

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a black lace dress. She is surrounded by lush purple foliage, including large leaves and tall grasses. The overall color palette is dominated by shades of purple and magenta.

GREY

wild

a novella

& RESTLESS

LEVERAGE & LOVE BOOK THREE

WILDE & RESTLESS

LEVERAGE & LOVE BOOK 3

GREY

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, likely reading 'J. Grey', positioned below the printed name.

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WILDE & RESTLESS

written by
Grey

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This work of fiction contains explicit sexual content and is only intended for mature readers. **Do not turn another page if you are faint-hearted and can't withstand steamy, hot sex scenes.** This piece contains many sexual encounters in which are very unconventional. This piece also contains explicit adult language, occurrences, situations and decisions that may offend some readers.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

We've reached the end of the road, and I'm so happy that you've been on this journey with me. I wouldn't have it any other way. Leverage & Love Series has been a pleasure writing, and I hope you've enjoyed it as much as

I've loved penning it.

First they were **Reckless**.

Then Jhalil was **Relentless**.

Finally, Wilde grew **Restless**.

Peace & Love.

Grey

WILDE & RELENTLESS

written by
Grey

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ONE

WILDE

"YOU NEED TO WAKE UP, old lady?" I poked fun of my grandmother as I stuffed the bookmark into my current read and stared at her peacefully sleeping beside me.

I'd made the couch at her bedside my home for the past four weeks. That's how long she'd been down under. She was showing signs of improvement but wasn't strong enough for the doctors to wean her from the medicine they'd given her to induce a coma-like state. According to them, all she needed was rest. She wasn't in imminent danger, but her body needed time to recover from the trauma it had witnessed.

"MAMA," Camden stirred at the sound of my voice.

"Get back to sleep, baby. It's nothing."

"I wan go home." Camden brushed the sleep from his eyes.

Me, too. I thought to myself. *But, I'm not leaving until she comes with us.* Of course, it was irrational thinking, but it was exactly the way that I felt. I'd gone home a few nights without her and only ended up staying awake until the sun rose, again.

"I wan go home." His whimpers began to irritate me. "Mama, I wan go home."

"Camden. You must be quiet." I urged, placing a hand on his back in an attempt to calm him from the tantrum he was on the verge of.

"I wan eat."

"Camden!"

Gritting my teeth, I lifted him from the cushioned couch and stood him to his feet. Him being hungry was a much better excuse to be keeping up the noise than wanting to go home. It was simple. We weren't going home. Not tonight, at least.

The vibration of my cell caused me to pause for a brief second before continuing. It was Jhalil. It was always Jhalil. Now that my grandmother was hospitalized, he was the only person to call me besides doctors and Rick who was concerned about my absence at the club. He was losing money, but I refused to lose time with my grandmother. She would have a fit if I wasn't at her side when she woke.

"I'll call him back in the morning." I resolved, worrying more about my frustrated toddler who was agitated from his lack of proper rest and confinement he'd experienced over the past month.

We were still breaking and waiting for whatever aha moment that I needed to secure my confidence as a woman. With my grandmother being in the hospital, my journey to complacency in womanhood had been placed on hold. I understood Jhalil's possible rejections to the freeze of progression, but he also understood my circumstances. Each night, he called and kept me company over FaceTime.

In my opinion, we both needed this to get to better know one another. Most times, I felt as if we were moving so fast, but the month gap between personal interactions helped us to get to know one another on a mental level. The soulful, emotional and physical attractions were intact from our first encounter.

"Come on. We're going to get something to hold us through the night. I'm starving myself." I was, honestly. I'd been sitting still to avoid waking Camden, but if I'd known his tummy was as empty as mine, then I would've shifted in my seat a long time ago.

WITH EVERYTHING COMING to an abrupt head, I'd began scouting daycare centers for Camden the second week that my grandmother had been hospitalized. A high school friend of mine and I bumped into each other at the cafeteria downstairs, and she informed me that she'd been the owner of a care center for special needs children for five years.

WHILE THEY WERE CONSIDERED special needs, neither of her children suffered from comprehension delays or had learning disabilities. This happened to be music to my ears, especially the friend and family

discount she threw in on the strength of my struggle. Camden was able to go to daycare for only \$80/week, which I could definitely afford.

Though the school opened at six in the morning and closed at seven in the evening, I kept Camden with me until ten o'clock each day and allowed him to stay with his new friends until just before the daycare closed.

IT WAS GOING ON EIGHT, which was always a tricky time for us. I wasn't sure if he'd eaten his afternoon snack or opted out of it. Whatever the case was, he seemed to need more food for fuel and so did I.

I stopped at the desk to notify the doctors of my departure. Since my grandmother's status had changed, I was able to be with her around the clock. The first four days were intense, which didn't allow for my constant presence.

"What do you have in mind for food?"

"Eggs. Cheese eggs. Jhlee cheese eggs."

I chuckled at his attempt to say Jhalil's name. It was a total failure, but cute. Nonetheless. "Baby, Jhalil is busy. How about we go to Baisleigh's House to get us some eggs?" Suddenly, I was in the mood for cheese eggs, too. And, whatever other kind of breakfast food was on the menu.

"And pancakes?"

"And pancakes." I nodded, taking him by the hand as we exited the hospital and headed towards my car.

The Summer was in full effect, the mugginess of the air sticking to my skin like tape. The sun had settled, leaving the lights of the parking lot to lead us to our destination. After I'd strapped Camden in his car seat, I took my own in the driver's seat.

"You ready, Camden?"

"Yes. Can I have orange juice, too?"

Luckily, I wouldn't have to guess what Camden wanted once we got to the restaurant. He'd given me the rundown, already.

"Orange juice is a go."

"Yes!" I heard him celebrate, still half asleep.

JHALIL

THE DARKNESS of the night was refreshing. It usually meant that my day was done and I could be someone other than who the city needed, undoubtedly. I could be Jhalil. Unfortunately for me, being Jhalil wasn't enough to satisfy the craving I'd gained three months ago.

"Dammit, Wilde." I fussed at my cell as if it was the cause of my disturbance.

She hadn't picked up, which was highly unusual but served me well on this particular night. I needed an excuse to see her, a good enough reason to break the treaty that we'd put in place to secure a solid foundation between us. Her absence was far more notable than her presence.

It haunted me each night that I went to bed after she and Camden had made mine their own for a few nights. Now, I didn't bother even getting in. It was too cold and too lonely, so I opted for the couch. The reclining chair. My office desk. A pallet. Anything but *our* bed.

After closing my blinds, I headed for the bedroom to grab a more comfortable fit. The suit that I wore was not going to work for the disguise that I'd need intact so that my face wasn't blasted over the news the next morning. I switched it out for some grey sweats, an express tee, basketball cap and some dark shades.

Standing in the mirror, I tripled checked my appearance to be sure that I wasn't obvious. Once satisfied, I stopped at the end table by the door to retrieve my keys. My next stop would be at the hospital where I'd finally see her, again.

As suspected, not one person guessed my true identity as I made my way to Ms. Jenkins' room. They'd moved her. I knew the number to her suite from hearing Wilde refer to it at least once each day that we shared calls with one another.

While I was expecting a handsome young fellow to be laid across his mother's lap, I found emptiness in the corner that I had witnessed on FaceTime night after night. My brows furrowed and chest ached. Their belongings weren't neatly tucked in the corner, signaling their lack of plans to return.

"Where are you?" I questioned with a scrunched nose and squinted lids.

"She..." Cough in the distance caused me to snap my neck in the opposite direction. "Gone..." more coughing, "for food."

My mouth slacked while trying to process what I was seeing. Ms. Jenkins held her hand to her mouth as she couched something serious. Forcing myself to think past the astonishment, I ran over to her bedside, where the pitcher of iced water sat, and poured her a cup. Either I hadn't been listening to Wilde the previous night when referring to her frustrations of her grandmother's condition or I'd just witnessed a miracle. I was certain that Wilde wouldn't have left her grandmother's side had she been awake before now. She'd waited too many weeks for this moment.

"Ms. Jenkins."

"Mayor Hanover." She addressed me in a harsh tone after she'd sipped a bit of water.

"Allow me to call your doctor."

"NO. They're just going to shoot that medicine up me like they did the last time to knock me out."

"The last time? This isn't your first time waking up?"

"No. It's my third. Each time, my baby girl is not here, and all I can hear them saying is that my body needs more rest. More rest. More rest." She paused to catch her breath. "I feel fine. All I need is my bed and my boy." She tilted her neck and stared at me under her lids. "And to know when and why you..."

"Ms. Jenkins."

"No. Don't Ms. Jenkins me." She was as feisty as I could remember.

"To my defense, I begged Wilde to mention us to you weeks before your accident. In Wilde's defense, you know how stubborn she is and how she prefers to do things on her own time. I'm..."

"In love with her."

"Completely. Utterly. Is it that obvious, Ms. Jenkins?"

"I hear it in your voice and see the way you're trying to defend her and explain her method of action to the woman that raised her as if I don't know her. You're protecting her, as a man should his woman." Winded, she shook her head and chuckled a bit.

"That's the thing. We're not exactly there, yet. Which is another reason I wish that you were awake all of this time. I can hardly understand her logic at times. She's on this self-love journey that I am all for, but what about..."

"One thing I've learned about Wilde is that you must have patience with her. Maybe she hasn't openly confessed that she wants a relationship with you, son. But, I hear you two on the phone. The smile in her voice is one I

haven't witnessed since she found out she was having Camden." Ms. Jenkins beckoned for the cup. Stepping forward, I held it to her lips and allowed her to sip.

"But, I'm ready. She's taking on so much right now and as her man... It's time to let some of that stress fall on my shoulders."

"AND IT WILL. If I have anything to say about it. That girl is so strong that it weakens her without her even recognizing it."

"So, what can I do to get her to understand that?"

"Be patient."

"I'm not a man of patience. It's been months."

"You're that type."

"I am. Whatever type you're assuming. That's the type I am. If you weren't here and I didn't have to risk the exposure of our relationship coming up here, then things would be much different by now. I'm not exactly the type to sit on the sidelines. Life is short."

"In that case. Maybe I can help a bit."

