

LOVESHIELD

Married to the Mafia

B. LOVE

LOVESHED

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#BTHEBEAST

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INTRODUCTION

Please READ before READING: This book is not the typical B. Love book. While it does have love and romance, that element is not the main focus of this book. Loveshed focuses on one major event that transforms the lives and hearts of a family. It shows how everyone adjusts to a very important family members death, so it showcases life and love before the funeral and after – that's it.

This is an urban novel, so it does have violence, vulgar language, and lots of sex.

P R E F A C E

Loveshed: Married to the Mafia – The Cast

James Salzano – Co-Creator of the Salzano Black Mafia

Trevor Bruce – Best friend of James and Co-Creator of the Salzano
Black Mafia

Estella Salzano – Wife of James, mother of James and Trevor's
children.

Pamela Bruce – Wife of Trevor, mother of Trevor and James' children.

The Family:

Cassius "Cash" Salzano – James and Estella's son – Boss of the
Bosses

Diem Salzano – James and Estella's daughter – Queen of the Bosses

Chief Salzano – James and Pamela's son – Boss of the workers and
street team

Eira Bruce – Trevor and Estella's twin son – The Money Man

Eiryx Bruce – Trevor and Estella's twin daughter – The Lieutenant,
Chief's second in command

Ai Bruce – Trevor and Pamela's daughter – The future Lawyer, no
attachment to the family's illegal dealings

CHAPTER 1

ESTELLA



Trevor had made himself comfortable, right in the center of Estella's being. He was literally inside of her, but there was nothing sexual about this moment. His dick was flaccid, and her pussy was only wet enough to keep their union from being painful. More than anything – Trevor wanted to be one with Estella because deep down, they both knew this would be the only way that union would be possible.

She was married to his best friend, and he was married to hers. For the past thirty or so years, they had tried their very hardest to deny the love they had for one another. Because, with their lifestyle, lust was acceptable. *But love?* Loving one another would be the ultimate betrayal for the other parties involved.

As much as Estella wanted to be Trevor's wife instead of James, she'd accepted their fate and the fact that this oneness would be the only one they would ever experience.

Rubbing Trevor's back, she all but whispered, "You can't be strong for them if you ain't strong within, Trevor. For once, you have to put yourself first, King."

Lifting his head, Trevor looked into her eyes in a way that made Estella smile. There was so much love there. For her. And while she wished that love was one they could share with the world, it had been their secret for quite some time. Even with them sharing children, they had never uttered those words.

"I gotta put *us* first. Fuck you mean? I'm doing this for you, too, Estella."

For a moment, they stared into each other's eyes in silence. Really, there was no point in her responding. That was the truth – the plan that Trevor had in place had been in the works for the past year and a half. It would not only give him his freedom from the black mafia, but it would provide an opportunity for them to be together wholeheartedly.

As much as Estella desired that reality, she was familiar enough with her husband, James, to know that he would never let that happen. His motto had always been – once you enter the Salzano family, there is no way out. You are married to the black mafia, and not even jail or death will separate us. That marriage was literal and figurative. She would never get out of their marriage, and Trevor would never get out of their business agreement.

But... she couldn't remind Trevor of that. Shit, she didn't even want to face that truth herself. So instead of her saying anything, Estella lifted Trevor's head by his chin and kissed his lips softly. Her lips curved into a smile as he began to grow inside of her. Their moment of mental and emotional intimacy was about to turn into a physical one, and Estella had absolutely no complaints about that.

Trevor wrapped her legs tighter around him before taking her hands into his and lifting them over her head. Their lips never disconnected as he began to give her the deep and hard strokes that she liked. Her walls began to leak more, giving him room to enter her more. Slowly, her lips parted as she inhaled a deep breath. As she moaned his name softly, Trevor kissed from her wrinkled eyebrows to her closed eyes, cheeks, and nose.

Biting back her smile, Estella arched her back at the feel of Trevor nibbling on her ear.

That was her weakness.

He knew that.

His breathing was ragged against her ear, and it increased her desire for him more. Clawing at his back, Estella began to lift her hips and match his strokes.

"I love you, Estella," he confessed for the first time, and Estella's movements stopped immediately, even though his didn't. "You've *always* been my always."

Turning her head to the side, Estella met his eyes. Seeing the gloss in Trevor's eyes made Estella's water. He continued to stroke her, slower now.

"I... I love you too, Trevor. Why..."

Trevor lowered his lips to hers and silenced her with a kiss. And there was something about the tenderness of his strokes, passion in his kiss, and wateriness of his eyes that made her tears fall. Squeezing her eyes shut, Estella moaned his name as her walls began to clutch him. But before they could succumb to the pleasure building between them, they were startled by the sound of the door bursting open.

Trevor's movements stopped immediately as he put his pointer finger to his lips, signaling for Estella to be quiet. She nodded, unsure of who could be at the hideaway spot that only the mafia knew about. He removed himself from her and the bed. Hopping into his boxers, he nodded his head towards the monitor on the nightstand. Estella was so alarmed she'd forgotten it was even there. Admittedly, she wasn't the calmest person during a crisis. She was more of a... react first and figure shit out later type.

Unfortunately, James was the same way too. Because of it, the children they shared had a bad ass habit of being reckless just like their damn parents. They approached it differently, though. Cassius, the oldest, was very logical in the beginning. He would consider all possible outcomes. No matter good or bad, if he got mad, he would act. In fact, through his calmness, Cassius was always the first to react. Diem was the firecracker who only thought about her actions afterwards. The combination was deadly for their enemies... and that was a great deal of why the South knew they were *not* to be fucked with.

Trevor got so close their noses touched as he whispered, "Take the monitor and your phone. Go to the spot. I don't care what you see or hear, call for help, and do not come out until help arrives."

"Trevor, let me..."

"No, Estella. Go, and let me handle this."

He placed a quick kiss to her lips before leaning down and grabbing his gun from underneath the bed. With the sheet wrapped around her body, Estella headed for the door that led to their escape room underground. Every closet in the house led to the escape room, but there was only one way to get out of it once you were inside. The doors would lock, and metal bars would close down – ensuring that no one who followed them would be able to get inside.

In the center of the steel room, there was a bar covered door that led outside into the backyard, but the bars only opened and gave access to the doorknob if you entered the correct code and passed the facial recognition test.

Estella quietly closed the closet door behind her, then pushed the clothes back to get to the door. She put in the code and opened the door, stepping in quickly as not to get caught under the bars when they shut down. Her phone trembled in her right hand as she held the monitor with the left. Almost tumbling down the stairs because of her lack of attention, Estella watched carefully as Trevor scoped out each room that led to the living room. When he made it, the door had indeed been barged through, but there was no one else in the living room.

He walked over to the door, but instead of going out to see if someone was outside, he turned back around. The moment he did, Estella covered her mouth as her eyes watered. The man, who had to be taller than 6'5, had a gun to the back of Trevor's head. She couldn't hear what he said as his lips moved, but she assumed he told Trevor to drop his gun because his hand released it.

"Trevor," she whispered, voice shaky as she battled between staying put in the hall of the escape room or going to help him.

The answer was made for her when she saw three men walk over to the taller man. Trevor's hands lifted in surrender, but he did something Estella didn't see coming, he used his hand to wave goodbye to her in the camera before trying to grab the gun unsuccessfully.

Each man fired his gun, and Trevor's body dropped fluidly. A brittle yell escaped her lips, and had the escape room not been soundproof, Estella was sure the men would have heard her and tried to find her next. Yelling Trevor's name did nothing to heal him. His body remained motionless on the ground as blood began to pour from the holes the bullets had created within him.

The taller man turned Trevor over onto his back, and his shoulders stiffened before they slumped. Almost as if he wasn't expecting to see who he saw.

Had this hit been for James?

That made the most sense.

Out of the two, James was the infamous leader who made an enemy out of everyone who didn't give him what he wanted.

Trevor was the calm and peace between the two. The love. No one crossed or tried Trevor. Shit, even their enemies respected and preferred him.

Besides, no one would have expected Trevor to be at the hide-away spot with Estella.

No.

This hit had to be for James.

Falling to her knees, Estella's body heated and rocked as she dialed James' number. She wouldn't dare call the police. People like them *never* called the police. Estella watched the monitor closely, waiting for the men to leave. As soon as they did, she put the code in the door, rounded the back of the house, and headed for the living room. For Trevor. She hadn't even realized James didn't answer the phone until his voicemail beeped.

"Fuck," she roared, ending the call and dialing his number all over again. But the moment she saw Trevor, the phone dropped from her hand. Estella ran over to him and dropped to her knees. His eyes remained closed as she pulled his head into her lap. "Trevor?" she called softly, placing the pad of her fingers to his neck. "Baby." His pulse, though there, was really, really faint. There was no way in hell their medical team would be able to get here in time enough to save him.

"Trevor! I need you to hold on for me, okay?" Estella patted his face softly as her tears began to drop onto it. "Trevor... Trevor!"

James

IT TOOK James three minutes to get to the hideaway spot with his medical team. The second time Estella called, he heard her yelling for Trevor in the background. Thinking quickly, he tracked her phone, and knew exactly where she was.

When James arrived, Estella was still on the floor. Holding Trevor's head in her lap. Rocking back and forth as she stared into the distance. Tears were steadily pouring from her eyes. She was so detached that she didn't even see or hear James and their team until they tried to remove Trevor from her arms. Once they did, James picked his wife up and carried her to the master bedroom.

Ignoring the messy, soiled sheets, James sat her on the edge of the bed before returning to the living room. He looked from one doctor and nurse to the other before staring down at Trevor. At his best friend. His business partner. His fucking brother. Having the same blood running through their veins couldn't have made them any closer than they already were. Truth – their relationship was odd to the outside world, but it worked for them. For them all.

And the thought of not having Trevor in his life quickly became too much for James to handle.

"We can't have the police here. Drop him off at the hospital," James ordered, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"Yes, sir," Paris, the head nurse agreed.

James turned his back to them as she pulled the black body bag from her bag. He sent out a mass text to the family, telling them to meet him at his and Estella's home ASAP. With his back still turned, James tried to figure out how in the fuck he was going to tell them Trevor was gone. Of the two, James was the one everyone was sure would die first. Hell, he was still surprised every day of his life that he woke up alive. Every enemy the family had was because of him and their success and influence in the drug world.

But Trevor?

Nah.

No one fucked with Trevor.

This was for him.

He knew it.

Shit, they'd probably followed his wife thinking she'd be at the hideaway spot with her husband. Who would have thought the man making love to her would be James' best friend? But James wasn't surprised. He'd known the connection and chemistry they shared ever since they first met. Honestly, he shared the same chemistry with Pamela. Life and love was funny in that way, though. James had met Estella at the club first, and Trevor had met Pamela first. They found out that the women and men were friends.

Back in those days, it was nothing to hear of swinging and switching partners. So while they remained with the person they originally met, they had sex with each other's partners as well. Trevor and James had even had a threesome with Pamela one drunken night. There was only one rule – love and marry the person you're with. Out of loyalty, they all upheld that rule – whether Trevor and Estella wanted to or not. At one point, James did a stint in prison, and he was sure he would get out and hear news that his wife wanted to leave him for his best friend.

But for the entire ten years that James was gone, Trevor maintained his role in the business, Estella, and his children's lives. He stepped up in James' absence, and if James were to be honest, it was because of that period that his children had a deeper connection with Trevor than him. Even after he was released, his relationship with Estella, Cassius, and Diem was never the same. Trevor stood down and let James take the lead again... but the damage had already been done.

Still, their friendship or business never suffered. Because Trevor was a standup guy. He was a father to James' children and an ear to his wife while still being loyal to James without asking for anything in return.

And now... he was gone.

The sound of the bag zipping pulled James out of his trance. He turned and held his hand out. Paris stopped zipping the bag as James lowered to his knees. Swallowing hard, he inhaled a deep breath. Looking Trevor over one final time, he placed a kiss to his forehead before standing abruptly and almost running to the bathroom.

But it didn't matter, because as much as he didn't want anyone to see his weakest moment... there was no doubt in his mind that they heard his sobs.

CHAPTER 2



All Cassius needed was one night with Treasure in his bed, and he would fuck her life up. Period. And it was for that very reason that his best friend, Kameron, did whatever he could to keep Cassius away from his sister. It didn't matter how much Cassius desired Treasure and made it clear that he would do right by her, Kameron wanted him to keep his distance. While Kameron would never say that Cassius was a bad guy, he would definitely say that Cassius was bad at love – mainly because he didn't value it as much as he should.

But was that really Cassius' fault?

The family he'd been born into didn't provide the best image of love and marriage.

Truth – his father’s best friend showed his mother more love than his own father did. And Trevor had been a more present father figure in his life than James ever was. Though Trevor never said it, he knew that he loved him, his sister, and his mother. Out of respect and loyalty to James, those words never left his mouth, but every morning Trevor would text Cassius and tell him that he was proud of him.

If he had it his way, Trevor would have been his father, not James. Trevor would have been his mother’s husband, not James. But that decision was out of his hands.

Every day he watched his mother and Trevor stifle their love for each other he wanted to experience it less and less. If they didn’t value it enough to fight for it... it must not have been something special enough to worry about.

Nah.

Loyalty, money, power, respect, business... that shit came first.

And it would always come first.

Period.

Still, that didn’t keep Cassius from desiring and being attracted to Treasure. A part of him felt like he wanted her as much because he couldn’t have her. That whole... forbidden fruit bullshit. But as he watched her ass jiggle as she left the living room, Cassius was sure she’d be the one to fuck his life up – not the other way around.

“Where you going?” Cassius asked, eyes heightening as she turned and stopped.

“Why?”

Always blunt in his delivery, Cassius confessed, “‘Cause when your brother gets here, I won’t be able to look at you no more, so I’m trying to take full advantage of his ass being late.”

Treasure’s naturally low, slanted eyes tightened more as she smiled. “Keep on playing. Kam is going to get you.”

She started walking away again but stopped when he said, “Nah. I’m tryna get *you*.”

Her smile fell, but not soon after, her plump, round, glossed lips formed an even bigger one. Standing, Cassius slowly sauntered over to her. With every step he took, Treasure took one backwards – until her back was pressed against the wall. She inhaled a deep breath, eyes fluttering as his Bleu De Chanel filled her nostrils. They closed

completely, but Treasure opened them when his hand gripped her neck.

"Gimme a chance," he requested, though he already knew what her answer would be.

"To do what, Cash? Play with my heart?"

Stepping closer, Cassius pressed his body into hers, begging his dick not to get out at the sound of her quiet whimper.

"Why do you think that would be the outcome?"

"Because I've been knowing you for years, and nothing lasts forever with you."

"Then be my nothing."

Her body weakened against him as she stared into his eyes. The sound of the front door opening had Treasure trying to push him away, but Cassius didn't move immediately. He waited until she harshly whispered his name and clawed at his wrist to back away with a smile. Treasure scurried over to the couch and plopped down, grabbing the remote as she ran her hand across the high bun at the top of her head.

Cassius leaned against the wall and took her in as she avoided his eyes at all costs. Since the moment he first laid eyes on her, he'd been infatuated with her light, reddish skin, slanted eyes, and high cheek bones. Not yet had he been able to taste her lips, but he wouldn't die or rest until he had the chance to do so.

"What's up, nigga?" Kameron greeted, stepping into the living room. As he shook Cassius' hand, he told Treasure, "Don't you have a house or something to sell? Get lost."

With a chuckle and shake of his head, Cassius accepted the folder Kameron offered him as they walked over to the couch.

"Fuck you," Treasure grumbled. She made sure to bump his shoulder on her way out of the living room.

It never failed – Kameron tried to keep them apart as much as he could. If he would have known traffic would be at a standstill on the interstate and he'd be late, he wouldn't have told Cassius to come over as early as he did. Treasure was two years younger than Cassius and Kameron who were thirty-two. She was a Broker at one of the best black real estate companies in Memphis. But it didn't matter how much money she made or independence she had, Treasure and Kameron planned to stay with each other until one of them got married.

Cassius admired the bond they had, and that was partly why he didn't fight for Treasure as hard as he wanted to either. Neither of their parents were in their lives, and their grandmother died when Kameron was seventeen and Treasure was fifteen. She would always tell Kameron that even in her sickness, she stayed alive for as long as she could to raise and take care of them. And when she felt like Kameron could handle it, she surrendered to her rest.

Their grandmother died a month before his eighteenth birthday, and for that entire month, Kameron did all he could to prove that he was ready and capable of being Treasure's guardian so she wouldn't have to be put in the system. Estella stepped up on his behalf and promised to look in on them before and after Kameron's birthday, and the Judge decided that they could remain in the home together since it was paid off as long as Kameron could maintain his grades while working.

Both Kameron and Treasure had become a part of Cassius' family, and he didn't want to do anything to ruin that.

"Cash..."

"I don't want to hear it. My Treasure still ain't giving me no play because of your ass."

Kameron chuckled as he slipped off his shoes. "Stop fuckin' with her too. You know I don't play that shit, bro."

"Yea, yea."

Cassius opened the file and looked over the numbers presented to him. Kameron was Cassius' personal accountant and tax preparer. He also handled the payroll for the employees of Cassius' legit businesses. But there was a special project that wasn't in place yet that Kameron was helping with, and that's what Cassius was most excited about.

He'd been talking to Trevor on and off for the past year about using their money, power, and influence to create a black wall street. Kameron had put together a presentation that would show Trevor what they needed to have upfront to create their own economy for black people in Memphis to start, then beyond.

"How was your date? She make a sucka outta you yet?" Cassius teased, merely glancing at the numbers. He trusted Kameron enough to not question him too much. Plus, he was a master with numbers. There was nothing that Cassius could add to what he'd created to make it better.

"Man..." Kameron's head shook as he blushed. His left leg bounced while he ran his hand over his face. "She trying to. And I might let her."

Cassius smirked as he pulled his vibrating phone out of his pocket. The second he saw James' name his smile fell, and irritation filled him. While he loved his father, he couldn't stand his ass either. Between the disrespect, abuse, and cheating he subjected his mother to and the way he damn near held her captive, there was no respect for James within Cassius' heart. Yea, he knew they were into that swinging shit back in the day, but he also knew that that was never what Estella wanted.

She only settled for it because that was the only way she could have the man she truly wanted.

And Cassius hated his father for putting his mother in that position.

Cassius ignored the call and sighed as he tossed his phone onto the couch.

"So when will you be able to meet with Pops to talk about this?"

"Whenever Trevor is available, we can discuss it. I'm going to make it my priority because I believe in this shit."

Cassius looked down at his phone, and the only reason he answered James' call was because he only called back to back when it was important.

"Yea?"

"You ain't get my text, motherfucker?"

"Fuck you want, Rock? I'm handlin' some business."

"Trevor is dead. I ain't wanna tell you like this. Wanted you all to come to the house. But I may as well just tell you now. He's dead, son. I'm sorry."

Cassius sat up in his seat. His grip on the phone tightened, though he said no words at all. Kameron looked over at him, sensing the change in his mood.

"You good, bro?" Kameron checked.

Blinking rapidly, Cassius disconnected the call absently as he stood. "It's Pops. Rock said he dead."

Kameron's words began to grow quieter and quieter as Cassius exited the living room. Treasure rushed towards him, grabbing his arms and peering up at him with tears escaping her beautiful eyes. She wrapped her arms around him tightly and held him close, and

all Cassius could do was stand there and let her hug him. No words, no thoughts, no actions were registering in his brain.

It stopped the moment those words left his mouth... along with his heart.

Trevor was his father – not James. He was his number one supporter. His mentor. The one who understood him best. His calm. His peace.

Who in the fuck did he have now?

TREASURE

HE DIDN'T ASK for her to, but Treasure followed Cassius home anyway. The strong, protector, and masculine part of him would never express his hurt and pain in front of anyone – if he expressed it at all. Treasure knew how close the two men were, so there was no doubt in her mind that Cassius would soon break. Whether it was in the form of rage or tears, Treasure felt it was her duty, her responsibility, to be near. Cassius pulled into his driveway first and let the garage up, she waited until his car was inside to park in the driveway.

Even if he didn't let her in, she'd stay there, in the driveway. Waiting on the moment he needed her.

It didn't matter how much Kameron wanted them to avoid each other, Treasure was head over heels in love with Cassius. It wasn't the kind of love that forced her to have to have him, though. It was... the kind of love that required him to be safe and okay. Happy. And at peace. Whether they ever got together or not. There was no part of her that wasn't crushed when a new woman came into his life, but that never lasted long.

Treasure was confident and secure enough in herself and what she had to offer to know that any woman Cassius entertained would always be him settling since he couldn't be with her.

The light by the door cut on, so Treasure cut her car off, got out, and locked it. Quickly, she made her way up the walkway and the sight of Cassius when he opened the door made her shoulders

slump and heart sink. Even in his despair, he was beautiful. He was trying his very hardest to show no emotion on his face... but Treasure felt it, and she saw it in his eyes.

His usually deep, raspy voice was even raspier now, as if he'd cried and yelled the entire ride to his home when he asked, "What you doing here?"

Treasure shrugged, unable to take her eyes off of his. They were red, dry. A little puffy. "I can go..."

"No," he interrupted. "I need you."

At any other point, finally hearing those three words would have almost filled her with as much joy as hearing *I love you*. But in this moment, hearing those three words only broke Treasure's heart more. Cassius had always been her knight in shining armor. But the thing about armor was that it was impossible to penetrate – just like Cassius' heart. The slight access she was getting now only stemmed from his pain, and she refused to find any pleasure in that.

Treasure stepped into his home as she whispered his name under her breath and pulled him into her arms. This time when she held him, he relaxed against her body and held her back.

"I'm so sorry, Cash."

Cassius held her tighter, body weakly wobbling. On the ride over, she thought of what she would say if he actually let her in, but none of those words seemed to matter now. So she held him. Held him until his embrace loosened and he released her to close the door behind him. Taking his hand into hers, Treasure led Cassius down the entryway and into the dining room. He sat down at the table while she fixed him a drink.

As she offered him the glass of whisky, Cassius opted for the bottle in her opposite hand instead. Treasure took a small sip from the glass as she watched him gulp the brown liquid. He drank it as if his throat didn't feel the burn. Maybe he was so numb it didn't. Placing the bottle on the table, Cassius wiped his mouth as his face twisted up.

He was so damn beautiful.

Everything about his appearance, from his looks to his style of dress screamed classic man. Cassius had smooth, blemish and tattoo free caramel colored skin. His frame was tall and slim but muscular. The waves atop his head were deep, shiny and richly dark black.

Both of his ears were pierced, and he almost always had on a cross necklace, Rolex, and ring on his left hand.

Cassius' lips, just a shade darker than his skin, were bordered by a mustache goatee combination, and he had the longest, prettiest eyelashes she'd ever seen.

Make no mistake about it though, Cassius was a bad man. *Nothing* to fuck with. Quite a few men made the mistake of trying him because of his handsome face and professional attire. And they all learned quickly that Cassius could smile in your face one second and knock you the fuck out the next.

That was his thing – his smile. Whether he was mad or happy, he smiled. But tonight... there was not even the smallest smile on his face.

The bar was usually just for his guests. Cassius only drank when something was on his mind. He was a heavy weed smoker, though, so Treasure decided to get that for him next. She stood, and like a little puppy, Cassius trailed behind. They went up the stairs and entered his room. Already on his dresser, there was a case that was slightly longer than an eyeglass case. Treasure had seen it enough times to know what was inside.

After grabbing it, she walked over to Cassius who was seated on the edge of the bed. He pulled his lighter out as she put the blunt between his lips. Once it was lit, she tried to walk away toward the bathroom, but his grip around her wrist stopped her.

"I'm just going to cut the shower on," she assured him.

Cassius stared at her for a few seconds before nodding and releasing her. Treasure got the water how she'd learned he liked it through conversation – a little hotter than warm, but still not hot. She returned to his room and tugged on his hand until he stood.

His Rolex, ring, and necklace were the first things Treasure removed. Slowly, she began to undress him, starting first with his red, blue, and purple, checkered blazer. Then, she removed his form fitting button down white shirt. The first three buttons were already open since that's how he wore them when he didn't have on a tie, so she only had a few left to work with. On her knees, Treasure pulled his brown loafers off his feet.

She then unbuttoned his tailored pants and helped him step out of them. Last, were his boxers, but she didn't touch those. Up until this point, Treasure had only fantasized about how his dick would

look and feel inside of her. Cassius had brushed it against her ass enough times to know that he was working with something nice, but she'd never actually seen or held it before.

By the time she stood, Cassius was pushing his boxers down. Their eyes remained locked, and out of respect, she made herself promise not to look down at the gift between his thighs. For a brief moment, Cassius grinned at her shyness, but it fell quickly when his darkness returned.

Treasure was prepared to wait for him in the bedroom, but those plans changed when Cassius grabbed her hand and led her to the bathroom with him.

"Get in," he ordered, sliding the door to the shower back.

It took Treasure a moment, but eventually, she removed her clothing and stepped inside. The entire time she washed his body his eyes never left her face. No man had ever looked at her... looked into her... the way Cassius Salzano did.

She washed herself quickly, then cut the water off and stepped out of the shower. Cassius did the same, grabbing his floor length cotton robe in the process. He left the bathroom and Treasure stayed behind to dry off. It felt like she hadn't released a breath until she was alone. Leaning against the sink, Treasure clutched her chest and tried to regulate her breathing.

Reminding herself that she was here for comfort and not sex, Treasure looked through the contents of his bathroom closet until her eyes landed on the cocoa butter. After applying it all over her body, she wrapped the towel back around herself and headed out of the bathroom in time enough to see Cassius putting the top on the cocoa butter that he kept on his nightstand. He offered her one of his t-shirts to put on, and Treasure had to resist lifting it to her nose for a nice inhale.

Treasure climbed into bed, and Cassius wasted no time rolling over and cuddling up next to her. He tossed his leg over hers and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her even closer as he buried his face in her neck and exhaled. Closing her eyes, Treasure caressed his back and the back of his head, praying silently for his strength, comfort, peace, and power to heal. When she was done, she opened her eyes, and not even a few seconds later he lifted his head and stared into her eyes.

Vulnerable under his stare, Treasure chuckled and looked away before asking quietly, "You just gonna stare at me like a weirdo?"

When Cassius didn't reply, Treasure gave him her eyes. He hardly ever talked to a person if they didn't show respect with eye contact.

"You prayed for me?"

Her eyes blinked three times before she swallowed. "Why do you ask?"

His jaw clenched as Cassius ran his pointer finger down her cheek, and Treasure would be damned if she didn't shudder.

"I felt it."

Treasure closed her eyes and smiled softly as she nodded. "Yes," she whispered, opening her eyes. "I prayed for you."

Even though she saw his lips lowering to hers, Treasure still couldn't believe that he was kissing her. Even after she felt it. But it was better than in her dreams. His lips were soft, moist... but the kiss was hard. Tender. Sighing into each other's mouths, their tongues tangled and swirled as Treasure cupped the back of his head. Each time Cassius nibbled, sucked, or pecked... Treasure moaned quietly.

No kiss had ever turned her on as much.

Then again – she'd never been kissed by Cassius Salzano before.

When his hand slid under the shirt she was wearing, Treasure broke the kiss, in disbelief of what was happening. Their eyes locked, and he smiled softly before whispering, "Please."

As if he needed to beg.

As if this wasn't the only thing she'd *ever* wanted for her *entire* life.

Well... the second thing.

The first?

His heart.

Nodding softly, Treasure pulled him back down to her, connecting their lips again at the same moment Cassius squeezed her breast. Her body relaxed more into the bed, legs widened when his thumb caressed her nipple. Kissing her deeper, Cassius alternated between each of her breasts before slipping his fingers between her folds.

She was already wet – *soaking* wet.

There was really no need for foreplay.

Besides, they'd wasted too much time to let another moment pass of not being one.

Cassius seemed to be on the same page because he quickly spread her legs and pressed her knees into the bed. Treasure's eyes lowered to her pussy as the head of his dick waited at her opening. He was just as thick and long as she thought he would be. And that was proven even more when he began to slowly make his way inside of her.

They both watched as he pushed and pulled, shaft quickly becoming slick by her wetness. When he was sure she was comfortable, Cassius began his steady dig. Not too slow. Not too fast. Just right. Treasure's eyes closed and her mouth opened as she gripped his arms and dug into them with her nails. She tried to move underneath him, but in this position, he had her trapped. All she could do was literally take the dick, not that she minded.

Like at all.

No.

His long, purposeful strokes had her walls leaking and mouth moaning instantly.

She gripped the sheets, back arching when Cassius released her and got into push up position.

"Give me that tongue," he demanded, dropping his dick into her in a way that made her cry out and try to wrap her legs around him, but he opened them back up before gripping her neck and parting her lips with his tongue. Cassius alternated between pulling himself out of her completely just to drive back in deeply and circling his hips just enough to create friction without pulling out of her at all.

She tried to fuck him back... tried to gain some type of leverage. Some type of control. But Treasure was completely under his.

Finally, he allowed her to wrap her legs around him. Their eyes locked as he slowed his strokes, resting inside of her for a few seconds after each one. By the third time he did this, Treasure's body began to heat. Her walls began to squeeze him tighter and leak. Back arched. Eyes closed, mouth opened. Pussy... came.

Cassius grabbed her ankles and used them to spread her legs apart so much her ass lifted off the bed slightly. He quickened his strokes, fucking her faster as she moaned and asked for more. The sight of him slowly beginning to unravel aroused her more. His head flung back as he groaned. Six pack clenched tighter. Strokes grew

sporadic, and not as deep. But that didn't keep Treasure from cumming again, and it only intensified when he pulled out of her and rubbed his shaft up and down her clit before sliding back inside of her and stroking her deeply.

His hands went to her neck, and he squeezed as he jerked against her – shooting his seeds inside of her. Treasure waited to feel his dick get soft inside of her. But it didn't. In fact, he pulled out, put her on her knees, and took her for another wild ride.

CHAPTER 3



Not even twenty-four hours had passed since Trevor was murdered, and James had summoned everyone to his place. As Diem leaned against the doorframe of the room she grew up in, her mind flashed back to the day James was sentenced to twenty-years. His lawyer assured him that he would only have to serve half of that, which was true, and he promised that James would be able to get out and go back to his normal life.

Except... his life was anything but normal before or after James was arrested.

Before he left, the relationship he had with Estella was toxic. Seemed as if he was married to the money and Estella was his side chick. She played her role well publicly, but her children knew just how lonely and depressed Estella really was. Estella would always

say that she was a grown woman who had made her own choices... choices that had nothing to do with her children. She would always tell them not to worry about her, but that was easier said than done.

When James left, Trevor stepped up in a major way. He was at their house every day. Since he had to see his own children to school, Trevor would be there to welcome them home. Three times out of the week, they were able to have family dinners with their siblings – at his place with Pamela or at home with Estella.

Those ten years were the best years of their lives. They were filled with love, emotion, memories, and normality. But the moment James got out, things changed. Trevor didn't come around as much, and Estella returned to her lonely shell. A part of Diem began to resent James for coming back and ruining things for them.

His time away only made him more ruthless. What little devotion he had to them was gone. He was hardly ever home, the streets called out to him from sun up to sun down. And when he was home, he was a controlling asshole. Cassius and James always butted heads because while Cassius loved the women in his family enough to do whatever it took to try and protect them, James would taunt him just to get a rise out of him and prove who was the alpha male in the house.

James was her daddy... but Trevor was her father. And now, he was gone. Diem brushed away a few tears before stepping further into the room. It was James' request on Estella's behalf that she, Cassius, and the rest of the family stay at home until after the funeral. That request was probably the most noble thing he'd done in quite some time. Diem agreed, only because she knew her mother wouldn't have him for comfort and support.

Pamela came to mind.

Had anyone checked on her?

It had to have been hard knowing the man you loved, loved someone else.

Or did she even love him?

It was hard to say these days.

People were married with nothing but children and history keeping them together.

Diem pulled her phone out of her purse on the bed and put in her password. She went to Pamela's name in her contacts and her finger hovered over the call button. Biting the bullet, she called,

and sat down on the edge of the bed as she waited for Pamela to answer. It took quite a few rings, but eventually, she did. Not wanting to outright ask how Pamela was doing, Diem simply let her know that she loved her and was there if she needed anything. Pamela's voice broke as she said okay before disconnecting the call.

Running her fingers through her hair, Diem released a shaky breath before standing and heading out of her room. She started to go to Estella's room, but she'd been locked inside ever since she got there. Diem made her way into the kitchen and the sound of the front door alarm sounding made her smile a small smile.

Cassius.

Her brother, though quiet and to himself, had always been her sunshine on the cloudiest of days. Today, however, Diem wasn't sure if there was anything that anyone could say to put a full smile on her face. Cassius wrapped his arm around her neck and pulled her into his chest, causing her to smile again.

"Fuck you in here 'bout to burn up, sis?"

"Shut up, Cash. I can cook."

"Yea right." One time, one time in her life, had she ever burned some chicken, and Cassius straight up refused to let her live it down. "Where your daddy at?"

Diem's smile faded at the mention of James. She walked away from Cassius and opened the refrigerator. Her stomach was empty, but she didn't really have an appetite.

"In his office."

"Ma?"

"In her room." Closing the refrigerator, Diem leaned against it and crossed her arms over her chest. "What we gon' do, Cash?"

Cassius nibbled on his bottom lip as he ran his hand down his neck. "I'll let you know when I figure it out."

They stared at each other until James rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. "Meeting will start when your siblings get here," was all he said before grabbing a bottle of water and walking back out.

Since Diem arrived, he hadn't asked once how she felt. If she was okay. But she didn't expect anything less than his nonchalant detachment to be honest. Cassius asked her what she was going to eat, and after she told him she didn't have an appetite, he agreed. They went into the living room, in their own worlds, while they waited for the

rest of their family to arrive. They all trickled in one by one, and when it was down to only Eira, James decided to go ahead and get the meeting started.

Eiryx, Eira's twin, agreed to fill him in on what he missed whenever he arrived.

The meeting started with a prayer as usual, then James wasted no time naming Cassius as Trevor's replacement. It was black mafia law, naturally, since he was the oldest child in the family. Even though Eira was Trevor's oldest son, he was nowhere near ready for such an important position. Eira's calling was money – counting and cleaning it. Giving orders, calling shots, and making decisions had never been his strong suit.

