



# Objection

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** Kaos Montgomery is one of four managing partners at Montgomery, Pierce, Walker, and Gough Law Firm. He handles the organized crime unit, defending mafia leaders, drug lords, and assassins. Though Kaos spent his younger days in the underworld, he thrives and takes pride in the legit life he lives now . . . though some people in his past and personal life wish they could bring back the old him.

Serenity Monroe has one goal—to thrive at Montgomery, Pierce, Walker, and Gough. It is the most prominent, prolific, and prosperous law firm in Rose Valley Hills. As Kaos Montgomery's executive assistant, Serenity takes pride in providing him and the office with what her name means: a state of calm, peace, and absence of trouble.

As light as Serenity's presence makes the office and Kaos's life, there's a darkness that surrounds him because of his past that threatens his reputation and her safety. Technically, their love is forbidden because she works for him, but that doesn't stop the building bond that blooms between them. When the pair agrees to blur the lines and make their professional relationship personal, they have more than just the board and other partners at the firm to worry about. They have to deal with the ghost of Kaos's past indiscretions too . . .

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# Page 1

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Kaos (Chaos)

The silence in the room had a thick tension. So thick it felt suffocating. So thick it felt as if Kaos moved, it would wrap around him and steady his movements . . . like concrete. As convinced as Kaos was that he was doing the right thing, the confused, disappointed, and sad looks on the faces of his family members had him questioning his decision briefly. Then, his eyes landed on Parker, who was there because her husband had been killed and she had to take his place, and Kaos was reminded of why he had to leave.

The Montgomery Mafia was at the height of its notoriety when Parker's husband, Holt, was murdered—by his brother. Unfortunately, betrayal meant banishment or death. Worse, death at the hands of a family member. For Kaos, watching his cousin kill his own brother was the final straw. Ironically, Kaos deciding to leave was in itself considered betrayal, positioning him to have the same fate.

Kaos had grown up learning the ways of the mafia. He'd been prepared to take over for his father, who served as underboss for his older brother, Alpha. Never completely content with that path for his life, Kaos went to school and gained his law degree to ensure he always had a second option.

Alegitoption.

His father boasted of Kaos's accomplishments in pride, making it clear Kaos was a carefully placed chess piece. With his job, he'd be able to help them if they were ever arrested and charged for a crime. For a while, Kaos agreed, because it meant he could practice law freely. That changed when Holt was murdered and Kaos was asked to

take his place.

His father, Adam, made it clear to Kaos what he was risking if he left, and how grim the options were. How severe the consequences were. How some people in their family, and the mafia, would look at his choice to leave as betrayal. None of that mattered to Kaos. He'd seen far too much bloodshed and death and wanted to spend the rest of his days in peace.

The first sound to cut through the thickness of the silence was the creaking of Alpha's chair. After he signed a piece of paper that his brother, Adam, passed him, he stood and made his way around the table toward his nephew. Kaos had been raised and trained to fear no man . . . not even his uncle . . . who was known in the underworld of Rose Valley Hills and Memphis to end a person's life for even the slightest annoyance or inconvenience—blood or not.

Alpha gripped Kaos's shoulder tightly, giving it a squeeze. "When you were born, your mother named you Kaos because of how rough her pregnancy was. She said she was sure you'd come out the womb wreaking all kinds of havoc."

They smiled, and though Kaos kept his gaze on his uncle, he saw his father smile too out of the corner of his eye.

"You put in a lot of work as a young hoodlum, and I'll always appreciate the time you put in," Alpha continued. "I understand your desire to go legit and practice law full time. I will honor that request. Usually, anyone wanting to leave would be banished or killed." Alpha looked back at his brother, who nodded his agreement. "Because of the loyalty you've shown and your willingness to defend any members of the Montgomery Mafia legally, you may remain in Rose Valley Hills, and no one will come after your soul."

Kaos's eyes closed, and he inhaled a deep breath before swallowing hard. Though he

knew there was a chance Adam would be able to convince his brother to keep Kaos alive, he also knew there was a chance not even his father would be able to save him. If that was the case, Kaos was willing to accept his fate. He'd never been a man to back down from anything or do anything he didn't want to do, and that wouldn't start now. Even if he had to leave Rose Valley Hills and never see or speak to his family again, he'd accept that punishment to live his life for himself.

"Thank you." Kaos's crisp, deep voice seemed to pierce his uncle's heart. His face twisted and eyes watered, as if it hit him in that moment that Kaos was really leaving. Without saying a word, Alpha pulled Kaos into his embrace. His hand went to the back of Kaos's neck, holding him close.

"Do good," Alpha whispered in his ear before releasing him, and that command almost meant more to Kaos than his freedom.

The meeting ended, and Kaos left with his father. Neither of them spoke until they made it to Adam's town car. Adam looked over at his son with a smile and pride in his eyes.

"I felt like I couldn't breathe the whole time we were in there," Adam confessed, running a thick handkerchief over his sweat-covered forehead.

"Why the fear?" Kaos wondered.

"It wasn't fear," Adam corrected. "It was sadness."

"Sadness?" Kaos repeated in disbelief. "Why?"

"I was sure my brother would demand your blood, and if he did, I'd have to kill him. Which meant his men would kill me. I'm not ready to leave my wife yet."

Kaos smiled, but he knew his father's words were the truth. Brother or not, Adam had always been his son's protector. He'd already made it clear no one would come against his son and not face consequences for it . . . regardless of who they were.

"If anyone sent a bullet your way in that room and left my mama here alone, I'd fight God to come back to Earth and punish them all for it."

"I know, Son," Adam admitted, lightly tapping Kaos's shoulder with the palm of his hand. "It seems it's over now. Your work in the streets at least. I hope you know Alpha is going to take full advantage of your law degree. Get ready for things to get reckless around here now that he knows he has you. He will test you and your loyalty to make sure letting you stay here, alive, was the right choice." Kaos nodded his agreement. "Your cousin just lost his life because of his betrayal. People are going to see your life and presence here as an unfair display of favoritism. They will come after you, Son. And when they do..." Adam cupped the back of Kaos's neck, forcing him to look into his father's eyes. "I don't care who it is and how legit you are . . . you lay them the fuckdown."

## Serenity

Sniffling, Serenity wiped her leaking eyes. She pulled in a deep breath. The last time she hid herself in the bathroom to cry, it was because her boyfriend of two years had cheated on her and gotten another woman pregnant. The current moment was a happier occasion. She should have been smiling and releasing happy tears. Unfortunately, the weight of leaving her family was a bittersweet one. One that had sadness and anxiety filling her temporarily.

Not only was she leaving the safety and security of her family, but she was also leaving her small town home of Jasper Lane. Going to a big city was a huge feat on its own, but going, finding her dream job, and settling into the new way of life was altogether different.

Regardless of how much Serenity told herself she was making the right choice, small pieces of doubt caused by comfort and familiarity made her question herself. But this was right. This was the first step for her to regain control of her life, and Serenity wouldn't trade that for anything in the world—not even the comfort of her old life and home.

After wiping her eyes again, she splashed water on her face and pulled in several deep breaths. Once composed, Serenity made her way out of the bathroom. Her family was just as she'd left them. Her mom, Yolanda, was keeping busy fretting over things that were already clean in the kitchen. Her father, Walter, was stubbornly sitting in his favorite recliner with a frown on his face and his arms crossed over his chest. Her sister, Taylor, was in her own world with her head buried in her phone. The rest of her family and friends were scattered around the house for her going away party.

"I'm so proud of you," her grandmother said, wrapping Serenity up in a side hug. If no one else was, Serenity could count on her mother's mother to be proud of and happy for her. It was because of Diana that Serenity even had the courage to leave their small town. She'd fallen into a depressed rut and wanted more for her life. More than Jasper Lane could offer. While her mother suggested she pick up a new hobby, her father offered her more hours at their family restaurant. It was her grandmother who coached her through her thoughts and feelings until Serenity realized for herself what she wanted, and to her father's displeasure, that was leaving Jasper Lane.

"Thank you, Granny. Your son-in-law has been ignoring me all day. I don't think he feels the same."

## Page 2

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Diana sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes, making Serenity laugh. “Oh, don’t worry about him. You’re his baby girl, so of course he’s going to be upset that you’re leaving him. Plus, it doesn’t help that he has to find a replacement for you at the restaurant and grocery store. You know he hates change. Don’t take it personal.” After giving Serenity a kiss on the cheek, Diana joined Yolanda in the kitchen.

The music shifted to something they could dance to, and for a brief moment, the room was filled with laughter and good vibes. Once the moment passed, Serenity made her way over to the couch next to her sister and plopped down. Taylor looked at her and rolled her eyes with a pout. The gesture made Serenity smile as her eyes watered.

Tossing her arm over Taylor’s shoulders, Serenity almost cooed, “You’re still mad at me, boo?”

“Duh.” Taylor shoved Serenity’s arm from around her. “You’re leaving me here with our parents and putting a target on my back. Daddy is about to drivemecrazy now.”

“I told you that you could come to Rose Valley Hills with me.”

Taylor’s head shook. “Nah. You’re the one with big city dreams.”

“I wouldn’t say I have big city dreams,” Serenity countered with a smile. “I just . . . want more for myself. I’ve literally done everything I feel like I can do here, and I want to be more than just a waitress and cashier at our family businesses. I have two degrees that I’m not even putting to use. Why is that such a bad thing?”

With a sigh, Taylor's expression softened as she took Serenity's hand into hers. "It's not a bad thing, Sissy. I know I might not act like it, but I'm happy you're moving if that's what you really want. I'm just going to miss you."

"I'm going to come home and visit, and you can visit me whenever you want, so you won't even have to."

Taylor smiled and pulled Serenity in for a hug. Pleased with the conversation with her sister, Serenity looked around the room in search for her father. When she couldn't find him, she went to the kitchen to talk to her mother. The hushed tone of the conversation she was having with Serenity's father slowed her steps. At the sight of Serenity, Yolanda snapped her mouth shut. Walter looked back at her, and his shoulders immediately slouched as he released a hard breath.

Serenity took small steps in their direction, hopeful that time Walter would hear her heart, not just her words, and understand she wasn't leaving him. She wasn't abandoning him and the family businesses. She was simply moving to another city for the next phase of her life.

"Hi," Serenity spoke softly, looking from her mom to her dad. While Yolanda gave her a warm smile, Walter avoided her eyes. "Um, I just wanted to say thanks again for the party. It's been fun seeing everyone before I leave in the morning."

"Of course, baby," Yolanda replied. "You know we wouldn't send you off without a proper goodbye."

They both looked at Walter to see if he'd engage, but he didn't. Huffing, Yolanda rolled her eyes.

"Daddy, I—"



Not bothering to listen to what she had to say, Walter turned and headed out of the back door. Serenity's eyes watered, and her hand wrapped around her neck to stifle her cry. A part of her hoped her father would say something to her before she left, but it didn't look like that would be the case. Though Serenity hated the wedge her leaving had put between her and her father, that wasn't reason enough for her to stay. If she did, she'd only resent Walter because she wanted to leave. All she could do was pray one day soon he'd accept her choice and not take it as a personal rejection.

"He'll be okay," Yolanda assured her, pulling Serenity into her arms for a much needed embrace.

"He may be, but I'm not."

"Any time you do what's best for you, you're doing the right thing. Sometimes that means hurting someone you love. You did it in the gentlest way possible, with no ill intent, so I don't want you to feel bad about this. He'll come around. In the meantime, I want you to go forth and soar. There's a whole new world of experiences out there for you, baby. Take full advantage of every single one."

Serenity didn't realize how much she needed her mother's encouragement until she received it. She weakened in Yolanda's embrace, gaining her strength, hoping her mother was right.

Kaos

Several Years Later

Serenity Renae: I'll leave quietly, because the absence of my presence in your life will be loud.

I stared at the picture shared with the cryptic caption from Serenity, being careful not

to like it on IG. We didn't follow each other, and I didn't need my executive assistant knowing I stalked her on social media to keep up with what was going on in her personal life. While we shared some facts about each other during small talk and random lunches or dinners, we kept a clear, thick line drawn between professional and personal exchanges of information. We had a close bond during work-hours, but after that, I was only left with thoughts and desire for her.

As I scrolled through her IG account, I noticed a lot of the pictures and videos she'd posted with her boyfriend had been removed. Not all of them, because there were so many, but enough to know the couple had broken up. I hoped she wasn't sad about the breakup because it made me happy. So happy a grin spread across my face.

"What you over there smiling about?" Tristan asked.

He was one of the other three managing partners at Montgomery, Pierce, Walker, and Gough (Go). It was crazy what walking in your purpose looked like. When I first left the mafia, I was confident, but there was a part of me that wondered if I'd made a mistake. Now, I co-owned the most prominent, prolific, and profitable law firm in Rose Valley Hills. The bigger flex? Our entire staff was BIPOC. Knowing that I'd helped create something with a powerful legacy that would go down in history made leaving the mafia worth it.

"Nothing." My head shook. "Something online but nothing I'm about to talk about with you."

"Oh, so it's about Serenity then?"

Between his nonchalant tone and deadpanned expression, I couldn't help but laugh. Tristan was the only one of the partners that knew I was insanely attracted to Serenity. Our chemistry was always undeniable because of our banter, but I denied any allegations. Not just because she was eight years younger than me at thirty-two

but also because she worked for me, and a relationship between us would go against our nonfraternization policy. But Tristan? Tristan had a way of seeing the things most humans wanted to keep hidden. Even if I wanted to lie to him about my infatuation with her, I couldn't.

## Page 3

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“She invading your thoughts?” he continued.

My head shook as I set my phone on my desk. “Nah. I can get rid of an invasive thought. Whatever happens when I think of her . . . I can’t cut off.”

“Hmm,” he hummed deep within his throat with a bob of his head. “So when are you going to act on that?”

“I can’t. You know that.”

He chuckled. “Why not?”

“Nigga, did you forget we got a whole nonfraternization clause?”

“Nigga, did you forget we run this shit? You can do whatever the fuck you want to do.”

I ran my hands down my face as I sighed. I knew he was right, but I also wasn’t with breaking the rules just to make them benefit me. That went against my morals. Plus, I didn’t know if she wanted that anyway. It meant more to me to keep our business relationship as it was than to risk it for something that wouldn’t last. Serenity was the best executive assistant I’d ever had. We worked well together, and she knew how my brain worked. My workload was lighter because of her, and most times I didn’t have to ask for anything because she provided it naturally. Plus, I loved her presence here in the office. I couldn’t risk that for something that may or may not last or be reciprocated.

“I ain’t risking it, but I also don’t know how much longer I can be satisfied with flirting with her here and there. Plus, apparently she’s single now so—”

Light tapping at the door halted my words. I knew it was Serenity before I turned my head to look because she knocked the same way every time someone was in my office. Had I been in here alone, she would have just opened the door not giving a fuck what I had going on. You’d think the first time she caught me having a random quickie in my private bathroom with an ex face down ass up on my desk last year would have made her remember to always knock but it didn’t. If I was crazy, I’d say she enjoyed the thrill of wondering what she’d find me in my office doing other than working. Depending on the day, there genuinely was no telling what I’d be in here doing. I spent almost more time here than I did at home, so I had a small wardrobe, bathroom, and mini bar set up for entertaining.

“Come in,” I granted, warning Tristan with my eyes to be on his best behavior. He smiled and stood, and I was grateful he decided to leave.

“What’s up, Serenity?” Tristan greeted her.

“Hey, Mr. Pierce. How has your day been?”

“Well, thank you. How about you?”

“It’s been great, but it’ll be even better if I can get Montgomery out of here at a decent hour.”

Chuckling, Tristan tossed me a look over his shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

I checked the time on my Rolex as Tristan closed the door behind him. I hadn’t realized how late it had gotten. We were supposed to be out of here by five, but it was fifteen minutes before seven.

“Okay, Montgomery,” Serenity said, gaining my attention. I looked at her and couldn’t help but smile. She looked good as fuck in a spaghetti strapped white dress. All day, she had the dress covered by a kimono. Now that we were technically off the clock, she exposed those beautiful cocoa bean brown shoulders. My eyes scanned her frame. It was slim but had that classic coke bottle shape because of her perky breasts, small waist, and wide hips. “It’s time to go home.”

“On one condition.”

“Which is?” she asked with a warm smile.

“You come home with me.”

Her slanted dark eyes rolled playfully before she licked those full bowtie shaped lips. Dainty fingers pulled her long black and brown highlighted hair behind her ears.

“Of course I will. Let’s just go—now.”

I chuckled before releasing a low, rumbling, “Yes, ma’am,” before licking my lips and looking her over once again. I knew she’d say just about anything to get me the hell up out of here, but I appreciated her agreeing, even if it was a lie. “One of these days I’m going to ask you to come home with me and I’m going to be serious,” I challenged as she squeezed her way past me to cut off my desktop and laptop.

I inhaled her scent and swallowed my desire. When we were at the office, she wore clean and fresh scents. This one smelled literally like linen and soap. Anytime we had events outside of the office, she wore more enticing and feminine scents. I loved the clean scent on her and always wanted to rub against her when she stood close, but I refrained.

“You know the only thing you’d have me doing is going through your files from

work.”

“Yeah, aight.”

I put on my dark blue suit jacket though it was fairly warm outside because of the June weather and grabbed my phone off the desk.

“What are you doing tonight?” I probed as we headed out.

“Going home and eating a frozen dinner before binging *Living Single*.”

## Page 4

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“We can’t have that. I’m buying you dinner.”

“Oh.” She smiled again before shyly looking away. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I want to.”

Deciding not to take no for an answer, I led her toward the elevators and out to my car. With how stressful some of my days could be, I never drove to work. I had two chauffeurs who had a rotating schedule for my town car, Rolls Royce, and Bentley. Raquel must have been watching the door, because as soon as we stepped out of the exit into the parking garage, he opened the door.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?” Serenity asked. “I don’t want to inconvenience you and you have to bring me back here to get my car.”

“Let me be a gentleman,” I commanded, lifting my hand to stop Raquel from opening the door for her.

With a sweet giggle, Serenity gracefully climbed inside the Rolls Royce. “Oh, please. We know you’re anything but,” she teased, making me laugh.

Instead of responding, I shot her a wink before closing the door and walking over to the other side. She, like a lot of people, probably heard of my family and my past—my reputation. While she didn’t know I’d been a part of the mafia, I was sure she’d heard rumors since she’d been in town . . . even if just around the office. I’d never deny that I was a gangsta . . . but I was a gentleman too.



## Serenity

I couldn't stop smiling when we pulled up to my favorite barbecue joint in Rose Valley Hills. It reminded me of Green Street Smoked Meats in Chicago because of the layout, but it tasted like Memphis barbecue. Rico's Ribshad a coffee shop in the underground first level, a bar and buffet with family style seating on the second level, and rooftop seating on the third. On the second level, there were TVs on the walls, low music playing, and a small arcade area that was hardly ever free.

When I heard Kaos laughing, I looked over at him. Though he'd told me to call him Kaos, especially after hours, I couldn't, so I called him by his last name. I was a firm believer in the power of words, and Kaos had always filled me with everything but chaos.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"The fact that I could have taken you literally anywhere, but I knew you wouldn't be as excited as you would be to come here."

"Hey, what can I say? Ain't nothing better than a good plate of barbecue."

Raquel opened the door for Kaos, then he came to open mine. I put my hand in his and stepped out of the car, ignoring how good the warmth radiating from his large hand felt against mine. Ignoring the way his eyes traveled my frame, I adjusted my dress and waited for Kaos to close the door so we could go inside.

While he ordered our drinks at the bar, I took a moment to acknowledge how good he looked today. The blue suit looked delectable against his cinnamon brown skin. He was tall and wide with a muscular build. There were tattoos on his chest, arms, and hands. He had dark, shiny eyes, naturally arched brows, and skin colored, juicy lips that looked like the softest pillows. His beard was black and thick, and so was his

tapered fade, but it had a few streaks a gray in the front that added age and wisdom to the forty year old who looked as young as thirty-five.

When he turned to face me, I quickly shifted my gaze, though his smile made it clear he caught me looking.

“Where would you like to sit, Serenity?”

Looking around the room, I decided on the long table in the back that was empty. He led the way and set our drinks down before confirming what I wanted. When he left to get our food, I checked my notifications. The calls and text messages from my ex made me block him. I hadn’t planned to, but I didn’t like how it felt to see that he’d reached out to me. It felt invasive. He chose to downplay my place in his life and not give me the priority and attention I deserved. Since he didn’t value my place in his life, I left. I don’t think Mario expected me to actually break up with him, so he was shocked when I did. Now, he was calling and texting and applying the pressure he should have had to keep me instead of using it to try and get me back.

Shortly after, Kaos returned with two trays of food. I offered to help him grab our sauces, but he declined. I figured with everything I did to help him around the office, he liked to return the favor on the rare occasions where we went out after work. Or, he was naturally the kind of man who took care of everything. I’d gotten into the habit of serving most men as long as they returned the gesture, but I hardly ever had the chance with Kaos unless we were at work. That’s why I loved doing anything I could to make his days easier—even if it was something as simple as making sure his coffee and breakfast pastry or sandwich were available as soon as he walked through the door.

When we first started eating, there was no conversation between us. Not only was I hungry because I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, but I was also deep in my thoughts. Though I didn’t regret breaking up with Mario, I was disappointed that I had to start

dating all over again. When I was in a committed relationship, I cut the rest of the men I was talking to off, and I hated having to start all over again.

When I spooned a bite of elote corn into my mouth, I moaned and danced in my seat. The gesture led to Kaos breaking the silence.

“Good?”

“The best. Far better than what I had back home.”

“Let me taste,” he requested, already shoving his spoon into my corn. I didn’t mind sharing with him, especially since he’d paid for it. “Mm, that is good.”

“Told you.”

“When was the last time you went home? You’ve been working for me for what... two years now? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you mention going back.”

I wiped my mouth and released a shaky breath. “It’s been a while,” I confessed. “I went back maybe three times when I first moved here before I stopped going.”

“Why?”

Shrugging, I lifted my strawberry lemon drop, though I knew the exact reason I’d stopped going to Jasper Lane. “Never really felt good,” I confessed.

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“Why not?”

“My daddy is still upset over me leaving so that makes things weird. And my sister won’t say it, but I think she resents me for it too. She says she loves it in Jasper Lane, but I don’t think she does. Or maybe she does, but she doesn’t like the responsibility she has at the restaurant and grocery store. Now that I’m gone, she’s there twice as much.”

