

*finding what they lost*

# UNFINISHED BUSINESS

BOOK TWO

Christina C. Jones

## **Unfinished Business**

Christina Jones

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— Terrence —

*Damn I miss her.*

I relaxed into the back of my chair, staring down at the gorgeous face lighting up the screen of my phone. I could be biased, but my little girl was the closest thing to perfection I'd ever seen. As usual, she was smiling hard enough for you to see every tooth in her mouth, and the dimples she'd inherited from me were on full display. The wild mop of black curls, caramel skin, and big brown eyes were from her mother. Five year old Joci looked just like her mother.

To be honest, I missed *her* too.

***“Joci insisted that we send this to you! - Gabi”***

That was the text she sent to accompany the picture. She was beside Joci in it, looking more like her big sister than her mom. She'd cut off most of her hair in what she swore *wasn't* an effort to look more mature, but she still looked closer to the other side of twenty than thirty.

***“AND, thank you for the bracelet, and the flowers.  
They’re both lovely. - Gabi.”***

***“You didn’t think I had forgotten, did you? Happy  
Birthday, Beautiful.”***

I closed my messages and pulled the picture back up to stare at my family. Gabi would probably cringe if she knew I thought of her that way, but I couldn’t help it. She was the mother of my daughter, and *should* have been my wife, but I messed that up. If I could go back in time... but there’s no point in that. We’ve been apart for four years, and as much as I’d like to change what happened, I can’t.

***“Of course not. You hardly ever forget. I’m sure Joci would have had an earful for you if you did. Could you imagine? ‘Daddy, you forgot mommy’s birthday, and that’s not polite!’ You know she’s all about proper manners this week. - Gabi.”***

*Hardly ever.*

She was right. I *hardly ever* forgot her birthday.

There was just that one time...

— & —

*“I guess I’m just... what, invisible to you now?”*

*My hands slipped away from the tie I was removing as I turned to look at Gabi. Her head was down, staring at a barely-awake seven month old Joci as she nursed. I audibly sighed as she looked up, her eyes filled with tears.*

*“What is it, Gabi?”*

*I didn't mean to be short with her, but this was starting to get on my nerves. Ever since the baby arrived, Gabi just never seemed... happy anymore. It wasn't overt though. She would walk around with this pleasant half-smile, pretending everything was ok. But I knew Gabi. Something was there, just under the surface, but if I pressed the issue, she denied that anything was wrong. She would just give me that fake smile and act like I hadn't said a word.*

*But every once in a while, she would do this. Make a cryptic comment that she refused to elaborate on, and then cry when I didn't 'get' it. It was tiresome, and I was very nearly to the point that I just wanted to stop asking. How was I supposed to make it better if she kept pushing me away?*

*“I called Tarryn, and asked her to watch Joci for me. She agreed, and said she was gonna take her to see Aunt Rae.” She stopped to take a deep breath, and I just stood there, confused. Why was she telling me this?*

*“After Tarryn left with the baby,” she continued, “I took the best shower I’ve had since Joci was born. I shaved, and fixed my hair. I did my makeup, and I went to the store. I found lingerie, Terrence. Real lingerie that actually fits my massive nursing boobs and covers my tummy. I actually felt sexy. I felt great.”*

*I looked down at the nursing tank and yoga pants she was wearing. “Uhh, that’s good babe.”*

*“Oh, that’s not all.” She flashed me her phony smile. “I decided that I was going to do something really, really sexy. So I put on one of your shirts over my lingerie, and I belted it at the waist, so everybody would think it was a dress or something. And I put on my sexiest heels, and drove to your office to see you. But when I got there, you were... occupied.”*

*I shook my head, turning away to finish taking off my tie as tightness spread across my chest. “Of course I was occupied, I was working.”*

*“No.” Behind me, I could sense her rising from the bed, placing Joci in her bassinet. When she spoke again, she was at my shoulder. “I know what you’re like when you’re working, Terrence, since that’s what you’re always doing.*

*You're quiet, you're focused, you're tense. But no, you were very, very relaxed when I saw you."*

*"What are you rambling about, Gabi? Do we have to do this tonight? I'm tired." And I was sweating through my shirt. I removed it, tossing it into the laundry bin as I walked to the bathroom, with Gabi close behind.*

*"Damn right we're doing this tonight. You were looking much too cozy on that couch with little miss perfect for us to not do this."*

*I cocked an eyebrow at her. "Are you talking about Sabrina? She's just a new lawyer at the office; I've talked to you about her before, all the time."*

*"Yeah, and while you were raving about how smart she is, how great of a lawyer she is, how she's so this, she's so that, you forgot to mention that she looks like a freaking video vixen! Is that why you've been spending so much time away from home?" Gabi shoved her hair out of her eyes, glaring into my face.*

*I smirked, even as a lump swelled in my throat. "So what, you're jealous now? It's not a good look, Gabi."*

*Her eyes widened in shock, then narrowed as she clenched her eyebrows together. “You’re right, Terrence. I am jealous. Sabrina gets happy, laughing, charming Terrence. She gets the best of you. All I get is what’s left over at the end of the night, when you’re too tired to ‘do this’, too drained give me even an hour of relief from caring for our child, so that I can get some sleep. I haven’t had more than two hours of sleep at a time since Joci was born, Terrence. I finally ask for some help, so I can do something sexy for you, who ignores me like my needs don’t matter in whatever grand plan it is you seem to have. When I get there, you’re grinning in some other bitch’s face, instead of working like you claimed. So yeah, I’m jealous of her, because she’s getting the attention I need from you, and jealous of you, because you get to act like you’re still a bachelor, while I sit at home and take care of our child.”*

*She tossed me a look of contempt before she stormed out of the bathroom. I stood there for a moment, stunned into silence before I followed her into the living room.*

*“Hold on, you can’t say that type of shit and then just walk away. I’ve been working my ass off, keeping a roof over our heads and putting away money so Joci is taken care of. So*



*both of you are taken care of. So this 'acting like a bachelor' shit? You're not gonna put that on me."*

*"You think I don't know that?" she asked, looking up as she angrily knotted the laces of the shoes she had put on. "Why else would I let it slide that all of Joci's care falls to me?"*

*"You're a stay-at-home mom, Gabi. What did you expect?"*

*"I expected that you wouldn't think that absolved you of responsibility. I expected that you would recognize that I'm floundering, here Terrence. I expected..." She stopped, swallowing a sob. "I expected you to know that 'taking care' of me had nothing to do with collecting an insane amount of money in the bank. Two nights ago, I begged you 'Terrence... please. Can you please watch the baby so I can close my eyes for just a second?' Do you remember what you did, Terrence?"*

*I scrubbed a hand over my face, recalling the exact moment she was talking about, but she didn't give me a chance to answer before she continued.*

*"You turned up your headphones. I needed you, and you turned up your headphones. But you wanna throw it in my*

*face that you bring home a check?” She shook her head, wiping tears from her eyes as she stood to grab her keys.*

*“Gabi, wait. Where are you go— what’s with the balloons?” I asked, seeing something flash from the corner of my eye. I turned to see that our kitchen counter was filled with flower arrangements and balloons.*

*“Right. You forgot,” she said, opening the front door. “Happy birthday to me.”*

*Joci’s cries rang out from the bedroom when Gabi slammed the door closed behind her.*

*— Gabi—*

*For the longest time, I just sat there. Too sleep deprived to risk driving at night, and no one other than Regina that I could call at nearly midnight. She wasn’t answering, so it was just me. Alone.*

*I thought I would like it.*

*Earlier, it was great. When all I was thinking was that it was my birthday, and I was going to go have birthday sex with my man in his office. So much for that plan. I had forgotten about the fact that all of the offices had been*

*remodeled, and that all of the associate offices now featured a glass panel that was nearly a foot wide on either side of the door. I snuck up to Terrence's, trying to make sure that he didn't see me, which would have ruined my surprise. Instead, I got one of my own.*

*Looking through that little glass window, I could see that Terrence was seated on his couch, next to Sabrina. They were so close that they were touching as they laughed about something, and then her hand landed on his thigh, and something shifted. They weren't laughing anymore; they were just staring at each other. Terrence licked his lips. She bit hers. Even from a distance, the sexual tension between them was so thick that I felt like I was suffocating. I knew that look, because it was the same that he and I used to share back when we were pretending that we were just coworkers.*

*I could see why he was mesmerized. Smooth mahogany skin, pretty hazel eyes, and a body that made me sick with envy, thinking about the stretch marks that now decorated my stomach and hips. And, according to him, she was incredible at her job. So basically, nothing like the frumpy, jobless woman that waited for him to come home.*

*Terrence leaned forward, whispering something into her ear that made her giggle and cover her mouth.*

*I had to get out of there.*

*When my uncle called to wish me a happy birthday, I pretended nothing was wrong. When Tarryn dropped Joci off a few hours later, I pretended nothing was wrong. When Terrence came home, just short of midnight... I couldn't pretend nothing was wrong.*

*So I didn't.*

*And then, I was sitting in my car, crying my eyes out because the man that I basically gave up my life for... wanted someone else. What else could I do, really? Throughout my pregnancy, Terrence had gone on and on about how his mom had stayed home with he and his sister when they were little. According to him and Aunt Rae, Jocelyn had loved everything about being a mother. She left her job, had natural births, breastfed, and she 'Kept her own babies. She wasn't out running the streets like some of these other young mothers do. She let Terrence Sr. do his job as provider, while she took care of her kids, instead of putting them off on someone else.' That lovely little tidbit was from Rae. It didn't feel right to me, but what the hell did I know? My own mother didn't have a*

*nurturing bone in her body, so I certainly wasn't about to follow her example. Terrence and Tarryn loved their mother the way I wanted my kids to love me.*

*So I followed the Jocelyn plan. We even named our little girl Jocelyn, in her memory. I reluctantly gave up my position at Pritchard & Graham to settle into my new role. I pretended to be enthusiastic about it, but the reality was that I hated it. I loved Joci, but being suddenly thrust into motherhood wasn't what I had planned. I had worked my ass off to become a lawyer, against my parents' wishes, and now... I was concierge to a screaming baby who couldn't even offer me a simple 'thank you' for the career, sanity, and supple young body I was sacrificing for her.*

*But I don't have to do this anymore.*

*Just like that, I realized that if Terrence wanted to go be with Sabrina, there was no reason that I should continue playing the part of doting housewife for him. It obviously wasn't what he really wanted. He claimed to love me, but he was doing a crappy job of showing it. Sure, he was an excellent provider. I had access to all of his accounts, so I could see every dime he was bringing in from all the extra*

*hours he was billing. But in the process of doing all of that providing, he was neglecting us.*

*And now I knew why. Sabrina.*

— & —

“I can’t believe you didn’t kill his ass,” Daniella said, pouring the last of the pitcher of frozen margarita into my glass.

I shrugged, then accepted the drink from her and took a sip. “He was still Joci’s dad, and even though it hurt like hell... I still loved him.”

“Well, you’re better than me, cause *I* would have bust into that office and thrown a Molotov at that couch.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder, frowning as she looked around the restaurant.

*Daniella and these dramatics, my goodness.* I shook my head at my coworker and friend of almost four years. I had instantly been attracted to her bubbly, over-the-top demeanor on my first day at Atkins & Associates. I think she could tell I was new to Dallas *and* new to practicing law, because she approached me as soon as I walked through the front door, complimented my shoes, then told me to straighten

my shoulders and look a little 'sweeter'. "This is Texas, *nena*. 'Nice-nasty' will get you everywhere, but if these folks think you're a bitch... well, good luck."

It took me a full thirty minutes to actually believe that she was a legal secretary. *My* secretary. With her perfect wavy hair, perfect stylish clothes, and perfect fun attitude, I would have been more inclined to believe that she was a news anchor or something. I quickly learned that her 'pretty girl' looks were no reason to under-estimate her. Daniella was a *beast* at her job, which I definitely needed. Moving to a new state with no friends or family and a one year old had left any semblance of order in shambles. Daniella found Joci a wonderful daycare that was close to the office and half the price of the nanny I had hired, got me into a gorgeous condo and out of a hotel room, and after only two weeks as a new associate, she had me so well organized and integrated that I felt like I had been there forever.

One day, after I had been at Atkins & Associates for about a month, she walked into my office while I was in the middle of a breakdown. Terrence had called to check on me and Joci, and the sound of his voice just made me lose it. I rushed him off of the phone so I could cry about the mistake I

had made in giving up on our relationship. I cried because I was disgusted with myself for still loving him, even after he had hurt me *so* bad. And I cried because I was guilty that it felt so good to be back at work, doing what I loved, instead of tending to my baby.

When Daniella walked in, she simply said, “Uh-uh.” before she stormed back out to her desk. A few minutes later, she was back, and I learned that she had called my former nanny and worked out some kind of on-call babysitting deal with her. She then informed me that she and I were going out that night, to have some fun. She’s been dragging me out on sporadic Friday nights ever since then.

“Stop looking at your phone, *chula*.”

I shot Daniella a playful scowl as I finally read the last message Terrence had sent me, nearly two hours before.

***“You didn’t notice the inscription, did you?”***

I placed my phone down on the table and removed the pretty white gold bangle that had arrived in a pretty blue box. Trying not to think of what Terrence must have spent on what was easily my favorite gift, I held it up to the light, turning it until I found the tiny words inscribed inside.



*“I’ll never forget again.”*

— 2 —

— Gabi —

*This man really thinks I'm stupid or something.*

I tried not to let the agitation show on my face as I adjusted my glasses. I didn't really need them, but I wore the harsh black frames anyway. I liked to think they made me look a little less like a teenager, which was important working at *this* firm. On the surface, Atkins & Associates was a lot like Pritchard & Graham, filled with bright, talented lawyers of color. But where P&G had a warm, family vibe among the associates, A&A had a competitive culture. I *loved* it.

It had taken a short period of adjustment to get back into the swing of practicing law after my nearly year-long hiatus, but once I found my groove, I began to thrive. Under Daniella's tutelage, I quickly learned how to handle myself in the A&A environment and I liked to believe that after seeing me in action, I gained a lot of respect from my peers. I may have looked like a college girl, but I would, figuratively, drag any one of their asses into a back alley and do what I needed

to do to *win*. The unfortunate lawyer across from me didn't know that.

I raised a freshly groomed eyebrow at him as he somehow found the nerve to lift his hand a few inches from my face and snap his fingers. "Well, Ms. Jacobs? What do you have to say? Are you going to agree to our demands or not? Your client really doesn't have a choice."

Openly smirking, I glanced at the lawyer beside me, my co-counsel. Preston was barely keeping a grin off of his handsome face, because he knew exactly what I was about to do. When I met his gaze, the laughter in his eyes broke every bit of restraint I had left and I burst into giggles.

"I fail to see this as a laughing matter, Ms. Jacobs. Your client is about to owe mine several million dollars."

That statement only made me laugh harder as I leaned forward to flip open the file I had stashed at the bottom of the stack on the conference table. "Well, *you* may not find it funny Brent — I can call you that, right? We may as well get familiar. — But Preston and I think it's hilarious. Your client brought a defamation suit against our client. There was a tweet posted from our client's official twitter account about your client that stated, *I quote* 'This big ass muscular man has

a pencil dick. I don't understand the point. Why, lawd, did you give him so much muscle, and so little dick?' End quote.

Does that sound accurate to you?"

"Get to the point, Ms. Jacobs."

I allowed a broad smile to creep across my lips.

"*Gladly*. You see... in order for it to be defamation, the claim has to be false. But, ahh... how to say this..." I smacked my lips together. "Maybe I should just show you." I pulled out the stack of pictures my client had given me earlier in the day and spread them across the table in front of the opposing counsel.

"If you'll direct your attention *here, here* and *here*. Oh, and *here*, you'll see that based on these pictures, taken by a private investigator, of your client attempting to have sex with these three young women, he *does* have what seems to be a pretty small penis."

I sat back in my chair, swaying back and forth as Brent turned crimson. He clenched his fists, scowling as he shoved the pictures back across the table to me. "Kellen Davis is the number one running back in the NFL. If any of these pictures get out—"

"It would crush his poor little ego, and embarrass him, and he would become the latest hashtag on twitter. Yes,

we know. So *perhaps* Mr. Davis shouldn't be throwing out words like 'defamation' and 'lawsuit' against his ex-girlfriend. You should have advised your client to simply make a public denial of Lauren's tweet, and then ignore it. Everyone would think she was just a woman scorned, trying to embarrass her ex. It would have blown over, and he could have gone on about his life without the public knowing that his penis was the same size as his thumb."

"You can't release these pictures to the public."

"*Brent*," I scolded. "Atkins & Associates would never engage in such unethical behavior. But Lauren is a pop star, with a pretty volatile attitude. We're keeping her calm for *now*, but there's no telling what she'll do if this multi-million dollar lawsuit doesn't go away. She might be so distraught that she would, uh 'lose' her unlocked cell phone. Just think of the media frenzy that these intensely sexual texts from Kellen would cause if they got into the wrong hands! He had her doing some things to him that the general public would probably consider pretty unorthodox, so—"

"*I get it*," Brent muttered through clenched teeth.

I winked at him, and then plastered on yet another smile. "You're a smart man, Brent, I knew you would. So, we

can consider this matter dropped, correct?” Without waiting for him to answer, I stood, gathering my documents to shove back into my briefcase. “I tell you what, if it makes your client feel any better, why don’t you send over a non-disclosure for us, huh? We can come to an agreement to make sure the public never sees these pictures, and our clients can just leave each other to live their lives.”

After a hastily grumbled “ok”, Brent fled, probably anxious to rip into his client for not bothering to mention that Lauren’s claims were actually true. I shook my head, thinking of the mortified look on his face when he saw those pictures of his client.

“Do you realize just how deceiving your looks are?”

I turned to Preston with a sly grin, not realizing that he had stood until I nearly collided with his chest. Remaining in that position longer than I knew I should, I inhaled the scent of his cologne.

*Damn he smells good.*

Preston was sexy. *Too* sexy, with bright, easy smile, dark mahogany skin, and jet black shoulder-length dreads. Taking a step back, I tried to play off the awkward moment by pretending that I needed to adjust the belted waist of my dress.

“I do, actually. I think it works to my advantage, don’t you?”

He traced his fingers along his goatee, cocking his head to the side as if he were considering it. “I think that a less perceptive man might underestimate you, think you’re just the pretty one that get’s sent in to smooth things over.”

“But not you?”

“No, I’m smarter than that,” he said, reaching for my hand. “Smart enough, in fact, to ask you to have dinner with me tonight.”

I gave him a playful grin as I removed my hand from his grasp, using it to reach up and adjust his tie. “Is that right?”

I noticed the bob of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed hard before responding. “That’s right.”

“Why now, Preston? Huh? I’ve been here for your years. Why today?”

“I’ve been watching... waiting.”

I kept my hold on his tie as I leaned a little closer. “Waiting for what?”

“For you to show what you were made of.”

“Oh, so I had to prove myself to you?” I released my grip on the silky fabric as I turned to pick up my briefcase.

“Not at all,” he said, taking my hand again. “You had to prove yourself to everybody else. I wasn’t about to be *that* guy, taking advantage of the new girl.”

“So you’re going to be taking advantage of me now?”

“If that’s what you want me to do,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

I swatted his shoulder, giggling as I stepped away. “How about we start with dinner?”

“So that’s a yes then?”

Before I could answer, Daniella walked in, scowling from me to Preston. “So sorry to interrupt this little rendezvous, but you have another appointment, *nena*.”

“Hey, I don’t want to keep you from your other obligations. I’ll see you tonight,” Preston said, brushing a hand against the small of my back before picking up his own briefcase.

“I didn’t even give you my personal number yet, let alone my address. I’ll have Daniella send it to you before the



day is out.” I glared over at Daniella, who was standing near the door with her arms crossed and a sour look on her face.

“I’ll get it to him,” she conceded with a forced smile. She rolled her eyes as Preston and I exchanged grins, before he left the room with a wink.

“So, Preston Parker?” Daniella said, rounding on me as soon as the door closed behind him. “Really? Of all the gorgeous lawyers in Dallas — which, by the way, you *swore* you wouldn’t date— you choose the *cabrón*?”

I shook my head. “Dani, would you stop calling him that? He’s not an asshole. And I thought I asked you not to schedule anything for me past two today?”

“I didn’t. I interrupted to make sure you remembered that you had to go get Terrence from the airport, which you obviously did *not*, or you wouldn’t be making plans with Preston.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said, lifting an eyebrow. “Girl, Terrence doesn’t care. First of all, he’s coming to see Joci, not me, just like always. Second, we both know the other person is dating. It’s been four years, Dani, he’s not thinking about me like that.”

“I thought I taught you better, *chiquita*.” She walked over and grabbed my wrist, pulling it up to eye level. “This Tiffany bracelet he gave you for your birthday tells a different story than the one you’re trying to convince yourself of.”

I shook my arm away from her with a scowl. “No it doesn’t. He just feels bad about how things ended between us, and he’s trying to make up for it. The history between us is the only ugly mark on his ‘good guy’ record, and this is his way of making it right.

“For *four* years? That’s a lot of guilt.”

Shrugging, I tucked a few stray curls behind my ear. “Well, he has —*had*, I should say— a lot to feel guilty about. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not placing all of the blame on him, because I shouldn’t have allowed it to get to the point that it did. That’s *my* bad. But the way things ended up...”

