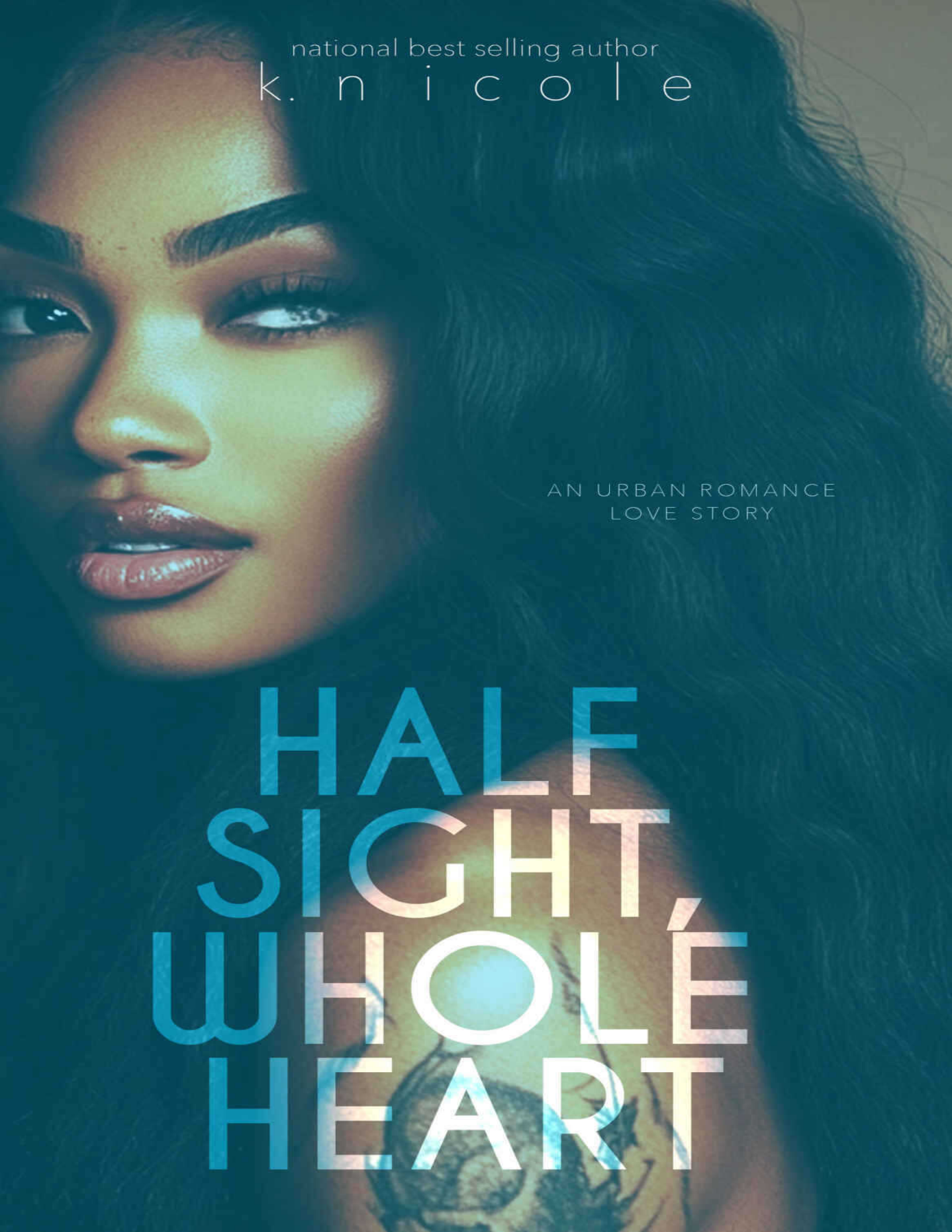




national best selling author
k. n i c o l e

AN URBAN ROMANCE
LOVE STORY

HALF SIGHT, WHOLÉ HEART

HALF SIGHT WHOLE HEART

K. NICOLE

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ERISS JACKSON

“Mama, why her eye like that?”

My head swiveled to the young child. Her mother and I met eyes, and her shoulders hiked up to her ears.

“Sorry,” she mouthed, tugging the little girl in the other direction.

Pushing the shopping cart, I continued to sift through boys’ clothes for my five-year-old son, Ermias. He stayed the night at my parents’ house so I could have some time to myself, per their request. Ermias was my heart, and I loved every moment with him. My parents, especially my father, felt like I needed some time to do things for myself, but here I was in *Ross*, looking for clothes for him instead of myself. That’s how it always ends up.

Ermias rarely liked leaving me. He was my *little helper*, so he called himself. He felt like my condition called for him to be by my side 24/7. He was such a sweet kid. If he were with me and heard what that little girl had said, he would have balled his little fist up and, in his squeaky little voice, would have said whatever five-year-olds say when they’re upset at someone.

It didn’t bother me. I was used to the stares from kids and even some adults. I was born with monocular vision. I still did normal things such as drive and work. I just relied on one eye for vision. Some days, I wore dark shades so I wouldn’t get the sympathy looks or the pointing from the little ones. I wanted to shop peacefully, just like everyone else.

Grabbing a few short sets for Ermias, I wandered to the laundry detergent and picked up a box of *Gain*. Leaving the aisle, my phone

vibrated in my back pocket. I stopped and picked it out of my pocket to see my best friend, Mahlia Graham, calling me.

“Hey Mahlia,” I answered with the phone to my ear.

“Hey Sunshine! I see you’re out near the shopping center. Where’s my nephew?” she asked, popping her gum.

I giggled. “You’re always checking my lo. Ermias is with his grandparents. Where are you at?”

She sighed. “Stuck at work for now.”

Mahlia was an emergency medical responder who worked long hours, while I was one of three receptionists at an orthodontist’s office. I was off on weekends, and Mahlia got stuck working most weekends. We were either on a call or FaceTime to keep up with one another because obviously our lives didn’t align.

“Any craziness today?” I asked. Mahlia had stories for days while working as an EMT.

“Shhh! It’s been a lil’ quiet so far. Don’t speak the craziness up. Mr. Jerry from the west side might fake a heart attack and have us rush out for nothing. It’s like he wants to die or something, Eriss. He fakes a heart attack every other week, and nothing is wrong with him.”

I chuckled. I knew exactly who she was talking about. Mr. Jerry was a hot mess and well-known in Heartville. You could always catch him bopping home from church with a forty in his hand.

“I called you because my people are having a family reunion next weekend, and I’m off. I haven’t been able to make one since I started this job. I want you and Ermias to come,” Mahlia announced.

“Where is it?” I asked, mentally checking if anything was going on with me and Ermias next weekend.

“My cousin’s backyard in Love Grove. You and nephew can ride with me. I’ll book our hotel rooms too.”

“Oh, it’s an overnight stay?” I questioned. “Sorry,” I told a man when I realized I was in his way. I began to slowly move my cart as I headed to the book section.

“Yeeees, is that a problem?”

“No, no, it’s not. I want to make sure I have everything Ermias might need for the weekend. You know I like to be prepared, Mahlia,” I answered her. In the book section, my eyes roamed over the books until one caught my eye. “Have I met this cousin?”

“Girl, no. Zyro keeps to himself. He owns an auto shop, and he does well for himself. His house is huge, and he is big on family, so we have our family reunions there every year.”

“That’s an interesting name,” I mumbled, placing the book in my cart. It was time for me to check out. I’d be in this store for another hour just looking around and picking up items I didn’t need. I had to stop myself before going to the toy section. Ermias had way too many toys.

“His mama’s name is Zena.” Mahlia chuckled. “His brother Zyleek is the street nigga with three kids and three baby mamas. He might try to holler at you, friend.”

I scoffed. “I’m not trying to be his fourth.” We laughed in unison.

“I don’t blame you. Now Zyro...he doesn’t have any kids. You and he might...” her voice trailed off.

“No, Mahlia, don’t. If you try to play matchmaker, I will leave. You know I’m not ready to date again,” I warned her sternly.

“Okay. Okay.” Mahlia sighed. “I just want you to be happy and in love again, E. You deserve it.”

“I am happy, Mahlia,” I countered.

“I knooooow,” she groaned, “but you need some peen in your life. A big, thick one, friend.”

I snickered. “I’m good on that for now, too. I just want to focus on Ermias.”

Ermias’ father and I were together for three years, and then I got pregnant with Ermias. When we came home from the hospital, I found out he had gotten another woman pregnant because she was waiting for Delion on our doorstep. I went into depression for a month, and I went to stay with my parents so they could help me with my newborn. One day, I was holding my son, and out of the blue, he smiled at me. It was the cutest thing, and from that day on, I shook back. I realized that I had to be strong for him, and no one was going to love me like he did. Delion and I co-parented, but that was where our relationship ended.

Mahlia quieted down for a second, chewing on the inside of her cheek like she was thinking hard.

“I get it,” she finally said. “And I respect the hell out of you for how you bounced back. Ermias is the happiest lil’ boy I’ve ever seen, and that’s because of *you*.”

I gave her a small smile, my fingers absentmindedly twisting in my bundles.

“But,” she added, cocking her head, causing me to groan because I should have known better, “just promise me you won’t block your blessings, alright? You don’t gotta be out here searching, but don’t shut the whole world out either. Love might sneak up on you when you least expect it.”

I rolled my eyes, but I wasn’t fully dismissing Mahlia either. I’d been focused on being a mama and healing, so I hadn’t even thought about dating. And to be honest, the idea of trusting somebody again? Terrifying.

“If it sneaks up, it better be ready to work overtime,” I muttered.

Mahlia snorted, “Girl, you sound like you’re hiring a man, not looking for one.”

I shrugged. “Again, I’m not looking for one, Mahlia. I need a man who I can have around Ermias, too, eventually. Not just good pipe.”

Mahlia’s head dipped to the side. “Yeaah, I agree with you on that.”

“You just... You deserve to be wild again, E. Just for a little bit. Not reckless like pre-Ermias you, but like...emotionally reckless. Take risks. Not my kind of risks ‘cause you know how I get down.” Mahlia stuck her tongue out, leaned over, and bounced her ass.

I snickered with a shake of my head. “What if I allow someone to come in and they wreck me worse than Delion did?”

Mahlia’s smile faded, and for once, she didn’t have a clever comeback. “Then we piece you back together. Like we did before, friend, only this time, you’ll know it’s possible.”

Mahlia wasn’t wrong. I had survived the worst already...betrayal and heartbreak. And yet, here I was.

Still standing.

Still healing.

Still loving my baby with everything in me. He deserved a strong mama. He *has* a strong mama.

“I’ll think about it,” I said softly.

Satisfied with my response, Mahlia nodded. “That’s all I ask. E. Just don’t shut the door before he knocks.”

Humming softly, I gathered the scattered crayons from the floor and dropped them into the plastic bin. The gentle ache behind my left eye pulsed, but I ignored it.

The smell of lemon cleaner wafted through the air as I wiped down Ermias' play table, moving slower than usual. My depth perception was a little off today, the shadows heavier on my left side. I missed a spot twice before finally scrubbing it clean. I had my bad days.

Behind me, I heard the soft shuffle of feet and the faint jingle of something metal, probably the junk drawer in the kitchen.

"Mommy?" Ermias's little voice floated in, muffled as if he had something in his mouth.

"Hmm?" I answered, groaning from the ache in my knees as I stood up from the floor. When I rounded the corner to the kitchen, Ermias stood near the trash can, clutching one of the kitchen tongs.

"Why didn't you come get me? I am here to help because I am strong."

I blinked. Something in my chest twisted and unraveled all at once.

"Yes," I exhaled, palming my forehead. "How could I forget? I could use some strong around here."

Ermias nodded with exaggerated seriousness and grabbed a crumpled paper towel off the floor that was by the trash can. It must have fallen out when I'd dumped trash inside. He used the tongs to pick it up.

"Got it!" he declared, dropping it into the trash can.

"Good job, baby."

Ermias, of course, saw everything. Even when he didn't say much. I didn't know if he felt bad for me or what, but I was sure that baby loved me.

He moved over to the table, tugging out one of the chairs to climb on. "Can I wipe this?" He asked me, already reaching for a napkin on the table.

I tossed him the damp towel. "Use this. Napkins leave fuzz."

"Okay!" Ermias scrubbed enthusiastically, missing half of the table, of course, but smiling so hard it didn't matter.

As I watched him, I felt that familiar tug. It was a mixture of love, guilt, and awe. I never wanted Ermias to feel he had to take care of me. But the truth was, he always noticed when I was a little off, when my left side lagged behind the right, when I bumped corners or hesitated steps. Instead of making a big deal out of it, he just...helped.

He was five. Just five, and already a better man than most grown ones I know.

“You’re doing amazing,” I praised.

He grinned, one front tooth missing and eyes bright. “Because you said we’re a team!”

I sniffed back tears. “Always,” I said.

“Even when your eye doesn’t work?”

I nodded. “Yes, even then.”

Ermias jumped off the chair, cloth in hand, and ran down the hallway. I’m gonna clean the doorknobs! You said germs always get on those!”

I giggled, shaking my head at him, remembering something so small that I’ve told him.

We were a team and were doing just fine with it, just being the two of us. Why add someone else to the equation?

“Mama, these shoes are tight.” Ermias sat on the edge of the bed, kicking his feet, scowling at the brand-new sneakers I’d just bought him. He was being all squirmy and dramatic. His handsome face was twisted up like he’d just tasted lemons.

“They’re tight because they are new,” I told him, smoothing the collar of his shirt. “You’re going to be fresh today at Mahlia’s family reunion. I’m not about to let you show up looking like nobody loves you.”

Ermias flopped back on the bed with a groan, arms flinging as if I’d just ruined his life. I laughed under my breath and stood up straight, brushing imaginary lint off my dress. My good eye did a quick scan of both of us. I looked decent. Mahlia bought us a family reunion shirt—army green with orange and white printing, and distressed jean shorts that stopped mid-thigh.

“Should I cover my eye with a patch?” I asked Ermias?”

He shook his head quickly. “No, Mama. I fight anyone who talks about you.” His tiny fist balled up.

I smiled at that. My baby had more heart than I did sometimes.

“I know you would,” I murmured, reaching over to brush his curls down my palm. “But we don’t have to fight anybody today, E, alright? Let’s go

eat good and speak when spoken to, and leave before any family drama starts up.”

Ermias nodded like we’d just sealed a deal.

A lil’ over an hour later...

We pulled up right when Mahlia texted me that the reunion was starting. It was just enough time for the grill to be smokin’, spades games starting, and music to be on its third Keith Sweat song. Mahlia’s people were deep. Tents and folding chairs stretched across the massive backyard.

When we turned onto the street, the house sat like a statement on several acres. There was a long, winding driveway full of cars. Its exterior was a mix of smooth ivory stucco and dark stone accents. Tall, black-framed windows lined the front, and a double door entry stood in the center beneath a towering archway. Everything about the landscaping screamed intentional—trimmed hedges, a custom stone walkway, uplighting along the edges that would make the whole thing glow after sundown. There was a three-car, black matte garage door. Above the garage was a balcony, complete with sleek railing.

This was a damn house.

As soon as we entered the backyard by the side of the house, kids were already running in every direction, and a cousin who’d clearly been drinking since breakfast was dancing solo near the bounce house. Mahlia spotted me and Ermias the moment we stepped into the grass.

“Finally!” she squealed, arms wide as she rushed us. She was acting as if she hadn’t seen us the other day when she dropped off the shirts. Maybe she didn’t think I would actually come.

Mahlia hugged me tight and then did the same to Ermias.

“Auntie,” he whined, causing us to laugh.

“You look too good,” she said. “I see you didn’t cover your eye. I’m proud of you. You’ve met most of my family anyway. That eye doesn’t take away from anything. You fine as fuck, girl.”

We laughed again.

“Can I go play?” Ermias asked, jumping as if he were already ready to take off. I nodded.

“Be nice and keep your hands to yourself,” I reminded him, but he was already halfway gone in a full sprint.

Mahlia waved me off. “He’s good, girl. I promise.”

We began walking to where Mahlia's mom, Mrs. Mena, was sitting, eyes on the kids.

I waved and spoke to her and everyone who was around. They all spoke back, but I couldn't help but notice some of their eyes lingering longer on my face. I shielded my eyes from the sun and glanced around.

That's when I saw him.

Tall, dark skin rich like coffee left on the stove too long. His locs were pulled back. He was wearing blue jean shorts and was shirtless, his family reunion shirt draped over his shoulder. His arms were crossed, tattoos covering both, along with his neck, stomach, and legs. I caught myself staring and immediately glanced away. I don't know what made me look at him again. When I did, he was looking back.

He nodded once. Real subtle.

ZYRO COLEMAN

She looked away quickly, but I caught her not only the first time, but the second time as well.

I didn't smile or move. I just offered her a nod.

I've never seen her before, but I saw she'd come in with a lil' youngin' that looked just like her. She walked beside my cousin, Mahlia. She spoke to my family. When she smiled, it didn't come close to reaching her eyes—not both of them, anyway.

Her left eye was clouded, but she was still beautiful. Fine, too.

Whatever my Uncle Tim was talking about, I ain't heard it. My arms were crossed, my shirt was tossed over my shoulder, and I was paying attention to *her*. Mahlia told me she was bringing a friend, and I brushed that shit off 'cause she was always tryin' to hook me up with a nappy-headed bitch she knew.

I watched her every move. She was now near the table that held food, helping her son poke a straw into a juice pouch. She kept one hand on his back as he gulped that shit down. My eyes darted to Mahlia, who was watching me with a smirk. She said something to her friend, her friend nodded, and then Maliah slid her way over to me. I took a sip of my brown liquor in my red cup.

"What you lookin' at?" she asked, nudging me with her bony ass elbow.

"What's the kid's name?" I asked instead of answering her question.

"Ermias. He's five and don't ask me 'bout no baby daddy 'cause she don't like to talk about him," Maliah rambled.

I frowned and looked at her sideways. "I ain't ask you allat."

My cousin laughed loudly and ignorantly.

I smirked and put my eyes back on the grill, pretending to watch Uncle T flip chicken. I took another slow sip.

"Why you ask about her kid, though? You didn't even ask about her. You want to know her name?"

"Nah," I told her, squinting and shaking my head. "If I did, I'd ask her."

"Just like you could have asked her son's name," Mahlia shot back, grinning.

"You real irritating sometimes, you know that?"

"And you real obvious sometimes, *you* know that? She's a good girl. Not looking for anything. I told her she needed to let her hair down and get her back blown out or some." Maliah snickered. "Is that bad advice?"

I cut my eyes at her, lips tight so I wouldn't laugh.

"Yeah, man. That's fucked up advice." I chortled and took another sip, letting the brown liquor warm my insides.

Mahlia cracked up and damn near dropped her cup.

"She blind?"

"She has sight in one eye. Other one—nah. She still does normal shit though. Eriss doesn't let shit stop her from being normal.

Eriss. I took note of her name.

I nodded.

"Eriss doesn't have time for the games, and she's tired of bullshit. I ain't gon lie, I did invite her so she could meet you." Mahlia cut her eye at me as she sipped.

I raised a brow.

"Nah, I ain't the one."

Mahlia snorted. "Who you fuckin' wit'? Leesa? You still talkin' to that bird?"

I licked my bottom lip. "Some like that. It ain't nun serious."

"Do she know that? Why is she here?"

Shaking my head and letting out an obnoxious snort, I watched Leesa switch her hips and bring her ass in my direction. It looked good, though. Her ass and legs matched. She knew how to wear a dress and knew who she was wearing it for.

"Why is she here?" Mahlia pressed again. "Ruining my damn plans."

I nudged her, almost knocking her over. “That’s why you don’t make plans fo’ me.”

“Heeey, bae,” Leesa said, approaching me and Mahlia, who rolled her eyes.

It wasn’t a secret to Leesa that Mahlia didn’t care for her. I don’t think Leesa liked Mahlia either, but she wasn’t crazy enough to voice that shit to me. I ain’t play ‘bout my family.

“Dang, I couldn’t get a shirt?” she pouted.

Mahlia rolled her eyes and took off back to her friend.

“You ain’t get no shirt ‘cause I ain’t invite you. Why you here?”

Leesa tossed her long weave over her shoulder and sucked her teeth. “I have to have a reason to come to your house?”

“Yeah.” I frowned. “Do I pop up on you?”

“No, but you could.” Leesa shrugged. “Why didn’t you invite me, though?”

“Because this is my family, Lee. I don’t have to invite ‘round my folks just ‘cause I’m fuckin’ you,” I let her know as kindly as I could. How she received it would be on her.

“That’s cold, Zyro. You’re not the only nigga that I can get attention from,” she snapped.

That’s why I didn’t do the relationship shit. Some females were too fuckin’ emotional and thought that when they were getting fucked dropped into them, it gave them the right to stalk a nigga. That wasn’t the case here. Leesa knew off top that I wasn’t wit’ that shit. She knew we were just fuckin’ and if she wanted to be wit’ a nigga who could give her more than what I was willing to give her, she could gone on ‘bout her business. I wouldn’t give a fuck.

That’s why I told Mahlia that I wasn’t the one for her damn friend.

Waving Leesa to move around because that was the same shit she always said, thinking that would move me. I ain’t give a fuck who gave her attention. When I called her, she came running. No, sprinting. She came sprinting.

I took another sip of my drink while eyeing Lessa, who still ain’t moved from around me. I didn’t want to have to act like an ass at my damn family reunion. I’ll yoke her ass up and toss her on her ass if I have to.

She huffed and took a few steps back. “Will I see you later?”

I shook my head. “Nah, not tonight. Get home safely.”

Leesa rolled her eyes and turned to leave. I watched her ass jiggle in that tight ass dress.

“Nephew, she was dressed to be on a pole, not for a family reunion,” Uncle Tim jested. “Fuck you find her ass from?”

I snickered and darted my eyes back over to Eriss. She was smiling and moving her hands around as she talked to my Aunt Mena, Mahlia’s mama.

My backyard was full of family. Before my grandma Lou passed away, at the age of nineteen, I told her I would keep the family together because it was important to her. So far, I’ve been living up to my promise. I went to a trade school and became a mechanic. I worked under my Uncle Tahj for a few years before venturing out on my own. *Zyro’s Pit Stop* was my baby. I put all my sweat, blood, and tears into that shop. That shop bought this house, which was sitting on acres, and my parents’ house.

Mama jokes all the time and says the only thing I was missing in my life was a woman. A real woman. She was always cordial to Leesa when she was around, which wasn’t often, but she didn’t care for her. Mama wanted me with someone who had shit going for herself, and Leesa wasn’t it. She was just some fine shit that I fucked when I needed my dick wet. Nothing more.

The DJ I hired for the reunion played a song that had everyone lined up and doing a line dance. I watched Aunt Mena pulling Eriss with her, who tried to wiggle free. She fell in line with the rest and was hitting the moves effortlessly. My Mama came out of the house and joined in, her knees bending like she was still twenty-one. Everyone was laughing, stopping, and clapping, the whole damn yard moving in sync. Mahlia ran over to me and pulled me to join in. With my cup still in my hand, I fell in line with the rest.

It was one in the morning when I sent everyone on their way. If they were too drunk to drive, a designated driver was making sure they made it home safely, but they had to get the fuck up out of here. Mahlia and her homegirl stayed to help clean. Her son was asleep in a tent that kept the mosquitoes away. She had to go and get him home, so when she picked up the last paper plate off the ground, I approached her.

“You can go ahead and get him home. It ain’t too much more clean up,” I said.

“Um...okay. We’re actually staying at a hotel in town.” Eriss replied softly and then squeezed her eyes shut. “Sorry, you didn’t even ask for all of that.” She glanced toward the tent. “He had fun. Thanks for having us here at your beautiful house.”

I smirked and nodded. “Yeah, he had a ball. Go on. I’ll finish here.”

Eriss hesitated. “You sure? I can—”

“I’m sure,” I cut her off with a small grin. “You’ve done enough.”

I couldn’t help but look at her cloudy eye. It wasn’t ugly. She... Wasn’t...Ugly.

Eriss caught me looking, but she didn’t flinch. She kind of held my eyes like she was testing me to see what I’d say or do next. Maybe she was used to folks asking her questions about her eye.

I cleared my throat. “Let me help you carry him to the car. It’s the least I can do. He’s knocked out cold and would be dead weight.”

“I appreciate that.”

Mahlia came over and silently looked from her friend to me. Leaving the two in that spot, I headed to the tent and unzipped it to pull her son out. Light as a fucking feather.

We walked in silence to her car. She unlocked it and opened the back door. When Eriss attempted to move me out of the way so she could buckle him up, I glanced back and chuckled, “I got it.”

Mahlia wrapped her arms around Eriss and whispered some shit in her ear that I couldn’t make out.

“Giiirl,” Eriss mumbled. “No.”

I stood to my full height and shut the door. Eriss thanked me again before jogging around to the driver’s side of her Toyota Camry. I crossed my arms over my chest as I watched Mahlia get in her vehicle. She could have stayed here tonight, but there was no telling what my cousin had up her sleeves or what nigga she was entertaining tonight. Mahlia pulled out first, honking her horn at me. Eriss followed behind her. I watched them drive down the dirt road until I could no longer see their taillights.

My phone rang as I headed to my front door, dragging a bag of trash. I squinted. The number that popped up, I was familiar with.

Love Grove Police Department.

My brother, Zyleek, was missing in action today. His kids were who Eriss' son was playing with. Mama had gathered all of them but one in her Jeep Cherokee. Zameer, his youngest, was out of town with his mama. I didn't even question why Zyleek wasn't here 'cause that nigga was wild. He stayed in some bullshit, always calling me to get him out. Like now.

I pressed the number to connect the call, and sighed.

"Maaaaan, Zyro. I got in some shit, bruh, and they just now givin' me my phone call," he hissed, frustrated beyond measure.

"What the fuck happened now, Leek?" I sighed, craning my phone between my shoulder and ear so I could swing the bag of trash into the trash can.

"I was at the wrong place, wrong time. I ain't even do shit this time, Ro," Zyleek pleaded. "For real."

"What they get you for?" I reiterated with another sigh. I locked the trash can just in case the raccoons came around tonight.

"Robbery, but—,"

"Fuck, Leek," I gritted.

"Nah, listen, Zyro...I don't have much long on this phone, and these pigs are some hoes. It wasn't even me. I was on the way to the reunion when I got pulled over, and these hoes talmbout I fit the description. You know I ain't been in trouble lately, bruh. They fuckin' wit' me, and I need you to come down here 'fore I nut up on these muhfuckas."

I could hear it in Zyleek's voice. He was close to taking shit to hell.

"I'm on my way. It's the fuckin' weekend, Leek. You ain't gon be able to see a judge until Monday, mane. I'ma need you to stay calm till then. Shit."

"Fuck that. Pull some strings and get me out of here, Ro, or I promise I'ma nut the fuck up on the next CO that comes over here fuckin' wit' me," he warned.

The phone went dead.

After making sure my front, back, and garage doors were locked, I jumped in my truck and dialed my lawyer, Conrad Duncan. That nigga could get a murder off. I needed to see what I could do to keep Zyleek sane until Monday, 'cause I knew they weren't letting him out until then.

