



B.LOVE PRESENTS

CAUSE WHEN YOU LOVE SOMEONE

A B O D Y G U A R D R O M A N C E

TUGORA
MONIQUE

CAUSE WHEN YOU LOVE SOMEONE

A BODYGUARD ROMANCE

TUCORA MONIQUE

[B. LOVE PUBLICATIONS](#)

CONTENTS

[Synopsis](#)

[Playlist](#)

1. [Ishmael](#)
2. [Clarke](#)
3. [Ishmael](#)
4. [Clarke](#)
5. [Ishmael](#)
6. [Clarke](#)
7. [Ishmael](#)
8. [Clarke](#)
9. [Ishmael](#)
10. [Clarke](#)
11. [Clarke](#)
12. [Ishmael](#)
13. [Clarke](#)
14. [Ishmael](#)
15. [Ishmael](#)

[One Year Later](#)

[Afterword](#)

[BLP](#)

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Any unauthorized reprint or use of the material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage without express permission by the publisher.

This is an original work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Contains explicit language & adult themes suitable for ages 17+

SYNOPSIS

Synopsis

“Lights. Cameras. Fades.”

On the outside, Clarke Rose is a material girl, living off the fame she earned as a reality television star. Under the surface, the retired jazz dancer lives bound to a castle she pays for and a prince she doesn't want. An injury and idle time stole her passion for the arts, and afterward, Clarke used every facade her mom taught her to maintain notoriety. But when the reckless star sneaks underground and gets her jewelry stolen, it carves out an avenue for the fast talker to land in private spaces with a man who can strip her bare.

“Dollars aren't the only thing that gives a man sense.”

Born a project baby, Ishmael Harden always placed his next meal and his next hustle in the same category. As an elder brother, he prides himself on taking care of his sister, and in the eyes of the Sons of Eshu, Ish is the most thorough. His reputation precedes him and affords the quick-witted protector the opportunity to make six figures in a short time. As good as it sounds, Ishmael knows stepping into contrived spaces could turn him into a protector or prey.

People often say, ‘What’s understood doesn't have to be explained,’ but does the same apply when the streets are talking, rumors are rolling, and everyone is begging to know why?

PLAYLIST

So Far Gone/Fast Life Bluez – Brent Faiyaz

Pray it Away – Chloe

Sometime Ass Nigga – Arin Ray

Thang 4 U – Coco Jones

Same Time – TWENTY88

Desperado – Rihanna

Call You Rose – Thee Scared Souls

WHY – Sasha Keable

Bodyguard – Beyonce

Sandstorm – Mereba, JID

Grown Woman – Beyonce

Paralyzed – Lucky Daye ft. RAYE

Forward – Beyonce

Devotion – Justin Bieber

Why I Love You – B2k

Safe – Cardi B ft. Kehlani

CHAPTER I

ISHMAEL

So Far Gone/ Fast Life Bluez

As I hopped out of my F-150, I prayed I didn't have to kill anyone on the Lord's Day. A call from my little sister pulled me out of bed sooner than I was ready, and the mention of our mama's boyfriend acting like a fool prompted me to grab my burner and take a trip to the projects.

After eleven years of dealing with the same shit, one would think I would be used to visiting the hellhole to mediate the beef between my mama and her favorite crackhead, but convincing two lost souls they shouldn't be together never got old.

"What's up, Ishmael!"

I lifted my head toward the clear sky, acknowledging the corner boy sitting on the hood of an abandoned car. Though I didn't associate with many who lived in the Paradise Projects, I knew most of the people who roamed the premises. Despite its name, the low-income building provided everything but the essence of a getaway. Profanity and noise from disobedient children filled the air. Unkempt grass littered with broken toys and beer cans brought down the property value. People treated the territory like a landfill, and on any given day, the block resembled a scene from *The First 48*.

My mom's unit was located on the first floor, which made it easy to hear her and Khalil argue as I stepped into the building.

"I'm serious this time! You gotta find somewhere else to stay. I can't do this shit no more!"

“You don’t have a choice, Mariah! I ain’t going nowhere. My mail comes here. You can’t put me out.”

I released a closed-mouth chuckle, hearing the high school dropout assert his dominance. He couldn’t find time to fill out a job application, but he had time and the desire to research something that only benefited him—go figure.

“Khalil!” I heard my sister yell. *“You are getting on my nerves, and I know you stole my money. I need to wash. Give it back and leave!”*

The tremble in Isabella’s voice added speed to my stride.

“Little girl, stay in a child’s place! I didn’t take shit from you, but if I chose to, oh well. Everything under this roof belongs to me.” He paused. *“And I do mean everything.”*

The loaded statement put my Nike slides into sport mode. My back teeth rubbed together as my mind jumped to conclusions. I marched through the partially open door and invaded their incomplete circle in the center of the living room.

Red bruises riddled my mom’s light skin, and her short hair reached for the popcorn ceiling, like the outside of a porcupine. Khalil’s dark skin appeared moist, and his wet tank top hung low like he had been chewing on it. Swiftly, my focus jetted to Isabella. Aside from her slender nostrils dancing from anger, the petite princess appeared untouched.

“You good, Izzy?” I asked, studying her face.

“I’m all right. I would be better if he”—she looked at Khalil—“gave me my money. I know he has it.”

I pulled my beanie down until it touched my brows. “How do you know that?”

“Because his dumb ass—”

“Watch your mouth. You’re too pretty to speak that way.”

She threw her hands in the air as a whistle slipped through her lips. “I don’t want to hear that, Ish. He came in here, talking about where I keep my stash. When I went to check it, the box had nothing inside. I even changed the spot every few days like you told me, and he still got me!”

I stared between my mom and her moron. Khalil sported a straight face, yet the woman who birthed me couldn’t even look at me. She also could hardly keep her eyes open. I snarled, thinking about how the brickhouse had downgraded to a hut. The glow that once painted her skin had turned into a shadow. Her raccoon eyes spoke louder than she did most days, and patches

of missing hair made her look sick. Had she not been the root of my nightmares, I may have had sympathy for her.

I grimaced. “You are one cold bitch. You stole from your child? You’ve been doing the same shit for almost thirty years.”

Isabella’s arms collapsed to her sides as the light in her honey-colored eyes dimmed a few notches. “Wait. What?”

“Tell her what you did, Mariah,” I demanded without raising my voice.

My mom waved me off and wandered over to the couch with a cigarette between her index and middle fingers. “Ishmael, your tall ass may be able to punk people in the streets, but your four-eyed ass don’t run shit in here! I keep telling you, Izzy doesn’t need all the money you give her. She’s starting to be tight like your cheap ass, and we got bills.”

“*You* have bills,” I clarified. “I don’t give my sister money to take care of two bums who don’t want to do shit with their lives. You’re not turning my bread into pills.” Khalil’s low growl caught my attention. “Do we have a problem?” I quizzed.

“Your mouth is the problem. Watch how you speak to—”

I snatched the gun from the waistband of my sweatpants and shut down his empty threat. “If I ever hear you say some shit that insinuates you can or will violate my sister, I will kill you and everyone close to you,” I declared, cutting my gaze in Mariah’s direction. “Izzy, go put on a sweater and some shoes. We’re about to step out for a few.”

My sister’s sad eyes dwelled on our mom before she disappeared down the hallway.

“Ishmael.” Khalil called my name with less bass in his voice than minutes ago. “Why are you coming at me sideways? I’ve been around Izzy all her life. She’s like my daughter.”

“But she isn’t your daughter.” I frowned. “You can treat Mariah how she allows you to, but you will treat my sister the way she deserves. This is the only time I’m going to warn you.” I put my gun away and faced Mariah. “I’m taking Izzy to grab a few things for school. I know you didn’t get her anything during spring break.”

She sucked her teeth. “That’s your problem! You spoil her, then get pissed when I can’t keep up.”

“Bullshit. If it were up to you, Isabella would believe she’s only supposed to get her hair done on her birthday, and men are supposed to lay up for free.”

“Whatever, Ishmael. Just have her ass back here before eight. It’s her turn to cook.”

I drove my hands into my pockets to keep from putting them around her neck. Even after all the trauma she had experienced, Mariah continued to be a shitty person. She was selfish, money hungry, and found more worth in the men she fucked versus the kids she birthed. As a kid, I witnessed her do anything for a dollar, including pimping us both out.

“Izzy! It’s time to go!”

The longer I stood in the apartment, the more I risked the chance of having flashbacks that would challenge my self-control.

Right as I thought to rush to her room, the pre-teen resurfaced with her purse in hand, baby hair swirled across her forehead, and her neck draped in gold necklaces she talked me into buying.

“Hold on!” Mariah struggled to her feet while wagging a cancer stick in the air. “When did you get the new necklace?”

The jealousy in her delivery boiled my blood. “Let’s go, Izzy.”

“Did you ride your bike?” my sister quizzed with a smirk.

“Of course not. I couldn’t ride a bike to rescue my princess.”

I wanted to pick my Isabella’s brain the instant we were out of Mariah’s earshot, but I waited until we got in the car and made it a few blocks away before I lowered the music.

“Why are you huffing and puffing?” I wondered aloud.

“Because I know you want to have a talk.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to talk about my feelings, Ishmael.”

“I respect that,” I replied, knowing the feeling all too well. “Can I ask just *one* thing?”

She nodded.

“Has Khalil ever . . .” My top lip trembled before I could continue.

“I know what you’re asking me, Ish. The answer is no. Hell no! Khalil plays crazy, but he knows you will cut off his fingers if he touches me. Plus, you trained me well.” She karate chopped the air.

“Good. Have you eaten breakfast?” I followed up.

“Not yet. I had plans to go to the laundromat before all the drama started.”

My eyes tightened at the corners. “You’re making your life hard. You wash clothes at my house any other time. Today shouldn’t have been

different.” I gripped the steering wheel. “This wouldn’t even be a conversation if you came to stay with me.”

“You know I can’t do that. I can’t leave Mommy alone. Khalil isn’t someone to rely on.” She sighed. “Things got crazy today, but they aren’t always bad, especially when she’s sober.”

I hated that I could relate to Izzy’s experience. Vividly, I remembered my auntie offering me a room after I got released from jail, and I declined. The idea of leaving my mom alone felt worse than dealing with her friends, her man, and her pill habit.

The sound of Isabella fishing through my middle console caused me to rip my eyes from the road.

“Get out of there.”

“Why? You didn’t want me to find this?” She raised a taser in the air. “I guess this means you’re taking over the security firm for Shiloh.”

“I haven’t made a decision, but if I take the position, I’m not doing it for Shiloh. I’m doing it for me. You,” I declared. “Honestly, I don’t know how I became involved with the firm. One minute, I’m working as an executive assistant, and the next, he’s printing business cards with my name on them.”

“You don’t sound happy about it.”

My shoulders twitched. “Over the years, I’ve gotten used to using my brain to make money.”

She squeezed my arm. “Now, you get to use that body.”

When Shiloh shared his plan to launch a private security firm under our car club’s name, I thought it was another way to wash money. Shiloh was good for starting a business he could use for multiple purposes, but to my surprise, everything was legit.

“Seriously, Ish!” Isabella slammed her back against the passenger seat. “Why did you park all the way back here? We’re almost on the last row.”

“The first few rows are reserved, and the middle is for valet.”

Her lids went low. “You are so cheap. Now, we have to walk a mile to get to the entrance.”

“I’m not cheap. You’re frivolous. Besides, I don’t hear you complain when we walk from one corner of the mall to the other.”

“Of course not. I’m trying to win best dressed this year. That title comes with sacrifice.”

“You’re counting on your looks. How are your grades?”

She dusted off her shoulders while saying, “Straight As, per usual.”

“My dawg,” I replied, bumping my fist against hers. “I want you to stay pretty and remain smart. Even if you turn into an ugly duckling, you can use your brain to make your own money.”

I showered Isabella with affirmations and warnings until we entered the mall, and she pointed out Auntie Annie’s. I hung back as she ordered a bunch of snacks I knew she wouldn’t finish, then I stepped forward when it was time to pay. Isabella called me cheap every chance she could, yet she knew she could get anything out of me. Aside from my club brothers and my best friend, Essen, she was the only person who could break my pockets.

For at least two hours, we walked through the mall, going into nearly every store we passed. I spent a pretty penny in Lulu Lemon and in the Gucci store, so I breathed a sigh of relief when she pulled me into Bath & Body Works.

The edges of my lips turned up as I silently thanked God for blessing me with financial stability. Even though I didn’t believe He approved of some of the ways I earned a living, I knew His protection allowed me to make it home every night.

“All right, Ish. After this, I just need to run to MAC for lip gloss, then we can go sit down and have lunch.”

“MAC? What happened to the beauty supply? Back in the day, that’s what the girls used to wear.”

“Back in the day? Really? You’re twenty-nine, not seventy.”

We laughed as we turned away from the register, but our lighthearted moment came to a halt when we saw a crowd rush into the store. Out of instinct, I positioned myself in front of my sister.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” A cashier came from behind the counter, waving her arms in the air. “If you’re not purchasing an item or inquiring about purchasing, you must leave the store. We are at capacity!”

Izzy tugged on the sleeve of my hoodie, garnering my attention.

“Do you know who that is? The person they’re trying to see?” she squealed.

“I can’t see through all the people, but obviously, you can.”

I focused on the entrance of the store and saw that a walkway had been curated for the source of the chaos. A lady no taller than five-foot-five swaggered through the place in white fur that swept the dusty floor. Butt-length hair poured down her back, and skinny, black shades covered her

eyes. A crinkle of a smile put her cheekbones on display, though I could sense her expression wasn't authentic.

"C. Rose!" Isabella cheered, slapping my shoulder. "I have to get an autograph and a picture."

"Aye, calm down. What does she do? Sing? Act?"

Isabella's gaze drifted to the floor. "She used to be on '*Hotties of the West Coast*', but recently, she became a cast member on '*The Wave*'."

"She's a reality star? That's what all the fuss is about?" I groaned. "Girl, let's go."

"Not until I get my autograph!"

"Izzy!" I shouted between clenched teeth, but she was already out of arm's reach.

From a few steps away, I watched Isabella weave through the group of fans until she was leading the pack. A chubby, bald man guarding the overdressed lady extended his hand to stop her, but he was too slow. My persistent sibling karate chopped the bodyguard in the center of his neck, causing him to catch his throat in his hands.

"Oh, shit!" C. Rose snickered as she removed her sunglasses to reveal a pair of orbs the same hue as a penny. Her slender nose and permanent pucker fit her face, and despite the makeup she wore, I could tell she was young. At first glance, she reminded me of a young Chaka Khan.

During my daydream, a deep grumble caught my attention. C. Rose's *protection* stumbled toward Izzy with a screwed-up face. My first thought was to drop him with no words, but the idea of being arrested in front of Isabella changed my mindset.

"Trust me. It's not worth it," I vowed, lifting my hoodie to show the gun tucked in my waistband. He was an armed guard, but I would bet every cent I owned he wouldn't be able to pull his pistol before I sent a bullet through his forehead.

"Yeah, okay." Big man sized me up before looking past me. "C. Rose, you good?"

I spun around in time to catch the reality star roll her eyes and wave him off.

"What's your name, beautiful?" She addressed my hyper sibling.

"Isabella, but everyone calls me Izzy." She faced me and snatched my beanie off my head. "Can you sign my hat?"

"What the hell?" I groaned.

“You have a million of these. You won’t miss it, Ishmael.”

C. Rose giggled at our exchange and autographed the cashmere cap.

“What are you doing in the mall without *real* security?” Izzy asked as if reading my mind.

C. Rose’s pouty lips turned down on the ends like the thought triggered annoyance. “I don’t normally shop for myself, but my personal shopper quit, and my assistant is attending a funeral. I didn’t have the patience to wait on a delivery.”

My weight shifted from one foot to the other as I dissected her tone. Her voice reminded me of the tone girls used on the party line. Soft. Whiny. Fake.

“Where did you learn the karate move you used on Chunks?” C. Rose wondered aloud.

“My brother. We took a few lessons together. He’s a part of a security company too.” The motormouth dug in her purse and pulled out a business card she must have snatched from my truck. “Take this. You need real protection on your team. Don’t let the glasses fool you. He’s the real deal.”

C. Rose’s perfectly arched brows twitched when she looked at me, then back to the wounded guard massaging his neck. His vision raced to his boots when he spotted all eyes on him.

“Izzy, let’s go.”

She sulked, but she followed me to the exit. “It was nice to meet you, C. Rose!”

The silence that followed caused me to look over my shoulder. C. Rose had already turned her back to the mob and placed her shades back over her eyes.



EVERY FEW MONTHS, I had the urge to date. Most times, the idea came about after talking to Isabella or seeing the interactions between my club brothers and the women they fell for. I had never been easily influenced, but my guilty pleasure was seeing something I wanted and working until it was in my hands.

Though I was on my third date in a month, I nervously waited for Presley to arrive. My last few meetups had been unsuccessful, but my

conversations with Presley flowed naturally, so I kept my word and showed up.

As I fiddled with the empty cocktail glass on the table, I glanced at the bar, where my best friend and my favorite hater watched me. It was out of character for me to need a chaperone, but I asked them to sit in a corner of the restaurant during my date. After the last one, I didn't want to run the risk of having to stop another crazy broad from trying to steal from me.

When Durk and Essen waved and danced in their seats, I looked away. The pair were cousins who argued like siblings. When I met Shiloh—the president of S.O.E—he introduced me to his little sister and cousin. It took some time, but over the last few years, we became attached at the hip.

I moved to check the time on my phone, but a sweet scent tickled my nostrils.

With the grace of a supermodel, Presley tossed her big hair over one shoulder when she reached the table.

“It's good to see you, beautiful,” I commented while pulling out her chair.

“Thank you. It feels good to be seen.”

Once I settled across from Presley, I admired how much she looked like her photos. It was obvious she could get filter happy, but it wasn't enough to make her look like a stranger in person.

Before we got down to the basics, a server walked over and took our drink orders. Presley requested red wine, and I asked for a club soda. I liked a glass of brown liquor like the next man, but drinking in the company of a stranger wasn't my style.

“I'm happy you picked Blanco's. It's one of my favorites,” Presley noted.

“Good to know.” I gestured toward the menu. “What would you recommend?”

“The tomahawk for sure,” she suggested, bouncing around in her seat.

“Bet. We can order whenever you're ready.”

In the meantime, Presley went on and on talking about herself, but I didn't mind. I loved a confident woman, and I appreciated not having to feed the awkward silence with my business.

“You're telling me where you are now. Tell me where you're going,” I replied to her rambling. “Do you want kids? I don't recall you answering that question when we spoke.”

“If I never have one, I’ll survive. Children are an extension of their parents. I don’t want my kids to be a reflection of any man I’ve been with. I’d die if they inherited their ways. What about you?”

“First comes love, then comes marriage. I’m not looking to have kids with anyone except my wife.”

“Oh. Mr. Traditional?” She snickered. “I bet that traditional shit goes out the window when it comes to premarital sex.”

I nodded at her calling me out. “Touché.”

Our server entered our bubble and placed our drinks on the table. “Are you ready to order?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Presley cut me off and ordered what seemed like one of everything on the menu. Uneasy, I stirred in my seat, thinking about the amount of money I would spend on a woman I knew I would never see again.

“All right. Enough about me,” Presley continued once we were alone. “I’m so happy we finally got to meet in person. I will admit, I looked you up. Someone had you tagged in an old high school yearbook picture. Being raised in the projects, I thought you would be . . . different. A little more hood.”

My jaws tightened, knowing where the conversation was going. “We’re in a Michelin Star restaurant. What do you expect me to do? Stand on the table and piss on the floor?”

“Of course not. Your demeanor is a pleasant surprise.”

“I’m surprised a woman that appears to be so confident is into online dating.”

“I mean, I’m not looking for a traditional union. The only people who seem to respect different relationships are those online.”

“Untraditional?”

A two-note giggle tumbled from her lips as she looked away. I tracked her eyes, but I didn’t notice anyone out of place.

“Yeah,” she said in a drag. “I’m thirty-five, and I’ve been married twice. Marriage, in the traditional sense, isn’t what I’m looking for.”

“You’re talking in circles.”

Presley ejected an open-mouthed huff. “All right. I’m just going to lay it out there. I’m currently in a relationship, and me and my girl are looking for a third.”

My heart sank. “You don’t think you should’ve shared that in your profile?”

“I prefer to connect with a man organically, not with some freak who thinks polygamy translates to threesomes. At this point, I don’t want to waste your time or mine, so I want to be transparent.”

I tossed my napkin on the table, sending Essen a signal to interrupt the date.

“I knew this was some bullshit,” I muttered. “You said you don’t want to waste time, but that’s exactly what you’ve done. I’m not into sharing. I would hurt somebody for touching my woman. You’re out of your damn mind.”

“You’re right about that. You’re wearing a Franco and a Rolex. I lost my mind when I saw you were wearing cheap jewelry and I didn’t walk out the door.” She snickered at her egotistical joke, then dabbed the corners of her lips with her thumb.

“Well, I guess you told me.” I grinned, staring down at the fifty-thousand-dollar watch on my wrist. My piece wasn’t as expensive as I could afford, but it was what I liked.

“I apologize if you feel I’m being vain, but it’s only right I keep it real.”

I side-eyed the weirdo. “Real is a stretch. I looked you up, too. Aside from you buying followers, you’re broke. You don’t own most of the luxury pieces you post. Don’t get me started on your lack of maturity or class. I was raised in the projects, and even I know you aren’t supposed to eat with your elbows on the table.”

“Aww. You really are butt hurt. I’m used to niggas—”

“And that’s your biggest flaw.”

As I looked for our server, I noticed my best friend’s petite frame weaving through the round tables. I shook my head, hoping it would halt her steps, but she kept coming.

“Ishmael! I’m so glad I found you.” Essen gave Presley a weak smile. “Sorry to interrupt. This is my cousin—”

“It’s cool, Essen,” I interjected while taking my wallet from the pocket of my slacks. “You don’t have to put on an act. She isn’t worth all that.”

Essen’s quick breathing came to a halt. “Oh. Okay. In that case, let this duck worry about the bill, and let’s go. I’ll go get Durk, and we’ll meet you outside.”

I waited until we entered the night air to explain why I ended the date. Essen looked at me with pity-filled eyes while Durk appeared disappointed.

“Nigga!” he yelled. “I can’t believe you threw in the towel because she wanted to bring you into her lesbian relationship. You’re gay.”

“You’re fucking easy.” I grimaced at the diamond-grilled shit talker. “Think about it. Would you share Clover with another person—man or woman?”

Durk’s face rumpled with rage. “Don’t play with me like that.”

“Exactly. Having an agreement to have fun with your partner is one thing, but bringing another person into the fold permanently is deadly.”

Most men would have hopped on the chance to commit to a relationship where they didn’t need to be the focal, but I required more. Shit like that was the reason I cheated in my last relationship. After the pain I caused, I vowed to walk away before I crossed the line.

“Durk, get off his back.” Essen chimed in. “You should know more than anyone what it’s like to want to find your ol’ lady.”

“Bullshit. I didn’t want to find a damn thing. God brought her to me.” Durk gripped my shoulder. “Pray about it, bro. The big man might mess with you.”

I shrugged off his encouragement. “I’m not pressed about it. This will be my last date for a while. First, the coffee date was a bust, then Essen hooked me up with that crazy lady. Now, this hot coochie broad with her ridiculous proposal. I know when it’s time to bow out.”

Essen pouted while squeezing my cheeks like a granny. “Aww, bestie, don’t give up so easily!”

“I’m not giving up. I’m just giving God the chance to move without trying to rush His steps.”

Durk chuckled as he shuffled his view between Essen and me. “I really thought you two would end up together.”

Essen and I stared at each other before busting out laughing.

“You’re sick,” I commented. “I’ve been telling you for years, you’re delusional. This is my sister. It’s never been like *that*.”

“Never say never,” Durk proposed. “You remember how I used to have an allergic reaction at the thought of being with one woman forever.”

Essen pursed her lips. “Then you fell in love and showed your ass in church. Don’t forget that part.”

“I didn’t forget! I’m not ashamed. You got to put in work to claim a good woman.”

“You call it putting in work; I say you were acting a fool,” Essen declared.

Durk poked out his chest. “Oh, well. I got my bitch. Maybe four-eyes should try it.”

I hit the reckless one with a heavy-lidded look. “I’m not taking advice from a nigga who ran into a church to confront his sidepiece for speaking to his new piece.”

Essen stopped in her tracks. “Weren’t you with him when he disrupted bible study?”

I grinned, thinking about the trouble I got into with Durk. “He works my nerves, but that’s my brother. Call my presence moral support.”

“Negro, please. You’re his accomplice.”

CHAPTER 2

CLARKE

Pray It Away

“Rock! Stop right here!”

My driver peered at me through the rearview mirror. “Take that ski mask off, little one! Your mom is—”

I pushed the door open, ignoring his unsolicited advice. The older man had been my personal driver since I was a teenager. He acted as my therapist many times, but that day, I didn’t need his counsel. There were no words he could say to make me rethink my decision to trip out.

A part of me regretted opening the direct message that put me on a hunt. I was supposed to be enjoying brunch with my friends, but I made the mistake of opening Instagram. I didn’t have intentions of telling my friends about the videos of Chaz in bed with another woman or the pictures of him kissing a woman in *my* Benz, but they called me out when my mood shifted.

After sharing what happened, I threw back a few shots of brown liquor and announced it was time for revenge. Simone and a few women I worked with in the past pumped me up to show out, whereas my personal assistant, Sage, reminded me of the consequences I would face.

Before I hopped out of the black truck, I leaned over the back seat and grabbed a bat from the trunk.

“Let me borrow this!” I snatched Simone’s glueless wig off her head.

“Clarke! What the hell?”

“I’ll replace it!” I assured her as my heels crashed into the pavement.

The popular downtown area was busy with shoppers, yet my focus resided with the apple red G-Wagon parked in front of a luxury boutique. With no hesitation, I smashed the wood into the driver's side window, sending a bang through the atmosphere. My chest caved in as I proceeded to do the same to every other piece of glass in my line of vision.

"That's right, best friend. Fuck his shit up!"

Fueled by embarrassment, I didn't need Simone's encouragement to damage Chaz's prized possession. The proof of his disrespect was all the motivation I needed.

"Don't let up, Clarke! If that nigga wants to embarrass you, then we're going to return the favor!"

My head almost spun off my shoulders. "Bitch! Don't say my name!"

On my Catwoman tip, I hiked my House of C.B. dress over my knees and crawled up the hood of the truck. Balanced on six-inch heels, I jumped up and down until there was a valley-low dent in the top. Every ounce of frustration that snatched my appetite guided my actions. The late nights. The women. The outside baby. I couldn't physically make Chaz feel my pain, but I knew what would hurt.

No longer than three minutes after my arrival, the blaring of sirens could be heard in the distance. Though I wanted Chaz to embody the same fury that flowed through my heart, I refused to end up behind bars. I wasn't above breaking the law, but I was too pretty for jail.

In a haste, I swiped Simone's wig from the concrete and stuffed the human hair deep into the muffler. A mischievous smirk seized my lips while I marveled at my handy work.

"Pam Grier!" Sage called me by a name only he used. "Get your ass in this truck!"

I jogged to the Escalade and jumped into the back seat, where Simone greeted me with her phone raised in the air.

"I got everything on camera, girl."

"What?" I snatched her phone. Without asking for permission, I deleted the video and then tossed the iPhone into the space beside her.

"Why the hell did you do that?" she complained.

"Why are you recording me committing a crime? Remind me to never do dirt with you."

"Too late." Simone rolled her hazel eyes as she began taking down the braids that were underneath her wig. "I was being a good friend. I thought

you would want proof that you don't fuck around."

"The proof is in the Benz truck, boo," I teased while sliding the ski-mask off my head. "Sage, please give me the compact out of my purse. I need to make sure my Barbie ponytail is still intact."

My sassy assistant smacked his lips, though he did as I asked. "I hope you feel better now because, later, your mom is going to kill us."

"No, she won't. If she kills *me*, then she won't have anyone to control. If she kills *you*, there won't be anyone for her to pawn me off on."

"Damn, Sage!" Simone rolled her eyes. "You're always complaining when it's time to put in work."

"Simone, we all know between the three of us, I'm not the one who's afraid of earning my keep. There are friends for everything, and I'm not the one to hype up bad behavior. Freeloader."

Amidst their bickering, my phone started ringing. I grumbled reading my mom's name on the screen before I placed it face down on my lap.

"I don't know why you're ignoring her," Sage commented. "If you don't answer, she's going to call me."

"You don't have to answer either."

His chin slipped into submission. "She pays me to answer her calls, Clarke."

"I pay you, Sage. She can wait. That's her problem. My mom thinks she's the talent, and she forgets she is my manager."

Right as Rock pulled up to my condo, my phone went off for a third time with a text message from my publicist.

Piper: C. Rose! Do you live to make my job hard? You showed your behind, and it's on film!

Me: No face, no case *smiley face*

Piper: Clarke.

Piper: People aren't as dumb as you think.

Me: Maybe, but can they prove it?

Though I was grateful, I was surprised at how long it took for the video to hit the blogs. Ever since I joined the cast of the hottest reality show available to stream, my moves became the subject of think pieces.

Some days, I still didn't know how I felt about the way my life turned out. What started off as posting videos of myself performing ballet and contemporary pieces to hip-hop music, blossomed into millions of followers and endorsements. However, a torn ligament and thirty pounds of

weight gain redirected my dreams. One day, I was in a dance studio, and the next, I was beating ass on television. Back then, resentment over my failed dance career powered my rage. Nowadays, I couldn't pinpoint what kept me in the industry.

"Hey, Javier!" I greeted my doorman as I entered the building.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Rose." He tipped his hat. "Earlier, a few fans stopped by pretending to be guests of yours. I had security clear out the lobby."

"Thank you. If they return, give me a call please."

In addition to loving the bohemian-themed décor throughout my place, I loved the staff that worked in my building. No one ever crossed personal boundaries, and most were kindhearted.

The journey up to my house was quiet, but the instant I unlocked my front door, my ears were soiled with profanity.

All my bold energy deflated when the sight of the biggest pain in my ass filled my sight. Anytime I came home and my mom was in my house, I thought about getting Javier fired. The only thing that kept me from acting like a diva was knowing how persuasive my mom could be. I had dealt with it all my life.

"Mom, I keep telling you it's rude to pop up at my house."

"Girl, I keep telling you, I don't give a damn. I'm the mama."

Designer threads covered her surgery-enhanced shape, and her long hair was pulled up into a ponytail. As much as her honey-toned skin glowed, I knew her power came from making me feel low. People called us twins any time we were in the same room, but other than matching brown skin and a dimple in our chin, we were nothing alike. Some days, I would rather be an orphan than share anything with her.

I got comfortable on my vintage TEDDY sofa and watched her stomp a hole in my Persian rug.

"Sage!" she bellowed. "Why would you allow this idiot to vandalize property in broad daylight?"

From across the room, I saw Sage's light skin turn red as he looked between the two of us. The conflicted expression on his face caused me to sit up.

"Sage can't control me, and I don't pay him to watch me," I interjected.

My mom rushed toward me. "You need to pay someone to do it. Your silly ass got robbed in a club weeks ago, and you're running around the city

like a ghetto bitch!”

“I went to brunch,” I replied in an even tone.

She smirked. “Now we both know eating is the last thing you need to go out and do.”

“Ma, I don’t understand why you’re upset.” I groaned. “I thought all press was good.”

“Not when you have brand deals on the line! We all know reality TV is fake, so those white people don’t care when you cut up on screen. Showing your ass in the streets is different.”

I freed a gust of air through my nose. “My supporters are people who look like me. I don’t have time to impress a bunch of palm-colored vultures. They’re asking *me* to promote their products, not the other way around.”

“Oh. You don’t have time for that, but you have energy to give a nigga who don’t know his place? You’re hustling backwards.”

I giggled at her slick comment. “You want to be a pimp so bad.”

“Girl, please. If I was a pimp, I’d be in here beating your ass for fucking up my money.”

Simone snickered, reminding me she was in the room.

My mom’s face was scrunched up as she walked up to Simone with a stiff finger pointed in her direction.

“Raggedy Ann, I don’t know why you’re laughing. I’ve been telling Clarke since you guys were in high school, you’re a bad influence.”

Simone pressed her fingers into her chest. “Moi? I rebuke that statement. I remind Clarke of her power.”

“Bullshit. You’re a professional crash out who loves dragging my baby into your shit.”

My baby.

The candid lady loved to code switch between a loving mother to a soulless manager. At one point, I thought her rollercoaster behavior was a result of losing my dad, but fifteen years later, she still hadn’t found balance.

“Enough of all the back and forth,” I declared. “Nobody knows it was me. I had something over my face. Anyone who says my name is assuming.”

Surges of air worked my mom’s ribcage. “Timon and Pumba, give me a minute alone with Clarke’s silly ass.”

Sage hurried out of sight, but Simone giggled before she strolled away. I returned her childish gesture while tucking my legs under my butt.

Once everyone cleared out, my mom retrieved a small stack of papers from a purse I knew she used my money to buy.

“Here.” She guided the documents to my hand.

Amusement brought a twist to my lips as I skimmed over the first page.

“See. You think this is a joke. That’s why I’m hiring someone to look after you.”

“What? I don’t need a handler.”

“You need something, little girl! I’m looking into a few private security firms. I’m hiring a bodyguard.”

I scoffed. “Why not just train me on how to use a gun?”

“Clarke, please. You’re reckless. I saw what you did with a bat and a wig. I can only imagine what you’d do with a gun.”

I jumped out of my seat. “I already have a guard.”

“Chunks was a temp, and he was horrible. You’re not filming right now, but you’re always outside. Did you forget someone snatched your jewelry off your body? My decision is final.”

“Mama, I’m twenty-six. You can’t—”

“As long as I’m working as your manager, I can do more than you would like to believe,” she interjected. “I’m setting up interviews for next week, so look up some of those companies, and let me know which one you’re feeling.”

Years of being bossed around by my mom taught me when to let her have her way, or at least make her think she was running the show. That’s what I tried to convince myself.

“Are we done? I want to get on live for a few hours.”

“I’m not stopping you, but I have somewhere to be anyway.”

On her way out, my mom asked Sage to go with her. He had been my assistant since I jumped into reality TV six years ago, but on any given day, my mom had him running errands or going to a meeting with her.

