



*My*  
MUTED  
love

*Muted Hopelessness 1*

LOVE BELVIN

My  
MUTED  
love

book 1 of the Muted Hopelessness series

*by Love Belvin*

MKT Publishing

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**-Now-**

*Ashton*

“I was so pleased to see you last night.” Lucinda smiles while tossing a cursory glance over her narrow shoulder. “Tyler told me you’d just flown in from France, where you ended an assignment. Cognac, I hear?”

I trail behind her, admiring the striking, picturesque view of the rolling mountains of Ojai, California. Ventura County sure is an idyllic settlement abounding in historic magnetism. It’s a far cry from the third world villages and impoverished western communities he’s laid his head in to tell a story. Someone of his breadth of work needed an oasis of this serene level.

“Yes,” I finally answer while absorbing the valley’s view of the dainty shops, galleries, and Victorian structures sitting miles away. They’ve been preserved by the community for generations. “A few miles outside the Crouin locale. The food is remarkable,” I mumble, not wanting to lose a moment of the view. “I may return recreationally for that alone.”

Lucinda peers over her shoulder again with an arched brow and a faint smirk. “Any new discoveries?”

It takes no time to consider it. “*Pour L’amour du Cochon.*”

“Ah... *For Pig’s Sake.*” We reach the French doors at the end of the corridor and she turns to face me with an outstanding beam. “I’ve heard delightful things. I’ll have to put it on my itinerary for the next time I’m in Southwest France. If all goes well, I’ll be out there this winter. I can ask you to recommend a dish or two.” She winks innocently.

“If you want to explain the seven pounds you’ll put on in as many days.” I wink in return. “Go for it.”

She chuckles breathily. “Oh, don’t you spew such things.” Her delicate hand swats my imitative self-pity. “You’re doing well with your body, Ashton. At this rate, when you become my age, you’ll have more mileage for the long haul.”

I stop a few feet in front of her. “Are you trying to charm me with blandish and fanning lashes, Mrs. Thomas?”

Lucinda’s youthful giggle bounces off the floor and walls of the corridor as she reaches for her neck to finger the back of her silver Pixie cut. Her eyes fall away. “Oh, Ashton. It’s a wonder you’re still single, young man.”

I scoff while shrugging my brows. “A wonder for who?”

Her chin dips with class. “Your presence at the *USC Annenberg* dinner last night was generous and greatly apprized.” She tosses her chin toward the office. “He’s been awaiting you.”

After a courteous nod, I amble into my mentor’s home office. Ghosted *Perique* tobacco permeates the upholstery throughout the pharaonic room. That and the scent of scotch and whiskey bottled in crystal decanters on the bar stand against the wall. The oversized office features two walls of floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with literature he’s read more than once; it’s the only way a leaflet can take up coveted space here. And, at least, a dozen of the books were penned by the man himself. His desk is a cluster of files, loose papers, and a desktop he still fusses about and uses begrudgingly.

The beloved vintage typewriter he still engages from time to time to “maintain his virtuosity” sits on a pillar just beyond his desk. Symmetric to it is another brass stand boasting his framed Pulitzer Prize certificate. In the adjacent corner is a curio displaying the dozens of awards he’s garnered spanning his fifty-year career: recognitions from esteemed publications, NAACP awards, plaques from state and local organizations, and award statues from renowned academic institutions, including *Blakewood* and *Harvard*.

“You may be younger...and richer,” gruff rings out from across the room. “but I’ve given that woman laps around my heart and in my head for more decades than you’ve been breathing.”

He sits partially reclined in a leather Lazy-Z-Boy, gazing through the glass of the patio door, out to the amazing vista of the Topatopa Mountains. Tyler Thomas, a giant in the world of journalism and a legend in publishing, never allows a passing miniscule detail before reconnoitering each layer presented.

“She’s seen me shirtless,” I mutter, lifting a book by a familiar name and title from one of his shelves. Fingering the spine, I continue, “I think you should let the fine lady choose for herself.”

“How was Cognac?”

My head swipes up, eyes wildly shooting to the back of his head, then I return the book and glide over to him. Leaning against the glass door, I fold my arms. “What the hell are you up to, Thomas?”

Finally, his copper eyes reach mine. “I can’t ask about your work?”

“Only if you hadn’t already done your due diligence last night.”

Last night, *USC’s School for Communication and Journalism* honored him at a dinner. Quite a few influential suits in the world of journalism flew in to attend, including a subject loosely related to the assignment I’m now closing. Tyler Thomas is my mentor, a legendary journalist with over a half a century in the game. One of the first impactful African Americans to break American stories overseas and to write for major publications like *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *ESPN*, *Black Press*, *TIME*, *LA Times*, and others. He’s the truest standard of what my generation terms as G.O.A.T. He’s even served terms as chief editor for many of them. Thomas has also begun his own small press called *40 Acres*. The small digital paper has been thriving for over fifteen years. It’s been the holy grail for Black students



pursuing internship opportunities and new writers beginning their career in journalism.

“I’m asking again!” shoots from his belly.

It’s a tone I decide right away not to test.

Letting out a fortifying breath, I scratch the back of my head. “Particularly harrowing.” I then brush my hand over my face.

“Did you get enough meat?”

Meat is his lingo for details. As a journalist, you need meat and teeth to create a complete, compelling piece.

“More than I bargained for,” I admit. “Similar to the wine industry, there are cartels destroying product and properties in the name of fair trade.”

Six months ago, I set out on an assignment for the *New York Times* to explore the shifting of the brandy industry. For centuries, the spirit was predominantly produced by the French. Over the past six years, the usual renowned brands received several new contenders on the market. The most aggressive competitor is helmed by a Black man. I flew to “brandy country” to research the market and all of its players. What I didn’t expect to discover was the underworld that attempted to regulate the brandy industry.

His eyes widen with concern. “Jacobs isn’t involved, is he?”

Azmir Jacobs is a mutual comrade of ours. He’s the owner of one of the most popular brandy line on the market, thanks to pop culture. Jacobs is how I met my mentor and friend, Tyler Thomas.

I shake my head. “He’s the only giant unscathed by the attacks, though. The *JFD Cartel*, also known as *Justice for Distilleries*, is a group of ruffians who’ve taken it upon themselves to right the brandy industry. They’ve gone as far as setting vineyards afire, slashed tires of brokers, and planting bombs in the headquarters of the bigger brandy heads’ offices.”

I know because I'd shown up to one of the corporate offices nearly three weeks ago to interview the head broker to find a quarter of the building charred.

His eyes utter the question before it slips from his mouth. "Did you find the players of the cartel?"

"It isn't Jacobs or anyone from the *Mauve* line." I lift my brows, sucking in a yawn. "Ironically, however, one of the Moreau Brothers is funding the cartel."

The Moreau Brothers were the family Jacobs robbed of their heritage several years ago when slowly purchasing the company, *Mauve*, from underneath them. The brandy company had been in the Moreau family for centuries. When they needed cash to prevent the company from going belly up, Jacobs stepped in. Within a few short years, he acquired the business outright.

"Jacques?"

"Nah." I shake my head. "Jean."

"Why?"

"Why not? He's still salty as fuck about losing his family's legacy. Jacobs will be enemy number one until he either dies, Jean croaks, or Jacobs loses the company to them."

"But *Mauve*'s vineyard or distillery hasn't been hit by *JFD*," he questions.

"Because Jacobs is the master of thuggery. His security there is tight as fuck. You can't get within four miles of the *Mauve* compound without having laser ammo marking your head."

Thomas shakes his head, relief shooting from each pore of his frame. He's hopeful for Jacobs' turnaround in life as his past is nefarious as hell.

I study the lines in his face. Either my guy is still exhausted from his celebration last night or he's stressed.

"You going to tell me what this meeting is about, or are you going to continue to shoot off causerie topics to delay it?"

“I need a favor.”

“Name it.”

His eyes appear on me. “My cardiologist called two days ago. She wants to go back in.” He pats his chest.

“Another surgery?”

“Replacement.”

“Still issues with the...” I snap my fingers, begging the terms back to memory. “the aortic valve?”

Thomas’ been suffering from valvular heart disease for years.

“That would be the adversary.”

“What can I do?”

He takes a deep breath, eyes still on the vista. “Mark Kevinjohn called in a favor—”

“*Sports Illustrated*?”

Thomas nods again. “You’ve heard of the shakeup over there. He asked for a freelance piece. A 10K word feature.”

*Damn...*

“What, specifically?” Lots of my personal friends are being or have been laid off. Mark and his team are changing the entire outfit of publishing over there.

“He asked for something groundbreaking...something to create a cloud to cover the melee happening over there.”

“Of your choosing,” I surmise. Thomas nods in confirmation. A pirouette of topics swiftly populates my mind. Then I scratch my brow. “What can I do to help?”

Thomas’ eyes are on me again. “Assume my assignment.”

“There’s a slight problem with that, Thomas.”

“Enlighten me.”

“*Sports Illustrated* is exclusively sports.”

“Last I checked, yes.”

“I don’t cover sports.”

“Which is why this would be a favor, son.”

I scratch my brow to process this. “In my entire ten-year career, I’ve never covered sports.”

“And I know why.”

My forehead narrows. “Do you?”

“It’s because of the injury.” His regard brushes against my legs.

My eyes flutter. *Yes*— “No. Not wholly. And what is the piece about anyway?”

“The latest boxing sensation.”

“Deontay ‘Bronze Bomber’ Wilder?”

His head shakes. “The latest female sensation: Tori McNabb.”

My damn knees go weak, heart slingshots only dropping to the floor, lungs fumble, and suddenly, I’m severely dependent on the glass door to remain vertical.

“Spencer,” he tries.

I can’t comprehend much more than that with my head spinning like a fucking dreidel.

“Thomas,” I try heaving in a deep breath without revealing my turmoil. “I’m sure Mark will understand when you tell him you can’t make good on the favor.”

“I’m not telling him that.”

“Why?”

“Because the story will be done, and well. She’s the biggest phenom in sports since Michael Phelps. Never in the history of boxing has the federation seen so much panjandrum from a female boxer. You know this. Before McNabb, a female boxer hasn’t had several nationally promoted commercials and the broad landscape portfolio of

endorsements she's had. Ali, in her height, didn't have half the corporate engagement as this young lady."

"No." I shake my head. "I don't."

The room grows quiet and after seconds of his annoying ass stare down, Thomas faces the mountains again.

"It's been years."

"And not enough."

His head whips to face me. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Not enough to make me want to cover sports. Why can't you have one of your students take it over? I'm sure they'd all be biting at the bit for this opportunity!"

"Because it belongs to my prize pupil." He swivels to face me.

My veins flood with shame. I hate to disappoint this man. No one ever says no to Tyler Thomas when presented an opportunity to run a story for him—much less a 10K word feature for *S.I.* No one!

*Not even stubborn ass me...*

But this is a hard limit for me. No way am I committing to meeting with Tori Mc-fucking-Nabb over weeks to get a 10K word feature piece, much less holding a twenty-second conversation with her.

*No fucking way!*

I shake my head again, eyes below. "I can't do it, Thomas—"

"Lucinda's going to leave me!" he belts abruptly.

My face tightens with perplexity and my eyes absently range over to the door she ushered me into just minutes ago. "What?"

"Yes." His throat cracked. "She wants me to stow the typewriter for good." *Retire?* "And I don't mean take a two-year hiatus. That was my last failed attempt at placating her.

She wants me out by the time I go under the knife. Completely.”

I sigh. “You and Lucinda have been through rougher times. I’m sure she understands the minutiae of fading to black in this industry. She’ll allow for more time.”

“Lucinda’s left my ass before. It would take an imprudent mollycoddle to not recognize the opportunity to keep a woman when she’s one foot out the damn door.”

The muscles in my face drop, weakened by the overtone. Thomas is pulling out all guns for this one, making it clear why my presence today was requested.

“Now, listen,” he begins, short of breath from managing his temper. “you’re going to have to give it your all. I’ve already created an itinerary with her agency. We’ve synced calendars, and I’m willing to tell them it needs to happen again to accommodate your schedule. She’s preparing for a big fight. Monica “Four Clover” O’Connor. Lots of attention has already been given to this one, because of the money on the table. One point five million for O’Connor and 70 million for McNabb. They’re estimating \$975 million in pay-per-view revenue from nearly 16 million paying *HBO* customers.” I blink successively at those figures. “This isn’t just some fluff piece. What this young lady is doing is significant to the culture. Fuck yes, I want her success plastered in a white publication. Shit, you better believe even *40 Acres* is covering it, too, but the reach isn’t as broad.”

I turn away, adrenaline running at the announcement of one name. A name I’ll never forget as long as I live. The name that’s brought pleasure and pain in equal servings.

“Thirteen years is a long time, son. What’s at stake here is this Black ass history this young lady is about to bring to American and sports history. And I know no one can cover this event like my most erudite, culture-protective protégé.”

My nostrils widen as defeat coats my body from head to toe.

love  believe

Tori

“Hey, Tori, heeeey!” Candice, the receptionist, sings as I approach the desk outside of my PR head’s office.

Her gaze goes between me and the area behind me, toward the elevators.

“Hey you, Ms. Hunter,” I return, then turn around to find the area empty.

No one’s on the other side of her booth besides me and the plush furniture and massive plasma television mounted on the wall.

“Who ya waiting on?”

Her eyes are on me again. “Goddamn Rut Amare is on his way up here.”

“And?”

“And,” Her head swings dramatically then. “errrrbody know that’s my forever crush!”

My head draws back. “Even though he’s married with a kid?”

“He was my crush before he fucked her. Before the million-dollar endorsement deals.” Her nose spreads and top lip lifts above the teeth line. “She better be lucky I ain’t go awf at their lil’ ceremony.”

I don’t recall seeing her at Rut and Parker’s wedding this past summer. “Were you there?”

Candice’s eyes roll, hot air rushing from her nose. “My brother said I couldn’t.”

Jackson Hunter, the head of *Dynamic Branding’s* public relations firm, is Candice’s big brother. *Dynamic Branding* is the parent company to the sports agency I’m signed to, *Love Is Action*. And it so happens that Jackson is my agent at *Love Is Action*—he and his wife, Elle Hunter. They sort of do this *dynamic* duo thing, *without the intended pun*.

But Rut, who she's referring to, is the homie. I know how he feels about his new family, and Candice here doesn't stand a chance. Nevertheless, this is Candice Hunter; always on the prowl. She's young, only in her early twenties, so much of her behavior is dismissed. Today, I don't want to be around for her trying her hand at Rut's attention.

"Is Parker coming up with Rut?" I ask. Candice shrugs, blowing off the idea. I need to clear this waiting area. "Is Elle available?" She should have been. She called for this meeting.

Without looking at me, Candice waves her hand toward Elle's office door. "She's been in there waiting on you," she mumbles.

I walk past her desk for the door. The moment I twist the handle and open it, a blast of familiar tunes hit me. In an instant, I'm transported back to seven years old in the living room of my Margaret's trailer home in Millville, New Jersey. I'd wake up some Saturday mornings to her using the broom, mop, or brush as a mic. And quite often, it would be one of Shirley Murdock's hits she was playing from the big flat screen mounted on the wall.

Elle's singing into a microphone feeding into the television screen, one of the most familiar songs in Shirley Murdock's catalog for me, "*Go On Without You*." Elle's blonde hair is cut into a fade with a sharp part drawn at the left side of her scalp. The blonde tint is lighter than I saw when we had lunch together a couple of weeks ago. But that's Elle Hunter; stylish and never boring to look at or follow.

She isn't alone in her office. Maggie from Finance sits on the couch swaying, amazed by Elle's stapler performance. Lamont from Product Management is squatting on the armrest, cracking the hell up. There's a woman of Asian descent I don't know standing in the corner, clutching a clipboard and smiling on. Elle's husband, Jackson, sits behind Elle's desk with his chin propped up on his fingers, swinging in the chair. So much expression in his eyes though his smile is reserved.

Then I glance at the screen again and see the lyrics are populating. The words are moving and before I know it, I'm



next to her, singing my heart out. I don't need the microphone, my fist works just fine. I close my eyes to a squeeze and recite the lyrics from memory. So many recollections flash behind my lids. As a child, when Shirley's songs played, you had no idea of the experience but could feel the emotion so vividly, conveying it was easy. Ms. Murdock's songs were a key thread in the fabric of my psyche, I learned some time ago.

"Never again, will I let you go..." I belt out with strong emotion.

"Okay, Tor!" I hear Jackson encourage from a distance.

That quickly, I'm in an emotional zone. As an adult, you collect enough experience to finally match the emotions of the songs. Experiences so vivid, sometimes listening to Shirley's music isn't the best idea. But it's fun singing with Elle. When a high note comes in the track, I lower my voice and look to Elle. Her bold persona stays true when she delivers it beautifully. I'm no singer, but remember Elle actually is. Since I've been signed to *Love Is Action*, I've spent lots of time with her, learning her many talents. Elle directs some of the lyrics to Jackson behind her desk. That cool veneer remains as his partial smile appears pleased.

We sing until the last note, eyes landing on each other expressively. "I can't go on without yooooooooou!"

The office erupts with heavy applause, and I turn to find Maggie and the Asian woman taking pictures and recording a video with their phones. That is the last thing I expect, but I giggle in good nature. Cutting up with Elle is always fun. When I turn toward her again, Jackson is kissing her forehead before heading for the door.

"Who knew another woman under forty-five knows a Shirley Murdock classic other than '*As We Lay*'?"

"Man, are you kidding me?" I'm out of breath, but still buzzing from the nostalgia. "I love me some Shirley!"

"Did you tell her at my wedding?" he asks, now holding the door open.

My lips pout. “I wasn’t able to make it. Remember? I was in China, promoting the fight with Lian Liu.”

“Shit.” He smacks his teeth. “I forgot about that. But I ain’t forget about that knockout at the start of the second round!”

“Aye!” I throw an air jab.

Laughing, Jackson leaves with Maggie behind him. I turn to find Elle signing off on a document as Lamont hovers over her, waiting on it. The other woman sits on the couch, sporting a smile.

“Tori, have a seat.” Elle points to one of the chairs right in front of her desk.

She’s done signing for Lamont and goes for her seat.

“Peace, Tori,” Lamont offers on his way out.

“Later, Lamont,” I return over my shoulder.

“You alone today?” Elle asks while scrolling down the face of her phone.

I shook my head, feeling my phone vibrate in my purse. “Security’s down in the café.”

“Oh, good!” She places her phone down on the desk and squares her shoulders. “Two things. This is Michelle Wu, the new head of Image Management.”

I stand to meet her midway for a handshake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. McNabb. I’m a huge fan and have been since forever.” She nods slightly. “I’m looking forward to working with you.”

After a smile of pleasantries, we take to our seats again and Elle continues. “Tori, Michelle was contributory in closing on a new relationship with a graphic design company out of Washington for a new toy.” She waves to bring my attention toward the mounted screen. “That was part of the karaoke simulator they’re putting finishing touches on.”

“To do what?” I shake my head to express my confusion and being overwhelmed by meaningless

information.

Elle leans into her desk with folded arms. “It’s a program that allows our athletes to rock out to their favorite songs and perform as though they’re singing in the mirror when...” She shrugs, looking as though searching for words. “getting dressed for the day while listening to the radio.”

My face balls up. “Why would we do that?”

“So glad you asked.” Elle sits back, sporting that million-dollar smile. “We here at *Love Is Action* want to give the fans of our clients’ insight on who they are when they’re not on the field, court, or in your case...” Her hand swings my way, showing off her almond-shaped manicured nails. “the ring. What better way to do that than to show off your comical, artsy side by way of music?”

“The plan is,” Michelle stands and walks closer to the desk. “for you to select two of your favorite songs—technically five so we can try for sample clearance—and by using this program, perform them to be recorded. Once recorded and edited, they’re available to download for free when someone purchases your merch.”

“That’s it?” I ask.

Michelle looks to Elle for help. Elle sits higher in her chair. “What do you mean?”

“We sing the song karaoke-style just for the people who purchase our merch on your site?”

“We’re actually cutting a deal with *Nike* and *Ase Garb* to have the downloads available on their sites, too, but that would only be for those of our clients who are endorsed by those companies. Think of it as a way to slide *personability* of the customer’s favorite athlete into their digital bag when they’re purchasing any product in support of said athlete.”

I squint my eyes suspiciously. “Is personability even a word?”

Elle winked. “It is when you catch my drift.”

“But in this digital age, that shit won’t stay exclusive. It’ll be all over social media within hours of being released.”

“Illegally, but...” Elle nods. “yeah. And that will be okay, because of the added exposure. Who are your favorite artists? Let’s say R&B—female.”

I stretch my forehead, quickly thinking. “Female R&B? Faith Evans...” I shrug. “Shirley Murdock.”

“Really?” Her hazel eyes light up. “I love Shirley! She’s the vocal master. Okay. So say you jam out to ‘*Go On Without You*’—”

“Maybe ‘*Found My Way*’,” I interrupt her.

Her neck snaps back and chin dips. “Oh, you’re a for real, for real SM fan, huhn?”

“According to my therapist, it’s indicative of things I’m not so proud of.” I roll my eyes.

Elle howls in laughter in front of me and Michelle does the same across the room.

“Well, anyway...” Elle is still laughing. “Seeing you sing a song you’re passionate about makes you more personable and can possibly connect unknowing watchers to a common interest with you. That’s what we’re trying to do at *LIA*; broaden your visibility and secure every opportunity to fatten your portfolio.”

“And the Image Management department,” Michelle chimes in. “is committed to exposing your image as well and as positively as possible. I think this venture will benefit everyone at the table.”

I nod with my lips pushed back. “Send the paperwork over so I can take my time going over it.”

“Yesssss!” Michelle cheers quietly, pumping her fist. I laugh as she walks to the door to leave. “Two down, two more to go!”

Elle winks at her, sitting back into her chair and interlacing her fingers.

I shift to face her again. “Who else okayed it?”

“You know Trent doesn’t have a problem performing musically,” she answers, rolling her eyes with a smirk.

“*Shoot ‘Em Up!* sho don’t! He gives me life!” I hoot.

“I meet with Rut in a few minutes to see if he’s game. Knowing him, he’ll try to rope in his footwear company to get a slice of the pie.”

I push back my cuticles, seeing it’s time for a manicure. “I ain’t mad at him.”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “Neither am I. But on to other TM matters. Your *Sports Illustrated* feature just got a shakeup.”

“How?”

“It was supposed to be Tyler Thomas doing it.”

My throat bobs to swallow without me asking it to. Then relief sets in. The idea of being interviewed by Tyler Thomas is nerve-racking. I was aware of his name and how long he’s been in the business before Elle and our team explained his request to interview me. But I didn’t know about his reputation and wild resume until then. Thomas has traveled the world covering poverty, war, and politics. Dude was one of the team of reporters for the Watergate Scandal in D.C., but was not tenured in the group yet, so he’s rarely mentioned with the other journalists who broke the story. It also didn’t help that he was Black in the seventies. He traveled with Muhamad Ali during many of his press tour runs in his prime. Tyler made sure Ali’s name stayed alive and positive during his troubles with the government when he rejected the U.S. draft. Tyler’s been interviewed by his peers like Diana Sawyer, and even Oprah for his work in journalism.

The man has done so much in his career that it’s hard to recount it all. But no matter how many pages Tyler Thomas’ résumé yielded or the impressive bullet points on it, his name alone brings flips to my stomach.

“Are you even listening to me?”

My eyes blink and then move to her. Elle's arms are in the air, and I can tell she used them to say whatever the hell I missed.

"Yeah..." I hear come from my belly, but not my throat. Then I blink again, admitting, "No."

Her forehead tightens. "Where the hell did you just go?"

I shake off the encroaching thoughts. The *what ifs*, *where nows*, the *what nows*...all of it. It's never-ending torture for me.

Swallowing hard, I finally answer, "Nowhere I need to be. I'm sorry. Go ahead."

After a few seconds, she speaks again. "He's not going to be able to do it."

"Oh." I can feel my lungs again. "So no more feature?"

Elle nods. "Yes, girl!" She drops her chin and rolls her eyes. "You *were* on a trip, I see! He's sending a replacement; some mentee of his."

*Oh... Okay.*

I try to examine how it feels to be dumped by *the* Tyler Thomas.

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes." She's still annoyed by my mental trip. "Ashton Spencer."

My spine gives out and back slams into the chair. The pits of my arms tingle and mist out of nowhere. For a short while, I can't breathe and my chest is pumping wildly.

"What the holy fuck, Tor?" Elle is out of her chair and over to me. "What's going on?"

Her panic snaps me out of my own. I have to ask myself *what in the world is this!* Shakily, I fight to get in control of myself. My hands slip on the armrests when I try to grip them to sit up.

“I’m okay.” I try moving my heavy tongue around my dry mouth. “Let’s cancel it.” I try for casual.

“Why?”

“Because Thomas canceled. That’s unprofessional.”

“I was told it’s for health reasons. He’s an older man, Tori.” Elle’s face is still tight from concern.

“Yeah, but I got some pride to myself. This is last-minute.”

“Not really. You’re due to start in two weeks.”

My eyes go wild. I can feel it. “And for how long?”

She shrugs. “It’s by word-count. From my experience, how long depends on how particular the writer is. If they feel they’re getting enough material from the subject to carve out a story, it shouldn’t be more than a couple of weeks.”

“But I travel for training soon.” I remind her. “I don’t need a reporter in my head while I’m preparing for a fight, Elle. Especially not this one.”

Elle’s head swings back and body holds tense. “You know him.”

I can’t help my crazy blinking. “Who?”

“You know who!” Her neck rolls. “The Spence guy.”

*Spencer...*

My eyes shift away.

“How?”

“How what?” I jump in my seat, my nerves fucking fried already.

Her mouth drops. “You’re yelling at me.”

“I’m not!” My eyes roll closed and my face falls into my palms, but when I feel my lashes being pushed back, I let up. “Elle...” I call her through my hands.

“Yeah.”

“We’re not girlfriends,” I mumble.

“I know. We’re strictly client/management.”

I cringe at that definition of our friendship. It’s bullshit: Elle’s been so much more. Her shrewd business savvy has cultivated my brand and made me a millionaire before the age of thirty. To do that, you must spend crazy hours together and have slip-ups in sharing or exposing personal details of yourselves. We’ve cried together after mutual losses. We share the same social circle. But every once in a while—when I need a girlfriend, and she’s conveniently around—I snap at her by reminding her we’re only business associates.

I lift my head and nod. “Exactly. But as a woman, I’m sure you have dudes in your past you want to stay there.”

“Oh, shit.” This time, her lashes smack together as her face goes toward the ceiling. “You’ve fucked him?”

“It was a long time ago. I was a kid.” Why I feel the need to backpedal now, I don’t know.

But the topic of this guy—man—is crazy personal. And painful.

“What type of kid?” One of her chestnut brows lifts higher than the other.

“*Blakewood.*”

“Oh!” she whispers, mouth won’t close. “I forgot you went to *Blakewood State!*” So do I. Often. “Do you think he can’t be objective? Is there bad blood?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.” Sadness washes over me like a waterfall. “I don’t know him.” Anymore. “Haven’t in...years.”

“How long has it been?”

I can’t concentrate to do the math. Frustrated, I can’t stop shaking my head. “Ten...maybe more.”

“Oh!” She goes back behind her desk. “That is hella long ago. You likely don’t remember what his dick feels like, much less harbor emotions too heavy to get the feature done.” She sits in her chair and leans back. That one brow plucking again. “Right?”



Elle's flexing. Yes, I'm the high-profiled client with much of the advantage and, therefore, leverage. But Elle's reputation is solid in the entertainment industry, whether it's corporate, music, or sports. And from what I hear, the Hunters are now moving into Hollywood. She's built a concrete career in just a few short years and has used her powerful connections to make me a household name, something she's done in almost no time at all.

"I guess you have a point about that being forever ago," I finally answer. "I don't know him."

She shrugs, tossing her chin in the air. "Then we should be fine. Tyler Thomas may not be doing the interview, but his name will be on it alongside Spence's."

"Spencer." I can't help but to correct her this time.

She taps to wake up her computer, then repeats, "Spencer. Ashton Spencer. And I don't want to fuck up an opportunity with Mr. Thomas. He's Black journalism's elite."

I nod firmly. "I got you." My eyes zoom into hers to convince her of my assurance.

Assurance that isn't there.

"Okay. The last thing on the agenda," she breathes out. "We have a new nutritionist on board for you."

My forehead lifts. "Really? What happened to Dhar?"

"Dhar was good, but he's too traditional; doesn't leave room for modern research. You know that's always bothered me. And this last fight with the *WBA* questioning if you weighed enough for middle weight class... Like what the fuck else would you be?"

My eyes fall to the ring on my left hand. She's right, but they weren't totally wrong. I barely made my weight requirements, thanks to stress. I trained hard for it, as usual, but didn't refuel as much as Dhar advised. The source of my distraction rewarded me with a ring two weeks after my last fight. I'm now engaged, but can't shake the risk it cost my career to get this.

“Who’s the newbie?”

“Dr. Shaquana Wilson.”

“A sister?”

“You damn right.” Elle’s head bobs up and down. “She’s been in the field for over twenty years and uses the empirical technology we need to make sure you’re in your best shape. She’s already prepared a meal plan.”

Half of my mouth lifts, annoyed. “Plant-based?”

“Mostly, but no.” Elle winks. “I think you’re going to like this one.”

My chuckle is dry. “I don’t think I’ve ever liked nutritionists.” I toss a few air punch combos. “It’s my trainers who I gotta love.”

She laughs while rolling her eyes. “Are you mentally preparing for the fight?”

“Always.” I’ve been watching Monica “Four Clover” O’Connor’s fight tapes and had strategy meetings. The third level trainings have begun. “My prep begins after I consent. You know that.”

With tight lips, she nods. “I do.” Her eyes are below again.

“I need to get out of here.” I grab my bag. “I’m gonna grab some pizza. Need to eat something before this meeting with *O.P.I.* Right after that is one with *M·A·C Cosmetics.*” *And digest this shit with Ashton Spencer.* I grab the doorknob.

“Tori,” she calls from behind me. I turn to face her. “How’s the wedding planning coming along?” Her eyes fall again and she reaches for the remote. This is too much for Elle. She’s an in-your-face type of broad. She’s skirting around a lot today and I don’t like it. I feel winded, totally opposite of how I did when I walked in. “You get in contact with Pam Hewl yet? I told her I gave you her info. She did a great job on my wedding.” When Elle finally looks my way, it’s brief.

“I will soon,” I mutter.

Elle hums, “*Mmmhmmm.*” Then she presses play on the remote and a familiar piano sequence begins. My mouth drops, but not as fast as my heart when Shirley sings, “It’s morning, and we slept the night away...”

Elle smiles, mood’s changed that quickly by nostalgia. “You getting Margherita pizza?”

My stomach is flipping again and I’m back in that emotional zone. I’m no longer a child, but a thirty-one year old polished woman. These lyrics can be expressed without Shirley’s emotions: I have my own vivid, passionate experiences. Conveying them can be as natural to me as an out-boxer maneuver in the ring. Some things look shiny and glistening on the outside, but inside is just as hollow as the knob in my hand.

“We’re not girlfriends, Elle.” My eyes bouncing around the floor as I swallow hard. “I’ll call you later.”

I leave, feeling like shit. I’ve disappointed the most influential woman in my life, and I’ll be sharing the same air as Ashton Spencer again soon.

My body trembles all the way out to the elevator. Thankfully, Candice is nowhere in sight, and I can try and focus my thoughts on my favorite pizza.

**-Now-**

*Ashton*

A hum of contentment leaves my nostrils as I chew the first bite.

“Is that where Maury gets her love of Margherita pizza from?”

I chuckle with a hot mouthful. “You would, too, if you had some with me,” I manage to garble, then hand over the partially-eaten slice.

Lori, the nanny, bites her lips together and shakes her head. “I don’t know. I can’t get with any pizza without shredded mozzarella.”

I toss my brows. “I can guarantee you’d develop a particular longing for it if you had your first slice with me, too.”

My wink spreads her cheeks, and Lori’s head ducks as my mother strolls into the kitchen just as the tea kettle sounds.

“Young man, you better be careful with them eyes and words,” my mother warns. “You know these young women have this *Me Too* thing going on, and when they come for you, it’s *ovaaaaa!*” She moves about the kitchen, pulling out a teacup and grabbing tea bags.

“There’s no sexual harassment going on here,” I reply.

“If this young lady feels she gotta have pizza with you to keep her job, there is!”

I shake my head and garble, “Don’t think that’s exactly how it works, Ma.”

“Don’t ask me.” My mother traverses the room for the stove. “Ask your millionaire/celebrity friends, who have to move around their board of directors on the org chart like

they're pieces on a board game, all to make it seem as though they're no longer the head of the company because these women ain't taking their foolishness no more!"

Lori's panicked eyes are on me biting into my pizza again, but she's trying to mask it with a smile. She's a beautiful woman, but a young woman. Lori's features are unique yet beautiful, thanks to her Black father and Saudi Arabian mother. Her lovely skin is as dark as licorice, and hair just as rich in hue, but a silky long mane reaching down to her little ass. And that was the problem. Lori was a twenty-four year old graduate student at *NYU*. At thirty-four years old, I no longer fuck women under twenty-five. I may do light-weight flirting, but that's it.

As my mother pours the water from the kettle into the teacup, Lori turns her head to peer over her shoulder to my mother. "I don't think Mr. Spencer has to worry about that, Ms. Lee."

"Oh, you don't?" my mother challenges with her back to us.

"No." Lori giggles, clearly now uncomfortable, though she knows our chemistry. "Only because I've been working for him for over three years now. So either he's a patient man or sucky in the harassment department." I chuckle as Lori turns completely to my mother. "Are they asleep?"

"Out like a light as soon as their heads hit the pillows." My mother confirms.

"Good." Lori turns to me. "If that'll be all, I need to meet up with my study group tonight."

"Oh." I grab my plate and wine glass to head for the table. "What're you meeting about?"

"Something we're all clueless about."

"Try me." I wink, biting into my slice again.

"How mythology plays into medicine. We're all over the place with possible topics to take on. No one has anything good." She snorts. "I hate this class already."

I think for a minute. “Achilles.”

Her brows meet as she drums the countertop with her fingertips. “I don’t follow.”

“He was a noted Greek warrior in the Trojan War. Classical mythology has it that when he was a baby, his mother gave him a bath in a river that was supposedly magical. She was trying to make him immortal, or some shit. She dipped him in, upside down, by his heel. All was immersed but that heel she held. When he fought the Trojan War, Achilles murdered the Trojan hero, but was hit in the heel by an arrow, and *that* killed him.” I shrug. “That small portion of his body is what was not submerged in the river, and it cost him his life. It was weak. Anatomically, the Achilles tendon runs from the calf, down to the heel.”

“And that term is used in medicine!” Lori gasps, wide eyes and pearly whites exposed.

“Not the official term, but yes.” I take another bite.

“Thank you, Mr. Spencer!” She jumps on her toes and turns to leave the kitchen. “You have no idea what a relief this is! Goodnight, Ms. Lee.”

My mother grunts, “Night, young lady.” She plops down in the seat across from me with her evening tea. After rolling her eyes at my ego being stroked by a twenty-four year old, she notes, “That lil’ girl wouldn’t know the first thing to do to keep a man like you.”

“Damn sure wouldn’t, but she’d keep me happy.” I stick my tongue out and shimmy in my chair.

She shakes her head, glaring at me in judgment. “Ain’t too many tricks she can do in the bedroom on you when you stay globe-trotting.”

“*That*,” I pointed into the air. “is what keeps me.” I bite into my pizza again.

“So, what’s next, young mister?”

I take a minute to chew and swallow what’s in my mouth. “Boxing.”

“Boxing?”

I nod, wiping my mouth.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been handed a feature for *Sports Illustrated* by the great Tyler Thomas.” The sarcasm in my words can’t be mistaken.

“Ahhh...” She’s digesting the information while picking up her teacup. “You’re covering sports now?”

“I guess this one time, I am.”

“Who?” Her upper torso jumps as she demands. “Must be somebody good to have you writing about sports.” An inspirational puff leaps from her mouth. “Don’t tell me! It’s about that knot-head boy, Mayweather.”

I scoff silently, bringing the pizza close to my face for another bite. “Tori McNabb.” This bite is tasteless after that name leaves my mouth.

“Who? That girl that’s all over the place, fighting?”

“I guess, yeah.” Laughing and chewing at the same time isn’t the best idea, but I manage.

Mom nods, taking a sip of tea. “I guess she’s owed. Young lady’s been making a name for herself. Nothing wrong with exposing to other young Black women and girls what God-given talents we have. What do you know about her, so far?”

I drop my crust onto the plate, squinting my eyes. “You don’t remember her, do you?”

“The Tori girl?” Her expression matches mine. “Why would I? I saw her fight one time at that sports bar Tabitha took me to a year or so ago. I hear her name everywhere, but remember her? What do you mean?”

Why am I feeling wounded? The shit doesn’t make sense.

“Tori went to *Blakewood*,” I try.

“Okay.” Her eyes are empty. My silence challenges her. “Oh! With you?”

I nod. “Briefly—well, toward the end. My last year. She was a freshman.”

“Oh.” Her eyes are still wild, now with questions of disgrace. She sips her tea again, blinking successively. “Was she friends with Aivery?”

A dry titter leaves my nostrils as I take a sip of wine. I don’t want to go there, but answer honestly. “No.”

She nods again, the cogs of her brain turning over visibly from my vantage point. “So how much of friends could you have been in just your last year?”

After taking a bite into the second slice from my plate, I wipe my mouth then recline in my chair, arms going over my head. “You really don’t remember her, do you?”

“I told you I don’t. What’s hard to believe about that?”

“She’s been to your house.” My arms drop and chin dips.

“In Newark?”

I nod, swiping my tongue against my teeth and gums to clean out the residual food. “Yup. And you intimidated the hell out of her.”

She sucks her teeth. “A child? She was a child, Ashton; I’m sure her shadow intimidated her!” My mother rolls her eyes to the other side of the kitchen. I stretch my palms over the table, shrugging. She collects her teacup from the table and stands. “Something don’t feel right about this.” *Tell me about it.* “I don’t know why, but it don’t.” She starts across the room before turning back to me. “You gotta travel with this one? I’m thinking about going down to Lamar for a few days. My aunt, Hattie, ain’t doing too well.”

*Good ol’ South Carolina...*

“Yup.” Unless this goes terribly wrong, I’ll be traveling with Tori during her training. “In a few weeks.”



She nods, lips tip. “I’ll take them with me...stay a few days, then go south to see the old mouse.”

I chuckle, eyes brushing over the half-eaten slice on my plate. “You know I couldn’t do this without you. Don’t you?”

She pivots to face me fully, chin touted in the air. “Ashton Spencer, you’re my only child. Ain’t too much on this side of glory I wouldn’t do. You’ve afforded me a wonderful life most women my age would give their drooping tits for. I don’t know what my fifties would be like if I didn’t make the worst mistake of my life.” She winked as I laughed my ass off.

My mother’s robust sense of humor knows no bounds. And people wonder where my charm comes from. I, personally, have no doubt.



**-Then-**

*August*

*Tori*

“It’s only been a few days, Tori.” Those words fell on deaf ears as I bounced my knees in the air from springing on the balls of my feet. My arms were crossed and eyes on the wall to the right of me. I didn’t give a shit how long it had been, I was ready to go home. “We explained it would be a difficult transition from New Jersey,” Trisha yapped off.

“It really is, Tori,” Collin, her assistant, jumped in. “This is an entirely different world here. It’s an opportunity many wish to have.”

“You’re probably bored,” Trisha thought. She was right and wrong. “Some organizations like the band and its whole ensemble moved in today. You should be able to meet more students. That may help with your homesickness.”

She typed away behind her computer as she spoke. I sat on the sofa against the wall in her small office. Trisha was the Athletic Director here at *Blakewood State University*. Sports was major here. I thought this place was...not as big as it is. The campus seemed as big as Millville, my hometown back in Jersey. Crazy thing was, I hadn't been around the whole damn place yet.

I tried fingering through the dry strands of the weave my cousin, Renata, put in last month. My hair looked a mess and I had nobody to do it for me or money to get it done. And the people here... At first, the campus was like a ghost town; now that people were starting to move in, I was sure I wouldn't fit in.

"Is that what it is, Tori?" Collin asked. He was a young white guy. I hadn't seen many of them on this campus. I guessed it was because *Blakewood* was a historically Black college/university. But he flew out to Jersey when Trisha came to meet with my trainer, Uppercut, about me getting college level training and exposure to help with my career. "You want friends? If that's the case, your roommate should be moving in by the end of the week."

My head shot over to him. "No. I ain't thinking about no friends, man." I stood, ready to go.

I wanted to get this over with, this school shit. The problem was, I still didn't know why I was here. School wasn't for me. My grades had always been shitty. I didn't know how a school like *Blakewood* accepted me. Along with those sucky ass grades, I had no money. Deep down inside, I remembered why I agreed to this. It was because I ain't have shit else to do in dry ass Millville, New Jersey. The only exciting thing coming out of the city was Alton Alston being drafted into the *basketball League*. Outside of that was nothing that would bring any level of success in my life or anyone in my community.

On my way out the door, Trisha called me. I stopped and turned to face her.

"Your test scores are in."

“What test?” I’d taken so many, probably flunking them all.

“Basic skills. All accepted applicants are required to take them upon their declaration of enrollment,” she answered, chin low while looking at me over her reading glasses.

I shrugged, halfway rolling my eyes as I tossed my hand in the air, giving up on trying to remember. I’d taken lots of tests since graduating in June.

Trisha rolled her eyes. “Anyway...” She sighed. “It’s a placement test to see where your weaknesses are in math, reading, and writing. Seems like you scored just above average in math, and average in reading, but in writing, you didn’t make the mark.”

Scratching the back of my head, trying to get underneath a cornrow, I asked, “What that mean? I go home?”

Trisha laughed. “No, quitting ass!”

“It means you’ll take a basic course to help get you up to speed,” Collin jumped in. “And they’ll assign tutoring.”

“Just for writing?” My face went tight.

Collin nodded, flipping through file folders.

Walking out the door again, I mumbled, “Ain’t nobody ‘bout to have no muthafucka in my face for no schoolwork.”

“Tori...” I was in the hall when Trisha called me again. “Have you called your mother?”

I thought for a minute. I hadn’t been here a full week yet. There was no need for me to call her. Wasn’t like she was helping out with my cash flow problem, and she damn sure wasn’t footing the bill for this place. Why would I call her?

“She call up here asking for me?”

*She say when she’ll send my money?*

Collin looked up from his folders. “Don’t you have a cell?”

I shook my head, scratching that same spot again. “Nah.” My eyes fell to his shoes.

My phone was turned off over a week ago. I told myself I’d get another when I found a job out here.

“Here.” He walked deeper into the office, then came back and tossed me an orange bag. I unfolded it to see it was a *BSU* soccer bag. He pointed behind me. “That one’s gonna fall apart any minute now.”

I took off, shaking my head, studying the bag in my hand. There was no way I was going to walk around this high saddy place with this bright ass bag. I already knew I wouldn’t fit in; no way in hell was I trying to stand out.

I hated *Blakewood State University* already.



*September*

*Ashton*

## **-Then-**

*She’s here...*

*Damn.*

She sat on top of the perfectly green rolling hill, a few yards away from the famous *Blakewood State University* landmark sign. The name of my soon-to-be alma mater could be seen from the closest major highway. It was the place my crew hung out, even at night, allowing the light posts to illuminate the historic landmark.

Aivery Cooper sat on the perfectly manicured grass with one leg folded over the other and an elbow resting on her knee while pretending to gaze into the sunny sky. Her golden shoulders sat high in a stark white tank t-shirt as her face hid behind oversized *Chloé* sunglasses.

I hiked up the hill toward her, wanting to get this over with. It was a meeting I'd been dreading all summer. It wasn't until I lowered myself a few feet away from her that Aivery turned toward me, almost as if she was done with an internal countdown.

"Hey, you!" she breathed out with a big smile. "It's so good to see you!"

When she reached for me, I didn't hesitate to return her hug. It was what she expected. What we'd always done. When we let go, Aivery shifted to face me, sporting a zealous beam.

"I see you liked the sunglasses."

"Oh, my god! Yes. It was so sweet of you, Ash!" Her high pitch belied her bubbling emotions. "All the girls in my room when I arrived were so fucking blown away! And my mom..." She squealed. "She wanted to come over to your apartment before we unpacked! I had to tell her you were likely in practice or working out." Her head tossed back slightly, giggling.

I nodded. "Glad you liked them."

Aivery's face sobered quickly. Her dark, thick eyelashes met, weighing her lids down, and I knew what was coming.

"I'm sorry for...everything, Ash." She sucked in a breath. "I hated every moment of this summer. Hated we weren't together."

"How was Europe?" I asked, curbing the apologies.

Her smile returned, but reserved. "It was sweet. Oh, my god! The French ice cream is to die for! I didn't remember it from the last time I was there—I mean, I was only four—but I'll never forget it again. I told my Dad I want him to send you and me back for my graduation gift. We must go to this cute little parlor named *Pozzetto*." She sucked in another excited breath. "Wow! What if we can fly in their ice cream for the engagement party or the wedding?" She turned to me with her mouth open. "Oh, my god, Ash! That would be amazing! French ice cream at our engagement party? We can hire a

photographer to take pix of us at *Pozzetto* this summer and we can use those for the engagement party invitations—”

My hand shot up in the air, killing the noise she wistfully dreamt up that quickly. “First, it’s called *glace* over there; not ice cream. I’m not a fan of it. Second, I don’t need your father paying for me to go anywhere. I can foot my own bill. You know that.”

“I’m sorry—”

“And I’m not done.” I tried to measure my tone. The plan wasn’t to hurt Aivery. She needed honesty, not my anger. My head shook as I found her eyes through the dark lenses. “I think it’s fair to say there won’t be an engagement party, much less a damn wedding.”

“Ash—”

“I’ve had plenty of time to think over the summer, and I’m sure you have, too,” I needed to make clear. “I think it’s best we go into our senior year clear on the terms of our relationship.”

“Which is?”

“We’re best off as friends.” Aivery gasped. I nodded, looking directly into the eyes she couldn’t hide with *Chloé*’s. “Our senior year of undergrad starts this week. There’s no need for us to go into it with the baggage we have. This summer was a great demonstration of how we’re better off apart.” During the week of finals last spring, I discovered Aivery lost her virginity to an alumnus of *Blakewood*, who so happened to have made me his nemesis since the first day I stepped foot on campus my freshman year when he was a senior.

Yeah.

They fucked before she and I became official, *but* after we’d started dating. So, while I was waiting on the pussy, settling just for her heart, she gave the pussy to an upperclassman who wanted me dead—or to disappear in the most dreadful way. She knew of my history with the guy when she and I agreed to being boyfriend and girlfriend, and

purposely kept it from me. That was until I ran into him at a party last spring and he told me, in no uncertain terms, that he was the first to have the pussy of the girl I thought I was going to marry one day. “I’ve got a lot riding on this year. We owe it to each other to not create this...farce about who we are to each other.”

“Why would it be a farce?”

“Because it ain’t true. We’re not together...haven’t been since the spring.” I made sure to catch her fleeting eyes again. “And I’m okay with that.”

Tears spilled from beneath the frames of the sunglasses. “I didn’t think me announcing who I gave my virginity to—well before you and I made it official—was important to our relationship.”

“But after we’d started dating. After we’d kissed is when said virginity was given!” I shouted then quickly whipped my head away, regretting my fucking tone. “I’m a fuckin’ fool,” I grumbled, body vibrating with violent energy. He’d set out to humiliate me and the fucker did it. “I can’t go another year—my senior year—with the *League* over my head and you on my arm. I won’t live a lie. I’ve taken the summer to recharge and figure this shit out.” Her small shoulders vibrated from her quiet sobs. I had to make this clear to her. “I could never go back to what we were after learning that.”

Aivery’s frame whipped toward me. “Well, I’m not giving up. I love you. My heart and life belong to you. I’m supposed to be Mrs. Spencer in two years. My parents and family are expecting it. I’ve wanted it since the day I agreed to be your girlfriend, Ashton Spencer! Now, I may have made the biggest mistake of my life that I’ll forever regret, but I’ll be damn if I’ll make an even bigger one. I’m not letting go of the love of my life without a fight! I’m not doing the last year of my college career not having everyone on this campus know who I am to you.”

“And what’s that?”

“The woman who will support you from the transition of college graduate to the next QB or wide receiver of the

*Connecticut Kings!*” She gave a strong nod of confident finality. “Transitioning will be a difficult task, but I’ll be there making sure you’re taking something solid and dependable into the new life with no certainties, and I will remain by your side from then on.” She pushed the glasses up from over her eyes to her forehead. “My heart is still the same. It belongs to you, Ashton. Now, I hear yours isn’t with me, but I’ll take what I can get to buy the time needed to earn your trust again.”

“And what if that day doesn’t come, Aivery?”

“It will because it has to.” Her lips quivered. “I’m begging you.” Her eyes rolled. “Okay. To the two of us, we’re just working it out. To the campus, we’re the same Ashton and Aivery we used to be: solid. I don’t think I could finish this year with the stress of the campus knowing we weren’t together anymore. I barely lasted the summer, trying to keep up the façade that we were fine to my friends and family.”

I shook my head, not able to roll with the lies. “I don’t know about that, Aivery.”

“Your coaches will tell you the same. You can’t go this last year with the scrutiny of a breakup. Not one of our magnitude. We’re the king and queen of *Blakewood!* Let’s just get through these next two semesters with minimal damage.” She shoulder-bumped me, making me realize how close she’d scooted over since I sat down. “It’ll give me a chance to convince you to forget that reckless ass mistake I made.”

My eyes closed, irritated from how this turned around. It was so different from how I planned it. The sunglasses were a ploy to ease the blow. I knew she liked her assuages by way of top designer names. Maybe they gave her the impression of hope.

*Fuck!*

This was so not how I planned this. I thought it would be easy compared to the blow-up that discovery caused last spring. It was so bad, Aivery left for the airport with swollen eyes from crying all night. She called me days later, swearing a commitment of celibacy to help clear her head. As if I gave a



shit. The last thing I was concerned about was fucking her again.

“And your celibacy pledge?”

She nodded fast and hard, fighting to assure me. “It’s still in effect.” She bit her bottom lip. “It’ll give us that fresh start I’ve been telling you we need.” Her arms folded around my shoulder. She tugged me, eyes turning puppy dog the way they did when she’d begged to have her way on yet another mindless issue. “Can I hug you again?”

I didn’t answer, but she pulled me into her chest anyway. Aivery was used to my temper. Whether she was the cause or football, she was good at deflecting my mood. It was one of many things about the girl I liked.

“I gotta go,” I murmured to break the embrace. “I told coach I’d meet with him before practice.”

When she released me, I stood to my feet and started down the hill. Aivery was on my heels the whole way down. “Looks like you did your summer slimdown well this year,” she observed out loud. I had. I’d trained since the first of July to be field-ready this season. It’s what I’d always done. “You look damn amazing.”

When we neared the walkway, scarce bodies came into view. Some girl called Aivery’s name from a distance, and thankfully. I caught the thickness in her cords in that last sentence.

“Hey, girl!” Aivery returned. “You know we’re meeting on the *Wilma Rudolph* track instead of the *Joyner-Kersey* one. Right?”

“Yeah. I was just getting a new key for my dorm,” the girl, Tameka Holden from Bridgeport, Connecticut, replied unnecessarily.

“And I was just greeting my man properly!” Aivery shouted back just as unnecessarily, peppering it with a pitchy giggle. She flipped her weave over her shoulder. “You know I don’t play about my Ashton Spencer!”

To avoid reacting to that bullshit, I decided on the target of my frustration. A leggy brown-skinned girl with the worst fucking weave job I've ever seen in my twenty-one years of living amongst Black women was intersecting our path. She kept her eyes low and lips touted while gripping the strap of her tattered red book bag. Her walk was stiff, shoulders high, and sneakers hardly had soles.

“Arrrrrrrr!” I stopped and barked. “Arr-ru-ruuuuuuu!” I repeated.

Aivery, while clawed to my waist, howled, cracking the fuck up. “Ewwwwww! Who the fuck let that one onto our campus, babe?”

I continued my bark. “Arrrrr-arrrrr! Arr-ru-ruuuuuu!”

The girl never looked back. Her pace away from us increased, but other than that, she didn't react at all.

When she was out of sight, I pulled away from Aivery. “Gotta go.”

My movement was swift to avoid the expectation of a kiss. But fuck, was I too slow. Aivery caught me at the sleeve of my shirt, pulling me into deep, pink-pouted lips.



Tori

“The fuck is you gone do then, huhn?” he screamed into the phone. My lips curled painfully into my teeth. “Fuck is you gone do then?”

“I'm gonna use one of them four plane tickets, fly home, and give the other three back to them.” My knees bounced from the balls of my feet, anger boiling through me.

“You sound stupid as hell, young girl! Stupid as all fuck,” Uppercut yelled. “The hell you gone do when you get back here? Fuck you gone do? Run back to that lil' white trash town and pull up a chair in the damn trailer park?”

Since the first time Uppercut took me home to Millville, when he saw the white people on the ride in, he's called my town white trash. If I didn't hate the place so much for unrelated reasons, I would've called him out on it. Right now wasn't the time: Cut was on one, and I had a point to prove.

Trisha shifted over me, likely uncomfortable while I sat behind her desk, speaking to my trainer from back home. Collin was across the small office pretending to not hear us. Shit. Everybody on this side of the building could.

“No. I'm coming back to North Jersey to train.”

“Train for what?”

“To fight!”

“Fight for pennies, foolish girl? For pennies?” Cut croaked. “That's all I'll be able to get you now. We talked about this. Until I can get us some opportunities out this way to make some type of money you can live off of, you need to be doing something productive.”

“Training is productive, Cut!”

“No the fuck it ain't if you can't pay to stitch the cuts in ya face you get from the occupation! What about food? Where the fuck you gone stay? You think about that, bright girl?”

“I can stay with Raj—”

“And don't you say you'll stay with that muthafucka! Where you gone be? In his grandmother's basement? That fuckin' house got more people than damn roaches! You don't belong there! You need to be around other fighters, athletes, or kids ya age doing something positive, girl!”

But Raj was a fighter. He was Uppercut's son who he used to half ass train. Raj was my best friend, the only person I could tell anything to...once I got over that stupid ass crush I called myself having on him. The one he now told people he had on me to soothe my embarrassment as an insider between the two of us. He used to come to the gym for work a lot, and was really good! He came every once in a while nowadays,

preferring to train with someone else instead of his father. It confused me why Uppercut never acknowledged his skills. Raj was knocking out professional fighters—and he didn't take competing seriously like me. When he started out, he just wanted to be under his father, I knew. But Cut rejected Raj. It wasn't until recently Raj had given up, opting to pursue his music career, and only came through sparingly.

Just like he was rejecting me now.

Tears pooled in my eyes, but no fucking way would I let them out here. I wouldn't crumble no matter how fucked up Cut was being. I decided last night I'd tell Trisha never mind and hop on a plane tonight. Students started moving in over the past two days and they were mean humans. When I came into her office today to deliver the news about leaving, she tried to talk me out of it again. She even tried telling me to wait until after my workout with my new gym trainer, and maybe I'd feel better. Feel better my ass. Fuck the gym trainer, and the boxing trainer, and the nutritionist. *Fuck BSU*. This time, I didn't let her convince me to stay. *Fuck that*. When she realized she had no wins, she picked up the phone and called my real trainer.

"I can figure it out," I tried. "I'll make it work. I just need to get the hell out of here so I can think of my next move. This place is suffocating me, Cut."

*And yesterday, just as I was walking here to the sports complex, some guy and his skinny ass, pretty ass girlfriend barked at me like I was a dog!*

For a while, Uppercut didn't say shit. The line hadn't gone quiet since we started the call. Finally, I'd gotten through to him. He'd heard the pain and suffering in my voice. These past few weeks had been hell for me. I wasn't built to move out of state. This shit was for the birds.

"Then fuckin' suffocate, but try not to die before you get that piece of paper," he advised. "That way, they'll ship ya body back to ya momma with your diploma in the fuckin' casket. You stay your ass out there, girl. And don't call me 'less you need something I can send or somebody put they

fuckin' hands on you. Grow the fuck up and smell the clean air, chile!"

He slammed the phone in my ear; being on speaker made its harshness clear. That shit hurt. It was beyond having it done in front of strangers. I'd just been abandoned by the only adult who, for years, I thought gave a real fuck about me. My knees bounced so high, they began hitting the bottom of the desk. Shaking all over, my lips trembled and fists balled. All movement in the office stopped, but I could feel Trisha's panicky energy looming over me. I didn't want her comfort or pity.

"Tori—"

I jumped to my feet, rejecting her touch, words—her everything. "I'm gonna work out with the new, stupid ass trainer."

I was out the door without another word from anyone when a realization hit. Cut never referred to me by my name. He called me everything but Tori or *Banger*.

*This must be how Raj feels, being invisible to his father...*



*Ashton*

As we came inside the gym from off the practice field, I studied the playbook. The guys were hyped, as usual, to be done with the repetitive plays and gruesome drills that went along with practice. Coach Green switched shit up on us, and I had to commit as much of it as possible to memory and help my team out with it, too. But, as always, I went first in the effort.

They were raucous. The horseplay, the singing, the cracking of the jokes, the bragging, and even the lying on their dicks...we did it all. Even me, from time to time—except lying on my dick. I hadn't done that shit since I was eleven years old to my old head ass cousins when they asked why I hadn't been getting pussy. But the sound of the *Panthers* as a

collective was one I was so accustomed to, I could sleep through for hours. It was when their roistering ceased that I became distracted from the task at hand.

I glanced up to see we were at the two-way window of the main gym. The guys were gaping intently inside.

“Goddamn.” Willy, a cornerback, whistled.

“I know. Right?” Josh followed up with.

“That bitch is a fucking robot!” When I heard Rudy assert that shit, my head swung wildly, praying no women were around to hear that. We’d gotten a lot of shit about the lack of respect shown to women on the compound. It would be me at the face of getting disciplined, even if it didn’t come from my mouth.

Tony, a fullback, asked while scratching his sac. “She the boxer. Right?”

“Fuckin’ robo-dog!” Al’s laughing sparked my curiosity.

“I ain’t never seen no four-legged bitch with them headlights, bro!” Josh croaked.

I pushed through the beefy, shitty ass-smelling, sweaty bodies to gain a view. There were a few people working out, but several still, observant bodies surrounded one. She was in the middle of a drill. Busted weave tied into a ponytail at the back of her head, sports bra—loose sports bra—cropped leggings, and dingy-looking sneakers all held tight to her agile form.