Conrad answered the phone groggily. I told him the issue, and he was getting dressed in no time. I pressed on the gas, the diesel engine roaring as I ate up the road. Zyleek was a hothead, always had been. He didn't think

before swinging, and these cops in Love Grove would love to bury him under the jail for one wrong move or put a hot one in him and get off free on some self-defense shit.

The county jail smelled like bleach and coffee. A tired, out-of-shape, slouchy ass CO sat behind the bulletproof glass. His eyes flicked up at me before dragging back down to his paperwork.

“What can I help you with?” he asked, flatly.

“Yeah,” I said, clinching my jaw. “Zyleek Coleman. What’s his bond?”

Without looking up or typing on his outdated computer, he said, “No judge till Monday.”

I clenched my teeth. “I didn’t ask you that.”

He looked up, his mouth twitching into a little smirk. The kind of smirk muhfuckas do when they think they have power.

“Like I said, he will see the judge on Monday. Until then, he’s in holding.”

Before the shit turned ugly, Conrad walked in, sharp as a fuckin tack, and it was going on two in the morning.

“Gentlemen,” Conrad greeted smoothly with a nod of his head. His eyes darted from my angry expression to the CO. He flashed his ID at the glass. “I’m counsel for Zyleek Coleman. I’ll be needing access to my client and a copy of his intake paperwork.”

The CO’s smirk disappeared. He shifted in his seat, muttering something under his breath before picking up the phone. Conrad leaned toward me. “Fuck happened before I arrived?” he asked.

“Shiiii, none I can’t handle.”

Conrad nodded as if understanding. “We’ll get Zyleek through the weekend, but please keep your temper under control. I don’t need you sitting next to him.”

“Yeah, aight,” I muttered, stepping back with my hands in my pockets. I let Conrad do his job.

Approximately five minutes later, a deputy I was familiar with came around the corner, whistling. When his eyes locked on me, the whistling ceased. Deputy Porter motioned with his hands for me and Conrad to follow him.

“I got this, Charles. Follow me.”

He brought us through a set of heavy doors and used his badge to buzz them open. Deputy Porter tapped his set of keys against his leg as we

walked, another one trying to show a little *power*. My focus was already set on the row of cells at the end of the corridor. Zyleek's ass was pacing.

His fists were balled, and his jaw was clenched. He was moving like he was two seconds away from tearing down the walls.

"Leek," I called out sharply.

His head snapped up. Leek was so deep in thought and zoned out, he didn't even hear the deputy's keys.

"Zyro," he exhaled. He stomped over to the bars fast, gripping them tightly. "Man, I ain't do that shit. They got me on some robbery shit, but I was literally on my way to yo crib for the reunion. You know I been on the straight and narrow. This some fuck shit."

"I believe you, Leek."

"They got me in here with a bunch of clowns," he scoffed, looking back over his shoulder. The COs want me to snap, Zyro. They want me to give 'em a reason."

I stepped closer, dropping my voice. "Don't give these folks no damn reason. You know how they do in this town, Leek. You'll be hanging by a tree 'fore daylight. You gotta chill 'til Monday. Conrad's already movin' on it, but you gotta keep your head straight 'til then."

"Fuuuck," he angrily growled out, but there wasn't shit else I could do.

Conrad stepped in and talked to Zyleek.

"I might need to bring my truck in to your shop next week," Deputy Porter grunted out. "Shit been running bad, and I've already taken it to two other shops in town. They say yours is the best..."

"But your pride wouldn't allow you to bring it my shit," I snorted with a toss of my head back.

His beady eyes narrowed. "How about I make sure your brother is good and you give me a discount..."

"The way he looks now, better be the way I pick him up Monday," I warned, with a finger pointing directly in his face. "My nigga better not even have a scratch on him."

Deputy Porter's jaw clenched, and so did mine as I bit down on my back teeth. It wouldn't do any good for me and Leek to be sitting here until Monday. Leek was angry, but I could tell he was scared to. They were setting him up.

The CO from up front came waddling his fat ass down the corridor, stopping in front of Deputy Porter and handing him papers. He looked over

them and then extended the papers to Conrad, whose eyes quickly scanned them. He frowned.

“You have my client locked up because he fit the description of a Black man in the area. He supposedly robbed an elderly Caucasian couple, but there was no description of what clothes he was wearing. His build? His hair? Just... Just him being Black and in the area?” Conrad roared.

My nostrils flared as I attempted to contain my own anger. Because my brother had no scratches or bruises, I could tell he cooperated. He was probably talking shit, but he didn’t resist.

“Get the sheriff here,” Conrad continued to explode. “This is foolish! My client should not be behind bars because of a wild guess! Get Sheriff Grey here right now!”

The deputy’s eyes darted from Conrad to me, and I stood there chill, but burning on the inside.

He cleared his throat. “He was also found with weed in the car, so we have probable cause to hold him.”

I bit down on my back teeth. I always warned Leek about having weed on him while in a vehicle. Anything that could put him in jail while operating a vehicle shouldn’t be on him. Nigga never listened.

Leek smacked his lips. “A fuckin’ gram.”

Conrad turned to me, face tight. “If he didn’t have the drugs on him, I could have gotten Zyleek out tonight. He’s going to have to sit until Monday, Zyro.”

I nodded. “Aight, I appreciate you for gettin’ up out your sleep and comin’ down here, Conrad.”

“I’ll walk you fellas out,” the deputy stated.

“Fuck man!” Zyleek fussed.

“Stay calm, nigga. I’ll be here Monday,” I called to my brother. “Do not give these muhfuckas a reason.”

“I hear you,” Leek replied. “I love you, big bro.”

“I love you, too, Leek. I got you.” With that said, I trailed Conrad out of the jail.

“This is some bullshit, and if he didn’t have that fuckin’ charge, we could sue their ass,” Conrad fussed.

“It’s still racial profiling. They had no business stopping Leek. See what you can do, Conrad. I want this town to stop this shit, and if we have to hurt

pockets, do it,” I argued, reaching my truck. “I’ll meet you here on Monday.”

Not waiting on a reply, I jumped into my truck and hauled ass away from the county jail. It was pushing three in the morning, and I needed some sleep. Instead of calling and waking our parents up with the shit Leek done got in, and cause Mama to have a breakdown, I decided not to tell her. I’ll hear from her tomorrow, because I was sure someone in this city would find out and call her.

ERISS JACKSON

Ermias and I woke up at 6:15 a.m. to eat breakfast at the hotel, then we climbed back in bed and fell asleep until it was time to shower, pack, and leave the hotel. The sun was beating down by the time we dragged our suitcases to the car. Ermias hopped in the backseat in his booster seat, strapped his seatbelt around him, and slid his headphones on to play on his tablet. I closed his door, rounded the car, and hopped behind the wheel. I slept so well last night, and I felt energetic. I thought about taking Ermias to the huge arcade they had in Love Grove before leaving.

Shoving the key into the ignition, I turned it and...nothing. It just clicked. I tried again, and the same shit happened. It just made a clicking sound. I frowned. My stomach dipped at the thought of Ermias and me being stranded in Love Grove.

“Not today,” I groaned, smacking the steering wheel lightly. “Not here.”

I pushed open the door and climbed out. Ermias was still busy with his tablet to even notice that I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I popped the hood like I just knew what I was doing. My car had been giving me small problems here and there, but it never gave out like this.

Sighing, I retrieved my phone from the front seat and called Mahlia.

“Hey friend, you make it home yet?” she answered. “I hadn’t had a chance to check your lo.”

“My car won’t start,” I said, keeping my voice low so Ermias wouldn’t pick up on my frustration. “We’re still in the hotel parking lot. Any suggestions in this town and on a Sunday?”

“Zyro. His shop is closed today, but I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. I just found out my cousin, Leek, went to jail last night, and you know that’s Zyro’s brother.” Mahlia sighed. “Let me call him real quick and see what he can do.”

“Okay, thanks, Mahlia. I appreciate you.”

“Anything for you and Ermias, friend. I’ll call you back.”

“Okay,” I replied.”

We ended the call, and I peered back inside the car. It was hot, and I wasn’t sure how long we could sit outside in this heat. Three minutes later, my phone vibrated in my hand. An unfamiliar number popped up with a Love Grove area code.

“Hello?” I answered skeptically, looking back once again to check on Ermias. We couldn’t stay out here too much longer. I watched him wipe sweat from his brow.

“Mom, it’s hoooot,” he whined.

“This Zyro, Mahlia’s folk. She told me yo’ car won’t crank.” I froze at the sound of his deep, country voice with a drawl.

“Yeah, it won’t,” I replied while walking over to the other side to tell Ermias to get out. We’d have to go back inside the hotel to cool off. “The battery just makes a clicking sound.”

“I can come see ‘bout it. I’ll have to stop at my shop to get the tow truck in case I need it. Y’all have somewhere to go to get out of this heat?”

I glanced at the hotel’s entrance and replied, “We can go back into the hotel and wait.”

“Aight, bet. I’ll call when I pull up.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Yeah,” he said, and the call ended.

“Ermias...” I pushed my phone into my back pocket. “We’re going to go back inside and wait for help. Mama’s car won’t start.”

I left our bags in the car, locked up, and led my son back to the hotel’s sliding doors. The air-conditioning hit us as soon as we stepped inside. I think we both let out a long sigh of relief. Ermias plopped down dramatically on a lobby chair and got lost in his tablet once again.

I sat in another chair beside him, removing my phone from my pocket before my butt hit the seat. That’s when the pressure started, a throbbing pulse behind my left eye. It began as a dull feeling and then sharpened as if

someone was pressing a thumb hard against the inside of my skull. I bit down on my back teeth to keep from howling out from the pain.

My phone vibrated, and with a shaky hand, I picked it up, answering Zyro's call.

"Hello?"

"I'm outside. I'm a come in a grab yo' key. You and lil' man can stay in the AC," his voice rumbled on the other end.

"Okay," I whispered. I hit the end button and attempted to act normal. Reaching into my purse, I grabbed my shades and slid them over my eyes.

The door opened, and Zyro swaggered in. I didn't think I could even stand right now to give him the keys. I guess I wasn't doing a good job hiding the pain because he immediately asked, "You good?"

I squirmed in my seat, stretching my keys to him. "Yeah, it's just a headache."

Ermias' headshot up. "Take medicine, Mama," he voiced, his brows furrowing.

Zyro didn't look convinced. His gaze lingered on my eye before I jiggled the keys I held out. He slowly took them.

"I will," I promised Ermias, who was also still eyeing me.

Pointing behind him with a thumb, Zyro told me that he would look at the car to determine if he could get it started. I watched him walk off, his slightly bowed legs causing me to forget about my headache for a second. He had a nice walk.

"He's nice, Mama."

I turned to my son, embarrassed he'd caught me watching Zyro.

"Yeah, he is, baby. He's trying to get our car working so we can go home. You hungry? Thirsty?"

He shook his head, and his head dropped back to his tablet. Digging in my purse, I pulled out my steroid eye drops prescribed for my condition. I tilted my head back and squeezed a drop into my left eye, blinking fast against the familiar burn. Relief came after a moment, easing some of the pressure. I dropped the little bottle back into my purse just as the lobby doors opened again.

Zyro entered, his expression hard, telling me everything before he even spoke. His brows were pulled together, jaw tight. He held my keys between his fingers.

“It’s not gon crank,” he said to me. “I think it’s more than the battery. I can tow it to my shop and see about working on it first thing in the morning.” I tossed my head back and groaned. “Where do you live?”

“Heartville. I can call—”

“No one,” Zyro cut me off. “I can take you and lil’ man. I had one of my guys come out already wit’ a tow truck from the shop. My truck is out there, so come on.”

“You’re a lil’ bossy,” Ermias uttered. My eyes widened.

“Ermias!” I hissed, while Zyro snickered.

“I am...a lil’,” Zyro replied. He turned to me. “It’s straight. Homeboy just called it as he sees it. He ain’t wrong.” Zyro’s eyes ran down my frame in the graphic tee and red biker shorts. “C’mon so I can get y’all home.”

I was a little hesitant about letting him know where Ermias and I lived, but so far Zyro had shown that he was good people. Mahlia wouldn’t have called him if he wasn’t. I trusted my girl with mine and my son’s life.

I slung my purse over my shoulders when standing, still side-eyeing Ermias for popping off the way he did. He hopped up and rushed to Zyro’s side, already liking this man too much. I can see it in his eyes.

“Truck’s right outside,” he told me.

The automatic doors slid open, and that big, shiny black F-150 truck on rims was parked outside.

“That’s the truck I saw out your house!” Ermias jumped up and down, yelling excitedly. “Mama, we get to ride in that!”

A light-skinned Black man with 360 waves was hooking my car to the tow truck. He briefly glanced at me and tossed his head back slightly before focusing back on the task.

“That’s my boy, Marco. He’s gon tow your car to my shop. Here.” Zyro handed me my keys, that was now missing the car key. “Marco!” Marco glanced up, standing to his full height. My keys went flying into the air, and Marco caught them.

“I need his booster seat!”

“Calm down. I already grabbed it.” Zyro opened the passenger and back door for me and Ermias. “It’s already in my truck.”

“Oh,” I replied, craning my neck to look into the backseat, seeing the booster seat there. “Thanks.”

I heard Zyro snicker and say, “I gotchu.”

While he helped Ermias climb into his truck, I hopped in the passenger seat and melted into the peanut butter seats. The seats were cool since Zyro had kept his truck running. I was just ready to get home, take another shower, make some tea, and climb into bed. The pain had subsided for now.

Zyro rounded the front of the truck, and I watched him. When he opened his door, I buckled myself with the seat belt, then turned around to see if Ermias was buckled. The seat belt was around him, and he laughed at something on his tablet. A small smile tugged at my lips.

Being so close to Zyro, and in his space...had me somewhat nervous.

"How's your headache?" he asked, placing the gear in reverse and backing up.

"It's gone for now. Do you need gas or anything? I can pay..."

Zyro let out a suppressed laugh. "Eriss...chill. I don't need anything from you, baby girl."

I wasn't used to men who brushed off money. Most of the time, they were quick to remind me of what I owed or what they had done for me. Zyro was different.

"Y'all ate?"

"Yes," I said.

"Earlier!" Ermias shouted from the back.

"And I asked you if you were hungry, little boy, and you told me no. We're good until we get home," I told Zyro, then ran off my address to him.

"I don't mind stopping anywhere. I don't eat in my truck, so we'd have to dine in," Zyro said. He glanced at Ermias through the rearview mirror. "That coo' wit' you?"

"I really want to get home. I can make him something at home. Thank you, though," I uttered.

Zyro didn't respond, and I turned back to the window. I was more worried about how much getting my car fixed was going to dent my pockets. Music began playing, and thankfully, it wasn't music I didn't let Ermias listen to. It was soul R&B. I smiled. Zyro was so country.

After a little over an hour, we arrived in Heartville, and I directed Zyro on how to get to my place. We'd listen to the music instead of conversing. I figured I had irritated him for not wanting to stop to grab food. Ermias had dozed off in the back.

His truck rumbled down the narrow two-lane road as I pointed out the turns. The familiar houses and mailboxes started appearing.

“Right up here,” I instructed. “It’s the little tan house with light blue shutters.”

Zyro slowed down, easing into my gravel driveway.

“Nice, quiet spot,” he said, placing the gear in park.

“Very quiet. Just how I like it,” I admitted. I pushed my door open. “I’m guessing you’re the same way, seeing how you’re ducked off in the country too.”

“Yeah, I am, but touch that door again before I can open it for you, we gon have a problem.” My hand slowly eased away from the door. “I can tell a man ain’t never opened the doors for you.”

He was right, but I chose to be quiet because I was still in shock. Zyro hopped out of the truck, walked around the front and came to my side, and opened the door. He held out a hand to help me out. I placed my hand in his calloused one and exited the truck.

“gon head and unlock your door. I can get your son and your bags.”

“I can—”

My mouth shut when Zyro gave me a hard look. I wasn’t used to this from a man, so it felt weird. It had me wondering if he wanted something in return from me, besides me paying for my car to get fixed.

As I ambled to the front door while digging through my purse for my house key, I kept glancing over my shoulder. Zyro was pulling Ermias from the truck. He was talking to him as he woke up. I couldn’t hear a word he was saying, but whatever he said had my son laughing.

Unlocking the door, I pushed it open and hurried to turn on the air conditioning and meet Zyro with our bags and talk to him about my car. I couldn’t go long without a vehicle. Ermias had daycare, and I had work. I didn’t like to ask my parents for much. I was always raised to be independent, especially due to my condition. I didn’t see it as a disability because I was still able to live a very normal life. If I ever needed help, they would, without question, but I try not to bother them. While I lived the country life in Heartville, they loved the city.

“Mama! The carnival is tonight, remember?” Ermias sprinted toward me, causing me to groan.

“Ermias, what have I told you about running with your tablet? It’ll be just my luck if I have to get *that* fixed too,” I fussed. My eyes dragged to Zyro with my bag and Ermias’ suitcase. The veins in his arms and hands stood out as he carried them.

“Okay, but can we go?”

“Not tonight, baby. I’m already stressing about my car. We’ll see if TT Mahlia wants to go this week,” I replied softly, trying not to crush his hopes.

The fair was one of our things when it came around. My car messing up was unexpected, but then again, it wasn’t. It was really time for another one.

I held my hands out to retrieve the bags from Zyro. He mugged me.

“If you don’t want me in your home, at least let me place the bags inside by the door. My Mama taught me better than that, baby,” Zyro said, brushing past me. He set our things at the door and then backed out of the house, only to stop at the doorway. His tall frame towered over me. “You wanna go to the fair?”

I shook my head. “I have more things to worry about than the fair. How much do you think it’s going to cost me to fix my car?” I queried. No lie, I was surprised Zyro even asked if I wanted to go to the fair. Was he interested, or was he just feeling bad for me and Ermias?

Zyro shrugged. “We gotta do a diagnostic to check the issue, but whatever it is, don’t let it stress you. Now, about this fair homeboy just told me ‘bout, you wanna hit it? He got me all excited about it the way he was talkin’ ‘bout it when he woke up from his nap.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Ermias loves the fair. I’m tired, though. I had planned to go tomorrow, but—”

“Then we can go tomorrow. On me.”

I ran a hand through my bundles and sighed. “I have more things to worry about.”

Zyro crossed his tatted arms across his chest. “Like what?”

“Like getting Ermias to daycare and myself to my job in the morning,” I screeched out, growing irritated from all these questions.

“Look, I’m just asking because maybe I can help with a solution,” he replied in an even tone.

“Thanks, Zyro, but I’ll figure it out. I appreciate you for taking time out of your Sunday to even do what you did.”

“No big deal.” Zyro took a step back. “I have ya number. I’ll call you when I figure out what’s wrong with ya car. You enjoy the rest of your day, Eriss.”

“You too,” I exhaled.

Ermias ran to my side before I could shut the door and yelled out, “Bye, Zyro!”

“See ya later, homeboy.”

Mahlia cackled loudly when I told her about her cousin. With Ermias bathed and in bed, I ended up on the sofa, covered with a blanket with the TV on after my shower.

“Girl, don’t play with that man—ever. I know my cousin. Telling me that he was offering to take y’all to the fair is screaming that he likes you. I even know that nigga did shit like that. Hell, he ain’t even offer to take the girl he’s screwing!”

“My point exactly! What I look like entertaining a nigga that’s in a relationship?” I snorted through a chortle.

The last thing I wanted to do was share a nigga. I’d been sharing a nigga who I didn’t even know I was sharing until a baby was made.

“Zyro isn’t in a relationship, sweetie,” Mahlia cleared up. “He’s just doin’ him without being tied down.”

“Scared of commitment, noted it,” I shot out, and we laughed.

“Aye now, he and Leek are my favorite cousins. Not too much. Not toooo much. Anyway, I’m off tomorrow, so I will come scoop you and Ermias, taking him to daycare, and you to work. Zyro and his team normally work fast. They’re the best.”

“My car is all the way in Love Grove, Mahlia.” I groaned.

“Shit, it’s time for a new one anyway. That bitch got more miles on it than a hoe’s pussy.”

She cackled while my jaw dropped, shocked she would talk about my baby like that.

“Fuck you, Mahlia,” I giggled.

Mahlia was still cackling on the other end of the phone. I pulled the blanket up to my chin and sank deeper into the cushion of the couch.

“She’s tired, baby. Put her out of her misery.”

I rolled my eyes, though she couldn’t see it. “Whatever, Mahlia.”

“But seriously, E... I ain’t never seen or heard that Zyro was offering to take you and Ermias to the fair. Shit, that nigga took y’all home! He would

have put a bitch in an Uber and called it a fuckin'day."

"He said his Mama raised him better than that."

"She probably did! You met her at the reunion. Aunt Zena. She was the one who dipped it too low and couldn't get back up." We laughed in unison.

"Yeah, I remember," I replied, tickled.

"She did raise her sons right. They're still hotheaded, but Leek is more than Zyro. Zyro has calmed down, but the beast is still in there somewhere when poked."

I nibbled on my bottom lip, staring at the muted TV flickering across the room on the wall. Zyro's handsome face flashed through my mind. It was the way he didn't look away from my eye, but still didn't make me feel as if it was ugly. The way he asked if I was okay during one of my headaches. Hell, the way Ermias took to him. Ermias was skeptical about any nigga who approached me. He didn't like that at all and was very observant. Very territorial. Very protective.

But still... I wasn't looking for a relationship. I don't know if Delion traumatized me or what, but I was good and happy single. It was peaceful not having to wonder if you're getting cheated on. It was a great day in the neighborhood, not to have people secretly laughing at you because you didn't know you were being cheated on.

Mahlia yawned, "I'll be there bright and early for you and nephew. Night, bookie,"

"Thanks, Mahlia. Good night, girl."

I ended the call and debated on whether or not to stay on the couch or drag my ass to my bed. Pressing the power button on the remote, I turned the TV off. I turned over and fell asleep, but not before hoping Zyro would call with good news.

ZYRO COLEMAN

“Y’ boss, who piece of shit car is this?” Tatum, one of my employees, called out when I came into view.

Tatum’s voice carried across the shop, half-laughing, half-disgusted, as he stood over the Camry.

“Chill out, Tatum. It’s one of Mahlia’s homegirls,” I said, wiping my hands on a microfiber cloth as I sauntered over.

“Shiii, what fine ass Mahlia doin’ these days? I miss her poppin’ up at the shop,” Tatum joked, wiggling his bushy brows.

“Oh, you must want to be standing in the unemployment line today, nigga,” I shot back, causing Marco to snicker.

“I’m just sayin’, she’s lucky this thing didn’t die on the freeway.”

Tatum wasn’t lyin’. The car looked even worse under the shop’s bright LED lights. Paint faded in spots, tires were fuckin’ balding. I was gon get on Eriss’ ass about that shit. Just like a damn woman, running the wheels down to the thread. The most important thing was the diagnosis.

I had to leave in a few minutes to head over to the county jail. I’d opened the shop for the fellas, and while I was gone, Marco was in charge of operations. We had one car that was getting a full paint job, and that was Tatum’s specialty.

“Boss man, the alternator is fried, the belts look like they’re from back in the day, and the battery is done for.” Marco sighed.

“The whole car needs a come-to-Jesus,” Tatum cracked, and I couldn’t lie, I agreed.

“She ain’t gon like that phone call,” I muttered, checking the time on my watch.

“Aye, is this just Mahlia’s friend or is there more to it?” Tatum questioned with one eye squinting.

“What I say? She’s her homegirl wit’ a kid, nigga. Customer pulling up. Take care of my damn shop while I’m gone!” I hollered out, cutting that conversation short.

I greeted the customer waiting near the bay door and let them know Marco would take care of them. I slid into my truck and peeled out of the lot, heading toward the county. Conrad had texted, letting me know that he was en route. If the traffic were light, we’d pull up about the same time.

On the way home from dropping Eriss and her son off at home yesterday, Mama had called me, livid about Leek being in jail. She was even more livid when she found out the reason he missed the family reunion. I could still hear her voice ringing in my ears now as I pulled onto the highway. Mama wasn’t wrong for being upset. She’d buried enough of our people to know the system wasn’t built for men like Leek. Like me. Men with tempers when pushed, and it was hard coming down from it.

My jaw clenched as my hands tightened around the wheel. Just thinking about Leek’s situation pissed me off even more. At least helping Eriss took my mind off him on Sunday. Now it was one thing after another ‘cause I still needed to call her about her car. That would have to wait. I needed to put eyes on Zyleek first.

I spotted Conrad as soon as I pulled up and parked. He was on the phone, pacing back and forth near his vehicle. His face was screwed up as if the person on the other end was saying some bullshit he ain’t like. I hope it didn’t have shit to do with Leek. I killed the engine and locked my shit up after hopping out. When Conrad noticed me, he held up a finger, telling me he’d be with me in a moment, but fuck that shit, I walked up on him ‘cause something was telling me it had everything to do with my brother.

“This is fucked up,” Conrad growled and ended the call.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Please stay calm when I tell you this shit, Zyro,” he begged with his hands stretched out, palms facing the ground.

I swiped my nose with the pad of my thumb. “It depends on what the fuck it is, Conrad.”

He sighed. “Zyleek got in a fight and his eye is swollen.”

“With whom? An inmate? A CO?”

“Another inmate, so they tryin’ to stick more charges on him, Zyro.”

“Fuck no! he had no business being in there in the first place, Conrad. Get him out of there, for I turn this whole county upside down,” I gritted through clenched teeth and walked away from his ass. How the fuck did Zyleek get in a damn fight already? That sounds like a fuckin’ setup ‘cause he wouldn’t have done shit to fuck up his chance to get out today over a fuckin’ gram of weed.

I could hear Conrad walking behind me. My head was pounding. My phone rang, and when I saw that it was Pops, I groaned. I stopped in my tracks to answer.

“Aye.”

“Any word?” he asked right off.

I cleared my throat. Conrad dipped his head and entered the building.

“I just got word Leek was in a fight and they’re trying to slap more charges on ‘em,” I told him.

“Maaaaan, if I gotta bring my ass up to that county jail, I’mma show them folks some,” he barked. I could hear him moving around. “Is Conrad there?”

“He here,” I uttered, rubbing a hand down my waves.

“Well, he’d better work fuckin’ magic! Leek’s baby mamas been calling and textin’ Zena like crazy. You would think he was still screwin’ all of ‘em!”

“I had to snicker at that. “He probably is.”

“Well, he’s a damn foo’! Let me know what they say, Zyro.”

“I will, Pops. I’ll have to wait out here ‘cause I think the lawyers are the only ones that can go in,” I let him know.

I hung up with my Pops, dragging my hand down my face. My temples were still throbbing. My fists flexed and unflexed. It was quiet outside, except for the doors opening and shutting as people came and went. My phone vibrated in my back pocket. I slid it out, thinking it was one of my people, and saw it was Eriss instead. She wasn’t saved in my phone, but I remembered the last four numbers—4656.

I cursed under my breath. This wasn’t even the time to talk about her damn car, but seeing that she was impatient because I was supposed to be calling her and not the other way around, I answered.

“This Zyro.”

“Oh, hey. This is Eriss. Any news about my car? I know it’s early in the morning, but—” Her voice trailed off.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Yeah, my boy got a chance to take a look at it right when he got in. Um...it ain’t good news though.”

She groaned. “I knew it.”

