



Them Boys: Book 3

Shu

Alexandria House

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(Them Boys: Book 3)

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Shu - the god of peace, lions, air, and
wind in ancient Egyptian religion.

Shu

At first, I wasn't sure what woke me up. Hell, I didn't even realize where I was until my eyes began to focus on the darkness around me only disturbed by the light from the muted flat screen TV hanging on the wall. Full awareness came when my eyes landed on the bed I was sitting next to where my father lay fast asleep. I straightened my slumped posture in the uncomfortable chair, my head snapping toward the sound of footsteps outside the room's door.

It eased open, and she hesitantly stepped inside the room, jumping a little when she noticed my presence. "Mr. Shu?"

"Yeah, sorry I startled you."

"Oh, no problem. I just need to check and see if your father needs to be changed. It's time to turn him, too."

I nodded. "You doing all that by yourself tonight?"

"No. Another aide is coming to help me."

I stared at the tiny woman, the *beautiful* tiny woman with silky-looking dark skin and a puff of kinky hair sitting on top of her head. Her eyes were big and expressive. Her lips were so full and pouty; it looked like they were made for kissing. Tiny gold earrings trailed up her earlobes, and a white t-shirt peeked from under her green scrubs. The ID badge hanging from a lanyard around her neck read: *Denver, Nurse Tech*. I'd seen her taking care

of my father before, but she usually had someone with her, to help. This was the first time she'd come in this room alone. "Uh, I can help you," I offered.

She frowned and shook her head. "I can't let you do that. That's *my* job."

Standing from the chair, I stretched and said, "I wanna do it, so tell me what to do."

The door creaked open again, and a woman wearing green scrubs that matched Denver's stepped into my father's room, her eyes swinging from me to Denver. "You still need my help?" she asked.

"I don't think so?" Denver said slowly.

"I'ma help her," I explained.

"Oh, okay. Holler if you need me, Denver," the other lady said, and rushed out the door.

Denver smiled nervously at me. "Um, we should change him first."

I nodded and watched as she pulled the covers back, checking my father's diaper. When she left to grab some supplies off her cart, I stared down at Omar Mitchell. He was once so big and scary to me, but now? Now, he was thin, frail, withering away both mentally and physically. I glanced at the door and then back at my father. There were so many words I wanted and needed to say to him, but just like every other night that I found myself in his room, I couldn't. The words were stuck in my brain, unable to make their way to my vocal cords.

Denver stepped back in the room with a diaper and some more stuff, and I did what she told me to do to help her, watched her change him like he was a baby, grabbed his arm when he tried to hit her, and after I'd helped her reposition him in the bed, I left, hoping the sleep I'd found in his room would follow me home.

It didn't.

I'm the middle child, the kid who exists in a hidden place between the youngest and the oldest. I was also the quietest child, so I slid under Omar's radar more than my brothers did. Shit, I honestly think he forgot to abuse me sometimes. Don't get it twisted, though. I definitely wasn't exempt from his cruelty. I was snatched out of bed and punched more times than I cared to remember. I was forced to do chores in the middle of the night and to fight my brothers, too. Life was fucked up for me just like it was for Set and Jah, but the nights when I was awakened by my brothers being hurt instead of me outnumbered theirs. So I decided he forgot about me sometimes, or maybe it was that I never showed fear or anger. I just...took it. I didn't cry. I didn't get mad. I just stared at him while he hit me and tried to hit him back until those tries turned into successes. Then he stopped, and like my brothers, I kept the violence going outside our home. We all liked fighting. I actually *loved* it. I still did, although I avoided it. I did everything in my power to avoid it, because once I unleashed that part of me, it was hard to lock it back up.

The thing is, my father made fighters out of my brothers, but me? He made me a killer.

Denver

I beat on the door and sighed. I could barely keep my eyes open after eight hours of changing, washing, and flipping grown folks at the nursing home, and this girl had the damn deadbolt locked? The one that only locked and unlocked from the inside?

Banging my fist against the door again, I shouted, “Sunny! It’s Denver! Open the door!”

Finally, I heard the locks disengage and watched as the door opened. On the other side stood Curtis, my cousin Sunny’s older, creepy-ass boyfriend, her main sugar daddy. He was shirtless, proudly displaying a field of taco meat on his chest, and there was something wet making his beard glisten. I guess I’d interrupted him eating my cousin’s pussy, but I paid half the rent up in this bitch, so whatever.

“Mornin’. Sorry it took so long to answer the door. We was...busy,” he said, giving me a salacious grin.

“Yeah, can you move so I can come in?” I basically hissed. I was too tired for this small talk shit and I had no desire to smell Sunny’s coochie on his breath.

“All right. Come on in, Little Bit. You mean as hell to be so little. What are you? Four-ten?” He licked his lips.

His ass was still in the doorway, so I shoved past him and headed to my room, slamming and locking my door behind me. This fool had messed up my tiny high from seeing Mr. Mitchell's fine-ass son with his big tall self. He was older than me, probably *much* older than me, and I usually didn't like older men, but there was something about him that made him very appealing to me. He was handsome, had these narrow eyes that if you really looked, you could tell were two different colors—one was dark, almost black, and the other was a caramel brown. Those eyes were so beautiful. His lips were nice, kissable lips that I'd never seen form a smile. He always looked, I don't know, a weird mixture of mad and sad, but more than that, he felt dangerous, like deadly dangerous. Being around him made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but despite all that, I kind of liked him. Shit, I kind of wanted him, too, which was crazy. Nevertheless, after I showered and climbed into bed, it was his face that occupied my dreams.

Shu

Still wearing my steel toes and my work clothes with my orange earplugs draped around my neck, I rang the doorbell next to the front doors of the Eternal Waters Care Center, since they locked the building down after hours. It was almost midnight, I'd been on my feet for sixteen hours, and I was nowhere near tired, so I came here hoping to find sleep as it only seemed to exist for me in my father's room. A security guard let me in, giving me a nod that I returned. Most of the night shift knew me, so I didn't

bother to stop at the nurse's station, making my way to Omar Mitchell's room and taking the seat next to his bed that my mother occupied in the daytime. She was devoted to him, but who could blame her? He treated her like a queen. He loved her. I hadn't quite worked out what it was he felt for me and Set and Jah, but if it was supposed to be love, that love was twisted like a motherfucker.

I stared at him as an old episode of *Gunsmoke* played on the TV, pretending to myself that I was beginning to feel tired when I wasn't. I wished I was, though. Anyway, sleep was never that kind to me. When it did arrive, it snuck up on me. I never saw it coming. I wouldn't even know it had been there until I found myself waking up. Sleep's ass pulled that shit again since I found myself startled awake just in time to see her again—tiny, pretty, timid.

“Hi, Mr. Shu. Sorry for waking you up,” she said softly.

“How old are you?” I asked, making her stop in her tracks.

“Sir?”

“How old are you?”

“Why?”

“You keep calling me Mr. Shu.”

“Yeah, so?” There was a little bit of an attitude in her voice. I liked it.

“So, unless you're under the age of eighteen, call me Shu. Just Shu.”

“Oh...okay, Shu.”

I nodded and hopped up from my chair.

She gave me a smile and reached into her pocket, pulling out some gloves. “I brought extra larges for you this time. I could tell the larges were too tight.”

I lifted the corner of my top lip a little and nodded. “Thanks.”

Then we went to work, pulling and tugging on Omar to get him changed and turned. Well, I just kind of stood there while she handled the diaper changing, because fuck that.

“That’s your real name? Denver?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, but I’m a change it.”

“To what?”

“Anything other than Denver.”

“You from Denver?”

“Nah, my mom said she just liked the way Denver sounds.”

“Oh.”

“Is Shu your real name? Like the Egyptian god?”

My eyes widened a little. “Yeah, it is.”

“Nice. God of peace, huh? Does that fit you?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t think mine fits me at all. Denver sounds like a white girl. I’m the opposite of white.”

And you’re beautiful, I thought. “What’s your last name?” I questioned, as she fastened the new diaper.

She glanced up at me. “Hayes. You know any Hayeses?”

I shook my head and grabbed what I now knew was the draw sheet, helping her pull Omar to the left, then taking the pillow she handed me and stuffing it behind his back.

“He must really be tired tonight. He didn’t even wake up to fight me,” she said with a grin.

“I’m sorry he does that to you,” I offered.

She frowned a little. “Oh, it’s okay. I know he doesn’t know what he’s doing. I’m sure he was the sweetest man before all this.”

I studied her for a minute before saying, “What makes you say that?”

She shrugged. “You. The way you visit him, sit with him, help take care of him, all that tells me he had to be a good man.”

I couldn’t respond to that, because then I’d have to explain that my reasons for dragging my ass up in this room night after night had nothing to do with him being a good man. I’d have to tell her the truth, and that shit was hard for me to even think about, let alone say.

My silence didn’t seem to bother her, though. “Well, let me get to the next room. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. You gonna be here?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded, and I watched her leave, then settled back in my chair, fixing my eyes on Omar.

Denver

He was still there when I came back just like he said he’d be, hopping up the moment I opened the door, his eyes puffy with sleep. He was tall and thick and so, so handsome with a mustache and beard that only enhanced his features and made him seem even more dangerous than he naturally felt to me. But he was also very quiet, not a man of many words. To say that he was enigmatic would be a gross understatement. He was also kind of... strange, but so was I.

I was *very* strange to most people, but I considered myself free. I lived how I wanted to live, had since I left my mother’s house ten years earlier.

No one understood me then, and no one really understood me now, but I really didn't care.

"Why you always got that little band-aid on your nose?" he asked, his deep voice startling me as I cleaned his father.

"Um, I have a nose ring. They said I either had to take it out or cover it up. I wasn't taking it out, so..."

He nodded. This man was always nodding.

"So, you work at the plant?" I asked, eyeing his bright orange shirt emblazoned with *DonCo* in white letters.

He glanced down at himself. "Yeah."

"You always come here straight from work?"

His eyes were glued to me. "Sometimes."

"Well," I said, as he helped me position his father on his back, "I really admire your dedication to your father."

He nodded, sadness clouding his eyes, and after standing there unable to take my eyes from his for a ridiculous amount of time, I left.

Shu

After so many nights of doing this, standing across my father's bed from her, I should've been accustomed to it and her. But still, I had to remind myself that I was supposed to be helping her. I couldn't stop staring at her as I tried to figure out how one person could be so beautiful. She was so much shorter than my six feet, two inches and fragile looking. She almost looked like she would break if I touched her, but at the same time, I knew she wouldn't. I knew she was tougher than she appeared to be, that she'd seen a lot of shit that could've, and maybe should've, broken her but didn't.

"Okay, you ready to turn him?" she asked, her thick eyebrows lifted.

I nodded and helped her move Omar, helped her cover him up, and a minute or so later, watched her leave his room.

"So we've been doing this tag-teaming thing for what? Two weeks now? It's time for me to start paying you, huh?" she said, when she returned to Omar's room that night.

I frowned. "Huh? Naw, don't do that."

She smiled. “It was a joke. You know...ha-ha?”

“Oh...”

We’d just finished getting Omar situated, and she was peeling a glove off as she said, “Do you ever smile or laugh?”

“Not really.”

She nodded. “I didn’t think so. Well—”

“How long you been a nurse?”

“I’m a CNA.”

“Okay, how long you been one of those?”

“A year.”

“You real good at it.”

She smiled again. “Oh, thank you!”

“You’re welcome.”

Denver

My favorite color used to be red, but now I regretted putting a red curtain on the one window in my room. It didn’t foster peace for me anymore than the bare walls that surrounded me. I hated this little room along with the second-hand full-size bed I was lying in, shoved into a corner so the room wouldn’t feel so claustrophobic. I didn’t have a closet, and there was no space for a dresser, so I lived out of a suitcase, but at least I had my own bathroom.

I rolled over and tried to block out my cousin and one of her men as they yelled at each other. She was always either fighting or fucking somebody, *loudly*, and I could count on one hand how many times I'd been able to sleep soundly in this house. Some days, like today, I couldn't fall asleep at all. Days like this, my mind would race with thoughts and memories and ghosts, which led to sadness and tears. The more tears, the closer I inched to sleep, until finally, the surge of emotions would deplete my energy, my eyes would drift closed, and my body would finally find rest.

I sat straight up in the bed, yanked from a sound and hard-won sleep by an eerie feeling that seemed to cover my entire body, making the terrain of my skin rough with goosebumps. In the darkness of my room, I rubbed my eyes and groped for my cell somewhere in the bed, finally finding it and focusing my eyes on the screen—8:00 PM. I'd literally slept all day, hadn't even eaten lunch or dinner. I was obviously tired and not just from working a physically taxing job. My damn life was wearing me out, but that was nothing new. I stretched, let my eyes scan the dark room, and yelped when I saw movement by the door.

"Sunny?" I instantly recognized the fake-confused voice.

"You know this ain't Sunny's room! Sunny!" I yelled.

"Damn, Little Bit. Shit! Why you yelling? Sunny ain't here. She just used my car to run to the store."

"Then why the fuck did you act like you thought I was her?"

"Shit, I don't know...I'm drunk."

"Well, get your drunk ass out of my room then!"

“You don’t need no money? Some food? I got enough money and dick for you *and* Sunny. I know how you little young hoes like money. I bet you’ll spit all over my dick for fifty dollars.”

“If you don’t leave my fucking room right now, I’m gonna shoot that little dick of yours off!”

“You a spitfire, ain’t you? You ain’t got no gun, Little Bit. With your pretty ass...”

“You willing to bet your dick on that?”

“Aw, Little Bit. Don’t be like that.”

I heard the front door open and close, and shouted, “Sunny?!”

“Yeah!” her gruff voice returned. She really needed to leave those damn cigarettes alone.

“Come get this nigga out of my room before I fuck him up!”

“Curtis! What the hell are you doing in there?” she asked, her voice growing closer.

“Tryna fuck me!” I informed her.