— & —

*“Really? You can’t just keep an eye on her for me for a few hours so I can finish this rebuttal letter and get it in before this deadline?” I stared at the phone in disbelief, as if it was the one denying me assistance again.*

*Disapproval radiated from Aunt Rae's voice as she replied, "Yes, really, Gabi. You're the one who decided to have a baby, not me. As much as I love that sweet little girl, you aren't going to push that responsibility off on me."*

*I literally bit my tongue to temper the first thing that came to mind, which was to remind her that she had been hinting about me having her 'grandbaby' since the first time we met. "I'm not trying to shirk my responsibility, I'm asking for a little help with the baby so that I can get some work done. I just went back from my maternity leave, and Joci is six months old. I haven't asked you or anyone else for any help until now."*

*"I thought you said you were going to do like Terrence's mom, and do the right thing and raise your baby. Jocelyn never asked anyone for help with her babies."*

*Ugh. Jocelyn this, Jocelyn that. I was so sick of hearing about how perfect Terrence's mom was that I was starting to hate that I had named my little girl after her. He had nearly been brought to tears when I made that suggestion, and that night, he made love to me like it was our last day on earth, huge pregnant belly and all. It had thrilled me to make him that happy, but now, I was wondering what I could do to*

*change her name to something with a little less 'prestige'. After a simple mention of wanting to be the kind of mother Jocelyn was, Terrence and Aunt Rae were laying on the pressure so thick I could barely breathe. Who knows what her namesake would have to live up to?*

*"You're right, Rae. I did say that I would love to be that kind of mother, but I don't want to just abandon my career. I worked too hard to become a lawyer to just throw that away."*

*Aunt Rae smacked her teeth through the phone. "So you can throw away time with your babies instead? I really thought so much better of you than that, Gabi, after you said all of that stuff about not wanting to be the kind of mother you had. You said you wanted to do better, but this is not better."*

*Screw this.*

*I quickly got off of the phone, not interested in another guilt-laced rant from her about the proper care of children. In that moment, I missed Regina more than ever. She had been transferred to her job's New York office shortly after Joci was born, and had been so busy that she hadn't been back to Atlanta since then. My uncle and his new wife, Veronica, were too busy jet-setting around the world with*

*international clients to be of any consistent help. I could have called Tarryn, who probably would have been willing to help, but I didn't want to put her at odds with her family. Then, there was Terrence. Mr. "Too Busy to Change a Diaper" was always at work, hoarding money like it would go out of style, for reasons I couldn't understand.*

*A nanny? Out of the question. "I don't want someone else raising my child when she has a mother," he'd said, with a look of pure disgust on his face. "If we did that, we may as well just shove her in daycare!" He said it as if we were basically sentencing Joci to death, and his expression and tone told me everything I needed to know about winning an argument with him about this. I wouldn't.*

*So, I did what women in love who don't know any better do. I gave in, because I trusted Terrence with my heart. I never thought that instead of finally bringing us back together after the disconnect that occurred after Joci was born, my decision to put my career on hold would actually drive us further apart.*

*Joci wasn't a screamer, but she was an active baby, who rarely slept. Because of that, I was barely sleeping, which led to me not having the energy to do much more than take*

*care of the baby. Anything left over after that went into keeping the apartment in some semblance of order. No one could say that my baby wasn't extremely well cared for, but I was bored. I missed getting dressed up to go to the office, writing thinly-veiled threats to opposing lawyers, and I missed making my own money. I missed my independence. I was miserable, and who wants to be around a miserable person? I fully believe that the change in me only encouraged Terrence to spend more time away from us. That pissed me off. I knew he could see what was happening, but instead of offering any compromises on Joci's care, he just ran away.*

*Right into the arms of Sabrina. I knew why he liked her. She was me, before I had his baby, and gave myself up to be what he wanted me to be. I guess somewhere along the way, he realized that what he wanted from a mother wasn't the same as what he needed from a partner.*

*When I found out about her two months after my conversation with Rae, I was done. Why was I making myself miserable trying to fulfill his ideal when he didn't even want me? Being stuck in a role that I hated certainly couldn't have been healthy for Joci. I could love her, be there for her, and be*

*an excellent mother even if delegated some of her care to other people.*

*While Terrence was busy swearing that nothing was going on between he and Sabrina, trying to convince me that he was still committed to our relationship, I was quietly making moves to put my life back on track. I asked him one last time if we could just hire some help so that I could resume my career, but the answer, still, was no. For a while, he was coming home at a decent time, and helping out more with Joci, but I was done. I wouldn't let him touch me, and I only talked to him about things related to making sure our child was taken care of.*

*Two months after that, I got a very exciting letter in the mail, offering me the position of my dreams at my former mentor, Ellen Atkins' law firm.*

*In Texas.*

— Terrence —

*“You're not moving to Dallas with my baby.”*

*Gabi was in the middle of the floor, playing with ten-month-old Joci, ignoring me with surprising ease. She was on all fours, crawling to one spot and waiting on Joci to use her*

*newly acquired walking skills to follow. Just before Joci reached her, Gabi would take off across the room, eliciting a peal of laughter from our baby girl before they repeated the game.*

*“Watch me.” She tossed those words over her shoulder in such a casual tone that at first, I actually watched her as they continued their game. Then it hit me.*

*Watch me.*

*It was a taunt. It was a dare.*

*“Gabi... I don’t know what the hell is going on with you now, but this” — I held up the stack of legal documents—  
“Isn’t funny.”*

*“Would you look at this common ground we have?” She finally sat still, looking at me as she wrangled Joci into her arms. “I don’t think its funny either, Terrence. It’s a serious, binding legal document. You’re gonna sign it, and Joci and I are moving to Dallas.” This wasn’t the same girl that, just a few months ago, had been pleading me with to watch the baby for a few hours while she slept. There were tears in her eyes then, but I didn’t have the time.*



*Now? I only saw anger. In that moment, I wished she would just fly off the handle, hit me, do whatever she needed do, as long as she showed some sign of the fire I knew was there. But this was a cold anger. Her demeanor, her actions, her words, they were all meant to leave me frostbitten and numb in her wake.*

*Did I do this to her?*

*I brushed that thought away. It served no purpose right now, if Gabi thought I was going to go along with what she said simply because she said it.*

*“Why do you want to leave so bad?” That wasn’t what I’d meant to ask, but now that it was out there, I wanted an answer. It was the first thing that popped in my mind when I finished reading the custody agreement she had so casually dropped onto the counter in front of me.*

*She didn’t respond until she had strapped Joci into her highchair and presented her with a handful of Cheerios. “Why do you care?” she asked, brushing her hands on the fronts of the light-wash skinny jeans she wore. The move called attention to her new, plumper thighs, a remnant of the pregnancy that she couldn’t seem to get rid. That was probably my fault too, somehow.*

*“I don’t know, Gabi. Why shouldn’t I care that my girlfriend is trying to move our child three states away?”*

*Gabi laughed a derisive bark that I didn’t recognize. “Girlfriend? You’re funny. You and I both know that’s not how you see me, so cut the bull. Besides, Dallas to Atlanta is a two hour flight. It’s not that serious.”*

*You and I both know that’s not how you see me...  
What?*

*“You’re making plans without thinking it through. Who’s gonna pay for those tickets Gabi? It’s not like you—”*

*“It’s not like I what, Terrence?” She stepped right into my face to stare me down. “Were you gonna say it’s not like I have a job? God, I hope not. Surely you’re not about to throw that in my face as if me being jobless didn’t happen by your design.”*

*My eyebrow shot it the air. “My design? Are you delusional? You wanted to be a stay-at-home-mom!”*

*Her eyelids fluttered. For a moment, her glacial front slipped, and I saw a trace of the old Gabi. Vulnerable, yes, but at least this Gabi was accessible. She dropped her head, pressing her lips into a thin line.*

*“If you really believe that, I’m further convinced that I need to go.” When she looked up again, her eyes were wet.*

*“Just sign the papers, Terrence. It’s not like you spend a lot of time with Joci anyway.”*

*“What are you talking about? I see my baby girl every day!” Was she trying to imply that I was a deadbeat? That I didn’t care about Joci?*

*“Yeah, T, you see her every day. That’s not the same as being with her though. Can you even tell me how many teeth she has?”*

*Shit. No, I couldn’t. But she was still exaggerating the hell out of the situation, trying to paint me as something I wasn’t. Was it really that hard for her to see that I was working my ass off for her and Joci?*

*“Ok, you’re right. I should spend more time with Joci, especially now that she’s getting older. But how is that supposed to happen if you take her to Dallas? I’m not signing this. You do not have my permission to take my child to another state.”*

*Gabi tossed her head, and that wall of hers went right back up. “I didn’t want to have to do this.” Her voice was clipped, as if she were forcing herself to say the words. “But,*

*I'm not giving you a choice, Terrence. I will do everything in my power to ruin you if you don't sign it."*

*I couldn't help it. I laughed. Who, exactly, did Gabi think she was?*

*"Gabi, you were a junior associate for what, a year and some change before you stopped to take care of Joci? Please explain this power you think you have. I'm listening."*  
*I relaxed into the back of the barstool, waiting for her to wilt into tears in front of me as she realized just how silly this was. Instead, she straightened her posture and her eyes went, if possible, even colder than before.*

*"Bravo, Terrence," she said, sneering as she clapped her hands, an action that Joci repeated in the background.*  
*"Applause. That's what you wanted, right? Congratulations, you tore me down, again. You are so good at that. And you know what? You're correct. Now that I've dropped everything that mattered to me to take care of the baby, I'm nothing, right? No goals, no dreams, no drive, no ambition. Hell, I can't get my body back. This is awful for you, isn't it? Everything that attracted you to me is... gone." She stopped speaking, looking past me as if she'd just realized something important.*

*Was that really how she saw herself? As someone who used to be?*

*Did I do this to her?*

*There that question was again, and it made me sick to my stomach.*

*Her body was a non-issue to me. The extra weight she hated had settled into her butt, hips and thighs, something I would have appreciated if I'd been given the opportunity to touch her at all. The larger breasts, courtesy of nursing Joci, were a benefit in my eyes, but Gabi didn't share those feelings. Whatever body issues she had were all on her, but she was right about the other stuff.*

*When I looked at her now, she wasn't the eager, determined young lawyer I fell in love with. She was always tired, irritable, and if I didn't know better, I would think her entire wardrobe consisted of yoga pants and tank tops. Gabi no longer carried the aura of a woman who was in control. Now, she just seemed... defeated. And she was right, it wasn't attractive. She was nothing like her old self, nothing like Sabrina, who reminded me so much of the old Gabi that I could... That I could what?*

*"Gabi... I—"*

*“No,” she interrupted, snapping her attention back to me. “Let me say this. I may not have any power myself, but I have access to it. My uncle. Your boss. He considers me his own, and he would stomp you in a heartbeat if he knew how you’ve hurt me. He’s a big deal... very well connected, you know that. Uncle Bobby would destroy your reputation and career without a second thought, for me. I’ll tell whatever lies, cry as many tears as I need to, to make that happen.”*

*Who was this bitter, vindictive person?*

*“Do you really hate me that much, Gabi? If I don’t let you take my child from me, you’re willing to ruin my life?”*

*“Yes. I mean... no, I don’t hate you. I thought I did. I wish I did, but... I don’t hate you, Terrence. This isn’t about taking your child from you; this is me pulling out my big joker, the only card I have, to try to keep you from stopping me.”*

*Her voice broke, and that icy facade fell again. “I don’t want to do that to you. I just... I have a chance to put my life back on track, get back to my career. If you just sign the custody agreement, it’s better for Joci.”*

*I frowned. “How the fuck do you figure that? Why can’t you get back to your career here in Atlanta, at Pritchard & Graham?”*

*“I can’t go back to P&G because I can’t work with you and her,” she said. Shit. I had forgotten about that particular little detail, that Gabi had actually seen me with Sabrina.*

*“And it’s better for Joci because it would mean her mother wasn’t walking around miserable.”*

*“Miserable? I make you miserable?”*

*Was it really that bad for her? I was doing just what I said I would, taking the best care of her and Joci that I could. She didn’t have to work, and she didn’t want for anything. That’s what every single extra hour I put into these cases was about. Taking care of home, so that she could be a homemaker like she wanted.*

*“If you really believe that, I’m further convinced that I need to go.”*

*I looked at her, still waiting on to respond. When she dropped her eyes, I repeated the question.*

*“We’re getting away from the point,” she said, glancing back at Joci, who had fallen asleep in her chair, with several Cheerios stuck to her face. “Terrence... you know how important my career was to me. I postponed that, to try to fit your perfect vision of what a mom should be, and now... I barely even recognize myself. You’ve gotten to brand yourself*

*as this super-dedicated, hardworking attorney, the guy who stays up all night working on ways to leave destruction at an opponents' doorstep before they've even had their morning coffee. But you did that at my expense, while I was killing myself taking care of the baby that we created."*

*My mouth opened to contradict what she was saying, but I couldn't. The tears she had been holding back were streaming down her face without abandon.*

*Did I do this to her?*

*Yeah. I think I probably did.*

*"Terrence... please."*

*For the second time that day, I remembered her making that same tearful plea before. Was that the breaking point for her? When I knew she needed me, knew she needed the break, but ignored her anyway, to 'brand myself'?*

*I tipped her chin up, hoping that she would see sincerity. "Gabi... I swear I want you to be happy. But you're talking about taking Joci away."*

*"You would still see her really often. The agreements states that you would get her every other weekend, and I'll spend the holidays here in Atlanta so you can always see her*



*then. We both have smartphones, so I can let you video chat with her whenever you want. And you can come see her in Dallas at any time, as long as you give me 48 hours notice. I'm not trying to keep her from you Terrence. This is fair. Even if I stayed in Georgia, we would probably still have this arrangement, and if I moved far enough, it would actually take longer than the flight to Dallas to get to her."*

*I offered her a slight nod as I tried to process what was happening. I knew without asking that Gabi had researched this into the ground. But...*

*"And what about us?" She tried to turn away when I asked that, but I gently forced her back, making sure my eyes met hers. "We've been talking about custody, and all of that, but what about us?"*

*Briefly, Gabi closed her eyes, and I got the distinct impression that she was gathering her strength. "I... There isn't an us."*

*I was expecting that, but it still felt like an ice pick to the gut. She backed away, clutching her arms around her stomach as if she was feeling the same cold, deadening pain. She was hurting, bad, and she had been for some time, while I avoided it, giving my attention to work.*

And Sabrina.

*I grabbed her arm, turning her to face me before I bent to place a kiss on her forehead.*

*And then I signed the custody agreement.*

— & —

“Daddy!”

I had just picked up my suitcase from the baggage claim when I heard my baby girl’s voice. I turned to see her huge puff of curly black hair bobbing in the air as she ran toward me. I caught her in my arms and pulled her into a hug, placing a kiss right on her forehead. She was giggling like crazy, just as she always did.

Maybe it was just a typical kid thing, but Joci was always thrilled to see me. It was mutual. Joci was so happy and energetic that you couldn’t help enjoying yourself around her. She was really just an awesome kid, and I knew it had everything to do with her mother. I peeked through Joci’s hair over to Gabi, who was watching us. She had her top lip pulled through her teeth, but her eyes were shining and I knew she was trying to suppress a grin.

“Come on and show me that pretty smile Gabi,” I said, lowering Joci to the floor. I led her by the hand over to where her mother stood, taking the opportunity to look her over.

*Damn, she looks good.*

Gabi was wearing a dress the color of orange sherbet, made of a fabric that clung to her curves, but flowed away from the rest of her body every time she moved. The sleeves reached her elbows, her hem reached her knees, and she was showing just a hint of cleavage, but still, it was sexy as hell.

Her lips parted into a smile as I closed the distance between us, pulling her into a hug and giving her the same kiss on the forehead I had given Joci.

“Trying something different, are we?” Gabi asked, reaching up to stroke my beard, which I had allowed to grow a little longer than usual. “I like it. It makes you look more distinguished.”

“Daddy says he’s gonna grow a big beard like *Santa*,” Joci chimed in, still giggling as she grabbed one of each of our hands.

Gabi's eyes widened as she turned to me. "Oh, is that so?"

"Well, I didn't agree to Santa-length," I said, giving Joci a fake scowl. "But, my baby girl said she wanted to see me with a puffy beard, so we're doing a puffy beard."

When I looked from Joci back to Gabi, she was staring at me, with her lips slightly parted. "You do anything this girl asks you to do, don't you?"

"Anything in my power." I flashed a smile at her, which made her blush.

*What the hell was that?*

That was... new. It had been a long time since I'd been able to make Gabi blush with just a smile. When it came to me, those feelings of hers were an impenetrable wall. Sure, we were on great terms. I would even be comfortable calling Gabi a very good friend. But anything that even looked like it might want to consider implying a hint of something of a romantic nature, she immediately shut down. To her, that part of our lives didn't exist anymore, a conclusion she probably came to after I started officially dating Sabrina, shortly after Gabi left for Dallas.

But I wasn't with Sabrina anymore. I wasn't with anybody now, and that blush, paired with the fact that she wouldn't meet my eyes now gave me a bit of hope that maybe, if I went about it the right way, Gabi and I could pick up where we left off.

“So,” I said, picking up my suitcase as we exited the airport. “I was thinking I could maybe take two of the most beautiful girls in Texas to dinner and a movie tonight.”

“Yeah! Yeah, can we see the one with the ice princesses?” Joci stopped walking to look up at me with pleading eyes.

“Of course, sweetheart. Whatever you want to see.”

“Uh, actually,” Gabi said, allowing the end of the word to trail off. “I, uh... have a little... dinner... plan... thingy.”

My energy deflated a little. “You mean... a date?”

“Yeah... but I can cancel if i— “

“No,” I interrupted, following as she led the way to her car. “You should go, have fun. Anybody I would know?”

“Yeah, you've probably met Preston before.”

A dull throb began in my temple, making its way down to jaw. “Preston Parker?”

“Oh, so you do know him?” Gabi pulled her keys from her purse, using her key fob to unlock the doors. When I didn’t immediately respond, her expression morphed from merely curious to irritated. To avoid her question, I busied myself putting my suitcase in the trunk while Gabi secured Joci in her booster seat.

“Are you really gonna act like I didn’t ask you a question?” she asked, glancing over at me from the driver’s seat as I climbed in.

“Huh?”

“Terrence!”

I looked behind me to see that Joci had donned headphones, and was absorbed in something on the tablet screen in front of her. “Fine. Yes, I know Preston. We went to college together.”

“*And?*” Gabi lifted a brow at me, narrowing her eyes at me as she pulled out of the parking lot. “And what? What do you want me to say? He was frat, but I didn’t really kick it with him.”

“But he’s cool?”

I sighed as I pushed the back of my head into the plush leather headrest. “I guess. If you like pompous, arrogant, assholes, Preston is cool as hell.”

“Oh my God....”

I didn’t have any personal experience with Preston’s antics, but I’d been a witness to the constant competition between him and my friend Dorian for the entire time we were peers at Emory University. Who could screw the most girls, who could get the best grades, plus a whole list of other dumb shit they were always trying to one-up each other about. Dorian was just having fun, but Preston had a tendency to play dirty, almost getting Dorian kicked out of school.

“Why do people keep calling him an asshole?”

I shrugged. “I knew him back in undergrad, so it’s been more than ten years. Maybe he’s changed, but I don’t know.

“Yeah. So... would it bother you for me to date him?”

*Uhh...*

Let’s see, how to answer that one? Hell yes it would bother me, but I didn’t have a reason. At least not one that Gabi would go along with.

“Gabi, as long as you’re being treated well, I’m good.”

“You sure? I mean, I don’t wa—”

I stopped her as we pulled into the parking deck for her building. “Hey,” I said, covering her hand with mine. “I said we were good, just like before I knew who it was. If Preston makes you happy...”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far, tonight would just be the first date.”

“Well, good luck on first date. I hope you have a good time.” She smiled at me as she pulled the keys from the ignition, seeming satisfied with that answer.

Guess I’m a pretty good liar.



*“Don’t. Move.”*

I shot a warning look over my shoulder before I carefully knelt. I had to do this quickly and quietly if I was going to have even the slightest possibility of success.

One chance. That’s all I had.

I turned slightly to my left, raising a finger to my lips to silence the quiet giggles filtering through the room before I unscrewed the top from the hot pink lip gloss I held in the other hand. I pulled the brush free and took a deep breath, shaking the tension from my shoulders before I raised the wand and carefully began applying it to Terrence’s lips.

Tension swept the room as he stirred from his sleeping position on my couch, groaning as he turned onto his side and ground his head further into my cushions. The quiet giggles resumed behind me, and I continued my task. A few seconds later, Terrence’s lips were painted bright pink, and I sat back on my heels.

“Beautiful!” My declaration was met by loud shrieks of laughter, and I tried to silence them with a quick “*Shh!*”, but it was too late.

“Gabi... what the hell?” Confused, he looked around until his eyes landed on the open tube of lip-gloss I still held in mid-air. “Are you putting *makeup* on me?” he asked, raising his fingers to his mouth.

I tucked the tube behind my back, forcing myself not to laugh. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really?” He held up his fingers, which were streaked with the sticky pink gloss. “You know what this means, right?”

“Terre— Ahh!”

Before I knew it, I was flat on my back on the floor with my arms pinned over my head, struggling and screaming for my life as Terrence planted kisses all over my face, neck, and chest. It started innocently, but then his lips accidentally brushed mine, and we both froze. Our eyes met and locked, and the desire I saw reflected in his snatched the air right from my lungs.

His gaze flickered down to my lips just before he closed the distance between us again, offering another barely-there kiss. I didn't protest because I *couldn't*. My traitorous body wouldn't allow me to move away, but my nipples hardened enough that I was sure he could feel them pressed against his chest, even through the layers of my bra and dress. This was bad. Really, really bad.

He gently pulled my bottom lip between his teeth, and then flashed those *damned* dimples at me before he delivered an almost-painful nip to my earlobe, following it with a soothing touch of his lips. He continued a similar pattern down my neck, nip, kiss, nip, kiss. Moisture pooled between my thighs, and I—

“Joci, your daddy is eating is your mommy!”

*Shit! Forgot about the kids!*

My eyes flew open to the sight of an alarmed five year old standing over us, pointing an accusing finger right at Terrence, who was frozen, with his lips pressed into my collarbone.

“What the— Joci, stop!” Terrence threw up his arms, defending himself against the sudden pillow attack from our five year old daughter. Joci's friend from down the hall, Talia,

who apparently thought Terrence was a cannibal, joined in, diving at him with a fierce battle cry.

I escaped to the bathroom while Terrence was occupied with the girls, posting in front of the mirror to wash the pink streaks of lip-gloss from my face.

*What the hell was that about?*

There wasn't supposed to be any of *that* left between Terrence and I. That was established when he got hot and heavy with Sabrina as soon as I was out of his hair. It had been a particularly hard pill to swallow, even though I was the one who decided to end our relationship. It hurt to see him move on so quickly, but it let me know that I didn't need to harbor any guilt about the breakup — not that it stopped me— and it also kept me from holding on to any hopes that he was going to fly to Dallas and scoop me into his arms, promising to do better and begging me to come home. I was almost grateful. Instead of pining away over the loss of our relationship, I moved on too, confident that there would never again be a Terrence and I.

But then, what was this? As I ran a towel under the hot water, I examined the glossy prints he had left, noticing that some of them dipped as low as the bare skin between my

breasts. Pair that with the blatant attraction I had seen in his eyes, and I was one confused girl. Terrence had never given me any indication of wanting more than the great co-parenting relationship and friendship we had achieved through many, many sessions of family counseling when Joci was two years old. When asked about reconciliation, Terrence and I had given the same answer: not a chance. He had actually laughed, which made me even more certain about my answer. So, again, *what the hell was this?* Had he been putting on a show back then, or was this all just a heat of the moment thing? Yeah. That's what it had to be.

I was pulled from my thoughts by a knock on the door. I opened it to find Terrence on the other side, grinning as he sidled past me into the bathroom.

“What are you doing, Terrence?” I asked, backing as far as I could until I hit the wall behind me.

He pushed the door closed behind him, before he approached, placing his hand the on the wall just above me before he leaned closer. “I set the girls up with some popcorn and a movie...they'll be occupied for the next hour. We can finish what we started.” He grazed a thumb along my face, then tipped my face up to meet his.

*Why does he have to look this good?*

The four years that we'd been apart had been very, very good to Terrence. The fine wrinkles that the late nights had left along the corners of his eyes made him more mature, and as I'd noted at the airport, the slightly longer beard was a sexy, unexpected surprise. I knew exactly how soft those lips really were, and I had plenty of experience with the skill of the fingers that were now working to untie the belt that was keeping my dress closed.

“Terrence, do you really think we should be—” I stopped, placing my hand over his to stop him.

“Is this what you're wearing on your date?” he asked, bending so that his lips grazed my ear as he spoke.

I swallowed past the hard lump in my throat before I answered. “No... I was about to take a shower before you barged in here like you were crazy.”

“You need some help?” Terrence tugged on the belt again, this time pulling it loose from my grasp. “I'd be *more* than happy to do that.” He pressed his body closer, pinning me against the wall as he lowered his in a kiss that was much more urgent than before. Again, my body betrayed me and my lips parted, allowing his tongue to mesh with mine. An

involuntary moan escaped my throat as he pulled my dress open, exposing the flimsy orange lace bra and panties I had worn to match my dress. He palmed my breasts as he kissed me, then ran his hands down to cup my behind. He trailed his mouth down to the side of my neck, using a hand behind each of my knees to lift me against the wall.

I was quickly losing the tiny bit of self-control I had as he suckled the soft flesh of my neck into his mouth. I involuntarily ground my hips into his as he positioned my legs around his waist. The shock of his erection, hard as steel as it pressed through his jeans into the gap between my thighs, elicited a moan from my throat.

“Mommy!” I gasped at the sound of Joci’s voice. It seemed to be right behind me, but as I glanced back, I was relieved to see that the door was still closed, and Terrence and I were alone in the bathroom. “Mommy, your phone is ringing!” Joci called again from the other side of the door. “The screen says P-R-E-S-T—”

Preston. I cringed, remembering that Daniella had programmed the number into my contacts before I left the office to retrieve Terrence from the airport. I couldn’t meet Terrence’s eyes as he lowered me to the floor. As soon as my

feet touched the ground, I pushed him away, tightly belting my dress again before I opened the door to accept my phone from Joci and sent her back into her room to watch her movie.

Still pretending to ignore Terrence, I quickly dialed Preston back to confirm that we were on for our date. Instead of having him pick me up, which I never would have allowed anyway, because of Joci, I made arrangements to meet him at the restaurant he named. When I ended the call, I finally turned to face Terrence again, rolling my eyes at the frustratingly amused look on his face.

