



Say
YOU
LOVE ME

MONICA WALTERS

SAY YOU LOVE ME

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, violence, moments of grief/depression, talks of rape, and other topics that may be sensitive to some readers. It also contains urban elements, which is why it is listed as a genre category for this book.

This is book twelve of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids and their friends. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in later books.

This book is about Ali and Shyrón's friend, Jericho Marcellus. You first became acquainted with him in book six, *I Want You Here*. It's highly recommended that you read the previous books of this family series before indulging in this one, because it typically picks up right where the last one left off and updates ongoing issues that I don't go into great detail about.

Love On Replay
Deeper Than Love
Something You Won't Forget
I'm The Remedy
Love Me Senseless
I Want You Here

*Don't Fight The Feeling
When You Dance
I'm All In
Give Me Permission
Force of Nature*

Also, please remember that your reality isn't everyone's reality. What may seem unrealistic or unrelatable to you could be very real and relatable to someone else. But also keep in mind that despite the previous statement, this is a fictional story.

Jericho and Whitney's story has plenty of drama, but it is also a beautiful love story. So brace yourselves. Again, issues from previous stories are resolved and/or updated, and new issues have surfaced. So I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

P.S.- Jericho and his family are Haitian, so there is some Haitian Creole throughout the book. I did my best to interpret everything so you won't be lost. Oh, and Jenetta and Chelsea are the same person!

Berotte Family and Friends Family Chart

Sheldon (1st wife Marie) and Anissa (1st husband Dexter) Berotte (Patriarch and Matriarch)

Isaiah (Jovy)

Tatum, Tyler, and Talon
(The triplets)

Chad (Lexi)

Foster

Shyrón (Brittany)

Kinsley and Kaylee
(Twin girls)

Dylan (Skyler)

Mariena
Mason

Alexz (Axton)

Ariana

Dexter Dent Jr. (Shavozz)

Trayveon and Dalen
(Shavozz's sons w/ Elvis)
Pregnant

Jamel Dent (Sandrene)

Arrow Vaughn (Ax's brother) &
Lynn

Seneca Roberts (Jovy's brother) &
Kaysyn Anderson (Axton's sister)
Ellington and Jericka
(Kay's kids w/ Luckey)

Ali Joseph (Shy's friend) &
Riley

Aina
(Riley's daughter w/ Gabriel)
Pregnant

Jericho Marcellus (Ali's friend) &
Whitney

Jungle (Watchful Eyes)

PROLOGUE

JERICHO

“Jenetta? Wake up, baby,” I whispered softly in her ear.

Her eyes opened slowly, and I was able to see how swollen they were. My anger was consuming me, but I was doing my best to be soft with her. I had to take out three muthafuckas with my blade to even get to her, not to mention scaling a fucking wall like a damn ninja or navy seal. “Jericho?” she inquired softly.

“Yeah, baby. Come on. I’m taking you with me. You have to be quiet though.”

My lip twitched as I unlocked the cuff at her ankle with the key I got off the guard at her door. Jules had her in this fucking room like a got damned prisoner instead of his baby sister. The minute I caught up with his ass, I was gonna stab that nigga in his fucking throat. Jenetta scrambled, trying to find clothes to put on. She hurriedly slid on some sweatpants and a T-shirt, then some tennis shoes without socks. She slid a crossbody bag around her like she’d been waiting for a moment like this to present itself.

“What about Mama?” she asked.

I damn near caught whiplash as I turned to her. “Mama? You told me she died damn near seven years ago.”

“No. Jules made me say that shit to try to get you to come home. She’s in the lower level. I couldn’t tell you the truth by phone because Jules listens to my calls. That’s how he knew where you were.”

“Fuck!” I whispered harshly. “Let me get you out of here first. I’ll have to come back for her.”

“Okay.”

“We have to move now.”

I peeked out of the door and hurriedly got Jenetta off the compound and to the vehicle I had waiting a mile away. She ran with me and didn't get tired. Freedom was in her bones and had been dying to be let loose. This was her opportunity, and she wasn't going to miss it, even with a swollen ankle. As I started the car, I took off, headed toward the airport. She grabbed my hand and kissed it repeatedly.

"Listen to me, baby. I'm taking you to the airport. You're gonna fly to Houston. I'm gonna call my boy out there to get you. He will protect you. Okay?"

She nodded. "I always knew that you would eventually come for us."

I grabbed the phone from the console. "You did leave that other phone, right?"

"Yes. He can track me."

"Okay. Here's a phone for you to call me as soon as you get to Houston. I'm going to give Jungle this number to call you. Most likely, it will be him and a guy named Vegas. I thought I would be flying back with you. I can't believe Manman is still alive. I didn't plan for this, so wish me luck. Going back will be extremely dangerous. I need you to tell me exactly what room she's in."

She filled me in on the details as I drove, and I was able to know exactly where my mother was and how I would get to her. There was a courtyard right outside the room she was in. She informed me that our mother was in good health and should be able to make the mile. After giving Jenetta five hundred dollars to put in her bag and using her phone to purchase a ticket, I hugged her tightly.

"What do I do? I've never flown before."

"Ask an employee for help. Show them the e-ticket, and they will help you get to where you have to go. Now go. I love you, and I will see you soon."

She kissed my cheek and hugged me tightly. I was worried that I wouldn't get away with getting Mama, but I wasn't afraid. It was past time for me to get them to safety with me. Jenetta quickly got out of the car, and I took off back to the compound.

Jungle and I had a lot in common. Like his father ran Houston and left it to him and his sister, my father ran all of Miami and the surrounding areas, and it fell in Jules's lap when I killed him. I quickly called Jungle, and he answered on the first ring. "What's good?" he answered groggily.

“I need you to get my sister from the airport. She should land about six a.m. central time. I just dropped her off at the airport, and the flight leaves in about thirty minutes.”

“Muthafucka, you went to Miami?”

“Yeah.”

“Why aren’t you flying back with her?”

“I have to go back for my mama. I found out that she’s still alive and is in relatively good health. I have to try, man. Take care of my sister until I can get there. If it’s not possible for her to stay there, get her to Jamel and Sandrene for me. I know she’ll be safe there as well.”

“Be careful, Jericho. I got’chu.”

I gave him her number, and he said he would send her pictures of him and Vegas so she would know what they looked like. My mother was nearly sixty years old. I didn’t know how she would make the mile if she wasn’t conditioned for it, but if I had to carry her the entire way, I would. I parked and made the run, with the gun I copped across my back and my blade at my side like I was fucking Arnold Schwarzenegger in the movie *Commando*.

When I got outside the courtyard, I saw that there were three guards out there, and they were clearly oblivious to what had happened on the second level. That was a huge plus, because that was my biggest fear. I just knew they would be on high alert by the time I got back. I pulled my gun from my back and plucked them off one by one. I hurriedly grabbed the keys from the waistband of one of them and unlocked the room my mother was in.

Surprisingly, she was awake, sitting on the side of the bed. Her eyes widened when she saw me. Without me saying a word, she slid on her shoes and slid her bag across her body, similar to the way Jenetta had done. I swore she looked exactly the same as she did sixteen years ago when I left. We didn’t have time to greet one another, because it would only be a matter of time before someone realized something was wrong.

I grabbed her hand, and we left the room just as one of their walkie talkies was going off. We disappeared into the bushes, and we ran like hell as sirens started blaring. When she began to fall behind, I pulled my gun to the front and hoisted her on my back and ran the rest of the way. By the time we got to the car, I could see headlights headed our way.

She was breathing hard as I cranked up and took off. “Get on the floor. They’re gonna start shooting.”

She sank to the floorboard right before the first bullet shattered the back

glass. We just had to make it out. My mother and sister deserved to live in peace after years of torment, even if I had to die to ensure that happened.

CHAPTER 1

JERICHO

TWO WEEKS LATER...

I *'m back, and I need to check in with you when you have time.*

I'd sent that message to Ali. I knew he was pissed, because he was supposed to come with me to Florida to help me rescue Jenetta. Plus, I'd left him in limbo for two weeks. Had I known my mother would need rescuing as well, I would have utilized him. We escaped, but we couldn't go to the airport right away. I had to drive to Fort Myers just to get out of their line of fire. We caught a flight from Southwest Florida International Airport and got to Houston by eleven a few days later, because we had to lay low for a while.

Jungle insisted that we crashed at his place. When we got there, Jenetta and Mama had hugged tightly, then they both collapsed against me. They wouldn't allow me to crash in a different room. The trauma was ever present. All three of us slept in the same bed for two days until they could finally feel comfortable enough to allow me to go to the next room. Jungle had slept on the floor in the room with Jenetta the days before we arrived. I owed him big time.

Jungle's friend, who he considered a little sister, Amiko, and Sandrene had gone shopping. They'd left without basic things for their hygiene care. They just made sure they had their IDs and important legal documents like their birth certificates. They were ready. I had to give them that. They'd told me that they had been anticipating my return for nearly four years. To know they had faith that I would be coming back for them made me happy that I'd finally made the decision to take the risk.

Visions of the day I fled haunted me constantly for years until I met Lexi. Nightmares of walking down the hallway to see my father on top of my fourteen-year-old sister, grunting and groaning like he was enjoying the fuck out of it, plagued me something fierce. The nigga didn't even close the door to the room. That was just how fucking bold he was. No one told him what to do. I was the only one that looked out for my mother and sister.

Being that I was supposed to be at work, I supposed he thought the coast was clear. Jules wanted to be just like him, while I grew up resenting him. He always called me soft because I preferred to be around my mother...

Manman. He didn't realize that I was still soaking up knowledge about the streets and how I could apply that shit to taking care of my mom and my sister.

They started training me on how to shoot at a young age, beat my ass until I learned to fight, and taught me how to hunt like a fucking wild animal. None of those skills got by me, but I made them believe they had. I kept those skills to myself until I needed them, and I knew a day would come where I would. The tears falling down my sister's face as she lay there limp and staring at me, propelled me to do something.

I went to my room and got the gun from under my mattress and shot him right in the side of his fucking head. I threw him off my sister then told her I had to go before they killed me. When my mama saw what I had done, she cried. I wanted to believe they weren't tears of sadness about Jonas Marcellus. Those tears were because I would have to leave them there with Jules. He was twenty-four at the time and was being groomed to take over. He was just as evil and deadly as Jonas.

I called Ali, because I'd located him a couple of years prior, and made my way to Beaumont, Texas, where he was, before I could be found out. I'd been here for years and had made a career out of being a contract hitman until Ali started his business. I couldn't fuck around with anyone other than Ali, because of what I did for a living. The fewer the people that knew me, the better.

In my mind, not only did I pine after my mother and sister; I pined after my girlfriend I had to leave behind, Whitney Paul. She was everything to me... the love of my life. Although I was only eighteen, I knew she would be the woman I would spend the rest of my life with. We'd met at a grocery store, and she was a year older than me. Her smile, high cheekbones, mahogany skin tone, and slanted eyes had me mesmerized. We hit it off immediately and had traded numbers that day. When I left, we'd only been together six months, but it had been a perfect six months with only one or two minor arguments.

I couldn't even contact her after I left, because I didn't want to put her safety in jeopardy. That was the hardest part... not being able to hear her voice or her laugh. But I knew that Jules was looking for me. Although I'd done my best to keep my skills hidden from everyone, he'd once caught me in target practice and saw just how good of a shooter I was. He knew I was capable of what he found in Jenetta's room that day, because he knew just

how much I hated Jonas.

After I started working with Ali, he accepted a job to watch after two young women. One was Skyler Berotte, and the other was Alexis Fontenot aka Lexi. He gave the task of watching Skyler to another nigga and gave Lexi to me. The moment I saw her, I was smitten. My mind was so consumed with how beautiful she was. Her beauty reminded me that I had a fucking dick.

The day I bumped into her in the grocery store was on purpose. Recreation of how I met Whitney was what gave me even more of a connection to Lexi. I didn't just get too close by accident. I was a damn professional at staying out of sight. Meeting her was imperative to me. I'd been watching her for almost a month, and for the first time the night before, I didn't have a nightmare about Jenetta and my father. I dreamed of making sweet love to her body. That was what led me to make her acquaintance.

She reminded me so much of Whitney. They were both feisty and somewhat short tempered. It was her sexuality that caught me by surprise. While she and Whitney looked nothing alike, they were the same in almost every way personality wise. Whitney was sexual as well, but not like Lexi. Whitney craved *my* love and no one else's. I quickly learned that Lexi was hung up on someone else and would probably never give me her all. However, it didn't stop me from falling in love with her.

I knew that me falling for her wasn't even about her though. It was about my longing for Whitney Paul. To this day, I couldn't stop myself from longing for her. I knew her number by heart, but it had changed. After being gone for a year, I tried to reach out. That number had been disconnected. My number had changed as well, but that was so Jules couldn't find me. It was like she'd disappeared. I couldn't find her. When I looked up Whitney Paul, there were at least a thousand possibilities. I was immediately discouraged and accepted that I would have to move on without her.

As I stood and got dressed, there was a knock at the door. After pulling my pants up, I said, "Antre."

The door opened slowly, and Jungle stuck his head in. "Man, you know I don't understand that Haitian language. I just assumed that meant 'come in', so I did."

I chuckled. "That's what it meant. What's up?"

"You wanna look into getting more permanent housing for your people today?"

"I don't want them in Houston though. Jules knows that I frequent

Houston. I was thinking Dallas or Austin, although I know they won't quite be happy to be alone right now. I'll probably have to relocate with them for a while. That's why I need to talk to Ali. He hasn't texted me back yet."

"You know he probably at the Berottes' for Sunday dinner."

I looked at the time to see it was almost eleven. "Yeah, you right."

"He's a family man now. I never saw the day coming that he and Seneca would slow their asses down. After he helps us wrap up this shit with Jules, he's aiming to be totally legit."

I nodded, thinking about how I had taken Ali's parents out without a second thought. I couldn't stand by and watch them embarrass and torment him. I caught them in their sleep, so there was no fighting. I was in and out in less than five minutes. Ali was hard, but he wasn't nearly as hard as I could be.

Lexi had exposed my tender side... the part of me that only Whitney got to see. As soon as she let me know it was over, I felt guilty about it. My heart belonged to Whitney, although I had given up on ever reconnecting with her.

I nodded at Jungle again, thinking about how he was heading in that direction too. He'd already said he was starting to dismantle shit, piece by piece. He wasn't buying any more product. As soon as they got rid of what they had, that would be it on the drug trade. He was right. Times were changing, and it was hard to find loyal niggas these days. The family we'd found were loyal to the T, but they were legit as well. The Berottes were the family most of us craved.

We all came from broken homes. Ali, Jungle, and I missed the semblance of family. Jungle didn't grow up with as much trauma as Ali and I had, but he lost his mother at a young age, just like the Berottes. However, when his dad and brother were killed, I wanted to believe that it changed him. All he had was his sister and her family and, of course, Vegas.

"What are you thinking?"

"That I know you're heading that direction as well."

"Man, I'm forty-three years old. It's time. I need to come in from the wild. A nigga tired of this shit. I thought I would be doing this shit forever, but the game done changed. It ain't like it was when my pops was here. I wanna say that hanging around the Berottes and shit has affected me too. I just want a family. I ain't got nothing but random hoes around me. I want a woman that can feel me for real. You tell anybody I said that shit and I'ma take you out in your sleep."

I chuckled as my sister appeared at the door with a smile on her face. Jungle turned to her and smiled then patted my shoulder and left the room. “Hey, brother. What’s on the agenda today?”

“Well, I thought I would take y’all to Beaumont to meet some of the people I consider my family. You’re too young to remember Ali, but I’m sure Manman remembers him. We used to play together until he moved when we were like nine.”

“I think I vaguely remember him. I was only five. He was like a Hispanic boy?”

“Yeah. He’s biracial. His mom was Puerto Rican, and his dad was Black,” I said as I got a visual of me slitting his father’s neck. “Then tomorrow, I wanna go look at houses in Dallas. Houston isn’t totally safe because we’ve spotted Jules here. I’ll feel safer with you guys out there. I’m gonna stay a while with y’all too,” I added as I saw the panic on her face.

She brought her hand to her chest. “Okay. Will Sandrene be in Beaumont? She’s really sweet.”

“Yeah. She teaches a pole dancing class on Sundays out there.”

“Sounds like fun!”

I gave her a slight smile then finished getting dressed as my phone vibrated. I checked it to see a message from Ali. *Yeah. You got some explaining to do, nigga.*

I chuckled and slowly shook my head. When I looked back up at Jenetta, I could see she had her sights on something or someone outside the door. I made my way to her, to see she was staring at Jungle. I rolled my eyes. “Nope. That’s my boy. You too young for him anyway.”

“Jericho, I’m thirty years old. He can’t be much older than that.”

“He’s forty-three. Too old for you. He won’t give you the time of day anyway, because you’re my sister.”

She smacked her lips and said, “Fine. I haven’t had a boyfriend in years. Jules had me on lock for three years. He added that damn ankle thing almost a month ago because I kept trying to escape. There were days I just wished he would have killed me.”

I pulled her in my arms. “I know. You may need counseling, sis. I know a good one. You might get to meet him today.”

“I don’t know about a man counselor, Jericho. Will he be able to understand things from a woman’s point of view?”

“Yeah. He’s counseled women before. Come on. Let’s go meet Manman

so we can hit the road.”

She nodded, and we made our way downstairs to head to Beaumont. Although I didn’t frequent the Berottes’ home because I didn’t want to make Chad and Lexi uncomfortable, I knew it wasn’t a problem. They were married now and had a son. She wasn’t worried about my ass. We shared a lot of personal and emotional moments, but her heart had always been with Chad. I’d hoped she would eventually love me, but after that day we went to lunch, she clued me in that it was a lost cause, not to mention Seneca and Jungle interrupting our moment.

When we got downstairs, my mother was seated on the couch, talking to Jungle. I smiled softly at her as he stood from his seat. When my mama saw me, she said, “There’s my handsome son.”

“Y’all going to Beaumont?” Jungle asked.

“Yeah. You wanna ride out there with us?”

“Naw. I got some shit to handle around here. Excuse me, Manman.”

I frowned. “Nigga, why you calling my mother mama in Haitian Creole?”

He chuckled and bit his bottom lip. After shrugging his shoulders, he said, “She said I could. When I asked her what it meant and she told me it meant mother, I was wit’ it. You jealous?”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed my mother’s hand, pulling her away from him in a possessive but playful manner. “I just got her back. I’m not sharing her wit’ yo’ ass right now.”

“Right now, but it’s coming. Fortunately, the only permission I need is hers though, bruh. So I got a lil brother again and a mama who I can call Manman.”

He put his arm around my neck and attempted to put me in a headlock. I quickly broke free as I frowned at him. “Mama, you see what you started? This crusty foot negro thinks he’s my older brother now.”

My mama giggled, seemingly getting a kick out of Jungle’s foolishness. “Let’s go before I whup his ass.”

They all laughed as we made our way to one of Jungle’s cars. “How far is Beaumont from here?” Jenetta asked.

“About an hour and a half.”

“Will there be a lot of people there?”

“Yeah. The family is huge. Mama, you’ll probably get along well with Mrs. Anissa, Ms. Patricia, and Mrs. Shirlene if she’s there. Seneca’s mom may be there too, Ms. India. Jenetta, there’s a few women there your age or

close to it. Lexi, Skyler, Alexz, Sandrene, and I think Brittany is around your age too. There are quite a few kids running around as well.”

“Sounds like you are excited to go,” Manman commented.

“I really am. They’ll get to meet an extension of me that I’m proud of—family that I thought I would never see again.”

“Will the man that you spoke of that’s a counselor be there?” Jenetta asked.

“Yes. It’s his parents’ house that we’re going to. His name is Isaiah Berotte. You’ll be able to scope him out. He’s usually really lowkey and observant until his brother Chad starts picking with him.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“No. Not even close. Isaiah and Chad can’t be compared to me and Jules. Jules did that shit out of hatred. This family is filled with love. Everything they do, including the horseplay, is in love. There’s no way you can stay a toxic individual around them.”

“Jericho, what do you plan to do to Jules when you find him?”

“No disrespect, Manman, but the same thing I did to his father. There’s nothing more to do. When I see him, it will be me or him. Both of us won’t make it past that moment.”

She remained quiet, but I wasn’t sure what she expected to hear. Jules was a dead man walking. As soon as I spotted him, I was gonna send him straight to hell to meet his father.

CHAPTER 2

WHITNEY

I was so worn out I could fall asleep standing up. It had been a day at the office. I was a real estate agent and had shown three houses today. That wasn't normal. Then I booked two international vacations with my business, Whitney's Escapes. I just hoped Vashawn was still at work so I didn't have to entertain his ass too. We'd been trying to make things work through adversity for the past five or six months, but this shit was getting old.

We'd been together for the past three years, but when we moved in together last year, he was more demanding of my time. I didn't understand how he was expecting any more time than what he was already getting. My workload hadn't changed just because we'd moved to the next level in our relationship. I was more than happy that he'd moved in with me instead of the other way around. I didn't want to start over.

Starting over fifteen years ago wasn't a part of my plans. I'd planned to be in Florida until the day I died. I loved my state. Miami held horrible memories for me, but I could have lived anywhere else in the state and been satisfied. The 305 was home and for a long time; my future was there... until he disappeared into thin air. Before knowing exactly what had happened, I knew his family had something to do with that, because his older brother started taunting me.

I cried for Jericho for years, wishing he would come back to me. We were so young and had our whole lives ahead of us. Now I was thirty-five, still not married, and didn't have kids. I dreamed of us having the perfect family. Our chocolate babies would look like him but would cling to me. We'd have a two-story house, dog, and two vehicles. We had it all figured out. We were the Trina and Trick Daddy of Miami back then.

I had to move on though. It just wasn't healthy to hold on to him. Before I left Miami, I gave his sister my phone number. She told me she would keep in touch, but I hadn't heard from her. Jules was so ruthless, just like their father. I could only hope that she was okay. Jericho had told me he thought something was going on with her. He was extremely protective of his mother and sister, so I knew he would get to the bottom of it.

When he got off work early the last day I heard from him, he told me he was going home to change, and we would meet at the pier later. I showed up, but he never did. When I talked to Jenetta almost a week later, she told me he was gone. He'd killed their father for raping her and had to leave. She hadn't heard from him and didn't know where he'd gone. My heart was broken. His number had been disconnected since the day he disappeared. I had no way of contacting him. That was the next to last day I heard from Jenetta.

Jules started fucking with me, thinking that I knew where he was. He'd even gone so far as grabbing me by the neck, practically choking me to death. That was when I knew I had to leave. He would eventually kill me. I left Miami and didn't look back. Jericho didn't want to be found, and once I left, neither did I. I changed my last name from Paul to Sanders. It took some getting used to, but it was necessary. I knew my father had to be turning in his grave, but I had to protect myself. I had no one else to do it for me. Jericho was my protector, and he was gone.

When I turned in my driveway and saw Vashawn's car, I cursed under my breath. I didn't feel like dealing with his bullshit. Hopefully, he would be on some different shit tonight, but I wouldn't hold my breath. I grabbed my satchel and my purse and made my way inside to see him standing at the stove, cooking shirtless. *Well, look at God.*

"Hey, Vashawn. How was your day?"

He turned to me and smiled slightly. "Hey. It was okay. How about yours?"

I went to him and kissed his cheek as he stirred a red sauce. It seemed to be spaghetti sauce, but I didn't see any noodles. "It was long, but what else is new?"

He gave me a one-cheeked smile as I headed to my in-home office to put my things down. When I came out, I said, "I'm gonna go take a shower and get comfortable. Thank you for cooking."

"Okay, babe. I got'chu."

Hmm. I wondered what in the hell he was up to. Vashawn hadn't been

this considerate in a long ass time. Usually, when I got home, I still had to cook, then he wanted me to cater to his ass. Maybe tonight I could show him some tenderness, to show him how much I appreciated him doing this for me.

I didn't doddle in the shower. I quickly washed and got out, then moisturized my skin and put on a nightshirt and some fuzzy socks. When I made my way back in the kitchen, he was taking garlic toast from the oven. As he set them on the stove, I slid my arms around his waist. He chuckled and turned to me and kissed my awaiting lips. "Go have a seat while I fix our plates."

I smiled big and made my way to the table before he changed his mind. Glasses of wine were already sitting there, and there was a salad bowl in the middle. I was impressed as hell. "Did you get off early today?"

"No. It's not like it takes long to make spaghetti. I got home at five thirty. I took a shower, then came straight to the kitchen."

"I really appreciate you doing this, baby. It takes a load off. We wouldn't have eaten until well after eight if I had to cook when I got here."

"Mm hmm."

That 'mm hmm' made me uneasy. I was on guard for what he would say next, but he remained quiet and made his way to the table. He worked at an investment firm, and their hours were set. Me, on the other hand, I worked by commission. The day was over whenever I didn't have a customer. I tried to abide by my set schedule, but I wasn't turning down money. I needed to be able to take care of myself. I refused to be in the predicament I was in when I first got here. I was working three jobs just to be able to afford an apartment. I worked my ass off to purchase this house, barely sleeping.

That grind stuck with me. Just because he was in my life, I refused to depend on him to pay my bills. He was a 'this is mine' type of nigga. I quickly realized that when he moved in. He had his own toothpaste, mouthwash, and even fucking toilet paper. He'd gotten better, but if he put something in the fridge, I had better not touch it, or we would be arguing for days.

I wasn't about to put all my chips on him. He'd proven that I shouldn't even be comfortable doing that. While he had taken over paying the house note, the money I normally paid that with was put into a savings account. That way, if there ever came a time that he refused to pay it, I would have it. This was *my* house. I'd worked extremely hard for it, and I refused to let my love for a man end it all.

Honestly, I believed I was slowly falling out of love with him. Seeing him didn't give me the feeling it used to. When I was away from home, he rarely crossed my mind. We no longer texted one another during the day, unless there was something specific we needed to say. It was like we were roommates with relationship perks.

After we said grace, we dove into the meal. *This shit is nasty*. How in the hell did someone mess up spaghetti? It smelled good, but it seemed he forgot to season it. I quickly got some salad from the bowl and drizzled some Italian dressing on it. When he took his first forkful, he frowned then lifted his eyebrows. "Shit. I forgot to season the ground meat. You need some seasoning?"

"Please?"

"So you were gonna eat that shit like that? You weren't gonna say anything?"

"I was going to eat it like G. Garvin cooked it. It was the fact that you cooked, baby. I wasn't going to say a word about it."

After he set the seasoning on the table, I sprinkled a little over my food as he stared at me. He was making me uneasy. "So you were just going to lie to me?"

I frowned slightly. "I didn't say I was going to lie. It isn't horrible, Vashawn. It's edible the way it is."

"So had I asked you how it tasted, you would have told me that it could be better?"

"No. I wasn't going to hurt your feelings. Then you would have said I was being unappreciative. Why does it seem like you're trying to ruin a perfect evening?"

He lifted his hands in surrender and sprinkled seasoning over his food as I continued eating. He'd ruined the fucking mood. As Sally Richardson had said in *Low Down Dirty Shame*, before she killed Roc, *you could have had some pussy*. He wasn't getting shit now. I turned my glass up and gulped some wine as my phone alerted me of a text. When I picked it up, he grabbed his plate and left the table.

I huffed and rolled my eyes. He was on my damn nerves already. Had he been the man I needed him to be, he wouldn't have had to feel like he was in competition with my job. I knew that was what it boiled down to. If he wasn't so damn selfish and proved that he truly cared about the things I cared about, things would be different. All he cared about was what I could do for him,

and that shit was wearing me thin.

When I unlocked my screen, I was fully expecting a job-related text or email. When I saw the text from an unsaved number, I figured someone was inquiring about a listing. However, I was in for the surprise of my damn life when I opened it. My heart started to race, and perspiration immediately accumulated in my brow.

Hi, Whitney! I hope this is still your number. This is Jenetta. I'm so sorry I hadn't texted you over the years, but Jules was monitoring my phone. My mama and I were finally rescued from him and the prison he'd subjected us to. Guess by who? Jericho came through like a one-man army and got us out of there. My brother is back! He's still single, and I can tell he's longing for something... or someone. Here's his number. Don't tell him I gave it to you, although I'm sure he'll figure it out.

She sent another message with his number. My breathing quickened. Just knowing I had access to the man I'd longed for over the past sixteen years had me nervous as hell. I was more than sure Jericho was different now. He was probably still hiding. While he had bad boy hiding in his depths, that wasn't who he was. However, I supposed in order to survive this long and to pull off the one-man mission he'd accomplished, the bad boy was front and center now.

When I gathered the nerve, I responded to her. *Hi, Jenetta! It's so good to hear from you. When I hadn't, I thought the worst. I'm so happy you and your mom are okay. I'm also glad that Jericho is okay too. I uhh... I'm in a relationship now, but I may reach out to him soon. Don't tell him. I don't want him seeking me out if I choose not to. Thank you for messaging me.*

I hit send and immediately regretted saying that I was in a relationship. The minute I read her text, thoughts of getting rid of Vashawn's ass popped in my mind. I glanced up to see him in front of the TV, eating his food there. I rolled my eyes and ate the rest of my food and began cleaning the kitchen. As I put that bland ass spaghetti in the refrigerator, I closed my eyes and knew I was about to go *awf* on his ass.

"You know what, Vashawn? I'm tired of babying your ass. If you can't handle my career, why in the fuck are you here? This was my career before I even met you. Why did you expect anything to change when you moved in? It's not like you're the most giving person in the world. You always look out for you. The most you do is pay the mortgage. But I was doing that shit before you got here. What's the deal?"

“What’s the deal? You don’t know how to balance that shit. You spend more time on your phone and at work than you do with me. That’s frustrating as hell. I’ve always come second to your bag, but now that I live with you, it’s even more apparent that you have no desire to change that.”

“Why should I? You haven’t given me a reason to. Me showing you attention has been about me catering to your needs. What about mine? When am I ever made to feel like a woman? The only time you show affection is when you want sex. Nothing you do shows that you considered me until you cooked tonight. But you even found a way to fuck that up.”

He stood from his seat and stared at me like he wanted to do something. I frowned as he approached me with his plate of spaghetti in his hand. “Maybe it’s best that I give you time to yourself tonight. We need to really think about the direction this shit is headed. We won’t make it like this. I love you, Whitney. I just need you to love me back. You ain’t said that shit in weeks.”

“You have a funny way of showing your love, because I don’t feel it. Maybe we should just end this now before it gets worse.”

“You’re speaking from your current emotions. Let’s talk about this Sunday. A small break might do us some good.”

I took a deep breath as my phone chimed again. He slowly shook his head and walked away. I couldn’t be concerned with his attitude. I pulled my phone from my pocket to see Jenetta had messaged back. *I hope you reach out to him. I think it will do him some good. When I mentioned your name, he completely changed the subject without responding to what I’d said.*

I closed my eyes for a moment, then responded. *I’ll try to reach out Sunday night.*

I was more than sure Vashawn and I would be done by then. If there was one thing I knew about Jericho, it was that he was aggressive. Once he heard my voice, I knew he wouldn’t rest until he saw me. I had no clue where they were, but distance wouldn’t matter for him. If he could afford to go to Miami and get them, then make a quick turnaround, then he could afford to get to me.

Seeing him would probably render me speechless. I didn’t know how I would respond, looking into his expressive eyes or ogling all the chocolate fineness he flaunted. I could only imagine that he was probably even finer now. He towered over me. He had to be every bit of six feet three or taller. So when he held my five-foot-six-inch frame in his arms, I felt like I was protected from the world. To feel that again would probably take me out of

here.

If what Jenetta had said was true, then Jericho wasn't going to rest until I was his again. If he was anything close to what he was back then, he wouldn't have to work that hard. However, if he had changed, I would have to wait to see if the Jericho I loved would resurface. After losing my parents nearly simultaneously, he was the only person I had. He was family, and so was Jenetta and their mom. I needed to be careful about this. If I weren't, I would completely lose myself in who he once was without considering who he'd become.

CHAPTER 3

JERICHO

“Ali, you remember my mother?”

He frowned for a moment, then his eyebrows lifted as my mother smiled at him. “Yo! You said she died.”

“That was the lie I was fed to get me back to Florida.”

He grabbed my mother’s hand and said, “It’s good to see you again, Manman.”

“Man, two other niggas calling my mother mama ain’t gon’ fly.”

Ali frowned as Mama said, “Jungle calls me that too.”