She was performing hyper-extended, static holds while tossing a medicine ball back and forth to a trainer I wasn’t familiar with. I’d seen her around the sports complex a few times over the past week. I wondered if she might have been the weird girl I’d seen on the main campus yesterday when I was with Aivery. She held still and steady, using her abs and thigh muscles while receiving and throwing the big ass sand-filled ball. When the built girl was done, she breezed over to a bench and performed bench-hops, never breaking her stride. Each drop down, she landed on her ass to make contact with

the pad in a manner of squats. Next, without a break, she moved on to weights and did push-presses without faltering. Her expression was a warrior's wall. She didn't pout, complain, moan, or speak. She only blinked and breathed.

The girl ended the drill with a pushup and power jumping jack combination until the trainer yelled time. She was handed a bottle of water as the people around her wrote on their writing pads and conferred with one another. Then she was cued to start at the top, and began without hesitation.

"I'll still fuck her," Al's country accent trilled amongst the small crowd. "In the dark."

They all hooted, slapping palms.

"Her name is Tori McNabb. Add that to your fantasy that wouldn't likely last more than five seconds," Collin, Trisha Gaskin's assistant, appeared out of nowhere. "Why don't you try out-working her instead. Bet nobody hi-fives to that." He shook his head.

My attention went back to ol' girl. This broad was a fucking beast. And suddenly, her lack of pride about her appearance and femininity made sense. What girl could keep up with manicures and ends-trimmings when she can perform athletically like this? And Tori McNabb was definitely a girl. Her globular tits were loud and fucking glaring in that tiny and flimsy sports bra. But she didn't seem to have cared, moving with athleticism and not an ounce of vanity.

"Man." Al waved Collin's challenge off while getting 'oooooh'ed' by the guys. "Ain't nobody falling for no bet against no broad, man."

Collin pointed toward the direction of the locker room. "Then knock off all the catcalling and ogling, and move it along."

After defiant stares and sucking their teeth, my guys began to move. "She must be his girl or something," someone—likely Josh's dumb ass—mumbled, walking away.

"What?" Collin shouted, incensed. Naturally, all that was heard were snickers. Collin turned to me. "You better

teach your boys gym-side manners, Spencer, or I'll make sure Jones will. He's not fucking around with making this compound a welcoming place for McNabb. I'll have Trisha write up a report or do it for her, just to teach you guys what will no longer be tolerated."

I raised my hand and nodded, pleading to silence his bitching. My eyes kept catching on to the McNabb girl for some odd reason. "I got it. On behalf of my team, please accept my apology for our crassness." I made my way toward the locker room. "Clearly, we're not used to seeing athleticism that skilled in a girl. Salute to you guys for bringing in more talent."

As I took off, I was sure Collin knew I was placating him to diffuse his bitchy-rage. I was also sincere in recognizing the girl, Tori's, skills.



## -Then-

September

Tori

“You still don’t have a phone?” I couldn’t miss the concern in his voice.

“I will.” My eyes rolled as I stared at the ceiling of my dorm room. “I’m waiting on that money from my mother.”

“Still?”

I exhaled. “Still.”

“You want me to send you a couple of dollars—”

“Save it, Gee-Gee.”

“Don’t call me that shit,” he fired back, voice seeming deeper over the phone. “And save it for what?”

“For your studio time. And didn’t you say you needed a new *Gibson* something?” I gazed out of the window to the parking lot. People were unpacking their cars and trucks of their dorm stuff to move in. I’d been hearing increased traffic out in the hall from more students moving in today. “When I need you, I’ll let you know.”

Ragee didn’t speak for a while, probably sick of me giving him shit for being kind. He’d always been kind since I’d met him years ago, when I was twelve. Although there were eight and a half years between us, Raj was the first guy to befriend me and it be purely platonic. He never flirted or gave me the gross eye men—and women—who were creeps did. We had our reasons for taking on a friendship that made us both feel safe and protected, even when others thought it was weird at first.

“I’mma hold you to that.”

“You can. I’ve got a job.”

“For real? Where?”

“Here on campus. I start tomorrow. The woman who recruited me, Trisha, got me a hookup in one of the cafeterias here on campus.”

He chuckled. “You gone be serving your friends?”

“Gotta have friends to serve them.” I twisted my mouth. “Anyway. The pay ain’t much, but good enough to help me get a few things. It’s not like I have a car to get a real paying job.”

“But you’re a boxer at the college level now. They keep a tight schedule—at least for men, they do. How are you going to have time to train, workout, go to class, study, and work?”

I swallowed, emotionally blown by the truth of his words. “I’ll have to make it work. It’s what millions do every day,” I grumbled. Even if under different circumstances.

“What’s it like out there?”

It had only been a few weeks, but now felt like forever since I’d last heard from him. Right now, Raj felt like home.

“Shit.”

He laughed, thick throat rumbling. “Knock it off, Tor.”

“I’m serious. It’s crazy boring out here. A waste of my time.”

“They giving you specialists to help boost your skills. How is that a waste of time?”

“Let’s see,” I exhaled. “...my boxing trainer is older than old man Cut, his assistant pours scotch in his morning coffee, I met the nutritionist last week, who’s got me on a damn schedule with my food, and I just started with my gym trainer this week. They got me looking like a fucking lab rat for the stupid football team, testing me and timing me. They take notes and have me doing exercises for experimental

reasons. And they still ain't say when my first fight is." If I was going to be miserable, at least let me fight.

"You need to chill and give it a chance."

"You sound like your father."

"What do you mean?"

"He hung up on me the other day when I told him I was coming home—correction: he cussed me the hell out, wished me dead, then hung up on me."

"What?"

Licking my lips, I explained, "I called to tell him I was coming home the other day. And he cussed me the hell out, saying I had to stay, and I'm not giving it a chance. He told me there was nothing he could do for me if I came back, and that I would be homeless."

"I wouldn't let you do that," Raj assured. "You know you can stay at the crib. Grandmother won't mind."

"And how would I eat? Cut said he can't get no fights with real money no time soon."

"We'd figure it out, but I'm not saying you should come back."

I laughed. "Because you can't. What you make playing for those churches and restaurants can't feed two mouths. Plus, aren't you still looking for your own place?"

He groaned, I knew annoyed over the topic. "Yup. But most of these places want to do a credit check."

"And you ain't got credit." Raj's résumé was filled with mediocre paid gigs as a musician, nothing substantial or long term.

"Or a real job. But I'm faithful God's gonna come through."

I scoffed, "Tell Him to come through for me, too."

If anybody could pray or knew God enough to talk to Him, it was Ragee.

“He will, kid. Don’t worry.” His tone was with finality. “I tell MyMy the same thing all the time. God will come through, not just to make ends meet, but to overflow our storage houses.”

His cousin, Myisha, was more protective over him than normal. It was so bad that, although she was older than me, but not as much as Raj, I had to put her little ass in a choke hold when she tried to tell me to get out of the front seat of his hooptie so she could get in...because she was his cousin. Even though I didn’t go full whoop ass on her, Raj had to pull her from my headlock grip. Since then, Myisha never bothered me again, but she hardly spoke to me now. Hearing him mention our names together for such intimate reasons reminded me of how territorial she is and, therefore, how awkward things were between us.

“Hey.” A thought hit. “You heard from Heather?”

“What makes you ask that?”

Raj’s ex was an odd mention. “Because the chick who gave me the orientation for the job reminds me of her. She acts like Miss Perfect, like she’s so innocent and better than everybody.”

“Ah, man...” He cried laughing. “Let that shit go. Besides, she’s happily married.”

“To Antwaaaaaan?” I teased, clowning the new husband of his ex.

“I’m happy for her. Let them people live.”

“She still wants you.”

Ragee groaned again. “I doubt it, but okay.”

That made me laugh. Raj knew I hated his ex. She did him dirty, and because *he* didn’t hate her for it, I did the honors.

Suddenly, my mood turned dark. “Fucking Patty been around?”

Raj didn’t answer right away, but I knew why and knew he’d heard me, so I waited. As I did, I heard sounds by

my dorm door. I wasn't exactly alarmed because if this boring, annoying school was nothing else, it was hella safe.

“Grandmother drove her to another detox center in Paterson,” his thick cords finally rumbled with an answer.

*Shit...*

I was hoping she'd stay out of sight and mind for everybody. That bitch was crazy. She had one time to run up on Raj while I was around, and I'd body her dope fiend'ing ass. Hearing she'd recently resurfaced agitated my mood. She was an evil human.

“How do you know?”

“MyMy rode up with them.”

*Oh...*

The damn door opening had me flying to my feet.

“Shit!”

“I know,” Raj sighed.

Coming inside my room was a white woman with dark brown hair and big hazel eyes. A smile formed on her face within seconds of finding me.

“Hi!” she mouthed, seeing I was on the phone.

She managed a wave, then pulled the key from the door and dragged a suitcase in from the hallway. Behind her was a girl, carrying stacked plastic bins. Behind her was another woman, but she was Black with long locs.

Once the girl with the bins placed them on the empty desk next to the door, she looked my way.

My brain juttled, returning to what I was doing just moments ago.

“Nah, Raj.” My voice was shaky, I was so startled. “I gotta go. Think my roommate just walked in.”

“Oh. A'ight. Go 'head. Stick on in there. I'm praying for you.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, watching the girl amble my way as I tried to figure out just what type of human she was.

“And get a damn phone! I don’t want to have to always wait until nighttime to check in on you.”

“I got you. Bye.” I placed the cordless the campus supplied back on its base.

“Hi.” The girl’s voice was low, monotonous. “You Tori?” I nodded, eyes going between her and the two women behind her waiting expectantly with big ass beams. The girl reached out her open hand to me. “I’m Samantha. Looks like we’ll be roommates this year.”



“You sure you’re okay with this set up?”

I glanced around the room. It seemed cramped now, but nothing I couldn’t live with. Trisha explained from the gate I’d be sharing a room with a stranger human. This stranger was a strange human—pun intended. Samantha lived about three hours from *BSU*. She was average height and wore loose clothes, but I could tell she was rather small. She seemed friendly, having talked from the time she introduced herself to when her mother and aunt left, and all through us moving around furniture to set up our room.

I shrugged. “I’m good with it.”

“Okay.” She exhaled, laying out over her bed. “I guess this is the part where we exchange simple facts about one another.” *Huhn?* Her head propped up. “Ready?” she asked.

My face was tight when I nodded. I thought we did share information about each other. Samantha told me where she was from and this would be her second year at *Blakewood*. What more could I know?

“I’m Black.” Her face didn’t move when she spit that piece of information out. Frozen uncomfortably myself, I simply stared at her, not knowing what to say. “I know you heard what I said.” I nodded, still confused as to why she was making a big deal out of her race. “I need you to know this

because you saw my mother, and people gave me so much shit about my ethnicity. I'm a student at *BSU* to continue the tradition my great-grandfather began. He attended school here, so did his son, and then my father."

Wanting to cut this awkward spell, I spat out, "What's your major?" It was something I was still deciding on.

Other than fight and never return to Millville, I had no clue what I wanted to do in life.

"The same thing my father majored in: chemistry. He's a lead chemist at *Semiest*, one of the top pharms in the country. My great-grandfather was the first Black professional staff member and chemist they employed."

"That's what you wanna do? Work in a lab?"

Samantha shook her head. "I'm going to get a job and save to start my own a line of Black skin care products. I'm taking fifteen credits this semester, eighteen next semester. I refuse to make this a more than four year journey." I poked my lips out, feeling the awkward silence. "What about you?"

"Boxing. I box."

"That's it?" She snorted. "Just boxing?"

My head bounced. "Just boxing."

"Well, maybe you can help kick some ass if those dickheads want to harass me about my race this year."

"Who?"

"Stupid people. Jessica Williams, Michael Perry—*but they graduated*—Aivery Cooper, her friend, Andrea something. You know, the dark skinned one with the long box braids. It's a few of them that gave me shit my freshman year when I tried going out for cheer and participated in a debate about race in class for a course assignment. It was horrible. I almost didn't come back."

"Sorry for that." I didn't know what else to say, but had to offer something. Her voice cracked at the mention of almost dropping out. "I don't think it's easy being the new kid."

Freshmen always have it bad. I was ready to quit before the semester started.”

“Fuck them assholes.” She jumped from the bed, fingered her scalp to fan her long, dark curly hair. “I’m hungry. Let’s go to the main cafeteria. I hope that Japanese station is still there. I’ve been craving their hibachi all damn summer.”



## Ashton

Everyone seemed to have been present—and on time. Drinks were flowing and music blasted as I threaded through familiar faces, networking and talking shit. This was a dope ass intro into the semester. My fraternity’s first meeting of the school year at the chapter house. It was also a Monday and I understood at eleven at night, they likely wanted to be someplace else, recovering from the weekend—especially those like me who didn’t live here. No matter how tired these motherfuckers were, they were still drinking and cutting the fuck up. I gave countless grips on the way to the living room, and threw up *AOPsi* signs even more.

“Attention *AOPs!*” Rashid Coleman, my Vice President, gathered the crew. His bark was extreme and resounding. I had to get used to it over the years. He was hardly 5’4 and one hundred-twenty pounds when we crossed nearly two years ago. Paddle ass-whoopings were hell for dude. Since then he hadn’t grown, but had put on a couple more pounds. “Thanks for showing up to the first *Alpha Omega Psi*, *BSU* Chapter meeting of the academic year. We won’t keep you long. Taylor passed around the volunteer opportunity signup sheet. I better see the name of every member in this place on there. *BSU AOPs* are known for our commitment to the community and providing a helping hand to the less fortunate!”

I peeped a few faces dropping and eye-rolls, niggas being dramatic.



*Unbelievable!*

Coleman must have caught it, too. “I know damn well y’all ain’t pouting about giving up your time! It’s only fuckin’ September: the holidays ain’t even here yet. If y’all ain’t for volunteerism, tell me, Black leaders, what the fuck are you branded with? It damn sure ain’t the lion’s head!” A few of the guys straightened up. Nobody liked being called out, which would have been next if I didn’t see a reaction. “That’s what the fuck I thought.” He scanned the room daringly.

I scoffed. “Y’all acting like pledges out this bitch.” Half the place snickered and laughed. “Who the fuck wanna go back on line?” The room sounded in snorts, denouncing that concept.

“I know it better not be nobody from my line. Some of y’all ain’t resemble Bigs,” Coleman snorted. I couldn’t hold my humor. “Shit. I’mma call y’all niggas Lils. Speaking of which, most of what we’re gonna cover tonight is this year’s rush process.”

I acknowledged him and the room with a firm nod. “As you know, last spring at the final chapter meeting of the year, it was decided that I’d be the DP of this year’s line. The job of Dean of Pledge is time-consuming—hella meaty. It requires 24/7 access, something I don’t have with my football career preparing to peak—” The room erupted with a sharp applause. They were proud, and I was thankful. “With that said, I will not be fulfilling the role of DP.” I placed my hand on Coleman’s slender shoulder. “I’m switching roles with Coleman, and will be the Assistant Dean of Pledge. For those of you not that familiar, it’ll be similar to Pledge Dad.”

“Damn, man!” Big Brown from Illinois griped. “That means you won’t be having fun with us on the head of these wet youngins?”

“Nah.” I chuckled. “I’ll be the one wiping their tears and collecting y’all asses for doing too much.”

Half the room laughed, the other half groaned.

Coleman turned to me and murmured, “I’m gonna make you proud, my G.”

I threw my hand up for a grip. When he met my hand, I assured him, “Just make sure those pups know their shit. I can’t get embarrassed in front of the chapter Bigs.”

“For sure.” He nodded before turning to the room. “Alright! Alright! Now moving on...” Coleman continued with the agenda.



I was the first of a few to leave the chapter house, and that’s because most lived and/or hung out there. I opted not to this year, being sure to stay focused on my *League* goals. But damn, did I have good times there. Even though I’d been in a relationship with Aivery most of my college career, I’d still been able to run wild with the boys without compromising my commitment to her.

My thoughts and words were halted at the sight of a nemesis who wore the same letters as I did and was branded with the same lion’s head as me. Benjamin Pettiford leaned on the hood of my *Panamera* with one fitted-cut dress pant leg crossed over the other. His white dress shirt was fitted, too, with the first few buttons undone to expose the top of his chest. *This country motherfucker need all that on a college campus full of what should be kids to him at this point in his life...* He sported the same goofy ass grin he always did when coming my way.

I stopped a few feet away from him, silently talking myself out of knocking him the fuck out. I couldn’t; he’d enjoy seeing me lose it.

“So this what we doing now?”

He laughed, standing from my ride. “What *we* doing?” he mocked.

I scratched the back of my head, giving my surroundings a cursory glance to see who was around to pretend not seeing me fuck Pettiford up. That quickly, I

decided to let it go...*again*. It's what his old ass wanted, and I wasn't in the business of giving clowns a circus.

"Oh, you ain't got shit for me? No, 'hi, Big? Nothing?" he pushed as I sauntered to the driver's side.

"The fuck are you even doing here?"

"I'm mentoring Jeremey. We had dinner and he remembered the chapter house meeting." He shrugged. "I shot him over and told him I'd wait for him." His smirk melted. "Or are you asking why am I standing outside of my own frat house, lurking like a weirdo?"

I laughed, pulling out my keys. Yup. He was fucking with me. "Nah." I cracked the fuck up even louder. "Never that. I'll leave the pleasure all to you."

Just as I was about to duck inside, he asked, "I'm sure you heard I got a job with the *Lady Panthers*." His face folded. "I'd be curious to know who told you, though." Then the muscles in his face lifted, Cheshire cat smile illuminating. "Lil ViVi or A.D. Jones."

With cavalier disregard, I chuckled. "Deeze nuts, bitch." Then I dipped inside my ride, masking my boiling venom.

Seconds into my ride, deeper into campus, my cell rang. It was Aivery.

I was not available.



Tori

Samantha was out of breath and damn near limping into the locker room after our "workout."

"This is how you train?" she panted.

Giggling silently, I shook my head with my eyes roaming all around. This was my first time in the recreation center. This was where all non-athletes at *BSU* worked out. It

was nice...big, but different from the one on the athletic compound. It was hard to explain, but the machines were basic. This place resembled your average *L.A. Fitness*, which made me appreciate the athletic program even more.

We passed through the open door leading to the vanity section of the locker room, going straight to the back.

“I’m wiped out,” Samantha cried, swiping the sweat from her forehead. “How do you do this every day?”

“Only about five days a week,” I explained. “Six if I’m preparing for a fight.”

“Damn, that’s a lot!” She pulled clean clothes from her locker. “Is that why you never broke a sweat?”

Taking a seat on the bench, I laughed at that one. No, I wasn’t dripping in sweat like her, but my heartrate had elevated.

“Put it this way: we only did a quarter of what I have to do in my sessions. That was what we call a warmup to get me ready for the real deal.”

Samantha fell into the lockers dramatically. “Well, damn, Tori. Call me a fat loser while you’re at it!”

“You are not fat. Knock it off!”

I wasn’t into emotional blow jobs, but I liked Samantha. I’d been getting to know my roommate, although it was hard. I didn’t like meeting new humans. *Shit*. I’d had a hard enough time with the ones I’d known all my life. But she was reaching with the fat description.

Her face twisted into a pout. “That’s not what the cheer team told me last year.” She shrugged. “And when I went out for track, the coach told me I’d need to go on a diet before they’d even consider me.”

“I don’t know much about track, and especially at the college level, but I do know *Blakewood* don’t play when it comes to their athletes. They got my ass on a diet. I hate diets.”

She blew me off with a wave of her hand. “You don’t need them. What are you? A hundred and thirty pounds? I know you’re tall, but you look great.”

I shook my head. “I’m five-ten. My trainers wanna get me up to a hundred sixty-five/a hundred seventy. That’s why they’re regulating my food.”

“They want you to gain weight?” Her eyes went wild.

I threw a few air jabs. “They want me to knock out bigger broads.”

“You do that?”

Both our attention went behind us to the group of girls coming in, wearing all black: short biker shorts and matching tanks with low-top sneakers. Their hair was in high ponytails, too.

When I turned back toward Samantha, she mouthed, “Cheer team.”

The girls crossed over our section and filed into the next one over, it sounded like.

“Look!” one grated. “I’ve worked too hard to become captain, all to have half-ass talent on my team. I vouched for a few of you. Some of you came to me, begging for mentoring. I put you into positions to be seen, not lazy. Your poses are off, toe-points with your jumps are non-existent, and some of you aren’t even smiling!” she shouted like a vicious Chihuahua.

“Tamika, I swear to god, if you can’t get a basic thigh stand down, you don’t deserve to cheer at the collegiate level. And you damn sure don’t deserve placement on my squad: I don’t give a damn how many Olympic medals your father and uncle have won. This is my damn squad and I measure greatness with a performance scale, not a genetic one.”

The area grew quiet for a few seconds. Then sniffles could be heard. Again, I looked at Samantha. She rolled her eyes shut to a squeeze. She must have known these girls.

“Save your tears!” the Chihuahua commanded. “Now, everyone, let’s go and get this shit right!”

Within seconds, the herd's feet sounded and they eventually crossed over our section again. No one paid a single glance in our direction; all sported long faces of pain and defeat. I knew those expressions all too well. But it was the last girl trailing behind the moping line. It seemed from the moment she registered Samantha's and my presence, her nose lifted and mouth curled in disgust. I recognized her from that expression, but couldn't remember from where right away.

When it was safe to speak, Samantha grunted, going back into her locker. "She's relentless."

"You know her?"

"That's the Aivery Cooper girl I told you about."

"When?"

"When I moved in. She was one of the upperclassmen giving me shit about my race and me attending an HBCU last year. She thinks the only things *BSU* revolves around are her, her cheer squad, and her boyfriend, Spence."

"Spence?"

"Ashton Spencer. He's the franchise football player for *BSU*, a quarterback. He's pretty good. They call him Spence for short; he's headed to the *Combine* in February."

"What's that?"

"Basically the tryouts for the big *League*." *Oh...* "The school revolves around him. They've gotten a good run out of Spence. He's brought the attention back to the *Panthers* since...Tariq Evans. You know him? He's a wide receiver in the *League*."

I nodded. He played for the *Connecticut Kings*. I didn't watch football, but Raj, Cut, and so many at the gym in New Brunswick did, so I was forced to endure it.

"I think I've seen him around."

*Bad human...*

It was in that moment I, in fact, remembered both of them. A couple of days before Labor Day, he barked at me like

I was a dog. My mood darkened and I stood.

“Hey. Where are you going? You don’t need to shower?”

My body froze at the mention of being naked in a public bathroom.

I turned to her. “Nah. I’m going to shower back at the room. And I need to hurry up to make my shift at the cafe.”

Samantha’s face folded into a frown. “Oh. Okay. I’ll see you later then.”

I chucked her the deuces from over my head as I walked off.



*Ashton*

My eyes got lost in the flame of the blazing fire pit. I floated above and beneath the sounds of idle conversation happening around me. It was Tuesday evening and I’d just gotten out of my business class, Organizational Structure, and was fucking tired and overwhelmed with coursework already. Al hit my *Blackberry*, saying this was the meeting place for the evening. Aivery managed to clear the greenhouse.

“I’m over this semester so soon,” Aivery moaned while sitting back, massaging her temples. “I fucked around and took two major courses my last fall semester here. Lorraine warned me against this, but I wanted to free up the spring for...” She gestured my way, referencing the *League’s Combine*.

“Who’s Lorraine?” Andrea asked, face curled as she flipped her long braids over her shoulder.

“My advisor.” Aivery mumbled.

“*Shiiiiiiit*,” Dre sighed, pushing his palms down his thighs as he sat across from me. “I got the bomb hookups this semester for all my classes. Who’s got fucking time to ball, swag out, and study?”

I snorted at his silly ass. Al found it funnier than all of us by the way he hooted, laughing and reaching over to give Dre some dap. This dude was always dressed to the nines, and didn't mind taking fashion risks either. He'd do leather motorcycle jackets with thick corduroy, rock pink as long as he had footwear to match it. He was even known to go sockless with pants outside of the summer season. Mr. Swag was his motif. Aivery and Andrea rolled their eyes, used to his jokes which, in this case, were serious.

“Nah. I feel you,” Al added. “Coach been on us for years, saying school'll catch up with us soon if we didn't develop study skills.”

Voices nearing us could be heard coming from the greenhouse. We all turned at the same time to see who was incoming. The expression of the girl with the familiar face dimmed as they sauntered farther out. On either side of her was an older woman and man. The man's gear particularly caught my attention, wearing a *Howard* t-shirt, navy blue Bermuda shorts, and brown *Ralph Lauren* boat shoes.

*A dad for sure...*

“What do you want?” Aivery snapped, voice controlled.

The girl's shoulders shrunk. “My parents are visiting. And I wanted to show them the greenhouse. I saw the closed sign was up, but the door was unlocked.”

“You saw the closed sign, but still came inside?” She dropped her head to the side and plucked her brows.

Sighing with grief, I turned back around to face ahead. Aivery was prepared to slaughter the poor girl in front of her parents.

“I was just...” The girl hesitated. “We wouldn't be long.”

“Yet, I'm already here entertaining.” Aivery turned to face the fire pit and shooed them with her hand. “Try in the morning.”



I heard one of the parents clear their throats before the girl mumbled, “Great.”

The door slammed, letting us know we were alone again.

That’s when my phone vibrated. Without looking at it, I jumped to my feet to leave the area for privacy. “Excuse me.” I went inside the massive all-glass house where all I could see for, at least, a quarter of a mile were rows of shrubs. On the other side was the same design, but with long plots of soil. “Yeah.” I answered the call.

“Fuck!” my uncle, June, swore. “I think we lost him. Boobe, you there?”

“Yeah,” my cousin, Boobe, answered. “I think we lost him, though.”

“Shit. First we couldn’t get Ash; now we lose Brick.”

We’d been trying to three-way a call with my cousin, who was locked down for some time at this point. It had been a stressful time since he’d gotten locked up in July. Between his beef with Newark PD and Blocck Boi \$even, a longstanding rival gang, my boy was hemmed up pretty badly. On the streets, my family had deep ties with a powerful gang. Brick ranked high in the organization, although he was less than twenty-five. So on the streets, he was covered, though on high alert for close to a year. But now, it was painful knowing there was nothing we could do while he was in custody. The Department of Corrections had its own society and was insulated as a motherfucker. We had very few eyes on him.

“What he say?” I asked.

“Nothing. I tried this three-way call as soon as he came through,” June bemoaned. You wouldn’t have known it unless you knew him. We were all stressed the hell out.

I nodded. “Hang up. He’s gonna try again. I’m right here by my phone.”

Boobe was the first to respond. “A’ight.”

“One,” June mumbled before disconnecting the call.

I went back outside, where I saw Aivery had sparked a blunt and passed it over to Andrea. When I plopped down into my seat, I felt her eyes on me, but ignored it.

“Damn,” Al groaned. “Y’all just gone do us *Panthers* the fuck like that, huhn?” His southern drawl came alive when he complained.

“I need this shit,” Andrea claimed, holding in the vaped ganja. “Sorry to you, sir.”

“That’s fucked up, and y’all know it,” Dre griped, pulling his cell phone out of his *Louis Vuitton* sweater pocket.

*BSU* had a strict zero-tolerance policy on drug use. We were tested fucking vigorously, which was all good in this instance. Here on three acres of loam soils, my friends were burning trees. It only propelled my reason for chucking the deuces. I didn’t want to be here anyway. Between class work and not having heard from my cousin in over three weeks, this was the last place I wanted to be.

Aivery waved her hand dismissively while pulling on the blunt. We waited for her to ceremoniously blow it out. “Brielle’s coming to town Thanksgiving week before we break.”

“Oh, word?” Al perked up.

“I’m going!” Dre declared. “*We* going. Shit!”

“Oh, my god! When?” Andrea began typing into her laptop. “What am I going to wear? Fuck.” She paused, gazing into the air. “I need to get my hair re-braided!”

Aivery beamed. “I don’t know, but I’m thinking about wearing those new *Loubs* I bought last month. Maybe my sister will get me—”

My phone rang again and I shot to my feet to take the call. “Yeah?” I barked when I made it inside.

“The fuck it do, kid?” I recognized the swag in that call right away.

I felt relieved and pained at the same damn time. “The fuck, yo!” My eyes closed. “Three fucking weeks?”

“Nigga, you know I woulda called before now if I could. I was just telling June these pigs in here fuckin’ with me.”

“That’s all. Right?” Boobee wanted to confirm. “Cause we can tighten up a Blocck Boi out here to make sure they know shit won’t be tolerated.”

“Nah, my G. I’m good on them. They keep us separated anyway. You know them informants keep them D. They beat my ass for like three fuckin’ days straight last month and revoked my calling privileges. Them bitches threw me in the hole all this time.”

“You good?” I asked, feeling fucking helpless.

“Muthafuckas chipped my tooth, broke my nose and shit. But I’m good now,” he was almost able to convince me. “But that lawyer you got me, Ash, is the reason why I’m making calls again. Them niggas tried to slow up my court dates and every fuckin’ thing.”

“That’s what’s up,” June mumbled.

“True dat,” Boobee agreed.

“Well, let me know what else I can do,” I offered with more sincerity than I’d ever pledged. “June ready to come put something on your books.”

“Coming as soon as we hang up,” June confirmed.

“I’m coming, too,” Boobee added.

“For what, nigga?” Brick scoffed. “It ain’t like I could see you.” The dryness in that last sentence wasn’t lost upon me. The line went silent for a few seconds, so much muted emotion synapsing from each man on the line. We wouldn’t break code, though. It wasn’t what we were taught. “Speaking of fuckin’ visits. Let me call this bitch. I know she trippin’ the fuck out.”

“Yeah,” Boobee agreed. “Do that.”

“Hit us as soon as you can next time,” June demanded.

“Fuck the collect charges. I got them.”

“I know you do, Ash. ‘Preciate you, my nigga. Salt and pepper, baby.” Brick, aka Deshawn Lee, fired off our code talk.

“Gray, bitch.” I replied predictably for him the same words we’d practiced since we were eleven years old and realized we were from the same family, but different bloodlines.

“That’s what’s up. A’ight, Boob and June. I’ll check my commissary in a few hours.”

“Peace.”

“Love you.”

My heart screamed a bidding, but it wouldn’t reach my lips. Goodbyes never felt right in situations like this. I prayed more this month and a half than I had all my life. I prayed God would spare my cousin from the gang war and his beef with the police department. My G was up against a wall right now and he had no protection.

Feeling...fucked up now, I headed back out. The moment I sat down, Aivery’s chinked eyes rolled over to me. I knew right away she was tight.

“Everything okay?”

I shook my head, unable to look at her. “Brick,” I mumbled, knowing she’d know what I meant right away.

“He still alive.”

*Hardly...*

I heard it in his voice and in what he didn’t say. “Obviously.”

She rolled her eyes again, taking her attention back to the group. “Well, since you left in the middle of the conversation, we picked roles for the Brielle concert. Dre’s bringing the liquor for the after-party; Andrea, ShawnNicole, and I will take care of the food; and Al’s paying for the party bus.” Aivery rolled her neck back to me dramatically and with defiance. She was a bold one when flying off the loud. “Now you gotta get the suite at the stadium.”

Al and Dre snickered. Of course, their cheap asses didn't want that expense. Dre's favorite pastime was showing off his parents' wealth, until it included sharing it with others when there was nothing to be gained from it by him. Andrea's wild eyes bounced between Aivery and me. She became extremely paranoid, depending on the grade of trees she inhaled.

Once again, I stood, this time grabbing my book bag. "Well, of course." I gave a nod with crumpled lips. "I'm out."

And I was off to do something more meaningful and productive.

## -Then-

Tori

“There are like three tables that need cleaning out there. Take care of that then clear out the dishwasher. The cycle’s almost done. Got it?” Rich, my supervisor, shot out before going back into his office, turning slowly in a manner I could see the curve of his plumpness.

Rolling my eyes, I turned myself, placing my earbuds in to get through this shift with tunes. He was a strange human. A short one with a big belly and a long, curly beard. I wheeled the trash can out from behind the station to the general dining area. I’d been working as a kitchen staff for the largest station in the biggest cafeteria on campus for just over two weeks. *BSU* had six cafeterias and restaurants throughout the campus. There were small ones in close proximity of some of the dormitories, one fancy restaurant near the administrative office, another on the athletic campus, and I hadn’t seen or been told where the rest were.

But the one Trisha got me a job at so happened to be the busiest one for students. It had twelve stations, all making different foods: American, Japanese, deli-style, soul food, Caribbean, Italian, French, desserts, fondue, ice cream, *Cinnabon*, Chinese, *Pizza Hut*—even a *B-Way Burger* station that tasted like the real deal. I worked the American, which was the biggest counter.

*BSU* put loads of detail into the place. Each station was outfitted to represent the food it served. The tables included real plants next to them. Even at the BBQ station, a few tables in front were picnic style with the checkered pattern tablecloths. Thankfully, the set of tables I was responsible for cleaning today were pretty easy. There were used plates, cups, napkins, and such left behind by adult children who still thought they were eating from their momma’s kitchen.

Ignoring my bad mood brought on by my period, I worked to get the tables cleared so I could move on to cleaning them.

Humming while picking up a ball of chewed gum from the table, something across from me caught my attention. I glanced up to find my worst nightmare. The mean cheer girl Aivery, her awful human boyfriend, Ashton, and their goof crew were staring and snickering. I glared at them from left to right; the girl with long box braids, Andrea, was the only name I kind of knew from sharing the same dorm building. But the Ashton guy's arm was over his petite girlfriend's shoulder as she leaned into him giggling. Ashton's hyena friends, who I'd seen around the athletic compound all annoyed me. I believed one played basketball, the light skinned one who thought he could dress. One of the other girls lived in my dorm, and the other I couldn't recall seeing at all. But collectively, I knew the bad humans clique.

If I were stupid, I'd wonder what they were laughing at. But I wasn't. The moment I decided to continue with work, one of the girls made hand gestures around her head. Then Ashton mouthed something looking directly at me. I pulled out my earbuds to hear him, immediately regretting it.

“Arrrrr-arrrrr! Arr-ru-ruuuuuu! Arrrrr-arrrrr! Arr-ru-ruuuuuu!” he continued to bark while his corny crew laughed.

Aivery had tears rolling from her eyes, she laughed so hard. And Ashton kept going, bringing unneeded attention to me...on my job. A group of people walking my way caught on to the joke and began to snicker, too. A couple had the decency to cover their mouths and scatter on. Others didn't.

It was my hair. It looked a hot mess. I still hadn't taken the tracks out. On most days, I wore a hat. But in instances like this one, I had to wear a sun visor. It was standard uniform for my job. My natural, unblended hair must have come through the opening.

“Dog for sure!” a tall—extremely tall—light skinned guy with a curly fade shot from across the room. Dude had to be, at least, 6 feet and 6 inches. He was sure to pay homage—I

mean, eye contact—to Ashton while stalking my way. “Hey, pooch, fetch this!” he shouted, then tossed his cup my way.

I’d be damned if it didn’t miss the trash can right in front of me. It hit my chest on a dud, the lid separated from the cup, and milkshake spilled on my uniform shirt and pants, dripping down to my sneakers. When my head shot up, it seemed like the laughing volume grew to infuriating degrees.

My body jerked and I was gliding over the table, target on this fuck boy’s head. In the backdrop of my fury was the laughing happening theater-style at a glaring level. I landed on my feet just as I saw the smile fade from his golden bumpy face. Then my fist jammed—actually, my arm. I yanked to cock it again, suddenly smelling something masculine that didn’t make me nauseous.

“Don’t touch her, babe!” A feminine voice shouted hysterically. “She’s a fucking disease!”

When I tried to turn to investigate why I couldn’t punch the shit out of the goofball, big arms gathered around me, lifting me in the air with a bear hug until I landed in a 180-degree angle.

“*Panthers* don’t do that shit,” was muttered smooth like butter in my ear. Between the hard, throaty sounds and earthy smell, I was temporarily hypnotized. “Kill it.”

My eyes widened and I pulled in the deepest breath to kill the trance trying to overtake me. I was able to gain my senses, and I snatched away from the thick grip with a few yanks of my torso.

“Get the fuck off of me!” I broke loose and jumped to see who I had to knock the hell out to find the guy, Ashton.

The glare in his eyes did nothing to the fury boiling in my belly. With wide nostrils and hard lips, he shot me a look I wanted to challenge. This guy was big...tall and thick, but I couldn’t give a shit. I’d fought all size boys before. Even the ones I lost to didn’t walk away without signs of my wrath. I was ready. The only problem was his energy wasn’t right. He wasn’t raging like me. Even the light-skinned, bumpy-faced,



tree-height dude stayed at a distance with fear in his eyes. Ashton didn't have fear, but the calm in his aura was non-negotiable.

“Tori.”

“*WHAT?*” I leaped in the air, doing a 90-degree turn this time. It was my supervisor, Rich.

His fists pushed into his doughy waist as he postured himself to speak from authority. “You wanna keep your job, young lady?”

The threat was loud and clear. And so was my answer. “Fuck no!” I tossed my visor to the ground and stomped off before I fractured a facial bone.

I hated rich, Black *Beverly Hills 90120* humans.

With a fucking passion.

For real.



“I need shoes and stuff. I still ain't got my cell phone,” I tried explaining in plain terms.

“Well, whatchu do with ya check, Tori?”

I rolled my eyes, blindly seeing the disorganization of Trisha's office. “Ma, I only worked there for two weeks and a day, and you know I ain't work every day or eight-hour shifts. If I'm lucky, the check I do get next week'll be forty dollars. That ain't gone help much.”

“It ain't like you gotta worry about food, Tori. They paying for everything. You ain't got rent or gym dues. *Shit.*” Here we go. The fighting I was doing for *my* money. “You still act like the world revolves around you and boxing. But anyway, I'll send it.”

“When?” I barely let the last syllable drop from her mouth.

“Damn, Tori! As soon as I can get a ride. You know I work.”

“I know.” My eyes closed and I dropped my head into my hand over Trisha’s desk. “But, Ma, the money came the day after I left for school. It’s been four weeks. The next one’s coming soon, and I still ain’t got what I need for school.”

I didn’t raise my voice, didn’t want to. Trisha was in the corner, watching videos of a *Lady Panthers* soccer match. She coached them and was in the middle of her workday when I asked if I could call home. I couldn’t make long distance calls from my room unless I paid and had nothing but worry to do that with.

Even though Trisha was occupied, I didn’t want her to know just how little support I had in life. It was embarrassing. I knew my mother had her own shit to deal with. The trailer we lived in had a hole in the floor, and had it for so long, it was beginning to rot the flooring inside. The windows barely survived last winter, and the trifling park people still hadn’t cut down the tree growing so wild, it pushed into the trailer. And those were the issues I knew; I couldn’t imagine the ones I didn’t, like how she struggled with loneliness. But that wasn’t my fault or problem.

I never really knew my father. He grew up a couple of blocks from our trailer park. Apparently, he and my mother had known each other for years, but never dated. They’d see one another around the city and knew each other’s families, but they never paid either or any mind until they crossed paths at *Cumberland County Community College*. My father was two years older than my mother. So when she enrolled with half the commitment, her inspiration to see it through became my father, who had been on his way out and to a four-year university in Delaware.

He hit on her, flirting, and my mother could never resist a man. So they started hanging out and she got pregnant. They never officially dated. It was a huge inconvenience because he was due to leave for school in Delaware soon, which was a stone’s throw away from Millville. More than that, my mother had started catching feelings for an old boyfriend she’d had. When my father’s parents were willing to keep him home so he could be around as a father, my mother

told him to go. While that sounded noble, my grandmother said it was only to free my mother to date the old flame.

My father went off to school in Delaware and didn't return until he brought back a wife and children when I was four. He bought a house in Egg Harbor Township, a suburb of Atlantic City. My grandmother carried herself to his parents' home on foot and wouldn't leave until they worked out child support payments with my father. Margaret McNabb didn't play. She had been laying low, taking care of me practically alone for four years. My mother could never keep jobs long. Well, she'd had enough.

The child support payments were given straight to my grandmother from my father. Monthly—and faithfully—he'd meet her in Millville and shell out what grew to four hundred a month, which was one-hundred dollars a week. My grandmother, who I'd basically lived with more than my mother, would use it for clothes, food, school, and eventually boxing. That was until she passed away when I was twelve. While I was dealing with the loss of the most important person in the world to me, my father never reached out to propose a new plan.

It was four years before my mother began receiving child support from my father, this time directly. My grandmother was smart enough to know my mother would mismanage the money, and she did. I'd always had to beg for my needs. And it wasn't like I could call my father. That motherfucker moved not too long after my grandmother's death and would never respond to my mother's calls to his parents. That was the only way she knew to reach him. When that didn't help, she filed for child support officially. It was the government that finally caught up to him and began to garnish his checks when I was sixteen. It seemed like the time to receive the money took time, too. I was almost seventeen when the money started coming.

He was on back pay, so the amounts and length of payments were formulated. When I turned eighteen last year, the checks started coming in my name. But I had the funds directly deposited into a bank account I shared with my

mother so she could use some of it for things around the house, although I was gone a lot, up in North Jersey training with Cut and fighting. My mother had the only debit card to the account, so I let her give me the amount I needed each month. That was supposed to continue, even the day after I left for *Blakewood*.

“Tori, it ain’t like our bank is out there. If it was, I swear, I would just give you the card and leave that money all to you. Damn!” She was mad. “In between my shifts, I’ll figure out how to give it to you.”

“Don’t *Walgreens* got a *Western Union*?” That was where she’d been working.

“*Wha—* Huhn? I ‘on’t know, but I’ll find out on my next shift.”

I rolled my eyes. She was throwing me off the phone.

“Alright, Ma.”

“Bye, Tori. I gotta go.”

“Bye.”

“Mmmhmm.” The line was cut.

I hung the phone on the cradle and buried my face in my hands, letting out a long breath.

“What do you need, Tori?” Trisha asked from across the small office. “You know it’s our job to make sure all your needs are met so your two focal points are your studies and fighting.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Nothing. I’ll figure it out.”

“You don’t have to.”

Inhaling, I shared, “I need to find another job.”

“I’d rather you not work, Tori. Your focus needs to be narrow. Get in shape for the first fight, then the next, then the next. But if you’re insistent on being stubborn, I can find you another one on campus.” I shook my head, dismissing that idea right away. But Trisha spoke louder. “At least, they’d be more amenable to students’ limitation to hours in a shift.”

“I’m not working another job where I have to serve or be seen by these damn snobs. I could have broken that boy’s shit.”

She cocked her head to the side and sighed, “And that wouldn’t have been wise.”

I stood from her desk. “Neither is being broke.” After grabbing my book bag, I started out. “I’ll find something.”

“Don’t forget about transportation,” she warned behind me.

I shouted from the hall, “I’ll figure it out!”



*Ashton*

I pulled back my sleeve to check my *TAG* for the time. It had been close to twenty minutes since my last student left. I was grateful when the full hour had ended so I didn’t have to worry about one of his gazillion acne bumps bursting on me or my things. *Shit*. That dude needed a potent triple dose of benzoyl peroxide, salicylic acid...antibacterial soap, or some shit to melt the rocks and volcano craters on his face.

The thought to check my email came to mind, so I pulled my laptop closer. Chewing on my thumbnail, I tapped in my login credentials on the *BSU* site and scrolled down my inbox.

*Shit.*

*Shit.*

*Shit.*

I made mental checks as I recognized the names of a few of this semester’s professors with yet another syllabus update. Their lack of preparation annoyed the fuck out of me. I scrolled until I came across an email from Aivery. It was sent early this morning. The link inside sent me to a greeting card site, where the page opened to a digital card writing out, “*I miss you. Have a splendid day!*”

On another huff, I closed out of my school account and logged into my personal *Hotmail* one. The first unread email I saw had me rolling my eyes mentally.

*Porter, James*

*Ashton,*

*I'm just checking in to see if you've looked at the second quarter earnings report I sent back in July. The third quarter's will be available before you know it next month. You really must be in the habit of reading them and asking the right question—*

I clicked out of the email right away, not finishing it.

*Blah, blah, blah, blah...*

“Eat a dick, Jimmy,” I whispered to myself. “I’m sure you still know how to.” I found that hilarious and chuckled.

I didn’t fuck with him, and he knew it. If I had questions about money, my well-compensated attorney could have the answers to me in less than an hour. The door of the private study room opened, snatching my attention. In walked stiff shoulders, a baseball cap, and a silky plastic ponytail hanging behind her head. Her sneakers squeaked as she turned to close the door.

Annoyed as fuck, I grabbed my clipboard to check the name again.

*What the fuck is the Tori broad doing here?*

As she pulled out the chair across from me, I choked out, “I got a girlfriend.”

She scoffed, eyes rolled as she dumped herself into the wooden chair across from me at the small table. Then she sat back, swinging one arm over the back of the chair. “And I don’t. So?”

My eyes narrowed and one cheeked raised in a leer. “You sure about that, tomboy?”

“Sure am, toddler feet.” Then she straightened in her chair, sighing. “Can we get this over with?”

“Get what over with? I told you, I have a girl.”

*What does she want?*

“This!” Her hand swept over my desk setup: writing pad, laptop, clipboard, textbooks, and writing implements.

“I don’t take random students. The *Office of Admissions* assigns them, *tomboy*,” I emphasized.

“Funny, because it’s their stupid fault that I’m getting tutoring in the first place.”

I issued her an empty gape. “You needing help academically is the *Office of Admissions*’ fault?”

“You heard what I said.” Growling lowly, she rolled her eyes again.

*She’s serious...*

I went to my laptop to cross-check the list I was sent via email against the printout I created for the sign-in sheet. When I was ready to spin my machine her way to show her how serious *I* was, something hit me.

I reared my head, eyes narrowing with suspicion. “What’s your name?”

“You know my name, man!” She was irritated.

But what in the hell for? It was my time she was wasting, asking for help.

I leaned over my laptop, over this bullshit already. “I only know of Tomboy Tori.”

“Then you ain’t communicating with the *Office of Admissions* because the first ain’t my name at all, and you won’t find the second one on there either.”

“What’s your name?” I exhaled, prepared to end this childish ass game.

Her nose went north, mouth balled. “For the first and last damn time. KaToria McNabb,” she gritted out.

My mouth dropped. That was too feminine a name for the beast before me. I wanted to ask for her ID, but doubted the girl could pull a scheme of this proportion out of her ass.

*Tomboy's real name is KaToria?*

She sat back, huffing loudly. "I ain't got all night. Some of us make the most of training—or practice, in your case."

My pissed-the-fuck-off-odometer was well past the restraint phase. I didn't want to tutor tomboy here. I couldn't spend any more time with her than I'd already been told I had to.

I sat up again in my seat. "First of all, I have a zero tolerance for tardiness. My time, as a senior and leader of the *Panthers* amongst other things, is valuable to more people than just me. It won't be wasted by ignorant asses like you."

Her eyes popped wide. "What makes me ignorant?"

"The fact that you have no idea of the opportunity being handed to you."

"Being tutored?"

"Yes."

"Newsflash, club foot. Tutoring happens all the time."

I laughed at her dumb ass. "You're one of them."

"One of who?"

"One of them welfare recipients. The new student who didn't earn their way to *BSU*, but got here by way of the pity train." I shook my head.

"Why do people talk about this place like it's so damn special? It's a school full of rich, bratty ass kids, acting like them *Beverly Hills 90210* people, only Black."

I laughed again. Harder. "You're fucking clueless, too." I couldn't stop cracking the hell up. I wiped my wet eyes when I could. "Well," I sighed, trying to calm myself, leaning into the table. "you're right about the wealth of *some* of the students here. This campus is steeped in Black culture,



tradition, wealth, excellence and, most of all, superiority. Nothing expressed here, represented here, or cultivated here is subpar to any PWI.”

“PWI?” Her face was tight.

“Predominantly white institution.”

“Okay. It’s a Black college. Whooptie woo!” She tossed her arms in the air, dropping back into her chair. “It’s a state school.”

I leaned closer to her uneducated ass. “Do you not realize *Blakewood State University* is unparalleled to any academic institution in the country? We’re not the oldest or the largest historically Black college or university, but we are by far the most superior. Founded in 1842, *BSU—the original Panthers*—was the first institution to be funded and established by a Black coalition consisting of, not just a Christian church, but Black business entrepreneurs, doctors, and educators.

“It was created on the premise of, not equality, but Black superiority, culture-foundation, maintenance, and pride of African Diaspora ancestry. Yes. Originally, it functioned as a state school, receiving funds from the government. But what was boss about *BSU* was the founders fought for the agreement of total control of the curriculum and admissions. Eventually, when it was able to function independent of governmental aid, back in 1875, the *S* in *BSU* became silent, as those ‘negroes’ were able to establish an academic endowment program. Even today, the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Eli Richardson, Michael Jordan, Tariq Evans, and many more unrecognizable names of Black wealthy people around the globe sharing a passion for the economic advancement of Black people, endow the education before you.” I winked. “We’re revolutionists, revolters.”

“So, you’re a Black Panther here?” she hissed cleverly.

My brows rose.

*Ahhhh...so, she does have a brain...*

I lifted my *BSU Panthers* letter jacket, exposing the logo.

Tori rolled her eyes, likely defeated. “It’s not like this is an Ivy League school or something.”

“Do you even know what constitutes Division I, let alone Ivy League institutions?”

“Can we just get on with this?”

I extended my arm, halting her haste. “No. You made me wait. So, you can spare a few minutes understanding the privilege you sit in right now. Maybe it’ll help you be on time moving forward.” She dropped back into her chair again. “*Blakewood*, having Division I intercollegiate varsity sports teams for women and men, is unlike the Ivy Leagues you speak of because it does offer scholarships. We reach back, understanding the wealth disparities of our people. Thirty-one of *BSU Panthers* teams participate in Division I intercollegiate varsity sports teams for women and men. That’s the largest of its HBCU’s kind. Your assignment is understanding how, while boxing isn’t of that number, your success in that program can expand the *BSU* athletic brand.”

Her mouth balled even tighter. Ignoring it, I continued, “As far as Ivy League: we couldn’t give a shit about being locked outside of the traditional eight’s circle. It could be because of our high caliber of academics; we have a 98.2% graduation rate, and our library system is a beast, encompassing eighteen individual libraries holding over eleven million items with 40% of it dedicated to Black relevance.” I was on a roll at this point, but I had her attention.

“Like those Ivy League institutions you like to throw around, *BSU* is a predominantly research institution confluence of Black economics. There’s a heavy emphasis on cycling the production, distribution, and services through Black families and communities. And let’s not talk about *BSU*’s intricate admissions standards. At 24%, it *is* higher than most of ‘your’ Ivy Leaguers, however, with reason. Again, we award scholarships to talented students around the country because we understand the wealth gap.

“People like you, who are deemed talented in a specific area, *BSU* sees a value in and believe deserves the higher education experience. So the university relaxes its admissions filter just slightly to be sure we’re providing an opportunity to our own, who may not have had the financial means of pursuing academic excellence, but have the ability to change the world as a Black man or woman.” I cocked my head to the side. “So...anything else you wanna say my school ain’t, tomboy?”

Unable to look at me, Tori rubbed her lips together, arms crossed protectively. Seconds later, her deservedly broken spirit uttered, “I didn’t mean to trash the school. I was just telling you to relax.”

“No.” I shook my head. “My Black ass can’t afford to relax when I’m against the odds in this country.”

“Says the big man on campus.”

“The campus of *BSU* is safe, the world it’s planted on isn’t. That’s why you need to pursue the wealth of opportunities here like time is fleeting, because it is.” I flipped through the papers on my clipboard for her information. “You clearly have no respect for time. Please let me be the catalyst of that enlightenment.”

Tori didn’t speak, which was wise. She was wasting my time. As I studied her writeup, I finally discovered what she was here for.

“Writing.”

“What?” she finally spoke again.

“You scored low on the writing portion of the admissions exam.”

She shrugged, eyes cast into the distance. “That’s what they said.”

“They? Who are they?”

“The athletic director,” she muttered.

“Byron Jones?”

She shook her head. “Trisha *Gaskin*.”

*Oh...*

“Trisha is an A.A.D.”

Tori finally gave me eye contact again.

“What’s that?”

“A.A.D.? She’s an Assistant Athletic Director. There are dozens of them here. One for most of the athletic programs.” She didn’t know that?

What did this...KaToria McNabb know? Just how to throw a fucking jab?

“Who do you have for writing?”

“What?”

I closed my eyes tight, jaw flexing. “Your *Basic Writing* course. Who’s the professor? Johnson or Brown?”

“Oh. The fat lady that makes those weird noises with her nose and throat.”

An unexpected bubble of laughter pushed through my throat. I shook my head.

“What?” Tori eyed me untrustingly while looking to hold back on her own laughter.

“Nothing.” I shook my head again. “It’s just that... never mind.” I took a deep breath. “Okay. Shanice Brown—who, by the way, suffers from allergies and asthma—typically kicks the semester off with having you write about yourself. Next, she’ll have you write about a little known Black figure. What do you have in mind for those?”

“What do you mean?”

My head reared. “What do I mean?” I repeated. “What do you plan on sharing about yourself in the first paper? It should be due next week. Do you have an outline? And for the Black figure: do you have someone in mind for it?”

Her eyes glazed over. “Outline?”

“Yeah. Bullet points of your ideas that’ll structure your paper. It’s an arrangement of points you’ll cover.”

Tori bit her bottom lip, eyes falling in shame.

“This is it,” I muttered, exhaling.

“This is what?” she hissed.

“It’s what those who feel *BSU* shouldn’t recruit athletes without strong academic backgrounds are arguing.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, you don’t know what a damn outline is, clearly couldn’t pass the general admissions test, yet you come in here late with a damn attitude!”

She banged her fists into the table as she shot to her feet. “I didn’t ask to be here! Still don’t want to be here. Yeah, *Blakewood* may be rich in culture and tradition, but that doesn’t appeal to regular people who want basic respect!” Her eyes were hard, lips tight as she spewed her little anger. “Maybe I came late because I decided earlier I wouldn’t come at all. I knew you were my student-tutor and don’t feel like taking any more shit from stuck up, mean people like you and your princess girlfriend and hyena-looking and acting friends. Classes started only two weeks ago, and I’m sick of the cool kids’ club already!” She snatched her book bag and headed for the door.

It was the incident in the cafeteria two days ago when she quit her job. I was only fucking with her. Didn’t mean for her to go bat shit crazy and lose her little job.

“And another thing.” She glanced back at me. “I may not be rich, and needed a scholarship to live on the same campus as you pompous fucks, but I didn’t come checking for this school. Y’all came for me. And if you and your friends keep fucking with me, I’ll show you why I’m here!”

The door slammed hard, and I blinked several times with a growing smirk.

love ∞ belbin

“I want to go to *Saint Justin* this spring break,” Andrea announced out of nowhere, pushing back her cuticles. “Shit!” She stomped her foot. “If the nail techs here in the *BSU* cosmetology program want to be taken seriously, they should focus more on their craft than complaining about low wages and thirsting after the campus guys.”

“Shut the hell up, Andrea.” ShawnNicole grumbled, pushing her oversized plastic frames up her face. “If you don’t like one tech, go to another. There’s no shortage of them in that program.”

Andrea rolled her eyes without looking up from her hands. It was the same message she’d heard before when she went to the nail salon on campus and complained.

ShawnNicole was a business management major who had taken one of *BSU*’s special tracks, which were non-degree programs offered for those in pursuit of technical vocations. She was sensitive about those programs as she was pursuing a career that required more of the technical license than it did the degree. This was a constant battle between some students; degree-track students respecting vocational training students. Half my attention was present in the conversation and the other was in my gaze around the pool room in the student union.

It was the third week following the official start of the semester, and the freshmen had realized who the top dogs of the campus were. They flocked around us, trying to capture our attention. For the first time in my *BSU* tenure, this was wack. Standing against the wall with Aivery under my arm and having our crew circle around as though posing for a *Ralph Lauren* photo shoot, I was bored.

“You didn’t go this summer?” Aivery asked. “I thought that’s where your family was.”

Andrea shook her head. “That was the plan, but my dad won a big account at his firm and all he did was eat, shit, fuck, and shower at home this summer.” She rolled her eyes. “Strange how, that ‘grueling’ regimen didn’t let up until last

week, well after I've moved back to school. I said fuck it; I'll go alone."

"We should all go for winter break." Aivery turned in my arm, face melting in a smile. "You think your people can find us a few suites somewhere on the island?"

"Shit!" Dre scoffed. "Anywhere on that bitch would be fire. Just say the word. I'll cover liquor and plants for the whole week."

"Damn, that sounds like fun!" Karmen breathed wistfully. "I hope so. They book up fast in the winter. Christmas is impossible."

"Please, woobie," Aivery gave her baby point, but kept it sexy.

I had no intention of spending my winter break with Aivery and her friends this year. But I would never say that. I kissed her on the cheek as a sweet gesture to back the hell off. It worked because Aivery turned again, her shoulders leaning into my chest. And I continued my countdown to when I'd blow this wack ass post up.

"She looks like she reeks," Karmen snarled. "And those sneakers are just as hideous as her hair."

"Where?" Andrea asked, twisting the end of one of her long braids around her index finger.

"Passing the pinball machine right now," ShawnNicole assisted. "I wish I could run my comb through that fucked up so-called 'installment.'"

Not knowing what the hell an installment was, my eyes raced in that direction, knowing the target before they landed. Tori trekked the student center with her palms fisted around her stained red book bag. She wore black cropped running pants, a *BSU* jacket, and those busted ass sneakers that I now knew for a fact held an odor. Her head was down, baseball cap low on her face. A flash of anger bolted through me.

*Why does she make herself such a damn target?*

The girl gassed herself before doing a slow walk into the fire. A few people tapped a friend on the low, drawing attention to the spectacle on the lower level of the student center. I'd seen countless cases of this in my tenure here, but usually with corny ass guys.

“So fucking diseased,” Aivery hissed, little body tensing beneath me. “I swear. They just let anybody in now. This place was so much more exclusive when my grandfather and great-grandfather attended. Scholarships are such a Dems handout to the fucking poor. And now we've got to smell and endure the sight of this trash.”

I flinched and immediately hoped she didn't sense it. That shit was harsh. McNabb's existence annoyed me, but she was a human being. Hell, even though I ripped her ass a new one two nights ago, it was still clear to me she had feelings, a voice, and a damn pulse. Her comment reminded me of the funk I was in. Why was I here in this populated ass student center when there were a whole three hundred plus ass acres of this campus, and I likely had access to, at least, eighty-five percent of them?

As I watched Tori step onto the elevator, I thought to myself, ‘this shit is wack.’ I needed more. This shit was boring.

“Spence,” Dre called over. When he had my attention, he flicked his chin in the opposite direction.