"I'm listening to whatever you have in mind."

"Go home."

"Huh?"

"Go home." She repeated. "She doesn't have to know we had this conversation or that I'm awake. Besides, it would kill her to know that I woke and she wasn't here. I can feel my energy depleting, anyway. I'm going to catch some sleep before she returns. The news of me waking will send her into a state of happiness. The first person she'll call is you. Don't answer. Make her come looking for you just as you have for her."

Nodding, I allowed the sly smile to creep up on my lips. She was right. I'd chased Wilde for months, and allowed her to dictate the speed of our thing. It was time to turn the tables. I placed the cup back on the table after emptying it.

"Thank you so much!"

"Anything for my Wilde Roads."

"Blessings and I hope to see you soon."

"You will. Without a doubt."

TWO

WILDE

MY EXCITEMENT PLUMMETED to the ground as I heard Jhalil's voicemail for the fourth time in a row. I'd missed his call two hours prior, so I figured he'd be expecting my call. To my surprise, I was receiving his voicemail over and over. Sighing, I decided to make my way back inside of my grandmother's room where doctors and nurses were running tests and welcoming her back to reality.

I rested my limbs on the couch and watched from afar. Every few seconds I would glance at my phone hoping that it rang. My grandmother kept her eyes locked on me as she gave the staff a tongue-lashing.

CONCERN WAS ETCHED in the creases of her forehead. I knew that I'd have some explaining to do once they'd exited and we were alone. Though I'd like to conceal my relationship with Jhalil for as long as I could, I needed someone to vent to, and I knew that my grandmother would lend a useful ear.

WHEN THE ROOM CLEARED, her voice was the first thing I heard. "What's the matter?"

Rubbing the curly top that Camden had, I focused on the bland tiles spread neatly across the floor. "I met someone. Months back. I had every intention of it being just a fling. A one-time thing. But, he wouldn't let up. So I gave in. I fell. Hard. I didn't realize how bad I'd fallen until tonight. Tonight is the first night that he hasn't answered my call. My calls, rather.

And, I'm sick about it. I can't even keep my eyes off of my screen hoping he'll call back."

"I don't like subliminal. Who is he?"

"Jhalil Hanover." I caved inside as the lines rolled off my tongue. An awkward silence pursued, causing me to cringe from the judgment I felt I was under.

THEN, she breathed life back into my body. "Mayor Hanover. I would've never guessed that's who you've spent late nights with. Or fell asleep on the phone with only to wake up and continue your conversation as if you two slept next to each other. Never would have thought that he was the cause of that smile I've been hearing in your voice these last few weeks or the one I saw on your face before I got into this predicament."

The smile that she spoke of returned, causing me to temporarily forget our shortcomings. "You heard all of that?"

"I have. Every word." She nodded. "It sounds like you're at a place I've waited for you to visit since I held you in my arms."

"What's that place?"

"Happiness. And let me tell you about this place. Run to it as often as you can, because the next second is not ours to choose how we live it. I've heard his pleas and your decline for over a month. Mayor Hanover has a city full of women beckoning for his attention, and you're declining it as if it is something you don't want.

The man didn't pick up the phone one time, and you are near tears. If he's a source of happiness for you, then don't continue to hurt yourself by running away from it instead of towards it. Some souls make misery. Some make memory. Some make music. Some make magic. Which does yours make?"

"Ours make music. Magic as I've never seen it before." An emotional wreck, I didn't understand where the outpouring of emotions came from. Tears stained my cheeks as I tried putting into words just how Jhalil made me feel. "I'm hoping to make memories, too."

"Then you're not going to do it alone, Wilde. You've tried that route, and it got you nowhere. How about taking another route and bringing someone along that journey with you? What are you afraid of?"

"It's not me that I'm worried about. It's him. And you. And Camden."

"Oh, honey. I can carry my own. You don't have to worry about me at all. What're your concerns with him?"

"MAYOR MAKE plans to save the city and an exotic dancer that he met at some dark, STD infested strip club."

"Wilde!" My grandmother warned.

We'd sworn not to speak about my occupation since I'd gotten the job. My grandmother's lack of judgment was a huge part of my acceptance of the position. It was only her opinion that mattered. If I allowed Jhalil into my life – full-time – everyone else's would begin too. Hell, no one else knew about us, and I was already scared shitless that we would be exposed and his glass house would come tumbling down.

"FOR ONCE, we must be honest with ourselves."

"Obviously, the man doesn't care enough about what anyone has to say. He's putting forth the effort, and you should return the favor."

"I CARE. Someone has to have sense in this situation, even if I'm the only one. He's okay with it all until the stank hits the fan. And then what, he jets. Concerned with protecting his image more than his relationship? I..."

"Now, we're getting somewhere. In addition to you protecting him, you're also protecting yourself. Afraid of what he may do – or not do – if this all comes to a head."

"Yes. That. But, I genuinely care about how this could jeopardize his career. I'm not worth it. Not worth his downfall. Not worth risking the hard work he's put in in order to secure his spot and rebuild our city. Jhalil is..." My sobs were making it harder to talk. "He's really good at his job, and I can't see myself as being the reason he loses it all."

"LET him be the judge of that. You're stepping in a lane that you don't belong in. Let Jhalil be the one to determine your worth. What he's willing to risk."

"Someone has to be logical. Realistic. He's not the only one at risk. I'm risking humility and possibly my sanity."

"You're a strong individual, Wilde. There's no convincing me otherwise. In addition to everything you said, the most prominent reasoning happens to have everything to do with the neglect that you harbor."

"Mama." My voice cracked. She was bringing out all of the stops.

"I see it in your eyes. Hear it in your voice. In the way that you love your son. The way that you hug him as if he'd disappear. The measures you're willing to take in order to secure his place in this world that he rightfully belongs in."

"Stop it," I begged.

“I’M SORRY, but there’s no better time for you to hear this than now. You have to understand that you’re not the cause of their shortcomings. Not your mother or whoever the hell she decided to lay down and mate with. That’s not on you. You could’ve have been more perfect and your mother more flawed.

Stop beating yourself up as if it's your fault. It's not. Still, today, your mother is fighting demons that grabbed ahold of her when she went off to college. My baby returned for the Summer, and I didn't even recognize her. Just like there was nothing I could say or do to correct that path she was headed down, there was nothing you could've done to redirected her from it.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry for her. I’m sorry that she never got the chance to experience a love like yours. Maybe it would’ve healed those wounds that she have. Maybe... But, we will never know, and it is her loss. Every day, I feel as if it is the day that I will get the call that informs me of her passing. You know what, my soul will finally be at peace. It's sad when you'd rather see your daughter resting under the dirt than worrying about her while she's above it.

I’VE LEARNED to let go, baby. I blamed myself for years. I see that same guilt in your eyes. She neglected me, too. Didn’t let me protect her as a mother should. The way that you protect Camden. And, I had to grow to understand that she chose her battle and I can’t fight it for her. I’m going to get me some more rest, now. Think about what I’ve told you and don’t let that man go to waste.”

I WAS DONE. *Completely.* As I prayed I didn’t wake Camden with my whimpers, I dug deeper into my personal issues and tried to understand why I felt the way I did about my pending relationship with Jhalil. Was I really afraid of being neglected?

I’d never taken the thought into consideration, but hearing it explained to me had me second guessing everything about my existence. I remember the heartache I felt when Camden's father had left me. It wasn't due to his departure from my life, but the fact that my son would grow up fatherless because of it.

I DIDN’T HALFWAY UNDERSTAND the dramatic shift I felt, but it was beginning to surface. Knowing what I’d gone through – emotionally – as a product of neglectful parents, I immediately felt my son’s pain though he hadn’t even been born.

Leaning backward on the couch, I tried reducing the pain in my chest and the tears that fell. I had some things to consider and some battles to fight. The bandage had been removed from my wounds and exposed to me for the first time.

As I thought more on the situation, I realized I had more healing and learning to do than I'd originally considered. Which meant that Jhalil would have to continue his wait for me. The thought alone made me miserable, but I couldn't be a whole us if I wasn't a whole me.

My eyelids grew in size due to the precipitation and constant wiping with my shirt. It wasn't long before they closed and I'd drifted into an uncomfortable slumber. Before I was fast asleep, I prayed that the Lord would be a source of protection while I treaded the depths of my mind and soul over the next few months.

THREE

JHALIL

I WOKE with uncertainty stirring in my heart. I'd listened to Ms. Jenkins' advice and shifted the narrative of our journey. No longer would I be running behind Wilde.

WHEN SHE FOUND the nerve to accept the love I was ready to fill her to capacity with, then I would be waiting. Until then, I would fall back. My pursuit was – obviously – not the answer to our dilemma, so it didn't sound like too much of a bad idea to try another route.

Four missed calls. She'd tried my line a number of times before giving up. It had taken everything within me not to call her back last night or even when I woke this morning.

Now, I was sitting in my office after the morning rush, phone in hand and contemplating making contact. I continued to squeeze the device with hopes that it would ring due to a call from her so that I wouldn't have to break my own rule. But, I could feel myself weakening by the minute. If she didn't reach back out soon, I would be forced to find out why.

Shit. This girl had my fucking head gone, and she had no clue. Watching her ring my line last night was more dreadful than any obstacle I'd faced since taking office and far before.

"MAYOR HANOVER." Dorian peeped into my office before stepping inside.

"Yes, Dorian." I couldn't lend my undivided attention. It was already given to Wilde, wondering and guessing where she was and what was

keeping her.

"Mayor." Trudy came barging through my door. "We have a busy day ahead of us. Sorry, I'm behind on briefing, but..."

"MAYOR." Dorian was the calmest and most collected man I knew unless there was reason not to be. He was the silent but deadly type.

"ONE SECOND, TRUDY." I waved a hand in Trudy's direction.

"You have a visitor," Dorian revealed, finally.

Déjà vu hit me like a ton of bricks. I'd been here before. In this moment. I'd remembered things happening much similar to the way they were at the time, but I couldn't be certain.

"Dorian. Trudy is getting ready to brief me on my day. Whoever it is will just have to wait. In fact, they'll need to schedule an appointment as everyone else. I don't have revolving doors for visitors to come and go as they please. Send them away."