When the front door slammed shut, Simone peeked her head around the doorframe. “Is the coast clear?” She bounced over and flopped on the loveseat beside me. “Yo’ mama knows she can fuck up a good day.”

“She can, but she may be right. My ass could’ve ended up in jail.” I caressed my forehead. “I was doing so good, and then I got that message.

This man really brings out the worst in me, and he isn't even my man this month."

Simone tossed a grape into her mouth. "It's kind of your fault."

"Excuse me. How?"

"You've been with him off-and-on for five years, and even when y'all are *not* together, you give him access to you. That's why he had your truck in the first place. That fool has been cheating since y'all made it official. Plus, he uses your name to stay relevant." She freed a breathless whistle. "Don't get me started on junior being born on y'all anniversary."

Dread collapsed my shoulders. "Damn. Kick a bitch when she's down."

"You know I don't mean no harm. I'm just being honest. That nigga does you dirty, and you're feeling bad about returning the favor."

"No. I feel dumb for jeopardizing my freedom to prove a point."

"Well, for what it's worth, *The Pink Room* posted the video."

My head fell back into the couch cushion. "That post puts money in their pocket, not mine."



"ROCK! Don't give me that look. I'm home, and I'm safe."

His bald head shined under the streetlights when he adjusted his view downward. "You aren't safe until you're *in* your house. I'm surprised you got so loose at the event, especially since you were by yourself, amongst some questionable people."

I playfully slapped his arm. "Don't be so judgy, Rock. I used to be one of those people."

"Who you used to be, and who you've grown into, are two different things. Give yourself a little credit, baby girl."

Before OnlyFans was filled with coochie and dick, I made bank on the site, performing different genres of dance while wearing very little clothes. I could've happily retired and disappeared with seven figures in the bank, but my indecisiveness kept me around. Some days, I wanted to move to a farm in the country, and other days, I loved being in the mix of the entertainment industry. My wavering decision also kept my mom and Chaz perched on a pedestal. As long as I was in the limelight, so were they.

My full bladder caused me to speed past the nightguard and head straight to the elevator. I danced all the way to my front door, but the second I got it open, everything around me went still.

Candles carved out a walkway leading to the living room, where I found my furniture had been pushed to the side, and a petite lady with a violin was in the vacant space. Any other day, my heart would have exploded from the sight of red roses situated throughout my haven. This go around, I viewed the petals as another mess of Chaz's I would have to clean up.

As I prepared to call Chaz's name, long, chubby arms circled my waist.

"Are you looking for me, baby?" His naturally hoarse voice lined my ears.

"Chaz, why are you here? What is all of this?"

He repositioned himself in front of me, then inched a new designer bag into my hand. I tried to fight it, but after a few seconds, I felt compelled to make eye contact with the six-foot deceiver.

"Speak," I demanded.

"I'm hot about my car, but I understand why you did it. I fucked up," he spat out. "I messed up, and I wanted to show you I'm sorry."

My focus drifted to the over-the-top gesture. "All of this is beautiful, but I don't deserve it. I don't deserve to be manipulated into forgiving you. That's what this is. You don't do things like this unless you're trying to repair the damage you caused. A new bag doesn't make me forget about the bitches!"

"I know that. I'm apologizing for making you doubt me. That's on me, Cece. I get it."

"Chaz, you don't get it, which makes all of this pointless."

When I realized my voice was competing with the live music, I released the purse to the floor and massaged my temples.

I tried to leave Chaz in the front room, but he stayed on my heels until we entered my master bedroom. As if there wasn't a stranger in my house, he got comfortable in the sea of pillows on my bed.

"I'm not playing with you, Chaz. You aren't spending the night. Go to Tracy's house. I know your baby mama and your son would love to be with you."

The intruder bolted upright. "Cut that shit out, Clarke! I love you. Nobody else! I would rather die than live in this world without you. Don't give up on me—on us, baby."

Tears filled his eyes, and his teeth sank into his juicy bottom lip. After five years together, I knew Chaz's game. I knew what he would say before he said it. I knew he'd dick me down then let me down.

Then why do you fall for it?

"Cece, I promise I won't bother you. Just let me stay the night. I just want to be close to you, mama."

"I said no!"

In the blink of an eye, anger snatched him by the jaw. His nostrils blew wide before his round frame hurried in my direction, causing me to stumble until my back hit a wall.

"You must want me to break your neck?" he growled.

"You've tried that a time or two," I replied with no emotion. "Why are you here? I blocked you for a reason."

"Fuck that! We're going to talk about this."

"What can you say? I saw a video of you and a woman in my car. The second video was you in another bitch's bed without no damn clothes on!"

He grinned. "Stop lying. I had on drawers."

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"I wasn't at a bitch's house. That video is from the time I spent the night at Money's spot."

My eyes went around in a circle after hearing his brother's name. Just like Chaz, Money was as deceitful as he was handsome.

"Get to the point."

"Remember I told you I got too faded to drive home. I went upstairs and took off my clothes and went to sleep. The bitch must've come in the room and shot the videos."

"Ha! That's the best you can come up with?" A deep belly laugh climbed up my throat. The harder I laughed, the more he backed away.

"Chaz, I've stood by you when you had nothing and when you lost everything." I squeezed my eyes shut. "We aren't together, but we're still attached. I hate it. I don't want to hate *you*."

"Hol' up! Don't downplay who the fuck I am. Part of your success came from being my bitch! You want credit for holding me down when that's what you're supposed to do. When I was selling beats in my sleep, you were on my dick!" He grimaced. "You want to act like an ungrateful bitch. I'm going to leave before I break your fucking face. You talk hot shit when I add value to your life."

“You used to! Now, you cost more than you’re worth. We said we were taking a break to figure shit out. I don’t want to be with you. Problem solved.”

When he opened the door, I heard the live music soaring from my living room.

Chaz hustled by the lady without saying a word, though she opened her mouth to speak.

As soon as he made his exit, I dug in my bag and fished for the last hundred I had on-hand.

“I’m sorry for the drama.” I handed the cash to the violinist. “Thank you for coming.” I watched her brows jog up her forehead as she examined the cash. “Is there a problem?” I quizzed.

“Hmm. I only received a deposit. My fee is three hundred, plus fifty for travel.”

My shoulders hunched forward. “Give me a second.”

I returned to my room and locked the door behind me. Though I wanted to tell the lady to speak with Chaz about the debt, I refused to invite another woman to my heartbreak hotel. I peeled four hundred bills from my stash, then went to pay the soft-spoken lady. She already had her things packed and gathered near the door when I returned.

“Here you go. Sorry for the confusion.”

She offered a toothless smile. “No problem. To be honest, it was an honor to play for you. Even for a few minutes.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. Do you watch my show?”

Her palm caught her snicker. “No. I used to be obsessed with your dance videos. I always thought it was beautiful seeing a black ballerina who liked to twerk.”

We shared a short laugh before I said, “Thank you.”

“Do you ever think you’ll dance again?”

“Only God knows,” I replied while leading her out the door.

I didn’t mean to be rude. I just didn’t want to spend another minute going down memory lane. Any time someone spoke of my years as a dancer, I was reminded that I exchanged my passion for profit. I let an injury consume my confidence and acquired fame for things that brought me no peace.

CHAPTER 3

ISHMAEL

Sometimes Ass Nigga

I had been sitting behind my desk for five hours, trying to break into the Traffic Management System in another state, and I still hadn't figured it out. The traffic signals in most cities were on a timer, so Shiloh asked me to hack into the server and override what was in place. We didn't want to risk any driver from Loh Wheels getting caught at a red light once off the highway, so we needed as much control as possible.

"Knock, knock."

I glanced away from my computer when I heard Shiloh enter my office. The smirk on his face and the laptop in his grasp made me raise a brow. "Everything good, Loh?"

"You tell me. Looks like you need a break."

My head jerked back. "You know me better than that. I would rather push through instead of taking a break and struggle to find my groove again."

Shiloh's gold grill came into view as he got comfortable in a chair across from my desk. He didn't say much, but I knew the look of admiration stemmed from my growth over the years.

Twelve years ago, Shiloh and the Sons of Eshu stepped in when my one-on-one fight turned into a bunch of pussies trying to jump me. When all the dust settled, Shiloh hired me to handle small jobs around his strip club. However, when I turned eighteen and he learned about my black-market computer skills, he asked me to work as his executive assistant. The job title

threw me off, especially when he mentioned hacking. The word *assistant* rattled my confidence. Nevertheless, I learned being the right-hand to a man who ran a delivery service that transported drugs was much different than I assumed. I also learned about the six-figure salary.

“I’m working, Shiloh. What do you need?”

“Wow. Niggas in their feelings about something?”

My back fell against the office chair. “My bad. I just have a lot . . . never mind. You know when I lock in, I don’t like the outside noise.”

“And that’s why I want to talk to you. I have a job for you if you want it.” Shiloh leaned forward and intertwined his fingers. “I know outside of the warehouse, you have your freelance hacker shit going on, but you deserve to have something legal with your name on it. Eshu’s Shield is in motion, and I know I’ve been trying to convince you to join the team, but I’m thinking bigger. I want you to have stock in the business.”

“Shiloh, do I look like a bodyguard to you?”

He laughed. “I’m not one to judge another nigga, but the glasses don’t take away from your stature. I’ve seen you in action. Get on your Superman shit.”

“Why me? I thought Draco was thinking about moving down here to handle the firm.”

“I can’t trust many other people to do it. Not only have you worked with me for years, but you’ve also been a part of my squad. You’ve had your hands on my money and been around my kids. I trust you with the reputation of our business.”

“Damn. After you put it like that, how can I say no? I have never even thought about being a bodyguard, let alone owning a firm. I would have to do the job to understand how to run the company.”

Shiloh whipped his MacBook open. “I’m happy you said that.”

I felt my face rumple with skepticism. “Oh, Lord. Here we go.”

“Get yo’ panties out yo’ ass, Ishmael. I haven’t told you what’s going on.”

“You’ve said enough. I should’ve known you were up to something when I saw you were in the warehouse before me.”

“Man, don’t make it seem like I don’t get to the money before the sun comes up.”

I gave Shiloh a blank stare. We both knew that since he met his wife, Stevie, the gold-mouthed boss had changed a lot over the last few years.

He waved me off. “Fuck all that. You’re about your bread, so I thought you’d be down.”

“All right. I’m listening.”

Shiloh smiled as if I had already agreed to his proposition. “The firm got a call from the manager of C. Rose. I asked who referred them, and she said they got our information from someone in the mall.”

I listened intently, only moving around in my seat when I realized he was referring to the lady Izzy and I saw at the store last Sunday.

“Her manager said they need someone solid. She wants someone clean-cut with a killer instinct.”

“Tell her we can’t help her.”

His grin bled into a snarl. “Fuck no! We ain’t passing up on no money.”

“All money ain’t good.” I removed my glasses. “Do you even know who she is? She’s a ratchet ass reality personality who believes an app makes her a star.”

“Ish, you sound like a bitter broad. Why the hell you give her the information if you didn’t want her to use it?”

“I didn’t give her anything.” I scoffed. “Izzy’s big mouth ass gave her a card.”

Shiloh clapped. “That’s my girl! Always about her business. I thought she inherited her hustle from you. I guess not.”

“Shiloh, you can’t manipulate me to do anything.”

He rose from his seat and wiped invisible wrinkles from his slacks. “I know. But I know you’ll do everything to make sure Izzy has what she needs. College ain’t cheap, but you are. Your stash gotta stay heavy.”

Shiloh wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t know, yet it was a reminder I needed.

“Do you even know what this woman is about?” I followed up.

“I did a little research. Like you said, she’s the biggest star on Cleo TV. Her money is long. I don’t give a shit about the rumors.”

I reclined in my seat and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I guess it would be good for the company.”

“Exactly! Eshu’s Shield is new. Being able to add ol’ girl to our client list would be a good deal. The pay is seven stacks a week for six months, then you’ll receive an increase. Travel expenses are also covered.” He shrugged. “The deal is solid, plus she’s pretty.”

“She’s pretty, but she doesn’t have a choice *but* to be. What she didn’t need to do was walk around the mall in a floor-length fur.” I groaned. “Why does she need protection in the first place? I thought she was supposed to fight and get paid for it.”

“Ask her during your interview.”

He responded so fast, I almost missed it. “Interview? Yeah, I really need to think about it.”

“Don’t think too long, Ish. You either want the bread, or you don’t.”

“How long do you expect me to fill the position?”

“Until it no longer fits you. We both know your stuck-up ass will jet once you’re not feeling something.”

My eyes snapped up from my computer. “I don’t like that shit. Pick another word.”

“I don’t give a shit. It’s the truth. You always got your nose up. You hate the hood—”

“I don’t hate it. I just didn’t have the same experience as you. My core memories are trash. Crackheads in the hood are only funny when they don’t live in your house,” I declared. “I’ll think about the job and helping you run the firm, and I’ll get back to you.”



AS I DROVE up the curved driveway, I silently prayed the roaring engine would be a turn-off to my potential *employee*. For three days, I contemplated taking the job before a conversation with Essen persuaded me to attend the interview. Honestly, learning they were going to pay to meet me was enough to solidify my decision.

The sun beamed down on me as I removed my helmet and brushed my hand over my fresh taper. I wasn’t impressed by the massive estate, but the antique cars preceding the house had me stuck for a minute.

Before I could reach the porch, the front door opened. A round woman dressed in all black, except for a floral apron, smiled from the doorway.

“Mr. Harden?” She recited my name with a heavy country accent.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here to see Ms. Rose.”

She snickered. “You’re here to see *Mrs.* Rose. Follow me.”

As soon as I entered the house, the comforting aroma of fresh coffee met me in the foyer. A dual staircase filled my sight, along with a bunch of fixtures. There was so much going on that it was hard to appreciate the worth of the framed art and statues.

The lady in the apron spun around and asked, "Would you like something to eat? Drink? A refreshment?"

"No, thank you. I'd like to get down to business."

As the words left my lips, a woman I could describe as a gazelle started down a long staircase.

"A man that doesn't mince words. I like that better than the motorcycle."

She looked me up and down once her heels were on solid ground. I extended my hand to offer a handshake, but she dismissed the gesture.

"Are you ready to start the interview?" I asked in a rush.

She smirked. "One second. We're getting to it."

Like a lioness stalking her prey, Mrs. Rose circled me, occasionally squeezing my biceps and shoulders in the process. When her hand journeyed to my earlobes, I stepped out of reach.

"Hold on. You're doing too much."

"Yes, *she is*." The raspy voice that interrupted the uncomfortable interaction was like music to my ears. I rotated my vision from the inappropriate cougar and eyed the familiar face.

"Mom, if you're going to make him your new boy toy, you can at least learn a little bit about him."

"Clarke, shut up. Green doesn't look good on you."

"Every color looks good on me." She sidestepped the older lady and extended her reach out to me. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Clarke Rose."

Clarke is a pretty name.

"Ishmael Harden. We've met before."

One of her brows rose to the high ceiling. "When? I meet a lot of people every day."

"It's not important." Her mother shoved her back, causing Clarke to stumble.

"Am I supposed to protect her from everyone or just the public?" I asked when the thought landed.

Clarke's slit-eyed gaze grew wide, but Mrs. Rose plastered on a smile.

"Follow me," the head honcho declared.

Her heels clinked against the freshly waxed floor as she strutted down the hallway. She twisted her hips extra hard, seemingly trying to capture my attention, yet I peered over my shoulder at Clarke.

Unlike the first time we crossed paths, she was dressed down in a black one-piece made of spandex, and her hair was braided in two French braids.

We entered an office covered in brown walls and decked out in leather furniture. Mrs. Rose ordered me to sit in the seat in front of her desk. I checked my surroundings and watched Clarke sit on the couch on the other side of the room.

“All right, Mr. Harden,” Mrs. Rose started. “Before we get down to the important things, tell me about yourself.”

“What do you need to know?”

“Tell me about your experience. Have you ever worked in law enforcement? Do you have a military background?”

“No.”

The women traded an unreadable glance, then their eyes came back to me.

“Mr. Harden, your good looks won’t—”

“Have anything to do with making sure your daughter makes it home safely every night.” I straightened my glasses, then entangled my fingers as I leaned forward. “I don’t have any formal training. I’ve been looking after the women in my life since I hit puberty. I protect those close to me with my life because I’m built that way. Drama doesn’t interest me. Famous people don’t excite me. We all bleed and shit the same.”

Mrs. Rose dropped her frisky smile. “I like you. I don’t like that you don’t have any formal training, but I may be able to look past that. I may not know much about you, but I’m familiar with Shiloh and his wife, Stevie. Stevie grooms my dogs. I suppose we can move on in good faith.” She traced the end of her pen over her bottom lip. “Do you have a driver’s license? Gun license?”

“Everything is in the file you requested.”

She abandoned her seat and rested the tips of her fingers on the desk. “I hope your schedule is free. I want to conduct a trial run before I have you sign a contract.”

Clarke sucked her teeth. “That’s unnecessary.”

“So is your opinion,” Mrs. Rose argued. “Before I put my money maker in the hands of a stranger on a permanent basis, I need to see how you two

work together.”

“Ma, you don’t need to tag along. If this is supposed to be a trial run, it should mirror a real scenario. Most days, you’re somewhere with a drink, a dick, and that slow ass Dell.”

Mrs. Rose opened her mouth to respond, but I interrupted her by raising a finger toward the high ceiling.

“Excuse me, ladies. I need to make something clear. I’m not working for you; I’m working with you. The trial run works two ways.”

Clarke stomped away, leaving me alone with *Cruella Deville*.

When I tugged my eyes away from the empty hallway, I caught Mrs. Rose staring at me.

“The girl claims she has some errands to run. You’ll tag along, and we will pay you for your time. Her driver, Rock, will handle transportation,” she stated as we journeyed back to the front of the house. “I promise we aren’t as bad as we seem.”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me. I’m here to work. I’m not interested in the family drama.”

“Yeah, okay. Make sure *you* remember that.”

Clarke resurfaced after about thirty minutes, and she looked like a different person. Her natural hair was gathered in a long ponytail that hung down her back, and she exchanged her spandex one-piece for something colorful. Had I not seen the denim bottoms when she bent over, I would have believed all she wore was a hockey jersey and knee-length boots.

Without acknowledging her presence, I walked past Mrs. Rose and followed Clarke to a black truck. A short, dark-skinned man stood near the back door. He moved to open Clarke’s door, but I stepped in front of the handle.

“I got it,” I declared before pulling the door open and stepping to the side.

Clarke’s driver stared at me like he wanted a problem, but he didn’t move.

“It’s okay, Rock.” Clarke snickered. “This is . . .”

I reached for his hand. “Ishmael. It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise. Will I be seeing you around?”

“We’re figuring that out now.”

Clarke stepped between us. “*I’m* figuring that out. Remember, if I hire you, you work *for* me, not *with* me. I don’t care what you think.”

I saluted her. “Yes, ma’am.”

She pushed me back and got comfortable on the last row of the Escalade. My need for space guided me to the row in front of her.

A text from my sister caused me to glance at my phone. I grinned at her kind words and the encouragement she offered. I told her I’d accepted the position within the firm, but I didn’t go into details about who I was meeting with.

Before I could write her back, Clarke’s conversation reached my ears.

“Why do you keep calling me? I blocked your number, your mama’s number, your baby mama’s—”

Her phone was so loud, I heard the other end clearly. Other than apologizing, the deep voice professed his love.

“Chaz, you don’t need to come to the photoshoot. I spoke to the photographer, and we’re going in a different direction. Just return my laptop and come get your things.”

She ended the call, and I listened to her breathing venture from an anxious huff to an even pace.

I knew it wasn’t my place to ask about her relationship. Still, my interest in other things made me twist around and face her.

“Why do you need protection?”

“You really don’t know?”

“I don’t keep up with people in . . . your industry.”

“Okay. It feels like you’re being shady, but whatever. I got robbed about a month ago. I’ve been getting threats ever since.”

“And you’re still running wild?”

A smug expression controlled her features, and for the first time, I spotted the dimple in her chin. “A girl’s gotta live.”

“You’re living wrong, girl.”

“You’re one to talk. I read your file. Your juvenile files are sealed, but that’s enough to know you’re a criminal.”

“And you’re a walking lick. Don’t tempt me.”

As soon as the truck stopped in an underground parking lot, Clarke slipped on a pair of sunglasses and let herself out. She walked over to a metal door in the corner of the structure, and in seconds, the door opened from the other side.

“Darwin!” Clarke exclaimed.

“C. Rose! My baby! It is so good to see you.” A chubby man with pale skin stood in the doorway with his arms stretched wide. “Come inside. Your pieces are ready, and I have some new things to show you.”

Rock remained outside while I tailed Clarke and entered the back entrance of the store. Any questions I had about where we were got put to bed when we stepped onto the main floor of the jewelry store.

Amid her shopping spree, Clarke answered a FaceTime call, but this time, she didn’t sulk in her skin when she spoke on the phone.

“You know I love jewelry like I love sushi!” She giggled and placed a bracelet in the camera. “Do you like this bracelet?”

“It’s cool,” the person responded. “What did you get me?”

“Ugh. Stop being a brat, Simone. You know I got you something. Darwin is packing up our pieces now.”

“I know you got me. That’s why you’re my best friend.”

Clarke’s shoulders lowered a few notches. “Whatever. Are we still—” Her mouth hung open when she caught me watching her. “Simone, I’ll call you later. There are too many eyes on me.” Clarke smirked at her passive statement, whereas I shifted my weight from one leg to the other.

“Next time, you need to send the call to voicemail,” I suggested after she put her phone away.

“Excuse me? You can’t tell me what to do.”

“I can if you’re not being mindful of your surroundings. Someone robbed you, and instead of keeping your head on a swivel, you’re distracted and posting pictures of your location. Tighten up, Clarke.”

The tension in her forehead caused wrinkles to disrupt her smooth peanut butter complexion.

“Yeah . . . this isn’t going to work.”

“I agree. If I stick around, you’re going to be the death of me.”

Blotches of red ambushed her high cheeks as if I offered a compliment. “I may be able to bring a little spice in your life.”

“No, thank you,” I replied, then stepped back.

Clarke’s focus went to her jeweler when he reappeared with four velvet cases in his grasp. When he peeled the top back on the boxes, diamonds and emerald stones danced under the overhead lights. From afar, I studied every piece of jewelry Clarke picked up. The bust-down necklace was predictable, but the diamond-encrusted ballet slipper charm piqued my interest. Most of the pieces looked like they were for women, yet a watch

I'd seen on one of my club brothers was amongst the bunch. The idea of it being a gift for the nigga who had her drowning in her skin earlier almost made me snatch it from her.

"Darwin, I don't know about this one. That idiot doesn't deserve a new watch." She grunted and closed the case.

"It's already paid in full, beautiful. Take it home and give it to your next man."

I shook my head at the awful advice and stepped forward to retrieve her bags. The rigidity between us didn't stop me from being a gentleman.

As soon as we returned to the truck, I noticed Clarke sitting in the back seat with her full lips balled up.

"You didn't have to purchase the watch," I suggested. "I know a store like that has a decent return policy. You should've given it back."

"It's not your place to tell me how to spend my money."

"I wasn't telling you how to spend your money. I was reminding you to watch how you spread your kindness. People don't deserve it simply because you share a bed or bloodline."

Her vision coasted down to her phone. "Why do you care?"

The quiver in her voice made me tune her out instead of responding. I had already spoken out of turn, and I didn't want to extend guidance I wouldn't accept from a stranger.

We made it back to her mom's house faster than we got to our destination. Clarke rushed out the door, but I took my time. Truthfully, I thought about getting on my bike and leaving without saying a word. The only thing that anchored my steps into the big house was the idea that I would pass up twenty bands because I had to work with a spoiled brat.

"Ishmael." Clarke approached me with a brazen grin. "We appreciate you interviewing, but I don't believe we're a good fit. I'm actually positive this shit won't work."

Her mother entered the room, peering over a teacup. "I beg to differ. If he's pissed you off to the point where you're walking around with your hands balled into fists, he must've checked you on being reckless. That's what I like to hear." She spun around to me. "Mr. Harden, I have a file ready with everything you need to know about Clarke and my expectations. If you want the job, it's yours."

CHAPTER 4

CLARKE

Thang 4 U

Years in the limelight made me oblivious to eyes on me, but it was nearly impossible to ignore Ishmael's presence. I damn near begged my mom to continue the interview process after he left, but my pleas were met with rejection. Part of me believed she only hired him to spite me. I made it clear when we returned from Darwin's spot that I didn't like Ishmael, and she thought it was funny. Truth be told, I didn't know if he liked me either. A week ago, he escorted me to a video shoot where I made a cameo, and I could count on one hand how many times he spoke.

Earlier, I watched Ishmael read his book as the glam team worked on me. His fitted black collar shirt clung to his biceps, and his dimples came into view every time he moved his lips.

Like the last time we were together, he didn't speak much. He really didn't have to. His six-foot-five stature demanded attention, and his indifferent expression spoke volumes. My mom believed Ishmael was clean-cut, but glasses and chill demeanor aside, I knew a sinner when I saw one.

"Right here, Clarke!" Poochie yelled from behind the camera. "Give me something fierce! Give me something sexy!"

I shut my eyes, disappointed at the idea that I couldn't deliver. The beauty shoot was our third look for the day, the only one that didn't include props that could drown out my dead eyes.

Poochie pinched the bridge of his nose and dropped his camera by his waist. “Clarke, I don’t know what’s making you so uptight, but it’s showing on your face. That means it’ll show in the photos. I thought you were comfortable with turning this into a solo shoot.”

I huffed, knowing he was referring to my decision to complete the photoshoot without Chaz. “I’m sorry, Poochie. I don’t know what’s going on with me.”

The slender photographer combed his fingers through his hair and plastered on a grin I could see through. “All right. Let’s try something. I want you to think of the sexiest man you’ve ever seen.”

Before I could catch myself, my stare shifted to Ishmael, who stood a few feet behind Poochie. In a ripple, the handful of people on set followed the route of my gaze. Though my cheeks burned with embarrassment, Ishmael seemed unfazed by the attention. Even with all eyes on him, he kept his concentration on me as he stroked the holster wrapped around his shoulders.

“All right, Whitney Houston!” Poochie called out. “I want you to take a second and envision yourself in the arms of the sexiest man you know. Move that body how you would move it if only he was watching.”

I shut my eyes, falling into a space that only included me and a man who smelled like citrus and mint. He could be dismissive, but for right now, I would make my bodyguard my muse.

After a few naughty visions flashed in my head, I pried my eyes apart and made love to the camera like I was born to take pictures. I tried to fight the urge to give Ishmael my eyes, but I had no self-control. I found him in the room and caught a sideways smirk dancing across his face when we locked eyes.

“Yes!” Poochie yelled. “Keep that brow pointed.”

I followed his directions, though I mimicked Ishmael’s expression. For a second, it felt like we were in our own little world. He stroked the hair on his upper lip and chin, and I snaked my fingertips around my neck, but we maintained eye contact like we were playing a secret game of *Look Away*. Had the peanut-butter shaded giant been any lighter, he would have been red in the face. Growing more comfortable by the second, I began mouthing the words of a Jazmine Sullivan song playing in the warehouse. As soon as I mouthed the word *pussy*, Ishmael abandoned his post and walked out of sight.

I only had a few minutes to bask in the idea of breaking him down before the heavy steel door slammed shut. All eyes raced toward the exit where Chaz walked in holding a bouquet of flowers and my laptop.

“Poochie, can we take five?”

He nodded. “Handle your business, babe. I think we have everything I need.”

On his cue, everyone dispersed, and Sage powerwalked over to me with his eyes bulging out of his head.

“I thought he wasn’t participating in the photoshoot,” Sage whispered.

“He’s not.” I screeched. “I’ll be right back. Let me go see what he wants.”

Before I could make it to Chaz, I saw Ishmael cut off his path. The bodyguard pointed to the peace offering in Chaz’s hand, and instantly, my throat started to itch.

“That’s your woman, and you don’t know which flower she’s allergic to?” Ishmael grimaced.

“Nigga, I know. I was just . . . moving too fast. Who the hell are you?”

Ishmael snatched the flowers, then walked off without offering an answer. Chaz’s chest swelled at Ishmael like he wanted to go after him, but instead, the human teddy bear stomped over to me. The stench of vodka soared from his breath when he went in to kiss me. His eyes were covered by a pair of sunglasses, but they didn’t conceal how fucked up he was. He was so consumed with shielding his eyes that he didn’t clean the powder from under his nose.

A jittery smile overpowered my face while my eyes danced around the room. Everyone on set signed a non-disclosure agreement. Still, that didn’t stop them from watching the shit show unfold. I thought to get on my diva tip and demand they all wait outside while I handled the addict, but I figured that would damage my reputation even more.

“Chaz, what are you doing up here? You don’t usually spend time on set.”

“I came to return your computer like you asked. My bad about the flowers.”

My heart cracked when I observed his hands quiver as he handed me the laptop.

“You could’ve brought this to my house, and the flowers aren’t something you should forget.”

“You’re right. I should know better, just like you should never put a nigga on your payroll without telling me. That’s what you on? That’s what you doing now?”

I shook my head and started toward my dressing room, and as I expected, he followed me.

“Coming in here won’t shut me up, Clarke!”

“Yeah, but it’ll help with the embarrassment you’re causing me.”

He spun around like a Tasmanian devil. “What? That’s how you feel? I’m an embarrassment to you?”

“Yes! I don’t understand why you’re here. I told you a week ago, we’re done! I didn’t stutter, nigga!”

Chaz’s teeth sank into his bottom lip as he slowly entered my personal space. Before I could sidestep the maniac, he placed his hands on my face, forcing me to look at him.

“You can’t leave me, Cece. I love you.”

“Love isn’t enough, Chaz.”

A loud knock at the door caused us to freeze.

“Open the door, Clarke,” Ishmael ordered without raising his voice.

Yes! Saved by Superman!

Chaz squeezed my cheeks. “Is he the reason you don’t want me, Clarke?”

“*You’re* the reason. You have forty-eight hours to come get your stuff before I have Sage take it to Goodwill.”

As the door screeched open, Chaz gave me space to breathe. I tried to conceal my discomfort and left my hands at my sides instead of massaging my achy jaws.

On shaky legs, I watched the men size each other up as Chaz stepped backward through the open door. I could hear him cussing and talking shit as he made his exit, yet I stayed put. I had witnessed enough of his dramatic departures to know I didn’t need to see another.

“Clarke.” Ishmael spoke my name softly. “Are you ready to go?”

“Give me a second,” I said so low that I almost didn’t hear myself.

“I’ll be outside the door.”

The fear of facing the people in the warehouse made me linger in the dressing room. Every time I blinked, I could feel a migraine creeping up on me, so I undid my ponytail, hoping to gain relief. I exchanged my halter top and biker shorts for a leather top and high-waisted jeans, and once I was

satisfied with the facade I saw in the mirror, I sashayed back on set like nothing ever happened.

“Clarke, baby.” Poochie tilted his head to one side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I apologize for the drama.” I combed my loose waves behind my ear. “You know good pussy drives the boys crazy.”

“Trust me. I know all too well!”

Poochie and I giggled like delusional homegirls before he promised to send me proofs of our work and sent me on my way.

To my surprise, Ishmael climbed into the driver’s seat of my black truck once I was settled in the back.

“Hm. What are you doing? Where’s Rock?”

“He had an emergency. I’m taking you home.”

“Wow. Why am I the last to know?”

“Because we were giving you space to work, unlike other people you associate with. Not everyone is around to disturb your peace. Those are just the ones you seem to enjoy having around.”

“Things are bad now, but they weren’t always this way,” I lied.

Ishmael released a low chuckle. “I didn’t ask.”

“I know, but I . . . I can feel your judgment.”

“You’re projecting. You think the shit you put up with *should* be judged.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Thank you for . . . checking him about the flowers.”

“It wasn’t for your benefit. It’s my job to make sure you make it home safely. If something happens to you while I’m around, it’ll fall back on me.”

“Damn. That was harsh.”

“It’s the truth. When I made a comment about spending money on your man, you told me to stay in my place.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be . . . mean.” My eyes clung to passing cars. “It doesn’t matter. We broke up.”

“I’m sure this isn’t the first time.”

My head snapped back before I stuck out my tongue and flicked him off.

“I can see you in the mirror,” he replied, causing my bones to stiffen.

“You’re giving that energy to the wrong person, Clarke. You can’t say I’m lying. I run a background check on everyone I work with. I don’t talk about what I don’t know.”

“Hmph. What did you find out?”

“You were a dancer. Why did you stop?”

“I hurt myself, healing seemed like it would never happen, then I became an afterthought in the industry. The rest is history.”

“From the videos I watched, you were pretty good. Reminded me of Cecily Tank.”

Shock pried my lips apart. “Wait. What do you know about classical dancers?”

“Growing up, our cable was always off, so I read a lot. I had an obsession with Gio Flight’s books.”

I dressed the back of his low taper with a skeptical gaze. “Didn’t he write about gangstas and pimps?”

“Amongst other things. In his older work, he talked about how smooth Cecily Tank’s moves were, which led to me looking her up.”

“Wow. I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. Having the opportunity to learn is a privilege. I just take advantage of it.”

I tucked my feet under my butt, asking, “Have you ever been to a ballet?”

“It’s on my bucket list.”

I couldn’t pinpoint why, but hearing the passive protector mention a bucket list softened my heart. Most men I interacted with operated like they had it all together. They moved like the only thing to gain in the world was a dollar. It didn’t take much to observe that Ishmael had more integrity.

“A renaissance man,” I murmured. “Do you plan to do this for the rest of your life?”

“Do what? Work as a bodyguard? Hell no.”

“You plan on leaving me already?” I quizzed. I didn’t realize how desperate my question sounded until it was met with silence. “I didn’t mean for that to sound like such a cry for help.”

“There’s nothing wrong with asking for help. Just make sure you’re available to receive it.” He paused. “If that man puts his hands on you again, you won’t have to ask me to solve your problem.”

“Wha-what?”

“I know it’s not easy to walk away, but don’t cover for a coward, Clarke. That makes you complacent.” His eyes shifted to the rearview mirror. “If you don’t know no better, I’ll teach you.”

Uneasy, I closed my eyes since I was unable to maintain a confident front. I didn't know how to respond to someone forcing me to put myself on a pedestal.

Without thinking, I pulled my phone from my bag and called Sage.

"Hey, love. Do me a favor. Call T-Mobile and have them change my number, please."

