



Giving Him Something He Can Feel

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Description: Summa '23

You ever met a soul so beautiful that your trauma wanted a taste? It's summer '23 and the city is lit with the same old mess, just a different crew. This time trauma resides among them pulling the strings and keeping the toxicity at an all-time high. The leader of the Infamous Ace Boys, Cartrek Givens, is a man so callous and cold that plenty watch his throat to see if he has a pulse. He wasn't always that way, but something about betrayal had the ability to turn a person cold and have them swearing off all things related. His heart didn't do the crime, but it was sure to do the time that he barely escaped. His heart was away in solitary confinement, awaiting a fair trial until he laid eyes on her... Virtue. A young mother whose sole purpose is to give her daughter the world, no matter the cost. She hasn't completely sworn off love, but she's pretty close. With dysfunctional family, and a battered heart the last thing she's looking for is another complication in this life that she's barely living. Like magnets the two meet, worlds colliding but are too blind to see what's right before them. With rival gangs, and past demons refusing to stay in the past things can get a bit hectic, but what's meant will prevail right? Only if it's meant. With his heart on trial for his crimes, can Cartrek see past his past, or will his callous nature leave him too scorned for repair?

Cartier lives life as he sees fit, running the Ace Boys alongside his blood and clinging to a freedom that he never saw himself giving up. Something is missing, well not something, but a someone. One night with Jovie changed his whole perspective, but not before he broke the cardinal rule. For Jovie that one night in Miami has haunted her ever since it happened. From the way he touched her to the spell she found herself under any time she and Cartier were in the same space. Can similar souls find love within one another or will rash decisions threaten a future they didn't know they had?

Trauma, drama, toxicity, jealousy, and plain old street mess... all a recipe for the best kind of disaster there is. Are you down to take a ride with a crew you didn't see coming? Don't forget to put your seatbelt on, because this fast-paced stand-alone is bound to get bumpy, and you never know what might be hiding in these Chicago potholes.

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Chapter One

Cartrek

I looked out into the water and shook my head. I shouldn't have gave a fuck about what was out there, but I did. I gave a fuck because it was the burial spot of the only person to ever betray me and actually hurt me. Probably not a burial spot, but the last place I saw her before she washed ashore with a hole in her head and a message for the agency that sent her. The news covered that shit for at least six months before they realized that it would get no traction. Mia was a snake and she died like one. Too bad when she died that day a piece of me died as well. I stared out into the water for a while longer before I got ready to run off.

"I come out here every so often to remind myself of what we lost. Of what you did." The voice speaking made me look to the side of me at the familiar face.

"Do you get paid for all this overtime?"

"It's not overtime, asshole."

I laughed, wiping the bead of sweat from my forehead. This shit was comical to me.

"I may not have proof, but I know it was you. I know you killed her, and I'm not going to rest until justice is served."

"I don't know what you're talking about, officer. But if I did, I'd say you got a lot to prove, huh?"

“You’re damn right I do, and I’m going to.”

“But, you know they say without proof cases tend to fall apart. So, good luck with that, detective. I hope you get your man.” With that I squeezed the Air Pod in my ear to resume the playlist and started back jogging. This was my morning ritual and had been for the last three years since I almost lost my freedom. I stopped by the pier to remind myself why I didn’t trust bitches, and how much I had to lose if I did.

By the time I reached my place, I walked up the cobblestone pathway to the front door. The space should’ve been empty, but I smelled breakfast.

“Thought I told you to be gone before I came from my run.” I didn’t have to see her to know that it was Melanie once again trying to cross the boundaries that we had both clearly put in place.

“Just thought you’d be hungry after las?—”

“No, I’m not. Get your shit on and go.” I grabbed the room temperature bottle of water from my table and went toward the master bedroom to shower. This was my home, but it wasn’t where I laid my head. It was more like a crash pad when I had a bitch in the car. Nothing more nothing less.

By the time I was done with my shower, I didn’t hear anything in the distance and the pile of Melanie’s items were gone. Good, because I needed to get my day started. That included going to meet with a nigga who owed me money. He said he had a way to pay me, and I was all ears. I was no fool and knew he couldn’t get all that he owed me and just hand it over, but the businessman in me knew there was something.

After about an hour of just moving around, I went about my day. I stopped off and got myself a breakfast sandwich from the café near the spot. Usually I opted out, but Melanie was right. I did work up an appetite, but I wasn’t eating a damn thing she or

any female cooked. I didn't trust her like that. Just because we fucked didn't mean a meal had to be had.

I ordered my shit and stood off to the side, waiting for old girl at the front to call my name when an incessant babbling caught my ear.

"I just don't understand, Dad. What the hell am I supposed to do about him? We're not close, she had him after she abandoned me. Why do either of them think I owe them anything? Better question why are either of them reaching out to me?" Shorty was in the midst of cutting up a pancake for the toddler across from her. She was fucking beautiful with the type of lips that dicks appreciated. Mine would surely appreciate them.

"Trek, your order is at the front."

The barista calling my name stole my attention from old girl. I gave her one last look, before I went up and grabbed my food. I was out of the door seconds later headed toward where I knew my brother was. It was early in the morning, but motherfuckers loved to gamble and lose all their coins. Didn't matter to me because I was gonna get my money regardless.

I pulled up to the mattress joint I owned a few minutes later, opting to park in the back because if a motherfucker hit my car I was totaling their fucking life. The mattress sales were a front, but the amount of ammunition that could be stuffed between the springs was the gold. Plus on the lower level of the spot money was constantly being made off the backs of poor souls who couldn't walk away from the table.

I grabbed the paper bag of food and entered through the backdoor, immediately being greeted by one of the guards who to the naked eye looked like he sold mattresses. He was dressed in the khaki chinos and royal blue polo with the store logo to the left on

his chest. He repped the Ace Mattress store well but didn't know the first thing about 'em except they were soft up until we stuffed them.

"Sup, boss."

"Price of living, and gas," I joked as always.

"Don't I know?"

I continued past him into the back office. I knew for sure that's where Cartier was watching the movement through the camera. If he wasn't, then that nigga was on the floor. He was hands on, and that was necessary for the type of business we ran.

"Niggas just rolling in all late and shit, you good?" Cartier asked as soon as I entered the office.

I waved him off. "Clock these niggas in here, babyboy not me."

"Fuck outta here. You're my blood which means I'ma clock err'thang 'bout yo' missing in action ass. Must've had a bitch come through and that's why you acted like you couldn't pick up the phone and call me or yo' worrisome ass sister."

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I chuckled before tossing him the other breakfast sandwich in the bag. Knowing him he hadn't eaten shit today. "Her ass ain't worried. Baby girl is broke and in a college dorm. She wants some money."

He laughed because he knew I was right.

"And you already sent it."

"Hell yeah I did. Shorty has all A's and she ain't out here hoing. The fuck you think I ain't?"

"I hear you. But watch she don't call until she's broke again." I wasn't finna get into this debate with him again. He believed our sister didn't need to stress about working while in school. I agreed to some extent Indy needed to work, because she spent more money than the fucking drug dealers at this point. Shorty was a bill and she had no concept of work because Cartier spoiled the fuck out of her... we both did.

"You heard from Linny?" he quizzed with a mouth full of food.

"Yeah, I told 'em I'd see what he was talking about later on. Either way I'ma get my money."

He chuckled. "Err'time that nigga gets out of the hole, he finds a way to get right back in that shit. Last time wasn't it something about his mama's house?"

"Yup. She took out a double mortgage to help that fool. Then he came right back in here and got in the hole." Niggas like Linny disgusted me.

“That’s fucked up because you’d think he’d wanna steer clear of this shit. But nah, that nigga digs in and deeper. I even asked Marco about his playing and he said the man is trash.”

We both shook our heads but ceased any type of conversation about Linny. It was time to get down to business.

“Do you believe in God, Cartrek?” her tone was even and, I could only guess the expression her face housed.

“Do you?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“More than I believe in anything else. But this isn’t about me. This is about you.”

I bit into my bottom lip, before I glared at Sayers. She always wanted to get into a nigga’s head. I mean of course that was her job, but she got right to that shit. No pleasantries or anything, straight up mental invasion.

“So, do you?”

“Do I what? Believe in God?” I looked up at the ceiling then back down at my intertwined hands. “I have to, don’t I? Pops made us go to that fucking church every Sunday, even though going there didn’t do a damn thing for us.” Once I finished that statement, I looked at her.

“That doesn’t mean you believe in him.”

I shrugged. “Then maybe I don’t.”

“Okay. How are you today?” she asked changing the subject for only a few seconds because she’d definitely double back on this God conversation soon. It was how our

sessions worked.

“Money is being made, I’m free and I’m alive. I can’t call it, Doc.”

She nodded. “You say you’re free and alive like that’s something of a sho?—”

“You don’t do what I do for as long as I’ve done it without a tombstone or shackles. They come from every direction to put a nigga down.”Every direction...

“You’re thinking about her?”

I nodded. “I am.”

“Do you regr?—”

“I don’t regret a damn thing that is warranted. Betrayal is punishable by death.”

“I never said it wasn’t, but our last few sessions have been you thinking about Mia. You keep going back to that day like you could’ve done something different.”

I nodded my head. She was right, but Mia hadmade her own bed. She knew the consequences of betraying me. She knew who I was when we took vows, shit even before then. She knew who I was when she went undercover and made herself a part of my life. She caught me slipping, something that should have never happened. The message was clear as fuck and I got it...Bitches weren’t shit but trouble.Mia taught me that.

“Do you wish you wouldn’t have been put in such a position?”

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I made real eye contact with her before I spoke. “What position?”

“Being forced to choose between your marriage and yourself.”

My tongue glossed my teeth as the question she asked jumped around in my head. “All the time, but in the grand scheme of things we’re put in certain situations to learn from them, right?”

She nodded. “And what do you feel like you learned?”

“Feelings, love and all that other shit all seems to end one way. I’m not trying to feel or be felt, I’m tryna touch as much paper as possible and stay in my fucking lane.”

“Was that really a lesson though?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Probably not for you, but damn sure for me.”

I went back and forth with the doctor for a while longer before it was time for me to leave. I was meeting Linny and my brother at some lil’ bar and grill. Of course the nigga Linny chose a public place because he owed me a lot of fucking money. Being that I was a businessman, I was up to hearing him out. I mean I couldn’t kill that nigga, especially if I wanted my money. Dead men didn’t pay their debts.

When I arrived at the bar, I parked my car and got out, meeting my brother at the entrance. I’d told him I had it but let him tell it my anger would have me behind bars. He was probably right, especially since the good doc couldn’t cure a nigga. I had been in therapy for about two years, something about needing to work on my anger

and get my head together. I only stayed because I saw the changes in my anger, and most of the shit she said made sense. Plus to keep it a buck I fucked with the idea of paying somebody to listen to me talk, and it not leaving that space. For obvious reasons I didn't tell the good doc everything, but it worked.

"Thought I told you I had this?"

"I never said you didn't. You've always got things big bro, but your temper is what takes things further." He gave me a knowing look.

I chuckled, entering the spot. It wasn't like I was gonna beat this nigga over the back with a chair in here. Upon entry we were immediately seated. Then as if he had been watching the door, Linny approached our table a few seconds later.

"You like the place? It has nice food, and it's a goldmine," he stammered, before taking a seat in the chair furthest from both of us.

"Okay and, what the fuck you bring us here for?"

He was about to speak, but his attention caught somebody behind our table. Before I could turn around and see what, she was standing before us. The beauty from the café earlier. I can't even lie, this female was gorgeous, standing at about five feet two inches, clothes that snugly hugged her figure and those fucking lips. Lord, those fucking lips.

"Good afternoon gentlemen, your server will be with you momentarily. Can I get you both started off with something to drink?"

Neither myself nor my brother had the chance to respond before Linny spoke.

"Sis, this is Trek and Cartier. I brought them here because remember I asked you for

a favor?”

The beauty looked skeptically at Linny. “You never told me what the favor was, because I never asked.” Her expression transformed within seconds. Though her eyes looked pissed and lips were tight it didn’t take away from anything about her. She had these big brown eyes, protected by thin lids, and naturally curled lashes. I could tell those were her shits because they didn’t look like they were about to fly away and kidnap her eyes. Speaking of her eyes, they were a chocolate hue with what looked like specks of honey to compliment her warm complected skin.

Linny’s annoying ass voice interrupted my mental noting of his sister.

“It’s small. I did the math and I need you to fork over about 30 percent of your profits to them so that it’ll pay off my debt within the next six wee?—”

The shit spewing off his tongue had even my ass floored.

“You are out of your monkey ass mind if you think I was gonna say yes to that. Me nor my business have nothing to do with whatever the fuck you owe these niggas. As a matter of fuckin?—”

He grabbed her arm forcefully, with desperation in his eyes. “Virtue, I need you. If you don’t help me?—”

“I said hell no. You’re tryna take food out of my child’s mouth just so you can...” her sentence trailed off as she shook her head. It was as if she realized she was in a space full of people and calmed herself down.

She then looked at us, before her eyes landed back on her brother. “I don’t know what this nigga has told you, but my business has nothing to do with any of his dealings. Now if that’s what you were here for, have a nice rest of your day. If not, I’ll have

someone come take your drink order.” Without another word, she cut her eyes in Linny’s direction before turning to walk away.

“I’ll take whatever you’re about to go to your office and take a shot of.” Leave it to Cartier to speak when it wasn’t a speaking moment.

She didn’t respond, or even acknowledge what Cartier said. She was pissed, and I didn’t blame her, but I didn’t know her, so it wasn’t my problem. What I did know was that Linny still owed me. So, my eyes landed right back on his scandalous ass. Though on my mama I wanted to know what was up with her fine thick ass. Her and thatpeach.

Virtue

I could’ve stole off Linny out there, but I kept my cool. I held my composure for the most part, but I swear I didn’t know why I even let him around. Not only was he always borrowing money, but always in need. My brother and I didn’t grow up in the same house, because we had different father’s, and my mother was a drifter. She drifted to whomever was taking care of her at that time. My father took me from her, shit didn’t even let me visit her as a child because it was that bad. His wife, Amelia, was the closest thing I had to a mother, because Eva was no such. Eva was for self. For a while we had no contact, but about a year ago they started reaching out to me. I was skeptical at first, and for good reason. But this shit right here was a different ballpark... I mean had this nigga really just tried to use my business to pay his debt. The better question is why he believed that it would fly. I’m not his mother, which meant I wouldn’t be sinking myself to keep him alive. If he couldn’t stay away from gambling houses, that was on him. Eva could barely take care of herself because she was piddled with carrying this fool. Not to mention she still hadn’t grown the fuck up, still calling me with the same I’m your mother kick. She hadn’t been my mother in years.

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I sat at my desk for a while longer keeping my temper at bay before I was back on my feet again. I was about to go work the table when my door was opened and Linny was stepping through it.

He had this expression on his face that let me know he was about to beg. The same expression that let me know he didn't think what he did was wrong.

"I really nee?—"

"No, what you need is to get out. I should've known you'd do something like this."

"Look, I'm desperate. Mama can't take out any more loans on the house and they will kill me."

"No. Now leave."

"What do you mean? I'm your blood brother and you can't help me out?" He was pissed off like he had a right to be when he didn't. He didn't have a right to feel shit, especially when he just ambushed me thinking he could force my hand in front of those niggas. "I bet if I was that nigga Fari you'd help."

I laughed. "I damn sure would because he wouldn't be putting me nor my child in anything like this. But you, I met you less than a year ago and here you are. You've graduated from asking me for two hundred dollars here and there to the profit from my business to pay your debt. Does something with that equation sound off to you or am I the crazy one here?"

“No but I.” he started.

“No, I don’t want to hear it anymore. Please leave and don’t come back.” I held my hand up, over whatever was about to come out of his mouth.

He looked me over before he defeatedly walked out of my office. He wasn’t done with this, I knew that for sure.

A few minutes after he left I found myself still standing in the same place irritated about the whole thing. I wish I could be one of those people who didn’t care about much, but I couldn’t, I cared about everything. Unlike most I carried things too deeply for way too damn long. Carrying shit always ended me in foul spaces, because anger always introduced itself to the mix. That’s where my temper always showed up, too many feelings in one body and mind caused that type of shit. Before coming into the city I told my father I’d watch my temper and especially watch out, but this shit was pushing it. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I dialed my older brother. He and I shared the same father, but Amelia was his mother. In so many words my father was with Amelia, then he got with my mother, before doubling back and ultimately ending up with Amelia.

Tafari and I were close, as opposed to Linny. Fari lived closer to our parents, which sometimes made me want to move home, but I liked it here. I liked the hustle and bustle.

“Yeah, baby girl?” he answered on the first ring.

“Needed to hear your voice. I got frustrated about something.”

“Bout what?”

“Linny shit. He cornered me in front of these niggas who he owes money to and tried

to tell me he needed me to give them a percentage of my business income because he owed them and they'd ki?—”

“What the fuck? You for real?” I could hear his expression through the phone. He already didn't like Linny, so this probably made it worse. “Did any of those niggas say anything to you?”

“No, it was all him. I handled it, but I hate that for some reason him and Eva think me being here is for their use.”

“Cut they asses off. Matter of fact I'll handle it.”

“No, I got it, Fari.”

“You sure? Because it's nothing for me to pay the both of them a fucking visit.”

“I know. I know. Probably shouldn't even be calling you with this. Considering you already don't like neither one of their asses.”

He chuckled but didn't deny it. “You good, short fry.”

He and I talked for a while longer and even planned to have dinner this weekend before he had to go, and I had to do my last check of the floor before I went to pick up my baby from the sitter.

I walked out the back fully expecting the guys that he had meet him here to be gone, but they weren't. From the looks of their table they had ordered and were now watching the game while eating. I hoped to God they hadn't stuck around because of Linny, because if so that was a dead mission. I was in no way changing my mind.

After walking the floor and keeping my eyes on the one guy whose eyes stayed on

me, I found my way to the back to pack up. He was handsome, jaw dropping, panties on the floor, amusement park pussy type of fine. But it was something about him, something cold about his eyes that made me shudder every time our eyes locked.

When I had my things together, I looped my laptop in my arms and walked out calling myself going straight to my car. What I didn't expect was to see my brother leaned against my car puffing on a cigarette. I knew what it was because of the smell.

“I need that money, Virtue.”

“And I told you no.”

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He gripped my arm trying to pull me into him. Then he began to shake my shoulders like that of a mad man.

“Let me go!” I tried to pull away sending my MacBook crashing into the pavement. “Are you fucking serious, Linny?”

I snatched from his grip and started swinging my purse wildly. “You are out of your fucking mind.” I landed two good hits before his lanky frame fell against the pavement. “You’re lucky I don’t call Fari.”

With that I reached down to pick up my computer which I knew was completely destroyed. This shit right here was why I didn’t deal with him or Eva. They had this uncanny ability to have you acting out of character in a crowded ass parking lot. I glanced around the parking lot feeling like I was being watched. Then he and I locked eyes.

He nodded his head, as if to ask me if I was okay and for some reason I felt compelled to nod back. It was all in the eye contact and the way he seemed to be ready to exit his vehicle. I had to be losing my mind, because I didn’t know this man from a can of paint, he was probably just casing my fucking restaurant for Linny’s sheisty ass. As bad as I wanted to tell Fari, I wouldn’t because if I did Linny would be in a body bag rather than on the ground.

I picked my baby up from the sitter and went home. I needed to calm down, to breathe, and to check out my laptop. It hit the ground pretty hard. Shit at this point I wasn’t even sure I still had a laptop.

I woke up the next morning physically drained and ready to stay in bed, but the knock at my front door made that impossible. I wasn't expecting anybody, so who the hell could it have been. Then I heard the door jiggle and somebody stuffing a key into it. I knew who it was in that moment.

"Ma, I thought we said you'd call before you came barging in." I stood in my kitchen making coffee as she walked in the door.

"Who is Peach?" she disregarded my question as she walked in holding an apple bag and a card.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You had a card at your door and a bag from Apple. The card said, Don't sweat the small shit, Peach." Then she held the card out for me to grab, before sitting the bag down on the island. I must've looked over the card a million times, before I finally looked at what she pulled out of the bag. It was the box of a brand new MacBook.

"I don't know." I stared from the card to the computer a few times drawing blanks.

"What do you mean you don't know? Somebody doesn't just spend a thousand bucks on you, and you just don't know. Whomever it was didn't leave a signature or anything, so you must know, babygirl." My mom shook her head, before sitting down on the computer. "I didn't know you needed a new computer. What happened to the one you just bought?"

"Linny happened."

Her expression showed her confusion, so I gave her the entire rundown of last night. By the time I was done speaking she was just looking at me flabbergasted and I was left nodding my head.

“You said you dropped your computer too, right? Did anyone see you drop it?”

“I mean the guy he brought to my restaurant probably, but I doubt a complete stranger would send me a computer. He doesn’t even know my name, let alone my address, Mom.”

She nodded. “Sure. Have you talked to your brother? Told him about Linny’s antics?”

“I told him some of it, but not all of it, i.e., the parking lot situation.”

“Good. Other than all of that, how are you?”

“Well, but you don’t think so, because you came out here.” I peered at my mother because I knew her like the back of my hand.

She giggled. “You’re right. I just worry about you in this city all alone and away from us...away from me.” Amelia would always be more of a mother than Eva could ever be. When Eva first found out I moved into the city she called me acting like she wanted to check in on me, but she didn’t. She just wanted to borrow forty dollars. I regretted giving it to her that day, because best believe she kept coming back until I told her ass I wasn’t a fountain.

“I’m fine, Mom. It’s been months. Business is good and life i?—”

“Boring. You only work and take care of my grand baby. That’s about it. With that being said, I’m taking her back with me and I want you to live a little. Shoot, do something other than punch your own clock.”

I was about to disagree and tell her no, but she put her hand up as if to tell me that her words were final. “Have you even seen your friends? Hung out even?”

I shook my head no. She was right. I was a determined workaholic and I'd admit that. My best friend, Jovie, had stopped by a few times, but every time she wanted to go out I always had an excuse. It wasn't that I didn't want to hang, I just didn't know how anymore. Ever since Adorie's dad, and his bullshit I had become somewhat of a zombie with nothing but planned out time.

"Right. Call your girls and enjoy some time out. My baby will be with me for the next few days. I'll return her when I feel like you've let your hair down." Then she went toward Adorie's room like she owned the place.

I cackled. "Mama, you can't just kidnap my child for however long and say you'll return her whe?—"

"I can and I will. As a matter of fact I'll be doing this more often. She could stand some time with me and her grandfather, while you do something other than work your life away." By now she had opened my baby's closet and she was fixing to pack a bag. This lady was crazy, but she was right. Nothing from her lips was a lie though. I fell in love with Adorie's dad, Don, in my senior year of college. I liked to think he loved me too, until I found out about his wife and two kids. Nigga expected me to play the I'll leave her for you game with him, but I didn't love him that much. I didn't love him enough to lay my morals and values by the wayside. Long story short that didn't work out, so he decided not to be in her life. At first I was broken up about it, but I wasn't up for making him be a father or anybody for that matter. Now, three years later my baby was going on four and I hadn't heard from him since the day he asked me if I was sure. He didn't sign the birth certificate or acknowledge that he had a child outside of his marriage and I didn't require him to. At first I was bitter, real bitter but then I had her. Adorie made what was supposed to be the hardest part of my life somewhat the easiest. She was my heart and some.

After my mother kidnapped my child, I actually picked up the phone and called my extroverted other half/best friend whom I had been neglecting.

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“Is somebody dead?” she asked neglecting to say hello.

“No. why would you ask that?”

“Because the last time you called me at this time of day that disgusting pet rat that Dorie had died.” She giggled at her own stupidity.

“No, my mama just kidnapped my child and basically told me to get a life.”

She cackled at my pain for a good thirty seconds, before she finally said anything legible. “Alright then, let’s get you a life bitch.”

Chapter Two

Jovie

Lowkey I was glad my girl called me the other day, because the bitches I usually fucked with was getting on my nerves. Unlike the females that I partied with, Virtue was actually my girl. Pre-school familiar closeness best friend type of girl, but I understood that she was a mother and couldn’t party with me like she used to. I got that, so I kept females like Tay, Jessica, and Gema around. It wasn’t too deep or anything, they were just there when I wanted to hit up a club or even check out a hood function. Bitches like them would go across the world for a paid ass nigga while all I wanted to do was shake my ass a little, and maybe give out my number at the end of the night. Too bad when I did give my number out I wasn’t giving a nigga the time of day. I valued my peace and loved being left the fuck alone. I didn’t really have time to be out here playing Uncle Willie with the dog catcher trope. It wasn’t in me.

Mama chased my sperm donor my whole childhood for him to still end up with her sister, a bitch that he didn't run crazy. While Mama ended up in the ground they lived happily ever after.

"Where are we going, Jovie?" Virtue asked the moment she hopped her old acting ass in the car.

"To shake ass. Now get off that old shit and let's get in there." I parked and stared at my best friend for about thirty seconds before I turned my car off and reached down to put my shoes on. I hated driving in shoes, so I often took them off and drove barefoot.

Once out of the car we walked toward the front doors of the popular lounge. I bypassed the entire line and went straight up to the bouncer. Lloyd was cool as hell and also Gema's brother, so he knew me.

"Jo." He nodded, before opening the door.

When we walked in the spot it was live and packed damn near to capacity. Grabbing Virtue's hand I pulled her in the direction of the stairs. Jessica, Taylor, and Gema was up there. So was Cartier's fine ass. We locked eyes the moment I walked in, but like always I was the first to break. Couldn't get caught staring at him for too long, shit threatened to happen. He'd invited me here, but of course I declined out of respect for Tay who thought she was his girl. Nah, I wasn't being catty or anything like that but long story short me and Cartier fucked a few months back and both kept it moving. No bad blood, we were just drunk and both horny, so it happened. Then he messed around with Taylor who is my girl, and thought he'd double back on me. I was cool on those types of parties, and I let that be known, ultimately telling him it was fun, but that one night was all it would be. From my end there was no bad blood, but Cartier was an Ace boy... He was used to getting what he wanted at any cost. I won't lie, the dick was fire but not enough for me to be sharing with the home girl. For the

most part we coexisted, but he was him and that made it hard at some points. Lowkey that's why at first I wasn't gonna come through, but I had a hard day at work and needed a release. Plus, the fact that we kind of ran in the same circles would make it difficult to avoid the man forever, so I didn't try. I literally just kept it moving.

When we reached the bar, I looked up at the balcony and locked eyes with Cartier before Tay rushed me.

"Took you long enough, bitch." She hugged and kissed my cheek. "What's up, Vee? She finally got you to come out and hang with the big dogs?"

Virtue laughed. "I guess so."

"Lotta begging and pleading." I cut my eyes at my girl, before looking around the space again. I felt watched, like a pair of eyes were burning holes through my body. I knew who those eyes belonged to, but I was determined to ignore them. Determined to enjoy my time with my girl tonight and not find myself in his space for too long. Every single time I got cornered by him in settings like this, I always struggled to keep it together. By no means was I some weak bitch, spineless to these niggas but it was something about him. As well as the fact that I knew what that mouth did. I know how deep the stroke game was too, but then again so did the bitches I called myself associating with. That was a number one no for me, because I didn't share dick with nobody. Didn't matter though, because I knew what happened with Cartier and I could never happen again, it was one reckless ass night that I'd probably never forget no matter how much I lied to myself claiming I wanted to. Good dick made you lie to yo'self.

Cartier

The moment Jovie walked in the spot my shit was on brick. The lil' thin ass orange dress that she wore had me ready to walk over and snatch her ass up. But I couldn't,

she was firm with that not fucking with me mess and I didn't understand. How was I supposed to know she wouldn't fuck with me if I fucked Taylor? As far as I knew bitches shared niggas, but Jovie wasn't bitches. She was different and I hated that shit. Why couldn't she be other bitches? Shit, Taylor didn't care about sharing, hell she knew I wanted Jovie, but still swallowed balls when I called. As a matter of fact I had Taylor invite her tonight because she turned me down. I just wanted to see her thick ass even if she was momentarily telling me no.

“Yo, ain't that Linny's sister next to Jovie?” my brother asked, making me remove my eyes from Jovie for the first time since she entered the club. They landed on the pretty brown beauty that was indeed Linny's sister. “Yeah, that's her fine ass.” She looked good as fuck too, but the way she was close to Jovie let me know they were close, so I wasn't attempting it. I already had to maneuver this Taylor shit, because I don't know who the fuck Jovie thought she was turning me down like I was about totake that. She knew who the fuck I was and what I was about, so whatever was on her mind she could dead it all.

“Shorty's shape is sick as fuck.” Trek took a sip from his drink, before allowing his eyes to lull over the room.

“Is. She find out it was you who sent the computer to her crib yet, old stalking ass nigga?” I cut my eyes in his direction before focusing on Jovie again.

I felt his eyes on me. “Fuck you all in my business for?”

“Because nigga you are my business, and for sure I didn't think you'd be the bleeding-heart type, after ever?—”

“Just a computer. Cool yo' ass down and keep pining over Jovie. Shorty ain't giving you no play no matter how many times you put yo'self in the same room with her.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Nope, but I do wanna sit here and enjoy my drink before I get outta here. Can I do that in peace or you want me to replace your computer too?”

I chuckled. “Naw bitch, but I’ll keep that in mind for future references. I’ll be right back, though.”

He smirked. “Yeah, alright. You need to leave that girl alone.”

I probably did, but that didn’t mean I would. Jovie had me like a crackhead trying to get my next fix. Shit I don’t even eat pussy, but I ate her shit from the back, the side, shit upside down. And all of the fucking above.

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When I made it downstairs to the bar she was talking to her girl. Her sentence halted when she felt my hand on her ass. Yeah, I didn't give one fuck that she was probably trying to get some play in here tonight. If she knew like I knew she should have been giving it to me.

In one swift motion she gripped my hand, lifting it from her pillow soft ass and tossed it at me as if it wasn't attached to my body. Then she turned around with a mug plastered across her pretty ass face and just looked at me. Jo was fucking breathtaking, the type that belonged on the cover of somebodies magazine and she knew that. Two tone full lips, high godly cheekbones and eyes slanted slightly making her chocolate ass look almost oriental. Then she had this bushy, curly ass hair that she every once in a while had pressed and flowing down in her back. Tonight was one of those nights. Though on the short side, she had a shape out of this world and was nowhere near compact.

“What I tell you about frowning and shit? You'll fuck around and have wrinkles all over your face.”

“Cartier.”

“Baby mama.” I joked calling her that since the one night we did sleep together she had me stopping to get a Plan B from the pharmacy. Yeah it was that drunk nasty sex, just the way I fucking liked. After feeling her bare, I never planned to feel her with something between us. I ain't want no relationship or shit like that, but she was about the only female I'd raw dog with and go pick up the Plan B for. The only.

Then my eyes left hers and landed on Linny's sister. I think he called her Virtue or

some shit like that. “What’s good, Mama?”

She forced a polite smile onto her face, but she wasn’t moved by my greeting one bit. Shit, as far as she knew me and my brother was probably in on that shit that Linny bombarded her with at her spot. “Hello.”

Jovie looked from me to her girl, as if to wonder how she knew me. Yeah, she wanted a nigga. I could see that much in her eyes, before her girl started explaining our brief run in. I also noted the relief that entered her body too.

“Linny is a fucking asshole.” The disgust in her face couldn’t be missed before her eyes landed on me. Just that fast she had gotten caught up in what little her girl said.

I leaned in, speaking into her ear. “Y’all come upstairs and chill in the section. It’s too fucking crowded down here.”

“We’re fine, no tha—” she started.

“Unless you want me to clear this motherfucker out, just come chill baby mama.”

“Stop calling me that.” She didn’t say no, so I grabbed her wrist pulling her with me up to the main section that I had rented.

After a brief walk we entered the semi lit section with only Ace members and a few bitches, all just vibing to the music and minding theirs.

I stopped and turned around to address old girl, keeping Jovie in my grasp. “Chill out shorty, bar’s on us.” I used my head to nod toward the personal bar in the corner of the space.

She nodded her head.

When I finally took my seat, I attempted to pull Jovie into my lap, but she wasn't going. Instead she took a seat across from me on the table.