Byron Jones, the *BSU* Athletic Director, was standing in the doorway looking like a damn NARC. He tossed his head, summoning me. I checked my wrist for the time, hoping I wasn't late.

“I'm out,” I murmured to the crew and took off.

As I approached him across the busy room, he backed out of the doorway.

“What's up, chief?” I greeted, following him down the pathway. “I was shook at first, thinking I was late for our meeting.”



“Nah.” He swung his arm in the air, dismissing the notion. “I was down, getting a sandwich from the cafe and thought you’d be in there with your crew. I drove a cart down and figured you’d appreciate the lift.” We made it down to the end of the walkway, where a golf cart awaited. Jones tossed me the keys. “Do an old man the honors.”

I dropped my bag in the backseat and hopped in. We pulled off quietly and I drove us down the narrow pathways, rounding the few bodies we passed on the way.

“How’re you making out, son?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been on campus for five weeks now, started classes three weeks ago, and I hear your crazy ass is tutoring again this semester. I wanna know how you’re balancing it all.”

“Too early to say, sir.” Today wasn’t the best day to ask.

“You sure? You don’t seem like a young man starting out the end of his collegiate career where he’s about to take the world by storm and declare for the *League*’s draft. The world is your oyster right now. I need you to live in that.”

I considered that for a minute. “To keep it real, sir, I’m wondering if I should have declared last year.”

“Last year?” he echoed as we arrived at the blockades of the athletic facilities. Crossing over to this side of the campus was never anything short of a prideful experience. It was an athlete’s haven. With state-of-the-art equipment, a full-service sports spa, showers, break beds, and a small cafeteria, you could practically live here. “What’s going on?”

When I pulled into an available park, I cut the engine and sat back. “Lackluster.”

Jones laughed, covering his face. “You and these words. I swear, you may be a better wordsmith than you are anything else.”

I shook my head. “Nah, sir. I’m a better lover than I am anything else.” He knew I was fucking with him and cracked the hell up.

I needed to infuse humor. Talking about something I couldn’t quite define wasn’t easy.

“Is that what it is?” he asked. “You need more time to...clear your pores? You and Aivery...”

Shaking my head cut him off. “This has nothing to do with her.” *Per se*. “As a matter of fact,” I hopped out of the cart. “let’s forget I even brought it up. The semester hasn’t truly gotten started yet. Maybe getting back on my normal schedule’s got me buggin’.” I shook my head while grabbing my book bag.

Jones left the cart and started for the building, his face tight. “Before we meet, I have another matter to bring to your attention.”

“What’s that?” I followed him inside.

“In my office.”

We took the elevator and rounded several halls before arriving at likely the largest office in the building. One wall of his office was floor-to-ceiling glass overseeing the main gym floor. When Jones wanted privacy, he’d frost the glass so no one could peer up into his massive office, though he still had full view.

“Have a seat,” he ordered me.

As he ambled behind his desk and dropped the bag of food down, there was a knock on the opened door. Trisha Gaskin craned her neck inside.

“Come on in, Gaskin.” He waved her inside. “Ashton and I just got here.”

Trisha closed the door behind herself and my hackles shot in the air. She claimed the chair next to me facing her boss. My eyes swung from her to my A.D.

Jones began unwrapping his sandwich. “Ashton, Trisha here, as you know, is an A.A.D. She’s coached soccer for a

couple of years and recently moved into boxing. *BSU* is expanding its repertoire into female boxing, something Gaskin has professional experience in. She took the lead on recruiting Tori McNabb. I believe you're familiar with her." His eyes rose to meet my own.

"Yes," I answered.

Jones unscrewed his water then set it next to his sandwich that began to scent the room. That's when it dawned on me. Jones' tuna could have been purchased from the small bistro downstairs. He didn't have to come down to the campus unless it was for another reason. Me. This meeting was just arranged today. Had to be. I'd already had one with him that was supposed to begin in twenty minutes: enough time for him to scarf down his sandwich and be prepared.

Tori had snitched on me to her A.D.

"But I'm not sure why I'm meeting with Ms. Gaskin here," I decided to amend.

Jones nodded, granting her permission to sic me. Locked and loaded, she didn't hesitate.

Trisha turned to me on a hiked breath and let it go. "Your first tutoring session with her, how do you say it went?"

"It didn't." My brows hiked and I tilted my head.

"Why?"

"Because she stormed out of the room, refusing to be tutored."

"Did you say anything to make her feel uncomfortable?"

"Did she say I did?"

So quickly, Trisha needed a deep breath. She peered over to Jones for assistance. "Can he answer my question?"

Jones' chin lifted, appearing to be considering his position. I was too anxious for the verdict.

I shifted to face her. "If I'm going to be called into my A.D.'s office over a complaint, I have every right to know

what the allegations are.”

“No one’s talking allegations, Spence,” Jones tried assuring me.

“This feels hugely litigating, sir,” I countered him.

“Ash—” Trisha tried again.

“What did she say I did?” I demanded, voice controlled, but firm.

Trisha’s eyes fell, chin lifted as she swallowed. I gave her a moment to come with her shit. “She didn’t. Tori came to my office yesterday saying she no longer wanted to be tutored by you, and I was able to piece together a foul exchange.”

“On whose part?”

Her eyes rolled across the office. “Listen, Ashton, I know you’re the—” She used air quotes. “big man on campus —”

“Nah. A straight A student, academic aid volunteer, and then the starting quarterback of the *BSU Panthers*.” I interjected. “And not to mention, Wanda Lee’s son. If you’re gonna check me over my behavior with a woman, be clear on your objective and evidence.”

“Please don’t take that tone with me, Ashton Spencer.”

“I believe you set the tone by going to my A.D. instead of requesting to speak to Tori and me alone to sort out whatever differences you may feel we have.”

Trisha, once again, looked to her boss for assistance. Jones nodded with a tilted head, gesturing validity to my point.

“I didn’t do that because...” She hesitated then shook her head. “I couldn’t do it because Tori didn’t lodge a complaint.”

“So why are we here?” I asked.

Jones sat back in his chair, pushing his frames closer to his face.

“As her point person here, I’m not only responsible for Tori’s trainings and scheduling her fights and arrangements, but I’m also a liaison and advocate for her. I’ve been feeling like the only one on her welcoming committee. My assistant and I have observed how you and your friends tease and taunt her. You’ve been doing it since she arrived. And now she’s saying she doesn’t want the tutoring.”

“Which is fine.” *My plate is full this semester as it is...*

“If she doesn’t get tutored, she doesn’t maintain her academic obligations to the university, which means she’ll be dropped from the program. Is it too much to ask for simple kindness from the straight-A, star quarterback of the school?”

“Again, it wasn’t me who decided to end the tutoring.” I pressed my fingertips into my chest. “I haven’t said I wasn’t doing it. Clearly, she did.”

“Why should she want to if all you’re going to do is make her feel uncomfortable?”

I hated when she stated it as though I’d done some nefarious act of proportions.

Sitting back, I rested my elbow on the arm of my chair and leaned into my fingers. “What did I do wrong two nights ago other than question her respect for my time when she showed over twenty minutes late for a thirty-minute session?”

Trisha sat up splaying her fingers and counted off. “You’ve referenced her as tomboy, you and your friends snatched off her hat, playing hot potato with it—”

“Jesus!” Jones whispered hard, sitting in his seat.

I tried killing that. “Now, I didn’t participate in that—”

“*And* you bark after her, calling her a dog!” Trisha came with the hammer.

“Now, Ashton!” Jones sat up in his seat. I shrank in mine. “Tell me you didn’t treat a young woman that way.”

I let out a deep breath. Yes, I’d done that, but Trisha had it all wrong. I was no bad guy. Tori should have showed on time.

“All I’m saying here, Ashton,” Trisha spoke again when I’d gone so long unusually speechless. “is that Tori may not be glitzy, girlie, and come from generational wealth like so many in your crew, but she does belong here. She brings a special skill set *Blakewood* would like to highlight in U.S. collegiate athletics. We have the resources; she has the unique skill. She’s poor, Black, and female: I get that makes her unpopular, but it shouldn’t make her a target for being bullied.”

My eyes popped wide. Bullied.

*Wow...*

We were throwing that word around now.

*Cool.*

*Nah. Fuck that!*

It was obvious to me Jones had my back by walking me into the lion’s den. But Trisha flipped it and now, I was in some shit with the top dog of my program.

“I’m at a loss for words, Ashton. Truly.” Jones’ voice was of that typical patriarchal disappointment, and damn was it effective. “Gaskin, give me a moment alone with Mr. Spencer, so we can discuss his recourse in this matter.”

Stiffly, Trisha stood from her chair and clomped out of the office, leaving us alone.

Jones’ and my eyes met each other at the same time.

I took the lead. “In my defense, I only barked twice—and, again, I did not touch that girl’s hat!”

He raised a hand, silencing my claims. Then his index finger shot out like a gun. “You mark my words: in the next ten years, it will be the year of the woman. And I mean for the things you’ve not committed at all, but should be aware of. All of the immoral dismissiveness, sexual harassment, innuendos, and discrimination. A shock wave will be sent through the ‘old boys club.’ The slightest ‘lazy’ move of the hand or slip of a word will land a man jobless and wrapped up in litigation, awaiting monetary deductions. It will be a game changer, son.

Even what I just did, dismissing a complainant without allowing her to see my course of action, will be no more.”

“But I’m not like that, Jones. You know me!”

“I do! Which is why I’m going to propose something that will hurt me just as much as it hurts you.”

I rolled my eyes, arms swiping the air then landing back on my thighs. “Here we go with the preamble to an ass whooping.”

“Maybe, but we got to make this right, son! You’ve been the cleanest QB I’ve had in years, even all the coaches say it. I’ll be damned if I’m going to have a millennial woman like Gaskin bring disgrace in my camp this year. So, whatever predisposed feelings you may have in the moment, you’re gonna have to swallow them shits, and real good and fast.” His southern drawl piqued. With flared nostrils, I looked him square in the eyes and waited for my sentence—the damn verdict had already been read.

Jones sat back in his chair, regard tossed to the window as he thumbed his chin. “You’re going to resume the tutoring. We need McNabb in top academic shape.” He rocked back and forth, thinking. “And workouts. Buddy up with her.”

I shot up in my seat. “What!”

Jones nodded. “Making amends goes beyond words of apology. Befriend the girl. You may catch a friend out of her.”

“Never!”

“That decision ain’t up to you right now.” He sat up in his seat. “Right now, the *Panthers’* rep is in question. It ain’t about you. If we can’t treat our own with dignity and respect, what the hell are we?”

“What I’m not is an assailant of any kind. I’ve done nothing wrong.” I sat back in my seat to appear relaxed, though in reality, I was all but. The sacrifices I had to make for this shit. I tossed my palms in the air. “But it’s whatever you want to do, sir.”

I wasted the next fifteen minutes listening to Byron Jones' plan of action. It was completely painful, but I didn't part my lips to object. My limbs loosened when the conversation transitioned to my schedule for the next month. I had games, press tours, practices, photo shoots—so much happening this semester that I was unable to oversee the pledgees this year for my frat.

When he closed the meeting, I stood to my feet, armed with a cool veneer. “Thanks for your time, sir.”

When Jones gave me the dismissive chin dip, I didn't hesitate to make it for the door.

“Spence...” I glanced back his way. “What's on your underwhelmed schedule tonight?” He was referencing my “lackluster” statement earlier.

With definitive mind, I answered. “Something that doesn't involve this campus, sir.”

Slowly, he gave his second, yet hesitant gesture of dismal by way a nod, and I made my exit.



## -Then-

Tori

“You’ve been on a plane for three days straight, huh, Vic?” Trisha pointed out to her friend as she forked through her nasty ass *Applebee’s* salad.

I could say that and be factual because I ordered the same one. *Who can’t get a salad right? Applebee’s!* It was the same with the one by my house. Their food sucked. I’d much rather be scarfing down a *B-Way* all the way right now—or even a salad from them. Even *B-Way Burger* made better food than *Applebee’s*. But I didn’t complain. I swallowed the whole plate without a word.

“Yeah. So, I flew out of Cincinnati two days ago for Atlanta. The *CDC* has a position in Disease for a women’s program. They just got like three million for a huge marketing push.”

“So what would you do?” Karen, Trisha’s other friend, asked.

*Why does she care?*

Vic scratched the top of her low-cut fade. “I’d be on the team to help create the language for the promotional materials.” She shrugged. “I stayed down there last night with my old *Spelman Jaguar* crew.” She stuck out her tongue and shot an air ball above her head. “Then my girl, Ryan, dropped me off at the airport crazy early this morning. I flew into New York for the interview at *J.G., Wizer, and Hunter*.”

My eyes scanned the restaurant, bored, as they caught up.

“That’s the big firm out in New York, right?” Trisha asked Vic.

“Yeah. One of the partners, Quincy Hunter, is who I was trying to engage while in there this morning,” Vic shared. “They’re doing some dope shit with corporations.”

“Who are they?”

*Keep up or shut up!*

Not that I had a clue as to who or what the hell Trisha’s tall friend in a two-piece suit with a handkerchief hanging from the breast pocket was yapping about. I honestly didn’t care. Trisha was insistent on me coming out with her tonight to get off campus. I didn’t want to be rude, so I agreed to it. Now, I regretted not being able to come up with an excuse.

“They’re a public relations firm. Right?” Trisha answered, pushing her plate up, finally done. Vic nodded, confirming. “A friend of my father’s worked there for a few years. He said they’ve been snatching up accounts left and right and the older, more mainstream PR companies hate it.”

Vic sighed, sitting back. “I need in. The problem is, Hunter is such a fucking playboy, and my pussy ain’t a bargaining tool. If it was and my damn tits were hanging out, I wouldn’t have had to work so hard to engage him.”

Trisha tossed her napkin in the plate, clearly annoyed. “This is such a patriarchal society, and I hate it.” She gestured over to me. “Got one of the most talented boxers in the country here and the *Panthers* QB wants to make her his target for harassment.” I wished she wouldn’t have said that. I told Trisha I was good. Those clowns couldn’t beat me. I’d seen tougher ones than these preppy snobs. “So, I go to my A.D. and request a meeting with the little fucker—”

“That QB ain’t little!” Karen pointed out.

“Yeah. But his brain still isn’t fully developed. Little fucker. Well, the two of us go at it, and I eventually won. The kid knew it, and so did my boss. But instead of him disciplining the kid in my presence, he dismissed me so they could ‘further discuss it.’ I was two minutes away from sending him an uncomfortable email when I got one from him saying he’ll be meeting with me tomorrow alone to follow

up.” Trisha sucked her teeth. “If that ain’t the all-boys club move, I don’t know what it is. I wish I could give you some employment leads in the Athletic Department here at *BSU*, but this shit has me so vexed.”

It was obvious that it did. Trisha couldn’t stop rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

“Wish his father was still around to possibly teach him sensitivity,” Karen hummed, bringing her glass to her mouth with lifted brows.

“Settling in here at *BSU* sounds like a beautiful possibility,” Vic murmured and when I glanced her way, I found her eyes on me. Her smile was small, but definitely noticeable.

Quickly, I turned my head to the other side of the restaurant. My mind began to wander and I remembered my conversation with my mother earlier when I called her from Trisha’s office. She couldn’t send the money again today. I was now starting to believe she didn’t have it. I didn’t want to, though, because believing she used my money again on something other than me when I needed it would piss me off. I was tired of being pissed off. My mother swore she didn’t have time to find a *MoneyGram* or *Western Union*. She asked could she just mail it because wiring it would eat up the money I could be using on other things. So, I was still all the way out in the middle of nowhere with no money. I needed deodorant and a bigger sports bra—sneakers, too!

*Maybe I can get a loan from Uppercut...*

“I gotta go,” Karen announced, pushing back from the table.

She was a round woman with short hair and big teeth. Tonight was my second time seeing her. She worked somewhere on campus.

“Already?” Trisha asked, looking to be upset. She then stood to her feet, too. “I’ll walk you out. Then go to the restroom.”

“Nice meeting you, Vic.” Karen offered her hand and Vic reached across the table to meet it in a shake. “See you around, Tori.”

I gave her a nod, not knowing what to say. Trisha and her big booty friend left the table. I watched them exit the area of the restaurant, too.

“It’s good to meet my namesake.”

*Huhn?*

I looked over to the Vic lady and, this time, her smile was wide enough not to be missed. Her eyes were low, too. I’d seen that more times than I could count coming up.

Twisting my mouth nervously, I then asked, “What do you mean?”

“Namesake. You know. You have my name.”

My face balled, I was confused. Her licking her lips was the only clear messaging happening at the table. “*Wha*—why you say that?”

She leaned in closer, head falling to the side, eyes getting even smaller. “Your name is Victoria, and mine is, too.” She laughed quietly.

I stared at her, picking up too much from her energy. Then I shook my head. “That ain’t my name.”

Her face wrinkled. “It ain’t. Your name’s Tori, right?” I nodded, feeling crazy uncomfortable. “Then what could Tori be short for?” She yanked my ponytail softly.

I swallowed, knees trembling beneath the table. “*Ka*—KaToria.”

“Ahhh!” Her head bounced slowly up and down. “That’s even prettier. You know what it means?” Her eyes shot over to the direction Trisha and Karen had left in. That’s when I knew. I’d been here before. Too many times, but mostly with grown men. I shook my head. “Okay, cutie. Then why don’t you give me your number so I can help you figure out the meaning.”

She reached inside her suit jacket and pulled out a pen and business card. Vic turned it over to the blank side. “Write it there, *KaToria*, and I can school you on it.”

At first, I couldn’t move. I could only stare at the small white rectangle. My number? For what? I decided right away to not upset Trisha again today with anything concerning me. I snatched the pen and scribbled my dorm number. She was reaching for it before I could finish.

“Is this your cell?”

“I don’t have one.” My stomach started to turn and throat squeezed at what I’d just done. Trisha would be mad as hell at me. But I didn’t know what to do...didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. I needed to go. “Tell Trisha I had to get back to the campus. I’ll get up with her later.” I snatched my jacket off the back of my chair and broke out of there.

Vic was asking something, but it was behind my back because I was fucking out.



*Ashton*

I watched the table being cleared under the candlelit ambiance. The soft play of a live accordion backed by a baby grand piano filled the restaurant. It was half filled as it should be, I guessed, for a weekday.

“Can I get you the dessert menu?” the waiter asked; his eyes traveled from me, landing on NormaJean across the table.

Her eyes sparkled with wanton charm as they always did, riveting men—and sometimes women—unexpectedly. She regarded me, high cheekbones bronzed and sparkling under the soft light. “I don’t think we will. Thanks.” Her voice was melodic and clear.

“Very well.” He offered a neck bow before leaving, not paying another glance my way to see if I agreed.

It wasn’t personal. NormaJean was that mesmerizing.

“How’s your mother?” A note of sincerity in her cords.

NormaJean crossed her fingers painted a dark red at the square tips. Her head wrapped in a black turban with sparkling gems in the *Chanel* brooch holding it together. Only NormaJean could wear such a piece as a necessity and make the shit look like classic vogue, similar to the simple diamond studs in her ears. I guessed at thirty-four years old, she had it down to a science.

I chuckled, rubbing just beneath my bottom lip. “She’s good.”

“Still teaching at *William Paterson*?”

“Nah. She started at *Kean* this fall. They have a larger and ‘more active’ women’s health program, according to her.”

NormaJean scoffed, “Damn feminist. Does she still hate me?”

A harsh chuckle pushed from my nostrils. “NormaJean, my dear, my mother will go to her grave hating three people: her father, my father, and you.”

Finding it funny her damn self, she giggled. “I guess I deserve that.” Her eyes twinkled, spearing into me. “Enduring her animosity for me is one penance I wear without regret.” She angled her head. “Give the young lady a break.”

My head reared and eyes narrowed. “That was a swift change of pace.”

“Keep up.” Her chortle was breathy. “Instead of viewing her as disgraceful, useless, and annoying, you should try seeing her as a young, untarnished bud filled with potential the world needs.”

I scoffed. “You’ve got a lot of faith in a young, mean ass girl you’ve never met.”

“Because I was once a young, mean ass girl most wished they never knew.”

“That’s because I hadn’t been born yet. If so, you would’ve lost your mind from the smiles I put on your face.” I flashed a wicked smile.

With a repressed grin, NormaJean shook her head. “You wouldn’t have known how to make me lose my mind: I taught you those primal skills. You forget?”

Snapping my fingers then pointing to her, I agreed, “Touché.”

She scratched above her brow, smiling bashfully. “Now, back to the point. Everyone deserves grace. If she’s a horrible person—which I doubt she is—hopefully she’ll improve. Two of the best things I did were grow the hell up and make friends.” I nodded, appreciating her revelation. “And thank goodness I learned to. It made this whole cancer experience that much more bearable. Thanks to friends like you and others, I’m not going to die alone.”

My mouth dropped and nose flared. “Is that why you flew out here?”

*That’s fucked up!*

Flying so far to dump death in my lap.

“Oh, dear, no!” She giggled. “Ashton, calm down.”

I tried relaxing in the dimly lit restaurant, but I had no control over my heartrate that was now on fucking Pluto.

“Then what are you saying, woman?”

Her lips met, mouth widened into a smile, and long thick lashes smacked. “I’m cancer free, Ashton.”

My eyes burst wide and spine inclined in my seat. “Are you serious right now?”

Her lips parted and those perfectly white chiclets appeared. NormaJean smiled so big and bright, something I could only recall seeing after fucking for hours straight. When she nodded, I shot to my feet and leaped to the other side of the table. I grabbed her wrapped head and kissed her forehead. Her little hands rounded my waist and squeezed.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, girl!” I whispered through gritted teeth.

“Thanks, Ashton.” Her voice was small, and unusually fragile.

I took back to my seat, relieved as hell. It had been a tough past eight months of surgery then chemo. I’d taken more last-minute flights just to be by her side than she’d been able to talk me out of. I missed a game last season when she had an emotional breakdown after having both breasts removed. In her line of work, those accessories carried six zeros or more behind them.

“Thank God,” I muttered, meaning it. I may have acted like a heathen, but I knew God. Well. “This shit is finally over.”

“Well, let’s hope so.”

I shook my head. “Let’s say so, and let that be the end of it.” Still processing what this meant, I punched the air with passion.

NormaJean laughed. She’d still been underweight, but the color in her golden bronzed skin had returned some since I’d seen her this summer. I knew she had her last session of chemo before I returned to school, but she never mentioned the assessment her doctors had to do when it was up.

A thought occurred. “So, this is why you flew all the way out here.”

Giggling, she nodded. “Yes, Ashton.” Her arms went into the air, gesturing *Mario*, the best formal restaurant in my college-town. “This is why I came out here. To give you the news face-to-face. You deserve that courtesy after all the support you’ve shown.”

The waiter returned, handing me the check.

“No.” Her hand pushed into the air. “This was my invite; my treat. I insist.”

“You came all the way out here to share the best news I’ve heard in forever, and you think I won’t get the bill? You must be out your damn mind, girl.”



I handed my *American Express* to the waiter without glancing at the tab. It was easily over two hundred bucks, but pennies for the company.

“So what are you doing to celebrate?” I asked when the waiter took off.

“Well, I just started, by coming out here to see you. I’m going to head back to the airport and fly out to Paris for a few weeks. GiGi and the crew want to hit the circuit, and that takes time.” Then she rolled her neck, cheekbones highlighted. “And how do you plan to celebrate.” The devilish gleam in her eye clarified her inquiry.

I chuckled. “Go back to my apartment and work on these written interviews before the department’s PR head chews my ass out.”

“A young man your age should have a willing celebratory partner on speed dial.”

My brows lifted, uninspired. “I have a girlfriend. No speed dial feature on either of my phones.”

She spat in the air. “Give me a fucking break. Girlfriend my ass. I swear, I can still strangle her.”

A quiet chortle pushed from my chest. “It wouldn’t help. Aivery’s Aivery.”

“Fuck her,” NormaJean hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. “She doesn’t know how many of those girls on campus would die to be in your bed...your girlfriend, no less. She needs to grow the hell up, and before you’re drafted in the spring. I still don’t think she should have a ticket to your train. Find another girl, one who has a fucking clue.”

“Hey!” I waved my palms in the air. “Don’t kill my vibe by bringing her into this moment with my cougar/bestie/favorite pinup girl.” I laughed, and NormaJean did, too. Sobering, I added, “But this is huge for me. Congrats, baby girl. You’re the toughest woman I know.”

“Why thank you, Ashton Spencer. I’m happy to have this moment with you.”

The waiter returned my card with receipts for me to sign. When I wrapped that up, NormaJean and I left the table. I assisted with her *Burberry* cape near the front door when a suited man approached us.

“I’m sorry, Spencer.” His smile was goofy. “But Ms. Norma J, do you mind?” He pointed to a waitress who held up a camera.

My questioning gaze met NormaJean’s. I knew how particular she was about her appearance, especially after having just finished chemo recently. “Maybe some other time —”

“It’s okay, Ashton,” NormaJean insisted. “Unless it’s not okay with you...”

“Totally fine.” I backed away to give them room.

After a few clicks and flashes, and seeing a bit of the fire back in her eyes, a weight lifted from my shoulders. I had no idea I’d been carrying the stress of her recurrence and treatment the way I had. She was still here, healthy, and with all the beguiling star magic she’d had since I met her years ago.

As I walked her out to Marv, her travel companion who was pretty much an armed bodyguard, she elbowed me. “You got jealous back there?”

“How?”

“With them asking for a picture?” Her grin was perceptive.

“Hell no. Protective, for sure. I don’t want you feeling like a damn spectacle, especially after what you’ve been through.” I acknowledged Marv, waiting on her.

“Looks like it’s about to rain,” NormaJean surmised out loud, peering into the purple sky.

“Then you need to go.” I motioned her toward Marv as I handed my card to the valet.

NormaJean croaked out a sound begging my pardon. “If you don’t get over here and hug me!” She yanked on the

cuff of my jacket sleeve.

“Shit.” I caught myself. “I can now get out of protective mode. We cancer free, baby!” I sang playfully, pulling her into my arms.

She readily received me. “You better act like you know, Spencer.” Her squeeze was tight and sincere. She pulled back and peered up to me. “You better be lucky I respect your little relationship enough not to make you kiss me out here.”

My eyes roved up, left then right on the slow-moving street. It was after eight at night, and not much was popping around here during the week. Across the street, I saw a few people leaving out of nasty ass *Applebee's*, but that was the most populated area.

Smiling, I glanced down to her still in my arms. I hadn't held NormaJean this close in public in years, and especially around or on my campus. Neither one of us was with it. But tonight was different. I could tell she was just as giddy as I was about her recovery. I kissed her forehead again.

“Hit me up soon, and tell GiGi she owe me.”

NormaJean slipped from my hold, giggling. “You have a girlfriend. She can't make good on shit.”

Laughing, I shook my head. Marv had the car waiting at the corner. Seeing her off reminded me of wilder times. Tonight, *the* NormaJean flew into *BSU* land to surprise me with good news of her health. A few years ago, during my freshman year, she'd fly in to fuck.

“Tori!” The shriek snapped my attention across the street. Trisha moved frantically down the street. A tall woman with a masculine build and fade cut looked to have been searching in the opposite direction. “Tori!” she called out again.

At the same time, my truck pulled up in front of me. I sauntered out into the street and spotted the valet a crisp twenty before descending into my car and taking off for campus.



Tori

The rain pelted down on me. It began two minutes ago. The droplets so fat, trekking uphill, my sneakers were starting to soak. They were heavy and slowing me down. Worse than that, I had no idea where I was going beyond the bridge I'd just started on.

“Hey, shit brain!” A passing car zipped past with some idiot yelling out. “It’s raining like fuck!”

Their collective laughter faded the farther away they drove. *Humans are the most dumb creatures ever.* More cars zipped past, their tires spraying me with puddled water, but lights helping me see the next few yards ahead. Sudden beeping scared me and I began to walk faster. I was no punk, but not a fool either. The last thing I wanted was to come all the way out here to become a cold case. I watched that show.

“Tori!” a deep voice barked. Ashton was driving alongside me with his window down. Behind him, cars punched into their horns. One van veered around him, blowing its horn, too. “Hey, Tori!”

“I’m good. You can go!” I called out to him.

“In the rain? Don’t be dumb. Come on!” He tried watching the road and me at the same time.

“I’m not dumb, and I don’t need your help!” He was the rudest human of them all.

“Tori!” he shouted again.

I stopped, so fucking irritated. “It’s not far. Just go!”

“It’s a twenty-minute ride to the first *BSU* entrance!”

“So?”

“Add another twenty to get to your dorm, girl!”

I continued to walk, feet slipping inside my sneakers. “I’ll be fine.”

*If only I knew the way after this bridge...*

“You’re new here,” he continued to shout. “You don’t drive; you can’t possibly know how to get back to campus.”

“I’m good!”

He slammed on his brakes and roared so loud, it bounced off the railings on the bridge. “My fucking leather interior is being ruined because your stubborn ass wants to be a dumb ass!”

I stopped again, but didn’t look his way. Between that and the loud horns, I yanked my body toward his truck and dumped myself inside.

“Bout damn time,” he muttered, checking the rearview mirror before taking off. I rolled my eyes, holding my body tight. Beyond being soaked, I felt...dirty. “Where are you coming from?”

“Dinner.”

“With who?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It does if they drove you out here and had you walking back to campus. That’s fucked up.” He kept pushing. “Where’s your cell? You couldn’t call your roommate or some upperclassman with a car?”

“I don’t have a cell,” I grunted, wanting this ride to be over.

“So, with who does matter. Anything could have happened to you. If some random, nefarious fuck didn’t get to you, the bears would have once you crossed *BSU* lines.”

“Doesn’t matter. Why do you care what happens to this dog?”

“You’re shivering,” he mumbled and tapped a button on the console that lit in turquoise. This truck was fancy: burnt orange leather interior and it smelled like nothing else I’d ever experienced. “And believe it or not, I do care if you die.”

“Don’t care too much. I’m out of here tomorrow.”

“Leaving? As in quitting?”

“As in never coming back to this shit hole.”

“Yeah. Quitting like a quitter,” he muttered. My curled body tensed even more. Then he spoke louder. “That’s too bad. We start workouts tomorrow.”

I chanced a look his way. Ashton’s eyes met me quickly, then went back to the road.

“Who?”

“You and me. It’s a part of me making amends—” His eyes rolled and inflection changed. “—with you and to show *Panther* spirit. Trisha didn’t tell you?”

“No. Why you gotta do that?” I felt my butt warm.

“Because you snitched on me.” His voice was calm... friendly as though we were kicking it about the game. “That’s what happens when you’re a leader on this campus. You’ve gotta kiss lots of ass.”

“I ain’t snitch.” I needed that to be clear. What Trisha did was what she did. I didn’t run crying to her. “I ain’t no baby. I ‘on’t need saving.”

“I was vexed earlier, but honestly, I’m over it. It’s all good. My bad for all the shitty things I said to you. It won’t happen again.” I didn’t say shit. He was probably messing with my head anyway. This could have been some immature game he and his friends were playing, trying to make me believe we were cool. “It was wrong of me to never introduce myself or simply let you be without the jokes.”

I swung my neck his way. “So, I’m supposed to believe we’re friends now?”

“Hell no.” He chuckled, but it wasn’t in a mean way. His words were harsh, but his energy, not so much. “I’m saying I won’t be a shitty human anymore.”

My eyes slid over to him. Did he have a bug in my brain? But Ashton’s attention remained on the road. And that’s the way the rest of the ride went. We arrived on campus, and as though I’d told him which one I lived in, Ashton pulled in

front of my dorm building. Thankfully, no one was out because of the rain. It was late and I was tired.

The truck hardly stopped before I opened the door.

“Hey,” he called out to me, and my body froze with my back to him. “If you change your mind about quitting tomorrow, I start my workout at the old track field. I run four miles before lifting in the main gym. I’m out there at 5:30 sharp, Monday through Friday.”

Without another word, I left the truck. I made a dash up the stairs and into the building, hearing my sneakers suck-kiss the floor. When would this day end?

“Who’s dropping you off in the *Cayenne*?” I turned to see Andrea, one of Aivery’s friends, standing near the windows with the full view of the front of the building.

“What?” My face was balled tight.

Her head fell to the side, long, dark, braids with the perfect X pattern reaching her small hip. She then tossed her head back toward the window, boxed braids swinging in the air. “The *Porsche* out there. He’s still waiting on you.”

My eyes swung toward the window. Ashton was still out there waiting in his... *Porsche*? Ashton Spencer had a *Porsche*? Is that what they looked like? I’d never seen one.

“Mind your fucking business while waiting on your food.”

Her mouth dropped as soon as the elevator chimed. Two people stepped off and I walked in. When I pressed my floor, I saw Andrea still standing there, mouth ready to catch flies.



The stupid phone ringing snapped me from my sleep. The room was completely dark, and for a while, I didn’t know where I was. After a few rings, I realized Samantha either wasn’t in her bed or wouldn’t answer it. I lifted from my warm pillow and tapped the small nightstand, hoping to feel it. Thank god the cordless was there.

“Hello...”

“Tori?”

My forehead stretched. “Ma?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah...” What was going on?

“Look...” My heart started racing at her second pause.

“Ma, it’s late.”

“Yeah. I know!” she snapped. “Look. I ain’t got the money.”

“My money?”

“Yeah. That.” *What?!* “I got let go from *Walgreens* a couple of weeks ago. I ain’t wanna tell you because I know you been tryna get yourself together out there. I used the money to pay the bills around here where I was short from my last check from them.”

I pulled in hella air from my nostrils; my stomach flipped, then squeezed. “That was my money, Ma.” The words felt yanked from my throat. Painful. I knew she’d lied when I spoke to her last week. “I ain’t got no tampons, bras...my sneakers got a hole in them and they stink.”

“I know,” she groaned.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“I’m figuring it out. I called Cut—”

“Cut? Why?”

“Because you need money, Tori!” she yelled.

“You still shouldn’t’ve done that, Ma!”

*His ass abandoned me!*

“He said he gonna get back to me tomorrow. But your aunt, Sonya, gone send you fifty dollars in the morning. That should get you something.”

“That ain’t enough for sneakers.”



“Times is hard, KaToria! It ain’t always about the finer things in life!”

“Ma! Did you hear me? My only pair of sneakers stink! I have a hole in my sole. It rained tonight and water got all in my shoes!” I groaned so hard, my throat felt like it was on fire.

She knew I didn’t buy clothes and shoes. I didn’t ask for much other than food. That money was mine to take care of me. I had basic needs unmet.

“Well, walk to a *MoneyGram* in the morning.”

“I’m in the middle of a big campus, Ma. I can’t walk off of it. Everything’s far.”

“Well, bum a ride. Damn! Shit!” she snapped again.

I wanted to tell her that was almost as impossible as walking because I didn’t have friends. Wanted to tell her I was coming home as soon as I could arrange the flight because the humans here were just as bad, if not worse, than those in Millville. I didn’t say any of those things because she didn’t get it. She never got me. And the truth of the matter was, many of my problems with folks at home came from my mother. Here, at *Blakewood*, the kids hated me for reasons that had nothing to do with her. That revelation reminded me of something important. I’d gotten away from her. I was now on my own, free to create a life for myself, hopefully drama-free. I had no clue how I’d do it, but trying had to be better than what I was feeling when dealing with her.

“Okay, Ma. I’mma go to bed now.” I swallowed back bitter words. “You should, too.”

“Get there early!” she shouted as though I was closing the door on her.

“Bye, Ma.”

I did. I hung up determined to give *Blakewood* another try.



# Ashton

Half the sky was black and the other orange as the sun rose over the mountains. I cranked up the volume on my *iPod*, preparing to hit the track. *Damn...* I loved it out here first thing in the morning. This was the old track and field team's official running grounds. Two years ago, *BSU* finished the construction on a newer and larger field on the other side of the athletic campus. I had no idea what they'd do with this one, but until they did, I'd come for my runs. It was always vacant and clean. Almost as though only the grounds people and I remembered it existed.

A hard hand pat at the back of my shoulder scared the living shit out of me. I snatched off my headphones as I leaped into the air. Just when I was prepared to cuss Al, Dre, or whichever one of my boys with the balls to sneak up on me the fuck out, the girl, Tori, was there resting her weight on one hip with crossed arms.

"The fuck!" I yelped.

"Tell me you're not inviting me out here just to clown me with your friends as some type of set up." She waited with a balled mouth and hiked brows.

*Invite?*

Shit! I forgot she existed, much less I had invited her out here to appease Jones and that fucking pain in the ass, Trisha Gaskin.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Going for my *iPod* to hit pause, I exhaled, bringing my mind back to yesterday. "I have no idea who or what you think my friends and I are about, but I can swear to you, on everything I have, we have better things to do than to fuck with a freshman."

Tori glanced around over each of her shoulders. "So you mean to tell me, they're not behind the bleachers or the fence over there, ready to laugh at the hole in my sneaker?"

A hard scoff left my nostrils. "Hell no!" She was bugging. "And what hole?" That was impossible...until she

lifted her left foot and pulled on the sole, exposing the white of her sock. “Damn. You need kicks ASAP. I don’t have time to wait for you to get some either. I’ve got weights in an hour, then practice, then therapy.”

Tori rolled her eyes beneath the brim of her weathered *Connecticut Kings* baseball cap. “I’m good in these for this run.”

“It’s not just a run I do, but if you insist...” I shrugged.

“I haven’t agreed to doing this with you.” She continued with her misgivings. “Tell me why you had a change of heart about me.”

I shrugged again, pivoting to keep from laughing. “I told you. Your A.A.D. ratted me out to her boss, the head of the athletics program, after you ratted me out to her.”

Tori shook her head, eyes blinking. “I never ratted you out to anyone. I told you: ain’t nobody doing nothing to me on this campus for me to be scared.”

I chuckled, scratching my head to exercise patience. “Well, that’s how it played out to me.”

“I only told her I was ready to go home because I don’t fit in here. Besides that...” She shook her head, palm in the air. “You’re the biggest man on this campus. I don’t see you tucking your tail for anyone. I heard how the whole staff bows down to you.”

I nodded. Even though she was wrong, she had a point. “Okay. What do you want from me?”

“I want the real reason why you invited me to do this.”

I rubbed my chin. Then a thought occurred. “Okay.” I nodded, inspired. “I’ll tell you what gave me a change of heart if you tell me something.”

She dropped her arms and dipped her chin. “What?”

“Why you left Trisha at *Applebee’s* last night.”

Her eyes fell away and she took in a deep breath. “Deal. You first.”

“Me?” My forehead stretched. Tori nodded, and I tried not to laugh. “Okay. My change of heart came last night at dinner, in town. A friend of mine gave me incredible news about their health.” I nodded, feeling those few words landed anticlimactically. “It was a possible terminal diagnosis, but with responsive treatment, it was defeated. It reminded me of what really matters in life—or in this case, what doesn’t. I’ve had a rough start to the semester.

“My cousin’s been locked up since this summer on some police corruption bullshit. We’ve been supporting him as much as possible, but have no control behind those barbed wires. I live for his calls just to hear he’s okay until they move his case along. So, that diagnosis and major family issues were bits of it. I took it out on you when I saw you, but it was nothing more than that. Your turn.”

She widened her legs and crossed her arms protectively. “What?”

“Why did you leave dinner with Trisha like that? What did she do to piss you the fuck off?”

Tori rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t Trisha.” She stalled for a moment. “It was her friend.”

*Friend?*

I was confused until I remembered the lesbo outside with Trisha.

“What happened with her friend?”

“She tried to...” Her face whipped away, nostrils expanded. Tori struggled with her words. “Her friend thought I was something I’m not.”

“Like what?”

She shrugged, eyes swinging left to right. “I don’t know. I’m just not down with that stuff. I don’t like girls.”

*Oh...*

“Trisha let her push up on you?” Tori shook her head to the negative. “Then what happened?”

“She tried me. That’s all. I didn’t like it, so I bounced. That’s it.”

*Okay...*

Not caring much about the girl to push her for more details, I decided to drop it. I pointed over toward the starting point of the track. “Let’s start there. Not sure how fast or long you are, but I’m here until I finish four miles, which is usually sixty minutes. You can wait or go; it’s up to you. When I’m done, I go the main gym floor for about forty-five minutes of conditioning and strengthening. After that is practice, then a massage for me. We play here at home tomorrow.” My hands swung into the air, not knowing how much more to share. It’s not like she was on my team or anything. I just wanted to be less hostile to the girl.

Without a reply, Tori took off for the starting point. I met her there, slipped my headphones on, and hit play on my *iPod*. Then started my clock for the time. We took off together, and naturally, she lagged behind me. I didn’t give a shit. This was my time. Sharing a track with her meant nothing to me. I released my mind to Lil’ Wayne as I glided into my run.

The first time I thought to check my watch, I saw a shadow behind me. I was flying through the middle of the second lap. The sun was fully set, and Tori was about three meters on my ass. From my quick glance, her face was tight, mouth ajar as she pushed ahead. On a mental chuckle, I continued forward, old school Biggie blasting in my ear now.

I felt sweat race down my face the next time I checked the time. I was on the third lap and my feet were heated. A curled body to my left on the track led my mind to register Tori, who was bent over, doing something with her foot. She must have wiped out, I figured, and locked back into my focus. On my fifth lap, Tori was stretched out on the track. I pushed ahead.

In the middle of my seventh lap, I breezed past her moderate jog. Running was an escape for me. It allowed me to move mentally in a way I’d love to through life; in a breeze. I could focus on a thought, or not entertain any if I wanted while

sprinting. Awareness did strike on lap nine when I caught Tori slowing, hurled over coughing. Mentally, I laughed again. She needed to improve on her lungs.

Tori was back on the track for her ninth lap. She looked better, completely soaked. By lap ten, I was struggling; warring with laziness. I preserved, but slowed on my eleventh lap. My feet were swollen and chest heavy. So, I practically jogged into lap twelve. Tori basically ended with me, just as winded.

We both ended hunched over with our hands and arms on our knees. That was until Tori barreled over and stretched out on the track mat.

Winded my damn self, I laughed. “So you aren’t quitting?”

Her eyes opened and narrowed. Tori’s face was stony when she finally shook her head.

I snorted. “That could be a good thing. Flight prices are mad high now.”

She eventually stood and we started off the field. “Oh, I wasn’t paying.” Her face was to her feet. “In my *BSU* package is two flights this semester, for one of the holidays.” She jerked her head. “Mine would’ve just been one way.”

I nodded, not caring for much more small talk. “Let’s go do some conditioning and strength training in the weight room. Who’s your trainer?”

She shrugged then stopped to take off her shoe. She bent it, manipulating the sole, then took a whiff. Her face folded something mean. But Tori didn’t complain. She put the sneaker back on. “Luke Brown.” She wheezed. “Cornny guy, but I didn’t schedule with him for this morning.”

That was odd to me, but working out with a girl was, too. We drudged to the gym. Inside, one of the training aides was crossing the foyer.

“Hey, Todd,” I called out to him. “You know who Tori’s trainer is?”

Tori and I stopped as he tapped into his tablet. “Luke? Yeah.”

“Is he in this morning?” I asked.

“Nah. Not until six tonight. But that’s her boxing trainer.”

*Okay...*

I didn’t realize that. What Todd was saying was her boxing trainer wasn’t scheduled with her this morning, so he wouldn’t be in the general gym randomly.

“Is there a trainer available for her now?”

“Nah. It’s okay.” Tori shook her head, body stiff. “I can hit Trisha to figure it out.”

“Tasha could be.” He pulled out his cellphone. “Let me find her.”

Ignoring Tori’s coolness, I nodded and pivoted to take off. “Cool. We’ll be in the main gym.” I swung my head for her to follow.

I opened the door for her and we walked into the gym. The usual heads were there. Dre had already been at it on the TRX Row. The treadmills were almost all occupied. The elliptical machines were going. And many of the weight benches were taken.

Mark, my trainer, approached us. “Ready, captain?” He rubbed his hands together, his playful sinister grin on display.

“You know it.” I tossed my head to Tori, who was gazing around the gym like a wild cat. “Tori’s gonna work out with us until Tasha comes. Good with you?”

“Oh, yeah. Come on, young lady!” He began toward the back of the gym where he already had my weight tools ready for me. “I’ve seen you around the admin offices. Right?” Tori nodded, stiff as usual. I emptied my pockets on a bench. “What’re you? Fifties?”

“Yeah,” Tori nodded. “I guess.”

“Yo!” I shouted over to the manager’s booth where Sam’s, the gym’s manager, booth was. “Let’s let that *King of the South* spit on this bitch!”

I needed to kill the top 100 pop play happening now. Seconds later, T.I.’s “*What You Know*” began filling the air. Mark got me started with bench presses and Tori with push presses. Less than twenty minutes later, Tasha came through and took over with Tori. They remained in the back, where I generally worked out alone with Mark before going over to the TRX Row and other things. For the next hour and fifteen minutes, we trained hard, something I knew Tori was capable of.

When I was done, a small crowd had gathered around Tori across the floor. She’d just finished up on mountain climber tuck jump burpees. Some of the female soccer players gathered a couple of crew members, and some of my team spent the last of their training time watching her work. She moved like a damn machine: eyes blank, face glistening, and entire body in swift coordination.

The crowd broke when Tori was done. Tasha gave her a few words of feedback as Tori pulled that damn sneaker off again, bending it. That shit annoyed me each time she did it, so I could only imagine how much of a distraction it was for her when working out.

I lifted my arm, pointing toward the north doors of the gym where the café was. “Protein?”

Twisting her mouth to the side, she nodded. Again, she was hesitant, but I was believing that state of mind was her thing. We walked to the small concession and ordered our drinks. I made short conversations with a few people in passing, all while noticing Tori avoided, at all cost, looking my way. When our drinks were ready, I used my card to clear mine.

“You have your meal card?” I asked her.

Tori hesitated, then pulled the card from the inner pocket of her leggings. “I can use this here?”



I snorted. “Yeah. You use it anywhere on campus that honors meal plans.”

A burst of shouts snatched my attention. My guys were marching down the hall in one line toward the exit for the field. Al’s big ass led the way and while chanting, he made sure to growl and gesture a ferine bite to Tori before continuing to the door.

Laughing at his stupid ass, I turned to Tori. “You good?” She nodded while rolling her eyes. “I’m gonna shower before this Research in Statistics class, and I’ll meet you back here around 1:15 for a massage.” I backed away, keeping in mind the time. “I’ll have you scheduled.”

Tori performed the faintest nod before I took off.

## -Then-

Tori

As I left class, confused as hell about complex compounds, I stopped at the opening of the entrance of the science building.

“Yo, sir?” The call got my attention, weird enough. I rolled my eyes when I saw Al strolling past with his arm around a girl whose head he held close to his. “Spencer’s looking for you in the gym.”

My face tightened, confused. Didn’t I tell him I had class? Why would he be looking for me? We’d worked out already for the day.

“I just left him after showers.” Al barked back, not breaking his stride with the girl.

I sighed, hoping this wasn’t what I had to look forward to now that I’d *only* agreed to working out with him. Something I hadn’t exactly committed to, but was feeling out since he seemed to be trying to be nice. I didn’t trust these *Blakewood* humans. A little annoyed, I took the campus jitney to the athletic compound. Once there, I headed straight to the main gym. I didn’t see Ashton. Thinking of where he could be, I left for the hallway. Then I remembered Al mentioning the showers.

*I’m not going in there!*

“Hey, McNabb,” Dre called me, coming from the opposite direction. His curly fade tilted as he looked to be dialing into his cellphone. “Spence looking for you. He’s in the massage room.”

I stopped in my tracks. *That helps a lot...* I rolled my eyes. How did he expect to “get” me if he was in there?

I didn't realize Dre had stopped until he mentioned, "You can go ahead to Room B in the spa wing. He said just knock." He spoke without looking at me and walked off.

I tried remembering exactly where the spa wing was. I didn't recall much from my tour here when I first moved in. Only the main gym and locker room. *Damn, this place is too big!* The athletic facility at *BSU* was bigger than my damn regional high school in Bridgeton! Moving toward the back of the main room, I saw a directory. After locating the massage wing, I took up the stairs to the third floor. It was quiet up here, mostly suits passing me by in the halls, but not many.

It took a short time to find Room B once in the right corridor. My palms were soaked when I tried to ball one into a fist and knock on the door softly.

"It's open!"

I jumped at that like a damn fool. I tried catching my breath before pushing the door open. Ashton was face down on the massage table with just his boxers on while a guy I'd seen around the complex was kneading into his shoulder.

"Oh..." He hesitated. "Hi."

Ashton lifted his head and his eyes found me. He looked...tired. "I thought you were supposed to meet me here at 1:15 for the massage."

My eyes raced to the walls where, on one, I found a digital clock. It was 2:02.

"I had class." My mouth was parched, tongue heavy.

"You didn't mention that. I had a session set up for you, but didn't know if you prefer a masseuse or masseur."

He looked at me like he was expecting an answer. I had no idea about the difference between a masseuse or masseur, so I shrugged. "I 'on't know." My words fell too softly.

*Like a punk...*

Like... Somebody touching me all over as the guy was doing to Ashton? *Hell no!* Somebody I didn't know or trust on something other than my hands or lower arms? *Nah...* My

body began to tremble lowly. I was low key freaking the hell out.

His forehead stretched. “You don’t know?”

I reached back for the door handle and shook my head. “I don’t need a massage. I gotta catch my next class.” Ashton didn’t say anything, and the guy massaging him slowed and gaped at me like I rode the damn short yellow bus, too. “I’ll see you on the track in the morning.”

I left and closed the door behind me without another word. I didn’t want to be touched.

By *any*-fucking-one.



Working out twice today didn’t seem like a good idea when I was just about limping into the building of my dorm. My trainer, Luke, with his assistant, Tyrone, was ready for my ass promptly at 6:15, when we were scheduled to box. In between going over boxing techniques, Tyrone had me working out. Once again, they brought me some work I didn’t think I’d get through, but I did. The last set of pushups, lunges, squats, and footwork drills took me out.

Right after the gym, I wobbled over to the cafeteria for dinner to-go and came straight to my dorm. I couldn’t wait for my shower and to put my feet up while I devoured the T-bone steak, fresh mashed potatoes, and string beans I found out would be my dinner. Each meal was a surprise for me now, thanks to that nutritionist.

As soon as I stepped through the lobby door, the elevator dinged. Andrea and ShawnNicole stepped out, dressed to the nines in heels and mini dresses. Bright red and pink lips with bouncy, glistening hair. Andrea’s long boxed braids were styled into a neat bow at the crown of her head. ShawnNicole’s thick, dark natural curls spilled into her face and covered her shoulders. Nope. I didn’t fit in at *Blakewood* at all. Not even the best from my hometown looked so polished when cleaned up.

*Shit...*

I kept a steady pace to catch their elevator.

“Hey, McNabb. Right?” the guard behind the security booth asked loud enough to get my attention. My head whipped over to him as the clench on my bagged dinner tightened. I nodded, eyes flicking between him and the glam girls passing me. Well, they were until my name was called. “You’ve got a delivery that needs to be signed for.”

With every sore muscle in my body, I turned to my left for the desk. Had my mother finally sent me the money? Was it an apology for abandoning me from Cut? A care package from Ragee? Curiosity took over and I quickly signed, and was handed a box. Beyond anxious, I ripped it open to find a fancy gold metallic box. Inside were two brand new pairs of sneakers; one white and the other black. They had to be from Cut. He was cheap as fuck, but never as cold as he’d been when abandoning me.

*Is he congratulating me for not quitting?*

“Holy fuck!” was breathed behind me. I whipped around at the same time Andrea cried, “The *DMP Jordan 6s!*”

The sneakers were clearly *Jordans*, but I didn’t notice which ones right away. They were the limited edition my friends at home had been yapping about all year. My jaw dropped. Uppercut couldn’t afford this. He didn’t have money like that. Moving the boxes aside to separate them, I found a card inside.

*Again, my bad.*

*Plus, your old ones smell like garlic roasted shit, in case nobody’s told you.*

*P.S. Had to call in a favor for your shoe size. It better be right.*

My eyes popped from my head as every muscle froze rigid in my body. Shock, embarrassment, confusion...I felt everything in that moment. His name wasn’t on the card. Ignoring stupid ass Andrea, I searched the box it was delivered

in and all that could be found was the brand's company name.

“Is that from the *Cayenne*?” Andrea asked, eyes wide with wonder.

“Who?”

“The guy who dropped you off in the *Porsche Cayenne*.”

The elevator dinged—and in perfect time. I threw the snobby girl, Andrea, the nastiest expression my facial muscles could strain into before pulling the boxes in my arms and skipping to the elevator.



He was different today, slower. Still ahead of me, but closer than what I'd seen of him yesterday. I wasn't too far behind like before, but was still able to catch sight of his face twisted tight as though he was in pain. I didn't see that yesterday at all. Maybe he got hurt at practice and was now in pain.

Just as Ashton told me, the old track was empty. I met up with him this morning for a warm-up run. He didn't say a word when he showed up, finding me waiting. There was only a nod of acknowledgement before we stretched then took off on the track. The new sneakers were a save, but needed to be broken in.

It was nice out here, clean and peaceful. The cool breeze hit my damp face and heated body as my legs lifted and pushed against the air. Sparring was my favorite training, but running quieted the noise of my head in a way that made me feel like I was floating. This morning, I ran with a confidence Ashton didn't allow yesterday because he went so hard. We were only on the third lap, but were too close to believe all was okay with him.

I pushed ahead, emptying my brain of anything that would prevent the success of the task at hand: finishing the run. On the fifth lap, I stopped to catch my lungs that burned, feeling like they were about to explode. As I stretched over to

grab my knees, Ashton passed by slower than his norm. Dude was definitely off. After a couple of minutes, I pushed myself on to continue. Before I knew it, I'd made it to the seventh lap. When I was able to capture it from close enough proximity, his face was still screwed.

By the ninth lap, he'd begun grunting. I knew that was to push himself to the finish line. Any athlete would recognize the painful cry. On the tenth lap, Ashton was faster than he'd been since we'd started. But when he was done, he rested longer, bent over on his knees, than he did last time. Yesterday was only one day that I'd run with the guy, and not enough time for me to profess to know dude. But his aura had been so closed off yet heavy compared to just twenty-four hours ago, it couldn't be ignored.

After grabbing his *Panthers* sports bottle and then my own, I jogged over to him with a heaving chest. Using the bottle, I tapped his shoulder, offering it to him.

When he grabbed it without changing posture, I asked, "I'm sure if you tell her you're sorry for the gazillionth time, assure her the girl meant nothing, and tell her how pretty she is, she'll forgive you *again* and take you back *again*."

His face came up, scrunching against the newly risen sun. "I don't fuckin' cheat on my girl."

"Shit happens." I shrugged, pulling my bottle to my face for a sip. "I'm sure reminding her of her superior features will heal the lick of betrayal."

"You checkin' for my girl, McNabb?"

I spit out air. "Hardly. She's cute and all, but—"

"But what?" He stood to his feet, a sneer I'd seen on him loosening his face.

"She's not my type."

"What's your type?"

"A real athlete, that's for sure."

He laughed. When I thought he'd curse me out for dissing his girl, Ashton Spencer laughed. I watched him catch

his breath and drink water.

“I don’t have a problem with my girlfriend. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were slow today. Crazy slow.”

The smile fell from his face, and the sadness immediately darkening him was so obvious.

“Shit happens,” he mumbled.

“Not to ‘Spence,’ from what I hear around here.”

He shrugged with his head, eyes cast out into the distance. “Yeah. So I’ve been told.”

Suddenly, the words in his note that was delivered with the sneakers yesterday came to mind. “Is it your family?” Without looking at me, he nodded, lips hiked. “Wanna—” I swallowed unexpectedly, not believing how naturally the words came to mind. I didn’t comfort humans; I steered clear of them. And in this case, it was extra corny and awkward because here was a cool kid. The most popular on campus. I licked my lips and forged ahead against my better judgment. “Wanna...uhhh...talk about it?”

He scoffed, suspicious regard on me. “Why would I want to do that?” His eyes rolled down to my feet, then back up to my face. “Because I bought you kicks? Is this your way of saying thanks?”

That nipped me.

“No.” My lips pouted and brows pinched. “The fact that you randomly bought the ‘dog’ sneakers is what made me believe you do shit like this to randoms you fuck, too. That’s how I advise you to handle your girlfriend. But now that you bring it up, I guess I should say thanks for the sneakers. You never gave me a chance to with how cold you were before we started the run.”

“Again, I don’t cheat on my girl,” he pushed out through gritted teeth, intimidating the fuck out of me.

“And I don’t usually give two shits about obviously wounded people when I come across them, but I thought we



were both *Panthers* and could, at least, treat each other with kindness for that reason alone.”

Ashton’s gaze was so hard on me, it damn near burned my face. But I wouldn’t back down. I hated bullying. Win, lose, or draw, sometimes I forced myself to fight back. He was rude. Mean and moody. Manipulative, using occasional kindness in a gesture to lower my defenses, all to be cold to me all over again.

“No one’s asked,” he whispered as though in the middle of a revelation.

*What?*

“Asked you what?”

“Asked me about what’s really been going on with me. Or how I’ve been feeling about what’s happening to my family. Weeks back on campus and no one’s fuckin’ asked.”

“Well, I just tried to.” *Confused human.* With wide eyes, I swiped my head left and right. “What’s going on with your family, bruh? With you?”

Ashton lifted one brow. “Why are you asking?”

I crossed my arms and widened my stance. “You really wanna go back there?”

I couldn’t give a shit about Ashton Spencer. I didn’t even know him. His cousin could have lost the family house that big momma left behind and I wouldn’t lose a night of sleep over it. The cousin’s house could have burned down and they lost all their memorabilia—something that had happened to me—and I wouldn’t think of it past lunchtime. I didn’t give two rats’ ass—

“I heard you were from Jersey, too. I don’t know if you knew, but I’m from Essex County.” He scratched his head, beginning what felt like a long ass story. “I’ve got a bunch of family in Newark. You know anything about Newark?”

*Duh! Stenton Rogers is from Newark!*

“A little,” I answered. “Yeah.”

“Well, you should know it’s heavy in gang activity. My family runs one of the biggest gang organizations in the city. For some of my family, street life is all they know. I have so many cousins my age and younger who only aspire to wiping out a rival gang. And these gangs go beyond the streets; it’s heavy in the county jail and prisons throughout the state.”

*Wait...*

“You in a gang?”

“No.” He shook his head. “My moms would beat my ass. But so many of our family are. My cousin, Brick. The one I mentioned yesterday. He’s my age, and has not only been in a beef with a rival gang for years, but it’s been progressing like crazy. It exploded when Brick got into a shootout after a backyard baby shower back in April. He hit a kid from the other side, Blocck Boi \$even. He didn’t kill him, but dude was messed up, in a coma for like a month. It took the police department a few months, but they finally picked Brick up for the shooting back in July.”