Since Diem was Cassius' right-hand woman, she was now third in line for the throne instead of fourth. Under other circumstances, being one step closer to being in control of it all would have filled Diem with joy but knowing that Trevor's demise was the reason for her elevation made Diem sick to her stomach. Standing, she swallowed a few times to avoid throwing up as she briskly made her way to the bathroom.

Estella was right behind her, holding her hair as she emptied what little liquid she had left in her stomach.

"What?" Eiryx yelled from the living room.

Estella stood and Diem assured her that it was okay for her to see what was going on with, "Go. I'll be fine." With a nod, Estella rushed out of the bathroom and down the hall. When Diem was sure nothing else would come out, she stood to brush her teeth and gargle. Instead of going right back out, Diem looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her stance grew weaker and weaker, and whether she wanted to eat or not, it was time to. Not wanting anything heavy, Diem decided to go to the grocery store to get the ingredients for chicken noodle soup.

She stopped by her room and grabbed her purse. When she went back to the living room, Cassius and Chief were pacing while James was seated with his head hung. Eiryx was on the phone while Ai rubbed her back.

"What's going on?" Diem asked, dropping her purse onto the couch.

"It's Eira," Estella answered. "He's been arrested."

"What! Why?"

"We don't know," Cassius answered.

"But bet I'ma find out," Chief added, snatching his keys from the arm of the couch and heading out of the living room.

It felt as if the walls were closing in on Diem as she leaned against the couch. Too much. Too soon. Eiryx mentioned their trap houses on Brooklyn Cove being robbed just as James cursed under his breath regarding a text.

"DEA just pulled the truck from Texas over. If they snitch, that's it."

Diem's head began to spin as her palms started to sweat. They brought in their drugs from Cuba through Florida and Mexico through Texas. Every time, they used the same people and the same routes. Trevor hadn't been gone for a full twenty-four hours yet, and things were starting to crumble all around them. As fucked up as it was – Diem couldn't say that she was surprised. Trevor was the foundation that held a lot of things together for them.

It was his heart and his love that covered them with God's grace and mercy.

Maybe He'd taken him so he wouldn't have to suffer the wrath the rest of them was about to feel.

Unable to hear another piece of bad news, she sluggishly made her way out of the living room. And when Cassius asked her where she was going, all she could do was mumble, "Chicken noodle soup."

Diem got into her car, but she didn't drive off right away. Her thoughts had temporarily paralyzed her. Without her position in the business, Diem had nothing else to show for herself. No businesses of her own, no major achievements, no love, no man, no children. Yet, there were tons of things and people effected by the loss of Trevor.

Because his life had meaning.

It held weight.

Beyond who he was in the streets.

"When I die... what are they going to say about me?" she asked herself as she started her car. Diem chuckled with a shake of her head. "That I was a boss bitch who took no shit." She shook her head again as her smile faded. Sadness began to fill her. It took Trevor's death to make her realize just how little she was doing with her life.

Diem had no idea where she was going to start... but something would have to change.

DEACON

DEACON RELEASED a sigh as he looked from one bottle of wine to the next. His sister, Melody, was at home nursing a broken heart. Not wanting to show up at her place empty handed, Deacon stopped by the nearest Kroger to grab some fruit and a bottle of wine. Problem was, he'd never paid attention to the brand she liked before, so he had no idea what kind to get her. There were way too many options, and instead of just randomly picking something, he'd been standing in the same spot for five minutes.

A woman joined him on the aisle, and he had the bright idea to ask her what she would recommend. Deacon turned in her direction, but he couldn't pull himself to walk over to her. Not right away at least. She was so damn beautiful all he could do was stare at her. There was a sadness about her though that was hard to ignore.

The longer she stared at him, the more time Deacon had to take in her beautiful features. Her skin was the color of ground nutmeg, and it encased her slim yet curvy frame perfectly. She had long nails and even longer hair that came down to her perky breasts. It was parted in the middle, framing her heart shaped face. Her espresso brown eyes were almond in shape, and they were his favorite feature on her face... but her bowtie shaped lips were a close second.

"Do you think it's sexy for women to approach you or something, or am I supposed to wait for you to come to me?"

Deacon was so caught off guard by her question that he couldn't do anything but laugh at her. She smiled softly and pushed her hair behind her ears. Licking his lips, Deacon slowly closed the space between them. It wasn't the first words he wanted to say, but he couldn't keep, "You smell good as fuck," from coming out of his mouth. He also couldn't help but wonder if she tasted like the honey she smelled like.

"Thank you."

"I was looking at you because I wanted to ask what kind of wine you liked. I want to get my sister something, but I have no idea what to get."

She chuckled as she grabbed a six pack of beer and put it in her basket.

"I don't drink that sweet shit. I'm more of a Hennessy and D'USSÉ kind of girl." She paused before adding, "But my sisters like Stella Rosa."

Deacon's interest had been piqued even more. This was the first time in at least a year that a woman had him speechless and unsure of what to say. The last time a woman had this kind of effect on him, he fell in love with her just to have his heart broken. But he didn't spend that time sulking in the house like Melody did. He quickly headed down a path that led to sexual encounters with one woman after next for four years, and none of them satisfied Deacon or healed his heart. So he decided to fast from women, but the longer he stared into this beauty's eyes... he was starting to want to break that fast.

"Stella Rosa," he repeated with a nod. "I appreciate that." She nodded and turned to push her basket until Deacon added, "To answer your question, I think it's sexy as fuck when a woman knows and goes after what she wants... but I'm the kind of man who prefers the chase." Her tongue slid between her lips, from one corner of her mouth to the other. "Why don't you let me take you out for drinks, so I can thank you properly for helping me out?"

Without batting an eye or lowering her smile she rejected him with, "I'm good, but you're welcome."

Deacon watched for just a second as she walked away before returning his attention to the wine in search of the Stella Rosa she mentioned. He wouldn't give her inconsistency a second thought. At first, she was all in, but when he made a move, she shut it down. Her sigh caught his attention. Tilting his head, Deacon looked in her direction as she stopped pushing her basket and turned to face him.

"I'm sorry. I'm used to flirting and fucking with men without giving them a real chance." *Clearly.* Not bothering to respond vocally, Deacon nodded and returned to the wine. When his eyes landed on the Stella Rosa, he walked over to it as she added, "I'm uh... trying

to work on that, though. So if you wanted to exchange numbers that would be cool."

After grabbing the peach flavor, Deacon walked back over to her. Gone was the confident smile she wore seconds earlier.

"What's your name?" he asked, sitting the wine down on the stacked cases of beer next to them.

"Diem."

"Unlock your phone and give it to me, Diem." Diem looked him up and down briefly before handing her phone over. When he was done locking his number in, Deacon gave the phone back and told her, "Don't call me until you're sure."

With a nod, she bit down on her lip, turned, and walked away. There was something that told Deacon to run. Because she was a runner. But there was also a part of him that hoped she would be worth the chase.

CHAPTER 4



*I*t was irritating as fuck for Chief to listen to them go back and forth. Their relationship was toxic as hell, that wasn't anything new, but it was affecting him differently tonight. He supposed with everything that was going on, it was harder for him to accept the way Gray talked to and handled Remington. Chief and Gray had been friends since high school. Damn near brothers. But Gray had some ways about him that made it hard for Chief to really fuck with him on a consistent basis.

Gray also reminded Chief a lot of his father. And the fact that he saw Remington first and wanted her from the jump yet had to watch her deal with Gray's bullshit didn't sit too well with Chief either. The couple met two years ago. It was after Chief had pointed Remington out at the car lot. Before he could even make his way over to her,

Gray was stepping up and offering to buy her anything she wanted off the lot in exchange for her phone number.

She bit the bait, of course, and they'd been rocking ever since.

For quite some time, Chief taking Remington from Gray had been a running joke between the two, but the more Chief watched Remington's light dim when she was with Gray the more serious he became. His breaking point was the sight of Gray forcefully pushing Remington into the wall. Her eyes squeezed shut and she bit down on her lip as her fists balled up. She wouldn't dare hit him while he had company, but there was no doubt in Chief's mind that they would be going at it when he left.

That was one thing he could say about Remington. Though she gave off damsel in distress vibes, she also had no problem holding her own. There were plenty of times where Gray would come out of a private room with a swollen eye or busted lip after trying to talk crazy to her in public.

Having seen enough, Chief pinched his nose and sighed as he stood and walked over to them. Leaning against the wall next to Remington, he looked into Gray's eyes. "You stupid or some shit? Let'er go before I beat your ass." With his jaw clenched, Gray's head tilted as he unwillingly released Remington.

Gray licked his lips and rubbed them together as he stood directly in front of Chief. "You got one more time to step between me and my lady before I take offense to that shit, bruh."

Chief chuckled as he took Remington's wrist and pulled her closer to his side. "You can take offense now then, because you know how I come."

As angry as Gray may have been, he would never go against Chief. No one in their right mind would. Gray looked from Chief to Remington before sucking his teeth and walking away. Remington released a sigh as her shoulders slumped.

"I could have handled him but thanks," she muttered, avoiding Chief's eyes.

"You shouldn't have to handle him." Her eyes rolled, and before she could get on the offense, Chief asked, "What you put up with this mane for, Remi? You deserve better than that."

She scoffed as she crossed her arms over her chest. "And who is going to give me better, Chief? No one is going to fuck with me now because of his crazy ass. I'm marked for life in Memphis unless

someone comes here not knowing who he is and takes me away. Besides, everything I have now is because of him. If I leave, I lose everything."

Chief couldn't argue with her logic. The car she had came from Gray. He paid for her to go to school and get her cosmetology license. Gray fronted the money for her shop and gave her a few stacks to start her hair care and bundles line. They lived together, so the house she loved showing off came from his money, too. Literally everything she wanted he gave. It was starting to make even more sense why she put up with his bullshit.

"You may lose all that materialistic shit, but you'll have your peace of mind and freedom. And you're a hustla, so you'll get it right back." Remington smiled softly as she squeezed the back of her neck. "You can always come to me, too. Whatever you need – I got you."

Nodding softly, Remington closed the space between them and wrapped her arms around his neck. She released the sweetest sigh as she held him close.

"Why wasn't it you?" she asked.

Chief's eyes closed as his arms wrapped tighter around her. "He was quicker, but you know how I feel about you, Remi. That won't ever change."

Remington released him, but Chief's arms remained around her. She placed her hands in the center of his chest as her head lowered.

"You hear me, Remington?"

She nodded before removing herself from his grasp and briskly walking away. This was the last thing Chief needed today. He was still struggling with the loss of Trevor, Eira being locked up, and one of their biggest shipments being intercepted by the DEA. But all of that shit seemed meaningless when it came to Remington. As always, she was at the top of his mind and the bottom of his heart.

Remington

WHEN REMINGTON ASKED Chief to pick her up hours after he left, she wasn't expecting him to show up so quickly. But that was one of the things she loved about Chief – he always kept his word. He told her whatever she needed he had her. And as he drove her to the Ritz Carlton, Chief was proving yet again that he was a man of his word.

Shortly after Chief left earlier, Gray returned. His mood had calmed down drastically, but Remington wasn't ready to play nice yet. His attempts to have sex with her were denied, which led to Gray getting upset all over again. The moment he tossed her onto the bed and tried to choke her out, Gray gave her the perfect opportunity to reach under her pillow and grab the knife she kept there.

Remington put the knife to his throat, and Gray released her with no hesitation. After fighting with him for so long, Remington finally grew tired of the toxicity. The entire time she paced the bedroom Chief's words replayed in her mind over and over again. She'd grown tired of asking God to move her mountain – now, she'd have to walk around it or climb it.

The second Remington told Gray that it was over, his entire demeanor changed. It was like watching someone go through the five stages of grief. Gray went from denial of what she'd said to angry all over again to bargaining with promises of change to sadness filling him to the point of tears to acceptance. That acceptance lasted the entire time she packed, but as she made her way out of their bedroom, that acceptance was replaced with anger all over again.

He told her that she couldn't take anything with her that he'd purchased, so that left her with not even the clothes on her back. She tossed on an old t-shirt and a pair of sweats, then put her belongings in a plastic bag because she'd thrown away all of her old purses when she moved in with him. It was his bright idea to update her clothes, shoes, and bags. Remington thought it was cute in that moment – being spoiled by him. But she saw now just how foolish it was to become so dependent on a man.

At the hotel, Remington was in for a rude awakening when she tried to use her credit card to pay for her room and it was declined. Every card she tried was declined – even her bank cards.

"Son of a bitch," she grumbled, completely forgetting Chief was next to her until he grabbed her arm.

"What's wrong?"

"He canceled all my cards, and I never carry more than a hundred dollars in cash."

The sigh Chief released as he pinched his nose was a clear warning to Remington that he was trying to put a handle on his anger. The last thing she wanted was for him to be upset because of her situation. Chief had never been the kind of man to let a feeling consume him. He did what he had to do to deal with the feeling then released it. If he got too upset, he would find Gray and beat his ass. Had they not been good friends, that would have been okay with Remington, but she wouldn't dare come between the two.

Unless it was in the form of Chief coming and cumming between her legs.

He was too loyal for that, though.

"I'll take care of it," Chief offered.

"No. I can't let you do that."

His head tilted as he released another sigh. "Then how do you want me to handle this shit, Remi? Because I'm going to handle it."

Her hand went to the top of her head as she closed her eyes. Remington took a few deep breaths as she thought over her next move. She couldn't go to her parents... they would only say they told her so. She couldn't go to her friends... they would clown her and try to get their boyfriends to beat Gray up. Her only option was to take advantage of Chief's offer until she was back on her feet with enough cash to rent a room somewhere.

Opening her eyes, she smiled at the sight of Chief staring at her. He was always patient with her, even if he wasn't patient with anyone else. Remington cursed the day she chose money and flash over feelings and attraction. In that moment, Gray seemed like the better pick because of his willingness to spend thirty thousand dollars on a car to impress a woman. But she learned very quickly that what Gray lacked in the bedroom, in his emotions, and his overall character he tried to make up for with money.

But Chief?

Chief was a made man.

His power, money, status and success had been guaranteed through his family before he ever had to work a day in his life. Now, he spent his days capitalizing and building his dynasty. Not only was he secure financially, but he had a heart of gold. A temper and

bit of a problem being reckless when upset, but hey, who didn't have a flaw?

And he was fine, too.

He could have been a long-lost twin to the rapper The Game. They had the same skin tone, buff build, round nose, and tight eyes. Chief's body was covered in tattoos, and his hair was currently in that tapered nappy style... connecting with a beard that Remington had to keep herself from consistently trying to grab.

"Do you mind if I crash at your place until the weekend? If I find a shop to work out of for the next couple of days, I can make more than enough money to get a hotel room for the rest of the month." Chief's stance was sideways, but when she made her request, he stood directly in front of her. "If I can't, I totally understand. I'll go to one of my girlfriend's houses. I just don't want to hear anyone's mouth during this transition."

Chief cupped her chin and tilted her head back. "You know how long I been waiting to get you in my space alone? You ain't ever gotta ask." Remington's smile widened when he took her by the hand and told her, "Let's go."

As much peace as his presence and help filled her with, Remington wasn't naïve – she knew this was a situation that she'd gotten herself into and would need to get herself out of. Completely relying on Chief, though it would make this easier, would only put her in another position to take a loss. And that wasn't to say that Chief would do her the way Gray did, but she wasn't one hundred percent sure.

Yes, they were different men, but they were close friends at the end of the day. There had to be some similarities within them that binds them at this point.

As they rode to Chief's home, he gave her the space necessary to think. Gray had already told her that she could pretty much kiss the shop goodbye, which meant she would have to find another place to do hair for her and break the news to her stylists. Remington hadn't done hair for the past year. She simply didn't have to. The bulk of her income came from her hair care products and the bundles she sold. Her stylists paid booth rent too, but she didn't charge them much because she didn't have to.

Now, she didn't have access to any of the money she'd made or the money Gray gave because her accounts were linked to his. And

even if she wanted to try to take him to court and prove that the business was in fact hers, everything was in his damn name.

Just thinking about the mountain was daunting, but by the time they arrived, she had enough courage to ask God to give her the strength to climb it. As Chief pulled into the driveway, she noticed that there were several other cars parked there as well. Now was certainly not the time to be rude or make demands, but Remington was not in the mood or right headspace to be around other people.

The house was huge enough though for her to be confident that she could find a place to crash without having to deal with anyone. It reminded her of the mansion on *Greenleaf*. Before Chief could open his door, Remington grabbed his hand and stopped him.

"Um... I didn't know you had company, and I don't want to impose."

Chief smiled as he looked towards the house. "This ain't my crib; this Rock and Mama E crib. Since Trevor died, they want all of us here until the funeral."

Great. Remington almost slid down into her seat thinking about the pressure that was about to be on her around them. Not only was this a hard time for her, but it was twice as hard for this family too. She hadn't even thought about Trevor and Chief's mental and emotional state when she made her request.

"Shit. I'm so sorry, Chief. That completely slipped my mind. Let me call Taylor."

Before she could hit the call button, Chief was pulling her phone out of her hand. "I'm good. Being around you makes me feel better. Besides, the house is big as hell. Everyone has their own wings. The only common areas that we all share are the living room and the kitchen. I ain't gon' let nobody fuck with you, Remi."

That eased her nerves enough for her to nod softly. Chief got out of the car and opened her door before grabbing the one bag she was able to leave Gray's house with. Taking her by the hand, he led her to the front door. His head nodded towards the guard that was standing in front of it before he unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Remington expected to run into someone in his family, but the bottom level of the house was completely empty. That was good – seemed like everyone was to themselves. At least right now. They went upstairs and to the right of the hallway. Chief opened the dou-

ble doors, and Remington had to keep from gasping at the spacious sight before her. It was as if there were several smaller homes inside of a really big one.

In Chief's wing, he had his own living room that was decked out with comfortable couches and recliners, plush rugs, a bathroom with a garden tub that Remington couldn't wait to soak in, and a large bedroom. He told her to make herself comfortable, and while she thought that would be in a room alone, Remington found herself following him back into the living room.

Remington sat as close to him as she could on the couch. His hand went to her thigh while the other cut the TV on. She watched as he flipped through channel after channel before opening the Netflix app and starting the first movie that popped up. Leaning forward, Chief grabbed the small brown box that was on top of his coffee table. He opened it, and Remington chuckled at the weed, cigar, and lighter that was tucked inside.

"Roll that for me," Chief requested, handing her the box.

She did as he asked while he stepped out of the wing. It took her hardly no time to break the weed down and remove the small amount of seeds that were inside. Once she had it rolled, she licked the edge and closed the blunt, then put it on top of the box on the table.

While she waited for Chief to return, she scrolled through her contacts. As much as she hated group chats, she sent all of her stylists one letting them know what was going on. She also gave them permission to call her first thing in the morning if they wanted to talk about things one on one. Afterwards, she made a status on Facebook and a post on Instagram looking for shops for her stylists to work out of until she got her new shop up and running.

She wasn't too much worried about herself at the moment. Once she had them taken care of, then she would try to find herself something. When Chief returned with a bottle of champagne and some takeout menus, Remington put her phone on do not disturb.

"Champagne?" Remington smiled as he handed her the plastic cup and menus.

"This is cause for celebration."

Her smile turned into a chuckle as she watched him pick the blunt up from the table.

"Celebration? What exactly are we celebrating, Chief?"

"You finally let that sucka ass nigga go and linked up with a real one."

As much as she wanted to check him all she could do was giggle and shake her head. "I'm staying with you temporarily. Don't apply that pressure, Chief."

"Whatever, man. You been mine and you gon' *be* mine. I'll give you space to figure shit out though."

There was not a tinge of humor in his voice, eyes, or face. He was dead fucking serious. And as much as Remington hated that, it turned her on.

"But what about Gray? Isn't that one of your best friends?"

Chief shook his head as he lit the blunt. "I been hanging around him to keep tabs on you. The nigga is reckless as hell and I got too much shit on my plate to be getting caught up with him. So if the choice is you or him..." His eyes locked with hers. "It'll always be you, boo."

As he leaned forward, Remington licked her lips in preparation of his kiss, but she found herself disappointed when he merely pecked the side of her mouth. And he knew what he was doing too because he smiled when he pulled back.

After they decided on pizza, mozzarella sticks, and wings, Remington popped the champagne and poured them both a glass. As they rotated the blunt, she hummed under her breath Mahalia Jackson's "Don't Move My Mountain" until her nerves began to truly settle. Truth of the matter was, she wasn't fucked up about her relationship being over at all. Remington had never loved Gray – just the way he took care of her financially.

There would be no need for a period of healing her heart and getting over him. That ship had long since sailed.

They continued to smoke until their food arrived, and since they were sharing two blunts and drinking champagne, Remington had a slight buzz by the time they started to eat. It was nothing close to having her tipsy, so high she wanted to laugh the night away before going to sleep, or out of her right mind – just enough to have her smiling with low eyes and feeling good.

A serious case of the munchies had them scarfing down everything they'd purchased and going down to the kitchen for ice cream, too. When they came back up, they started talking about themselves.

Chief gave her a more detailed look into his life. He shared with her his family tree and how all of his siblings were related by four different parents. The role he played in the family business. And the smaller facts that she already knew, like he was thirty-two and would be thirty-three in July, which was four months away.

Since he knew about her goals, he told her his goals – to get out of the family business and start his own. He didn't fake the funk and make it seem as if he had a desire to go legit fully one day. Chief had a legal business to clean his money, but the streets were his heart and his passion.

He'd die behind this shit.

Period.

The only thing that had him considering getting out of the business now was the fact that Trevor was gone. With James having more control now, shit was about to go left unless Cassius found a way to exercise his new role. He didn't want to leave his family, but he didn't want to die too soon or catch a bid because their leader couldn't lead them no more.

Remington in turn told him about herself. She was the oldest of three to parents that were still married. At twenty-eight, she'd always been a hustler and a go getter. She didn't start getting lax and lazy until she met Gray. A part of that had to do with the fact that she'd been taking care of herself and her siblings for so long that it felt good to have someone take care of her.

"But I'm never making that mistake again," she finished.

Chief's head shook as he sparked the third blunt, and Remington decided she'd let him have that one on his own. He was definitely a more experienced smoker than her, and even though the food had sobered her up a bit, she'd fall asleep with the quickness if she drank or smoked anything else.

"Depending on a man wasn't a mistake; you just depended on the wrong man. A nigga like me gon' spoil you just like he did, but I'ma make sure you take care of yourself too."

Remington could rock with that logic, so she continued without debate. She told him about how she got into natural hair care and what she wanted to do going forward with her business and personal life.

Their conversation shifted to their likes and dislikes. Chief shared with her that he liked tattoos, pain turning into pleasure, rough and

nasty sex, strippers, and gambling. And when it was Remington's turn, their conversation took a turn that could potentially get them both into trouble. She told him that she liked her solitude for the most part but that she enjoyed going out and having a good time too, watching videos on YouTube, taking showers, cooking, and masturbating.

"Masturbating?" Chief repeated, putting the blunt out.

Remington chuckled and nodded. "Yea. I love pussy play. Not just myself but when a man does it too. He just gotta know what to do."

His voice deepened and lowered when he confessed, "My curiosity has been piqued." Remington's head fell back as she laughed and squeezed his arm. "Aight wait, so you prefer that over dick? Or do you just like it a lot?"

His question made her laugh harder because he looked so damn serious. "I wouldn't say I prefer it over dick... okay... I do. And it's not like I haven't had good dick, I have, I just feel like fingers and tongue gives me a more intense orgasm. I love good dick, though."

"I feel you. A nigga got a high sex drive so I be having to use my hand too 'cause most women think that's all you want from them when you want it as much as I do, and then when I try to use restraint they think I'm out fucking off."

"Is that why you've been single since I met you?"

Chief thought over her question for a few seconds before answering her with, "One of the reasons."

Remington thought over his reply before asking, "What were the others?"

"I wanted you."

If it was anyone else, Remington would have said Chief was running game. In this moment, there was no reason for her to question his sincerity. Their bodies slowly pulled in the direction of each other – like magnetic pieces needing to be bound together again. Her head tilted to the left, his... to the right. The moment their lips touched, Remington released her soul into his. Closing her eyes, she surrendered to the pleasure that she'd only been able to dream of for the past two years.

The warmth of his tongue connecting with hers had Remington's nipples hardening like the diamonds he made her feel as if she was worth. Cupping his cheek, Remington hissed and bit down on her

lip at the sound of him moaning. She was fully aware of his like of nasty sex... but she wasn't expecting a man like him to be vocal. To be passionate. Hell, to even kiss her.

Chief kissed up her cheek and neck, making it to her ear to ask, "Can I play with that pussy?"

"Yes," she moaned quietly, squirming when his tongue entered her ear.

As Chief lowered himself to the carpeted floor, Remington spread her legs and made room for him. She watched, still in slight disbelief of the moment that was happening, while Chief pulled her sweats and panties down. He bit down on his lip and groaned at the sight of her pussy before mumbling about how pretty it was.

Chief stood and cut the TV off, then went to the bathroom. The water cut on, and Remington loved... no... liked him more for washing his hands before entering her most sacred space. She expected him to cut some music on, but he said he wanted to hear the melodies she would make instead.

When he returned between her legs, Chief nibbled up her thighs, kissing and licking the places that got a reaction out of her. His middle finger slid between her folds, and her eyes lowered when he licked her nectar before sliding his finger inside of her. Closing her eyes, Remington relaxed and allowed herself to feel the highest amount of pleasure from his selfless act.

It took him no time to find her G-spot. Slowly, he applied pressure with just one finger. When it began to feel really good, Remington grabbed her legs and spread them wide. Her walls tightened against him more, and Chief lifted his hand and went deeper with his finger.

"That's it," she moaned, feeling her body heat.

"Open your eyes so I can see you cum."

She did – and locking eyes with Chief only intensified the pleasure she was already feeling. Her walls locked around him tighter as white, creamy nectar began to coat his finger. Remington's back arched as her pussy pulsed. She locked her legs around his hand as she jerked and came underneath him.

Spreading her legs again, Chief pushed a second finger inside of her as he sucked her clit into his mouth. She cried out and cupped the back of his head before begging him not to stop. Having not come down from her first orgasm, Remington's walls remained just

as tight, producing more wetness and suction for Chief to move in and out of her with ease. The sound of her pussy's suction against his fingers increased her arousal. Remington began to caress her nipples as he bent his fingers and literally told her orgasm to come here.

And it did.

Again.

Needing time to recoup, Remington pushed him away gently and closed her legs. She took his hand and used it to urge him to stand. When he did, Remington unbuckled his pants and pushed them and his boxers down. After stepping out of them, he sat on the couch as she turned sideways on it and got on all fours.

Chief carried himself with big dick energy – there was no doubt about that. Seeing his long, meaty dick curve upwards had her pussy pulsing and mouth watering in anticipation. After placing a kiss to his head, Remington began to lick the length of his shaft until her mouth was wet enough to take him into her mouth fully. Remembering that he liked rough, nasty sex, she took him deeply, allowing the head of his dick tapping the back of her throat to wet her mouth more.

After dripping saliva onto his shaft, she began to stroke him with her hand, twisting as she went up and down while maintaining her medium paced sucking motion. His left hand went to her hair and the right went to her pussy. Chief stuck his finger inside of it but used that lubrication to wet her asshole.

"You 'bout to suck the soul out a nigga dick," he moaned, and as much as Remington wanted to laugh, she wouldn't dare open her mouth and stop pleasing him... but that went beyond her control when his thumb entered her asshole. Her head lifted as she gasped and inhaled, and Chief wasted no time using her hair to put her back down on his dick.

The moans that left her mouth added a vibration that had moans falling out of his. When her body began to heat, Remington looked up and back, needing to see what Chief was doing to her. She'd never climaxed from anal before, but the way her body was tightening and heating... it was soon to come. Watching in amazement as creamy nectar poured from her ass, Remington pressed back to take his thumb deeper as her eyes closed and she moaned.

Rippling waves of ecstasy began to consume her as she climaxed, causing her body to tighten so she could enjoy each and every damn

one. Chief smacked her ass and moaned, coaching her to cum as he continued to finger her. Remington pushed his finger out of her, wanting to thank him for giving her another form of pleasure that she didn't know she had.

As she straddled him, she kept his stare and returned it just as intensely. Chief gripped her hips and put the head of his dick at her opening, not even bothering to look down as he slid her down his shaft. Her head flung back as she took him in. With each inch of him that broke the barrier of her walls, Remington accepted her fate – Chief was going to be the nigga to have her all in her feelings.

There would be no years of dating and not falling in love.

Nah.

She was going to fall hard, and quick, and not be able to control the shit.

"Look at me while you ride this dick," he ordered with a smack to her ass.

"Yes, Chief," Remington purred, placing her hands on his chest.

Beginning her ride, Remington looked into his eyes – and there was something deeply satisfying about the intimacy of it. No man had ever required such connection from her, and the longer their eyes remained locked the more her tummy tingled. Heart fluttered.

Grabbing a handful of her hair, Chief pulled down, tilting her head and arching her back in the process. Her moans grew louder. Movements sped up. Walls clenched tighter. Pussy poured.

"I'm about to cum on your dick," she warned, gripping his neck and squeezing until he whispered a quiet...

"Fuck, Remi." Releasing the hold he had on her hair, Chief took palmfuls of her breasts and told her, "Look in my eyes while you cum." She did, but as soon as she did, her eyes began to roll into the back of her head. That only seemed to turn him on more because he said, "That's what the fuck I'm talking about. Cum all on my dick with your sexy ass."

Falling into him, Remington continued to slowly ride him as the last few tremors shot through her body. Chief stood and laid her down on the arm of the couch. He told her to hold her legs once he'd placed them by her ears. Unable to resist, she teased him with, "Don't be sexing me all hard and rough and make me fall, Chief."

He chuckled as he stared down at her. "The only time I'll ever let you fall is when it's for me."

Chief slid back inside of her, and Remington knew in that exact moment that she was royally fucked. Fucked... and soon... falling head over heels in love.

CHAPTER 5



It didn't surprise Eira that the first person to visit him was his mother, Estella. That didn't mean he liked for her to see him like this. Hell, if he had it his way, none of his family would have come to visit him while he was doing his time. Problem was, Eira didn't know exactly how much time he would be facing. He didn't know how he'd been set up either.

One of the things the Salzano family thrived on was being meticulous when it came to their business. After James' ten-year bid, none of them had gone to jail for drug charges since. Every now and then back in the day, Cassius and Chief got a few assault charges, but their legal team was always able to get them out of trouble. But now, things were supposed to be running so smoothly for them that they never had to worry about catching a case.

On top of Eira's arrest, twenty-three other men were arrested, and one of their largest shipments had been confiscated. Everyone was keeping their mouth shut for now, but everyone wasn't looking at the time Eira was.

"I just don't understand," Estella repeated for what had to be the third time since she'd arrived. She sat up further, giving Eira an even better view of her through the monitor. Unfortunately, he hadn't been approved for visits on the lower level yet, only those via camera in his pod.

"Run it back for me again, son."

Eira smiled through his irritation, knowing she was asking only to find a clue that he was missing somehow.

"Me and Sienna were going out for dinner since her mama had Brensen. On my way there, the chef called and told me he had the greens but couldn't get in touch with Chief since he was a day early and asked if I could pick them up and pay instead of just meeting him to pay as usual. I called Chief to see what he was doing and he was all the way on the other side of town, so me and Sienna stopped by the market before we grabbed our food. As soon as I paid for the greens and put it in the car... you know what happened next."

Estella massaged her temples as her head shook. "This is why we pay people to go shopping for us."

That was true, however, when there was product on the line, you did what you had to do. Getting that product in a day early meant more money. Normally, Chief would send one of his guys to pick up the product. He'd trail him to make sure everything was straight, but he never interacted with the supplier or touched the product himself. Then, Eira would hand over the money.

This was the first time he'd ever touched product, and ironically it was the time the police pulled up right after.

"Do you think it was the chef?" Estella questioned, referring to one of their suppliers, Enrique.

Eira's head shook as he shrugged. "I don't know, Ma. All I know is, these folks been waiting to get some shit on us, and now that they have, they gon' try to make me pay for all of it."

Estella squeezed her neck as she looked away. "I'm sorry, baby. This is why we try to be so careful, and I feel like we failed you. It makes absolutely no sense for James to be working with so many

people from so many places and still do business with people here. Fuck!"

"Chill out, Ma. I'm good."

"No, you're not good, and I won't be good either until I get you out of here."

Eira stared at his mother silently. He didn't want to tell her that that wouldn't be happening no time soon. With the amount of drugs they found on him plus the gun, Eira was looking at a good twenty to thirty years, and that was if they didn't find any bodies attached to his gun to add on.

"How you doing, though? What they saying about the funeral?"

It was a sour thing to ask just to change the subject, but time was running down on their visit, and Eira had to ask. Estella scoffed as she sat back in her seat. Her eyes watered, but she wouldn't let her tears fall. She wasn't the type. Then again, she'd never lost a love like Trevor either. No matter how hard they tried to fight it, everyone knew that they were the ones meant to be together – not her and James.

"They aren't having a viewing, and Pamela is honoring his wish to have him cremated, so I won't even get to see him again." She paused and lowered her head as it shook. "Every night the image of his body dropping hunts me." Her voice lowered and shook when she added, "I will *never* be okay." Swallowing hard, Estella lifted her head and put back on her façade. "But I don't need you to worry about me, baby. Have you talked to Sienna?"

That was his mother – always worrying about and seeing to others without ever taking the time to see about herself.

One day... Estella would get the life and love she deserved.

And that alone was motivation for Eira to do whatever he had to do to get out so he could try and make that happen.

Sienna

SIENNA'S LEG shook under the bar as she watched Eiryx's every move. With everything that was going on, Sienna had the bright idea to go out and have some drinks. What she wasn't planning on was for Eiryx to be living and moving so damn reckless in the process. She tried to be understanding, knowing that Eiryx had just lost her father and her twin brother was in jail... but she was trying her hardest to start a drunken fight with literally everyone that looked their way.

Of course no one in their right mind would fuck with Trevor's baby girl and James' step-daughter... but every once in a while... you had a nigga who placed no value on his life and tried to buck the system. If she kept trying it, Eiryx was going to find the trouble she was looking for and end up in a pod in the building next to her brothers.