“Why are you grinning at me like that?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest to hide the fact that my nipples were still painfully hard.

“Because you’re trying so hard to act like that didn’t just happen.”

“Because it *shouldn’t* have happened. What the hell are we doing, Terrence?” I shied away from his grasp when he stepped forward, reaching for my hand. “We can’t do this. We worked really hard to build a relationship where we could be good parents to Joci, and friends. I don’t want to mess that up.”



He shook his head, shoving his hands into his pockets.  
“I don’t either, but what if I’m not interested in just being friends anymore?”

My breathing hitched as I registered what he was saying. “We tried that Terrence, and it didn’t work. Remember? The only good thing that came out of it was Joci.”

“Who says it can’t be better?”

“I don’t know if I can trust you to make it different.”

The smile dropped from his face and his expression turned to pain, compelling me to continue. “I know we’re not in the same place now, and I’m not intentionally holding anything against you. I’m responsible for what happened between us just as much as you are, but it doesn’t change the fact that you hurt me, badly. Even it *was* four years ago. I’ve forgiven you, but forgetting is a different story.”

“I’m not asking you to forget, Beautiful.” Terrence reached for my hand again, and this time I didn’t pull away, allowing him to bring it to his lips. “I just want a chance.”

*You already had one.*

I gave him a wry smile as I shook my head, blinking a sudden influx of moisture from my eyes. I would be lying to myself if I pretended that it didn't give me a smug sense of pleasure to know that he wanted me back. It would be another lie to deny that some part of me wanted him as well. But neither of those changed the fact that when he *had* my heart, he hadn't given me the protection and care that I had expected. He had denied me what I needed from him, at a time when it was as vital to me as breathing.

It didn't matter that I knew why now. They were understandable, almost *good* reasons, but it didn't erase the bad memories.

"I can't think about this right now, Terrence. I have to get ready for this date. I'm supposed to be meeting Preston soon."

He lifted an eyebrow at me, but nodded his assent as he gave my hand a final squeeze and left the bathroom. I didn't realize I had been holding my breath until he closed the door behind him, and a relieved sigh rushed from my lungs. As I gazed at myself in the mirror, still reeling from the encounter with Terrence, my eyes landed on the small purple bruise on my neck that was becoming darker right before my eyes.

Terrence had marked his territory.

— Terrence —

“You are such a damn cheater.” I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest as I leaned back against the dresser.

Joci scowled at me from the other side of the kid-sized table as she gathered her winnings, a stack of quarters. “I’m gonna tell mommy you said a bad word.”

“So?” I scoffed. “I’m not scared of your mom. Besides, if you tell on me, I’ll tell her you’ve been in here hustling people in poker.”

“Then *I’ll* tell mommy you taught me how to play poker.” She cocked her head to the side, giving me a look that very clearly said ‘Your Move’.

“Whatever,” I said, pulling myself up from the uncomfortable position on Joci’s floor. “You win *this* time. Cheater.”

Joci giggled as she added the quarters she had won from me to her piggy bank, then climbed into her bed with a book she had pulled from the shelf on the way. “Can you read me this story please daddy?”

“Absolutely, Princess.”

She was asleep before I reached the middle of the book, tired after the events of the day. Before my nap on Gabi’s couch, I had taken Joci to the park to play. Afterwards, once Gabi left, I took her and Talia to a movie, where they stuffed themselves on popcorn. I dropped Talia off with her parents, then took Joci home to get her into a bath and pajamas before our poker game. By the time I got her in the bed, it was nearly ten at night, and Gabi wasn’t back yet.

Guess her date was going pretty well.

While I took my shower, I thought about what had transpired between Gabi and me before she left. After the way everything went down, I should have expected that she would still be harboring some hurt, even though we had been able to move forward and become friends again. Not helping enough with the baby, pushing — no, *forcing* — her to be a stay at home mom. And then Sabrina. Of all the mistakes I made in my relationship with Gabi... that was the stupidest, and it was the one that I knew hurt Gabi the most.

I never told Gabi that shortly after Joci was born, her father had shown up at the office to see me, claiming that he wanted to make sure his daughter and granddaughter were

being taken care of. Foolishly, I allowed his words to consume me, and I convinced myself that I needed to make as much money as I could so I could provide Gabi with the same lavish lifestyle he had provided her. She didn't even seem to notice though. She was always moody and drained from dealing with the baby, which wasn't exactly the vibe I wanted to come home to. Hell, I was drained too.

Then, there was Sabrina, sauntering into my office on her first day to introduce herself. Smooth mocha skin, lush curves, and a reputation as a brilliant lawyer. I was mesmerized. There was no financial stress, no sleep deprivation, no feeling like I was a disappointment with Sabrina. It was easy. My sense of loyalty to Gabi kept me from crossing the line physically, but emotionally? I checked out the minute I realized Sabrina would have been down for whatever.

Looking back, I hated myself for that. Back then, I didn't get it. All I could see was how hard I was working to provide for someone who didn't even seem to appreciate it. I was oblivious to the fact that I was giving Gabi what I *thought* she needed, based on my own selfish wants. When she decided to leave, I tried to act like Joci was the only one of my

girls I would miss, but that was bullshit. I had too much pride to admit to anyone that Gabi's move to Texas gutted me. *She left me.* So again, I turned to Sabrina, trying to replace the love I had lost.

Sabrina and I were together for three years. I was clear with Sabrina from jump that I had no plans for a long term commitment, because it wasn't my style anyway. I enjoyed her company, but I never shared with her the same love and connection I'd accidentally found with Gabi. Eventually, she got tired of that role and started pressuring me to take things further. That went on for two years, and then led into a year of on-again, off-again, which I had finally left *off* after Sabrina made a slick comment about Gabi in front of Joci.

After Sabrina, I didn't bother anymore. I knew exactly who I wanted, and unfortunately for me, she was just out of my reach.

I stepped out of the shower to dry myself off, then secured the towel around my waist before I opened the door to let out some of the steam. I was just in time to see Gabi coming through the door, wearing a content smile.

*Shit.*

Her eyes widened when she saw me, and I didn't miss the sharp intake of breath as they traveled down the length of my body.

I raised an eyebrow. "Gabi?"

"Hm?" Her head snapped up, and her eyes returned to my face.

"How was your date?" I asked, ambling over to the hall closet where my suitcase was stored. I carried it to the couch and began rummaging through it, searching for the boxers I'd intended to retrieve *before* my shower. "From that smile on your face, I take it that it went well."

"Well enough that I agreed to another." She sat down beside my bag, leaning forward to unfasten the straps of the heeled sandals she wore with dark jeans and a high-collared blouse to hide the hickey I had given her.

"Cool."

*Hmph.*

It wasn't. As shitty as it was, a little part of me had been hoping Preston would be the same jerk I knew back in college, be the worst date possible, and send Gabi back to me

needing a shoulder to cry on. The news about the second date had to be my punishment for those ugly thoughts.

Gabi rolled her eyes as I dropped my towel to don the boxers I had finally spotted in the bottom of my suitcase. “Did you have to do that out here?”

“Nothing you haven’t seen before, Gabi.”

“I’m going to bed.” She stood, shoes in one hand, and started toward her bedroom door.

I grabbed her other hand as she passed me, stopping her exit. “Hey... I know I crossed a line in the bathroom earlier. I just wanted to tell you I was sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything I wasn’t perfectly willing to let you to do, Terrence. You’re good. *We’re* good.” Gabi smiled at me, and then pushed herself up on her toes to place a kiss on my cheek. Our eyes met when she stepped back, and I was surprised to see a hint of sadness behind them.

“Gab—”

“Goodnight, Terrence. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She was disappearing into her bedroom before I even realized I wasn’t holding her hand anymore.



“Terrence. Hey, what’s up with you, bruh?”

I scowled at Dorian in the semi-darkness of the crowded strip club as I leaned back into my seat at the circular booth. He motioned up at the nearly naked woman hanging from the pole installed in the middle of the table. “All of this in your face, and you’re sitting there looking bored. What’s your problem?”

“I *am* bored— no offense,” I added, offering the dancer the handful of singles I had pulled from the ATM. She shrugged as she accepted the bills, then climbed down from the table, ignoring Dorian’s protests as she walked away. “Does this not get old to you?”

“Man, *hell no*.” Dorian shook his head, swallowing the last of his drink before he motioned for a waitress. “I’m not at the hospital getting thrown up on by kids, I’ve got my best friend with me, and all the naked ass I could possibly want to see in front of me. I’ll never get tired of this.”

I shook my head as he ordered several more shots. “I can’t say the same, D.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’d rather be hugged up with your ex.”

“What? Nah, man. I’m not even thinking about Gabi right now.”

“Then how do you know I was talking about *that* ex?” Dorian asked, grinning. “Maybe I was talking about Sabrina. Which... speak of the damn devil.”

I followed Dorian’s gaze straight to Sabrina, who was sauntering over to our table wearing a red dress that she had to have been poured into. She was easily one of the top five sexiest women in the room, and based on the sway of her hips as she approached, she knew it.

“Mr. Mills,” she said, barely tossing a glance in Dorian’s direction as she focused in on me.

He raised an eyebrow as he looked from me to Sabrina, then laughed. “Ms. Wilson. Why don’t I leave you two alone?”

*Damnit, Dorian.*

“That would be wonderful, Dorian. Maybe you can keep my friends over there company.” She motioned toward the table she had come from, where two other attractive women sat.

Grinning, Dorian winked at me as he stood from the table. “Don’t mind if I do.”

I blew out a heavy sigh as he disappeared. He knew damned well I didn’t want to be left alone with Sabrina, wearing a dress that was barely covering her ass.

“So... the strip club, huh?” She slid into the booth beside me, not bothering to pull down her skirt when it hiked up over her thighs. “You know you could have just called me if you wanted to see a show, Terrence.”

“I appreciate the offer Sabrina,” I said, ignoring the hand that she placed high on my thigh. “But I’m gonna have to pass.”

She groaned, practically pushing herself into my lap before she responded. “What’s going on with you? We were good until last year.”

“We were going through the motions until last year.” I gently pushed her off my lap, moving away to put some

distance between us.

“So, let’s make it real this time.”

I shook my head. “Sabrina... we both know what it really was.”

“No, I think I need you to explain,” she snapped, crossing her legs.

“You’re gonna act like we were ever supposed to do anything more than casually date? What was it that you said, something about wanting to keep your freedom? Well, you’ve got it. I don’t know what you’re looking for from me.”

“That’s what it was, at first. Until it became more.”

“Yeah, when you found out I was being considered for partner. What, did you think I didn’t notice?”

Sabrina narrowed her eyes, cocking her head to the side as she sucked her teeth. “Terrence, your perception doesn’t automatically equal reality.”

“Oh, come on, sweetheart. You were ready for a ring all of a sudden when you thought I might become a partner at the firm, then when the promotion went to someone else, you fell back into the ‘let’s not rush things’ act. That’s when you wanted to start making disrespectful comments about the

mother of my child. Now, my name is back in the ring for partner and here you come again. Not this time, Sabrina. You like to hitch yourself to whatever opportunity you can find, which is fine; *I* just don't want any part of it."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Terrence. You and I both know you *never* had a complaint about me being 'opportunistic' back when we were humping like rabbits. Your little *baby momma* must have finally given you some hope after all of these years, huh?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business, Sabrina."

"You're right," she scoffed. "It's not. I'll see you at the office, Mr. Whitaker."

When she was gone, I blew out a heavy sigh of relief. Even work encounters had become a draining experience with Sabrina, which is exactly why I shouldn't have been dating a coworker. I had lucked up with Gabi. She was an anomaly.

"You look like you really enjoyed that," Dorian said sarcastically as he returned to the table. "You two have fun?"

"Kiss my ass, bruh."

Dorian chuckled. "Touchy, touchy. Are you gonna keep claiming nothing is bothering you?"

I sighed again, then swallowed one of the whiskey shots the waitress had just delivered to our table. “She went on a date while I was there.”

“Who, Gabi? *Ouch*. So that’s why you’ve been moping around like somebody kicked your puppy for the last two weeks. Let me guess...he’s a senator or some shit, right? To have you *this* sick about it?”

“What? No, it’s fucking Preston Parker. They work at the same law firm.”

The grin slipped from Dorian’s face. “The one we went to school with?” His jaw tensed when I nodded. “I was hoping somebody would have killed his ass by now.”

“If he does anything to Gabi, I might have to grant that wish for you. I don’t trust him.”

“Did you tell Gabi?”

“Not yet,” I said, running my fingers along the edge of the empty shot glass. “It was just their first date, and you know how Gabi is. If she feels like I’m trying to tell her what to do —”

“—she’ll rebel. Gotcha.”

“Besides that, I don’t want her to think that I’m just talking shit about him to get her back.”

Dorian lifted an eyebrow at me.

“That might have *some* validity,” I admitted. “But Dorian, you know like I know, Preston is not somebody I want my daughter *or* Gabi around.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I have no idea.” I dropped my head, massaging my temples to stave off the headache I could already feel starting between my eyes. “Gabi is *smart*. I think she’ll see through his bullshit.”

“Yeah, but how much damage will he do in the meantime? I mean... think about it Terrence, he *has* to be up to something. Gabi’s been there in Dallas what, four years now? His ass has probably been there the whole time too, and he just now decides to ask her out? What’s different now? What changed that all of a sudden, he has to have the woman who just happens to have a child with *you*.”

I shrugged. “There was never a problem with me and Preston, he hated *your* ass.”

Dorian swallowed two shots of his own before he spoke. “Wrong. I know— or *knew* — him well. He had beef with me, so by default, he had beef with you. That’s how he operates. I’m telling you, don’t turn your back on him, man. If you don’t want Gabi to get burned, you’d better get her out of that fire.”

“So I’ll win her back. I know Gabi. If we’re back together, she’s not gonna give Preston any steam.”

“You make it sound easy, but she’s still in Dallas, single, and you’re still in Atlanta, single.”

“I’ll get her back.”

“Preston moves fast.”

“So, I’ll move faster.”

— *Gabi* —

*Saved by the bell*, I thought, shooting an apologetic grin up at Preston as I fished my cell phone from my purse. I assumed the scowl he gave me in return had a lot to do with his interrupted plan to kiss me. He had been much too close, breathing too heavily in my ear as he dropped me off at my door for his intentions to be anything else. I suppose he thought he deserved at least a little peck. We’d been out three



times in the last two weeks, and even after my heavy initial flirting, the most touching I'd allowed was a little hot and heavy hand-holding.

I hated to admit it, but Terrence had gotten to me. Not just his comments about Preston's character, either. Those were bad enough, and had me giving Preston a little extra scrutiny, but really, it was his revelation of wanting to get back together that gave me pause about pursuing anything serious with someone else. On one hand, we should probably both move on. We tried it, it didn't work out, and now we had gotten to a good place, where we could successfully co-parent our daughter. Why mess up a good thing?

*Because I still love him.*

Seeing his face lighting the screen of my phone, I wondered what he could want. It was nearly midnight on a Friday, and Joci was in Dallas with me. What could he need to discuss at this time of night?

"Who is that?" I glanced up to see Preston peeking over my shoulder at the phone.

"Oh... um, it's my daughter's father calling," I said, hiding the screen from his view as I turned to face him again.

“You have a child with Terrence Whitaker?”

*Shit.*

“Um, yeah. Do you know him?”

Man, I hoped my acting skills were as good as I thought they were. Preston knew that I had a child, but I hadn't seen a need to discuss paternity with him, and I *definitely* hadn't mentioned Terrence's cryptic comments about their history.

“You could say that. I went to college with him.”

“Oh, ok. Small world.”

“Indeed... *Terrence Whitaker*... I never would have thought.”

I lifted an eyebrow. Something about his tone was bothering me. “Never would have thought *what?*”

“Terrence just always had this stuck up, high and mighty, better than everybody else kind of thing going on, and I couldn't see you going for somebody like that.”

“He's not stuck up,” I snapped, crossing my arms as heat rose to my cheeks. “He's confident, and reserved, but he's a good person.”

Preston raised his hands in a defensive pose. “I don’t mean any offense; I was just telling you my impression of him back when I knew him.”

“Well that’s not the Terrence that *I* know.” I rolled my eyes as I turned away and began digging through my purse for my keys. How dare he insult my... my... what? I was entirely too offended about what truthfully *wasn’t* really an insult, just Preston’s own observation.

“Hey,” he said, grabbing my hand to turn me around. “I’m sorry, okay? I really wasn’t trying to—”

“I know. You don’t have anything to apologize for, I overreacted. It’s just... Terrence is an *excellent* father, and he’s my friend. I got defensive. *Overly* defensive, and I’m sorry.”

Preston smiled as he pulled me closer. “So you and me... we’re good?”

“Yeah,” I said, returning his smile. “We’re good.”

I braced myself as he lowered his mouth to mine, knowing that my body wouldn’t respond. Instead, warmth spread through me as he gripped my waist, covering my lips with a kiss that created an unexpected spark in my chest. I was

honestly a little disappointed when he pulled away, giving me another kiss on the forehead before he stepped back.

“Goodnight Gabrielle.”

“Goodnight.”

As soon the door closed behind me, I blew out a heavy sigh, a mixture of confusion and relief. I waited until I was showered and comfortable in my bed to call Terrence back. A glance at the clock told me it was nearly 1AM, and I almost felt bad for calling so late, until I remembered that it had been midnight when he called me. Terrence was a night owl. He would be up.

“Took you long enough, Beautiful.” My breath caught in my throat at the sound of his voice, low and husky with drowsiness.

“Whatever, Terrence.” I ignored the sudden swarm of butterflies in my stomach. “What are you doing up anyway?”

“Working, waiting on you to call me back.”

Engaging the speaker function on my phone, I laid it on the pillow beside me and turned to my side. “Do you ever just call it a night early and go to bed?”

“Not really, but you know that.”

“Yeah... So, did you need to talk to me about something? Joci isn't with me, she's at a sleepover.”

Terrence chuckled. “Yeah, she called me before she went to bed, talking my ear off about everything she did today. You know she calls every day, right?”

“I know, I look at her little call history. That's what you get for getting a cell phone for a five year old.”

“Yeah, yeah. What are *you* doing up?”

“Calling you back, duh.”

“You know what I mean. You *always* answer the phone, so I'm assuming you were occupied before?”

“I was...”

“Out with Daniella?”

“No,” I said, not wanting to mention Preston.

“Terrence, did you need something?”

“So what are you doing now?”

I rolled my eyes. Why was he ignoring my question?

“I'm in the bed, what else would I be doing?”

“Oooh. What are you wearing?”

“A big faded tee shirt, big faded sweats, big granny panties, and big faded socks.”

“Why are you lying, Gabi?” Terrence laughed. “You know damn well you aren’t wearing all of that. The tee shirt, *maybe*. And it’s probably one of mine that you stole.”

“I didn’t steal anything from you,” I said, grinning down at the Emory logo emblazoned across the front of the oversized shirt. I had worn his shirts to bed the entire time we were together, so maybe a few *did* end up coming to Dallas with me when I moved. I don’t even know what made me put it on, but inexplicably, I was glad that I had.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Yeah, right. I think you’re doing this on purpose.”

“What am I doing?”

He sighed, then lowered his voice “Trying to have me on a plane to Texas to spank your naughty ass. You’re not slick, calling me with your sex voice on, in the bed in nothing but one of my shirts.”

“Does that turn you on, Terrence?”

“Hell. Yes.”

“You should go find yourself a pretty young thing at the club or something then.”

“I don’t pick up ‘pretty young things’ at the club.”

“You picked up *this* pretty young thing at a club,” I teased, reminding him of the night we met. “That’s how I found out about your secret peppermint stash. Do you still keep your glove compartment full of those things?”

“I do. I can’t help it; it’s a habit I picked up from my mom when she was alive. She kept a purse full of them.”

“Oh... You never told me that.”

He blew out a breath before he spoke. “Well, Beautiful, there’s a lot we never got a chance to learn about each other. We were only together a few months when we got pregnant, then you were sick pretty much that whole time, remember?”

“Vividly,” I replied, my stomach flipping at just the thought of my hellish pregnancy, most of which was spent either with my head in the toilet, or in the bed, too weak to move because I couldn’t even keep down water. “You took really good care of me though.”

“I had to; I hated seeing you like that. Maybe if I had kept that up, instead of—”

“Don’t even bring it up... we’re good.”

“We’re *not*. Two weeks ago, you stood in my face and told me you didn’t trust me.”

I deactivated the speaker, putting the phone to my ear as I turned to my other side. “That’s not what I said. I *do* trust you, just—”

“Not with your heart... right?”

When I didn’t respond after a few minutes, he spoke again, with obvious strain in his voice. “Tell me what I have to do, Gabi.”

“Terrence...”

“I’m serious, tell me what I can do to make you change your mind about me.”

“I don’t know!” *Damn, that came out harsher than intended.* “I don’t know,” I repeated, softening my words. “It’s not that there’s something for me to change my mind about, it’s just... I don’t want to be foolish again. I *can’t* be foolish again.”

“I’ve grown up, Gabi. I’m not the same guy.”

“I know that,” I assured him. “Neither of us was even looking for the type of commitment that we ended up in, and



unfortunately, it wasn't the fairy tale we thought it was going to be. We messed around and got pregnant, so we tried to make it work. If it wasn't for Joci, we may not even—”

“Don't say that.” I could hear the frustration in his voice. “We had a connection, even from that first night. Even when we tried to fight it. Even when it seemed like everything was working against us. Don't downplay that. We're supposed to be together.”

“So what, I should go running back into your arms just because you say so? Were you thinking about how we were meant to be when you were with Sabrina? Don't act like this is all on me, because it's not. I could have gotten over the other stuff...I *would* have, if I knew we were in this together. You say you never slept with her while we were together, fine. But it doesn't change the fact that we were supposed to be a team, and you went and got yourself another partner. I can't pretend like that doesn't still hurt.” I shoved angry tears from my eyes, cursing myself for losing my temper.

“So...you *don't* trust me, and I get it. I just wish there was something I could do to make you believe me when I tell you that I'm sorry about that.”

“I know that. It’s not *about* that. My primary focus is taking care of Joci, then myself. It doesn’t make sense to go back to a situation that ended in heartache.”

Silence lingered in the air for so long after my last statement that I almost thought he had hung up. “Terrence?”

“Hm?”

“Just making sure you’re there... you got quiet on me.”

He chuckled a little. “Well, yeah... You’re pretty much telling me I don’t even have a chance here, Gabi. I don’t know what to say to that.”

“I’m not saying you don’t have a chance,” I said, shaking my head even though he couldn’t see me. “You have just as much chance as anybody.”

*Probably more.*

The truth was that I hadn’t given *anyone* a chance to get that close to me again. I didn’t have the time. Between Joci and my career, I purposely didn’t leave any room for love. Dating? Fine. Anything else? Absolutely not.

But why? If I was really over it, like I claimed to be, why *shouldn’t* I make a place in my life for something more?

Right then, I made a decision to be open to love if it happened,  
but I had to be smart about it.

Getting back with Terrence wouldn't rank very high on  
a list of smart decisions.

Would it?

“Boy, where is my grandbaby?”

I grinned as I pulled my Aunt Rae into a hug, lifting her off of her feet. “I don’t get a ‘hello’ or anything when I come to the door, huh? It’s all ‘where is Joci?’ now.”

As soon as she was back on the ground, she donned an apron that had been resting near the table beside the door. “It’s *been* about Joci. I thought this was one of your weekends?” she asked, picking up a metal bucket.

“It usually is, but remember, Gabi and Joci are on their ‘Girl’s Trip’ in the Bahamas. She wanted to take Joci to the Atlantis resort down there, so we switched weekends since this was the only time she could get away from the firm.”

Aunt Rae nodded as she slid a pair of gardening gloves on her hands.

“Auntie, what are you doing?” I asked, eyeing her baggy, wrinkled attire.

“I’m going outside to weed my flower bed, what does it look like?”