“Dang...”

He shook his head. “It’s not just that. Brick about that life. He knows what comes with it. If he shoots and the bullet traces back to him, he knows he has to answer for it some way, somehow. What’s fucked up about it is last summer, Brick found his way into police corruption. He was at his man’s house when a few NPDs came to cop. Dudes were in plain clothes, but was poppin’ off at the mouth. Brick had no idea who they were while waiting on their product—honestly, I don’t think he’d care—so he started firing back.

“One thing led to another, a fight broke out, spilling into the backyard. Brick was getting the best of one of them... even threw dog shit in dude’s face. I guess that was too much and his partner pulled out on Brick, finally identifying themselves. With a gun on him, they whooped Brick’s ass, fracturing his ribs, busted his nose and lips. Someone who didn’t know these were cops called 911. Everything was caught on tape.”

“Shit...”

There was no win with the police. This story was insane.

“Exactly. Brick was arrested then treated a whole day later. Internal investigations got involved when someone emailed every address in the police department and city they could find. We still don’t know who. It didn’t really matter to Brick: he lived to hustle another day and ain’t no snitch. So since last summer when this all went down, it seems like NPD put a bounty on his head, which is probably why they took so long to arrest him for shooting the Blocck Boi \$even. They wanted to be thorough and make that shit stick.”

“I see.”

“Nah.” Ashton shook his head. “Let me paint the picture. The Blocck Boi \$even who Brick shot has a brother in the county. Matter of fact, quite a few Blocck Bois are in the county.”

“Like...the county jail?”

“Yeah. And at the county level, if NPD wanna fuck with him, they can assign him to an area where Blocck Bois outnumber my family’s gang. He’s really at their mercy.” Stunned at his reality, I was wordless. I had nothing to offer. I wasn’t good at...comforting humans. “When you’re behind those walls, there are no eyes on you. The COs can do whatever the fuck they want, and so far, they’ve been fuckin’ with us. We go weeks without hearing from him. Even the people he fucks with in there can’t account for him, so we have no control. We got him a lawyer, but nothing’s guaranteed. The last time we spoke to Brick, he tried to assure us he was okay, but I know my cousin. He’s just putting on for us and whoever’s listening in on his calls.”

“Have you heard from him lately?”

Ashton shook his head, eyes blinking fast with worry. This tall, athletic dude was torn before my eyes.

“That’s messed up, yo,” I breathed in disbelief. “How can you perform with all this shit on your shoulders?”

# Ashton

The wrinkle between her eyes struck me. Who was this girl? The Tori McNabb I'd seen around campus was more detached and other than human. She was pitiful, and from what I'd heard, talented. She was weird with a fucked up weave and busted sneakers.

This girl, just inches away, showing more sympathy than anyone I'd known for almost four years on this campus, was warm and compassionate. It was unnecessary. I wasn't looking for a friend in Tori McNabb. I'd only been trying to make good on disappointing A.D. Jones. Nothing more.

I shrugged, stepping off to get the rest of my things to go. "The way people in my family do. Keep pushing."

I left Tori hanging, standing there looking stupid. It was wrong, but necessary. She didn't utter a word while I walked to the bleachers for my bag and towel. She was still muted when I started toward the entrance of the track to leave.

I waved her on. "C'mon. We can schedule you for a massage before my practice."

Tori bent over, picking up her things from the ground in a single, rough swoop. She walked past me, making it clear, "Ain't nobody laying a fuckin' finger to massage me. Ever."

I blinked, not expecting that decree. Maybe I deserved that brisk energy.



October

Tori

She threw a hook I saw coming, and I was able to block it and toss a quick and easy left jab, right cross combo.

"Ut!" Luke, my trainer, shouted, jumping over the ropes and into the ring. "That's it!"

The girl was laid out on her side. *What?* I was vexed. I didn't even hit her hard. Tyrone, Trisha, Collin, and the medical trainer jumped in as well. I stood back wondering why this girl was on the floor.

*The hell...*

We were sparring today. When sparring, you typically don't go for blood with your opponent. You get pushed and your timing and response are tested. At my level, it wasn't cool to knock out your sparring partner. She was a twenty-four year old local fighter. Had been fighting longer than me. I didn't use full force on her. In this practice exercise, we were testing speed, not power.

I watched, waiting patiently while they asked her if she was okay. Then Luke, Trisha, Tyrone, and Collin backed away, forming a new circle. They whispered, sighed, and shook their heads. I couldn't hear much because of the old school music Luke had playing in the back. It wasn't loud—I didn't hear it while sparring—but now that ear-hustling was paramount, it annoyed the shit out of me. Conferencing? For what? I did nothing wrong. Not saying ol' girl did either, but that combo was lightweight. Would they kick me out of the program?

*Do I care?*

I'd been wanting an out from this place since I stepped foot on campus six weeks ago. *Send me home!* I'd at least make a few dollars doing this instead of feeling like a lab rat. I couldn't deny feeling a stab of fear, though, and I hated it. I hated rejection. If I had gone home on my own, it would have been me quitting. But if I was sent home, it would have been me failing. I didn't know much, but boxing was a skill I honed in my damn sleep. No damn way I could have *BSU* ship me back for not exceeding in this one thing!

First, Luke turned and started my way with his head hung. Still out of breath, I tried to get control of my lungs. Then Trisha and Collin followed him, being just as long-faced as him.

“Tori...”

“Yeah?” I answered too anxiously; my eyes fell away, embarrassed.

Luke had to be in his forties, an old head, but younger than Uppercut. He had brown skin, wore small, but thick-lens glasses, and was balding in the middle of his head. He scratched his temple, which was silver-gray as his head tilted to the side and his eyes were on the ring floor. “How do you feel about sparring with...men?” He used his hand to swipe the back of his neck. It was obvious he was uneasy about this. “I got some amateurs at a gym I own who need to learn the basics. They ain’t that big—”

“I don’t need small,” I made clear. Both Trish and Collin’s heads behind Luke snapped up. The medical trainer had the girl up and was helping her out of the ring behind Luke. “I ‘on’t know why we started with one. I ain’t never spar with no girl. Why it feel like y’all tryna hold me back here?”

“Hey.” Trisha came to my side quickly, trying to soothe me like I was a baby. “It’s not that. It’s just at the collegiate level, there are liabilities we have to consider. Not only do we have to teach you, we have to protect you. Remember, you’re *Blakewood’s* first *Lady Panther* boxer. We’re trying to do this right *and* big. We can’t treat you like a ragdoll and throw gorillas in the ring with you, Tori.”

“But you could bring your male boxers. That one, Reggie Laws, is somebody I can give work to.”

Collin shook his head silently. Luke gave Tyrone an eye I didn’t exactly understand, but I knew when I was being slept on.

“Tori...” Trisha hesitated.

“It’s sparring, Trisha, damn! It ain’t like we’re fighting.”

“You were sparring with Latesha here.” Luke pointed over his shoulder as she limped to the set of double doors to my right, hanging onto the medical trainer.

I shook my head. “I ain’t hit her hard at all. I swear it.”

“We believe you,” Collin finally spoke up. “It’s obvious you’re stronger than what we gave you credit for.”

I sucked my teeth, disappointed. “And y’all flew out to two of my fights. You said you watched a few on video, too.”

“Yeah,” Trisha tried to explain. “We did, but Luke is your trainer and has to get to know you at his own pace. We have to respect him.”

I looked Luke straight in the eyes. “Respect me, too. Don’t treat me like a girl. I’mma fighter. A damn good one. Get me someone strong for sparring. I won’t break.”

With lifted brows and poked lips, Luke barely nodded. “Let’s do some sparring with the body protector bag.” His words were muttered as he walked away and toward Tyrone.

I turned away, mitts over the rope as I tried to center my breathing.

“Yo, Spence!” I heard a faint yelp outside the double doors closest to the ring.

It was ghosted until I saw movement from the next set of double doors. Clearly, someone was just standing and had walked away.

“C’mon, Tori!” Luke yelled. “Get your head in the fuckin’ game!”

That burst the bubble of thought I was in, and I turned back into the ring, getting into stance.

Could it—

*Neveeeeer!*

He was too much of an ass.



“You can’t be full, eating like a rabbit.”

My eyes dropped to the containers of foods I’d just gotten from the cafeteria when Samantha and I stopped in to get her an early lunch. Then my attention went to the shrimp Po’boy sandwich she was munching on.

“I was good until seeing the glop of mayo on the side of your mouth.”

“Here.” She swiped it off, handing the smeared mayo over. “It’ll be more satisfying than the cattle food you’re eating now.”

As she laughed, I tossed two almonds in my mouth as I rolled my eyes away. I’d been people watching since we copped a squat on the pavilion lawn. It was nice out; the sun was bright against the cool winds. Its rays speared through the thick, green leaves on the long tree branches all around. We were in the perfect spot, trapped under the shade.

Across the curvy walkway were two guys and a girl tossing a Frisbee. To the right of us, a kid bounced a soccer ball on his toes and knees while carrying a stack of books. Coming up the walkway, stringing through bodies zipping past her was a girl in my Black History class on a skateboard. She carried a small boom box in her left hand. As she rolled closer, I could hear Maze Featuring Frankie Beverly’s “*Before I Go*” pushing through the small speakers. She didn’t see me, but I was sure even if she had, the girl wouldn’t have said hello. She was another weird human.

*Like me.*

“So...” I turned to find Samantha swallowing while trying to speak. “...is that like your lunch?” Her face twisted in confusion, and likely pity.

The almonds, sliced oranges, and avocados weren’t exactly mouthwatering, but I was so damn hungry after my workout with Ashton, I’d eat one of the branches off the tree covering us right now. We’d been working out together in the mornings for close to two weeks now—and tutoring. We’d been...cool. Other than a few slick comments from him, Ashton had kept his word on keeping peace between the two of us. This past week, I’d finally settled into my new schedule with classes, training, and working out. The food thing was annoying because it was the one element of training for a fight I’d never done with Uppercut back in Jersey. They were strict here about it at *Blakewood*.



I shook my head. “It’s a snack. Stupid ass nutritionist got me on some kind of diet to get ready for my first fight. My lunch is after my next class.” And I wasn’t excited about that.

A sharp whistle had my neck snapping up.

“Shit...” Samantha swore under her breath, bringing attention to her.

Quickly, I followed her line of sight across the pavilion. It took a few seconds, but I eventually saw pretty boy, Dre, the basketball guy, who hung out with Ashton. I rolled my eyes and reached for another slice of orange.

“What’s up with that?”

Samantha’s head lifted from pretending to be looking for something in her book bag. “Huhn?” Her eyes were big. Wild. “What?”

“The Dre guy.”

“What about him?”

“He’s whistling at—”

“I don’t know.” She answered too quickly. Samantha must have realized it, too, and shook her head. “He’s been flirting. A lot. Last year, he never paid me more than a glance, but since I moved in this semester, he’s been speaking and smiling.”

“Gross.” I rolled my eyes. “Just gross.”

“What’s gross about that?” Samantha sounded hella defensive.

“Him. Anything attached to Ashton Spencer, his stupid girlfriend, and their crew is gross. They’re not humans.”

“Then what are they?”

I shrugged. “Worse than the kind of humans I hate.”

“I think he’s cute.” She bit into her sandwich. It smelled amazing, but I would never admit that. “Nice, too.”

“Nice so soon into the semester?” I challenged. “Okay.”

She mumbled, “Nicer than these bitches here.”

Before I could glance up, Aivery Cooper had flipped her long hair then reached down to give Samantha some type of flier. “Take time out of stuffing your face with an oncoming coronary artery disease to help out with a worthwhile cause.”

She quickly handed it to Samantha, practically shoving it at her, and strutted away in her short denim shorts and high sandal wedges with the *Burberry* print. Her white t-shirt had the matching *Burberry* print around the collar and was knotted at the back, showing off her slim waist. The bitch. Samantha wasn’t fat by anyone’s standard. The girl was smaller than me, wearing mostly size fours.

“What was that thing you said about humans?” Samantha whispered, rolling her eyes.

“What’s that? She might as well have shoved it in your face!” My tone wasn’t as low.

Aivery glanced back at me over her shoulders and rolled her eyes.

Samantha righted the paper for a better view. “It’s her annual petition. She’s been doing it with her cheerleader friends since she started dating Spencer, I’ve been told.”

“What’s it about?” I could see several girls around us now, handing out the same flyer.

“They want *BSU* to recognize them as athletes. Something about having access to the sports complex like the football team, basketball teams, hockey, soccer...boxers.” She pointed my way with her head. “Word is, only Aivery pushes the petition so hard. Everyone thinks she only wants that recognition so she can have more access to him,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“Only athletes and their staff have access to the grounds and buildings over there; not us regular students. Even the guests of the residents there have strict visitation privileges. They’re very limited to help keep them focused. I’m surprised you’re not over there.” I quickly remembered

hearing Trisha say something about me registering too late for athletic housing. “She’s so insecure, she wants to live on the same part of the campus he does so she can be with him all the time. She wants to have access to that gym you guys have over there, too. I heard that shit is beyond state-of-the-art!”

I forked an avocado cube.

*Stupid human...*

“Wait! You didn’t give her one!” the girl, Andrea, giggled as she trekked over to us with her long box braids fanning down her back. She handed me a flyer.

“I only acknowledge normal people!” Aivery shouted back to her as she continued giving the flyers to students.

“I think she’s normal. Didn’t I tell you about the *Cayenne* she pulled up in two weeks ago?” Andrea’s smile was so permanent, I couldn’t determine if it was a sneer. “This one’s either normal or super-normal. She gets all kinds of deliveries from her big *Cayenne* boy.” My mouth fell. “Those sneakers and that book bag.”

“You’re kidding me.” Aivery returned. ShawnNicole appeared out of nowhere. Her big hair tagged along. It was a huge afro of natural-styled curls falling into the big plastic glasses on her face and even reached the middle of her back. Her style alone made a statement. *Great*. “Not this girl. *Hell...* neither of them.”

Wherever this crew gathered, attention followed. I hated attention—outside of being in the ring.

“Well, I can only tell you what I saw with my own two fucking eyes.” Andrea tossed her hands in the air—one with a stack of flyers—shrugging with that sneaky smile. “Bitch get deliveries.”

“Bitch got a name,” I hissed.

“Yup. Tori,” Andrea supplied. “*That bitch*’ Tori. You gotta be to pull a guy like that looking...regular like this.”

Aivery busted out laughing and Andrea went along with her. That’s when I knew she was clowning me for sure.

“Maybe you should pay attention,” I advised. “Could teach you how to get a man without being a wanna be or trying too hard like your goofy ass friend here.”

Andrea’s smile dimmed, and her hand smacked her chest. “Me? I’m goofy? You’re walking around here with this busted ass, dusty ass weave and stinking ass gym clothes all day, every day, but I’m goofy. Child, teach me something. Please!” She sighed, faking exhaustion.

“Come on, y’all. We’ve got to finish these flyers.” ShawnNicole tried waving them off, and I was grateful. “And I’ve got better things to do than talk about some fake boyfriend.”

“How do you know he’s fake?” Samantha dared.

“How do you know he’s real?”

“She’s my roommate. Duh!” Samantha’s head bounced.

“So what’s his name?” *Was this Andrea girl that thirsty?* “He in school? He can’t go to *BSU*; I would know him.”

“He’s none of your business,” Samantha reminded her.

“Maybe she’s a paid whore and he was a one-time John dropping her off,” Aivery’s tone was too matter-of-fact. “ShawnNicole’s right. We have to go.”

That whore label pissed me off. How dare she call me anything and didn’t know I existed before a few weeks ago? Her dismissal reminded me of Tangi and Raquel when they would ask when would my father finally come around to show his face. Their slight was hurtful; Aivery’s jab was annoying as hell.

“Friday,” I called out as they began to take off. Andrea turned first, then ShawnNicole, and finally Aivery. “We’re going out on Friday.”

“Where to?” Andrea demanded, eyes wild.

I shrugged, not having an answer, though half of one rolled off my tongue. “A show.”

“Oh, shit!” Andrea clapped her hands together. “I can’t wait. He fine?”

I shook my head. “You won’t see him. You’ll never see him. He’s low key, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“That means you’ll look like a regular person?” Aivery gasped then laughed hard, tossing her head back. “I bet he stinks just like you.”

“Don’t push it, Aivery.” I warned. “I’ve been too nice to you.”

She rolled her eyes, sighing, “Let me get away from this.”

Aivery and her crew took off. Wisely. And I was left wondering how in the hell I was going to pull off a date on Friday with a guy who didn’t exist.

“Fuck them, okay?” Samantha tried to comfort me.

*No. Fuck me...*

## -Then-

*Ashton*

I rubbed my tight eyes. “So, that’s who you’re going with?”

Across the table from me, Tori sported a blank expression as my eyes traveled between her and my laptop.

“Yeah.” She blinked, unsure. Then she cleared her throat. “Yes.” Her tone now firm.

I dropped my chin. “*The Black Guerilla Family?*”

She shook her head successively. “Yup.”

“Why does that subject matter inspire you?” I cleared my throat, my hand massaging my beard as I sat back in my chair. “Why them?”

Tori shrugged, eyes faltering. “I ‘on’t know. They were fighters. They took on the system, the oppressors.”

“In prison,” I iterated to be clear.

“And in the streets. I read something about that.” She nodded with a twisted mouth.

*Okay...*

This shit further exhausted me. It was four in the afternoon, and thankfully, Tori was my last tutoring appointment. Coach’s advisement of me avoiding this commitment had been screaming louder and louder on days like this when I was so tired from practice and working out, I didn’t know what day of the week it was. Instead of studying, this small room in the library suddenly felt like the best spot to steal away from the world and cop a nap.

To push Tori along, I tried it from a different perspective. “So, Professor Brown wants a little known Black figure, as in person; not organization. So why don’t we go

with the founder.” His name wasn’t coming to memory fast enough.

“Oh,” she hooted like an owl. “The author. George...”

“Jackson.” I finally recalled. “George Lester Jackson. Do you have his bio—the basics, like where and when he was born? What type of upbringing did he have? Did it consist of anything you could connect to his push for revolutionary work?”

Tori nodded again, convincing me she understood my guidance. “But I like the movement. He rose up against people who tried to keep him down. He didn’t give a single fuck.”

The conviction in her voice gave me pause. “Why does he inspire you?” I hated the seniority in my tone.

She shrugged again, exhaling. “I’m just feeling like it’s me against—” Her eyes skirted the small room “—everybody. Nothing wrong with learning about another underdog and bouncing your shoulders ‘cause of their victory.”

Victories? Dude was killed trying to escape.

Rubbing my eyes again with the bottom of my palms, I murmured. “Alright. Get those demographics on him and better articulated reasons why you’re selecting him, and we should be able to go from there.”

It was time to end this session. I was getting up with Aivery and the crew soon and needed to mentally prepare.

*And wake the fuck up...*

“Hey.” The mixture of softness and sincerity in her call grasped my attention acutely. “Do you know of any second-hand stores around here?”

“Like...consignment shops?”

Tori’s head bouncing in the air meant I had heard her correctly. “Yeah. One of those.”

“No.” I couldn’t point her to one anywhere on this green/blue earth. “Why?”

“I got myself into some bullshit with my big mouth.” She started packing up. “Don’t sweat it. I’ll figure it out.”

I gave it a mental shrug, not knowing what the hell she was mumbling about. In less than two minutes, Tori was out the door, leaving me a few minutes to decide if I’d close my eyes for a few minutes or suck it up and grab a cup of java.



“Yooooooo! I can’t wait for the *iPhone* to drop.” Dre shared while typing into his *Blackberry*. “It’s gonna take this shit out the game for a very long time.”

With Aivery curled under my arm in the lounge area of the cafeteria, we’d finished eating and were just sitting idly around at this point. Either we were people-watching or they were watching us. At this point, I didn’t know. It was stifling, but I remained...the hamster stuck on the wheel.

“Yeah. My cousin, who’s an executive at *AT&T*, saying it’s going to be a problem,” Al agreed. “They’re letting top execs play with it before their trainers. The trainers teach the store reps who sell the devices.”

ShawnNicole asked, “When’s it coming out?”

“Definitely next year,” Dre advised, twisting his hair, something he did unconsciously. “You know how shit gets pushed back, and pushed back, and pushed back.” He tossed his hand, demonstrating.

“Homecoming will be here before you know it,” Andrea added randomly.

“Mmhmmmm.” Aivery agreed with a contented sigh.

“You two should let me design your coordinating ensembles,” Andrea proposed, twisting a braid around her finger and smiling conspiratorially, using extra syrup.

So the mention of homecoming wasn’t random at all.

Sucking in a breath, Aivery sat up straight. “That would be so bomb!” Her wild eyes shot over to me. “Babe,



wouldn't that be amazing? I can think of a few colors we'd kill in."

"Awesome!" Andrea shrieked excitedly, clapping her hands in victory.

"I didn't say I'm with it," I made clear.

"Well, you have to by Monday," Andrea explained. "The specs have to be in as my first grade for the semester."

"Please," Aivery began to beg, tugging at my shirt while my attention was fixed straight ahead.

More than usual, since the semester began, I was not in the mood for acting. It was one thing to be in close proximity with Aivery to pretend we were still solid, but it was an entirely different matter to plan matching outfits.

*Yet I'm here...*

A senior quarterback of the most prestigious HBCU in the country, I had no personal time to take a shit. Between practices, working out, my obligations to the *Panthers*, and finishing up on my classes, time was a nonrefundable commodity. Still, I died a slow suicide by hanging out in the cafe's lounge, doing...shit.

With Aivery's best rendition of puppy eyes on me, I finally answered, "Getting custom clothes for an event we don't even know we'd win doesn't sound economical on any level."

Her expression melted downcast. "You know we're going to win, Ashton."

"I don't. Dre, over there, is peaking in popularity stock," I informed, no matter how wild the reach was. "If he picks the right upperclassman to start dating, we could be wiped completely off our three-year winning streak."

"Bwaaaah-ha-ha!" Aivery spat a mocking guffaw his way. "Bullshit. Dre could never! He barely made captain this year. Only because he hangs out with us." She stuck her tongue out at him playfully to assuage the blow.

But it was not. Aivery was all about appearance and popularity. Her claws cut and killed.

“Ohhhhh!” Al choked on a laugh, needling Aivery’s jab.

Typically I’d join in, but this afternoon, the humor in it all missed me.

Dre’s crooked smile made me believe she may have possibly offended him. “‘S’all good. I always got next year when y’all gone.”

Aivery’s head swung up to me when she felt my body harden to stone. I didn’t acknowledge her, though.

When she needed something resembling a response from me, she continued. “It’s our last year, Ashton.”

“Isn’t Sherell due that weekend?”

Sherell was Aivery’s older sister who not only adored her, but was having twins. Aivery was expected to be there to welcome the babies into the world.

Aivery shrugged. “I can always arrange for a flight after the festivities—”

“Look at her,” Andrea hissed.

Within seconds, all of our eyes shot across the room. Mine immediately landed on tall firm legs, quickly ambling to the athletic counter to place an order. I wasn’t quite sure about Andrea’s subject, but my mood was further frustrated by, once again, noticing Tori McNabb.

“Look at her hair,” ShawnNicole noted. “I can do so much with it, instead of leaving that fucked up weave in.”

“She’s diseased. I wouldn’t go near her,” the derisory in Aivery’s voice twisted my gut.

“Nah. McNabb’s cool,” Al tried explaining.

“Word.” Dre agreed, snickering. “Strong as hell, too.”

“She looks it.” Andrea snorted, starting off a round of laughter from her and Aivery.

While there was familiarity to the energy of their humor, today it offended me. Cutting up and shooting the shit at others' expense had always been a pastime for us. Why had it been an annoyance to me these past few weeks?

"You guys thinking she's cool is a specific result of Ashton working out with her in the mornings. You know all it takes to make or break a reputation on this campus is a word from our crew," Aivery declared. While gaping at Tori, at the counter, her eyes narrowed. "No way could she be telling the truth about having a man with money interested in her."

"But I know what I saw. That bitch stepped out of next year's model *Cayenne Porsche*. My uncle's courting it, so I know!"

*Cayenne?*

That was the loaner I had two weeks ago when I dropped my *Panamera* off for service. My service account rep said it was the only loaner available, but I suspected he was trying to upsell me. They were known to try and entice customers to upgrade. It was obvious to me the night Andrea was yapping about was the one I dropped the poor girl off.

"The only people on this campus with *Porsches* are Ashton and Hakeem McDowell, and they're both cars." Aivery tapped her chin as she thought hard. "Unless she's whoring—and she can't be because no one's buying pussy packaged like that—it has to be someone off campus."

"Well, she swore it was someone she was dating when we saw her earlier, Aivery." Andrea laughed. "She said she had a date with him, so we shall see."

"When?" Karmen's head whipped around.

"This week." Aivery answered. "She said they're going to a show, and her dingy ass better not be lying or I'm going to roast her all the way down to the last line of her *BSU* resignation letter." Her eyes and mouth were tight as she swore that pledge.

The entire group howled, knowing how vicious Aivery Cooper could be.

“Wouldn’t that be crazy? If that bitch is lying about fucking a baller?” Andrea highlighted.

“Who said she was fucking him?” I asked, hella-confused.

“For a bitch who looks like that to attract a dude pushing a *Porsche* of any kind, you know she’s, at least, blowing him down every chance he gets.” Aivery visibly shuddered. “Ewwwww! She’s just gross.” The group—except for me—chuckled. “I’m dying to see her ugly, broke ass fall on her face.”

I winced at those harsh words. I watched Tori take food to go, because she had no one to eat with here in the cafe, so of course she’d go. Her shoulders curled over and her feet dragged in her new sneakers. That’s when I remembered.

*“Hey. Do you know of any second-hand stores around here?”* Her question in the library earlier. *“I got myself into some bullshit with my big mouth. Don’t sweat it. I’ll figure it out.”*

She was looking for something to wear to a show. But did she really have a date, or was Tori putting on for my superficial friends here?

As my crew laughed at Aivery’s threat, suddenly and clearly, I was slapped in the head with something I hadn’t felt in fucking forever: inspiration. I shuffled to my feet, realizing I didn’t have her room phone number and had to get it.

“Just remembered a meeting I have.”

“*Wha—*” Aivery trilled. “Where?”

“The athletic compound.”

“I can go with you!” Aivery called behind me.

“It’s a closed meeting and you know you can’t roam around there,” I reminded her, pulling out my cell.

“Shit! Make sure you tell Jones I plan to keep fighting for inclusion!”

Those were the last words I heard, and recognized the passion behind them right away. Aivery had been fighting for cheerleaders to have access to the athletic compound for a year now, but unsuccessfully. Cheering wasn't considered a sport and, therefore, its group didn't need space on that secluded portion of the campus.

I couldn't think about that bullshit. There was a more pressing matter to tend to: Tori.



“Is that all?” I asked my mother while turning into the parking lot of the *Garden Boutique Mall*.

“That’s all he said, Ashton. Those motherfuckers are playing dirty,” my mother swore as I held my cellphone to my ear. “Then I heard they put him in the same unit as Blocck Boi Seven. You know they’re doing this to fuck with him, right?”

My chest constricted as I pulled into a parking space, the sky darkening into an orange hue.

“Let’s just see what Levi says before we jump to any conclusions,” I tried calming the both of us.

No matter how convincing my resolve, I was scared as shit for my cousin, Brick. He was high rolling in custody. Between law enforcement and his enemies from Blocck Boi Seven, he had to sleep and shit standing on his feet.

“Shit. He’s being paid more than the federal reserve for a third world country, he better have something useful like placement in solitary confinement until his expedited court date.”

“I gotta go.” I took a cleansing breath. “Love you, lady.”

“Love you, baby.”

When I hung up, my attention swung to my right. Instantly, I was distracted from my woes back at home. Tori was physically tense and fidgeting at the same damn time.

“This y’all local mall?”

“Kind of. It’s where some of us come when we’re in need of...” I scratched my neck. “...higher end products. Plus, it’s on the low-low. You don’t find many *BSU* people here.”

Her narrowed, untrusting eyes swept the area around my car. “So why are we here? And whose car is this?”

“We’re here to get you something to wear on the date you told my friends you have on Friday, thanks to this car that belongs to me.”

“I don’t get it. You’ve got a car and a truck?”

“That night I picked you up from in town when you were walking in the rain, the *Cayenne Porsche* truck was a loaner because this baby—” I tapped the steering wheel “—was getting a maintenance checkup. Everyone on campus knows my car. Otherwise, nosey ass Andrea Brown wouldn’t have created a romanticized narrative of who you were with that night.”

“So, this your fault?”

“Not exactly, but I do feel a part of your ruse now and can try and subsidize it. And we start in here. Let’s go.” I opened my door to exit. “I have a meeting tonight I can’t be late for.”

When I stood to my feet outside, I sensed Tori following suit. When she closed her door, I tapped the fob, locking the doors. It had taken close to two hours to get here from when I left Aivery and the crew in the cafe. Although just minutes behind her leaving from getting her food, it seemed like Tori had disappeared. I went to her dorm room and her roommate, Samantha, told me she wasn’t there. Then I shot over to the athletic compound, scouring the building and fields for her, all to no avail.

I ran into Collin, Trisha’s assistant, who told me Tori mentioned going to the common area on her floor. That’s where I found her: on the floor, legs spread out with her food and the yellow pages in between. It was clear to me, in that moment, she was determined to find a second-hand shop. For once, we were on the same page.

I held the door for her once we reached the building. Tori followed me down the shiny replica-cobblestone floors until we arrived at the boutique. Inside, it was as slow-paced as the halls, which was ideal.

“Hi! Welcome to *Tessie’s*.” A young caramel woman greeted with large, expectant eyes. “I’m Bella. How can I help you?”

“I called earlier to request a stylist. My name is Ashton.”

“Oh!” Her eyes bounced between Tori and me. “That’s me. I spoke to you earlier. Is this your girlfriend?”

I snorted. “Hardly. Let’s call Ms. McNabb an unusual ally.” Then I turned to Tori, whose eyes were big as saucers as she stood with one arm crossed over her, holding the other while her fingers curled and flicked successively. “Dress, jumpsuit—”

“Or rompers,” Bella interjected. “I see you have lengthy legs. We have a gorgeous sequin romper just in. Ashton mentioned the event being formal.”

Before Tori could speak, I made clear, “Perhaps tuxedo hot pants, but no romper on my dime.”

Bella coiled visibly, and when we looked to Tori for an answer, she shrugged with one shoulder.

I turned my back to Tori again. “Let’s see a few mini length dresses. I’m sure Tori’s date would like to be reminded of her age while taking her out for a night on the town.”

“Let’s get started, shall we?” Bella clapped her hands, shoulders lifted in sheer excitement as she pulled in a deep breath.



Thirty-five minutes and four dresses later, I glanced up from my *Blackberry*. Tori cowered out of the dressing room in a long-sleeve embellished black mini dress with a plunged neckline. I knew this because Bella gave a full description of each dress before Tori tried it on. This one hit different than all

before it. The black lined mesh beneath the jeweled embellishment looked good against her rich brown skin.

As Tori stood tautly with foot on the other, she bit her lips together. If I was crazy, I'd think she liked this one. She didn't try hiding a smile like with all the others.

"You like it?"

"You like it?" she countered sans the hidden smile.

Bella joined us mutedly, hands crossed over her pelvis as she smiled wistfully.

"I do, but..." My eyes roved up her colorless toes and hairy legs to the pink cotton cupping her breast underneath the lush material of the dress. "Why do you have that sports bra on?"

Tori shrugged meekly with one shoulder. "It's my only bra."

My face fell into my palm.

"Oh. Ummmm..." Bella lilted. "You don't need brassiere support with this dress. However..."

I caught her hesitation and nodded respectfully. Lifting my head, I asked the painful question through gritted teeth. "You only have one bra, and it's this sports bra?"

"Yeah. This one's new, though. I just got it 'cause my old one didn't fit anymore."

*Old 'one'?*

I swung my index finger at Bella, lost for words. But she, too, understood questions and commands without words.

"We have a line of *Mahogany* undergarments here. They are pricier than your *Calvin Klein* or *Victoria Secret*, but it's because they're hand-sewn using extraordinary fabric. They also melanin-match very well," Bella explained professionally with an undertone of pleading. "What size are you?"

My regard swept up to Tori, and I found myself holding my breath. When those eyes fell downcast and that



one shoulder lifted, my face dropped into my palm again.

Firmly, Bella announced, “I’ll get my measuring tape,” and took off swiftly.

“Ashton...” Tori started.

“When you take off the dress, try not to rip it.”

Tori’s eyes flashed and head bucked. “Fuck you, Spencer.” She stormed back into the dressing room.

I grumbled, “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Seconds later, Bella appeared again and slipped behind the floral curtain of the changing room. I got lost in my phone, playing solitaire. Steve Irwin died from an occupational injury. The guy had been celebrated for weeks at this point. *Google* had been in talks of buying this new video-sharing platform website, *YouTube*. The shit was unreal. It had just gotten popping. So many irreversible, Internet revolutionizing events happening in this brief span. Those fuckers from *Facebook* were my age and younger. *My age!* They rolled out their social media services to colleges and we’d played around on it, setting up profiles. I told Dre and Al we’d been too comfortable with our parents’ fortunes because these white dudes were creating wealth, independently, for their great-great grandchildren. In my case, I’d been relying on football to generate my own—

“Ashton!” My head shot up and mouth collapsed. “Is this how it’s supposed to fit?”

I couldn’t tear my fucking eyes from the wine hued laced bra holding tits belonging to a goddamn porn star. Her waist was femininely narrow, highlighting her curved hips in the sports leggings she wore here under the oversized gray sweatpants. My mouth went dry and my voice morphed into damn crystals as she waited impatiently. How the fuck could McNabb hide all that shit under gym gear?

In my peripheral, I could sense Bella returning, but couldn’t gain my faculties to speak or move.

“Perfect! So we know your size,” Bella announced cheerfully. “We have this in several colors in lace, and in a

combination of lace and satin. What would you like?”

I inspected each inch of Tori’s face for answers to her betrayal, and she gaped my way for answers about this shopping excursion. Somehow, I was able to snap back into the here and fucking now.

My eyes closed and I swallowed nothing down my dry throat. “Half dozen,” I croaked out then licked my lips. “Half a dozen bras and two dozen panties. Two to match each bra.” My eyes landed on Tori as I gained my wits. “Can you at least pick the colors? Damn!” I stood, leaving the dressing room. “I’ll be looking at shoes.” Before either could speak, I was headed toward the front of the boutique.



Tori

A fancy sequin dress, more bras and panties than I ever had or wore at a time in my entire life, a pair of stockings—no, hosiery—with the fancy line down the back of the leg that I’d probably rip, and high-heeled *Jimmy Choo*’s because, apparently, that brand of shoes had a flatter arch I could walk in, were all being rung up before me. *The shoes...* We spent thirty minutes on me trying on shoes and walking in them. It was a little embarrassing, but seeing Ashton get into helping me get ready for my fake date won over my ego.

“That’ll be \$2,318.89.” The girl, Bella, smiled as she hit us with the damage I’d been worried as hell over.

I bit my lip, trying to drag my heavy neck to look at my co-conspirator. I had nothing close to three hundred dollars to my name, much less two-thousand, three-hundred. But when my eyes finally landed on him, ignoring me, Ashton pulled out a credit card smoothly. His face was still tight with annoyance. He seemed fifteen years older the entire way here—in fact, he’d been acting that way each time I’d seen him without his friends. He still handled me with an edge of coldness, but now each moment I’d been spending time with him, he’d been helping me in some way.

He turned to me and grated with a tight forehead, “You have to practice walking in those heels. Remember, the old women’s track field is pretty much ghost town now that they’ve gotten a new one. It stays clean and well-lit at night. You can go out there for a lap or so to practice.” He pulled in a deep breath through his nose. “You can get your hair, nails, feet, —” His eyes swept over my face “—eyebrows and all that done on campus. Do you know where the hair and nail salons are?” I nodded.

“They’re some of the most talented around the country. They’ll hook you up. I’ll cover it before you go on Friday. You just have to call to make your appointments ASAP. Let me know if you have any questions.” I was too overwhelmed with details to even nod my head. “And Tori...” My eyes snapped back up to his tight face. “Practice walking in the fuckin’ shoes.”

Before I could respond with whatever dumb version of “okay” I could come up with, he turned away and bags were being handed over the counter. Ashton carried all but one, and silently we walked out of the mall and drove nearly an hour back to campus. We only spoke when agreeing Ashton should drop me off at a secluded part of the campus where I could catch the shuttle to my dorm. It was close to nine when I made it back to my room. The first thing I did was lay stretched across my bed, hoping Ashton didn’t miss his meeting.



The next day, I was on the old track and field ground at six in the evening finishing up on my final strut around. I felt like an idiot, but it was solid advice to follow. I didn’t fall, but I did twist my ankle a couple of times and stumbled more than that. And I didn’t break the shoes. Thankfully, I didn’t hurt myself. Once done, I sat on a bleacher to switch out the heels for my sneakers. I felt unbalanced standing on my feet again.

The campus was quiet this time of the day unless the football team was practicing. The sun had set less than an hour ago and the farther I moved off the athletic grounds, the more populated the campus became. I mostly kept my head down,

not wanting to be seen by anyone. The sight of my sneakers was more appealing than mean ass humans.

“Tori!”

My head shot up as my feet stopped, and I looked around. It was Samantha, cutting across the courtyard, heading toward me.

“Hey,” I acknowledged her.

“Where’ve you been? I was waiting around for you until I got hungry. I’m grabbing dinner at the cafe. You wanna come?”

“No thanks. I’m not ready to eat yet.”

*My nerves are fucking raging from my fake date tomorrow night.*

“Okay.” She began to back away. “Well, I missed lunch, and my belly’s reminding me of it now. Oh!” She stopped, snapping her fingers then tapping her head. “You got another package. Security called up for you to come claim it.”

My armpits began to itch and my knees trembled. Another delivery? Before I could push my brain to speak, Samantha had taken off. I continued toward my dorm, almost running. Knowing the reason of my destination made me nervous and excited at the same time. Was this delivery like the one before, or something random?

The worst thing happened when I made it to the lobby of my dorm. Andrea and a friend of hers were coming out. Maybe it was something written on my face, but Andrea didn’t ignore me today—again—the way she would before the night Ashton dropped me off in that truck. Her eyes lit with more interest than I was used to getting from...anyone, other than creepy men or horny boys—and old ass women.

I saw when Andrea tapped the girl to bring her attention to me. But I didn’t stop or hesitate passing them and stepping into the lobby.

“I have a package?” I told the security guard. “Tori McNabb.”

He stood from his chair and searched the small closet at the back of his desk. My stomach did somersaults when he turned to me with individually wrapped boxes stacked according to size and bonded together with one black silk ribbon. He sat them on the rounded desk. Impatient, I pulled the card at the top, just beneath the bow, out.

*Sorry for all the snark yesterday. Heavy family issues have been getting the best of me.*

*P.S. Be in the lobby at 7 pm tomorrow.*

*Ashton?*

I didn't care what was in the boxes or what time to be down here for a fake date. There was only one concern. Family issues. Ashton spoke to his mother on the phone when we rode to the mall yesterday, and mentioned solitary confinement and expedited court date, but that's all I'd really paid attention to. My nerves were beyond fried at being so close to him, and in his luxury space, going to some unnamed destination at the time.

"Shit. You arguing already?" I leaped around to find Andrea must have been reading over my shoulder. "And he apologized?" She gasped. "How old is he? Damn! That was sexy," she breathed out.

Pissed the hell off, I grabbed the boxes and the bag with the shoes I carried from the field and marched to the elevator.

"Mind your damn business, girl."

I was happy the doors opened not too long after.

Andrea didn't seem fazed at all when she smirked, swinging her braids over her shoulder. "Yeah. Whatever. You better bring that work tomorrow at seven."

I rolled my eyes before the doors closed.



## Ashton

“Closing in,” Darron Williams, a sports-talk personality and *ESPN* correspondent, brushed his chin with an index finger. He began counting down on his fingers as the heated bright spotlights glared over us. The large, round reflective fill kept grabbing my attention, no matter how many of these shits I’d filmed over the years. The cameras rolled silently as the director and producers circled motionlessly behind him.

“You’ve maintained a 3.8 grade point average, are the first string QB on your D1 team—a team belonging to the most popular HBCU in the country—and you decided to finish your degree before going to the *Combine*, you volunteer tutoring services, your mother believes you’re a model son, and you’ve earned the number one spot on the *Who You Should Know in Black America* list—again.” He chuckled good-heartedly. “On paper, you’re perfection. I mean, Coach Green has said if he could replicate your skill set and mannerisms, he’d do it every two years.” I did my obligatory co-laughing with him. “What is it you aren’t good at?”

*Wack ass question, Williams...*

The problem with these fluff pieces, even for *ESPN*, was there’s no true reveal or challenge in the questions. Had Williams really provided investigative work into learning who I am? Hell no. He did the least and usual with touching bases with my athletic team here at *Blakewood* as well as my mother. Nothing in depth or requiring a think piece. So in response, I gave him fluff.

Scratching my brow-line to appear as thinking, I began, “Well, you know...I receive two whole academic credits for tutoring. Those services aren’t exactly ‘volunteered.’”

Williams howled in laughter as I smiled charmingly. His producers around him cackled silently as well. In the world of journalism, if you gave a reclusive or nervous or disengaged interviewee the narrative to their answers, they’d

run with it. Then, at the end of the day, the piece would lack substance, meat, individuality, and discovery.

“All jokes aside,” I circled back before his high humor died. “I’m not good at spontaneity.”

Williams’ upward expressions of humor gained gravity and weight, falling to the floor. He straightened on his stool and his lips parted, but he stumbled on his words so severely, *I* had to feed him *his* question. “You—can you...”

My brows peaked. “Expound on it?”

“Yeah. Please.”

*I’m only feeding your mediocre ass this because I can’t see another Black man on a white platform behave with such goddamn incompetence.*

I flashed my palms, posture relaxed, and expression the same to communicate sincerity. “What I mean is, I was taught by my very first Pee Wee coach that the best athletes are the ones who can obey and mimic.”

“Obey and mimic,” he repeated for dramatic play.

“I was taught to obey authority and mimic what they tell you to do in sports. I applied it at home as well. My mother asked me to do something once, and that’s all it took. Similar to having the options to attend three Ivy League schools. The opportunity was there for me. I gave one look to my mother for guidance and her three-worded response was Black Ivy League.” I shrugged. “*BSU* was my only option at that point. Even now, *Blakewood* has armed me with a team to assist in and encourage my goals in this sport. Nutrition, fitness training, field education, mentoring—it’s all provided. My only job is to obey and mimic. Once I master the game of football, I’ll gain autonomy and begin exploring spontaneity—doing what I want to do, when I want to do it.”

For a flash second, Williams’ pupils appeared dilated before he regained himself. This time, his chortle was simulated. “Well, I don’t think Ms. Cooper appreciates that aspect of you, in the romance department!” He belted in laughter, the kind I was expected to join in on.

*Why, oh why are you referencing a young girl's romantic experience at your ripe age of fifty-six, Darron? Don't be a perv...*

And even more than that, I couldn't give a shit about Aivery romantically in that instance. When I didn't react in the manner he'd anticipated, Williams wisely moved on. He knew that awkward moment between the two of us would somehow be edited out.

Clearing his throat while adjusting his collar and tie, he continued, "You're headed to the *Combine* in February. Some believe you'll be the top quarterback prospect in this year's draft." His inflection dropped. "Some believe you're still behind Billy Vanderbilt out of *UPenn*. He's expressed wanting to be an *Eagle* over the years. Before we end this, my last question is, in your wildest dreams, where would you land?"

This one was easy. Lazy, but lightheartedness I'd allow.

A proud smile opened on my face. "I've made no secret, my admiration for Tariq Evans, talented wide-receiver for the *Kings*. It would be an honor to wear the official crown."

Williams' regard went to one of the two cameras. "You caught that, Eli Richardson. We need to make this happen!" he joshed. "For *ESPN's Off to a League Start*, I'm Darron Williams."

"And cut!" one of the producers shouted while slamming the clapperboard.

I stood to shake Williams' hand and expressed my gratitude for his time. After a few compulsory final words and jokes by Williams and his crew, I was thankfully whisked off to a meeting. Downstairs in the large conference room of the athletic compound was my team. They'd been waiting on me, individual presentations in tow. In the lowly lit room, I checked my *TAG* for the time.

"Spencer," A.D. Jones began. "How did the *ESPN* interview go?" He beamed.



“He killed it as usual. You know this kid is the master of interviewing,” Dana, one of the staffers in the athletic department, added while taking a seat.

“That and charming the shit out of men, women, and children,” another at the table amended.

I chuckled dryly, recalling the dance I’d just completed with Williams. The table laughed at related matters.

“You’re representing this institution well, son,” Jones reeled the room in. “You’ve certainly made me proud over these four years, and I won’t speak for Coach Green here, but you’ve been a stellar pupil at the sport of football.” He nodded Coach Green’s way. “Well, let’s not take up too much time. You’ve got kickoff at eight o’clock sharp. This is an early semester check engine meeting. Let’s start with the books, academically. How are you adjusting to the new semester?”

“Well.” I nodded. “I’m up to date with most of my assignments. This weekend will be when I clean up on the rest.”

“And what classes are you taking? What’s the course load again?”

The department’s Academic Liaison answered while glancing down at his clipboard, “Leadership, Innovation, and Change, Economic Analysis for Managers, Innovation, Strategy and Corporate Sustainability, Marketing Management, Academic Aide, and an independent study course. A total of fifteen hours.”

Scribbling in his writing portfolio, A.D. Jones asked, “And this is the last semester of courses, correct?”

Firmly, I sustained, “Correct.” My tenure of undergraduate studies was coming to a glorious end, which meant my life in the pros was soon to begin.

“Great. Moving along...” Jones’ head lifted, eyes swinging around the oval table. “Nutrition. Where are we with weight goals and maintenance? I know Spencer declined the vegan attempt.” He regarded the department’s top nutritionist.

“Yes.” I sat up in my chair. “I opted for the pescatarian,” I mumbled while glancing down at my wrist again for the time. It was 4:51 in the evening.

*McNabb, you better not fuck this up...*

## -Then-

Tori

The elevator dinged and I couldn't feel my lungs. The doors opened to the lobby of my dorm and a dizzying wave had me almost horizontal before I could step out. But it didn't. I pushed through and carefully stepped off the elevator in the heels, focusing on the rhythm of my steps. A loud hush showered over the area and all eyes were on me. There had to be close to ten people present. All of them weren't for me, though. Several appeared curious about the sudden silence.

"Holy fucking shit..." someone whispered.

"That's really her?" another random asked.

"Can't be!"

Ignoring them and avoiding obsessing over the meaning of their words, I maintained a pace forward, keeping them in my peripheral. Twenty feet from the door, I heard a click of a camera. Finally, I turned my attention from straight ahead. Karmen had a camera out and was clicking away. Stunned, I couldn't find the words to tell her to fuck off. That's when I saw them all. Aivery stood with blank eyes, but parted lips. Andrea's eyes were wild as they raced back and forth from my head to my feet. Her hand was clenched to Aivery's arm as though she needed help standing straight.

What did surprise me was the encouraging smirk of pride on ShawnNicole's face as she stood with her arms folded to her chest. She winked, messaging her approval. ShawnNicole had styled my hair earlier. When I showed to my appointment, the salon manager asked what I wanted done. When I told her I didn't know beyond taking out the old tracks my cousin installed, she called to the reception area her available stylists. I'd never heard of a college campus having its own hair and nail salons, filled with Black practitioners, so

I kept silent when ShawnNicole aggressively insisted she'd be the one to do my hair.

Her "boss" agreed and although I was hesitant, knowing she was Aivery's friend, and all of Aivery's friends hated me, I went along. I guessed she was happy I did. ShawnNicole didn't say a nasty word as she worked on my hair. As a matter of fact, she talked a lot about the quality of my hair, complimenting me for not having a relaxer. She believed, with my texture, I could do so many natural styles with little product. At first, I didn't understand, but ShawnNicole's natural rough and gruffy tone wouldn't stop yapping away. In no time, I was able to lower my guard and let her go. She decided on a simple ponytail, adding a few tracks of hair for a puffy finishing. She didn't use heavy gel to do it either. ShawnNicole believed my style should match my diva: simple. Whatever that meant, I was okay with how my hair came out.

ShawnNicole's approving presence superseded everyone else's and was what I needed to make it out of the door without tripping or stumbling. The night air was mild, but just what I needed before my next point of panic happened. In the note with the delivery, Ashton told me to be in the lobby at seven. He didn't say for what. My dumb ass hadn't thought of transportation until I was able to take my first relieving breath of fresh air. After that, the stress had returned.

"Ms. McNabb?"

I looked ahead, and down the stairs to a short white man at the back seat of a limo. My mouth opened to ask who he was when he tapped his hat to nod, then shut at the sounds behind me. The girls had come outside and were reacting to the limo. That snapped me into gear and I took down the stairs on shaky legs. He opened the door and I slid in, trying not to expose my panties.

Inside smelled good—like fresh leather and cologne. After he closed the door, the light dimmed, but didn't go completely dark. I was still able to see the girls outside of the door, all gaping at the limo. As we pulled off, I couldn't miss Aivery's tense posture as she watched on. What was she even

doing here? Her dorm was a ways away from mine. Did she hate me that much to come all the way over here to confirm I was lying about my fake boyfriend?

Instead of dwelling on that, I had another problem. Where was I going in this limo? Ashton obviously thought a step ahead of me, even paying for my ego trip, but that was the extent of his instructions. I thought to call him, but remembered I no longer had a phone. I was stuck at *BSU* with no means of calling for help. That was a problem I planned on remedying soon enough.

I watched the outside scenery and traffic, trying to figure out what looked familiar once we were finally off campus. It was a twenty minute or more drive before I recognized our destination. It was in town where Trisha had taken me to *Applebee's* with her trifling friend. Not only did I not like the food there, I didn't have money to pay for it. We pulled into a temporary park across the street, and within seconds, the driver was opening the door for me.

With a warm smile, he tapped his hat. "Ms. McNabb, Mr. Spencer would like for you to enjoy the fine cuisine of *Mario*." He helped me out of the limo. When I was steady on the base of my feet, he waved ahead toward the restaurant where the door was being held open by another man in a different color uniform. "The host, Benny, will have you seated." He strode back to the driver's side and slid inside.

Hesitant and with tight hands clutching the purse Ashton had delivered along with the jewelry on my ears, neck, and wrist, I turned for the waiting man.

"Good evening, Ms. Tori." His head dipped as he smiled once directing me inside. I liked Tori better than McNabb. It lessened the lie. "We've been looking forward to you dining with us tonight. The chef has prepared several exciting courses for you. This way."

I followed him toward the back of the fancy ass restaurant. I didn't see a lot of people, and most I did were in the front. They were all dressed in suits and shoes, too, just not in anything showing cleavage and thighs like my dress had. I

had to remind myself I was on a date, and I supposed on dates, the girl had to look sexy for the guy.

*Humans are so extra with this shit...*

Sexy was work. Sexy was something I had no interest in doing ever again. These were my strong thoughts as I was led to a table in the back. White cloth, three candles, flowers, glasses, plates, and silver utensils topped it. If the decoration and vibe of the place on the way in hadn't told me, this place was uppity...like Ashton and his "*Beverly Hills 90210*" friends.

The seat was pulled out for me and a cloth napkin placed in my lap, thankfully quickly. I didn't like people so close, and definitely not at my lap.

"Ms. McNabb." A short Black man with the brightest smile walked up to the table, his palms pressed into one another. "I'm delighted to have you with us tonight. I do believe it's your first experience at *Mario*." I knew he was waiting for an answer, but my brain was stuck on the McNabb part. Hearing it this time reminded me of my grandma. I wasn't worthy of sharing the name. His lashes smacked together a few times, smile held as he continued, "I was fortunate enough to have a contact at the *BSU* athletic program to find out your diet. When Mr. Spencer told me you were an athlete, but he didn't know what you ate, I thought to reach out to Tamara, your nutritionist, to clear you. We're both *BSU* alumni. Class of ninety-eight."

When he saw, like a lame, I wouldn't respond, he got to the point. "Well... I'm happy to hear your diet includes seafood, so tonight. Although the menu is there on the table, I want to discuss it. I've prepared a decadent grouper, marinated in my special sauce topped with tropical fruit salsa that is led with mango." He kissed his fingers and smiled with closed eyes. "Delicious. Your first course is on its way. I would like to know your dessert choice. My pastry chef is offering chocolate gooey butter cake, key lime pie, white chocolate-pecan bread pudding, and finally, *Mario's* triple decker devil's food cake."

I felt my face move.

“Ahhhh...” He smiled wide. “I see we have a devil’s food fan in the building. Or am I wrong?” Shyly—stupidly—I nodded, chin to my shoulder. “Excellent! The triple decker it is!”

He took off just as a waiter was bringing a tray of food. The first thing I was served was tasty potato soup, then came some kind of barbecued meatball with melted cheese. Next, a salad that included quinoa and chopped kale with delicious croutons. I was surprised I liked it. Then came the fish, I couldn’t recall the name of. It was so good, I finished it all even though I was full. The diced mango was a hit. I’d never had it before...I’d never had any of this food before. Had never even heard of it until the chef mentioned it, and I read it off the small, personalized menu at the table.

I had to wait a few minutes before having the cake. When I finally did, I was surprised and happy to see how rich and fluffy it was. The chocolate frosting was creamy and the perfect level of sweetness. It was the bomb, but I didn’t have room for it. At some point, the chef was back at the table, smiling.

“What do you think of the cake?”

I was quickly able to find my voice. “That I probably shouldn’t have swallowed the food down as fast as I did so I could fit all the cake in.”

His face lit with a smile bigger and brighter than the ones from earlier. He snapped his fingers to get the attention of one of the waiters who’d been serving me.

“Wrap that to go for her,” the chef ordered. “Anything else I can pack for you? The check and generous tip has been settled by Mr. Spencer.”

*What?*

I mean... I guess I knew it had, but to hear it mentioned by the chef this way made it all sound so...boss. My tongue seemed to have tied again. To answer his question,

I shook my head. No way I could ask for more. This was beyond reasonable.

“Right away, sir.” The waiter scurried off.

“Well, I hope this will not be your last visit with us. It was my attempt to make your time here the most delightful experience. Kindly let me know if I missed the mark?”

Unable to look him straight in the eye for long, because I was so taken by hearing a Black man, who seemed straight as hell, speak so well. I didn’t want him to think I was—well, you know—I was beneath him.

“This was all nice...and good. Thank you, sir.” I hid my eyes again.

“Thank you, young sis. Thanks for dining with *Mario*, and I look forward to serving you again.” With the same white smile in place, he took off.

Minutes later, I was leaving the restaurant, trailing behind the host again. Even though it was really nice of him to walk me out, it wasn’t necessary. Outside, the driver was waiting with the back door of the limo open. He tapped his hat again in greeting, and I paced out to him with my purse in one hand and the bag holding the cake in the other.

“I trust dinner was exceptional, Ms. Tori.” He smiled.

That name-change made me return one. “It was good.”

I dropped inside and straightened my short dress once the door closed. We pulled off with soft music flowing through the speakers and the back of the car softly lit. I saw a panel with colorful controls I wouldn’t explore. Instead, I sat for the ride with no idea of our destination. The quiet made me anxious. What the hell was I doing? How did I get myself into this...charade? I was not in elementary or middle school, still putting up fronts for Tangi and Raquel. I was almost nineteen, stronger, and far away from those lonely times when I was bullied.

My kicking myself in the ass was halted when the limo stopped. Before the door was opened, I tried looking outside to see where we were. I didn’t have enough time to get a good



view before I was stepping out with my purse in my tight hands.

“Someone will be out to see you to your place inside,” the driver informed as he looked around.

We were in front of a huge ass building. Around us, people were bustling inside. Where were we? I wanted to ask, but didn't want him to think I was panicking. I was and I wasn't.

“Ahh...” The driver pointed. “Here he is.” I looked in the same direction as him and saw a guy who looked to be in his early twenties jogging our way. “He's going to take you to your seat. When the show's over, come out and I'll be right here. Okay? If you don't see me right away, just stand here. It means I'm circling the building and am in traffic.”

Instead of speaking, I blinked. The guy was at the limo before I could acknowledge the driver's instructions.

“Hi. You can follow me,” was all he said before taking off again. My brain had the speed to follow him, but I was nervous about walking too fast. These heels were no joke. I had no idea how women did this every day. “I'm sorry to make you rush. It's just that the show will be getting started soon.”

*Show?*

Wordlessly, I followed him inside. The lobby wasn't anything grand. Clean, decent flooring and the walls were painted with art pieces in different sizes. There was a ticket booth some stood in line for, but we bypassed. There were people all over, some at the bar, some on the escalator, but all created a chaotic energy I couldn't escape. The guy led me to an elevator that shot us up to a level opening to a carpeted loft with railings allowing a view of a lower level that wasn't the lobby. Against each railing were single seat leather sofas facing each other. The center aisle of the loft was clear. It was quiet, except for the voices of the people up here seated next to the railings. It brought to mind the upper level of a mall where you have a view of the lower floor.

“You’re assigned to sit here and here,” the guy announced, pointing to four sofas on each side. Each sofa faced the other, one set on the left and the other on the right. I glanced around and saw couples taking up just one side with a small cocktail table between them. “I’ll grab you a drink. Should I card you?” His eyes squinted and mouth twisted playfully.

With wild eyes, I shook my head. “Just water for me.”

I couldn’t think about putting another thing in my body. While I didn’t feel the fullness I had back at the restaurant, my nerves were wild from the suspense of the night. Where was I? What show was this?

The guy took off, and having to make way for an incoming couple, I moved into one of my seats to the left of me. I had four, after all. How could I take up all four seats when there were two views available? I sighed, settling into the cushy leather, happy to be off my feet. They didn’t hurt, but the pressure of being on the balls of them wasn’t something I was used to. The lower level was pitch black, and I had nothing to look at down there, so I people watched.

Similar to *Mario*, there were mostly Black people here—good looking Black people. I saw a few older white people, two Asian couples, and several who could have been Indian and Spanish. But most were Blacks, a little high saddy, too. No one seemed to look at me strange or pay me too much mind. Most smiled politely, acknowledging me. That wasn’t something I was used to.