Unable to watch anymore, Sienna stood and walked the few steps it took to get to Eiryx on the dancefloor.

"Will you chill, Ree? You bringing a lot of attention this way, and most of these niggas on some weirdo vibes. If your ass gets jumped and we have to shoot a bitch I'm fucking you up when we get home," Sienna warned, grabbing Eiryx's arm and trying to lead her back to their table.

The fun night she wanted them to have had turned into a babysitting expedition, and if she wanted that, she could have stayed at home with her and Eira's child.

Eira.

He hadn't even been gone a week, and she was missing him like crazy.

"Will you get off my damn back?" Eiryx roared, snatching her arm away from Sienna and stumbling in the process. Sienna tried to help her stand but Eiryx pulled away again. "What you even bring me for if you was going to ruin my buzz?"

"I didn't bring you here to try to fight every person that looked at you wrong. Plus, you tipsy. You need to sit your ass down somewhere."

"Fuck you, Sienna. Leave me alone."

Sienna's head shook as she watched Eiryx push her way through the crowd to get to the bathroom. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have allowed her to go to the bathroom on her own... but

she needed a damn break before the fight Eiryx was looking for ended up being with her.

CHAPTER 6



Eiryx really didn't have to pee, she just didn't want to be around Sienna when she burst. At the most random times she found herself bursting into tears. If she wasn't crying over her father, she was crying over her brother. Not one moment since things went down had she been able to find peace. Alternating between smoking, drinking, and sleeping, Eiryx had been trying her hardest to numb the pain. Unfortunately for her... nothing had been working.

As she made her way through the crowd, Eiryx was even more ready to go home. Going out was a bad idea. She should have gotten drunk with Diem like she originally planned to, but she wanted to go out with Sienna knowing this was a hard moment for her as well. They were different in that way, and it made Eiryx wonder what her

brother saw in her. Sienna was a good woman... just nothing like any of the women in his family – maybe that's why he clung to her.

Grumbling under her breath, Eiryx pushed past two women and looked back at them with a mug, daring either one of them to say something slick. One of them had her chest poked out, but when she looked into Eiryx's face and realized who she was she backed down. With a smug grin, Eiryx continued towards the bathroom, but before she could make it, she was grabbed by the waist and pulled into the bar.

"Nigga, if you don't get the fuck off of me..." she started, but the feel of the gun in her back silenced her.

Eiryx's eyes closed at the feel of his nose trailing up her neck.

"I been watching you all night. Actin' like a bitch and shit. You need some dick to act right?"

Her eyes opened and squinted as she gritted her teeth. Looking around the club, she cursed under her breath at the sight of Sienna smiling in some man's face. Her brother hadn't even been gone for a week and she was already on to the next.

"Get the fuck off me," she repeated, scanning the club for someone else she knew.

"Nah. I'm about to get *in* you. Maybe that'll wipe that mug off your face. By the way... tell your brother not to disrespect me again."

Recognizing his voice, Eiryx tried to turn to face him, but his free hand went to the back of her neck and he kept her from turning. "Gray?" She chuckled. "He's going to kill your ass when I tell him about this."

"Shut up bitch. You ain't gon tell him shit." Gray's hand went to her dress, and as he lifted it, Eiryx squirmed against him. Her eyes landed on Xi as Gray told her, "Stop moving before I shoot you. You know I'll do it."

Her nostrils flared because she knew he would. That's what he was known for. He never fought. Like the weak ass trick he was... he always pulled the trigger. As Eiryx watched Xi walk in their direction, she considered her options because surely he wasn't coming over to her. For as long as she'd been in the family business, Xi had been competition. Friendly, but competition, nonetheless.

Eiryx's pistol was in her purse next to Sienna at the bar. Her knife was on the side of her hip, but she'd need to subtly retrieve it.

"You're going to rape me in this packed club on the side of the bar, Gray?" she asked, leaning forward.

"I am, and if you move again, I'm going to kill you in this packed club on the side of the bar. You got me?"

When Xi was a couple of feet away, he lifted his head, chin poking out as he looked from her to Gray. "You good?" he mouthed.

"No," she returned, afraid if she moved her head Gray would notice.

Her eyes lowered to Xi's hand. She closed her them and inhaled a deep breath when she saw him reach behind his back. Eiryx opened her eyes in time enough to see Xi pulling a gun and aiming it in their direction.

"Move," he mouthed, and as soon as she did, he shot.

Giving her no time to think, Xi grabbed Eiryx by the wrist and led her towards the area behind the bar as people yelled and ran. She stepped over Gray's lifeless body, not even bothering to look down at him.

"My sis is on the opposite end of the bar. She'll worry if she doesn't see me."

Xi pulled his phone out of his pocket and handed it to her as he said, "Call her and let her know you straight."

The combination of knowing and being familiar with him combined with the fact that he'd literally just bodied a creep for her had Eiryx comfortable enough to do just about whatever he asked at that point. With a trembling hand, she accepted Xi's phone. Eiryx couldn't say that her nerves were rattled because Gray had tried to violate her – thank God he hadn't been able to – but it was more so the vulnerability that had her so on edge.

She hated lacking control.

Had she not been a little tipsy and unaware fully of her surroundings, this wouldn't have happened.

"You gotta put your password in."

Xi rattled off six numbers as he led her down the hall and out of a back exit. Eiryx shot Sienna a text letting her know that she'd be calling before sending her a FaceTime request. Sienna answered, and Eiryx let her know that she was okay and that she could leave without her. At first, Sienna declined hesitantly, but when she saw that Eiryx was with Xi she agreed. She may have known that he was an enemy to the family, but at least it was someone they knew.

And she made it clear that if anything happened to Eiryx she'd be sending them brothers after him.

Eiryx handed him his phone back, and they walked to the car in silence. That silence remained while Xi pulled out of the parking lot. Thankfully, he was parked right behind the back exit, so there wasn't much traffic that they had to get through.

He drove a couple of miles before pulling into a Walgreens parking lot. Xi cut the car off and turned his head in her direction.

"You good?"

Eiryx looked over at him and forced a soft smile.

"Yea, thanks."

"Wasn't that your brother's boy?" Eiryx nodded. "And he tried you like that?" She nodded again and looked away.

"I never thought a nigga would try to violate me like that. Especially one I know." Eiryx inhaled a deep breath and released it slowly. "I'm good, though. Thanks to you."

Xi nodded as he started his car back up. He told her to put her address into the GPS but she told him she couldn't do that. Instead, she called Sienna back and told her to meet her at the Walgreens at the corner. Now that her nerves were settling, there was no way in hell she'd let Xi or anyone else know where James and Estella lived.

After Sienna agreed, Eiryx gave Xi his phone back. What little influence the liquor had her under was gone. That ordeal had caused her to sober up quickly. At this point, all she wanted to do was go home, shower until her skin turned red, and crawl into the middle of her bed. Instead of focusing on what could have been, Eiryx kept telling herself to be grateful for Xi. Shifting her perspective from a negative to a positive one was the only thing calming her down in that moment.

"My condolences about Trevor. I'm sure that makes what happened tonight even worse."

Eiryx smiled as her eyes watered. Clenching her jaw, she tried her hardest not to cry for what felt like the millionth time that day.

"You have no idea," she whispered before inhaling a shaky breath.

Not expecting to feel it, Eiryx jumped when his hand covered hers. He pulled it back as if he'd touched fire.

"My fault. That was inconsiderate as hell of me considering..."

"No." Eiryx chuckled and shook her head as she reached across the center console and grabbed his hand. "It wasn't that. I dare not give him that kind of power over me. I just wasn't expecting it and was deep in my thoughts. That's all."

"Well, I know you probably got a lot of options and shit, but if you need anything..."

Both of them looked straightforward as a car pulled directly in front of his. It was Sienna, and Eiryx couldn't help the irritation that filled her at Sienna ruining the moment. While she'd always thought Xi was handsome, she felt there would never be anything between them. This was the first time she'd ever been alone with him, and just that quickly, it was over.

Still holding his tattoo covered hand, Eiryx lifted it and kissed it gently.

"Thanks... again."

Flipping their hands over, Xi kissed hers as well. "You're welcome."

"If um... the police try to come for you or something..."

Xi chuckled as he released her hand. "They won't."

Xi opened the door and walked over to her side of the car. He opened her door, then led her over to Sienna's car. After opening the door, Xi helped Eiryx get inside. He stared at her for a few seconds before closing the door, stuffing his hands into his pockets, and walking away.

For as long as she could, Eiryx watched his every movement. When Sienna reversed to turn and he was no longer in her sight, Eiryx closed her eyes and tried to implant that vision of him inside her memory.

"You know what happened? Who got shot?"

Eiryx looked over at Sienna briefly before grabbing her purse off the floor in search of her phone.

"I have no idea."

CHAPTER 7



*A*i's fate was sealed – she would only help the family as their lawyer once she finished school. Her ties to the mafia would only be legal. As the baby of the family, it was the family's job to protect her, keep her safe, and make sure her hands remained clean. Until she graduated college, though, she served as the family's connect. It was her job to communicate between James, Trevor, and their suppliers.

Well... now James and Cassius.

Set to meet with a new, potential supplier, Ai shared the news with Cassius and Diem instead of James. Before Trevor died, he asked her to meet with Duke Byrd and get a feel for his integrity. That was Ai's superpower – being able to get an immediate and genuine vibe from a person after speaking with them for at least five

minutes straight. Because Trevor stressed that he wanted to keep this between them, Ai didn't feel comfortable telling James, but she also didn't want to go to the meeting by herself.

It had been Trevor's desire to grow and make the drugs they sold on their own without the use of an outside supplier, knowing that it would lower their chances of getting caught and increase their income. He did, however, consider Duke to be a good supplier for them to have in Memphis so that they could cut off their out of state and country suppliers altogether. Trevor had made it clear that he didn't trust their current Memphis supplier – Enrique. And now, Eira was in jail after meeting him for an early delivery.

A part of Ai felt responsible for Eira's current state because if she would have shared with Cassius the conversation she had with Trevor the day before he died, maybe they would have canceled the shipment with Enrique and Eira would be a free man. But there was no point in dwelling on that now, and Ai was trying her very hardest to release that weight.

When the door opened directly across from Ai's chair, she looked up and into the eyes of the most beautiful, brown skinned man she'd ever seen. Dressed in all black, he captivated Ai with his wide smile. She wasn't sure who he was talking to as he disconnected the call, but his deep dimples and the wrinkles on the sides of his eyes made her glad they were able to get a laugh out of him. As soon as his eyes zeroed in on her, his smile fell, and he licked his lips as she stood.

Cassius and Diem did too, but his eyes remained locked on her as he said, "I only want her."

Ai looked from her brother to her sister, and when Cassius nodded and sat back down, she slowly made her way in the direction of his office. When she was standing directly in front of him, Duke extended his hand for hers. Instead of taking it immediately, she looked down at it, nipples hardening at the sight of how his veins bulged from his hand and arm.

She didn't know why... but a man with large veins on his hands, arms, and shaft always turned her on.

Placing her hand inside of his, Ai inhaled a deep breath. His grip was firm but... a safe firm. As she released her breath, Duke caressed her hand with his thumb as his smile returned.

"Duke Byrd."

"Ai Bruce."

"I know, your father has told me all about you and shown me several pictures of you. Come in."

Ai looked behind her between Cassius and Diem. While Cassius wore a mug, Diem was cheesing like Jerry. The sight was enough to make her laugh as she removed her hand from Duke's and followed him inside of his office. To the untrained eye, he was a well-off lawyer and that was it... but to the streets... he was the connect and supplier who could also get his clients out of trouble if need be.

When Duke closed the door behind him, Ai looked back in time enough to watch as he unbuttoned his blazer. She wasn't worried about him trying to do anything to jeopardize her safety physically... it was the safety of her heart that she was worried about. Her attraction to him was unable to be hidden... and by the way he looked at her... Ai could say the same about him.

"I'm sorry about what happened to Trevor as well. He was a standup guy. One that brought me a lot of respect in the streets."

Duke extended his hand towards the seat he wanted her to sit in as she said, "That's funny. Beyond yesterday, he never mentioned you."

Duke nodded as he sat back down. "Has he ever mentioned Michael or Kensington?"

With recollection brewing within her, Ai nodded with a smile. "Yea. Both. He said Michael was an old friend and Kensington was his son that he mentored."

"That's me and my father. Kensington is my first name." His hand pointed towards the law diploma behind his desk with his full name on it – Kensington Duke Byrd. "I stopped using Kensington while practicing law after my father got locked up because I didn't want prosecutors to hold that against me or my clients... but that's me."

Duke's confession gave her more comfort. It felt like being in the presence of someone that was close to her father. Losing Trevor was a loss that Ai would never really get over. At this point, she was on a numb autopilot. She hadn't even cried yet. But Ai knew when the dam broke... it would drown anyone in its path.

Ai listened intently as Duke shared with her her father's plans. That he wanted to bring him on as a local supplier. And while she wanted to stall to buy more time with him, she couldn't help but be honest with him and tell him that James wouldn't want to have any-

thing to do with another local supplier after what happened with Enrique.

Whatever the case, there was nothing she or Cassius could do to bring Duke in.

Understanding of their position, Duke stood to see Ai out. When they made it to the door he asked, "So what do you think?"

Leaning against the door with a smile, Ai looked up at him innocently. "About?"

"Me. He told me that you have a way of reading people. What vibe did you get from me?"

Her head dropped briefly, but it lifted when his arm rested on the side of her on the door. Duke took a step closer, almost closing the space between them altogether.

"I think you're genuine. You would have been worthy of our trust. Unfortunately, my father died before he had the opportunity to convince James. And even if me and my siblings go to him on your behalf, he will still say no."

Duke stared at her silently before saying, "I think I have a way of convincing James, so I look forward to doing business with you."

Ai chuckled as she turned. Following her lead, Duke pushed his body off the door and opened it.

"I highly doubt that."

"Then I look forward to experiencing pleasure with you."

She blushed as she stepped out of his office. "You don't even have my number, Duke."

"Leave all that basic shit to me."

As she turned to face him one last time, the door was closing. For a second, all she could do was stand there and stare. Ai had no idea what her father was thinking bringing Duke into her life... but she also couldn't help but wonder if this was his subtle way of putting him into her heart.

AFTER THE FUNERAL...

CHAPTER 8

PAMELA



*A*s Pamela wiped the tears from her cheeks, she clenched the letter in a death grip. The last time Trevor left their home, he'd given it to her. It was after a fight, and Pamela was sure it was an apology. Wanting to remain in her feelings, Pamela hadn't bothered to open it. When she heard of his murder, she couldn't pull herself to open it.

It was stupid – wanting to stay mad at him – knowing life wasn't promised to any of them.

And love wasn't promised for her and Trevor.

Hell, it never had been.

Trevor was the perfect husband, only lacking love. Romantic love at least. He took care of Pamela, provided for her and protected her. Did everything he could to make her feel secure. Treated her to

weekly date nights and monthly trips out of town. Every day, Pamela received a bouquet of roses – yellow roses. Every day, they were a reminder that Trevor saw her as one of his best friends. And that no matter how good he was to her, he would never be in love with her.

It wasn't his intention. He'd never tried to torture her in this manner. Any desire she had he gave. There was only one thing Trevor had never been able to give her, and that was his heart. Unfortunately, that had always belonged to Estella.

Estella and Pamela had always been best friends, just like Trevor and James. When they met the men, their lives changed forever. It was Pamela who first noticed Trevor, but after getting to know them with time, she began to desire James. But it was too late at that point, their partners had been chosen, and they had to deal with the consequences.

Except, James had an idea. One that Pamela thought she would never entertain. But she learned that night why it was important to never say never. When he expressed his desire to get to know her intimately in all ways, Pamela was insulted. Turned on, yes, but also insulted. She couldn't believe that he would think she would cheat on Trevor or anyone else. He expressed to her how Trevor didn't mind, that they shared women all the time.

After discussing it with Trevor and finding out that he was cool with it, Pamela decided to give it a try. It was like having the perfect man all in one. Each one brought different things to the table, and they made up for the things the other lacked. While James was more rough and exciting, Trevor was sweeter and more thoughtful.

It was fun, alternating between the two men. But eventually, Trevor and Estella's feelings for each other began to grow deeper. And while Pamela would have been okay with Trevor leaving her to be with Estella, James wouldn't hear of it. He promised Estella a life that she would never want to be free of if she chose him, and unfortunately, she did. It didn't take long for both women to realize they had chosen the wrong men, so keeping up with their arrangement of sleeping with each other was cool.

But as James grew older, he grew colder. He stopped caring about what either of the women wanted. And it felt like Estella had gotten the short end of the stick. For the most part, Trevor devoted all of his time and attention to Pamela while Estella was stuck with James.

Lately, though, Pamela sensed a shift within them both. Trevor was a lot more secretive, and Estella was a lot more distant. Always looking and acting guilty when they were around.

If Pamela didn't know any better, she would have sworn they were considering being together, but she knew neither of them would consider crossing James in that manner. After inhaling a long, shaky breath, Pamela opened the letter.

PAMMY,

I couldn't pull myself to say this to you face to face. Not right now anyway. Still, you deserve to be the first to know. Well, second. I've already shared this information with Duke, but that was only for safety precautions. Estella and I have decided to finally be together. We are going to start our own family business and allow anyone who wants to leave James to come along.

In order for us to really be together, you and I would have to divorce. This is best for all three of us. Though I know you believe that I treat you good, I'm not in love with you because I've always been in love with Estella. It was stupid of me to believe love didn't mean anything, especially not as much as loyalty. Because of me and James' horrible upbringing, we promised that we would always be there for each other and never let anything come between us.

Love had shown us both its ugliest sides in our younger years, and we vowed to never let it make us weak. To never be a need. So even though I loved Estella, I chose to not honor that love for all the wrong stupid reasons.

You're an amazing woman, tainted by two horribly selfish men. Men who honestly don't even deserve you. Either of you. So now, I want to release you. So you can find someone to give you the healthy love you need. If you want to remain married to me, let me know, and I will honor your wishes as always. But I hope you see this for what it really is – your way to freedom.

Yours,
Trevor

PAMELA SCOFFED as the letter dropped from her hand, wishing she would have read it sooner so that it could have been cremated right along with Trevor. Here she was feeling guilty over not having read the letter before he died, and now, she was glad that she hadn't. As angry as she wanted to be with him, she knew his choice had come from a place of love and care, for both her and Estella. And he was right, she did deserve to be free and loved by a man who could love her unconditionally.

CHAPTER 9

ESTELLA



It was the first time Estella had really given James the time of day since Trevor was murdered. Truth – a part of her held James responsible for Trevor's death. Trevor never went to the hideaway spot unless he was with James, so if anyone was looking for him, they wouldn't have thought to look there. James frequented the hideaway spot most. And she always couldn't shake how the man's shoulders fell when he saw that it was Trevor lying on the floor.

He literally looked as if he had shot the wrong person, or he didn't want to shoot Trevor to begin with.

Either one was a possibility, and until she knew which one it was, Estella had no desire to talk to James about anything.

That wasn't going to be possible now, though.

He'd been gracious enough to give her space and let her sleep in a different room. Today, his patience had run out, and he was demanding an explanation. A part of Estella wanted to continue to ignore him, but since she'd had a heart to heart with Pamela moments earlier, she figured it was best to have one with James as well.

When Pamela first called and told Estella she knew Trevor intended to divorce her, she expected Pamela to go off on her. Pamela expressed her disappointment but her understanding as well. And she apologized to Estella for having Trevor for as long as she did. Though Trevor was sweet and caring, both men mishandled and devalued Estella and Pamela. And since they couldn't trust the men to value and do right by them, they should have had the courage to leave. Estella agreed, but that did nothing to change her love for Trevor or desire to have him back.

The first time he asked, Estella remained silent. But the second time James asked, "Why were you at the hideaway spot with him, E?" she answered.

"I was with Trevor... because I love him." James' head whipped in her direction as she chuckled bitterly. "Loved him. And we were tired of hiding it. We were talking about how the both of us would go about getting a divorce."

James exhaled as he shrugged his shoulders and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "We said no love," he gritted quietly.

"I only agreed to that because that was the only way you would be okay with me being with him, James. You were the one who wanted an open marriage – I never did. But since Trevor was an option to me, I agreed."

Scratching underneath his chin, James slowly made his way over to the bed. Gripping the edges of it, Estella tightened her body just in case he tried to pull her from it. They were no stranger to domestic abuse. That was partly why their children couldn't stand him. But after Estella shot him in the leg to get away a few years ago... James expressed his anger in other ways.

He sat next to her and put his hand on top of her thigh.

"It's okay if you don't love me. As long as you continue to live in a way that honors and respects me, I'm okay with that. But you know, better than anyone, that there is no getting out of the Salzano family. You will be my wife until you die, and even then, it will be *my* last name that's on your grave." James stood and looked down at

her when he added, "Let that be the last time we *ever* have this conversation."

She waited until he left her room to grab a pillow, go into her closet, and scream. The tears that left her eyes weren't sad tears; they were angry tears. And she wasn't just mad at Trevor, she was mad at God for allowing someone to take him from her, too.

"Why did you leave me here with him, Trevor?" she whispered, sliding down the wall and pulling her knees and the pillow up to her chest as she cried. Life with James had been bearable because of Trevor. Now that he was gone... she had no idea how she would survive.

CHAPTER 10



*A*s Cassius loosened his tie, Treasure made her way behind him. Her hands began to massage his shoulders. Lips kissed his neck. Back on his bullshit, Cassius had no time for feelings. He knew leaning on her during his time of need would come back to bite him in the ass, and he was paying for that now. While he still liked and desired Treasure, a relationship wasn't his priority; business was.

And the last thing he needed was for a woman to be checking his every move.

Now that Trevor was gone and he was the official second in command, his free time would be limited. If he was going to keep the family safe and secure, there would be no room for distractions – not even one as beautiful as Treasure.

Cassius casually removed himself from her grasp and slowly walked to his closet. For whatever reason, James asked to meet with him and Kameron immediately after the repass. Any other time he would have told his inconsiderate ass to wait, but that wasn't an option anymore.

"Are you okay?" Treasure asked softly, making small steps behind him. "I mean... I know you're not okay... but you seem a bit more distant than you were when we first left. Did I do something wrong?"

Her concern... the fact that she was worried because of his detachment instead of angry... only made Cassius desire her more. But at this point... it was in her best interest if he left her alone altogether. They still had no idea who murdered Trevor or snitched on Eira and gave word to the DEA about their shipment. Too many things were happening right now for him to be worrying about a relationship or the safety of another person.

"I'm good, Treasure. When you heading out? I need to meet with Rock about some business."

"Oh. I was going to stay here just in case you needed me, but if you want me to leave I can."

Of course he didn't want her to, but he needed her to. And that need had his heart burning as he removed his suit and tossed it into his dirty clothes hamper.

"Yea. I'm straight now that the funeral is over, so you can go ahead and head out."

There was silence. And stillness. So much silence and stillness that Cassius stopped moving to listen for any from Treasure. He heard her release a shaky breath, and the thought of her fighting to maintain her composure made him feel even more like an asshole. The only thing that kept him from rushing out, apologizing, and pulling her into his arms was the repetition inside his mind that this was for the best.

"Okay. I guess just... call me if you need me."

"I won't, but thanks."

Cassius wanted her to call him an asshole. To get angry and lash out. To give him a reason to convince himself that cutting her off was a good move. He prayed his gaslighting would send her into a spiral of emotions that would make her crazy... even though it was his words and actions that drove her there.

But that wasn't Treasure. She had too much grace and class to act in such a way. And she would handle him with mercy more than anything, because that's the kind of heart she had. He heard her footsteps nearing the closet, so Cassius busied himself with removing his undershirt.

She stood at the opening of the closet but didn't step inside. "I know you're hurting right now, and I know you're focused on the business. And for whatever reason, that has you wanting to push me away. I'll move around gracefully but what I won't do is wait for you to realize you've made a mistake."

As she made her way over to him, Cassius closed his eyes and tightened his grip on his shirt. Treasure placed a kiss to his cheek that would have softened the concrete around any man's heart.

"Take care of yourself, Cash, and don't let this position turn you into your father."

Her last statement felt like his heart had been ripped apart with a machete. Even worse, she was right. That was exactly what it would do.

Brushing that truth, that premonition, away, Cassius continued to undress and redress in jeans and a t-shirt. When he was done, he called Kameron to confirm that he would be able to meet with James. There was no doubt in his mind that he'd try to send one to his jaw if Treasure came home sad or crying over him, and he would take it because he deserved it, but that would be all he gave Kameron if he tried to protect his sister's honor.

The entire time Cassius drove to the warehouse on Main St., his mother kept popping into his mind. Her pain over losing Trevor was hard to ignore. It made him want to both feel a love so deep and steer clear of it at the same time. But without Treasure... love for Cassius now seemed impossible.

It took him about fifteen minutes to get to the warehouse on the expressway, and on his way, he got a call from Kameron letting him know he'd be late because something was wrong with Treasure. She may not have planned to go into detail about what was bothering her, but there would be no way for her to hide her ill feelings from her brother even if she tried.

Since Cassius was the first to arrive, he decided to see what exactly James wanted to discuss that he couldn't talk to him about around the family.

"This couldn't wait?" he asked, shaking James' hand.

"Business don't stop for nothing; you know that, Cash."

They sat across from each other at the square table, where there were two additional seats. Already, Cassius couldn't wait for Kameron to arrive so he could get the fuck out of there. Before Cassius was old enough to form an opinion about his father, he idolized him. Maybe it was because James was around so little that when he did come home Cassius was simply happy to see him.

That changed when he turned five and he began to pick up on the kind of man his father really was. Between the abuse, cheating, and disrespect of his mother... Cassius immediately began to despise his father. Once he started to be loved and nurtured by a real man, Trevor, he began to like his father even less. And when James got out of jail, he made it clear that it was no longer his responsibility to love and care for his children... and that was the final straw for both Cassius and Diem.

It was only out of loyalty and Estella and Trevor's wishes that Cassius had anything to do with his father at this point, otherwise he would have cut him off completely.

"What is this about, Rock?"

James chuckled as he slumped down in his seat and tilted his head. "He dead and you *still* can't call me daddy? Pops? Nothing?"

Cassius thought over his father's question and all possible outcomes of what would happen before saying, "You ain't been a father to me, so why would I call you any of that shit?"

James had gained the name Rock in the streets because that's what he first started selling; rocks of cocaine, but his children began to call him that because his heart was as hard as stone.

"Trevor was more of a father to me than you ever was. All you did was provide the sperm to get me here; that nigga was my Pops."

James lifted out of his seat and flipped the table over, and if it was anyone else, they may have cowered in fear. All Cassius did was remain in his seat as James stalked over to him.

"If it wasn't for your mama, I would kill you right now for talking to me like that."

Cassius released a quiet chuckle as he stood and looked James scare in the eyes.

"If it wasn't for my mama, I would've been murked your ass. Get the fuck out my face with this bullshit, Rock, before I show you why

you called me your beast.”

Like two wolves not willing to submit and lose control, they stared at each other until James sucked his teeth and walked away.

The door opened, and Cassius literally felt the thick tension that was brewing between him and James leave the room as Kameron entered. He could already tell that working alongside his father in this capacity was not going to work. Cassius could barely stand to be in the same room with him for more than thirty minutes unless someone else was there to keep them from having to consistently engage with each other. How in the fuck were they going to run this business together?

And to think, he pushed Treasure to the side after pining for her for years to deal with this shit.

That thought pissed him off even further, and he had to silently thank God for giving him the mind to leave his pistol in the car, otherwise he would have taken it out and beat the fuck out of James with it.

“What you do to my sister?” Kameron asked, not even acknowledging James.

Cassius looked over at him briefly before returning his eyes to James. “Released her. You welcome.”

James picked the table back up and sat down, but Cassius didn’t bother. As far as he was concerned, this meeting wouldn’t last too long. He made the mental note to thank Treasure for not going into detail about what happened and salvaging his friendship with Kameron.

“I ‘preciate that but let this be the last time she come home after leaving you with puffy eyes and a fucked up attitude. She was fine when she left the repass so I know that shit was you.” Not even bothering to give Cassius time to reply, even though he didn’t plan to anyway, Kameron extended his hand for James to shake before sitting down.

Still standing, Cassius listened as James explained why he asked them both to be there. Since Eira was still locked up, James wanted to plan for the future. There was only so much that he could get accomplished financially through Sienna on Eira’s behalf. Sienna was cool, but no one trusted her to take Eira’s place. Kameron, on the other hand, was different.

His reputation with Cassius had preceded him. James liked the way he handled his business and wanted to know how they felt about Kameron handling the money for the family business as well.

Cassius was cool with it. Even though he didn't want Kameron any closer than he was to his father, he would never stop the next man's cash flow. Kameron asked for twenty-four hours to think it over and their meeting was done. As Cassius left the warehouse, he had to stop himself from trailing Kameron home to see Treasure.

He missed her already, and the decision to focus on the business instead of his personal life was already beginning to feel like a terrible mistake.

CHAPTER 11



Deacon told her to call when she was sure. Tonight, Diem was sure. Not because she was so interested in getting to know him, though she was, but because she needed something to get her mind off Trevor. Sending him off made his death real, and it was all-consuming at this point. Since they didn't know much about each other, they agreed to meet up for drinks and possibly dinner depending on where the night took them.

To be honest, Diem was in the mood for a quick fuck.

A hard, rough, deep fuck.

One that would make her forget everything else in the world but the feel of a long dick ramming her pussy from behind.

But there was something about Deacon that told her he wasn't the one-night stand type. Then again, what man wouldn't take ad-

vantage of bedding her? Diem wasn't cocky, but she was confident and fully aware of her worth. Deacon should count it a privilege that he was considered and a blessing if he was able to even get a *whiff* of her pussy.

Just the thought of the prize between her thighs had Diem smirking as she entered the bar. Deacon was hard to miss, seeing as he was the finest nigga in the room. It was March, which meant it wasn't hot enough to sweat but it wasn't too cold you couldn't get away with wearing just a t-shirt. And Deacon had chosen to dress casually in a white t-shirt that stretched against his milk chocolate frame beautifully.

The contrast of the white against his brown skin had Diem biting down on her bottom lip as she walked over to him. He stood, giving her a better view of his tall, muscular build. Mouth partially open, Deacon tucked his bottom lip between his straight white teeth before biting down on it. He lowered his snapback over his eyes until she couldn't see them anymore, then pulled it from his head altogether.

"What's up?" was his low greeting as he pulled her into his chest.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting long."

"You did, but you worth it."

Diem smiled as he led her over to a nearby table instead of returning to the bar.

"What's good with you, Diem?" he asked, sitting across from her in the booth, but that was too far away for Diem's liking.

"Can you sit next to me? I want you close."

"I did want to look across from you and see that pretty face, but I'm cool with being close to you too."

Unable to keep it in, Diem blushed as he scooted closer to her. Crossing his arms on top of the table, Deacon leaned forward and looked at her as she rested her back against the booth. There was something about the way lust danced around in his eyes as he stared at her that made her pussy throb.

"Thank you for agreeing to come on such short notice. Today was a really rough day."

Deacon motioned a waiter over as he asked, "What made it rough, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I um..." She paused and gathered herself to avoid breaking down. In the streets, she was lethal. Never cracked. Was more masculine than some of the men on their team. But losing Trevor? That

was a blow that could easily have her crying like a baby and folding like a snitch on death row. "We had my father's memorial today. Well, he wasn't my real father, but he was like my father. So it was tough as hell to do that."

Deacon's hand lowered to her lap and took a hold of hers. "I'm so sorry, Doll. My father was murdered when I was seventeen, so I know exactly what you're going through."

"That's crazy; he used to call me Doll too."

Deacon smiled as he sat back. "I'm not surprised. That's what your pretty ass looks like."

Was she blushing again?

Swallowing hard, Diem looked away as the waiter approached their table. Deacon told him to add whatever she wanted to drink to his tab at the bar. Diem requested a Hennessy and Coke before trying to get the attention off of her. She asked Diem to tell her about himself, hoping that would be enough to ease her mind.

He told her that he was twenty-eight, which made him two years younger than her. As a businessowner, he had a car lot, car wash, and car detail company. She gathered that Deacon was a typical mans man because he liked sports, cars, and other manly shit. He had a sister and older brother.

Deacon loved old school music, watching and attending sports events, and playing card games. His life pretty much consisted of traveling and doing whatever the fuck else he wanted to do. Because he had managers for his businesses, he only popped in a couple of times a month and let the money flow in. He expressed his desire for a partner to make memories and travel the world with, but because of how his last relationship ended he wasn't in a rush to get serious with anyone.

"What happened?" Diem asked, dipping one of the tortilla chips into the salsa that he ordered after her drink was delivered. She wanted something light to put on her stomach while she drank, but as smooth as their evening was going, Diem didn't mind going out for dinner as well.

"She cheated. Wasn't really getting everything she claimed she wanted from me but didn't want to leave me, so she got what I lacked from someone else."

Her chewing temporarily stopped, but she picked it back up and swallowed before replying. "What did she want?"

Deacon shrugged as he picked his drink up and took a sip. "Time. I was just getting my detailing shop off the ground and my employees were new, so I was there more than usual. She just wanted more of me, I guess, and since she couldn't get it, she tried to find an artificial replacement."

"Did you love her?"

Even if Deacon didn't want to answer, Diem knew the answer by the shift in his mood and the way he slightly moved away from her out of discomfort. Though interested, that would be the last question she asked no matter how he answered.

"Yea."

She nodded and lifted her drink, almost choking on it when he asked, "You ever been in love?"

Diem shook her head and laughed as she set her drink down. "Nah. That hasn't really been my priority. I'm working on dating and stuff now."

"Why haven't you been interested until now? Work? Hurt? Family shit?"

Her head tilted as she shrugged and scooted her glass back and forth. "A combination of those things. My father wasn't too good to my mother, and for the longest time I felt like she was weak for putting up with his shit. So if love did that to you, I never wanted it. But I realize now that she never loved him, she was just comfortable and loyal. The man she truly loved was the one we said goodbye to today. Naturally seeing my mother hurt, hurt me. And no matter how hard I tried not to, I couldn't help but take her heartbreak personally."