I grabbed her hand as she was heading out of the door. “Wait a minute now, are you sure it’s ok for you to be doing that? You just spent almost a month down with the flu, and you’ve only been over it for a week. I don’t think you need to be out there in the sun working.”

“Have you lost your mind, child?” She snatched her hand away. “Did you forget that *I* am the elder around here?”

“That’s exactly my point,” I said, laughing. “You’re getting older, Auntie, you’ve gotta start taking it a little easier. Please?”

“Terrence, you listen to me. I’m about to go outside and pull up these weeds before your sister gets here with the twins. *She* knows how to bring my grandbabies by here when I want to see them.”

“You see Joci twice a month, plus any other time she’s in Atlanta, and I know she calls you.”

Aunt Rae sucked her teeth. “That’s not the point, boy. The point is, I’m a healthy, grown woman. I can pull up a

few weeds without you acting like I'm outside in the heat of the summer digging trenches.”

“It *is* the heat of the summer auntie.”

“I'm wearing my sun hat.”

“I'll give you thirty minutes.”

“Hour and a half.”

“Forty-five.”

“An hour, and there's *one* slice left of that caramel cake in my fridge.”

“... You've got a deal.”

We shook on it, and then I went to the kitchen to get my cake. It was actually the reason I had stopped by in the first place, since I had just seen Aunt Rae a few days before. She was looking better today than she did then, but I still felt a little uneasy about how well she was *really* doing. After thirty minutes, I decided that I would go and sit out front so that I could watch out for her during the last half of her gardening time. I grabbed a bottle of water for her from the fridge, and then headed out. My fingers were just closing around the doorknob when I hear a scream from outside.

“Are you gonna call Gabi?”

I looked up from the pattern of tiles on the hospital floor to see Tarryn standing over me, holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her outstretched hand. Shaking my head, I accepted the drink from her, using it to warm my hands. “No point in ruining her vacation for nothing. You know Auntie Rae, she’s gonna be fine.”

“Yeah... maybe you’re right,” she said, biting at the corner of her lip as she sat down beside me.

I rested my hand on hers, entwining our fingers. “I know I’m right. There’s not an alternative. The doctor is gonna do what he has to do, and Rae is gonna be fine.” She *had* to be fine. For thirteen years, our Aunt Raelyn had been the closest thing to a parent Tarryn and I had. At 63, she was still vibrant, energetic, and full of life. Not coming out of this procedure wasn’t an option.

“You didn’t find her passed out on the ground clutching her chest though, Terrence. *I* did. Do you have any idea how terrifying that was for me? For the kids?” she asked, referring to my twin nieces, Madison and Marissa. “Auntie Rae *just* got over that flu, and now she has to do this surgery? This isn’t good.”

“It’s just an angioplasty, Tarryn, not even *really* a surgery. They’re just gonna use a little tube to help open up the blood flow in her heart.” I cupped her face in my hands. “You can’t freak out on me, sis. I’m trying to hold it together here... I need you to do the same.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before Tarryn’s face crumpled. “This is all happening way too fast. I was just dropping the twins off so she could watch them while Neil and I went to a movie. We just wanted a date night, this wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“What? I know you aren’t blaming yourself for this.”

“You know how Aunt Rae is, Terrence. She was probably running around, stressing herself out to get her own stuff done before she had to watch the kids. The doctor said that her passing out could be a complication from doing too much after that bad flu. I shouldn’t have even asked her to do th—”

“Tarryn, stop it. If anything, I shouldn’t have let her go out in that sun like that.”

“*Let?*” Tarryn chuckled through her tears. “Now you know can’t nobody tell Raelyn what she can and can’t do.”



“Except Joci. Aunt Rae will do anything that little girl asks her to do.”

“She’s not the only one Joci has wrapped around her finger. I see you *still* haven’t shaved that mess off your face.”

“I’m keeping the beard because *women* like it.”

Tarryn lifted an eyebrow at me. “*Women or Gabi?*”

“Damn, why do y’all act like everything I do is about Gabi?”

“Because it *is*,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “I know for a fact that girl is a sucker for good facial hair. She probably made a comment about— no, she *touched* it, last time you were Dallas, and now you’re hoping she just won’t be able to resist you and this rug on your face.”

“Whatever, Tarryn.” I shook my head, even though her assessment may have been valid. Just a little.

“Don’t whatever me. I don’t know why you two won’t get it together, and *get back together.*”

“Because she doesn’t want to. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“Doesn’t want to, or isn’t ready to?”

“What’s the difference?”

Tarryn nodded. “Touché, little brother. I guess I can’t blame her... you and Rae really did a number on her. If I had known back then I would have shut that shit down. How did y’all decide you were gonna *make* somebody do what you wanted them to do?”

“I didn’t know any better, Sis. I just wanted Joci to have the same kind of childhood we had.”

“Mmhm,” Tarryn said, rolling her eyes. “I think you let Aunt Rae fill your head up with bullshit about mama. I bet she didn’t tell you that mama actually *hated* being a stay at home mom. She had other stuff she wanted to do with her life, but daddy and Rae railroaded her just like you tried to do with Gabi.

“*What?*” I scowled over at Tarryn. “Mama was always smiling, singing, baking, cleaning... she loved being a homemaker.”

“No, she was a good actress, which is exactly what she *really* wanted to do. She got pregnant with me by accident, and it messed up her plans. She didn’t want to be doing the Martha Stewart thing, she just had a good work ethic. And she loved us. Of course *you* don’t remember her

walking around with a frown. She was resigned to her fate by the time you came along.”

“But... why? If she wasn't happy, why did she keep doing it when she didn't have to?”

Tarryn shrugged. “The same reason Gabi did. She loved her family, and she wanted what was best, but didn't know what that was. Daddy and Aunt Rae grew up with a certain family dynamic, so of course they thought it was the best way. And you know Aunt Rae was never able to have kids of her own, so she kinda lived vicariously through Mama.”

“How do you even know any of this, Tarryn?” I asked, searching my mind for evidence of what she was saying.

“Because Mama told me, right before she found out about the cancer. She was just waiting for you to graduate high school, and she was going to try to pick her dream of being an actress back up. Obviously, she never got the chance to do it.”

I stared at Tarryn, waiting for her to tell me that this was all just a joke. How could I have possibly been *so* wrong in my perception of my mother?

“Terrence, uh-uh.” Tarryn grabbed my hand, squeezing my fingers. “I know your ‘over-analyzing’ look when I see it. Cut it out,” she demanded as she released her hold. “She may not have liked being Suzy Homemaker, but she *loved* us, and don’t you dare doubt it. She told me all the time that we were the best things to happen to her.”

“Even if it meant sacrificing her dream?”

“Yep. But it wasn’t until later that she realized she never *had* to. We would have been perfectly fine, and she wouldn’t have loved us any less if she’d had people around her to support her dream. I mean, do you think Gabi is a bad mom because she has a career outside of the home?”

“Hell no,” I said, louder than intended. “Gabi is a great mother, and she takes excellent care of Joci.”

“Exactly. You and Rae were doing all of that huffing puffing, trying to tell Gabi how to be a good mom when she didn’t even need that. Now that she’s doing her own thing, she’s *thriving*. Now, just think of how happy mom could have been without that interference.”

I slumped back in my chair, exhausted by this new information. “If I had known all of this, I never would have

tried to make her be a stay at home mom. We would probably still be together now.”

“Bingo.” Tarryn blew out a heavy sigh as she crossed her legs. “If you had talked to me about it then, I could have told you. Instead, you were conspiring with Auntie. Y’all are both lucky that Gabi is so forgiving, because *I* would probably just now be speaking to either of you again behind that bullshit.”

“Yeah... we are.”

“You should call her, Terrence. They were getting close again, she would want to know that Aunt Rae was in the hospital. This is serious.”

I shook my head. “Tarryn, I told you I’m not ruining their trip. Aunt Rae is gonna be fine.”

— Gabi —

“Oh my God!” I pulled the phone away from me and looked at it, wondering if I had correctly heard what had been said. After a few seconds, I finally put the phone back to my ear. “You are *so nasty*,” I admonished Preston, joining him in laughter. It was nearly midnight, and he had just spent the last

fifteen minutes explaining, in detail, what he wanted to do to me when I got back from my little vacation with Joci.

She was fast asleep in the bedroom of our suite, while I sat on the couch in the living room, listening to Preston flirt within an inch of his life. He was campaigning *hard* to finally get invited into my bed.

“This is your fault, you know,” he said in response to my accusation of his nastiness. “I wouldn’t be saying such lewd things on the phone if you’d let me do them to you in person.”

“You know I have a three month rule, Preston. We’ve talked about this already; you’ve got two more months to go.” That was lie. That was a *big* lie. I had no such rule, at least not before I started dating *him*. I liked Preston well enough—a lot, actually — but the fact that *none* of the people I trusted who knew him before I did had anything good to say about him gave me pause. The latest had been Regina, who remembered him from college as well. She, Dorian, Terrence, and apparently Preston, had all attended Emory during the same time, and her memories were far from fond. According to her, Dorian and Preston had shared a similar playboy reputation, but the difference was that Preston was also well

known as a jerk, in a major way. Of course I knew that people could change, but some things are just a part of who you are. In my experience... assholes were just that. Assholes.

But, he hadn't treated *me* with anything short of adoration, so I was content to spend time with him. I was biding my time, trying to see if I caught a glimmer of what the people who knew him before saw. He was well known and well respected in the law community in Dallas, and Daniella was the only one from the firm who seemed to not be impressed. Still, I knew that sex would mark a definite change in the nature of our relationship, and I wasn't willing to go there while I was having doubts about his character. Or while I was still in limbo regarding my feelings for Terrence.

Right on cue, my phone beeped to let me know I had another call coming in. Of course, it was Terrence. I smiled at the new picture of him with his longer beard. God, he was sexy.

"Preston, can you hold on for a second? Someone is calling me, and I need to get this."

"This late?" he asked, an edge of irritation lacing his voice. "It's not your ex again is it?"

“What do you mean ‘again’?”

“I mean this isn’t the first time he’s called you this late at night, and your daughter wasn’t with him either time. And that’s just the times *I* know about. Is this something that happens a lot?”

My eyebrows bunched together in a scowl as he spoke. “Um... Preston, I fail to see why the father of my child calling me at *any* time is a problem for you. He knows that I’m probably awake at this time, since we’re both usually up working. It’s a good time to catch each other, *not* that this is something I should have to explain to you, because it’s not your business.”

“It *is* my business, if we’re going to become serious about whatever we’re doing.”

“Yes, *if*. Because it’s definitely not going to happen if you’re going to have a problem with me speaking to Terrence. We have a daughter together, so my connection to him is forever. We made a commitment to raise our child in the healthiest way possible, and the only way to do that is if we maintain a relationship with each other.”

“So you two are in a relationship now?”



I rolled my eyes as the phone began beeping again. I had missed the first call, and Terrence was calling back. “Don’t be obtuse, Preston. Yes, we’re friends and co-parents. Both of which require communication, neither of which *you’re* going to control. I get it, okay? Me being close with my ex could be uncomfortable for you, but my daughter is a priority. If you can’t accept that, then—”

“I can. I’ll be honest and say that I don’t trust his intentions, but I’m not intimidated. I’ve got more than enough to offer, so I don’t mind a little competition.”

*You’re in for more than a ‘little’ competition with Terrence, sir, and you just lost major points with your whining.*

“Good. Now, he’s calling a third time, so I have to let you go so I can answer. I’ll see you in a few days when I get back, ok?”

“Yeah. See you then, Gorgeous.”

I quickly switched lines, hoping to catch Terrence before my voicemail picked up again. *Shit.* I ended the call when I heard silence on the other end, then dialed him back, wondering what could possibly be so important that he was calling me in the Bahamas in the middle of the night. The strained tone of his voice when he answered immediately

clued me in that something was wrong. My heart clenched in my chest as I listened to what he was telling me. When he finally stopped talking, I was only able to say four words before I had to hang up the phone to avoid giving in to the tears prickling behind my eyes.

“I’m on my way.”

— & —

“I’m glad you came.”

I looked up from my hands when Terrence finally spoke. His voice was barely above a whisper, and so choked with emotion that tears immediately sprang to my eyes. He was sitting in silence in the semi-darkness of his childhood bedroom, and had been for at least the twenty minutes I’d been standing in the door.

I pushed out a heavy breath, and then strode over to him, stopping just before I reached his slumped form on the edge of the bed. Fighting against the heaviness in my own chest, I tentatively placed my hands on his shoulders, urging him to look up at me.

“I’m tired of losing my family, Gabi.”

I stepped between his legs, and he laid his head against my chest as I wrapped him in my arms. He had been seemingly stoic all day, holding himself together for the sake of his family, but now, I just gripped him into me tighter as wetness spread across the front of my dress. I choked back my own tears. I would have my own private time to grieve later. This time was his.

When his emotions had subsided, he gazed up at me as if he were noticing me for the first time. “You interrupted your vacation to bring Jocelyn?”

I gently ran my thumbs along his thick black eyebrows, an action that had always worked to soothe him when we were together. “Not just to bring Jocelyn. Aunt Rae was family to me.”

“She thought of you like a daughter, you know? Especially once we gave her a ‘grandbaby’. You know Tarryn couldn’t do anything right until she had the twins.”

I laughed— the memory of Aunt Rae constantly harassing Tarryn to have children was a welcome break in the aura of sadness surrounding the funeral and burial. “She was so happy when she saw those two little heartbeats on that ultrasound screen.”

“Yeah, and Tarryn passed out.”

We shared another laugh, until Terrence gripped me at the waist, tugging me forward. “I’m *really* glad you came,” he repeated. I swallowed hard as he raised his hands to my shoulders, and then cupped my face, gazing up at me with glossy eyes. As he lowered my mouth to his, my heartbeat boomed in my ears, so loud that I barely heard my common sense speaking to me.

*Gabi, you know you can't do this.*

“Terrence, no.” I pushed his shoulders back, creating the distance needed to break the emotional spell. “I’m,” I cleared my throat, “I’m dating someone.”

I caught the flicker of surprise in his eyes, but it was quickly hidden, replaced again by the sadness they held the moment before. “Preston? I didn’t know you were still...”

“No one does. It’s nothing to apologize for.” I stepped back, suddenly aware of just how close I’d been standing. I had been careful not to even mention Preston to Terrence, knowing how he felt about him.

Terrence lowered his hands to the bed, gripping the navy blue comforter beneath his fingers. “Is it serious?”

“I don’t know yet. It’s... new.”

He wet his lips as he nodded in understanding. “So you really like him?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, you’ve just got a thing for lawyers, huh?” He smiled as he reached forward to take my hand, giving it a slight squeeze, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

I shifted my head from side to side, pretending to think about it. “I guess you could say that.”

“I’m happy for you, Gabi. Really.”

“Thank you.”

He released my hand and then lay back, with his hands crossed behind his head. “Has Jocelyn met him?”

“No, not yet. It’s way too soon. But, she knows that I’ve been going out with a ‘friend’ whom she hasn’t met.”

Terrence laughed as he pulled himself back into a seated position. “She’s five, Gabi. She’s smart enough to pick up on you having a little boyfriend.”

“I’ll just pretend otherwise until I’m ready to introduce them, if that happens.”

“*If* it happens?”

“Yes, *if*. Not when.” I sat down on the bed beside him. “You know, you never told me what happened with you and Sabrina. Why did you break up with her?”

“So you’re just gonna shift this over to me?”

“I am.”

“Oh, ok. Sabrina.” He cocked his head to the side as he thought about her. As far as I knew, she was the only serious girlfriend he’d had since we ended our own relationship. I actually liked Sabrina, once I got past blaming her for the end of me and Terrence. She was always genuinely good to Joci, and she seemed to be good *for* Terrence, until he abruptly ended things with her.

“Are you gonna say anything other than her name?” I prompted him, poking him in the side.

“I’m thinking, man. Trying to see how to say it.”

“Just *say* it.”

He shrugged, then pushed out a sigh before he spoke. “Sabrina wanted something that I wasn’t willing to give her.”

I raised my hand in front of me, twisting it back and forth with my fingers spread. “She wanted you to ‘put a ring

on it'. Why wouldn't you? She seemed wonderful."

"Things aren't always what they seem. But... a little over five years ago, I met and fell in love with the 'prototype'. Sabrina didn't live up to that standard for me, so I had to let her go, for both of our sake. It was amicable... mostly."

I rolled my eyes. "So *you* say. Now this 'prototype' you speak of..."

"Hush, Gabi. You know I'm talking about you. When is your flight back to Dallas?" Terrence asked, placing a hand on my knee.

"Tomorrow afternoon. Joci starts kindergarten Monday, so I need to finish preparing for that, and get some sleep."

"Let me take you ladies to breakfast, and then I'll drive you to the airport. Is that ok?"

"You know I don't turn down free meals, Terrence. What time?"

He laughed, then pressed a kiss into my forehead.

"Let's say 9am."

"It's a date," I agreed. I tried to stand, but he pulled back down to the bed, practically into his lap. "What are you

doing, Terrence?”

“I’m about to kiss you. A *real* kiss.” He snaked an arm around my waist, bringing me closer to his body. Despite my weak — I should say silent, nonexistent— outward protest, inside I was quickly melting into a puddle. I knew he was hurting about Aunt Rae, and just looking for comfort, but the heat radiating between our bodies had nothing to do with that. My heart raced as he cupped my chin with his other hand, holding me still as he covered my lips with his. Why did being in his arms have to feel so good? So *right*? A surge of guilt rushed through me as he pressed his tongue insistently against the crease of my mouth, trying to get me to open up to him. This was exactly what Preston was concerned would happen.

“Terrence, I *can’t*,” I said, pushing away from him. I stood, with my back to him as I spoke. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

And then I got out of there as fast as I could, fleeing before I *really* did something that would keep me from being able to look Preston in the eye.



“I’m about to make your day, Beautiful.”

I looked up to see Preston striding toward my desk after walking into my office unannounced. He was looking good, like always, in an impeccably pressed teal blue oxford that contrasted perfectly against his dark skin, with his tie loosened around his neck.

Daniella was a few footsteps behind him, her pretty face distorted into an angry mask. “I’m sorry, *nena*, I told him you were busy, but he just barged in anyway, like the—”

“It’s ok, Dani.”

She tossed her head, sending thick black waves of hair over her shoulder. “Are you sure? Because I can have se —”

I stood from my seat, holding out my hands in what I hoped was a calming manner. “I’m sure. It’s fine.”

Daniella gave me a slight nod, and then turned on her platform heels to give Preston the stink eye as she stalked out of my office.

“I... don’t feel very safe right now,” Preston laughed as he sat down in one of the upholstered chairs facing my desk.

“Smart man. I don’t think Daniella is very fond of you,” I replied. “What’s with the tie, and the rolled up sleeves? I’ve never seen you so... unkempt at the office.”

He flashed that knee-weakening smile at me again before he spoke. “Working hard, baby. That’s what I came to talk to you about. We just got a new client, and I’m not talking about another pop star. These people are a *big deal*. Come sit down, let me show you.”

I joined him on the other side of the desk, taking the empty seat beside him as he flipped open the file he’d brought in with him.

“We’re representing Dexter Technologies.”

“*The* Dexter Technologies? As in, *William Dexter’s* Dexter Technologies?” I asked, my eyes growing wide as I bit down on the tip of the pen I was holding.

“You’ve got it. He and his wife were business partners, but they got divorced last year. She moved away and started her own technology company, and now she’s suing Dexter Technologies, claiming that they stole proprietary software from her. Only problem is, half of the stuff she used to build her company is owned by DT. So now, we’re gonna get the pleasure of handing Teresa Dexter and her copyright infringing company their asses in court. Or, taking it from them, depending on how you look at it.”

I didn’t bother trying to hide the smile that wanted to spread across my face. This client wasn’t just a ‘big deal’. This was a *big fucking deal*, a la Joe Biden. Dexter Technologies was quickly becoming a well-known tech firm. If we could build a relationship before they became so big that they needed a huge legal team...we could *be* that legal team. “Preston,” I said, grabbing his hand. “This is *amazing*. I understand why they picked *you*, but... *I’m* still considered a rookie.”

“Gabi, the board of directors asked me who I wanted on my team for this. *I* chose you.” He brought my hand up to place a kiss on my palm, but I pulled it back as I leaned away from him.

“I hope you don’t think this is going to make me give you any ass, Preston.”

He chuckled as he reached up to cup my chin. “It has nothing to do with that. I’ve only got a month left, I can make it *that* long,” he joked. “I chose you because you’re passionate about what you do, and you’re good at it. Great at it, actually. You would be an asset to my team, and I want you there at my side.”

*Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Parker.*

“In that case, I’d love to be a part of this with you.”

I may have been a little unsure about a relationship with Preston, but I was certainly no fool— *anymore*. This one lawsuit, for this one client could potentially launch my career into orbit, and I wasn’t about to pass up the chance.

“Excellent.” Preston gave me a lingering kiss on the cheek before he stood up, leaving the file on my desk. “That one is yours to look over, and I’ll have my secretary contact Daniella to coordinate our schedules. This should be fun.”

I agreed with him as we said our goodbyes, and when the door closed behind him, I rushed to my desk to look over the thick file. This could be the biggest case of my career, and

I was excited to get started. That is, until my eyes landed on the line listing the firm that would be representing William Dexter's wife.

“You've gotta be freaking kidding me.”

— Terrence —

“Knock-knock.”

I suppressed a groan at the sound of Sabrina's voice coming from the direction of my door. I had enough of a headache, and I had no delusions that an encounter with her was going to make it any better. Maybe if I just ignored her, she would go aw—

“Terrence, I know you hear me.”

*Shit.*

“How can I help you, Ms. Wilson?”

She sucked her teeth as she sauntered into my office, perching on the desk in a pose intended to give me a full view of the long chocolate legs she was barely covering with her skirt. “What's with formalities, *Mr. Whitaker?*”

“Just trying to be professional. Is that a problem?”

“It wouldn’t be if that were true, but it’s more than that. You’ve been acting pretty stank toward me for the last few months.”

I finally looked up, tossing my pen onto the desk. “If not sleeping with you anymore is what you call ‘acting stank’ then yeah, Sabrina, I guess I have.”

She smirked, pushing a handful of her bob behind her ear as she leaned closer to me over the desk. “You know I like it when you get riled up, Terrence. That’s when you *really* fu—”

“Did you want something, Sabrina? Cause if not, I really have other shit to do.” For the last month, since Aunt Rae’s funeral, I had been throwing myself into work. It was the only way I could keep myself from giving in to grief I was feeling over the loss. Sabrina’s antics were interrupting my attempts to numb my pain, and it was quickly fraying at my nerves.

“Whatever,” she snapped, slapping the folder she’d been carrying onto my desk. “We got a response back today from opposing counsel in the Theresa Dexter suit, and it seems that Dexter Technologies brought out the big guns.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Elaborate.”

“Atkins & Associates, out of Dallas. Lead counsel is Preston Parker, whose kind of a big deal over there.”

*Fuck Preston Parker. Motherfucker wins three or twenty big cases and people act like he's a damn legend.*

“I don't see why *we* need two lawyers for this.”

“Well, *they* have two. It's Parker, and then let's see...Gabrielle Jacobs as co-counsel. Wait a minute... *Gabrielle Jacobs?* Isn't that your little baby momma?” She broke into an annoying fit of giggles.

I rolled my eyes at Sabrina's awful acting. She knew that little tidbit before she even walked in. “Yes, Gabrielle is the mother of my daughter. I don't understand what's funny though.”

“Of course you don't. *I'll explain.* It's hi-la-ri-ous to me that a person with money as long as William Dexter would allow himself to have such sub-par legal representation. I mean, Preston? Sure, he's proven, he's a shark. But this *Gabi?* Oh please. I know you care for her as the mother of your child, but if we're completely honest... let's just say law might not be her calling.”

A deep throb began pounding at my temple as I listened to her speak.

“Then you obviously don’t know shit about Gabi.”

She shrugged. “I know that I’ve beat her once already, when I took *you* from her.”

“*Took me from her?* Is that what you think happened?”

