy,

full-figured diva. Well-spoken and highly articulate, too. Apparently, she was a romance reader as well and big time. While she was running down authors like [Bailey West](#), [Bianca Xaviera](#), [Takerra Allen](#), [Chelsea Marie](#), [Charae Lewis](#), [B. Love](#), [K.C. Mills](#), and countless other Black romance scribes I had yet to try, I struggled to quickly type the names into my phone. She mentioned an author by the name of Love Belvin, but claimed she didn't "fool with her" too much because her books were too long and angsty. She'd lost me at that last mention because I caught Juggy from the corner of my eye shooting winks and kisses to Corinne while she arranged the dessert table display.

Ezra and Lex were present today. He'd blessed the food, revealing an immense vocabulary, rasping words of blessings and inspiration. The women were checking him out, likely not able to believe a man who could be on the cover of *Essence* magazine, bearded and dressed as swagged and stately could be a preacher. Peach was nervous when I formally introduced them. She'd been scolding our friends for their lusty whispers of the bishop since before I arrived, including lusty ass Cecil. Azmir and Rayna were in the South of France and couldn't make it, but sent a video to share their gifts as other absent family and friends had done, too.

There was a spell of Black magic and love in the atmosphere. I couldn't deny that. It was all...eerie. The subworld I'd created with a man I'd fallen for and spent what I considered, at the time, the best days of my life within mere months. And just to know it was all built on a bed of lust and lies, and all for nothing. But I smiled and bore through it all. The food was delicious and beautifully displayed, the room designed for anticipation of a new life—royal-like. And the music seemed to have spurred happiness for all.

I'd just left my dad and the new project manager he hired to assist with the merger transition when I threaded through the tables and guests, admiring the work my friends had put into this event. The room was packed with over two hundred people, a number I thought was reasonable rather than hosting close to five hundred people easily. I knew too many damn people! Peach, Corinne, Becky, and Shizu were determined to

throw me the best shower, but my overzealous father wouldn't sit this one out. He wanted to hire an event coordinator and have my girls keep an eye on him or her.

Then the girls met with Jas and he ordained their request to plan and host, but only if he could pay for it. The girls felt it would be his shower, too, which seemed unfair. My father offered to pay, but Jas refused. Jas insisted on the expense, leaving my father to concede, yet have them agree to allow him to host here on his property. Incurring one another in life again had still been a bone of contention for Jas and my dad. Nonetheless, it all worked out for me. The one singular drawback of my shower was not having my mother present. She refused to attend here in my father's home. So, she'd been planning a post-delivery shower in *Della* later on this spring, something I'd not been looking forward to. It would be senseless!

During my stroll, I spotted four people chatting. Good-looking people at that. Jas and his intern, Ava, were standing over a woman with a curly tapered bob, wearing the biggest diamond wedding ring I'd ever seen from such a distance. She was sitting at an angle, knee-to-knee with a smooth almond-skinned man with a stunning bald head and the most radiant green/goldish eyes. Those eyes were on me in approach. Of course, I strutted their way. I had to. Ava and Jas resembled a couple, chatting with a "fellow-couple." And Jas looked damn good with those dark, messy coils in a tan'ish brown two-piece suit over a white dress shirt and with white sneakers. It corresponded with my mauve sequin mini empire dress with layered tulle.

Surprisingly, and for the first time since we'd broken up, that unusual spirit of jealousy emerged.

"Well, who do we have here?" I beamed.

The woman turned around, exposing her gorgeous freckles and warm golden complexion. She smiled with big eyes. "Oh, you're gorgeous." She gushed.

"Takes one to know one." I offered my hand. "I'm Shi-Shi."

She took my hand in a shake as she rose to further greet me with a kiss on my cheek. “Of course, you are. It’s great to meet you. I’m sorry the first time is at your baby shower, but I’ll take it. I’m [Bilan Ellis](#).”

*Ellis?*

I smiled as her fine ass husband stood to grant the same salutation, though I didn’t understand the connection. “Hey, Shi-Shi. [I’m Sadik](#). I see you’ve made my little brother here a very lucky king.”