“What?! Bring your ass on in my room. You must be planning to pay my cell bill, too, pulling some shit like that,” Sunny said, now standing just outside my room. She didn’t really care and I knew she didn’t. As long as he gave her the money she requested, he could fuck me and every other woman in the city.

She’d turned the hall light on, I could clearly see that Curtis was in his boxers, and *ew*. He followed her from my room without uttering another word, and I quickly hopped up and locked my flimsy bedroom door, wondering how I’d forgotten to lock it in the first place. Then I crawled back into bed, wishing I was anywhere but here.

“Fucking piece of shit-ass car!” I hissed, as I slapped my steering wheel. I was too tired for this shit. I’d worked all night and needed to get home and at least *try* to get some damn sleep.

I turned the key in the ignition of my old-ass Caprice again, listened to it stutter, and dropped my hands, placing my forehead on the steering wheel. I was going to have to take a damn Uber home and hope the administrator didn’t have my car towed before I could get it off the nursing home’s lot.

I lifted my head and literally screamed when I saw him standing next to my car. I was so startled; I snatched the door open and hopped out of my car. “You scared the shit out of me, Mr.—Shu!”

“My bad. You having car trouble?” he asked in that soft, even voice.

“Yeah, it won’t start. You know anything about cars?”

“No, but my brother does. He owns a shop.”

“Oh...well, I’m broke. So...”

“He’ll work with you. Let me call him.”

“No, by broke I mean...” My voice trailed off as he stepped away from me with his phone. “*Broke* broke,” I finished to myself. “The fucking brokest.”

He had an entire conversation with someone, presumably his brother, with his back to me, and although he was only a few feet away from me, I didn’t hear a word.

Finally, he turned to face me again. “Grab your keys and whatever else you need and come on.”

“Huh? Where am I going?” I asked, growing more confused by the second.

“With me.”

I just stood there and stared at him. I might have had a thing for his strange ass, but I wasn't going to get in a car with him. Hell no to that shit!

“We need to take the keys to my brother. He's gonna have someone tow your car to his shop. After that, I can take you home.”

“Look, I don't have car repair money. I'm for real broke. You say your brother will work with me? Well, ain't shit to work with.”

“You ain't gotta pay him.”

“I don't?”

“You don't. You coming?”

I stared at him again before blowing out a breath, grabbing my tote bag and keys, and following him to a shiny, new-looking GMC pickup truck.

“You need help getting in?” he asked, opening the passenger door for me. There was a smile in his eyes.

I gave him a smirk. “I'm not that short.”

He shrugged and stepped around to the driver's side as I climbed in and buckled my seatbelt. The interior of the truck was clean, too. Spotless. And it smelled like marijuana.

“You smoke? They don't test y'all at the plant?” I asked, as he pulled off the parking lot.

“They do when you first get hired. Been there twelve years. Ain't been tested again yet. You smoke?”

“Nah, I haven't smoked in a long time. Been too broke.”

He nodded.

We were silent for the rest of the ride to JD's Auto Repair. I gave him my keys and my phone number and stayed in the truck upon his request while he gave both to his brother, and when he came back, he asked, “You need to stop anywhere else before I take you home?”

“Uh, no.”

“You got breakfast at the crib?”

I didn’t. “Yes.”

He nodded. “What’s your address, then?”

“1111 Roundtree Circle.”

His hand stilled on the gearshift, and he turned to look at me. “Roundtree Circle?”

“Yeah, you can drop me off up the block if you’re scared of your truck getting stripped or something,” I said with another smirk.

“Ain’t nobody gonna fuck with me over there. Them niggas know better.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

“I just...you live there by yourself?”

“Is that your business?” I was tired, and therefore, his interrogation was irritating the shit out of me.

“Nah, it ain’t,” he said, and then drove me home in silence.

We were parked in front of my house when I sighed, and said, “This is my cousin’s place. I’m renting a room from her until I save enough to get my own place.”

He just looked at me.

So I continued, “Sorry for snapping at you earlier, and thank you for the ride. And for getting your brother to fix my car. I really appreciate it.”

“How you getting to work tonight?” he asked.

“Um...Uber?”

“You ain’t too broke to Uber?”

“Not quite, but I’m not working at the home. I have another gig tonight.”

“A’ight.” He slid out of his truck and walked around to open the door for me, reaching up and placing his big hands around my waist to help me

climb out and onto the pavement.

And then we just stood there, him dwarfing me as we stared at each other with no words passing between us until he tapped my nose, and asked, “Can I see?”

I frowned, then reached up and brushed my hand over the band-aid. “Oh!” I peeled it off and rolled it between my index finger and thumb. “It’s nothing special. Just a nose ring.”

“I like it,” he said, his eyes smiling at me again. If that smile ever reached his lips, I was going to faint.

“Thank you. Shu, do you like art?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

“If you don’t have to work tonight, you should come to this art show I’m working at. It starts at nine. Wait, I might have a flyer in my bag.” I managed to dig a rather wrinkled one out and handed it to him. “It’s fifteen dollars to get in, but it’s worth way more than that. There will be all forms of art, live painting, everything!”

He actually lifted a corner of his mouth into an almost smile. “I’m off tonight, so I just might come through.”

“Okay. There’ll be a bar, too.”

“Cool.”

“All right, well...thank you again.”

“No problem, Denver.”

Shu

Usually, I'd call and see if I could pick up an extra shift on my off days, but not today. After I dropped Denver off at her place, I went home and actually got a little sleep. Woke up and ate, watched some TV, smoked a blunt, called Jah to check on her car, and around eight-thirty that evening, climbed in my truck and drove to the address on the flyer. The Ewa Art Gallery was located downtown in a building I remembered used to be a furniture store. I'd probably passed by this place a million times without even glancing at it, and here I was, paying a short dude in skinny jeans fifteen dollars to enter an art show, and what did my ass know about art? Not shit. I just...shit, I liked Denver. I liked her and I wanted to see her, so I came and was willing to do whatever people did at art shows just to be in her presence.

I half-listened to Skinny Jeans explain the layout, but I did pay attention to where the bar was, quickly making my way over to a table in the entryway that held bottles of wine and beer. Bud Light in hand, I stepped from the "bar" and out to the main gallery. My eyes damn near popped out of my head at the scene before me, and the name of the show—Freedom Art—clicked in my head. The art on the walls was erotic to say the least. I mean, there was a whole section with photos of couples straight fucking—*in color*. Another set of photos showed men and woman tied up or blindfolded. There was a statue of a naked woman with real-ass titties. By real, I mean they were big and hanging, not sitting up to the sky. It ain't like I was a virgin or anything like that, but I couldn't close my mouth as my eyes rounded the room. I was not expecting this shit.

I moved from the main room to explore the rest of the artwork and to see if I could find Denver. She said she was working the show, and I wondered what that meant. I peeped in a door labeled, "Demonstrations," and almost

slammed it shut after seeing a woman standing in the front of the room sucking on a dildo. What the fuck? I was legit scared to open anymore doors at that point, but when I found one labeled “Live Painting,” I opened it and stepped inside, and that was where I quickly found her. The sight of her made my big ass gasp. She was...naked, and too damn beautiful. Seeing all of her, her body covered in that smooth chocolate skin? That shit took my breath away. There were two people painting her, one spreading gold metallic paint over her chest and the other painting tiny silver lines on her cheeks. A quick glance around the room made me fully realize what they meant by live painting. People were painting live models, painting their *bodies*. I was so unprepared for this shit, I turned to leave so I could get myself together, because again, what in the fuck?

“Shu! You came!” Denver squealed.

Nah, I ain’t came yet.

I spun around to look at her, and after glancing around the room again, stepped over to the corner she, a table with paint and brushes, and the two artists occupied. “Uh...hey,” I muttered, my eyes on the wall above her head.

“Hey! Wanna paint me?” she offered.

I frowned, looked down at her, and couldn’t take my eyes off her dark, hard nipples. “I ain’t no artist.”

“You don’t have to be! Anyone can paint the models.”

“Uh, you already got two people painting you, so...”

“Oh, we’re done. Go ahead,” a lady said, and then she and the other chick who had painted Denver’s chest gold left me standing there trying to will my dick not to get hard. It didn’t work.

Denver smiled and grabbed my wrist. “Pick a color, Shu.”

“A’ight.” I picked the metallic gold, dragged a brush through it, and asked, “Where you want me to put it?”

“Anywhere you want. Make me a piece of art.”

Letting my eyes slide over her small, curvy body again, I said, “You already are.”

She smiled, her eyes soft as she said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Let me see your back.”

She grinned and turned around. Well, that was a mistake, because her ass? Shit! She’d been hiding one hell of a body in those scrubs, had my mouth watering. And she smelled so damn good. I could let her scent fill my nose all day, every day.

I slid the brush down her spine, then placed little dots on each side of that solid line. “I don’t think you should change your name. I like it,” I told her.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“First time anyone’s ever told me that. Thank you. I like yours, too.”

“Welcome. You never told me how old you are, Denver,” I said, as I continued to work.

“Twenty-five. How old are you?” she asked.

“Forty-one.”

“Really?! You look much younger.”

“Yeah.”

I kept adding dots and lines, actually enjoying what I was doing.

“I wish I could see what you’re doing back there,” she said, after I’d been painting for a good while.

“Hold up.” I took my phone out of my pocket and snapped a picture, showing it to her.

Her eyes ballooned. “That’s beautiful, Shu! It looks...tribal. I thought you weren’t an artist.”

“I’m not. Your skin is...it’s luminous and shit, fucking gorgeous. It’d probably make anything look good.”

The smile in her eyes shifted to a soft sadness. “Thank you, Shu.”

“You’re welcome...again. Uh, when is this thing over?”

She lifted her eyebrows. “You ready to go already?”

“Nah, I just...you doing anything after this? Wanna go get a drink?”

She bit her bottom lip and shrugged. “Sure. A drink would be good.”

With that established, I kept working, painting her back and arms, even her legs, fighting not to lick her booty as I crouched behind her, and then I headed back to the bar with a hard dick, found me a bench in the main gallery, and sat there until the show was over.

Denver

“I think I’m dry, but you got a towel or something you can cover the back of this seat with just in case? I don’t wanna get paint on it,” I said as he opened his truck’s passenger door for me, nodding toward my arms and exposed upper back in my tank top. There was barely an inch of me that wasn’t painted.

“Hold up,” he replied, taking the light jacket he wore off and draping it over the back of the seat. My eyes were glued to his now-exposed muscular arms in his t-shirt.

“I don’t wanna mess your jacket up either.”

“I can wash it. Hop in.”

I nodded, watched as he walked around the front of the truck in jeans that fit his long legs and nice ass so well that I was fighting not to just offer my pussy up to him on a platter, and then climbed inside and fastened my seatbelt.

“Boy or a girl?” he asked, as he fastened his own seatbelt.

I frowned. “What?”

“When you were modeling in there, I saw the scar on your stomach. C-section, right?”

“Oh...yeah. Girl.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah. You know what? Being in this truck makes me wanna smoke so baaaad!” I whined.

“I don’t mind sharing,” he said, as he started the engine.

“Really? You got a blunt on you?”

“What makes you think I smoke blunts?”

I smirked at him, making him chuckle. He chuckled! I’d never even seen him form a whole smile and he *chuckled!*

“No, not with me,” he said.

“At your place?”

He nodded.

“Then let’s go to your place.”

His eyebrows flew up. “Huh?”

“Let’s go to your place. You got alcohol there? Or we can pick some up on the way and still have that drink, right?”

I watched him shift his eyes from my face to the windshield. “That ain’t a good idea, Denver.”

“Why? You got some bodies hidden or something? You a serial killer?”

“Hell, naw.”

“A wife? Girlfriend?”

“No.”

“It’s that dirty?”

“No, I...okay, so I wanna fuck you. Right now, and I’m sure you don’t wanna fuck my old ass, so I ain’t with torturing myself by taking you to my house.”

“Who said I didn’t wanna fuck you?”

His head snapped back around to face me. “What?”

“I’d love to fuck you. I really like you, Shu.”

“Uh...”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Uh, what? Let’s go, nigga, or are you scared of this young pussy?”

“I ain’t scared of shit.”

“Then why are we still sitting in this parking lot, Shu?”

He gave me another one of those almost smiles, and without another word, he pulled out of the gallery’s parking lot.

His house was small but very neat and clean. The furniture was nice, but one could easily tell there wasn’t a woman living there. It screamed bachelor pad from the leather couch to the sharp-angled coffee table. It smelled of Febreze and weed, and it felt...peaceful, something my current home and all the homes of my past lacked.

“This is nice,” I said, turning to where Shu still stood by the front door. Then I walked over to a bookshelf and picked up a diploma holder. “You went to Caruso High?”

“Yeah,” he softly said, his narrow eyes affixed to me.

“S-h-u, so that’s how you spell it...”

With a lifted eyebrow, he asked, “What? You thought it was s-h-o-e?”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t sure. People tend to change name spellings sometimes...Shu Solomon Mitchell. I like it.” My eyes toured the rest of the shelf, stopping at a set of dog tags in a display case. “Army?” I asked, pointing to them.

He nodded.

“My dad was in the army, too.”

“That’s cool...look, you ain’t gotta fuck me, Denver. You don’t owe me that. You can have all the weed you want without fucking me.”

Turning to face him, I said, “Um, I know that. You’re a good guy. I didn’t think it would be payment for anything. I told you, I want to. I’ve wanted to since the first time I saw you sleeping in that chair in your father’s room.”

“Why?”

“Um, you don’t own any mirrors? You’re fine, Shu. Fine as hell.”

“The way you used to act and look at me, I thought you were scared of me.”

“I was. Maybe I still am. Maybe you feel dangerous to me, and maybe I like that.”

“I’m not what you think I am.”

I frowned. “If you tell me you’re a woman, I’m going to pass the fuck out.”

He chuckled *again*. “Nah, I’m definitely a man, but I ain’t necessarily a good one.”

“You have a past?”

“Yeah.”

I shrugged. “So do I.”