“Oh, I *know* that’s what happened,” she said, smirking as she kicked off one of her stilettos and ran her foot along the front of my thigh. “I came to work for P&G, saw something I wanted— you— so I took it. You were *so* vulnerable, and oh my God, *so* naive. It was kind of incredible that a man your age, as fine as you are, as successful as you are... you were so damn pure, and I had *such* a good time corrupting you. There you were, pouring your heart out about how overwhelmed you were, how you were just trying to do right by your family— and what was it you said? ‘Give Gabrielle the lifestyle she deserves’. Hmph.” She stopped speaking to give an exaggerated roll of her eyes. “You were killing yourself at this office to take care of her, while she sat at home, watching TV, getting fat, and nursing the baby. Or at least, that was *my* assessment of the situation. When you



showed me that big-assed engagement ring you were planning to give her, well... *come on* Terrence. I kind of *had* to take you from her. I mean, I wanted that ring, and she obviously wasn't taking care of things at home, or you would've been there, instead of with me."

"Yeah, but you never did get it, did you?" I asked, pushing her foot out of my lap. "Cause I knew you weren't shit then and I know you aren't shit now. Yeah, I was stupid. *I* messed up. You're crazy as hell if you think *you* took anything from Gabi. She's moved on, she's happy, yet *you're* sitting on my desk with your legs wide open practically begging me to fuck you again." I leaned back in my chair, smirking at the scowl that covered Sabrina's face. "You're so proud that you played a part in disrupting our family. Why? You still didn't get what you wanted. That ring finger of yours is still bare as hell, and now that you've dropped this little gem of information, that you *purposely* tried to break us up... well, baby girl, you won't even get me to *sneeze* in your direction."

"Whatever, Terrence." She hopped down from my desk and shoved her foot back into her shoe. "She ran away without even putting up a fight when she found out that you and I were one late night away from getting hot and heavy.

She doesn't like a challenge. Say what you want, I'm still gonna rip her ass up at that conference room table next week. I doubt she'll be in any shape to take this to court."

I shook my head as Sabrina stomped towards the exit. "I'm telling you this for your own good, so you don't embarrass yourself. I suggest you ask around about Gabi, because you've really got the wrong impression. She will chew your ass up, spit you out, and not even wipe her mouth after, to make sure everybody knows not to fuck with her. You're making a mistake if you underestimate her."

"I'll take my chances," Sabrina shot back as slammed my door behind her.

*Tried to warn you.*

Even though I didn't want my client to lose, I would be lying if I said I wouldn't be looking forward to seeing Sabrina and Gabi face off, only because Sabrina seemed so cocky. It annoyed the hell out of me that she thought she had one-upped Gabi.

I hoped Gabi ate her alive.

— Gabi —

"So... are you gonna be able to handle this?"

I blew a heavy sigh into the phone, thinking about the question Regina had just asked.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked, flopping back into the pillows. Regina knew that in just a few hours, I would be joining Preston on a flight to Atlanta to meet with Theresa Dexter’s legal team. I was nervous as hell. I hardly ever got nervous about these things, I got in the *zone*. But, I’d never gone up against Terrence, and I’d never even been in the same room as Sabrina.

I didn’t know much about her, other than the fact that she’d, perhaps unwittingly, played a part in the demise of my relationship with Terrence. But that wasn’t *her* fault, it was his. I couldn’t hold it against her.

That didn’t mean I wouldn’t light her ass up in court though.

Terrence was a different story. My palms were sweating just thinking about going through depositions with him, and it had nothing to do with being afraid he would beat me. I was, however, afraid that I would be so turned on from watching him in action that I wouldn’t be able to think straight. I shared that thought with Regina and she laughed at me until she was choking on her tears.

“Gabi, you are such a damn fool,” she said, coughing to clear her throat. “You really think you’re gonna be in court with your panties wet?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” I replied, laughing along with her. “After court some days I would drag Terrence back to his office, lock that door, and girl, we would go at it.”

“Nasty asses. So... Tell me... Do you have that same feeling with Preston?”

I immediately sobered, and sat up on the bed. “Well... not *exactly*, but I’m definitely attracted to him. It’s just not like it was with Terrence.”

“Interesting...”

“Was does *that* mean?” I asked, sucking my teeth.

“Don’t play dumb, Gabi. I remember Preston from college, and he was fine as hell then, so I’m sure he’s fine as hell now. Definitely the kind of guy that could generate a little throbbing *down there*, but you’re telling me he doesn’t. You know why that is, right?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

Regina chuckled. “Damn right. You’re still too hung up on Terrence. Now, don’t get me wrong, you know I *love* you

and Terrence together. But if you're gonna move on... *Move on!* You're not giving Preston a fair chance. I mean, come on Gabi, you haven't had sex with him yet, and you've been dating for more than two months. I've known you to get it "on and popping" on date number *two*, so what's the hold up now?"

"The hold up is all of you telling me he's an asshole! I don't want to give up the cookies, and all of a sudden he switches his entire personality."

"Girl you know damn well that's not the only reason, but I'm gonna let you roll with that lie. It doesn't have to be Preston, but I would love to see you give someone a real chance. Yeah, you've been having your little fun, playing the field, but you haven't been in a *relationship* since Terrence."

I rolled my eyes. "You're just trying to get me married off, so I can be like you. How is that navy man of yours doing anyway?" I asked, referring to Cedric, the marine Regina had met, married, and moved from New York to Virginia for.

"I wish I knew." I poked out my lip as I heard the sorrowful sigh on the other end of the line. "You know since he's been deployed, I only get to talk to him *maybe* once a

week. But he comes home in three months, and God, I can't wait to get my hands on my man again."

"But you're calling *me* nasty? Ok, girl."

"Whatever, Gabi!" Regina laughed. "What can I say; I can't get enough of him. I miss him *so bad*."

"I know the feeling," I replied, thinking back to when I first moved to Dallas. For those first few months, I missed Terrence so much it made my stomach hurt.

Regina sucked her teeth. "I don't wanna hear that, Gabi. Not when you can just go get your man if you want him."

"I wasn't referring to Preston."

"Yeah, neither am I. Nobody is thinking about his ass, including you."

"Wait a minute now, you were just saying I should give him a fair chance!"

"And I stand by that, but it doesn't mean I think it's going to go anywhere."

I let out an annoyed groan as I flopped forward onto my belly. "So what should I do?" I whined.

“Girl, I don’t know what to tell you, you have to make your own decision there. But you seem hell-bent on *not* going back to Terrence, so I guess its Preston... for now.”

“Don’t do that...”

“Don’t do what?”

“Keep saying that Preston isn’t gonna last!”

“So you want me to lie?”

“Regina... bye. I’ve gotta finish packing so I can get some sleep and make it on this flight in the morning.”

“Ok honey. Make sure you call and tell me how things go, ok?”

“Of course.”

I ended the phone call with Regina feeling more confused than I hoped I would. She was my best friend, and I had been counting on her to clear a path for me in regards to what I should do. But she was right; it was a decision I would have to make on my own.

Why did it have to be so damned hard?

— Terrence —

Sabrina damn near choked on her tongue when Gabi walked in. Hell, I almost did too. The tailored midnight blue she wore underneath her blazer was completely professional, but on Gabi's curvy body it was sexy as hell. Toned calves led up to toned thighs, which led to rounded hips, then a flat belly. The view finished with just a hint of cleavage, provided by what I lovingly thought of as perfect handfuls of breast. Gabi was banging, as always, and from the confident smile she wore when she stepped into the conference room, she *knew* it.

She was quiet and cool, exuding a pleasant sort of charm that I was sure she had picked up in Texas. I wondered if her opponents knew as well as I did that her sweet demeanor was meant to lull them into a false sense of superiority. Preston was putting off the same vibe of arrogance I'd always remembered, and as he shook my hand with a much-tighter-than-necessary grip—which I returned until he flinched and let me go—I thought I detected a challenge.

“Been a long time, Whitaker.”

*Not long enough, Parker.*

“It sure has, man. How have you been?”

*Not that I give a shit.*



He glanced over at Gabi. “I’ve been *very* good.” He winked at me, and then turned to introduce himself to Sabrina.

I narrowed my eyes at Gabi in an unspoken question. *Are you fucking him?* She looked at me like I had lost my mind, probably wondering what I was scowling about. I shook the jealous thoughts away from my head and smiled at her, which she returned with a smile of her own.

*Beautiful.*

After we moved past the formal introductions and seated ourselves around the table, Gabi got straight to business. “Let’s go ahead and get this over with, shall we?” she asked, casting a smile around the room.

“Yes, *let’s.*” Sabrina pulled out a stack of papers, slapping them on the table in front of Gabi. Surprise flashed in her eyes, but she quickly shuttered it as she fixed her gaze on Sabrina. “Just take the settlement my client is offering, so she can move on with her life, and her business.” She tossed a pen on the stack of papers and sat back, waiting on Gabi’s response.

Seemingly amused, Gabi shoved the papers back across the table. “Not so fast, Ms. Wilson. I think you may

want to hear what we have to say, so you can take this back to your client.”

“I’m not sure thinking is your strong suit, Counselor.” Gabi arched an eyebrow as Sabrina continued. “Theresa Dexter isn’t interested in anything except a check and a public apology, unless you want to take this to court... and I think we both know that wouldn’t fare well for you.”

*Holy Shit. What is she doing?*

Cocking her head slightly to the right, Gabi smirked. There it was. The exact moment that she turned that ‘sweet’ dial all the way down, and brought out the Gabi I’d been hearing about from our peers, but had been waiting to see. “Then it would seem that the ‘thinking’ deficiency would be on your end, *Counselor*, because I would love nothing more than to argue this in front of a judge, but I’ve got a feeling we won’t get that far.”

Sabrina let out a huff of laughter. “You’re as naive as I suspected if you think you would *enjoy* arguing this case against me. I’m sure you’ve had fun so far, but it may be time to let Mr. Parker take over from here. This settlement paperwork is complicated.” She turned her body so that Gabi

was out of her line of sight and directed her attention to Preston.

“Oh, I see,” Gabi said, breaking into a full-on grin. “You have a comprehension problem as well. That’s alright, Ms. Wilson, we’re going to give you plenty of time to look over everything I’m about to give you, okay?” Still wearing that saccharine smile, she opened her briefcase and took out several folders. “This one contains copies of the original patent filings for the software that your client’s company, TechTree, claims that Dexter Technologies stole— you’ll want to look at the dates on those. *This* one contains copies from DT’s internal servers of the chat history between the entire developer team that worked on that software— you’ll want to note that while William Dexter participated in these chats often, and actually did some of the coding himself, *Theresa* Dexter is missing. Of course, these are things that only *we* had access to, so don’t feel too bad that you didn’t know. Oh, and this one,” she said, pressing a hand to her heart, “This is one is my favorite. It contains the counter-suits we’ve filed against TechTree. One for copyright infringement, and the other? Well, that one is for breaking the non-compete agreement your client signed in her divorce settlement. The amount we’re suing for has *so many zeroes* I can’t stand it. So about this

settlement...” She reached over the table to pick up the stack Sabrina had tried to give her earlier, and tossed it into the trash. “It won’t be happening.”

Any other time, I would have been embarrassed. Obviously, our client had been less than forthcoming about the true details of the lawsuit, and I would be addressing that later. I had built a great reputation, and an even better record, and I didn’t want it tainted by an ill-conceived lawsuit that would be impossible to win. But in that moment, I was cheering in my head. After all of Sabrina’s shit talking, she was seeing exactly what I’d told her: don’t underestimate Gabi.

“Well, well, well. Bravo, I guess,” Sabrina said mockingly as she glared at Gabi. “All of this time, I thought you were just some fat, live-in baby mama who couldn’t really cut it as a lawyer— based on what Terrence told me about you back when you two were still together.”

*What. The. Fuck. Is. She. Doing? Don’t bring me into whatever bullshit you’re trying to pull.*

Gabi’s movements to pack up her briefcase stilled, and I watched as the warmth dropped right out of her eyes,

replaced with a coldness I was all too familiar with. I had to stop this before it got out of hand. “Gabi, I never sai—”

“It seems like you might know a *little* something,” Sabrina continued over me, “But make no mistake... my client wants this settlement, which means *I* want this settlement. And I *always* get what I want.” She ended her speech with a pointed look in my direction, then a smirk back at Gabi.

I knew I should probably say something, but... what the hell was I supposed to say?! I glanced over at Preston, who looked just as clueless as I felt, and then back to Gabi, who had adopted an expression of deathly calm. I flinched when she broke into a grin, which turned into a hearty laugh.

“What is so funny?” Sabrina asked, disgusted.

Gabi laughed for a few seconds longer, and then calmed herself, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. “You want to know what’s funny? Ok, let me explain. You see... I’m looking at this settlement paperwork in the trash over here, and then, over *here*,” — she pointed in my direction— “I’m looking at a man who does *not* want you... and yet you say you *always* get what you want. So, it’s *you*, Sabrina. *You* are what’s so ridiculously funny.”

She stood then, gathering the rest of her things and then heading for the door. “We’ll see you in court,” she tossed over her shoulder as she left, with Preston right on her heels. When they were gone, I turned to Sabrina with a smile.

“Told you so.”

I was mad as hell. Actually, that's probably an understatement. I was *livid*, and I couldn't even properly vent my frustration, because I was in the car with Preston. He wouldn't understand why I was so *pissed*. Hell, he would probably find a reason to be mad that I was a mad. I suspected that he already was, from the silent treatment he had been giving me ever since we left the P&G offices. But I didn't care about that. At the moment, all I cared about was the fact that Sabrina's ass had gone rogue.

That was the only way to explain it, really. What the hell had *I* ever done to *her*? She was the 'home wrecker', not me! And the bitch had the nerve to say that Terrence had implied that I was stupid. And fat. *And couldn't cut it as a lawyer*. Oh, what I wouldn't give for a quiet moment alone in a camera-less, windowless room with her and a baseball bat. How dare she? What the hell was her problem? Inquiring minds— mine— wanted to know.

“So do you want to talk about what happened in there?”

*Do I look like I do, Preston?*

“Not really, but you brought it up, so obviously you want to.”

“I’d just like to know what in the world is going on. Do you have some kind of history with Sabrina Wilson too?”

“She dated Terrence after me.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

“It didn’t sound like that was all.”

I scowled at Preston from the passenger seat. “We were going through a rough patch, he started talking to Sabrina, we broke up, they started dating. Is that sufficient information for you?”

“So he cheated on you? Damn, baby. I’m sorry.” He placed his hand on my knee in what I assumed was supposed to be a soothing gesture, but it only annoyed me. He was so obviously trying to use this as a way to get closer.

“Thanks, but it was four years ago. We’re past it now.”



I ignored the constant buzzing of my phone as we pulled up to the hotel. I knew it was Terrence, since he'd been blowing me up since we left the office, probably trying to apologize for Sabrina. I couldn't believe I'd let him bring Joci around her! With that thought, I was mad all over again, slamming my door as I exited the car. Preston walked me to my room, where he expressed, *again*, how confused he was about why I needed my own, instead of sharing with him.

"You know, I could come in... help you relax," he said, pressing me into the wall beside my door, and using a finger to tilt up my chin. Despite my annoyance, my nipples peaked into hard pebbles against the inside of my bra as he kissed me, long and deep.

"Mmm, as tempting as that sounds, I'm really not in the mood, Preston. Besides... three more weeks, remember? I wouldn't want to get you all hot and bothered, especially when I'm going to be heading out in just a few hours."

"Heading out?"

"Yep. A couple of friends asked me to have dinner while I was here, and I said yes."

"So what time are we meeting them?"

I lifted an eyebrow, confused. “*We?*”

“Yeah, I want to meet your friends too.”

“Ahh...”

“Let me guess...one of these ‘friends’ is Terrence, who you *just* told me cheated on you.”

“He didn’t technically cheat, and it’s not relevant to our *friendship* anyway,” I said, pushing him away. “But yes, one of the friends is Terrence, and the other is Dorian Mills.”

He shook his head, letting out a snort of laughter. “Of course it is. I bet those two have some interesting stories about our time at Emory, huh?”

“No, actually.” I had tried my best to pry information out of Dorian, but all he would say was to watch out for myself, and to call him if Preston needed his ass kicked. And Terrence... I didn’t talk about Preston with him, especially after the kiss we’d shared the month before after Aunt Rae’s funeral. He’d been quieter than usual, and always tired. I knew he was probably throwing himself into work, just like he always did when he was trying to fight his emotions. I just hoped he wouldn’t make himself sick trying to avoid facing his grief.

Preston shot me a look that showed his obvious doubt of my claim that Dorian and Terrence hadn't been bad mouthing him, but at that moment, I really didn't care if he believed me or not. "Look, I'm gonna go inside and call my daughter before I get ready for dinner. If I get back early, I'll stop by and see you, ok?"

He stepped forward, pulling me into his arms again. "Stop by even if it's not early," he said, brushing his lips against my ear.

I nodded my agreement, and then slipped into my room before he could say anything else. Kicking off my heels, I sat down on the bed and called Joci, who spent an hour telling me what she had done that day, and how she was excited to spend two nights in a row at Talia's house. I made a mental note to slide an extra hundred dollar bill in the thank you card I was already planning to give Talia's mom, then convinced Joci to let me off the phone by telling her that her dad was waiting on *his* phone call.

I was just slipping out of my dress to get into the shower when a knock sounded at the door.

*Preston.*

I thought about ignoring it, but remembered Regina's words about not giving him a fair chance. Maybe I could be a *little* nicer. I pulled on my bathrobe, belting it tightly around my waist before I opened the door.

*"Oh. My. God!"*

I squealed at the sight of Regina in my doorway, posing with her hand on her hip and a big smile. "Surprise, girly!"

I wrapped her in a hug, squeezing her tight as I pulled her into the room. "What on earth are you doing here?" I asked, taking in her slightly different appearance. Her thick black curls were gone, replaced by a sleek bob with blunt cut bangs. "You look great!"

"I'm here to see you, duh!" Even though we spoke on the phone often, I hadn't actually seen Regina in person in almost two years, because of our conflicting schedules. "The first time our schedules finally blend, I wasn't gonna pass it up! You mentioned what hotel you were gonna be in, and I got your room number from the guy at the front desk. I used to date his brother," she said with wink.

"Well your timing couldn't be better."

“Uh-oh. Sounds like trouble. Good thing I came prepared.” I watched, curious, as she bent down and rummaged in her suitcase. “I stopped and grabbed this on the way here, fresh from the cooler, the best \$10 I’ve ever spent!” When she emerged with a bottle of wine and a corkscrew, I laughed, and then searched the room before I found two plastic cups we could use. Once the wine was poured, we sat together on the bed as I told her about the encounter with Sabrina.

“You should have choked her ass,” Regina said when I finished, draining the last drops of wine from her glass— and the bottle.

I shook my head. “Girl, I really should have. But I didn’t want to her to know how much she had gotten to me. I was *so* pissed. I’m *still* pissed, but I’ve gotta get ready to meet Terrence and Dorian for dinner. You’re coming with me, right?”

“Of course I’m coming too. The four of us back together again? I wouldn’t miss it!”

— Terrence —

Dorian shook his head as the waiter led us to our table at the lounge where we were meeting Gabi for dinner. While we were waiting, I had recounted the entire scene from the conference room earlier.

“You’ve gotta get Sabrina to shut up if you’re gonna have *any* chance at winning Gabi back. Those little slick comments probably set you back a couple of months’ worth of progress.”

I groaned, knowing that he was probably right. “I didn’t even *say* that shit to Sabrina, man. She completely twisted what I had confided in her back then, and I don’t know *how* to make her stop the nonsense. It’s not like I can just threaten to kick her ass, she’s a woman!”

“I’ve got a home girl that will make her disappear for a small fee...”

“Dorian, be serious man.”

He grinned. “I *am* serious.”

“I’m not about to end up in jail for conspiracy fooling with you,” I laughed, checking the door again to see if Gabi had come in. She hadn’t answered any of my calls for

the last several hours, but I knew she had talked to Joci since the meeting from hell.

*I hope she's not mad at me for Sabrina's nonsense.*

“Damn, dude, will you stop staring at the entrance? If she wasn't coming, she would have told you.” I glowered across the table at Dorian, then peeked at my watch again. Maybe he was right. It was only a few minutes past seven, which was the time we agreed to meet. I sat back in my seat and tried to relax, but I didn't release the breath I was holding until Gabi sauntered in a few minutes later, with Regina on her arm.

Earlier, her look had been sexy and professional, but now she was just plain sexy, in a pale yellow summer dress that barely skimmed her thighs. Her scent of citrus and vanilla surrounded me as she slid into the booth beside me, and I had to bite the inside of cheek to calm my body's reaction. Why, after so many years apart did she still affect me so much?

I waved to Regina as she took the seat beside Dorian, and then turned my attention back to Gabi. Looping an arm around her shoulders, I pulled her into me to place a kiss on her forehead. “Hey,” I said, lowering my head to speak quietly

into her ear. “About earlier, that whole thing with Sabrina... I’m sorr—”

“No need, Terrence.” She waved a hand as if she were brushing away my words. “I don’t even want to think about that right now, ok? I just want to eat, and enjoy a night with my friends.” She gave me a pat on the knee, then turned to greet Dorian.

Moments later, when the waiter came back to take our drink orders, Gabi asked for a glass of wine. I felt a sharp kick under the table, and looked up to see that Regina was trying to get my attention. “*Watch her,*” she mouthed, which I thought was a little strange. Gabi was a lightweight, but one glass of wine wasn’t enough to cause concern.

“So did you notice where we were?” I asked, watching as she downed the glass of wine the waiter placed in front of her in one gulp.

She rolled her eyes, tipping the glass in the air to indicate that she wanted another. “Of course I did, it’s the place where we first met. Wow, you *do* think I’m stupid, huh?” She softened the words with a wink, giggling as the waiter refilled her glass. After that brief moment of tension passed, an hour went by while we talked, laughed, and ate our



food. When they were done, Dorian asked Regina to go out onto the floor to dance with him. The spark of chemistry between them was still there, but I knew Regina was happily married, so I shot a look of warning in Dorian's direction as they headed away from the table, leaving Gabi and I alone.

When they were gone, an uncomfortable silence settled between Gabi and I. I tried to focus on my plate, but out of the corner of my eye I could see her staring into her glass as she swirled the deep red liquid around. "It used to be *so easy*," she said, looking up at me. When I turned to her, there were tears in her eyes.

"What used to be easy, Gab?"

"Loving you." She placed the glass on the table, and then turned her body to face me. "It didn't take anything out of me. It felt good, and it didn't take any effort. It was *easy*."

I dropped my fork, and turned to look at her too.

"And now it's not?"

"No," she replied, emphatically shaking her head.

"It's not. Because you lied, Terrence. All those times you said you were working late, you were really with her. I don't know how to get past that."

“That’s not true. I *was* working, every time. She was there sometimes, but Gabi, I promise you, I *never* slept with her.”

She scoffed. “And? You may not have slept with her, but the shit wasn’t innocent. What I *saw* with my own two eyes wasn’t ‘just working’. She shouldn’t have been able to get you to look at her the same way you used to look at me. She shouldn’t have been able to get under your skin. She shouldn’t have mattered to you, Terrence. I was supposed to matter.”

“You always mattered to me, from the first night we met, right here. And you’ve never stopped.” I tried to cup her chin, but she jerked away, biting down on her bottom lip as she averted her eyes. “I was overwhelmed, Gabi. I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing with a family of my own, out of nowhere. I just needed somebody to talk to... and Sabrina was there, and it was easy.”

“And it wasn’t with me?”

I shook my head, reaching for her hand. “It *wasn’t*. You were overwhelmed too, always doing stuff with the baby, and your moods were all crazy. You never seemed happy. I

wasn't making you happy, and I didn't know how to face that."