"So..." Deacon took her hand back into his. "I gotta wait for you to heal from your daddy issues before I have a real chance?"

Not wanting the seriousness of his question to get to her, Diem smiled and tried to make her reply as light as she possibly could. "I thought you weren't looking for anything serious?"

"I'm not, but if I find it, I ain't running from it either."

Their eyes remained locked for a while, and when Deacon picked up on the fact that she didn't want to answer, he changed the subject by asking her to tell him about herself. While most people didn't know her family just by her face or saying her first name, they almost always knew after she shared her last name. Deacon was no different. As soon as he figured out that she was a part of the black

mafia in Memphis, he understood why she was having the troubles she was having as far as relationships were concerned.

She expressed to him how hard it was to submit and show her emotions like the typical woman, but Deacon made it clear to her that all she needed was the right man leading her for her to submit.

"It won't be easy dating me," she warned, to which he gave her a crooked smile.

"I don't like easy. It ain't worth it if you don't work for it."

If Diem wasn't careful, she would slip up and allow Deacon into places that no other man had access to – like her heart.

They had a couple more drinks before deciding to grab dinner. Deacon suggested a restaurant that was about two blocks away. He offered to drive and just bring her back to her car, but she declined, even after he stressed that parking was always packed.

When they pulled up to the restaurant, Deacon found a parking space with ease because he parked in the managers parking space. Getting out of his car, he leaned against it with his arms crossed and a smug look on his face. It was a hell of a lot harder for Diem to find a parking space. In fact, she had to circle the block for a good seven minutes before someone left and she hurriedly took it.

Had it been any other instance, her impatience would have caused her to drive off, but she was determined to prove a point to Deacon. When she walked over to him, she rolled her eyes, and that made his smile turn into a laugh.

"You couldn't be a gentleman and give me that parking space since you clearly know the manager?"

"If I did that you wouldn't have learned your lesson. Listen to me when I tell you shit. I ain't gon' ever steer you wrong." With a roll of her eyes, Diem tried to walk away, but Deacon grabbed her arm and pulled her into his embrace. "Lose the attitude before you ruin our night." It wasn't his command that softened her but the kiss to her forehead that followed. Taking her hand into his, Deacon led her into the restaurant.

He spoke to a few people on the way and introduced them to Diem, letting her know that this was one of his closest friend's restaurant as they were led to a back table. Even though the place was packed, that table was empty. When she asked him about it, Deacon told her that he called his friend to reserve it when she went to the bathroom.

"So you just knew I was going to want to spend some more time with you huh?" she teased, looking over the menu.

"Why wouldn't you? I'm probably the only man you've given half a chance that could actually tame your ass."

With a loud scoff, Diem slammed the menu back down on the table and lowered herself in her seat. "I'm Diem Salzano. Ain't no taming me."

Deacon sighed as he grinned. "Yea. Aight."

DIEM WAS STARTING to reconsider her decision. They agreed on getting a room for the night after their conversation over dinner took an odd turn. The subject of their last sexual encounter came up, and Diem confessed that she was thinking about having a one-night stand with him. She shared that she changed her mind because the idea of letting a total and complete stranger inside of her without knowing his true character didn't really sit well with her.

So Deacon put her mind at ease by telling her all of what he considered to be his flaws, toxic traits, and weaknesses... and she did the same. It was probably the most open, honest, and vulnerable conversation she'd ever had with a human being, and though she hated to admit it, that conversation made her feel closer to him than she'd felt to any man.

But that conversation wasn't the reason she was changing her mind. The way Deacon was handling her was. As soon as they entered the hotel room, he pressed her body into the wall and began to tug her panties down her hips. The more time she spent with him, the more difficult she perceived cutting him off would be.

"So since you claim this is just a fuck and it ain't gon' mean shit, we don't have to kiss and be intimate right?" There was no smile on his face, but there was certainly one in his glowing eyes.

"Right," was what her mouth said, but her heart definitely wanted otherwise.

Not even bothering to remove her dress or hells, Deacon pulled his hardened dick out of his jeans. The sight of it was enough to cause her pussy to flow more than it already was. She watched as he

sheathed himself with the condom, then he lifted her into the air and spread her legs as he told her, "Bring me home."

"You keep saying shit like that and you will turn this into something we don't want it to be."

Her hand wrapped around his dick, and Deacon waited until he was nestled inside of her snugly to say, "Something *you* don't want it to be. I'm open for whatever."

Diem was prepared to say some slick shit, but the moment Deacon began to fill her with long, hard strokes... talking became the last thing on her mind as she held onto him. Biting down on his neck, she kept her legs stretched wide as she took everything he gave. Though she wanted to yell, moan, and cry out his name... the most she gave him was heavy breathing.

No man had ever broken her and gotten the satisfaction of knowing he'd pleased her sexually beyond the wetness of her walls – and Deacon wouldn't be the first. But... with every stroke... it was getting harder and harder for her to maintain control.

"How this dick feel?" Deacon asked, pressing his body fully into hers and slowing his fast pace down. "Is it good?"

Brushing his pelvis against her clit with each stroke, Deacon drew out a whimper that she quickly silenced by biting down on her lip. "It feels so good, Deacon."

The moan he released into her ear as her walls began to tighten around him caused Diem to shift against him and try to put some space between them as her back arched. "Then why your ass ain't saying shit, Doll? Hmm? I know you 'bout to cum 'cause you drenching my dick."

"If you can feel it... why do I have to say it?"

Deacon laughed before speeding his strokes back up. "I can see now I'ma have to break you."

Not even bothering to reply, her hand went to the back of his neck as he bit down on her neck. Deacon waited until she was on the verge of climaxing to reposition her in his arms. Her legs went from being spread wide to bent at the knees. He began to bounce her up and down his shaft instead of grinding up and into her. The added friction made Diem hold him tighter around his neck as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Diem's heavy breathing turned into whimpers, but that still wasn't good enough for Deacon. Once again, he waited until she

was about to climax to switch things up. This time, he lifted her off the wall and carried her to the bed.

"Stop cutting off my nut," she almost begged, trying to sound as stern as she possibly could.

"Nah. You ain't cumming until you learn to submit. If not to me, to this."

"Deacon..."

His slow, deep stroke silenced her. Diem gasped through trembling lips as her entire body rocked. Staring into her eyes, Deacon delivered one methodical stroke after another. When she lifted her hips and tried to match his strokes, he held her down on the bed and told her, "Lay still and take this dick."

That demand was enough to have her eyes rolling into the back of her head as she moaned and wrapped her legs around him tightly. Pleased with the sounds both her pussy and mouth made, Deacon continued to stroke her until she came, kissing along her neck and cheek in the process. When her moans stopped, he covered her lips with his and kissed her.

Kissed her like he missed her.

As if they were lovers in another time and space... familiar with each other in every fucking way possible.

Cupping his cheeks, Diem held him in place, not wanting to even breathe unless it was to inhale his exhailes. But he pulled away anyway, lips still lingering on hers just to say, "I thought you said no kissing and intimacy?"

With a smile, Diem ran her hand down his chest and cupped his balls, massaging them in a way that pulled a grunt from within his throat.

"You haven't given me my way all night – please don't start now."

CHAPTER 12



For the most part, Remington had stayed out of Chief's way after the funeral. It was harder on him than he thought it would be. And James' random visit hours later only made it worst. Chief returned to his home immediately after the funeral, and he didn't go to the impromptu meeting James had with Cassius and Kameron.

James decided to stop by and fill Chief in on what happened, making it clear to him that he wanted Chief to try and take Cassius' spot in the family business. He stressed how Chief was more like him than Cassius was, and if he wanted to take things to the next level, he would have to get Cassius out of the way.

And while Chief partially agreed and believed that to be true, there was no part of him that wanted to go against his own blood

brother. Why... that was an even clearer indication that shit was about to start going left for the family now that Trevor was gone. Hell, he hadn't even been turned into ashes yet fully and James was already trying to start a war – between his boys nonetheless. Maybe back in the day when Chief was really on his bullshit, he would have considered doing whatever it took to get that number one spot... but now... he was too old for that shit.

Besides, Remington had him considering a different part of life. One that he really hadn't considered until losing Trevor. Truthfully, Trevor's death was showing a lot of them what it meant to live. For years, their lives had been consumed by the business, and though the money was good... they really didn't have anything else to show for it. What... enemies trembling when they entered the room... some at the mention of their names.

What did that really provide for their lives?

Nah.

Chief wanted something with *substance*.

Something he could look back on and smile about.

All that other shit was for the birds.

But... even though Chief definitely wanted to try something new with Remington, there was still that part of him that was afraid of the unknown. He'd never been in a serious, committed relationship and he didn't want to fail at one now. Most often women only wanted the status that came with being with him, so they didn't care whether he was faithful or not... but he knew with Remington he would have to be a better version of himself, and she wholeheartedly deserved the best version of him.

Before he could lessen his anger, Chief snatched the plate that held his untouched dinner on it and tossed it against the wall before growling and punching his palm. He didn't realize just how much peace Trevor provided until that peace was gone. Slowly, Remington made her way into the living room. Not wanting her to see him like this, Chief told her to leave, but that didn't stop her from going into the kitchen and returning with the broom and dustpan.

He watched as she cleaned up his mess, wondering what he'd done to deserve her care. When she was done, Remington went into the kitchen and came back with another plate of food. Chief told her to leave again, even though God knew he really didn't want her to.

And Remington did too. She told him to shut up softly while using her head to signal for him to sit on the couch.

Chief did, and she sat as close to him as she possibly could.

"I haven't seen you eat in three days," Remington noticed, sliding a forkful of lasagna in his direction. Even though she'd specifically asked him what he would actually eat for dinner so she could cook it, he still hadn't bothered to consume anything she'd made. "You need to eat, Chief."

Chief's head shook as he gently pushed the fork away. "I don't have an appetite, Remi."

"So? You still need to eat to maintain your strength. A lot of people need you. *I* need you. How are you going to be here for us if you die because you've starved yourself? You've always been my strength, but you have to have strength for yourself before you can be that for anyone else." Remington put the fork back to his mouth. "Eat."

Chief gritted his teeth as his eyes watered. Time and time again he'd see Estella tell Trevor that. It was never a conversation he heard, because it would be whispered whenever they were handling business. But Chief was an expert at reading lips like Ai was an expert at reading people and the room. And every time Trevor was feeling upset about something that James had said or done... Estella would tell him that he couldn't be strong for others if he wasn't strong within himself.

In those moments, he thought Estella was just gassing him up... but now that he was in that position... he understood how Trevor felt perfectly, and he respected Estella and Remington even more. So although he didn't have an appetite, Chief opened his mouth and allowed her to feed him.

Because what she'd said was true; a lot of people *did* depend on him.

And if his father was about to go on a warpath, it would be up to him and Cassius to stop him.

Besides, he hadn't been inside of Remington in about four days... and he was going to need all of his strength for that. There was something about the way she cared about him that turned him on effortlessly. Something about it that made Chief want to do whatever it took to make her just as happy as she'd made him – even if that

meant embracing his fear of the most uncharted territory he'd probably ever embark upon... love.

CHAPTER 13



“So what are you going to do, Eira?”

Eira’s eyes rolled. He exhaled a hard breath as he ran his hand down his face. Unfortunately for him, they’d tied the gun in his car to several murders all around Memphis. It was no secret that if you had an issue with the family they had a team to handle you so they wouldn’t get their hands dirty... but... sometimes... things were personal, and they wanted to handle an enemy on their own. Because of that, Eira was not only facing drug charges with the intent to sell, but he was also looking at seven counts of murder.

He had a video arraignment earlier with the judge to discuss his new charges. No bond was set, and she pushed Eira’s court date back a year. So at minimum, he had an entire year behind bars before

his trial would even start. And there was no telling how long that would take unless he plead guilty during the preliminary hearing.

"Fuck you mean what I'm gon' do?"

"I'm saying... didn't your lawyer mention reduced time depending on what information you can offer..."

"You can silence that shit right now, Sienna. I ain't no snitch."

"I'm not saying snitch, Eira. You can't hold the weight of this for your family on your own. None of them motherfuckers have a kid like you do. It's not fair that you're the one locked up when Chief..."

"Sienna."

Her breath was shaky, and Eira had to tell himself not to be too hard on her. Though she knew this was a possibility when she got with a street nigga, it wasn't really the life she signed up for – especially after they had their son five years ago.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this."

Eira didn't know what to say besides, "I'm sorry."

She laughed, and Eira's grip on the phone tightened as he hung his head. "What does that do for me, Eira? You ain't even supposed to be in the streets. You handle the damn money! But they get set up and *you're* the one who takes the blame? That don't seem suspect to you? And of course they got that nigga Kameron to replace you already. I don't trust that shit, baby. Like at all."

"So what you tryna say, Sienna? You think my own family set me up?"

She laughed again, and this time, it started to irritate him.

"Your family is Estella, Trevor, and Eiryx. The rest of them mutts are *not* your family."

"What the hell you just say about my family?" Eira leaped from his seat, slamming his fist into the concrete wall in front of him. Sienna had been acting real brand new since he'd been locked up, and Eiryx told him she'd been smiling all in a nigga's face at the club the other night. It was probably a good thing that he was locked up right now, because had she said something like that to his face, he would have choked the shit out of her.

"I'm sorry but I'm not sorry. You and Chief don't have the same mama or daddy, and even though you, Cassius, and Diem have the same mama... the fact that they have James' blood in them makes them suspect to me. Same goes for Ai's weird, emotional ass. I know y'all got the same daddy but still. She's weird as hell."

"Say some more slick shit out your mouth and I'ma have all three of my sisters to come see you, Sienna. Say one more thing, shawty."

Sienna released a huff into the phone, and before she could reply, Eira slammed the phone onto the receiver as he sat back down. He had enough on his plate, and when he needed her to give him peace the most, she was causing an even bigger headache.

"Last thing I need is to be going back and forth with her stupid ass," Eira grumbled, picking the phone back up and entering his inmate number.

"Aye, I need to use the phone," came from behind him, but Eira was so sure the man was talking to someone else that he didn't even bother to look back. He waited for the line to clear then proceeded to dial Trisha's number. It was times like this where he regretted choosing to get serious with Sienna instead of Trisha, but that was a decision he couldn't take back now. All he could do was be grateful for his son and the fact that he still maintained a friendship with Trisha.

"You don't hear me talking to you, bruh?"

Eira looked to the right, and when he saw the man hovering over him, he chuckled.

"You better step back and ask about me," was all Eira offered as he continued to wait patiently for Trisha to accept his call.

"I ain't gotta ask nobody *shit*. I *said* I need to use the phone."

"Hello?"

Just the sound of her voice soothed him, but the nagging coming from the right side of him was about to have Eira on edge if he didn't handle it soon.

"Trish, can you hold on one second for me, sweetheart?"

"I've waited for you for years, what's another second, Eira?"

Biting his lip to hide his blush, Eira allowed the phone to dangle as he stood. Walking past the man, he went over to the guard and asked, "You mind if I strip down?" as he pulled a hundred-dollar bill from the pocket of his shirt. Casually the guard nodded as he accepted the bill. "Cool."

Eira walked over to his open cell and removed his shirt, shoes, and socks. As soon as he stepped back out, everyone in his pod knew what was up. Unless you were going out to the yard, you never took off your shirt *and* socks unless you were about to knock a nigga out – and that's exactly what Eira did. It only took one hit, and the man was flying back and into the phone.

“Daaaammmmmnnn,” reverberated off the walls at the loud thud of his body hitting the ground.

Eira casually walked back into his cell and put his shirt, socks, and shoes back on, then stepped over the mans body to sit back down and grab the phone. There was no doubt in Eira’s mind that he was going to have to do whatever it took to get out of this place. Period.

As he put his ear back to the phone, he used his foot to kick the man’s arm away from his chair as he said, “Sorry about that, Trish. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

CHAPTER 14



Up until now, Chief was the only person who knew about Eiryx's encounter with Gray and Xi, and she only told him because Gray and Chief were cool to her knowledge. After Chief explained what happened with Gray and Remington the last time he saw him, it all made sense. While Chief was appreciative of what Xi did for her, he still made it clear that it was best if she stayed away from him.

Savior or not, Xi was competition, and in Chief's mind, that made him an enemy as well.

Well... that had been a lot easier said than done. He was on her mind every day. And today while she was at lunch with her sisters she was lurking on his Instagram and accidentally liked one of his pictures. That led to Xi telling her she could call instead of lurking on

his social media. She knew in her mind that she shouldn't call... but there was a part of her heart that wanted her to.

"Have y'all ever dealt with someone that the family didn't want you to?" she asked as she closed the Instagram app.

Diem shook her head as she mumbled, "Nah, but you know I don't give a fuck about that shit."

Ai chuckled as she nodded. "Your brothers and Rock don't want me with anyone in the streets because they want me to be legit when I graduate, but I've been talking to Duke since I left his office that day. He found my number somehow and he's been putting me to sleep every night."

"Putting you to sleep?" Diem repeated, rearing back in her seat making both of her sisters laugh.

"Not sexually with your nasty ass. I mean on the phone. We literally talk for hours until I fall asleep."

"Mhm," Eiryx hummed with a smile before sipping her lemonade. "Sholl wish this was some tea for what I'm about to tell y'all."

"Spill it," Ai urged while Diem rolled her eyes, already knowing whatever her sister said was about to irritate her.

"Well... I ran into a little trouble the night me and Sienna went to the club. Someone there helped me and really looked out for me tough, but he's technically our competition."

"Who is it?" Diem asked, dipping her mozzarella stick in the marinara sauce.

Eiryx released a sigh as she sat up in her seat and pushed her plate towards the middle of the table. Her intuition told her that she wouldn't have much of an appetite when this conversation was over.

"Xi."

Both of her sisters remained silent as they stared at her. Diem's head moved from side to side like Eiryx's favorite monkey gif, and that was the only reason she laughed.

"Xi? Like Z last letter in the alphabet Z?" Diem clarified to which Eiryx nodded. "Oh hell no, Ree. Do not even go there with him."

"Why nooooot," she whined, stomping her foot under the table.

"Because he is not to be trusted."

"But why not though? He has never given us any trouble, and neither has anyone in his camp."

"Yet. You don't know that man's motives or when that could change. Stay away from him before I tell Cash and he beat that mane

ass for even trying you in that manner.”

Sitting back in her seat, Eiryx crossed her arms over her chest with a pout. She should have known not to mention Xi to either of them.

“I think he’s cool,” Ai mumbled. “Or at least he was as far as business is concerned. I can always talk to him again and see what kind of vibe I get from him if you want.”

“Would you? Please?”

“Oh Lord,” Diem added, pulling her phone out of her pocket. “I can see now you about to be on some bullshit.”

“Don’t tell Cash! Or Chief! I promise if Ai says she doesn’t get a good vibe from him concerning me I won’t talk to him.”

That seemed to appease Diem because she slowly put her phone back in her purse. Even with that off her chest, Eiryx decided not to reply to Xi’s message or call him just yet. She’d already made it clear that she was thinking about him and lurking by accidentally liking his post... she absolutely refused to call him on the same day.

CHAPTER 15



When her doorbell rang, Ai was in the process of putting on her highlighter. It was the second to last step in her makeup application for the evening. The only other thing she had to do was apply her lipliner and lipstick, then set her face. Instead of doing both and then answering the door, Ai stood and made sure her robe was secure before heading to let Duke in.

As the youngest of her siblings at twenty-two, Ai was the most covered and the most spoiled. It was her last year in college, and she'd hadn't worked a real job a day in her life. Up until his death, her father paid for college, her rent, all of her expenses, and gave her a monthly allowance to make sure she was straight. Now that Trevor was gone, James offered to pick up where he left off, even though he left her with more than enough money to take care of herself.

Since that was the first thing James had ever offered to do for her, she agreed, but a part of her wondered if he was doing it because he genuinely wanted to or if he had some other motives.

With her hand on the doorknob, Ai inhaled a deep breath before slowly opening it. At the sight of Duke, her smile lifted immediately. She didn't realize she was stepping back and into her apartment until his arm wrapped around her waist and he pulled her into his chest.

"Hi," she spoke softly, smiling as his lips lowered towards hers.

"Hey," he replied quickly, mirroring her smile before kissing her lips softly.

Once.

Twice.

A third time.

No tongue – just a sweet, soft kiss that elicited chills on her arms and the back of her neck.

"I missed you, woman."

Blushing, Ai ran her hands up and down his arms. "You've been talking to me every night since we met."

"But I haven't seen you since then. You look breathtaking."

Her smile widened as she squeezed his arms. "I'm not even dressed yet, Duke."

"I know. I'm wondering if I'm going to want to go out tonight when you are. Might not want to share you." His head tilted as he released her and looked her over. "Yea. I want to show you off."

Ai chuckled as she turned and headed down the hall. "Make yourself comfortable. All I have to do is put on some lipstick and set my face and slip on my dress and unwrap my hair. It may sound like a lot, but it'll take less than ten minutes I promise."

"Take your time, beautiful. I'm in no rush."

After applying a nude lipstick and lip gloss, Ai set her face then unwrapped her hair. As she smoothened it with her hand, her attention briefly landed on the large scripted tattoo that stretched across her forearm. Before Trevor's death, it simply read 'My success is only by God' but after he died, she went back and had angel wings added along with 'My steps are guided by Trevor' underneath.

Shaking her head and refusing to put a damper on her mood, Ai looked her face over for any imperfections. Satisfied with how the soft glam looked against her toffee brown skin, she headed for her

bed to grab the cream bodycon dress that Duke had delivered earlier for her to wear for the night. It was accompanied by clear Christian Louboutin pumps with silver rhinestones along with a silver clutch to match.

She took her time sliding into the dress, loving the way the smooth fabric felt against her skin. Ai gave herself one last glance, then sprayed her Gucci Flora perfume and headed out. Upon her entrance in the living room, Duke stood and released a quiet whistle.

"I didn't think perfection could get any better."

Ai had grown used to his charm and compliments over the phone but hearing him say things like that in person would take some getting used to. He wasn't the first man to compliment her, and Ai knew she was beautiful... but it was something about the way his compliments made her feel. They hit a place within her that no other man had been able to reach.

"Thank you, Duke. You look very handsome yourself. I'm just trying to match your fly."

"Nah, you exceeded that."

The way he couldn't take his eyes off her... made her feel as if he had access to those inner parts of her that were hidden from everyone else. Looking away, Ai inhaled a deep breath and swallowed as her nipples hardened. Damn what her brothers or anyone else had to say about it – there was no way she was leaving this man alone.

CHAPTER 16



The last time Cassius was released from prison he vowed to never come back. Hell, he didn't even want to visit anyone that was locked up, but that was thrown out of the window when it came to Eira. By now, he'd been able to go down to the lower level for his visits, so they shook hands before taking their seats.

"What's up, bro? How you maintaining?" Cassius checked, stretching his legs out under the table for comfort.

"Shit, talking to Trisha and my son as much as possible. And Ma. On God."

"Word?" Cassius' ears perked up. While he accepted Eira's relationship with Sienna, he always felt like Trisha was a better match for his brother. When Sienna had his son, Cassius figured any chance

Eira had of making things work with Trisha was over. And to a certain extent it was. Trisha came around with Eiryx every once in a while, and they would exchange flirty looks and comments here and there, but she'd made it clear that she was no man's second choice, and Eira couldn't help but respect her for that.

"Hell yea. Sienna only adding to my stress, so I've been cutting contact with her down to a minimum. I call to talk to my son, ask her how she doing, and that's about it. What's up, though? I'm surprised to see you here."

Cassius smiled, though he felt this conversation was about to go left real quick.

"What that mean?"

Eira chuckled as his head reared back. "Come on, bruh. You know you don't fuck with the family like that. We barely kicked it when I was out, so I wasn't expecting you to show up when I got locked down."

Cassius face twisted up as he sat up in his seat. "You my brother; why wouldn't I come to see you?" Eira shrugged and remained silent. As upset as Cassius wanted to be, he couldn't blame Eira. Truth – he had been neglecting his relationships with his family and friends. Business was always coming first. Add that to the fact that he was naturally to himself, and that was a recipe for social disaster. "I'ma always come for you, bruh. No matter what. Even if we don't talk every day... you my brother, and I love you."

Eira relaxed in his seat more as he nodded. "I love you too, and I do appreciate you coming for real. Means a lot."

With the heaviest weight now removed, their conversation flowed freely. In no time, their visit was up, and Cassius hated to leave. After promising to be back in three days, he unwillingly left his youngest brother and followed his heart. It led him to Treasure. *His* treasure. The treasure he hadn't cherished like he should have.

They hadn't spoken to each other since the funeral, and Cassius had no idea what he would say to her if she even let him inside of her office. Hearing those words come out of Eira's mouth put things in a different perspective. In a real perspective. It was one thing for him to brush off love and friends... but when it came to his family... that shit hurt him to his core. It was time for him to not only make love and Treasure his priority but strengthening his bonds with his family as well.

Losing Trevor should have been a wakeup call that none of them took lightly. None of them knew when their time would be up, and it would be in their best interest if they did whatever it took to make the most of it.

Before going into Treasure's office, Cassius sent everyone in his family and Kameron the same text that invited them to his place for a set later that evening. He put his phone on do not disturb so the vibrations wouldn't distract him, then headed for his treasure.

When he walked inside, Cassius was greeted by the receptionist. He walked over to her desk and asked if Treasure was in even though he saw her car outside. The receptionist told him that she was then asked if he had an appointment. Cassius told her no, so she offered to see if Treasure could see him. Instead of having a seat like she offered, Cassius headed to the back towards Treasure's office. Whether she said she had time or not, she was going to see him regardless.

The receptionist's heels clicked behind him, letting him know that she was following him before he heard her voice telling him that he couldn't just burst into Treasure's office.

"Yes I can," was all he said before he turned the doorknob and stepped inside of her office, slamming the door in her receptionists face in the process.

Treasure rolled her eyes and tried to her hardest to hide her smile. "You are so damn rude. Get out and go apologize."

"I ain't apologizing for shit."

"Cassius."

Cassius groaned and turned around. She only called him that when she meant business. Opening the door, he headed back down the hall and mumbled a quick apology before returning to Treasure's office. She was still reading over the papers on her desk, as if she wasn't fazed by his presence at all, but Cassius was burning up on the inside at the sight of her. Treasure seemed to have gotten even more beautiful over this past week, and he wasn't sure how that was even possible.

"Is everything okay, Cash?" The fact that she didn't even bother to look up as she spoke to him irritated him. Treasure knew he demanded respect, and that included looking in his eyes when you talked to him.

Deciding to play her game, Cassius sat in one of the chairs on the opposite side of her desk and remained silent until she looked up at him.

"How are you?"

She smiled with one side of her mouth. "You made it clear that you don't care how I feel when you kicked me out, so what do you want?"

"I want you." Treasure's eyes rolled as she dropped her pen onto her desk and sat back in her seat. "I know what I did and how I did it was fucked up, but I felt like that was necessary. In that moment, all I could think about was handling business, and I didn't want to neglect you or put you in harm's way because of it."

"What's changed?"

"It ain't that big of a priority to me no more." When she didn't say anything, Cassius continued. "If I felt like apologizing would earn your forgiveness, I would, but I know you require actions to prove remorse. So I'm here to ask for the chance to make amends."

Treasure nibbled on her bottom lip for a moment before sighing and shaking her head. "You're right, I don't want an apology, because I don't want you to think that's all it takes to make what you did okay. Even though you've seen the error in your ways, there can't be anything between us if you feel as if it's okay to shut down on me and not take my feelings into consideration. If we're going to have a partnership, you have to remember that you're not the only person that matters."

"I know that; I just need the chance to show you."

Treasure paused and thought over his request again.

"Fine, but this is the only other chance you'll ever get. I don't give men multiple chances to show me that they don't want or value me. And if I didn't know you as friend, you wouldn't even have this one."

Cassius stood, letting her shit talking go in one ear and out of the other. She had her chest poked out now, but all it took was some sweet talking and wining and dining for her to be purring in his ear again.

"I'm having a set tonight and I invited the family over. Can you come through so I can start making this up to you?"

With a smile, Treasure picked up her papers and straightened them out before laying them flat and grabbing her pen. "Thanks, but

I have other plans.”

Cassius was no fool. Her ass was boring as hell. The only plans she had was a popcorn and wine date with Netflix.

“Cool. Well can I call you tonight at least?”

Her smile widened as she nodded. “That’s fine, Cash. Tell everyone I said hello.”

Making his way around her desk, Cassius licked his lips. He was unable to resist. There was no way in hell he could be this close to her and not feel her lips. As he lowered himself and she tilted her head, he decided to exercise all the self-control he had and kiss the corner of her mouth instead.

“I’m picking you up after my family leaves. Have a bag packed, and don’t make me wait outside for long.”

Her tongue rolled around her cheek as she gave him an open mouthed smile. Even though Treasure didn’t say yes, she didn’t say no either.

Instead of going straight home, Cassius stopped by the store to grab some meat for the grill. He told everyone else to bring sides, liquor, and something for dessert. By the time he made it home, it was a little after three, and that gave him more than enough time to chill and take a nap before it was time to start seasoning the meat.

Cassius ended up starting a text conversation with Treasure before falling asleep, and he didn’t wake up for four hours. At that point, he took a shower and refreshed his hygiene then seasoned and marinated his meat. Even though he told everyone to come at eight, Estella and Ai were always early because they genuinely wanted to help. They both came at seven something, prompting him to throw some hot dogs and smoke sausages on the grill so they would have something to eat while they waited for everyone else.

It wasn’t long before everyone else arrived. The music was blasting, blunts were being passed, drinks were flowing, and Cassius and Diem was beating everybody’s ass in spades. The vibe was good as hell, letting Cassius know the night of fun was most definitely needed. Only person missing was Eira. And Treasure.

When his doorbell rang a couple of hours in, Cassius excitedly went to answer it thinking Treasure had changed her mind. His entire mood was fucked up at the sight of James. He started not to answer but he knew James would just call him to come to the door if he

didn't. Cassius opened the door with a scowl that was unmistakable... not that he'd try to hide it anyway.

"Fuck you doing here?"

"Your mama told me about it and said I should come and apologize for how shit went down."

"I don't need your apology."

"And I don't want to give it. But me and E are having enough problems as it is. I'm not trying to hear her mouth about how I did you wrong."

Not caring either way, Cassius released a sigh and stepped to the side so James could enter. The moment they walked into the living room, everyone's laughter and conversation ceased. All eyes went from James to Cassius and he shrugged. It wasn't his bright idea for the man to be there.

Sensing the tension, James was on the offensive in his usual fashion.

"What? Y'all don't want me here?" When no one replied, he laughed and widened his stance. "Y'all wish it was me that was gone instead of him, don't you?"

"Sit down and have a beer, James," Estella suggested, trying to lighten the mood.

"No, fuck that. Y'all wish I was the one dead. Say it!"

"You gon' have to leave if you gon' be on that bullshit, Rock," Cassius warned returning to his seat. "Everybody having a good time and I ain't about to let you fuck that up. Sit your ass down and have a drink and some ribs or bounce. Either one is cool with me."

Slowly, everyone began to return their attention to their conversations and the game. James stood there for a while before yelling to hell with all of them and storming off. Though Cassius smiled, he tried his hardest to hold his laugh in, but that was damn near impossible when Ai's already tipsy ass burst into a fit of giggles.

"Why y'all do Rock like that?" she asked, clutching her stomach as she continued to laugh.

"Mane, forget him. He'll be cool in the morning," Chief assured her. "A nigga ain't got time to be stroking his ego and babysitting his jealous ass."

Cassius shook his head before slamming his cards down on the table, refusing to let James or anyone else fuck up his night.

CHAPTER 17



*X*i was approaching their table, as if there was no fear or bitch in his blood, and as much as Eiryx wanted to deny it... she liked that shit. After they had so much fun at Cassius' impromptu set two days ago, Eiryx and her siblings decided to go out tonight. There was a lot going on that they needed to vent about and celebrate, so they decided to go to dinner and hit up the club to do so.

To start, no one on their team had snitched yet from when their shipment was intercepted, so that was good.

Diem had finally found a man worth her time and effort. Yesterday, her and Cassius had to make an example out of someone who used to be on their team. When asked who he wanted to get his ass whooping from, he chose Diem, as if he expected it to be easier to

handle coming from a woman. He learned quickly that that was a mistake, and Diem's knuckles were bruised and cut up because of it.

When Deacon called her for a random lunch date, she declined because she didn't want him to see her with blood on her clothes and hands. She lied and said she didn't feel good, and he popped up on her to take care of her. His concern softened her even more towards him, and that heightened when he didn't judge her. Instead, he kissed her knuckles, ran her a nice bath, gave her a full body massage, and spent the rest of the day making love to her.

Diem was on cloud nine – until she heard him having a muffled conversation before leaving without so much as a goodbye. She hadn't talked to him since, so this night out was much needed for her. Eiryx and Ai tried to convince her not to overreact and think the worse while her brothers felt as if she should cut her losses and do away with Deacon now if he was showing signs of inconsistency or that he couldn't be trusted.

Chief wanted to take Remington out to celebrate because in a short amount of time, the city had shown her so much love because of Gray. When she first went live and explained how she'd fucked herself up making a man her everything and had to start all over because of it, her books filled immediately with people who genuinely wanted her to do their hair and some paid deposits just to send donations her way. And when word began to spread that Gray had been killed, everyone swore it was his karma for the way he'd treated her and several other women while they were together.

Today, she signed the lease for her own shop again, and she was able to make the down payment on her own. Even though Chief offered to buy her a building or pay the deposit if she preferred renting, Remington made it clear that this was something she had to do for herself and by herself.

And Eira... Eira proved his loyalty by deciding not to bring anyone from the family down with him. He told his lawyer that he would be facing the charges alone. On top of that, he asked that no one from his family or Sienna visit him while he did his time because that would only make things harder for all included.

Needless to say, with the mix of both good and bad things happening for them, the whole family wanted to step out and get loose.

For the most part, everyone's mood was chill, and Eiryx wanted to keep it that way. With that in mind, she quickly stood from her

seat and headed away from the table before Xi could get to it. Her sisters already knew what was up, but her brothers still had no idea that Xi was the reason Gray was dead and that she'd had a moment with him.