Grinning into his beautifully translucent eyes, I explained, “I aim to please.” Then I shrugged. “It’s what I do. Na’ah I mean?” I rolled my shoulders and winked, earning me a crack of laughter from everyone in the group except for my baby’s daddy.

He gazed over my entire being with what felt like wonder in his eyes. Jas and I may have officially abandoned our relationship as a couple, but he didn’t fail to make me feel seen and...beautiful. Him not laughing was also telling of him expecting my silliness. I may have been living with hurt, confusion, and fear for my future, but I fought every day to be me. Humor was one of my easiest expressions outside of work.

“I saw you in the *Asè Garb* commercial,” Bilan mentioned. “I had no idea it was you until my father-in-law mentioned it while we were in the great room waiting for dinner to be served. He lowered his reading glasses and said, ‘*I think that’s Sin’s girl. But can’t be. She pregnant. I think that nigga lying. She too pretty.*’” She laughed after doing an impression of what I assumed was an older man. Even I found that crazy hilarious.

“Yeah,” Sadik interjected. “You ain’t tell me about the commercial, Sin.”

They made a big deal about *my* gig from a few months ago. The commercial I shot, dancing in their latest foot and coat line as *Asè Garb* expanded their ready-to-wear products.

“I forgot to. I had lunch with him the week it went live,” Jas answered and I wondered where he’d gotten that information from. Only a few knew the specific timeline.

Ava laughed along as though she knew more about these people than I did in her lilac pants suit with a cropped jacket highlighting the small waistline I missed having. Now, I needed to be in the know.

“So, why do I feel like I’m missing the connection here?” I asked with a smile. “How do you two know Sin?” Of course, I had to be the asshole by using that name.

“Oh, my bad.” Jas’ eyes closed in realization. “Ashira, Sadik’s father is the big homie. Used to mentor me. Remember the *Ellis Bombardier*?”

“Yes...” I answered warily.

“This is the youngest of the Ellis men, Sadik. I’ve known him since... forever it seems. I had to hit him up for his *Ellis II* over in the fall.”

My hackles stood straight and eyes raked over to a smiling Ava holding a champagne flute, one of my mother’s favorite designs she left behind.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked. “Where did you go?”

“Cuba,” Jas supplied casually. “I hadn’t been to the *Por el Amor del Amor* estate since being off parole. The *Ellis Bombardier* was too big.”

“Too big for you? Was it just you and Juggy? Or did you two kiddos have company?” I wagged my eyes.

No one made a sound. Jas nodded, eyes locked into mine keenly. Jas had either caught on to my line of questioning or wanted to fuck. With this level of laze in his eyes, I couldn’t choose.

“And Man,” he murmured, “of course.”

I nodded, satisfied with that answer. “Of course.”

I’d never forgotten Jas’ threat to me last summer, here in my father’s home. He all but told me he’d kill the next man I

fucked. Part of me wanted to keep as far away from his deranged ass as I could—as I’d practically been doing—and the other, more cynical, part of me wanted to challenge him on it. But I’d been very pregnant and working hard between the *Asè Garb* opportunity, being given the choreography gig with Alana, and having the final touches put on the club I’d purchased.

“Well, whenever you need it, you know what to do,” Sadik offered, breaking the eye-war Jas and I had ensued.

Jas lifted his palm for dap, to which Sadik received. “I appreciate it, Deek.”

“You got it.” Sadik patted his chest, an act of allegiance before resuming his seat.

Then Jas’ head cocked to the side. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

My eyes skated over to Ava, who smiled mildly, and I answered, “You’ve knocked me up. I guess a talk would be harmless in comparison.”

Ava’s eyes dashed away, flute dipping to her pelvis. She was uncomfortable and I was satisfied.

“I’ll be right back, Ava,” Jas bade.

“Oh!” she murmured. “Sure!”

He took me at the hand, an odd gesture. “Where can we have privacy?”

I knew just the place.