Ali nodded repeatedly. I knew he was putting two and two together. The fact that Jungle knew I was back before he did was only throwing salt in the wound. I regretted it, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

We’d just walked through the back gate at the Berottes’ home, and Ali was the first person we saw. I introduced him to Jenetta, and she smiled brightly and shook his hand. Seneca, Shy, and Chad joined us, and I introduced them as well. I watched my mama smile at the children in the yard. She seemed so peaceful, despite what they’d gone through, and I was grateful for that.

I took them inside, and I immediately introduced them to Mrs. Anissa as I glanced at Lexi. She smiled at me, so I smiled back. The sight of her still made my heart skip a beat. However, after boundaries had been established when it was determined that Chad was the father of her baby, I fell back. I knew Chad was the father. I’d strapped up every time. I was just hoping for a few moments more with her. I wasn’t ready to let go.

“Jericho, you go on outside. I got these introductions. Your mom and sister will fit in perfectly around here, baby. We got them,” Mrs. Anissa said.

I smiled slightly as Lexi walked over and introduced herself to my family. She still cared for me, and I could see it plain as day. I was in her past though. Skyler followed behind her, along with Alexz and the other women, welcoming my family into the fold. I smiled as my mama and Jenetta smiled and offered hugs to all the women there.

I made my way back outside to see Ali staring right at me. He tilted his head to let me know he needed to speak with me privately. I took a deep breath and followed him to the driveway. "How long have you been back?"

"Almost two weeks."

"And you just now messaging me? That's where we at right now?"

"Mwen mande padon," I said, apologizing in my native tongue. "It was crazy. I was just..." I rubbed the top of my head. "For the first time in a long time, I was scared. Not for me, but for them. I had to fly Jenetta alone, and Jungle was the closest to go get her. I had no idea my mother was alive until I got to Jenetta. At that moment, I wished I would have waited for you. It was a huge risk going back to get her."

He looked away from me and took a pull from his blunt. "So what's your next move?"

"I need to find them permanent housing, but not here. We're going to Dallas tomorrow."

"I'm going with y'all. Don't shut me out again. We supposed to be brothers. You handled my issues. Trust me to help you with yours."

I held my hand out to him, and he hesitantly shook it. He was still angry, and I didn't fault him for that. "Come on back and meet Riley and Aina."

I gave him a slight smile and followed him back to the back yard, wondering why he didn't remember I'd met them already. I didn't say a word to him about that though. "Princess?" he called out.

She immediately ran to him. She really looked like she could be his. My eyebrows lifted as I stared at her. I didn't get a real good look at her last time. "Prince Ali, I'm having so much fun with Uncle Chad!"

"I see. Well, I wanted to introduce you to another uncle. This is Uncle Jericho."

Her eyes lifted to mine, and she cowered a bit until I smiled. I wasn't really a smiler, and kids were intimidated by how mean I could look. "Hey, Aina. It's nice to meet you, little one."

She peeked around Ali and smiled a bit. "Hi."

I held my hand out to her, and she placed her tiny hand in mine. "Li

tèlman bèl,” I said, then kissed her hand.

She smiled big then looked at Ali. “Daddy, what did he say?”

Wow. She called him daddy. That was some serious shit. “He said you are so beautiful, baby.”

She smiled even bigger then looked at me and said, “Gracias!”

She took off back to the backyard, and I stared at him as he played on his phone. “She calls you daddy. That’s cool, man. I’m happy for you.”

“Yeah. Caught me by surprise too.”

I chuckled. “I can imagine.”

The back door opened, and a beautiful woman walked outside with a slight smile on her face. Riley Domingue. She was even more beautiful than I’d remembered from the benefit and the time we met here over two weeks ago. Her daughter’s father had to have been Latino or White. She was about Lexi’s complexion. “This is my brother, Jericho.”

“Yeah, we’ve met.”

I smirked slightly. It wasn’t like Ali to forget. However, I remembered it was the traumatic day when his parents arrived and shook shit up. Ali reddened slightly. “Damn. How could I have forgotten?”

She said something in his ear, and he pulled her close. I rolled my eyes then sat on the bench and watched Chad play around with the kids. Seemed like they were multiplying at an alarming rate, and Skyler looked like she was ready to go into labor at any moment. Once Riley had gone back inside, Ali said, “The pussy got me catching fucking amnesia.”

I almost choked. “Nigga!” I shoved his arm as he laughed. “So you leaving the bullshit alone, huh?”

“After we handle Jules. I’m at peace, and I have you to thank for that. That’s why I took offense to you shutting me out. If I see that nigga, I’m gon’ blow his brains out and end all this shit.”

I nodded as I brought my attention to Isaiah. He’d walked outside with a slice of cheesecake. When he handed it to me, I smiled slightly. I loved Alexz’s cheesecake just as he did. He clapped my back and said, “Your mom and sister are really friendly. It seems your sister is analyzing me though.”

“Yeah. I told her she needed to talk to you. They were in a bad situation.”

No sooner than I said it, Jenetta walked outside and headed toward the car. She looked spooked. I glanced at Isaiah then went after her. “Jenetta! Where are you going?”

When she got to the car, she went to the back of it and fell to the ground.

I quickly got to her and pulled her in my arms. “Netta, what’s wrong, baby? Did someone offend you?”

She quickly shook her head. “That’s her, Jericho! That’s her!”

I was so damn confused. I didn’t have the slightest clue what she was talking about. “What?”

“I can’t go back in there. I can’t. I can’t handle it.”

“Netta, you speaking in riddles, baby. I don’t know what you talking about.”

“He got rid of her, and she’s here! My baby is here!”

I frowned hard. As far as I knew, everyone here had their children naturally. “You had a baby?”

“Seven years ago.” She broke down for a moment, and I could feel my blood simmering. “Jules followed in his father’s footsteps, and I got pregnant, Jericho. He took my baby from me, and she’s here.”

When she said the age, I immediately knew who she was talking about. The little girl whose name happened to start with a J. Jericka. Seneca’s stepdaughter. Kaysyn had adopted her. I pulled her back to me and closed my eyes. This was some shit. I never expected this. When I first saw the little one, I thought she looked as if she could be of Haitian descent, but I’d never in a million years thought that she could be my blood.

My anger toward Jules had reached an all-time high. He and Jonas had violated the most fragile in our family. My baby sister was torn apart, broken, and this was the final straw. “I’m gonna find his ass,” I said in a low, deadly voice. “I’m gonna find him. He gon’ pay for this with his life.”

My mama found us on the ground behind the car, along with Isaiah. She had tears streaming down her cheeks. Apparently, she knew. Isaiah stooped beside us. “Jenetta, whenever you wanna talk things through, I’m here.”

Cautiously, he grabbed her hand, and she looked up at him. The tenderness could be seen in his eyes. “I don’t know what all has happened, but I promise that I can be a listening ear and help you through it. The most important thing is that no matter what has happened, you are still here. I want to help you enjoy the life you have left. Even if we have to have our discussions by phone or Zoom. I know I don’t know you, but I can be just as invested in your future. We gon’ get to the root of your issues and find our way out. Okay?”

Jenetta slowly nodded her head then fell into Isaiah’s embrace. Shit, maybe I needed to talk to his ass too. As if hearing my thoughts, my mother

said, "Me too, Isaiah."

He nodded at her and grabbed her hand and squeezed it as Ali and Seneca approached. This would be a delicate situation, because Jericka was Seneca's baby. I didn't want them to feel threatened in any way. When I helped Jenetta from the ground, I went to her ear and asked, "Would you like to talk to Seneca and Kaysyn today?"

"No. I just met them. They'll hate me. Let me talk to Isaiah first. Okay?"

"Okay. Whatever you want to do."

She hugged me around my neck as I glanced at Ali. "We have to go, man. I'm gonna go to my place."

"A'ight. Give me a minute, and I'll be over there."

I nodded, then helped them inside the car. Before I could close the door, Isaiah passed Jenetta a card, and she smiled slightly and nodded. I shook his hand. "Thanks, man. She's been through so much, so I know talking to you will benefit her."

"Thank you for trusting me."

Before I could get inside, I saw Mr. Sheldon heading my way. I stopped and waited for what he would say. We talked a couple of times, and it was because of my love for Lexi. The first conversation with him was him putting me at ease around them. He'd told me that my past with Lexi didn't matter to them. If I was cool with Chad and Shyrón, despite the situation, then I was welcomed at his house anytime.

The second talk we had was him noticing how quiet I was. I'd given him a little of my background so he'd know who he was dealing with. I didn't reveal that I was a contract killer, but I'd enlightened him on my family and how I had killed my father. It was strange that he could even get that out of me. He was so easy to talk to, and I wanted to believe that was where Isaiah had gotten it from. Mr. Sheldon accepted me into their family, even though my past was questionable. He said he could see the goodness in me, and that shit had me soft as cotton.

"Y'all are leaving?"

"Yes, sir. My sister has some issues."

"She knows who Jericka is, doesn't she? I saw her staring at her like she was analyzing her. You know there isn't much that gets by me or Isaiah. It was like when realization of who Jericka was hit her, her eyes widened, and she ran out of the house."

"She does know. Jericka is her daughter that my brother took from her."

We will have to eventually talk to Kaysyn and Seneca. She doesn't want to talk right now, because she doesn't want them to be defensive."

"They will be that anyway. The sooner she can talk to them, the better. Maybe they can come to some type of understanding. Jericka knows she was adopted, so half the story is already known."

I nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Sheldon. I'm gonna talk to her and try to get her to say something soon. She wanted to have a discussion with Isaiah first."

"That's good. Maybe he can help her approach the situation better. I'm sorry y'all have to go. We were enjoying them. Once she's comfortable and has had the necessary conversations, y'all please come back. Okay?"

"We will."

I shook his hand then made my way to the car. Mama was in the back seat with Jenetta, and Ali was walking to his car to meet us at my place. "Are y'all hungry? Did y'all eat in there?"

"We ate, but not a lot. We didn't want to impose since it was our first time here," Manman responded.

"Okay. What do y'all want?"

"Is there somewhere we can get oxtails?"

"Yeah. There are a few soul food places we can get some from. You okay though, Jenetta?"

"I just can't believe she's here. I never thought I would see her again. Honestly, I don't even know if I'm happy or hurt."

I glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "She doesn't totally look like Jules, so that's a good thing, although I do see the slight resemblance. I *am* happy that she seems to be happy and is doing well though. She's so beautiful, Jericho," she said softly.

"Just like her mother."

She allowed more tears to fall as the anger evaded me for the moment. I could only feel sympathy for my sister. I didn't know how she recognized Jericka, but a DNA test would surely have to be done. "Did he take her right away, Jenetta?"

"No. I had her for a week or two. Jericho, it's her. I named her Jericka. I named her after you. I'm surprised they kept her name the same. He stole her while I was asleep. Although she was conceived in hate, I couldn't look at her that way. She was so innocent... so beautiful. She was my little doll. I just want to be able to meet her, maybe establish a relationship with her. I won't try to take her from them."

I nodded, knowing she was in a difficult predicament. In her darkest hour, he took her baby from her, someone that would love her unconditionally. I slowly shook my head, thinking about how I wanted to personally fuck him up. I hoped I was the one to find him, because I would make him suffer and torture him to death for days.

I called Ali and asked him if he could get them some oxtails, and he agreed to. When we got to my place, I carefully searched the perimeter with my gun drawn, then escorted Manman and Netta inside. I was more than sure Jules knew that I had them by now. They got comfortable on the couch, and I turned on the TV while we waited for Ali to arrive with their food.

Going to my room, I packed a bag to take to Dallas. As I finished up and was about to head up front, my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number, but it was indeed a Dallas number with a 469 area code. I knew that from dealing with Lexi's dad, Mr. Fontenot. I frowned slightly as I answered. "Hello?"

The line remained quiet for a second, but I could hear breathing. I remained silent until the caller said, "Hi, Jericho."

My body froze, and it seemed my breathing paused. It couldn't be her. Couldn't be...

CHAPTER 4

WHITNEY

“Hello? Are you there?”

“Whitney?”

“Yes. It’s me. I just... I called to say hi.”

“Called to say hi? After sixteen years, that’s all you wanna say?”

“No, but I’m afraid that may be all you wanna say to me.”

I was shivering I was so nervous. His voice was even sexier than I remembered. Jericho Marcellus was on my phone. I had just finished cursing Vashawn out, and he’d packed more clothes. We couldn’t come to an agreement about anything. He still wanted to work things out, asking if we could just start over. My thoughts of Jericho kept me from agreeing to that. I didn’t have the energy to start over with him anyway.

“Whitney, do you know how long I’ve longed for this moment? Why would I only just want to say hi? I need to see you. Where are you?”

“You’ve been longing for me?”

“Hell yeah,” he said, relief evident in his voice. “I’ve been single for the past sixteen years. Man... shit. I can’t fucking believe this.”

“I’m in Dallas. Where are you?”

He chuckled. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but it put a smile on my face. “Man, I know you shitting me. We gon’ be in Dallas tomorrow, house hunting.”

“I’m a realtor, Jericho. I can help you.”

“Fuck! This can’t be real. How did you get my number? Never mind. I already know. Only one person could have given it to you. Whitney, I can’t wait until tomorrow. I need to see you. Send me a picture.”

“You send me one too.”

I stood and held my camera up as my hand trembled. My heart was mush, and knowing I would see him tomorrow in person was overwhelming. After taking the picture, I sent it to him, then asked, "So what have you been doing for the past sixteen years?"

My phone chimed with a picture from him as he said in a low voice, "Damn. Still sexy as fuck."

My face heated up as I opened his text. *Dear God, have mercy on me.* Lust filled my heart. "Jericho, how are you so fucking fine after all these years?"

He chuckled. "I could ask the same of you."

I realized he didn't answer my question, so I asked again. "What have been up to all this time?"

"I work at a P.I. firm right now. I've been doing that for the past year or two. Before that I was umm... working for myself. What about you? Have you been selling houses all this time? What made you move?"

Him working for himself wasn't explanatory enough, but I could imagine what that meant. It was probably something he didn't want to admit by phone. "I've been selling houses for the past ten years. I'm also a travel agent. Before all of that, I was struggling, working three jobs to make it. I had to leave Florida because Jules was becoming unbearable. I had to protect myself, so I got out of there."

"He was pressuring you about my whereabouts. Do you know what happened and why I had to leave?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand why I couldn't call you?"

I took a deep breath, thinking about how hurt I was that I didn't know where he was or what had happened to him. "I think so."

"You knowing where I'd gone would have put you in more danger. Jules was monitoring every damn thing. By the time I was able to call you, your number was disconnected. I searched for you and couldn't find you anywhere."

"That's because you were searching for Whitney Paul. I changed my last name. I didn't want Jules to find me. It was the first thing I did when I got to Dallas."

"Damn. Whitney... shit. I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you. Fuck!"

I swore he was breaking down. He sounded so emotional, and that shit had tears pouring down my face. "It's not your fault," I said through my

tears.

“I can’t wait to see you. Damn. I don’t even wanna get off the phone with you now.”

“Jericho! Nigga, get yo’ ass in here!”

“Sorry. That was my boy Ali. He got us something to eat.”

I could hear him walking to the front, and I heard a kissing noise. “Jenetta, damn. Thank you.”

I smiled as I wiped my face. Taking a deep breath, I heard my line beeping to see Vashawn was calling. I wished I *would* hang up with Jericho to entertain his ass. It was bad enough he still had a key to my place until he moved all his shit out of here. I listened to Jericho speak in his native language to everyone. That shit was so sexy. That picture he sent me was still up on my phone, and I couldn’t stop staring at it. He was wearing an orange shirt, and he wore shades. *My God*.

That beard looked so good on him, and I liked his low haircut. He used to wear it somewhat thick when we were younger. It took me a while to call him. I was so fucking nervous. I interrupted the silence and asked, “What time will the three of you be here tomorrow?”

“There will be four of us. This fool that’s here making all this noise is coming too. We’re in Beaumont. I plan to be there no later than noon. I’m shooting for ten though, if I can get these women up and on the move. I can’t wait to see you. I almost wanna come right now.”

“Well, I have a slight situation. I uhh... I just broke things off with my boyfriend earlier today. He lived here and is in the process of moving out.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I should have known that you weren’t single all this time. You’re a beautiful woman. I can only hope that we’re just as compatible as we were back then. I want you to be mine again, Whitney. I’ve missed you so much, baby. For real. You know this shit is real if I’m saying it in front of everybody. My boy knows about you and how much I’ve needed you.”

My face heated up as I wiped tears from my face. He was just as expressive as he used to be. We shared everything... our dreams, fears, aspirations, all of it. “I’ve missed you too. However, I had to move on. I thought you were dead, Jericho. I didn’t know what to think,” I said as I broke down.

I cried audibly, and I couldn’t make it stop. He was completely quiet while I had my moment. When I finally calmed down a bit, I said, “I’m so

sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, baby. It’s my fault. I should have taken you with me. There are so many things I would do differently if I had the opportunity to do them again. I would have moved the three of you with me. Please don’t cry, Whitney. That hurts my soul, baby. Talking to you makes me feel like I can breathe again. Damn.”

“We were young. You did what you thought was best at the time. It’s not your fault. It’s Jonas’s fault.”

“Listen. I have to go, but I’ll call you back tonight with particulars about tomorrow and what type of house we’re looking for. Maybe you have something.”

“Okay,” I said softly. “Talk to you later.”

“Whitney... you *will* be mine again. I promise.”

He ended the call, not giving me a chance to respond. I sat there with the phone to my chest as I heard the back door open. I rolled my eyes and quickly wiped my face as Vashawn entered the room. When he saw my face, he came over to me. He sat next to me and grabbed my hand. *I know this muthafucka don’t think I’m crying over him.*

“Baby, we can work through this. I can try harder to show you how much I love you. You’re right. I’ve been selfish.”

“Vashawn... no. I told you that I was done. Please get whatever you came for and leave the key on the countertop. I can’t do this anymore with you. We’ve been on this slippery slope to hell for months, and I just want to be done with it.”

“I’m not giving up, Whitney. You’re a good woman. I fucked up, but I plan to make it up to you.”

He stood from his seat and went to the bedroom as I took a deep breath. He was gonna get his feelings hurt. Jericho was coming tomorrow, and I was more than sure they would end up at my place. This was gonna be a fucking disaster. Jericho wouldn’t back down. If anything, he would taunt Vashawn if he came here while he was here.

When he walked back up front with his iPad charger and a few other articles of clothing, I said, “Don’t forget to leave your key, Vashawn.”

He huffed. “I’m not doing that until I’ve gotten all my things, Whitney. I plan to finish up tomorrow evening.”

With that, he walked out. I slowly shook my head, knowing that things might get ugly tomorrow. I didn’t know what I could do about it. I’d told him

to leave my shit, but he chose to do what he wanted to do. Now he would suffer the consequences.

CHAPTER 5

JERICHO

“**Y**ou wanna slow down, nigga? Gon’ mess around and get pulled over. We almost there.”

“Shut up, Li. You know how long I’ve been pining after her. If I could go faster, I would. I’m sixteen years late.”

He slowly shook his head. Since Whitney called me yesterday, I’d been lighthearted and on a high like no other. My dark side had taken a back seat, and that hadn’t happened since I was with Lexi. I knew that Ali could tell, because he was smiling more than normal. The whole way to Dallas, we’d been talking about Jules and how to flush him out and Whitney. Manman and Netta had gone back to sleep. We left Beaumont at six this morning. The second we were on the road, I texted Whitney to let her know we would be in her office between nine thirty and ten.

I was pushing this Audi to the limit. Jungle had allowed us to ride in style. I owed him. When we got back to Beaumont, I would have Ali follow me back to his house so I could take it back to him. Before calling Whitney back last night, I’d had to have a talk with Ali about what went down at the Berottes’. When I told him, he was silent for a while. I’d never known him to be in shock. But that shit had caught him by surprise, just like it had me. How coincidental was that shit?

My sister’s baby was right here close to me for the past three years or so. When Kaysyn and Luckey adopted her, she was two or three, I think. I had to assume she was in CPS custody all that time for her to have the same name Jenetta had given her. Of course, her last name had to change once she was adopted. I was puzzled on how she ended up in Texas though. The thought that maybe Jenetta was mistaken had entered my mind as well. There was

only one way to find out, and that was to conduct a DNA test.

I knew Seneca and Kaysyn would still be fucked up about it, because they wouldn't be able to control how Jericka felt about it. What if she decided she wanted to be with Jenetta? That would kill them. Jenetta and I would have to have a serious talk about the possible responses her revelation could bring before she brought that information to them.

When we turned in the parking lot of the realtor's office, my heart rate was on a race I tried my best to subdue. I was about to see the woman that I'd loved for years, and I didn't know how to contain myself. We all got out of the car and stretched, then made our way inside. I told the lady at the front desk who we were there to see, and she called her.

Jenetta, Mama, and Ali sat in the waiting area, but I couldn't. Sitting was out of the question with all the emotions going through me. I literally cried in bed last night, thinking about how I would get to see her. Whitney made me weak as hell. This was a moment I didn't think would ever happen. I knew that, most likely, I would end up being single for the rest of my life. Had I tried to be with anyone else, it would have been because I was comparing them to Whitney... like I did with Lexi.

Suddenly, the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen rounded the corner. I was stuck, and so was she. We stared at one another for at least a minute before she approached me and grabbed my hand, pulling me to her office. I assumed my family felt we needed the time alone to get reacquainted. Once we entered her office and she closed the door, we continued our stare down. The tears began falling down her cheeks.

My body trembled as I pulled her in my embrace. *My God.* My heart was full. I closed my eyes and whispered, "Damn."

I kissed the top of her head as she tightened her grip around my waist. When she stared up at me, I couldn't help but kiss her lips. She was even more beautiful as a grown woman. She was only nineteen when I left. She slid her hand over my beard as she stared into my eyes. "Hi, Jericho."

"Hey, baby."

I closed my eyes and pulled her into another embrace. It was like I was scared to let her go. It felt like I was dreaming. Once I finally released her, she said, "God, I still feel the same way in your arms as I did back then. I missed you so much, Jericho."

"It feels even better than back then. I missed you too, Whitney."

I glanced at her desk to see a Whitney Sanders nameplate on it. That was

why I couldn't locate her. "I know we need to get to know one another again, but it feels like the foundation is still there. Whit, I just want you to know that I'm actively pursuing you. I don't give a fuck about your ex or how recent that shit was. You belong to me... always have and always will. You know that, too, because I know you feel it just like I do. The only thing that has changed about me is that I've gotten more aggressive, which leads to a lot of other things. I need you, and I'm not letting go now that I'm in contact with you again."

She pulled away slightly and cleared her throat. She looked up at me with a slight smirk on her face. "I don't know nann nigga that have the balls to come in here and tell me what he gon' do."

I chuckled as I thought about how we used to rap that nasty ass song to each other back in the day. "Girl, quit playing with me. We far from them Trina and Trick Daddy days."

She laughed as she said, "I hope your sense of humor is still the same."

"Honestly, it's not. It's practically nonexistent these days, but I have a feeling having you in my life will bring it back. There haven't been many moments to joke about since I left Florida. The guys at the firm know me as being rather serious. I'm not playful anymore, Whitney. The passion is still there though," I said as I scanned her body in her fitted dress.

Her cheeks reddened as she scanned my body. "Well, one thing you've definitely been doing over the years is working out. You weren't a small guy before, but damn. I don't see struggle anywhere. You've been living good."

She chuckled as I smiled. "Thanks, Whit. Struggle paid me a visit, though, just like it did you. I don't see it on you either."

She shivered then looked away. "Well, I guess we should get on the move. I have a few houses that meet your criteria... three bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a three-car garage. A couple of them have more."

"My family is waiting. I'll have Ali drive them. I need to ride with you."

She gave me a soft smile as she approached me and laid a kiss on my lips. The way she held the back of my neck proved how much she needed me too. When she pulled away, she hummed. "Mm. You have my permission to actively pursue me, Jericho. Vashawn doesn't want to let go though, and he won't leave his key to my house."

I gripped her waist tightly and jerked her to me. "You let me worry about him. Okay?"

She nodded, but I noticed a glint of fear in her eyes. I slowly released her,

and I knew the question was coming. We always discussed things face to face, so when she didn't ask last night by phone, I knew she would be asking today. "So what exactly did you do when you worked for yourself?"

I lowered my head for a moment, then stared at her as she nodded repeatedly. "I was a contract killer, Whit. Am I proud of it? No. That wasn't who I was, but it was something I knew would pay me quickly. But I kind of developed an affection for it. If that's something I need to do, I don't hesitate to do it. Jules's days are numbered."

She looked extremely uneasy, but I could imagine so. The man she once loved killed people for a living. "Are you still doing that?" she asked.

"Not for a living. I work for the P.I. firm that my boy Ali owns. If someone needs handling though, I don't hesitate to handle it."

She nodded again, then grabbed her purse and keys. Before she could leave the office, I grabbed her arm. "Does that change things?"

"A little. It makes me more cautious. I always knew you had that in you, but it was in the background. Sounds like it has moved to the forefront. I would have to get used to that side of you. We have time for me to get to know you again, Jericho, since you said you aren't going anywhere."

I released her, and she walked out of the office to the front where my family was seated. I took the keys from my pocket and handed them to Ali. "Can you drive my family?"

"Mm hmm."

"Whitney, this is my brother, Ali."

He shook her hand and gave her a smile, making her smile in return. All the ladies loved his smile. I rolled my eyes as Jenetta nearly tackled Whitney. They hugged tightly, swaying side to side as my mom anxiously awaited her turn. "She's beautiful, man. Y'all have a lot to talk about, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm not the same man I was sixteen years ago. I was still a kid. I barely knew myself back then."

"Understandable. By your facial expression, I can tell she got a glimpse of who you are now."

"I told her."

He lifted his eyebrows. "You didn't waste any time, nigga."

"She asked. I can't lie to her, no matter what it is. I got enough shit working against me. I refuse to add to it and make her feel like I'm a liar and she can't trust me."

"I feel you. I'm just fucking wit'chu. You know I know. I refused to lie to

Riley about anything I did. She just happened to be experienced with hood niggas. That made it a little easier.”

I nodded as Whitney turned to us. “Ready?”

I nodded again and followed her out to her Toyota. Glancing at the car, I said, “You know I’m six four. I hope I can fit in this.”

“Alright now. You ain’t gon’ be talking about my car. I fit in it perfectly fine. Thank you.”

I chuckled, then opened her door for her to get in the driver’s seat then walked around to the passenger side. It actually looked a little roomier on the inside than it looked from the outside. Being careful not to hit my head, I sat in the seat then moved it back as far as it would go and closed the door. I glanced at her to see her staring at me. “Looks like you fit just fine to me.”

I slowly shook my head as I looked in the side mirror to see Ali right behind us. Bringing my gaze back to Whitney, I grabbed her hand. When I felt the slight tremble in it, I stared up at her. “I make you nervous?”

“Just a little.”

“Why?”

“Because just as you came back into my life, you can be taken right back out. You seem dangerous, Jericho.”

I nodded but didn’t try to rebut. She had a right to feel everything she felt. I *was* dangerous, and there was a high probability that Jules could take me out before I got to him. One of us would die, that was inevitable. What sense would it make for me to come back into her life only to be taken out by my brother?

Our ride remained quiet for a few minutes until she asked, “Are you always this quiet?”

“Most times, especially when I’m thinking.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“You and your standpoint. Would you feel more comfortable if I didn’t come on as strong?”

I asked the question, but it went against everything I said I would do. I’d planned to come on strong. Whitney was the woman I wanted and that I still loved. She remained quiet for a moment as I turned and looked out the window, taking in the scenery and watching where we were going. I was familiar with the area, because I’d met Lexi’s father in this area to collect payment.

“I want you to be who you are, Jericho. How am I going to get to know

the grown-up you if you hide him from me?”

I only shrugged and continued to stare at the scenery. It had never crossed my mind that I may no longer be the person she wanted. I was just way too excited to see her and didn't even consider it. Breaking the silence, she said, “After I show y'all these houses, I'll be done for the day. Can I cook for y'all?”

“So you gon' invite me over knowing that your ex still has a key to your home?”

“He deserves to see whatever he sees since he wouldn't give my key back.”

I nodded. “Okay. We'll come.”

She squeezed my hand slightly and smiled. “Good. I'd taken a pork shoulder out of the freezer and have it marinating in epis. I was hoping that you would agree to come over. You still like griyo, right?”

“Hell yeah, especially when they're tender. You doing plantains too?”

“Yeah. I'm frying them.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

“I also made a Pen patat.”

I frowned at her. “Why you cooking all these Haitian dishes? You know I'll eat anything that tastes good.”

“I want Manman to feel comfortable. Plus, I know you love them. I've made griyo a few times, because I liked it when I ate it at your house once. I looked up a recipe and perfected it to my liking.”

Knowing that she'd taken the time to learn a little about my culture was impressive. That was love. I knew Ali and I would be friends for life when he'd learned to speak Creole, knowing it wouldn't benefit him one bit in this part of the country. That was why he was my brother. I lifted her hand and kissed it, then whispered, “Mwen te manke ou anpil. Mwen toujou renmen ou.”

I wished I could have told her in English what I'd said, but I had to get the words out somehow. I'd said, *I missed you so much. I still love you*. It wouldn't take much for her to bring out the Jericho she once knew. I could already feel him making a comeback just from being in her presence. She smiled at me but didn't ask what I said.

Just my luck, she'd probably learned Creole too. She grabbed her phone and put on the Fugees. She knew how much I loved them too. “I love when you speak Creole. What did you say?”

Okay, she hasn't learned it. For some reason, I was relieved. "Just that I missed you so much."

She lifted our hands and kissed my hand. I needed her lips so badly right now. When she smiled at me, I swore I saw heaven. It was bright, and despite our conversation earlier, she looked happy. "Jericho, I'm happy that you're back. Please don't take my hesitancy to mean that I don't want you. I just... I have to..."

I put my fingers to her lips. "I get it."

I didn't need her to verbalize the possibilities of what my lifestyle could lead to. All my boys were working their way to being legit... even Jungle's wild ass. I didn't get it. "You know, when you said you changed your name, I thought maybe I should do that for Jenetta and Manman."

"Your mom probably won't want to, but I could imagine that it would be good for Jenetta. It might make her feel safer. She doesn't have to change her last name. She can change her first name... or both. It's up to her."

I nodded repeatedly. That would be something to talk to her about. When Whitney turned in the driveway, I scanned the front of the house. It was modest looking... not too big, nor too small. I wouldn't be here permanently, so it would be big enough for Manman and Netta. I was the size of both of them put together. I got out of the car when she put it in park and walked around to help her out as she opened her door.

"I don't know what kind of nigga you were dealing with before, but I open doors. What's his name?"

"Va-Vashawn."

I nodded, then grabbed her hand. That tremble was back. "Cool out. I'm good. I was just asking a question. I'm not gon' fuck with that nigga unless he fucks with me or you. Okay?"

"Okay."

I didn't give a fuck about Vashawn. He apparently was no competition since she'd broken up with him. "Did you love him?"

"Once upon a time. Have you been in love since us?"

"Once, but for all the wrong reasons. The main one being that she reminded me of you."

"She looked like me?"

"No. Her personality is a lot like yours. Don't take shit off nobody."

"Hmm. Interesting. What happened?"

"She didn't love me. She was hung up on another nigga who happens to

be one of my damn brothers now. Sounds crazy as fuck, but we just roll with it.”

“It doesn’t necessarily sound crazy. It sounds grown as fuck, especially if y’all aren’t all in each other’s faces all the time.”

“Naw. I see him maybe once a week, but I only see her when I go to his parents’ house for Sunday dinner. It’s become a tradition that we go there and kick it. I don’t go every Sunday though. Maybe once or twice a month. They’re married with a kid now.”

She nodded as she unlocked the door. I glanced back to see Ali helping my mother over the cobblestone walkway to us. Jenetta had run right past them. As Whitney walked inside, I gestured for Jenetta to go in first, then Ali walked my mama inside. When I followed them, I glanced around the house. It looked nice, but I wasn’t totally sold on it. I needed to see what else she had to show us.

“Come see the kitchen!” Jenetta yelled.

I rolled my eyes. This was gonna take all day at this rate. Ali wasn’t prepared to spend the night. “You not feeling it, Jericho? You haven’t seen the whole house yet.”

“It’s okay. I just wanna see the others.”

“This didn’t wow you then. Maybe the next one will.”