When I reached my truck, I pulled down the bed and hopped on it, taking a seat. I didn’t know how long it would take Conrad to come back out, but I was sitting my ass right here until he did.

“I’m not at the shop right now. I kinda got some family shit going...”

“Oh yeah, your brother. Um, Mahlia told me, and I hope everything is okay. I’m sorry to be bothering you.”

“You ain’t botherin’ me,” I was quick to say. “When I was leaving, I was told it was a few issues wit’ your car. We can fix it, but it’ll be costly, or you can think about trading it in and gettin’ some else.” Silence hung for more than a second. That was some she didn’t want to hear, so I was sure she was processing that shit. “The alternator’s gone along wit’ the battery. Let’s talk ‘bout those bald ass tires. That car shouldn’t even be on the road wit’ you and lil’ man in it.”

Eriss inhaled sharply. “I figured it was bad, but not that damn bad.”

“Yeah, I’m always keep it real wit’ my customers.”

“I appreciate that.” She sighed softly. “I don’t know anything about trading in a car.”

I glanced up when I noticed movement and saw Conrad come out of the building. I jumped off the bed and pushed it back up.

“I don’t mind helping you, but you have to do me a solid first.”

“Niggas always want something in return,” I heard her mutter, causing me to chortle.

“Like what, Eriss? I don’t want any pussy if that’s what you’re saying? I just want to take you and my lil’ homeboy to the fair tonight,” I replied. “Think about it, and I’ll call you later. The lawyer just came out, so I gotta go.”

Without waiting for a response or a rejection, I ended the call and met Conrad, sliding my phone back into my pocket. I met him halfway across the lot. His tie was now loose, with his jacket slung over his arm.

My chest was tight. “Well?”

He let out a breath through his nose. “Leek is a damn fool, Zyro,” he started, telling me something I already knew. Conrad had better be lucky he

was damn near family to even be talking sideways about Zyleek like that. “They wanted to slap him with those fresh charges, but I argued excessive provocation and self-defense. I also made the judge aware that Zyleek was profiled Saturday night. The judge agreed to grant bail instead of holding him.”

“Let me get this straight, Conrad. My brother was profiled, and we still gotta give these bitches some money?” I argued.

I was relieved my brother could come home today, but he should be walking out of there free, no damn bond needed.

“I know. I know. It’s fucked up, but we just need to get Leek out of there and then figure out what we gon do about it. I don’t want them getting away with that shit. If they’ll do it to Leek, they’ll do it to another Black boy or man,” Conrad snarled. “That shit makes me sick to my stomach.”

Conrad clapped my shoulder. “You always come through for him, Zyro. Make sure he doesn’t land right back in there. We don’t know what the fuck them people on.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’ll handle Leek, just get him processed out, and I’ll send the bread.”

Three hours later, Leek walked out. The second I saw him, my blood heated. This nigga grinned, slapping one fist into a palm.

“You should see the other nigga.” Zyleek pointed to his eye. “This ain’t shit.”

He pulled his falling pants up and slapped hands with me. His eye was swollen damn near shut, the skin purpled and split. Zyleek was lighter than I was, taking after our Pops. His lip was busted too, dried blood crusted at the corner. They ain’t let him get cleaned up for court. Wild shit.

“Man...” I muttered, clenching my fists until my knuckles cracked. “I wanna go fuck those niggas up.”

“I’m straight, bruh. I fucked that bitch ass nigga up. They thought he was gon come in there and handle me.”

I shook my head and motioned with my head toward my truck.

“C’mom, man. You need a couple of showers. Yo’ baby mothers been callin’ Mama.”

I opened my car door and slid behind the wheel.

“They put money on my bail?” he asked.

“Nah, nigga. You know it was all me,” I snorted.

“Well fuck ‘em!” he shouted. “All three of ‘em.”

I sucked my teeth. “Them yo’ kid’s mamas, man.” I shook my head. “They need to make sure yo’ kids straight. Fuck puttin’ money on yo’ books.”

Leek side-eyed me, and I returned the look. As ratchet as his baby mamas were, they still took care of their kids. They didn’t get along with one another, pissed that Leek lied down and procreated with the other, but my two nieces and nephew knew their ABCs and 123s. They were always dressed nicely, clean, and their hair was always done or had a haircut.

“You never on my side,” he smacked.

“Nigga, I’m here, ain’t I?” I rebutted, finna smack the fuck out of this nigga.

Leek sighed and reclined my seat all the way back. “I need a nap. Let’s hit the booty club tonight? I know you’re tired of Leesa’s pussy.”

I cackled. “Nah nigga. I have other plans tonight.”

“Maaaan like what?” Leek asked with his mouth twisted.

“The fair, bitch.”

“The faaair? The fuck you goin’ to the fair fo’? Who you goin’ to the fair fo’?”

“That ain’t none of your business lil’ bro. Focus on lettin’ some water and soap hit yo’ ass. You smell like a fuckin’ dumpster,” I said, glancing at him briefly before putting my eyes back on the road.

He waved me off, saying, “Whatever, nigga. I appreciate you.”

I nodded. “Just stay out of the way, Leek. Let me handle the shit.”

Zyleek snorted obnoxiously. “Yeah, okay. You ain’t doin’ shit without me, Ro.”

I stopped at a red light and looked over at my brother. His light-skinned ass now had his eyes closed, probably getting the rest he couldn’t get in jail. Leek was what you called a pretty boy. Short curly hair that was tapered at the sides. We were both six feet even, getting our height from our Pops.

“And whatever female you takin’ to the fair, I need to meet ‘cause I know it ain’t Leesa’s stank ass.”

ERISS JACKSON

I've been in a horrible mood ever since I talked to Zyro. I had to break down and call my dad because even though I was grown, I had no clue about trading in vehicles. He was there when I got my first car.

When I sat in Mahlia's car after work, my mood hadn't changed.

"Hey, bookie," she sang out as I put my seatbelt on.

"Hey, girl," I replied in a dry tone.

"Nuh uh, what's wrong?" Mahlia pulled out of the lot and into traffic.

"My car is a bust."

"But we already knew that. It's time for something new, E. You've been holding onto that raggedy thing." I cut my eyes over at her. "What?" she laughed. "Anyway, I heard you and my nephew are going to the fair tonight."

I reared my head back. I had pushed Zyro's talk about the fair to the back of my mind hours ago.

"I never agreed, plus, I don't even know that man. Did his brother get out?"

"Don't try to change the damn subject, Eriss. Yes, Leek is out, but that man you don't know got you and your son safely home yesterday. Drove from one city to another and didn't even get any pussy, so please don't act like he ain't a good guy. I would have never called Zyro to help you if I didn't think he was a good guy."

"He told you he was taking us to the fair?"

“Not really, Leek messy ass did. He called me to gossip.” Mahlia chortled. “He said he knew that I knew what female had Zyro’s nose wide open. His words, not mine. I didn’t tell Leek shit, though. He has other shit to worry about. I think you should go and spend my cousin’s money. It’ll take your mind off your car for a while,” she suggested.

“You are a mess. Did you just tell me to spend *your* cousin’s money?” I giggled.

“I did. Zyro can afford to trick,” Mahlia snickered.

“I can’t wait to tell him that,” I let slip.

“Oh, so you’re planning on going to the fair then? I love to hear it.”

“That’s not what I said, but if it’ll make Ermias happy, I guess. Why don’t you come, too?”

“Because my cousin didn’t invite me.” I watched Mahlia squint. “Why didn’t he invite me? I’m like his favorite person in this world.”

Chuckling, I said, “Sounds like you have questions that need answers.”

“Nope.” Mahlia smiled at me, then turned into the parking lot of Heartville Kiddies, Ermias’s daycare.” If Zyro has to replace me with someone, I would rather it be—”

“Don’t say it, because it’s not happening,” I warned.

“You.

“You’re a trip, Mahlia, but I’m afraid I’m gon have to disappoint you because me and your cousin are not happening,” I let her know and pressed my lips together. “I’ll be back with your nephew.”

I’d just put a load of clothes in the washer when my phone rang on the dryer. I picked it up and wiped the sweat from my brow. Seeing that it was Zyro, I figured he had more news about my car, not realizing the time.

“Hello?” I answered out of breath.

“Bad time?” he asked.

“No. I was doing chores around the house. More news about my car?”

“Nah,” he exhaled. “Nah, there’s no change, baby girl. I just hit Heartville. The fair...remember?”

“I didn’t agree to it...remember?” I mocked him, a little annoyed that he was persistent. If Zyro wanted to go to the fair so badly, he could have taken

someone else.

He kissed his teeth. "So, your son hasn't been askin' 'bout the fair today?"

"He has, but I'm not in the position to do so right now," I shot back.

"Down, baby. I'm just tryin' to help out. Come out and have some fun."

I was a sweaty mess and haven't showered myself. When I rounded the corner and saw Ermias sitting in the living room in his Ninja Turtles pajamas, my heart swelled. The fair has been on his mind heavily. When I picked him up from daycare, he didn't even greet me like he normally did with a "Hey, mommy!" It was "Are we going to the fair?"

Sighing, I gave in. "Okay. I need to shower and get Ermias dressed. Give me forty-five minutes."

"Aight."

I hit the end button, and before telling Ermias the good news, I told him to stay put while I showered. He was good about not answering the door, trying to cook, or doing anything else that a child his age shouldn't do while I showered or slept. Cartoons, his coloring books, and toys would keep him busy.

It took me thirty-five minutes to shower, dry off, moisturize my body, and put on a graphic tee and distressed shorts with black socks and red Converse. I went ahead and took Ibuprofen ahead of time in case my eye began to ache. My drops would be in my purse, too. I never left home without them.

Ermias ran into my room and peeked inside the bathroom where I was brushing my hair into a high ponytail. He eyed my attire.

"Where are you going, Mommy?" he asked out of curiosity.

"*We* are going to the fair."

His eyes lit up, and he began jumping up and down, screaming, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" He stopped. "Are we going with Zyro?"

I chuckled. "We are." I turned the water on to wash my hands. "You want to wear the same thing as me?"

Ermias nodded. Most times, when I buy something for myself, I look to see if I can find it in his size. There was a Mommy and Me shop here in Heartville that created cute graphic shirts with different artists and actors for adults and kids to match. Today I sported a Crown Heart tour shirt, and Ermias had one too.

I'd just finished brushing Ermias' hair when I heard car tires in my yard, and that now familiar rumble of Zyro's big ass monster truck. Ermias couldn't stop talking about the truck.

I had to stop him from trying to run to the door and open it without my permission. He knew better.

I waited to see if Zyro would blow the horn or get out like a gentleman and knock. I don't know why it even mattered. Even if he was interested in me, I wasn't ready to get into anything serious with anyone anytime soon.

When I heard knocks on the door, I couldn't say I was shocked. I grabbed my purse, told Ermias to be on his best behavior, then opened the door.

We were met with a smile with diamond fangs that I hadn't seen until now. I couldn't even remember if he had them in at the reunion. Zyro wore crisp light blue jeans and a plain black crew neck t-shirt. On his feet were grey and black Retro 4s. The scent coming from him was intoxicating. So intoxicating.

"Y'all look nice," he complimented with a bigger grin.

"Mama, I want diamond teeth! Look! He has diamond teeth!" Ermias pointed at Zyro, and I gently slapped his arm down.

"We don't point at people, Ermias. I see them. You're too small for diamond teeth," I said before looking back up at Zyro. "Thanks, so do you."

I scooped up Ermias's booster seat from against the wall near the door, and Zyro took it from me, telling my son to follow him while I locked up.

"We get to ride in the monster truck again! When I get big, Zyro, I'm going to get one!"

I stifled a laugh. Next, he's going to want me to take his little ass to the tattoo shop to get covered like Zyro. I shook my head. If only he could get the same attention he was getting from Zyro, from Delion. It's been a month since Delion had even called for Ermias. I wasn't one of those baby mothers who'd call and cry about it either. Ermias wasn't missing out on anything. He was loved and he cared for. I shouldn't have to force anyone to be in his life.

Zyro helped me into his truck again. I could have sworn his hand lingered just a second longer than it needed to before he shut the door.

It was a fifteen-minute drive to the Heartville Expo, where the fair was always held. Zyro had music playing low.

"How you feelin'?" he asked about five minutes into the drive.

“About what?” I questioned. “My car? My eye?”

He pointed to his eye. “If I’m overstepping, let me know.”

“I took pain meds before I left the house, just in case. Right now, I’m fine. I appreciate you asking, though.” I offered Zyro a small smile.

“Do people...Do they give you problems in public? Do they just stare?” Zyro asked.

“Most of the time it’s kids, but they don’t know any better. I brought my eye patch to put on, though. Ermias...he’s very overprotective of me. He’ll buck up to a teen if he sees them talking about me,” I mumbled so my baby couldn’t hear me.

“As he should. Boys don’t play ‘bout they mamas.”

I shook my head and pointed behind me with my thumb. “He sure doesn’t.”

“I’ll knock a nigga off this Earth ‘bout mine,” Zyro uttered, then licked his lips. I had to glance out the window.

“Zyro?” Ermias called out from the back.

“Yeah, big man?”

“Are you getting on the rides? The scary ones?”

Zyro glanced over at me, and I raised a brow, awaiting his response to my baby.

“Yeah, I ain’t scared of shit.” Without thinking, I elbowed Zyro for cussing. He frowned at first and then grinned. “My bad.”

The fair wasn’t as packed as the weekend; that is why I preferred to bring Ermias on a weekday. When my feet touched the ground from exiting the truck, I reached into my purse to pull out my eyepatch. As I was about to pull it over my head, it was snatched out of my hand.

“You don’t need this,” Zyro mumbled, sticking it in his pocket while Ermias and I watched with our jaws dropped. “If anybody looks at you a lil’ too long, they gon have to answer to me. I’ll push a kid down,” he leaned over and said, lips inches from my ear.

I gasped and then broke into a laugh. I wasn’t sure if I should be afraid or grateful.

“You don’t have to. I’m used to it, I promise.”

“You’re too pretty for this damn patch.”

My cheeks heated.

“Ouuuu, Mama! Zyro called you pretty. He thinks you’re pretty!” Ermias stopped walking and cocked his head to the side as if he’d just

thought of something. Nothing could prepare me for what would come out of his mouth. “Zyro, are you going to be my new daddy?”

“Ermias!” I screeched. “Oh my gosh! Why would you ask that?” I turned to a skinning and grinning Zyro, who had both hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. “Do not answer that!”

Zyro chuckled. “C’mon, man. Let’s go get the tickets so we can see who big dawg and who’s the scaredy cat.”

“I’m big dawg!” Ermias said loudly, poking his chest out.

Zyro looked over at me. “I heard that.”

It wouldn’t be long before Ermias ran into a friend from daycare, and he begged me to let him go on the Ferris wheel with him and the boy’s mother. Then Zyro told him we’d be on the one behind them and forced me on it.

When we sat down, he reached over me to buckle us up. My breathing hitched. Zyro’s arm brushed across my chest as he tugged the belt tight, his cologne wrapping around me. My pulse jumped. I shifted, pretending to flick imaginary lint off my shirt.

“You nervous?” Zyro queried in a teasing tone.

“A little,” I admitted.

The ride started, and we were going slowly in a circle.

“Where’s his dad?”

I swallowed, my throat drying up.

“Um, he’s around. He doesn’t really come around a lot.”

“So, he’s a fuck nigga?” Zyro shot out.

“Yeah...that. Found out about him having another kid when the woman showed up at my doorstep, big pregnant, acting like I stole him from her,” I scoffed. “He tried so hard to get me to stay with him, but a baby is where I draw the line.”

“Shit, cheating should be where you draw the line. Don’t ever let a nigga do you any kind of way, Eriss. He knew what he had, and he fucked up.”

I tilted my head to look at Zyro. His waves were swimming for sure. They were going around his head perfectly. When he bit down on his lip, where his top front teeth met the little patch of hair under his bottom lip, a deep crater appeared on his cheek. It was cute. Real cute.

“Yeah, you’re right. Thank you for saying that, being a nigga and all.”

“I’m a man,” he said softly. “A man wit’ a Black queen for a mother. A Black queen for a grandmother. “

“So why don’t you settle down with the woman you’re messing with?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

Zyro ran a thumb over his bottom lip. “‘Cause she’s not my wife. I know she’s not my wife. I’m a nigga, and I have needs. She serves that purpose for me. I’m not stopping her from going to find her husband. I don’t take her on dates. I don’t take her out to eat. We don’t do couple shit but fuck. I’m just keepin’ it a buck witcha.”

“And she’s okay with just getting a wet ass from you?”

Zyro snickered. “She’s more than a wet ass, sweetheart.”

My eyes stretched, and I was done with this conversation because it was going in a whole other direction. The last thing I needed was for Zyro to think I was one of those women who fell quickly just because a man showed me a little attention.

The wheel jolted slightly as it continued its slow spin. My fingers tightened around the safety bar. I wasn’t scared. It was the forced proximity that had my nerves going haywire.

When the ride finally ended, I could breathe again. Ermias was already bouncing on his toes, tugging me toward the games where you had to pay cash because they didn’t accept tickets.

“Mama! Let’s play a game so Zyro can win you a teddy bear, then you won’t be so lonely!”

I cut my eyes down at Ermias. The shade he was throwing was insane! Zyro laughed.

“I got you, lil’ man. I don’t want your mama to be lonely either, so let me win her some,” he said, followed by a wink and another swipe of his tongue over his lips.

I covered my face and groaned. These two were tag-teaming against me. Usually, Ermias would be on my side. He was switching up on me for Zyro right before my eyes...or eye.

He and Zyro walked over to the game where you had to throw rings around bottles. Zyro peeled off whatever amount was needed to play and handed it over to the game runner wearing a bright blue shirt.

The game runner handed Zyro a set of rings, ran the rules down to him, and stepped back. Zyro rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck, and turned around slightly, smirking.

“I ain’t gon lie,” he whispered loudly to Ermias, “these games are rigged, but they don’t know who I am.”

“Big dawg!” Ermias howled. “He’s big dawg, right, Mama?”

My jaw dropped.

“Right, Mama?” Zyro teased. “Answer the man, Eriss.”

I looked around, shaking my head lightly. “Yeah, Ermias. Zyro is big dawg.”

Ermias extended his hands out with his thumbs up. I couldn’t deal.

One by one, Zyro flicked the rings with a casual flick of his wrist, his expensive-looking watch shining brightly. The first two clinked against the glass bottles and bounced off, but the third slid neatly onto a neck. Then the fourth. Then the fifth. Ermias went craaaazy.

“Big daaaaawg!” Ermias yelled. It was a sight to see, seeing him hugging Zyro’s legs.

The game runner was even shocked. He said, “Go ahead and choose a big price, my man.”

Zyro turned to me, his lips tugged a smug grin. “Which one you want, baby?”

I could have melted into the hot pavement when he said that. There was no way my legs felt like noodles, and I was throbbing in the most sensitive part of my body.

Pointing to a brown bear, I replied, “That one.”

The game runner wrestled the huge teddy bear down and handed it over to Zyro. Ermias was squealing. He was too excited. I couldn’t help it. I began smiling too when Zyro handed it to me.

Zyro leaned over closely to me and muttered, “I just need to spray it down wit’ my cologne and we’ll be all set. You won’t be lonely anymore.”

ZYRO COLEMAN

The drive back to their home was quiet except for Ermias in the back seat, lightly snoring. I was glad he had a good time. I spent a lot of money tonight and didn't regret it at all. Beside me, Eriss was holding her bear and glancing out of the window. Ever since I said my lil' one two 'bout spraying my cologne on her bear so she wouldn't be lonely, I could tell she kind of distanced herself from me for the rest of the night. It was coo'. Mahlia had put me on game the night of the family reunion. It was no pressure. Eriss was a cute, fun girl when she let her hair down, but that's where it really drew the line. Like I told my cousin, I wasn't the one. I was a good nigga, but just like Eriss—I wasn't lookin' for a relationship.

When I turned onto her road, the energy shifted. A car was crooked in her yard, and I can tell Eriss tensed up some. The lights were beaming, engine still running. The door of the Altima opened, and out stepped a nigga.

"You know him?" I asked Eriss.

"That's Ermias' dad," she said lowly. "Fuck."

"Fuck...what?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Ermias! Wake up, babe."

"I can carry him in," I offered. I placed my truck in park.

"Um.."

"Um, nothing. That nigga out there don't fuckin' scare me, and you bet not be scared of his ass either."

“I...I just don’t want any shit,” Eriss whispered. “Not in front of my son.”

“Mama...is that Daddy?” Ermias asked, sleep laced in his tone.

“Yeah, Ermias. It is.”

“He pops up like this all the time, or did you know he was stopping by?” I questioned, opening my door.

“Zyro...” Eriss’ voice trembled. “Please don’t. Let me handle this. I appreciate it, but it’s okay.”

I bit down on my lip. Her eyes begged me to back off, the cloudy one darting to mine. I sighed through my nose and leaned back, but I kept my eyes locked on that nigga whose face was frowning the fuck up like he was trying to figure out who the fuck was in this big ass truck. My windows were tinted dark; there was no way he could see inside. It was also dark outside since we’d been at the fair for hours.

“Yo, Eriss!” the nigga barked out across the yard, walking toward us. “You in that truck? Whose truck is that?”

Ermias was fumbling with his belt, excited as fuck, not catching any of the tension surrounding him. I pushed my door open further. When Eriss started to touch her door, I growled out, “Don’t touch that damn door, girl.” She backed off and waited, gripping her bear tighter.

I stepped out, letting my height and my silence talk for me. Our eyes met, his squinting out of curiosity.

“I know damn well she ain’t got my son around...” his voice trailed off. His steps faltered. His jaw was tight.

I rounded the front of my truck, and when I reached Eriss, she had an annoyed expression on her beautiful face.

“I really can help myself out of your truck, Zyro,” she uttered under her breath.

“Not on my watch,” I replied just as low.

I opened the door and grabbed Ermias by the waist and pulled him out, placing him on his feet.

“Dad! We went to the fair! Zyro...Zyro took us!” He said, running to his dad, who wasn’t paying him any attention. He was too busy watching Eriss.

“Is that right?” he asked.

“You straight?” I questioned Eriss loud enough for that nigga to hear.

“I’m fine, Zyro.” She removed a piece of loose hair from her face. “Thanks for tonight. You made Ermias’ day.”

Eriss started to walk away.

“Did I make your day?”

She stopped in her tracks, and I told her to hold on. I reached into my truck, opened up the console in the middle, and pulled out a bottle of cologne. Removing the top, I grabbed the bear from her hands and sprayed it a couple of times all over. Eriss stood there in disbelief.

“There. So you won’t be lonely,” I told her, smirking. “Now, did I make your day?”

I handed the bear back to Eriss. Her eyes reached mine.

“You did because you made Ermias’ day. Again, thank you, Zyro. Have a safe ride home.”

I chuckled at her dismissing me.

“Bet.” I craned my neck. “Have a good night, big dawg!” I shouted to Ermias.

“Good night, big dawg!” he called back. I snickered and sauntered back over to the driver’s side with my eyes on that nigga because his was on me. I chuckled my head at him, silently letting him know I was on whatever he was on.

I wanted to tell Eriss to call me if she needed me, but she’d already put her wall back up. Pulling out of her driveway, I had to talk shit to myself.

“What the fuck are you doing, Zyro? You ain’t tryin’ to be in shit, and she ain’t either. Let that shit go,” I mumbled as I drove down the dark street.

Picking up my phone from the console, I dialed a number.

“Hello?” Leesa answered groggily.

“I’ll be there in an hour and twenty minutes.”

“Okay.”

“Zyro!” Marco’s voice carried over the music coming from the built-in speaker in the shop. “Yo, you got company!”

I slid out from under the SUV, grease on my arms, and shirt sticking to my back. Wiping my hands on a rag, I spotted Eriss. She wasn’t alone. Beside her was a tall, older man with a salt-and-pepper beard, plaid button-

down tucked sharp into khaki slacks. His eye cut across my shop like he was measuring every single detail.

I stood and sauntered over to them. My eyes dragged over to Eriss. She had a damn patch over her eye. I wanted to ask what happened when I left last night, but it wasn't my place. I did wonder if she slept with that bear, smelling me every time she inhaled.

"Mr. Coleman?"

"Zyro," I answered, tossing the rag over my shoulder.

"Name's Greg Jackson. My daughter's car is here. We're here to see if we can get it towed to a car lot to see about trading it in."

Eriss shifted her feet, avoiding meeting my eyes.

"Yeah, I can have it towed to wherever you need it towed. My man Marco can handle that."

"How much will that run me?" Mr. Jackson queried, removing his wallet from his back pocket.

Finally, her eye landed on me. I wanted to reach over to yank that patch off, but I remained in my spot.

"It's on me," I said, still looking at Eriss, who slightly tilted her head and squinted.

I gave her father my attention again. He was glancing from me to his daughter.

"Do you two know each other?" he questioned.

"He's Mahlia's cousin. I told you this in the car," she said.

He nodded. "Right...Right." I could tell he felt there was more to it.

It wasn't.

Greg tucked his wallet back in slowly, still watching his daughter and I.

"You sure you don't mind covering that tow?" he pressed.

I shrugged, leaning into my stance. "It's on me. Consider it a courtesy."

The patch over Eriss' eye was driving me crazy.

Greg nodded, lips in a tight line. "Well, I appreciate that, son. Your shop...You run a clean shop here."

"Always," I replied.

Marco came ambling over with a clipboard, giving me a *You want me to handle this now?* look. I jerked my chin toward the Camry. He got the message and disappeared through the bay doors.

"Shouldn't take him long. He'll just follow the two of you to your destination," I let them know.

“Thank you,” they said in unison, and I dipped my head in a nod.

“No problem,” I replied. “You two have a great day.”

“You too, son,” Mr. Jackson called out over his shoulder as they began walking away.

I removed my phone from my pocket and sent a text.

Take that damn patch off. You're too beautiful for that shit.

I killed the lights one by one, bright LED lights over each bay snapping off. The sounds of the machines faded and were replaced by the steady clink of tools as Marco was putting things back in place. I tugged the big bay door chain, the metal screeching as it rolled down. The faint scent of oil was in the air.

The shop had gotten busy later on in the day. The next few days, we had to work to get all the vehicles we had to work on out of here and back to their rightful owners. I'd be back before sunrise; therefore, I made sure everything was set right before leaving.

Outside, the night hit me. A slight breeze was blowing, but it was the middle of June, so that lil' breeze wasn't shit. I slid in my truck and turned the air on full blast, and let my engine rumble to life. For some reason, my mind kept circling back to Eriss. There was his heavy pull to her that I couldn't explain. It was so heavy that when I went home, I showered and headed back out to Heartville to check on her.

By the time I pulled onto her street, it was after eight. The neighborhood was quiet with dim porch lights on. Her place was at the end of the street, and there sat a black Jeep Cherokee in her driveway with a paper license plate.

I cut my headlights and killed the ignition. I sat there for a moment trying to figure out what the fuck I was doing.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, pushing the door open and stepping out.

I was dressed in white ball shorts, a white shirt with red lettering, white socks, and red slides. As I started toward the front door, it opened. Eriss stepped out with a bag of trash. When our eyes collided, a look of confusion was etched on her face.