"I sacrificed the best parts of me to be what I thought you wanted, of course I wasn't happy. How do you think it made me feel, to realize that I was giving up everything to build a family with you, while you were grinning in Sabrina's face? I mean... I get it, Terrence, I do. I understand why you were drawn to her, and I can admit that I pushed you away. I'm sorry for that. But... I was here first. I opened my heart to you, after all of that bullshit with Michael, and my family.... I *gave* myself to you, fully, no restraints. Neither of us was even looking for love, let alone planning to start a family. But I was all in, and I thought you were too, and then... you folded on me, and went and played a different game."

Helplessly, I watched as the dam of tears broke and began streaming down her face. "After I found out about her, do you know how much time I spent looking in the mirror, comparing myself to her? Trying to figure out what it was about me that didn't do it for you anymore? Doubting myself, wondering why I wasn't good enough? How—"

"It wasn't about that, Gabi." I interrupted.

She gave a dry laugh. “It was, Terrence. Because you went and found someone who was everything I was before the baby. And now, I have to listen to that bitch tell me you said I was fat, and lazy, and a crappy lawyer. She didn’t get that out of thin air, Terrence. She didn’t just *luck up* on every insecurity I had about myself back then.”

“She twisted my words! I mentioned that you weren’t happy with your body after the baby, she turned into you being fat. You being tired all of the time became ‘oh, she’s lazy’. And you not being able to work while you tended to the baby in those first few months got twisted into you being a bad lawyer. She took the things I confided in her and turned it into something ugly.”

“You shouldn’t have even been talking about me with her, Terrence!”

“Who else would I have talked about, Gabi? I *love* you; I was planning to marry you!”

Gabi froze, with her lips slightly parted and her eyes red from crying. “She knew, didn’t she?” When I nodded, she laughed, shaking her head. “So that’s what the other statement was about then. I’m guessing she saw the ring, and decided to up the flirting... to get what she wanted. *You*. And I didn’t

even try to figure it out. I left, and threatened to ruin your career if you wouldn't let me. Wow, we really fucked this up, didn't we?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "We definitely did." I furrowed my eyebrows as she began fidgeting with the bracelet on her wrist, succeeding in pulling it off.

"I want you to take this back... I shouldn't have accepted it." I frowned down at the bangle she slipped into my hand... the one I had given her for her birthday "I've been wearing it every day, no matter what, because it meant a lot to me. But... I feel like it represents a step forward in our relationship that I'm not ready to take."

My heart began to race, and tightness spread across my chest as she pulled back, leaving the bracelet in my palm. "No," I said, grabbing her hand. "Put it back on."

"Terrence, I—"

I shook my head, trying to swallow past the sudden lump in my throat. "I said pu— Gabi, please... just put the bracelet back on." She didn't resist when I held her wrist up, sliding the engraved bangle back over her hand. I brought it to my mouth, kissing her fingers before I rested my chin in her palm. "Don't take it off again, okay?"

She nodded, and I pulled her forward, burying my face in her hair. Gabi had to keep that bracelet on. As long as she was wearing it, maybe I still had a chance.

Two months after Aunt Rae died, Tarryn and I sold the house. After living through the deaths of three parents there, neither of us had a desire to enter the house, let alone live in it. We paid a crew to pack it up, fix it up, and get it off our hands. I didn't expect it to feel so freeing.

With my portion of the proceeds from the sale, I dragged Dorian along with me and bought my own house. Just... on a whim. I was tired of paying the ridiculous rent for the apartment I'd moved into as a new lawyer, nearly ten years ago, and just like the house, it held a lot of memories I wanted to put behind me. Besides that, I wanted Joci to have a yard where she could play. The house I found needed quite a bit of work, but Dorian and his DIY'ing had rubbed off on me, and I was looking forward to doing it. The first thing I did was fix the yard. Joci's sixth birthday fell on one of my weekends with her. She also had a two day break from school that week, so Wednesday night, I flew to Dallas. Thursday morning, we were back in Atlanta, and I was uncovering her eyes to show her the backyard playground Dorian and I had built for her.

I took the day off that day, just so that I could watch her. She played *hard* all day, and I had to practically drag her away so that we could eat and go back to the apartment, where we were staying until the work was finished on the house. That night, after I had given her a bath and tucked her into bed, I laid on the couch ignoring the TV as I thought about how distant Gabi had been since the night she tried to give me that bracelet back. It had been several weeks, and while she was still as pleasant as she always was, I could tell that there had been a shift. She was back to only really talking to me about things that related to Joci, and now, the Dexter Technologies/TechTree case. Any time I tried to broach another topic, she shut down, and I could tell she was trying to create some distance between us.

*Which is exactly what I didn't want to happen.*

Before Sabrina opened her mouth, I felt like I had been getting somewhere with Gabi, and now, it was like we were all the way back to the beginning. I had talked enough information out of Regina to know what she was still dating Preston, which of course meant that they were getting serious. How could it not? I shook my head.

*Don't want to think about that shit.*



A strange noise from the other room caught my attention and I sat up, muting the TV so that I could listen. Hearing the sound again, I walked toward the back of the apartment, where I realized it was coming from Joci's room. When I opened her door, she was sitting up, crying her eyes out as she clutched her stuffed puppy, Penelope, to her chest.

I rushed over to her bed and pulled her into my lap, noticing that her skin was burning hot. "Joci, what's wrong sweetie?"

"My tummy hurts so bad, Daddy," she sobbed, burying her face into my neck. My heart ached for her as I rubbed her back. I wracked my mind, trying to remember if I had anything in the medicine cabinet that would help a tummy ache *and* reduce a fever.

"Well, Daddy's gonna figure it out," I assured her. I tried to stand, but she shrieked in obvious pain when I moved. "Hey, tell me what's going on!"

"It huuurts," she said, crying even harder. I carefully slid her back onto her bed, dashing into the living room to grab my phone. Dorian was a pediatrician, who better to call? Phone in hand, I walked back into Joci's room just in time to

see her vomiting onto the floor. Dorian answered just as she lifted her head, looked right at me, and asked for her mommy.

— Gabi —

*You can do this Gabi. You can do it. Preston is a sexy guy. He's handsome, and smart, and fit, and he smells nice. You can do this. Please? Just do it, and get it over it, so that you'll know you're ove— bitch, just do it.*

I relaxed against the arm of the couch, forcing a grin up at Preston as he balanced himself over me. He had dutifully endured the three remaining weeks of my bogus three-month wait to have sex, without complaint. I had been mostly enjoying myself with Preston, and I was horny beyond belief after six months *without* sex. It was time to make this happen. I could do this.

He kissed me, taking advantage of my parted lips by slipping his tongue into my mouth. I let out a sigh as he began kissing my neck, willing myself not to stiffen as he began making his way down to my breasts, which were currently only covered by the flimsy hot pink lace bra I had purchased

specifically for this occasion. He continued his trail of kisses down to my belly button, and he had just hooked his thumbs into the waist of my matching panties when my cell phone went off.

It was Terrence's ringtone.

*Thank God.*

We both tensed, and Preston laid his head against my stomach as he pushed out a heavy sigh. "Let me guess... you want to answer that." He looked up me, obviously hoping that I would say no, but he was about to be sorely disappointed.

"I'm sorry..."

He sucked his teeth, sitting back on the couch with my legs still in his lap. "Really, Gabi? We're finally about to do this, and you want to stop to answer your damn phone for him?"

"Preston, my six year old is in Atlanta with him! He wouldn't be calling me this late if there wasn't anything wrong. He and I talked about that."

"And I suppose it's just a coincidence that he's always interrupting our time?"

I rolled my eyes. “That’s an exaggeration, and you know it. It’s not like he calls every time we’re together.”

“But you’re always at his beck and call when he does!”

“I’m not going to apologize for making myself available to the father of my child!”

Preston scoffed. “Yeah, I bet you are *available* for him.”

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” I asked, snatching my legs away from him. I stood and grabbed my phone, looking around for the dress he had stripped off of me a few minutes earlier. “I know you aren’t trying to imply that something is going on between he and I?”

“That’s exactly what I’m implying.” He closed the distance between us to grab my arm, holding up the wrist that held the bracelet Terrence had given me. “You think I don’t know what this shit means?”

*I don’t even know what it means, what makes you think you do?*

“Get your hands off of me,” I hissed, snatching away from him.

“That’s not what you were saying a few minutes ago, and I bet that’s not what you tell *him* when he wants to touch you.” He released my arm, pushing me away as he did.

Eyes narrowed, I looked him right in the face as I caught my balance, even though a tingle of fear was making its way up my back. “Preston, unless you’re trying to die tonight, get the fuck out of my apartment.” My phone began ringing for the fourth time, but I was mentally calculating the distance between myself and the heavy bronze statue on the mantle behind me. Even though it had been years ago, the ‘altercation’ with Michael taught me that if I even *thought* a man meant me physical harm, I should go for blood. Preston was barreling his way towards the wrong end of a bludgeoning.

His eyes searched my face for a moment before they lit with understanding. “What, you think I was gonna try to hit you or something? I wouldn’t do any shit like that!”

“Well, you’re doing a damn good impression of someone who *would*. Bye Preston.”

He held his hands up in a defensive gesture, taking a step back. “Gabi, are you serious? You’re pissed because I’m upset about you running back to your ex every time he calls?”

“No,” I replied, hurriedly pulling my dress over my head so that I wasn’t arguing half-naked. “I’m pissed because you implied that I was a whore! And nobody is running back to anybody. I’m making sure my daughter is ok, but you can’t seem to get that through your head, so maybe it’s best that we just call this through.”

“Call it through? You’re breaking up with me?” He ran a hand through his dreads, a pained expression crossing his face.

Cutting my eyes toward the ceiling, I groaned as my phone began ringing, *again*. “Preston, I don’t have time for this right now. I need to answer this call so I can see what’s going on.”

I could practically see the wheels turning in his head, desperately trying to figure out what else to say. “You know this isn’t ethical, right? Having this relationship with opposing counsel?”

*So he’s gonna go there. Okay.*

“Take me off of the case then, Preston, I don’t care, but you need to *go*. I’m not gonna say it again.”

He crossed his arms. “Gabi, if this is about *anything* other than your daughter and you go running to him again, you can consider us over.”

Shaking my head, I unlocked the screen of my phone. When I looked up again, I pointed Preston to the door. “I already consider us over.”

He sulked the entire way out, and I closed and locked the door behind him while I was waiting on Terrence to answer the phone. When he did, he sounded like he was out of breath. “Gabi, I’ve been calling you for like twenty minutes!”

“I know,” I said, massaging my temples as I sat down on the arm of the couch. “What’s going on?”

“Joci is asking for you... I had to take her to the hospital.”

My heart abruptly dropped to the floor. “The hospital?! For what?”

“We don’t know yet. She had a bad fever, and she was throwing up, crying because her stomach hurt. Dorian is here checking her out, but she’s asking for you, Gabi. She needs you here... we both do,” he said, and my hand flew to my mouth at what I could swear was a crack in his voice.

“I’m coming. First flight I can get, I’m on my way.”

— Terrence —

Relief flooded through me when Gabi rushed into Joci’s room, just four hours after I called her. She went straight to Joci’s side, running her hand over her messy pigtails as she slept. “They had to give her something to help with the pain so she could sleep. We just got back from doing X-rays.”

“No answers yet?”

I shook my head, taking a few steps closer to her, but not close enough to touch. I didn’t want to do anything to push her further away, but when she looked up at me with wet eyes, I couldn’t help it. I took those last two steps and then took her into my arms, pressing her as close to me as I could as she cried. When it seemed like she had calmed down a little, I took her over to the couch and sat down, pulling her with me so that she landed halfway in my lap.

To my surprise, she didn’t move away. She actually snuggled closer, resting her head against my chest.

“Terrence... I’m going to lose it if Joci isn’t ok. I’m not gonna



be able to take it if something happens to our baby.” It was taking everything in me not to freak out my damn self, but seeing the pain in Gabi’s eyes just about took me under.

“Shhh,” I whispered, pressing a kiss against her hair. “Don’t even think about that. Baby Girl is gonna be fine.” As the words left my mouth, I desperately hoped they were true, remembering that the last such promise I’d made ended in a funeral. This was the last place I wanted to be, in the same hospital where Aunt Rae had died. I was still managing my grief from that, so how could I possibly manage if... No, I couldn’t think about that. Not when I’d just promised Gabi that Joci was going to be okay.

She tilted her head back, looking up at me as she blinked back tears. “Thank you for taking such good care of her.”

“Why would you ever think you had to thank me for that?”

“I don’t... I just want you to know I appreciate it.” She shifted in my lap, laying her hand against my chest.

“Well... you’re welcome, I think?”

She closed her eyes and laughed a melodic sound that made this entire night not seem quite so bad. When she opened them again, I was staring at her, taking in the features of her face like I was committing them to memory.

“Why are you staring at me?” she asked, just as my gaze rested on her lips.

For a moment, I thought about lying, but I quickly decided to take my chances with the truth. “Because I want to kiss you, really, really badly.”

She bit down on her lip, averting her eyes.  
“Terrence...”

“I know... I know.” I wrapped my arms around her waist, trying to be content with just holding her close.

“Aww, look at the lovebirds.” We looked up to see Dorian striding into the room, wearing a big grin.

Gabi hopped out of my lap, practically running towards him. “Please tell me you have some news!”

“I do,” he said, giving her a hug. “Jocelyn Jr. over there is gonna be fine. She’s got appendicitis.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? At her age? I thought that only happened to older kids?”

“Nope,” he responded. “It’s not uncommon for a six year old. We’ll have to remove it, which means a surgery, but it’s really simple, and it’ll just be a small incision. She’s gonna be fine,” he repeated.

I scrubbed a hand across my face, nearly sagging with relief at the news. “Dorian, man, thank you.”

“Come on, Terrence. You know you’re like my brother, and that makes Joci my niece. I’ll always look out for her. We’ll let her sleep a little longer, then we’ll have to wake her up to get her prepped for surgery so when can go ahead and get it out before it bursts.”

“How long will she have to stay after the surgery?”  
Gabi asked, grabbing my hand.

“Just a day. Possibly two.”

I grinned at the huge smile of relief on Gabi’s face and pulled her closer.

Dorian smirked between the two us, and then gave me a wink. “I’ll leave you two alone to talk about it.”

When he left, Gabi turned to me, still beaming with happiness. “She’s gonna be fine! Did you hear that?”

“I sure did,” I said, wrapping her in my arms. As she returned the hug, I said a quick thank you to God that my little girl was going to be ok. And if the fact that she was holding on to me just as tight as I was holding on to her was any indication... Things with Gabi were going to be ok too.

— Gabi —

I couldn't keep the smile off of my face as I watched Terrence and Joci from the door of her bedroom at his condo. He was crowded onto the twin-sized bed with her and about 20 of her 'favorite' stuffed animals and dolls, listening as she read a book to them. It had been two days since her surgery, and this was her first night home, so she insisted that they all needed to be there, to get reacquainted.

When she finished with the story, Terrence climbed out of the bed, giving her a kiss on the forehead before he replaced the book on her shelf. “Good night, baby girl. Sweet dreams.” I blew her a kiss, and we shared a laugh when she caught it and pretended to eat it before we finally closed the door.

Following Terrence into his living room, I sat down beside him on the couch, tucking my feet underneath me as he

stretched out onto the ottoman. The only light in the room came from the soft glow of the TV and I propped my elbow against the pillows and rested my chin against my hand, not realizing that I was staring at him until he nudged my leg.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, reaching forward to push a few strands of curls away from my face.

I averted my eyes, shaking my head. “No reason, really. Just thinking.”

“About?”

Taking a deep breath, I turned back to him, trying to decide on the right words before I spoke. “Uh... just, seeing you with Joci these last few days, it makes it sink in for me how great of a dad you are. Joci adores you, Terrence and I really do see why. I mean... the girl woke up at 1AM the other night asking for chocolate chip pancakes, and you went and found her some.”

He shrugged. “I’m just doing what feels natural.”

“I know. That’s what makes it so incredible.” I hesitated before I said the next words. “Actually... *this* is the Terrence that I thought you would be. That I knew you could

be. Caring, and protective, and attentive, and... really easy to love. Relaxing on the couch with you after we put the kids to bed... this is like a little snapshot of what I thought our life together would be.”

He moved closer, burying his hand into the curls of the nape of my neck. “We’re here now.”

“I know.”

His fingers grazed my scalp, and just that brief contact sent a burst of heat rushing through me, settling into a dull throb between my thighs. “I’m about to kiss you again, Gabi.”

“I know.”

Closing the last of the distance between us, he pulled my legs into his lap as he leaned forward, brushing his fingers along the side of my face. “I love you.”

“I know.” I skimmed my hands up the firm expanse of his chest, bringing them up to cup his face as I looked him right in the eyes. “I love you too.”

I expected the kiss to be gentle and sweet, but I thought wrong. Instead, he kissed me with a passion and urgency that stole my breath. He rolled his tongue over mine,

stroking and massaging in way that fueled the throbbing between my legs, bringing my arousal — and his— roaring to life. He pulled back, gently nipping my bottom lip before he sucked it into his mouth.

“Terrence,” I panted, pushing against his chest when he finally let me go. “Let me up. I need to get in the bed.”

He cursed under his breath, but moved away so that I could use my suddenly shaky legs to remove myself from the couch. I headed for his room, which he had offered for my use as long as I was in Atlanta for Joci’s surgery. Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed that he was still sitting on the couch, a bewildered expression on his face. Pushing back my inhibitions, I turned back toward the living room.

“Are you coming?”

He lifted an eyebrow, cocking his head to the side. “Gabi... if I come in that bedroom with you right now, we both know what’s going to happen.”

“What’s your point?”

I could see the barely contained desire building in his eyes as he contemplated what I had just said.

“What about Preston?”

I cut my eyes up to the ceiling, pretending to contemplate his question. “Preston who, Terrence? The only man on my mind right now is the one who gets my daughter chocolate chip pancakes in the middle of the night.” I turned and finished the short journey to his room, not closing the door behind me.

He caught me from behind a few seconds later, wrapping his arms around my waist as he kissed the back of my neck, pushing his obvious erection against my backside. I took a deep breath, trying to calm the rush of sensation as he pushed his hand underneath the hem of my shirt, grazing the bare skin of my stomach. Turning me around, he kissed me again as he slowly backed me towards the bed, until edge of the mattress hit the back of my thighs. I closed my eyes as he eased me back onto the sheets, moving with me until we were together on the bed, with him balancing himself over me.

I was suddenly nervous as he gazed down at me, with such obvious love in his eyes that it made my breath catch in my throat. I didn't know what to do with my hands and my mouth went dry, but as soon as he kissed me, my anxiety melted away.



I blushed as he stripped me of my clothes, staring at my body with hungry eyes as if he'd never seen it before. I released a soft moan as his lips found my throat, kissing and licking his way down to my breasts. Using his tongue and mouth for one side, and his fingers for the other, he teased my nipples until they were hard as rocks.

Terrence grew still when I snaked a hand between us, past his shorts and into his boxers to wrap my fingers around his erection. I grinned at him, emboldened by his reaction to my touch. "You've got on too many clothes," I whispered against his lips as I began to lightly stroke him. I released him, pushing against his chest until he sat back on his heels, and I pulled his tee shirt over his head then grabbed his waistband, yanking everything down at once. "What's funny?" I asked, tracing the lines of his abs as he laughed.

"How eager you are."

I palmed him again, giving him a gentle squeeze that dropped the smile from his face. I ran my thumb over the head, leaning into him to nip his earlobe. "This is funny?"

"W—what?" He breathed, his chest heaving up and down as I stroked him.

“I thought so.” I pushed him onto his back, straddling him as I trailed kisses over his chest then down his stomach before I took him into my mouth. He groaned loudly, burying his hand into my hair as he guided my head up and down until he abruptly pulled me off of him, turned me onto my back and spread my legs open.

I gasped as he slid his fingers inside of me, stroking me at an agonizingly slow pace and strumming with his thumb until I begged him to stop teasing me. When he finally entered me, I dug my nails into his back as my body stretched to accommodate him. Our rhythm started as a slow dance of languid, sensual movements as we got reacquainted. The tempo grew faster, and harder until we were frantic, touching and kissing whatever we could reach as we grinded our hips against each other until we fell together in a tangled, sweaty heap.

And then we did it all over again.

And then again.

And then one more time— just because.

I was sitting in my office in Dallas, trying to catch up on the details of the of the Dexter Technologies suit when Daniella walked in, her lips curled into a smirk.

“Welcome back, *chiquita*,” she sang, crossing her legs as she sat down across from me at my desk. “How is *mija*?”

“Joci is doing well. She went back to school today.”

Today was our second day back in Texas, after spending a week in Atlanta allowing Joci some time to recover from her appendectomy. I was feeling a little overwhelmed, after coming back to a stack of new files from our client, part of which included notes on several *new* lawsuits William Dexter wanted to file against his wife. I glanced up at Daniella, waiting on her to ask me what really wanted to know. I had been updating her every day on Joci’s condition, so she already knew Joci was fine.

“Did you have a good time in Atlanta? You look good. Walking a little funny, but still.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “Walking funny?”

“Yeah, like your papaya hurts from too much horizontal mambo.”

I tried not to smirk as my mind wandered back to the night before Terrence drove us to the airport. Joci had been taking a nap, and he was trying his best to convince me not to go. His first tactic was to bury his face between my legs, giving me climax after climax until I passed out. A while later, I woke up to him slipping inside of me, stroking me into another orgasm induced coma. We barely kept our hands to ourselves the entire week I was there, and our preoccupation with each other’s bodies allowed us to avoid the topic of what our sudden reconnection really meant.

“But,” Daniella continued, “I know you haven’t been doing any of that, because Preston has been here in Dallas, sulking around the office like someone stole his candy—wait... *did* someone steal his candy?”

“I... uh...”

“*Ay, Dios Mio*, that’s why you had *me* tell Preston about Joci instead of telling him yourself!”

Nodding, I tossed my pen down onto the open file on my desk. “I was actually gonna tell you about everything tonight, but yes, Preston and I broke up.”

“Good riddance. He didn’t deserve you anyway.”

*Well, at that’s at least one person that will feel that way.*

I hadn’t seen Preston since I’d been home, and I wasn’t looking forward to it. He had been calling and texting me several times a day, all of which I ignored while I was entertaining my fantasy of a family with Terrence.

“So you and Terrence are...?”

Shaking my head, I looked back down at my work.

“No... just reliving the past for a little while.”

“You sure? Your mouth is saying one thing, but your eyes tell a different story, *nena*.”

With a heavy sigh, I propped my elbows on my desk and massaged my temples. “Of course I’m not *sure*, Dani. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing! While we were there it was wonderful. The only thing I was thinking about was how much I loved him, and how incredible he made me feel, but

now that I'm back home, I think I may have made a huge mistake."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because, he wants us to be a family again."

Daniella frowned like she was confused. "And you don't?"

"I do. Maybe. I don't know! I just... if this were someone else's life, I would think she was stupid for going back. Would *you* think I was making a mistake?"

"Why does that matter? There are only a few *relevant* questions here, chica." She raised her hand to tick them off on her fingers. "Have you forgiven him? Do you love him? Does he make you happy? Can you see yourself building a life with him? If the answer to all of those is yes, then that should tell you what you should do."

"Well, I—"

Holding her hands up, she shook them in front of me to stop my words. "That's not an answer *I* need from you. It's something you need for yourself. I will say this though... who *cares* if anybody else thinks its stupid? Your happiness

matters more than that, and they need to mind their damn business anyway.”

I laughed, reaching forward to squeeze Daniella’s hand in mine just as a knock sounded at the door. We both looked toward the sound, but neither of us made a move to answer. As the knock sounded again, Daniella looked toward me with a sympathetic smile. “You can’t avoid him forever, Gabi,” she said, assuming, as I did, that it was Preston.

“Ugh, I know.” I rolled my eyes as she headed for the door, leaving it open for Preston as she left.

“Hey,” he said, stopping just in front of my desk. Preston was gorgeous, there was no denying that, but as I looked at him, I felt nothing. *Nada*. I realized right then how ridiculous it had been to ever pursue anything with him. For someone else, he was probably a perfect guy, but for me, he was a barely satisfactory replacement for Terrence— at best.