Out of nowhere, the lights flashed. I could hear a collective gasp as though the people were excited. Then the loft darkened completely until, in rhythm, the lower level lit and music began to play. All around, people turned into the glass railings giving view to downstairs. With the flashing of a light, a dark-skinned man with locs appeared. He splashed red paint against a giant-sized wall canvas. His swing was athletic, passionate...in rhythm with the music. He stepped toward the canvas aggressively, observing it. A feminine voice began to belt lyrics. To the right of the artist was a silhouette of a

woman singing live. Then, on beat, he stepped away, going back to a paint palette I didn't see until now.

A man's voice sounded, blending with the woman behind the opaque lit screen, but I couldn't see him. Staying on beat, the artist continued to throw paint, sometimes different colors, other times he'd work on stroking the paint into a shape. Turning on my left hip, I crossed my leg, locked into the show. I found myself hypnotized in no time, wondering what dude was painting.

"Sorry it took so long," I heard whispered on the other side of me. It was the guy who walked me inside and to my seats. He placed water with lemon and a cheese, nuts, and crackers platter on the small cocktail table in front of me. It looked good, but no way was I eating. I was more concerned with what this art was making out to be. "I'll be back around in case you need something more."

When he left, my eyes caught the empty chairs across the aisle. They were mine. But no way could they be an equal or better view than these on the left. I glanced down at the artist, who was now bouncing as he threw paint onto the canvas in a similar fashion to how I did on a speedball punching bag. It was cool as hell. That's when curiosity got the best of me and I looked to my right again. Out of nowhere, there was an explosion of a reaction from the people on that side.

Quickly, I stood to my heeled feet and took lunges to the other side. As I plopped down on the leather, single sofa, it took no time for me to identify a Black woman with a floppy afro, slapping paint on the same size and color canvas as the man on the other side. She wore large earrings, a mini leather skirt with a matching sleeveless, cropped shirt, and was barefoot. Her seashell anklet was visible even from my proximity. That's when I recognized the silhouette of the male singer, behind an opaque screen to the left of her. I watched the female artist's piece, which I suspected was an exotic bird on a naked Black man's shoulder, for a few minutes before going back to the left side.

The guy's painting had progressed and I was able to identify the makings of a Black woman, naked with her palms to her face. He'd done a lot in those few minutes I'd been away. He was now working on her hair. In the strains of her afro, he fingered words like career, love, misogyny, babies, family, racism, leadership, accountability, intimacy, and so on. When he finished with acceptance, I was struck with a connection.

Acceptance.

Did all women humans—Black women humans—want that? Some days I did. There were times I was tired of sticking out—or trying to fit in. And I didn't mean just at *Blakewood*. It had been all my life. Growing up, there were more whites than Blacks, and although there wasn't much of a class distinction between the two, by demographics alone, Blacks were in the minority. This meant, going to school, I had to conform to the norms of that culture. Racism wasn't as big of an issue in my city as it had been in other places in my county, but it was present.

Then add to being Black was me being weird. Boys hardly liked me, and if they did, it was for one reason. Even some of the girls—mostly grown women—wanted me for the same reason. It was a huge part of the reason I hated humans. Equally, I'd developed an aversion to both male and female human species. Before Paul, I couldn't remember a childhood crush. Since that horrid period, the only resemblance to attraction or crush I'd had was with my bestie, Ragee, something I soon learned was inappropriate and not authentic at all. That brought me back to my original stance on humans. They were nasty or mean, or nasty and mean, and never accepted me for me. Then again, I had no idea who the hell I was, other than a kick-ass fighter.

The slowing of the music pulled me from my wild thoughts. I hated when I sat in them. The man and woman singers were synchronized in notes, obviously ending the song. The male artist was putting the finishing touch on his piece, which was his name. When the song ended, so did the art piece, and birds were released all of a sudden, flying from

one direction to the next, making the crowd go crazy. A loud round of applause rang out in the place. It scared me at first, then snapped me into etiquette and I clapped, too.

Seeing them, I wondered about the other piece happening on the other side, and I crept over there. The woman finished a young, fit man with an exotically colored bird on his shoulder. The man was Black, and appeared my age. She didn't color him in, leaving the black canvas for his skin color, but she used white paint to create his muscular contour. Just like the male artist to my left, the image looked so life-like.

As though via a switch, the lower floor blackened as the upper level lit with modest lighting. When I saw people leaving their seats, most praising the shows, I knew it was over. I also knew I'd had a good time. I knew nothing about art, but enjoyed every moment of this experience. I managed to fall in the line forming to leave. On the way to the escalator where all were headed, I peeped the guy who escorted me up. He waved me out of line and we took the elevator down. He walked me to the door and told me where my limo should have been waiting.

Just as the driver explained, I waited out in my heels at the curb for a few minutes before he pulled up in the dense traffic. He hopped out to open the backseat door for me. I dumped my body inside, making the first thing on my agenda taking off the high heels. I exhaled hard and with relief when I did, stretching my arms on either side of my long frame. The next few minutes into the commute were spent with me in that position.

That was until I remembered the cake from *Mario*. I now had room in my belly for it. When I dug into the bag, the silver plastic fork and napkin were trill to my eyes. I ripped open the lid of the container and devoured the cake, inhaling it until the last of the cream on the fork was smeared on my tongue. Then I tossed everything into the paper bag and sat back and observed all around me. It would be my last time in a limo, so I should take it all in.

In the darkness of this fancy ass ride, I couldn't stop smiling, and neither could I keep still. I tried highway watching to find a singular focus, but it didn't work. My mind kept rewinding back to the lights, the music, the artists, the colors and birds...the food. *That shit was banging!* This was how rich people lived. *Right?* They had to. Black chef, Black artists, and Black singers performing Black music.

*Wow!*

This was some culture shock for me, but in a good way I'd never experienced. I threw a few air-jabs, unable to keep still. Then I grabbed the sides of my head and curled over my lap. Would I ever experience something like this again? Was it okay to feel...happy? I couldn't remember the last time something excited me. Then his face flashed through my mind, and my body instantly warmed and heart raced. Adrenaline flowed through my veins similar to how it did before a fight. I felt...hyperaware all over. Glancing down at my legs, I clapped them, closing them tight and resting the weight of my legs on the side of my feet. It seemed like something girlie girls would do.

That's what he liked. I knew he did. He dated Aivery Cooper. She was as girlie as they came. That was his type; not...me. A stream of gratitude poured over me. The only other guy who looked out for me without wanting anything in return was Ragee. He always hooked me up. Always treated me like a good human.

*Is that how Ashton sees me?*

I chewed on my lip as my forehead tightened. Now would be a time to have a cell phone handy, but I didn't. I wondered where he was right now. It was late, but old people's hour of late. I sat up in my seat and reached for the buttons in the center console. When the glass separating me from the driver began to roll down, I knew I'd selected the right one.

“Hey...” I called out. “You wouldn't happen to have a cell, would you?”

*love* ∞ *believe*

The door was agape when I made it to the third floor, apartment D. There only seemed to be four on the top floor of the dorm—that looked more like an apartment building—and this was at the far end of the hall. When the limo pulled up, I honestly thought maybe this was the wrong place. I'd never been on this side of campus. It could have been for staff and not students from how garden apartment'ish it looked. But when the security guard asked for my ID and who I was visiting, I knew I was at the right place. But this being Ashton's dorm was still a question. Either way, I was back on campus and could easily get back to my dorm just fine.

Slow music flowed through the crack of the door. Did he have company? Was Aivery in there? Maybe this was a mistake. With a shaky hand, I rang the doorbell. Doorbells. *They have doorbells?* We sure didn't. Then again, we didn't need them for our small rooms. It would be annoying to hear over your head when the door was just feet away.

“Come in!” boomed through the door and into the carpeted, quiet hallway.

I glanced around behind me before pushing the door open. This was so not how I planned this. The first thing coming into view when I click-clacked inside was a small, rectangular room with a fancy lamp, a chair and a half *because it was slightly bigger than a chair and smaller than a loveseat*, and a huge fish tank. In the corner was a stereo system, playing old school music. It was...a vibe in there.

“Back here.” I recognized that baritone and closed the door.

As I continued down the dark hall, catching the frames on the shadowy walls, the music faded. This place was nothing like the room I stayed in. My heels clacked along the way until I met a lit opening. I realized it was the living room on the right with the kitchen directly across to my left. Ashton sat, stretched out on a sofa shirtless, with one leg extended on a loose ottoman. An ice pack sitting on his leg as he faced the large television posted over a fireplace. Around the living room were lit candles, but even with those, I could tell this

wasn't a romantic setup because of the background noise in here. It was football.

“Is this your place?” I asked, though slowly being convinced it was.

As crazy as it sounded, the place smelled like him...in a natural sense. Not that I'd been around Ashton a lot, but when I did, I picked up on his natural body scent.

He didn't answer right away. Ashton was motionless, inspecting me from head to toe, reminding me why I was here in the first place. My plan was to be a little cocky and strut—or attempt to—in the heels to show him I'd practiced on the track like he told me to. But his empty expression blew every ounce of cockiness out of the water. His eyes fell from my head and moved down my face, torso, legs, then *Jimmy Choos*. When they returned to my face, I immediately felt self-conscious.

My hands shot up to my cheeks. “Samantha, my roommate, did my makeup. I told her not to use a heavy hand; that would be doing too much. She said a natural look would be best for a date anyway, or something like that.” When he still didn't speak, a thought occurred. Candles, soft music—at least at the front of the apartment—and a shirtless Ashton. “Is your girlfriend here? Did I interrupt...something?”

Ashton pointed to the TV mounted on the wall. I twisted around, my attention going behind me. I recognized the *Panther's* uniform. Then I saw Ashton's number as he flew down the field with the ball cupped in his arm. When I turned back around, Ashton was gone, on his way to the kitchen with his back to me. His back was broad and cut with several tattoos. And his ass...

I looked away, finding a notebook and pencil he'd had in his lap when I walked in. Ashton's ass was... The band of his dark boxer briefs hung low on his waist, and his silver basketball shorts sagged beneath them. When I looked his way again, Ashton was at the refrigerator. He pulled out a bottle of *Snapple* and opened it while he walked to the long countertop separating the living room and kitchen.



“I don’t know what ‘something’ could be popping off when football study’s happening.” He took a gulp of the juice.

*Oh...*

So he was alone. And in a mood. He hadn’t smiled once or said anything to make me feel welcomed. I didn’t plan on staying long when I called and asked where I could meet him from the limo: I certainly wasn’t staying much longer now.

“Okay.” My nervous jitters had me blinking hard. That and the sight of his thick, hairy chest. Checking out guys had never been my thing. The last time I did, it was with Raj and it was totally wrong. I had also liked him for the wrong reason at first. And even that didn’t count because of all the words I could use to describe Raj now, sexy would not be one of them. It was just gross. But Ashton’s chest and the cuts in his abs...it all made me uneasy. “I just wanted to show you I didn’t wobble in the heels, and I went to the appointments you set up for my hair and nails.”

Then I thought. “Oh, and all the people were nice to me tonight. Everybody.”

His face folded in a frown. “That’s it?”

“Oh!” spit from my lungs. “And thanks for everything. I really appreciate you bailing me out. I’m going to pay you back...before the end of the spring semester,” I sputtered.

“What about the date?”

“What do you mean?”

“The actual date. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Oh! For sure. The food at *Mario* was good as hell. I had this fish—” I scratched my brow “—I can’t pronounce. I thought it was one way reading it, but he pronounced it differently when explaining the menu. Then he brought out this fire triple decker devil’s food cake that took my damn head off!”

Then the muscles around his eyes loosened and Ashton nodded. “I was hoping you liked it. It’s my favorite there.” He

took another sip of his juice, bringing into view the ball of his muscle in his curled arm.

*Oh...*

“So, you like the art musical stuff, too?”

“Did you?” he asked, face empty.

Fidgeting, I scratched my ear, hitting the stupid earring. “I did.” A lot. “I didn’t know what to think when the room went dark and the music blasted. Truth be told, I was mad curious when the first guy started throwing paint against the damn wall.” When a crack of a smile appeared on his face, I snorted, holding back on laughing. “That was weird until I waited for it all to play out. I ain’t never seen nothing like that before. And the Black people! I ain’t seen so many looking so sharp in my life.”

“Where’re you from again?”

I hesitated. “Millville.”

“Hmmm...” He took another drink.

*Weird human...*

“Well...” My lips twisted. “Thanks again for everything.”

Deflated, I started for the door. Not knowing this Ashton in his place made me realize my bright idea was stupid.

“Aye...” I turned back toward him and saw Ashton closing the *Snapple* bottle. “Glad you finally got a phone.”

A frown formed on my face, confused. “I don’t have a phone yet.”

The bottle paused on its way to his mouth and his head fell to the side. “Then how the hell you call me?”

Oh. “I used the driver’s phone.”

He scoffed. “You need a phone. How you gone be out here, on the move without a means to communicate with anyone?”

“I’m working on it. I got a new job.” I turned for the door again. “Start in two days.”

“Word? Where?” His heavy cords traveled across the apartment—an apartment I still couldn’t get over.

“At a kid’s trampoline place.”

I heard him laugh all the way out. Rolling my eyes, I reached the door annoyed.

Now *that* was the Ashton Spencer I knew.



They put in a vanity desk with a mirror in the locker room for me, at *Bakers University* in Minnesota. My opponent, Brenda Walsh, was a local, in her third year here. When we walked in earlier, I’d wondered if she had a vanity or if she was in an official room. I thought it was cool, though. Back at home, I couldn’t think of one gym that went out of their way for me. It looked out of place, but the working light bulbs around the mirror were cool. Four rolls of gauze, about seven rolls of tape, special scissors, and a thick towel for cushion for my arm to rest over were all I needed to suit up. As I zoned out, waiting on my hand to finish getting taped, I looked at myself but didn’t see much.

I was angry...disappointed. Again. My mother never sent the money I needed and she was two months behind on what was owed to me. She’d abandoned me, too. And now she wasn’t taking my calls. I tried her twice this week and she hadn’t had the decency to call back.

“How do the shoes feel, Tori?” Collin asked, lacing my boot.

I nodded my approval. Finding the right shoe had been an issue for my first fight—at least, it was for them. Uppercut never went through so much trouble. But then again, I learned, he’d never spent as much on my gear as *BSU* had. They had someone in their upholstery—or something—department make my uniform, customized to my size. It was dope shit. Trisha was able to work with the ponytail, but only using my natural hair since ShawnNicole tamed it for me.

Luke, my trainer, squatted down next to me. “Don’t forget to focus on your jab. Walsh is going to try you with that left hook. You gotta fuckin’ keep that shit in mind or you’ll be on your ass, not realizing the shit is over. She’s not strong, kid. She’s not. But she’s been trained to have that be her game-changer.”

I nodded at his coaching. “If you let this little *bit*—wench win,” he continued, eyes squinting with warning. “I’mma beat that ass up so bad next week, you gone fuckin’ regret ever calling yourself a fighter. You hear me?” I nodded. “One hit. Just *one* hit, she’s down and you’re a champ.” I continued nodding, absorbing it all.

I felt good—had been eating good, too, other than my food at *Mario* a week ago, but I was still angry. I felt alone, and cheated. Felt forgotten about. Still, I trained, and harder than I had in all the years I’d been boxing. I had more than Cut to answer to with this team. Assistant coaches, trainers, nutritionist, athletic director—they all were in my ass. Most times, I felt like a lab rat. Tonight, I had a point to prove. I was worth all of them coming together for.

“What song do you want to come out to?” Collin neared me with an iPod in his hand.

I thought for a minute, considered everything I’d been through to get to this moment. It had been a ride for me. Being teased, doubted, lied to, betrayed, counted out, and name called. I wanted to even show Ashton he’d been working out with a fellow-champion for the past three weeks.

My eyes rose to him in the mirror, and I blinked once and answered, “DMX.”

“Which song?” he asked.

Sounds of barking glared loudly in my ear. After being taunted with it, practically since I stepped on campus, I couldn’t run away from the label. My sight fell from Collin in the mirror and I saw myself. *The Banger*. She always showed up. Time after time, and I didn’t quite call on her. She just... knew. She never let Tori fight. Not once since I met her at about eight years old. A warmth trickled down over me and I

felt an out of body experience when I finally answered, “*Get at Me Dog.*”



The bell tolled and the referee gave the wave and head motion to start, shuffling backwards out of the center of the ring. Right away, my gloved fists went to my face and chin toward the floor as I approached her. She did the same, but began to bounce on her toes, almost zigzagging. I gained her enough to throw a test jab, something she missed, jumping back. Staying on her, I continued to find the right proximity to land another jab. When Walsh’s back hit the corner of the ring unexpectedly, like a wild rabbit, she bounced toward her left and out of a potential trap.

I was still testing her, but so far knew she was what Cut called a dancer. Walsh didn’t want to get hit. She’d rather play defense. That was okay. I decided right then and there to up my aggression. Putting more power in my legs, I launched from my left leg, executed my left jab then propelled my right hook. Walsh was too slow, and I landed on her jaw. Her head bounced back, footing loosened for a few seconds before she quickly gained herself and went back into posture.

*Tap! Tap! Tap!*

I caught her with three light jabs she didn’t see coming as she danced around me, but nothing that would land her on her ass. I only wanted her to know my fists were faster than her feet. I could hear shouts into the ring. Walsh’s trainer told her to hit me. When I moved in closer to give her the impression of having the advantage, she landed one on my chin that slipped to my shoulder. That was when I knew the level of her strength. And *that* was when I was ready to go in. She bounced out of my range, exposing her preference as an outside fighter.

Testing was over. I had to be quicker and more aggressive in catching then slaying my weak prey. I launched off my leg to reach her with longer jabs. Both landed, ending Walsh’s dancing. It also snapped her into action where she threw a hook I was able to block and counter with an uppercut.

It was a mean blow to her chin, snapping her head up. I followed with a proper cross by snapping my right shoulder back, pivoting my hips, and letting my right rip forward, landing on her nose. Blood squirted, but I was too zoned out to care where it landed. That was until I saw the ref.

He ordered us to break, checking to see if Walsh was okay. Then he sent us back to our corners, and I knew I'd landed right.

"You're doing good, girl," Luke praised the moment I reached the stool. My mouth guard was removed and water was fed to me. "She's outside boxing. You did good by throwing longer punches and shooting from that leg!"

I knew this from Uppercut.

"Tori, you spooked her. She's yours to devour!" Trisha confirmed what I knew.

"She's scared now!" Luke shouted. "She senses *The Banger*."

My face was wiped down again before the bell rang, and I was on my feet, making my way to her. Walsh's face was pink, making her a huge target in my mind. She did her dance, attempting to stay out of my reach. Determined this time, I kept up with her, even made myself appear open to bait her.

She took the bait.

Walsh tried me with her anticipated hook, something I was able to block with an outside ninety using my left. In equal exchange, I delivered a smooth hook, using the power of my core and rotation of my hips like Luke had been pushing all month. Of course, she wasn't expecting it. Brenda Walsh from Minnesota was a boxing dancer, not a fighter.

She flew backward in the air. Midway, the ref popped up in between us, backing me off. I watched him tend to her. He shouted numbers at Walsh she barely responded to, she couldn't beat the count. It didn't take long for him to call the fight. Yes, I could have "engaged her" longer, something Luke would say. But I was *The Banger*, who finished fights on her feet with her arms up.

The bell tolled and my victory was confirmed.

## -Then-

Tori

“So, who has the best pizza,” Teefah, in the passenger’s seat, asked. “*Verti* or *Dough Brothers* back on campus?”

The whole SUV sighed, challenged by that question.

“I think *Verti*,” one girl from the driver’s seat answered as we drove the dark roads in the middle of nowhere. “They customize your pizza, and you have soooooo many options. They’re just so good!”

“*Verti*’s sauce is amazing,” Neemah, the one sitting on the other side of Samantha, contributed while tapping on her phone. “Remember when they were on one of those shows on the *Travel Channel*?”

She had one of those ritzy *Blackberrys*. I’d been seeing lots of students and teachers with them. My old supervisor, Rich, stayed on his instead of working.

“Nah,” Samantha added. “*Dough Brothers* has the best crust. It’s thick, a tad sweet, and crusts just right. Plus, a girl from my Financial Lit 102 class worked there for a semester. Back at home, she worked for a commercial, chain pizzeria. She said *Dough Brothers* orders quality ingredients for their kitchen. Nothing’s frozen or filled with preservatives. You *have* to learn how to toss dough to work in the kitchen.”

“Well, duh!” Teefah laughed. “I guess they ain’t called ‘*Dough*’ *Brothers* just for the pun.”

They laughed. I guessed when I didn’t—again—Samantha peeped it. I rolled my eyes, mocking this dry ass conversation. This time, she nudged me with her shoulders and laughed louder. She knew I didn’t want to come out with her friends to a pizzeria. It didn’t seem like fun to me. I was tired,



in the last days of my menstrual cycle, and still coming down from my win in Minnesota. I didn't want to be around a bunch of girls I didn't know. I never fit in with new people and I was okay with that. Plus, I didn't have any money. I was too embarrassed to tell her that, so I didn't. But I didn't agree to this small talk either.

"Oh, my god," the passenger seat girl gasped. "Y'all hear about Al being pissy ass drunk in the Winnie dorm the other night?" That mention of Al had my attention. *Winnie Mandela Dormitory* was where Aivery and her friend, Karmen, stayed. It was within walking distance from my dorm, but a power walk to get there in little time. "Word is..." Her animated eyes, I could see from the light posts along the road, went between the driver and Samantha. She had perfect view of me, too, but I was used to being invisible unless in the ring. "he was with a freshman and went back to her room to fuck. But dude was too drunk to the point of her eventually throwing him out. He ain't make it far: he slept in the center lounge on that floor." The girls gasped at the same time again. "Yup." She nodded. "I hear there are pictures of him drooling on the couch floating around campus!" She fell out, laughing hard.

"He's a wild guy," the driver added, still giggling. "There're lots of wild stories of him at *BSU*."

"Yeah. Right?!" Samantha cried.

"I just hope he finally grows up." *Blackberry* girl sighed. "He'll be graduating this year. Time to be an adult."

The other girls, no longer laughing, expressed agreements.

"What about Dre?" My head whipped over to Samantha as she bit her lip, cheesely.

She wouldn't look at me.

"What about him? He's soooo stuck on himself!" The passenger seat girl croaked out as though he was a painful thought. "He thinks he's better than everybody, and can be holier than thou, which I never understood because he cusses

like a drunk sailor and fucks everything moving on campus like a long-distance truck driver.”

“Well,” Samantha droned, sounding low key defensive. “I guess that’s what happens with most preachers’ kids. You know they say they’re most troubled with their identities and feel the need to aggressively rebel to fight the stigma.”

“Oh, whatever!” The passenger seat girl waved her off.

“*Shit...*” vibrated from the *Blackberry* girl’s lungs.

No one agreed with her defense, and I was stuck in disbelief. I couldn’t believe Samantha had it bad for Dre. *Come on, girl. He’s a horrible human!* All of them were. All of the guys at *BSU* had been corny and, sometimes, mean humans!

Oh, god, could we get to the place any faster? I was already wanting to be back in my room. I remembered I had a row of crackers left in a box I’d bought last week. I splurged on them. They were the *Keebler*—

“I wonder what Ashton’s gonna do.”

That name-drop popped me out of my bubble of cracker thoughts.

“What do you mean?” Samantha asked.

“Like... He’s gonna be done with *BSU* in a couple of months. He technically wasn’t supposed to be here this semester, but wanted to finish his degree,” *Blackberry* girl ran down. She actually looked up from her phone for more than three and a half seconds.

“Oh, he doesn’t have to wonder what he’s going to do,” the girl in the driver’s seat explained with her hands very confidently. “Everything’s laid out for him. He’s going to the *League’s Combine* in February and will likely do well.”

“Yeah,” passenger seat girl hummed, seeming bored with the conversation. “He’s probably going to be all over the country this spring. I wonder if he’ll get a break to breathe.”

“I wonder if his tight-ass girlfriend will give him a break,” *Blackberry* girl hissed, not skipping a beat.

“I wouldn’t give his ass a break,” the driver declared, then threw a flirty expression to the passenger seat girl. They both giggled in a way that told me they were on the same page. “I’d fuck his big sexy ass morning, noon, and night, every day until he leaves for the team who drafts him. He’d be so fucking exhausted from my pussy, he wouldn’t want more for months. And that’s when I’m flying into town, drowning him with more!” They hi-fived each other.

“And he look like he could fuck, too, right!” Passenger seat girl shouted, kicking her feet as she laughed. “Shit! I’d fuck him now, but I don’t wanna rock crybaby Aivery’s world. His dick would be broken if he was mine!” They cracked the hell up.

“I’ve heard about him,” *Blackberry* girl shared, still more into her phone, it appeared, than this conversation. “And if what I’ve heard is true about how Ashton Spencer likes to fuck, ain’t none of us in here ready for him—and damn sure not Aivery Cooper. What’s crazy is he know he’s blessed with the fuck talent.”

“Fuck!” driver seat girl moaned dramatically.

*Dang...*

I was annoyed. Is this what college girls talked about? Is that all they saw? I’d spent enough time with Ashton to know there was more to him than his face and body. And I damn sure didn’t care about what he did for or with sex. He was a smart guy—generous, too. How could they skip that?

*Ughhhh!*

I was ready to be done with this already! Lucky for me, minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot. It was pretty packed for a weeknight in a town in the middle of nowhere. Once we stepped inside, I discovered something I wish I’d known before letting Samantha talk me into coming out. The restaurant was filled with *BSU* students. The first person I recognized was Al, standing behind a girl who had no idea he was there, and he yanked her ponytails then ran. The girl’s friends laughed like stupid feminine robots.

Dre was in another area of the diner-looking restaurant, posted up with other guys wearing *Panthers'* basketball jackets with a *Gucci* t-shirt and fresh *Timberland* boots. He was probably the most fashionable straight guy I knew. His eyes met us at the door, then coolly and quickly, he looked away.

“There’s Krystal. She saved us seats.” Passenger seat girl motioned for us to follow her.

I was the last in line, the tallest, too, following behind these giddy girls. We walked to the last booth against the wall alongside the entrance door. There was a bit of shuffling before it all stopped.

“Wait.” One girl, Krystal, whom I’d only seen a few times on campus held a puzzled face. “It can only hold seven people. You brought four.”

The driver girl turned to Samantha, then to me. When Samantha looked at me with apologetic eyes, I understood. Krystal had a friend with her already at the table. I was the unexpected party.

“No sweat,” I mumbled, shaking my head. “I’ll stand.”

“You sure?” Samantha’s face was tight. “We can find a couple of seats somewhere else.”

I scanned the restaurant. It was so full, quite a few people were standing and mingling. I wouldn’t stick out that much.

“Ain’t no seats in here.” I used my head to point to the table. “Go ‘head. Talk to your friends. I’m okay. I’ll just stand here.”

I tried to ignore the concern in Samantha’s eyes and looked away.

“C’mon, Sam,” one of the girls encouraged her. “We’ll eat and mingle, then go.”

Trying to look occupied, my eyes kept swinging to the far right of the restaurant. Artificial plants, high and low booths, black and white striped walls, and the same colors on

the checkerboard floor made the place look cool. *And the smell!* I knew I'd get hungry at some point in the evening. Coming here meant I'd miss most of the restaurants on campus. The big cafeteria would be closed by the time we made it back. And the ones still open would've been a hike for me to walk. I was screwed without money.

At the same time I could see Samantha finally sit in my peripheral, I caught eyes with a tight face I could now spot a mile away—something I hated. Dark eyes shooting right at me. They held me for a minute, making my body feel crazy. My underarms misted and breaths felt shallow. Golden fingers with long, almond, burgundy nails reached up to his face and pulled it low. Aivery's face appeared, golden highlights up in a messy bun when she kissed him on the lips. I watched her eyes close and cheeks lift in contentment when their mouths met. His tanned and hers the same color as her nails. When I looked inches up to his eyes, I saw they were still on me while he was connected to her. And that's when my eyes swiped away, lids blinking hard and uncontrollably.

Why had I been staring for so long? What was wrong with me? He was probably thinking, in that moment, I was a weird human. *I am a weird human.* And apparently a nosey one. I tried to play it cool and continued to peruse the restaurant. The garlic and dough, Ashton kissing...it all had me feeling wavy. Somehow my stupid eyes found him again, and again, he was staring at me like he'd never stopped. If I had money, now, I'd use it for a cab back to campus.

*Do they have taxis out here?*

A few minutes later, I was still standing by the girl's booth with my hands in my jacket pockets. My legs were good. I figured I could do this for another hour—one and a half at the most. More than that, I'd snap and go crazy.

“Hey, y'all!” I lifted my head to find Dre leaning over the table, smiling at the girls.

“Hey!” They all seemed to greet him in return at the same time.

“What y’all doing out?” He sounded to be flirting. “I usually see this crew by the *MLK Atrium* in the library. Science girls, right?”

I decided then and there to tune them out. Dre never acknowledged me anyway. Watching the staff behind the glass ordering counter appealed to me more in the moment. There had to be about twelve of them back there, bustling with orders. I wondered were they hiring. These days, I always looked for jobs, hating them all.

“Let me order you something, Saaaaam.” The way Dre pronounced my roommate’s name made my skin crawl.

“Ummmm...” she hummed, with a girlie giggle in her voice. “Sure. A personal veggie?”

“For sure. For sure.” He stood straight. “Anybody else?”

The girls mentioned ordering their food already from the small kiosk on the table I didn’t notice because I’d been standing. Apparently, Dre came over just before Sam was able to put hers in. It was clear to me she was his target.

He turned to me. “You want something?”

I shook my head, looking away. “I’m good.”

“A’ight,” he spoke mostly to himself before walking off.

“Tori, you sure you don’t want anything?” Sam asked with a smile and eyes begging me to be a girlie, grateful human. “He was going to pay.”

“I got money.” I tried playing it cool, happy the restaurant was so loud no one could hear my stomach grumbling. Smelling all this food sped up my hunger. “I can get my own food.”

“Here.” *Blackberry* girl pushed the little screen to the end of the table for me to order.

“I don’t need it. I’m good.”

“Aren’t you going to eat?” the *Krystal* girl asked.

I shook my head. “Kind of full now. Had some snacks before I left the room.”

I tried to ignore them looking at each other. It didn’t take long. They were back to yapping and laughing in no time. I leaned against the window and watched the kitchen. My thoughts traveled to my next fight. It was in a couple of weeks, here at *Blakewood*. No one really attended women’s boxing matches. I went to two of Reggie Laws, *BSU*’s top male fighter’s, fights and saw more than three times the amount of people than were at mine in Minnesota.

Most people at my fight were boxing people: staff, trainers, judges, a couple of reporters, and a few relatives of my opponent. My mother had been saying there was no money in boxing and it was a waste of time. When Uppercut came down to talk to her about how people from the top HBCU in the country wanted me to come fight for them, her first response was no. She said I needed to apply for a job at the new diner they were opening in Millville or try for work at the casinos in Atlantic City. She felt this was pointless.

Now, watching Dre hand Samantha her veggie pizza that looked good as hell, followed by the waiter bringing the rest of the girls their food, I wondered if there was a bit of wisdom in my mother’s stance on this. Samantha offered me a slice, and I turned it down. A small slice of a personal pizza would only tease me. Plus, I’d look poor.

I stood, people watched, smiled and responded when Samantha tried to pull me into a conversation, and ignored my stomach eating itself. The girls were done with their food twenty minutes later, but still talking.

I tapped Samantha’s shoulder. “I’mma hit the bathroom.”

“You want me to come?”

“Nah. Talk to your friends.” I stretched out my hand, telling her to stay. “I’ll be right back.”

The most annoying thing for me had always been threading through a crowd of my peers. I hated touching those

stupid humans or having to say excuse me to get through. Luckily enough for me, I made it to the bathroom with no major issues. I didn't even look Ashton and his girlfriend's way. When I stepped inside, I was reminded I didn't have to go in the first place; I'd just needed to move, sick of smelling delicious garlic. In my dry, starved thoughts, I figured in the bathroom I could smell something gross and be healed of my hunger.

There were two girls at the sinks and three available stalls. Only one was unoccupied, and thankfully, it wasn't the last, near the wall. I was able to slip inside just to wait. My eyes fell to my sneakers and the floor. What in the world was I waiting for, though? The water from the sinks silenced, then yanked paper towels could be heard. The girls at the sink said hello to the one coming out of the occupied stall. Then the doors to the other stall opened, and I heard the sink going again.

I let out a breath, eyes shooting up to the ceiling as I wondered how I got here. The door to the restroom opened and closed again. Just when I thought I was alone, voices vaguely familiar to me sounded.

“Are you okay?”

After a spell, another girl finally answered, “I will be. Relationships are just so fucking hard!” I recognized that whiny cry.

*Aivery...*

“Well, tell me,” the first girl encouraged. “What's going on?”

“He's been stressed since we got back on campus this fall about his ghetto ass cousin who's been locked up for months—*should have been long ago if you ask me*. My question is why does that affect you to the point of losing focus?”

“On what?” *Karmen*. I finally recognized the voice as Karmen. “Everything okay with the *Panthers*?” There was a



pause. “Oh. Then is it school he’s falling behind in? I know how seriously he takes his studies.”

“I really don’t know. He doesn’t say much. What I do know is we should be planning the next phase of our life together. He’s graduating in January; I graduate in May. He’ll be going right into the *League*. We should have our engagement figured out, our wedding date...be settled on our first house.” My eyes went wild, head swung back.

I had no idea things were that deep between them. Ashton never talked about Aivery. Then again, why would he to me?

*But engaged?*

“You know my sister, Sherell, and her husband live in my parents’ first home, a five thousand square foot colonial with their two-year-old. And now they’re having twins and don’t have their own place yet? I wouldn’t dare! My dad bought Mom an eight thousand square foot home before they had me. I will not be Sherell! Ashton and I will have a sizable home before we have children and when we decide to start our family, we will have moved into something suitable for it.”

I blinked hard. If this was how all people with money thought, I’d forever be behind the mark. My mother moved out of my grandmother’s trailer home and into her own in the park when I was about four. The three of us lived comfortably in that two-bedroom trailer. Those were the best days of my life, a time I’d gladly go back to. The place felt so big to me. It kept us close.

“It’s tricky with family, Aiv.” Karmen’s tone was more gentle than I thought she was capable of. “It’s gonna work out. Before I know it, I’ll be shopping for my bridesmaid’s gown!” She ended it on a cheery note.

“And not to mention, he flew out of town the other day, cutting his phone off. I didn’t hear from him for close to eighteen hours. His only explanation was ‘*Panthers* business.’ Like...what does that even mean? You hop on a plane and disappear when you want?”

“You know he’s carrying the *BSU* sports torch, Aiv. The athletic department is the top of the nation. They’re secretive as hell over there. That doesn’t mean he’s doing something wrong.”

There was another dramatic pause.

“Whatever. I’m just never supporting his hood ass cousin. I can’t stand him. He could rot away in there, and I wouldn’t give a damn. Why should I if he doesn’t care about his future? And Ashton doesn’t seem to care about his own if he’s neglecting it for his loser cousin!”

“Aiv...”

“Let’s just go. I can use a drink.” I could hear a deep exhale. “Megan’s got *some Macallan Sherry Oak 18* from her uncle’s stash back at the room. C’mon.”

“Ohhh!” Karmen sounded intrigued. “I’m down.”

I listened to them leave then counted to thirty before leaving out of the stall. It would have been crazy awkward if they’d checked to see if they were alone. Relieved I’d avoided a moment of disaster, I took my time washing my hands then left the bathroom. Ashton talked about his cousin to me a month ago. I never thought to ask him about it again. He got so cryptic that day on the track when I thought he was sharing something that had really been bothering him. Out of nowhere, I felt an emotion I wasn’t used to when it came to humans like Ashton Spencer. I felt guilt. Following up on his cousin’s issue seemed impossible, but necessary.

On my way back to my standing wall, I noticed Ashton standing along with Aivery and their crew. They were leaving. I kept my eyes trained to where I was going, my mind flying with the details from the conversation I’d just ear-hustled. Aivery’s words were harsh. Had she told Ashton how she felt?

“I was just about to come and look for you,” Samantha advised lowly when I rested against the window.

I tried for a smile in response, but honestly, I had no idea what came out. It was time to go. We’d been here for the better part of an hour. And my hunger pangs returned as soon

as I resumed my post. This was why I didn't like going places with drivers I didn't know. I had to decide how long it would be before I'd ask to go.

"Margherita pizza for the champ." The waiter looked me dead in the eyes when he lay the pizza on the table.

All the girls looked at me.

When he started to walk away, I made clear, "I ain't order this."

"Well, it's paid for and was ordered for you." He shrugged, looking at me over his shoulder. "The guy just left. Enjoy, sweetheart."

Why? Why did he always feel like he had to rescue me? I didn't ask for this. My eyes met the pizza. I'd never had this type before, but... *Damn. It looks good as hell!* My stomach started to turn over again, similar to how it did before I left for the bathroom.

"Here, Tori," Samantha ordered, scooting over. I hadn't even noticed the two girls saving the table had left. "This looks good. Eat."

I'd only eaten pepperoni, sausage, or just plain cheese pizza. This was not those. With little hesitation, I sat down for what would be my favorite pizza for the rest of my days.



*Ashton*

On a knee over the green of the *Panthers* field, we surrounded Coach Green, A.D. Jones, the coordinators, and other staff for final words before we ended practice. It was the last one before homecoming, when they shared their final words. It was a time of unity and internal reflection.

"We went hard on you this year," A.D. Jones admitted humbly. "We worked you since your move-in day in August. Some of you bitched and moaned, but everybody showed up this year. Everybody followed Coach Green and the

coordinators' vision to the best of your abilities. Spence switched up a few plays—”

“And was patient with everybody,” Coach Green spoke up.

“I’ve been told,” A.D. Jones continued as my teammates closest to me patted my back in agreement. His eyes brushed against the dozens of *Panthers* kneeled around him and his staff. “You guys deserve tomorrow’s win. You’ve put in the work, made the sacrifices, stayed focused, and you trusted the coaches and each other. Let that all culminate tomorrow, translating into a win.”

He gave Coach Green the nod of completion. Coach stepped toward the center of the cypher.

“I’m not just a man,” he projected loudly.

We responded with the next line. “I am a *Panther!*”

He continued, “My ancestors weren’t just resilient.”

“They were warriors!”

“I will never be average.”

“I’m superior!” we shouted.

Then we finished together. “And tomorrow, we will remind the world!”

Feeling hyped, we jumped to our feet, chest-bumping and dapping it up with each other.

“Hold up!” A.D. Jones shouted into a bullhorn. Immediately, we calmed to the call. “Before we let you go relax.” He squinted his eyes in a muted warning we found funny. “We have a...small presentation *Panthers* style!”

We all looked around, confused and in anticipation. Seconds later, music sounded. At first, I thought it was just from the speakers, but when the first few members of the band marched in obviously playing their instruments, I couldn’t trust my ears. My team and I watched, swaying to the music, eventually recognizing Jay Z’s “*Encore*” from *The Black Album*. Al’s big ass began bouncing around and into people,

super-duper psyched. The jumbotrons started to play above the stadium seats, awakening the place.

We watched the band take formation, reminding me how they were the best marching ensemble in the country—though *Bethune Cookman* would argue otherwise. We always killed them, in spite of how great they were. *BSU* was cutting edge. There was no greater ensemble than these beautiful Black and brown people gelling their talents in music and performing arts. In no time at all, my feet began to step rhythmically, one arm shot into the air, and head bobbed. Horns, drums, cymbals, timing, it was a *big* vibe.

We were all into it. Coach Green, hardly forty years old, two-stepped while reciting lyrics. All the staff did; A.D. Jones, too. One of the biggest benefits of attending an HBCU for me was, for the most part, shared-culture. A.D. Jones, Coach Green, other coaches, coordinators, and trainers varied in ages and life experiences, but still there was a universal language and expression we shared as Black men and women in America. Apparently, this particular track by Jay Z demonstrated that shit. Coach Green rapped the lyrics to the point of shouting. He was a big B.I.G., Hov, and Pac head—old school cat.

My team started our own party, getting hyped with the jumbotrons playing at the top of the stadium seats. The dancers flipped and somersaulted their way into the act. I guessed we were overtime and they were moving us along to use the field to prepare for homecoming. But we didn't move, we enjoyed the sneak-peek. When Jay began the second verse, my shoulders were pounded on. It incited my two-step.

“Oh, shit! Look up, Spence!”

My head flipped up and on the jumbotron was a video of my first play as a *Panther* my freshman year. I was second string for a wide receiver who was injured. Never did I think I'd ever get off the bench my first year at *BSU*. That was how I caught the attention of the coaches. It switched to plays in my second and third years here, videos and still shots. It took a few seconds for me to realize my team was acknowledging my contribution to the *Panthers* legacy. Tomorrow would be my

fourth and final homecoming as a student. I was blown away at the gesture. This also meant we were not being rushed off the field. When the dancers surrounded my team and coaches, our group opened up and I was isolated.

Excitement returned when they chanted “Spencer! Spencer! Spencer!” instead of Hov’s name. I laughed, embarrassed by the spotlight and surprised. But my boys cheered me on, celebrating me. I told myself to snap out of it. The dancers formed a line, parting before me. They clapped, invited me to come down like *Soul Train*. I did them one better. I did several back-flips landing at the end. Hearing their explosive response gassed me to continue. When I was on my two feet, one of my trainers was there, telling me that was enough. Of course, none of us needed a QB injury the day before the game.

This was dope. A beautiful moment shared between my extended family and me. This would be the last of this type of pre-homecoming comradery for me. Next year, I’d be closing my first season in the *League*, and I prayed it was in Connecticut. Ice cold liquid poured over my head, quickly racing down my face and back. *Fuck*. They got me. A bucket of ice water was emptied over my head. Someone grabbed me from behind and my guys held me in the air. I laughed my ass over, holding tight until I was released. *Damn*. It got emotional for me. When I landed on my feet, a soft hand hooked me at the waist and pulled into me.

Aivery.

She smiled proudly, long thick lashes batting. Then she pointed to one of the jumbotrons. My fucking heart stopped in my chest at the sight of a picture with the two of us.

*Fuck...*

*Is this how my story will end?*

*Do I want the next chapter with her?*

My spirit dropped hard and fast like a damn freefall, killing my celebratory mood. It didn’t help that the horns played solo, ending the song. I caught myself when my guys

came back in, slapping my shoulders and cheering and chanting. When the show ended, A.D. Jones threw me an expected gaze, handing me the bullhorn.

“The best years of my life have been on this roster, supported by the best fuckin’ coaches and players in the game!” My words were all uttered before the explosion of shouts and whistles. When they quieted, I continued, fighting the eerie feeling in the bottom of my belly. I scratched my head and scoffed, “I think we’re celebrating the wrong thing. We got ass to kick on this field tomorrow. Let’s show the alumni how the fuck we carry the tradition of *Panthers!*”

I handed the bullhorn back to Jones while the field exploded again. Aivery felt needy, which was distracting, but I knew why. She wasn’t getting the PDA from me she’d grown accustomed to. It was something she needed, and in the past, I had no issues executing. But today, I was spooked. If this was the ending of an era in my life, would I begin the next feeling as unsettled and dissatisfied as I had been for months now?

“All right. All right!” he spoke into the bullhorn. “It’s time for the players to relinquish the field to our incomparable marching band. Get on, fellas!”

Still hyped, my team acted quickly. Still jarred by my gray “next step,” I was now subdued, withdrawn from the celebratory vibe. In the middle of the pack, my team, coaches, staff and I filed down the tunnel and into the building. They were still shouting the “*Encore*” lyrics, and a few, my name even. The further inside we traveled, the more I could hear a disruption of the playful banter ahead. When I made it closer to the end of the walkthrough, I saw why.

“Oh, shit!” Al shouted. “Don’t hurt us, Ali!” He threw air punches, something I’d seen her do a lot and randomly.

“It ain’t Ali,” Tori corrected him, standing with her back and right foot against the wall. “It *is* champ, though. Something you *Panthers* better be about tomorrow.”

“Ahhhhh!” The guys erupted in laughter.

Some challenged her, “We been about that life, fresh meat.”

Tori may have had a calm demeanor, but I’d seen her ruffled enough to know she stayed guarded. Her posture appeared relaxed, but she was tensed, hands buried in her pockets, chin in the air, challenging.

“Really?” Her once thick, unruly eyebrows were now neatly arched as they furrowed. I remembered before her “date” they were not shaped at all, but it still didn’t mar her natural attractiveness. “Remember that tomorrow.”

That had them turn up another notch, but they kept it moving. Even the coaches appeared tickled by her tough talk. We weren’t used to seeing anyone not related to *Panthers* football or media in this area of the building, but no one questioned her. I was glad. Call it timing, but knowing Tori was here, even in this revelatory time, brightened my mood exponentially. She made all the doubt from the gray dissipate. This...tomboy of a champ appealed to me on some weird level. This moment—this very moment—was when I decided it was okay to find McNabb intriguing beyond just being her tutor.

I sauntered right up to her, and for the first time, I experienced the slip in Tori McNabb’s eyes. They were jumpy, regarding me from my face down to my abs exposed from my cropped practice jersey.

“What are you doing on this side of the compound?”

Her eyes shifted away, face hardening again protectively. “Looking for you.”

“Ah...” My mood brightened even more. “How’s the paper coming along?”

“That’s not why I’m here.”

I snorted, amused. “Okay...” I found that hilarious. “But still. How are you doing with it?”

“I’ll answer that after you give me answers, which is why I’m here.”



I switched stances, now holding my helmet with both hands. “How can I help you?”

She shook her head, and mumbled, “You don’t always have to help me.” Tori’s eyes were on me again. “Thanks for the pizza last night, but you didn’t have to do that.”

“I didn’t have to continue to watch you play tough girl while your stomach was eating itself.” With pouted lips, I nodded. “You right. You right,” I sighed facetiously. “And I didn’t. I left. But I see you still have a problem with saying thanks.”

Her face tightened again. “Maybe I forget because I never remember asking.”

“Oh, so when I see a starving, stubborn ass girl, I should—”

“Thank you. Would you shut the hell up and let me get on with why I’m here?” With a bow of my head, I granted her what she asked for. Tori took a deep breath as though she was annoyed. I, on the other hand, was amused—*particularly amused*—today. “Your cousin, Spencer.” She rolled her eyes as my stomach sunk to my damn cleats. “How’s your cousin?” Her eyes widened and chin dipped. “The one that’s locked up. Have you heard from him?”

Until that moment, I’d forgotten I shared that shit with Tori. And, again, no one asked. It was almost a month ago since I rambled to her about Brick. The mention of him brought me back to the conversation I had with my mother last night about him.

“Look.” She switched weight on her legs. “If you don’t want to talk about it...”

I swallowed. “Nah. It’s cool.” I yanked on my ear. “My uncle’s girlfriend went to see him two weeks ago. She said he looked good, but has lost a few pounds and has scars on his face. She said Brick’s spirits are still up. He was supposed to call that same night at the usual time, but never did. My mother told me last night the lawyer is supposed to speak to the judge about it soon. We’re just...hoping.”

“What are the streets saying?”

“What do you mean?”

“You mentioned the street war. The rival gang. They have people in there. So do your family.”

My mouth twisted and eyes caught on to her sneakers. I couldn't believe she wore them every day. That loosened something in my chest. “They've kept Brick separate from his gang since he was admitted. That's unusual after a month or so. But they damn sure put him in there with other gangs. All we've heard in the streets is they're gonna kill him as soon as the opportunity presents itself.”

“So, you're living the same nightmare you were when you told me?” I nodded. “Maybe when you go home for Thanksgiving, you can schedule a visit.”

“For sure. Now, answer my question. How's the paper coming along?”

One shoulder lifted in the air higher than the other as she tried to turn away coyly. “It'll be fine...when I start it.”

My eyes blew the hell up. “That thing is due next week.”

She turned back to face me. “I know.” She rolled her eyes defiantly.

“And it's six pages.”

“I know.”

“And you're working that shitty job.”

She nodded, a smile opening on her face. “I know. I work today.”

I shook my head. “I can help you get started tonight.”

“Don't you play tomorrow?”

“Yeah. So I won't be partying tonight. I'll save that for tomorrow. What about seven? I can meet you at the library.”

She shook her head. “Eight-thirty is as early as I can do it.”

I took a moment to think. “The private rooms shut down early on Fridays. There’s a strict policy on group and buddy-studying in the common areas. The best I can do is my apartment.”

Tori nodded, slowly. Protectively. “Okay.”

I pointed down the hall. “I gotta make my massage appointment to loosen up before tomorrow. I can get you one, too. You should need one after your fight the other day.”

She shook her head, taking off. “I’ve got work in less than thirty minutes. Gotta catch this bus into town. I’ll see you at eight-thirty.”

I laughed, knowing she’d say no.

**-Then-***Ashton**Why the hell am I here?*

The band stopped their number, having to start again for the millionth time. Again, several of the two-hundred piece looked my way on the bleachers, nine times out of ten wondering what the hell I was doing here. I stretched back until I reached the metal bench behind me. After the mandatory massage, I watched a film of our school's rival football team for tomorrow. I made sure to carve an hour to sit out here and "support" Aivery. Supporting, by her definition, was sitting in the bleachers watching the cheerleaders practice with the band for tomorrow. It was bullshit, but I played along. After her ranting last night when we left *Verti's Pizzeria* about me giving up so soon into the semester on our agreement to be a couple to the campus, I decided to come out here and just... watch.

And Aivery was damn happy, too. She couldn't keep her eyes off of me anymore than the girls on the band or the ones on her squad. I could see the slick ass eyes they tossed me and was surprised Aivery couldn't. Speaking of her, she began hopping up the bleachers, en route to me.

"You enjoying yourself?" She heaved out of breath, taking a seat next to me.

"It's good doing...nothing." I tried supplying a gentle smile to soothe the bite of my sarcasm.

"Coach Tomeka is wrecking my nerves today. She's recommending this old routine for the opening tomorrow. It's fucking ridiculous that we're *the Blakewood* and doing old routines at homecoming!"

"That's fucked up." I sat back again.

She rolled her eyes. "Thanks for trying."

She knew I didn't give a shit. I had to be ready for tomorrow my damn self. I still had more plays to study and films to watch before I turned in at a decent hour. It was time for me to go if I wanted to keep on a reasonable schedule. I didn't feel like fighting like we did last night. After hearing her go off about how we looked to others, I decided I'd play it safe with Aivery and not rock the boat. She was right more than she knew: I had to be smart about my moves with her.

Aivery gazed across the field. I found my attention go out there, too. Within seconds, my eyes collided with balding Benjamin Pettiford. Dude's hairline had been fading since he graduated from *BSU*, and here, two years later, he still kept his cut low to have it blend with his dark skin. He waved my way. Slowly, my pupils rolled over to my left. Aivery waved back with a measured smile. She kept her eyes low and greeting short.

Then she shuffled, turning to face me. "You know we're going to win tomorrow." Her tone seductive and baby-like to stroke my ego.

Aivery was changing the subject to smooth over the fact of her friend, Benjamin, trying to play me and the fact that she assisted him. I didn't trip. Benjamin's name was honest. He was petty as shit, but I was too mature for his antics, which is what he hated. He'd applied for an assistant coaching position for the football team, but A.D. Jones, knowing our history, couldn't risk the liability of having him near me. So Pettiford had to wait out my leave as an assistant to the *Panthers* band coordinator. It was a piece of shit gig, seeing he wanted to be in sports. Good for his ass. I was just disappointed for the thousands of professionals who would kill for that role and bring more to it than the simple nepotism Benjamin Pettiford did.

"Aiv, tomorrow's my last homecoming as *Panthers* QB. You think I should be concerned about wardrobe changes?"

She frowned. "I guess you have a point. It would have been nice, though."

My *Blackberry* rang in my pocket. I pulled it out and didn't recognize the number. The area code was weird as hell. That's when it hit me. NormaJean. She emailed me yesterday saying she'd call sometime today. She'd just left Paris and had arrived in Shanghai this week.

"Aiv!" someone shouted from below. "You're needed!"

I took to my feet. "I gotta take this. Go do your thing." I pulled her into me with one arm and kissed her forehead.

"See you tonight?" she offered.

"I'm about to turn in early. Got prep to do for tomorrow. Coach Green got an early call on us in the morning."

"Oh." She managed a smile. "Okay."

I left her, dropped down the stairs of the bleachers while taking the call.

"Yo," I answered.

NormaJean yawned. "Hey, my favorite student." Her voice was always lyrical and worldly feminine. "Shit. Please tell me you don't have me on speaker."

We both burst out laughing. As I walked toward the side of the stadium, my head fell back. I could hear her melodic chortle, too.

"You are wild, girl."

"I know. Your mother would shoot me dead if she heard that. And Byron Jones would have state troopers at the airport, ready to turn my plane around."

"It's not that bad." I trekked across the manicured lawn, amused by her call already.

"Trust me. Based on what he said to me your freshman year about him keeping you focused, the man's capable of anything."

"How's China?"

“Beautiful, as usual. We got in late last night and stopped at my favorite street vendor for some yummys, drank wine made in China, and crashed. I just got up not too long ago. Yesterday, before flying out, something hit me.”

“Oh, yeah?” I finally located my bike, parked against a tree. Only on a secure campus could you leave a *Ducati* near a random shaded tree. I could have left it in the parking lot, but I was feeling rebellion brewed by Aivery and exercised it this way. “What?”

“I miss you. That’s when I emailed you—well, that and when I realized tomorrow’s *Blakewood*’s homecoming. Are you ready?” Her voice raised an octave, expressing her excitement.

“I’m getting there.” I swung my leg over the bike to straddle it.

“What are you doing? Tomorrow’s your last one, guy. I wish I were there. Shit,” she scoffed. “If I’d planned this trip right, I would’ve been there, even if I had to wear a mask.”

I chuckled. “That wouldn’t be necessary, baby girl.”

“So?”

“So, what?”

“What are you doing?”

“Right now or to prepare?” My eyes gazed around the side of the building.

“Right now. Don’t tell me you’re with that little girl,” she gruffed.

I smiled. NormaJean had her way of showing me support. She watched my games on television or recorded them when she couldn’t watch live. She actually came to a few since I’d been at *BSU* dressed in disguise, sitting in the distance.

“Nah. I just left her when you called though. Right now, I’m about to head back to my apartment and order some food. I’ve got a tutoring session, believe it or not, before I start preparing for the game.”

“In your apartment? Argh!” She growled playfully. “Wish I was your pupil.”

I yanked on my ear, excited at the prospect. “It’s never too late to go back to school.”

“But you’re leaving.”

“Last I checked, tutoring doesn’t require enrollment.”

“Good point, stallion.” She giggled sweetly. “No, seriously. Since when do you tutor at your place?”

My brow line tightened and lips pursed at that very relevant question as I considered it. “Since I’ve been presented with an interesting subject.”

“Subject as in academic or prospective ass?”

I grabbed my head, tossing it back dramatically. “I’ve got a girlfriend, NormaJean. You forget that?”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t. I just wish you didn’t.”

“But you were for it when I started fucking with Aivery.”

“I always have and will continue to be supportive of all you do. That’s not being for Aivery, honey.”

I rubbed my forehead, confused. “That makes no sense.”

“It does, dear heart.”

“How?”

“You only pursued Aivery because we got exposed. If it were not for that debacle, you would not have put on the face of a young man living what some perceive to be a norm for his age.”

I blinked, taken aback. “What?” Thick laughter left my lungs, belying my unease. “What perceived norms, young lady?”

“That, in order for you not to be a sex addict or deviant, you have to be in a committed relationship with a young girl your age. And that’s simply not true. There are



countless men your age who fulfill their sexual fantasies and explore their sensual temperaments with several women before pursuing monogamy.”

“You don’t think I know that?”

“I wonder, Ashton. I swear, I do. But when I see you struggling in a relationship you’re not being fulfilled in, as your friend, it’s my job to remind you. Just cut Aivery off. You’re about to go into the *League*; that is the absolute worst environment for the flimsy house of love and commitment you and that girl have built. You can go in there, fuck whoever and however many women you want to fuck, the way you like to fuck them.”

*The way you taught me to fuck...*

“I fuck Aivery the way I like to fu—”

“Bullshit! That girl hasn’t lost her mind yet.” We both had to laugh at that. When she was able to calm her humor, she asked. “Who are you ordering food for?”

My eyes scanned the area. “Tori.”

“A guy?”

My head shot back, reacting to that assumption. “No.” Then again, I didn’t know what in the hell Tori was...other than intriguing. But that was it. Even if I was single, Tori McNabb wouldn’t be my type. “KaToria,” I qualified. “Her name is KaToria.”

“Oh, nice. Is she pretty?”

Tori pretty? I’d been thinking about that a lot lately. Sitting on my bike, I shrugged like a damn kid. Lucky for me, NormaJean wasn’t there to witness it. “She a’ight.”

“Does she like you?” Her voice turned dreamy.

I laughed. “Hell no!”

“This KaToria, at least, finds you attractive. Right?” NormaJean sounded more hopeful than the reality of my relationship with Tori.

“I seriously doubt it. And you know what?”

“What’s that?”

“I think that’s why I’m ordering dinner tonight and tutoring her in my apartment instead of the usual library.”

NormaJean expelled a heavy breath into the phone. “I severely doubt if she doesn’t want to find out how heavy your cock is on her tongue, but I guess you having a platonic relationship with a young girl is necessary, too.”

I nodded. “It’s sensible for me to have one with someone my age. It’s been working out well with you, my senior.”

“Speak for damn yourself, stallion.”

I laughed. “I gotta go.”

She yawned, “Okay.” NormaJean cleared her throat. “I’ll shoot you an email tomorrow night to see how it went. But I know you’re going to give them a show.”

“You better know that, sweetie.”

“Later, Ash.”

“Later.”

I slipped my cell into my pocket then pulled my helmet over my head. Trying to stay on schedule, I kicked the stand, cranked the engine, and pushed off for my apartment.



Tori

Behind me, I could hear a streak of yells, yelps, and laughter, letting me know the door opened. I was sure to put the wet floor maintenance sign in front of the door. Standing, I looked beyond the door of the stall I was in. It was my boss, Kelly. He stood in the middle of the doorway, behind him, nasty little kids zipping down the walkway. I hadn’t even been working here long and was already tired of looking at kids. When I had my own, I would never take them to an indoor

trampoline park—or any indoor place for kids. It was just gross!

“McNabb, I need you to take the morning shift tomorrow.”

“Why?”

Kelly’s eyes widened like he was surprised by my question. “Because Tim called out with a stomach bug. Plus, I asked you to.”

“I’m not on the schedule for tomorrow because I can’t work.”

“Well, I need you.”

Tomorrow was homecoming, and normally I wouldn’t care about school events, but I was told I had to be there as a *Panther*. Beyond that, it was a big game for Ashton. I... wanted to...support him.

“I can do opening till like ten-thirty, but I gotta go after that. It’s homecoming.”