“Zyro?” she asked, swiftly glancing behind her. “What are you doing here?”

“I just came by to make sure you and my boy were straight.”

I walked over to her and removed the bag of trash from her hand.

“You drove over an hour instead of calling or maybe sending a text?” she asked in a whisper.

Instead of answering Eriss right then, I turned and took the bag to the trash can and dropped it inside.

“Thanks,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

I nodded toward her house. “Can I wash my hands?”

We held a long stare before she shook her head slightly and replied, “Yeah...Yeaah, I guess.”

She turned, and my eyes glided down her backside in the little shorts she wore. Eriss had a nice round ass, her cheeks exposed at the bottom. Her hands flew to her ass, and she turned around, face now flushed.

“Sorry about my clothes. I wasn’t expecting company.”

“That’s how you go outside?” I countered.

“I mean, I was just taking the trash out. There’s no one outside,” she fired back. “The bathroom is down that hall to your left. Second door.”

Her home smelled faintly of vanilla. Clean. I removed my slides by the door out of respect and took off down the hall. I flicked the bathroom light on, and I ran water over my hands before pumping lemon-scented liquid soap into my palm. I stared at my reflection for a second, my diamond chain resting against my shirt, waves holdin’ but needed a cut. Still, the question in the air was, *What the fuck was I doing here?*

When I came back out, Eriss was in the living room, leaning against the arm of the dark brown leather couch. Her arms were still crossed over her chest.

“Why are you here?” she asked again.

“To check on you since I didn’t get to do it when you were at my shop. I see you got a vehicle. You need me to look at it for you?” I stretched my neck. “Where lil’ man?”

“Ermias is with his dad for the rest of the week. I guess his seeing me with another man around him put a lil’ fire under his ass to be a father to his son,” she said, letting out a short, suppressed laugh, then ran her tongue along her inner cheek.

“You trust that nigga like that?”

“Yeah, Delion is a foul nigga, but he was a good father to Ermias. Ermias can tell me when something is wrong, plus he has his tablet just in case he needs to reach me. To answer your question, I don’t need you to look at the Jeep; my dad did that. “

I held my hands up. “My fault, mama. I just...”

“You just what?” she queried.

My hands fell, and I squinted before running a hand down my face. “Shit, I don’t know.”

“You think because I have one working eye that I’m some fragile female.” Eriss smacked her lips. “Guess what? I’m not.”

I shook my head from side to side and replied, “I wasn’t thinking that shit at all. To be real, I don’t know why I’m compelled by you. I mean, you’re beautiful and I enjoyed the fair wit’ you, but I know I’m not good for you, yet...I’m still here.”

Eriss’ lips pressed together like she didn’t believe a word I said. Probably heard the bullshit from niggas before, but I was deadass. I ain’t never played wit’ a female’s mind or heart. I always let them know what it is and what the fuck it ain’t.

Headlights pulling into her driveway brought me to take long strides to her window. I peeked out, making sure it wasn’t no nigga on some bullshit. I’d left my Glock under my seat in the truck.

“You’re really nosy,” she laughed.

“Shiiit, Heartville ain’t my territory. That ain’t nobody but Mahlia. You told her I was over here?” I smirked.

“No, she comes over sometimes on her break. Just like you, she pops us. Must run in the family,” she jested, causing me to break out in a chuckle.

Sure enough, the knock came before the front door opened without waiting for permission.

“What the fuck is Zyro’s truck doing...” Mahlia hollered out, and her voice trailed when she saw us standing there. “What are you doing here?”

“Shit,” I answered. She had grocery bags in her hand.

Mahlia began to smile mischievously. “I like this.”

“There is nothing to like, Mahlia,” Eriss yapped. “He was just leaving.”

“Was I?” I challenged.

“And don’t you have something of mine you need to return?” She pushed off the couch and held a dainty hand out.

“I know you’re not talkin’ ‘bout that damn eye patch. I tossed that shit down the highway,” I told her. In reality, it was in my truck’s console.

Mahlia snickered. “What the hell y’all got going? Should I leave?”

“No,” Eriss said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Leave.”

Mahlia giggled and shook a finger at me. “Let me put this ice cream for my nephew in this kitchen. I might need to sit here and eat because I am very entertained.”

She dipped into the kitchen while Eriss and I held a stare-down.

“You don’t need that patch, but I see you have extra.”

“Sometimes the sun hurts my eye, and I cover it too. It’s not always about me hiding it from the world,” she said in a soft tone.

I tucked my lips in and nodded. “I’ll give it back. Since I’m here, I can chill wit’ you for a moment. I did that long drive just to check on you and see my nigga, he ain’t even here.”

“Should do like normal people do and text first,” she mustered. “Why do you want to chill wit’ me? We both don’t want a relationship so...and Mahlia, it doesn’t take that long to put some damn ice cream up.”

Mahlia tiptoed back out of the kitchen with her shoulders up to her ears. “Y’all were having a moment. You know Leek tryin’ to figure out who Eriss is? He said your nose is so wide open...”

I waved that shit off. “He has his own problems to be worrying ‘bout my shit.” I looked back over to Eriss. “You gon let me chill?”

Mahlia’s brows rose, waiting for the Eriss’ response too.

“I...” Her eyes shot to my cousin, who bugged her eyes. “I...I guess.”

Mahlia squealed. “Well, I must go back to work. You two...have fun.” She wrapped her arms around me, and I kissed her forehead. Before leaving, she blew Eriss a kiss, who rolled her eyes.

Sighing, Eriss asked, “Can I get you anything to drink?”

ERISS JACKSON
CHILL? THIS NIGGA WANTS TO CHILL?

I 'd just finished cleaning my kitchen and was about to curl up in bed with a book after taking the trash out. I have the day off tomorrow, and with Ermias gone with Delion, I was starting my relaxation early. The last thing I expected was Zyro standing in my living room, saying he wanted to chill... with me.

"Nah, I'm straight." He sat down on the edge of the couch, feet apart and hands laced. "Come have a seat."

I narrowed my eye at him. "Don't you have work in the morning?"

"Bright and early," he stated. "Don't worry 'bout that. I can open the shop and take a nap if I want to."

"Oh, right. You're the boss."

Zyro smiled, and that's when I saw the diamond fangs again. "Exactly." He leaned back. "What were you 'bout to do before I evaded your space?"

I chuckled. "Get in bed and read. I'm off tomorrow, no kid, I want to relax," I answered, sitting down on the other couch. I pulled my legs up to my chin and quickly reached for the throw blanket to cover my legs and my exposed cheeks.

It was weird having Zyro here. It was usually just me and Ermias, and sometimes Mahlia when she stopped by. My parents rarely left home. They were so glad when Instashop was invented. They prefer someone to shop for them and deliver it to their home. I was hardly at their home, and they were never here at mine. They'll keep Ermias from time to time. He loved his grandparents on both sides.

With Zyro sitting across the way from me, it was very awkward, so I darted my eyes over to the TV, where I had left it on the A&E channel. I'd been binge-watching First 48.

"You watch niggas gettin' killed before bed?" He half laughed, his deep voice carrying playfulness.

"It's interesting," I defended, hugging my knees tighter. "Somebody always snitches in the first forty-eight hours. I love to see the family of the deceased get justice."

I tried not to smile, but the corners of my lips betrayed me. Zyro was too calm, too comfortable in my space.

His throat cleared, jarring me to glance at him.

"If I get to asking personal questions you don't want to answer, stop me," he stated.

All I could do was nod. I wasn't sure what he was about to ask.

"You and your baby daddy... Y'all still fool around?" Zyro licked his lips, distracting me for a moment.

"Hell no. He's tried before, but I would never let him think he can have access to me when he wants to anymore. That's dead. Next question," I answered honestly.

"Do you two have a good co-parenting relationship?" was his next question.

"It's really non-existent. He just has him now because he saw you."

"And how does that make you feel...me around your son?"

I blinked a few times and moved strands of loose hair from my face.

"Were you planning on being around him again?" I questioned.

Zyro grinned, and I squeezed my legs together. His smile. Those diamond fangs. Those dimples. He was a problem. A handsome ass problem.

"I kinda like being 'round his mama, so it's a possibility."

Zyro was so blunt and smooth with it, it felt like my heart had stopped. Not in a bad way, he just caught me by surprise. Zyro was also a man. Men tend to say anything because it sounds good in that moment. Zyro though... I wasn't sure about him. He seemed like he was a really good man. To drive after work over an hour away just to *check* on me and my son was something I've never experienced. Ermiyas' dad lives fifteen minutes away and doesn't check on shit unless he feels like someone is a threat to him... someone like Zyro.

Last night, when Zyro had driven off, Delion called himself, trying to grill me about Zyro. And this was a man who was still with the woman he was cheating on me with and got pregnant. When I kicked him out, he tucked his tail in and went to her house, and of course, she let him in. She thought she'd *won*. If I wanted Delion, he would still be here. He begged... even cried for me to forgive him and let him stay...said we could work it out. I didn't want the nigga. She could keep him. I just wanted him to do right by our son.

"You like being around me?" I found myself asking out loud.

Zyro chuckled, scratching the side of his face and then under his chin. "Why'd you say that as if it's hard to believe?"

"Because...because we haven't been around each other but three times. We don't know each other and..."

"Sounds like excuses to me." There was a long pregnant pause before he added, "That nigga hurt you bad, huh?"

I released a breath of air. "Had a baby on me, but..."

"So, you gon hold that shit against me?"

"I...I thought you said you weren't looking for a relationship?" I shot out.

"I'm not looking for anything that you're not looking for, but whatever happens...happens."

I was at a loss for words...and confused. Was Zyro wanting to spend time with me, or was he just trying to get between my legs? I know Mahlia says he was a good guy, but he was still a nigga.

"What are you saying?" I asked him. "Are you trying to *date* me?"

Zyro dipped his head, and then his dark eyes met mine. He wet his lips, and my nipples pebbled. I hid them by pulling the blanket to my chest. He lifted his tatted hands and ran both down his face. Zyro taking too long to answer *was* his answer.

"Exactly. Plus, you already have a situation that I want no part of," I let him know.

"I don't have a situation, baby girl. I have no current titles with a female," Zyro rebutted, sitting up straight and creating a tent with his hands. "I don't mind taking you out and getting to know you."

Suddenly, something dawned on me.

"I'm not a charity case. Did Mahlia set this up because she said I needed some peen?" I screeched out.

Instead of responding, Zyro doubled over, laughing.

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ wit’ me, right? Fuck I look like being pressed behind pussy, Eriss? We’ve had this conversation already, ma. It ain’t that. I can go home and jack my dick off.”

We stared at one another for a brief moment before laughing in unison.

“How did this get here?” I giggled. “This went really left.”

“Shit, real quick, he said with amusement dancing in his eyes. His grin was lazy.

“I’m just cautious. In high school, boys would bet each other to see if I would fall for their shit. Niggas come with agendas so...”

Zyro leaned back, one arm stretched across the top of the couch. “I’m not just any nigga, Eriss. One thing ‘bout me, I’m a straight up nigga, but I feel you. If you told me these niggas names, I’d probably go look fo’ their asses tonight and put a hot one in their skulls.” My eyes stretched. “Know I ain’t got a hidden agenda. If I wanted you for one thing, Eriss, I would’ve said that already.”

He sounded believable, which was a little scary.

“Shit, you’re lucky you met me before Zyleek. Now that nigga might’ve wanted some different.”

I laughed. “So I heard. How’s his case?”

Zyro let out a breath with a shake of his head. “He out, but I’on like how they played wit’ him. It’s not sitting right wit’ me.”

His tone was chilling. A shiver moved up my spine. Something in Zyro’s tone told me he wasn’t letting that go until someone paid for it. He was so...nice, but I could tell he had another side to him. A side he didn’t show often, I was guessing.

I didn’t know what to say after that. Was I supposed to be scared of someone who wanted to protect his family? Zyro had zoned out before me, and his eyes had darkened, but he shook whatever had a hold on him, and a grin spread on his lips as if we weren’t just talking about some dark shit. How he quickly flipped the switch, now that kind of scared me.

“Besides reading, what do you like to do?” he asked me.

“Honestly? I might be a little too boring. I take care of my kid and we do fun shit together, and I read. It’s Ermias’ world,” I laughed. “I’m just living in it.” I shrugged. “What about you?”

His eyes locked onto me. “I don’t be doing shit. I might go to the strip club with Zyleek and Mahlia from time to time, but other than that, not shit.

It keeps me out of trouble.”

“Oh, you enjoy the strip club?” I asked, raising a brow.

“As a single man, yeah,” Zyro replied, then his lips curled into another sly grin. “Don’t do that. I said I go from time to time. I don’t live in that bitch, and I don’t fuck wit’ the females in there. It’s mostly for the vibe and wings, baby.”

“I’ve never been,” I admitted.

“Let’s go next weekend.”

“I might have Ermias.”

“Aight, then tomorrow night. Mahlia’s off tomorrow, and she’ll be down if you’ll feel more comfortable with her there,” Zyro suggested.

I was off tomorrow. My last off day, and Ermias was supposed to still be with Delion, so...

“Um...okay. Do I have to have money to throw?” I quizzed.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that. Just come out. I’ll scoop you if you don’t want to drive.”

“Is the club in Heartville or Love Grove?”

“We can go to one down here. It doesn’t bother me to get on the road and drive.” He grinned.

“Yeah, I see that.”

Zyro stood and adjusted himself in his shorts. I saw the bulge. It was definitely there, but I turned my head because I now understood why he walked wide-legged.

“I’m fin get on this road,” he announced and started heading to the door.

I stood to lock up behind him, pulling my shorts down as far as I could, but when I began to walk, they crawled back up my ass. Zyro turned halfway and paused when he reached the door, his hand on the knob. His gaze slid down my body with no shame at all.

“You slept wit’ that bear last night?” he asked teasingly.

Heat rushed to my face because I indeed did. Slept real good and peacefully.

“It...it was in the bed with me, so I guess so,” I mumbled.

“Maaaaan,” he guffawed with his fist to his mouth. “Stop fuckin’ playin’, ma. You slept with that muhfucka to your damn chest. You gon quit playin’ wit’ me, for real.” With a cocky smirk, he said, “Say it. Say you slept wit’ it.”

That shit made my core throb. It caused me to shift my weight to the other leg. “I slept with it,” I said lowly, causing his smirk to spread into a wide grin. The craters in his cheeks appeared.

Zyro’s hand slipped off the knob, and he took two steps toward me until he was towering over me. I think I stopped breathing then.

“Sleep wit’ it a lil’ closer tonight,” he leaned down and said into my ear. His lips were touching my ear as he spoke. I reached out and grabbed onto the wall. Zyro simpered and tweaked my chin. “Have a good night, Eriss.”

He turned back around, unlocked the door, and opened it.

“You too. Be safe,” I managed to get out.

“Always,” Zyro replied, and I shut the door, locking it. With my back against it, I slid down because what the hell was he doing to me?

Instead of driving, Mahlia offered to get dressed at my house and to drive us. We rapped to Crown Heart as we rolled down the highway. Because I told Mahlia everything, I told her about the bear, and I told her how I damn near lost control of my legs last night. Of course, she clowned me.

Mahlia swerved around a slow driver, causing me to hold on to the seat. I gave her a look, making me wish I had driven myself. Mahlia knew that if she got drunk that I wasn’t letting her behind the wheel. She’d have to stay at my place until the morning.

The closer we got to The Dollhouse, the more my nerves tangled up. Meeting Zyleek had my stomach flipping, just because Mahlia already put me on the fact that he spoke before thinking, and said he meant no harm—sometimes. She told me not to take anything he said to me personally. She said he was a loose cannon, but with Zyro around, he might not act like a fool.

“I just can’t wait to see you and Zyro around each other again. The back-and-forth banter yesterday was so cute,” she cooed, bringing me to roll my eyes.

“Girl, it ain’t even that serious, I promise. You know I don’t really feed into shit a nigga say,” I told her. I bit down on my lip and looked out the window.

“Aight,” Mahlia squealed out. “I keep telling you my cousin ain’t like these other niggas, Eriss. I guess he gon have to show you since you’re not trying to take my word for it. From what you told me, he is on you bad!”

We pulled into the club lot, pink neon lights glowing off the cars already parked. My stomach fluttered again, a mix of excitement and nerves. Mahlia found a spot, killed the engine, and then turned to me, grinning and twerking in her seat.

“You ready, friend?”

“I guess,” I laughed.

We stepped out, and I pulled down the black mini shirt that I paired with a black crop top and strappy heels. A red purse was draped across my body for a pop of color. My hair was down in loose beach curls. The only makeup I wore was mascara and lip gloss. I wore rings, a necklace, and hoop earrings.

Mahlia wore a bright pink dress with clear heels. Her hair was in fresh braids and in a high ponytail. She had a full glam on her face.

Together, we ambled to the entrance of The Dollhouse, where Mahlia said the guys were already inside. I decided not to wear a patch over my eye tonight, but the moment we entered the club after showing identification, I instantly regretted it. Men stared and women frowned.

“Ignore them, Eriss. These hoes just mad because you’re beautiful with your clothes on!” Mahlia hollered over the music, loud enough for the women around to hear her.

The bass from the music rattled my body. Weed smoke was thick in the air. Holding onto Mahlia’s hand, she led me to a section where I spotted Zyro instantly. There was another man beside him. Light-skinned, but I could tell they were brothers. Zyro had a fresh cut. His waves shine under the light. His brother had a short curly top, faded on the sides. Zyro was dripped out in jewelry tonight. There were at least two or three necklaces around his neck, one a diamond Cuban link, rings, and his ears. I was sure his fangs were in. He wore black jeans with a Gucci shirt that was unbuttoned. They were standing side by side, both throwing money at dancers, who were bent over, shaking ass. His brother was hyping up the dancers, his deep voice carrying over the rap song.

As soon as Mahlia’s foot hit the step to climb up toward the section, Zyro’s head turned in our direction. I couldn’t tell where his eyes were since he wore dark shades, but I felt them zooming in on me. Zyleek craned his

neck to see what had Zyro's attention, and he grinned. Both the top and bottom rows of teeth were gold.

"Bout time!" he yelled. Zyro placed a kiss on Mahlia's forehead, and Zyleek squeezed the hell out of her in a hug. I smiled, seeing how close they all were.

"Sup, baby girl," Zyro said, his rasp causing my stomach to clench to keep the throb from beating as loud as the music.

"Hey," I smiled with a little wave.

"This her?" Zyleek asked, moving Mahlia out of the way to get to me. "This who got your nose wide open, nigga?" He lifted his shades from his eyes. His low, red eyes rolled over to my cloudy eye and lingered on it for a moment. Then they ran down my body. "She's fine as fuck. Real pretty," he said.

"Aight, nigga," Zyro gritted, pushing his brother with an elbow. "Not too fuckin' much."

Zyleek chortled, pointing at Zyro with a finger. "See. Nigga in loooooove."

He and Mahlia cackled. Zyro just shook his head, his jaw clenching. He moved closer to me and leaned over. "You look nice. My brother is right. You're fine as fuck and really pretty." He rose with a grin, running his tongue along his top row. The fangs were intact.

"I want a grill," I stated.

Zyro's grin widened. "Aight. I'll take you to get one. Let's me spend more time witcha."

"Give us some of that bread so we can pay a bitch rent!" Mahlia said, tickling me. I swatted her hand away.

When I noticed the stacks of banded money on a table, my eyes stretched.

"You're spending all of that in here?" I screeched, causing all three to laugh.

"Hell yeah, spend it and get it back!" Zyleek yelled. "Ain't shit broke 'bout us!"

I held my hands up in surrender.

"Girl, ignore him, cause he's definitely going broke behind his baby mamas," Mahlia joked. Zyleek mushed her head, and the two of them went back and forth.

“Here.” Zyro held out a stack of money to me after pulling the rubber band off. “Aye!” he called out to a dancer. She happily brought her ass over. Zyro motioned toward me with his head. “She wants a dance.”

The dancer, a real curvy woman with honey-colored skin and long curls down her back, switched her hips over.

“Have a seat,” she purred, her voice silky.

Mahlia sniggered. “Shit, I want one too.”

My feet didn’t move until Zyro gently spun me around and walked me to the red velvet chairs with his front pressed against me, his dick sitting right at the top of my ass. It turned me on immediately.

“Just have fun,” he murmured. “Throw that money on her and slap her ass.”

The song switched to Crown Heart’s new banger, Get It Out the Mud, and the niggas in the club began rapping along with him, including Zyleek and Zyro. Zyleek was wild with it, but Zyro...he was smooth, moving his hands and arms around, and rapping to me. His lips, wet from him licking them, shone and were so kissable.

The dancer straddled me with her back facing me and began to shake her ass to the beat. Her ass was moving like water. With one hand, I raised a few of the bills above her and began to swipe with my thumb, letting the bills rain down on her. I glanced up at Zyro, and he nodded in approval.

Another dancer was grabbing her ankles in front of Mahlia. She was rubbing the dancer’s ass as she shook it. The thin material the dancers wore didn’t leave anything to the imagination. I looked away briefly to see Zyro extending a red cup to me.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Pineapple and vodka.”

I did love pineapple in my drinks. I wondered if Mahlia had told him. Taking the red cup, I placed it to my lips and took a small sip. Very fruity, less alcohol...just how I liked it.

“Thanks,” I mouthed and sipped some more while grabbing more bills to toss at the dancer.

The night went on just like that. Dancers coming and going. Drinks were being made, and money was being thrown. I was really enjoying myself, but I missed my baby. It was late, so I figured he’d be asleep by now. I’d call Ermias in the morning. I was ready for him to come home already.

Zyro had bought us buffalo wings to put on our stomachs since we were drinking. I was on my fourth cup of pineapple and vodka. It was so good. Zyleek had rolled a blunt, and I even took a few hits. I was being careless tonight, and I needed this. Tomorrow, I'll probably wake up regretting everything I did tonight, but right now, in this moment...I was living my best life.

It was still dark when my eyes popped open. My stomach was making weird noises, and my mouth was watering. Removing the bedding from my body, I jolted up and swung my feet over the edge of the bed, taking off toward my bathroom. I made it to the toilet by the skin of my teeth. Wings and alcohol. How was I going to work like this?

I flushed the toilet and almost jumped out of my skin when I heard footsteps. They weren't padding the feet of a little boy either.

My baseball bat was in my room. There wasn't anything I could use in the bathroom to fight an intruder. I barely had the money to offer them if that was what they were looking for.

I stood, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. When the person came into view, I was confused and relieved at the same time.

"You stayed here?" I asked a shirtless Zyro. My brows dipped as I attempted to remember last night.

I couldn't.

I just remembered wings, drinking, and lap dances.

"I drove you home and was too tired to drive back," he replied.

"You slept..."

"On the couch, ma." I peered down and saw that I was just in a long T-shirt. "Mahlia made sure you were comfortable and helped you out of your clothes. How you feelin'?"

"Sick," I admitted. "I don't think I'll be able to work today. What time is it?"

"It's just five in the morning. What time do you work?"

"Nine," I answered, placing a hand to my stomach.

"You might not feel better by then, to be honest. Do you have any crackers in the kitchen? Sprite?"

I shook my head. “No, but I don’t think I could even keep anything down right now.”

I sauntered over to my sink to brush and rinse my mouth out. Zyro remained by the door, eyes trained on me. He looked tired as if he didn’t get much sleep. I started brushing my teeth. When I spit, I asked, “Why didn’t you stay the night with Mahlia?”

Zyro rubbed his head. “Zyleek caught her couch. I could have gotten a room, but I wanted to make sure you were good. Damn, you don’t want me here?”

I finished brushing my teeth instead of responding. While I was rinsing my mouth with Listerine, I forgot about Zyro for a moment until I heard urine hitting inside my toilet. I slightly turned and got an eyeful of dick. He had no shame. I spun back around so fast my head began to pound, and I nearly knocked the bottle of mouthwash over.

“If you needed privacy, you could have just asked. I have an extra bathroom outside of my room,” I said as I walked across the bathroom for a face towel, making sure not to look in Zyro’s direction.

The toilet flushed. I imagined him shaking that anaconda and pushing it back into his boxers. I slightly shook my head to get that vision out of my brain. As I was walking back to the sink, he was too. I’d left the water running so it’d be hot. Zyro quickly washed his hands and moved out of my way.

“You need me to run to the store to get you anything?” he quizzed.

“At this time?”

One shoulder rose and dropped. “A corner store is open. A Sprite might help.”

I just need to lie back down and see if I can get a few more hours of rest. I’ll...I’ll be okay,” I replied. “Are you about to leave?”

As soon as I asked, a crack of thunder boomed, and I almost jumped out of my skin. The sound of rain began to hit the bathroom window.

“You want me to leave in this weather?” he asked, a smirk gracing his lips.

I didn’t bother answering, because, of course, I didn’t. Instead, I washed my face, patted it dry, and then trudged back to my bedroom and slid back into bed. I had no idea what Zyro was doing, but my stomach was still uneasy. My legs felt heavy.

My eyes barely fluttered shut when I felt my mattress dip. My eyes snapped open.

"I know damn well..."

"My back hurt sleeping on your couch. It's soft, but I'm a tall nigga," he said as if that was a good reason to be lying in my bed with me. "You uncomfortable? I can go crash in my homeboy's Paw Patrol room."

That had me chuckling. "That's a twin-size bed."

Zyro let out a low sigh. "Yeah...I'll be better off sleeping on the floor."

Silence settled over the room, broken only by the rain pattering against the window.

"Is it supposed to rain like this all day?" I finally asked, my voice soft in the dimness.

"Not sure," Zyro mumbled. "I'm finna be sleep in a few seconds, ma. Wake me up if you up 'fore me. I left my phone in the living room."

"Okay," I whispered, letting my eyelids fall as the steady rain and warmth from my covers pulled me back into sleep.

The soft drumming of the rain against the window pulled me out of my sleep. For a moment, I lay still, staring up at the ceiling as the thunder rolled low in the distance. I could see how gray it was outside from the heavy storm, and I doubt I'd be going to work. I wouldn't be able to get to Ermias until the storm cleared because I couldn't drive in weather like this with my condition.

When I turned my head, Zyro was still there. One arm rested on his stomach, the other pushed down in his shorts. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. I took in Zyro's long lashes and the different drawings on his neck and below.

"It's kind of weird to stare at someone while they're sleeping, don't you think?" came out of his mouth.

Embarrassed, I turned over onto my stomach.

"I was debating whether or not I should wake you. It's still coming down out there. Don't you have to call your employees?"

Stretching, Zyro yawned. "Yeah, I do. I'm just gon close the shop today, and make a post about it being closed on social media."

He rose and tossed his legs over the edge of the bed. I watched Zyro stand and swagger out of the room. I left the bed too and scuffled to the bathroom, making sure to lock it behind me this time.

Zyro was on the phone in the living room when I emerged.

“Yeah, it’s coming down crazy. I’m not even in town and not gon risk it. The shop’s closed for the day. We’ll catch up tomorrow when it’s clear.”

He ended the call. I took off to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee and then back to my bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed and called myself in. When the weather was as bad as this, they didn’t penalize me since I couldn’t drive in this. Uber was out of the question.

With my phone, I video called Ermias. Normally, he’d be up around this time. When he didn’t answer, I called again as I walked back to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. He didn’t answer again, which had me frowning hard.