I forced a smile to my face. “Hey yourself. How have you been?”

“I’ve been okay,” he shrugged. “I’ve missed you.”

“Mm.”

An uncomfortable silence lingered for a few moments before he cleared his throat, then spoke again. “Daniella told me about what happened with your daughter... I’m glad she’s okay. I really felt like an asshole for how I reacted when your ex was trying to call and tell you. I’m really, really sorry for that.”

*I’m glad you realize how much of an asshole you are.*

“Thank you, Preston. I appreciate the apology. Was there something I could do for you?”

“Well, I was hoping you would let me take you to dinner, and we could talk... clear the air?”

I shook my head, hoping that my face didn’t betray the annoyance that I felt. “That’s not necessary, Preston. I don’t have any hard feelings toward you; a romantic relationship just didn’t work out. We don’t have to make things weird.”

“So... just like that, were done?” he asked, scratching at his jaw as he cocked his head.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Yeah, Preston, we’re done. I thought we established that the other night?”

His expression hardened, eyes narrowed as gave me a slight nod. “We do still need to get together to prep for this



meeting tomorrow.”

“Meeting?”

“Yeah, with TechTree’s lawyers from Pritchard and Graham. I thought you would already know, since you and Terrence...”

“I’m not lead counsel on that case. Communication doesn’t go through me, because Terrence and I don’t discuss work outside of work.”

“Right,” he nodded. “Well, I’ll have my secretary get with yours, to figure the scheduling out.”

“Ok, great.”

He gave me another simple nod, and a small smile that made my skin crawl a little as he left my office. As soon as the door closed behind him, I released a breath that I hadn’t realized I was holding.

*That was much easier than expected.*

Immediately after that thought, the low buzz of my vibrating phone notified me that I had received a message.

***“We’re going to have to talk about this at some point, Beautiful.” - Terrence.***

I lowered my head to my desk, suddenly feeling drained.

*Sorry Terrence. That point is definitely not now.*

What was I supposed to tell him? ‘Yeah, this week of playing house again was wonderful, and I enjoyed every second, but now, I’m still not sure that I want to be together.’ My head supported that idea, but my heart was a whole different story. Not wanting to get hurt again and not wanting to hurt Terrence were weighing pretty equally on my mind, and it didn’t help in the least that the constant sex sessions we’d snuck in whenever Joci was asleep hadn’t quenched my thirst at all. It only made me want more.

The problem was... wanting more could only lead to both of us *wanting more*, and I still wasn’t sure *that* was something I was willing to give.

— *Terrence* —

*Damnit. I knew this was going to happen.*

Frustrated, I tossed my phone across the desk. I had hoped that the week we spent together would be the catalyst

for a positive change in my relationship with Gabi, but she was back to ignoring anything that wasn't directly related to Joci. But, she had things seriously confused if she thought that a few ignored texts were going to make me give up after a week of mind-blowing sex and declarations of love. She may not belong *to* me, but she definitely belonged *with* me, and I was going to do whatever I could to make that happen. She and I had unfinished business to attend to.

I glared down at the plane tickets lying on the top of my desk, wishing that I had made my own travel arrangements for Dallas instead of leaving it up to the secretary. She had booked the tickets for Sabrina and I together, taking the liberty of selecting adjoining seats. When she gave them to me, I started to ask her why the hell she thought I would want to spend two hours in a confined space next to Sabrina, but it wasn't *her* fault that Sabrina was a shitty human being.

She had been in rare form for the last week, obviously in a fighting mood after finding out that Gabi was having an extended stay in Atlanta. I ignored her as she sashayed around the P&G offices making nasty little comments that I'm sure were intended to get under my skin. I

was way too close to making partner to have it ruined because I cursed out a fellow senior associate.

But, I couldn't dwell on that, not when it was too late to do anything about it anyway. The airline wouldn't change the seating assignment, so the next day, I got on the plane and just tried to pretend that Sabrina didn't exist.

“So do you think Jacobs and Parker are an item?”

*Shit. So much for that plan.*

“I don't think about what Gabi and Preston do outside of what's relevant to this case,” I lied. That very question had been on my mind nearly constantly since Gabi went back to Dallas. Is that why she wouldn't talk to me? Had she gone back to Preston? Did he know what we had done, and how many different ways we'd done it?

“Well *I* do. Preston Parker is quite the eligible bachelor... Gabi would be lucky to get her hooks in him. Of course, he's got a little reputation as a player as well, and I've heard that he doesn't disappoint. I'll have to ask Gabi if those rumors about how big his—”

“Sabrina do you really think I'm interested in talking to you about another man's dick?”

She shrugged, taking on that annoying little smirk that I used to think was sexy. “I don’t think you would mind if it was one that hadn’t been dipping in your precious baby mama.”

“I’m pretty sure I would,” I replied, ignoring her implication that Gabi and Preston had slept together. Even if they had, I was confident that during any future intimacies, her mind would wander back to the way *I* made her feel. In her own words, *Preston who?*

I made a mental note to try to arrange alternate seating for the flight back, no matter what extra fees I had to pay. I was just anxious to get the hell away from Sabrina. After we landed, I spent another tortuous hour alone with Sabrina in the rental car as we made our way through the heavy traffic to the Atkins & Associates offices. Once inside, Gabi’s pretty Latina secretary led us into a conference room, giving me a sly wink as she left us there. Through Gabi, I had known Daniella long enough to know that it wasn’t flirtatious, but what *did* it mean?

There wasn’t much time to wonder about it, because a few moments later, Gabi strode into the room alone, looking like sex personified in a chocolate brown wrap dress that clung

to her curves. Today, her normally springy curls were big, soft waves that framed her face, and she was wearing her ‘grown up’ glasses. Resting my eyes on the swell of her breasts, I smirked when her nipples visibly beaded in response to my gaze. My knees may or may not have gotten a little weak when her tongue darted out to lick her lips, and when our eyes finally met, I knew she was thinking the same thing.

The spell was broken when Preston entered the room, and I glanced back at Sabrina to see that she was staring at Gabi with narrowed eyes. She turned to me with a look of disgust, then pretended to be occupied with a file until Preston took his seat and we began the meeting. It was much less eventful than the one we’d had in Atlanta, but still unproductive. When it was over, Gabi slyly caught my attention then slid her eyes over to Sabrina before she cut them back toward the door.

*Get rid of her? Ok.*

I gave Sabrina the keys to the rental car and told her I would take a cab back to the hotel after I discussed a personal issue with the mother of my child. Not giving her a chance to protest before I was out the door, I tried to appear casual as I

followed Gabi to her office. Inside, she wasted no time locking the door and backing me against it.

“Hi,” she said, biting her bottom lip as she stared up at me. “I missed you.”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it... ignoring calls, ignoring texts. That’s not cool, Gabi.”

Pressing her breasts against my chest, she reached down and unbuckled my belt then unbuttoned and unzipped my pants. “I know... let me make it up to you.” I closed my eyes when she slipped her hands into my boxers, wrapping her fingers around my erection, which was already as hard as steel. “Come on.” She led me to one of the oversized chairs that furnished her office then shoved my pants and boxers down my legs, pushing me into the seat. “Open your gift,” she whispered, indicating the ties that were keeping her dress closed. I didn’t hesitate.

*Hallelujah.*

The dress opened to reveal completely sheer black lace lingerie. Her pretty brown nipples were strained against the fabric, practically begging me to let them free. The bra and panties were both secured with flimsy ties that I loosened with barely a tug, and soon Gabi was standing in front of me

in her office, in the middle of the day, wearing nothing but her heels.

I pulled her into my lap, kissing her as she stripped me of my tie and began unbuttoning my shirt. As soon as got it open, she lowered her silky wetness onto me and began riding me, grazing her hardened nipples against my chest.

*Hell yes.*

Gabi let out a breathless moan as I gripped her thighs, pulling her down as I pushed upward, attempting to bury myself inside of her as deep as I possibly could. She began panting, louder and louder as I took control, and then tried to hide her face in my neck. I weaved my fingers into the silky strands of her hair, pulling her back. “Uh-uh,” I said, wrapping an arm around her waist to keep her from moving away. “I wanna see your face when I make you cum.” Suddenly, she was even wetter, whimpering as our skin slapped together. Somebody was knocking on the door, and several phones were ringing around us, but neither of us cared. When her legs began to shake, her warmth began pulsing and contracting around me, I drove faster, and harder, thrusting as the tension in my body built and built then finally, released.



She collapsed forward onto me, with her arms wrapped tightly around my neck as she tried to catch her breath. After a few moments, she sat back, staring at me as if she were trying to figure something out.

“I think we messed up your hair,” I said, watching her hair revert back to its usual springs.

“Definitely worth it.” She gently sucked my bottom lip and then kissed me, skimming her fingers over my head.

I caught her hand, bringing it to my mouth. “I could get used to this again.”

“To what?”

Still semi- hard, I gave her a little thrust, sending her into a fit of giggles that didn't subside until I had her seated on the edge of her desk, stroking her towards another orgasm as I watched the hypnotic bounce of her breasts.

Thirty minutes later, we were in her private bathroom, sharing smiles as we cleaned up, trying our bests to not look like we had spent the last hour doing what we were doing.

“So... you know we still have to talk, right?”

She looked up from tying her dress closed so that our eyes could meet in the mirror. Averting them, she pretended to

fuss over her hair as she replied. “Talk about what?”

“Don’t do that, Gabi.” I turned her around, circling my arms around her waist to pull her closer. “You know what I’m asking you.”

Wriggling away, she continued to avoid my eyes. “Terrence... I don’t know what answer you expect me to give you.”

I scoffed. “After last week, I expect—”

“You shouldn’t. Expect anything, I mean. Don’t expect anything from me just yet, because I’m not rea—”

“*Still*, Gabi?” My hands went limp against her waist, and after a few seconds went by with no answer, I dropped them away.

“Yes, still,” she replied with a shaky voice. “I just... this is confusing, Terrence. I need time.”

Stepping away, I threw my hands up. “Fine. You can have your time, but... Gabi, I can’t do this forever. I won’t wait forever.”

A tear dripped from her eye. “I know. And you shouldn’t have to.” She grabbed my hands, and I knew before I felt the warm metal against them that she was pressing that

damn bracelet into my palms. “This is why I tried to give this back to you. You shouldn’t *have* to wait, Terrence. You’re a great guy, and I know you’ve changed. I know you’ve grown up. You deserve to be with somebody that can *just* love you, without holding back. I want that for you, I want you to be happy.” She snatched her hands back like she had been burned. “Don’t wait. You shouldn’t wait, because I don’t know when, or even *if* I’ll be able to give you what you need from me, and I don’t want to keep hurting you, so... don’t wait, Terrence.”

I didn’t think it was possible for my mouth to feel so dry, or for my chest to ache so badly. I stared at Gabi for what felt like hours, watching her as she tried to fight back her tears. Here she was, giving up on me, *again*. Instead of us figuring it out together, she was pushing me away, *again*. I gave her a slight nod and then turned away, slipping the bracelet into my pocket as I left her office. There was no point in begging—I’d already done that, and yet here we were, still fucking up our happy ending.

I hugged my pillow tight to keep it clutched against my body as I turned over. I had barely slept last night, and the previous nights hadn't been much better. The sun streaming through the windows was almost enticing enough to make me get out of the bed, but all I really wanted was some sleep. Just a few hours of restful, uninterrupted sleep that wasn't permeated with nightmarish constant replays of that stupid encounter with Terrence in my office, nearly a month ago.

Why had I pushed him away? What the hell was I thinki— scratch that, I *wasn't* thinking. I was just reacting, to his declaration that he wasn't going to wait around forever. Was that what I was doing? Hindering him from living his life, stringing him along? I knew that wasn't fair, and it wasn't what I wanted, so I did the stupidest thing possible: I told him to go. And he went. *He went.* What did it tell me about his real feelings that he *went*? Was I really being unreasonable enough that one week he was declaring that he would do anything to show me that he loved me, and the next he couldn't even give me a little time?

The sounds of laughter from my kitchen only made my heart ache more. Terrence had come to Dallas to fulfill the promise he made Joci to take her Trick or Treating. That was last night, and now he was in my kitchen cooking pancakes like everything was normal, when it wasn't. For the last month, he had barely acted like I existed. I knew— or *hoped* — that this was just a coping mechanism for him, but it hurt like hell that he abruptly stopped any little thing that could be construed as anything more than casual courtesy. No more random phone calls or texts, no more jokes, no more flirting. At this point, it almost felt like he could barely even tolerate speaking to me even when it was for Joci, so I made it a point to make *myself* scarce when he wanted to see her. This time was no exception.

Suddenly, a pair of brown eyes nearly identical to my own appeared at the side of bed. I forced a grin to my face then stretched my arms out, inviting Joci to climb up and join me under the blankets.

“Are you okay, mommy?” she asked, resting her head on my pillow as she nestled against me.

“Of course, sweetie. Why do you ask?”

“Cause you’re sad all the time. Did somebody hurt your feelings mommy?”

“No baby.” I reached down to smooth her thick curls, not realizing that my moods had been so easy for her to read. I had tried my best to be the bubbly, fun mommy she was used to, planning surprise trips to the arcade and zoo, stopping for ice cream, staying up to paint nails and eat popcorn even though I felt broken beyond belief. She had seen past my fronting and noticed that I wasn’t my usual self, and it just made me feel worse.

“We’re ‘posed to tell the truth, mommy, remember?”

“*Suh-posed*. Why don’t you think I’m telling the truth?”

“Cause your eyes are pink and puffy. They’re pink and puffy a lot. Do you want me to get Daddy so he can make you laugh?”

It made my chest ache, wondering what Terrence’s reaction would actually be if Joci called down the hall to the kitchen, demanding that he make her mommy happy. He would probably respond that he had already tried, but I wouldn’t meet him halfway, so he was done. Just like that, he was done.

“No, Joci. Let’s not bug Daddy about that, okay?”

“But his eyes are pink and puffy too. Do you think I should have another surgery?”

Frowning, I tipped her chin up so that her face was parallel to mine. “Baby why on Earth would I think you should have surgery again?”

“Because you and Daddy were really happy then,” she said, smiling. “He made you laugh a lot, and we had pizza together, and played together for a whole bunch of days. I wish we could all be together all of the time.”

My heart lurched upward into my throat. “That would be nice, but it’s kinda complicated.”

“Why?”

“Well sweetie, Mommy and Daddy live in different places.”

“Maybe we can all live together, in Daddy’s new house. It’s almost ready, and you can have your own room!”

I laughed, planting a kiss on her forehead. “I appreciate your generosity Joci, but there’s more to it than that. Sometimes... mommies and daddies are happier when

they live in different places. They can be better friends, and better mommies and daddies when they're apart."

"Daddy makes you sad, Mommy?"

*Ah, hell.*

"That's not what I'm saying, baby."

"Then why does it make you happy to be apart? It makes me happy when we're together, cause I love you, and I love Daddy. Maybe you and Daddy should love each other, and then it won't make you happy to be apart."

I swallowed, trying desperately to wet my suddenly dry throat. How the hell was I supposed to respond that?

"Do you love Daddy, Mommy?"

Tracing my finger along one of the dimples she had inherited from Terrence, I nodded, with a weak smile. "I do, sweetheart."

"Does Daddy love you?"

"I... uh—"

"Joci?"

We both turned to see Terrence standing at the open door of my bedroom, his expression curious as he took a step



in. “You were just supposed to be going to wash your hands for breakfast sweetie, not bugging your mom.”

As she wiggled her way out of the bed, I averted my eyes, not wanting him to see the barely restrained wave of tears threatening to break free.

“Daddy, do you love Mommy?”

*Holy shit, what is he going to think I was saying to her?*

I didn’t dare look up, but I was listening as hard as I could.

“Of course, Baby Girl. I love your mother very much, and I always will, because if it weren’t for her you wouldn’t be here. Why do you ask?”

“Cause if we all love each other I don’t understand why we can’t be together, Daddy.”

He blew out a breath. “Wow... that’s pretty heavy stuff. Why don’t you go ahead and wash your hands, and we can talk about it later, okay?”

I heard the patter of Joci’s feet as she ran off to the bathroom, but Terrence lingered in the door.

*What should I do? Should I say something to him?  
Should I explain?*

Before I could make a decision, the soft thuds of his footsteps told me that he was walking away.

— Terrence —

I wasn't in a partying mood.

Not even a *little*.

But Robert and Veronica Graham had invited the entire firm to their five year anniversary party, and when you were trying to gain one of the partner positions at your firm, you showed up when the guys with their names on the door invited you somewhere. The formal event was actually a perfect way to get my name and face out there even more in Atlanta's legal community, but I wasn't feeling particularly social. Especially not when Gabi was in attendance. She was family, after all, but I would have appreciated her presence a lot more if she could just look a little less fine as hell.

She was in a glittering gold strapless gown that hugged her curves and offered an enticing view of her bare shoulders and arms. Her hair was pulled away from her face, and she was gorgeous as she made her way around the party,

talking and laughing with what seemed to be everyone except me.

Not that I could blame her.

For the two months since I had accepted the bracelet back from her, things had been strained, to say the least. I was always cordial with her, but I just couldn't seem to make myself give anything more than that. At first, I was angry. I was good enough for her to sleep with, but anything else, she needed 'time'. What the fuck was that about? Then, I realized I was being stupid, and the anger gave way to a hurt that reminded me of when she first informed me that she was moving away, and that 'we' no longer existed. That made me mad all over again. I would shift from being pissed off at her to being pissed off at myself. I wanted so badly to call her and tell her that I had lied. I would absolutely wait forever.

But she said she needed time, so I promised myself I wouldn't bring it up again. Not a word, not a single iota of pressure. If she came to me, it would be because she wanted to, not because she felt like she had to. The old cliché said that if you loved something, you let it go, so that's what I was doing.

*And this shit better work, or I'm kicking somebody's ass. Preferably Preston.*

When Robert and Veronica stood to give their speeches, I took the opportunity to gaze inhibited at Gabi from across the room. Why did she have to be so smart, so driven, so beautiful, so *perfect*? And why did *I* have to be so damn whipped? This wasn't me. Before I met Gabi, I wasn't the type of guy to even consider settling down and starting a family. I should be mad at her, she messed up my flow. I was just fine with getting a little ass here and there from one night stands while I focused on building my career. I didn't know anything about being in a relationship. And love? What was *that*?

Then Gabi walked into my office, and she's been fucking my head up ever since.

I was so deep in thought that I didn't realize that Gabi had noticed me staring. Our eyes met for a moment, but she quickly flicked hers away, shifting her wine glass from one hand to the other as she focused on the couple of the hour. Robert said something over the mic that made everyone laugh, and I decided that I should probably be paying attention to what he was saying.

“ — won’t tell the other joke I was planning, since my wife is giving me the stink eye about that last one, but I want to sincerely thank each and every one of you for coming out to help us celebrate five years of marriage. You know we’re old folks, we have to party whenever we get a chance!” He grinned, obviously pleased as everyone laughed along. “Before I go, I’d like to make a little announcement as well. I know that many of the attorneys from the firm are in attendance tonight, and I was going to wait until Monday to make this announcement, I figured since we’re already at a party, there’s no better time than now! I’d like to introduce you all to the newest partner at Pritchard and Graham... Mr. Terrence Whitaker!”

*Wait, what? What?!*

I blinked against the harsh brightness of the spotlight that was suddenly on me. I forced a smile to my face and waved as the people around me began clapping and patting me on the back. Finally. After being with Pritchard & Graham for nearly ten years, I could *finally* say that I was a partner. It felt amazing. I was in daze as people came to shake my hand and introduce themselves. It felt like an hour had passed before I was finally able to sneak away to a corner to catch my breath.

Without even seeing her, I knew that Gabi was close by. I felt her presence, and when I turned around, there she was. She seemed startled, and her hands clutched handfuls of the liquidly fabric of her dress, twisting it between her fingers. She was nervous. Why was she nervous?

She licked her lips, avoiding looking me directly in the eyes as she spoke. “Hey... um, I know you’re probably trying to have a moment to yourself, but I’m about to leave, and I couldn’t without stopping by to tell you congratulations. I know how hard you’ve worked to get here, and you deserve it.” Having said what she needed to, she gave me a little nod, and then turned to walk away.

“Wait a minute,” I said, taking a few quick steps forward to grab her hand. “I know you said you were leaving, but... you think you have time to spare a dance for the newest partner at P&G.”

She hesitated, the uncertainty in her eyes made me feel like an asshole for how I’d been acting for the last few months. From what Joci had reported back to me, I knew Gabi had been hurting, and trying valiantly not to let it show. But then she smiled, and I felt light enough to walk on air. “Maybe just *one* dance,” she agreed, allowing me to lead her out to the

dance floor. The lights were turned down, and a slow, sexy song pumped through the speakers, creating a much more intimate atmosphere than I think either of us expected, but I wasn't complaining. It just felt good to have Gabi in my arms.

“You look stunning tonight... as always,” I said, lowering my mouth to her ear.

“Thank you... So do you. I mean, you look nice as well.” She shook her head, laughing as she fumbled her words. For a moment, her eyes shone with happiness as she looked up at me, but then a different emotion crossed them, and she looked away. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sabrina watching us with a scowl on her face, but I ignored her, focusing back on Gabi.

“Hey, you remember the last time we danced like this?”

“I do. How long ago was it... seven, almost eight years? At the breast cancer fundraiser.”

“Yep. When I rescued you from your ex,” I teased.

She rolled her eyes, fighting back a smile. “I remember that night very well. You made an extremely

inappropriate comment about wanting to strip my dress off of me.”

“Who, me?”

“Don’t act like you don’t remember.”

“Ok, you got me,” I admitted. “To be quite honest, I’ve been thinking the exact same thing about the one you’re wearing tonight.”

*Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I wished I could pull those words back into my mouth, but I knew the damage was already done. “Gabi, I’m sorry. I should have let that thought stay in my head.”

“It’s not a big deal, Terrence. I mean... we used to flirt like that all of the time, I hope you don’t think I’m offended. We’re friends... or at least, we *were*.”

“We *are*,” I corrected, placing a light kiss against her temple. “We’ve gotta make that promise to each other, not even just for us, but for Joci. I know we’ve been doing a great job of messing that up, but no matter what, we need to always be able to say that we’re friends. Deal?”

She smiled at me, and then nodded her agreement before resting her head against my shoulder as the music faded



into the next song.

— Gabi —

*It's not enough.*

That was the thought that woke me from my sleep later that night in my hotel. Joci was having a sleepover with Tarryn's twins, so I was alone, which is why I could make the ridiculous decision to get out of bed, brush my teeth, and make myself look marginally sexy before I headed out the door to find Terrence.

I had made that deal with him earlier at the anniversary party, to always be friends, but something about it had felt... incomplete, and now I knew why. It wasn't *enough* for me to peacefully co-parent Joci with him, and it wasn't enough to just be Terrence's friend. I wanted to be his partner — I wanted to be his *wife*, past hurts be damned. The two months I had spent feeling like my heart had been snatched out of my body had given me a pretty clear insight to what I wanted.

I thought back to those questions Daniella had asked me in my office, the day before I made the ill-fated decision to call Terrence's bluff. *Have you forgiven him? Do you love him? Does he make you happy? Can you see yourself building a life with him?* Yes, yes, yes, and yes. And like she said, I knew exactly what I needed to do. I needed to go and get my man.

The elevator seemed to be moving in slow motion as it made its way up to Terrence's floor. By the time I was in front of his apartment, I was a bundle of nerves. Swallowing my fear, I tossed my shoulders back and rang the bell. And I waited. And waited. And waited, until the door finally swung open.

*What. The. Fuck? Don't react, Gabi, don't react.  
Don't react. Don't react. Be cool, don't react.*

Sabrina stood at the door wearing one of Terrence's tee shirts, holding an open bottle of champagne in one hand, a full glass in the other. "Can I help you?" she asked, smirking before she took a long sip.