Casually, Eiryx headed in the direction of the bathroom and Xi followed behind.

As soon as he was within her personal space, Xi trapped her between his body and the wall. She looked to the left, as if she'd be able to see her family, but Xi cupped her chin and pulled her attention back to him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, pushing his hand down, even though she enjoyed the feel of his skin against hers.

"This is my club. Why wouldn't I be here?"

Eiryx released a hard exhale as she closed her eyes and rested her head on the wall. Her family couldn't have known that as much as they frequented the club. They wouldn't have put money in their competitions pocket like that. Still, Eiryx had to give it to Xi – his club was one of the hottest spots for after hours in Memphis.

"You don't want your folks to see you with me, Eiryx?"

She opened her eyes at the sound of his question, getting annoyed by the amusement in his eyes and small smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

"No. So I would appreciate it if you didn't try to talk to me when they were around."

She tried to walk away, but he used his hand around her neck to gently push her back into the wall. Eiryx's head turned to the left again, causing Xi to lean against the wall and block her view.

"I'm grown as hell; I'll talk to you whenever the fuck I want around whoever the fuck I want. And why haven't you called me yet?"

Her smile was wide this time as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Is there somewhere we can go and talk privately?"

Xi's head shook. "If I get you alone, talking will be the last thing on my mind."

Eiryx considered his insinuation momentarily before agreeing with, "That's cool too."

Xi held her gaze for a few seconds before taking her by the hand and leading her through the crowd. She appreciated his tall stature shielding her and keeping anyone she knew from seeing her. The en-

tire time she walked behind him, Eiryx convinced herself that she was attracted to him because he was handsome, and he'd saved her. That it was natural for her to feel something for the man. That all she had to do was fuck him once, get him out of her system, and never care to see him again.

But when they walked into his office and he locked the door behind them, Eiryx felt feelings for him locking themselves inside of her heart, too. Xi's hand gripped her thigh, and he wrapped her leg around him as he pressed her body into the wall. Avoiding his piercing dark eyes, Eiryx gripped his shirt and inhaled a shaky breath.

This was wrong, on some many levels, but that was partly what made this feel so right.

"Why haven't you called me?" Xi asked again.

"I thought we weren't coming back here to talk?"

Xi smirked, releasing her leg and tugging her over to his desk. He sat her on top of it before pulling her panties down and stuffing them into his pocket. Eiryx laughed, but her laugh was silenced quickly when Xi placed her hand on his already hard dick.

"That's what happens every time I see your ass. You need to quit playing and give a nigga a chance, Ree."

Instead of replying vocally, Eiryx wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted his shirt over his head.

There would never be any denying their attraction to each other, and if what happened with Gray didn't happen, neither of them would have acted on it. Eiryx reasoned within herself, that that was all the proof she needed that she'd be able to cut him off when this was over. Her hand went to the button on his jeans, but Xi wrapped his hand around her wrist.

"You don't get the dick until *after* I get the number."

Her mouth fell open before she laughed and yelled, "Xi!"

"Nah. I'm serious, Ree. You ain't finna hit it and quit it. Give me your number or you don't get the dick."

With a pout, Eiryx considered his stipulation. Her arms crossed over her chest, but they lowered and went to his shoulders when he asked, "You need a reason to believe you need me on constant rotation," while spreading her legs wide. But before he could lower himself to devour her pussy, the door to his office was being kicked in.

It seemed as if protecting her was Xi's natural instinct at this point, because he was quick to push her down into his desk while

pulling his gun from his back.

"The fuck?" he gritted, causing Eiryx to look around him.

The sight of Chief and Cassius had her rolling her eyes as she sat up.

"Get the hell out," she yelled, using Xi to shield her body. Even though her dress was still on, the vulnerability of the moment they caught her in made her feel naked under their eyes.

"You lucky I ain't come right in here and put a bullet in your motherfuckin' head, Xi. Fuck you think you doing?" Chief questioned, stepping towards them with his gun still pointed in Xi's direction.

Eiryx hopped down off his desk quickly and stepped between them. She looked to Cassius for help since he was usually the most sensible between her brothers, but he looked just as upset as Chief.

"Put the gun down, Chief," she pleaded, placing her hand on top of his wrist. Slowly, she lowered his arm. Chief grabbed hers and used it to almost drag her out of the office. Forcing herself not to look back at Xi, she tried to wiggle free of Chief's grip.

"The fuck wrong with you, man?" Chief checked, tightening his grip on her. "Don't let me catch you with that mane again."

"You are *not* my daddy."

"I don't care. Stay away from him, Eiryx. And that's all I'ma say about the shit."

Chief released her, pushing her forward and in front of him in the process. Eiryx quickly made her way through the crowd, ready to take her ass home already. Even if she didn't want to see Xi again after tonight, the rebel in her made her want him even more since her family was trying so hard to keep her away from him.

CHAPTER 18



*A*i didn't want to wake up, because when she did, she would have to leave. What was she thinking spending the night with Duke during the week knowing she'd have to leave early for school? A long sigh escaped her, prompting Duke to hold her a little tighter from behind. Smiling softly, Ai wrapped her arm around his and snuggled against his chest a little tighter.

Last night was magical. Duke showed Ai that he really paid attention to the things she said during their conversations instead of just asking questions to be asking. First, he took her to her favorite restaurant, where she was able to pig out on crab legs and hot wings. Next, they went to her favorite dessert bar and shared a large milkshake. Then, they went to hear Anthony Hamilton at the Landers center in Southaven because she told him he was one of her favorite

singers. Afterwards, they went to a rooftop party where they had a few drinks and got high.

By the time they made it back to his place, they both were sleepy, but neither of them was in a rush to surrender to their slumber. Instead, they laid in his bed and talked more as they held hands.

Everything about their night together was perfect, as it was on their first date. In fact, every time she saw him the time they spent together was even better. A part of her wanted to skip her classes just to lay in his arms, but he had court this morning as well.

"Good morning, beautiful."

The sleep made his voice raspier than usual, and Ai absolutely loved the sound of it.

"Good morning, handsome. How'd you sleep?"

"Amazing with you in my arms. How'd you sleep?"

Her cheeks raised as she blushed. "Amazing. I hate we have to live life, otherwise I'd stay here in your arms forever."

"I agree... but I have a solution for our dilemma."

Duke placed a kiss to the back of her neck.

"What's that?"

"You can come back here after you've done everything you need to do today, or I can come to your place. We don't have to go out tonight; we can just chill."

Even though she knew what her answer would be before he even finished speaking, Ai waited a few seconds before saying, "Sounds good to me. I'll probably be out longer than you because I have to go with Eiryx to take care of some business. So I can just bring some dinner and come back here."

Duke laid her flat on her back and tried to kiss her, but Ai turned her head to the side as she giggled.

"Boy stop! My breath is stinky!"

"And? Mine is too. We can be some stinky breath lovers together."

She laughed harder as he turned her head back in his direction, but her laugh faded away when he kissed her. It was tender and sweet with no tongue as usual. After their first night she asked him about it, and Duke told her the moment their tongues connected he'd want their bodies to connect too. They hadn't had sex yet, even though they both wanted it. They agreed to take their time and get to know each other before taking things to the next level. But times

like this made Ai want to say to hell with that and bust it open for him.

When his lips made a trail down her neck, Ai moaned quietly as she wrapped her legs around him. A part of her questioned why her father had never introduced them to each other before... but if he had... Ai wasn't sure if they would share the connection they did now. One of the great things she loved about her union with Duke now was that he had pictures and stories about her father that no one else had. Even though that wasn't the only reason she was enjoying his companionship, it was definitely a bonus.

As his tongue slithered across her neck, Ai dug her nails into his shoulders. "Duke..." she called softly, squirming at the feel of his hands gripping her thighs.

"Yes, beautiful?"

"I'm ready."

He groaned and brushed his dick against her opening before pulling her hair gently. "Are you sure, baby? I'm hard as fuck right now and I don't want to be teased."

"Touch my pussy and ask me that again."

"Nah." Duke chuckled as he lowered himself down her body and wrapped her legs around his neck. "This *my* pussy."

And he set out to prove that fact, feasting on her... on his... pussy... as if she was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted in his whole life. Ai had never heard so many sounds pour from her lips, but there was something about the combination of his licking and sucking that produced almost unbearable pleasure. She alternated between begging him to stop and pleading for him not to let up.

Duke was able to slip his finger inside of her effortlessly, she was so wet. But that wasn't what she wanted. Unraveling her legs from around him, Ai used his ears to pull him up her body. He was dressed in only his boxers, and she only had on his shirt. And Ai was thankful that there weren't unnecessary barriers between them. That made it a lot easier and quicker for him to reach into his side table and grab a condom then make his way back between her legs.

With the crooks of her knees on the tops of his shoulders, Duke pressed his chest into the back of her thighs, and the front of her thighs into her chest. He had her trapped and unable to move as he connected their lips and opened her mouth with his tongue. As their tongues began to wrap around each other, he slowly entered her and

stretched her tight pussy. Her lips opened as she gasped, and Duke bit her bottom lip in the process.

Duke's hands cupped her head gently, securing her as he made love to her mouth as well. No man had ever made love to her in the deckchair position. She'd never given up so much control. Felt such deep penetration. Her pussy was leaking as thick and quickly as ice cream in the sun on the fourth of July... and the more aroused she became the better he stroked her, slower he stroked her, deeper he stroked her.

"Duke," she whimpered, gripping his arms as her body began to tingle. She was used to cumming quick. But this orgasm was building and taking forever to hit. Quite frankly, Ai was scared as fuck. She was already falling for him quickly, and no matter how hard they tried to hit the brakes, her feelings were starting to consume her. And the way he was handling her... his... pussy... Duke was about to have her going crazy over the dick.

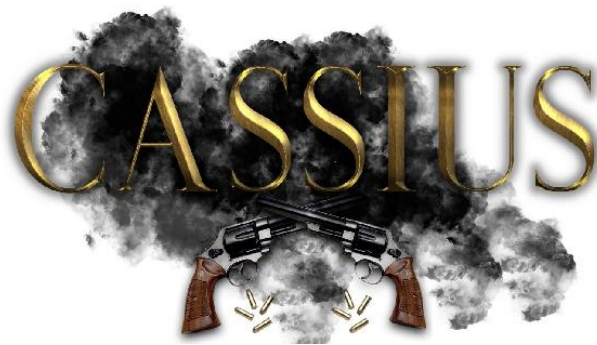
"You ready to cum?" he asked sweetly before licking her lips and sucking the bottom one into his mouth. "I want this pussy to hug my dick for a little while longer."

Ai whimpered as her back arched and legs began to tremble. "I can't hold it, bae. I'm about to cum."

He buried his face in her neck as he moaned. "If you cum, you better cum hard, Ai. Soak my dick."

He said it... as if she had any other choice... his name left her lips in the form of a whimper as her pussy began to throb. And in that moment... school and anything else no longer mattered. For now... all she wanted to do was feel Duke deep in the pit of her until she couldn't take anymore.

CHAPTER 19



*I*t was risky, but at this point, Cassius was willing to do whatever it took to get some alone time with Treasure. She'd been avoiding being alone with him like the plague. If he stopped by her and Kameron's place, she would talk to him as long as Kameron was there, but the moment he left... so did Treasure. Cassius more than understood her fear and hesitancy about getting close to him again, and even though he didn't want to force her to give him a chance to make things right... he at least wanted to do everything he could to try.

Cassius scheduled a showing for one of Treasure's multi-million-dollar listings. When he pulled up, she was already inside of the home. He got out of his car and grabbed the basket from the backseat, then headed to the front door. It was locked, so Cassius cursed

and rang the doorbell. If she looked out and saw him, she probably wouldn't answer. Hell, he had to use a fake name to even get the showing.

He knew exactly when she made it to the door because he heard her sigh. Treasure opened the door, and to his surprise, she wore a smile.

"Let me guess..." she opened the door wider. "You're Denero Green?"

With a nod, Cassius stepped inside. "Yea. I wasn't trying to manipulate you or no shit like that. I just wanted this to be a surprise."

"You wanted what to be a surprise, Cassius?"

He lifted the basket that was in his hand, and Treasure looked down at it as if she hadn't even noticed it in his hand.

"I was hoping maybe we could have a picnic. If you have the time."

Treasure slicked her already perfect hair. There was not one strand of hair out of place in her bun.

"Why here?"

"Because... you won't be alone with me anywhere else. And, I want to get a bigger house. Wanna get married soon. Have a big ass family. So I genuinely want to see this house and possibly buy it. Just tryna kill two birds with one stone I guess."

Treasure licked her lips and looked away as she considered his request. When she returned her eyes to his she said, "Okay. I'll show you around first. Would you like to sit the basket down somewhere?"

He said yes and asked her to lead him to the living room. There, he set the basket down, then followed her around for a tour of the spacious home. It wasn't as big as Estella and James' home, but it was definitely close. As far as he was concerned, there was no need for him to look at anything else. He was already about to create an amazing memory there with Treasure, and it would be the foundation for the rest of their future.

Once the tour was over, they returned to the living room, where Cassius set up their picnic. At the bottom of his basket was a blanket that he used to cover a small space on the floor. To eat, he packed a few different kinds of deli meat for their sandwiches, cheese, and fruit. He included her favorite bottle of Moscato and a couple of candles. Cassius played soft music on his phone, not wanting Treasure

to feel obligated to speak until she was absolutely ready... if she was ever ready.

Cassius didn't mind giving her time while she gave him the space to make this right.

She was quiet while they ate, but she kept looking over at him and smiling, so that was a good sign.

When they were done, Cassius packed up his basket then headed for the door. Treasure followed him there, hands cupped in the center of her. Before he left, Cassius turned to face her.

"I will never force you to give me a second chance. If you never want to try again, I will understand. All I want is a chance to make this right."

Her head lowered as she slowly took a step in his direction. As much as he wanted to pull her into his arms, Cassius exercised restraint by pulling his arms behind his back.

"I want us to try; I just don't want you to think it's alright to hurt me and come back with just an apology."

"If you give me a chance, I swear to God I won't ever do anything to intentionally hurt you again."

Cassius lifted her head and forced her to look into his eyes. Nibbling on her bottom lip, Treasure nodded softly.

"Okay."

With a smile, Cassius repeated, "Okay?"

She mirrored his smile as she said, "Okay."

"Okay." He released a breath that he didn't realize he was holding in. "I want to do this the right way. Before I take you out on our next date, I'm going to talk to Kameron about us and gain his blessing."

That made her smile harder and step into his embrace. Even though Cassius wouldn't let anything or anyone stop him from having her if she'd granted him a second chance, out of respect for his best friend, Cassius was willing to have that talk.

CHAPTER 20



“*I* know your ass in there, girl. I ain’t leaving until I see you.”

As much as Diem wanted to play hard, she couldn’t help but smile. Deacon had been outside of her door for the past forty-five minutes, and it didn’t seem like he was going to be leaving any time soon. Since he randomly left her place without as much as a goodbye, Diem had been ignoring his calls and text messages. It wasn’t so much the secretive nature in which he left that had her avoiding him; it was the fear.

Deacon was opening her heart in ways that she never thought was possible, and the idea of him being up to no good and hurting her was too much to handle. If just the thought made her feel that

way, Diem didn't want to risk being hurt by him for real. So she decided it was best to cut him off altogether.

That didn't mean she didn't miss him, though, because she did. Missed him like crazy. To counteract that, she'd been working more than normal, but that only fucked with her more knowing she had to busy herself just to deny thoughts of him.

Her phone rang, and the sight of his name tickled her. Instead of ignoring it as she'd been doing, Diem answered and said, "Go home, Roger," knowing her comparing him to Roger on *Sister Sister* would both irritate him and make him laugh. And it did.

After he chuckled, he said, "You better bring your ass to this door and open it before I let myself in."

Disconnecting the call, Diem stood and placed the margarita she was sipping on the end table. She stopped and looked herself over in the mirror in the hallway, then continued to the door. When she opened it, she didn't bother trying to hide her smile. For some reason he thought that was his permission to enter, but Diem held her hand up and kept him from coming inside.

"I don't want to see you."

"That's a lie – and I want to know why."

Leaning against the doorframe, Diem looked his handsome face over with a shake of her head.

"Who were you talking to the night you left my house, and why didn't you say anything before you left?"

Deacon's face twisted up before he chuckled. "That's what this is about?"

"That's *exactly* what this is about."

"Why didn't you just ask me sooner instead of cutting me off?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what's the fucking point, Diem?"

Inhaling a deep breath, Diem stepped to the side and allowed him entrance. Deacon followed her into her home and sat next to her on the couch.

"It wasn't you having a secretive conversation and leaving without saying anything. It was the thought of you fucking up one day and hurting me. Cutting you off may seem extreme to you, but I can't risk getting hurt."

"Dammit, Diem," he grumbled, taking her hand into his.

Diem listened intently as Deacon shared his truth. That it was his ex calling – the one he was, used to be, in love with. Apparently, word had spread that he'd finally moved on, and like the average manipulator, she wanted a second chance before she no longer had access to him. Deacon left to get his mind right. For years, he'd been waiting for a second chance with her, and he needed time to decide if he wanted to take it or move on with Diem.

"Clearly I chose a future with you 'cause I been blowing your ass up. And before you think it will be an issue, you don't have to worry about me ever wanting to work things out with her. I set her ass straight then blocked her on everything."

While Diem thought hearing the truth would make her feel better, it didn't necessarily. When she heard about his ex coming back into the picture her heart sank. Even though he was saying now that he didn't want to have anything to do with her, who knew how he would feel if she put forth true effort to get him back?

She felt weak even saying that she was running from love to avoid hurt, but that was the truth. Not once in her life had she been weak over love, and Diem wasn't sure if she wanted to take that chance. All she could think about was her mother with James... but as she stared into Deacon's eyes... she thought about her mother with Trevor too. And how she'd wasted so much time not being able to love the man fully that she really wanted to be with because of shit that really didn't matter.

Not as much as love and her heart's desire.

And even though it was scary, Diem didn't want that for her life.

So she agreed to try and see what would happen between her and Deacon, but she made no promise that it would be easy. And like he did the first time, Deacon assured her that he didn't want easy – he wanted her.

CHAPTER 21



This wasn't the turn he was expecting his situation with Remington to take, but Chief had no one to blame but himself. Instead of fully surrendering to how good she was making him feel, Chief did something that could potentially fuck it up. While Remington had no problem with Chief continuing to live his life as normal, what she *did* have a problem with was him fucking other bitches. What was supposed to be a normal trip to the strip club turned into him getting a lap dance in a private room.

Which led to head.

And some dry ass sex.

Admittedly, Chief fucked her because he had the opportunity to, but the moment he slid inside of her pussy he immediately regretted the shit. He couldn't even stay hard thinking about what Remington

would do if she found out. Chief told himself that they weren't in an official relationship, so she shouldn't have been too mad, but he knew that was bullshit as soon as the thought crossed his mind.

Chief was a lot of things – a liar was not on the list.

It may have cost him Remington by telling the truth, but he hoped it at least made her respect him a little.

When Chief told her what happened last night, she thanked him for being honest and disconnected the call. He waited a couple of minutes to call back, and when he did, she had him blocked. This morning, he met up with one of her stylists and got her to open the salon for him. He had it filled completely with roses hoping it would at least make Remington smile when she arrived, but all she did was shake her head and tell him to take the flowers out when he left.

"I don't get no credit for being real with you, Remi? If we were in a relationship, I wouldn't have done the shit."

Remington chuckled as she shook her head and put her purse under her station.

"Fuck a title; we had a bond. And if you could have sex with another woman as good as things were going between us, how do you expect me to believe you wouldn't do it just because we had a bogus ass title?"

She had him there, but Chief wouldn't let her know that. He thought about it long and hard instead of just saying the first thing that crossed his mind like he normally did.

"If we were in a committed relationship, I would not have done that, Remington. I couldn't even stay hard because I was thinking about you. The only woman I want is you."

Leaning against her station, Remington stared at him with a blank expression.

"I just got out of one toxic relationship; I won't be in another. If you and Gray were friends, I'm sure you're just as bad as him."

"So you can spend years with him letting him fuck up, but I make one mistake before we even get together, and you're done with me?"

"That's what you were expecting? That I would let you fuck up and instantly take you back?"

Chief looked towards the ceiling as he groaned. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying we aren't even official yet and you blowing me off over some bullshit."

Remington lifted her hands in surrender and took a step away from him. "I think it would be best if you left, Chief. Now."

Chief took a step back. "I'll give you that, but I'm letting you know now, I'm not going to chase your ass, Remi. You want me and I want you. I fucked up but I own that shit. If you want me, you gon have to meet me halfway so I can make this right."

Turning her back to him, Remington began to put the bouquets of roses that were on the top of her station on the floor. Sucking his teeth, Chief headed out and thought of who he could vent to. If he went to Cassius, he would tell him he was wrong. If he went to James, he would at least entertain his crazy, so he headed for his father's house.

The entire time he drove, Chief wondered what in the hell would even possess him to pull a stunt like that. Telling himself that he loved sex was a lie. Telling himself that they weren't committed was a lie. It went beyond that. And it took pulling into the driveway and seeing James talking to a man with a smile on his face that made him realize exactly what it was.

He was... his son's father.

A man who, in the past, used honesty as an excuse to hurt women.

A man who, in the past, went after what he wanted no matter who got hurt in the process.

A man who, in the past, didn't give a fuck about a relationship or fidelity for that matter.

But now... Chief didn't want to be that man anymore. He couldn't be that man anymore. Not if he wanted to make things work with Remington.

Before getting out of the car, he opened his email to reach out to Remington since she had his number blocked.

REMI,

I'M SORRY, aight? I fucked up, and it had nothing to do with you. It was me being a man I swore I'd never be... my father. That's no excuse, but if given the chance, I want to commit and do right by you. And if we do get togeth-

er, I give you my word that you will never have to worry about me fucking with another woman again.

AFTER SENDING THE EMAIL, Chief looked towards James and the man, and his face twisted up in confusion. The man was familiar, but he couldn't put a finger on where he recognized him from. The longer he stared at the man as he watched him get in his car, the more Chief tried to figure out where he had seen his face before. Except, it wasn't his face that Chief recognized.

It was his height, back, and skin tone.

There weren't too many men in their circle walking around that looked to be seven feet.

Flashes of the video of Trevor being shot began to replay in Chief's memory.

Surely this wasn't the man who murdered Trevor, and if it was, why was he here talking to James?

Instead of getting out of the car and talking to his father, Chief started his car and reversed out of the driveway. He needed to find Estella and watch that video again, because he was praying this wasn't the same man. He was praying that James wouldn't set Trevor up like that, and if he had, that was all the more reason why Chief wanted to be nothing like him.

CHAPTER 22



Eiryx was unsure why... but Xi was the first person she wanted to be around when Eira called and gave her the news. All morning she had been sick to her stomach – literally. Something was off with him. Fearing the worst, she called the chancellor and requested a wellness check be done to make sure he was alive and well. After it was done, Eira called her and shared what was going on with him, which explained why Eiryx had been feeling the way she was feeling.

The thought of spending the rest of his life in prison was weighing heavily on Eira. He ended up speaking with his lawyer and the District Attorney. If Eira were to give the state information identifying the murders he had committed along with a list of corrupt cops, lawyers, and government officials, he would be released with a clean

record. As a safety precaution, he would have to leave Memphis altogether and presume a new identity.

While Eira would never fear for his life, if he were going to give these names, there would be a lot of people wanting to put a price on his head. The D.A. also wanted someone with his past and record out of the city, so unfortunately, him leaving town was not an option – it was a requirement.

Even though Eira wasn't in fear of his life, Eirxy was. She'd just lost Trevor; she couldn't stand losing her brother too. So as much as she didn't want Eira to leave, she would rather he leave and be safe instead of staying in Memphis as a walking target.

Eira asked Eiryx to spread the word about his decision because he didn't trust Sienna to give anyone the news. He felt some type of way about her reaction. Instead of her being happy that he was getting out she was more concerned with him leaving the family and how it would effect her.

Xi answered her call right away and told her to pull up. Well, he offered to meet her somewhere, but she didn't want to be seen with him in public. There were still quite a few things plaguing them, and the last thing she wanted to do was add her attraction to Xi to the mix. Honestly, Eiryx had no idea what seeing Xi would do for her mind and heart... but she was determined to find out.

As much of a rush as she was in to get to his place, Eiryx couldn't pull herself to get out. Eventually, Xi came outside and got into the passenger seat of her car.

"You good?" he asked as he closed the door behind him.

She shrugged and reclined her seat. "Yea. I feel like I should be happy about something, but it don't feel right."

And that was the truth. While she was joyous of Eira's potential return, there was something about it that wasn't sitting right with her. He didn't want to leave immediately after he was released, which gave people time to put two and two together that his release was connected to the arrest of several other people. On top of that, who was to say that they wouldn't send someone after another family member since they couldn't get to Eira?

Eiryx may have been born into the black mafia, but she'd never really wanted to be a part of it.

Truth – her exterior was rough, and she could handle the toughest of men and get them to submit... but she was over that lifestyle.

All Eiryx wanted to do was leave the business, settle down, and put her international business degree to good use. She was tired of spending her days exerting all of her masculine energy as their street team's lieutenant and Chief's second in command, keeping grown ass men in line.

For once... she wanted a man to take her load off for a change.

Not because she needed it, but because she wanted, deserved, and had earned it.

"You wanna talk about it, or just let me help you take your mind off things?"

Xi took her hand into his and kissed it, and that alone was enough to slightly ease her mind.

"I was hoping you could distract me, but I feel like I would only be using you."

Xi smiled as he put the back of his head on the headrest. "Use me, baby." Eiryx laughed as she pulled her hand out of his. "Come on. Let's go inside."

After thinking it over for a few seconds, Eiryx nodded in agreement. Xi wasted no time getting out of the car and heading to her side to open the door for her. As she followed him inside of his home, her heart began to race. If anyone in her family knew she was here they would lose their shit. Why was the person who could potentially help her return to her peace also one that was capable of wreaking havoc?

"We can chill and talk if you want. Smoke and listen to some music. Watch a movie. Whatever you wanna do."

"Ummm... I don't know."

Eiryx chuckled softly as she looked around his bright and spacious living room.

"What do you normally like to do?"

"Read usually, but I feel like my mind wouldn't be settled. So I guess we could watch a movie. Or talk and get to know each other. Whatever you want to do."

Standing directly in front of her, Xi wrapped his arms around her waist. "This ain't about me, but I'll tell you what I want to do." Smiling, she wrapped her arms around his neck as he pulled her closer. "Take you upstairs to my bedroom, get to know you, feed you, then fuck you so good it ain't space in your mind for nothing else but thoughts of me. How does that sound?"

"That sounds good," Eiryx confessed softly.

"Cool."

Eiryx was pleasantly surprised when they made it to his room. She was expecting to find nothing but a bed and large tv, but his master bedroom was decked out with a sofa that he led her to and very welcoming décor. As a joke, Eiryx mentioned this being the most beautiful and comfortable room because of all of the women he had to have over, but he told her that the opposite was the case. She was the first women Xi had ever allowed in his house or room.

He'd allowed his designer to place the bulk of her emphasis on his room because it was his sacred space, the place that should always and automatically give him peace.

Appreciating his logic, Eiryx didn't even want to lower the vibration of the room with her dis-ease. They talked about themselves and got to know one another on a more personal level. Even though they knew of each other because of business for the past five years this was the first detailed, personal conversation they'd had that didn't revolve around flirting.

Eiryx had to admit, it was nice being able to talk about herself for a change, and it was just as nice seeing a softer side of Xi. If she could only get her family to see him for the way she was starting to see him... as a caring, loving, protective man.

They talked until their stomachs began to growl, then they went downstairs to the kitchen. Xi had in mind originally for them to order in, but Eiryx said there was no point in that if he had something there for her to cook. And he did. She ended up using his chicken to make stuffed spinach and cheese chicken breasts with their family recipe for baked rice and green beans. Everyone loved their baked rice.

The moment they tasted it they tried to figure out all of the ingredients, but they never could.

Women always tried to duplicate the recipe for her brothers, but it never tasted the same.

Only once had someone come close to *almost* getting the taste right, and that was Treasure.

After their meal, they returned to his room where they tried to agree on something to watch on Hulu. In the middle of their negotiating, someone knocked on Xi's door. He checked to see who it was on his phone, and when he saw the person on his security app, his

entire mood changed. Quickly, Xi excused himself before rushing out of the room with quiet force.

Not wanting to think too much of it, Eiryx grabbed her phone for the first time since she'd gotten there to check her calls and messages. The front door opened, and Eiryx immediately heard a woman yelling. Finding the voice familiar, she jumped up and looked out of the window as she heard Xi slam the door.

Eiryx watched as he pushed Sienna away from the door, and Eiryx began to burn with anger.

First, what in the hell was Sienna doing over there?

Second, how did she know where he lived?

Xi said he was careful about who he gave his address to and that he never let a woman into his home.

Was that a lie?

And if it was... what else had he lied about?

Eiryx couldn't even focus on that part, though. She was more concerned with what her brother's woman was doing at the supposed enemy's house. While she could have gone downstairs to confront them both, Eiryx knew they wouldn't give the truth up that easily. If Sienna was cheating on her brother, maybe she was coming to call things off since Eira could potentially be getting out soon.

But of all the people she could have fucked with... why did she have to choose Xi? And why hadn't he mentioned Sienna to Eiryx in all this time?

Eiryx made her way back over to the couch when Sienna stormed off to *Eira's* car. The nerve of this bitch. Pulling up to another man's house in her brother's car. Eiryx's nostrils flared and her anger began to elevate just at the thought.

Though the family had accepted Sienna, they never really cared for her beyond her bond with Eira. She was cut from a different cloth, one that made it impossible for her to be loyal to anyone beyond herself. And if there was one thing the Salzano and Bruce family was known for... it was their loyalty. Not capable of faking the funk, Eiryx slipped her feet back inside of her shoes. She'd come here for peace, and if she wanted to maintain it, she would need to leave now because Xi showed a side of himself that she could do without.

Meeting him on the stairway, Eiryx forced a smile as she ran her fingers through her lightly curled bundles of hair.

"I'm gonna head out. Thanks for everything."

Xi blocked her path and kept her from being able to leave. "Why? I'm not ready for you to go yet."

"Unless you're going to explain to me why my brother's fiancée was here, I think it's best that I go."

His shoulders slumped as his head lowered and he sighed. Xi stepped to the side, giving Eiryx space to leave. Her eyebrows wrinkled as she sized him up, jaw clenched as her anger turned into disappointment – with herself – for even *thinking* there could be something between them.

"If I find out y'all on some slick shit to destroy my brother..." Eiryx chuckled as she continued down the steps. "I will kill the both of you and not think twice about it."

Their heads turned toward each other at the same time. "This ain't that, Eiryx," was all Xi offered. And unfortunately for him... that wasn't enough for her.

CHAPTER 23



“*I* can protect myself,” Ai griped, trying not to step on the backs of Duke’s feet as he led her throughout her apartment.

“Shut up,” he mouthed, cocking his gun as quietly as he could.

When they first made it to her door, they noticed it was cracked. Slowly, Duke opened it, and the pictures lining the wall had been shattered and were laying on the ground. Her living room had been ransacked, and it was clear at this point that someone had either tried to rob her or send her a message – but they weren’t sure which one yet.

Ai may have been the baby of the family and the one that wanted to live a legit, normal life, but that in no way meant she couldn’t take care of herself. Instead of wasting her efforts trying to get Duke to

see that, she submitted to his desire to protect her as her man and stayed close behind him.

They checked every room before Duke felt like it was empty and safe enough for her to roam the place without him. As she tried to make a mental note of what, if anything, had been taken, Ai couldn't get past the mess they had created. Pillows were ripped and feathers were everywhere. Her TVs had been broken. Clothes were pulled off hangers and tossed all over the floor.

This wasn't a robbery.

If it was, they took things out of the convenience of being in her place.

But this was a message.

Not a good enough one to scare her, though, but a message, nonetheless.

"I'm going to go look and see if the security cameras caught anyone going in and out of my apartment while I was gone," Ai informed him.

"Okay. Can you think of anyone who would want to violate you like this?"

Ai thought over his question for a few seconds as she picked up a few pieces of broken glass in the kitchen. "No, not really. People don't like me because of James and our family business. Some people at school hate to see my clothes and jewelry and car because they think it comes from blood money. But I don't think any of them have the balls to do something like this."

"It doesn't take balls to trash a person's place while they are spending the night with their man, baby."

That was true.

Ai made her way to the front desk and asked if they could page someone from security. They did, and they also let her know that they had called the police on her behalf. Of course, they weren't in a rush to come out for a victimless crime. Her neighbors heard her place being trashed before the sun came up, but none of them looked out to see what was going on or who was the cause.

When the head of security came with his iPad, he showed her the footage that was captured at the entrance of the gate. A black car come in, used a code, and left out a few minutes after her apartment was trashed, but they couldn't see their faces nor did the car have a license plate on it. This was intentional, and if it wasn't someone

who knew her and her gate code, it was set up by someone in her apartment complex – which would explain why none of her neighbors thought to see what was going on or even call her for that matter. With her suspect list growing even more, Ai began to feel her irritation growing. While she would have preferred to handle this within her family's way of law, without getting at least a suspect from prints from the police, Ai wouldn't even know where to start.

"I'm gonna have your car towed and sent to my guy Deacon's shop just to make sure nothing has been tampered with or that a tracker hasn't been put on it."

Ai hadn't even realized that Duke had come outside with her but feeling his arm wrap around her gave her peace.

"Okay. Thanks. I guess I'll call Diem and see if I can stay with her for a couple of days until I can get this shit cleaned up, and I'm certainly not doing it today."

Duke turned her in his embrace to face her. "Why do you have to stay with her? You know I don't mind you staying with me."

She smiled for the first time since they arrived. "I know, bae. And I would like to, but when my family finds out about this, they are going to want me close. It's not that I don't trust you, I just know how they are."

Duke nodded as he dropped his arms from around her and took a step back. "And I know that you know that they wouldn't want you with me, would they?"

Ai couldn't pull herself to say yes, but her eyes said it for her. Duke released a hard breath as he took another step away from her.