"Mm. Are you sure? There are a lot of—"

"Sage!" I interrupted his rambling. "Just do what I asked. Please. I want you to change my number. Don't give it to anyone."

"What about your mama?"

"I'll make sure she has a way to get in contact with me. Thank you."

Ishmael's back was to me, but I could see his cheekbones reach for the roof of the truck when he moved in the front seat.

"I didn't do that because of you, Ishmael."

He chuckled. "I hope not."

Instead of trying to convince the cocky man that his words held no weight in my world, I scheduled a delivery from my favorite Thai spot.

By the time I looked up, I saw Ishmael was pulling into the extra parking spot I paid for.

"I'm going to walk you upstairs. I'll get a ride home once I know everything is . . . quiet."

I opened my mouth to tell him it wasn't necessary, but I knew it would fall on deaf ears. Despite only being in each other's company for a little over a week, I knew Ishmael would do as he pleased if he felt it ensured my safety.

The journey up to my place was quiet, apart from my heart ringing in my ears. Ishmael didn't appear troubled by the silence, though I couldn't stop shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

"You shouldn't have to stay long," I announced. "I'm sure the doorman would've told me if Chaz showed up."

Ishmael stepped past me as soon as I unlocked the door. The warm scent of cinnamon and a trail of clothes met us in the front of my home like a doormat. No matter how much I kept a clean house, I couldn't care less when I had to find something to wear.

"Hm. Sorry about the mess," I called out before he disappeared down the hallway. "I'm not usually this messy. Most days, my place is put together. I know it doesn't look like that now, but I was in a rush to leave."

An amused expression seized his face when he joined me in the living room. “You’re rambling.”

“I was explaining.”

He nodded while relaxing in my favorite seat in my house. Arranged in front of a floor-to-ceiling window, the spot offered a spellbinding view of Silk Hills.

“How long are you staying?”

“Not long,” he replied, though his focus was attached to his phone.

His lackluster response drove me to rush out of sight. So accustomed to people being at my beck and call, I second guessed myself when in the company of a man who paid me no mind. Granted, I appreciated his professionalism, but I thought our short moment at the photoshoot meant he had passed treating me like an annoying little sister.

On weary legs, I went into my beauty room and closed my door. As I struggled to take off my leather top, tears layered my vision. I was overstimulated and overwhelmed with my racing thoughts.

“Ugh!” Dramatically, I threw my body back on the bed, yet a soft knock at the door caused me to sit up. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

“No—yes.” I stopped before I started rambling again. “Can you help me?”

The door crept open, and Ishmael occupied the space.

“What can I help you with, Clarke?”

“My top. The zipper on my top,” I clarified.

Like a bee to a fresh sunflower, Ishmael’s long legs swallowed the distance between us while I abandoned the bed and gave him my back.

“Move your hair,” he muttered in a voice that piloted goosebumps to my skin. “Why are you shaking?”

My breath got caught in my throat when I felt his longer fingers dance across my back. “I don’t know.”

“You do know. Are you scared?”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

The moment of silence was interrupted when Ishmael guided my zipper down my spine.

“Happy you know it,” he declared before leaving me alone.

The absence of his hands on me made my skin yell for one more stroke. It had been a long time since a man’s touch gave me goosebumps, and even

longer since I wished a man would try his luck.

Any other night, it would take at least an hour to complete my nighttime routine; however, the idea of Ishmael being in my house led me to change clothes then join him in the front room.

“Nigga! I sent you the address thirty minutes ago. Hurry yo ass up!” I heard Ishmael say to someone on his phone.

“Whoa! The bodyguard has some hood in him,” I kidded as I entered the open-faced kitchen.

“I’ve never pretended to be from somewhere I’m not.”

“So, where are you from?” He grinned instead of answering. “Does everything have to be a mystery?”

“No, but everything isn’t for everyone to know. Telling folks your business can be dangerous.”

“Oh. Who’s scared now?”

He leaned against the island that kept us apart. “I’m from here. I grew up in the Paradise Projects.”

“I’ve been there a few times.”

He reached for his glasses. “For what?”

“You know good girls like bad guys.” I lifted a bottle of wine that was on the counter. “Would you like a glass?”

“I don’t drink while on the job.”

“I respect that. Do you eat on the job?”

Our eyes locked when the sexual innuendo hit the air. Unsure of how we went from frowning at each other to subtly fawning, I stroked my lips with my tongue to satisfy the craving to have something in my mouth.

“I appreciate you offering to feed me, but my ride almost here.”

My lower lip shot out. “Damn. You’re trying to get away from me already?”

“I don’t mean any disrespect. I just ... It’s for the best.”

“Why?” I asked, pressing my luck.

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“You should appreciate me asking questions rather than making up rumors or moving off of assumptions.”

“I suppose.” He nodded as he relaxed on a barstool. “Go ahead. Ask what you want to know.”

“Well, I know you’re twenty-nine. Do you have children?”

“No.”

“That’s unheard of nowadays.”

“It is, but I don’t have any interest in having a baby with a woman who isn’t my wife.”

Shock drove my back against the sink. “That’s refreshing to hear. Does your girlfriend have a problem with you working with me?”

Again, Ishmael grinned while shaking his head. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Why not?”

He stared me dead in my eyes while saying, “Because I don’t settle for less.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“I’m not looking for perfect, but I’m looking for more than women I’ve dated are willing to give.”

When I reached for a paper towel, I nearly knocked over one of the many vases littering my home.

“All these damn flowers.” I grunted.

“A woman that doesn’t like flowers. That’s different.”

“It’s a shock to you, but it shouldn’t be a shock to Chaz. After all these years, he still can’t remember I prefer candy over flowers any day.”

Ishmael rubbed his hand over his fresh cut as he shook his head.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I damn near begged.

“I’m sure you have enough people showering you with their opinions. You don’t need the people in your personal space to follow the trend.”

A knock at the door intruded on our exchange.

“Do you want me to answer it?” he asked, already headed toward the door.

“Yes, please.”

I washed my hands while Ishmael went to get my food, and when he returned, there were two bags in his hands and a studious expression on his handsome face.

“Don’t judge me,” I grumbled. “I don’t film until next month. Plus, my mom isn’t around to call me fat. Let me live.”

“I didn’t say anything. I love to see a woman enjoy a meal after a long day. You earned it.”

“I’d like you to tell Mrs. Rose that.”

“You’re a big girl. God didn’t bless you with pretty lips for nothing. Open your mouth and tell people what’s on your mind.”

I could feel my brow curve in surprise at his choice of words. “Okay. I want you to have dinner with me.” I followed up and pushed a take-out plate over to Ishmael.

His dimples made an appearance before his words.

“When I said I had to go, I wasn’t just talking.”

His rejection caused me to shrink a few inches, although I tried to hide it by bouncing on my tippy toes.

“It’s cool. Maybe next time,” I declared.

Ishmael gave me his back as he slid his jacket on. “Come lock up.”

Like a sad puppy, I followed him to the door with my hands behind my back.

“The schedule shows a club appearance Friday,” Ishmael commented. “I’ll see you then.”

“Yep.”

Once he stepped out the door, I expected him to rush to the elevator, but instead, my hired protection stalled a bit. He placed a hand on the doorframe and studied me. He didn’t wear his thoughts on his face, but his narrowed eyes smiled more than they ever had when I was in his line of vision. I couldn’t tell if it was lust or pity, but the aura of disgust was no longer present.

“Dinner. Next time,” he said before walking off.

A second after I locked my front door, I swung at the air. I didn’t expect Ishmael to spend the night, but I liked having him around. Though his presence was humbling, I enjoyed picking his brain.

Once I finally claimed a seat with a plate of food in hand, I spotted a set of keys on my living room table.

I guess he’ll have to return sooner rather than later, I thought to myself before taking a few pictures of my plate. I scrolled through Instagram as I ate, and soon, I started to wonder if Ishmael was on social media. He seemed like the type to only post once a year and never put anything intimate online.

My pestering assumptions drove me to type his name into the search bar, but a knock at my door put my investigation on pause.

In a hurry, I cleaned my mouth with a napkin, then skipped to the front of my house with Ishmael’s keyring dangling from my finger

“Next time came quick,” I teased before I had the door all the way open. However, my lively energy morphed into repulsion within seconds. “Chaz,

what the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to get my things, like you said. I’m not giving up on us, but I need my shit.”

Before Chaz could continue his speech, Ishmael stepped off the elevator. His loose limbs turned rigid when he recognized I wasn’t alone.

“My keys?”

“I was waiting on you,” I replied after tossing them into his palm.

“Do we have a problem?” he asked with a pointed brow.

“Like you said, I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

CHAPTER 5

ISHMAEL

Same Time

“Aww, hell nah!” Durk’s gold grill sank into his bottom lip as he rushed to his feet. “This is your last game. You can’t play no more!”

I laughed. “See, that’s why you’re losing. Poker is about strategy and patience. Your temperamental ass always shows your hand on your face.”

“Don’t study me, nigga. Run that shit back!”

Today, the Sons of Eshu were hosting a casino-themed party for one of our high-ranking members, and from the moment I sat down, I had been whupping ass and taking Durk’s money.

Before the dealer had the chance to start a new game, I checked my phone and saw I had two missed calls from Isabella.

“Hey. Y’all can play this one without me. I’ll be back for the next.”

“You damn right,” Loso exclaimed. “You’re going to give me the chance to win my money back.”

“That’s my money now, meathead.”

As the losers complained, I walked away and found an empty table amongst the partygoers.

“What’s good, little one? What do you need?” I quizzed once Isabella answered the phone.

“Ugh. Don’t make it sound like I’m always begging.”

I tilted my head from side to side. “I mean . . .”

“Whatever. Can you send me some food? I only have cash, and the place I want to order from won’t let me pay once the food gets here. I don’t

want to use my debit card.”

“Spoiled ass,” I muttered. “Are you home alone?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Annoyance tightened my jaw. “I’ll have one of the ladies that hangs out at the clubhouse drop your food off. I don’t want some weirdo delivering anything to you. What do you have a taste for?”

While Isabella ran down her order, I massaged my forehead to keep from spazzing. It was pointless to question my sister about Mariah’s whereabouts. I was sure she left without saying a word. Still, it pissed me off to know Mariah hit the streets before she made sure her kid was taken care of.

“Izzy, text me what you want, and I’ll pass it along.”

“Appreciate you!”

Though good vibes and deep pockets packed the clubhouse, I checked my watch to see if it was too early to leave. The black-tie birthday party was invite-only, yet the guest list included close to eighty people. Most were members of the Sons of Eshu, and the rest were big names from Silk Hills. After watching Church heal from gunshot wounds, then watching him enjoy life despite losing part of his hearing, my brother’s life was worth celebrating. Next to Durk and Shiloh, the professional clean-up man was who I called when I had to get my hands dirty.

Right as my phone went off with Isabella’s food order, Essen sang my name. I grinned, admiring how good she looked in a fitted sleeveless gown made of lace.

“Why are you over here looking like you lost your best friend?”

“I’ll tell you about it later.” I sighed. “You look pretty. You plan on taking somebody home tonight?”

She frowned. “Not anybody in here. I just came to celebrate my brother. I still can’t believe he let Blaze throw him a party. She said SiR is performing in a few hours too!”

“Let?” I chuckled. “You know Blaze better than that. If she could, her ass would buy your brother the world, even if he didn’t want it.”

“They have a different type of love, but it’s theirs. Who are we to judge?”

Before I could mention a few instances when Church and Blaze deserved to be scrutinized, my phone went off. I checked my notifications,

assuming it was my sister. However, it was a message from my favorite reality star.

Clarke: Superman?

I waited a few minutes before texting her back, asking what she needed.

Clarke: What are you doing?

That's not how this works, was my simple reply.

Clarke: I don't like the sound of that. Are you on a date?

I placed my phone on the table face down. Since the last time we were together, she had stayed on my mind. I wanted to place kisses down her back after she asked me to unzip her top. The fruity scent of her hair and the way her skin inherited goosebumps when I touched her made me feel obligated to warm her up.

"What the hell are you smiling about?" Essen asked, poking the top of my phone. "Who was that?"

"Get back," I teased. "Clarke texted me."

"The reality diva herself?" she asked with a hint of aloofness in her delivery.

"She's not that bad."

"Not that bad? Have you seen the articles the blogs post about her? That girl is crazy."

"Like I said, she's not that bad."

My eyes fled to the dance floor when the heat from Essen's hazel glare swept over me.

"Nah. Don't do that, Ishmael. What's up with you two?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "She's cool. She's not as funny as she thinks, which makes her funnier. She's more grounded than I thought she was three weeks ago."

Essen's hands rushed to her mouth. "Oh my God. You like her."

"I like things about her." I pulled at the velvet handkerchief in my jacket pocket. "She has someone she swears she's done with, but I don't know. The shit is messy. Her mama is messy. Her life is messy."

"But you were blushing when she messaged you."

"I'm not afraid of a little mess every now and then."

"You's a lie." She snickered. "For as long as I've known you, you've despised it."

Though a premature idea, I almost said Clarke was worth the chaos. To deny the vulnerable space we moved into seemed unfair since, initially, the

quiet spells were packed with judgment.

“We’re going out of town next month. I may need Izzy to stay with you while I’m gone. It’s during her summer break, and she’s usually with me.”

“Yay! You know I love spending time with my baby.” Her eyes narrowed over her cocktail glass. “Things with your mom still on the rocks?”

“New day, same shit.”

“You are right about that. Look who’s walking over here with her homegirls.”

My stomach churned when my focus landed on my ex-girlfriend, Taylor. We hadn’t been in the same room in two years, and our last conversation was crammed with disrespect and confessions that solidified our end.

“Ishmael, I’m going to get another drink. I’ll be *right* back,” Essen declared once Taylor was within arm’s reach.

Taylor’s dark complexion sparkled under the high lights, and her curves were wrapped in a fitted black dress. Her shoulder-length hair was slicked back, giving a clean view of her high cheekbones and the diamond studs in her ears. Nothing about her appearance revealed the deceitful heartbreaker I knew her to be.

“Taylor Hedges,” I professed.

“Ishmael Harden.” She beamed when speaking my name. “It is good to see you. I see you’re still the flyest man in the club.”

I glanced down at my purple label tux and velvet slippers like I didn’t know what I had on. “When did you get in town?”

“I flew in this morning. One of my clients is hosting a pop-up shop downtown.”

“And you decided to come here?”

A flush of red touched her cheeks as she placed her hand on my thigh and blinked over to where her friends waited. “Don’t be like that, Ishmael. You don’t miss me?”

“Have I called you?”

“No. You didn’t respond to my messages either, but you’ve always been bullheaded.” She pointed to where Church and Blaze slow danced in between other couples. “I didn’t come here for you. I came to celebrate one of the head honchos. If I remember correctly, he introduced us.”

“That’s right. I also remember you hating this place. Now, you’re here with your homegirls. I do commend you on being bold enough to be in my face after I made it clear we don’t have shit to talk about.”

She scrunched her shoulder against her neck. “Well, I got married, embarrassed, and divorced in the matter of a year. I have to be bold, or I’ll drown in depression. Anyway, what’s new with you? Are you still changing hobbies like you change your underwear? I always loved that about you.”

I scoffed. “You still get a kick out of throwing that word around.”

“You still get a kick out of calling me out. I didn’t know how much I needed that in my corner until you weren’t there.”

“This isn’t the time or place to have *that* conversation. You look good, and I’m happy you’re doing well. Leave well enough alone.”

The connection between us was never something to rave about, but it was fulfilling until we both stepped out on each other. Her work life introduced her to a man she was willing to leave me for, and her distance challenged my confidence and self-control.

“All right. Before you shoo me away,”—she dug in her handbag and retrieved a key card—“if you’re not busy tonight, come see me.”

I stared at the plastic, then back at the desperate woman. There were a lot of mistakes I’d made twice, but fucking with Taylor wasn’t happening. The minute she left me for another man, I knew we were broken beyond repair.

As the heartbreaker strutted away, Essen returned and gave Taylor a nasty look as they passed each other.

“Yuck! I still can’t stand that bitch.” Essen groaned. “Are you good?”

“Of course. Taylor’s presence doesn’t shift my energy.” I motioned to the entrance of the club. “But shit like *that* breaks my fucking heart.”

There weren’t many things that rattled my composure, but spotting my drunk mama and her hobosexual stumbling into the club boiled my blood. I thought to slip out the back door as if I didn’t see them, yet the fear of them getting into trouble kept me stagnant.

“How the hell did she get in here?” I wondered aloud.

“I’m sure she told security she’s related to you.”

I deserted my seat. “That makes it even worse.”

Fire coursed through my legs as I eliminated the space between me and the woman who birthed me. So wrapped in her own world, she didn’t acknowledge my presence until I grabbed her arm.

“What the—Ishmael?” A drunken snarl spread over her face. “Why are you manhandling me?”

“Why are you in my spot with a bottle in your hand? You can barely stand up in those old ass kitten heels.”

“Boy, please. Get the stick out your ass. I look good! You act like I can’t turn up because I’m somebody’s mama.”

I spun around to address Khalil. “You okay with your lady walking around looking a mess. That’s your business. I just don’t want to witness the train wreck. Find somewhere to chill.”

“Ishmael, I can celebrate Church,” my mom blurted out. “If it were a problem, the big niggas at the door wouldn’t have let me in.”

“They let you in because my name is good in here. Your best bet is to leave before I put you out.”

Mariah’s weepy stare sliced through me.

“You would do your mama like that, Ishmael? You hate me that much?”

“My mama has done worse to me. Go home, Mariah.”

She talked shit and cursed my name, but she grabbed Khalil’s hand and staggered off. Silently, I prayed she made it home safely. Despite my feelings for my mother, I didn’t want Isabella to have to deal with losing her.

The mixture of cigar smoke and my thin patience pointed me through the back exit in search of fresh air.

The instant the warm breeze swept over my face, my clutched fists became undone. However, my moment of silence was interrupted by a call from Clarke. When I answered, I listened to her background instead of speaking. I didn’t hear Clarke’s voice, but the sound of breaking glass and roaring engines put me on edge.

“Ishmael? Ishmael, can you hear me?”

The slur in her tenor scorched my eardrums. “Where are you, Clarke?”

“Somewhere I don’t want to be. The plan was to go out for drinks with Simone and Pinky. I don’t know how that turned into being in the bathroom with bitches taking pictures with cocaine mustaches. I know that shit is already hitting the blogs,” she explained in a low tone. “They’re trying to go to another club, but I don’t want to. Can you come get me? Please. Pretty please.”

Though I wondered why she didn’t call Rock, I didn’t hesitate to tell Clarke to send me her location. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if

something happened to her after she called me for help, and after the ugly exchange with Mariah, I deserved to look at something pretty.

“Baby, why are you over here by yourself?”

A deep voice touched the line, and I cringed at the image of someone in her face.

“Did you get it?” Clarke asked, rejoining the call.

“Yeah,” I spat out. “Tell whoever’s in your face to back the hell up. I can hear him breathing over the phone.”

Clarke’s giggle faded in the background before I heard her say, “Excuse me. Can you back up? My man can hear you, and he doesn’t like niggas all in my space.”

As she addressed her surroundings, I stuffed my dinner jacket in my trunk and removed my helmet. I had a thought to go home and get my truck, but Clarke’s speech didn’t sit right with me. Her shaky tone urged me to go to her before doing anything else.

Thankfully, Clarke wasn’t too far from the clubhouse. I hopped on the freeway, and after passing two exits, I sped down Obama Road. The area had a bar or club on every block for miles, and celebrities were known to hang out and get high in the VIP sections.

I weaved through parked cars and people who loitered in the streets until I pulled up to where Clarke stood with her friends in front of a Venetian-style building. Everyone around her socialized and danced to music that could be heard outside the club. Still, Clarke leaned against a poster-filled wall with her arms crossed and her eyes covered with shades. She looked like a rockstar dressed in a cropped leather jacket, boots made of the same material, and a silk dress that stopped above her knees.

For a second, she didn’t seem to recognize me, but by the time I lifted my helmet, Clarke found me amongst the crowd. A smile graced her face as she removed her glasses and met me in the middle of the sidewalk. “You came for me.”

“You called. That’s my job.”

“Is that the only reason you came?”

“No,” I confessed. “Are you all right? Smells like you had too much to drink.”

She squared her shoulders. “I did not. I can walk a straight line and all!”

Clarke stepped back, attempting to prove her sobriety. However, she tripped over her own feet. Without missing a beat, I caught her back before

she hit the ground. From the outside looking in, we probably looked like lovers enjoying a dance.

“It’s time for me to get you home.”

She frowned when I lifted her upright. “No. I don’t want to go home.” She pleated her arms across her cleavage. “At least let me tell my friends I’m leaving.”

I glanced at the women Clarke pointed to. She was concerned with her friends, and they didn’t even look back before climbing into their Uber.

“Send them a text,” I suggested as I led her to my Kawasaki Ninja.

“Wait! You want me to ride that? My condo is forty minutes from here, and I have to pee!” Clarke whined and gripped my hand. “Lord, my head is already spinning.”

“You came out and got drunk to bury whatever you’re feeling and look how that turned out.” I shook my head. “Do you feel better?”

The shackle of her squint sealed me in place as she said, “I do now.”

“I bet.” I cut free a laugh. “Put the helmet on, get on the bike, and get comfortable.”

Clarke did as I said, and once we were on the road, she rested her head against my back. Every so often, she squeezed my sides. In return, I reached back and tapped her thigh. Any plans of steering clear of Clarke outside of work slipped away with every out-of-work encounter. The day we met, I spotted the facade she upheld, and now, I wanted to pull it apart, then piece her back together.

We made it to my house about twenty minutes after leaving downtown, and I didn’t have the chance to give Clarke a tour of my home before she tossed her purse on the couch.

“Where’s your bathroom?” she quizzed.

“Down the hallway, second door on the left.”

Since the trip to my neck of the woods was supposed to be a pitstop, I waited by the door with my keys in hand. However, after standing in the same spot for minutes, I decided to check on my houseguest.

“Clarke.” I tapped on the bathroom door. “You good?”

“I’m fine,” she answered too fast for me to believe, but I didn’t pry.

While she handled her business, I went to my master bedroom and changed into a pair of lounge shorts, a black tank top, and a pair of Birkenstock slides.

By the time I made it to the front of the house, I found Clarke stretched out on my couch. Her dress had crawled up her thighs, and the safety pin hairclips that kept her mane off her face sat on the end table. Her tresses rained down the arm of the couch, and her lips were puckered, even in her sleep. The dramatic, overstimulated beauty that met me in my dreams lately appeared to be at peace. She looked beautiful—innocent.

A flood of ideas of what could have happened had we met under different circumstances played in my mind. By the way I judged her after our first conversation, I'd be lying if I said we would have been anything more than passing strangers.

Instead of disturbing Clarke, I decided to call and check on Isabella.

"What's good, little one? Did Mariah make it home yet?"

She smacked her lips. "Yeah. She's outside, smoking with Khalil."

I wanted to complain that she still wasn't in the house with her kid, but instead, I accepted the situation for what it was.

"Did everything go good with the drop off?"

"It went okay," she whined. "The lady who came over kept asking if I could put in a good word with Loso for her. Please don't send that one over here again."

I chuckled at her dramatic attitude. "All right, I got it. Let me call you back. I have company, and I don't want to be rude."

"You can't be serious. It's not like you have Beyonce or C. Rose over there."

I gloated at the idea that the know-it-all knew very little. I wanted to tell her who I was working with, but I knew that would start arguments about her coming to work with me.

"Ish, one more thing. I won't be able to go to the cooking class in Haywood next weekend."

"The cooking class is in Chandler," I corrected her. "Why can't you go?"

"A spot in the braiding class at the YMCA opened. I've been on the waiting list for six months, so I have to show face if I want to claim the seat."

Isabella's ambitious nature provoked my lips to relax into a smile.

"I respect the hustle. Let me know if you need anything."

"You know I will. I love you."

"I love you more."

Clarke cleared her throat the second I ended the call.

“Who was that?” she asked with no hesitation.

“That was my little sister. You met her.”

“I remember. The pretty girl with dimples like yours,” she recalled. “You seem like a good big brother.”

“I try to be. Isabella deserves the world, and my mom isn’t equipped to make sure she gets it.” I grimaced. “Are you ready to go?”

“No.” Clarke buried herself under a throw blanket I kept on the couch. “I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to be alone.”

A low whistle slipped through my lips. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I have a few ideas, but feeding me feels like the safest choice,” she answered from under the thin material.

Unsure of how to respond, I removed my glasses and pinched the bridge of my nose. I may not have admitted it, but I didn’t want Clarke to leave. If I took her home, I would spend the night staring at my Kindle and thinking of everything else. On the other hand, I wasn’t sure how long I could practice discipline before I made her sit on my face.

“Damn. Do I annoy you *that* much?”

“You don’t annoy me at all, Clarke,” I corrected her. “There’s something brewing between us. This shit just feels dangerous.”

“Speaking of dangerous, I like your bike,” she said, changing the subject. “I never took you for the type to ride a motorcycle.”

“Why?” I asked, making my way to the kitchen with her on my heels.

“Because you seem . . . mild-mannered. Most men who ride motorcycles are aggressive, belligerent, and covered in tattoos.”

I washed my hands, then opened the refrigerator. “Seems like you learned two lessons today.”

“Two?”

“Yeah. Don’t judge a book by its cover, and everybody isn’t your friend.”

Her mouth sank into a sad smile. “Don’t do that. Simone has been my bestie for over a decade.”

“Then she should know your triggers. When you told her you were done for the night, she should’ve made sure you made it home. We’ve been together for at least an hour, and you haven’t received one call or text. Real ones don’t move like that.”

“I can’t argue with you on that one,” she muttered. “Well, I appreciate you answering my call on your off day. They say the way a man treats women reflects the relationship he has with his mama. You and yours must be tight.”

“That’s only true when you have a good mother.”

Flashbacks of Mariah showing up at the club prompted me to shut the fridge door so hard, the glass bottles inside knocked against each other. When I faced Clarke, her penny-colored eyes were wide as she stared me down.

“My bad. Me and my mom don’t have a good relationship. If anything, my sister is the reason I treat women right.”

“You’re so lucky. I always wanted a sibling. Maybe then, my mom would have someone else to torture.”

“You have too much freewill to be locked in a box, Clarke. What do you think will happen if you say fuck everybody else’s feelings and do what you want?”

“Everyone will hate me.” She breathed a laugh through her slender nose.

“Your insecurities aren’t funny to me. Tell me the truth.”

“Okay. I’m terrified I’ll lose everything. I’m afraid my world will collapse if I remove the crutches. I’m used to them.”

“That’s real.” I nodded. “You know what else is real? Your ability to start over. Every day that the Lord allows you to open your eyes, you have the chance to choose how *you* want to live. Don’t take that blessing for granted.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She pepped up. “Now, what’s for dinner?”

“Do you eat leftovers?”

Her brows lifted. “Did you cook them?”

“I did,” I countered, already removing the top on a platter of enchiladas I’d made the night before.

As I warmed up dinner, Clarke wandered over to the wine racks mounted on the wall. Though I rarely drank wine, I had been collecting expensive bottles for close to four years.

“Your collection is impressive. Your house is too. While you changed clothes, I peeked in one of your rooms. I didn’t expect to see the home library and abstract art and all the other cool stuff.”

I couldn't decide if I was upset that she invaded my privacy or if I was pleased by her praise. When I looked away from the foil and food, I saw Clarke watching me with dreamy eyes as her tongue swept across her permanent pucker.

"Every time I see you, you inch further and further across a line you aren't supposed to cross. You are a beautiful woman, and I can admit I judged you when we met. That doesn't mean I care to deal with the people attached to you."

She twisted her curves from side to side. "You never know. I may be worth the trouble."

"I have a funny feeling I'm going to find out."

We spent the next hour eating and sharing facts about ourselves that weren't on Google. I was blindsided by the news that she prayed every night and got warm at idea that she collected charm bracelets. Her laugh was contagious, and listening to her reveal her insecurities wasn't something I took for granted.

After her third glass of wine, Clarke excused herself, leaving me alone with the regret of having to take her home. I kept myself busy by straightening the kitchen, but Clarke's vibrating phone caught my attention.

"Clarke! Your phone is going off."

The silence that followed directed me down the hallway where a sliver of light snuck from beneath my cracked bedroom door. Taken aback, I pushed it open and froze seeing Clarke's dress on the floor and her body swathed in one of my graphic tees. Though her eyes were shut, the grin on her face proved she was awake.

"The word boundary doesn't exist in your world, does it?" I asked while getting closer.

"Let's just say, I'd rather ask for forgiveness than permission."

The corners of my mouth turned up before I could stop them. "Bad girl," I whispered. "Your phone was ringing."

"I don't feel like talking. It's the last thing I want to do."

"What's the first?"

"To lay with you. You're my bodyguard. You're supposed to protect my heart too."

"I thought you said I was off duty."

She swung the cover back. "Not anymore."

With little hesitation, I placed my glasses on the nightstand and turned off the reading lamp. As if she craved my affection, Clarke wasted no time giving me her back and molding herself into my body. She shivered in my grasp, encouraging me to hold her tighter. The next day, we would have to deal with the consequences of putting ourselves first, but in that moment, it didn't matter.

"So, this is what it's supposed to feel like," she muttered.

I pressed my nose into her hair and suffocated myself in her scent. "Clarke." I groaned. "You've been free for a couple of weeks. That doesn't mean you're ready to jump into something else."

"Maybe. Maybe not. The good thing is I'm free to fuck around and find out."

"Yeah, okay, Billy Bad Ass," I baited while tugging on the silk garter belt around her thigh. "You wear things like this all the time?"

Her girlish giggle spread through the room. "Maybe."

The night was still for a second before I muttered, "I like it."

"Hm. Do you like me?"

"Maybe."



THE LONG NIGHT out with my club brothers, mixed with my morning workout, caused me to arrive at Ms. Louise's cooking class a little after noon.

Nine months ago, I signed up for the class out of boredom, yet I picked up skills I used anytime I was in the kitchen. Most times, I was the only man in the room unless one of the ladies dragged their partner along.

I purposely left my phone in the passenger seat before I hopped out of my truck and hurried to the suite. In the past, Ms. Louise met me at the door with a warm smile and an apron in hand, but this go around, the sound of giggles and chatter replaced her hospitality.

I stepped through the door and saw the ladies were situated in the back of the classroom. My first thought was that a private event was taking place, and Ms. Louise forgot to tell her other students. I turned around to leave, yet a familiar face bolted my New Balances to the floor.

"Superman!"

A batch of butterflies danced around my gut as the unofficial nickname soared through the room. When the popular lady maneuvered out of the man-made circle, the students wandered to their posts, giving us a minute alone.

“Clarke Rose. What are you doing here?”

“You don’t look happy to see me.” She pouted.

“It’s not that. I’m just . . . shocked. Did you know I would be here?”

“Yeah,” she replied in an innocent manner. “The night I stayed at your place, I heard you mention a cooking class in Chandler. I did a little research, and Ms. Louise’s was the only one scheduled for today.”

I pulled at her full skirt. “Did the website say something about the dress code?”

“No. I dressed like a Stepford wife because I wanted to. A girl can dream, can’t she?”

“Yeah.” I nodded slowly. “There ain’t nothing wrong with dreaming.”

Dazed, I massaged the hair on my chin as her honesty sank in. It had been a few days since our nightcap, and though I hadn’t gone to look for her on my day off, I was glad she came to see me.

“All right. Since you’re living in a dream world, you won’t need this.” I snatched her phone from her grasp and slipped it into my pocket. “If you really did your research, you know phones aren’t allowed in here anyway.”

“But, what if . . . never mind. All right. I can do it.”

We left our uncertainties behind once I led her to the two-man station near the front of the room.

“Good morning, everyone!” Ms. Louise addressed the class. “I see we have some new faces in here. Welcome! I’ll give you step-by-step directions on how to make something amazing from scratch.”

“From scratch?” Clarke’s outburst tore through the silence. “I’m sorry. The website said we’d stick to the basics. The only thing I make with confidence is money and oatmeal.”

Ms. Louise gripped her wide hips. “You walked in here looking like a beauty out of the fifties, and now, you’re scared of a little action? Cut it out. You got this. I think the fine man next to you will help too.” She winked. “Now, before we get down to business, I need everyone to wash your hands, then grab a pair of gloves. There’s a caddy on your station with everything you’ll need to make a key lime bar.”

Once Ms. Louise was done giving us the rundown, we got down to business.

At first, Clarke seemed to be in her own world, grinning every so often at something I wasn't privy to. But after about ten minutes, she cleared her throat and glanced at me.

"Can we talk while we cook?" she asked after a while. "You're in the zone. I don't want to be a distraction."

"You being here is a distraction. A good one," I confessed while slipping an apron from her hands. Like she was a mannequin, I laced the polyester material over her head, then tangled the strings around her small waist.

Though my vision lingered on her white heels, I could feel the fire in her eyes melt away all the reservations that kept me from pressing her back against a wall the night we slept together.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I heard myself ask.

"I'm just thinking. How did you get here? A cooking class. A motorcycle club. You're a collector. You have expensive taste, and I'm not talking about material things. Where does it come from?"

"It stems from having nothing or feeling like I didn't have enough. My mom has always been an addict, and I have no idea who my father is. Being the man of the house, I had to find ways to make money. One summer, I joined the YMCA's computer program. I worked there a few months, making more than my mama's hustles once a few of the students taught me about hacking. From that day, no one could convince me to sell drugs, because I earned money by using my brain."

"Is that your passion? Working with computers?"

"I hate to admit it, but I don't know. Fear of going back to the projects made me do so many things for money. I can't really say what I *like* to do."

"I may regret saying this, but I think you should take time to figure it out."

I scoffed. "If that ain't the pot calling the kettle black, Dancing Queen."

"Yeah. I walked right into that one." She snickered under her breath. "And how did you end up with the Sons of Eshu?"

"They stopped a group of niggas jumping me." A one-note chuckle rocked my chest as the memory passed. "I've always been tall and solid, so when I was younger, niggas would try me. They wanted me to put in work

for them, and after already catching a charge, fear made me stay out of trouble.”

“And they didn’t respect that?”

“Of course not. Some men’s pride is bigger than their integrity,” I declared. “Shiloh and his brother, Church, circled the fight with guns out, daring anyone to jump in. After I whupped ass, they welcomed me into their family, and once I purchased my first Impala, I joined their car club.”