That last part filled me with guilt, but I’d shake it once the conversation passed. I had to always remind myself it wasn’t my fault that my sister had to work more. She could have easily said no and gotten my parents to hire someone else. Not doing so was her choice, and I couldn’t allow guilt to make me feel bad for that. I did what was best for me, and she would have to as well.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Kaos’s voice was sincere as he covered my hand on top of the wooden table. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you came. My world at work was hectic before you came in and provided structure, help, and peace. I hope you know whatever you left behind was worth the transition, and I can’t apologize for how selfish that sounds.”

His words made me grin as they released some of the sadness that temporarily settled on my heart.

“Thank you, Montgomery. I know it was worth it. I really do love my job and the connections I’ve built here.”

“You just wish your family was happy for you too.”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“Well... you can’t control how people receive and perceive your actions and the choices you make for your life. As long as you had good intentions, that’s all that matters.”

That made me chuckle. “You sound like my mom. She said something very similar the day before I left.”

“Maybe that’s God’s way of reminding you of that truth.”

Our eyes remained locked for a few seconds before I mumbled, “Maybe,” with a smile.

“You wanna go back?”

As I shrugged, we both returned our attention to our food. “I do, but I’m not sure when I will.”

“Well when you go, I’d love to go with you.”

At first, I thought he was joking, but when I looked at him and saw his serious expression, I realized that wasn’t the case.

“That wouldn’t be weird at all,” I replied sarcastically, making him chuckle.

“Why would it be weird?”

“Have you accompanied any of your other employees back home?”

“No.”

“That’s why. It would look like we were dating.”

“Who cares what it would look like? We know the truth. Besides . . . there are worse things in the world than being attached to me, Serenity.” His tone lowered when he added, “In fact, there are few things that are better.”

Clenching my thighs, I licked my lips as my mouth dried. Swallowing didn’t help. Looking away didn’t help either. Surrendering to what his rebuttal made me feel, I returned my eyes to his. I was sure what Kaos said was true, and a part of me wished I could experience more of him. Unfortunately, regardless of how insanely attracted to this man I was, I loved my job too much to risk it. The random flirting we did would have to do.

Kaos

I should have said no.

Truth was, though my presence was asked for, it wasn’t a true request; it was a demand. Uncle Alpha asking to see me this evening meant only one thing—he needed something from me. If it was anything else, he would have called me himself. The fact that his consigliere called instead made it clear this had something to do with the business.

As I cruised through the city streets, I called my father to see if he’d be in attendance or at least knew what this meeting was going to be about. He answered almost immediately with...

“What’s up, Son?”

“Wassup, Pops? Are you busy?”

“Never too busy for you. What’s up?”

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“Unc asked me to meet with him this evening.”

“Alpha?”

“Yeah. You know what that’s about?”

Pops sighed into the receiver, and that was all the warning I needed that whatever it was, he didn’t agree with. “I have noidea, and that’s how I know he’s about to be on some bullshit. I told my brother anytime he wanted to bring you into some shit to check with me first. The fact that he didn’t lets me know it’s something I wouldn’t be okay with. Where y’all supposed to be meeting, and what time?”

After sharing the details with him, I ended the call. I wasn’t sure if he’d be able to make it in time for the meeting, and if he didn’t, I’d just pull up on him to debrief. My thoughts drifted to Serenity. Though she seemed to be in good spirits yesterday while we had dinner, I noticed those brief moments where she’d drift off and into her head . . . her heart. Unable to resist the urge to check on her, I called her.

“Is everything okay?” was her greeting when she answered, and I could understand why she asked. It was the middle of the workday and I’d left without giving her details.

“Yeah. I just felt led to check on you. You good?”

The line was brief for several seconds before she cleared her throat. “I-I’m okay.”

“Are you sure, Serenity?” She sighed. “You know I’m a lil tender ’bout you. Tell me



what's wrong."

She giggled like I hoped she would. "Tender, Montgomery?"

"Yeah . . . tender."

"And I'm supposed to believe this is treatment reserved just for me?"

"Even if you don't, that's the truth."

When she sighed that time, she followed up with the truth. "Okay, but I'm not sure this is a conversation I should be having with my boss." Serenity paused. "I really am okay. I was just thinking about my ex. We broke up like a week ago and he won't leave me alone. The effort I asked him for regarding our relationship, he's now putting forth to get me back."

"Is that what you want? To get back with him?" Even though I hoped that wasn't the case, I had to ask.

"No, I don't. I know I shouldn't have even asked for the things I was asking for, so I'm certainly not going to waste my time with a man who has proven he isn't capable or willing of providing them."

"Good fuckin' girl."

It was my intention to think that and not actually say it, but the words tumbled out before I could even stop them.

"Kaos," she whispered, and the sound of her saying my first name for the first time made my dick hard.

“If a man is truly for you, he gon’ have a cape around his neck when it comes to you. He will actively do whatever he can to make you happy. You won’t have to ask. And if you do, you’ll only have to ask a question for correction once. If that corrected action doesn’t come, also revoke his access to you. You did the right thing, princess. Don’t let his invasion make you believe otherwise.”

When she sniffled, it took everything in me not to tell Raquel to turn around and take me back to the office.

“You’re right.” Her voice was shaky as she fought to compose herself. “I know you’re right. He’s just been calling and texting so much I started to doubt myself for a second. I blocked him but he still does from other numbers. The pressure confused me, but having you ask me if I wanted him back forced me to vocally admit that I don’t. So I’ll be good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Thank you for calling and checking on me. Not sure why you felt led to, but I’m glad you did.”

I started to tell her I was led to check on her because she was my wife and it was my responsibility to make sure she was safe physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. I wanted to tell her it was my responsibility to make sure no nigga made her anxious. Instead, I told her I’d see her in a few.

After ending the call, I went back to her IG and screenshotted a picture of her and her ex. I sent it and his username to one of the private investigators we used at the firm. Since he couldn’t take the hint, I would make sure he understood how important it was for him to leave Serenity the fuck alone going forward.

About ten minutes later, Raquel pulled up at Unc’s pool hall. I told him I wouldn’t be

long and to keep the car running. I tossed a nod in Mini's direction. He was the six-four, four hundred pound bouncer that was the complete opposite of his name. I made my way straight to Unc's office and hoped whatever he wanted wouldn't piss me off for the day.

I knocked and he told me to come in. When I did, he stood, and we shook hands before hugging briefly.

"I 'preciate you stopping by, Nephew."

"No problem. What can I do for you?"

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“Your pops asked me to wait for him to get here, but it’s really not necessary. I want you to take on a case.”

“For who?”

“Woody Simpson. I don’t have all the details yet, but I want you to get a handle on his case.”

“I’ll get the affidavit and see what the charge is. When I do, I’ll let you know.”

Though I was aware of the fact he expected me to automatically agree, I wanted to make it clear to him that wouldn’t be the case. My clients were mafia members, drug dealers, and killers. A lot of people thought because of that, that I defended literally anyone, but that wasn’t the case.

We said our goodbyes, and I called Pops to let him know he didn’t have to pull up. After that, I scheduled a flower delivery for Serenity to help brighten her mood. I thought about sending her red roses but opted for the bouquet of the day instead.

By the time I made it to the office, Gino, the private investigator I’d reached out to, had a full name, phone number, and address for me for Serenity’s ex—Mario. I shifted my steps and headed out to pay him a visit to make sure he didn’t reach out to her again.

Serenity

When my best friend, Nessa, asked me to go out tonight, I happily agreed. We met

my first day in Rose Valley Hills. I'd gotten lost and couldn't decipher which of the apartment buildings was mine, and she pulled over and helped me. She also helped me unpack. We talked and got to know each other and had been inseparable ever since. While I was in building C, she was further back in building G. I loved the apartment complex because it had amazing amenities, but I was also ready to have my own home. I already knew the only downside to the move would be not being as close to Nessa but spending time together would always be an easy fix for that.

We didn't really have a true destination in mind, but we were sitting in my apartment sipping wine while we tried to figure it out. If we were going to go somewhere to drink, we'd Uber or get a town car.

"We could try that new jazz club," Nessa suggested. "I'm not into that, but I heard that's where some of the fine, rich niggas be at."

I laughed. "Montgomery loves jazz and he mentioned that he was looking forward to their opening. If he's an indication of the kind of men that will be there, you're right about that, friend."

I half listened to her response as my phone vibrated on the table. Confusion filled me when I saw the person calling was Ashley. We didn't really talk often because we didn't have that much in common. She was a wild party girl whose main priority was enjoying her life, and though I respected that, I was more laidback. I'd pop up at a lounge or venue for some live music occasionally, but I hadn't gone to a club since I was in college and didn't see that changing any time soon. Meanwhile, Ashley was in somebody's club literally every weekend.

"Hold on, girl. Ashley calling me."

"Ashley?" she repeated as her face scrunched up, causing me to hold back my laughter as I answered.

“Hello?”

“Serenity!” she yelled before laughing. “Girrrlll, somebody beat thefuckout of Mario’s ass.”

I wanted to ask her why she was telling me because we weren’t together anymore, but I was curious about what happened to him . . . and concerned.

“What? When? And why? Do you know who?”

“Last night. He went live talking all this shit about getting jumped, but his neighbor went live too and said it was a lie. That it was just one person who did him in. He posted a video from his camera but removed it a few minutes after. Apparently, the man who beat him up don’t play that shit and had him delete it expeditiously.”

“Hmm . . . that’s odd.”

“You know what’s even odder?” she taunted, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

“What?”

“I saw the video, and I would swear I heard the man that beat him up tell him not to call or text you anymore. He said if he did, the last words he said to you would be the last words he’d ever say.”

My heart dropped as I walked toward the island in the kitchen and sat down. “That can’t be right. I don’t even know any men here that would—” I immediately stopped as thoughts of my conversation with Kaos yesterday filled my mind. “Do you remember what he looked like?”

“I couldn’t see his face, but he was tall and wide like he worked out a lot. He had a

deep, sexy voice, and I think he had tattoos on his hands.”

Sighing, I shook my head. I refused to believe Kaos had attacked Mario. There was no way for him to even know who he was and where he lived. Still, who else could it have been?

“I’ll uh . . . talk to you later.”

Absently, I disconnected the call. Licking the corner of my mouth, I looked over at Nessa as she scrolled aimlessly on her phone.

“What she want?”

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“To tell me someone beat Mario up last night.”

“Oh shit,” she muttered, setting her phone down on the island. “What happened?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I know how I can find out.”

I pulled up Kaos’s contact and dialed his cell number. When he answered, I heard loud music in the background.

“Hey,” he answered, and as much as I hated it, his voice made me smile.

Squeezing the back of my neck, I paced the kitchen. “I don’t know why I’m even asking this because I know it’s not possible, but did you attack my ex last night?”

Kaos didn’t respond immediately. A while passed, and I knew he was leaving wherever he was when I no longer heard music in his background.

“Yeah,” he disclosed casually, causing my heart to skip a beat.

“Wait, what? Why would you do that?”

“You told me he wouldn’t stop calling and texting you, so I handled that. Has he called or texted you today?”

My movements stopped as I twisted my mouth to the side. “Well, no but—”

“You’re welcome.”



Scoffing, I pulled my ear from my phone to look at it, as if I could see him. “I’m welcome? Are you insane?”

“Nah. I’m just a man that don’t play about the women in his life, and whether you believe it or not, you at the top of that list.”

My emotions were all over the place. While a part of me was pissed that he’d done something so reckless, another part of me was aroused and flattered. I didn’t know how to express or even process that, so I didn’t bother trying. Instead, I hung up the phone and groaned. As I headed to my bedroom to put on my shoes, I told Nessa, “Forget the jazz club. We’re going to a bar. I need something a hell of a lot stronger than wine.”

Kaos

One Week Later

Even though I’d seen Serenity every day, she called herself giving me the silent treatment unless she absolutely had to talk to me. I missed her. I wasn’t sure why she was mad because I beat her ex’s ass, but apparently, she was. Her anger amused me but I did want to make amends so things could get back to normal between us. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I stood and made my way to her office, which had an open concept across the hall from mine.

She looked good as fuck today in a silk gold dress that hugged every one of her curves. When she saw me, she rolled her eyes and pulled her blazer over her arms, and I laughed.

“You ain’t gotta hide yourself from me,” I told her.

“How can I help you, Mr. Montgomery?” she asked, pecking away on her computer.

“Oh, I’m back to Mister now? Let me find out you like that man and that’s why you’re mad I beat his ass.”

Serenity huffed and tilted her head but avoided my eyes. “I’m mad at you because you took a moment of me venting to you, vulnerably, and used that to cause someone bodily harm.”

“So?” That got her to look up at me, and the slow way in which her head turned caused me to expand. “Were you not upset?”

“Yes.”

“What about me makes you think I’m the kind of man that can know you’re upset and not do anything about it?”

With a sigh, Serenity sat back in her seat and ran her fingers through her hair. “Fine. Just... please. If I’m upset again, can you not automatically resort to violence?”

“No, I can’t. If someone needs to get their ass beat, I’mma give ’em what they deserve . . . especially if it’s concerning you.”

Her eyes rolled but she smiled. “You’re crazy, but I think I like it.”

“Good, because I like you.”

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“Mont—”

“Kaos,” I corrected. “You called me that once, now you have to always do it.”

“Okay, but only when we’re off the clock.”

“Fine.”

She must have expected that to make me go back to my office because when I sat on the edge of her desk she smiled. “How can I help you, Montgomery?” she asked sweetly.

“I’m bored.”

Serenity chuckled. “I’ve never met a man as wealthy as you always claiming to be bored.”

“I’ve done all my work today, so I’m ready to have some fun.” A thought crossed my mind, and before I could talk myself out of it, I asked her, “Do you still want to go to Greece?”

“Of course I do.”

Pushing up off her desk, I told her, “Go pack a bag with enough clothes to last for the rest of the week.”

“For what?”

“We’re going to Greece.”

Her mouth dropped before snapping shut. With watery eyes, her head shook as she stood and twiddled her arms. “We can’t just go to Greece, Kaos.”

“Why not?” I asked softly, closing the space between us. “I have court next week, and while my paralegals prepare my files, I have some time to spare.” Taking her hands into mine, I asked, “Are you going to force me to go by myself?”

“Really?” she almost whispered, giving me that beautiful smile I’d been missing for the past week.

“Really. You got my card on file. Book the flights and whatever hotel or villa you want. Don’t book no cheap shit either.”

She laughed as I walked away.

“Wow. Okay. I guess we’re going to Greece,” she muttered before releasing the cutest squeal.

Serenity

We were staying in Santorini, but our first day here, we did a wine tasting and had an early dinner before lounging on the most beautiful beach in Crete. Elafonisi had the prettiest pinkish white sand and clear water I’d ever seen in my life. Being here, I was in absolute heaven. Every time I thought about the fact that Kaos had randomly asked me to come here with him, tears filled my eyes.

I remember when I mentioned wanting to visit Santorini. I wasn’t expecting this to happen. Now that it had, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. A part of me was nervous about being alone with him without the distraction of work, but I was

confident we'd be on our best behavior. Since we had about two and a half hours of travel time to get back to Santorini, we agreed the only thing we'd do tonight was chill and rest after we left the beach.

My eyes landed on Kaos's center when he extended a drink in my direction. I was thankful I'd put my shades on because I didn't bother trying to look away from his dick print. This was my first time seeing him in boxers and loose hanging swimming trunks, and my God... I'd been wet at the mouth and pussy all afternoon. I didn't think anything could top Kaos Montgomery in a suit but seeing him damn near naked had me squeezing my thighs together and praying the only thing wet on me wasn't my bikini bottoms and thighs when I stood up.

"Have you gotten your fill yet, woman? Or do you want me to stand here a little longer so you can look?"

I was too embarrassed to even act like I wasn't looking at him. All I did was laugh as I took the drink.

"I have," I confessed, making him laugh.

"Too bad. I liked having your eyes on me."

That made me blush. "Thank you," I mumbled before sipping the alcohol.

"You're welcome." As he returned to his seat next to me, Kaos added, "You look good as fuck in that swimming suit too."

"Thank you. I didn't think I'd have a chance to wear it this summer, so I'm glad I did." Turning slightly, I took off my shades and he did the same. Covering his hand with mine, I shared, "Thank you for bringing me here, Kaos. When I left home, I vowed to travel and truly live for myself while working a job I loved. I've been

wanting to come here for the last decade, and now, I can finally scratch it off my list. I'll never forget this trip . . . or you."

"Oh, I know you won't ever forget me," he said with a chuckle as he leaned back in his lounge chair. "I would have to leave your life for that to happen."

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“Well what about if I work somewhere else?”

Sucking his teeth, Kaos’s expression remained serious as he took a sip of his drink.

“You’ll be my wife before you leave the firm. I ain’t worried about that.”

For a while, all I could do was stare at him. I mean . . . sure . . . we flirted sometimes, and he finally vocally said that he liked me before we left Rose Valley Hills, but I never expected him to say something of this magnitude. I wanted to believe it was the liquor, but that couldn’t have been the case because he’d only had one sip.

His smirk was small as he reached forward and lifted my chin to close my opened mouth. “Be careful, princess. Keep that pretty mouth open too long and I might feel inclined to put something in it.”

Gasping, I clutched my chest as my pussy throbbed. “Mr. Montgomery!”

Kaos laughed, and as much as I didn’t want to, I joined in.

“I’ll ease up. It’s clear you ain’t ready.”

“Ready for what exactly?” I asked, needing transparency.

“For us to put some action behind the flirting we’ve been doing for the last two years. Action behind how we feel for one another.”

I wanted to ask him how he felt about me, but it seemed like a silly question at this point. Maybe I wanted to ask because his words were different from his actions. But

were they really? While we hadn't taken things to a romantic level, Kaos took care of me in other ways with what he'd done to Mario being the most recent. He listened to me and offered solutions to any problem I may have had. He gave the most amazing gifts for my birthday, Christmas, and employee anniversary. We didn't spend a lot of time together afterhours, but every time we went to have dinner or drinks, he treated me like a princess. Even with that truth, I was still in shock over him saying I'd be his wife.

"Is that what this trip is about? You wanting things to take a more personal turn between us?"

"Nah. I was bored and wanted to get out the city. But if I can be completely honest, I always struggle to keep things professional between us. Being so far from home relaxed my boundaries, but I've always wanted to be more than just your boss, Serenity."

With him being so open and honest about his feelings, I decided to follow his lead and be open about mine as well.

"I've been attracted to you since day one," I confessed. "I started developing feelings for you about three months after I started working for you. When we started flirting, I didn't think it would ever lead to anything, but the moments always make me smile."

"So how about this . . ." Kaos took my hand into his and we mirrored each other's smiles. "We won't make any plans or promises. No more declarations. Let's just enjoy each other's company with no restrictions and see how things flow."

"O—"

Before I could agree, Kaos lifted his hand to stop me. "Let me be clear." He lifted my hand and kissed it. Feeling his juicy, soft lips on my hand made my nipples harden.



They were as soft as I thought they'd be, and I couldn't wait to feel them on my lips—both sets. “We can go with the flow for now, but I'm very intentional about what I want. If anything happens between us, I'm coming after you, and you will be mine.”

Rendered speechless, all I could do was nod my agreement.

Kaos

The Next Day

It had been hard to take my eyes off Serenity. Earlier we did a private sightseeing tour then took a helicopter ride. Afterward, we had lunch and rested for a few hours. Now, we'd just finished dinner outside this beautiful restaurant with the perfect ocean view, but I couldn't get over how beautiful the woman sitting in front of me was. She was dressed in a flowy white dress that didn't leave much to the imagination. Her perky breasts sat up without the help of a bra, and her round, small ass was jiggling like crazy.

Taunting me.

Did she not have on any panties?

Her ass never shook like that back home.

Even though I told her we were going with the flow, I'd fallen back slightly today. More than anything, I wanted her comfortable with me. I didn't want her to think I'd brought her here just to take advantage of her. So as much as I wanted to touch her and flirt with her today, I took it easy.

Serenity released a soft sigh and smiled. “I want that,” she shared.

I followed her line of vision and saw an older couple dancing in the street to the live music that was being played. Looking back at her, seeing the longing in her eyes, I took that as my way in. Standing, I extended my hand for her to place hers inside.

“What’re you doing?” she asked softly, sweetly.

“May I have this dance?”

Tugging her bottom lip between her teeth, Serenity placed her hand inside of mine. Just a few inches away from our table, I held her close as we danced to the slow music. Having her in my arms like this was all I’d been wanting for the last two years. I tried to stay on my best behavior and not let my hands lower to her ass. Instead, they alternated from being entangled with hers to resting on her waist and then the small of her back.

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“Is this all you wanted?” I inquired, willing to give her just about anything. “Just the dance? Or do you want long lasting love like that too?”

“Being in your arms like this is nice, but yeah . . . I meant the love. The romance and the connection at that age.” She looked at me briefly before eyeing the couple. “I’ve seen marriages fade because couples lost the spark and didn’t put forth the effort. So seeing them seemingly happy, in love, and enjoying each other’s company—” Her head shook as she smiled. “It’s beautiful.”

“I agree.”

She smiled before resting her head on my chest. “Do you? I never took you as the sentimental type.”

I laughed as I tightened my grip around her. “I told you I’m tender about you, woman. I’m very chalant. I care, I express, and when I really lock in on a woman, I become a little obsessed with her. That’s why I don’t date often. Not every woman is worth that kind of energy.”

“I’m starting to see that now,” she confessed through a sniggle. “I still can’t believe what you did to Mario. I guess because it was so unexpected. But . . . I do appreciate you looking out for me, especially since I didn’t even have to ask. It’s nice to know there’s someone on this Earth, in this city, in my life, that cares for me and will protect me. Now I know you’ll do that always in all ways, and that means more to me than you will ever know.”

“I know what it means to you, because I feel the same way about you protecting me.”

“How do I protect you?” she asked skeptically.

“You protect my heart and mind. You keep me calm. You’re truly my helpmate at work. I meant it when I said everything is easier now because of you. Before you came, my work-home balance was horrible. My cases were backed up, clients weren’t getting the attention they needed, and I was overwhelmed. None of that is the case now because of you, and I’ll forever be grateful to you for that.”

“Aww, Kaos, that means the world to me. I take what I do seriously. I don’t look at it as just a job. I’m truly passionate about it and I want to help others be the best executive assistants that they can be. That’s why I want to open a staffing and training company. You’re a powerful, busy man. Your executive assistant is an extension of you. One who should be able to anticipate what you need before you can even ask to make your job and life easier. So hearing you say that’s what I do for you is confirmation that I’m doing this right.”