He closed the door to the bedroom on the second level of the pool house. The room had been vacant for years. It was only occupied during the summer when my parents hired a grounds guy to maintain the pool and the property surrounding it. That ended when I left for *Blakewood State University*.

Jas took a deep breath, releasing the button of his jacket. “Look, Ashira.” His head swung left to right with his eyes to the carpeted floor. “Well, first of all, thanks for letting me drive you here today. I appreciate having some alone time with you outside of the doctor’s visits.”

“You may want to cut to the chase,” I warned. “We have over two hundred guests beneath us.”

He nodded humbly, still not able to look me in the eye. The struggle in his posture lit the flame of my sizzling libido. Relishing in *his* discomfort, too, before he could speak again, I rushed him against the wall, head in lead, torso behind and kissed him ferociously. Jas’ big hot hands shot up to cup my face and he moaned from his nostrils like a wailing dog. His tongue was smooth, tasting like promises. My movements were aggressive, Jas’ was predictably hungry. *For me*. My hands rushed down his body and beneath my distended belly, finding his mildly awakened cock against his thigh. I stroked it, squeezing beneath the bulbous head the way he liked.

I reached for the waist of his pants, unhooking the sewn-in clip.

He pulled away from my mouth and breathed, “Shira,” pleadingly. “We can’t...”

I unfastened then kicked off my heels, using his body as an anchor. Then I slowly took to my haunches with my new risky weight in mind. I tugged down his pants and boxers, inhaling the virile scent of him. Natural male musk with hints of his cologne, my pheromones were on fire.

“*Gutdamn*,” he grunted when I pulled him by the thick columnar root, bringing his raging bulbous head into my mouth.

Now, fully erect, his heavy balls were huge and teasingly hanging so I grabbed them too, stroking softly with my palm, fingers, and thumb. The tips of my coffin-shaped nails catching against his stiff sac occasionally. I could suck this man bone dry and rival his satisfaction. Jas knew this as he palmed me at the back of my head, thrusting into my mouth

while gazing down on me through slitted eyes. That quickly, we'd fallen into our roles of rabid lovers.

Those O.B. visits were the only occasions we engaged in verbal conversations since discovering my pregnancy. However, two to four times a month, Jas and I found ourselves wrapped in a fury of passion, making love long and hard in the night. It was an unspoken agreement, bound by unresolved emotions, including the resentment I'd still held in my heart for the barrier he kept high with me.

I tried to moan when his swollen head bobbed into the back of my throat. It meant his hot cum was soon to follow in a more spectacular fashion. That was until he leaned over and hooked me at the shoulders, urging me to my feet.

"The lower belly cramping," he whispered hoarsely, remembering my most recent complaint to the doctor last week.

Then Jas tossed his chin toward the full-sized bed in all his b-boy flare. I understood and lead the way, offering him a seat.

Standing over him, I gathered my dress in my hands. "I can't reach my panties," I was breathless and wanting.

Jas reached up and pulled the lace material over my hips and down my legs. After placing them on the bed, I anchored myself by his shoulders and shuffled onto his lap, standing on my knees, clutching him.

"Help me," I whispered, swallowing hard. "Please."

His tongue flipped out and traced the lining of my overflowing bosom in the dress. My body began to tremble, aching with renewed desire. The walls of my sex flexed deliciously, heart beat loudly in anticipation of him.

The moment I felt his smooth fat head at the flexing lips of my sex, I greedily began to sink down onto him, clenching at each effort to swallow him whole.

He lay his forehead against me. "*Fuck...* You're so wet," rumbled lowly from his chest. His head shook. "I miss you so



much.” Jas had never been a talkative lover, typically silent in his doling of pleasure.

My chest expanded at that rare admittance of his feelings for me. With shaky hands, I reached for his face and kissed him again, tongue rolling over his as my sex stretched to let him in deep. My lung seized at the pressure between us. Holding onto my hips, Jas flexed upward and forced me to sink down further onto him. I swear, it felt like the man had grown inches since our last touch.