He stared at me and then left the living room, walking deeper into the house, and I just kind of stood there. He was so damn strange and sexy. Really, *really* sexy.

He returned about a minute later, holding a lit blunt up to his mouth, taking several puffs. I watched as smoke swirled around his face and inhaled the familiar aroma. With his eyes locked on mine, he handed the blunt to me. Then he slid a finger down my arm, making me want to shiver at his touch.

“You’re dry. Have a seat,” he offered, and then left the room again.

I took a long draw from the blunt as I plopped down on his sofa. He returned with two Bud Lights, handing me one. I took a swig from mine and watched as he guzzled his. Then this giant dropped to his knees and began pulling at the waist of my long skirt. So he wasn't playing, huh? Instinctively, I lifted my butt to help him, was prepared to do the same so he could remove my panties, but instead, he grabbed my hips, pulling my ass to the edge of the couch, and slid the seat of my panties out of his way, sliding a finger inside me as I moaned into the beer which I quickly finished, dropping the bottle on the couch next to me.

I almost dropped the blunt, too, as I threw my head back and moaned again. Then I felt his mouth on me and lifted my head, gazing down at him as he lapped at my clit. He lifted my still-painted legs over his shoulders and kept working my pussy with his mouth, making me whimper and shake. Once I'd come down from my orgasm, I glanced around the room, and not seeing an ashtray, said, "I need to do something with this before I burn your house down."

He lifted his head from between my legs, his beard glistening with me as he took the blunt, pulled on it with his mouth, and then blew the smoke on my pussy, making me drop my head back and groan. I felt his finger inside me again, and when I looked up, he was rubbing my juices on that blunt before putting it back in his mouth, puffing on it this time and filling the air around us with smoke. He handed it back to me, staring at me expectantly, so I pulled on it, tasting myself and the weed and him...and shit! My pussy was throbbing like I hadn't just creamed all over the man's sofa.

Then the blunt was...somewhere, and Shu was standing before me shedding his clothes, revealing the body of a damn African god—rich brown skin and muscles and tattoos.

Lord Jesus!

“You’re a work of art, too,” I declared, my eyes refusing to leave his body.

In lieu of a response, he reached for my hand, pulling me to my feet and helping me out of my shirt and panties. Then he pulled me to him, my painted skin meeting his tattooed flesh as he kissed me so deeply, I actually felt my knees give a little. He pulled back, kissed my nose ring, my eyelids, my cheeks, and then recaptured my mouth. All of Shu—his hands, his arms, his mouth—felt so good and foreign and passionate. He kissed me like he’d loved me all his life, so I had to return that energy. That kiss burned so hot, my pussy started throbbing even more furiously, and I swear it began leaking when I reached down and grabbed the erection that was sandwiched between our bodies, the long, thick erection painted with veins that twitched at my touch.

Shu snatched his mouth from mine and stared down between us, then up at my face with a look in his eyes that read pleasure. He liked seeing my hand on his dick, so I added my other hand and began sliding them both up and down it, slowly jacking him off. In response, he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, his Adam’s Apple bobbing up and down. I removed one of my hands and continued working him with the other while pinching one of his nipples. He jerked, and I grinned. Then he lowered his head, fixing his eyes on me as he placed his hand over mine, helping me jack him off. I slid my free hand to my pussy and stroked my clit. Soon, we were both moaning as he moved my hand, easing two fingers inside me as we jacked him off together. This shit felt so good, it was unreal, and when he grunted, “I’m about to bust,” I moved his hand from my pussy, dropped to my knees, and wrapped my mouth around him to catch his seed.

“Shit, Denver!” he almost yelled, resting his big hand on my head.

I sucked him, milking everything out of him, and then I stood to kiss him, holding the sides of his handsome face with my hands.

When the kiss ended, he gazed down at me and said, “Got damn, girl.”

In response, I smiled.

Shu

Sleep snuck up on my ass again, and I was so unaccustomed to actually sleeping in my bed, I was confused as hell when I woke up, but quickly remembered passing out after dumping my load down Denver’s throat. Then I remembered how good it felt for her to jack me off, how hot her mouth had felt around my dick, how sweet her mouth had tasted, and slid my hand down to my hard dick.

Rubbing my eyes with my other hand, I peered at the opposite side of the bed to see her sitting up with her back against the headboard, marijuana smoke clouding my view of her pretty face.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, as she let smoke seep from between her thick lips.

“I don’t. That’s why you came here. For some weed,” I said, sitting up beside her.

She handed me the blunt. “That wasn’t the only reason I came here.”

I took a puff and grunted, “Did you nut?”

“Yeah, while I was swallowing your unborn babies,” she said with a grin.

I nodded, passed the blunt back to her, and reached over to where I’d set an unused condom before falling asleep. I was still naked. So was she, and I

kept my eyes trained on her face as I rolled the rubber down over my dick. Then I reached over and slid my hand between her thighs, opening her lips and pushing two fingers inside her. I watched her close her eyes, that blunt totally forgotten, so I took it from her and set it on the night table. I played with her until I couldn't take anymore, and then I basically croaked, "Come here, Denver."

She crawled over to me, straddling me while leaning in to flick her tongue against my nipple. She eased down on me, making me close my eyes and groan at the heat surrounding my dick. Denver placed her hands on my chest and started riding me, whimpering softly.

"Damn, you're so biiiiiig," she whined, repositioning herself so that her feet were on the bed. She bounced up and down, her whimpers growing louder and louder as I reached around and smacked her ass. Then I grabbed her, rolled her onto her back, and spread my body over hers, sliding back inside her with a grunt. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, frowning as she kissed me, then threw her head back and screamed, "Oh my god! Oh my god!" Her voice sounded...frantic, damn near hysterical.

I thrust harder, deeper, and faster, watching her eyes widen and her mouth drop open, felt her pussy begin to pull and tug on my dick, and then I filled that condom and collapsed onto her body.

Shit, I fell asleep again?

I hadn't slept this much in years. The hell was in Denver's pussy?

It took me a minute, but I finally managed to climb out of bed and pull my underwear on, making a pit stop in the bathroom before going on a search for her, hoping she was still there. I almost smiled when I saw her sitting at my kitchen table eating a sandwich.

“Hey, you woke up! I made you a sandwich, too, if you’re hungry”

I sat down across from her. “Thanks.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

We ate in silence until a thought hit me. “You need to get home to your little girl?” I asked.

She stopped chewing and stared at me for a moment, as if calculating something in her mind. Then she said, “My baby is dead. I mean, she-she died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Shit, I’m sorry, Denver. I thought—”

She dropped her eyes. “It’s okay. “

“Uh...how? I mean...what happened? If you don’t mind telling me.”

“She...she had some genetic disorder. Her heart...it was messed up. I can’t even pronounce the name of what she had. I just know it took her away from me when she was two months old.”

“Damn, Denver. I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“It’s...thank you. But I guess I *should* be getting home. You’re probably sick of me by now.”

“Nah, you’re good.”

She smiled. “I really like you, Shu.”

I gave her half a smile. “Same here, Denver.”

Denver

“Denver, you gotta try to get along with him. He’s my husband now,” my mother begged.

“But I ain’t doing nothing! He keeps messing with me, Mama! Can’t you see that? I think he hates me. He’s...he’s a racist!” I explained.

“How the hell could he be a racist, Denver Dolores?”

I sighed. “Never mind.”

“Yeah, never mind, and fix that damn attitude before your blue-black ass makes me lose my damn husband. I’m lucky he still wanted me knowing I already had a kid.”

“Denver?” Shu’s voice pulled me back to the present, making that scene from my past and visions of a much younger me fade to black.

My eyes focused on my home, and I remembered he’d driven me here at my request. We’d screwed again after I told him about my baby girl, Kelly, and then I decided it was time to go. I could feel myself getting attached to him already. Attachments never worked out well for me.

“Uh, thanks for...everything,” I uttered.

“No problem. You gonna need a ride to work? I’ll be at the plant, but I can arrange something for you,” he said.

“No, I got it. See you later, Shu.”

“Yeah.”

When I made it to my door to find the deadbolt locked a-damn-gain, I kicked it. Here came my cousin's old-ass man opening the door *again* with a stupid-ass grin on his face. I turned and waved at Shu before shoving past this nigga without a word.

“Damn, you can’t speak, Little Bit?”

In response, I headed to my room and slammed the door shut, being sure to lock it.

Shu: *Why you not at work? You okay?*

I smiled at the text message as I slid into the restroom.

Me: *I’m at work. You in your dad’s room?*

Shu: *Yeah.*

Me: *I’m on a different hall tonight.*

Shu: *Oh.*

Me: *I’ll come see you though.*

Shu: *Okay.*

He was asleep but woke up the moment I stepped into the room. He always did that. No matter how quiet I tried to be, he’d wake up, almost like he’d sensed me. He stood and stretched in the dimly lit room, his drowsy eyes fixed on me. “Hey,” he said.

I took in his work attire and returned, “Hey. How was work?”

He shrugged. “Same as always. Come here.”

Shit, that was sexy, I thought, as I inched my way over to him. He smiled down at me as his eyes inspected my face; then he leaned in and softly kissed my lips. I kissed him back, wishing we could do more, wishing we

were back at his house. I didn't want to be attached to him, but from the way my heart raced just from that kiss, I already was.

He pulled his lips from mine and informed me, "I'll take you home in the morning."

I smiled. "Okay. Oh, have you heard anything about my car?"

He nodded. "Yeah, Jah says it's real fucked up, needs a lot of work."

I frowned. "Jah?"

"My brother. He said you'd do better by getting another car."

"Shit. Well, thanks anyway. Looks like I'll be Ubering for a while."

"I got you when you get off, though."

"Right. Thanks."

He leaned in and kissed me again. "No problem."

"Hey, can he sell it or something? Maybe I could still get something out of it?"

"I'll check with him."

He'd driven me home the next morning, and I was staring out the window at my house, silent, thinking that this was the last place I wanted to be.

Sunny's main man's car was in the driveway, and I just...couldn't. Plus, I wanted to be with Shu. I mean, I *really* wanted to be with him, so I said, "I wanna go home with you. Can I do that?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah."

Shu

“You ever been married?” Denver asked before taking a sip of her orange juice.

“No. No kids either,” I replied, shoving a forkful of pancakes in my mouth. “You ever been married?”

“Hell no. Who would I marry?”

I shrugged.

“Oh, you’re thinking about my daughter’s dad? We didn’t have a relationship. I mean, not a real one.”

“I see. Why didn’t you wanna go home?”

She sighed. “Because I hate it there, to be honest. I appreciate my cousin for letting me rent the room, but I can’t stand one of the old-ass men she’s messing around with. He’s always giving me these looks, stumbled into my room tryna get some pussy the other night. Plus, they stay locking me out of the place.”

I stared at her.

She frowned. “What?”

“He tried to do what now?”

I must’ve been looking crazy, because her eyes widened as she said, “Nothing.”

“Okay *nothing*.”

She sighed again.

“I’m older than you, a lot older than you, so that makes me an old-ass man, too?”

She grinned. “But you got a young-ass dick, though.”

I laughed loudly, making the few other people in the restaurant look at us.

Her eyes were wide as she said, “You laughed! Out loud! I didn’t think you knew how!”

I lowered my eyes. “Don’t usually have a reason to laugh.”

“Ooh, so I got powers over your ass, huh?”

I lifted my eyes. “Yeah, you do.”

She fell asleep on the way to my place, and for a while after I’d parked in my driveway, I just sat there and stared at her, watching her sleep. She was so unbelievably pretty, and...broken. Hell, so was I. Maybe that was what drew me to her—her brokenness. The pain I could see in her eyes was strangely alluring, maybe because it somehow matched mine.

She shifted in the seat and moaned a little, making me smile. Another minute passed before I eased out of my truck and stepped around to her side, opening the door, and carrying her into my house.

She woke up just as I opened the front door, smiled at me groggily, and wrapped her arms around my neck. Carrying her through the house, I placed her in the bed and just stood there. I wanted her so bad that it hurt, but she was obviously tired from working all night and needed to rest. Not everybody had demons chasing them in their sleep, like I did.

Blinking slowly, she asked, “You’re not coming to bed?”

“Uh...I think I’ll sleep on the couch.”

She raised up on her elbows. “Why?”

I glanced down at my dick, which was doing its best to bust through my pants.

Following my gaze, she said, “Well, shit, nigga...let’s fuck then. I’ve been wanting to anyway, just didn’t wanna seem like a ho’ or something. On the real, my pussy gets wet every time I see you now.”

I grinned and joined her in the bed, kissing her while we pulled each other’s clothes off. “I smell like work,” I said against her mouth.

“So do I,” she replied.

With my mouth still on hers, I reached and fumbled around the night table until my hand bumped into the package. When I tried to move, she grabbed me. “No,” she whispered.

“I gotta strap up,” I said.

She nodded and let me go, but as soon as I’d put the rubber on, she grabbed me, pulling my body down to hers and wrapping her legs around me. I eased inside her with a groan and a “Shit!” because one, this woman held the keys to my soul between her legs, and two, she *was* wet and hot and so damn tight.

She whined and frowned, sliding her hands down to my ass and clutching it as she whimpered, “Deeper.”

So I eased back and plunged inside her again, giving her my full length and making her suck in a breath. “Oh god, Shu...you feel so good!” she cried.

“You...too...baby,” I grunted with each stroke. I was tired as shit, but I couldn’t have stopped fucking her even if I’d wanted to, and make no mistake, I didn’t want to. If I could’ve lived between her legs, I would’ve. She was like a drug and I was a willing user.

Grabbing my face, she pulled it down to hers and kissed me like I was the damn man of her dreams, and then she snatched her mouth from mine

and threw her head back, her body stiffening as she wailed, “Shhhhhhhit!”

“You coming, baby?” I asked, but I knew the answer, could feel her pussy contracting around my dick. “You coming?”

“Oh, shit! Yes!”

“Good.”

I kept going, letting her ride out that orgasm, and then I rode out mine.