I locked in the fact that she wanted to start her own business so I could come up with ways to help her make that happen.

“Who shows up for you the way you show up for me, Serenity?”

Her eyes lifted to mine, and this time, she didn’t immediately look away. “What do you mean?”

“Who helps you? Who serves you? Who makes your life easier?”

“No one really. You and my best friend . . . you both make my life better. Even though I tease you about it, I appreciate the way you look out for me and take me out sometimes. But other than that . . . no one.”

“I wanna change that. Can I be that person for you?”

Her hands slid down my chest before her arms wrapped around my neck. “Yes,” she whispered. “B-but only—”

Before she could put any stipulations in place, I lowered myself to her lips for a kiss. I didn’t want to hear shit about being that for right now, or not at work, or only in our homes, or none of that shit. I’d wanted this woman since I first laid eyes on her, and I meant it when I told her us being so far away from home was relaxing my boundaries and control.

I didn’t want to hear nothing about how things would be when we got home. For now, all I cared about was this moment, this kiss, the peace and fulfillment that came from finally having her in my arms. And by the way she gripped me, relaxed in my embrace, and sighed in satisfaction as I deepened the kiss, it was clear that was all Serenity cared about too.

Serenity

The moment my naked body hit the bed, Kaos devoured me. I’d had my pussy eaten before, but what he did wasn’t just sexual stimulation. Each swipe of his tongue against my clit had every nerve in my body in sensory overload. I melted and moaned and gasped and groaned. My body shook, one minute from need of more and the next from not being able to take it.

By the time he finally lifted his face from between my legs, I’d cum three times, and the bed was soaking wet. My breathing was ragged, and I was drained in the best way possible . . . but I wanted more. Needed more. And he gave me more—he gave me all of him. Every stroke, every circle of his hips, every graze of his lips or fingers solidified the truth of this moment, even if my mind was too afraid to admit it. Our souls were officially connected . . . and I was officially his.

The Next Morning

I woke up with a smile on my face. For a moment, I thought I was dreaming what happened yesterday. Kaos and I had the most amazing day together, then we danced and shared our feelings before coming back to the villa and making love. Nasty, sweet, deep, love. It wasn't until I felt a strong arm tighten around me that I realized it wasn't a dream. That actually happened last night.

Gasping, I froze.

I had sex with my boss.

Oh God.

"I can feel you thinking," Kaos said, voice husky from sleep. "Panicking. Do you want to talk about it?"

Releasing a shaky breath, I relaxed in his embrace and snuggled more against his chest. His arm loosened before he rubbed my waist and hips then cupped my pussy. Moaning, I bit down on my bottom lip and spread my legs slightly for him to lower his hand and massage my pussy.

"Are you going to fire me now?" I asked breathlessly.

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Kaos laughed quietly. “I will never fire you. Do you regret last night?”

“Not at all. Last night was amazing.”

“Good . . . because I want to do it again.”

And we did. His fingers made me cum quickly and efficiently before he lay me on my back and spread my legs, using his tongue and lips to send me into my second climax of the morning. By the time I was on my knees as he entered me from behind, any doubts or anxiety I felt about us had completely dissolved and been replaced with desire for him.

Kaos

Serenity sported a syrupy smile as we waited to get on the boat. I held her in front of me by her waist so I could keep my eyes on her. She’d been shifty all morning as she processed how things had changed between us. One minute it seemed she was at peace with the progress we were making, and the next, she was unsure. I was cool with that and knew the only way to make her feel safe with this, with us, was to remain consistent and make sure she understood I was sincere.

“I had no idea you were so affectionate,” Serenity admitted, wrapping my arms around her completely.

“Do you like it?”

“I love having your hands on me.”

I lowered myself to her ear and muttered, “Good,” before kissing it and vowing to keep my hands on her as much as I could.

“Do you believe in love languages?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think they are limited to that small list. If I had to choose from it, I’d say my love language is physical touch.”

“I can see that,” she said with a giggle. “Well feel. Mine is touch too, but I also like gifts. How else do you feel loved?”

“Truth? I care less about feeling loved and more about being respected. Trusted. If a woman trusts me, respects me, and represents me well, that makes me feel loved. To that I would add when she’s sincere and we have chemistry. The more compatible I am with a woman, the easier it feels to love each other. Love is just a foundation to the things that matter to me more, but I know love means more to the average woman than respect.”

“I get that, and I agree. I’ve been with men whom I loved and got disrespected. Now, I understand respect means more to a man than love, so if he ever does something that disrespects me, I know he doesn’t truly care about or love me. Love is a foundation. Friendship too. I feel loved when a man is a true partner. When he puts forth effort and provides security in my place in his life and heart and stability for mine.”

Turning her in my arms, I took advantage of her hair being up in a bun and looked over her beautiful face.

“I can offer you that. I take pride in being able to make a woman feel served, protected, provided for, and secure.”



“In exchange, I want to serve you too. Be your partner. Add a softness and submission to your life that influences you to be and have better.”

I brushed my nose against hers before kissing her tenderly. I wasn't sure how long this confidence in us would last within her, but I planned to take full advantage.

When we got on the boat, we had a couple of drinks as we talked and got to know each other a little more. We discussed our pasts, hobbies, and interests. We also talked about our future desires and goals.

After that, we swam and went snorkeling, and seeing her so happy and at peace in the water made me even more glad I could create this moment for her. I wanted to do this, to see that smile on her face and hear the lightness in her voice, for the rest of my life. I wanted to be in her possession and at her disposal until I took my last breath. The happier she was today, the happier it made me.

Once we got back on the boat, we prepared for the barbecue the chefs would grill by eating small appetizers. She thought it was so funny and cute that I'd found a cruise that offered barbecue since I knew that was her favorite thing to eat. We marveled at the Volcano of Santorini at Nea Kameni Island and indulged in the food and white wine from the open bar. By the time we made it to the last destination of the trip, Port of Vlychada, she was slightly tipsy and relaxed. Her arm was wrapped around mine as we took in the beautiful view.

“I can't believe this is my view. This is my experience,” she confessed. “Thank you, Kaos. I know I keep saying it, but I'll never forget this.”

“You're welcome, princess. Stick with me, and I'll show you the world. I'll give it to you too.”

Her arms wrapped around me, and she stepped on the tips of her toes for a kiss. We'd

only be here for ten minutes, so we snapped a few pictures of the beach and each other before taking a few together. On the way back to our starting destination, Serenity held my hand and rested her head on my shoulder. I relaxed in my seat and placed my hand on her thigh. Tristan was going to trip when I told him about this shit.

Serenity

The Next Day

From the living room of our villa, we had the most beautiful view of the ocean. While I looked at it in awe, tears slipped down my cheeks. Being near water made me feel happy and at peace—closer to God. That was the biggest perk of moving to Rose Valley Hills. The beach back home reminded me of one of my favorite beaches in California. But this? This view was otherworldly. It made me never want to go back home. Last night, Kaos asked me what other islands and oceans I wanted to see during this lifetime, and as I shared with him my list, I wondered if this could be my life. Traveling where I wanted, doing what I wanted, receiving what I wanted.

I checked the time difference. It was eleven in the morning in Greece and seven in the evening back home. I decided to call my mom to get her input before me and Kaos started our day. After breakfast, we decided to rest and take it easy since we'd be leaving tomorrow.

“Hello?” she answered, and I smiled at the sound of her voice. I missed her terribly and wished I could see her more. We talked at least four times a week, but nothing could compare to being in her presence. Things were so off with me, my dad, and my sister, that me and my mother's relationship suffered because of it. Though she was fair and told them they shouldn't hold the move against me, it didn't seem to matter. She didn't let our issues come between us, and I appreciated that.

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“Hey, Ma,” I almost whispered before crying harder, and I felt crazy by the outburst of emotion. I was so happy here in this moment with Kaos, and not being able to share that with all of my family made the moment bittersweet.

“What’s wrong, baby? Are you . . . are you crying?”

“Y-yes,” I sobbed, wiping my face. “But nothing’s wrong. I mean, everything is really, really right.” Chuckling, I inhaled a shaky breath before sniffing. “I’m just sad because this is something I’d want to share with everyone but . . .”

She sighed. “I’m so sorry, Serenity. I thought your daddy would be over it by now but he’s so stubborn I don’t think he’ll get over it until you come back home.”

“I don’t think I ever will, Ma. Not to live there at least. I really love it in Rose Valley Hills.”

“And I’m happy for you,” she assured me quickly, “but . . . I wish I could see you more. You have to let me come see you.”

“Of course. I only told you not to come because I didn’t want you and Daddy to have issues because of me but I’d love to see you.”

“Don’t you worry about us. I love your father but you’re my baby. He can’t keep me away from you. If that causes issues between us, he knows how to fix them.”

I smiled and wiped the last of my tears. “How’s Taylor?”

Ma groaned. “She’s okay. She’s working like crazy and not doing much of anything with her life. You know she decided not to go back to school . . .”

“Oh no. I hate to hear that. I was hoping she wouldn’t let work keep her from going to college. You don’t think I—”

“It wasn’t because of you. She made the choice not to go to college, and honestly, I get why. She has a secure job for life at either the restaurant or grocery store. I just hate that she’s doing both.”

“Is something going on that she might not be telling you about?”

“I think so, but I can’t help if I don’t know what it is. It seems like ever since you left, she hasn’t been as happy. And I don’t think it’s because you left per se. I think it’s because she wants to as well but just doesn’t have the courage to. I think she feels obligated to stay and help because you left.”

“Maaa,” I whined, “that was never what I wanted. If I had to choose, I’d rather she leave and I stay. Please tell me you don’t really think that’s the case.”

“I do, baby.” Ma paused. “Taylor is spoiled, you know that. As long as your father and I are taking care of her, she’s going to stay here. She’s comfortable here, but do I think she wants to be here? No.”

“Do you think I should reach out to her? Last time we talked she was so dry with her responses I haven’t reached out since.”

“Yeah, I think you should.”

“Alright, I will.”

“Now . . . tell Mama what’s new with you.”

We continued to talk and I told her about my time in Greece with Kaos. She was just as excited and happy as I was. When she asked me how things were going to be for us when we got back to Rose Valley Hills, I told her I honestly didn’t know. I was okay with this version of us while we were away, but I didn’t know how easy a relationship would be between us back home. Technically, it was against the rules for us to be together.

I meant it when I told Kaos that I loved my job and didn’t want to lose it for anything—not even a relationship with him. He’d increased my happiness and peace on this trip, the sex was amazing, and I loved how easy and carefree life had been with him at my side. I barely had to think let alone plan anything like back home. He took care of literally everything. I liked that and how we balanced each other out. But would that be a permanent change? I wasn’t sure.

Did I want love? Yes. Did I want a healthy marriage? Yes. Children? Of course. But romantic love was so fickle these days. I didn’t want to risk anything sure I had for something that may or may not last. Kaos was dedicated now, but would that always be the case? He and my job meant too much for me to risk. I wished there was a way for me to know 100 percent that he was the one for me and that we’d get married, have babies, and live a long, abundant, God-approved life. That security would have made the risk worth it.

When I shared that with Ma, she told me, “I learned something the hard way that I’ll share with you in hopes that it will make your journey easier than mine. For some, control is respect. It’s security. It makes it easier to surrender to something because control provides a safety net and confirmation that something will go your way. It’s okay to want control and clarity, but I also want you to remember what you truly are and are not capable of controlling.

“You might not be able to control your future with Kaos or anyone else for that matter, but you can control yourself, your choices, and your reactions to others. I would suggest you do whatever makes you happy, baby. If that’s being with Kaos, be with him. Don’t deny yourself now out of fear of what may or may not go wrong in the future. If that man is how you’ve described him, I don’t think he’ll let anything pull you away from him easily when he finally gets you. Rest in that.”

“Thanks, Ma,” I mumbled, trying not to get emotional again. She’d said exactly what I needed to hear . . . as always.

### At Sunset

We’d officially scratched everything off my Greece bucket list. We’d just finished a sunset horseback ride on Black Sandy Beach. What made it even more special? Kaos had a private dinner and wine tasting set up for us at the end of the ride. I had to quickly excuse myself so he wouldn’t see me cry. Most men never put forth this kind of intentional effort with me. I’d share with them desires and dreams and it always felt like a conversation topic that never led to anything else.

I couldn’t think of too many times, if ever, where I expressed something I wanted or liked and Kaos didn’t provide it. This trip had been no different. While I wouldn’t say every relationship of my past was toxic or bad, quite a few of them were. It wasn’t until I started to learn the way men operated that I started to figure out how to navigate relationships with them and limit the damage done to my heart in the process. After Mario, I didn’t even want to think about meeting someone new and trying to love again. The risk of pain was too often attached to something that was supposed to be beautiful. But with Kaos . . . I was starting to think maybe it was possible to be with a man who liked me, valued me, wanted me, and was willing to do whatever it took to keep me and keep me happy.

Love was starting to feel less like a fairytale.

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It was starting to feel like something I could actually have.

All the objections and reasons we shouldn't be together—the age difference, our work relationship, my skepticism with trusting men to be consistent—they were starting to matter less and less. Every reservation I had, whether shared with him or not, was shredded by his intentions, words, and actions.

As I made my way back out to him, my nervous system instantly relaxed. I made myself anxious out of self-preservation, but every time I was in his presence, I felt calm. Safe. Seen. Heard. Valued. Fuck. I was going to fall in love with this man . . . and I was going to fall hard.

Kaos

“Talk to me,” I commanded, running my fingers through Serenity's hair. “I feel your fear. I know when you're at war with yourself about me. About us. I know time and consistency will show you that I'm serious, but is there anything I can say or do now to make you feel comfortable taking things to the next level with me?”

Serenity wrapped her leg and arm tighter around me. We were lying together on the couch outside the villa staring out into the ocean. Since we had an early flight home in the morning, we decided to chill for the rest of the evening after the horseback ride.

“I know it sounds cliché, but I love hard, Kaos. When I'm in a relationship, I give my all. It hurts to pour so much into relationships that shift as quickly and without warning as these tides. And I know it's all about perspective and that I should just appreciate the good times when a relationship ends . . . but I'm tired of them ending. I

was starting to lose hope in finding my forever, and then things changed with you.” Her voice lowered and shook when she said, “But I’m still scared.”

“Of me hurting you?”

“Yes . . . but also of losing you. Maybe I’m not mature enough but I don’t want to just appreciate a quick honeymoon phase of happiness with another man. If it’s not going to lead to my forever love, I don’t want it. I’m tired of wasting love and losing men I’ve shared parts of myself with that they clearly didn’t appreciate and deserve.”

When she sniffled, I realized she didn’t need me to say anything to change her mind. She needed me to heal the remnants of pain left by previous men with my consistency, my love, my effort, and my devotion toward her. That would take commitment, time, and dedication, and I would gladly give her that. She was worth it. We were worth it.

Tires touching down on concrete pulled me back to reality as our company jet landed. I held Serenity’s hand while Raquel put our bags in the back seat. Once we were settled inside the car, I told her, “You’re coming home with me.”

“You haven’t gotten tired of me yet?” she teased with a smile.

“I will never get tired of you.”

Leaning forward, Serenity puckered her lips for a kiss that I happily gave her. Music played lowly in the background. She hummed, eyes closed, with a soft smile on her face. I took a picture of her, wanting to have proof of this peaceful moment with her—of her.

When we made it to my home, I gave her a tour, saving my bedroom for last. I was exhausted and wanted to do nothing but shower and crash. My plan was to let her



shower in my bathroom while I showered in one of the guest bathrooms. So when she began to undress as she walked toward the bathroom and asked me, “Are you going to join me?” it caught me by surprise.

“Shit, you ain’t got to invite me but once.”

Serenity laughed as I immediately stripped too. We kissed and touched each other as we stumbled toward the bathroom, stopping long enough to get the water at a temperature that was good enough for the both of us.

“I remember the first week we met you said patience gets you nowhere,” Serenity reminded me as we stood under the showerhead. “You said the only way to get what you wanted was with immediate action.” She paused and looked up at me with all the admiration in the world as she said, “Thank you for being patient with me.” A quiet chuckle escaped her before she added, “I know taking things slow may not be your preferred method of action.”

“It’s not,” I admitted with a smile as I cupped her cheek. “But some things, some people, are worth taking things slow . . . though I would usually just reserve that slowness for when I’m in your pussy. I want you, and I know I’m going to have you. We can take our time.”

Our lips connected again, and when I realized where things were about to go, I pulled away so we could wash and get the fuck out of this shower.

Kaos

Back at the Office

“The rest of the partners are ready for you in conference room three,” Serenity told me over the intercom.

After pressing the button I told her, “Thank you. Please let them know I’ll be right down. I need to find that file Unc wanted me to look over before he gets here, and I can’t remember where I put it or the man’s name.”

Serenity giggled. “His name is Woody Simpson. The file is in your middle desk drawer.”

Relief quickly washed over me when I opened the drawer and saw the file.

“Thanks, princess. Did we get the—”

“I put the affidavit in there before we left for Greece. His first court date isn’t for another three weeks, so you have more than enough time to prepare should you decide to take on the case.”

“Perfect, thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

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I set the file on my desk and stood to meet with my partners—Tristan, Carson, and Zander. We all balanced each other out. While I was about action and had a shorter temper and small amount of patience for certain things and people, Carson was the opposite. He was a talker, a planner, and believed in the power of words. Tristan was straightforward and direct, and he had no time for games or nonsense. He was very logical, maybe too logical. Zander was highly empathetic and compassionate.

As I made my way inside the conference room, I thanked them for meeting me. “I just want to make y’all aware of something before I go to HR about it,” I told them as I sat at the head of the mahogany brown table.

“You did it, didn’t you?” Tristan asked with a grin.

“Did what?” Carson inquired.

Zander sighed and sat back in his seat. “I think I know where this is going.”

“Y’all know I just got back from Greece two days ago. Serenity was with me. We don’t have a title yet but she’s mine. I ain’t coming up off her for nothing, certainly not this nonfraternization clause. I wanted y’all to know first before I went to HR.”

“I knew it,” Tristan said. “What happened? How did she react? I’m glad you finally made a move.”

I shared the least descriptive version of what happened with them to keep what happened between us sacred—I was bored, we went out the country, and had an amazing time.

“Wassup with y’all not having a title?” Zander peeped.

“If y’all ain’t together, are you sure it’s worth going to HR over?” Carson wondered.

“I’m not trying to rush her. She’s a little fragile from relationships that failed in the past. She’s mine, though, and definitely worth taking it to them.”

“Well, you got my support,” Tristan said.

“Mine too,” Carson agreed.

“Yeah, no doubt,” Zander added.

We talked a little longer before Serenity buzzed in to remind me of my uncle’s visit. I appreciated the reminder, because I needed a few minutes to look over the affidavit before he arrived. On the way back to my office, I stopped by hers and asked her, “You haven’t ordered my lunch already, have you?”

“Not yet.”

“Good. We’re going out for lunch. Is that okay with you?”

Smiling, Serenity stopped typing and stood. Her palms rested on her glass desk as she leaned forward. My eyes lowered to her breasts before snapping back up to her eyes.

“You make it very hard to try and control this situation, Montgomery.”

“I know. You’re so much sexier when you submit and let me lead. I got a lot I want to give you, princess. Be a woman and receive. The more you do, the easier you’ll find it to trust yourself with me.”

She'd leaned forward after each statement I made, and when she realized it, she covered her mouth and shot back. "That made my pussy so wet I almost kissed you."

After releasing a bark of laughter, I loosened my tie.

It's getting hot as fuck in here.

"I'll kiss both sets of your lips after my uncle leaves, then we can go to lunch."

With a nod and sweet smile, Serenity agreed. I made my way into my office and grabbed the file. Walking to the window, I opened it and read the affidavit. The more I read, the less willing I was to defend Woody. By the time I got to the end, Serenity was calling to let me know Unc had arrived. I told her she could send him back as I tossed the file onto my desk.

"Nephew," he spoke as he stepped inside.

"Wassup, Unc?" We shook hands and I motioned for him to have a seat. "I ain't even gon' hold you," I continued, sitting down. "I can't have anything to do with this case."

His brows wrinkled as he sat up in his seat. "Why not?"

"The man is being charged with rape, domestic assault, and attempted murder. I don't play about any crimes against women and children. Youknowthat."

"Yeah, but can you make an exception? We have a deal in place. If I can get you to defend him and he's found not guilty, he's going to lend us his fleet of trucks. We'll be able to import and export through his company with less risks and a lower fee than what it's currently costing us to rent trucks and pay our own team."

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“Nah, I can’t. I’m not going against my boundaries to save you money.”

He released a hard breath before standing and shoving his hand in his pocket. “Maybe I wasn’t clear in my communication. I asked out of respect, but you really don’t have a choice. When I released you from the mafia—”

“Let me stop you there, Unc,” I said as I stood. “I’ve made it clear to you over the years that though I don’t mind representing some people on your behalf, you don’t control me or who I take on as clients. He raped a nineteen year old then tried to kill her when she decided she wanted to keep her baby. He tried to kill a child just so his wife wouldn’t find out. Thankfully she survived and had the courage to go to the police. Even if I represented him, there’s no way in hell he’s getting away with this.”

His knuckles tapped my desk. “If I lose out on this deal because you aren’t going to represent him, you’re going to regret this.”

“Out of respect, I’ll let you leave here alive even though you threatened me. Next time, that won’t be the case.”

The only thing that broke our gaze was Serenity opening the door and leaning against it. He looked down at her and smiled before walking out.

“Are you okay?” she asked carefully, taking small steps in my direction. “That looked kind of heated from outside the door.” I didn’t realize how tight my mouth and jaw were until she cupped my jaw and caressed my cheek with her thumb. “Hey,” she called softly.

Looking down at her, I relaxed my body when she wrapped her arms around me. I couldn't feel violent and hostile with her softness pressed against me.

"I'm good, princess."

"Hold me," she commanded softly, forcing me to wrap my arms around her as a slow smile spread my lips. "Let me anchor you for a while. Keep you steady until he leaves."

The longer we stood there, silently, staring in each other's eyes . . . the more confirmation I received that she was the woman for me. Women in my past loved my violence, my temper, having a man that was on that rah rah shit. Though I was still very much about that life, it felt good being with a woman who wanted to experience a different, safer version of me. It gave me something to have hope in—hope that I never did anything to lose her. Disappoint her. Scare her.

"You make me wanna be better," I expressed, squeezing her ass. "Thank you for coming in here. I honestly don't know how things would have played out if you didn't and he responded to the last thing I said."