She winked at me and walked off to finish the tour. Ali stood next to me while she talked to Mama and Netta. “You just wanna spend more time with her.”

“Naw. This one is just alright to me. She invited us to dinner, but if this takes too long, I know we may not be able to stay. You gotta get back to your family.”

“Naw. I’ll rent a car if I have to. Y’all stay. Sixteen years is a long time.”

“Yeah. I told her I still loved her in Creole. I had to get it out. She doesn’t know the language.”

“You got it bad, my nigga. I know the feeling.”

He clapped my back, and we continued on the tour until it was time to move to the next house. I was just ready to be in her home... in her space. Nothing was gonna keep me from making her mine again. Nothing.

CHAPTER 6

WHITNEY

They all finally decided on the third house. I knew that would be the one. It had a combination of the things they liked about houses number one and two. By one o'clock, we were back at my place. I'd turned on the TV so they could watch whatever they wanted while I cooked. As I got the pork shoulder ready to roast, Jericho joined me in the kitchen.

"It smells good in here," he said as he slid his arms around me from behind.

Feeling him this close to me was like a dream come true. While his extracurricular activities gave me pause, I could still see the old Jericho hiding in there. The longer we were around one another today, the more of him I saw. "Thank you. Are you in here to help?"

"In any way you need me to."

When he lowered his head and kissed my neck, I wanted to turn around and tell him to take me. I had to remember that there were other people here, namely his friend Ali. While he had a big smile, I could tell that he was just as dangerous. However, one thing I felt with them here was safe.

I turned to him, and the moment I did, he lowered his lips to mine. I nearly got carried away and forgot what I was supposed to be doing. Gently pushing him by placing my hands to his chest, I gave him a soft smile. "Would you prepare the plantains?"

He smirked at me and said, "Yeah."

"I'm glad y'all were able to decide on a home you all liked. I'll get the paperwork started on it tomorrow."

"Make sure it's in my mother's name. I don't plan on staying there permanently. It's going to be her house."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "So you're going back to Beaumont?"

"Yeah. That's my home. That's where I work. I'll be out here for a month or so though. Ali was nice enough to give me the time to get shit situated. I'll still be back and forth though. I just felt like moving them here would be safer than them living in Beaumont or Houston."

I didn't know how we would establish anything living four hours apart. Maybe I jumped in too hastily. I was so excited that I was seeing him, I didn't take into consideration that this would be a long-distance relationship. After I started the meat to roasting, Jericho said, "Come here."

He set the knife down and welcomed me into his arms then turned me to the countertop. He put his arms around me and continued slicing the plantains. He leaned over to my ear and kissed it. "Don't worry about those four hours. I'll eat that highway up getting to you, just like I did today. Plus, you'll never know when I'll be working out here. Watchful Eyes is nationwide."

"But how will you hold me at night?"

"Girl, we can fall asleep on the phone every night when I can't be here. I'm gon' do whatever I have to do to make this work. You trust me?"

"Yes."

Goosebumps had to be covering my entire body with the way he was talking in my ear. His deep voice was a turn on like no other. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting his words sink in, then turned to him and kissed his lips. He dropped the knife and wrapped his arms around me, molding my body into his. His tongue slid to mine, and I knew this was exactly where I wanted to be. I pulled away from him and said, "I wish you could stay here tonight."

"Here as in Dallas or here as in your house?"

"My house."

"We may can arrange that, baby. My boy said he would rent a car, if necessary, to get back to Beaumont."

I smiled at him as my arm brushed across the butt of his gun. He stared at me, waiting for what I would say. I mean... if he was a contract killer, why wouldn't he have a gun? That didn't bother me. As I stepped away from him to get the skillet to fry the plantains in, I heard the back door being fucked with. I knew it was Vashawn. Jericho's eyes never left mine. He seemed extremely calm when Vashawn walked inside.

I stared at him as he said, "Hey, Whitney. Who are all these people? I

mean, you never had guests.”

“Why are you here, Vashawn?”

“I told you I was coming to get the rest of my things,” he said as he glanced at Jericho. “You’re not going to introduce us, Whitney?”

He walked over to Jericho and said, “I’m Vashawn, her umm... ex, although I’m not giving up.”

Jericho shook his hand and said, “I’m Jericho, the one that got away. But I’m back now, claiming who has always been mine.”

I could have swallowed my tongue as Vashawn frowned at me. “Your first love? I thought you didn’t know where he was.”

“I didn’t until this past weekend.”

“So you broke up with me because you wanna try to be with a man you haven’t seen in sixteen years? You can’t be fucking serious right now!”

Before Jericho could respond, Ali walked in the kitchen. “We have a problem?”

“Naw, bruh. Vashawn just came to get his shit. If he get loud with Whit one more time, we *will* have a problem,” Jericho said as he stood up straight, stepping away from the cabinet.

“Vashawn, just go get your things and leave. I tried breaking up with you Friday, before I knew Jericho’s whereabouts. You weren’t hearing it. Knowing that he’s here... that he’s back, there’s no way I’ll ever go back to you, although I was pretty sure before now.”

Jericho stepped in front of me and said, “You don’t have to explain a damn thing. That shit is none of his business.” He turned to Vashawn and said, “I don’t see you moving, nigga.”

“You don’t intimidate me, man.”

Jericho glanced at Ali, and I didn’t miss the smirk on Ali’s lips. Jericho took a step toward him and said, “That’s a good thing. That means when I break yo’ fucking neck with my bare hands, you won’t even see that shit coming.”

“Nigga, if I were you, I would get the fuck on before shit get out of hand in here,” Ali added.

After glancing at Ali, Vashawn attempted to look at me, and Jericho grabbed him by his neck. He did that shit so fast I didn’t see him about to do it. He literally lifted Vashawn and threw him across the damn kitchen. Vashawn was coughing up a damn lung as Ali slowly shook his head. “Niggas don’t listen.”

Jericho turned to me as I stared wide-eyed at him. He gently rubbed his hand over my cheek, calming me down that quickly simply from his touch and his gaze. “You don’t ever have to explain yourself to a nigga that don’t matter. You hear me?”

He lifted his other hand and stroked both of my cheeks with his thumbs. “Yes.”

He kissed my forehead as Vashawn finally got his lame ass up from the floor. Without another word, he headed to the bedroom, and Ali followed behind him. “I’m sorry he thought I wouldn’t fuck him up. I don’t know why he thought he was just going to holler at you in my presence and nothing happen to him.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me for protecting and defending you. You belong to me, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then. Enough said. Let’s fry these plantains. I’m hungry as hell now.”

I glanced back toward the bedroom when I heard talking, and Jericho said, “Ali got him. He’s not as big as me, but I promise you, he’s just as quick. He doesn’t fight with his hands anymore though, but I think he’ll make an exception this time.”

I swallowed hard as I got the sea salt. I was hoping Vashawn just got what the fuck he needed and got out of here. I was shocked Manman and Jenetta didn’t come in to see what was going on. They’d probably had enough of this type of shit. I didn’t blame them.

When I got back to the stove, Jericho had put oil in the pan and was waiting for it to heat up. I checked the pork then stared at Jericho. “I’m going to make sure he leaves that fucking key too. There’s no reason he needs to be able to just walk in on you like that.”

I nodded, grateful that he was here. Now maybe Vashawn would leave me alone. I heard the footsteps coming down the hallway and saw Vashawn with his duffel bag over his shoulder. Without Jericho saying so, he pulled the key off his ring and set it on the countertop as he stared at me. He was pissed, but there wasn’t shit he could do about it. He put himself in this situation.

Once he left, Jericho said, “I can’t believe you told him about me. How long were y’all together?”

“About three years. Why wouldn’t I tell him about you? You were my first love. Did you tell your lady about me?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t even tell her about me. We were never a couple. We just fucked around. She was a job, actually, and I intentionally got close to her. Her father wanted me to protect her from possible backlash from a client of his. Just the fact that he was a father trying to do right by his daughter had me take the job on the spot.”

“Oh. I see.”

He hadn’t been in a relationship since he’d been with me. That was sad, but I totally understood it, especially since he knew that I was still alive. I had no clue whether he was dead or alive, so it was just unhealthy for me to keep pining after him. Oh, but now, despite my reservations, I was glad to have him back in my life. The way in which he handled Vashawn just now jumpstarted my libido. The desire to have sex had been nonexistent for months.

I didn’t know if he’d gotten angry or what. He was so damn calm the entire time, even when he damned near threw Vashawn across the kitchen. Just by the smirk on Ali’s face, I could tell that he already knew what was coming. Jericho had turned back to the stove and had dropped the salted plantains in the oil. When he turned back to me, it was like his gaze pulled me to him. I went to his arms, feeling the love he still had for me.

I wasn’t sure why he wouldn’t tell me that he’d also said that he loved me in Creole. He’d said it enough times back in the day for me to recognize it forever. He added something to it, but I knew he’d said he loved me. I loved him too, but I wasn’t sure if I was still *in* love with him. The feelings swirling inside of me could have been from the excitement of just being near him again. Time would tell.

“If you don’t want these plantains to burn, you might want to stop distracting me.”

I smiled up at him and backed away then watched him take them from the skillet and place them on the paper towel with a slight smile on his face. As soon as he was done, I slid my hands around his waist. Despite the little voice in my head telling me to take this slow, I said, “I’m so glad you’re back. And now I’m not asking. Stay with me tonight.”

He slowly turned around in my arms while biting his bottom lip. Without a word, he lifted me in his arms and palmed my ass. I couldn’t help but close my eyes and release a soft moan as he kissed my neck. Thankfully, I’d

changed when we got here, because there would have been no way I would have been able to wrap my legs around his waist. I'd worn a form-fitting dress that was sure to get his attention.

I quickly realized I could have worn a trash bag and still would have had Jericho's attention. He loved me, and I needed to know what that felt like again. That was one thing he was never immature about... his feelings for me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Any time," he mumbled against my neck.

"Why didn't you tell me everything you said in Creole?"

He slowly lifted his head and stared into my eyes. "You remembered what it meant?"

"You used to say it to me every day. How could I forget?"

He brought his lips to mine and kissed me, then rested his forehead against mine. "I needed to verbalize it. I didn't think you remembered though. I've never stopped loving you. After sixteen years, you're still the woman I want... that I need. I'm just happy that you're willing to give me another opportunity to have your love in return. I just didn't want to make you uncomfortable. I still love you, Whitney. That's what I said. I still love you."

He reiterated those sentiments much softer and began kissing my neck again. He made his way to my shoulder, then lowered me back to my feet. I brought my hands to his face and stared into his expressive eyes. "I love you too, and I know it won't take long for me to fall for you all over again."

CHAPTER 7

JERICHO

I couldn't even stay angry. Whitney's ex had me ready to snatch his fucking larynx out his god damn throat. He ran his fucking mouth too much. That was probably his problem with Whitney. She was extremely vocal about what she wanted, so he couldn't have been listening. I was thankful that he hadn't been. It left the door wide open for me. When she said she was no longer asking, but told me to stay, I bricked up something fierce.

I liked when she talked to me that way. I was glad to know that hadn't changed about her. As she stared into my eyes, she said, "I can see that the Jericho I know is still here. Let me go get Manman and Netta and show them where they'll be sleeping."

When she tried to pull away from me, I pulled her right back to me. It had been a long time coming. Just as I was about to lower my lips to hers again, Ali came to the kitchen. He had a deep frown on his face. "I need to talk to you."

I glanced down at Whitney then quickly pecked her and followed him outside. I knew shit wouldn't be quiet for too long. I'd taken them from Florida two whole weeks ago. The bottom was surely about to fall out. When we'd gotten out of earshot, he turned to me. "Seneca said they saw Jules near your place. He said just when he was about to take the shot, one of your neighbors stepped in his line of vision."

"Fók! Was he able to follow him?"

"No. He disappeared just that quickly."

"He knows he's being tracked. He fucking with us."

"Listen. I been meaning to ask you this shit. Why is that nigga just now coming after you? You killed your dad sixteen years ago. Is some other shit

going on that you aren't saying?"

I slid my hand over my head. "He's *been* after me. He just got close not long ago. I took a lot of Jonas's money and a lot of his contacts to be able to make it on my own. His connections were important for Jules. You know older folks didn't know how to use the computer and shit, so all his stuff was handwritten. Without it, Jules can't effectively take the business where it needs to go. Plus, since I've made contact with a lot of them, they think I'm running shit. Jules would be looked at suspiciously if he were to make contact. They'd think he was trying to undermine me."

"Shit! So how did he find you?"

"By listening to Jenetta's calls. There's not much business to run in Florida. They are relying heavily on the drug trade to make it. All the business ventures have come to a halt."

"Damn. Well, you withholding that information ain't changed shit. I thought it was gonna be something that was gon' make me wanna fuck you up. You had to make it. So that was how you got jobs."

"Yeah. They were my way in. Simply because they knew Jonas, they trusted me. It was either that or live on you. You know good and well I wasn't gon' do that, and selling drugs definitely wasn't something I wanted to do."

"And that was what I was doing at eighteen."

"Yeah."

"So, it's imperative that Jules finds you. He's desperate now. It won't benefit him to kill you right away until he has the information he needs."

"Right. But you best believe, as soon as he has what he wants, he would put a bullet in my head. That's why I have to find him first."

"I got it. We gotta catch his ass. I feel like he fucking with us because he knows we're looking for him."

"He is. That was why I'd called it off. I knew he would show himself when he wanted us to see him. He's always been good at the hunt, but what he doesn't know is that I thrive on being hunted. I'm not an easy catch or kill. He doesn't know this side of me, because this side hadn't evolved yet when I left Florida."

"We gon' eventually get his ass, and when we do, I'm throwing a fucking party!"

I chuckled. "Shit, I'll supply all the alcohol."

Ali laughed and shook my hand. When his phone chimed, he pulled it

from his pocket and smiled. I knew that had to have been Riley. Ali was always smiling, but now that smile was reaching his eyes. This woman really made him happy. I was truly happy for him. He'd never had love from his biological family. He needed this.

Now that Whitney was back in my life, I felt like I could be happy now too. She was who was missing from my life, not to mention having my mother and sister here with me. "I thought you was gon' snap that nigga neck earlier."

"Naw. I just wanted to scare him since he wasn't intimidated. I needed to give him a clue of who he was fucking with. The way he yelled at Whitney had him in dangerous territory, and he didn't even know it. Thank you for always having my back."

He waved me off, then asked, "So, what is Jenetta gonna do about talking to Kaysyn and Seneca?"

"She wants to talk to Isaiah first. Maybe she'll have some clarity after that. Knowing how observant Seneca is, I'm almost sure that he knows something is up and that it has something to do with him or his family. I'm surprised he hasn't asked yet. I'm wondering if I need to talk to him first to smooth shit over."

"That may not be a bad idea, but make sure you know for sure that Jenetta is going to go through with it first before you say anything. She could change her mind about talking to them. Who's the father?"

I glanced at him, and he slowly shook his head. "More of a reason why I want to be the one to take his ass out. Just like Jonas had to suffer the consequences of his actions, he will too. I can't understand why they would want to violate their own flesh and blood. It's sickening."

"It is. I haven't seen her since I was nine, and I still look at her like my lil sister. I'm not even kin to her. She's a beautiful woman."

I narrowed my eyes at him as he chuckled. "On that note, she was looking at Jungle."

"Word?"

"Yeah. I told her hell no. He's too old for her."

"He ain't *that* old, nigga. About twelve or thirteen years older."

I just stared at him as he lifted his hands in surrender. "That's my boy. I don't know how I would feel about him being with my sister, man."

"I get it, but at least you know that nigga."

"Yeah, but that's what gives me pause. I know how big of a ho he is."

Why would I want him with my sister?”

“Anybody can change. Look at Seneca.”

“You right about that shit,” I said then chuckled. “Let’s go back inside. You can take the car, because Whitney said I’m staying with her. I’ll get a car when I need to come back.”

“Naw, I’ll get a car. Y’all have to go back to Jungle’s anyway to return his car and get your things. Just let me know when y’all are back, and I’ll get Seneca to ride with me out there to deliver your ride.”

“A’ight. Sounds like a plan. After we eat, I’ll take you to get a car.”

“A’ight. Then we can put the tracking device I brought with me on Whitney’s car, for just in case.”

I nodded, then we headed inside. When I walked inside, Whitney was taking the griyo from the oven. I was ready to sample that shit. It smelled so good. Knowing that she’d taught herself with me in mind only made it that much more appealing. She looked over at me and smiled as she set it on the stove. “Damn that smells good.”

“You wanna sample it?”

“Hell yeah.”

She smiled at me as I walked closer then got a fork and pulled a piece of meat from the pan. When she brought it to her lips to blow it, I bit my bottom lip. She’d always been the mothering type. I slid my hand around her waist to the small of her back and pulled her closer as she held it up to my mouth. I pulled it from the fork, not taking my eyes off hers until the flavor really hit my tongue. I closed my eyes and hummed. “Damn, girl. This is good. Manman is gonna be proud.”

She giggled, then took the plantains from the warming station and said, “Go have a seat so I can serve you.”

I kissed her forehead. “Don’t spoil me, Whit.”

“Oh, that’s already in the plans.”



“JERICHO! PLEASE DON’T LEAVE ME AND MAMA HERE! PLEASE!”

“Sis, I have to go, or they will kill me. They will catch the three of us. I’m gonna come back for y’all. I promise. I love you, Netta. Y’all just hold on for

me. Okay? Let me get situated, and I'll be back. Just survive for me. I really have to go before anyone knows."

I looked at Jonas's lifeless body laid across Jenetta's bed, his head damn near hanging from his body. I'd silently blown that muthafucka's head off. I knew it would end up coming to this. I saw the way he looked at her. It wasn't the way a father should look at his daughter.

I looked at her once more, kissed her forehead, then left the room. After slitting Randolph's throat, I had a clean break to Jonas's office to get the resources I would need. After filling my satchel, I escaped through a window and traveled through the high grasses and swamp until I made it to where I needed to be.

Going to a truck stop, I took a shower and made my way to the exit. Before I could get out of the store, I could see Jules on a rampage, looking for me with practically an army with him. I approached a man and paid him to hide me in his car and take me to the airport. As I got in, Jules saw me.

They immediately started shooting, killing the man I was supposed to be riding with. I quickly scooped up his keys and got the hell out of there. My phone rang, and Netta was screaming in the background. "You want this bitch to die? I will fuck her up. She's not a Marcellus anyway."

I sat straight up in bed. Sweat covered my chest, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. Incidents I'd forgotten about flashed through my memory like a movie playing on the screen. Jules had said Jenetta wasn't my father's daughter. Her last name was Marcellus, but I remembered Jules yelling that out. Something wasn't right.

"Jericho, are you okay?" Whitney asked.

"Yeah."

I stood from the bed and went to her bathroom. She'd asked me to hold her tonight but had denied having sex with me until we were both tested. I respected her wishes, although I argued that condoms were pretty effective. I'd touched and caressed her body until I couldn't take it anymore. That was when I rolled over and went to sleep. I could tell she was just as worked up as I was, but she stood firm on what she'd said. If I would have had some pussy, I probably wouldn't have had that fucked-up dream.

I was going to have to talk to Manman to find out what happened. Was she adopted, or did my mama cheat on Jonas? I stood at the vanity, staring at myself in the mirror until I heard someone talking in the front room. It had to either be Mama or Jenetta. When I walked out of the room, I noticed Whitney

was no longer in bed. It was probably her then.

Making my way to the kitchen, I saw her standing there with Jenetta, drinking a bottle of water. “Jericho, I want to change my first name.”

“To what?”

“Chelsea. I’ve always liked that name. Whitney said she could take me to do it if I wanted her to.”

“Umm... okay. I guess. Just get some ends from me in the morning. You need to get some sleep though.”

I wanted to ask her so badly if she knew, but I didn’t want to start that type of conversation at two in the morning. That was a discussion for my mother. If Jenetta didn’t know, it would probably hurt her. Then again... it probably wouldn’t. Knowing the man that raped her wasn’t her father would probably help stabilize her mental.

She was a lot like me. She internalized everything and hid her true feelings. Most times, no one could tell what I was going through on the inside. I was naturally a quiet person until I had to be more vocal. Being that I was mostly serious, no one ever thought anything of my facial expressions, unless I was clearly angry or upset about something.

I watched her walk to the bedroom with Manman, and I stared at Whitney. “That shit goes for you too. We gotta get up early, and you need your rest. Can’t have bags around those beautiful eyes. Come on.”

She gave me a slight smile, then made her way down the hallway to her bedroom. I popped her ass and watched it bounce as I followed behind her. When we entered her room, she turned to me. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“Something like that.”

My phone chimed, so I checked it immediately. It was Jungle. *The rat is in the basement.*

I knew he couldn’t have meant what I thought he meant. They caught Jules? If that was the case, I was gonna leave right fucking now. My phone started blowing up with text messages from Seneca, Ali, and Shy. “What is it?” Whitney asked.

“I gotta go. Can you take care of my sister and my mama until I get back?”

“Uhh... yeah, but where are you going?”

I was already getting dressed. There was no time to waste. I texted Jungle back. *Hold it there for me. I’m leaving now.*

“I’m going to Houston. I have some real important shit to handle. I’ll be

back in a couple of days. I promise.”

I kissed her lips and got out of the house fast as hell. As soon as I got in the car, I called Ali.

“What’s up, nigga? I just left to head to Houston,” he said as soon as he answered the phone.

“A’ight. Me too.”

“We’re meeting at the club.”

“The club?” I asked with a frown.

“Yeah. Better facilities for what we need. You know that nigga ain’t got rid of that shit, and he gives our boy free access.”

“See you there.”

I knew he was speaking of Smoke’s club, Pilar’s. He was Jungle’s brother-in-law, and he was also married to Amiko. She owned the dance studio where Sandrene worked. Smoke had gotten out of the game years ago, but many bodies had passed through Pilar’s. He had soundproofed rooms and shit where no one could hear a thing. I was just ready to get this shit over with, and I was more than sure Jules would have plenty to say before I sent him to hell to meet his maker.

CHAPTER 8

WHITNEY

“**W**here is Jericho?”

I turned around to see Ms. Fabiola looking around the front area. “He had to go to Houston early this morning. He asked me to take care of you two until he got back.”

“I’m sorry, Whitney. I didn’t even say good morning. Good morning, ti bebe.”

“Good morning, Manman.”

Her accent always made me smile. I could only hear Jericho’s accent when he got angry or when he spoke Creole. I could see the nervousness on her as she sat on the couch with a book. I believed she had a feeling of what was going on as well, especially for Jericho to leave in the middle of the night without saying anything to her.

I couldn’t go back to sleep once Jericho left. He had my nerves shot. When he said he had business to handle, I felt like I already knew what that business was. His friends... or brothers as he called them, had probably caught up with Jules. The thoughts of all the things that could go wrong had me lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. When I tried calling him, he denied my call. I sent him a text that he never responded to.

Nervous energy had me in the kitchen at five this morning, cleaning out the refrigerator and mopping, and now, I was cooking breakfast. Although my heart was aching, nervous, and worried, we still had shit to do today. I needed to get the paperwork handled for their home, and I also had another house to show this afternoon, if I couldn’t get someone else to handle it for me. That didn’t include taking the time to help Jenetta file a petition to legally change her first name.

I was more than sure we would have to do that in Florida since her residency in Texas hadn't yet been established. The entire process could take months. So it was best to get the ball rolling on that. She wouldn't be able to file any documents in the state of Texas until it was done. My process was a little different because I'd already established residency in Texas by changing my driver's license.

As I cooked the potatoes, Jenetta appeared in the kitchen. She kissed my cheek and said, "I think they probably got Jules."

"I think so too. I just wish he would talk to me."

"You have to understand. He needs his frame of mind to be diabolical while he's handling Jules. If he talks to you, there's no way he can keep that same mind. He would be too soft. Jericho has changed, but at the same time, he's still the same man you once loved. He just has some shit he needs to wrap up to secure us and our future."

I kept my attention on the food as I said, "I suppose you're right. I just got him back yesterday though."

She rubbed my back as I sautéed the potatoes. "One thing Jericho knows how to do extremely well is survive. He'll be back."

I nodded as I scraped the potatoes into a plate, trying to get him off my mind. That seemed almost impossible to accomplish in the quietness, so I turned on some music. Of course, my phone would play something that would have the tears sliding down my face. "Say You Love Me" had been on repeat since Jenetta sent me Jericho's phone number. He had done exactly that. Although he was hesitant to tell me, knowing how he felt had given me joy and had brought me to tears last night.

Turning him down sexually was a bad decision, but I wasn't ready. I wanted to make sure we were both clean, because I didn't want to feel him for the first time in sixteen years with a condom. We rarely used them back then, and I didn't want to use them now. I just loved him so much. I didn't care if I got pregnant when it concerned him. Raising his children would give me joy.

Feeling his dick against me was hard, and apparently, it was hard for him, too, so he turned his back to me. That was the first place I needed to go to this morning... give blood. I was gonna have them rush that shit too. If it wasn't done by the time he got back, then I was going to have to settle for the condom. I couldn't go through another night like last night.

When I felt a hand wiping my tears, I looked over to see Manman. She

smiled at me then took the eggs from me and began cooking them. I took a deep breath and got plates from the cupboard and eating utensils from the drawer. He wasn't with me but for half a day, and he had my emotions going haywire. The way he handled Vashawn's ass had me wanting him so bad, but my mind refused to let me relax about it.

Shaking my head of my thoughts, I began fixing our food. As I did, I turned to them and said, "I have a doctor's appointment in a little bit. It should only take me an hour or so. I'll be back to pick you two up so we can go to the office and sign some paperwork."

"Okay. When will we do my name change?"

"We can apply online. We'll have to go to court and all that other stuff. I'm assuming the two of you will be here to stay once we close on the house, right?"

"Yes. Well... once we can move in, we will be here, unless Jericho has different plans. I guess we will know once he comes back," Manman said as she put eggs on our plates.

"Let's not talk about the depressing stuff right now. Can we talk about how fine Jericho's friend is?" Jenetta said.

Manman rolled her eyes, and I chuckled. "Who, Ali?"

"Girl, he fine, too, but I'm talking about Jungle. I snuck a picture of his fine ass without a shirt on."

She walked over to me and showed me the picture. My eyebrows lifted slightly. "I mean, he's no Jericho, but he is nice looking."

"Nice looking? Clearly, you can't see that well. Jericho doesn't want me looking at him, but I can't help it."

"Why doesn't he want you looking at him?"

"He says that Jungle won't give me the time of day, because that's his boy. Plus, he's older than me. He's in his forties... like forty-three or something."

"You're thirty. What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"My point! It's not like I'm a kid fresh out of high school."

I slowly shook my head as I grabbed our plates and headed to the table. Glancing at the time, I knew I needed to get a move on so I could make it there on time for my lab work. When my phone vibrated, I nearly jumped out of my damn skin. Grabbing it from the table, I saw a message from Jericho. I quickly opened it to see, *I'm okay. Call you later.*

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Jericho just texted me saying he was okay

and that he would call me later. He's still the same thoughtful Jericho. He knew I would be worried."

Jenetta smiled at me as Manman sat next to me. "Jericho has always been considerate. He still has a soft heart. He's just hidden it for so long. We'll have to bring it back to the forefront. A man can't do the things that Jericho has done with a soft heart. However, just the time we've been here with you, I can see the difference."

"Mama's right. I can see the difference in him too. He was somewhat short with us after we got to Houston. He stayed in the room with us at first, but he didn't talk much. He's definitely not as playful as he used to be. Our fucked-up situations have sucked all the fun out of him." She glanced over at Ms. Fabiola and said, "Sorry for my language."

She didn't pay Jenetta any mind. I nodded at her, knowing how hard Jericho's life had probably been. I needed to just chill out and see how things would work out. However, I always had a problem with that. I was a fixer. Things had to be rectified as soon as possible with me. I remembered we'd gotten into a small argument, and I was trying to fix it that day. He'd told me to just let him be so he could calm down, and we would talk about it the next day. We did, and he was much calmer.

Dealing with his attitude was something I didn't want to do, so I promised myself that I would give him time. He was in a dark place, and I knew he wouldn't fully leave that dark place until he felt it was safe to do so. I just had to give him time without the constant nagging. After taking a deep breath, I shoved some eggs into my mouth.

"Well, I need to go and get ready for my appointment. Can y'all be ready within an hour?"

"Yes," they said in unison.

I smiled at them then power walked to my room to get dressed. Today would be busy, so hopefully, I wouldn't miss Jericho too much. I just hoped he called me like he said he would.



"HOW DID YOU KNOW WE WERE AT THE HOUSE?"

"Don't worry about that, Whitney. I'm gonna always know where you

are. You're important to me, and I always keep tabs on my valuables."

Jericho had left me speechless. I didn't know how he knew we'd gone to look at the house again. Jenetta had turned cartwheels in the front room, causing me to laugh. She seemed to be so happy. She had a big personality to go along with her big hair, and now she was free to be herself. She was as happy as a kid in a candy store. Just being around her made my soul light.

"When are you coming back to Dallas?"

"Probably day after tomorrow. I left some cash with my mama to pay the down payment and closing for the house. Once I come back, we'll be leaving the next day to go to Houston to make sure they have all their things and to hang with my people over the weekend. Then we'll be back for good... Well, at least they will be."

He sounded so monotone, like what he said to me was rehearsed or something. I knew some shit had gone down. I didn't want to ask, but I surely wanted to know. Instead, I just said, "I miss you already."

"I miss you too. But listen. I need you to always pay attention to your surroundings. Okay? I want y'all to be extremely careful when you travel and move around. You can never be too safe."

"Jericho, where is this coming from? What's going on?"

"Just some idle threats made. He doesn't know where y'all are, but I don't want him finding out somehow. I may be there tomorrow."

"He's still alive?"

Jericho remained quiet, so I didn't know where to go in the conversation. I should have known better than to ask that question over the phone. His statement had just caught me off guard. I was more than sure that he'd killed Jules on sight. Breaking my silence, I said, "I'm sorry. I'll pay attention."

"Okay. I have to go. Oh! Did Jenetta get the ball rolling on the change she wanted?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll hit you back tonight."

"Okay. Bye."

I ended the call in my feelings somewhat. When he got back to me, I knew things would be different, but this conversation felt weird. There was no tenderness in his voice at all... not like there was yesterday when he got here. However, I just had to be grateful that he called at all. "Stop thinking so much, Whitney. If I lived in my head as much as you do, I would be a nutcase by now. All the shit I had to overcome and deal with should have me

crazy by now.”

I glanced over at Jenetta... soon to be Chelsea and nodded. Accepting her words of wisdom, I changed the subject. “So should I start calling you Chelsea now?”

“I really think you should so you can get used to it, Ms. Sanders.”

We both giggled as Manman smiled at us. “Okay. Well, let’s get to the office and get a start on this paperwork for your new home. I’m so happy y’all are here. I don’t feel like much of a loner now.”

“You know you were like my big sister when you and Jericho were dating. You were so cool to me. Granted, I was only fourteen, but in my mind, we were best friends. I felt like I could talk to you about anything. Just when I was about to tell you of my suspicions about my father, that day happened.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. “He’d been staring at me weird-like. Kind of how that old man was staring at Nettie in *The Color Purple* before she went to meet Celie. It was creepy, and I didn’t know what to do about it. I didn’t want Jericho to get in trouble, but I suppose it was meant for him to be one of the first to know what was going on. Manman knew, but what could she do about it?”

Her mother lowered her head, and at that moment, I could see the weariness in her face. She had few wrinkle lines, but she looked tired. “I should have tried harder,” she said softly. “If I had to die protecting you, then that was what I should have done.”

“Mama, no. Can you imagine what would have become of me after Jericho left? I feel like Jules didn’t do half of what he wanted to do to me because of you. I never understood why he and Jonas hated me so much.”

I had to get a handle on this conversation, but I didn’t know how. We’d been just sitting in the car talking. I decided to back out of the driveway and head to the office. As I glanced over at Manman, I could tell there was more she wanted to say that she chose to keep to herself. I was relieved. Whatever it was, it looked heavy. I would prefer if Jericho were here for these types of conversations. While I knew them, I wasn’t one hundred percent comfortable around them again. Hell, I was barely totally comfortable around Jericho.

Just like with him, I didn’t know in what ways they’d changed. I didn’t know the situations they may have endured. I only knew that Jonas had raped her, and that Jules kept them there like prisoners. What all of that entailed, I didn’t know, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know. Just from a couple of

discolorations on the side of her face, I could tell that something had happened. She wasn't nearly as dark complexioned as Jericho and Jules. She was lighter than I was.