Placing my phone down, I dialed Delion on speaker while I poured the hot liquid into a mug. It rang and rang.

“What the fuck,” I mumbled, heart pounding. “Um, do you want a cup of coffee or anything to eat?” I called out to Zyro, still eyeing my phone.

Instead of responding, he came into the kitchen. I guess I was frowning so hard while pouring my creamer, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

I exhaled and placed the creamer on the counter.

“My son or his dad is answering the phone. Ermias is up around this time,” I replied.

“Give it a few more hours. If they still are not answering and the weather clears up, we’ll take a trip to check on him.”

“Oh, I can’t ask you to do that,” I said with a shake of my head.

“When did you ask?” Zyro quizzed with a smirk. “I’m offering. Now, what do you have for breakfast?”

I let a few hours pass by. Around one, I called again, and neither responded. I sent Delion a text because I now felt like he was playing games.

Why aren’t you answering the phone? You or Ermias?
Everything okay?

I'd fixed Zyro, and I scrambled eggs, bacon, and French toast. I barely got two bites of my French Toast and a forkful of eggs before my phone rang. When I saw it was my baby daddy, I muttered, "Finally," and answered it. "Hello? Why haven't you—"

"Eriss." Delion's voice cut me off. I could already tell this conversation was going to go left. It's the way he said my name. It dripped with pettiness.

"What?" I screeched. Zyro stopped eating. He was sitting across from me.

"I'm keeping Ermias. He's staying here with me from now on. You have him around a nigga that ain't his daddy, not gon fly wit' me."

I couldn't breathe. My head got lightheaded, and I felt like I was about to pass out.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I shouted, pushing back from my chair. I didn't give a fuck if the floor scuffed. "You don't get to decide that! Put my son on the phone now!"

"I'm not playing games with you, Eriss. He's staying with me."

"Delion, you don't get—"

The call disconnected, and I started crying and trying to call him back. The phone began to go to voicemail. He blocked me. I called Ermias' tablet, and the call no longer went through.

"Eriss..."

"Leave me alone!" I screamed. My eyes were both cloudy. It was just a blur.

I felt his presence near me in seconds. With hands dripping my face gently, he lifted my face.

"Aye, I don't take disrespect lightly. Tell me what's goin' on so I can help you," his raspy voice rang out. I was now shaking. Zyro pulled me into him, and I gripped his sides, screaming out into his chest.

"He...He's not giving Ermias back to me because...because he saw you," I whimpered.

"Where does he live?" Zyro asked calmly.

I shook my head, blinking fast, fighting the tears that kept spilling. I pulled back out of his arms.

"You'll only make it worse."

Zyro's jaw clenched, and he snorted. "Shiiid. That nigga gon give you my homeboy back. I promise you that. Once that rain calms the fuck down,

we goin' to go get him."

I nodded, clutching the edge of the table, my heart still racing. My thoughts were a jumbled mess of fear and anger. I had no idea if Ermias was scared of Delion right now. Delion was with the woman he'd cheated with and gotten pregnant while we were together. How the hell could she allow this?

"Hey. Hey. Breathe. I promise you, Eriss, Ima handle it. He's not gon keep your son away from you." His voice was soft.

"Should I call the police?" I asked, wiping my nose. I know I looked a mess, but right now I couldn't care less about my appearance.

"Hell nah. They ain't gon do shit but drag their feet in this weather anyway. Just know, I'm not gon sit on my hands if that nigga try to play wit' you."

I groaned. "I don't need you going to jail, Zyro. Not behind me and my mess."

Zyro tore a piece of paper towel off the holder and handed it to me. "Here. Wipe your face. Don't let this break you," he told me.

I took the paper towel, dabbed my eyes dry, then blew my nose. Pointing to his chest, I said, "I made a mess on you. I am so sorry."

Zyro glanced down and then waved me off. "This ain't shit."

"His dad can be real manipulative. I just don't want Ermias thinking I don't want him, you know?" I mumbled. "He twists shit."

Zyro nodded in understanding. "As soon as the rain slows down, we're gone. We ain't leavin' without him, aight?"

The words should've scared me, but instead they calmed me. I believed him.

In a shaky breath, I released, "Okay."

ZYRO COLEMAN

The sky was still gray as hell, but the rain had finally backed off to a drizzle. It was after four now. Time had crawled by, and I'd been watching out the window for the last few hours, sitting on Eriss's couch with my phone in my hand and the TV on a movie. She was lying on the other end of the couch, freshly showered with the same blanket I slept under last night. Mahlia had called, and she'd told her everything. Mahlia had texted me that she knew I'd do what I had to do to get Ermias, but not go to jail. She knew me well.

"Aight. Let's head to this nigga's shit," I announced, sitting up.

As I sat, I had scheduled for ADT to come out tomorrow and set up security for her place without her knowing. I planned on telling her tonight, but I wasn't letting her and Ermias stay here. They were coming to stay with me tonight, or I would get them a room. I ain't trust shit, and I hate we lived in different cities, but I'd do anything to give Eriss and Ermias some type of security and relief.

"You think it's safe to drive? I don't want to get to Ermias and then be stuck somewhere," she asked, standing up fast. After the breakdown she had, I'd watched her put some drops in her eyes. Eriss said it helped with the pain. That made me want to break her baby daddy's jaw for even causing her the pain to begin with.

She rushed down the hallway to dress. I had to get home to shower and change out of last night's clothes.

“The roads are still wet, but we ain’t gon float away, baby. You know where he stays?”

Eriss nodded and picked her phone out of her purse. Her hands trembled.

“Do you need a jacket?” she inquired, stopping before locking her front door.

I rolled my head in refusal. “Nah, I’m good. ‘Preciate you for asking.”

Eriss offered a faint smile, then locked up. We jogged to my truck. She sat quietly in the passenger seat, scrolling through her phone until she gave me directions. I kept my eyes on the road. The soft thump of the windshield wipers kept up with my thoughts.

The rain had the streets shining and littered with puddles, but folks were out and about. I adjusted my grip on the wheel.

“You don’t have to go be Superman. I think you showing up alone will make him give me Ermias,” Eriss said after telling me to turn left.

I chuckled lightly. “I can tell that nigga ain’t as hard as he is gon try to appear. He ain’t givin’ your son up easy, baby. I can tell you that now.”

Eriss sighed. I’d dealt with plenty of foul situations in my life, but not one like this. By the time we hit the turn to the apartments he lived in, my hands had curled tighter around the steering wheel.

“Right here,” Eriss announced, pointing.

I parked and cut the ignition.

“Which one?” I asked, unbuckling my seat belt. “I can go by myself.”

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head with a grimace. “I need to lay eyes on Ermias and make sure he is okay. I can’t just sit here, Zyro.”

“Aight,” I agreed, not that I was gon win that battle anyway.

I locked my shit up and followed Eriss to apartment 45B. Before she could knock, I stopped her and carefully moved her out of the way. I knocked a slow, heavy tap at first, then harder the second time. Without Eriss’ knowledge, I’d grabbed my Glock from underneath my seat and tucked it in my waistband just in case it was needed.

Footsteps shuffled on the other side before the door swung open. A balled up face, Delion stood there shirtless in some ball shorts, squinting at me like he couldn’t believe I dared to show up on his doorstep. His face twisted deeper when he spotted Eriss behind me.

“What the fuck I say, Eriss, and why the fuck you bring a nigga to my crib?” he spat.

“Fuck allat. Bring her son out,” I said flatly. I wasn’t tryin’ to cause a scene where someone called the cops.

Eriss shifted behind me. “Delion, just go get Ermias. He still has daycare.”

The nigga ignored her and kept his eyes trained on me. “Y’all can get the fuck on. I said Ermias is staying wit’ me. The boy needs his *father*, not a random nigga that’s just getting your ass wet.”

“Watch yo’ fuckin’ mouth,” I warned. That would be my only warning.

A softer voice floated from inside the apartment. “Babe, just give them the boy. We have enough mouths to feed around here and don’t need to be adding another.”

Eriss attempted to push past me, but I grabbed her up.

“Talking about my damn son like that as if he wasn’t here before you decide to open your legs, bitch!” she hollered. The woman appeared, waddling. She was okay-looking, but didn’t touch Eriss at all. Her braids looked to be a year old. Eriss laughed hysterically. “You keep letting that bum of a nigga shoot inside of you, dummy. Go. Get. My. Son. Since. He. Is. Not. Wanted.”

The girlfriend crossed her arms over her belly, watching Eriss with a mix of shame and boldness.

“Get from in front of my door. Bitch can’t even see, but wants my damn son. I should—”

Before that nigga could say more, I’d cracked him wit’ a clean right hook that sent him stumbling back inside and onto the floor.

“Stay here,” I told Eriss, who, with wide eyes, nodded swiftly.

Stepping over the nigga who was attempting to get his bearings together, I called out to Ermias.

“Homeboy!” I hollered.

“Big dawg?!” A door opened, and Ermias came running out to me, hugging my legs. “My dad said I would never see Mama again,” he sniveled.

“Grab your tablet and whatever else so we can go. Your Mama is outside waiting on you,” I told him. He ran back into the room and did as he was told.

The girlfriend started mouthing off again. “Y’all are foul. You hit my man!”

“And I’ll do that shit again if he disrespects his son’s mother again. Shut the fuck up ‘fore you stress that baby out,” I spat. Delion was trying to get to his feet, but was too dazed.

Ermias came running out with his backpack and tablet in his hand. He ran right into his Eriss’ arms. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around him, kissing his cheeks over and over.

“You don’t have to worry about an extra mouth to feed, ‘cause he’s good,” I said. “If I catch you comin’ ‘round them, you won’t have to worry ‘bout my fist.” I lifted my shirt, exposing the butt of my gun. “I don’t make threats just to be makin’ ‘em. I’m really ‘bout that.”

I closed the door behind us with a sharp pull, locking eyes with Delion one last time through the crack before it shut. I slid my palm against the small of Eriss’s back and steered them both toward the truck, which Ermias got excited about seeing and getting inside again.

Rain still drizzled on us, but the storm in Eriss’ eyes didn’t ease. She held onto her son’s hand like she was scared somebody might snatch him back. I wanted to make a U-turn and pop that nigga in his mouth again, knocking some teeth out after he said that slick shit about Eriss. I prayed we crossed paths again. Just me and me.

We got to the truck, and I opened the doors for both of them. I smirked a little. Eriss knew not to touch that door. Baby girl was learning quickly.

“Can I...sit in the back with him? I mean, you don’t mind?” she whispered.

I brushed a strand of wet hair out of her face.

“I don’t mind.”

I helped her up in the back. She buckled Ermias, and in turn, I buckled her. Eriss’ eyes met mine and then looked away just as fast. I shut the door and rounded the back of the truck to the driver’s side.

“I wanna go home now,” Ermias said through a yawn.

“We’re going home, baby,” Eriss said quickly. “You don’t have to worry about coming over here ever again.”

Through the rearview mirror, I saw him nod.

“Hungry?” I asked. “We can stop and grab something.”

Ermias shook his head. “Just sleepy.”

“I feel you. I am too,” I said.

I pulled out of the driveway. As soon as I started the both of them fell asleep, Ermias lying on his mama, and Eriss against my window. Good

thing because I wasn't headed to her house. I was heading to Love Grove.

The rain had stopped. Ermias had shifted in his seat, his little head resting on Eriss' shoulder, and I couldn't help but smile. He was happy to be under his mama. Then I caught the tension in Eriss' body. She wasn't relaxed, and when I made the turn onto the highway toward my house, I saw her stir, and her eyes fluttered open. She looked out of the window.

"Wait..." she gasped. "Wait, where are we going? Where are you taking us, Zyro?"

"To my crib for the night," I answered her. "Just to be sure there won't be any pop-ups tonight. I just want y'all safe." Her brows furrowed for a moment, then softened when I added, "Mahlia is staying the night, too."

"Oh...okay. I guess that's fine, but I don't have our things."

"Anything you need, I can get. You have medicine for your eye in you purse?" I quizzed, turning left onto the dirt road that led to my place.

"Yeah, I do. How am I getting home in the morning to get him to daycare and myself to work?"

"Mahlia is going back home in the morning, and she'll take you. I'm also having security installed at your house tomorrow, is that alright?"

Eriss' head tilted slightly to the side. "Thank you."

I nodded.

I veered into my driveway, pulling into the garage.

"Yeeeee!" Ermias cheered loudly, causing Eriss to cover his mouth. When she dropped her hand, he said, "I love it here! The house is big!"

I winked at Eriss. "Stay as long as you want, homeboy."

Eriss laughed and shook her head from side to side. "Don't tell him that. He'll want to stay forever."

"And y'all can," I found myself saying. Eriss blushed, then began fidgeting with unbuckling herself and Ermias.

I exited the truck and helped them out. I couldn't wait to shower, eat, and take a nap.

I grabbed the snacks we'd picked up earlier, then rounded the truck to Eriss' side. She had just unbuckled Ermias, who was practically bouncing in the seat, eyes wide as he looked around.

“I want to play basketball!” he announced, pointing at the goal.

“It’s too wet today, homie. Maybe another day,” I chuckled. Eriss climbed out, avoiding my stare. When she moved out of the way, I helped Ermias out. “We can order pizza instead, how about that?”

“Yeeeee! Pepperoni!” he shouted. Ermias stomped toward my front door. Luckily, there were no puddles.

“Remove your shoes before going inside, Ermias,” Eriss told him. “We’re going to respect Mr. Zyro’s house.”

I snickered. “Mr. Zyro is wild,” I mumbled.

I kicked off my shoes after unlocking the door. Eriss and Ermias did the same before we entered the main part of the house.

“Your home is so beautiful,” she gushed. “So, so beautiful.”

“Preciate it,” I replied, placing the bag down. “I’ll grab you some clothes if you want to get out of the wet ones. Mahlia is going by your house to pick up whatever you and Ermias will need for the night.”

She stood there, clearly feeling out of place.

“I am so thankful for you both,” she finally said.

I shrugged it off. “It’s no big deal. Make yourself at home. If you want to shower first, I’ll watch your son for you.”

Eriss glanced around my living room. “Yes, please. I’ll hate to sit on your furniture without one.” Her eyes looked up at the high ceilings, the massive chocolate sectional, and the framed photos of my family on the wall.

I nodded and pointed down the hallway. There is a bedroom where Mahlia keeps some of her things when she’s in Love Grove. It’s the third door on the right. Help yourself.” My eyes glided down her frame.

She giggled. “I’m a lil’ thicker than Mahlia, but we’ll see.”

Licking my lips, I had to agree. “You ain’t lyin’.” Our eyes met, but of course, she looked away quickly and headed down the hallway, but not before warning Ermias to behave.

I picked his backpack off the floor and found some clean clothes for him. I had three bathrooms in this house. I’d throw him in one while Eriss handled her business to help her out.

Eriss stepped out of the bedroom, asking where the shower was. I would have let her use mine since it was big and definitely an experience, but she burst my bubble.

“And not the one in your bedroom. Mahlia just texted me and told me how nice it is, but I would rather not,” she said. “That’s too much in your space.”

“Aight, you win. The second door on the left,” I told her. She took off, and I watched the sway of her hips.

Before I could head to the other bathroom with Ermias, the doorbell rang, and I already knew it was Mahlia. I answered the door, and Ermias sprinted to her. She was still in her EMT uniform.

“Oh, sweet boy. I’m so glad you’re okay,” she said, hugging him.

“I was just ‘bout to put him in the tub.”

She looked up and eyed me in the clothes I had on from the strip club.

“I’ll bathe my nephew. You get cleaned up and then order that pizza.”

“I’ll order it before I hop in the shower, you just grab it when it comes,” I let her know. My eyes landed on the bags she had. There was a big trash bag. “What’s in the bag?”

Mahlia laughed. “That teddy bear with your scent on it.”

I walked away chuckling and shaking my head.

I washed the club and day off me and then changed into joggers. When I left my room, I heard their voices floating from the kitchen, the smell of the pizza wafting through the air. Ermias was set up on a barstool at the island, grinning from ear to ear as he ate.

“‘Bout time, Mahlia teased when she saw me.

Eriss looked up and then back down at her pizza. She was in a two-piece pink silk pajama set that hugged her hips perfectly. I strolled over to the sink to wash my hands. When I turned around, I got an eyeful of her round ass, and my dick twitched. Mahlia passed me a paper plate with her brows raised. She’d caught me.

I let out a light, airy laugh and grabbed three slices of pizza and bottled water.

“I’ll let you women and Ermias have the kitchen. I’ll eat and lie down for a couple of hours. Have at it,” I told them, biting into a slice.

I started out of the kitchen, eyes dragging on Eriss a little longer. She hadn’t looked up, keeping her focus on the pizza. I bit into another slice as I

left the kitchen, hearing Eriss laugh. It was beautiful, but I could tell she was still bothered about what happened earlier with her baby daddy. If it were up to me, today would have been his last day breathing.

After eating and brushing my teeth, I slid into bed and under my sheets. My phone chimed, and I removed it from under my pillow. It was Leesa.

Miss you. Can I come over?

Four attachments of her ass naked were sent. I looked them over, and they were nice, but a nigga was tired.

Nah. Not tonight.

I silenced my phone and pushed it back under my pillow, closing my eyes. An image of Eriss in that pink set had my dick bricking up. My hand flew into the shorts I had changed into. Squeezing it, I took some pressure off. I wanted her ass badly. I knew I had to get rid of Leesa for good if I wanted to pursue Eriss, and that wasn't a problem. I ain't need Leesa coming to Eriss as a woman 'cause she was never my woman to begin with.

ERISS JACKSON

My eyes cut to Mahlia when she removed the bear Zyro had won for me at the fair.

“Now, why would you grab this out of all things from my house?” I quizzed.

“You’ve been sleeping so peacefully with it, bookie. I felt like you needed it,” she replied with a mischievous grin.

I groaned. “It just smells really nice.”

Mahlia laughed. We were in one of the four guestrooms. Ermias had eaten, brushed his teeth, and passed out. Mahlia had carried him to one bedroom and convinced me not to smother him tonight, but to sleep in another room. She promised me that Zyro’s house was one of the safest. I wasn’t worried about Delion the way Zyro put him on his ass. That still tickled me because Delion always thought he was the toughest nigga around and untouchable. Zyro proved that to be a lie.

What Delion had said about my eye didn’t bother me one bit. During our relationship, he would say shit like during arguments and then turn around and apologize. After a while, I kind of checked out of the relationship because it got tiring, so when she showed up at our doorstep big and pregnant, I didn’t fight or cry about it. I kicked Delion out since it was my grandparents’ house.

Mahlia sat down on the bed in her own pajamas. A serious expression graced her face.

“What?” I huffed.

“Zyro would really be good for you,” she said quietly. “I see how he is already protective...*over*protective of you and nephew, that...I just can’t wait to see him with his own running around here. I swear he’ll keep your beautiful ass pregnant.”

“Mahlia...”

She raised her hands, stopping me from crushing her spirit. “Hear me out.”

I sighed, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Remember, I told you not to block your blessings. I really, reaaaaally feel like my cousin is your blessing. He’s a damn good man.” She pointed a finger in my direction. “And you can’t deny that.”

“I also told you that I wasn’t ready to get in...”

“A relationship,” Mahlia finished, mocking me. I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’m just saying, don’t let him get away. You might end up with a Zyleek.”

We guffawed.

“He’s actually fun to be around,” I told her.

“He is! Dating, though, hell no.”

“He might get it together one day, with the right one, but you’re right...I don’t want a Zyleek.”

We snickered again.

“Not too much on my bro.”

Our heads both turned to the door that Mahlia had not closed. My face grew hot because I was so embarrassed to be talking about his brother in his house. Mahlia was now on the floor, rolling with tears in her eyes.

“You know it’s true, cousin. I would never put my real friends on to Zyleek.” Mahlia giggled. “That’s my boy, but he isn’t ready to settle down just yet. If my friend was just looking for a fuck and fun type shit, then yeah, Zyleek is the man.” I cut my eyes over at Zyro, and Mahlia caught it. “Nuh uh, friend. Zyro and Leesa... nah, just don’t put their names together.”

Zyro snickered. He leaned against the doorframe, wearing that lazy grin, one of his dimples exposed. Could I see myself with someone like him? He’s been nice since we met, and the way Ermias talks and gloats about Zyro all the time. The way his face lights up upon seeing Zyro needs to be studied.

“That nigga got three baby mamas...”

“That we know of,” Mahlia interrupted Zyro and added.

He scratched the side of his face. “They like it. All three of them are on that nigga, but he said he ain’t fuckin’ with nan one ‘cause they ain’t put shit on his bail.”

Mahlia and Zyro both cracked up. Without thinking, I picked up the stuffed bear and inhaled. I mean, eyes closed and everything. When I popped them back open, two sets of eyes were on me.

“You ain’t even gotta say it,” Mahlia hooted.

“You need me to spray some more?” teased Zyro.

Right then and there, I decided to play along. Mahlia dared me with her eyes.

“Sure. It can use some more,” I uttered, bringing a squeal out of Mahlia. She brought an arm up and rotated it in a circle as if rooting for me.

Zyro jutted his head toward the door. “Follow me to my room with the bear.”

I wasn’t sure what had gotten into me, but my legs began to move. Mahlia’s jaw dropped. I followed Zyro down the long hallway. All throughout his home, it smelled like lemons. One of my favorite scents for cleaning products, wall plug-ins, and candles. I was barefoot, and the cool, wooden floors felt good underneath my feet. This wasn’t liquoring courage because I hadn’t been drinking. This had to be the throbbing between my thighs that wouldn’t stop when I was around Zyro.

The two wooden doors that opened to his bedroom were taller than he and I. This whole house was luxurious. I couldn’t hold back the gasp that escaped my throat when I trailed him beyond the doors. It was so beautiful. Everything was black, but the wall light fixtures made the aesthetic even more beautiful. His bed was enormous.

“My mama designed all this,” he told me without breaking his stride to his bathroom.

“She did a real good job,” I gushed.

The bathroom was just as amazing in black and gold, and the floor shower with the black and gold marble floor and walls took my breath away. The bathroom was massive. At least my bedroom and Ermias’ put together.

Zyro stopped at the sink where there were bottles of colognes on the counter. Turning to face me, with one swift motion, he scooped me up and sat me on the counter. I yelped from him, catching me off guard. I tightened

my hold on the teddy bear in my lap as he removed the top from a bottle of cologne. I didn't want to be gone too long because I didn't want Mahlia to think something was going on in here, and I also didn't want Ermias to wake up and catch me on this man's bathroom counter.

Zyro shook the bottle once, removed the bear from my hold, and lightly misted it, spinning it around in his large hands. The veins protruding from his arms and hands were sexy as fuck to me. He was sexy.

The fresh, woodsy scent curled around us. Instead of handing me the bear right away, Zyro stepped between my legs. If there was a sound coming from all that thumping in my middle, it would be one of a drum in an HBCU band.

His nose twitched, and a slow smile spread on his lips. The seat of my panties was damp, and I could even smell my clean essence.

I reached for the bear so I could hop down and leave, but Zyro was too quick. He moved it behind his back. He moved closer, one hand now on my thigh. I swallowed, not knowing what I should do. I couldn't fake the funk if I wanted to; this felt good. Having the opposite sex up on me like this, I hadn't had this in a while.

He had me caged in. His voice came out in a rough rasp.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked.

I couldn't even speak. Afraid that it'll come out in a squeak or some shit other than my voice. I nodded, looking in his eyes. That was all the permission Zyro seemed to need. He leaned in slowly, cupping my chin. His lips brushed mine as he pressed them against mine. Parting my lips, he deepened the kiss, slowly. His thumb brushed along the edge of my jaw as if he was testing how far I would allow him to go.

He sucked on my bottom lip, then gave me a peck before stopping and stepping back. He slightly shook his head and glanced down. His dick was erect.

"See the shit you do to me, Eriss. You might need to leave 'fore I do more than kiss yo' beautiful ass," he said with a low groan that sounded more like a growl. Zyro dragged a hand over his face and laughed under his breath as I just sat there. "I said I ain't want a relationship, but you're making it real hard, baby."

With the bear still in his hand, he gripped my hips and helped me off the counter. I was...disappointed.

He handed the bear to me.

“Go ‘fore I take it too far. I ain’t go lie...I want you bad, but I’m on yo’ time, baby.”

My body was screaming out, stay in there with this man and let him take you on a euphoric ride. I knew that ride would be better than any rollercoaster they’ve ever made. Zyro gave off that vibe.

I saw it from the shorts he wore. The length. The girth.

I felt it, too.

That kiss was still on my lips.

Boldly, I inched back in his space, and a bushy brow rose on his face. Zyro licked his lips, then bit down on the bottom one while watching me. I reached around him, placing the bear on the bathroom counter against the mirror. When I straightened up, he circled his arms around my body, his hands roamed down to my ass, and he gripped both cheeks. My body pressed against his, the bulge knocking at my stomach.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

He frowned so cutely. “Scared of what?” he asked.

I licked my lips. “Scared of what this might turn out to be. Scared that you’ll get tired of looking at my eye.”

Zyro half-smiled as his brows drew together.

“Eriss,” his voice rumbled, “Ain’t nothin’ ‘bout you that’s ugly to me. That hit deeper than the damn kiss. His thumb brushed my hip in slow circles. “I’m not in the business to hurt you,” he continued, his gaze steady on mine. “If you need slow, shiiid we can go slow, but I want to at least taste you tonight.”

My face grew warm. I felt like a damn schoolgirl.

“Maybe I should get back before Mahlia...”

He smacked his lips. “She knows what it is.”

We laughed.

“And what is it?” I asked teasingly.

“Lemme show you,” Zyro said, before dipping down low, taking my shorts with him.

I wanted to stop him because the hair on my mound was growing back since my last wax, but then I hadn’t felt lips down there in so long.

I gripped the counter with one hand when he pushed my purple thong panties to the side. Zyro stuck out his tongue and swiped the tip along my folds.

“You smell so good,” he mumbled. “So sweet.”

My lids fluttered as my stomach clenched. The feeling of his mouth on my sensitive parts caused a moan to escape. Zyro continued to lick, suck, and kiss. I tried so hard to keep it down, afraid the other two might hear me, but it was so hard. So, so hard. Zyro was working me like I was one of the broken-down vehicles at his shop, and he was under my hood.

“Oh shit!” I squealed out, coming undone as my body quaked, but that didn’t stop Zyro; he continued until I started slapping the back of his head.

I fell back against the counter, my legs weak, eyeing the demon. Zyro stood to his full height, smirking and wiping his mouth.

“You gon sleep good tonight, baby. Make sure you hug on that bear a lil’ tighter tonight, ‘cause it’s almost time for his eviction. I’m a be holding you soon.”

The next morning

When my alarm on my phone went off, I groaned with my head buried in the pillow, and with my hand, I looked for it. Groaning again, I turned over onto my back and realized I was not in my room. I was not at home. Then last night hit me. The pussy eating demon hit me.

“You gon sleep good tonight, baby. Make sure you hug on that bear a lil’ tighter tonight...”