"I don't know what that was about, but I saw the anger in your eyes and felt a pressure on my chest." After I told her what our conversation was about, she said, "Oh, wow. I can see why you don't want to represent him. You made the right choice, baby."

"Yeah, I just don't know what the consequence will be."

"Consequence?" she repeated, reminding me that I hadn't told her about my time in the mafia. She knew who my family was—almost everyone in our city did—but not the role I used to play.

“Let’s get to lunch. I’ll tell you about that a little later.”

“Okay, let me shut my system down,” she agreed before heading back to her office.

While I waited, I texted Pops to let him know we needed to talk to his brother before leaving for what I needed to be a peaceful lunch with my future wife.

Serenity

When I felt arms wrap around me from behind, I knew exactly who they belonged to. As much as I wanted to relax in his embrace, I immediately pushed Kaos’s arms down and put some space between us.

“What are you doing?” I shrieked, looking around the room just as Cathy walked inside.

“Trying to hug my woman.”

“Baby, you know we can’t do that here. Just in your office, really just your bathroom.”

“Why not?” he asked, closing the space between us, pressing me against the printer in the process.

“Because it’s against the rules,” I reminded him, gently shoving him back.

“Fine, you’re fired.”

Even though he was grinning and clearly joking, I gasped and stomped my foot with a pout. “Kaos, this is serious!” I whisper-yelled.



“Aight, aight. Meet me in my office when you’re done and we can talk.”

I agreed with a nod then grabbed the papers I was making copies of for his paralegals. In court earlier this morning, the prosecution slipped some unexpected witnesses onto their list, and now, Kaos and his team had to vet them and make sure nothing they said would be a detriment to the case. They’d need to know what these witnesses knew before it was revealed in court over the next few days, and sometimes, gaining that knowledge was like finding a needle in a haystack.

When I was done, I gave each paralegal a copy before taking the final copy to Kaos. He was on a call with a client, but he motioned for me to sit down until he was done. I watched him in pride. He was so damn fine. Today, he was dressed in a burgundy suit that made his cinnamon brown skin glow. His tapered fade and beard had been freshly lined, and I couldn’t wait to go out with him this evening.

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As he put the phone back on the receiver Kaos said, “Now wassup with you not giving me no affection?”

“Babe, we can’t be affectionate in public. We really shouldn’t even be dating in public, but we definitely shouldn’t get physical at the office.”

He released a quiet chuckle as he sat back in his seat. It was clear I was worried enough about this for the both of us, because he didn’t seem to care at all.

“I talked to my partners, and they are okay with us being together. I am ready and willing to go to HR as well. Or . . . you can open your staffing and training company, work for me freelance, and we won’t have to worry about us being together going against the rules.”

I heard his words, but it took a second for me to actually process them.

“What do you mean?” I asked quietly. “My own company?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that what you said you want?” he asked sweetly with a smile.

“Yes,” I almost whispered as my eyes watered.

“So . . . a solution I came up with was for you to not work for the firm but for your own company. That way, you’ll be a freelance hire and, on my payroll, —not the firm. They won’t have a say in anything we do. And I get to help you bring your dream to fruition, so it’s a win-win.”

I quickly wiped two tears and released a shaky breath. “Why would you do that?”

Kaos stood and walked over to me. He lifted me from the seat by my hand, sat down, then placed me on his lap. I was too in my feelings to worry about someone walking by us and seeing us through the glass windows and door.

Kaos kissed my bare shoulder. “Because I’m a man.” Then my neck. “And you’re my woman.” Then my cheek. “Eventually you’ll be my wife.” And the corner of my lips. “It’s my responsibility to take care of you. Whatever you want or need that I can provide I will. Whatever problems you have I’ll fix. Whenever you need me to protect and advocate for you, I will. Let me do this for you . . .”

Resting my forehead on his, I allowed my tears to fall.

“You really wanna do this for me?” I asked in disbelief. “You really like me huh?”

His laughter made me smile. Kaos cupped my cheeks and wiped my tears. “I do like you, princess. A lot. And yes, I really wanna do this for you. Will you let me?”

Nodding bashfully, I smiled and shyly looked away from him. “Yes.”

“Good.” Kaos gave me a quick kiss. “I’ll behave and try to keep my hands off you unless we’re in my office while we look for you a building and get everything together for your staffing company.” He smacked my hip and ass. “But all that shit you wastalking about us not dating in public, you can kill that noise. I’on give a fuck if anyone sees us. If they do, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. I’m not hiding you. Period.”

I hugged his neck as excitement surged through me. Not only did I have a fine man by my side but a generous one too. A problem solver. A need meeter and way maker. A direct extension of God and His favor and blessings from Heaven on this Earth for

me.

“I want you to know I’m not with you for your hand; I want your heart too. But I really am grateful for this, Kaos. I’m too in shock to fully process this, but thank you, baby.”

I held him tighter and buried my face in his neck when more tears poured. This time, I wasn’t in a rush to wipe them away. I could admit I’d given a lot to men and sown a lot in relationships where I came out empty.

For the first time, I was with a man who poured into me.

For the first time, it felt like I was about to receive a harvest of love.

Kaos

The Wife: I hope everything goes well for you today in court. You’re the best defense attorney in RVH. This trial is just a formality. You’ve already won.

Thank you princess. I needed that. I can’t wait for court to be over so I can see you. I missed not seeing your face first thing in the morning today.

The Wife: I missed seeing you too but I took full advantage of not being in the office today by resting and going shopping.

\*Apple Cash\* \$10,000

Next time tell me first. Ain’t no more spending your own money while you’re with me.

The Wife: Aww thank you baby! When you get a break, I’ll show you one of the

outfits I bought. Don't open it until court is in recess.

The Wife: Image

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Fuck princess! As beautiful as you look in that lingerie, I can't wait to take it off you. Tell me what you want me to do to you tonight.

The Wife: I was hoping you'd like it. What do I want you to do? Me... in my bed, on the dresser, in the shower. Slow and fast and nasty and hard and deep and gentle. Can you do that baby?

My leg bounced as I waited for the light to turn green. Only one light stood between me getting to Serenity's apartment. Court dragged on for hours, and texting this morning and during recess only made it feel like it took longer. My dick was hard all morning thinking about her in the sexy ass lilac colored lingerie.

As anxious as I was to be inside of her, I knew we also needed to talk. I hadn't told her about my previous role in the mafia yet, and it was starting to weigh on me. I didn't feel like it was something that would come between us, but I didn't like feeling like I was holding something back from her. The last thing I needed was for us to be out and someone mentioned something that she should have heard from me.

As soon as the light turned green, I sped off, made a sharp left, and swerved into her apartment complex. I had to laugh at myself because I'd never been anxious to get some pussy. Then I had to be honest with myself. It wasn't just the sex, though she had the best pussy I'd ever had. It was about the experience—the emotional and mental connection we shared. And it was also about the intimacy. I loved becoming one with Serenity. She was the first woman I'd ever made love to and truly felt like my soul had been tied to hers. It connected us to each other on a deeper level, and I would never be able to have sex with another woman again.

I parked and headed to her door, hoping she'd unlocked it already since I told her I was on my way. When I twisted the knob and the door opened, I smiled. I made my way down the hall and chuckled at the sight of her sleeping in the middle of the bed. Traffic was hell and what would have usually taken fifteen minutes took an hour. After stripping out of my clothes, I hung my suit up, took a shower, rubbed a quick nut out, then joined her in bed. It was the middle of the afternoon, but today's mental acrobatics in court had me drained. I was looking forward to being inside of her, but I was also happy to finally be with her.

When I pulled her close, she shifted slightly and moaned.

"Baby?" she called before clearing her throat. "I fell asleep."

"I know," I said through my chuckle as I adjusted the pillow. "Looks like you needed the rest."

"I did, and I know you do too. We were up all night going through those papers."

"Yeah, I'm just glad we finally found the connection between those fraudulent account numbers. When I shared our findings today, I saw the moment a lot of jurors lost faith in Kyle's version of events. I think this was the smoking gun we needed for reasonable doubt. If we can make him a second option for the killer, we'll at least get a mistrial."

"I mean . . . it wouldn't be the first time money made a person kill someone they knew. I already had a bad feeling about Kyle but when I saw that he'd opened those accounts and had been siphoning money from his own father, my first thought was that he'd killed him to get access to his funds."

Sighing, I ran my beard against her neck, and she giggled. "People kill for less. Kevin was a billionaire, and he left half his fortune to his son. It's a realistic motive for

murder, especially considering how much debt Kyle is in. I'm confident I did a good job highlighting that. There's a very good chance I'm going to get Shemar a nonguilty verdict, but I'll settle for a mistrial."

"That breaks my heart. I believe Shemar is innocent, but if Kyle really did kill his dad—for money at that—Jesus. How could someone be so heartless?"

Her question made me roll over onto my back and stare at the ceiling.

"Would you feel differently about me if you knew I had some bodies under me?"

Serenity turned onto her side to face me, but I kept my eyes on the ceiling.

"Bodies under you?" she repeated. "You mean like if you killed someone?"

"Yeah."

"Are we talking self-defense or the defense of others, or serial killer vibes?"

Smiling, I turned my head to finally face her. Damn, she was beautiful. I meant it when I said I missed not seeing her at the start of my day this morning. I didn't want to rush her, but it was taking everything in me not to pack her shit up and move her into my home. Hell, it was big enough for her to have her own room if she wanted it . . . but I'd still find a way to have her in my bed every night anyway.

"I'm not a serial killer," I said carefully. "A serial killer kills multiple people with no reason, no motive, and they often follow a pattern. I have killed a few people, but everyone I killed, they deserved it."

Her lips parted and she swallowed hard. Blinking rapidly, her chest rose and fell slower. Harder.



“Are you being serious right now?”

“I am.” I licked my lips and paused. “You know my family started the Montgomery Mafia. My uncle is the boss, my father is the underboss. Before I left to start the firm, I was an enforcer. Do you know what that is?” She nodded silently. “Does that bother you?”

“Did you kill any innocent people?”

“Never. I’ve never hurt any women or children, and those days are behind me. Unless I was protecting you, myself, or someone truly in danger, I vowed to never take another life again.”

“And I’m safe with you?”

With a smile, I leaned forward and kissed her. “The safest you’ll ever be in your life.”

“Then that doesn’t change anything for me. It actually kind of makes me feel safer with you. I never doubted you could protect me physically but this definitely confirms it. That’s twisted huh?”

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Chuckling, I shook my head and wrapped my arm around her waist. “Not twisted at all. I take pride in who I am and what I’ve done. You won’t ever have to worry about me allowing anyone to hurt you. John Wick will look like a saint compared to what I’d do if anyone ever hurt you.”

Serenity giggled and snuggled closer to me. For some reason, her not rejecting me, getting scared of me, or judging me made me want her more. It was time for me to officially make her mine.

“Is my heart just as safe with you?” she asked. “Will you protect that too?”

“I’ll protect it as long as mine is beating. Every part of you will be safe with me, princess. I will protect your honor, your image, your softness as a woman, your mind, your peace—all of you. You’re safe with me.”

With a soft smile, she brushed her nose against mine before kissing me. I held her close by her neck. When she tossed her leg around me, the weight grounded me instantly. Relaxed me instantly. Not long after our lips disconnected, I fell asleep.

Serenity

One Month Later

Life had gone by in a blur for the past month. Kaos won both of his cases and we’d started looking at buildings for my staffing company. I still couldn’t believe he’d offered to not only buy me a building but help with whatever else I needed. When I made the choice to come to Rose Valley Hills, I had hope that the perfect life for me

would be started here.

Two years later, I was doing what I loved, dating an amazing man, and close to having my own business. That thought had me reaching out to my sister again. I'd called her when we made it back from Greece but she didn't answer. She texted me the next morning and told me she was working and we'd been playing phone tag ever since. A part of me felt like she was intentionally avoiding my calls, but what I wanted to say to her couldn't be said through text.

Before I could call her, I noticed a text from Kaos.

The Best: Couldn't risk staying and not being able to pull myself away from you. There's something for you at the door.

An excited squeal escaped me as I scurried to the front door. Kaos had been a bit distant this past week and I wasn't sure why. My overthinking and anxiety had me thinking he was up to no good or changing his mind about me—about us. I knew that was a me thing, so I didn't want to bother him about it. Plus, I felt a little spoiled. When I mentioned it to Nessa, she told me to tell him how I felt so I wouldn't have to wonder what was going on. I said I'd bring it up to him the next time we saw each other, but this random pop up was making me feel better already.

My eyes widened when I realized he'd gotten me something from Saks Fifth Avenue. He was the only man I knew that would go to Saks and literally spend thousands of dollars on T-shirts. Kaos had immaculate style. The only time he dressed down was over the weekend, and even then, he really knew how to put that shit on. We were kind of the same with our style. I'd wear a white tee with jeans, yet my heels, purse, and jewelry would be fancy or designer. Being with Kaos hadn't changed my style but it definitely elevated the brands I wore, and I loved that for me.

I carried everything inside and oozed with happiness and excitement after I opened

one bag and box after the next. Kaos had gotten me three bottles of perfume—Bond No. 9 Greenwich Village, Cassili by Parfums de Marly, and Baccarat Rouge 540. My mouth literally salivated at the sight of the cherry blossom sequined mini dress by Oscar de la Renta. It was absolutely stunning, and so were the heels and purse to match. The last box had a platinum and natural diamond tennis bracelet with matching diamond studs. I plopped down on the bench in front of my bed with watery eyes. This man had easily spent almost sixty thousand dollars on me in one day, and he probably didn't even give it a second thought. Once I was sure I wouldn't cry over his generosity, I called him.

"Princess," he answered, with the wind blowing and music playing in the background.

"Babe," I whined, causing him to chuckle.

"Do you like it all?"

"I absolutely love it. That dress is gorgeous."

"Good. I want you to wear that tonight for our date."

"I will. Thank you, baby."

"You're welcome."

"Um . . . I feel kind of silly saying this now but . . . I was a little worried you were starting to get bored with me. You've been kind of distant this week and I was hoping it wasn't because you've changed your mind about us."

"Why didn't you say something sooner?"

“I felt spoiled and like I was overreacting. We saw each other at work but we talked less, and I haven’t seen you afterhours all week.”

“First, I want you to always come to me any time you have an issue—big or small. Overthinking has an easy fix . . . communication, validation, and clarity. With that being said, it wasn’t my intention to be distant this past week. I thought it was just me, and since you didn’t say anything, I didn’t mention it. That’s why I planned this date for us tonight because I was missing you more than I usually do after work.” He chuckled. “I have been working more than usual this past week but that’s because of what I have planned for us this weekend and next week. I don’t want to spoil the surprise, but I’ll say what happens tonight determines how the rest of our weekend will flow.”

“Ooh. Okay. I’m excited.”

He laughed. “Just know I’ve been busy working on something special for you this weekend. I put a lot into this and came up with everything myself. I’m quite proud of myself actually.”

“Mhm, I bet. Well can I at least get a little hint?”

“Nope. Just know it will make my distance worth it.” My phone dinged, signaling I had a text. “That’s your itinerary for the rest of the day. Please make sure you follow it and don’t be late, Serenity.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Aight, I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay, I can’t wait.”

We disconnected the call, and my excitement grew even more when I looked over the schedule he’d made out for me. My nail appointment was in an hour, he had my hair appointment scheduled for an hour and a half after that, and the final thing on the list was getting my makeup done. She was going to come to me and do it after I showered, and I was glad he’d set up a home visit for that.

I felt crazy thinking he was switching up on me, and the whole time, he was putting together something special. My response was triggered because of past relationships. I’m glad I didn’t treat him any differently or take it to him in a negative way. I now had something new to put on my list for the ways I felt loved—being with a man that maintained the same energy from day one. One who kept doing what he did to get me . . . to keep me. My spirit was soaring so high I didn’t want to call my sister and risk her ruining my mood, but since she was on my heart, I decided to call her still.

“Hello?” she answered, and I was so surprised she answered it took me a few seconds to respond.

“Oh, hey, Sis. What you doing?”

“Nothing, on break. I was just watching a TikTok video.”

That explained why she finally answered.

“Are you working at the restaurant or grocery store today?”

“Both, but I’m at the store right now.”

“Ma told me you weren’t going to school.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I um . . . I just don’t really have the time, you know? Ma and Daddy take care of me so I feel obligated to help. I work a morning and evening shift, so I don’t really have time to go to school.”

“Taylor, I want you to hear exactly what I say. Don’t add to it, and don’t take away from it.”

“Okay,” she agreed quietly.

“You are their child. It’s their responsibility to take care of you. You are not required to work for them in exchange—especially all day, every day. I can understand if you wanted to do a part time shift but you can’t let them taking care of you be the reason you end up working like crazy for the rest of your life. You’re not taking full advantage of your youth because you’re spending all your time working.”

“Well who else was going to help them after you left?” she all but screamed. “You left them shorthanded, and I had to step up!”

“I left two years ago, boo. They could have easily found someone else to fill my position.”

“You know they only want family working for them.”

“That’s bull. They only want family working for them because it keeps them from having to pay more than they do. Besides, they have other family members in Jasper

Lane than their daughters. Me leaving isn't a good enough excuse for them to take advantage of you." She didn't respond, and I took that as her listening to me, so I continued. "Just tell me this, baby sis. Do you want to go to school . . . or not?"

"Of course I do, but . . . I see the way Daddy completely cut you off and . . . I don't want that. What if he does me the same way if I decide to go to school?"

The fear in her voice made my eyes water. Our father was loving, but I could admit it sometimes felt conditional. Or like we had to earn hearing the words. I believe that's why my relationships had been how they were in the past. I would go above and beyond trying to earn a man's love when it should have been the other way around. A lot of the men in my past didn't deserve the access I gave them to me. I spent more time trying to prove I was worthy of a man's love who wasn't worthy of me. And because they weren't worthy of me, they could never love me the way I wanted to be loved.

"Daddy is . . . a hard nut to crack, but you can't let your fear of disappointing him or not having his approval keep you from living the life you want to live. We haven't spoken in two years, and though I miss Daddy like crazy, I had to accept the fact that, if he wanted to talk to me, he would. If it means more to his stubborn ass to ignore me because his feelings are hurt over me leaving, so be it. He'll get over it eventually, and if he doesn't, it's his loss. I don't regret leaving. I'm having the time of my life in The Hills."

"You are?" she asked quietly with hope coating her tone.

"I am, Sis. It's amazing here. I love my job and I'll have my own business soon. I have a best friend and a few other ladies I hang with from time to time. And then there's Kaos. He's . . . he's genuinely the best thing that's ever happened to me. I want you to meet him and come see my life here. Maybe it'll inspire you to live for yourself too and go to school."



“Okay, I’ll come visit. Can I stay with you?”

“Of course. Just let me know when you want to come.”

“Okay, yay. I can’t wait. Let me look over the schedule and see what I can do.”

“Alright, baby sis. Call me tomorrow or text me.”

“Will do. I love you, Serenity.”

My eyes watered. That was the first time she’d said that in two years. “I love you too.”

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After ending the call, I sat with my feelings for a while before getting ready for my nail appointment. All I could do was pray Taylor went to school and got her degree and did whatever else she wanted to do. It upset me to hear that she hadn't gone to college because she was worried about Daddy cutting her off like he'd done me. That made me want to call him and give him a piece of my mind but it wouldn't matter. He was stubborn as hell and wouldn't change his mind until he was absolutely ready to.

Kaos

I hadn't been able to take my eyes off Serenity. She looked absolutely beautiful. I loved her in any color, but there was something about white and pink against her cocoa bean brown skin that always produced a hunger for her within me. Her hair was in an updo with spiral curls falling forward in her face and on her neck, and her makeup was flawless. She looked absolutely stunning, and I was proud to be the man asking her to commit tonight.

As she smelled the red roses that I'd given her when I picked her up, she smiled. "You make me feel cherished in the sweetest ways, Kaos. Today has been perfect."

"I'm glad, but our time has just begun. I have so much more in store for you tonight."

Serenity crossed her legs and wrapped her arm around mine. "Guess who I talked to today."

"Who?"

"Taylor."

“Your sister?”

“Yep.” She smiled. “I think we made progress today. She may even be coming to visit me soon.”

“That’s amazing, princess. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you,” she cooed, snuggling closer to me. “My conversation with her made me even more grateful for what I have with you. We talked about my dad, and it made me realize my relationship with him influenced my romantic relationships more than I realized.”

“Is there anything I can say or do to help you work through that trauma? I have a very close bond with my mom and dad, and I can’t imagine how I’d feel if either one of them decided not to talk to me anymore because I moved away.”

Her eyes watered but she blinked rapidly until they dried. “Being with you has already helped a lot. You make me feel like I don’t have to earn something that should be freely given. It’s healing.”

“I take great pride in being able to do that for you, princess. You don’t have to earn anything from me. It’s an honor to even be in your life. I’m the one who has to earn you.” I took her hand into mine and kissed it. “You’re the prize. You’re my treasure. You’re my crown. You’re my rib.” Taking a deep breath, I confessed, “I wanted to do this over dinner, but now seems like a more fitting time. Serenity, we’ve been taking things slow, but I want us to make things official. Will you be mine?”

That time, my crybaby was unable to keep her tears from falling. She caught them quickly with a soft laugh.

“Yes, Kaos,” she whispered, pulling me close for a kiss. Moaning against my lips,

she used her tongue to spread them.

“Aight na,” I warned, pulling away. “You keep kissing me like this and I’m a forget we aren’t alone in this car.”

She giggled, but I was dead serious. “We’re in a relationship?” she confirmed.

“We are. Finally.”

“Thank you for waiting on me.”

“You’re more than worth it, princess.”

Serenity gave me another quick kiss before returning to her side of the car. We allowed silence to settle between us before we arrived at the restaurant. Flavor was an upscale steakhouse with burgundy seating, golden lighting, and a dark ambiance that provided a romantic vibe. It was perfect for the evening. We had a damn good steak dinner before leaving and going to Divine, which was a black owned art gallery that was having an artist showcase tonight.

Before the bidding started, we walked around and looked at the paintings and sculptures from Neko and Aspen. Tonight was special because it was the first time in years Karrington was making his paintings available for purchase. I didn’t think the world would ever be blessed with a Karrington Lowe original painting again, but after he got married and took over the Lowe Mafia for his father, something happened that encouraged him to pick up a paint brush again. That reflection caused me to ask Serenity, “I know you like puzzles and crocheting for your hobbies . . . but are you into any forms of art?”