"Why you be playing with me like this?" I demolished the little bit of personal space she tried to create.

"Like what, Cartier?"

"Like this." I motioned around, before I found my hands on both sides of her thighs. She had the butteriest fucking skin, shit the softest I've ever felt on a female.

"You're still not telling me what?" she licked those thick ass lips, never breaking our eye contact.

"Like you 'on't know I want you. Like you don't give a fu?—"

"Swear to God I thought we went over this." She peered at me.

"We did and I straight up told you that I wasn't letting up, and from the looks of it you on't want me to." I smirked.

"What makes you think that?"

"The way you looked like you was about to drop a few, before old girl told you how she knew me."

"Virtue and no I wasn't. I was just abo?—"

"If you 'on't give a fuck then what was that face? I know you shorty, remember I've known you for a minute and yo' expressions is something I pride myself in being hip to," I admitted honestly. When it came to her I was always too honest, but I couldn't

help that shit.

“Because Taylor is one thing, but Vee is like my blood. That you just can’t come back from.”

“So, you saying I can come back from Taylor?” At this point a nigga was begging and had that look in his eyes.

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“Hey, what are y’all over here doing?” Speaking of the fucking devil, because as soon as I heard her high-pitched tone I wanted to put a hole between her eyes. Within seconds Jovie was pulling out of my space and standing to her feet. This was that shit, bro. As soon as I felt like I was getting somewhere a motherfucker always had to get in the fucking way.

Trek

I stayed in the cut playing the background of everything, still keeping my eye on my brother as well as my new fixation. She sat off to the side checking her phone every so often, then sipping from the drink that she had been babysitting since she entered the section. It was obvious this wasn’t her normal move. Her girl probably dragged her out here, but then again Jovie has been around a few times, and I had never seen her. I didn’t often hang out with my brother because this nigga loved the lounges and clubs. Me on the other hand I wasn’t with it. It was too much I couldn’t control. I had to step out sometimes though, because the Ace Boys was my organization, what did I look like if I didn’t show face and chill with the crew for a minute from time to time?

I took a sip of my drink just in time to catch this nigga named Lo all in shorty’s face. Wasn’t my problem or my business, but something in me didn’t like that shit. She and I locked eyes, but just like she did in the parking lot of her spot she looked away quick as fuck, but in that same moment Lo looked in my direction. I found myself shaking my head in his direction which made him throw his hands up in surrender. The fuck was that, Trek? Then as if I hadn’t already done too much, the second time I locked eyes with her I was motioning for her to come here with my hand extended and index finger beckoning. I was straight up tripping.

She looked around to see who else I could be talking to, but quickly realized that she was indeed who I was talking to. She was cute, oblivious to the type of smoke she was near cute. Tilting her head to the side, it took her a minute but she nodded and stood to her feet. If she was my bitch she wouldn't have had her ass nowhere near a space like this let alone dressed as good as she looked. She had that toffee skin on display, inviting the light hues to bounce off every revealed space, creating the most alluring visage.

She walked over, standing near the space I was sitting. "Can I help yo?—"

"Take a seat, Peach." I threw my head toward the empty seat next to me.

"And I had to come over here, why? You couldn't have just come that way?" she took a seat, but she still gave me lip.

I chuckled then leaned down so that my lips were near her ear. "I can see the whole spot from here. Where you was had too many blind spots."

She didn't respond. Instead she took a sip from her drink, before turning her head to look around the room.

She smelled good than a motherfucker, and not like some oversaturated cheap shit that hos loved to overspray.

"Who is Peach?" she asked after a while almost as if she thought about our whole lil' encounter while we sat there.

"You. Least that's what I dec?—"

"Wait, you bought the computer that was delivered to my house." She'd realized that, too.

“Yeah. What, you’ on like it?” I asked having to mentally check myself because it seemed like I gave a fuck with that question.

“No, I love it. I just wish I would’ve known who to send the thank you card to.” A simple smile formed at her lips.

“We don’t choose our blood, but we choose how we deal with them. Keep that nigga up outta yo’ space.” I didn’t give a shit that I was speaking on her brother. Niggas thought just because you shared blood with them that gave them a right to choose how they treated you or how much of their shit you ate. Blood could do a motherfucker much worse than anybody on the streets could.

She glanced in my direction before nodding her head. “Thank you for that, and the laptop.”

“You’re welcome, shorty.”

Nodding her head, she once again checked the time on her phone.

“You got somewhere to be or something? You been looking at yo’ phone since you got here.”

She squirmed almost, before she began to talk. “I don’t usually do this. Hang out, that is. I run on Mommy time, which means I’m usually sleep and or clean— you don’t want to hear about all of that,” she stopped herself midsentence.

“What if I did? I didn’t mind, Peach.”

She giggled. “What’s with the Peach nickname?”

I shrugged. “First time I seen you, that was the first thing that came to mind.” I was

shocking the fuck out of myself the way I was sitting here having a whole ass conversation with shorty, while I'd normally be looking at a bitch sideways for talking to me.

For the rest of the night we just vibed, conversing back and forth while keeping one another company in a space that neither one of us frequented. It was nice, but it wasn't shit I was getting used to. So by the end of the night that's why I didn't ask her for her number. I watched her and her girl walk to their car, before going to my own. I couldn't do complications. I needed to keep it at meaningless with sex nameless bitches. I knew I couldn't touch her though, because in her eyes rested a potential for something that I myself knew I had no business thinking about. The last time I took a woman serious she was deceiving me and working with pigs to take me down. As a matter of fact she was a fed, and I was potentially what would make her career.

"I seen you last night getting acquainted with Virtue. I didn't see it until last night, but she's nice as fuck." Cartier sat across from me while we had breakfast at my place like always. It wasn't an everyday thing, but we did it at least three times a week. Once with all the Ace members and normally just me, my brother, and our cousin if nothing was going on. He couldn't make it this morning because he got too twisted last night and was on daddy duty.

"Fuck you watching me for?"

He shook his head chewing on the piece of turkey. "Couldn't help it. Taylor messed up my move, so I didn't have shit to do."

I chortled. "Put her ass in her place."

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“Shorty acts like she’s hard of fucking hearing.” He was frustrated and I could tell. Cartier was used to bitches moving the way he wanted them to rather than having their own brains. Taylor was willing to do whatever he needed while Jovie was that independent type. Type of bitch who knew that she brought the entire fucking table rather than the silverware.

“I’mma stop fucking with her for a while. I’m tired of lowkey having the same fucking conversation over and over again.”

“Problem solved.”

“Indeed. You spoke to Linny about those coins he owes us?” Cartier’s mind always jumped from personal to business.

“Nah, nigga is dodging us. I’d hate to put a bullet in his shit.” I rubbed my hands together before reaching for my orange juice.

“Especially because you wanna fuck his sister.”

I cut my eyes in his direction. “Especially that, even though I know she don’t mean me no fucking good.”

“She ain’t Mia, and you ain’t looking to get married or have kids with her. You know had I not taken Jovie to get that Plan B that night she would’ve had to be ‘round me? She would’ve been carrying my junior.” He shook his head with regret written all over his face.

“The fuck you talking about, Cartier? Yeen ready for no kids.”

He sucked his teeth. “I could’ve been.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his stupid ass. Matter of fact bump stupid, this nigga was borderline desperate. “Why don’t you have an adult fucking conversation with her? Tell her how you really feel.”

His face screwed up immediately. “The fuck am I?”

“A nigga whose out here feining. You might as well put yo’ big boy shorts on and go get what you want. If not then keep having her fake ass girl invite her to places you frequent.”

“I’on know.”

I shrugged. “Well.” I had nothing left to say. This was the nigga literally stalking the woman, but he didn’t want a relationship. Shit at this point it was obvious he didn’t know what he wanted.

Virtue

I was out late, real late with Jovie last night. So, I was grateful to my mother because even though she kidnapped my child I didn’t have to get up early this morning...or so I thought. That is until I heard moving around in my kitchen. By the time I heard footsteps coming in the direction of my bedroom, I was already in my closet fisting the pistol that Tafari told me to keep close.

“Wake yo’ ass up. Ain’t no partying all night and sleeping all fucking day.” Tafari’s voice boomed before he busted into my bedroom like he was somebody’s father. What the hell was he even doing here?

Opening my closet door, I glared at him, before tossing one of my shoes at him. “I could’ve just shot you. Why are you here?” I put my pistol back up on the shelf, before coming out of the closet.

He laughed. “Testing yo’ reflexes.”

I flipped him off and took a seat on my bed glaring at his stupid ass.

“Breakfast shorty, now get yo’ ass up and get dressed.” Then like the asshole I knew him to be, he turned my light on. “Up.” He turned to walk out of my room, threatening to come back if I wasn’t up within the next five minutes.

I contemplated getting back in bed, but I knew my brother. His ignorant ass would be back in here getting on my nerves. I reluctantly stood to my feet, walking toward my bathroom.

It didn’t take long for me to get myself together and be ready to leave with him. I didn’t overdo it at all, I just threw on a two piece short set, because I still had to work out today, before I made my way to the restaurant for the day.

“The dead has arisen.”

“I got in late asshole. You tend to sleep late, but of course you know nothing about that because you never sleep.”

He chuckled. “You’re baby free and laid up in bed like you made one last night.”

“Not funny. Where are we going?” I went into my purse and grabbed my wristlet and keys.

“To eat. Lil’ breakfast spot over East with good eggs. You know if you opened your

spot before twelve, you'd get that morning breakfast rush too."

"Probably, but that would kill the vibe of my space. Late open is purposely to create a late type of vibe."

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He nodded. “But you could still add some eggs to the menu, right?”

“Sure.” I was lying. I wasn’t adding no damn eggs to my fucking menu. He knew that too, that’s why he didn’t push the subject.

With his driving and inability to take his time with anything, we found ourselves at the restaurant less than forty-five minutes later. Then when we walked in I knew God had to be playing tricks on me, because my eyes landed on the man from last night. Him and the one Cartier who stayed in the vicinity of Jovie were standing at the door.

Then, to make matters worse my brother greeted them both, by name.

“What’s good nigga?” Cartier spoke to my brother.

Cartrek’s eyes never left me. I felt them, even though I looked everywhere but at him. I had to because his fucking stare was like a laser burning through me.

“Shit, tryna get a meal.” Fari shrugged, before his eyes went down to me. “Vee, this Cartier and Cartrek.”

I nodded, about ready to act like I didn’t know their asses, but of course Cartrek spoke and Cartier’s stupid smirk gave something away. Nine times out of ten they thought I was one of Fari’s bitches because besides a few freckles we didn’t look a thing alike.

“What’s good, Peach?”

“We ain’t speaking, Virtue?”

“Who is Peach? How you know them?” By now Fari was all in my shit like a protective older brother.

“Now Fari.” I was about to check him about how he was coming at me in front of these niggas.

“Ain’t that deep bro. Ain’t know this was you.” Cartier cut his eyes in his brother’s direction before looking at Fari.

“First of all, I’m grown and I’m not him or whatever you’re saying right here. Second off Fari simmer down, I met them originally when Linny tried to give them some of my profits. Then last night when I went out with Jovie. Not that I have to explain myself to you, because you are not my father. You are my brother, now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go make a call.”

Without another word I walked off and left him there with them. I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn’t realize I had walked into somebody until I hit a hard chest and fell back almost hitting the floor, but the same athletic frame caught me before I could hit the ground.

“You gotta watch where you going, Mama.”

“I’m sorr?—”

“Don’t be out here apologizing. You too beautiful for that.”

Back on my feet and standing before the handsome stranger, I smiled. “Thank you, and honestly I didn’t mean to bump into you. I wasn’t paying attention.”

An icy white smile crossed his expression. I mean this niggas eyes were even smiling. “Keepin’ it a buck I’m glad you bumped into me, baby. Means I ain’t have to fuck up yo’ motion to ask you for yo’ number while you was sitting down with whatever bunk ass nigga that you currently entertaining.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. He had personality, enough to crack me up in the first five seconds of meeting. You didn’t meet many handsome men with personality in this city. Everybody was so serious, carrying so much anger in their beings that you just left folks alone.

“So, you finna gimme yo’ number or do I gotta fuck up your motion?”

Cackling, I accepted his phone and keyed my number in. I mean why would I have held it hostage? Conversation never hurt anyone, right?

I handed him his phone back, before looking around hoping my brother wasn’t on his sneak up on me shit. He was notorious for that.

“I’m Aylo, an?—”

“Virtue,” I answered before he could ask my name.

“I’ll hit you up soon, lil baby.” He gave me a final look before he walked away leaving me alone to my thoughts.

“You know that nigga, Peach?” Cartrek’s voice behind me broke my thoughts.

“No, but that doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” A frown rested on his handsome face when I finally faced him.

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“Because it’s not like I gave him my address.”

He nodded. Looking at me like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t. Instead he told me he’d see me around, before turning on his heels and leaving.

I slid into a booth irritated that I even cared about what he didn’t say. That was odd for me, but then again my biggest flaw was me being one of those people who cared too much about the odd things in life.

“You didn’t tell me you met those niggas last night.” Of course Fari would want to discuss this.

“I didn’t realize I had to run everybody I met by you. Shit by the way I just met a guy named Aylo two seconds ago.” I was being sarcastic at this point.

My brother’s eyes narrowed. “Where?”

“Right here while you weretalking.”

He leaned forward, giving me direct eye contact. “Stay away from that nigga. He got too much beef in the city. You don’t need to be caught up in his or nobody’s shit.”

“Is that so? Are we still talking about Aylo here or so?—”

“Who is Peach?”

I cackled. “Hell if I know. I met him when I cursed Lenny’s ass out. Then he saw

what happened in the parking lot.”

“And what happened in the parking lot? What did he?—”

“Linny was being stupid, but it’s nothing that you should be worried about.” I waved him off just as the waitress approached our table asking what we wanted to drink.

I spent the allotted amount of time with my brother while he tried not to pry but was definitely all in my damn business. Then when he finally did drop me back off at home, I was lowkey bored. I probably sat in the house for all of twenty minutes before I decided to go check on my restaurant. Today was my off day, but here I was headed there. That is until Jovie called me. It’s almost like she sensed that I was on my way to be productive on my day off.

“Where are you going?”

“To chec?—”

“Nope, not today. I feel like shopping. Let’s shop. I’ll be downstairs when you pull up.” Then like the true diva she was, she hung the phone up before I could object or even give her an excuse.

Of course I busted a freaking U-turn in the middle of the street to go to her place. Then just like she promised she was downstairs when I pulled up. Almost like she was tracking me. She hopped in the car seconds later smiling hard as hell.

“You must have talked to Cartier.” I teased knowing that smile would dry up quick.

“Don’t bring that nigga up. He’s like a period. You bring him up and he pops up.” She almost looked like she didn’t want to see him.

I cackled. “Girl boo. You wanna see him. I just saw him though, he was at the breakfast place my brother took me to.”

“With who?” I felt her eyes on me as I drove.

“His brother. Be careful baby, you seem like you care though.” I cut my eyes in her direction.

“Yeah right. But since we’re baring it all, how about you do the same. Talking about his brother. You know that nigga’s name because he sure as hell knows yours, Peach.”

I waved her off. “Shut up, I already got a lecture from Fari about God knows what an?—”

“Hell yeah, because he’s an Ace affiliate. He knows the bullshit that happens with those niggas.” She shrugged like what she was saying was normal.

“Affiliate. What? Then I met this guy named Aylo, and he nuttled the fuck up.”

She busted up laughing. “Aylo. Chocolate, unusually white teeth, six something, basketball player physique and dreads?”

I nodded. “How did you know?—”

“Oh bitch. That’s a Mafia nigga. No wonder Fari nuttled up.” She shook her head as giggles escaped her lips.

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I waited until I parked the car before I looked in her direction for a full explanation.
“Dumb it down for me, because I swear I don’t get it.”

“Cartrek and Cartier run the Ace Boys. Aylo is their rival if niggas even call it that. He runs the Mafia niggas. They’re not exactly beefing, but shit is thick with them. Meaning any little thing will have these niggas beefing and bullets flying.”

“And my brother is Ace.”

“Ace affiliate because he occasionally handles shit for them from time to time.” She shrugged.

“And how do you know this?”

“Who doesn’t? I mean with the exception of you, it’s public knowledge.” She shrugged. “So, Aylo. You give him your number?”

“Uh yeah, he was fine and had a little bit of personality.”

Jovie laughed. “I heard them Mafia niggas didn’t eat coochie, but that’s an ocean you gotta cross on yo’ own.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her stupid ass. “What is wrong with you, girl?”

“Shit, nothing. What Steve say ‘bout thinking like a man? When I see these niggas I think about sex. Nothing more nothing less.”

I nodded. “If that’s true, then what’s the problem with Cartier?”

“Everything. Nothing. Too much. Not enough.”

“English, Jovie.”

“Deep pockets, good dick, and a God complex. My fucking type, but he’s too friendly with the dick. I ain’t trying to marry the man or anything like that, but him fucking with Taylor blindsided the fuck out of me. Hell, I don’t know why it even bothered me.”

“Because you like him. I peeped the fear in yo’ eyes that night when you thought I had familiarity with him. He might not have but I di?—”

She nodded. “He did, then he cornered me about it while you were over there showing your thirty-two to Trek.”

“I was not. I was thanking him for the MacBook.”

“The MacBook? Bitch what are you not telling me?”

I sighed, before running down the whole thing to her. Of course by the end of my story she was cheesing hard as hell.

“Well from experience I know Ace niggas eat coochie and spend the dough.” She hopped out of my truck at the same time as I did. We met at the back, walking toward the mall.

“Again how do you know I’m a sleep with the nigga, Jo?”

“Hell you betta. Test the fucking waters. You saw how unfair that love shit was last

time you gave it a chance. We ain't getting any younger either."

That she was right about. I had done the love thing and got done dirty. Maybe it was time for me to just be with no expectations.

Chapter Three

Jovie

My eyes hurt because I had been staring at this damn board in front of me for hours. I don't know what it was missing, but it was something. I prided myself in near perfect events so the fact that I felt like something was missing with this one irritated me. Made me wanna pull my hair out, bite my nails to the beds and scream. Something was off, and I couldn't place it. Something with this ghetto ass shindig was completely off. Maybe it was the fact that this vision clashed with what I was used to. No expense was spared, but it was something. Then again maybe it was the fact this was a first. I'd never planned a shoe ball. I always shied away from the low budget events with no real purpose. However this one I couldn't, the money was plentiful, and the nigga was flashy.

My phone buzzed on my desk, prompting me to turn around. I already knew who it was, it had been him the last day and a half. Cartier was too cool for this shit, but also the type of nigga not used to being told no. Gotta admit that even though I longed to be the bitch telling him yes, I liked grounding his ego.

I was inclined to let the call rollover, but he would just call back. He wasn't a good morning text type of nigga. He was a let me call you at the ass crack of dawn and have a whole ass conversation about a day that hasn't started yet.

"Cartier it's called stalking." I picked the phone up putting it on speaker, before going back over to my work area.

“I’ on give a fuck. Buzz me in.”

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“For what? I’m not at home and it’s five in the morning.” I glanced over at the clock momentarily before my eyes went back to my board.

“I know that. Had yo’ ass up at four in the morning running that mile so you cou?—”

“No, really. It’s called stalking.” I couldn’t help but chuckle as he ran down my very early day’s events over the phone like it was normal.

“You about to buzz me up or not? ‘Cause I could go give this egg frittata shit to the homeless lady under the overpassing.”

Giggles escaped my lips as I walked over and pressed the button near the light switch. He knew how to get up here. Food... fucking food.

He hung up seconds later, leaving me to stare at this damn board until I heard his footsteps moving through my space.

“Eat.” I heard him sit the carton of food down before I turned around and looked at him.

“How did you know I didn’t?”

“Despite what you think, I don’t only just pay attention to yo’ backside. Kind of got a nigga studying and fucking stalking.”

“So, you admit it.”

“That what I gotta do to get you to see this how I see it?”

I laughed. “And how do you see it? Matter of fact what is it?”

Shaking his head he of course took a seat in my desk chair, before pulling it back so he wasn’t eating on my work. Yes, my desk was full of shit and a complete mess because I was in the middle of three projects. “Us.”

I couldn’t control the laughter that spilled from my lips. “Us, and what am I missing? When has there ever been anus?”

“When I ate the pussy. When I nuttled in you. Then I ate yo’ pussy again. Then I took my ass in that Walgreens and bought that Plan B to kill my junior. Shit whe?—”

“Now Cartier. I know I’m not the only female you’ve had those experiences with.”

He shook his head. “Nope. You are. Kind of shit bonds us for life, don’t you think.”

I didn’t have a response at first. “What abou?—”

“No bitch can ever tell you I put my mouth on her or even touched her without the latex between us.”

“We were drunk that night though, we could’ve slipped up. You know like humans do.” I had to rationalize what he thought bonded us for life.

“You ever slipped up with a nigga?”

I shook my head no. “It was a first for me as well.”

“Exactly.”

“So, what does that mean, Cartier? You know you, and I know me. We’re better as friends. Not to mention you’re fucking Taylor and God knows who the fuck else.”

Of course he nodded his head. “I ain’t saying I wanna be in no relationship or any of that. Shit I guess I could be yo’ friend. Thing is I’m the only fucking friend.” He put the emphasis on fucking making sure I knew what he meant.

I laughed. “Do you hear yourself? Only fucking friend. You just wanna fuck and du?—”

“No, ‘cause the friend part is in there. We friends, shit homies. So we chill and all that shit. See how I bought you breakfast?”

“I’m still not fucking you behind Tayl?—”

“That’s done. I already told her that shit.”

I crossed my arms across my chest. “And why on earth would you do that, especially if you didn’t know what I’d say to you.”

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“Cause I only kept her ass around to get to you. She knew what was up. It was never that fucking deep.” Within seconds he was on his feet and walking toward me.

I tilted my head to the side looking at him. The more I thought about this the more I didn't think this was a good idea. “I don't know.”

“You said it yo'self. I could come back from Taylor. Right? Long as it wasn't sis.” Why he insisted on calling Virtue sis I did not know. By now his body was making contact with mine, and in no way was I able to move. Hell, I didn't even think to move until he had already picked me up.

“I didn't say that.”

“Probably didn't fully but I'm a smart nigga. I can read between the lines.” His hands were on my ass holding me in place, while his legs were moving in the direction of the sofa that sat at the far end of my work loft. When we made it, he sat down with me in his arms.

“Your interpretation of a conversation doesn't mean that's how it went. That night we had both been drinking and you nev?—”

“Lotta honest shit happens when we're both drinking. You got something to drink in this motherfucker right now?” His lips were now pressing themselves against my neck.

“It's five something in the morning, Cartier.”

“So.” He pulled back looking me in my eyes before he leaned in and ceased ahold of my lips at the same time as his hand gripped my neck. The feel of his touch was dangerous, horribly fucking dangerous. There was absolutely no way this was a good idea, but just like the dare devil I was I chose the opposite of what my common sense was telling me. I told myself this would be great, shit it would...until it wasn't.

“We gonna be like that?” he asked hands now easing up my cami?

“Like wha—” my word was halted because his lips were smothering mine, swallowing my words.

“Best fucking friends. Typa’ friends that make sure we’re both good?”

“Mhmm.” By now I was on my back, dress up above my waist while he unbuckled his jeans.

“Tight like this.” He was back between my legs, massaging his free mushroom tip against my opening.

Fuck! It was like every time I was in this space with him, I was under a fucking spell. Too aroused to speak, or even listen to the common sense floating through my head like a blimp. Fuck!

He pressed forward, thrusting into me with a hunger that matched my own. We shouldn't have been doing this, but I couldn't stop and he didn't. It was all coming down, my leg on his shoulder while he touched depths no one had ever touched while I attempted to hold on for dear life. This nigga didn't come here to feed me today, he came to make sure I knew that no matter what I said none of it mattered.

“You hear me, Jo?” he asked lips sloppily against the side of my face. “This shit with me and you ain't—Fucck,” he interrupted his own sentence.

“Mhmm.”

“Tell me that. Tell me we more than friends. Right now.” His lips found mine, and he began nipping at my bottom lip while his hand fondled with my breast under my shirt. He knew just what to do to send me over a fucking cliff, out of body free air and groundless cliff.

“Tell me you’re done, Jo.” He fucked the sentence into my system suspending me with each stroke.

I couldn’t help but agree, shit repeat anything he wanted because an orgasm so wicked threatened to escape my core. “Fuck.” I moaned.

“Say it.” He began to drill into me mercilessly not giving a fuck that he had my body feeling like it was in an inebriated state, and words of any language just wouldn’t come to me.

“I...mm...d...done...pl...playing...Fucck.” I whined out on the brink of an explosion.

“Good, now where you want it, baby girl?” he asked huskily barely holding on himself.

“Wherev—” The word never ended because our lips sloppily locked as the orgasm I had been holding on to ripped through me.

After Cartier finally left, I tried to get some work done. I was successful until my grandfather’s nurse called me. He was in a foul mood, refusing to take any of his medication. That part was normal but when she said he hadn’t gotten out of bed and didn’t seem well I was alarmed. Instead of requesting she take the phone to him, I decided I’d go to him. A day or two in burbs would probably do me justice. I needed to ground myself and get some actual work done.

My grandfather was my heart, and my saving grace. He stepped up and raised me after my mother died and my father married her sister. Earl knew absolutely nothing about raising a six-year-old by himself considering my grandmother had done all of the heavy lifting with my mom and her sister, but he did it. My grandmother passed months after my mother, leaving an already fragile family even more fragile. My auntie was a bitch, so I didn't fuck with her at all, her, or my so called father. Long story short Earl figured it out, he did the impossible and raised his deceased daughter's daughter by himself and for that I'd be eternally grateful. My grandfather was my world, so when he took ill a few months ago I wanted to drop everything and be with him, but after a week he told me to go back to my life. He forced me to keep living when all I wanted to do was crawl up and stay with him. Since I couldn't do that, I spent two weekends out of each month with the old man. We'd play chess, watch old movies, and reminisce on old times.

I stopped by my house to grab a bag to go, then I hopped on the road within an hour. On my drive out, I just listened to music keeping myself busy for my drive out to the fields. It was necessary considering the fact that this was a long ass ride. Well maybe not that long, but I had ADHD so sitting in a car driving for hours felt like forever for me. The type to have my ass chewing spicy sunflower seeds to stay awake. All of this before ten a.m., of course.

I made it no less than three hours later pulling into the round driveway with a smile that was smeared off my face the moment I laid eyes on the ambulance wheeling out a black body bag on it. Immediately, I hopped out of the car rushing it because it couldn't be. I knew he was ill, but not sick enough to die on me, right?

Before I could reach the body bag and unzip it, I was stopped. Then I heard Carmella from afar say the words that broke me. "It was too late baby girl. It happened right after I called you." Her arms followed her words attempting to pull me into her chest, but I needed to see him. I needed to lay eyes on him.

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“I just need to see him.” Tears puddled my eyes as I pleaded with them.

I guess they heard me because she let me go and they stopped walking. Timidly I approached the black bag, unzipping it from the top. He looked asleep, but it hurt no less. It didn't put me back together. He was really gone and it broke my heart. I kept telling myself that Earl didn't raise no ho, that this crying shit was for the birds but how could I not.

Carmella ushered me in the house, where she helped me to the couch. Her eyes were puffy too, she'd been crying too. He was really gone, and there was no way I could pick up the phone to call him. No more of that because my pop-pop was gone.

I sat on that sofa for what felt like forever, as the tears streamed down my face and my eyes glared at the blank wall. It was almost like I was challenging God, asking him why he had to take the only man I had ever loved, hell the only man who had ever loved me unconditionally. He always used to tell me that God didn't put nobody down here forever, but I didn't believe him. Hell I'd convinced him that at ninety-six he was a special case. Course he didn't believe me, but I believed me. I believed my pop-pop would live forever, but he didn't and now my whole soul hurt because he was gone and had left me here alone.

Trek

I looked at my brother trying to figure out what was up with the nigga. He had a lil' more pep in his step, almost looked giddy when he got here earlier. “The fuck is yo' problem?” I finally asked staring at him.

“Just secured some shit.” He smirked.

“Huh?” I was confused because why the fuck was this nigga being so damn secretive if it was business. “What do yo?—”

“Nigga you ‘bout to be an uncle in ‘bout nine months.”

I threw my head back trying to figure out what he was talking about, then it hit me. “You didn’t.”

“Sure and the fuck did. I’ll do an eighteen year bid with Jovie if that’s what it takes to make sure she stays where I want her at all times. Call it what you want, but that’s me.”

“Yo, you crazy as fuck and that’s on me.”

He shrugged. Say what you want but I went for what I wanted.”

I was about to tell him just how flawed that statement was, but then there was a knock at my door.

“It’s Linny. I ha?—”

“Come in.”

Seconds later the door was open and Linny walked in with his hands in his pockets and the shit face. That meant he didn’t have my money but was about to tell me how he’d get it.

“You got my money, Linny?” I sat back in the chair observing the stupid ass expressions his face contoured into. I didn’t see how he was any kin to Peach. Shit

was baffling.

“No, not yet. But I just gotta talk to my sist?—”

“Nah, stay yo’ goofy ass away from her. Yeen taking shit out of her fuckin’ pockets to help yo’ debt. She tol’ yo’ ass no last time, and I saw that shit you pulled in the parking lot. Try it again and you won’t attempt shit else.”

He looked confused, but I didn’t give his confusion time to settle.

“You hear me?”

He nodded. “But how am I supp?—”

“Sounds like a fucking personal problem, huh?”

Of course Cartier snickered, but I didn’t give a damn. I said what I said and Linny had no choice but to respect that or fuck around and find out.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re right I’m gonna figure it out.”

“Good, you got seventy-two hours.” I gave him one last look, before my eyes landed back on my brother. Nigga had a smirk on his face, so I know he was about to say some slick shit.

He did just that as soon as Linny closed my door behind himself.

“Niggas was about to get in my shit ‘bout Jovie but youround here threatening motherfuckers. Yeah, don’t tell me shit about my methods.” He waved me off.

I didn’t even touch that. Instead I changed the subject and jumped into business. That

was the real reason his worrisome ass was here anyway. We needed to up production and spill into another warehouse.

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“Cruz find a spot yet?”

I shook my head no. “Gotta be perfect and more privacy than anything.”

He nodded.

We talked for a while pitting ideas back and forth before he left because he claimed he had shit to do but nine times out of ten he was going to see about some pussy. Typical Cartier.

I didn’t stay long either because I had something else in mind. Something unlike me but a nigga was curious and way passed being intrigued. I pulled up in front of the restaurant, shaking my head at my own stupid ass. Something ‘bout this girl wouldn’t let me go about my way. Something in me wanted to know her, to see what was to her and I hated that shit. I hated that my desire had something to do with another.

When I walked in the restaurant my eyes scanned the space before I went to the bar. Shorty behind it smiled my way before asking me how she could help me.

“Virtue in?”

She nodded. “I’ll call her up.”

I shook my head no, before pointing toward her office. “Nah, I got it.”

I could tell she was taken aback by my forwardness. Hell by the time she realized what I was doing I was already walking down the hall to her office.

I knocked, seconds before I heard her say come in. When I walked in she was sitting on the floor with paperwork sprawled around her, then when she looked up at me she had these big ass glasses. Had me regretting walking in this motherfucker. She looked too damn good and appealed too much to my attraction for me to keep the type of distance I was trying to keep. I didn't do shit like this, popping up on females not knowing what the fuck I was finna say to 'em.

"He...hey what are you doing he—" by now she was gathering her papers up off the floor.

"I don't even..." my sentence trailed off as I picked up the single piece of paper because she had pretty much picked up everything else. "Come take a walk with me."

She accepted the paper from me, before putting it on her desk. "Is it about my brother because I ju?—"

"Nah, it ain't. You busy or something?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not busy at all."

"Then come take a walk with me."

She looked at me for a minute, before nodding her head yes. "Let me grab my purse."

"You 'on't need it."

She looked at me for a minute, before nodding her head and slipping her phone in her pocket. "Where are we walking to?"

I didn't respond, instead I waited with the door open for her to exit.