Jericho had told me that his maternal grandmother was fair complexioned and that was where Jenetta had gotten her complexion from. Although she was lighter complexioned, she still resembled her mother. So I supposed it made sense. Doing my best to change the subject, I glanced in the rearview mirror to see Jenetta in her phone, and asked, "So do you have Jungle's phone number?"

Her eyebrows rose, then she smiled. "I was actually texting him. He's probably with Jericho though," she said and rolled her eyes.

"What were you saying?"

She smiled slightly. "Just telling him thank you for all he did for me and Manman. Also, that I was happy about the friendship we'd established. Hopefully we can continue to be friends."

"That sounds friendly enough, but if he's as smart as Jericho, he'll know you're flirting with him."

"That's the point. I want him to know that I'm flirting, but I wanted to be subtle about it. I just sent it."

My eyebrows rose a bit, and a smile teased at my lips. I wanted her to be happy, and she seemed to be happy whenever she spoke of Jungle. "What's his real name?"

"Shit, I don't know. He introduced himself as Jungle, and I haven't asked him. He's a boss. I know that much. Has Houston at his fingertips. Oh shit! He messaged me back."

I watched her quickly scan the message with a huge smile on her face. "What did he say?" I asked as I glanced at the traffic light.

"I'm gonna read it." She paused, then continued. "What's up, lil mama? You don't have to thank me. Jericho my boy, and I would do anything for him. He's like family, so that means you and Manman are family too. Hit me up whenever you want to."

She looked up at me with a huge smile on her face. "He put a heart emoji at the end."

She was thirty years old, but I could still see the youth in her. I didn't think she'd ever had a boyfriend because of Jules. "Baby, that could just mean that he looks at you like a little sister."

She frowned slightly. "You know, you're right. Family. Ugh!"

“Not right now, but later, you’ll have to be more direct if you want his attention in that manner.”

“He has to know I’m flirting, right? I mean, I’ve told him thank you multiple times.”

“Calm down, chile. The man knows. Just respond to him and tell him he can call you anytime too,” Manman said.

I smiled at her, and Jenetta beamed and went back to her phone. I slowly shook my head as I continued my drive, only to hear her phone ring. Her eyes widened so much I swore those things were gonna fall out of the sockets. “He’s calling!”

“Answer, chile!” Manman yelled.

This nut answered him on speakerphone. I was happy, though, because I needed to hear firsthand how this conversation was going to go.

“Hello?”

“What’s up, Netta? You good?”

“Hey! Yeah. I didn’t expect you to call right now,” she responded and giggled.

I rolled my eyes as he said, “Well, I wasn’t busy just yet, and I didn’t want you to think I was ignoring you when I did get busy. How you liking Dallas?”

“It’s cool. I submitted an application to change my first name.”

“Yo, for real? What’chu gon’ change it to?”

“Chelsea. You like it?”

“Yeah. I like that name. I better get used to calling you that then. Let me see what yo’ nickname gon’ be.”

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, “I got it. C-Mar. Mar for Marcellus. Yep. I think it fits.”

That girl was so red. I wanted to laugh so bad. “I like that, Jungle. So what you up to?”

“Shit. Sitting here waiting for Vegas to bring lunch back. Jericho told me y’all found a house. I’m gon’ have to come visit. How’s Manman?”

She continued making small talk with him. His voice was rugged sounding. Nigga almost sounded like DMX. Apparently, whatever Jericho had going on right now was between him and Jules if Jungle wasn’t with him. I wished he could take a break from his current mental state and talk to me. I tuned back into her conversation to hear her ask, “What’s your real name?”

“See, lil mama, you tryna get war secrets now.” He laughed and said,

“Naw. I’m fucking wit’chu. Milton Patterson, Junior. Now you see why I go by Jungle? Old ass name. That was my pop’s name though. I wouldn’t wanna be named anything else. It’s a part of him I can carry with me forever.”

“That’s cool. How long has your dad been deceased?”

“Ten long years, man. I’ve never asked, but how old are you?”

“Thirty.”

“Oh, okay. Well, when y’all come back, if Jericho cool with it, we gon’ have to hit Pilar’s up. That’s my boy’s club. It’s the best spot in Houston to turn up.”

“Okay. Sounds like fun, so Jericho may be against it.”

He laughed loudly as Jenetta rolled her eyes. He’d friend zoned her. She was gonna have to work hard to get to the next level now. I could hear the slight hesitancy in his voice when he invited her to the club. He knew what she was up to. I could tell that he wasn’t a fool by far. If he was a kingpin, then surely, he could feel out her vibe.

As we turned in the parking lot at the realty, Jenetta ended their call and told him she would talk to him soon. Having her around was gonna be eventful. I got out of the car and said, “Calm down, C-Mar. You’ll get to him.”

She shot me the finger as I laughed and walked in the office. Manman and I did our best to keep it together enough to walk.

CHAPTER 9

JERICHO

I silently followed Ali to the room they had Jules in. There was nothing that needed to be said. When I walked inside, they had a black pillowcase looking bag on his head and had him tied to a chair. I walked straight to him without an ounce of fear in me and yanked that shit off. His eyes squinted under the lights. His mouth was bleeding, and he had a huge knot on the side of his head. They'd probably knocked his ass out.

When he was able to focus and saw me, he gave me an evil smirk. "Mwen pa poukont mwen. Ou ka touye m, men sa p ap fini."

I frowned hard. He'd said that he wasn't alone. I could kill him, and it still wouldn't be over. I didn't give a fuck about who else was out there. I couldn't worry about the niggas I didn't know. I knew his ass. He was the only muthafucka I could be worried about right now. I stooped in front of him and said, "Mwen pa pran swen. Ou pral siplye m pou m touye w lè m fini."

Ali nodded in agreement. I'd told him that I didn't care and that he would be begging me to kill him when I was done. I looked around the room, glancing in my brothers' eyes. "Y'all might want to leave the room."

Shy and Chad were the main ones that needed to be gone. I didn't want them to have to see what I was about to do to this nigga. For the most part, the Berottes were on the right side of the law, although they'd seen some crazy shit, especially Shy. I wanted to keep it that way. They didn't need to be witnesses to this shit, although they'd witnessed the massacre at Ali's mom's place a couple of months ago when he snapped.

"The last thing I'll ever do is beg a weak ass nigga like you. If you got the balls to torture me, I'll be surprised."

Shy stared at Jules with a frown on his face and said, "Naw, I'm staying." Chad twisted his lips to the side. "I don't punch a clock."

I nodded, then looked to Jungle, Seneca, and Ali, and said, "Well, let's get the party started."

Jungle pulled out quite a bit of plastic, and Seneca helped him spread it over the floor and on top of shit we didn't want to damage. They picked his chair up and set him on the plastic. As they walked off, I slid Jungle's car keys in his hand. He nodded as he slid them in his pocket. Even if he would have let me keep it, I didn't think I would be able to drive much after this. Most of the people I killed had no connection to me. This was my brother. I was emotional and angry as hell, just like I was when I killed Jonas.

I didn't know why Jules was thinking I wouldn't fuck his ass up. Visions of my father on top of my sister flashed through my mind. Memories of all the shit Jules had done, namely the imprisonment of our mother and sister in that house, played as well. The fact that Jenetta had a baby from him had my face twitching in anger. The way her face was bruised when I rescued them over two weeks ago was also something that would never leave my memory.

I pulled my knife from my bag, and Jules smiled and slowly shook his head. I wasn't about to entertain him. My focus was unfuckwithable, and that was something he didn't know about me. "Where are you going with that pathetic shit?"

I pulled out my block and began sharpening it as he watched. I turned to Jungle and asked, "Who caught him?"

"Vegas. Caught that nigga slipping last night trying to get something to eat in Sunnyside. I believe he knew what we all looked like, but he had left Vegas out of the equation, because he rarely kicked it with us. Whenever I'm with y'all is usually when I'm chilling by myself. Vegas knocked that nigga out and drug him to the SUV and tied his punk ass up."

I nodded, thankful that *someone* had caught his ass. When I turned to Jules, I could see him staring at Ali. I knew that he knew exactly who Ali was. He gave Ali a head nod, but Ali wasn't amused. "You better be glad Jericho wants to do this himself. I would have put a bullet in your head a long time ago. I would have shot yo' ass right there in Sunnyside in the back of yo' fucking head and been gone without a trace."

Jules laughed, but he wasn't laughing when I swung and sliced him across his face. "You got anything else to say about my knife, Jules?"

He frowned. "You still a pussy, just like Jonas said you were."

That was what they thought about me. That worked to my advantage, though, because they never thought I was capable of turning on them. I gave him a head nod and delivered another blow across his chest, deep enough to bleed, but not to nick any arteries or veins. Jungle yanked his shirt open and grabbed a bottle of rubbing alcohol and poured it on top of his head. That nigga screamed like a bitch. I smiled at him. As he jerked in the chair, I prepared my next tool of choice. When I pulled out a small, cordless skill saw, Chad's eyebrows rose.

They didn't know me like they thought they did. Sometimes, *I* barely knew who I was. The only version of me Chad had really met was the nigga that was in that SUV going to the DNA center with him in Houston when Lexi got pregnant. I was in love then... feeling mild and somewhat sensitive. I hadn't killed a person in a year or so at that time.

When I cranked it up, Jules's eyes widened. I walked closer to him and slid it across both of his legs slowly as he screamed, penetrating his flesh down to the bone. His blood had splattered all over my upper body and the floor. Ali had an evil looking smile on his face like he was enjoying this shit. Jules had tormented him when we were kids, calling him weak because he wouldn't hit girls or talk disrespectful to them. It was nothing for him to knock the wind out of us.

When Jules stopped screaming, I broke my silence. "My sister didn't deserve that shit you and Jonas did to her. She was a kid. You and Jonas were some perverted, nasty fucks to want to be with a child, let alone your sister and his daughter."

He slowly shook his head. "She wasn't Jonas's daughter, and you know that shit. Your whore for a mother got pregnant from another nigga. Too bad he ain't living to verify that story," he said breathlessly.

I slid that saw across his lap again, feeling the blood splatter my face. He wasn't going to get away with calling Manman a whore. I didn't care what the situation was. She was our mother and had done right by us. She deserved our respect. "Whatever the case, Jenetta was still a kid! What did that shit have to do with her?"

"She was insignificant. Her existence didn't matter to me one way or the other. I had fun with her though. She was only going to die anyway. She was conceived in lust, betrayal, and dishonesty. She's lucky you were able to get to her. Jonas would be proud to see what you've become, Jericho."

The slow torture I thought I would be able to handle wasn't gon' work

out. I was filled with rage, and I needed to get it off me. The last thing I wanted was to believe that Jonas would be proud of me. I hated him. “Jonas was an evil muthafucka, and you’re just like him, which is why you will be joining him in hell. I have a good heart, but I allowed my hatred for the two of you to taint it. I have a life to live, and knowing that you have paid for your sins against the women of our family will make it that much sweeter.”

He smiled at me and slowly shook his head as Jungle poured the rest of that alcohol on his legs. He started screaming again, and Ali couldn’t help himself. He stood from his seat and punched him across his face, and said, “Shut the fuck up, you pussy!”

That was what Jules used to tell us all the time whenever we whined about something he’d done. We were between the ages of five and eight. Jules was six years older than us... a damn teenager by the time Ali moved. Beating on us gave him joy, and now Ali was enjoying his torture. He punched him again, knocking one of his teeth out. I hadn’t seen him throw blows like that in a long time. He was angry, and I could tell he wanted more, but I was about to combust from the flames burning inside of me.

I went to him with my knife and jerked his head back by grabbing his chin, slicing his throat from ear to ear slowly. Ali, Jungle, and Seneca all had deep frowns on their faces, but I noticed Chad seemed a little bothered by what he saw. I knew he’d seen shit like this when he worked in the prison, and this shit probably took him back there, mentally. Shy seemed unbothered. His poker face was in force, so we would never truly know how he felt about what had just happened.

I sat in a chair directly in front of Jules and watched him stare at me in shock as he gurgled on his own blood until his head fell over and his body slumped. He was still doubting that I would kill him in cold blood. It was easier to do than I thought it would be. I didn’t have to dig for horrible memories to put me in this frame of mind. When it came to Jules, I didn’t have any good memories. The same was true for Jonas. I refused to move. I just sat there staring at him... grateful that he was dead.

Jungle and his clean-up guys appeared in front of me. “Let us get this cleaned up, bruh.”

I nodded as I felt the blood rolling down my face, then stood from my seat as Ali handed me a towel. I wiped my face and hands, then made my way to the bathroom to scrub it with soap and trash the shirt I was wearing. I was more than sure Jungle was shocked that I was capable of something like

that. While he knew that I was a bad muthafucka, I'd exhibited street shit that he'd never seen from me. I watched Jonas kill people that way all the time. Maybe Jules was right. Jonas would be proud.

This was the only kill I'd played around with, although I didn't play very long. Normally, I shot them and got the shit over with. This was personal. I'd always considered Jenetta and Manman to be my responsibility. I failed them when I left Florida. This was my way of making things right, especially for Jenetta, because Manman didn't seem to suffer from Jules's cruelty as much as she did.

When I came out of the bathroom in my undershirt, Ali, Chad, Shy, and Seneca were all standing there, waiting for me. Ali put his hand on my shoulder, and I followed them out. We loaded up in Ali's SUV and took the drive to Beaumont. The ride was quiet besides the guys occasionally checking on me, making sure I was good. Chad had stared at me off and on for the entire trip. I knew what he had to be thinking. *Where in the fuck this side of him come from?*

I'd avenged my sister and mother's suffering. However, that talk with my mother would happen sooner than later. I needed to know what had gone down to where she would cheat on Jonas, especially with him being as dangerous as he was. Why would she take that risk? He could have killed her. There was no telling who I would have ended up being had that happened. There would have been no women in my life to protect. I probably would have been just who I had turned into... a heartless killer.

When we arrived at my place, Seneca accompanied me to the door. Ali left to take Chad and Shy to Watchful Eyes to get their cars. The minute we stepped inside, he went to my kitchen and poured us drinks. I sat on my couch and just stared at the wall. Once he joined me, I realized he'd poured himself a glass and had brought me the bottle of D'USSÉ XO.

I took a swig of it and set the bottle on the coffee table as he silently watched me. I glanced over at him and said, "Thanks for having my back."

"You ain't ever gotta thank me for that. I have a question for you though."

"What's up?"

"That's what you grew up seeing? Yo' pops was a gangsta?"

"I guess you can say that. He was a kingpin like Jungle. He practically ran Miami-Dade County and part of Fort Lauderdale, until I blew his fucking brains out. It's a miracle I'm still alive, man."

“I would have never imagined you were capable of some shit like that back there.”

“My younger self would have never imagined it either, but you do what you have to do to survive. Sometimes that shit becomes a part of you after a while. It took over me. It had been lying dormant until I took care of Talisha. It was like blood in front of a shark. I craved it. Seeing her eyes widen as I choked her to death only enticed me to kill again.”

“So where will you go from here?”

“I’m going to take care of my family and try to convince my woman why she should trust me. I left her sixteen years ago when I left Florida. My sister gave her my contact info recently, and we reconnected... actually, just yesterday. I have to get back out there.”

“That’s what’s up. The right woman can definitely change your life.”

“That’s what I hear. I’m proud of you, man. Happy for you too.”

“Yeah. Kaysyn is way more than I initially thought.” He took a swig of his drink and said, “I didn’t want to ask you anything, but Kay Baby said your sister was staring at Jericka kind of weird like. It was right before she practically ran out of the house.”

I frowned like I didn’t already know. I refused to have this conversation with him until I talked to my sister again after she talked to Zay. “Naw. I thought she was just suffering from the trauma my brother put her through... like had a flashback or something. I’ll find out when I get to them.”

“A’ight. Thanks, man.”

I nodded then took another swig as someone knocked at the door. We both pulled our guns out of habit, and before either of us could get to the door, Ali said, “It’s just me. Put that shit down.”

His instincts and knowledge always impressed me. Seneca slowly shook his head and headed to the door to let him in. When he walked through, he glanced at the liquor on the table and went and got himself a glass. When he rejoined us, he sat in a chair across from us and asked, “You know what tonight signifies?”

Seneca nodded as I replayed what Jules had said. *This shit wasn’t over.* “It signifies the end of my criminal involvement, unless it can’t be avoided. No more bullshit. Riley and my princess too important to me to be fucking around.”

I nodded without uttering a word. Whether Jules was being truthful or not was plaguing me. He could have just been saying that so I wouldn’t kill him,

or he could have been telling the truth. However, had anyone been in Houston with him, he wouldn't have been alone in Sunnyside. His crew had been dwindling, and he couldn't afford to bring anybody to Texas with him.

"Bruh, you know I'm gon' have your back if there's any truth to what that muthafucka said," Ali added.

"I know. I don't think there is, but I can't be so sure just yet. Y'all get home to your women."

"Riley is already heading to drop Aina to preschool. I'm cool."

"Kaysyn started working for BISD, so she's already on her way to work too. Chill out. We kicking it with you until they get off. I'ma need a nap though. I ain't no fucking vampire like Ali."

I chuckled. It didn't help that nigga had fangs. They weren't that noticeable, but they were there. He could stay up for a couple of days without completely burning out. I could too. This liquor may have us on our backs later though.

"Shut the fuck up. I'ma take a nap. I gotta pick up baby girl at three. I need to be rested so I can give her my undivided attention."

Ali put his feet up on my coffee table and got comfortable in the chair. "Nigga, go get in the bed. I have an extra bedroom," I said to him.

"Shit, I may not wake up in time."

"Well, shit, I'll take it," Seneca said and stood.

He slapped both our hands and went to the room. Ali gave me a knowing look, and I shook my head. I knew he was silently asking me if I talked to him about Jenetta. "He has a clue something is up though," I said quietly.

Seneca could eavesdrop like a muthafucka. Ali nodded then yawned. I stretched then slumped in the corner of the couch. I knew after tonight's... rather this morning's events, I wouldn't be sleeping. Grabbing my phone, I saw a couple of missed calls and text messages from Whitney. I took a deep breath and allowed myself to feel her worry. I sent her a quick message. *I'm okay. Call you later.* I stared at the ceiling, hoping that I was just as done as Ali wanted to be.

CHAPTER 10

WHITNEY

“O kay. That’s it. All the papers have been signed, the down payment and closing costs have been accepted, and here are your keys. If for some reason something falls through, you’ll have to give them back. I’m only giving them to you now because I know y’all,” I said to Manman.

She wore a huge smile, and so did Chelsea. *Calling her Chelsea is gonna be hard to get used to.* “When can we start moving?” Manman inquired.

“Hopefully, by next week. Because you paid with cash, it expedites things a little. The approval came through this morning, which is crazy, because it usually takes longer. And instead of waiting for the down payment to clear, we can send everything to the title company and get an inspector in, sometime this week. Jericho is a smart man.”

Manman smiled again, but it quickly faded. I knew she was thinking about what had most likely gone down. She’d lost a son at the hands of her other son. I couldn’t imagine being in a predicament like that. Despite all that Jules had put them through, he was still her son. While I knew she wasn’t angry at Jericho, I felt like she was definitely angry with herself.

As I stood from my desk, I said, “Let’s go eat. I’m starving!”

Chelsea giggled and said, “Me too. I thought that snack you gave me was gonna hold me, but sis, my stomach is fighting me.”

I grabbed the envelope with all their paperwork, and when I opened the door and saw Jericho standing there, I nearly had a heart attack. He scared the fuck out of me. Bending over, he grabbed the envelope I’d dropped from the floor and handed it back to me. “You were in Dallas when you called me?”

“Almost. I was about an hour or a little less away.”

“Have you slept?”

I could clearly see the weariness in his dark eyes. He shook his head as his mother stepped out of the office. The way he looked at her had me stepping out of his way. I wasn't sure what was going on, but clearly, it was something I didn't want any parts of. He grabbed her hand then lowered his face to mine and kissed my lips. There was no passion in sight, and it was barely tender. When Jenetta walked out, he kissed her forehead. “I'll follow y'all.”

He released his mother's hand and walked out without waiting for us. I couldn't wait until we went home and I could love on him. He'd told me he wouldn't be back for another two days. I wondered what changed his mind. I glanced at the ladies, and Manman looked extremely nervous. I wasn't sure what was going on, but it seemed she already knew without him saying a word.

We ended up at Escondido, a Tex-Mex restaurant. We'd agreed that we could all go for a good margarita, and it was the closest. Plus, the food was great there, so it was a win-win for us. Jericho approached the vehicle and opened my door, helping me out, then opened the door for his mother, who was seated behind me. When I noticed Chelsea just sitting there waiting for him to open her door, I chuckled.

He did the same and walked around the car to open her door too. “Come on here, Cheeellsea,” he said, dragging out her new name.

She giggled then threw her arms around him. I wasn't sure what she said in his ear, but he closed his eyes and gripped her tighter. She knew how to reach his heart. I knew that everything he'd done today was for her. His little sister was his heartbeat, and I loved that about him. His relationship with her and his mother was what impressed me the most. I knew that he would treat me well, because of the way he treated them.

Once she released him, he made his way to me and grabbed my hand. Bringing it to his lips, he kissed it tenderly. That alone made me hungry for more. I couldn't wait to have his perfect body next to mine tonight. Jericho didn't have a blemish on his body. His skin was flawless. There were no tattoos. There were only dark spots around both his wrists. I remembered when I first saw them. At first glance, I thought there were tattoos there.

When I'd questioned him about it, he'd told me how his brother had tied him up with rope, overnight, for crying, and how his friend, who I now knew was Ali, had tried to defend him. He'd said his wrists were raw the next day

from him trying to get loose, which had only made the rope tighter. I couldn't understand how someone could be so cruel, especially to a small child. Their father had allowed and perpetuated that behavior in Jules, because he was following in his footsteps.

"I'm sorry I was emotionally unavailable."

I brought my hands to his cheeks and pulled his face to mine, desperately needing to feel his lips again. This time, his kiss felt like it did yesterday. I moaned softly and said, "It's okay. I know you will make up for it later."

He smiled and put his arm around me and led us inside. I didn't miss that he had yet to say anything to his mother. *God, I want to know, but I don't.* As the hostess led us to a table, Jericho kissed the side of my head. I was now all smiles. After getting to the table, he pulled out chairs for the three of us, then sat next to me. "What made you come back today?" I asked.

"I needed to be with you. I also need to talk to my mother before the pressure of what I don't know drives me crazy," he said in a low voice.

Leaning toward his mother, he said something in her ear, and she nodded. "So... Chelsea, how are you adjusting to the name?"

"It was easy, because I'd often daydream that was my name anyway and that I was a totally different person with a different life. It will be harder for you guys than for me."

Jericho gave her a nod, then leaned back over to me, sliding his arm around my waist. He nuzzled his face against my ear and exhaled against my neck, causing all the hair there to stand. I turned to him, and he kissed my lips, gently sucking my bottom one. His need for affection had multiplied just that quickly. I lifted my hand and stroked his cheek as he said in a low voice, "I love you, Whitney."

"I love you too."

He rested his forehead against mine, and that was when I realized his soul was tortured. What he'd done was fucking with him, although he had very good reason to do what he did. I could imagine that killing his dad probably had similar effects as well. I kissed his lips again and said, "Everything will be okay. Let's eat, and when we get back to my house, I will help you relax. Okay?"

He didn't answer me verbally, but like that Mario song, I could hear his heart crying out for me. He needed me to soothe his torment, and that was a job I was well prepared to handle. Jericho was everything to me, and I would give everything I had to help him get back to the man he used to be.



THE MINUTE WE GOT BACK TO MY PLACE, I LED HIM TO MY BEDROOM. HE'D been extremely quiet during lunch, and I knew it was because his conscience was eating him alive. As soon as I closed the door to my bedroom, I pulled his shirt off and had him sit on the bed. I got in behind him and began rubbing his shoulders. They were so hard and stiff. As I rubbed, I kissed the side of his head then his ear.

It didn't seem the massage was working though. My fingers were beginning to cramp, but he didn't feel any looser. As I kissed the back of his neck, he swiftly turned around and grabbed me, bringing me to his lap, and kissed me until my head fell back, giving him easier access to my neck. "Whitney, I know what you said last night about wanting to get tested first. I submitted a sample this morning before heading out here, but I need to feel you, baby. Please..."

I wasn't about to sit here and be so fucking high and mighty that I would let him beg me for something that belonged to only him in the first place. I kissed his lips then stood from his lap and pulled my sweater over my head. He immediately stood, and I couldn't help but see his dick through his pants. Damn, it looked bigger than I remembered, but I wasn't the least bit intimidated. "Whitney, let me unwrap my gift."

I stood there trembling in anticipation. I remembered how he used to take his time with my body. We were only eighteen and nineteen at the time, but he proved to be so sexually mature back then. I couldn't help but fall for everything he was doing to me. He slid his arms to my back and unfastened my bra while staring into my eyes.

He licked his lips, and mine parted as I stared at his perfection... from his slanted eyes and high cheekbones to his soft, thick lips and beard. I slid my hands in the waistband of his sweats, easing them down until gravity took ahold of them and brought them the rest of the way. When he stooped and gripped my ass, my eyes rolled to the back of my head. He lifted me and laid me on the bed, then began unfastening my slacks. As he pulled them off, there was a low rumble in his throat. I opened my eyes to see he was laser focused on my ultimate gift to him. He was going to hurt me so good, and there would be nothing I could do to restrain the pleasure that emitted from

my lips.

After getting my panties down my legs, he stood there admiring my body. When his eyes met mine, he said, "As much as I love you, I'm about to fuck you up. I hope you can still handle me. I need you to. I haven't had sex in over a year, and I'm so fucking backed up, you gon' get pregnant... condom or not. So get ready to be a mother, Whitney."

I nearly creamed at his words as I watched him remove his boxer briefs. My breathing had turned ragged, and I could barely keep my eyes open. My body had begun without him, and I couldn't help but to pinch my nipples. I moaned in pleasure until I felt Jericho get in bed with me. My eyes opened in time to see him shielding himself, and right after, he slid right into my paradise.

My back arched as he lowered his head. "Fuck!" he yelled.

There was no fishing around for the fucking entry, nor did he use his hands to guide him there. It was like he remembered exactly how she was positioned when beneath him, and that missile acquired its damn target. The tears left my eyes as he just marinated inside of me. He kissed my ear, then whispered, "Say you love me, Whitney."

"I love you, Jericho. I love you so much, baby."

He began stroking me, causing my body to go up in flames. *Dear God.* His body sliding back and forth on top of mine was way too much pleasure at once. I erupted without warning. As my body trembled, he said, "I wanna be the only man to ever take you here again. Mwen renmen ou."

I loved to hear him tell me he loved me in Haitian Creole. When I began rolling my hips into him, he gripped my hip then slid his hand beneath me, lifting me into him. He lifted his head and stared into my tear-filled eyes and filled me beyond capacity. I moaned loudly as I stared into his eyes. He stilled for a moment, then lowered his head to kiss my neck.

When he began stroking me again, it was filled with need and thirst for only the waters I could provide. I could no longer meet him stroke for stroke. He grunted quietly as he fucked me like a got damn savage, taking just what he needed from me. While his assault was rough, it was still filled with love, and I could feel every bit of it every time the head of his dick slid across my G-spot on its way to breech my cervix.

"Jericho! Fuck! Please don't stop!"

He gripped my leg then hooked it with his arm, bringing my knee to my shoulder as I wrapped the other around his waist. His stare was so fucking

intense my body began trembling again. Instead of letting me bust in the position we were in, he quickly pulled out of me and dove face first into my paradise. I erupted all over his gorgeous face. I grabbed his head, holding him where I needed him as I grinded against his lips.

He gripped my hips, lightly massaging them, and that only caused my orgasm to add an extension. He lifted his head and gently patted my clit as I squirted all over the bed. As he entered me again, I pulled his face to mine and slurped his lips into my mouth. The wetness of his beard against my face only turned me on more.

Pulling away from me slightly, he rolled over, putting me on top of him. He gut checked me twice, then I flattened my feet on the bed. The tears poured down my cheeks as I began bouncing on his dick... something I thought I would never feel again. "Yeah, Whitney. Fuck yo' shit up, baby."

He extended his hand to my clit and began flicking it back and forth as my pussy digested every inch of him. "Whitney, I'm about to cum."

It was like that gave me even more energy to put in my best work as I twerked my ass on him as I bounced. He popped the shit out of one cheek then the other as I watched the veins pop out in his neck. "Here it comes, baby. Fók!"

I continued to bounce on him as he came, waiting to see if he would stop me. That muthafucka decided to show me why his name was Jericho. Without God's control, that nigga refused to crumble. I continued bouncing on his hard dick while he nuttet. He gripped my hips, slamming me repeatedly on his dick.

He lifted me, pulled the condom off, and lowered me right back on the shit. *Fuck it.* I continued to put in work as the perspiration began to roll down my face. The minute Jericho noticed, he pulled me off him and laid me next to him. He went up on his knees, and before I could turn to my back, he said, "Naw. Let me see the waves this ass finna make."

He rolled me to my stomach, then hovered over me as I stared back at him. He once again entered me without assistance. I didn't know how he did that shit. Vashawn's raggedy ass always had trouble finding it, like it moved on him or something. The nigga was using his hand as a guide and still missed. That shit would ruin everything for me sometimes. I could see now that sort of thing would be in my past. My future was shining bright like a diamond.

I lifted my ass into him, and he went to his knees and gripped it as he

continued feeding me everything he had to offer. “Jericho! Fuck! I love you.”

Turning me to my side, he lay behind me and wrapped his strong arms around me. He entered me and slowed his assault, taking his time to make love to me. The kisses he placed on my shoulders, neck, and back had me gushing all over him once again. “I missed you so much, baby. I’ll never get enough of you. This grown woman pussy is on a different level, and my dick loves this shit.”

With those words, he gave me stronger thrusts as he moaned in my ear. That shit had always been his thing, and it did beautiful things to my soul whenever he did it. It wasn’t a grunt or groan, just a tender ass moan that told me I was everything he needed. Despite his rough demeanor, he always showed me just how tender he could be. I loved every moment of it.

I moaned along with him, and our sounds of love made the perfect duet as I held onto his hand tightly, not wanting him to ever let me go. “I missed you too, Jericho, more than I even realized.”

It was amazing that we were just able to pick up where we left off with all the time and adversity that had passed. With what had happened today... had it been any other man, I would have run as fast as I could in the other direction. I knew Jericho’s soul. His spirit had lived within mine all this time, and that was why it had been so easy for us to just pick up where we left off. Mine had obviously lived within his as well.

“Whitney, I can’t go back to a condom, baby. Not after feeling this. You know what it is between us. I’m about to nut.”

I began circling my hips slightly, coaxing his nut from him. I didn’t care where he put it at this point. This man was mine, and I refused to let him go anywhere. I would hold on until I got blisters, and even then, he’d have to cut my hands off for me to let go. When my love for him began spasming around his dick, he quickly pulled out of me and nudded on my back. I took a deep breath as he kissed my shoulder.

Standing from the bed, he walked to my bathroom and started the shower. When he came back, he lifted me from the bed and cradled me in his arms like his most valuable possession and took me to the bathroom to get cleaned up. I knew we had a long road of healing ahead of us, but together, we would overcome anything, just like we’d already overcome our sixteen-year hiatus.

CHAPTER 11

JERICHO

The mirror cracked as I slammed my fist against it. Fucking Whitney on the vanity proved to be my undoing. “Oh fuck!”

The shower was running, and we had yet to get inside. Cradling her naked body close to mine with my kids sliding down her back like they were on a Slip 'N Slide, had my dick back at full potential. He was at a buffet and planned to eat until his ass was throwing up. I gripped her neck, and she noticed the blood.

“Jericho. Oh fuck! Baby... wait. You're bleeding.”

“Fuck that right now.”

I lowered my head and sucked her nipples one at a time, then watched her pussy take everything I had to offer. She'd forgotten all about my hand when her pussy squeezed the life out of me. I hoped she didn't have shit else to do today, because I planned to live inside of her. I needed her more than I could have ever imagined.

Picking her up from the vanity, she wrapped her legs around me as I made my way to the shower. Her pussy was bouncing on the head of my dick and was threatening to take me down at any moment. The moment I stepped inside, I lowered her some, filling her up once again. “Slide that hot pussy on this dick, Whitney. Let me feel it hold me tight again, baby.”