“I actually do have an interest in paintings and sculptures, but being from a small town, we didn’t have museums and showcases like this to expand my palate and

knowledge. Any time I'd go on a trip, I tried to find a museum to visit." A quiet sniggle escaped her before she admitted, "I desire to be more cultured and knowledgeable about art, cinema, theater, and literature and music, but I don't really take the time to dedicate to it like I should."

"I feel you. I was the same way about learning the cultures of others. I wanted to travel and experience how other people live—and eat. All I used to eat was soul food."

"You think you're so fancy now because you eat Italian and Mexican," she teased, and it was so unexpected I released a hearty laugh that had people looking in our direction.

She covered her mouth while I did the same with my fist as my laugh died down. As she sipped her champagne, I wiped the corners of my mouth.

"Aye, that's progress. A lot of progress I'd say for two years." Wrapping my arm around her waist, I added, "I guess I owe that to you huh?"

"I'd say so. If I didn't make you try something different for lunch, you'd still be eating sandwiches, hot wings, and soul food every day for lunch."

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“Ease up off me, princess,” I urged through my laugh as she giggled. “But let’s make a pact.”

“I’m listening.”

“Let’s expand our palates together. We’ll travel and become more cultured in all things—art, food, and ethnicities. New states, countries, and continents. I want to literally put the world at your feet.”

Her head shook as she looked up at me in awe. “I love you.” Her declaration caught me off guard. “Thank you for helping me turn into the best version of myself. Thank you for sharing your life with me.”

“You love me?” I echoed, wrapping my arms around her.

“Mhm. And I don’t want you to feel obligated to sa—”

“I love you too, princess. I have for a while now.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she asked sweetly with a warm smile.

“I didn’t want to push you away and make you think I was moving too fast. Hell, I had to take you to a whole different country just to get you to admit you like me.”

She laughed. “Oh stop, it wasn’t that bad. But I can admit the impromptu trip to Greece gave me the courage to be honest about how I felt for you.”

“Same. I’d take you across the world if it gives me access to your heart.”

“That’s not necessary, babe. You’re already locked tight inside. Please don’t make me have to release you.”

“Trust me . . . I won’t.”

Serenity

One Week Later

My smile had been a permanent fixture for the whole week. Kaos was right—he’d put together the perfect week for us. If this was how he celebrated us becoming an official couple, I couldn’t wait to see what he’d do to celebrate us when we got married. The past seven days had been spent blissfully traveling from Napa Valley and Las Vegas for wine and fine dining and gambling to the Hamptons and Dallas for shopping. I even got him to be brave enough to try sushi for the first time, and his expression was my favorite part of the trip.

I wanted to take a long, hot shower when we made it to his place, and since he didn’t need his water as hot, we showered separately. I wasted no time oiling myself down and spraying a few pumps of perfume before pulling my hair up in a bun and slipping into one of his T-shirts. By the time I was done, he was already in bed. I cuddled up next to him and sighed in contentment.

“You’re the first man I’ve never gotten annoyed by. Usually I get tired of spending so much time with a man, but that isn’t the case with you.”

He chuckled as he flipped through the streaming channels on his TV. “Thank you, princess. I feel the same way about you. I used to love spending time away from a woman. Not just because it helped me figure out how I felt about her but also because

a woman that gave me too much access to her was a turn off. I can't get enough of your ass, though. If I felt like you'd say yes, I'd ask you to move in with me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I want to wake up next to you and go to sleep next to you. You truly increase my happiness and peace."

"You should ask," I encouraged with a smile. "You never know what my answer will be."

"Don't play with me, woman," he warned.

"I'm serious, baby. Ask."

"Will you move in with me?"

"Yes," I crooned, and the shock that covered his handsome face made me laugh.

He sat up. "Let's go pack your things."

"Babe!" I laughed as I pulled him back down on the bed. "I'm tired and I know you are too. We can do that later."

"I don't want you changing your mind."

"I won't," I assured him, running my fingers over his hair. It had grown in some and was longer than he'd usually keep it, allowing the few gray hairs he had to shine through. "Your hair is softer than I thought it would be. I was always told gray hair was coarse."



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“You act like I got a whole head full of gray hair,” he countered through his laugh. “I only have eight.”

“You counted the strands?” I screeched, laughing even harder at his serious tone.

“You damn right I did.”

I yelped when he hovered over me and tickled me, threatening me with what would happen if I teased him about his gray hairs again. I laughed until I had tears in my eyes, begging him to stop.

“I’ll stop when you promise not to tease me again.”

“I can’t promise that,” I confessed. “I like your gray hairs. They make you look so mature and sexy,” I complimented, running my fingers over his hair before scratching his scalp.

“Mm,” he moaned, lowering himself to my lips.

Just as our kiss deepened, his phone rang. He cursed under his breath as he grabbed his phone. “Let me get this, princess.”

“Hurry or I’m going to take care of this myself,” I cautioned, spreading my legs so he could see the wetness that had pooled at the opening of my pussy.

“Touch my pussy and you’ll be punished for it.”

“Sounds like a good time to me.”

He smiled as he answered the phone and walked out of the room. While I waited for him, I checked my phone too and noticed I had a call from my sister. My heart dropped instantly as I leaned against the headboard and called her back.

“Hello?” she answered softly, sounding like she was crying.

“Who did it?”

Taylor laughed. “Your damn daddy.” She groaned. “I told him I wanted to take a weekend off and he was cool with it until Ma mentioned I was trying to come see you. Now all of a sudden we’re too busy for me to take off.”

I squeezed the bridge of my nose and shook my head. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

“Have you asked anyone to cover your shift?”

“There’s no one for me to ask really. The only other cashiers at the store are Rodney and Kiara. Both of them are already scheduled for next weekend, and Daddy doesn’t want them to work double shifts because he doesn’t want to have to pay them for the overtime.”

“Fuck that. That is not your concern. If either of them are willing to cover your shifts, let them. And if they won’t, quit. I got enough money saved to help you out until you find another job . . . or if you want to go back to school. Maybe you can work as my receptionist part time when I open my staffing company. For now, though, I got you for whatever you need.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking; I’m offering.”

“Well . . . okay. Let me see if I can get the shifts covered. If I can’t, I’mma quit. I’m so tired of working my ass off for what feels like nothing. The harder I try to please him the unhappier I feel with the choices I’m making. I think you’re right, Sissy. I think it’s time for me to focus on what I want and go back to school.”

It took everything in me not to yell hallelujah. God knew I wasn’t trying to take her away from my parents, but I did want her to live her life for herself. There was no future in her working for our parents.

It would have been different if that was what she truly wanted, because then it would provide stable financial security that she never had to worry about running out, but Taylor had always had one dream since childhood—she wanted to become a lawyer because she loved arguing and defending people and she hated when people got away with doing wrong. Watching her lose her voice over the years and shrink into herself bothered me and was another reason I wanted to leave home.

I didn’t think me leaving would lead to her working more and giving up on her dreams. If she wasn’t going to spend her twenties in college working toward her career, she should have spent it traveling and creating memories and life lessons. After I expressed that to her, we made plans to talk again after she tried to get her weekend shifts covered.

A part of me hoped she wouldn’t be able to so she’d quit, but I knew Daddy would blame me for that too. Either way, I prayed God kept her aligned with His will for her life, because that was truly the safest and most fulfilling place for anyone to be.

Kaos

## Two Weeks Later

There had been a light in Serenity's eyes that hadn't been there for a while ever since her sister arrived in Rose Valley Hills. I remember the moment as if it happened yesterday. One minute, Serenity and I were at my home getting her things set up in what would be her closet, and the next, Taylor was calling asking where she was, because she was in front of her apartment.

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We dropped everything to meet her there, and Serenity was surprised she'd even popped up. When she gave her sister her address, she wasn't expecting Taylor to actually use it. Apparently, when Taylor got one of her cousins to cover her shifts for the weekend, her father told her that was unacceptable . . . so she quit, packed a few bags, and drove her little hooptie that she called Purple Passion all the way to Rose Valley Hills. She said it ran hot on her a few times, but she was determined to get to her big sister.

Of course I prepared for Serenity to want to go back to her apartment to be near her sister, but Taylor insisted that she didn't change her life for her. To compromise, Serenity spent Taylor's first week here at her apartment. This weekend would be the first weekend that she'd be with me. For now, she would be at the apartment Monday through Thursday and at my place for the weekend. I was cool with that.

I'd gotten Taylor a new car, and she was set to start working at the firm next month. It was kind of perfect that she wanted to go to school for law. Needing time to adjust to the new city, Taylor decided to start school during the spring semester. As happy as she was to have her sister here, I sensed something was bothering Serenity. She wouldn't say it, but I knew it was because of her father. If I could, I'd go with her to speak with him, but she'd only do that when she was ready.

Today, all I wanted to do was chill with my woman, but Pops called and told me his brother wanted to talk. Since he went through my father to get to me, I assumed it was serious, and that was the only reason I agreed to meet with them.

Serenity hummed as she cut up fruit at the island in the kitchen. I wrapped my arms around her, and she melted against me. Running my nose across her neck, I inhaled

her fruity scent.

“You smell so good, princess.”

“Thanks to you keeping my favorite perfumes stocked.”

“What are your plans for the afternoon?”

“Taylor and Nessa wanna go swimming, so I’m going to eat breakfast and chill for a little while before meeting them at the pool.”

“How’s lil sis adjusting?”

“Very well. She’s excited about school and interning at the firm. And the girl has already made two friends.” Serenity chuckled as she wiped her hands and turned to face me. “Thank you again for helping me help her. I—”

“You don’t have to keep thanking me for that.”

I caressed her cheek as she pouted. “I feel like I do. You didn’t have to give her a job, and you certainly didn’t have to buy her a car.”

“I want you to have the best quality of life. I want you to be happy and live a quiet, peaceful life full of love. My job as your man is to do whatever I can to make sure that happens. If that means helping you make sure your sister’s transition is smooth and easy, I will do it with no hesitation.”

“Crazy thing is . . .” Serenity wrapped her arms around my neck. “I believe you. And I appreciate you. Thank you so much, baby. You do increase my happiness and peace. My life is so much better with you in it.”

The only thing that stopped me from sitting her on top of the island and feasting on her was the fact that I had to meet the elders. I elected to be satisfied with just a few pecks before heading toward Unc's pool hall. I hoped he wasn't about to try and get me to change my mind about Woody again.

His trial had started, and from what I heard, his lawyer wasn't doing a good job. In Owen's defense, there was only so much that could be done in a case like this. Woody was guilty. Period. If I was his attorney, my goal would be trying to get him the least amount of time possible at this point, but there was no way he'd be found not guilty unless they tampered with the jury or bribed the judge.

Me and Pops pulled up at the same time. Like always, I told Raquel to keep the car running, because I didn't expect this to take long. Me and Pops embraced before we headed across the parking lot toward the front door.

"You know what this is about?" I checked, and he smiled.

"I'm glad I trained you to always be prepared and try to get ahead of a situation." His head shook. "It's about Woody. That's all I know."

My steps faltered before I sighed and kept my stride. "This man does not give up. There's nothing he can say to make me have anything to do with this shit."

"Stand firm. I got ya back."

I knew that but hearing him say it boosted my confidence. We spoke to Mini then made our way back to Unc's office. I allowed Pops to enter first and sit down while I stood behind him with my arms crossed over my chest. Unc chuckled and shook his head, looking just like his brother. But the biggest different between Alpha and Adam Montgomery was their character and integrity. Alpha was willing to go along with just about anything if it meant more power . . . more money. My father, on the other

hand, had his morals, principles, and boundaries like I did.

“What’s this about, Alpha? We got shit to do,” Pops spoke, and I had to hold my laughter back. Folks thought I lacked patience, but I got it from him. The only person he was patient with was my mama.

“Since your son decided not to represent Woody, we lost out on an amazing deal. We could have seen a seven figure increase per quarter, but this nigga wanna have morals and shit.” My eyes rolled toward the ceiling as I sighed, but I didn’t bother to respond. If he was disgusted by me having boundaries, that was his issue, not mine. I’d already said what I had to say about the shit. “Now . . . Woody is spiraling. He thinks the case is already lost and he wants to make somebody suffer.”

“Look, his best bet is to take a plea,” I advised. “The proof is in her stomach, and she’s being guarded so he won’t be able to try and kill her again. The moment the prosecution shares the DNA results and they confirm Woody is the father of Tamera’s child, it’s a wrap.”

“His lawyer said something similar,” Unc said, “but that’s not what I wanted with you.”

“Then what’s up?” I asked.

“I agreed to pay his legal fees and oversee his men while he’s away temporarily to make up for you not defending him. Now you owe me.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “I don’t owe you, because I didn’t ask you to do that or agree to your terms.”



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“Still, you owe me. So the next time I come to collect, you better pay up and do exactly what the fuck I say, or—”

“Big brotha,” Pops called, standing from his seat. “You think I’m about to let you threaten my son in my presence and let you continue to breathe?”

I stepped between them because I knew Pops didn’t play about me. The last thing I wanted was for him to go to war with his own brother because he was so damn stubborn. Unc was used to being in control of everything and everyone. More than anything, I believed he had a vendetta against me because I chose to do my own thing. All of my cousins craved his attention, approval, and a place in the business. I wanted more, and Unc hated that. He hated that there was someone in our family who didn’t bow at his feet.

“The threats can stop,” I said. “Unc, you helped Pops raise me. You know ain’t no fear in my heart. If you want us to have a healthy partnership, come to me with respect. If I am comfortable with the situation, I will help you. If I’m not, no amount of threats will make me do shit I don’t want to do. Now if that’s all you need, I’m about to grab me a drink and beat my old man in a few games of pool.”

Unc looked from me to Pops before his head bobbed once. His knuckles tapped the desk like they always did when he was in deep thought.

“You’re welcome to join us,” Pops tossed over his shoulder as we walked out. “But you better not be on no bullshit.”

Serenity

Two Nights Later

I was drunk.

I knew it.

I felt it.

The world was slightly tilted, I couldn't stop smiling, dancing, and singing, and I was drunk.

It was my baby sister's twenty first birthday and we made sure she brought in her newest year of life right. I took her shopping, then we spent the day being pampered. After that, we went to Rose Valley Hill's hottest lounge and the champagne and liquor was poured abundantly. She'd tapped out and was asleep in our VIP booth, but I wanted to dance to one more song before we left.

Kaos was here but he blended in with the crowd. He made it clear his responsibility was to pay for our shit and make sure no one bothered us or tried to take advantage of us while we had a good time, and I appreciated and respected him for that. I was surprised by how he really kept his distance.

At first, I was a little nervous when he showed up with the other partners from the firm. I knew they were his closest friends, but it was a little weird smoking and drinking and dancing in front of them. Eventually, I realized they were normal people off the clock ready to have a good time like the rest of us.

"Girl!" Nessa yelled far louder than she really needed to since she was clinging to my arm and right against my ear. "Your sister is knocked the fuckout!"

We cackled as the song changed to something to twerk to. I didn't usually twerk or

dance provocatively. In fact, I usually only line danced or two stepped . . . but the combination of champagne and tequila flowing through my system had me on a different level.

“One more dance, then we’re out of here!” I yelled back, rolling my hips and clapping my ass cheeks.

Everything happened so fast.

One second, I was dropping it low enough for my ass to almost touch the floor, and the next, a hand was gripping my arm before I was tossed over somebody’s shoulder.

“Hey!” I yelled, holding on to a wide waist tightly. I giggled when I realized it was my man. “Kaos . . .”

“You done lost your damn mind,” he scolded, smacking my ass.

“What’d I do?” I slurred, closing my eyes as the floor started to spin.

“I’m all for you dancing, but you don’t get to show these niggas what belongs to me. The fuck were you thinking lifting your skirt like that while you were dancing?”

“It’s too tight. I could barely move.”

“Wear something looser next time.”

I could tell he was serious, but I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. He didn’t put me on my feet until we were outside. Leaning me against the car, he barked orders to everyone that was with us. Tristan put a still sleeping Taylor in the Lamborghini Kaos had rented her for her birthday. If this was how he spoiled my sister, I knew our children would have no limitations.

“All of them are entirely too drunk to drive,” Kaos said, using his hand around my waist to keep me pressed against the car. “Tristan, drive the Lambo and take my little sister to my house. You can crash there if you want. I’ll meet you there. Raquel, take Nessa and her homegirl home. Take the rest of the weekend off.” Tilting my head by my chin, Kaos stared into my eyes. His held slight amusement, and I couldn’t imagine how goofy I looked right now. “Do you need to throw up before I put you in my car?”

Biting my bottom lip to keep from laughing, I shook my head. “No, I’m not that drunk. I just need some food and I’ll sober up.”

He laughed. “Yeah, aight.”

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He shook everyone's hands and thanked them for coming out to help us celebrate Taylor, then he tried to open the passenger door of the Rolls Royce for me. "Wait," I pleaded quietly, shifting slightly toward the back.

"That's what type of time you on?" he asked, opening the back door with a sneaky grin.

"Yes, baby. I can't wait until we get home."

As I climbed onto the seat, Kaos followed and closed the door. While I pulled my skirt up, I heard the sharp intake of breath he took. My cheeky panties had a hole right down the middle, giving quick and easy access to my pussy.

"Damn, princess. Had I known you were coming like this, I would've been in your pussy all night long."

I giggled, but it turned into a moan when he spread my ass cheeks and swiped his tongue between my lips. A sizzling breath escaped me as I gripped the seat with one hand and palmed the floor with the other. I was already soaking wet, so foreplay wasn't needed, but there would never come a time when I'd decline having this man's lips on mine.

"It's coming," I warned him through trembling lips.

"Let me have it," he slurred against my pussy before smacking my ass.

And I did.

I'm not sure why tequila made me so horny, but it did. I was trembling in anticipation when I finally felt the head of his dick at my opening. A satisfied moan escaped me when he finally pressed his way inside. My palm pressed against the window as I fucked him back. Each time I rocked against him, some kind of sound came out of my mouth or pussy.

"I need it, baby," I begged shamelessly. "Make me cum."

"You gon' cum on my dick?" he taunted, deepening my arch and tightening his grip around my waist.

"Mhm," I moaned.

"If I let you, you better cum hard, princess."

"I-I will," I promised.

Kaos's hand pushed down on my back and his strokes deepened. Each time he pulled out of me, he brushed against my spot. My eyes rolled into the back of my head and toes curled as my mouth hung open. Quick, low, breathless moans escaped me as I came. He stayed on that spot, drilling it until I came and squirted. That time, he roared and squeezed my ass cheek as he came inside of me. Instead of pulling out of me, Kaos sat down and kept me on his lap. On his still hard dick. Lowering myself slightly, I grabbed my ankles and bounced up and down on his dick until my cum coated his thighs and he came a second time.

Kaos

I was still amused over what happened last night. Every guest room in my house was occupied last night after Taylor's birthday shenanigans. She ended up waking up by the time Serenity and I made it home. Lil sis was fucked up, but I was glad we helped

her bring in her birthday right. Serenity sobered up enough to see to her sister when she got sick. Me and Tristan fried fish, chicken wings, and fries while Zander and Carson made sure the girls were straight.

After everybody ate, Serenity sobered up a bit more like she said she would. She laid in bed with Taylor until she went back to sleep, then came to bed with me. I was knocked out but felt her presence as soon as she came in the room.

This morning, she was moving sluggish but with a smile as I fixed breakfast.

“Mornin’,” I spoke as she wrapped her arms around me.

I gave her a quick kiss before she greeted me back with, “Morning, baby.”

“How’s our girl?”

“She just woke up. She does have a slight hangover and she’s still tired, but her stomach isn’t queasy thankfully.”

“Good. I’m a fix a greasy breakfast that will help if she does get nauseous. If she didn’t feel sick when she brushed her teeth, she should be good though.”

“Yeah, she didn’t get sick thankfully. Where are the guys? I wanted to thank them again for last night.”

“Out on the patio. You talked to your girls?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Nessa texted me and said they were up but going back to sleep.” Her brows wrinkled as she pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Uh oh. It’s my mom.” Serenity plastered on a fake smile, but it didn’t transfer completely to her voice when she answered her mom’s call with, “Hey, Ma.” Her smile dropped

immediately as she nodded. “I-I kn—oh, you saw her story? Well no . . . of course I was with her the wh—ugh. Please tell Daddy to stop yelling. I wouldn’t let anyone take—it was her twenty first—a bad influence? The girl was going to get drunk anyway. It was better that she did it with me than people she didn’t even know! I’m not telling her to come back home. She has a job lined up and school and—Ma, please. I can’t talk to you with him yelling in the background like a mad man. If you want to talk, we can talk later. Bye.”

Groaning, Serenity tossed her phone onto the kitchen table before plopping down in a chair. Instead of addressing the situation immediately, I went outside and asked Zander to keep an eye on breakfast, then I led Serenity up to my room. As soon as the door closed, her tears started to fall. I wiped them then led her over to the sitting area by the floor to ceiling windows. After giving her a few seconds to release her tears, I wiped them away.

“You wanna talk about it, princess?”



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Sniffling, she avoided my eyes. “He says I’m a bad influence and that she needs to go back home.”

“Well . . . good thing she’s an adult and can make her own decisions.”

“Is he right?” she asked, and I hated that her parents had her questioning herself. She and Taylor were so happy yesterday. I didn’t want that to be ruined because of her father’s bullshit. “I thought I was helping her be safe by taking her out. Last night wasn’t the first time she drank, and I wanted to be with her to make sure she’d be safe and—”

“Hey,” I called softly, squeezing her hand to keep her present so she wouldn’t spiral. “You didn’t do a damn thing wrong. Bringing your twenty first birthday in with alcohol is a rite of passage for a lot of people. Taylor was drinking before yesterday, so it wasn’t anything new to her. Not saying underaged drinking is okay, but she handled herself well because she was already drinking. All y’all were fucked up last night, though, not just her. That was proof to me that y’all had a good time. Don’t let your parents make you feel bad about that.”

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. “I’m trying not to. I just got her back. I don’t want them to take her away from me.”

When her lips trembled and eyes watered, I had to keep myself from getting her phone and calling her damn daddy. Instead, I pulled her onto my lap.

“God gives us free will. He lets us make our own decisions. If God ain’t the one making her go back home, I can promise you they won’t be able to either. As long as

she wants to stay here, and you want her here, Taylor is staying in Rose Valley Hills. I give you my word.”

Serenity released a shaky breath before rubbing her nose against mine and resting her forehead against mine.

“I always wanted a companion for moments like this. I knew there was power in having the right person by your side, and I’m so glad I get to experience that now with you.”

Light tapping on the door kept me from responding.