“So?” His face turned red. Kelly was heating up.

“Trisha already told me no athletes could miss homecoming.”

Kelly sighed hard. His eyes going to the ceiling, fists going to his hips, a pencil in one hand and the clipboard in the other. It looked like that call would stand.

When I pushed for needing a job after quitting the cafeteria on campus, Trisha tried staying ahead of me. She was able to get me a job here at the trampoline park which was two miles from campus. The woman was even able to work out transportation for me, having the shuttle that drove into town make a stop not en route and dropped me off three blocks from my job. It worked for me, until I learned how nasty kids could be and how neglectful their parents were.

“Fine!” His lips balled and nose seemed to lengthen. “But be here on time to open, and you had better not have a single call out or tardiness this week!”

I'd never called out or been late since getting the job. Kelly waited a few seconds for a response from me, maybe an argument. When he saw I had nothing to say, he left the bathroom. The door closed and the noise from the rowdy kids' raucous muffled. I went back to mopping the overflowed toilet.



## Ashton

When the doorbell rang, I hopped from the countertop to my feet. Unaccountably nervous, I opened the door with sweaty palms, ready to curse her ass the hell out. But when I did, I saw...a wet dog. The hell?

Tori rolled her eyes. "I got caught in it."

"You didn't take your umbrella to work?"

She shrugged with indifference. "I don't have one."

I blinked, overwhelmed by the sight of the tall and completely drenched chick shivering on the "God's Dwelling Place" doormat my grandmother purchased for me.

"You could have called," I gritted. "I could have come and scooped you from anywhere when the rain started."

"I wasn't on campus when it started, and—"

"You don't have a damn cell," I cut her off, answering for her. Moving aside to let her in, I scolded her. "You're too damn far away from your stomping grounds to not have a phone."

Tori bent over to unlace her sneakers and neatly placed them on the mat before stepping in.

Paying me a cursory glance, she rolled her eyes away. "Why do you think I work?" She turned to me fingering her flat ponytail as I closed the door. Tori glanced around, bringing my attention to candles lit in the living room. "You expecting your girlfriend tonight?"

*Shit...*

My eyes closed in realization. Not only were the old school, love songs playing for my pet fish, but the candles. I didn't know they were burning, it was habit.

“My bad. I light candles when I write.”

She sucked in a breath and her body tensed. “You were writing?” Tori was implying she disturbed me.

My chin dipped. “That’s why you’re here. For your paper?” I asked with sarcasm.

“Oh! It’s just that...”

“What? That since you forgot about me sacrificing my time to help you with your paper, that I did, too.”

“I didn’t forget, Ashton. I got stuck in a rainstorm! You hear it out there. The wind is crazy!”

I did hear it outside. It was insane, the heavy wind slapping against the windows made it clear how dangerous it was out tonight. I was worried about the girl. Powerless. Angry that I could even feel those emotions about her.

Tori turned away and ambled down the hall and into the living room, creating a trail of wet puddles on the floor. She shifted back to find me standing in the same place. “Is that garlic I smell?”

Exhaling, I sauntered toward the kitchen. “I forgot about that, too. You hungry?” I asked, pressing buttons on the stove to start the oven.

“Starving like Marvin.”

I stood straight, eyes shooting to meet hers. “You can’t sit on my furniture soaked like that.” I couldn’t lose the insolence in my tone, neither could I put my finger on why I was still angry. The girl was here. Wet, but safe—and hungry. Expelling another harsh breath, I dropped my hands on my waist and felt my eyes roll to the ceiling like a bitch. What the fuck was wrong with me? “Stay right there.”

I rounded the counter to leave the kitchen, passed by Tori’s wet frame in the living room, and promenaded toward the back of the apartment where my room was. It took less

than a minute for me to collect a t-shirt, socks, and a pair of my boxer briefs.

I was back in no time with a stack of clothing in my hand. “If you want to change, you can use these, but...” My eyes roved up to the wet mop of her head. “I advise you to shower if you’re really going to feel comfortable.”

Blinking with a closed mouth, Tori appeared stunned. “You okay with me showering here and wearing your clothes?”

“I don’t think sending you back out there to do this in your dorm is safe or smart, do you?”

When my eyes traveled over to the window where the naked branches of a tree could be seen dancing wildly as the rain poured down, from my periphery, I saw Tori’s head turn to follow my line of vision.

“And do what with my uniform? I gotta open in the morning.”

I shook my head. “Just...” I pinched my nose. “Throw everything out in the hall when you take them off.” I pointed to the stacked washer and dryer door farther down the hallway. Tori hesitated with downcast eyes and a hanging jaw. That gave me pause. “Wait.” I switched weight on my legs. “This ain’t gone be one of those miscommunication experiences when you report me for sexual harassment tomorrow, saying this was the moment you felt uncomfortable, but couldn’t express that and the night went on with more points of pressured decisions to where you feel sexually harassed, is it?”

In a flash, Tori grimaced then snatched the clothes from me so hard, she dropped the socks. “Ashton Spencer, I may not be big or strong enough to beat your ass, but I will knock you the fuck out if you ever try me,” she threatened through gritted teeth and took off for the back of the apartment. “Where’s the bathroom?”

Yanking my ear, I answered, “First door on the right.



“They’re still in the wash?” I turned around to find Tori standing over the peninsula on the living room side of the counter.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t what I got. Wrapped around her head was a towel, and the *BSU* t-shirt I loaned her was big as hell, being held by her small shoulders and covering her incredibly crudely exposed breasts underneath. Their contour was elicited, sheer beneath the cotton, making the experience of her natural femininity alarming, fucking luscious and surreal. Tori McNabb was KaToria, a woman.

This was fucked up.

*Dangerous.*

Tori’s brows met. “Why are you looking at me like I slapped your great-granny?”

“Because your big ass tits are high-beaming me.” My face dropped, eyes closed, and shoulders curled. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“Shit...” I heard her whisper. “My bad. I don’t have a...”

I pointed to the heater unit near the kitchen table. “They won’t be dry for a minute.”

When I glanced up, Tori was attempting to hide her breasts as she stalked into the kitchen to where the unit was, built into the wall. Her bra and panties were stretched out on the vent. Her ass. My eyes closed to a squeeze.

*Oh, my fuckin’ go—*

“You...” My head whipped up just as hers did the same toward the hall where the washer was still going. “You...”

“Don’t say it.” I grumbled. “The answer is yes. That underwear is expensive as hell. I hope you don’t throw them in the washing machine.”

“Do your girlfriend hand wash hers?”

That question was alarming, forcing me to face her again. “I don’t know what she does.”

“So, you don’t hand wash them for her?”

I snorted. “No. I don’t wash her clothes, McNabb.” I washed Tori’s by hand because... Well, because she *was* Tori. That was until she came out of the bathroom, half dressed, revealing her true sex. It was official, she was no longer gender-neutral to me. “What type of dude do you think I am?”

“A panty buyer and washer.” Tori spit a laugh, exposing all her teeth and shallow dimples I didn’t recall seeing before. Her teeth were...pretty. Lips full and shapely. Abruptly, her humor ended. Tori’s lashes blinked successively. “If this is going to be weird for you, give me a jacket.” She attempted to cover her breasts again.

I had to get my shit together. *I* was being weird. Clearing my throat, I asserted, “Nah. It’s not weird, but it is awkward. Aivery’s got some things here. I would go check for a bra of sorts, but I know off the run, you’re not the same size.”

“And I wouldn’t wear a stitch of her clothes anyway,” she hissed. “The girl would probably kill me if she knew I were here; I could only imagine what she’d do if I wore her clothes.”

“Yup.” My voice hiked as I sucked in a breath, agreeing with her. “Anyway.” I pointed to the blow dryer on the coffee table in the living room. “That’s for you to dry your hair when you’re ready—”

She sniffled. “That pizza?”

*Shit!*

I leaped around in the air, taking long lunges to the stove. Thankfully, the pizza wasn’t burning or quite on its way. I’d just put it in when Tori came out with teardrop-shaped boobs. I grabbed a mitt to pull it out. “I was getting to that. Was gonna say you should probably eat first.”

Tori peered over the counter and saw the pizza. “Margherita! My favorite!” Her lips pushed into the air as her



eyes fell. “Well, since *Verti*.”

I froze, reaching for the plates. “That’s the first time you had Margherita pizza?”

Tori’s expression turned downcast again. For the first time, I hated it. “Why do you always do that?”

“Do what?”

I plated the hot slices. “Wear negative emotions on your face and reserve the positive.”

“What’re you talking about?”

About how I didn’t know you had dimples—no matter how shallow they are—until now. “You frown and scowl a lot, and immediately when something’s upsetting or bothering you. But you don’t smile or laugh much.”

“I do,” she grumbled following me to the table.

I placed the dishes on the table. “When? I never see you.” When I peered up at her, Tori’s tits catcalled me. I snapped my fingers then pointed to her. “Jacket. Right. Let me get napkins and drinks, and I’ll take care of that.”

“Please don’t do that to me.” The brittleness in her request sounded painful.

I turned to her. “Do what?” My face was tight, I felt defensive.

I did and said anything and everything to spite her.

“Don’t make me feel like a dog. Don’t make gestures that make me feel something other than what you, your mean girlfriend, and your snobbish West Beverly High friends are.” *West Beverly High?* “I mean, I get it. I’m not like you guys, but I don’t start trouble or even retaliate when you pick on me. I know you and I aren’t friends, but we are *Panthers*. Don’t make me feel less than that.” Tori took a deep breath, nostrils expanding. “I get it. I’m not light skinned, girlie, soft-spoken, or sexy. But because you’ve got a girlfriend, I thought you wouldn’t care about me being those things. I’m not like other girls, so that’s not what I’m asking. What I’m asking is try to

keep your disgust for me to yourself. I can't take much more of it."

My head shook on its own volition. "You think that's what I think about you?" My throat was so tight, my voice cracked. "You're fuckin' crazy, girl." Tori switched weight on her hips, crossing her arms over her chest, expelling a tired breath. "A month ago, you're right: you were 'the dog,' but I told you I dropped it. Hell, I dropped stacks on you to trick my friends and my girl. You think I do that for 'dogs?'" I shook my head. "I'm not an animal lover, sweetheart. You think I feed strays? Tutor and workout with them?"

"You had to," she tried to argue. "Trisha...A.D. Jones —"

"Girl," I interrupted her false assessments. "I'm not only the quarterback of the *Panthers*, a senior in my last semester here, but I'm also *Blakewood's* premier athlete. My sport and skill brings bank to this institution. You think they're cool with me using my limited time tutoring? Do you know who A.D. Jones prefers for me to do my workout with? The kid they're grooming to be my successor."

"Yeah, but let's not act like you're thrilled to spend time with me." Tori rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you would rather do it with your girlfrie—"

"Yes, at the start of the semester, I didn't want to be within two-miles of you. That's true, but we've spent lots of time together, Tori. You're cool—or were cool before—"

She gasped, once again going into defense mode. "Before what?"

"Before walking in here braless, making it hella clear you're no dog or girl, for that matter."

Tori's fists balled and she took a step closer to me. "Then what the hell am I, Ashton Spencer?"

"A fuckin' woman I want to touch and kiss! Okay?" I damn near shouted. At a much lower and appropriate tone, I pointed behind me and shared, "I'm gonna go look for that jacket. Help yourself." I stormed off for my room.

On the way, I heard the wind and rain beating against the windows. It was a monster out there. When I returned with a zip up hoodie, Tori had begun digging into her pizza. I grabbed a couple of napkins from the drawer and brought them over to the table. After dropping them near our respective plates, I handed her the jacket. Tori wiped her hands and mouth before taking it. Then I went back to the cabinets for glasses.

“What do you want to drink?” *Please don't say beer or wine...*

I needed to keep this night rated G for *good Ashton*.

“Juice is fine.”

“Cranberry cool?”

“Yeah,” she answered around her food.

I poured us both drinks before joining her at the table. Tori had put the jacket on and continued to eat.

“Cloth napkins?” Her forehead hiked before biting into her slice again.

I scoffed, knowing where this was going. Picking up my pizza, I shrugged. “My grandmother again.” I took a huge bite of my pizza.

“Where are you from?”

I chewed, not speaking until I swallowed. “I’m a hybrid cat. Half Newark, half South Orange.”

“Humph...” she snorted.

My head snapped back at her audacity. “What does that mean?”

“I may be from South Jersey, but I know North Jersey.”

“How?”

“From boxing. It’s where I train.” She took another bite of her pizza then waved her hand dismissively. “Anyway. I fought a lot in and around Newark. And one of the kids at the gym was from South Orange. Couldn’t fight for shit.”

“So what you mean?” I dropped my face, eyes challenging her. “I can’t fight?”

Tori rolled her eyes and scoffed. “No. You ain’t no fighter. I’m saying people from South Orange ain’t gotta fight. They just floss.”

I nodded, cool about it. “Do I floss?”

Her face tightened as though considering that. “No. You just...” She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“No. Please. Tell me.” *I don’t know why I give a shit, but I do.*

“Honestly, I don’t know what you are. Maybe you’re on to something with the Newark/South Orange mix. You’re arrogant, stuck up when you want to be, but...”

“But what?” My patience game fled me.

“I don’t know.” She sat up in her chair, eyes going to the ceiling. “It’s like... You’re mean, but generous, smart, and...thoughtful.”

“Thoughtful?”

“Like this. You got me my favorite pizza for tutoring.” She winked. “We won’t mention the under clothes on the radiator. And even the blow dryer.”

“That reminds me. You need to hurry with that. I’ve gotta return it.”

“Oh. I thought it was Aivery’s.”

I shook my head. “I was lucky my neighbor was in. She’s usually on the road, working.”

“Working? How much working and traveling can she do as a student?”

I took a sip of my juice then explained, “Dorothy isn’t a student. She’s a *BSU* rep in admissions. She goes around the country to inner cities and makes our existence known.”

“A *Blakewood* employee is your neighbor?”

I chuckled at her naivety. I liked it. “Most people in this building are. I think only a handful of us are students. My roommate’s a marine geology major. His ass is never here.”

“What’s that?”

“He studies the ocean and various shit in it. He’s a senior, too, so a lot of his work is in the ocean. He travels more than I do.”

“Wow...” she breathed out. “I’ve never heard of that major. There’s so much up here. What’s your major?” Tori stood to grab the tray of pizza from the stove.

“I’m studying business. What about you?” I pulled apart another slice before she could sit down.

“I don’t know yet.”

“So, you’re undeclared.”

“That’s what my paperwork says. It’s just that there are too many options out here. I’m only eighteen, I don’t know what the hell I wanna do with the rest of my life—other than fight.”

I thought about her statement for a moment while I chewed. “You know why I want to study business?”

The muscles in her forehead flexed. “Why?”

“Because I always knew I wanted to be in the *League* and be so good at my job, I’d make millions. I’m sure you’ve heard as many bankrupt stories about Black entertainers as I have. I didn’t want that to be me. Of course, you hire competent and specialized talent to handle your finances, but I felt I should have a baseline knowledge of what’s happening to protect my legacy.” Tori had stopped chewing to listen. Her eyes danced until well after I was done speaking. I wondered if I’d lost her. “You follow?”

“I think,” she murmured with food in her mouth.

Why did that not annoy the shit out of me? I humiliated my teammates with less table-manner offenses.

“What I’m saying is if you believe in your talent as a fighter, and you invest in it, use the resources of *Blakewood* to ensure the legacy of your talent. Learn marketing, analysis, leadership, and finance. You can’t go wrong.”

Slowly, Tori’s head began to rock up and down, lips pushed out. “Good stuff, Spencer.”

“I know.”

Tori spit out a guffaw and quickly picked up the crust from her first slice, tossing it at me over the table. I registered it just as fast and caught it.

Just when I thought we fell into a comfortable spell of silence, she hit me with, “Is she going to want to fight me when she knows I’ve been here tonight?”

The “she” was Aivery. That shit pissed me the hell off.

“Do you have a boyfriend—” I quickly thought, remembering not to assume. “or a significant other to speak of?”

She blinked hard successively. “That’s none of your business.”

“And my relationship with my girl is yours?”

“I just want to be prepared if she tries to run up on me.”

My head fell to the side and I squinted. “Are you scared of Aivery, Tori?”

“I ain’t scared of nobody on this soft ass campus.”

“Then what do you have to be prepared for?”

“In case she tries me.”

My head dropped even more. “Tries what?”

Tori shrugged, fingering the huge glob of cooled mozzarella on her slice. “To come for me again.”

“Like fight you?”

“Maybe. Girls get that way over their boyfriends, you know.”

I chuckled. “Aivery’s bold and aggressive, but violent, she’s not. None of my friends are. We don’t have to be here. For the most part, physical violence isn’t a concern on this campus. But let me ask you this: Even if the girls did fight, why are you so scary around them?”

“What do you mean?”

“They treat you the way you allow them to. You’re a brawler, the fear should be in reverse.”

Tori shook her head. “Just because I could beat them doesn’t mean it’s my go-to. I just want to be left alone. Invisible. I like being invisible.”

“Isn’t that what you just admonished me for a few minutes ago?”

“No. I asked you not to be mean and rude. I’d rather be ignored than picked on.”

I didn’t reply. It was clear to me Tori wanted to be heard, and oddly, I wanted to hear her. Learn more about her. We continued to eat mutedly, and I moved on to my third slice, though I was no longer hungry.

“You have any brothers or sisters?”

Tori shook her head. “Not really. You?”

“No. It’s just me.” I wasn’t satisfied with her answer. “What does not really mean?”

“My...‘father,’” she swung her head side to side, emphasizing that title. “has other children, but I’ve never met them.”

“You never met your siblings? How many of them are there?”

“I’ve never really met my father. I’ve seen him from afar a few times, but never knew him. And no, I ain’t never meet his kids. I think he has like three: a boy and a girl for sure. I’m not sure what the third one is. I haven’t heard from them since my Margaret died.”

“Who’s Margaret?”

Tori paid me a suspicious glare. I was asking too many questions. She put her pizza on the plate and wiped her mouth. “My grandma.”

“Was Margaret your father’s mother?”

“No.” She shook her head. “My mom’s mother. My best friend, too.” She smiled with warm nostalgia.

“Oh. So you two were close.”

“The closest. She taught me how to love my mother and take up for myself.”

“Your mother?” I probably forfeited my cool with that question.

“Yeah. Long, boring story.”

“Make it short.” I pushed.

Tori did her favorite thing, which was shrug. “She taught me not to cheat, steal or lie—too much. Margaret told me to be a solid woman, but not take shit. She always told me people won’t like me, and if I be a good, solid woman, them not liking me won’t be because of me. It would be because of them.”

*Wow...*

“And what does that have to do with your mother?”

“She was the first person I believed didn’t love me. She didn’t hate me, but even at five, I knew she wasn’t a ‘mommy.’ She wasn’t like my friends’ mothers, getting me ready for school, meeting my teachers, taking me to extra-curricular activities...hugging me when I cried or comforting me when I was hurt.”

“Damn...”

She nodded, finger making invisible circles on the glass. “Yeah,” she sighed. “My mother always felt like a big cousin for most of my life. I lived with my Margaret until a couple of years before she died, and my mother lived with us until my grandmother got her an apartment in our... development. She said my mother needed to grow up and be a



mother. That meant me having to go live with my mother, without my Margaret for the first time in my life. It was hell. Like... For real. Hell. It got so bad, my Margaret took me back, but it was only for a few months. She died.”

*Shit!*

“How?”

“Cancer.” Tori’s eyes met mine when she murmured, “I think she knew for a while, but didn’t want us to know.”

“Like that’s why she had you go live with your mother?”

She nodded. “She was teaching me all that time how to love her. My mother’s different.” Her head gestured to my plate with three-quarters of the pizza slice still intact. “You done?”

I nodded, wondering why she asked. Then Tori stood and collected our plates.

When she ran the water, grabbed the soap and dish cloth and began washing them, I informed her, “You know there’s a dishwasher for that?”

“It’s all good. If you’re feeding me, the least I could do is clean. Margaret wouldn’t have it any other way.” How could I argue against that? It made me reflect upon my own grandmother—the one who was still alive—and wish we had a real bond. “You like being the only child? By the way, you don’t exactly act like one.”

I turned to face her in my chair. “And how does an only child act?”

“Selfish.”

“Are you selfish?”

Tori smiled, exposing those shallow dimples. “Never. My Margaret wouldn’t play that.”

“Well, I’ve never been called selfish, I don’t think. And I guess being the only child was cool. I’m not sure I ever felt by myself. I’ve got a big ass family.”

“On which side?”

“Newark.”

“Oh.” Her one syllable affecting. “Maybe you do have some street in ya.” She made a goofy expression, one I wasn’t expecting, making us both fall into laughter.

When she was done, Tori neared me in the kitchen.

“Well, as much as I would love nothing more than to continue this chat, you’ve got to handle that so I can get the blow dryer back to my neighbor.”

“You would want to keep talking to me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I couldn’t explain it, but I would. Tori shrugged, eyes falling. “Whatever that meant.” I shook off her odd question. “Lucky for you, I got started on my game prep early or this tutoring session would’ve been dead when you rang my doorbell.” But it was still late on the eve of a big game for me. Time was of the essence. “I’ve got my laptop set up in the living room already.”

“Man!” she grumbled. “I didn’t bring anything to work with.”

“You didn’t start shit.”

Tori pulled the muscles around her mouth back to express coyness. “Right.”

I snorted, slightly amused by her unprofessionalism. “I have a thumb drive you can borrow. Let’s go. It’s getting late.”

## -Then-

Tori

“We have—” The sudden sound of a clack against one of the windows caught both our attention. Ashton took a deep breath, roughly wiping his hands down his face. “Sounded like a small tree branch.” As long as it wasn’t one of the garbage cans from the side of the building that we saw rolling around the lawn earlier. The rain and wind were still brutal outside. “Like I was saying.” His attention went back to the laptop. “We have the introduction of the philosophy of Marxist–Leninist then your argument of its relevance now, in 2006. Then we move on to the biography of George Lester Jackson and what led him to his conviction. Next will be the—”

“I got it. Jackson’s ‘encounter’—as you put it—with George “Big Jake” Lewis and W. L. Nolen—”

“No.” He turned the screen of his laptop toward me. “The climate of San Quentin State Prison.” He gave me a testy stare. It was late and we were tired. And to add to the late hour, I’d been showered, fed, and my scalp felt good after a thorough wash, conditioner, and blow dry. The blow dryer Ashton gave me may have been his neighbor’s, but I suspected the shampoo and conditioner in the bathroom belonged to his girlfriend. I expected to see *Victoria’s Secret* and other expensive feminine products, but I didn’t. *He did mention her underclothes being here, though.* “Then comes the encounters with his co-founders, and then *The Black Guerilla Family.*”

I nodded, avoiding saying something slick and setting him off. Chilling with Ashton tonight was...peaceful. It didn’t matter that we’d argued about me being late or my ridiculously annoying beach ball tits. He was nice and that was cool.

I pointed to the screen. “It’s all there, Spencer.”

Ashton yawned. “I know. I just want you to get the layout.”

“I do.” I sat up, uncrossing my legs. “You’ve made it crystal clear. It’s all on that thumb thing. Right?” I stood to my feet, lifting my arms and stretching as I yawned.

“Thumb drive.” He corrected. “Yeah.”

“Alright. I’m gonna get dressed to go. I know you have a busy day to rest up for.” His apartment and cellular phones rang all night. It sounded like his coaches, trainers, and a few of his teammates. The guys on his team wanted to hang out. Ashton declined, telling them the weather was no good. “You have an umbrella I can borrow?”

Ashton’s attention went to one of the windows in the living room. “I don’t know of an umbrella that’s going to survive that, and neither will your dry body.” He stood, going to the window, fully pulling back the curtains and lifting the blinds. “You can’t go out in that, Tori.”

My face screwed into a hard ball. “So what am I supposed to do?”

Ashton’s tight, sleepy eyes closed, squeezing. He rubbed them. “Fuck,” he whispered. Then he took a deep breath and looked at me. “You can stay.”

“Stay?” My eyes burst wide and pulse beat hard in my neck. “Like... Here?” I glanced around.

“Yeah. There are no common area lounges in the building like other dormitories on campus. Where else can you stay?”

I pointed to his couch. “I’m way too big to stretch out on that little thing.” It was a two-seater. “Unless it pulls out?”

Ashton shook his head, eyes closing again. “This is so awkward,” he whispered again.

“What is?”

“The fact that there’s only two places to sleep in here.”

“Where?”

“My bed or the floor.”

“What about your roommate’s room?”

Ashton’s hand swung to the back of the apartment. “He keeps his door locked because he’s got lots of the school’s water equipment in there on loan. If it comes up missing or broken, dude has to answer for it.” He smacked his curly lashes together and forged a fake, charming grin.

My eyes swept across the wood floors. *I have to share a room with Ashton Spencer.* My eyes closed, processing it. I could do this. He was cool now. Ashton wouldn’t hurt me... not like that anyway. “*You—*” I swallowed unintentionally while trying to speak. Then I tried again. “There’s no carpet out here. You got carpet in your room?”

Ashton chewed on his lips, brows in a straight line. He shook his head no. Realization washed over me and I sucked in a breath.

“I’ll sleep out here.”

Panic ran through me. “On this little couch? Hell no!”

“Why are you trippin’?”

“You’re the star player on your team! It’s enough you stayed up late with me and not your teammates, helping me with a stupid paper. Ain’t no way you’re showing up tomorrow cramped and tired because of me. No!”

“It’s all goo—”

“No! Get me a pillow and blanket, and I’ll make do.”

“Tori, you’re like 5’10, ain’t no way in hell you can sleep on there.”

“So the both of us are supposed to sardine in your bed?” I folded my arms over my chest. No way!” Ashton’s face fell into his hands and he laughed. At me. “What’s so funny?”

“Com’ere, girl.” He motioned with a curled index finger.

I followed him to the back of the apartment and into his room. It was dark. Dark wood floor and furniture, navy blue curtains and comforter with a silver bed skirt. *BSU* colors. There was a body mirror in the corner, a bench topped with brand new clothes with visible tags. But the bed...it was huge, bigger than my mother's.

I turned to him. "How is it that you have this gigantic bed, but everyone else is stuck with tiny ass ones?"

He shot me a wink. "One of these days, you'll understand I'm that *BSU* muthafucka, girl." I sucked my teeth, rolling my eyes to the other side of the room. His bedroom was almost as big as the dorm room I shared with Samantha. "Anyway," he uttered on his way to the closet. "what I was getting at is we can both fit in the bed if you're not a wild sleeper." The winds sounded against the windows, taking my attention. Ashton pulled out a blanket, unraveling it until it was just folded in half, and placed it on one side of the bed. "One person can sleep under the comforter and the other the blanket. Make sense?"

I took a mental deep breath, accepting my fate of the night. Hate it or despise it, I was sleeping in Ashton Spencer's bed.

*With him...*

A wave of nausea washed over me.

"I'll sleep over the comforter." My throat was so tight, my words came out squeaky. "You're too damn heavy for me to be trapped underneath a blanket you're sleeping on top of."

"Wait," his gruff cords demanded. "If you're feeling uncomfortable, unsure, uneasy, pressured, or anything other than sleepy as hell, please let me know. Speak before I turn off this light."

"Why you gotta say all that?" He was being extra.

"Because I have to protect myself. I mean, I understand you're in a precarious situation right now, but trust me: this is even more awkward and risky for me."

"And why is it?"

“Because I’m Ashton and you’re just...Tori.”

“And?”

“I’m cool, and you’re not.”

My head swung back, defenses shooting in the air.  
“Yeah, but I can beat your ass.”

Ashton killed the light and pealed a high-pitched chortle, “Conjecture.”



The urge to turn over was beyond severe. But I couldn’t because if I did, Ashton would probably know I was still awake, and if he knew I was still awake, he would think I was still being weird about this. I *had* been weird about this—the whole thirty-eight minutes that had passed since we’d climbed into his big bed. And that’s what was strange to me. The bed was large enough for us to not have to touch each other. But still, I was restless.

My brain ran laps in my skull, thinking. This had never happened to me. I’d never shared a bed with a guy. I never wanted to share a bed with anyone, not even my cousins. So I didn’t understand what I was feeling. The smell of his sheet, pillowcase, and comforter was so...Ashton, even more than his apartment. I counted sheep trying to describe the scent. Wood, spice...nutsy, orangey? All those things, though it sounded crazy to even me.

More than cologne, I smelled him. There was something natural about his body odor I couldn’t define, even to myself. And that part of it frustrated me. My nipples tingled and warm liquid soaked the seat of the boxer briefs I wore. *That* made me wonder if my period had come. Couldn’t have. It had just gone off. I was too embarrassed to go to the bathroom to check. If it was my period, that would be an embarrassing inconvenience of epic proportions.

But it couldn’t be my period. My period didn’t make me throb *down there* the way the scent had been doing since I lay on his comforter.



The rocking of my body had my eyes swing open. It was daylight; that was clear in the darkly decorated room. Ashton was sitting on the bed next to me, smelling more Ashton-y. He was topless with sweats clinging low on his waist, tattoos I'd never seen this up close glistening on his chestnut skin. Then my mind caught up and pulse beat wildly.

“What time is it?”

“Early, but I've got to head out.” His voice was thick, coarse, and masculine. Ashton was a...man-human. “Coach wants us at eight.” I moved to leave the bed. Ashton touched my arm gently. “Why are you rushing?”

“You said you have to go. I know you need to lock up.” I was disoriented, not recalling when I'd fallen asleep last night.

“I have to go, not you,” he explained in his bossy Ashton way. “It's not even seven o'clock.”

“I have work.”

“What time do you have to be there?”

I thought for a minute. “Nine.”

“You're good. Relax.” He stood and opened a drawer, pulling out a long-sleeve shirt. I watched *too* attentively as he slid it over his head and thick body. “I had breakfast dropped off from the cafe and ordered enough for you.”

*Great.* Another prince of *Blakewood* privilege.

I lay back, rubbing my eyes. When I felt the crust in them, my whole body ran cold. My face...my breath! I hid my face behind my hands.

*Ughhhhh!*

“You don't strike me as the makeup type, so if you wanna chill here until you leave for work, you're good. You have your washcloths and towel from last night and there's a new toothbrush in the linen closet. You could probably find some off-brand deodorant my roommate uses in there, too. It's



some organic shit he stockpiles. And the front door locks behind you.” He started for the door. “I got pancakes and French toast. Didn’t know which one you preferred. You should find something decent out there.” I didn’t answer, doing him a favor of not knocking him out with my hot breath. But Ashton got to the door and turned to me. “Are you coming today? To homecoming—the game?”

My mouth opened then shut behind my hands. Then I uttered, “It’s mandatory.”

Ashton’s eyes bounced left, right, then down, his lips pouting. He nodded before leaving me alone in his gigantic, Ashton-smelling bed. I could hear his footsteps throughout the quieted apartment. With wide eyes, I listened with tight fists clenching the comforter. I could even hear Ashton talk to the fish and change their music. When the door closed, I was able to let go of a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

My eyes bounced around the room; I didn’t get a chance to take in the apartment last night. It was clean and manly, dark and neutral colors. There was a framed picture on his nightstand. It was old, had to be taken in the nineties, of a woman with four little bad ass looking boys. They couldn’t be more than nine or ten, standing on a city corner, in front of a bodega. The woman’s smile felt familiar. *Ashton*. One of the boys was a young Ashton, shirtless, cheesing with old school *Jordans* on his feet. The other boys were half dressed too, making it clear it was summertime. The boys stood in front of the woman with their arms hanging over each other’s tiny shoulders. His beam was big, unguarded, not cool guy or Mr. *I’m The Shit*. He was a...regular, happy boy.

That was the only picture I could see from the bed. No more of himself or his family in sight, but there was a poster of a football player. *Connecticut Kings. Tariq Evans*. His face was familiar and his name definitely rang a bell for a non-football fan like me. Evans was everywhere...on the radio, making cameos on television sitcoms. I’d even seen him on *MTV’s TRL* a few months ago. Why was he the only football player with a poster in Ashton Spencer’s room?

*His room!*

My back shot up from the bed. Why was I lazing around in his bed like he didn't have a girlfriend? How could I have slept with him last night knowing he had a girlfriend? This was Aivery's boyfriend's bed. The scent created from the swiftness of my sitting up had that "Ashton odor" wafting through my nose, causing that stir in my belly I felt all night until I fell asleep.

My hands shot beneath the blanket and boxers then between my legs. I swiped myself, leaping at the weird sensitivity down there. When I brought my hand up, I was relieved to see it wasn't red, and weirded out at the thick goo I brought back. Holding my hand in the air, I jumped out of his bed and powered into the hall and in the bathroom.

Not liking the wet feeling, I showered again and brushed my teeth with a quickness I didn't know I was capable of. I trekked to the front of the apartment to find Ashton laid all my clothes out, including underwear, on the back of the La-Z-Boy chair. I snatched them up, ran back into the bathroom to change, and finger comb my hair into a ponytail. When I ventured back out to the front of the apartment, I saw the food covered and spread out over the table. Ashton was right. There were pancakes, home fries, French toast, waffles, eggs, bacon, and sausage there untouched. Standing, I scarfed down a little bit of everything before throwing it all out, cleaning behind myself.

Then I thought about the bed. My Margaret wouldn't take too kindly to me leaving here without cleaning behind myself. I revisited the room and made quick work at folding the extra blanket I'd used, then made the bed. Before leaving the apartment, I checked every room I visited since arriving last night to remove any traces of my existence. I would die if Aivery found out I stayed over and took my time leaving her boyfriend's apartment. When I was satisfied, it wasn't quite eight-fifteen and I finally left.



“Oh, you're early!”

I glanced up from my sitting position on the ground to see my boss, Kelly, approaching the back door of the building with a newspaper, coffee, and a bunch of folders in his hands and arms. I wouldn't respond to that stupid remark. Of course, I was here—physically, at least. It was the last place I wanted to be, but I needed the money. My mother hadn't sent much, and definitely not all that was due to me from child support.

The sun was brighter than it had been all week, drying the ground. I'd seen damages from the winds on the bus ride into town. Store owners picked up overturned garbage cans, trash, and debris from trees and loose furniture. I stood to my feet and wiped the back of my pants down, ready to get this short shift over with.

“Start in the kitchen, making sure the ovens are warming. When Isaiah gets in, he'll need to get right to warming that food.” Kelly started the moment he opened the door. “Then make sure Marsha cleaned the bathroom good. Some kid shitted all over the place last night. Ate something that didn't agree with him.”

Walking toward the small kitchen in the place, I rolled my eyes, pretty much ignoring the rest of the noise coming from that lazy human. Only two and half hours and I would be out of here and switching masks and uniforms to be a *Panther*.



“What's going on here?” I was glad Samantha was asking the questions I shared. I didn't want to let on to my team that I had shit knowledge of football.

With his eyes glued to the field across from us, Collin explained, “The *Panthers* have staged an incredible comeback. They've driven the ball down to the five-yard line.” He pointed.

“But they're behind.” The panic in Samantha's reminder made my stomach flip.

The ability to breathe was stifled by the thousands of people filling up the stadium. This place was packed! And I couldn't believe I was rooting for a stupid football team. Is

this what going to college did to you? My nerves were more frazzled in the past twenty minutes when the *North Carolina AT&T Aggies* took the scoring lead. This suspense was worse than waiting to hear which couple won *Blakewood State University's* king and queen only because Ashton was a contender.

During the halftime event, a twisted part of me rooted for Aivery, too, because she belonged to him, and suddenly I was team *Everything Ashton Spencer*. My eyes were glued to them when they were announced and made their entrance onto the field. My pulse raced as the crowd issued them the loudest shouts and rounds of applause. Ashton was still in his uniform and sported his classic glare while escorting his girlfriend. I heard Trisha say his head was still in the game and not on the contest. Maybe she was right. Either way, Aivery looked the part: gorgeous and graceful in her long gown. When their names were announced as *BSU's* 2006 homecoming king and queen, folks all around jumped on the bleachers, clapping and hooting. My elation was in the form of my body tensing all over. The crown belonged to Ashton. He was certainly *Mr. Blakewood* in my head. And when she reached up to kiss him, I couldn't tear my eyes away while feeling a deep throbbing between my thighs. It was too weird and intense.

The only highly entertaining part of the event was watching the band. *Holy hell!* They were popping! We came in on their performance, something Samantha said she didn't want to miss when I ran into our dorm room after my shift to shower then change into leggings and a *Panthers* hoodie. She said she wanted to come with me because I had better seats than she could get as a non-athlete. When we got to the seats Trisha had saved for me, we didn't sit until the *Panthers'* band performance had ended. It felt like being at a party where no one present was a stranger. We danced, rolled in the bleachers—a *BSU* tradition I knew nothing about—and sang at the top of our lungs. *Blakewood* was more than a vibe, I witnessed today. It was a whole ass culture.

“They are trailing by four points and need a touchdown, a field goal doesn't help,” Trisha added to Samantha's observation.

The entire stadium went crazy as Ashton jogged back onto the field, straight to his teammates.

Collin sat up, revealing how edgy he was, too, and muttered without looking at Samantha, “He’s used the team’s final timeout with only seven seconds remaining in the game to talk things over with his coaches. Now he’s relaying the play to his teammates.”

“He’s broken the huddle!” Trisha announced with nervous excitement as she stood to her feet.

Ashton, number seven in the navy blue, silver, and white jersey, paced up to the line, studying something deeply with each step.

“What’s he observing so closely?” Samantha asked boldly.

*Thank you, god!*

I was wondering the same thing.

“Defense,” Trisha shot down as she stood.

“He’s surveying the defense. Everyone in the stadium knows that a pass play is coming because running the ball is too much of a risk,” Collin explained in more detail. “It looks like the defense is going to play man-to-man, which means the outside linebacker has the running back in coverage, so the end of the line should be vulnerable.” He pointed to the field. “You see Spencer looking over at his halfback? See he just nodded his head as if signifying a change in the play because of the defense they’re playing?”

“Yeah,” Samantha answered warily.

The game started up again and the center hiked Ashton the ball. The *Panthers* were moving in all directions as Ashton appeared to be giving the ball to someone on his team, but instead shot up the field. The *Aggie* guys pummeled the guy Ashton handed the ball to and the crowd went crazy. At first it floored me, then Collin and other people around jumped to their feet as Ashton continued to run.

“Holy shit, Spence!” he yelled more manly than I’d ever seen of him. “Yeah, baby!”

Ashton kept running and the crowd got louder and rowdier until the horn activated. His teammates ran to him, jumping around, slapping his shoulders, grabbing poor Ashton from every angle. My attention went to the clock and I observed the time had run out and the game was over. At this point, it was clear to me we had won the game.

*But how?*

Finally, I asked, yelling over the victory cries happening all around me, “What just happened?”

Collin turned to me. “He took the snap and to everyone in the stadium’s surprise, especially the defense, the *Panthers*’ incomparable quarterback ran an RPO—” He shook his head, to correct himself. He was beyond elated at this point. “I mean a *Run Pass Option*. Spence put the ball in the halfback’s stomach, but pulled it back just as the *Aggie* linebacker delivered a crushing hit to the halfback. That’s when Spencer turned the ball up the field using his sneaky 4.5 speed, covering the needed yardage to cross the goal line untouched!”

“We won!” Trisha yelled at the top of her lungs, something I’d heard when I was in the ring. “We beat those *Aggie* fools!”

Even Samantha expressed excitement. Never meeting Trisha or Collin until today, she jumped from her seat and hugged Collin, then reached over him to hi-five Trisha. I, on the hand, watched absorbedly as Aivery charged the field, cutting between the big bodies of his teammates until she jumped into his arms. Ashton was caught off guard, but received her, lifting her small bouncy frame into the air. She grabbed his face again and they kissed. Her cheerleading friends were now in the mix, along with his coaches and others I didn’t know. It was...cute, I guessed. It was how they celebrated, was what I figured while watching.

“I heard Spence’s family didn’t come,” Collin shared with Trisha.

I noticed how people called Ashton both Spence and Spencer, his full last name.

“No, they didn’t,” Trisha answered, snapping away at the field on her camera. The smile on her face couldn’t be measured. “And it’s strange because his family usually comes out for homecoming.”

“That’s what I’d heard from one of their trainers this morning,” Collin added.

“Well, as long as NormaJean isn’t here, I don’t care who is.” Trisha laughed.

Collin snickered, “Don’t be mean.”

I had no idea who or what they were referring to, but could spot shade from a mile away no matter how light-hearted it was.

Samantha elbowed me to get my attention. “Look. Whose attention is he trying to get?”

My eyes bounced around below where she was looking. “Who?”

“Dre.” She pointed. “You don’t see him?”

“He’s calling you, Tori,” Collin announced.

Finally, I located Dre. He was decked out in fresh black jeans, a *Panthers* letter jacket, matching sneakers, and a navy blue hat. He waved me on, then pointed to the crowd on the field.

“He’s telling you to come down, Tori.” Trisha’s serious tone, unlike when she was joking with Collin a few seconds ago, felt authoritative and I jumped into action. I dropped down the six levels, threading through celebratory bodies to get to the field. It took a few stops and rounding of folks, but I eventually made it to him.

“Your friend ain’t wanna come?”

*What?*

“Huhn?”

Dre's regard was over my head, looking at someone. He waved them down, too. "Your friend. The one sitting with you," he explained.

When his face opened in a smile, I glanced up myself and that's when I noticed Samantha coming down. It took her longer than me because she wasn't as agile on her feet as I was, but she zig-zagged through the sea of bodies in the walkway.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"Spence called for you." He tossed his chin toward the field then went back to smiling, hands tucked in his jacket pockets.

It took a few seconds, but I found Ashton and a beat after that, he'd found me. His eyes narrowed on me before going back to the crowd in front of him.

"Here she go," Dre announced. "C'mon."

Samantha was at my side in an instant and we followed behind Dre, running into the security on the field. He mentioned I was a *Panther* and they let us through, going back to observing the bleachers. We continued to trail Dre, weaving between another throng of excited bodies. When it became too much, I stopped. *Or* when I met eyes with Aivery, I should say. Her triumphant expression faded when she recognized me, then I noticed when she tried to revive it. Dre kept going while I remained cemented in place. Samantha was at my side, wild eyes scanning the crowd on the field.

"Spence!"

"Ashton!"

"Spencer!"

The sound of his name seemed to have gotten louder, making me look directly in front of me. Ashton cut through the last of the crowd and was traveling directly my way. His eyes were pinned to me, forcing me to pay him the same measure of attention. People were flanking behind him, including a cameraman. That was one thing Samantha was able to answer for me once we arrived at the game. *BSU's*



games were televised, another level of fanciness of the school I wasn't used to.

“Ain't you got something to say?”

*Ain't?*

*From Ashton Spencer?*

“What?”

His amused eyes went from me to the right. “Hello, Samantha.”

“Hi, Spence.” She ducked her head shyly. *Oh, give me a break! It's just Ashton.* “Congrats on the win.”

His attention returned to me. “At least someone knows proper etiquette.” Half his face lifted in a devious smirk while his eyes narrowed.

*Shit...*

“Congratulations, Ashton,” I offered part dryly, part embarrassed. I *had* to do better with my manners. “You happy now?” My goofy grin hijacked my face and I rolled my eyes again.

But when he opened his arms, requesting a hug, my entire frame went rigid. Swallowing hard, my eyes rolled around.

“Oh, knock it the fuck off, McNabb!” Ashton charged me, lifting my whole body in the air.

He ran in a circle with me on his dirty shoulder. Samantha squealed, and Dre and others laughed at Ashton's playfulness. My thoughts went to Aivery, but he moved too fast for me to find her. When he set me back on my feet, I was disoriented for a minute.

So, when Dre asked, “Y'all coming to the bonfire tonight, right?” I didn't quite process it.

It could have been that his eyes were glued to Samantha when he did.

“Yeah,” Ashton answered in his bossy nature. “McNabb’ll be there. She’s *BSU*’s champ, just won a fight this week. Dual celebration tonight!”

“True that!” Dre slapped his palms together.

At the same time, Ashton’s name was being called by several people.

“I gotta go do press,” Ashton explained, clearly about to leave. He pointed to me. “See your fidgety ass tonight.”

Before I could answer, he disappeared into the waiting crowd. But I did catch Aivery’s eyes on me, her mental calculator computing overtime.



*Ashton*

Game days could be tough, but big game days like this one were brutal, and particularly when you didn’t have your family there with you. It didn’t matter if it was to celebrate a W or support you through an L, no one showed love the way my family did. When my mother, uncles, aunts, and a few cousins told me via phone call, email, or text they wouldn’t be here in the span of a week, slowly, I fell disappointed. Of course, I didn’t express this to them. I wasn’t the type to guilt people into supporting me at their expense or make them feel obligated. Even with that, this was still unusual for my family. They enjoyed homecoming at *BSU*. I guessed the situation with Brick had taken its toll on everyone.

So, I woke up this morning purposed to accept my family wouldn’t be here today. A certain leggy, booby tomboy made that part of the day easy. Even without the presence of my family, my day had turned out great. We defeated *NC A&T* during my last *BSU* homecoming. Life was still sweet. Now that post-game press was over and I’d just stepped out of the shower, I could finish the day with celebration.

I dried my head on the way to my locker. Most of the guys were done getting dressed at this point, only a few of us lingered for interviews. But I could still hear them cutting up

in the front lounge area of the *Panthers* locker room. The first thing I checked was my phone. There were *BBM* texts from Aivery—*already*—my mother saying she'd been emailed pictures from the game, my uncle, and cousins. Needing to get dressed, I decided I'd answer them while I ate. Moms wasn't big on texting, but had done it a few times to reach out.

When I pulled out my bag, I saw someone approach from my peripheral.

Smiling, I shouted out young Marcus Bell. "Bell, my nigga. What's the deal?"

He greeted me with a dap then took a seat on the bench a few feet away while I sorted my clothes.

"Yo." He scratched the back of his head, expressing unease. Bell was my frat brother, my little. A Detroit native, he was in his third year here and had been cool with me since he stepped foot on *BSU's* campus, declaring his name on the rosters of the *Panthers* and *AOPsi's*. I always liked his swag and ambition. He'd done some volunteer work on our frat's behalf in his hometown, feeding the homeless. He and Karmen used to fuck around until Bell got back with his high school sweetheart over a Christmas break. Although he and ol' girl from home didn't last past the New Year, Karm didn't trust him after that and moved on. "I don't think there's ever been a good opportunity for me to tell you this shit."

"You better take that shit now, youngin," my delivery indifferent, mind on a different planet as I wildly wondered what would Tori McNabb wear to the bonfire. The girl had no style, something I'd been contemplating remedying. "I'm about to get *fawked* up."

"It's about Aivery."

"What about her?"

He didn't respond right away. "It's about Aivery and Ben Pettiford."

*Benjamin...*

My head lifted from the duffle bag. "Spit it."

“You know the chick I’m fuckin’ with stay in *Winnie*. Right?” *Winnie Mandela* was the dormitory Aivery stayed in. I didn’t nod for confirmation, wanting him to get on with his story.

“Two weeks ago, when I was chillin’ with Towanda from the band at their practice field, I went inside to take a leak. On the way to the bathroom, I passed by Ben’s office and saw Aivery in there leaning on his desk, kicking it. I spoke and kept it moving. Then, this past Monday night, I walked Towanda back to her dorm mad late and saw Ben and Aivery in his car in the back of the building.”

Pacing my reaction, I lightly rubbed the tip of my nose with the knuckle of my index finger. “How late?”

“Late,” he emphasized. “It had to be well after three in the morning. My roommate back at the chapter house was up in the room fuckin’ two tricks, and Towanda was crabbing on me about it, so we bounced. I ended up staying in her room that night, but had to get up early for training.” He twisted his mouth, eyes moving in a circular motion in their sockets. This was hard for a little to tell his big, I guessed, because Benjamin Pettiford was his big, too. “Look, it may sound petty, but I fucks with you, so I’m just gone say it.” I nodded to encourage him. “I left out between five and five-fifteen, and they were still in the car talking.”

I didn’t speak, considering all he’d shared.

“Look, I ‘on’t want you thinking I’m wasting your time, and shit.” He stood from the bench. “I ain’t see them touching or kissing, or no shit like that. But that late night frackin’ it up in the car—”

“Escaping sleep shit is real suspect. I get it.” I pressed my hand to my chest as a sign of humble appreciation. “I appreciate this, bruh.” Then we gripped it up *AOPsi* style.

“Black forever, brothers for life.” Marcus saluted me and turned to take off.

So this was life. Aivery canoodling with her first crush. That was a stretch. I didn’t believe she was fucking Pettiford,

but it was obvious there was an emotional connection they weren't letting go of. Clearly, me finding out and having the reaction to it I'd had didn't deter her from using his bootleg ass employment on the campus as an opportunity to continue it.

As I dressed for the day, I wondered why Aivery didn't simply take the out I gave her at the start of the school year.

**-Then-**

*Ashton*

“Shit!” Aivery muttered, clutching my arm tighter while holding her red *Solo* cup in the air. “The fucking ground.”

It was pliant from last night’s rainstorm. The branches were still damp, even the large, curled ones we usually sat on that were growing back into the ground. Why she wore heels just to chill in the woods was beyond me. We stood in an inlet of hanging branches covered by dangling leaves because, ironically, the ground was firmer here. And because of that, we were isolated from the rest of the gang of people out here, and away from all three bonfires going, creating heat.

“Say cheese,” Karmen requested cheerfully, holding a camera up to us. She’d been making her rounds with that damn thing for the past half hour. This was the fifth time we were posing for a cheesy picture. After a few clicks, she dropped the camera to her pelvis and her gaze lingered. She lifted her shoulders and dipped her chin as though mesmerized. “You two are so fucking gorgeous. When’s the engagement? I’ve got to make sure my body’s ready. I’ve got to be slim and trim for the occasion.”

Aivery’s face whipped to my profile, nose to my beard. I refused to respond to her goading. Karmen was either drunk or two sips away from it. I wouldn’t entertain a personal, *and now*, touchy question as that.

I tossed my chin to her, completely ignoring Aivery underneath me. “Who would be your plus one, Karm?”

That broke her fairy tale spell. Karmen’s shoulders dropped and she rolled her eyes. “Unless you have an identical twin in personality and all, I’m fucking doomed.” She pushed her tongue out in disdain, then walked away with a crushed spirit.

Aivery and I laughed. Karmen, Aivery's bestie by function, was melodramatic when sober, and fucking theatrical when drinking.

"Yo!" Dre approached us with Hakeem McDowell, a point guard on his team, in tow. "We been debating over there." He pointed over his shoulder. "Whose idea was that last play that stole the game today?"

"No disrespect, big homie," Hakeem paid me some love, dapping it up. "but that was some shit none of us expected. Y'all showed us why *BSU* is that fuckin' winning ticket!"

Aivery caressed the hand of mine hanging over her shoulder. "Did you guys put money on it?"

They laughed. Hell, we all did. The *Courvoisier XO* Dre supplied for the team tonight had me nice. It was a tradition with my *Panthers* crew; whenever a team won, the other would supply liquor or arrange the celebration party. This had been a practice for the past two years for the football, basketball, and baseball teams, only when they were considered big games. The preacher's kid knew his spirits.

"Nah. We just wanna understand the order of greatness, my nigga," Dre explained.

A burst of feminine laughter had my attention going beyond the nook of the big tree. The first place my eyes landed was in their default landing: over at the bonfire where Tori had been with her roommate, Samantha, and her science major crew. Coincidentally, they were who caused the sudden hike in energy. They formed a circle with the one girl, Korin, in the middle dancing to old school Mary J. Blige. "*I Can Love You*" was a vibe back in the day. I was a kid during that time, and still understood that. I guessed they felt the same.

Korin had, had enough of the spotlight and pulled Samantha into the center of their loose circle, then she exited and cheered her on. Samantha looked awkward as fuck, gripping her plastic cup protectively to her chest. Her shoulders were high near her neck as she tensely two-stepped

and shook her head. I laughed mentally as Aivery cracked the hell up beneath me.

“Those geeky bitches can’t dance for shit,” Aivery clowned. “Look at this one. Ain’t she white? What’s her name again?”

I watched as Samantha was a good sport at being put on blast by her friends who tried hyping her up.

“Fuckin’ Samantha,” Dre answered throatily. His eyes were locked dead on her, which could mean only one thing. “I want that so fuckin’ bad, bruh.”

Chuckling, I turned my attention back to the girls just as Samantha grabbed Tori’s arm. That’s when the girls went up in volume again, hooting their dare and encouragement. My eyes went wild, and I could swear my heart began to fucking pound. Tori had been cool out here for the past ninety or so minutes. She seemed to enjoy herself with those girls. I knew how weird she could be socially and didn’t want any fucking undue attention or pressure on her.

“Your arm is crushing me!” Aivery laughed beneath me, squirming and lifting my arm from her shoulder.

*Shit...*

“Oh, fuck,” Hakeem choked out. “Ain’t that, that boxer?”

Tori joined her friend in the circle, smiling and holding their interlinked hands in the air while cupping her drink in the other, too. *Does Tori drink drink?* She was taller than Samantha, and tried to spin her around. Samantha followed Tori’s lead. She also followed Tori’s “safe” two-step movements. The girls noticed Tori’s instruction and praised her.

“Alright, TM!” Teefah shouted.

Then Tori disconnected from Samantha and began a smooth and rhythmic whine, descending into a squat. I lost my balance momentarily and had to catch myself—and Aivery.

*What the fuck...*



I blinked, clearing the haze. She stayed low for a while before slowly coming up, never breaking the smooth rotation of her ass. An ass with a contour I'd become all too familiar with. When she resumed a standing position, Tori exited the circle, laughing and actually looking like a normal girl with normal girls her age. The only thing fraudulent about the perception was Tori McNabb was no ordinary girl. It was the very thing that annoyed the fuck out of me and lured me to her.

“Daaaaaaaamn!” Hakeem howled, dropping his weight onto Dre. “You see that shit, bro?”

Dre smiled cunningly with a predator's nod. “Damn sure did.”

“I'd climb that fucking redwood and fuck the shit out of it!” Hakeem jumped up and down, peeling in laughter.

I scoffed, “It?” Trying to mask my anger, I chuckled and quickly tempered myself. “You called the girl an *it*?”

“A diseased *it*!” Aivery slapped her mouth with her palm, playfully.

Hakeem laughed, and Dre's unsure eyes met mine knowingly. And not because he knew *how* cool Tori and I had become—no one knew that. But it was because he knew we were cool, and that she was on the no slander list. I confirmed his inclination with a simple gaze.

“Chill, man,” Dre warned peacefully. “Ain't nothing diseased about ol' girl. She's mad cool, to me.”

“Yeah, whatever. That bitch been weird, coming on campus with those busted ass sneakers and her hair all over the place.” Hakeem chuckled.

Aivery snickered with him. My chest tightened, lips, too, when venom shot from my belly to my mouth.

“She's an athlete, man. A beast at boxing, too.” Dre laughed, twisting the top of his head. “I put a stack on her dropping your ass if you say that shit to her face.”

“I ain’t about to disrespect the girl,” Hakeem laughed. “Not after twerking like that! She can get this dick, though!”

“Chill, my nigga. Tori ain’t beat for no tricks no way. Get to know her, man,” Dre advised him. “She’s a *Panther*.”

“Call her over then!” Hakeem slapped his palms together, licking his lips.

“Ilk! You wouldn’t dare, would you?” Aivery challenged him.

“You’re right.” Hakeem sipped his drink. “She probably into girls anyway.”

I wanted to fucking body his little ass. All I needed was one more reason, and I’d hem McDowell’s ass up and roast him over the fire. Dre paid me a gaze once again, and I gave him a singular dip of my chin.

“Yo, Tori!” Dre took off, shouting.

“Oh, shit!” Aivery laughed.

My eyes remained locked onto Hakeem, conjuring all the shit I’d do to finish his ass.



Tori

I ducked, almost running into a hanging branch. It was cooler over here, and darker. The light from the bonfires barely reached behind the leaves.

“Oop!” Aivery giggled. “Be careful, giant. You’re going to drop your drink.”

Her body was kissed to Ashton’s big frame with ownership. I made sure to stop at a distance to them.

Ashton’s face was tight, eyes narrowed as he tried looking into my cup. “What’re you sipping on, champ?”

I shrugged. “Some wine.”

Tasted more like spiked punch to me, but Samantha and her science friends were drinking it, and swore I should, too. All except for Teefah. She said it was cheap and disgusting. It had me feeling nice, *and able to ignore the big man on campus all this time*. That was until Dre summonsed me over.

“That’s that cheap ass *Sutter’s Home* garbage.” Dre pointed behind him. “There’s some *Josh...Chateau Ste. Michelle*, and some other shit over there.”

“I’m good.” I wasn’t comfortable with him being so nice, in spite of Samantha’s stupid crush on him.

“Tori, Hakeem here wants to know how many fights you’ve lost.” Aivery’s eyes were tiny and red as she bit her lip to hide an obvious grin.

“None,” was my one word answer before taking a sip of wine.

“None?” The little guy shrieked, laughing. “C’mon. You can’t say you’ve won every fight you’ve been in, sweetie.”

“How do you think I got here?” I asked. “Losing sometimes?” My neck popped back and I shook my head, attention going out to the crowd.

“You fought dudes?” Dre asked.

I nodded. “I spar with them.”

“But like...to fight?”

Ashton scoffed. “That’s a dumb ass question. What governing body you know allows men fighting women?”

“Oh, yeah.” Hakeem sipped his drink. “You ever knock your man out—or your girl?” His eyes widened, expecting an answer.

Aivery spit out a laugh alone, I noticed.

I tried chuckling to myself, taking another sip of my drink. “Lucky for you and me, you’ll never know that answer. You too little, player.”

“Yeah, a’ight! You wanna go deeper into the woods to find out?”

Aivery was now choking on her laughter. Dre shook his head, keeping his face low. And Ashton’s face was stone.

I shook my head. “You’d have to carry a stool to get it in, son.”

The abrupt and crisp sound of Dre, Ashton, and Aivery’s laugh cut through the air, scaring the shit out of me.

“This bitch, man,” Hakeem hissed, unbuckling his pants. “Hold this, my nigga.” He tried handing his cup over to Dre, but Dre was too lost in humor to notice. So, Hakeem put it on the ground. “C’mon.” He approached me. “Let’s see about that.”

That quickly, I planned to throw my drink in his face and hook his ass. I turned to face him, preparing as he lunged my way.

“Muthafucka, I wish you would lay a finger on her,” Ashton’s thick, throaty warning was low, but so alarming, my body leaped at his first word. “I’ll beat the shit out of ya little ass.”

He didn’t yell, didn’t move. A bear didn’t have to. His words were even, but powerful. My pulse raced and eyes bounced between the two. I didn’t know which made me more anxious: preparing to fight a guy or Ashton being angry, and threatening to fuck him up.