"Mayor." The uneasiness in Dorian's voice caused me to squint my eyes in an attempt to read him. I came up empty-handed.

"DORIAN?" I questioned. His eyes landed on Trudy before returning to me, letting me know that whatever he was about to say didn't need to be heard by her.

"This isn't just any visitor. I wouldn't have disturbed you if..."

DORIAN SHRUGGED as if he could no longer contain the news brewing inside of him. Hell, that made me feel a lot better. I wanted to know who had decided to visit my office unannounced and reign such supreme that they even had the head of security shaking in his boots. Not to say that Dorian was afraid, because I'm certain he wasn't. He was handling the situation with care. The visitor must've been very special to receive this treatment from him.

Shit. It's her.

Clearing his throat, Dorian coded. "It's *Wilde* out there. You saw the news this morning?"

"I said the same thing." I agreed without second thought. "Trudy. If we could have the office. I will buzz you in a few to let you know when I'm headed out." I dismissed Trudy with quickness. There were more pressing issues at hand.

"Mayor Hanover." Trudy protested, but I had no interest in her cause.

"Trudy." I deepened my voice so that she could understand the seriousness of the situation while trying to calm my raging heart and

conceal my uneasiness. "I'll reach out when I handle the matter at hand. We have a busy day ahead of us, and we need to stay focused."

"YES, MAYOR." She nodded, finally getting the point.

Standing from my desk, I removed the coat of my expensively threaded suit. The temperature seemed to have spiked in a matter of seconds, or maybe it was the unexpected visit that elevated the heat within me. Whatever the case, I felt as if I would engulf in flames at any second.

"DORIAN, where is she? Is she okay?" Concern coated my tone. Wilde was adamant about keeping our thing on the low, so showing up to my office in broad daylight was a bit out of character for her. I couldn't help but question the nature of the visit. Though appreciated, I needed to know what it warranted.

"SHE SEEMS JUST fine and is on her way up."

"Up here?" My eyes nearly dislodged from my skull.

"Yes. I tried reasoning with her, but the solution I offered didn't sit well with her."

"What did you offer?"

"To whip you by her crib after I found a way to carve out a few minutes at the start of our schedule to get you to her."

"Dorian." My nostrils flared.

"Mayor." He responded.

"Wilde is, now, top priority. What she wants is hers to have. So, please don't ever reason with her. Ever."

IF THERE WAS nothing more Dorian had learned about me was that my heart wasn't lodged in my chest. It was walking around screening my calls, refusing to be with me – fully – and demanding that I give her unnecessary time to become someone she already was. I was clueless as to how she carried the strength to reject me when we both wanted – both needed – the same thing. *Each other.*

It was baffling, and I raked my mind every day trying to sort it out but came up empty-handed. So, this unexpected visit was both surprising and refreshing. I wanted to shut down my office and cancel my entire day. It had been five weeks out since we shared any time together or I'd seen her anywhere but FaceTime. Since I hadn't been able to remove her lingering presence from my mind.

"IS SHE COVERED?"

“Unrecognizable. Shades, big ones. A large hat to conceal what they’re not.”

“Send her in.” I rubbed my hair towards the front of my face, scalp beginning to perspire along with my palms.

“Are you going to continue to talk about *her* as if *she* isn’t in the room?”

“Dorian.” I nodded towards the door. “The room.”

“Of course. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Please. Don’t bank on it.” Wilde smirked, watching as Dorian backed out of my office.

Once we were both alone, I shared a hypnotizing gaze with the woman I’d – selflessly – given myself to in return for reciprocation. So far, I’d come up empty-handed, but this visit seemed to be a start. I’d take it. The move she’d just pulled was risky, giving her a bit more cool points than I’d like to.

“Wilde.” I stood in place, fighting the urge to remove any space between us so that I was surrounded by her essence. Remembering what her grandmother had warned, I stood my ground.

“Jhalil.” Perplexed, she tilted her head as she removed the hat and glasses from her face.

OUCH. She’d been crying, a sign of pain or discomfort.

Am I the cause? It had only been a few hours since she’d called and I’d missed them. My mind went into overdrive, praying that I wasn’t the source of her sadness.

“Is there a reason you risked all of those things you are always warning me about to come up to my office?”

“Yes.”

Agitated. I could sense her frustration. Still, I wondered what was the matter. Wilde stood still, huffing and shifting her weight. It had been a month since she’d been at the club, and it was apparent. She’d picked up a few pounds since I’d last saw her over a month ago. It wasn’t much, but I’d studied her body enough to notice the simplest changes.

“What may that be?”

“To fuck.”

THIS GIRL BLEW ME. I was expecting a long speech about how she was ready to put our differences aside and work on being a couple. However, I wasn’t complaining about what she was proposing.

“I’m so horny. I can’t take it any longer. I’ve been at the hospital for a month. I haven’t been able to use any of my toys or even get a quick rub in while Camden is sleep because I’m afraid to wake him. My grandmother is up, now, by the way. Back to what I was saying. I’m all pent up and...”

“Wilde.” I stepped forward. “One, I won’t fuck you in my office. You’re too loud for that shit. Two, if I hear anything else about a manmade toy when I’ve got a real ass dick for you to suck and fuck when you’re good and ready to, then I will personally remove them from your home.”

The distance between us was nonexistent. “Jhalil. I didn’t come to hear you tell me no.”

“Wilde, you’re spoiled rotten.” I lifted my hands towards the sides of her face. “But continue to leave me out here like I ain’t got nothing or nobody.”

“Jhalil. Don’t say stuff like that.” Her eyes glossed as she looked up at me, standing on her tiptoes to try and peck my lips. Leaning backward, I didn’t award her with the opportunity.

“WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM?”

“You,” I admitted. “I haven’t seen you in over a month, per your request. I’ve been patient. I’ve waited. I’ve wanted. I’ve prayed. Yet, nothing seems to get through to you. Yet, when you get horny enough, you risk every damn thing you’ve warned me about to get a piece of dick. Selfishly. Is my dick the only thing worthy of your effort, Wilde? You couldn’t do this shit for something more promising... You know. Like, my heart?”

“It’s not like that.”

“That’s exactly what it’s like, Wilde. I don’t have evidence of it being any other way.”

“I just... I’m...”

“Horny, so you made your way to the dick?” I nodded as she did the same.

“Bet.” I stepped backward, removing my limbs from her body.

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?”

“Nothing. Whatever Wilde wants, Wilde gets.” I shrugged.

The buckle of my belt sounded as I began to undo it. The excitement in her eyes at the thought of me pleasing her, physically, pained. This is what I wanted. The anxious and demanding Wilde, of my heart instead of my heart.

But, I was thankful for the revelation of the day. Her visit was the push that I needed in order to see to it that she suffered as much as I had the last few months of her stubbornness. After today, she'd be facing a plethora of regrets, starting with her visit.

"Jhalil. Why'd you say it like..."

"Bend over my desk, Wilde. In that little ass shit, you wore up here to get my dick hard. Well, you've gotten my attention. Bend the fuck over." I commanded.

AS I THOUGHT, she followed in line and readied herself for me. Foolishly, I thought that I'd be able to withhold after she'd announced her current state. I'd been jacking my dick for far too many weeks and couldn't wait to feel her insides, again.

After I'd gotten my pants at my ankles – along with my boxers – I stared at the prettiness of her pink pussy as she bent over my desk as I'd asked. Stroking my dry meat, I walked closer to where she was.

My dick reached her before I could, in search of lubrication. Her secretion flowed from her canal and stained her pussy lips. I rubbed my dick across the area where her liquid gold collected. She was overdue. Long overdue. She'd began whimpering and moaning and I'd barely even touched her.

Putting us both out of our misery and deciding not to prolong the process, I began inserting my dick into her inch by inch. She barely wanted to open for me, but I took my rightful place, anyhow. This was my pussy, and I'd be damned if I couldn't get inside.

"JHALIIIIII..."

Leaning forward, I covered her mouth with my right hand and whispered into her ear. "See, this the shit I'm talking about, Wilde. You need to quiet down, or I'm pulling out."

HER HEAD SHOOK from side to side as she begged me not to remove myself. Abiding by her requests, I began to stroke her from behind. Once I felt as if she could contain herself, I removed my hand from her mouth and squeezed her hip to relieve myself of some of the pressure her pussy was placing me under.

"Stay quiet," I said just above a whisper.

"UM. HMMMM." Wilde nodded in agreement.

"You like that shit, don't you?" I questioned, watching as her face contorted and eyes lowered.

“Yes.” Wilde was trying her best not to scream from the hurting I was putting on her pussy.

Me, on the other hand, was attempting to keep the slapping of our thighs at a minimum as I drilled her from behind. Her pussy was insanely wet, a sign that she missed the dick something serious. Wilde reached backward, trying to stop me from going any deeper than I was, but I smacked her hands out of the way.

“YOU WANTED THIS. TAKE IT.”

I showed her no mercy, my feelings getting the best of me and becoming my source of energy. Lost in my thoughts, I began pumping into her as if my life depended on it. Shit. It did. Or, at least, it felt like it. Without Wilde at my side, I felt lifeless.

Her, right now in my office, was the only time I’d felt as if I was amongst the living all month. She kept me alive with her wittiness, confidence, stubbornness and will to love even though she hadn’t noticed it quite yet.

FOUR

WILDE

HE'D GIVEN me what I wanted, and I can't say that it was all I needed. As we stood in silence readjusting our clothing, I felt the shift in the atmosphere. Jhalil was plain sick of my shit, which made me wonder if mentioning my grandmother's conversation and the new demons I was fighting.

Would he even care?

I'd like to have called him selfish, but I knew that the word didn't fit his character. Jhalil gathered my things for me, shoving them into my hands and wishing me well as he revealed to me that he had a busy day and no time to keep with me.

Though it stung like hell to see him acting so nonchalant with me – all of a sudden – I held my composure and made my exit. It wasn't until I made it to the car when all hell broke loose. In the midst of my tears, I typed away, expressing my plight and explaining his negligence of my feelings due to his impatience.