“Yeah?” I called.

“Uh . . . is my sister in there?” Taylor asked hesitantly.

“Yeah,” Serenity answered as she stood and headed toward the door.

When she opened it, Taylor said, “Can you come out so we can talk? Your crazy ass daddy is blowing my phone up.”

Serenity chuckled with a nod. “Yeah.”

Turning, she mouthed thank you to me, and I was glad I was able to help her process her own feelings so she could now be there for her sister. I’d meant what I said though. As long as they wanted Taylor here, she’d be here. If her daddy wanted her back bad enough, he’d have to come and take her—through me.

Serenity

Early August

“Oh my God. I can’t believe this!” Taylor squealed as we finished the tour of the firm. I could understand her excitement because I was the same way the first time I toured it. Each partner had their own floor, and there was also the first floor where reception was along with a café. The sixth floor had conference rooms, and the seventh floor had two large rooms devoted to play and rest. I loved that they’d mimicked some Chinese tech companies by incorporating a space for rest with showers, beds, and recliners. The other room had games, card tables, and pool tables for those who felt recharged by recreation.

“Believe it, Sis. You are officially a paid intern for Montgomery, Pierce, Walker, and Gough.”

Pride consumed me as she did a little dance. “I literally owe all of this to you, big sis. I feel so bad for the way I resented you after you left.” Her smile faded slightly. “A part of me was so angry at you for leaving me. I just . . . didn’t know how to express that. I felt silly feeling like that. You were doing what was best for you and I should have been happy for you not jealous.”

“Aww, Taylor.” I couldn’t stop myself from pulling her into my arms for a hug. “That doesn’t even matter anymore. You’re here with me now, and we’re going to make sure you live life on your own terms.”

“This is so amazing! Most freshmen can’t get an internship like this until their senior year, and it’s paid? Like damn. I know I have to work my way up and it’s just secretarial work for now, but just being in this building during my first year of college is a blessing. Thank you, Serenity, seriously. I got a great job, I’m enrolled to start school in the spring, you set me up with an amazing apartment, and my brother upgraded the Purple Passion. Life cannot get any better than this.”

I laughed as we walked toward the elevators to head back down to the first floor where she’d be working.

“I’m glad you’re happy. Me and Kaos are on the fifth floor, so you come up there if you ever need anything.”

“I won’t unless I absolutely have to. I don’t want to take advantage of having you here. I feel like I’ve already used the privilege of having you as my sister enough.”

“What’s the point of having privilege if it can’t be used?” At the sound of my man’s sexy ass voice, we both turned to face him.

Happiness and desire floated through me at the sight of him. Kaos looked impeccable in a dark gray suit with platinum and silver jewelry. There was a time I craved a man in the streetwear aesthetic. Now, nothing turned me on more than my man in a suit—and if it was a white, black, or burgundy suit . . . that was a plus.

“You guys have done more than enough for me as it is.” Her eyes watered, and I gave her hand a squeeze. “There’s no way I can pay y’all back for this.”

“You don’t have to,” he made clear.

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“Yeah,” I confirmed. “I know you feel like you have to because we’re used to Daddy’s conditional love, but that’s not what we’re on here. There are so many genuine people here who love networking and giving back. Even if we weren’t in the position to help you, we’d know someone else who could. If you want to thank us or pay us back . . . thrive, boo.”

She nodded and fought her tears before giving me a hug. We talked a little longer before Kaos and I headed up to our floor. I thanked him for all he’d done for us though he promised me it wasn’t necessary. When I made it to my office and saw the bright red roses waiting for me, I gushed. His arms wrapped around me, and I was too in love with my man to even care about anyone seeing us.

“These are beautiful, baby. Thank you.”

“They are beautiful, but not as beautiful as you.”

Turning in his arms, I wrapped mine around him and gave him a quick, sweet kiss. “Your latte will be here soon. I’ll share your schedule for the day. There’s nothing pressing for this morning, but you do have that brief this afternoon to prepare for.”

“The Hamilton case?” I nodded my agreement. “When does that trial start?”

“On the fifteenth.”

“Good, that gives me a little time to try and get a deal done before litigation. I need this handled at the table. It’s not worth my time to go to trial.”

“Okay, I can schedule a meeting between you and the ADA and see if they’d be willing to offer a deal. She’s been super busy lately, though, so you might have to pull up on her at her office.”

“That works. Get Hamilton on for a call before he comes in for the briefing. I want to see if he’d be willing to plead no contest for the criminal case. He’s going to lose that civil case, and if we go to trial for this and lose, he’s going to have to pay more.”

“Alright, baby.”

As he walked toward his office, I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Kaos had a high win rate, but he cared more about getting the best outcome for his clients. Sometimes a not guilty verdict just wasn’t possible, and I loved that he didn’t give them false hope. That’s why those who were both guilty and innocent wanted to be defended by Kaos Montgomery. They knew regardless of the outcome that he would fight for what was best for them. And now that things had taken a romantic turn between us, I realized that wasn’t just his character as a lawyer; that was his character as a man too.

Kaos

I hardly ever took on research gigs. If a client asked me to look into something, I usually had a paralegal do it. This was too personal of a situation for just anyone’s eyes. Though I trusted my team, I didn’t put anything past anyone. If what Mayor Collins had me looking into was true, I didn’t want to risk anyone sharing the information with a blog site for a quick come up.

Mayor Collins was serving his second term as The Hill’s mayor. He was a sixty-four year old Black man who had a hunch that his grandson was actually his stepson. When he told me he believed his son had an affair with his third wife, a part of me wanted to tell him that couldn’t be possible. However, in my profession, I’d seen more impossible things than I wanted to remember. This wasn’t my usual area of

expertise, but I agree to help as a personal favor. The only other person who knew what was going on was my private investigator.

If it turned out that his son and wife had an affair, I had no idea what Collins was going to do.

When the door opened, I didn't bother to look up as I said, "What do you need, princess?"

"Princess? You've never called me that before."

My head snapped up at the sound of my mother's voice. With a wide smile, I stood and rounded my desk to hug her.

"Hey, old lady."

"Ugh. I think I liked princess better," she joked as we hugged.

"Wassup, Mama?"

"I can't stop by and see my only son?" she asked before giving me a kiss on my cheek.

"Of course, but you and I know you only stop by the office when you've got something to gossip about or you want me to do something."

She laughed as I helped her into her seat. "I won't take offense to that."

Serenity lightly knocked on the door and stuck her head in. "Hey, Mrs. Montgomery. It's great to see you again." Her eyes shifted to me. "I was just letting you know I'm back."

She'd left the office to grab some files from the DA's office, which explained how Mama had gotten into my office without me knowing she was here.

"Serenity, come on in here and give me a hug, girl," Mama said, standing with her arms wide. Serenity shyly made her way inside and into my mother's arms. "How have you been?"

Serenity's eyes locked with mine when she said, "I've been great, Mrs. Montgomery," and I took pride in knowing I had a hand in that.

"Great, great. You are absolutely glowing!"



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“Thank you. That’s what being loved properly can do,” Serenity announced as they released each other. “I’m going to give you two some privacy though. Mr. Montgomery, I’ll clear your schedule for the afternoon so you can spend some time with your mom.”

I didn’t realize I was staring at Serenity until Mama called me out on it.

“Mhm.” Her hands were on her hips when I forced my eyes off Serenity’s ass as she walked away. “That’s princess huh?”

I couldn’t stop smiling even if I wanted to. Nodding, I confirmed. “Yeah, that’s princess. Things started shifting between us in June, but we’ve been official since July.”

Mama clapped excitedly, making me chuckle. “Why haven’t you said anything?”

“I wanted to, and I’m not hiding her at all. I just . . . wanted her to myself for a while, you know?”

“How serious is this? I mean . . . it was serious enough for you to commit and you haven’t done that in years.”

“It’s as serious as serious can get. She’s definitely going to be my wife.”

Mama squealed as she hopped from her seat. Walking over to me, she grabbed my face and covered it with kisses until I laughed and pushed her away.

“I felt led to stop by since I was in the area and had no idea why. Now I know! I had to stop by so I could get this good news! You’ve got to bring my future daughter over for family dinner and tell me all about how this new relationship came to be.”

“Of course. Whenever she’s ready, I’d love to bring her over.”

“Oh, she’ll be ready this weekend. See you Sunday.”

After shooting me a wink, she gave me another kiss on the cheek. When she left my desk, she lingered at Serenity’s. I was going to go out there and save Serenity but decided against it. She’d have to get used to my mother’s overly affectionate and emotional ass anyway. As soon as I saw Mama hug and kiss her, I laughed. This lady was too damn much.

Mama pointed in my direction, and that was the only reason I stood to go see what was being said.

“Does this Sunday work for you?” Mama asked.

“Oh um . . . I mean . . . sure. I-if that’s okay with Kaos. I certainly wouldn’t want to impose.”

“Chile, please. It’s my house and you’re going to bemyguest. Don’t worry about him.”

“Wow, Mama. Tell me how you really feel.”

She sucked her teeth and gave me a dismissive wave of her hand.

“You sure you’re okay with this, baby?” Serenity asked.

“Positive. If you’d like to go Sunday, that works with me.”

“I guess we’ll see you Sunday,” Serenity agreed, causing Mama to gush and hug and kiss her all over again.

I ended up walking Mama outside and telling her what I wanted to eat Sunday, then checked on Taylor before going back up to my floor.

“Sorry about that,” I said, leaning against Serenity’s desk. “I probably should have warned you that Mama is very affectionate.”

“It’s cool. I love it, and now I see where you get it from.”

Chuckling, I nodded my agreement. “Yeah. I definitely grew up with love and affection.”

“It shows, and I’m glad I get to reap the reward of that. There’s nothing worse than a man so hard he can’t be soft and affectionate with his woman.”

“Oh, you’ll never have to worry about that. Don’t get it twisted; I’ll lay a nigga out by day and use these same hands to hold you close by night.”

She giggled and leaned forward and was about to kiss me until Eva frantically jogged down the hall. Eva always had anxious energy, so I didn’t bother to try and figure out what she was obsessing over now. If she needed my input, she’d come.

“That was close,” Serenity whispered as she sat back down. “I’ll be glad when I can love on you freely in here.”

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“Well, when you find a building and come on freelance, you’ll be able to. Or, I can still go to HR now. That’s still on the table.”

Serenity sighed as she considered the options. “I appreciate you wanting to go to HR for me, but I don’t want to feel like we’re breaking or bending rules that were put in place for a reason just to benefit us.”

Chuckling, I grabbed her hand and lifted her from her seat. “Aight, that settles it.”

“Settles what?”

“I think sometimes you forget who I am.”

“How?” Not bothering to respond, I led her over to the elevator. We rode it down to the first floor in silence. When we stepped off, she tried to release my hand, but I held it tighter. “Kaos,” she whispered, tugging my hand. “Ah!” she shrieked when we made it in front of the head of HR’s office. “Oh shit.”

Chuckling, I knocked on Dupree’s door. When he granted us entrance, I pulled Serenity inside.

“Mr. Montgomery, what can I do for you?”

“Serenity and I are in a relationship. I know that goes against the nonfraternization policy, but I need you to find a way around that.”

Sitting back in his seat, he touched the pads of his fingers together as he looked from

her to me.

“Yes, sir. There’s an amendment in the clause for partners that says as long as the relationship isn’t forced, an abuse of power, or a stain on the company’s image, managing partners do have permission to date an employee.” He turned his chair and grabbed a blue binder. “However, there were some stipulations put in place by the board. One personal relationship per partner, so as not to encourage incessant dating and relationships within the firm. The staff must be notified. And there are to be no public displays of affection. If at any point the relationship begins to affect the firm negatively, the board has permission to request it be ended. If it isn’t, both parties will face performative reviews that could lead to termination of employment.” Dupree pulled out two pieces of paper. “All of that is outlined here. You’ll need to look it over and sign within seventy-two hours.”

“Thanks, Dupree. The no public displays of affection won’t work for us, but everything else will be fine.”

He nodded as he smiled.

After grabbing the papers, I handed one to Serenity, then we left. She was quiet as she looked over the contract while we headed back up to our floor.

“After you sign it, I’ll take it back down to Dupree,” I told her. “Then, I can kiss you and hold you whenever we want.”

Her eyes rolled playfully as she smiled. “I actually love the sound of that. You almost gave me a heart attack, but that was far easier than I thought it would be.”

“I told you I got us. Do you believe me now?”

“Yes,” she purred. “Thank you, baby.” After giving me a kiss, she wiped her lipstick

off my lips then signed the contract.

“Now you know you’re not supposed to sign anything without looking it over thoroughly and having a lawyer look it over for you too.”

Serenity giggled as she handed the paper to me. “I trust you. If you’re going to sign yours, I have no reason not to sign mine too.”

“Let me sign it now so I can take you in the bathroom and show you how much hearing you say you trust me turns me on.”

She laughed, but I was dead fucking serious. I went in my office and looked that shit over expeditiously before signing and telling her to meet me in my private bathroom.

Serenity

Sunday

When I first met Claudia Montgomery, I had no idea she’d be the mother of my favorite man. She’d always been kind and warm to me, but this evening, she took it to the next level. Dinner was delicious, and I loved getting to know her and Adam on an intimate level. They shared stories with me of Kaos’s childhood—some he hated to have shared—and I’d been enjoying every second of our time together.

While we sipped wine in the sitting room, Kaos’s hand rested comfortably on my thigh. I found myself naturally leaning against him without even noticing. My body felt so safe with him, it always gravitated toward him.

“So how did your relationship shift from professional to personal?” Claudia asked.

Kaos chuckled. “There was always attraction there,” he started, and when he looked

at me, I nodded my agreement, “but things shifted when we went to Greece back in June. Truth is . . .I knew there was something special in her for me when we met. I’ve just been waiting for her to catch up.”

“I have,” I admitted as I blushed and put my hand on his knee. “I guess I should say I knew it too. I was just less willing to acknowledge it.”

“Will you two working together be an issue for the firm?” Adam asked.

“Nah, that’s taken care of,” Kaos answered.

“When can I expect marriage and babies?” Claudia wondered.

“Whoa, Ma.” Kaos laughed as he sat upright and wrapped his arm around me.

Truth was, I did want to marry Kaos and spend the rest of my life with him, but I had hesitancy about marriage. It had nothing to do with him, and I didn’t want my past and issues that came from my parents’ marriage to taint what we had. I’d shared with Kaos how I felt about marriage and children, and he seemed to be okay with it. That wasn’t a truth I wanted to share with everyone, but I didn’t mind being open with his family.

“It’s okay, Kaos,” I said.

“Nah, you don’t have to—”

“If you’re uncomfortable discussing that, please don’t feel obligated to,” Claudia granted.

“It’s not that. It’s just . . . complicated,” I replied.

Kaos took my hand into his and kissed it. Against my ear, he whispered, “You don’t have to share anything you don’t want to. I know where we stand, and we’re good.”

His validation gave me the courage to stand in my truth.



“I do want marriage,” I confirmed, “but it’s not something I’m rushing toward. Truth is, my parents’ marriage wasn’t the best example of what I should aspire to. I’m still working through some things, and Kaos has been helping me with that.” I kissed his hand as my eyes watered. “So, I can’t say for sure. I guess whenever he’s brave enough to ask.”

“I would ask right now if I knew you’d say yes,” he replied with a smile.

“Wow. My son is really in love,” Claudia said with tears in her eyes.

“Been a long time coming.” Adam beamed.

We talked for about another hour or so before Kaos and I left. He wanted to make sure the whole marriage and baby talk hadn’t ruined my mood, but I assured him that I was okay. I had a really great time with his parents and saw myself getting close to them both.

“I didn’t embarrass you, did I?” I asked, half teasing on the ride back home.

“You could never.”

“Still . . . I know most moms start planning the wedding as soon as their son brings a woman home. I hope I didn’t disappoint her with my answer.”

“Your answer was your right and your truth. Even if she was disappointed, which she wasn’t, it doesn’t matter. You told me right after we committed to each other how you felt about marriage, and that’s all that matters. We’re on the same page.”

I nodded and released a shaky breath, thankful that he still accepted my position and respected my wishes. I did want marriage, but I’d seen too many couples end things because they outgrew each other or fell out of love. Stopped putting in the work or

cheated. Even with my own parents, they were honest about how things changed after they got married. Mama became a shell of herself to a certain extent and gave up her dreams to be a wife and mom. She worked at the store and restaurant because that was my father's legacy, but she had always wanted to be a singer.

She gave that up for a small town life with the man of her dreams, just for him to cheat on her and never give her the life she deserved. Well past it now, Mama made her peace with the life she'd made for herself, but that wasn't good enough for me. I think that was another reason why I was so adamant about leaving Jasper Lane. After finding out about his infidelity and Mama's unfulfilled dreams, I became even more determined to live for myself. To choose myself.

I knew one day I'd be brave enough to marry the right man who showed me life and my heart would be safe with him. That he'd encourage me to become new versions of myself as I aged and never dim my light. One who would value me and what we had to never risk losing it with stagnancy or infidelity. We may not have been together long, but I believed Kaos was that man. I just didn't know when marriage would be in our future.

"I'm gonna ask you something, and I want you to be completely honest with me," I told him, and we turned slightly in our seats to face each other.

"Wassup?"

"Are you really okay with my stance on marriage? I don't want you to feel like you're settling by being with me."

The left side of Kaos's mouth lifted into a smile. "I'm not settling at all. I want marriage, a healthy marriage, and I will have that . . . with you."

"How can you be so sure?"

“I know your fear about marriage is because of other people’s failures. That ain’t got shit to do with us. When I earn your trust enough for you to believe in forever with me, I’ll propose, and you’re going to say yes.” He leaned forward, hand wrapping around my neck to pull me closer. “And you’re not just going to say yes. You’re going to be secure in our union. We’re going to have beautiful babies who will be inspired by our bond. And all the trauma from your childhood won’t haunt you anymore because that little girl inside of you will be getting all the unconditional love, affection, validation, and support that she needs.”

My tears fell so rapidly. So unexpectedly. “You always know exactly what to say to keep me from spiraling.”

“That’s my job.” He wiped my tears with a lazy smile.

“I love you, baby.”

“I know. And I love you too.”

Kaos

September

“You sure about this, brother?” Tristan asked me.

I could understand why. This would be the first time in about a decade that I took time off from the firm. I wanted to spend the rest of the year traveling and spending time with Serenity. With me being forty years old, I’d had my fair share of sex partners, random relationships, and sometimes toxic situation-ships. Because the truth of the matter was, regardless of how much you were transparent and honest about what you wanted and was willing to offer, you couldn’t control other people’s actions, feelings, or perceptions. So even though I took pride in treating women well, there were a few situations in my past that could have ended better—especially when I was in the mafia.

“I’m positive. I’m not taking any more cases until January of next year. I would be willing to look over paperwork and do research so I won’t get bored, but yeah . . . no litigation for me this last quarter.”

“Damn.” Carson rubbed his palms together as he sat up in his seat. “I never thought I’d see the day you took time off work . . . and to spend time with a woman?”

“Not just any woman,” I clarified. “My wife.”

“You plan to propose at the end of the year?” Zander wanted to know.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I admitted, squeezing the back of my neck. “We’ve known each other for going on three years now. Even though I do see marriage in our future, I’m not trying to rush it. Serenity is a strong woman but she’s also delicate. Fragile. Not like China, but like a bomb. I know how she operates. If I rush things, she’ll explode and run because she’s an overthinker. My first priority is ensuring she knows she’s safe with me and that when we do get married, she never has to worry about me switching up on her or cheating on her. Once I’m confident she believes that, then I’ll propose.”

“Is that why you’re taking off?” Tristan asked. “So you can really focus on her?”

“Yes and no. I haven’t even told her about this yet. It’s so I can rest and prioritize something else for the first time in at least fifteen years. All my life, it has revolved around my family and the mafia. Then it was the mafia and the firm. Now, it’s the firm. I need to breathe, and I want my woman with me while I do.”

“What’s first on your list to do?” Carson asked.

I shared with them my plans for the month and the trip I wanted to take Serenity on before we left the conference room. When I made it back to the fifth floor, Serenity was on a call. It wasn’t my intention to eavesdrop, but when I heard her mention her mother’s name and roll her eyes, I slowed my steps. I sat on the edge of her desk and she wasted no time gripping my thigh.

“I haven’t been avoiding your calls, Ma. It’s just been crazy busy at work, and you know Taylor started school last month so I’ve been helping her get adjusted.” She smiled. “Yeah, she loves it, and I really love having her here.” Her eyes lifted to me

before she rolled them, and I held my laugh back. “No, Ma. She does not have little boys in the apartment. I don’t be watching her every move but there are cameras there. Plus, I trust her. She won’t violate my space like that, and even if she did, she’s twenty one not eighteen.” Since it seemed she was good, I stood to leave, but she grabbed my hand as her mouth dropped. “You . . . you want me to come back for Daddy’s birthday party? Uh . . . does he know you’re inviting me?” Her shoulders slouched. “Oh. So he doesn’t want me there? I appreciate the invitation but if it didn’t come from him—Ma, that’s not—” I grabbed a sticky note and quickly scribbled for her to tell her mom we’d be there. After she silently mouthed if I was sure and I confirmed, she did as I said. “Okay, Ma. I will be there. I can’t speak for Taylor, but I’ll tell her too. Okay, see you soon. I love you too. Bye.”

“I can’t believe I’m going,” she mumbled with a pout. “I’m setting myself up for failure with this man, baby. Unless I apologize for something that I don’t think I was wrong for or tell him I’m coming home, he’s not going to say anything to me.”

“Then I’ll handle him. There’s no point in you avoiding your mom because you’re having issues with him. I know you miss her.”

“Yeah, I do,” she admitted, massaging her temples. “I don’t blame her for my dad’s behavior at all. I wish she would have come to see me, but I get why she didn’t.”

“Why didn’t she?”

“I think it was because she preferred I go there so she could try and fix things between us. When we were in Greece, she said she was going to come here and I got really excited, but she never did. I think it was because they argued about it. I get her wanting to keep the peace in their home, so I didn’t mention it again.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t even going to speak on that. There was no way in hell I’d let my wife keep me away from my child. I had a healthy priority and knew I’d have

to put my wife on the same level as me so we could be one, but still. Some shit wasn't up for questions or debate, and being in my child's life was one of them. It always blew my mind when I met men who didn't want to be in their kids' lives, but I understood not everyone had the same principles, morals, and perceptions of family and life.

"When is the party?"

"Tonight."