Once I got the feeling back in my limbs, I pulled Denver’s limp body to mine. “You ain’t never got to go back to your cousin’s house if you don’t want to. You can stay here. I mean, if you want to.”

There was silence from her.

So I added, “I mean, I know you don’t really know me like that, but I ain’t gonna hurt you or nothing. I...I like having you around and I like you and...shit.”

She looked up at me and nodded. “I’d like to stay here. Maybe until I get on my feet? I wouldn’t want to become a burden to you, and I’ll pay you rent in addition to the pussy I’m gonna freely give you, because I’m gonna give you this pussy. All of it. At will. Any time you want it and when you don’t want it. And head. I’m gonna give you copious amounts of head. Shit, you gonna get tired of this pussy and this mouth.”

I grinned. “Girl, you crazy.”

“Nah, whoever had that dick before me and let you take it away from them is crazy, because damn!”

All I could do was laugh and laugh...and laugh.

Shu

“Shu? How are you?”

I held the phone, unsure of what to say. She never called me. She never called any of us.

As Denver rolled over in my bed, turning her back to me, I said, “Uh, Mama?”

“Yes, you don’t recognize my voice anymore?”

“It ain’t that. It’s...is everything okay? Omar straight?”

“He’s fine, the same. I’m sitting with him now.”

“Okay...”

“I was calling because I was talking to his nurse, and she was telling me about how you’ve been sitting with him at night. She said she read it in his chart. I wanted to thank you for doing that. He loved you boys so much. I’m glad to see at least one of you cares.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Well, Set and Jah just don’t seem as concerned. Jah still lives here, and he barely ever visits your father.”

Scratching my forehead, I asked, “Are you serious?”

“Well, yes. Look, I know he’s never been perfect, but he’s still you boys’ father, Shu.”

“He’s never been perfect?” I scoffed. “He was a fucking terrorist and an abuser. Do you have any idea how fucked up me and Jah and Set are because of that man?”

“Shu—”

“I don’t know why I asked you that. *You know*, just like you knew he was abusing us when it was happening, fighting us when we were little boys like we were grown-ass men! Were you just okay with that shit?”

“Your father wouldn’t like you talking to me like this,” she said evenly.

“What’s that supposed to do? Scare me?!”

“No, it’s...what do you want me to say, Shu? What am I supposed to say?”

“Shit, how about you fucking apologize for letting him do that shit?”

Nothing from my mother, and all I could do was shake my head. Then I hung up, because there wasn’t shit else to say.

When I glanced over at Denver, she was wide awake, her eyes full of concern as she looked at me. “You okay?” she asked. “You were yelling. I didn’t know you knew how to yell.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, and said, “Uh...sorry for waking you up.”

“You do that a lot, you know?”

“I do what a lot?”

“Avoid questions. I asked if you were okay.”

“Yeah. I’mma go take a shower.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

Denver

When I slid the shower door open, his head whipped around, and there was a look on his face that read murder. So I just stood there, my twisted ass feeling petrified and aroused at the same time. Then I swallowed, and asked, “Can I join you? I need a shower, too.”

He nodded, and a few seconds later, I closed my eyes and let the warm water rain down on me as I felt Shu’s body behind mine. I almost cried when I felt him begin to wash my back, my ass, and my legs, and when he turned me around and repeated the process on the front of my body, I *did* shed tears, because I couldn’t recall the last time someone...cared for me. He was so gentle as he washed me, so...tender. I grabbed his wrist, stopping him from washing my chest, and stared into his eyes as my tears rapidly fell. That’s when a tear escaped his eye.

One tear.

I reached for him, gasping when he yanked me into his arms and kissed me so deeply that I wasn’t sure where I was in space or time. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, releasing a sigh as he entered me. He slapped a hand against the shower wall, bracing himself as he held me against it, thrusting into me deep and hard, making my voice vibrate as I called his name over and over again. I held onto him for dear life as he fucked me into madness, making me claw at his back, bite his lips, and roll my eyes into the back of my head. Shu Mitchell was like no other man I’d ever known in many ways, but his sex? His sex was on a level other men wouldn’t achieve in ten lifetimes.

I screeched and cried as Shu seemed to take control of my body, making it ache and quiver and hunger for more of him than any mortal man had to give. By the time Shu cried out, indicating that he’d met his happy ending,

my pussy was throbbing from the punishment he'd put on it, and my heart was breaking at the sight of the fresh tears that flooded his handsome face.

I lay in his bed, gently rubbing my hand over his coarse hair as he rested his head on my stomach. I knew he wasn't asleep, so I said, "I ran away from home when I was fifteen."

He lifted his head and peered up at me. "Word? Why?"

"Well, my dad died when I was one. I don't even remember him. All I know about him is what my mom told me. Anyway, my mom remarried when I was twelve, and my stepfather was nice when I first met him, but when my mom got pregnant and had their first child, he started acting like he didn't want me around. He barely spoke to me, and when he did, he was usually fussing about basically anything and nothing. He'd do stuff like telling me I better not mess his house up or I better not let my friends steal any of his shit. And everything was always my fault—if it snowed, his car broke down, they went up on the price of gas, it was all somehow Denver's fault. He even told me he hated my name and how dark I am. I felt like shit all the time. He was fucking fixated on me. I told my mom, but she just couldn't see it. Even when she witnessed it, she couldn't see it. Or maybe she didn't want to see it. Or, more likely, she didn't care, and I just couldn't take his shit anymore, so I left."

"Where'd you go?"

“To my grandma’s at first, then a friend’s house, and finally, my aunt’s. My cousin I’m living with? Or was living with before now? Her mom. Things were okay there. Not ideal, because she loved men just like her daughter does, but no one was mean to me, so I managed to finish high school at Caruso. Then I kind of drifted again. Stayed with my different boyfriends, and when I got tired of the bullshit that goes along with that, I moved in with my cousin and ran into more bullshit. But your place? It feels peaceful. I like it.”

He laid his head on my stomach again. “I wanna love you, Denver, but I’m afraid to, but at the same time, I feel it happening anyway, like I can’t control it.”

I didn’t know what the fuck to say to that, so I started rubbing his head again.

“You heard what I said to my mom about my father, about him hurting me and my brothers?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“I hated him for a long time. Shit, I *still* hate him. I don’t know why the fuck I keep going to that damn nursing home. I don’t...I think maybe—shit, I want to kill him, Denver. I sit in his room and stare at him and try to come up with reasons not to kill him. I try so hard that I end up falling asleep, and when I wake up, I still don’t have a reason not to. You’re probably gonna stop fucking with me now, huh?”

“No,” I said. “He hurt you and now you want to hurt him. I get it.”

“Yeah.”

“Shu, have you killed someone? Ever?”

“Yes.” Damn, he didn’t even hesitate.

“When you were in the army?”

“Uh-huh.” He lifted up and opened my thighs.

“Outside the army?”

He swiped his tongue over my clit, and my hands put themselves on his head.

“Mm-hmmmm,” he hummed against my pussy.

“Were you...did you...shit!” The things his tongue and fingers were doing to my pussy shut my interrogation down, and I was pretty sure that was his intention, to shut me up. Well, it worked, because all I could do was bite my lip, moan loudly, and rock my hips. I fucked his face until the bubble popped inside my pussy, and then I fell asleep.

Shu

“Shu-Shuuuuu!” was how this nigga answered the phone, sounding like a damn train, almost making me smile.

““Sup, Set Moses? What you into? Working?”

“Shit, what else? Either I’m working at the gym or working my wife, but my ass always be working.”

I shook my head. “Whatever, nigga.”

He chuckled. “What’s up with you, man?”

“Nothing...”

“Aw, shit. Mama called you again?”

“Yeah, she did.”

He sighed into the phone. “She don’t fuck with me and Jah. She calling you because your ass is so quiet. She’s mistaking that shit for meekness.”

“Yeah...well, she knows better now.”

“You unleashed on her? For real?”

“Yeah, she pissed me off. I...uh, I yelled at her.”

“Nigga, you can yell?!”

“Evidently, I can.”

“Damn! She must’ve said something fucked up about me or Jah. I might be the oldest, but you were the protector of us three. You remember that

time you jumped on Omar's back and fucked his head up when he had Jah jacked up?"

"Damn, I forgot about that."

"Yeah, you were like nine. After that, he didn't fuck with you as much as he did me and Jah. Shit, I think Omar was scared of you."

"He was scared of my eyes."

"He was? How you know?"

"I heard him talking to Mama one time, telling her I had to have the devil in me for my eyes to be like this. I just remembered that shit. Damn, nigga...I been blocking stuff out and didn't even realize it."

"I wish I could block some shit out."

"Yeah."

"So, you gonna apologize to Mama?"

"Would you?"

"Fuck no!"

"Exactly. So, how's the wife?"

"Good. Too good for my ass. Hey, we'll be in town in a couple of weeks. Kareema is selling her daycare, and we'll be there for a couple of days to wrap that shit up. We all need to get together, have drinks or something."

"With the wives?"

"Hell yeah. I don't do shit without Kareema. But you ain't got to bring a date or nothing if you don't want to. I know how you are about not getting too close to women although I don't know why you think a date is getting too close."

"I got somebody to bring. I mean, if she ain't gotta work."

"Word?" Set said in a high-pitched voice.

"Word, my nigga."

"Anybody I know?"

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay...uh, okay. I’ll get with Jah and set something up.”

“I can tell your black ass is smiling.”

“I am. I’m...shit, I’m happy for you, Shu-Shu.”

“Nigga, you act like I just told you I’m getting married or something.”

“Nah, it’s just that your voice changed when you mentioned your girl.

Got all soft and shit.”

“Hear y’all tell it, I always talk soft.”

“Yeah, but not like this. This was a real...bitchish soft.”

“Nigga, fuck you!”

Set howled laughing into the phone, and I hung up on his ass, making my way from the break room so that I could finish this damn shift.

Denver

I didn’t get in his father’s door good before he grabbed me, closing the door and pressing me against it, his lips covering mine and making my entire body tremble. I wasn’t sure what this was or what we were doing. I barely knew him, but craved him all the time, had agreed to move into his home. Shit, we were going to get my stuff from Sunny’s place after I got off work. It all felt so rushed and sudden, but it also felt...right, like this was how things were supposed to progress with us. But still, what were we doing? Playing house temporarily or building something lasting and real? We

burned so hot, I wasn't sure if something real or lasting was even a possibility for us. Well, whatever this was, whatever *we* were, I wanted it. I wanted *him*, even though he wore his brokenness like a second skin. We were kindred when it came to that. Two fucked-up, broken souls that perfectly matched one another.

“You’re gonna get me fired,” I breathed, once his lips left mine.

Shaking his head, he buried his face in my neck, and murmured, “No, I’m not,” while untying the drawstring at the waist of my scrubs. They were the same scrubs I’d worn the night before and washed at his house.

He slipped a finger inside of me, and I whispered a moan while closing my eyes. “Shu, I gotta go,” I whined. “I got other patients waiting for me. I need to take care of your father.”

“Then this pussy shouldn’t be so good. I can’t keep my hands off of you. I can’t stop thinking about how pretty you look when you come.”

When did he learn how to put that many words together in a way that made my pussy liquify?

“Oh, shit!” I hissed. “Shu, please, baby—”

He cut me off by plunging his tongue into my mouth while continuing to finger me. Hell, I forgot where I was, what I was supposed to be doing, my middle name, my birthday. He fingered me into an explosive orgasm and a mild case of amnesia, and when I finally left Omar Mitchell’s room, the entire seat of my panties was ruined.

Denver

“What the fuck are you doing, moving in with another sorry-ass nigga? I thought you were done with that shit, Denver!”

I sighed as I continued collecting my toiletries from the bathroom as my cousin stood in the doorway berating me. “He ain’t sorry. He’s-he’s different.”

“Different? Denver, how many times are you going to do this before you realize none of them are different? You keep giving these niggas your heart and you won’t have anything left for yourself. And that’s a grown-ass man out there, not some young fool like what you’re used to dealing with! He ain’t gonna just sit by and let your flighty ass leave him!”

I stopped packing and faced her. “This coming from the woman with the old-ass sugar daddy who has all but taken my pussy from me? Okay.”

“Girl, please. You know I ain’t fucked up about Curtis’s limp dick ass. Ain’t nothing working on him but his mouth, and *it* ain’t shit to brag about, either. He wasn’t gonna do nothing but try to gum you to death. He always takes his dentures out when he eats pussy.”

My mouth fell open. “But, peep this...I don’t want him anywhere near me or my pussy! He’s a damn creep, an insistent one. How in the hell can you keep dealing with him?”

“Look, him and all other men are nothing but a means to an end to me. I means to pay my rent and they end up giving me the money to do it.”

I laughed despite not wanting to, and she soon joined me.

Then she pulled me into a hug. “Don’t go. I feel like we’ve barely spent any time together since you moved in. You’re always working and sleeping.”

“And you’re always...Curtising or Harolding or Bustering.”

“Bitch, I ain’t fucking nobody named Buster!” she shrieked, releasing me.

We laughed again.

“My point is, I’m not down with the whole sugar daddy or multiple sugar daddy thing you got going on. As a matter of fact, I hate that shit *and* them old men, but I haven’t judged you for it. I need the same courtesy from you. I...I haven’t known Shu long, but I care about him and I like being with him. He’s really sweet. He’s really...*real*.”

What I didn’t say was that his home was the first place I’d stepped foot in since I was little that felt like a home or that I could rest, really rest in this man’s arms for the first time in my life. I felt safe with Shu, truly safe. I didn’t tell her any of that, because I didn’t understand any of it myself.

She finally thought to lower her voice since Shu was waiting for me in the living room. “Is it because Curtis kept locking the deadbolt? I’ll make sure he stops doing that.”

“You didn’t hear shit I just said, did you?”

“Yes...”

“I’ll pay my part of next month’s rent, Sunny.”

She grinned. “I mean, you don’t have to...”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

When I finally emerged from the room with my belongings, I was relieved to see that Shu was still sitting on the sofa, waiting for me. Relieved, but not really surprised.