That was exactly nine days ago, and I still hadn't heard a word from him. Jhalil didn't even think enough of the outpouring of my feelings to text back. Withdrawals were something serious and had me shaking at the boots.

"You sure you're going to be fine?"

"Chile. If you don't get yourself out of my room, I'm going to kick you out."

"Seems like you're already doing that." I sassed.

"Don't be getting no attitude with me cause you deprived and dumb."

ROLLING MY EYES, I began to back out of my grandmother's bedroom. "OH, now you want to leave. Nah. Stay right there Ms. Attitude."

"You've been walking around here with a chip on your shoulder since you went to visit that damn boy. My only guess is he's gotten tired of putting up with your shit."

"Mama."

"And I'm glad, too. Cause, I told you. You think the sun rises and sets on your ass when it comes to him, but it doesn't. That neglect you're trying to avoid is staring you right in the face. You avoiding the man to avoid the heartache and trouble of it all and still ended up with the short end of the stick.

What difference is it... right now with him not worried about yo ass or you two splitting if things got crazy with the public's opinion involved? You've made your scariest nightmare a reality, honey. I'm telling you, now. No one can fix that but you."

"Is that all?" I scrunched my brows and folded my arms across my chest.

"Nah. You're hiding something, but it won't be long before you can't conceal it."

"Excuse me?" My neck reared backward, attempting to understand what she was hinting at, but I had no idea.

"Close my door behind you, child."

Shrugging, I obeyed and continued my day. After meeting with Rick at the club, I had two other stops to make; one included picking up Camden from school. I was so damned relieved that my grandmother was back home because I'd missed my bed something awful.

AS SUSPECTED, Rick wasn't the happiest with my resignation. He'd lost a shitload of money since my absence and was praying to find some new talent that could replace me. I could only wish him good luck because I knew damn well the task would be almost impossible.

WITH MY BODY secretly convulsing behind my tinted window, I stared at the large sign that displayed the company's name that it belonged to. Per usual, there were protesters crowding outside of the gates, seemingly a bit more than usual for a Tuesday. My appointment had been made three days prior when I decided to quit ignoring the signs that my body was changing to accommodate the love note I'd been chosen to have.

Checking the time on my cell, I noticed I had no more to spare. As I exited my vehicle, shades low and hat covering the most of my face, I gnawed at my bottom lip – a sure sign of nervousness. The walk inside seemed to have been three miles long, but I managed. By the time I was inside of the office building, my nerves were scattered and unable to be tamed.

“CAN I HELP YOU?” I heard behind me as I looked around the spacious waiting room.

There were only a few women, all with their heads stuck in their phone or a magazine. Shame polluted the air. I could smell it as I walked up the trail to get inside. Yet, there was only remorse on two of their faces out of the six that I counted.

Procedures were lengthy; the operator had told me last week. So, they refrain from scheduling too many people at once. It was also a plea for privacy on the patient’s behalf, another sign of shame. Or guilt. Whichever was chosen, they were suitable.

“Wilde Roads. I have an appointment.”

JHALIL

“THAT WAS a great speech you gave, Mr. Mayor.”

“Fucking murderer!”

“You are right. Women deserve to chose what they’re allowed to do with their bodies.”

“How would you like it if your mother would’ve aborted you?”

“Abortions are murder. Point. Blank. Period.”

“I was raped, Mayor Hanover. Abortion felt like my only option. Thank you.”

THE SUBJECT WAS A SORE ONE, usually on all sides. Personally, I was pro-life, but I understood that certain situations and circumstances weren't idea to bring a child into. Plus, the world was so cruel to women,

telling them how to use and when to use their bodies. I felt as if a woman didn't want to have a child; then no one should make her.

THE THOUGHT WAS ABSURD. We put so much pressure on women protecting themselves from unwanted pregnancies as if they could impregnate themselves. That is the reason most of my focus is towards raising young men that respect women and vice versa. It was all a system that worked together for the greater good.

I'd just finished my speech outside of Parenthood, a clinic that serviced low-income mothers who were in need of abortions. There were a few other services they offered, but ninety-eight percent of their clients received abortions. Before heading back to my vehicle, it was a habit of mine to speak with the people.

"No, thank you," I responded to the young lady in my path as we shook hands.

I CONTINUED THROUGH THE CROWD, ignoring the protesters who'd gathered in flocks. Their signs were large, and voices were loud. One even had a bullhorn in an attempt to drown me out as I was speaking. Of course, I understood their fight, but they had no rights deciding what someone else decided if it didn't directly affect them.

OUT THE CORNER of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the building. The same hat and shades that I'd seen a week or two ago came charging forward. The moisture in my cheeks evaporated, leaving my throat dry as I watched her climb into her car and reverse it.

Immovable.

I couldn't move a muscle as I simply stared. Flashbacks of our last encounter began floating around in my head, accompanied with our moments of intimacy that led to unprotected sex. That unprotected sex led to poor removal skills at the sign of ejaculation. I was no good at the task.

THE SUDDEN CHANGE IN BEHAVIOR.

The not-so-obvious weight gain.

The emotional meltdowns.

The overbearing sex drive.

It all made sense to me, now. Considering where we were and what was done behind the doors of the office she'd just exited, there was only one conclusion to be made. My knees weakened, and heart fought to exit my chest cavity.

SHE WAS PREGNANT.

THE PAIN WAS POTENT, but the anger overruled within seconds. Wilde was one that thrived in secrecy, which is why I could hardly understand what was so damn difficult about having a relationship that reflected her preference, anyhow. When my brain began to function properly and could order my limbs, I cut my socializing short and headed towards my vehicle.

Trudy was in tow, Dorial leading the way and two other men from my team were behind me. Swiftly, we trod towards the truck. Most of our bodies piled into the large SUV. There was no way that I was taking Trudy along this ride with me, so it was important that we split. Regretful, I informed her that she'd need to catch a ride in the second vehicle that belonged to the detail.

"Trudy. I have a very important – and personal – matter to tend to that needs my immediate attention. I need you to get into the truck with Marcus and Daniel."

"Mayor. We have another stop to make before we head to the office. Remember, we..."

"I don't remember much of shit but what I just told you. Our next stop isn't as near as pressing as the issue at hand. My appearance is a favor; I didn't sign on for anything. I was only showing face out of generosity. Trudy. I'm not going to go back and forth on this matter. I'm leaving, and you're getting in the car behind us."

NODDING, she removed herself from the vehicle. Dorian had stepped outside the minute that I mentioned her departure. My head fell into my hands as the pressure of my pending conversation drowned me. Anxiety was a trait that I took pride in controlling, but it was choking the life out of me as I waited for Dorian to return to the truck and get me to her.

"Mayor." He slid into the driver seat and spoke.

I didn't respond, because he was aware of our next move. There was only one person who could get me riled up like this. Her name was Wilde Roads. My body felt as if it had been drenched in hot lava down to the sole of my feet. Everything was on fire. The small vent that was spewing air was no match for the heat that had arisen within me.

DORIAN CUT our travel time down by minutes. I was thankful for his urgency. "Come back in twenty-five."

My truck sitting outside of Wilde's house wouldn't have been a smart idea. "Grab the keys to the Jag from my house and come back in it. We will continue the day as planned after I finish up in here."

“Will do.” Dorian’s reply was simple.

I exited the truck as I loosened my tie and the first two buttons on my shirt. Thankfully, her car was parked in the yard, a sure sign that she was home. The doorbell sounded from the inside out after I’d rang it. It felt like an eternity before Ms. Jenkins opened the door with a scowl on her face.

“Where is she?” I whispered, not wanting to warn Wilde of my presence.

“Hello to you, too.” Ms. Jenkins yelled-whispered.

“She was pregnant.” I ignored her statement and let out the one I’d been holding inside since I saw Wilde leaving Parenthood.

“She’s upstairs.” Ms. Jenkins didn’t have anything to say. Nothing. Instead, she directed me towards Wilde’s bedroom.

The door was unlocked, allowing me to push my way inside. The discontent I felt came to a boiling head. The minute I saw her curled up in the bed recovering as if she hadn’t just slaughtered my child, I lost it.

“Get the fuck up!” I roared.

“Jhalil.” She rolled over before sitting up on the bed.

HER LIDS WERE SWOLLEN, possibly due to the guilt she was carrying around. I didn’t feel an ounce of remorse as I watched her weeping from afar. Too uptight and dysfunctional to care any or give her the least bit of sympathy. Whatever she was dealing with, she deserved it.

“An abortion?” My voice cracked, finally speaking the words I’d held back. “Do you hate me that fucking much to abort my child without even considering the fact that I should have a say in the matter?”

Am I that damn bad that you couldn’t come to me and confide? I must be one pathetic son-of-a-bitch, Wilde. Really. Are you so afraid of love that you can’t even accept the unconditional kind that a child gives you, no matter what? I just...”

My eyes prickled from the display of emotions in the form of tears threatening to spill over my lids.

“I just... just don’t get it. Get you. Get any of this. Damn, girl. Not only have I had to suffer for someone else’s mistakes, but my child has fallen victim to your fucked up mentality as well. I can’t do this shit, Wilde.”

“Jhalil. Please. Let me explain.”

“There’s nothing for you to explain, Wilde. You sound as pathetic as you look. This is it for us. It for me. I tried to give you something that you simply didn’t deserve. I’m fucking dying inside. Can’t you see that shit?”

You've got the balls to slide up and down a pole in front of strangers but didn't have the courage to tell me that you were carrying my child?"

"Don't you dare go there."

"Oh, I went there and for good reasoning. Listen. Let me get this shit over with. Don't ever call my fucking phone, again. Don't come by my house, or I'll have you arrested for trespassing. If you see me out, look the other fucking way.

In fact, I don't even want your fucking vote when the time comes, again. I don't want shit to do with you. You're one sick, inconsiderate individual and I want nothing to do with you and these invisible demons you keep trying to fight alone. Good fucking luck!"

I had to get out of there. I was afraid of what else I might say or do while in her presence. She'd managed to unman me in the most insane way. My vulnerability was at an all-time high at the moment. I didn't even have the balls to sit on the side of Dorian in my vehicle, so I didn't call.