"Wait." I chuckled and ran my fingers down the corners of my mouth. "She just called to invite you to a party she's having for your father tonight?"

"Yeah. She said she wasn't sure I'd come so she didn't want to invite me and be rejected but something told her to call. If you weren't sitting there, I wouldn't have agreed."

"I think it'll do you some good to go. Even if he doesn't talk to you, you need to talk to him. I want full access to your heart, and I can't do that if you got some shit you need to work out with your father in there."

She stood and stepped between my legs. Her arms wrapped around my neck. "I agree, but I can say with all the confidence in the world that I'm committed to us. I won't let my issues with him stand in the way of that. I love what we're building."

"I do too, princess, and I'm proud of you for going. I know the perfect way for us to celebrate."

"Ooh, what do you have in mind?"

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“You don’t want to be surprised?” I teased.

“No!” she whined, swaying from side to side. “Tell me now please.”

“How about we finish up for the day and go home to pack for this impromptu trip, and I’ll tell you on the drive to Jasper Lane?”

“Ugh, fine. That’ll do.”

Serenity

“Okay, what’s the surprise?” I asked as soon as we left home, and Kaos laughed at me.

It didn’t take us long at all to pack because we were only staying one day. Mama said they were having a party tonight and brunch tomorrow, but I wasn’t sure we’d go to the brunch. It would depend on Daddy’s mood. Kaos still booked a room just in case.

“Oh shoot! Babe, you have a deposition—”

“It was handed off to someone else. That’s why it wasn’t on my calendar.”

Relief immediately washed over me, and I relaxed in my seat. “Thank God. I thought I’d forgotten about it until just now.”

“Nah, princess. It was intentionally taken off the schedule. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about when we left the office. I do want to reward you for going



to see your parents, but I kind of already had a trip planned. Now, you'll be able to use it to unwind if this shit goes left field."

"Okay, I'm intrigued. Tell me more."

"I'm taking the rest of the year off from the office." My head immediately jerked in his direction, but he tightened his grip on the steering wheel and kept his eyes on the road. "I'll still do small things from my home office, but I won't be taking any more cases until January."

"Is everything okay? You're not sick or anything are you?"

His chuckle was light as he looked over at me and grabbed my hand. "I'm fine, and everything's okay. Everything's great actually. That's why I want to take some time off." He paused and dropped a quick kiss on my lips. "I want to travel and enjoy you. I want to help you start your business. I want to focus on something other than my crazy ass clients. I need a break, princess."

"I understand, and I'm proud of you for taking the time you need. I'm also honored you want to prioritize getting more out of your time with me. That's not to say we have an expiration date. I'm just glad you're putting forth effort and being intentional about us."

"Yeah, I know what you meant, princess. And you're right—I'm being very intentional about us. Now that you've finally given me a chance, I'm going to make sure you never regret it. This isn't just a phase either. I won't change. Not for the worse at least. The same pressure I'm applying now, I'm going to apply ten years from now."

Kaos was the first man that gave the validation and clarity I needed without me even having to ask, and I appreciated him so much for that. I told him that, and our

conversation shifted to how he planned to spend his break, which led to me thinking about it too. If he wouldn't be at the office, neither would I. I was looking forward to prioritizing finding a building for my business and traveling but also spending more time with my sister and best friend. When Kaos's workload was hectic, I had to be there to help him carry the load, so I intended to take full advantage of having the rest of the year off from the office.

"Do you know any other languages?" he asked.

"I learned Spanish in high school, and I learned some French in college, but I want to learn more. I want to learn Italian too. What about you?"

"I know Spanish and French as well. How fluent is your French?"

"Hmm . . . I'm not too confident but say something to me."

His chuckle was sexy before he licked his lips. "Tu mérites le monde, et c'est le début de ma façon de vous le donner."

"Okay, I understood the words you, world, and giving."

We laughed. "I said, you deserve the world, and this is the start of me giving it to you. Our next trip is to St. Barts."

"Ah!" I clapped and bounced in my seat. "Babe! No way! Are you seriously taking me to Saint Barthelemy?"

"Of course. I'll never tell you a lie, Serenity."

"Yayyy I'm so excited! When are we leaving? Will I have time to brush up on my French? I know they speak English, but I want to be able to speak in French if and

when I need to.”

“We can go as soon as you’d like. It’s your world, girl.”

“Baby,” I cooed before leaning to the side to hug his neck and kiss him. “Thank you so much. I’m so excited. I cannot wait! It’s going to be so much fun!”

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I'd never been to the French-speaking Caribbean Island before, but I'd heard a lot about it. A lot of wealthy people vacationed there, and it was known for its luxury, which was why it appealed to me.

Our conversation topics continued to shift before we fell into a comfortable silence and let the sound of music fill the car. That gave my mind time to process the fact that I'd be seeing my parents in two hours. I told Taylor but she didn't want to come. She was still feeling some type of way about Daddy trying to keep her from coming to see me. His plan backfired, clearly, because now she was here permanently. If only he hadn't poked that bear, she would still be there. I was glad he did, because now she was in school pursuing her degree, and that's what she should have been doing all along.

By the time we made it to Jasper Lane, my intuition was telling me this wasn't going to end well. I told Kaos not to even bother with checking into the hotel. It was only a three hour drive, so if he didn't want to drive back, I would. I didn't even have the confidence that we'd make it through dinner.

As he pulled onto their street, my heart palpitated. I started sweating and rocking in my seat. When he noticed, he held my hand.

"You're really nervous about this huh?" I nodded. "If you don't want to do this, you don't have to, Serenity."

"It's not that I don't want to. I do want things to be better between me and Daddy, and I don't want Ma to be in the middle of it. I just know him, and unless I apologize, I don't see us making any progress this evening."

His head shook as he parked the car. “I’m all for being the bigger person when the situation calls for it, but I’m not for stroking a nigga’s ego just because. You didn’t do anything that you should apologize for.” After cutting the car off, he used my chin to turn my head in his direction as he said, “Look at me.”

“Yes, sir?”

A low groan escaped him. His eyes lowered as he tugged his bottom lip between his teeth. As his hand went from my chin to my neck, Kaos pulled me closer and gave me a deep, passionate, wet kiss.

“You distracted me. Now I done forgot what I was about to say.” I cackled before giving him another quick kiss. “Oh yeah, if at any point you want to leave early, just let me know. I’m not going to let anyone disrespect you—not even your father. Hemight have helped bring you into this world, but if he hurts you in front of me, I have no problem taking him out of it.”

“Oh God. I’m going to forget you said that.”

“You ain’t gotta remember. You gon’ see it if he try you.”

“Kaos, please. That’s my father. You can’t kill him just because he hurt me.”

He frowned as he looked at me before scoffing and opening his door. My head shook as he muttered something about me not knowing who he was as he got out of the car. Now Ireallydidn’t want to be here. Maybe this was why I didn’t have a good feeling about this. I’d forgotten what he’d done to Mario. There was no doubt in my mind if Daddy said something disrespectful that Kaos would address it.

Kaos

Stepping close to Serenity, I wrapped my arm around her from behind. Her body was literally shaking, but when I touched her, the shaking ceased. After placing a soft kiss on her neck, I reminded her, “We can leave whenever you want to.”

She looked up at me with watery eyes and a soft smile as we heard the door unlock. Seconds later, a woman that looked like an older version of her answered the door. Her focus was so much on Serenity that she didn’t even notice me.

“My baby!” she screamed before pulling Serenity in for a hug.

Serenity giggled as she held the woman whom I assumed was her mother. “Hey, Ma.”

“Oh I’m so happy you came. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“I missed you.” When I heard the crack in her voice, I reached out and rubbed her back. “Where are my manners?” Serenity pulled away, and her mom immediately gripped her hand. “Ma, this is my boyfriend, Kaos. Kaos, this is my mom, Yolanda.”

“Boyfriend?” Yolanda repeated, extending her hand for me to shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Kaos.”

“You as well. I hope you don’t mind me crashing the party.”

“Not at all. Please, come in.”

We made our way inside, and it was clear the party was well underway. Music was playing, people were dancing or engaging in conversation, and the food smelled good as hell.

“Let me find your father, then y’all can speak to everybody and fix yourselves a

plate,” Yolanda advised.

“Uh, okay,” Serenity agreed, reaching for my hand absently from behind.

I grabbed it and made my way to her side as I caressed her hand with my thumb. We followed her mom through a maze of people, all of whom stopped us so they could speak to and hug Serenity. It was clear her people missed her, and I hated that she’d felt the need to stay away for so long. At the same time, I commended her for maintaining her peace . . . even if that meant staying away.

We ended up outside by the grill where three older men stood. I assumed the one working the grill was her father, because I didn’t know too many men who’d let someone else handle his grill at his home . . . even if it was his birthday.

“Honey, look who’s here,” Yolanda almost sang.

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The man turned, and at the sight of us, his smile wavered slightly. He handed the man next to him his tongs, then wiped his hands on his apron.

“Speak,” Yolanda urged, nudging her husband with her shoulder.

“Hey, baby girl.”

“Hi, Daddy.” She wrapped her arm around mine. “This is my boyfriend, Kaos.”

“Boyfriend?” he repeated, just like her mom. Only difference was, Yolanda’s tone was surprised and amused. His was angry. “He looks a little too old to be anyone’s boyfriend.”

“Daddy!”

“Walter!”

“It’s fine,” I said with a smile. “He’s right. I’m forty years old. I’m her man, if that makes you feel better.”

“What would make me feel better was if she’d be with someone closer to her age.”

“Daddy, please. He’s only eight years older than me. It really isn’t that big of a deal.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Monroe, your daughter could not be in better hands. No one will treat her better than me.”



His head shook as he sighed. “How’d you two meet?”

“She’s my executive assistant.”

“Oh great.” He laughed as he looked at his wife. “So not only are you older but you’re her boss too?”

“We didn’t come here for this,” Serenity said, crossing her arms over her chest. “If you have a problem with my relationship, that’s fine, but it’s not going to change anything. I’m in love with Kaos, and I’m happy with him. I’m happy with my life in Rose Valley Hills.”

“I bet you are,” he challenged, pointing his finger in her face. “You stole your sister from me and convinced her to run off from home too.”

“Aight, we’re gonna end this conversation here,” I told him, pulling Serenity behind me. “Out of respect for your home, I’m going to ask you nicely not to disrespect my woman.”

“Your woman?” He laughed. “That’s my daughter.”

“True, but what I said stands. I asked her to come here so the two of you could work out your issues. If that’s not possible, I’m going to take her back home.”

“Walter, please,” Yolanda begged, grabbing his arm.

“Don’t Walter me,” he mocked, pulling himself out of her embrace. “Unless she came to apologize or tell me she’s coming back home, there really ain’t nothing else for us to say.”

“Wow,” Serenity muttered, head jerking as if the words physically struck her. “Let’s

go, baby.”

As we headed out, Yolanda called behind us. We didn’t stop until we were out by the car.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, “and for trying.” Her teary eyes lifted to mine. “It was nice to meet you.”

I nodded as she pulled Serenity into her arms for a long, tight hug.

“You can always come to The Hills to see us, Ma, but I’m never coming back here again.”

Sniffing, Yolanda nodded and wiped her eyes. “I understand, baby. I wouldn’t even ask you to. Not until he’s ready to stop being stubborn and fix things between the two of you.”

“That man is old as hell,” I said. “Whatever is his character, it’s fixed. Unless God speaks to his heart, he won’t ever do the right thing. And I will never let her be subjected to his bullshit again, so for his sake, you better hope he has a come to Jesus moment.”

As I opened the door for Serenity, her mother said, “Please take care of my baby, Kaos.”

“You have my word.”

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I got in the car and drove off immediately. Not even a block later, Serenity burst into tears. I wasted no time pulling over and pulling her onto my lap—into my arms.

Serenity

Two Weeks Later

I'd been kind of down about what happened with my parents. Of course, since Kaos suggested I go, he felt bad about it. Even with me telling him it wasn't his fault, he still intentionally made amends. I felt like it was more so on my father's behalf than his, and that made me appreciate and respect Kaos even more.

He'd been softer with me. Gentler. Looking at me with pitiful eyes. I told him all I needed was real love and authentic energy around me, and he gave that, but he also took me shopping because I love gifts. As I showed Taylor and Nessa the new stack of David Yurman chains and bracelets he'd gotten me, they swooned. Having a man that was financially stable was a flex; having a generous man who was a giver was an even bigger one.

"Okay, Sissy. I just need to make sure you leave these to me in your will," Taylor said with a smile.

"Girl, we're not that far apart in age. By the time I die, you'll have your own," I clarified, making them both laugh. "I do intend to continue to build my collection though. I've been sleeping on the brand."

"It's truly a classic, classy brand," Nessa added. "I said I'd splurge on my first couple

of pieces once I become a little more mature. It takes a certain kind of woman to pull these stacks off. I'ma stick to my Van Cleef dupes for now."

My eyes rolled playfully as we laughed. I could admit I did feel different though. I wasn't sure if it was because of my time with Kaos or just life's circumstances. My mentality had changed, and so had my style. We talked a little while longer before the girls left, giving me time to cook my man dinner and freshen up before he arrived. Even though he wasn't working at the office anymore, he went today for a meeting with the rest of his partners.

By the time he arrived, I had dinner finished, along with an ambiance fit for a king. I wouldn't say Kaos was romantic, but as he would say, he was tender about me. Like me, he appreciated the effort, so I lit some candles, got him a bouquet of roses, and picked up a gift for him. While he stepped away to take a call while we were shopping in Houston, I had the sale's associate grab a few pieces that I wanted to have shipped home for him, so he'd be surprised. If I tried to get it for him while we were in David Yurman, he would have paid for it himself.

"Yeah, man," he said on the phone as he walked into the foyer. "Tristan is the ultimate strategist. If you need help coming up with—" At the sight of me, a wide grin spread as his steps halted. "Let me uh . . . I'll send him your contact." Absently, Kaos disconnected the call before sauntering over to me. "Princess . . . you look delectable. Divine. Damn."

I giggled as he wrapped his arms around me. I had on a red silk gown with a matching robe and pumps.

"I'm glad you like what you see."

"Ilovewhat I see. Wow."

When he kissed me deeply, it took all my strength to push him away before things went too far. As much as I wanted him inside of me, I'd put a lot of effort into the evening, and I didn't want it to go to waste.

"I hope you're hungry," I crooned, leading him into the dining room by his hand.

"Oh wow, Serenity. This is beautiful. Thank you."

"You're welcome, baby."

"And it smells good as hell in here. You cooked?"

The skeptical look he shot my way made me laugh. "Yes, Kaos. I cooked."

"Okay, okay, I see you. I ain't know you had it in you to throw down like this."

I wasn't offended because I usually cooked something quick and light if I even cooked at all. But tonight, I'd prepared a feast. Since he loved soul food so much, I made a collard and mustard green mix with turnips, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and sweet potato cornbread. For dessert, we'd have homemade chocolate chip cookies and ice cream.

After I pulled his suit jacket off, I kissed his back. "Mm," he moaned, grabbing my hand before I could get too far away. Kaos pulled me close and gave me another kiss. "Thank you, princess."

"You're welcome. You're always taking care of me, and I wanted to do something to remind you that I appreciate you. I respect you. I trust you. I love you. I know I say it all the time, but I wanted to put a little action behind it too."

"I really appreciate this, but you show me those things daily, whether you realize it or

not.”

I hoped I did but hearing him confirm that made me feel good. I wanted to always be as good to him as he was to me. Kaos said I was the prize, but I wanted to make sure he always remembered and believed that.

After hanging up his jacket, I came back to the dining room to find he'd already devoured a third of his plate. Chuckling, I poured him a glass of Kool-Aid though I preferred wine.

“I already plan to marry you, Serenity. You know that, right?” he asked after moaning and almost eating his piece of cornbread in three bites.

“Yes,” I confirmed through my sniggle before sitting down.

“I don't want you to think I need you to be my chef, but now that I know you can cook like this, I'ma need at least one homecooked meal a week, princess. This is good as hell.”

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“Anything for you, baby,” I agreed, feeling honored that he enjoyed my cooking as much as he did.

We made small talk while we ate dinner, but before we had dessert, I grabbed his gift bag from the kitchen. His head shook adamantly as I walked over to him with it.

“Nah, na. You know I don’t want you spending your money on me, princess.”

“Technically I spent your money on you because I used some of what you sent me.”

He laughed and accepted the bag. “I guess that’s okay.” He set the bag on the table and placed me on his lap. “I can’t recall a time a woman ever bought me something unless it was for my birthday or Christmas outside of my mother.” Kaos swallowed hard, and when I saw the tears gloss over his eyes, I was glad even more that I’d put together what I had for him. “Thank you.”

“You don’t even know what it is yet,” I joked, trying to keep my own self from getting emotional.

“It doesn’t matter.” His crisp, deep voice was serious as he stared into my eyes. “Thank you.”

When I realized he cared more about the gesture than what was inside, I gently took the bag and opened it. Each time I pulled an item out, heoohed,hissed, or saidoh shit. I was too tickled because his excitement grew more and more like a kid onChristmas. Total, I’d gotten him a Cuban link ring, bracelet, and chain. He loved platinum and silver jewelry, but when I saw this in gold, I knew it would look damn good on his

cinnamon brown skin. As I put it on him, I was pleased to see that I was right. We walked over to the mirror in the dining room, and he sized himself up. While he ran his hand over his beard and did his sexy smize, I giggled and took pictures of him.

“Aight, I’ll admit you just put me on to gold. I’m definitely cop more in the future.”

“No. Let me do this for you. You barely let me do anything for you at all. Let this be it.”

“I can agree to that,” he almost hummed, pulling me into his chest. “Thank you, princess. For real. It feels good finally being with someone who pours into me just like I pour into them. I don’t need a woman to do much for me, but I truly appreciate the reciprocation.”

“It’s my honor and pleasure,” I told him before standing on the tips of my toes for a kiss.

I thought he was going to lose his shit when he saw the cookies and ice cream. He changed clothes and we climbed into bed, ready to smoke and binge watch *Beyond the Gates* while we chowed down on the cookies. After that, he fucked me senseless wearing nothing but the jewelry I’d gotten him.

Kaos

“Shit,” I muttered, gripping a handful of Serenity’s hair.

Every time she woke me up with sloppy head, I knew the day was about to be great. She sucked and licked and stroked my dick until I shot my seeds down her throat, then she rode my dick until my toes twisted and body convulsed underneath her.

After the perfect start to my day, I got dressed and headed for what I believed was



going to be a waste of my time. I hadn't taken off time from work to make myself more available to Unc, but he asked to meet me, and like always, I agreed.

When my phone vibrated, I pulled it out and smiled at the sight of Taylor's name. Raquel lowered the volume on the Kendrick Lamar that was playing, and I answered.

"Lil sis, wassup?"

"Hey, bro! I didn't catch you at a bad time, did I?"

"Not at all."

"Good. So two things. One, I'm at the office and Mayor Collins was looking for you. He said he wanted to talk to you about some work you did for him previously. I told him you weren't available for any office meetings, and he wanted me to call and see if that applied to him."

I laughed. "Yeah, it does apply to him. However, I will make one exception. Please email your sister and have her schedule a meeting for me and Collins at my home office. But in the future, that rule applies to everyone—even him."

I figured giving him privacy in the comfort of my home to tell him he was right about his son sleeping with his wife was the least I could do. Collins was probably going to lose his shit when he found out about their betrayal. All I could do was pray he didn't do something that would require me to have to renege on not going to trial before next year.

"Yes, sir! Writing . . . it . . . down . . . now. Okay! And the second thing is a little more personal. I wouldn't mention this on the clock, but I have class right after and—"

“It’s cool, Tay. What’s on your mind?”

“I was talking to Sissy earlier about our holiday plans. She’s feeling a little sad because we won’t have a big Thanksgiving dinner like we used to have. I asked her how she celebrated the last two years and she said she was with Nessa’s family. There’s nothing really wrong with that but I was wondering if we could maybe start a new tradition this year?”

“Yeah, I love the sound of that. Y’all are more than welcome to come to my parents’ home for Thanksgiving. Maybe we can do Friendsgiving the day before too at our house.”

“That would be perfect!”

“And for Christmas, what do you think about Aspen or Denver?”

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“Yaaasssss she would love that! She’s always talked about going to Denver to smoke and her ass don’t even really smoke like that.”

Her revelation made me laugh because I’d noticed that too. She would hit the blunt a few times and be done because she was a lightweight, but I gave her credit for trying.

“Aight, say less. I’ll get some things planned with my travel agent and keep you in the loop. We’re gonna make this holiday season perfect for you and our girl.”

“Thank you, Kaos. I really appreciate you. Thank you for being so good to and for my sister. This version of her—it’s light, and peaceful, and refreshing. One I’ve never seen on her or any of the women in my family honestly. I know it’s because she’s finally living for herself, but I know it’s also because of you.”

It probably wasn’t her intention to put me in my feelings, but that shit meant a lot to me. It meant a lot to me to know that as a man, as Serenity’s man, people were seeing a difference in my woman because she was being loved properly. We talked a little more before I shared my calendar with her so she could schedule a couple of follow up talks while she was at the office so Serenity wouldn’t know what we were up to before we ended the call.

I groaned when we pulled into the parking lot of the pool hall and Raquel laughed. I didn’t believe in wasting my energy or my time, but Unc insisted on talking face to face about shit that he knew I’d say no to. I was about to start telling his ass to come to me. As always, I told Raquel to keep the car running, then spoke to Mini and made my way inside.

The sound of heightened voices caused my feet to move quicker, and when I realized one of them belonged to my father, I pulled my Glock from my hip. Uncle or not, I'd lay anybody down behind my woman and my parents, and he was no exception.

At the sight of me, they both stopped speaking. Pops' shoulders relaxed and face softened. His eyes focused on my Glock and his eye twitched.

"The fuck is going on?" I asked, slamming the door behind me.

"This crazy son of a bitch has officially lost his mind," Pops answered while Unc dramatically waved his hands in the air.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Unc said.

"And that's the problem," Pops reprimanded, pointing at his brother. "All you see is the mafia. You don't see the real people, real lives, that are attached to it. There's no way in hell my son will agree to this, and even if he wanted to, I wouldn't allow him."

"Agree to what?" I chimed in, needing more insight on what had them about to come to blows before I walked in.

Unc scratched his brow and motioned for me to sit down but I preferred to stand, especially with tensions being so high.

"You remember I told you that since I smoothed things out with Woody that you owed me, right?" he reminded me, as if that was needed.

"And you remember I told you I wasn't going to do anything I didn't want to do?"