"So what, Ai? Do you plan to hide what we got going on until it's over?"

Her shoulders slouched as she walked over to him and took his hands into hers. "Of course not. Quite frankly, I don't want what we have to be over. It's just... things are moving really fast between us, and I want to be secure in what we have before I start that fight. My dad may no longer be here, but they are going to honor and uphold the life he wanted for me, and that includes not being with a man in the streets."

"But what life do *you* want for you? What man do you want at your side?"

Lowered head, Ai thought over his questions. Truthfully, she didn't give a damn how her man made his money or what side of

the law he was on, but she'd never said that to her father or anyone else for that matter. As the baby, she simply went along with their guidance because they had never steered her wrong. But now that she was experiencing such happiness with Duke, Ai was starting to question if this was one thing they were wrong about.

And if maybe, deep down, her father knew that – and that's why he kept them away from each other.

"I want you at my side, Duke. No question about that."

"Then they will have to get used to seeing me there because that's where I want to be, too." Ai smiled, but it dropped when he added, "I need you to set up a meeting for me and your family."

"What?" He removed his hands from hers and began to walk back into her apartment. "That's not a good idea."

"But it's a necessary one. Make that call to James or Cash, or I will."

CHAPTER 24



James looked from one file to the other, trying to put the pieces together. He had dug himself into a majorly deep hole – one that would trap him and his family if he didn't move quickly. Removing his reading glasses, James rubbed his eyes hardily and exhaled a hard breath. Moments like this made him wish he was still on good terms with Estella. Though Pamela would be there for him in any way she could, no woman eased her nerves and gave peace to his mind like Estella.

She was truly one of kind, which explained why Trevor and so many other men wanted her.

But she chose him. She chose him to love, honor, cherish, provide, and protect her. Out of those things, James could confidently say that he provided and protected with ease, however, if he didn't

handle this situation with the DEA and FBI, his ability to protect her may soon be in question too.

"Mr. Salzano, Mr. Byrd is here to see you. Shall I send him back?"

James sat back in his seat as he rolled his eyes. The last thing he wanted to deal with right now was Duke's bullshit, but he didn't have much wiggle room to ignore him – especially now that he'd established a relationship with Ai. They may not have known he knew, but he knew. Out of respect for Trevor, James had been keeping a close eye on both of his girls.

"Yea, send 'em back."

With a sigh, James stood from behind his desk and walked over to the large window that gave him a beautiful view of Downtown Memphis. Even though he loved what he did in the streets, James also had a love for stocks and exchange. He said it was a form of legal dealing. Having a stock trading company gave him an interest and pleasure that he could discuss freely with anyone he came in contact with and not have to worry about it sending him to prison.

A part of him also loved stocks because it allowed him to clean his money in a way that wouldn't draw too much attention to himself when receiving a return that was anywhere from one to ten times the amount he'd put up.

His door opened, and James didn't bother giving Duke the respect of turning to face him. As far as he was concerned, Duke hadn't done anything to earn his respect. Hell, Duke was borderline an enemy at this point, and the only reason he hadn't been dealt with yet was because James hoped knowing what he knew would keep him away. But with this random visit, James could only believe that would no longer be the case.

"What do you want, Byrd?" James asked, placing his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

"Ai is going to ask you to have me over for a family dinner." Slowly, James turned in Duke's direction. "When she does, I need you to lead your family into accepting our relationship." Duke shrugged as he unbuttoned his blazer, lifted his pants, and sat down. "She's mine whether y'all approve or not, but I know her mind will be more at peace if you do."

"Why on earth would I do *anything* to help you?"

Duke smiled with one side of his mouth. "Because I know that Trevor was about to split from the family to create his own. That he

wanted to bring his children too. And your wife. Which would have left you to fend for yourself with the FBI and DEA. So you did what you had to do to keep that from happening."

They stared at each other as James walked over to his desk and sat in the chair next to Duke's. "You don't know a motherfucking thang. I ain't new to this shit, young blood. Whatever I do I do well."

Duke's smile formed fully. "Do you want to risk finding out what I know?"

Quite frankly, he didn't. If anyone knew about the problems he and Trevor were having, it wouldn't surprise James for it to be Duke and his father. They were his closest confidants. And the only reason Trevor didn't try to bring Duke into the family sooner was because he knew how attracted to each other he and Ai would be. He would always tell James about how much alike Duke and Ai were, and how there was no doubt in his mind that Duke would be his son-in-law if given the chance to court his daughter.

When James made the decision to kill Trevor, he felt as if he was killing himself. Trevor had been his best friend all of his life, but if the choice was Trevor or his freedom and family, James didn't have to give it a second thought. For years, James had been able to run the family with Trevor with little to no issues because of the connections they had within law enforcement and the government.

Unfortunately, FBI Agent Jack Neely became aware of their dealings, and he made it his mission to bring the Salzano family down. James tried to bring him into the fold, but Neely declined, using the bribe as more ammunition against James and Trevor. Instead of finding a way to make it out of this with no issues, Trevor took this as a warning that it was time to start working on getting out of the streets. He had the idea to create a black wall street that served the community and eventually leave the streets altogether.

But first, Trevor wanted to distance himself from James because of how reckless he had begun to move. After years of getting away with so many things, James started to think he was untouchable. And with that kind of pride came mistakes. Not wanting anyone caught in the crossfire of James' demise, Trevor spoke to Estella about his plans to break away and mentioned it to Cassius as well. He hadn't gone into full detail with Cassius yet, only mentioning his desire to change suppliers and start the black wall street.

If Trevor would have been able to successfully break away from the Salzano family, he would have not only taken all of their kids with him plus Estella, but he would have also become competition for James while leaving him to fend off the FBI and DEA on his own. The only way to keep that from happening was to kill Trevor. That way, the family would stay under James' control. If he went down, they *all* went down.

It may not have been what they wanted, but it was the life they had been prepared for.

Once you entered the Salzano family, there was no way out. If that meant serving time together... so be it.

"If what you're saying is true, and I did what I did to him, what makes you think I won't do the same damn thing to you?"

Standing, Duke released a full sigh – as if he hated even being *asked* that question. "Because I have an insurance policy just as Trevor did. I *am* his policy, and someone that you would never suspect is mine. If you fuck me over, I'll make sure your entire family knows you had Trevor killed. The only thing I'm asking for to not tell them your secret or kill you myself for taking a man that was like a father to me is to help me secure a future with his daughter."

"She will hate you if she finds out the way you're blackmailing me."

Duke buttoned his blazer and walked away, tossing over his shoulder, "I'll take my chances."

James waited until Duke closed the door behind him to growl and shove the papers that were on his desk down. When he made his plan, it never crossed his mind that Trevor would have told Duke about his suspicions. He didn't consider that until after the hit was done. Now, he had to not only live with the paranoia of the law coming after him... but Duke and his children if they ever found out what he did as well.

BEFORE THE STORM...

CHAPTER 25



*I*t felt corny as hell, but Cassius wouldn't want to spend his night any other way. Treasure had finally graced him with a date... after he and Kameron came to an agreement about him dating his sister. Kameron made it clear that he didn't have an issue with it, as long as Cassius was always upfront with Treasure and gentle with her heart. She was way more open and loving than Cassius was, so she could be hurt twice as hard and deeply.

Aside from Kameron not wanting Cassius to hurt his sister, he didn't want their friendship to be ruined either. Cassius agreed, and he assured Kameron that he would do whatever it took to protect Treasure's heart. After their conversation, he asked Treasure out for the evening, and when she agreed, he told her that he would be back at five to pick her up.

They went out for dinner to a bougie ass restaurant that was high as hell with small ass servings. Cassius was cool with that, though. He already knew Treasure called herself a rich ghetto bitch. She was the type to go to a hood party and act classy and go to a classy party and act hood. When they were done with dinner, he took her to a salsa class because she loved that sensual shit. It caused them to work up an appetite, so they went to the store and grabbed what they would need for a late night dinner.

Instead of cooking as soon as they made it home, they changed clothes and headed over to James and Estella's place. Something was off with James, and he wasn't saying what, but he'd tried to take his frustration out on Estella. Things didn't get too physical, but she was emotionally distraught more than anything. The altercation made her miss Trevor more, and she was on the verge of having a breakdown.

Treasure volunteered to spend the night with her, to which Estella declined. She loved that the young couple was finally giving love a chance, and she didn't want to do anything to get in the way of their progress. Still, Cassius called the rest of his siblings over, and they spent a few hours listening to music, dancing, smoking and drinking, and cracking jokes to lift Estella's spirit. By the end of the night, Pamela was shooing them all out, promising to stay with Estella until the morning.

Once they made it back to his place, they cooked together, and this was the first time Cassius understood why people loved cooking with their spouse. It was a lot of fun, and it made him feel closer to her. They talked about everything under the sun and over the moon, rapped to hip hop songs and danced to love music as they alternated between playlists. The smothered chicken, savory baked rice, southern green beans with bacon, and corn filled cornbread that they created together came out perfectly.

After dinner, they showered, then climbed into bed together. But instead of laying down, they were sitting across from each other playing some intimacy game Treasure had read about. She was cheesing hard as hell, bubbling over with excitement as they asked and answered questions about each other. The current question they both had to answer was how they perceived each other and what was the strength and flaw that they saw in each other's character. It was a little odd for Cassius at first, because he wasn't used to having

such a deep conversation with a woman, but eventually, he started to enjoy it almost as much as Treasure was.

"I think you're a classic leader," Treasure shared, running her fingers up and down her leg as she sat Indian style. "You have to fix problems, and you have to be in control. Sometimes you can seem detached, unemotional and harsh, but you genuinely love everyone in your life." She massaged her chin and looked towards the ceiling. "What is yours – you keep. You're very protective and possessive. And that's how you most show love. Not with emotion and talking like most, but with action. Making sure your family is straight." Cassius gritted his teeth and lowered his head. "You hate relying on people. For help, or for love. I don't think you've ever considered romantic love to be a necessity, and I guess that's a good thing because it doesn't drive you like the average person. I would say your strength is your intelligence and ability to take charge and lead and control. And I would say your flaw is that you live what you know. Personally and professionally. The things you hated seeing growing up you make sure never happen in your life, but I think you have gone to the extreme with it of not trying to attach yourself to anyone at all."

"I'm working on it, though."

She lifted his head by his chin and smiled at him warmly. "I know. That's why I'm here. Now you do me."

"You're a nurturer. The calm in those that you love's storms. You're a balm. Loyal. You need to be needed, so you often attract niggas with issues like me." They shared a soft laugh even though he was dead fucking serious. "You high a very high sense of self-worth and confidence. You know who you are and what you deserve, so that adds to your value. I love the way you place all bets on yourself in your relationships and your business and always come out on top. I would say your biggest strength would be your patience, and I see no flaw in you."

Treasure's head tilted as she smiled. Pulling his face to hers, Treasure kissed him passionately. Slowly. Tenderly. And when she slid her tongue into his mouth, the intimacy game was officially over. Well, the talking part at least. Lowering the top half of his body onto the bed by a gentle push to his chest, Treasure straddled Cassius. His hands roamed her body, settling on her ass that he began to squeeze and tap.

The sound of her moan was like music to his ears. A melody that he wanted to hear every night for the rest of his life. Treasure broke the kiss and pulled her shirt over her head, allowing her breasts to spring free. Cassius wasted no time palming them as he lifted his body and kissed her neck.

"I've wanted you inside of me so bad," she confessed softly, grinding her hips against him.

The warmth of her pussy had Cassius biting back a moan as he lifted his head from her neck. "Then slide down on this dick and give us what we both been wanting."

Treasure smiled as she lifted slightly and pushed her panties to the side. Their honest and intimate conversation had her pussy soaking wet. If this was the result of communicating, they would definitely have to do this shit more often. The moment her walls were wrapped around him completely, Treasure let out the sexiest moan he'd ever heard as her arms wrapped around his neck.

She began to ride him slowly, just to stop abruptly. "Cash, we haven't used a condom not once."

"Fuck," he grumbled, placing his forehead on hers as he gripped her waist.

Lord knows he didn't want her to stop. Didn't matter much at this point anyway. Weeks had passed since the first time they made love, and he'd been cumming in her ever since.

"Are you on birth control, Treasure?" Her head lowered and shook. "So I could have a baby in here?" His hand went to her stomach. She nodded her head. "Look at me, what you hiding for?"

Treasure lifted her head, letting him see her watery eyes and pouty mouth. "Because this was so damn reckless of us, Cash. We are just now getting to a good place, and if I'm pregnant that will fuck it up."

"How? You don't want to have my baby?"

Her eyebrows wrinkled and head shook. "No. I mean no, that's not it. I just... didn't think that you would want that this soon. We discussed you leaving the business when you got married and started your family, but with everything going on I don't expect you to do that now."

With his hand around her neck, Cassius pressed her into the bed and switched their positions so that he was in control. As he gave her that first, long stroke, Treasure squeezed his arms as she bit

down on her lip. Wrapping her legs around him, she began to lift her hips and match every breath snatching stroke he gave her.

"If you're pregnant, I'm out the game, and it's as simple as that. You know how I've felt about you, and I won't ever put anything or anyone above you or our baby. I've seen the effects of that my whole life, I would never do that to you."

"But Cash, I don't want to force you..."

Kissing every reservation she had away, Cassius continued to stroke her deeply. Showing her with the passion of his lips and dick that he was committed to this. And by the time his strokes grew sporadic, Treasure was so deep in bliss that she was begging him not to pull out and give her a baby.

After their lovemaking session, they headed to the bathroom to shower together, where Cassius reinstated that as long as she was ready to start their family, he was too, and that he would never engage in anything that could potentially put them in harms way. His assurance led to a second round with her pressed against the shower wall as he fucked her deeply from behind. And it was there that Cassius made up in his mind to give Chief his place in the family business whether she was pregnant or not.

Because at the end of the day, nothing was more important to him than his future with Treasure.

And baby or no baby, they would soon be married, and a little addition would be added to their family.

He'd seen what choosing the family business and loyalty did to his mother and Trevor, and he would *never* give up his life like that.

Nothing or no one was going to change that.

CHAPTER 26



Diem didn't know what the hell she was thinking agreeing to this shit. The last time she and Deacon went on a date, things went left. The date itself was great; it was what happened on their way out that changed things. As they left the lounge, a man bumped into Diem without saying excuse me. Used to handling business herself, she was fully prepared to handle the disrespect. As her man, Deacon wanted to take care of it for her.

What should have been them teaming up against the problem, because of their egos and needs to be alpha, turned into a problem between them. They argued the entire drive to her place about her inability to submit to his lead as the man. While Deacon understood her past and position in her family, he tried to get Diem to understand that he was a man who could earn not only her love but re-

spect and submission as well. And it didn't matter how tough she was in the streets... she would always have to submit to him within the confines of their relationship.

The night ended with her telling him off and slamming the door in his face. After she calmed down, she called her mother and sisters who all told her she was overreacting and not really trying as much as she could have to make things work with Deacon. Still being stubborn, she tried to convince herself that she shouldn't have to change and compromise to be with a man, but that didn't last long. Truth – Deacon was the kind of man Diem wanted, but if she didn't get her shit together, she would end up being with a weak man who let her walk all over him.

After apologizing and promising to do better on Diem's part, they picked back up where they left off. This evening, they were meeting with a couple of his friends and their women along with Cassius and Treasure and Chief and Remington. Diem couldn't believe there were women on this earth who could make her brothers commit. They both weren't the type she saw ever settling down. Cassius was too detached and focused on business while Chief wasn't the committing and sleeping with one woman at a time type.

But Treasure and Remington had seemingly done the impossible – made honest men out of them.

Every time Diem thought about it, it tickled her. And she wanted to see them interact with their women now that they were in committed relationships. So when Deacon mentioned his friends wanted to meet her, she figured that was the perfect opportunity for them to all meet up. Things were going good at first, but when Cassius started talking about marriage Diem wanted to shrink in her seat.

While she was happy for her brother and genuinely wanted love and happiness for herself, there was still quite a bit of ice around her heart. Ice that made her wonder if agreeing to dating was such a good idea.

"What you quiet for, sis?" Chief asked with a grin.

Everyone had pretty much weighed in on whether they wanted kids and marriage or not, and when it was Diem's turn, she took a long gulp of her French Connection and remained silent long after she wiped her mouth. With an uncomfortable chuckle, Diem looked from Chief to Deacon.

"You know how I feel about that, Chief. Don't be an asshole."

"Well, I know, but does he know?"

Running her tongue over her teeth, Diem stared at Chief as her leg began to shake under the table. "The fuck does it matter for?"

He shrugged and sat up. "I love you, and I want you to have the world if you want it. This is the first time you've ever brought a man around, so I want to make sure this doesn't lead to hurt for either one of you. Especially you. So you need to let him know what it is so he can decide if he wants to deal with it, instead of y'all fucking around and he fall for your ass then feel some type of way and want to jump stupid if you break his heart."

Diem may have been upset about Chief bringing the subject up, but it was the truth. He knew that she'd never wanted love, marriage, and children. Just recently had her mind began to change. The men she usually fucked around with only met her family by random luck of seeing them out in public. This was truly new for her on all kinds of levels. And though it was a little uncomfortable at times, Deacon made it worth it.

She looked over at Deacon, and he was already looking at her.

"You don't have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable," he assured, to which she smiled.

"It's cool; he's right – you do need to know how I feel about this." Deacon nodded, and as she continued, she blocked everyone else at the table out. "I am trying out this whole relationship thing, and I do want marriage one day, but I haven't always. I don't want children. Not right now at least. Because I don't want to risk them having the same childhood as me. Maybe if I were to really fall in love and be able to trust my husband to be a good father, I will change my mind. But I have to warm up to this shit one thing at a time. So yes, I want marriage one day, but no, I don't feel like I need it. I don't need a man. I don't need love."

Deacon's friend, Eric, brought his fiancée along, and when Diem said she didn't need love she chuckled. Looking across and behind Deacon, Diem looked at Lydia as she asked, "Something funny?"

Lydia shook her head as her smile lingered. "I just think it's odd to hear a woman say she doesn't need a man or love. So you're saying you don't need Deacon?"

Now Diem was the one chuckling.

"Check your girl, fam," Deacon ordered, to which Lydia repeated...

“Check his girl?”

“Ain’t that what I said?”

“It’s fine, babe,” Diem assured, covering his hand with hers. “No, Lydia, I don’t need Deacon. Or any other man for that matter. And I don’t need love. Yes, it would be nice to have it, but to imply that I need either means I wouldn’t be able to live without them, and I would never give a thing or person that big of a weight in my life because it’s too much for them to handle. That’s why so many people end up in fucked up situations with unrealistic expectations. Do I want Deacon? Hell the fuck yea. I want the shit out of him. Do I want marriage with Deacon? Possibly. We’re still getting to know each other. But I will never need him, and I won’t ever let him idolize me so much that he needs me. We’re going to enjoy the fuck out of each other, but that’s it.”

Diem sat back in her seat as Lydia said, “So how would you two work if you’re not sure you want children? Does that include step-children?”

Deacon’s head flung back as it shook. “You told her that?” He asked Eric.

“Told her what?” Diem questioned.

“Man, she was all in my face asking what caused me to leave out that time of night. I had to.”

“And you couldn’t tell her to keep her fucking mouth closed? That wasn’t her business to tell or even insinuate.”

Deacon stood and pulled three twenties out of his pocket before lifting Diem out of her chair by her hand.

“What is she talking about, Deacon? Do you have a child?”

“We’ll talk about this later.”

“No.” Diem ripped her hand from his grip. “We will talk about this now. Do you have children?”

Deacon looked at all the eyes that were staring at him before walking away. Diem groaned as she followed behind – knowing that was the only way she’d get any information out of him. He waited until they were leaving the parking lot to say, “The night she called me she mentioned having a son by me. I didn’t believe it because it didn’t make sense for her to keep something like that from me and wait until now to tell me. She said she kept it from me because she knew I would want to make things work between us. But she wasn’t ready for that type of life. I took a DNA test, and I did block her and

tell her I wanted nothing to do with her like I told you I did. But if her son is mine, I'm going to be in his life of course."

Diem chuckled, but she didn't say anything. Not right away. Because if she said something right away, it would end up being the wrong thing. It would be something she said out of emotion, not logic. When Deacon pulled into her driveway, he cut the car off, but made no effort to get out and open her door.

"Say something, Doll."

Her head shook as she looked out of the window into the darkness. "Why didn't you tell me, Deacon?"

"Because I didn't want you to let that be the reason you cut me off. When I found out for sure, I was going to tell you. That's my word."

Her head shook again as her lips parted. This feeling in the pit of her was foreign to her. It felt like hurt, but Diem wasn't exactly sure why. They weren't in a relationship yet, and she had convinced herself that she could cut Deacon off at any moment. So what was this feeling that was consuming her?

While a part of her felt disappointed over his secrecy, she understood why he wanted to wait. Things were hard enough as it was, and if he had told her then, she probably would have cut him off. But as they spent more and more time together, she'd fucked around and caught feelings for him. All that bullshit about not needing him in her life was starting to feel like a lie. Because the thought of cutting him off tonight for his ill thinking and never seeing him again had her heart dropping into the pit of her stomach.

"You shouldn't have taken away my choice," she mumbled.

"Maybe. I did what I thought was best. It's my job as your man to lighten your load not add to it. I didn't want to put this on you until I knew for sure, Diem. I won't apologize for that, but I will apologize for keeping something this serious from you. Good intention, bad decision, I guess."

She nodded and licked the corner of her mouth. "Well, just let me know when you get the results."

"Will I see you before then?"

Gritting her teeth, Diem looked over at him briefly. "I don't think so. I need some time."

More than anything, she needed time to come to grips with how she felt. This was dangerous. Having such a deep reaction after such

a short period of knowing him. If she wasn't careful, she would fall for him... quickly.

"That's fair."

Deacon opened his door and went over to her side of the car. He opened it, then walked with her to her door. His head was hung, and Diem tried her hardest not to renege on her decision. After unlocking the door, Diem stepped inside.

They avoided each other's eyes, but neither seemed to be in a rush to be away from each other. And while Diem understood his hesitation to leave, she couldn't understand why she couldn't pull away.

"If he's mine, will this be the end of us?"

"I don't know, Deacon. I don't know how I'll feel when I get that news. I'm struggling to understand how I feel right now." She chuckled – feeling silly at how hard it was to come to grips with her emotional state. "But we can talk it out when the time comes. You've taught me the importance of communication..."

"And now you think I'm a hypocrite huh?"

He looked at her, finally. Diem smiled and shook her head softly. "No. I think you had my best interests at heart, but... I just need some time."

Deacon nodded as he released a sad sigh. "I understand."

Still, neither made an effort to move. Unable to withstand it any longer, Diem stepped back out on her porch. Directly in Deacon's personal space. He looked down, letting her lead. Diem stepped on the tips of her toes and tilted her head. She kissed his lips three times before Deacon kissed her back. He sighed, as if he was trying his hardest not to do it. Not to want her. Not to feel anything.

But the moment he surrendered, he cupped her cheeks and spread her lips with his tongue. She gripped his shirt and pulled him closer. Deacon wrapped her legs around his waist and carried her back into her home. After closing the door with his leg, Deacon put her back against it. He held her body up with his as he unzipped his pants, and as much as Diem wanted him inside of her... she knew she was setting herself up getting it like this.

"Deacon," she begged.

"Please," was his rebuttal.

Beating her head against the door softly, Diem whined as he pushed her panties to the side. Up against the wall was her absolute

favorite position with Deacon. His dick was long and curved perfectly. In this position, she felt every inch deep in the pit of her, got the ridges of her G-Spot rubbed every time he pulled out, and had her clit brushed every time he pushed himself in. It would take no time at all for her to be leaking down her ass and onto the floor.

It also didn't help that she was completely powerless in this position. Under his total control. Maybe that's why he liked it so much, too. Because it was the one time for sure where she had no choice *but* to surrender.

As he slid inside of her, Deacon bit down on her bottom lip. He alternated between stroking her slow and soft with deep and fast. And hard. And long. And just at her spot. And in no time she was cumming all over his dick as her body trembled against the door. Tightening his grip around her, Deacon carried her to her bedroom. He put her on the bed, on her knees, then sheathed his dick with a condom before sliding back inside of her.

For a while, he let Diem take control and throw it back at him. When she felt him start to throb inside of her, Deacon gripped her hips and began to take control. Relaxing into the bed, Diem gripped the sheets until her second orgasm began to build. When it did, she reached behind her and tried to push at his thigh, but Deacon grabbed her hand and held it on top of her back. Her whimpers turned into moans, moans into heavy breathing, heavy breathing into his name until she came.

Deacon reaching his climax wasn't far behind. Once he did, they went to separate bathrooms to clean up. Deacon returned to her room to grab his things. After getting dressed, he walked over to the bed and stood in front of her as she sat on the edge of it. He tilted her head by her chin and kissed her lips softly.

"I'ma give you your space and stay away, but if you change your mind I'll be here as soon as you call."

Diem smiled and nodded, resisting the urge to ask him to stay. She followed him out so that she could lock the door, then grabbed her strawberry ice cream out of the freezer and headed back to her room. More than anything, Diem needed this time to come to grips with how she felt about Deacon, because if she was worried over losing him this soon... maybe it would have been wise for them to end things now.

CHAPTER 27



“*I* don’t know what that mane on, but he on something,” Cassius decided, to which Chief nodded in agreement.

Chief was on his way to pick up Remington for their night together, but he had to call Cassius on the way there. He’d stopped by to see Estella when he was sure James wouldn’t be home. It had been bothering him for days not knowing who the tall man was that had stopped to see James. After Estella showed him the video again, there was no doubt in Chief’s mind that the tall man that stopped by to see his father was the same man that had murdered Trevor.

What Chief wasn’t sure of was if James knew this already or if he was an unaware target, and that’s why he’d called Cassius. They may have had different ways of handling things, but they almost al-

ways were on the same page mentally. Chief had already put invisible guards on James just to be safe, but the situation still wasn't sitting well with Chief. Until he had proof, though, he wouldn't say anything to anyone else.

"That's what I'm thinking. He a loose cannon at this point. Every other time I see 'em he going off about some shit. That's why I put them guards on him to be safe."

"Yea. And if he did have something to do with Trevor, it will slip out soon enough."

Chief's head shook as he pulled into a parking space at Remington's place.

"I'm praying we're just being paranoid. I would hate to think he would be capable of doing something like that to Pops of all people. But I'll see you later tonight. I just pulled up to get Remi."

"Aight coo'."

Chief disconnected the call as he sighed. They'd been trained to think the worst and consider all possibilities and outcomes. Chief was known for acting first and thinking second, and that was something he'd gotten from his father. James would have had to have been really upset to take Trevor out, but to set him up? That was too calculated and required too much planning. James wasn't the type.

With that reasoning, Chief cut his car off and headed to get Remington out of her shop. She'd agreed to spend the evening with him and his family at Eira's welcome home party then spend the night at his place. Even though Chief was very much in a committed relationship with Remington, she was still carefully taking her time warming up to him. After the fight they had, Chief was willing to do whatever it took to make things right.

When he apologized via email, Remington unblocked him. She let him come over that night, and they were able to talk things out. Chief promised her that he was hers and only hers from that point forward, but Remington was a little hesitant to commit out of fear of being hurt. Since Chief understood where she was coming from, he didn't force her into putting a title on them and instead focuses on using their time together to prove that she could trust him.

The dinner they went to with Cassius and Diem was a good start. It allowed them to get inside each other's minds in an environment that made it a bit more relaxed and comfortable for something that would otherwise be a serious conversation. So far, Remington had

been enjoying this side of Chief, but she was still taking her time instead of rushing in.

And Chief was cool with that.

She didn't have to say he was her man... but she for damn sure was his woman.

THE STORM...

CHAPTER 28



Seeing Martino felt like fate, or a slap in the face, and Eiryx couldn't decide which one yet. She stopped by the liquor store to grab a few bottles of Hennessy to take to Eira's place for his welcome home party. When Eiryx first walked into the store, her mood was foul as fuck. She'd just gotten off the phone with Eira and Xi, and everything in her told her that shit was about to go left. But the moment her eyes landed on Martino she was filled with peace.

This morning, it was Eiryx who picked Eira up, not Sienna. He'd done everything he could to ensure his freedom for the sake of their child. Not only was Eira putting his life on the line, but he was also putting a target on his family's back by giving the FBI names of crooked cops and government officials along with the names and de-

tails of every murder he'd ever committed so they could close their cases and finally give the families involved some closure.

Eira would only have twenty-four hours to party it up and say goodbye to his family before going to the local FBI headquarters and getting his new identity. He would be escorted out of Memphis immediately, and Sienna didn't even have the decency to pick him up like she said she would. Eiryx didn't mind picking her brother up at all, but that was yet another thing for her to hold against Sienna. She still hadn't gotten over her popping up at Xi's house, and Eiryx hadn't made up in her mind yet if she was going to mention it to Eira or not.

Eira made that decision for her when he called her a couple of hours ago and told her that he hadn't heard from Sienna at all and she still hadn't made it back home yet. Since he started to get worried about her safety, Eira accessed the tracker on her car. When he pulled up on her, he saw her leaving out of a house he didn't recognize with Xi. Because Chief mentioned to Eira having to tell Eiryx to stay away from Xi, he called her before he made a move. And that's when she told him about Sienna pulling up while she was there.

If Xi was on some scandalous shit, Eiryx wanted to know. She told Eira not to make a move until she got a feel for what he was on, and Eira told her to invite him to his party tonight. After disconnecting the call, Eiryx called Xi to see what he was doing. He lied and said he was going over some numbers at the club instead of saying he was with Sienna, and that made Eiryx loathe him more. She couldn't believe how stupid she was to think he really liked her.

But that was cool.

He'd pay for it in due time.

After inviting Xi to the party she got off the phone with him, ignoring the hesitancy in Xi's voice. She was so irritated she wanted to pull up on him and strangle the both of them when she walked into the liquor store, but the sight of Martino had that desire dissolving.

Her head hung and she smiled as he walked over to her. Truthfully, Eiryx felt as if she was in no position to entertain a man after what happened with Xi, but Martino was in a different league. Memphis was slick small as hell, but she hadn't seen him since they graduated high school. Back in the day, they were heavily attracted to each other, but they never had the chance to make something shake.

While Trevor thought he was a cool young buck, he felt as if Martino was wilding in the streets with no structure. Trevor advised Eiryx to give him time to mature and wise up before trying to date him. Martino went off for college but ended up catching a bid a few months in. When Eiryx heard he was out, she considered looking him up, but decided against it because it looked like what her father had said about him was right.

Martino didn't even bother greeting her before pulling her into his arms. He held her tight and close, and Eiryx would have been damned if she didn't melt into his arms.

"I missed you," he confessed, voice low and thick with passion.

"I mis—"

Before Eiryx could finish her statement, Martino was pulling her hair down and head back and covering her lips with his. Her mind told her to push him away and slap the shit out of him, but her heart told her to take full advantage of experiencing him in this capacity. Once she'd gotten her fill, Eiryx pushed him away and wiped her mouth, then covered her hardened nipples with her arms crossed over her chest.

Her breathing was hard as she took two steps back.

"Who do you think you are kissing me like that? You don't know if I have a man or not."

Martino smiled as he took a step in her direction. "Ain't no ring on your finger, so I know you ain't married. I don't give a fuck about you being in no relationship. I'ma take your ass from him with the quickness."

Her head dropped as she chuckled and tried to compose herself. When she lifted it, all she could do was stare into his eyes for a moment.

"You can't take me if I'm not interested in being took."

"Why wouldn't you be if the one taking you is me?"

Martino took another step in her direction, and she had to inhale to keep their bodies from touching.

"Martino..."

"I told you what would happen if I saw you again, didn't I?"

His fingers slid through her hair, and she was no longer able to hold her breath in. When she released it, their bodies touched. With a nod, Eiryx closed her eyes.

"Yes."

"What did I tell you would happen if I saw you again?"

Her eyes opened.

"You said I would be yours, no matter what anyone had to say about it."

With a smile, he wrapped his arm around her waist. "And I meant that shit too." He stared into her eyes silently for a few seconds, as if he wanted to give those words time to resonate within her. "So you wanna do this the easy way or the hard way? You wanna be mine now or after I chase you for a little while?"

Blushing, she covered her cheeks and shook her head as she pulled away from him. If this would have happened before Xi, she would have allowed Martino to smooth talk and woo her with no hesitation. But now, Eiryx was starting to question her taste in and choice of men. While Martino wasn't an enemy to the family, she couldn't help but wonder if she could trust his sincerity. The last thing she wanted was to consider a future with a man just to end up getting played in the end.

"We haven't seen each other in ten years, Martino. I doubt if we're even the same people."

"Is that your way of pushing me away out of fear that we are the same? That I'm the one? That this is finally our time."

Her head shook adamantly as she pulled her hands behind her back. "This is too much for me right now. I have a lot going on and this will only make it worse. I don't have the time to try to figure out if you're good for me or not."

"Oh." Martino chuckled as he nodded. "So that's what this is about? You chose a fuck nigga and he played you?" He nodded again as he took her hands into his. "I get it. We can take things as slow as you need us to for you to see that you can trust me. I'll even give you my number and trust that you'll call when you're ready."

Thinking over his offer, Eiryx flipped her hands over and allowed his fingers to intertwine with hers. If she were to be honest with herself, she'd always been in love with Martino. Her parents swore it was young love that would fade with time, and if it didn't, then she'd know it was real whenever he came back. At twenty-eight, Eiryx had been searching for pieces of Martino in every man she'd come across, and she swore that's why her relationships didn't work.

In Xi... she saw small specks of Martino. The suave street character. Protector spirit. Rough love. Aggressive passion.

Martino had *always* been so passionate.

So passionate she oftentimes wondered if what they had was real.

But it was real.

Had always been and probably always would be. But that truth didn't stop Eiryx from saying...

"We can exchange numbers, but I do need some time. I don't move as quickly as I used to," she lied. Quite frankly, moving so fast was the reason she was in the position she was in with Xi. She was in such a rush to fall in love and prove her family was wrong that she didn't consider the possibility of him being unfaithful. Him cheating had never been a thought – only the damage he could do to their business.

"I'm cool with that, ReRe. Whatever you need. Just know... we got a lot of time to make up for."