INSTEAD, I took off down the street, headed nowhere in particular. The risk of someone seeing me wandering never crossed my mind. For once, I needed to be in my feelings and accept the changes that were sprung on me just minutes prior.

As I continued down the road, far away from her, I allowed the tears to cascade down my cheeks. I wasn't too much of a man that I resented tears.

Though, I'd never openly shed them or hadn't done so in years; I was still prone to them. Just as quickly as they fell, I swiped them away with the button-down I wore. I'd been trying my hardest not to hurt her or inflict any kind of pain on her and look where it had gotten me. I was so blinded by her agony that I didn't see my own until it was staring me in the face.

I wasn't the culprit. Never had been. She was. She was destined to disappoint me from the start. I should've collected my losses and never looked back after we'd had our fun the night we met. Pursuing her after we'd left the club was my biggest mistake to date.

FIVE

JHALIL

THE FIRST WEEK was the hardest. *She'd called 22xs to be exact. Against my orders, she'd come by twice.*

The second week was a bit easier. *She'd called 8xs.*

The third week, pressure rose. *However, she only called 3xs.*

The fourth week, *she called once. On a Tuesday.*

Week five, *she didn't call at all.*

It was week six, and instead of a call, I received five text messages. I didn't access them right away, drying my body and moisturizing my skin from the shower I'd just exited. It was on my own time that I opened her messages. I was expecting a five-page letter on how sorry she was and how she wanted to try and work things out. I had nothing for her. But, what I received nearly knocked me to my knees.

TEXT #1: *20 weeks, today. Second trimester. No complications. Healthy baby & mom.*

ATTACHED WAS ***a photo of her small round belly.***

SHE'D CROPPED the picture so that her face wasn't visible. For some reason, there was a burning desire within me to see her face. I wanted to know if she was happy with her decision to keep our child. I wanted to know if the pregnancy had been good to her or was she as miserable as I'd been for the last six weeks. It all mattered to me.

Regret filled my lungs like oxygen, and I was beginning to feel remorseful for the way that I'd treated her that day I barged into her room.

Each time she tried to explain, I cut her off. Even afterward when she'd tried calling and coming by my place. I shut her out. Shut her down, completely, when all she wanted to do was tell me that we were expecting a little one.

Suddenly, I didn't care what she was doing at the clinic. All that mattered is that she came out the same way she'd went in, with-child. Trying not to get too caught up in my head, I continued with the messages.

TEXT #2: *She's the size of a banana, now. Weighing approximately 10.8 ounces, give or take a half ounce. Her heart rate is strong. Sounded so beautiful at the appointment, today. She's busy through the night, sleeping through the entire day. I rest when I'm able, and that's okay with me.*

TEXT #3: *Her first photo.*

ATTACHED WAS ***an ultrasound with circles and words that identified parts of the body.***

I COULDN'T GAUGE her mood. The texts were so bland and straight to the point. There wasn't a hint of excitement. If my gift of discernment was intact, then I sensed sadness. Yet, I had no idea if it was due to my absence or the baby.

TEXT #4: *I've begun a list of possible names. I was wondering if you'd chose.*

BRIELLE.

Jillian.

Joelle.

Caliana.

Leigha.

Josee.

Jai.

ALL OF THE names listed were beautiful, but Joelle stuck with me the most. *Joelle Caliana.* I paired two of the names on the list. They sounded good together.

TEXT #5: *I'm sorry. This thread of messages have everything to do with the life we created and nothing to do with me, but I just wanted you to know how sorry I am for not being able to become the woman that you needed me to be.*

YOU WERE ALREADY HER. ***I didn't want you to change a single fucking thing, Wilde.*** I thought to myself as I continued reading her

apology, which read so sincerely. At this point, I was aware of her state. Sadness was confirmed. I could only imagine how painful it was to confess her shortcomings that didn't truly exist. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that she was a ball of tears sending these messages. The thought pained me. I still cared. Still loved her. As fucked up as it sounded, *I still wanted her.*
BUT, for the sake of our daughter, I pray for your forgiveness each night.
I'm aware that there's no us.

WHY DOES she do this to herself? To me. Why does she say shit like this? The room heated, though I had the air conditioner blowing. Yes, I'd told her that I wanted nothing to do with her, but I halfway meant that shit. Both of us couldn't lose hope. Someone had to fight for what we had, and I was tired. I needed her to fight back. Go to bat for me as I'd done for her for months at a time. It was the only way. Our only way.

I'VE COME to terms with the fact that everyone serves a purpose in your life and this little one was ours to each other. I'm at peace with that. What I'm not at peace with is the possibility of raising another child as a single parent. I hope that we can find a way to at least be what each other needs for her sake. If you're willing, can we please have a sit down one day soon to discuss our roles in one another's life as it pertains to our unborn child? I will be waiting for your response. Goodnight, Jhalil.

I STARED AT THE SCREEN, reading each message at least five times each before I began typing one of my own.

I'm coming...

I'm... I began to erase the message I'd started.

Wilde... I was so indecisive.

W... I erased that, too.

Thank you. I finally got out but erased it as well.

I DIDN'T KNOW what to say or how to say it, so I said nothing at all. As I was about to exit the messages, I saw the gray bubble pop up, and anxiety hit me like a ton of bricks. What more did she have to say?

TEXT #6: *I understand if you have nothing to say to me. I'll leave you with this information so that you're able to witness the growth of our child, inside and outside of the womb. I'll continue to send the appointment cards as I receive them. Goodnight, Jhalil.*

ATTACHED WAS *a photo of a white card with her appointment date and time listed.*

NO, don't go to sleep. Stay awake and keep telling me more about our gift. I wanted to be the one to crash first, thoughts of my unborn child rocking me to sleep. Wilde had confessed that she stayed awake at night, so I was certain that she wasn't on her way to bed. I couldn't bring myself to respond, though. Instead, I dressed in a pair of briefs with a silly smile on my face. I felt so damned good inside that I doubted if sleep would come soon. But, I tried anyway.

THREE HOURS later and I was still *restless*. I was busy wondering what Joelle must've been doing in her mother's tummy at one in the morning. I also wondered who she'd resemble, but my bets were on Wilde. At least, I hoped that she took after her mother. Wilde was beautiful, exotic-looking. She had this oriental trait that shined brightly, causing me to question who her father's ethnicity.

Realizing the hype wouldn't die down, I returned to the thread of messages that I'd received from Wilde. I wanted her to know that I'd decided on a name. If I was lucky, she'd release more information about our baby girl.

JOELLE CALIANA. I sent before I could think twice.

Hanover. That was the second message, assuring Wilde that our daughter would take my last name.

THOUGH IT WAS ONLY three minutes, it felt like an eternity before she responded.

I LOVE IT.

I think she's excited as well. She's cutting flips just now.

THE THIRD MESSAGE I received a video of Wilde's stomach. It was dark, but I could still make out the movements. It was amazing, seeing her stomach expand and sink. She didn't show her face, but I could hear the happiness through the laughter of hers in the video. My heart swelled.

At that moment, there was nowhere I'd rather be than between her legs, kissing her stomach and reminding my daughter that she'd been chosen for

the best, most loving pair of people in the universe. Together, we would teach her to be so much more than the world expected of her.

“JOELLE. Daddy decided on a name for you, sweet girl.”

Her voice was so soothing, calming the movements in her stomach. “Don’t shy away, now.” Wilde chuckled before the video ended. I was a bit disappointed that it was so short in length.

Over and over, I played it until sleep did find me. My weeks had been quite shitty since seeing Wilde at the clinic. Yet, the conclusion of my day had soothed the wounds I’d acquired since then. For once, I was utterly happy.

SIX

WILDE

“CAMDEN. Mommy doesn’t feel too good. I need you to be a good boy this morning. Here. Slip on your shoes.”

Fall was upon us, and the weather couldn't make up its mind. Due to its indecisiveness, I'd developed a cold. Any mother could vouch that pregnancy colds were the worst of them all. It seemed as if they never went away. There wasn't much medicine available for us to take without harming our babies, so we were left to fight off the infections ourselves.

“Camden.” I heard my grandmother call from downstairs. “Get down here so that I can put your clothes on.”

“He has them on. He only needs his shoes on.”

Bending was becoming a bit of a task. At twenty-five weeks, I was finally starting to look as if I had swallowed a watermelon. I had begun sitting on my knees to do things as simple as tie Camden's shoes. The amount of huffing and puffing that I did if I bent over to fix them was borderline embarrassing.

“WELL, send them on down with him.”

She didn't have to tell me twice. “Here. Take these with you, baby.”

While Camden made his way downstairs, I finished getting dressed for my appointment. I could hardly wait to get a glimpse of my little one, again. She gave me hell every night, but I was certain it would all be worth it in the end.

Once I had completed my morning tasks, I headed downstairs as well. “Camden. Come on. It’s time for us to go.”

He came speeding out of the room, ready to get to his school. I’d worried about him liking the new environment, but I found myself explaining every weekend why he couldn’t go to daycare.

“We’re gone.”

“Alright, baby.”

AS I GOT Camden in his seat, I was astounded to see the Jag that I’d been inside many times come to a creep in front of my house. Squinting, I tried getting a better view of the passenger that Jhalil was hauling around. I didn’t have to wonder about her identity for long, because she exited the car along with him.

They approached me much faster than I’d anticipated. “Wilde.”

“Jhalil.” It was the only thing that came to mind.

“This is my mother. Mom, this is Wilde. We’re here to accompany you to the appointment.”

My mouth slacked as I shifted my weight from one side to the other. I hadn’t seen Jhalil in an entire lifetime, or so it felt. Now, here he was as sexy as I remembered him. Extending my arm after finding my manners, I embraced his mother with a firm handshake.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Same.” She seemed sweet enough. Like Jhalil, she was dark skinned with a beautiful smile and no signs of aging. It would’ve been hard to believe she had a child his age.

“Jhalil. I need to get Camden to school before the appointment.”

“I figured. We can follow you.”

“You sure?”

“I’m certain. Watch out.” He commanded.

When I was out of the way, he opened the door and began getting Camden riled up. I shook my head as the two of them went back and forth making dino noises. Knowing that Jhalil would make sure his door was secured after their shenanigans, I had my seat behind the wheel.