“They sound solid. More solid than any man my mama has brought around.”

“You don’t have a good relationship with your old man?”

Clarke’s shoulders jerked in a careless shrug. “My dad was a jackass before he passed. Then again, his presence kept my mom’s tyrannical behavior in check. We used to be close. Once she started managing me, our relationship shifted.”

She peered up at me.

“You know Rose isn’t even her last name? She changed it when my popularity grew. I try not to let it bother me, but I’m human. That woman makes me want to empty my bank accounts and buy a home in Black Valley.”

“Make the move. It’ll give me someone to visit up north.”

After Ms. Louise gave instructions on how to prepare the filling for our dessert, the hyper beauty next to me became mute as she worked. She gave her attention to a handful of limes and didn’t look up until it was time to add cream cheese and condensed milk to her bowl.

“You flickin’ your wrist like you know what you’re doing,” I professed. “Let me taste it.”

A sultry expression slanted her eyes before she swiped her finger over the spoon, then brought it up to my lips. I didn’t hesitate to take her entire finger into my mouth and suck it clean.

“I guess that means it’s good?” she quizzed.

“You damn right.”

It was close to four by the time we stepped out of the building. A few people asked Clarke for pictures, so I stood back and watched her do her thing. Even with flour on her skirt and a wet spot on her sleeve, she looked happy wearing a genuine smile.

Once the crowd dispersed, Clarke wandered over to me. I glanced around, looking for Rock and her black truck, but the lot was almost empty.

“I enjoyed you today,” I admitted as we moseyed through the parking lot.

“I’m happy to hear that, since I need a ride home.”

My feet became engraved to the pavement. “You think I’m your driver and your bodyguard?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to admit what I think about you. Not without getting myself in trouble.”

Her answer slid a smirk up one side of my face. “You think you’re slick.”

“Slick? No. A girl who enjoys the company of an interesting man? Yes.” She batted her long lashes. “Can we go out instead of going home?”

“You sure you ready for that?”

“I wouldn’t have asked you on a date if I wasn’t.”

“That’s what you call it? I promise, I’m *letting* you think you’re running shit. I like the way confidence looks on you.”

The moment we got in my truck, we powered our phones back on. I had a few messages from Essen and Shiloh. However, Clarke’s phone sounded like an alarm.

“Fuck! Fuck!” She smacked her forehead.

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m late as hell for an interview with *Put On* magazine. My mom sent me a screenshot of the email thread. They’ve been at her house since one!”

“Don’t lose your shit over something you can’t change. This is your program. Call her and tell her we’re coming now.”

“Nah. I’ll wait to face the devil. No sense in getting cursed out twice.”

My chest grew tight as I sped to Mrs. Rose’s house with Clarke beside me, gnawing on her bottom lip. I placed my hand over her knee when she started to fidget in her seat. She didn’t comment but looped her fingers between mine and squeezed tight.

Even though her mother’s neighborhood was affluent, I raced up her driveway and found the angry mama waiting on her porch in a robe and a scowl.

Clarke didn’t have a chance to cross the threshold before Mrs. Rose gripped her arm.

“Don’t walk in here like your ass isn’t hours late for a job! I’ve been calling you.” She spun around and pointed in my direction. “I’ve been calling you too!”

“I’m not sure why. I was off today.”

“Excuse me? Maybe I didn’t make it clear when I hired you, but you’re never off duty.” Her eyes jetted to a frowning Clarke. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Out. I went out, Mama, and for the first time in a while, I didn’t stress about my appearance. I learned something new. I smiled more than I have in a long time.”

The jealous woman sent her raging eyes from left to right.

“You’ve been with him all day, right? You’ve been moving around the city like you aren’t tied to another man.”

“Me and Chaz broke up! How many times do I have to tell you that? Do you even listen when I speak?”

“Not when you’re saying bullshit and acting like a ho! No one knows you and Chaz are over. And now, you’re smiling in your bodyguard’s face. It’s not a good look.”

From where I stood, I watched Clarke’s jaw muscle form into a rigid line.

“Since I clearly have more respect for you than you have for me, I’m done with this conversation.”

“Good! I need you to look good, not run your mouth,” Mrs. Rose declared while walking out of sight.

Despite her frustration seconds ago, Clarke’s buoyancy returned when her mom disappeared.

“Fuck what she’s talking about. I won’t allow her to ruin my good mood.” She bounced on her tippy toes. “I had fun today.”

“Yeah? How much?”

“Enough to want you to lick more than cream from my fingers.”

My willpower went out of the window when the sexual innuendo landed. I teased her lips with mine, and without pause, Clarke placed her hand behind my head and pulled me into her. The sticky gloss on her lips kept us glued together, and I furthered the link by roping one arm around her waist and lifting her from the floor. Her breath smelled like the sweet dish we created, and her lips felt like the smooth cream we’d tasted earlier. Soft moans ripped from her throat, triggering me to press her back into the front door.

So caught up in one another, we didn’t detect someone had entered the room until Sage cleared his throat.

“You two are getting really reckless.”

Clarke rolled her eyes while slipping out of my grasp. “Don’t start, Sage. What do you need?”

“I need you upstairs. The ladies are waiting to work on you.”

Clarke groaned, then removed the band holding her long tresses in place.

“All right. Give me a second,” she replied before facing me. “When can I invade your world again?”

“Oh. You’re asking for permission this time?” A low laugh tickled my throat. “We’ll figure it out.”

“We? I like the sound of that.”

Clarke skipped from the room, leaving me with my wayward thoughts. I knew I was playing a dangerous game, but I couldn’t see myself staying away after I had crossed the line. I couldn’t say if it was her willingness to be vulnerable in my presence or her being bold enough to show up somewhere on my behalf, but something about the reality star made me thirsty.

“We need to talk.” Mrs. Rose approached me before I could make it outside. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing with Clarke, but let the idea die. Chaz and Clarke have been together for years, and they’ve secured brand deals as a couple. They’re just going through a rough patch.”

“Is that what you call it?” I grimaced, recalling some of the situations Clarke exposed during her drunken rant. “You should want better for your daughter than to spend her life with a nigga with no plan B and no respect for her.”

“As handsome as you are, you can’t be that close-minded. Everyone has issues.”

“The only issue Clarke should have is deciding if she wants to vacation somewhere hot or cold. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

Her darting tongue stained her lips with moisture. “Oh. You really are a protector. I can see why my daughter is slowly climbing in your lap. Do you have room for two?”

“Mrs. Rose, watch your mouth before I sue you and take more than just your daughter.”

CHAPTER 6

CLARKE

Desperado

I stared at my phone like it was covered in shit after my mom went over plans for the night.

“Mama, this is bogus, and you know it. Doing a club appearance is going to send mixed messages.”

“Clarke, who gives a damn? Jupiter’s Lounge paid you and Chaz twenty thousand dollars to attend their grand opening. You signed a contract, and I’m not getting dragged into court, because you’re acting like a fucking diva.”

Disgust drove my eyes around my head. “Can you stop being my manager, for one second, and act like my mom?”

“No matter what role I play in your life, I would still expect you to do a job you’ve been paid for. Ishmael should be there soon, and I already informed him that Chaz and his friends are a part of your entourage for the night. I won’t be able to make it, so act like I raised you right, and go secure the rest of our bag.”

Sage freed a shaky exhale after I ended the call.

“You could just give the money back,” he suggested.

My head sank into the pillows near the headboard. “I could, but me and Chaz split the deposit down the middle. I’m pretty sure he’s spent his half, and I’m not paying his portion back.”

“I mean, it may not be *that* bad. You are only expected to show face in the lounge for two hours.”

“Two hours or two minutes is too long. Any amount of time in the same room with a man I’m trying to break free from is too long,” I whined. “I’ve been doing so good, too. I’m going on four weeks of no contact.”

“After witnessing what you’ve gone through with Chaz, I’m proud of you, Clarke,” Sage professed. “Is Ishmael coming along tonight?”

“Of course.”

“Of course.” Sage playfully mocked me. “What’s going on with you and the bodyguard, Whitney?”

“What do you mean? He works with me.”

Sage’s silence prompted me to sit up on my elbows.

“What?” I squealed playfully. “I don’t know what’s going on between us. Ishmael is ... different. He challenges me, but he also makes me feel safe. He checks me about things without making me feel judged. We’ve come a long way in the six weeks we’ve worked together.”

“Look at you, sitting here with rosy cheeks,” Sage teased. “I knew he was something special when you trusted him to pick you up from the club. Usually, you just hang around until Simone is ready to go.”

“True, but Ishmael made me feel like if I called, he would come running. I’m not really used to people doing that without expecting something in return. I like that about him.”

Sage lifted his finger in the air. “I’m sure you also like how fine he is. He reminds me of that rapper AZ Chike, but he’s finer and thicker and a few inches taller.”

I snapped my fingers when Sage pretended to drift into a trance.

“Hey! Stop daydreaming about my man—bodyguard.”

“Nah, you had it right the first time,” he joked. “Let’s go get you ready so your bodyguard can escort you and your ex-boyfriend out on the town.”

I placed a pillow over my face and screamed, “That sounds horrible!”

Along with Sage, I walked into my closet at my mom’s and searched for my leather D2 two-piece. Since I decided to get dressed at my mom’s house, my selection wasn’t as broad, but I still tried to coordinate with the options Chaz had sent earlier. In the same message, he asked if he could get dressed at my place, and I quickly vetoed the idea. I knew our closeness that night would send mixed signals, but I prayed my dismissive behavior would remind Chaz we were done.

As I put on a pair of big silver hoops, I looked out the second-floor window and spotted Ishmael. He leaned against a party bus with his

attention planted on his phone; however, after a few seconds, his eyes floated up to my window. Stuck in place, I could feel him touching me, even from far away. His studious frames had been replaced with a pair of buffs, and instead of slacks and a polo, Ishmael dressed in a motorcycle jacket, black pants, and boots. For the first time, he wore a diamond piece around his neck, and the watch on his wrist shone bright enough for me to see from upstairs.

“I see the bodyguard pulled out his good shit tonight,” Sage commented, breaking my trance.

“Don’t do that. Ishmael always looks fly.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t always wear diamond frames.”

Nervously, I wandered around the room, making sure I had everything I needed for the night, then I made my way out the front door. The night breeze welcomed me outside, and Ishmael’s dimpled smile soon followed.

I strutted over to him, swaying my hips like an African beat played in my head. “I see you brought out your Sunday best,” I greeted him.

“In that case, I guess every day is Sunday.”

“Oh. You’re on your cocky shit tonight. I like it.”

In the midst of our flirting, three black foreign cars sped up my mom’s driveway and parked behind the party bus.

My eyes did a lap around my head as I stepped away from Ishmael when Chaz and his friends walked in our direction. His low growl made my eyes cling to my leather boots. Ishmael may not have agreed, but I didn’t want him involved in my personal drama. I didn’t need Chaz to latch onto the idea that Ishmael and I had something going on and act a fool during our booking.

A little while after Chaz and his crew arrived, Simone and some girls I worked with in the past showed up, and we got on the road.

I purposely sandwiched myself between Sage and Simone so Chaz wouldn’t have the chance to sit next to me. Luckily and unluckily, the spot planted me directly in Ishmael’s line of vision.

Are you mad at me? I texted Ishmael when I observed his tense disposition.

Superman: Mad at you for what? I didn’t say anything, Clarke.

I tried not to stare him down before texting back, *Not verbally, but your body language is loud.*

Superman: What is it saying, Clarke?

That you're . . . bothered? I replied with a question mark since I didn't know if I was right.

Superman: I'm here to work, Clarke.

STOP TYPING MY NAME! I responded.

Superman: I'm here to work, Lois Lane.

I couldn't hide my smile before Chaz pointed in my direction.

"Who are you talking to? You blushing and shit."

For a second, I forgot I had on makeup and swiped my hand across my forehead.

"You gon' disrespect me like that?" Chaz quizzed between slits for eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about. We are not together. Four weeks without talking confirms that."

"Bullshit! I gave you space to get your mind right since you've been acting like a bird brain."

Ishmael cleared his throat, interrupting our back and forth.

"Do you need some water or something, nigga?" Chaz snapped.

My protector didn't respond with words. He just smiled and looked down at his phone.

"Clarke, stop acting like this," Chaz continued. "You know I can't live without you, woman. I'm not perfect, but I'm perfect for you."

I scoffed. "Bullshit. Would you want your daughter with a man like you? You would want her to love a man that cheats, lies, steals!"

"I've never stolen anything from you."

"Chaz, you've stolen things I could never get back."

Simone waved Chaz away before he could speak. "Enough of all this. She doesn't want to talk. Give her some space until we get to the club. Damn!"

Instead of challenging her, Chaz openly poured a bump of coke on his knuckles then fed it to one of his nostrils. I slipped my shades on and faced the window to keep from calling him out. He wasn't my man, and I didn't need my words to be confused with concern.

The clock struck midnight as we pulled up to the lounge. Ishmael stood up when the party bus slowed down. From my seat, I admired how good he looked when he checked the gun tucked in his waistband. I smirked when he cut his eyes at Chaz while he did it. I never wanted tension between

them to expand to the point of needing to cut with a knife, but I enjoyed having someone around to put a little fear in the user's cold heart.

"Sage, you and Clarke's friends will get out first. I'll follow you, and the princess will walk between me and dude." Ishmael looked at me over his shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'm going to be."

A plethora of flashing lights hit us like fire to a blunt when our driver pulled the sliding door open. Careful not to trip over my jacket, I accepted Ishmael's outstretched hand as I found my footing. There was a line of people waiting to get in, while others were fans pleading for a picture.

After walking the red carpet and taking a few pictures with Chaz, the club promoter escorted us to our section. I had never been to the spot, but the two-story layout covered in gold, screamed elegance, though the crowd was rowdy. The dancefloor was huge, and aside from the second floor being reserved for VIP, there was a rooftop area where guests could enjoy a blunt or a cigar.

When we made it to our section, I noticed we were placed between another reality couple and a group of men and women dressed in black and red, sporting diamonds. Most of the men looked like athletes, and the women at their sides rocked different styles but were all beautiful.

While everyone partied and enjoyed the perks of being in a private section, I stayed attached to Sage and enjoyed a mixed drink. We danced in our seats and talked shit about people on the dancefloor until Simone's drunk ass crashed into the cushion beside me.

"Why are you sitting over here like two boring bitches in the club?"

Sage mugged her. "Boring? Bitch, we're sipping and sitting pretty, while you're over there dancing offbeat with a group of powder heads."

"Sage, you got one more time to talk to me crazy before I slap the hell out of you." She faced me. "Anyway, come dance with us! This wallflower shit is the same shit you pulled at the club a few weeks ago."

"You know more than anyone why I'm not in the mood to party."

"Right. That's why I'm trying to turn you up!"

"Girl. You're trying to turn yourself up. Maybe I don't want to drink to sort through my pain. There are other things I can do to forget about a nigga."

She laughed. "Like what? Messing with your bodyguard? You're moving backward, Clarke."

“And you’re moving funny! Go get something to eat and a bottle of water.”

She smacked her lips. “Ugh! I’m grown. I’ll drink what I want. Come on, Sage! I want to go to the bar.”

“Girl, I am not following your drunk ass around this lounge.”

I tapped the top of his thigh. “Please. Just make sure she doesn’t get into any mess.”

“Tuh. I’ll try my best,” he spat.

Once the pair walked off, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Ishmael speaking to a man in the section next to us. The chocolate man sported a low-cut and gold in his mouth. The men looked nothing alike, but judging by the looseness in Ishmael’s shoulders and his pearly whites on display, I could tell they knew each other.

Drawn to him, I found myself fixing my silk press and dabbing the corners of my lips as I approached my bodyguard.

“Did you forget about me?” I asked in a soft voice.

“Never.”

I glanced at the man and woman at his side. “Are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

“Hm. I don’t know these people.”

The small lady rolled her eyes and pushed Ishmael back. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Essen, Ishmael’s best friend.”

My eyes drifted to the man covered in tattoos.

“Durk,” he said, lifting his head.

“Nice to meet you both.” I read the charm hanging from Essen’s necklace. “So, you all are a part of the Sons of Eshu?”

Durk frowned. “Damn, Ish. You been telling your girl our business?”

I grinned at the idea, but the grimace on Ishmael’s face wiped it away.

“We work together. She’s not my lady,” he replied.

“You say it like it’s impossible. We both know the truth,” I sassed.

Essen snickered into her hand. “Talk yo’ shit, girl!”

Somewhere between compliments and flirting, I ended up hanging with Ishmael and his folks. The men were all big in stature and energy, and their wives were welcoming. The group interacted like they were kin, making me realize how much I missed having solid friends in my corner.

When the men stepped away, a pretty lady with red hair, an hourglass figure, and a scar running down one side of her face tapped my knee. “So,

you're Ishmael's . . ."

"Hm. Client."

"Ha! Girl, please!"

The full-figured woman Ishmael introduced as Stevie giggled while she pushed her long braids off her shoulder. "Blaze, leave her alone. Maybe *client* is Ish's nickname for her. You two looked cozier than just client and bodyguard."

I groaned. "Damn. Is it that obvious?"

"That's not something you should sulk about. Of all the men in this crew, Ishmael is one of the most . . . intentional. He's selective with who he talks to and who he brings around the family."

Essen interrupted the playful interrogation with a pointed stare. "You're a lot calmer than I expected. I'm not going to lie, when I learned Ishmael was working for you, I thought there would be a problem."

"I'm no saint, but a lot of what people judge me for is fake. A lot of what is shown on reality TV is contrived drama."

"So, that wasn't you beating the paint off a Benz a couple of months ago?"

My eyes raced to the woman I knew to be Stony. "Nah. That was all me."

"Oh, I'm not mad at you." Blaze giggled as she passed a tray of shots around. "I've done some crazy things for love, and even worse for revenge."

By the time Ishmael came over to grab me, I walked away tipsy and committed to a future lunch date with the ladies.

I didn't ask any questions as Ishmael led me to the rooftop, and to my pleasure, there weren't many people occupying the area.

"Now that I've seen you with your friends, I must admit you're cooler than I thought. I still can't believe a motorcycle club is the company you keep."

"They're more versed than what meets the eye." He pointed to the man with the skunk strip in his hair and another who was built like a football player. "Shiloh owns a few businesses, and Church owns a cleaning company." He nodded toward the man with the toothpick. "Durk purchased his tattoo shop a little while ago, and Loso's been running his garage for almost ten years. Not too much needs to be said about O'Cyrus Dellinger, the heavyweight champ."

I snapped my fingers like I was in a poetry club. “Damn! All those successful black men, and almost all have a black woman on their arm. I love to see it! Where’s yours?”

“I’m waiting on God to tell me.”

My head sloped to the left as I admired him. “You speak of God a lot. Did you grow up in the church?”

“No, and I didn’t have a grandma to pray. I had to learn to pray for myself.”

We changed spots and marveled at the city until I felt compelled to address the scene on the party bus.

“Thank you for being cool earlier. Chaz doesn’t have any self-control.”

“I didn’t do it for him. I did it for you. You are too damn pretty to be crying over me breaking his fucking face.”

My brows crawled up my forehead.

“What does that look mean?” he quizzed.

“Mm. That what you said may not be the worst idea.”

Ishmael shook his head and laughed into his fist. “That’s your date for the night. Did you forget why we’re here?”

“Yeah. For a second, I thought I was with my man and his friends.”

Tempted and tipsy, I spun so I was facing Ishmael. He looked like he was waiting for me to make a move, pushing me to stand on my tippy toes, despite wearing heels.

The corners of his lips twitched. “Do it. You bad.”

I moved to feel him against me, yet the feeling of someone watching us caused me to check my surroundings.

Sage stood a few feet away with his brows lifted and hands on his hips, reminding me of a mad mama.

“Ma’am!” Sage waved at me. “Did you forget why you’re here?”

“Almost,” I admitted for the second time. “I guess I should get back to work.”

Ishmael slowly pushed his body off the railing. “Yeah. Me too.”

When we rejoined the party, I searched the second floor for Chaz. He disappeared after the bottles were empty, and I hadn’t seen him since. The smug expression on Simone’s face made me go to her. She was posted up off to the side while Chaz’s friends and the ladies I invited stood by the banister.

“Simone, have you seen Chaz?”

“Nope.” She smirked. “Call him and see if he’ll answer.”

I took my phone out of my handbag, and the flood of notifications on the screen caused my chest to cave in.

“What the hell?” I glanced up to find Sage staring at me with sympathy, slanting his gaze. “You saw this shit?”

He flipped his phone around. “Just saw the notifications.”

I didn’t tell anyone my next move as I marched outside to where the special guests parked. Sage, Simone, and Ishmael followed me, and ironically, Ishmael’s friends were already outside.

Unable to contain my disgust, I paced back and forth with no regard for who was watching me.

“This nigga has done a lot foul of shit, but this takes the cake. I wonder who even recorded his nasty ass.”

Simone raised her hand and staggered forward. “That would be me.” She spoke proudly.

My eyes sliced through her. “Wait. What do you mean?”

“I went downstairs to pee, and I saw Chaz and Tracy together. By the time I made it to the bathroom, I could hear them outside the stall. Dumbasses didn’t even notice I was standing on the toilet next to them recording.”

“Why the hell would you post it on the internet? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t post shit! I meant to send it to you, but I accidentally sent it to Mira’s messy ass. Knowing her, she probably sold it to one of the blogs.”

The more she spoke, the more I thought of putting my hands on her. Simone had always been a brat, but knowing she was capable of basking in my embarrassment was something different.

Done for the night, I prepared to call Rock. However, the sight of Chaz walking out the private exit holding hands with his baby mama changed my plans. The part of my heart that was done with Chaz urged me not to say a word as they passed me. The part of me that was tired of being disrespected made me snatch Tracy by her ponytail after she flicked me off.

In the blink of an eye, everything moved in slow motion. One second, I dragged Tracy to the ground, and the next, I heard Ishmael’s friend Blaze threaten Tracy’s friends when they attempted to jump in.

Being the hater she was, Tracy tried to pull my hair from the root, but I punched her in her nose until she let go. When I remembered I had six-inch

boots on my feet, I got Tracy to the ground. Ready to stomp a hole in her face, I lifted my foot, but luckily for her, Ishmael tossed me over his shoulder.

“Put me down! Put me down now!”

Ishmael didn’t reply. He just carried me away while Chaz talked shit and helped his battered bitch off the ground.

“You need to relax, Clarke.”

“You need to put me down!” I snatched out of his arms then pushed him back. “I’m sick of being disrespected! If you don’t back up . . . ”

Ishmael grinned at my threat. “You got ol’ girl leaking, but I’m not scared of those pillows.”

“Don’t patronize me, Ishmael!”

He gripped my chin, forcing me to find his eyes. “Don’t threaten me.”

“I don’t want to fight you too. Can you take me home?” I pleaded with Ishmael.

He showed me the key fob in his palm. “I already made arrangements.”

“To *your* home,” I added, needing him to catch my drift.

“You didn’t stutter. I didn’t either.”

I couldn’t explain how we went from fussing in the parking lot to naked in Ishmael’s bedroom, but the small details weren’t important. The only thing that mattered was that Ishmael did as I asked.

“I have been wondering how wide you can open your mouth,” he teased while looking down at me on my knees.

Slobber leaked from the corners of my lips as I eased his ten inches down my throat. I didn’t think before I wiped the moisture off my face and rubbed it onto my clit.

“Fuck, Clarke. Go all the way down on it,” he muttered, already guiding my head further into his pelvis. “You got my fucking legs shaking.”

The sound of my gags birthed a deep groan from Ishmael. There were a lot of things that turned me on, and the sound of my man’s moans was like a lullaby.

“Nah. Open your eyes. This is what you wanted. Look at the mess you’re making.”

His tempting words sent my wide-eyed gaze up to his tapered stare. Light from the bathroom gave me a clear view of him, and even with a face twisted in pleasure, Ishmael was fine as hell. His body was more sculpted

than I imagined, and when he took off his shirt, I saw he had a tattoo of a tattered cross covering his back.

Lost in the feeling of his dick pulsating between my lips, I squealed when Ishmael snatched me from the floor. Naturally, I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck.

“I want you to sit on my face. I don’t get to breathe until you get what you need.” He took hold of my bottom lip between his teeth. “You hear me? I want you to bounce that pussy on my tongue.”

“Aww, fuck.” I groaned and tossed my head back, giving Ishmael the opportunity to suck on my neck.

When Ishmael carried us to bed and turned my body around so my ass was in his face, I doubted how long I would be able to last in that position. So close to Ishmael’s long dick, I didn’t hesitate to swirl my tongue around the tip and massage his balls. The sweet taste of his pre-cum made my mouth water. The moans from his lips made my pussy throb. Fear of suffocating him caused me to hold myself up, but Ishmael bit into my ass cheek and yanked me down.

“Stop being scary, and let me taste it,” I heard him say in a muffled tone.

His shit talking motivated my hips to rock back and forth until a quiver raced up my spine. “Oh shit, Ishmael. Right there. Lick me right there,” I begged as my hands slithered up to my hard nipples.

Ishmael’s fingers ran down my back while his tongue tended to the hole below my waist. I could feel a tightness in the pit of my stomach when he moved his fingers from my clit to my asshole.

“Aww, yes. Do that,” I professed. “Keep doing that shit. Make me cum. I want to cum, baby.” I twisted my pussy against his chin until my orgasm hit then a minute later subsided. Between narrowed eyes, I saw his dick twitch. The need to please him terminated the thought of taking a break.

“I want you on top of me,” I declared, already getting into position.

Ishmael didn’t utter a word as he slowly slid inside of me, as if savoring the sensation of my warmth clinging to him. Even with us linked, I lifted my hips so he would go deeper.

“You have no business having pussy this good. You feel my dick throbbing inside of you?”

I nodded as I traced my fingernails from the top of his butt up to the back of his neck. I inherited the tremors that tore through when he leaned

down and grasped my nipple between his lips.

“Mmm. That is my spot. Suck harder.”

My breathing increased when my generous lover followed my command and added teeth. The combination of pleasure and pain had me ready to nut fast like a nigga fresh out of the pen.

“I know you want to cum again,” Ishmael suggested as if reading my mind. “I can feel your pussy getting soaked again. Pussy grippin’ my shit like it got a mouth on it.”

“You’re doing that to me,” I whined in a soft voice. “You’re fucking me so good. I can’t hold it.”

“Give it to me. There ain’t no reason for you to hold it, baby.” He thrust into me. “I’m going to fuck you all night.”

CHAPTER 7

ISHMAEL

Call You Rose

From the right side of my bed, I watched Clarke as she slept. She rested her head on her forearm, leaving a dab of drool to balance on her lips. The night before, her hair hung down her back, but now, her thick mane shriveled up to her shoulders. Even together, for only twelve hours, I got a preview of scars makeup couldn't conceal, and I listened to night murmurs that only subsided once I tightened my hold on her.

Though Clarke's light snore pierced the air, a smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. I never thought I could experience chaos and serenity in the same night, but after breaking up Clarke's fight, then falling asleep with her pussy juice on my lips, I was a believer.

"Stalker." Clarke's hoarse voice spread a sneer across my lips.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't front. I felt you watching me."

"Call it what you want. You're beautiful. I like looking at you."

She snuggled up to me, pressing her naked breasts against my chest. "Usually, that would bother me, but when you say it, it makes me feel like . . . you're looking at more than what's on the outside. That look is what got me into trouble last night."

With a handful of her hair, I pulled Clarke's head back, then ran my tongue from the base of her neck up to her chin. "You damn right about that. You let me into your body with no protection more times than I can count."

“I’m more worried that I let you into my mind. My heart.”

I cringed, hearing she was unsure of what we were doing. Clarke never seemed bold enough to be transparent with her mom or her friends, but with me, she said exactly what came to mind.

“I’m sorry for intruding on your space, especially after showing my ass at the event.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I like having you in my bed. If you’re here, I know you’re safe.”

“That’s why I’m never leaving,” she declared before shimmying her body further under the covers.

“I would never put you out. Everything in me wants to keep you locked in my house, eating wings and kicking yo’ ass in every card game I own. But you can’t run away forever, love. Your reputation will last longer than your toxic relationship.”

“Hm. You say you’re not kicking me out, but it kind of feels that way.”

I pulled the covers back, giving myself a view of the frown lines between her eyes. “Never. I checked the calendar this morning. Your schedule is clear for the next two days. You’re staying with me.”

A flush of red flashed over her cheeks as she wrapped her arm around me. “Yes, daddy. Maybe we can add a dance class on our bucket list?”

“Our?” I quizzed, hoping she would serenade me with plans for the future for a second time.

“You heard what I said. Was that too much too soon?”

I pulled her close, trapping the apprehensive woman in my arms.

“Never too much. I don’t want space. I want to breathe with you—laugh, sleep, learn—all of that.” I pecked the dimple in her chin. “I also understand I may have to give you time to heal and figure out your next move.”

A bewildered expression widened her slanted eyes. “Are you breaking up with me already?”

“No, Clarke. I just want you to think beyond the moment. Things are good when you’re with me, but what happens when you return to the real world?”

“You come with me, or we build a world of our own,” she proposed. “Whether you believe it or not, my relationship was over long before we called it quits. I haven’t slept with Chaz in a couple of months, and I never made it a secret that I didn’t want to be his wife.”

“Seriously? You whispered about your dream wedding while I ate your pussy last night.”

Her shoulders crowded around her ears. “Different man, different dreams.”

Visions of the night before made my mouth water. Pussy had never been hard to come by, but good pussy was priceless. In one night, Clarke coaxed me into being a patient lover, holding back just long enough to make sure her pussy soaked my dick.

“Mm,” I moaned.

“What are you over there thinking about?”

“Let me show you.”

Clarke squealed when I sat her ass on my chest and her pussy near my mouth. Soft kisses on the inside of her thighs drew out murmurs I could barely make out.

“Don’t be shy, baby. Let me hear you,” I demanded.

“I swear you make me forget monsters exist,” she muttered. “I was so worried—”

My tongue ran over her clit, cutting off her sentence. “Worried about what, love? The way you fell asleep with ease, I don’t think the word *worried* is appropriate.”

She reached down and massaged the top of my head. “What’s more befitting?”

“Safe. Optimistic. In heat.” I moaned when she scooted forward and rubbed her clit against my lips. “Pussy taste so fucking good.”

“Mm. Let me ride your tongue,” she declared right as my doorbell went off.

Like mannequins, our bodies went stiff, only moving when the disturbance returned.

“Who is that?” Clarke sat back on my chest. “Don’t tell me you have a girlfriend or baby—”

I flipped her over so she was lying on her back. “Stop talking. I’m a fucking man. I wouldn’t lie about having a woman or a baby. You shouldn’t be in my bed if you think I would.”

Ding Dong!

Clarke sat up and pulled her knees up to her chest. “Stop fussing at me and go see who it is.”

Right as the doorbell went off for the third time, I made it to the front of the house. All the insults I prepared dissolved on my tongue when I saw Izzy on my porch.

“About time you answered the door. I was two seconds from climbing through your window.” She shoved me to the side and stepped down the hallway. “I’ve been holding my pee for almost an hour!”

I breathed a sigh of relief seeing it was my sister, but the squeal that echoed through my house after she arrived put me back on alert.

“Why the hell are y’all yelling?” I quizzed, busting into the room. “What are you doing in here? I thought you needed to use the bathroom.”

“It went away!” She bounced on her tippy toes. “Oh my God! I can’t believe the tea pages were right!”

“What did they say?” Clarke asked in a low voice.

“That you two ran off and got married.”

Isabella’s response made heat touch my cheeks. “And you think that’s true?”

“At first, I didn’t.” She pointed to Clarke in my bed. “Now, I do.”

As if boundaries didn’t exist, Isabella leaped on the mattress next to Clarke. She studied the brown beauty like she was an artifact while she stroked her hair. “I can’t believe you’re here. I need you to help me find a dress for a dance I’m attending soon. Can I go to set with you one day? Can we take a selfie?”

“All right. That’s enough, Izzy.”

Clarke gave me a sweet smile. “She’s fine.”

“Not acting like a groupie, she isn’t. Izzy, go wait for me in the living room.”

She slammed her palms into the bed and sprang to her feet. “Whatever. Clarke, don’t leave before we get our picture.”

I stepped to the side and let the spoiled brat pass me before I walked in Clarke’s direction. The need to inhale her scent triggered me to place one hand at each of her sides and lean down until we exchanged the same breath.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here until you come for me. After what you started this morning, I don’t want to be anywhere else unless it’s with you.”

I kissed her nose, then dropped one foot back. “That’s good to know since I was hoping you would come with me to the brunch Blaze is having

for Church.”

“Oh. She’s a girl that likes to celebrate her man’s birthday all month. I love that for them.” Her brows leaped up her forehead. “Wait. I don’t have anything to wear. I don’t want to call any of my people.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“You’ll take care of it,” she repeated with a hint of doubt packing her tone.

“I’m going to teach you to stop doubting me.”

She leaned back and crossed her legs. “I don’t mind being a student when my teacher knows what he’s talking about.”

I swiped my phone from the nightstand on my way out of the room. Although I would have to deal with questions about Clarke, I knew O’Cyrus’s wife, Stony, could have a rack of designer pieces delivered in an hour. Though the retired paparazzi was now a sports photographer, she owned a photography studio used by some of the biggest designers in the world.

The sound of TikTok music led me to the kitchen, where Isabella sat with a bowl of cereal.

“Why were you playing at the door instead of using your key?”

“I forgot it at home.”

Her lack of eye contact made me sit in the chair beside her. “How did you get over here?”

“I took the train. I started to Uber, but it was too expensive.”

“It would’ve been free had you called me to pick you up.”

She shook her head. “If Mama would’ve seen you pick me up, she would’ve started begging.” She rolled her eyes. “That’s why I left. The landlord came over complaining about unpaid rent. When I refused to give her my stash, she started swinging.”

I rubbed my back teeth together to keep from swiping everything off the table.

“The rent is only four hundred and fifty dollars, and every month she has a problem paying it, even when she gets a check from the county.” Isabella sulked. “As much as I don’t want to leave, I may take you up on that offer.”

With every word she spoke, I could see the weight of our mother’s reckless behavior constrict her shoulders. Isabella was too young to be

stressed, and Mariah was too old to have the same struggle after so many years.

“Instead of worrying about rent, how about you hang out with me and Clarke?”

Her lips twisted to the side. “Clarke. That’s what you call her?”