She moaned loudly as I put my hands to her ass and bounced her on my shit roughly. Her moans turned to obscenities then to screams as I gave her body what she'd been needing. When she began orgasming on my dick, I couldn't withhold my nut any longer. I fired off within her depths as I leaned against the wall of the shower. She slid down my body as I caught my breath.

She grabbed my hand and said, “I suppose we'll be replacing my mirror

before you leave tomorrow?”

The smirk on her face caused me to chuckle. “Yeah, but I decided I’m not leaving until Friday. I want you to come with us. We’re gonna drive to Houston and stay the night there, then head to Beaumont Saturday afternoon. We’ll be back Sunday night.”

“Okay. I’ll leave work early and just take my laptop with me.”

I nodded and kissed her forehead before I began washing her beautiful body. “This is a dream come true. I longed for you for so long. I figured when I got settled, I would find you. Jenetta... I mean, Chelsea had told me that you had moved, but she didn’t know where. All this time without you felt like a waste.”

“You have me now, Jericho... all of me. Let’s just focus on that. You are so much more than I imagined you would be now. Even more passionate but with a rough edge. I love everything about you, even your dark side. While that would probably scare someone else, I know the you in here,” she said as she laid her hand on my chest.

I pulled her into my arms, feeling even more grateful to have been able to reunite with her. When I released her, I washed up, and we got out. While I wanted to take advantage of her again, especially when I noticed her salivating over my dick, I knew I needed to talk to Manman. Now that I was calm, this was the best time.

After drying off, I slid on some boxers then my shorts as Whitney stared at me. “I have some shit I need to talk to Manman about.”

“Okay. I’m gonna take a nap, so I’ll be ready for you later.”

I chuckled as she snuggled under her comforter, completely naked. “Mm. So I’m cool to just slide under there with you and eat you out of house and home then, right?”

Her eyebrows lifted, and she said, “Nigga, ’til I’m homeless.”

I laughed as I shook my head and headed out of the room. When I got to the front, Chelsea rolled her eyes at me. I frowned. “What you rolling your eyes for, Cheeeeelllsea?”

“Zoe, you know what the fuck you did.”

I frowned hard. “First of all, don’t call me that. I know I’ve taken on the criminal part of their attributes, but that was Jonas and Jules. Now what are you talking about? The sacred swapping of affections a minute ago?”

She rolled her eyes again, and I chuckled. I was so glad that I was feeling somewhat lighthearted, because what I needed to speak to my mama about

was everything but. She was staring at me, waiting for me to call her over to me. I didn't keep her waiting any longer. "Can we talk?"

She nodded, so I walked over to her, helped her from her seat, and led her outside to the patio. It was a little cool, but it wasn't crippling. Still, I'd grabbed a throw from the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders. Once we were seated outside on a swing Whitney had positioned there, I turned to her.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush, because that's not my style. I need to know... Was Jonas Jenetta's biological father?"

She lowered her head, and I watched her hands tremble. When she looked back up at me, she shook her head. "No, he wasn't. He took that out on Jenetta and taught Jules to do the same."

"So what happened? You cheated on him... What?"

She swallowed hard as I stood from the swing and began pacing. Her hesitancy to tell me the truth was bothering the hell out of me. The shit was done now. Just say it. However, if she cheated, then she was at fault for the abuse Jenetta suffered at their hands.

"I was raped by your father's friend. Jonas killed him. When I found out I was pregnant again, I didn't know whether the child was from Jonas or from Evens. When Jenetta had turned a year old, we knew without a blood test that she wasn't from your father. She looked like Evens. We took one anyway and discovered that she wasn't his. Suddenly, he turned on me like it was my fault. I was raped, but somehow, he turned it on me, saying I liked to dress too scantily."

A tear fell down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away. "Jenetta looks just like Evens. There's no doubt about that. She has his skin tone, his eyes, and his smile. It used to pain me to look at her some days. However, I was able to separate her from him. She was innocent in all of this, but it seems she suffered the most. The Zoe Pound destroyed Evens piece by piece."

"Why didn't you ever tell Jenetta?"

"I thought it was easier this way. She was a rebel by nature. Had she known that, she wouldn't have stopped until Jonas or Jules would have killed her. It was best she didn't know."

"What about now? It may help her to know that Jonas wasn't her father."

"Possibly. I'm just not sure if I want to tell her she was the product of a rape, just like her daughter, Jericka, was. It could cause more demons to infiltrate her mind."

“She has the right to know, Manman.”

“I’m going to pray about what to do, because she *does* have the right to know. I just don’t know if now is the right time.”

“This conversation went a little easier than I expected. While I can imagine that it was hard for you to tell me this, I thought we would be yelling at one another by now.”

“That’s because you disrespected our presence in this house when you ‘swapped affections’ with Whitney,” she said, putting up air quotes. “She calmed you.”

I chuckled then bit my bottom lip. “She calmed me down for sure.”

She slowly shook her head but remained silent for a minute or so. For some reason, when she turned back to me, I already knew what the topic of what she had to say would be. “So, you killed him, right?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure why she even asked that question. She had to know I didn’t drive all the way to Houston in the middle of the night to have a conversation with his ass. “Yeah. He’s gone. It was going to be him or me, and I surely wasn’t about to let him kill me.”

“Is it over? What did he say before you killed him? I know he wasn’t quiet.”

“He said it wouldn’t be over with his death, but I know that my life was surely at risk with him being alive. I’ll deal with whatever backlash comes my way when and if it comes.”

She nodded and gazed out at the backyard, seeming to be in deep thought. “I understand why you did what you did. It’s just a hard pill to swallow, knowing that my husband and oldest son are both dead by the hands of my youngest son. I never saw you as a killer, Jericho. You were so loving.”

“I’m still that man. He’s just buried deeply right now. Once I can feel like we’re safe and I’m not on edge, he may make a comeback.”

“I can’t wait for the day, son.”

“I truly believe being here with Whitney will help.” She nodded when I paused. My mind was trying to adjust to what she told me. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Mama. Was Jonas always cruel to you, or did it happen after Jenetta was born?”

“He wasn’t the nicest man in the world, but he wasn’t cruel. That happened after she was born. It was like something in him snapped, although he knew I was raped. I didn’t have control over that. I tried to fight Evens off me, but he was a big man.”

The tears sprang from her eyes as if she were reliving it. I didn't understand how a man like Jonas had even gotten a woman like her. Her heart was so beautiful, and I knew she was where my passion came from. Before killing Jonas, I didn't believe I'd inherited any of his traits. I held my mother in my arms and did my best to console her.

When the patio door opened and Chelsea walked out, she had a smile on her face. However, when she saw Manman's tears, her smile faded. "Everything okay?"

Mama sat up and quickly wiped her tears. "Yeah. Everything is cool."

She frowned slightly, then cleared her throat. "I just wanted to let you know that Isaiah said he could talk to me Saturday evening since we'll be in town. I'm a little nervous to be around him alone since I don't know him like that. Will you be able to sit in?"

I slid my hand down my face. I didn't know if I would be able to bear listening to the abuse she suffered while I was out here trying to make a life for myself. Although I knew I had to wait for the Marcellus dynasty to crumble a bit before I could rescue them, that didn't do anything for the guilt I felt. "Yeah, I'll go. I'm glad you scheduled to talk to him. I truly believe he can help you get through the turmoil."

"You seem extremely confident in his abilities. Have you talked to him?"

I thought back to when I was having issues going around the family because of my feelings for Lexi. He'd approached me and talked to me about how she wasn't who was meant for me anyway. He could see right through the façade I was putting up... just like his father. I ended up telling him about Whitney. If he could pull that shit out of me, he was gifted like hell. "Only briefly when I was having issues. I've seen firsthand what he did for Chad, Seneca, and Ali. I don't have to experience it to believe in his capabilities."

"Are you going to talk to him?"

"About what?" I asked with a frown.

"The things you had to do to survive... killing your father and brother."

"I don't feel an ounce of remorse for what I did."

"Jericho, I didn't say you did, but it has to fuck with you, right? You put my needs ahead of your own and obtained retribution for what they did to me, but at what cost?" She walked closer to me and put her hands to my face. "I love you, brother, and I want to see you at your best too."

I grabbed her hands and kissed them then closed my eyes. Killing Jonas had come back to the forefront of my mind when I had to kill Jules. That shit

was heavy, but I was dealing with it the best way I knew how. Before I could respond to her, my phone rang.

Releasing her, I pulled it from my pocket to see a call from Ali. “What’s up?”

“Just checking on you, bruh. You good?”

“Yeah. I’m cool.”

“Well, Riley wanted to know when you were coming back to Beaumont.”

“Saturday afternoon. I have to go to Zay’s house.”

“She wanted to cook for y’all. Seneca and Kaysyn, Jamel and Sandrene, and Arrow and Lynn will be here too. Jungle even talked about crashing in on us couples. You ask me, I think he might be feeling Jenetta.”

I frowned hard. “That ain’t gon’ work out. Her name is Chelsea now though. It’s not final, but that’s what she’ll be going by.”

“That’s what’s up. Why it ain’t gon’ work though? He seems to be calming down and trying to get out the game. I think he might be good for her.”

“I’m not finna talk about that shit right now. I’ll holla at you about it later.”

“She must be standing right there.”

“Yep. Saturday night sounds good though. Let me know if we need to bring anything.”

“Most likely not. The kids won’t be here, so Chelsea should be good.”

“A’ight. I’ll holla later. Tell Riley thank you.”

“A’ight.”

We ended the call, and I couldn’t help but glance up at Chelsea. She was on her phone. I had a feeling I was gonna have to get involved in her shit. Jungle was the last person I wanted her with. He was a ho, and if he fucked over my sister, the Patterson dynasty would be ending long before he planned.

CHAPTER 12

WHITNEY

My eyes opened to see Jericho between my legs, eating me out of house and home, just like he promised. A soft moan left my lips as I slid my hand over his head, pushing him deeper. He obliged me by swallowing my pussy whole. The way he massaged my hips while he was eating did some shit to me. He didn't used to do that, so maybe it was something he learned along the way. I'd never had anyone do that, and now I saw exactly what I was missing.

My orgasm snuck up on me and flooded the area, damn near taking him out in the process. He went to his knees and pushed inside of me as my eyes fluttered closed. This man was gonna be the death of me. I opened my eyes and pulled his face to me, kissing him like it was the first time all over again. While I knew he was using me to soothe his soul, I also knew that he felt everything he said he did for me.

I could only pray that my presence would be healing for him like his presence seemed to be healing for me. He'd only been around for a damn day, and I was a fiend for his touch all over again. When he left to go to Houston, I thought I was going to lose my fucking mind. He slid his arm beneath me and lifted my hips into him as he lowered his head to my nipple. I wrapped my legs around him and allowed my head to drop back to the pillow as he did with my body as he pleased.

"Whitney, I'm about to nut, baby."

His words were low and soft and gently pulled the orgasm from me as he emptied his affections inside of me. Jericho's love making took my breath away, and I couldn't believe that the woman he loved didn't want this... him. How could she have turned all this away? I could only imagine that she was

getting this as well if he loved her. Whatever the reason was she didn't cling to him, I was grateful. There would have been no room for me.

After having Jericho back in my life, I honestly didn't know what I saw in Vashawn that wowed me. Maybe I'd just settled. It seemed these thoughts had been plaguing me since Jenetta texted me his phone number. My craving for him amplified significantly at that moment. Our love was so perfect it was hard to even believe it was real. The way we'd reconnected like we were never apart spoke to that.

He lifted his body from mine, after kissing my lips, and went to the bathroom. I lay there for a second, just basking in what my body felt, then joined him. When I sat on the toilet, his eyebrows lifted. "What?" I asked.

"You still being that comfortable with me makes me happy. That's all."

"Listen, I'm not about to hold my piss. We have history. If I can't pee while you're in the bathroom with me, then there's a serious problem."

"You're right." He turned to me and leaned against the vanity in all his naked glory. "So umm... when you wanna go buy a baby bed?"

I almost got choked. He chuckled then turned back to the sink to rinse the towel for me. "I'm on the pill, Jericho. I didn't need any mishaps with Vashawn. Most times we used condoms, but I could never be too careful. Had I had his baby, I would have tried harder to make things work between us."

"Why didn't you try harder anyway?"

"We'd been on this windy road for six months. I was tired. Plus, when Jenetta sent me access to you, I couldn't focus on him anymore. It wasn't like I broke up with you. I needed to reach out, even if it was just to get closure."

I wiped and flushed the toilet then went to the vanity to wash my hands. Once I did, he handed me the towel. "You knew I was single, so you had to know you would get way more than closure."

He stared at me as I cleaned up, but I couldn't stop staring at his weapon of mass destruction. It was just hanging there like it was waiting on me to do something to it. Once I threw the towel in the hamper, I went to my knees in front of him. He bit his bottom lip and slid his fingertips across my cheek. His dick began hardening, and I refused to let it start the process without me.

I licked the tip then slowly pulled it into my mouth as he stared at me. His gaze was threatening to make me go too fast, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from his. *God, he's so fucking fine.* When he began slowly winding his hips, that shit put me even further in a trance. He pulled my braids to the top

of my head and watched me handle up. I hadn't sucked dick in months. I refused to give head when I was angry. Vashawn would have gotten his shit bit fucking around with me.

My mouth watered more as I stared up at him. The goosebumps covering him let me know that he was feeling way more than he was letting on right now. The way I needed him proved that we were supposed to be here together at this moment, doing this very thing. I wrapped my hand around the base of his dick and began stroking the three or four inches I couldn't fit in my mouth.

This man was so well endowed. I knew God didn't make mistakes, but damn. I wondered if He'd gotten this nigga caught up with the damn mules, because their dicks dragged the ground. Like when He saw Jericho had gotten mixed in, He was like, *Oops. Oh well.*

I bobbed on his dick, allowing it to breach my throat, gagging and spitting all over him. His grip on my braids got tighter, and a soft moan left his lips. When I looked up at him, the tears rolled down my cheeks. I massaged his balls with one hand and slid the other up his leg, wrapping it around his thigh.

"Whitney... oooh yeah, baby."

His low, passionate voice had me about to cum. Knowing how pleased he was turned me on... always had. I was all in, all over again. Sex with him left me in my feelings, and it was the main reason I wanted to hold out. To hell with condoms or STDs. I trusted Jericho. I didn't want to fall in the abyss his passion created only to be disappointed by who he was now. His aura was all consuming, and I didn't want to be burned to a crisp because of it.

However, I had to let go and let Jericho inhabit every part of me. That was the only way he would let me see all of him. As I gagged once again, he said, "I'm about to cum, baby."

I didn't know how he kept his voice so calm. Continuing to stare at him, I sucked him faster, beckoning his nut to coat my throat with its excellence. "Fuck!" he said in a harsh whisper as his body trembled.

The fruits of his ejaculation filled my mouth, and I happily digested every drop of it. As soon as my lips slid from his dick, he yanked me up from the floor, holding me to him tightly, then lifted me and lowered me on his dick all over again. At some point, we were going to have to come up for air. It just wouldn't be now. "Jericho! Oh God!"

He was fucking me relentlessly, and I was enjoying every moment. My titties bounced so much until they were tingling and itching. "Ahh shit! I love

you, girl.”

My nails dug into his back as he led us to the nearest wall and fucked me up. I knew I’d scratched him several times, and my screams of passion had to have been heard throughout the house. I couldn’t even care about that right now though. All I could think about was how good Jericho felt inside of me and how he knew just how to please my body. We were compatible in every way.

Once we’d both orgasmed and cleaned up all over again, I collapsed back to my bed. He chuckled. “I’m ready for a nap my damn self.”

“Yeah, but I have to cook so we’ll have something to eat. Being around you is going to have me forgetting about basic ass responsibilities.”

“That’s okay. I got’chu. You know that. What did you take out?”

“Shit, I don’t even remember.”

He laughed, then got in bed with me. Feeling his naked body against mine was something I’d never get enough of. He kissed my shoulder then my neck and settled against me. When I heard his breathing get heavy, I knew he was finally at peace enough to sleep. I didn’t dare move and risk waking him up, so eventually, I joined him.



“I TOLD YOU HE WAS FINE AS FUCK,” CHELSEA SAID SOFTLY AS JERICHO GOT out of the car to open our doors.

We were in Houston at Jungle’s house. Jericho seemed a little uneasy, but I wasn’t sure what that was about. Jungle had approached the car and had slapped his hand. He opened the door for Manman and said, “Welcome back, Manman. How was your stay in Dallas? I heard y’all were able to find a home.”

“It was good. We enjoyed our time with Whitney.”

She turned to me and extended her hand. When I went to her, Jungle smiled. “The famous Whitney. It’s nice to make your acquaintance.”

I smiled back. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

His gaze shifted to Chelsea, and he said, “What’s up, girl? Why you look like you pouting?”

Jericho glanced at him to see he was addressing Chelsea. She rolled her

eyes and walked off. Jungle frowned and looked at Jericho. "What's wrong with her?"

"Shit, I don't know. She was fine on the way here. I'll check on her in a minute."

"She told you she called me?" Jungle asked.

Jericho's frown only deepened. I was happy that Jungle didn't keep that from him and risk their friendship, but at the same time, I knew this wouldn't be good for her. "Naw. What she calling you for?"

He shrugged and said, "She wanted to thank me again and asked if we could be cool. I told her I didn't see any harm in that. We've talked a couple of times about random stuff and her name change."

Jericho nodded and walked away from him in search of Chelsea. I took a deep breath and said, "Aww shit."

Manman looked over at me and said, "Aww shit is right."

I grabbed her other hand and helped her inside as Jungle walked on the other side. He didn't say a word, but I could see the irritation on his face. That made me think that he liked her too. It made me wonder if their conversations had taken a turn. Once we were inside, Chelsea came stomping down the stairs, and Jericho was right behind her.

"Yo, bruh, let me holla at'chu," Jungle said.

Jericho followed him outside before cutting his eyes at Chelsea. "Fuck him. I'm thirty years old. I can talk to who I want to talk to."

She stomped off and met them outside as Manman and I stared out the glass door, eyes wide. When I heard her say, "You're no better than Jules since you want to control me!"

I quickly let Manman's hand go and ran to her just as Jericho snatched her up by her arm. Jungle pulled him away from her, and he jerked away from Jungle. When I made it outside, I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the house as Jericho stared at me. I could have sworn I was the one that had him fucked up.

When we got inside, I saw the single tear escape Chelsea's eye and roll down her cheek. "I want to leave."

"Chelsea, what's up? You know that's his friend. Has Jungle said he was interested in anything more than friendship?"

"No, but I can tell that he is. He's only holding back because of Jericho. If he just wants to control me, he should have left me in Florida. I've had muthafuckas controlling every aspect of my life for as long as I can

remember. When will I get to live my life the way I want to live it? I'm sick of this shit."

She pulled away from me and headed to the door. "Jenetta, where are you going?" Manman asked.

"My name is Chelsea."

She opened the door and slammed it. I didn't know what to do at that point. I glanced back outside to see Jericho and Jungle talking. I had to tell him. She could be in danger. She knew nothing about Houston but thought it would be a good idea to take off walking. "Go and tell him."

I turned to Manman as she urged me to the outside patio. When I got to the door, I heard Jungle say, "We're just cool, man. She said she didn't have any friends and if I was cool with you, then I must be good people. That's it. I wouldn't disrespect you by pursuing her behind your back. If there ever came a time that I wanted more with her, I would talk to you first. I would definitely have my life in order if something like that ever happened. We're friends... nothing more."

"Yeah, but I know she's feeling you. I don't want my sister getting hurt."

"Let me talk to C-Mar. I'll explain to her that I'm not ready for nothing like that. We have to smooth that over with her. The last thing I ever wanna hear is her comparing you to a nigga that didn't give a fuck about her. You far from that, and I know that she knows that too. She's just in her feelings right now. I still don't know why she rolling her eyes at me. I ain't done shit."

Jericho nodded as I cleared my throat, getting their attention. "She left. I don't know where she's going, and I don't think she knows either."

Jericho sprang from his seat, and Jungle was right behind him. Instead of coming inside, they ran around the house to see if they could see her. I went back inside and ran to the front door to see what they were doing. When I saw them hop in a car and one of Jungle's people hop in another car, I knew that Chelsea had gone too far.

She was behaving immaturely, but I knew that had a lot to do with her basically being under lock and key all this time. She hadn't matured mentally because she was shut off from the world. I turned to Manman to see her eyes water. "My baby has gone through so much. She doesn't understand that Jericho is just trying to protect her. Although we were in the same house, we only saw one another twice a week. Jules raped her constantly."

She burst into tears as she shook her head. "The police were useless. Most

of them were on payroll and were afraid of Jonas and Jules. We were trapped, and no matter how much she rebelled, she didn't mature any. Jules only kept her around to keep dibs on Jericho. Had he gotten to Jericho and had killed him, she would have been next. The nights I prayed for Jericho, that God would keep him safe was heard. That prayer wasn't just for him though. It was for her too. As long as he was safe, I knew that her life would be spared."

I pulled her in my arms as the front door opened, and Chelsea walked through it with Jericho and Jungle right behind her. "Lil mama, let me holla at'chu," Jungle said and walked away, fully expecting her to follow him.

She glanced at Jericho, then followed Jungle into another room of the house. This house was massive, so they would definitely have privacy. I walked over to Jericho and asked, "What's going on?"

"She was having a fit. Thought he was ignoring her. She wants to be with him, but he and I both agree that it's not something that's feasible right now. He's a ho... plain and simple. Whenever or *if* ever he decides to slow down and be a one-woman man, then maybe. That's supposed to be what he's explaining to her now, because apparently, me telling her that wasn't good enough. Maybe she needs to get her heart broken so she can see what I was trying to protect her from."

"She has a lot of maturing to do, and maybe she needs to experience that to understand. She's thirty years old, but she has the mind of an eighteen-year-old, experiencing adulthood for the first time. Give her time to adjust, baby."

"I'm trying," he said as he pulled me into his arms. "I feel like you knew about this already though. Don't be gassing her up to do shit. You or Manman. She ain't ready for half the shit life has to offer. It will chew her ass up and spit her out."

"She has to learn at some point, Jericho. She's so behind in life. Let her catch up. Loosen the reins a lil bit," Manman said.

"And that proves me right. Y'all knew she was talking to Jungle before I did."

"Jericho, I didn't know it was a problem," I said, not being totally truthful.

I just didn't want my ass chewed out right along with Chelsea's. She'd told me what Jericho had said, although she specifically left out the part about Jungle being a ho. "I know. It's cool. I hate to see it, but she's gonna

fall flat on her fucking face.”

When I heard Chelsea stomping her way back to where we were, I knew this wasn't over. Jungle was behind her and had slid his hand down his face. When Chelsea ascended the stairs, he slowly shook his head and said to Jericho, “She reminds me of Fawn. Same fucking attitude when somebody just tryna look out for her ass. I know what it feels like to have your boy dating your sister. That happened with Law and Fawn. I was pissed because I had to find out from somebody else. I let it ride because I was locked up. I knew he could take care of her and make sure she was safe, but I didn't necessarily like it at first.”

Although he was saying that he understood where Jericho was coming from, I felt like he was trying to prepare him for what was to come. There was nothing Jungle would be able to say to prepare Jericho for him to be fucking his sister. That shit was like anticipating a bomb to drop, because that would probably be exactly what it would feel like. Jungle was a boss in his own right, and I would hate to see the two of them at odds.

Jericho nodded at Jungle, then he kissed me and followed him back outside. After glancing at Manman, I joined her on the couch and said, “This is going to erupt, and no one will benefit.”

“I have a feeling you're right, but I'll be praying for the opposite.”

“Me too, Manman.”

CHAPTER 13

JERICHO

“**I**’m sorry about yesterday. You are nothing like Jules. I just wanted to hurt you. I see something in Jungle... Milton... that is attractive as hell. He’s so cool, but he’s sensitive as hell when it comes to his family. Sound familiar? All the qualities I love about you are in him. What if I’m the woman that he needs, Jericho?”

I glanced at her as we headed to Isaiah’s house. I knew that Jungle and I were a lot alike when it came to our love for our families, especially our sisters. That was why we’d bonded. His family wasn’t nearly as dysfunctional as mine though. His father adored his mother and sister. While they were street niggas, their women were lifted on a pedestal, away from all the bullshit.

“Let’s just concentrate on this talk with Zay, Jen. I can’t focus on that right now.”

“Chelsea.”

I rolled my eyes. “Cheeeelsea.”

She giggled and grabbed my hand. “I’ll say this and leave it alone. You were right. He’s not ready for a relationship right now. My immaturity shined through when I felt like a neglected girlfriend because he spoke to me last.” She slowly shook her head. “But I truly feel a time is going to come when he stops running from love, Jericho. I want to be there when he does. I want to know what love feels like from someone other than my mother and brother. I know Jungle will be the one to offer it.”

I didn’t respond to her, because I was beyond tired of the conversation. When I turned in the driveway, she looked around and said, “He has a nice home.”

“Yeah, he does. I admire him a lot.”

“I gather. You speak highly of him, like he’s a big brother.”

“It feels that way.”

I got out of the car, slightly nervous about what was about to go down in Zay’s office. I swore when they told me he was a counselor, I thought they were joking. He was taller than me and just as big. He looked like he was probably a wide receiver or a middle linebacker on the football field. I would have never guessed that he could be as tender as he was. I’d seen his rough side once, but the tenderness he showed was what the women in his life needed. It wasn’t until recently that I realized the men in his life needed that shit too.

After opening Chelsea’s door, I helped her out and held her hand as we walked to the front door. I could feel hers tremble, and I was sure she could feel the tremble in mine as well. When I rang the doorbell, the door immediately opened. His wife, Joyy, greeted us with a smile as their boys held onto her legs. I smiled at her and hugged her then reintroduced her to Chelsea. She seemed a little confused by that name, but I didn’t clarify a thing for her.

Isaiah walked around the corner, holding their daughter, and smiled. He set her on the floor and slapped my hand, then gently shook Chelsea’s. “Y’all come on back to my office.”

“Da-Da!”

He turned and smiled at his daughter and said, “Da-Da will be back soon, Tatum. I love you.”

That little girl smiled big, showing her four teeth. “Wo wooo.”

That caused me to smile. She loved her dad and was clearly spoiled behind him. He led us to his office and offered us a seat. “Would y’all care for anything to drink?”

“Naw, I’m good.”

Chelsea declined as well, so he sat in his chair across from us. Before he could say a word, Chelsea said, “I was born Jenetta Marcellus, and I’m thirty years old. I’m extremely strong and resilient. I don’t allow anything to hold me captive, although my brother held me captive physically for years. Before him, the man I knew to be my father did the same.”

I frowned slightly and turned to her. “It’s okay, Jericho. I know he’s not my father. Jules didn’t fail to point that out repeatedly... that I didn’t share Jonas’s blood, so he didn’t rape his only daughter, trying to make him seem

innocent in the matter.”

I was stunned into silence. She was right. She was resilient and strong as fuck. Isaiah nodded as he took notes. “There’s only one thing that has been hard to overcome, and it caused me to break down the first time you met me.”

“Okay. Before we get into that, let me tell you a little about me. I’m Isaiah Berotte, and I’m thirty-eight. I’ve been a counselor for the past fifteen years. I went to Howard University in D.C., and I also got my master’s degree here at Lamar University. I’m married and have three kids, a set of triplets. I pride myself on listening and being able to comprehend many situations of abuse, neglect, addiction, and different types of mental turmoil. I want you to know that you can trust me to keep your information confidential and to provide you with my expertise to the best of my ability.”

Chelsea gave him a slight smile. “Jericho speaks highly of you. If he trusts you, then I know I can too.”

“Thanks, bruh,” he said with a nod.

I nodded back as he turned back to Chelsea. “I survived the only way I knew how. I’ve had to take care of myself since I was fourteen. The only people that gave a fuck about me were inaccessible... my mother and Jericho. Jules had sex with me at least once a week... raped me. I fought back for a long time. It wasn’t until I came to the realization that it wouldn’t stop, that I stopped fighting. When I was twenty-three, I got pregnant.”

Isaiah’s facial expression didn’t change. There was no way I could have pulled that off. That kind of information would have had me stunned, but I supposed he’d heard it all in his profession.

“I had the baby when I was twenty-four. I took her home with me, and it was the happiest day of my life. She was so beautiful. Even though she was a product of my rape, I had someone that would love me unconditionally. I could see it in her eyes when I looked at her. She was the most beautiful, black, Haitian doll. Her skin was like coal, and her hair was silky.”

The tears cascaded down her cheeks, but she kept right on talking. “One night, when she was almost two weeks old, I felt her being taken out of my arms. I screamed and cried for my baby, but he didn’t care.”

“Jules?” Isaiah asked.

“Yes. His own flesh and blood. His daughter. He brought her to a local fire station and left her there with all of her things, including her name card from the hospital and possibly her birth certificate. He got all the mail, so I’m not sure if it had come in. I cried for my baby until I made myself sick. He

made me lie in my own vomit for days.”

Isaiah stared up at her and reached for her hand as I rubbed her back, feeling anger consume me. “Isaiah, I saw her. After six years, I saw her at your parents’ house.”

His eyebrows lifted, and I could see the wheels turning. “Jericka?” he asked.

“Yes. She’s my daughter.”

He had the look on his face, and I read it accurately. *Oh shit*. “How did she get to Texas?” he asked.

“When he left her at the fire station, she was picked up by CPS. After that, I think he had something to do with her ending up here. I have no proof of that, but I know that’s her. I could never forget her face, no matter how much it evolves. I don’t want to seem like I’m threatening the woman that’s raising her though.”

“So you want to introduce yourself? Do you want to continue raising her?”

“I want to introduce myself, but I don’t want to take her from the only home she’s ever known. I just want to be a part of her life.”

“This is a tough situation. I know Seneca and Kaysyn personally. He’s my wife’s brother. Seneca will definitely see it as a threat. I honestly think you should speak to Kaysyn first. Seneca isn’t the man who adopted her. However, this is my concern. How will you be able to be a part of her life without wanting more? What assurances do they have that you won’t change your mind?”

I nodded repeatedly because that was my concern as well. I added, “Also, what if Jericka ends up wanting to be with you and start giving Kay and Seneca a hard time about it?”

“That’s a very possible consequence of this as well,” Isaiah said. “You have to think about all the possibilities that could come from that revelation. I know this isn’t your fault and that it’s way too coincidental that you ended up connected to the same family she’s a part of. I just want you to be sure. Once the ball is rolling, you won’t be able to pick it up and walk away as if nothing happened.”

Chelsea lowered her head and played with her nails for a moment. “I don’t want anyone to hate me. Maybe I could tell them who I am but not reveal it to her. That way nothing will change for her. As long as I’m around the family, I will get to see her.”

“I don’t know if you’ll be able to handle that, Chelsea. Look at how you responded last week,” I added.

“That was out of shock. I didn’t know what had happened to her or where she’d ended up. I wasn’t expecting to ever see her again. Seeing her brought back the horrible memories of how he took her from me in the middle of the night. That was hard, Jericho. I think I can handle that now since the initial shock has worn off. I’ll do a DNA test or whatever they want me to do. We can have a contract where I promise to never seek custody, but if something were to happen to the both of them, I would want her.”

“I think that may be feasible, Chelsea. I just want you to be sure that you’ll be okay with that. I also need you to be able to accept whatever their response will be. Be sure to explain what you want as clearly as you have today to me. Do you want Jericho to prepare Seneca for the conversation?”

She looked over at me, and I nodded. I actually thought that would be better, especially since he’d come to me about her. “Thank you, Jericho. I promise I have no ulterior motive. I just want to be able to see her and know how she’s doing. That’s all. While I’m strong, I don’t think I can even begin to handle raising a child. I don’t even have a job. I’ve never had a job and have no job skills. How would I take care of a child? Plus, we live in Dallas now.”

I looked up at Zay, and he nodded and gave me a tight smile. “I’m here whenever you need to talk, Chelsea. That goes for you too, Jericho. I can see the darkness in your eyes, man. I’m always available. You’re like a brother to me.”

I nodded, then stood from my seat. “Thanks, Zay. I’ll talk to Seneca tonight at Ali’s house.”

He extended his hand and shook mine, then did the same to Chelsea. She walked around her seat and hugged him tightly. “Can I make another appointment? We can Zoom.”

“Of course. Just let me know when. Go to my website to check my availability. I don’t usually work weekends, but you’re like family.”

Chelsea smiled at him. “Thank you so much.”