She did after a few seconds, and I followed behind her, attempting to keep my eyes everywhere but on her supple backside. Virtue was one of those females you could just tell filled out naturally. Slim, thick, with a set of hips out this world.

“I should be back in a few. Call me if you need anything, Maj.” She smiled at old girl behind the bar as we passed.

“This way, Peach.” My hand went to the small of her back changing the direction in which she was about to walk when we walked out of her spot. It lingered for a moment, before going to my side.

“You like to cook or something?”

She shrugged. “Somewhat, but not for people. If you’re asking why I own a restaurant, to me it was the quickest way to generate income.”

“Meaning?” she had me confused.

“I had just graduated from college, thought I met the man I was gonna marry and I was pregnant. Then I found out he was married with a whole family. I was heartbroken, but all I knew was that I wanted to generate my own income. I didn’t want my daughter to ever have to go without.”

I nodded. “And her father?”

“Still married. He’s not in her life because I wouldn’t be what he wanted me to be.”

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“That’s some bitch shit.”

“It is, but I’ve made peace with it. Adorie is straight.” She shrugged.

A brief silence filled the walk, before she spoke.

“Since I just poured my lil’ heart out to you for the second time since we’ve met. Tell me about you. Tell me about Cartrek. I mean that is why you asked me to take a walk with you, right?”

I chuckled. “What you wan’ know?”

“What you wanna tell me?”

“Ain’t shit to tell. I’m a boring, complicated nigga. My main focus is retiring in my youth rather than dying in it. And naw, Peach, I said come take a walk with me because I wanna get to know you.”What the fuck?

“A boring complicated nigga. That’s a contradiction in itself.”

“Yeah, but it’s the truth. Mostly stay to myself and make money. I’on like none of that extra shit that folks be on.”

“I feel that more than you’ll ever know.”

We reached the Italian ice shop seconds later. We made minimal small talk in line, then ordered our shit. Of course I covered it, then instead of sitting in the crowded

shop we walked through the park across the street. Just like that night at the club, I got so caught up in talking to her that I lost track of time. I got too lost in her presence, yet another reason I needed to be leaving her ass alone. She wasn't one of those females I'd fuck with just to get my dick wet, she was more and had the potential to be some niggas world. Type of female that deserved the world, and for some nigga to give it to her. The more I talked to her the clearer it became that I needed to go about mine, because I wasn't in a headspace for change for no female or to give anybody my all. Last bitch I gave my all to was building a case on my ass.

“Do you feel underserving of love, Cartrek?”

“Nah. I just ain't got time for it. It ain't about deserving it or any of that shit. It's about having the time and energy to invest in a motherfucker. Only to be betrayed.”

“So, you feel like love and betrayal correlate to one another?”

“They run pretty damn close right? Where I'm from niggas die over love. I almost found myself in a fucking cage behind love.”

“Does the woman you're thinking about remind you of Mia?”

“How do you know I'm thinking about a woman?” I asked staring at the good doctor for an answer.

“Are you not? Correct me if I'm wrong.”

I blinked a few times mentally attempting to pinpoint similarities of Mia and Virtue.

“How would I know? Mia played a role, presenting me with what she knew I was attracted to. Mia was a plant.”

Dr. West nodded. “Off the role Mia played. Are there any similarities.

“No. Peach has these honest eyes. Type of shits that tell you everything about her. She got this way of being an open book without even trying.”

She nodded. “But Mia didn’t?”

“Nope. Now that I think about it Mia’s purpose in my life was to make me chase her. To create this gray area in my life so that she could pull me off my square and catch me.”

“But she didn’t. Mia isn’t here, but you allow her to haunt your decisions. To make it hard for you to let others in.”

I nodded, hearing what she was saying but my mind was made up. Though I wanted to I wasn’t fucking with shorty like that. I couldn’t.

My session with the good doctor didn’t last that long. It probably did, but we talked enough that I didn’t even know where time went. After I left the session, I ended up at a restaurant near the crib picking up takeout. A nigga was starving and the only thing I’d eaten today was that fucking Italian ice with Peach earlier.

Speaking of the fucking devil, my eyes landed on her as she exited the restaurant next door holding a brown bag and her phone in her face. I swear her ass got finer every single time I laid eyes on her. Simply fucking beautiful.

“Yo, you stalking me or sum?” I asked.

Within seconds she looked up, and we locked eyes. “No. People get hungry, don’t they?”

I nodded, not knowing what else to say. Thing is I wanted to say something else. I wanted to be all in her space at this point after telling myself it wasn’t gonna be like

that hours earlier.

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“Where you going after you leave here?” I don’t know what the fuck I was doing, but it was something like a magnetic pull going on.

“My folks house. My mama refuses to give me my child, so I’m ju?—”

“Finna come chill with me, right?”

“Hmmm, you sure ‘bout that, Cartrek?”

“Yeah, and we gonna work on you and governments.” Nigga was probably forward as fuck, but oh well. She had one of those addicting personalities. Type to make a nigga wanna bathe in her presence and shit.

I had her follow me to my crib, and park in my driveway, which only took about twenty-five minutes. I lived all the way out of the way. I hoped to God she ain’t think she was leaving tonight, cause it was too fucking late for any motion.

We sat at the island talking and chilling while we ate, before migrating to the sectional that overtook my living room. Before I knew it, I lit up and we sat there passing the blunt back and forth a few times kicking shit. Talking and joking like homies and shit rather than her being a female I wanted to fuck. Don’t get me wrong I damn sure wanted to fuck, hell the steel in my joggers made that evident but the air was different.

“Do you always invite women back to your place and share your weed or is this...” her sentence led off because she probably saw my expression.

“New. I’ on kick it with bit—females like that unless I know what’s up.” I had never been the type of nigga to lie, so I wouldn’t start now. However it was becoming increasingly hard to stay on this end of the couch rather than in her space.

“Hmph and what about me because I’m su?—”

I licked my lips looking her over before my eyes connected with hers. “You grown, and though I know I ain’t bring you here for that, I’ma follow yo’ lead.”

She smiled nervously, before shaking her head. “Then my lead should be me going home, before it takes us somewhere else.” Within seconds she was on her feet.

I chuckled before standing up as well. “Nah baby girl, you’re high as hell and it’s late as fuck. Type of man would I be to let you out there like that.”

She looked at me for a few seconds before nodding her head. “Even though I’m not judgmentally impaired, I get you.”

“You can even sleep in my bed, and I’ll take the couch.” At this point I didn’t even recognize myself.

“Nonsense. I’m sure we can responsibly share a bed.” She had a smile in her eyes that didn’t extend to those thick ass lips of hers until moments after. “I need a show?—”

“I got you.” I led her down the hall to my bedroom and grabbed her one of my shirts and a pair of draws, before handing them to her.

While she showered, I took care of the few dishes we used and tidied everything up. I wasn’t a neat freak or anything like that, but I didn’t really like things out of place. That’s why me and Cartier couldn’t share a space because the nigga loved to make a fucking mess.

I ended up taking a shower in the guest bedroom that had no bed. I purposely never put a bed in there because I didn't like company and there was no fucking need for it. I met her in my room a few minutes later rolling my underwear up on her small ass waist.

"That shower was heavenly. Did you have that specifically installed or did it come with the place?"

"Came with it. I wanted one of those showers that came from the ceiling, but I haven't done much customization since I closed." Something always felt like it was missing, of course I didn't tell her that much.

"I can't wait until I buy my first house, customize it for my baby and I. Probably get a scruffy lil' dog and all of that cute stuff. Maybe even a cat, you know." She pulled back the comforter of my bed, climbing in.

I shook my head. "I can't stand cats, lil' motherfuckers are evil. You better off getting a dog, but not one of those lil' yappy shits."

I flipped the light switch and made my way to the bed. This was bound to be one difficult ass sleep because there was no way I'd be able to sleep next to her and not touch her. Motherfuckers was finna miss all type of sleep off this.

"Why is it so cold in here?"

"Cause I like it cold. I sleep better. What, you want me to go change the furnace." I was about to get up, but she stopped me.

"No, you don't have to do all of that to accommodate me. I'll just use your body heat." Within seconds she had kind of intertwined her body with mine. "You don't mind, do you." Her head was up and peering down at me while her chin slightly

touched my chest.

My arm rested on her backside, before I said fuck it and leaned my head down kissing her lips. I had been wanting to do that shit all night. She didn't pull back, or any of that. Instead she melted into my embrace, sucking on my bottom lip. She didn't expect to be pulled on top of me, but there was no thought in any of this, just action. Her grinding against me let me know what time we were on. I gripped her sides just knowing this was about to be one of those nights. I enjoyed the feel of her thickass thighs on both sides of my body and hated to break it up but I had to run in the other room to grab a condom. Once I escaped her body, I ran to do just that, coming back to her lying in the middle of my bed comfortable and inviting me to test that shit out as well. Something about the olive sheets under her frame popped out. Had my mouth water and dick hard as a fucking jaw breaker. If I didn't watch myself I was gonna fuck up with this one.

She sat up and looked at me, probably wondering why I was looking at her the way I was. I couldn't help it, her ass was simply ravishing in my bed.

I dropped the shorts barely hanging from my waist, sliding the latex on my shit. No matter how far I took it tonight, I wasn't fucking up like that. I couldn't help but eye the beauty at her core as it invited me in. Her slick folds partially protected by the briefs I had given her, but the wetness seeping through leaving wet spots on the seat of them.

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Looping my fingers around the band of the briefs she had rolled up on her hips, I pulled them down momentarily straightening her legs to aid me. The air in the room thickened with anticipation with each moment that passed. Once I had them off. I couldn't take my eyes off the beauty between her legs. The thickest of folds inviting me in. I rolled the latex onto my thickness, then I glanced up into her eyes before I pushed myself toward her slick opening.

She yelped, burying her teeth in her bottom lip, hands above her head.

“Caar...” She started to say my name, but I got greedy pushing into her inviting body with no warning. She jerked forward meeting me face to face, lips against mine. “Car..”

I just knew this was a bad decision, shit if I didn't know then I knew no from the way she hugged me, and the sounds I basked in pulling from her. Her not being able to form a sentence or finish my name egged me on while she lay there sex faces letting me know deep I was. Her folds were so wet and slippery, I just knew nobody had been in here. Pussy was tight and begging me to go as deep as I could while I ignored the urge to grip her neck. I didn't do drugs, but the shit between her legs had to be a form of one, because there was no way this shit existed in one, but it did. It existed in her and she existed. Fuck.

Virtue

I just knew I'd find myself on my back if I stayed at this man's house and here I was back to pillow top, and knees to the sky while he hovered over my body with kisses that felt sent from God himself.

“Talk to me, Peach.” His words a demand that I couldn’t obey because ...because. Shit I don’t know, I couldn’t even think straight. He pumped into my body like he had something to prove. Rendering me completely fucking speechless, because I don’t think I’d ever been touched the way he touched me. He was rough, callous and if I didn’t know any better determined to fuck me into oblivion. My legs shaking, and him still going for the gold was enough to do just that, because within seconds my stomach contracted. I was cumming so hard I felt like I was pissing while he still pushing in deeper and deeper.

“Fu..” I moaned aloud, before his lips swallowed up theckand he went into overdrive cumming his damn self. Everything about this night was dreamlike, from the way he pulled out of me, carrying us both to the shower to the way I found myself face down ass up still not finished. Cartrek lit a fire between my legs and created a thirst that I wasn’t used to in my body. One that we’d spend the rest of the night attempting to quench.

I don’t know how long I slept, shit I didn’t care. I just knew when I opened my eyes it was time for me to go. Though he was still asleep next to me, I couldn’t stay. This wasn’t my house and he wasn’t my man. So, after taking full advantage of his beautiful ass kitchen and making myself some breakfast, I left. Of course I made him a plate and left a sticky note on his counter telling him where it was, but I had to take my ass on. Last night was fun and I needed it, but that’s all it was. Harmless pleasure filled fun and I was definitely not one of those females that would fool themselves into believing it was more. Cartrek was a cool guy, guarded as fuck but cool.

Instead of going straight home, I decided it was time for me to go get my daughter. She had been with her grandmother and grandfather long enough. I wasn’t even going to tell them I was coming, I was just going to pop up. I mean since I was already out this way I might as well. During my ride it hit me that I hadn’t heard from Jovie in two days, which was completely unlike her. First I looked at her location on the app and realized that she was out at her grandfather’s house. It was normal for her to be

out there some weekends, but even when she was out there we still talked. Dialing her line, I listened to it ring for a few seconds before she finally answered. When she did, I didn't recognize her voice. I mean I knew it was her, but she sounded drained and in pain. Something had to have happened.

"What's wrong Jo?" I asked already knowing that I was about to go to her.

"He died, Vee. My pop-pop is gone."

The moment those words left her lips I felt tears well at my eyes for her. "What ha?—"

"I got a call and came here to him, but I was too late. He was gone when I got here." She was crying into the phone.

"I'm on my way to you."

"No...no you don't have t?—"

"Bullshit. I'm already out this way. So, here I come." I wasn't taking no for an answer. She needed help, so I'd always be there for my girl.

When I reached her, I couldn't help but pull her into a hug. I probably hugged her so tight that she couldn't breathe. She needed that, and I could tell. Of the two of us Jovie had always been the strong one while I was the crybaby, so just to hear her cry made my heart hurt for her and prompted me to be there in any way I could. She'd do the same thing for me. Hell, she did do the same thing. When Adorie's father pulled his shit, Jovie was right there no matter how much I tried to push her away.

"You never told me why you were out this way already." Jovie's voice filled the living room. Currently she and I were both laid up on the sofa scrolling our phones.

We were supposed to be watching a movie, but currently this was where we ended up, because neither of us could decide exactly what to watch. It was evident that bitches were too busy to be watching TV.

I looked at the ceiling wondering if I wanted to tell her or keep my last night's activities to myself. Safe to say I ended up spilling.

"I was leaving Cartrek's house."

The silence that took over the room was deafening, because even though she had yet to speak, I could hear her thoughts. They were loud and daring me to tell her why. Begging me to tell her why the hell I was at this man's house last night.

She cleared her throat. Of course she cleared her damn throat. "And"

"I was getting dinner late last night and I saw him. He asked me to hang out with him, and I gu?—"

"You went and hung out with him? Got some dick too, huh?" She had this big goofy ass smirk on her face. I was glad to see her smiling with those puffy ass eyes.

With my hands on my face, I nodded my head. "And it was goo?—"

The ringing of my phone broke my attention. When I glanced at it, I narrowed my eyes because I didn't recognize the number. The only problem is that it was definitely a FaceTime request.

Turning the phone up toward the ceiling I answered it. I was curious to know who it was. Then the handsome man from the restaurant a few days ago stared into the screen.

“Now you see who it is, gone ahead and put that pretty ass face in the screen.” His voice was filled with amusement.

I looked across the room, seeing that Jovie had popped her head up.

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Slowly I put my face in the camera, attempting to hide the smile that threatened to push through onto my face.

“Who is that?” She failed to mouth silently. I was pretty sure he heard her because he had a smirk on his face.

“You’re mighty bold to be gang banging through folks FaceTime like you know them, huh?” I asked peering at him. Aylo was just as fine as I remembered from that day.

He laughed, showing that dimple on his left cheek. Damn. “I’m a bold ass nigga if you didn’t know already.”

I chuckled. “Now I know.”

He nodded. “I wanna take you out tonight. Can I do that?”

I hesitated because number one I wasn’t even in the city. “I’m not in the city right now, I had to?”

“Bitch you better.” Of course Jovie’s voice filled the space.

“Where you at? I’ll come get you.”

I looked up mugging her, before looking back at the screen. While she sat across the room nodding her head like a damn fool, he had sat the phone in his lap while I assumed he drove.

Completely overwhelmed, I dropped the phone and glared at Jovie. “I came here to be here for you, not abandon you.”

“Girl death is death. We’ll all deal with it at some point in our lives. Go out, enjoy your night I’ll be here when you get back and we can even go get my niece in the morning.”

I looked at her for a minute, before I shook my head no. I wasn’t that hard up for no man to be out here abandoning my girl in her time of need.

When I picked the phone up and unmuted it, I spoke. “I would love to, but tonight isn’t a good night. I gotta be present for my friend.”

He nodded his head. “Then when is a good night, beautiful?”

Jovie clapped her hands across the room. “And that’s how you clear a bitch.” She was attempting to whisper but failed once again because he laughed.

“Gimme a day, I’m on your schedule shorty... one condition though.”

I tilted my head forward waiting for him to tell me the condition.

“I want yo’ whole day.”

“Hmm. That sounds attainable.” I had no other response but that vague shit. He was forward and from the few moments we spent on the phone straight to the point.

“Good, now save my number, baby girl. I’m finna get into something, but I’ll hit you in a few.”

“Okay.”

We hung up moments later and I could feel Jovie's eyes on me.

"I ain't never dated a Mafia nigga, but on me that shit sounded smooth. Like a cold glass of milk with two Oreo's type of smooth."

I cackled. "What is wrong with you?"

"You!" she pointed. "Not only do you have the leader of the Ace Boys eating pussy, but you got the fucki?—"

"I didn't ask for any of this. What happened to the vanilla niggas? Corporate and polished."

"Chile please. If one of them stepped to you today or tomorrow he wouldn't even be able to get the pussy wet. Sahara desert down there. Bitches don't want good men, we like hood men. The ones that do illegal shit, keep it to themselves and bust caps in niggas asses. We like them."

As much as I wanted to disagree, she was right.

"But anyway, are you going to go out with him?"

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“I don’t know. Not a decision I planned to make just yet. I don’t see why not.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. “You’re a fucking fool, but I hear you.” The room went quiet again, while we both went back to our phones.

“Food. I know I’m supposed to be grieving and dealing with this death shit, but I can’t do it starving.”

I nodded. “You’re right. Let’s go into town to get something to cook. Go get dressed and call Cartier back, while I go do the same and check on my baby. At this point I am a deadbeat.”

She moaned. “Do I have to?”

“Yes, you do. He seems cool and the fact that he has called you about a million times says he cares right?”

“About my pussy, that’s about it.” She shrugged.

Laughter escaped my lips. “Well if that’s true, then go ahead and update him on that too. One hour, Jo.”

She laughed and waved me off. “Fine.”

ChapterFour

Jovie-A few weeks later

My grandfather's funeral was a blur. Shit, for about a month after that that's how my life felt. I didn't know if I was coming or going, but I knew I was in pain. This intolerable, mind numbing pain that no matter what I did overtook me every time I tried to keep it moving. By the grace of God and Virtue I was able to get through the projects I had lined up. If not for her I would've stayed cooped up in my pop-pop's house crying with every passing moment. Then to be honest being back in the city felt different, hell I felt different. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was off. Then as if everything wasn't odd or off enough, Cartier was being too fucking nice. Like really nice and he actually cared about how I was feeling. Long story short after a month one would think I settled back into normalcy, but I hadn't. My heart was still hurting and I was pushing through life one day at a time.

"You hungry, baby mama?" Cartier walked into his living room with no shirt on and his pajama pants hanging way too comfortably below his waistline. He insisted on calling me baby mama rather than friend or my name.

"Starved. How did you know?"

"Felt it. Get dre?"

"You know I can go home, right? I feel like I'm crowding your space and sto—" he interrupted my sentence.

"What I tell you 'bout that? I like you being here, shit makes a nigga actually come home out the streets." He looked so serious, and I felt so guilty. I couldn't understand why he was allowing my grief and trauma to crowd him. Ever since I got into it with half of my family at my grandfather's funeral he made me stay with him. When I say made, I literally mean forced. Like I said, Cartier had been different, more into me and less into everyone else. I mean that I know of, because the nigga had literally settled into being with me like we were in a relationship, but we weren't. One thing I did know was that I needed to be going to get on something, because the last thing I

needed was to be creating a life out of whatever this is. We were for damn sure not protected at all, fucking, and sucking like consequences didn't exist.

“Cartier.”

“You want me to say that shit then?” He nearly mugged me before going to the fridge.

“Say what?” I asked thoroughly confused on what he meant.

“I like you being here, man. I on know what it is but I like that shit.” He turned around and looked at me serious. “Especially because you keep groceries up in this motherfucker.”

I looked at him, not knowing what the hell I was supposed to say, because I liked being here. Thing is I didn't like uncertainty, and I didn't want to get too comfortable here. Shit would be no good if this was just a fluke.

I guess I was quiet for too long, because soon he was walking toward me. “I want you here.” That part landed the moment his hands made contact with my flesh.

“For how...” my sentence trailed off because I didn't want to appear too needy or vulnerable to a nigga... to this nigga.

“Say it. Yeen never held back before, don't start now.” He challenged.

“I don't want to blur lines with us.”

Laughter spilled from his lips. The type that came from deep within his stomach. “We already did that, shit a few times. Matter of fact that line don't even exist no more.”

“And that means.” I guess I’d just settle for getting him to say what I physically couldn’t.”

“Means we’re seeing where this goes. Just me and you.” Then he turned me around and made me look at him. “Just you and I.” this time he said it looking me directly in my eyes.

I was about to respond, but the overwhelming need to puke up my guts overtook my senses. Before I knew it, I was running toward the bathroom.

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When I was finished throwing up my guts, I stood to my feet noticing that Cartier was holding out a towel for me to grab.

He seemed too cool, like way too cool. Maybe even comfortable with whatever was going on.

“You feeling alright, baby girl?” he asked while I stood at the sink cleaning my face.

“Yeah, something didn’t go down right. What are you doing tonight?”

“Taking you to get the shit for dinner and hanging back here with you. Ain’t shit to deal with in Ace-land, the fuck I’m leaving the house for?” Ace-land was the territory controlled by him and his brothers.

I just looked at him. “Who said I was cooking?”

“I did. But I mean if yeen feeling it we can eat out. You just be complaining ‘bout restaurants and shit.”

He was right I did. He knew me too well. Life had done a complete fucking 360. Pop-pop died and now I was shacking up with Cartier. The Cartier I said I wasn’t fucking with like that months ago. The same Cartier who fucked Taylor.

“I need to go get on something, because you and this not using condoms is going to give me a heart attack.”

He laughed. “You ‘bout late as fuck and I know for a fact you carrying my junior.

Rest in peace to the one we Plan B'd."

"That's not funny."

"It is. Shit it's even funnier that you don't think you are or you oblivious like this. I nut in you every time I lay with you. And I lay with you every night, have been for almost a month. We got eighteen, love."

I shook my head and waved him off. "Whatever Cartier. I'm gonna go to the doctor sometime this week. Gonna make sure you can't trap me for the next eighteen, love." I mimicked him with the love part.

"Whatever you say shorty." He seemed too confident, but I shook it off. Cartier was confident about everything, so this was no different. His picture was probably listed next to the word arrogant in the dictionary.

"Food though, you serious about going out?" I decided to change the subject.

He nodded. "As much as I'on feel like being around people, if you want to we can hit up a joint."

I looked at him for a few seconds before I nodded my head. "I'll cook something. Let me go get dressed."

I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep in the car until I heard Cartier calling my name telling me to get up. Then when I opened my eyes I realized that we weren't at a grocery store at all. We were at the damn mall, but I didn't know why. As far as I knew we were still getting something for me to cook.

He must've realized how confused I was after he turned the car off. "Got an Ace event tonight that we gotta show face at."

“We?”

“Yeah, we. You for me right?” Then he didn’t even give me a chance to respond, because he was speaking seconds later. “Yeah, so with that being said we gotta show face.”

He shut me right the hell up, before getting out of the car coming around on my side to open the door.

“You be tryna check me, Cartier. I’on feel that shit.”

“Cap.” He grabbed my hand pulling me in the direction of the high priced scammer filled ass mall.

“How?”

“Cause I said so, now can we try to be out of here in an hour? Cause I still need to get home, mellow out, get full off pussy, fill you up and be ready to be in a room full of motherfuckers.”

I cackled. “If you don’t wanna go, then don’t.”

“It’s my organization. Niggas gotta show face and bepresent the right way. The world don’t stop because I wanna lay-up under my baby moms.”

I nodded. “I’m not you baby mother, Cartier.”

“You saying that right now, bu?—”

“Cartier!”

“Fine, I’ll let you rock for now.”

“Thank you.” I should’ve been alarmed at his confidence, but I shook it off because Cartier was Cartier. Confident about any and everything, it was just a personality trait of his at this point.

“It’s on me and the attire is all-white.” That was literally all he offered before we were in the crowded ass mall hand in hand. Part of me expected him to let my hand go, to walk side by side with me not touching, because then it would be explainable to the bitches he frequented. The thing is he didn’t let me go the entire time we store hopped. Unlimited hand holding and physical assurance, that this vibing thing between us was something he was serious about. His energy was the same private and public, which had me smiling on the inside every time he pecked my temple or kissed or allowed his hand to rest on the small of my back for more than five seconds. Yep, I was completely overthinking this.

Outside of the fitting room I was currently holding myself hostage as he sat in the blue cushioned chair awaiting my presence with too many bags to count sitting next to his feet, and my Starbucks to his mouth. I knew that much because when I handed it to him, he made a face before deciding to taste the frappé. Now I heard the straw every so often when he was trying to finish off the drink. Niggas.

After I had the very short dress over my hips, I adjusted it at my chest before looking myself over in the mirror. I stared for long enough before I unlatched the door and stepped out into the semiprivate space for him to see. Even if I was unsure about it, I

knew his reaction would give me a yes or no. I wasn't looking for approval or disapprovals, but that self-adjustment thing men did when a bitch looked edible.

His eyes glossed my body for like forever before he told Trek he'd call him back. His left hand adjusted the bulge in his pants before his lips beckoned for me to come over closer to him. "C'mere right quick."

"Why? I have one more dress to try on," I lied.

He licked his bottom lip, chuckling before shaking his head. "You tryna get niggas killed at an all-white party. Blood don't come out of white, Jo."

"How? It's just a dre?—"

"It ain't the dress. It's the body in that motherfucker and how possessive I am 'bout it. Fuck a look but don't touch clause, niggas bet not even fucking look or that's their temples. Handing out head vents behind mine."

I laughed knowing damn well he was serious. Safe to say I got the dress, and he talked shit the whole time we checked out.

Instead of going elsewhere to find food, we found a nice restaurant inside of the mall and got a booth in the cut.

"You like bitches with their bodies done?" I looked up from the menu in front of me just in time to catch the expression that plagued his face.

"You got your body done?" he quizzed.

"No, everything on me is natural. This is my body."

“I like yo’ body, so I guess not.” He smirked, setting the menu down. “I want a steak, but on my son that shit is gonna fuck up my stomach.”

I nodded. “Then get a turkey steak and drown it in A1 sauce.”

“Ain’t the same.” He shook his head.

“What made you even stop eating red meat?” I was curious and we had never really talked about it.

“I was up late one night and caught one of those pork infomercials. Then I was so fucking into it, I watched the one ‘bout beef. It was disgusting and fucked it up for me ever since.”

I nodded.

“Hello, my name is Karey and I’ll be your server today. Can I start you both off with anything to drink?”

By the time I looked up at Karey her eyes were glued to Cartier. Bitch wasn’t trying to get my drink order at all she wanted his.

“Get my baby mama a glass of lemon water and a Diet Coke, then get me a regular coke.”

Her face mirrored what I assumed her thoughts were which made me chuckle. Bitches were willfully stupid and chose to be blind. She saw him sitting across from me but got mad when the man ordered my drink addressing the fact that I was indeed here.

Cartier’s laughter broke my trance. “Yeah, you know what it is, just like I do as well.

Now fix yo' face foe' I fix that motherfucker for you."

Cartrek

I rarely did dumb shit like I was doing now, but lately a nigga had been on some insatiable reckless shit. With my head back against the headrest of my seat, I let Shelly do her thing. Niggas was supposed to be having a whole ass business deal over breakfast about her hair shop, but her lips on my dick said some other shit. Shit said she knew her way around a dick in a car better than anything this morning. Then I was supposed to get out of the car and actually go over this shit with her. Fuck!

Her lips felt like a suction cup on my dick every time the tip touched the back of her throat. Jaws of heaven was what a nigga should have been calling her. I opened my eyes glancing down at her head in my lap, in complete awe. At the same time a car door opened a few feet away from me, of course I had to at least keep an eye on my surroundings. Even at my highest euphoric state I couldn't be no mark.

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“Fuck, I’m cu—” I bit into my bottom lip killing my own sentence and slamming my eyes shut while my hand gripped her hair to hold her head in place. I loaded up her mouth seconds later.

“Have you ever been here before?” The voice outside my car was familiar. Too damn familiar.

My eyes popped open looking for the source of the voice. I found it moments later, shit locking eyes with the person it belonged to. She looked even better than she did the last time I saw her. Shit, the last time I touched her. Too bad moments didn’t last forever, because within seconds the voice in the car with me was no longer in my lap.

The eye contact broke when I’m guessing she spotted Shelly’s head pop up, shit almost at the same time a car chirped, and her question was answered.

“Nah Mama, I tol’ you I’on be having time to check shit like this out.” He grabbed her hand seconds later and they walked into the restaurant.

“You know them?” Shell asked now in the passenger side of the car fixing her lipstick.

“Nah.” Pissed was an understatement, but who was I to be pissed. Not only was I seconds off a good nut, but Peach wasn’t my bitch. Her keeping company with that Mafia nigga shouldn’t have bothered me, but it did.

It fucked up my focus for the rest of the day. My meeting with Shelly was a fucking bust, because after all of that, I dropped her ass off and went home. I needed to do

some fucking thinking because I wanted to do some reckless shit. That nigga was too comfortable touching her, too comfortable in her fucking presence. What the fuck was she even doing with his ass? Better question why was I even tripping over a bitch that wasn't mine? This was some bullshit, and I fucking knew it. Affected by whatever the fuck she was on with old boy. I was having a good ass day up until I saw her ass, up until she let that nigga touch her.

I could've had the whole breakfast joint sprayed, but I didn't. I didn't because that was out of character for me. Giving a fuck about her being around that nigga was out of character for me. Good thing I didn't show that shit though, because the last thing I needed was for her to see it. For anybody to see it. A nigga needed to regroup and focus on the money like I been doing. Onenight with Virtue shouldn't have had any effect on that. I fucked and ducked females all the time, so this was no different. Except the fact that not only had I given her a nickname, but she ducked my ass. This wasn't over though, on me I'd be in her space soon.

It took everything in me not to go back to that fucking restaurant and fuck some shit up. I had to remind myself that she didn't belong to me, even though the way her body bent to my will told me I had some sort of claim. Did I want that shit though? Probably not, but the thought of another nigga touching where I touched pissed me all the way off.

Without another thought, I dialed up this nigga named Facts that we trusted to handle sensitive and technological shit for us. Of course he was Ace, because wouldn't nobody do what he did.

"Yeah, my G," he answered on the first ring.

"Get me the rest of what you can on Virtue Wilson. Remember shorty I had you send the laptop to?"

“Yeah I remember.”

“Get me err’thing you have on her. Also, send her address and shit to my phone.”

Bet, I’ll have it to you before the night is out.”

After I hung up with him, I went to take a shower. I had to show face at this Ace event tonight, then I had some other shit to see about.

What I didn’t anticipate when I got out of the shower was to see that Facts had gotten me what I needed so fast.

The first thing I did was send her a message.

Me: You better not let that nigga touch you.

After I saw the message deliver, I smirked before tossing my phone back on the bed so I could get dressed.

Like all Aceevents this motherfucker was packed. Bitches who wanted to be chosen, and niggas with too much liquor in their systems. Too bad my head wasn’t in it tonight because I had somewhere else I wanted to be. Somewhere else I was about to be.

“You ‘round here looking like you got other things to do.” My brother’s voice to the left of me broke my thoughts.

“Cause I do. Why you all in my shit?”

“Cause I can be, nigga. She ain’t coming, she got her daughter.” He assumed I didn’t know that already.

“Ain’t nobody looking for shorty.”

“The fuck you ain’t. I see it all in yo’ eyes.”

“Fuck I’m looking for her for when I already know where she at.” A chuckle escaped my lips just as Jovie walked up. Within seconds he had his arm around her shoulder and he was pulling her into him. Nigga was on some straight up possessive shit and all I could say was about time.