“That’s her name,” I proposed, though I knew what she was getting at. “I’m going to ask Stony to send over a few pieces from her studio. I’ll make sure they add a few moo-moos in the mix for you.”

“I would rather wear a trash bag!” She rolled her eyes. “Is Clarke your girlfriend?”

“Not yet, but soon.”

She giggled. “Cocky much.”

“I’m confident, baby. Not cocky.”



“THIS PLACE IS BEAUTIFUL!” Isabella swirled around in a circle after we stepped through a set of patio doors that led to a grand staircase.

Most times, the Sons of Eshu held special events at the local country club, but Blaze reserved an estate in Slyde City. The location was forty minutes from Silk Hills and known for being a millionaire’s playground. Many people liked to compare the area to Key West, but with all the black homeowners, I would say it was much more valuable.

In the center of the yard sat two long tables, each adorned with vases and chairs laced with pastel-colored flowers. To the far right, there was a dessert table, juice bar, and a bunch of oversized table games.

Clarke pointed out the setup on the opposite side of the kids’ fantasy land. “The juice bar is cute, but the tequila station looks better.”

“You’re going to love it. Blaze hired a bartender to teach mixology.”

“Is this their home?” she asked. “As beautiful as it is, I could never buy a house this big. The yard stretches back far enough to reach the next neighborhood. I would get lost on my own property.”

“Love, your condo has four bedrooms.”

“True.” Her voice dragged. “But lately, I’ve started to pay attention to what I need and not just what I want. I may not be there much longer.”

I wanted to ask her to elaborate, but I decided to save the conversation for another time.

With Clarke's hand in mine and Izzy at my side, I escorted my ladies through the yard. We didn't make it far before Durk and Clover cut off our stride.

"Check out the newlyweds!" Durk stretched his arms wide.

"Ha! The ugliest nigga in the group always has to be the funniest," I countered as I embraced Clover, Durk's better half.

When she stepped back, she glanced at Clarke. "Please ignore them. As much as they argue, you wouldn't believe the trouble they get into together."

The ladies exchanged a few more words before I jumped in to ask, "Where's my baby?"

"Baby?" Clarke quizzed in a sharp voice.

"Yeah." Clover grinned. "Durk is a grouch about these things, so we haven't made it official, but Ishmael is our daughter's godfather."

Durk sucked his teeth. "And he's a fucking deadbeat."

"Why are you lying? I see Lucky often, and my girl gets a gift at least once a month."

"I'm happy you brought that up." Durk snarled. "Stop sending my baby those corny ass gifts. You send her another life-size plushie because of some dumb ass national holiday, and we gon' have a problem."

I lifted my shirt to display the gun in my waistband. "Good thing I keep a problem solver."

A mischievous smirk put the diamonds in his mouth on display. "My nigga. I taught you well."

I turned to speak to Clarke, but Isabella was already pulling her in the direction of Shiloh's daughters. Hypnotized by how her ass jiggled in her sundress, I could only grin when she peered over her shoulder and blew me a kiss.

Since Clarke was occupied, I wandered into a large party tent posted in a corner of the yard. A cloud met me at the entrance, and a smile spread across my face at the sight of women I considered sisters.

"What the hell are y'all doing back here?"

"Getting blazed," Blaze answered for the group. "You want to hit this?"

Essen pushed her hand away. "You know Ishmael only smokes every blue moon."

Though she was right, I reached for the rolled tobacco leaf and brought it up to my lips. From where I stood, I could see Clarke through the tent's opening. She looked at peace amongst the impressionable bunch. Her smile seemed sincere, never wavering as she twisted one girl's hair and another braided hers.

"Aww. Look at my brother," Stevie cooed, interrupting my daydream. "You look like you're ready to put a baby in her."

"Not yet, but I do think she would be a good mother. She's kind-hearted, ambitious—"

Essen freed a low laugh. "And she can fight! If you hadn't snatched her off that girl at the club, she would've stumped a hole in that ho. You know the internet is having a blast with the story."

"She's not lying." Stony blew out a cloud of smoke. "Some of my old contacts posted about *the reality star and her bodyguard*. Honestly, the shit will pass. By next week, the streets will be talking about someone else."

"I'm not worried about it. People may be used to being in her mix, but I don't play that shit. Our situation isn't a secret, but for now, we're keeping things private."

After the blunts burned to ashes, everyone gathered to eat. Clarke's *crew* tried to sit beside her when they reached the table, but I parked myself in the spot before they could.

"Damn. You came with me and found new friends?"

"Wow. Are you jealous, Ishmael?"

I simpered when our eyes locked. "Would I be wrong if I said yes?"

"Yeah, but I would still want to make you feel better."

When I sensed her fingers creep up my thigh, my teeth sank into my lower lip.

"Did I hurt your feelings, baby?" she asked in a whispery breath.

With slits for eyes, I searched the table to see if anyone was watching us, and of course, someone was. Durk grimaced and shook his head as he mouthed the words, *y'all are nasty*.

Like Clarke hadn't started the explicit exchange, the siren attached to my hip buried her face into my shoulder.

"Don't act shy now. You started the freaky shit."

"I didn't," she crooned. "I just like touching you."

"Touching *me* or my dick?"

“All of you. If I could touch your heart without making a scene, I would rip your clothes off.”

I placed a kiss on the tip of her nose and swallowed the premature promises sprouting on my tongue.

“Hey, man!” Durk yelled. “Knock that shit off. My wife don’t want to see that.”

Clover playfully slapped his shoulder. “I think they’re cute! Carry on!”

Despite Durk’s pestering, brunch was blessed with laughs and the exchange of stories I had heard before. Every time one of my brothers mentioned an instance when I had to remind someone I wasn’t to be tested, Clarke stared at me in amusement. Shame wasn’t the word I would use to describe how I felt about my past. Still, being in the limelight wasn’t my sweet spot.

By the time we finished eating and creating our own drinks, the sun sat on the horizon. Blaze sent the kids to the theatre room, and everyone else settled in different areas of the yard, relaxing with their mates or taking a minute for themselves.

I shut my eyes for a second, enjoying the warmth of the sun on my skin. The mixture of tequila and weed had me relaxed, and the aroma of Clarke’s cucumber scent triggered my goofy expression.

“Are you drunk, Superman?”

“Something close.”

“Here. Drink some of this.” Clarke carried the bottle up to my lips, then guided water down my throat. “I’m stunned you drank as much as you did. I’m not complaining, though. I like you loose and easy.”

We laughed at her choice of words.

“If I’m being real, I always limit myself because I come from a family full of addicts. I can’t fuck around and lose my grip with reality.”

“As grounded as you are, you should have more faith in yourself.”

Though my tongue burned with the urge to defend myself, I nodded and looped my arm around her waist.

“You want to cuddle, but I want to dance.”

“Right now?”

“Right now,” she replied, standing to her feet.

Clarke slid out of my hands and switched her hips over to an area deemed the dance floor. Her hands moved from her thighs up to her mid-section when the beat of the smooth R&B switched tempos. I paid attention

to the way she pointed her toes, then carried her body around in a circle. Light on her bare feet, Clarke's movements ranged from something I saw in *The Nutcracker* and something out of a hip-hop music video. Even with her thigh peeking out of the slit in her dress, I wouldn't say Clarke's performance was provocative. No matter what she did, I would have been mesmerized.

Unable to stay away, I slowly bobbed my head and abandoned my seat when D'Angelo's "Untitled (How Does it Feel)" coasted through the air. I heard my club brothers hoot and holler when I got close to the dancing queen, but I ignored them. The only person I had energy for was the woman who gave me a reason to get out of my seat.

"I knew you wouldn't leave me out here by myself for too long." Clarke snorted through her laughter when I reeled her into my arms and pulled her back into my chest.

"For a second, I started not to interrupt. You looked like you were in your element."

"Yeah. Some things come naturally. Can't let them go."

"Then you need to tap in. There's no reason you shouldn't be working in the field you love when it's clear you can't let it go. I remember a pretty lady told me that."

A rosy color swooshed up her cheeks. "Hm. Sounds like she has a good head on her shoulders."

"Yeah. Her head game is crazy!" I joked as I spun her around to face me.

Girl, it's only you.

Have it your way.

And if you want, you can decide.

Every lyric I sang appeared to crack any doubt that may have plagued Clarke's mind. Her breathing reduced to a snail's pace, and she relaxed so much I thought I would have to hold her up soon.

"Everyone is watching us," she sang.

"Of course, they are. Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

"Actually, I haven't. I don't feel the need to. You make sure I know I'm the prettiest girl in the world."

My lips found their way to her earlobe. "Don't try to gas me up."

"Try?" She smirked. "It's too late for that, my love."



“I’M WALKING in the warehouse. Let me call you back.”

Clarke’s twisted lips emerged on my screen when she threw her body back on the hotel bed. Though she left my home a week ago, the hot commodity kept a low profile. Every day, I tried to convince her to go home, and her response was always the same. She wasn’t ready.

“I guess I have to let you go.” The brat huffed. “Are we still meeting for dinner at your place tonight?”

“I’ll never tell you a lie.”

“I believe you.” I watched her tongue sweep across her bottom lip before she peeled open the white robe that swallowed her body. “That’s why you get all of this.”

“Damn. We may have to skip dinner. I want to eat you.”

Right as I entered the lobby, Durk groaned like I soiled his ears. “Eww! This is a place of business. Go back outside with that shit. Nasty nigga.”

Clarke snickered at his outburst as she waved goodbye, then ended the call.

“About time you made it inside.” Durk spoke. “I thought you planned to sit in the parking lot forever.”

“And you were a loyal dog and waited for me by the door. Good boy.”

His fists smashed into my chest before I could step out of the way.

“Fuck you,” he spat out. “Bring your ass. We’re already late for the meeting.”

“*We?*”

“That’s what I said. Y’all are working with folks with deep pockets. I could use the money to open my next shop.”

We entered the meeting area right as Shiloh walked to the front of the room. He gave us a sharp stare like a teacher silently scolding tardy students, but he continued to address the other men in the room.

Less than five minutes after I sat down, my phone was flooded with risqué pictures of the superstar I liked to put my mouth on. The more messages she sent, the more disengaged I became from the meeting.

“The latest contracts have been sent to those selected for the jobs. If you didn’t receive any paperwork, you’ll have something in your email by Thursday.”

I glanced up, hearing the office chairs slide across the hardwood floor.

“Oh, shit,” I mumbled as everyone except Durk and Shiloh dispersed. “The meeting is over already?”

“Already?” Shiloh chuckled. “I been up here for forty minutes. I started to snatch that fucking phone out of your hand for being a rude nigga.”

I placed my phone face down on the table like the damage wasn’t already done. “My bad, Shiloh. I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

“I know, and that’s why I left you alone. I’ve been around you for a long time, and I have never seen you *this* red in the face over a woman.” Shiloh sat back and smiled proudly. “I still can’t believe you started messing with your client. I would expect that from Durk or Loso, but not you.”

“Yeah. It came out of nowhere, but I like her. A lot.”

“Then you know you need to quit.”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

I knew Shiloh wanted me to quit because our situation was a conflict of interest, but conversations I had with Clarke made me reconsider my decision about Eshu’s Shields altogether. My savings account allowed me time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, yet my thirst for money had me in limbo.

A hearty laugh erupted from Shiloh, invading my thoughts. “All that zoning out is probably why I received complaints about you.”

“You can’t be serious. From who?”

“Your girlfriend’s mama. She called twice. Once when you and the princess went missing, and again last night.”

“That woman needs to find something else to do besides hover over her daughter. Clarke isn’t perfect, but her mama is her biggest hater.”

Durk lifted a brow. “And you’re her saving grace?”

“I think she’s mine.”

Although I didn’t know how she would take it, I had been thinking about ending the contract since the night she fell asleep with her soft ass cheeks in my hands. I didn’t have a plan set in stone, but I had been thinking about cutting off my business relationship with Clarke after her Vegas appearance.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Shiloh asked.

“For the first time in years, not really,” I confessed. “After everything you’ve done for me, I don’t like letting you down.”

“My brother is finding his own path. Ain’t shit about that a letdown. I’m proud of you, nigga. Do you have a plan?”

“Nothing solid, but I’m working on it. You know I won’t make a move until I have everything mapped out on paper.”

Shiloh issued more advice before the conversation switched to Durk and his plan to open a second tattoo shop. We sat and talked for about an hour before a call from my tailor gave me a reason to head out. Even though the cousins swore they were busy, anytime we got together, they talked shit and chilled for hours unless their wives were available.

“Yo! Ishmael, come here,” Deuce, one of the warehouse guards, hollered before I could get through the exit.

“For what? I’m on my way out the door.”

“Your mama is at the *back* door!”

My heart jerked against its tethers. When I was in high school, my mom didn’t show up to one school event, and now, she popped up every chance she got.

My legs devoured the space between me and the rear exit. Deuce’s burly frame blocked the doorway, and still, my mom’s raspy threats slithered past him.

“Deuce, let her in.”

“Yeah, you heard my son. Get your big ass out my way!”

The guard’s sight traveled back to me before he walked off, shaking his head.

“Mariah, why would you come to my job causing a ruckus? How did you even know where I worked?”

“You ain’t the only one who knows how to use a computer.” She gripped her hips. “I’ve been calling you, and you haven’t picked up. Your family is in a bind, boy!”

With no sympathy, I remained quiet as she ranted and raved about her hardships. Her hyped demeanor made me think she had gotten her hands on something stronger than pills.

“This isn’t the way to get my attention. We can speak in my office.”

“I’m not going nowhere.” She swiped wrinkles from her dingy white sundress. “You’ve always tried to keep me locked in a fucking room. You’re embarrassed by me, Ishmael? I’m your family!”

“Act like it! Ever since I was little, you’ve acted like I’m your brother or your man. I’m your son!”

“A son I didn’t ask for! I was only twenty when I had you. I was too young to be somebody’s mama!”

I grimaced. “You were only fifteen when you became a pill head, but you don’t have a problem with that! Take some responsibility for the way your life turned out!”

Our back and forth triggered a small crowd to form on the second floor of the warehouse.

“You know what? Fuck you, Ishmael. Don’t forget, the bible says—”

“If you finish that scripture, you’re going to hell, Mariah. Your rent is paid. Had you checked your mail, you would’ve saw I put the receipt in there days ago.”

“Well, I would say thank you, but I know you didn’t do it for me.”

“It doesn’t matter *why* I paid the rent. Just thank God it’s handled.”

Frown lines creased the corners of her mouth. “Smart ass. I hate a goody two-shoes ass nigga, and that’s exactly what you are.”

“Your kids are the reason you came up in life. Section 8, the food stamps, and every other thing you have is because of me and Izzy. You used to play me, and I still prayed for you. My prayers help keep you alive, but you hate me. Get the fuck out of here, lady.”

Though I was on my way out the door before Mariah showed up, I went to my office and flopped down onto the loveseat.

“Are you okay?”

My eyes raced from side to side hearing Clarke’s soft voice float through my head.

“What the hell?” I patted my ear, feeling for my pod. “I didn’t realize I called you.”

“Yeah.” Her voice dragged. “Don’t think I’m weird. It sounded like you needed me, so I didn’t hang up. Do I need to pull up? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you raise your voice. Not unless you’re clearing out a crowd.”

“Yeah. My mother brings out the worst in me.”

She scoffed. “I know that feeling all too well. How can I make it better?”

The warmth in Clarke’s delivery absorbed the icy words Mariah left behind.

“You can be ready to go out by seven. I know I said we would stay in, but if I sit too long, old memories may drive me up a wall.”

“I got you.” She paused. “I know you may not want to talk about it, but what was the turning point for you two?”

Her question drove my hands up to my temples. A few times a year I thought about what drove a permanent wedge between me and Mariah, and still, the memory gave me a headache.

I sat in the corner of my room on a bean bag too small for my long frame, reading Gio Flight's new street lit. My baby sister was gone with our auntie Tisha, so I had the room to myself. It wasn't too often the house was quiet, but today, I had been able to make it halfway through my book without any interruptions.

In my own world, I nearly shitted on myself hearing a loud bang in the front room. A barrage of footsteps followed, sending my heartbeat into overdrive.

My mom's screams echoed through our half-empty apartment as I busted out of the room and came face to face with the barrel of a gun.

"Get that gun out of his face! My son is only fourteen!"

The police ignored her and escorted me to the living room. I praised God my sister wasn't around for the police to manhandle her like they did me. Even though she was a baby, the police wouldn't have cared.

Side by side, my mom and I sat cuffed on the couch. She kept bumping my shoulder and whispering, but the crashes of glass around us competed for my attention.

The officers tore up our apartment for thirty minutes before they came down the hallway holding two bricks of white powder.

"Look at what we have here," the redneck declared with a smile. "Who do these belong to?"

"You planted that shit in here! Don't try to play me."

"Bitch! You're the only one playing games. You and your nappy-headed bastard are going to jail if you don't tell me what I want to hear." He fingered one of the only picture frames on the wall. "Where is Charles? That's who we're here for."

My mom struggled to stand while shaking her head profusely. "No! That don't belong to Charles. That's not his."

"So, it's yours."

"Hell no!"

The big-bellied man grinned as his eyes shifted to me. "It belongs to him."

My mom looked at me like an idea had come to mind. I couldn't hear her thoughts, but at fourteen, I learned to recognize when she was prepared

to lie.

“Officer Johnson, give us a break. He’s only fourteen. He doesn’t know any better.”

“Well, I’m going to teach him a lesson.” He reached for my cuffed hands. “Stand up, son. You have the right to remain silent . . . ”

The officer’s voice faded once we made it out the front door. My mom followed us, yelling things I could barely dissect, but after she lied on me, I didn’t care to hear her speak at all. I was sure anything she said would tear us further apart.

Like she wasn’t the cause of her tears, my mom cried while the pigs pushed me into the back seat.

“Ishmael, don’t tell them anything! They can’t hold you too long. You’re a minor.”

“So it’s okay for me to take a charge for your boyfriend? I can’t play basketball from jail. I can’t get financial aid with a felony! Tell them the truth, Mariah.”

“Stop talking, Ishmael. Charles is going to straighten things out.”

My mom was no better than the old heads who convinced youngins to take the fall with promises of less time. I knew better, but I also knew snitching on Charles would bring my family more trouble than me going to juvie.

CHAPTER 8

CLARKE

Why For a week, I acted like a runaway held up in a nice hotel in downtown Silk Hills as if I didn't have a home to go to. But this day, I rode the elevator up to Bell's rooftop restaurant with newfound confidence. After the drama at the club, the distance from the spotlight allowed me to realign my thoughts. I vowed to be done with Chaz, but he wasn't the only thorn in my side.

When I stepped off the elevator, a camera crew and the backdrop of the city fell into view. The scene looked like an upscale cafe in the sky, but I knew from experience that most of the patrons were paid extras. They made a few hundred dollars and got a free meal. I didn't blame them for accepting tickets to the circus.

A few steps away from the table, I smoothed my hands down my spaghetti-strap Pucci dress. Fresh out of a seat at City Glam, I walked on set ready to film.

"C. Rose!" a cameraman cheered.

Everyone who was paid to be there smiled at my arrival. On the other hand, my mom mugged me from a table in the center of the scene. I ignored her menacing gaze and hugged Sage tightly. Simone got the same dismissive energy I gave my mom.

"Oh my God! Look at my baby!" Sage squealed as he fluffed my new short hair. "You look so good! Who gave you this fabulous cut?"

“No!” My mom yelled, prompting cameras to go up. “The real question is, why the hell would you let someone cut your hair? You know how many years I worked to get your hair to that length. You’re tipping the scale at one-sixty-five, and now, you’re baldheaded!”

I shrugged, brushing her insults off my shoulders.

“I’ll be twenty-seven in a few months. I needed a fresh start.”

“The style makes you look old!”

“That’s not the worst thing in the world. If you remembered that, you wouldn’t have to take so many trips to the Dominican Republic.”

She didn’t have the chance to spew a hateful comeback since a producer I worked with on *Hotties of the West Coast* walked over and ushered me away from the table.

“C. Rose, it’s good to see you.” Jerry embraced me like we were old friends. “I know tensions are already high, but I want to go over some show notes. Things can go off the rails, and I want to ensure we get what we need.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“I want to start with making note of what’s off limits.”

I thought to tell him I didn’t want to talk about Chaz, but I wasn’t ignorant. I knew most of my views would come from people who wanted to hear what I had to say about our breakup.

Jerry and I spent twenty minutes off to the side before I rejoined the table.

While the team ordered appetizers and drinks to be brought to our table, I decided to check in with Ishmael. To my surprise, I already had two messages from him.

Superman: Dark or Light?

My brows crowded in the center of my forehead when I asked for more context.

Superman: I can’t say.

I followed up and asked for a dick picture to ease my now anxious mind.

Superman: You are freaked out. I love that shit.

“Clarke. Get off the damn phone.” My mom raged. “You walk in here with a bald head and a smile like things are all good.”

“I have new hair. I see you have a new ring and bracelet. I guess we’ve both been busy.”

She straightened her hand and admired her new pieces. “I thought I would treat myself instead of slipping into depression since my brat ran away. Where is Ishmael?”

Unsure of how to respond, I broke the fourth wall and peered into the lens when the cameraman focused on me. Ishmael and I didn’t have a label or title, and I wasn’t ready to share him with the world. I knew part of the reason I had been living in a fairytale was for that very reason.

“Hello? Clarke! Are you going to answer my question?”

“I gave him the day off.”

“Excuse me! Who gave you the right to do that?”

“The *right*? He works for me. *You* work for me.”

“I don’t want to hear that shit. He should have been here, just like he should’ve been on your ass when you disappeared for a week.”

I curled a piece of hair behind my ear as flashes of our times together played in my head. “How do you know he wasn’t?”

Sage’s hand sprang up to his lips. “Oop!”

“You can shut your mouth, Sage,” my mom spat out. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“Stop talking to him like that! Sage isn’t your assistant, and from now on, he’s not available to you. You need an assistant, hire one.”

“Wow,” she muttered. “You get a new haircut and some new dick, and you forget who runs the show?”

“Actually, a real man spoke life into me, and I remembered my power.” My vision switched to Jerry. “What’s next?”

The producer fumbled with a few pages in his notebook. “Let’s move into the Chaz segment.”

“That man doesn’t get a whole segment; he gets a few sentences. The relationship is over.”

Simone freed a gentle puff of a laugh. “We’ve heard that before.”

“See!” My mom slammed her palm on the nicely decorated table. “Even your best friend knows it. You and that boy love to break up to make up.”

I started to correct her on Simone’s position in my life, but I thought it was more important to set the record straight about Chaz.

“This time is different. I’ve dealt with too much to put up with more. The people around me will treat me right, or they’ll be cut the fuck off.”

By the end of my rant, my gaze landed on Simone.

“I don’t know why you’re staring at me. I haven’t done shit wrong.”

The love I had for Simone kept me from pointing out where she fucked up.

“Simone, we can have *this* conversation in private.”

“No the hell y’all won’t.” Mama Bear chimed in. “This is good for TV.”

“Okay, I’ll go first,” Simone started. “You’re pissed at me when I’ve been a good friend to you. I’ve defended you when people talked shit. I’ve wiped your tears anytime you got in your feelings. Don’t get me started on how I had to accept being your sidekick.”

“I’ve never treated you like a sidekick. I put you on a pedestal. When I treated myself, I treated you.” I scoffed. “Even when you ruined your reputation by being a thief, I let you use my credibility to walk in rooms people dream of. You want to talk about accountability? Just like I chose to stay with Chaz, you chose to ride my coattails.”

“Clarke, please. I put you first because your sensitive ass needed a friend like me.”

“Simone, you have a big mouth, but I have strong hands. I never needed you to protect me. Trust me, I hold my tongue because I know the damage words can do. I experience it every day!”

“*Oh, this is good,*” I heard someone say in the distance.

“Simone, you can say what you want, but what you did was foul. You moved like a hater, and it makes me wonder if *you* ever slept with Chaz.”

Simone scooted her chair back and jumped to her feet. “Yeah. You’ve lost your mind. I’m out of here.”

Once Simone stomped out of sight, Jerry redirected the conversation. Along with my mom, Sage and I discussed my reasons for leaving *Hotties of the West Coast*, then we talked about a few brand deals I had in the works.

By the end of filming, the tension was still thick, but my shoulders felt lighter.

I started toward the elevator with Sage at my side, but I excused myself when I saw Jerry in a corner smoking a cigarette.

“Whew! Today was a full day. I know the network is going to love it.”

“I hope so.” I checked my surroundings. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Of course, beautiful. What’s going on?”

“Well . . . I know the show is supposed to highlight the drama in my life, but what if I wanted to take things in a different direction?”

His brows knitted together. “Different direction?”

“Yeah. I’ve considered getting back into dance, and I want the show to document the journey—along with everything else, of course.”

I explained my plans to train and then open a dance studio. I already owned a space I inherited from my father and had never figured out what to do with it.

“Look at you! You sound like a producer.” He grinned. “Have you spoken to your mom about this?”

“I have not.”

The pale man massaged his non-existent beard as he bobbed his head up and down. “I like it. The network may give some pushback, but once they find out your mom doesn’t know about your plans, that will be enough to give the green light.”



ISHMAEL and I hadn’t made things official, but that didn’t stop him from arranging date night at least once a week for the last three weeks.

On any other occasion, I would have hired a team to help me get ready for a black-tie event. But, since I gave up my hotel hideout, I had a thirst for proving my independence to myself. My bob needed maintenance, so I slicked it back like Mystique from *X-Men*. Makeup wasn’t my forte, but I knew enough to make my face as pretty as the diamonds I planned to wear.

In between completing my look, I sipped on a glass of Don Julio and cranberry juice. Love songs played throughout my beauty room, but when the music shuffled to “Girl” by Destiny’s Child, so did my thoughts.

Simone and I hadn’t spoken in weeks. Based on the amount of finger-pointing she did, there was a chance we could go years without exchanging words. I wasn’t above forgiving my friend for crossing the line—I had forgiven Chaz plenty of times. Still, Simone wasn’t asking for forgiveness since she didn’t think she did anything wrong. That was where she lost me. In the last text she sent, she called me out for being hugged up with Ishmael so soon after cutting ties with Chaz. Even though my actions crossed my mind, I was a grown ass woman. A single woman. If I wanted to pop my kitty for a protective, fine, intelligent big dawg, that was what I was going to do.

“Hell, I’m ready to do it again.” I giggled to myself as I put on a pair of diamond drop earrings. The jewelry and the three-foot train attached to my black gown were over-the-top, but I lived for a good statement piece.

With only a few minutes to finish getting myself together, I switched my ID, lipstick, and key fob to a red Jimmy Choo Callie clutch, then pranced to the living room.

A soft knock on the front door triggered a smile to overpower my face. I checked the security camera to ensure a knight was at my door instead of a frog before tugging it open.

I had no consideration for my fresh lipstick when I swept my tongue across my lips. “Damn, you’re fine.”

“You love to make me blush. These are for you.” He ushered a bouquet of red roses into my hands. “Before you say anything, those are chocolates, not flowers.”

My heart did a pirouette. “Aww. You remembered what I said about flowers. Let me go put these in the fridge, then we can go wherever we’re going since you won’t give many details.”

Our small talk comforted me as we made our way downstairs, but my pulse surged when Ishmael guided me to a big-body Maybach. Don’t get me wrong; I had been in plenty of luxury vehicles. The difference was knowing *Ishmael* arranged for us to ride in style.

“Pretty lady, I know you’re not crying over this car. You’re always riding in some expensive shit.”

I nodded. “True, but I purchased them for myself. You set this up for me. For us.”

Ishmael removed the handkerchief from his tuxedo pocket and softly dabbed the corners of my eyes.

“Don’t worry. I’m not messing up your makeup,” he commented. “I’m happy to know I can make a woman who has everything smile about something.”

“I don’t have everything. The more time I spend with you, I realize how much I’ve been missing.”

Ishmael helped me into the spacious back seat, and the partition was the first thing that caught my attention. Naughty ideas came to mind, but I knew my greedy pussy would have to wait until later.

“How long is our ride?” I wondered aloud.

Ishmael peered down at his phone. “About forty minutes, so sit back in that pretty ass gown and enjoy.”

“Mm. I would rather pick your brain.”

“All right. I’ll shoot first,” he replied. “Do you want kids?”

“Sometimes I do. Sometimes I don’t.” I shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind having a family of my own. Then again, I’m disturbed at the notion that I’ll be too much like my own mother.”

“You aren’t that type of woman. You won’t be that type of mother.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been watching you.”

A second of silence passed before it was crammed with our laughter.

“That shit sounded creepy,” he suggested.

“A little, but I’ve grown to love it. Do you want kids?” I asked, putting the focus on him.

“I do. I want a big family, a wife, and all.”

“I don’t understand why you don’t have that already. You’ve been solid since we met.”

“I’ve made mistakes.”

The switch in his demeanor caused my muscles to shift under my skin.

“Things that would make me look at you differently?” I asked.

“Things I wouldn’t do again. I’ve had the opportunity to make the mistake again and again, but I didn’t slip. I learned that once you add accelerant to a flame, you become as at fault as the person who started the fire.”

Not once did Ishmael look away as he spoke. There was nothing except sincerity in his delivery. After being with a manipulator for years, I trusted myself enough to be able to spot the bullshit.

We pulled up to our location, and my mouth dropped open. The scene looked like a movie premiere, occupied by flashing lights, photographers, and fans. My eyes ascended to the marquee, and the words in place nearly stole my breath.

I couldn’t speak when I faced Ishmael, so I jumped into his arms and squeezed him like a lover being reunited with their soulmate.

“Did I do good?”

“Beyond! I haven’t been to a ballet in years! They’re so far and few on the West Coast.”

“Who you tellin’? *Ivy’s Thorns* only comes to the Opera House twice a year. This is the last show.”

Overcome with emotions, I chose to hush instead of risking the chance of dropping more happy tears.

The sound of cheers from the crowd met us at the curb when our driver opened the door. Never one to shy away from a photoshoot, I strutted down the red carpet with a tight grip on Ishmael’s hand. He whispered something about giving me space to shine, but I ignored him. I used his hand as a prop and posed for the flashing cameras like a pro. A few photographers tried their luck and asked about Ishmael, and that was my cue to cut the photoshoot short.

Once we entered the Opera House, an usher escorted us to box seats. In awe, I marveled at the intricate ceiling design and the velvet fabric lining the walls. I never believed Ishmael was broke; then again, I didn’t know he was in a position to spend five figures on a date.

“I’m really trying not to scream. You outdid yourself, Superman.”

“I like hearing you say that.” He rubbed his thumb from the base of my neck to my exposed cleavage. “I really wouldn’t mind hearing you say it for . . . a while.”

“You call me spoiled, then say something like that.”

“I guess I’m your enabler.”

I gnawed on my bottom lip, taking in the smell of his minty exhale. “It sounds like you’re trying to be my man.”

“You think you’re ready for that?” I rolled my eyes, instantly reminded of what Simone said in her message. “Don’t get defensive because I questioned you. If you believe it, stand on it.”

“Don’t you feel how much I want you when you’re inside of me?”

A luring smirk ambushed his face as he said, “I do. I would actually—”

The curtains went up, silencing whatever wicked comment he was prepared to utter.

For the next hour and a half, I sat on the edge of my seat, sipping wine and whispering to Ishmael. I felt bad when I realized I kept talking during the performance, but I couldn’t stop. The dancer in me raved about every Russian fouetté and leap. I held my breath when the performers completed stunts that I had only attempted. Even the love story that moved the show along almost drove me to tears.

By the time we made it back outside, the crowd had settled, making it easier to get to our car without a scene. About ten minutes in our ride, I still stared into space replaying the show and planning out one of my own in my head. Inspired more than ever, I knew I made the right decision get back into an art form I loved.

“Baby girl,” Ishmael called out to me once we were back in the car.

I snickered, seeing his head fall back. I asked him to drink with me during the show, but I didn’t think he had *that* much.

“Lightweight. We only had wine,” I muttered.

“There ain’t nothing lightweight about me, woman.”

“Oh. You’re tipsy and talking shit.”

I kicked off my heels then pressed a button to roll up the partition, blocking the driver’s view of us.

“Bad girl.” Ishmael reached out and tugged on the bottom of my high-knee stockings. “You are sexy as fuck. Come here.”

I entered his personal space, prepared to swallow him whole, but Ishmael made me take his seat.

Our eyes remained latched together while Ishmael removed his jacket, then undid the first few buttons on his white button-up. All that talk about rocking exaggerated pieces went out the window when they kept Ishmael’s warm touch away from my skin.

“You have to be quiet,” he muttered as he bunched my dress above my waist. “Can you do that for me, Clarke?”

“Yes,” I moaned. “I can be . . . quiet.”

My words guided the hungry man between my legs, but instead of licking me, he nibbled on the inside of my thighs. Since the first time he ate my pussy, I noticed Ishmael got a kick out of making me beg.

“Ishmael. Please, baby.”

“Please what, mama?”

“You know. You know what I want, Ishmael.” I groaned and cupped my breasts. “You are such a tease.”

A one-sided smirk shifted his lips while he rubbed his thumb over my clit. “Good things come to those who wait.”

“Fuck. That.” I grabbed the back of his head and ushered his face to the puddle between my thighs. My dominant behavior only seemed to entice my greedy lover. He didn’t pull away when I forced him close. Ishmael got comfortable and feasted on me.

With me sitting upright, I had the perfect view of his long, pink tongue making circles around my hard clit. The sight triggered my teeth to grab hold of my bottom lip, but my cries for him to slip his finger in one of my holes still cut through.

As I rode his tongue, Ishmael snaked his hand up my midsection. He took a few seconds to strum my nipples, but his hand didn't stop until it reached my neck. When his fingernails softly ran against my flesh, I guided his thumb into my mouth. Hard and slow, I sucked on Ishmael until an ache in my gut pried my mouth wide open.

On the brink of an orgasm, my head dropped back, but my moment in paradise came to a halt when Ishmael left me hanging.

"Baby, what the hell?" I whined.

Ishmael didn't offer an explanation as he unzipped his pants, then sat in the seat beside me. There wasn't anything to say once he took hold of my waist and placed me on his hard on. The sensation of our bodies colliding conjured a deep moan from Ishmael. The need to taste him made me part his mouth open with my tongue.

"You taste your pussy on my tongue. You taste good, huh?" He requested to know while squeezing my ass cheeks together and rocking my wet spot back and forth against his pelvis. "Let me hear you say it."