"Yeah, but you shouldn't have any problems with this. It's a favor for an old friend."

“Old friend?” I repeated. “Who?”

“Fedora.”

Fedora.

Fedora wasn't an old friend—she was my ex. At one point, she was the woman I was supposed to marry. Had I stayed in the mafia, she'd be my wife. The thing about a woman like Fedora was she'd do whatever she could to get what she wanted . . . no matter who she used, hurt, or betrayed in the process. The moment she found out I was leaving the mafia, she cheated on me then moved on to the next man. That would have been cool if it wasn't our enemy. Now, I had no loyalty for her at all. Her ass could be on fire, and I wouldn't piss or spit on her.

“I know you didn't waste my time asking me here about Fedora.” Though I couldn't see my face, I felt it twist and frown.

“Hear me out, Nephew.” Sighing, I nodded my agreement. “I realized with this whole Woody situation that there's power in partnership. A lot of the recent deals made have been made through hostile takeovers, which leads to a lack of loyalty and trust in the long run. What Woody and I have now is solid because we are both looking out for and benefiting from this arrangement.”

“What does this have to do with Fedora?”

“I reached out to Mason to broker peace. She was the connect because of her previous ties to you and our family. Mason isn't completely on board, but Fedora is willing to get him to agree on one condition.”

Here we go.

“Which is?”

“She wants you.” I literally laughed in this man’s face, yet he continued. “She’s heard about your relationship and fears it’s serious. So serious you might be permanently off the market soon. Fedora believes this is her last and only chance to make things right with you, so she’s willing to get Mason to agree if I can get her another chance with you.”

Me and Pops locked eyes, and he shook his head as if he couldn’t believe the delusion his brother was spitting either.

“Are they not in a relationship?” I confirmed, solely out of curiosity.

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“Yes, but she feels like she’s stuck with him because she left you for him. Now that she has an opening back into the family and your heart—”

“She doesn’t have an opening,” I interrupted to make clear. “Even if I wasn’t in love with my woman, I would never give Fedora a chance again. She cheated. She betrayed me. Ain’t no coming back from that.”

Unc released a hard breath. He took slow steps toward me, and Pops stepped between us. I didn’t need the protection, but I also didn’t expect him to stand down.

“I don’t think you understand how this shit goes, Nephew. I spared your life in exchange for your cooperation.”

“With clients that I agreed to represent. You’re crossing boundaries again and again, and I’m losing my patience with this bullshit.”

“If Mason and I can become allies, we can shut the South down. I rule the city with my gambling rings, loans, and drugs. He has white and pills on lock. Not to mention he has a clientele that is willing to pay for discretion. We’re talking some very rich people who would do just about anything to get high in secret.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but that has nothing to do with me. Maybe you and your consigliere need to figure out a way to broker this partnership without using Fedora because I will never be with that woman again. I don’t give a fuck what’s on the line.”

Unc chuckled and took a step back. “If this is your second time rejecting me, you

know there won't be a third, right?"

My grip tightened on my Glock. "Do what you gotta do, Unc. Just make sure you don't miss . . . because you know I never do."

He laughed as I walked away, but I knew he knew just how serious I was. I meant it when I told Serenity I vowed to never take another life, but if I had to to release myself from his clutches, I'd do what I had to do. My life was more fulfilling and peaceful than it had ever been, and I would let nothing ruin that.

Serenity

That Weekend

"Baby, no," I whined as laughter bubbled up within me. Kaos and I were keeping up with our commitment to deepening our palates and becoming more cultured. We were taking a class together to learn Italian, and he was learning to play the piano, while I'd taken up the hobby of salsa dancing. Tonight for our date night, we were trying a new restaurant, and this man was gagging and on the verge of throwing up his stomach from the smallest bite of foreign food.

"Oh God. What the fuck was that?" he asked, wiping his mouth in disgust.

I laughed so hard I cried. "Kaos, I think you have a sensitivity to certain textures with food. You don't eat eggs or blueberries, and we can officially add avocado to the list."

"I'll take your word for it. I'm not trying that shit again. People be acting like it tastes so good. How do y'all put that in your mouth? Ew."

Between his serious expression and the disgust on his face I couldn't help but laugh



again.

“How about I put something else in your mouth to take the taste away?” I flirted.

“Ooh . . . I love the sound of that.” He looked around for a bathroom, making me laugh again, but my laughter faded when a strikingly beautiful woman sat down next to him.

Tall, thick, stallion.

Ebony skin, curly hair.

Structured cheek bones.

The woman was beautiful, that I wouldn't deny.

But the scowl on Kaos's face?

That was ugly.

“Hey, lover,” she said to Kaos. “Feels like fate seeing you here.”

“It's going to feel like death if you don't get your hands off my man,” I warned, gripping the seat cushion to keep from hopping over the table as she cupped his cheek.

“There's no need for that, princess,” Kaos said calmly. “You know you'll never have to come out of character around me or for me.”

“Princess? That's cute,” she said as he lowered her hand and shoved her out of the benched seat.

“I’m not sure what gave you the courage to come over here and talk to me let alone touch me, but don’t ever do that shit again, Fedora.”

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“Aww come on, lover. Don’t be like that. I was hoping this truce between your uncle and Mason would be the key to us getting back together. I’ve been missing you and—”

His hand lifted and silenced her as he laughed. “Like I told him, what we had is over. Even if I wasn’t with the best woman I’ve ever met in my life,” he winked at me, and dammit if it didn’t make me smile, “there’s absolutely no place in my heart or life for a woman like you.” He stood. “Now, spare yourself the embarrassment and leave on your own before I have to make you.”

Her nostrils flared as she swallowed and blinked rapidly. Looking down at me, her jaw clenched.

“There’s really no chance we can try again?”

“None. At all.”

Fedora’s head bobbed once before she took a small step backward. “I think you just want me to work for you to prove I regret the way things ended. I can do that.”

“That’s not what this is,” Kaos roared, slamming his fist on the table. “You need to go, Fedora,” he seethed. “Now.”

All eyes were on us as she quickly walked away. Kaos motioned for the waitress and our check as he sat back down. Silence swirled around us as we waited. The moment she set it on the table, Kaos tossed a few bills on it and stood.

“Let’s go,” he commanded, and I stood, cupping my hands in front of me instead of accepting his waiting hand. Chuckling, he wrapped his arm around my waist as we walked out, keeping me from putting space between us.

Kaos waited until we were in the car to speak. “It’s clear you’re upset. Can you share why?”

“What was that about, Kaos? I feel completely blindsided. Who was she, and why does she think she has a chance to get back with you?”

He sighed and ran his hands over his face. “That was my ex Fedora. We dated years ago. Before I left the mafia. We broke up because when I told her I was leaving, she cheated and got with one of our enemies—Mason Henry. Fast forward to a few days ago, and my uncle summons me to tell me he wants to start a partnership with Mason. Mason isn’t completely on board, but Fedora assured him that she could change his mind in exchange for me. Apparently, she planned to leave him after the deal was done if she had a second chance with me.”

“And you said no?”

He frowned as he stared at me. “Of course I said no.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it wasn’t something I felt was worth mentioning. I didn’t expect for us to run into her. I realize now the error I made. Had I told you, you would have been prepared. For that, I apologize.”

Nodding, I looked out of the window. I felt like I had a right to be upset, but I also didn’t want to overreact, so I chose to remain silent. For a while, I allowed myself to believe there were no other women in Kaos’s orbit, which was naïve. He was one of

the most sought after bachelors in The Hills. I was sure there were plenty of women before me, and there'd be plenty of women after me if I left.

"Do you accept my apology?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Do you need time to process what just happened?" Nodding, I swallowed back my tears . . . afraid if I spoke my voice would crack. "I can give you that, but I meant what I said back there, princess. There's nothing between me and Fedora." When his hand rested on my thigh, I closed my eyes. "The only woman I want, for the rest of my life, is you."

Thankfully, the conversation ended there.

When we got home, I felt better. I knew in my heart that he was telling the truth. More than anything, I felt insecure over the thought of him leaving me for someone else, regardless of the reason. This was the best relationship I'd ever had. He was the best man I'd ever had. I didn't want to even think about it ending. I didn't want to be healthy and mature and say I'd appreciate the good memories and let him go easily.

Fuck that. He was mine, now and forever, and I'd be damned if I let him leave me after giving me the best loving of my life. I believed Kaos was a man of integrity. A man of principle. A man of his word. If he told me this was nothing for me to worry about, I believed him.

"Hey," he called softly when I tried to walk toward the kitchen for a bottle of wine. As his arms wrapped around my waist, chills covered my arms. "I'm sorry for the way our date ended."

"It wasn't your fault."

“Yeah, but still. I take accountability for her behavior. I’m sorry, princess.”

“You make it very hard to be upset, Mr. Montgomery.”

He smiled, then kissed the corner of my mouth. My hands slid up his arms, then I wrapped my arms around his neck. Kaos accepted the signal and kissed my lips.

“Good, because I don’t want you to be upset about anything if I can help it. I’m so happy with you, Serenity. I hope today won’t make you question that.”

“Just promise me that if you decide to leave for any reason, just leave. Don’t switch up on me. Don’t change the way you treat me. Just . . . give me a kind goodbye and leave.”

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“I can promise you that only because I have no intentions of leaving you—ever. You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life, princess. The sooner you trust that . . . the better.”

“Hearing that you said no makes me believe it. Not because of her, but because it means you went against your family. I know you probably did that for yourself, and our relationship was safe because of the overflow of that choice but—”

“Nah, I’m not gonna let you downplay the role you had in my decision. Yeah, I said no because I didn’t want to do it, but I definitely said no too because of you. Because I don’t want anyonebutyou. I will never intentionally make a choice that willhurt you. I meant it when I said all of you was safe with me.” He caught a tear that slipped down my cheek as he asked, “Do you understand me?”

Nodding, I smiled as more tears fell. “I understand, baby. Thank you for communicating and not letting me get too in my head.”

“Always. C’mere.”

I giggled as he picked me up and held me close. A soft moan escaped me as I settled into his embrace. God—this man . . . he was safe.

Kaos

October

What I wasn’t expecting this morning was to receive a visit from Rose Valley Hills

PD. Because of who I was, I was granted a conversation in my home instead of being taken down to the station for questioning. When Serenity tried to leave, I told her to stay. I had nothing to hide. We sat knee to knee on the sofa as Detective Asher handed me an envelope.

When I opened it and saw pictures of Fedora badly beaten, my heart dropped. Regardless of how I felt about her, I never wanted any kind of harm to come to her. Serenity gasped and covered her mouth as I stared at the pictures.

“Who did this to her?” were the first words out of my mouth.

“She said you,” Asher responded.

“What? That’s a lie!” Serenity almost yelled.

“Look, I know there’s no way you could have done this, but I had to follow up. When my captain finds out about this, he’s going to want me to bring you in. Please tell me you have an alibi for last night. She says she was attacked at the bar the two of you met at years ago.”

“Does she have proof that it was me?” I asked, standing to go get my iPad.

“No. Just her word that she saw you before you hit her.”

I left the room and went to my office to grab the iPad. I unlocked it and pulled up my camera footage, which proved me and Serenity were at home all night. We even had pizza ordered before Tristan and Taylor came through. They ended up staying until midnight, which based on what Asher said, was around the time Fedora had been taken to the hospital.

“I’m a be straight with you,” I said. “Fedora is probably doing this to get back at me



and my family for rejecting her. I don't know who she was attacked by, but as you can see, it wasn't me."

"Thanks for this. I want you to go ahead and come down to the station with me. With this evidence, we can have you cleared as a suspect before the official report is done."

I agreed, but then I thought about it. If I allowed her to go ahead and file a report knowing she was lying, I could use that to my advantage. Not only was she risking her freedom by filing a false police report, but she was giving me leverage. At this point, I didn't know what else Fedora had up her sleeve, but it was now my priority to make sure I remained one step ahead of her.

Several Hours Later

By the time I was done at the police station, I had several missed calls from Pops. I already knew some shit went down, so I didn't bother to call him back. Instead, I headed straight to his and Mama's house. He was standing outside pacing in a circle of his guards. I barely let Raquel put the car in park before I was hopping out.

"What happened?" I questioned, charging over to him. "Where my mama at?"

"She's safe, Son." He paused. "My brother is d-dead." His voice cracked and chin trembled as he fought his tears. I knew regardless of the issues they were having, he loved Unc. Hell, I loved Unc. I just refused to let him control my life.

"What happened?" I asked, gripping his shoulder.

"Mason. Fedora was attacked last night, and she said you did it. Mason confronted your uncle, but Alpha didn't know what was going on. He believed he wanted to talk about the partnership. Left himself wide open." He scoffed and shook his head as he looked toward the sky.

“Has he been handled yet?”

“You know it. The moment he sent that bullet into your uncle’s skull, every man in the room emptied their clips into him.”

While that gave me relief, I was still in shock over Unc being gone.

“What now? I know you’re about to take over but . . . are you going to war with his team?”

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His head shook. “Nah. I considered it heavily, but I want that shit to be dead with the both of them. I do, however, want Fedora punished. I don’t even have to ask if you touched her because I know you didn’t. Her lie cost my brother his life, and she deserves to pay.”

“Already ahead of you. She just filed a false police report. And now, I’m going to make sure she’s charged with both of their murders.”

“Is that possible?”

Smirking, I shook my head. “When you know the law like me? Yeah. Her lie was what led to the shooting. Even though she didn’t pull the trigger, she’s responsible. I can have her charged as an accessory or facilitator of the murders. Might not get as many years as Mason would have gotten if he was alive, but it will hold her accountable.”

“Good.”

Wrapping my arm around his shoulders, I led him inside the house. I called Serenity and told her I wouldn’t be home any time soon, and when she found out why, she offered to come over immediately. I appreciated her for that, because the truth was, as upset as I was with Unc over his choices lately, I was still hurt that he was gone.

Serenity

Ten Days Later

I'd never been to a mafia leader's funeral before. It was cold. Scary. Emotionless yet thick with tension and emotion at the same time. His wife and daughter may have been the only people shedding tears, but I could see the pain and anger on a lot of people's faces. I saw the tight jaws, the heavy hearts. The unshed tears. Adam looked so pitiful. Kaos shared with me how things had been between the brothers lately, and how a part of him felt responsible. He felt like if he would have been more willing to bend his boundaries, the brothers wouldn't have had as many issues. I quickly spoke to his heart and character and reminded him that it was more important to remain a man of principle above anything else.

If he would have done what his uncle wanted, Alpha would have taken more advantage, and instead of feeling guilt, Kaos would be feeling relief and resentment. That seemed to help him, and he'd been his father's strength the whole service.

There would be no burial. No repast. No consoling of the family. Instead, Adam had to immediately get down to business, and life and the mafia would continue on as if nothing had happened.

"Let me know if you need anything," Kaos said to his father.

Adam smiled. "I appreciate the offer, but you know I want you to stay out of this. I'll be good, Son."

"You better be, because I can't lose you, old man. Not no time soon."

"I believe I got a good thirty years left in me." His eyes shifted to me, and he gave me a playful smile. "Gotta be here for my grandbabies."

"We can make that happen sooner than you think," I granted, taking Kaos's hand into mine.

He looked down at me in surprise before smiling and kissing my forehead. After Adam and Claudia left, we went home in a comfortable silence. I tried to be present but also give Kaos his space. The breathy relief that escaped him once we hit the foyer made me smile. I couldn't imagine how overwhelming this was for him. As he loosened his tie, I asked, "Is there anything you need, baby?"

"Nah. I think I'm good now that the funeral is over. Of course I'll miss him, but I can't act like it won't feel good to no longer feel pressured to do what he wanted me to do. How fucked up is that?"

"It's not fucked up at all. It's real, and it's your truth."

He sighed and nodded his agreement. "I'm tired, princess. I think I'm just about to go to sleep. Come lay with me."

I agreed with no hesitation. Once we made it to our room, I undressed him then took off my dress and heels. We climbed into bed, and instead of me cuddling up against him, I lay on my back and pulled him onto me. As I caressed his back and head, I paid attention to his breathing, not allowing myself to relax until he was asleep.

### The Following Monday

Zander had come over to update us on Fedora's case. When she heard she could be facing two to twelve years because two people were dead because of her lies, she immediately broke down and asked to see Kaos in hopes of a deal. I know he wanted her to pay, but I didn't think he'd ask Zander to try and get her the max sentence. They ended up agreeing to the ADA offering her six months' probation, but she also could have no contact with Kaos or anyone attached to him, including me. I felt like that was fair. It sucked that men had lost their lives, but from what Kaos had told me, they were bound to go to war anyway. I was just glad it was finally over.

While I waited for Kaos to wrap up his business so we could look at buildings for my staffing company, I passed time reading Danielle Allen's latest release on my Kindle. She was one of my favorite independent authors, and I loved the way she wrote romance.

When a call came through from my mom, I stared at the screen for a while before answering.

"Hey, Ma," I spoke.

"Hey, baby. I was hoping I could come and see you and your sister this weekend. I talked about it with Taylor, and she told me I could stay at the apartment instead of a hotel."

My heart dropped and I sat up in my seat. "S-sure. Is everything okay?"

"Honestly . . . no. I still haven't gotten over the way your father acted toward you and Kaos on his birthday. I love him, and I want to be with him, but I love my girls too. I can't continue to be in the middle and miss out on time with the both of you. If he can't understand that . . ."

She let the essence of her words linger in the air. I nodded and licked the corner of my mouth as I processed her words.

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“I’d love that, Ma. Absolutely.”

“Good.” I heard the smile in her voice, and it made me smile. “I will see you this weekend then.”

“I . . . I can’t wait.”

It took me a second to lower the phone from my ear after she ended the call.

“You good, princess?” Kaos asked as he walked into the room.

Smiling, I blinked back my happy tears as I stood and hugged him. “I am absolutely great.”

Kaos

Thanksgiving

Pride filled me as I watched my parents interact with Serenity, Taylor, and Yolanda. Yolanda had been coming to Rose Valley Hills every weekend for about six weeks. I loved seeing Serenity and Taylor be like little girls with their mom all over again. Even if Walter never came around, it meant the world to me that Yolanda was no longer allowing his ego and stubbornness to keep her out of her daughters’ lives. They were thriving here without her, but they’d been significantly happier now that she was coming around.

As if Yolanda felt eyes on her, she looked around the room and smiled at me. I took a

sip of my cognac as she headed in my direction. I believed she had a good heart and the right intentions. Unfortunately, she let her desire to be loyal to her husband drive a wedge between her and her daughters temporarily, but she was finally making things better.

“Hey,” she spoke, as if we hadn’t been talking sporadically throughout the day.

Smiling, I set my drink on the round high top bar table. “Hey.”

“Um . . . Walter is here. Well, not here, but in Rose Valley Hills.”

“For what?”

Her eyes rolled as she said, “He said he didn’t want to be alone today.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “You about to head out to meet him?”

“Actually, I was wondering if he could come here. He promised to apologize and be on his best behavior. I believe his humility took so long because I condoned his behavior, though that wasn’t my intention. Now that I’m coming to visit the girls and making it clear I don’t agree with the way he’s been treating them, he says he wants to change.”

“What he says and what he does are two different things. I don’t mind him coming if he’s genuinely going to apologize, but I won’t show him the same grace I did back in Jasper Lane.”

“I understand, and I promise, he will be on his best behavior.”

I nodded my agreement and told her she could give him the address. This was the last place he’d show his ass if he tried that slick shit.



About forty minutes passed before the doorbell rang. As Mama mentioned not expecting anyone else, I headed to the door. As soon as I opened it and saw him, I saw the difference in him. He might have had the strength to live without his daughters, but the lack of his wife had already started to take a toll on him.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” he said.

“Happy Thanksgiving.”

“I wasn’t the most welcoming the first time we met. For that, I apologize.”

“Apology accepted, but if you’re here to disrespect my woman or my little sister—”

“That’s not what I’m here for,” he promised, lifting his hands in surrender. “I’ve seen the error of my ways and I’m here to apologize.”

“Alright,” I agreed, opening the door wider for him to come inside.

I led him to the sitting room where everyone was gathered before dinner. Serenity’s mouth dropped and Taylor almost spilled her drink. Covering my mouth to keep from laughing, I led Walter over to my parents first. After introducing them, we went over to the girls. My arm wrapped around Serenity as she stared at her father.

“Girls . . .” Walter started, looking from one to the other. “I’m sorry for the way I’ve been acting. My feelings were hurt because you all were leaving me, the family, and our businesses. Businesses that I take pride in keeping as the Monroe legacy. Add my ego and stubbornness to that, and I’ve been a fool. I didn’t know how to express how I felt—”

“Your feelings being hurt is no excuse for your bad behavior,” Serenity interrupted him to say, “but I know putting aside your pride to come here and apologize took a

lot, so we can try to restore our relationship, but it's definitely going to take some work."

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“I’m willing to put in the work,” Walter said with a smile before looking at Taylor. “What about you, baby girl? Do you still have space in your heart and life for me?”

“Yes, Daddy, but if you do this again—”

“I won’t. I promise,” he replied, pulling them both in for a hug.

A part of me was glad he’d come to his senses and joined us today because of what I had planned for after dinner, which we sat down for about thirty minutes later. Pops said grace and thanked the Monroe family for joining us. He also expressed his desire for this to be the first of many gatherings of both families, to which they agreed.

When dessert was served, I kept my eyes trained on Serenity next to me. While the servers gave everyone else plates with crème brûlée, hers had a twenty carat diamond pavé ring.

“Oh my fucking God,” she muttered, staring at the ring.

Pushing my chair back, I stood and kneeled. I grabbed the ring and took her left hand into mine. Licking my lips, I pulled in a deep breath.

“Among all the objections for why we shouldn’t have been together, there were more reasons why we should. I love you so much, princess, and my life has been so much better with you in it. I can’t imagine how great it will be with you as my wife, but I want to find out—soon. Serenity Renae Monroe, you have been my most valuable asset at work and now my heart. Will you do me the honor of making this permanent by becoming my wife?”

Her head nodded rapidly as she bit her bottom lip while tears poured from her eyes.

“Say something, crazy!” Taylor yelled, nudging her sister and making her laugh.

“Yes,” she almost whispered, tugging me up and into her arms. “A million times yes.”

As I slipped the ring onto her finger, our families cheered. I tried to be on my best behavior when I kissed her, but damn if I didn’t want to lay her on this table and feast on her. When we sat back down, she gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before making everyone in the room laugh by asking, “Um . . . does this mean I don’t get any crème brûlée?”

The Beginning

Because true love has no end...