“Sup, Jo? You finally stopped shattering this nigga’s ego?”

She giggled. “Something like that.”

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“Fuck outta here she ain’t shatter shit. She was just doing that dumb ass overthinking shit that females do. She knew what was up the whole time.” He had a knowing smirk.

For a moment we all silently looked over the balcony at folks partying.

“I’m about to head out. I got some shit to go handle,” I spoke to my brother.

He cut his eyes in my direction, before shaking his head. “Yeah, alright man. Call me when you make it in. We’re about to head out in a lil’ while too.”

I nodded then discretely slipped through the back door. Nigga ain’t feel like dealing with all that extra shit that motherfuckers liked to pull. I had Virtue on my mind and nothing was finna stop me from getting to her. The fucked up thing is I didn’t know if I wanted to be in her space to curse her ass out or touch on her in the right ways. I was all fucked up.

When I got into my car, I pulled up the address that Facts had given me, before putting that shit in my GPS. I knew my way around the city, but the lil’ burbs and shit weren’t my thing. Well any burb other than my own. Hers was about ten minutes outside of the city, and fifteen minutes from where I was right now. Both locations closer than my own crib. My main place was all the way out of the way, but my duck off spot was about twenty minutes away.

When I pulled up to her place, I nodded in appreciation. It was a nice spot, one of the newer building developments in the area. I looked at her building for a while before I finally got out of the car. Thankfully Facts had not only given me her address, but

also the code to her building and what apartment she was in. My boy was the Kobe of this computer shit, straight up magnificent at what he did.

I bypassed the desk because old boy was sleep and went directly to the elevator. It opened the second I stepped in front of it. I stepped in and pressed the number to her floor, before leaning back against the wall. With my phone in my hand, I finally decided to look at the response that she'd sent back earlier.

Peach: Bye Cartrek.

Me: Open the door.

The elevator doors opened a minute later, and I stepped off walking in the direction of her corner apartment.

Peach: Are You crazy or something?

Me: Crazy af. Now open the fuckin' door.

I responded just as I reached the door. I was about to knock when the door swung open wildly. Half-dressed and mugged the fuck up she stood there. "What are you doing here, Cartrek?"

"The fuck you mean what am I doing here? That nigga bet not be here."

"And if h—" The smoke detector in her house went off, forcing her to turn away from the door and rush back toward the kitchen.

I took that as an invite to come in, which I did locking the door behind myself. Her crib smelled good, like she was in this motherfucker getting down. When I walked in, I noticed the dimly lit living room, with Rush Hour playing on the TV.

“I didn’t tell you to come in.”

“You ain’t have to. I was coming in anyway.” I looked around the kitchen noticing the glass of red wine sitting in the middle of the island, and her phone next to it. She was too busy bent over in the oven to pay me any attention. That of course gave me ample time to take in her lil’ vibe. Crib nicely decorated and clean as fuck, besides the toddler toys you couldn’t even tell she had a child.

“Why are you here, Cartrek?” She was now standing up straight and sitting a pan of whatever on her stove.

“How long you been seeing that nigga?”

She turned around sending a mug in my direction. “Why?”

“Cause I fucking asked.”

She shook her head. “Really? You do kn?—”

“You fucking him?” I asked before she could even finish whatever smart remark about to slide off her tongue.

She threw her head back, turning her nose up narrowing her eyes in my direction. She was offended as fuck which alone let me know she wasn’t fucking him. I don’t know why I cared so much, but I did. The mere thought of it had me wanting to yoke her ass up.

“I don’t know what type of bitches you’re used to, but you’re not going to come in my fucking house and cal?—”

“Muh. Loud. Very loud.” A small voice interrupted Peach, while a small hand started

pulling at her shirt.

I stepped around the island, seeing a toddler standing there with an iPad and a hand full of her mother's shirt. Shorty was the spitting image Peach, but with brighter skin.

Peach sent a mug in my direction, before softening her face to look at her daughter.
"I'm sorry baby."

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The toddler nodded, then slid back down the cabinets and went back to whatever she was doing on the iPad.

Peach glanced down at her daughter to see what she was doing. “You got a lot of fucking nerve, coming over here and insulting me.”

“Stop cursing.”

“Nig—Cartrek I know like hell you didn’t come here to ins?—”

“Nah I didn’t. I apologize for that. Something ‘bout you got a nig—me on some selfish shi—stuff.” Here I was telling her to stop cursing but it was hard as hell for me.

She folded her arms over her chest looking at me for a while longer before I guess my answer sufficed. “Not that I answer to you, but no I didn’t screw him.”

“But you went on a date with him.” I didn’t mean to say that aloud. That shit bothered me.

“And you got your di—thing sucked in your car. Since we’re listing events.” She leaned against the island peering at me.

I was about to speak, but baby girl stepped from behind the island scratching the top of her head. She looked to be leaving the kitchen to go in the back of the apartment. Then she turned around.

“Too loud, Mama.” She looked from her mother, then at me as if she just realized I was standing in her kitchen. Seconds later she was standing in front of me, studying me like her little ass was grown or something. “Mama who?” she asked.

“He’s fro?—”

“Hey pretty girl, your name must be Adorie.”

She smiled. “Yes. What’s yours?”

I leaned down on one knee getting to her height. My name is Cartrek?”

She nodded. “Trek.” She took it upon herself to shorten my name.

I chuckled.

“Can you stop making Mommy yell, Trek?”

I was taken aback by her sassiness, but she had that shit honest. “Yeah, I got you lil’ mama.”

“Good, bye.” Then she pranced her ass out of the kitchen toward the back of the house.

“Don’t you go messing with that dog, Adorie.”

“I not,” she sassed from afar.

When it was just Peach and I, she folded her arms giving me a look like she wanted to curse my ass out. “Why Cartrek?”

“Cause I like you and I ain’t liked nobody since my wife,” I admitted honestly.

She was taken aback by my honesty. “And where is your wife?”

“Dead.”

Cartier

The last thing I wanted to do was be in a club chilling Ace style, especially when that shit was no longer appealing to me. I don’t know what the fuck had come over me, but a nigga was on a different wavelength.

My eyes went from grazing the room to the beautiful woman at my side. She sipped on the club soda and cranberry, while vibing to the music.

Throwing my arm around her shoulder I pulled her in closer to me, so I could whisper in her ear.

“You ‘bout sexy as hell in here.” I had been telling her that shit all night. She was probably tired of it at this point.

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“Thank you, baby.” She moved in front of me now leaning forward slightly and grinding her thick ass against my already bricked up dick.

“Keep fucking around in here.” I palmed her ass before sitting down and bringing her down with me.

Laughter spilled from her lips as I found myself faced with an even better sight.

“You ready to go?” I held her on my lap like mall Santa did the kids every year.

“Thought you’d nev?—”

“Well look what the cat drug in. Hey Jo.”

Taylor stood in front of us with her hand on her hip and a nasty ass expression.

“What’s up.” Jovie stood up off my lap.

“We ain’t seen too much of you. I guess I know why.” Shorty was salty as fuck and that much was evident.

Standing as well, I grabbed Jovie’s hand so we could leave.

“So, ya’ll fucking?” Taylor asked like she had some right to know when she didn’t.

“Where is that your business?”

“I just asked a question. You out here fucking behi?—”

“Aye Taylor move the fuck around because we ain’t ‘bout to do this in here,” I responded this time, forcing Jovie behind me.

“Oh so this you? You’re with her like that, Cartier?”

“You know not to question me, just like you now know not to step to her on no bullshit. Go enjoy the festivities.” My tone was as icy as my glare, because within seconds she was walking away.

Jovie stepped around me, looking off into the crowd. She was likely about to give me some shit, but I didn’t feel it. Not at all, so before she could start, I pulled her body into me and kissed her temple.

“This is why I did?—”

“Fuck all the reasons you about to tell me why we shouldn’t be doing what we’re doing. Us is us, two motherfuckers on the inside. Don’t let folks who stuck outside fuc?—”

She turned around throwing her arms around my neck and looking up at me. Our eyes were connected for long enough before she was on her tippy toes locking her lips with mine. That was it right there. We left the space a little after that making our way to get something to eat before going home.

The dynamic with myself and Jovie was unlike anything I had ever experienced with a female. We fucked and sucked like lovers in a honeymoon stage, then chilled and hung out like homies who had known one another for lifetimes. I didn’t talk to many, but Jovie was different. I talked to her and trusted her with shit that I didn’t trust a soul with. I trusted her more than anything, and prayed to fucking God that trust

didn't fuck me up in the end.

Hearing the shower in my bedroom, I pulled my shirt off walking toward it. I'd spent the last twenty minutes of my time talking to my brother who was at Virtue's house. He wanted to talk business, but I wanted to know why he was creeping around. I assumed when he left tonight he was going home, but I was entirely wrong. Trek had me surprised and low key worried at the same time. I'd see his ass in the morning though, and there was no way he could avoid my questions.

Ridding myself of my clothes, I stepped in the shower with her. She had her back to me, while she allowed the water to cascade down her body. Of course she had this big dumb ass waterproof bonnet on her head, so she wouldn't get her braids wet.

"I didn't ask you to come in here." She had yet to turn around and look my way.

"I'on care. Ain't like yeen want me to come in here." I pulled her body into mine, kissing the side of her neck. She melted into my embrace.

"You be tryna be difficult and shit. I'on like it," I mused.

"Have you ever thought about the fact that maybe I'm just difficult?" She turned her body around, facing me.

"Oh I know you are, but what I'm saying is how much dick I gotta lay for you to get over that lil' difficult stint you're in."

Now it was her turn to laugh. "What is wrong with you?"

"You, niggas is addicted to everything about you. Ever since you let me between yo' legs I been fucking obsessed. Then you think 'cause a female walk up on us in the club that I'ma let this go... this pussy go...you go?"

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yeen have to. You’ve been moping and shit.”

“I’ve been just thinking, but you know what the funny thing about all this is?” She pushed me back against the bench in the shower.

“What?”

“I couldn’t go anywhere if you paid me, because to be to be honest I think you trapped me.”

I grinned hard as fuck, knowing she couldn’t see me in the dark ass shower room. For the life of me I couldn’t understand why she refused to turn the light on when she got in. Talking about it was peaceful, shit peaceful enough to break your fucking neck if you asked me.

“Trapped you how, baby girl?”

“How else? Stop smiling so fucking hard. I can still see your teeth in the dark.”

I chortled. “Trapped is a strong word.”

“Well did you?”

“You mad?” I asked, wondering if she was.

“Should I be?”

“I don’t know, should you?”

Seconds later her hand hit my shoulder. “Stop answering questions with a question. Should I be mad? Yes. Am I mad? No. Because something in me believes that if I am pregnant then maybe just maybe this baby is meant to mend what losing my grandfather did to me.”

I nodded. Honestly I couldn’t argue with that, because she truly believed that him dying left her down here alone, and that was the furthest thing from the truth. I just wasn’t a fan of words, I had to show her that through actions. I ain’t saying I was willing to jump into a relationship or anything like that, but for her I’d do some damage to the roster.

“Just promise me one thing though.”

My hand landed on her thigh. “What’s up.”

“If for some reason this isn’t working for you anymore, tell me that. Put me on game, so I ain’t out here looking stupid behind you.”

“I got you.”

ChapterFive

Virtue

My eyes scanned the playground, as I watched Adorie running about with the other kids. I always wanted the best for my baby and my goal was to give her that. I’d die making sure my daughter never wanted for nor needed for anything. The one thing I

couldn't give her was him. I couldn't give her what I had, because I wasn't willing to be stupid for a nigga who not only played me but expected me to be stupid. I hated that she didn't have a father, but there wasn't much I could do about it, except being prepared to have that conversation in a few years. It was what it was.

"Mommy look." She yelled for me to watch her go down the slide.

I smirked, watching her slide down then clap for herself. She was a true diva. "Good job baby girl." Of course I cheered because that's what you were supposed to do as a parent.

I glanced down at my watch taking note of the time. I'd told myself that I was gonna give her thirty minutes out here, but then thirty minutes easily became an hour. Now I was cutting it close on getting her in the house, starting dinner and being able to go over my quarterly reports.

The ringing of my phone broke up those thoughts instantly. When I saw Eva's name cross the screen I immediately rolled my eyes to the ceiling. The only reason she called was for one of two reasons. Shit, some of the time she called for both.

I didn't want to answer, but I did and immediately I regretted it.

"They turned the lights off, baby. I don't know how I'm gonna get the money to pay it, because I was so far behind. Can you?—"

"Dang, good afternoon to you, too, Eva. I'm fine as well," I responded as if she had asked.

She sucked her teeth. "That's good to hear. I really need you right now, baby girl. I know we have our differences but if my lights stay off, they're gonna put me out."

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I glanced at the park making sure to lay eyes on my child before I looked around hoping she thought I hung up because I wasn't speaking. This was that bullshit that made me send her phone calls to voicemail.

"Do you hear me, Vee?"

Of course I rolled my eyes. "How much?"

"A little over seven hundred, they put all those late fees and stu?—"

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, I know it's a lot, but as soon as I get it I'll pay it back to you. I just need to get myself together." That fast she'd forgotten that she said the money was for the damn light bill.

"So, the money is for you to get yourself together?" My eyes followed Adorie around the park up.

"Well half of it is. I jus?—"

"I don't have it."

She sucked her teeth again. "I know you do. I said I'd pay you back." At this point she was frustrated, I could hear it through the phone.

"And how do you know that?"

“Beca—look I wouldn’t even be calling you if I didn’t really need it. You only get one mama, Virtue. Can you help yours out?” And there she was with the manipulative shit.

“And there you go. Goodbye Eva.” I hung up before she could get another word in. The one thing I didn’t have was time for was bullshit...her bullshit.

Right when I was about to drop my phone in my purse I had yet another incoming call. Good I looked at the caller ID because I was about to ignore her ass. She wouldn’t get me on the line twice.

Seeing that it was Aylo requesting to FaceTime I answered. He and I had been talking back and forth since our breakfast date a few weeks ago. He was cool, funny and didn’t seem so hard up for pussy. Maybe because he had a lot of it around him on a silver platter. He owned a strip club, not to mention his phone rang our entire meal. Of course he wasn’t disrespectful enough to answer it, but yeah. I knew he had bitches, shit all of these niggas did. Who was I to think or believe any different? He wasn’t screwing me, so he was messing with somebody, right?

“Hey,” I answered, looking at him briefly then back up at Adorie now on the monkey bars.

“Yeen hit me up last night when you got in.”

“My bad. I was exhausted, hell barely standing. After I picked baby girl up, I got in and passed out.” I shook my head thinking about how badly my inventory beat me last night.

He nodded. “I figured. Let a nigga know next time though. Send a bird call or somethin’.”

Laughter escaped my lips while I watched Adorie walk toward me. “I got you.”

“Good. You finna let me take you out this weekend or I gotta show up at yo’ joint and order err’ thing on the menu then force you to come eat it with me.”

“Honestly both of those sound like a win for me, but what did you have in mind?”

“Saturday around seven. A movie and dinner. You said you like simple shit, right?”
There he was being persistent like he said he’d be.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then cool. I gotta take care of something right quick, so I’ll hit you back in a few.”

I nodded just as my baby approached. He hung up seconds later.

“Mama, I hungry.” She was scratching the top of her head looking just like Fari with the expression she gave me. Somehow my baby was my brother and my father’s twin. She didn’t lookshit like her own father, and I was glad for that.

“I know.” I gave her a knowing smile before standing to my feet. As if on cue my phone rang once again in my hand when I was about to toss it in my purse. This time I had received a text message and it was from Trek. The only nigga at this moment that I allowed to touch me, but I told myself I couldn’t expect anything extra. Sex and a little bit of conversation was cool with me especially because he was the type to go missing for days. Maybe not missing, but he’d go about his business for days and pop back up like he never left. At first I felt slighted, but I got over it. Shit I had to, because it was just sex...great sex.

On the walk home I decided to check my messages to see what see what Cartrek was talking about. He has to be the most guarded nigga I knew. When he was at my house

he was just there. He wasn't big on talking himself, but he'd listen to me giving minimal responses. He had this way of just being present when he was around. I tried not to read too much into that, so I entertained Aylo. Since that first day he had popped up at my house at least four other times, having dinner with Adorie and I then spending the night. Of course he made sure to be gone when I woke up but messaged me telling me he'd get up with me a little later. He never did.

Cartrek:I'm on my way over. I got us somethin' to eat.

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Cartrek: You home?

Me: I'm walking toward the house. About to walk in the building rn.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and proceeded in. Like always I let Adorie press the button as we awaited the elevator. It took a minute, but once it got to the lobby we stepped on. Of course she pressed our floor, while I stood back watching the numbers change as we went up.

"Where do you see yourself in about five years?" his voice was cool and crisp as we sat in the empty suite that he'd rented for our dinner. He was a thoughtful human.

"Five years. Specific huh?" I sipped from the wine glass in my hand.

He nodded. "What, did you want a nigga to say fifteen years? Shit, I'll be out of my prime."

I giggled. "No but that was random. Anyway I just wanna be comfortable. Giving my daughter the life she deserves and happy. Not too much, right?"

"Not too much at all. You see yourself letting a nigga be that happiness?" He sat back and looked at me for my answer.

"I don't know. It depends. I'm not into the idea of allowing a man to be all of my happiness, especially when he'd have the power to strip me of that."

He nodded. "Well some of it."

I smiled. “Maybe.”

“I know that Ace nigga still tryna be in the picture, and none of me is mad ‘bout that right now, but the more serious we get the less I’m tolerate it. I’m a selfish nigga, Vee.” That fast his sentence went serious, and he was giving me the most serious expression he could muster.

I swallowed hard and nodded my head. “And when you say serious, what exactly does that mean? For you of course?”

He chortled showing those perfect ass teeth. “Means when I’m putting all my energy into you, I want all of your energy on me. Serious.”

“Good to know, but until then we’re dating and you’re free to put all your energy into to all of those you’ve been putting it into?”

Laughter escaped his lips. “We’ll see.”

The rest of the night went on, and we continued to enjoy our night void of any Ace or Mafia talk.

The ding of the elevator interrupted my flashback of my date last week with Aylo. I blinked a few times, before my eyes landed on the opening gold doors. Adorie was the first to step off, then myself. When I did step off, I smelled him. Something about Cartrek’s cologne was so potent that it filled spaces leaving anyone smelling it with the desire to follow the scent. Then when I turned the corner, there he was standing at my door with food cartons inside of white bags with the words THANKYOU printed more times than necessary. Though he went missing more than a feral cat, he sure knew how to show up and have me knowing I’d veer from my plans. Not only had he brought dinner, but he brought dick. What a beautiful night tonight would be.

As soon as Adorie spotted Cartrek, she yelled his name rushing his legs like she had known this nigga her whole life. For some reason that was comical to me because she was such a fickle child.

I reached the door to my apartment a few seconds after she reached him. Once I had it unlocked, I stood back allowing him to walk in first and her little happy ass to follow. He set the food on the counter, while she ran to her bedroom. I already know she was running her ass in there to her iPad.

I was so busy watching her little bowlegs that I didn't feel Cartrek in my space, until his lips were against my neck and a hand squeezing my ass.

He definitely brought dick.

"How was work?" his question filled the kitchen. Though I couldn't see him, I know he was clearing off the table from our dinner.

"I didn't do much there today. I just went in and printed my quarterly reports. You?"

"Long ass day. Nigga needed a moment to just be." He placed a few plates in the dishwasher, before reaching to close it.

I nodded. "I get that some days are just exhausting."

"As fuck, but somehow when I come here with y'all..." His sentence trailed off. Something he normally did when he was biting back his words, looking for the right thing to say so he doesn't come off as too open.

"You get a lil' boost. I get it, you use us for our energy."

He chuckled. "Among other things." Within seconds he was behind me, dick stabbing

me in the lower back while his hand rested on my side.

“Good, We got a mutual agreement.”

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His lips found my neck and within seconds I was forced against the sink. “A mutual agreement, huh?” another peck behind my ear.

“Yep.”

In one swift motion he’d turned me around and put me up on the edge of the sink stepping between my legs.

We kissed for what felt like a brief forever before he picked me up and carried me off to my bedroom. He was sure to stop at Adorie’s door to look in on her before we continued to my bedroom.

He placed me on the floor in front of my bed, before stepping back. “You still seeing that nigga?”

“You still getting head in cars?”

He continued to pull his shirt off his body. “You just gon’ keep playing with fire ‘til you got somebody blood on your hands.”

“How? Unlike this thing where you pop up, fuck me, and go about your business, he actually takes me out. And before you ask, I’m not fucking him.”

“You want dates, Peach?” he asked while continuing to come out of his clothes.

Stupidly I nodded. “Look, I know we are?—”

“I ain’t just fucking and ducking you, Peach. I be busy.”

“Sure, so busy that when I wake up in the morning you be gone.” I immediately regretted the words as they escaped my lips. Scorned and all.

Before I knew it he was in my face, looking at me with an expression that I couldn’t read. One that I knew for sure was the opposite of my emotion-filled confession.

“Maybe we need to cool off. I’m not equipped for this. ” I don’t know what I was saying, but I felt like I needed to say it. I felt like I needed to run while I was ahead instead of getting my ass caught up in the mix with an emotionally unavailable man like him.

“You want me to leave?” His question hit me likesomebody was stoning me. Mouth dry as hell and emotions at an all-time high.

“No, but I think it’s best if you did.”

He nodded, and before I knew it he was retracing his steps. Redressing to leave at night instead of in the morning while I slept.

He was gone less than twenty minutes later and I was left wondering if I made the right decision, because technically my feelings were my problem. Not his.

After he was gone I lay in my bed questioning myself wondering if I had done right in sending him home, but I had to right? It was necessary. That is what I told myself up until my phone started ringing.

When I glanced down to see who it was, of course it wasn’t him. It was Aylo, requesting to FaceTime like always.

“Yesss..” I sang into the phone.

“See, I knew you could hit them high notes, but you be playing.” He was lying against deep blue sheets with a DIOR printed du-rag on his head.

“I cannot. I was ju?—”

“Naw naw don’t try to downplay it now. You can blow, Mama.”

I laughed at his silly ass. “Yeah whatever, I’m a let you keep thinking that. Why are you in so early? Usually you’re out running the streets.”

He chuckled. “Damn that’s cold. A brother can’t just be tired?”

“So, you’re tired?”

“As hell.” He shook his head. “Plus I wanted to talk to you. Niggas know for a fact if they don’t call you at a certain time you won’t answer the line. Be knocked the fuck out.”

I laughed, because though he was right mostly I also didn’t answer the phone because some of the time he did call my ass was laid up next to Cartrek and I wasn’t dumb enough to answer the damn phone no matter how unserious things with he and I were.

Jovie

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I had a doctor's appointment early this morning, one that confirmed that I was indeed carrying this crazy man's baby. While I surly looked upside his head, he had the biggest smile on his face. A smile so damn big that his teeth were threatening to break out of his mouth. So I kind of came to the conclusion on my own at home, having a doctor confirm it made this so much more real.

He had really trapped me, and I was really going to have his baby. This was probably the most unorthodox situation I had ever been in. His smile in the doctor's office was ingrained in my brain because he was so happy and I didn't really know how to feel. I mean yes I felt this thing between us, but things were moving in a way I wasn't used to. Shit I wasn't the relationship type, and he knew that because he wasn't either. As a matter of fact we talked about this that night. The night that started this whole thing.

When I climbed into this man's car the last thing I expected was for us to end up in a hotel at two in the morning. Wasn't one of those trashy joints either, it was nice but not the one I was supposed to be in while I was here. Our girls trip to Miami had gone nothing like planned. Tay had hooked up with some nigga from the club, while Gema had ditched us for Cruz. That left me with Tasha who didn't know how to party and this nigga, Cartier. Wasn't anything wrong with Cartier, shit if anything he was too fine and easy on the eyes. Type of nigga you just knew brought his own set of issues and had whole bunches of bitches following up behind him to get chose. Hood rich niggas had it like that.

"You good over there, Jovie? Yeen finna bust out the door and run off on me are you?"

I giggled, broken from my mental tangent for the first time since we walked in the

room giving him a thorough look. He'd shed his shirt since I last gave him a look, now showcasing the swamp of tattoos that loitered his beautiful body. "No."

"Good." He was in my face seconds later pulling me against him before he picked me up and carried me into the bedroom of the suite. Like magnets my legs locked around his waist loving the feel of his face in my neck. I was wasted as fuck, because I knew this shouldn't have been happening, but I couldn't stop it. I couldn't free the words from my brain because I wanted it, I wanted to break my celibacy for him, for this moment right here.

Seconds later my back was flushed against the cool hotel goose down, while he gripped my body at the edge of the bed. Hands locked on my ankles forcefully moving my body to where he wanted me.

"Fuck," he murmured just before licking his full lips.

That was when he first made contact, his heavy index finger tracing the outline of my pussy while his middle finger occasionally traveled deeper.

"I wanna taste it first, you gonna let me?" his eyes bore into mine, daring me to deny him.

"Nn...noo," I stammered, now sitting up on my elbows with the desire to watch him do just that.

Him tightening his grip around my hand grounded me, bringing me back to the present. Now mentally back in the car with him, I gazed over at him with a knowing smirk. "We have just never used condoms. Not the first time and damn sure not now."

He laughed. "First time we were both fucked up, not thinking 'bout it. Then after that,

shit was a conscious effort.”

“A conscious effort, Cartier?”

“Yep. I wanted you, and you acted like you couldn’t get over some shit that didn’t matter. Now we stuck together, least for the next eighteen.”

“What if I was a fucked up female and you just made a whole baby with me. What if I’m the wors?—”

“You ain’t.”

“But how do you know that, Cartier?” I asked attempting to emphasize my point. “You made a baby with me because you liked the se?—”

“I been stalking yo’ mean ass for years, Jo. Plotting, tryna get to know you and peeping err’time you turn niggasdown. You think that night was some fly by the way shit? Well it wasn’t that night I was drunk enough to go for what I wanted instead of watching you from a fer like I been doing. I ain’t no scary nigga by any means, but the idea of something real with you scared the fuck out of me. One look at you let me know that you wasn’t shit like err’body else, that I was gonna feel you and be fucking stuck ‘cause that’s how you had me when I first met you. When Gema first introduced you to me.”

I blinked a few times just looking at him, mentally attempting to travel all the way back. It wasn’t possible was it? He had to be bullshitting me, because that would mean I had been oblivious to this with him way longer than before. “Are you serious?”

“Shit had just popped off with Trek, and I wasn’t looking for shit serious but I wanted you. I just knew I wasn’t in the best headspace and I was gonna fuck it up, so I never

stepped to you. Kept it cool.”

I nodded. “That night I broke my vow of celibacy with you.”

He smiled. “I know.”

I turned my head in his direction taken aback. “Those bitches were feeding you my business like ninety going north, huh?”

He chuckled. “Makes you feel any better, I didn’t ask about none of it. Motherfuckers knew I wanted you. Only person who didn’t know was you.”

Chapter Six

Cartrek

I hadn’t talked much to Peach since she nearly threw a nigga of her crib. I struggled with the fact that I understood why she did it and trying not to give a fuck. I tried hard too, but it didn’t hit me how much I liked her until a few days later when I was going home instead of to her crib to freeload off the energy and enjoy the company. I knew I fucked up because I should’ve never started hanging out with her. Should’ve kept it strictly fucking and now here I was fucking stuck. I refused to reach out to her, because I wanted her to hit me up, but she hadn’t done that. She was standing her ground, something I used to not give a care if females did. It used to not matter to me one way or another, but with her it affected me. She affected me and that irked my entire fucking soul. I couldn’t let it show though, I had to keep it the fuck moving and pay attention to the things that warranted my attention. Peach didn’t belong to me, so she didn’t warrant my attention. Though I wanted to give her all the attention in the world, I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t risk repeating past mistakes.

“Four years Mia, four fucking years and you only slipped once.” My eyes beat into

hers as she looked me square in mine. She didn't even look like the woman I loved, she looked like a fucking pig. I couldn't believe I didn't see it before now, can't believe I didn't catch it. God knows what she had on me at this point. Her thick hair was pulled back, brushed into a perfect Librarian bun to the back of her head, and not a drop of makeup rested on her usually made up face. A beautiful fucking pig.

I turned my back on her and walked to the far side of the space. I needed to get as far away from her as possible, because at this point I was liable to choke the life out of her.

“If you just let me ex?—”

“Nah, fuck an explanation. That ain’t necessary. What’s necessary is you telling us what the fuck you got,” Cartier spoke.

“I can—Trek! Baby it isn’t what you think.” She began to cry. Something about her that always affected me. Her tears always broke me when she shed them, but today was different, today the audacity of her to shed them enraged me.

“Then what the fuck was it, Mia!” My voice elevated killing the cold silence that followed her begging. “Tell me the picture and the badge ain’t yours. Tell me the information I got is wrong. Tell me that shit, and on my life I’ma run with it.” I knew I couldn’t run with it, but in that moment I needed something to make this shit feel less real.

“I...I.” she shut her mouth, before looking down at the aged wooden planks that lined the dock that we currently stood on.

“You can’t do that, can you. Because when you took those vows yeen mean a damn thing you said. You intended to do whatever was necessary to see me behind bars. You intended to take from me what I spent my whole fucking childhood building.” With each word I spoke I walked toward her with my hand on my side. “I’m sorry yeen succeed. Shit, I’m sorry you lost everything including your life behind this shit.” Before either of the three other people on this dock knew what was going on, I had already done what was necessary. I sent a slug through the forehead I once loved... the forehead I had kissed a million times. She dropped instantly, falling on her back with blank eyes staring up at the sky.

“Damn you aright in here? You been held up in this fucking office since this morning.” Cartier’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Nah, I’m straight.” I looked around my office, before my eyes landed on him.

He eyed me for a minute as if he was debating if he’d accept my answer or not. When he nodded his head, and a smile creased his lips I knew he wasn’t on any of that over questioningshit he usually did.

“It’s official, you’re ‘bout to be an uncle nigga.” He was excited, so damn excited that he seemed like he was about to pop out of his skin.

I nodded my head happy for my brother. “Good shit, how did Jovie take you trapping her?”

He chuckled. “Better than I thought she would. Believe it or not I’m feeling this shit with me and her. Shit, who knows we could be the fucking Huxtables.”

“You want that?” I asked, searching his eyes for the answer before he spoke it.

“Didn’t know I did until we stepped in that appointment room and the lights went out. Shit was fucking magical, now I’m wondering what the fuck I’m a name my seed and how I’m?—”

“And Jovie?” I asked making sure this nigga wasn’t just fixating on making a bunch of fucking kids with random bitches and becoming a hood father. You know the nigga with a baby on every block, with like eight different bitches.

“We locked in. I’m a have to put in some work to get my starting five, but we good.” He lit up just thinking about shorty. This couldn’t be the same nigga who didn’t want anything serious weeks ago.

I chilled and talked with my brother for a while longer, before Melanie called me asking her to meet her at some restaurant so we could talk. What we had to talk about, I didn't know but when she said it was important and couldn't wait, I decided to humor myself. When she sent me the address to Peach's spot, part of me didn't wanna pull up, 'cause I didn't wanna. How in the fuck could I have forgotten? Shit maybe because I had been trying hard as fuck to block her out of my mind.

I parked the car, and hopped out to go in. I scanned the parking lot hoping to see Peach's car, but it wasn't in the lot which meant she wasn't here. When I walked in, I immediately spotted Melanie's stupid ass sitting in the corner booth near the entrance of Peach's office. Shit, if I didn't see her she waved me down so I could. I almost didn't sit down, instead I wanted to walk my ass straight into Virtue's office. I wasn't gonna do that though, because one she wasn't here and two, she said her peace. It was what it was at this point no matter how I felt about it.

I slid into the booth glaring at Melanie before I spoke. "What?"

"Well hello to you too." She smiled like this shit wasn't odd. Like us sitting across from one another was a normal occurrence. We didn't share meals or converse, we fucked and that was it. Nothing more nothing less.

"Fuck that. Why did you call my phone all urgent. What do you want?"

"I'm pregnant, Trek."

I threw my head back in confusion. "Pregnant by who? Because it damn sure ain't by me."