"My pussy tastes good, but your dick feels better," I whispered while stroking the back of his head. "I can feel myself leaking all over you."

Ishmael sank his teeth into my shoulder, sending a tremble through my core. I was so wrapped up in our moment that I forgot we were in a car until I caught the vision of passing cars out of the corner of my eyes.

"Ish. Baby. I can't hold it anymore."

"Then let that shit go," he demanded. "Let me feel that gripper squeeze the nut out of me."

I nibbled on his chin when his head fell back. "Only if you say it's mine. Tell me it's mine, Ish."

"Everything," he moaned. "Always. All yours, mama."

Ishmael's strokes shifted from fucking me to something close to lovemaking. I refused to reach my peak without him, so I squeezed my walls around the hardest part of him, summoning his moans.

"I love you, Ishmael. Baby, I love—"

"I love you, Clarke," fell from his lips, and triggered my orgasm. When I felt him twitch inside of me, I knew we had reached heaven together.

Though I tried to assure Ishmael he didn't have to escort me to my door, the gentleman in him wasn't having it. Tipsy and all, Ishmael wrapped his long arms around my body and guided me to the elevator. On the way up, we sang along to Jodeci playing in the elevator, then we continued our karaoke moment until we reached my front door.

"I enjoyed you, pretty lady," Ishmael declared, pinning me against the door.

"Not too much." I pouted. "You're leaving me."

"Stop acting like that. I have an early morning with Izzy."

"Oh." My arms fell to my side. "In that case, I understand. Lord knows if you stay, you won't get any sleep."

"Damn. When you put it like that, maybe—"

"Stop it." I giggled at his mannish behavior. "You know you won't flake on your sister. Your word is bond. That's one of the things I love—I mean . . ."

"Nah, nah. It's too late for you to take it back," he boasted. "Get in the house, Lois Lane."

We shared a kiss before Ishmael walked backward to the elevator, humming "Human Nature" like he was the happiest man in Silk Hills.

Butterflies danced in my belly as I floated into my place. All I could think about was the next time I would be close to him. I purposely avoided checking my phone since I didn't want to read any opinions about us on the red carpet. Just like my mom's opinion couldn't keep me away from Ishmael, neither could people on the internet.

"Look who finally made it home."

Chaz's menacing tone punctured my heart. Like he didn't have a care in the world, the round man sat on my kitchen island swinging his legs and smacking on pretzels. His mangled clothes and unkept hair nearly made him unrecognizable. Every other time we separated, Chaz had time to fuck different women in peace, but this time, he appeared frazzled.

"I don't understand how you got in here. I changed the code on my alarm. I'm suing this fucking building."

"Sue whoever cut your hair." He dropped a drunk laugh at my feet. "I don't like the new look."

"And I don't like *you*. Whatever you left over here was put in storage a week after I beat up your baby mama, and your brother has the key. There is no reason for you to be here."

“I wanted to check on you.” His nonchalant delivery drove my eyes shut.

“Chaz, I don’t feel like dealing with your shit tonight. Get out of my house.”

“Why? So you can call that nigga back over here?”

He leaped off the counter, and for the first time, I noticed the blade in his grasp. “When shit in the music business got slow for me, you loved to call me a broke ass cheater. Then, you go and fuck with the help. You make a big deal about me doing my thang, but you cheated on me with your bodyguard.”

“Chaz, we aren’t together, and the only reason I pressed you about fucking your baby mama is because you did it when we were supposed to be making money together. You can’t understand that?”

“I don’t understand shit!”

I pretended to be unfazed by the knife and stepped over to the couch to remove my heels. As if he wasn’t built like a linebacker, Chaz slammed me on the couch. The liquor on his breath and the fire in his eyes pissed me off.

“Chaz, let me go!”

“Fuck no! You think shit is a game.”

The same spot Ishmael christened with a kiss only minutes earlier, Chaz damaged with a knife. A stream of what I assumed was blood flowed from the cut to behind my ears.

“Chaz. You have a daughter. Don’t do this. Just leave.”

A deep scowl cut past his face before a trail of spit leaked from his lip and dropped between my eyes. Humiliated, I was more hurt by the spit than by his putting a blade through my skin.

“I told you I won’t live without you, and I meant that.” He stumbled to his feet, knocking over furniture in the process. “I got something for yo’ ass. Your name won’t be the only one in lights when this shit is all over!”

CHAPTER 9

ISHMAEL

Bodyguard

“Ish! Don’t forget to bring me something back from your trip.”

I grinned, hearing Izzy’s hyper tone boom through my speakers.

“How many times do I have to tell you, I’m going on a work trip, not a vacation.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she chanted. “I would believe you if you weren’t going to another state with your girlfriend.”

“That’s another thing I keep reminding you. Clarke isn’t my girlfriend. If I’m being honest, I’m not sure where we stand right now,” I revealed without recalling who I was speaking to. “Anyway, what are you and Essen getting into while I’m gone?”

“Stop being dramatic. You’ll only be gone for a few days.” She snickered. “Essen asked if I wanted to have a spa day and visit Ruth’s Bookstore. I’ll probably take her up on her offer.”

An abrupt quiet spell took over the line.

“What’s on your mind, Izzy?”

She sighed. “It’s nothing bad. I decided to take you up on your offer. I want to move in with you. I’m coo’ with going to Winston Academy next year.”

Excited, I slapped the steering wheel. I cleared my throat and tried to sound normal when asking, “What made you change your mind?”

“Hearing you talk about going back to school at fifty made me realize how much freedom you have. Most people can’t afford to do that, and I

know you're able to because you worked hard at a young age. I want to have a fair shot at living my dreams like you instead of surviving in hell like Mom."

"And you know I'm going to make that happen, right? You trust me?"

"Always." She released a short whistle. "I don't know how Mama is going to take it, but—"

"Don't worry about her. You've done that long enough. I'll deal with whatever backlash comes our way."

"Tuh! You don't have to tell me twice."

"I bet. I'll call you and Essen when I land."

On my way to Mrs. Rose's house, I prayed the vibes between Clarke and me would be better on the trip to Vegas than they had been over the last two weeks. After our date at the ballet, Clarke had been distant. I wouldn't say we were back to acting like Martin and Pam. We damn sure weren't moving in the direction I thought.

A few nights, I lay awake trying to figure out if there was something I said or did to make Clarke go from using my name and the word love in the same sentence to not wanting to stay on the phone for too long. Never one to wrack my brain when I could ask for the answer, I pressed her about it, but she dismissed my accusation. Part of me believed she was back with Chaz, but that was the question I couldn't bring myself to ask. We had sex for the first time over a month ago, and the idea that she shared a moment like that with a nigga who didn't respect her sent an achy tremble down my spine.

I drove up the curved driveway and saw a group of women I had never seen trailing behind Mrs. Rose when she exited her house. Clarke lingered behind with Sage at her side. A pair of shades covered her gaze, but her bunched brows and pursed lips explained her mood.

"Look who decided to show up," Mrs. Rose greeted me when I got out of my truck. "I hope you're ready to put those muscles to good use because this weekend is going to be crazy."

"I've done my research. My company is going to send extra guards out to meet us."

Shiloh had the idea to fly extra men out to work, and judging by what I read about the festival, the extra protection was welcomed.

"Well, I hope the men are more professional than you. Every time Clarke goes missing, you're unavailable to find her."

“Mrs. Rose, I’m not going to try to convince you I’m capable of making sure your daughter and anyone with her gets home in one piece. I’ll stick to my job, and you concentrate on yours.”

Clarke’s mom stomped away, making room for the brown-skinned beauty to take her place.

“Hey, you.” She spoke in a low voice.

“What’s up. I see you brought your entourage.”

She smirked. “They’re ladies I’ve worked with over the years. I had to bail on our girls’ trip, so I figured this was a healthy compromise.”

“Always thinking of others.” I pointed to the red blotch on the side of her neck. “Is the hickey the reason you’ve been acting funny toward me? That’s tacky as fuck.”

“You know me better than that. I’m too fly to be tacky,” she answered quickly. “I’ve been taking some time to reflect on a few things. Our pictures were all over the internet, and we haven’t made anything—never mind. It’s not what I know you’re thinking, Ishmael.”

“Did you let that man touch you?”

Her shoulders dropped, followed by her head. “Ishmael ...”

“Baby girl, you don’t need to explain yourself, especially if it’s hard. We had fun. I enjoyed you. Let’s just put things back on a professional level. You good with that?”

A glimmer of unshed tears added a sparkle to her eyes.

“Ishmael, I had an amazing time being with—”

My one-note chuckle caused her to pause and pin me with a stern stare.

“Ishmael, don’t do that to me.”

“You’re doing it to yourself.”

I left her standing alone and climbed into the passenger seat of the sprinter. During our ride to the airport, I pretended to read, though I couldn’t help but glance over my shoulder a few times. Every time, Clarke’s focus was launched in my direction. Her gloomy demeanor made me regret ever crossing of the line. Though we were grown, I would have never been with her if it turned into her staring at me with sadness narrowing her gaze.

After we arrived in Vegas, I assisted the house staff in getting all the luggage inside. The ladies journeyed into the backyard, so I prepared to go to my room, but one of them asked me to take pictures of them.

“Ask Sage to handle that.”

“He’s in the restroom.” She sucked her teeth. “You’re a grouch. Clarke said you were sweet. There’s a videographer coming, but he doesn’t land until five.”

I took hold of the phone she shoved into my chest and followed her to where the others waited in the backyard. While they figured out how they wanted to pose, I examined the phone and realized it belonged to Clarke. After spending months together, I knew her passcode, but out of respect, I walked over and asked her to unlock the phone. In her personal space, I made the mistake of locking eyes. The cheers from her friends were the only thing to break my trance.

“Y’all need to cut it out.” Clarke giggled as she rushed back to the group.

As expected, they shifted around in different poses and asked me to take multiple shots. Their excitement and the liquor they drank had them moving swiftly, so I scrolled through the pictures to check my work. Images of Clarke with a black eye, a tearful face, and bruises around her neck made my mouth go dry. My stomach pitted into tight coils as I gripped the phone, storming toward the door.

“Ishmael. Ishmael!”

I heard Clarke, but I didn’t face her until we were both inside the house.

“What the hell is wrong with you? One second, you’re smiling while taking our pictures, and the next—”

I flipped her phone around. “I see a fucking picture of you looking beat up. Is this really the nigga you picked over me?”

“Ishmael, I promise I want you more than anything in this world. I would never be able to forgive myself if something happened to you because of my mess. Your legacy will be filled with accolades, not condolences.”

“You can’t be fucking serious. That’s what you hired me to do, and now you’re pushing me away? Don’t treat me like I’m a bitch.”

With a tight chest, I examined the faded bruises more than I had earlier. I played it smart when it came to making moves that could land me in jail, but when it came to Clarke, there was no line I wouldn’t cross.

“Ishmael, you trusted me enough to tell me your biggest fear is going back to jail. Being away from Izzy would break you. What kind of woman would I be if I put you in a position to have your heart broken? I can’t do that. I can handle Chaz.”

“If you could, he would be dead or in jail.”

A scoffed laugh split her glossed lips apart. “Now you expect me to kill him?”

“No. I expect you to tell me there’s a problem, then sit pretty because you know it’s handled. It’s obvious you still have a lot to learn about me.” I leaned forward and laced her lips with mine. “Fix your face and go enjoy your friends.”



WHILE CLARKE FINISHED GETTING ready for her club appearance, I called a meeting with the guards who Shiloh had flown into town. The group of five all had previous experience, which I hoped would make my job easier.

“This is insane. Folks really go crazy for someone who doesn’t sing. She doesn’t act. Dance.”

“See, you don’t know what you’re talking about, so you should be quiet, Anthony. Don’t be mad that you can’t make no money unless you’re using that belly to block a bullet. Close your mouth and use your ears.” I faced the masses. “Now, like I was saying, the club layout is simple. Clarke will be in a section on the first floor for an hour, then she’ll go to a private area upstairs. We leave the villa at eleven, and a black truck will be outside waiting for you. I’m riding with Clarke.”

Since I was out of state, I tucked extra protection. Unlike in Silk Hills, people didn’t know me. There was a chance someone would press their luck to get to Clarke, and I wanted to be prepared to handle whatever.

It was twenty minutes until eleven, so I made my way to the front of the property. A party bus and black truck waited in the circular driveway. I stood out there alone for ten minutes before Clarke’s friends spilled out of the house. Blessed in various shades and sizes, every woman looked good. Still, none looked better than the pretty lady in the knee-length, pink, latex dress. Had we been alone, I would’ve bent her over and fucked her outside.

“You’re drooling, Ishmael.” She flirted when she reached the party bus.

“Have you seen what you look like? I can’t help myself.” I stepped closer and peered down at her. “Don’t get nobody in trouble tonight.”

Clarke playfully rolled her eyes, then joined her friends.

If anyone questioned Clarke's influence, the crowd of people littering the club's entrance demolished the doubt. As I opened the door for the ladies, I noticed the other guards were already clearing a path.

Clarke's entourage led the way, while she stayed at my side. I tried to maintain a firm stance, but a small smile broke through while listening to the crowd yell Clarke's name.

In the midst of the chaos, a few folks started to get aggressive.

"Back up! Back up!" I warned them. "Give us some space."

The bass in my voice triggered Clarke to squeeze my hand. The thought that she felt unsafe made my body tense up. After a few minutes of maneuvering through the crowd, we entered the club and headed straight to the designated spot.

"Clarke! I'm so happy you made it!" The woman pulled her in for a hug. "I hope the ride over went smooth."

"Natalie, everything has been amazing. The villa is breathtaking. I couldn't ask for a better spot."

The lady clapped. "That's what I love to hear. Well, I have bottles and appetizers available for you and your friends. A host has been assigned to you. Let her know if you need anything else."

I acted like a shadow in the cut while Clarke and her friends hyped up the club and threw back shots of liquor. For almost two hours, they hopped on the mic and spit rap lyrics like they wrote and meant every word. I never thought listening to a woman rap about guns and drugs could be so appealing, but I had to adjust myself when Clarke's voice got me excited.

"Superman," she slurred. "I want to dance."

"You been dancing all night."

She reached up and toyed with the end of my glasses. "Stop! You know what I mean. Take me downstairs."

"There's a lot of rowdy people downstairs."

She poked the center of my chest. "Yeah, but that's why you're here. You won't let anything happen to me." She licked her lips. "Right?"

I gripped her hand and led her to the dancefloor.

"Come on, y'all. Clarke came downstairs to party with us. Let's give her some space to show out!"

The partygoers took heed and gave us room to breathe. Though I bobbed my head to the music, I felt out of place.

"Stop standing there like a statue and dance with me."

“I’m on duty,” I replied as a lady in all white twisted and bounced her ass against my leg. People nearby tried to hype me up to entertain her, but I turned my back.

“Don’t do her like that.” Clarke giggled. “You better catch it.”

“Stop playing. You would be okay with me dancing with another woman?”

She shrugged. “I don’t care about that. I know where you’re going at the end of the night.”

Drawn to her, my hand snaked around Clarke’s neck before I turned her around. Her body moved so fluidly, I wished I had singles. She didn’t rush her moves when she ground against me. Every move she made seemed intentional. I held onto the ends of her dress when I noticed it creeping up, but nothing in the world could make me stop her from enjoying the moment.

“You actin’ up,” I muttered in an intimate tone.

“And I only had a few drinks. I think I just missed being close to you. Two weeks was too long.”

Before I could respond, I detected more attention on us.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I suggested.

Clarke nodded while I motioned to Anthony that we were going to the section. Unlike the last time, I walked behind Clarke since she took off before I could tuck her into my side.

“Clarke,” I called out, right as a small man with glossy skin blocked off her path.

In a swift motion, the stranger snatched the diamonds off Clarke’s neck. He turned to run out of the exit, but he didn’t get away before I yanked him back by his hood.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Fuck you!” the man yelled before doing the worst thing you could do to somebody. He spat on me.

In unison, the crowd groaned as the fluid landed on the collar of my shirt. Logic escaped my body as I gripped his neck and slammed his head into the floor like it wasn’t made of bones. A voice in my head urged me to stop, but my hands kept going to work.

“Ishmael, that’s enough. Please. Stop!”

Most days, I prided myself on having self-control, yet the thought of a man playing with my woman and my manhood made me lose common

sense.

After what felt like forever, the club's security was the only ones who could pull me off the bitch boy. Reality and the night breeze hit me as they drug me outside, and I saw the blood covering my clothes.

By the time I caught my breath, Anthony and a few other guards came outside with Mrs. Rose marching behind them.

"Ishmael! Boy, you—"

"You can stop now," I interrupted her rant. "I'm not a boy. That's what you and the clown in the club must've forgotten."

I stepped around her when Clarke and her friends rushed out of the building. A panicked expression overpowered her face as she ran to the curb, then looked from side to side.

"Clarke!"

Her tense shoulders dropped before she raced over to me.

"Are you okay?" she asked, examining my face. "We need to get out of here."

"No. *You* need to get out of here. I can't run. If they want to charge me, they'll put a warrant out for my arrest. I don't want them coming to the house looking for me."

"The one thing I tried to save you from is the one thing I led you into." She sobbed.

"Don't cry, pretty lady. That muthafucka spit on me. Beating his ass was self-defense."

She nodded while swathing her arms around my midsection.

"Clarke!" her mother blurted. "We have to go. People are recording, and this isn't a good look for your brand."

Her head jerked back. "Fuck the brand! This is serious."

I grabbed hold of her face, forcing her to look at me. "She's right, Clarke. You have to leave before the police get here. Bad enough you're on camera rubbing that ass on me."

"But I'm a witness."

"If they want your testimony, they'll come find you."

The sound of sirens made my heart slam against my chest. Things I had tucked in the dark part of my mind rose to the surface. At least this time, I was going to jail for something I did, and not for someone else's crime.



BETWEEN NARROWED EYES, I concentrated on the Jenga piece I placed at the top of the tower. Anytime a book or being outdoors didn't capture my worrisome mind, I pulled out a board game. Jenga was typically a multiple-player game, but similar to chess, it didn't require multiple players more than it required a sharp mind.

When my phone lit up, I placed it face down without looking at the screen. Since I got released from jail, I stayed to myself. Regret was the last word I would use to describe the way I felt about fighting on Clarke's behalf, but still, I chose to lay low. Not only had I put myself on the bad side of social services, but my mom had also caught a charge in the few days I was gone.

I took a swig from my glass of whiskey, then leaned forward to make a move, but a knock at my door caused me to freeze. I thought of putting on a shirt, but considering the person at my door showed up unannounced, I didn't care to be courteous.

"Now, what the hell are you doing here?" I asked with a smile.

Clarke twisted her body from side to side and poked out her bottom lip. "I missed you. Plus, I wanted to give you these."

I didn't know how to feel about accepting the bouquet of long-stemmed roses. "These are for me?" I quizzed.

"Yes. After what happened in Vegas, I wanted to come see you and give you your flowers for being who you are to me. I know you've been in your head since the fight. I wanted to remind you you're appreciated, Superman."

My throat got tight as I listened to Clarke express her admiration for me. Thanks to my mom, I grew up believing I didn't deserve praise for things I was *supposed* to do.

When I noticed Clarke tapping her heels against the ground, I examined her outfit. Red high heels made her look tall, and her trench coat made her look mysterious.

"You out here looking like a sexy Inspector Gadget."

She giggled as she tugged on the belt of her coat. As the material came undone, I yanked her into the house.

"See, you walking around with no clothes on. I think you like seeing me in trouble."

She pointed to the Jenga tower. "Jenga? You're such an old head. I love it."

I placed the flowers on the table and sat back in my spot on the couch. Like my lap had her name on it, Clarke straddled my waist and roped her arms around my neck. Her butter-soft skin melted against my fingers when I massaged her neck.

“Why does it seem like the devil is trying to stop something beautiful from forming?” she asked.

“God has a job to do, and so does the hater beneath us.”

She groaned. “First, the drama with Chaz, then the chaos in Vegas. Now, you have to go to court. Are we worth the trouble?”

“Don’t let the devil get ahold of your tongue,” I replied. “Give me the lips.”

The instant her tongue touched mine, I pulled her further into me. Whatever shampoo she used saturated my nostrils, and the way she held onto me made me moan into her mouth.

“Baby,” she broke away to mutter. “Would I be wrong if I decided to stop filming the show?”

“You already know the answer to that. Integrity is important. Don’t soil your reputation because of someone else’s warped thinking.”

“I don’t know how long I can deal with my mom. Since we got back from Vegas, she’s been worse. Plus, the blogs are making up their own stories.”

“But we know the truth, right?” She nodded. I squeezed her thigh. “I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, baby. Yes!” Clarke giggled and squirmed in my hold.

Once she relaxed, I asked Clarke if she wanted to go bike riding.

“No, but I do want to learn how to ride your skateboard. I know they aren’t just mounted on the wall for nothing.”

A skeptical laugh skipped from my lips. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

Though I only knew the basics, I got excited thinking of teaching Clarke something new.

“All right. I got you, pretty.” I abandoned my seat. “First, I need to find something for you to put on.”

“Oh. Superman’s going to dress me?”

“A lot of my clothes are too big for you, but I got some scissors you can put to use.”

She lifted a finger. “And a belt.”

“Yep, so I can whup your ass for coming out the house damn near naked.”

“I planned to give you some pussy, but that can wait until later.” She picked up my phone resting near her leg. “Your phone is vibrating.”

I checked the screen and didn’t hesitate to answer when I saw Durk calling.

“Yo!”

“Damn, nigga,” Durk grumbled. “About time you answered the phone. When are we making a move on your boy?”

My eyes raced to Clarke, who was staring dead at me. I thought to excuse myself before I continued the conversation, but I didn’t want to hide anything from her.

“I haven’t decided when, but the play is still in motion. There’s no way he’s getting away with that shit. But, hey, let me call you back.”

As soon as I ended the call, Clarke sucked her teeth.

“You cannot be fucking serious, Ishmael. You just got out of jail a week ago. Not to mention, you have a pending court case. Let that shit go.”

“No,” I replied evenly. “Men like Chaz don’t give up easy. Tell me he hasn’t threatened you since he left your house. Tell me I’m wrong, and I’ll dead the issue.”

Clarke’s vision dropped to the floor.

“Exactly,” I blurted.

She shook her head while walking back to the couch. I watched her with a grimace as she put on her trench and grabbed her phone.

“Where are you going, Clarke?”

“I’m leaving. I doubted myself, but we aren’t good for each other. Just like my mom, you don’t trust that I can take care of things in my life, and I’m sick of it.” She gave me her back and marched to the door. “We’ve blurred lines, and now, you’re ready to take a charge for me. I can’t stand by while you do that. You’re fired, Ishmael.”

“Fired from being your bodyguard, or are you dismissing me from your life altogether?”

“You have my address. Write me a letter when they send you upstate.”

“That shit ain’t funny.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Neither is you playing with your freedom for a nigga who doesn’t value his own.”

“This is some bullshit. If we had a daughter and a nigga put his hands on her, how would you expect the man who loves her to respond?”

“I get it, but . . . ”

My ego started to crumble as I thought that maybe she was trying to protect him. “You want to protect the man you love?”

“Yes, but you don’t seem to understand that.”

CHAPTER 10
CLARKE

Sandstorm

Comfortable in the salon chair in my beauty room, I sat with my eyes shut while Sage gathered my hair into a ponytail. I didn't consider I would need help to do my hair when I voluntarily became a chicken head, but luckily, Sage loved to play in my hair, so he jumped at the chance to help.

When the music went from Cardi B to Kehlani, I hummed along with the song. Surprised by my positive energy during a heartbreak, I silently thanked God for giving me the strength to get out of bed when I really just wanted to climb into Ishmael's.

"Someone is chipper this morning. I'm happy to see you in good spirits."

I freed an easy breath. "Yeah. I'm doing something I love, so I can't complain. I spoke to Jerry earlier. He said the network is excited about the direction we're taking the show."

"That's good news. I know you were worried that the bigwigs only wanted footage of you throwing ass on a yacht and fists in the club," he kidded. "Hmm. Have you spoken to—"

"No," I interjected. "It's been a week, and I don't think I will. Ishmael is so set on protecting me, but he won't allow me to do the same for him."

"That sounds like something you two can get over."

A swoosh of air fled through my nostrils. "Not if he can't put his pride to the side," I muttered. "Enough about me and my disastrous love life. Are

you ready for your vacation?”

“I am, but I would feel better knowing my favorite person is in one piece.”

I untucked my bent legs and sat up straight in the chair. “I’m good. I promise! Even with a broken heart, I’m ready to get back to the dancefloor. If things get too heavy, I’ll just go shopping.”

We shared a laugh at my *girl math answer*, but we were interrupted by his phone. I sat quietly while he spoke to whoever was on the line. I could tell by Sage’s tone that the call was work-related.

“Was that the new guard?” I asked after he slid his phone into the pocket of his slacks.

“Yeah. He’s downstairs with your mom, so let’s get a move on it.”

I rolled my eyes at the idea that my biggest critic would be a witness to a vulnerable moment. I hadn’t worn a leotard in front of other people in four years. I hadn’t attended a class in five. Rusty was an understatement when it came to my dance skills, and I didn’t need my mom’s judgment to play on my insecurities.

I draped a peacoat over my dance fit, then draped a crossbody bag across my chest. My call time was ten, and I wanted to make a good impression on the teacher by being on time and dressed accordingly. It was bad enough that the studio had to make accommodations for the filming crew.

A second call from Rock led us downstairs, where my mom waited in my black truck. Only in her presence for a second, I noticed a mean mug disturbed her fresh Botox.

“Hello to you, too, Mother.”

“Hey. Why wasn’t I informed about the location change for today?”

I ran my tongue over the edges of my teeth. “It’s obvious you know something. We’re doing things a little different this season.”

She snarled. “Different or safe? I can tell you got some bullshit up your sleeve, Clarke. You’re going to ruin your reality career with this *better-than* persona.”

As she interrogated me, I recalled Ishmael’s silly but truthful joke about me being in charge.

“I’m not going to defend how I want to present myself to the world. If I choose to dance on a cloud instead of fighting and promoting a toxic relationship, that’s my decision.”

She dusted off her hands as if ridding herself of me. “All right, smart ass. I’m going to let you bump your head. You’ll crawl back when you need me to nurse you back to health. Just like I told you that the fling with you and Ishmael wouldn’t last.”

At that point, my mom didn’t deserve to know the details of my love life, so I put on my shades and relaxed until we got to the studio. By the time we pulled up, Jerry waited outside at the curb. As soon as I stepped out of the truck, he roped his arm around mine and whisked me off before anyone else could get to me.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“No problem. Judging by the voicemail I received from your mom a little while ago, I assumed the car ride would be tense.”

I smirked. “You know us so well.”

Aside from the dance instructor, Kori, there were two cameramen and three dancers in the large room. I didn’t know if the small class size was a strategic decision, but the less eyes, the better.

“Ms. C. Rose!” Kori walked over and embraced me. “I’m so happy to welcome you back to your happy place.”

“That is music to my ears. I appreciate you allowing us to film at your studio. I know the cameras and all that jazz are . . . a lot.”

The pretty lady with the honey brown skin placed her hands on her midsection. “It’s an honor. I love providing a space and opportunity for a fellow dancer.”

“I needed to hear that,” I admitted. “Where should we start?”

I removed my jacket, instantly conjuring a laugh from the back of the room. I peered over my shoulder to see my mother smiling with a camera in her face. It wasn’t one of those proud, nurturing smirks, but a condescending grin.

“You are too thick for that costume, C. Rose,” my mom suggested in a sarcastic tone. “Girl, you are going to make a fool out of yourself.”

Kori’s mouth fell into a disgusted shape. “Do I need to make this a private session?”

“You sure don’t. I’ll be quiet.” My mom raised her palms in the air.

For the most part, we went through basic stretches and warm-ups before Kori taught me a jazz number. The bass from the music tickled the bottom of my feet, ushering a smile onto my face. My attention to detail helped me through the steps, and despite the weight I’d gained over the years, my

stamina was top tier. Like riding a bike, I remembered to keep my shoulders squared or to shift my weight to the ball of my foot to increase my speed while turning.

Enthralled with the sensation of freedom, I didn't remember the cameras were in the room until Jerry asked if we could add ballet into the mix.

Once my lesson was done, I had a one-on-one conversation with Kori about my plans to convert the property I inherited into a dance studio. We planned to meet again—without Jerry and the cameras—and she asked that I have a sports physical done before our next lesson.

Though I had more scenes to film, I had a few hours to kill before I had to be in front of the camera. A quick call to my doctor gave me the opportunity to complete my physical without having to wait weeks.

"Mom, we're about to run to Dr. Stewart's office. I want to get my physical handled."

"That's fine. I want to see how much you weigh. You think because you carry it in your ass and hips, it doesn't matter."

"Mom, if you're going to be nasty about this, maybe you should skip the doctor's appointment. Jerry isn't coming, so there won't be any camera time."

"Clarke, stop talking to me." She snarled. "Sage, call Rock and tell him we're coming out."

Just like during our ride to the studio, I remained quiet until we reached our destination. The less I spoke to my mom, the less I ran the chance of being discouraged.

The doctor's office was empty, so we were escorted to a room within a few minutes of arriving. Since I was only getting a simple check-up, I didn't stop my mom when she followed me. Instead, I asked Sage to come to the back as well.

"Ms. Clarke," Dr. Stewart sang when she joined us in the room. "Is everything okay? You're not due for your semi-annual appointment for another three months."

"Well, I need a sports physical."

"Sports physical? Okay. What are you getting into?"

"A fairytale," my mom answered in a mocking tone. "She has the nerve to try to get back into dance."

“Mama. Please. Stop.” I offered my doctor a smirk. “I’m taking classes with Kori Soles, and her studio requires every student have a physical in their file.”

“Aww, Clarke! I love to hear that. I remember you coming to me for your first physical. Whew. You’re making me feel old,” she declared before seizing the clipboard hanging on the door.

It was quick, but I saw Dr. Stewart’s perfectly arched brows leap up her forehead before crashing down.

“Is everything okay?” I quizzed.

“Yeah. I just think you might have to rework your plan. You may have to put the dance recital on hold and start planning your baby shower.” She carried air into her nose. “You’re pregnant, Clarke.”

My neck jerked back. “Girl. That’s not funny.”

“Comedians don’t make enough money for me, honey.” She grinned as she stepped over to me. “I can run a blood test or complete a vaginal ultrasound, but the stick is positive.”

A burn flared behind my eyelids when I tried to hold my emotions in, but that didn’t last long. Silent tears rolled down my face when my head fell to the side, giving me a clear view of the mischievous smirk on my mom’s face. I had just started to accept the idea that I had to give Ishmael up, and now, I may be attached to him forever. I had my reasons for cutting him off, and I was afraid the news I’d just received wouldn’t be enough to stitch us back together.

“Every time I take one step forward, it feels like I get knocked two steps back,” I muttered.

My mom scoffed. “You didn’t get knocked down. You got knocked up. You love saying you’re grown. Now, you’re acting like you don’t know what happens when you have unprotected sex.”

Though she was right, I couldn’t appreciate her brash tone. I knew hopping on Ishmael’s dick would produce more than a body rocking orgasm. That didn’t mean I needed the truth thrown in my face.

While I had a silent panic attack, Dr. Stewart’s voice merged with the background when she asked Sage and my mom to leave. My mom argued her down, but the mention of security made her abandon her seat. The last thing she needed was a blog to get a tip that she was showing her ass in the nice part of town.

As the realization of the news sank into my consciousness, my skin flooded with goosebumps. Air rose up in my throat, but there was a knot blocking its path. I was lying down, yet the room spun, causing my head to fall into a dizzy spell.

“Clarke. Clarke, look at me. Breathe through whatever you’re feeling right now.”

The sensation of a hand wrapped around my ankle welcomed me back into reality.

“This can’t happen. Not right now.”

“Clarke, you have options. You don’t have to decide anything today. The only thing you need to accept is that you’re pregnant.”

“It’s not that I don’t want my baby,” I clarified. “I just want my man too.”

No matter how much advice Dr. Stewart offered, it was hard to see the beauty in my situation. Ishmael was sick of my shit. He didn’t want anything to do with me, and the thought of being pregnant by a man who didn’t want me made me as nauseated as morning sickness.

A knock at the door sent my focus to the opposite side of the room.

“That’s probably my mom. I know she’s having a fit out there. God. I hope she doesn’t tell anyone,” I rambled. “Can you tell me how far along I am? I mean, I know you *can* . . . I’m ready.”

“Of course. Do you want to call your family back inside?”

“No. It’s just me. I want to be alone.”



TWO WEEKS later

I strutted through the park with a few castmates behind me, security leading the way, and fans surrounding us. Since my doctor’s visit, I hadn’t accepted any booking that wasn’t already on the calendar, but I couldn’t say no to the community event.

“The hood niggas are out and looking lovely!” Junie grabbed her knees and popped her ass. “Mrs. Rose, you don’t like a roughneck every now and then?”

“Hell no!” My mom sharpened the corner of her upper lip. “I hate being around hood rats, and this isn’t the type of place to find a man.”

I tugged on my mom's arm, guiding her a few paces ahead of the pack.

"Mom, most of the people who sponsored the event are here. There's nothing wrong with having a relationship with the community. Please don't say anything crazy."

"I don't want to hear that. Just look out for guns. You're carrying my next meal ticket."

"You say things like that with so much pride," I replied sarcastically.

"Not at all. You're having a baby, and you don't have a husband. There's nothing to be proud of."

I repaid her snarky comment with a toothless smile.

"You had a common law marriage with my dad; that doesn't count. And, I'm happy you feel that way about my baby. That means you should have no reason to share your disappointment with a soul."

I knew it was pointless to try and sway her pompous attitude, so I walked off and left her to walk with Sage, Junie, and Bhila.

"C. Rose! Can I have an autograph? A picture, too!"

I grinned at the cutie with two-strand twists. She didn't look any older than eleven—too young to watch my content. Still, I posed for the selfie and signed the pair of jazz shoes she inched in my direction.

"I'm so happy you came to the competition. Are you dancing today?"

"Not today, but hopefully soon." I winked before giving her a hug, then walking off to the judges' table.