"Well, I was looking for Terrence." I returned her smirk, glad that I had taken the time to put on cute clothes and I little makeup. This would have been ten times worse if I had

run over here in the clothes I had been sleeping in—  
coincidentally, one of Terrence’s shirts. I guess they were  
pretty popular tonight.

“He’s....uh... unavailable.” She glanced toward the  
back of the apartment, then back at me. “Think I may have  
tired him out.”

“Good for you. Well, I came by because Joci can’t  
find Graham,” I lied.

“Graham?”

“Her stuffed puppy. She doesn’t like to sleep without  
it, and I thought it might be over here, so I was just gonna  
come and look.” The lies just kept coming. When I did I  
become such a liar?

Sabrina looked disappointed. “I guess you can come  
in and look, but you have to be quiet, Terrence is sleeping.”

*Bitch, what?*

“I’ll pass. I have no desire to breathe in the fumes  
from whatever you two have been doing. I’ll just... buy her  
another one. Goodnight.”

I turned on my heels, feeling nauseous as I made my  
way down the hall towards the elevator.

*Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry... yet. Don't cry yet.*

I repeated that mantra over and over, and over again as the elevator made its way down to the parking garage. If I could just make it my rental car before the tears came, I would be okay. I had to be okay, because this was the outcome that *I* had set in motion. It was no one's fault but my own. I mean... I told him not to wait for me. I was completely disgusted by his choice of who to move on with, but it was just that— his choice. I gave him my permission, my *blessing* to move on.

That didn't make it hurt any less. I collapsed into the driver's seat of the car, crying my stupid little eyes out until I had to open the door and hold my head out so I wouldn't vomit all over the seats.

And then I cried some more.

— & —

“The head honchos want to talk to you.”

I stopped in my tracks, turning back to Daniella's desk. It was the first day back at the office after my weekend misfortune of finding Sabrina at Terrence's apartment. Outwardly, I — hopefully— appeared to be relaxed, refreshed,

and ready to kick ass, but inside I was as feeling as fragile as a cheap wet paper towel. The last thing I needed was a problem at work.

“About what?” I asked, noticing that she wore a looked of fear that matched how I felt.

“I don’t know, *nena*, but I don’t think it’s good. The partners were looking *very* serious when they went into the conference room, and...”

I furrowed my brow, waiting on her to finish. “*And*, what, Daniella?”

“Preston is in there.”

*Shit.*

I could only imagine what he had said or done. By the way his reputation preceded him, I should have known to expect more drama from our breakup. Yet *another* stupid mistake of mine. He had been much quieter than I expected since our breakup, but always extremely professional. That unnerved me for some reason, but with everything else going on, I had simply ignored it. Until now.

“Guess I’ve gotta go face the music,” I said, grimacing as I handed her my briefcase and coat. She wished

me luck as I headed into the private conference room she pointed out, one of the few that wasn't lined with a glass wall.

When I walked in, everyone was stone-faced, and I suddenly wished that my former mentor, the firms' original namesake was still there. Ellen Atkins had moved on from practicing law to becoming a judge, and now the named partner was her son Elijah. I avoided Elijah Atkins and his grabby hands like the plague, preferring to have as little engagement with him as possible. Now, he wore a lecherous grin that made me regret my choice of sweaters as I sat down.

“Good morning everyone,” I said with a smile, trying to lighten the mood. My greeting was met with a few grumbles, and I looked around confused until my eyes landed on Preston, whose hateful smirk let me know that I was not about to have a very good day.

“Miss Jacobs,” Elijah started, “We'll get straight to the point. Mr. Parker over has brought it to our attention that you have an inappropriate relationship with the opposing counsel of one of our *very* important clients. Is this true?”

I glared at Preston before I answered. “Yes, Terrence Whitaker with Pritchard and Graham is the father of my six year old daughter. I'm not sure how a connection that was

established well before I even became an associate here could be classified as inappropriate. Besides, Mr. Parker knew of the relationship between Mr. Whitaker and I before he asked me to serve as additional counsel.”

“That’s true,” Preston replied, still wearing that ugly smirk. “But that was before I became aware that you lacked the ability to maintain a relationship that was professional *only* with him.”

Annoyed, I rolled my eyes. “What are you talking about, Preston?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He picked up a remote control from the table and turned on the large flat screen TV that was mounted near the ceiling. All ten people in the room turned toward it, and I squinted as I recognized a surprisingly high quality video image of the inside of my office.

“What is thi— Oh my God, *No.*”

I watched, horrified as my on-screen self led Terrence into my office, locked the door, and then practically humped him against it. Frozen, I couldn’t even protest as Preston used the remote to navigate the video, basically creating a highlight reel of me having sex in my office. I was *mortified*. It wasn’t until the entire room had turned back to

me, after watching me have a mind-blowing orgasm on my desk, that I finally found my voice.

“Where the hell did you get this?” I managed to choke out through my rage. I didn’t realize I had been clenching my fists until my fingers began to ache from the pressure of me squeezing them so hard.

“Security cameras,” Preston said, shrugging. “I had one put in your office when we started dating because I wanted to keep you safe. But imagine my surprise when *this* showed up on the video feed!”

I stood up from my seat so fast that my chair fell backwards. “You put *cameras* in my office? How dare you? Is this even legal?”

“The legality of the video isn’t the issue,” Elijah chimed in. “It is absolutely unacceptable for you to have sexual relations with an opposing lawyer *in our offices!* What kind of message does this send to our client about our firm? And the rest of the world? You’re a good lawyer Gabi, but your lack of self control has turned you into a liability.”

“So what are you saying?”



“I’m saying that as of five minutes before the filming of the contents of that tape, you are no longer affiliated Atkins and Associates. You have until the end of the day to pack up your desk and exit the premises. Security will make sure you get any uh... *assistance* you need. Meeting adjourned.”

Stunned, I didn’t move or say anything until nearly everyone had cleared the room, leaving me alone with Preston and a burly security guard that looked like he could easily snap me in half.

“Why did you do this?” I whispered, shoving tears away from my eyes. “*Why*, Preston?”

He shrugged. “You humiliated me, I humiliated you. Now we’re even.”

“You think *this* is even?”

“Well... now that you say something, you may have gotten the short end of the stick, with the losing of your job and all. Don’t worry, you won’t be disbarred or anything, but it may be hard to get another position at a firm with a sex scandal or your record. But don’t worry,” he smiled. “You won’t be alone. You see, I heard that Terrence got a promotion this weekend, but I bet they haven’t signed the paperwork yet. I’m sure Robert Graham will get the email I sent with this

video attached before that, and I can only imagine how he'll react. This certainly isn't *partner* behavior."

I felt nauseous. He sent the video to Robert Graham. My Uncle Bobby. I was definitely going to be sick... but not before I choked the shit out of Preston. I darted at him, and I was just a *hair* from having my fingers around his neck when the security guard caught me, holding tight until a flustered-looking Preston had rushed out of the office.

*Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

I was obviously taking this year off from common sense to just be as stupid as I could possibly be. What other explanation was there? Having sex with Terrence in my office while we were representing opposing clients unquestionably topped the list of *stupid*. So. Damned. Stupid. After dealing with this bullshit, my energy was sapped. What was I supposed to do now? What was Daniella going to do for a job? Hell, what was *I* going to do for a job?

Shoving my way away from the security guard, I exited the room, grabbed my stuff from Daniella's desk and fled to my office, closing the door behind me. How the hell was I going to break the news to Terrence that I may have cost him his career? I started toward my desk, putting my arms for

balance as a wave of dizziness swept over me. Shaking the fuzziness away from my head, I took another step forward, trying to ignore the dull ache in my temples. I made the last few steps and collapsed into my chair, laying my head down on my desk.

*He's gonna hate me*, I thought as my eyes drifted closed.

He's gonna hate me.

— 11 —

— Terrence —

***“Come and see me as soon as you get to the office.”***

**- Robert Graham**

That was the last text I read before I tripped over Joci’s stuffed puppy on my way to the kitchen, and everything I had in my hands, including my phone, went flying. I cursed under my breath when it hit the floor full force, shattering the screen.

*I don’t have time for this today.*

I was already running late because I’d slept through my alarm, exhausted after spending my Sunday installing the tile in the kitchen at the house. It was far enough along now that any time I didn’t have Joci with me, I spent the night there instead of at my condo. There was a peaceful quality about the house, and I liked being further away from the brightness and noise of the city at night. This would be the last week of renovations before I packed up my apartment and moved into the house for good.

Deciding to leave the now useless smartphone on the floor where it was, I headed out to battle the early traffic to get to work. By the time I made it in, nearly two hours later, I was tense and agitated, and I was really beginning to wish I could just go back and hit the reset button on the day.

“You wanted to see me, Robert?” I asked, sticking my head into his partially opened door.

“Yes, Terrence. Come in, and close the door please.”

I did as I was asked, feeling a little bit like I was in the principal’s office to be scolded, but I hadn’t done anything... at least I didn’t think so. Uncertainty crept over me as Robert finished up a phone call, then turned to me.

“Mr. Whitaker, I woke up to a somewhat, um, disarming message in my email inbox. There was a video attachment of you and my niece, in what I assume to be her office, about to engage in some type of sexual activity. Now aside from the fact that I *assured* you I would kick your ass about my niece, I’m guessing you weren’t thinking about the potential damage involved in this decision.”

*Video of me and Gabi... Holy shit.*

He was right, I *hadn't* considered the conflict of interest, which was a testament to just how wrapped up in Gabi I was.

“Robert, I—”

“If you’re about to apologize, save it. I don’t really care about what you do in your personal time, but I’m sure you understand what this could look like to our client.”

I scrubbed a hand across my face. “Like we might not be working in their best interests because of the relationship.”

“Exactly, son. I assumed that you would be able to maintain a professional distance, which is the only reason I let you continue.”

“Robert, I didn’t know that Gabi would be involved when I asked to be counsel for TechTree, and by the time I found out she *was* a part of it, it seemed crazy to ask to be excused for that reason alone. I didn’t know that what happened in her office was going to happen.”

He removed his glasses, placing them on the desk. “But it did, and apparently it was captured on film by someone who has no scruples about broadcasting it for the world to see.

I woke up this morning to a message asking me if I knew that my new partner was ‘sleeping with the enemy’. It’s not acceptable Mr. Whitaker, and I *hope* that I can trust nothing like this will ever happen again.”

*What? I’m not being fired?*

“You can,” I said without hesitation. “I won’t let you down again.”

“You’d better not. There are three reasons why I’m not kicking your ass out of here. The first is that I just off of the phone with William and Theresa Dexter. They’re dropping all of the suits against each other, and getting remarried. Apparently, all of this was just another one of their pissing contests to get back at each other, and they finally got tired of it and got back together. So as of now, they’re unconcerned about their lawyers sleeping together.”

I cocked an eyebrow in disbelief. “So the hundreds of hours I’ve spent working on this for months—”

“Have been billed, and paid in full. You’ll get your compensation.”

My shoulders sagged in relief as he continued.

“The second reason is twofold. Joci needs a father with a job, and I think Gabi would stop speaking to me if I fired you for this, even though I would be well within my rights to do so.”

*Thank God for nepotism.*

“Lastly... Mr. Whitaker, I feel for you, I really do. That niece of mine has the power to get you all out of sorts, and as amusing as it has been to watch, I’ve been there, and I know what it’s like. My current wife gets me into all kinds of crazy things I would never do otherwise.”

I grimaced, remembering the image that had burned into my brain nearly seven years ago, of Robert taste-testing Veronica in his office. On *this* desk. I put my hands in my lap, suddenly paranoid to touch any of his surfaces.

“Love can make you lose your head sometimes, sir.”

“Indeed. That actually brings me to something else. When I spoke with William Dexter, he informed me that he had been notified that Gabrielle Jacobs was no longer an employed attorney at Atkins & Associates, citing inappropriate conduct.”



“So Gabi was fired.” My heart sank, knowing that she was probably a mess right now.

“Yes, and I can’t seem to get in touch with her. I’ve already commissioned paperwork on the lawsuits we’re going to file on her behalf, because I was informed that this video was played for their entire managing partner team, and that it was obtained by unethical means.”

Unethical means? Of course... Gabi was quite a bit more sexually aggressive than she had been when we were together years ago, but I didn’t think she was enough of an exhibitionist that she would knowingly have sex in her office if she knew it would be caught on camera. So how...?

“Preston Parker.” I sat straight up in my chair as understanding of what had occurred shot through me, quickly followed by white hot rage. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

Robert raised his hands in a calming gesture. “Slow down. I know you want to rush to defend her honor, but I’ve got a few years on you, son. I’m already handling it. I need *you* to go see about my niece.”

Forty-five minutes later, I was on a plane to Dallas.

— & —

The first thing I noticed was that she had been crying. Her eyes were swollen and red, and she looked downright exhausted. When she saw me standing on the other side of her door, she went completely stiff for a few seconds before she finally spoke.

“I’m *so* sorry, Terrence. Please don’t hate me. Or at least don’t tell me you do.”

I frowned, confused. “Gabi, what are you talking about? Why would I hate you?”

She took a deep breath, choking back tears as she rambled. “For costing you your position at the firm. Uncle Bobby has been blowing up my phone, and you won’t answer yours, so I know you know about the video, and there’s no way P&G is gonna risk losing a big client like TechTree, they would just get rid of the lawyer first. But I promise you, I *never* would do that if I had known about the camera, and I’ll *beg* Uncle Bobby, to see if there’s anything I can say to ma —”

“Gabi,” I gently grabbed her shoulder, lowering my head until we were eye level with each other. “Stop, it’s ok. I didn’t get fired, okay? Robert is calling you because he’s worried about you, and I’m not answering my phone because I

don't have it. I broke it this morning, and I haven't had a chance to get it replaced.”

Her eyes widened, and then her entire body drooped with relief as my words sank in.

“Can I come in? We need to talk.”

She led me into her living room, where I sat her down and told her everything I knew so far. “And right before I left, Robert informed me the Atkins & Associates guaranteed that they had destroyed any copies of the video they had, and they all signed non-disclosures that will financially ruin their families for *several* generations if any of them violates it. That includes Preston.”

“I'm suing his ass into oblivion,” she said, her voice shaking in anger. “He's so stupid and vindictive that he didn't even think this all the way through. I guess he was sitting on the tape, trying to decide what to do when he found out that you had made partner. This was a way to hurt *both* of us, but joke's on him. It's illegal in Texas to film someone without their permission if they're undressed, and the idiot used a camera that captured sound. Wiretapping much? He's going to wish he had never even looked my way by the time I'm done with him.”

“You should call your uncle back; he says he’s already got something in the works.”

A smile spread across Gabi’s face. “Did he now?” She sat back on the couch, looking extremely satisfied.

“What does that mean?” I asked, slightly alarmed.

“Don’t worry about it,” she smirked. “Preston will be handled.”

After a few moments of silence passed, I rested my hand on Gabi’s bare thigh. “Hey... I watched the video.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I had your uncle forward it to me before he deleted it from his computer, and I watched it on the plane... we looked *good*.”

Her mouth gaped open in shock for a second before she burst out laughing so hard that tears began to stream down her face. “Terrence, I can’t believe you said that. I can’t believe you *watched* it.”

“Of course I did. Had to see what the big deal was. Emphasis on *big*,” I teased, trying to make her laugh again. I knew that resolving things around the video would make her

feel better, but it wouldn't take away the sting of getting fired after she had worked so hard to pursue her dream.

“You'd better stop talking to me like that, I don't know if Sabrina would like it.”

*Record scratch.*

“Why would I give a shit what Sabrina likes?”

Gabi tried to turn away, but I caught her, turning her back to face me. “Gabi, what are you talking about?”

“I saw her at your apartment Terrence, didn't she tell you?”

I lowered my eyebrows, clueless about what she meant. “Gabi, I haven't had Sabrina at my apartment in over a year.”

Rolling her eyes, Gabi pulled away again. “Terrence, she was there at your place when I went to see you Friday, after the anniversary party. I *talked* to her, I'm not imagining that.”

“Gabi, I wasn't even *at* my apartment that night, at all! I got ready at the house, and when I left the party I went back to the house. I didn't see Sabrina that night.”

“She was in one of your tee shirts, drinking champagne, Terrence. If you weren’t there, how did she get in?”

“I don’t know! But I— *shit*. At one point she had a key. Knowing her she probably got copies made before she returned it when I asked for it back. She had to have let herself in, Gabi, I swear. After Robert’s party I took my ass home and went to sleep because I knew I was starting another renovation project the next day, and I wanted to get some rest. Why didn’t you just call me?”

She shrugged, looking sheepish. “I wasn’t even thinking really, I just wanted to be close to you.”

“In the middle of the night?”

Averting her eyes, Gabi wrapped herself in her arms. “Well... before I found Sabrina at your place, I was kinda thinking that maybe — if you were even still interested— that we would possibly... get back together.” She rushed over those last words, and my eyebrows lifted as I processed what she was saying. When I didn’t immediately respond, she continued. “But if you don’t want to, I get it, I know that I—”

“*Hush.*”

I leaned forward intending to kiss her, but she shoved me back, suddenly springing up from the couch to get to the bathroom. Following her, I listened outside the door as she wretched— a sound I was all too familiar with. I pushed the door open, and wet a towel with cool water to place on her forehead as I knelt beside her. When she finally stopped, she sat back on her heels, looking embarrassed as she wiped her face and mouth.

“Hey, Beautiful,” I started, smoothing her hair away from her face. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“Umm....congratulations?”

— *Gabi* —

— *one year later* —

“*Shhh.*”

Pretending to still be asleep, I listened as Joci and Terrence snuck into the room. I heard the rustling of papers as he closed the file I had been reading before I fell asleep. The California-King mattress shifted as they climbed into the bed, moving carefully so they wouldn’t wake up TJ — Terrence Jr — who was still latched on to my breast as he dozed. When I

opened my eyes, Joci was staring down at her baby brother in awe, but Terrence was looking at me.

“What?” I whispered.

“I’m jealous.”

“Of what?”

“The baby. You never let *me* fall asleep hugging your titty like that,” he teased, referring to the way TJ had his arms wrapped protectively around my breast, as if he were trying to make sure no one took it away.

I rolled my eyes, trying not to laugh. “Terrence, shut up. You’ve fallen asleep doing a *lot* more than that plenty of times.”

We shared a smile, and then he leaned over both kids’ heads to kiss me. Exhaustion didn’t even begin to describe what we were feeling, even with our *shared* responsibilities of taking care of the baby, making sure Joci didn’t feel neglected, and working. When we finally found time to focus on each other, we were usually ravenous, but tired, and often passed out with our limbs and other body parts still tangled together.



But we were happy. Way happier than I had even imagined we could be.

Ellen Atkins reached out to me to apologize on her son's behalf. While she agreed with the decision to terminate me, she was livid about the process Elijah had used, which was far from professional or ethical. A week after that conversation, I received a sizable check from their letterhead, labeled as 'severance pay'. After confirming that accepting the money wouldn't void anything about the non-disclosure agreement keeping anyone from leaking copies of the video, I cashed the check and deposited it to start TJ's college fund. After all, there was a good chance he had been conceived on their property.

We never got the chance to pursue legal action against Preston. With the increased scrutiny after his little surveillance activities, it came out that he had been billing hours that he hadn't worked, and skimming money from several clients— money that he was hiding in illegal foreign bank accounts. So, Preston got carted off to serve time for wire fraud and embezzlement.

After the way that I had been fired from Atkins & Associates, I was embarrassed to show my face in public, let

alone look for a position at another firm. I certainly wasn't listing them as a reference, so what was I supposed to say I had been doing for the last four years? When Uncle Bobby formally offered me a position at Pritchard & Graham, it wasn't a surprise, but it was certainly a relief. With nothing tying me to Dallas, I accepted, and Daniella tagged along as well, to continue as my legal secretary/

Terrence was thrilled that I was moving back to Atlanta, and immediately presented me with a key to his new house, which I was surprised to learn was mostly undecorated.

"I was waiting for you to do it," he said in response to my look of bewilderment at the empty rooms. He was ready to take me house shopping right then, but I refused to move a single sock into that house until we had a discussion about what our expectations were from each other as we embarked on this new chapter. I made it clear that under no— well, under *very few* circumstances would I be giving up my job, and that I expected him to play an active part in the baby's care. He agreed, insisting that we would share responsibility as much we could, and hire help if needed. I was six months pregnant when Joci and I officially moved in with him, and his house became all of ours.

Of course, Joci couldn't be happier. She had her mommy and daddy together, just like she wanted, and she was very excited by the prospect of a little brother. She and Terrence drove me nuts, pulling me into the baby section of every store we entered to pick out more clothes and toys than any one baby needed. She was making so many plans for the baby that I started to suspect she thought he was *hers*. When he was born, she somehow fell even more in love with her little brother, who looked just like his daddy. He even had the dimples.

There was one person who was less than thrilled about the course of events. Sabrina. We found out later that she had, indeed, used a stolen key to let herself into Terrence's apartment the night he was promoted, intending on giving him a private celebration. Knowing that she had lied again, intentionally creating yet another rift between Terrence and I, I threatened to kick her ass if she even looked at him again. Obviously unaware that Robert Graham was my uncle, she went to him with intentions of badmouthing me, which he quickly shut down. She was so disgusted that she ended up taking a position at another firm: Atkins & Associates. They absolutely deserved each other.

I looked down when I felt TJ suddenly start nursing again. When he was full, he popped away, and Joci immediately asked if she could take him into his nursery to play. I compromised, allowing her to get a blanket and place it on the floor at the foot of the bed so she could ‘play’ with him, which consisted of watching him bat at the toys on his baby gym.

With the bed to ourselves, Terrence and I gravitated toward each other in the center.

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?” he asked, kissing me again as he ran a hand up my thigh.

Grinning, I shook my head and pressed my body closer to his. “Nope. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Or I could show you...”

“Terrence, the kids are right there!”

“I wasn’t even talking about that, get your mind out of the gutter,” he laughed, dodging my hand as I aimed a swat at his shoulder. “I was referring to this.” He caught my fingers, holding me still as he slipped something onto my ring finger. It was white gold, just like the engraved bracelet that I still wore every single day, and glittered with a row of nine

flawless diamonds— three larger ones in the middle, flanked by three smaller ones on either side.

“Why nine?” I asked breathlessly, staring down at the gorgeous engagement ring.

Terrence lifted an eyebrow at me. “Come on, now, you’re a woman, I thought y’all remembered all of this sentimental stuff.”

“Just tell me.”

“No.”

“Terrence...”

“Since the day we met, Miss Forgetful,” he teased, brushing his lips against my ear. “It’s been *almost* nine years. We tiptoed around each other for a year until we got pregnant with Joci. Then just under a year for being pregnant. You moved to Dallas when Joci was a year old, so that’s three. Then four years passed before I finally told you that I wanted you back. You acted like you didn’t want me for almost seven months until you found out you were pregnant again, a year ago. That’s almost nine. To be honest, I didn’t go *looking* for a ring with nine stones, but it clicked for me when I saw it. I knew that was *your* ring.”

My heart swelled at the amount of thought he had placed into choosing this ring for me.

“Come on, Beautiful, you’re making me nervous. What’s your answer?”

“Terrence, you haven’t asked me a question.”

I shrieked as he pushed me onto my back, balancing himself over me. “Gabi... I love you. I’m sorry that it took me nine years to put a ring on your finger, but after the way we messed up the first time around, I wanted to make sure that we could work, and baby, we *do*. You’ve almost gotten me fired like three different times, but you’ve also given me two children, so still... you are the *best* thing that has ever happened to me. Will you marry me?”

Pressing myself up on my elbows, I kissed him, nipping his bottom lip before I pulled it into my mouth, just like he always did to me.

“Terrence... nothing would make me happier.”

— *the end* —

— *A word from the author* —

*I hope you enjoyed Terrence and Gabrielle's story. They were an absolute joy to write for a second time. I was very dedicated to doing them justice, and I hope that I've been able to that. Thank you so much for reading.*

*I would love you know what you thought! You can share with me by leaving a review, or visiting me at my website [www.beingmrjones.com](http://www.beingmrjones.com) add me as a friend on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Christinacjones>*

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