Hakeem’s eyes swung from me to Ashton, then back to me. His face opened to a bright beam as he backed away.

“Big homie, you know I was just fuckin’ with her... tryna scare her!” His laughter wasn’t convincing.

Someone called for drinks, out by the bonfires.

Dre slapped his palm on Hakeem’s shoulder. “C’mon, bruh. If I leave you, your lil’ ass gone get eaten by either the bear or the lioness, my nigga.” He laughed.

Hakeem’s fake smile dimmed, but he obeyed, backing away to leave with Dre. The air felt thick, a ringing sound in

my ear now. I wanted to leave, too, but didn't want to make the moment anymore weird than it was. It was a struggle controlling my choppy breaths and their harsh sounds. Now, there were the three of us: Ashton, me, and his girlfriend.

“Oooh, baby,” Aivery purred. “I'm cold.” She giggled. “I'm going over there to get warmed up. You want more brandy?”

His taut cords produced, “That's the goal.”

She giggled again before walking off. Aivery made throaty sounds each step she took when her heels pushed into the damp ground.

*Why would she wear heels out here?*

The hell did I know? Clearly, I wasn't a girl or guy, according to people here.

*Some at home, too...*

“You gotta be more assertive,” bossy Ashton scolded.

“And you've got to mind your business and let me take care of myself.” I turned to him. “And don't expect me to say thank you for that. I would have beat his little ass.”

Ashton chuckled. “Is it a foreign thought to you that you don't have to?”

I turned to face him again. “What?”

“That as a mere Black woman, you're protected. You don't have to be so damn hardcore all the time.”

“And wait on your crew to clown or protect me?” When Ashton didn't reply right away, I scoffed. “That's what I thought.” My attention went back out to the crowd.

People were dancing, drinking, chatting...just being peaceful and having fun. That's what I thought I'd been doing before I stupidly came over here. But no. Instead, I'd gotten teased by the *West Beverly High* crew, tutored by the head of it, and even slept in his bed last night. I'd never fit in, and didn't know why I let myself think for even a second tonight that I could.

“It’s been eight weeks since you arrived at *Blakewood State University*, Tori.” His head rolled over to me, eyes tight from drinking. I hated how I couldn’t deny his good looks anymore, at least not to myself. Hated that I found him so dangerously attractive. It was frightening for someone who struggled with their sexual identity and used it as a comfort blanket. “You enjoying your time as a *Panther*?”

I couldn’t let him see it. I turned away, bobbing my head to the new Mario track, “*Let Me Love You*.” “It’s been nine weeks for me.”

Ashton didn’t like the cold shoulder I’d just given him. He abandoned the marked spot his girlfriend left him in and stalked over to me. I smelled him all too familiarly now, his towering frame hovering over me, making my knees quake. Ashton did that. As a girl who’d been teased all her life for being the tallest in the class and group, his immense height shrunk me in a way that was just as comforting as it was intimidating.

“Ignoring me had you twisting and turning last night.” My lungs vacuumed at the smoky gruff in his whisper traveling just above the loud music. The scent of alcohol on his breath tickled the fine hairs on my neck. Ashton was so close, closer than he was when we shared his bed last night. “You’re good at locking the world out, making everyone feel at bay to your iron veneer. But spending time I don’t have with you has afforded me the opportunity to penetrate that tough girl blockade you wear as a protective blanket.”

*Blanket...*

He was a mind reader.

Looking away from his girlfriend with her back to us, warming at one of the pits, I turned to him with my mouth open and forehead tight.

“You’re drunk, Ashton.”

“I’m loose and unfiltered, not giving a single tomboy fuck.”

I blinked hard at him, his eyes angry, challenging me for something unknown.

“What do you want from me?” I gritted, officially disturbed. “To fucking fawn over you deliriously like these other girls do in front of your girlfriend? To bow at your feet for getting me here”—my eyes gestured to the party happening outside of the cove we stood inside of—“with all of your cool friends instead of being the usual target of their hate?” I shook my head, hurt that he would make me feel so small, knocking me off the pedestal he’d put me on for his friends. “I’m not that girl, Ashton.”

A ghosted smile melted on his handsome face, and I vowed to never drink around him again. “But you *are* a girl. I know it—knew it since I started paying attention, something you don’t like people doing to you.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

He moved violently close to my face. Inches away from my lips. Guys and girls alike caught fades for getting that close to me, much less for the intent of intimidating me. But I didn’t move, couldn’t. I felt his breaths and tasted his brandy at this dangerous proximity.

“I know your pussy cried in my bed last night. I know that’s why you twisted and turned until you exhausted yourself. I know you don’t view me as you do every other guy or girl on this campus.”

“You don’t know shit.” I hated the crack in my voice, the sound of my pulse ringing in my ear.

“I know lots of shit about you.” His eyes turned dark and hungry, dropping down to my lips. I knew a hungry man when I saw one, sadly all too well. But why didn’t I feel alarmed or threatened right now with Ashton? “Even splenetic little tomboy wanna-be-piranhas like you.”

That annoying place between my trembling thighs began to throb louder than my pulse and suddenly, my tits felt heavy in the bra I wore. My breaths warred with his, mixing into a dangerous potion. If I’d ever fantasized about having

this human's flesh on me, now was my opportunity. All I had to do was take a deep breath and our lips would have sealed together.

“Ash!” someone yelled. It was Aivery, and I was paralyzed, trapped in the heat of him. “Let me tell you what this asshole said!” she laughed, coming our way.

“I’ll fuck clarity into your confused mind and hungry pussy,” he breathed the threat into my mouth. His tight eyes traced my face from my forehead to my open mouth. As though I’d been cast by a spell, my eyes closed, I felt so light-headed. “Don’t let me fuck you, Nabby-girl. Don’t let me ruin your peace.”

A physical emotion never felt bubbled up my stomach, and my eyes closed to try and taper it down. My whole body trembled. I would not lose my shit out here, and definitely not in front of Ashton Spencer and his stupid friends. I didn’t owe him or them a damn thing, no matter how crazy he ran my mind and made my insides feel.

“You okay?” My eyes opened to a clear view of Aivery with half her mouth reaching her nose, her hatred for me was so clear as she scowled at me. Ashton was back in the same place she’d left him minutes ago. “You look...sad.” She was back, under his heavy—and what I’ve come to believe as comforting—arm looking like the perfect couple.

She was beautiful and he, devilishly handsome. Tempting. The cute image reminded me of their win earlier as the king and queen of *BSU*. That led me to question who I was in relation to that title. I was not my mother. I refused to be.

“I’m just...great.” I forced a smile as phony as her concern. “Need another drink or my bed. Let me see which one it’ll be.” I walked off, already having decided.

“Nabby-girl,” Ashton’s heavy vocals called after me. *Nabby-girl?* When I looked over my shoulder, he warned, “Don’t forget what I said,” raising his cup into the air.

I turned, taking off with a beating pulse. My haunting thoughts drowned out the music as I walked over to Samantha.



Laughing with her friends and Dre, she turned to me. “You good?”

“Nah. I think I drank too much of that wine.”

Teefah shook her head. “Told y’all that *Sutter’s Home* shit is cheap as hell!”

“You want me to come with you?” Worry filled Samantha’s eyes.

The last thing I wanted was her thinking I needed emotional aid, too. I was fine.

I shook my head. “No. I know the way. I can trail people who are coming and going.”

“We can walk you,” Dre added, including himself into our conversation.

I shook my head.

Samantha squeezed my arm. “Are you sure?”

“Sam!” I tried laughing off my frustration. “I’m really okay.”

She pouted playfully. Laughing while shaking my head, I said goodnight to her friends and walked off in my favorite fashion.

Alone.



My eyes swept over to the door, nervous about Samantha coming in. Then they went back to the mirror and I took a good look at my body—a different view this time, though.

My titties were high and round, belly flat but curvy, and my hips plump beneath the band of the lace panties. The sight of my legs had my mind going. They were long, but thick. My thighs and butt were always thick, no matter how much I worked out. It usually annoyed me, but tonight, in this fancy bra and panty set, it made me curious.

I felt... I looked like a...woman, not a little girl that was weird, tall, and thick. I was a woman Ashton wanted to touch and kiss.

*And protect, Nabby-girl...*

I rolled my eyes, turned off the light, and dragged my heavy body to the bed.



*Ashton*

“*Oh, fuck! Ashton!*” She bounced on my dick with wild abandon. “*Yes! Yes! Yes, baby!*” she cried.

Her golden tits with pebbled, caramel apexes sprang with equal fervor. When her face squeezed and her pussy clenched over my cock, I knew she was coming. My hands clutched her hips, jerking them up and down for longer strokes.

“*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*” she cried, and I continued intensifying her thrusts.

I’d walked Aivery to her dorm because I didn’t trust Karmen’s drunk ass to do it. Aivery had been flirting heavy as hell toward the end of the bonfire, telling me all the ways she was going to congratulate me for today’s win. I didn’t bet on it; she’d declared celibacy over the summer, and I wasn’t with drunk fucks. The problem was Aivery was a loud drunk, and when I turned her down once back here in her bedroom, she became too rowdy. And the problem with *that* was I was damn near drunk myself and didn’t have the resistance to leave. I’d been backed up in the worst way.

Not that she forced me. That would be a ridiculous claim. I hadn’t had a pound of ass since the summer: it took little pushing, gropes and the pushing of her tongue in my mouth for me to make the decision. The only pause I gave was at not having condoms. Aivery had been on birth control since we decided to start having sex, but *that* Aivery, I learned this past spring, was not the Aivery I’d fucking fell in love with. *This* Aivery, coming on my dick, wasn’t pure when we first

fucked and didn't want me to know. The man she gave her hymen to and the secret she kept from me is what I couldn't shake, no matter how many months we'd been back at *BSU*. So, I was relieved as shit when she went into Karmen's room and returned, waving square, foiled wrappers in the air.

“Ashton?” Her hips tightened and I blinked, getting her into focus. “You haven't come yet, baby? I'm tired.”

I had to return to the moment. So lost in my thoughts, I missed she had finished. Thinking quickly, I reached up to kiss her again. I needed her wet for me. Then I lifted her from my lap and flipped her on her hands and knees. I checked the condom to be sure it hadn't broken, then pushed into her.

“Ooooh!” she moaned, arching her spine up.

I repositioned the small of her back before thrusting into her. Aivery reached for the comforter, clenching it in her palms. She didn't like doggy-style, but I knew she wouldn't complain tonight. Still, I paced myself, being sure not to go too deep.

When I closed my eyes to measure my thrusts, I thought of the dorm room irony. Tonight, I was in Aivery's bed when last night, I had Tori in mine. Idly, my mind roamed to the lewd view of her ample tits I had to endure last night. The curvature of her tight ass., the lingering aroma of her wet pussy when she turned over pushing wafts of it into the air. And how close I was to devouring her mouth earlier at the bonfire.

I wondered if Tori liked getting fucked from the back. Wondered what her favorite position was. *Could I convince her to appreciate all of my favorites?* What the fuck does Tori's face look like when she cums? Do those hidden dimples go deeper—”

“Uh—gad...” I gripped her hips, pounding into her, exploding at the same damn time.



Tori

Out of breath, I bent over with my hands falling to my knees. Morning runs were intense. The cool air breezing over my heated body was needed, but not enough.

“Drink.” My back was nudged. I glanced up to receive my water bottle from Ashton. I greedily gulped down as much as my lungs would allow. When I was done, my head collapsed again. “You did better with your speed today. Improved by ten minutes.”

I would have said thanks, but I didn’t have the lung capacity. The feeling in my toes hadn’t even returned yet. Getting up this morning in the four o’clock hour wasn’t as hard as it had been previously. I had a boost in energy and alertness from the moment my alarm clock went off. I’d even beat Ashton here. As soon as he arrived, we’d gotten started with hardly any words exchanged.

When I could feel my feet again and my chest no longer burned, I was able to stand straight. Ashton was a few yards away, wiping the sweat from his head.

“You going to the party tonight?”

*Party?*

“What party?”

“The Halloween party in the *MJ Hall*.” Ashton was able to read my mind. He let out a quick breath. “The *Michael Jackson Hall*. It’s not too far from your dorm.”

I was confused. “Today’s Halloween?”

A slow, but slightly annoyed smile widened his face. Ashton even rolled his eyes. “Yes, McNabb. Today’s Halloween, and each Halloween the Greeks sponsor a party, and it’s typically in the *MJ Hall*.”

My mouth hung open. Of course, I didn’t want to go. But how would I tell him?

“Are you going?”

His head dropped to the side. “I’m *Alpha Omega Psi*. Of course, I’ll be there. My guys are working the door.”

“Oh.”

Ashton chuckled. *At me*. “Oh,” he mocked me then tossed his towel over his shoulder to reach into his bag. “Here’s my cell phone number. Call me and tell me if you wanna come through.”

As he wrote down the number I thought how I’d never had Ashton’s cell, only his apartment number. That was how I was able to call him the night of my fake date. The limo driver had his information. It was odd receiving it, random. But then again, so was Ashton Spencer. I was still thrown from his drunken behavior at the bonfire. Not that I wanted to rehash it, but it was weird. We’d almost kissed. He was so bold, sneaky.

“Here.” He handed me a small piece of paper that looked and felt foreign receiving. “I gotta get out of here. Long day today.” After looking over the small piece of paper, I tucked it in my bag. “How’s the paper coming along?”

“I knocked out like...” I thought for a second. “Maybe two and a half pages yesterday. Kicked my ass, but I got it done.” I shrugged then grabbed my things, and followed him out of the field park. “You going to get a massage?” I tried for small talk.

“Nah. The *Panthers* have charity work. We’re going to a couple of the local schools to give away books and laptops.”

“Oh...” I nodded.

“Oh.” Ashton mocked me again, this time with a puzzled expression.

“Fuck you, Spence.” I pushed him by the shoulder as we split to go our separate ways.

“You want me to arrange a massage for you?” he called back to me.

I responded by flipping him the bird over my head. I had to shower then get ready for class. The sounds of Ashton

Spencer's amusement, even at my expense, was music to my ears for the first time.



My body throbbed as I trekked up the stairs of my dorm building. After a day of classes then training with my team, I had little left in me. When I left the sports complex, I trudged over to the main cafeteria and grabbed food to go from the athletic counter where they knew my prescribed meal plan written by the nutritionist. I was too tired to care if it was good or not. I scanned my card, grabbed the bag of hot food, and jetted out of there.

As I approached the door, I saw a girl who stayed a few dorm rooms down from me dressed up as Cruella with the wig and all. The guy she was with had to be Herman Munster. They dashed out of the door and down the steps, chatting and holding hands. The sight of them reminded me it was Halloween. I guessed that was a big holiday up here amongst these college humans. Even the guard wore a clown's wig and nose behind the security desk.

"Hey!" he called after me. "You're McNabb, right?" I nodded, looking at the man like he was a fool of a human, possibly because of his appearance. "You had a large delivery. The guy from the last shift said it was too big to keep here, so he called up to your room and your roommate signed for them and took them all up."

I nodded again and continued to the elevator while still processing the information. When I unlocked the door to my room and let myself in, I hit the light. There were boxes everywhere: on my desk, the floor, and a small one on my bed. I dropped my book bag and put my food on Samantha's desk. The ones on my desk were where I started. Plucking the scissors from my drawer, I cut the tape on one of the boxes.

If my mother thought buying me shit herself instead of sending me my money was going to fly, she had my wrath coming. I'd been ignoring the fact that she hadn't called in forever. Was this her official check in?

I pulled out jeans—three pairs—of a designer I’d never heard of, but the price tag dispelled my assumption quickly. They were different shades, two pairs of blue and one black. All three equaling in over three hundred dollars. The next box had two pairs of jeans and four blouses. The blouses were different colors and designs, all soft in style. Feminine. There was no possible way my mother could be responsible for this. Moving on to another box, there was a pair of black combat boots from another unfamiliar designer. I was afraid to investigate the price on them. I flipped the next lid and found a pair of booties with modest sized heels.

Moving along, I opened all the boxes trailing to my bed. There were sweat suits, sneakers, another pair of high heels with red bottoms, fancy leggings I didn’t believe were for working out, and gold hoop earrings. As I examined them, my free hand found its way to my bare ears. By the time I made it to the lone, small box on my bed, I was acutely aware of the sponsor. It took longer to open this box, though smaller. There was a box inside the mailing box.

A phone.

A freaking cellular.

A goddamn *Blackberry*.

*“Here’s my cell. Call me and tell me if you wanna come through.”*

I almost dropped the damn thing on the bed, my hand shook so violently. Why would he do this? I powered it on, not knowing a damn thing about using a *Blackberry*. I’d just stopped using flip phones not too long ago. *Blackberry* was now the *Porsche* of phones.

*Porsche.*

*Ughhhhh!* My face fell into my hand. What was up with this guy? Did he do this for all awkward *Panthers* new to *BSU*? And the ‘almost kiss’ at the bonfire. What did that mean? I knew better than to think guys only kissed girls they liked. That was bullshit. Beyond that, why would he be tempted to kiss me? I wasn’t Ashton’s type. All my life, I’d

only been the perfect type for the wrong people. Mean humans. Evil humans. What did that say about Ashton Spencer?

It took the next ten minutes for me to figure out the phone had already been set up and ready for calls. It was confirmed when I called my dorm line and it rang. That could only mean one thing. Ashton was paying the monthly bill. Why?

My next two calls were to his cell, then apartment. Ashton answered neither, so I left messages.

Rude, Tori messages to a confused human like Ashton Spencer.



**-Then-**

Tori

I'd just left my ten o'clock Sociology class and was starving. I knew I couldn't make it until after my next class to eat something. Besides, I had twenty minutes until I had to get across campus for my algebra class. It was the only one I actually enjoyed. But I needed nourishment to be on top of my A game. As I trekked over to the athletic counter of the cafeteria, I internally applauded myself for making the right decision to stick to my meal plan yet another time. Last night's dinner of chicken parmesan without breading, whole wheat pasta, and sautéed broccoli rabe wasn't bad at all. I officially decided I liked the musky vegetable. Before *Blakewood*, I never knew the green leaf existed. I guessed it was what these HBCU humans enjoyed chewing on.

The cafeteria was busy as usual, but not as much as it was on nights and weekends. I preferred it less busy and the atmosphere calm. I went to the kiosk at the counter to type in my name and student ID. The girl nodded her head, greeting me, then went to the back to prepare my food. I hummed, drumming the counter while waiting. After a minute or so of that, I remembered my phone. Digging into my book bag, I pulled it out. A surge of excitement arrowed in my chest of the possibility of Ashton having called or texted me back. It had been over twenty-four hours since I last saw or heard from him. Last night, when Samantha got in from the Halloween party—I suspected she was encouraged by Dre to attend—I asked if she'd seen Ashton. When she said no, a tendril of worry coursed my mind.

"McNabb!" My head shot up. "Here you go." The girl slid my tray of food closer to my side of the counter.

I scanned my card then found a table surrounded by a partition topped with green plants. It felt private and that

appealed to me. After squirting my hands with hand sanitizer that sat amongst the condiments, I began to fork couscous, something I hadn't decided on quite yet. The salmon, spinach, and tomatoes and fresh mozzarella salad all looked solid and promising. I dug into the food, knowing I didn't have a lot of time.

At the same time, I got lost in thought about my fight next week. It would be here, at home. My opponent was a senior at a university in California. Still in my weight class, but bigger than the Walsh girl in Minnesota. I wasn't concerned, just still learning how this boxing thing worked on the college level. Not many in the U.S. had boxing programs, and even less HBCUs. Heck, I was the only female boxer at *Blakewood*. The male ones hadn't been supportive like Ashton. The top male boxer here, Reggie Laws, just learned my name when Trisha and Luke asked his trainers to have him spar with me. He had been cool, but I knew when I was invisible to someone, could feel the indifference. It didn't matter to me, and all that did was Laws knew I hit hard and could fight.

"So what happened?" the whisper in that question made it sound sneaky, catching my attention.

"She is mad as hell, girl!" another girl gasped, both women sounding familiar.

*Great!*

My face dropped toward my plate, cheeks full of food. Why am I always in the middle of secret conversations with this crew? They sounded to be directly behind me, separated by the partition and plants.

"But why? He did nothing wrong!" That was ShawnNicole.

"It goes deep, girl." Karmen's delivery was that of a gossip.

"Oh. You think? They've been acting weird all damn semester! I've been wondering what the hell is going on between the two of them."

“It’s the cousin that was locked up. Aiv hates that boy. Hates him. She thinks his situation has taken Ashton’s attention away from their relationship.”

“That’s stupid.”

Karmen scoffed, “Why?”

“Because if they’re as close as I’ve heard they were—as I’ve heard Ashton in years past say—then why wouldn’t the guy being locked up fuck with Ashton.”

“He sounds like a thug. A serious drug dealer with only two destinies ahead: death or prison. I don’t blame Aivery for feeling like Ashton stressing over him is a waste of time.”

“Because you and Aivery know nothing about that life to have compassion,” ShawnNicole nipped at her.

Karmen exhaled audibly. “Here you go with that ‘being from the streets and not’ shit.”

“Because you, Aivery, and Andrea make it clear all the time that you’re from a different culture, the one without empathy for your own people who come from lesser circumstances.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

ShawnNicole sucked her teeth. “Then show me another side.”

“How?”

“Be honest with Aivery when she comes crying to you about the bratty fuckery. She has the man of everyone’s dreams, they have a promising future together, are about to graduate from one of the top universities in the country, have a shit-load of resources waiting on them after graduation—and not one student loan—and have the world as their goddamn oyster. Yet she wants to sit around and cry a fucking creek because her all-star boyfriend flew home to bury his cousin who was more like a brother and best friend.”

My heart fell from my chest and abs clenched so tight before unfurling. That sensation had never happened and scared the shit out of me.

“Well, I’ll reserve my judgment until I’m put in that situation,” Karmen replied dismissively.

“Well, I’ll remain a human being with common sense. Y’all gone learn to have a brain of your own one of these days, and stop taking Aivery’s words and life for gold. Something’s up with her and Ashton, and maybe he’s where you need to be mentally.”

“And where’s that?” Karmen shrieked, clearly offended.

“Out of Aivery’s LaLa-Land and in the real world where you can see how immature and controlling she is. Don’t get me wrong, I love her, but Aivery be on some shit at times and needs to be checked every now and then, like everybody else.”

“Whatever. You sound just like you did that day, defending Tori. It’s like you don’t like Aivery anymore.”

“No. That’s not true. I’m with treating people with respect. That girl hasn’t bothered anybody. She minds her business. I’ve done her hair and she was extra cool. Why are we warring with that girl?” ShawnNicole posed it as a point, not a question.

“Because like Aivery said, she’s diseased.”

That was a blow.

“And on that note, I’m hungry and done with this conversation.” I couldn’t hear much more of her words because ShawnNicole took off.

I closed my eyes to control my rapid breathing. His cousin—*Brick*—died. Ashton’s best friend and cousin passed away. But when? How long would he be away from school? How many classes and games would he miss?

*How much pain is he in?*

My appetite had disappeared and so had the time. So, I threw everything onto the tray, grabbed it and my book bag, and left for class. The weight in my stomach followed me.

*love*  *believe*

“Yo...”

I pulled my face up and turned to look behind me. I’d created a dangerous habit here on campus. Walking with your head down was a big no-no back at home, and especially in New Brunswick where I trained with Uppercut.

Dre was there, looking to have left my dorm building. I didn’t even realize I’d walked past him. It was after nine at night and the end of another brutal day at training. I didn’t say hello, not being sure if it was safe. We weren’t friends. He had a low-cut fade with man-made curls and thin mustache. Dre was light skinned and just a couple of inches taller than me. His smile was crooked, full lips, and decent teeth. Dude was far from ugly, but I didn’t see what all the hype was about.

When he saw I wouldn’t respond, his smirk lengthened. “You heard what happened?”

“What do you mean?” I moved to let two girls leaving my building pass by.

“Spence.”

*Oh...*

That had been on my mind since late morning. I still hadn’t heard from Ashton. My eyes fell away, blinking and I nodded.

“That shit’s fucked up.” I couldn’t believe Dre was making small talk with me—or engaging in *real* conversation. Ashton’s cousin was a serious deal. “My nigga hurting right now.”

I nodded again, eyes falling away, too. “They were pretty tight,” I finally found my voice.

“Yeah, man. And the way they broke the news to Spence.”

My eyes shot up and mouth fell open. Catching my desperation, I closed it and swallowed, pacing myself. “*How*—what they do?” Ashton seemed to have disappeared yesterday.

“Cuzzo died almost two weeks ago, Al told me. Coach Green told him. The family didn’t want to fuck up Spence’s

head before homecoming. They waited until close to the funeral.”

A dull ache turned my stomach. “They did?”

He nodded, swiping his nose as he glanced away. “It took the family a minute to get the body from the *Department of Corrections*. You know the government’s slow as fuck and it ain’t nothing you can do about it. I guess Spence’s family waited until they had the body and a funeral date to tell him.”

I wanted to ask if the county killed him or the rival gang. Ashton didn’t mention Brick being sick, so it had to be murder. But I didn’t ask, not wanting to go there. It was Ashton’s business to tell. But the question I did ask, shocked me.

“You know when the funeral is?”

Dre yawned, “Friday.”

“This Friday?”

He nodded. “Yup. At the second largest church in Newark...*Mt. Calvary*. He flew home yesterday and Aivery flew home this afternoon. Her sister had the twins on Friday, but she wanted to stay here for homecoming.”

My thoughts drowned out the noise coming from Dre’s mouth. I recalled Aivery mentioning her sister being pregnant with twins that night at *Verti*, but couldn’t care less. My concern was Ashton losing his cousin. I knew he had a big family, but how supportive were they? How big were they? When my Margaret died, less than twenty people showed at the funeral parlor, and even less at her burial. No one came to comfort me. None of my friends, and my cousins didn’t know how.

Those unknown variables pushed me to inspiration.

“My dad preached at the church a few times. Only high dignitary-type people get to have their funerals there. You know, that pastor—”

I interrupted him mid-sentence. “Okay. Thanks for telling me.” I turned in the direction I’d just come from. “I just

remembered I left something at the gym.”

“Oh.” Dre blinked several times. “Oh, a’ight.”

“Goodnight.” And I was out.



When I saw Collin and Trisha with their coats on from a distance in the hall, but still busy around the small office I knew I’d made it just in time. With determined speed, I flew inside.

“I need to go home!”

Both their heads popped up and eyes met me. Collin, with a blank expression, turned over his shoulder for Trisha. She met his alarmed stare quickly then regarded me again.

I watched her swallow and blink hard. “Is everything alright, Tori?”

“No. There’s a family emergency I need to tend to. And I need to do it ASAP!”

“But you have a fight in exactly a week from today.”

“Breaking training so close, Tori, isn’t the best idea,” Collin tried to back her.

I took two steps deeper into the office. “I don’t give two shits about what you think is a good idea or not. I have an emergency that I need to get home to see about and I need to go right away.”

Panicking, Trisha lifted her hand, gesturing for me to calm down. “What’s wrong, Tori? Are Ashton and his friends still bothering—”

“Fuck his friends!” *Especially Aivery.* “I tell you I have an emergency at home and you ask me about a bunch of rich kids that can’t beat me?”

“Okay.” Trisha tried to pace herself. I could tell. Her eyes ran across the office and her hands stayed swinging softly in the air. “Let’s be rational about this. You can’t just up and leave. You have classes, too. Should I call Uppercut?”

I switched weight on my hips, temper flaring by the second. And the mention of Cut's treacherous-self added to the speed of it.

"You can call Cut all you want, but you'll be wasting my time. I get a round ticket for each semester I'm here. I want to use it now."

"Okay." Collin nodded. "How soon, Tori? How soon are you talking to leave and when are you proposing to come back."

I hesitated for a minute. The sense of them finally breaking caught me off guard. That, or the fact that I hadn't gotten that far with my plan. Dre said the funeral was Friday. That was in two days.

"Tomorrow. I need to leave tomorrow and I'll be back on Friday night." I nodded, feeling what I said would work.

"A turnaround flight?" Trisha's chin dipped. "So, you're sure you're coming right back. Right?"

"You can book it for me to be sure, or tell me how it's done. Either way, I'm going home. Don't make me question if I should come back." I hit them with a daring stare.

Yes, I was playing hardball here. I'd been the good, quiet, very compliant athlete they recruited since the day Cut abandoned me. That was when I learned I had no support. My mother had been holding my money, leaving me up here penniless. Cut told me I wasn't welcomed back to train. My best friend, Ragee, had been engrossed in jump-starting his singing career, and my cousins and friends from back home were stuck in the Millville mentality, unable to relate to me now. Right now, I needed to feel in control and not in compliance.

Trisha's eyes rolled hard and she exhaled. There was a short delay before she murmured, "Let's get them booked right away," to Collin. "Flying into Philadelphia. Right?"

"No." I swallowed, heart galloping in my chest. "Newark."



Her eyes rolled up to meet mine. I lifted my chin, maintaining my determination.

*Don't fuck with me on this...*



“Hello?” His thick cords vibrated over the phone as I jogged across campus.

“Ilk!” I trilled. “You sleep?”

“Tori?”

“Yeah.” I shifted right to avoid a weird male human skateboarding up the walkway.

“What you think?” Raj grumbled.

Not having a lot of time, I cut to the chase. “I need a huge favor.”

“Name it.” The swiftness of his acquiesce had always warmed me to Ragee McKinnon. He was the kindest person I knew. Smart, too.

“I’m flying home for a funeral—”

“When? Who?” His thick tone was alarmed.

“I’m sorry to worry you, big head. No one you or I know, but someone close to a...” I hesitated. “...friend of mine.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow—”

“Tomorrow, Tori?”

I stopped jogging, eyes bouncing wildly. “It’s an emergency, Raj. I’ll explain everything to you, but for right now, I need to get to the funeral.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s on Friday in Newark at...” I tried recalling the name Dre gave me. “...the second largest church in the city.” My brain hiccupped again. I was so worked up at the news when Dre mentioned Ashton finding out so late, I hardly

listened to much else. “Ummmmm... Something with a C. Calvary, or something?”

Ragee McKinnon was a church boy. If the church had a choir, he’d know it. And what church didn’t have a choir?

“*Mt. Calvary?*”

“Yes!” Excitement sparked in my belly. “That’s it.”

He groaned. “What time?”

Relieved, I resumed my jog. “I’ll be landing in Newark tomorrow at 6:55...”



*Ashton*

Sitting in the second pew of the church, eyes stinging and swollen, heart numb, and body bone-chilled, I watched my family standing over the open casket delivering gut-wrenching sobs. It was the end of the service and the funeral home director explained once the casket was closed for pre-service viewing, it would not be opened again. However, my family being as forceful as we can be, demanded it was opened after the eulogy.

That was a big mistake and I knew it, which was why I remained here alone while three rows of family and friends were huddled over the casket. I knew after seeing his body privately last night at the funeral home, I didn’t want that image of him engraved in my mind. Brick was in a suit. The nigga hated suits. He didn’t even wear one to his prom or the weddings of family members we’d gone to over the years.

He wore his gang colors everywhere, even down to his boxers and socks. That was the only thing his mother, who was my aunt, and my mother, who’d paid for the funeral and repass, allowed. His underclothes—something I didn’t know was a staple in funeral culture—were the colors of his gang. But his suit was a classic navy blue, shoes were a dope cognac, and dress shirt was a crisp white opened at the neck. Brick wouldn’t approve, but he wouldn’t be mad either.

*When I lifted from picking up my money and the dice, I peeped him lighting up a spiff. We were in the stairwell of my mother's luxury apartment building, shooting dice.*

*I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "You gone get our asses beat, bruh!"*

*He took a heavy pull, eyes shrinking, then pushed it toward me for the offer. I shook my head, declining.*

*Brick chuckled. "Yeah. I'm still scared of Aunt Wanda, yo. Straight up. She'll beat my muthafuckin' ass." He let out the ganga-infused smoke. "Just like she did when she caught those twins in your room, running a train on yo ass!"*

*We both curled in laughter. The reminder of the shoe my mother chased my fourteen year old ass around her apartment with tickled the hell out of me in the moment.*

*"Yo," I tried to slow my laughter. "When I finally decided I had to let her catch me..." Laughter choked my words. "That chic beat my ass with that shoe in more ways than I knew possible!"*

*We rolled against the wall for support, cracking the hell up. I was damn near drunk from the bottle of Yak we'd just drained, and I was sure Brick was, too. It was the night after Christmas and I was home from school on a break. Eventually, Brick pulled a few more while I enjoyed the quiet of my tipsy brain. That was until the damn smoke detector sounded. Right away, we tried fanning off the alarm. I pulled my white tee from over my head and waved it toward the ceiling, where the small device flashed. That was dumb. We wasted precious getaway time trying to quiet a piece of systematic equipment.*

*"Stay right there!" the new security yelled from a lower level inside the stairwell.*

*"Fuck!" I threw my t-shirt back on as I made my way to the steps, taking three at a time, hauling ass upstairs.*

*"Oh, shit!" Brick was behind me laughing.*

*I didn't find shit funny about being found smoking weed in my mother's apartment building. It was not a rundown centurion-old structure you found in the slums of Newark.*

*Nah. This was gentrification money and security. UMNDJ Doctors, lawyers, professors, and the like type of living. I ate up four flights of stairs before I thought to leave the stairwell. Brick's stupid ass was still laughing behind me. I looked over my shoulder while power-walking to the elevator. The blunt bounced between his lips while he pulled up his coat.*

*I'd be damned if another security guard didn't appear behind Brick from the stairwell we'd just come from.*

*"Fuck!" I swore again, kicking off a sprint.*

*The elevator doors were just closing when I made it there and stuck my hand inside to open it again. Thankfully, Brick was on my ass and slipped in. I beat the close button begging for it to work and fast. Just as the security made it in the frame of the elevator door, he stumbled over his feet and fell on his face. Brick laughed his ass off at the guy. As the doors closed, I watched him pull out his walkie-talkie, alerting his partner of our elevator's descension.*

*"Damn!" I swore.*

*"Yeah! Now them niggas know we going down!"*

*That sprung my inebriated mind into action and I pressed for a new floor, one that was higher than the first.*

*"When these fucking doors open, I'mma need you to haul ass as quietly as possible to the roof. Okay?"*

*Brick busted out laughing, holding his sac in his baggy jeans. "This nigga said 'quietly as possible!' That's how you be talkin' to them muthafuckas you be tutoring?"*

*I shook my head, turning to watch the dial above the door. "If they catch yo ass, my moms gone fuck you up. Laugh at that, nigga."*

*"Nah. I'm with you, Ashton, man!" Brick sounded to sober up that quickly behind me.*

*The bell tolled and car stopped. Before the door could open fully, I squeezed through, breaking for the exit at the end of the hall. I pushed in the doors and took long lunges up the stairs, four at a time to quiet them. I heard walkie-talkie*

*communication from a distance, alerting me to our proximity. When I made it to the top floor, I slowed to kill the noise of my heavy Timbs. There was one half a story to the rooftop. I prayed there was no alarm on the door. I'd have to eat a mean verbal thrashing and maybe a punch or two from my mother. My twenty-one year old, junior in college ass was too big to be getting whooped with a damn shoe.*

*An exhale slipped my lungs when the door opened without a sound. Fuck! It was just over twenty degrees outside and all I had on was an undershirt and tee. I dipped down by a vent pipe blowing warm air. The alcohol and adrenaline had me out of breath, not the run itself. I chuckled, thinking how Brick's Newport-inhaling ass probably got winded and was caught. I knew I'd be good because my cousin never snitched. He'd just have to feel my mother's wrath alone. Besides, it was him sparking a blunt that got us hemmed up in the first place.*

*The door burst open and Brick's heaving ass came barreling out. I laughed so hard at his ass I almost pissed myself. In fact, I jumped to my feet, flew to an adjacent corner and took a relieving piss. Yeah. I was wildin' the fuck out at Wanda Lee's apartment building, acting real "Newark" in Newark. Only this wasn't "that" Newark.*

*When I was done, I returned to my seat on the ground. Brick had sparked his blunt again. I rested my head against the building, taking a deep breath. We'd just cleaned hefty plates of leftovers before shooting dice, so I was nice, but for the high-speed chase of the weaponless security.*

*"You know..." He took a pull from the blunt and held it in when he continued, "the way you hauled ass up here is how you should with that girl."*

*I shook my head internally as he exhaled the hemp. "Fuck you talkin' about?"*

*"Your Hillman chick. I'm surprised she ain't come home with you—oh, that's right!" He clowned, snapping his fingers as though suddenly remembering. "Aunt Wanda ain't with that roping you shit!"*

*“Where Tricey at, Deshawn?” I referred to him by his real name then snapped my fingers. “That’s right! At home with all the Michael Kors bags and watches, and Ugg boots you bought her for Christmas to make her temporarily forget that you ain’t wifin’ her like she wanna be.”*

*Tricey was Brick’s most recent baby’s mother. He used his money to substitute his time with his women.*

*“That’s because,” he continued in a playful falsetto. “she ain’t NormaJean’s fine ass. She don’t give head on her head and eat ass with class,” he rhymed.*

*“Fuck outta here!” I cried laughing.*

*“Word up, yo!” He took another pull. “If it was me, there wouldn’t be no college chick if I had NormaJean bustin’ it wide open for me like she do for you.”*

*NormaJean and I hadn’t fucked in a long while, but there was no explaining that to Brick, who viewed her as nothing more than a sex toy. That was such a small part of the beauty and magic of her being. I tried explaining this to him over the years, but his understanding was limited to his experiences. Brick only dated hood chicks inspired to do nothing more than floss the dough boys’ profits on the block.*

*“You play the game you understand,” I murmured.*

*“What you mean, ock?”*

*“I mean, you fuck with chicks who move a way you understand and can almost predict. I’m more drawn to females who are independent thinkers and go-getters. NormaJean ain’t a renown, bimbo porn star. She’s a millionaire entrepreneur with investment deals and resources out the ass.”*

*He shook his head, blowing out smoke. “What college ass words can you pull out your ass for your bougie Texas chic?”*

*I turned to him. “Now what do you mean?”*

*The touch of a soft hand caused a shudder of warmth to ripple from the back of my neck to my ass on the padded bench. The music from the church organ and heart-twisting*

wails from familiar sets of lungs filtered through my psyche. Just as all service long, I'd go in and out of the here and now, not decided on my preference. This touch causing the heating of my cold, cement-like tense frame triggered me to glance to the right of me.

Her eyes were unsure, but her presence heavy enough to force me out of my head. "I'm sorry for your loss. *I—I wish I could take the pain away.*"

I nodded, lifting from resting my elbows on my knees and forged a smile. While pulling her in for a side hug, my eyes went back to my mourning family. My aunt, Tabitha, Brick's mother's, cry raised above the others. And his first baby's mother, Precious, screamed so loud and hard, she had to be escorted out. Sitting in boiling grief fucking hurt. I couldn't take another minute of it.

*"What I mean, nigga, is you ain't fucked up out here with these chicks like me. You smart, Ash. Word up! You could bag a dime without trying. A good bitch that'll be loyal to you and have your babies. Fuck you right, and stay home and out the streets. Shit, with yo bread, she ain't gone want for nothing." He laughed. "That's what you got in Miss Pageant girl. But that ain't ya speed. You half street, half intellect. You's a hybrid nigga that need a woman that's gonna give your complicated ass more than poise and posture. Ya lady gotta give you fuckin..." He snapped his fingers successively, really trying to search for the word this time. "What's that word. Passion! That's it, it's passion. You need a chick that make you work for the pussy through her mind, not her pedigree." His head bounced with confidence as he took another pull.*

*I scratched my head. "That's what you think?"*

*"My nigga..." He exhaled the smoke. "It's what I know. You ain't a predictable cat, so the shortie that's really for you ain't gone be what Aunt Wanda or your grams think is best for you. Don't get so wrapped up in this chick because they scared yo ass when they found out about NormaJean. Fuck that, my nigga. Do you."*

*I wanted to laugh at his attempt at a poetic conversation about love. “What if Aivery is that one for me?”*

*He rolled his eyes, hand slapping his head. “Yeah. Ya stubborn ass gone make me suit up just to prove to ya moms and grams you what they think you is. You’s gonna cave, but it’s all good. I’mma be right there to marry you off and then right there again to catch you when that shit don’t work out. I’mma stay down.”*

*I finally laughed. Brick was really on some futuristic shit when high. I sat back, trying to catch the heated smoke from the pipe and not freeze my ass off.*

*“Yo, straight up!” he chirped out of nowhere. “I’m only wearing a suit for your dumb ass wedding to Whitley Gilbert—” I sputtered a laugh. He loved calling Aivery Whitley Gilbert, a character from the sitcom “A Different World”. “—and my fuckin’ funeral. ‘Cause I know Aunt Wanda’s gonna soup my mom up to put my ass in one even though she know I ‘on’t like them shits!”*

*We laughed, finding something so mindless so damn funny.*

*“Salt and pepper, baby.” Brick held his palm in the air.*

*“Gray, bitch.” I met it as we continued howling.*



I ambled out of the convenience store of the gas station, peering through the plastic bag for my sour *Mike and Ikes*. When I made it to the truck, my uncle, June, was outside and on his cell phone. I handed him his *Mountain Dew* then put the bag on the hood of the truck. I found my cousin, Boobee’s, *Funyuns* and slipped them to him as he sat in the driver’s seat. The gas attendant was finishing up on filling the tank.

“You eatin’ them shits before the repass,” I joked with Boobee.

We’d just left the cemetery from burying Brick, and Boobee needed to stop for gas and drop off money to his son’s



grandmother before we went to the repass at a hall here in Newark. My mother wanted a smaller event in Upper Montclair, but my aunt, Tabitha, was adamant about not excluding people from the block who were without transportation. My uncle, June, also reminded my mother of the risk those same people would take if pulled over in the affluent town just for being Black. Rarely is Wanda Lee talked off a cliff, but she digressed.

“And I’mma fuck something up as soon as we get there. That caterer Aunt Wanda got better be legit.”

I chuckled, this moment bearing the resemblance of after-church hunger I used to experience as a kid with my cousins on my pops’ side. We’d stay up all night fuckin’ around, get up earlier per my rigidly religious grandmother, and move so slow we’d miss breakfast. Then we’d spend the entire long ass service starving. And of course, dinner wasn’t ready when we stepped in from church. We had to wait until my grandmother and her housekeeper were done cooking. So, we’d try finding a store to get snacks from to hold us over.

“It is. She used *Kim’s Soul Food* on Lyon’s Ave. She’s official,” I vouched for the spot.

My mother had me pick up an order from there a few times, and I’d had some of her food. My mother didn’t eat everybody’s cooking but had made a life’s effort of supporting Black women.

“Nah.” June stuffed his phone into the front pocket of his dress shirt. The burly six foot-eight-inch figure stretched his arms in the air and rolled his thick neck before yawning. “Kim was fuckin’ around on sending a quote. Wanda wasn’t beat. She got my man, Shawn, from the spot on Bergen Street.” June’s eyes rolled low as he tried recalling the name of the restaurant.

“*Real Soul Grubs?*” Boobee asked from the driver’s seat.

“Yeah! Them. I went to school with his baby’s moms. She was bad as shit back then! I used to try to fuck so bad, but she wasn’t with it. Now, that bitch look like a fuckin’

hippopotamus! I hit up the spot last year and when I was at the counter, ordering my food, I could see shortie in the kitchen. I ain't know if baby girl was cooking the food or eating all the shit up."

Their peal of laughter was contagious. Boobee slapping the steering wheel while curled over made it even funnier.

"Word, man." Boobee resiled in his seat. "These chicks be risky investments in the long run. You think you wifin' a Angela Bassett type of lifelong bad ass, and get a fuckin' wide receiver two years after getting her high school diploma."

My face balled tight until a guffaw forcefully pushed through my lips. Boobee's ass was no prize himself at twenty-seven years old with a goddamn beer belly. And Uncle June... While he was still known in the streets for getting busy, he was better with those things that pop than a full round fight these days. He maintained a reputation of knocking niggas out when necessary while managing his own security guard company, but I'd seen him sparring and knew he'd lost his lungs years ago.

Slowing his humor, Boobee's eyes burst wide. "Yo! Speaking of that shit. Who was shortie at the funeral with the club dress on?" I frowned, not remembering shit but pain from earlier. He laughed. "Word bond, it had long-sleeves, like black mini dress with this..." He gestured his chest, described large breasts. "low ass neckline. The shit was sexy with like... jewelry on it."

"Oh! The tall brown one with the big ponytail?"

"Yeah." Boobee affirmed. "Pretty girl. Tomboy, though."

A shiver rocketed up my spine and a wave of dizziness swirled in my head. Nothing outwardly dramatic, but the warmth I'd felt earlier at the church heated me in an instant.

*Tori...*

"Like a party dress?" I asked.

“Yeah. It was weird as hell!” Boobee laughed. Her body was sick as fuck, but a goddamn party dress at a funeral?”

*Was that Tori?*

“She wore heels?”

June shook his head. “Nah. Some combat boots. Looked crazy. Well...” He tossed his chin to Boobee. “Like he said, her body was on point. I was wondering where the nigga, Brick, know her from.”

“Where did y’all see her at?”

“She was in the back,” Boobee answered then regarded June. “She was in the last row when the family walked in the church?”

“Nah. She was standing up.” June smoothed down his goatee. “One of the first people by the door, standing when we came in to kick off the service. She had the stocky dude behind her.”

“Yeah. I ain’t know if that was his lady or what, but could tell they was together.”

My eyes closed. It had to be Tori. I felt fucked about not returning her text messages and calls. It wasn’t until I landed that I’d gotten a gamut of alerts. Halloween day, since I left school for the airport, everyone tried contacting me—everyone except Aivery. She didn’t think I should go, never gave her condolences, at least not sincerely. That fucked me up, causing me to shut down.

A.D. Jones called me into his office with Coach Green waiting there for me, too. They called my mother and handed me the phone. Initially, I didn’t believe he was dead. How could he have just died on Halloween in custody and have a funeral on Friday. I’d always been a sharp kid. But when she explained he’d passed nearly two weeks before, but they had to wait on DOC to release his body, reality hit. And so did a wave of nausea. Coach Green, thinking on his feet, caught my sinking body.

They had me escorted to my apartment to pack. My flight had already been planned before she broke the news. Before packing, I went to find Aivery and shared the news with her. The coldness exuding from her was something I'd had a taste of a time or two, but never to that degree.

**-Then-**

T  
Tori

I couldn't believe it.

The moment he pushed on the brake once we pulled up to the airport, Raj was handing me cash.

"Why?" my tone was crisp.

"Because you're traveling, T. You can't be bouncing between states broke."

"My flight goes straight there. Why would I need money?"

"You can get hungry!"

"You just fed me!" I matched his thick gruff.

Ragee took a deep breath. "Look. You know me. Don't ask me to rearrange my schedule to do you a solid just to have you bite my damn head off for making sure you're good." His auburn eyes met mine. "You just left a funeral!"

"I didn't know the deceased!"

His thick frame twisted to face me from behind the wheel. "You may not have known Deshawn "Brick" Lee." He picked up Brick's obituary lying near the ashtray and waved it in the air. "But you damn sure felt the loss of his passing."

I sucked my teeth, snapping my neck back. "The hell you mean, choir boy. Let's not get beside ourselves."

"Who leaves school and flies back to Jersey—not home, though—to go to a funeral of a dead kid she didn't know?"

Raj hadn't given me pushback since he picked me up from the airport yesterday. Because I told him I didn't even want his father, Cut, knowing I was in town and I didn't know

anyone outside of the gym and boxing in North Jersey, Raj took me to eat then to a gig he had in a small club in Weehawken. I stayed in the back and sipped on free sodas all night. When he was done, we stopped by his grandmother's church to change some things around on the pulpit. After that, we went back to his grandmother's place, where he lived in the basement. I slept on my usual, fold-up bed, grateful his other bestie, LeRoy, had been staying with his boyfriend—something Raj and I joked about lasting for no more than a month.

This morning, we had breakfast his grandmother, Pastor McKinnon, prepared, enduring one of many of her mini-sermons. The lady was sweet as cake, but all she wanted to talk about was Christ, God, the Bible, and all the characters in it. I never knew how he connected to the woman he loved the most. When she told me “the Lord” showed her fish in her dreams last night and the first woman she saw this morning was me, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to remain quiet and not laugh in her face. After that ordeal, I returned to the dungeon to get ready for the funeral. Oddly, I didn't want to be late.

“How many ways can I say I know his cousin—”

“A cousin you just met in what? August/September? I know you. You like the Ashton kid, Tori.”

My face folded all kind of ways. “I don't even know that *bo*—”

“If you're going all out your way to go to his cousin's funeral, he's more than *that boy*.”

“He's a *Panth*—a fellow-athlete at *Blakewood*, Raj. I told you I don't have any friends there. He's like the coolest kid on campus and I thought it would be nice to ‘show myself friendly’ as you *love* to say!”

“And since when did you give two shits about fitting in?” Raj's thin brows met. My eyes fell away. “Are you listening to yourself? KaToria, it's okay to like someone. That's normal, you know. The shit you and I go through—fight through day after day—ain't. If you finally run into a cat

that makes you feel something, it doesn't have to be love or anything like that, it's okay to ride out the feeling."

I turned to him with burning eyes, but a cool shell. "What if it's a she that makes me feel something?"

Raj laughed. "I wouldn't have a problem with that either, but you're not gay, Tori."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're too damn comfortable with me to think you couldn't tell me all this time. Because your brazen ass wouldn't fear the world knowing."

The thought of a soul knowing I had feelings for anyone scared me. Why should I trust anyone that way? I had no fucking clue what I was feeling for Ashton, but what I did was like a living, breathing thing. Other than Ragee, no one had ever been so generous to me. I didn't understand why I saw the boundary between Raj and me that I couldn't see with Ashton. Raj was much older than me—too old. And quite honestly, I didn't see him for more than a crush that lasted just as long as LeRoy's relationships. Ashton's boundary should have been Aivery *or* the obvious fact of him not liking me. I'd decided that near-kiss was him being drunk, and nothing more. Because why would Ashton Spencer want a girl like me, let alone cheat on a girl like Aivery with me?

"And," Ragee's sea-deep vocals burst my bubble of thought. "You've got to be brazen as hell to wear this club dress to that funeral." He laughed.

"You told me I'd be fine!"

"Because *you said* since you had to at your Margaret's funeral, you had to wear a dress today." He shook his head, snickering.

I sighed, closing my eyes. He was right. When my grandmother, Margaret, passed away, my mother went crazy looking for a dress for me to wear. She said my Margaret told her ladies only wore dresses to funerals. There was no way I wouldn't keep her word at heart. But Raj said wearing the *Jimmy Choo* heels I wore the night of my fake date would

have been taking it too far, and suggested the new combat boots I'd flown into Jersey in.

I chewed on my lips, feelings soured, and face tight. "You think people clowned me?" Since when did I care?

"There were too many people in that sanctuary to notice much beyond the sadness." Raj always knew the right thing to say.

And that was another thing. Ashton had a huge family. He didn't grieve alone like I did. He had a gang of relatives flanking around him. It wasn't until Ashton's family asked to see the body after the preacher preached that he separated from them. While they were all at Brick's casket crying from their souls, Ashton stayed behind. His elbows planted on his knees and broad back high from the bench, motionless. That's when Raj pushed me to get over my nerves and go pay my condolences. I didn't want to parade around in a mini-dress, but I did want to...see him, so I went while Ragee stayed in the back. Ashton gave me a friendly hug, but I was pretty sure he had no idea who I was. He was that subdued, an Ashton I didn't know.

"We've been sitting here too long." Ragee pointed to the police officer twirling his finger in the air. "You need to go."

He handed me the money again.

I snatched it, irritated by the fact he wouldn't have taken no for an answer. "Whatever, McKinnon."

"Just don't come back pregnant. You know Grandmother is a seer." Facing ahead, his brows lifted high and eyes rolled my way.

I sucked my teeth again, grabbed my bag while mumbling things I'd never say out loud about that crazy old lady.

Pushing the door open, a thought hit. "Thanks for this solid, Raj. I owe you." I was pretty sure my tone didn't message the sentiment. But Ashton got on me about saying



thank you. I got out of the car and turned to face him. “And don’t fucking call me KaToria again.” I slammed the door.

Not even that barrier could mute out his subterranean deep laughter.



## Ashton

I watched the people at the gate across from mine line up to board their plane. From the floor-to-ceiling window to the right of me, I could see my plane’s respective place was empty. I wasn’t due to board for another thirty minutes. The darkness of the sky mixed with the thick raindrops matched my sulking disposition. Glancing down to the picture in my hand, I cried even more internally as I examined the mean-mugging faces of Brick and me from ten years ago on his birthday.

Snickering to myself, I recalled just how much posturing I was doing in the photo. I’d just gotten off a plane from Cape Town, South Africa with my father three hours earlier. Fighting fatigue from a sixteen-hour flight and trying to adjust to the seven hour time difference, I was determined to be with my guy on his birthday that evening. Brick was so damn appreciative, he wouldn’t separate from me the whole night at the party Aunt Tabitha threw for him at the skating rink. A few of his boys from the block gave me nasty stares, hence my pose during the photograph when I knew a few were watching. They had no idea how stressed Brick and I were when we learned during the summer with my father, that year, that he’d be taking me out of the country exactly two weeks before Brick’s birthday. He’d even laugh at the pic—if he were here.

*This can’t be life...*

My *Blackberry* ringing snapped me from my reminiscing. My chest caved when I saw the caller’s ID.

“Hi, Nana.”

“Hello, dear heart.” My grandmother’s voice box vibrated like a stereotypical senior citizen. “What are you up to?”

My eyes gazed around the place. “At the airport.”

“Oh!” she cried, feigning disturbing shock. “Where are you going?”

My eyes closed as I braced myself. “Back to school.”

“Does that mean you were home and didn’t come to see about your Nana?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry, Nana. It’s been a rough time.”

“How so?”

She knew, but still pressed me. “I’m sure you heard my cousin, Deshawn, passed away. He was buried on Friday.”

“Mmmmm...” she hummed into the phone, never admitting she knew. “Well, my condolences to the family. Death is not easy. To be absent in body is to be present with the Lord, but I’ve always told you, Ashton Spencer, we must make wise decisions. If one lives by the sword, they will die by the same. I just hope you can find something good in his story.”

The something good to my grandmother would be me not hanging out with my mother’s side of the family. She never cared for them, and liked Brick even less. My grandmother hated when Brick would find a ride to her house in Scotch Plains, staining her reputation as the queen of high society.

“I hope I can, too, Nana.” I glanced down at the picture in my hand.

Her voice hiked up when she requested, “Please give my highest regards to Ms. Cooper. Tell her I wish I could have seen her, too, while you were here. Perhaps next time?”

My eyes rolled toward the window where my plane was taxiing in. “Aivery isn’t with me, Nana.”

“Oh.” With that one word, I could tell that gave her pause. “I’m sure she regrets what’s keeping her from supporting you.”

“Not really.” I sighed and quickly regretted it.

Next, I would have been telling her how Aivery never truly expressed her condolences. For seconds long, my grandmother didn’t speak. I knew her well enough to know where that narrowed mind was going.

“You’ll see her once you land, I’m sure.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not, Ashton Spencer?” And here was the lioness.

“Because I’m not sure where she is, Nana. The day after I flew out here, Aivery took a flight home.”

“Was there a family emergency?”

“No.”

“Then why did she go home in the middle of the semester?”

“Because her sister delivered twins.”

“Ahhhhh!” She’d regained the confidence in her understanding. “So there was an emergency. She wanted to be there for their births or so after.”

“The babies were delivered two Fridays ago, days before she left.”

“What took her so long to leave? Classes?”

“Homecoming,” I delivered dryly. “She wanted to win.”

There was another stretch of silence.

“Ashton Spencer, you don’t sound particularly upbeat about Ms. Cooper.” *Because I’m not*, was what I wanted to say, but I said nothing at all. “Have you two discussed when you’ll be engaged? Have you settled on a date?”

I yanked on my ear. “No, Nana.”

“That could be the problem, Ashton Spencer. A young woman like Ms. Cooper knows her worth and that she shouldn’t have to wait for something as vital at this point in her life as marriage. You’re about to complete your studies and receive your degree in just a little over a month, surely you’re prepared for the next phase of your life: the real world.”

The next phase of my life would not be marriage or engagement, for that matter.

“Nana, I’m going to the *League* next year.”

“You mean the tryouts. You have to get in first, Ashton Spencer.”

“And I will. But yes, I have to successfully compete at the *Combine* first. That prospect alone requires my priority.”

“Ashton Spencer, you know chasing a career like that comes at a high risk. You’re a Spencer. You don’t have to take extreme risks to secure an established and secure financial future.”

My mother begged me years ago to tell my grandmother to fuck off with her demands on my life and trying to control it. Instead of being so blunt, I had come up with my own plan. To pursue self-generated wealth without having the carrot that was my father’s immense wealth dangling over my head.

“Yes, Nana.” I cleared the mucous from my throat. “I know.” Sitting up to stop the nervous springing of my ankles, I licked my lips before uttering, “They’re calling for my flight now. I need to board.”

“Okay, dear. Have a safe flight and be sure to give Ms. Cooper my warmest regards. Remind her that I’m just a call away.”

“Will do, Nana.”

“Good night, Ashton Spencer.”

I tapped to kill the line. Rampant thoughts from the past few days bounced around in my head: NormaJean theorizing my reasons for being with Aivery. Brick having told

me not to marry Aivery. Aivery sending a big “fuck you” back home with me to bury my cousin. Tori flying out to Jersey to support me. And finally, my Nana, maintaining her demand that I marry Aivery. The vibrant energy of each individual loud and competing in my head. The loudest energy was the one that showed support during my biggest loss to date.

I sat back in my seat, and allowed myself to be angry.



I was in my bedroom, freshly showered, and changing into basketball shorts and a *Panthers* t-shirt when the doorbell rang. Pulling the shirt down my chest, I gaited barefoot out to the front of my apartment. When passing by the digital clock on the wall, it read 9:43. My first thought was there being a major blunder at the *AOP* chapter house. I was the person to be called when a mess was made and they didn't know where to begin cleaning.

*Shit...*

I wasn't in the head space to be quarterbacking a fraternity-related fuck up. Yes, I loved my *AOP* brothers, but this school year, I was beyond that undergrad Greek life. To my surprise, I pulled the door back and found Aivery with her hands tucked into the pockets of her magenta leather motorcycle jacket. Her hair was up in a ponytail on top of her head, and her face was enhanced with just mascara and clear lip gloss. After a spell of silence, I leaned into the door, resting on my arm.