And I did. I slept good as fuck as I held the bear, inhaling Zyro’s scent. All I remember is pulling up my clothes, snatching the bear off the bathroom sink, and hauling ass out of there. I had bypassed a nonstop Tickle Me Elmo Mahlia and went straight to the room I was sleeping in, locked the door, showered again, and then hid underneath the covers. Eventually, I had gotten up to unlock the door just in case Ermias woke up in this big ass house looking for me. As soon as my head had hit that pillow again, I was knocked out.

Mahlia should be up herself, getting ready for work, thus, I got out the bed to get myself ready and then Ermias. I did not want to leave this man’s house, but I had to get away from him before he turned my ass out.

I padded to the en-suite bathroom and flicked the light on. It took a moment for my eye to adjust. My reflection looked back at me with sleepy, satisfied eyes. Pulling my slightly crooked bonnet off, I turned the water on

and splashed cold water on my face to wake up and willingly myself to get it together.

Going back into the room while patting my face dry, I grabbed the overnight bag Mahlia had packed for me and located my toothbrush, mouthwash, and face cleanser. Since I showered twice last night, I decided to skip the shower this morning. I pulled out the clothes Mahlia packed and removed a graphic t-shirt and light blue jeans that were distressed at the knees.

As I was slipping on white socks, the door opened and Ermias came sprinting in, sliding in his own socks on the wood floor.

“Mama! Zyro said if it’s okay with you, I can go to the shop with him today. He’ll bring me home! Please, Mama!”

I frowned because a child didn’t belong at a damn mechanic shop, but then again, Zyro’s shop was very...different. Mahlia had told me had a huge room for kids at the shop with toys. I have never seen it myself, but I believe it. Zyro looked out for people, whether you knew you needed it or not. I could see him helping the mommies out with their kids while waiting for an oil change.

“I don’t know, Ermias...”

“Ahhh, he’ll be fine, E. I promise. My little cousins go up there all the time with Zyro. He’s the boss. If he doesn’t have to work on the car, he doesn’t have to. He has workers to do the labor,” Mahlia said, coming in behind Ermias.

I cut my eyes at my friend. “You really gonna vouch for him taking my baby to a whole mechanic shop? Ermias would need to be watched at all times so he won’t be sneaky out there trying to get under a damn car to fix.” We giggled, but I was so serious.

“That big playroom has little cars, beanbags, tablets...the whole nine. My cousin doesn’t half-step.” She winked. “You know that.”

I blushed. *Did she know about last night?* I wondered to myself. Nah, Zyro doesn’t seem like the type who’d gossip about anything like that. Mahlia had to be assuming.

Ermias was bouncing on the balls of his feet, his smile wide and pleading. “Maaaaama!” he stressed, holding his head as if I was stressing him out. “Please. I’ll behave.”

I glanced over at Mahlia, who had the same expression on her face. Lips poked out and brows almost kissing.

“Fine. This is crazy,” I finally said after a few beats. “I’m just paying for daycare just to pay for daycare, I guess.”

Mahlia giggled. She was dressed in her uniform, her braids in a low bun.

“Good. Just throw him on some clothes to play in, and we’ll head to Heartville. Maybe you can drive back down here and spend another night after work.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“Girl, leave me alone,” I cackled.

Ermias bolted out of the room in excitement. I shook my head at all the energy he had this morning because if we were at home, he’d be dragging his feet, complaining about going to daycare.

“Zyro down there making you...coffee?” One of her brows rose. “That coffee machine just sits there untouched until you came over.”

I didn’t respond immediately. I was fighting the little smile creeping onto my face.

Of course, Mahliah didn’t miss it, even when I attempted to turn my head.

“Mm-hmm. My cousin has you blushing soooo bad,” she whispered. “If he weren’t my cousin, I would have asked for the details because I know *something happened* last night. Get up and let me see you walk. I can tell if you’re walking crooked or not.” She lifted a finger and twirled it around, telling me to get up and walk.

“Mahliaaaa,” I groaned out through a damn laugh that I couldn’t help. “It didn’t go that far,” I admitted. It was weird even talking to her about this because they were so close.

“How far...” She stopped talking, and her eyes grew three times their size. “He...” She made a V with her fingers and flicked her tongue through it.

“Bitch,” I squealed, falling over laughing. “I am not doing this with you. I’m not. I’m just not.” My face and body were on fire. I was so embarrassed, and this was Mahliah, my best fucking friend. My sister.

I stood. “I need to go get Ermias ready, and then we can go so we both won’t be late for work.” I tickled her side and walked out of the room with my bag.

“Oh bitch, don’t you forget about this damn bear.”

I snorted through a laugh when Mahliah ran to get it from the bed that I had fixed.

The scent of coffee filled my nose when I walked further down the hall. Ermias wasn't in the room he had slept in, so Mahlia and I descended the black marble staircase.

I dropped the bag in the living room, then went searching for my son. I heard voices coming from the kitchen and started in that direction. Mahlia was no longer behind me.

A shirtless Zyro stood in front of his toaster, spreading jelly on toast. His head popped up upon seeing me.

"Good morning," he spoke first.

"Morning," I said back. I forced my eye to stay on his face, but it was really difficult with his chest and tattoos covering him on display. And then...and then there were those lips that were on my me not even twenty-four hours ago.

He lifted his chin a little, quirked a brow with a grin like he knew exactly what I was thinking. "Coffee's fresh. Cups in the counter. Creamer in the fridge."

"Mahlia said you never use your Keurig," I said, jutting my head toward the machine. "You got up this morning and got me coffee and creamer?"

A tilted grin spread on his lips. "I did," he answered. Zyro's eyes roamed down my body and landed on my middle. As if he forgot Ermias was in the room with us, he cleared his throat and shook whatever images he had in his head away. "Homeboy wanted toast."

"His favorite breakfast." I moved past him toward the counter, picked a mug up that had his business logo on it, and began pouring my coffee. "Are you sure it's okay to have Ermias at the shop with you. He just needs to be watched..."

"It's fine."

"But you probably need to catch up..."

"Eriss...I got this, baby," he said with so much certainty.

"Ouuu Mama, big dawg called you baby," Ermias teased, pointing with jelly and butter on his cheek.

"You get around Zyro and become so messy," I laughed. "Eat so..."

"I got this. Brush his teeth. Change clothes. I got this."

Mahlia appeared. "Chiiiiile, my cousin ain't playing no games." She chortled. "He got this. Let's go, bookie, and don't forget that bear. You might want to sit in the car and sniff it on lunch break."

I rolled my eyes. They were all ganging up on me.

Zyro swaggered over and removed the mug from my hand. He grabbed a tumbler from inside the cabinet, rinsed it out, and poured my coffee in it. He found the lid, rinsed it as well, and placed it on there before handing it to me.

“Y’all have a good day,” he growled out, looking directly at me.

“Well, it’s obvious you weren’t really talking about me, but you too, cousin!” Mahlia hollered out. “Be good, neph!”

ZYRO COLEMAN

As soon as Ermias stepped foot in the shop's playroom, his eyes lit up. He promised to stay here while I did my morning routine as my guys began to spill in.

"Who's the kid?" Marco asked, pointing toward the glass playroom where I could keep an eye on the kids who were inside.

"His mama was the one who came in with her pops the other day," I mumbled, checking off shit on my clipboard."

"Wait, you hittin' that? The one with the..."

My head slowly rose with a hard look on my face that had Tatum swallowing the words that were to follow.

"Damn, my bad, boss," he said, hands in the air. "She was pretty as fuck."

Marco cackled. "Nose wide open."

"Mind ya business," I shot back with a smirk. I wasn't talking about shit with these niggas.

Tatum whistled low. "Step daddy vibes, my nigga. I see you."

"Maaan, get to work," I told him. "We need to get what we can fixed and out of here."

Throughout the day, I kept my eyes on Ermias. I even let him come out and see what was all happening in the bays, but keeping a safe distance. If anything happened to my boy, Eriss would never forgive me. Shit, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself.

When I needed to fix a belt, I took him back to the playroom with snacks until lunchtime. I figured we'd go eat somewhere, wishing his mama worked in town so I could take her pretty ass too.

After washing the grease from my hands, I took my phone to shoot her a message. I laughed at myself. Marco wasn't lyin'. Eriss had my muhfuckin' nose wide open. Her taste made it worse. I was now on her bad.

Unlocking my phone, I noticed a message from Leesa. I opened it, and there was a video of her playing in her pussy. I didn't even bother turning the volume up or letting it play more than a second. I deleted the shit like it was spam, and thumbed out a quick reply. I've seen Leesa's pussy many times, so that didn't do shit for me.

Aye, don't send me this shit anymore. Matter of fact, don't hit me up anymore

The bubbles popped up, and I didn't give her a chance. Straight to the block party, her ass went.

I blew out a breath through my nose, then shot my future wife a message.

Hey beautiful. I know it's killin' you not to check on homeboy, but he aight. We finna go get some to eat. Send me a picture... a video or some so I can see yo beautiful ass. Make my day.

I slid my phone into my pocket and glanced over into the playroom. Ermias was having a damn ball in the ball pit. I took off toward the door while Marco was shutting down for our lunch break.

"You hungry, homeboy?" I asked, holding the door open with my boots.

His head snapped up. "Yes, sir!"

"Cool, go wash your hands in the sink over there, then we can head out. What do you have a taste for?"

"Crab legs and shrimp!" he yelled, causing me to double over.

"Maaan, maybe we can get that when we're wit' ya mama. Let's do some simple shit today. How 'bout some soul food? There's a buffet around the corner.

"Bet!"

I snickered, pushing my hands in my pockets.

"You must've heard that lingo in daycare, man," I said, laughing.

“My dad was on the game, saying it. He is always on the game.” Ermias’ voice dropped in a bleak tone. He stared at the floor, shoulders hunched.

“Aye, man.” I licked my lips as I stopped him from walking. “We don’t get sad over this way. You want a man to spend time wit’ you, holler at me. I’ll put my number in yo’ tablet, and I’m coming, aight? Fix yo’ face. Put a smile on that shit.” Ermias grinned from ear to ear. “Yeah, that’s what I like to see.”

“Can you keep my mama happy, too, big dawg?”

“Okay father and son!” Tatum called out.

Marco chuckled. Tatum always tried to get under a nigga’s skin, but if I fired his ass today, he wouldn’t be doin’ all that mouthing off. That shit didn’t bother, though. I knew it was all jokes, but don’t let Eriss be the butt of one. I’ll blow that nigga’s head off.

See, willing to do time behind baby.

As soon as I slid behind the wheel, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I removed it and tried to bite back the smile on my face. Eriss had texted back.

Hey, work is good. Thanks for asking, and I hope your day is going just as well, baby sitter lol. I was fighting to text you about my baby, but I know he is in good hands. And here...

She sent an attachment. She was at a desk with her head resting on a hand. That pretty ass smile on her face.

Can’t wait to kiss those lips again...both sets.

I placed the phone in my lap and pulled out of the lot, heading down the strip toward the diner I hit up now and then for some good ass greens and smothered chops.

I shook my head, cheesing hard like a damn fool as I drove. The diner was an old school spot with the big windows and the neon sign glowing. It was a lil’ after noon, therefore, it was booming with the town’s folks.

We walked inside, me holding onto his shoulder, making sure he didn’t walk behind a car that was pulling out. We entered, the bell over the door jingling. A waitress, an older lady named Miss Noreen, who has been working here forever, spotted me right off. Her eyes lingered on Ermias.

“Well, if it ain’t Mr. Mechanic,” she greeted with a warm smile. “And who is this young man? Don’t tell me you had a kid this whole time and I didn’t know.”

I glanced down, making sure my boy was comfortable. Ermias smiled shyly.

“This is Ermias. He’s starving,” I answered, not answering her question. I respected my elders, but some shit just wasn’t their business.

“Nice to meet you, Ermias. You are a cute one. Gone over there to the register, and I’ll help you out with him. Eat all you can eat, Ermias. I do want to warn you,” Miss Noreen chuckled, “you will get sleep after this.”

I let out a low whistle. She was not lying. I had no business here, knowing I had to get back to work. So far, we have had three cars fixed and picked up by their rightful owners.

After paying for the buffet, Miss Noreen helped Ermias with his choices at the buffet while I piled my plate with greens, cornbread, baked chicken, a smothered chop, and mac ‘n cheese.

We slid into a booth they’d just finished cleaning after the last customers. On Ermias’ plate was random shit. I chuckled at the pizza, fries, a brownie, and mac ‘n cheese, but my boy got what he wanted to eat, and that’s all that mattered. That smile ain’t left his face yet since I told him to put it back.

“Can you tell my mama to let us go back to your house tonight?” Ermias asked from the backseat through a yawn.

When we made it back to the shop, he caught the itis, and I made him a pallet on the floor of the playroom and let him sleep. I was tired myself, but I thugged it through the rest of the day. Now, we were on the way to Heartville after I stopped by the crib to shower, change, and grab Ermias’ things.

“I don’t know, man. Your mama might not want to drive that distance in the morning for work,” I told him, eyeing him through the rearview mirror.

“Tell her to quit. You have that big house and money. You can take care of her,” he suggested. I ran a finger over my bottom lip, chuckling.

“What about I see if she’ll let me stay the night?”

“Yes!” he cheered with both arms shooting straight up.

I’d already let Eriss know I was on the way with Ermias. She never responded to my last message, but I knew it had been on her mind. I ate her shit like I was on death row, and that was my last meal. Her shit shouldn’t be so damn sweet. That nigga that cheated on her had to be smoking crack. I would have never let Eriss go...and won’t...Once I got her.

Unbeknownst to Ermias, I had a bag packed just in case I stayed the night. I wanted to be up under Eriss tonight. Under her and inside of her. I also had to make sure her security system had been installed correctly. Since Mahlia had a key, she was there on her break with her food while they installed it. I sent her a stack just for doin’ that solid for me.

By the time I pulled into Heartville, the sky was a deep orange-blue. Ermias had knocked out again, his head tilted to the side, and his mouth ajar. Little man had been through a long day of good southern soul food and the shop’s playroom. He asked if he could come back tomorrow, but I promised I’d ask Eriss if we could do it once a week.

I eased the truck into Eriss’ driveway. I sat there for a second, thinking how quickly my life was changing and revolving around these two. It wasn’t a bad thing, but it was a change. Mama called me the other day and wondered why I hadn’t been by to see them. Shit, for a moment, I forgot I even had my own family sniffing behind Eriss.

I got out, opened the back door, and scooped up Ermias. His eyes opened, and I let him down while I grabbed his backpack, leaving my own bag in the truck. I wanted to make sure it was coo’ wit’ Eriss first.

A few seconds later, as we were walking to the porch, the door opened and Eriss stepped out. She had on a Crown Heart shirt and some leggings. Her hair was tied up, and she sported a bare face.

Ermias ran over to her and they hugged each other like they had been a part for months.

“Damn, can I get one of those hugs?” I asked, after Ermias had run inside.

She surprised me by wrapping her arms around me. My free hand slid to her ass, gripping a handful. Eriss let me go, and I followed her inside. The scent of fried food caused my stomach to rumble. Even though I had eaten hours earlier, the smell of chicken frying was right up my alley.

“Mama!” Ermias yelled from somewhere in the house.

“Yes, son?” she answered.

“Can big dawg stay the night? I wanted to stay at his house, but he said you wouldn’t want to drive in the morning.”

Our eyes met. I winked at her, causing her face to tint red.

“Oh...um...I mean...If he wants to,” Eriss stammered.

“I sure do,” I said with my hands in my pockets and a big grin on my face. “I sure fuckin’ do.” She looked away. “I’mma check this security system out. Gotta make sure my babies are good when I’m not around.”

Later that night, Ermias bathed and was asleep, I’d grabbed my bag from my truck and sat on the porch to smoke. I hadn’t rolled up in days. The door opened as I blew out smoke, turning my head just a little to see Eriss.

“What are we doing?” she asked, hugging her arms around her body. It wasn’t cold out.

I took another puff. “Shit, it ain’t clear, yet, baby?”

She moved down one step and sat beside me, one knee knocking into mine. I took another pull and angled my face toward the yard so I wouldn’t blow smoke in her direction.

“I mean...I can tell what your intentions are, but what is it?”

I let out a rough chuckle. “I’mma go wit’ the flow type of nigga. I can tell you this, I enjoy being around you and Ermias.”

I wasn’t gon to tell her ‘bout our conversation earlier when he was sad about that nigga not spending time with him. Fuck he was trying to hold him from Eriss fo’ then? Petty shit. Petty ‘cause he couldn’t have her ass. Shit, she was mine now. *They* were mine. I wasn’t coming up off them either when I really do get them.

“The way I kissed you... The way I...” I paused to lick my lips as if I could still taste her.

“You say that now,” she finally said, “but you don’t even do relationships. You said that yourself.”

“True,” I admitted. I took another slow drag, then ashed the blunt out on the step and set it aside. “Didn’t mean I wouldn’t change my mind when the right woman came along. I just...” I looked her in her eyes. “I ain’t think I’ll meet her this fast.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The soft trill of crickets and cars passing by were the only sounds. Eriss let out a small breath.

"I don't want to let you in and then you decide that this isn't what you want. I can't let Ermias get used to you and then have to watch you leave," she whispered.

I shifted my body, leaning my forearms on my thighs as her words excavated in my brain.

"I hear you, baby. I can't promise you forever tonight, but I can put that on everything I love that I'm not playin' wit' you. I swear I ain't. I wouldn't even play wit' yo' heart like that, Eriss. I do want you to be mine, though." I poured my heart out right there.

Her lips parted, not expecting all of that. Eriss looked out in the street instead of me. I didn't say shit. Whatever was on her mind, I wanted to hear.

"I'm scared," she murmured.

"And I get that. Ain't none wrong wit' being scared...with the wrong person. Shit, I ain't him." My brows crinkled a little. I wasn't annoyed, but I wanted Eriss to know I wasn't them peon niggas she fucked wit' in the past that hurt her. I would never. "You can doubt me all you want, pretty girl, but my actions line up wit' my words. I don't even want anybody else, and damn sure won't hurt you and my homeboy. He might shoot me wit' his water gun if I tried."

Together, we laughed. I stood, grabbing my unfinished blunt and holding my other hand out to Eriss. I pulled her into me, gripping the front of her neck. When she moaned, my dick twitched.

"I'ma show you, aight?" I lightly squeezed her neck. Eriss nodded. I leaned my head down and pecked her soft lips a few times. "Just give me a chance. Open up to me, aight?" She nodded again.

I let Eriss' neck go and saw the disappointment in her face. I snickered and licked my lips, savoring her taste.

We ambled back in the house, me holding the door for her, and locking it behind me. I removed my shoes at the door and removed my shirt. We'd eaten fried chicken, cabbage, and cornbread. I'd gotten full all over again and then smoked. I'd have to find my homeboy's snacks to eat on in a few. I know he wouldn't mind. He was just happy I was here. I'll restock the whole kitchen if Eriss wants me to.

We bypassed the dark living room, me on her heels. We passed Ermias' door on the way down the hall. I slowed just enough to glance in. He was lying sideways on the bed, dead asleep, one sock off, the other halfway on. I couldn't help but smile at the sight. He had a Paw Patrol night light on. I closed his door halfway, 'cause the shit I planned on doing to his mama, no kid should hear.

Strolling into Eriss' bedroom, she was in the bathroom, head tilted slightly as she wrapped her hair up. I walked behind her, pressing my front into her back. Our eyes met in the mirror. The light above it threw a soft glow on her face, catching the tiredness, but still a beautiful look in her eyes.

She didn't move away. That small, but quiet sign made my heart beat a little faster. Eriss had changed into shorts. She'd changed after she cleaned the kitchen. She was slim, but that ass was juicy along with her thighs. I always like some I could grab. In my eyes, Eriss was perfect for me.

Eriss turned the light off, leaving the TV on. It was on the show *Cops*. That alone made me think of Zyleek. I hadn't heard from him since the strip club. I hoped that nigga was staying out of trouble, and I'd hit him up tomorrow morning.

She got into one side of the bed, and I peeled my shorts off, adjusting my semi-hard dick in my Versace boxer briefs. I slid in on the other side, the mattress dipping under my weight, and before Eriss could even get comfortable, I was pulling her into me.

"You might want to turn the volume up on the TV," I mumbled in her ear before flicking my tongue inside.

"Zyyyyro," she moaned out, arching her back. Her ass was pushing into my dick, and I know she felt that big muhfucka.

Eriss trembled. My hands traveled underneath her shirt. I cupped her breast, rolling her nipple between my fingers until it hardened. I sucked her neck, she gyrated into me.

"I'ma take care of you, Eriss." I meant that in more ways than one.

Her breath hitched when I slipped my fingers beneath the waistband of her shorts. My dick throbbed with anticipation. Slowly, I pulled down Eriss' shorts, revealing her smooth thighs. My hand traveled up, caressing her inner thigh, causing her to squirm.

"Tell me what you want," I murmured, my voice husky.

Eriss turned on her back, looking up at me. Her chest rose and fell quickly as she tried catching her breath. "I want you, Zyro." My brows rose in surprise and excitement when Eriss reached down to grasp my dick through my boxer briefs. "I...I want you inside of me."

I growled, rolling on top of her, my body pressing against hers, but I made sure my weight was crushing her. My lips captured hers in a deep, passionate kiss as I pushed my boxers down, letting my dick spring out. "You have a rubber?"

I wasn't sure how I'd feel if she said yes, because then I'd wonder who they were for. When Eriss pointed at her nightstand, I narrowed my eyes. She started laughing, but ain't shit was funny in my eyes.

"The box hasn't even been opened. It was just...in case. I almost forgot about them," she giggled. "I was about to let you go inside me raw."

"It's tempting, but I know damn well I wouldn't pull out," I told her, nibbling her bottom lip before reaching for the drawer in the nightstand. My dick sat right on her thigh.

"Damn, it's heavy. I'm a little scared," she giggled, covering her mouth. "Like, for real."

I grinned, my eyes darkening with a mix of amusement and... possessiveness. Snatching the box out, I tore it open and grabbed a condom. Extra-large. I tore the wrapper open with my teeth. I rolled it on swiftly.

Eriss licked her lips. "It's been a while, Zyro. For me."

"I got you, baby."

She bit her lip when I positioned myself at her warm, wet entrance. Her hands shook on my arms. I pushed in slowly, inch by inch, feeling her tighten around me. Eriss gasped, her grip tightening on my arms and my dick.

"Fuck, you're tight as fuck, baby. Like you ain't ever been broken in, and I know you had a kid. You had a C-section?"

Eriss shook her head side to side, a tear falling from her cloudy eye.

"You want me to stop?" I asked, scared I was really hurting her.

"No," she hissed out. "More. Give me more."

I complied, increasing my pace, my hips moving faster.

Harder.

The bed creaked beneath us, the headboard banging against the wall with each powerful thrust I gave her. Eriss' moans turned into cries, and those turned into whimpers.

“You feel so fuckin’ good,” I groaned, wrapping a hand around her throat. Her pussy grew wetter. She loved that shit.

My body tensed as I fought to maintain control. I reached between us, finding her clit, and rubbed it in tight circles. Eriss cried out as I hammered her pussy with no mercy. She began to meet me thrust for thrust as I talked her through it.

“That’s it, baby. Give me that shit. This yo’ dick. Squirt on yo’ dick. Gimme allat shit,” I whispered through clenched teeth. “Fuck it.”

I pulled out and flipped her lil’ ass with one arm. I wanted to see that shit from the back. I wanted to see her take all of me.

Eriss arched her back, head down, ass in the air. I smacked it, watching it move like jelly. Looking up, I thanked the Man upstairs for this shit. Her body still trembled as I positioned myself behind her. She looked back at me over her shoulder as I buried myself back inside.

“Fuuuuck!” we both moaned.

I had to sit in it for a moment, but Eriss had other plans. She began to throw her as back slowly at first, and then she sped that shit up. I wiped at my eyes, unbelieving what the fuck I was seeing.

That’s why that nigga ain’t want to give her up.

Not taking away from the fact that she was a nice, sweet girl and a bomb ass mama to her son, but my lil’ baby was a freak. A damn stripper in the bedroom. She would move it in circles and then back and forth, letting me see her pussy swallow my shit. Grabbing my dick, I pulled out to see her shit filled with white cream.

“Zyro! Put it back in,” she demanded. I chuckled and did as she asked of me. I was willing to do anything Eriss wanted. Long as she ain’t take her heart or this pussy from me.

I started to move, my hips thrusting against her, each movement deep and deliberate. The sound of our bodies slapping together filled the room, mingling with our moans and gasps. Eriss cried out, her body convulsing as she came, her inner muscles clenching around me. The sensation sent me over the edge, and I came hard as fuck, gripping her ass roughly.

We collapsed together, our bodies slick with sweat. Our breathing came out in ragged gasps.

“Shit,” I huffed, pulling out. I rolled onto my back and removed the condom, pinching it so I wouldn’t spill the contents out on her bed. It

wouldn't have made a difference. There was a big ass wet spot underneath her.

Eriss's eyes were closed, and her knuckle was in her mouth. She was snoring lightly.

"I know you fuckin' lyin'," I muttered, snickering. "I know you fuckin' lyin'."

The sharp pop-pop-pop yanked me out of my sleep. My hand shot out to where I had put my Glock after I'd woken Eriss so we could shower and change the sheets, then she had instantly fallen back asleep.

"What was that?" Eriss groggily asked, sitting up.

"Stay here," I whispered. She inhaled sharply at the sight of my gun. My first thought was Ermias. "Wait! Zyro! Were those gunshots? Shit! Ermias!"

Eriss hopped up, and I stopped her.

"Stay here. I'll get him. I can't worry about you and him. Stay low just in case and away from the windows."

I crossed the hall in two long strides and pushed his door open with my shoulder while keeping an eye on my surroundings. The gunshots were from outside, but I couldn't be sure if someone was inside until I got to Ermias.

He was still knocked out, oblivious to anything around him. Quickly, I scanned the window. No shattered glass. No holes.

"Zyro."

I turned to see a hardheaded Eriss now in a silk robe tied around her body. She held her phone out to me. It was on the ADT camera app. My eyes squinted at the screen as I saw my truck being shot up.

"Your fuckin' baby daddy," I gritted. "I'ma kill him."

One thing about me, I take in everything. I captured that nigga's build and how he moved. That was him on that screen shooting my fuckin' truck.

"Delion?" Eriss asked, confused.

"Stay inside. Stay with Ermias."

She started to protest, but I gave her a look that I meant what I said. I went back to her room to throw on my clothes and shoes. In the bathroom, I

brushed my teeth. It was one thing to shoot up my truck, but to shoot where your son lay his head was fucked up. When I said I was gon kill that nigga. I meant that shit.

ZYRO COLEMAN

“What the fuck?” Zyleek screeched, fist to mouth. “Who the fuck you pissed off nigga?”

The blue and red lights from the last police cruiser rolled off. The neighbors had been nosy as hell, peeking from their porches and windows when they heard the shots, and I couldn’t say I blamed them. The police took the shells, but they weren’t taking my truck like they thought they would. They had the video too. Since Eriss had ADT, she couldn’t give the video up. When they asked if she knew who would have done this, the baby did as I told her and told them *no*. I wanted to handle that nigga myself, and I made it clear to Eriss there were consequences for what he did, and I hope she understood what I really meant. That nigga dug his own grave.

Marco joined Zyleek, looking over my truck. “What you gon do?” he asked.