“Anytime.”

He walked us to the door as I contemplated how I would break the news to Seneca. It would definitely have to be in private. We thanked him again for his time, and I went to his website to make a payment for today’s session, although he didn’t charge us. That was why I couldn’t stay away from the

Berottes for too long. They were really good people that made living life a little bit easier. It seemed we were all craving that... Ali, Seneca, Jungle, and me. None of us could stay away despite how we came in, me and Jungle through Lexi.

For them to accept us into their family was a testament to how great they were, especially Chad. I would always have their backs, no matter the cost. They were family when I thought I would never reunite with my own.



“FINALLY! WE GET TO MEET WHITNEY,” SENECA SAID.

I rolled my eyes. He was always starting some shit. Whitney blushed and turned to me. “Everyone knew about me?”

“Just those closest to me. Ali, Seneca, Jungle, Jamel, and Arrow. Then again, I don’t even remember if Arrow and Jamel knew. Isaiah knew as well.”

After introducing Whitney to Riley, Lynn, Sandrene, and Kaysyn, I headed to the back room where Ali chilled out. The kids were all at the Berottes’ house, probably giving Mr. Sheldon and Mrs. Anissa a run for their money, although there were only three of them there. Shy and Chad were supposed to come through later as well. I didn’t know if they would be taking their kids there or not.

The minute we sat, Ali smiled. “I never thought the five of us would be in love. It was like we were the bad side of the Berottes.”

I chuckled. “Shiiid, Shy ain’t no fucking saint. That nigga and Chad are the reasons we’re affiliated with the Berottes in the first place,” Jungle said as he walked in the room.

We all stood and slapped hands with him. Our talk had gone well earlier. The last thing I wanted to do was beef with my boy. Had it not been for him and his team, Jules would still be walking around, making threats. I felt comfortable leaving my mother and Chelsea at my place while I came here. Chelsea wanted to come, and I knew that was because she knew Jungle would be falling through, but if she wanted me to talk to Seneca, it was best that she wasn’t here.

I trusted that Jungle would be up front with her and keep her at arm’s

length, simply because she was my sister. I could tell that he wanted more with her by the way he looked at her to talk to her in private. Chelsea was a beautiful woman, but she was my sister who I'd neglected once. That shit wasn't gonna happen again. Jungle understood exactly how I was feeling. He said when his sister got raped, he was in prison and couldn't do shit about it. Thankfully, she had Law.

The point was that he understood about me not being able to be there for her, because he couldn't be there for Fawn. We'd talked for a while, and I told him that when he was ready to settle down, he had my blessing. I just didn't want my sister to be another ho in his stable, because the nigga had a gang of 'em.

"Jericho."

I turned to see Seneca was calling me outside. *Shit*. I stood and followed him outside as Ali watched us. When we stepped out there, he asked, "You get a chance to talk to your sister?"

I slid my hand down my face. "Yeah, man."

He frowned when he saw my expression. It was one of sorrow and somewhat nervousness. I had never been nervous to tell a nigga anything, but this was his baby. "So what's up?"

"I need you to promise that you will hear me out before interjecting. It's bad, but it doesn't have to continue to be." I paused for a moment, then said, "Jenetta said that Jericka is her daughter."

"What the fuck?"

"She was raped by my brother seven years ago... well, he was constantly raping her. But she got pregnant seven years ago. Two weeks after she had the baby, he took her, and she never saw her again. She named her Jericka. The only person in my family whose name doesn't start with a J is my mama. She doesn't want custody. She just wanted to let you and Kaysyn know, because she wants to be able to see her from time to time. She said Jericka doesn't have to know."

He sat in the chair and brought his hands to his face for a moment. When he looked at me, I could see the hurt in his eyes. "Naw. I don't think that will be a good idea, man. What if she changes her mind? Everyone loves Jericka, and while she's not at fault for giving her up, once she gets to know her, she's going to want her back. Guaranteed. That would kill me. Kaysyn too. That's our baby."

"I totally understand, bruh. She said she would be willing to sign a

contract. The only way she would want to raise Jericka is if something happened to you and Kaysyn. Other than that, she doesn't want to take her from the loving home she's comfortable in. She knows that she isn't even in a position to take care of Jericka. Talk to Kaysyn about it. She wanted to talk to the two of you but wanted me to say something first."

"Man, I'm so tired of shit coming up. First, Riley is my sister, and now this. I'm devastated thinking about the shit. I'm sorry for your sister, I really am, but I can't sacrifice our sanity for the sake of hers."

He left me sitting outside staring at the night sky. I could understand his viewpoint, but I could also understand my sister's. There wasn't a right thing to do in this instance. I just didn't know how things would go if Chelsea ever wanted to go to the Berottes' house with me... like tomorrow. How would she handle being around them, knowing that they didn't want her to have a relationship with her daughter?

When I heard the door open, I knew it was Ali. I didn't bother turning around to look at him. "Bruh."

That wasn't Ali's voice. I turned around to see Jamel. He and I talked occasionally, but not nearly as much as we used to. I gave him a head nod.

"You good? Seneca looks pissed too."

"Yeah, I'm cool. I just need to think a bit."

"A'ight. You know if y'all need to hash it out in front of everybody, we got y'all."

"We didn't have an argument. It's just a difficult situation. Thanks, Mel," I said as I stood to head back inside.

Seneca was sitting on the couch with Arrow, talking like we didn't just have a fucked-up conversation. I didn't see Jungle or Ali though. That had my antennas raising until they walked in the room from the front part of the house. They had Shy and Chad in tow. I slapped their hands while I was standing, then sat in the chair across from Seneca. For my sister's sake, I probably wouldn't go to the Berottes' tomorrow.

Standing again, I headed to the front to check on Whitney. She and Riley were talking and giggling as Sandrene showed them a dance move. When she saw me, she smiled. I smiled back at her, but by the way her smile faded, I knew my smile didn't reach my soul. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's cool. I was just coming to check on you."

"Oh, I'm good. The ladies are all really friendly. They invited me to their pole dancing class tomorrow."

She bit her bottom lip and slid her fingertips down my chest. "Oh yeah?" I asked as I grabbed her hand and kissed it.

"Mm hmm. I've already chosen my stripper name."

My eyebrows lifted as she giggled. "Fantasy. What do you think?"

"I like it. So they all have stripper names?"

"Yeah." She continued in a hushed voice. "Sandrene used to be a stripper."

I chuckled. There was no sense in me telling her that I'd seen Obsession in action. "Yeah. Well, I'm going to go back in the back. I just wanted to check on you."

I kissed her forehead and walked away, although I could tell she had more questions. I just didn't want to talk about it here. We could have that discussion on the way back to my house. However, when I got to the back, Ali approached me. "We gotta dip for a minute. Let's ride."

I didn't ask any questions. I followed him out, hoping that I didn't have to kill anybody else.

CHAPTER 14

WHITNEY

I was having the best time, but I got a weird feeling that something was wrong. As I was about to excuse myself, Riley came back into the room. “They left. Ali and Jericho did. They’ll be back soon.”

I frowned slightly. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. Ali doesn’t go into detail about anything by phone. He called saying that they would be right back, and Jericho said to pass the word to you. I could only imagine that it would have something to do with Jericho.”

“Shit.”

I was starting to panic, not knowing what was going on. Riley grabbed my hand and brought me to the kitchen where she was checking the food. “Listen. I know all about this life. They will be back to us. Ali always comes home. I just have to let him be who he’s going to be until he’s ready to change. I accepted him the way that he is, and I love that man with all my heart. Let Jericho handle things, and he’ll be back.”

“How do you not worry?”

“I used to. I wouldn’t sleep until I’d heard from him. I mean, I still don’t sleep until he checks in, but I realized worry only hurts me. I have a daughter to be here for. I can’t be stroking out because I’m worried about a man that can take care of himself. I get it, though, because my daughter’s father got killed in the streets. However, Ali is one of the most careful people I’ve ever seen. So try not to worry, because they aren’t worried. That’s for sure. If they were, that would put them in danger.”

“Thank you. I feel like I can calm down now. I suppose wanting to know what’s going on doesn’t help. I like to be in the know. When I don’t know, it

drives me crazy.”

“Right. So let’s go in here and have a drink. The food is almost ready.”

“Okay.”

I followed her back to the women, and they were in a discussion about their men. I quickly found out that all their men were reformed hoes... at least Jamel, Arrow, and Seneca were. Riley had stayed quiet on the subject, and I wouldn’t dare input anything in that conversation either. The only thing I knew about Jericho’s sex life was that he’d been abstinent for over a year.

Deciding to hop in the conversation, I asked, “What made you finally give in if they were such hoes?”

Lynn smiled. “I never really knew that side of Arrow. He was my anesthesiologist for a surgery. We fell right in. We had a hiccup along the way with some woman he was messing around with before me, but he was so real with me and so loving, I couldn’t let him go.”

Kaysyn grinned as she said, “I didn’t want his ass. I only wanted the dick.”

Everybody hollered, and she couldn’t help but laugh as well. “I had trust issues. I just wanted someone to cherish my body and give me a reprieve from my problems at home. We messed around for over a year. He got serious and wanted more, but I needed him to prove to me that he was who I needed. He fell in love with me and proved that he could adapt in my world instead of looking and acting like a thug all the time. Now we’re engaged.”

“My story is similar,” Sandrene said. “Jamel fell in love with Obsession before he met Sandrene. He was one of my clients in the club. He was there nearly every time I graced the stage. That man was so sexy. He dropped bands on me after every performance. I started calling him Bandz. After we met on my nine to five, he eventually figured me out because I’d given him a lap dance for his birthday. Like Lynn, I didn’t really see his ho side until I found out he’d fucked his mama’s best friend. We were already together by that time, and she wasn’t feeling that shit at all.”

My mouth was wide open, and I couldn’t hide my shock. “I can imagine that didn’t end well.”

“Not at all, but it’s all in the open now. He was keeping that secret from his mother. So it was best that it came out, because he probably wouldn’t have ever told her.”

I glanced at Riley to see she wasn’t really into the conversation as much. While she’d given me words of encouragement, I could see that Ali’s absence

was bothering her. When she went to the kitchen to check the food again, I followed her. “Hey, you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. I’m trying to wait on them to get back before we eat, but they’re taking longer than I expected. They’ll just have to eat whenever they come back.”

I was starting to get a little worried, too, not knowing what was going on. I sent Chelsea a message, hoping they were okay. She didn’t respond. I began helping Riley with the stew and potato salad. Hopefully, we would hear from them soon.



“YOU ARE REALLY PRETTY. I LIKE YOUR BRAIDS,” AINA SAID.

She was such a beautiful little girl. I’d gone with Riley to pick her up from the Berottes’ home, the people Jericho called his family. I didn’t get out, though, because I refused to meet them while I was frustrated. Everyone had gone home for the night, and I was still at Riley and Ali’s house, waiting for Jericho to return. He hadn’t updated me at all, and it had been hours.

My irritation was visible to anyone who would have laid eyes on me, so I didn’t want that to be my first impression. Riley had carried Aina to the car, because she was already in her pajamas. They thought she would be spending the night like Kaysyn and Seneca’s kids. She was originally supposed to, but since Ali wasn’t home and Riley didn’t know when he was coming back, she wanted her daughter with her.

“Thank you, sweetheart. You are gorgeous yourself.”

She blushed and said, “Thank you.”

We had just gotten back to the house, and I was helping Riley clean the kitchen and put food away. That stew was amazing, and she’d given me the recipe so I could try it when I got home. As we cleaned, I asked, “Have you heard from Ali yet?”

She shook her head, and I could see her eyebrows scrunch together. She was getting more worried, but I knew she wouldn’t voice that to me. Shyrón and Chad Berotte had bolted, along with Seneca and Jungle when they found out why Ali and Jericho had left. They didn’t tell us a thing. I was more than sure it had something to do with Jules and his death, but I couldn’t be one

hundred percent.

I once again tried to call Chelsea, but she didn't answer. Something was terribly wrong, and I could only pray that everything turned out in our favor. After finishing the kitchen, Riley and I plopped on the sofa. She turned on the TV, and we both stared at it like we were watching it, while Aina sat between us.

"Mommy, where's Daddy?"

"He's working, baby."

"Aww. So he won't be tucking me in tonight, will he?"

"No, baby. Actually, I probably need to get you to bed now. It's almost eleven."

"Okaaaay. Good night, Ms. Whitney."

"Good night."

"I'll be back in a little bit," Riley said as she lifted Aina from the couch.

I nodded at her and dove back into my feelings. I grabbed my phone from beside me and sent Jericho a text. *A simple 'I'm okay' will suffice.*

I'd been calling and texting him for the past couple of hours. The thought of what Chelsea had said about his frame of mind came to my mind, but damn. I didn't know if I was built for this. My blood pressure was probably through the roof. My greatest fear seemed extremely possible when he did shit like this. That fear being him being taken away from me after just getting him back. A week wasn't nearly enough time. It didn't scratch the surface of forever.

Within minutes, Riley had come back and sat next to me. She grabbed my hand, and I could feel the tremble in hers. "He's never usually silent this long. The wait is killing me. I know what I told you earlier about not worrying, but I can't hide *my* worry any longer. It's been hours. Sandrene called to check on us at nine, and she said if we needed her, she would come back. She's very intuitive and noticed how nervous we both were."

The doorbell rang, and Riley frowned. It seemed my nerves had heightened. She seemed baffled by anyone coming to her house this late. Obviously, if it were Ali, he wouldn't have rung the bell. When she stood, I did the same and followed her to the door. She checked the peephole, then smiled slightly. When she opened it, Kaysyn and two other women were standing there with Walmart bags in their hands.

Once they walked in, Kaysyn said, "Hey. I thought we could use each other's company since all our men are M.I.A."

Riley turned to me and smiled. “Whitney, this is Brittany, Shyrón’s wife, and this is Lexi, Chad’s wife.”

When I saw her, my eyebrows rose slightly. I could see why Jericho had fallen in love with her. This was somewhat uncomfortable, although I knew she didn’t love him. Just being around her was awkward. She noticed my facial expression, and I saw her face redden a bit.

“Ladies, this is Whitney, Jericho’s girlfriend.”

Brittany smiled at me. “Welcome to Watchful Eyes, girl.”

She chuckled and hugged me. Her spirit seemed to put me at ease, and I was extremely grateful. When she released me, she made her way to the kitchen. She had ice cream and cookies in her Walmart bag, and Kaysyn had potato chips. They all retreated to the kitchen except Lexi and me. She walked closer to me and grabbed my hand. “You know who I am already, don’t you?”

I lowered my head and took a deep breath. “Yes. He told me. We have a lot of history back in Florida, and one thing we’ve always been is honest with each other.”

She nodded. “You’re beautiful. I believe he was looking for you in me.”

My eyes widened slightly. I wondered if he told her about me. “Did he tell you about me?”

“He mentioned being in love with someone a long time ago when I’d asked him about being in love. We used to have talks at times. He’d never mentioned your name though. Just you saying that y’all had history led me to believe you are the one he’s been longing for. He’s a good man, but my heart belonged to someone else.”

“He told me. I’m glad you found happiness.”

“Me too. And now I’m glad he has too. I could tell he was somewhat tortured.”

I pulled my hands away from hers and sat on the couch, bringing my hands to my face. The awkwardness was gone. She sat next to me and gently rubbed circles on my back. “I know this is hard. While my husband wasn’t always as involved in the past as he is now, I know it’s for good reason. They are brothers. When one has problems, they all have problems. When Chad was in a bind, they all stepped up for him... for months. Ali wouldn’t accept any clients while they were looking out for Chad, until my father called. The only reason he took that case was because he knew me and my sister. My sister is married to the youngest Berotte brother.”

“What if something happens? You don’t ever worry about that?”

“I can’t. I just feel like if one can’t come back, then none of them will. They are their brothers’ keeper. I admire their bond. That’s why we... their wives, fiancée, and girlfriends... have tried to establish a sisterhood. We can lean on one another for support. Sometimes, we need it even more than we know.”

I stared at her for a moment as I let the tears fall down my cheeks, then leaned in to hug her. Who would have ever thought I would feel a connection like this to a woman in Jericho’s past? I supposed knowing that she was a substitute for me made it easier, especially since she knew that too.

“Now, let’s get some snacks. Those chocolate chip cookies are calling my name. I swear these niggas gon’ have us packing on the pounds.”

I giggled. I could see that we had the same feisty attitude, just as Jericho had said, simply by her last statement. This was what I didn’t know I needed.

CHAPTER 15

JERICHO

“**H**e’s waiting for you to get there. Jules wasn’t lying. There’s two of them. The plus for us is that they don’t know we coming firing at all cylinders,” Ali said.

My nerves were on edge. He’d gotten a call that Manman and Jenetta were in danger... Chelsea. I didn’t risk my life and theirs in Florida just for them to be killed in Texas. “We shouldn’t have come here. We should have stayed in Dallas.”

“Naw. This flushed them out. We gon’ get their asses and send a high priority message to any more that may be hanging around. This gon’ turn out fine. We’ve been preparing for this backlash since you took out Jules. We got yo’ back, bruh. Real shit.”

I watched him text Shy as he drove to the office to get more weapons. It felt like we were gearing up for war. My phone had been ringing off the fucking hook, so I turned it off. I knew it was Whitney. I knew she was safe, so I couldn’t think about her right now. I let my guard down, thinking Jules was bluffing me to keep me from taking his ass out, but he was right on the money.

By the time Ali came out, Shy had driven up. He, Chad, Jungle, and Seneca were together. I got out of the car as they all huddled up, discussing the plan of action. “You go in as planned. We will surround the house.”

“I don’t know. They may decide to shoot me right away. They don’t know me and have no reason to talk to me about avenging Jules’ and Jonas’ deaths.”

Shy handed me a bulletproof vest, and I realized they were all putting them on. “Okay. Listen. We will all surround the house first and look for

clear shots. If we can't get them both at once, then we won't take the shot. Jericho, put the vest under your shirt so it can't be seen." Ali turned back to everyone else and continued. "Jericho has a lot of windows. I'm more than sure we will be able to take those muthafuckas out without a problem. The back window is always unlocked. I'm climbing in unless they are in that room."

I didn't know how that nigga knew that about my apartment, but I was glad he did. "I'm going in with you," Shy said.

"I got outside. I know I can shoot a nigga in his eye from a mile away," Seneca added.

We all huddled together in a moment of silence, then we all piled in Ali's SUV that he kept at the office and made our way to my place. I didn't know what the rest of the plan was, but I trusted that they had my back and wouldn't allow anything to happen to any of us. Not without retribution. I bowed my head, silently asking God for forgiveness and for this to be over.

Ali parked on the other side of the complex, and they all inserted earpieces. He couldn't risk me having one and it being seen, alerting them that I wasn't alone. We gave one another a pound, and they all approached my apartment from different directions. I went to the main entrance. As I approached, I could see all the lights were on, and I could see shadows in the front room through the sheers.

When I got close, I heard Chelsea's mouth running a mile a minute. "Fuck you! I can't wait until Jericho gets here to kill you both. If he could kill Jonas and Jules, what do you think he's going to do to your pathetic asses?"

I slowly shook my head. She was never gonna go down quietly or without a fight. Although she wasn't a Marcellus by blood, she had definitely inherited that trait. I wasn't a noise talker. I was typically quiet, like my mother. Ali's parents never knew I was coming. The nail in his father's casket was when he called me a Haitian bitch. Glancing around the side, I saw Ali climbing through the window and Shy right behind him.

Seneca was in position at the front window, and Chad and Jungle were on the other side. When I rang the doorbell, I heard my mother scream. That shit had anger flowing through me like a rushing river. I didn't know if something had been done to her or if she was alerting me that they were alive. As I heard his footsteps, indicating that he was rushing to the door, I peeked through the window to see the other holding my mother in front of him with a knife at his side.

As I heard the locks disengage, I peeked again and saw Ali heading to the guy with my mother. I quickly lifted my gun and shot the muthafucka through the glass in the door. Shy ran to open the door for me, and I saw that Ali had killed the guy holding my mother hostage. However, what surprised us all was when another guy appeared behind Ali, putting a gun to his head.

My heart sank to my feet. I dropped my gun, and so did Ali. I was about to offer myself instead of Ali, until a bullet pierced the side of that man's head, more than likely from Seneca's gun. Shy quickly got my sister and mother out of my place to the SUV as we scoped everything out to make sure no one else was hiding. Seneca had joined us inside and began searching as well.

When he yelled suddenly, we all ran to where he was to see him wrestling on the floor with another nigga. He'd dropped his gun, and that big muthafucka had delivered a blow to his body that could have very well cracked one of his ribs. Ali held his gun to the back of that nigga's head. When he turned to me, he said, "Frè out e mal sou ou."

He'd said that my brother was wrong about me. I didn't know what that meant until he continued. "Fotèy la se pou ou si ou vle li. Aparamman, chat sè ou a te vo tout bagay sa yo."

"Kill him."

Ali allowed the bullet to pierce his head. He'd told me that the throne was mine if I wanted it. I wanted no parts of that shit. It was his final sentence that marked him for death. *Apparently, your sister's pussy was worth all this.* Jonas's and Jules's downfalls were them raping my sister. His statement was true in a sense, but it wasn't a statement for him to make. It was disrespectful as fuck. Going to my knees, I grabbed Seneca's hand. "You okay, man?"

"Yeah, I think so. I think he may have bruised a rib though."

"I think you need to go to a hospital. We'll just tell them we were preparing for a boxing match or some shit," Ali said as he made a call from his burner.

I was more than sure he was calling a cleaning crew. Four bodies to clean up, and we weren't done checking the house. Chad entered where we were, and Ali asked him to help Seneca to the SUV while we checked the rest of the apartment. We'd been gone for three hours, and I was sure Whitney was about to have a nervous breakdown. I just didn't have time to message her right now. Just the fact that I'd let her penetrate my thoughts, put me at risk.

I scoped out the rest of the place and didn't see a soul, so Ali and I

headed to the SUV. Glancing over at him, I said, "I appreciate you, man. You had my back. Had you not put the team together and prepared for this, I could have died tonight trying to rescue my people."

"You my brother and have been for years. Why would I not have your back, especially after everything you've done for me? I got you for life. I don't care how legit I become. I will always be in the trenches when it comes to any of you."

I put my arm around his shoulder and slapped his outstretched hand with my other one. When we got to the SUV, my ears got slightly heated. Chad and Seneca were in the front, Shy was in the middle seat, and Jungle was in the back with Manman and Chelsea. His arm was around Chelsea, and she was all up under him like he was her man. I knew what he and I had discussed, and I felt like he wouldn't betray me, but before he noticed us, I saw him staring at her, his face full of emotion.

They'd only known each other three weeks. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm my nerves before getting in. Shy scooted to the middle to allow me and Ali inside. I glanced back at Jungle, and he lightly shrugged his shoulders, silently saying this was all Chelsea's doing. I figured it was, and I knew in this situation, he wouldn't push her away. He didn't realize that I'd gotten a glimpse of his emotions.

"Thank you, Jericho. Thanks everyone for coming to our rescue," Manman said.

No one responded verbally. We all just kind of nodded. We would sit here until the cleaning crew showed up, and then we would head to the hospital with Seneca to make sure he was good. He seemed okay. His breathing wasn't *too* labored, but I could hear that it was, slightly. As he'd suspected, it was probably bruised. If it were broken, his breathing probably would have been even more labored.

When I glanced back at Manman, I saw that she was now holding Chelsea, and Jungle was in his phone. I didn't know why I was letting that shit fuck with me so much. I supposed I was just extremely overprotective of my sister with as much as she had gone through. I didn't want her to get caught up in no bullshit.

"They're here," Ali said, then made his way to the apartment to let them in.

We stayed put until he made it back, then headed to St. Elizabeth for Seneca to get looked at.



“BABY, WAKE UP.”

We’d gotten back to Riley and Ali’s place, and it was nearly three in the morning. Whitney was asleep on the couch with a blanket over her. Her eyelids were red, and I knew I would have to suffer through her attitude. She hadn’t heard from me since six o’clock, and that was through Ali and Riley. I knew she was worried. I should have texted her before we went to the emergency room, but I was still in a fucked-up mood.

When her eyes opened, she frowned almost immediately. I licked my lips and tried to help her up from the couch, but she jerked away from me. Riley joined us in the front room and hugged Whitney. She said something in her ear that I wasn’t privy to, and Whitney nodded. “Thank you, Riley, for your hospitality. See you tomorrow,” she said as she glanced at me. “Hopefully.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but I was sure I was about to find out. “Thanks, Riley. I appreciate you.”

Riley nodded and gave me a tight smile as we headed to the door. Before we left out of the door, I slapped Ali’s hand. “Thanks again, man. I appreciate you.”

We slapped hands and hugged, then I made my way to the car to open the door for Whitney. She got in and closed the door, nearly taking my hand off in the process. I supposed I deserved that. When I got in the car, she remained silent, staring straight ahead as I backed out of the driveway. “We’re getting a hotel room. Jungle is there with Manman and Chelsea. There were four men at my place holding them hostage until I got there.”

She looked over at me, but she didn’t say a word. “I’m sorry I didn’t message you. I turned my phone off because I needed to focus on getting them out of there unharmed. Then we had to go to the hospital to get Seneca checked out. He got in a fight with a nigga that was hiding in the house. He had a bruised rib, but it took a while to find that out.”

“You couldn’t even message me while y’all waited at the hospital? Clearly, you didn’t have to be in go mode then. Apparently, I wasn’t high enough on your list of priorities to even text me saying you were okay.”

“We killed four men tonight. My mother was forced to suck a muthafucka’s dick in front of my sister, while they taunted her, telling her she

was a ho like her mother. I'm sorry if texting you wasn't on my mind. I need you to fucking think about the shit I'm going through right now. Everything ain't gon' always be about you. I love you. I shouldn't have to explain myself when you already know about the bullshit going on."

"Then maybe you should have waited to ask for a commitment after all this shit was over. A relationship is about both parties. I sympathize with you. I really do. I only asked for five seconds of your fucking time so I wouldn't be worried out of my fucking mind, thinking you were dead. You're telling me that your mind was so consumed with what had gone down that you couldn't take five seconds to assure me you were good in the nine hours you were gone? Five fucking seconds. A text saying you were okay. That's all I asked for, and I'm being selfish?"

She nodded repeatedly as she turned to the window. I didn't have a response for her. I just continued driving to the hotel. She turned back to me. "You left me at a woman's house whom I'd just met an hour before. But I'm the selfish muthafucka, huh? Fuck you."

She was beyond pissed, and she had every right to be. I wasn't considerate of how she was feeling in all this. I went to grab her hand, and she jerked away. "You're right. I'm sorry, Whitney."

She didn't respond. I took a deep breath as I turned in the hotel's parking lot. Before I could get out and help her out, she opened her own door and got her bag from the back. She turned to me and asked, "Does Manman and Chelsea have a king or a double?"

"Double."

She glanced at her phone then typed in it and headed to the entrance. I scratched my head as she turned to me. "I'll be sleeping in the room with them tonight. If I could find a way back to Dallas right now, I would."

I lowered my head as I stared at her. I didn't know what else to say to justify my behavior. I'd already apologized. She walked away from me, heading to the elevator. I wanted to get another room because I hated dealing with drama. I liked to be calm. Whitney, on the other hand, was the opposite. The longer it festered, the angrier she got.

I followed her to the elevator, and as soon as the doors opened and we'd walked inside, I roughly pulled her to me. "If you sleeping in the room with them, then so am I. I said I was sorry. I'm not letting you talk to me any way you want to and push me at arm's length like I'm a whole fuckboy out here. I made a mistake. A bad decision. I apologize, and it won't happen again. Pase

sou kaka sa.”

She tried pulling away from me, but I only pulled her closer. Hopefully she didn’t ask me what I’d said, because it would only further piss her off. I’d said for her to get over that shit. After all these years, I realized I wasn’t as passive as I was back then. I would have let her go her way, and I would have gone mine, then apologized and loved on her the next day. That nigga was gone. The world and the life I was living had hardened me. It was time for her to realize that shit too.

She rolled her eyes as I kissed her forehead, then took a deep breath and grabbed my hand. She closed her eyes as if she were praying and didn’t open them until the elevator door opened. Instead of going to the room, she sat on the bench near the elevators. I sat next to her and stretched out my legs. My bones were aching, and I knew it was because I hadn’t been getting enough rest.

“Riley told me to roll with the punches. That I knew what kind of man I had. You would never intentionally leave me out. However, I need you to start thinking. I get that in the moment, you can’t do that, but you had plenty of time after it was over.” She paused briefly then said, “I met Lexi.”

When she said she met Lexi, my mind blanked on everything else she said. “What was she doing there?”

“They’ve formed a Watchful Eyes sisterhood to deal with y’all bullshit. Y’all don’t realize how y’all stress us the fuck out. I’m new... brand new to this. I see now how they get through it. They bond, keep each other company, and lean on each other. I needed that more than ever tonight. Lexi and I talked. She’s a beautiful woman. I also see what you saw in her.”

I grabbed her face by her chin and turned her to me. “I saw you in her.”

“She said the same thing.”

I frowned as she continued. “She said that she could tell you were tortured when you spoke of your love lost. When I told her we had history, she gathered that I was the woman you were missing.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry. I assume that moment was awkward for you.”

“It was at first, but she was so nice that I was able to get past it.”

I nodded again, then stood and held my hand out to her. She grabbed my hand, and I pulled her from her seat and hugged her. “I’m going to do better. I think this is finally over though.”

She nodded, and we headed to the hallway to head to the room. Jungle was sitting outside the room on his phone. When he saw us, he stood and

shook my hand. “Thank you for looking out for them. Why are you out here?”

He bit his bottom lip, then said, “Your sister had on some shorts that were a little short. Out of respect for you, I came out here.”

I slowly shook my head. If she kept throwing herself at him, he was going to eventually take advantage. “I’ll talk to her. Thanks again. You staying in Beaumont tonight?”

“Naw. I got some shit to see about in Houston. We’ll have to hook up whenever you come to visit or if I go out there to Dallas.”

We slapped hands and I hugged him. I watched him walk away, then used my key card to enter the room. Chelsea was in bed, and so was my mama. It had been a long night. When the door closed, my mama sat straight up in the bed. “It’s just us, Ma.”

She grabbed her chest and lay back in the bed. I kissed Whitney’s head. “Get in bed with Chelsea and get some rest. I love you.”

“Where are you going?”

“To this couch. I have a lot on my mind right now. I doubt I’ll get any sleep anytime soon.”

She nodded, then got in bed while I sat on the couch. I rested my head on the back of it and stared at the ceiling, thanking God we made it out of that situation safely. My head was pounding, and I just wanted rest, but I knew I probably wouldn’t get any.

CHAPTER 16

WHITNEY

“**B**aby, this is Mrs. Anissa. She’s the woman of the house. If I don’t get to introduce you to another woman today, you’ve met the sweetest one here.”

Mrs. Anissa blushed as she smiled big. “Aww, Jericho, that’s so sweet. It’s so nice to meet you, Whitney. All my babies settling down around here. We just have to work on Jungle.”

She giggled and hugged me as I smiled big. She was so warm and endearing like a mother should be. Jericho then led me to Mr. Sheldon and did the same introduction. When we were out of his presence, he elaborated more. “I will always admire that man. He gives amazing advice, and he raised his five children on his own after his wife died. He will always have my respect. He’s given me a bit of advice too. His oldest son, Isaiah, is just like him.”

After introducing me to all his brothers, the ones I didn’t meet last night, I left him to be with the ladies. When I entered the front room, Lexi, Kaysyn, Brittany, Lynn, Sandrene, and Riley all stood to hug me. There was one lady with a frown on her face though. “Hol’ up, heifers. How y’all know her already?”

Kaysyn laughed and said, “Whitney, this is Alexz with a Z. She thinks she has to know everything about everything. She’s the youngest Berotte and extremely spoiled. She’s also married to my brother, Axton.”

Alexz playfully shoved her in the arm and said, “Hi, Whitney. It’s nice to meet you. Don’t believe shit they say about me. These hoes ain’t loyal.”

I laughed so hard I almost got choked. This was the beginning of a great time. I could see why Jericho fell in love with these people. Everyone was

extremely friendly, kept me laughing, and accepted me into the fold. They introduced me to Skyler, who looked miserable as hell. She said she was a week from her due date, but sis was over it. When I heard her name, I realized she was Lexi's sister. I also met Joyy and Shavozz. Jericho wasn't lying about them having a big family.