“You ready?” he asked, his voice soft but excruciatingly masculine.

“Yeah,” I replied, giving him a slow smile.

He lifted the corner of his mouth a bit, his eyes twinkling as he reached for my bags.

“Wait!” Sunny yelled, pulling me into a hug and whispering, “Okay, I just got a good look at him, and shit, I see now! This negro is fine as hell! And he’s so...mean looking. I bet that dick is everything!”

Rolling my eyes again, I kissed her cheek and backed out of the hug. “Bye, Sunny.”

“Bye, cuz!”

“Could you hear us? Did you hear what my cousin was saying when we were in the bedroom?” I asked, as I followed Shu from the house to his truck.

“Yeah. I heard you, too,” he said as he started loading my things. He still had that twinkle in his eyes, so I knew we were good.

My stuff was in the back of Shu’s truck and I was about to buckle my seatbelt when I remembered something. “Shit. Shu, I’ll be right back. I forgot something.”

“Need me to come with you?” he asked with lifted eyebrows.

“No, I got it.”

He stared at me, and when I leaned in to kiss him, he grabbed the back of my head, digging his fingers into my hair and massaging my scalp. Then our tongues were sliding against each other as we kissed for so long that I wouldn’t have been surprised if hours had passed when we finally broke

apart. Panting for air, I whispered, “Shit,” because this thing we shared was so intense and raw, it was overwhelming.

He took my hand and placed it on his crotch, lifted those eyes that had narrowed so much I almost thought they were closed, and said, “Hurry.”

My mouth watered at the feel of his erection through his pants. “I will.”

I basically ran back to the house and knocked on the already locked door.

“You forgot something?” was how Sunny greeted me.

I nodded, slid past her, sprinted into my old bedroom, retrieved my property, and ran out the door yelling, “I’m gone for real this time, Sunny!”

“Okay!” she yelled back.

Once outside, I smiled at the sight of Shu standing by his truck waiting for me as I trotted toward him, but a hand grabbed me and stopped me.

“Where you running off to, Little Bit?”

Before I could comprehend what was going on, I’d dropped the metal box I’d pulled from under the bed and was in Curtis’s arms. He was smiling at me as I fought to get out of his grip.

Then I saw a fist fly out of nowhere and plow into Curtis’s face, knocking him to the ground. I shrieked and clamped my hand over my mouth, my eyes on a now unconscious...or dead Curtis. Was Curtis’s old ass dead?

My eyes rose to meet Shu’s, who was standing there staring at me.

“Uh...” was all I could say.

Shu picked my box up and said, “Come on.”

So I followed him to his truck.

Shu

“You know what really makes a song?” I asked, as I rubbed my hand down Denver’s leg. We were in bed, and I was lying between her legs, using her pussy as a pillow.

“Um...good vocals?” she answered.

“Nah, cymbals. Like this song right here? Them cymbals are hitting!”

“I was wondering what your high superpower was besides mind-blowing sex —”

I frowned. “So, it ain’t good to you unless I’m high?”

“I didn’t say that. You know being high enhances and intensifies damn near everything.”

She handed me the blunt we’d been working on. I looked at it for a few seconds that felt like minutes and grunted.

“Anyway,” she continued, “when I’m high, food tastes extra good. Like, I can taste all the ingredients and shit. You’re like that with music.”

“Mostly *his* music, though,” I said, as *The Lady in My Life* continued to pour from my stereo speakers.

“You’re an MJ fan?” she asked in a high-pitched voice.

“When I’m high, yeah. But back to what I was saying, this song wouldn’t be shit without those cymbals. Another cymbals masterpiece is *Boo’d Up* by that light-skinned chick.”

“Hmmm, you ever wonder how the ceiling stays up there like that? I mean...look at it.”

“No more weed for you. You buggin’.”

“No, baby! Look at it. It’s just...there.”

“And I hope the motherfucker stays up there.”

She gasped. “Those cymbals do sound good!”

“Denver, the song just ended. Ain’t no music playing right now.”

“Shit, I *am* tripping.”

“You think?”

She giggled. “I never told you, but I loved it when you painted my body. We need to do that again.”

“Yeah, that was cool, but we gonna have to do it here.”

“Why?” she squeaked.

“Well, you may disagree, but I feel like your body is my body now, and I don’t want no other niggas looking at our body.”

It was quiet, and then she said, “I can vibe with that, Zaddy. I mean, my whole body might not be yours, but my pussy? She’s yours all day every day!”

“Hell, I already knew that shit.”

“Hey, Shu?”

“Yeah?”

“My cousin texted me while you were in the bathroom earlier,” she informed me softly.

“Word? What she say?”

“Well, she evidently didn’t see you hit Curtis. She found him on the ground outside after we left, thought he had a stroke or something, and called nine-one-one.”

I flipped over, peered up at her face, and kissed her pubic hair. “Yeah?”

She sucked in a breath and exhaled her words, “Yeah. They figured out he’d been...assaulted, but he doesn’t remember anything. Shu, I think you

punched the damn man into amnesia.”

“His fault,” I said as I spread her pussy lips apart and licked her clit.
“Shouldn’t have been fucking with you.”

She grabbed the back of my head. “Shit, baby!”

“What did you say after your cousin told you that?” I asked, as I moved up her body.

“I said something about that being messed up.”

Sliding deep inside of her, I closed my eyes. “You think what I did was messed up?”

She took my face in her hands and said, “Look at me, Shu.”

I did, staring down at her pretty face while continuing my slow steady rhythm inside of her.

“I think what you did made my heart cry. No one has ever protected me or defended me in my whole life before. Thank you for doing that for me.”

I buried my face in her neck, kissing it, rubbing my hands all over her body, loving her with every inch of mine. And when I knew I was about to bust, I whispered in her ear, “Always.”

Denver

I was going to be late.

I'd overslept, and Shu was at work, so he wasn't there to wake me up. Two weeks into cohabitation, we had a good little rhythm going. He worked the two-to-ten shift at the plant and made it home in time to drop me off at the nursing home for my eleven-to-seven shift. Then, at my insistence, he came back home to sleep instead of sitting up in his dad's room. Well, at least that's how it worked some nights. Other nights, he'd refuse to leave the nursing home, sneaking kisses and other really good things in with me whenever he could.

I loved this, living with him, having sex with him, sleeping in his bed, merely being in his presence. Hell, I loved just looking at Shu, at his beautiful eyes that held oceans of pain and love, his lips, his body, his... *everything*. Shu was a puzzle I didn't really care about solving, a mystery I could and often did get lost in. He was a consuming work of art, a dangerous masterpiece. He was deadly. Everything in me confirmed that, but that same network of instincts also told me that he'd hurt himself before he'd hurt me. I believed he'd burn the whole world down for me. That all should've felt wrong. I should've been in a panic, scrambling to get away from this man, but on the contrary, this felt right. *He* felt right. He'd very

swiftly become my protector, my lover, and my peace. There was no way I was running from that.

I quickly showered and dressed and was putting my shoes on when Shu made it home.

He walked into the bedroom and said, “I must’ve put you in a dick coma before I went to work. You just now getting ready? I might need to start withholding it.” He fell onto the bed.

“Unh-uh, get up off that bed in your work clothes and take me to work before I’m late!” I fussed, as I pulled my lanyard over my head.

“You’re driving yourself tonight. Matter of fact, you’re driving yourself from now on.”

I frowned and then pursed my lips. “You’re letting me drive that big, pretty truck of yours? What did you say her name was?”

“Minnie Riperton, because that motherfucker can sang. My truck, I mean.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re gonna let me drive her? Really?”

“Hell no,” he said in that quiet voice of his. “*Shit* no. I ain’t finna let you turn Minnie into Paula Abdul. I got you a car.”

“You...what? You got me a who?”

“A car. It’s in the driveway.”

I took off through the small house, flew out the front door, and clamped my hand over my mouth. Sitting next to his Minnie, was a shiny black car, a damn Lexus! I felt him step up behind me and spun around to face him with wide eyes.

“It’s used, old as fuck, and it didn’t break me to buy it, so don’t get too excited. It’s in good condition though, had one owner, so—”

I started crying, wailing loudly, hiccupping and breathing staccato breaths. When he pulled me back into the house, I really bawled, holding

my stomach as sobs racked my entire body.

Shu sounded more than a little alarmed as he sat on the sofa and pulled me onto his lap. “Denver, what is it? What’s wrong?”

It took a good three or four minutes for me to kind of pull myself together, but I did, resting my forehead against his as I spoke. “Nothing is wrong. Everything is right and I...I don’t understand why. Why are you so nice to me? Why do you care? Why would you buy me a car? We barely know each other. We’ve only been...whatever we are for like a couple of months. People who’ve known me my entire life have never treated me like this.”

“Like what?” he asked, wiping my face with his rough hand.

“Like I’m special. Like I matter.”

“You *are* special, and you make *me* feel special. I ain’t a rich man, Denver. I’ve worked my ass off all my life, and before you...before us? All I did was work. I worked double shifts for a whole month sometimes. I got money saved up and you needed a car, so I got you one.”

I held his painfully handsome face in my hands and locked eyes with him. “How is it that you were single when we met? Single with no kids, at that? I don’t understand how you walked this earth, as kind and caring and fine as you are, and no one snagged you.”

The corner of his mouth lifted a little, and his eyes were smiling at me as he said, “Someone did. You.”

Shu

For the first time since I'd hooked up with Denver, I couldn't sleep. So I took a shower, threw on some clothes, and walked through the doors of Eternal Waters around three that morning. I got bigger, brighter smiles from the staff on this night, so I figured Denver had told them about the car, and I puffed my chest out a little bit as I nodded my greeting to them. It not only felt good to have Denver in my life, but to be able to give her the treatment I believed she deserved. She was special, had been through a lot already in her twenty-five years of life, and if I could brighten any part of her world in any way, I was more than willing to do that.

I didn't cross paths with her on the way to my father's room, so I figured she was busy somewhere else in the building. I started to text her and let her know I was there but decided to let it be a surprise when she came to check on Omar. If he was assigned to a different nurse tech, then I'd text her.

Settling in my usual chair, I fixed my eyes on the sleeping former giant, the man I'd feared for most of my life. The man who demolished me and my brothers in an attempt to fortify us. I would say he didn't understand what it meant to really love someone, to take care of them and cherish them, but he did. He loved my mother from his soul. Anyone could see the truth in that, and that made for more confusion. How could this man who worshipped his wife be the same monster who terrorized his sons, all of whom were variations of him physically—eyes that had many labeling us as Blasian, chiseled features, and tall stature plus a powerful build? We were bred for battle, organically built for it too, but the only somebody either of us was currently fighting was the memory of a fucked up childhood and the pain that circled us like a damn school of sharks, waiting to pounce at the most inopportune times.

I hated this man.

Almost as much as I loved him.

Yeah, I loved him, admired him even. He was Sergeant Omar Mitchell for years on top of years; a big, intimidating man respected by all and feared by many. A man beloved by his brothers in blue, an honorable member of the Fraternal Order of Police and the Prince Hall Freemasons and the Phi Omega Eta Fraternity, Inc. I wanted to be him while simultaneously wanting to destroy the twisted part of my brain that housed that desire.

Denver wasn't assigned to my father that night but dropped by his room to visit and to let me kiss her until she had to leave, her eyes glowing and what seemed to be a permanent smile on her pretty face.

It was almost five in the morning before I decided to leave and grab some breakfast that I'd share with my lady when she got off work. I used to hate being home alone, which was why I worked so much, often volunteering to work the six-to-two day shift on top of my regular evening shift. I figured I'd be too exhausted to care where I was after working sixteen hours in steel toe boots, but my thinking had been wrong, which led me to my visits with Omar.

And that led me to Denver.

I felt the smile on my face at the thought of her as I stood from the chair, gave Omar a last look, and had made exactly one step toward the door when it opened, and my mother stepped inside the room.

As the smile on my face evaporated, one quickly covered hers. She was so beautiful; it was easy to see why my father loved her so much.

"Shu!" she gushed. "I was hoping I'd catch you before you left one of these days! I guess today is that day." She grasped the strap of her purse tightly. "You look so good. It's been so long since I last saw you. I miss seeing you boys. I wish I saw more of you."

I didn't respond. I *couldn't* respond. I...wished I missed her, too, but there honestly wasn't anything to miss. That didn't keep the knot from forming in my chest, though. It didn't stop the deep desire for this woman to hug me, to hold me in her arms *just once*, from rushing over me.

"Mama?" I croaked. I wasn't sure why I even said it or why it came out as a question. I knew it was her. If it wasn't her, my big grown ass wouldn't feel like crying.

The bright smile she'd been wearing eased into a smaller, softer one. "Yes, Shu. It's me." Her hand moved, almost as if she was going to touch me, but she didn't. "You were always so quiet, so...sweet."

My eyes narrowed. "Sweet" wasn't a damn compliment. "Sweet" was what Omar's torture had supposedly been preventing. That one word broke the trance, and I said, "I gotta go."

"Wait! Shu, please...I..."

"What?" I asked.

"Um, have a good day, son."

"Yeah...you too, Mama."

Denver

I wasn't sure how I felt about this night, wasn't sure how it would go, and when he pulled up to a house that was a little larger than his, my heart began to race. Peering out the passenger window from where Shu had parked on the street, I took in the neat yard, letting my eyes shift to the cars in the driveway.

"This is your brother's house?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, placing his big hand on my bare thigh, making me wonder if the dress I'd chosen to wear was too short.

"The mechanic, right?"

"Yeah. You all right? You been real quiet tonight."

I turned to look at him, this gorgeous titan in black jeans and a white button-up. "I'm nervous. I mean, this is your family, right? Didn't you say your other brother was famous?"

"He used to be a boxer, but hey, they're just my brothers. Ain't shit to be nervous about, baby."

My eyebrows were damn near fighting each other as I said, "You called me baby."

"This ain't the first time I called you that."