“Alright. We’re right behind you. If you don’t mind, my mother will go inside of the doctor’s office with you. When they call you back, I’ll come in. To keep...”

“I know. You don’t have to explain, Jhalil. I’ll see you there.”

“Cool.”

IT WAS ONLY her and I. I'd gotten checked in and was waiting to be called back. I could sense the urgency in her movements. She wanted to talk, but I didn't have much to say. I'd fucked over her son and gotten myself into some shit by getting pregnant by him. As well, I was facing the possibility of being a single parent to two children under the age of four. It was all depressing to even think about.

"So." She started, facing my direction, possibly staring at the roundness of my face. That's one thing I didn't miss about pregnancy. "Have you considered plans for a shower?"

"I haven't. I haven't given it much thought. Not sure if I even want one."

"Oh, honey. We must have one. If not for you, at least for me. This will be my first grandchild. I've waited on this day for some time, now."

"In that case, I won't deprive you."

I was happy that her questions didn't feel like she was prying. "Thanks. Jhalil mentioned that he'd chosen Joelle for a first name. Did he mention that his father's name is Joseph? It is perfect."

"Yes. He did choose that name, though I had no reason why. With a father named Joseph, that sounds logical."

"HE'S SO happy about the baby, just as I am. We've wanted to be grandparents since Jhalil graduated college."

"Really?"

"Yes. That boy has been grown for an eternity. I hated his father grew him up so darn fast. I imagine if I had a girl, I could've had a bit more time to spoil her."

"Well, now you have one."

"Roads." My name was called.

"That's us. Will you let him know?"

"Of course."

STRANGELY, I was settled into the same room that I'd been in the appointment before my current one. As I laid back on the bed, clothing removed, I listened for him. It wasn't long before I heard him knock, softly,

and then enter the room with his mother behind him. She'd stayed out in the hallway while I got undressed.

"It's open."

JHALIL WALKED INSIDE with an unreadable expression on his face. I couldn't determine what he was thinking. I'd give an arm to know how he felt. He didn't even attempt eye contact, focusing on his mother and participating in conversation with her.

"Ms. Roads. Nice to see you again." Doctor Adams walked into the room with a notepad in his hand.

"Doc, I need to speak with her for a quick second. Can you give us like five seconds?" Jhalil found the nerve to ask.

"Sure. I'll be right back." He turned around and walked right back out of the room.

"Jhalil."

"You couldn't find anyone else to play with your pussy? You had to choose a man. I'm sure there are female doctors in here. You need to..."

"Jhalil. He's gay."

His mother burst into laughter, shaking her head and rubbing Jhalil's back to calm him. "What's the big issue?"

"You should've said that at first."

"You haven't exactly given me time to tell you anything. Have you forgotten that you won't even answer my calls? Barely reply to the millions of texts messages I send."

"You don't deserve a response from me, so let's not go there. I'm here. Where I'm supposed to be, so let's just focus on that."

"Here when you're supposed to be? Is that what you call this?"

"Yeah. That's what this is. You brought this upon yourself, though."

"Jhalil." His mother hissed.

"I'm just giving her..."

"Now is not the time. You've had ample time before this visit to find out everything that you wanted to know. So, don't blame anyone but yourself. You've even told me that the damn girl has tried reaching out. It's just as much of your fault as it is hers."

"Nah. It's my fault. Everything is my fault, I guess." Shrugging, I focused my attention towards the ceiling. "Doctor!"

THE COOL GEL was the part of the appointment I loved most, mainly because it signified the fact that I would be hearing and seeing her seconds

later. First, the heart monitor made its appearance. The swooshing subsided and a strong heartbeat came blasting through the speakers. Jhalil stood beside me in silence, watching the monitor where our baby's stats were displayed.

"Very strong girl." Doctor Adams complimented. "Now, let's see what she's doing in here."

He replaced the heart monitor with a gray wand. There was more swooshing before she popped up on the screen. "And there she is."

"That's..." Jhalil started. "That's her? That's my little girl?"

I wondered what he looked like under those shades and hat. He was definitely in disguise, but I wanted to see him. I needed to see if he was as in love with her as I was the first time I laid eyes on her or heard her heartbeat.

HEAT EMITTED FROM HIS SKIN, flames engulfing me as I felt him latch on to mine. "That's our daughter." He brought the back of my hand up to his lips, sending electric currents through me.

Nodding, I agreed. "That's her."

"How many of those can we have, Doc?"

"How many pictures?"

"Yes. I want as many as you can take. We don't mind paying for extras. Wilde will need a set and so will we." She referred to she and Jhalil, making me sick to my stomach. The thought of separating everything, getting double everything. It was all too much at the moment.

"Yes. I'll have these printed up for you. A nurse will be back to bring them in. You can get dressed, Ms. Roads."

"Thanks."

"My pleasure."

Silence. No one said anything as he exited. When the nurse returned, there still hadn't been any exchange in words. I was given an appointment card, and so was Jhalil. His mother grabbed their set of pictures before the nurse could even offer them. Her excitement was contagious. Too bad I was overcome by sadness, realizing just how fucked up of a situation we were in.

JHALIL

“MOM. Can you give us the room?”

“Sure. I’ll be waiting outside.”

We both remained silent, staring at each other and communicating without words. We were hurting, both of us. Separation didn’t suit either of us well. The minute my mother was out of the door, Wilde covered her face and began to weep.

Her tears were agonizingly loud, inducing an emotional flare of my own. I cleared my throat to try and correct the path I was following her on. I couldn’t do this shit. I couldn’t sit and listen to her express her pain. I couldn’t keep pretending that us not being together wasn’t fucking with me, too. I didn’t want to, either.

So, instead of keeping my composure, I began, “I’ll be here every step of the way.”

IT WAS ALL I HAD. I swallowed the rest of my words – the ones that would bring her solace – and decided that she didn’t deserve them at the time. Her suffering was self-inflicted. Keeping my promise to myself, I started for the door.

“Jhalil. Please.” Her pleas were potent enough to dismantle the strongest man. I didn’t face her, but my steps halted.

“Thank you. Thank you for giving my parents and I a reason to keep living and someone else to pour our love into.” With that, I exited.

SEVEN

JHALIL

“YOU LOVE HER.” My mother finalized after five minutes of silence. I'd gotten back into the car and hadn't said a word. The excitement of the visit had been downplayed by Wilde, and I's personal differences.

“SO MUCH THAT it hurts to see her hurting and not be able to stop the pain.”

“Why won't you?” She shifted in her seat, removing her shades and facing me.

“She's been hurting me, too. I've been chasing behind her for far too long. If she wants this, then she's going to have to work for it. I'm tired of giving her passes.”

“She's a nice girl, Jhalil.”

“The best kind of girl.” I bragged. “I just need her to get her stuff together.”

“She will. I can see that she misses you and vice versa. You two have so much time to make things right that you don't even have a clue.” She chuckled.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“She's the one you'll marry.” My mother was a very frank woman. Hearing the words come from her mouth had me shaken up a bit.

“You think?”

“I knew there was someone special, Jhalil. I could feel it. I also knew that she was the one for you. When you revealed the news that you two

were expecting, I was so happy that my suspicions were confirmed. I'm delighted to welcome her into our family. Last night, I went into your grandmother's things. I removed the ring your grandfather got her in case you wanted to... You know... Carry on the family's tradition. It's at the house waiting for you. You should take it with you and have it just in case the moment arises."

"We're at odds right now. I can't possibly propose marriage."

"Oh. There's a rule about proposing only when you're happy with your spouse? I never read that anywhere. I can't see the difference, son. As long as you know you're going to spend the rest of your life with the woman, it doesn't matter if you two are on shaky grounds or not. Do you plan to marry her?"

"I knew that I would the day that I met her."

"Then, don't wait too long to engage."

"I won't. She's just always so worried about what others will think of her. It drives me insane."

"It's called pride, and she has every reason to protect it. I suggest you clean out your closet so the public can see. This way, they have no ammunition to fire at your loved ones. It is your job to find a solution. But, don't wait until they go snooping. Bring it to them first."

I THOUGHT about what my mother was saying, and she was right.

I STARED at the black box that I'd picked up while dropping my mother off earlier. The ring that it held inside was beautiful, but I wanted to give Wilde something a bit more modern. I came up with the idea to allow her to pick out a second ring on her own. She could rock it as a wedding band, with this being the engagement ring.

But, none of that mattered at the time. We were not anywhere near where I wanted us to be when I asked her. For now, we had bigger fish to fry. One was the little sweet girl that she had baking in her oven. After we got that situation out of the way, we could consider us.

My cell pinged, alerting me to a text message. It was her. of course, she wasn't asleep. Joelle kept her up during the night. Around this time, she was **restless** and so was I.

*JHALIL. I've been thinking so much about us lately. Seeing you today was unexpected, but it helped me to understand how **relentless** and resilient you are. I've been such a horrible person, and I'm ready to right my wrongs. Tell me, is there anything I can do to rectify our situation? Put us back on track, again?*

WITHOUT MUCH THOUGHT, I replied to her message. I'd gone over the solution to our problem many nights and this one was no different. I only wanted one thing from her.

FIGHT.

FIGHT? She replied.

FIGHT FOR WHAT YOU WANT. Fight for me. Fight for us. Fight for Camden. Fight for Joelle. Fight for your family.

SHE DIDN'T REPLY, showcasing her lack of courage to blossom under pressure. I waited and waited. Nothing. Coming to terms with the fact that she wouldn't be responding, I prepared myself for bed. Ten minutes after I'd made myself comfortable on the couch in the living room, my doorbell sounded. Frustrated, I lifted to see who was at my door at this time of day.

"It's me." I heard her yell, acknowledging her presence.

Immediately, I swung the door open to see if everything was okay. "What are you doing here? This late? Everything okay?"

"YOU SAID that I needed to fight. Well, this is me. Putting up a fight." Her head hung low. She couldn't look me in my eyes.

"Wilde. Go home and get some rest."

"I'm fucking restless, Jhalil." She began to cry. "I just need you to not be upset with me anymore. I'm so scared. I'm so scared to do this all alone, again."