As much as Eiryx didn't want to, she blushed as she pulled her phone out of her pocket. When she saw the text that Xi had sent her, her eyes rolled. He said he wouldn't be able to make it to the party and gave the excuse of her family not fucking with him to be the reason why. After telling him that this would be the perfect time for them to get to know him, Eiryx deleted their text thread in preparation of what she was sure would be the end of them coming soon.

Martino rattled off his number for her to save, then she did the same for him.

After he paid for her bottles, Martino walked her to the car and placed a tender kiss to the side of her mouth before opening the door for her. It took everything within Eiryx not to move her face half an inch so their lips could connect, but she had to maintain enough control to ensure they took their time. Trusting another man after Xi wouldn't be easy... but if that man was Martino... Eiryx would most definitely try.

CHAPTER 29



*P*ainting plates wasn't something Cassius would typically consider a good date, but Treasure wanted to go, and it actually turned out to be relaxing. The vibe was chill with its low lighting, candles, soft music and wine. There were several options of things to paint and so far, Cassius had already done a coffee mug and bowl. As they painted, they made small talk and cracked jokes, nothing serious. But as time continued to pass, Cassius burned with the desire to ask Treasure when she would be taking a pregnancy test.

He didn't think he'd be as excited as he was over the potential of being a father, but every time he considered the fact that he could be Cassius would get excited. No one knew about the possibility of Treasure being pregnant; not even Kameron. Even though at this

point she was two weeks late for her period, she brushed it off as a change in her cycle because of how much sex they were having. While Cassius understood her denial of the possibility was a way for her to keep herself from being disappointed if she wasn't pregnant, he was experiencing the opposite.

All he could think about was that she was... not how he would feel if she wasn't.

"How much longer you gon' wait, Treasure? Why you can't just go and get a test tonight?"

With a roll of her eyes, Treasure smiled and shook her head. "I'm starting to wonder if you've been spending so much time with me because of me or because I could possibly be pregnant with your baby."

"Come on now. You know this ain't that. A nigga is just excited, that's all. I ain't never been in a position where the woman I've always had deep feelings for could potentially be carrying my child."

Cassius hoped she knew he was being sincere, but if she didn't, he couldn't blame her. Every day he asked the same question two or three times. And the more she made him wait the more anxious he became. With a low sigh, Treasure put her brush into the cup of dirty water.

"I'm just as anxious as you, but I'm scared. I guess that's why I'm not in a rush to take the test."

Cassius put his brush down as well and took her hand into his. "What are you scared of?"

Her head tilted before it lowered and shook. Wiping the corner of her eye, Treasure smiled bitterly before looking into his eyes.

"If I am, what it would mean. If I'm not, what it would mean." She chuckled quietly and squeezed his hand a little tighter. "Kind of feels like I won't be, because that would be too perfect. For me to have the man I've always wanted *and* his baby? I'm just... gonna be really sad if I'm not."

He understood where she was coming from completely because for a while, he considered the same thing. Cassius didn't know what he'd done to be blessed with Treasure and a baby with her in the same year. But he wasn't going to question it if it was his blessing. And he needed her to not question it either.

Lifting her hand to his lips, Cassius kissed it and placed it on his heart.

"If you are, you know I got you every step of the way. If you aren't, that's okay too. We will have the rest of our lives to start our family. I'm just... anxious as fuck to know, but I'm willing to wait for as long as you need us to."

Cupping his cheek, Treasure kissed his lips through her smile.

"Thank you for being so understanding. I promise I won't make you wait for too long."

All Cassius could do was nod because he knew there was no telling when Treasure would take that test. It didn't matter, though. They would find out whenever they found out. For the time being, they were going to enjoy the rest of their date before heading to Eira's place.

CHAPTER 30



Diem paced back and forth in anticipation of Deacon's arrival. No matter what the test said, she was just ready to see him. The past three days gave her a lot of time to think about what she wanted to make her next move. Right after Trevor died, Diem vowed to uphold the business less and focus on her personal life more. Maybe she wasn't expecting God to send a man her way so quickly, because she definitely wasn't prepared for what that would entail.

Admittedly, Diem hadn't been putting forth as much effort as she could have. When it came down to dates and sex she was all in, but when it was time for more serious conversations and decisions... she realized she still had quite a bit of work to do. Her life had been hers and the family's all her life. Not once did she ever have to take a

man's feelings, wants, and needs into consideration before because she never cared.

If they didn't want to do things her way... she would send them off on their way.

But this... with Deacon... it was different.

A good different.

And if she could just release the pretenses set in her mind from her childhood and ice around her heart there was no doubt in Diem's mind that she could make something beautiful happen out of her bond with Deacon.

She released a heavy exhale as she went into the kitchen to pour herself a drink. While she wasn't the typical wine or sweet alcohol drinker, Diem loved a good glass of champagne. Tonight, she wanted something heavier, though. In a few hours she would be heading to her brother's house to welcome him home and tell him goodbye. Every time she thought about the drastic change Eira had made all Diem could do was shake her head and will herself not to cry.

It was one thing for him to commit to taking a life sentence on his own without implicating the family. That's what was expected of the family. He wasn't receiving a badge of honor for doing something they all had been prepared to do. But at the same time... you never know how a person can handle being in that situation until they are actually in it. Diem didn't know if she'd be able to be in jail for life, under guards rule, completely losing her freedom.

Even if she used her name and status in the streets to gain some type of leverage while she was locked up, her freedom would still be taken away from her.

So her brother's original choice did make her respect him a bit more. She wouldn't have shared that with anyone other than him, but it did.

Then... when she learned that Eira had agreed to become an informant, she immediately prayed for his soul. If he would have snitched on anyone in the streets, there would have been a price on his head, and there would not have been anything the family could do about it. Hell, the gracious thing to have done in that moment was to end his life themselves.

But that wasn't the case. Eira wasn't giving information on the streets like a snitch; he gave information on the law... like a mother-fucking boss. While some people still didn't agree with what he'd

done, others didn't give a fuck. They didn't see having law and government officials on your team as true security because they could flip on you at any time – so to know that Eira was handing them a dish of the justice they tried to give others so many times... it was laughable to the streets.

However, not everyone was laughing.

The people he had arrested weren't laughing. Their families and partners weren't either. Death threats and prices on his head had already begun to circulate. All it took was one bad traffic stop by a cop who knew what Eira had done... and he would be dead. So while no one in the family wanted Eira to have to leave, they knew it was for the best. At least until enough years passed for the city to forget what he had done.

Diem poured herself three fingers of Jack Daniels, then filled the rest of the glass up with champagne. She took a small sip while heading back to the living room, jumping and fighting back a squeal when her doorbell rang. Since she wasn't expecting anyone else, Diem knew it had to be Deacon on the other side. After taking one last gulp, she patted her chest as she set the drink on the table and rushed to the door.

Diem inhaled a deep breath and tried to calm herself down before opening the door, but as soon as she did and saw Deacon in all of his milk chocolate, chiseled glory... appearing cool and unbothered had been tossed out of the window! That squeal that she had been holding back was released as she leapt into his arms. But she didn't care, because Deacon held her just as tightly as he chuckled. His chuckle turned into a moan when his hands lowered to her ass and squeezed.

"I missed your ass so fuckin' much, Doll. You hear me?"

Not wanting to get too emotional, Diem only held him tighter as she nodded. When she was sure she wouldn't cry, a shaky, "Yes," came out in a whisper. Diem cleared her throat and took in a deep breath before adding, "I missed you too."

Deacon tried to release her, but she held him tighter. "No. Just... hold me for a little while longer."

Seeming to have no issue with her request, Deacon lifted her into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. He locked the door, then carried her to the living room. When he sat down, Diem remained straddled on his lap.

"You really missed me huh?"

The only reason Diem pulled back was because she heard the smile in his voice and wanted to actually see it on his face. Remaining on his lap, she dropped her arms from his neck and looked into his eyes. Sure enough, there was a wide grin spread across his face that made her smile.

"Yes, I really missed you. Did you really miss me too?"

Deacon entangled her fingers with his as he nodded. "Missed you every day that you've been gone."

"So..." She licked her eyes and swallowed hard. "Is he yours?"

His loaded sigh answered her before his mouth did. "He is. I'm sorry, Doll."

Diem smiled with one side of her mouth as she cupped the back of his head. "You don't have to apologize for something that happened before you knew me. Now if you fuck off with a bitch now that we're together..."

"Now that we're together?" Her smile formed fully. "You saying you still want to be with me?"

"Yea. A man having a child with someone else doesn't faze me. Hell, I got five siblings and only one has the same momma and daddy as me." Her chuckle made Deacon smile. "All I care about is that you're faithful during our relationship and you treat me right. And that your son's mother stays in her place. As long as neither of you disrespect me, I'm good."

Deacon sat back in his seat and let out a soft, "Whew." Clutching his chest, he smiled. "Baby. You don't know how good you saying that shit makes me feel. I was going to let you go if I had to because I know I didn't handle this the way you wanted me to, but Lord knows I've been praying that you give me another chance. And you don't have to worry about Sienna because..."

"Sienna?" Deacon nodded. "Your son... his name isn't Brensen is it?"

Deacon's face twisted as his head tilted. "It is. How do you know that?"

With a scoff, Diem lifted herself from Deacon's lap and began to pace in front of him. Her head shook, mind unable to wrap around the truth that was presenting itself before her.

"That's my brother's fiancée. My future sister-in-law. Brensen is my nephew." Her pacing stopped. "Well, I thought he was my

nephew. But if Eira isn't his father that means he's not."

Deacon stood and towered over her. "Has she ever hinted at the fact that your brother wasn't the father of her child? Like I said, I haven't talked to her since she broke up with me, so I had no idea she was pregnant. And I know of your family, but not well enough to know them by name and who they have kids with."

"No. She's never said anything like that. Let her tell it she fell in love with Eira the moment she saw him and hasn't wanted to be with anyone else." Diem rolled her neck and popped her knuckles. "I'ma beat that hoe ass, Deacon. Tonight."

He chuckled as his head dropped. "Under normal circumstances I would never want my lady fighting... but this bitch is scandalous."

It was in that moment that Diem realized this went beyond Sien-na's scheme. She'd not only been lying to her brother and their family, but she hurt Deacon in the worst way too. Diem wrapped her arms around his neck and held him. It took a moment for Deacon to surrender himself to her consoling him, but when he did, he wrapped his arms around her too.

"I'm sorry, baby. I know you really loved her and had no idea that a baby came out of her cheating on you."

"Yea. This would explain why she randomly broke up with me. Her ass gave me a bullshit ass excuse about not wanting things to get even more serious with how much I was working, but really, she just didn't want me to know she was fucking off and was probably pregnant by another man."

"So I wonder why she told you now? Eira has to leave in the morning and she's packed and ready to go with him. What is her game?"

"Shit, I don't know, but we can find the fuck out now."

Deacon released her and tried to walk away, but Diem stopped him. Even though she wanted to hand her head to Eira and her ass to Deacon on silver platters, tonight went beyond her betrayal.

"Tonight is really important for my brother and my family. I don't want to put this weight on him at least until the end of the night. Can we not say anything when we first get there?"

Deacon thought over her request for quite some time before agreeing with only a head nod. If shit was about to go left for all parties involved, Diem at least wanted Eira to enjoy a few hours of peace with his family before he found out the horrible truth.

CHAPTER 31



Chief could always tell when Remington was getting drunk. First, she would always randomly blurt out that she wasn't tipsy. Second, she would get freaky as hell. Both of those things were happening right now. They were at Eira's place, and she was already a little fucked up when they first arrived. Remington swore she could hang and fucked around and tried to keep up with Chief and Eiryx's drinking. Eiryx had stopped by his place before the party, and what was lightweight for them had Remington tipsy as soon as they left the house.

Now, she was grinding against Chief's hard dick whispering in his ear about what she wanted to do to him when they got home.

Home.

As in the home they shared together.

She swore they still needed to take their time and see how things gradually worked out between them, but instead of her getting her own place, she'd been staying with Chief ever since they made up. True enough, she slept in the guest room unless they messed around and had sex, and she was paying him what she thought was rent money, but Chief had opened a bank account for her and was putting every cent she ever gave him inside to give back to her at a later date.

"What we gotta wait until we get home for? It's a bed in another room right now."

Remington laughed, but Chief was dead serious. Hell, he would have taken her to the bathroom and gave it to her on the sink if she let him; he gave no fucks. Actually, having sex in public places with other people around turned him on. All he needed was the okay and he'd be tossing her over his shoulder and taking her somewhere to have his way with her.

"Listen. As fucked up as I will be by the end of the night, we gotta be alone because I know I'm going to be screaming your name loud as hell."

Chief chuckled as he cupped the back of her neck and pulled her lips to his. If anyone deserved a night to turn up beyond Eira, it was Remington. She'd been working her ass off to rebuild her brand. Not only was she back to doing hair herself, but she had almost all of her stylists back. And she was working on the relaunch of her hair and hair care line, too. By the end of May, she'd be back up and running in all areas.

What could have been a loss for her showed her her strength and character. Now, she could confidently say that she worked for everything she had, and it was all hers.

Chief didn't even allow himself to think about Gray these days. Knowing that he tried to violate his sister made him want to find where Xi hid his body just to bring him to life, torture him, and kill him all over again. There was something about that shit that still wasn't making sense to Chief, and it was going to drive him crazy until he figured it out or gained some peace. Him and Gray may have had an issue because of Remington, but it was nowhere near cause enough for him to try and violate his sister.

Didn't matter how drunk or mad he was – Gray had never crossed a line like that.

Chief deepened the kiss, needing his thoughts to circle back around to Remington.

"Oh shit."

Chief broke the kiss at the sound of Estella's voice. He looked in the direction of her attention as Diem, Deacon, Ai, and Duke entered the house. Chief had heard about Ai prancing around town with Duke, but he was waiting for her to introduce him to the family officially. Of all nights, tonight didn't seem like the best time. Tonight was supposed to be a celebration, not a lynching, and if Duke or any nigga that came around with his sister said the wrong thing... that's what it would turn into with the quickness.

Taking Duke's hand into hers, Ai quickly walked over to where Pamela and Estella were seated. The two mothers of the family stood and embraced them both while James went to every one of his sons and mumbled something in their ears. By the time he got to Chief he said, "Watch this motherfucker, son. He on some bullshit. And you *know* we don't play about baby girl." Chief nodded and licked his lips, patting Remington's ass for her to get up. Before he could make his way over to Ai and Duke, James was lifting his hand and stopping him.

"Hold up now. Let's be smart about this. Get all the family together in the dining room so we can handle this like gentlemen."

James headed towards the dining room, grabbing Ai's hand in the process. Of course Duke followed behind, along with Estella and Pamela. All it took was one look from Cassius, and the rest of his siblings were following him down the hall. As soon as everyone was in the room, James asked, "What is this?"

Duke chuckled as Ai's face covered with confusion.

"Why are you acting like you don't know what's up?" she questioned, throwing Chief off. "I told you that I wanted you all to meet Duke since this would be the last time all of us would be together for a while."

"You know your father didn't want you with someone in this business, Ai. And as a father figure to you, I've always agreed."

Ai inhaled a deep breath as she looked from James to Pamela.

"Ma, I know that's what you all want for me, and I really appreciate your concern, James, but whether you approve of him or not, I'm going to be with Duke. My father didn't want me with a man in

the streets, but Duke was the exception to that. I think that's why he kept us apart for as long as he did."

James looked at Duke, and his head tilted as he held onto Ai's hand. The way he stared at James... not too many men outside of the family did so. Either he was cut from a different cloth, or he had something on James that they didn't know about. Chief wasn't sure which it was, but he respected the shit.

"If you do this, the family won't have anything to do with you."

"That's not a call you can make. You're not even my real father."

"But I'm the head of this family, and I'm the closest thing you have to a father now." Duke chuckled, causing everyone to look over at him. "You got something you want to say nigga?"

"Tread lightly motherfucker. I'll blow all your shit up."

For the first time in his life, Chief saw his father back down. Not vocally, but physically. His shoulders hunched and eyes bucked before his face cast over with fear. Now, Chief's curiosity had been piqued, and there was no getting out unless he was let in on what the fuck was going on.

"You gon' handle this brother, or shall I?" he asked Cassius, to which Cassius asked...

"If you know something about my father, can you tell us?"

Duke sighed as he released Ai's hand.

"I didn't want to do this. Even though it's been eating me up inside, I was hoping James acted right so I wouldn't have to tell you all this."

Ai put her hand on his arm and turned him more in her direction as she asked, "Tell us what?"

Duke scratched his ear as he looked her over and released another hard breath. "James had your father murdered."

"What?" she cried out, while gasps and curses fell from everyone else in the room.

"He knew that Trevor wanted to leave the business and start his own, taking all of y'all with him. Given the choice, y'all would choose Trevor, so he got rid of him and had it look like the hit was for him to keep any speculation away from him."

"That's bullshit," Diem yelled, stepping closer to James. "Rock is a bastard, but he ain't heartless like that. He's the one that taught us loyalty. Right, Rock?"

James remained silent as he stared at Duke.

"Where's your proof?" Chief asked.

"Proof!" James yelled, pulling away from Diem. "He doesn't have proof. He's only doing this because I told him I wouldn't force you all to accept his relationship with Ai."

"I have proof, in a safe place. Trevor came to me because his trust was beginning to waver for James. Plus, he knew that he and Estella were going to try and finally be together, and James would die before he let that happen."

"This is bullshit. I'm not standing around for this."

James began to leave as Estella cried, "Is it true, James?" He didn't answer her vocally, just sent her a small smile before making it to the doorway. Before he could get out, Cassius was on him, hitting him so hard he fell to the ground instantly. There was no part of Chief that wanted to save his father, but his loyalty was the only reason he tried to get Cassius off of him... after he landed a few more hits.

"You dead to me!" Cassius yelled, trying his hardest to get out of Chief's grip.

Eira stepped up to hold him back, warning James with, "You need to go before I let him loose."

Estella fell to the ground, sobbing as Pamela tried to hold her up though she was shedding her own tears. Ai exited briskly with Duke following right behind. Diem stared at the door in disbelief, holding her stomach as if she would be sick soon. And all Eiryx could do was rock back and forth in one place as tears drenched her face.

It was enough for them to wrap their minds around losing Trevor. Now... they had to accept the fact that he was gone because of James.

CHAPTER 32



During all the chaos, Eira noticed Sienna in a heated debate with Deacon before storming out. That didn't make any sense to Eira because this was his first time seeing Deacon with Diem or anyone else. In his mind, there was already something fishy going on between the two. As he watched Sienna casually leave the party, Eira wondered if he wanted to go after her right away or speak with Diem about how worthy of trust Deacon was. At this point, all he knew was his name and that he was dating his sister – that's it.

Deciding to follow Sienna, Eira called out to Diem and told her to walk with him outside. She did, face still covered with tears. Diem wiped them quickly and gave Eira her full attention.

"I'm sorry to ask you this now, but do you know about your guy and Sienna?"

Her shoulders lowered as she exhaled a hard breath. "Yes. We wanted to wait until the party was over to tell you, but things took a turn none of us were expecting." Diem paused and grabbed his wrist. "I didn't find this out until a couple of hours ago, but Sienna cheated on Deacon with you. When she got pregnant, she broke up with him. Sienna randomly reached out to Deacon when she found out that we were dating and told him that he was her son's father."

Thankful for his car being behind him, Eira leaned against it when it felt like the air had been knocked out of him.

"Deacon got the results back today, and he is Brensen's father. I'm so sorry, brother. I don't know what Sienna is up to, but I got you on whatever you need to find out."

Pinching his nose, Eira looked in the direction that Sienna's car had gone. He pulled up the app he used to track all of his and her cars, then studied the road she was taking. When Eira made the deal while in prison, he put guards on Sienna at all times. They were invisible, and she never saw when she was being followed. Since it was for her safety only, Eira never asked the guards what she did throughout the day.

He trusted her, so that wasn't his concern.

Now, Eira was starting to wonder if he'd been naïve with trusting her.

Ever since she got locked up, she'd been exhibiting signs of things changing between them. From her no longer wearing her engagement ring to her barely answering his phone calls. Eira was cool with that, and he was even cooler with them not being together, especially since he had started talking to Trisha again.

But in the back of his mind, all Eira could think about was his son and how he deserved a better childhood than Eira and his siblings had. So, Eira made the choice to do whatever it took to make sure both he and Sienna could be in his life, in the same home, even if that meant being with a woman that he had slight doubts about.

"I need to borrow your car real fast to make sure she doesn't recognize mine."

"Whatever you need."

Eira followed Diem back into the house, but when she handed him the key to her Mercedes he headed right back out. Sienna had a

good enough lead for her to not be able to see when Eira was approaching her. He kept two cars between them – a stranger, and Caf, the guard who was on Sienna for the night. As he followed her, Eira tried his hardest not to think about the news he'd just heard. For the past five years, he'd devoted his life to a son that wasn't his. A woman who hadn't been faithful.

Nah.

If he thought about that now, he would end up catching a fresh charge for doing something reckless in front of everyone around.

Eiryx FaceTimed Eira when she realized he was gone to make sure he was straight. When he told her the news, she wasn't surprised. Not because she had ever seen Sienna with Deacon, but because she saw Sienna with Xi and flirting with other men. Eiryx still didn't have proof that there was something going on between Xi and Sienna, but when she pulled up at her destination, Eira showed it to Eiryx, and she confirmed that it was in fact Xi's home.

Sienna knocked and waited, made a few calls. After about five minutes of Xi not answering, she gave up and left. Eira let her back out of the driveway and leave the neighborhood cove before he ordered Caf to help him box her car in. Eira saw her arms flailing in anger, but they fell immediately when Eira cut the car off and got out. Slowly, Eira made his way over to the car. To keep from putting his hands on her, Eira pulled them behind his back.

She opened the door and hesitantly stepped out.

"Eira..."

"All I need is for you to explain what the fuck you on Sienna. No excuses. No lies."

Her hands covered her face as her head shook. When she lowered her hands, her eyes were watery, but that didn't sway Eira in the least.

"I don't know what you're..."

"Deacon!" The bass and volume in his voice made her jump. And before he could stop himself, his hand was gripping her throat and pushing her body into her car. "And what you got going with Xi? If you're honest, you have the chance to live. But if you lie or bullshit me, I'll put a bullet in your head right now."

Eira didn't realize how tight of a grip he had on her neck until she tried to speak and nothing would come out. He released her and

put more space between them. Holding her throat, Sienna coughed as she leaned forward, clutching her stomach with her free hand.

"You need to speak, Sienna. Now."

Standing up straight, she licked her lips and swallowed after dropping her hands from her body.

"Deacon is my ex. We were together when you and I first met. I fell for you instantly and cheated on him. When I got pregnant, I chose the best man, which was you. I was prepared to spend my life with you and let you believe Brensen was your son even though I wasn't one hundred percent sure. I didn't find out until today that he's Deacon's."

"Why did you reach out to him to begin with?"

She squeezed the back of her neck and leaned against her car. "Because, I felt like my plan with Xi wasn't going to work and you were going to cut me off. I needed a backup. If we were able to leave Memphis without Xi telling Eiryx the truth, I was going to take Brensen and make sure Deacon never saw him so we could continue with our family and plans for marriage. But if Xi told Eiryx, Deacon was my backup plan. He says he doesn't want to be with me, but I was going to try my hardest to change his mind so he could take care of me and Brensen."

Eira scratched under his bottom lip as his nostrils flared. It was one thing for her to fuck with him, but the moment she mentioned not one but two of his sisters and their men... that took his anger to another level. Taking a second step back, Eira massaged his temples.

"What does Eiryx have to do with this?"

"Xi wanted to be with her – for real. He... asked me if I could put in the good word for him. I knew that Eiryx wouldn't give him a chance because of the family, so I set something up that would make him look really good in her eyes. But it kind of backfired because instead of that proving to him that I was loyal enough to be on his team, he said it was a shiesty move and that he wanted nothing to do with me. She's basically been walking on eggshells with him because of me, so he said he was going to tell her the truth and let her choose her next move. I came over here to try and stop him one last time, but I assume he's trying to find her now to tell her. So I was going to head to my mom's place to grab Brensen and leave before any of you found me."

All Eira could see... all he wanted to do... was bash her head into the windshield. Covering his face and shutting his eyes, he gave his mind time to wrap around what she'd said. It was a lot... but he had to ask...

"Did you set me up? Are you the reason twelve was able to pull up during that deal?"

He lowered his hands, needing to look into her eyes when she answered. "Yes. You were talking about how you wanted to leave the game, and I didn't want to risk my money drying up. I figured if you caught a charge, the family would put me in your spot and pay me well and take care of us because you took one for the team."

"And that's why you started acting funny when they brought Kameron in. And when I took that deal." She nodded softly. "Ai's place being trashed... was that you too?"

"Yes. I needed a distraction from Eiryx and Xi. If they challenged their relationship, he would tell the truth. I knew if something happened with Ai, that would become their main focus."

Eira's stomach began to boil as his heart raced. It was cool outside, yet he began to sweat.

"You need to leave," he warned, turning his back to her. "Now."

"Eira, please let me..."

"Now, Sienna. I swore I would never harm a woman but you a few seconds away from making me change that."

Feeling his body grow weak, Eira squatted as his ears began to ring. The sound of her car speeding off only made it worse. Covering his ears, he inhaled a deep breath until the ringing stopped. As his heartbeat began to settle, he stood and looked around.

Caf's car was gone too.

Eira pulled out his phone and dialed Caf's number.

"Yea?"

"You still on her?" Eira asked, starting Diem's car.

"Yea. You want me to fall back?"

Clenching his teeth, Eira considered Caf's request.

"Nah. Stay on her. Don't let her make it to her mother's house. You feel me?"

"Yea. I'll have Loco to give you a call on my behalf when it's done."

"Good. Make sure you have this number and phone cleared too."

"On it."

Eira disconnected the call, and the moment he did, tears began to blur his eyes. He couldn't even allow sadness and heartbreak to fill him because of the anger that was shooting through his core. As the tears began to fall, he repeatedly punched the window until it had shattered completely. Transferring that pain to the glass was the only safe way to get him out of his head temporarily. Diem would give him hell about it, but he'd leave a few stacks with her to take care of it before he left Memphis and the bitter memories of Sienna and her lies behind for good.

CHAPTER 33



Eiryx wasn't expecting to see Xi parked in her driveway when she got home. A part of her wanted to leave, but the other part of her was curious about what he had to say. She already knew Eira was about to handle Sienna, and if she needed to, she would handle Xi too. As she cut her car off, her phone vibrated with a text from Martino. Instead of bothering to look at it right away, she looked to the left to find Xi already staring at her.

Her body already began to grow weak as she opened the door and got out. As she closed her door, Xi was opening his. His hands were up in surrender as he walked over to her.

"I'm not here to start any shit; I just want you to know the truth."

Eiryx had been waiting for that for so long that she'd grown numb. All she could do was nod her head once and lead him to her

front door. This was the moment she'd been waiting for, yet her spirit grew heavier and heavier. There was no part of her that wanted to hear what Xi had to say, and she had to keep herself from asking him to leave.

Stepping out of her shoes at the front door, Eiryx sighed as she leaned against the wall.

"I don't even want to tell you to come in." She chuckled softly and hung her head. "Just tell me the truth here. Now. Get it over with."

"First, I want you to know that I never meant to hurt you. I genuinely cared about and wanted to be with you." Eiryx scoffed and shook her head at his disclaimer. "The only thing I did wrong was choose Sienna for help, when I should have just approached you on my own."

Eiryx looked over at him finally, and he told her everything from the beginning.

He started by telling her that he'd been knowing Sienna for years. Sienna had always been a hood nigga delicacy. She knew everything happening with everyone because she was the kind of woman to always stay in the loop. It didn't surprise Eiryx that she knew Deacon and Xi, but Sienna had never mentioned either of them before. And in a sense, Eiryx understood that. One rule of survival in the hood was to never let another person know all the cards you held in your hand.

When Eira began to express his desire to leave the business, Sienna tried her hardest to get him to stay. In her mind, it was fast and quick money. But their son was getting older. He was at that age where he started questioning things. And Eira didn't want him to be a part of that life or the business. He made up in his mind to go legit and start his own financial institution, and that set Sienna's plan into motion.

Xi didn't know what she had in store for him. She came to his club one day, and when they ran into each other, Xi asked Sienna to put in the good word for him with Eiryx. Sienna stressed that Eiryx was loyal to the family and would never be with someone who was their competition... unless he stood out in a major way and gave her a reason to. Sienna agreed to set them up if Xi would find a place for her in his organization. He thought it was odd seeing as she was

Eira's woman, but he agreed because he assumed that would be the only way he could get a true shot with Eiryx.

The night of the incident, Xi had been watching their every move. He was waiting for Sienna to give him the okay to approach but it never came. Still, he watched and waited, and that's why he saw when Gray tried to violate her.

Xi had no idea that Sienna had set that up until the night she came over while Eiryx was there. She stopped by, livid, because Eira had called her and mentioned taking a deal to get out of jail. If he did and they started to really look into who had set him up, she knew all fingers would eventually point to her. When Xi found out about the foul shit she had done, he made it clear to her that he wanted nothing else to do with her, but she tried to blackmail him into still giving her a place in his business by telling him that she would make Eiryx believe Xi set Eira up and tried to take Sienna from him in the process.

At that point, he felt as if he had no choice but to play along. But eventually, it was more important to him that Eiryx know the truth and the type of snake they had in their family.

"Do you have proof of this?"

Xi nodded as he pulled his phone out. He'd recorded the conversation he had with Sienna that day she popped up. He had sent her away, but after Eiryx left, he went after her. Eiryx listened intently as Sienna confessed to everything – setting Eira up to take the fall to stand in his place within the family, setting Eiryx up to be raped, forcing Eira to father a baby that she wasn't sure really belonged to him, having Ai's apartment trashed, and trying to set Xi up for snitching if he didn't give her one hundred thousand dollars and a spot in his business.

Eiryx's body weakened, causing her to slide down the wall. Xi asked if it was okay to sit next to her, and she nodded while remaining silent.

"I'm sorry, Ree. It was never my intention to hurt you. All I've ever wanted was the chance to be with you. I should have stepped to you myself, but I trusted Sienna and knew you did too. She had her hands in so much shit, but I never thought she would do any of this. I don't know what else to say other than I'm sorry."

A lump had seemed to form in her throat. Holding it, Eiryx nodded.

"I know you probably still won't want to have anything to do with me, but I had to tell you the truth. If you need anything from me, I'm here."

She nodded again, fighting back her tears. Not sad tears, but angry tears. Out of her whole life, there were only two men she'd ever really wanted – Martino and Xi. And while she was trying to make something shake with Martino, it was hard because of her mistrust of Xi. Now... she knew that Xi had been innocent all along. If anything, he was played like the rest of them thinking Sienna was a good person. But she'd ruined any chance they had of ever being together, because there was no way Eiryx could see herself trusting Xi still.

No matter how good and faithful he'd be, this situation would always be in the back of her head. And he didn't deserve that. He didn't deserve to be punished for her wrongdoing. It was best if they ended things now, before deeper feelings were involved.

"Thank you for telling me the truth," she managed to get out as he stood.

Looking up at him, Eiryx forced a smile.

"Be easy, Eiryx. And again, I'm here for anything if you need me."

Eiryx nodded softly, resting her head against the wall as her eyes closed. The sound of the door closing felt like the closing of her heart as well. She wanted to send a bullet straight through Sienna's skull for putting her in this position. As the thought crossed her mind, Eiryx's phone began to vibrate. She pulled it out and smiled softly at the sight of Martino's name and picture.

"Hey."

"You good?"

"I am," she lied, but her voice cracked as her eyes watered.

"No, you ain't. Drop your location. I'm 'bout to pull up."

"Martino I'm fi—"

He hung up in her face, and as frustrated as she was, she laughed too. She should have known Martino wouldn't take her sounding sad lightly. That had always been his heart. His care. His spirit. After sending him her address, Eiryx put her phone next to her and got lost in her thoughts.

She hadn't realized how long she'd been sitting there lost in her thoughts until her doorbell rang. Checking the time, Eiryx smiled.

Martino had gotten to her in ten minutes. Standing, she took a deep breath and tried to put up a façade. One that wouldn't show she felt as silly as she did. But as soon as she opened the door and let him in, he took her into his arms, and all of that tough girl shit flew out of the window.

Martino carried her to her room, helped her undressed, then held her in the middle of her bed. He didn't ask questions; he simply gave her his presence and the space to talk or not talk – whichever she needed in that moment. And as Eiryx held him tightly, she wished this would have been enough. But in the back of her mind... all she could think about was her growing desire for Xi.

CHAPTER 34



*H*e kept trying, but Ai didn't want to say anything to Duke the entire drive home. She'd been staying at his place even though her apartment was cleaned up after being trashed. Up until tonight, she hadn't been in a rush to leave. Waking up and going to sleep next to Duke had been a dream. Except, tonight, it felt more like a nightmare.

Tears kept falling. Every time she thought about James being the reason her father was dead. More tears came.

Duke opened the garage, and as he pulled inside, Ai quickly wiped her tears. Her car was parked in the garage, next to his, as if it belonged there. As if *she* belonged here. Smiling softly, she opened her door and got out, ignoring his attitude over her not waiting for him to help her out.

Ai made her way through the kitchen and to the bedroom they'd begun to share. She grabbed her suitcases and backpack from the closet, avoiding his eyes as he watched her every move.

"You're leaving? This isn't something we can talk and work out?"

Putting the bags on the bed, Ai sat on the side of it and looked at him as he leaned against the dresser.

"You've known all along. I can't believe you would keep something like this from me."

"I didn't feel like it was my place. This was a family issue. Trust me, I wanted to get to James myself, but I had to play my role. That had nothing to do with how I feel about you, though. Or your father. I truly cared about him, and I'm starting to fall in love with you."

While Ai believed the words coming out of his mouth, they weren't enough to stop the aching within her heart. With a curt nod, she turned her back to him and continued to open her bags. When she turned to head for the dresser, Duke was gone. She was happy that he had left yet sad at the same time. Ai packed as quickly as she could, then headed towards the living room and sound of the TV.