Holding my breath, I plunged down through rippling pleasure until my ass smacked his thighs and the head of his cock reached the end of me. My body vibrated from the pain and pleasure balance, arms secreting with sweat, and my groin churning over.

I tossed my head back, pulling in a needed breath, rocking my hips and squeezing my thighs around him. Jas reclined backward, surrendering to the pace I set. It gradually grew, steady with the smooth penetration. When I plunged down onto him again, Jas’ chest heaved visibly as he watched me. It was invigorating, pausing my mixed emotions for him and taking pleasure from his incredible body.

And I rolled up and down, losing time and relishing in bliss. I watched the tense muscles in his face flex as his eyes held me for a long while. Then my groin began to lift, ascending and ascending until my entire body flew into a fit of spasms. I bit my lips together and reached for Jas’ shoulder. He sat up to allow me and I grabbed my swollen belly with one hand as it contracted while a delicious orgasm rolled over me.

“Shi—*raa!*” he whispered, plunging upward, intensifying my explosion.

His grip on my thighs was bruise-worthy, but I held on observing his hanging jaw and strained face.

We rocked and rocked until our bodies calmed, hearts racing and breathless.

“Be careful,” he murmured when I began to readjust my weight to stand to my sleeping knees again. “Hold on to both my shoulders.”

He tried to recline as much as necessary to accommodate my belly. It took a stretch of time, but I was on my feet and wobbling to the bathroom eventually. Thankfully, there was linen and soap and I was able to wash up. Jas worked around me, cleaning himself then left for the bedroom. When I was done, I could still feel a stretch in my abdomen as I promenaded out of the bathroom in search of my panties. It was good that I wore liners because I doubted I was able to get all of Jas’ seeds from my cavity with the washcloth.

Jas, dressed again as though untouched, was standing near the bed, his hands at his waist in a waiting posture. I paid it no mind until I saw the purple velvet box.

*Andreatta’s Promises...*

Out of all the times he could attempt this, why would it be today, at our shower? Why would he not try to meet me at my home or invite me to his place—hell, do it in the OBGYN’s office? And more than that, why would he continue to insult me with a promise built on his jailhouse wish list? Marriage was cool, but my life was for me. It would be some time before I could think of locking myself down like that. Wasn’t it enough that this baby was yet another delay in my happiness? My fulfillment?

My gaze lifted to him, anger blazing through me. Jas blinked in memory.

“Oh, my bad.” He sat on the bed and held out my panties for me to step in. “I know you’re going to say no. If I thought otherwise, I wouldn’t have brought that here today.” His attention was below on the task as he shrugged. “I was hoping to have a private moment with you while you were happy to remind you of my love for you. To tell you I still want you. Ain’t nothing change no matter how much I respect your feelings and fall back.”

Lightning occurred in my belly as I tried centering my anger. This motherfucker came into my life just before I

learned my boyfriend had been cheating on me, ending our three-year relationship. And when I'd thankfully dodged the pain from that disappointment, too caught up in this handsome, alluring creature, I actually got my heart broken by said beast. I got pregnant, too. And while I knew each of my best friends with the exception of one would have aborted the baby by the felon, like a damn fool I decided to keep it. My career had literally just taken off in a way of bringing me international exposure! What was worse was Jas never took accountability for the lies and delayed truths. He owned them without apology, but never acknowledged the cross I bore from them.

*But you want to bring up marriage?*

My nose spread, likely to the size of my mouth as I fought back my emotion. Jas peered up to me, waiting as though I'd respond to that piss-poor proposal.

The shuddering in my body grew unbearable when I thought the only thing I knew would run him out of here like light on roaches.

My lips trembled when I asked, "What's your name?"

I saw his chest begin to lift and drop again and, just when I expected his weak ass 'say less' line, he murmured, "Ojasvi Lamont Sinclair." Each syllable was soft puffs dispersing into the air.