"I'm here. You won't be doing it alone."

"You been there when I need you is not the same as you being THERE. It's different. Even if we find a way to do this apart, I'll still be doing this alone. That terrifies me."

"Is the baby the only reason you see fit to be with me, Wilde. Because, before now, you were adamant about pushing me away."

"But you were still there, so I took advantage of that. It wasn't until you shut me out that I was able to experience life after you. Its miserable and

the pregnancy doesn't make it much better. I'm a wreck without you."

She was saying the things that I needed to hear in order to believe that she was genuine with her pursuit. "Wilde. I'll need some time to process this."

"No. I've given you two and a half months of time. I can't manage another minute without you. I'm afraid that I'll hate myself even more if I have to."

"Don't hate yourself."

"Then, don't make me."

"Tell me, Wilde. What do you want from this?"

"Contentment. Recovery. Happiness." It didn't take but a second for her to belt out her wishes. She'd thought about this. "And more babies." A half-smile appeared across her lips before she looked up at me, again. "Marriage, maybe?" She wasn't so sure of the last one, but I was. There was nothing more that I wanted to do than give her everything that she'd requested.

"Maybe?" I questioned.

"Definitely." She corrected. "And trust. Honesty. So much Jhalil. I even wrote it all down." She dug into her back pocket and retrieved a small journal. "I've been writing to you since that day you came over. The words that I can't say, I've written. Everything is there."

"Fuck." I flipped through the pages that were filled to the brim.

"I ran out of pages. That's when I knew it was time to confront this. Please, Jhalil. Tell me you forgive me."

"Come inside, Wilde."

"No, I'm going back home to cry myself to sleep. I've been *restless*. But, first, please tell me."

"Why can't you do that shit here?"

"Because, when I stepped into your house again, I refuse to bring the demons of my past with me. If you can tell me that you forgive me right now, I promise to be back in the morning. Just say it, Jhalil."

"Wilde."

"Say it." She pleaded, eyes red from the crying.

"You're forgiven."

"Jhalil. I want you to mean it."

"I don't say shit I don't mean."

I was expecting for her to jump all over me or forget her promise to only return to my home when she'd battled her demons and won. But, I was wrong. Even if it was only a few hours, she had plans to make me wait.

"JHALIL. Thank you. Thank you so much. I know I haven't shown it, but you're everything to me. Everything. You've come into my world and twisted it right side up. I promise I'll be so good to you that you won't be able to stand it. I'm sorry for the pain and frustration I've caused. I'm going to spend the rest of our lives making it up to you. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." I wiped the tears from her eyes, though I wanted to kiss them away. I knew that if I didn't let her go to conquer her hindrances, then she never would.

"I'll see you in the morning. Wait up for me."

"I've been waiting up for you since the day I met you, Wilde," I admitted.

"Go inside." She pointed towards the door.

"No, you go ahead."

"I don't want you to see me walk away and try to convince me to stay. I'll give in."

"I don't want to see you walk away."

"Jhalil." She whined.

"But, if you insist." I turned and headed back inside of the house.

It took everything in me not to reroute and try to invite her inside, again. I wanted her in the bed I hadn't seen for weeks. I'd managed to find peace in it the night I found out about Joelle, but not since or before.

From my window, I watched as she got into her car and sat there. I wasn't sure if she was contemplating returning or just needed to release the tears I saw her hunched over and crying. Feeling as if I had to do something, I returned to the door and exited. I reached her car without her even noticing. When I opened the door, I startled her.

"Jhalil."

"Just stay the night. Please. Let me love on you like you need me to. Aight?"

"O... Okay." She sniffled.

"And stop crying. You're probably upsetting Joelle."

"Okay."

SHE WAS PENT UP. For the fourth time, her pussy hiccupped on my dick. It contracted while attempting to squeeze nut from me that I wasn't

ready to give it. Though we could be as *reckless* as we wanted since the damage had already been done, I still had a minute or two in me.

"Shit." I fussed as I tried containing my excitement.

Channeling my energy in a different direction, I stared down at Wilde's protruding belly. She was going to have my baby. The woman that I loved was giving me a love child. It all seemed surreal.

I continued to slide in and out of her slipperiness, watching as Wilde made the sexiest faces known to man. She was so damned beautiful, and I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my entire life with her at my side.

The thought alone brought me to my climax. I held on to her shoulders while leaning forward to whisper in her ear. "Marry me."

"Okay." She agreed.

I CLEANED US BOTH, wanting to bathe her but decided to let her rest. She was at peace laying across my bed, stomach poking towards the ceiling. I could already tell that this would be my favorite view until the baby was born.

"Wilde," I whispered.

"HMMMM." She stirred in her sleep, hardly.

"Will you marry me?" She hadn't exactly said what I wanted to hear, yet.

"Jhalil. I said, okay. We can talk about this another time. I'm so tired."

"We're going to talk about it right now. Rub your hand across your ring finger." I suggested. During our lovemaking session, I'd managed to get her ring on.

"JHALIL." She jumped up from the bed, fully awake, now. "You didn't."

"Tell me what I want to hear, Wilde."

"What do you want to hear, baby? Of course..." She choked up. "Of course, I'll marry you."

"I want you to say the magic word."

I didn't want to see any more tears, but these were happy ones.

"YES. Yes, Jhalil. I'll marry you. How could I not? When did you? How did you?"

"It's been on my nightstand all day. I picked it up after our appointment and a long talk with your grandmother and my mother."

"I don't deserve you."

"Don't say that. Come here, Mrs. Hanover and baby Hanover."

“Stop. You’re going to make me cry.” Wilde shuttered in my arms as I wrapped them around her.

“Too late for that.”

“I love you.” She confessed.

“I love you, too.”

EPILOGUE

JHALIL

THE DURATION of the five-minute stroll from the government issued car that I'd ridden to work inside of up to my office was tripled. Supporters – my most loyal ones – were in attendance to show their support the day after announcing that I would be running for a second term. While others were in attendance to spew their hate and give me the nonsense reason as to why they felt I was as weak as my campaign.

IT WAS my fourth year in office, and I was banking on extending my run by dominating my opponent in the upcoming election. I'd unburied the city in under four years, decreased the unemployment rate, improved the overall school system, dug deeper into our city's budgets, removed the necessary clutter, reduced crime in the communities and reenlisted faith within our people.

YET, there were still thousands of voters unwilling to admit to the fresh air I'd breathed into the city or the newfound hope I'd brought along with it. However, they weren't my concern. It was the people like Mrs. Francine, who had become a regular, showing her face and support at every event I was scheduled to thank me for helping her son get a job and get out of the streets.

There were men like Mr. Folder who appreciated my cleanup efforts in his neighborhood. Heath Benedict was also one of my great supporters, which allowed me to hold meetings in his offices with the city's core leaders and way makers in order to induce change where and when needed. Those

were the voters who were awarded my attention time after another because those were the voters who were going to get me back into office the following election.

"TRUDY."

I nodded walking into my office, finally free of the massive loads of people demanding handshakes, hugs, a quick word or a rundown on plans for the upcoming term that I hadn't even made. Seeing the walls of my office had never made me happier. Trudy was already in attendance, iPad in hand waiting to go through the pile of work I had stacked for the day.

"MAYOR HANOVER. Good morning. Can I get you some coffee, sir?"

"In the last five years, you haven't known me to drink a sip of coffee. Yet, you question if I want one every morning."

"Because I can't understand how you make it through the day without at least one. I have two by the time I'm walking out of the doors. That's just to get me home. I'd need three if crashing wasn't the only option once I made it there."

We both shared a hearty chuckle before Trudy cleared her throat and began calling off tasks. I listened while logging into my computer and returning a handful of personal emails that needed my attention. The reading of my agenda concluded as Trudy, and I heard a knock on the door.

"MAYOR. YOU HAVE A VISITOR." Dorian, head of my security detail peeked in and warned.

"Dorian. I'm being briefed on my day. Whoever it is will just have to wait. Being that my schedule was just given to me and no one is due in my office at this time, I'd even prefer for you to inform them of our policies. Schedule a meeting or don't bother..."

"Mayor. This isn't just any visitor."

Dorian was no longer behind the door. He'd stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The seriousness of his tone alarmed me, Trudy, all the same. Both of our eyes edged a bit closer to their ledges, questioning the nature of the visit. Without giving Trudy as much as a glance, he locked eyes with me, signaling the unthinkable and causing me to near cardiac arrest.

CLEARING HIS THROAT, Dorian coded. "It's Wilde out there. Crowd isn't simmering down."

"That, it is. Trudy. If we could have the office. I will buzz you in a few to let you know when I'm headed out."

"Mayor Han..."

"Trudy." I began scratching my temple, trying to calm my raging heart and conceal my uneasiness. "I'll buzz you when I'm heading out. We have a busy day ahead of us, and we need to stay focused."

"YES, SIR."

Standing from my desk, I removed the coat of my expensively threaded suit. The temperature seemed to have spiked in a matter of seconds, or maybe it was the unexpected visit that elevated the heat within me. Whatever the case, I felt as if I would engulf in flames at any second.

"Dorian, where is she."

"She's on her way up."

"Up here?"

"Yes. I tried stopping her, but she was adamant."

If there was nothing more Dorian had learned about me was that my heart wasn't lodged in my chest. It was walking around ignoring my calls, refusing to talk to me, demanding that I remove myself from her existence and being the biggest fraud to grace the city. I was clueless as to how she carried the strength to reject me when we both wanted – both needed – the same thing. Each other.

It was baffling, and I raked my mind every day trying to sort it out but came up empty-handed. So, this unexpected visit was both surprising and refreshing. I wanted to shut down my office and cancel my entire day. It had been nearly ten months since I'd encountered her one night while grabbing groceries. Since I hadn't been able to remove her lingering presence from my mind.

"IS SHE COVERED?"

"Unrecognizable. Shades, big ones. A large hat to conceal what they're not."

"Send her in." I rubbed my hair towards the front of my face, scalp beginning to perspire along with my palms.

"She's already here."