"Yeah, but you usually say it when we're fucking."

He leaned in close to my face, so close that his warm breath tickled my nose as he said, “I’ma call you more than that later on if you calm down and enjoy tonight. My brothers aren’t exactly like me. They...”

“They talk, smile, laugh, raise their voices?”

He smirked. “Let me come around there and open that door for you since you got jokes and shit.”

After Shu knocked on his brother’s front door, he grabbed my hand and squeezed it, brushed a feather-light kiss across my lips, and gave me one of his “almost smiles.” What more could a girl ask for from Shu Mitchell?

The door swung open to reveal a man who was just as handsome as Shu, but way bigger. He had at least three or four inches of height on Shu and far outweighed him. If Shu was a giant, then this man was the head giant.

Wow, he was absolutely beautiful as he grinned and shouted, “Shu-Shu!” Then he put Shu in a headlock and yanked him into the house. I stood there on the doorstep, my eyes wide as the two humongous men tussled, grunting and growling at each other, but that smile never left his brother’s face.

“Shu here?” a voice growled, and then a third giant appeared. He shared those hypnotic eyes with Shu and the other giant, but his were a strange brown. As a matter of fact, they matched his skin color and one of Shu’s eyes. He was muscular like the other two, but leaner. His build was more refined and athletic—the boxer.

I smiled when he grabbed the biggest brother, unlocking his arm from Shu’s neck and then slapping hands with Shu and yelling, “Shu-Shuuuuuu!” as if imitating a train. “Man, I see you still smoking that shit. Smell like you showered in weed.”

Shu smiled a whole smile. “Fuck you, Set.” Then he punched who I assumed was Jah in the chest. “Jah Rastafari!”

“Who we got here?” Set said, nodding toward me. His voice scared the shit out of me.

Shu reached for my hand, pulling me against him. “This is my girl, Denver Hayes. Denver, these two ugly niggas are my brothers, Set and Jah.”

“Nigga, I’m beautiful,” Jah said, and he wasn’t lying. All three of them were beautiful.

With raised eyebrows, Set nodded at me but directed his words to his brother. “Okay, I see you, Shu Solomon!”

Jah, in turn, yanked me into a hug, and said, “Good to meet you, Denver.”

Although I was afraid he was going to crack at least one of my ribs, I mumbled, “Likewise,” into his hard chest.

“Nigga, let my woman go before you break her. Shit!” Shu said.

“My bad. Just excited to see you got you a woman. I forgot you like ‘em tiny,” Jah said, releasing me from his death grip.

Shu inspected me. I mean, he actually ran his hands over my rib cage, and asked, “You good? That nigga don’t know his own strength but he means well.”

I nodded and wrapped my arms around his neck, pecking him on his cheek. “I’m fine.”

“Y’all come on in the dining room so Denver can meet Trish and ‘Reema,” Jah said.

“What I tell your ass about that ‘Reema shit, nigga?” Set rumbled, making me flinch. That negro was just...frightening.

As we walked through the house, I took in the neatness and how the place smelled so clean. I mean, this house was immaculate. Jah’s wife must’ve cleaned the place from wall to wall every day!

The ladies, both so beautiful in different ways, greeted me with smiles and hugs, and then we all took our seats at the table.

Shu

“Jah, you cooked?” I asked, working on my second plate of greens, pinto beans, and the best fried pork chops I’d ever tasted.

“Nah, Trish did. My wife can burn, right?” he replied, leaning in to whisper something in Tricia’s ear that made her giggle and say, “Boy, quit!” After that, I thought Jah was gonna fuck her right there at the table the way he looked at her.

“She really can. This is good, Tricia,” I said.

“Thanks, Shu,” Tricia replied.

“Do you give lessons? I mean, I can cook, but not like this,” Denver said, the first words she’d spoken since we sat down at the table, but I understood her muteness. Me and my brothers together in the same room was a lot to take in. Three cloths cut from the same Omar Mitchell cloth—big and mean-looking.

“Sure! I’ll give you my number before you leave tonight. Maybe we can hang out sometimes since my best friend here deserted me,” Tricia said.

“Please, you know Set kidnapped my ass,” Kareema interjected.

“You wanted me to,” Set said, nuzzling her neck and making her laugh before she turned and kissed him. Set looked like he was about to climb on top of her in her chair.

“Got damn, Set. Shit!” Jah said.

“Fuck you,” Set shot at Jah once his lips left his wife’s.

“Uh, I’d like that,” Denver said to Tricia. “I work nights, but we can get together when I’m off sometimes and you can help me work some magic in the kitchen for Shu.”

“I can’t wait,” Tricia squeaked. “Hey, where did you two meet?”

“At Omar’s nursing home. Denver is one of his nurses,” I explained.

“CNA,” Denver corrected. “I’m a CNA.”

“Word?” Set said, with his damn eyebrows up in the sky. “At the nursing home? You been visiting Omar, Shu?”

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

Silence filled the dining room, coupled with a familiar heaviness.

“How is he?” Jah asked, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was staring at his wife, who’d cupped his face in her hands.

“Same. I go at night, so he’s always sleep. He don’t really wake up, and even if he does, he don’t talk anymore, so I just sit there.”

“How can you stand to see the nigga like that?” Set asked.

I shrugged again. “Better he’s like that than the way he was before.”

Set nodded. “That’s big facts, man.”

Jah jumped up from his seat. “Y’all remember this?” Swiping at his phone, he laid it on the table, and when *Dem Boyz* by Boyz N Da Hood started playing, he grinned a grin so infectious, me and Set were soon grinning too, and then we all stood and started rapping to the song as our women laughed and smiled, enjoying our little impromptu show.

In the car on the way home, Denver reached for my hand, grasping it with her much smaller one. “I loved tonight. Your brothers and their wives are just...it was great.”

“Yeah.”

“And I love Jah’s house. The décor? Wow!”

“That was all Trish. She’s got that place looking like a home now.”

“And it’s so clean, like really clean.”

“Yeah, Jah’s a neat freak. I guess all that crazy ass middle of the night cleaning our father used to make us do stuck with him.”

“With you, too. Your house is clean, just not *that* clean.”

“Yeah. Uh, you can decorate the house and stuff if you want. I mean, you know...I wouldn’t mind.”

“Do you want me to decorate it?”

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Then I will. Hey, Shu?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m so sorry your dad treated y’all like that. If I could go back in time and change things for you, I would. You’re a good man, the best I’ve ever known, and I...I love you. It feels like it’s too soon to be saying it, but I mean it.”

I nodded, kept driving, and as soon as I pulled to a stop next to her car in the driveway, I leaned over, cupped her pretty face in my rough-ass hands, and said, “I love you too.” And then I kissed her.

Shu

Carol Thornton's personality contradicted her stature. She was a short, light-skinned woman who kept her graying hair in a ponytail and rarely smiled. She was no-nonsense and matter of fact. She was one of those "I said what I said" type of women. At the plant, she demanded respect and got it from a building full of mostly men, and she was my direct supervisor. She'd also always been nice to me, but that was probably because I worked more hours than anyone else, or at least I used to.

Sitting behind her desk, she welcomed me into her office with a smile, a rare sight. "Mr. Mitchell, please tell me you're here to pick up some shifts."

Settling in the chair in front of her desk, I shook my head. "Nah, I'm actually here to see if I can change shifts. I need to be on the graveyard shift."

She stared at me for a moment before saying, "You've worked here for what, twelve years, and you've never worked graveyard."

I couldn't tell her that was because I spent most of my childhood "working" the graveyard shift, so I just said, "I know. Time for a change."

"First you stop picking up extra shifts, and now this? Shit, what's next? Are you gonna quit on me?"

"Nah, got too many bills for that shit. I ain't quitting, but I need to change shifts...if that's possible."

“It’s possible. I’ll get right on it. You know I’ll make it happen for you.”

I stood, gave her a nod, and turned to leave.

“Congratulations, Shu,” she said to my back.

I turned and frowned at her. “For what?”

“For finding whatever or whoever is making you want to spend less time here. I can see it in your eyes. Something is making you happy and I’m happy for you.”

I lifted the corner of my mouth and nodded again. “Thank you.”

I dug my fingers in her thick, soft hair and rubbed her scalp as she lay next to me, her sweaty skin sticking to mine as we both tried to catch our breath.

“I hope we’re always like this—close, happy, nasty,” she murmured.

I chuckled. “You really like the nasty part, don’t you?”

“Mmmm-hmmmm,” she sang. “I really do.”

“Denver, you like being here with me? I mean, you good? Comfortable?”

“Yes! You know I am. Being here...I’m truly happy for the first time in my life. Well, except for when my baby girl was alive. Nothing will beat what it felt like to be her mother. Why do you ask?”

“The other day, after we had dinner with my brothers, you called this my house. I need you to know it’s your home, too, for as long as you want it to be.”

“I know. I’m just still getting used to it, but I did buy some new curtains for the living room yesterday after I got off work.”

“Word?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

After a couple of minutes of silence, I asked, “You got any pictures of your little girl?”

She hesitated before saying, “Yeah. You wanna see?”

“If it’s okay...”

She reached up and kissed me. “Be right back.”

I watched her leave the bed, her ass jiggling as she walked the few steps to the closet. I loved every dimple and bump in her ass. Denver was short and compact. Not skinny but not fat, just...shit, *fine*.

A few seconds later, she climbed back into bed next to me, holding the metal box she’d almost left at her cousin’s house. She opened it and slowly lifted a bib, a tiny pink dress, little baby socks, and a stack of papers out of it. My eyes brushed over the birth certificate that sat on top of the stack, noticing the words written on it and realizing it was her baby’s birth certificate. Finally, she produced a packet of pictures, pulling a large one out and handing it to me. Her little girl was tiny with light brown skin and fine, straight hair. “She was beautiful,” I said, and she was. In the same little pink dress she’d pulled out of the box and lying on her stomach on what looked like white fur, little Kelly was almost doll-like in her beauty.

As I handed her the picture, she stared down at it and said, “Thank you.”

“You miss her?”

She nodded. “Every day. Losing your child is some shit that just never really heals, at least that’s how it’s been for me.”

“How about her father? Did it mess him up?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I told you, it wasn’t a real relationship. We don’t talk.”

I nodded and held her chin so that she looked up at me. “Hey, I love you. You know that, right? I love you and you can talk about anything you want with me. You can tell me anything, Denver. *Anything*. I wanna know how you’re feeling whether you’re happy or sad.”

“You’re worried about me? Don’t be. Thinking about her always hurts, but I’m happy, Shu. I’m happy with you.”

I smiled. “Me too...with you, I mean.”

She stared at me. “You are so beautiful.”

“It’s the eyes, huh? Women love the eyes, even though mine are even weirder than Set’s.”

“It’s everything, but your smile? God, it’s like the clouds parting to make way for the sun. Your smile is gorgeous, Shu. You should smile more.”

“Thank you, baby.”

“And...women?”

I rolled my eyes. “Chicks I dated. I did date before you, baby.”

“I mean, I figured that. I damn sure know you’ve fucked before. That is pleausrably obvious.”

I chuckled.

“But...I don’t know. I guess I feel a little jealous. Like, when your brother said you like ‘em tiny? I was like, damn...Shu has a type? I’m not the first vertically challenged woman in his life?”

“I’m forty-one. So yeah, I got a type—*you*.”

“Your mom is short, right? I’ve seen her a time or two when I’ve taken care of your father. She arrives right before my shift ends.”

Damn, I’d never connected that shit before, but my mother *was* short, petite, so I said, “Yeah...maybe that explains it.”

“Shu, I’m—”

“It’s alright. It doesn’t hurt to talk about her like it does when I even think about Omar. He did so much crazy shit. Set and Jah swear they don’t remember this, but he pulled a gun on us one time, kept pulling the trigger while pointing it at each of us. I think all three of us pissed ourselves. And then he showed us it wasn’t loaded and called us sissies for being scared.”

“Maybe they blocked it out.”

“Yeah...I wish *I* had.”

She stared at me, her eyes full of a combination of rage and empathy, and before I realized what she was doing, her head was in my lap, my dick was in her mouth, and my body had turned to Jell-O.

Denver

“I swear I love that we work the same shift now! It’s like we’re a real couple now. We have meals together, we’re awake at the same time...” I said, as I inspected an avocado.

“You get to drag my ass to the grocery store...” he mumbled as I placed the avocado in the shopping cart he was pushing.

“You’re not having fun?”

“I don’t like people.”

“You like me.”

“I *love* you, but you ain’t just people. You’re my woman.”

I grinned, pulling my buzzing phone out of my pant pocket as we continued perusing the produce section. We were both still in our work clothes, had met up at home after getting off work, and I'd convinced Shu to go with me to buy groceries before we climbed into bed. Checking my phone, I stopped walking, almost making Shu run into me with the cart.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Um...this is my mom. She never calls me. I didn't think she knew my number, and I honestly can't believe hers is the same after all this time. I mean, I haven't talked to her in like, five years. Not since my grandmother died."

"You gonna answer it?"

"She hung up," had barely left my mouth before her name appeared on my phone's screen again. I finally tore my eyes from my phone, looked at Shu whose forehead was creased with concern, and accepted the call, placing the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

Shu

I joined the military right after high school, although my daddy thought it was stupid as hell to serve a country that, in his words, “didn’t give half a fuck” about my black ass. That confused me since he’d been protecting and serving since before I was born. At any rate, I was the official property of the United States Army for eight years during which my strength, agility, natural stealth, aptitude for hitting long-range targets, and a talent for having an unshakable concentration and an almost disturbing willingness to kill made me an invaluable sniper within my special ops branch. So yeah, I killed for my country, but that wasn’t my inauguration into taking lives. The first time I killed someone was in high school after I got wind of a nigga pulling a knife on Set and gashing his back. After I got over the guilt of not being with my brother to have his back, I got mad, pissed the fuck off, left the house late one night, and found that nigga right where the streets told me he would be. One look at him told me that Set had fucked him up just like he said he did, but that wasn’t enough for me. A nigga bringing a knife or a gun to a fight meant one thing in my mind, and if he had the audacity to pull that shit on Set once, I was sure he’d do it again, and that he wouldn’t fail the second time.