"I'm pregnant and it is your baby." Her voice carried, loud enough for the whole fucking restaurant to hear. Not to mention on some dramatic shit she started crying. Like what part of the game was this.

I was about to respond, but I felt eyes on me, so I looked around. When I turned around my eyes rested on Peach. Caught her staring before she looked away and turned to address old girl at the bar.

“I can’t believe you. I know nothing with us was serious, but the fact that you’d deny a child we made is a new low. Even for a man like you.”

I watched Peach say a few more words to old girl behind the bar before hi-tailing it out of the front doors. What she meant by a man like me, I didn’t know, but I didn’t give a fuck either. This was bullshit and I didn’t like it. So, I stood to my feet, tossed a couple bills on the table, and crossed over to her side. I bent down, so she could hear me.

“It ain’t my baby and you know it. However since you’re so convinced and seconds from manifesting that shit do us both a favor and get rid of it. I’ on want it, and you don’t need it.” Then I pat her shoulder and walked out of the bar. If Mel knew what was good for her she’d do what she was told.

When I left out of the space I was hoping to catch Peach, but by the time I stepped out of the restaurant I only saw a white G-Wagon Pulling from the lot. I knew that flashy shit from anywhere. She was still seeing that nigga.

I didn’t have a lick of say so on what she did and who she did, but seeing that nigga was dangerous, because it made me wanna do reckless shit. Made me wanna order a spin on his fucking block just because she was in the car with him. Peach made me reckless, and as much as I didn’t need that shit in my life I knew I wanted her. FUCK!

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Cartier

I was on my way to the crib when Jovie told me she was on her way to the city. What the fuck she was doing out here I didn't know, but I wasn't hesitating to meet her wherever the fuck she was. When I met her I found that she was going to see her grandfather's lawyer, finally. At this point I was glad I met her because her auntie was seconds from catching a bullet. The old bitch was borderline harassing Jovie, and I didn't like that at all.

"Yo' folks here too?" I put out the blunt I lit up on my way to her.

"Mhmm. They're already up there."

"Yo' bitch ass daddy too?"

She laughed. "Behave baby daddy."

"I'ma try, but if he don't control his bitch I'ma chastise his ass."

Of course she didn't respond, instead she pushed the button to summon the elevator.

"You 'bout as thick as a fruit basket in this lil' get up." I tugged at the material of the romper she wore."

"Thank you baby."

We stepped on the elevator, me against the back wall and her standing in front of the

doors. This was emotional for her, being in this space to for a Will reading of her grandfather.

“If you wanna talk abo?—”

“No. I’m fine. I just wanna get this over with and get some sleep. I’ve been working all day.”

“Bet.”

We stepped off the elevator seconds later. I followed her lead in the direction of the meeting. When we walked in the door, I immediately spotted her auntie and her bitch ass daddy. The old bitch had the nerve to sigh when she laid eyes on me.

I chuckled because that truly meant they thought my baby mama was about to come in here by herself so they could try that bully shit they did at the funeral. Not on my watch. Jovie could hold her own, but while I was here she didn’t have to. While I was here she didn’t have to hold a damn thing if she didn’t want to.

“Good evening, Dr. Jones,” Jovie spoke, before taking a seat on the sofa next to me.

He smiled sympathetically, “Hey Jovie. How are you holding up?” From what she explained he had known her grandfather for over thirty years, and they were good friends so there was a familiarity there.

“Well.” She forced a smile prompting me to put my hand on her thigh for reassurance.

“He ain’t the only person you see in here.”

Jovie cut her eyes in her auntie’s direction before her hand landed on top of mine.

That was her way of making sure I didn't say shit to her auntie, 'cause she wasn't about to. I hated when she wanted to be on that high road shit.

The lawyer looked between Jovie and her folks, before nodding his head. "We are all gathered here today to read the last will in testament of Mr. Earl Williams. Before I start I would like to say that as requested by Earl, there will be no contesting of this will. What is listed is final."

I could have sworn when he said that last part he looked over his glasses and his eyes landed directly on Jovie's sour ass auntie. Yup, this was about to be a circus.

"With that being said." The old man pulled out the thick wad of paper and unfolded it, before he began to read. "In the event of my untimely demise, I Earl Williams leave all of my earthly possessions, my rental properties all eight, My current residence and everything inside to my granddaughter Jovie Williams. To my daughter, Pearly Williams- Evans I leave 15 percent in my company. The rest is to be split equally between the residing current partners of the company. Last but not least I leave all of the assets mentioned in the list below to Jovie Williams. As well, I leave the balances of all of my account including savings to totaling a sum of fifteen point six million dollars to my granddaughter Jovie Williams."

Jovie was tense against me, hell with every word she grew tenser. Understandable because in so many words her grandfather had just left her everything.

"No the fuck he didn't. He left me stake in a company and her everything else! This can't be true!" Here came the fucking circus.

"I'm sorry Ms. Williams-Evans, those were his wishes."

"His wishes my ass, none of that was his words. You've been working with her to ta?—"

“You’re a sick bitch, how dare you bring your foul ass in here and try to talk on my granddaddy’s grave over some money. Newsflash he left your hateful ass something, right? You could have had nothing.” Jo had been quiet this entire time, but I guess she had had enough. I guess the highroad was too far away.

“Show your auntie some respe—” Her pops had fucked up, because I was on my feet in seconds.

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“She doesn’t have to respect a motherfucking thing, not you or yo’ broad.”

Her father looked me up and down as if he was sizing me up, then shut the fuck up just like I thought he would. I was the wrong motherfucker to test like that. He peeped that though because he was silent throughout the rest of the lil’ meeting. That was good because I wouldn’t hesitate to knock his shit off. Hell, I already had aggression for him from whatJo told me about her childhood, so to be honest it would be a long time coming.

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t know. Is it okay to say that?” she asked seconds later stuffing a chip in her mouth.

“You’re entitled to that. You lost your last living relative, and you realized that today.” I pulled her in closer to me. We were supposed to be having dinner, but when we slid into the booths the air was unlike us. She didn’t speak much because she was so lost in her thoughts. That much was understandable, but I couldn’t let her stay there. “You want me to get rid of them?”

She giggled. “No, Cartier I don’t.”

“Then cheer up for me baby, cause I swear I’ll line the funeral homes schedules.”

More laughter escaped her lips. “Okay.”

“Good, cause we got something else to speak on.” My expression grew serious for a

moment which caused her to perk up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Yo girl gotta stop tryna humble my brother. Nigga don’t know what to do with himself while she’s keeping it moving.”

Jovie busted up laughing like I was cracking a joke. I was dead ass serious. Though Trek didn’t tell me about his feelings, I could just tell. Nigga was in his feelings on some distant shit.

“You probably need to tell him not to play with her.”

I shook my head. “That nigga is certified, but she’ll learn that shit in her own time.”

“Just like I learned about your antics in my own time?” She raised a brow looking at me.

I had to laugh because she had me with that one. “Probably, but you made it easy for me. You wasn’t out here entertaining lil’ niggas. Hell baby you mean as fuck, so wasn’t nobody bold or big enough to approach you.”

She cackled. “I am not mean.”

“The fuck you ain’t. You turned a few of the Ace’s down and those niggas was down bad body hurt.”

“But you still tried yo’ luck.” Her face held a questioning expression.

“Wasn’t no luck. We was cool for a few, kicked it in the same circle and you let me get to know you. Peeped you had something different about your mindset, and you

wasn't shit like the birds you chilled with."

She nodded. "You could've asked me and I would have told you that."

"You probably would have, but I had to see that for myself."

She nodded. "And then?"

"We both got fucked up that night and you let me between your legs." I licked my lips just thinking about her slippery slope between her legs. "You fucked up then because I was hooked, using Taylor's ass to get you to come out."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Shorty was willing to do whatever to stay in my face. Knowing I wanted you and to be in your face she was willing t?—"

"Keep bringing me in your space. Trifling as fuck." She shook her head.

"Not for me, because it worked, and I got you. Gut full of my seed and we 'bout to be the Huxtables in a few years."

If nothing I said made her laugh, that sure did and it brought a smile to my face. It was something about being able to make her happy or brighten her day that elevated my own happiness. On me, that's how I knew she was for me or we wouldn't have been so in sync...so connected.

Virtue

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I watched Jovie sip from her water awaiting my response to the news she'd just dropped on me. I'd admit the last thing I expected was for her to drop the news of her being pregnant on me, but I was happy for her. I just wanted to make sure shewas happy.

“Look, I know it’s crazy and borderline nu?—”

“Mumm. Can I have fries?” Adorie asked interrupting Jovie’s spill.

I nodded and handed her the little cup from my plate. “It’s not crazy. It happens, I just wanna make sure you’re happy.”

She nodded. “I am. He actually makes me happy. Plus I believe this baby is a blessing, and God’s way of trying to mend the hole left from losing my pop pop.” Her lips curled into a weak grief filled grin.

“Good, good. And you know I will always have your back for whatever, regardless of circumstance.”

She smiled, before gazing at Adorie. “I just can’t believe I’m a be somebody’s mama.”

“Yeah you are, and the funny thing about that is that for the first few months it’s gonna shock you.”

“I don’t know if this shock is ever gonna wear off.” She had one of those toothy smiles overtaking her features. “But on another note, what’s up with Cartrek?”

My face soured. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t talked to him.”

“Um why not?” she leaned in with a knowing smirk.

“Because he and I are on two different pages. Cartrek is guarded, and I get that bu?—”

“He has a reason though, Vee.” Jovie’s face housed a sympathy that wasn’t there before. “His wife betrayed him.”

“Huh?”

“Wait, you didn’t know he was married?”

“Yes, I knew he was married, he told me that much but as far as I know is that she’s dead. Lord please don’t tell me I done got involved with another married man, and he was lying.” I shook my head about to lose my shit. Only a psychopath lied about people being dead.

Jovie sat up and looked around before she looked directly at me. “His wife was a federal agent whose job was to turn him in.” When she spoke, she barely spoke above a whisper.

“What?”

“He’s guarded, because that’s all he knows, Vee. Nigga got some trauma.”

“So she is dead? How did she die?”

Jovie shook her head. “Hell if I know. Too many stories to know for sure. All I do know is that part is for real.”

I nodded, sitting back in my seat. “Well it’s good he and I aren’t messing around anymore. Plus he had a baby on the way with one of the females he messes with.”

She nodded her head. “For real?”

“Yeah, so I don’t have a horse in that race or any race for that matter.” I crossed my arms and rested back into the chair.

“And Aylo?” she asked.

“He’s cool, but I’m not sleeping with him, so you know how that goes?”

“True. These niggas be for everyone.”

I talked and chilled with Jovie for a while longer before we parted ways. I was taking Adorie to the store to get a few items to add to her closet, before we turned in for the night.

“Trek!” Adorie’s voice interrupted my thoughts as she took off running down the street. It took me a moment to see what she was running toward, but when I did my heart dropped into the pit of my chest. She had run straight to Trek who was leaned coolly against my car. As much as I tried to hide my emotions, my conversation with Jovie made me feel a way for Cartrek. I know he was no saint, but betrayal was the worse pain a person could encounter. Trust me I knew from experience.

“What’s good, Peach? You look like you seen a ghost,” he greeted.

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“Nothing, I was jus—what are you doing here?” I couldn’t start going easy on him just because I felt bad for his past. Niggas ran game all the time all in the name of trauma.

“Came to take you and lil’ ma for lunch, but from what she just said you already had that.” He held her up, smiling in her face.

“What about ice cream? We haven’t had that, Trek.” Leave it to my child to be the fucking crossing guard.

“You haven’t? Then that’s what yo’ day is missingshorty.”

“It is?” her dramatic ass asked, before looking in my direction. “Mommy can we go have ice cream with Trek? We can get clothes later.”

My eyes narrowed in his direction, before softening when I looked at her. “Yes baby we can.”

The ice cream parlor was right up the street, so we opted to walk, never mind how awkward it was considering I said much of nothing, but Adorie talked his ears off. He got a little break after she got her ice cream and convinced us to walk back to the house on the side near the park. Of course she made her way to the park, leaving me alone with Cartrek.

“You still mad at me, Peach?”

“Mad at you? Why would I be mad at you, Cartrek?”

He shrugged. "You tell me. Been running 'round with old boy avoiding me and shit."

I stopped and looked at him for a minute before I spoke. "How am I avoiding you, Cartrek?"

"Cause I had to pop up on you to see you."

"Cartre—" I was about to speak, but before I could his lips were on mine, and he had pulled my body into his.

"I'on like the idea of you letting another nigga be with you like this."

"You gotta stop putting your lips on me and touching on me. Don't you have a baby on the way?" I asked pulling from his embrace and turning to look for Adorie.

"She's by the slides and nah I don't."

I shook my head. "Wel?—"

"In the grand scheme of things, shit like that don't matter." He said that so close to my face that I knew a kiss to my temple would follow. It did too, because within seconds he did just that.

"What do you mean?"

"Little people don't really matter when it comes to what's supposed to happen." Here he was talking in riddles.

I was about to say something slick, but his phone started ringing. He answered it within seconds, stepping back from me. It wasn't a long conversation at all, if anything seconds later he was assuring whoever was on the other line that he was on

his way. It was definitely a woman because I could hear the high pitch in her tone.

Just that fast I was reminded of what Kash said, “These niggas are for everybody.”

ChapterSeven

Jovie - A week later...

I looked in the mirror studying myself for what felt like forever, looking for something. Very much something to physically indicate that that little alien in my gut was in there. I mean I felt him every day, but I didn't see him. Not yet at least, but I was ready to see my baby boy. We didn't know the sex for sure, but for some reason I felt like it was a boy, hell I lowkey needed it to be a he considering I didn't know a damn thing about pigtails and didn't want to learn. Plus, I felt bad if I had a daughter. I witnessed first-hand how Cartier was with his sister. Last week he was talking about cutting her off because she said she had a man, this week they were beefing because she had pushed back her visit weekend. It wasn't hard to peep that baby girl had a guy and was doing that thing we all did. You know spending all the time in the day with him. Us females did that shit all the time, especially the young ones. Anyway, I wasn't up for subjecting a baby girl to his overprotective ass antics. I could only imagine what my daughter would go through.

“Still can't see shit, but you are thick as a snicker baby mama.” Cartier walked in the bedroom eyes glued to my booty.

“Thank you.” I cackled before reaching for my dress.

“Anytime. I thought you had lunch with Vee today.”

“I did, but I wasn't really feeling well, and I got up late. I'll hang out with her at some point. I need to get to the studio and look over the plans for one of my events.” I

shook my head just thinking about one of the situations I had going on.

He nodded. “What got you irritated?”

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“Gema asked me to throw her party. Well plan it, but she’s changing her mind all through the process. Ho went from talking about one long table to small circle ones. Then sh?—”

“Don’t let that shit stress you out or piss you off. As a matter of fact I don’t know why you’re even throwing her shit, anyway. She got a fucking budget and I know for a fact those shits you do be up there. You gonna be pissed when she can’t pay for half of that shit.”

“She said Cruz was payi?—”

“Don’t believe that shit. That nigga’s wife monitors the accounts more than her fucking monthly. Trust me I know my blood. He can’t stand that broad, but he ain’t gonna disrespect her that bad.” He walked up to me wrapping his arms around my waist. “You chilling with me today?”

“Depends on what chilling with you entails. You know how you are.”

He chortled. “The fuck that supposed to mean?”

“You feed and fuck me. Literally in that order. Then be talking about how the streets don’t fill you up no more.”

“Damn that’s cold, see when I tell you how I fee?—”

“I’m just playing, baby. But I know you.”

“You talking shit, but don’t nobody tell you to walk around here half ass naked knowing yo’ body is my fucking kryptonite. I be tryna be focused and then bam! You walk yo’ thick ass out in some shorts you know too small and a half top talkin’ bout, ‘What you doing, baby daddy?’”

He had me there and I couldn’t help but laugh. He was right, I fucked with him when I was bored, asking him what he was doing when I already knew damn well what he was doing or where he was on his way to. “You know I could go hom?—”

“Yo’ ass is home. Anyway, Ace members were pulling up to Sandos tonight and I was gonna show face, but I changed my mind. Figured I’d chill with yo’ fine ass tonight especially ‘cause I know I’m getting some after the movie.”

Laughter escaped my lips. “You just know that fora fact, huh?”

“Hell yeah, and you’re about to run me a redo on 2K. Talking about beginners luck. Yeah right, fuck outta here.” He referred to the fact that I had blown him out a few nights ago.

“It’s Curry, baby.” I held my hand up acting like I was shooting a ball.

“You look ‘bout slow as fuck with that fucked up form.”

“Somebody is hating,” I taunted before pushing past him into the washroom.

“Ain’t no hating, I just peep that you hustled me.” By now he had his arms crossed and was looking at me with the eyes of a child.

I cackled. “I didn’t though. However since you’re staying in with me tonight I guess we can get that rematch cracking.”

“I’m down as long as you are, just don’t be mad refusing to cook, withholding pussy and on bullshit when I whoop that ass.”

I smiled at him, loving this moment we were in. Cartier and I didn’t act like a normal couple, shit if anything we were friends. The one thing he told me he couldn’t be to me when I told him that I didn’t want anything else.

“I think I may have to change my number.” I changed the subject jumping onto something a little more important.

“Why?” he leaned back against the sink peering intently at me as I continued getting dressed.

“My auntie. She won’t stop calling me. Hell if I was in the city at my place, I’m willing to bet she’d be at my door on a daily. And yes, before you ask all of her calls are about money.”

He nodded his head. “You want me to handle it? Matter of fact I got it. ”

“No. She’ll eventually stop.”

“ Nah, I said I got it.”

I looked at him for a minute, before shaking my head. “Well, have it and don’t do anything crazy.”

He had a smirk. “Ain’t gonna do nothing too crazy.”

“Yeah right. I can see it in your eyes that you’re lying.” I turned around in front of him, holding out my necklace. “Can you clip this?”

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He accepted it, doing as I asked within seconds. Then his hands found their way to my hips pulling me back against him. Then he turned us around to the mirror, locking eyes with me through it.

“I’ma do the dash behind you, wifey. Regardless of what you say or how you probably think it’s too much.”

Totally rested back in his arms, I nodded. “I hear you.”

“Good now get yo’ ass dressed. I’m tryna chill in the crib all day, but it’s hard to do that when we gotta run out and get shit to eat, right?”

Before I could offer a response, he slapped my ass and told me to hurry my ass up. I did just that too, and we left the house less than thirty minutes later.

Of course we argued the entire way there, because neither of us knew what we wanted to eat and couldn’t agree on anything. While I wanted Mexican he wanted fried chicken and french fries. Nigga wanted a hood meal out of the house with the mild sauce included. Where the hell we were finding the mild sauce I didn’t know, but according to him there was a store out west that sold it.

We eventually settled on nachos with french fries instead of chips. Though he hated the idea, he was willing to compromise as long as the taco meat was ground turkey and not red meat. That would take some getting used to because Cartier didn’t eat red meat at all. That meant as long as I had been with him at his house I’d eaten mostly turkey besides the one Wendy’s burger that had me on the toilet for hours, because let him tell it my stomach was no longer used to the harshness of red meat. I love steak,

so that was fucked up. Low key I had to because I had a shellfish allergy out of this world. We compromised though, and it was cute. Well not cute, but very adult-like and I liked it.

“What do you want outta life?” Cartier’s voice took my attention from the road ahead carrying us to his place.

“Happiness, fulfillment. Fullness.”

“In what terms?” I felt his eyes.

“I know nothing is perfect, but I want something close. I wanna create a life so beautiful that I don’t find myself regretting a thing. I just wanna be in a state of peace, and happiness at my best self.”

“You think you could attain that with me?”

I glanced in his direction for the first time since he started talking. Immediately I felt the need to put my hand to the side of his face. “I am attaining that with you. I love us like this.”

He nodded resting his head against my hand.

“What about you? What do you want out of life?”

“You, this, us and a few more kids.” He smirked after that last part.

“Are you sur?—”

“Positive. The hos, the clubs and all that shit gets old. Niggas run through some shit, but then you encounter that one that leaves a mark. That one that’ll have you denying

what you really want but plotting on making yo'self a permanent fixture in her life."

I laughed. "Meaning?"

"I'm all in, baby girl. If you want the world I'ma give you that shit with a bow wrapped around it."

I couldn't contain the smile that overtook my face. I never expected any of this, let alone from him. "Keep it like this."

Virtue

He was angry, that much was evident, but why did I care? Why did I care when for the last few weeks he had been with God knows who doing whatever? Why was I giving a care or even allowing my mind to travel to his section? I was here with Aylo and that was that. A firm grasp on my thigh broke my thought, causing me to look up at him. Him was Aylo, eyes hidden behind the designer shades. He was one handsome nigga, and he knew it with his cocky ass, but tonight he'd shown me a side of him I'm not sure I liked. Well screw that, he had introduced me to the less reserved side of him and hell no, I didn't like it.

It was a lot going on here, a lot of unsavory humans that I could feel energy coming from. Unsavory meaning a bunch of niggas with eyes I didn't trust. Though I liked spending time with Aylo, I didn't like this setting or the side of him I met tonight. I liked the intimate time, not this. He also seemed different when we were around people, less reserved and human. More like a reckless nigga with too much to say. The vibe was off, and I peeped that one hundred percent, especially when he had drank more in the last few hours than I'd seen on any of our dates. He was different.

"Yo' skin soft as fuck." He leaned in my direction so I could hear what he was saying. Then he pecked the side of my face before sitting back against the booth.

Being in Aylo's space differed totally from Cartrek's. At this point I was kicking myself off in the ass because I should have passed on this outing. Not only was my grown ass was sitting here devising a plan on how I could get out of this, but I was literally counting the minutes of how long I had been here I was so ready to go and I made no attempt to hide it. The thing is he was so in tune with everything going on around us that he didn't peep that I was giving off ghost vibes. I don't know how long he and his crew partied, and he didn't look like he'd be ready to leave any time soon. If anything him sitting back next to me was him getting a break from the bottle popping and pouring drinks down bitches throats. At this point just his touch alone made me uncomfortable. The vibe he introduced me to was not the vibe he maintained.

I'd had enough thinking. So instead of sitting here quietly, with my skin crawling from the contact of this man I stood up, about to walk off. He caught my hand before I could get far.

"Where you going?" he asked now standing beside me.

"Washroom." When he had yet to let my hand go but was looking around for someone to send with me, I shook my head. "I'm good. It's right there right?"

He nodded letting my hand go seconds later.

Good to know that one thing still remained in his inebriated state, but that wasn't enough. As soon as I neared the washroom door, I slipped in the opposite direction. When I peeked in his direction to see if he noticed, I noticed the same female whose throat he poured a drink down in his face. Shaking my head, I found my way to the main entrance of the club, near the stairs. Stairs that led upstairs to the section that I knew Cartrek and the Ace's were in. Though it was still loud from the music vibrating the entire space, I had some space and could be heard on a phone call.

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I had maneuvered to the Uber app when I heard somebody in my space. “What’s up shawty, you looking for a ride?”

Not only could I feel this man’s breath on the side of my face, but the landing of his game killed me. “Um no, I’m good.” It was one of the guys from Aylo’s section. One with the creepiest countenance. He gave off one of those I take pussyvibes.

“You sure ‘bout that? You seem lost.” He came too close for comfort, so I stepped back creating some distance. “I cou—” he then started but his sentence halted.

“She said she was straight, right? Fuck you was finna do? Take something that don’t belong to you?” My brother’s voice filled the space. Then before old boy could utter a word or even move he was airborne. Tafari’s fist had knocked his ass off his feet. Seconds later bouncers rushed to pick him up and put him out. They didn’t dare approach Tafari, let alone look him in his face. Their main focus was removing the now unconscious man from the doorway.

Of course after that his fiery eyes landed on me. Though I refused to look at him I felt them. “What I tell you, Virtue?”

Finally I looked up at him, irritated because he was on this fathering shit. “No, don’t do this. I’m grown and I make stupid decisions. Everybody does. The absolute stupidest decisions ever but trust me it won’t be made again. I’m swearing off all these niggas.” At this point I was borderline lecturing myself.

He didn’t say anything, but he nodded. I guess that meant I had said almost everything he wanted to say. “Gone ahead and get in the truck. I’m about to head out

right now. It's right out front." Then he looked to the guy standing next to him before speaking. "Do me a favor and walk her to the truck."

He nodded and without another word walked me out to my brother's truck. Then he held the door open for me to get in, before closing it behind me. I expected him to walk off, but he didn't. He stood outside scrolling through his phone, and I guess waiting on Fari. I was sitting in the passenger seat for all of what felt like thirty seconds when I heard his voice. His being Cartrek.

"I got her, you good." Then the door opened. "Get out of the car." His tone was leveled, but he was pissed. His being contained the same energy I felt when I was in the club, and we locked eyes. Though I wasn't near him then, I felt him. Now I was close to him and I felt him more than anything. He was more pissed than he was in the club. I can't say I didn't find it sexy, but he was definitely angry. But why did I care? He had enough to deal with.

I looked around, before my eyes landed back on him. He couldn't have been talking to me. Of course he was talking to me, but that didn't stop me from acting like he wasn't. "Wha?—"

"Get the fuck out of the car and lets go, Virtue. You got about five seconds before I pick you up and toss yo' ass over my shoulder."

Definitely pissed. He didn't call me Peach. Two could be pissed though, so instead of cowering in his anger I crossed my arms across my chest and settled back into my seat. I wasn't going anywhere with him, he had better go get old girl who was supposed to be having his baby. I wasn't even able to get comfortable in my seat before he did exactly what he said he'd do. In one swift motion he had my ass over his shoulder, and he slammed my brother's car door with all the frustration in the world. Hell. I was shocked the glass in the window didn't shatter from the force.

“Put me down, Cartrek,” I demanded as he literally carried my ass all the way to his car. Ass on his shoulder and head against his back like a whole ragdoll.

“Nah, ‘cause you can’t fucking listen. Fuck around and get your ears checked or something cause this shit OD,” he mumbled and ranted the whole walk.

Then we reached his car, and instead of putting me down and letting me get in myself, he put my ass in the car like I was a fucking child. Never mind the fact that he also strapped my seatbelt in before slamming the door.

“Where the fuck is Dorie, while you out here tryna get you and that nigga murked?” he asked as soon as he got into the car on his side.

I hope he didn’t really expect me to answer him, but of course he did.

“I know you fucking heard me.”

“I did, but I’m wondering why you think you can question me like I be?—”

“You sound dumb as hell. As a matter of fucking fact, tonight you was on some dumb ass shit too. Letting that nigga parade you ‘round like you a fucking trophy and you belong to him in that busted ass club.” Yep he was infuriated and here my stupid ass was in the car with him.

“This isn’t the way to my hou?—”

“Think I give a fuck? Where is Adorie?”

“With my parents, damn.” I sighed, irritated with him. “Then where are we going? Take me home.”

He didn't even bother responding. Instead he reached over and turned the music up to tune me out. One bold ass nigga is what he was, because he didn't say another word the whole forty-five minute ride to what I assumed was his house. Then when he pulled up, he didn't bother opening my door. He got out and walked up the path to the house, only waiting for me when he reached the door and noticed I wasn't behind him.

I had to stop to take off the painful ass heels that I had on my feet. They weren't comfortable when I put them on and now hours later my feet felt like they were leaving me. By the time I finally reached him, he was unlocking the door. After he had it open, he stepped back allowing me to enter first. Maybe he wasn't that pissed, but then again he was probably making sure I got in first so I didn't take off running.

I had never been here before, so I was in awe of the place. Not that the other house wasn't nice. This one was nicer. High ceilings, fully furnished with earth tones, and unlived in.

I was snapped from my admiration by the sound of him going up some stairs. I decided to follow him, considering I didn't know where anything was.

As soon as I walked into what I now saw was his bedroom, again I was in awe. Freaking stuck, because why did he come to my place when this was his.

"You fucked that nigga?" His hardened voice filled the space before I felt his eyes on me.

I sighed. "Why do you insist on asking me this when you're still fucking every bitch with eyes and a tongue?"

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“So you fucked that nigga.” His eyes felt like hands caressing every spot they touched. Beseeching for a response, but I realized that the longer I stayed silent the more infuriated he became.

“Why do you care?” I shattered the scorching silence that had overtaken the room.

He looked at me like I had two heads and wanted to knock one of them off my neck. “Answer the fucking question.”

“Ask the fucking question then. All you seem to be doing is making assumptions.” I could’ve told him I didn’t fuck Aylo, but I didn’t want to... not yet.

“Did you fuck him?”

“And if I did?” I tilted my head to the side awaiting his response. If looks could kill my ass would’ve been laid out on the floor.

“Then that nigga dead.”

With my head still tilted to the side, I looked him square in the eyes. They told no tale. He was willing to kill this man if at any point I had allowed him between my legs. Did I really want to keep playing with fire like that? Play with someone’s life, with this unhinged ass man before me.

“His blood is on yo’ hands.” He turned to walk away, pulling his shirt over his head like it was nothing.

“Well he didn’t fuck, so you’d be killing him for nothing,” I responded in a matter of fact tone.

“Wouldn’t be for nothing. You let that nigga puthis lips on you. He tou—” he started, but I couldn’t take this incessant shit anymore.

“Why are you like this? You’re mad at me for not obsessing over you. For being happy and not sad because you do you? Not waiting for you to deci?—”

“Yes, fucking yes!” His voice roared loud enough to make the hair on the back of my neck stand. “You let him touch you like you belonged to him. Had you ‘round his niggas like you were his bitch.”

“What gives you the right to regulate me when you don’t even want me? When all you do is fuck other bitches. Don’t you got a kid on the way?” He didn’t respond right away, so I kept talking or so I planned to.. “I don’t belong to anyone, Cartrek. Not him, not yo—” My statement ended with him moving at almost a vampiric speed back into my space.

“Nah, finish that statement. You don’t what?” By now he had my ass yoked up like one of those bad ass kids in Walmart. Anger was seeping through his pores while decreasing inside of me, because tonight, in this moment showed me how much I affected him.

“How can I belong to you when you don’t belong to me?” I broke. Anger didn’t reside in my being anymore. He had enough of it for the both of us.

“The fuck you mean by that? Where I’m at right now, Peach?” Still angry he huffed.

“Here, but only because you saw another nigga enjoying the space you didn’t.”

He was about to respond, but his phone began to ring.

When he held his finger up as if to tell me one minute, I rolled my eyes to the ceiling. Here this nigga was again putting me on hold for yet another female.

“Yeah,” he answered holding the phone to his ear and looking me square in the eyes.

“Where? The fuck you mean. He good?” His eyes softened with every word. “Nah, I got her. We’ll be up there.”

Now I wanted to know who her was and was who good? When he got off the phone his hand immediately went to the back of his neck before he gave me a serious expression. The words that spilled from his lips seconds later rocked my whole world.

“Tafari got shot. We got to get up to hospital right now, Peach.”

Cartrek

The moment those words left my lips I could see the anguish that entered her body. Then another moment passed us and she almost lost balance, prompting me to rush her.

“He...he what?”

“He got shot. We gotta move, Peach.” At this point I was holding her up.

She nodded her head, and that was it. She didn’t say much of anything else as I put my shit on and we left the house a few minutes later. Last time I saw Fari the nigga was mugged about her but talking shit with the lil’ niggas. What the hell had happened between now and then I didn’t know, but the moment we hit the hospital

somebody had better been telling me.

We arrived about twenty minutes later, rushing the elevator to the floor given by the nurse at the desk. Shorty tried to play that waiting room shit, but Peach wasn't having that. Like a fucking brute she made old girl give us a floor and room number before we reached an elevator. When we reached his floor a few seconds later, I spotted a few Ace members lining the hall, then my eyes landed on Luke leaned against the empty receptionist desk. I hung back to have a word him while she rushed into her brother's room.

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I needed some understanding on what took place tonight, and he knew that because as soon as I walked up, he was talking.

“Those Mafia niggas were on some bullshit. Upped on Trell and Fat Pete. Bullet probably wasn’t meant for Fari, but he was in the vicinity.”

“What do you mean they were on some bullshit?” I needed the full details.