Without lifting my head or laying eyes on the person shedding sweet harmonies within my office, I knew it was her. Gucci Bamboo, her favorite fragrance – thanks to me – stuffed the room until I could barely breathe, but that was fine by me. If she was the last thing I'd laid my eyes on, I'd die a happy man.

I HAD to take her in doses. She was too much for one man, but I deserved her overflow. I'd worked for it. Waited for it. Wished for it. Prayed for it.

Starting with her feet, I admired the curves of her body, synching and then expanding without explanation. The most notable curve happened to reside in the midsection, between her hips and breast. The moisture of my mouth evaporated as I heard Dorian creep out of the door to give us the privacy we needed.

PERPLEXED, I furrowed my brows and shoved my hands into my pockets. I didn't want to make the wrong assumptions, but I was hoping she would break the silence and put my thoughts to rest. They were badgering my skull in an attempt to escape.

"Jhalil." She was biding time that I didn't have at the moment.

"Wh... Wh..." I couldn't form a word, less known a full question.

"I come in peace." I saw her shades fall onto the chair along with the hat Dorian mentioned.

"There's no other way to come, Wilde." My gaze had yet to abandon her stomach. The boldness and roundness of it snatching the life from me as I stood.

"I had every intention of doing this alone. Not bothering you or intruding on your life. Exotic dancer impregnated by Mayor of Channing City. Scandal waiting to happen. I couldn't afford that type of scrutiny, embarrassment or..."

"All I've heard since you started talking was I."

My pressure had soared, and I was boarder line stroke range. The veins underneath my skin bulged, anger consuming me. There was an underlying pang more prominent than any other emotion I was feeling. Though small, it was mighty and jabbing me in the heart like thick shards of broken glass. Each time I breathed, the agonizing pain caused me to consider not taking the next breath.

HURT. That's what that shit was. It started with the tips of my toes, ending with my heart and threatening to claim my end. Right here. Right now.

"IS that the only person you considered in any of this? You? What about me? What about what I wanted? What about seeking avenues other than seclusion and desertion? What about..." I ground my teeth until I felt small particles chipping from them. "us?" I had to give myself a second before continuing.

"MY CONNECTIONS AND RESOURCES. What about having the least bit of faith in me, which is something you've failed at from the start. And here you are, now? Swollen and barging into my office like a high ranking officer of some sort. Like my greatest supporter. As if you even deserve to be standing here. Wilde." I removed a few feet from between us, too riled up to be any closer to her than I needed to be.

"YOU DON'T DESERVE anything but my ass to kiss. Do you understand what you've taken from me? Nine months. Nine months of my child's life that I can't get back because of your selfishness." I couldn't have held them back if I wanted.

The pain had become too much to bear. My eyes welled with tears that spilled over the minute I found the courage to look her in the eyes. I needed to see the coldness, the evilness that she possessed once and for all. I had to remove the wool I'd placed over my eyes and witness Wilde for who she really was. Something of the wilderness. An untamable beast that I'd gotten into the ring with and lost constantly.

BUT AS I stared into her rounds, I saw nothing of the expecting. There was fear. And pain. Even more, than my own eyes mirrored. There were doubt and uncertainty. There was regret. Lastly, there was love.

THE WAY she stared back at me as if she'd lost the time, too. It was something neither of us could get back, and I was sick about it. Plain sick.

"IS this what I have to look forward to? Is this is what I'm reduced to? Do you, still, not believe that I'm worthy of anything more than a late night fuck when you're fed up with your manmade pleasure seekers? When you're feeling alone or ready to reciprocate the love I've been pouring into you the night that I met you? Tell me, Wilde, because I've run out of guesses with you."

"JHALIL."

"Don't." I wiped the wetness from my face. "Don't Jhalil, me. I've been everything to you, Wilde. Everything and the only thing you've been for me is heartache. I thought nine months ago was the last of my troubles, but here you come waddling into my office, ripping my shit from my chest. You have it. It's yours. What more do you want from me, now? I've selflessly given you what mattered to me most. I'm a walking shell, Wilde. You've taken everything. What more? What more do you want?"

"Your forgiveness." She whispered, shamefully. The cracking of her voice filled my throat to the brim with thickness. "I want you to forgive me.

It's hurt me more to keep this away from you. And I know that I have your heart, Jhalil. It's so big and so wide, your love is, which is why I knew that it would be enough to share with someone else.

I've kept every ultrasound, recorded every doctor's appointment, kept a scrapbook that I stuff a picture in every day, handwritten my thoughts, emotions, and cravings. I've been able to maintain them all except one. My craving for you has yet to subside. I wanted you to know that your heart isn't the only one walking outside of your chest. Mine is, too, Jhalil."

Her levees broke, unmanning me. Don't cry, my love. I reached out to her, pushing her backward until her back brushed against the door of my office.

"I hate you so much, right now," I whispered to her, my hands on each side of her face. I was holding up her head so that she could see me. Unveiled and exposed. Wilde needed to face the damages, digest the pain she'd caused me.

"NOT AS MUCH as I hate myself."

"Why'd you do this to me?"

"I'm so sorry." Wilde poured out, tears cascading down her cheeks. My heart was aching something serious. I'd surely need to put a hold to my dealings for the day. There were more pressing issues at hand.

"You shut me out."

"I didn't know how to let you in."

"Not ever?"

"Not since the day I met you. I'm scared, Jhalil." She confessed for the first time.

"Don't be afraid of me," I begged of her.

"IT'S NOT you that I'm afraid of. It's me. I've never had anyone to love me the way that you do. It's discomfoting to know that I've settled for much less, considering it to be everything. I'm unaware and unequipped to accept all that you're willing to pour into me. I'm undeserving."

That hurt. To know that she'd been given so little that she was unable to accept me, wholly. I was too much for her, emotionally and mentally. She didn't understand how to deal with a real man, so she ran from him. Ran from me. That was disheartening to the third degree.

"Don't fight it because you don't understand it... Understand us."

"Then what am I to do?" Snot emerged, Wilde was in full weeping mode.

"Help me understand your love."

"I..."

"Shhhhhh. Stop crying. You're tearing me to pieces."

"I'm a mess, Jhalil."

"A beautiful mess, Wilde. And I want this mess. I want you and everything that comes with you."

"Even this big belly?" She found her smile, striking me by surprise. The heavens had opened and shined down on me.

"Especially this belly."

Dropping to my knees, I embraced the roundness of her abdomen. She was beautiful in every way, glowing in pregnancy and beaming before my eyes. If I wasn't already, I'd fall head first over her. Even flawed, she was everything.

"What do we have in here?" I looked up, praying she would bless me with a smaller version of herself.

"I don't know. I wanted to save something for you. That's why I'm here. My final appointment is this morning. I'm so sorry to spring this on you, but I pushed it back three hours with the hopes that you could join me. On the drive over, I couldn't gain control of my emotions and wanted you there. I'd held out on knowing the sex so that you..."

"Shhhhhh. It's no problem. Of course, I'll be there. And anywhere else you all need me."

"THAN..."

"Don't."

"Okay."

Standing to my feet, I began clearing her face of the tears she'd cried for me. For us. For our unborn child. "No more of these."

"Jhalil."

"Yes?"

"Don't go easy on me. I don't deserve it."

I JUMPED up from my sleep, feeling around the bed. She was sound asleep just beside me. The revelation of her presence calmed my nerves and soothed my soul. I'd had the same dream months prior, which explained my déjà vu that day in my office that Dorian warned me of Wilde's visit.

All along, I was clueless, but the repeating dream was a fair warning. The situation wasn't exact, but it was damn near spot on. It was crazy how

things worked. It wasn't fishes I'd been dreaming of. It was Wilde, as large as she was now and carrying my little girl.

"Babe. Are you okay?" She stirred in her sleep, flipping over so that she was facing me.

"Yes. Everything is marvelous." I assured her.

Checking the time on my cell, I noted that we hardly had any to spare before it would be time to get dressed and prepared for our exclusive this morning.

Taking my mother's advice, I'd waited until Wilde had gotten to her final trimester and month of pregnancy before contacting one of my favorite reporters. Eden Rothschild. She'd agreed to sit with Wilde and me to ask appointed questions that shed light on our situation and how it came about.

WILDE HAD BEEN TRAINED for weeks on what to say, when to say it and how to say it. It was my duty to protect what we had, and I couldn't do that if I didn't get ahead of the mess before it started. This way, I could contain the situation and direct the narrative. All they needed to do was see her. She was amazing.

Once the public got a feel for Wilde, they wouldn't be able to stop gushing. I hadn't, yet.

During the interview, we would give Eden a grand tour of our new home, the nursery and our unfinished backyard. I'd been in search of something more spacious since the night that Camden shared a bed with us.

Thankfully, my realtor put a rush on the search after I'd let her know that we were expecting. We were selling Wilde's old home and had moved Mama Jenkins to our residence.

That's what I was calling her these days. She was a joy to be around. Still my number one supporter, she was going even harder for me these days.

DURING OUR INTERVIEW, we wouldn't hide the fact that Wilde was once a dancer. In fact, my publicist had put a spin on the situation and decided to focus on her reasoning for dancing instead. The lack of health care for mothers and their cubs had led her to make sacrifices beyond her wildest nightmare.

Of course, we could've gotten away with not mentioning her past occupation due to the mask that she wore to conceal her identity, but there were people besides customers that would pray for her downfall. Because of that, we were covering our tracks, completely.

“Baby.”

“HMMMM.”

I couldn't wait to marry her. We'd decided not to rush the wedding and choose a date, yet.

When our heads were clearer, and the baby was born, we would handle our vows. For now, there was only one thing we were concerned with, and that was making the public love Wilde as much as I did.

“WE NEED TO GET UP. The glam squad will be here any minute for you.”

“What if I don't want to get up?” She whined. “Knowing the city will probably hate me after this interview is not very motivating.”

“I've got some motivation for ya ass,” I smirked through the dark.
“REALLY?”

“Ummm. Hmmm.” I climbed over her, kissing her belly before kissing her lips.

“What does this motivation consist of?” She was a bit more active than a second ago.

“Big, long, good dick.” I teased. “Now, open up for daddy.”

The end...

For real this time...

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