So I killed him.

With my bare motherfucking hands.

I was in and out so fast, no one even knew I'd been there, and the nigga had so many enemies, no one really cared to sort through the pool of suspects for a known criminal's murder. So that was the first and only time I took a life absent of orders given to me by Uncle Sam, only because I was still trying to convince myself not to kill my father. That is, until tonight. Tonight, I sat in my truck staring out my windshield at the front doors of the medical facility, ready to end a motherfucker, itching to put his lights out.

But I wasn't just some fool off the street. I was trained to do this shit. Tax dollars were poured into making me very skilled at ending lives, so I would do it right and in a way that kept me outside prison walls, but it would get done. It *had* to get done. I wasn't going to rest until it was done.

I sat there watching the front doors until he finally exited the building through them and walked to his car near the front of the lot like he didn't have a care in the world, like he wasn't a fucking demon. I followed him home, knowing no one would be there waiting for him, but kept driving and eventually parked on a Walmart parking lot. It was three in the morning when I went back, leaving my vehicle blocks away from the scene of the crime I was most definitely about to commit. I made my approach on foot, quietly picked the lock on the back door, and woke the motherfucker up out of his slumber so he could see it was me who put him back to sleep... permanently, using my natural weapon—my hands.

Shu

Nineteen hours earlier...

I watched as she answered her phone, so focused on her and the words she spoke that the grocery store seemed to disappear around us.

“What?” Denver shrieked, placing a hand on her chest. “Okay, okay, I’m on my way.”

“What is it?” I asked, as soon as she ended the call. “Where we need to go?”

“My mom was rushed to the hospital. That was my aunt on the phone, the one I used to live with?”

“Sunny’s mother?”

“Yes. She says my mom’s really sick.”

“Okay, let’s go then.”

She just stood there, and I thought about the things she’d told me about her mother, how she’d basically run away from home when she was a kid. “You don’t wanna go?” I asked.

Her eyes rounded our immediate area before landing on my face. “I... don’t know. I should go, right? I mean, I’ll probably feel bad if I don’t go and she dies...”

“You ain’t gotta do shit you don’t wanna do. I’ll understand either way.”

She stood there for another minute, grabbed her purse from the shopping cart, and said, “Let’s go.”

I honestly don’t think I’d been inside a hospital since the day I was born. So I didn’t feel any kind of way about being there with Denver. Shit, I *wanted* to be there to make sure she was okay. I knew how it was to have to come face to face with a sorry motherfucker who was supposed to be your parent.

When we got there, her mom was in surgery. Turned out her appendix was messed up, so they were removing it, and she was going to be okay. Denver decided to stay until she was out of surgery to at least see her face, maybe talk to her for a few minutes, and I was cool with that.

“Uh, where’s Burton? Shouldn’t he be here?” Denver asked her Aunt Elaine, who’d met us there in the surgery waiting area. She was the one who’d called and let Denver know about her mother.

“He’s on his way back here. He brought your mom to the ER and then left about an hour ago to take your sister and brother to his mother’s house. They’re going to spend the night there. Oh! There he is!”

I followed the woman’s line of sight to a tall, thin white man rushing toward us.

“Who is that?” I asked Denver.

She looked at me with ghosted eyes. “M-my stepfather.”

I nodded, watching as the man took a seat next to Aunt Elaine. “Look who’s here!” she said, excitedly pointing to where me and Denver sat across from them.

I watched the man, stared at him as his blue eyes flipped from concerned to...amused. He kind of leered at Denver, licking his lips before greeting her. "Denver. My god, girl. You have surely grown up."

Denver didn't reply.

Aunt Elaine stood, saying something about coffee, and this Burton motherfucker shifted his gaze from Denver to me when I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her stiff body into mine

"I'm Burton Wilcox, Denver's stepdaddy."

Giving him a little nod, I replied, "I figured that."

He smiled a smile that was more cunning than anything. "And you are?"

"Denver's man," I said.

"Well, I figured that, too."

And then silence as I stared at him, taking in his features and the fine brown hair on his head that was receding. My mind brought up images of the papers that Denver kept in that metal box, her baby's birth certificate with no father listed. The date of her birth, her light skin, her fine silky hair.

"He was fucking fixated on me."

"...it wasn't a real relationship."

This man, her mother's husband, he was her daughter's father. She was sixteen when she had her, a minor. This motherfucker got her pregnant right under her mother's nose.

My chest grew tighter and tighter by the minute, my pulse raced, and my right fist was clenched so tightly that my nails were digging into my palm. He met my gaze at first, but he must've read something in my eyes or felt the rage that had to be damn near tangible at that point, because he eventually stood, mumbling something about coffee, too, and left the waiting area.

“Denver,” I said softly, “I know you wanna see your mother, but I think —”

“Let’s go. I need to go. *Now*,” she said, her voice quivering as she looked at me with pleading eyes.

I nodded and took her hand in mine. “Come on.”

Denver

We rode home in silence, my mind racing, my hands shaking, my bowels threatening to release right there inside Shu’s truck. Some silly part of me had thought I could do it, that I could go see my mom even if it meant being around her husband, that I was over all that.

But I wasn’t.

Then again, was that really some shit a person just...got over?

It only happened twice, but that was all it took for me to get pregnant by my stepfather at fifteen. My mother didn’t believe me when I told her, even told my grandmother I was lying to cover up for some “nappy headed boy” I’d opened my legs to. She actually stuck to that story even after Kelly’s physical appearance proved it to be a lie.

“Denver,” Shu said after we made it home. “That Burton dude, did he—”

I pounced on Shu, kissing him, rubbing my hand over his crotch.

Tearing his mouth from mine, he said, “Denver, stop. I know what you’re trying to do, but we need to talk.”

“About what?!” I yelled. “How that motherfucker raped me and got me pregnant when I was fifteen and still a fucking virgin? How I hated my baby until the day I held her in my arms? How I have felt guilty every day since she died?! What the fuck do you want to talk about?! Huh?”

“Denver—”

“Wanna know why I didn’t tell you about him and me and all that shit? Because I’m fucking embarrassed and it fucking hurts to even think about it! There, we talked! Now I’m need you to fuck me. Is that okay with you? No talking, no me crying on your shoulder, just your dick in my pussy right fucking now, Shu!”

He grabbed me, yanking the scrub pants I still wore down to my ankles and then dropping his own pants. In a second flat, I was bent over the sofa, hands on the cushion, ass in the air as Shu slid a finger in my pussy and bent over my back to say directly in my ear, “You wanna fuck? We gon’ fuck.”

“Then stop talking and fuck me, nigga,” I spat at him.

His finger left my pussy, and I’d barely taken another breath before his length and girth had invaded me. The first thrust was swift and hard and aggressive and just what I needed, making me moan loudly.

He eased out and slammed back into me, a punishing stroke that made my knees buckle. “Don’t stop!” I howled.

He stuck a finger in my ass and drove into me over and over again, banging against my cervix and making my pussy contract around him. Only a few strokes in, and I was already climaxing, but I needed more and more and more.

“Shu!” I screamed, losing a little more of my mind with every stroke he delivered. He didn’t say much of anything, but that wasn’t rare. I could hear his harsh breathing and grunts, felt the death grip he had on my hip and the

finger that still breached my asshole. That all told me he was getting just as good as he was giving, but I still asked, “This pussy good, Shu?”

“Hell...fucking...yes,” he said between thrusts.

Two orgasms in, I fell to my knees, and before he could react, I spun around and took him into my mouth, making him almost yell, “Shit!”

I worked him, sliding him in and out of my mouth while holding onto his hard thighs, enjoying the sounds he made, the way he gripped my head and moved his hips, the way he dug his fingers into my spongy hair, tugging on it, trying to move my head when he felt his nut coming. But I shook my head, grabbed his ass, and pushed him deeper into my mouth, choking myself with him, trying to breathe while at the same time not giving a fuck if I passed out. Finally, he dumped his load down my throat, and I let him slip from my mouth, a string of come mixed with saliva hanging from my bottom lip as I looked up at him.

At first, his eyes were closed as he breathed through his orgasm, and when he opened them, he gave me a look that made me want to take off running. He looked so angry and...hurt, maybe? I’d pushed him too far, disrespected him, and I knew I needed to do or say something, to apologize. I’d opened my mouth to do just that when he reached down and grabbed me, literally threw me over his shoulder, and carried me to the bedroom, dropping me on the bed. It all happened so quickly that I hadn’t done more than yelp when he climbed in the bed, spread my thighs apart, and buried his tongue in my pussy. We both still wore shirts, and Shu was still wearing his work boots. But I didn’t have time to think about that as he slid his tongue up to my clit and plunged two fingers into my already flooded core. The pressure started building almost immediately as I alternated clutching the cover underneath me and his head, my hips rolling against his mouth as he snaked his hand under my shirt and pinched my nipple through my bra.

He licked and finger-fucked and pinched and slurped, and I popped, pleasure bathing me as I screamed his name so loud and hard, I was sure people miles away heard me. Then I broke down, sobbing loudly through heaving breaths. Shu rose and pulled me into his arms, soothing me with his nearness, his sheer presence, bringing me peace and calming my raging soul. I cried until I couldn't, and then as exhaustion overtook me, I vaguely heard Shu whispering in my ear, "I got you. I got you, baby. That motherfucker will never hurt you again. I'ma make sure of that, and I'ma do it tonight."

Denver

Now...

I woke with a start, my eyes immediately finding Shu's side of the bed. He was gone, and a panic rose in me. After the way I'd acted with him last night, I wouldn't have blamed him if he was in the middle of throwing my shit out of his house, but as that thought filled my mind, the aroma of bacon filled my nose.

Sighing, I climbed out of bed, realized I still had my scrub top and bra on along with yesterday's funk, and decided to take a quick shower and throw on a t-shirt and panties. By the time I made it to the stark-white kitchen, Shu was sitting at the table waiting for me, wearing nothing but a towel. I eyed his plate of food which mirrored mine—untouched.

"You didn't have to wait for me to eat," I said, standing in the kitchen doorway.

His face was unreadable, his eyes fixed on me as he said, "Sit down. I need to talk to you."

Shit.

I sat across from him and took a deep breath. "Shu, I'm sorry—"

"I said I need to talk to you. That means you don't talk. You listen."

Why the hell was that so sexy to me? "Okay," I said.

“I’m fucked up, but you still love me, and I appreciate that about you. I really think the women in my past were scared of me, and the ones who weren’t couldn’t deal with me working all the time or they hated that I’m so quiet, but you?” He shook his head. “You ain’t never complained about shit, and that made me want to be with you, made me want to be with you more than anything in the world. So I cut back on work and changed shifts. I...I love you so much. This shit don’t make sense to me, not happening so fast, but I love you.

“I’m probably always be a little messed up in the head, but I’m also always love you, and I want you to know that. I’ll always put you first. I’ll always protect you. I’ll always take care of you.”

As he spoke, tears traversed his cheeks, but his voice remained steady and strong. I wanted to reach for him or say something, but I could tell he needed me to just listen, so I did.

“You’re so damn young,” he continued, “and you’ve been through so much shit. I just wanna take your pain away and make you happy. I...I need you to marry me.”

My mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I love you so damn much, Denver. I didn’t even know it was possible to be this in love, to feel so good around and inside a woman, to think and breathe someone like this. I’m not a charming nigga, and I’m real quiet. I don’t laugh a lot, but there will never be another person who loves you like I do.”

I blinked back tears. “Shu, I love you, too. I love you with every part of me. I really do. You’re absolutely perfect to me and for me.”

“I know you love me, baby. You make me feel like I’m somebody, somebody...good.”

That's when I stopped trying to hold back my own tears. "Baby, you are! You're the best person I've ever known!"

He shut his eyes and blew out a breath. "Thank you. See, that's why I want you to marry me. I mean, I wanna marry you. Shit, you wanna get married, Denver?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but he cut me off with, "Wait, don't answer yet. I got something to tell—look, I killed that Burton nigga. I mean, he was white but you know what I'm saying. I killed his ass."

"You did?" came out as little more than a whisper.

He wiped his face with his big hand. "Yeah."

I stared at him for a moment as he watched me with anxious eyes. Then I said, "Thank you."

He frowned a little. "Uh, you're welcome?"

"Are the police going to be looking for you?"

"Nah, I doubt it. They gotta find the motherfucker first, and his car and that suitcase I packed full of his shit...and that's highly unlikely."

"Well, if they do come around, you were here all night anyway, so..." I shrugged.

In turn, he smiled. "So, you gonna marry me?"

"Well, can I say something before I answer that?"

His shoulders slumped a little. "Go ahead, baby."

"Shu, I'm pregnant."

He stared at me, and then the brightest smile spread across his face, making him look even more handsome than he always did. "You are?"

I nodded.

"Baby, what?!" he shouted, still smiling. Shu *shouted*.

Wow.

"I'm pregnant," I repeated.

He grabbed my chair and dragged it over to his, making me giggle. Then he kissed me, making my pussy tingle. When he ended the kiss, he was frowning. “How far along are you?”

“About a month. You know we kinda said fuck condoms after the shower sex that time.”

“Yeah. Hey, no more weed.”

“Agreed. That means you, too.”

“Shit, okay,” he grumbled. “Wait, did you know you were pregnant last night when you had me fucking you like a damn wildebeest?”

“I’ve known for a few days, and I’m sorry about that. I was...I’m just sorry.”

He nodded. “You think I hurt the baby?”

“No, Shu. I don’t feel any different, so I don’t think you hurt her or him. And before you ask, yes, it’s yours.”

“Don’t you think I know that shit?”

“I’m just saying...”

He blew out a breath. “I’m a be a daddy...then that’s a yes, right? You’ll marry me?”