“That nigga Alias, Aylo’s brother pulled up on us while we were loading up to hit the next joint. He was talking greasy, all drunk and shit. You know Fat Pete’s mouth, he bucked back. Alias upped, and shit went left. Trell took one to the hip and well, Fari took one to the chest. Doc said he’ll make it, but that shit was close.”

I looked toward the room, before looking back at Luke. I knew my thoughts were impaired, shit more than impaired those shits were blurred. I already had heat for Aylo off this Peach shit, but now it was bigger than that. There was no balance, because my feelings for Peach and the actions of Mafia was about to start something I knew wasn’t good for money.

“What you want me to do?” He awaited his marching orders and interrupted my processing.

“Take a few niggas and go light it up. Double up on the two.” If Ace took two bullets then them Mafia niggas needed a few more.

He nodded. “Bet.”

Technically Fari wasn't Ace, but he was affiliated, so niggas would still feel that even though I knew he would have rather handle shit on his own.

He walked off seconds later, leaving me to enter Fari's room and check on him and Peach.

"You mad dramatic, Vee. You see I'm sitting up here talking to you, right?" he fussed at his sister.

"How am I dramatic? You just got shot in your chest."

Just as I pictured Peach was standing on the side of her brother's bed mugged up likely mad at him for downplaying the situation.

"You know how many times I been shot, Vee?"

"No but do tell. Does Mommy know as well?"

He didn't respond but the expression on his face said that he regretted that shit the moment it came out of his mouth.

"Aight Peach, the man just got shot. Give the man some time to heal before you get in his shit."

She turned around sending me a menacing glare as well before she finally just threw her arms up and stormed her mad ass out of the room.

Instead of following her, I focused on Fari. I knew she wouldn't go far, plus it was more Ace members than a little bit in this motherfucker. She was good.

"You straight?" I asked after a while. That was my way of making sure Virtue was a

safe distance away.

“Chest burning and shit, but I’ll be good. Don’t send nobody on that nigga Alias. I wany his bitch ass myself.”

I chuckled. “Wouldn’t dream of it, but you gotta get you some rest and chill out up here, Fam.”

“The way these nurses look in here, I’m a rest good with one of them sponge baths, but I mean that shit.”

“I know.”

“Good. I’m a hit Cartier and leave Biggs up here with you. I’on wanna hear no shit on it either.”

He laughed. “I’m ‘bout high as hell right about now, leave whomever you want long as it ain’t Vee. Matter of fact take her ass home, I’on need that nagging shit she does. I can tell she’s about fifteen minutes from calling Mama, and I damn sure don’t need that.”

I could tell just when his medication kicked him because his eyes had glossed over and were barely open.

“Bet. I’ll make sure she don’t.” I walked out of his room a few seconds later. When I walked out of the hospital room a mug covered my face. When it came to Peach I had this possessive shit about me, so the nigga in her face doctor or not pissed me off. I didn’t like nobody in her fucking face, but every time I looked up niggas tested boundaries. Boundaries I had yet to set. Then the closer I got to her, I could hear what she was saying.

“I told you I have nothing to say. Time has passed and there is no?—”

“Look, is there anywhere we can talk? I know I fouled up in the pas?—”

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“You made your decision, Don. I’m not interested in talking to you about shit, my child is good. Somove around because there is nothing here for you.” She saw me and moved toward me almost like she knew my reaction before it surfaced.

“To be a fucking doctor you sholl is hard of fucking hearing.” Virtue stepped in front of me, eyes begging me to let it go.

“Look, buddy. This is between me and Virtue. I think it’s best if you go fin?—”

I jawed his yappy ass before he could finish his sentence. “Now it’s between me and you. Next time you see her, act like you don’t or fuck around and find out.”

“Was that even necessary?” Peach was pissed as we walked toward my car.

“Yup.” It probably wasn’t, but when it came to her a lot of shit I did was necessary. When she was involved I was short tempered about everything. No fuse no shit, years of therapy down the drain because I didn’t think when it came to her. I acted.

When we got into the car, she didn’t speak for a while at first, before I felt her eyes on me. I glanced in her direction. My hand landed on her thigh seconds later.

“I didn’t know he was there or let alone in the city.” She uttered those words softly. So soft that I barely heard her.

“Yeen had no contact with him sinc?—”

“Since I wouldn’t let him lie to me about leaving his wife. He told me he’d never

claim my child. That was the last time I spoke to that man. And I swore on my life she would never need him a day in hers.”

And she still didn’t.

Instead of going back to my place, we ended up at hers. It was not only closer to the hospital, but closer in general. I wasn’t taking that long ass drive again tonight. Niggas was dead tired, but sleep wasn’t too much in the plans. I had to make sure shorty was okay. While she made us something quick to eat, I took the time to call Cartier and Cruz to make sure they were aware of what happened tonight. We’d be meeting sometime tomorrow, because they had to be fully in the loop about the whole ordeal. Not tonight though, because I wasn’t dotting this fucking door.

Stepping behind her, I allowed my hand to travel up her side as she stood at the stove flipping the pancakes. I got so lost in feeling her up that I forgot I was on the phone with Cartier. That shit happened a lot. I knew I was fucking up, but I couldn’t help it.

“Did you hear what I said?” he asked loudly.

“Nah, ‘cause you’re fucking yelling in my ear. What’s wrong?” By now I had leaned down and pressed my lips against the side of her neck. Our conversation from earlier wasn’t over, but the fact that’s she didn’t pull away from my embrace nor tell me to move let me know that we had some type of understanding.

“I said mattress shop in the morning old, distracted ass nigga.”

“Sound about right. If you know I’m distracted then hang the fucking phone up. I’m a see you tomorrow.”

He laughed but did as I requested prompting me to slide my phone in my back pocket before I gave her some space.

“Does this sort of thing happen a lot?” She sat my plate on the island for me to go to.

“What?”

“You or my brother getting shot at. Is it a normal occurrence?” Those big brown doe-like eyes now rested on me awaiting an answer.

Lowkey I wanted to lie to her and tell her it wasn’t, but I couldn’t do that. Not to her. “Not abnormal. Lotta niggas want my head, and plenty of ‘em want my life. Ain’t none of this shit a cakewalk, Peach. Hell life ain’t even a cake walk.”

She looked at me for a while, before nodding her head. I guess she accepted my answer. “And the person who shot my brother?”

“Nobody you need to be worried about. Do me a favor though, stay yo’ ass away from Aylo.” I probably should’ve told her the full, but that much I’d protecther from.

“Did he have something to do with my brother being shot?”

“Probably not, but I don’t want you ‘round him.”

She smiled. “You wanna tell me wh?—”

“You belong to me, Peach. I don’t want my lady ‘round no nigga, specially not the nigga I’m possibly beefing with.”

She smiled. “Your lady, huh?”

I nodded my head feeling myself relinquishing what in my mind felt like control. I hadn’t been this open with a woman or anyone since Mia. There was no room for error with this. I’m not saying this had to be perfect, but it had to be pretty fucking

close, because I couldn't take anything less...My trauma couldn't. Her voice slit through my overthinking.

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“Does that mean you belong to me as well?” she had one of those big goofy ass smirks on her face as she leaned across the counter.

“On me, but this thing with me ain’t just flowers and sunshine. I come with some shit that means I’m need you to be patient with me.” She was about to speak, but I held my hand up for her to let me finish speaking. “I ain’t saying I’m be out here dirty, ‘cause I ain’t. What I’m saying is that I’m a man about mine and I know what I carry. I’m come through way more times than I fall short.”

She nodded her head. “And I’m hold you to that.”

“You do that.”

Chapter Eight

Cartier

I glanced at my brother and shook my head. When he called last night and told me that Fari had been shot as well as Trell I knew this couldn’t be taken lightly. The thing is I didn’t expect for my brother to have responded as fast as he did. I had to get with him about that and make sure he wasn’t reacting like this because he didn’t like Vee messing with the nigga Aylo. Though Cartrek was very levelheaded with certain shit, the last thing I needed was for him to be out here with clouded judgment. It was possible and I didn’t blame him if it had, because I didn’t know how I’d react if I looked up and Jovie was chilling with another nigga, let alone a nigga who called himself my rival. Childish shit, but that nigga Aylo was a childish nigga.

“Look I’m not up for starting no war or anything like that, but that nigga sent the first shots. Who are we to shy away?” Cartrek shrugged his shoulders.

“But the fact that the nigga put his lips to your girl made it all but easier, huh?” Cruz spoke before I could.

“I’d be lying if I said that shit didn’t motivate me, bu?—”

“If that be so, niggas still took shot at Ace niggas. Fat Trell took one and Fari did as well. Fari is as affiliated as any other nigga who reps. Nigga has put in more work than most.” I don’t know why I felt like I was taking up for my brother when I was spitting facts.

“And even if I was moving off some shit with my lady, don’t you think I’d take that shit up with my lady and him?”

Cruz chuckled, easing the building tension. “Nigga would be dead on arrival.”

I shrugged because I knew my brother. “This is the first I’m hearing about that nigga Aylo kissing on Vee, you sure you good nigga?”

Cartrek grimaced. “It wasn’t all that, but it’s handled. She and I had a miscommunication, it’s solved now.”

My eyes nearly escaped their sockets. “What you mean solved?”

“Right, how about you elaborate for us, so we know how to proceed.”

Trek laughed. “Y’all niggas just wanna be all in my business. We good though.” He was trying to be close lipped but leave it to Cruz to break that shit.

“You did say yo’ lady right? So, ya’ll just fucking, or that’s you?”

The office grew quiet and all eyes were on Cartrek.

“That’s me.”

The moment he said that I threw my head back in shock. “Say it ain’t so, you done messed around and got exclusive.”

“I know yo’ ass ain’t talking. You trapped lil’ Jo. She ain’t have a chance in hell. Now you’re on some family shit.”

“Damn right.”

“Just don’t be in no rush to hit the isle. Shit gets deep after the I do’s,” Cruz spoke somberly. Nigga had a lot of regrets and he slept next to his main one every day. Julia wasn’t his one, but he let a fat ass, big titties and a brain fool him. I tried to tell him that every smart, built bitch wasn’t a good look, but he didn’t listen. Nigga called us on his honeymoon complaining about the way she ate. It was the funniest thing ever, now here he was three years later with two kids, and he hated everything about shorty and cheated every chance he got. He wouldn’t leave her though, instead he convinced himself that he was giving his kids the household he never had. I understood that, but if I didn’t like a bitch, I didn’t like a bitch. That was it, bottom fucking line. The thing with Jovie was that I liked her too much, hell if a nigga ever looked at myGooglesearch, folks would revoke my player card. Niggas was trying hard to figure out if love at first sight existed. Yeah, shit with us was that deep.

“Don’t I know?” Cartrek’s statement interrupted my mental tangent.

“I know you loved shorty, or thought you did, but that shit don’t count. Think about it. She was planted in your life for you to like. Like badgered and pestered with things

to entice yo—” Cruz started.

“Argh nigga, that’s enough. You been watching too many super spy movies,” I joked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Way too many.” Cartrek waved him off.

“You probably need some more time out the crib, instead of daddy duty. Niggas be planted in front of all those action movies thinking the shit is real. You still know how to bust a gun, or have you replaced that skill with changing diapers and coloring in the line?”

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He flipped me off. “It’s funny you should ask, considering you about to pick up a few new skills as well, huh? Now that I think about it, you too nigga.” He threw his chin in Cartrek’s direction.

He looked up from his phone confused. “The hell that mean?”

“You’re dating a female with a kid, nigga. Baby daddy iss?—”

He waved Cruz off. “Nigga ain’t in her life.”

Cruz chuckled, anybody in here talked to Ayce?”

I shook my head no.

“Yeah a few days ago. Nigga is in the trenches balling the fuck out on it,” Cartrek responded.

“Ain’t that yo’ fucking brother?”

“You know how he is. He be on some loner shit.”

We ended up chilling and talking for a little longer before I decided to go get some food and pull up on my baby mama. We’d been texting periodically throughout the day, so I knew what she wanted to eat, but not gonna lie I missed her something special. When I wasn’t around her she had me missing her like I didn’t wake up next to her every day. It was odd, but I was getting used to it. Getting used to needing another the way I never needed a soul before.

Me pulling up on her never happened because I ended up stopping to handle some business. Then by the time I was done, she was headed toward the house asking if I could pick up dinner. I was good with that considering I planned to do that anyway. Shorty wanted some hard fried catfish and garlic truffle fries. After she told me what she wanted, I called up to the Tellys and ordered it so it would be ready when I walked in. I didn't do that standing around shit at all, especially with everything going on.

When I walked in the joint, I saw a few familiar faces throwing my chin upward to speak before I focused on the lady at the counter.

"Hey, Ms. Ann. I greeted Thirteen's grandmother. He told her she didn't have to work anymore but look at her still up and kicking. Though he owned the joint, this was her place. Her kitchen and her floor. Niggas knew to respect it.

"Hey baby, how you been?" she asked with a toothy smile.

"Good, tryna stay out of the way."

"That's good, I hear you got a baby on the way. You finally settled down? Or you spreading yo'self thin?"

I laughed. "Nah Ms. Ann I'm tryna hold on to the one I got."

Her smile grew. "That's good to hear, bring her by here to meet an old woman won't you. I wish the lot of 'em would be like you, specially Teen. You know these lil' fast tail easy ass hussies ain't nothing but trouble." She shook her head.

I chuckled. "I got you."

"Let me go see if yo' order is ready, watch the register for me, okay?"

She didn't give me a chance to respond because she was already walking toward the back.

"Long time no talk. How you been, Cartier?" I recognized the fake whiny ass voice from anywhere.

I glanced to my side and Taylor was standing near the table in an apron. I didn't know she worked up here.

"Good."

"So I hear. Neither you nor Jovie have been around." It wasn't a question, but a statement.

I nodded, looking around the space once more for Ms. Ann. Niggas was ready to go and I didn't wanna talk to shorty.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Going home top my baby mama. You know it ain't like that no more, Taylor."

"So, you used me to get to her? And now you don't want to mess with me anymore because you have her."

I shook my head. "C'mon now. You knew what it was, niggas ain't hold a gun to your head or force you to do that. You knew what it was with us from jump."

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“So what? You and her get to be happy together? What about me?” she was seconds from throwing one of those childish ass tantrums.

“What about you? Your feelings ain't my problem. Never have been.”

“Here you go baby, your catfish just came out so, it's nice and hot.” Ms. Ann took my attention off Taylor.

“Thank yo—” I started but the feel of a sharp pain in my shoulder interrupted my sentence.

I turned around to see what the hell it was, and Taylor was standing behind me with a scared expression and a knife in her hands. From it dripped my blood. My fucking blood. This bitch had just stabbed me.

Jovie

The last thing I expected when Cartier called me was for him to be telling me that he was leaving the fucking hospital. I was ready to curse him out because it had been three hours since I last spoke to him and he was supposed to be getting food. I naturally assumed he had gotten caught up with business, but for him to say he was leaving the hospital after being stitched up, I immediately thought the absolute worse. The entire forty-five minutes it took for him to get to me had me on edge. He didn't want me to come to him because it was so late, but he insisted on coming all the way home. To say I was worried was an understatement, but I got through it and so did he.

After what felt like forever he was pulling into the driveway. He got out of the car

slow, stiff on one side and moving slow.

I met him in the driveway, noticing the blood on the heather gray tee-shirt he left the house in. I reached for the pharmacy bag and jacket that he was holding then followed him into the house.

“What happen?” Seeing him in pain scared me.

He took a seat on the sofa, neglecting to sit back for obvious reasons. “Help me take my shirt off, please.”

I nodded, approaching him slowly almost as if quick movement would hurt him. When I reached him, my hands immediately went to the hem of the bloodied shirt and I slowly began to ease it up.

Once I ridded him of his shirt I was able to see the big bandage on his shoulder that had a slight red tint in the middle of it. Again my lips formed the words to ask what happened, but he started to speak before I could ask.

“Bitch stabbed me at Tellys when I picked up the food.”

Now I was pissed, because what bitch had stabbed him and what the fuck was the reason. “What bitch, Cartier?”

“Taylor.”

“And why the fuck would she do that? Bitches stab the niggas they fucking.” By now my hands were on my hips and I was mugging the absolute fuck out of him.

“I ain’t fucking that broad, and you know that. I ain’t fucking nobody but your crazy ass. Bitch stabbed me from behind and you in here beefing with me.” He sat back

against the couch sighing in pain.

His pain eased my anger, immediately making me feel stupid for even thinking he was still fucking her for a second. “I’m sorry baby, you want me to go beat her ass?”

“No, ‘cause you carrying my junior, but when you drop his ass that’s fair game. Bitch stabbed me and started crying and shit.”

“That’s too long. I’mma pay one of those hoes who don’t like her to catch her stupid ass. Nah, I’mma hit her ass with my car.” I was already thinking of ways I could get her myself. Her stabbing him enraged me.

He laughed tired as hell. “Nah, you ain’t gonna hit nobody with your car, Let lil’ duck foot think she got away with that shit, when she least expects it I’mma pay a block bitch to make her wish she was dead.”

I looked at him and nodded my head, accepting his answer. “Do you want some pain meds?”

“No, I just want you to come lay with a nigga. I feel like being babied.”

I couldn’t hold back the laughter that spilled from my lips as I joined him on the sofa. I tried not to crowd him or get too close but leave it to him to climb his dramatic ass between my legs. Him being so close to me, gave me a reassurance out of this orbit. Hell, it calmed nerves I didn’t even know I had and eased my worries.

We ended up sleeping on the couch, me not wanting to move or disrupt him and him just needing the rest. Even though every so often he was telling me lets go get into bed. We never made it into bed. He definitely didn’t, because when he woke up the next morning he was in more pain than the following night.

I ended up babying him, up until the ibuprofen PM kicked in knocking him out for a few hours so I could focus on getting some work done. Today ended up being a wash, but that was okay as long as he was fine, because I swear I don't know what I'd do if something were to happen to him. I was just getting used to him being my person, so the thought of losing him sent tremors through my body and fear into my brain.

Virtue

My eyes rested on the beautiful woman standing awkwardly in front of me with nothing to say. She had a lot to her when she walked in my place looking for me, but right now with it just being the two of us she was uncomfortable. I could understand her reasoning, but I didn't get why she was here to see me. Why was Don's wife here to see me? And yes, that's what she introduced herself as.

"Look I don—" she started, but stopped herself midsentence, because she decided against what she was about to say.

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“I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t understand why you’re here.” Me on the other hand, I couldn’t hold back.

She forced her head into her hands, before shaking her head and sounding panicked. “I don’t know why I’m here either. He told me that you won’t let him see his daughter after everything he’s done.”

“And what has he done? My daughter has received nothing from Don, nor does she even know the man. Then why would I allow him in the same space with her if he told me he’d never claim her? Why would I put my child in that position? Before we go there, I don’t want anything from him either. Adorie is fi?—”

“Wait, so he has never met her?”

“No. I don’t know what he has told you, but the day I saw him at the hospital was the first day in four years I’ve seen him.”

She looked confused by the words that came from my mouth, like for the last few years he had been lying to this woman.

“I feel like a complete fool, coming down here to confront you with nothing but lies over a man who has been cheating on me for the last ten years.”

“I’m so sorr—” She was standing to her feet a few seconds later. “You’re young and much stronger than I could have ever been.”

I was about to respond, but my office door busted open and Adorie came barreling in

unaware of anything going on around her.

“Mommy! Untoo Fari coming!” she rushed my legs playfully screaming as I heard what I assumed was my brother’s footsteps coming down the hall.

Don’s wife glanced down at Adorie, and I could see the tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry I bothered you, please forgive me.” The rest was offered in a mumble as she tried to rush out of the room nearly running into my brother.

In that time Adorie had taken a seat on the floor, playing with her iPad after her little loud greeting to me.

“The fuck was that about?” He walked in immediately taking a seat on the sofa located in the corner my office.

“Don’s wife. Apparently he’s been lying to her about Adorie for the last four years.”

He nodded, “Want me to go see him?”

“Um no, Don isn’t worth it. Also you shouldn’t be going to see anyone, considering.” My eyes left his face and went to his chest covered by the Nike crewneck.

“I’m straight.”

“Mom dropped her off to you?” My eyes swept over to my daughter.

“Nah, I picked her up. Lil’ ma didn’t wanna hang with all those fucking old heads in the bingo room.” He shook his head.

I laughed. “Mama said she liked it.” My phone rang a few seconds later, prompting me to look down at it. When I saw the name that crossed the screen, I declined the

call then looked back at Fari. Aylo still hadn't caught the hint.

"That nigga still calling you?" he asked, face growing serious.

"Yea, bu?—"

"Stay away from that nigga, Vee."

"You don't have to tell me twice." I held my hands up in surrender. "I don't have anything to say to him, Fari."

He nodded. "And you and Trek?"

"You about to tell me to stay away from him too?"

"Nah. I saw how he was about to rush after you in the club. You good, as long as that's what you want and you know what you're getting yourself into." Now it was his turn to throw his hands up.

"And that means?"

"Trek ain't no regular blue collar nigga. Hell none of us are, but err'thing ain't sunshine and leafy meadows. Real shit happens and niggas make real decisions every day."

I looked at him for a while in attempt to decrypt what he just said, but I couldn't. Leave it to Fari to be on some riddle mess. "Yeah, whatever all of that means."

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He shrugged. "I can't explain it to you. Gotta see things for yourself, baby girl." Fari stuck around for a while and even ate dinner with Adorie but he had to cut out shortly after to go see whatever female that had been blowing up his line.

Adorie and I left shortly after headed home. I planned to stop and get myself something to eat, but quickly decided against it because I didn't really know what I wanted and didn't want to be driving all around. I decided I'd order out. Then my thoughts traveled to Cartrek, I hadn't heard from him since earlier. I knew he was busy, but still found myself wondering if I'd see him tonight.

As if he felt me thinking about him, his name flashed on the console of my car indicating that he was calling. I clicked the green circle, to answer. "Yes."

"How far out are you? I'm about to pull up."

"We just left the restaurant. We're about to pull up."

"I'll meet you in the garage. I'm parked in the front row." We hung up a few seconds later.

Then I pulled up next to his car, him leaned against the hood staring into his phone looking handsome as ever. I don't know what had his attention, but suddenly I wanted to be that.

When I opened the car door, those serious eyes landed directly on me softening slightly as he pushed off the car. He was in my space seconds later, kissing my cheek.

“You ate today?” He then approached the back door to grab Adorie.

“No, but she did. She ate at the restaurant. I think I’ve Od’d on it.”

He nodded. “Probably have.”

With one hand he picked her up out of her seat, and the other he grabbed her iPad. My baby was out like a light. Food always gave Adorie the itis.

“What about you?” I closed the door behind them now trailing him as we walked toward the lobby entrance of my building. When we entered, we went straight for the already open elevator that seemed to be awaiting our presence.

“Nah, I had a different type of taste on my tongue today.”

Confused, I looked up at him and he sent a wink in my direction, causing heat to rush my cheeks and a jolt to shoot down my spine. I knew just what that taste was.

I had just checked in on Adorie before coming back into my room. She was out for the rest of the night, but I still liked to check on her and tuck her in. I stopped in the washroom to turn the lights out before going toward my own room.

When I walked in, Cartrek was standing on the side of my bed, about to get in. Ever since we made things official, we spent a substantial amount of time like this. When he wasn’t working or I wasn’t at the restaurant. It was nice and it just seemed to fit. Sometimes it seemed harder than others to get him to open up, but other than that, it was nice. I had honestly forgotten what it felt like to have somebody, shoot anybody.

“This little ass bed,” he mumbled lifting the cover to climb in.

“You don’t have to sleep in it. You coul—” I had a smart ass remark ready but the

expression he sent my way halted that.

“Yo mouth, Peach. The fuck I’m a do with that?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.” That came out way more suggestive than I intended.

“I could definitely think of a few things I could put in it, but you was just complaining in the shower. Go yo’ ass to sleep.” He fluffed the pillows a few times, attempting to get comfortable.

I giggled. “What if I’m not sleepy?”

I cut the lights out and walked toward the bed. When I got in, he immediately pulled my body closer to his.

“Then you close yo’ eyes and count sheep.”

“Rude ass.” I tried to escape his embrace, but he pulled me further into him, then held me in place. Then I felt his lips on my temple.

“How was yo’ day?”

“Long, but I’ve been working on something new for my restaurant. Not a new location, but a bar inside.”

His hand caressed my skin. “What made you come to that addition?”

“The original space was a bar. Well in the fifties, but it shut down. At first I wanted that, but the idea of dealing with a bunch of drunk people doesn’t appease me. A full blown bar attracts a different crowd.”

“And you fear that?”

“Somewhat. I just don’t want to lose my business to the riffraff.”

He laughed. “Yo, where the fuck did that come from?”

“It was the only way I could describe it.” I turned my body so that I was on my side looking directly in his face. “How was your day?” that was something I never really asked.

“Much longer than yours.”

“Why?”

“Everybody wanna call themselves the king of the streets, but don’t nobody wanna put in the work to maintain that shit.”

I nodded, with no real response in mind.

“I heard you got a visitor today.”

“My eyes narrowed. You heard, or you have somebody watching me?” When he didn’t move I closed my eyes resting them from the day.

“Lil’ bit of both, but only for yo’ protection. You wanna tell me about yo’ visit?”

“There’s really nothing to tell. She came there to check me about a man I have no

dealings or ties to. Apparently he's been lying to her though. Telling her that he's taking care of my child and little things like that. And no, I don't need you to go see about him, because it wouldn't be worth it."

He was quiet for too long, which made me open my eyes to see his face. The moonlight through the window reflected off his face, and there a smirk sat carved into his features.

"I'm serious, Cartrek." I look up at his now hovering face.

"Ain't nobody gonna go fuck with that nigga, as long as he keeps his fucking distance. He can lie all he wants, that's his business." His hand found its way under my shirt massaging my side.

"Thought you told me to go to sleep," I teased knowing damn well what was next.

His body between my legs and face inches away from mine gave me my answer before his lips did. "I did, but you smell good as fuck." Warm lips made contact with my neck, at the same time as his fingers made contact with my bare flesh under the covers. "Borderline fucking edible."

KenScentuals That Girl for the win. Within seconds he snatched the cover off and sat up on his knees looking at me with eyes that told me he was ravenous.

With one hand on my knees, holding them apart he closed the gap up between us, using the other to massage my slick folds.

"Condom?" I asked.

He shook his head no, before greedily assuring me he'd pull out.

ChapterNine

Cartrek- A Few Weeks Later

When I woke up this morning, I smelled coffee and knew I wasn't at my place. Hell I hadn't spent much time at my place as of lately. I found myself wrapped up in Peach's sheets with her body under mine more days than I cared to count. It was nice and the air that surround her was beautiful, shit her and lil' mama kept a nigga content. They had me on something that I had never been on, not even with Mia. It even had me questioning if I ever really let my guard down around Mia. Of course niggas were naturally guarded from past trauma and all that good stuff, but with Peach some things just flowed naturally. She didn't ask too many questions or badger. She went with the flow, which made me want to be open with her. It made me want to discuss things with her that I usually kept in my head.

I finally climbed out of her Tiffany blue clean scented sheets, I went to the washroom to take a piss and take care of my hygiene. Then I found myself at my duffle bag pulling out a pair of shorts and a tee-shirt. After I slipped my clothes on, I went to the nightstand to check my phone. Of course I had a missed call from my brother, and another from Aysun, but there was no 9-1-1s or anything, so I continued comfortably into the kitchen to see what shorty had cooked.

When I reached the kitchen I saw that she had her phone to her ear and she was talking. I made out part of her conversation, and immediately realized she was talking to Jovie.

"Get off my phone talking about an Ace baby, Jovie." Shelaughed, not realizing I was right behind her.

She sat her phone down several seconds later, right before she turned around and saw me. She almost jumped out of her skin. "Jesus, you scared me." She held her chest

attempting to catch her breath.

“My bad.” I kissed the side of her face then went around and took a seat at the island. She had this motherfucker smelling good as fuck.

She nodded, getting back into her groove. “How’d you sleep?”

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“Good, until I didn’t feel you under me. You got up early, didn’t you?” I asked, eyes moving across her whole backside. Peach had a supple waist and the most sensual features a nigga had ever seen.

“My bad, my mother called me last minute telling me she wanted to come pick up Adorie today. And the last thing I needed was for her to come up here snooping.”

“You hiding me from yo’ fol?—”

“No, but I’d rather not tell my mother you’re my man while you’re laid up half naked in my bed.”

I nodded.

“Plus my brother is a part of your club, right?”

I chuckled at her calling Ace Boys a club.

“What’s funny?” She was confused.

“Ace Boys isn’t just a club, baby girl. It’s a lifestyle, one that started in the minds of four young niggas watching their immigrant grandmother’s struggle in this country, while our parents worked their asses off. I ain’t saying shit is perfect, but we made something shake, so the last thing I’m worried about is some young flashy nigga with a crew full of fucking children.” I looked at Peach while I spoke getting into a history that I rarely shared.

“What? Fou?—”

“Grams fled the DU after all that shit happened. Came over to America with her two kids looking for better. She didn’t find it. She found Ace though, a nickel and dime hustler trying to make a name for himself before they called it fraud and those folks flooded the streets with that shit. He just wanted better, hell they both did. Hence the Ace Boys, built off the backs of myself, Cruz, Cartier and Aysun. Four hungry young niggas who happened to share blood and hug more blocks than the average. Drugs ain’t my shit, baby and no I’m not saying it ain’t sold within the organization, but I sell guns. Ammunition across state lines is good capital.”

“Why are you telling me this?” She was sitting on the counter watching me drink the room temperature bottle of water she’s sat out for me.

“You said I don’t open up to you enough. So there is something.” I stepped between her legs, resting my hands on her thighs.

She smiled. “Thank you for that.”

“Anytime.”

She laughed. “Don’t say that because I’ll ask you a question and before I know it you’re looking at me with those eyes.”

That made me laugh as well. “Depends on what you’re asking.”

“Whatever.” She waved me off and sipped from her coffee.

“What do you have planned for the day?”

“Nothing. A few errands. You?”

“You.”

She smiled bashfully. “That’ll have to be after I run these errands and get dinner, but then again my mom is going to have Adorie for the weekend, so th?—”

“That leaves time for me to take you out, feed you, kidnap you for a few days, do you and chill up under you.”

“You don’t have anything pressing today?” she asked peering at me over her mug.

“Just you, Peach.”

She nodded. “Let me go take a quick shower and then we can go.” Seconds later she rushed out of the kitchen toward the back.

I took that as my time to check in with my brother. The phone rang one time, before Cartier’s aggy ass answered.

“You sleep later and later nigga, you sure you ain’t pregnant?” Cartier’s voice filled my eardrums.

“What’s the word old comedian reject ass nigga?”

He laughed. “Shit really. Whole bunch of small nothings, but on some real shit I need to holla at you ‘bout something.”

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“What.” I stood from the seat I’d taken in Peach’s kitchen and started walking toward the back. Something about the sound of the shower on was summoning my ass to the back.

“My baby mama misses her friend, but you on some selfish shit.”

I laughed. “You ser?—”

“Yes, he’s serious Cartrek. I’m very serious. She was mine before she was yours. You gotta share.”

“I got you.” I stood in the doorway of Peach’s washroom watching her body through the wet glass doors.

“I’m serious.”

“I got you, Jo. As a matter of fact let me holla at her ‘bout that right now. I’mma hit y’all back.” I hung up the phone with no intention of calling them back. Wasn’t shit pressing going on, but the heat seeping from that shower.

I shed the little bit of clothes I put on this morning, before opening the door and walking into the dimly lit shower.

“Now you kno—” she started to speak, but me forcing her body into mine halted that.

“Know what?” I turned her around, giving in to my hand’s desire to grab her neck. It only rested there for a few seconds before I reached down and picked her up.

“That whatever you start in here won’t be quick.” She wrapped her arms around my neck at the same time as her legs locked around my waist. As long as she knew it as well.

We made it out of the door about two hours later. I had talked her into packing some things to stay at my house for the next few days.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the store, she cut her eyes in my direction before sucking her teeth.

We got out seconds later meeting at the front of the car.