“Shiiid, ain’t like I can’t walk in a dealership and get a new truck today.” I ran my hands down my face.

“Aww, that nigga gotta pay,” Zyleek exhaled. “Who did this shit?”

“Eriss’ salty ass baby daddy. I punched his ass down when he tried keeping her son from her, so he had no business here. I’m a handle that, though.”

“We,” Zyleek expressed, frowning. “You ain’t finna leave me off bad and bougie.”

Marco’s jaw dropped as he just stared at Zyleek in awe. I was so used to that niggas antics.

“You still fighting a fucking case your damn self, nigga. Worry ‘bout that and those kids. Don’t need you drawing any more attention to yourself than you already do,” I grumbled, eyeing him. I couldn’t take Leek getting into any more bullshit right now. He was a damn wildcard, but I needed him to heed my warning. I got this.

Zyleek grinned with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Aight.”

I shook my head, not feeding into his bullshit. Marco, who had been listening quietly ‘cause that’s what he does, spoke up. “You don’t need any problems either, boss man.”

“You right, but I’m touchin’ that nigga, though.” Pointing to my truck, I said, “Gon ‘head and load my baby up. Let me go let Eriss know I’m headed back to Love Grove wit’ y’all so I can see ‘bout another truck or some.”

Marco’s head bobbed, understanding the gravity of the situation. “Aight, I got you, Zyro. Be careful, nigga.”

“Always am. I’m not that reckless ass nigga,” I chortled, chucking my chin Leek’s way. He was sparking a blunt. “Nigga, what I told you ‘bout riding wit’ anything on you. You give these muhfuckas a reason every time. Then you gon drag Marco down wit’ you.”

“Maaan, fuck them,” he said with a flick of his wrist. “Is she yo’ girl now? Left eye?”

Before I could stop myself, I popped that nigga in the jaw with a mean right, the impact sending a sharp pain up my arm. He stumbled back, his now low eyes as wide as they could get with surprise. before a smirk spread across his face. *Ol’ crazy ass nigga.*

“You need to go lie on someone’s damn couch,” I told him, pointing a finger in his face. “Don’t say that shit no mo’. Don’t disrespect Eriss at all, Leek,” I warned.

“I just be fuckin’ playin’, damn. I bet she has a sense of humor ‘cause yo’ ass don’t,” he huffed before pulling on the blunt. “Aight. Aight.”

With that, I turned and walked back to the house before dipping off. Eriss was in the kitchen, and Ermias was at the table eating his jelly and buttered toast. When Eriss saw me, she rushed to me.

“Zyro, I am so sorry,” she apologized.

Gently, I grabbed her chin, pushing her against the counter with my body. “I don’t ever want to hear you apologizing to another nigga, Eriss. This ain’t yo’ doing, feel me?”

She nodded quickly before a moan escaped from her beautiful mouth.

“Are you leaving with them?” she asked.

“Yeah, I need a new truck,” I said low enough so Ermias wouldn’t hear. His feelings might be crushed ‘bout that one out there.

“You got it like that?” she asked, brow raised.

I simpered. “Do I?” I pecked her lips and let her go. “Make sure the alarm is always set when y’all are here and not here. This weekend y’all comin’ back up there wit’ me, and yes, I’m telling you.”

Eriss offered a smile. “Okay. I feel safer wit’ you anyway. That kind of shook me up. Ermias has no idea what even happened while he was sleeping. Imagine...”

I stopped her. “Don’t imagine that, baby. He good. You good. You won’t have to worry ‘bout that shit after today.”

“Are you...”

Again, I stopped her, but with another peck to the lips. “Don’t ask me anything you know you don’t want the answer to, love. I gotta go, but do as I asked. Text me on yo’ lunch break or some.”

With one more kiss to her lips, I headed out of the kitchen, told Ermias I’ll talk to him later, and walked out of the house before Leek's crazy ass came in.

My new baby rolled smoothly as I left the lot. She was just like my old one, but instead of a 2024, I got a 2026. As I merged onto the highway, I glanced down at my phone when it lit up and saw Conrad’s name flash across the screen. I hit the answer button and placed the call on speaker.

“Yeah?” I asked, my voice calm.

“Good news, Zyro,” he began. “The charges against Zyleek have been dropped. They knew that shit was bullshit from the start and knew it wouldn’t hold up in court. The prosecution decided they didn’t have enough evidence to move forward.”

“That’s some good shit, but we knew that. So what’s the plan? How can we get Zyleek justice ‘cause that was some fucked up shit. My boy missed the whole family reunion, and Mama ain’t letting that shit go. She wants blood, and I aim to give it to her.”

Conrad sighed, his voice tinged with a hint of caution. “Zyro, you know I’m all for justice, but we need to be smart about this. We can’t just go after these people with guns blazing. We need a plan, something that will stick.”

“Shit, picking the wrong man up off of some guess is the glue,” I snapped. I leaned back in my seat, eyes fixed on the road ahead. “I hear what you sayin’, but you also know me, Conrad. I’on play ‘bout my family.”

There was a pause on the other end before Conrad spoke again. “I understand. Let’s do this the right way.”

I snickered. “Aight. Once he gets that bread ‘cause I’ma make sure he gets that, all bets are off.”

“I didn’t hear that,” he mumbled.

“Sure you did.” I ended the call and felt a sense of determination. I was gon make sure Leek got the justice he deserved.

A video call I’d been waiting for all day came in next.

“Hey, pretty lady,” I said with a grin as soon as Eriss’ face was on my screen.

“Hey,” she said. I noticed her background was not of a place of business, but instead, her bedroom.

“Why you not at work?”

“I was having a lot of pain, and I don’t know how I left my drop on the bathroom sink. They told me I could go home and rest. My job really works with me and my condition,” Eriss answered.

I nodded, my expression softening with concern. “Damn, baby, I’m sorry to hear that. You okay now? You need anything?”

Eriss offered a small smile. “Just you, but I can wait until the weekend.”

I licked my lips, keeping my eyes on the road. I was on the way back to my shop to check on shit. We were down to two vehicles that were brought in yesterday. Oil changes, tire rotations, and other shit were done daily, so we were never not busy.

“You ain’t gotta wait until the weekend, love. I can see you every day if you want me to. I need to put some miles on this truck.”

“Oh!” She jolted up. “You got a new truck already?”

“Yeah, it’s the same as my last, just a 2026,” I told her, turning into the shop’s lot. I drove to the back, where the owner and employees parked.

“Just a 2026,” she mocked. “That’s big shit.”

“Light work,” I snickered. “You sure you gon be okay though? Do you need me to send you something? Food?”

Eriss shook her head. “I’m just gon lay down until I get Ermias. I’ll probably take him out to eat ice cream or something.”

I killed the engine and opened the door. “Send me your Cash App, Venmo, Zell...”

Eriss groaned. “No.”

“Do what the fuck I said, love. It’s just money. I’m not giving you my kidney... Although I would if you really needed it.” We chuckled in unison.

After releasing an agitated breath, Eriss replied, “Fine.”

“Aight, baby. Let me see what’s goin’ on in this shop and I’ll talk to you later. Send me that info right now, though, so I can go ahead and send it.”

“You’re so bossy,” Eriss fussed. She was now in her bathroom, putting her hair in a high ponytail. “I need to take this out.”

“And I’ll send you money to get it redone, or if you want to wear your natural hair, I’ll get that shit done too.”

“Let me find out you trick,” she gagged, causing me to roar with laughter.

“Fuck no, but for you... Call me Trick Daddy.”

We laughed again before we said our ‘see you later’s’ and ended the call. Eriss obliged and sent me her Venmo. I sent her five hundred and told her to get ice cream, book her hair appointment, and if she wanted her nails done, go do that too. Of course, she had some pushback, but I wasn’t trying to hear that shit.

I was gonna roll up on Eriss and Ermias later since I was now in their city. When I said I would handle that nigga, I meant that. Marco had a homegirl, Lee Lee, who needed help with bills, so I had a proposition for her. I had eyes on that nigga, Delion, all day. It was nine thirty and his ass was at a bar downtown. Lee Lee’s job was to lure that nigga out of the club like she was gon let him fuck. Lead him right to the rented car Marco was in. Marco was gon put him in the fuckin’ trunk and bring his ass to me.

I hit Marco up, making sure everything was still in motion.

“Everything smooth?” I quizzed, soon as he picked up.

“Smooth as gravy,” he replied. “Leek gon be pissed.”

I chuckled. “He's a hothead.”

“Already knowin’. I’ll hit you up when I’m en route.”

“Already.” I hung up and sat back in my truck. I wanted to call Eriss so I could pass the time, but I needed to be focused on the task at hand.

Once Marco had that nigga in the trunk and headed to me, I would be waiting inside the vacant house, ducked off in the woods. I took a moment to appreciate the irony of the situation. That nigga thought he was untouchable even though I’d already put hands on him, but he had no idea who the fuck he was messing with. He had no idea who I was before I turned into businessman Zyro. I was gon make sure he regretted every decision that led him to even thinking he was gon take Ermias from his mama and to shoot at my truck in front of her damn house with her and him inside. He was gon regret all that before his last breath.

Almost two hours later, the headlights of the rental car cut through the darkness as Marco pulled up to the abandoned house. I stepped out of my truck with my Glock, my eyes narrowing as I approached the vehicle. The engine stopped, and Marco exited. He wore a satisfied smirk on his face.

“Lee Lee gon come through every time,” he chirped.

“I appreciate her, too. Sending her the money right now.” I pulled out my phone and sent Lee Lee the two thousand to her account that Marco had given me.

A grim smile played on my lips when Marco popped the trunk, my mind already racing with the slow death he was about to endure.

“I knock him out,” Marco chuckled. “He ain’t know what hit him when she brought him over to the car he thought was hers. He thought he was finna fuck some pussy.”

“Cheatin’ ass fuck nigga,” I muttered. If his other baby mama knew better, she wouldn’t cry when he doesn’t come home tonight.”

Delion was stirring awake. When he realized he was in a tight, confined space, he began to spazz. His eyes widened with fear and confusion when they landed on the grand reaper. Me.

“Sup, fuck nigga,” I greeted him, pulling him out by the collar of his shirt, hauling him out with a rough jerk. “We have some unfinished business to tend to.”

Delion struggled until I placed the Glock to his temple.

“I’m sorry. Let me go, and won’t go anywhere near Eriss and Ermias. I’ll sign my rights over. Just let me go,” he begged.

“Shit, you never had rights as soon as I knew I wanted to make her my woman. All that shit was cut off, nigga,” I snorted, frowning at his ass. Motioning toward the house with my head, I said, “Let’s go. If you scream out like the bitch you are, I swear I’ll blow your head off.”

With him stumbling in front of me, I walked behind him with my shit pointed at his back. Marco kicked the door in with two swift, hard kicks. He had a bag with him that contained two candles for light. Marco lit them, and Delion’s eyes darted around the room wildly.

“Please, man, I’m sorry. I...I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. I was just bitter. I loved Eriss, and I fucked up. Please don’t hurt me,” he pleaded.

I chuckled angrily, a cold and bitter sound escaping. “You think you can just walk away from this shit and all goes away? Nigga, you one dummy. Why the fuck you shoot at my shit where yo’ kid lay his head?”

“I...I wasn’t thinking. I was bitter seeing you around my kid.”

“Nah, nigga. You didn’t know I was gon be there that night. Who the fuck did you have that gun fo’? You thought you were gon shoot Eriss until you saw my damn truck parked out there, huh?” I tapped my temple. “Yeah, I’m a smart nigga.”

I reached my gun out to Marco. He took it from me.

“Let’s fight, nigga. I’m gon let you get yo’ one wit’ me,” I told him.

His eyes bugged in disbelief. I moved a chair out of the way to give him some space and opportunity. His eyes darted from me to Marco and slowly back over to me.

“You don’t have a choice. We gon fight regardless. Like a predator, I circled him. “You look pussy, but maybe there’s more to you than I think. Come whoop my ass, nigga,” I taunted, knowing damn well I was about to beat the fuck out of him. I was gon crush some bones in the process.

Delion swung at me, a wild and desperate attempt to land a hit. I dodged that shit easily, my reflexes quick. I countered with a jab to his ribs, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone beneath my knuckles.

He grunted out in pain, leaning over and holding his side, coughing. Thinking I was the next Karate Kid, I kicked him dead in his face, and he went flying backward.

“Fuuuck!” Marco dragged loudly. “Damn, nigga!”

“Get up!” I barked. “We ain’t done.”

Delion slowly shook his head *no*.

Huffing, I lunged at him, my fist flying in a fury of punches, and I wasn't letting up. I hit that nigga in the face, the stomach, the chest, and his ribs again. I didn't stop until Marco yelled out, "That nigga peeing on himself, Zyro!"

I reached my hand out, and he placed the cold steel in my hand.

"Please n—"

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

I emptied my clip in that nigga, riddling his body with bullets. Delion's body jerked and twisted as his eyes popped out of their sockets. It was a gruesome sight to see.

Standing over his lifeless body, the echoes of the gunshots were still ringing in my ears. His eyes were wide with terror, frozen in a final moment of horror. I smirked at the sight. The room was filled with the acrid smell of gunpowder and the metallic tang of blood. Each bullet I had released, found its mark with ruthless precision, and I hoped I would never have to get out body again like this, but behind my family, my girl, and her boy...I would.

With that, I turned and started for the door.

"Burn this shit up," I told Marco. "To the muhfuckin' ground."

I was at Eriss' home in thirty-five minutes, sitting outside on her porch, smoking. The front door opened after I had sat out there for five minutes.

"I saw you pull up," she said. "Thought you might need some space since you didn't come in right away." Her face was filled with a look of concern and curiosity. "Everything...okay?" she asked. I was taking my final pill from my blunt. I didn't respond just yet, and she sat next to me, her gaze soft as she tugged my head to face her by the hair on my chin.

I finally asked, "Eriss, I don't ever need space from you. You aight?"

"Are you?" she shot back. "Why is your fist bruised like that?"

"Don't ask shit you don't want to know, baby. How is your pain?"

She exhaled. "On a scale from zero to ten, a three, but I'm managing."

"Do you need to see a doctor? Let me know what I can do to help you."

"Help me by grabbing a pair of scissors and cutting these tracks out of my head. Mahlia had to work over," she responded, standing. "C'mon."

I grabbed the ashed blunt 'cause I made sure not to leave even the roaches where her son might play. Standing to my feet with my bag I had brought with me, I grabbed Eriss back to me.

"I ain't even get my kiss."

Standing on her toes, she poked her lips out. That ain't what I wanted. I wanted to explore her mouth and let her suck on my bottom like she did.

I pecked her lips and then snaked my tongue inside while gripping her ass, pushing her up against me so she could feel how hard she had me.

"Is my son asleep?" I asked.

Eriss giggled. "Your son?"

"That's what I said, ain't it?"

She tossed her head back, her ponytail falling. "You did. He adores you so much.

"That's my homeboy," I said, trailing Eriss inside the house, the coolness relieving me from how warm my body was. The adrenaline from earlier still there.

"You ate?" Eriss questioned, turning her head to the side.

I shook my head. "Not since earlier, but I am hungry."

"I cooked steak, mashed potatoes, green beans, and rolls."

"Gah damn. Let me shower, and then I'll be ready to eat. I want dessert after."

"I didn't...oh!" Eriss' face reddened.

I licked my lips and nodded. "Yeah, that dessert."

"You're so nasty," she hissed with a smile.

ERISS JACKSON

“Fuck, Zyro,” I whimpered as I arched my back, pressing myself against his mouth.

He peered up at me, never stopping the flick of his tongue, his eyes dark with desire. My hips bucked voluntarily as we held a stare as he continued to flick, suck, lick, and kiss. Pleasure coursed through my body.

I loved how Zyro took his time pleasuring me. He wasn’t just all about pleasing himself. He took his time, exploring every inch of me with slow, deliberate licks and sucks, building my arousal to a fever timbre.

“Zyroooooo!” I cried, my hands gripping the back of his head. “That feels so good.”

Mahlia had come over, eaten, and since she was off tomorrow, she took Ermias to her house to take him shopping tomorrow, or so that was what she said. She was taking him shopping for sure, but her real motive was to give me and Zyro some time to ourselves.

“Shit, I love the way you taste, baby. So sweet and addictive,” he growled out. “This my shit. I want my shit to give me what I want.”

I could feel the pressure building inside of me from his words and tongue. My body coiled tight as Zyro’s skilled tongue and fingers worked inside of me. He slipped two fingers inside, curling them to hit the perfect spot, while his mouth continued to devour me.

“I’m close, Zyro!” I yelled.

“Come for me, love. Come all over my face.”

A final cry came out as I shattered. My body convulsed as waves of pleasure washed over me, and Zyro continued eating my pussy, riding out my orgasm. Like he wanted, my came so hard, it hit him all over his face. I honestly didn't think I could do that until the first time Zyro and I had sex. I've never come so hard until him.

He stood, covered in my juices. "Gimme a sec, then I'm finna beat that pussy sore."

He took off toward my bathroom and disappeared behind the door. I heard the water running as I tried catching my breath.

Zyro emerged a moment later, his face clean, but those dark eyes burned into me. He stood before me, between my legs, his chiseled body hovering over mine as he leaned forward. I could feel the hardness of his dick against my thigh.

He grinned, showing those perfect white teeth and dimples. This man is so handsome, sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve him. Reaching down, I gripped him in one hand, using my thumb to circle the head.

"Shit," he growled out. "What you gon do wit' it?"

Letting go, I told him to back up. He did. I stood out of bed and dropped to my knees before him. Grabbing him in my fist, I flicked my tongue out, teasing the sensitive tip. Zyro groaned, hands fisting my hair, guiding me as I took him into my mouth.

I swirled my tongue around his head, savoring the salty, musky taste of him. My cheeks hollowed out as I sucked him in deeper, creating a tight, wet pressure that had Zyro bucking his hips. His black socked toes curled into my carpet. I bobbed my head, both hands working in tandem with my mouth, stroking and sucking in a rhythm that had him cursing and groaning.

"Fuck, Eriss. Shit. Shit. Shit," Zyro panted, voice strained.

I hummed around his dick, the vibrations as I continued to suck the skin off his dick, sent shivers through his body. The grip on my hair grew tighter. It wasn't painful. It turned me on and made me wetter. Zyro grew harder in my mouth, his shit pulsing. My hand and mouth worked faster because I was determined to bring him near the edge.

Zyro tried pulling away, but I squeezed a little tighter. His head fell back, and the most beautiful contorted expression was on his face. One fist flew to his mouth to keep him from screaming out.

"I'm to come down your damn throat, Eriss. Fuck, what are you doing to me?" he growled out.

I looked up at him, never breaking my suction. Spit dripped from the sides of my mouth. With a final deep thrust, Zyro spilled down my throat, and I swallowed every drop, milking him dry.

I licked my lips as I pulled back. He helped me up and put me on my back. Zyro strolled over to the nightstand, dick swinging, to grab a condom.

“We’re going through this whole box ‘fore Ermias comes home,” he stated, causing me to giggle.

Zyro ripped open the condom wrapper and rolled the rubber on. I crawled to the top of the bed, and he climbed in behind me, hovering over me. I spread my legs, inviting him in, my body already aching for him.

Zyro ran the head down my slit, his eyes locked on mine. “I’m a fuck you so good.”

He pushed inside of me, filling me up completely. Zyro grabbed my hands and held them above my head at the wrists. He began to move his hips, and the only sounds in the room were him stirring my pussy, the slapping of our skins, and our heavy breathing.

I wrapped my legs around him, urging him to go deeper.

“You want me to fuck you harder?” he asked, he quizzed in my ear. I shivered.

“Yes,” I answered.

Zyro’s thrusts became more powerful...more desperate. The headboard knocked so hard against the wall; I was sure it would dent.

“Put her knees to your chest, Eriss.” Scared as fuck, I did as he asked. “Keep ‘em there.”

One hand flew to my breast, and he began to roll his finger over my nipple as he circled his hips and then dipped deep inside, causing my mouth to open. Nothing escaped. Zyro hit the bottom of my pussy. The pleasure was intense, bordering on pain. I could feel every inch of him, every vein, every ridge, as he moved in and out with a ferocity that left me breathless. I was losing it.

As much as I didn’t want to fall for another guy so fast...I was falling hard for Zyro. It was hard believing that he wouldn’t hurt me...hurt Ermias...not physically, but mentally if he ever left. I knew relationships didn’t last sometimes, but I couldn’t lie and say I would hate it if Zyro decided he didn’t want me anymore.

“Give it here,” he coaxed, and as soon as the words left his mouth, my body gave out. “Come all over my shit, love.”

I did, almost pushing his dick out. Zyro fucked me through my orgasm so he could get his. Once he emptied the clip and pulled out, I was rolling over and sucking on my thumb.

The next afternoon

As soon as I walked into Mahlia's house, she began to twerk with one of her legs up.

"I see that walk, girl. Hips already spreading too!" she laughed.

I looked down, frowning. "Stop lying, Mahlia."

"Shit, made you look. They'll be spreading soon, though. Stomach might be growing soon, too."

"We use protection. I don't want another kid anytime soon," I told her, dropping my purse on the sofa and then my body. "Where is Ermias?"

"In the backyard, playing with the new toys I bought him," she answered with a smile.

"He is so spoiled." I ran a hand through my natural hair. Zyro had taken the weave out for me; he even washed it, but I'd blow-dried and hot combed it. I still had the money he told me to use partially on a new hairstyle, so I was thinking about getting braids. The only thing is, I didn't want to sit long for them.

Mahlia, in her lounge wear, sat down beside me with her legs underneath her.

"So, are you in love yet?" she questioned, causing me to loudly laugh.

"Mahlia! What? No!" I squealed out. "You are crazy. Why'd you ask that? Did Zyro say anything?"

Mahlia grinned, wiggling her freshly threaded brows. "Nah, girl. Zyro doesn't talk his bedroom business with me, and I wouldn't even want to know. I can just tell by that crooked walk my boy is handling his business."

I stuck my middle finger up at her, then quickly put it back down when Ermias came running in with toy wrestlers in each hand.

"Mama! Look what Auntie Mahlia bought me!" He threw himself in my lap. I started to kiss his face, and then stopped when I realized where my mouth was last night. Instead, I kissed the top of his head and hugged him tightly.

“I love them,” I told my son. “You have so many toys, Ermias. What are you goin’ to do with them all? Donate them, maybe?”

“Maybe the baaaby toys,” he said, letting out a dramatic sigh as if I had just ruined his life by suggesting such a thing.

He took off back outside, and I kicked my shoes off, getting comfortable over at Mahlia’s. She ended up making us all nachos, and I didn’t even know I had drifted off to sleep until I heard a familiar voice.

Stretching, I yawned and sat up. My left eye throbbed just a little, but I still dug in my purse to pull out my drops.

“Your eye hurting?”

I turned my head to see my man in a graphic shirt and ball shorts. A plate of nachos was in his hand. Mahlia came out of the kitchen behind him, looking concerned, too.

“A little. It’s normal, so don’t go worrying about me,” I told him. I dropped my head back and let two drops drip into my eye. “How was work?” I changed the subject from me to him.

“Busy like always. I missed yo’ beautiful ass all day,” he responded.

“Awwwww.” Mahlia melted.

I sniggered. “I missed you, too.”

Mahlia began to fan herself. “I love Black love. If I didn’t have to work tomorrow, I’d keep nephew again so y’all can knock those boots again.”

I groaned while Zyro guffawed at his cousin. Mahlia just didn’t give a damn what came out of her mouth. She and Zyleek were just alike sometimes, but I wouldn’t tell her that.

We left an hour ago, and since I was off for the next two days, we were going to spend those days in Love Grove. Ermias was stoked.

Zyro drove behind me to my house, so I could grab my and Ermias’ things. Nearing my house, I noticed a grey SUV in my yard. The same SUV that Delion drove to my house a few times.

Parking, I pressed the button to kill the engine, unbuckled myself, and stepped out. The driver’s side opened, and Delion’s pregnant girlfriend climbed out. I could tell she was angry from the way her face balled up at the sight of me.

“Where is he?” she barked.

My head reared back as I helped Ermias out of the car.

“Where is who?” I asked. “I know you’re not asking me about your boyfriend’s whereabouts.” I snorted through a fucking agitated laugh. I was

appalled.

Zyro was by my side in no time with a stoic expression. Whatever he did to Delion, he knew she would come. Her actions weren't surprising him at all.

Her angry eyes were set on Zyro.

"You! You did something to my husband!" she screamed, jabbing a finger in Zyro's direction.

"Take homeboy inside, Eriss," Zyro commanded as I laughed at her calling Delion her husband. That nigga was for everybody.

Grabbing Ermias' hand, I kept a good distance from Katrina and led him up the porch.

"Where is he?" she continued to yell.

Pushing Ermias inside once the door was unlocked and open, I called out, "Hey, I have neighbors. Chill or the police will be called, and I will let them haul your pregnant ass to jail!"

I slammed the door and then massaged my temples. How could she care for that nigga so much when I was sure he wasn't a good man to her? I've heard Delion would be seen out on the town trying to pick up women. She was acting like Stevie damn Wonder because I was sure someone had seen him and it had gotten back to her.

Turning to Ermias, he was looking at me with wide, confused eyes.

"It's okay, baby. Everything is fine," I assured him, running my hands through his curly mane.

"Why is Ms. Katrina looking for Daddy?" he questioned.

"I don't know, sweetie. That's their problem, not ours...okay?"

He nodded.

"I like Zyro better than Daddy. Is that okay?" he asked, causing my bottom lip to quiver.

Sniffing back tears, I mustered out, "It's perfectly fine with me. Let's get our things together so we can go with big dawg.

That put a smile on his face. Ermias dragged me to his room to start with his suitcase. I had the urge to go eavesdrop, but I wanted to stay in a great mood. After packing my son's things, I took off to my room. I was throwing panties into my duffel bag when Zyro entered the room.

"She loves that nigga's dirty drawls," he tittered, coming behind me and hugging me. "You good?"

“Fine. What happened? What did you tell her?” I asked, getting straight to the point.

“I told her if she doesn’t get her ass on with that kid in the backseat, causing a disturbance at my woman’s house, I was gon show her some.” Zyro chortled, then nipped at my ear. I elbowed him.

“You gotta be stopped,” I scoffed with a smile.

“I told her we didn’t know where that nigga is, and it’ll be her best bet to stay from ‘round here.” Zyro slapped me on the ass. “Finish packing. Pack up this whole house if you want to and come live wit’ me.”

“Yessss!” Ermias shouted, and we both looked at him because we didn’t even hear him come in. “Let’s live with Zyro!” I cut my eye over to him, and he held up his hands.

“I ain’t even know he was in here,” he cackled.

I grinned. “Me neither. Go put your shoes on, Ermias. We’re not moving.”

He stomped away.

“Yet,” Zyro added. He sat on the edge of my made bed, watching me like a hawk. “I don’t see the problem.”

I shoved shirts in my bag. “The problem is that it’s moving way too fast. We just started this thing between us.”

“This thing?” he queried with raised brows. No smile on his face at all.

“You know what I mean, Zyro.” I hiccupped a laugh. “This relationship between us just started. Enjoy your space until that day does happen.”

He slapped his thighs and stood up. “I can’t wait until that day comes.”