Chelsea and I sat side by side, and Manman had retreated to the kitchen with Mrs. Anissa and Lexi's mother, Ms. Patricia. They'd met everyone last weekend. We listened to them talk about wedding stuff. I learned that Seneca, Arrow, and Jamel had done a triple proposal some months back. They were all planning their weddings and had picked dates. Sandrene and Jamel would be getting married first. She was talking about dresses and how big and fabulous the wedding would be.

There were kids everywhere, and it was definitely difficult to keep up with who was who. However, I noticed Chelsea staring at one little girl in particular. She was a cutie with two huge, curly afro puffs. The more I looked at her, though, the more familiar her features were. I nudged Chelsea and asked, "What's up? You're staring."

She cleared her throat and grabbed my hand, leading me to the front porch as Kaysyn watched us. Something was up, and I didn't know if I liked it or not. The minute the door closed behind us, she turned to me and said, "She's my daughter... the little girl I had from Jules raping me. Somehow, she ended up here. How could God put me in the same location as a baby that was stolen from me? He took her and turned her in to CPS. I'm more than sure Jules had something to do with why she ended up here."

My eyes were wide, and my mouth had fallen open. "Do they know? Oh my God."

"Seneca knows, but he told Jericho yesterday that he didn't want to talk to me about her. I think his wife is suspecting something foul, because she stares at me quite a bit. I don't want to take her from them. I just wanna talk to her. She doesn't even have to know that I'm her birth mother. After seeing her again, I realize she has more of Jules' looks than I originally noticed. Although that revelation should pain me, it doesn't. She's mine, and for two weeks, she was the only person in the world that loved me unconditionally."

I was in shock. "Who else knows?"

"Isaiah. I talked to him early yesterday about it during our counseling session. Manman knows too. I just... I don't know. I don't want to seem creepy to his wife because I keep staring at her daughter... my daughter.

She's so beautiful. She has thick curly hair, just like me. Maybe I should try holding one of the other kids to keep my attention away from her."

"I don't know if that will work, but it's worth a try. In the meantime, let's go eat. That food smells amazing. I don't know who helps them feed all these people, but I need to make a donation. If it smells this good, it has to taste good."

Chelsea smiled at me and grabbed my hand. "Thanks, sis. This is a little tough, but I know I can get through it. It won't be like I'll be here every Sunday. After today, it will probably be a while before I come back."

As we stood, another car turned in the driveway. His music was blasting, and when he opened the door, smoke came out with him. He was kind of cute in a country sort of way. He was bowlegged as hell, like he'd been riding a horse for hours. He nodded at us as he went around to the back of the house. That was where the men congregated. It wasn't all that warm outside, but they were still out there.

When we walked back inside, everyone was fixing food, and some had already sat down to eat. I didn't even know what they'd cooked, but I was about to find out. "Thanks for the tripe, Mama. I appreciate you!" Chad yelled across the room.

Tripe? That couldn't be what was smelling so good. I wasn't about to eat that. When I got to the stove and saw the greens, mac and cheese, yams, fried chicken, red beans and rice, and cornbread, I knew I was in heaven. Chad had the biggest plate known to man with that nasty ass tripe on the side. Apparently, she cooked that just for him. As I grabbed a paper plate, Alexz approached us. "Don't get too full, na. Y'all have to save room for cheesecake, banana pudding, or key lime pie. We even have lemon and chocolate cakes today. Our Sunday dinners are getting bigger, so that means more food." Turning away from us, she said, "Rondo, get your country ass out of that pudding!"

She was so funny. I took her advice and only put a tablespoon or so of everything on my plate. I made my way to the table to see there were a couple of seats left, since the men had gone back outside and some of the women were in the front room with TV trays. When Chelsea and I sat, we blessed our food and began eating. I swore, God had touched this food with a finger of love. It was so good.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt lips on my neck. I turned to Jericho, and he laughed. "That food got yo' ass mesmerized, huh?"

“I’m gon’ have to go straight to the gym tomorrow. This is so good though.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it. Are you gonna want to go to pole dancing class with them at three?”

“Umm... yeah! We talked about that for an entire hour yesterday. They said it’s only an hour. I told you I already picked a name. As long as we can leave by five, we should get home before it’s too late.”

“Okay. Mwen renmen ou, cheri.”

“I love you too, baby.”

I tilted my head back and kissed his lips then went right back to my food. By the time I came up for air, I was done and fat full. I didn’t know how I would be able to fit dessert in there, but I’d have to get in a couple of tablespoons of banana pudding so Alexz wouldn’t be on my ass. As I threw my plate in the trash, someone screaming caught my attention. No one seemed to be bothered by it, but I had to be nosy to see what was going on.

I peeked out the back door to see Chad running around with Alexz across his shoulder. No one was paying them any attention. “Every Sunday.”

I turned to see Joyy. She chuckled and slowly shook her head. I chuckled, too, then went back to the table with Chelsea. “You okay, sis?”

“Yeah. I just wish Jungle was here. He held me last night, and I just knew that was where I belonged. After I took my shower and came out in my bed clothes, he got the fuck out of that room so fast he should’ve been dizzy. He wants me too. Before long, he won’t be able to control himself. I can’t wait for the day.”

“I don’t know why you like playing with fire. Jericho is going to come unhinged.”

“He’ll be okay. Whenever Jungle comes to me, he won’t be going to anyone else.”

“Okaaaay, sis! You better talk that shit,” I said with my eyebrows raised.

She laughed then stood to throw her plate away. As soon as Alexz walked in the door, breathing hard, she said, “Who’s ready for dessert?”

“Girl, you ought to be ready to throw up,” Shavozz said.

Everyone laughed as Skyler’s face filled with panic. “Oh shit!”

Everyone turned to her and started screaming. They all started yelling for Dylan, who I assumed to be her husband. He ran in the house, immediately scooping her up as their daughter jumped up and down, trying to figure out what was going on. I stooped to her and said, “Your mommy is having the

baby. Isn't that exciting?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes!"

She ran off barking, and I was a little confused by that until Chad started barking too, holding up his Omega Psi Phi sign with his hand. He picked her up and started hopping with her as a couple of others joined him. They didn't look to be heading to the hospital just yet, but all the women piled up in two vehicles and took off behind them.

"Well, it looks like we're stuck here with the men," I said to Chelsea.

"I don't mind. They are all pleasant to look at."

I giggled with her until she looked at someone behind me and said, "Except him."

I turned to see Jericho headed our way. I playfully shoved her arm. "He's the sexiest man here. Don't do my baby."

I was so pissed at him last night and early this morning, but he knew I wouldn't be able to stay mad at him. I knew his ass had said something smart to me last night when he said it in Haitian Creole. Had he told me what it meant, I would probably still be angry. I ended up going to the couch with him last night, and we pulled out the sofa bed. He held me all night. He'd gone to sleep, but I didn't have a clue on how long he'd slept because he was awake when I woke up.

I stood, and he pulled me close. "This has been an amazing day. I can't wait until I'm rushing you to a hospital. I know it's only been a week, but I have a feeling that my seed laid that egg out last weekend. Fucked it all up."

I chuckled as I closed my eyes and shook my head. "You're a mess."

"Well, we got the desserts all to ourselves," Ali said as he headed to the kitchen.

"Hell yeah," Chad added. "I'm about to kill that banana pudding."

"Long as you don't touch that cheesecake," Isaiah said.

It seemed everyone had their favorites. "The women are gonna be pissed that they ate all the desserts," Jericho said. "I guess it's safe to say there won't be any pole dancing today, Fantasy."

I giggled. "I guess not. I'll have to wait for whenever we come back."

"Let's get some dessert before Chad's greedy ass eats it all."

As we went to the kitchen, Chad turned around with a small mixing bowl full of pudding. Before I could filter myself, I said, "Damn. Did you save any for anybody else?"

His eyebrows went up, and he laughed. "Oh, I guess yo' ass done got

comfortable around here, huh? Don't make me handle you like I do Alexz every Sunday."

It was my turn for my eyebrows to hike up. He nodded repeatedly and said, "That's what I thought. Get yo' woman, Jericho, before she get christened into the family."

Jericho had the nerve to laugh. "Jericho, you would let him just snatch me up like he did Alexz?"

"Well, you gotta watch what you say and who you say it to."

"Mm hmm. Wait until we leave. I'm gon' have a few choice words for yo' ass."

"Long as the words 'come get this pussy' is included in that tongue lashing, I'll take it."

I rolled my eyes, but I'd gushed in my panties. After fixing some banana pudding, I saw Seneca staring at Chelsea, and Jericho noticed it too. When Seneca started walking toward her, Jericho leaned over to my ear. "Give me a minute."

He made his way to them and put his arm around Chelsea as Seneca talked. He looked angry as hell, but he wasn't talking loudly. Hopefully, this didn't turn into a mess.

CHAPTER 17

JERICHO

“**W**hy do you feel it’s a good idea to turn our lives upside down?” Seneca asked.

“Mine has been upside down for over six years. I’m not saying I want to take her, Seneca. She doesn’t even have to know. I just want to be able to interact with her whenever I’m in town. That’s all. She was taken from me. I didn’t give her up.”

“Let’s take this outside, y’all.”

We were still at the Berottes’, and Seneca had approached Chelsea about what we’d talked about. Just the fact that he’d approached her let me know that he’d been thinking about it. Skyler going into labor was perfect, because Kaysyn had gone to the hospital with the ladies. As we made our way outside, I could see Isaiah and Mr. Sheldon watching us. They gave me head nods, and I did the same back to them.

When we got to the picnic table, Chelsea sat as Seneca paced back and forth. I held her hand, hoping this would work out in a way that was best for everyone. I didn’t think she was being unreasonable. She just wanted to spend time with her occasionally. However, I also understood the threat that Seneca was feeling. Jericka was his baby girl. Although he’d only been around her for a barely a year or so, he loved her like she was biologically his. She almost looked like she could be biologically his.

“So you’re telling me that you just want to spend time with her sometimes. How are you sure that she’s even yours?”

“Because I could never forget her. I would be willing to do a DNA test. But yes, that’s all I want. I just want to get to know her. I can’t even take care of myself, let alone a kid. While I know one day I won’t be in that position, I

would never want someone to feel the hurt I've felt all this time. It's a feeling that I wouldn't wish on anyone. Trying to take her from you and Kaysyn would hurt everyone, including her. I could never do that, especially not to her."

Seneca closed his eyes, then held his ribs as he took a deep breath. "I need to talk to Kaysyn about it. If she agrees to this, we will most definitely need a DNA test and a contract. We are assuming all the risk, and we need protection in place."

Chelsea stood from her seat and walked over to him then hugged him. His eyes widened some as she said, "Thank you so much. You have my word that I will honor what I said here today. She's so beautiful, and the two of you have done a wonderful job raising her so far."

She looked over at me and smiled after releasing Seneca. "I'm gonna go back inside with Whitney."

I nodded, then turned my attention to Seneca. "Thanks, man."

He slowly shook his head. "I'm tired. I just want to live in peace with my family. The kids finally saw Luckey yesterday. He's lost quite a bit of weight. I think seeing him that way traumatized them. Ell didn't want to go visit him in the first place. He surely doesn't want to go back now."

"Is he in rehab?"

"Naw. He has an apartment. He ended up going through a detox program, and he's in counseling. He lost his job, so he left the Houston area. He's in Nederland now. Jericka cried for nearly an hour when we left him. Getting to play with Aina helped her perk up some. I just hope he gets himself together sooner rather than later. He's on track to doing that though."

"Well, that's a good thing. Hopefully he starts gaining weight soon and begins to look like he used to."

"Yeah. Well, Friday, Riley and I finally had a discussion about my father too. So to say my emotions and shit are all fucked up is putting it lightly."

"I'm sorry, man. I'm sure helping me with my bullshit didn't make things any better."

"Yo' shit was a welcomed distraction. It kept my mind off my own shit. You think Jules sent Jericka to Texas because he knew you were here?"

"I don't know. He would have no reason to do that, especially if he didn't care for the child. Why would he even want her to connect to family or risk me finding out who she was? I just think he was trying to get her away from Florida and probably had some type of connection here. That shit was totally

coincidental. I never even picked up on how much Jericka looks like him until what my sister told me.”

Seneca slid his hand down his face. “All I know is this shit is fucked up. Hopefully nothing else comes up, because I don’t know how much more I can handle.”

“I always have your back, bruh, even with my sister. I’m going to make sure she upholds her end of the agreement, if Kaysyn agrees to it. You know Isaiah is always there if you want to talk. He already knows about this situation. Chelsea and I talked to him yesterday.”

“Man, why in the fuck you calling her Chelsea? I thought her name was Jenetta.”

I chuckled slightly. “She’s in the process of changing her name. That was before we handled Jules. It would be less likely he could find her if she changed her name. I’m trying to get used to calling her that.”

He slowly shook his head. “Man, whatever. So now that all that bullshit is over, what’chu gon’ do?”

“I’m gonna be in Dallas for a while to help them get settled in their place then I’ll be back. I still have my guard up for bullshit, but I’m optimistic that it’s done. I just wanna get settled in my relationship with Whitney. You know, properly date her again. While we know each other, I feel like we really need to get to know who we are as adults. With all this bullshit going on, we’ve only had time to explore one aspect of that.”

He twisted his lips to the side. “Yeah, I bet.”

“Nigga, don’t play with me. I been chilling since that shit with Lexi. Ain’t been with a soul. Soon as I saw Whitney, I was ready to tear her apart.”

He chuckled and was about to slap my hand then remembered his ribs. “See, you almost had me finna fuck up.”

“I can’t pay you for what you did for me, but I’m gon’ try to tighten you and Ali up. Jungle too.”

“Naw, you can’t pay us, so don’t even try. Your loyalty is enough, bruh.”

“Don’t try to pay who?”

We turned to the door and saw Ali walking out of it. “If you talking about us, you ain’t gotta worry about that. Just when you think you about to be legit, we got more action.”

I took a deep breath. This shit was never gonna stop. We would be hood, thug ass niggas for the rest of our lives. I supposed it was a good thing the women had their support group. I didn’t know how Whitney would benefit

from that while living in Dallas though. I couldn't turn my back on my brothers. "What the fuck now?" Seneca asked.

As he asked, Chad walked out the door, along with Shyrón. Chad slid his hand down his face, and I knew it had to involve him in some way. He had all our attention, so he spoke. "I got a phone call a minute ago. That muthafucka is tryna come for me again. When the fuck he gon' give up?"

"Knowledge?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"He still in Pollock, right? I have an old connect from my father out there. Give me the word go, and I'll make contact," I said, informing them all.

"Go," Ali said, answering for him. "This nigga done escaped with his life one too many times."

"What did he say in the phone call?" Seneca asked.

"That just because shit been quiet don't mean it's over. We were gonna pay for killing Fatima and leaving his son motherless."

"Well, look like his child finna be fatherless too," I said.

Shy slapped my hand, then Ali. I walked over to Chad, because I could see that this shit was bothering him. "I have a wife and son to look out for now."

I put my arm around his shoulders. "You ain't got shit to worry about. We got'chu."

If I could get in Pollock, I would do that shit myself. I went to the car and got my burner from the console and made my way back to the backyard. That nigga had been in Pollock for years, since I was a damn preteen. If he couldn't get to that nigga, no one could. From what he'd told me, the warden turned a blind eye to a lot of shit when it benefitted everyone involved. Knowing that Chad was once a federal employee and had sued the FBI, those muthafuckas would probably be willing to let a lot of shit slide out of fear of retribution.

Chad didn't realize the power he held, but I was about to enlighten him. "Furthermore, you and Shy sued the fucking FBI. Those muthafuckas are at your mercy. If you wanna go the legal route, you can do that, and we will keep shit straight on the street. After that suit, I'm willing to bet they will investigate a fucking mosquito bite if you make enough waves about it."

Chad looked at me and gave me a slight smile. "You know, you might be right. Let me think on that, because I don't trust those muthafuckas. I trust y'all with my life. In the meantime, please help me look out for my family,

especially Alexz. He's tried to kill her once already."

"Like I said, we got'chu."

My bruhs all huddled together in silence for a moment. Ali gave us all a pound as he said, "I'll update Jungle, because we'll need him and Vegas."

We all nodded in agreement as he said, "Seneca, you and Shy got Alexz. I got Lexi. Jericho, you and Jungle got Chad, man."

I nodded. All progress would have to be stopped on my family moving. Just to get out of it, I could have the inspection fall through since I had his information. I needed my family to be good, and I couldn't assure that if I wasn't there. However, there was no way Whitney was going to move to Beaumont. Maybe the three of them could live together. I would have to talk to them about what was going on. I'd leave the inspector alone and just be honest with them about the situation.

I didn't think they needed to be here, just in case shit really got hot. All our families could possibly be in danger. It would probably be best to get them all out of here, but I knew that was impossible with their careers and what not. "Yo, you thinking pretty hard. What's up?"

I turned to see Ali standing there. "I'm just trying to decide what to do about my family. I'd planned to be with them in Dallas for a while, but I won't be able to do that right now. So I don't know if I want them to get the house or just stay with Whitney."

"Talk to them. I know this is difficult, but I knew you wouldn't feel comfortable about leaving us hanging."

"Yeah. We have to go back to Dallas. I'll talk to them on the way home. I'll head back first thing tomorrow."

"A'ight. Shy gon' be researching shit, trying to figure out who we dealing with. Hopefully, he'll just let you take that muthafucka out. At least it won't be lingering forever. The law drag their feet. I need people fucked up right then so I can be through with the shit."

"I feel you on that shit."

"Once Shy has shit figured out, we'll have a better idea of what needs to be done."

I slapped Ali's hand as he headed back inside. "Skyler's in active labor, so we need to be leaving soon!" Mr. Sheldon said out the door.

I went inside to get my family and decide if we would go to the hospital before we left. When I walked in, Whitney's eyes found mine. I could see the questions in hers. She'd probably seen the alarm on Chad's face before they

came outside. I walked over to where she, Chelsea, and Manman were seated, playing with Isaiah's triplets. Chelsea was holding one of Shy's daughters.

"Do y'all wanna go to the hospital before we leave town?"

"Sure! I would love to see the baby," Manman said.

Whitney's eyes stayed trained on mine. She stood while holding one of Isaiah's sons. "What's going on?"

"We'll talk in the car, because I need to talk to all three of you at once."

She gave me a look like she thought I was bullshitting her. "Whitney, I promise. I learned from last night. A'ight?"

She nodded and handed Isaiah's son to him then grabbed her purse from the couch. As we made our way to the car, so did everyone else. They were loading kids up, and I noticed Chelsea smile at Seneca as he got Ell and Jericka situated to go.

Once I'd opened doors and they all got inside, I took a deep breath, hoping that they would understand why I couldn't leave my boys hanging. Had it not been for them, with the exception of Whitney, we could all be dead. Once inside the vehicle, they were all staring at me. "Not right now. There isn't enough time between here and the hospital to effectively explain what's going on. I'll explain on the way to Dallas."

They all simultaneously took deep breaths. I wanted to chuckle, but there wasn't shit funny about what I had to tell them. Whitney had only been through a couple of instances, and she was already getting fed up. I had to make sure that I kept all lines of communication open to assure that we wouldn't have a repeat of last night. If we did, I knew I would surely lose her.

CHAPTER 18

WHITNEY

“So, we have to abandon the sale of the home? Is that what you’re saying?” I asked Jericho, trying to get a clear understanding of what he was saying.

We’d left the hospital after seeing Skyler and Dylan’s precious baby boy that they’d named Mason. He was almost nine pounds. I didn’t understand how a woman so tiny could handle such a large baby. Skyler wasn’t short, but she was like Barbie doll thin. However, that little chocolate drop was a replica of his big sister. He had a head full of hair and a natural frown on his face like he didn’t want to be here. We couldn’t help but laugh at that.

However, now that we were on our way to Dallas, nothing Jericho had said to us was funny. He’d said we could be in danger... again. While I understood it was part of his “job” to handle these types of situations, this shit was getting tiring already. First Jules and his bullshit, then his men and their bullshit, and now, there was some old shit with Chad. Did it ever end?

“I’m saying that I would prefer for the three of you to stay together, whether that’s at your place or at the new place. They are both three-bedroom homes. I feel like all of you will be safer staying in Dallas, but I won’t be able to be there, because Watchful Eyes is on high alert for one of our own. We have to make sure Chad and his family are safe. They all did the same for me. I wouldn’t even feel right abandoning them when they need me. Had it not been for them, Manman, Chelsea... we’d be dead. Whitney, there wouldn’t have been a relationship.”

I sat thinking about what he said. I wasn’t faulting him for what his decisions were. They were justified. My issue was that I didn’t know if this was something I could constantly deal with... always worrying about him

and his safety. He just said had it not been for his brothers, they would be dead. He could be killed at any moment. None of the situations guaranteed he'd come home.

"Whitney, what are you thinking?"

"Nothing I care to speak about right now."

He nodded repeatedly. "I'm sorry that it seems like I don't give a fuck about y'all. That couldn't be further from the truth. It's not always like this. It just seems like shit is just popping off all over the place. Seneca and I were talking about that earlier. We're all tired of it, but what can we do? We can't leave our brother hanging, especially not when he made sure we were all straight financially when he got his settlement. We thought this shit was over back then... a good nine months or so ago."

I couldn't form words to express my emotions and my fears. However, Manman was able to string words together. "Jericho, we know you love us and that you aren't a reckless individual. You wouldn't engage in things you felt you had no obligation to. So, I understand your dilemma. You're a good man. All of you are. I just hate that all of this is jeopardizing your happiness with your families. All of you have something to lose in this, even Jungle. He has a sister and nephews. He doesn't want to leave his sister all alone in this world, although she has a husband. So I get it, baby."

"Me too, Jericho. Just because I wanna call you Zoe doesn't mean you're like Jonas and Jules. You take care of your people. The Zoe Pound was founded on those principles, and those are the principles you and your brothers live by. I love your brotherhood. So, y'all are definitely what the founding fathers of the Zoe Pound had in mind," Chelsea added.

"Thanks, y'all."

I remained quiet as Jericho drove. Manman and Chelsea were used to this life. I wasn't. While my parents died when I was young, we lived a peaceful life. I didn't discover or rather experience that lifestyle until I met Jericho. However, back then, he wasn't involved in it. He was as peaceful as I was. He'd never shown me that side of him. When I found out what he'd done to Jonas, I was stunned. At first, I thought it was just the situation that caused him to snap.

I should have known better though. His father ran all of Miami. He *had* to have picked up on how things were done in the streets. This life was a part of who he was. It was only lying dormant all those years ago. He'd told me as much when we reconnected. I had no idea it would be like this though. We'd

only been around one another for a week, and I was mentally tapped out.

We continued the drive home, and I remained quiet the rest of the way. He and his family held conversation, and music played on the radio, but I just couldn't verbalize a thing. For nearly four hours, I was quiet as a church mouse, choosing to sleep for half of it. The only way I knew to get rid of stress was to pray it away or sleep it off. I did both.

When the car stopped, I woke up to see we were at my house. I quickly opened my door, choosing not to wait for Jericho to do it, and went to the trunk to get my bag. I swore he looked like he wanted to fuck me up. The scowl on his face gave me pause... literally took my fucking breath away.

I made my way to the back door and unlocked it and made a beeline to my room. His demeanor had me nervous as hell. I wasn't looking forward to our conversation or what he would say. After hearing him talking to Manman and Chelsea for a bit, I could hear his footsteps getting closer to my bedroom. I began unpacking my things, trying to be busy doing something when he entered.

When the door opened, I looked toward it. He came into the room, face all business. "Listen to me and listen good, Whitney. I don't give a fuck how many disagreements we have. I'm gon' always be a man to you. I don't need you showing me that you can be independent of me. Whether I'm pissed or not, I will always treat you like you're the love of my life, because you are. Give me that respect. I won't ever treat you like you don't matter to me."

That's what he got angry about? I just knew he was angry because I got quiet on him. He made my heart melt, and my confusion fell by the wayside. I stared at him, but before I could apologize, he said, "Now had you been paying attention when you walked in this bitch, you would have noticed that a muthafucka done been in here."

I frowned. Someone had been in my house? I tried to walk past him, but he stopped me by grabbing my arm. "There wasn't a break-in. It had to be your ex. Apparently, he has another key."

I nodded as he released me. When we got to the front room and I saw my TV was gone, I wanted to go find his ass. "He took your lamps and the shelf that was over there too."

I walked away and headed to my room to get my phone to pull the footage from the camera at the front and back doors. Sure enough, it was Vashawn's ass. I didn't know how he knew we would be gone. Not only that, but he had to have known that we would be gone a while for him to risk

coming here taking shit. And not just any shit. He took big shit.

Jericho walked into the room, and before he could say anything, I said, "I'm sorry about my attitude and making unnecessary statements. I just... I don't know if I can constantly deal with this kind of shit. I lived a peaceful life, Jericho. We've only been together a week! I'm so overwhelmed. I can't handle this."

"What are you saying to me, Whitney? You're breaking up with me?"

"I don't know what I'm saying. Whether we're together or not, I'm going to worry about you. So I don't guess I am. I just wish you didn't have to be involved in all of that. I understand why you need to do this for Chad. I really do, but now I don't even know when I'll see you again. You tried to warn me, and I didn't take heed to that warning. I underestimated the turmoil it would cause me mentally and emotionally."

"Well... maybe we should take a break. I'll take Manman and Chelsea back to Beaumont with me and put them up in a hotel. I know your life is here. I don't know what else to do though, Whit. I love you, and I've loved you for over sixteen years. Having you back in my life meant everything to me, but I think you should probably move on if my life stresses you out this much. At least we'll have closure this time."

I was stunned into silence. He was breaking up with me, and I didn't have the words to keep him from doing so. I stared at him as the tears fell down my cheeks while he gathered the few things he'd brought to my house. He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder. "You need to get your locks changed before you go to work. You have Manman's phone number if she needs to sign any more paperwork."

He turned to leave the room, and I panicked. I quickly ran to him and held him around his waist. I laid my head on his back as I listened to him breathe. Closing my eyes, I reached up and slid my hands down his chest. I felt crazy as fuck. I wanted him, but I didn't want him in that bullshit. This shit was out of my control, and I didn't know how to handle my emotions.

He spun around in my arms and held me tightly. "I can't guarantee that nothing else won't pop off. It's not always like this though. I want you to be with me, Whitney. I really do, but I won't be able to bear seeing you hurt and needing more from me. I would much rather see you move on and be happy with someone else than to settle for me."

"Knowing you're out here and I can't be with you won't be good either. Please, don't leave me. I love you, Jericho. I've fallen for you all over again,

and I won't be able to bear the separation again. This shit is just confusing, and my mind and heart are at war. You said you still needed me. I still need you too."

He dropped his bag then led me back to the bed. We sat and he stared at me. After grabbing my hand, he asked, "What do you propose?"

"Take us with you. At least we'll have support there and not be out here alone. It won't take you long to get to us if you need to. I need to know though. How serious are you about me? Jericho, I will leave all this behind. Just say you love me. I need to hear you say you wanna be my only," I said, quoting lyrics from a song by Alex Isley.

He licked his lips and pulled me astride his lap. "I love you more than myself. I want to be all yours, and I want you to be all mine. Just me and you. I need you to be my rider though. I don't want to be a burden on your heart. I'm gon' come home to you every night. I'm fucking Jericho Marcellus, and I work for Watchful Eyes P.I. Firm. We the fucking best to do it. I need you to believe that. I know shit gon' get scary, but I need you to rise above that shit. I will always make it back to you. You hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you," I said as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

Trusting was the hardest part of any relationship, but in the situations we were in, trusting that he would be okay would be even harder. As if he was reading my thoughts, he said, "Trust me, baby. I got'chu always. You are so important and special to me. You and my family will always be of utmost importance."

He pulled away and kissed my lips tenderly. "Don't make me live without you again. I won't be able to stomach that again either, Whitney."

He slid his hands to my ass and squeezed as he placed soft kisses on my neck. I held the back of his head and wished that he didn't ever have to leave me. Lowering my head, I kissed his forehead. He looked up at me and gently caressed my cheek.

"So, go ahead and cancel the sale of the house and call movers in the morning to pack up this house. I won't be watching Chad's back all day tomorrow. Ali knows I had to come to Dallas, so Jungle is going to take care of it until I get there. If there is someone you trust to oversee the move and sell of your house, get in touch with them in the morning. After I fuck you real good, you need to pack the things you'll need."

"What about Vashawn?"

"I'm gonna change your locks in the morning. You don't need shit he

took. Fuck him. He got something he need to say about that, he can say it to me.”

He bit his bottom lip as he stared at me, and I couldn’t help but to grind against him. His dick was hard as hell and needed me. There was no way I was going to turn him down. I loved his tender but firm approach with me. He was prepared to leave me here in Dallas, just like he found me, although it was going to tear him apart.

He pulled my shirt over my head, and I quickly unfastened my bra. Before we could fully indulge in one another, there was a knock on the door. “Kisa ou bezwen?”

“Noup rale aswè a?” Chelsea asked.

“Non, demen maten.”

“You better get yo’ man, sis!”

I giggled as Jericho slowly shook his head. “What did she ask you?”

“She’d asked if we were leaving tonight, and I told her no, tomorrow morning. I suppose I should tell them that we will all be heading back tomorrow morning.”

He squeezed my ass again and asked, “Now where were we?”

“You were about to fuck me real good.”

“Mm hmm.”

He brought his face to my nipples and began sucking them, making my eyes roll to the back of my head. Jericho had my body on lock. If I could get my mind to stop overthinking and get with the program, we would be on one accord.

CHAPTER 19

JERICO

“**A**in’t no way I was gon’ fully let go of this pussy. Whitney, damn, baby.”

I was plunging deeply inside Whitney’s love, and the shit had my body covered in goosebumps. I was bluffing her by saying I would leave. There was no way on God’s green earth I could have permanently walked away from her. However, I knew Whitney was stubborn until she felt her back was against the wall. Having to be without me after a sixteen-year absence had her pressed.

This life wasn’t what she was used to. While she’d witnessed a couple of situations at our place with Jonas and whoever he was dealing with, I would always do my best to shield her. It was time to take the blinders off. She needed to see all of me and who I’d grown up to be. I thought we had an understanding already. I just hoped we didn’t have to go through this every time some shit popped off.

Relocating to Beaumont would do her some good. Just like we had a tight brotherhood, the women of Watchful Eyes had a sisterhood that I wasn’t privy to until Whitney came along. They looked out for each other just like we did. If she could feel that comfortable with women who were basically strangers to her, then I knew her decision to move was what was best.

I rolled to my back, landing her on top of me. She didn’t waste any time getting started on her ride. She immediately began rolling her hips as I rested my hands on her ass. Staring into my eyes, she pressed her hands into my chest like she was giving me CPR, as she began bouncing her lower torso on my dick. “Mm, fuck,” I voiced.

“I love... you, Jericho. Fuck!”

She came all over me as her body practically convulsed in pleasure. I took that opportunity to pull her to me and slowly fuck her from below. Whitney was the love of my life, and I wanted to show her just how much I loved her every time we made love. I wanted her to feel my heart through my dick, with every stroke, whether it was in her beautiful pussy or in her warm mouth.

She was the woman meant to get all these inches.

She was the woman that deserved everything I had to offer and more.

She was the woman that God had made just for me.

She was rough around the edges, but so was I. We had to do our best to navigate through life's turbulent waters after I killed Jonas without support from anyone. We'd both done well surviving, but now it was time to survive together as a family. Despite us evolving as adults, our hearts were the same and had carried a piece of each other all these years. It was why we were able to move like we had never been apart.

I gently nibbled on her earlobe, then whispered, "There's no other place more pleasing to be than within your walls. Fuuuck!"

"I enjoy every inch of your dick, every second it's inside of me, baby. This is my fucking happy place."

I licked my lips then bit my bottom one as a tremble went through my body at her words. She lifted her head and stared into my eyes as I began to stroke her a little faster, going deeper than before, promising to shove my dick into her throat canal from below, halting all sound from her. More than before, I desired to be the man she needed in every capacity.

"Whitney, I'm about to cum, baby."

The chill that went up my spine alerted me that this round was about to be over. I'd planned to fuck the shit out of her, putting some act right into that ass, but her sensitivity and mine had me changing shit up. She needed my sensitivity more than anything at this moment. If I could give her the stars from the sky, I would, so sensitivity when she needed it wasn't shit.