*"Whu—what?"*

Jas swallowed, brows knitted tightly as his eyes swung over to the wall. His jaw flexed before he murmured, "My moms wasn't an angel in her hay. She had a thing going with the Indian bodega owner across the street from my building. They was banging on and off, exchanging favors, you know? When my moms was around her due date with me, she was in the store and the old man got her to the hospital." He shook his head. "From what she said, it only felt right to give me his name. It was how she felt she could honor him. So..." He shrugged with his forehead. "It's Ojasvi."

*Jas is short for Ojasvi...*

For over a year, this was the one piece of information I waited for, what I'd been obsessed with! Some days, I quelled the curiosity with his charm, beauty, and/or incredible fucking. A few days, I chased the thrill of not knowing. But today—*now*—he so casually and with ease gave me the one piece of information that would have allowed me to decide if I wanted to risk my future with this man. And now, with a belly full of his baby, it was too late. My future was irrevocably changed. I would now be chained to his stubborn deceitfulness forever.

My mind flipped and turned upside down so rapidly, I grew lightheaded. I closed my eyes and breathed through the dizziness.

“Ashira, you *go*—”

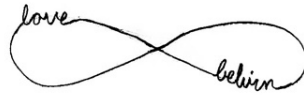
I hauled off and slapped the shit out of him. Then I leaped backward, hand stinging. “Don’t fucking come near me!” I growled from a despair I never knew until encountering one *Ojasvi Sinclair*. “Don’t even say another fucking word to me. I don’t want anything to do with you, your companies, your religion—your fucking cunning ways!” A stream of tears raced down my face. “Take that fucking ring and give it to a woman you respect enough to give her all of your shit up front because clearly I was not that one for you.” Through the tears, I could only see his silhouette.

“Can I *just*—”

“*YOU RIPPED MY FAMILY’S LEGACY RIGHT FROM BENEATH MY STUPID ASS!*” I cupped my belly. “You stole it from my child—*future children!* You have no future with me. The next fucking time you’ll hear from me is when my daughter is born. Get the fuck off of my daddy’s property!”

I had no idea what he would do, but if Jas tried to get violent with me as he did Jonathan or the man in St. Vincent, I’d claw his fucking eyes out before he’d kill me.

Slowly, he reached down for the ring. Then Jas sauntered to the door with his head low, leaving me room to breathe.



jas

An hour after I left Ashira, she went into labor. She gave birth that night.

I'd soon learn she meant every word spewed through tears of pain, never recognizing my life again from that day on. My "Samson" cautionary tale about a man weakened under the wiles of *one* irresistible woman had definitely been Ashira Witherspoon, and her exclusively.

As weakened as I was by her rejection, I wouldn't have it that way with any other woman.

~Next Up

*the promise.*  
*the prism series : three.*

**Winter 2022**

## ~Love Acknowledges

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Santisha Taylor of *AccuProse Editing Services* — Your teachings in this installment were incredible! Thanks so much for your flexibility and professionalism!

**MDT:** I may be slow, but I produce. On to the next!

*Master*, my *Jireh*, my *Rohi*, Acts 20:24 (NIV) “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s **grace**.”  
*Thank you, Father, for your graciousness, being slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and thy unmerited faithfulness.*





"Chill! You *only* got panties and a bra on, Shi!"

*Arwwww...*

"You afraid to be tempted by my *feminine* chicaneries again?"

"I'm tempted just *smelling* you... *hearing* you. *Thinkin'* of you."

*grace.*  
*the prism series: two.*

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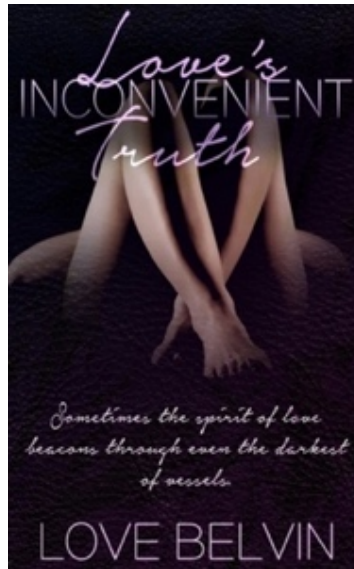


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## ~Extra

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