That made my heart warm to feel wanted. Zyro trekked out of the room to see what Ermias was doing and to make sure the crazy lady wasn’t still bold enough to be still lurking around the house. I was going to check the camera app later to see how long she’d been here before we arrived, and if she had gotten out and walked around my yard being weird. I didn’t even know she had her oldest kid with her until Zyro mentioned it. Now that had me somewhat feeling bad for the kids, that whatever Zyro did to Delion, he was probably not coming back to them. On the other hand, it was fuck that shit. He got what he deserved for shooting around my house with Ermias here.

Fuck that nigga.

Zyro had my body sore from the many positions he had me in tonight. With Ermias tucked in in another room, Zyro hammered my pussy so good, I could still feel him inside of me, and it's been a couple of hours now since we'd washed up, changed his bedding, and fallen asleep. Now, at three in the morning, I was on my back, looking up in the dark with Zyro's arm across my body. He had to always be touching me while he slept, and I thought that was cute. His face was snuggled into the crook of my neck, his stubble rough against my skin, and I could feel the warmth of his breath against my collarbone.

The only light came from the slightly parted curtains. I shifted slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position. When I did, turning my back to him, his hold tightened around me, pulling me closer. I smiled, feeling appreciated. Feeling needed. Feeling...loved?

My mind drifted back to the events of the evening, from Katrina's pop-up to the way Zyro had handled the situation. Did I want to know what happened to Ermias' dad...not at all. Whatever happened, he brought it on himself. You couldn't treat people poorly, especially your children, and think karma wasn't nearby.

With Zyro, I felt safe and protected. I trusted him with Ermias' life. I could tell he would do anything to keep harm far away from us. That was a man. He wasn't a little boy who just wanted to play mind games with me. Zyro was a man of action. He talked about it, and he was about it.

My eyes drifted closed again. A soft smile played on my lips as I remembered the way he had handled Katrina. There was no doubt in my mind that he had handled Delion, and while I didn't want to know the details, I trusted it was for the best. His attempt to take Ermias from me really shook me. If the police were called, they would tell me it wasn't anything they could do about it because he was Ermias' father and on his birth certificate. I was very grateful for Zyro.

As sleep began to claim me once more, I felt a sense of gratitude wash over me. For Zyro, for the future, and for the love that was coming. In his arms was now one of my favorite places to be.

The only sound in the room was his soft snores. I snuggled deeper into his embrace, letting the warmth of his body envelop me, and I slept. I slept well, knowing this was where I was meant to be, where I wanted to be, where I *needed* to be....with a man who would protect and cherish me.

ZYRO COLEMAN

The back room of the bar was dimly lit. I sat around a small, scarred table with Conrad and Zyleek, who was already downing his fist glass of dark liquor. Conrad's face held a serious expression, his eyes flicking between Zyleek and me as he spoke.

"Love Grove PD is offering a quarter of a million for the wrongful arrest of Zyleek. Also, they have on camera Deputy Porter telling another inmate to take Zyleek out, and he'd say it was self-defense.

Zyleek snorted. "I wore that muhfucka out, too." He then leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "A quarter mil?"

Conrad nodded with a smile. "They're not trying to have me take this to court. It's basically a cover-up for their bullshit. Porter's also been fired."

I nodded, but still didn't think that was good enough. Porter needed to be handled. Firing him was some soft shit. For fuckin' wit' my brother like that, I wanted his life. Mine and Zyleek's low eyes connected, and a grim smirk slid on his dark lips. He knew exactly what I was thinking.

Conrad cleared his throat. "Whatever you two are thinking, I don't want to know. Just make sure it's clean and that you don't leave any traces."

Zyleek chuckled and waved a waiter over for a round of shots. "You know how we do, Conrad. We always cover our tracks. Shiiiiid, no body, no case."

"It's no face, no case, nigga," I snickered.

He waved me off. "What the fuck ever. Same thing."

The waiter arrived with a tray of shots, placing them on the table and leaving with a nod. We all picked one up.

“To money, justice, and bitches!” Zyleek hollered.

I frowned as he threw his head back and shot the liquid into his mouth. Conrad shrugged and downed his shot.

“To the first two,” I mumbled. The liquor burned a path down my throat.

Conrad stood, shook both our hands, and dipped.

“I meant to ask that nigga when the check gettin’ cut,” Leek fussed. Then clapped his hands together and started dancing like his favorite rapper, YB. He immediately stopped and pointed a finger at me. “Don’t be telling my baby mamas ‘bout this money. They’ll try to milk my ass.”

“You better break all three of them off wit’ some, Leek. “

“Shit, I am. My foot off in their ass if they keep tryin’ me.” We both laughed, but one thing my brother was not was a deadbeat. He took care of his kids by all means necessary. That’s why all three of them wanted his crazy ass back. He was a good nigga, just a lil’ psycho.

“What’s up wit’ you and ole girl?” he asked.

My eyes narrowed. “Eriss.”

“Gah damn, you be getting out of body quick ‘bout ole Eriss. I know that’s right, nigga.” Zyleek sat back in his chair. “I might settle down one day. Not soon,” he added quickly. “But one day.”

I shook my head. “Mama nem wanna have a fish fry this weekend over at my crib. Fall through and don’t get pulled over, nigga. Can you get from A to B without incident?”

“Psh, when we gon fry that nigga, Porter? His ass got fired, so you know he’s out for blood,” Zyleek said, and he told no lies.

Porter probably had all his loyal people looking for us now. It wasn’t hard to find in my big ass truck, and Zyleek definitely wasn’t in his bright neon green Camaro with LEEK going across his windshield.

“Tomorrow,” I said lowly. “We’ll get him tomorrow.”

The next night...

We had Porter's house staked out all day, learning who all resided in the modest one-story home tucked away in a quiet suburban neighborhood on the north side. We learned his ass was divorced and had twin boys away at college.

The lights were off. Leek and I moved swiftly and silently with gloves covering our hands and ski masks. Zeek tried the handle, finding it unlocked. Muhfuckas were crazy, always thinking a neighborhood was safe enough to leave their shit unlocked. I was pretty sure Porter had guns in his home. He'd be crazy not to.

Removing my Glock from my waistband, we slipped inside. The house was dark with stale ass air. We covered our noses.

"This fool in here rotting or some?" Leek whispered. "Gah damn."

With a flashlight, we carefully walked along the dark hallway until we located the bedroom he was sleeping in, just from the loud snoring.

"No wonder his wife left him," Leek muttered."

The door was ajar, a sliver of light spilling out into the hallway. I pushed open the door, and the hinges creaked softly. Porter was snoring so loud, he ain't hear shit. His back was to us. I moved to the side of the bed, my gun pressed against his temple before he had a chance to react.

"Wake the fuck up, Porter," Leek taunted. "Wake. Thee. Fuck. Up."

"Whaaa...Whaaa...What the hell is going on?" he stammered. Zyleek flicked his lighter in front of his face, and when Porter realized who was in his house, fear washed over him.

"We heard about you losing yo' job," I said. "Why?"

"I don't want any problems, Zyro. Whatever you want, please take it. I'm sorry for everything. You're...You're getting money," he turned to Leek and said.

"What else do you want? I could get it for you? I have kids."

He sat up, back against the headboard with wide eyes. Porter was shirtless, his big belly out. The room was just as musty as it was downstairs.

"Oh, you're not Mr. Tough Guy now, are you? I have kids, too, bitch. That nigga you thought could whoop me? Dead. Drowning in his own blood right now as we speak." Zyleek continued to taunt.

Porter's eyes grew three times their size. "Please..." His eyes flew from Leek to me and then back to my brother when he had begun screwing on his

silencer. His hands flew out as if that was enough to shield him from the damage that was about to take place. Leek pointed the gun at Porter.

“All that crying and pleading ain’t fin work now, fuck boy,” Leek growled out.

Bullets tore through Porter’s body, riddling him with holes, each impact sending sprays of blood and tissue across the bed and walls. Porter’s screams turned into gurgles as he tried to speak, his body convulsing.

My brother emptied the clip, his hard expression never changing. When the last shot left his gun, he smiled.

I tilted my head. “You got that out of your system, nigga?”

He nodded, a satisfied smirk now on his lips. “Hell yeah, I felt like I was in the mafia or some shit. “Say hello to my little friend,” he said, mocking Al Pacino from his favorite movie, Scarface.

“Man, get the fuck out of here,” I laughed.

As we left the house, content that justice had finally been served, I was ready to go lie up under my woman. She and Ermias were at my house tonight, with him already asleep before I left. Eriss didn’t ask any questions when she saw me dressing all black. She just whispered, “Be safe.”

We made our way back to the car that would be stripped down tomorrow at the shop. I’d dropped Zyleek off at his last baby mama’s house as requested without a word. That was his damn business.

I pulled up to my house fifteen minutes later, exhausted. As much as I wanted to slide inside Eriss, I didn’t have the energy, and I wasn’t gon give her no half ass dick down.

Surprisingly, Eriss was still up, sitting in bed, reading a book. Her natural hair was braided on both sides of her head, making her look younger than she was. It was cute.

“Hey, bae. Can’t sleep without me, huh?” I jested, sauntering over to her. Eriss raised her head, pushing her lips out for a kiss.

“Something like that. You know I’m still getting used to this big house. Ermias has been in your game room all night until he passed out after his bath. He loves it here,” she confessed. “It’s like pulling a baby off a nipple when it’s time to make him go home.”

I laughed. “Then stay. If I gotta get you your own place in Love Grove if you’re not comfortable living with me, then I would. You won’t have to work, but I know you so well already that I know you wouldn’t want to just sit your pretty ass at home and do nothing. I can help you get a job or

maybe start your own business. Whatever you want to do, love, I'm behind you one hundred percent. I just hate you live in Heartville and I'm here." I chuckled, scratching the side of my face and then pulling on the hair on my chin while squinting at Eriss. "You put that voodoo pussy on me, didn't you?" I queried. "Ain't no way I'm already acting like this over you. I don't act like this at all."

Eriss giggled, closing her book after holding her spot with a bookmark. "I did no such thing."

I removed my shirt. "I'm finna shower. Think 'bout what I said. If it's too much, tell me. Don't ever hold back 'bout how you feel, even if you think it'll hurt me, aight?"

The corners of her mouth turned upward. "Why are you so perfect, Zyro? Like, for real. Is there one flaw you have?"

"I'm flawed, baby. I turn into a whole 'nother person when the people I love are fucked wit'. I show no mercy, I would tell you to go ask yo baby daddy, but that nigga good as crisp."

A few days later...

The family wanted a fish fry so I made it happen. Mama remembered Eriss from the family reunion and welcomed her and Ermias with open arms. Zyleek had all three of his kids here and told his baby mamas to stay home. That nigga was a straight-up nut. I ain't think they mind though since he gave each a couple of thousand. Now what they did with the shit was on them, but they better use it wisely and on the kids and bills. Leek took care of his kids, but he didn't break their mamas off like that often.

Uncle Tim was frying the fish since he was the one who handled all that when we got together. I just bought all the shit, and the women made the sides.

Soul music blasted from the speakers, Leek and Mahlia cutting up on the makeshift dance floor. The kids were running around playing tag, my boy Ermias with his shirt off.

"You're a good man, baby," Mama said, coming to stand next to me. "That woman is beautiful, and I want you to make sure she knows that every single day. I feel good about her. Now that Leesa girl..."

I frowned. "Speaking of Leesa. Why the fuck is she here?"

"And in that short ass shit. I bet her ass out and these kids over here. I bet she thought she was coming to get fresh with you," Mama grunted with her nose balled up. "Hoe."

I cackled. My eyes flew to Eriss, who had stopped dancing with Mahlia and Zyleek after he dragged her over. Her eyes were on me, too.

"Aye, Leesa, lemme talk to you for a minute," I heard Mahlia say, but Leesa waved him off and kept marching toward me. I sighed. If she wanted her feelings hurt around my family, then so be it.

"Aye, you heard my cousin, wanch!" Zyleek hollered.

"Leek!" Mama chastised. Although she didn't care for Leesa, she didn't like for a man to call a woman out of her name around her. Now what was said not in her presence was a different story.

"Hey, baby," Leesa said with a smile as she approached me. Mama grunted and took off. That's another reason why I couldn't fuck wit' Leesa. Her ass ain't even speak to my mama or anyone else. That disrespectful ass shit.

"Leesa, come take a walk wit' me," I told her. She started toward my house with her tongue out and a huge grin. "Nah, let's talk over there by yo car."

Her brows pinched as she stood confused. As pretty as she was, her elevator didn't go all the way.

"Oh...okay," she said. When she attempted to grab my hand, I pulled away. "Can you tell me what I did?" she questioned. "Like, you didn't hug or kiss me."

"Do I ever do that shit, Leesa?"

"No, but-,"

"Well, there's yo answer, but check this out," I started as we made it to her Kia Forte. "My girl in there..."

Her eyes ballooned as she spun and thought she was 'bout to go check some shit. Leesa better think twice 'cause she'd be buried wit' a broken neck in my backyard fuckin' wit' Eriss. I jerked her back by her arm over to where she'd been standing.

"Ow," she whined, rubbing her arm when I let go.

"I don't know who you feelin' like, love, but you ain't fin do shit but take yo lil' ass on, Leesa. What we were doin'...that shit been over once I got a whiff of Eriss"

“Eriss? That bitch with one eye?” she screeched.

It took everything in me not to put my hands on this girl. I took a deep breath, trying to keep my composure. “Watch yo’ fuckin’ mouth, and get the fuck up outta here. Don’t care back ‘round my shit,” I let her know.

Her expression turned from defiant to hurt, her eyes welling with tears. “That’s it? You just dismiss me like that?”

“Yeah,” I replied simply.

“I’m fucking other niggas anyway,” she laughed. “Fuck you.”

“I don’t care, love. I always strapped up. Now get the fuck from over her ‘fore I change my mind and decide to teach you a lesson you won’t fuckin’ forget.”

Leesa hauled ass to her car. I felt a sense of relief. She was out of my life...for good if she knew what was best for her. Picking wit’ Eriss was not the fuckin’ move she wanted. Now I could focus on what truly mattered.

As soon as I stepped back in the yard, all eyes were on me. It didn’t bother me. I made my way to Eriss, who was now over by my Uncle Tim as he placed cooked fish in the basket she was holding.

“Everything straightened out?” she quizzed, tilting her head.

“Everything is gravy, baby.”

“Hungry? I can fix you a plate.”

“Ermias ate?” I asked.

She smiled. “He said he’ll eat later. Thank you for asking.”

I sucked my teeth. “You ain’t gotta thank me for that, love.”

“My nephew is a real man,” Uncle Tim said between his missing front teeth.

“Preciate that, Unc. It runs in the family,” I told him, patting his back.

“Damn right! Ain’t no fuck niggas over here!” he hollered.

Eriss and I cackled, and once he was done placing that batch of cooked fish in the basket, we walked over to the table together.

While she fixed my plates, asking me what I wanted and liked, I could tell Eriss was a little reserved.

“What’s up? Talk to me,” I said.

“Is she or any other females going to be a problem?”

“No. Never. Not when I know you’re gon be my wife.” She stopped dropping salad on the plate and appeared shocked at my revelation. “Don’t say nothing you don’t mean.”

“I never do, baby.” I smiled. “Stop acting surprised like this wasn’t supposed to be our endgame.

“I don’t deserve you,” she gushed, handing me my plate. Eriss looked as if she wanted to cry.

Holding my plate with one hand, I pulled her into my body. “No, love... I don’t deserve you.”

ERISS JACKSON

Knocking on my parents' front door, I slid my hands down my jeans to wipe away the sweat. Nervous wasn't the word. They knew all I'd been through with Delion, and here I was bringing Zyro to meet them, hoping they wouldn't treat him as if he were just like Delion. My dad had met Zyro briefly at the shop, so bringing him to their house as my boyfriend may shock him.

Zyro gripped the back of my neck gently. "It's gon be a good visit, baby. They'll love me and I can't wait yo Mama."

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. "My dad can be a bit old-fashioned. I hope he doesn't say anything about your tattoos, but ignore him if he does. He means no harm."

Zyro chuckled, looking so good in his dark jeans and colorful Ralph Lauren polo shirt with the Ralph Lauren boots. He smelled good, too. Real good. "I got you, baby. I'll be on my best behavior. Promise."

The door swung open before something nasty slipped out of my mouth, and there stood my mother, her eyes widening in surprise as she took in Zyro's imposing figure. "Eriss, honey! And you must be Zyro. It's so nice to meet you." Her voice was warm and welcoming.

"Nice to meet you, too, Ms. Jackson. "You're beautiful. Eriss had told me so much 'bout you and your husband. I'm honored to even be here."

Even I had to melt. Mama looked like she was in love, the way she grabbed her chest. She beamed, stepping aside to let us in. "Please call me, Lou. Come on in, you two."

As we stepped into the living room, my father looked up from his newspaper, his expression neutral as he sized Zyro up. He stood, it taking him a moment to rise from having two hip surgeries. I was about to help him up when Zyro reached out instead.

“Thank you, young man,” he said.

“It’s no problem, Mr. Jackson.

My dad hugged me. “This is my baby right here. You taking care of her and my grandson?”

“I sure am. They deserve the world,” answered Zyro.

My father sat back down with a loud grunt. “You still working over at that shop in Love Grove? They allow that with all those tattoos?”

I groaned and looked over at Zyro, who sat down across from my dad, still smiling. I wanted to bring Ermias with us so bad, so they would focus more on him than Zyro and his tattoos. Zyro wanted to talk to my parents first and made me drop Ermias off down the street first with my mom’s sister, Lela, who had her grandkids over there. Ermias was ecstatic because he didn’t see them often.

“I’m actually the owner, sir.”

My father nodded, his eyes lingering on Zyro and his tattoos before meeting his gaze. My father didn’t have any. Always said it was for *thugs*. Zyro was far from that.

“Ah, that’s right. I think I remember you introducing yourself as the owner. Hard work is something to be respected, and I appreciate you taking care of my girl and my grandson. Family is everything.”

“I agree. Family is everything. We have family reunions, fish fries, and seafood boils at my house from time to time. We’ll invite y’all the next time,” Zyro told them.

“Thank you,” Mama said. “Do y’all want anything to drink?”

Zyro and I both declined. We’d just eaten before we came.

“I hate to ask questions like this in front of your new boyfriend, Eriss, but have you had any problems out of Delion? Have the two met?” My father asked.

I never told them about Delion attempting to keep Ermias from me.

“Um, they’ve met. Of course, Delion threw a fit and even tried taking Ermias from me,” I said.

My dad sat up quickly. Mama gasped. “What do you mean?”

“When I let Ermias visit him, he didn’t want to give him back. Said I would never see Ermias again,” I explained.

My father’s expression darkened, his eyes flashing with anger. “That son of a bitch. I knew he was trouble from the moment I laid eyes on him. How dare he try to keep my grandson away from you?”

“How... How did you get him back?” Mama asked. “Did you have to call the police?”

Zyro’s expression remained calm. “I took care of it. Had to put my hands on the nigga, and I’m glad I did.”

My father nodded, respecting it. “Good. Teach him a lesson. I heard he has another baby on the way by that same girl.”

I shrugged, no longer caring to discuss Delion, who wasn’t even among the living anymore. I knew that much.

“Yeah, I’ve seen her. She even came by my house asking me where Delion was, accusing me of doing something to him,” I said calmly. Inside, my heart was racing.

“Have they lost their mind?” Mama asked softly. “You might need to put a protective order on them, baby.”

“No need for that. I am the protective order,” Zyro chuckled, causing my father to laugh, too.

“I hear you, son.”

Hearing my father call Zyro *son* was nice. He never called Delion anything close to that. Ever. And he was the father of my son. When my dad got a bad vibe about you, he was usually right. Seeing him laugh and enjoy Zyro’s company really warmed my heart.

“He won’t be causing any more trouble for Eriss or Ermias. You have my word on that,” Zyro told my father, and they held a stare for a moment.

“Good. Eriss, you should have told us. I’m not against getting my hunting gun,” my father said with a grunt.

“And that’s why,” I laughed, causing the three of them to do so as well.

Zyro rubbed my back in circles. I know he was silently telling me *I told you so*.

A week later

The body of former Love Grove deputy, Harold Porter was found in his home after neighbors noticed an unusual and persistent smell emanating from the residence. Authorities were called to the scene, where they discovered the deputy's lifeless body, riddled with bullet wounds. The circumstances surrounding his death suggest a targeted and brutal attack, indicating the deputy was likely overpowered and unable to defend himself. The community is in shock, and an investigation is underway to determine the motive and identify the perpetrators. Tragic.

That happened in Love Grove, and I wondered if that was the same deputy who tried to have Zyleek hurt. While sitting at the kitchen table, sipping on my coffee, I decided to open up Facebook. When I did, I had a friend request from Delion's baby mama. Ignoring it, I also saw I had a message from her. I clicked on it, and there was a news article. I clicked on that too, and it sent me to my internet browser.

In a startling turn of events, an intense fire engulfed an abandoned house deep in the woods, sending plumes of smoke visible for miles away. Firefighters were called to the scene, but by the time they arrived, the structure was engulfed in flames. The cause of the fire is still under investigation. The house, which has been vacant for years, is located in a secluded area, making it a mystery as to how the fire started and who might be responsible. Authorities speculate that it may have been deliberately set on fire. But why?

I swallowed. Is this what Zyro had done to Delion? Burned him inside that house in the woods? I leaned back in my chair, my mind racing as I stared at the article. My mind raced to see if I could remember a time when Zyro came over smelling like smoke. I could only remember the time when his fists were bruised. I peered back over to the date on the article, and it matched up. I knew Zyro had killed Delion. I just never knew how. Was I scared of him? Did I think he would harm me and Ermias...no. He protects us...in his own way. Was I twisted in the head for having a sense of gratitude?

As I sat there, the weight of the truth settling over me, Ermias padded into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes. I shut Facebook down and ignored her. I would hate for her to continue being persistent about a man who didn't give a damn about her.

"Morning, Mama," he yawned.

“Good morning, and happy sixth birthday, baby boy.” I stood and met him halfway, pulling him into a hug. “You’re just growing up on me. Are you ready for today?”

Zyro had booked an indoor water park in Love Grove just for Ermias. His and my side of the family were invited.

My son beamed up at me, his crusty eyes sparkling with excitement. “Yes! I can’t wait to go to the water park!”

“Good, now go wash your face while I fix your breakfast.”

Ermias scurried away, bringing me to snicker. Zyro had stayed at home last night, so he could be sure everything was perfect up there. Mahlia had stayed the night at his house. She was grabbing the cake. They were determined, just like I was, to make this a special birthday for Ermias. Zyleek was calling him nephew, and his kids and Ermias called each other cousins.

Instead of just toast, I fixed him pancakes, eggs, and bacon. He couldn’t have all that fun on an empty stomach, and toast wasn’t going to cut it.

A call came in on my phone, and when Ermias came back into the kitchen, I answered and propped it up.

“Happy birthday, my boy!” Zyro loudly said. “You’re a man now, right?”

I rolled my eyes playfully while Ermias nodded and replied, “Yes.”

Zyro nodded. “We’re getting everything ready for you. Your cousins are ready.”

“Okay!” Ermias mumbled with a mouth full of pancakes.

“Get on the phone, mama.” I slid over, and he licked his lips when I came into view. “Beautiful.”

“Thank you. You look good, too, with that fresh cut,” I told him.

Zyro ran a hand down his waves. “Well, you know... My woman likes this type of shit, and she can’t seem to stay off me when I’m fresh.”

We laughed. Ermias looked over at me with big eyes.

“My bad, homeboy! Your mama has that effect on me.” My face warmed. “Let me get off this phone ‘fore it turns into some other shit,” he chuckled, pulling at his chin hair. “I love you, Eriss.”

That caught me off guard because we hadn’t said that yet.

“She loves you, too!” Ermias replied for me. “Don’t you, Mama? Say it back.”

“I...I love you, too, Zyro. It’s only been a short time, but I wasn’t expecting you to say it first.”

He snickered. “I’ll see y’all later.”

“Okay,” I squeaked out, and ended the call.

I put the phone on the table, and couldn’t help the flutter in my chest. Zyro had said he loved me, and it had taken me completely by surprise. I glanced over at Ermias, who was grinning from ear to ear, clearly pleased with himself for prompting me to reciprocate.

“Mama, you and Zyro are in love, right?” he asked me in his tiny voice.

I ran a hand through his curls affectionately. “Yes, baby. I think we are in love. Zyro is very special to both of us.”

Ermias nodded with a serious expression. I wanted to laugh because he was so young to be so serious. “I like having him around. He’s fun and takes care of us.”

I pulled him into a tight, well-needed hug. “That’s because Zyro is a good man, Ermias.”

EPILOGUE

After two years, I was finally doing it. Ermias and I were moving in with Zyro. He'd been so patient with me. When Zyro said he loved me, I not only heard it, but I felt it. It was a love that enveloped me, a love that I had come to cherish and rely on. Zyro had shown me what it meant to be truly loved and to be protected. He showed me he'd stand beside me through thick and thin.

We stood in the living room surrounded by a few boxes. A lot of the things we had, like the furniture, were donated. Old clothes were sent to a women's shelter that could use women's and boys' clothes.

"Thank you, Zyro," I said to him when he embraced me in his arms. "For everything. For being patient, for loving not only me, but Ermias, too. For making all of this happen."

"Baby, you do not have to keep thanking me. I'm yo man. A real fuckin', Mr. Make-It-Happen ass nigga. You and Ermias are now my world, and I would do anything for you both. No matter what." His voice was low and filled with emotion.

"I love our new home," Ermias came over from playing in the corner with toys he couldn't wait to pull out of his box.

"I do, too. Our home with Zyro and our new baby," I said with a smile.

Ermias kissed my stomach, talking to his little sister in a baby voice.

Mahlia and Zyleek entered the room, their arms laden with food and drinks. Ever since Zyleek found out his brother was finally having a baby, he called me every day and checked on me. When he had his son, he would

come get Ermias. Zyleek opened up his own bail bond company and was doing so good for himself.

Mahlia was still an EMT and is now dating a firefighter. They met at a scene of a fire, and he's been invited to family functions.

We sat around the table, enjoying the pizza and buffalo wings. Ermias chattered about the backyard and how he plans on playing out there every day. The conversation around the room flowed easily, filled with laughter and how new memories were going to be formed. Once Mahlia moves to Love Grove, we'd be complete. It wouldn't be long, I trusted that since the firefighter resided here, too.

The three murders went in cold. I hadn't heard from Katrina since the message on Facebook. It was somewhat sad that Ermias wouldn't see his siblings, but I had one baking for him.

Later that evening

We stood on the porch, the cool night wrapping around us. I turned to Zyro, my eyes reflecting the soft glow of the moon. Well, one of them. The day had been tiring, but exciting at the same time. Moving in together was scary, but I felt complete.

His gaze met mine, his eyes filled with a depth of love that took all of my breath away. Zyro reached out, cupping my face gently.

"What's up, love?"

"I just feel so good about this." I exhaled a shaky breath.

"Eriss," he began in a husky tone. "You may have half sight, but you have my whole heart. Every beat. Every damn moment."

The tears I was holding in came pouring out. This was my husband. God sent me my husband. In Zyro, I had found my whole heart.

The end

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