As my vision panned across the field, I slipped my hands in the pockets of my denim shorts. I had been keeping a low profile, but it felt good to see all the brown faces in the park. The place was known to house criminals and drug dealers, yet people forgot about the kids and mothers occupying the space. Though my mom initially declined the request to be part of the function, I followed up and confirmed my attendance. My decision was authentic, but it was also my way of establishing my presence in a community I wanted to be a part of.

The talent show was an annual event hosted by a Silk Hills basketball player. The team logo being on the flyer was always enough to bring out motorcycle clubs and churchgoers.

Before I could make it to my seat, Derrick Chambers approached me. The giant was so tall, even my new guard had to look up to confirm who he was.

Surrounded by an audience, Derrick pulled me into his chest and squeezed me tight. Out of kindness, I returned the gesture before stepping back and sliding my hands in my back pockets.

“Clarke Rose.”

“Derrick Chambers. It’s good to see you.”

He licked his big, pink lips before saying, “Oh, trust me. The feeling is mutual. I haven’t seen your pretty ass since we hosted Club 28 together.”

“That’s right. I remember you had the girls going crazy.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “All I recall is asking you for your number, and you curved me.”

“I had to be a good girl. I had a man.”

“*Had?*” He massaged his full beard. “I like the sound of that. I may have a chance to take you out after all.”

My belly became a sinking stone at the idea of dating someone else.

“How about you escort me to my seat? We can talk about everything else once the show is over.”

“I’m a patient man. I can work with that.”

I hooked my arm around his and followed his steps. Even with stacks of diamond chains around his neck, Derrick mobbed through the park like he dared someone to touch him. When I thought about it, his demeanor reminded me of the kind man I had pushed away.

“How long have you been hosting this event?” I asked to reroute my thoughts.

“This is the seventh year. Truthfully, I got the idea from a kingpin from a hood on the East Coast.”

“Really? He used to host Pop-Lock contests?”

Derrick dropped a laugh into his fist. “Something like that. Aside from the festival and talent show, I host a Thanksgiving and Christmas giveaway every year.”

“Goodness. That’s a beautiful way to give back. Anything you have coming up, count me in.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

Once we reached the judges' section, Derrick took a moment to introduce me to everyone at the table. We exchanged a few pleasantries, and by the time the small talk had worn dry, a thick lady dressed in a denim jumpsuit walked across the stage. She introduced each judge, then started the show.

The first performer came to the stage carrying a saxophone. He was an older man but two-stepped to the mic.

“Mr. Henry, we always look forward to seeing you.” Laura smiled. “What song will you be playing for us?”

“You know better than that, baby. Just step back and catch the groove.”

Mr. Henry started his performance, and about a minute in, the audience began singing along to his rendition of “Ribbon in the Sky.” Smooth and experienced, he floated across the platform, playing his instrument like it was an extension of his existence.

Though he delivered an even tempo melody, Mr. Henry’s act seemed to loosen everyone up. By the time Laura returned to the stage, I relaxed in my chair and stopped drumming my fingers against the table.

“Our next group is a community dance team straight out of Silk Hills.”

Oh shit!

“The girls range from ages six to sixteen, and they study everything from ballet to majorette dance. Put y’all hands together for YND!”

Unable to settle down, I twisted around in my seat and searched the audience. Regardless of our short time together, I remembered Ishmael’s sister mentioning her dance team.

Between squinted eyes, I scanned the crowd until my gaze landed on a row of memorable faces. Like a photographer in the company of her muse, I gagged over Ishmael’s side profile. His lips were oiled, and the sunlight sparkled against his brown complexion. Dressed down, Ishmael traded in his business wear for a Supreme graphic tee and denim shorts. A pair of buffs I had never seen outlined his eyes, and his diamond Eshu chain sat on his chest. His leer held tight to the stage, but his best friend stared a hole into me. When she moved to alert Ishmael of my presence, I shook my head before giving her my back.

Fuck!

We hadn’t spoken in three weeks, though I knew we needed to have a conversation. Ishmael swore I had some type of allegiance to Chaz, when the truth was, I wanted to keep *him* safe. Ishmael already went to jail behind my shit. Deep down, I believed separation was the only way I could ensure that didn’t happen.

As expected, YND’s performance was amazing. Their transitions from majorette to jazz were beautiful, and when they stepped like a sorority, the

crowd got hyped. I don't know if my mind was playing tricks on me, but I could've sworn I heard Ishmael's voice calling my name.

Another six performers, ranging from a magician to a praise dancer, hit the stage before we submitted our score cards. While I waited for the winners to be called, I decided to upload a few photos to my Instagram story. As soon as I opened the app, my screen was flooded with notifications. The images of me and Derrick's embrace had already hit the internet.

"All right, everybody. We have a winner." Laura's spunky tone captured my attention. "First, I want to thank everyone who participated. You did an amazing job, and for being brave enough to get up here, Nike is hooking you up with a swag bag."

I wasn't surprised when she read the top three winners, and of course, Isabella's team snagged first place.

Though I was ready to go once the trophies were handed out, Jerry and his crew announced they needed to get extra footage around the park.

I joined my mom, Sage, and the ladies, but when Isabella waved in my direction, I knew I couldn't leave without speaking.

"I'll be right back."

"No, you won't. There isn't anything for you to talk to them about." She pointed to my stomach. "You have a family with Chaz that you need to worry about. You need to get out of your feelings. You and Chaz can be cashing in on endorsements."

"My pregnancy and my baby are not for sale."

She waved me off. "Only because you don't know how much they're worth. That's all right. That's what your mama is here for."

I may have been wrong for not telling my mom about the paternity of my baby, but I didn't trust her with that information. I thought it was obvious Superman and I were hunching. However, her sly remarks proved otherwise. Sadly, I believed she enjoyed the idea since Chaz would let her have her way, and Ishmael wasn't going for it.

Regardless of my mom's warning, I strolled over to Essen and Izzy near the stage. Ishmael was nowhere in sight, making me fearful that he would pop up at any moment.

"Hey, beautiful!" I greeted the talented teenager. "You and your team did a fabulous job, Isabella."

She pressed her chin against her chest while twisting from side to side. "Thank you. You were a bomb dancer, so that means a lot coming from you. I even made Ish convert his garage into a dance area since I moved in."

I went still. "Oh. You live with your brother now?"

"Yeah. I moved in last week," she answered. "Are you dating Derrick Chambers?"

I snickered. "No. Where did you get that idea?"

"The internet. I saw my brother looking at a post on Instagram before he shooed me away."

"Isabella, I'm not dating anyone," I replied, hoping she would go back and share the message with her brother.

Essen looked me up and down as she grabbed her hips. "I'm happy you came over here. I thought you were going to leave without speaking to me."

"Of course not," I lied. "I just finished taking pictures with the kids. How are you?"

"I'm good. *You're* glowing."

A nervous laugh slipped through my lips. "Girl. It's the sun."

"Yeah. Okay," she replied, her voice laced with doubt. "I see you're filming again. You got the girls out here twerking to get on camera."

"Little do they know, it's not always as good as it's cracked up to be," I declared in a faraway tone. "I'm about to head to another location to film. I just wanted to come over and say hi. I'm happy I ran into you guys."

Essen pulled me in for a hug. "It was good to see you, Clarke. Don't be a stranger."

Proud that I made it through the conversation without asking about Ishmael, I freed an uneasy breath as I walked away. I made it a few feet away from the parking lot before Chaz's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," I grumbled. "Go home, Roger! There is no reason for you to be here or speak to me. The only reason I haven't put your ass in jail is because of your babies. I refused to be the reason you can't provide for them."

A distant look narrowed his eyes. "You keep saying there's nothing to talk about, but according to the text I got from your mom this morning, we got *a lot* to talk about. I thought her weird ass was being messy, but then I read the article."

My head jerked back. "What are you talking about?"

He waved his phone in my direction, and I snatched it from his grasp. My eyes raced across the screen, soaking in every word of my business being on the internet. The article was written in a cutesy way, but the details could only come from one of two people.

“This is a lie. This is wrong. We are not having a baby!”

Chaz’s sly grin morphed into a flat line. “We aren’t, but *you* are?”

“That’s not what I said,” I answered in a rush.

His long fingers reached for my hair, but I side-stepped his affection.

“If you touch me again, you’re going to jail or hell. It all depends on how I feel that day.”

“After finding out you’re having my baby, I’m willing to take the charge or time with the devil.”

In the midst of the argument, a few girls walked by and offered us congratulations. Chaz beamed at the idea of being attached to me, whereas I got the urge to puke at the thought. It was bad enough that Derrick hugged me tight enough to start a rumor. Now, Chaz was under the impression we were going to be a family.

Giving the nuisance my back, I spun around and stomped off to the parking lot. When I approached Rock, I could tell by his expression that he was ready to deliver an affirmation.

“Not right now, Rock. I don’t want to hear it,” I snapped. “Do me a favor and call my mom a car. She can’t be trusted. Her and her big mouth ass can’t ride with me anymore!”

CHAPTER II

CLARKE

Grown Woman

Most times, I crawled into a hole when my business hit the internet. This go around, I put on my finest threads, jade-colored stones, and walked into my lawyer's suite with my head held high. Although I was fine with attending the meeting alone, Sage insisted on tagging along, and I accepted his support. Lately, he was the only person I knew who was in my corner.

We sat in the office, gossiping for about five minutes before Kelis Troy joined us in the office.

"No mom today?" she asked while relaxing in her oversized leather chair.

"Nope. She won't be attending any meetings with me from now on. I'm dissolving our contract."

"Wait. Are you serious? You two have been a team since I became your lawyer."

"So you should know how serious I am. I want to update my will too."

Kelis removed her glasses, then reclined in her seat. "Well, Clarke, even though you're terminating your manager, she's entitled to revenue on deals she secured on your behalf."

"That's fine. I'm not against sharing the money. I just don't want to share the same space."

Sage fanned himself. "Whew. This feels like a divorce."

"More like a healthy separation," I replied.

“Healthy?” Sage quizzed. “You know your mom better than that. She already goes crazy when you go missing. Imagine what she is going to do when she learns you cut her off.”

“I expect it, and I can handle it. I just want my freedom. My mom separated me from anyone who loved me differently, even when she wasn’t loving me right. I won’t allow her to play games with my baby.”

Kelis’s eyes crinkled with a smile. “So the rumors are true? Are you and Chaz coming to see me about a prenup next?”

“No.” My head fell. Not out of shame, but because I yearned for the man whose baby I carried. “I’m not having a baby with Chaz.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t have to worry. Ishmael isn’t the type of man who would come after my money or assets.”

“Ishmael? Your bodyguard?” She pepped up. “I remember that name on a non-disclosure I filed away the other day.”

“That’s him.” My breast swelled with an inbreath. “How long will it take to serve her the paperwork?”

“I’ll have it handled within forty-eight hours.”

Satisfied, I freed a sigh of relief. It was unfortunate that I had to pay to get out of a toxic relationship, but some things were priceless.

“Since we’re on the subject of contracts, have you figured out how you’re going to handle your liquor contract?”

I sat up in my seat. “Actually, I have. I’ve spoken to my producer, and he’s going to shoot a mini-commercial with my friends.”

She nodded. “That’s a solid plan. The contract only requires you to be in the visual with the product, not use it, so that’s perfect.”

Kelis excused herself, leaving me alone with Sage and his pointed stare.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You’ve been telling everybody who asks that you’re not having a baby with Chaz. When are you going to talk to Ishmael about it?”

“When the baby goes off to college,” I joked.

“Ain’t nothing funny about that. Ishmael is a good dude. He deserves to watch his baby grow.”

“I know. I’m just . . . scared. I don’t know how to tell him since, for weeks, I haven’t addressed the rumors. Chaz’s stupid ass is fueling the lies, when he knows we weren’t having sex.” My racing heart caused me to palm

my chest. “I’m scared Ishmael will reject me. Us. I don’t want to hear him declare we’re better off as parents and nothing more.”

“Then that makes you no better than my mama,” Sage declared. “You can’t keep a baby away because her daddy may not want you.”

“I know,” I spat out. “I wouldn’t do that. I guess I’ve just been hoping he’ll come see me. He’s the one who couldn’t put his ego to the side. I feel like he forced me to make the choice for us. Why do I have to make the first move?”

“Girl, Ishmael is a grown ass man. It’s his job to protect you. You should have rewarded him instead of punishing him for it. When you love someone, you put your pride aside, so they’ll have room to feel. You sacrifice being right for the sake of peace. The thought of rejection can’t keep you apart.”

I tilted my head and dressed my friend with a sharp stare. “And how do you know I love him?”

“Because you’re so afraid he doesn’t love you.”

Once I completed my meeting, Sage and I planned to have lunch. Pregnancy cravings weren’t an issue, but my appetite had me eating like an elephant. Almost three months into my pregnancy, I was apprehensive to see how much I’d be eating once I hit my third trimester.

While we waited for our car to arrive, my phone started ringing. I didn’t have the number saved, so I didn’t answer the call, but when the person called back, I answered.

“Hi, Clarke.”

“Mm. Hi.”

The caller smacked their lips before saying, “You don’t know who this is, huh?”

A silent spell gave me a minute to search my memory for the voice.

“I know exactly who this is,” I replied after a while. “How are you, Izzy?”

“I’m okay. Me and Essen are headed to Venice to look for dresses. I know it’s last minute, but you said you would come and—”

“I got you,” I cut off her rambling. “Where are you stopping first? I have a few friends who own boutiques over there. They can help us out.”

The sound of Izzy’s enthusiasm comforted my heart. I had gotten so used to giving that I forgot what it felt like to feel appreciated.

Izzy continued singing my praises, then dropped her location, which wasn't far from where I was. I promised to see her soon before I ended the call.

"What?" I griped, seeing the irked expression on Sage's mug.

"*What?*" He mocked my high-pitched tone. "Clarke, you are not slick. You won't call the man, but you kicking it with his best friend and little sister? Thirsty."

"Maybe a little. There's also a part of me that feels obligated to keep my word. Izzy needs people who can be trusted."

"Oh. I believe all that." He nodded. "I also know you want to get your bodyguard back."

I rested my chin on my shoulder. "Two things can be true."

On my way to meet Izzy and Essen, I made sure to call the owner of Violet's Kisses and asked if they could arrange an hour of private shopping. She gave me some pushback, but once I promised to promote some pieces from her store, she agreed to accommodate us.

A few paparazzi were hanging out on the popular block when I arrived, so I kept my head down when I entered the store. When I checked my surroundings, I was happy to see the boutique was empty except for Essen and a few employees. I waved at the ladies behind the counter, then joined Essen in the lobby near the fitting rooms.

"Hey, love! I'm sorry I'm late." I hugged Essen tight.

"No apology needed. After the lady at the front desk told us that you arranged for us to have private time in the store, you were forever good in my book."

I blushed. "Yeah, I didn't want Izzy's moment to be filled with my photo requests. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" Essen's brows twitched toward each other. "Girl, I'm a princess, too. I love exclusive shit."

I pointed to the Chanel bag sitting on her lap. "Oh. I've been a witness." I snickered. "Where's Izzy?"

"In the room, trying on her first choice. She should be out in a second."

"Sounds like I'm right on time. I really appreciate the invitation. I'm an only child, and thanks to working at a young age, I missed out on school dances and picking out looks with my friends."

"It's my pleasure. Besides, Isabella was adamant about calling you, even when her brother told her not to."

“Damn.” I shook my head. “I didn’t even think to ask if Ishmael was okay with all of this.”

“Well, I can tell you he didn’t have a problem with it. He just assumed Isabella was being worrisome.”

Though I was unsure if Essen was being truthful or if she was just trying to put my mind at ease, I put my worries to the side and chose to leave it alone.

“Would you ladies like a glass of champagne?” One of Violet’s employees came over, holding a serving tray.

Essen raised her hand. “I’ll take one.”

“I’ll take water.”

For a second, I felt Essen’s gaze haunt me. I didn’t appease her curiosity by explaining my drink choice. Today was all about Isabella, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Right as my worries got the best of me, Isabella appeared from behind the curtain in a teal, strapless dress covered in stones. I thought the cleavage was a bit much, and I could tell when Essen shook her head that she thought the same.

“That’s beautiful, but I think it’s showing a lot of skin,” I proposed. “An older lady once told me: A classy woman shows legs or shoulders but never both.”

Isabella wagged her finger at me. “That’s a good one. Somebody needs to tell the girls at my school. They always look slutty in halter tops and booty shorts. Next one!”

While Isabella changed into the next dress, I decided to post a few pictures of myself in the boutique. I was only able to snap a few pictures since I became distracted by a message from an unsaved number. Whoever sent the message also put me in a group chat with Ishmael.

Superman: Who is this?

(616)331-0908: You know who the fuck this is, bitch boy!

“This nigga has lost his mind,” I grumbled as I responded to who I assumed was Chaz.

(616)331-0908: Fuck you, Clarke! You think you’re Kim Kardashian. Well, bitch, I’m Ray J!

The video Chaz sent to the group chat caused air to escape my lungs. I remembered the day clearly, and though I wasn’t doing anything other women hadn’t done, I didn’t want it on display for the world to see.

Instead of texting him back, I sent a voice note explaining how I was sending him to jail.

(616)331-0908: I don't give a fuck about that. I'm going out with a bang, baby.

Superman: Keep me out of y'all shit.

I responded, trying to convince Ishmael we didn't have anything going on. I also reminded Chaz he wasn't supposed to contact me.

(616)331-0908: I'm not stopping until I'm ready. You want me to share you with the world? I got you, bitch.

I didn't know if Chaz's warnings were honest, but they were staggering. Tears chased one another down my cheeks as the weight of Chaz's threat slammed into my chest. My vision scattered around the room, landing on my horrid reflection in the three-way mirror.

"Clarke!" Essen yelled. "Are you okay? Talk to me!"

I fanned myself as I sat back on the couch. "I'm all right. Water. I just need water."

One of the ladies dressed in all-black switched off when I spoke my request.

In between slow blinks, I saw Essen hike up her dress and kneel at my side. "Is there anyone I should call?"

Embarrassment shimmied up my bones at the idea that I had no one to call in case of an emergency. My mom and I weren't talking. Simone was still unreliable and upset. Sage was my only option, but I had leaned on him so much in the last few months, I refused to call him.

"Clarke, I think you should go to the hospital."

I shook my head. "It's not that bad."

"Aren't you pregnant?" Essen quizzed in an unsure tone. "I didn't want to pry earlier, but if you are, maybe you need to eat or lay down."

"I just need . . ."

Those were the last words I remembered saying before everything went black.

CHAPTER 12

ISHMAEL

Paralyzed

“Ishmael Breezy Brown!” Durk tapped my leg. “You sure this the move you trying to make?”

My vision stayed out the window, though I raised my gun. “What does it look like?”

Church grunted from the driver’s seat. “It looks like you’re about to get yourself into some shit.”

I glanced in his direction. “You think I’m making the wrong move?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I could never fault a man for protecting his lady. I just want to remind you, once you take a life, you can’t go back.”

Chaz may have gotten away with the foul shit when it was just him and Clarke, but when he included me in the group chat, he included me in the bullshit. He made it clear he wanted to see me, so I decided to fulfill his wish as soon as possible.

Durk sat up in his seat and put his concentration on the homes we passed. “Forrest Gump, are you sure this is the neighborhood this nigga kicks it in? I thought he was a producer.”

“It wasn’t hard to figure it out. He put his every move on social media. I know for sure he’s from Sway Gang.” I paused. “It’s not even about Clarke. It’s about respect.”

Silence crowded the truck, then seconds later, a storm of laughter took over.

“Nigga.” Loso grabbed his forehead. “I know you didn’t just say that. You sound like a—”

“You don’t even have to say it.” I chuckled. “I already know. That’s the first thing a woman says when she’s fighting over a nigga. This is different, though. Sending me texts and threatening me was his last mistake.”

Church crept down the street until he reached the address I gave him. The home appeared rundown, but there was a pack of niggas guarding the property like it was worth millions.

Showing up in anybody’s hood unannounced was risky, but after Chaz texted my phone, I pushed logic to the side.

At first, Durk insisted on going with me, then Loso, Shiloh, and Church pledged their presence. I repeatedly declined their offers to tag along, but by the time I came out of the restroom, everyone had already mounted into Church’s truck.

Like the kings we were, we hopped out of the truck and left it running in the middle of the street. A smirk swept across my face when I realized Chaz hung with a bunch of bitches. There was never a day a pack of niggas could show up on our turf and not be met at the curb with burners.

“What’s good? Who runs shit over here?” I addressed the group while Shiloh, Durk, and Loso hung a few steps back.

A short dude with faded golds in his mouth mugged me. “Y’all came over here dressed in all black like the fucking mob. Who the fuck are y’all supposed to be?”

“I’m going to ask you again before I handle you like you’re the one I’m looking for.”

An older gentleman sitting in a wooden chair on the porch told the frontman to fall back. I impatiently waited for the old head to reach the curb before I asked about Chaz.

“What did he do this time?”

“It doesn’t matter. I heard this is his hood.”

“Not anymore. That bitch got put off a week ago for doing some weird shit. What happen? He played you?”

“He played himself. He may not be from your hood, but you know where he hangs out.”

“I don’t know how you niggas think this works, but this ain’t that.”

All eyes fell to the ground when I dropped a backpack filled with seven thousand dollars at his feet. No matter how much they wanted to press,

when money was on the table, pride went out the window.

After *meeting* Chaz's homeboys, Durk and I went back to the clubhouse, while everyone else went home.

When we sat down, I swore I would have one drink and be done. But I made the mistake of drinking with Durk, which tossed that plan out of the window. He didn't have anything to do since Clover was out of town with their twins, and their baby was with his grandma.

"Aww, shit!" Durk slurred two hours into trading shots. "Your girl just walked in here."

My heavy eyes dragged to the table he pointed to, and I flicked him off when I recognized who he was referring to.

"Fuck you, and fuck her." I grimaced. "Why the hell does she keep popping up?"

"It looks like she's handling business."

I shook my head. "That doesn't explain why she's doing it *here*."

I hadn't seen Taylor since I'd dismissed her at Church's birthday party, and that was months ago. Her lips hung so low when she walked away, so I never thought I would see her again.

From the bar, we watched Taylor speak to a young lady and an older gentleman for nearly twenty minutes before she shook their hands and sent them on their way. If they knew like I did, they would've tossed her business card in the trash the second they got out the door.

I prayed she followed her guests' lead and left once she was done, but as soon as she had her things packed, she strutted over to us.

"Hey, you two," she spoke in a high-pitched tone.

Durk lifted his chin toward the ceiling, whereas I just mugged her.

"Taylor, why do you keep finding your way back up here?" I quizzed.

"You don't own the city, Ishmael." She rolled her eyes. "My client got in town late, and most places are closed. I knew the clubhouse was open and safe."

"Yeah. Okay."

I sat back and listened to Durk and Taylor catch up and reminisce until he announced his Uber was outside. I wanted to shoot him for calling one without telling me, but when Essen's number popped up, I got distracted.

"How did the dress shopping go?" I asked once I picked up the phone.

"It went . . . well. Are you still coming by to get the princess?"

“If I come over, I’m spending the night. I’ve been sitting in this bar for two hours, and my head is swimming.”

She hummed. “Okay. Yeah. That’s cool too.”

“Essen, are you sure everything is okay?”

“It will be once you get here.” She sighed. “I’ll see you soon.”

I stared at the phone like it was a strange fruit when I ended the call. I started to call her back, but I figured I could get more answers if I went to her house like she asked.

“Ishmael, I know I’m your least favorite person, but I know you hate spending a coin. I can drop you off wherever you want.”

I ignored her offer until I saw that the next Uber would take forty-eight minutes to arrive.

“Taylor, I’ll take you up on your offer, but please don’t try no weird shit. I’m not in the mood.”

I hated how excited she was when we walked to her car. She looked at me with a raised brow when I slid into the back seat, but she didn’t question me.

“This is nice,” I declared a few minutes after I gave her Essen’s address, and we got on the road.

“I appreciate that, Ishmael.” I watched her lick her lips in the rearview mirror. “I know it may not mean anything, but I am really sorry for hurting you. Don’t get me wrong; I don’t appreciate the way you responded, but that’s not for me to judge. You were transparent. I was holding things close to my heart. By the time I realized the damage, karma was already at my door.”

“It takes a thorough person to apologize, and it takes an honest one to admit some things are unforgivable. I gave you everything I had, and just like your apology, it wasn’t enough to keep us cordial. We don’t have to forgive each other. We just have to move on.”

When she turned on Essen’s block, I unfastened my seat belt. When I saw Clarke outside, I started to tell Taylor to keep going.

“Thanks for the ride, Taylor.” I dropped a fifty in her passenger seat.

I stepped out of the car, hoping she would speed off, but unfortunately, she climbed out of the driver’s seat

“Damn, Ishmael. I can’t get a hug?” Taylor opened her arms wide.

I opened my mouth to check her about being messy, but I didn’t have the chance since Clarke hurried off the porch and met us at the curb.

“Who the hell is this, Ishmael? I just got released from the hospital because of dehydration while carrying *your* baby, and you pull up to your best friend’s house with another bitch?”

Like someone had pressed pause on life, everything went still until I found my breath.

“What did you say?” I quizzed.

“You heard me.”

“I did, but I’m trying to pretend I didn’t. I deserve a better pregnancy announcement than this ghetto shit.”

“You may have gotten it had you not pulled up with another woman.”

“I don’t give a shit about her,” I declared. “She hasn’t mattered in years.”

Taylor snickered, then swung her door open. “I didn’t mean to start any trouble.”

“Yes, you did,” Clarke spat out. “And next time, I’m not going to spare you, bitch.”

When Tracy sped away, Clarke marched toward the house. The agonizing thought of continuing our separation triggered me to call her name.

“So you’re having my baby, and you still don’t want me? You’re still giving your loyalty to the man you love?”

Her chin crashed into her chest. “You took that the wrong way.”

“Then why didn’t you correct yourself?”

“Because you still wouldn’t have understood where I was coming from. You still would have fought me for putting you first.” She blinked back tears that I wanted to catch just so nothing that came from her went to waste. “I love you, Ishmael. I can’t stand back and watch you crash out over me. We have a baby to raise together. That’s the only person we go to war for.”

Though I couldn’t agree with her, I pulled Clarke’s face into my chest and shut my eyes when the scent of her hair got trapped in my nose. “I missed you. I missed you so fucking much.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you, Ishmael. I have been sick without you, and I did it to myself,” she cried. “Next time, I’ll be ready to ride instead of standing in the way. I know you got me. I just want to prove I got you.”



WITH EVERYTHING GOING on in my life, adding school into the equation was risky, but still I walked into the university's front office with my head held high.

Chaz was still in hiding, so I put my attention on shit that mattered.

"How are you, ma'am?"

A small, white woman sat behind the receptionist's counter. She peered up, then did a double take.

"Oh. My day is better now. How can I help you?"

Her obvious flirting hooked one side of my lips. "My name is Ishmael Harden. I have an appointment with an advisor at eleven."

She tapped a few keys on her keyboard, then focused on me. "I have you down for a meeting with Advisor Peterson. I'll let him know you're here."

"Appreciate you."

I spun around and searched for a seat. The lobby was partly empty, so I sat in a seat closest to the door.

To kill time, I skimmed through a magazine, yet the sensation of someone staring at me pulled my eyes from the pages.

"Can I help you?" I asked the only other person in the lobby.

She dropped her phone into her lap and placed both hands near her mouth. "Are you Ishmael Harden?"

I instantly grew anxious, hearing a stranger say my name. "Do I know you?"

"Not personally, but I love C. Rose. I run one of her fan pages," she explained. "We're so glad you're around and Chaz is out of the picture."

The sound of the hideaway's name made me shift in my seat. Since the night I rode down Chaz's block, he had been missing. I hired people to stay around his hangouts when I wasn't available, and he hadn't shown face. I may have let the issue go had Clarke not been pregnant, but the idea of him walking around freely when she was uncomfortable didn't sit right with me.

"Anyway, I won't talk your ear off. Just know, The Rosebuds support Superman and Lois Lane. We're glad you're around. She deserves to be happy."

Never one to live off the validation of others, I simply said, "Thank you."

Of all the things I aspired to be, I never wanted to be famous. The idea of people watching me made my skin crawl, and now, it was my new

normal.

“Mr. Harden.”

An older black man dressed in an expensive suit waved me over to a pair of double doors. It may have been wrong, but seeing someone who looked like me in such a high position in education was another confirmation that I was making the right move.

My meeting with Mr. Peterson lasted two hours, but luckily, I made it out in enough time to get Clarke to her appointment. She offered to reschedule, but I couldn't wait another day to see my baby.

Lately, she had been uneasy about staying at her condo, so I insisted on her staying with me and Isabella. I had to get used to living with two women in a short time, and it only furthered my prayer for a little boy.

“Baby. Are you almost here?” Clarke asked when she picked up the phone.

“Yes, ma'am. Come outside. I'm pulling up now.”

It was still surreal that we were about to be parents, but I didn't think I could have been more prepared. I knew God put us through what we may see as a hardship as a way to strengthen our shoulders for the next blessing. I believed he put me in a position to take care of Isabella so I would be prepared to nurture my own children.

After adjusting the radio, I glanced up to see Clarke stomping to my truck. I moved to get out and open her door, but she snatched it open before I could.

“Ma'am, why are you frowning?”

Her slim nostrils danced on the ends. “Tell me how the meeting went first.”

“It went just how I said it would. I'll be in school studying computer science forever, but I'll get it done.” I hunched a shoulder. “Now, tell me who pissed you off.”

“Somebody's been playing on my phone all morning. I hired people to work on the studio, and I don't want to change my number.”

I kissed the back of her hand. “Relax for me. I'll look into the number as soon as we get home. For now, I want you to live in the moment.”

“You're right. Checking on our baby is more important.” She squealed.

“Woman, why are you yelling?”

“Because we're having a baby. This is fucking crazy.”

“It was inevitable.”

She slapped my shoulder. “Don’t be cocky. Like you just knew I would be yours.”

“I didn’t believe it when we met, but the night you laid in my bed with your diamonds on, your phone out, and your body nearly naked, I knew you trusted me. I want to give you more reasons to. I love you, Lois Lane.”

“I love you, Superman.”

We sang along to D’Angelo’s debut album until we reached our destination. Thanks to Clarke’s rapport with her doctor, the office accommodated her request for a private appointment. We only needed thirty minutes, but we didn’t want our time interrupted.

We sat in the cold room for all of a minute before Clarke’s doctor walked in, singing her name. As soon as she shut the door, she looked me up and down with a smirk.

“This must be Dad.”

My pretty lady’s cheekbones reached for the roof. “Yes, Dr. Stewart. This is my daddy.”

I cut my eyes to her. “Bad girl.”

Her doctor laughed at our exchange while dressing her hands with a pair of gloves.

“Well, I see how you two ended up here,” she teased. “Clarke, during your last visit, we did a vaginal ultrasound, but today it’ll be on the belly. If my count is correct, you should be about eight weeks.”

Dr. Stewart covered Clarke’s belly with a blue gel and then rubbed the head of a long, gray instrument over her. A sound that resembled horses galloping packed the room only seconds later.

“Baby has a strong heartbeat,” Dr Stewart muttered.

Heat traveled in a slow wave over my face. “Strong like his daddy. Handsome like his daddy too.”

Clarke’s low hoot bounced off the walls as my joke landed. After being apart for weeks, I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing I wouldn’t have to live without that melody.

We made it home close to two, and after having lunch, Clarke announced she was going to take a bath. I gave her time alone while I straightened up the kitchen, but the sound of her screaming at the top of her lungs triggered me to drop everything in my hands to the floor.

Like a maniac, I busted through the bathroom door and froze when I spotted the horrified expression on her face.

“Clarke, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

I searched her body for any signs of damage before a chest-rocking sob brought her to her knees.

“It’s Chaz,” she muttered. “TMZ just reported that he committed suicide.”

CHAPTER 13
CLARKE
FORWARD

Lost in the music playing from my Bluetooth speaker, I watched my body in the mirrors. My studio was far from ready, but there were a few rooms in the spot I could occupy comfortably. Dance had always been my superpower, and I needed to feel invincible.

My heavy-lidded gaze sprang open when my music was interrupted by a call. I didn't want to be bothered, but I figured whoever was calling wasn't going to stop.

"Yes, Sage." I tried to mask the shakiness in my voice when I picked up.

"I wasn't calling to bother you. I just wanted to check on you. Are you still at the studio?"

"Of course. Lately, it feels like a safe haven."

"Clarke, you know you're welcome to spend a few nights with me."

"I know, and I love you for saying it. I'll hit you back. I was recording before you called."

He said a few departing words, then promised to check on me later in the day.

Once I turned the music back on, I played something with an upbeat tempo. Since I was familiar with the choreography for "Bongos" by Cardi B, I filmed myself doing the Sean Bankhead masterpiece with no intention of posting it.

I couldn't remember the last time I took a social media break, but the distance helped me think. Anytime I made the mistake of scrolling, I got my feelings hurt. There was either a post praising Chaz or a status demonizing

me. It was like, as soon as he died, he stopped being known as an abusive cheater and became a saint.

Winded and parched, I went to grab my water bottle when the song ended, but I choked on my spit when my ears caught the beat of the next song.

As soon as the bass dropped, so did my mood. I lay on my back with my vision launched on the ceiling of the studio. My overflow of emotions was what guided me to my spot. Nowadays, the studio was the only place I could purge. I didn't want to scare Izzy, and I didn't want to offend Ishmael. Though he never let it show on his face, I wondered if it bothered him to hear me grieve over someone else.

"I knew I would find you in here."

I looked over my head and saw my mom entering the room. As if she was a stranger, I quickly sat up and pulled my knees up to my chest.

"Clarke, you've only been working on this place a short time, and I see things are already coming together."

I gulped through a dry patch in my throat. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. I wanted to check on you."

I pushed my messy hair back. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." She inched closer until she was sitting Indian style. "I know things between us have been tense, but you're still my child. Tell me how you're *really* doing."

The second time she inquired about my mood, the levee that kept my tears at bay cracked at the seams.

"I don't know. I always knew I had to watch my words, but I never believed my thoughts had so much power. No one could tell me that my silent wishes for Chaz to disappear didn't somehow manifest into his demise." I filled my lungs with air. "I'm confused on how I *should* feel. I want to find peace in knowing he won't bother me again, but I'm not heartless like you—" I cuffed my lips. "I didn't mean it like that."