“Target ain’t no grocery store, Cartrek.” She walked ahead pulling the wedgie out of her butt. Her ass was eating the Nike leggings the fuck up. Had I not watched her put her underwear on this morning, I would’ve sworn she wasn’t wearing any.

“The fuck it ain’t, and you know I could’ve gotten that for you.”

“What makes this a grocery store, Trek?”

“Shit, I don’t know. It got groceries don’t it?”

She laughed. “But it’s high as hell.”

“It is? I didn’t notice. I’ll be in here.” I shrugged grabbing the cart from her.

“Interesting. Let me grab some cheese.” Virtue squeezed down a tight aisle. Instead of trying to squeeze through as well, I decided to just go around the one behind it.

“Givens.” I heard my last name, immediately shaking my head because every time I turned around this motherfucker was finding a way to be in my face. If I didn’t know

any better I'd think he was bored.

I looked around before my eyes landed on him. "Detective."

"I haven't much seen you on your morning run, Givens. You wouldn't happen to be avoiding me, would you?"

I laughed. "What's to avoid?"

"You're an arrogant prick." Just that fast he'd lost his cool. One thing the detective couldn't hide was how bad a nigga got under his skin.

"Sure."

"Oh, there you are. All of the cheese is gluten free. I don't think it'll taste any different." Peach walked up to the side of me oblivious of the detective staring me down. She tossed the cans in the cart. My eyes left Archie, and immediately went to her.

She'd peeped his presence, perhaps even caught his vibe because she stepped to my side. It was almost like instinct.

"You're pretty, too pretty to be with scumbag murders." Archie had fucked up by addressing Peach but I couldn't lose my cool in here. Couldn't let him see that for once he had gotten under my skin.

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“Who ar?—”

“No need to ask, baby. This stalking ass motherfucker right here is Detective Archie Bishop, first grade fuck up and bearer of no common sense.”

Peach nodded, hand resting on my forearm. “Oh.” If she was bothered, she didn’t show it.

“You might not wanna get too close to Mr. Givens here. He did murder his last wife.”

She didn’t fully react, but I knew what he said did something because she tensed up. I’d been around her long enough to peep settle shit like that.

“Something about proof, or right you gotta have it. You don’t though, so I’d suggest you stop playing these accusatory games before my lawyer be sitting on front of your chief. Enjoy the rest of your day, Detective.” I forced a tight smile knowing damn well I wanted to beat his ass in here. I was starting to regret more and more not killing his ass when I had the chance. “You ready, Peach?”

She snapped out of her thoughts and nodded her head. “Yeah, I think got everything.” I paid for everything, and we left the store a few minutes later. I could tell that what was said got to her and I hated it. I hated it because I had already gotten used to her, so there was no way this shit could go back to what it was before. It was impossible because I was already addicted to her.

When we reached my spot, we sort of went our separate ways. Her cooking in the kitchen while I went to my office to think. I knew we needed to have a conversation,

but I didn't know how that shit would go. Hell I didn't know if I wanted to be straight up with her or keep shit vague. Ultimately it came down to me wondering if I wanted to protect her from the real me and lie or if I was going to be straight up and watch her view of me change. I spent so much time cooped up in my office that daylight had escaped and the aroma of food filled the darkness that surrounded me.

Standing from the sofa in the office, I stretched a little before I opened the door to exit. The living room and foyer were dark, because neither of us had turned the lights on. I entered the kitchen, eyes trained on the back of her head as she moved around the kitchen. The space fit her like she was made for it. Like it was made for her.

She turned around, placing a plate on the counter, before looking up at me. She still had that same look in her eyes. The one that let me know what Archie said had gotten to her. Niggas could've skated around it, but I didn't want to. Oddly enough I felt the need to be transparent with her as if it couldn't hurt me in the long end.

"You wanna talk about it?" The words spilled from my lips on a bitch type vibe. Since when was I the one who wanted to talk or even discuss something? When it came to her.

"About what? I was just coming to get you to eat." Her expression was blank.

"I know you heard what he said. I know you probably wanna know."

"I did, but I don't—"

"I did. I killed her." I've never admitted this shit to a soul, not even my own little sister when she heard the news. For some reason though, I had to admit it to Virtue. What I felt for her wouldn't let me say the right things to brush this under the rug.

She blinked a few times, stunned at my honesty. "Wha—What?"

“I met and fell in love with Mia quick as fuck. Thought that shit was love at first sight, but I was so mistaken. For her I was a career maker; a way to move up. Detective Archie was not only her handler, but also the nigga she was fucking behind my back and in my bed. She used me for everything she could get outa me. I was with that woman for four years and she only slipped once. Had she not I would’ve been served to the feds on a silver platter by her hand. I’m not saying all of this for you to feel bad for me or none of that shit, because at the end of the day I made a decision. One that I’d make a million times over, because betrayal is betrayal and that shit is punishable by death in my book.”

I rounded the corner, stepping into her space. “Speak, Peach.” She had been too quiet, and that shit was lowkey killing me.

“What am I supposed to say?”

“That you don?—”

“When I got with you I didn’t think you were a saint, hell I didn’t expect you to be. Now I didn’t expect you to have killed your wife, but in some weird way I understand.” She looked up at me with the sincerest of eyes.

I was taken aback one hundred percent by her response. “You don’t have to say that. You can feel how you feel.”

“It was you or her, and you chose yourself. Does the fact that I don?—”

I interrupted her sentence picking her up and sitting her on the counter. Eyes locked and bodies in contact.

“You mean that shit?” each word I spoke made contact with her lips.

She nodded. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Cartier

Tensions between Ace and Mafia were at an all-time high and a war was imminent. Alias taking shots at Fat Trell and Fari started it. Then, my brother retaliating and making sure they couldn’t make money added fuel to an already lit fire. I heard Mafia didn’t lose anybody to that fire, shit no one had lost anyone yet, but I knew it was coming. Niggas wasn’t about to keep sending shots and missing. Hell had the bullet been five centimeters to the left Fari would have been gone. He wasn’t though, he was still here and that alone should’ve had that nigga Aylo putting his brother into some type of hiding. With Fari back on his feet, that was something niggas should have worried about. Though he was affiliated to Ace, he didn’t need us. That nigga was a one man army and came atshit as such.

“It’s crazy to keep beefing with these lil’ niggas like they’re somebody. Niggas ain’t shit but roosters in counterfeit Patek’s and all-white.” Cruz drank from his glass looking from me to my brother.

I chuckled. “Niggas won’t be standing for too long. You know how that goes.”

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He laughed. “Where his ass at anyway?”

“Probably stalking them nigga’s mama.”

We all shared a laugh, at the same time as the door opened. When I looked up, my eyes landed on a popular ghost himself. Aysun was the only nigga I knew who stayed low in the trenches but didn’t have to. He claimed it was because he liked to see his money be made. I didn’t get it, but I respected it. I respected his moves and his hustle.

“Y’all niggas sitting in here looking like straight up marks. The fuck is up?” He looked around, before taking a seat.

“Shit. Tryna see where yo’ ass been.” Trek looked at him.

“Out here livin’. I’m young and ‘bout my paper.”

“I see. Yo’ count be good.”

He nodded. “What’s up with y’all and that Aylo nigga?”

“Nothing too deep, I know he looking to retaliate, but don’t know shit about beefing with niggas.” Cruz laughed.

Trek shook his head. “We ain’t gonna touch ‘em yet. We touch his money, but that bullet touched Fari.”

“Oh damn. The brother shot Fari, right?” Aysun asked.

I nodded. “Don’t mean they ain’t gonna both feel that shit. Fari moves on his own resonance. I’m shock?—”

A face standing in the doorway halted my words. “Boss, word just came through. They found that nigga Alias hanging from the light pole on Mafia territory.” After a few seconds Cody walked away leaving us in the small office to confer. Fari’s retaliation would ultimately be taken as a transgression by us. He was his own entity, but Aylo’s need to show the streets who he thought he was would drive him to do some stupid shit. The type of shit that would land him as well in a casket before the month was out.

“Ain’t like y’all ain’t know that shit would happen.” Cartrek shrugged, pulling his phone from his pocket. Within a few seconds he had it to his ear.

“Where you at?” A moment later a smile creased his lips, which let me know who he was talking to. Peach. He spoke with her for a while longer before he ultimately hung up and focused back on the conversation at hand.

“So, we don’t move on a nigga unless he moves on us?” Aysun asked with a questioning glare.

“Or if you got it and you’re up for it take the shot. Don’t put that word out to the lil’ niggas though. Be just our luck they do some reckless shit and shoot up a crowd.”

Just that easy word for Aylo’s life was dangling and in the hands of the four of us. Funny thing is we all knew Aysun would be the one to take it, because though he was the youngest he’d make an executive decision in a minute. Blood was non-confrontational but would vent a niggas skull in a minute.

“But on another note, how you get stabbed in the middle of Thirteen’s joint?” Aysun’s eyes were on mine, and now so were my brother’s.

I shook my head. “Bitch caught me off guard. I’m reaching for my food and she’s driving a fucking steak knife through my shoulder.” Shit pissed me off just thinking about it.

“And she still walking around here?”

“For now. My baby mama wanted to touch her, but I can’t even let that shit rock. She’s carrying the future.”

He nodded. “I know a few bitches off the block that’ll handle that for you.”

I nodded. “Right now?”

“Hell yeah, hos just be itching to fight.”

“Bet.”

“Y’all niggas be reckless as fuck together. Don’t be on no mess,” Cruz started. He loved to lecture, but before he laid low was the most reckless of us all.

Sun shook his head. “What, you wanna hold my balls forme nigga?”

We kicked it for a while longer, talking shit before it was time to handle business. I was ready to be in my baby mama’s face because I hadn’t seen her since I left her sleep this morning. Jovie was a heavy sleeper, hell the type to wanna fight a nigga if I woke her up so I just kissed her forehead and left a few bucks on the nightstand for her since I knew she was going to get her nails, toes and shit taken care of today.

We left the mattress store a few minutes later, me hopping in the ride with him. “I know I be on some missing shit, but you wanna tell me how you went out here and made a baby?” He turned his loud ass music down and glanced in my direction

briefly.

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“Man, I fucked one time. Got to know her and knew I couldn’t let her slip through. Course she kept me on bone for a while ‘cause I fucked her girl bu?—”

“You done fell yo’ goofy ass in love.”

I laughed at his teasing. “Swear I didn’t see this shit coming, but Jovie got a nigga in the stuck field.”

“I’m happy for you, but on me it couldn’t be me. I’m not looking for shit past some head. These females are trifling and disloyal as fuck. Think I wanna lay-up and trust a bitch when she could be holding the knife to stab a nigga in the back?”

“Not all of ‘em like that though. Nigga Trek took one of the biggest L’s of ‘em all but look at ‘em. Giving that shit a chance again.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Fari’s sister. I seen her before, shorty look good than a motherfucker.”

I chuckled. “Don’t let that nigga hear you say that.”

He joined in on the laughter, shaking his head. “Blood gone, huh? Matter of fact both of y’all niggas is gone off this love shit.” Seconds later he pulled his phone out and started scrolling through it. When he found what he was looking for, he put the phone to his face.

“Yo, you and Shauna come take a ride with me. I need you to do something for me. I’m outside.”

A few seconds later he dropped his phone on his lap and focused ahead. “It’s this lil’ chick that stay up the block. Bad as fuck, but different.”

“What do you mean different?” I tilted my head to the side looking at him.

“She don’t be out like that. She be in her own space, an?—”

My laughter made him look at me. “Niggas talking ‘bout me, but you borderline stalking a bitch whose name you ‘on’t even fucking know.”

“It ain’t li?—”

The sound of the car doors opening behind us halted the conversation. As a matter of fact the ride over to where Taylor lived was quite. Then when we pulled up shit happened like a fucking movie. I pointed the house out, and like hungry ass hyenas shorty and her girl went up and knocked on the door.

I watched the whole scene unfold wishing I’d gotten popcorn or something from the store. They knocked on the door, she opened it and they snatched her ass out of that house like a bag of fucking laundry. Shit was straight up action packed. All that could be heard was her yelling for help, but in this neighborhood nobody came when you called for help. The best that happened is niggas looking out of their windows, but that was about it. It was what it was.

Virtue

I’m not sure what happened today, but by the amount of times Cartrek checked in with me, I’d say it was something. Then again it could’ve been our weekend. It was eventful to say the least, but most of all it was insightful. He opened up in a way that I never expected after the whole Target debacle. It was so nice that instead of exiting our little bubble I went to get Adorie from my parent’s house and went right back to

Cartrek's house. I was sad when the alarm went off this morning, alerting us to the beginning of the week and need for us to get back to regularly scheduled program.

One could say we both had early days today from the fact that we were both out of his house by six-thirty. Well, me him and Adorie. She was still asleep, so he carried her to the car for me. Now here we were, both kind of cooped up in my office while I worked, and she played on her iPad. On days like this she and I usually got a meal here and then retired home, but in a few when I finished the grunt of my work I was going to go see about my brother. Fari said he was fine and looked fine, but I needed to make sure he was really fine ... for my own sanity. Then after that we'd probably be on the way home. The thing is I didn't know what Cartrek was on, because he said he wanted to do a late dinner tonight when he got in when he called earlier. Then he text me a few minutes ago asking my location but had yet to respond when I sent it to him then asked him why. Instead he sent another message, telling me we were staying at his place for the next few days, and that I needed to pack a bag for myself and Adorie.

I was so stuck in my thoughts that the sound of a knock at my door startled me.

"Virtue, there is somebody here to see you." Then at the same time she was speaking there was a vibration in my hand. When I glanced down I saw that it was a call from Aylo. I hadn't answered his phone call since that night at the club and he still hadn't caught the damn hint. Nothing against Aylo, but everything against Aylo. He wasn't Cartrek, and though he had personality the wavelength wasn't the same. Even with everything I know about Cartrek, I'd still chose him over any other. That night at his place took us to a new depth, one that had me feeling more connected and in sync than anything.

"Okay, can you have chef whip up some ravioli for me?" I stood.

With Adorie's hand in mine I walked out into the dining space, only to lay eyes on

the very nigga I had been praying went about his life.

“What are you doing here, Don?” Of course Adorie stepped behind my leg afraid of the stranger who was now fixated on her. My baby was bashful sometimes and didn’t really like strangers in her face.

“Is that her? Is that my child?”

“No. You shouldn’t be here.” I backed up with Adorie behind me when he seemed to walk forward.

“Why? That is my daughter. As long as my blood runs through her veins, I have just as much a right to her as you do.” He was pointing his finger in my face speaking belligerently and causing a scene.

“Leave Don, before I call the cops.”

“Call them for what? That’s my daughter, Virtue.”

I was about to respond, but Adorie letting go of my leg and running toward the door took my attention. She only did that to me when she saw one of two people, and when I looked up it just so happened to have one of them standing at my door with the most menacing glare. Don needed to go before this went all bad for him.

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“I don’t give a fuck about that nigga, I wanna know my daughter.”

“Your daughter who doesn’t know you because you chose not to be in her life. You chose no?—”

“Yo, didn’t I tell you to leave her the fuck alone and find something to do with yo’ time?” Cartrek’s voice filled the space as he walked toward us with Adorie in his arm and a mug plastered on his face.

“Look I?—”

“I’ on wanna hear none of that. Be real lucky that they’re here, or you wouldn’t be walking up out of this motherfucker.”

Don backed up, hands up like he was about to surrender, but of course like the coward I knew him to be, he got near the door and got loud. “I will be back. Nobody will stop me from meeting my child.”

“A bullet will. Keep fucking around.”

We made it to my office a few seconds later, and Adorie was all over Cartrek telling him about her day like she hadn’t seen the nigga this morning. Of course he peered intently at her, listening to, and responding to everything she said. Her initial excitement from seeing him wore off after a while and before I knew it, she was sitting on the other side of the loveseat tapping away on her iPad.

I was shaken up from Don’s little stunt. So shaken up that I couldn’t keep my eyes off

my daughter. “He didn’t sign her birth certificate, so he doesn’t have any rights to her, right? I think I need to get a law?—”

“Nah. I got it, I’ll handle it.” My eyes went to his heated ones. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah, we gotta stop by and get my and Dorie’s bad but that’s about it. Are you sure you’re up for that drive?”

He nodded. “It’s necessary, and I know you like that space.” He smiled forcing the fire in his eyes at bay.

I could tell there was something else, but he wouldn’t tell me. Not directly that is. I grabbed my purse and a few things I might need before I looked him over. I felt his eyes on me the entire time I moved.

“What’s old boy’s name?”

“Why?”

“Cause I asked.” His tone was cold almost like a steel pipe.

“Adonis Jeffries.”

He nodded, then seconds later stood to his feet, picking up Adorie and her iPad as well.” We left a few moments later and he trailed me all the way to my place. Something was off, I could feel it, but I decided not to ask him about it. I just hoped that if it was something bad, he’d talk to me and not have me out of the loop.

“Are you okay?” I asked walking into his office where he had been barricaded pretty much since we got here.

He looked up from his desk, eyes on me for a moment before he nodded. “I’m good, why you ask?”

“Um, I don’t know. It seems like you’ve been in here hiding.”

He chortled. “I’m straight, I just got a lot on my mental.” When I was close enough to his grasp, he pulled me closer to him.

“Like what? Do you wanna talk about it?” while I spoke he was pushing me up onto the empty desk.

He pecked my chest, hand traveling under my shirt. “Nope. That shit’ll be there tomorrow.”

“You sure, bec—” I started, but his lips were already pressing against mine.

“Positive. Where is Adorie?”

“On the sofa asleep.” His hands at the hem of my shirt, lifting it off my body.

Standing to his feet, he tossed it across the room before he attacked my body, covering it with his own. “You always smell so fucking good.”

I smiled. “And you’re always telling me that.”

“Cause it’s true.” I felt his hands at my underwear, as he pushed them to the side totally disrespecting them with his fingers. Playing in my folds, before he pulled my body forward halfway off the desk hovering over his lap. Tonight was about to be long, because one he was determined to prove to me that there was nothing on his mind, and two, me letting him.

Chapter Ten

Jovie

When I woke up this morning, Cartier was already gone but had gotten me decaf coffee and a croissant to start my day. It was sitting on the island waiting on me, still warm. Instead of staying in the house like I so badly wanted to, I got up and got myself together. If nothing else, I needed to go to my suite and get some type of work done. I couldn't be one of those pregnant bitches that let pregnancy take over their whole damn life. The only thing I hated is that Cartier had to live all the way in the damn boondocks, so the convenience wasn't there. It was literally a forty-five minute to one hour drive into the city, then at a certain time the drive was easily two hours. Shit was sick and I knew he felt it too, even though he loved his place. When I arrived at my spot, my assistant was already there working, and she had samples on my desk for me to look at. That's what I loved about Alicia, she had hella work ethic which meant she got shit done.

I was a few hours into my day when she knocked on the door and let me know I had a visitor. I wasn't expecting anyone and per Cartier's last text he was meeting up with somebody before he came to me, so immediately my face contoured into a frown showing my confusion.

"Who is it?"

"He said he's your father, Jo."

Now I was really thrown for a loop because that had to be wrong. The only man I

remotely called my father was in the ground, so who the fuck was out there playing games and why.

I nodded. "Send him in."

She nodded, then opened the door fully and stepped back. Low and behold, there stood Thorn. My mama's husband, my auntie's husband and my sperm donor. Not a motherfucking soul could make me call that nigga daddy, because he was no such thing. Nigga was a bum.

"What are you doing here, Thorn?" Yep, we were on first name basis.

"I came to uhh?—"

"Nope...nope ...nope. Why are you really here?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the family and everything that's going on." Now that looked sincere because it wasn't about me nor did his family involve me. His family consisted of him, his wife, and her two kids that he didn't father, but took care of. Grown ass bums now. Last I heard Al had a gambling problem and Phoebe had about three kids while still living with them.

"And why would you want to talk to me about your family, Thorn?" I had no patience for the beating around the bush. "I don't have all da?—"

"We're broke and drowning in debt. I lost my job a few months ago and uh I ne?—"

"You need money. From me." I finished his statement for him in disbelief.

"He didn't leave anybody anything. He left it all to you. Don't you care about how anyone else is?" he saw how unmoved I was, so now he was trying to play to my

emotions.

I laughed to myself, looking at this pathetic ass excuse of a man standing before me. How he knew where to find me was beyond me, but the audacity of him to find his way in my face asking for money was the absolute craziest. "Excuse me?"

"Look, baby girl the last thing I want to do is be standing here asking you for money, or anything but I'm here and we're in trouble. Now I know I haven't always been right an?—"

"Ever."

He looked at me like he was confused at what I said.

"Ever. You haven't ever been right. It's crazy that you can come in here and ask me for money to help your family but couldn't pick up a phone and even see how I was doing over the years. As a matter of fact, you couldn't even call me for a fucking birthday, but here you are. When my mother died, you took that insurance check and married her fucking sister right after dropping me off on my grandfather's front porch. You abandoned me, your own flesh and fucking blood years ago, but now you've got the audacity to stand here, in my fucking office and ask me... no expect me to give a damn about you and your family. When did you give a damn about me?"

He stood there, dumbfounded looking everywhere, but at me.

"Right and you still don't give a damn. You're just here to beg for her."

"I just need time with you, baby girl. Let me make this ri?—"

"Deeds already done. When I needed a father, you weren't there. You were a father to my cousins, while my pop pop had to step up. God rest his soul. The fact still stands

though. You ain't getting a dime out of me. You nor her."

He looked at me for a while before he shook his head and walked back out of the door.

"Aye, homie don't bring yo' ass 'round here no more, either. Shit ain't necessary." Cartier's voice made me look up. I didn't even know he was here, or how long he had been here.

He stepped through the threshold, shaking his head. "Motherfuckers 'round here feigning to get in them pockets."

I laughed. "Shit is. It's sad, too."

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"Ain't sad at all. Niggas will be niggas baby."

I nodded because he was right. "How is your shoulder?"

"Not too bad today. That oily ass massage you gave me last night did the work."

"It was. Now why were you picking me up again?" Earlier he insisted on picking up my car, and then picking me up when I finished work. It was all suspicious to me, but I didn't fight him on it. I was too busy working on a retirement event to pay him much attention.

"Cause one, I dropped your car off to get an oil change, and two we gotta go look at something."

"Look at what, Cartier? What are you up to?" I glanced at him attempting to see through the blank expression he offered.

"You ready to go, or not. I'm double parked down there. If a motherfucker hits my car that shit is on you."

I shook my head. "None of that is my fault. Why on earth would you even double park on a one way?"

"Because I expected your egghead ass to be ready when I got up here." He walked over and grabbed my tote, and lunch bag. Then like the true asshole I knew him to be, he went and stood next to the door.

"Do I rush you?" I gathered the few loose items that I planned on taking with me.

"Look, all I'm tryna do is feed you and make shit easier for us. Now, we gotta get up outta here, because I planned this shit around you getting off work."

"Planned what around me getting off?"

"Jovie." His impatient ass growled my name like I was annoying him.

"Fine." I opted out of challenging him and walked toward the door. After everything was locked up, we were headed to his car. Lately he felt like being a gentleman, so of course he opened the door for me to get in and closed it before heading on his side.

"I'd give all this money back to have one more day with my pop pop," I admitted aloud. Instead of looking at him, I kept my eyes ahead.

"I know." I felt his eyes on me almost as fast as his hand landed on my thigh. "He knows that too."

I turned in his direction. "You think so?"

"More than you know. He didn't leave you the money to replace him, but to ensure that you were good. To make sure you were taken care of and you never needed to depend on a soul."

"I know, it's just so weird not having any?—"

"Nope, you got us. We're a lil' family and I'm working on securing just that."

"And that means?" Just that fast I was attempting to read between the lines on just what the hell he was saying.

“What do you think about moving in together?” he kept his eyes on the road awaiting my response.

“Don’t we already kind of live together?”

“Somewhat, but I mean officially and in the city.” His eyes found their way to me again. He was trying to gauge my reaction.

“Why in the city, I like being out in the burbs.”

He laughed knowing I was being sarcastic. “I’m for real man.”

“Plus, we can just stay at my place. In your picky ass opinion it may be a little small, b?—”

“Exactly. Shit is small, and just enough space for you. We’re ‘bout to have a youngin’, which means we need space, space shorty.”

“Okay.”

“That’s a yeah you’re moving in with me or a yeah you’re right baby daddy?”

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“Both nigga, damn. You love being right.”

He chuckled, before turning his music back up. For the remainder of the ride we just vibed to his music both exploring our own thoughts on opposite sides of the car.

“This is nice.” I walked through the empty spacious condo. I had to give it to Cartier. He definitely knew how to pick out a place.

“So is this the one or do you want to keep looking?” His voice behind me made me turn around.

We locked eyes briefly before I turned back around taking in the space. “It's beautiful, but what do we need four bedrooms for?”

“Life.” He had this stupid smirk on his face that said more than his lips did.

“I mean, I guess I could turn one of the bedrooms into my office and you may need an office as well. I like it. I think it's sexy.” By this time I had turned back around, and I was taking in the view. We were above the clouds, and something about that was peaceful and not at all scary like I imagined when he first said it on the elevator.

When I turned back around, he was looking at me. Gone was the stupid smirk, it was replaced by this look in his eyes that I couldn't place.

“Is this what you want?” I know he had initiated this, but I had to ask him. Sometimes life had this way of going so fast that nobody ever decided to put the brakes on until it was too late.

“Why wouldn't it be? This was my idea, right?”

“Yeah, but the last thing I want is for you to feel pressured into something just because we have a child on the way.” I was being honest.

“Shit, the only person who should be pressured is you. You know how long I wanted this? How long I wanted you. Jovie, this shit has been the plan since before you ever let me between yo’ legs.”

I couldn't help the smile that formed at my lips. He always knew what to say. That was like his superpower.

“Talking about pressure, do you know what the hell I did to get you into the spaces that I got you in?”

Now that made me laugh. “Yeah, and now look at you stabbed by a ho who just couldn’t let go.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.”

“I'm serious, but I saw that post on her story about getting jumped. Something tells me you had something to do with that, huh?” I peered at him.

He laughed before throwing his hands up like he was waving a white flag. “I mean, I was there I watched that shit, but I ain't tell bitches to put their hands on her. Shit just came together on its own.”

I nodded.

“Now, are you ready for me to let this lady back in here so we can tell her yes? Or are you gonna change your mind?” He made it seem like it was my idea to tell the lady

who wasselling us the condo to get out. He knew it was him because he got annoyed with her constant questions about his income and my income.

“You're the one that put her out in the first place asshole.”

“Bitch was too fucking nosy.” Seconds later he went for the door, to I guess let her in. “We're ready. You can come back in. We want it.”

Of course it took a minute for everything to get done, but once it was finished he and I were free to go. We'd move in sometime next week, but for now I was just hungry and tired.

“You trying to get back to the house right now?” he asked as soon as we were in the car again. “Cause we got somewhere to be.”

“Where? I thou?—”

“You said you missed your girl, so I got you.”

“Now you're setting up playdates and shit for your girl. Awh shit, I'm good as long as there is food.” I smiled widely, which made him laugh.

“Greedy ass.”

“Blame yo' child.”

“Now you about to be out here blaming my baby when you just greedy as fuck and my baby just so happens to be along for the ride.”

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“Yeah right, that’s what you say.” I rested back in the seat while of course he drove toward our destination.

“When is our next appointment?” he asked out of the blue.

“Friday, remember?”

He nodded his head. “I knew it was one of these days. Is it the one when we confirm sex or no?”

“No, Cartier it isn’t. We got a few months for that, I think. Why?”

“I been kicking around names and shit, ready to meet my lil’ one.” His hand went to my stomach while he drove.

“Me too.” My hand covered his and all I could think about was what would soon be our reality. The crazy thing is I didn’t know if I should have been reading parenting magazines or what. Besides having moments of being completely petrified, I also had bursts of excitement filled moments.

Virtue

Jovie looked happy. I loved that for her. I loved that she was being loved the way she deserved, finally. Most of all I loved that Cartier was who she needed him to be, through and through. I needed that for her, because after her grandfather died I was scared for her.

“Not that this nigga set me up on a playdate in the poolhall.” She remarked sipping from the can ginger ale.

I laughed. “At least you knew about it. I wasn’t aware at all until Cartrek told me that you said he’s been hogging me.”

“Hell he has. Nigga doesn’t realize that you were mine before you were his.”

I giggled. “He told me about that too.”

“I bet. How are you though? You happy?” She scooted to the end of the couch I was on and leaned my way so only she and I could hear our conversation.

“I’m really happy...with him.”

“Meaning? And when you say with him what do you mean? Dumb it down for a sista.”

I cackled looking up from my drink in his direction. It just so happens he was looking directly at me. “I like it, and him.”

“Good bu?—”

“Nope, stop picking me and tell me about you.”

She smiled shyly. “Well you know what I’m up to. Pregnant, lowkey in love with my baby daddy, moving again and being borderline stalked by family that I’ve never fucked with like that.”

“Lowkey in love. Did I hear that right?”

“After everything I just said that’s truly what you heard?”

“No, but that’s what I decided to respond to first.” I giggled. “So spill.”

“Yeah man, I love that ole’ unhinged ass nigga. But don’t say anything because we haven’t exchanged those types of words yet.” The entire time she spoke she smiled.

“I get that. It’s just so funny because remember all that shit you used to talk? You know about how you couldn’t go there with him, but after everything he’s your one.”

She nodded. “Today we toured a condo in the loop, and I swear that all I could think about. I made a million excuses holding up my own process only to be literally floating on a freaking cloud with this man on a daily.”

I shook my head.

“Curse me for standing in the way of my own happiness.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” I nodded agreeing whole heartedly with her. It was something about just letting go and being happy. Releasing doubts and just deciding to be. With Cartrek that’s what I felt like it took. I had to become comfortable with not knowing everything, but just being... with him.

My thoughts were interrupted by my phone ringing. When I glanced down, I noticed that the call was coming from a number that I didn’t recognize. I didn’t answer calls that I didn’t know, because half of the time they were scam calls. If it was an important call, it would’ve had a caller ID and not a wonky area code.

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By the time I stuffed my phone back into my pocket, I felt his body near mine. Though he was just across the room, I could feel him move.

“You good?” I knew I was right when not only did I smell him, but I also felt his presence. It was heavy, not in a bad way but in one of those ways that made the connection stronger than anything. I probably sounded crazy, but that was the best I could explain it.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” I glanced up and my eyes caught his. Concern was etched in his handsome features, it had been for a few days now. I didn’t know what was going on, but it was something, I could feel it.

His hand touched the side of my neck, resting around the back of it before he leaned over pressing his lips to my temple.

“What did you do to my brother, Peach? Niggas can’t even focus on a conversation without migrating over to you.”

I laughed. “You tell me.” My eyes never left Cartrek’s, because we had that unspoken eye thing as well as this down ass connection going on right now.

“She ain’t did shit to me.” His mug transformed into a smirk before he finally broke our eye contact and looked toward his brother.

“Shidd. You a witch or something, Peach? Wiggling yo’ nose in the shadows like old girl from Bewitched,” Cartier asked making both myself and Jovie laugh while Trek flipped him off. Then like the fool he was, he started attempting to wiggle his nose.

“What, I’m dead ass just asking.”

“I bet you were.” I waved his foolishness off, before my focus went back to Cartrek. He was here physically, but not here. He was thinking a lot...about what, I wasn’t sure. Then every time he’d distract me by starting a whole other conversation about something different or initiating physical contact. “I’m good, Peach, now come up outta these,” he’d say.

Though the night was still young it was time to turn in. Cartier and Jovie cut out as soon as she started yawning and rubbing on her pudge. Then when Cartrek started touching all over me, pulling me in his lap I knew he was ready to go. Right when he and I were about to cut out, Cruz was also leaving with a blonde.

“Isn’t he married?” I asked Cartrek when we were settled into the car.

He nodded. “According to the state, and on paper but him and her been on their own shit for years.”

“Oh, why doesn’t he just divorce her?”

“Too much drama and they got lil’ ones. Who wants to put them through that?”

I nodded my head, understanding. “I guess, but if I was unhappy I wouldn’t stick around and make somebody else unhappy.”