She murmured, “Al told me you'd be back tonight.” Rubbing her lips together, the line between her brows telling of her restlessness, Aivery's eyes fell. “Sherell says thanks again for the gifts you sent down for the twins.”

Internally, I nodded, having forgotten all about the package I arranged to have sent down to Aivery's sister when I learned she delivered the babies. Sherell sent an ecard expressing her gratitude. I guessed Aivery had just learned about it when she finally flew home to meet her new niece and nephew.

When I didn't answer, she sighed, "Can I come in?"

I pushed the door open and backed away to let her in. Aivery sauntered down the hall and into the living room with light steps and heavy shoulders. By the time I met her in there, she turned to me and repeated her lip-rubbing, stalling mechanism.

Her eyes were low. "I'm sorry."

I stood straight, crossing my arms and scratching my chin deep inside my beard. "For what?"

Her eyes met mine. "For not supporting you for starters, but for lots of shit."

"Like what?"

"Like..." She rolled her eyes shut. "Being all over the place emotionally. I spoke to my spiritual advisor, and she told me it made sense that after months of celibacy, I still have no true resolve in my life at this point." Her arms swung in the air, telling her frustration.

Aivery had been seeing this spiritual advisor since the spring when I learned of her secret. I had yet to buy in on the need of such a person or the validity of her services. Apparently, she was someone Aivery's mother had been using for years and thought she could help Aivery. The problem was I was Christian and brought up in a Pentecostal church no matter how much I failed to uphold those edicts. I was far from religious as of late, but still struggled with Aivery's beliefs and far from sold on whether the advice she received from this woman was beneficial.

"For starters," she continued. "I didn't respect your decision to break up. I still cannot. And then my frustration about the next chapter of my life. A year ago, we were clear it would be with you and we'd be engaged around graduation. You've been distant all semester long, and it's made me angry."

"What do you want, Aivery?"

"I want you, Ashton. I just need for it to be right."

“What’s right?”

“It’s something I feel, not what I can explain. That’s what I told my spiritual advisor. You’re not the same since I told you about Benjamin. I get it: it was wrong that I withheld that information from you. It was my fault you thought...what you thought.” That she was a virgin. Something that would have been so insignificant back then was now a huge red flag for me. “And I kick myself for it every day, it seems, but it changes nothing.” She turned to be square with me, forehead stretching. “What do you want, Ashton?”

That was an easy answer. “I can say unequivocally I don’t know what I want, at this point. Like you, our future together isn’t as clear as it was before last spring. But what I do feel clearly is this fucking dark shadow hovering over me. I can’t outrun it or eliminate it. Officially breaking it off with you and letting the campus know this time won’t cure it.” Even if we were single and everyone knew, it would still be awkward. We were that much of the *BSU* culture and would be until we graduated and left. Aivery and I had been together since our sophomore years. “This isn’t an easy fix.”

“Do you still love me, Ashton?” Her chest rose as she licked her lips, awaiting my answer.

Of course, I did. When I drowned out all the anger and silenced the cry of betrayal, there was a genuine love, concern, and desire for Aivery. The problem was those elements were all buried and the passion had been gone. I no longer craved her presence in my life. Was that temporary? I didn’t know. But I’d decided not to kill myself trying to explore it.

“If you don’t love me anymore, why have sex with me homecoming night?”

I scoffed. “Why did you have sex with *me* homecoming night?”

“Because I love you!” Her neck rolled. “You think I have sex without any feeling? I only give my body when my heart is involved!” The righteous indignation rose at an inopportune time.

“What type of feelings did you have for Pettiford?”

Aivery’s mouth snapped shut and her coated lashes clapped repetitively. As much as I enjoyed reigning as a world class asshole, this was a rare occasion when I wished I’d be defeated. And it was because of this very reaction that my concerns on the matter festered. Who Aivery gave her body to before being in a relationship with me was no more my business than all the women I’d fucked before our relationship was of hers. And let’s not excuse the enmity Aivery carried proudly for NormaJean. That all aside, the fact that she reserved so much information about her feelings for Ben wasn’t something I would give her shit about, but damn sure wouldn’t ignore either.

“And we’re still here.” Aivery’s small shoulders fell as she let go of what appeared to be a long, laborious breath.

“The same impasse,” I agreed with her.

Her head lifted. “How can we advance down the board?”

A slow twist of my neck with my eyes narrowing was my initial response. So much damage had been done. I had never known how quickly peace could be disrupted in a relationship—life for that matter. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be carrying this burden of awkwardness on my shoulders around campus.”

“Benjamin is not a *proble*—”

“He could have killed me!” Some days, I believe he’d actually tried.

And she knew this, said she had agreed on countless occasions. This had been the issue I couldn’t resolve in my mind. I couldn’t give a shit about not having her virginity. What concerned me was the omission, and what hurt was her being a confidant through the whole ordeal. Aivery and I were dating when I was pledging *AOP*. Just about the whole campus knew; my mother made sure they did.

We stood, paralyzed by silence, and breathless from anger. Aivery lifted her chin, the warring happening inside of



her maddeningly visible.

After countless moments, she sauntered over to me, wrapping herself around my one arm and torso and pushing her head into my chest. “I hope we can move past this,” she murmured. “All of us.”

Me, Aivery, and Benjamin Pettiford.

My head rolled back and I blinked hard and successively. I was speechless, had no more to say. She’d made her position painfully clear tonight. Aivery backed away, paying me a final pleading gaze; for what, I didn’t know.

“I know you’ve had a long day with the travel, and all. I’ll go so you can get some rest.” She waited a few seconds more for me to reply, then headed for the door.

When I heard it close, I ambled over to the peninsula separating the kitchen from the living and picked up the phone. I sent over a text.

**Me: You up.**

When she replied “*Kinda*,” I proceeded with explicit instructions.

Then I made a call from the landline. I listened until the automated system picked up for the *Charles Harrison Technology* building, I then hit the respective number to be redirected.

“Harrison Tech.” His country brogue answered. “How may I help you?”

“I need a favor.”

“Spence?”

“Yeah.”

“Ohhhh!” he cheeped his jolly guffaw. It was infectious on most days. Tonight, my agenda overrode all pleasantries. “Welcome back, broadie! You good?”

I glanced down the corridor to the front door. “I will be.” Snapping out of it, I focused on the task at hand. “Hey, remember that favor you owe me for using my apartment?”

Al texted, asking if he could bring a sophomore over while I was back home. I was fine with it so long as he didn't fuck in my bedroom.

“Ah, shit,” he droned. “Already, my G? But hold up! I cleaned up behind myself. We spot-cleaned the sofa, man.”



It was well after ten at night when I pulled up to the *Charles Harrison Technology* building. Before I came to a full stop, I saw Al, in his white lab jacket and goggles resting on his head, coming out of the side door where he agreed to meet me. But he was empty-handed.

I cut the engine on my *Ducati* and asked, “Where they at?”

“Listen,” he started. “These shits can get me in trouble if they're broken or lost. Why do you have to have them, man? You can get on this new social media platform the department is coding. It's going to be huge! *Shit.*” He wiped down his forehead just as if being inspired with another idea. “I can even give you a test run on the AI horse we're almost done with. It'll be able to walk the shores of the ocean when we're done with it.”

“I'm not interested in a robot horse. I want the remote helmets, Al,” the warning in my voice carried. Al loved initiating deals, then changing the rules of it after he got what he wanted. Tonight, he wouldn't win. “Are you saying no now?”

He took a deep breath, head hanging as he turned for the door. “No, man,” he muttered.

I waited while he reached inside with one leg extended out, holding the door of the building open. He then pulled out a rolling cart with two remote helmets atop.

“How long you gone be?” His lips were tight, head low. Al was heated.

“A couple of hours,” I advised while pulling one of the helmets over my head. I secured the other on the back of the

bike. “Thanks.” I offered a smile when kicking the stand to go.

“Spence.”

“Yup.”

“My academic career rests on you bringing these back unscathed.”

“And that’s what I shall do.”

He switched weight on his hips. “Why do you need these anyway? You taking Aiv out for a ride? Y’all don’t need these features.”

Last month, Al and I took our motorcycles out for a ride when he wanted to show off his department’s latest invention. It was a pair of remote helmets that allowed voice communication and had GPS navigation and a vast music library installed. I didn’t understand the phases of developing technology and how it went to patenting, but he made it clear the project was still being worked on. We enjoyed it the day we rode out, and tonight, I wanted to use it for a specific feature.

“I got my phone on me. Won’t be out all night.” Al would be at the lab sometimes until the sun rose, working and tweaking. I doubted if I was inconveniencing him past being an unauthorized user of the university’s technology products. I started the engine, tossed him a nod and took off.

Less than ten minutes later, I was in the back of *Greener* dormitory. My headlights caught long thick legs in tight, dark leggings and sexy, pointy-toe heels. She stood with her hands tucked in her black hoodie. Of course, she had to add her boyish twist. Even the tomboy made the mismatch effortlessly tantalizing. I cut the engine once in front of her and heaved the helmet from over my head.

“You pull up to *Greener* with that loud ass engine. Wow!” Her glossed lips parted wide.

I shrugged, arrogance being a comforting companion. My eyes roved over the building. “Yeah, and?” Tori rolled her eyes that seemed deeper tonight, captivating. “Do you know who Richard Theodore Greener was?”

She rolled her eyes again; fighting a grin. My chest expanded in knowing I'd created it. "School me again, Mr. *BSU*."

A small snicker fluttered in my belly. "Greener was the first African American to graduate from *Harvard*. And in case you didn't know, *Blakewood*'s mantra, on the low, is *fuck Harvard; we're better*. He went on to be a dean, I believe at *Howard*, which is noble, I guess. But our second mantra—on the low—is *fuck Howard; we're better*."

Laughter spurt from her lips. "You're too stupid to be so smart."

I nodded, accepting that summary of myself.

When she quieted, I gave a neck bow. "You're welcome."

"What?"

"Your texts from last Tuesday. You said thanks for the phone, clothes, and shoes without my prompting." I thumbed my chin. "Good girl." I couldn't help the groan in that last sentence.

Instantly, her features morphed into that of a ten-year-old's, her eyes falling away, cheeks descending. Gazing into the distance, she asked, "You came all the way over to *Greener* to be a smart ass?" Tori bit her bottom lip when her eyes returned to me.

"I came to say thank you, too."

"For what?"

I pulled the second helmet from the holding. "For blowing your flight allowance this semester on coming to check on my crying ass all the way in Jersey." That look of child-like innocence had returned, and I lost Tori's eyes again. "How did you know I'd need it?" I tried for a softer tone, not wanting to turn her off.

"When my Margaret died, I felt alone."

"And you didn't want that same state of mind for me?"

Tori peered at me deeply before shrugging. “You’ve been a mean asshole to me, but the friendliest and...” Her regard fell to her *Louboutins*. Then her eyes rolled up to me again. “...generous. I ain’t know what type of support you had. Didn’t know you had such a big family.”

“But you know I’ve got a girl.” My regard leveled with hers.

Her eyes rolled at that implication. Yes, the asshole reared its head, but I couldn’t help it. Something identifiable—something sadist in me delighted in my cruelty to her. It was similar to the satisfaction I took in gifting her shit. I enjoyed fucking with Tori McNabb.

I tossed my chin. “C’mon, Nabby-girl, let’s ride out.”

Her eyes blossomed. “Me? On there?”

I nodded, grinning mildly. “With me, yes.”

“I—I ain’t never been on no motorcycle, boy.”

I patted the seat. “Then I’ll be your first ride.” I smirked.

Tori paid a few seconds to consider it. When she stepped off the curb relief flowered in my belly. I assisted with the helmet until I felt it wouldn’t cover her head. When I lifted it off, her hand went to her ponytail. It was obstructing the helmet. Without permission, I yanked at her scrunchie until her woolen hair was released and fingered it to the nape of her neck. Tori stood stock still with parted lips as I had my way with it.

“There.” I smiled. “We made it work. Now come on.” I gestured behind me. “You can hang onto my shoulders like a girl, if you need to.” Grinning arrogantly, I faced ahead.

Tori didn’t need my shoulders. She positioned herself to swing her right leg over the bike. But she tried to avoid touching me when adjusting herself onto the seat. The space between our seats was narrow and she couldn’t ride holding onto it.

I reached behind, placing her heels on the respective metal bars. Next, I found her trembling hands and placed them on my waist. Then I tapped the button I recalled allowing us to communicate through the helmets.

“This is a contact sport, Nabby-girl. You’re gonna have to squeeze your thighs around me.”

The sharp inhale echoed through the speaker in my helmet made me snicker. I powered the engine and pushed off.

We were silent cruising through campus. Once outside, I picked up speed and traveled down a road I knew would get us to where I wanted to go: nowhere.

To kick off our journey, I asked, “Are you ready for Tuesday?”

Her second fight of the semester was here at *Blakewood* in two days.

“I’m ready in my sleep. I stay ready.”

“Good.” The sweet force of air felt amazing and the moon chased us. Sounds of the roaring engine competed with that of her breath in my ears, thanks to these helmets. “Now, tell me more about your Margaret.”

I felt Tori’s arms and thighs flash-squeeze around me before relaxing. After a spell, I heard soft, comforting, and intriguing swishes.

“She told me to never fall for long distance truck drivers or guys who ride motorcycles.”

I laughed. “Why?”

“My Margaret said they’re loners and not good companions. But men who ride motorcycles are worse.”

“Why?”

“Because they purposely choose a small vehicle with high speed to not carry baggage and to get out of dodge in a hot ass hurry. And they love with the passion they ride with, but the speed, too.”

I laughed. “You believe that shit?”

“I believe everything my crazy Margaret said. Yup.”

I hadn't laughed so hard and merrily in what seemed like forever. “So, you'll never date a long-distance truck driver or a dude with a motorcycle because of what she said?”

“Oh, I'll never date.”

*Shit...*

**-Then-**

*She still hasn't sent me a dime...*

I didn't want to think about that, but I had to. It was now safe to. I could now think about how I'd been away from home for close to three months without the money that was rightfully mine. My mother hadn't been returning my calls either. She did call my room and left a message two weeks ago when I was in class, saying not much of shit at all. But that was better than Cut. He hadn't called, and I seriously doubted he'd been in touch with Trisha to see how I was faring away at school.

*Fuck them!* screamed in my echoing head.

As the guy from *Walden University*, where my opponent was from, watched, Trisha cut the last roll of gauze with special scissors, ready to move on to the roll of tape. My wrist and knuckles were covered in white gauze while my palm and fingers were bare. The sight of a gauzed hand excited me deep within. I made sure to stretch my fingers out and extend my arm as it rested over a thick towel for cushion on the back of a folding chair I sat in.

"Feels good?" Trisha asked, wrapping the tape around.

I nodded. "Yeah, good."

"Your eyebrows are amazing." She winked, attention quickly returning to my hand. "Your hair looks good, too."

That made my mind go where it didn't belong. Ashton. Yesterday, he'd arranged for hair, nail, and pedicure appointments. And his generosity didn't end there. Apparently, I had an account similar to some of the bratty princesses on campus, whose parents loaded money on their *BSU* grooming accounts so they could stay prettied up. I felt it was silly, but



more than that, I thought it was something he liked. Like, girls with their hair, nails, and feet done. And because Ashton Spencer liked it, it foolishly intrigued me and I went along with. Just like I went along with the clothes, the cell phone bill, and him calling me up at ten o'clock on Sunday night, telling me what shoes to wear to meet him behind my dorm.

Was I stupid? Would I just do whatever this guy ask me to? Since when did I care what people thought of me to the degree of obeying them? I'd actually gotten my eyebrows waxed again yesterday. It was the most painful shit in life! But I did it. I sat through the pain, believing the end result would be pleasing someone. When I sat and considered my actions, I felt weak. My heart skipped a beat and belly flipped. And *this* was the mental place I didn't need to be in, much less before a fight.

"Thanks," I finally returned to Trisha.

I don't know why my attention went to the tall, thin white guy standing over us with crossed arms. He wore a *Walden University* windbreaker jacket and his long, straight blond brows almost reached to his eyes as they strained over my hand. Trisha said *Walden* was in Northern California. I wondered if he lived near a beach with how bronzed his skin was. My opponent tonight, Kerry Hill, was a senior at the university, and had apparently just one loss and three wins by way of knockout. She was taller than me with a longer reach. Luke had been giving me the same pointers all day.

"The deejay's gonna be up soon, Tori," Luke called from behind me.

"He's going to ask for your walkout music." Trisha's eyes lifted to me again.

I halfway cared in the moment. I was minutes away from another fight at *BSU*, and just like the first time I fought as a student, it brought to mind how everyone back in Jersey—north and south—had been going on with their lives without a thought of me, my feelings or wellbeing. Well, everyone except for Raj, who was sure to call to make sure I got back to school safely. My cousins back home never called because like

me, they couldn't afford the long-distance fees. I hadn't called them yet because it seemed like as soon as I got the phone, Ashton left for home, and I stupidly ran after him. And when I got back on campus, I had school work and training to get back to. But my mother and Uppercut, they couldn't give a damn.

*That's cold...*

The door opened and Collin stepped in with speed and wide eyes. When he looked at me as I faced him, I could see the excitement drain as he schooled his expression. Then he leaped over to Luke in just two steps, it seemed, and whispered something to him. Luke's head shot up and eyes grew just as wide as Collin's when he came into the room. Luke lifted his hat, his mouth hanging open as he wiggled it on his balding head.

"Done," Trisha announced then began collecting her equipment.

The guy from *Walden* inspected my hands, raising them in the air, one by one. Then they moved over to my gloves. I turned toward the mirror, locking eyes with myself, not realizing I'd be seeing her so soon. *The Banger*. She was staring back at me, promising to make me feel better. She scared me sometimes, because of how discreet yet forceful her return had always been.

Sounds of soft rustling tagged my attention. Collin was across the room, whispering to Trisha this time. She looked at me over her shoulder, appearing stuck similar to Luke. Then her attention went to Collin.

*Weird professional college humans...*

"Tori!" Luke was holding the door open as some light skinned dude leaned inside the doorway. I turned to fully face him. The loudest thing about his presence was a curly fade. "You have a song yet?"

My forehead stretched and face tightened at the guy. "You the deejay?" I was shocked.

A cheap smirk opened on his face then he slid his full, long body inside. “My bad, Tori.” He walked over to me. “I swear to god, on my unborn kids, I didn’t mean to hit you with that milkshake. I was just fuckin’ around and got caught up.”

It was the kid who had me fucked up in the cafeteria then got me fired when I was ready to beat his ass. He squatted down next to my chair apologetically. He was still almost my height as I sat. I stood, shooting him bullets while debating if I should punch him in the face. I was sure I could bruise his pretty, pale face with just one jab.

“Tori,” I recognized the warning in Trisha’s voice. Then I could feel her nearer.

“What’s your name?”

“Paul.” He swallowed, big eyes looking up to me. “DJ Paulie.”

I flashed my teeth, still considering if I should lay him out. It wouldn’t be hard to do, and especially from this vantage point.

“Is there going to be a problem?” The blond, tan from *Walden University* butted in, stepping close to me.

Trisha moved in behind him where she faced me, her expression was hard on *Walden*.

“Is your name Paul, too?” I asked him.

“Excuse me?” *Walden University* demanded.

“Unless your name is Paulie, then there is no problem.” I turned back to Paulie. “I hate Pauls, Paulie. Like real, real bad. You’re running up reasons for me to beat your corny, light skinned ass. Stay the fuck away from me.”

“Alright now, McNabb.” That time, Luke cautioned.

The kid, Paulie, stood to his feet, now towering me. He wasn’t flexing, though. He pouted. Maybe he was scared or his light skinned, curly head-ass feelings were—I didn’t know. But he didn’t want none of me, and that was for sure.

“Tell him what song and let that be the end of it, Tori,” Collin softly murmured.

I wouldn't rip my eyes from this *Paulie* human. He was a pussy and I could smell it. Most bullies were. Without a crowd of immature, and in this case, bratty ass *BSU* instigators, they didn't bark, much less bite.

“DMX. ‘*Ruff Ryders’ Anthem*,’” the words pushed through my gritted my teeth.

The sparkle from Trisha's proud smile in my peripheral—the one that narrowed her eyes—was the small piece of support I needed to go out and kick ass. Paulie moped out of the room and nosey-don't-know-how-to-mind-his-business-blond-tanned-human followed him.

We were ready. *The Banger* and me.



“Who's the ref tonight?” the woman from the admin office asked as we walked the halls.

“Miller Blue,” Collin answered.

“It's a shame how much of a shortage of Black, qualifying referees there is,” Trisha shared.

We made it to the closed doors of the main boxing gym. This would be my first fight here. Luke, his team of trainers, Trisha, Collin, and two administrators from the *Panthers* stood with me as we waited for Kerry Hill's rock theme music to stop so I could be announced. I got nervous before each fight. The nerves didn't stop tweaking until I stepped in the ring. It was survival mode in there. In my mind was a brewing storm. Even with this team behind me, I felt alone.

An eruption of boos spilled between the cracks of the door. My face fell.

“What the hell?” the man from *Panthers* administration croaked.

There were a few short whispers behind me, but I refused to turn around. It was rude, and overwhelming when I

was still trying to figure out what could this sound of amped up humans on the other side be. But when I heard the announcer begin my call with my record then my name, the loud shout that came after it blew my mind.

DMX could be heard asking, “*Where my dogs at?*” and then barking before the track began.

“Oh, shit!” someone cried behind me. I didn’t need to see them to know they were dancing. “This was my joint!”

“Oh my, god! Right?” Collin agreed.

I rolled my eyes to the doors. DMX was an old-school artist and these old heads were showing their age. The doors opened and after a few steps inside, I saw dozens of faces in the seats that were usually empty at my fights. The place wasn’t packed, but a wall and a half was covered with bodies from the floor to near the ceiling in the bleachers. The closer we walked to the ring, the clearer faces became.

Samantha and her science crew were in the third row jumping up and down. She held a huge yellow sign in her hands above her head that read, “*Kick ass, TM!*” There were rows of people above and beneath them rocking out to the music.

“Tori, Tori, Tori!” the chirpy shouting had me looking farther down that row to find ShawnNicole. She, too, was amped up, pumping her fist in the air, big head of curls swinging all over.

From her location, Andrea and Karmen could be located. Andrea clapped with a partial smile while Karmen watched me motionless on her feet. I sensed her before my eyes carried over to Aivery. Her one arm folded over her little waist while the other fingered the pearls on her costume necklace. She scowled my way with her nude colored lips slightly lifted. And of course, she had to be kissed to Ashton’s lengthy frame. I swear, they were “on sight” perfect. Her sandy-bronzed skin next to his mocha always appealed to me. Wrong, but true. I never made trouble with my brown skin, but I could see beauty in hers when it came to Ashton.

*Yup, I'm a weird human...*

When my eyes finally braved him, Ashton saluted me with his hand to his forehead and a hint of a bow. When he winked at me, I whipped my head away.

He'd done this. Ashton, being the cool kid on campus, got his cool gang of friends and crew of bratty humans to come to my fight. Unbelievable. I didn't know if I should be angry or annoyingly grateful. I'd just made it to the steps of the ring. Once I crossed the ropes, I heard none of the spectators.

*The Banger* saw her threat.

Kerry Hill.



*Ashton*

*The asshole...*

That was my first thought when DJ Paulie dropped DMX's interlude. When I heard "Where my dogs at?" it took crazy discipline to not bust out laughing. An asshole. Tori had some of it in her, I knew it. What I didn't know was all that made up the strange bird.

*Or why her strange ass has me so fucking fascinated...*

When "*Ruff Ryder's Anthem*" kicked off, the small crowd gathered went mad. Al rapped the lyrics, line for line, above me. Dre had to be the loudest. It took the least amount of convincing to get him here tonight. The girls were dancing, singing what little they knew of the lyrics—everyone except for Aivery. She didn't want to be here, and recommended we go bowling. But the majority of the group voted on coming to see what Tori had been invited to *BSU* to do. I knew she had work and was happy as shit they were about to see, too.

When I put out the call for everyone to show tonight, I didn't consider Reggie Laws and other guys from men's boxing to show. Had my call to action been that powerful? Was Tori right in her assumption of me being the cool kid on

campus? Whatever the hell it was, Tori's ass had better make this fight entertaining or there was no way I'd be able to pull this off again.

The referee called them to the center of the ring for the rules. I recognized the nasty scowl Tori shot the girl. Just when I thought this boxing shit was staged, I learned that Tori may very well be ready to knock me or anyone else who annoyed her the fuck out because we received the same glare.

The girl, Kerry Hill, punched Tori's gloves harder than necessary when it was supposed to be a gesture of agreement. The crowd noticed and reacted, too, with boos. One thing Tori had going for her tonight was she was at an all-Black university where white superiority was frowned upon. So, if boo-ing and heckling could break Hill's spirit, we'd assist with that.

When the bell rang and they charged each other, knots formed in my stomach as though I had money riding on this. I sat down then found myself standing almost right away.

"Are you fucking serious?" Aivery's country twang made *'serious'* sound like *'series,'* she was that irritated.

Andrea laughed, flipping her braids over her shoulder. "Girl, this is a guy thing. You know..." She punched the air to explain. "We'll never understand. We're women." She waved off the notion.

When they hi-fived each other with clattering laughter, I wanted to remind her Tori wasn't a guy, but wasn't interested in taking on that conversation. I ignored them and was rewarded when Tori blocked a punch. This girl, Kerry Hill, was taller and her arms seemed longer than Tori's. Hill swung on Tori twice and missed, and I found my fists clenching. Then Hill swung again, and this time, landed on Tori's shoulder. That's when it was clear to me there was power behind her punches.

"Fuck her up, *Panther!*" Dre shouted so loud, he captured my attention as well as Aivery, Karmen, and Andrea's.

We all glanced down the opposite end of the row, startled by his abrupt volume. He stood, clapping. That surprised me. Dre and Al had been laying off of Tori, but I didn't know they accepted her as our own. I had no idea why I gave a fuck, but I approved.

Aivery rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth. "I wished her nerdy, ugly ass would just fuck him so he could move on."

Andrea gasped. "Who?"

"Dre and that science bitch who dorms with the dog." She used her forehead to gesture to the ring.

"He wants that white bitch?" Karmen shrilled, slapping the *Gucci* bag in her lap.

"You can't tell?" Aivery's hair swung in the air when she turned her way. "It's been almost as disgusting as Ashton pitying the dog this semester so she could get some friends." She scoffed. "You know none of these people would be here if it weren't for Ashton."

Andrea didn't look very comfortable all of a sudden as she fingered the end of one of her braids, but Karmen snickered, something I knew was disingenuous and her default response to whatever her mean-girl ringleader said or did. I somehow caught eyes with ShawnNicole, whose face was tight on her friend, Aivery, even behind her oversized glasses before rolling her eyes back to the ring. I did the same and saw Tori had still been maintaining her focused posture, alertness and vigilance.

Hill had been taking lots of heavy swings, but Tori only ate a few. Tori, on the other hand, attempted less punches, but was more accurate with her landings. She was composed and kept her head low. Out of nowhere, Tori landed a left hook Hill didn't see coming. Shit. Neither did I. It sent Hill's head back past her shoulders then her torso followed, but she didn't fall. Someone from Tori's corner yelped harshly. I knew it was Luke Brown, her head trainer. It sounded as though he was scolding her. Hill threw another punch, a weaker one, likely still dazed by Tori's blow, then the bell tolled.



After the end of the first round, I made myself sit. But I watched Luke leap into the ring and be in Tori's face the minute her ass hit the stool that was placed there for her by his assistant. I couldn't hear what he was telling her, but could easily decipher it wasn't praise. He pointed in her face as he bled at her, but not in a violent manner. Tori sat calm through it all, controlling her breathing and accepting the water Trisha Gaskin fed her. She nodded to Luke while white boy Collin patted her face with a towel.

The possibility of Tori not being human crossed my mind as I watched her so focused and insulated by a force I couldn't see or hear, but could certainly feel. Was this force that shield she walked with every day in her life to protect her against people like Aivery, Karmen, Andrea, and...me? There had to be a correlation. Did that force help her survive day to day, walking with holes in her sneakers, a busted wig, and tattered book bag on a historically prestigious campus? Was it the same that gave her the balls to fly all the way out to Jersey for the funeral of a dude she didn't know and wear a party dress just to be sure I was not alone?

The bell rang and Tori and Hill met in the center. For the first few minutes, Kerry resumed her successions of punches. The time seemed to have dragged, waiting for something to happen in Tori's favor: land a punch—*shit, throw more punches!* I found myself standing, more anxious than was healthy. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Aivery arrowing the nastiest scowl, but I was too tense, too caught up in anxiousness to care or try to appear affected by it.

Kerry's big ass managed to walk Tori into a corner, throwing body blows Tori bobbed and weaved through. It wasn't looking good—or at least, feeling good to watch.

“*Now, finish her!*” Luke yelled through his curled hands.

Within seconds, Tori wiggled her way out of the corner and was near the center of the ring. She kept her face down and fists close to her cheeks as she approached Hill. Not giving her a minute to prepare, Tori popped her, delivering short jabs to her face. They didn't seem to have much distance

in them, but were obviously impactful because Hill's head popped back, behind her shoulders each time, and her eyes rolled in the same direction.

“Tap dance on that bitch, Tori!” ShawnNicole screamed.

Standing on her feet, fists balled tight and face screwed, she seemed as captivated as I was. Several people on my side did. Hill had yet to gain her stance since boxing Tori into the corner. Tori let up, giving Hill time to gather her bearings. When Hill swung a right cross, Tori blocked it and hit her with an uppercut. Hill was the big tree that fell in the forest, her descension was slow and breathtaking. It wasn't until she hit the floor that she woke up. The impact alarmed her. But she was done. She struggled to balance herself. *Holy shit...* The referee jumped in, observed her eyes then called the fight. Tori knocked Hill out and won.

Not only did she win, she whooped old girl's ass! But it wasn't about a fight of rage. I'd seen countless street fights, had been in them, and some with my cousins. There's a certain level of anger and experience needed to engage physically, and even then, you're not guaranteed to walk away the victor. But what Tori just did required natural skill and studied technique, conditioning, preparation and calm. *Fuck*. I was aroused to discover this...mastery in the tomboy.

DJ Paulie kept the “dog” theme going with “*Get at Me Dog*.” It was done in good spirits, which was evident by his energy at the turntable. His excitement mirrored everyone around the gym with the exception of Hill's team and the judges, who had to be neutral. Fist pumps and hoots was the theme of this victory. I don't think anyone cared about rocking out to another old-school track. Good music was good music and *Panthers* were versed in celebrating victories.

As the referee held Tori's gloved hand in the air around the ring, I murmured to myself, “You're a real *Panther* now, Nabby-girl.”

I'd have to explain that to her tomorrow after our morning run.



When I reached the end of the last lap, my legs felt like logs, blood rushed my veins all over my body. And damn, did it feel amazing. I walked over to my bag and pulled out a towel to wipe my head and face. As I fought to control my breathing, I heard Tori come to a stop behind me. Her speed had improved over the past six weeks. She went straight to her water bottle and ran it over her dripping forehead.

“Getting better, kid.” I smiled at her.

Tori turned away to drink her water. Immediately, I felt the cold vibes. Admittedly, I didn’t talk much when we came out here at the crack of dawn’s ass to run. I was still getting used to having someone with me. I’d been running alone in the mornings since my sophomore year when the stress became overwhelming while pledging with Benjamin Pettiford as my Dean of Pledge. Although we had to be on-call twenty-four-seven, I was still able to find the time to run. Alone. Living under a bunch of spirit-broken dudes with one fleeting-by-the-task—sometimes seemingly impossible—goal for the semester had been grueling. The running alone and in obscure places where no one could find me helped balance my sanity.

But some days, I couldn’t shut Tori up after runs—well, in Tori’s unique way of being garrulous. She didn’t exactly sluice words at rapid-fire pace, but she had a way of asking questions in a manner totally contradictory to her normal standoffish manner. Today wasn’t a day I’d expect reticence.

“How did you do on that algebra quiz?” I tested out my theory.

She’d just sucked in water, and I waited for her to swallow it. “B plus.”

“That the best you could do?”

She shook her head, drinking more. “Didn’t have time to study much when I got back from Jersey. Had to go right into training for my fight.”

She picked up her jacket and towel to leave, effectively ending our time together. So, I followed suit. I decided she was in a mood and I'd leave her there. It was weird to me. When I won games, I was on an impenetrable high until the next game. But that was me. Not all athletes were built the same.

We tottered toward the entrance of the track park, her body displaying the fatigue mine endured. "I guess I'll see you later when you come get this massage." I couldn't shake my mirth.

I had practice in twenty minutes then a massage to help loosen up for my game tomorrow against *Southern University Jaguars*.

"No." That one syllable, one word answer was evidentiary of what I'd sensed about her mood.

It fucking nipped at me. My mind was subconsciously reeling from that bite of rejection to even my playfulness, but not enough for me to let off of her. We slowed just outside of the gate, prepared to go our separate ways.

"You know, one of these days you're gonna tell me what your hang-up with getting massages is." I came to a full stop, gazing her way. "I'm believe that's a requirement in boxing." In fact, I was sure it was.

Tori never stopped, and actually continued in the opposite direction, walking backwards. "*That* would require me telling you what I've got against people touching me, period. I don't like being touched."

And with that, she turned and took off. Scoffing off the sting in that, I headed for the football field. Tori had class, and I had practice.



"Spence..." I felt a nudge on my back that was out of deep tissue sequence. "Spence."

I glanced up from the padded donut face cradle, eyes brushing against the big ass clock on the wall unintentionally

and registered it was just after two o'clock. My head felt groggy from falling asleep on the table. It wasn't the first time, but today, Coach Green kicked our asses in practice.

My tight, blinking eyes lifted to the trainer, Devon, and he tossed his head toward the door. When my regard followed, Tori's frame, curled into the doorframe came into view, filling more than three quarters of its height. I rubbed my eyes and was able to see she'd changed into slim-fitted jeans, a long-sleeved *Panthers* t-shirt, and combat boots. My defogging brain slowly registering I'd last seen her damn near eight hours ago. I'd been showered, but hadn't dressed yet past my boxers.

"Everything okay?" I hated the gruff in my voice.

It made me feel disoriented and vulnerable. I had class in an hour, an exam no less. *But Tori...* She carried a diametrically different energy than this morning. There was a smile in her eyes and one begging to lift on her tight, glossed lips. Her head was against the door with comfort, and I couldn't see her hands that were behind her curvy frame.

Her eyes swiped against Devon, who'd been waiting.

He cleared his throat. "I'm actually done and need to make a call to my daughter's school before the teacher's lunch is over. When I'm finished, I'll come back to stretch you."

I nodded, lifting to rest my elbows on the table. Tori shifted closer inside the room as Devon moved to leave, closing the door behind. She bit her lip, dipping to grab the rolling stool. After squatting on it, she pushed off her feet to scoot toward me. She was close. Smiling.

My face tightened. "What's up?" I questioned her giddiness.

"I got my paper grade."

"Paper?"

"Will you wake up?" She giggled. Tori was so close, I could smell her hair products and the bubble gum she chewed. "My paper on George Lester Jackson, stupid!"

My eyes closed in realization. “Oh!” When they opened, she was handing me the stapled stack of papers. Feeling too relaxed, I sat up to face her, my legs hanging from the table. When I thought she’d back away to give me the space I assumed—at least—*she* required, I was met with an eager Tori. Her eyes were big, expectant. “Let me see.” I snatched the papers from her hand, for some reason, wanting the nasty vibes from her I was used to.

It was large and legible in the top right-hand corner. 92 A-. I thumbed through the papers, paying cursory glances to the red ink underlines and notes left by Professor Brown. Most of them were of Tori’s lack of usage of punctuation. She missed quite a few comma opportunities and even included one or two unnecessary exclamation points. Her passion for parts of the piece had slipped. This was an informative piece, Tori should have been neutral.

I lowered the paper to peer down at her. “Yo, you know the purpose of a comma—”

My abs lurched and upper body jerked back at the feel of her hand on my dick. Shocked as fuck, my wide eyes shot down at Tori. Her face was vacant, lips pressed together, rubbing against her teeth as she fondled me. My cock immediately registered shit my brain couldn’t fathom so quickly. Her hands were manipulative, *conversant* as they worked inside the obtuse opening in the front of my boxers. My dick twitched at the skin on skin contact.

The tent in my boxer made me uncomfortable with Tori in the same purview. There was no room inside the cotton for my dick and her hand. But she found a way to grip the base of me and stroke with intense pressure. Gripping with weight from not being able to move or breathe, I was confused by the sight before me. Tori fucking McNabb used her other hand to pull at the elastic of my waist and tug it back to allow my cock to plop out.

*Fuck...*

I didn’t recognize the most intimate part of myself. The veiny swelling of my shaft, the smoothness of my engorged

head—none of it was familiar in her presence. Tori managed her hand from the opening and transferred the manipulated touch to beneath the bulb of me. She used her index finger and thumb to create a ring of pleasure, twisting around me, unfurling a delicious rhythm. I was no longer shocked by the audacity of her touch. This was the magic of a skill set there was no fucking way Tori fucking McNabb could possess. She didn't even like being touched, per her claim.

Her head lifted, eyes capturing my tight gaze, and I was able to identify a transitory presence of the girl I knew. She disappeared just as quickly, and then Tori's blank expression returned. There was a surreal presence in the small room. The chemistry I'd cultivated with this girl had been absent, and all that was present from her was her shell. Intrigued as fuck, I gave in to the heavy energy filling the room.

My jaw dropped as her glossed lips parted and she leaned in with her head, protracting her tongue to run it up the underside of my throbbing dick. Between her handmade ring beneath my swollen head and the pressure from the tip of her tongue, my neck gave out and my head rolled backward. Muscles in my thighs contracted in sync with her movements as she did it over and over again.

When Tori let go of me, my eyes burst open and head inclined in just enough time to see her head near me and mouth slip over the head of my cock. Her tongue twirled around, and it pained me not to touch her. I didn't do this. It had been years since I'd let a woman blow my damn mind without orchestrating it. Having one explore me with exceptional skill hadn't happened since I was a kid, encountering one of the most recognizable names in Black porn. But even NormaJean let me touch, gave me permission to express my pleasure.

I'd gripped heads with a fast passion to the end game, kissed pussies I didn't care to see the next day, but this was different. This was Tori fucking McNabb and I dare not lay a goddamn finger on her. Without warning, I knew there'd be ramifications. It was an unnamed awareness of her handicap I

couldn't understand. Why had it captivated me in these short months? The handicap I wanted to exasperate and feed, but not reveal. It was that unnamed handicap that made me want to infuriate *and* soothe this girl.

And right now, her busy tongue and mouth and hands jerking my dick, like the perverted innocence she possessed, made me want to see her this determined for my pleasure while tears fell from her eyes and snot tracked down her face. I wanted Tori to see herself in the mirror, emptied of everything within but my heavy cock pounding her pussy that sobbed as hard as her face.

I tried squeezing my eyes closed to the imagery. They were too potent and vastly fucking inappropriate. It didn't matter that Tori fucking McNabb had both of her hands slipping over the undulating, throbbing veins while sucking on my warming head. I couldn't do it. In all good processes of my brain, I could not connect the Tori I knew with the one blowing my mind as she handled my cock like a fucking maven.

But in due time, we had to reconcile everything. When my fucking belly flipped, feet curled, and goddamn balls heaved, I had to accept the action of my cum spurting in her busy mouth. And even then, she tipped her hand of skills by adjusting the pressure and jerking pace as I did. Enduring the beautiful, noisy chaos in my mind, I prepared for Tori to release her mouth from me. She had to know I'd started busting by now.

*She didn't...*

Fucking.

KaToria.

McNabb.

Swallowed.

Every.

Fucking.

Drop.



Of.

Me.

Feeling warm sensations all over from post-orgasmic waves, I tried catching my damn breath, struggling to do it quietly. When I was able to open my eyes again, Tori's nostrils flashed wide as she tried catching hers, too. Swollen lips and pooled eyes, the scary ass posing Tori I knew had reappeared. Did she regret it this soon? Did she not expect for me to lose my goddamn mind like this when she sucked me like she did?

The fear of her coyness returning propelled my anger. I grabbed her savagely by the jaw and shifted until our noses were mere inches apart.

“*Wha*—why did you do that?”

Tori's forehead strained, her breathing grew choppy. Then her nose lifted as though she'd cry any second. “To say thank you,” she whispered.

I growled, fucking angry beyond comprehension. “For what?”

She heaved hard, struggling to control her lungs. “For the fight...the paper...” Her eyes finally closed. “For everything.”

My chest fucking opened to painful degrees, exposed to her torture, her gratitude, and the sneaky and unnamed facet of her manipulation. The apology for clowning her, the restitutions of my time, money—creativity of her fake date—the balmy break in grieving from her unexpected presence at the funeral. All of it. My mouth dropped along with every muscle in my face as realization hit. I'd been finessed...by a goddamned tomboy.

I didn't know if I should feel betrayed or delighted and throw her over this table and fuck the shit out of her Machiavellian ass. Before I could decide, Tori was stuffing my deflated dick beneath the elastic of my waist and pushing off the stool to leap to the corner, where she picked up my charging *Blackberry*.

“Yeah, ma,” she uttered. “When?”

Just as I was about ask her what the fuck was she doing, a blast of air blew over me.

“I forgot my watch.” Devon reached across the foot of the bed. “You ready?” he asked standing straight as he strapped it on.

My head swung to Tori, who squatted on the floor, carrying on a fake conversation with her mother while facing the wall. My mind spun, confusion in every corner of it.

“Okay. I gotta go,” she urged. “I’m on Ashton’s phone and his trainer needs him.”

My eyes squeezed closed and face collapsed as I figured out her smooth cover. Tori stood, grabbed her paper, and glided toward the door. “Thanks for this, Spence.” *Spence?* She uttered the name like she was a teammate. “I’ll let you know about our meeting in the library next week. May have to cancel.” And she was out.

That was it. The door closed, leaving me alone with a clueless ass Devon, and a reeling mind.

Just like her writing paper, Tori didn’t express commas to pause and leave room for proper perception. There were no context cues...no hints of her attraction to me or experience with sex. Hell, I’d started to believe she had no sexuality. But she could sure shut shit down...in the ring, a fucking fantasy.

That *those* were her periods. Where she ended things.



**-Now-**

Tori

“I don’t know about these.” I point to the boxing trunks on the *iPad* screen. “I’m good with the color scheme, but purple in this material is too risky. Let’s go back to the magenta ones again,” I explain to my assistant, who’s showing me submissions from a seamstress, pitching her designs for

my next fight. “Maybe I’m not feeling the material. It’s too shiny.”

“Isn’t this her second submission?” Elle asks just as she catches the attention of a passing waiter outside of our private room. “We have, at least, a dozen more designers who are waiting to present their work.”

She’s snappy. This upcoming fight is special to me, so I’m doing something I’ve never done with so many things, including encouraging up and coming fashion designers to submit for my boxing ensemble for the fight. Elle hates that this is just another thing on my plate pre-training. Me being anxious as fuck since she stopped by my place last night to go over my training travel lends itself to her snappiness, too.

“My favorite is *The Sewing Heir*. Her joints are fire!” Lidia, my assistant, is too excited to share.

“I know.” I sigh, placing my chin on my standing hand over the table. “But she was the first to send her designs in, and I don’t want to miss anyone because we’re blown away by the very first submission.”

The waiter approaches the table with quick speed, taking long lunges. “How can I help you, ma’am?”

“Prosecco for me,” Elle orders then looks my way. “A thumb of *Mauve*?” I shake my head. My nerves are too bad for robust brandy. “Two thumbs of *Mauve* for her. Pronto,” she demands.

Before I can speak, he takes off in double the speed he came in on.

“I’m going to ask this designer about the material and will upload more submissions for you,” Lidia shares before she stands from the table, checking her wrist for the time.

I nod my head, dismissing her. It feels like a pack of elephants are dancing on my belly; I’m so goddamn nervous. I lick my lips, and while shifting in my chair, my attention subconsciously moves toward Elle.

When she begins chewing on the inside of her mouth, tooting her orange matte lips and flaring her nostrils, I admit,

“I think I should sit this one out.”

“You can’t,” she returns even faster. Then Elle leans into the table. “Why the fuck are you so nervous about this? You’ve done dozens of interviews since being signed to *Love in Action*, possibly more before then. This is the *Porsche* of all print opportunities here, and you’ve got a case of the fucking jitters I can’t deal with.”

*Porsche...*

My eyes close at the memory of that brand of vehicle. It was the start of my deception at *Blakewood State University*.

Then my eyes pop open. “Elle.”

Her brows meet. “What?”

“Didn’t you say you were working on that mouth of yours?”

“I did.” She nods. “Just like you said you’d do this interview with *Sports Illustrated*.”

My face twists in agitation similar to the tumbling in my belly. “Don’t be an insensitive ass, Elle.”

“I’m trying not to be, but the little history you shared with this guy was thirteen years ago. You’re fucking Tori McNabb now. Who gives a shit if he’s the slightest bit displeased with a decision you made to partner with a major brand or one to turn down a fight with a particular fighter who wanted an opportunity at you? You’ve made an impactful career without a degree from *the Blakewood State*.” She gestures “pompous” with her hands and neck. “You’re a success story, which is why your paths are crossing all these years later.” She drops her chin and shakes her head. “He’s here to put it in print—*holy shit*.” Her eyes go beyond my head. “Is that him?”

Unable to feel my stomach in the span of one point three seconds, I turn to gaze over my shoulder. Ashton’s promenading toward us with his head low. And even without the benefit of seeing his face, I detect hair on his face as he yanks on his left ear. Warmth blooms in my belly from the familiarity of that one trait of his after all these years. From

my vantage point, I can tell he's thinned out considerably. I turn to face the table again in search of the *Mauve* that has not been delivered to the table yet. Then I begin a countdown in my head.

10...9...8...7...6...5...4...

“KaToria.” As unlikely as it is for his voice to have changed, it sounds velvetier and too versed with my full first name.

Hesitantly, I lift my gaze to meet him and find his teeth beautifully ivory hued, and full lips shaped with sensual tokens of yester-year.

“Ashton?”

He's dressed casually in jeans, a simple white t-shirt, cognac suede jacket, and crisp black leather *Bred 9s*. Yup. Impossible, but Ashton does seem...taller, athletically slimmer, and definitely more mature in the face—*hell*...his overall appearance screams *grown ass man*. His hair, still cut low but a thick, dark, sheen of carpet-like waves at the top of his head. That detail had not changed about him. My hands pushing through the silky breadth of his scalp is still one of my most sensuous acts today.

“Mouth.” Elle chirps so crisp yet quickly, I almost miss the heads up.

I snap my mouth shut and swallow hard.

Ashton chuckles darkly as his head tilts to the side. “Were you expecting someone else?” His voice is as compact and controlled as I remembered it—actually, I'd forgotten all about until seconds ago. The same baritone that wrapped around my brain and squeezed years ago, slithered down my spine, pumping juices between my legs. The most dangerous part of that magical masculine voice is that it didn't bypass my young heart. “This is our appointed meeting time and place, isn't it?”

“Of course, it is,” Elle responds as she stands and crosses over me to reach Ashton. She extends her hand. “Elle Hunter.”

“Nice to finally make your acquaintance, Elle.” He accepts, swallowing her pale hand in his mocha grip. “Your reputation more than precedes you and Mr. Hunter. You’ve been building a rapid, all-encompassing empire. Much respect to you.”

Elle’s hazel irises glimmer as she peers my way. They communicate so much and scream *impressed*. “Thanks,” she snorts, taken by Mr. *BSU* already. It’s pathetic and, I thought, impossible for a worldly woman like Elle. But this isn’t just any Joe. The Ashton I thought I knew at eighteen/nineteen years old was highly cerebral and rugged at the same time. He preferred you to believe his urban persona over his deeply intellectual abilities. Now, at thirty-one years old, I can appreciate that interchangeability. “We’re certainly trying to make our mark on branding.” She ends that small exchange with her killer signature smile, which Ashton returns.

My lungs hitch, and Ashton’s attention returns to me. His head tilts again and eyes narrow, and I could feel heated reproach in them. When my gaze shifts to Elle, there is something similar in her posture, too.

*They’re standing...*

I push back from the table, fighting for a cool veneer. My hands meet at my pelvis line as I smile painfully with closed lips. His scent meets me before I stop before him. *God, I thought this would be easier than what my fears created.* But I have to remain cool. I’m not that young, uncultured, insecure girl he knew and hurt. I’m now a woman who’s traveled the world and made a name for myself through my talent. I have more words in my arsenal to articulate myself, and more sense than to be emotionless when up against sophisticated, gregarious energy such as his. I can do this.

Ashton’s hand extends to me, eyes sparkling with censure I’ve forgotten I was able to feel from him. “It’s good to see you. Thanks for agreeing to meet with me.”

I nod, eyes blinking fast then meet his big, warm palm. “Glad you had the time.”

His head tilts even more and eyes narrow slightly smaller, but a ghosted smile appears, too. “Is that right?”

Pulling in a deep breath, I assured, “It is.” I point behind me. “Please. Have a seat.”

The waiter returns with the drinks, and as he loads the table with them, I turn to Elle.

“Hey,” I start. “I think I’m going to take this one alone. Is that okay with you?”

It’s a stupid question. I invited her here to be an emotional shield or blanket against whatever Ashton is. Suddenly, I don’t want protection or assistance with him. I need clarity for the both of us if we’re going to be sharing time in the near future. He needs to know the adult Tori; fuck the child. He betrayed her. And I’m sure Elle being here is giving a perceptive Ashton Spencer *old Tori from BSU* vibes.

Elle’s eyes flick between Ashton and me, clearly staggered by my sudden change in agenda. “*Su-sure!*” she chirps. She looks around the table locating her belongings, then begins collecting them. “I’m almost positive Jackson’s in the area, closing on a deal.” She winks, standing with her deep red *Hermès Birkin* bag hanging from her lower arm. “There’s nothing like a Hunter threesome.” She winks then fastens her attention to me. “Call me later about those designs. I’d like to know which one you go with so I can have our people vet them properly.”

I nod, grateful for her seamless reaction to my impulsive decision. I watch her strut off in five-inch *Giuseppe Zanottis* before I’m able to bring myself to look Ashton Spencer in the face. And my... He’s devilishly handsome, and is quite aware of it, I can see.

“You look great, Tori.” His compliment doesn’t exactly match his expression. That makes it hard to believe him.

I pull in a heap of air through my nose, surprised by his words. Empty of my own, I offer, “Thanks,” which is accompanied by a *ready for press* smile. Then my brain jumps into gear. “I appreciate that.” I swallow. “My assistant says we

don't start the interview for another week or so. Why are we meeting now?"

"I'm not sure if you've been made aware that my associate, Tyler Thomas, was supposed to do this *S.I.* piece, but unfortunately can no longer meet the obligation."

Nodding, I share, "Yes, I've been told."

"And he's asked me to step in as his proxy."

"Yes." I struggle with my eye focus. I want to look at him to study each of his facial features and gaze away as to not care in equal measures. "My team has made me aware. I've okayed it."

"Have you?" Ashton doesn't sound too sure of my answer.

"Yup. I have." Then something hits me. "Do you have a problem with doing it?"

For the first time, it's Ashton's eyes that falter and he doesn't answer right away. "Which is yours?" My eyes follow his to the table confused. "The drinks."

*Oh!*

"I didn't order either." *Honestly.* "Elle did."

Ashton goes for the brandy glass and takes a sip. He nods in approval. "*Mauve.*" He guesses correctly. Or maybe he knows. Ashton was damn near born a millionaire. If he's a brandy drinker, of course, he'd know *Mauve*. It's been the fastest growing brand of quality brandy for years now. I've even shared a glass with Barack and Michelle Obama last fall in their home in Illinois. "I guess I shouldn't expect anything less from your aristocratic circle."

My eyes burst wide. "Aristocratic?" That's it. "Let me tell you something, Ashton Spencer. If we're going to do this, there's a very important key to my life you need to know."

A smirk opens on his face. "What's that?"

Blood rushes in my ears and my body is vibrating from a surge of anger I can't contain. "I'm not that young broken



girl from Millville, New Jersey, who couldn't articulate or express herself. I'm not poor, pitiful, needy, and lacking grace and manners. No. I'm a wealthy, talented woman, who used the little she was left after all the shit I've been through as a child and young adult to set a course of success that will allow for generational wealth for the women coming behind me. I give to countless charities and even have a longstanding and wide-reaching organization myself that's creating more Tories. I am whole, strong, and unbreakable."

I stab the white tablecloth, being sure to measure my volume. "I will not allow anyone—including you—to reduce me to what they think they know of me because of my humble beginnings; not without crushing you first." I pointed to the *Mauve*. "Shit. I have mutual friends with the man who owns that company. I won't apologize for or cower away from what I've made of myself."

Emotionless, Ashton reaches for the glass and gulps it all back. I follow the process of his swallowing by sight and sound. He leans into the table, placing his elbows on either side of the empty glass. "I'm a journalist, KaToria." I know this. It's why he's sharing the same air as me right now. Notwithstanding my curiosity about his career choice. Ashton Spencer's only dream was to be in the *League*, being the new Tariq Evans. Jordan Johnson has taken that role, leaving Ashton Spencer unheard of. "It's my job to research and dig and learn and pour over countless documentation to draw conclusions."

"And."

"And when I tentatively accepted the assignment from Thomas, I did a cursory search of your career's timeline, and learned it strengthened not quite ten years ago when you resumed fighting under your former trainer, Kevin "Uppercut" Michaels, and began sweeping titles in the state until you went regional in the same manner. I read about when you left super welterweight for middleweight, then back to super welterweight then up to super middleweight—strange pattern, but I know about it.

“I researched your small battle with Uppercut when you decided to break away from his tutelage for the big league. He publicly resented you for it for over a year until his son, world renowned Ragee, arranged for a private talk of peace between the two of you, at which time you gave him an unprecedented title on your newly formed team with *Love In Action* with an undisclosed five-year term salary. A pacifying agreement I wonder if his son recommended, just like he suggested you going over to the Hunter’s burgeoning sports agency in the first place, by the way.”

I suck in a breath at his accuracy, and Ashton tosses me a wink to let me know he knew for sure the inner-workings of my organization.

“We can fill in the blanks and innuendos later down the line,” he continued. “Right now...right here...today, I’d like to demonstrate my motives in taking on the assignment for Thomas. I’m not here for any other reason than to gather information about the Tori of yesterday and her journey to the Black ass, bad ass Tori McNabb that has acquired multiple world championship belts in several weight classes, and is currently reigning as the undisputed female middleweight champion of the world.”

He motions for the attention of the waiter and orders another glass of *Mauve* without the use of words. Then his attention returns to me and Ashton chuckles.

“What?”

This is definitely one of those menacing snickers I’d been the recipient of too many times in my *BSU* days. Just when I’ve lowered my guard, he gives me reason to not be so trusting again, another action of his I recall so vividly. Ashton gave generously and took my dignity without shame or conscience.

“It’s just that after all these years since remedial Basic Writing, Professor Brown pegged you precisely.”

“How?”

“You haven’t mastered the art of using commas versus periods.”

I vaguely recalled him admonishing me about this years ago. “What does that mean?” My face is tight with contempt.

“You’re jumping to a faulty conclusion and are prepared to end a thing prematurely. You think my interest here is to be...” His eyes roll up as he considers the words. “...haughty and judgmental when it’s you, in fact, who is misjudging me. I’m a journalist, not an immature twenty-two year old, clueless ass student. Allow me the benefit of the doubt before the ‘*Run the World*’ protest. Save it for the article. I promise to be positive.”

Am I overreacting? I hope so. Am I crazy as hell for giving Ashton Spencer access to my life again? He doesn’t deserve it. There’s no room for his kind in my universe. He was a mistake; my biggest to date. He’s no different from my mother or Cut. I was kind enough to forgive them for abandoning me during my *Blakewood* days, but neither wounded me as much as this man sitting mere feet across from me. I may not give him the pleasure of crying my tears of yester-year, but I damn sure won’t forget what he did to me.

Ashton’s eyes, those chocolate abysses that always held great knowledge, wisdom...and my pain, sear me when lifting from my left hand to my face.

“So.” He inhales, raising his bearded chin I still can’t believe is as dark and full as it had been 13 years ago when I first laid eyes on him. “I hear you’re engaged.”

Clearing my throat, I readjust myself in my seat, trying hard as hell not to reveal my squirming. “I am. Since April.” I muster false pride. “We met like two years ago—”

“Approximately thirteen months ago at the *BET Awards* in Los Angeles, yes. I’m aware.”

My eyes fall to the table, and lids won’t stop blinking as I attempt the math in my head. *How the fuck does he—*

A subterranean deep rumble pushes from his stomach and echoes torturously around me. And instantly, I'm eighteen-year-old timid Tori in his elite world where I had no place in.

“See? You don't know shit about commas, but your ass is damn sure conversant with periods.”

My head spins so fast, I grip the table to anchor myself.

###

To be continued in...

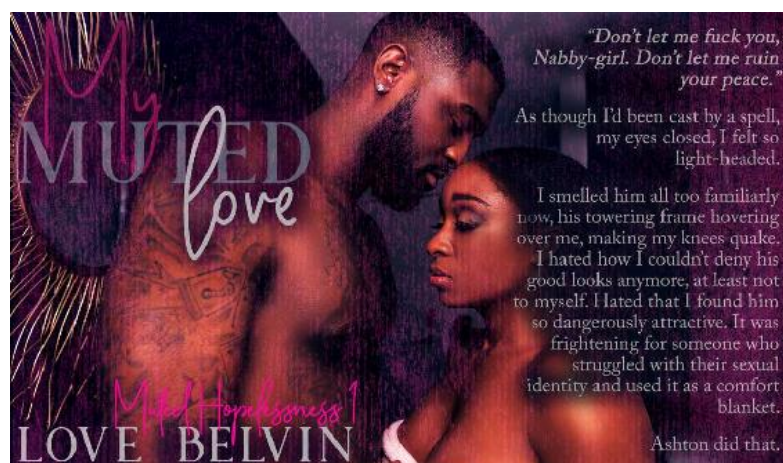
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**MDT:** I'm back, my G. Get that Role ready! (No, for real.)

**Master,** my **Jireh,** my **Rohi,** Matthew 10:16 (NKJV) "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." *Lord, in this business you've allowed me to pursue, never let me identify with the wolves. Keep me wise and my heart gentle in this jungle.*

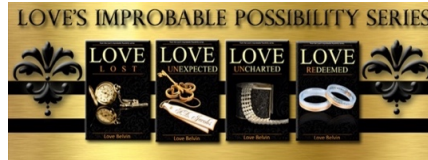




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~Extra

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