"You don't have to spare my feelings, Clarke. I get it." She shrugged. "I get upset with myself when I think about how much I act like my mother. She was a sharp-tongued lady who thought she could say what she wanted because she was honest. She raised me to be hard—even with those I love. It's not an excuse, but it's the truth. She taught me that love was honest, but we didn't get into the kind part."

“Wow. You’ve never told me that. Granny never showed me that side of her.” I scoffed. “That may make it worse. She was able to turn her toxic tendencies off and on. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Back then, I didn’t, but now, I’m everything she said I would be. Anyway, I thought your bodyguard would be close.”

I hesitated, unsure of how much I should share. Ishmael went to Vegas at four in the morning after I promised to FaceTime call every few hours. We hadn’t had time to enjoy the news of my pregnancy since the news about Chaz broke. Still, in between minutes of silence, he stole seconds to caress my belly and whisper sweet nothings to his little one.

“Ishmael’s handling the assault case. On another note, thanks for coming by. It means a lot to me.”

“You don’t have to thank me for doing what a mother is supposed to do. I hate how death brings people together, but I had to take a chance.” The line of her sight fell to the floor. “I understand why you cut me off, but I hope I can fix things between us. You are my only child, and you’re having your first baby. I don’t want to miss that experience.”

“Then you have to prove it. If Chaz’s death has taught me anything, I’ve realized we all leave a mark on the people we connect with. My baby isn’t a prop or an experiment.”

“I understand.”

We sat in mute for minutes before she started smiling. “I can already tell you’re going to be a better mom than me. I also know Ishmael has your back. For what it’s worth, I’ve always been fond of him.”

“It’s not worth much, because your opinion doesn’t matter,” I answered confidently. “At one point, you liked him a little too much.”

She dumped a girlish giggle into her palm. “Don’t do that. That man was never worried about me. When he started working off the clock, I knew he didn’t have eyes for anyone but you.”

“What’s good, baby mama!”

My eyes sprinted to the other side of the room, where Ishmael’s *sisters* crammed the doorway. The ladies were dressed like they were coming from four different events, but they looked good. Three of them strutted into the room with animated expressions, and Blaze displayed a grimace. I followed the path of her squint and recognized that her hazel eyes were drilled into my mom.

“Clarke,” my mom muttered as she stood. “I’m going to give you some time with your friends. I don’t have your new number, but you have mine. When you’re free, give me a call. Please.”

“I’ll call you, Mom.”

I waited until Mrs. Rose was out of the building, then I stepped to the ladies Ishmael treated like sisters.

“How did you lovely ladies know I was here?”

Clover, Durk’s lady, batted her curly lashes. “Superman told us.”

I let loose a short chuckle. “What do you mean?”

“When Durk called to check in, I asked about you. Ishmael said we could probably find you here. We came to take you out.”

My eyes raced to the two-piece Alo set I wore. “I don’t have any clothes.”

Stony lifted a garment bag. “That excuse won’t work. Everything in this bag has tags on it. I even included toiletries so you can freshen up. Now, go get extra pretty. We have a reservation.”

The garment bag held two big label fits, and as much as I wanted to choose the pink dress, my hands grasped the black Lacoste polo dress. All the crying I did over the last couple of weeks had my eyes puffy, so I put on the Dolce frames I wore to the studio and prepared to get into the sun.

“Where are y’all taking me?”

“Somewhere cute,” Essen replied. “I know you’ve been going through a lot, and Ishmael has been attached to your hip. We didn’t want you to forget you have a village even when the chief isn’t around.”

When we pulled into a parking lot, I tried to recall if I had ever been there before. The spot was on the north side of Silk Hills, located in a small shopping center with only three suites. I wanted to question the location for a second time, but instead, I took a few deep breaths and exited the car.

Inside the suite, vibrant colors tinted the walls and floors, and the table and chair setup reminded me of a paint and sip event. A tall, ebony beauty I assumed was the owner journeyed from behind a small table as we stepped through the room.

“Ladies! Welcome to Four Page Letter. How can I help you today?”

Essen took a few faltering steps. “We have a reservation booked for three o’clock.”

“Oh. You must be Essen.”

“I am. Nice to meet you, Jhene.”

Essen took the liberty of introducing everyone by name before Jhene asked us to get comfortable and find a seat.

“Since this is your first time here, I want to tell you a little about what we do.” She winked. “Four Page Letter is a haven for healing. We encourage our guests to use the board on your easel to brainstorm and purge before writing a necessary letter to someone in your life. A lot of times, we have things we want to say to our younger or older selves. Our daughters and sons. Whoever it may be, we urge you to put it on paper.”

“Damn. Where are the Kleenex?” Clover muttered what I was thinking.

Jhene grabbed a caddy of markers from underneath the table and then passed it to Essen. “I want you ladies to grab a few writing utensils while I find a good playlist and a bottle of wine.”

The essence of the place sparked my desire for transparency. I waited for Jhene to disappear down a hallway before I decided to pick the girls’ brains about something that kept me up at night.

“Let me ask you guys something.” I turned to the group. “Would I be crazy if I go to Chaz’s funeral?”

Blaze sucked her teeth. “Hell yeah. Fuck him.”

Stevie slapped the top of her hand. “Don’t do that, Blaze. Clarke, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. You and Chaz were together for years. Don’t let anyone make you feel bad about mourning the good parts of him.”

Stony nodded. “True, but that doesn’t mean she owes him a damn thing.”

“It’s not about him. It’s about her,” Stevie professed. “Have you talked to Ishmael about it?”

“That’s the last thing I want to do. For the last week, he’s held me, cooked for me, and let me cry freely without making me feel guilty about it. Ishmael will give me anything I want, including a ride to the cemetery, if I ask. I don’t want to talk to him about the funeral. I haven’t even told him about the letter.”

“Letter?” Essen repeated with raised brows.

“Yeah. Chaz’s mom texted me a few days ago. Apparently, he wrote more letters than we thought. After the way he named me throughout his suicide note, I’m scared to see what he wrote only for my eyes.”

Stevie caressed my hand like a nurturing big sister. “I’ve been through something like this, and I learned, sometimes, ignorance is bliss. There’s

nothing wrong with you reading the letter, but I say save it until you're ready to accept whatever it may say."

About ten minutes into our session of purging, I looked around the room and saw all the ladies had added words or phrases to their boards, while I sat in place, gnawing on my bottom lip. With so many emotions running through my body, I didn't know where to start.

"Are you good, Clarke?" Jhene walked over with a grin and kneeled next to me. I smirked and bobbed my head up and down. "Have you decided who you want to write your letter to?"

"I'm stuck," I admitted. "The only person I want to talk to is my unborn."

The ladies oohed and aahed at the comment, melting away the worrisome energy that plagued my mind.

"Every lesson, every accomplishment, every star you've planted, share that with your baby. Explain how their birth delivered a different part of you. Thanks to the internet, I know a little about the loss you've experienced, but you're here. I have a feeling your nugget is part of the reason. Write about it."

After my elder laced my boots, I got started on my masterpiece. The knot in my gut didn't disappear, but every stroke of my pen chipped away at the boulder.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my phone illuminate. I started not to answer, but I didn't want my silence to worry Ishmael.

"Hey, handsome."

"Mama, I miss you," he answered. "I just landed. Where are you?"

"In the streets with your sisters. They got me out of the studio." His muted response made me check my phone to ensure he hadn't hung up. "Are you still there?"

"I want to see you, Clarke. Drop your location. I'll wait outside until you're done."

"Ishmael, I need this moment alone. I'll call you once we're done. Okay?"

His breath blew thinly through the line. "All right, Clarke. Take whatever time you need."

CHAPTER 14

ISHMAEL

Devotion

“Oh my God.” Isabella groaned. “This line is so long.”

“I told you it would be, but you didn’t want to get up early. Don’t start complaining now.”

She smacked her lips. “Why not? You’ve been complaining about coming to see Mommy ever since the first time I asked.”

My mom had been locked up for a few weeks, and every week, Isabella asked if we could visit her. Had I been her age, I may have had the same desire to see my mom no matter the circumstances. In my case, I was a grown ass man, sick of dealing with my mother’s bullshit. After going to court for my own case, the last thing I wanted to do was voluntarily walk into a courtroom or jail.

“I know you’re mad at her, but she needs our support, Ish.”

“I do support her. Her commissary is laced.”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Eww. You sound like a deadbeat that pays child support but doesn’t see his kids.”

“That’s the problem. Mariah isn’t my damn child. Everybody seems to forget that.”

We stood in line for almost an hour before we reached the last security check-in and were directed to the visiting room. There were a few men scattered throughout the room, but most of the visitors were women.

“I swear, I’m never having kids,” Izzy muttered when a few babies in the room started to wail.

“There’s nothing wrong with having children. The important thing is making sure you have kids with the right person. You get pregnant by a street nigga, then you can expect to take your baby to the pen instead of the park. The choice is yours.”

Right as I got comfortable on the metal bench, a second set of inmates were escorted into the room. Even with the weeks that passed, my mom had gained some weight. I assumed that meant she hadn’t gotten her hands on anything while in custody.

“Mommy! You look good. You put on a few pounds,” Izzy greeted her.

“Please, don’t remind me.” She tugged on the collar of her green jumpsuit. “Hi, Ishmael.”

“What’s up, Mariah? It’s good to see you.”

She pursed her dry lips. “I bet you do love seeing me behind bars.”

“You know that’s not what I meant. I’m happy you’re surviving.”

“Barely,” she mumbled. “I would appreciate it if you added a few extra dollars to the pot. I want to get more sausage and noodles from the store.”

Izzy sucked her teeth. “Enough about food. We talked to your lawyer. She said she may be able to get your three-year sentence reduced.”

“That’s good. I need to get back to my man and my baby.”

I scoffed at her audacity. “That nigga let you take a charge for him. You still haven’t learned shit.”

“Please! Don’t pretend to care whether I stay in here or come home. With me out the way, you can have my daughter to yourself, like you’ve been trying to do.”

I gnawed on the inside of my jaw, hoping the pain would override my anger. If Izzy could visit Mariah without me, I would’ve jetted out the door and waited in the car. I had hoped going to jail for possession would change Mariah’s outlook on life, but it didn’t take long to realize it hadn’t.

“Ma, you’re not being fair. Ishmael has changed his life for me to be comfortable. You should just say thank you.”

“Fuck that! He’s always judging me, but I heard he went to jail too.” Her heavy-lidded gaze raced to me. “Somebody ended up dead behind you and your bitch. Yeah, I know about the Hollywood drama you’re in with that reality star you work for.”

“You can say what you want, but I’m nothing like you. Unlike you, I don’t gain anything from you going to jail.” All the emotions I had held in for years rose to the surface. “Mariah, you’ve always loved you more than

you've loved me, and it shows. The day you put yo' man above me, I knew it. But still, I've taken care of you. Prayed and provided for you. We ain't nothing alike. Now, do what you've done for years and ignore me. Talk to your daughter."

I remained quiet for the rest of the visit, allowing the mother-daughter duo to catch up without adding my two cents.

Our time at the jail ended around three, and after grabbing something to munch on, we started our two-hour drive back home. With so much going on, I needed the time to drive and think. Clarke had cried herself into a hole since Chaz had offed himself, and I didn't know if I could pull her out of it. I was secure in my relationship, but I could see guilt behind her eyes every time I looked at her.

"Ishmael, Mommy only has three years or less. I wouldn't be mad if we didn't go back. I can see her when she comes home."

My focus raced from the highway. "Where did that come from?"

"My heart," she answered. "Nobody in this world loves me more than you. I never want you to get hurt trying to make me happy. Mommy is ungrateful. I know it bothers you."

"I'm good, Izzy."

"You're not. I can tell. I know Clarke calls you Superman, but you have feelings too. Besides, we have other things to get ready for. I'm about to be an auntie!"

Even with the tension in our home, my heart kicked up its heels at the idea of building my own family.

When rumors circulated that Clarke was pregnant, it took me by surprise. But when I read Chaz was the father, it broke my heart. Even with his pop-up visits, I didn't believe Clarke was giving her body to anyone but me. I started to confront her about the rumors, but my pride wouldn't allow it. The day Chaz added us to the group chat, he all but confirmed my suspicions were true. Clarke and her baby were mine.

"Izzy, how do you feel about everything going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"The baby. Clarke. All that good stuff."

She bounced around in her seat. "I'm happy. Proud. I know how you feel about having a family."

"And you know you'll always be my favorite person, right?"

“Duh. When you moved into your house, I thought you would forget about me. But then you made sure to pick me up, take me out, and just kick it with me. After that, I knew you would never let me down.”

I blinked away the tears that balanced on the brim of my eyes. I tried to keep my orbs still to keep my tears from falling. I never needed praise for taking care of my sister, but her appreciation touched my soul.

“Have you decided on a name for Baby Rose?”

“It damn sure won’t be Baby Rose. We don’t know what we’re having, so it’s still up in the air.”

“Well, as much as I love Clarke, don’t let her name my baby Apple or Galaxy. You know how those reality stars do.”



FROM THE DRIVER’S side of my truck, I obsessed over my lady as she checked her appearance in the sun visor.

“Saying you look good at a time like this seems inappropriate, but I don’t give a damn.”

“Cut it out.” Clarke’s eyes sparkled with laughter. “Also, I would like to hear more.”

I was happy to see her weak grin had light behind it. For two weeks, I could tell Clarke didn’t really feel comfortable smiling, but she seemed more at peace.

Though most guests seemed to park in the lot behind the church, I parked in a restricted area, and my brothers followed me. After I mentioned Clarke’s decision to attend the funeral, my folks and their ladies demanded to come with us.

For a second, I checked my surroundings, then got out of my truck and walked around to let Clarke out. Hand-in-hand, we wandered over to where my family waited for us.

“Y’all ready to do this?” Church asked the group.

Clarke breathed windstorms through her nose. “As ready as we’re going to be.”

Even though we all wore black, we stood out amongst the crowd as we mobbed down the block. Cameramen and pockets of people filled the sidewalks, and the streets were packed with double-parked cars. Clarke and

I had a conversation about how we would handle the day, but once we got to the church's steps, I didn't want to let her go.

"Baby," she whispered.

I lifted her glasses off her face so I could see her eyes. "Are you going to be okay? I can go inside with you. I dare a muthafucka to say something."

"I promise, I'll be fine. As long as you're out here waiting for me, I'm good."

A muscle beat in my jaw as I thought of the worst. "If anyone even looks at you wrong—"

"We'll handle it." Blaze stepped up and tapped her purse.

As pretty as she was, I knew Church's wife was serious. I had been a witness to what she would do to a person who got on her bad side.

"We won't be long," Clarke declared in a tone that still didn't bring me comfort.

To avoid the paparazzi, we crossed the street and posted up under an oak tree. From where we stood, we had a clear view of the entrance to the church.

The sound of a lighter triggered my vision to scatter. I grimaced when I saw Durk leaning against the tree with a bunt between his lips.

"Don't spark that shit. We're right across the street from a church."

"Right. We're across the street. We're not inside. You probably need to hit this to calm your nerves."

I shook my head. "I won't be able to chill until Clarke comes out that church."

"I still can't believe you let her come to this nigga's funeral," Durk replied as he added fire to the tobacco leaf.

"Let?" Loso scoffed. "Clarke is a grown ass woman. I don't know why you talk shit like you're a big dawg. We all see the way you turn into a little puppy when Clover is around."

"That's different."

I chuckled. "No, it's not. Besides, I don't lose anything by supporting Clarke. We have a baby coming. She's working on her studio. She needs closure, and I'm not threatened by the dead."

"I can't believe that foo' killed himself. He's definitely going to hell now."

Shiloh gave Durk a side-eye. "Don't speak ill of the dead, nigga."

“Nigga, please. Why are you acting like we weren’t looking for that bum a week before he shot himself?” The sharp-mouthed menace released a callous laugh. “To kill yourself over some pussy is crazy. That nigga lost his mind when he found out you and Clarke were having a baby.”

As harsh as it sounded, Durk was speaking facts. I had been on the hunt for Chaz’s big ass days before he died, so pretending to be hurt by his death would’ve been fake as hell.

Loso used a red bandana to rid his bald head of perspiration. “I’m happy you brought up the baby. When y’all getting married? You swore up and down you wouldn’t have a baby mama.”

I snatched the blunt from Durk when he started laughing. One deep inhale crammed my lungs with smoke that I let pour out through my nostrils.

“I don’t know if we’re ready for that. We’re having a baby in less than six months. I’m still on the hook for parenting classes. Plus, I’m going back to school. The day I ask her to marry me, I want it to be out of love, not obligation,” I confessed. “On another note, I appreciate y’all coming with us. I know the crowd is a lot to deal with.”

“You ain’t lying, but we’re family.” Shiloh squeezed my shoulder. “Just like you wouldn’t let Clarke enter the lion’s den alone, we feel the same way about you. We’d paint this city red if something happened to you.”

Clarke and the ladies exited the church about thirty minutes after they walked inside. Plans for a family lunch came into the conversation, but I insisted on taking Clarke home. Right then, I didn’t want to share her with anyone.

As soon as we got home, Clarke went to shower, and I checked on Isabella. I wasn’t surprised to find her sprawled out across a beanbag, reading a book.

“You good?” I asked.

She barely glanced my way when she waved me off. “I’m good. Get out!”

A low laugh rocked my chest as I closed her door. I knew from experience not to talk to a reader when they were in Lala Land.

Since Clarke was still in the bathroom, I used the time to change my clothes and set up a pillow palette. Thanks to my prissy lady, candles were already arranged in my room, so I didn’t have to do much to set the scene.

“Baby.”

The softness in Clarke's tone birthed butterflies in my belly. I spun around, and the smile on her face added character to her eyes. Drips of water tumbled from her damp hair, and the expensive pieces and makeup she wore earlier were gone. Fresh-faced, my sweet baby looked renewed. Her shoulders were no longer bunched up to her ears, and her fingers were loose instead of balled into fists.

"Baby. What is all this?"

"Come here, pretty lady."

Her cheekbones reached for the roof as she joined me in the sea of pillows.

"When's the last time you've done something new?" I asked when she tugged on the chain hanging from my neck.

"It's been too long. What are you thinking?"

"Have you meditated before?"

She shook her head. "I never thought I could keep my mind quiet."

"That's why we're doing it. I hate seeing you at war with yourself, and before I let you get lost in your thoughts, I'll teach you how to find peace within the haze. It's a learning moment for both of us. This is new to me too."

I sat down, then positioned Clarke so that her legs were wrapped around my waist. Face to face, we smiled at each other like goofy kids.

"You can't play. We have to focus if we're going to do this," I suggested.

She snickered. "Okay. Okay. I'm going to try. You know I get hot and bothered when you're teaching me something new."

"In that case, you're going to be walking around with a sharp mind and wet ass for the rest of your days. Now, close your eyes, and let me work on you."

CHAPTER 15

ISHMAEL

Safe “Clarke, you can’t be serious! How many times are you going to call me?” The silent line caused me to push a heavy exhale through my nose. “Hello? Clarke, you there?”

“I’m here. I’m just trying to figure out if I want to cry or curse you out for raising your voice at me.”

“Mama, I—”

“No. Forget it. I won’t call you anymore. Just hurry your ass up with my food.”

Clarke hung up in my face, and my tight lips relaxed into a smile. Five months left in her pregnancy, and Clarke’s attitude bordered between brat and baby depending on the day. I promised myself I would continue to eat up every emotion she threw at me as long as the night ended with us coming to an agreement.

The house was quiet when I entered, giving me time to empty my hands in the kitchen before I had to face the madwoman.

“Damnit!” I cringed once I reached my bedroom and almost fell over a stack of boxes. “Clarke. What is all this? I thought we agreed to cut back on shopping.”

She appeared in the doorway of the bathroom wearing a sports bra and shorts. The scowl dressing her face made me assume she was still in her feelings. “For your information, those are things you ordered.”

I strolled over to the pretty lady. “You mad at me? If I hurt your feelings that wasn’t my intention. I just don’t like hearing you worry.”

She snuggled into my chest, giving me the chance to adorn the top of her head with kisses.

“I know I can’t hover, but . . . I’ve been having bad dreams. Ones where you . . .”

“Hey. Let’s pray. Close your eyes.” I placed my forehead against hers and took ahold of her hands. “Dear heavenly Father, we first come to You to say, thank You for all You’ve provided purely out of love. We aren’t worthy of Your kindness, and yet, You allow us to wake up every morning and thrive. In the midst of the grace You give, I ask You to cover Clarke. To create a space for clear thinking. I ask that You comfort her when the devil tries to pollute her thinking. I praise You in advance, Lord, because I know it is already done. Now, all the believers under the sound of my voice say, Amen.”

Once I knew Clarke’s mind was at ease, I climbed into bed next to her and massaged her bump. It wasn’t huge, but there was no mistaking she was pregnant.

“What do you have planned for today?” I asked.

“I think I want to paint my belly. I’ve been looking at pictures on Pinterest.”

I rubbed my hands together. “Aww, shit. I’m down.”

“No, you’re not. You said you were studying today not playing with me.”

“Oh, baby. I will always find time to play with you.”

Her upper lip sharpened. “Talking like that after you just finished talking to God. You’re going to hell,” she teased as she disappeared into the closet. In a blink of an eye, she returned with a labor stimulator in hand. “Care to make a wager?”

I bobbed my head. “I’m listening . . .”

“I’ll give you a quiz. If you get the answers right, I strip. You get it wrong, and I trigger a contraction.”

A sharp laugh rippled from my throat. “I swear I’m mad I let you buy that.”

“You should’ve never let the words *labor* and *manageable* leave those pretty lips.”

I fell back on the bed thinking about what sparked the debate. One day, we watched a water birth on YouTube, and I made the mistake of judging the pain level. Clarke purchased the contraction simulator the same night and had been trying to get me to try it ever since.

“I guess I found Superman’s Kryptonite.”

My head jerked back. “I’m not turning down nothing. Hook it up.”

Clarke took about five minutes to place pads over my bare chest and grab my flashcards, and by the time she was done, I was trembling.

“I don’t know why you’re shaking. If you scared, go to church.” She giggled. “All right, Mr. Harden, what is an algorithm?”

“That’s easy.” I rambled off the text-book answer. “I know I’m right. Take the top off.”

Clarke rolled her eyes and stripped out of her bottoms. “You got lucky. Give me the four basic principles of OPP?”

Too cocky for my own good, I spat out the answer without much thought.

“Wrong!” She pressed the button, triggering a growl to split my lips apart. “Yeah! It doesn’t feel good, does it?” She triggered a second contraction without warning.

“What the hell, Clarke?”

“Ha! That’s for yelling at me earlier. Let’s keep going.”

I shook my head, trying to shake away the wringing in my ears. “Watch. I’m going to stick my dick so deep in your pussy, you might get pregnant with another baby.”

“Hm. That doesn’t sound like the worst idea.” Her eyes reached for the ceiling. “I know you’re trying to butter me up.”

As she paced back and forth, Clarke issued a third question. When I realized I didn’t know the answer, I squeezed the arm of the chair.

“Fuck.” I shut my eyes as the pain level moved from a six to an eight. Sweat littered my forehead, and my heart felt like it had launched into my ribcage. “All right, baby.”

“All right what?”

“You win,” I muttered.

She stuck her neck out and pulled her hair behind her ear. “Whatchu say? I can’t hear you.”

“I said you win, mama. That shit hurts so bad, I understand why women demand push gifts.” I peeled the sticky pads off my chest. “You can have

anything you want after you push my baby out. Hell, I'll buy it now."

"I'm happy you said that. I have the list ready in my notes." She finished pulling the contraption off my skin with glee in her eyes. "You lost so that means you need to study."

"Hell no. Isabella isn't here. I don't want to spend my alone time away from you. I'll help you paint, and later, you'll help me *really* study."

She rose up on her tippy toes and kissed my nose. "I'll go get the materials. You grab a sheet and meet me in the backyard."

Summertime in Silk Hills was usually scorching, but we were blessed with a breeze. The familiar smell of orange trees danced in the air, and in the distance, I could hear kids playing at a nearby park. While Clarke removed paint and brushes from a box, I spread a white sheet over the grass. Once our set up was complete, I faced the lady in charge. "Tell me what you have in mind."

She shifted her weight to one foot. "I was thinking you could turn my belly into a basketball, but what if it's a girl?" She tapped her chin. "What about an egg?"

I smirked. "What's the next option?"

"Can you draw a fishbowl with a goldfish inside?"

I walked over and knelt in front of Clarke. "We're about to find out."

An hour of bickering, laughing, and Clarke posing like she was an easel turned into a memory neither of us would forget. I was no Picasso, but I got as close to the picture as I could. Truthfully, I was more proud of making Clarke's day than my artwork.

"Let me get some pictures before you start melting," I professed, sending Clarke out further in the lawn. She twisted and turned, going from holding her belly to sensually positioning her arms above her head. In awe, I fell into a daydream as I watched her. Never in a million years would I have believed the love of my life was a reality star. Not only had she changed the way I viewed people who weren't a part of my inner circle, but Clarke confirmed things I had started to doubt about myself. I *did* deserve love. I *wasn't* put on Earth to carry the trauma of my parents.

"Handsome! Come take a few pictures with me."

With no hesitation, I programmed a timer on my phone and rushed over to Clarke. Naturally, I stepped to her and placed a kiss on her forehead. The sensation of my lips anchored Clarke's eyelids closed. The gesture was subtle, but for me, it meant I had done my job. She felt safe.

ONE YEAR LATER

EPILOGUE

Clarke

Why I Love You

For the last year, my life had been quiet, but that evening, I welcomed the world into the space I created. I invited every talent agent, manager, and event planner I knew to the grand opening of Lois's Lane, and thankfully, everyone showed up. Thanks to Ishmael, I settled on the name of my studio and decided to turn the outside area into a performance space. Strings of overhead lights and warm-colored seating made the area look like a poetry lounge.

As a new mommy, I wasn't in the position to get on stage, but I was happy to provide the opportunity to showcase other dancers. Down the line, I planned to follow in Ishmael's footsteps and go to school for my passion. In the meantime, I was going to host jazz classes for beginners and rent out the rooms to other instructors, videographers, and people hosting small events.

"Aww. Look at you, all teary-eyed over your new baby," Sage commented as he joined me in a corner of the outside area.

"Yeah. I'm a proud mommy two times over at this point." I blushed, thinking about my firstborn. "Can you believe this is my life? One day, I'm staggering into my house after being in the club. Next, I'm putting my baby in his crib."

"Now, why are you over here lying? You know this boy doesn't sleep in his bed."

The sound of Ishmael's voice tweaked my lips to one side before I hugged Sage goodbye and focused on Ishmael and baby Isaiah.

"Don't put me on blast." I playfully rolled my eyes. "I like to have both of my favorite people close. Can you blame me?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't." He grinned, then pecked my lips. "How are you feeling? Things went as good as I knew they would."

"For the first time in a while, my name is on something I'm proud of. This studio will be a part of my legacy. There was a time I didn't know if my name was too tarnished to ever be in lights again."

The noise surrounding Chaz's death still lingered, but the private messages and vulgar comments weren't as frequent. Had it not been for Ishmael, I don't know if I would've been able to grow our baby in love. He stayed attached to my hip unless he was at school or working. Any time outside opinions crept under my skin, Ishmael's reassurance abolished the doubt.

"Well, aside from what you thought would happen," Ishmael continued, "you've become an entrepreneur and mom within a matter of months, and you handled it like a champ."

"Because you had my back. The days and nights when the walls closed in on me, you created a space for me to breathe. I needed that, especially since me and my mom are still not on the best of terms."

"Have you two talked? I saw her talking to Jerry before I came over here."

A hiss slipped through a crack in my pursed lips. "She came over and spoke. You know she had something smart to say about the studio, but I let it roll off my back. I guess therapy is working."

Even with all the time that passed, I couldn't bring myself to trust my mom the way I used to. To know she put fame and money above her love for me set the tone in our relationship. I meant it when I said I forgave her for leaking my pregnancy, but I couldn't forget. If I did, it would open the door for it to happen again.

Around seven, the studio had cleared out, but Essen hung back, throwing away flutes and napkins left behind.

"Friend," I sang. "You know the cleaning crew is on their way?"

"I know. I'm actually on my way out. I was waiting for you to have some space so I could fangirl over how dope you are," Essen professed with

teary eyes. “Lois’s Lane looks amazing. I checked your calendar online, and there are already days booked!”

“I know! I knew it would be a hot commodity since Silk Hills doesn’t have many dance studios, but I’m still grateful.”

Ishmael pulled me to his body so we were attached at the hip. “You would’ve come out on top anyway. If things didn’t go well, I would’ve paid for a few dates my damn self.”

I glanced up at him. “Always making sure my feelings aren’t hurt. I swear, I love you.”

We hung around until the cleaning company completed the job, then piled into Ishmael’s truck to go home. Since Isabella chose to go home with Essen, that meant I wouldn’t have my nighttime helper. The way Isabella acted over Isaiah, I was amazed she wanted to spend the night away from her nephew.

“Bae. Did your mom end up calling back during the event?” I asked, recalling a conversation we had at the studio.

A subtle twitch in Ishmael’s shoulders made me regret asking. Their relationship hadn’t gotten much better since she went to jail, but strangely enough, she’d been in contact more since I gave birth.

“Yeah, but I missed the call again. We don’t really need to talk. She still blames me for the move Izzy made.” He chuckled. “The last time we spoke, I answered the phone, and she asked to speak to Izzy and Isaiah.”

“Maybe he’ll be her saving grace. She may be better to Isaiah than she was to you. I know that sounds harsh.”

He shrugged. “It’s the truth. I understand people change, but my son isn’t an experiment. She has to prove to me she will do right by him. I won’t let her disappoint him like she did me and Izzy.” He glanced at me. “You think I’m being hard on her?”

I shook my head. “You don’t play about your son. You could never go too hard on someone when it comes to him.”

As a way to escape the heaviness of our childhood trauma, I turned up the radio. Stevie Wonder’s “As” played as if God knew what Ishmael needed to hear. Good music was Ishmael’s love language. The smile that overpowered his face confirmed it.

When he yawned, I reached out and caressed his growing beard.

“Cut all that sleepy shit out. You have homework to do when we get home.”

“Little do you know, I submitted the assignment last night.”

I peered at him in awe. “You always talk about how proud of me you are, but you’re the one that deserves the praise. You take care of all of us and still show up for yourself.” I shivered. “Whew, I can’t wait to give you some pussy tonight.”

Ishmael’s eyes bulged as his focus raced from traffic over to me. “What I tell you about that? As baby boy gets older, he’s going to start repeating everything he hears. We need a nickname for the goodness between your legs.”

“Ooo, I like that.” I turned in my seat so I was facing him. “What are you thinking?”

His hands eased over to my side of the car, landing on the inside of my thigh. The contact sent a tremble down my back.

“It’s wet, hungry. Pretty. Soft.” The lower his voice dropped, the more I moaned. He bit into his bottom lip. “You’re so nasty. Velvet? Velvet. That’s her name.”

“That shit is so—” The sound of my baby babbling in the back seat put a weak smile on my face. “I can’t believe he is still up after such a long day.”

“That’s because he knows his daddy has a stop to make. He wants to get in on the action.”

“Hmm. What are you talking about?”

Ishmael pointed to the parking lot he was seconds from turning into. I was so caught up in him that I hadn’t realized we were driving in the opposite direction from our house until we arrived at Darwin’s jewelry store.

“Ishmael, what are we doing here? It’s almost eight. The store isn’t usually open this late.”

“For me, it is.” Ishmael winked. “He called during your event and said baby’s pieces are ready. Since little man wasn’t fussing when I put him in his car seat, I figured we could make a detour. You good with that?”

I rubbed my hands together. “Oh, baby. You know I’m never turning down a trip to the jewelry store.”

The last time I saw Darwin was the first time Ishmael worked as my bodyguard. So much had changed since then, but my appetite for a new tennis bracelet was still alive and well.

Since Isaiah was still fresh, we left him in his car seat, and Ishmael carried him into the building. Darwin met us at the door, wearing bright colors and a warm smile.

“Ms. Rose! My girl,” Darwin cheered as he led us into his spot. “It’s so good to see you, beautiful. I knew the day you came in here with that tall, handsome man following you around like a puppy, it wasn’t just because he loved his job.”

I dusted my shoulders off on some cocky shit. “Was it that obvious?”

“Painfully,” he said in an exaggerated way and walked over to Ishmael. “I have everything you ordered for baby. You ready to see how it turned out?”

“Yeah. Let me see what you came up with.”

While Darwin went to grab the pieces, I wandered to the other side of the store to look at watches. Ishmael complained when I bought him stuff, but there was no way he could say the Audemars Piguet wasn’t collection-worthy.

“Bae!” I called out to Ishmael with my back to him. “Please come look at these watches. I know you wouldn’t accept it as a *just-because* gift. What if I buy it as an early graduation gift?”

He laughed. “What about a wedding present?”

“What?”

I spun around and found Ishmael down on one knee. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until he smiled and said, “Breathe, baby.”

“I can’t,” I whined.

“Yes, you can. And I promise to always make that possible. I promise the grass will always be greener on this side because we’ll water it together. If you fall short, I’ll carry the weight. You love to ask me why I handle you the way I do. There’s no intricate answer. It’s simple. I love you, and when you love someone, you nurture them. You’re patient. You’re a protector. You’re my lover. Will you marry me, Lois Lane?”

Tears rolled down my face. “Yes! Yes, Superman!”

AFTERWORD

Lover, you've made it to the end!

I would really appreciate it if you left an honest review for this story! I dropped some questions below that I hope makes the process easier:

1. Do you believe Ishmael was too hard on his mother?
2. How do you feel about Clarke's response to Chaz having sex in the club? Was she just as wrong for entertaining Ishmael?
3. Would you go to your ex's funeral?
4. If money weren't an obstacle, what's one hobby you would get into?

Let's stay connected!!

FACEBOOK: Author Tucora Monique

INSTAGRAM: @AuthorTucoraMonique

Twitter: AuthorTucora

Web: www.authortucoramonique.com

BLP

Howdie!

Thank you for indulging in a BLP book. As the ambassador of Black love stories, it gives me great pleasure to provide love stories regardless of the niche. Whether you are looking for urban romance, contemporary romance, erotica, women's fiction, paranormal, fantasy, or thriller... you can find an author to read and enjoy within BLP.

Now that you've completed this book, feel free to go to our website for a list of our authors to look up on Amazon and further enjoy.

With love,
B. Love

www.blovepublications.net