“Probably not, but every female ain’t you, Peach. You’re secure in you. Even though you ain’t going nowhere, you ‘on’t need me for shit for real, for real.”

“Oh, so she’s holding him hostage.”

He laughed. “Pretty much.”

I got it and understood completely what he was saying, but it didn't mean it was something I resonated with.

His hand found mine in the middle of the console before he lifted it up bringing it to his lips.

“And no, I'm not going anywhere.”

“I didn't ask you if you were. I know yeen going nowhere.” He said that with more confidence than anything.

“Tell me something.”

“Anything, what's up?” I felt his eyes momentarily, before they settled back on the road.

“What's going on? What aren't you telling me?”

“What do yo?—”

“The truth.”

“I ain't never told you a lie,” he countered defensively.

“I know, but what are you not telling me? Checking in almost every hour. Not that I don't like talking to you, but I know you're a busy man. Random drives to your house for routine changes. Concern etched in your fea—” I was prepared to list more instances that I'd paid attention to. I was fine with not knowing everything, but I needed to know some things.

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“Aylo’s brother Alias is who shot Fari. Fari killed Alias recently. I don’t want—”

“The man hanging from the light pole on the news.”

“Yeah, look I try to protect you from it all. You and Dorie. It’s street shit.”

“Thank you.”

I could tell he was shocked at me saying thank you. He probably expected me to want him to go further into detail, but I didn’t.

“I’m not asking you to tell me everything, but I’m asking you to tell me about the things that have you staring into thin air when we’re eating dinner. The things that worry you.” I meant that. I could do without the street details, though I wasn’t naive enough to believe my brother or my man were saints. They were street niggas, and I accepted that.

Before another word could escape my lips he had pulled the car over and unbuckled my seatbelt. Not even a second later he’d pulled me into his lap, bringing us face to face. Then like magnets our lips collided acting as suction cups.

Cartrek

Sex with Virtue always made me feel like I was opening up different dimensions. Like somehow I was around here plane jumping every time I climbed between her legs. Virtue was dangerous, because not only was she addicting as fuck but she had the ability to make a man feel like he was at his highest with just one look. The entire

time we were at the pool hall tonight, I was only thinking about one thing. Getting her back to the crib was at the top of that list.

“Yo, you gotta keep it down because I’m not tryna have baby girl bust up in here on us.” I hit her deep, while my hand covered her mouth. The bathroom was right next to Adorie’s bedroom, which meant I either had to control the noise or get out of this shower and lock the door.

“I can..nn’t,” she barely pronounced can’t with way more ns’ than I knew were in the word. “Baby you’re—you’re breaking me,” she said that but thrust her pelvis up against me every time I thrust into her, holding her gliding ass in place while I assaulted her center with a vengeance.

With her wrapped legs around my waist, she slid up and down the marble wall in pure ecstasy, face reflecting everything I was doing to her body. I needed this shit, fuck it, I needed her ass.

From the moment I paid the babysitter and locked the door behind her, I was on Peach’s ass. Before following her into the shower, I made sure to check in on Adorie who was sound asleep in her bedroom. I stepped in, putting the cover on her and tucking her in before exiting just as quick as I had entered. Now here I was wishing I’d locked the bathroom door, because ain’t no way Adorie didn’t hear her loud ass mama.

“I...I...fuckkk.” She cried out every time I forced her ass down. She knew that running shit was a no go with me.

“You what, Peach?” I taunted.

“I think.” My understanding of her sentence ended there, because by now she was moaning intelligible words while I pumped into her viciously in attempt to make her

cum.

“I got... gotta pee.” She moaned out bringing a smile to my face.

“No you don’t baby, let that shit rock,” I said seconds before she exploded like the ripest tomato on the vine and I was right behind her, filling her slick folds with nothing but me. Every fucking thing I had at the moment.

I don’t know what time it was when I opened my eyes, sleep interrupted by the constant vibration of a phone on the distant nightstand. I knew it wasn’t mine, because throughout my slumber I’d reached on my side thinking it was my own over a million times. With my eyes now open, I realized that it was her phone, because not only was it flashing but it was also vibrating hard as hell against the wood. Peach could sleep through anything, so I didn’t expect her to get up and get it, so I got it. Reaching across her, I grabbed the phone ready to lay into whomever was calling at this time of morning.

“If it’s my mother, tell her I’m sleep,” she moaned out.

I laughed, because apparently she did hear her phone, but she just decided to ignore it.

When I saw the no caller ID I knew it wasn’t her mother. Somebody was calling her private. Curiosity got the best of a nigga, because within seconds I clicked the green circle and mashed the phone against my ear.

“About time you answered my call, Virtue. I just want to meet my fucking daughter, but you’re making this shit so difficult. You have left me no choice but to take you to court, because this I’m not standing for. You have my child around thugs and criminals, but you won’t even let me see her. I’m calling to let you know I’m going for full custody. My wife and I will ra?—”

I didn't need to hear any more of that bullshit, so I hung up. Threatening mine had just put his bitch ass on the top of my list. Though I knew he was making idol threats, I didn't like the fact that he thought he could. I damn sure didn't like the fact that he was bold enough to harass her, because apparently she hadn't been answering his calls. I had told the nigga to get a hobby, but I see he couldn't find one so now I had to see about his stupid slow ass. Fucking with mine would help a nigga lose his life, and on me it was just that easy. My thoughts stopped when I heard a small tap at the door...then another one followed by Adorie's little voice.

"Muhhmy."

I hopped up from the bed, rushing the door. When I opened it, Adorie was standing outside of it scratching her head with one hand and using the other to hold her iPad.

"I can't sleep," she whined as I leaned down to pick her up. I caught her iPad just in time, because as soon as she was in my arms, she let that motherfucker go.

With her head on my shoulder, I carried her into the kitchen to find her a snack and calm her down. I knew enough about her to know that she was food motivated like a motherfucker.

"We watch cartoons?" She lifted her head from my chest looking up at me.

"You want to?" I couldn't help it that shorty had me wrapped around her finger.

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She nodded her head wildly almost head butting my ass in the chin. “Pahcorn too?”

I chuckled. “Yo’ mama gonna kill us, shorty.” Seconds later I sat her down on the countertop and began to move about the kitchen.

“Mhmmm.” She smiled deviously.

I located the popcorn a few minutes later, and it didn’t take me long to pop it. I knew the trick to that shit. Never listen to the instructions, that was how you got yo’ shit burned.

After I finished with the popcorn, getting us both cups of juice we settled in on the sofa in the living room. Of course she was bossy just like her moms, so we ended up watching Disney’s Princess and The Frog. I don’t know how much of the movie I actually paid attention to before I passed out. Shit, the last thing I remembered was shorty feeding me soggy ass popcorn in my sleep.

When I woke up, Adorie was asleep at the end of the sofa now fully dressed instead of in her PJs. Picking my head up, I also spotted Peach walking right into the living room.

“Somebody is up.” A smile crossed her beautiful face, before she went toward the kitchen.

When I stood I stretched. Peach had the most comfortable for the moment type of furniture. Once satisfied with my stretch, I found my way behind her, pressing my body into hers. “Where you going?”

“To the restaurant. You and your sleepy best friend enjoy your movie night?”

I laughed. “Did we? Only thing missing was her mama, but you get a pass considering the fact that you took some major artillery last night.”

She cackled. “Why thank you, but no thank you. Now I have to deal with her grumpy little ‘tude because she’s going to be sleepy.”

“Nah, you don’t. Leave her here with me. I might do a lil’ bit of moving around today, but nothing too major.” Her bitch ass baby daddy flashed into my mind.

Peach turned around and looked at me for a moment, trying to gauge if I was serious or not before just asking. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“I’m just saying, I know she can?—”

“Nope, I got it. We’ll be straight.”

“Okay.” She made my plate, then handed it to me before continuing to get ready to leave. The entire time I watched her moving around while stuffing my face with what she cooked. A nigga could straight up get used to this shit, because even though she was trying to leave out by a certain time she still made sure I was straight as well as baby girl.

By the time Adorie and I left the crib, Peach had been gone for at least two hours. She was settled into her office by the time I called her asking how the fuck I was supposed to set up the fucking booster seat. She’d shown me once, but my focus was on her ass rather than the instructions she was giving. This time I had no choice but to get it.

“Wea we go, Trek?” Adorie asked from the back seat as we drove in the direction of where I was supposed to be meeting Cruz.

“To get my hair done. A nigga is out here looking bad, Dorie.”

She giggled in the back seat, before her eyes went back to the screen of her iPad. For the duration of the drive to the mattress shop, she was preoccupied, and I was in my thoughts. Cruz hopped in as soon as I parked.

“What’s up nigga? What the fu?—”

“Yoo,” I interrupted his sentence, using my head to point to the back seat to where I know Dorie was listening to him and paying too much attention. Because I had my music turned down, I knew exactly when she turned hers off or paused it.

“Oh, what’s up lil’ mama?” he greeted Dorie with a big toothy ass grin. The type that let me know he had some smart shit to say when she wasn’t listening.

She waved. “We get snack soon, Trek?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Then seconds later the headphones started again. She was officially tuning us out, which meant we could talk candidly.

“Never thought I’d see the day.” He set back in his seat.

We conversed back and forth about what I needed from him while I got my hair lined up. I gave him old boy’s full name and asked him to get me whatever he could between the time he dropped me and Dorie off at Freddy’s.

While I got my hair cut and lined up she sat on my lap the entire time oblivious to what was going on around her. Niggas loud as fuck talking shit. Shop talk, and shorties cutting the hair as it hit the ground. It was a regular day in the shop, except here she was. In my space, like she belonged to me. Didn't she though, especially because her mama damn sure did, so it was settled. The kid belonged to me because her mama was mine. All of this shit was new to me, the comfortability, reassurance, and most of all the questionable little eyes that looked at me with more trust than I had in myself. My kid.

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When I was finished and evicted from the heavy thought process going on in my mind, I paid Freddy and we bounced. Cruz was double parked in front of the shop on the busy ass boulevard. Once I had her snapped in and set up, I rounded the car climbing into passenger side.

“You got that for me?” I asked as soon as I was settled in.

Cruz chuckled. “Here lil’ mama. I got you a slice of pizza and some apple slices.” Of course Adorie clapped her hands happily as he handed her food to the back seat. “Yeah, pops I got your shi—stuff,” he answered after he had her situated.

“What did it sa?—”

“You wanna go handle that right now?” He asked, pulling from the middle of the street. Cars honked, but he didn’t give a shit, he was too focused on my answer.

“What do you mean now?” He had me confused at this point.

“Nigga is in Grant Park teaching his son’s little league.”

“How you know that?” I cut my eyes in his direction.

“Niggas put their whole lives on the media for a few likes and some reactions.” He shook his head in disgust. “So, we pulling up, or what?”

I turned my head looking out of the window, before looking in the side mirror and seeing lil’ mama playing like her apple slices were airplanes. The girl was mine

regardless, right?

“Yo’ she greedy as fuck. Lana was like that at her age,” Cruz’s words interrupted my thoughts.

I chuckled. “Leave my lil’ baby alone.”

“Yo’ lil baby, huh? You ready for that? That ain’t some shit you can take back after you step into that space.”

I nodded. “Her mama ain’t going nowhere and neither is she. That’s me.”

I felt his eyes, before he ultimately said, “Grown ass man shit.”

“Pull up.”

He laughed. “I already intended on doing that. You know what’s fucked up?”

“What?” I finally looked in his direction.

“Err’body growing up and slowing down except Ayce. The fuck it’s gonna take for him to see?”

“Probably catching something that strong ass antibiotics can’t even get rid of.” I shrugged. “He young though, and in his prime. Give him time, shit the same time you need. I saw old girl the other night.”

He laughed. “Did you? Shit you should’ve seen the broad she was with. I had a good night too.”

We pulled up a few minutes later. With Adorie’s hand in mine, I walked her over to

the bleachers with my cousin in tow.

I picked her up and sat her on the third one from the top, before I looked out at the field for old boy. When I didn't see him, I sat down next to her.

"We play football, Trek?" she asked, big brown eyes beckoning me to answer.

"No, lil' ma. I'm here to see a friend. You're gonna chill with Cruz while I go talk to him, okay?"

"Yo' left coming out of the dugout," Cruz spoke.

"Bet. Did you hear me, Adorie?" I peered at her waiting for an answer.

"Mhmm. Stay with Cru." She nodded, her hand slapping against the side of her face.

"Good, I'll be right back." I walked off in the direction of this bitch ass nigga who didn't want shit to do with Adorie for real, he wanted to fuck with Peach. That much was fucking obvious, but I was about to help him out with that and alleviate that need to fuck with mine right now. As my big ma' used to say, I was nipping that shit in the bud.

"What are you do—" he started, but I held my hand up halting his sentence.

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“You know who I am?” I asked looking out at the kids running back and forth waiting for some sort of instruction from their coach. Homeboy was busy right now.

“She sent you here?” he asked, like he was owed a fucking answer. He was lucky Adorie was in the stands because I would’ve stole his ass for answering a question with a question.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked again, damn sure not a fan if repeating myself.

“Ye..”

“Then you know I don’t fuck around, especially when it comes to mine.”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the outfield. On the kids that were having a fucking ball.

“But she isn’t yours. She’s mine. Both of them are.” Now he chose to look at me. I could see the fear in his eyes though he tried his darndest to hide it.

I laughed. “You know what you want on that stone? All yo’ paperwork filled out?”

“What do you mea?—”

“You willing to die behind that shit you spewing out here? If you know of me, then you know I’ll have you casket ready by tonight while I eat dinner with my family.” My family. My woman. My kid.

“And what am I supposed to do? Just let you raise my daugh?—”

“You ain’t gonna let me do shit. Had you been a different type of nigga and been in her life, then we wouldn’t be here. Niggas would be able to co-exist, but you round here having losers regret ain’t what’s up. That being said, don’t think I won’t leave yo’ bitch a widow and yo’ kids fatherless. We got an understanding?”

He looked at me for a while before he nodded. “Yeah.”

Chapter Eleven

Cartier -A Week Later

Niggas was dead asleep when I got the call that the mattress shop was lit up. The last thing I wanted was to climb out of bed with my baby mama, but I had to. Niggas had to get up and put work in to secure a future for me and mine. I’ll be damned if I allowed anybody to take that from me. Thankfully me and Jovie stayed in the city last night, so the drive wasn’t hours long. I pulled up at the same time as my brother, then I met him at his bumper.

“You know that nigga ain’t gonna move around gracefully.”

“Ain’t nothing about this graceful.” By now Trek was looking up at the damage of the store. Thank God our shipment went out two days ago and it wasn’t sitting in the basement. We would have been fucked.

“So, what are you saying?” my eyes left my brother and landed on the chard building, nearly drenched in water. Shit looked so bad, I just knew we’d have to change the shipment location.

He didn’t speak for a while, putting his fist to his lips, almost like he was the property

assessor, checking out the damages. “He thinks we killed his brother.”

I nodded. “Might as well have.”

“Good morning gentlemen. I’m Detective Landing and this is my partner, Jones. We have a few questions for you.” I could hear the smugness in the detective’s voice before I turned around. Police didn’t like us too much and that was fine with me, considering I didn’t care much for their lazy asses either.

“Questions for what? Niggas just pulled up. What could he or I possibly know?”

He looked from me to my brother who had yet to pay either one of them a lick of attention. He was still in his head looking at the building.

“How there’s such a beef between yourself, the Ace Boys, and the Mafia boys. Who started it?” the female cop’s words made me look in her direction. She seemed to have done her homework even though she didn’t know shit.

I laughed, shaking my head at what she thought she knew. “A wa?—”

“Don’t matter what you think you know, Detective. Hell if anybody is at war, it should be y’all and the city. I hear the paychecks are lousy while y’all are out here jumping in front of bullets.” Cruz’s words from behind them made them turn their backs on me to face him.

Neither of them responded.

“But since we don’t want to be spreading everybody’s business out here, how ‘bout y’all go do y’all’s job and move the fuck around.”

“My job is right here, questioning scum abo—” she started, but her partner touched

her shoulder.

“Another time, Jones.”

She sent him a menacing glare, before stepping back. Within seconds they both must’ve realized it was a good idea to move around because they were hopping in their cars soon after.

That being said we stood and talked for a while, before my brother pulled his phone out and mashed his phone against his face. I don’t know who he was talking to, but I assumed it had something to do with this situation, because whomever he was talking to he asked for a location.

“We’re going to the mortuary on Lake.” Cartrek’s next words were barely above a whisper, because the last thing we needed was for the pigs who were watching our every move to hear shit. At this point we were on that type of timing.

“First, we’ll stop by the spot, get a meal in.” Cruz cut his eyes in the direction of the pig’s car.

“Bet.”

We spilt up seconds later and all headed to our own vehicles. The spot was this lil’ soul food joint he owned in the city. It had parking so we were able to park and all pile into one car to move around.

Neither of us had an appetite, because other things clouded the mind. Then when we were getting ready to ride out, Trek’s phone rang. He mashed it to his ear, standing in front of the window.

“Bet.” He was off the phone and now facing myself and Cruz.

“Nigga Fari moves fast. Let’s move.”

“Watchu mean?” Cruz asked.

“When I first called he was watching Aylo, now he got that nigga in the trunk riding down state to a warehouse near the waterfront. Said he got something else too, but we’d just have to wait and see.”

After a two hour drive outside of the city, we pulled up to a warehouse in the middle of nowhere. Waterfront my ass, this was the fucking swamp and I didn’t know Chicago even had any of these let alone one. Trek pulled up to a set of doors that immediately began to open as he neared them.

When he pulled in the doors closed immediately behind us. Fari’s crazy ass walked out of an open room with a whole ass bar on his shoulder.

“Not even finna ask.”

He chuckled, before throwing his head forward in the direction of a door. “I heard about the mattress shop. Y’all straight?”

“Matter of a building and a few bricks. Shit will be straight as long as this gets handled.” Trek looked around before meeting Fari’s eyes.

“Straight. Lemme ask you something though.” Cruz’s voice pulled our attention in his direction.

“Shoot.” Fari nodded.

“How did you get that nigga on a light pole?”

Laughter erupted between the four of us, before Fari shook his head. “Shit was easier than you think. I borrowed one of those tru?—”

“Nope, I ain’t tryna hear that homicidal shit. Can we handle this shit so I can go get back into bed with my baby mama?” I interrupted them.

Fari chuckled, before he nodded in the direction of the door. “As y’all know I was on old boy when you called. Guess who he happened to be meeting with right after we hung up. Niggas was out here, plotting for a setup.” We stepped into the room seconds before Fari flipped the switch.

The face before my eyes brought a smirk to my face. “Hasn’t this motherfucker been stalking you, Trek?” though he was sleep, I knew exactly who this hard working underpaid motherfucker was. He had been working hard to get us, and none of this shit worked.

Cartrek didn’t respond immediately. Instead he stood there looking like he’d hit the lottery. Then his eyes went to Aylo who looked like he was taking a much needed nap taped up to the chair. He wasn’t even aware that he was on his last days.

“How much we owe you?” Trek didn’t look at Fari because he was fixated on the tow tied up motherfuckers.

“Shit, mattress spot was technically my fault.” Fari chuckled.

Niggas laughed again, this time waking Aylo up from his restful slumber.

“Awh shit, y’all woke up sleeping beauty.”

My brother rounded the both of them, now smirking. “You good nigga? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

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“Bitch ass nigga snaked me.”

Fari laughed. “Nah, I clocked you in yo’ shit in yo’ face.”

Aylo shook his head. “Niggas beefing with me over a bitch I could’ve ben fu—” The rest of that sentence was halted by the contact that Trek’s fist made with his jaw.” Shit was like something out of a movie because I could’ve sworn I saw that nigga’s face rearrange.

“You already about to die, tread lightly before I make that shit last all night. Fucking around with me you won’t rest peacefully at all.” Fari’s tone was icy as fuck.

Aylo spit blood from his mouth, before looking up at my brother. I could see the hate in this nigga’s eyes. he hated Trek with everything in him, and that shit had nothing to do with Vee, and everything to do with the fact that he lacked something in himself.

“I ain’t telling y’all niggas shi—” Trek vented his brain before he could even finish his sentence. We didn’t wanna know shit, his time on this earth had just expired.

“Damn, I wanted to know what he was about to say.” Cruz’s voice filled the space.

“Welp. Somebody wanna wake this motherfucker up?” Trek was over all of this, I could tell.

Fari didn’t utter a word, he just swung that bar in his hand as he made sure to make contact with Archie’s knee. I knew I heard something crack, before his agony filled

scream filled the room.

Then when he realized he wasn't alone and this was no nightmare, he looked us all over before his eyes got stuck on Trek. What the fuck did my brother do to these niggas for them to hate him like this? His eyes held the same hate as Aylo's. Then again Trek did kill the love of this nigga's life, so I guess his hate was warranted. Then again maybe not because they came after him. Wasn't his fault he got hip to it and she caught a bullet.

"I am a federal agent, you think you can just kill me?" he asked, eyes still trained on Trek.

Laughter expelled from my brother's lungs. "Won't be the first and damn sure won't be the last."

"You evil piece of shi—" Another sentence ended by my brother's pistol and a loud bang.

"Tired of hearing niggas talk. All these niggas do is talk and wolf." He shook his head, ranting to no one in particular. "What happened to the niggas that was 'bout it 'bout it?"

"Dying breed." Cruz shrugged.

"Sure is," Fari responded, walking the room and loosening the tarp that had been lain flat against the floor for the mess he knew would be made here.

"We'll move everything to that warehouse you just got up and running on Lake while repairs on the shop take however long. That way we can take on a lil' bit more to cover the extra territory we're about to have. Somebody let Ayce know that the Mafia boys don't have territory no more, he can move in on that shit and corner it before

somebody else calls themselves king of the streets.”

“Bet.”

When I made it home to my baby, a nigga just wanted to crawl into bed and pull her body into mine. I did just that after showering to get all that fucking death off me. Didn't take long before I was climbing into the bed and pulling her as close as possible. No matter how sleep she was, she woke up when she felt me near.

“You good, baby?” she asked sleepily, hand covering mine on her belly.

“Mhmm. Why wouldn't I be?”

“Because you rushed out of here mumbling and cursing. Then now you're bac—” she started, not moving, or turning around to look my way.

“I'm straight and things are handled. We're all straight.” Then I kissed the back of her head, which happened to be her hair bonnet that reeked of the rosemary oil she used to oil her scalp every night.

“Okay.” I knew she'd have questions in the morning but for now I was grateful for her state of sleep. Grateful that I'd have time to come down off everything that had taken place tonight.

“Jo.”

“Hmm?” she answered.

“I love you baby.” The words that had been begging to be said slipped from my lips.

“I love you too.”

Virtue

When I opened my eyes, he was lying next to me with his head in the crook of his elbow. I wanted to wake him and ask him if he was fine, but I didn't. I let him sleep. Whatever happened last night had to be serious. Not only was his conversation loud enough to wake me up, but it was enough to have him up and out of the door at three in the morning. I tried not to worry, but I was completely unsuccessful in that endeavor. I worried most of the morning, before the fact that I was dead tire took over my body. I couldn't help it, I passed out and now here I was awake wondering if I should go make him breakfast or stay here and push out a few more hours of sleep. With how tired I'd ben lately I could have, but it didn't feel right. Just because I was off work and Adorie was with my mother didn't mean I was permitted to lay-up and do absolutely nothing.

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When I finally willed myself from my bed, I went to the kitchen to start the coffee maker. Then I heard a loud banging at my door, which immediately put me on guard. I glanced at the wall clock that read eight-fifty-seven, before tightening my robe around my body and approaching the door.

I glanced through the peephole seeing that it was none other than Eva. I wanted to leave her at the door and walk off like I didn't hear her, but I had neighbors and the last thing I wanted to do was disturb them.

Rolling my eyes to the ceiling I sighed before I stepped back to open the door. Of course I didn't want her in my house, but what else could I do? Hopefully this was a quick visit because I low key wanted to make this man breakfast and then climb back into my damn bed and I didn't feel like being bothered.

When I eyed the duffle bag in her hands, I just knew my hope meant nothing. She was about to try to push a few boundaries and piss me off.

"About time you opened the door. I was beginning to think you wasn't home." She walked in past me and tossed her bag on the floor looking around like she had never been to my place. "It's nice in here."

"Thank you, what are you doing here?" I refused to beat around the bush nor bite my tongue. It was too damn early, and she was fucking unannounced.

"Well, since that nigga you messing with done ran Linny out of town and you won't give me a few dollars to pay my rent I don't have anywhere to live."

I tilted my head to the side looking at her, completely fucking speechless because this was what had come out of her mouth. “Excu?—”

“Look it’s just for a little bit. ‘Til I get back on my feet.”

“No. You can’t stay here. And for the life of me I don’t know what gave you the idea that you could just show up here and it would go like that.”

“And where am I supposed to go?” she asked like that was my problem. “What you probably got that nigga laid up here with you. Me, your mother can’t get a few days?”

“No, and you should use that word very lightly, because the last thing you have been is a mother.”

She looked at me for what felt like forever before she shook her head. “I gave you life, and here you are being ungrateful. How dare you sit your ass up here and think you’re better than m?—”

“Leave Eva. I can’t keep doing this with you. For once I’m happy and I refuse to let you mess that up for me. I refuse to let you bring all of this hateful shit into my life.”

“You good in here, Peach?” Trek’s voice broke the intense eye contact between me and my mother.

Immediately she looked at him. “And who the fuck are you supposed to be?” Eva whipped her head in his direction so fast that I’m sure she almost broke her neck.

“The nigga whose willing to do whatever to protect her from motherfuckers like you and yo’ son.” He knew all about Eva and Lenny’s tactics. It was one of those nights when we stayed up talking and I felt comfortable enough to voice my frustrations with that part of my family.

“And what the fuck is that supposed to mean? What is he talking about, Virtue?” Her fury was now pointed in my direction.

“Look, I wasn’t taught to disrespect my elders, so I’m gonna say this as nice as I can. Get up outta here, and leave her alone—”

“That’s my fucking daughter. You don’t tell me shit about mine! You letting this nigga dictate your moves and tell you what to do?”

“He’s not telling me what to do. He’s telling you what to do where I’m concerned, and I think you heard him.” I walked over toward the door to open it. When I had it open I just stopped there, holding it, and waiting for her to step through it.

She looked taken aback, before she nodded her head and stood. “When this nigga leaves you for whatever other bitch he’s fucking don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She had her bag on her shoulder stepping out of the door seconds later.

Once she was on the other side of the threshold, I closed the door without a second thought. When I turned around Cartrek was looking at me, expression filled with concern.

“I’m good, thank you,” I assured him as I walked toward his shirtless frame.

“Yeeen gotta thank me for protecting you. I’m gonna do that shit regardless. Your peace is my priority.”

I smiled. “Is that so?” Compared to Cartrek, I was a damn midget. So, when I wrapped my arms around his body my head was against his chest, nowhere near his face.

“Very much.” He picked me up carrying both of our bodies to the sofa. He took a seat

seconds later, hands on both sides of my thighs.

“How are you?” I questioned, staring intently at him as he peered into my eyes.

“I’m good. Better yet, great.” His lips were against my neck seconds later.

My hand found his chin, tilting it up for him to look at me. “You’d tell me if you weren’t, right?”

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He peered at me intensely, before he nodded.

I guess that worked for me... for now. So I leaned in and pressed my lips against his. His energy was enough for me, and that alone made me so content in his arms...in his presence. He was enough, this space was enough and for once I was okay with the feelings he gave. He was genuine, sweet, attentive and most of all a grown ass man who didn't play when it came to the matters of his heart. I was grateful for that...grateful for him. Though he got on my damn nerves, he was mine and I couldn't do anything but feel that.

Jovie

When Cartier came in this morning, I felt emotional, then my worries consumed me. Like somehow all of my thoughts had conjured up this immeasurable amount of intrusive thoughts that cloaked themselves in worry. Worry that dispersed the moment I felt him put his hands around my body in bed. I don't know what he had gone out and done, but I knew it wasn't good. Not with all the obscurities he mumbled as he walked through his bedroom getting dressed in a quickness. Pissed was an understatement and I knew that for a fact, because even though I was sleep when he got the call I heard and felt everything. From the moment he leaned over the bed and kissed my cheek, worry settled into my being making it close to impossible for me to get back to the sleep I had when I was in his arms. I managed though, because his child wouldn't let me get out of bed and my eye lids were heavy as rocks. I managed to stay in that space of horrible sleep, eyes closed and solid consciousness for the duration of his time away. But he consumed my thoughts, because I just wanted him to be safe... shit to be back in this bed with me.

I never expected things to get this deep with Cartier and myself. Especially when he was fucking Taylor and we partied in the same groups. That felt like a lifetime ago, because not only had this baby and life sat me down, but it slowed him down too. I didn't expect that one night to bring us here, to planning our lives together and negotiating furniture together. I didn't expect any of this. Shit, to be honest I didn't even expect to lose my pop-pop, no matter how many times he warned me that his time was coming. I didn't believe him, because in my mind the old man would live forever and give my children the pop-pop experience I had.

Anyway life had this way of not showing you it's hand until you'd either folded or stood on business. Plenty of times I wanted to fold, to roll over and cry into my arm, but I couldn't. wasn't raised like that. Shit nothing about me was soft life material if anything I was hard body.

"You over there staring into space. You must think you know what we having." Cartier's voice interrupted my thoughts and brought me back to the present space we were in.

I blinked a few times allowing my eyes to gloss the small appointment room, before they landed on my fine ass baby daddy. "Told you it's a girl. 'Cause if it ain't you're on your own buddy boy."

He chuckled. "Fuck outta here. Even if you carrying my daughter right now, you still finna carry my son in the nearest future. I need me about five." Stupidly he held his hand and all five of his fingers up as he spoke. Such an animated ass nigga.

I chose not to respond to his decree. Not because I didn't have a rebuttal, but because I knew when it came to him, he could have whatever he asked for from me and some. Instead I waved him and that sneaky ass smirk off.

I could see it in his face he was about to respond but a knock at the door interrupted that.

Seconds later the doctor was stepping through the door with a nurse in tow and the sonogram machine. “Good afternoon mom and dad, how are we doing today?” she asked politely.

“Good and ready.” Cartier smiled rubbing his massive hands together. When he felt me looking at him he looked from her to me, before sending a wink in my direction. His way of reassurance.

Not long after she set up the machine and asked me to lift my shirt, she confirmed that I was indeed carrying a little girl. A little girl I’d protect with my life, and so would her father. A little girl who would never know the feeling of abandonment because she’d always have us. I didn’t know what the future held, and yes this was technically the beginning of mine and Cartier’s story together.

“Yo, you know I love you right?”

Immediately heat overcame both of my cheeks, and a smile to challenge Jigsaw covered my face. “You do? It ain’t like you didn’t say it last night while I was half sleep.”

His hand gripped mine, bringing it up toward his face as he drove. “Is Turkey ass turkey? I love you with everything in me and I’m a give you the fucking world. You and lil’ Cartierra.”

I busted up laughing. “I love you too, but we are not naming my daughter that ghetto shit.”

Cartrek

I glanced down at my watch, before my eyes glossed the doctor’s face. I could see how surprised she was when she saw me in the waiting room. She was completely taken aback, and she tried to check herself, but she couldn’t. Doc was used to seeing

a nigga weekly so she could pick my brain and be all in my shit about my choices, my regrets, and the moments I couldn't forget for the life of me.

"It's been a while. How are you, Cartrek?"

I shrugged, getting comfortable on the sofa as if I'd be here long.

"Straight. I'm good."

She nodded her head. "That's good. How is life?"

"Leveled."

Her brow raised as she looked up from the notepad in her hand, eyes studying me and completely thrown by the word I'd just said. "Leveled. That's an interesting word to use. Care to explain what you mean?"

"Like I'm leveled out right now. Found a lil' bit of a balance between obsessing over the shit I can't change and the things I can. Life is balanced."

She nodded and continued to scribble my words into her note pad. "What brought about this balance? If you don't mind me asking."

"Life." And her.

She nodded. "That's good. How have you been feeling?"

My eyes traveled the room, before they landed on her. "Felt."

The end...For Now