“Well, of course I’ll marry you. You’re the best man I have ever known in my entire life, but we’re acting like we don’t have other options. Don’t you wanna talk about the baby, the possibility that he or she will have the same condition my little girl had? Shouldn’t we—”

“Do you want to have my baby, Denver?”

“Yes, I honestly do. I can’t think of anything I want more, other than you.”

“Then that’s our option. We’ll have the baby and love it forever, however long forever is for him or her. Now, go get dressed.”

“Why, where are we going?”

“To the jewelry store and then to the courthouse.”

“Okay,” I said slowly.

“And Denver?”

“Yes, Shu?”

“I’mma need you to quit your job. You ain’t gonna be pulling and tugging on grown folks and getting hit while carrying my baby.”

“But the bills and—”

“I was paying them bitches before you moved in. I got it. I’ll work all the damn shifts if I have to, but you’re quitting that job, Denver. *Today.*”

I smiled again, my heart almost aching because of this man who loved me. *He really loved me.* “Okay, baby. Whatever you want.”

Shu

The first person I called after we left the courthouse as man and wife was Set, who conferenced in Jah, and before I knew it, a Vegas celebration was planned for me and Denver. My wife—I like the way that shit sounds—was so excited about the trip that I had to calm her ass down before she upset my baby.

She rolled her eyes. “Shu, you’re gonna have to chill about the baby.”

“I’m not chilling after you tried to make me fuck my baby outta you.”

“Oh, my god,” she groaned. “And I’m married to this fool.”

I smiled.

Denver

My mother called a few days after Shu and I were married, crying about not seeing me at the hospital and all distraught about Burton just up and leaving her in her time of distress. I listened, wishing I could make myself feel bad about Shu killing him, but I just couldn’t, and when she asked if I could come stay with her for a while to help her until she recovered, I politely

declined and ended the call. That conversation was playing in my mind as I stared out the window at the clouds we passed by.

Shu was the first and only man to truly love me. No, scratch that, he was the first and only *person* to ever love me, period, other than my Kelly. He was the first somebody to take care of me. He was the first person to provide a real home for me. And now, added to that, he'd taken me on my first flight, my first trip out of my hometown.

My eyes were wide with wonder as we passed over the desert. It looked so different from what I knew—trees and green grass and concrete and asphalt. What I saw felt like a whole new world, and maybe it was the pregnancy hormones, but the sight made me want to cry, as did the beautiful airport, the limo Set sent for us, and the huge beautiful hotels we passed on our way to Set's home.

When we made it to the house, I *did* cry. Not an audible sob, but two tears that I quickly wiped away escaped my eyes as I stood in the driveway while Shu tipped the driver. It was so big and pretty and tan, the front lawn full of bushes and stones and palm trees. It was hot, but not uncomfortable. It was paradise.

"Damn, this is nice," Shu said, stepping up behind me.

"I still can't believe you've never been here before," I mused.

"Like I told you, they haven't lived here long, but I've been to Vegas before. It's been a long time though, like back when Set used to box. I gotta remember to show you some videos of his fights. Set wasn't shit to play with."

"I think that's true of all the Mitchell men."

He grinned, kissed my cheek, and led me toward the front door which flew open before we could get to it. Jah ran outside and picked Shu up,

knocking over our bags in the process. “Shu-Shu got a motherfucking wife!” he screamed.

Shu was smiling as he yelled, “Put me down, nigga!”

Shu’s feet had barely hit the ground before he said, “Nigga, do not hug my wife. Be done crushed my son.”

Jah’s mouth fell open. “It’s a boy?! Another Mitchell man?! Aw, shit!” He approached me with a smile, lifting my hand and softly kissing it.

I had to smile. “We don’t know the sex yet. Shu just wants a boy.”

“Either way, congratulations, Mitchells,” Jah shouted, grabbing our bags and heading back inside the house. Shu took my hand, and we followed him inside.

Shu

“Damn, Mrs. Shu. What you do to this nigga? I ain’t smelled no weed on him since y’all got here,” Set said, cutting into his steak. “I figured he’d be drowning in weed since it’s legal here.”

“She’s having my baby, nigga. That’s what she did. She can’t smoke, so I can’t either,” I said.

“What you doing in the place of smoking dope, then?” Jah asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m fucking and eating pussy, nigga,” I replied.

“Shu!” Denver shrieked, her eyes sweeping around the table of family—me, my brothers, and our wives. Ain’t that some shit? Me and my brothers were married and happy and stuff. Life was wild.

I raised my eyebrows. “What? Ain’t that what I’m doing?”

Denver shook her head. “Wow.”

“Girl, welcome to the Mitchell wife club. All three of these negroes are...different,” Tricia said.

“But y’all love us, though,” Jah stated.

Tricia smiled at him. “Boy, you know I do.”

I swear I heard Jah snarl as he went in for a kiss.

“Aye, Jah. Don’t wake me up tonight hollering and shit. You ain’t the only one tryna get some,” Set advised.

Never taking his lips from Tricia’s, Jah gave Set his middle finger.

Kareema shook her head. “Well, I’m glad you’re all here. I hope you enjoyed dinner.”

Before either of us could compliment her on the good-ass food she cooked, Set mumbled, “The fuck?” while staring at his phone. “Mama’s calling me. She never calls me.” He looked at me and Jah as he accepted the call. “Hello? Mama?” A few beats of silence passed as he listened, and then he frowned and softly said, “Died? When?”

Shu

Denver clutched my arm as I stood there and stared at the hole in the ground, at the coffin the men had just lowered into it, at the individual roses that lay on top of the casket.

Final resting place.

“You okay?” Denver whispered.

I nodded, because I wasn’t sad. Couldn’t be sad. I just...I couldn’t believe this shit.

My eyes drifted over to the woman hugging Set, a stony expression on his face. And then to Jah who just looked bothered, like he had better shit to do. I was sure their minds held the same thoughts as mine: *What the fuck am I doing here? Paying my respects? How, when this motherfucker never earned any?*

“Shu?” a soft voice coming from behind me said. I turned to see the familiar face of my Aunt Clem, an aunt I rarely saw growing up. My mother’s sister. She looked so much like her—petite and beautiful.

She pulled me into a hug I didn’t return, her thin arms feeling strange to me. Then she backed away. “This is so hard. I know it’s hard for you, too. She was always going, trying to see about your daddy. It’s no wonder she fell asleep at the wheel. It’s just so tragic, but he loved her so much, there

was no way she wouldn't be there for him. They were so good together, and your daddy is a wonderful man."

I stared down at my aunt, my jaw twitching as Denver tightened her grip on my arm.

Aunt Clem smiled up at me, gently patting my cheek. "Your mother always said you were the strong, silent one. That hasn't changed."

"What she say about me?" Jah asked, his eyes full of confusion.

She turned to him. "Jah...she said you were her sweet baby boy." Then she turned to where Set stood a few feet away from us. "And she said you were your father all over again. Those eyes, the way you handle yourself, that's all Omar. I knew you were the one to call with the news because of that, so I found your number in her phone."

Set shook his head, and from where I stood, I could see fury in his eyes. Kareema whispered something to him and tugged on his hand, trying to get him to leave, but he was already too far gone.

"I ain't shit like that man!" he rumbled as he stomped over to us, dragging Kareema with him.

Aunt Clem's eyes ballooned as she looked from Set to me and Jah. "Uh...I'm a head on in the church for repast," she muttered and then scrambled away from us.

"I guess we're the only ones who know what he did to us," Jah said. "Shit, I need to—let's go, Trish."

"You sure you don't wanna grab a to-go plate first? Church food is usually the bomb," his wife expressed.

"Baby, we're gonna have to either go home and fuck, or it's gonna be on you to find me somebody's ass, *anybody's* ass, to kick. Hell, I'm two seconds from kicking my aunt's ass."

“Bye, y’all,” Tricia said, grabbing Jah’s hand and leading him away from the gravesite.

“Aye, Shu, can you take a ride with me real quick?” Set asked.

“I ain’t really tryna leave Denver right now since she’s pregnant and all. I like to be around in case somebody fucks with her,” I told him.

“No, it’s okay, baby. I can drive myself home. Go with your brother,” Denver said.

“We came here in Minnie, Denver.”

She rolled her eyes.

“How about I run her home in our rental and you two can take, uh, Minnie?” Kareema suggested.

I hesitantly nodded, because I really did want Denver glued to my side. Still, I kissed her, and left with Set.

Set called and told Jah to meet us after he got through fucking. His words, not mine. It took our baby brother thirty minutes, but he finally made it, meeting me and Set in front of the building. We hashed some things out right there, and then we walked inside, garnering stares from the staff, but I could admit that we were kind of a spectacle. Three niggas in black suits, all over six feet tall, muscular, and shit, handsome, wasn’t something you saw every day. Add to that the eyes we shared with Omar and the fact that we all accurately looked like we could fuck shit up, and I guess that made the stares understandable and unavoidable. As we rounded a corner, we passed a nurse whose mouth dropped open as she looked at us, and said, “Dayum!”

We entered the room in the order of our births, and I was shocked to see that Omar was awake. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him with his eyes open. We all just stood there by the door like three little boys trying not to disturb a sleeping giant even though our giant, our monster, was just a shadow of himself now, even thinner than when I'd last seen him. After we'd stood there for like ten minutes, I tapped Set on the shoulder and nodded toward Omar. Since it was his idea to do this, I figured he should go first.

He stepped closer to the bed where our father lay with his eyes glued to *Wheel of Fortune* on the TV.

“Uh, Omar? It's Set, your son?” Set cleared his throat. “Shit, you prolly still don't know me, but anyway, I don't know if Mama told you, but I got a wife now, Kareema, and she said I should do this, talk to you and get some shit off my chest. I'll do anything she asks me to, so I'm here. Uh, it was fucked up what you did to us, but I been thinking you must've been through some shit, too, and maybe that's why you did the stuff you did. I ain't gonna lie, it fucked me up, but I'm good. I'ma keep being good, but this is the last time I'm coming to see you. Gotta do what's best for me, and coming here ain't it. Me and Shu and Jah gonna split the cost of you being here, so yeah, we gon' make sure you straight.”

Omar never moved his eyes from the TV. I doubted he'd heard a word Set said.

Nevertheless, I was up next. So I took Set's place by his bed and blew out a breath. “Uh, it's Shu. I ain't been here in a minute. Got a wife, too, and a baby on the way, so I'm kinda busy right now.” I leaned in closer to him and lowered my voice. “Look, I don't wanna kill you no more, because it looks like karma is taking care of that shit.” I stood upright again.

“Anyway, I wanna thank you for the one good thing you did—you taught us

how to love a woman, and I, for one, love the hell outta mine. So yeah, thanks for that.” I blew out another breath. “I won’t be coming back to visit either. So, uh...be easy.”

Omar’s eyes shifted from the TV to the ceiling as Jah stepped up to his bed. “This is Jah. I got a wife, too, a damn brick house who I’d kill and steal for. I love her that much. I know you feel me, Omar. So, look, I don’t know if anyone told you yet, but the woman you love? My mama? She’s dead. I hope that shit hurts, my nigga. I hope it really fucks you up.”

Then Jah turned to leave, with Set and me following him.

Denver

Tricia joined Kareema and me at me and Shu’s house, gushing over the baby stuff Shu wouldn’t stop buying even though I was only six weeks pregnant.

“He won’t give me a chance to buy anything! He’s got my doctor’s appointments saved on his phone, he made me quit my job, will barely let me lift a finger. It’s overwhelming and crazy, but at the same time, I love him for it. I honestly think it’s his love language or something,” I shared with my sisters-in-law.

“Honey, those Mitchell boys are protectors, fierce lovers, but also the sweetest men on the planet. And I used to be petrified of them back in school,” Kareema said.

“The only one I was really afraid of back then was Jah,” Tricia admitted.
“Ain’t that some shit?”

I smiled as they laughed, and I wondered what their stories were. Had their lives been as fucked up as mine pre-Mitchell era? I doubted it.

“Hey,” I said, “thanks for always being so nice to me. I know I’m a lot younger than Shu and you don’t know me all that well, but you’ve both been so friendly and genuine. I appreciate it.”

Kareema moved closer to me on the sofa and grasped my hands in hers.
“Denver, we’re family. It’s all love.”

“Right, and I promise I’m about to spoil the shit out of my little niece or nephew,” Tricia chimed in.

I was two seconds from crying when the front door opened, and my Shu walked in with his brothers. Then my Shu gave me a smile, bent over, and kissed me.

My Shu.

My Shu.

I loved him so much.

So, so much.

Denver

One year later...

Our eyes were locked, his hands resting on my thighs as I slid up and down his shaft, my forehead creased as I rode him. Sitting with his back resting against the headboard, he moved his hands up to the back of my head, pulling my face to his. He kissed me softly, grabbing my bottom lip with his teeth and making my breathing stutter.

Moving his mouth to my ear, he nibbled on the lobe and whispered, “This pussy is too damn good. I’m tryna hold this nut so you can get yours, but your sexy ass better hurry up.”

I couldn’t reply, because evidently, he’d talked me up on an orgasm as my pussy began to rhythmically squeeze him.

He closed his eyes, hissed, “Shit!” and as I tried to catch my breath, he tightly clutched my ass, lifted his from the bed, and roared as he filled me with his seed.

“You gonna fuck around and get me pregnant again,” I murmured, my forehead against his.

“Shit, I hope so.”

Shrill cries preempted my response, and Shu damn near threw me off of him, hopping up from the bed and into his underwear. A few minutes later,

he stepped into our bedroom with little Ma'at Marie Mitchell, our chubby, healthy, baby girl in his arms. She was so beautiful, so much like her daddy, such a peaceful little girl.

Shu handed her to me, and as I breastfed her, he slipped into bed beside me, fixed adoring eyes on Ma'at, then me, and said, "Thank you."

I smiled, traced his lips with my finger, and softly replied, "Thank *you*, baby."



A southern girl at heart, Alexandria House has an affinity for a good banana pudding, Neo Soul music, and tall black men in suits. When this fashionista is not shopping, she's writing steamy stories about real black love.

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