I held her tighter as my nut filled her paradise, fertilizing her soil to yield fruit. We might as well get ready to be parents, because the shit was gonna happen sooner rather than later. She lay on my chest and traced circles around my nipple with her finger. "Do I have to get up?" she whispered.

"Either now or super early in the morning. Pick your poison."

"I need a shower, so I guess I'll have to get up tonight."

"I need a shower too. You can always sleep on the ride to Beaumont. You

know if I get in that shower with you, I'm gon' zap the little bit of energy you have left."

"Mm. Well come zap me, Zoe."

I frowned at her slightly. She was tryna get fucked. That was why she called me that. "Zoe, huh? That's the kind of time you on? I'll give you whatever you want."

"Mm. Good to know," she said as she stood from the bed. "Come fuck me up then."



"I'M SUPPOSED TO BE GETTING SHIT TO CHANGE LOCKS, BUT I WANT YOU TO know that if I didn't love Whitney, I would take you out right here. I could have already without you knowing what the fuck happened. You take your ass to that house again, there will be no warning. I'll shoot you in your fucking neck from a half mile away."

I'd tracked Vashawn down at his fucking condo. While Whitney was asleep, I went through her phone and found his last name and birthday. That was all it took for me to find out more. He had no idea who he was fucking with.

"How do you know where I live? Whitney doesn't even know."

"How does God know?"

"He's God. All knowing."

"Well, I'm his lil brother... his evil lil brother when provoked. You wanna see God's wrath through me, keep fucking up."

I had him jacked up against the wall of his condo by his shirt while he trembled in fear. Knowing a man was afraid of me and what I could do only made my adrenaline pump harder. I'd rang his doorbell, and he'd obviously opened it without looking to see who was standing there. He flung the door open with his satchel crossbody and cup of coffee.

"Looks like you gon' have to change and be late to work since you wasted your coffee and fucking pissed on yourself. Maybe next time you'll think twice before fucking with my woman again, or it will be the last time you have the opportunity to think at all."

I dropped him and walked out the door, proud of my work. I had every

intent on coming in here and breaking his fucking neck, but I knew this was reckless. There would probably be all types of evidence from the complex's surveillance. When I got to my car, I took a deep breath and headed to Home Depot to get two doorknobs for the two perimeter doors.

Whitney had already left for the day, going to her office to hand them her resignation and stop progress on the house. She was also entrusting them to handle the sale of her house and a specific agent she knew to supervise the movers. Hopefully, by ten, we could be leaving to head to Beaumont. There was no way I was gonna leave this bitch ass nigga untouched though.

This was his second warning, and again, he'd better thank God for Whitney. She was somewhat soft toward him, and I could imagine why. While she said she was no longer in love with him, they were together for three years, living together for the past year, so she had to still feel something for him. I was trying to take that into consideration. Next time, he wouldn't be so lucky.

When I got back to the house, my mama and sister were all packed and ready to load their things in my car. Whitney hadn't made it home yet. Before getting started on the locks, I loaded our things in the car as well. My mama started cooking breakfast, and I was grateful. I started to stop and get something on my way back, but I didn't want it to be cold by the time Whitney got here.

Before getting started, I sent her a text. *Hey, baby. How's it going?*

She responded immediately. *I'm heading out of the office now. See you in a few minutes.*

I smiled at her message as Chelsea laughed loudly. "Nigga, please. Hold on."

She handed me her phone for me to see Jungle's face. I frowned slightly but calmed down a bit. I couldn't stop her from calling him, nor could I force him to ignore her. However, if he wanted to be with her, he was gon' have to come correct. "Will you tell your lil sister to stop pressuring me about some damn Beyoncé tickets? I told her I ain't her nigga, so I refuse to pay for some damn Beyoncé tickets."

I slowly shook my head. "What's up, man?"

"Not too much. Sitting outside Chad's house. Fooling around with y'all, a nigga gon' need to get a place in Beaumont too. I met this chick from Alabama though, and I'm kind of feeling her. Beaumont would be a lil bit closer if I chose to do that."

“Word? Chelsea must not know that.”

“She does. We’re just friends, bruh. I never thought I would have a female friend, but it’s cool talking to her. I wasn’t open to no female friends back in the day.”

“Must be that old age getting to you.”

“Shut the fuck up. What time you plan to get here?”

“About two. What’s this woman’s name you talking to?”

“Kennedy. That’s why I wasn’t there yesterday. She was in Houston visiting a cousin, so we spent some time together.”

“That’s what’s up, man. You must be really feeling her.”

“Yeah, she cool. I’m still getting to know her though. I may bring her to Sunday dinner one Sunday so y’all can meet her.”

“Cool. Well, let me get back on changing these locks so we can eat and hit the road.”

“A’ight. Let me holla back at C-Mar.”

I rolled my eyes and hollered for her to come get her phone, then got to work changing the lock at the front door. She grabbed it and said, “You know yo’ ass can get that ticket for me. You ’posed to be my boy. That’s okay though. I know where our friendship stands. Bye, nigga.”

She giggled after she hung up on him, then her phone started ringing right after. If she was cool with them just being friends, then I didn’t have a problem with it. I just didn’t want her to be hurt. By the time I finished changing the lock in front and had walked to the back, Manman was finishing breakfast, and Whitney was walking through the door.

“Mm! Smells like I’m right on time.”

“You are! Now come on, let’s eat,” Manman said.

After Whitney kissed my lips, I changed out the back doorknob while they fixed our plates. Once I threw the old one out, I saw that Manman had cooked an omelet for me. She remembered just how much I loved them... all types. I kissed her cheek and said, “A’ight, ladies. Let’s eat up so we can begin our new lives. I have to honestly say that I’m glad we’re moving to Beaumont. I get to be around all my people at once. Now that Jules is out of the picture, we can truly live in peace, especially you two. I’m glad I took the risk to go get y’all. I’d do it all over again if I had to.”

Manman kissed my cheek, and Chelsea stood from her seat to do the same as Whitney looked on with a smile. “I’m happy that God blessed me to reunite with my family. I love y’all. Thanks, Chelsea, for not losing my

contact information. That has changed my life for the better.”

She leaned over and kissed my lips. As she pulled away, I sucked her bottom lip. Life was finally about to begin again for me, and I couldn’t wait to begin it with my mother and sister, but also with the love of my life. Those sixteen years didn’t even matter anymore. All that mattered was the here and now, and at this moment, we were all happy.



“CHAD SAID FOR YOU TO CALL YOUR GUY.”

“Shy, you sure?”

“Yeah. He don’t wanna fuck with the FBI. I tried to talk him out of it, but when it comes to Knowledge, he doesn’t trust them to do their fucking jobs. I can’t really fault him for that.”

“I can’t either. That nigga been a thorn in his flesh for a while. What? Three years now?”

“At least. He started fucking with Alexz before she even met Ax. She introduced his ass to all of us before Dylan even met Skyler. Chad is fucking antsy right now, though, because another nigga done called him, making threats on his family. Lexi is scared as hell, so he’s talking about having her take a leave of absence from work. It’s not like she has to work anyway, but she loves her job as a speech therapist. However, I want to believe that she loves her life more.”

“Did he say where he’s going to send them?”

“He did, but I’ll tell you that in person.”

“Got it, bruh. How are the girls?”

“Getting big. I can finally tell them apart.”

I slowly shook my head. “What made it finally click, nigga? They gotta be a good seven months old now.”

“They are eight months old. Kaylee is bigger, and her eyes slant downward. Kylie’s eyes slant slightly upward, like Brittany’s. I’m glad though. Now y’all can stop giving me a hard time about it.”

I chuckled. “A’ight. Let me make this phone call right quick. I’ll holla back when I talk to him.”

“Okay. Be safe on the road.”

“Thanks.”

We’d been on the road for two hours, and everyone was asleep, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I could only admire how beautiful they all were and how they were all depending on me to take care of them. I couldn’t let them down. I just hoped after this bullshit with Knowledge, things would be quiet for a while. Whitney couldn’t even begin to understand how tapped out we were.

In less than a month, I’d killed more people than I could count... at least ten for sure. If this call went like I thought it would, there was no telling how many more people’s deaths I would be responsible for. While everyone was asleep, I searched the number in my main phone, then grabbed a burner from the console. I had a few of them.

The phone rang once, and he picked up. “What it is?”

“Pras, this Jericho.”

“Aww shit. Who done fucked up?”

“Knowledge Rucker aka Earl Riggs and anyone too close to him. He been fucking with my boy for far too long.”

“You must be talking ’bout that Berotte nigga in Beaumont. Riggs been walking around here trying to recruit whoever he could to help with that shit. Anybody that can get him a connection to the outside. I only know of two muthafuckas that agreed to help. I got’chu though, my nigga. You taking over in Florida?”

“Naw. I don’t have time for that shit. I’m tryna start a family... be legit.”

“That’s what’s up. I always saw that in you, although Jonas tried to turn you into a miniature version of him. You stayed true to who you were all that time. I’m glad you tryna get back to that. I’ll call you when it’s done. Give me a bit, though, because they been wildin’ in this bitch. Guards been on high alert and shit. Yo’ ass strain too hard tryna take a shit, they throwing fucking gas bombs in your cell.”

I wanted to laugh, but I didn’t want him to take offense, so I just said, “That’s fucked up.”

“Tell me about it. But I’ll get back wit’chu, nigga.”

“A’ight.”

I could only hope that he handled this shit soon, because we would all be on high alert until he did.

CHAPTER 20

WHITNEY

All the sororities of the Divine Nine were represented. Skyler and Alexz were AKAs, Joyy was a Zeta, Riley was a Delta, and Kaysyn was part of Sigma Gamma Rho. Sandrene didn't go to college, and I didn't think Lexi, Brittany, or Shavozz had pledged. We were all at Shavozz's house talking about Sandrene and Jamel's wedding. Skyler wasn't here, but I knew what she'd pledged because of Alexz saying they were the majority.

As soon as we got to town, we'd gone to the Berottes' home because everyone else was at work. Jericho had to relieve Jungle so he could head back to Houston until it was time for him to come back tomorrow afternoon. Riley had promised to make sure we got checked into a hotel when she got off work.

Once we had, Manman chose to go back to spend time with Mrs. Anissa, and Chelsea and I came to Shavozz's house with Riley. I desperately needed the distraction. Although I knew Jericho was only looking out right now, none of them knew when they would have to do more than look out. I did my best to keep my mind at ease. After having him relocate me and promising to take care of me, the least I could do was show him my trust and support.

While they all danced to the music, I could see that Kaysyn was occasionally glancing at Chelsea. She had to have talked to Seneca about what Chelsea talked to him about yesterday. After I found out what was going on, I knew that shit couldn't be good. Seeing the hurt in Chelsea's facial expression when she talked about it was a lot. She'd filled me in on the conversation she and Jericho had with Seneca this morning.

I had a feeling that Kaysyn wanted no parts of whatever Chelsea was proposing. I could definitely understand her point, but I truly felt sorry for

Chelsea. It was bad enough she was raped by her brother and had to carry a baby from him, but after falling in love with the baby, he stole her from her. That had to tear her heart right out of her chest. Kaysyn's staring was making me a little uncomfortable, so I knew Chelsea had to be feeling the same way or worse.

I nudged her shoulder and asked, "You okay?"

"I want to ask her to just say what she wants to say to me. I don't know how much longer I can take her glances."

"Well, approach her nicely and show her that she can talk to you. Honestly, to me, she looks worried. Maybe you need to assure her that she has nothing to worry about."

"Yeah. We'll see."

Before we could continue the conversation, Shavozz stood in the middle of the floor. "I'm glad all of you are here, because I need support."

Everyone frowned, showing their confusion. She reached into the bag hanging from her arm and pulled out a pregnancy test. The house went into an uproar. I didn't know how long she'd been married to DJ, but this seemed to be a really big deal. I knew from yesterday that she had two sons already, and one had already graduated from high school.

Lexi quickly looped her arm through Shavozz's and led her to the bathroom as we all talked amongst ourselves. Riley sat next to me and said, "She may not be the only one. I can't do it here in front of everyone though. Ali would want to be the first to know. He might spazz out on me if he knew I shared that with all these women before him."

I chuckled. Ali and Jericho were a lot alike. Jericho would probably flip out, too, if I did something like that. "So are you going to take a test tonight?"

"I'm thinking about it. Ali knows every damn thing, so he'll probably know I'm pregnant before I do. He was the one that told me to purchase pregnancy tests, because his soldiers didn't fuck around." She rolled her eyes and chuckled as she shook her head. "I hope I am. Aina would love to have a younger sibling."

"Well, I hope you are too then. Since we'll be living here now, I hope we can hang out more often. I'm going to be looking for a job, but in the meantime, I would be able to cater to your availability."

"I would like that, Whitney."

As we started talking about random things, Shavozz appeared back in the front room with tears falling down her cheeks. No one moved or said a word

until she blurted, “I’m pregnant!”

Everyone stood to their feet to offer congratulatory hugs. Alexz’s face was red as she hugged her. Kaysyn put her on blast. “Alexz, you good? Girl, you quiet as hell.”

“Y’all are making me reconsider only having one child. Ugh!”

She pretended to cry, but I believed she really wanted to cry, and that was her way of playing it off. As I sat there laughing at their shenanigans, my phone vibrated with a text message. *Hey, baby. I miss you.*

I smiled as I stared at it. *I miss you too. I love you.*

Just that he’d texted me while he was working made me feel better about everything. Things would be fine, and I couldn’t wait until we could find a house and get settled.



“SHY! WORK THAT SHIMMY OUT, BOY!” ALEXZ YELLED.

We’d been here a week almost. It was Sunday, and we were at the Berottes’ having an amazing time. We were all in the backyard watching them put on a step show. It was exciting to watch, especially since I didn’t go to college. I only went to a trade school to get a certificate in real estate. Chelsea was amazed all the way around because she had never seen that.

She was sitting next to Jungle, and they seemed to be having a good time. He was truly trying to be a friend to her, and I found it admirable. Dylan and Skyler had stayed home with their newborn baby, and Skyler’s mother and Lexi were with them as well. Mr. Sheldon had said when someone had a baby, they usually congregated at that person’s house on that Sunday and a couple of Sundays after that, but Skyler had just been extremely tired.

She’d had some postpartum hemorrhaging due to a uterine atony after delivering the baby. They were able to contain the blood flow, thankfully. I wasn’t sure exactly what that was until Alexz explained that her uterus didn’t contract enough to clamp the placental blood vessels shut. They’d massaged her uterus and gave her medication to make it contract more. That was why they were giving her blood when we’d gone to see the baby.

I was scared for her, because I read up on it. Had they not caught her hemorrhage in time, she could have bled to death. If she wasn’t physically

tired from that, I could surely understand her being mentally tired. Just thinking about what could have happened could wear a person out. I was a witness to that because I tended to worry too much, especially when it came to someone I truly cared about.

Jericho sat next to me and put his arms around me, pulling me closer to him. “This week has been amazing. Although I haven’t been around as much as I would like, just knowing that my family has your back has lifted a weight off me like you wouldn’t believe.”

He kissed my head, and I giggled. He was right. This week *had* been amazing. I’d lived in Dallas for so long without family. Now that I had it again, I would never let go. Manman, Chelsea, and I had spent a lot of time with Mrs. Anissa and her grandbabies that weren’t in school yet. I didn’t know how she kept the triplets, the twins, Ariana, and sometimes Mariena and Foster. She said Ms. Patricia and Mr. Sheldon helped her, but since Skyler had the baby, that was where Ms. Patricia had been.

So she welcomed us to help with all those kids. This past week, she also had Aina once she’d gotten out of school. Mariena was also in preschool, but she had her right afterward as well. I was glad we could be here to help her and Mr. Sheldon. Seneca had been busy looking after Alexz. He normally got Aina from school.

We’d been staying in a hotel that I found out Watchful Eyes was paying for. It was like a miniature apartment, so we were cool. As long as we could cook and watch TV, we were fine. Jericho didn’t want me to drive my car without him being in it, so sometime next week, Chad was gonna take us to Dallas so we could get it. Mrs. Anissa and Mr. Sheldon had been our transports until Jericho’s shift was done.

We’d also gone searching for a house. We’d found one that could accommodate Manman and Chelsea, but we hadn’t found one for us just yet. Jericho said we needed at least a three-bedroom, because he planned to put some babies in me immediately. Who knew? I could be pregnant already since he was positive that my birth control wasn’t shit compared to his nut.

As the Q-Dawgs strutted their stuff, Mariena joined them, barking just as loud as they were. Alexz had gone to their house to pick her up so she could come play with all the kids. She was too cute. When she saw Riley join them, she smiled so big. I supposed seeing another woman strutting with them made her excited. When they finished their stroll, Ali walked over to Riley and gently rubbed her belly. I hopped up from my seat and ran to her. In a

short time, we'd gotten close. Her spirit was magnetic, and I loved being around her.

As I hugged her and congratulated her, I noticed there was a line of women behind me, waiting to do the same. Shavozz had made her announcement earlier, and Mrs. Anissa cried real tears. Her biological son was finally giving her a grandbaby. It wasn't that the other children weren't her grandbabies, but DJ was her flesh and blood... came from her womb. I could understand the significance. I was more than sure it would be the same for Jamel and Sandrene when that time came.

As I made my way back to my seat, I noticed Chelsea was sitting there with her face in her hands. "Chelsea, you okay?"

She quickly shook her head, then stood to head to the front porch. I glanced back at Jericho, and I could see him frowning slightly as he watched her. He pulled away from Ali and the guys as they passed out cigars for the second time today and grabbed my hand so we could follow her to the front.

The tears on her cheeks let me know that only one thing could bring her to tears like that. "She said no, didn't she?" I asked.

She nodded, and the cries she was desperately trying to hold hostage erupted from her. Jericho wasted no time getting to her and pulling her into his arms. She was so confident that they would agree. When Seneca had said he would talk to Kaysyn about it, I believed she thought it was a done deal. Kaysyn was so friendly, whereas Seneca could be intimidating. Winning him over had made her so optimistic.

The tears freely rolled down my cheeks as I went to them. "What am I gonna do now, Jericho? I can't keep coming here, seeing my beautiful daughter and not being able to interact with her. Kaysyn will think that I have an ulterior motive whenever I stare at her too long or that I'm not gonna honor her wishes. I should have never asked them. Then I could still be optimistic instead of feeling this disappointment."

That only made me cry more. "Don't give up, Chelsea. She could possibly change her mind."

When Jungle appeared around the corner, Chelsea stood from her seat and went inside. "Everything okay?"

Jericho stared at him and shrugged his shoulders. "The only way you can find out is to ask her. If she wants you to know, she'll tell you."

Jungle bit his bottom lip and nodded. As he was about to head inside to go after Chelsea, she came back out with her purse. "Jungle, can you take me

for a ride, please?”

He glanced at Jericho, seeking his approval. Jericho nodded, so Jungle grabbed her hand and led her to his SUV as Jericho slid his arm around my shoulders. I turned to him and hugged him tightly as Manman joined us. “What’s going on?”

Jericho pulled away from me, and I could see him swallow the lump in his throat. “Kaysyn said no to her getting to know Jericka.”

Manman brought her hand to her chest and released her emotions as well. She went to the porch and sat as Jericho gently stroked my cheek. “I guess my family won’t be as welcomed as I thought.”

I pulled him back to me as I noticed Kaysyn making her way to us. When she got close and she saw the emotion on my face, she lowered her head. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I just can’t take the risk of losing her. She’s been my daughter for almost four years. What if Chelsea changes her mind and wants more than she’s initially asking for? She could take us to court and take Jericka away from us.”

Jericho stepped closer to Kaysyn and hugged her. However, what he said sent a chill down my spine for some reason. “Kaysyn, if she wanted to do that shit, she could do it without talking to you. You not allowing her to even interact with Jericka isn’t based on that. She knows that what happened has nothing to do with you. She’s not asking for her to live with her nor for her to even know of their relation. She just wants to get to know her. So tell me the real. What’s the real reason?”

She stared up at him as Seneca joined us with a frown on his face. *Oh shit.* “I’m scared. What if Jericka somehow puts two and two together and wants to be with her?”

“Kay, baby, you don’t have to explain your reasoning. No is no.”

Jericho frowned at him hard. “No one asked her to explain a thing. She came up here where we were. Adjust that tone, bruh.”

Seneca’s face eased some, surprisingly. I just knew there was about to be a problem. “My bad, man. You know this woman means everything to me. I don’t need her stressing herself out.”

“No one is faulting her for saying no. I understand both sides of this. It was her that felt the need to come up here and explain.”

Seneca nodded and took Kaysyn back to the backyard. Going back to Jericho, I wrapped my arms around his waist, and I could feel the tension in him. I had a feeling this was going to get worse before it got better. I could

only hope that they could come to some sort of agreement that would benefit them both.

CHAPTER 21

JERICHO

“I want to move to Houston.”

“What? How are you going to move to Houston, Chelsea?”

“Do you actually think I can stay here and not be tempted to make their world come crashing down? I didn’t think I was asking for a lot. I should have just kept my mouth closed and got to know her without them knowing the truth. I was trying to be honest, but you see where that got me. Fuck them!”

Chelsea was in the hotel room about to have a meltdown. She’d stayed gone with Jungle for over an hour. I didn’t know where they’d gone, what they’d done, or what they’d talked about, nor did I ask. Now that the realization of what had been said had time to settle within her, she was pissed.

I did think it was somewhat cruel for them not to at least understand where she was coming from and what had happened to her. She’d offered for them to draw up a contract. If she broke that contract, they could take her to court. I supposed they didn’t even want to risk the possibility of that happening. Now Chelsea was threatening to make everything come crashing down. I valued my brotherhood, but my sister would always come first. I hated the predicament this situation was putting me in.

“I know it seems unfair, baby. But just like you had no control over what happened, neither did they. They believe that they are protecting themselves and their daughter.”

“She’s my daughter too! She was taken away from me, and now that I know where she is, how is it fair to make me suffer? It’s like dangling meat in front of a hungry animal. I have to get away from here!”

I pulled Chelsea in my arms and hugged her tightly. "I'm so sorry, baby."

I kissed her head, then grabbed my phone and left the room. I had to talk to Jungle to see what had happened. If she wanted to move to Houston, I would help her do that, but she would most definitely have to get a job somewhere. She would need help if I couldn't get to her in time. When the door closed, I made my call.

"What's up, bruh?"

"Jungle, did Chelsea tell you what was going on?"

He took a deep breath. "Yeah. It's fucked up. Seems like they would trust that things would work out just because of you. She said you'd promised Seneca that you would make sure she honored her word."

"Kaysyn said no, not him. I thought maybe he could convince her to change her mind, but after what he said today, I don't think that's gonna happen."

"She wants to move to Houston. She tell you that?"

"Yeah. That's the main reason I'm calling. I thought you'd convinced her to make that decision."

"Naw. She asked me if I would look out for her if she did, and I told her I would. She has zero job skills, but I may be able to get her on at one of the grocery stores here. If not, I'll help her find something else."

"Okay. I'm gonna look for an apartment. Give me some good neighborhoods to search, 'cause I ain't tryna have my baby in the hood."

"Well, just look up some places, and I'll tell you whether they're good or not. I know you have a lot of shit on your plate, trying to find Manman somewhere to live and you and your woman. What about your old apartment?"

"I don't even wanna be in there like that, and neither does Manman after what happened."

"I feel you. I'll pay for Chelsea's place. Don't tell her, though, because I don't want her reading that shit wrong."

I took a deep breath and lowered my head, then accepted his help. "Thank you, bruh. I appreciate you."

"No thanks needed. You my brother, and Chelsea is my homegirl."

After a few more items of discussion, I promised to make my way to him soon to sit outside of Chad's house, then headed back inside the hotel room. Chelsea stared at me with angry but sad eyes. "Okay. I'll look for you a place in Houston. I can't have you suffering like that."

“I’ll go with her, Jericho,” Manman said.

My eyebrows lifted. “Really?”

“Yes. I don’t want her to be alone right now. She’s so emotional and angry. I want to be her voice of reason in case she decides to do something reckless.”

“I think that will be good, Manman. Thank you.”

“Jenetta’s my baby. You don’t have to thank me. I’m just worried about her,” she said as she glanced at her. “I’ll never get used to calling her Chelsea.”

She chuckled as I smiled at her. We were both speaking as if Chelsea wasn’t sitting right here in the room with us, but she’d seemed to zone out. I hated the way this was affecting her, but this was the very thing Isaiah and I were trying to prepare her for. “Okay. Well, I’m going to look for an apartment for the two of you.”

Manman nodded, and I kissed her cheek, then began my search. Things had to get better, and I could only pray they didn’t get any worse before things started looking up.



“OH MY GOODNESS, JERICHO! THIS RESTAURANT IS SO NICE!”

I’d taken Whitney to Mastro’s Steakhouse in Houston. We were in desperate need of a date night. I waited until the weekend so Shy could look out for Chad and so I could get Manman and Chelsea moved to Houston. Jungle had helped quite a bit. He was excited when I told him Manman was moving too. He had the nerve to fuck with me about it, saying Manman really just wanted to be close to him.

I knew that was why Chelsea wanted to go to Houston. She wanted more access to Jungle. I didn’t know what their talks consisted of, but I had a feeling that neither of them was telling me everything. They seemed to be so close already, and I was willing to bet Jungle felt some shit for her. That was why he was paying for that apartment and had it fully furnished by the time we got there. He even promised to take her and Manman shopping.

They still didn’t have a lot of clothes, because we’d just been back and forth, trying to figure out the best move for them. Chelsea was so excited

when he said he would take them shopping. She'd nearly jumped in his arms. He looked so fucking uncomfortable, but I felt like that was only because I was watching. We went to a bank and opened accounts for the both of them, and I deposited a chunk of change in them for groceries and other things they may need.

After getting us a hotel room, Whitney and I took a shower and got dressed. I'd had her pack something nice to wear because I told her I was taking her out. She was excited about that, and I had to admit, I was too. This was my first attempt at normalcy in a long time, and I knew it was because I'd reunited with Whitney. I wanted to be able to cater to her like this, always.

"It is pretty nice, huh? Hopefully the food is on the same level as the décor."

"Right," she said, then chuckled.

After informing them of my reservations, they led us to our seats. I pulled out her chair as I admired her toned physique. This white, strapless dress was speaking to me as it exposed every curve Whitney possessed. Her white toenails had me wanting to suck the fuck out of them. Then I'd let my tongue travel the length of her body all the way to her exposed neck. She'd pulled her braids in an updo and applied light makeup.

I swore I had the most beautiful woman in the room on my arm tonight. I couldn't wait until work really slowed down and I could take her places like this every weekend. Once I sat, she smiled at me, then excitedly looked around the restaurant. I sat and admired everything about her... from her wide smile to the way her toes wiggled when she was excited.

"So, have you talked to Ali? How's he adjusting to the news of him having a baby on the way?"

"That man is the happiest I've ever seen him. I'm beyond happy for him. He deserves it and so much more. That's practically his entire conversation now. They are already looking for a bigger house. Nigga said she gon' be pregnant every year fucking wit' him. That's gon' be me and you before long."

"Oh really?"

"Mm hmm. Don't be acting surprised with the way I been nutting all over your cervix for the past month. In another month or so, you gon' be pissing on a stick too. Hood niggas make babies quick, because we wanna feel love the most... at least the good ones like me and my brothers."

She frowned. "Why is that?"

"Because most of us didn't grow up with that shit, especially from our fathers. The Berottes got love from their father. They already know how blessed they are. Seneca never got to know his father. Didn't know who the nigga was until after he died. My father wasn't shit, and neither was Ali's. Jungle's dad was a kingpin like mine, but I wanna believe he got love from him though. I wouldn't know because we never talk about it. All I know is that his father and brother got murdered the same night."

"If you say so. I think hood niggas are just impatient. Y'all move fast as hell."

"That's true too. Waste time for what? Time is one thing that ain't promised to nobody, especially a nigga who puts his life in harm's way all the time, whether he's legit or not."

"So you think I'm pregnant now?"

"Absolutely. Only time will tell. You wanna make a lil wager?"

"What's at stake?"

I pretended to think real hard then responded. "If you're pregnant, you have to marry me at the courthouse. If you aren't, then you can pick if and when we get married."

"Jericho Marcellus, you know I'm gon' marry you anyway."

"Naw. You're misunderstanding me, baby. When you find out you're pregnant, we are going to the courthouse to get a marriage license, and then you marrying me not long after. I'm not finna drag this shit out and date for two years and shit. We already know each other. That shit is pointless."

"Oh my God! Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. You gon' shake on it or what?"

She side-eyed me for a moment and did her best to restrain her smile. She failed miserably. "Okay. You got a bet."

"You gotta shake on it," I said as the waitress appeared, to introduce herself and take our drink orders.

Once she left, Whitney stuck out her hand and shook mine. "We'll get married next year, Jericho."

I chuckled. "Naw. We gon' be married at the end of next month."

"You know I'm on birth control, right? I know I told you that."

"And? I promise you my shit done burst through that protective barrier already."

She giggled. "This is the side of you I've missed. I know things have

been hot around here, but it's great to see your sense of humor. I think it's what I've been missing from you."

"I'm not even being humorous right now though. I'm spitting straight facts. Mark my words."

She rolled her eyes as the waitress set her glass of wine on the table. After giving her our orders, Whitney turned to me and smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too. I can't wait to show you tonight."

"Me either," she said as she slid her foot up my leg and to my crotch.

"Keep playing and you won't have to wait."

My phone started ringing, and when I saw it was Chelsea, I showed Whitney. I answered and she said, "You are not going to believe this shit!"

I frowned immediately. "What?"

"They filed an injunction to keep me from interacting with Jericka! What kind of fuck shit is that? Jericho, I swear I want to go after their asses."

I took a deep breath. I didn't know what to say. They thought she was going to try to take Jericka from them. That act alone had pretty much alienated my sister from my people. I couldn't stand for that. Seneca and Kaysyn would be hearing from me sooner rather than later. That shit made me want to help her take Jericka from them.

"What's going on?" Whitney asked softly.

"Chelsea, calm down. Let me talk to them. I can't believe they did that shit. Is it permanent?"

"No. It says it's a temporary restraining order, but I don't know how long it's for. Are they taking me to court?"

"I don't know, baby. I'll be back in Beaumont tomorrow, and we'll figure this shit out. Okay?"

"Yeah. They don't want the evil side of me to emerge. Talk to them about this shit soon, Jericho."

She ended the call, and I said to Whitney, "They filed a restraining order against Chelsea."

"Seneca and Kaysyn?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure it only has Kaysyn's signature. Seneca isn't Jericka's legal guardian since he and Kaysyn aren't married. I don't know what they are up to, but I'm surely gonna find out tomorrow before Chelsea loses her fucking mind. I refuse to dwell on it tonight though. I'd rather dwell on how good your pussy tastes."

"You ain't said shit but a word."

She called the waitress to our table. “Yes, ma’am, how may I help you?”

“Can you box our food? We really need to leave. There’s been a slight emergency.”

“Sure. I’ll get that done as soon as it comes out of the kitchen.”

When the waitress walked away, I asked, “What fucking slight emergency?”

“You threatened me with a good time. Sounds like a slight emergency to me. Do you object, Zoe?”

“Mm. Hell naw. I’ma beat that pussy like it stole my manhood.”

The End

If you did not read the [author’s note](#) at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

FROM THE AUTHOR...

This story was so damn draining. I don't even have much to say about it other than, the next story is going to be interesting. This shit with Seneca and Kaysyn has really gotten serious, and I'm ready to see how it's gonna play out. The crap with Chad and Knowledge is on my last nerve, and I'm ready for Knowledge to go! LOL! Hopefully, Jericho's guy comes through, but you'll find out in the next book.

Jungle is just about ready to leave the wild, and I can't wait for the drama that's gonna come along with that. Cast your bets! Will he end up with Chelsea or this Kennedy woman he's seeing?

Jericho was so passionate and just had to adapt to survive. I kind of liked him killing people for some reason. SMH. Whitney's anxiety with it though was totally understandable. This wasn't the Jericho she knew, and that took a lot of getting used to, especially with everything happening so fast.

I truly hope that you enjoyed this drama filled ride that probably had your feelings all over the place. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters to view my releases.

Please subscribe to my webpage for updates and sneak peeks of upcoming releases! <https://authormonicawalters.com>.

For live discussions, giveaways, and inside information on upcoming releases, join my Facebook group, Monica's Romantic Sweet Spot at <https://bit.ly/2P2l06X>.



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