She found Duke sitting in his recliner with a glass of brown liquor swirling around in his hand.

He stood and tried to take one of her bags, but she declined his offer.

"I believe that you didn't keep this from me out of malice. And we can still be together, I just need a little time to wrap my mind around all this. It's going to take some work to separate James' betrayal from you, so I think we should take a break until I am able to."

His head dropped. Shoulders slumped. Breath came out slow and heavy.

"I understand." Duke's head lifted as he added, "I'll wait for you. No matter how long it takes, I'll wait for you."

Duke placed a soft kiss to her forehead, then stepped to the side so she could leave.

Ai had no idea how long it would take for her to get over James' taking her father away from her.

Or how long it would take her to not think about Duke negatively every time she thought about her father being gone now.

But there was one thing she knew for sure, and it was that her father was a good man who saw something just as good in Duke. And

there was no doubt in her mind that they would cross paths soon and be able to start all over again.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END...

CHAPTER 35



Saying goodbye to Brensen was the second hardest thing Eira ever had to do. The first – ordering Sienna’s death. Though Eira wanted to take Brensen with him, he felt as if he no longer had claim to his son. Well, to the young giant in training that he thought was his son. Eira would always love Brensen, and he’d probably be sick over not being in his life anymore for quite some time. But it didn’t seem fair to take him with him knowing Deacon had just learned of his existence.

On his way to the FBI local headquarter, Eira stopped by Sienna’s mother’s house. It hurt his heart like hell to tell her that he didn’t know where Sienna was. In a sense, he didn’t, because Caf and Loco had taken care of her body. Eira told her that last night, Sienna told him that Deacon was Brensen’s real father, and that she’d planned to

run away to avoid the consequences of her actions and truth. He gave her Deacon's number and told her to expect a call from him.

It would take some time and be a long process, but eventually, Deacon was going to get full custody of his son. For now, though, he made it clear that he was okay with Brensen staying with his grandmother and continuing to see Eira's family as his own. While he wasn't supposed to come back to Memphis ever again, Eira agreed to coming back the day Deacon and Sienna's mother, Melinda, decided to tell Brensen who his real father was.

By then, Sienna would have long since been classified as a missing person.

It hurt like hell for Brensen to be caught in the crossfire, but there was no way Eira could allow Sienna to live after all she'd done and planned to do. He refused to allow her to take Brensen and not allow him to see Eira or his real father again.

Eira pulled into the parking lot after going through the security check, parking next to his family's set of cars. They all started to get out one by one, and Eira was so overwhelmed he couldn't even get out of his car right away. The party didn't go how they expected it to last night, so for them to show up to see him off...

With a shake of his head and a chuckle, Eira got out of his car.

"The hell y'all doing here?" he asked, extending his hand for Cassius to shake.

"You ain't think we would let you leave without lighting one up did you?" Chief checked, pulling him in for a brotherly hug.

"Mane, you out your damn mind if you light up in this parking lot. Weed ain't illegal in Memphis."

"And? How you think we got it in here? You know we don't give a fuck," Cassius reminded him.

All Eira could do was laugh, but his laugh fell when he saw Trisha get out of the back seat of Eiryx's car. His smile fell as he slowly walked over to her, but it returned the moment they were less than an inch apart. In that moment, nothing or no one else mattered. No one but Trisha.

"Hey," she spoke softly, looking up at him with her beautiful brown eyes.

"What you doing here, Trisha?"

She smiled, blessing him with her deep ass dimples. If Eira was ever crazy in love with anyone... it was Trisha. She was legit the one

that got away. Truth – Eira tried as hard to make things work with Sienna because he felt like it was a mistake choosing her instead of Trisha. Every day of his life, he tried to love her and be there for her as much as he could, to get the same back from her, hoping it would convince his heart that he'd made the right choice.

But deep down, he always knew it was Trisha.

And the only reason he never tried harder was because he felt like she deserved better. Better than a street nigga whose family had a drug empire that he cleaned the money for.

"I let you get away from me once, I'm not going to let that happen again, Eira."

He was so caught off guard by her statement it took Eira a while to respond. He didn't snap out of his trance until she giggled.

"Don't play with me, girl. I'll stay for you."

Her giggle had turned into a smile that lingered when she said, "And I'll go for you." She looked back into the car and Eira did too. The sight of her bags made his heart skip a beat. "Whatever I need to do to be cleared to go with you, I'll do."

Fuck it. There would be no him without her. If they didn't approve her leaving with him, Eira would reject the deal and deny ever giving them one name on their list. Period.

Now that he had a second chance with Trisha, he was going to do whatever it took to capitalize on it. This certainly wasn't the way he thought it would come about... but he supposed this was his rainbow after the storm of Sienna. Lowering his lips to hers, Eira allowed them to reacquaint themselves with hers after what felt like forever. But he couldn't even enjoy the kiss because the sound of his family cheering and clapping made him pull away as he laughed.

"Mane. If y'all don't gone somewhere. Messin' up a nigga moves..."

CHAPTER 36



A week after everything went down, things were slowly starting to get back to normal. As normal as they could be at least. No one had seen or heard from James, but they knew exactly where he was. At the hideaway spot. Deciding to leave well enough alone for the time being, they handled business without him. But when he showed his face again, there was no doubt in Chief's mind that shit would get real all over again. And James knew that too, because he had guards at the hideaway spot twenty-four seven.

No one would bring him lethal harm, though he deserved it, but they all wanted to beat his ass.

Eira was cool and adjusted. Having Trisha with him definitely made his transition smoother. They preferred his family not to have

any contact with him, but the Salzano and Bruce clan always broke the rules and was with the shit.

Diem and Deacon were doing their thing. He had spoken to Melinda, Sienna's mother, a couple of times at this point, getting a strategy in place for how they would bring him into Brensen's life. Brensen had his moments where he missed his mother, but the family had shielded and covered him with so much love that he barely felt as if there was a lack.

Eiryx had gone ghost, only stopping by when it was a family gathering or to see Brensen. Both she and Ai needed time to wrap their minds around everything that had happened, and the family understood and respected that.

Cassius had to be kept on a short leash. If given the opportunity, he would be the first headed to the hideaway spot to get up with James. The only thing keeping him tamed at this point was Treasure's peace.

And then there was Chief. All of his time had been devoted to the women in his life. Eventually, he was going to start investing his money in legal businesses, but for now, he wanted to make sure Remington, Estella, and Pamela especially were straight. Tonight, his attention was devoted to Remington. She'd finally agreed to him being her man and accepting the fact that she'd *been* his woman.

They were officially a couple... and Chief didn't think anything could make him happier in this moment.

As Chief looked over at her across the table, he considered when and how he would propose. It would be anywhere from four to six months from now, now that she'd finally gotten on some act right. He couldn't blame her, though. Fucking that stripper was stupid as hell. A way for him to convince himself he didn't like Remington as much as he knew he did. Worse, he didn't even get a nut.

But that was cool, because Remington had the best pussy he'd ever had.

She was the best woman he'd ever had.

Remington was the kind of woman who took care of her man. The better he treated her the better she treated him. She had everything every other woman in his past lacked. Not only was she beautiful on the outside but she was on the inside as well. Remington was a firecracker who took no shit but she was sweet as hell too. Al-

ways willing to do whatever she could for anyone—but she expected the exact same loyalty in return.

And she was freaky ass hell... just like him.

Goofy when she wanted to be, serious when she needed to be.

Always for him, even when she was mad at him.

She was patient with him, giving the time he needed to become the best version of himself because she knew the potential of the great and faithful man he could be.

And she was independent on her boss shit... the complete opposite of how she was with Gray. That was his doing, though. He started their relationship with a foundation of money being the only thing he had to offer her, then expected her to see him as something beyond a buck.

Nah.

Their bond was real – and special.

"I been thinking." Remington wrapped her hand around her glass of champagne with a smile.

They were on the American Queen riverboat for their date night, eating steak and lobster like that shit was common for him, and Chief was enjoying the fuck out of it. He did the bare minimum for women in his past, but with Remington, he put careful thought into every date he planned for them.

"About?"

"Whenever your schedule permits, I'd like for you to join me when I go to Dallas and Vegas to do hair. I know you got your own thing going here, but I feel safe when I'm with you. And you make me smile so much. Even if it's just once a month..."

"I'll be at your side every time you go. Fuck this other shit."

Lowering her head, Remington blushed. "Thank you." When Remington lifted her head, she pushed her straightened, natural hair back. That was Chief's favorite thing about her. Her thick, long shiny ass hair. If he stared at it too long, he would want to wrap it around his fist as he fed her his dick from the back. Clearing his throat, Chief sat up in his seat to avoid his mind getting too nasty.

That didn't work.

His dick was hard as fuck when they stood to go to the main deck lounge to listen to some live music. When Remington noticed it, she laughed and teased him by asking if he wanted her to take care of it. Naturally he did, but of course she was going to wait until

they were at home or at least in the car. They sat in their reserved seats at the top of the lounge, secluded and away from the eyes of everyone except the couples who had their own box seats to the left and right of them. If this shit wasn't over soon, Chief was going to give them a show.

Remington took his hand into hers as the lights lightly dimmed and the pianist began to play. When she sucked his pointer finger into her mouth, Chief looked over at her in pure surprise. She hardly ever did things like that in public, but Chief wouldn't dare complain. He wrapped his hand around hers and lifted her to her feet, prepared to escort her to the nearest bathroom or closet, but she surprised him again when she pushed him back down into his seat and got on her knees.

Sitting back fully, Chief relaxed as she went to work unzipping his pants. Still expecting her to back out, he bit back a satisfied moan when she pulled his shaft out and began to circle her tongue around his head. The moment she took him deep within her throat, Chief wrapped his hand around her hair and pulled as he groaned, "You tryna make me propose to your ass tonight, huh?"

CHAPTER 37



When Eiryx received a phone call from Nolan's Spa confirming her day of pampering, she was sure it was a gift from Martino. He told her that he had no idea what in the hell she was talking about... and that's when she knew it was Xi. She called him, and he confirmed the reservation had been made and paid for by him.

They hadn't talked since he told her the truth, and she hadn't talked to Martino either. It wasn't because he wasn't trying to talk to her, though. Martino had been calling or texting her every day, but that night... she saw clear as day why Trevor didn't want her to be with him in the past. He was very, very reckless. Still in the streets, she listened as Martino handed his business while he thought she was asleep.

Eiryx had to keep herself from telling him several times that he was making horrible choices. For one, he was ordering product over the phone without using any type of coded keywords. For all he knew, the person he was talking to could have been recording him to use that against him at a later date. He was paying twice what he should have been paying, and the supplier he was working with had been known to have a low grade of product.

When she couldn't take it anymore, she sat up and offered him advice. He damn near flew off his rocker talking about he wasn't about to take advice from a woman, no matter what family she came from. Even though he realized quickly how disrespectful what he said sounded, it didn't matter. Eiryx had no intention of being with him on a personal level.

Eiryx was confident that he'd be catching another charge soon, especially since she found out he'd been locked up twice since he got out after his first bid. And she refused to get caught up in his mess.

It was risky, deciding to thank Xi in person, but it seemed like the polite thing to do. That's the excuse Eiryx gave herself when she pulled into his driveway. She couldn't possibly tell him the truth – that she simply wanted to look at his face. When Eiryx asked if she could stop by and thank him after she left the spa, he told her that was more than okay. That he'd stop and grab some of her favorite items from the Japanese restaurant by his house and they could make a lunch date out of it.

But... as soon as he said that, Xi quickly corrected it by telling her it was no pressure. Just a chance to put some free food in her stomach. Eiryx didn't reply, but the thought of having a lunch date with him was nice. Hell, having any kind of date with Xi would have been nice. She'd always had a crush on him but figured it would never come to be. And when he saved her, Eiryx was confident that that was a sign that they were meant to be. Had it not been for Sienna's scheme, they would still be dancing around each other in different paths avoiding the same destination – love.

It was that practice of changing her perspective from negative to positive that had become Eiryx's saving grace. Instead of focusing on what Sienna tried to destroy, she tried to focus on the gift she gave her... an in with Xi. There was no point in Eiryx hating Sienna at this point because she was gone. And without that hate in her heart, she had more room for love. Maybe it would be with Xi and maybe it

wouldn't. But... they owed it to themselves to see what could happen either way, on their own.

Getting out of her head, Eiryx opened the door to her car and stepped out. By the time she made it to the door, he was opening it and stepping outside. Their smiles were wide and full as they mirrored one another.

"Is it okay if I hug you?"

She nodded and braced herself to feel the warmth of his body again.

As soon as his arms wrapped around her body, Eiryx's eyes closed as she hugged him back. Her body weakened against his, molding into his frame as she inhaled a deep breath.

"Thank you," she whispered, "For everything."

"It's nothing."

"Why'd you do it?"

"Just wanted to do something for you because you've been on my mind every day." Xi pulled away from her slightly and looked into her eyes. "This isn't my way of trying to lure you back in. I just... had to do something to feel connected to you."

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before Eiryx dropped her arms from around him.

"I've been thinking about you a lot too."

"Anything good?"

Eiryx smiled and shook her head. "Yes. After the first day or two, it was all good thoughts."

"Come in."

Following behind him, Eiryx thought about the last time she was in Xi's home and the dis-ease it left within her. Trying to get those thoughts out of her head, Eiryx reminded herself of the present moment and how important it was not to dwell on the past.

When they made it to his kitchen, Eiryx smiled at the setup he had on the bar. All of her favorites were there – sushi, fried rice, bang bang shrimp, and a bowl of Ramen. It was crazy because, they'd yet to have Japanese together. On her way to his house the first time, Eiryx mentioned how much she loved Japanese food. She even rattled off some of her favorites items to make conversation, but she certainly wasn't expecting him to remember what she'd said.

After sitting on the bar stool, she took a picture of their feast and uploaded it to her IG. Admittedly, she could have kept Xi's arm from

being in the picture, but quite frankly, she didn't want to. Before she could even finish eating her first piece of sushi she was getting a FaceTime request from Chief. With a chuckle, she asked Xi if he minded her answering and he said no.

"I don't have in my earbuds," was the first thing she said after accepting the request.

"Where you at and who you with?"

Smiling, Eiryx dipped her sushi into the soy sauce Xi provided.

"I'm at Xi's place. What's up?"

She looked at Chief to gauge his expression. At first, he looked confused, then he smiled. The family had already discussed Xi. He was still competition, but they didn't see him as an enemy or a threat. Xi had the perfect opportunity to use Sienna and gather information about them to use to his advantage to take out his competition, but he didn't. Even though he was slow about it, Xi told the truth, and they all appreciated that.

"I was just trying to see who your little ass was with since it looked like you was at somebody house."

She chuckled quietly as her cheeks raised. "I'm good, bro."

"Aight. Tell that nigga I said what's up and your brothers wanna see him. If y'all gon' be dating and shit, he gon' have to get grilled like every other nigga do."

They stared at each other, mainly because Chief had always been the hardest brother to please. The fact that he was even considering meeting up with Xi meant a lot to her. Twisting her mouth to the side, Eiryx nodded as her eyes misted over.

"You don't even know if he wants to date me, crazy, but I'll tell him."

"Aight cool."

Eiryx disconnected the call and wrapped a few ramen noodles around her chopsticks, trying to ignore Xi staring a hole into the side of her face. When she couldn't ignore it anymore, she looked over at him with a smile.

"I would love to date you... and be grilled by every one of your brothers."

She giggled softly with a nod of her head. "I would love that too."

Xi's head shook as he dropped his chopsticks onto his plate. "I'm sorry, Ree..."

Silencing him the best way she could think of, Eiryx placed a soft kiss to his lips. She didn't let them linger there long; afraid she would want Xi to make a meal out of *her*. Instead, she removed them and allowed her forehead to rest on his.

"It was sweet of you to go to Sienna to get to me. It was brave of you to save me. And it was noble of you to tell me the truth. That's all I care about now. If we don't work, we won't work because of us, but I'm not holding on to anything in the past."

Running his hand down the front of her neck and chest, Xi allowed his hand to settle on her waist. Leaning forward, he kissed her. This time, their kiss was longer. Harder. More tender. As Eiryx cupped his cheek with her palm, she allowed herself to lose herself in this moment and not think too far in the past or future. Instead, focusing only on the beauty of their right now.

ONE MONTH LATER...

CHAPTER 38



Today was supposed to be the proudest day of Ai's life, and she was proud, just not as happy as she thought she would be. Her and Duke hadn't spoken to each other in a whole month, but she'd invited him to her graduation still. When she walked across the stage and looked in the direction of her family cheering for her, she didn't see his face. Ai tried not to overthink it, but his seat would have been next to her mother's. Trying not to let that get the best of her, Ai gripped her diploma tighter as she walked down the loop in search of her family.

She couldn't blame Duke for not coming. Clearly she wasn't a priority to him anymore. Who knows what he had to do today, and it wasn't realistic of her to expect him to change his plans for her – es-

pecially after she'd cut him off for a whole month. When her eyes finally zeroed in on her family, her pout was replaced with a smile.

Before she was able to make it over to them fully, a strong arm wrapped around her. The moment she looked down and saw those veins and tattoos Ai melted into his chest. Her eyes closed as she grinned and inhaled his scent. Duke lowered himself and buried his face in her neck before whispering, "Congratulations, beautiful. I'm so proud of you."

Ai turned quickly in his arms and buried her face in his chest, thankful she decided not to wear makeup. Something told her her emotions would be all over the place, so she opted for individual lashes and lip gloss instead.

"I didn't see you. I thought you didn't come," she whined, trying to hold back her tears unsuccessfully.

"Look at me," he commanded, cupping her cheeks and pulling her face from his chest. "I will *always* show up for you, Ai. Always."

It didn't do any good that he wiped her tears away because more fell. "I missed you so much, Duke. I'm so happy to see you."

With a smile, Duke pulled her back into his arms. "I missed you too, baby. And I will show you how happy I am to see you when you come home with me."

Though the thought crossed her mind, Ai didn't even bother playing hard to get or as if she wanted to go another night without being in his arms.

"Aight, aight. That's enough," Cassius decided, ripping the reunited lovers apart and pulling Ai into his arms as she laughed. "Congratulations, baby sis. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, brother."

When he released her, the rest of her family members took turns hugging her. Afterwards, they headed to J. Alexander's for food, though that wasn't her first pick for liquor. Her original thought was to go to a bar or club to turn up, but now that she had Duke at her side, all she wanted to do was go back home with him. Especially after he told her not to get too full because of the surprise he had for her.

Like the hood niggas they were, Chief and Cassius pulled out bottles of D'USEÉ and rotated them around, daring anyone in the restaurant to check them about it. Ai ended up ordering her usual – chicken tenders, fries, and macaroni and cheese. Her side of the table

shared spinach artichoke dip as well. Even though this was her absolute favorite place to eat, Ai made sure she saved room for whatever Duke had in store for her.

The vibe had been amazing. Everyone was all jokes and smiles. Hell, they had even welcomed Xi in warmly. But the vibe of the restaurant changed drastically when James showed up.

"The fuck are you doing here?" Ai asked, to which Duke grabbed her hand and kissed it to calm her nerves.

"Your mother invited me. May I speak with you?"

Ai's head shook as she stood. "No. I don't want to have anything to do with you. Don't come around me again, James, or I swear to God I'll have Duke do what your sons are too damn loyal to do."

Duke stood and wrapped his arm around her before leading her out of the restaurant.

"You good? I could have made him leave so you could enjoy your family, baby girl."

Her head shook as her nostrils flared. "No. My mood would have been shot. That D'USSÉ makes me real mean. I'm ready to be alone with you anyway."

Okay with her choice, Duke said nothing else about it. On their way to his place, they caught each other up on what had been happening in their lives and made small talk. Truth of the matter was, Ai wasn't as present as she should have been mentally to have a real conversation. Seeing Duke after a month made her heart light. Seeing James after a month made her heart palpitate.

All of the spiritual work that she'd been doing for the past month felt like it had flew out of the window at the sight of James. Now, the desire to see him perish was just as strong as it was the day everything went down.

In the garage, Duke told her not to come inside until he came to get her. Ai closed her eyes and smiled, trying to rid herself of the negative energy that had filled her. She took a few deep breaths and reminded herself that she was the only person in control of her emotions.

When he came back out, Duke took her hand and led her into his home. Everything appeared normal, but when they made it to the living room, that changed. There were gift bags everywhere, lit candles, a fruit and cheese tray, and champagne. As Ai took in everything he'd done for her, Duke started some music.

“Bae, you so didn’t have to get me anything.” Ai walked over to the table and snagged a white chocolate covered grape.

“The fact that you really feel that way is proof of why you deserve everything.”

When Ai turned and saw the intense, passionate look in his eyes... she knew he was the best gift she could have gotten. If this past month away from him had taught her anything, it was that she didn’t want to go another day of her life without him.

CHAPTER 39



Diem never thought they would get to this point. Hell, none of them did. Having to have a meeting about James without James was something she never would have expected. Unfortunately, though, this was what it had come to. Ai's graduation dinner last night was the first time they'd seen him since everything went down. For the most part, he'd been trying to handle business through other members of the team via phone. That was cool with Diem and Cassius, because it gave them time to fix a lot of the things that were broken within their system of handling things.

If James would have been there, he would have rejected the changes immediately.

"Y'all know why y'all here," Cassius started, looking everyone seated at the round table in the eye. All of their advisors and leaders

were in attendance. Whispers had been buzzing around. People were wondering what would be the next move. "James has become a cancer to the family, and if this situation isn't handled, we run the risk of losing money, power, respect, our freedom, and our lives."

"James started this company, that we will never deny," Diem picked up. "But he did not do it alone. He did it with Trevor, some that have died, and all of you seated at this table. If we ban together, we can remove him from the mafia with eleven votes."

Cassius stood and leaned against the table with his palms resting against it. "If he is removed, we can continue on with our changes to turn this into the most prosperous cartel the south has ever seen."

"We're talking two million a month in revenue, new streams with guns and knives, plus the black wall street we've already discussed to help the community out. But we can't do this if James is still in control."

"Who's ready to vote?" Everyone raised their hands. "All in favor of James being removed?"

Diem counted the raised hands one by one as a slow smile spread across the left side of her mouth. Thirteen hands were raised.

"And those who want him to stay?"

Two hands raised.

"Alright. He's out," Diem declared, sitting back in her seat with a full smile. "Bring him in."

Charles, the guard at the door, turned and exited. When he returned, James was walking in behind him. The evil glare that was on his face made Diem chuckle. In the beginning, it was hard for her to even consider her father could do something so callous to Trevor of all people. They may have shared women, true, but Trevor was the best friend James had ever had. Hell, Trevor was the best friend of anyone he came in contact with.

Every time she thought of James' ability to take the most genuine person in her life away from her, Diem lost a little more love and respect for her father.

"If y'all ever have me waiting outside of a meeting for my business again, I'm going to forget y'all are my children and treat you like two suckas on the street."

"This is no longer your business," Cassius replied casually.

"You've been voted out," Diem added.

James laughed. First, it started out really low and slow. Then, it turned into something loud and hard. The longer he laughed the more irritated Diem grew.

"What you say to me?"

"I didn't stutter."

Diem looked over at Cassius, not wanting him to get too upset. What worked in their favor was showing that they were the complete opposite of James. If Cassius spazzed out, he would look just as reckless as their father.

James tried to walk over to them, but Charles stopped him. Jerking away, James spit in their direction, and that was the last straw for Cassius. Before anyone could stop him, he was leaping over the table and knocking James onto the ground. It took five men to pull Cassius off of James, and the entire time James was carried out he spewed threat after threat their way.

"You good?" Cassius asked, straightening his torn shirt. James must have grabbed it when Cassius damn near tackled him.

"Yea. Dismiss this shit so I can go."

He did, and Diem wasted no time heading out to her car. Cassius told Charles to go with her and trail her home, but Diem didn't believe her father would do anything to her. Still, she didn't want Cassius to worry about her, so she didn't protest to Charles trailing her.

Once she was settled into her car, Diem called Deacon and connected it to her Bluetooth. Things had been flowing between them beautifully. So far, Deacon had seen Brensen three times, but they haven't shared that he was his real father yet. His grandmother wanted to make sure he would be comfortable around him first. Diem still had her moments where she challenged his lead, but now, she was able to stop herself and quickly correct it.

"How did it go?" Deacon asked, and his concern put an immediate smile on her face.

"Crazy ass hell. When James found out that he'd been voted out he tried to spit on us, so Cassius beat his ass again."

Deacon chuckled. "Are you okay? He's been on some foul shit, but that's your father at the end of the day."

Her smile wavered as she gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. "It fucked with me, I can't lie. And the fact that he threatened me..." Diem shook her head and bit down on her trembling lip. "A

part of me wants to say he will definitely try Cash and not me... but the look in his eyes today... I can't even say."

"Well that's one thing you will never have to worry about; I ain't letting him or anyone else hurt you physically or emotionally. I got you, baby."

Diem's smile returned. Normally she would question a man saying something like that, sure it would be a promise he couldn't keep. But with Deacon, Diem relished in how good it felt to surrender and trust a man to have her front, back, and side.

CHAPTER 40



This – this was the moment Cassius had been waiting for, for over a month. Treasure had finally worked up the nerve to take a pregnancy test. Three actually. As they waited for the results, they stared intently into each other's eyes. Either way it went, Cassius was secure in the bond they had.

When he first arrived, he walked in on her pacing, anxiously waiting for his arrival. He hadn't even had time to tell her about how things went down with James. How... his child would never get to meet his grandfather or the man who was like a father to Cassius. He wouldn't be able to talk to his father about the ins and outs of parenthood, and the only sibling that had a child wasn't even the baby's father. The more Cassius thought about his past and current situations, the less excited he grew about having a baby.

The last thing he wanted to do was fuck a child up the way he'd been fucked up. Even though he'd turned out fairly decent with minor issues, that wasn't always the case. Cassius couldn't bear to look himself in the mirror if he screwed up his child.

Standing, he began to pace just as Treasure was doing when he arrived. She chuckled quietly and grabbed his hand when he passed her. Standing, Treasure placed her hands in the center of his chest.

"You're not drowning in your thoughts are you?"

There was no denying it, and Cassius didn't bother trying as he released a loud exhale.

"I just don't want to fuck our baby up. Whether you're pregnant now or we wait a few years... I can't fuck this baby up, Treasure."

Her head tilted as she smiled. Treasure placed his hand on top of her stomach.

"I would not have shared my body with you if I didn't think you were capable of being a good father. You know how I know you will be?" His head shook. "Because you saw what not to do in James and what to do in Trevor. We are going to fuck up and make mistakes, but we're going to love our children with everything within us and learn things along the way together. I got you, you got me, and we're going to have this baby if I'm pregnant. Okay?"

Cassius nodded and kissed her forehead before lowering his lips to hers, in no rush to pull away even though the timer on her phone vibrated. When Treasure pulled away, her smile was wide as she softly jumped up and down and asked if he was ready. Her excitement began to radiate within him, causing him to smile as he said yes. They made their way to the bathroom, and Treasure was the first to step inside.

Cassius watched as she took a deep breath. Her eyes closed, then opened and looked down at the tests on the counter. With wrinkled eyebrows and partly opened lips, Treasure picked the tests up one by one. By the time she finally looked at him, her eyes were watery. Swallowing hard, she allowed the stick to drop before covering her face and sobbing.

Cassius walked over to her and grabbed one of the tests from the floor. Squatting down, he read the results. He blinked rapidly, refusing to believe what he was seeing. After picking up the other two tests and finding that they all said the same thing, Cassius stood, embracing the fact that he was about to be a father.

"Baby," he whispered, picking her up and spinning her around softly as her cries turned into giggles. "Fuck, Treasure. We're about to have a baby."

"I know. Can you believe it?"

"I can. You know what else I can believe?" Cassius placed her on her feet, then kneeled on one knee. "That you're it for me."

"Cash..."

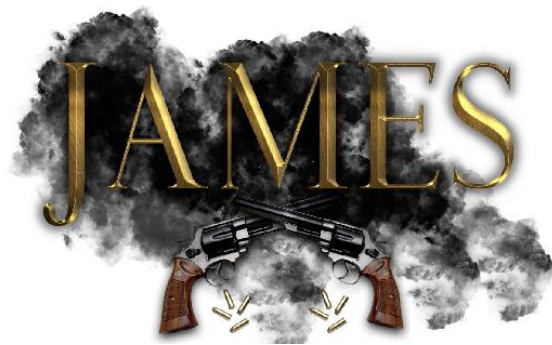
He took her hands into his. "You're my dream girl. And now that my reality is that you're my woman and you're carrying my seed... I refuse to wait any longer. I'll get you a ring and propose in front of our family and friends in a way that will honor you, but I have to know this before another day passes in our lives. Will you be my treasure for life? Will you be my wife?"

Treasure's head nodded rapidly as she laughed through her tears.

"Yes," she whispered, pulling him up from his knee.

Cassius kissed her ring finger, then picked her up bridal style. He carried her to his room, to their room, to celebrate their engagement... and it was a good thing that she was pregnant... because how Cassius was feeling, she would for sure end up full of his seeds by the end of the night.

CHAPTER 41



As he lay there, with blood spilling from the hot, fresh holes piercing his skin, James Salzano's karma had finally caught up with him. Over the years, he became hypnotized by hate. Worse, it was hate for his own best friend. Truth – James had agreed to sharing Estella with him only because he felt like that was the only way he wouldn't lose her to Trevor. Having Estella, the only woman Trevor had ever really wanted, was supposed to be the ultimate win.

Year after year, James rubbed his relationship with Estella in Trevor's face. But he didn't seem to care. Not only was his relationship with Estella secure, but his relationship with their children was as well. It didn't help that everyone in the business respected him – even their enemies. The bitterness that began to consume James

caused him to start looking at Trevor a different way. What was once a genuine friendship had become fake love and genuine hate.

Trevor had to have felt the shift, but he was such a stand up guy that he didn't even mention it.

And things between James and Trevor would have still been cool... if only Trevor would have stayed in his place. It was bad enough that the FBI and DEA had an open file on James and the Salzano family; but James also had to deal with Trevor's desire to leave the business, take his family, and go legit.

Refusing to let that happen, James made the decision to do something he never thought he would have to do... kill his best friend. Kill his brother.

Every day that passed of James holding in that secret felt like it was rotting his soul. Honestly, James was relieved when Duke told the truth. It felt as if a weight was lifted off his shoulder.

But now... as he stared at the barrel of the smoking gun... James wished that he would have tried harder to keep anyone from finding out.

Blood began to seep from his mouth, and as his heart beats began to slow even further, James knew he was nearing the end. He opened his mouth further, trying to say something before he left... but the bullet that shot through his mouth made it clear that they were ready for him to be silenced.

SHE'D DRIVEN three hours to discard of the gun in the river, and as she tossed it over the railing, the peace that consumed her let her know it was worth it. She was probably the last person anyone expected to kill James, and that was exactly why she knew she had to be the one. Leaning against the railing, Estella inhaled a deep breath as she looked out into the setting sun. A part of her felt partially responsible for James' reign of terror because she chose to lie down with him and have his children.

Have his soul tied to hers.

Have his demons try their hardest to overpower the good and grace that was within her.

For quite some time, Estella had no problem living life through an unhappy marriage. She'd already made her bed when she agreed to having an open relationship instead of standing her ground and choosing the man she truly loved. But all of that was about to change. Her and Trevor were finally about to choose and put themselves first, and James just *had* to fuck it up.

Estella's phone began to vibrate, pulling her gaze from the setting sun. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and smiled as she answered and put it to her ear.

"Is it done?" Trevor asked, and the sound of his voice sent a shiver down her spine.

"Yes. And it played out just like you said it would."

The night of the shooting, Trevor's heartbeat was so faint they thought he was dead. When Paris and her team went to bury Trevor in their mafia field, they heard faint sounds coming from the bag. At first, she thought she was hearing things, until the bag slowly began to move.

Out of loyalty for him, Paris and her team promised not to tell James that he was still alive. Instead, they let James believe he'd been buried in the field. While Pamela wanted to honor his wish of being cremated, James still wanted to possess him by putting him in the field. But, that worked out for Trevor more, because Paris was able to have someone else's body cremated instead of his. She convinced James to convince the family that it would be best not to see him in that state. To instead remember him alive.

James was selfish and possessive in that way, and that was one of the main reasons Trevor didn't want him to know that he was alive. Paris and her team nursed him back to health, and the only person she had reached out to on his behalf was Estella. At first, Estella didn't believe it was true, but there was no denying it when she saw him face to face a few days ago.

It felt as if she had to mourn Trevor all over again when she found out James was responsible for the hit. Honestly, Estella had made up in her mind that night that she would kill him. Finding out that Trevor was still alive was just the icing on the cake.

"Will you ever come back, or must I come to you?"

Trevor sighed. Estella waited patiently for his reply as she returned to the car she'd rented from a small car lot in the hood. She wanted no record of her taking this trip from the miles on her per-

sonal car or from her renting a car through an actual rental company. For the car she had, all she had to do was leave a copy of her license and credit card that would be shredded when she returned it, with three hundred dollars in cash, and they agreed to keep no record of her temporarily borrowing the car.

"I know the kids will be upset because I didn't tell them, but with all this bloodshed... I feel like it could give them life, love, and relief too. Plus, I can't ignore the love that has been shed between us for over thirty years. I've missed you all so much. I'm going to come home, E."

Estella smiled as she nodded and started the car. She wouldn't have forced him to come back, but she was praying he did. Yes, their children would have temporarily been upset that he didn't let them know that he was still alive, but when he expressed that it was necessary to end James' reign and free them all... Estella knew they would understand.

"I'm so happy you're coming back, Trevor. You can't imagine how much this means to me. For us. All of us."

"I can, because I've been waiting for this just as long. I love you. Call me once you've made it home and set something up for me to see the kids when I return."

"I will. I love you too."

Estella disconnected the call, then started a group FaceTime with all of their children. She started out by reminding them of what James used to always say. Once you enter the Salzano family, there is no way out. You are married to the black mafia, and not even jail or death will separate us. That had been true for quite some time. But now, things were about to change drastically.

She didn't tell them over the phone, but she did let them know that she needed to meet up with them all soon. Death had finally separated them from the rule of James Salzano, and now that he was finally gone... they all could love... and live... freely.

The End

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